



BASEBALL BETTING GUIDE

TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR BETTING THE MLB

OUR REGIONAL GUIDE INCLUDES

- TEAM PREVIEWS
- A LOOK AT FUTURES
- MLB STATS TO KNOW



A NORTH STAR FOR FUTURES

By Adam Burke

We've all heard about how money doesn't buy happiness. I don't know, I'm pretty happy when I can use money to buy a plane ticket and take a vacation or purchase those concert tickets that I want.

We've also heard that money doesn't buy championships. The other three major North American professional sports have salary caps, so it's hard to really apply that notion to those, but we can look at what it means in the context of Major League Baseball. (At least until we get a salary cap and salary floor in the next CBA negotiations!)

Objectively, no, money does not buy championships. Dating back to 2011, the most expensive roster in baseball has lifted the Commissioner's Trophy just three times and two of them have been the Dodgers over the last two seasons. But, one thing that we can state is that spending more money than the majority of teams does increase your chances of playing for a championship.

Jensen Lewis, my co-author on this year's MLB Team Previews and co-host of VSIN By The Books, actually had an interesting page in his Google Doc of writeups highlighting the payroll ranks of teams to make it to the World Series, with a side-by-side comparison of the winner and the loser. It was just in there. I don't think it was meant to be the catalyst for a featured article in this year's publication, but it can be something of a north star for those looking to get involved in the World Series futures market.

WORLD SERIES WINNER & RUNNER-UP PAYROLL RANKS

- This is the Opening Day 40-man, taxable roster payroll
- Total payroll in millions

The average payroll rank of the last 14 WS champs is 6.6 with an average payroll of \$218.4 million.

The average payroll rank of the last 14 WS runners-up is 11.0 with an average payroll of \$184.7 million.

As you can see, we've only had three teams outside the top 10 and only one outside the top half of the league in payroll as the champion of October baseball. We've had more outliers get there and lose, including five teams in the bottom half of the league, but we've only had one World Series out of the last 14 with two teams outside the top 10 in payroll.

None of this data is shocking, though I guess it is somewhat shocking to only see the team with the highest payroll in the World Series four times in this data set and the No. 2 team in payroll nowhere to be found. But, as you think about the futures market for 2026, longer shots that have still been willing to spend some money are probably better investments than young teams on the come-up that look promising and tantalizing.

YEAR	WS WINNER	PAYROLL RANK	TOTAL PAYROLL	WS LOSER	PAYROLL RANK	TOTAL PAYROLL
2012	Giants	5th	160.4	Tigers	8th	145.2
2013	Red Sox	3rd	177.8	Cardinals	10th	138.6
2014	Giants	7th	179.8	Royals	19th	111.0
2015	Royals	11th	152.1	Mets	21st	122.7
2016	Cubs	4th	205.9	Indians	21st	117.6
2017	Astros	19th	140.5	Dodgers	1st	253.6
2018	Red Sox	1st	239.5	Dodgers	4th	195.0
2019	Nationals	6th	201.2	Astros	5th	203.8
2020	Dodgers	5th	204.7	Rays	27th	89.9
2021	Braves	13th	172.6	Astros	7th	206.6
2022	Astros	9th	210.7	Phillies	4th	244.4
2023	Rangers	8th	242.1	D-Backs	19th	154.6
2024	Dodgers	1st	353.0	Yankees	3rd	316.2
2025	Dodgers	1st	417.3	Blue Jays	5th	286.1

*Data from Spotrac

DETROIT TIGERS

25-1

The Tigers look to be cracking the top 10 here with Tarik Skubal victorious in arbitration and then more than \$50 million for Framber Valdez and Justin Verlander. That's not what pushes them over the edge for me, though those are some very valuable innings to add to the picture. What is really nice, and what we see with a few of the lower payrolls on there is that they've been teams capable of winning a bad division and then making a run, like the Indians in 2016 and Royals in 2015.

The Tigers have a playoff-worthy pitching staff and any offensive gains will help, plus it appears as though Christopher Ilitch is at the point where he's ready to spend after cutting a lot of pork from the payroll when his father, Mike, went all-in to try and get a title before he passed away. That also means perhaps going out and buying a more expensive Trade Deadline piece as well as they have maybe the easiest path to the postseason in the AL Central.



BOSTON RED SOX

15-1

I like this one less because the path to the postseason is much tougher to navigate, as the Yankees and Blue Jays look strong again, plus the Orioles could be an improved team and the Rays are always pesky. But, this is an ideal confluence of high-priced talent with pre-arb and early-arb up-and-coming talent.

Expensive players are often older with more extensive track records, but higher injury risk profiles. That's why a team needs to be able to have cheap, preferably internally-developed replacements waiting in the wings. In that respect, the Red Sox are in great shape, in that their highly-paid players aren't that old, but there are plenty of options to fill in the gaps. Boston has also produced additional payroll flexibility by locking in guys like Roman Anthony and Kristian Campbell to long-term surplus value deals that are likely to make the books look way better than they are because of the future equity. That often leads to purchasing power at the Trade Deadline.

So, keep in mind that while money doesn't necessarily buy a championship, it surely gives you a much better chance at playing for one.



MLB STATS TO KNOW

By Adam Burke

My go-to line when explaining baseball stats and analytics to people is to say that “they quantify what the eyes can see.” Advanced MLB stats simply paint a better picture than the traditional stats and provide more layers of context to help explain how much a player is helping or hurting his team.

You may watch a game and notice that the center fielder isn't very good defensively. He's getting a late read on fly balls and doesn't have the speed to compensate. He's got a “noodle arm”. Well, the advanced metrics can look at things like “Outs Above Average” or “Defensive Runs Saved” to show how much worse than an “average” fielder that player is.

A lot of traditional metrics fall short. Think about on-base percentage, which is walks plus hits divided by plate appearances $((BB + H) / PA)$. That stat really came to prominence around the time that the Michael Lewis book Moneyball was released in 2003. Batting average had always been the go-to stat, but the whole goal as a hitter is not to make an out. Walks are a big part of that equation, thus OBP became a better indicator of offensive output than BA.

But, let's think more about OBP. Should a home run count the same as a single? Should a double count the same as a walk? With OBP, there is no distinction between the ways of reaching base. Enter wOBA, or weighted on-base average, which is an OBP variant that assigns run values to the manner in which a hitter reaches base. For example, in 2025, a single was worth .882 runs, while a home run was worth 2.037 runs in the formula for wOBA. A walk was worth .691 runs, but a double was worth 1.252. Why? Because doubles increase the chances of scoring a run or driving in a run more than a walk does.

The way I analyze baseball is to utilize the metrics and the statistics to try and find betting opportunities. I don't want readers or listeners to be overwhelmed by the numbers. It's my job to explain what they mean, why they are important and how we can use them in our handicapping to find smart bets to make.

I know these stats and abbreviations can be daunting. My only request is that you keep an open mind throughout the season.

The following are some of the stats that I use in my team previews and will use throughout my daily article and my on-air appearances over the course of the season.

ALTERNATE TEAM STANDINGS METRICS

BASERUNS

In my season previews, I talk about the BaseRuns record. BaseRuns is a “context-neutral environment” that takes all of the individual outcomes, puts them together and spits out expected runs for and against.

Think about these six events in an inning: HR, 1B, 1B, K, K, K. Depending on the order, a team might score three runs (1B, 1B, K, K, HR, K), two runs (1B, HR, K, 1B, K, K), one run (HR, 1B, 1B, K, K, K). The same six outcomes, just in different orders. BaseRuns removes “sequencing”, which is largely random. This also eliminates the randomness of hitting or defending with runners in scoring position. A big disparity between actual record and BaseRuns record might show that a team got lucky or won a lot of close games.

PYTHAGOREAN WIN-LOSS

Pythagorean Win-Loss is a standings metric based on run differential. A team's runs scored and runs against are put into a formula and an expected record is produced. This concept is used across all sports and is sometimes just labeled “Expected W-L”.

TEAM AND PLAYER MLB STATS

FANGRAPHS WINS ABOVE REPLACEMENT PLAYER (fWAR)

Wins Above Replacement Player (WAR) is one of the most comprehensive individual player statistics available. It shows how much value a player has provided relative to his peers. The “f” stands for FanGraphs, which is where I pull my player WAR data from, since I think they do the best job of calculating it.

A player with a fWAR under 1.0 is a replacement-level player, or not a very good one. A player with a 1-2 fWAR is a decent role player or a platoon type of guy. A player with a 2-3 fWAR is a solid player that any team would be happy to have. The scale goes up from there and separates the bad players from the good players and the good players from the great players.

WEIGHTED ON-BASE AVERAGE (wOBA)

wOBA is one of my favorite stats because it does add more context than on-base percentage (OBP). Much like OBP, a high wOBA is good and a low wOBA is bad for hitters. On the flip side, a low wOBA is good and a high wOBA is bad for pitchers. Once again, it just adds another layer of context where the outcomes of reaching base are weighted differently based on their importance.

WEIGHTED RUNS CREATED PLUS (wRC+)

Using wOBA, we can get to a stat called wRC+. With this stat, a player that has a 100 wRC+ is exactly league average. A player with a 120 wRC+ is 20% more productive than a league average player. A player with an 80 wRC+ is 20% less productive than a league average player. Anything over 100 is good, anything under 100 is bad.

The “Plus” means that the stat is park-adjusted and league-adjusted for the run environment. “Park-adjusted” means that there are factors within the formula that account for the way that Coors Field is a better hitter's park than American Family Field or that Fenway Park is a better hitter's park than Tropicana Field.

“League-adjusted” basically means grading on a curve. If a lot of runs are being scored, batters have to be that much productive to be above average. If it is a low run environment, then great hitters will stand out that much more.

K% AND BB%

I don't like using raw strikeout and walk numbers or strikeouts per nine innings (K/9) or walks per nine innings (BB/9). I prefer to use K% and BB%, which is simply the percentage of plate appearances that end in a strikeout (K%) or a walk (BB%). This can be used for both pitchers and hitters.

Last season, the league average K% was 22.6% and the league average BB% was 8.1%.

ATLANTA BRAVES



ADAM BURKE'S NERDY TAKE

Things have changed, but they've also kind of stayed the same for the Braves. Ex-manager Brian Snitker was forced out/stepped down after the season and has taken on an advisory role in the front office. Atlanta simply promoted bench coach Walt Weiss to take over and he shuffled things around, including the appointment of new pitching coach Jeremy Hefner, who was fired by the Mets at the end of last season. The Braves hired Hefner about a month after he was let go, so they moved quickly on the soon-to-be 40-year-old.

Hefner has ties to the Twins, along with new bullpen coach JP Martinez and new third base coach Tommy Watkins. New bench coach Tony Mansolino has ties to the Cleveland

system, as well as the Orioles. These are all organizations that are very forward-thinking, as the Twins were led by former high-ranking Cleveland exec Derek Falvey before he was fired prior to Spring Training, and the Orioles went heavy on analytics when they hired Sig Mejdal and Mike Elias from the Astros. The 62-year-old Weiss had a tough go of it as manager of the Rockies from 2013-16, but he has a way stronger roster here and doesn't have to deal with Coors Field.

While Weiss calls the shots, the most important coach is Hefner, as the drop-off for the Braves pitching staff, which allowed 127 more runs in 2025 compared to 2024, had a lot to do with last season's poor finish.

HITTING

The three-year tumble for the Atlanta offense is something to discuss as well. The 2023 version led MLB in wOBA by 18 points, posting an obscene .359 mark with a 126 wRC+, slashing .276/.344/.501. To put that into perspective, the 2023 Braves are the only MLB team to ever slug over .500 as a group. The closest is the 2019 Astros during the juiced ball season, a season in which four teams broke the league record for home runs in a season. The 2023 Braves tied that record with 307. Rafael Devers had a .271/.351/.500 slash that season, so Atlanta hitters collectively performed at his level.

Since then, the Braves have had wOBAs of .315 (12th) and .315 (13th). Admittedly, I have no idea why 2023 was such an extreme outlier, with three 40+ homer guys and two more with 33+. Things have very much leveled off since then and the Braves had four guys with 20+ dingers last season, but nobody hit 30. Ronald Acuna Jr. would have, but he was limited to 95 games recovering from an ACL tear and then from some Achilles inflammation. Most of the lineup is

pretty similar heading into 2026, though the Braves did get rid of Marcell Ozuna and picked up Mike Yastrzemski and Mauricio Dubon. Based on their batted ball data, the Braves were pretty unlucky last season with a .399 SLG and a .418 xSLG. They're banking on track records and it's hard to argue.

PITCHING

While there are some players who may need to revamp their swings, work on their launch angles, or simply find another way to get back to their usual standards on the offensive side, the pitching staff just needs to stay healthy. Bryce Elder led the team in starts with 28 and innings with 156.1 last season and hung a 5.30 ERA with a 4.72 xERA and a 4.55 FIP. It was a wasted season for Spencer Strider, who came back from Tommy John surgery, only to lose time to a strained hamstring. Spencer Schwellenbach suffered a fractured right elbow that cut his season short and will start the 2026 season on the 60-day IL, a huge blow before the team even started Grapefruit League play.

I cautioned buying stock in Reynaldo Lopez entering last

season, as he threw 135.2 innings and made 25 starts in his first full season as a starter since 2019. He made one start for the Braves. Chris Sale was limited to 20 starts, but he was awesome when he was out there with a 2.58 ERA, 2.85 xERA, and a 2.67 FIP. In total, the Braves needed 19 different starting pitchers. When healthy, this is a good group and Grant Holmes proved his worth as a starter if need be. Didier Fuentes is also knocking on the door. The bad luck on the health front coincided with a big drop in performance by the bullpen, going from a 3.32 ERA and a 3.41 FIP to a 4.19 ERA and a 4.26 FIP.

PROSPECT WATCH

The Braves are in a tough spot. Most of their best prospects are in the lower levels of the minors and virtually none of them are position players, so it will be up to the proven big leaguers to play to their usual standards. The top pitching prospect is the aforementioned Fuentes, who made his MLB debut last season with four rather poor starts, allowing 20 runs on 23 hits in 13 innings of work. Atlanta has never had a problem with service time

or putting kid gloves on prospects. They aggressively move them up the system. Fuentes won't turn 21 until June and has 202.2 minor league innings to his name. I'd expect to see the Braves with a long list of non-roster invites to try and find depth in case of injury because it's unlikely to come from below.

OUTLOOK

Like I mentioned above, the pitching staff is the key for Atlanta and if the Spencers can get and stay healthy, they'll greatly improve upon last year's numbers. Offensively, it's about bounce back seasons for Michael Harris II and Ozzie Albies. Most of the others were solid, but Albies was second in PA with an 87 wRC+ and Harris was third in PA with an 83 wRC+, so 13% and 17% below league average, respectively. It's the third season out of four for Albies as a below average bat and second in a row for Harris. To reach the expectations placed upon this team, it would help a lot for those two to be better.

2026 ODDS

WIN TOTAL: 88.5

DIVISION: +190

PENNANT: +800

WORLD SERIES: 16-1

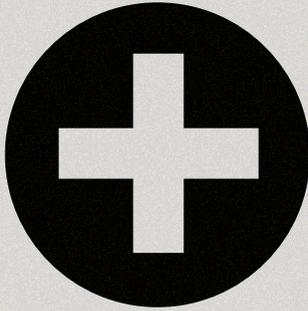
**BURKE'S WIN TOTAL
PICK: UNDER 88.5**

BURKE'S BOLD TAKE: The Braves are in contention, but trade Chris Sale at the August Trade Deadline to get more prospects into the system



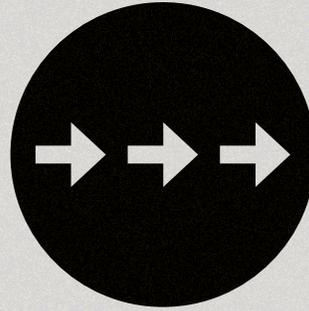
ATLANTA BRAVES

2025 RECORD: 76-86, 4TH IN NL EAST
LEWIS' WIN TOTAL LEAN: OVER 88.5



NOTABLE ADDITIONS

OF Mike Yastrzemski
INF/OF Mauricio Dubon
INF Ha-Seong Kim
RP Robert Suarez
INF Jorge Mateo
C Jonah Heim



NOTABLE DEPARTURES

DH Marcell Ozuna
SP Cal Quantrill
SP Charlie Morton
OF Jake Fraley
RP Pierce Johnson
RP John Brebbia
RP Alexis Diaz
OF Alex Verdugo

2025 BETTING RECORDS

MONEYLINE
76-86
-40.1 UNITS

TOTAL
72-80-10

RUN LINE
73-89

MONEYLINE 1ST 5
61-80-21
-47.3 UNITS

TOTAL 1ST 5
76-84

RUN LINE 1ST 5
68-94

YES RUN FIRST INNING
82-80

JENSEN LEWIS' PLAYER TAKE

HITTING

When healthy, this lineup is one of the most prolific in all of baseball. The operative phrase “when healthy” is front and center the last couple years with so many high-profile injuries, hindering the production over the last two seasons. All-stars RF Ronald Acuña Jr., 1B Matt Olson, 3B Austin Riley and 2B Ozzie Albies return with veteran DH Jurickson Profar taking over for free agent DH Marcell Ozuna. 2025 NL Rookie of the Year backstop C Drake Baldwin solidifies the middle of the order while 2022 Rookie of the Year CF Michael Harris II slots towards the bottom of the order. Offseason acquisition SS Ha-Seong Kim sustained a torn tendon in his right middle finger, so the earliest he might return will be mid to late-May, meaning INFs Jorge Mateo, Nacho Alvarez or Mauricio Dubón likely get the first shots to start. C Sean Murphy is recovering from hip surgery last September, so the bench consists of new signees C Jonah Heim and LF Mike Yastrzemski, with OF Eli White rounding out the depth options. On paper, this lineup should improve dramatically over a very average 2025 campaign (if healthy). I'd target Olson for another 30+ HR season and take shots on Riley at 25+ HR, as well as Harris II at 20+ HR too.

PITCHING

Health. That's it. If this rotation stays healthy, it'll be one of the best bounce-back years for a starting five in recent memory, as 2024 NL Cy Young winner Chris Sale anchors the top of the rotation, alongside Spencer Strider. Keep an eye on the velocity drop with Strider last year, as the post-injury problems presented themselves and affected performance significantly. Getting Reynaldo Lopez back to full strength will be a huge boost with the news early in camp that Spencer Schwellenbach will miss significant time with bone spurs. AJ Smith-Shawver is recovering from Tommy John surgery and likely won't be available until after the All-Star Break either. Re-signing closer Raisel Iglesias AND getting free agent stopper Robert Suarez from the Padres makes the Braves back-end about as potent a 1-2 punch there is. Dylan Lee and Tyler Kinley will fill the early setup roles, alongside Aaron Bummer and Joel Payamps. The potency of the pitching staff takes a big hit with the early loss of Schwellenbach, so guys like Grant Holmes and Bryce Elder get opportunities to earn rotation spots. With rotation health already a prominent question mark, how many starters will be standing in September?

PROSPECT WATCH

Lots of intrigue atop the pitching prospect list for the Braves in LHP Cam Caminiti (cousin of the late Ken Caminiti), RHP JR Ritchie and RHP Didier Fuentes. All three are 22 years old or younger, but can provide impact anywhere from late 2026 to early 2027. There's no question the bedrock of the Atlanta minor league system is rooted in their arms. Keep an eye on position players developing the next couple years in SS/OF Tate Southisene & SS Alex Lodise.

OUTLOOK

Longtime manager Brian Snitker retired and Walt Weiss took over as the leading man in the Braves dugout. He's incredibly familiar with the culture, expectations and urgency to get Atlanta back to prominence atop the NL East. There's no sugar-coating where this organization is: the stars must be healthy and return to producing like the back of their baseball cards show. The excitement is worthy for a group that has championship DNA. No excuses for this team in 2026: challenging the Phillies and Mets for the top spot in the division is not only viable, but expected.

LEWIS' BOLD TAKE: THE BRAVES WIN THE NL EAST AND FLY OVER THEIR WIN TOTAL, TAKING HOME 92+ VICTORIES

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