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B A S E B A L L M E N T S

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OK, having riffed on the topic of [fast pitchers](#), now it's time for my list of the 32 fastest pitchers in baseball history. (And you'll recall [why these lists go to 32.](#)) What am I basing this on? Speed. Stories. Gut. I will say up front that any of these 32 — and at least a couple dozen others — might be the fastest of all time. I only put them in order because otherwise you wouldn't be able to yell at me.

* * *

32. Amos Rusie

They called him the Hoosier Thunderbolt, and his fastball was probably as responsible as anything else for the decision to move the mound back in 1893 from 50 feet to where it is now, 60 feet 6 inches from home plate.

From 1890 to 1892, Rusie struck out 300-plus every year and walked 270-plus ever year. He also hit 66 batters. It's telling that the moving back of the mound was, at least in part, done so that hitters would have more time to get out of the way of Amos Rusie's fastballs.*

**I've always found it interesting that Rusie's control — at least as it related to walks — got BETTER after they moved the mound back.*

In any case, his fastball was so fast that, according to the excellent [SABR baseball biography](#) by Ralph Berger, Rusie once inspired a book called *Secrets of Amos Rusie, The World's Greatest Pitcher, How He Obtained His Incredible Speed on Balls*. He also once hit Hughie Jennings in the head, sending Jennings into some sort of four-day coma.

31. Robin Roberts

Think how much different Robin Roberts' career would have been had he come up in today's era. He was 21 when he got the call to the big leagues... he had signed that same year out of Michigan State. He appeared in only 11 minor league games, won nine of them, showed off one of the greatest young arms anyone had ever seen, and, voila, he was up in the big leagues. His first 13 big league games, he had a 2.39 ERA and threw what we now call quality starts in 11 of them (seven of his first 13 starts were complete games — it was another time).

Think about how a pitcher with that sort of talent would be treated now. Roberts had a ferocious fastball... he was a great athlete who had been a star basketball player at Michigan State, too. These days, teams would do anything to protect that arm.

Then? Not so much. In consecutive seasons, beginning at age 23, Roberts threw 304, 315, 330, 346, 336 and 305 innings. He was down to 297 innings the next year. He was also done as a great pitcher.

So the Robin Roberts a lot of people talk about now was the Roberts of the late 1950s, early 1960s, when he was still a workhorse but without his great fastball. In his early days, people called him Rapid Robin, and I think his fastball should rank with the fastest of all time.

30. Roger Clemens

With Clemens, it wasn't about pure speed. His greatness as a pitcher came from an almost inconceivable blend of power, finesse, competitiveness, command and certainty. But he also was clocked at 100 mph in 2001. when he was 38 years old. So he could certainly pump it up there.



Strasburg showed blazing speed and impeccable control in his brief debut. (Heinz Klutmeier/SI)

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I think there's a whole other list (a very different list) to be done — who threw the BEST fastballs in baseball history. I think Clemens has an argument. He controlled his fastball in a way that Feller and Ryan never really did. There are some pitchers with incredible fastballs — like Pedro, like Seaver, like Alexander and numerous others — who would be on the list of greatest fastballs. But we're trying to guess the fastest here.

29. Rex Barney

One of the great scenes in Roger Kahn's classic *Boys of Summer* was of the old sports editor trying to teach Kahn about baseball writing by reliving his own classic line: "Rex Barney pitches as if home plate is high and outside." Barney, as I understand it, would sometimes use the line himself in later life, after he became the public address announcer for the Baltimore Orioles.

Barney threw serious heat, no question about it. But he also was one of the first of an archetype that you will find on this list more than once... the preposterously fast pitcher who can't control his fastball and, as such, does not have much success. Barney had one good season in the big leagues, 1948, when he won 15 games, but the rest of his career was an astonishing disappointment, and everybody knew it. What's interesting to me about this is that his lack of success made his career disappointing but probably made Barney's fastball MORE LEGENDARY, not LESS LEGENDARY. You'll see this as we go... it's amazing how the fastballs of pitchers who turned out to be great (like in the case of, say, Robin Roberts) tend not to be remembered quite as well as fastballs of those disappointments who could never quite harness the power or could not maintain their fastball for very long.

28. Virgil Trucks

He threw two no-hitters, twice led the league in shutouts, once led the league in strikeouts. (He also pitched in 25 games for the Yankees in 1958, which, I'm told, makes Trucks, now 93, the oldest living Yankee.) They called him "Fire" because it fit his last name and because of his hot fastball, which he says was clocked at 105 mph when he was timed with an Army radar gun.

Ted Williams used to say that Trucks' fastball probably came in at about 110 mph. Williams famously disliked pitchers but he also offered some of the most famous quotes about pitchers who threw hard (see Dalkowski, Steve).

27. Mark Wohlers

Wohlers was clocked at 103 mph during a spring training game in 1995, which places his name in the fastest-of-all-time competition.

He grew up in Holyoke, Mass. — same hometown as Jack Buck — and he is one of the first players I remember whose fastball really emerged after he was put in the pen. This would become a staple of the 1990s, starters who would add three, four, five mph to their fastballs once they were in the pen and could throw all-out.

Another of the challenges of this list is trying to compare hard-throwing STARTERS with hard-throwing RELIEVERS. Any pitcher with a great arm can throw one pitch at preposterous speeds. Being able to maintain it is much harder (see Verlander, Justin). I have no doubt that some of the hard-throwing starters in a different role could have thrown 100 mph or faster. Bruce Berenyi, Jim Maloney, Bob Turley all come immediately to mind.

Back to Wohlers. He was mostly an ineffective starter his first two years in the minors, but in his third year he was put in the pen, and he was absurdly good and throwing so hard that he was up in the big leagues at 21. The fastball kept getting faster and faster until 2005, when he went 7-3 with 25 saves and 90 strikeouts in 64 2/3 innings. He was good enough to make the All-Star team the next year.

Then he had a disastrous 1996 World Series, and he was somewhat less effective in 1997. In 1998 he lost it completely and could not throw a strike.

26. Joe Wood

Walter Johnson said this: "Can I throw faster than Smoky Joe Wood? Listen, Mister, there's no man alive can throw harder than Smoky Joe Wood."

Wood was born and raised in Kansas — it's amazing how many great fastballs came from the Heartland. Rex Barney and Bob Gibson are from Nebraska, along with Pete Alexander, who could have been on this list, Joe Wood and Johnson are from Kansas, Dazzy Vance and Bob Feller are from Iowa...

Wood broke his thumb trying to field a ball in the wet grass after his excellent 1912 season (34-5, 1.91 ERA, 10 shutouts) and was never quite the same as a pitcher. After three years of trying to make it work as a pitcher, he tried instead to become an outfielder and he did become a pretty decent hitter.

He played a role on the 1920 World Series champion Indians, and he hit .366 in 229 plate appearances in 1921.

25. Kerry Wood

I've long thought it's intriguing how similar the stories are of Joe Wood and Kerry Wood. Both were power right-handed pitchers named Wood. Both came to the big leagues at a very young age — Joe Wood was 19 when he was a regular, Kerry was 21. Both had otherworldly fastballs. Joe Wood had his great season at 22, in 1912. Kerry had a spectacular season at 21 — he struck out 233 in 166 innings in 1998, which up to that point was the most strikeouts per nine innings for a starter in baseball history*.

**Pedro Martinez the very next year would strike out 313 in 213 innings to break the record. Two years after that, Randy Johnson would strike out 372 in 249 innings to set a new record — which still stands today.*

Of course, that year in his fifth start — FIFTH BIG LEAGUE START — he struck out 20 and walked nobody in a one-hitter against the Houston Astros. Though it wasn't a perfect game, it still might be the greatest nine-inning pitching performance in baseball history. Bill James will tell you that his game score stat is mostly for fun, but it's worth noting that Kerry Wood's game is the only nine-inning performance to have a game score higher than 101 (it scored an astonishing 105). Whatever the case, there's just no place to go from throwing one of the great games ever in start number five.

Well, he had eight more 10-plus strikeout games the rest of that year, including a 16-strikeout game in the second-to-last game of the year. He was pretty spectacular. You know what happened next. He had Tommy John surgery and missed the next year. He led the league in strikeouts in 2003, but basically the last 10 years have been about all sorts of injury problems... though he has not tried to come back as a position player like Joe Wood, he has tried as a reliever, and he still will pump up his fastball into the mid-to-upper 90s, and he can still be effective at times. But the all-time fastball, it won't ever come back. The fastball he threw in 1998, it has to be one of the fastest in baseball history.

24. Neftali Feliz

Talk about easy motions — Feliz seems entirely capable of throwing 120 if he ever really unleashed.

Feliz, though, seems to me the kind of guy who will really pull back on the radar gun as he tries to become a good pitcher. I think of golfer Davis Love III... people don't remember this, but when he came up to PGA Tour he was a ridiculously long hitter, comically long, not unlike John Daly. He could have made himself legendary that way, but he had this goal of being a good golfer rather than a legendary one, and he pulled back on his drives and ended up winning a lot of money.

Feliz seems to me — from afar, admittedly — to have a similar sensible approach. He hit 100-plus on the gun routinely early in the year, but as of late he seems to be mixing his pitches much more — topping out in the 97-98 range, but occasionally throwing in the low 90s, too, to mess up hitters' timing. What made Nolan Ryan, among others, remarkable (though perhaps not as great a pitcher as he might have been) was that he never gave in, never pulled back, never stopped trying to throw 110 mph. Most pitchers show that kind of speed when they're young and then settle on a slightly less turbulent attitude.

23. Justin Verlander

The thing that's amazing about Verlander, of course, is how OFTEN he can throw hard. Two starts ago, Verlander went eight innings against Toronto. His last pitch — the 127th of the game — was clocked at 98 mph. So, there's no telling how fast Verlander could throw if he were a closer, if he threw with everything he had on every pitch. Even as is, he has thrown numerous 100-mph-on-the-radar pitches, including a 102 back in 2007.

22. Bob Gibson

Gibson looked like he was throwing absurdly hard. He *was* throwing absurdly hard, of course, but the larger point is that he looked like it. His pitching form was performance art, with appendages flying every which way.

I sometimes ask hitters if they would rather face an easy-motion, 100-mph fastball or a violent, body-parts-going-left-and-right, 95-mph fastball. I have yet to hear from a hitter who would rather face the violent delivery. I think Gibson's intimidation, which he talked about at some length [here](#), came more from the power of his will than from the power of his fastball. But he threw plenty hard, too.

21. Dazzy Vance

Vance was born in Iowa, and for much of Bob Feller's youth in Iowa the stories about him kept

referring to him not as the fastest young pitcher since Walter Johnson but instead as the fastest Iowan since Dazzy Vance....

Vance is a fascinating guy to look at as we watch the story of Stephen Strasburg unfold. Vance, like Strasburg, had a breathtakingly good arm, but unlike Strasburg there certainly was no plan to limit innings in those days. Vance spent his youth throwing lots and lots and lots of those youthful fastballs in places like York and St. Joseph and Columbus and Sacramento. He was up in the big leagues for four starts in 1915 when he was 24, and he made a brief, two-game appearance for the Yankees in 1918 when he was 27.

And that was it. His great arm might have been the most abused in the history of professional baseball. He probably threw 2,000 innings in the minor leagues — sore arm all the way — before he finally had some sort of mysterious arm surgery that reduced the pain. He was healthy enough to pitch a full season for Brooklyn in 1922. He was 31. He led the league in strikeouts. He would lead the league in strikeouts for the next six consecutive years after that, too.

Even then — in his 30s and after some kind of antiquated arm surgery — he threw the fastest fastball in the league, the fastest, people said, since Walter Johnson. So there's no telling how fast he threw in those minor league days when he was young and wild and hurting.

20. Rob Dibble

I originally had him ahead of Stephen Strasburg on the list and decided that I could not do that in good conscience.

Dibble, of course, threw serious gas, though, before his arm blew up. He was regularly clocked at 100 mph by scouts. He also had a furious temper, which he once demonstrated by firing a baseball into the center-field bleachers. The ball reportedly hit a pregnant elementary school teacher, which probably left Dibble (not unlike the criminal caught by Maurice Green referenced above) muttering to himself: "Oh yeah, OF COURSE the ball couldn't hit some drunken guy without a shirt. It had to hit a pregnant elementary school teacher."

19. Stephen Strasburg

There was — and hopefully will be — something limitless about Strasburg. Even in his short major league debut, he showed that he could throw 100-plus. His breaking stuff bent and swerved in preposterous ways. And he really seemed to be doing it all under control.

Some pitchers come back from Tommy John surgery as great as ever or, perhaps, even stronger. Some don't. Everyone will be watching Strasburg closely.

18. Ryne Duren

I touched on this in the Clemens and Rex Barney comments: The speed of a fastball can be measured in many ways... and one of them is the pitcher's inability to control it. Someone who can throw 100 mph on the corners is obviously going to have a lot of success... but, paradoxically, this probably makes the fastball seem less dangerous.

Duren, of course, was famous for two things: (1) Throwing really hard; and (2) Having very little idea where the ball was going. He wore thick glasses, and he had a reputation as a heavy drinker (something he wrote about touchingly in his autobiography) and these two things made him stand out as the scariest and most dangerous pitcher of his day. He struck out more than a batter an inning in an era when hitters did not strike out much, and hitters managed only a .210 batting average against him over his career. But he walked a lot of hitters, hit a bunch too, gave up home runs and burned out before he had thrown 600 innings in the big leagues.

Hitters who had to stand in against Duren's fastball would say there was nothing quite like it. "I would not admire hitting against Ryne Duren," Casey Stengel famously said, "because if he ever hit you in the head, you might be in the past tense."

Ryne Sandberg, a player who could not have been much more different from Duren, was named after Ryne Duren.

17. Goose Gossage

Did you ever play a game called Statis Pro Baseball? That was the first baseball board game I ever played — even before Strat-O-Matic — and it must have been the 1979 season when I was 11, because I remember two things about it:

(A) Matt Alexander was by far the best player in the league. By far. Nobody was even close. He only got 44 at-bats in the big leagues that year, but he hit .538 with a triple, and he stole 13 bases (while being caught just once) and his card was a wonder to behold.

(B) Goose Gossage was unhittable. This was a bit more realistic since Gossage, at times, *was* unhittable. Still, I would see my friend put Gossage's card down on the table and my heart would sink, and I would see in my mind the most unhittable and blazing fastballs that have ever been thrown.

Gossage, like Gibson, threw hard and looked like he was throwing even harder. His matchups with George Brett — the best fastball hitter of the time and one of the best of all time — were epic. It seemed like we had more epic matchups in those days, but maybe that's just nostalgia. In anyway case, Brett only hit two home runs off Gossage, but they are both famous. One, of course, was the pine tar home run. The other was Brett's three-run blast that basically won the 1980 playoffs — that was a high fastball, up around the eyes, and as Bill James has written, it was more or less the last fastball Brett would see for the next five years.

16. J.R. Richard

There is a great CBS special that I saw on ESPN Classic once, featuring J.R. Richard when he was a high school phenom in Ruston, La., in 1969. There are many wonderful things about the special, including the premise, which was that Richard was such a good athlete that nobody was entirely sure if he would be a pitcher or an every-day player. Apparently, Richard as a pitcher did not allow a single run in his senior year of high school, and as a hitter once cracked four home runs in a game. He was, incredibly, the SECOND pick in the 1969 draft, behind another high school legend, Jeff Burroughs. It was a good year for high school phenoms.

What I loved most about the special, though, is that there was a wide shot of the dozens of scouts there in Louisiana to see Richard. And in the wide angle, it appeared that there was only one scout who was black. When I heard his voice above others, I knew: It was my friend Buck O'Neil.

Richard threw insanely fast, but he was also insanely wild, and so he didn't really establish himself as a good pitcher until 1976, when he was 26. At that point, he was almost unhittable at home, in the hitting torture chamber that was the Astrodome. That was the perfect match of man and ballpark. Look at these home numbers:

1976: 11-8, 1.96 ERA, .194 batting average against, 3 homers

1977: 9-6, 2.78 ERA, .226 BAA, 5 homers

1978: 12-5, 2.06 ERA, .155 BAA, 3 homers

He was, as you might imagine, considerably worse on the road. By 1979, though, Richard was becoming a great pitcher at home and on the road — he led the league in ERA that year — and one of the great baseball tragedies is how his career ended in 1980. He was 6-foot-8, threw impossibly hard, was beginning to gain control of his stuff..

There is a movement in Houston to retire his number. Frankly, I cannot believe that they have not done that already. The Astros are already known for being somewhat retired-number crazy — they've retired nine numbers, including emotional numbers like Jim Umbricht's 32 and Don Wilson's 40. Hard to believe that they haven't retired Richard's number — he was both great AND he has an emotional story.

15. Jonathan Broxton

He was clocked at 102 mph in a 2009 game, and best I can tell he has hit 100 mph in 25 different big league games. He has only hit 100 once this year, according to [PITCHf/x](#), though, and by all measures his fastball is not as effective as it has been the last couple of years. This is another thing about the fastest pitchers ever... usually their shelf life is awfully short.

14. Lefty Grove

When people talk about Grove, they rarely talk about pure speed — this might be because with Grove there's plenty else to talk about. There's his greatness (strong argument for best pitcher ever). There's his temper. There are a million stories.

But Grove threw really fast. It is Grove who inspired perhaps the most famous fastball line ever. Arthur Baer said, "Lefty Grove could throw a lamb chop past a wolf."

13. Sandy Koufax

In Rob Neyer and Bill James' *Guide to Pitchers*, they do not list Koufax's fastball as one of the 10 best ever, because for years his CURVEBALL was considered his best pitch (Koufax's curve is ranked No. 1 in the book). Hard to imagine someone having the best fastball AND the best curve in baseball history at the same time... nobody should ever get a hit. Of course, few did hit Koufax in his prime.

His fastball was legendary enough that it inspired Al Campanis to say that the only two times the hair on his arms ever stood up were when he saw the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and when he saw Koufax throw a fastball for the first time. The thing about Koufax's fastball when you look back at video is how much it seemed to rise. This is an optical illusion, I'm told, but his fastball absolutely seemed to jump out of its plane as it approached home plate. I doubt that any fastball ever appeared to jump quite that much (though Dwight Gooden's in 1984-85 was close).

12. Herb Score

Score was only two years older than Koufax. They were both left-handed pitchers from New York State with impossibly great fastballs. They both made their big league debuts in 1955 — imagine two left-handed arms like THAT coming into the league at the same time — though under very different circumstances. Koufax was a bonus baby who had to be on the big league roster and clearly wasn't ready. Score led the American League in strikeouts — becoming, in the process, the first starter to strike out more than a batter an inning in a full season. It is a record that Koufax would later break, once he found his way.

Score threw absurdly hard — I don't recall him ever talking about making an effort to have his fastball timed, but it had to be in the 100-mph range.

11. Joe Williams

They called him Smokey Joe Williams and Cyclone Joe Williams, but either way his fastball was legendary, even though few saw him as he toiled in the Negro leagues.

A couple of fascinating items on Joe Williams:

(A) He was almost unhittable in exhibition games against major leaguers. Sometimes, he was unhittable. He shut out the world champion Giants in a 1912 exhibition game. He shut out the National League champion Phillies in a 1915 exhibition game. And in 1917 he lost to the Giants but threw a no-hitter and struck out 20.

(B) At age 44, he struck out 27 Kansas City Monarchs in a 12-inning game under the lights. True, the lights were probably awful, but 27 strikeouts is 27 strikeouts... especially for a 44-year-old man.

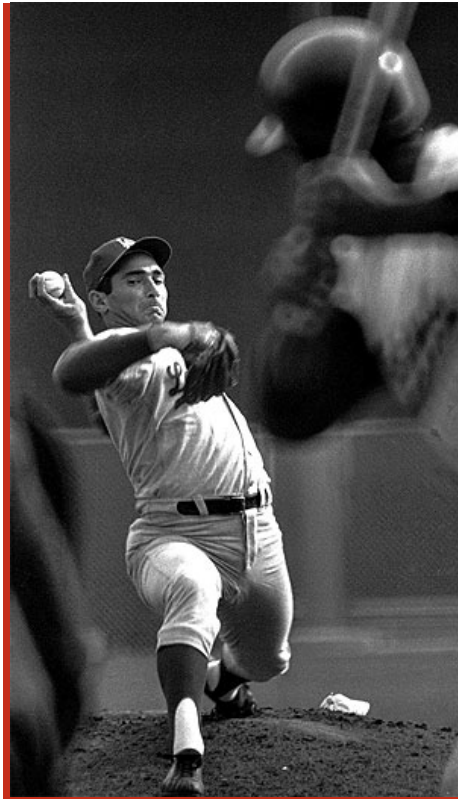
In a 1952 survey in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Williams, and not Satchel Paige, was named the best pitcher ever in the Negro leagues.

10. Sudden Sam McDowell

With McDowell, Duren, the preposterously hard-throwing Rube Waddell, Pete Alexander and Dwight Gooden, among others, there seems to be at least some connection between legendary fastballs and alcohol. Are some pitchers with great fastballs like some of those great and tortured jazz artists — haunted as well as talented?

There was no American League Cy Young Award in 1965, but if there had been I suspect, based on MVP voting, that reliever Eddie Fisher (15 wins, 24 saves — which they did not keep track of then — 2.40 ERA) or starter Mudcat Grant (21-7, 3.30 ERA) would have won it. But there's little question that McDowell was the best pitcher in the league. He led the league in ERA, strikeouts and, we can see now, WAR. But he only went 17-11. There's no way that would have won him a Cy Young in 1965.

Is it so different now? I don't know, but I think we'll find out. A lot was made last year out of Zack Greinke and Tim Lincecum winning the Cy Young Awards with 16 and 15 wins, respectively. But it probably wasn't a real test, because nobody won 20 games in either league. Whoever won the Cy



Koufax

Young was going to do it without an imposing win total, and so giving it to Greinke and Lincecum — who I think were the two best pitchers — was great and not too difficult.

It will be different this year. The best pitcher in the American League might very well be Felix Hernandez. His 2.30 ERA is second only to Clay Buchholz's 2.25, and he has thrown 65 more innings. His 5.5 WAR is the best in the league by [Baseball Reference](#) numbers. There are other numbers.

But his record is 11-10. With that Mariners offense behind him, he's quite likely to have a losing record by year end. And CC Sabathia will probably win 22 or 23 games. I'll have more on this later, but you could certainly make an argument that Felix (or Cliff Lee) has been better than CC, and that pitcher wins has become so outdated and pointless a statistic that it now deludes much more than it enlightens. But... wins still has power. It will be interesting to watch.

9. Randy Johnson

If you were a left-handed hitter, I suspect that no pitcher in baseball history has ever looked faster than the Big Unit. Not only was he lightning fast — 100-plus mph on the gun — he pitched from that crazy angle, and he was 6-foot-11, and he looked taller and... yeah. He was plenty fast against righties, too. But if you were a lefty, the ball had to look like it was coming at you at a million miles an hour.

8. Billy Wagner

You don't have to be tall to throw one of the all-time fastballs — it's a beautiful part of the deal. Wagner is only 5-foot-10. But he was clocked at 101 in 2003, and he has probably thrown faster than that.

Michael Bamberger's [story](#) on Wagner from 1999 is excellent, though I think my favorite single story about him revolved around his reaction a few days ago when he broke the record for most strikeouts by a lefty reliever.

Yeah. Most strikeouts by a lefty reliever. I know.

But here's the thing: So does Wagner. It happened in a 7-1 Braves loss, and they tried to get Wagner to throw out the record-breaking ball for safekeeping or whatever, and he flat said: Um, no.

Actually, according to what he told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, he said: "We're getting our [butts] kicked, it's raining, let's go."

"It's stupid," he said afterward. "Who in their right mind makes a big deal out of doing something they're supposed to do in the first place? I'm out there pitching in a game; we're getting our butt kicked. It's not worth it to make a big deal out of that. That's embarrassing."

He flipped the record-breaking ball in the stands later, and the Braves apparently went out, made a trade and got it back for him. That reaction tells you pretty much all you need to know about the general awesomeness of Billy Wagner.

7. Steve Dalkowski

I'm bowing somewhat to the legend here by putting Dalkowski at No. 7 — but not entirely. There are plenty of people who think he should be No. 1.

There is absolutely no question that Dalkowski threw an amazing fastball. He really did strike out 24 and walk 18 in a minor league game — that's the stuff that inspired the Nuke Laloosh character in *Bull Durham*. Ted Williams really did call him "the fastest ever" after facing him one time in spring training and declaring that he never wanted to face him again.

He really was once clocked at 93.5 mph despite throwing on flat ground and after pitching the night before.

Still, because Dalkowski never pitched in the big leagues, the stories can basically go anywhere. Legends build and then build higher if no one is watching. There are many people in the game I know who insist that nobody ever threw as fast as Dalkowski, and that may be right, but there is little tangible evidence here. And, as you will see, I prefer to believe in another legend.

6. Joel Zumaya

Zumaya's 104.8-mph fastball is the fastest ever reliably clocked — that happened in 2006 in Oakland. Of course, "reliably" is a charged word.

In 2009 and 2010 Zumaya's fastball AVERAGED 99 mph, according to PITCHf/x. That's pretty special.

5. Aroldis Chapman

Chapman's fastball has registered 105 on numerous radar guns, and as my friend Keith Law (among many others) says, the amazing part is how easy it looks. There is no violence at all in his motion; he's like the anti-Bob Gibson in that way. Just a slow beginning, a fluid motion, and BLAMMO the ball just fires out like the Batmobile rolling out of the cave.

I can tell you that I have never seen anyone throw harder than Chapman live and in person. I can also tell you that it is absolutely impossible for me to really tell you that Chapman throws harder than Feliz or Zumaya or Wagner or Gossage or any of the others on this list that I've seen. Contradiction? Absolutely. But it's like I said at the start: Finding the fastest pitcher is more art than science, more instinct than calculation.

I once asked a friend how you choose the greatest rock and roll song ever. He said: "It's the one that makes you feel the most alive." I think it's a bit like that with fastballs.

4. Walter Johnson

Ring Lardner: "Johnson's got a gun concealed about his person. They can't tell me he throws them balls with his arm."

Ty Cobb: "His fastball looked about the size of a watermelon seed, and it hissed at you as it passed."

Cliff Blankenship (on Johnson): "You can't hit what you can't see."

3. Bob Feller

Nobody worked harder than Bob Feller to find out exactly how hard a person can throw a baseball. His fastball raced a motorcycle. He threw his fastball through some sort of radar gun contraption and it was clocked at 98.6 mph, but supposedly you must add 9 mph to get a real radar gun reading because it clocked the ball as it crossed home plate rather than when it left his hand. So that would make the pitch **107.6 mph**. Anyway, he was always curious about the limits of his arm.

Walter Johnson, who was always as upfront and honest as he could be about such things (see Joe Wood), supposed that he threw harder than Feller. But I'm leaning toward Feller here, simply because he was SUCH a sensation when he came up as a 17-year-old in 1936. There were still players in the league who had faced Johnson (though not the young Johnson) and Feller still seemed like something entirely new.

2. Nolan Ryan

I will never forget the image that umpire Ron Luciano painted of Ryan in one of his books. I was probably 15 or so when I read it, but I remember it so clearly. Luciano was talking about how he was once behind the plate for Ryan, and a fastball came in, and to Luciano it suddenly seemed to explode into a million pieces. Luciano turned away and waited for the crowd to go crazy — imagine a guy throwing a fastball that was so fast that it exploded. But the crowd reacted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Later, the same thing happened. Luciano went to the doctor after the game, who explained that Ryan's pitches were coming so fast that Luciano's eyes simply could not adjust to the ball coming at him.

I'm not sure that's much more than storytelling, but it's good storytelling. I haven't forgotten it.

1. Satchel Paige

OK, well, most people would expect Ryan to be No. 1 on this list. But I'm going to go with Paige. Some want to believe in Dalkowski, I'll believe in Satchel Paige.

I have several reasons for this, but I'm going to go with this one: For most of his career Satchel Paige threw nothing but fastballs. Nothing. Oh, he named them different names — Bat Dodger, Midnight Rider, Midnight Creeper, Jump Ball, Trouble Ball — but essentially they were all fastballs.

And he was still unhittable for the better part of 15 years. One pitch. It's a lot like Mariano Rivera, except he wasn't doing it for one inning at a time. He was pitching complete games day after day. That had to be some kind of incredible fastball.

Paige never spent much time — or any time, really — trying to guess how fast his fastball went in terms of miles per hour. He wasn't the sort to allow himself to be quantified with plain numbers. "I never threw an illegal pitch," he said, "The trouble is, once in a while I toss one that ain't never been seen by this generation."

In the late 1920s, when he was still trying to get his control under control — he would become perhaps the most precise pitcher in baseball history — he threw ludicrously hard. And he also threw hundreds and hundreds of innings. He was a great pitcher until he hurt his arm in the late 1930s, then

recovered and was a great pitcher again in the 1940s, then had enough left to go 7-1 with a 2.48 ERA in 21 games as a rookie in the big leagues in 1948. Later, he made the All-Star Game. By then, and really for the decade or so before, he was relying more on his command and his guile and various other tricks to get hitters out than on any kind of speed. Nobody who would see Paige at that point could imagine how hard he threw as a young man.

But then so few SAW Paige as a young man that all we really have to go on are stories. Dalkowski's case is largely built on the Ted Williams quote. Well, Joe DiMaggio would say that Paige was the best he ever faced. Bob Feller would say that Paige was the best he ever saw. Hack Wilson would say that the ball looked like a marble when it crossed the plate. Dizzy Dean would say that Paige's fastball made his own look like a changeup. And Paige himself had a few things to say about his greatness.

"They all threw hard," Buck O'Neil told me when I asked him how Paige's fastball ranked against Feller's and Ryan's and Johnson's and the rest. Then he winked. "But Ol' Satch threw just a little harder."

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