

My Tournament Team Selection Process

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Hello all, my name is Brian Wells and for the past several years I have been coming to APBA Tournaments. Summer 2012 will mark my tenth APBA Tournament between 2002 and 2012, skipping 2006. A frequently asked question I get while at the tournament is 'how do you pick your team for the tournament every year?' People tend to assume that I just make the playoffs often due to lucky dice rolls and hot streaks and big wins when they count. Sure, I have had some lucky breakthroughs late in games to seal up a big win late in the round robin, but many people have experienced similar things. It is not uncommon to win late in a game; after all, it is a baseball simulation. In baseball, as we all know, it ain't over 'till it's over.

However, I don't win so many games because I am just getting better dice rolls than anyone. That would not make any sense. If you were to make a chart of my dice rolls and compared it to the dice rolls of anyone else in the tournament, you would probably see similar results. The difference between my record and everyone else's record comes not from the rolls, but from the teams I use. I know that for the past three tournaments I have used the 2004 Cardinals, but that does not mean I have not put the team through a rigorous series of numbers tests to analyze and evaluate the overall talent level of the team I am playing with. I have a serious formula that is by no means perfect, but in my opinion, effective.

Those of you who follow the Delphi Forums – APBA Between the Lines may remember when I did the 'Tournament for the Tournament' thread in 2010. In that thread I took the twelve best teams from 2000 on that I could think of with the exception of the 1999 Yankees. There were twelve teams. Along with the '99 Yankees, the 2007 Rockies, 2004 Astros, 2008 Rays, 2002 Angels, 2002 Giants, 2009 Cardinals, 2002 Twins, 2003 Marlins, 2001 Yankees, 2004 Cardinals and 2001 Mariners. Now, the Mariners were ineligible for the real tournament because I won with them in 2008, but I felt they were the pinnacle of tournament teams for me because the other team I won with was the 2000 Diamondbacks in the sub-.450 winning percentage requirement year of 2002. I don't know why I did not include the 2001 Diamondbacks in my 2010 Tournament for the Tournament, as I brought them to the real tournament in 2003 and 2007 and made the playoffs both times, but for whatever reason they were not included.

I did not take the time to evaluate each team very deeply; I just looked at what I considered to be my version of an ideal team. I was close, but still wrong. Some may remember I never finished the Tournament for the Tournament thread, and that's because I began my work on a 'secret' formula to figure out who the best team to bring is. Have I perfected the formula? No, of course not. I have only been working on it on and off for the past couple of summers. I designed the 2009 Fantasy League I have been posting about on the Delphi Forums to really get a feel for a lot of players in a specific carded season. A better indicator probably would have been to use real teams, as they have their flaws and their upsides that could be measured, but I like to experiment with the flavors of the top players. I learned a little bit from this league that led to some tweaks in my formula. It really showed me the strength of an individual player, while the 2010 Tournament for the Tournament showed me the strengths of good **teams**.

Now, I also went back and broke down all of the teams who made the official APBA Tournament championship, winners and runner-ups, with the exception of the 2003 runner-up because there is no definitive team listed anywhere, because those are the teams that most people who go to the Tournament want to control. They want to be in the championship.

Time to get into the analysis of the teams...First I had to ask myself what the most important components of a talented APBA team are. Good baseball teams do not make for good APBA teams. In 2006, the St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series with one of the worst playoff teams ever. In fact, I once read a graphic *The Onion* did on the 2006 playoffs, listing humorous best and worst-case scenarios for the eight playoff teams. I'll never forget what they did for the Cardinals. Rather than type out scenarios, they simply wrote one word to sum up St. Louis' odds: "Nope." I think it goes without saying; the 2006 Cardinals are a bad APBA team. There are many examples of bad APBA teams winning games in the real MLB, so clearly winning in real life clearly does not make for a great APBA team every time.

In 1990, Barry Bonds won his first MVP award. He also won a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger that year, and the Pirates won 95 games and the NL East under Jim Leyland. Bobby Bonilla and Andy Van Slyke also had great cards, rounding out a great Pittsburgh outfield. One would probably think to themselves 'Hey, this is a playoff team featuring both the NL MVP and the NL Cy Young (Doug Drabek) with three very good hitters to bat 3-4-5, I think I could take my chances here.' If you think that, you would more than likely be wrong. The Pittsburgh Pirates definitely had a solid pitching staff in 1990. Very Solid. One would then assume the offense would be just as good because of Bonds and the other two outfielders. However, APBA isn't a three man game.

Some people who come to the APBA Tournament bring teams with dead-ball offenses because they want to take their chances with the elite pitching staffs, hoping they get hot dice. Some are successful: John Duke won the APBA Tournament in 2009, beating me in the semifinals, with the 1909 Pirates. Ray Ouellette was the runner-up to Chris Sorce in the 2011 Tournament using the 1913 Giants. Most people choose to bring potent offenses, though. These offenses can penetrate through an A pitcher's defenses against an eight or a nine result with power swings and walks. Solid starting pitching will not guarantee wins; you still need to score more than the other team.

The problem the 1990 Pirates face is they have no true leadoff hitters. Their leader in stolen bases is Barry Bonds with 52, then Van Slyke with 14 and then Jay Bell, the shortstop, with ten. The team has just adequate speed and the guys not playing in the outfield just are not very good at hitting the ball and getting on base. Basically, if you were to play with this team, you would hit well with the 3-4-5 hitters and then maybe DH Wally Backman, but you would have to pray you could crack scoring position with the other five hitters on the team. If you go into the tournament thinking you have a great offense, but really you're banking on five or six guys even reaching *second base* and being productive, then you already have no shot. You can't be blinded by awards and the power of three guys; you have to have a solid TEAM. All nine of your hitters are not going to produce to their potential in this ten game round robin that is the APBA Tournament opening round, but you want the best odds that five, six, seven of them will.

I know that I tried to pull twelve solid teams together in my personal 2010 tournament for the Tournament, and I assumed that the teams who have made APBA championships in the past have been solid teams, so I gathered the necessary stats from those teams. What stats did I deem necessary? Well I think everyone can agree that team batting average, on base percentage, slugging percentage and on base + slugging are all very important ratings; however, you need a little bit more than that. When I evaluate an offense, I like to know that the team has good enough speed to score from first on a double with less than two outs and not be thrown out at home in certain situations. I like to know that the team does not strike out too often, because strikeouts never help anyone. No runners advance, no production is had, it is just a change of batter and an added out. I also think that double plays are the most poisonous thing that can occur in a half inning. I do not want a team that frequents in double plays. These latter three factors are nowhere near as important to me as the overall hitting ability of the team, but they are just big enough to swing a team compared to another team by a couple points here and there. It just helps to visualize all of this.

I gave teams a rating out of 250, and offense counted for 100 of those points. Inside of that, batting average counted for 15 points, OBP and SLG percentages counted as 20 points each and OPS counted for 25 points. The ability to avoid double plays counted for ten points, the ability to not strikeout often counted for 5 points and each team received a speed rating out of 5 points. Those numbers add to one hundred, but feel free to do the math yourself. I looked up the worst offenses in Major League Baseball history and also the best offenses, and then weeded out the outliers and set a scale to allocate points from one to either five, ten, fifteen, twenty or twenty-five depending on the stat. One example would be batting average. A team with a batting average of .234 or below receives a weak one point, but a team hitting over .300 receives a perfect score of fifteen. Pretty standard. OBP goes from .294 and under to .385 and up, SLG goes from .319 and under to .500 and up, OPS goes from .629 and under to .850 and up.

Starting pitching is just as important as offense, though. You want both to be very solid if you want to have a good team. Obviously in the basic game, pitching is easy to track. A-B-C-D ratings simply illustrate the ability of a starting pitching staff. However, some people undervalue the power that comes with a Z pitcher. I would take a BYZ pitcher over an AYW pitcher every single day of the week. You should too. Maybe the W doesn't carry as much weight as some perceive it as, but the Z certainly carries more. What I have learned from years of APBA Tournaments and tight must-win games, the more outs the better.

In 2008 in Las Vegas I was playing Joe Krakowski and the 1930 Cardinals. I had a three run lead in the top of the eighth of a high scoring game, and Krakowski had a runner on first and two outs. Jeff Nelson, my AXYW set-up man was on the hill firing. Krakowski rolled a 14-Walk that would have been stopped by a Z, and now I was in trouble. Next batter, Puccinelli, hit a game-tying three-run home run. I'll never forget that moment. I pulled out Jaime Moyer, a BZ, for that inning, and had I left him in I might have escaped the eighth with a one-run lead. There wouldn't have been a walk, and the batter who walked would have hit the Home Run. The next batter Krakowski had ended the inning and the same would have happened to Puccinelli. I had a solo shot from Mike Cameron in the bottom half of the eighth anyway, but if I hadn't won that one I would not have made the playoffs and I would not have won my second championship. Heading into the bottom of the eighth it was anyone's game, and that happened because I thought an A would guarantee me a solid inning.

Sure, with the bases empty an A stops a 9 and a B does not, but with a runner on first neither pitcher can stop a 9 result. With a runner on first, a BZ is more powerful than an A, and definitely better than an AX due to the 27-Double Play-X Strikeout result. So starting pitching relies on A's and B's, but you definitely want Z's, as many as you can get. In a three man rotation, no Z's is practically unacceptable, one is serviceable if you have a few in the bullpen, two is pretty good and three is great, regardless of whether the pitcher is an A or a B.

In my two APBA championship appearances since the winning percentage limits were dropped in 2003, a win over Mike Harlow in 2008 with the 2001 Mariners and a loss to Ron Seamans in 2010 with the 2004 Cardinals, my six starting pitchers have consisted of three B's with a Z (Chris Carpenter, Jaime Moyer and Aaron Sele), two B's without a Z (Jason Marquis and Freddy Garcia) and a CZ (Matt Morris). That's right, no A's. How is that possible? Well I definitely had great contribution from two powerful offenses, but the fact that four of the six pitchers had a Z definitely helped out. In MLB video games, pitchers have 'tendencies' that are not visible when looking at the pitchers attributes, you have to dig into the players overall profile to find them. One of these tendencies is 'Base on Balls allowed.' What I did is create five different 99 overall starting pitchers, the highest score you can get, by controlling all variables besides the tendencies of the pitcher to allow walks. These pitchers were carbon copies of each other; I made absolutely sure of it. The results? Much more staggering than I could have imagined. MLB games are not flawless in their simulation ability when it comes to stats, but comparing the stats to the rest of the virtual MLB I was using, and it was pretty crazy.

The pitcher who never walked any batters and would probably be like an A&C ZZ pitcher won the Cy Young award and posted an ERA of 2.86.

The pitcher who walked a lot of batters, like a W, set an MLB record for walks allowed in a single season and posted a league high 7.12 ERA.

A pitcher with slightly below average base on balls tendencies, what I equated to neither a Z nor a W, posted a very average 9-15 record with a 4.46 ERA.

The pitcher that I equated to being a Z posted a 17-7 record with a 3.44 ERA.

The fifth pitcher I imagined would have been an AKXY pitcher, mowing down hitters and walking hitters, posted a 4.07 ERA and the third most wins on the team.

What is my point with all of this? Well, it definitely shows the power that a walk can create. These pitchers were all created to dominate hitters, be absolutely unhittable, but yet one pitcher was allowing tons of runs to weaker hitters. The game is designed to pull a pitcher when they have absolutely fallen apart, which typically keeps ERA's of bad pitchers in the 5's. To have an ERA in the 7's means that the pitcher was allowing a ton of big innings and that was what hurt him most. If you have a pitcher who can not stop a team good at getting on base and drawing walks, you will not be able to win too many games. I won the tournament in 2008 and was in the APBA championship in 2010 because I had teams with great OBP's. In fact, on my offensive scale, six teams received an OBP score of 15 or higher out of 20. Five of those teams received a starting pitching score of at least 60 out of 100, which puts them in the top twenty of the twenty-six teams I analyzed when it comes to starting pitching. Of those five teams, two have won an APBA championship, two have been runner-ups in the APBA championship, and one team has both won and been a runner-up in an APBA championship. That's not a coincidence, folks. Teams who get on base statistically perform better in the APBA Tournament than teams who do not.

I also gave starting pitching a score out of 100. I rated A&B, A&C, A, B, C and Z substantial ratings that influence the teams overall starting pitching. Z's were very important in my rating scale, and teams without Z's were really hurt. The 2002 Angels have a top ten offense in the twenty-six teams I ranked, but they have the worst starting pitching staff with a score of 46 because there are no Z's to be seen. I missed the playoffs with the 2002 Angels in 2004 for that very reason. I bet if you looked at all 72 playoff teams in the APBA Tournament since 2003, there will not be a single starting pitching staff that has no Z's. Average pitching staffs received scores in the high 60's and low 70's. The top three pitching staffs were big outliers, though, with scores in the 90's: the 1909 Pirates, the 1913 Giants and the 2009 Cardinals.

I judged relief pitching on a different basis than simply letter grades. The point of a good relief staff is a staff that can come in and improve the pitchers you have on the hill. If I have a B at starting pitcher, it would be excellent to be able to throw two A's in the eighth and ninth when you really need outs. Long relievers are the same way. Let's say I have a BXY third starter, and he gets absolutely shelled early and is downgraded to a CXY by the start of the third inning. There are several innings before I can reach my short relief staff, as they can only throw one inning of work each. I would hope to have a CZ long reliever in the bullpen to throw out there and save me a little work. Having an extra B in the long relief staff would be gravy. If a team's best long reliever is better than their downgraded third starter, they get some points. However, if the reliever is better than the second starter downgraded, the relief staff gets more points. In the rare case he is better than the ace, well, you get it. Relievers were graded on a scale of 25.

Here's an incredible statistic: In the top ten of the twenty-six relief staffs there are six teams that won an APBA championship. In the bottom ten, there are 5 teams that have lost an APBA championship. The six teams in the middle have not qualified for a championship. Is there a correlation? Probably not. You could say to yourself 'well, it seems as though more often than not the team with the better relief staff wins in the APBA Tournament championship.' Well, you would be correct, but I do not think we can draw anything from that other than that bare bones hypothesis. I am not suggesting that once you're in the APBA championship you better have a great relief staff, but it certainly helps when you're facing the power hitters that sent the other guy into the 'Ship with you.

Fielding is pretty important, which is something I learned from my 2009 Fantasy League that I have been doing and posting about on the Delphi boards. I always knew fielding played a role, but playing so many games with an intense attention to detail when it came to fielding for the first time in my playing career really put things into perspective.

In the 2010 Tournament I played David Small in the 8th game of the divisional round out near the lobby at the Heritage Hotel in Lancaster because he wanted to get away from the noise. It does tend to get a bit loud inside the playing room, so I didn't blame him. I believe I was down by two runs in the bottom of the eighth with one out and runners on second and third, dare I guess the score was 6-4? That is how I remember it. Regardless, Edgar Renteria was up to bat and I rolled a 53-18, resulting in an error on Small's fielding-two shortstop, loading the bases. Albert Pujols stepped up a batter later, now with two outs, and sent a Grand Slam into deep center field. I held Small in the ninth and won the game, giving me an 8-0 record. I then lost my next two games to Platon Elias and the 1953 Dodgers and finished 8-2, winning the division. However, had Mr. Small had a fielding-one shortstop on the field, Renteria would have popped out, and Womack still would have been out. The inning would have ended, and there is a good chance I would have lost the game. Had that happened, I would have tied Mr. Elias with a 7-3 record and since he beat me twice he would have won the division and the New York Times would not have had the storyline of Wells v Duke in the semifinals that they used. Amazing how all of that can happen just because of one fielding number, isn't it?

Points were awarded based on fielding one and fielding two team ratings and then they were swung a little by the individual fielding of impact positions based on the APBA Tournament rules. One interesting fielding statistic: Eight teams received a score of 24 or more out of 25 points for fielding, and seven of those teams have made an APBA championship.

So to recap...Offense and Starting Pitching are the most important things on my grading scale. When it comes to offense, OPS is the most important thing to me because I want my team to be able to both get on base and be able to power the guys who get on base in to score. OBP and SLG percentages are worth 20 points apiece for the same reason I just said. One might think that OBP and SLG are unnecessary after OPS is included, or vice versa, but so many teams are good at just one of the two, and it shows in the OPS. I find that including all three is important. Batting average is just 15 points because I don't see that as too important compared to the other three statistics. Batting average is good to have on your side, but late in the game when I'm losing, a walk will do just fine with me compared to a base hit. In fact, batting average adds to 8's and 9's, and late in the game against an A those do nothing for me. I would rather have more walk numbers. Also, when I look at my batting order, I like to see an even distribution of fast players. A lot of teams have slow catchers and some also have big slow power hitting first basemen. Sometimes this is acceptable, but I like to also have three or four fast guys on my team.

When it comes to starting pitching I put value on A pitchers, but seeing as I've reached two APBA championships without an A starter, I didn't make them out-of-this-world valuable. Z's were worth some good points because they carry a lot more weight than people assume.

A good relief staff is one that actually improves upon the starters they are replacing. In APBA there is no 'stamina,' if you choose to; you can have a pitcher throw a full fifteen inning marathon. If you have an A&C XZ starter, unless he is downgraded a couple times, you probably don't need to replace him ever. Why replace an AZ starter with a BZ reliever? Or even an AZ reliever? You want a relief staff that actually impacts your starting pitching staff. Also, one must account for the downgrading of starters and your ability to relieve them in the event this occurs. Fielding is also important in its own way. Remember, I would not have made the playoffs in 2009 if it weren't for one below average fielding grade.

I like to think that some teams play better if you really have the confidence in your team. This is probably just a placebo and I am probably way wrong, but I always found it interesting that the 2004 Cardinals and 2009 Cardinals were my championship teams in my tournament for the Tournament in 2010, as I am a Cardinals fan. Also, I know that the man with the handle 69ercubbers on the Delphi boards had a lengthy project called The Big Mix that featured a ton of teams, and was ultimately loved by his beloved Cubs. I do not think that my dad, a Red Sox fan, could ever win with a Yankee team. I don't think I could win with a Cubs team or a Reds team. Maybe it's just me, but that's how I feel.

Many people have always assumed I just rolled well and that is why I have qualified for so many APBA Tournament playoff appearances. That may be correct in some instances, as I feel like I have had some lucky rolls in my day, but I feel like I have always used a team that put me in the best position to win games. You can not get blinded by a couple of good hitters or the amount of wins a team had in real life, you must see a team for what it really is. Know the team's strengths and its weaknesses, and hope that the strengths prevail. Sometimes you're going to get a team with seven good hitters and a couple crappy ones, but if you can roll for the crappy ones you should have no trouble. APBA is a game that involves a ton of luck. I do not think I am luckier than anyone else, I think I am just very attentive to the little details. You can not control the dice rolls you get; you can only hope to put yourself in a better position to receive positive dice rolls. Would you rather roll a 64 and get a 13 result or a 14 result? These are the slight things that can alter your entire fortune, or even the fortune of someone else...

Thanks for reading. Looking forward to the 2012 APBA Tournament and hopefully many more tournaments in the future...I will attach the Excel file with my 26 team breakdown with this article, but my rating system is too complicated to record in most instances, so I will leave that be.