

Major League Baseball



Fleet afoot: Jacoby Ellsbury slides under Yankees catcher Jorge Posada, the first steal of home by a Red Sox player in 10 years.

The big swipe

It was a brazen robbery, stealth and swift. The master thief was identified by his red socks as Boston's Jacoby Ellsbury. The owner of home plate, none other than New York Yankees pitcher Andy Pettitte, the recordholder for pickoffs. On April 26, Ellsbury cased the joint from third. "Lefties are tricky," he confessed later, "but every pitcher has a key. I knew if I got my lead and he went from the windup, I'd run."

Ellsbury eyed Pettitte's right foot until he rocked back in his motion. Then — *whoosh* — Ellsbury blazed down the line, slid under the pitch and — *whoosh* — made a quick getaway. But Ellsbury would return to the scene of the crime, swiping base after base, breaking the Red Sox single-season record of 55 on Aug. 25. By season's end, he had stolen 70. Catch him if you can.

Curtain calls: 10 season highlights

By Devra Māza
Special for USA TODAY

They don't call it "The Show" for nothing. Baseball, more than any other sport, has made curtain calls part of its game. For more than a century, fans of America's pastime have called out players with applause for a tip of their cap as they connected with history.

This year, ovations stopped play for a dazzling array of achievements, the sheer variety of which illustrate what makes baseball so boundlessly entertaining. They ran the gamut from milestone hits and walk-off home runs to franchise records and rare fielding gems, led by the most difficult of all to achieve, the aptly named perfect game.

Across the country, fans rose to their feet to honor feats



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of the moment or a tour-de-force day, with some accomplishments decades, even careers, in the making. None were accomplished alone, and all were exhilarating to behold, so let's bring them out for one more curtain call as we celebrate the highlights of a sparkling season.



By Jim Prisching, AP

Spotless: Mark Buehrle is greeted by catcher Ramon Castro after his perfect game July 23 vs. the Rays.

Perfect timing

There's nothing like a perfect game, with fans and fielders alike holding their collective breath on every pitch.

The Chicago White Sox's Mark Buehrle was that pitcher July 23 and seemed to be the only one unaffected, smiling after plays, chatting in the dugout, actually saying the word "perfect," so the baseball gods decided to have fun, too. As the ninth inning began, they sent Buehrle's unhittable change-up over the wall in center field, where Dewayne Wise had just been inserted.

Wise ran back, leaped up, hit the wall and hauled the ball back in. As he came down, the ball rolled out of his glove and dropped — faster than you can say "heart attack" — into his hand as he fell to the track.

The imperfect circus catch helped Buehrle land baseball's 18th perfect game, but he didn't stop there. He kept his streak going, setting a major league record of 45 consecutive batters retired.

"Never say never in this game," Buehrle said, "because crazy stuff can happen." If the baseball gods are smiling, sometimes it's the stuff of history.



By Morry Gash, AP

Collateral damage: Prince Fielder has a ta-da moment after hitting a 12th-inning walk-off home run vs. the Giants. The blast was one of 160 in his five-year career, but it was the celebration afterward that left people mesmerized.

Kaboom

No one likes getting hit. Especially Prince Fielder. The Milwaukee Brewers' big slugger prefers to do the hitting, exploding with 23 long balls, including a 503-foot bomb, to

win the All-Star Home Run Derby. Fielder set off a bomb of a different kind Sept. 6 when he ended his walk-off home run trot with an exploding stomp of home plate as his teammates fell down around him.

The surprising celebration be-

came a YouTube sensation, delighting everyone except the playoff-seeking San Francisco Giants, who just stared stunned as Brewers rolled back on the dirt. They should get used to that position. Someone's getting hit next season.

Model player

It was raining in New York, but Derek Jeter is nothing if not patient. It's what allows him to wait on an outside pitch and hit it the other way. He used that patented inside-out swing Sept. 11 to surpass Lou Gehrig for most hits by a New York Yankees player with 2,722. He had tied the franchise record the same way, and his next hit would be no different, each driven down the right-field line, as if hugging first base, where the Iron Horse used to live.

As one Yankees captain surpassed another, new memories were created in a new stadium. Incredibly, despite a team history packed with icons, Jeter could be the first Yankee to get 3,000 hits. It's a milestone that will



By Ray Stubblebine, Reuters

No. 1: Derek Jeter's 2,747 hits include 2,027 singles.

stay on deck for 2010. But the Yankees faithful don't mind the delay. They know Derek Jeter can wait.

Déjà vu

Jonathan Sanchez had been banished to the bullpen. The San Francisco Giants left-handed pitcher had been getting knocked out of games early. His teammate, Randy Johnson, one of the most dominating lefties of all time, had advice. "He told me how to stay in the game," Sanchez said, "to try to get first-pitch strikes, get ahead and get them out on three pitches." Johnson showed him how it's done, getting his 300th win June 4.

Three wins later, Johnson went on the disabled list, giving Sanchez a second chance at the rotation. He had learned his lesson. On July 10, with his father in the stands seeing his son start in the majors for the first time, Sanchez not only got his first complete game but also threw a no-hitter. Johnson was there as Sanchez hugged his way off the field. But the biggest hug would



By Ben Margot, AP

Father and son: Jonathan Sanchez, right, after his gem.

go to Sanchez's father as the two embraced in the dugout. "This is a gift for him," Sanchez said. Later, Johnson would return to pitch from the bullpen. The ball had been passed.

Screenwriter Devra Māza writes articles about film and baseball. Her epic poem *The Great Greg Maddux* is in the Baseball Hall of Fame.



By Tony Gutierrez, AP

Swinging away at consistency: Since he joined the Mariners in 2001, outfielder Ichiro Suzuki is 9-for-9 in seasons with at least 200 hits and a .300 batting average.

Deuces wild

Ichiro Suzuki is playing for two. Before the season, he got the winning hit in the World Baseball Classic for Japan, where he played before joining the Seattle Mariners in 2001. He was just getting warmed up. Ichiro got his 2,000th major league hit Sept. 6, becoming the second fastest of 259 players to get there, by leading off a game with a hit for the 215th time.

A second milestone came Sept. 13, when, in his second at-bat, during the second inning of the second game of a doubleheader, Suzuki set a major league record by getting his 200th hit for the ninth consecutive year, tying him for second place with Ty Cobb for most 200-hit seasons. The Mariners would honor his two milestones by presenting him with, you guessed it, two plaques. No wonder he's beloved in two countries.



By LM Otero, AP

Gut feeling: "I knew I had an opportunity to hit for it, so as I got to second base, I knew I was going for it. That's all there was to that," Ian Kinsler said of his triple for the cycle.

Magic number

To commemorate the April 15 anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier, all players wore his No. 42. The number must have had big-time mojo for the Texas Rangers' Ian Kinsler, who slid headfirst into third to hit for the cycle as he went 6-for-6, becoming the only player to accomplish both feats in a nine-inning

game since 1890. Kinsler matched club records with four extra-base hits and five runs and had four RBI and a stolen base. "It's more special to do it on Jackie Robinson Day," Kinsler said. "He could do everything."

On this day, so did Kinsler. When the Hall of Fame requested a memento, Kinsler gave them his bat. He kept the jersey. Nobody messes with Jackie's mojo.



By John Bazemore, AP

Honor: The Braves and Cubs retired Greg Maddux's No. 31.

The best

Legend has it there once was a pitcher named Greg Maddux who had magical powers on the mound. They say he could make a sinker move wide but come back to bite you. They say he could change speeds with the wind and snare flares on a dime. They even say he could force batters to hit balls into the ground by simply reading their minds. Are the legends true? Two teams think so. The Chicago Cubs retired No. 31 in honor of Maddux and fellow control artist Ferguson Jenkins on May 3. The Atlanta Braves followed suit July 17, inducting Maddux, with his four Cy Youngs, 18 Gold Gloves and 355 wins, into their Hall of Fame.

Atlanta manager Bobby Cox was asked if Maddux was the smartest player, best pitcher and best teammate he ever saw. "Yes to all of them," Cox said, and he ought to know. Cox became one of four managers to notch 2,000 wins with one team June 8. "If you get that many, you've had some good players," Cox said. They'll meet up again in Cooperstown, where legends live on.

The new math

Manny Ramirez wasn't playing. He had just served a 50-game suspension for breaking baseball's drug policy, but Hollywood loves a comeback. So Los Angeles Dodgers fans flocked to his bobble-head night July 22 only to discover he'd been scratched. "The bobble-head's going to left field," quipped Ramirez. Sure enough, with the score tied and the bases juiced, Ramirez pinch-hit his 21st career grand slam into the left-field "Mannywood" stands, placing him second behind Lou Gehrig's record 23.

After returning to the dugout, Ramirez came out to acknowledge the wild cheers (free swag + grand slam = all's forgiven). Later, the Dodgers also did some math (free swag + big moment = big bucks) and announced



By Denis Poroy, AP

Double: Manny Ramirez got a second bobble-head day.

an encore bobble-head. This one would be posed, helmet raised, in Ramirez's post-slam salute to the crowd. It was the only time a bobble-head got its own curtain call. But fans hoping for a repeat of his heroics would be disappointed. Manny Ramirez wasn't playing.

What goes around

The reigning world champion Philadelphia Phillies found a way to repeat. During spring training, they brought back retired second baseman Mickey Morandini for a fielding clinic. Among the defensive Houdini's career gems was a rare unassisted triple play in 1992.

Phillies second baseman Eric Bruntlett was in Morandini's position Aug. 23 with two New York Mets on base in the ninth.

Both runners were attempting to steal as a ball was hit up the middle.

Bruntlett snared the ball, stepped on second base and tagged the runner headed there from first, becoming the 15th player to get an unassisted triple play and the second to do it for a game's final three outs. The only other time was in 1927.

"I didn't know how to react," Bruntlett said. But baseball fans did as they watched the replay again and again. After all, it's worth repeating.



AP

Bruntlett: Three outs at once.