

THE SKENES START

It took eleven starts.

I think that is the latest moment where you'd have to admit that Paul Skenes was very probably the best pitcher in baseball. In that eleventh start, Skenes threw seven no-hit innings against the first-place Brewers. He struck out eleven of the 23 batters he faced, walked one, and also hit one. The performance dropped his season's ERA down to 1.90.

Anyway, he convinced someone: Skenes was selected as the starting pitcher for the All-Star game.

That is a *mighty* big leap.

Skenes was selected as the first player in the 2023 amateur draft in June. He went to the minors and threw one inning in rookie ball, three innings in Single-A, and two innings in Double-A. He started the 2024 season in Triple-A and allowed exactly *three* runs over 27 innings, striking out 45 of the batters he faced. He was pitching in the major leagues by May 11th. He was starting the All-Star game in July.

Speed run.

There are very, very, *very* few pitchers in baseball history who hit the majors and forced their way into the conversation for best in the game.

Well, it certainly feels that way. Is that true? Let's actually find some contexts for Paul Skenes.

We can start with the obvious one: Skenes started the All-Star game in his rookie year. That must be a first.

Of course it's not. He is actually the fifth pitcher to start the All-Star game in a rookie season:

Year	Player	W-L	ERA	IP	K
1962	D.Stenhouse	6-4	3.03	95	58
1976	Mark Fidrych	9-2	1.78	101.1	43
1981	Fer.Valenzuela	9-4	2.45	110	103
1995	Hideo Nomo	6-1	1.99	90.1	119
2024	Paul Skenes	6-0	1.9	66.1	89

Dave Stenhouse was a curious selection: he started the second All-Star game in 1962.

Stenhouse was a pitcher for the American League, and you'd be hard pressed to find a worse group of All-Stars. Somehow, the AL won: Stenhouse pitched two innings and allowed a run, and then the phamous phalanx of Ray Herbert, Hank "Wrath of God" Aguiere, and Milt Pappas kept the junior circuit in the lead.

Mark Fidrych you probably know about: the Bird blazed into baseball like a comet in 1976: a goofy kid from the 495 beltway of Massachusetts who didn't know that you were supposed to act a certain way if you were in the major leagues, and didn't care. You can get away with that if you're winning, and for a summer all he did was win.

The late, great Fernando Valenzuela and Hideo Nomo were trailblazers whose starts in the majors at least matched Fidrych.

After a couple bullpen stints in 1980, Tommy Lasorda gave Fernando the ball on Opening Day, and the screwballing Mexican threw a shutout. He gave up one run in his next start (a complete game) and then threw three more shutouts. He allowed one run in a complete game and then another shutout, and then the magic dissipated: he gave up a woeful two runs in the next complete game. The Dodgers won anyway: he started the year 8-0.

There is a direct line between Hideo Nomo's breakout performance in 1995, and the great Japanese pitchers who are crowding major league rosters (particularly *one* roster) today. Nomo single-handedly dissipated the illusion that Japanese players could not compete against American talent, and he did so in spectacular fashion, striking out tons of hitters with his hesitation windup.

Of the five, the only one who compares to Skenes is Valenzuela. Stenhouse was a twenty-eight-year-old whose season was more luck than greatness. Nomo was older, too: twenty-six when he came to the Dodgers and an ace for the Osaka Buffaloes already.

Fidrych...I don't want to take away anything from Mark Fidrych, who had one of the indelible seasons in baseball history. But he was a pitcher running on luck in 1976, and it is highly unlikely that he was going to