

Baseball's *Real*/Golden Age

The Hits Just Keep On Comin':



Comparing the Hitters, Decade-By-Decade

The most beautiful sound in baseball – and the most unique sound in all sports – comes from the meeting of wood and horsehide. It says summer. It says you're alive. It says something exciting is happening ... now.

Even the most efficient strikeout pitcher can't elicit the same kind of excitement that a hitter can. When a pitcher throws a strike, nothing really changes (unless it's a 3rd strike). When a batter hits that strike anywhere between the foul lines, everything changes. The possibilities are endless.

If baseball had a golden age exclusively for hitting, that would surely be the 1920s. The batting averages posted by the hitters of that decade must look like an unreachable, almost unimaginable peak even to today's best hitters. The batting averages for so many hitters on so many teams were so astronomical that it might be easy to conclude that the pitching fell below today's standards. Yet contemporary accounts suggest that the great pitchers of the 1920s would prevail as outstanding hurlers today or in any decade in-between ... and that the greatest hitters of the 1920s would treat the majority of today's pitchers with the same kind of ruthless punishment that they inflicted on all but the best pitchers of their own generation.

How good were the best hitters of the 1920s? Consider this:

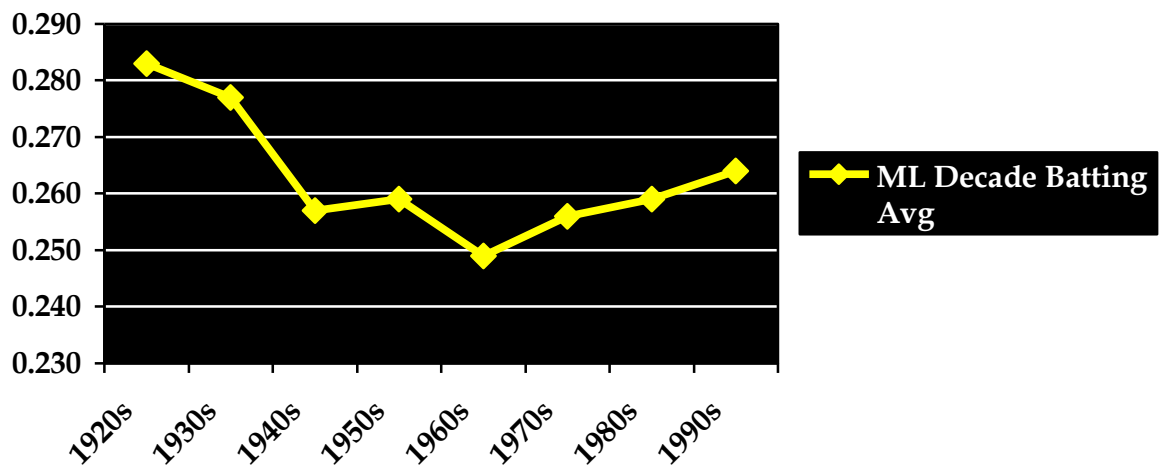
- In 1924, Zack Wheat of the Brooklyn Dodgers hit .375 and *didn't* win the batting title ... in fact, he finished 49 percentage points behind league leader Rogers Hornsby.
- Among the top 10 hitters in the American League for each year from 1920 to 1929, the worst batting average was .323 turned in by Cleveland's Joe Sewell in 1928.
- Three times in each league, the leading batter hit over .400
- Ty Cobb hit a combined average of .357 for the 1920s. Al Simmons averaged .356 for the decade. Neither of them won a batting title during the 1920s.

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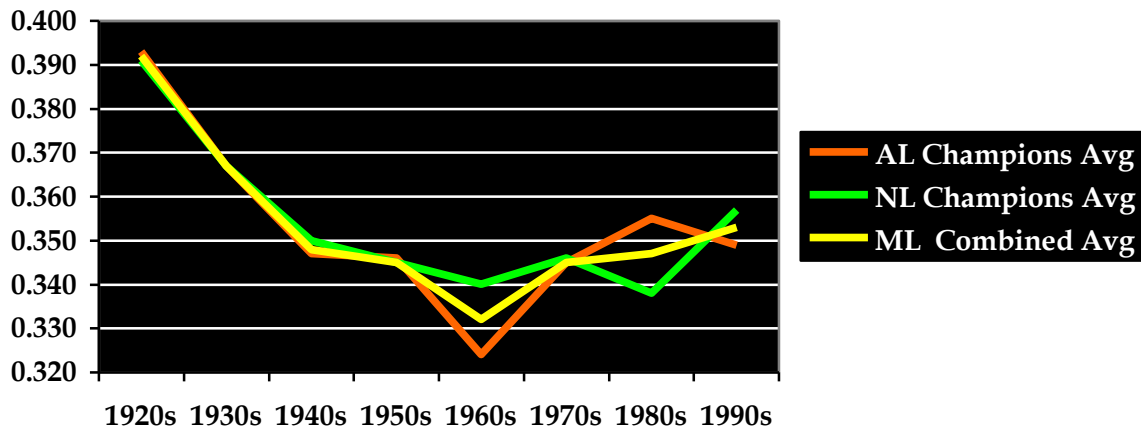
Major league players as a group hit a combined .283 for the 1920s. In both 1921 and 1922, 5 different major league teams hit over .300 for the season.

The offensive onslaught continued into the 1930s. While batting averages dropped slightly (the combined major league average for the decade was .277) and total major league hits declined by less than 1%, hitters traded batting average for slugging, as both doubles and homes runs increased ... and scoring increased by 2%. Major league teams averaged a combined 9.86 runs per game, the highest average for any decade in the century.



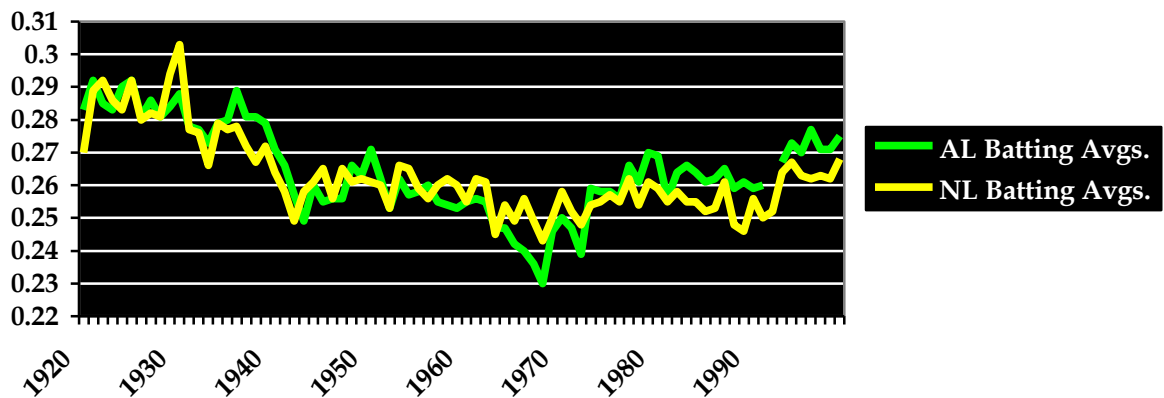
From the 1940s through the 1990s, major league batting averages tended to range around .260, with the exception of the 1960s, when major league batting averages hit their low. While hitting was down overall in the 1960s, the best hitters of that decade recorded averages that were comparable with the best hitters in baseball history. The highest single-season batting average recorded during the 1960s was .361 by Norm Cash in 1961, a respectable average in any decade (though in the 1920s, it would have been good enough to win the batting title only in the 1926 National League season). Pitchers dominated in the 1960s in a way that was comparable with the hurlers of the pre-1920s "dead ball era." Only pitchers in the 1960s tended to have more pitches, more power and a larger strike zone to work with than the pitchers a half-century before.

That the hitters in the 1960s hit as well as they did attests to the quality of the best hitters in that decade. This is demonstrated by the fact that the batting champions in the 1960s, in their championship seasons, hit a combined .332 for the decade - in line with the batting champions of every decade since the 1930s.



After the 1930s, the batting champions for both leagues have tended to average between .340 and .360, with the notable exception of the 1960s, when averages even for American League batting champions stayed in the .320 range (and did so despite Carl Yastrzemski's .301 in 1968). The "odd balls" here are the 1920s and 1930s, whose averages are extraordinarily high compared to the rest of the decades.

When the major league owners shrank the strike zone and lowered the pitching mound before the opening of the 1969 season, hitters in both leagues immediately responded with higher averages, which consistently trended upward through the 1990s, though still below the hitting heydays of the 1920s and 1930s.



But what caused the drop in batting averages from the 1940s on? Was it the emphasis on the home run that de-valued contact hitting? Was it bigger gloves and faster players who turned hits into outs and made keeping the ball in the park less rewarding?

Were the hitters of the 1920s and 1930s better than those in the later decades, or was the pitching worse? Look at the numbers for each decade, and you decide.

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The Top Player Batting Averages for Each Decade (1920s-1950s)

1920s	
Rogers Hornsby	.382
Harry Heilmann	.364
Ty Cobb	.357
Al Simmons	.356
Babe Ruth	.355

1930s	
Bill Terry	.352
Lefty O'Doul	.345
Lou Gehrig	.343
Joe DiMaggio	.341
Joe Medwick	.338

1940s	
Ted Williams	.356
Stan Musial	.346
Joe DiMaggio	.325
George Kell	.305
Joe Medwick	.305

1950s	
Ted Williams	.336
Stan Musial	.330
Hank Aaron	.323
Willie Mays	.317
Harvey Kuenn	.314

Did You Know ...

For the 6 seasons from 1920 to 1925, Rogers Hornsby hit for a combined batting average of .397.

1920s – Was Rogers Hornsby the greatest right-handed hitter ever? Yea, probably. The best of the 1920s, certainly. Consider that Hornsby *averaged* .382 for the decade. Since the 1920s, only 8 players have had a higher average than that during a single season, let alone a decade. (Ted Williams did it twice.) In the 1920s, Hornsby won 7 National League batting titles, 3 times winning with an average of .401 or better. His 2,085 hits during the decade led all hitters in the hitting-crazy '20s, 161 better than Harry Heilmann, who won a “mere” four batting crowns over in the American League during the 1920s, and hit better than .400 only once (.403 in 1923).

Who almost made the list? George Sisler at .347, Eddie Collins at .346, Jimmie Foxx at .342.

1930s – Though the averages might have been down, the offensive onslaught continued in the 1930s. Bill Terry’s .352 decade average included only one batting title, when he hit .401 in 1930. Four other times during the decade Terry hit .340 or better, 3 times only to finish second to the likes of Chick Hafey, Lefty O’Doul and Paul Waner. Terry’s .341 average in 1935 was only 6th best in the National League (Arky Vaughn was batting champion that year at .385). But none of these batting champions could match Terry’s hitting consistency for the decade.

Who almost made the list? Jimmie Foxx and Paul Waner at .336, Babe Ruth and Charlie Gehringer at .331.

1940s – Despite losing three seasons to the Second World War, Ted Williams won 4 batting titles during the 1940s and finished second twice to post the highest average during the decade. He also finished 5th in total hits for the decade (Lou Boudreau had the most with 1,578 hits). Stan Musial’s performance during the decade was almost as impressive, winning 3 of his 7 career batting titles during the 1940s.

Who almost made the list? Tommy Holmes and Johnny Mize at .304, Stan Hack at .303.

1950s – Williams and Musial again ranked first and second for the decade, with Williams winning 2 batting titles and Musial 4 batting crowns. Williams actually had the American League’s highest batting average in 1954 (.345), but not enough at-bats to qualify for the hitting crown, which went to Cleveland’s Bobby Avila (.341). Hank Aaron won 2 batting titles, and Willie Mays and Harvey Kuenn each won one, during the 1950s.

Who almost made the list? Richie Ashburn at .313, Mickey Mantle and Jackie Robinson at .311.

Did You Know ...

When Ted Williams won his first Triple Crown in 1942 (.356, 36 home runs, 137 RBIs), he finished second in the MVP voting to the Yankees’ Joe Gordon.

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The Top Player Batting Averages for Each Decade (1960s-1990s)

1960s	
Roberto Clemente	.328
Matty Alou	.312
Rico Carty	.311
Pete Rose	.309
Hank Aaron	.308

1970s	
Rod Carew	.343
Bill Madlock	.320
Dave Parker	.317
Pete Rose	.314
Jim Rice	.310

1980s	
Wade Boggs	.352
Tony Gwynn	.332
Don Mattingly	.323
Kirby Puckett	.323
Rod Carew	.314

1990s	
Tony Gwynn	.344
Mike Piazza	.328
Edgar Martinez	.322
Nomar Garciaparra	.322
Frank Thomas	.320

Did You Know ...

Of all the league batting champions during the 1960s, Detroit Tigers first baseman Norm Cash had both the highest single-season average (.361) and the lowest combined average for the decade (.275).

1960s – In terms of batting average consistency, Roberto Clemente was clearly the dominant hitter of the 1960s. He won 4 batting titles during the decade, and hit less than .300 for a season only once (.291 in 1968). He also had the most hits during the decade (1,877), 58 more than Hank Aaron and 101 more than Vada Pinson. Matty Alou's impressive hitting decade included a batting title in 1966 with a .342 average. Pete Rose won his first 2 batting titles in 1968 (.335) and 1969 (.348).

Who almost made the list? Tony Oliva at .308, Frank Robinson at .304, Willie Mays at .303.

1970s – Rod Carew dominated hitting for average in the 1970s the way Ted Williams did in the 1940s and 1950s. After winning his first batting championship in 1969 (.hitting .332), Carew collected 6 more batting titles in the 1970s. Although Pete Rose had more hits during the decade, (2,045 to Carew's 1,787), Carew accomplished his total with 1,300 at-bats *fewer* than Rose, accounting for a decade batting average almost 30 points higher than Rose's.

Who almost made the list? Steve Garvey at .304, Al Oliver at .303, Bob Watson at .301.

1980s – Boston's Wade Boggs, and his 5 American League batting titles, set the pace for all hitters during the 1980s. The most hits during the decade were collected by Milwaukee shortstop Robin Yount, with a total of 1,731. (Baltimore's Eddie Murray finished second in hits with 1,642.) Tony Gwynn accumulated 4 batting titles in posting his .332 decade average.

Who almost made the list? George Brett at .311, Robin Yount at .305, Tim Lincecum at .303.

1990s – Tony Gwynn was the only hitter to appear in the top five for the 1980s and 1990s, collecting four National League batting titles in each decade. His .358 average in 1993 was only good enough for second place to Andres Galarraga's .370. In leading the league in hitting from 1994-1997, Gwynn averaged .371 over that 4-year period. Edgar Martinez led the American League in hitting twice during the 1990s.

Who almost made the list? Vladimir Guerrero at .314, Paul Molitor and Larry Walker at .313.

Did You Know ...

Tony Gwynn's .394 batting average in 1994 was the highest in the National League in over 6 decades ... going back to Bill Terry's .401 batting average in 1930.

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The Top Team Batting Averages for Each Decade (1920s –1950s)

1920s	
Detroit Tigers	.295
Cleveland Indians	.295
Pittsburgh Pirates	.294
St. Louis Cardinals	.291
New York Giants	.291

1930s	
New York Yankees	.288
Washington Senators	.286
Cleveland Indians	.286
St. Louis Cardinals	.285
Pittsburgh Pirates	.284

1940s	
St. Louis Cardinals	.272
Brooklyn Dodgers	.268
Detroit Tigers	.263
Pittsburgh Pirates	.262
New York Yankees	.261

1950s	
St. Louis Cardinals	.268
New York Yankees	.268
Boston Red Sox	.267
Brooklyn Dodgers	.266
Detroit Tigers	.264

Did You Know ...

The last National League hitter to win the Triple Crown was Joe Medwick in 1937, batting .374 with 31 homers and 154 RBIs.

1920s – The remarkable thing about team batting averages in the 1920s (besides the fact that they were so robust) was that the New York Yankees, who scored the most runs in the decade (8,486 – over 200 more than any other team), did not lead the majors in batting. The team's .291 batting average for the decade tied it with the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Giants, however the Bronx Bombers had fewer at-bats than the Cardinals and Giants (probably fewer bottom-of-the-ninth innings that they needed to play). The Detroit Tigers and Cleveland Indians topped the majors with .295 averages, with the Tigers hitting .300 or better as a team 4 times during the decade, and leading the league with a .316 *team* batting average in 1921. Hitters ruled in the 1920s

Who almost made the list? New York Yankees at .291, St. Louis Browns at .290, Washington Senators at .285.

1930s – The New York Yankees led the American League in batting average only twice during the 1930s, but they were the most productive hitting team in major league baseball throughout the decade. The Washington Senators had the most hits (15,707), but the Yankees again scored the most runs with 9,695, almost 1300 more than any other team. The highest single-season team batting average during the 1930s was posted by the New York Giants with a .319 average in 1930.

Who almost made the list? Detroit Tigers at .282, Chicago Cubs at .282, New York Giants at .281.

1940s – Team batting averages for the 1940s dropped dramatically from the previous 2 decades. Certainly, the war's draining talent from the major leagues had some impact on batting efficiency. Led by hitters such as Stan Musial and Joe Medwick, the Cardinals paced the majors in both batting average and total hits (14,767) for the 1940s. Yet the Cardinals' leading average wouldn't have put them in the top 5 in either of the previous 2 decades. For the first time since the introduction of the "lively ball," no major league team hit .300 or better for a season during the decade.

Who almost made the list? Chicago Cubs at .261, New York Giants at .260, Boston Braves and Washington Senators at .257.

1950s – Overall, team batting averages slipped even more from the previous decade. The St. Louis Cardinals' and New York Yankees' .268 team batting averages would have ranked only 14th for the 1920s. The Cardinals again had the most hits for the decade among all major league teams with 14,253. The Cardinals led the National League in team batting average 4 times in the 1950s, and the Yankees topped the American League in team batting average 5 times. The only team to bat .300 for a season was Boston, which batted .302 in 1950.

Who almost made the list? Cincinnati Reds at .262, Boston/Milwaukee Braves and Chicago White Sox at .261.

The Top Team Batting Averages for Each Decade (1960s-1990s)

1960s	
Pittsburgh Pirates	.268
Cincinnati Reds	.262
St. Louis Cardinals	.261
Milwaukee Braves	.256
San Francisco Giants	.253

1970s	
Chicago Cubs	.284
Pittsburgh Pirates	.269
Minnesota Twins	.268
Boston Red Sox	.266
St. Louis Cardinals	.265

1980s	
Boston Red Sox	.278
Milwaukee Brewers	.267
Kansas City Royals	.266
New York Yankees	.266
Cleveland Indians	.265

1990s	
Colorado Rockies	.284
Cleveland Indians	.278
New York Yankees	.274
Texas Rangers	.273
Boston Red Sox	.273

Did You Know ...

Talk about a hitting phenom: Minnesota Twins outfielder Tony Oliva led the American League in batting (.323), runs scored (109), hits (217), doubles (43) and total bases (374) in winning Rookie of the Year honors for 1964.

1960s – The 5 best-hitting teams over the course of the 1960s all came from the National League. The Boston Red Sox, which had the highest average among American League teams, ranked 6th. The Pittsburgh Pirates, led by 6 individual batting championships (4 for Roberto Clemente, 1 each for Dick Groat and Matty Alou) had a the highest average at .268 and the most hits with 14,901. The Pirates led the National League in team batting average 5 times. In the American League, the Minnesota Twins had the highest team batting average 3 times during the decade.

Who almost made the list? Boston Red Sox at .252, Minnesota Twins and Los Angeles Dodgers at .251.

1970s – For the first time since the 1920s, the leading team batting averages for the decade increased from the 1960s to the 1970s. The Chicago Cubs were far and away the best hitting team throughout the decade, and banged out the most hits (15,539). Though the Cubs had 3 individual batting champions during the 1970s (Billy Williams once, Bill Madlock twice), they led the league in team batting only in 1978 (tied with the Los Angeles Dodgers at .264).

Who almost made the list? Cincinnati Reds and Los Angeles Dodgers at .262, Seattle Mariners at .258.

1980s – During the 1980s, the Boston Red Sox outhit the rest of major league baseball by more than 10 percentage points. The Red Sox led the American League in team batting 5 out of the 10 years, and 6 times the league's batting champion wore a Red Sox uniform – once it was Carney Lansford, and 5 times it was Wade Boggs. The National League team with the highest batting average for the decade was the St. Louis Cardinals, whose .259 average ranked 10th among all major league teams at that time.

Who almost made the list? Toronto Blue Jays at .264, Minnesota Twins at .263, Detroit Tigers and Texas Rangers at .262.

1990s – The Colorado Rockies recorded the highest decade-long team batting average (.284) since the 1930s. In the first 7 years of the franchise's history, Colorado, aided by the hitter-friendly confines of Coors Field, led the National League in team batting 5 of those 7 years. The Cleveland Indians, with one of the most balanced line-ups in modern times, led the American League in batting 3 times during the 1990s, and led all teams in hits (14,936) for the decade. Nine of the top 10 team batting averages for the 1990s belonged to American League teams.

Who almost made the list? Minnesota Twins at .273, Chicago White Sox at .271, Seattle Mariners at .269.