

## “Notes on the Uniform Distribution”

[David King](#)

Harvard University

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On opening day at Fenway, 1994, I caught a glimpse of the Tigers' new warmup jackets - traditional navy throughout but for one shock orange arm from shoulder to sleeve. The fearsome likes of Fielder and Fryman devolved into pathetic one clawed lobsters. Ugly. Ridiculous. Welcome to high fashion.

The fellow next to me, a Boston sports writer of some note, explained that lots of teams are redesigning hats, jackets, and jerseys these days. Why? Licensing fees, he said. See that kid in a White Sox jersey over there? It's a 1991 design. Made Major League Baseball a mint. Think about it, he said. Even kids in Kansas City are buying Marlins and Rockies hats. Why did the Indians change uniforms this year, and the Reds last year? Money, he said. Nothing's sacred anymore.

True? There certainly are plenty of redesigned jerseys in stores. The Brewers are looking better lately, at least off the field. And the Astros finally stopped dressing like night shift managers at Taco Bell. But across baseball, is there really a wave of innovation going on? And what causes design changes when they happen? Is it money, as my writer friend says, or something more insidious, like a new cadre of fashion consultants pigeonholing team owners at their occasional national meetings?

Thanks to Marc Okkonen's wonderful picture book, Baseball Uniforms of the 20th Century (New York: Sterling, 1993), we can see if the wags and cynics are right.

Are uniform changes more common today than back in the good old days, whenever they were? The answer is clear, and the answer is no. Major league ball teams are no more likely to be sporting redesigned uniforms in the 1990s than they were in the 1940s, or any decade since World War II. That is true for home and road uniforms, and home and road hats too.

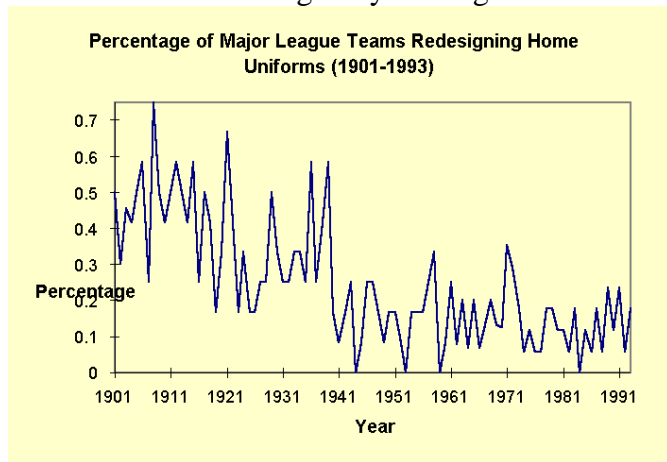
To understand how turbulent the uniform distribution can be, I randomly selected 17 of the current 28 baseball teams, nine from the American League and eight from the National League. With the help of a research assistant, I studied every jersey and hat design for each year in a team's history, as shown in Okkonen's book. We used conservative coding rules, ignoring times when design changes were slight, like different colored socks, varying sleeve lengths, and the occasional appearance of commemorative patches. Instead, we only recorded major modifications, such as new color combinations, pinstripes, and the appearance of those pullover pajamas in the 1970s.

For an example of how often uniform styles change, recall what the Kansas City Athletics looked like. In 1960 they sported an off-white button-up jersey with black piping and a red script "Athletics" on the chest. The 1961 Athletics showed up in

pinstripes with a large navy "A" over their hearts, and their look was topped off with a new hat. They were in new hats the next year too, as the 1962 Athletics dressed in black and red "tank top" jerseys, with block letters spelling out the team name. Not to be out done, the 1963 A's came to camp introducing their now-familiar green and gold combination.

The way the Athletics tinkered with uniforms is not some historical fluke. Most teams have gone through similar spurts of innovation. The figure below shows the percentage of major league clubs in our sample that redesigned uniforms in a given year. The percentage varies widely, from 75 percent in 1909 to zero in 1984, but the trend is unmistakable. Despite the general impression that there are more uniform changes happening in the 1990s, the greatest flux came before World War II.

Take the Yankees. Originally the Highlanders after moving from Baltimore in 1903, the



young New York team went through six home and road jerseys by 1909. Since Babe Ruth joined the Yankees in 1920, however, the Bronx Bombers have changed their look just once, and it was minor. Likewise the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs tried out various uniforms in the 1920s and 1930s, but they have made relatively few changes since the 1940s. This has been the pattern across baseball, as anyone collecting old uniforms will

note.

The figure shows what has happened to home uniforms over the years, but there are important marketing niches for hats as well. Just think about the Rangers' new logo, or the return a few years ago of Baltimore's stylish bird. Maybe teams are increasingly likely to play head games for the sake of clever marketing in the 1990s. Again, the answer from our data is clear, and the answer is no. Hat designs are as stable now as they have ever been.

There have been two general types of caps in baseball history. The "Chicago style" pillbox looked like a layer cake. (Recall those old pictures of "Home Run" Baker, or, if you dare, imagine Kent Tekulve with the Pirates in the early 1980s.) The "Boston style" from the turn of the century was, as Okkonen notes, "the forerunner of future cap styles with a rounded close-fitting crown" (p2). This Boston style presumably includes the shockingly red cap that Bernie Carbo wore for the Red Sox in the mid-1970s.

The adjoining table shows the average annual rate of design changes for uniforms and hats this century. The results are similar to what we see in the figure. There were routine design changes in the first half of this century, and there has been considerable stability

ever since. In the 1930s, clubs were much more likely to have separate home and road hats, doubling the number of hats diehard fans could buy. Even if it seems like every kid on the block is wearing a fancy new cap, your parents, and your grandparents probably thought so too.

	Home Uniform	Away Uniform	Home Hat	Away Hat
1901-1909	47%	46%	50%	43%
1910-1919	43	39	38	35
1920-1929	33	36	23	36
1930-1939	36	38	21	25
1940-1949	15	14	12	13
1950-1959	15	18	13	12
1960-1969	14	18	7	11
1970-1979	13	16	4	7
1980-1989	16	22	5	6
1990-1993	18	18	6	6

**Average Annual Percentage of Major League Teams with Redesigns, by Decade (1901-1993)**

The aggregate statistics paint a different picture than one expects, based on what we have been hearing about the new marketing push for licensed baseball products. Still, the figure and table can be misleading, because some teams have indeed been going through spurts of

redesigns. In their history, the San Diego Padres have modified their uniforms, on average, every 2.33 years. Since 1940, Cleveland has had a new look every 3.38 years, on average. And thanks largely to Bill Veeck's years as the White Sox's owner, Chicago has averaged a new home jersey every other year since 1976. Contrast this with the stability in uniform designs found in Detroit and St. Louis.

Why is there such team-by-team variation? Why do some teams go through spurts of innovation, followed by long periods of stability? A team-level analysis of the uniform distribution highlights a few things that make teams more likely to scrap their old jerseys and start anew.

- This is obvious, but when franchises change cities, like when the Washington Senators became the Minnesota Twins in 1961, teams almost always redesign their jerseys. (The Braves are a notable exception. When they sinfully abandoned Milwaukee for Atlanta in 1966, only the letter on the hat changed.)
- Related to this, we should mention that when there are new franchises, like those in Florida and Colorado, there are naturally more new licensed products on the market. But that does not mean that established teams are changing their looks.
- New hats and jerseys usually come with new stadiums, like those in Cleveland in Arlington in 1994.
- When ownership changes, a team is more likely to go for an image overhaul.
- Pennant winning teams are much less likely to tinker with their wardrobe.
- Teams in smaller than average media markets (like Milwaukee, Seattle, Pittsburgh, and San Diego), are slightly more likely to change designs, and
- Teams with below .500 records, and teams with below average attendance records, are much more likely to redesign hats and jerseys.

These last two findings, that weaker teams and small market teams are more likely to redesign their uniforms, make sense if marketing decisions drive uniform changes. What teams need the most help with marketing? Ones in small markets, and ones with losing records and poor gates.

Maybe my writer friend had the story half right. No, we baseball fans are not drowning under a new wave of hats and jerseys. Our grandparents survived much more turbulence in the uniform distribution than we are seeing now.

Still, the all-mighty Dollar probably does play a role in the design changes we are seeing. In baseball, teams market jerseys, but they also market dreams. When our favorite team fails in September, we hope against hope, whispering "Wait until next year." It is easier, I suppose, to dream that dream when your favorite nine no longer look like the scraggly bunch of losers who disappointed everyone the year before. Anyone remember what the Brewers looked like when Dave Bristol was their skipper and they lost 97 games? Me neither. Thank goodness.