



JUN 29, 2009

JOE MAUER WILL SERENELY, POLITELY CRUSH YOU

THE ODDS ARE STACKED AGAINST HIM, BUT HERE'S WHY THE TWINS CATCHER'S PURSUIT OF .400 COULD BE DIFFERENT: A SINGULAR SWING THAT BRINGS BAT AND BALL TOGETHER IN PERFECT HARMONY

TOM VERDUCCI

*The superior man is satisfied and composed; the mean man is always full of distress.—
CONFUCIUS*

Joe Mauer speaks in a buttery monotone, occasionally giving away his unmistakable Minnesota-ness, as when he turns so into two syllables, with a slight accent on the second one (so-OH). As a hitter, he watches pitches go by—good ones, not just the bad ones—with the patience of a twinkle-eyed fisherman. And when he does swing, often with two strikes, the wellspring of distress for inferior men, Mauer does so with a beautiful economy. What the abacus is to calculation and the sundial to timekeeping, Joe Mauer's swing is to hitting.

To be Joe Mauer is to be an irritant to pitchers. His serenity gives them no anxiety on which to prey, or as Oscar Wilde put it, "Nothing is so aggravating as calmness."

"He's a special breed," Pirates righthander Jeff Karstens said last week after Mauer, with two strikes, doubled off him on the sixth pitch of an at bat, a slider, the first pitch on which Karstens came inside. "He never seems tense up there. I'd say he's the best hitter in the American League. You have[Albert] Pujols in the NL and Joe Mauer in the AL."

Being Joe Mauer is about keeping his life and his swing as simple as possible, which is why, given a rare day off last Thursday, he drove an hour outside Minneapolis to the log cabin getaway he built in the Minnesota woods. "Real logs, real Lincoln logs," he says, though within those real-log walls are such creature comforts as a bowling alley and a batting cage.

To the log cabin is where Mauer also repaired immediately after last summer's All-Star Game at Yankee Stadium. The memory of coming home to the woods, not playing in the last big event at a baseball shrine, is what elicits a bigger smile. "I took a plane ride after the game," Mauer says, "and within eight hours I was riding a lawn mower up there. So you have New York City and the All-Star Game and all the craziness that goes on with that, and eight hours later I was sitting there cutting grass. Talk about your two extremes. And oh, yeah, I was happy."

Being Joe Mauer is being Joe Mower.

Since baseball instituted steroid testing with penalties in 2004, the sport has largely lacked a major national narrative to pull the game forward the way that the consecutive-games record of Cal Ripken and the (since devalued) 1998 home run race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa did in the wake of the '94 strike. Since '04 no player has hit 60 home runs (it happened six times in the six years before that); no pitcher has won more than 22 games or struck out 300 batters; no world championship team has won 100 games; and no batter has carried a .400 average into July.

Here is where Mauer comes in. With home runs having gone the way of junk bonds, derivatives and no-document mortgages, the most iconic, captivating pursuits are of hitting streaks and a .400 batting average, in part because of their daily drama and the stirring of the ghosts that come with them. Not since the Reds' Pete Rose hit in 44 straight games in 1978 has a hitter come within 15 games of Joe DiMaggio's single-season record of 56 straight. Not since the Rockies' Larry Walker and the Padres' Tony Gwynn, in 1997, has anyone hit .400 even as modestly deep into a season as June 22—until Mauer.

At week's end Mauer was hitting a blistering .407, making him only the 10th player to hit .400 this far into a season since Ted Williams in 1941 became the eighth and last .400 hitter in the modern era. Mauer has been so impressive that his manager, Ron Gardenhire, cracked after his catcher had a 4-for-4 night against the Pirates last week, "Let's enjoy the heck out of it. Let's talk about .500. It's just amazing."

Mauer doesn't have to actually hit .400 to captivate the country. The mere possibility of it is the attraction. No other question hangs as tantalizingly over this season as this: Can a player, a catcher no less, hit .400? "Ah, I don't know," says Mauer, whose stress-free approach doesn't change whether atop the batting race or a riding mower. "We've got a lot of baseball left. I think it's way too early for that [talk]. I'm trying to keep it simple. I've tried to have a good start. It's probably not going to last forever, but I'll try to hold on to it as long as I can."

The odds are heavily stacked against him. Only one player in the 68 years since Williams hit .406 has been at or above .400 after Aug. 3: the Royals' George Brett, who was hitting .400 on Sept. 19 and 13 games later finished at .390. (Honorable mention goes to the Rockies' Todd Helton, who entered September 2000 hitting .395 but went 8 for 40 over his next 10 games and wound up at .372.) Remember the excitement just last year about the Braves' Chipper Jones, who was hitting .400 on June 18? Perhaps not, because he hit a routine .320 the rest of the season to end up at .364.

Mauer's mission is made even more difficult because of the rigors of his position. No catcher has ever hit better than .367, and that standard, established by the Brooklyn Dodgers' Babe Phelps, has stood for 73 years. And while Mauer is a career .332 hitter before Aug. 1, he is a .305 hitter in the final two months, when the toll of catching comes fully due. Based on his current rate of at bats, Mauer would need to hit .397 over the Twins' remaining 91 games to become the first .400 hitter since Williams. Last week he admitted, "I'm starting to feel more aches than I normally would this time of year. I think it's the [artificial] turf, because I feel it even more when we're at home. I listened to guys like [former teammate] Torii Hunter who played on turf for a while, but it never got me until this year."

But then, Mauer already is a two-time batting champion, who only now is entering his prime and exhibiting the power long foretold for him. He also has the wisdom that accrues from more than 2,500 major league plate appearances, and his approach to hitting is as close to slump-proof as anyone's in baseball. Mauer undertook no baseball activities, weightlifting or running all winter and into spring training because of a blockage in a kidney that required surgery and inflammation of the right sacroilac joint, which connects the spine to the pelvis. When finally given clearance to play ball in late April, Mauer played in five minor league games before joining the Twins on May 1, whereupon he promptly homered on his first swing. He hasn't stopped hitting since. In addition to his .407 average, Mauer had already hit a career-high 14 home runs and led all big leaguers in on-base and slugging percentage. His batting average has been below .400 exactly one day this year, a hiccup at .397 on May 20.

"This may sound crazy," Twins shortstop Brendan Harris says, "but it's not like he's been hot. He hasn't. He's just so consistent. It's every day. He doesn't change. Every day, every at bat, he just stays within himself. So even if he has an 'off' day, that just means he's 1 for 3 with two walks."

"Yes, it's possible," says Minnesota outfielder Delmon Young of a run at .400. "His cooling off is everybody else's hot. It's amazing to watch, even for the rest of us. We have the best seat in the house and don't even have to buy a ticket. It would be something to tell your kids someday, 'I played with the last guy to hit .400.'"

Hitting .400 is so difficult that only two men alive even played with a .400 hitter: Bobby Doerr, 91, and Herb Hash, 98, the lone survivors among the 29 Red Sox who were Williams's teammates in 1941. So how can Mauer, at least in the small sample of this season, make something so hard look so easy?

Forget the math and the probabilities and the projections because the greatness of Mauer is sometimes better grasped anecdotally. Last week, on the Pirates' team flight to Minneapolis, Pittsburgh pitching coach Joe Kerrigan waved the advance scouting report on Mauer as if it were a white flag.

"Are these right?" Kerrigan said. "Are these misprints? They must be misprints!"

"The reports," Pirates coach Rich Donnelly explained, "basically showed he doesn't strike out, doesn't pop up and has no holes. It's like with Tony Gwynn, Barry Bonds and Albert Pujols. When you go over the reports on hitters like that, you basically just go, 'Next.' Why waste five minutes? And Mauer is putting himself in that class."

"I'll tell you how good a hitter he is," Harris says. "He almost never breaks a bat. He changes bats because they wear out, not because they break."

"I've broken a couple," Mauer says. "I don't know the number. Not that many. I try to hold on to them for as long as I can, but yeah, sometimes they fray. I've only broken maybe three or four."

Here's another measure of Mauer's excellence: the checked swing, typically the signal of defeat for a hitter in his one-on-one duel with the pitcher. Hitting is timing, the Hall of Fame pitcher Warren Spahn said, and pitching is disrupting that timing. The checked swing announces the hitter's surrender.

"Maybe five times in four years I've seen him take a checked swing," says bullpen coach Rick Stelmazsek, a Twins coach for 29 years. "I've seen it only once this year. He's a freak."

The secret to Mauer's success is his serenity, his minimalist movement and emotion. He is the Ben Hogan of hitters, bringing the sweet spot to the hitting area with no extraneous movement. "I think the biggest thing about my swing is I don't have a lot of stuff going on," he says. "Guys have different triggers for timing, and my timing is very simple." As a boy growing up in wintry St. Paul, Mauer pounded balls into a tarpaulin hung in the family garage. His father, Jake Jr., a salesman for a company that designs trophies, rigged up a contraption that would drop the balls through a coffee-can-and-PVC-pipe device, leaving time only for a quick, short stroke. By the time Mauer was a senior at Cretin-Derham Hall in St. Paul, his swing was so pure that he made contact nearly every time he swung (he, in fact, struck out only once in high school), though with little power at first.

"My coach, Jim O'Neill, took me out for batting practice one time," Mauer says. "He would just throw and pepper certain spots. And that's when we found out that middle in or middle a little up was my spot. I was consistently hitting balls over the fence.

"So after we were done, all he said was, 'Why don't you look in that spot the next couple of games?' I think I hit seven home runs in the next seven games. I took that and ran with it, not just for hitting home runs but hitting good pitches."

Mauer has grown into such a finicky hitter that he has swung at only nine first pitches in 202 plate appearances this year. He stands at the plate taking mental measurements of how the baseball behaves out of a pitcher's hand. "I just try to see how the ball moves, especially my first at bat," he says. "I always like to see a couple of pitches before I offer at one. I think ever since I can remember I've always felt pretty comfortable with two strikes."

With each strike pitchers jackhammer away at a hitter's leverage. It doesn't work as well with Mauer. Through Sunday, the average major league hitter this year had hit .186 in two-strike counts. Mauer had hit .253 in such spots. "When I get two strikes," he says, "I widen [my stance] a little bit and stay shorter to the ball. When things go bad, I joke with my coaches, 'I'm just going to go straight to my two-strike approach' because I'm comfortable with it. I don't like to get in that situation, but if I do get there, I don't panic or anything."

At 26, a Gold Glove catcher, batting champion, homegrown icon, and now, having closed the last loophole in his game by adding power, Mauer might well be the most valuable asset in baseball. Statistical analysis by the website fangraphs.com estimates that Mauer is giving Minnesota about \$38 million worth of annual value this year. (Pujols is worth roughly \$39 million according to the site's calculations.) Soon the Twins must put a real dollar figure on his worth. Mauer is scheduled to earn \$12.5 million next season, when the Twins open Target Field, their publicly financed outdoor ballpark, after which he will be eligible for free agency. The Red Sox and the Yankees, each playing this year with a 37-year-old catcher and no obvious replacement inside the organization, will likely reenact last winter's bidding war over Mark Teixeira (eight years, \$180 million) if the Twins don't sign Mauer to an extension.

To carry Mauer under a new contract, the Twins would most likely have to push their payroll from \$65 million into the neighborhood of \$90 million—in line with the average 37% first-year jump in payroll for the past six non-New York franchises that have moved into a new ballpark (the Brewers, Pirates, Phillies, Reds, Nationals and, the only such team to cut payroll, the Cardinals). "It would be devastating to Minnesota if he left," says longtime Twins radio announcer John Gordon. "To play one year in the new ballpark and be gone would be crushing. [First baseman] Justin Morneau said if [Mauer] ever left, he'd never speak to him again."

Says Mauer, whose grandparents attend virtually every home game, "To tell you the truth, I really haven't even thought about playing anywhere but here. But I think it's pretty early. Right now I'm just trying to stay on the field. All of that stuff will happen when it needs to happen."

There is a kind of natural, unhurried beauty in his game and in his life right now, not unlike the calm moments he cherishes at his log cabin in the woods, far, far away from the New York-Boston corridor. "My favorite thing," he says, "is just to sit on the deck and watch the deer and wildlife go by. I try to keep it a little hidden secret up there, just to get away and relax."

When it all goes right, which is what has happened most of this year, the batter's box is not too different from the deck of his cabin. Mauer is so calm he seems to change the physics of the game. Because his swing is so compact, he can wait longer to commit to pitches, which has the effect of stretching the 60 feet, six inches between the pitching rubber and home plate. "He sees the ball longer than any hitter in baseball," Stelmaszek says.

"Pitches seem to slow down a little bit," Mauer says. "When I'm up at the plate, it doesn't feel like anything is rushed. You see the ball coming in, and everything is nice and easy, and you put a good swing on it. And sometimes the field may look a little wider too. You try to hold on to that feeling for as long as you can."

MAR 29, 2004

THE BACKYARD ROOKIE IN ST. PAUL NATIVE JOE MAUER, THE TOP PICK IN THE 2001 DRAFT, THE TWINS HAVE A SWEET-SWINGING YOUNG CATCHER READY TO CALL THE SHOTS

DANIEL G. HABIB

The prodigy's parents are in Section 109, Row 14, right behind home plate. Dusk is dropping on Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, Fla., as Jake and Teresa Mauer listen for the evening's starting lineups. How many times, they are asked, have they done this, sat and waited to watch one of their sons--all three of whom are in camp with the Twins--play a baseball game? They turn to each other and share a look, weary but proud. "That's all we do, all summer," Teresa says. "All spring, too," Jake adds. Teresa smiles and says, "Basically our whole lives." Tonight their oldest son, 25-year-old Jake III, an infielder, is on the Twins' bench. He is here just to get a taste of big league life; two weeks from now, he will be back in minor league camp. Billy, 23, a Class A righthander, sits with his parents in the stands. Batting eighth and catching, the public-address announcer bellows, is their youngest, 20-year-old Joe.

Tonight the attention of the Mauer family--Grandpa Jake, a bartender who was the boys' day-care provider while their parents worked, is here too--centers on Joe. He has been microscoped since his sophomore year at Cretin-Derham Hall, a private Catholic high school in St. Paul, when two dozen scouts began watching him take batting practice every afternoon. "The first day of spring training this year, there were seven TV camera crews covering my every move," Joe says. "Pretty nuts." Whenever Mauer arrives at or leaves the spring training complex, the same handful of men, claiming to be fellow Minnesotans, descend on his late-model SUV for autographs. When it is suggested to Mauer that he rent another vehicle to make a quicker getaway, he replies, "I can't. Not old enough."

Now the scrutiny and hounding will go nationwide. Without a major league at bat on his statistical ledger, Mauer, the first pick in the 2001 draft, will start at catcher for the defending two-time American League Central champion Twins; his family has set aside about 1,000 Opening Day tickets for friends, relatives and acquaintances. In a budget-conscious organization that has long depended on drafting and developing talent to stock its roster, Mauer's burden is to replace the traded A.J. Pierzynski, a 2002 All-Star who hit .312 last season and will earn \$3.5 million this year in San Francisco. To succeed, Mauer must learn the nuances of the Minnesota staff and the tendencies of every American League hitter, adjust from Double A to big league pitching and withstand the nonstop glare that will halo him throughout the season.

By all accounts Mauer is ready. Scout-centric Baseball America and statistically inclined Baseball Prospectus named him the game's top prospect this spring. He appeals to proponents of performance analysis because he displays offensive consistency and patience: He has never batted lower than .302 or had an OBP worse than .393 in four minor league stops, has 129 walks against 101 strikeouts over that span and last year threw out 36 of 69 runners trying to steal. Scouts love his quick hands, smooth, compact lefthanded stroke and defensive footwork. He also has the all-around athleticism that sets their mouths watering. (Mauer was even offered a scholarship to play quarterback at Florida State.)

Equally important, he handles a staff with an aplomb that belies his inexperience. "It's pretty impressive," says Twins reliever Joe Nathan, "that a 20-year-old can already feel so comfortable at this level. Usually it takes all camp for a catcher to learn what his pitchers like to do, how they set guys up. He's fast." Mauer likes to catch side sessions for starters throwing in-between outings, and when he's in the lineup he sits beside his pitcher in the dugout between innings. When he's behind the plate Mauer processes everything going on around him: Over which shoulder does the umpire like to set up? What pitches are working best for my pitcher tonight? Is the batter jumping at fastballs? Where are my fielders positioned? "That's what I love about catching," he says. "You're the guy in charge."

The bat speed and hand-eye coordination that make Mauer's swing so potent evolved from his father's inventiveness. When Joe was eight, Jake jerry-rigged a batting aid in the garage of the family's three-bedroom house in St. Paul. What would come to be called the Quickswing was a V-shaped elbow of PVC pipe on a stand--both open ends facing the batter. A ball fed into one end of the pipe drops out the other end a few seconds later and is (with any luck) smacked with a bat. In short, it's a version of the hitter's soft-toss drill that can be performed alone. "He'd bring it to the gym three or four times a week," says Jim O'Neill, Mauer's baseball coach at Cretin-Derham Hall, "and the other kids couldn't come close using baseballs and bats. Meanwhile, Joe was hitting golf balls with a piece of pipe." Now the Mauers hope the Quickswing can become their main business venture; a spiffed-up version, endorsed by Hall of Famer Paul Molitor and plugged on cable commercials in the Twin Cities and in several states, sells for \$79.95 (www.mauersquickswing.com), and the family hopes to sell as many as 30,000 units by Christmas.

Though the Quickswing helped make Joe a superior hitter for average, he has not yet shown power; in 1,177 minor league plate appearances he has nine home runs, a ratio more benchwarmer than Johnny Bench. "I'm never worried about power," says Minnesota general manager Terry Ryan. "Joe's got a nice swing, he can hit balls a long way, but I'm more interested in his ability to help us win, score runs, catch a pitching staff, shut down the running game and stay healthy. I think the power numbers will start to show up." Says another American League G.M., "Power's the last thing to come."

Talent evaluators and teammates uniformly praise Mauer's maturity, but he retains a youth's passions and idols, like Michael Jackson. "A big fan," says righthander J.D. Durbin, one of Mauer's roommates last season at Double A New Britain (Conn.). "He knows all the moves." It's jarring to envision Mauer--who comports himself publicly with seriousness and sobriety, a stolid Minnesotan--freaking in his apartment to the HIStory double album. At the same time, it is refreshing because it is a reminder that Mauer's skills obscure his youth, that he still, as Durbin puts it, "dorks around."

The Mauers were, pre-signing bonus at least, a middle-class family, Minnesotans four generations back on Teresa's side, three on Jake's. Teresa still works full-time at Saint Patrick's Guild, a religious-goods supplier. Jake was an engraver, and is now a salesman working three days a week, for a trophy and award company. "They worked a lot of hours, they sent us to private school," says Jake III. "I can remember my dad working overtime around Christmas to make ends meet, and he always coached our teams." Joe used part of his \$5.15 million bonus to pay off his family's debts.

Like most every other highly touted rookie, Mauer will be heckled mercilessly this season. He has heard it all before and is usually oblivious to such distractions, but Teresa remembers a game five years ago when the abuse was particularly venomous. "I remember he came out to pitch, and his demeanor warming up was mad," Teresa says. "I had never seen him that angry. He struck out nine in a row and hit a home run."

That's only one of many tales about Joe Mauer's feats in St. Paul. But now it's just backstory. On Opening Day, against the Cleveland Indians at the Metrodome, in front of a thousand friends and family members, Joe Mauer is expected to catch and bat eighth for his hometown Twins. Two weeks later he'll turn 21. And then there'll be 150 more games for Jake and Teresa to watch him play this season.

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COLOR PHOTO: CHUCK SOLOMON TRIPLE PAY The Mauer brothers--Billy (left), Joe (center and opposite) and Jake III--all draw checks from the Twins.

COLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY AL TIELEMANS [See caption above]

COLOR PHOTO: BRAD MANGIN

EXTRAORDINARY JOES

Four other rookies who, like Joe Mauer, could hit it big in 2004

BOBBY CROSBY, SS, Athletics, 24

This 2001 first-round draft pick (right) blossomed as a power hitter last season, belting 22 home runs at Triple A Sacramento while stealing 24 bases. With Crosby ready to move up, Oakland was able to let free agent Miguel Tejada walk and use the extra money to re-sign third baseman Eric Chavez.

ZACK GREINKE, RHP, Royals, 20

Think Bret Saberhagen. The 6'2", 190-pound baby-faced starter has a veteran's repertoire (moving fastball that tops out in the mid-90s, change, curve, slider) plus an easy, compact windup and impeccable command. In 87 innings at Class A Wilmington (Del.) last season he had a 1.14 ERA.

EDWIN JACKSON, RHP, Dodgers, 20

He owned Double A hitters last year, fanning 157 in 148 1/3 innings with a 3-to-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio. In his big league debut last September he beat Randy Johnson. Jackson's mid-90s fastball and biting breaking ball have manager Jim Tracy comparing him with a young Dwight Gooden.

ALEXIS RIOS, OF, Blue Jays, 23

This 6'5", 195-pounder won't break camp with the big club, but if he excels in Triple A his stay in the minors could be short. At Double A New Haven (Conn.) last year he batted .352 with an OBP of .402 and a slugging percentage of .521. His primary need: better discipline at the plate. --D.G.H.

NOV 19, 2018

HOMETOWN HERO

JOE MAUER: TWO CAREERS; ONE GREAT GUY

SI STAFF

JOE MAUER had two careers. The first ran from April 5, 2004, through Aug. 19, 2013. On that gorgeous August afternoon, Mauer was catching for the Twins when Ike Davis fouled a pitch off Mauer's helmet. The ball ricocheted with such force, it landed in the seats. Mauer finished the game, but it was the final one he played that season, forced to the bench with a concussion. His skills never recovered.

At the time of the foul tip, Mauer was one of baseball's best players, with six All-Star selections, an MVP award and a career .323 batting average. He was an AL MVP candidate that season too, hitting .324. His induction into the Hall of Fame seemed assured; just five catchers in history had ever put up more value through the age of 30.

We couldn't have known it that afternoon, but Mauer, who announced his retirement last week, saw his first career end that day. Because of the risk of more concussions, he wouldn't play catcher anymore. In the spring of 2014, Mauer was a first baseman. He would play the next five seasons at a diminished level, hitting .300 just once more. He never sniffed another All-Star Game.

What was consistent across the two careers, however, was Joe Mauer the person. As a catcher or a first baseman, a superstar or an aging veteran, Mauer was the same. In an era when the next unpleasant surprise is a click away, it's hard to invest in heroes. The jersey you buy today could be burned by hundreds on YouTube tomorrow.

Mauer, though, was safe. He was T-bills and Volvos and your mother's arms. A three-sport star at Cretin--Derham Hall High in St. Paul, Mauer never got within a ringing double of a scandal. He married a high school classmate; they had twins. He did local TV ads for milk, for cryin' out loud.

So maybe his first career will be honored with a plaque in Cooperstown. We have five years to discuss that. Today let's remember Mauer as he was on his final at bat, on Sept. 30, slashing a double, standing on second, ice-cold milk coursing through his veins, the Twins on their way to a win over the White Sox, a crowd cheering, decked out in number 7 jerseys they'll never have reason to put away.

"MAUER NEVER GOT WITHIN A RINGING DOUBLE OF A SCANDAL. HE MARRIED A HIGH SCHOOL CLASSMATE. HE DID LOCAL TV ADS FOR MILK, FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD."

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

FLYERS MASCOT GRITTY RECEIVED TWO WRITE-IN VOTES IN THIS MONTH'S ELECTION FOR THE CAMDEN COUNTY (N.J.) SHERIFF.

THEY SAID IT

"IT'S KIND OF LIKE HAVING A GREAT MEAL AND SMOKING A CIGARETTE.... YOU FEEL FULL AND COMFORTABLE, AND IT ALL LEADS TO A NATURAL LETDOWN."

ALABAMA COACH NICK SABAN, on the possibility of the Crimson Tide growing complacent in November because of their success.

SEP 25, 2006

ST. PAULIE BOYS

TWINS SLUGGERS JOE MAUER AND JUSTIN MORNEAU SHARE A SEMIMESSY BACHELOR PAD

GENE MENEZ

Two of baseball's top young talents (and AL MVP candidates) sleep, eat, sleep, drink, sleep, party and sleep under one roof in St. Paul. Twins catcher Joe Mauer, 23, and first baseman Justin Morneau, 25, live in a three-story, two-bedroom town house that Mauer (in blue) bought two years ago for about \$400,000. Their similar, leonine dozing habits aside, they constitute an odd couple, Mauer playing the fastidious Felix to Morneau's untidy Oscar. Mauer, a St. Paul native, keeps his room just so and tries to shun the spotlight. Morneau, who pays Mauer rent, leaves shirts on the floor and is quick with a joke. A brief tour of their digs.

KITCHEN (Photos 1, 2)

"We don't do any cooking around here," Mauer says. The fridge is stocked mainly with beverages--Tropicana orange juice (no pulp), water, milk, Goose Island stout, Mountain Dew and Pepsi. What do they do for food? "If we have to play that day, Jimmy John's [sub sandwiches]," Mauer says. "After the game it's pizza or hot hoagies from Davanni's."

LIVING ROOM (3)

Mauer decorated it with advice from his mother, Teresa; the taupe paint job lends a warm feel, and Mauer added shelves for books (including *The Tao of Health, Sex and Longevity*--a gift from former Twin Corey Koskie that Mauer likes because it "talks about diets and all that") and memorabilia (a Wheaties box of Kirby Puckett, whom Mauer idolized growing up). On another shelf is a black bat autographed by Tigers catcher Ivan Rodriguez (Mauer and Rodriguez swapped signed lumber in 2004), a photo of Mauer stroking his first big league hit, in 2004, and baseballs signed by Luis Gonzalez, Shawn Green, Torii Hunter, Tony Oliva and others.

UPSTAIRS LANDING (4)

In a niche at the head of the stairs on the third floor is a display of two Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and 10 bobbleheads, including three of Mauer from his minor league stops. "Joe's bobbleheads are realistic," Morneau says. "His head is huge."

MAUER'S ROOM (5)

Painted baby blue. ("I didn't want something dark in there," Mauer says.) Articles of clothing (jeans, T-shirts) are on a bench at the foot of his bed. About 15 pair of shoes are arranged against one wall. Asked how many pairs he owns, Mauer says, "I couldn't put a number on it. My mom says I have a shoe problem." The room's one personal touch: a photograph on the dresser of Mauer cheek-to-cheek with a stunning brunette. "She's a friend," Mauer says. "That was a gift from her the last time she was in town." The "friend" is Miss USA 2005, Chelsea Cooley.

BASEMENT (6)

Hangout central. A vending machine spits out bottles of water, Gatorade, Bud Light and "rootbeer for Joe," Morneau says. The main attraction: a 60-inch Mitsubishi rear-projection TV. "When we get home after a night game, we're too wired to go to bed," Morneau says. "We'll watch music videos or the Discovery Channel or the Travel Channel, mostly to see the girl hosting the show." Last month Morneau downloaded the first season of Prison Break; one off day the two watched the show for six straight hours. The pair often has teammates over, and lately they've had a basement live-in: rookie outfielder Josh Rabe, who is crashing on the couch.

MORNEAU'S ROOM (7, 8)

Just down the hall from Mauer's. Clothes and more than a dozen pairs of shoes are strewn across the floor (even after some last-minute cleaning). Baseball caps, bills, video games and a Mac PowerBook filled with 4,500 songs cover the top of a dresser. Morneau, who grew up in New Westminster, B.C., keeps a hockey stick and goaltender gloves handy but says, "The only thing the team lets us play in the off-season is golf." In lieu of curtains Morneau has hung a blanket over a rod to block out light. "This way," he says, "I can sleep until noon."

EIGHT PHOTOS

Photographs by Tom Dahlin

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

TWO PHOTOS

JOHN BIEVER (2, MAUER AND MORNEAU PLAYING)

TWINS

Joe Mauer's flawless swing was masterful mechanics

Hitting mechanics involve a series of movements working in concert. Joe Mauer made the process look effortless.

JUNE 15, 2019 — 7:06AM



CHIP SCOGGINS
@CHIPSCOGGINS

Derek Falvey saw a video recently of Joe Mauer, at age 3, swinging a bat. Something looked familiar to the Twins chief baseball officer.

The swing.

"I think it was exactly the same," Falvey said, laughing.

Twins fans can probably still see that swing in their mind's eye. A smooth, compact swing executed with assembly-line repetitiveness. From his rookie season to Year 15, Mauer's stroke looked identical.

Former Cretin-Derham Hall coach Jim O'Neill first saw Mauer's swing when he was in fifth grade. Same exact swing, O'Neill said.

"It started in the backyard with Wiffle ball," said Mauer's older brother, Jake. "I don't think there was ever a swing overhaul."

Mauer's career can be cataloged by distinctive markers. His batting titles, his MVP season, his injuries, his position change and his contract.

His swing deserves a chapter, too. Falvey said it's "as pretty as they come."

"There was a smoothness to it and calmness to the way his bat comes through the zone," he said. "I know this isn't physically possible, but it felt like he could adjust after the swing was going to manipulate the barrel of the bat."

Hitting mechanics involve a series of movements working in concert. Mauer made the process look effortless.

"It's just natural," Jake Mauer said. "It wasn't anything that was created by a hitting guru."

Well, not exactly. His swing was sharpened on a contraption built by his father. The device had connected pipes that would drop a ball into the hitting zone, forcing Mauer to have a compact swing and no excess movement. The invention later became known as "Mauer Quickswing."

"I think that had an awful lot to do, if not everything to do, with the kind of hitter he turned out to be," O'Neill said.

Mauer's swing produced many line drives to the opposite field. He remained committed — or stubborn, in some people's opinion — to that swing in the face of criticism that he didn't hit enough home runs.

"That was his best trait — he was always trying to be himself," Jake said. "He's not going to be who everybody wants him to be. He's going to be who he wants to be. I think it worked out pretty good."

O'Neill recalled a young MLB scout who visited Cretin-Derham Hall during Mauer's senior season. The Raiders still had a state playoff game after the Twins drafted Mauer No. 1 overall in 2001.

The scout, who worked for another team, returned after the draft to watch Mauer take batting practice.



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Twins Joe Mauer took to the batting cage for swings during 2010 spring training in Fort Myers, Fla.

“I said ‘What are you doing? The draft’s over,’” O’Neill said. “He said, ‘If I ever see a high school kid with this kind of swing, I’ve got to remember because I’m going after him.’”

JOE’S DAY

The Twins will retire Joe Mauer’s No. 7 before Saturday night’s game against Kansas City. The ceremony begins at 6 p.m.

- Mauer, 36, played 15 seasons for the Twins. He is the only catcher to win three batting titles. He was the AL MVP in 2009 and a six-time All-Star who won three Gold Gloves as a catcher before moving to first base in 2013 because of concussions. He retired after last season.
- Hall of Famers Jim Thome, Paul Molitor, Rod Carew, Bert Blyleven and Jack Morris will attend, with more than 25 other Twins alumni.
- Other Twins retired numbers are Harmon Killebrew (3), Tony Oliva (6), Tom Kelly (10), Kent Hrbek (14), Rod Carew (29), Bert Blyleven (28), Kirby Puckett (34). Jackie Robinson’s No. 42 is retired across Major League Baseball.
- Gov. Walz declared Saturday “Joe Mauer Day” in Minnesota.

Chip Scoggins is a sports columnist and enterprise writer for the Star Tribune. He previously covered the Vikings, Gophers football, Wild, Wolves and high school sports in nearly 19 years at the paper.

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Is Joe Mauer a Hall of Famer? His wonderful, underrated career should stand the test of time

By [Matt Snyder](#) Nov 10, 2018 at 11:10 am ET • 2 min read

The proverbial writing seemed on the wall when [Joe Mauer](#) said farewell to [Twins](#) fans at the conclusion of the 2018 season and, sure enough, [he officially announced his retirement Friday night with a letter](#). Thus concludes a 15-year career in Minnesota from the boy who was born in St. Paul and attended Cretin-Derham High School in the Twin Cities. Mauer was never able to be part of a World Series-winning team, but otherwise should go down as one of the most beloved figures in Twins history.

In fact, despite being a six-time All-Star, five-time Silver Slugger winner and the 2009 AL MVP, Mauer's career is, at present, very underrated.

It is times like these when I realize just how important the five-year waiting period is before the Hall of Fame vote. Human beings are vulnerable to recency bias. It happens to me all the time, especially regarding movies and TV shows. The last thing I saw was the best ever ... until I get some distance from it. I remember when my brother finished "Breaking Bad" and I immediately asked him where it ranked for him all time. He sensibly told me he needed to take time and get some distance from it. He's always been better than me on this front. I immediately crown things in my mind.



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79 runs. It's a nice line, sure, but that isn't anyone who would get any sort of Hall of Fame consideration whatsoever.

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Let's remember that peak, though, before age, being a catcher and concussion issues caught up with Mauer.

From 2006-13, Mauer hit .327/.410/.473 (139 OPS+) with 162-game averages of 40 doubles, 15 homers, 90 RBI, 98 runs and more walks than strikeouts. He was an above-average defensive catcher who twice led the league in caught stealing percentage and secured three Gold Gloves. He won three batting titles, led the league in on-base percentage twice and slugging once, and took the 2009 MVP. He finished in the top 10 of AL MVP voting four times. The Twins won the AL Central three times in this stretch.

That's one hell of a peak, no?

In totality, Mauer hit .306/.388/.439 (124 OPS+) with 2,123 hits, 428 doubles, 143 homers, 932 RBI, 1,018 runs and gathered 55.1 WAR in his illustrious career.

Among players who spent the majority of their time behind the plate with at least 3,000 plate appearances, Mauer ranks fifth in batting average and third in on-base percentage. Among catchers, he trails only Johnny Bench, Gary Carter, Ivan Rodriguez, Carlton Fisk, Mike Piazza, Yogi Berra and Bill Dickey in WAR. Only Carter, Bench, Piazza and Rodriguez top him in "peak" WAR score and Mauer sits above the average Hall of Fame catcher line in JAWS.

His resume screams Hall of Famer and, admittedly, right now it's easy to feel like that doesn't line up with what we got used to seeing over the past few years.

Distance. We just need distance.



In this next five years, we are tasked with remembering the Joe Mauer from 2006-13: An obvious Hall of Famer.

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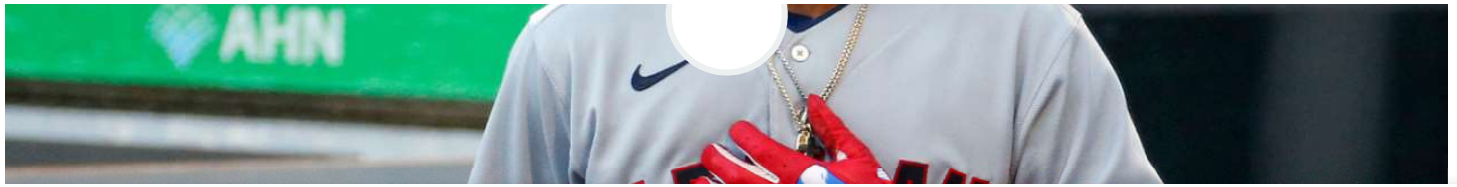


Yankees are still waiting on DJ LeMahieu; here's why that may have cost them already this offseason

By [Mike Axisa](#) 9 hrs ago • 6 min read

Mets Introduce Francisco Lindor





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00:00 / 00:00

To date, this has been an inactive offseason for the [New York Yankees](#). They added depth outfielder [Greg Allen](#) in a minor trade with the [Padres](#) last week and that's about it. Allen is the only player the Yankees have added to their 40-man roster from outside the organization this winter. Minor-league signings like [Jhoulys Chacin](#) and [Andrew Velazquez](#) are their only other moves.

The inactive offseason is largely by design. The Yankees are planning to cut payroll amid the pandemic -- team officials have not given a set 2021 payroll figure but the expectation is they will duck under the \$210 million luxury tax threshold -- and their No. 1 priority is re-signing [DJ LeMahieu](#). That's understandable. LeMahieu is a great player and fits their needs perfectly.



DJ LeMahieu

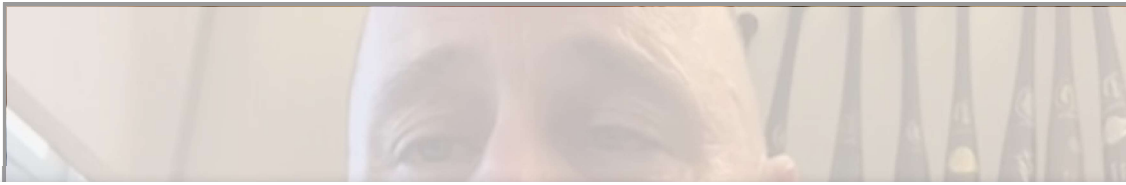
NY Yankees • 2B • 26

BA	R	HR	RBI	SB
.364	41	10	27	3

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On multiple occasions last month GM Brian Cashman admitted the Yankees are waiting on LeMahieu's decision before moving on to other offseason business. Here's what he said during a YES Network interview on Dec. 10:





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"Like always, we'll come up with what the best options are, but we're gonna exhaust his option first, which is to try to keep him here," Cashman said. "He loves playing in New York. He loves playing for the New York Yankees. There's a lot of things in our favor, but it ultimately comes down to the financial opportunity we provide compared to the financial opportunity others are providing. That's the big unknown."

A few days later Cashman held a conference call with reporters, including James Wagner of the *New York Times*, and said "anything that's come off the board before today came off the board because I'm willing to wait to hopefully find a way to navigate a negotiation successfully with DJ LeMahieu." Clearly, LeMahieu is the top priority.

Last month a report indicated LeMahieu is seeking five years and \$125 million. Soon thereafter it was reported the Blue Jays and the Dodgers have interest in him. Seems to me the Yankees leaked LeMahieu's asking price to scare other teams away, and LeMahieu's camp responded by saying an AL East rival and fellow big-market team are interested to get the Yankees back to the table. That was the last update on contract talks.

My hunch is the Yankees have the largest offer on the table and they know it, and they're waiting for LeMahieu to say yes. Why bid against yourself? LeMahieu, meanwhile, maybe be searching around for a better offer, or at least an offer he can take back to the



Yankees and get them to up the ante. This isn't a unique free agent negotiation in that regard. This is how these things work. The two sides use the media and other teams as leverage.

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Yankees still have multiple needs to address. They have one viable major-league middle infielder ([Gleyber Torres](#)) and their No. 2 starter is [Jordan Montgomery](#). [Luis Severino](#) is expected back from Tommy John surgery at midseason, though you never quite know what you're going to get so soon after elbow reconstruction, and New York needs rotation help behind him. Their depth chart:

1. RHP [Gerrit Cole](#) (amazing)
2. RHP Luis Severino (expected back at midseason)
3. LHP Jordan Montgomery (5.11 ERA in 2020)
4. RHP [Domingo German](#) (missed 2020 while serving a domestic violence suspension)
5. RHP [Deivi Garcia](#) (top prospect who figures to have a workload limit in 2021)
6. RHP [Clarke Schmidt](#) (top prospect who figures to have a workload limit in 2021)
7. RHP Jhoulys Chacin (6.06 ERA the last two years)
8. RHP [Michael King](#) (7.76 ERA in 2020)

You're the Yankees and you fancy yourself a World Series contender. You can do better than that. No, let me rephrase: you *have* to do better than that. The bullpen is strong is the lineup is so good that they will cover for a lot of rotation shortcomings during the long 162-game regular season. In a short postseason series though, that rotation leaves an awful lot to be desired.

The offseason has moved so slowly in general that waiting out LeMahieu made sense. There was no need to rush into anything. Things are starting to heat up though, and within the last three weeks or so the Yankees missed out on a [Yu Darvish](#) salary dump trade, and [Carlos Carrasco](#) and [Francisco Lindor](#) quasi-salary dump trade, and Tomoyuki Sugano's free agency. We could even include [Lance Lynn](#) here, though that trade happened back in early December. Everything else happened more recently.



(I don't think [Blake Snell](#) was ever a realistic option for the Yankees given the whole AL East rivalry with the [Rays](#). [Charlie Morton](#) probably wasn't an option either given his stated desire to play close to the family home in Florida.)

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behind Cote, as well as a superstar middle infielder who would have more than adequately replaced LeMahieu. The Yankees should have been in on every single one of those players, and, to be fair, they reportedly inquired about Lindor. They're just committed to seeing things through with LeMahieu, so talks never got serious. The Yankees didn't spend much time exploring Lindor as an alternative to LeMahieu.

[#Yankees](#) inquired with the [#Indians](#) on the price for Lindor as a backup plan if they did not sign LeMahieu, but have remained committed to seeing it thru with LeMahieu even as other options — such as Lindor — come off the board.

— Joel Sherman (@Joelsherman1) January 7, 2021

[The Yankees are about \\$35 million under the \\$210 million luxury tax threshold at the moment](#). If they re-sign LeMahieu -- I think a reunion is by far the most likely outcome -- he'll eat up at least \$20 million of that, maybe even as much as \$25 million. That doesn't leave much for pitching, be it a reunion with [Masahiro Tanaka](#) or something else. It certainly takes them out of the running for [Trevor Bauer](#), [the No. 1 pitcher on the free agent market](#).

Waiting out LeMahieu and his \$20-something-million a year contract presumably took the Yankees out of the mix for Darvish all together, meaning they didn't even consider pursuing a trade (Darvish is owed \$59 million the next three years). Chances are the same is true with Sugano, who reportedly wanted [Yusei Kikuchi](#) money (four years at \$14 million per year) [and returned to Japan](#). The commitment to LeMahieu means the Yankees couldn't even consider Darvish or Sugano, financially.



The market has several appealing options behind LeMahieu and the pricey Bauer. On the mound, there's Tanaka and [Jake Odorizzi](#), as well as brand-name reclamation projections like [Corey Kluber](#) and former Yankee [James Paxton](#). [Joe Musgrove](#) stands out as a trade

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elsewhere. The Yankees haven't missed out on *that* much.

The Yankees have missed out on several players because of their commitment to LeMahieu though -- Lindor is extremely likely to be the best non-LeMahieu infielder available to the Yankees at any point this offseason, and Carrasco, Darvish, and Lynn (and Snell) figure to be the best starters traded -- and the longer they wait for LeMahieu, the more they risk losing out on other quality players who would improve their roster and thus their chances of winning the 2021 World Series.

At some point the Yankees are either going to have to get LeMahieu signed or begin seriously exploring other options, and that point can't be too far away because [the hot stove is heating up](#) and spring training is drawing near. For a big-market contender, the Yankees have a lot of needs this offseason, particularly in the rotation. They're not a LeMahieu away from being World Series favorites. They shouldn't let one player dominate their offseason much longer.

For now, the Yankees are content to wait out LeMahieu, even if means missing out on other opportunities. Patience has served them well in the past -- the Yankees did not sign LeMahieu the first time until Jan. 14, 2019, a few days after re-signing [Zack Britton](#) and a few days before signing [Adam Ottavino](#) -- and the slow-moving free agent means good players are still available. They can't wait forever though. The market is heating up and their needs are numerous.

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A Shift Toward the Extreme: Defending Joe Mauer

[BuzzinTheTower](#) Apr 20, 2017 · 7 min read

(picture courtesy of sbnation.com)

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gone from high school wunderkind, to hometown hero, to AL MVP and fan favorite, to an overpaid, injury-prone shell of an MVP. Mauer has both enthralled and frustrated the Twins' fan base, as his prior history of success seemed to coincide with the Twins making the playoffs, while his large contract and decline have been the main martyrs for the Twins' struggles over the past 5+ seasons. While the debate on whether Mauer has been the main cause for the Twins' recent failure can obviously be debated, his hitting profile has largely stayed the same throughout his career. He rarely swings at the first pitch, he pulls a lot of ground balls, and he abuses outside pitches with line drives to left field. Over the course of his career, teams have shifted their defense accordingly to adjust to his hitting profile, but in 2017, teams have gone to extremes to try and limit Mauer's effectiveness. This creates a few things to notice moving forward: which defensive tactics will be used, the level of effectiveness of these defenses, and what measures Mauer can use to adjust to these new shifts.

FINDING THE SHIFTS



(picture courtesy of newsday.com)

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written by ESPN's Doug Mittler in 2014, infield shifts had increased from less than 3,000 occurrences in the MLB in 2011 to more than 13,000 shifts during the 2014 season. The infield shift became the Beanie Baby of the new age of baseball, with almost every team buying in, but experiencing different levels of success. According to a 2014 article for Beyond the Box Score written by Chris Teeter, Oakland and Tampa Bay were able to create a gain of more than 10 runs when they employed a shift in 2013, whereas one of the teams that used the shift the most, the Chicago Cubs, were actually 5 runs below average using the shift. By 2016, the Cubs had completely changed their tune, using the shift less often than 28 other teams, according to a 2016 article from [fivethirtyeight.com](#). In using the shift less often, the 2016 Cubs led the MLB in both defensive efficiency and defensive runs saved on their way to the World Series.

While much data exists surrounding infield shifts, it's difficult to distinguish how effective the shift actually is. According to the same [fivethirtyeight.com](#) article, since the shift was made popular in 2011 until 2016, the league-wide batting average of balls in play (BABIP) had actually increased from .294 to .300. At the same time, the league's batting average of balls pulled on the ground decreased from .199 to .183. What makes it difficult to distinguish the shift data from traditional alignments is the fact some of the balls that were outs into the shift may have also been outs in a traditional defense, and some hits through the shift may have also been hits against a traditional alignment. The shift has been proven to be effective against certain batters, but some teams have seemingly over-utilized or over-exaggerated their renditions of modern infield alignments. Even less data seems to exist on outfield shifts, as it has been a common exercise to move outfielders around for a significant amount of time. In the case of Joe Mauer, teams like the Kansas City Royals and the Chicago White Sox have begun using an unprecedented outfield shift to counter Mauer's extreme opposite field tendencies.

A CONSISTENT PROFILE



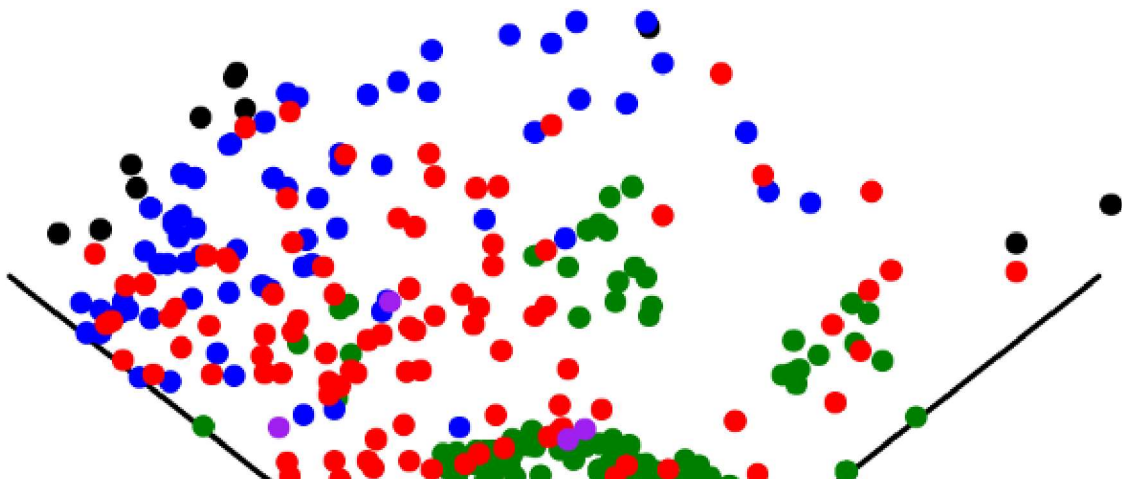
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(picture courtesy of zimbio.com)

In the mid- to late-2000s, Joe Mauer achieved unprecedented success as a catcher, winning 3 batting titles and the 2009 MVP. He built his hitting profile by a distinct, but somewhat unusual, approach. Seemingly everything Mauer hit on the ground went to right side of the infield, and most of hits in the air were to the left side of the outfield. As you can see below, Mauer's spray chart supports both of these notions, as he almost stays exclusively in that hitting profile.

Joe Mauer: Batted Balls

Seasons: 2016 to 2016



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● **Home Run** ● **Groundball** ● **Bunt** ● **Flyball** ● **Linedrive**
● **Blooper**

(spray chart courtesy of fangraphs.com)

Mauer has used this profile with success, as his career batting average on balls hit to the opposite field sits at .435. His success stems from the fact that his hits “into the air” are generally line drives. Mauer carries a career line drive rate of 24.1%, which is second-best among active American League hitters, trailing only Nicholas Castellanos. Despite the fact that defenses have adjusted to Mauer’s tendencies, he continues to stay with his same approach. Due to his consistent approach, teams have employed more and more aggressive shifting, which has now extended to the extreme outfield shift. This shift often involves sliding the left fielder almost to the left field line, sliding the center fielder over to the left-center field gap, and moving the right fielder almost to where a normal center fielder will play. Teams have started to make it clear that they will basically dare Mauer to pull the ball.

On a recent broadcast, Twins announcers Dick Bremer and Bert Blyleven discussed the extreme outfield shift employed by the White Sox, with Bremer suggesting Mauer was a victim of advanced scouting, while Blyleven was under the impression that Mauer simply needed to adjust to the shift that is being employed against him. Both of them might be correct, but at this point of his career, it could be tough for Mauer to overhaul his approach.

MAKING THE ADJUSTMENT

Among the common gripes among Minnesota fans is Mauer’s unwillingness to attack the first pitch of a count. Over the course of his career, Mauer has swung at the first pitch 10.2% of the time, with the league average sitting at 27.5%. Overall, about 5% of Mauer’s career plate appearances have ended on the first pitch, and Mauer has had

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three-time batting champion that has still posted a career average of .281 after the count has hit 0–1. In 2017, Mauer has swung at 14.8% of first pitches, which would be a career high. With that being said, pitchers in 2017 are still not adjusting to Mauer’s increase in first-pitch aggressiveness, because as the heatmap below shows, pitchers are still pouring the first pitch right down the middle of the plate.



(heatmap courtesy of fangraphs.com)

While it may seem as though the adjustments lie completely on Mauer’s shoulders, it is important to remember that there is a pitcher involved in the equation as well. With their outfield swung completely to the left side of the diamond, it certainly doesn’t make sense for pitchers to try and pound Mauer on the inside of the plate. As the heatmap

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defense.



(heatmap courtesy of fangraphs.com)

The heatmap above shows all pitches to Mauer in 2017, so it is important to note that many of the pitches that are in the middle zone can be attributed to the first pitch. Another thing that is important to note is that, in general, when a batter attempts to pull an outside pitch, he will simply roll the ball over on the ground, which would play right into Mauer's infield shift. Teams are getting ahead of Mauer, pounding the strike zone away, and using what made Mauer a great hitter into a defensive predictability. This creates an interesting strength vs. strength scenario, as Mauer has what would be a career-low 0.57 ground ball/fly ball ratio (career 1.06 ratio) and is hitting what would be a career-high 40% line drives (career 23%). It's incredibly difficult to tell a guy to quit hitting line drives, but it remains to be seen how well the new defensive extremes will

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- 1. Continue hitting line drives and trying to punish the pitches he has traditionally hit well on the outside of the plate
- 2. Become even more aggressive on the first pitch and look to pull the ball right down the middle
- 3. Possibly make another adjustment, such as standing closer to the plate, in order to create a larger number of pull opportunities

In my opinion, Mauer will need to use some sort of combination of the three factors above in order to counteract the defense that is being employed against him. It is important for Mauer to keep in mind what got him to the proverbial dance, and that's taking what is given to him at the plate. As long as Mauer continues to hit line drives, he should be successful against whatever defense is opposing him.

(statistics courtesy of baseball-reference.com and fangraphs.com)

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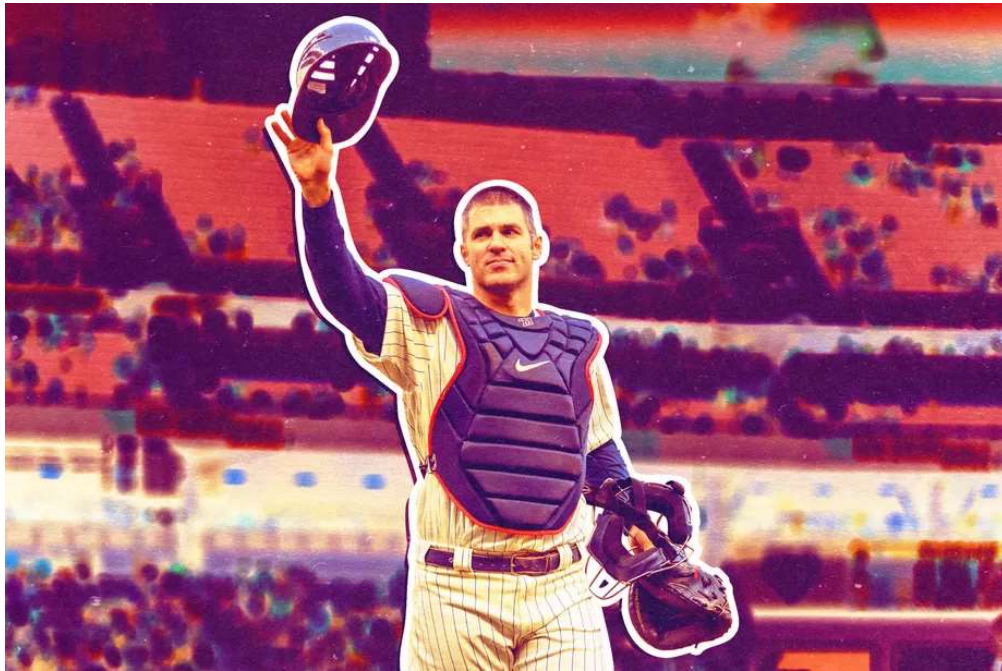


MLB SPORTS

Joe Mauer's Hall of Fame Case Begins Behind the Plate

The Twins legend's retirement jump-starts one of the more interesting Cooperstown candidacies in recent memory. He didn't hit like a catcher, but he should be judged like one.

By [Ben Lindbergh](#) | Nov 13, 2018, 1:01pm EST



Getty Images/Ringer illustration

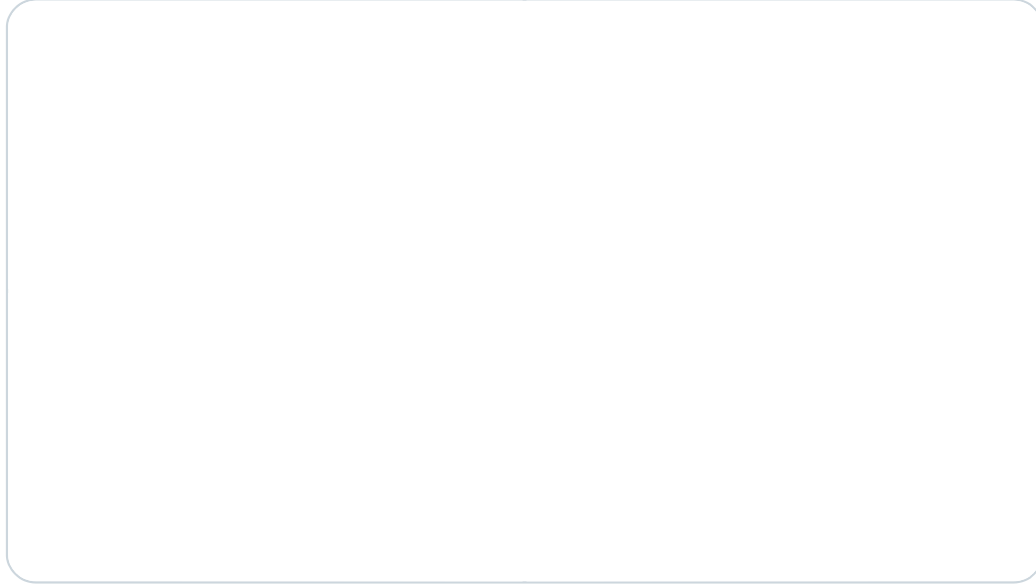
On Friday, Joe Mauer announced his retirement. And on Monday, during a poignant press conference at Target Field, many Twins fans wept with him as he said goodbye, the once-thick thatch of inky hair that helped soothe so many [itchy, flaky scalps](#) cropped close and sprayed with gray.



Carlos Gonzalez ✓
@CarlosGphoto



The Minnesota Twins held a retirement press conference for Joe Mauer at Target Field. [#MNTwins](#)



1:35 PM · Nov 12, 2018



427



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Mauer **meant a lot** to most Twins fans: A Saint Paul native who stayed home his whole career, he ranked **third all-time** in career WAR with the Twins, behind Rod Carew and Harmon Killebrew. His highlight reel is a little light on national signature moments, both because he didn't have eye-popping power or speed and because he played for forgettable teams; the Twins ranked **19th** in wins and winning percentage during his Minnesota tenure, and he played in only 10 postseason games, all of them losses. In my mind, the most salient snapshots from his 15-year career are his nonchalant **no-look catch** of a ball that bounced off the backstop, a well-played line in a **PlayStation ad**, and a **sentimental moment** from his final game, when he wore catcher's gear in a game for the first time in five years.

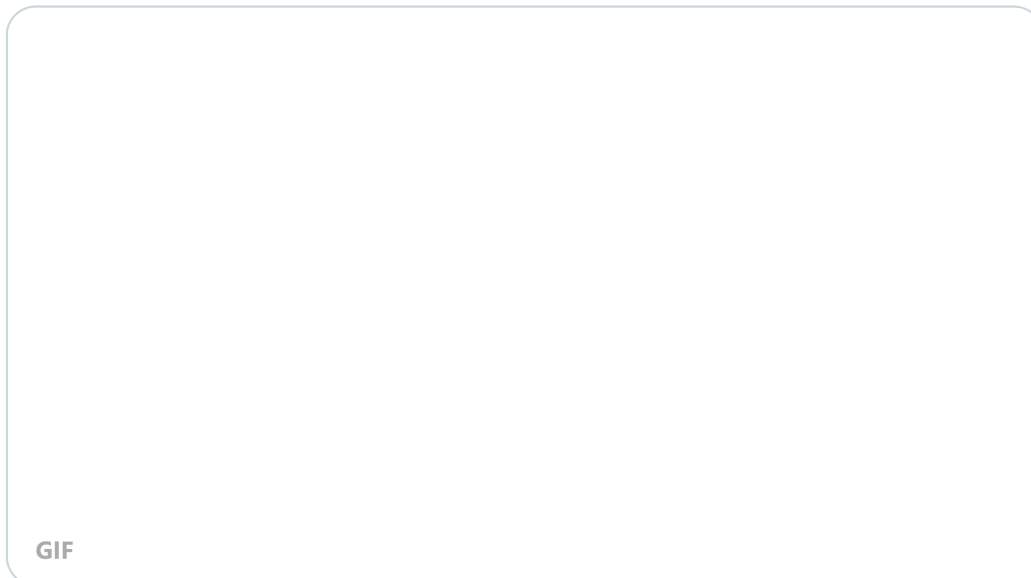


Jeff Passan 
@JeffPassan



Very rarely can you encapsulate a man's career in three words. But with Joe Mauer, it's quite obvious how to put a bow on his time in Minnesota.

Well played, Mauer.



8:00 PM · Nov 9, 2018



384



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A lack of **back-breaking homers**, **iconic October bat flips**, equally **iconic *fielding* flips**, or **incredible catches** that capture a career with one GIF shouldn't diminish what Mauer accomplished with constant contact, a steady diet of walks and singles, and a good glove at the most important position. In the wake of his farewell, the topic turned to Cooperstown, as it often does when a player who appears to be on the Hall of Fame bubble calls it a career. He has the pedigree: Mauer went from no. 1 draft pick to **no. 1 prospect** (in back-to-back years) to no. 1 player. In his five-year peak from 2006 to 2010, no AL hitter had a higher FanGraphs **WAR** (or *Baseball Prospectus* WARP). He has hardware, including a 2009 AL MVP award, three batting titles (a first for a catcher), and three Gold Gloves; five Silver Slugger awards; and six All-Star appearances. And he has a spotless off-the-field record, with no character-clause concerns to derail his induction. This is a man who costarred with his mom in a **milk commercial**.

What Mauer lacks is longevity: Although he's **easily the leader** in games among 6-foot-5 players who caught in at least 40 percent of their appearances, he spent only 10

seasons behind the plate, making 885 starts at catcher before a concussion **forced him to first base**. Height makes a catcher's body a bigger target for foul tips, and it also **increases the strain** on his knees. Earlier in his career, Mauer's *lower* body ate into his squatting time; according to **Baseball Injury Consultants**, he hit the DL 10 times and lost a total of 500 days to injury over the course of his career, and only two of those DL stints were attributable to concussions. It doesn't help his case that the final third of his career came as a roughly league-average player: More **Mientkiewicz** than Killebrew, Mauer sported a below-average bat for his power-centric adopted position but compensated by becoming a **top-five** fielder. By the time he hits the Hall of Fame ballot, his last season as a star-level player will be as distant as his debut was when he had to quit catching.

Because Mauer's catching career was cut short, some voters may deem the total package disappointing. Mauer's 44.7 Baseball-Reference WAR through age 30 ranks **fifth all-time** among all players who caught in at least three-quarters of their games through that age—topping Mike Piazza, Mickey Cochrane, and Yogi Berra, among others—so it *is* disappointing that he caught only one professional pitch thereafter, even though it's hardly his fault that catching dangerously rattled his brain. There's also the matter of Mauer's subpar power. “The 36 doubles and 13 home runs he hit last year are going to slowly morph into something more like 25/25 over the next few years,” *Baseball Prospectus* wrote after the 2006 season, but 13 proved to be his second-highest homer total. Mauer's 2009 MVP power output was an outlier that inflated expectations: That year, he went deep 28 times without any notable corresponding increase in fly-ball rate, hard-hit rate, or pull rate. The extreme spike stemmed from more of his flies leaving the park, which was partly a product of 11 fence-scraping “Just Enough” homers, tied for the **fifth-most** of that type in the AL.

Many Minnesotans also see Mauer as a disappointment because he couldn't catch for the majority of the period covered by the eight-year, \$184 million extension he **signed** in 2010, still the largest awarded to a catcher or a Twin. Still, it's hard to hold a brain injury against a guy—or it should be, although some injury-shaming local columnists

didn't seem to see things that way. Plus, the perception that Mauer made too much money by baseball standards is more a function of timing and MLB's collectively bargained indentured-servitude system than his own shortcomings; Mauer made \$218 million over the course of his career, but his production would have been worth \$307 million on the free-agent market. If his contract prevented the Twins from making other upgrades, that's on ownership, not Mauer.

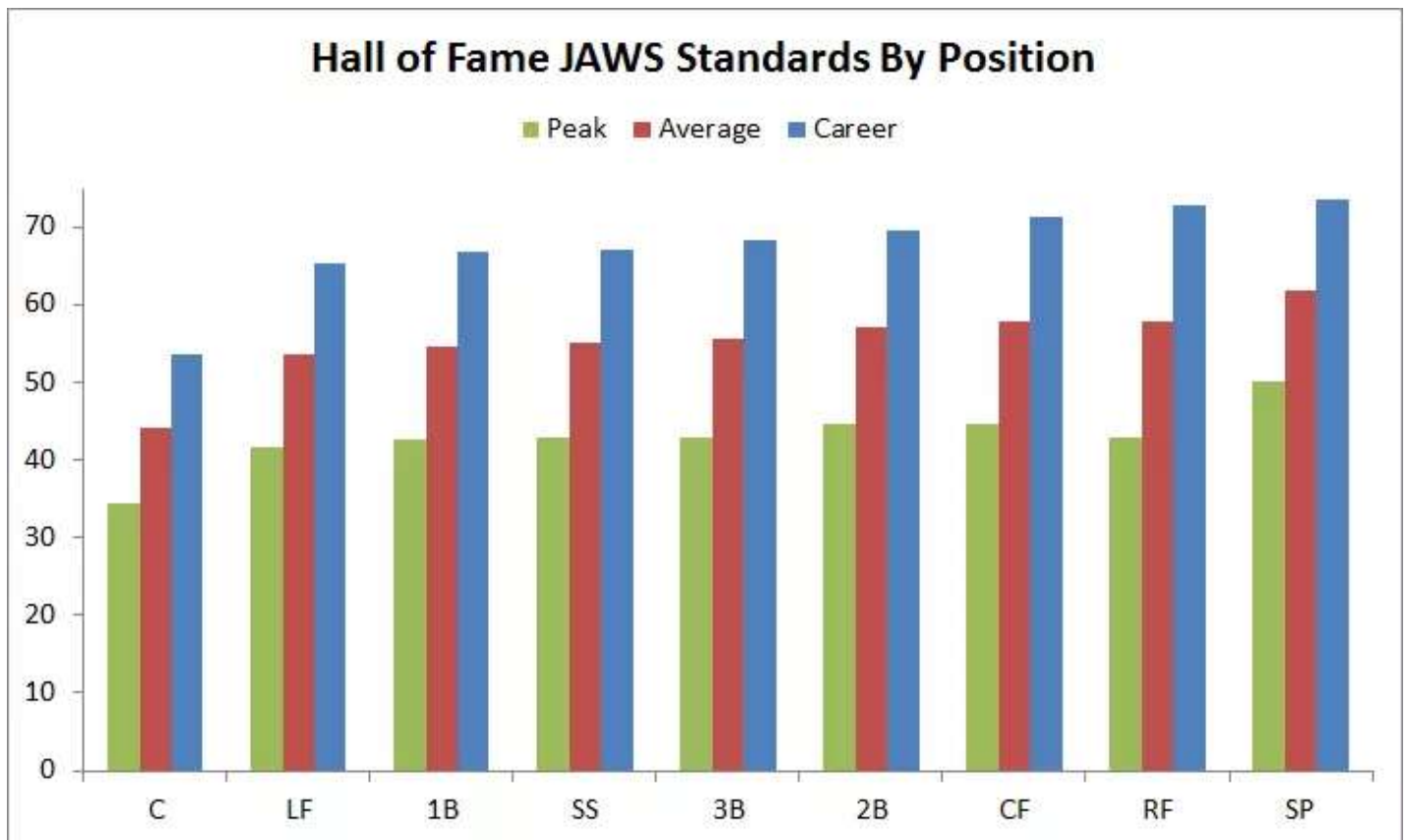
None of those slights should diminish what Mauer *did* do, which puts him in an exclusive class of catchers despite his relatively brief backstop stay. His .328 batting average as a catcher leads all players with at least 1,000 plate appearances at the position, and his .408 on-base percentage as a catcher ranks second, trailing only Cochrane, who retired (a year younger than Mauer) more than eight decades ago. Admittedly, Mauer never suffered a decline phase as a catcher that would have dragged down those stats, but he amassed an enormous amount of value by hitting so well when he *was* at catcher, a position so demanding on defense that the offensive baseline is low. Only seven catchers have ever put together a better 10-year stretch than Mauer's best decade: Gary Carter, Johnny Bench, Mike Piazza, Iván Rodríguez, Yogi Berra, Cochrane, and Thurman Munson. That's six Hall of Famers and Munson, who was killed in a plane crash at 32 but like Mauer won one MVP award and three Gold Gloves. And although the above stats don't incorporate receiving, Mauer excelled at that too, ranking well above average in his first eight seasons behind the plate before falling slightly below in his last two. (Among the 34 catchers with at least 30,000 framing opportunities from 2004 to 2011, Mauer ranked eighth on a rate basis in called strikes added, according to *Baseball Prospectus*, saving 68 runs.)

Add it all up—well, all except for the framing—and Mauer compares favorably to the catchers who are already enshrined. Both Mauer's career WAR and his peak WAR (defined as a player's best seven seasons) clear the average totals for Hall of Famers who accumulated the majority of their career value at catcher. Naturally, so does his JAWS score, which averages the two and puts him in seventh place at the position.

That positional context makes all the difference to Mauer's Cooperstown candidacy. Consider the cases of Mauer and David Wright, two perfect contemporaries whose wholesome careers ran along parallel lines. Both are 35 and spent their entire careers with the teams that selected them in the first round of the 2001 draft. Both made the majors in 2004, and both looked like Hall of Fame locks through age 30. And both encountered a series of serious injuries that diminished their skills and ultimately ended their time in the majors—though not before they took emotional career curtain calls on consecutive days.

From 2004 to 2013, which conveniently encapsulates both of their healthy and productive periods, Wright recorded a 137 wRC+ with 47.2 Baseball-Reference WAR; Mauer managed a 134 wRC+ with 44.7 WAR. Wright hit slightly better and made almost 900 more plate appearances over that span, while Mauer offered much more defensive and positional value. It all came close to evening out. And although Mauer tacked on more post-peak production than Wright did, the two are almost indistinguishable in terms of career value. Average the three win-value metrics at FanGraphs, Baseball-Reference, and *BP*, and Wright emerges with a tiny two-win lead, 53.7 to 51.6.

Yet when Wright retired, he was widely described as someone who *was* on a Cooperstown trajectory until injuries intervened, whereas Mauer is receiving more serious Hall of Fame buzz. This is why, in one graph:



Catching is incredibly difficult, as Mauer's career makes clear. Because of the physical demands of the position, catchers don't last as long as players at every other position, which prevents them from racking up equivalent career WARs. Even at their peaks, they don't play as many games or make as many plate appearances, which limits their ceilings; Mauer's 7.8 WAR in 2009, when he became the first catcher to lead his league in batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage, was the **fifth-highest** single-season catcher total of all time, less than one win behind the leader. WAR includes a positional adjustment that gives catchers a boost relative to other players on a per-plate-appearance basis, but it doesn't give them any extra credit for career length. Hall of Fame third basemen—who fall in the middle of the positional pack—boast 28 percent more career WAR and 25 percent more peak WAR than their catching counterparts. As a consequence, it makes sense to compare catchers to catchers—and Mauer clears the bar for his cohort, while Wright comes in under the bar at third base.

Mauer wasn't behind the plate for his whole career, and both he and we wish that he could have been back there longer. But because so much of his value came at catcher, he deserves to be considered a catcher for Cooperstown purposes. Mauer can take the time before his Hall of Fame run to relax or embark on a second career of drinking milk and **making mixtapes**. And we should take that time to remember what he was: one of the best ever to play a position that chews up players and spits them out too soon. ■

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