Determining the 3D Spin Axis from Statcast Data
(updated, March 31, 2015, August 31, 2018, May 24-25, 2020)

Alan M. Nathan[*]

Department of Physics, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801

A technique is developed to determine the direction of the spin axis for pitched baseballs. The method utilizes the measurement of the magnitude of the spin from Statcast and the magnitude and direction of the spin-induced deflection from the ball trajectory.

I.   A QUICK REVIEW OF BASEBALL TRAJECTORIES

When a baseball travels through the air, it experiences various forces that determine the trajectory. The most familiar of these forces is the downward pull of gravity F_G. Less familiar are the aerodynamic forces, namely the drag force F_D and the Magnus force F_M. The drag force, or in everyday language "air resistance," is due to the fact that the ball has to push the air out of the way. Rather than talk about the forces, it is more convenient to talk about the accelerations, since those are actually measured by the tracking systems; they are related to the forces by Newton's famous Third Law $F = ma$. The conventional way to express the drag acceleration a_D is through the expression

$$\vec{a}_D = -KC_D v^2 \hat{v},\tag{1}$$

where the factor K is given by

$$K = \frac{1}{2}\frac{\rho A}{m},\tag{2}$$

where m and A are the mass and cross sectional area of the ball, respectively, and ρ is the density of the air. The direction of the drag is $-\hat{v}$, which is a unit vector pointing opposite to the direction of the velocity. Thus the drag reduces the speed of the ball but does not change its direction. The factor C_D is called the drag coefficient. If the baseball is spinning,

it also experiences the Magnus acceleration a_M, which is conventionally written as

$$\vec{a}_M \;=\; KC_L v^2 \frac{\hat{\omega} \times \hat{v}}{|\hat{\omega} \times \hat{v}|}\,, \tag{3}$$

where C_L is called the lift coefficient. The direction of the Magnus force is given by the vector cross product $(\hat{\omega} \times \hat{v})$, which is perpendicular both to the velocity vector and the spin axis, the latter indicated by the unit vector $\hat{\omega}$. A handy mnemonic is that the Magnus force is in the direction that the leading edge of the ball is turning. Note that the cross product vanishes when the spin is either parallel or antiparallel to the direction of the velocity, so that component of spin does not contribute to the Magnus force. The component of spin perpendicular to the velocity contributes to the Magnus force, which deflects the trajectory from a straight line path but does not change the speed. Of course, the gravitational acceleration $\vec{g}$ changes both the speed and the direction of the ball.

In the following sections, it will be assumed that the pitched ball trajectory is parameterized by the so-called "nine-parameter" fit to a constant-acceleration model. Although an approximation, such a description has been shown to be an excellent description of the full trajectory.[1] It does not matter which of the two tracking systems are used to obtain the trajectory (PITCHf/x or Trackman). Note that since the start of the 2017 season, the Statcast data exclusively uses Trackman for pitch tracking. The PITCHf/x coordinate system will be used in which the origin is located at the corner of home plate, the y axis runs toward the pitcher, the z axis points vertically upward, and the x axis points to the catcher's right ($\hat{x} = \hat{y} \times \hat{z}$). Therefore a pitched baseball is primarily moving in the $-\hat{y}$ direction.

II.   THE TECHNIQUE

A.   The transverse and gyro components of spin

According to Eq. 3, the Magnus acceleration is only sensitive to the component of spin that is perpendicular to (or transverse to) the velocity. We call this part the "transverse spin" and denote it by $\vec{\omega}_T$. As mentioned above, the Magnus acceleration is not sensitive to any component of spin that is along the velocity direction. We call this part the "gyrospin"[2] and denote it by $\vec{\omega}_G$. The total spin $\vec{\omega}$ is the vector sum of the transverse and gyrospin parts:

$\vec{\omega} = \vec{\omega}_T + \vec{\omega}_G$. Since the transverse and gyrospin parts are perpendicular to each other, then

$$\omega_G = \sqrt{\omega^2 - \omega_T^2}, \tag{4}$$

where I have purposely rearranged the order since the right-hand side of the equation now contain measurable quantities. Namely, ω is determined by the Trackman measurement system while ω_T is determined by the trajectory. Eq. 4 then tells us how to compute the magnitude of $\vec{\omega}_G$. By definition, the direction of $\vec{\omega}_G$ is either parallel or antiparallel to $\langle \hat{v} \rangle$, and this method does not distinguish those two possibilities. One might guess, however, that ω_G is parallel or antiparallel to $\langle \hat{v} \rangle$ for right-handed and left-handed pitchers, respectively. We next outline how to determine $\vec{\omega}_T$ from the tracking data.

B. Determining the Magnus acceleration

The first step in determining $\vec{\omega}_T$ from the tracking data is to isolate the part of the acceleration that is due to the Magnus force. The 9-parameter constant acceleration fit to the data is utilized, where the acceleration vector $\vec{a} = (a_x, a_y, a_z)$ is given by

$$\vec{a} = \vec{a}_D + \vec{a_M} + \vec{g} \tag{5}$$

and the downward gravitational acceleration $\vec{g} = -g\hat{z}$. We first remove the gravitational acceleration to obtain $\vec{a^*} \equiv \vec{a} - \vec{g} = \vec{a}_D + \vec{a}_M$ which has the remaining drag and Magnus parts. We next remove the drag. That part is a bit tricky since the drag depends on the square of the velocity, which is not constant. The approximation adopted here is that the appropriate velocity to use in Eq. 1 is the mean velocity $\langle \vec{v} \rangle$ over the trajectory. The drag acceleration is simply the projection of $\vec{a^*}$ along the $-\langle \hat{v} \rangle$ direction. This follows from the fact that the Magnus acceleration has *no* component along that direction whereas the drag is *entirely* along that direction. Therefore the drag is given by $\vec{a}_D = -\left[\vec{a^*} \cdot \langle \hat{v} \rangle\right] \langle \hat{v} \rangle$. As a byproduct, one can easily obtain the drag coefficient from Eq. 1, $C_D = a_D/(K\langle v \rangle^2)$, although that is not essential to the problem at hand. Once the drag has been removed, the remaining acceleration is due entirely to the Magnus force. Putting all of this together, the Magnus acceleration is related to the total acceleration by

$$\vec{a}_M = \vec{a} - \vec{g} + [(\vec{a} - \vec{g}) \cdot \langle \hat{v} \rangle] \langle \hat{v} \rangle. \tag{6}$$

C.   Determining the transverse spin from the Magnus acceleration

Once the Magnus acceleration is determined from Eq. 6, it's magnitude can be inserted into Eq. 3, which can then be rearranged to find the lift coefficient C_L:

$$C_L \;=\; \frac{a_M}{K\langle v\rangle^2}\,. \tag{7}$$

There is no first-principles theory that relates C_L to the transverse spin, so it must be done experimentally. The experiments that have been done fire a spinning baseball and track it with high-speed video, which is used to measure both the trajectory (which determines C_L) and the spin. A number of such experiments have been done in the past decade[3] and a summary of the results is presented in Fig. 1. The C_L values determined from these experiments are fitted to a smooth curve given by (**updated, May 24-25 2020**)

$$C_L \;=\; A\left[1 - \exp(-BS)\right] \tag{8}$$

where $S = r\omega_T/\langle v\rangle$ is the so-called spin factor, r is the radius of the ball, A=0.336 and B=6.041. Eq. 8 is easily inverted to find ω_T:

$$\omega_T \;=\; \frac{\langle v\rangle}{rB}\ln\left(\frac{A}{A-C_L}\right), \tag{9}$$

Eq. 9 gives us the magnitude of ω_T; the direction is determined by a rearrangement of Eq. 3 to obtain

$$\hat{\omega}_T \;=\; \langle\hat{v}\rangle \times \hat{a}_M\,, \tag{10}$$

where $\hat{a}_M$ is the direction of the Magnus acceleration. It is important to keep in mind that the actual experimental data scatter about the smooth curve (see Fig. 1), so that the values of ω_T are probably not determined to better than $\pm 20\%$.

D.   Putting it all together

We now have everything we need to find the direction of the total spin. The TrackMan system determines ω. The trajectory determines both the magnitude and direction of $\vec{\omega}_T$
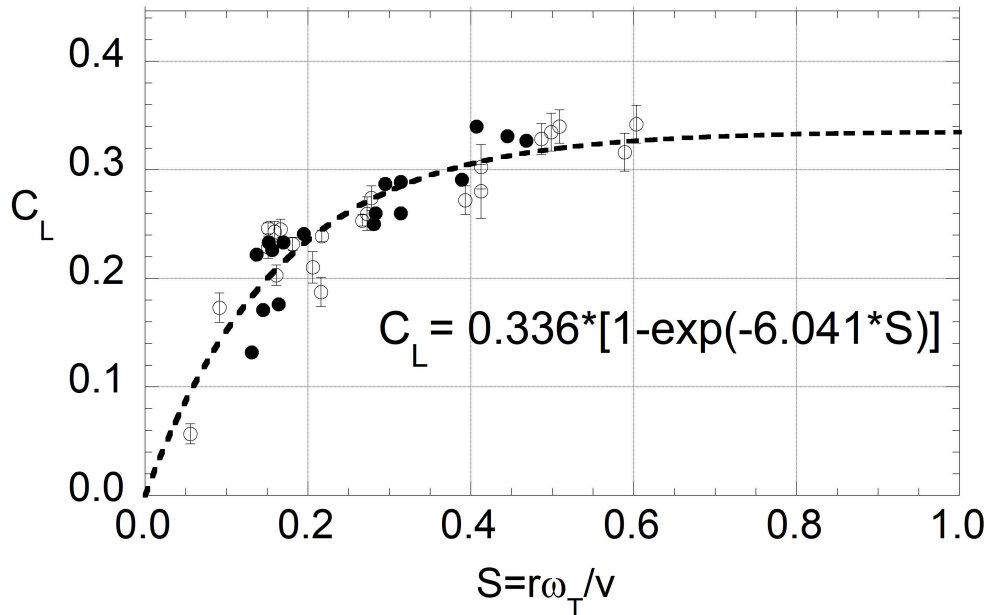
FIG. 1: **updated May 24, 2020** Experimental values of C_L as a function of the spin factor $S = r\omega_T/v$. The data come from motion capture experiments taken at speeds in the range 80-100 mph, including data from Alaways[4,5] (closed points) and Nathan (open points).[3] Other data from pitch-tracking experiments[6,7] have not been included due to their large scatter. Also not included are wind tunnel data,[8,9] which were unfortunately taken at speeds too low to be useful in the present analysis. The data were parametrized by the function $C_L = A(1 - e^{-BS})$, with A and B determined from a non-linear least-squares fit (black curve), with A=0.336 and B=6.041.

via Eqs. 9 and 10, respectively. Then Eq. 4 is used to calculate the magnitude of $\vec{\omega}_G$, the direction of which is $\pm\langle\hat{v}\rangle$. In component form, we write

$$
\begin{aligned}
\omega_x &= \omega_{T,x} + \omega_{G,x} \\
\omega_y &= \omega_{T,y} + \omega_{G,y} \\
\omega_z &= \omega_{T,z} + \omega_{G,z} \,,
\end{aligned}
\tag{11}
$$

where everything on the right-hand side of Eq. 11 is known. Thus the components of $\vec{\omega}$ are all determined and the direction can be calculated. In doing so, it is helpful to define a pair of angles. First, θ is the angle of the spin with respect to the $x - z$ plane, so that $\theta \approx 0°$ for the case where the spin is all transverse, whereas $\theta \approx 90°$ for a "gyroball". In fact, $\cos(\theta) \approx \omega_T/\omega$, which is just the ratio of "useful" to total spin. Second, ϕ is the angle with respect to the x axis of the projection of the spin in the $x - z$ plane. In terms of the

components, the angles are given as follows:

$$\theta = \arctan\left(\frac{\omega_y}{\sqrt{\omega_x^2 + \omega_z^2}}\right)$$

$$\phi = \arctan\left(\frac{\omega_z}{\omega_x}\right). \tag{12}$$

This completes the determination of the direction of the total spin vector.

E.   Relationship of spin to movement

NOTE: This section added on May 24-25, 2020

While Eq. 8 may be useful for physicists, it is not very useful for baseball analysts. In this section, I will develop a equation more suitable for the latter by relating movement to rotations.

Given the components of the Magnus acceleration, Eq. 6, the corresponding movement $\vec{M}$ is determined by the basic physics equation for constant acceleration,

$$\vec{M} = \frac{1}{2}\vec{a}_M t^2, \tag{13}$$

where t is the flight time. Using Eq. 3, this can be cast in the form

$$M = \frac{1}{2}KC_L\langle v^2\rangle t^2, \tag{14}$$

where M is the magnitude of the movement. However, $\langle v^2\rangle t^2$ is just the total distance D[10] from release to the front of home plate, so that we arrive at the simple equation

$$M = \frac{1}{2}KC_L D^2. \tag{15}$$

Note that C_L is a function of the spin factor $S = \epsilon r\omega/v$, where $\epsilon \equiv \omega_T/\omega$ is commonly referred to as the spin efficiency. Multiplying numerator and denominator by the flight time t, we find

$$S = \epsilon 2\pi r R/D, \tag{16}$$

where $R = \omega t/(2\pi)$ is the total number of rotations of the ball during flight. We can now combine Eqs. 8 and 15–16 to find a relationship between movement M and rotations R. We arrive at

$$M = \frac{1}{2}KD^2 A\left[1 - \exp\left(-2\pi r\epsilon BR/D\right)\right] \tag{17}$$

This is the desired expression relating movement M to rotations R. Note that M depends on air density through the factor K, Eq. 2. Moreover both M and R depend on the release extension, which determines the distantce D. For the purposes of making universal plots of M vs. R, it would probably be useful to normalize M and R to fixed values of K and D. Note also that the spin efficiency ϵ appears on the right-hand-side, as one might expect. Setting ϵ to its maximum value of 1 establishes a universal upper limit for the amount of movement M for a given number of rotations R. An numerical example is given in Fig. 2
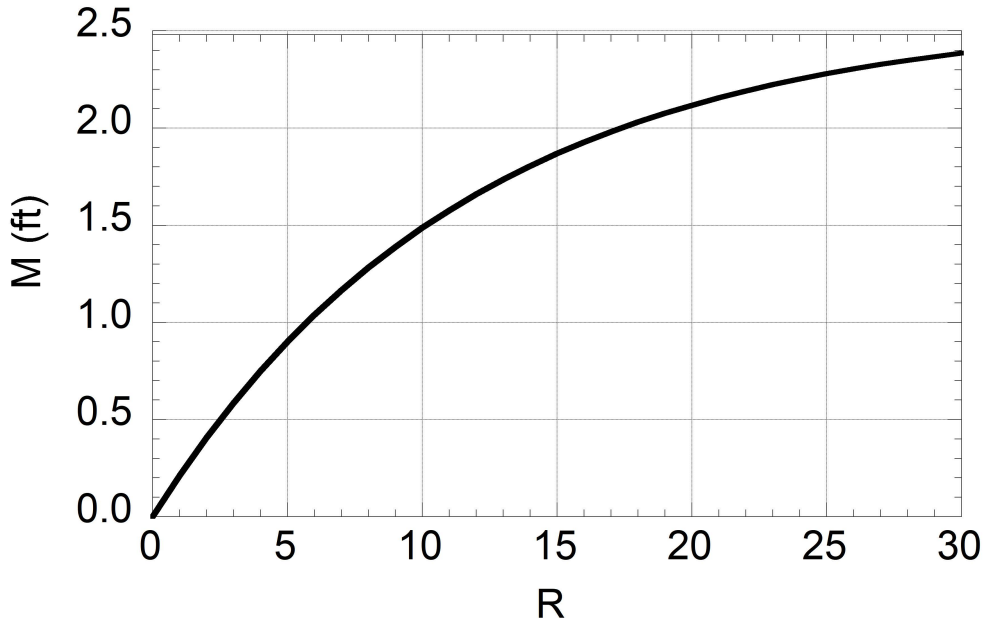

FIG. 2: Movement vs. Rotations calculated from Eq. 17. The calculation assumed a release point of 55 ft (D=53.58 ft) and $K = 5.356 \times 10^{-3}$ ft^{-1}, appropriate for a temperature of 70°, pressure of 29.92 inches, 50% relative humidity, and sea level. Since the spin efficiency was assumed to be 1, the curve is the upper limit of movement for a given number of rotations with the specified D and K.

One interesting feature of Eq. 15 is that for fixed values of D, K, and C_L, M is independent of the release velocity. A very convenient way to rewrite S is as follows:

$$S = 9.0 \times 10^{-3}\epsilon \left[\frac{\omega}{v} \right] , \tag{18}$$

where the total spin rate ω is in rpm and the velocity v is in mph. The ratio in brackets is sometimes called "Bauer units". Rephrasing my previous statement, for given D, K, and ϵ, movement is directly proportional to Bauer units but otherwise independent of velocity.

F. Some caveats

NOTE: This section was updated on March 31, 2015 and again on May 24-25, 2020

There are two major caveats to keep in mind when using this formalism. First, when comparing ω_T, which is extracted from the trajectory data, to the total spin ω, it is important to keep in mind the role played by random measurement errors. For example, suppose one were to compare ω_T with ω for a large collection of four-seam fastballs, for which one expects the two quantities will be equal. One would likely find that, on average, $\omega_T = \omega$, as expected. However one would also likely find a considerable spread in the distribution about the mean value, with as many pitches with $\omega_T - \omega > 0$ (a physical impossibility) as with $\omega_T - \omega < 0$. How does one account for the spread in these values? It is almost surely due to random measurement error in the pitch trajectory. The latter results in random measurement error in the accelerations, which in turn leads to random measurement error in ω_T. It could also be the case that there is a significant random error in the total spin ω. However a careful study comparing the spin measured by Trackman to spin directly measured using high-speed video shows that possibility to be very unlikely.[12] The role of random measurement error in this type of analysis was discussed in a recent article.[13]

An interesting exercise is to use Eq. 17 to estimate how a given uncertainty in M affects the determination of ω_T. Omitting all the details, one can show

$$\frac{d\omega_T}{dM} = 0.61 v_0 e^{6S} , \tag{19}$$

where v_0 is the release velocity in mph and the LHS has the units of rpm/inch. Putting in representative numbers for four-seam fastballs, we obtain around 150 rpm/inch, meaning 1 inch of noise on the measurement of the movement leads to 150 rpm of noise on the measurement of ω_T.

The second caveat is that there is a growing body of evidence[14] that mechanisms other than the Magnus force lead to movement on a pitch, particularly forces associated with the flow of air over the seams. While one can still use Trackman data to determine the movement on a pitch, it would not be appropriate to interpret that movement in terms of transverse spin, at least to the extent that these other forces are significant.

III. THE EXCEL SPREADSHEET

NOTE: This is the section that was updated on August 31, 2018

In this section I will relate the specific calculations in the accompanying Excel spreadsheet[15] to the formulas in this document. It is important to read the "Readme" tab on the spreadsheet before using it, as it contains important information on the input parameters. I will discuss this briefly here, referring to specific columns of the spreadsheet.

All of the columns of the spreadsheet that I have added are highlighted in yellow; the original columns from Statcast are not highlighted. The important columns of original data are as follows:

- The x and z locations at release, columns H and J

- The extenstion, column X

- The total spin rate, column W

- The velocity components from the 9P fit at $y = 50$ ft, columns Q-S

- The mean acceleration components from the 9P fit, columns T-V

None of the remaining columns of original data are needed (and, in fact, could be deleted).

The extension is used to calculate the release point y_R, column I. The 9P velocity components are at $y = 50$ and need to be calculated at y_R, and this is done in columns D-F. The components of the average velocity vector $\langle \vec{v} \rangle$ are in Z-AB. The three components and magnitude of the Magnus acceleration are in AF-AH and AI, respectively; the x and z movements are in AJ-AK; and C_L is in AL. Although not essential in the present context, the drag coefficient C_D is calculated in AE. The components of transverse spin $\vec{\omega}_T$ are in AO-AQ, while the magnitude ω_T is in AN. The ratio of transverse to total spin ("spin efficiency") is in column AT, and the angles θ and ϕ are in AU and AS, respectively. Whenever the calculated transverse spin exceeds the total spin, a physical impossibility, the angle θ is left blank.

Note that to calculate the transverse spin requires knowledge of the numerical factor K (see Eq. 7), which depends on the air density. In turn the air density depends on the temperature and elevation above sea level. The calculation is done in tab K, where the

temperature in Fahrenheit should be entered into cell B3 and the elevation in feet into cell B4. The factor K is automatically computed in D3.

IV.   A VISUAL TOOL

If the baseball were oriented so that the spin axis passes through a seam, the batter would observe a red dot. That turns out to be an excellent way to visualize the orientation of the spin axis. In Fig. 3 the ball is represented by a circle of unit radius, as seen by the catcher looking along the y axis, with the $\hat{x}$ axis pointing to the right and the $\hat{z}$ axis pointing up. The distance of the spin axis from the center of the circle is given by $1 - \sin(\theta)$, whereas ϕ gives the orientation of the dot about a circumference at that radius. Seven pitches are labeled on the plot. Pitch 1 is a gyroball, with the spin perfectly aligned with the y axis. Pitches 2 and 3 have their axes completely in the $x - z$ plane (i.e., no y or gyrospin component), and correspond to the transverse spin being purely backspin and topspin, respectively. Pitches 4 and 5 have a small gyrospin component and correspond to a tailing fastball (armside break) thrown by left-handed and right-handed pitcher, respectively. Pitch 6 has a small gyrospin component and corresponds to a curveball thrown by a right-handed pitcher. Finally pitch 7 has a large gyrospin component, with the transverse spin being purely sidespin and corresponds to a slider thrown by a right-handed pitcher.

The direction of the break can be determined from the tool by making a fist with your right hand placing it near the center of the circle. Orient your hand so that your thumb points to the red dot. Then your fingers will point in the direction of the break, as observed by the catcher. Alternately, you can just apply the following simple rules: pitches lying in the upper half of the circle break to the right, those in the lower half to the left, those in the left half break up, those in the right half break down. And of course, those in the center of the circle do not break at all. As an example, if we apply these rules to pitch 6, we see that it breaks down and to the right (catcher's view), exactly as expected for a curveball thrown by a right-handed pitcher. For a given total spin and velocity, the magnitude of the break will be greatest the farther the dot is from the center. For example, the maximum break will be achieved by pitches 2 and 3 and the minimum by pitch 1. Generally speaking, a slider (7) has less break than pitches of comparable total spin, since it usually has a large gyrospin
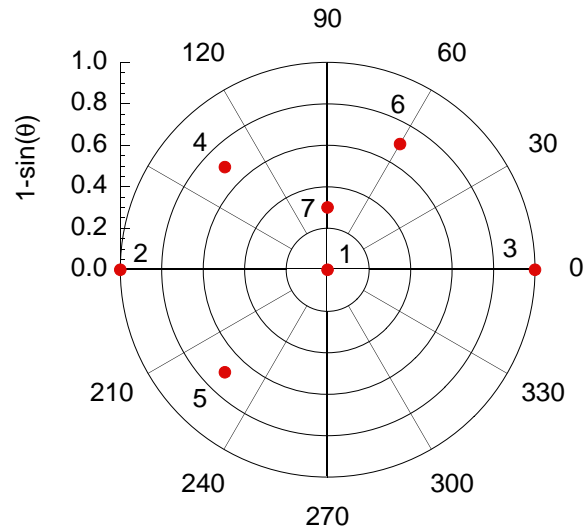
component.

FIG. 3: Visual representation of the spin axis, as seen by the catcher. The radial coordinate is $1 - \sin(\theta)$ and the azimuthal coordinate is the angle ϕ, as defined in Eq. 12. The numbers refer to specific pitches, as described in the text.

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* Electronic address: a-nathan@illinois.edu

[1] http://baseball.physics.illinois.edu/MCAnalysis.pdf.

[2] The origin of this notation is that a pitched baseball with its spin axis perfectly aligned with its velocity is conventionally called a "gyroball."

[3] See a summary in A. M. Nathan, Am. J. Phys. **76**, 119-124 (2008). A copy of the paper can be downloaded at http://baseball.physics.illinois.edu/AJPFeb08.pdf. The data shown in Fig. 5 of the article have been scaled up by 3% from the published values based on a reanalysis of the air density and ball diameter.

[4] L. W. Alaways, "Aerodynamics of the Curve Ball: An Investigation of the Effects of Angular Velocity on Baseball Trajectories," Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Davis (1998).

[5] L. W. Alaways and M. Hubbard, "Experimental determination of baseball spin and lift," J. Sports Sci. **19**, 349-358 (2001).

[6] Tsutomu Jinji and Shinji Sakurai, "Direction of Spin Axis and Spin Rate of the Pitched Baseball," Sports Biomechanics **5**, 197-214 (2006).

[7] Tomoyuki Nagami, Takatoshi Higuchi, Hiroki Nakata, Toshimasa Yanai, and Kazuyuki Kanosue, "Relation Between Lift Forces and Ball Spin for Different Baseball Pitches," J. Applied Biomechanics **32**, 196-205 (2016).

[8] L. J. Briggs, "Effects of spin and speed on the lateral deflection (curve) of a baseball and the Magnus effect for smooth spheres," Am. J. Phys. **27**, 589-596 (1959).

[9] R. G. Watts and R. Ferrer, "The lateral force on a spinning sphere: Aerodynamics of a curve ball. Am. J. Phys. **55**, 40-44 (1987).

[10] I am ignoring the small difference between $\langle v \rangle^2$ and $\langle v^2 \rangle$.

[11] While the ratio of spin to speed has long been referred to as the spin factor, the recognition that this ratio is roughly constant for a given pitcher and pitch type is more recent. Referring to this ratio as "Bauer units" seems to have originated at Driveline Baseball, `https://www.drivelinebaseball.com/2016/11/spin-rate-what-we-know-now/`.

[12] `http://www.baseballprospectus.com/article.php?articleid=23202`

[13] `http://www.baseballprospectus.com/article.php?articleid=25915`

[14] Particularly noteworthy is the recent work of Professor Bart Smith, `http://www.baseballaero.com/`

[15] `http://baseball.physics.illinois.edu/trackman/MovementSpinEfficiencyTemplate-v2.xlsx`.