

CATCHER SEASONS

Where does Cal Raleigh's 2025 season rate among the best years for a catcher in baseball history?

I think there are ten seasons in the conversation for best seasons by a major league catcher. It's a steep bar, and there are some difficult omissions. Yogi Berra is an omission. Berra was the catcher's equivalent of Warren Spahn: he just had the same very good season over and over again, but no season that particularly rates on this list. Yadier Molina was similarly excellent, but I don't know that one of his years really jumps onto the queue. Thurman Munson has some strong years in the 1970's, as did his rival, Carlton Fisk. Gabby Hartnett, Bob O'Farrell, and Ernie Lombardi won MVP awards as catchers: I don't think any of them merit a place in this conversation. I think Mickey Cochrane's selection as the 1934 AL MVP was absolutely appropriate, but much of the merit of his case lies in the fact that he turned around the Tigers as a player/manager.

So what seasons *are* in the conversation? I'll list the ten seasons that I would count in the discussion for the best ever by a catcher. In no particular order, they are:

Johnny Bench, 1972 – Choosing the *best* Bench season is tricky, but we're opting for his second MVP season because he added walks to his statistical profile in 1972, crossing the century mark and having perhaps the best defensive season of his career, a notable accomplishment for a man who reeled off ten straight Gold Gloves at the position. The Reds lost the World Series in seven games, but they'd be back.

Joe Mauer, 2009 – This is my favorite-ever year for a catcher: after writing articles over at Bill James' site saying that Mauer was the best player in the league, he decided to go ahead and win over the skeptics, winning the batting title, Gold Glove, Silver Slugger, and MVP. The batting title was the third of his career: he finished with a .365 mark after staying above .400 through most of June. The Minnesota native also paced the league in on-base and slugging percentage, leading the Twins to a first-place finish in the Central

and then their usual playoff sweep at the hands of the Yankees.

Josh Gibson, 1943 – Gibson led the Negro League in homers (20) and RBI (109), but narrowly lost the batting crown to Tetelo Vargas, who managed to hit .471 average to Gibson's paltry .466 mark. It's probably a case of misapplied credit: Vargas played in only thirty games in 1943, while Gibson played in 69 contests, leading the Homestead Grays to a World Series win over the Birmingham Black Barons. Translated to a full 156-game season, Gibson's numbers pro-rate to 50 doubles, 20 triples, 45 homers, and 247 RBI. I guess you could call that a year.

Buster Posey, 2012 – FanGraphs' WAR rates this as the best season ever by a catcher, and it was certainly a doozy. Posey hit .336 in a pitcher's park, adding 24 homers and 103 RBI for a team that swept their way through the World Series. That Giants team was decidedly thin on elite hitting talent: their next best offensive player was Melky Cabrera, who was suspended before September for testing positive for testosterone supplements. After that, it was Angel Pagan, Panda Sandoval, Brandon Belt, and Brandon Crawford: not exactly a Murderer's Row, either. That Giants team surprised and then repeated as champions twice more, with Posey as the key driver of those successes.

Roy Campanella, 1953 – The only catcher mentioned in Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire", Campy hit 41 homers, paced the NL with 142 RBI, hit .312, and had one of the best defensive years of his career, on his way to the second of three MVP awards. Snider finished third in the MVP vote, and Baseball-Reference's WAR suggests that Snider was much more valuable. I don't see it: Snider played more games, but their rate and counting stats are similar: in a draw, I'd side towards the backstop over the centerfielder, as the voters in 1953 did.

Mike Piazza, 1997 – The only catcher mentioned in a Belle and Sebastian song, Piazza probably had the most impressive hitting campaign this side of Josh Gibson: 40 homers, 124 RBI, and a .362 batting