

# A Golden Age for Baseball in the Golden State

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Baseball has been experiencing an interesting power shift over the last few years. Just as complaints about east coast bias in baseball coverage became widespread, east coast baseball began to get a lot less interesting. Today California, not New York and Boston is where some of the best and most exciting baseball is likely to be played. Obviously, California has five teams, which is more than New York and Boston combined, but among teams in the northeast, defined relatively broadly, only the Washington Nationals have a good chance of playing deep into October next year. The Nationals are also the only east coast team with exciting young players comparable to those in California.

This is partially due to the aging of the Yankees, Phillies and Red Sox, and the general mismanagement of the Mets, but it is also due to the spending, winning ways and young talent of the California teams. The Los Angeles Dodgers and the Angels both spent a lot of money this off-season signing high profile free agents like Zach Greinke and Josh Hamilton. The best the Yankees could do was sign an aging Kevin Youkilis and marginal players like Travis Hafner and Shaun Marcum.

The Dodgers and Angels may be spending the most money and making the biggest splashes in the off-season, but the best baseball in California, and perhaps in the big leagues, is played a few hundred miles north in the Bay Area where the Athletics won five more games than the Angels to win their division. The Giants, for their part, ran away with the NL West and went on to win the World Series.

Some of the most exciting young players in the game are also playing in California now. Mike Trout's rookie year was extraordinary, the most impressive debut by a young player in a very long time. Buster Posey, the catcher for the Giants won an MVP award in a season where most Giants fans would have settled for simply a solid return to catching. Posey and Trout could well be the two faces of baseball for the next decade. The only young players on the east coast who are similarly exciting, Bryce Harper and Stephen Strasburg, are playing not in Boston or New York but in Washington.

It is somewhat interesting that baseball's balance of power has, at least for now, shifted to California, but it may indeed have some significance for baseball generally. One big part of this is the rise of the San Francisco Giants. The Giants are an interesting team which, while playing in San Francisco for more than half a century, have only in recent years crafted an image that reflects their city. The quirkiness of Brian Wilson, the long hair and marijuana usage associated with Tim Lincecum, being the first major sports team to do and "It Gets Better" video, and the relative lack of expressions of gratitude to Jesus after every big win reflect the tolerant and more secular culture of San Francisco relative to much of the rest of the country. As a result, the Giants are building a national brand as the team for people who themselves are tolerant, quirky or, for lack of a better word, cool.

The Giants also have as big a social media footprint as almost any team in the game. It is no coincidence that the team that plays in the city a few miles from Silicon Valley in a region where Apple, Twitter, Facebook and others make their home, has a strong presence in social media and punch well above their weight on Twitter, the blogosphere and in the podcast world. This may seem like a quirky Bay Area thing, but it is also likely that a generation of Giants fans are being created outside the Bay Area because young people encounter the Giants more on the media they follow. The Yankees' YES network may be the most valuable network of any team, but the future is probably more with social media than with cable television. The happy coincidence that the Giants have also been the best team in the game over the last three years has helped baseball's transition into the social media era.

Because of its proximity and to both Asia and Latin America, as well as other Pacific Rim countries like Australia where baseball is increasing in popularity, California is also central to the growing internationalization of baseball. This year the final of the World Baseball Classic will be held in San Francisco, a city with a large Asian and Latino population. Obviously, some east coast cities also have large Latino and Asian populations, but not comparable to those of the Bay Area or Los Angeles.

Baseball will remain strong in the east coast and, while the Mets are chronically mismanaged, the Yankees made it to the ALCS last two of the last three seasons. However, the Yankees, Phillies and Red Sox all appear to be in a downturn due to being captured by the logic of big market teams. This has created an opening for the California teams that may be good for all of baseball.