



AP PHOTOS

On the left, Seattle Mariners starting pitcher Felix Hernandez reacts, with a sea of yellow from his “King’s Court” cheering section behind him, in the eighth inning on July 11 in Seattle. In the middle photo, St. Louis Cardinals’ Yadier Molina tosses his bat in frustration after being called out on strikes on July 8 in St. Louis. On the right, Los Angeles Dodgers starting pitcher Clayton Kershaw throws to the plate on July 10 in Los Angeles.

How low can you go?

Dropping the pitching mound could solve MLB’s offensive slump

By RONALD BLUM
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS – Baseball has a problem: Clayton Kershaw, Aroldis Chapman, Felix Hernandez and all the other kings of the hill are just too good. Ruling with an assortment of big-bending curveballs, sharp sliders and 100 mph heat, a new generation of pitchers has thrown major league hitters into a huge slump. The spike in strikeouts, the dip in home runs and worries that the game is becoming boring for fans reminds some people of 1968, when Bob Gibson, Denny McLain and their fellow aces dominated. Back then, the sport came up with a

radical solution: The pitcher’s mound was lowered from 15 inches to 10 and the strike zone was reduced. Combined with the addition of four expansion teams, the result was an 11-point increase in the big league batting average in 1969 and a 19 percent rise in runs. Should baseball drop the mound again? “I don’t know, man, maybe if they keep going like this,” Miami Marlins slugger Giancarlo Stanton said Monday at the All-Star festivities. “Move the mound back 5 feet,” he added with a chuckle. There’s some thought that reducing the mound would combat the outbreak of blown-out elbows, which has seen

stars such as Stephen Strasburg, Matt Harvey and Jose Fernandez needing reconstructive surgery, and could also claim Masahiro Tanaka. With low-run games again in vogue and defensive shifts taking away hits, there’s been more emphasis on small ball. That’s prompted questions about whether this is a cyclical change, or if this style is here to stay. From his vantage point in the New York Mets’ broadcast booth, former NL MVP Keith Hernandez has an unusual analysis and an equally drastic solution. “They should get rid of four teams,” he said. “Too many players. There’s too much dilution of talent. The pitching’s not better. It’s the same.”

“I think that the residuals of steroids and aluminum bats has affected how they taught kids how to hit, and now we’re seeing normal bodies and balls that used to get out of the ballpark are caught now,” he said. It wasn’t too long ago that batters had the edge. The boom years peaked in 2000 with an average of 1.17 home runs per team per game. The runs average of 5.14 was MLB’s highest since 1936. But offense has steadily shrunk — as have the players — as baseball implemented testing for performance-enhancing drugs and then repeatedly strengthened those rules. And with complete games virtually a relic, hard-throwing relievers domi-

nate the late innings. Radar guns routinely register mph readings around triple digits. “Everybody’s throwing 109, so you don’t get to see the starters for your fourth turn,” said Atlanta Braves manager Fredi Gonzalez, exaggerating only slightly. “There’s a lot of guys in the bullpen that are special guys.” All that gas has contributed to more than two dozen pitchers needing Tommy John surgery this year. Dr. David Altchek, the Mets’ top physician, said a lower mound “should decrease the force as the body gets less far ahead of the arm.” “As the body falls down the mound,

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BRITISH OPEN

A new golf generation emerging at majors

By DOUG FERGUSON
Associated Press

HOYLAKE, England – Even when he’s not the favorite, Tiger Woods is still the show at the British Open. Woods earned that attention by piling up majors at a faster rate than anyone in history, and the attention is just as great now because his recent past includes back surgery and his immediate future is more uncertain than ever. ESPN plans to show his entire round online Thursday. Not to be overlooked at golf’s oldest championship, however, is a new generation of stars. Rickie Fowler and Harris English will be playing ahead of him. Two groups behind will be Jordan Spieth and Hideki Matsuyama. They are among 25 players who share a bond that speaks to the state of golf. Woods has never won a major during their professional careers. Yes, they saw his dominance on TV. They just never experienced it. They were not around for the decade when Woods won majors with regularity, sometimes by a record score, sometimes by a record margin. They missed

the days that were so Tiger-centric a player couldn’t get through an interview without being asked something about Woods. “Tiger ruined a lot of guys’ lives,” Charles Howell III, a longtime friend of Woods who lived through those times, said earlier in the year. “He caused a lot of people some sleepless Sunday nights. But he also motivated an entire generation behind him.” Howell’s point was that while the next generation might have been in awe of Woods, being outside the arena allowed them to study him without getting scarred. They learned from the way he worked. They were more prepared than the generation before them. The talk at this British Open is that it is more open than ever. But then, that’s been the case since Woods won his last major six years ago. Since that 2008 U.S. Open, 19 players have won majors, and no one has won more than two. In the 24 majors leading up to his last major, Woods won six, Phil Mickelson won three and no one else won more than one. “Looking at the different amount of

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TOUR DE FRANCE

Talansky’s tenacity on show in Tour Stage 11

By JAMEY KEATEN
Associated Press

OYONNAX, France – Sitting on a roadside guard rail, wincing and rubbing his lower back, Andrew Talansky looked ready to quit the Tour de France in the middle of Stage 11. The Tour’s Web site and French TV commentators said his race was over. So did some English-language Twitterati. The “Pit Bull” proved them wrong. With a show of tooth-grinding grit and determination to repay his Garmin Sharp teammates who had ridden hard to help him, the 25-year-old Miami native got back up on his bike, wiped his eyes and pedaled on to the finish far behind the pack — and just in time. Two days earlier, the pain and damage from two recent crashes had already ended Talansky’s outsider hopes of victory. He began Wednesday’s 187.5-kilometer (116.3-mile) hilly ride from Besancon to Oyonnax in eastern France in 26th place — nearly 15 minutes behind race leader Vincenzo Nibali. The Italian retained the yellow jersey Wednesday by finishing right behind France’s Tony Gallopin, who won Stage 11 in a bold late breakaway. Talansky, nursing a sore back, had bad luck compound his misery early in the stage: He blew a tire and got left behind. Because he was no longer in contention to win the Tour in Paris on July 27, his teammates didn’t wait up. Straining, he couldn’t make up the difference alone, but pressed on anyway. When Talansky, clearly in agony, stopped on a roadside and sat down with about 60 kilometers left, Garmin-Sharp sporting director Robert Hunter — who as a rider became the first South

lometer (116.3-mile) hilly ride from Besancon to Oyonnax in eastern France in 26th place — nearly 15 minutes behind race leader Vincenzo Nibali. The Italian retained the yellow jersey Wednesday by finishing right behind France’s Tony Gallopin, who won Stage 11 in a bold late breakaway. Talansky, nursing a sore back, had bad luck compound his misery early in the stage: He blew a tire and got left behind. Because he was no longer in contention to win the Tour in Paris on July 27, his teammates didn’t wait up. Straining, he couldn’t make up the difference alone, but pressed on anyway. When Talansky, clearly in agony, stopped on a roadside and sat down with about 60 kilometers left, Garmin-Sharp sporting director Robert Hunter — who as a rider became the first South

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Andrew Omer BASEBALL | PLAYER OF YEAR



J. ANTHONY ROBERTS

Hopkins pitcher Andrew Omer has been named the Daily Hampshire Gazette’s Baseball Player of the Year.

Omer stepped in and dominated

By MICHAEL WILKINSON
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Andrew Omer took the role of pitching ace for the Hopkins Academy baseball team quite literally. The senior righthander earned the win in nine of 14 victories for the Golden Hawks, including seven of nine during the regular season. “Andrew carried us throughout the season,” coach Jordan Branson said. “The energy he created when he was on the mound helped us this year, and when he pitched all our guys picked it up that much more.” After helping lead Hopkins to a Western Massachusetts Division 4 title, Omer has been named the Daily Hampshire Gazette Baseball Player of the Year. “I had a good season, and I’m proud of what I accomplished with the help of my teammates,” Omer said. “The experience of winning a western Mass. title is something I’ll never forget. A huge part of baseball is team camaraderie and knowing your teammates support you and have each other’s backs. That was a big factor in our season.”

As the clear-cut ace from the start of the season, Omer finished 9-3 with a 2.38 earned run average while throwing more innings (74) than any pitcher in western Mass. “It’s been an incredible journey for him,” Branson said. “The success he had this season made the story that much more special. He didn’t have a ton of confidence when I started with him, but that confidence grew steadily and you saw it this season. He made the most of every opportunity, believing in himself and his team.” Omer deflected much of the credit back to Branson, his former middle school coach. “I could not have had the season I did without Coach’s help, both in the offseason and during the season,” Omer said. “He was always there when I needed him, and it’s great to have a relationship like that with your coach. He’s as much a friend as a coach.” Omer displayed a dominance throughout his campaign. He struck out 98 batters to average 9.3 per seven innings. He trailed only Greenfield ace Garrett Hudson (107).

After throwing three 1-hitters as a junior, Omer allowed four or fewer hits in eight of 12 starts. According to Omer, entering the postseason with just a 9-9 record helped the Golden Hawks. “I think it helped that we were underestimated before the tournament,” Omer said. “I mean, who’s ever heard of Hopkins Academy? Nobody expected us to be in the state championship. We all got hot at the right time and had a great run.” That run culminated in a sectional title with a 5-2 victory over Turners Falls on June 7. After escaping a bases-loaded, no-out jam in the first inning, Omer cruised to the win with 11 strikeouts. In the program’s first state final since 1985, Omer allowed three runs on six hits to undefeated Pope John Paul II of Hyannis. He left nine runners on base to keep Hopkins with- in striking distance, but the Hawks were shut out 3-0. “It’s a good feeling to be the guy my team trusts in those biggest

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