

Analysis

Baseball players are famous for cliches. Here are the ones they actually use.

By [Bonnie Berkowitz](#), [Manas Sharma](#) and [Leslie Shapiro](#) Aug. 29, 2018

The cliché-spouting baseball player has become ... well, a cliché.

“This is what you work your whole life for,” says Stereotypical Baseball Superstar. “Over the course of this season, we’ve gone through a lot of adversity, but we’ve got a special group of guys up and down the lineup. We are firing on all cylinders and looking forward to taking care of business. The goal is to win the game, but I’m going to try to stay focused and treat it like any other day.”

Do baseball folks really talk like that? Yes and no.

Nobody said *that* paragraph. It is a mashup of phrases uttered multiple times in nearly 7,000 interviews of major league players and managers between 1997 and 2018. In transcripts of those interviews, we found roughly 20,000 phrases (and their variations) that occurred over and over (including “over and over,” which showed up 113 times). We eliminated normal baseball terminology, then took a look at what we had.

Here’s what came up big. (Also, “came up big” came up 100 times).

Interviews are tough

One of the most common word combinations was some version of that’s a good question (522 times), which is often a verbal space filler that gives an interviewee time to think.

Baseball players may be asked questions almost daily over a 162-game season, plus playoffs for the lucky few. It’s no wonder every answer is not a breath of fresh air (14) — or that 18 guys mentioned “sleeping in my own bed.”

A classic scene in the 1988 movie “Bull Durham” elevated the interview cliché to both a critical skill and an inside joke. After a veteran catcher schools a dopey-but-talented minor leaguer on the best boring phrases to use in media interviews, the protege gets to the big leagues and rattles them off like a seasoned pro.

The advice was obviously timeless. Variations of two of those clichés, I’m just happy to be here (125) and we gotta play ’em one day at a time (485), still routinely show up in the speech of real major leaguers.

Baseball lingo is real

We eliminated technical baseball language from our count — “down the left field line,” for instance, is a description rather than a cliché — but that still left some quirky phrases that are either widely used in sports or are specific to the game of baseball (329 times).

Players and managers stressed the need to put the bat on the ball (50) and play your game (185) and find a way to get it done (75). Pitchers pound the strike zone (and attack and command it, 87 times total). Twenty-seven noted that good pitching beats good hitting.

You just have to mentally prepare yourself and pound the strike zone. I'm excited. I'm not in any way, shape or form trying to show any signs of weakness or anything like that.

Gio Gonzalez, Oct. 5, 2012



They don't strike out a lot, they put the bat on the ball, any of them can do damage at any time, they can all run well —

most of them can run well. They're here for a reason. And good pitching beats good hitting, though, and I just need to focus on making my pitches and hopefully come out successful.

Justin Verlander, Oct. 4, 2017



We have been backed into a corner before, it's nothing that we haven't been able to overcome, and it comes down to execution now.

Doug Fister, Oct. 7, 2017



He's magic. He's calm, cool, and collected. The thing about Ervin [Santana], he's been around the game for a long time. He knows how to win baseball games. He does all the little things right and fills up the zone.

Brian Dozier, Oct. 2, 2017



Players talk like us

But many of the most common word combinations were not baseballisms but widely used phrases that come up in everyday English.

For example, the top phrase was some version of a heck of a job, a tremendous job, an incredible job, etc., which appeared in more than half the transcripts (3,583 times). Regular people also say that all the time. Perhaps the best known instance of heck of a job was uttered not by an athlete but by [a U.S. president](#) — albeit one who had owned a major-league team.

These phrases aren't random. They are chosen to communicate ideas.

Players try to sound truthful — to be honest with you showed up 638 times — and magnanimous, as 301 wanted to tip my hat to someone else. And they're a notoriously superstitious bunch; knock on wood appeared 59 times.

Reaching for the same words and phrases again and again doesn't make a person inarticulate or lazy, language experts say — it just makes them human.

“When we put a sentence together, our brains are not just retrieving individual words from our memory. We are often retrieving larger chunks,” said Nathan Schneider, a computational linguist at Georgetown University. “It’s a good thing. It’s one of the things that helps you come up with a fluent sentence without having to be completely creative in every word you use when putting the sentence together.”

It's supposed to be fun. A lot of times I don't look like I'm having fun, but I'm enjoying myself.

Mike Hampton, Oct. 21, 2000



We want to stay in the moment, we want to play our game, and if it's good enough Wednesday, we'll win.

Ron Washington, Oct. 24, 2011



It's a long season. It's a marathon. You grind it out. It is what it is.

Derrek Lee, Oct. 23, 2003



The start is what it is, or it was what it was.
Chris Carpenter, Oct. 11, 2011



We use idioms time and time again (58)

Many of the most common phrases were idioms — phrases that mean something different from the literal meaning of their words. Grabbing the bull by the horns (9), for instance, nearly always means confronting a problem rather than an actual bull.

Idioms are like code phrases that help us build rapport with other people by demonstrating that we are part of the group, Schneider said. If you're not on the same page (161), they make no sense.

Idioms showed up hundreds of times, from bringing something to the table (125) and putting the cart before the horse (15) to keeping something on the back burner (13) and being all in the same boat (40).

“If you were to give a computer these texts and ask the system to figure out what baseball is about based on the words,” Schneider said, “it might get confused and think that baseball involves horses and boats and burners.”

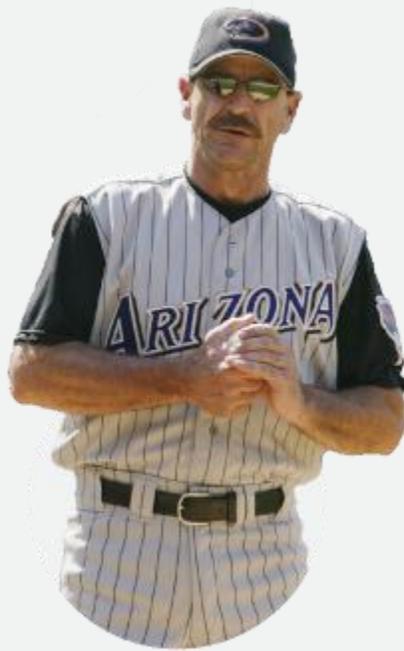
There were some troubled times early on in the season and somehow he was able to keep the arms fresh enough to where when everything started rolling and the rotation started getting on track, everybody was firing on all cylinders, and they really didn't miss a beat for four months.

Mike Bordick, Oct. 9, 2014



He is a refreshing breath of fresh air.

Bob Brenly, Oct. 31, 2001



You have to pick your poison, because the guy behind him is not chopped liver either.

Fredi Gonzalez, Oct. 5, 2013



Yeah, you never want to get your rear end kicked, there's no doubt about it.

Joe Torre, Oct. 29, 2001



I just try to think properly when I'm up there, this guy's in trouble, he's got to make the right pitch and I'm in the driver's seat.

Brad Hawpe, Oct. 11, 2007



These phrases are the cream of the crop (10 times)

Here are some of the most common and most interesting phrases from our data, along with a few — but not all — variations. Please take a look (101).

Hover over a phrase to view sentences using it.

Common phrases

all the confidence in the world

look forward to the challenge

happy to be here

sleep in my own bed

no question in my mind

off to a huge start

it's supposed to be fun

been around a long time
way to get it done
it's an honor
going about our business
it is what it is
in my wildest dreams
nothing we can do about it
see what happens today
learned a long time ago
did a tremendous job
came up big
took it for granted
relaxed frame of mind
great question
a firm believer
stay focused
stay in the moment
what you see is what you get
a big fan of Casey
not afraid to make mistakes
wonderful group of guys
little bit of everything
go out there and do my thing
to be completely honest with you
can assure you
take our chances
law of averages
have a lot of respect for