



Big Data Baseball: Math, Miracles, and the End of a 20-Year Losing Streak

By Travis Sawchik

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New York Times Bestseller

After twenty consecutive losing seasons for the Pittsburgh Pirates, team morale was low, the club's payroll ranked near the bottom of the sport, game attendance was down, and the city was becoming increasingly disenchanted with its team. Pittsburghers joked their town was the city of champions...and the Pirates. *Big Data Baseball* is the story of how the 2013 Pirates, mired in the longest losing streak in North American pro sports history, adopted drastic big-data strategies to end the drought, make the playoffs, and turn around the franchise's fortunes.

Award-winning journalist Travis Sawchik takes you behind the scenes to expertly weave together the stories of the key figures who changed the way the small-market Pirates played the game. For manager Clint Hurdle and the front office staff to save their jobs, they could not rely on a free agent spending spree, instead they had to improve the sum of their parts and find hidden value. They had to change. From Hurdle shedding his old-school ways to work closely with Neal Huntington, the forward-thinking data-driven GM and his team of talented analysts; to pitchers like A. J. Burnett and Gerrit Cole changing what and where they threw; to Russell Martin, the undervalued catcher whose expert use of the nearly-invisible skill of pitch framing helped the team's pitchers turn more balls into strikes; to Clint Barmes, a solid shortstop and one of the early adopters of the unconventional on-field shift which forced the entire infield to realign into positions they never stood in before. Under Hurdle's leadership, a culture of collaboration and creativity flourished as he successfully blended whiz kid analysts with graybeard coaches? a kind of symbiotic teamwork which was unique to the sport.

Big Data Baseball is *Moneyball* on steroids. It is an entertaining and enlightening underdog story that uses the 2013 Pirates season as the perfect lens to examine the sport's burgeoning big-data movement. With the help of data-tracking systems like PitchF/X and TrackMan, the Pirates collected millions of data points on every pitch and ball in play to create a tome of color-coded reports that revealed groundbreaking insights for how to win more games without spending a

dime. In the process, they discovered that most batters struggled to hit two-seam fastballs, that an aggressive defensive shift on the field could turn more batted balls into outs, and that a catcher's most valuable skill was hidden. All these data points which aren't immediately visible to players and spectators, are the bit of magic that led the Pirates to spin straw in to gold, finish the 2013 season in second place, end a twenty-year losing streak.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[*Big Data Baseball*] is a useful, entertaining look back at how the Pirates turned a small market, longtime loser into a playoff team... a very illuminating book." ?*Baseball America*

"*Big Data Baseball* is a particular kind of nerd heaven and if you're even vaguely interested in advanced analytics, you should already be halfway through the second chapter by now... Sawchik's real achievement is making the sabermetrics story accessible to everyone, even people who might have been scared off by it at first." ?*MLB.com*

"How this motley collection of men-from data geeks to throwback coaches to reluctant players-worked the numbers together to mold a winner makes Sawchik's tale as compelling as Michael Lewis' *Moneyball*. Which is saying a lot." ?*Booklist, starred review*

"This enlightening book by Sawchik explains how the team helped redefine the game... Taking cues from Michael Lewis's *Moneyball* and Jonah Keri's *The Extra 2%*, Sawchik wonderfully dissects statistics and the game itself in a style that will score with a broad range of readers." ?*Publishers Weekly*

"This important and highly readable book will introduce the changes in the way the game is being played today to many fans who are not even aware of those changes." ?*Spitball Magazine*

"In *Big Data Baseball*, Travis Sawchik reveals one of the great untold baseball stories of the early 21st century--how the Pittsburgh Pirates ended a twenty-year streak of futility by using data to revolutionize the way they positioned their defenders. Sawchik's fascinating tale is not merely about numbers, however. It also is about a spirit of collaboration between the new-age analysts and old-school field operatives that elevated the Pirates above other teams with access to the same information. For those who truly want to understand how the game has changed, *Big Data Baseball* is a must-read." ?*Ken Rosenthal, Senior MLB writer for FOXSports*

"An author's goal when telling a story like this is to combine gripping storytelling with fresh insight into the wonkish methods an underdog baseball team uses to defy odds and win. The former is a great achievement for anyone, let alone a first-time author. The latter, given how incredibly secretive sports teams have become, is damn near impossible. In *Big Data Baseball*, Travis Sawchik pulls both off, and he does so masterfully." ?*Jonah Keri, author of The Extra 2% and writer for Grantland*

"I read and loved *Big Data Baseball*...Highly recommend if you dig baseball stats and anecdotes!" ?*Seth Meyers*

"At times, the story reads almost like a John R. Tunis baseball book for boys...Tunis' optimism, idealization of character, and overall enthusiasm all are here. Most important is Sawchik's realization, however, that the diamond will never again be so rough-data-gatherers and -analysts are polishing assiduously. Both a comprehensive and a focused look at how computer-recorded data are fundamentally altering America's pastime." ?*Kirkus Reviews*

"The paradox is that as baseball becomes more complicated, the Pittsburgh Pirates are making it less

complicated with one single word: communication. *Big Data Baseball* intelligently reveals how the symbiotic relationship between the data and the human factor is the future of baseball.” ?Ron Darling, former major league pitcher and MLB Network and SNY analyst

“Insightful, thorough, and outstanding. Travis takes us beyond the field to show where we are in the post-sabermetric revolution. The Pirates have combined scouting, analytics, and old fashioned attention to detail to revitalize their franchise. Want the state of the art in winning baseball? *Big Data Baseball* gives it to you.” ?Brian Kenny, analyst/anchor for MLB Network

“Sawchik provides us with far more than the binary debate of ‘stats versus scouts.’ Rather, he’s produced the definitive narrative of how one organization forged a way forward using both objective and subjective methods---and made a great, skeptical baseball city believe again.” ?Jon Morosi, national baseball writer for Fox Sports

“It’s too simplistic to call this ‘*Moneyball* 2.0,’ but Sawchik has done much the same as what Michael Lewis did--he’s found an interesting story about how a team is forced to do things differently. Much like the Pirates, Sawchik finds a way to not go with the herd, not take the simple approach, and to make us understand how Neal Huntington changed a culture. Sawchik’s ability to find insights and the human stories inside of rows and columns on a spreadsheet is what makes *Big Data Baseball* a great read.” ?Will Carroll, writer at BleacherReport.com and former writer for Sports Illustrated and BaseballProspectus.com

“*Big Data Baseball* is the logical successor to *Moneyball*, a blueprint for how the successful teams of the next decade will get ahead. Sawchik has done a masterful job of pulling back the curtain to show how one team used advanced data analysis and technology to gain a competitive advantage. Serious fans will find the story fascinating and enlightening, and baseball executives who choose to ignore Sawchik’s insights do so at their own peril.” ?Sean Lahman, Database Coordinator for the Society of American Baseball Research and Data Reporter for Gannett Newspapers

“*Big Data Baseball* takes readers inside the Pirates’ analytics department, clubhouse, and beyond. One of the best baseball books I’ve read in years.” ?David Laurila, writer for Fangraphs.com

“In his two seasons on the Pirates beat, Sawchik has demonstrated a great facility for understanding how a radical, analytically-driven change in direction breathed new life into a struggling franchise. Just as a unique cast of players, coaches, analysts, and executives--Clint Hurdle, Neal Huntington, Dan Fox, Mike Fitzgerald, Russell Martin, Francisco Liriano, Ray Searage, Gerrit Cole, and more--were exactly the right people in the right place at the right time to put baseball’s latest wave of statistics into practice, Sawchik is the right man to tell the story.” ?Jay Jaffe, contributing writer to SportsIllustrated.com

“The Pittsburgh Pirates were the story of the season in 2013, but Travis Sawchik set his reporting eye on something bigger: The story of the decade. He found it in Pittsburgh’s use of big data, which is forcing teams and analysts to rethink a century of baseball wisdom. Sawchik is perfectly positioned to tell this story, with a backstage pass to the Pirates’ season and the keen baseball mind necessary to illuminate a complex subject.” ?Sam Miller, coeditor, *Baseball Prospectus 2014*

“*Big Data Baseball* is a *Moneyball* story for a new era, one in which the people and numbers work in tandem, rather than against each other. This book is a comprehensive, well-told case study of one team’s success at implementing a plan that wouldn’t have been possible a couple of decades ago.” ?Mark Simon, *ESPN Stats and Information*

“Travis Sawchik has really captured the essence of successful big league teams in today’s data-driven world by illuminating not only the strategies now being employed by teams, but also that critical partnership

between a major league GM and his staff, with managers, coaches, and players.” ?Vince Gennaro, *President of the Society for American Baseball Research and author of Diamond Dollars: The Economics of Winning Baseball*

“A great read! What *Moneyball* did for offensive analysis, *Big Data Baseball* does for defense and shows how the Pirates shifted the field in their favor.” ?Mike Ferrin, *MLB Network Radio*

“*Big Data Baseball* shows how the small-market Pirates outsmarted their opponents and became the talk of the game during their historic 2013 playoff run. Travis Sawchik describes the Pirates' tactics in fascinating detail, noticing crucial bits of strategy most commentators miss and explaining how members of the Bucs' unglamorous roster formed a team far greater than the sum of its parts. In an era in which most clubs have already learned the lessons of *Moneyball*, *Big Data Baseball* is as close to a sequel as we're likely to get. As a Pirates fan, I can't recommend it highly enough, unless you're the GM of an opposing team, in which case I hope you'll stay far, far away.” ?Charlie Wilmoth, *editor of BucsDugout.com and author of Dry Land: Winning After 20 Years at Sea with the Pittsburgh Pirates*

“Travis Sawchik paints a picture of the 2013 Pirates and their successful pursuit of a postseason berth: equal parts new-age data, front office decision-making, management's leadership ability, and on-field player success--all contributing to Pittsburgh ending a twenty-year losing streak. [Sawchik's] style of writing is convincing, entertaining, and a quick read! Any baseball fan can learn the attributes of a winning organization by reading *Big Data Baseball!*” ?Jim Duquette, *baseball analyst for XM Radio and former General Manager with the Mets*

“*Big Data Baseball* is the next logical step in the Baseball Sabermetric nonfiction collection, preceded by Michael Lewis' *Moneyball* and Jonah Keri's *The Extra 2%*. Travis Sawchik is able to take some relatively complicated concepts and provide a soft, inviting touch for less data obsessed readers.” ?Camden Depot

“The book is a love letter to sabermetrics.... It is not just a book for Pittsburgh Pirates fans...and it will likely serve as great fodder in strategy sessions for baseball's twenty-nine other teams, and for baseball analysts everywhere.... Sawchik makes sense of it all from both high-level and nuts-and-bolts views.” ?*Hardball Times*

About the Author

TRAVIS SAWCHIK covers the Pirates and Major League Baseball for the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. Sawchik has won national Associated Press Sports Editor awards for enterprise writing and numerous state-level awards. Sawchik's work has been featured or referenced on ESPN, Grantland.com, and the MLB Network.

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