

Eric Thames and the Transformative Power of Boredom

by Travis Sawchik - May 10, 2017
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PITTSBURGH – Baseball players are often late risers, working second-shift hours. As such, [Eric Thames](#) typically began his days in Changwon, South Korea, around 11 a.m. local time. He went through a series of stretching exercises in his apartment and then departed for lunch.

His home was about a mile from the ballpark in Changwon, a southeastern port city positioned on an inlet that flows to the East China Sea. For lunch, there were five or six American-style style restaurants nearby. There was a burger joint, Italian and Mexican restaurants. Web sites created by American expats documented all the options. He would eat alone, reading his Kindle or iPhone, skimming through articles. He would then walk, or travel by Onewheel skateboard, to Massan Stadium, the home of the NC Dinos. He would arrive early, and hit early, alone, for 30 or 40 minutes. Afterward, he would read more in the clubhouse as he tried to fill in the hours before first pitch.

During most of his time with the Dinos — owned by NCSoft, a South Korean video-game developer — Thames had only two American teammates and both had brought their families along with them. After home games, or on the road, Thames would often retire to his apartment or hotel room. For three years of his life, and of his professional career, Thames was often alone.

“I was so bored over there,” Thames told FanGraphs. “The language barrier was really tough. For me, it was a lot of time by myself. I didn’t speak any [Korean]. All the other American [players] had families and stuff, so they are with their kids. So I’m just online reading stuff, and I’m bored, and I’m pissed because I’m 0-for-15. ‘Let’s figure out what’s going on here.’ So I started looking up video.”

That's what Thames pinpoints as the beginning of his transformation from a fringe-y major-league player who had gone across the Pacific in search of everyday playing time and a contract — he didn't receive any offers from Japan's NPB clubs — to a breakout star upon his return this spring.

It was boredom, and how he filled in those often wasted minutes and hours, that allowed Thames to reinvent himself. He read. He meditated. He tried to become mindful. "I didn't want to do pleasure reading. I wanted to read books that would give me perspective," Thames said. It allowed him to become a better player.

In his book [The Power of Boredom](#), philosopher Mark Hawkins describes boredom as "spaces in time containing pure creative potential available for self and life transformation."

My friend, college professor, and Bucs Dugout staff writer David Manel [recently noted](#) the call of Gayatri Devi, a professor of English at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, "to lean into boredom."

"Properly understood, boredom helps us understand time, and ourselves," Devi [wrote](#). "Unlike fun or work, boredom is not about anything; it is our encounter with pure time as form and content."

Pure time. Thames had plenty of it, and he tried to maximize it.

It was at some point near the end of the 2014 season with the Dinos, late after a game at his apartment, when Thames stumbled upon a YouTube video of [Barry Bonds](#) on his smartphone. Thames said it was hard to find videos of Bonds *not* hitting home runs. What Thames wanted to find were full at-bats, when Bonds tracked pitches near the zone but didn't swing. After a semi-exhaustive search, he eventually stumbled across video of Bonds' full at-bats for home runs Nos. 70-73 in 2001. He was particularly intrigued by the at-

bats, resulting in his 71st and 72nd home runs, against [Chan Ho Park](#).

“I will never forget it. Chan Ho throws this nasty changeup. It was a pitch anyone would have swung at, bottom of the zone, and Bonds was just like ‘Nope.’ It was unbelievable,” Thames said. “I was like, how did he take a pitch like that? I’m like, ‘It’s amazing to be able to zone in.’ So I started studying strike-zone approaches and stuff like that. It’s crazy once I let go of my ego. If the ball is here, I will lay a good swing on it and whatever happens, happens. I’m not going to let me get in my own way and get myself out.”

Thames wanted to find a way to improve his approach. While he’d hit 37 home runs in his first year in South Korea, he had struck out 99 times in 125 games. In 2012, his last year in the majors, he struck out at a 30% rate.

“When I went to Korea, I was the the same hitter I was before I left,” Thames said. “I was swinging at everything... [In Korea,] I started to throw away at-

bats, swinging at three sliders in the dirt, [thinking] ‘Oh, I got to hit a home run.’”

While Thames’ plate discipline had not changed much in his first year, pitchers had begun to pitch around him because of his home-run totals.

“They didn’t want to pitch to me,” Thames said. “Unless they were going to intentionally walk me, I wasn’t going to take a walk.”

So it was there, in the dark of his apartment, he found the approach he wanted to try and emulate. He read about how Bonds looked in a “three-and-a-half-inch zone” for his pitch — and, of course, Bonds rarely missed a pitch when it was thrown into that zone.

He began to remedy the poor habits, the swinging-at-everything approach that had exiled him to the minors in 2013 and then the second-best pro league in Asia in 2014. With language still a barrier to working with his Dinos coaches and teammates, Thames arrived at his improved process alone. He began a practice of visualization, of imagining a pitch of a certain type, in a certain location, approaching home plate. He would balance a tablet on a counter or tabletop in his apartment and watch video of pitches, trying to decide whether to swing or lay off of them in real time with bat in hand.

“I kind of like swallowed my pride and said ‘Hey, I really want to get on base,’” Thames said.

He employed the same visualization practice behind the batting cage while teammates took swings. And he does the same practice now in the on-deck circle of major-league games, in his hotel on the road, or in pre-game cage work.

The breakout happened in 2015, his second season in South Korea. He walked (103) more than he struck out (91) and posted a .497 on-base mark and 1.288 OPS. He smashed 47 home runs.

Said Pirates pitcher [Josh Lindblom](#), who faced Thames in the KBO: “Great hitter. Probably the best hitter I’ve seen over a two-year period in my whole career. It was unbelievable. Seeing his success now, it’s no surprise to me that he’s come over here and doing what he’s doing.”

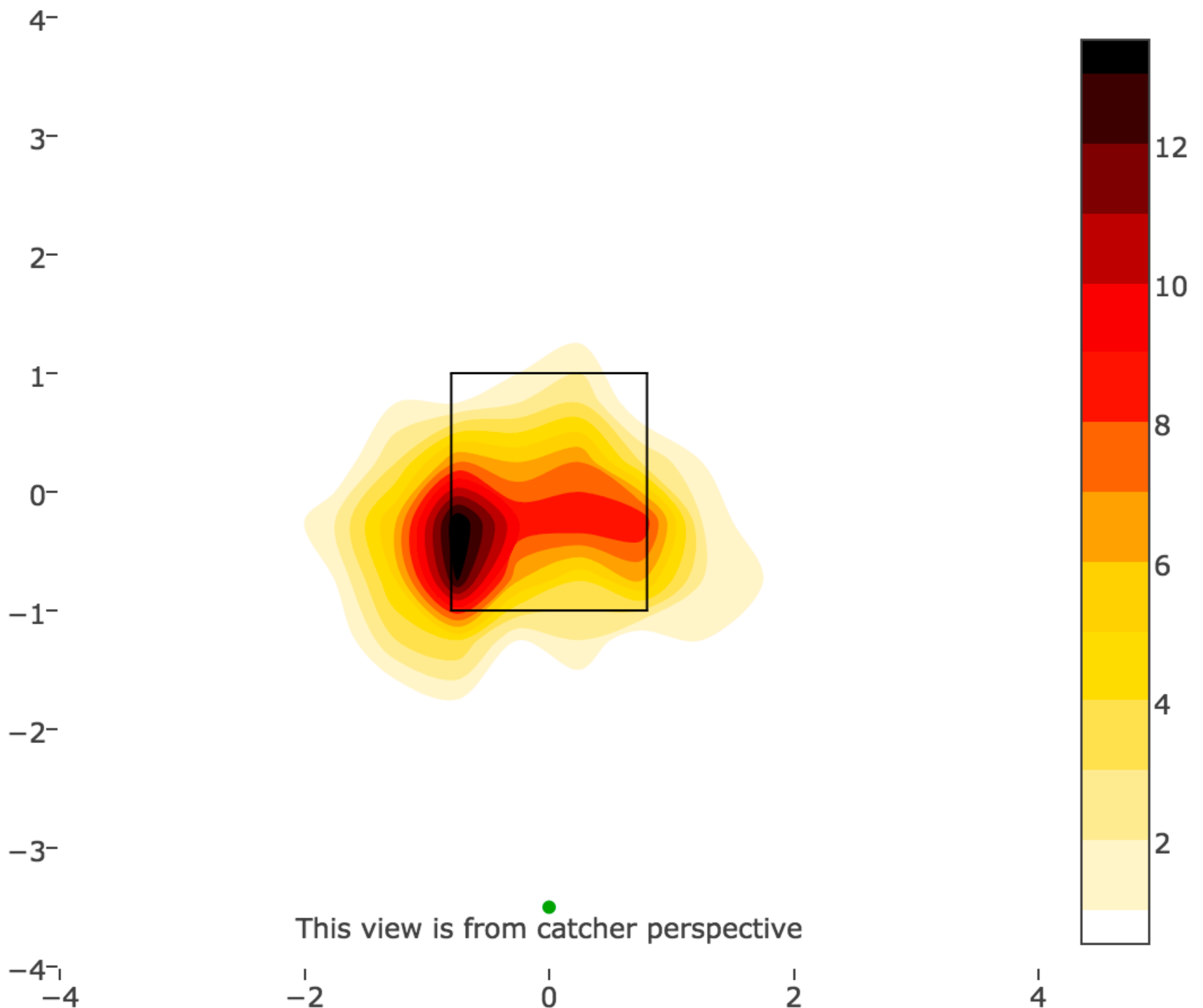
Thames says if you notice his pre-swing routine a lot of it is the left-handed slugger going into his load position, triggering his hands back, but not swinging.

“I do my load and stride [and ask,] ‘Is it a strike?’ I have to constantly have that repetition. During the game it’s kind of crazy of how your mind just picks up those habits,” Thames said. “Imagine a pitch in this zone, this zone, keep seeing it. Then hone in on it in the game. Even now, I do a lot of strike-zone visualization. I imagine, like the pitcher today [[Chad Kuhl](#)]. If he goes slider down-and-in, I’m constantly thinking ‘Ball, ball, ball.’ That kind of mental preparation has been the biggest thing for me.”

Among all qualified hitters this season, Thames has the [lowest out-of-zone swing rate](#) at 17.6% entering play Thursday. Thames had an out-of-zone swing rate of 35.6% in 2012 and 36.8% in 2011.

Consider a heat map of all his swings this season:

Eric Thames Heatmap



That is a data-density chart of a hitter who has zeroed in. He believes that allows some unconscious process that's he has cultivated to unlock and react to pitches in-game.

“It’s crazy how the body works, too,” Thames said. “If you just sit in a certain zone, and shut the mind off, and you get a nasty curveball, you just kind of react and hit a home run.”

For instance, earlier this year in Cincinnati, Thames was not sitting on a [Wandy Peralta](#) fastball. Peralta began Thames with three straight sliders,

including two swinging strikes. Thames was not looking for a fastball on a 1-2 pitch, but he was looking for a location.

“He threw a fastball at 96 in on my hands and I turned on it,” Thames said. “I was so shocked. I wasn’t looking for that pitch. I just reacted. That’s probably the best part about baseball, those athletic reactions.

“When that happened, I was blown away.”

Thames said he was fortunate to land the apartment he found Changwon. The living space had high ceilings, wide open space, and it also had hardwood floors.

“I had a lot of space, so I could swing a bat. That was the biggest thing I loved about it,” Thames said. “And it had hardwood floors. If you swing a lot on carpet, it tears up the carpet. I got lucky on that one. A lot of dry swings in that apartment.”

It was there Thames not only slowly adopted a more discerning plate discipline, but it was there that he also rebuilt his swing.

In his apartment, on flights, on team buses traveling from city to city — Thames said there was wifi on the team bus — he was always reading, always researching.

“I go through a million articles a day,” Thames said. “High-school coaches talking about swings — I read everything.”

Thames stumbled upon an interesting article. He couldn’t immediately recall the author or source when speaking to FanGraphs, but it detailed how there was this constant concept of a “flat swing” described by great hitters like [Ted Williams](#) to [Rod Carew](#).

In his previous life as a ballplayer, as a hitter, Thames still had the bat speed and strength he possesses today. While his hulking forearms and biceps have drawn suspicion from teams like the Cubs — “I can’t yell at my mom and dad for giving me these genetics,” Thames said — Thames said he has actually dropped his playing weight from 220 pounds in his first tour in the majors to 210 pounds this season.

But with the Blue Jays, Thames said he tried to “muscle up” on the ball. “I was throwing a lot of power out of the window,” he said.

He began to read more and more about hitting philosophies — from private instructors to hitters of past generations. He developed a concept of trying to keep his bat longer through the zone and to use it as “a whip.”

“Whereas before I was one of these guys trying to hit homer,” Thames said. “Now, I am trying to use the bat as a whip and let my hips pull. It’s crazy, the physics, the biomechanical [information available]. I had that mindset to learn and apply.”

Thames does not put himself in the fly-ball revolution camp, or the antithetical disciples of chopping wood. Rather, he thinks his swing is a “lost art.”

“Guys are talking about swinging down or swinging up,” Thames said. “[The ideal swing path] is like an airplane landing. I’m the happy medium.”

To improve flexibility in his swing he began stretching exercises and following [Kinstretch](#) techniques. Said Brewers hitting coach [Darnell Coles](#) to Thames earlier this season: “Dude, you look so free and loose right now.” Before, he had always been too tight.

Thames returned to the States with more refined zone, a new swing, and more comfortable with who he was. It allowed him to better accept the failure inherent in playing the game. Maybe it was from reading [Shawn Green](#)’s book

The Way of Baseball: Finding Stillness at 95 mph. Maybe it was from so much time alone with his thoughts, Maybe it was simply about natural maturity. He left at 27, returned at 30.

“I used to be a lot worse, going nuts,” said Thames of his emotions after a poor plate appearance. “Now it’s kind of ‘Whatever.’”

And he’s still learning, still trying to improve. He’s had conversations with Joey Votto about hitting this season, and has worked on creating greater hands-and-hip separation in his swing with the Brewers staff. Thames believe he has undergone a true transformation as a person and hitter, and the process continues.

“That’s why I laugh at all the accusations,” Thames said. “I am taking the same stuff I was taking 15 years ago. I stretch now. I am a smarter player. I process information better. I am not as emotional. I am not using anger in every at-bat. If I foul off a ball, now it’s ‘OK, next pitch.’ I try to be more mature about it.”

While there are those skeptical of Thames, there is a non-cynical explanation for his success. It is tied to taking advantage of those idle moments and hours that are so often missed, and filling the space with curiosity and exploration. With the story of Thames, there is no substitute for time, pure time.