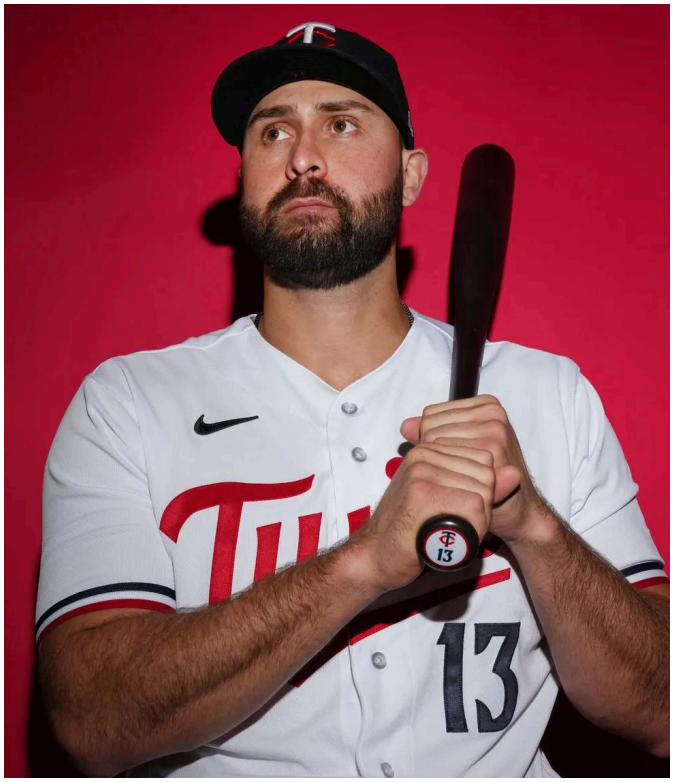
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Joey Gallo MARY DECICCO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

PREMIUM DAILY COVER

How Scott Boras Used Baseball's No-Shift Rule To Get Pay Raises For Underachieving Clients

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Left-handed batters, hurt by the increasingly popular practice of bunching defenders on one side of the field, are exacting their revenge by signing sweet post-shift contracts.

aseball fans are in for a real treat this coming season: More Joey Gallo.The strikeout-prone 6-

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Bfoot-5 slugger is as close to a perfect example of the state of Major League Baseball in 2023 as you're going to get.This season, which begins March 30, MLB is instituting three changes that are arguably the most revolutionary in the century-and-a-half history of professional baseball. One of them, a pitch clock, aims to keep game action moving faster after a generation of yawners. Another is bigger bases — what Red Sox manager Alex Cora called "pizza boxes" — that will no doubt make stealing easier while keeping more players' tender body parts out of harm's way.

But it's the third change, the banning of the so-called shift, that has already enriched left-handed hitters such as Gallo. The new rule forbids the team in the field from bunching its players on either side of second base, which had been an increasingly popular practice. Over the years, the shift had been especially detrimental to lefty batters, who for some reason have more trouble than righties hitting the ball to the opposite field, where the fielders weren't.

The prospect of shiftless Major League games has already altered how teams are putting their rosters together, according to experts who spoke to *Forbes*. Scott Boras, who *Forbes* called the most powerful agent in all of sports last year, put it succinctly: "Having a refrigerator at second base who can just hit won't fly anymore."

It also means big changes in player compensation.

"Clearly, left-handed bats will benefit," Boras told *Forbes*. "They were all dramatically impacted by the shift. The elimination of the shift brought the promise that those players' performances would benefit."

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The agent singled out left-handed hitters Corey Seager of the Rangers, the No. 3 highest-paid MLB player in *Forbes'* 2022 annual ranking, and the Phillies' Bryce Harper, the ninth-highest, as two players who'd benefit from the rule change. Both are signed through 2031, so their good fortune would be mostly statistical.

Gallo, a Boras client, stands to benefit on the stat sheet, too, but despite his shortcomings he's already improved his bottom line. Gallo hasn't batted higher than .199 in the last three years. His 2022 was particularly anemic: he hit .160 in 126 games, the equivalent of 16 hits every 100 times at bat. (The MLB average was .243.) In baseball, there's a derisive expression about a player not hitting his weight. Gallo tips the scales at about 235.

Though he's hit as many as 41 home runs in a season (2017), making him a premier power hitter, Gallo's most consistently impressive offensive statistic has been the frequency with which he strikes out. Over his career Gallo has averaged 226 K's for a 162-game season, an achievement that would put him in the running

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for the crown in just about any league in just about any year. By comparison, Babe Ruth struck out an average 86 times in a full season and, more recently, the player who replaced Gallo in the Yankees lineup last season, Andrew Benintendi, has a more modern average per 162 games of 125. None of it has prevented Gallo from increasing his income. With the shift gone, Boras negotiated a raise over his 2022 salary of $10.275 million. This offseason, Gallo signed a one-year deal with the Twins for $11 million.

More proof that the death of the shift means a reborn career, at least financially: Cody Bellinger. Another left-handed hitter and Boras client, Bellinger has endured three inexplicably awful seasons since winning the National League Most Valuable Player award with the Dodgers in 2019. That year, he had a 1.035 OPS — a key offensive metric that's a combination of on-base percentage and slugging percentage (total bases divided by at bats). In 2021, Bellinger's OPS was .542 and in 2022 it climbed all the way to .654. He made $17 million last year, a contract decided in arbitration, before the Dodgers cut him loose. Then came the rule change and suddenly Bellinger was a hot commodity again. In December he signed a one-year deal with the Cubs for $17.5 million — $12 million plus $5.5 million if the team chooses to buy him out for 2024, according to Spotrac.

Michael Conforto is one more example. Boras scored the left-handed hitter a two-year deal with

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the Giants for $36 million despite the fact that the former Mets outfielder missed all of last season with a shoulder injury. His last salary with the Mets was $12.25 million a year.

Not to dwell exclusively on Boras' clients, Excel Sports Management got Benintendi a raise, too. After making $8.5 million last season, the outfielder signed a five-year, $75 million deal with the White Sox.

Guess which side of the plate Benintendi hits from. That's right: the left.

Boras said he believed MLB teams were doing their homework to figure out how the new rules would impact different players, but he and his organization weren't leaving it to chance. In negotiations this offseason, he came prepared with reams of data showing just how much some of his clients stood to gain in a world where the shift was verboten.

"We had a lot of evidence to show teams that'd be the case," Boras told *Forbes*. "That would allow clubs to see how burdened a lot of those players were by the shift."

Boras said his data suggested 30-point bumps in batting average could be expected for lefties like Gallo who used to perpetually face unbalanced infields.

If that turns out to be true, Gallo will hit .190 in 2023, only 45 pounds below his weight.

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