

---

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

---

## Diamond in the Roughhousing

With MLB playoff battles raging, Mike Warkentin looks at the anatomy of the bench-clearing baseball fight.

---

By Mike Warkentin

October 2013

---



Getty Images

A precisely manicured ball field is a thing of beauty, and the best are gorgeous temples built in honor of the storied game of baseball.



Getty Images

***In 2011, Shane Victorino was hit by a pitch and decided to take on Ramon Ramirez and the San Francisco Giants. Four were ejected, and Victorino was suspended for three games. The Phillies were up by six runs at the time of the plunking.***

Painstakingly groomed dirt paths are surrounded by lush, impossibly healthy grass cut in elaborate patterns that catch both the sun and the eye. Islands of canvas are anchored at exact distances from each other, and atop the mound is placed a slab of rubber that's exactly 60 feet 6 inches from home plate, the holiest of holies.

There's a geometric elegance to the ball field, which is home to skilled specialists who run the spectrum from amazing physical specimens to freakishly talented trolls who look as athletic as a walrus but can hit a ball a country mile with a flick of the wrists. Each one has earned his place on the field, even if you might use the designated-hitter spot to shield an out-of-shape first baseman with bad knees and killer bat speed from the rigors of catching a ball once every few innings.

"In a highly skilled sport such as baseball, not all are athletes, but the good players are certainly athletic," Paul Fournier wrote in the 2010 *CrossFit Journal* article [The Marlins Go CrossFit](#). Fournier was the strength-and-conditioning coach for the Florida Marlins at the time of writing, and he noted that while older ball players might resist physical training, the new breed was less inclined to eating nachos between innings.

Still, baseball lacks the intensity of hockey or basketball. There's very limited opportunity for physical contact, and

most of the time players are separated by significant distances for the entire contest.

---

**Throw just one inside pitch  
at the right time, and suddenly  
all hell breaks loose.**

---

In many games, players stand immobile for innings at a time before a lazy fly ball arcs toward them, time is called and called again, and crotches are scratched with obsessive frequency while dugout snacks are stuffed in mouths by seemingly disinterested players and coaches. Consumption of tobacco products is acceptable, and there's even a specific period of the game when fans are invited to stop drinking, get off their asses and stretch a bit. All this led *Simpsons* characters Kodos and Kang to call a contest on the diamond "the most boring game in all the universe," and other commentators have done the same.

But throw just one inside pitch at the right time, and suddenly all hell breaks loose.





Getty Images

*Few can determine whether this is a fight between Andre Johnson and Cortland Finnegan or merely a standard play in an NFL game.*

Mild-mannered gentlemen wave bats at sulking pitchers while catchers try to deflect some of the anger. In the dugout, previously disinterested players charge up the steps and sprint to the aid of an enraged teammate who's getting choked out by a lanky hurler. The bullpen gates fly open with a clang and leak relief pitchers into the fray in a flanking movement. Coaches and managers can swell the numbers to more than 50, with but four umpires to try and keep a lid on the violence while fans scream for blood. In some cases, drunken fans get in on the action, either by throwing objects from the stands or by jumping a barrier to join the fray themselves.

It's like an episode of *Spartacus*—but so much better. In fact, it's one of the best parts of baseball.

### The Brawl Games

In [Basebrawl Fever](#), his excellent look at the 12 reasons

why baseball fights are so great, Bill Simmons brings up a solid point: "Let's face it: Nothing beats a lively major-league basebrawl. Think about it. They don't allow benches to clear in basketball or hockey anymore. Nothing ever happens in football fights."

Indeed, Simmons is correct.

The gridiron offers many opportunities for revenge between the whistles, though the ultra-violence that was once the province of uniformed hit men such as Jack Tatum and Jack Lambert has now been legislated out of the league for the most part via rule changes, ejections, suspensions and fines. Still, there are fights in the NFL, though it's sometimes hard to distinguish them from actual game play—perhaps why football fights aren't interesting to anyone.

Take, for example, the brief but slightly vicious 2010 tussle

between [Andre Johnson and Cortland Finnegan](#). In the two altercations shown in the video, the first just looks like football, while the second is pretty much just football until Johnson rips off Finnegan's helmet and punches him in the back of the head. Purists might still argue that this is merely just football. Rugby fans might argue that this incident is barely worth talking about because no one lost any eyes or teeth.

Basketball has its scrums, but they're also less common. Even a [top 10 list of basketball fights](#) looks more like a collection of gym-class squabbles. Tough-guy Charles Oakley and Xavier McDaniel caressing then hugging each other in 1989 was hardly a brutal fight, and the famous 1977 [Kermit Washington-Rudy Tomjanovich altercation](#) was less a fight than a one-punch knockout that threatened the latter's life and career. Sad, to be sure, but only sort of a fight, the kind of thing that ruins a UFC broadcast after some tattooed thug gets knocked out in the first 15 seconds of a fight and announcers have to fill the time before the next match is set to start.

Even some of the top "fights" in the video linked above are somewhat comical, such as the [Alonzo Mourning vs. Larry Johnson](#) whiff-fest, which featured a lack of landed punches and tiny coach Jeff Van Gundy clinging to Mourning's leg like a rabid squirrel.

In contrast to that was the 2004 [Malice at the Palace](#), in which the talented but volatile Ron Artest (now Metta World Peace) was at the center of chaos in Auburn Hills,

Mich. That tussle was most definitely a fight—perhaps a small-scale riot—but it was an odd one in that it mostly featured players punching fans rather than each other. That also might be considered normal in Detroit.

In hockey, fighting is almost too common. On the first day of the 2013 NHL season, Montreal Canadiens enforcer [George Parros got knocked out](#) during a scrap with Colton Orr of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Parros was knocked out not by a punch but rather by falling face first into the ice while entangled with Orr—but it still counts.

---

### Fighting is such a big part of hockey that most teams employ designated thugs who handle the fisticuffs.

---

Fighting is such a big part of the game that most teams employ designated thugs who handle the fisticuffs, and you can expect to see a scrap in just about every NHL game. The [NHL rules](#) governing fighting are extensive and even include additional penalties for combatants who instigate a fight but don't honorably remove their face protection before throwing a punch. Preventing an opponent from being able to break your face in a brawl you started is most definitely unsportsmanlike conduct at the rink, though it's



*"I went to a fight the other night, and a hockey game broke out." —Rodney Dangerfield*



perfectly fine to pummel an unprotected adversary until teeth are clicking all over the ice.

No, hockey brawls are like breasts at the strip bar: they have to be pretty spectacular to have any effect on a seasoned viewer. MMA on skates, if you will.

But if rink rage is all too common, battles on the ball field are one of the most entertaining, dramatic spectacles in sport for many of the reasons Simmons noted. I'll make the

recall both the complex, nuanced origins of the First World War and the glaring melodrama of the most tortured episodes of *Melrose Place* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

With baseball playoffs in high gear and brawls sadly unlikely, take a moment to appreciate one of the oft-overlooked aspects of the game, with one example from 2013 and a short walk down memory lane in the company of the immortal Pedro Martinez.

### Drama on the Diamond

Any asshole pitcher can whip a ball into the torso of a third baseman who won't take his medicine and accept a record-setting 211-game suspension. **Ryan Dempster did that to Alex Rodriguez** on Aug. 19, throwing a pitch behind A-Rod, then two more inside before plunking him on pitch four.

But when the benches cleared, no one seemed to care, as if the players all sort of agreed that A-Rod is a jerk and deserved to get hit. Even Rodriguez's teammates seemed like they were on the field for show and might have high-fived Dempster if it wouldn't have looked bad to do so. Dempster didn't even get ejected. Only New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi lost his shit, and he deserved an Academy Award for even pretending to care what happens to a guy the Yankees organization is clearly putting out to pasture.

No, that whole thing was lame—unlike this gem from earlier in the season.

Zack Greinke should have had a target painted on him when he stepped into the batter's box on June 11.

In the top of the fifth, Greinke had hit Cody Ross in the hand. Not a big deal. Ross was checking his swing on an inside pitch and took a ball to lefty. It was hardly intentional, but it set the stage for the bottom of the sixth, when Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Ian Kennedy sent a 92-mph pitch into the face of rising star Yaseil Puig.

Puig was OK, if rattled, and stayed in the game.

Kennedy led the Major Leagues with 14 hit batsmen in 2012, and only he can tell you if he plunks for pleasure or if he's just piss-poor when it comes to throwing inside.

In the top of the seventh, Greinke manned up for the payback and chucked a fairly deliberate pitch at catcher Miguel Montero's back, with hitting the catcher officially regarded as being the next best thing to hitting the other team's pitcher. The 91-mph fastball



Getty Images

**The National League policy of making pitchers bat allowed Zack Greinke to feel some leather on June 11.**

case that above and beyond any other reasons, ball brawls are so damn intriguing due to the subtleties involved in luring many overweight, disinterested men—often players, coaches and fans—away from their beverages and onto the field for combat.

You can sometimes trace the violence back to a single pitch, but the very best confrontations on the diamond

caught Montero right between the 2 and the 6 on his jersey as he turned away, and the benches cleared in the casual manner of baseball players who have been packing faces with sunflower seeds and chew for six innings.

Nothing much came of the posturing, but, as luck would have it, Greinke was due up in the bottom of the inning.

---

**The leather sailed into  
Greinke's upper left shoulder,  
and Kennedy added one to a  
National League-leading total  
of eight hit batsmen.**

---

Greinke—who had broken his collarbone in an April brawl after he plunked San Diego Padre Carlos Quentin—stepped into the batter's box and actually looked like he was leaning into a swing when the ball left Kennedy's hand. The pitch was very much not a strike. The leather sailed into Greinke's upper left shoulder, and Kennedy added one to a National League-leading total of eight hit batsmen that would make the fictional Duke Simpson of *Major League* very proud indeed.

Heaters near the head are serious business, and the benches cleared again, this time with real purpose. The ensuing fracas allowed Vin Scully to continue his string of legendary calls from the press box: "No sense calling out names. They're all there."

Indeed they were, including Diamondbacks coaches and throwback heroes Kirk Gibson, Steve Sax and Alan Trammell, the last of whom was tackled to the ground by Dodgers manager and old-school great Don Mattingly. Burly Mark McGwire, also on the Dodgers staff, played the schoolyard bully and got in everyone's grill while cooler heads tried to hold him back and press-box pundits tried to hold back the urge to smack a too-easy roid-rage joke over the fence.

In the aftermath, MLB handed out eight suspensions and 12 fines, including five games to D-back Eric Hinske, whose greatest offense looked to be getting punched by Puig. Kennedy got a 10-game suspension, Greinke got fined, and Montero called Greinke a "little chickenshit" in an interview after the fact.

It was high drama, indeed, and you can watch the whole proceedings [here](#).

And perhaps there's more to come as Greinke's career continues. He seems to be a modern incarnation of Pedro Martinez, who could ignite any game at any time.

### **Pedro Martinez vs. The World**

Besides being a World Series champion, eight-time all-star and three-time Cy Young Award winner, Pedro Martinez did a lot to keep baseball interesting, and his odd beating of 72-year-old Don Zimmer in 2003 was actually about 50 years in the making.

---



### **Solo Tantrum Honor Roll**

**David Ortiz goes berserk**

**Bo Jackson bat rejection**

**Chris Davis knows Bo**

**Brian Wilson dugout rage**

**Carl Pavano focused fury**

**Russell Martin carpentry skills**

**Carlos Perez switch hitter**

---



On [April 13, 1994](#), Martinez was carrying a perfect game into the eighth inning with one out. Playing for the Montreal Expos, Martinez was mowing down the Cincinnati Reds and was five outs away from perfection. Then he hit Reggie Sanders on an 0-2 pitch. Martinez had pitched him inside earlier, which was very much part of the ace's MO throughout a career that spanned almost two decades, and Sanders charged the mound while Pedro was looking skyward with arms raised, perhaps realizing he'd ruined his perfect game.



NY Daily News via Getty Images

***In a rare playoff battle, Pedro Martinez threw Don Zimmer to the ground when the Red Sox fought the Yankees in the 2003 ALCS.***

People have long said Sanders was foolish for thinking Martinez leathered him on purpose, but ruining a perfect game gives you infinite deniability as a headhunting hurler. The only way Martinez would have ruined a perfect game on purpose was if he wanted to hit Sanders more than he wanted perfection. That's certainly possible—and he still got to work on his no-hitter, which was eventually broken up, too. Interestingly, Martinez once retired 27 batters in a row but was denied perfection because his lame Expos teammates couldn't score a single god-damn run. The game went into extra innings and Martinez gave up a hit in the 10th.

Martinez was involved in three fights in 1994, and by the time he left Montreal in 1997, he had already developed a reputation as a headhunter.

"I'm not afraid of hitting anyone because I can put the ball where I want to," Bob Carter quoted Martinez as saying in the article [The Intimidator](#).

Indeed, Martinez had impeccable command, and when you couple that with 141 hit batsmen in a career (26th on the all-time list) and player Todd Zeile's opinion that Martinez "hit people for the effect," you've got a powder keg on the mound.

But really, what's better than having a batter step into the box wondering if he's going to get dusted?

"Don't get comfortable, dude. I'm coming up and in."

---

**"Don't get comfortable, dude.  
I'm coming up and in."**

---

On Sept. 24, 1996, Martinez demonstrated the National League's ability to create tension on the diamond by drilling Greg Jefferies, causing him to leave the game. Later on, with the Phillies in the field, [Martinez came to the plate](#) and attempted a bunt. Pitcher Mike Williams had other ideas, throwing at Martinez twice before Pedro charged the mound and used his batting helmet as a projectile. Assuming both pitchers were going to get ejected following the bench-clearing brawl, one commentator called it "a good trade for the Phillies."

Martinez gets special credit for having the stones to charge the mound himself.





***In another playoff fight, Pete Rose and Bud Harrelson set off a fracas between the New York Mets and the Cincinnati Reds in 1973.***

And then came the Zimmer incident—but there's more to it than a pitcher with a penchant for inside heat sending a septuagenarian to the hospital.

Pitching for the Boston Red Sox in the 2003 American League Championship series, Martinez was matched up against Roger Clemens of the New York Yankees in Game 3, himself a somewhat noteworthy asshole on the mound. This was a meeting of archrivals with a spot in the World Series on the line, and the aces were up for both sides.

In the top of the fourth, after giving up a 2-0 lead, Martinez hit Karim Garcia in the head, though Martinez maintains his control was suffering due to a bad shoulder and the pitch actually hit Garcia's bat. When Garcia slid into second later in the inning, he took out second baseman Todd Walker and started a minor shoving match that had Clemens, Zimmer and Jorge Posada yelling from the dugout. Martinez responded by pointing to his head and then at Posada. The subtlety of the gesture was not misunderstood, especially given Martinez's reputation.

Recall at this point that Zimmer had been hit in the head

in 1953 playing for the St. Paul Saints and nearly died. He wasn't totally conscious for 13 days and had holes drilled in his head to relieve pressure. He later made the Big Leagues and had a fastball break his cheekbone in 1956. It's safe to say Zim is not a fan of high heat, though he's said in [his memoirs](#) that modern pitchers are afraid to throw inside now and batters consequently have no idea how to get out of the way.

Be that as it may, in the bottom of the fourth, Rocket Roger worked ahead into a 1-2 count and sent a ball way up and in on crazy Manny Ramirez, who started screaming curses as the benches cleared. Zimmer made a beeline for Martinez, who calmly grabbed Zimmer's head and tossed it aside like a basketball.

Martinez was painted as an inhuman bastard, though Zimmer himself took full blame in *The Zen of Zim*: "I was the guy who charged him and threw the punch. To the people who said Pedro beat up an old man I said, 'No, an old man was dumb enough to try and beat up on Pedro.'"

The [video of all the incidents](#) is almost surreal and ends



with a Red Sox groundskeeper being escorted out of the Yankees bullpen after yet another fight broke out. Later, pitcher Jeff Nelson and Garcia—who had climbed the wall to get into the bullpen—were charged with assault and battery on Paul Williams, who was apparently cheering for the Sox while in the Yankees bullpen.

You can actually read the [police report](#) on the incident, and it's a document that deserves a special place in the Red Sox Hall of Fame. Both players later accepted community service and probation in exchange for dismissal of the case, and *Tessie* was no doubt played in bars throughout New England while fans laughed their asses off.

The Yankees went on to beat the Sox in seven games, but the Sox won the World series a year later. Zim is still working in baseball, and Martinez will be eligible for election to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2015.

He probably still throws inside in oldtimers games.

### Playoff Pugilism?

The World Series will end sometime in the last week of October, and with championships on the line, there's unfortunately less margin for teams to play these games within games. Having a star pitcher ejected or suspended can end the playoffs early, and intentionally hitting a batter puts a man on base, which is fine during the 130-some meaningless games during the year but generally frowned upon in the fall contests that really count.

The high inside heat and mad charges to the mound just aren't seen that often when temperatures drop and the tricolored bunting goes up in October.

Still, who can forget the 2003 Yankees-Red Sox playoff brawl recounted above?

---

**Intentionally hitting a batter  
puts a man on base, which is fine  
during the 130-some meaningless  
games during the year but  
generally frowned upon in the fall.**

---

And what about the wonderful World Series [Roger Clemens-Mike Piazza bat-throwing incident](#)? After Piazza's broken bat flew into the field of play in the 2000 subway series, Clemens whipped a piece of shattered lumber at the star catcher, who had actually taken karate lessons in anticipation of a fight after Clemens had skulled him three months earlier. In his magnificent fashion, Clemens offered his explanation to the umpire during the incident: "I thought it was the ball."

And what of Pete Rose and Bud Harrelson, who [fought in a cloud of dirt](#) in the 1973 NLCS?

Those assorted incidents over the years bring hope that maybe, just maybe the 2013 playoffs will bring another brawl to the diamond and send a charge through two cities already amped up on the high-pressure stakes of October baseball. It would be high drama, indeed—and good for ratings.

But if the players choose to play it cool, stay in the dugout and rob us of our diamond soap opera, if we're left only to the gentlemen's game of balls and strikes and performance-enhancing-drug scandals, well, there's always hockey from now until June.



### About the Author

*Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the **CrossFit Journal** and the founder of [CrossFit 204](#)*