

Baseball historian marks in books two millionth run

By Ed Breen

John Thorn, who is paid to keep track of such things, summed it up nicely: “What does it mean, two million runs?” Thorn said. “Absolutely nothing. But that’s what makes it fun.”

Thorn, who is the official historian of Major League Baseball, was talking about what Josh Donaldson did a couple of weeks ago, on Saturday afternoon May 29, when he crossed home plate without much fanfare and certainly little excitement. It was one of those trot-home-from-third-base on a ground rule double early in an average mid-season game. It scored a run for the Minnesota Twins in a game against the Kansas City Royals. Nothing more. One of probably two or three dozen scored that day by big leaguers from Boston to San Diego.

The sort of thing only baseball nerds keep track of, the sort of thing your dad might have taught you how to put in the score book when you were a kid and leaning the subtleties of the game.

But it was, nonetheless, the two millionth time in the history of the game that a baserunner had safely arrived at home plate. Run scored. Put it in the books. Put it on the scoreboard.

Let me explain. There were people who had been watch-

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A MOMENT

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ing for this for some time. They knew it would come in the last couple of days of May. Just didn’t know what day, what ball park, what inning, what baserunner, what circumstances. When that Saturday began, the run total was 1,999,977.

Why, it might have come on of one of those four-baggin’, round-trippin’, base-clearin’ circuit clouts. That’s what my old friend and colleague Chuck Wanninger calls a home run with the bases loaded. It might have been a walk-off home run to win a game in the bottom of the ninth inning somewhere. But it wasn’t. It was a run forced home in the most pro-

saic, dumbest way imaginable in baseball. A ground rule double.

And it wasn’t scored by a superstar. Not an Anthony Rizzo or Javier Baez, but by a 35-year-old journeyman infielder who was drafted by the Cubs a long time ago and has since played for Oakland, Toronto, Cleveland and Atlanta before settling in with the Minneapolis club last year.

Told by reporters after the game that the two millionth run had come across on his watch as Twins manager, Rocco Baldelli said simply, “I’ll be honest with you; I don’t know what to think.”

And, really, nobody else does either, which is kind of odd considering that baseball in the computer age has become obsessed with data-mining, with massaging mountains of numbers: batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, saves, blown saves, ERA, pitch count. Why, a month ago a pitcher who was throwing a no-hitter into the seventh or eighth inning was taken out by the manager because he had reached his maximum pitch count. Absurd, But I digress.

This whole thing goes back to the first baseball game of record, on April 22, 1876, which was only a couple of months before Gen. Custer lost it all at the Little Big



Josh Donaldson scored the two millionth run

Horn. The first run in that first game was scored by Tim McGinley, a catcher for the Boston Red Stockings, the forebears of today’s Atlanta Braves. We know he scored in the top of the second inning at Philadelphia, as Boston beat Philadelphia, 6-5, in the first game of the first season.

Eight teams in the league scored 3,066 runs in that first season. Over parts of three centuries, they and their ball-playing descendants have added hundreds of thousands more.

Two-hundred and twenty-one-thousand games later, the millionth run was scored. That was by Bob Watson of the Houston Astros on May 4,

1975. And big league baseball made a big deal of it

Watson’s run was the cap of a century of baseball – or at least Major League Baseball thought so – and it ended a weeks-long promotional campaign that featured countdown clocks in stadiums across the country, great speculation about who would score the run — and a million Tootsie Rolls for the guy who did it. Just for the record, Watson gave a half-million Tootsie Rolls each to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

And now comes this: All these numbers and celebrations are probably wrong because teams and leagues came and went in the early days of

professional baseball. The official numbers are based on only the National League and American League. The Federal League and the Union Association and several others would add several seasons of stats, including, yes, runs scored.

And finally, this bit of good news: After too much study, Major League Baseball has finally decided to include the records and statistics and accomplishments of the Negro League.

With the change, more than 3,400 players from seven distinct Negro leagues that operated between 1920 and 1948 will be recognized as major leaguers. And the statistical records will be updated.

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