

Let Hitters Hit and Pitchers Pitch (Unless They're Two-Way Players)

By: Logan Potosky, COM-343-1

Throughout the years, the notion of a designated hitter (DH) has been a contested rule in the realm of Major League Baseball (MLB). In the MLB, a designated hitter is a player in the lineup who exclusively hits, specifically for a team's pitcher, so that the pitcher only plays defense (MLB Advanced Media, LP, 2022).

The idea of a designated hitter was first inspired in 1887, when rules that allowed substitutions during professional baseball games were introduced (Cronin, 2016). Eventually, in 1973, the American League implemented a designated hitter from 1973 through 1975 (Cronin, 2016).

Then, in 1986, the most recent non-universal DH rule was adopted by the MLB (Cronin, 2016). This rule had both teams use a designated hitter in their lineups for games at American League stadiums, and no designated hitters for games at National League stadiums (Cronin, 2016).

However, after being used during the 2020 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MLB passed a universal DH rule in its newest collective bargaining agreement, starting in the 2022 season (MLB Advanced Media, LP, 2022).

This rule change unites both the American League (AL) and National League (NL), as it makes each league's teams both use a designated hitter for all games. Therefore, the MLB should keep its universal DH rule because it increases hitting performance throughout the league, keeps players on the field, and makes games more competitively balanced.

The most recent non-universal DH rule has showcased how designated hitters have indeed performed better in the batter's box than pitchers. "Pitchers last year batted .110/.150/.142... DHs last year batted .239/.3116/.434," (Jayson Stark, Interview by e-mail, April 25, 2022). "That computes to about half a run per game in extra offense" (Stark, Interview by e-mail, April 25, 2022). With more hitters being inserted into lineups, teams now have a chance to score more runs and potentially win more games.

Furthermore, the universal DH rule can prevent star hitters from missing games due to injury. For instance, outfielder Bryce Harper, the reigning NL MVP, currently has an elbow injury. "But he hasn't missed a game because of the [new National League] DH. He'd have been on the IL for at least two weeks last year," (Stark, Interview by e-mail, April 25, 2022).

Additionally, not only does the universal DH rule let injured hitters continue playing, but it also is able to keep pitchers safer. Instead of standing in the batter's box with the risk of being hit by a pitch, these players can remain in the dugout between innings and be ready to pitch after their teams hit.

"The universal DH should also help reduce pitcher injuries that have occurred at the plate and on the basepaths," (Kevin Skiver, April 7, 2022). "Pitchers can now focus on pitching and overall conditioning instead of trying to squeeze in batting practice" (Skiver, April 7, 2022).

While the American League has been playing with designated hitters in its ballparks for years, the rule may have a greater effect on this league than the National League. This great effect increases the fairness of baseball games.

“I think it actually has more impact on American League teams, because for nearly 50 years, they’ve been built a certain way, around having a DH in the lineup,” (Stark, Interview by e-mail, April 25, 2022). “Then in interleague play, or (even worse) in the World Series, they either had no place for someone like David Ortiz to play, or they had to force their DH into the field... it’s obvious how much more fair this makes interleague and World Series games” (Stark, Interview by e-mail, April 25, 2022).

Conversely, there are some who are opposed to the newly instituted universal DH rule. One reason why is because there are some pitchers who are somewhat decent hitters. For example, reigning AL MVP Shohei Ohtani has developed into a two-way superstar in the MLB.

Last season, not only did he go 9-2 with a 3.18 ERA and 156 strikeouts in over 130 innings pitched, but he also hit 46 home runs and 100 RBIs with a .257 batting average (Baseball Reference, 2022). However, under the universal DH rule, pitchers can still hit, but they are treated as playing two different positions: pitcher and DH (Skiver, April 7, 2022). Perhaps more two-way players could be making their way into the MLB soon.

Moreover, the position of designated hitter is rather expensive for teams. “In 2019... the average player signed by an American League team to be its primary DH got \$13.65 million,” (Bill

Felber, October 27, 2020). “That was three times the average \$4.35 million salary for all positions that season” (Felber, October 27, 2020). This means that if American League teams are having to pay this much money to keep a DH on their rosters, the National League will also have to spend a great amount of money to have DHs on its teams as well.

Ultimately, the designated hitter has had a considerable impact on baseball. It has resulted in rule changes, such as the current universal DH rule in the MLB. The universal DH will likely provide both more offense and fewer injuries to players. The rule also seems like it will result in fairer games, as both AL and NL teams will be abiding by the same rules regardless of venue.

There are many potentially favorable outcomes that can result from the universal DH rule, which is why the MLB should keep it in place for the foreseeable future.

Sources (in order of first appearance)

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- **Kevin Skiver, April 7, 2022:** <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/mlb/news/mlb-universal-dh-national-league-pitchers-hitting-2022/r1kbh2jzlpqxrydqqmkqonwq>
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- **Bill Felber, October 27, 2020:** <https://calltothepen.com/2020/10/27/mlb-the-case-against-the-universal-dh/>