

## World

## Baseball purists hit out over secret ball switch

A curveball has been tossed into one of America's favourite sports with claims of a discrepancy in Major League Baseball (Charlie Mitchell writes).

Meredith Wills, an astrophysicist and sports data scientist, uncovered a mistake after the league introduced a lighter, less bouncy ball this season to reduce the number of home runs. The move was allegedly taken without the knowledge of players or teams. However, the league was also still using the older style of ball, making a nonsense of any statistics.

In a statement to Business Insider, the news website that reported Wills's findings,

the league acknowledged that it had used two different balls. It blamed production difficulties at Rawlings, the company it owns that produces its baseballs, saying: "Because Rawlings was forced to reduce capacity at its manufacturing facility due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the supply of re-centered baseballs was not sufficient to cover the entirety of the 2021 season." It claimed that to address the issue, it sent out the older style balls to be used along with the



ELSA/GETTY IMAGES  
Meredith Wills discovered that a new lighter baseball was being used

players in a sport that revolves around statistics. Pitching and hitting percentages dictate who plays, who gets a contract and what they earn. A heavier or lighter ball could make or break a career. "Everything in this game is based on your statistics," Adam Ottavino, a free agent formerly with the Boston Red Sox, told the website. "If the variables are being changed from underneath you and in an unfair way, that sheds doubt on every statistic that you have."

Players hit 5,944 home runs this year, the third most recorded.

The ball row threatens to worsen a dispute between players and the league over pay. The league triggered its first "stoppage" since 1994 this week, after an agreement expired.

The stoppage means clubs cannot sign, trade or release players, or offer new contracts.



new balls. It added that it told the players' union,

which declined to comment.

Wills sampled hundreds of balls from 15 stadiums to find that

about half were the older, heavier balls that could be hit further.

Batch numbers indicated that some of

the older balls were produced after the league introduced the lighter ball. The disclosure has angered

Put your feet up and catch up with free\* delivery for ten weeks.

Stay in the warm and stay well informed with The Times and The Sunday Times while supporting your local shop.

Visit [thetimes.co.uk/delivery](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/delivery) or call 0800 912 9916

\*Free Home Delivery vouchers are redeemable at selected retailers. Maximum delivery reimbursement of £2.80 per week. Offer ends December 31, 2021.

**THE TIMES**  
**THE SUNDAY TIMES**  
Know your times



T&Cs apply. New customers only. Free delivery for 10 weeks (select retailers only). Offer ends December 31, 2021. Vouchers are not transferable and are subject to separate expiration date (see terms on back of voucher). The price of the newspapers will apply during the offer period, and then also the retailer's standard delivery charge after this. Delivery contract is with the retailer, not News Group Newspapers Limited.

# Biggest threat to America's treasures? Stormy weather

David  
Charter



WASHINGTON

Once a week the head of facilities at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the world's largest museum complex, convenes an emergency-threat meeting with senior staff. On the agenda: the weather.

Several of the best-known collections are housed on the lowest ground in the city, along the National Mall, where the risk of flooding is greatest and any sign of a storm is monitored closely for its impact on the nearby tidal basin of the Potomac River.

Such is the danger for the nation's treasures in the most vulnerable buildings — the National Museum of American History and the Natural History Museum, both on Constitution Avenue — that the Smithsonian has invested in a machine to make its own sandbags.

The history museum's most famous exhibit, the star-spangled banner that inspired the national anthem, is safely displayed out of reach of flood waters on the second floor. Thousands of items are kept in the basement, however, due to lack of any other storage space. The ground floor contains several exhibits including, perhaps in a display of dark humour, an exhibition called "On the water" featuring maritime miscellanea including a lifejacket from Titanic.

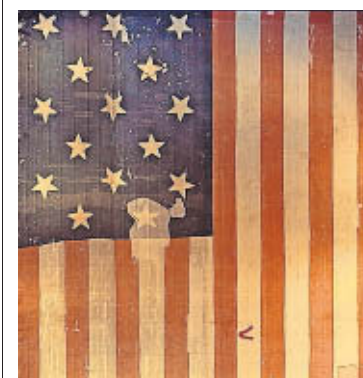
"I wish I didn't have to follow it as closely but we literally study

that weather," said Nancy Bechtol, the facilities chief. "One hour a week we gather all the leaders and just make sure we're prepared."

The modern buildings such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, opened in 2016, have up-to-date flood-protection measures, but the Museum of American History, completed in 1964, is awaiting extensive renovations to defend against water. The Smithsonian's climate change action plan, released this autumn, lists the costs for a flood wall and other defences at the history museum as \$38.9 million, while a new pumping station for the Mall would cost \$400 million.

The Smithsonian, which has 19 museums as well as the national zoo, received \$1 billion in annual federal funding this year but has struggled to find the money for flood defence work amid competing priorities, such as the recent \$600 million renovation of the Air and Space Museum. Work is due to start on a new storage facility on higher land in Maryland next year.

In the interim, Bechtol cannot



The original star-spangled banner is kept on a higher floor of the museum

afford to leave anything to chance at buildings where the ground floor is at sea level and water already seeps in during storms.

"I would say once or twice a year we're preparing those museums for flooding," she said. "This summer we had one storm that stalled and kept circulating. And it brought very high tides, so we had to sandbag. We'll go as high as five and six feet with sandbags. As it turned out, the water actually never came up. But we just can't ever take a chance."

Part of the history museum's basement is given over to a cafeteria and gift shop, but items earmarked for storage down there must be fairly robust, like the porcelain collection. Staff have been offered training in a "wet salvage" workshop and "long-term drying and mitigation techniques".

Much of the western half of the Mall, the two-mile strip that holds 11 Smithsonian museums and monuments stretching from the US Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, was created a century ago from silt dredged from the Potomac and its tidal basin.

The land next to the tidal basin is sinking, often leaving the cherry trees that line it three feet under water at high tide. With rising waters expected as a result of climate change, they could be fully submerged by the end of the century.

Work on flood defences for the east wing of the history museum is due to start soon while a master plan is being drawn up for the Natural History Museum.

"I understand that it seems like everything takes time but part of that time is to make sure you design it right, you build it right," said Bechtol. "Whatever I'm building, it needs to last for hundreds of years."