

Wills helped build baseball.

While many have waxed poetic about the sheer force of will of a pitching effort, a wall-scaling catch, or of holding on to a beer without spilling while catching a homer, I mean this quite literally.

Some of the greatest, most foundational figures in the sport were Wills and Williams, Bills and Billys, Guys, and Gils built baseball as we know it.

The Hall of Fame is littered with us. [Willies Mays](#), [McCovey](#) and [Stargell](#) are titans of the game. Billy Williams doubled down on the willpower. [Bill Vecck](#), one of my heroes, was a man decades ahead of his time. [Bill Foster](#), Negro League star, “threw fire” according to legend [Buck Leonard](#). [Wee Willie Keeler](#) has a tremendous name. [Bill, nee Wilbur, King](#), owns one of the best catchphrases of all time, ‘[HOLY TOLEDO](#).’ These only scratch the surface. Each Will essential to the fabric of baseball. Each adding their own brand of pomp, verve, panache, spice and tomfoolery.

There is a limit to my ability conveying the value of having a Will on a squad subjectively. I knew I needed to turn to the cold, hard facts (such as the unquestionable matter of Bill King’s tremendous facial hair).

I was born in 1988. This seemed like a good place to start. Both because that’s when I started and because I wanted the challenge of proving the value of a Will without some of those well-known old timers making us all look (even) better. Looking from 1988-2021, I set out to analyze all qualified players via the FanGraphs database in that range for will-full action.

Shockingly (to me), less than 1% of qualified players went by Will, Wil, Willy, Willie or William in this time frame. Looking at some of those names from an earlier era, clearly the name had tumbled down the baby name lists over the years. A cursory glance at census data and a few other English-speaking countries over the past decades does seem to show a perfectly common name, if not a chart-topper.

So the parameters had to be widened. Baseball is a beautiful, international game. Baseball is a sport of nicknames. Baseball is a game of Wills - sometimes they’re just sneaky (I grew up a Red Sox fan - looking at you, [Mookie Wilson](#)). I expanded, to the best of my abilities, the search to [every form of Will](#)

After that, I had to do some further digging. [Lance Berkman](#) was one of my favorite players growing up and you better believe I knew the Big Puma’s given name was William. I knew there were others. I dove into the names and learned a great deal.

With the expanded parameters, we have a slightly better sample. 62 total Will variants, 23 pitchers and 39 hitters. Still only 2.2% of qualified players fit the, er, Bill.

How did we fare? If you'll excuse the simplicity of the metric for the sake of the bit... I present to you:

Wills Above Replacement

Note: Figures are averages based on FanGraphs career leader stats for qualified hitters and pitchers

| Hitting | Players | Games | HR | RBI | SB | BABIP | Avg WAR/Player | #Sac/G | BB/K |
|------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|----------------|--------|------|
| <i>Wills</i> | 39 | 881.3 | 71.3 | 344.6 | 61.6 | 0.303 | 9.18 | 0.048 | 0.51 |
| <i>Non-Wills</i> | 1436 | 956.6 | 100.8 | 417.2 | 59.8 | 0.297 | 12.57 | 0.046 | 0.52 |

#(SF + SacBunts)

| Pitching | Players | IP | ERA | FIP | xFIP | Avg WAR/Player | BB/9 | HR/9 | BABIP |
|------------------|---------|-------|------|------|------|----------------|-------|------|-------|
| <i>Wills</i> | 23 | 677.1 | 4.12 | 4.15 | 4.06 | 6.78 | 3.298 | 0.99 | 0.292 |
| <i>Non-Wills</i> | 1297 | 872.6 | 4.16 | 4.18 | 4.26 | 10.13 | 3.311 | 1.01 | 0.291 |

Statcast data was widely collected starting in 2015. Unfortunately, this burns our sample size down considerably. I can barely give a skewed assessment of Will zone contact rate due to the lack of our universally strong forenames. Despite the relative simplicity and sloppiness of the data I DO have, I can use these historical Wills to explain just why we make such good teammates. With only a *few* leaps in logic...

A Discerning Eye

Wills may not have the same power as the rest of the league, on average, but we know the strike zone and clearly study opponents, coming into the game prepared. Wills come ready to play, with a slightly above-average BB/9 rate, undoubtedly due to a [Varitek](#)-like devotion to the research, and a league-average BB:K ratio, even with the likes of [Wily Mo Pena](#) weighing us down.

While my simple study here is not the best example, I am always ready to dive into the data, to research the game ahead and not jump at the pitch off the plate, so to speak. Understanding the parameters, the dimensions, is essential to controlling the strike zone on both sides of the diamond as well as in researching and writing an assignment. Wills can get that job done.

Help the team, Helped by the team

Is ERA a slightly out-of-date measure of a pitcher's success? Yes, we've accepted that there are better ways of measuring a pitcher's effectiveness, but ERA still works as a comparative metric, especially when we look at it in a bundle with its descendants.

What is a general critique of ERA? That much of it relies on team factors. That FIP breaks it down to portray the true value of the pitcher, apart from the team.

The argument can be made that we Wills trust and rely on our team. That our ERA, FIP and xFIP are all above average because, given control of the game as a pitcher, we know how to both rely on our teammates behind us as well as step up when we need to seize the reins. Wills understand the bigger team picture and know when to lean in to support and when it's time to do what needs to be done personally - note the above average HR/9 and BB/9 - we can lock it down when the responsibility lies on our shoulders.

Walks and homers are two of the most back-breaking events for the team behind you. Errors one can personally avoid that bring down the group are something we Wills at an above-average rate.

We trust our team to have our backs and do what we can to set our team up for success. This can also be seen in the superior 'Sacrifice Rate' (sacrifice bunts + sacrifice flies) we Wills can boast over this period. Sometimes, it is not about your own stats, but doing the little things to set up your peers to triumph. You likely don't get a big arbitration bump for leading your team in this category, but you certainly gain your teammates' respect and gratitude. While I cannot speak for all those other fellows, that mindset seems to track in my book.

Action & 'Momentum'

Finally, Wills make things happen.

Amusingly, this might be the area where my real-life baseball skills and this thinly-stretched metaphor collide. Put the ball in play and run like your hair's on fire, that's how I played as a kid. While we all know the value of a strong OBP and that a three-true-outcome player can still be tremendously valuable, there is always a need on a team for a spark, a nuisance, a motor.

In a finding delightfully in line with the strained framework I've created, Wills generate momentum. Our BABIP is above average. When we put it in play, good things happen. Once on, we pressure the defense, with an above-average steals/game rate.

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A keen knowledge of the zone. Putting the ball in play and making things happen as well as if not better than your average Julio, Dave or Alex. Limiting the big fly as well as a Greg, Hal or J.R.

We Wills are not so different. In fact, I'd say we're slightly above average. Am I straining this metaphor? You bet. Clearly, though, it's worth giving Wills a chance on the team.