The Most Perfect Game

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As of December, 2024, there have been 24 perfect games in Major League history (defined here as American, National, Federal, and Players leagues plus National, American and Union Associations). These are games in which the losing team had all 27 batters retired in order, none reaching base. There have been over 230,000 games Major League games played from 1871 through 2024. Unfortunately at this time Negro League records are too incomplete to be included. All data in this study come from Retrosheet where they are freely available (www.retrosheet.org).

Since there are two starting pitchers in each game, there were over 460,000 opportunities for a perfect game. This works out to about one perfect game for about every 19,200 games started. The average score of these 24 games was 3.5 to 0 which is much lower than the historical average number of runs per game which is over eight. Seven of the perfect games were 1-0 and four more were 2-0, so offense was generally low for both teams in more than half of these games. The widest margins were games of 10-0 and 11-0.

The focus has naturally been on the winning pitcher and his special achievement, but the emphasis in the present paper is to look at the games in their entirety, that is, is the combined pitching performance of both teams. Detailed information is not available for the two perfect games in 1880, but for the other 22, the winning team had an average of just over 10 baserunners as follows:

Hits	7.2	
Walks	2.0	
HBP	0.2	
ROE	0.6	(reached on error)

The winners averaged 9.1 strikeouts (no data for the 19th century games) and there were an average of 105 pitches (no data for 19th century games and two others). These were clearly dominant efforts.

The game which I call "the most perfect game" when considering the total offense by both teams was the one pitched by Sandy Koufax of the Dodgers on September 9, 1965 in Los Angeles against the Cubs. There were only 2 baserunners for the winners that night: one hit and one walk, both achieved by Lou Johnson. The game was 1-0 and the one run was not related to the hit. Johnson walked in the 5th, was sacrificed to second by Ron Fairly, stole third and scored when catcher Chris Krug's throw trying to get him went into left field. The one hit was a bloop double that barely reached the outfield grass in the 7th. Chicago pitcher Bob Hendley was the hard luck loser despite pitching a masterful game. Hendley got a measure of revenge 5 days later in Chicago when he beat Koufax 2-1, allowing only four hits along with three walks. The Chicago runs came on a 2-run homer by Hall-of-Famer Billy Williams. In their careers, Hendley and Koufax started against each other six times. Hendley beat Koufax in three of those games and Koufax only beat Hendley this once. Here are the totals for both pitchers for all six games in which they went head to head.

	IP	ER	H	BB	SO	HR	CG	W	L	WHIP	ERA
Koufax	32.2	14	27	6	35	4	1	1	3	1.02	3.86
Hendley	42.1	14	27	18	32	5	4	3	1	1.07	2.98

With the exception of walk rate, Hendley clearly outperformed Koufax in these six games, even when the perfect game is included, averaging over seven innings per start compared to Koufax with just over five and a third innings per start. It is instructive to see how both men did in the rest of their careers when they were facing other pitchers. This information is in the next table.

	IP	ER	H	BB	SO	HR	CG	W	L	WHIP	ERA
Koufax	2291.2	699	1727	811	2361	204	136	164	84	1.11	2.71
Hendley	837.0	374	837	311	490	94	21	45	51	1.37	3.83

Koufax had a much longer career and performed at a level which got him into the Hall of Fame, but Hendley definitely did much better when Koufax was his mound opponent.

Returning to the 9-9-1965 game, why was it the "most perfect"?
- The total of two runners is the lowest ever in a 9-inning game.
- No other complete game (at least 9 innings) ever had one total hit.
- There was one man left on base, the only game ever with just one.
- There were 53 batters, the lowest ever.
- The Dodgers had 26 batters, tying lowest for a 9-inning game with White Sox on 5-10-1914.
- Three games in deadball era had a total of two hits, but they all had four or more walks.
- In 1917, Fred Toney of the Reds and Hippo Vaughn of the Cubs had a "double no-hitter" through 9 innings, but two hits in the 10th won game for Cincinnati.
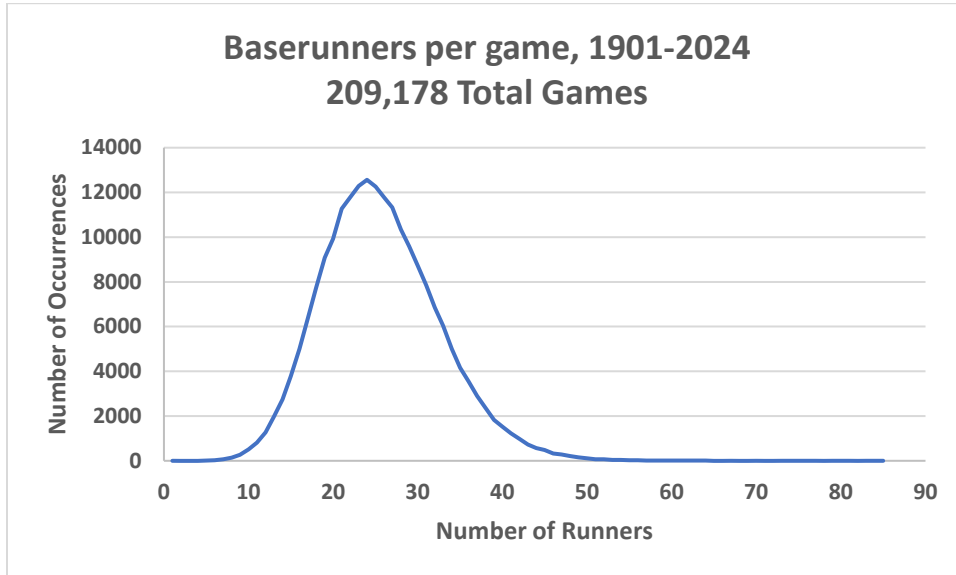
Other interesting features of the 9-9-1965:
- Two Cubs made their Major League debuts: Don Young and Byron Browne.
- Three Cubs in the game became Hall-of-Famers: Ernie Banks, Ron Santo and Billy Williams.
- Koufax struck out 14, the most in a perfect game, tied in 2012 by Matt Cain of the Giants.
- The 9-9-1965 game was a "one-game series" scheduled as such from the start of the season.
- It was the record-setting 4th no-hitter for Koufax, a total since surpassed by Nolan Ryan.
- Harvey Kuenn struck out to end game. He also ended Koufax no-hitter in 1963 with ground out.
- In Koufax's other no-hitters, he faced 30, 28, and 27 batters.

Ed Vargo was the home plate umpire for the perfect game and also for the third Koufax no-hitter which was in 1964 in Philadelphia. In that 1964 game, Vargo was injured by a foul ball to the throat hit by the last batter, Bobby Wine. After a brief delay, Vargo insisted that the game continue and Wine swung and missed at the last two pitches to end the game.

The truly "perfect game" with a decision would have a total of one runner who scored the only run. The total of two in this game is as close to that ideal as has ever been reached. Since 1901 (the earliest season available for the present study), there have been no 9-inning games with only three runners and

just one with four runners. That was the perfect game by Tom Browning of the Reds vs the Dodgers on September 16, 1988. There were two five-inning, rain-shortened games with three or four runners. As shown in the following figure, the most frequent number of runners in a game from 1901 through 2024 is 25 (average of 25.6).

At the high end of the scale, the most runners in a 9-inning game occurred on August 25, 1922 in Cubs Park (as Wrigley Field was known then). Chicago beat the Phillies 26-23 in a contest that saw 78 runners reach base as follows:

- 51 hits
- 21 walks
- 1 hit batter
- 12 doubles
- 2 triples
- 3 home runs
- 9 errors, 5 of which put men on base

The all-time high was an 18-inning game with 82 runners: Philadelphia Athletics at Cleveland on July 10, 1932 with a final score of 18-17. The Athletics took only two pitchers on this trip to the Midwest and Eddie Rommel had to finish the game after entering in the second inning. He had an amazing winning performance, allowing 14 runs on 29 hits and 9 walks while striking out seven batters in 17 innings.

In her award-winning biography of Sandy Koufax, *A Lefty's Legacy*, Jane Leavy covered his perfect game in great detail, but she also set the context of the game against a larger societal background. The Beatles hit movie *Help!* was being held over in local theaters for a second smash week. US ground troops in Vietnam were up to 108,000 from 24,000 in 1964, in the early stages of an increase to a peak of 543,400 in April of 1969. Hurricane Betsy reached category 4 after crossing the Florida Keys and striking Louisiana, ultimately causing 81 deaths and 1.4 billion dollars in damage. Locally, the city of Los Angeles

had just gone through the Watts riots (also referred to as the Watts Rebellion or Watts Uprising) from August 11 to August 16 that resulted in 34 deaths, 1032 injuries, and 3438 arrests. On September 9, there were still residual effects. Leavy quotes Byron Browne who made his major league debut for the Cubs that night. As his flight was landing in Los Angeles in the afternoon, three weeks after the main riot events, Browne saw: "The place was burning; it looked like someone dropped a bomb on L.A." Attendance for Koufax starts was a constant topic in the press in that era. On September 9, there were only 29,139 patrons, whereas the average for other Koufax starts at home that year was 38,014, including a crowd of 29,237 on August 14 during the riots. These smaller crowds presumably reflect the horribly unsettled conditions in the city.

Examination of the 1965 game in the pennant race shows how important it was to the Dodgers. At the end of play that night, they had a record of 80-61, tied with Cincinnati for second place, one half game behind San Francisco. On the other hand, the Cubs dropped to 65-77 and were in 8th place, 16 games out of first place in the 10-team league.

Stories about this game have logically focused on Koufax as this was one of the most commanding performances by a pitcher in any perfect game. However, Bob Hendley must not be overlooked. He deserves great credit for his exceptional work that night as the two lefthanders combined to create the most perfect game ever played.