Seventy years ago, Buzzy Bavasi began his distinguished career because of whom he knew. Farhan Zaidi has begun his career based on what he knows. The later has yet to be fully proven, but has been selected to work in a proven system, with Billy Beane and the A’s. Bavasi, along with Fresco Thompson, assembled some of the great teams of the last half-century.

In 1939, Buzzy Bavasi found his way into baseball through a chance meeting.

Traveling around the country for a year after completing college, Bavasi found himself at the Dodgers’ Clearwater, Florida, Grapefruit League facility attending a game at the same time as Ford Frick, then President of the National League and father of Bavasi’s DePauw University roommate, Fred.

“What are you doing here?” Frick asked.

Bavasi explained his *wanderjahr* to Frick. “And I’ve got two months to go.”

“No you haven’t,” Frick replied. “Be in my office tomorrow.”

“What office?”

“My office in New York.”

The next thing you know, Bavasi is reporting to Larry McPhail and Branch Rickey. Over more than 40 years with the Dodgers, Padres and Angels, he became one of the game’s more notable, effective, and colorful executives.

This certainly isn’t to say that Bavasi always flew by the seat of his pants. Bavasi had a keen sense for baseball and Rickey, and Allen Roth had explored the use of statistical analysis in a broader sense than had been done prior. On Base Percentage (OBP) is a product of these two visionaries from the ‘50s, and helped Bavasi chart a clear path with the Dodgers.

Not all GMs wound up in the right place at the right time—just happening to know the right person. Many have taken paths through playing professional baseball at some level. Ken Williams of the White Sox, and Bill Stoneman of the Angels are but two of many examples in the League now.

Nearly 70 years since Bavasi’s big break, is baseball the same? Is it who you know? Is it a case of breaking into the front office by being of “baseball pedigree”? Is the vast wealth of knowledge via the Internet and statistical analysis changing the types of personnel deciding who will be drafted or on your team’s 40-man roster? Or, is it somewhere in the
middle? A case of baseball lineage coupled with a solid grasp of Jamesian analysis that
can provide objective evidence to find the best player personnel possible?

**Will Statistical analysis and technology alter the front office?**

Ask author and senior baseball writer for ESPN Baseball, Rob Neyer if there is a shift
from “traditional baseball men” and there’s little hesitation. “There's certainly a shift
happening as we speak,” said Neyer, author of several books including *The Neyer/James
Guide to Pitchers*. “There will always be a place in the game for the guy who washed out
of the minor leagues, became a scout, and just stayed in the game however he could. As
there should be. But then you read about the career path taken by Theo Epstein, who
played only in high school -- as a reserve, no less – but became the youngest GM in the
history of the game. The down-side, quite frankly, is that it's becoming incredibly
difficult to get a job unless you're incredibly capable. Given a choice between
credentialism and ability, though, don't most of us prefer the latter?”

Neyer is seeing this possible shift in action first hand.

Walk up the 3 flights of stairs in this old-warehouse-turned-posh offices in the trendy
Pearl District of Portland, Oregon, and you reach the destination of Sports Management
Worldwide, a business applying distance learning—online education—to sports.

How, exactly, is Neyer involved? He’s an instructor for the Baseball GM and Scouting
Course. “My initial role was to help design the curriculum, particularly regarding the
books used as texts,” Neyer explains. “At this point, my role is two-pronged: every
Sunday evening, I participate in an audio chat on the Internet and, during the week, I do
my best to post feedback, via the Internet, in the discussions in which each student is
required to participate.”

So, will credentials that normally come through brick and mortar institutions of higher
learning for Sports Business possibly take this alternative path?

To give you an example of the growth of distance learning, Apollo Group, Inc., the
company that runs Phoenix University, a for-profit education company, posted profits of
$87.1 million in the fiscal second quarter ended Feb. 28, compared with $68.5 million a
year earlier. Online education is now approaching a billion dollar industry.

Dr. Lynn Lashbrook, President of Sports Management Worldwide, sees an opportunity
for those that wish to get into sports management through the ease of online education.
“Simply put, online means access for many students who want to learn the business but
cannot give up their day job or leave the family to learn,’ says Lashbrook, who has been
working and teaching in Sports Management for over 30 years. “Providing access to
education online allows a larger pool of potential candidates who can be trained and
credentialed.”
But, what about those who have already found a place in baseball? Has technology provided a great advance for those using sabermetrics? If you ask Bill James, the answer is not about a great breakthrough with computer technology, but something more fundamental.

“I am not good with computers,” said James, who named sabermetrics, has written numerous books, most notably his *Baseball Abstracts*, and now holds the position of Senior Baseball Operations Advisor for the Boston Red Sox. “I have basically no programming skills, and it’s not really connected to what I do. Computers have made my work vastly more efficient, as they have all of us in this generation.”

**Farhan Zaidi – A new breed apart**

One franchise that seems to epitomize the view that times are changing is the Oakland A’s. Surely, anyone who has remotely followed this shift in baseball has heard of Michael Lewis’ book, *Moneyball*, and its portrayal of General Manager Billy Beane.

But when you think about it, Beane isn’t really that big of a leap from the “traditional” GM. He was a top prospect as a baseball player, playing six seasons in the majors. So, he doesn’t truly define the possible change that the front office might see.

Beane has, however, hired someone who so greatly breaks with the mold that it has caught many by surprise. Farhan Zaidi was born in the Canada, and grew up in the Philippines where he went to high school in Manila. The school didn't have a baseball team but he played in an independent league. His background isn’t scouting, nor has he worked for any professional teams. Rather, before starting graduate school, he spent a year working at Smallworld.com, a fantasy sports site later acquired by the Sporting News.

No, the #3 man of baseball operations for the Oakland A’s behind GM Billy Beane and Assistant GM David Forst is something entirely different.

Zaidi, after undergraduate work at MIT, is in the process of completing his Ph.D. in Economics at the University of California, Berkeley—a far cry from what has been perceived as the normal route into baseball operations. It’s enough for old-timers to say, “What in the name of Branch Rickey is going on here?”

“I've been a big baseball fan for a very long time,” said Zaidi on an off day with the Athletics. “As a kid growing up in the Philippines—I was born in Canada, but my family moved to the Philippines when I was 3—the chances to watch MLB games live were somewhat limited, but I still followed the league closely through newspapers, books, and sports highlight shows.”

“My family would make summer trips to the US every other year or so, and whenever we were over here I'd try to see as many games and pick up as many publications as possible.
Since coming to the US for college in '94, I've watched a ton of games on TV and have tried to get out to the ballpark as much as possible.”

As to how one gets from Point A to Point B, Zaidi saw a posting for the Baseball Operations Analyst position with the A’s in December of 2004 and submitted an application online.

“I had made a habit of checking job postings on various MLB sites from time to time, and it just so happened that I chanced upon this one on the afternoon of the submission deadline,” said Zaidi. “It sounded really great—it's pretty rare to find a job posting within baseball operations, and this one was for a position reporting directly to the GM and Assistant GM.

“I had no personal contacts within the organization whatsoever and, with no pro sports franchise experience, I figured it was an extreme long-shot.”

A week later Zaidi got an email from Assistant GM David Forst requesting that he call and set up a time for an interview. He interviewed a couple of days before Christmas with both Forst and Billy Beane. They offered him the job in early January of 2005.

As with any break from traditional routes, there are normally advantages and disadvantages, and this unique dynamic that Beane and Forst have created has not been lost on their new addition to the fold.

“I think the advantages and disadvantages are pretty much what you'd expect,” said Zaidi. “Having experience with computers and being a quantitatively oriented person, I've been able to pretty quickly get up to speed on helping with our arbitration case earlier this spring, our amateur draft preparation and preparing statistical advance reports for the coaching staff.

“On the flip side, it's probably taken me a little longer to grow comfortable with the scouting aspects of the position, such as charting games or evaluating minor leaguers or college players based on seeing them in a couple of games. Hopefully that will come in time.”

Since Beane is viewed in some circles with Zen-like reverence, could every franchise decide that they too will be looking for this type of analyst role?

Zaidi has no pre-conceived notions. “Baseball Operations tends to be a pretty tightly run ship—partly out of tradition, partly out of necessity. While all teams value statistical analysis to some degree, that value has to be weighed against any perceived cost of adding another person to the baseball operations mix. Different teams will come out on different sides of that tradeoff. I obviously feel fortunate to be with an organization that places a high value on analytical skills in baseball operations.”
As to the future, Zaidi notes, “Ultimately, I think any hiring trend of non-traditional types will be driven by the degree of success that those individuals have once they've moved up the ladder to management positions.”

In the end, the assertion that one needs to be in one camp (of baseball pedigree) or the other (sabermetrician) is counterproductive. If one method works, why discount the other? Or, maybe it’s a case of grabbing all the knowledge you can, because you’re going to need it in spades in this day and age in Major League Baseball.

Bill James seems to sum it up best, “Sabermetrics produces knowledge—not knowledge about statistics, not knowledge about sabermetrics, but knowledge about baseball.”

Maury Brown is the co-chair of SABR’s business of baseball committee, and runs http://www.businessofbaseball.com.

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