



# BASEBALL

## BETTING PRIMER

# SPRING HAS SPRUNG

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO BET ON BASEBALL THIS SEASON

### OUR FREE PRIMER INCLUDES

- WORLD SERIES FUTURES ANALYSIS
- USING SABERMETRICS IN MLB BETTING



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2024

# ATLANTA BRAVES

## PREVIEW



Like so many others, I felt like a matchup between the Atlanta Braves and Los Angeles Dodgers was inevitable in the NLCS. As it turned out, neither team made the NLCS, both losing to division rivals, as the Dodgers got swept by the Diamondbacks and the Braves felt déjà vu with a 3-1 series loss to the Phillies for the second straight year.

The MLB playoffs are known for a high degree of variance, but the Braves won the division by 14 games over the Phillies in 2023 and 14 games in 2022. It was actually the Mets who tied for the NL East in 2022, but they fell off a cliff last season, leaving Atlanta with very little regular season resistance. But, as we know, teams like this are graded by what they do in October. After winning the 2021 World Series, the Braves have won 205 regular season games and two postseason games.

This season's team is absolutely built for a run at the World Series and probably better-equipped for it. Spencer Strider seems to have somehow gotten better and recently-acquired southpaw Chris Sale has looked good in Spring Training. Of course, the question is whether or not he'll stay healthy, but the Braves have more proven pitching depth after everything they went through last season and reunited with Adam Duvall for more of a bench presence.

The NL East has some decent teams, but it looks like the regular season is just a long warm-up for the playoffs once again.

### ATLANTA BRAVES PREVIEW: OFFENSE

Only the Dodgers are a bigger division favorite and have bigger "Yes" odds to make the MLB playoffs. It makes sense because the Braves are essentially running it back with the same offense that led the league by a large margin in HR, BA, OBP, SLG, wOBA, and wRC+. The Braves hit 307 homers. Nobody else hit more than 249. The Braves batted .276. Nobody else was higher than .263. The Dodgers did come close in OBP, just four points behind Atlanta's .344, but the Braves SLG was nearly 50 points higher.

Their 125 wRC+ tied the 1927 Yankees for the best offense ever by that metric. wRC+ is park and league-adjusted, which allows you to compare over multiple years and eras. The 2019 Astros had a 124 wRC+. It's a fancy way of saying that the Braves were 25% better than league average as a collective unit.

So I will say this – coming off of an historic offensive season means that regression is likely coming in some respects. The Braves stayed insanely healthy on the position player side last season, so that was a tremendous help. They are running it back this season with every regular who had a 115 wRC+ or higher and all of those guys should be in the Opening Day lineup. There were seven of them who all had at least 438 plate appearances.

There were 86 players with a wRC+ of at least 115 and 400+ plate appearances and the Braves had seven of them. That's genuinely insane. Duvall was not one of them...but that's because his 116 wRC+ came in 353 plate appearances for the Red Sox. The Duvall/Jarred Kelenic platoon has the chance to be pretty nice as well, if Kelenic can be somewhat close to last season's 108 wRC+ on the thick side of the platoon.

There just aren't any weaknesses in this lineup. There's an insane amount of depth. Even though the Braves did win the World Series in 2021 without Acuna, you'd certainly like to have the reigning NL MVP for the full season after he hit 41 homers and stole 73 bases. Acuna had a career-high 735 plate appearances and led the league in runs, hits, steals, and OBP.

Acuna shrunk his K% down to 11.4% from 23.6%, which does not get talked about nearly enough. He didn't sacrifice any contact quality and actually walked more than he did in 2022. What a special player.

I think the craziest part to me is that, outside of some natural regression, probably from a guy like Marcell Ozuna (41 HR) or Matt Olson, who hit 54 HR last season, there aren't really any outlandishly lucky stats. Nobody carried an obscene batting average on balls in play. To me, I think it's just health and a little less power that will pull the Braves somewhat closer to reality.

### ATLANTA BRAVES PREVIEW: PITCHING

The Braves scored 5.8 runs per game last season and needed more of them than they probably thought that they would. The pitching staff finished 15th in ERA at 4.14 and eighth in FIP at 4.10. You rarely see a

**World Series: +450**

**NL Pennant: +240**

**NL East: -240**

**Win Total: 101.5 (+100/-120)**

**Make Playoffs: Yes -1400 / No +900**

team get 30+ starts from three guys and still use 16 different starting pitchers, but Max Fried only made 14 starts and Kyle Wright battled injuries, so the depth guys were in a state of flux all season long.

Strider had a 3.86 ERA with a 3.09 xERA and a 2.85 FIP, as some unfortunate sequencing got the best of him. He only had a 70.3% LOB%, which is extremely low for a guy with his strikeout prowess. Now that he's added a curveball to his repertoire, I think there's an excellent chance that he breaks through and wins the NL Cy Young.

Wily vet Charlie Morton made 30 starts and covered 163.1 innings with a solid 3.64 ERA and a 3.87 FIP. After thinking about retirement a few years ago with the Rays, Morton keeps on chugging and this will be his age-40 season. This is the end of his two-year, \$40 million deal, so it could be a retirement tour of sorts. He had a 14.1% BB% in the second half last season, so I'm a little bit concerned about Father Time taking a toll. He's the potential weak link in the rotation for me.

Regression found Bryce Elder over the course of the season, as he finished with a 3.81 ERA, 4.61 xERA, and a 4.42 FIP. He was sent down from big league camp on Mar. 18, so obviously the Braves saw some concerns as well. They opted to go with newcomer Reynaldo Lopez as the fifth starter, even though he hasn't started full-time since 2020.

A couple of southpaws could be the key to the rotation. Fried was outstanding in those 14 aforementioned starts, but the Braves will hope for better health this season. He made 30 starts and had a 2.48 ERA with a 2.70 FIP in 2022. If he does that, this team would be a favorite to win 105+ games if we're being honest. He's also in a contract year, so he's extra motivated.

I think the Sale move is super intriguing, especially because the Braves have been ahead of the curve in so many ways at the MLB level. They were one of the first to really go all-in with launch angle changes to generate more power and they've been the most aggressive when

it comes to locking up young, budding superstars. I think they've also done a nice job of adding some velo with their pitchers and also optimizing pitch usage.

Sale only really throws two pitches, but he gets away from Fenway Park and has the chance to do something really special here. I don't know if Sale will stay healthy. His 102.2 innings were more than double his output over 2020-22 and he's going to turn 35 three days into the start of the season. I guess he's been throwing his changeup a little more in the Spring than usual, so maybe he'll be a 2.5-pitch pitcher and potentially a real weapon for the Braves.

The bullpen is full of last year's faces, plus Aaron Bummer from the White Sox. It's a solid group that was just outside the top in ERA last season, but finished seventh in FIP. I expect they'll be good again and they like to get relief arms at the Trade Deadline if need be.

### **ATLANTA BRAVES PLAYER TO WATCH** **SP AJ Smith-Shawver**

Smith-Shawver started last season at High-A, but wound up making his MLB debut by the end of the year. He made 20 starts across four different levels and allowed 12 earned runs on 17 hits with 20 strikeouts against 11 walks in 25.1 innings at the MLB level. He is the top prospect in the Braves org and a top-100 prospect per FanGraphs, so he'll likely be back up very soon.

It looks like the Braves may have added a little bit of velo, as he sat 97 and touched 99 in his Spring Training start against the Phillies. His PITCHf/x and Baseball Savant data showed that his mechanics and release point seem to have been cleaned up and he actually generated more Extension per Michael Baumann of FanGraphs. There's a good chance that he's ready by crunch time for Atlanta and he's a really exciting young arm.

## **ATLANTA BRAVES SEASON WIN TOTAL ODDS & PREDICTION**

The floor is absurdly high for this team and the ceiling may very well be also. The NL East is a decent division, but not a spectacular one and the Braves are very likely to win it by margin once again. The Phillies are the main threat and their offense is good, but it isn't on the same level as Atlanta's.

The problem is that I don't see any line equity on betting the Over on 101.5 wins. If anything, the only thing that makes sense to do would be to bet the Under, in the event that injuries happen. There is not a whole lot of margin for error on a team to win 102 wins. On average, you'll get a couple of teams per season at most that do that because it takes a lot of good health and good performance.

The Braves pitching staff looks stronger this season, especially if Fried can stay healthy. But, they had arguably the best offense of all-time last season and won 104 games. The MLB season is 187 days. They spent 185 in first place. It takes a lot to have expectations as high as these are for the Braves. They may very well meet them, but I won't have any bets on them doing so.

## **PICK: UNDER 101.5**

2024

# TAMPA BAY RAYS PREVIEW



Shame on me. I did the unthinkable last season and bet against the Tampa Bay Rays. By this point, you would think somebody as sabermetrically-inclined and analytically-in-tune as myself would know not to pick against this crew. They've consistently defied the odds of a low payroll, bad attendance, and unfortunate geography that put them in the AL East to be one of the most consistent and impressive franchises in all of sport.

If you had told me before the season that the Rays would lose Shane McClellan, Drew Rasmussen, Jeffrey Springs, and Wander Franco, I'd have been thrilled with my season win total Under 88.5. All of those things happened and the Rays still won 99 games, the second-most in the AL by NINE GAMES.

I'm not sure any team in sport is better at figuring out a way than the Rays. They'll have to figure out a lot early in the season while Springs and Rasmussen recover and they'll miss McClellan for the season. Franco will never play an MLB game again. They even traded away Tyler Glasnow. But, they'll probably find a way. And I've learned my lesson.

The Rays have three losing seasons since taking "Devil" out of their name starting with the 2008 campaign and nine playoff appearances, plus two AL pennants in that span. Kevin Cash will become the

winningest manager in Rays history in either April or May with the team's 16th win of the season.

The obvious caveat here is that the Rays started the season 13-0 and went 23-6 in April, but they were still 19 games over .500 the rest of the way and come into the season with a rather low win total line in my estimation.

## TAMPA BAY RAYS PREVIEW: OFFENSE

We think of the Rays as a pitching factory. That's certainly not untrue, but consider what their offense did last season. This was a group that ranked in the top five in nearly every important offensive category, including wOBA, wRC+ (second to the Braves!), batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and stolen bases. They were sixth in home runs, just one behind the Angels in terms of cracking the top five.

Given the extreme disadvantage of Tropicana Field, which ranks 28th in Statcast's Three-Year Park Factors, it is incredible that the Rays were able to put together a top-five offensive season. Admittedly, I do think some negative regression may be coming, as the team ranked ninth in Hard Hit% and 12th in Barrel%, but the top nine guys in plate appearances ranged from a 106 wRC+ to a 164 wRC+.

Franco was among that group and his offensive contributions (127 wRC+) will be missed, but the Rays have maybe the best prospect in baseball in Junior Caminero, another unnecessary present from the Cleveland Guardians organization, who also supplied Yandy Diaz a few years ago. Curtis Mead is another top-15 prospect knocking on the door to replace a lesser hitter in the lineup.

DH Jonathan Aranda hit 25 HR at Triple-A and posted a 165 wRC+ and new SS Jose Caballero, who was acquired from the Mariners, has hit at basically every minor league level, but hasn't been able to stay on the field enough.

The bench is also set up to leverage platoon opportunities. Harold Ramirez slashed .387/.411/.555 against lefties in 124 PA last season. Amed Rosario has been a potent bat against southpaws in his career with a .298/.339/.467 slash and a 121 wRC+. Jonny DeLuca was another trade target with good minor league numbers at every level, as he came over in the Glasnow trade with the Dodgers. As a righty, he actually hit righties better across three levels last season with a .975 OPS in 253 PA compared to an .823 OPS against lefties in 118 PA. Still, I expect him to be deployed in some platoon situations.

This lineup isn't big on household names or big-ticket free agents, but it looks like another top-10 group to me.

## TAMPA BAY RAYS PREVIEW: PITCHING

To me, this is an area where the Rays will be undervalued. There is obviously a chance that Taj Bradley doesn't make the leap or that Aaron Civale and Ryan Pepiot don't pan out as expected. There is also a

**World Series: +8000**

**NL Pennant: +4000**

**NL East: +1700**

**Win Total: 78.5 (+100/-120)**

**Make Playoffs: Yes +250 / No -300**

chance that all three of those guys exceed expectations and it seems likelier than not that at least one or two of them do because it's the Rays and this is what they do.

Tampa Bay just pulled a career year out of Zach Eflin, who threw his curveball and cutter more and his other pitches less to rack up 4.8 fWAR with a 3.50 ERA and a 3.01 FIP. All of those stats were career-bests for him and so was his career-high of 177.2 innings. I will admit that I have concerns about how many Rays pitching prospects have needed Tommy John surgery and do wonder about Eflin's durability moving forward, much like I do every Rays starter.

Beyond Eflin, it truly is an unassuming group of arms, but let's run through this and I'll tell you why I like these guys. Civala never really stayed healthy in Cleveland, but he has a 3.92 ERA with a 4.01 FIP in 475.1 career innings. The park factor will help here, but what also helps Civala is that he has allowed a 36.9% Hard Hit% and a 6.7% Barrel%, which are both well above average. He's added a little more swing-and-miss over the last two seasons as well and the Rays bumped his K% to 29.3% in his 45.1 innings with them.

I'm normally skeptical when a super smart team gives up a player, but I think the Dodgers are in World Series or Bust mode to the extreme, so they were willing to give up Peipiot in the Glasnow deal. Once again, health and durability are questions and that seems to be one area where the Rays may not have as many answers, but Peipiot's limited MLB sample size over 78.1 innings is impressive with over a strikeout per inning and some other standout numbers. The Rays are having Peipiot work up in the zone with the fastball in the Spring, which will make his 94 mph play up and probably cut down on his home runs, as hitters won't get under the ball as much.

As pitchers and catchers were reporting for duty, the great Eno Sarris penned a piece for The Athletic about five breakout candidates among starting pitchers (\$). Bradley was in that group on account of the raw

quality of his stuff. He misses bats. He gets swings and misses. He's got the tools and he's only 22 years old. I won't pretend to know that it will all come together this season for him, but the projection systems collectively have him around a league average starter and that's plenty good enough as the No. 5 in this rotation.

Plus, the Rays always find useful arms. Whether that means Japanese import Naoyuki Uwasawa, prospect Mason Montgomery, former top prospects Shane Baz or Brendan McKay, or somebody they pick up during the season, they'll work their devil magic.

The bullpen looks solid once again, which is just a given. Last year's group underperformed a bit as the injury bug bit them hard as well, causing the group to fall from the top 10 in ERA, but I really like the Phil Maton addition as a bridge to Jason Adam and Pete Fairbanks.

### **TAMPA BAY RAYS PLAYER TO WATCH** **3B/OF Junior Caminero**

Caminero won't make the Opening Day roster, but he hit 31 home runs across High-A and Double-A in his age-19 season before making his MLB debut late in the year. FanGraphs has Caminero as the fourth-best prospect in baseball this season, trailing Baltimore's Jackson Holliday, Texas's Wyatt Langford, and Milwaukee's Jackson Chourio. Chourio just signed an eight-year, \$82 million contract before even playing a MLB game.

For a huge power bat consistently playing up a level or two, the high contact rate for Caminero has been a surprise. He may never excel defensively, but he makes extremely violent contact and hits the ball a long way. The Rays have always found power by stacking 15-20 homer guys. This is a legit 40-homer bat at his peak, which won't come in 2024, but I bet he has a big impact later this year.

## **TAMPA BAY RAYS SEASON** **WIN TOTAL ODDS & PREDICTION**

I am very much a believer in the Rays this season. They outscored the opposition by nearly 200 runs last season while dealing with the major injuries on the pitching side. The offense absolutely looks poised to continue and maybe even surpass what it did last season and I do believe that the pitching staff has more upside than the futures and season-long prop odds would imply.

The Rays are in a tough division and the Yankees absolutely look better, while the Orioles are also poised to maintain the gains from last season, but the Rays should continue to find a lot of success outside the division and still match up well with their AL East brethren. I like Over 84.5 wins and also feel like +650 to win the AL East is a decent value. Shop around for the best line you can find, but I think this team is absolutely live to win this division.

I won't call 85 wins the floor for this team, but with that dominant of an offense, a team built to win at home (53-28 last season), and a pitching staff that could be a big surprise, I'm not sure I see many paths to this team hovering around .500. Their win total last season was 88.5, they won 99 games, and, outside of McClanahan, I'm not sure they're any worse.

## **PICK: OVER 84.5**

# Basics of Betting on Baseball

**Consider this the primer within the Primer, as baseball can be something of a difficult and frustrating sport to bet on for those who are not used to it. There are some fundamental differences between baseball and other sports that are worth discussing, along with some higher-level thoughts to keep in mind as the season draws near.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 RUNS

## MLB BETTING DIFFERENCES

### Baseball is a moneyline sport

Instead of having a spread like football and basketball, baseball is a moneyline sport. In nearly all cases, there will be a plus-money line on the underdog and a minus-money line on the favorite, something like -140 and +120.

The moneyline odds, much like in other sports, convert to an implied win probability, which is how the sportsbooks set the odds and how bettors analyze which side they want to bet.

You can bet a version of a spread called the “run line”, which is traditionally listed at -1.5, but there are “alternate run lines” out there like -2.5, -3.5, +2.5, etc., but moneylines are the most common bet type.

### Starting pitchers determine the odds

The strength of the team and the lineup are absolutely factors, but the starting pitcher is the most important part of the handicap and they are actually listed by the odds for the game. That is obviously different from something like the NFL or NHL, where the quarterback and goaltender are extremely important, but aren’t specifically listed.

A really bad offensive team may have its best starting pitcher on the mound and they won’t be nearly as much of an underdog as they would be with somebody else in line for the start.

### 1st 5 vs. Full Game

Bettors have the option to bet on the 1st 5 Innings (think 1st Half) or full game. A lot of bettors will shy away from full-game betting in baseball because of the volatility of bullpens and relief pitchers. Also, you’ve handicapped the game based on the starting pitchers. What happens when they leave the game is open to a lot of interpretation.

It’s not like the QB suddenly gets replaced for somebody with a fresher arm in the third quarter or a goaltender gets pulled because he’s tired in the third period. Relative to baseball, other sports operate under a “the game is the game” type of premise. In baseball, the guy with the biggest impact on the game is typically pitching five or six innings of a nine-inning game.

### 1st Inning bets

A lot of bettors love to play “Yes/No 1st Inning Run” props. You could think of this as a 1st Quarter or “Race to X Points” prop if you want, but these are growing in popularity, especially because there are a lot of people out there who find baseball boring and would rather have an instant gratification bet in play. These odds will obviously be set based on the starting pitchers and the top of each batting order.

These are the four main differences. There are other nuances, but I’ll touch on those as part of the strategy elements.

# MLB BETTING STRATEGIES

## Shop around for the best odds

Baseball used to have a standard called “Dime Lines”, which are still used in faraway places at some sportsbooks, but most of the market now uses a 20-cent line or sometimes higher.

You want to find a sportsbook that offers fair MLB odds. A “20-cent line” would be like the above example of an underdog at +120 and a favorite at -140. A “dime line” or “10-cent line” would be more like +120 and -130 or +125 and -135. The type of line is defined by the difference between the two odds.

It is always in your best interest to shop around for the best odds and moneyline sports make that concept even more vital. Don't take -140 when you can have -135. If you are betting \$100 per unit, it is a five-dollar difference to bet \$140 to win \$100 as opposed to \$135 to win \$100. Those differences add up. More often than not, spreads are very similar across the board. Moneyline sports can have more variance from sportsbook to sportsbook with the odds.

## Analyze the weather and the ballpark

Basketball courts are pretty much all the same. Football fields have different playing surfaces, but are still 100 yards with two end zones. Baseball stadiums vary greatly and play to different strengths and weaknesses.

Home teams across sports have advantages based on the crowd, familiarity, and sometimes the weather, but all 30 Major League stadiums are different. Every stadium stores the baseballs to be used in the game in a humid room to try and account for the atmospheric differences in an effort to standardize the ball.

But, all ballparks and environments are different. In hotter weather, a team that hits for more power may have a big advantage over a team that does not. Teams without power bats may fare better in the cooler months in April and early May than they will in the summertime because the other team's offensive output will be diminished. Ballparks with deeper dimensions may hurt left-handed hitters or right-handed hitters based on how far away the wall is from home plate.

Some ballparks also play differently based on the wind. Wrigley Field is a prime example, where totals with the wind blowing in might be 6.5 or 7 and totals with the wind blowing out might be 12 or 12.5. All of these things have to be factored into your handicap. Temperature and wind are two very big factors when betting totals.

Remember, MLB teams play 81 games at home (with the exception of international games or extreme circumstances), so they can tailor their rosters and skill sets to their specific ballpark in hopes of having more success.

## Picking out props

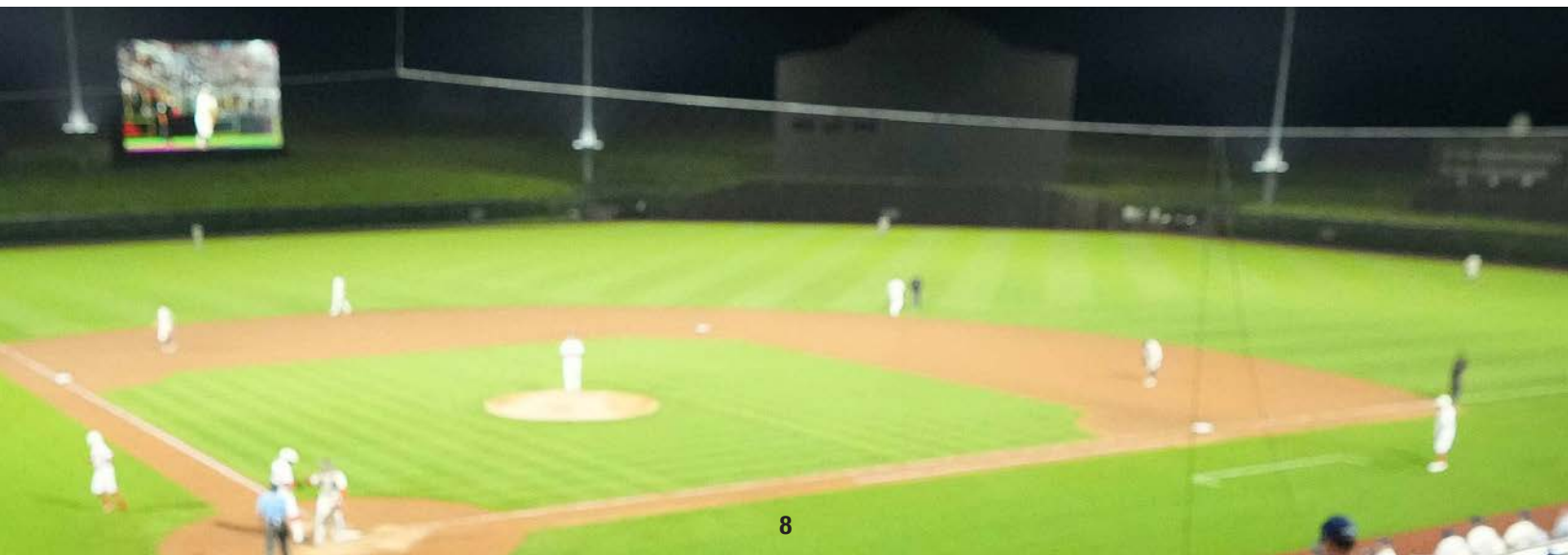
Prop betting is really popular in baseball. Bets like “Will [Player] hit a home run?” or “Total Bases” or “Pitcher Strikeouts” are among the most common, but there are plenty of others. The individual battles in baseball make these enticing handicaps because it is batter vs. pitcher or pitcher vs. team for most of those stats.

You don't have to worry about other players on the floor or on the field. It also allows you to focus on one particular element of the game instead of the game as a whole. With the immense amount of publicly-available data, you can look at everything about a pitcher vs. batter matchup and confidently take a position. A lot of people will only bet props as a result.

## Be prepared for the grind

The last, and probably most important, “strategy” element I will leave you with is that the MLB season is long. It is 187 days and every team plays 162 games. The only days with no games will be during the All-Star Break. Most days will have 15 games, with lighter travel days on Monday and Thursday. You might get 15 games a couple times per season in the NBA/NHL and football teams only play once a week.

It is a very different beast and one that can absolutely get overwhelming, especially during the days and weeks when it seems like nothing is going right. Try to keep a level head and the right perspective. Take a day off when you need to. Focus on your strengths and work on your weaknesses as time permits. Find what works for you and try to stick to that routine.



# WANDERING THROUGH THE WORLD SERIES FUTURES ODDS

When it comes to MLB futures markets, I tend to take a more passive approach. Why? Because you've got a good chance at finding better odds on a team at some point during the season than you will at the start of the season. Barring a ridiculous start, like the 2023 Tampa Bay Rays, who started the season 20-3 after 23 games, the highs and lows of a long season lead to a lot of buy points on teams.

Another reason is because injuries happen a lot and the individual nature of baseball can make it extremely hard to replace a star player or even an above average one. I certainly hold off until Spring Training is close to over because I want to know a team is getting to Opening Day healthy. Furthermore, with what I mentioned above, a star player could go out early and come back after the All-Star Break and make a big impact at a much better number than what I could've gotten prior to the season.

Even if you aren't betting into a preseason market, it is always good to see what the sportsbooks have to say with the odds. That is true of World Series odds, but also other futures and awards markets, which I will dive deeper into with my "Premium" MLB Betting Guide over at VSIN.com in the month of March.

## 2024 WORLD SERIES ODDS (subject to change)

| TEAM                  | ODDS  | TEAM                 | ODDS   |
|-----------------------|-------|----------------------|--------|
| Los Angeles Dodgers   | +350  | New York Mets        | +4500  |
| Atlanta Braves        | +450  | Boston Red Sox       | +5000  |
| Houston Astros        | +800  | San Francisco Giants | +5500  |
| New York Yankees      | +1000 | Detroit Tigers       | +6000  |
| Baltimore Orioles     | +1200 | San Diego Padres     | +6000  |
| Texas Rangers         | +1400 | Cleveland Guardians  | +7000  |
| Philadelphia Phillies | +1500 | Miami Marlins        | +7000  |
| Toronto Blue Jays     | +2000 | Milwaukee Brewers    | +9000  |
| Seattle Mariners      | +2000 | Kansas City Royals   | +13000 |
| Minnesota Twins       | +2000 | Los Angeles Angels   | +15000 |
| Chicago Cubs          | +2800 | Pittsburgh Pirates   | +15000 |
| Arizona Diamondbacks  | +3500 | Washington Nationals | +20000 |
| Tampa Bay Rays        | +3500 | Chicago White Sox    | +25000 |
| St. Louis Cardinals   | +3500 | Colorado Rockies     | +40000 |
| Cincinnati Reds       | +4500 | Oakland Athletics    | +40000 |

The Dodgers went on quite a spending spree this offseason, adding Shohei Ohtani (won't pitch this season), Yoshinobu Yamamoto, Teoscar Hernandez, and James Paxton through free agency, plus Manuel Margot and Tyler Glasnow via trade. They "won" the offseason in a big way by securing Ohtani and Yamamoto, so they are the rightful favorites.

Obviously the Dodgers and Braves cannot both play for the World Series title, so the AL is interesting with the next four on the odds board and seven of the next eight.



## RECENT WORLD SERIES BETTING HISTORY

Baseball has the most volatility of any postseason. The Rangers won the World Series last season after going into the year at +5000. The Diamondbacks were a surprise NL winner, coming into the season at +12500 to win the World Series.

According to Sports Odds History, six teams entered the 2023 season under +1000 - Astros +600, Braves +750, Yankees +800, Dodgers +800, Mets +900, Padres +900. Three of those teams didn't even make the playoffs.

In 2022, the Astros were +1000 entering the season, making them tied for the third choice behind the Dodgers (+500) and Blue Jays (+900).

In 2021, the Braves were +1000, fifth behind the Dodgers (+350), Yankees (+550), Padres (+900), and White Sox (+900).

In 2019, the Nationals were +1600 entering the season, behind the Yankees, Astros, Red Sox, Dodgers, Phillies, Cardinals, Cubs, and Indians.

I could go on, but you have to go back to 2016 to find the last time that the favorite won the World Series and that was the Cubs (+660) over the Indians (+1700).

The Rangers were a true long shot by historical MLB odds to win the World Series. In recent history, while the playoffs are high-variance, good teams are good teams over 162 games more often than not and find their way into the playoffs, even if they don't win it all.

That's why it's hard to bet preseason MLB futures. The Rangers were at their peak in the offseason after getting off to a great start and so were the 2022 Astros, but the 2021 Braves were around +5000 at the start of August. The 2019 Nationals were in the +6000 range in June of their World Series winning season and their price going into the Divisional Round of +1350 wasn't that far off of the preseason +1600.

## WORLD SERIES FUTURES BETTING TIPS

### Depth is critical

Aaron Judge is an elite hitter, but he missed 56 games last season. The Yankees were 57-49 when he played and 25-31 when he didn't. There were other issues with the team, but Judge covered up a lot of them.

The Rays, on the other hand, lost 60% of their starting rotation, Wander Franco, and others, and still won 99 games. Deep teams and smart front offices find a way. Not every team can do that.

Looking at 2024, can a team like the Phillies survive if Zack Wheeler or Aaron Nola go down for a long period of time? Even an oblique injury can be a 6-8 week thing. What if Julio Rodriguez gets hit by a pitch and fractures his wrist or gets a fluke broken hamate bone? Are the Mariners going to be strong enough to compete offensively?

Top-heavy teams are a major risk in Major League Baseball because one or two injuries can make all the difference over a prolonged stretch of games. I'm not saying you want to write in Sharpie that you're staying away, but you have to consider those possibilities.

### Look for buy points on the schedule

When the Braves made their run in 2021, they started August at +5000 and were down to +1300 by September. They went 18-8 in August with a really favorable 15-game stretch against Washington, Cincinnati, Washington, Miami, and Baltimore. They were 52-55 entering the month and by the time they reached August 22, they were 68-57 and went from five games back in the division to 4.5 games up.

If you can find a good team that has underperformed running into a really juicy part of the schedule, that is the time that you want to buy.

Also, to the point above, if a player got hurt early and the team was able to hang on and tread water, the boost from his return could be a good time to buy.

### Treat your bet like an investment

The goal should be to gain equity on your bet. You'd like to be able to get in at +2000 when the team is down to +1200 or +1000 by midseason. If a team you are holding has seen its odds improve, somebody else's odds have not and that could be a spot to add to your portfolio with another team that maybe went from +1000 to +2000.

It is a seven-month hold before the season, meaning that money is tied up until the end of the postseason. Having an advantageous position opens up other options for you or the choice to just let it ride and hope you got it right when all the dust settles. Given that your money is tied to one particular outcome, trying to diversify can be a good idea.

# ANALYTICS OF BETTING BASEBALL

I'm here to tell you that analytics are getting a bad rap in the sports world these days. The concept of analytics is such a polarizing topic, but both sides are guilty. Too many members of the anti-stats crowd and the pro-stats crowd are not willing to find the necessary middle ground between explaining their value and also keeping an open mind that the metrics should not always be treated as gospel.

As another baseball season approaches, I will be writing a lot of analytics-driven content to break down my process, which includes statistical deep dives into players and teams to find season win total bets and also get prepared for the day-to-day grind of 162 games in 187 days for all 30 teams.

The stats I use in baseball are collectively called "sabermetrics", in honor of SABR, which is the Society for American Baseball Research. There is a tremendous wealth of knowledge out there in the baseball community and new stats are being invented daily, weekly, and monthly that are used to analyze player performance, especially relative to peers.

I make it a priority every season to explain the stats and metrics that I use, but this introduction to sabermetrics and baseball handicapping is going to be more of an overview. For the glossary of stats and terms that I use, you'll be able to find that at [VSiN.com](http://VSiN.com) when I give it a refresh prior to the season.

## WHAT ARE ANALYTICS?

To me, the fundamental issue between those who use and believe in analytics and those who besmirch and belittle them is the messaging. As a bare bones definition, I would define "analytics" as statistics or metrics used to quantify what the eyes can see.

Even something as simple as "That guy stinks" can be very true on both sides of the spectrum. The purpose of analytics is to determine how much "that guy stinks". Using numerical analysis to compare that player to his peers, players in previous eras, or simply compare him to the league average would be a form of analytics.

We've all been watching a game and thought that a guy was a bad baserunner. Or a bad outfielder. Or a bad hitter. Maybe all of those things are true, but maybe he's a bad outfielder on balls hit to his left or balls that he has to go back on, rather than being bad in all facets of the position.

Maybe a bad hitter is bad at hitting curveballs and sliders, but he'll crush fastballs thrown in the upper third of the strike zone. Generally speaking, professional athletes aren't bad at everything. If they were, they wouldn't be professional athletes.

Because of the stats and metrics, we can analyze all of those things. Teams can as well, so they can attempt to put their players in the best positions to succeed. As handicappers, we can use those things to examine whether or not those players will succeed.

"Analytics" has also become a catch-all term for every stat, every model, every prediction engine, and everything wrong with sports. The word has acquired a negative connotation in my opinion because too many people don't take the time to understand the value of them and too many people don't understand that there are ways other than analytics to describe an event. It doesn't have to be one or the other. It can be some of both.

To use a football example, I will admit that I find flaws with decision-making models like the ones that say when a team should go for it on fourth down or not. There are variables in play - weather, personnel, game flow, and even gut feel, among others. A coach being reluctant to go for a fourth-down play when he lost his left tackle in the first quarter or because his primary running back is on injured reserve are reasonable considerations. It also takes conviction to perform at optimal levels and if a head coach isn't feeling it, he may not be in the right frame of mind to pick a play at a crucial time.

To use a baseball example, I loathe sacrifice bunts. There are plenty of calculations out there with regards to run expectancy and win probability that point towards bunting being a bad idea more often than not. But, those models don't always account for how good or how bad of a hitter that the guy in the bunting situation is. Or how good the pitcher is. Or whether or not the baserunner has enough speed to go first to third or second to home if required. Or whether or not the closer is fully rested if the goal in bunting is to try and take a one-run lead in the bottom of the eighth inning.

There are a lot of variables and those decisions have to be made very quickly, so the law of averages comes into play, either based on similar down and distance or baserunning situations in a historical context or with whatever other factors are applied.

Ultimately, the player in question has to execute or the play call also has to work for it to be viewed as successful, but that's why a lot of analytics-driven individuals, myself included, consider the process to be more important than the results. Outcomes are not absolute, but making the right decision that gives the event the best chance at succeeding should always be the goal.

## HOW TO USE ANALYTICS WHEN HANDICAPPING BASEBALL

Allow me to give you my favorite examples of sabermetrics in action.

By this point, most everybody is familiar with on-base percentage (OBP). If you read Michael Lewis's book *Moneyball* or saw the movie starring Brad Pitt, you are well-versed in that statistic. The idea is that a hitter's primary goal is to get on base by any means necessary. In doing so, that hitter did his job and it is up to the next guy to do his job and so on.

While on-base percentage is a better metric than batting average - a thought that continues to meet resistance, but is more widely accepted than ever - it is still a flawed statistic. Both of them are, when you really think about it.

Batting average (Hits / At Bats) counts every hit the same. On-base percentage (Hits + Walks / Plate Appearances) treats every way of reaching base the same. Fundamentally, though, isn't a home run better than a single? Isn't a double better than a walk?

That's why I use a stat called wOBA, or Weighted On-Base Average. The 'w' is the key part in wOBA because the ways of reaching base are weighted based on their run value, correctly valuing a home run more than a single or a double more than a walk. I especially like to use this stat when looking at a pitcher's platoon splits, meaning how a righty does against left-handed or right-handed batters or how a team does against a particular pitcher.

Good players are still good players and bad players are still bad players based on the wOBA scale, but it provides additional context and information. That's just one of the many metrics that I use.

I'll look at "contact quality metrics" such as Hard Hit%, Barrel%, and Exit Velocity for hitters and pitchers. Why? Because the harder a ball is hit, the more likely it is to become a hit and the more likely it is to become an extra-base hit.

A hard-hit ball is a batted ball with an exit velocity of at least 95 mph. Last season, all batted balls hit at least 95 mph had a .506 batting average with a 1.008 SLG. Hard-hit contact is good for hitters and bad for pitchers, so that is a main part of my handicapping and a way to use analytics to your benefit.

It is my belief that a knowledge of baseball analytics can get you out in front of line moves to get a good number and some closing line value (CLV) and also allows you to look at the game from a deeper level than the oddsmakers can, which should, in theory, create the opportunity to find edges.

I will be diving more into the world of baseball analytics as Opening Day approaches and throughout the course of the season as we get more data. I would encourage all readers to keep an open mind, whether they read and follow my work, read and follow others, or try to pick winners on their own this season because there is value in the numbers.



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