

MONEYBALL WEEKLY:

THE EMERGENCE OF BEN RICE ISN'T A SURPRISE



Ben Rice, a first baseman, catcher, and designated hitter for the New York Yankees. The Yankees are 20-11 this season so far.

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The MLB draft is unique in comparison to other professional leagues, holding the draft during the All-Star break and only seeing a total of 24 players jump into MLB action right away.

There's also a difference in who gets drafted, as international talent will sign as free agents with any team, leaving only high schoolers and college athletes on the board, though there are 20 rounds of picks for them to be selected in.

The result of this is the unpredictable nature of the draft. A lot of first rounders barely or never reach the league, while many of its superstars are undrafted or late-round picks. The last time the AL and NL MVP were both first round selections was in 2016 when Mike Trout and Kris Bryant won. Stars like Cal Raleigh and Gunnar Henderson came after the first, with two-time defending Cy Young winner Tarik Skubal being a ninth-round selection.

Stars often come from unexpected places in the MLB, and Ben Rice of the New York Yankees has been no exception to that.

Rice was selected at pick 363 in round 12 of the 2021 MLB draft, out of Dartmouth College. He was selected as a catcher and as most 12th rounds are, his name was quickly buried with the other

draftees.

Rice's MILB career began well but dramatically rose, starting in his first full season. He played well in low-A Tampa in 2022 and shot all the way up to AA Somerset by the end of the 2023 season.

Rice wouldn't spend very long in New Jersey, spending just 49 more days down there before a month-long stint in AAA Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. Throughout the 2024 season, he'd begin to learn first base, as his catching defense was subpar and 2020 first round pick Austin Wells was having a strong start to his MLB career.

On June 16, 2024, first baseman Anthony Rizzo suffered an injury that would end up sidelining him for multiple months. While this unfortunately was a factor in Rizzo's career ending soon after, it provided Rice with the opportunity of his lifetime, and on June 18, Rice made his MLB debut with New York, recording a single. Rice hit his first home run 16 days later and would send three more over the wall two days later against their rival, the Boston Red Sox.

Rice would only play 50 games in the 2024 season, finishing with a .613 OPS and seven home runs. While those numbers tailed off from his first few weeks, metrics suggest some bad luck was involved. Rice was not rostered for the Yankees' World Series run.

2025 was a different story. With Rizzo's option declined,

the first base position was up for grabs. Rice would take it alongside free agent signing and former MVP Paul Goldschmidt. Rice would post a .836 OPS in total during the year, hitting 26 home runs and proving to be already one of the Yankees' best hitters. Despite this, Rice was often platooned with Goldschmidt, as the team felt Rice was not good enough to face lefties just yet and in a time of contention they prioritized Goldschmidt's results to Rice's development in that regard.

Rice didn't become a story due to Aaron Judge somehow outdoing himself yet again, as well as Cody Bellinger having a resurgent year with New York. It likely didn't help that Rice had exhausted his rookie status the year prior, though the explosive entry of Nick Kurtz may have overshadowed that anyway.

Rice's OPS ranked 27 of 145 qualified hitters in 2025, with his .358 wOBA (weighted on base average) ranking 26. Though these are very good numbers, the truth laid in his underlying metrics. His xOPS of .922 and xwOBA of .394 ranked sixth of those same 145 hitters, meaning he was almost a top five hitter by metrics in 2025. His xwOBA-xwOBA was a -0.036, meaning his standard wOBA was 0.036 points unluckier than what was expected. Only Salvador Perez, Juan Soto and Luis Garcia finished with unluckier ratings.

To the naked eye, Rice looked like a good bat heading into the 2026 season. To those paying closer attention

though, he already was shining at an almost-MVP level, the ball just wasn't falling his way yet.

Rice's start to 2026 has been nothing short of dominant. His 1.145 OPS and .475 wOBA (as of before games on Tuesday) rank below only Yordan Alvarez, and his 1.045 xOPS and .444 xwOBA both rank fifth amongst 183 qualified hitters. He is eighth in BB%, top seven in both standard and expected variations of OBP and SLG and his 10 home runs put him on pace for 54 on the year.

It isn't a case of if he would be an MVP candidate anymore. Rice looks like he could be Judge's next true challenger for the title. If Alvarez can stay healthy, things could be on track for an all-time AL MVP race.

The recent notion of the Yankees failing to develop is starting to crumble. Cam Schlittler, another late-rounder, has been one of the best in baseball, and the Yankees have Carlos Langrange and Elmer Rodriguez-Cruz in the system as well. The hitting side is somewhat weak beyond infielder George Lombard Jr, but as seen with Rice, that can change in an instant.

With Carlos Rodon and Gerrit Cole soon to return to the already potent Yankee rotation, and two early MVP candidates in the lineup, things are looking bright in the Bronx. The now is great and the future could be even greater.



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