Willie Mays, Duke Snider and Ken Griffey, Jr.

It's no secret that these bigger than life baseball players are all Hall of Fame legends. But what about Mike Trout of the Los Angeles Angels? Or the Pittsburg Pirates' Andrew McCutchen or Carlos Gomez of the Texas Rangers? What do all six of these greats have in common?

If you guessed that none of them were pitchers, you would definitely be on to something. If you've really been doing your homework in the preseason, you would patiently explain that all six were "complete ballplayers," with above-average capabilities in hitting, hitting for power, fielding, throwing and running. If you wanted to show off, you could elaborate that each has at least three qualified recorded data points in one season in each of the five areas rendering them "five-tool players." These are the well-rounded players of field scouts' dreams.

The idea of this quintessential, albeit exceedingly rare player, harkens to another picture of perfection – the bond market. After peaking above 15 percent in 1981, the yield on the benchmark 10-year U.S. Treasury fell in July of last year to a record low of 1.36 percent.

That there is what we call the rally of a lifetime. A major contributor to the mountains of wealth that bonds have generated include the venerable inflation-fighting of one Paul Volcker. The three subsequent boom and bust cycles, largely engineered by Volcker's successors at the Federal Reserve, each made their own contribution and brought greater and greater degrees of intervention to bear on the market and helped push yields lower and lower. In bondland, that translates to prices soaring higher and higher.

Over the years, the castigators were cast aside time and again. As for the few with steel constitutions, who quickly drew parallels between Japan's intrusions and those of the Federal Reserve, let's just say they can retire and rest in peace. They bought 30-year Treasury Strips and buried them, giving new meaning to the beauty of buy and hold. To keep the analogy alive, let's say that at that juncture, the bond market was a four-tool player.

But then suddenly, last summer, something gave way.

Since July, the conventional wisdom has held that bond yields have finally troughed, bringing a denouement to the 35-year bull run. Of course, those comprising the consensus collided in arriving at their conclusions.

Market technicians, aka the chart-meisters, provide the simplest explanation. In 2016, the 10-year yield sunk below 2015's low of 1.64 percent and rose above its high of 2.50 percent. Technicians refer to such boomerang behavior in short spaces of time as "outside events" that mark the beginning of the end of a cycle.

The reflationists point to the pronounced uptick in the industrial metals complex as proof positive that inflation has seen its lows of the cycle. Everything from nickel to rebar to copper and back validated the notion that pipeline and margin pressures were building, especially if you had building a pipeline in mind.

And then we have the bullish economist cabal who insist that gross domestic product is set to accelerate into some sublimely sustainable hyper-drive mode. The increase off the lows in interest rates purely reflects the markets being forward-looking mechanisms and sniffing out the bevy of incendiary economic accelerants. In the event you've just emerged from a medically induced coma, we're talking about small business formation, tax cuts galore and repairing every crumbling bridge and filling every pothole from Bangor to Baja. Oh, and by the way, delivered care of our cuddly Congress, in full, tomorrow.

Lastly, there's the camp with which yours truly would most likely be associated: The Skeptics. As the ridiculous veered into the surreal last year, as nearly a quarter of a trillion in global debt yielded from somewhere south of one percent into deeply negative territory, some of us skeptics began to ask the ye-of-great-faith-in-omnipotent-central-bankers if they grasped the implications of policymakers' intrusions. Did they really believe Mario Draghi could vacuum up a corporate bond market lock, stock and barrel, and his counterpart Hiroki Kuroda an entire stock market and live to tell? Or was exhaustion overcoming exertion?

At the end of the trading day, all four camps' arguments are moot. At least, that's the message the 10-year Treasury is communicating in no uncertain terms. If there is one thing the 10-year can be called upon to deliver, it's consistency, as in behaving in the same way over time so as to be fair and accurate in anticipating the future. Lest you etymologists, pundits and, dare say, traders in our midst be tripped up, try not to confuse consistency with what you believe to be predictability, as in behaving in an expected manner.

You can carry this much, though not all the way to the bank — the bond market should have corrected long ago if history was any judge. Inflation, heck hyperinflation, should have ignited and burned our currency to the ground by now. But that hasn't happened, has it? Unlike so many of you who do indeed deliver on the expectations front (yawn), the bond market has consistently surprised those with cocky certitude calling for sea changes.

You're forgiven if it's been difficult to incorporate a once-in-a-century outlier factor into your decision-making framework. The entrant of over a billion workers into the global workforce, coupled with the building out of the equivalent of the United States in its glorious industrial age, introduced a deflationary impetus that simply doesn't exist in any economics textbook in print today. The weighty subsequent suppressant on yields, combined with the artificiality of central banks butting their way into bond pricing, held rates lower than logic or any econometric models dictated, confounding the esteemed doctorate community.

As for the here and now, worry thee not about the chartists, the inflation worrywarts, the optimists and even the skeptics. The decline in the 10-year yield tells you everything you need to know, and probably more than you'd like to acknowledge.

The simple fact is, the current economic recovery has peaked and rolled over. It's one thing if some subprime auto lender you've never heard of is whining about regulators clamping down on premature repossessions. It's quite another when the data tell you that car inventories are up nearly 10 percent over last year, GM is choking on incentives of its hottest selling pickups and State Farm has just swallowed $7 billion in auto loan underwriting losses (gulp!). Last check these were not hot-money, private-equity-backed fly-by-nighters.

In the event you require yet more proof that the bond scare was just that – scary — Behold! The yield curve flattens! After hitting a wide of 136 hundredths-of-a-percentage-point (basis point) in mid-December – which just so coincided with global bond losses hitting a cool $3 trillion — the difference between the 2-year and 10-year Treasury has narrowed to 112 basis points. Finance 101 tells us that the slimmer the divide between short and long rates, the closer we are to crossing into the netherworld, otherwise known as recession.

This precarious position posits a pondering pause: Exactly where does the Fed fit into the equation? By the looks of things, the post-election Fed has morphed into its answer to Dirty Harry. Odds of a March rate increase have catapulted to 70 percent in the space of three trading days, a tidy trek for academics more apt to move at the pace of molasses in January. And yet, their tough talk is borderline brash.

Take this from **New York Fed President William Dudley** three whole days before the onset of the blackout period ahead of next week's Federal Open Market Committee Meeting begins: "I just think it makes the risks to the outlook a little bit tilted to the upside at this point." When further queried whether the next rate hike should come, 'sooner rather than later,' Dudley replied. "I think that's fair."

As benign as his comments may read, make no mistake, they're fighting words for a Fed that's given new meaning to skittish for the better part of three decades. It's as if Fed officials were contenders within reach of that five-tool status save one that last qualifier – hitting for power with a home run distance of 425 feet or more. Recall that Dudley is Vice Chairman of the Federal Open Market Committee. In other words, his conceding to a 'go' in March cleared the ball way over the fences.

Rather than delve into any (deeply political so as to throw economy into recession) motivations, let's look beyond the next recession, inadvertently induced by an overly aggressive Fed, to the next question: How do policymakers wage that next battle?
Since you ask, this is where baseball reenters the equation, in its positively perfect form, in all its five-tool glory. Fighting the next recession is theoretically where the academics shine brightest and hit their collective pleasure threshold. This is where the bond yields steal home. There's one word for it. Wait for it… "MONETIZATION." The debt doth disappeareth.
It wasn't until a recent and very heated public debate, at which a friendly colleague attempted to put your fearless writer in her place (a mistake), that the height of the stakes became apparent. For starters, we both agreed that the overabundance of debt, not just in the United States, but globally, was problematic. Fair enough. The solution to such an intractable problem was thus by its very definition, tricky bordering on tempestuous.

The good news, he insisted, was that in the end, boys would be boys and men would be men. The overly indebted developed-world economies would march off into the great blue yonder and not return until a gentlemen's agreement has been secured. Pray tell, what form would that take?

In short, not in the neatest of forms. A blanket propaganda campaign would have to be launched educating the clueless public about the virtues of negative interest rates and a cashless society. Upon that sturdy foundation, we could then construct a full-blown monetization of the bloated debt we carry today, one in the same with what we're told is technically irrelevant because models dictate it can be wished away.

Lest you be led astray, there's no cathartic Kumbaya that conveniently follows before the credits roll. Milton Friedman was, and remains to this day, spot on in his observation that there is no such thing as a free lunch. My undaunted debater conceded that there would be losers, mainly emerging nations shouldered with boatloads of dollar-denominated debt and developed nations that were naïve enough to not be burdened with excessive debts. But so be it.

In global credit markets that exceed $200 trillion in outstanding securities, dominated by dollar-denominated debt, I deign to accede that the losers have much to lose indeed. Whether they will take their lumps lying down like lambs, however, remains a much wider, open and heated debate than that which played out on a stage in Austin, Texas. My greatest fear is that the war we will eventually face is of the all-too-real variety, precipitated by the greatest income divide since the years that preceded the Great Depression and the Second

World War.

Rather than focus on such dire potential outcomes, take comfort in the adage that history doesn't precisely repeat itself, but rather merely rhymes. Between now and Sunday, March 2nd, baseball's opening day, relish in the welcome distraction to come. Count your blessings as we count down to the day we hear, "Play Ball!" and spectate with hope for the next five-tool player to make us once again believe.