

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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LIFE | SPORTS | MLB

# MLB All-Star Game: The Kids Are Taking Over Baseball

As Tuesday's Midsummer Classic will show, the major leagues are skewing younger—as the business of developing prodigies gets bigger and bigger



Washington Nationals star Bryce Harper, who leads the majors in on-base percentage and slugging percentage.

PHOTO: ERIK S. LESSER/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

By **BRIAN COSTA**

Updated July 13, 2015 2:34 p.m. ET

By the age of 9, Bryce Harper was a coveted free agent. Long before he became the best player in the National League, he would leave his family's home near Las Vegas on weekends and join travel teams playing everywhere from California to Georgia. He had a year-round schedule, bankrolled by strangers looking to profit from his mere presence.

86TH MLB ALL-STAR GAME

Cincinnati

- Tuesday, 7 p.m. ET (Fox)

“A lot of these teams would just send plane tickets and invite him to play just so they could say Bryce Harper was on their team,” said Scott Boras, Harper’s agent.

It was the height of big-money, hypercompetitive youth baseball, the growth of which has exacerbated the decline of the casual neighborhood player. But when Harper, the Washington Nationals outfielder, takes the field in the Major League Baseball All-Star Game on Tuesday in Cincinnati, he will serve as a billboard for the benefits of that trend.

Baseball is laden now with prodigies. For all of the challenges the sport faces in maintaining its appeal among children in general, it has never been more geared toward identifying and nurturing special talents from a young age. And while that may not do much for MLB in the stands, the impact on the field has been dramatic.

YOUTH MOVEMENT	
2015 All-Stars who are age 25 or younger (starters in bold)	At 22 years old, Harper leads a class of All-Stars in their early to mid-20s who represent the sport’s burgeoning demographic shift. Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout, the 23-year-old reigning American League MVP, is the other headliner on a list that has grown this year to include a pair of 23-year-old rookies, third baseman Kris Bryant of the Chicago Cubs and outfielder Joc Pederson of the
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• C <b>Salvador Perez</b>, Kansas City</li><li>• 2B <b>Jose Altuve</b>, Houston</li><li>• OF <b>Mike Trout</b>, L.A. Angels</li><li>• P Sonny Gray, Oakland</li><li>• P Kelvin Herrera, Kansas City</li><li>• SS Jose Iglesias, Detroit</li><li>• 3B Manny Machado, Baltimore</li><li>• OF <b>Bryce Harper</b>, Washington</li><li>• OF <b>Giancarlo Stanton</b>, Miami</li><li>• 3B Nolan Arenado, Colorado</li><li>• 3B Kris Bryant, Chi. Cubs</li><li>• P Madison Bumgarner, San Francisco</li><li>• P Gerrit Cole, Pittsburgh</li><li>• P Carlos Martinez, St. Louis</li><li>• P Shelby Miller, Atlanta</li><li>• 2B Joe Panik, San Francisco</li><li>• OF Joc Pederson, L.A. Dodgers</li><li>• 1B Anthony Rizzo, Chi. Cubs</li><li>• P Trevor Rosenthal, St. Louis</li><li>• P Michael Wacha, St. Louis</li></ul>	

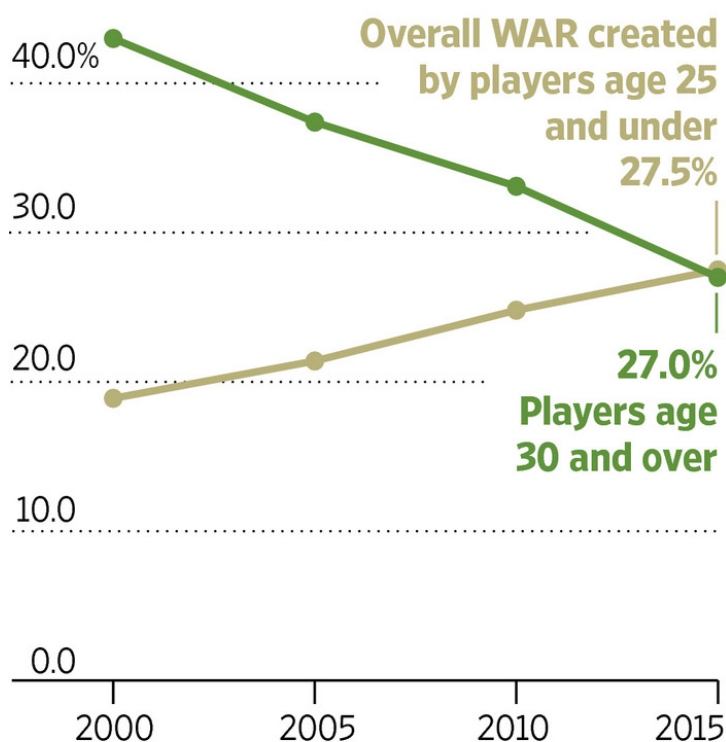
Los Angeles Dodgers.

“In the past, when you saw young players, they would be raw, pretty good players and mature into adult players,” said former major-league pitcher and current TBS analyst Ron Darling. “With these guys, their bodies are very mature and they’re like adults already. Nothing fazes them.”

Harper and Trout are once-in-a-generation talents. Earlier this season, Trout became the youngest player in baseball history to amass both 100 career home runs and 100 stolen bases. Three years after becoming the youngest All-Star position player ever, at 19, Harper leads the majors in both on-base and slugging percentage.

## Game Changer

How the value of young and older players has evolved, as measured by wins above replacement (WAR)



Note: WAR quantifies the value a player adds relative to what a minor-league replacement would be expected to do.

Source: FanGraphs.com

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But they are hardly the only players shifting the balance of power toward their age group. Across the majors, teams are relying on younger players for a growing share of their overall production.

The statistical website FanGraphs uses its version of the metric wins above replacement (WAR) to quantify the hitting, fielding and pitching value each player adds relative to what would be expected of a replacement from the minor leagues. So far this season, players ages 25 and under have accounted for nearly 28% of total WAR, up from just under 19% in 2000.

Meanwhile, the value of veterans has plummeted. Players age 30 and older have

accounted for roughly 27% of total WAR, down from 43% in 2000. By this measure, baseball's 25-and-under set is now more valuable than the 30-and-overs, who typically are paid much more.



Kris Bryant, the Chicago Cubs' 23-year-old wunderkind. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Executives credit baseball's crackdown on performance-enhancing drugs for making it more difficult for older players to extend the peaks of their careers. But drug testing alone doesn't explain why younger players are peaking earlier. A major reason for that shift is the very thing

that has left many parents shaking their heads: the professionalization of youth baseball.

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The U.S. Specialty Sports Association, the primary organizing body for youth travel baseball, said it has seen its participation numbers more than double over the past decade, to 1.3 million players. The company's chief executive, Don DeDonatis, said that every player taken in the first round of last year's major-league draft once played for at least one of its registered teams. "It's not for everybody," he said. "It's for the ones who want to compete."

Because of travel baseball, the most promising young players in the country are exposed to better opponents, better coaching and more serious competition far earlier than past generations. The acceleration in their development shortens the time it takes them to become major-league-ready prospects.

"By the time Mike Trout is drafted, he's seen some of the best pitching in the country, whereas 25 years ago he was still seeing pitchers throwing 80 mph," said Logan White, the San Diego Padres' pro scouting director. "I don't think it's helped the game overall, but for the elite player, it's helped him move up quickly."



Mike Trout—who is still just 23—is having perhaps his best season yet, with a 1.019 on-base plus slugging percentage at the All-Star break. *PHOTO: BRAD LOPER/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Increased parity and the extra wild-card playoff berth in each league have given teams more incentive to promote their best young players sooner. The Houston Astros, who are locked in a tight AL West race with the Angels, called up 20-year-old shortstop Carlos Correa from the minor leagues last month. And even teams that can afford pricey veterans are trying to get younger.

Josh Byrnes, the Los Angeles Dodgers' senior vice president for baseball operations, said the perennial success of the St. Louis Cardinals has made player development more of a priority throughout the industry. "That they consistently play in October with mostly homegrown teams is something everyone pays attention to," he said.

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The growth of early specialization and year-round ballplayers has an obvious downside, and it is evident in the number of young MLB pitchers lost to elbow injuries in recent years. The American Sports Medicine Institute cites overuse as a primary cause of the massive rise in elbow-ligament replacement surgeries for pitchers. But hitting prodigies don't face the same risks.

"There's kind of a geographic dynamic to this," Boras said. "Where do all these

guys come from? California, Texas or Florida. Or Nevada, or Arizona. The power comes from players who had a chance to play a lot when they were young.”

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