

Breaking down how breaking balls are breaking Ryan Howard

by Tom Verducci

Tuesday March 2, 2010 10:13AM

CLEARWATER, Fla. -- Ryan Howard is on the strangest diet in baseball, and no, it has nothing to do with his improving fitness. (He added lean muscle over the winter and plans to drop about 10 pounds in spring training to get at or below 230 pounds, which may leave him as light as he has been, he said, "since college or high school.") The diet in question is the enormous helpings of breaking balls that pitchers feed him. Howard sees more breaking balls than any hitter in baseball, and it keeps getting worse, a trend that will continue after what the Yankees did to him in the 2009 World Series.

"It seems like every other pitch I see is a breaking ball," Howard said.

Not quite, but it's close. The folks at Stats Inc. mined their enormous database of pitches for me to break down just how much pitchers attack Howard with breaking balls and whether he is getting better at hitting them for as often as he sees them. I always considered Howard something of a late-inning liability because managers can neutralize his tremendous power by matching up left-handed breaking ball pitchers against him. Howard is a career .298 hitter in the first six innings of a game but only a .237 hitter after.

But it wasn't until Stats Inc. provided its fascinating breakdown that I understood just how overwhelming and unique a challenge that Howard faces from all pitchers, left and right. Howard, like no other hitter in baseball, has a longstanding love/hate relationship with Uncle Charlie; the breaking ball for him is like that relative who comes to visit for Thanksgiving but overstays his welcome -- by a lot.

"I've got an idea," Howard said. "We come up with a new rule. A pitcher is allowed to throw a maximum of three breaking balls per at-bat. Once he throws his third breaking ball he's hit the limit and he can't throw any more that at-bat. What do you think? Think the commish will go for that?"

He was kidding, of course -- I think. Who can blame him? The barrage of breaking balls is only getting worse for Howard, who sees an abundance of curveballs and sliders from right-handers and left-handers, starters and relievers. By now the poor guy should be able to write a master's thesis on the Magnus effect.

To find out just how much of a diet of breaking balls he is getting, let's start out with this list from Stats Inc. of the hitters who saw the most breaking balls last year:



Most Breaking Balls Seen

MLB, 2009

Player	Breaking Balls
Ryan Howard	1,127
Dan Uggla	931
Mark Reynolds	930
Hunter Pence	928
Matt Kemp	913
Justin Upton	840
Jayson Werth	817

Howard saw the most breaking balls and it's not even close. But notice that Howard is the only left-handed hitter on this list. You would expect to see all right-handers because the preponderance of pitchers are right-handed -- and the breaking ball is a staple of right-on-right matchups because the pitch moves away from the hitter. So it's amazing that a lefty would see the most breaking balls -- by a lot. You have to go all the way down to 16th on the list to find another left-handed hitter -- Adam Dunn, with 756. That means that Howard

saw 49 percent more breaking balls than any left-handed hitter in baseball.

One reason why Howard's breaking ball total is so high is because managers severely tilt the balance of left-handed pitchers against him. The average left-handed hitter last year saw a left-hander in 18.5 percent of his plate appearances. Howard saw a lefty in 35.8 percent of his trips to the plate, or almost twice the average rate.

Howard is a very durable player and Philadelphia's potent lineup turns over often, so perhaps he sees more breaking balls because he simply sees so many pitches. But when you look at the rate of breaking balls -- what percentage of pitches thrown to him are curves and sliders -- Howard still is the major league leader and still the only lefty near the top of the charts.

Highest Percentage of Breaking Balls Seen	
MLB, 2009	
Player	Percentage
Ryan Howard	39.7
Alfonso Soriano	39.6
Hunter Pence	36.9
Alexei Ramirez	35.6
Justin Upton	35.4
Ryan Ludwick	35.2

It's not quite every other pitch, but it's close enough for Howard to feel like he sees curves and sliders half the time. Last year Howard was 57 percent more likely to see a breaking ball than the average big league hitter. The bad news for Howard is that the imbalance in his diet is growing. I had Stats Inc. run the year-by-year numbers on Howard, and the trend that emerges is obvious: He's seeing more and more of Uncle Charlie.

Percentage of Breaking Balls of Pitches Seen		
Year	NL Average	Howard
2004	22.85	20.54
2005	23.22	21.34
2006	24.36	29.17
2007	24.73	33.62
2008	24.64	31.49
2009	25.25	39.66

The other question I had for the Stats Inc. people was this: As he sees more and more breaking pitches, is Howard getting any better at actually hitting them? The answer was a resounding no -- until last year. Take a look at Howard's year-by-year results of his swings against the breaking ball, and you'll see that he finally made an improvement last year:

All Swings by Howard Against Breaking Balls			
Year	%Miss	%Foul	%In Play
2004	43.75	43.75	12.50
2005	44.23	28.85	26.92
2006	46.90	23.30	29.79
2007	48.50	31.06	20.44
2008	53.01	26.78	20.22
2009	42.24	30.84	26.92

What you find is that it wasn't until last year that Howard stopped an alarming trend: The more breaking balls he saw, the more often he missed them when he tried to hit them. If last year represented a breakthrough for him, Howard wasn't aware of it. Told that he stopped the trend and posted a career-low rate in swings-and-misses at breaking balls, Howard said, "Really? I guess that's good. The key for me is to swing at the ones that are strikes. A lot of times pitchers are throwing me their breaking ball in locations to get me to chase outside the strike zone. The key is not to swing at those breaking balls."

Howard's recognition of the breaking pitch may be the most important part in his "learning" how to hit it.

Still, when you look at which pitchers have given Howard trouble and which ones he owns, you understand why managers will continue to use pitchers with good breaking balls against him whenever they can, whether they are left-handed or right-handed.

The six most effective pitchers against Howard (minimum of 20 plate appearances, including the top three lefties) have been right-handers Livan Hernandez, Derek Lowe and Tim Lincecum, and left-handers Oliver Perez, Pedro Feliciano and John Lannan. According to Stats Inc., those pitchers have thrown breaking balls in 49.4 percent of their 682 total pitches to Howard.

Now look at the least effective pitchers against Howard and you'll find the list populated with pitchers who don't spin the ball well or often: right-handers Brian Moehler, Roy Oswalt, Tim Hudson and Mike Pelfrey and left-handers Tom Glavine, Johan Santana and Scott Olsen.

Howard feasts off those guys. Why? They have thrown breaking balls in only 23.2 percent of their 779 total pitches to him. The lesson for opponents: It's far better to throw Howard twice as many breaking balls as you would to the average hitter. If you throw a league average rate of breaking balls to him he will crush you.

Then again, maybe doubling the rate of hooks still doesn't go far enough to combat Howard's power. Maybe the Yankees rewrote the scouting report against Howard to include even more breaking balls. Howard struck out a record 13 times in the six-game World Series. Ten of those 13 strikeouts came on breaking balls. The Yankees fed him a diet of 57.4 percent breaking balls -- 127 percent above the recommended daily allowance for the average big league hitter. Here is Stats Inc's breakdown of the pitches the Yankees used against Howard:

Pitch Selection vs. Howard	
2009 World Series	
Pitch	Count
Fastballs	40
Sliders	36
Curves	22
Cutters	3
Total	101

The Yankees allowed him to face a right-hander only seven times in his 25 plate appearances in the World Series. Why is that important? Since 2006, his first full season, Howard has hit 198 home runs, more than anybody in baseball -- and it's not even close. Albert Pujols is next at 165. But if you put a left-hander on the mound and spin the ball to Howard, the greatest home run hitter in the game suddenly becomes just another hitter.

OK, time for one more breakdown to illustrate why Howard sees so many lefties and so many breaking balls. Stats Inc. broke down his 186 strikeouts and 45 home runs last year by pitch type. I threw out the results of off-speed pitches because so few left-handers throw a changeup to left-handers.

K's and HRs by Pitch Type		
Ryan Howard, 2009		
Pitch Type	Strikeouts	Home Runs
Right-handed fastball	35	17
Right-handed breaking ball	43	14
Left-handed fastball	37	3
Left-handed breaking ball	34	3

Howard crushes right-handed fastballs. He hits about one home run for every two strikeouts off right-handers' fastballs. But look how the odds grow tremendously against him as the ball spins and/or comes from lefties: roughly one homer for every three strikeouts against right-handers' breaking balls, and one homer for at least every 11 punchouts against lefties' fastballs and breaking balls. Here's another way to put it: Howard saw 1,129 breaking balls and hit only 17 of them for home runs, including just three from left-handers.

The bottom line is that the book on Howard is the most extreme scouting report in the game. The guy sees more breaking balls than anybody else in baseball, he sees more and more of them every year, and after what the Yankees did to him in the World Series, he should expect even more of them this year. Looks like Howard and Uncle Charlie will be spending a whole lot more time together.