



VSIN



A baseball player in a black jersey and grey pants is in a batting stance, holding a bat. The background is a red wall with a large white 'SPEC' logo and a cartoon mascot.

BASEBALL BETTING GUIDE

TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR BETTING THE MLB

OUR REGIONAL GUIDE INCLUDES

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

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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%.



2026 ODDS

WIN TOTAL: 72.5

DIVISION: 40-1

PENNANT: 100-1

WORLD SERIES: 200-1

BURKE'S BOLD TAKE: The Marlins have a league average offense for the first time since 2017 when they had a 101 wRC+

HITTING

Miami has basically produced a lineup of guys who were blocked in other organizations by better players or other top prospects. It is likely that the oldest position player to break camp with the Fish will turn 29 in July. This roster is cheap, which is an important part of the equation for owner Bruce Sherman. It is also a major unknown. loanDepot Park is a pretty good pitcher's park typically, so it's only fair that we look at the Marlins on a curved grading scale, where they had a 96 wRC+ with a .309 wOBA. With a bunch of young hitters, they did have the fourth-lowest K% in baseball. They were also seventh in stolen bases.

As these guys adjust to the league and the league adjusts to them, there's no way of knowing how this will all play out. Here's what we do know - of the top 10 in plate appearances last season, only two players - Kyle Stowers (149 wRC+) and Jesus Sanchez (104 wRC+) were above average hitters. Sanchez was traded to Houston at the Trade Deadline.

Xavier Edwards, who led the team in PA, had a 129 wRC+ in 2024 and just a 95 wRC+ in 2025 with a ton of regression to the mean in his BABIP (.398 to .330). Otto Lopez got very unlucky with a .246 BA and .368 SLG with a xBA of .271 and a xSLG of .426. Stowers had his magnificent season cut short by an oblique injury. But, all of these guys, including Stowers' Orioles teammate Connor Norby, have wide ranges of outcomes for this season.

PITCHING

Similarly, the pitching staff has a wide range of outcomes, too. Sandy Alcantara is still around, despite all sorts of trade talks last season and some this offseason, as he had a 5.36 ERA over a team-leading 174.2 innings of work, but he had a 61.9% LOB%, among the lowest in the league, so his advanced metrics painted a better picture. Instead of moving Alcantara, Miami traded Edward Cabrera to the Cubs for a highly-touted prospect in Owen Caissie, another hitter with a difficult projection. Cal Quantrill made 24 starts for the Marlins and he's gone.

MIAMI MARLINS

ADAM BURKE'S NERDY TAKE

The Marlins bottomed out in 2024 when they went 62-100, as there were a ton of things going on within the organization. It started well before October 2023, but that was the first big domino to fall, as widely-respected executive Kim Ng declined her option to stick around for 2024. The Marlins also opted not to give a contract extension to manager Skip Schumaker, who was coming off of being the NL Manager of the Year in his first season at the helm. With the dark cloud of Schumaker hanging over the team, coupled with all sorts of trade rumors and uncertainty, things were really, really bad.

Schumaker indeed left after the 2024 season and the Marlins wound up with Clayton McCullough, a man well-

respected in baseball circles, but not exactly a recognizable hire in a line that featured Schumaker, Don Mattingly, Mike Redmond, and one season of Ozzie Guillen. McCullough had a fine first season, going 79-83 with a 35-32 second half. McCullough sort of embodies the roster as a whole, as Miami is filled with no-name players. People know Sandy Alcantara. They maybe know Eury Perez. The average baseball fan probably couldn't name a single position player.

The projected starting lineup features eight players acquired via trade, one off waivers, and seven of them were acquired within the last two calendar years. Could this ragtag team of youngsters produce a darkhorse Wild Card contender?

There's some measure of addition by subtraction here with Braxton Garrett back after missing all of last season. He was very solid in 2022 and 2023 before getting hurt in 2024. Max Meyer and Perez are two arms that evaluators have loved for a long time, but health is a skill. The oldest player on the 26-man roster is likely to be closer Pete Fairbanks at 32 years of age. This is a bullpen that was completely stripped apart by trades two seasons ago and a lot of guys got valuable high-leverage experience last season.

PROSPECT WATCH

Whatever the Marlins do to isolate young pitching talent is still working, as we're likely to see the MLB debuts this season of Thomas White and Robby Snelling. White has enormous strikeout numbers to go with concerning walk numbers, as he's just overpowered hitters in the minors. The 6-foot-5 southpaw has only allowed eight homers out of 811 batters and has 272 strikeouts (33.5% K%). Meanwhile, Snelling, who was part of the Tanner Scott deal in that aforementioned bullpen sell-off, has given up more homers, but has

much better control. I would guess that Alcantara is traded at some point and if Garrett is healthy, the Marlins could move him before he gets deeper into arbitration.

OUTLOOK

I don't know that the ceiling is very high for the Marlins, but the floor could be pretty low. There are a lot of hitters with limited MLB track records and guys that could absolutely go one way or the other. Many of them have great minor league numbers, especially a guy like Caissie. There are injury risks left and right in the rotation, but a lot of productive pitchers when healthy. Plus, the Marlins are scrappy more often than not. Last year's team was +7 in actual record vs. Pythagorean Win-Loss because they only had 13 wins by 5+ runs and 29 losses by 5+ runs, putting a huge dent in their run differential. That 35-32 second half record? They were -34 in run differential.

**BURKE'S WIN TOTAL
LEAN: OVER 72.5**



MIAMI MARLINS

2025 RECORD : 79-83, 3RD IN NL EAST

LEWIS' WIN TOTAL LEAN : OVER 72.5

2025 BETTING RECORDS

MONEYLINE
79-83
+13.5 UNITS

TOTAL
80-80-2

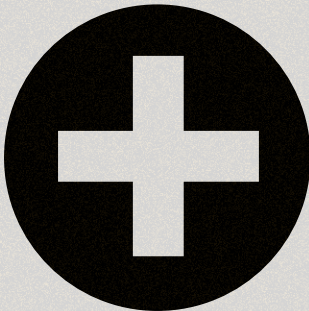
RUN LINE
94-68

YES RUN FIRST INNING
82-80

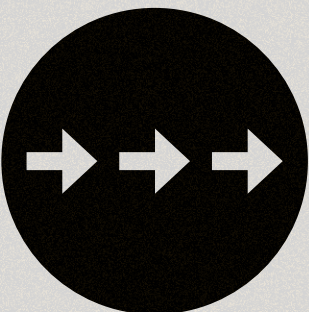
MONEYLINE 1ST 5
59-80-23
-18.5 UNITS

TOTAL 1ST 5
81-80

RUN LINE 1ST 5
80-82



NOTABLE ADDITIONS
OF Owen Caissie
INF/OF Christopher Morel
RP Pete Fairbanks
OF Esteury Ruiz
SP Chris Paddack



NOTABLE DEPARTURES
SP Edward Cabrera
SP Ryan Weathers
INF Eric Wagaman

JENSEN LEWIS' PLAYER TAKE

HITTING

Signs of life in South Beach? You bet. The emergence of budding stars 2B Xavier Edwards, LF Kyle Stowers and C Agustín Ramirez highlight the foundation this Marlins offense can bank on moving into 2026. Add in a big-time trade, sending Edward Cabrera to the Cubs in exchange for highly touted RF Owen Caissie and the cautious optimism continues growing. It's still a severely inexperienced lineup, but DH Griffin Conine, SS Otto Lopez and 3B Connor Norby can all take big steps forward this season. Leadoff hitter and CF Jakob Marsee is a real threat to be amongst the league-leaders in stolen bases, so the 1-2 punch of Marsee & Edwards can be table-setters for years to come. The one glaring hole? Power. Only Stowers is projected to hit 20+ bombs and that's a tough way to do business in the NL East. They'll need to rely a lot on speed and taking the extra base in spacious Marlins Park, while hoping their very talented rotation can keep them in games. It's an offense that finished right around league average in runs scored, but they're not sneaking up on anyone this year.

PITCHING

At one point, the top two rotation arms in Sandy Alcántara and Eury Pérez were the envy of the league. It looked like Alcántara may fall off the deep end with ineffectiveness to start 2025, but he finished in stride and Miami neglected to trade him at the deadline. Pérez, in the words of Marlins president of baseball operations Peter Bendix, "is just scratching the surface of what he can do." Young phenom Max Meyer is back from injury, as well as Braxton Garrett and Janson Junk made last year's rotation as a non-roster invitee. Chris Paddack assumes the No. 5 spot after signing in February, so the talent of the rotation is definitely deeper than a year ago. Can their health

be consistent enough to give their team a chance to hang around? One way to help the cause - go get a proven closer. Enter former Tampa Bay Ray stopper, Pete Fairbanks. One of the best leverage relievers in the sport, Fairbanks will lead a Miami pen with setup men Calvin Faucher and former closer Anthony Bender. The work in progress will be the bridge to that trio. Find those answers to help shorten games and the Fish may be dangerously close to contention.

PROSPECT WATCH

Owen Caissie would headline the Marlins farmhands, but he's likely ticketed for a spot on the Opening Day roster. Right behind him is power-hitting C Joe Mack and LHPs Thomas White and Robby Snelling. The real excitement is potentially the Miami face of the future: SS Aiva Arquette. The seventh overall selection out of Oregon State in last year's draft, he became arguably the best college position player in the country and can rocket through the minor leagues, knocking on the door of The Show probably in 2028. It's widely regarded as an underrated farm system, but the secret may be out soon enough.

OUTLOOK

Manager Clayton McCullough brought the winning culture from his days in the Dodgers organization and turned it into an exciting product on the field. After finishing the first half seven games under .500, he led them to a 35-32 second half, including a 13-4 surge to finish the regular season. Momentum and confidence are quietly rampant amongst this group and the NL East divisional foes got a first-hand look at this revamped roster. If a handful of young position players take off and the rotation remains healthy for the majority of the season, this team will be around come September.

LEWIS' BOLD TAKE: MIAMI FINISHES ABOVE .500 AND CHALLENGES FOR THE WILD CARD

NEW YORK YANKEES

ADAM BURKE'S NERDY TAKE

The quest for No. 28 continues, as the Yankees have made the playoffs in 11 of the last 15 seasons, but don't have a World Series trophy to show for it. In fact, the Bronx residents have made the playoffs in all but five seasons in years starting with a 20 and have two World Series victories (2000, 2009) to show for it. Failing to really build on the momentum of the Fall Classic loss to the Dodgers two seasons ago didn't sit well with the fans and the Yanks bowed out in the ALDS.

Truth be told, I'm not sure things could have gone better for the Yankees last season. Aaron Judge won another AL MVP and played 152 games. Cody Bellinger (4.9) and Jazz Chisholm Jr. (4.4) led a group of

five players with at least 3.0 fWAR. Max Fried and Carlos Rodon each threw 195.1 very valuable innings and Will Warren made 33 starts to offset the in-season loss of Clarke Schmidt and the preseason loss of Gerrit Cole. Outside of the bullpen being an adventure, Cam Schlichtler debuted and was excellent, Trent Grisham had a breakout season, Ben Rice would have gotten Rookie of the Year votes if eligible, and Aaron Boone was only ejected seven times.

With Ryan Weathers as the only newcomer, and an eye on Cole and Rodon's returns in May or June, do the Yankees have enough to emerge victorious in a clearly improved division?

HITTING

So, there's a glass half-full and glass half-empty approach to the Yankees offense. The half-full part is that Judge remains an elite hitter who was two times better than league average with an MLB-best 204 wRC+. Rice, Grisham, Chisholm, and Bellinger, who are all locked in for this season, combined for 120 home runs. Giancarlo Stanton only played 77 games, but hit 24 dingers with a 158 wRC+. Last season's power production remains intact and those guys collectively draw walks at a well above average rate.

I'm not going to pretend like Judge is going to experience a huge drop in numbers, but he'll turn 34 in April and his SwStr% was his highest since 2019 and his Z-Contact% has been down the last three years relative to the two years prior. Teams that have lofty expectations like the Yankees have to be viewed in the aggregate. Any decline from Judge paired with declines from Grisham, whose 21.5% HR/FB% was easily a career-high, Chisholm, who set a career-best mark in BB% and saw a huge spike in fly balls, Rice, who swung and missed less at the MLB level than he had in the minors, or Bellinger, who had a SLG of .480 with an expected SLG of .317, negatively impacts the team in a good division with a high win total and short futures odds.

PITCHING

The Yankees do find themselves in an advantageous situation here. Schlichtler's emergence as a burgeoning star and Fried's strong, healthy season give New York a lot to build around. Also, like we've seen with the Dodgers, there is probably a pretty big push among organizations with a lot of money or a lot of arms to not overextend guys. Fried is a workhorse, but Schlichtler worked over 160 innings and he's an arm worth protecting. That's why the May return of Rodon and the probable June return of Cole are so important.

With competent starters like Warren and Luis Gil, plus an arm I've loved forever in Weathers, the Yankees should run deep here by the summer. Weathers added

three ticks to his fastball over the last few seasons, but has never thrown more than 86.2 MLB innings in a campaign, so the jury is way out on him. Nevertheless, between the rotation and a bullpen in line for positive regression, this is a good group. Bullpens are super volatile year-over-year. The 2024 Yankees pen posted a 3.62 ERA with a 3.91 xERA and a 3.96 FIP. The 2025 Yankees pen had a 4.37 ERA with a 3.77 xERA and a 4.11 FIP. The biggest difference? The 2025 version had a 69.8% LOB% that ranked 26th. The 2024 version had a 72.6% LOB% that ranked 12th.

PROSPECT WATCH

We're finally at the point where Jasson Dominguez can't really be considered a prospect, so we go to the next outfielder in the pipeline with Spencer Jones. Jones is often dangled by Bronx Bombers fans in hypothetical trade proposals as a guy with prolific power and a ton of holes in his swing. He bashed 35 HR in 506 PA across AA and AAA last season, but also struck out over 35% of the time with a 19.2% SwStr%. I think strikeouts are overblown, especially if you can offset them with power and free passes, and Jones did post an 11.5% BB%. A boom-or-bust left-handed bat on a per-PA basis with this home ballpark intrigues me greatly.

OUTLOOK

Returning from Tommy John surgery is not linear, so there's no guarantee that Cole comes back looking like himself, nor is there with Rodon and his bone spur surgery. But, the Yankees have positioned themselves well to go seven-ish deep by late spring and shouldn't have to overextend guys. Similarly, there are a lot of above average bats to go with an elite one in the lineup. The relief corps will rely on situational regression with no major adds. This is basically the same team, but a year older. To me, this group stayed pretty much the same, while the other four in the division got better.

2026 ODDS

WIN TOTAL: 91.5

DIVISION: +160

PENNANT: +400

WORLD SERIES: 10-1



**BURKE'S WIN TOTAL
LEAN: UNDER 91.5**

BURKE'S BOLD TAKE: Multi-player regression hits and the Yankees are fighting for the final AL Wild Card spot several games back in the division

JENSEN LEWIS' PLAYER TAKE

HITTING

Hard to argue with the offensive output from this 2025 Yankees lineup. The league leader in runs scored, OPS and HR basically runs it back in 2026 with most of the regulars that finished in pinstripes last season. RF Aaron Judge won his third AL MVP award in the last four years and has his battering mates LF Cody Bellinger and DH Giancarlo Stanton back for lineup protection. Fresh off of a career year, CF Trent Grisham accepted the Yankees qualifying offer, returning to hit leadoff, while 1B Ben Rice and re-signed 1B Paul Goldschmidt share duties anchoring the infield of 2B Jazz Chisholm Jr., SS José Caballero and 3B Ryan McMahon. C Austin Wells rounds out the lineup. Bench options abound with INF/OF Oswaldo Cabrera and Amed Rosario, along with "the Martian" OF Jasson Domínguez. On paper, can the Bronx Bombers recreate 849 runs scored and 274 team HR? Projections indicate yes, with the favorable short porches in Yankee Stadium. This lineup surprisingly

finished top eight in stolen bases and with Caballero getting the Opening Day spot for the injured SS Anthony Volpe, he's got a shot at 50+ in that category. Speaking of 50 or more, what's to stop Judge from eclipsing the 50+ HR plateau and three-peating in the MVP race? There still seems to be no answer (outside of the playoffs) to solve getting him out in clutch situations. Expect the usual thunder and lightning from the Yankee starting nine again in 2026.

PITCHING

Hold the line. That's the refrain for the early portion of the 2026 schedule in the Yankee rotation. Max Fried is slated for the top starting spot out of the chute, alongside rookie sensations Cam Schlichter and Will Warren. A sneaky good deal with the Marlins brings in a high-upside starter in Ryan Weathers, with Luis Gil rounding out the first five. The rehab timelines for staff ace Gerrit Cole and stalwart Carlos Rodón are something to monitor, with Cole potentially joining the big

league staff in early June. Neither will be rushed, considering the depth of the current starting options; nevertheless, when both return to full health, New York will have a viable argument for the deepest rotation in the AL. Bullpen issues plagued this team a year ago, but with offseason defections by Williams and Weaver to the crosstown rival Mets, some roles become pretty clear heading into 2026. Closer David Bednar flourished down the stretch and will be the stopper. Setup men Camilo Doval, Fernando Cruz and Tim Hill all provide excellent leverage options. The real question in camp will be how to fill out the remaining reliever options, deciding between veterans Paul Blackburn, Ryan Yarbrough and Rule 5 selection Cade Winqest. New York can't afford this unit being the early Achilles' heel it became in 2025.

PROSPECT WATCH

Four Yankees farmhands find their spots in MiLB's Top 100 list entering 2026, highlighted by INF George Lombard Jr. (No.32),

RHP Carlos Lagrange (No.79) and RHP Elmer Rodríguez (No.82). Lombard possesses excellent base-stealing abilities and scouts believe he'll develop into a five-tool player. Rodríguez is ticketed for the Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre rotation as a potential early call-up candidate. Notably absent from the Top 100 list is ballyhooed power prospect OF Spencer Jones. His struggles with swing-and-miss continue to keep him from the Bronx, but his power is absolutely undeniable.

OUTLOOK

The goal never changes: World Series or bust. Manager Aaron Boone will rely on the early offensive firepower to win games before Cole and Rodón can return to the rotation. The bullpen needs a quick start as well. With the AL East getting even better this offseason, the Yankees will be plenty battle-tested. Will those battles result in too much injury attrition or can they overwhelm their division rivals, en route to a deep October run?

LEWIS' BOLD TAKE: THE YANKEE ROTATION REINFORCEMENTS PROVE VITAL AS THEY FIND THEIR WAY BACK TO THE ALCS

2025 BETTING RECORDS

MONEYLINE
97-72
-13.1 UNITS

TOTAL
77-85-6

RUN LINE
79-89

MONEYLINE 1ST 5
95-53-21
+16.8 UNITS

TOTAL 1ST 5
89-80

RUN LINE 1ST 5
95-74

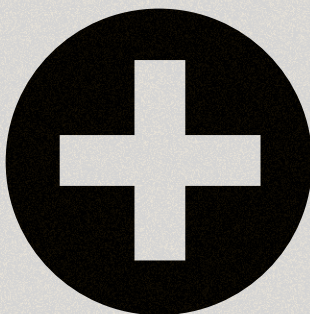
**YES RUN
FIRST INNING**
94-75



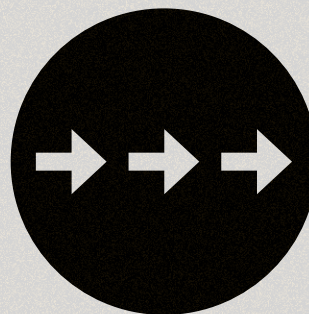
**NEW YORK
YANKEES**

2025 RECORD: 94-68
T-1ST IN AL EAST

LEWIS' WIN TOTAL
PLAY: UNDER 91.5



**NOTABLE
ADDITIONS**
SP Ryan Weathers
RP Cade Winqest



**NOTABLE
DEPARTURES**
RP Devin Williams
INF Paul Goldschmidt
RP Mark Leiter Jr.
RP Luke Weaver
INF DJ LeMahieu
SP Marcus Stroman
RP Ian Hamilton
RP Scott Effross
OF Austin Slater
RP Jonathan Loáisiga
RP Jake Cousins

BURKE'S BOLD TAKE: The Rays are pretty far out of it in July and one of their AL East rivals pays a rich sum for Drew Rasmussen at the Trade Deadline

HITTING

The move outside is complicated to process. The 2025 Rays hit .261/.330/.418 with a .326 wOBA and a 107 wRC+ at Steinbrenner Field. The 2024 Trop-dwellers hit .229/.303/.466 with a .295 wOBA and a 99 wRC+. Their .295 wOBA ranked 29th in the league, so moving outside helped. The Rays scored 67 more runs over their 81 home games. Of course, they also went 41-40 with the offensive boost and 42-39 in 2024 when they got outsourced at home because baseball is funny like that.

The incredible thing to me is that the Rays only had a FB% of 33% in a ballpark that does help the ball carry, though the park does play very differently during the day versus the night because of the humidity and the winds. I can't say I expected the Rays to lead the league in home GB% with what seemed to be a lot of reasons to elevate the baseball because nothing carries at Tropicana Field. And, yet, they still scored a lot more runs.

Oddly, the Rays were third with a 120 wRC+ in 2023 at home, slashing .255/.322/.439, which was an even higher SLG than last season. Obviously some personnel has changed and the team is always seeking an edge. I'll be honest, though, this lineup is unimpressive, even with the acquisition of Gavin Lux and the signing of Cedric Mullins.

PITCHING

Time will tell if going from Baz to Steven Matz is a downgrade - and to what degree, if so - but the Rays do field a very interesting staff this season. Drew Rasmussen made 31 starts and threw 150 innings in his first full season since 2022 and was extremely good, but also treated with kid gloves, as 15 of those starts featured between 62-80 pitches. Of course, he was also very efficient in most outings. Unfortunately, they were unable to provide the same to Shane Bieber, who didn't pitch in a big league game for the second year in a row.

McClanahan is said to be healthy entering Spring Training, but

what can the Rays realistically expect? As a high-velocity strike-thrower, his Stuff+ figures were elite pre-injury, but what now? Former Athletic Joe Boyle has punched a lot of tickets as a big leaguer with a 25.2% K%, but also sports a 14.3% BB%. With another five-and-dive guy in Ryan Pepiot, an oft-injured starter in Matz, and a cast of journeymen in the MLB bullpen and AAA rotation, the improved park factor of The Trop will have to boost this staff.

PROSPECT WATCH

Sometimes a cup of coffee can be really bitter and that's how to describe Carson Williams' 32-game sample at the MLB level, as he struck out 41.5% of the time, but did flash his power and speed tools with five homers and two steals. While the future at SS is the focus of the Rays organization SP Brody Hopkins is where I'm looking. The collegiate two-way player only threw 54 innings at Winthrop before making his pro ball debut with 66 strikeouts and 44 walks in 15 appearances. He was a centerpiece in the Randy Arozarena deal with the Mariners and has posted terrific run prevention numbers while still throwing a ton of pitches between strikeouts and walks. But, he's a highly athletic arm and the Rays don't mind pushing guys. With a delicate starting staff, I won't be surprised if Hopkins debuts this season.

OUTLOOK

Overperforming is what the Rays usually do, as they had a better record than their Pythagorean Win-Loss record four straight seasons from 2017-20 and then again in 2024. Last season, despite a +31 run differential, they were 77-85. Run prevention remains a strength, but run generation remains a moving target. If the Rays are going to lead baseball in ground ball rate and have a bottom-10 K%, they're not going to generate enough offense to be a factor in this division or the AL playoff picture.

BURKE'S WIN TOTAL PICK: UNDER 77.5



2026 ODDS

WIN TOTAL: 77.5

DIVISION: 30-1

PENNANT: 35-1

WORLD SERIES: 90-1

TAMPA BAY RAYS

ADAM BURKE'S NERDY TAKE

The Rays return home to Tropicana Field with earlier game times during the week and a new ownership group. Former owner Stuart Sternberg sold the team to a group led by Patrick Zalupski, Bill Cosgrove, and Ken Babby, who was the owner of the Akron RubberDucks, Cleveland's AA affiliate, and Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp, Miami's AAA affiliate. Most of the talk regarding the new owners this winter centered on upgrades to The Trop while waiting for a new ballpark in 2029.

We have no indication thus far as to whether or not this new group will be willing to spend more money on the roster or prevent guys from being traded prior to free agency, as they've spent under \$25 million on FA during their first offseason and jettisoned Shane

Baz before he got more expensive with upcoming arbitration years. When teams were still operating like it was the Dark Ages, the Rays were able to capitalize on data and smart minds, including Andrew Friedman, who leveled up from penny-pinching charter boat captain to drunken sailor with a trillion-dollar yacht moving from Tampa Bay to Los Angeles to lead the Dodgers front office.

These days, the Rays are still really smart and getting back to The Trop should help, as their roster is constructed for that, not a free-for-all, outdoor Spring Training park with Yankee Stadium dimensions. But, they aren't ahead of other organizations analytically like they once were and the first back-to-back losing seasons since 2016-17 do seem pretty telling.

2025 BETTING RECORDS

MONEYLINE
77-85
-20.0 UNITS

TOTAL
71-81-10

RUN LINE
73-89

MONEYLINE 1ST 5
71-71-20
-12.5 UNITS

TOTAL 1ST 5
74-87

RUN LINE 1ST 5
78-84

YES RUN
FIRST INNING
88-74



**TAMPA BAY
RAYS**

2025 RECORD : 77-85
4TH IN AL EAST

LEWIS' WIN TOTAL
LEAN : OVER 77.5

JENSEN LEWIS' PLAYER TAKE

HITTING

What a dichotomy the Rays offense is entering 2026. The good: 3B Junior Caminero is a budding superstar, All-Star DH Yandy Diaz continues to mash and slug with the best in baseball and youngster 1B Jonathan Aranda looks like a middle order bat that brings additional run scoring ability. Rookie speedster LF Chandler Simpson made his big league debut in 2025, 2B Gavin Lux came over in a trade with Cincinnati to replace the departed Brandon Lowe and veteran outfielders Cedric Mullins and Jake Fraley can take over in CF and RF, respectively. The bad? Who's filling out the bottom of a lineup that, as a whole, couldn't get above league average in most of the critical offensive departments last year? This team thrived on speed and pressure, leading MLB in stolen bases, while finishing ninth in team batting average. The Rays also depart their temporary 2025 "home" at George Steinbrenner

Field, Spring Training home of the New York Yankees, back to Tropicana Field, after \$55M in renovations from the devastation during Hurricane Milton. A new turf playing surface was installed in mid-January and may provide a new data point to consider for run totals in Rays home games. Will the power numbers from the left-handed bats, who benefitted from the short porch in a Spring Training ballpark last year, be able to recreate that firepower back indoors?

PITCHING

The pitching factory that's resided in Tampa Bay took a dip last year, suffering a rash of injuries throughout the staff. Health is always top of mind in all organizations, but the hope is former staff ace Shane McClellan can reprise his role atop the rotation. If so, Ryan Pepiot and Drew Rasmussen can team with him to form quite the trio. Add in veteran Steven Matz, as well as freshly

signed swingman Nick Martinez and youngster Joe Boyle. That group produces another familiar refrain in this organization, creating depth for a competent starting five. The closing duties in the bullpen will pass to Edwin Uceta, after the departure of Pete Fairbanks down the state to be the Marlins stopper. Setup men Griffin Jax and Garrett Cleavinger provide the bridge to Uceta and Bryan Baker is a name to keep your eye on for leverage spots in key situations. Finding early-season length out of the rotation will be an early litmus test of the success these Rays hurlers can expect in 2026. A plethora of swing-and-miss capability, teamed with high-octane velocity, puts this staff in their customary sleeper spot to surprise in the AL.

PROSPECT WATCH

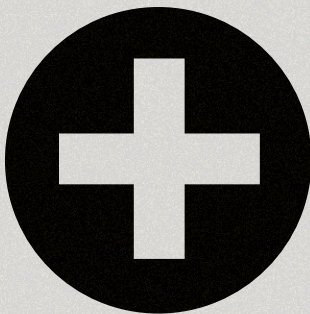
The highly touted SS Carson Williams got his feet wet in 2025 at the big league level and quickly found out how difficult life is at

the top. He's as big a foundational piece for the organization moving forward and can develop into an All-Star. A big addition is OF Jacob Melton, coming over from the Astros in the three-team deal involving Houston, Tampa Bay and Pittsburgh. His bat needs work, but his defensive prowess may give him a shot at beating out Cedric Mullins for the starting CF job this year.

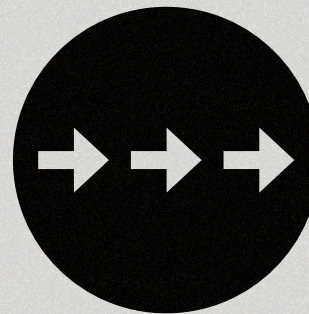
OUTLOOK

Manager Kevin Cash always seems to extract 110% ability out of his teams and this year's challenge will be no different. The AL East is arguably the toughest division in baseball going into 2026, but that's never daunted one of the best skippers in the game. The offense will need to limit strikeouts and their arms must remain healthy for the majority of the season. They go as far as Caminero's bat takes them and if McClellan gets 25+ starts, they'll push for a postseason berth.

LEWIS' BOLD TAKE: JUNIOR CAMINERO FINISHES TOP 5 IN AL MVP VOTING AND THE RAYS WIN 85+ GAMES



**NOTABLE
ADDITIONS**
INF Gavin Lux
OF Cedric Mullins
OF Jake Fraley
OF Justyn-Henry Malloy
SP Steven Matz
RP Steven Wilson
RP Yoendrys Gómez
INF Ben Williamson
SP Nick Martinez



**NOTABLE
DEPARTURES**
SP Adrian Houser
RP Pete Fairbanks
INF/OF Christopher Morel

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