

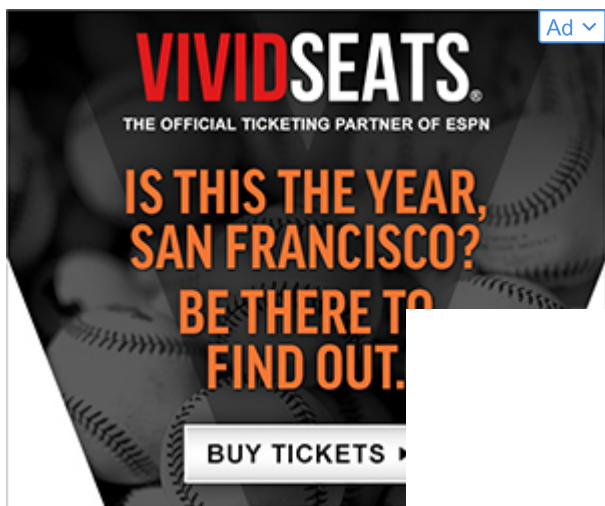


**From a Ph.D. to RBIs: How Farhan Zaidi left Berkeley and became a baseball pioneer**

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**Indians' Carrasco not expected to miss time**

CLEVELAND INDIANS 1h



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NEW YORK YANKEES 9h - Coley Harvey

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LOS ANGELES DODGERS 5h

**Wheeler homers, strikes out 11 in rout of Phillies**

NEW YORK METS , PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES 14h

**MLB looks at Harper's rant; no call on discipline**

# From a Ph.D. to RBIs: How Farhan Zaidi left Berkeley and became a baseball pioneer



Farhan Zaidi is a Canadian-born, Philippine-raised 42-year-old of Pakistani descent who went to MIT and has a Ph.D. in behavioral economics from UC Berkeley. He also -- oh, by the way -- runs one of baseball's foundational franchises.  
 Brian Rothmuller/Icon Sportswire



**Tim Keown**  
 ESPN Senior Writer

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**FARHAN ZAIDI'S FIRST** face-to-face confrontation as the baseball boss of the [San Francisco Giants](#) came from a stranger. Zaidi stood in front of a group of season-ticket holders at a January event and listened to one of his customers ask if he was serious about occasionally using a one-inning opener instead of a conventional starting pitcher. The slightly accusatory tone exposed the questioner's view on the matter, but Zaidi knew the topic was bound to arise after he had suggested to local reporters during the winter meetings that using an opener was a possibility. His reasoning -- it's pure fantasy for a team like the Giants to expect five starters to make 34 starts each, pitcher usage is undergoing a reconsideration, and the [Tampa Bay Rays](#) won 90 games in part by relying on an opener -- was inarguable, but it was still enough to kindle a small controversy. In the aftermath, the Giants' two crustiest starters, [Madison Bumgarner](#) and [Jeff Samardzija](#), denounced the idea in terms that sounded

vaguely threatening. Just try it, they grumbled, hands hovering over holsters. The job had barely started, and here was Zaidi, rolling up a dusty road in the Old West behind the wheel of a Tesla.

He is accustomed to being an object of curiosity, so the wariness emanating from those players and this crowd barely registered. His background reads like a fictional construct, or maybe a Mad Lib brought to life: a Canadian-born, Philippine-raised 42-year-old of Pakistani descent who went to MIT and has a doctorate in behavioral economics from UC Berkeley, who now -- oh, by the way -- runs one of the foundational franchises in Major League Baseball.

Along with the curiosity, Zaidi knows, comes skepticism. He was hired by the Giants as president of baseball operations after four years and two World Series as general manager of the [Los Angeles Dodgers](#), which brings a heightened level of suspicion among Northern Californians. Standing there in his first public event, with his wide black-rimmed glasses, slightly gapped smile and gentle nature, he looked nothing like their idea of a baseball guy.

And so he decided to answer the season-ticket holder's question with a question of his own:

"If I told you using an opener would *definitely* improve your chances of winning on a certain day, how many of you would *still* not want to use it?"

His premise was inarguable, genius: Whatever you think of me, and regardless of who pitches and for how long, *who says no to winning?* Who among you, men and women who have shelled out thousands and thousands of dollars for ballgames, cannot unite behind the shared joy of victory?

The group was too big to canvass individually, so Zaidi said: "Let me hear you boo."

And these men and women, the corporate networkers and the lifelong fans alike, cupped their hands around their mouths, aimed them at the smiling man at the front of the room, and booed.

**THE BOOS CARRIED** the sound of the central conflict that exists within the game: the fear that numbers are overtaking people. It's everywhere, really, not just baseball. Enter a search for a product online and you're immediately

targeted with ads for related items. If you like that, you might like this. Unpredictability is being algorithm-ed out of our lives, and our games are among the rare places that hold the promise of the unexpected. Those people booing Zaidi had their own data set. They'd seen the Giants win three World Series in five years despite never being considered the best team. They'd seen their manager draw on experience and intuition to make decisions that contradicted empirical data -- but still worked. Their connection to the game is visceral, not analytical. The idea that ballplayers can be reduced to ambulatory barcodes, people machined to complete a limited and specialized task that fits within a greater system, extracts the joy from the experience.

Some people believe games can be won by piling the information high enough. *If you like sacrifice flies, you might like a swing with a 30-degree launch angle.* Others, like the ones in Zaidi's audience, love the game precisely because of its illogic. They refuse to accept a world in which a third baseman spends half the game playing short right field, and they want to believe that the guy standing at the plate with one out and the winning run on third is going to succeed through the sheer force of his own desire -- perhaps propelled by their own hoarse cheering -- and not because a spreadsheet indicates he's the best option to lift the ball in the air against a right-handed sinkerball pitcher.

What these people believe in -- because they swear they've seen it -- is magic.

Zaidi stood before them, the future of baseball staring into its obstinate past, absorbing the boos with a bemused grin. I guess they'd rather lose traditionally than win nontraditionally, he thought. "It was a little eye-opening for me," he says, "but this is how I feel about everything in baseball: We should be intellectually curious and strategic and explore anything that gives us a better chance to win." And so, with that, he found himself in another familiar position: forced to prove, in whatever way possible, that he loves the game as much as they do.

Billy Beane says he and David Forst knew within the first 10 minutes of his interview that they would hire Zaidi to work for the A's. Michael Zagaris/MLB Photos via Getty Images

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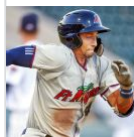
**HE CAN'T EXPLAIN** what drew him to baseball with any more certitude than someone can explain the allure of a certain style of music or a particular piece of art. He just knows he had to be the only 9-year-old in Manila who convinced his

father, Sadiq, who worked as a project manager at the Asian Development Bank, to subscribe to USA Today by mail so he could come home from school and sit down with three-day-old box scores while his younger brother, Jaffer, waited his turn. He had to be the only T-baller in Manila who checked the walk-in-closet-sized American bookstore at Seaport Compound for baseball books every day before practice. And he is definitely the only 9-year-old whose persistence was rewarded one day in the spring of 1986 by the random and nearly mystical presence of one -- one! -- copy of the 1986 "Bill James Baseball Abstract."

#### EDITOR'S PICKS



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[Law: The most loaded minor league rosters to start 2019](#)



[The most feared lineups in baseball](#)

"I've never worn out a book the way I wore out that one," Zaidi says. He was first entranced by James' whimsical way with words and numbers, and then obsessed with James' Hall of Fame Monitor, which caused him to assess every player based on his Hall of Fame credentials. "In a weird way, I had an unreasonable standard for greatness in baseball," he says. "I thought of every player like, 'Oh, is he a Hall of Famer?' That was my demarcation on whether or not you were a great player."

He collected baseball cards and rooted for the Blue Jays and bugged his parents to take him to games during the family's annual summer trip to the United States. In the early '90s, when Farhan was in his early teens, he and Jaffer got word that a couple of big league games per week were telecast on the Far East Military Network, so they convinced their father to subscribe to that, too.

He excelled academically, graduating from the International School Manila and heading to MIT. As a freshman, he asked a fellow resident of his dorm where he

came from. "I was born in Mauritius but raised in Singapore," the guy answered. Zaidi said, "Dude, that's so random. I can't believe what a random background you have." Then he stopped. "It was an epiphany," he says. "I looked at everybody around me and thought, *They probably think I'm that random, too*. You just go about your life thinking your life circumstance is normal, because you're the one living it."

Farhan's younger brother, Jaffer, says, "'Where are you from?' is an easy question for most people. Our background made that answer complicated. It always felt inadequate to pick one place."

Zaidi worked for the Boston Consulting Group after MIT and before Berkeley, but the baseball thing stayed with him. At the time, the only avenue for someone of his intellect and background was probably avocational journalism -- Baseball Prospectus was around, but not much else. The true merger of analytics and baseball operations was a few years away. And then came the second book that changed his life, Michael Lewis' "Moneyball."

Shortly after reading the book, in the course of one of his procrastination-induced trips through MLB job postings while at Berkeley, Zaidi found a listing for a baseball operations assistant with the Oakland A's. He saw it hours before it expired, and he scrambled to get his application downloaded just under the deadline. The A's responded with an interview request, and Zaidi crammed for two weeks, studying 18 hours a day. The job posting listed requirements that included fluency in four different coding languages, and he set a goal of being conversant in at least two of them. To separate himself from other applicants, he spent several days making individual and team projections based on the A's roster. He woke up one morning, looked on ESPN.com and saw Tim Hudson in a Braves cap. He went back to his projections, updating them with Juan Cruz, Dan Meyer and Charles Thomas and without Hudson. Two days later, he woke up and saw All-Star pitcher Mark Mulder in a Cardinals cap. Another major Billy Beane trade. Zaidi sighed and redid his projections one more time. "They didn't make it easy on me," he says.

He arrived for the interview 30 minutes early and called Jaffer from the parking lot. Together they wondered whether Farhan would get to meet Beane, his idol, and when he walked into the office he discovered he would interview with Beane and assistant GM David Forst, in Beane's office at the Coliseum. It's funny what the brain chooses to remember, and to this day Zaidi admits he was fixated on Beane's size. He kept thinking, man, this guy's enormous, as he

fought the urge to run out of the room, call Jaffer and tell him he just met Billy Beane.

Beane's memory sticks in two places: (1) He and Forst knew within the first 10 minutes that Zaidi was the guy for the job; and (2) Zaidi's clothing that day was, in Beane's words, "a semi-olive drab GI Joe suit with sleeves that didn't reach his wrists." A thick folder sat on the couch next to him, untouched, and Zaidi struggled to identify the right moment to gracefully enter its contents into the conversation. "I didn't want to be like, 'Oh, hey -- look what I did,'" he says. At one point, Beane mentioned a consultant the team had hired to run some win-loss projections. This was the opening Zaidi was waiting for.

"Oh, that's interesting," he said. "I did some projections of my own if you'd like to see them." Without waiting for a response, and with as much theater as he could possibly summon, Zaidi reached for the folder.

**IT SHOULD BE** noted that Zaidi wasn't just a student in the doctorate program at Cal. He was a star, the kind of guy who took second-year courses in his first year and was given the academic equivalent of the program's MVP award. When he interviewed with the A's, he had just finished a study on the effect government investment in infrastructure can have on poverty rates in Ghana. His adviser thought the study had ramifications that could impact global poverty.

"They were pretty bullish on my future as an academic," Zaidi says. "I had a set of academic papers I could have taken into the job market."

#### WHO'S NEXT?



For more on the athletes and ideas that represent the future of sports, check out the May issue of [ESPN The Magazine](#).

- [Nick Bosa is ready for a triumphant return](#)
- [Fran Belibi is the future of the WNBA...if she wants to be](#)
- [Will this tech experiment change football forever?](#)
- [Can Tyler Murray upend decades of draft convention?](#)

One paper, titled "Top of Mind in Task-Based Environments and Choice Under Risk," was a study of irrational decision-making, and how humans tend to, in Zaidi's words, "overweight low-probability events and underweight high-probability events." He used the case of a Tom Brady rookie card, valued at roughly \$500, as an example. Consumers were purchasing overpriced packs of cards on eBay, with a roughly 1 percent chance they could score the valuable card. As it turned out, the price of the packs had been jacked up so disproportionately that a savvy investor would have been wise to simply purchase a Brady card for \$500.

There are other, more somber examples of overstating low-probability events -- earthquakes, plane crashes -- but in baseball, Zaidi's favorite small-probability event is the industry-wide reluctance to use the backup catcher. "Oh, what if he gets hurt?" Zaidi says. "Then we don't have a catcher and disaster will strike." Managers will use pitchers as pinch hitters in game-deciding situations rather than take the risk of being without a catcher, and Zaidi says, "The likelihood of the catcher getting hurt in the last two or three innings of a game is tiny. But



when you're making this decision, you're not thinking, *There's a tiny chance*. You're thinking, *There's a chance*."

After he accepted the job with the A's, Zaidi called Ted Miguel, his professor in the Ph.D. program at Cal and a friend from their undergraduate days at MIT.

"I'm leaving the program," Zaidi said. "I'm going to work for the A's."

After a pause intended to keep him from saying the wrong thing, Miguel said, "What are you *talking* about?" Miguel figured Zaidi was going to give baseball a shot, maybe six months, before returning to the program. Consider it a hiatus, Miguel told himself. Because, really, how do you go from studying solutions for global poverty in one of the world's most prestigious graduate programs to devoting your professional life to figuring out whether a minor league pitcher's fly-ball rate will translate to the Oakland Coliseum?

"I knew how much he loved sports," Miguel says, "so I knew it was a unique opportunity. I thought it was way cooler than most, but the mainstream academics -- they felt blindsided by it. Here was one of their star students, someone who they saw becoming a professor at Princeton or Yale, and all of a sudden he's gone -- to work for a *baseball* team."

Zaidi called Stefano DellaVigna, his doctorate adviser at Cal.

"You mean like, for the summer?" DellaVigna asked. "Two or three months?"

"No," Zaidi said. "I'm going to start working full time in the A's data office."

"But you're doing great here, Farhan. You could do such great things."

He would eventually return to Berkeley and finish his doctorate while working for the A's, but at the time Zaidi told DellaVigna, "I know what you're thinking, but just bear with me."

This was 2004, one year post-"Moneyball," so Beane and Forst weren't surprised that a brilliant academic like Zaidi was sitting there, sleep-deprived, in an ill-fitting suit with a folder full of genius on the couch next to him. It was the advent of the age Beane considers baseball's renaissance, when the A's and other franchises began to compete with the biggest tech companies for the smartest people. The runner-up for Zaidi's job, which attracted 1,500 applicants

and paid roughly \$30,000 a year, was Yale graduate Michael Fishman, now an assistant GM with the Yankees.

"You look at these people and tell me analytics is ruining the game?" Beane asks. "No, it's making it *so much better*."

Zaidi "was able to park himself in both camps," Beane says -- the new-school analytics guys and the hardened baseball vets. Michael Zagaris/MLB Photos via Getty Images

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**HOW DO YOU** know what a big leaguer looks like when your baseball career topped out as a junior in a Philippine high school? Zaidi went on scouting trips through minor league towns. He watched high school and college prospects with amateur scouts. He asked questions and listened to the answers. His disarming personality and self-deprecating humor -- his ease amid the nonstop curiosity and rampant skepticism -- softened even the most hardened baseball men.

"What he did wasn't easy," Beane says. "He was able to park himself in both camps."

During the 2012 offseason, Beane and Forst put Zaidi on the case of a free-agent Cuban outfielder. The entire database on [Yoenis Cespedes](#) was an insane workout video and 36 at-bats in the Dominican winter league. Zaidi used that miniscule sample size to put together a rookie-year projection and a recommendation that the A's spend \$36 million to sign him. Zaidi's projection: a .265 average and 25 homers. Cespedes' rookie year: .292 and 23.

I suggest to Zaidi that baseball is perhaps the only profession where you have to live down a CV as accomplished as his. He laughs loudly and says the uniquely American obsession with college as a class signifier evaporates once he steps on the field. In front offices, the success of one-time outliers such as Theo Epstein (Yale) and Forst (Harvard) has changed that, probably forever, but perceived intellectuals are still viewed with distrust by a vast amount of those who feel the only men who can accurately assess a player's worth are those who've spent half a lifetime fouling pitches off their shins. They lament the fall of the wall between the front office and the manager's office. In particular, they bristle at the amount of input Zaidi and Andrew Friedman had on the Dodgers' lineup decisions -- no [Cody Bellinger](#) or [Max Muncy](#) against left-handed starters in the World Series, a fear of allowing starting pitchers to face the lineup a third time,

the pregame and postgame conferences in Dave Roberts' office. A big part of the industry lives in mortal fear of the smart guys coming to take away their game.

Zaidi role-plays both sides of a typical conversation:

"Where did you go to school?"

"Oh, in the Northeast."

"Oh, where in the Northeast?"

"Ah, Boston," he says, swiping the word out of the air, no big deal, hoping it might end the inquisition.

He laughs again.

"You try to put off actually naming the school," he says. "You stall, and you hope at some point along the line they'll give up on asking you where you went. Once they hear you went to MIT, or you have a Ph.D., then there's a whole new set of circumstances to deal with. You worry about how that's going to affect people's perception of how you view the game, or how relatable you are."

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Farhan Zaidi spent four years and made two World Series as general manager of the Dodgers -- which brings a heightened level of suspicion among Northern Californians. Jesse Rieser for ESPN

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**ABOUT A DECADE** ago, Beane did a series of commercials for a Ford dealership in San Jose, California. He refused monetary compensation and instead brokered a deal to give a certain number of his front-office employees free vehicles. This was universally viewed as an admirable act of generosity, but Zaidi -- after first seeing a couple of the commercials -- decided he couldn't accept the free car.

#### **Baseball Tonight podcast with Buster Olney**

ESPN's Buster Olney leads the discussion of the latest news and notes around baseball with the game's top analysts. [Listen](#)



"Farhan decided it was more important for him to rag on me for the commercials than take the car," Beane says. "He couldn't do both with a

clear conscience. He would walk around the office quoting from those things constantly. Even *I* had to admit it was hilarious."

For a fertile comic mind like Zaidi's, the material was abundant. The scripts displayed a mystifying reliance on simplicity. "Simply put, this is an amazing time to buy a Ford," Beane says in one. In another: "Consider buying a Frontier Ford. These are simple words, but it's a very important action." In one spot, Beane's hands are stuffed in the front pockets of his khakis the entire shoot. Zaidi's favorite, though, was a holiday-themed bit in which Beane proclaimed, "It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas around here."

"He just killed me," Beane says. "He would walk around the office just howling."

The Zaidi laugh is effortless and charming, an invitation, and it edges gradually into the conversation until it becomes a vital part of it. It is easy to understand how Zaidi's laugh has acquired its own level of microfame within the organizations he has worked. Zaidi's boss in Los Angeles, Dodgers president Andrew Friedman, recorded the laugh once, with the intention of making it his ringtone whenever Zaidi called him. Friedman could never figure out the mechanics of the transfer, so he's left with only a voice memo of Zaidi's laugh. "Surprisingly, Farhan was not particularly interested in helping me figure out the technology of it," Friedman deadpans.

In his down time in Oakland, when he wasn't writing lengthy, detailed late-night/early-morning treatises advocating for the call-up of then-minor league first baseman Brandon Moss, Zaidi frequented a message board devoted to his favorite NBA team, the Chicago Bulls. Going by Frank -- his Anglicized name, aka his Starbucks name -- Zaidi would suppress a bubbling desire to divulge his true identity as he argued with other anonymous posters about the direction of the team.

"He would sit there and seethe," Beane says. "He always wanted to write, 'I know what I'm talking about because I am a highly paid executive with the A's.'" Beane imagines this being written in all caps, because it's funnier that way. "He never did it, though," Beane says. "Unfortunately."

Miguel, the Cal professor, says, "Farhan's such an unusual guy because he's so good at so many things. Student, researcher, economist -- and he's such a jovial dude. He's like the Dalai Lama: a spiritual, happy dude."