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From The Classroom To The Bigs: Dan Meyer's Analytical Skills Are In Demand In Major League Baseball

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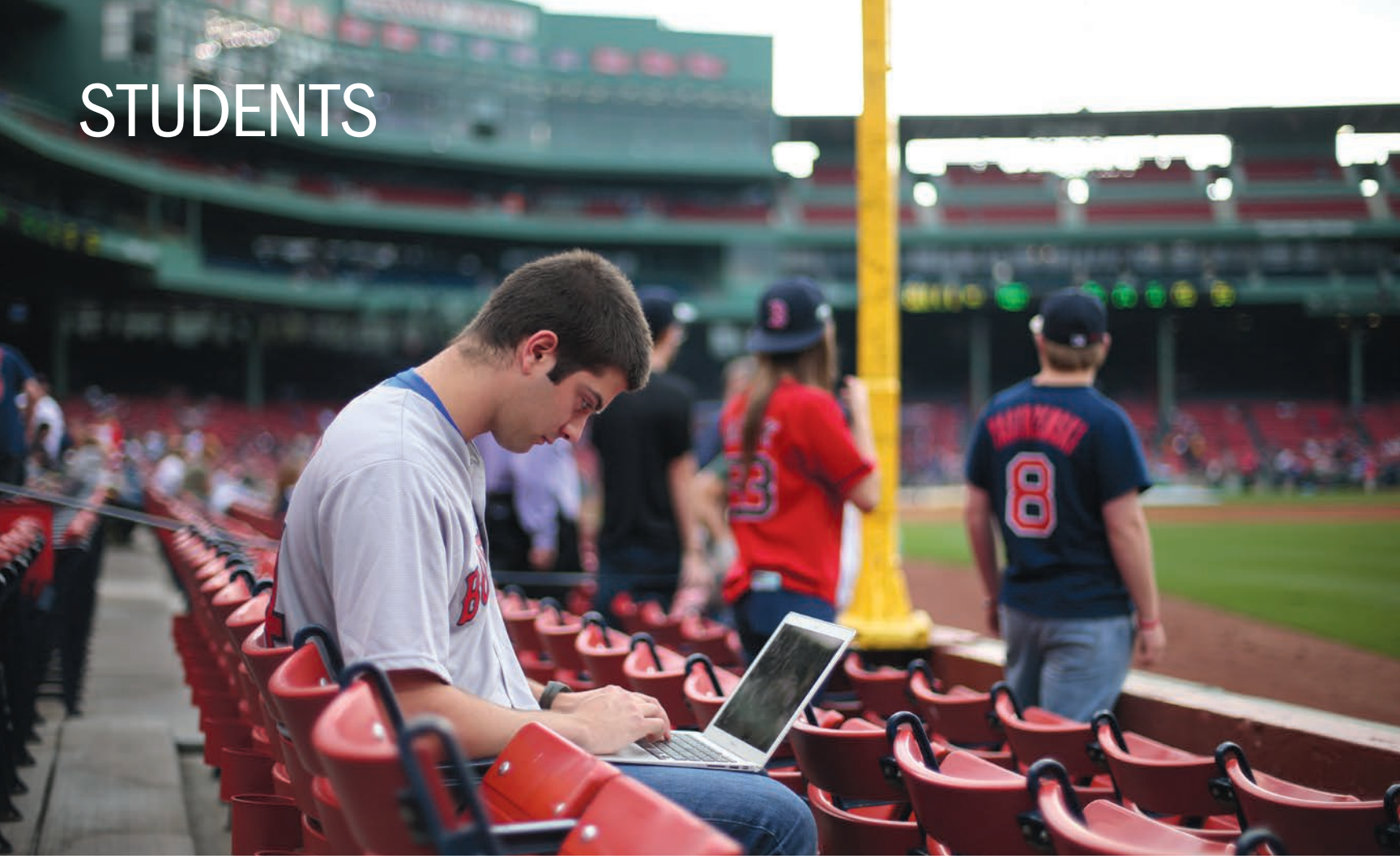

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE BIGS

DAN MEYER'S ANALYTICAL SKILLS ARE IN DEMAND IN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

By Gerry Boyle '78

Last fall, like thousands of other wannabes across the country, Dan Meyer '16 wrote to all of the Major League Baseball teams asking about internship opportunities. The response wasn't what Meyer expected.

"A number of them said, 'I'm actually familiar with your work. You do some really cool stuff,'" he said. "That came as a shock to me."

It shouldn't have.

In April the soft-spoken economics and mathematics double major landed a coveted summer internship with the Seattle Mariners. If they like Meyer, he could end up with a full-time job. The kid who was cut from his high school baseball team is headed for the bigs.

It's no fluke. Meyer spent last summer doing research for Assistant Professor of Economics Samara Gunter. During the day he did statistical analysis of tax-filing methods and their effects. At night he applied everything he learned—merging data files, the latest GIS mapping software (working with GIS and Quantitative Analysis Specialist Manuel Gimond), and sophisticated statistical analysis tools. "He would do this on my time and then he would do all the rest," Gunter said. For Meyer, all the rest is baseball.

About a year ago, Meyer decided to get serious about applying his analytical bent to America's game. Acting on the advice of

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>
> **—Seattle Mariners quantitative analyst Jesse Smith**

Leslie Brainerd Arey Professor of Biosciences Herb Wilson, who also teaches the course The Science of Baseball, and Boston Red Sox Senior Vice President and Assistant General Manager Brian O’Halloran ’93, Meyer started contributing to blogs devoted to the sophisticated statistical baseball analysis known as sabermetrics. His posts on whether to use a top reliever with a three-run lead and on the effects of concussions on player performance (among others) got the attention of baseball’s front-office types.

“They’re not easy to write,” he said. “I’m not just going to the headlines and writing up my thoughts about them.”

That’s an understatement.

Consider a random paragraph from the concussion post: *When conducting a two-sample hypothesis test, the 2.3% difference between the first game back and the prior season performance is not significant with a p-value of 0.54. This means there is a more than 50% chance the difference is due to random variation. This shows us that players are striking out at roughly the same rate across groups, so my hypothesis that players strike out more when returning from a concussion is rejected. However the same splits for walk rate are more encouraging.*

This is the new science of baseball, and Meyer’s work on its cutting edge soon attracted the attention of the game’s top sabermetricians and landed him gigs on the blogs *Beyond the Box Score* and *Hardball Times*. (He credits his economics research and philosophy courses that trained him to frame an argument, and a computer science project—creation of an application for visualizing and analyzing baseball pitches.) His work got him an invitation to a national sabermetrics conference in Phoenix in March, during spring training.

In Phoenix Meyer, using skills learned from presenting at the Colby Liberal Arts Symposium, spoke to a major-league audience about a study he’d done with a coauthor, Cornell senior Alex Smith, about geographic bias in the amateur baseball draft. Their analysis showed that players from big baseball states were undervalued in terms of future performance but players from less talent-heavy states were overvalued.

The following Monday Meyer had an email from Jesse Smith, the Mariners’ top quantitative analyst. The next day Smith interviewed Meyer by phone. Smith later said he was told he should interview Meyer, whom he knew not by name, but by his work. “Once I was told I should interview him, I looked into his stuff,” he said. “I said, ‘Oh, yeah. I know this guy.’”

He called Meyer back the next day and, with the go-ahead from Mariners General Manager Jack Zduriencik, sealed the deal. “Generally, we don’t even seek out summer interns … but our guy was so impressed by him, and we’re looking for just the combined skill set that he has,” Smith said. “It’s extremely competitive. People will work for free to work in baseball.”

They will and they do, often bringing doctorates in statistics and years in the workplace. Meyer brings his Colby education—and an unbridled passion for the game. Said the guy who grew up 1.3 miles from Fenway Park and once waited in line for 13 hours for World Series tickets, “I would be very happy to do this for the rest of my life.”

Dan Meyer ’16 and a graph that shows results of his statistical analysis of Major League Baseball, published in national baseball blogs. Above left, Meyer at Fenway Park.