

ONCE IN A GENERATION

Baseball's biggest names are awed by the great Clayton Kershaw

BY CARY OSBORNE

Cooper Arrieta is 5 years old. He's starting to get a grasp of the world that surrounds him. And much of that world is covered in green grass and clay-colored diamonds. He asks his father often about one of his favorite players — Clayton Kershaw.

"He's so into baseball, and he's starting to appreciate how good (Kershaw) is," said Jake Arrieta, the Chicago Cubs ace and 2015 National League Cy Young Award winner.

That's a gigantic compliment. One of the premier pitchers in the game says that one of his son's favorite players is the Dodgers' ace.

But there are bigger compliments. Some of the game's greatest players acknowledge that Kershaw isn't just great. They believe he's all-time great.

Since 2014, Arrieta is second in baseball to Kershaw in ERA, WHIP, winning percentage and opponents' OPS — and tied with four others for second in Cy Young Awards.

Arrieta's ascent was so rapid in 2015, a season in which he no-hit the Dodgers and finished with a 1.77 ERA, that he became Kershaw's competition in conversation

for the best pitcher in the game. The Cub right-hander's thoughts on Kershaw might end that conversation.

"He's pretty much in a class of his own over the last four or five seasons," Arrieta said. "He's going to go down as one of the best ever, and to play against (him) and with him in All-Star Games hopefully for a long time to come is special."

Some of Kershaw's fiercest competitors over the years agree.

THE PITCHERS

"Clayton?" Giants ace Madison Bumgarner asks when prodded about Kershaw. "Oh. That guy."

Through September 26, the left-handers had opposed each other 10 times. Kershaw's Dodgers had won five of the games, Bumgarner's Giants had won five.

It is a rivalry within one of the game's most storied rivalries, between two of the most laser-focused competitors in the game. And that's not just on the mound. They are both magna cum laude graduates of the less-talk-more-action school. Yet as deep as the rivalry is and as intense and brooding as Bumgarner is, the Giant has a deep respect for the Dodger.





“As of right now, I think everybody that’s playing this game is getting a chance to see possibly the best pitcher to ever play this game,” said Bumgarner, a four-time All-Star and 2014 World Series MVP.

In their matchups, Kershaw has the ERA advantage — 1.98 to 2.56. Six of their 10 matchups have seen both pitchers give up two runs or less. Even with runs at that much of a premium, Bumgarner said he can’t pressure himself into being that much more focused on the mound.

“I don’t look at it that way,” he said. “Regardless of if somebody’s better than another guy, that doesn’t change the fact they can be beaten on that day. If anything, you need to back yourself down a little. If you start (being too fine), it will have the opposite effect.”

But the best do sometimes get a jolt from facing the best.

“He’s inhuman,” said Texas Rangers lefthander and four-time All-Star Cole Hamels. “He’s the definition of almost a robot. It was fun when I got to pitch against him when

he was just learning because I think I was able to get victories early. Now it’s more of a challenge to go up against him. But that’s what we like. We like going up against the best, and I’m sure he likes to, too.”

Hamels faced Kershaw four times as a member of the Philadelphia Phillies — all in 2008 and 2009 during Kershaw’s first and second years in the bigs. The Phillies won three of the matchups, including Game 1 of the 2009 National League Championship Series, a game where neither pitcher was sharp.

Now that the southpaws are in opposing leagues, a Kershaw-Hamels matchup becomes more of a rarity. But Hamels is still very aware what Kershaw is doing — for good reason.

“It’s impressive to see (what he’s doing), but at the same time I think it kind of helps motivate all of us to do what he’s doing,” Hamels said.

Washington’s two-time All-Star Stephen Strasburg said the scoreboard or clubhouse TVs inform him of what’s going on in Los Angeles. He has never had the opportunity to oppose Kershaw on the mound, though he was scheduled to June 20 at Dodger Stadium. However, an hour before the game, the matchup of two of the leading Cy Young Award candidates at the time was axed when Strasburg was scratched due to a back strain.

“Absolutely. Yeah,” Strasburg said, confirming he was disappointed that the matchup didn’t happen.

At that time, a 2.83 ERA and 1.00 WHIP through July had put Strasburg on pace for the best numbers in his career. Kershaw, in comparison, has kept his WHP below 1.00 since 2012 and had a career ERA of 2.38 through September 26 (1.87 since 2013).

“It’s hard to really comprehend what he’s doing,” Strasburg said. “I know how hard it is to even have a respectable ERA, and the fact that he’s having something that’s out of



this world is amazing. The times I've seen him pitch, it's like a whole other level."

Batters share the thought.

THE HITTERS

The baseball world has stopped 12 times. Nothing else has mattered when Mike Trout stepped into the batter's box three times each on August 5, 2014, August 1, 2015, September 8, 2015 and May 17, 2016 against Kershaw.

It has been the best hitter of this generation vs. the best pitcher of this generation.

Trout singled in his first career at-bat against Kershaw, doubled in his second — and hasn't had a hit since. Kershaw has struck him out four times and walked him once in the last 10 matchups.

"You can't miss your pitch," said the superstar Angels center fielder of facing Ker-

shaw. "If you foul one off, you're in trouble. He's got every pitch to put you away. You obviously can't do too much with him. You can't try to hit the ball so hard or try to hit the ball so far, or he's going to get you out. You have to stay within your approach, and you can't change it."

Trout said when he has faced Kershaw, he has been more locked in. Yes, Kershaw sometimes raises a hitter's game. Rather, he raises their awareness.

"When we come to L.A. on a Friday night and he's pitching, there's a little something more to it," said Colorado Rockies two-time All-Star third baseman Nolan Arenado. "It's like, 'OK, here we go. Friday night in L.A. Kershaw's on the bump. It gets you a little more excited.'"

Arenado has faced Kershaw 32 times. He has eight hits and one home run with four strikeouts. He offers two insightful perspectives about Kershaw. He can speak as a right-handed hitter and as a player who plays at Coors Field, which has a reputation for diminishing the effect of a breaking ball.

"(Many left-handers) don't throw a lot of sliders to righties because it kind of goes right into their bat path," Arenado said. "But he's not afraid to throw it, and he throws it all the time. There are times you feel like you're on it, and I don't know, I just feel like I can't figure it out. Everyone talks about his curveball, but I don't think people understand how hard it is to hit that slider. I think when you face righty on righty, righties are tough. When you face a lefty as a right-hander, I feel like you see the ball better. But with him, guys like him, you see the ball but then you don't hit it."

As for the Coors effect ...

"His (breaking balls) break," Arenado said. "If you ask him, he'll probably say it doesn't break as much. But as a hitter, it breaks a lot. He's a unique pitcher. He's a one-of-a-kind pitcher. He's just one of those



guys that people get to see, and we don't know if we'll get to see another Kershaw."

The NL West has seen plenty of him.

No one more than San Francisco's Buster Posey. The four-time All-Star had 91 career plate appearances against Kershaw — his most against any Major League pitcher and likewise the most for Kershaw vs. any batter.

Overall, Kershaw has gotten the better of the matchup. Posey had a career .227/.253/.330 line with two home runs and 16 strikeouts against him.

Posey offers that the common thread when he has success against Kershaw is simple — he's swinging at strikes. But he also shared a view of what it's like in the batter's box against Kershaw.

"On a good day, he's running his fastball up to 95 mph," Posey began. "I think he extends to the batter as well as anyone in the game. His deception is as good as anybody's. (He has) all plus pitches, and he doesn't miss much. Hitting to me a lot is about getting a mistake on the plate. He's a guy who doesn't make many of them."

Another division rival, Arizona first baseman Paul Goldschmidt, couldn't figure Kershaw at all in his first three seasons. The four-time All-Star was 2 for his first 20 against Kershaw with nine strike-

outs. Since 2014, he is 8 for 19 with a homer and six strikeouts. Like Posey, he goes up against Kershaw hoping for a mistake.

"You can't take a pitch off against him," Goldschmidt said. "He comes right at you and throws a lot of strikes, but he can mix it up with his fastball and slider and curveball if he needs to. Very good location and command, and he doesn't make many mistakes, so if you get a mistake you need to hit it, because if you foul it off you're probably not going to get another one."

Kershaw's 15.4 percent rate of swings and misses per total pitches leads baseball from 2014-2016, according to Fangraphs. When there are two strikes, he's also the toughest. Kershaw led baseball in put-away percentage (which measures whiff rate when a batter has two strikes) in 2014 and 2015 and was third in 2016, according to Baseball Prospectus. Like Goldschmidt said, Kershaw doesn't give you many openings.

That's why Kershaw has a label attached to him. You've heard non-baseball players say it. Now it's from the mouths of Kershaw's peers.

"He knows how to pitch and make adjustments," Goldschmidt said. "He's one of, if not the best."