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2024

MIAMI MARLINS

PREVIEW



Spring Training was not kind to the Miami Marlins at all. With Sandy Alcantara already out for the season after Tommy John surgery, Braxton Garrett, Eury Perez, and Edward Cabrera all came down with arm injuries. For a team that had some very clear negative regression indicators anyway, this was a worst-case scenario type of situation.

Miami went 84-78, but did so with a -57 run differential. By Pythagorean Win-Loss, this was more like a 75-87 team. Miami's BaseRuns record wasn't as damning at 77-85, but this is a team that had no business being in the playoffs. The Phillies disposed of them 2-0 in the NL Wild Card Round after the Marlins became just the 11th team with a negative run differential to make the playoffs and had the worst run differential ever for a playoff team.

Ironically, the Diamondbacks were another one, and they went all the way to the World Series, but the question in Miami's case is – how does such an anomaly happen? Well, the Marlins were 33-14 in one-run games. They actually went 53-39 in the first half before going 31-39 in the second half, but they went 17-10 in September with a +1 run differential to make the postseason.

The manner in which they overachieved and the bevy of pitching injuries are all very much present in their odds for the upcoming season.

World Series: +8000

NL Pennant: +4000

NL East: +1700

Win Total: 78.5 (+100/-120)

Make Playoffs: Yes +250 / No -300

MIAMI MARLINS PREVIEW: OFFENSE

With all of the pitching injuries, this group is going to have to carry more of the burden this season. The Marlins finished 20th in wRC+ at 94, with their numbers graded on a fairly steep curve because Marlins Park is not a very good offensive venue. The offense was driven by a high batting average, as Miami hit .259 as a team. That ranked fourth, trailing the Braves, Rangers, and Rays, who were all top-five offenses overall.

However, the Marlins also had the fourth-lowest BB% in baseball at 7.1%, better than only the Nationals, Royals, and White Sox. As a result, despite the high BA, the Marlins ranked 19th in OBP. Even though they only hit 166 homers to rank 23rd, they were 19th in SLG because of all the base hits.

What the team stats don't really illustrate is that Luis Arraez was the main reason why the Marlins excelled in the K% and BA departments. Arraez hit .354 by carrying a .362 BABIP and only struck out in 5.5% of his plate appearances. He had 203 hits and just 34 strikeouts. The last player with at least 600 PA and fewer than 35 strikeouts was Placido Polanco in 2007.

Unfortunately, the contact quality for Arraez actually dropped and his .362 BABIP was easily the highest of his career in a non-COVID year. I still expect him to be a guy with a very high batting average and a very low K%, but the projection systems put him between a 109 and 120 wRC+. He had a career-best 132 wRC+ last season after a career-best 131 wRC+ the previous season. He is a unicorn capable of breaking the system, but I do think his batted ball luck regresses some.

Jake Burger is back for another year with the Marlins after coming over from the White Sox. He slashed .303/.355/.505 in 217 PA with a 131 wRC+ after the trade. Josh Bell was also productive with a 119 wRC+ in 224 plate appearances after he was acquired from the Guardians. Neither Burger nor Bell project to repeat that this season. Unfortunately, Jorge Soler and his 36 homers are gone, leaving the Marlins with even less of a power dimension for this season.

There is hope that 26-year-old Jazz Chisholm Jr. will stay healthy and fill that void, as he hit 19 homers in just 383 PA last season, to go along with 22 stolen bases, but he's played a season's worth of games over the last two seasons. Jesus Sanchez is another guy that the Marlins acquired from somebody else and he had 14 homers in 402 PA. Beyond that, though, the Marlins offense looks pretty below average across the board.

I'd expect both Burger and Arraez to regress. Chisholm may be able to pick up some of the slack, but this is not an imposing lineup. Even though Soler was a bit on the high side strikeout-wise, both Sanchez and Chisholm have holes in their swings, so I could see the team's K% tick up this season as well.

MIAMI MARLINS PREVIEW: PITCHING

It is impossible to overstate what the loss of Alcantara means to this team. He's been a fixture in this rotation since the 2019 season and had

made at least 32 starts in each of the last three COVID years before undergoing Tommy John surgery after 28 starts last season. He threw a career-high 228.2 innings in 2022 and he's a guy that consistently sits around 98 mph. There has been a lot of talk recently about what the human body can endure from a throwing standpoint after some comments from Chris Bassitt that humans weren't meant to throw harder than 91 or 92.

I won't pretend to know if he's right or not, but Alcantara's max effort combined with his workload certainly put a lot of strain on his arm and he'll miss the entire season after undergoing TJS in October of last year.

It was announced on Mar. 16 that Perez would undergo some testing on his barking elbow. The 6-foot-8, 20-year-old wunderkind made his MLB debut last season with 91.1 innings and a 3.15 ERA. He had a 4.11 FIP due to a high home run rate, but he struck out 28.9% of opposing batters after making the leap from Double-A. As the hours ticked by without any official announcement, everybody got more and more concerned and it seems like even if it isn't a season-ending injury, he'll certainly miss a good bit of time.

Garrett had shoulder soreness early in camp and he's a guy that I would watch very closely. He threw a career-high 159.2 innings and all of them came at the high-stress MLB level. One oddity about Garrett is that he was far worse at pitcher-friendly Marlins Park than he was on the road, as he allowed a .337 wOBA with a .463 SLG and a 4.46 ERA at home compared to a .275 wOBA with a .373 SLG and a 2.85 ERA on the road in nearly the same number of innings. I could see that flip a bit this season, but hopefully he simply stays healthy.

Cabrera faced 434 batters last season. He struck out 118, walked 66, and gave up 11 homers. He's a three true outcomes pitcher and a really hard guy to gauge because of that high walk rate. He isn't the only one. The Marlins are putting a lot on the shoulders of A.J. Puk, who has not made a start at the MLB level. He has 142 relief appearances with a 3.72 ERA and a 3.59 FIP, but zero starts. He has looked outstanding in Spring Training, but hasn't been a full-time starter since 2017 in Double-A.

Color me skeptical with Puk, especially in terms of how many innings he can actually provide. He's a huge dude at 6-foot-7 and 248 pounds, so he has the frame of a guy who can be a workhorse, but it's a big change. Then there's another guy to be skeptical about in Trevor Rogers, who only made four starts and threw 18 innings last season. He's been brought along slowly in camp. He did miss last season due to a torn lat and not an arm injury, but he's had his share of those as well.

Continuing on the theme of pitchers with iffy profiles, de facto ace Jesus Luzardo was awesome last season with a 3.58 ERA and a 3.55 FIP over 178.2 innings. He also threw 178.2 innings, which was about 70 more than he threw last season. The promise and potential have always been there with Luzardo, but the health hasn't been. He made 32 starts last season. He made 21 in 2022 across three levels. From 2017-21, he made a total of 78 starts.

Red flag after red flag with the Marlins pitching staff. It's a shame because the talent level is legitimately insane here, but some guys are already hurt and others are likely to be during the season.

As far as the bullpen goes, one-time hot prospect Sixto Sanchez will try to make it as a reliever. The weird thing about Miami's exceptional record in one-run games is that the bullpen finished 21st in ERA at 4.37, but they were 13th in FIP. Puk moving to the rotation could hurt, but Tanner Scott and Andrew Nardi were both terrific last season.

MIAMI MARLINS PLAYER TO WATCH

SP Jesus Luzardo

I could have gone with any of the Marlins pitchers, but I opted for Luzardo for a few reasons. First, he had massive home/road splits and the days he pitched really happened to work out in his favor. He had a 2.99 ERA with a .283 wOBA against in 108.1 innings at home compared to a 4.48 ERA and a .343 wOBA against on the road over 70.1 innings. He made 19 starts at home compared to 13 on the road.

Next, it was said that Luzardo was trying to work on his endurance and getting deeper into games. That usually comes with learning how to pitch to contact, as opposed to going for strikeouts in hopes of increasing pitch equity. Luzardo also saw some pretty gnarly times through the order splits, as he allowed a .268 wOBA and a 1.95 ERA the first time through, a .315 wOBA and a 4.48 ERA the second time through, and a .364 wOBA and a 5.15 ERA the third time through.

Lastly, the health, man. It's still a thing. Luzardo's K% dropped from 29.1% in the first half to 26.5% in the second half. His BB% spiked from 6.1% to 9.4%. Even when he had a good month of September, he had a 9.0% BB%. He allowed more pull-side contact, more fly balls, and more home runs per fly ball in the second half as he reached new thresholds. By September, his fastball velo and spin rate had both dipped. I don't think it was an injury, just fatigue, but he's under the microscope this season.

MIAMI MARLINS SEASON WIN TOTAL ODDS & PREDICTION

As the holder of a Marlins season win total Under ticket last season, I feel like I want to go back to the well again. I do think this version is pretty clearly better than the 2021 and 2022 versions that won 67 and 69 games, respectively, but as I mentioned, last year's team should have won 75-77 games, which would clear this number. Last year's team also had a healthy Alcantara.

There's certainly a chance that all of the starters perform at a high level and stay healthy. It would be a surprise, especially with the track record of health for the Marlins, but it could happen. Even if it does, I'm not sure that the ceiling for this team is that much higher than what the win total line states. Obviously, there's the chance for an outlier, say, like, going 33-14 in one-run games.

But, I don't think that will be the case. I think every team in the NL East is as good or better than last year's version. The track record for overachievers in the following season with that bad of a run differential can't be very good. It's an Under team once again for me.

PICK: UNDER 78.5

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. Civale 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 Civale 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.



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 or dry environment 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.

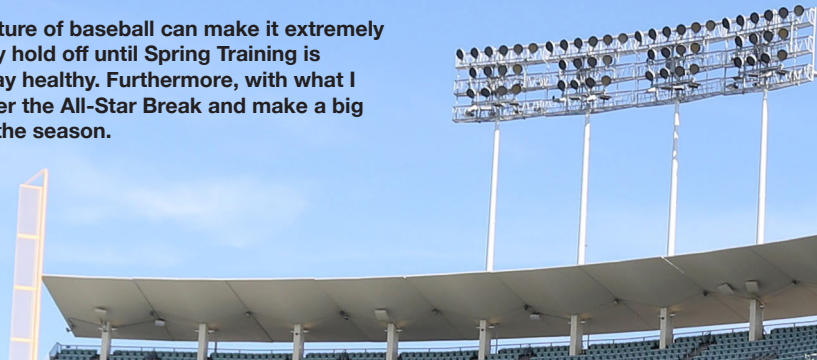


WANDERING THROUGH THE WORLD SERIES FUTURES ODDS

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 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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