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2023 MLB BETTING GUIDE

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Steve Makinen's

2023 MLB Strength Ratings

TEAM	DIVISION	TEAM PR	RANK	EFFECTIVE RUNS	RANK	STARTING PITCHING	RANK	BULLPEN	RANK
HOUSTON	A.L. WEST	-48	1	4.82	2	22	9	21	2
NY YANKEES	A.L. EAST	-42	2	4.7	3	22.5	6	12	10
ATLANTA	N.L. EAST	-40	3	4.64	5	24.8	5	20	3
SAN DIEGO	N.L. WEST	-40	4	4.62	6	13.9	16	10	12
LA DODGERS	N.L. WEST	-38	5	4.85	1	36.8	1	22	1
TORONTO	A.L. EAST	-37	6	4.65	4	19.8	13	4	17
NY METS	N.L. EAST	-37	7	4.54	9	36.1	2	15	6
ST LOUIS	N.L. CENTRAL	-33	8	4.56	7	11.7	19	9	13
PHILADELPHIA	N.L. EAST	-33	9	4.55	8	22.2	8	7	15
SEATTLE	A.L. WEST	-30	10	4.45	11	20.3	11	16	5
MINNESOTA	A.L. CENTRAL	-27	11	4.42	12	18.6	14	14	8
CLEVELAND	A.L. CENTRAL	-27	12	4.28	19	16.7	15	20	4
TAMPA BAY	A.L. EAST	-26	13	4.28	20	20	12	15	7
BALTIMORE	A.L. EAST	-24	14	4.38	14	3	23	2	19
LA ANGELS	A.L. WEST	-23	15	4.42	13	22.5	7	-6	26
CHI WHITE SOX	A.L. CENTRAL	-23	16	4.37	15	21.6	10	3	18
BOSTON	A.L. EAST	-22	17	4.48	10	3.7	22	14	9
MILWAUKEE	N.L. CENTRAL	-20	18	4.36	16	33	3	8	14
CHICAGO CUBS	N.L. CENTRAL	-18	19	4.32	17	8.9	21	-7	27
ARIZONA	N.L. WEST	-18	20	4.3	18	13	17	1	20
SAN FRANCISCO	N.L. WEST	-16	21	4.28	21	9.3	20	5	16
TEXAS	A.L. WEST	-15	22	4.25	22	31.8	4	-3	24
KANSAS CITY	A.L. CENTRAL	-13	23	4.25	23	0.6	24	-1	21
COLORADO	N.L. WEST	-13	24	4.21	24	-6.6	27	-2	22
MIAMI	N.L. EAST	-10	25	4.08	27	12.7	18	12	11
DETROIT	A.L. CENTRAL	-8	26	4.08	28	-0.5	25	-2	23
WASHINGTON	N.L. EAST	-6	27	4.15	25	-7.3	29	-11	30
PITTSBURGH	N.L. CENTRAL	-6	28	4.05	29	-6.9	28	-7	28
CINCINNATI	N.L. CENTRAL	0	29	4.15	26	-5.1	26	-9	29
OAKLAND	A.L. WEST	4	30	4.02	30	-8.8	30	-4	25

Steve Makinen's Strength Ratings Explained

Within this publication you will find references to four sets of Strength Ratings: Team PR, Effective Runs, Starting Pitching and Bullpen. Here is an explanation of each:

- The Team Power Ratings (PR) are my own manually adjusted ratings updated after every game based upon analysis of live action and box scores.
- The Effective Runs are purely statistical ratings, using the teams' key stats against schedule strength and their previous opponents' averages. These are also adjusted for any key injuries the team had endured or faced against.
- The starting pitcher rankings are a combination of each of the current pitchers in that team's rotation. Players are replaced when designated with lengthy injuries.
- The bullpen ratings are a collective analysis of the entire relief staff, again with an emphasis on both talent and performance.

Houston Astros 2023 Season Preview

By Adam Burke



Normally the reigning World Series champions don't have an awkward offseason, but that was the case with the Houston Astros.

Jeff Bagwell's official job title is Community Outreach Executive, but he sure had a lot to say about the Astros and their incorporation of analytics into the decision-making process. Among Bagwell's comments were things like, "This game is played by humans, man. It's not played by computers." He lamented how far into the numbers and metrics the Astros have gone.

Those comments came shortly after owner Jim Crane fired GM James Click and assistant GM Scott Powers. Ultimately, the Astros hired Dana Brown, who was the vice president of scouting for the Atlanta Braves, a team that - you guessed it - incorporates a lot of analytics into the decision-making process. The Braves have been tremendously successful in identifying and developing homegrown talent, but so have the Astros.

How anybody could find fault with what the Astros have achieved is mind-blowing. They've played in **FOUR OF THE LAST SIX WORLD SERIES!** They've won two of them and haven't fallen short of the ALCS since 2016. Not much has changed with the roster or the expectations for 2023. The window certainly isn't closed. I'm just curious how much longer it will be open, especially if more head-scratching decisions are coming down the pike.

Explanations of the stats used in this preview can be found in my **"MLB Stats to Know"** [article](#).

2023 Odds

World Series: +600
AL Pennant: +310
AL West: -180
Win Total: 95.5 (-115/-105)
Make Playoffs: Yes -750 / No +550

HOUSTON ASTROS OFFENSE

The Astros offense will once again rank near the top of the league. The obvious weak link last season was Yuli Gurriel, who was fourth on the team in plate appearances and the only guy ranked in the top seven in PA to post a wRC+ under 102. Keep in mind that 100 is league average and the other guys posted wRC+ marks of 136, 129, 164, 185, 102 and 114. Gurriel had an 85 wRC+, meaning he was 15% below league average offensively.

To replace him, the Astros turned to 2020 MVP Jose Abreu, whose power numbers dropped last season because of an awful offensive philosophy in Chicago. Abreu is 36, so maybe it was a little more than that, but he fits perfectly into this lineup. He makes a lot of contact, while still drawing walks, and has 30-homer upside.

At this point, the only clear below average hitter in the Astros lineup is catcher Martin Maldonado, whose defensive skills balance out his weak stick. Noticeably absent from the top seven guys in plate appearances is Michael Brantley, who only had 277 of them, but slashed .288/.370/.416 with a 127 wRC+ of his own.

Jordan Alvarez is an MVP candidate after crushing 37 homers with a 185 wRC+. He just needs to stay healthy, which may be a taller task because he's going to be expected to play more outfield this season with Brantley's limitations. He could play some first base with Abreu as the DH, but the Astros seemed to make it clear that they expect Alvarez in the field more. He served as the DH for 77 games last season and played left field in 56.

The Astros had six players with at least 558 plate appearances, which is rare in today's day and age. Injuries pop up a lot, but a lot of teams also utilize platoons. Because of their talent, the Astros don't have to do that. Guys like Alex Bregman, Kyle Tucker and Jose Altuve play every day and produce at a high level. Altuve will turn 33 in May and many have speculated how he'll age given his body type, but he's showing no signs of it yet.

Along with the Gurriel/Abreu upgrade, Jeremy Pena is in his second full season as the starting shortstop and it makes sense that he would be more comfortable offensively this time around. Pena played some excellent defense, but the bat was hit or miss with a .253/.289/.426 slash over his 136 games. He struck out over 24% of the time and walked under 4% of the time, but he only played 30 games at Triple-A in 2021 after losing out on most of that season and all of the 2020 season.

The Houston offense also gets a boost because this is one of the best teams in baseball about putting the ball in play. Only the Dodgers, Braves and Rangers pulled the ball more often as well, so the Astros may fare better in the batting average department. Home runs don't count towards BABIP and the Astros hit 214 of those, but they did only have a .278 BABIP, which ranked 25th.

It stands to reason that the Astros also benefit from the new rules. They don't strike out much and I just mentioned how often they pulled the ball. Utilizing a shift was some measure of defense against this elite lineup, but that opportunity is now gone. Some shaky decision-making is taking place in the front office, but that has little bearing on the talent that is currently on the roster. I think there are some questions long-term in terms of internal player development, scouting and financial flexibility, but those are down the road.

HOUSTON ASTROS PITCHING

You would think it would be really difficult to replace Gerrit Cole and Justin Verlander in the span of three years, but Houston's developmental wins on the pitching side

have left them with an all-homegrown rotation of guys under the age of 30. Verlander had a 1.75 ERA with a 2.49 FIP and won the AL Cy Young Award for his 175 innings of brilliance, so there could be some measure of a drop-off, but the collective group of guys in Houston's top five will be just fine.

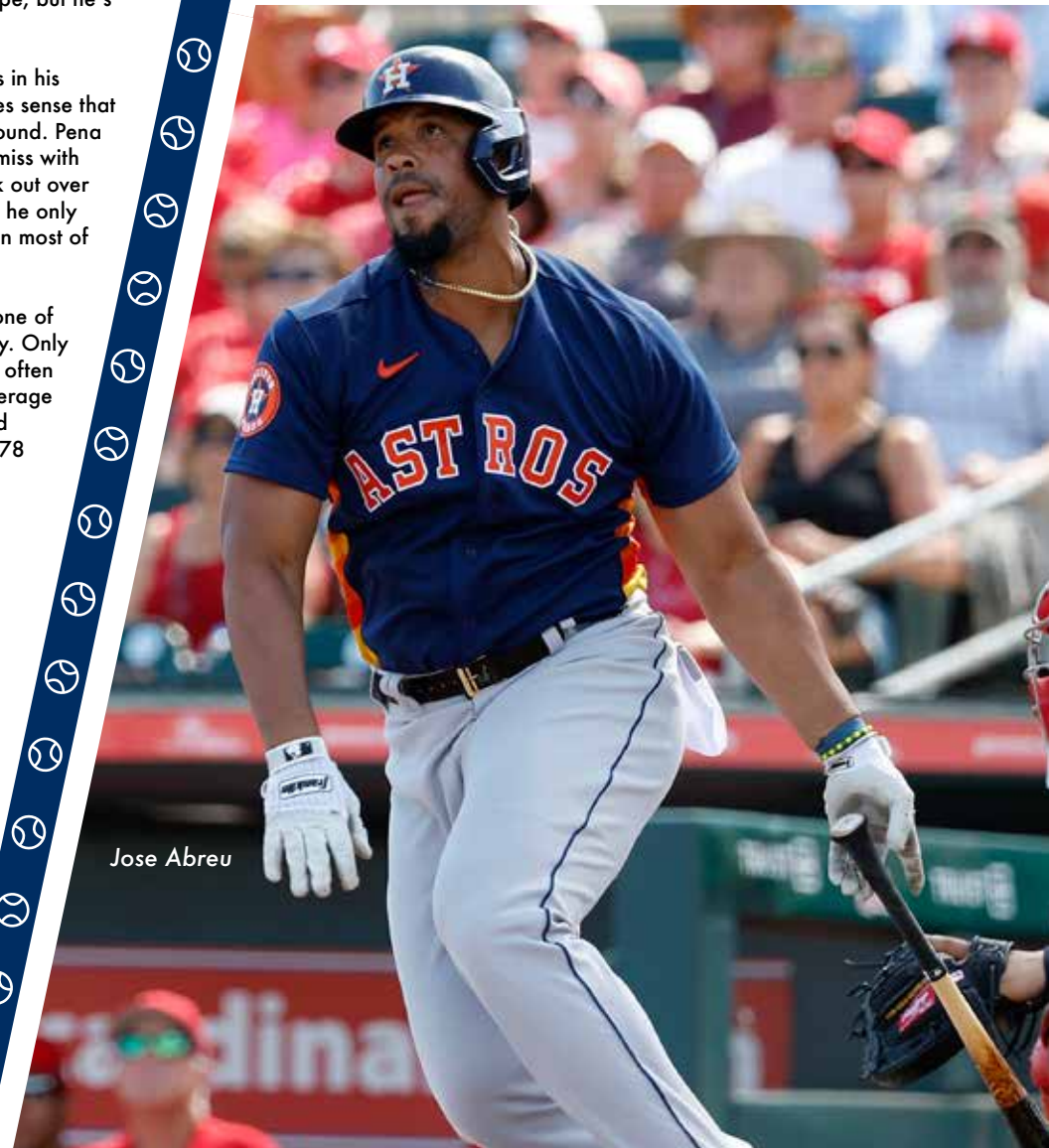
A stat I marveled about in the playoffs is that the Astros had 16 pitchers that made at least eight appearances and not a single one of them had an ERA over 3.94. In fact, eight of them had an ERA under 3.00. Included in that mix were all five of this season's projected starters. One of them was the oft-injured Lance McCullers Jr., who was delayed in Spring Training by some soreness right after pitchers and catchers reported for duty.

If McCullers does miss time (and he inevitably will), that simply opens the door for top prospect Hunter Brown, so the Astros will be just fine. Framber Valdez led the team with 201.1 innings last season and had a 2.82 ERA with a 3.06 FIP. He's one of the most extreme ground ball guys in the game, so we'll see how the shift rules impact him, but he keeps the ball in the park and showed a lot of durability by performing about as well in the second half as he did in the first half while setting new record highs in innings pitched and starts.

Cristian Javier is the guy I'm most interested in. Apparently the Astros are as well, since they signed him to a new five-year deal right before Spring Training. He's the strikeout guy of the bunch and had a 2.54 ERA with a 3.16 FIP in 148.2 innings of work. He's also the opposite of Valdez as a super extreme fly ball guy, but he cut his HR/FB% down by over 5% from 2021 to 2022, which dramatically altered his ceiling. Assuming those improvements stick, I think he's honestly a Cy Young Award candidate. He almost had 200 strikeouts and only pitched 148.2 innings last season.

The biggest difference for Luis Garcia this season will be that his windup is now illegal under MLB's new rules. The 26-year-old had fine numbers for the Astros once again, with almost an identical stat line to his 2021 season.

Jose Abreu



His ERA and FIP were up slightly, but he still graded above average. That was not fully the case for Jose Urquidy, whose 4.60 FIP was very much on the high side, but the Astros are typically good at fixing pitcher weaknesses, much like they did with Valdez's high BB% early in his career.

Houston's bullpen ranked first in ERA and first in FIP for the full season. Only the Guardians, Dodgers and Braves had lower ERAs for the second half and only the Guardians had a lower FIP. Every guy from that unit is back this season, so that should once again be a strength for the Astros.

There is only so much you can say about a team that seems to have no noteworthy weaknesses. You could argue that the improved rosters for the Mariners, Angels and Rangers are going to be the biggest threats to the numbers that the Astros put up both offensively and on the pitching side, but the depth here is tremendous all around.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

The Astros did play 93 of their games against teams with losing records last season and went 64-29, but they also trailed only the Dodgers in win percentage against teams .500 or better. They certainly padded their 106-56 record against the bad teams, but more than held their own against the good teams. They were also a ridiculous 42-12 against left-handed starters.

As I said, I'm not sure if the improvements made by some teams around the league will cut that much into Houston's productivity, but it is worth noting that they won 35 games by 5+ runs last season. They were also 28-16 in one-run games, so they found lots of ways to win, but one pronounced way was in blowing out the opposition. That may happen less this season.

PLAYER TO WATCH

SP Cristian Javier: Some sportsbooks have better player futures odds than others, but I do think shopping around for the best price on Javier to

win the AL Cy Young makes sense. Javier struck out 39.5% of right-handed batters faced last season. He is a fly ball guy and a home run risk comes attached with that, but he also had 25 pop ups last season, which are effectively strikeouts, including a boost with those in the second half. He cut his Hard Hit% from 42.7% to 33.3% and shaved 2.6% off of his Barrel%. His average exit velocity against on fastballs dropped from 93 mph to 89.1 mph, so he clearly located it better and he even seemed to mix in a few more curveballs, which has the chance to be an elite pitch with a 92nd percentile spin rate. He turns 26 just before the season and I think he's learned how to pitch now to go along with the stellar raw talent. He's a special player.

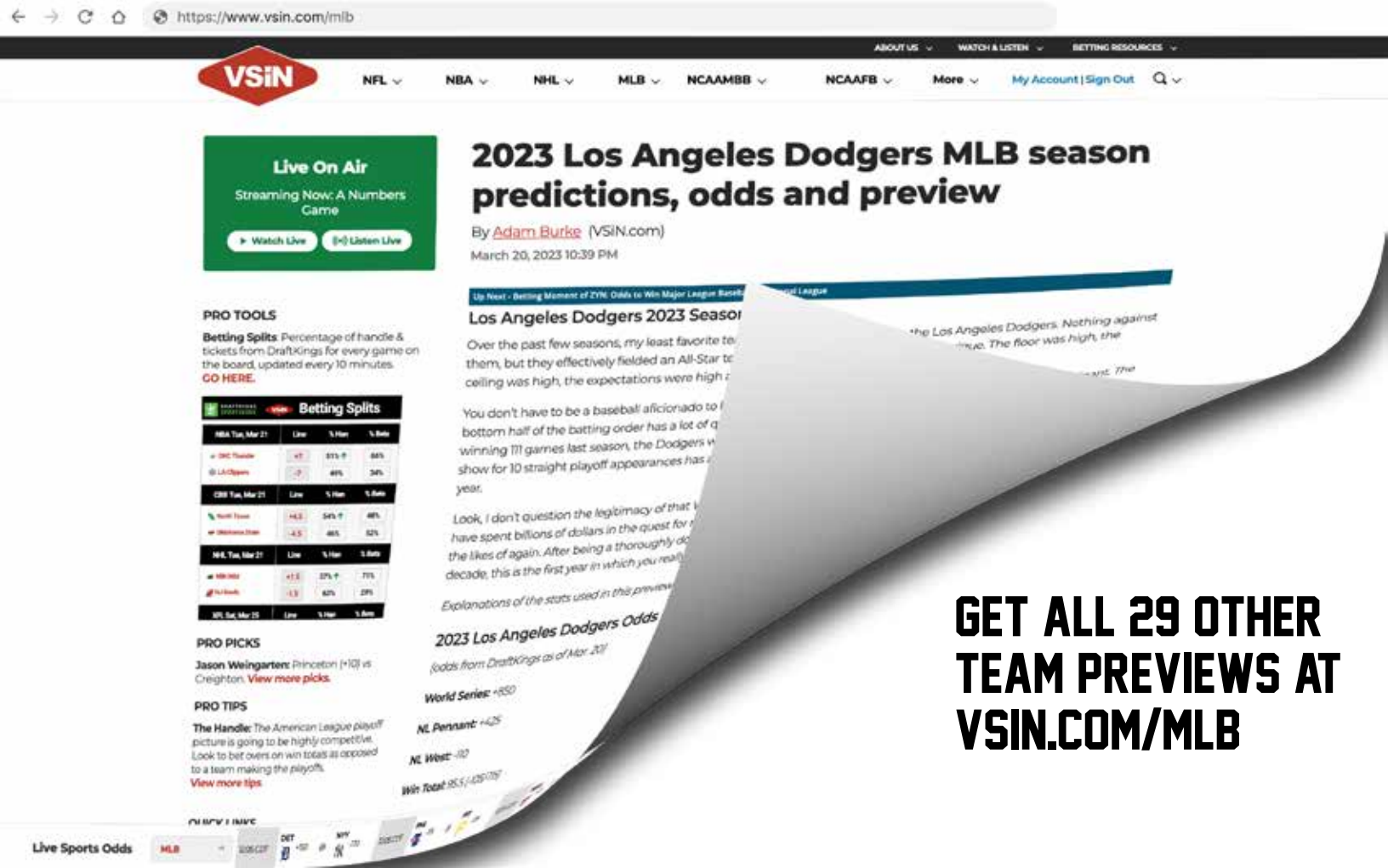
HOUSTON ASTROS SEASON WIN TOTAL PICK

This will be one of the league's best teams once again. The talent level is just entirely too high. That being said, the Astros do seem to be a little more depth-shy than past versions. This year's projected bench is full of below average hitters and the starting pitcher options behind Brown are lacking. The Astros have played a ton of baseball during this dynasty with lots of extra innings and plate appearances on the legs and arms of their core guys.

For the most part, the Astros have stayed healthy. When injuries have popped up, they've simply had tremendous depth to withstand the storm. This was a team that won 106 games last season and won the division by 16 games, even though I really think Seattle is on the rise. It's hard to do anything other than expect the Astros to be great, as all of their odds imply.

It should be another status quo season for Houston. They've won 101 or more games in four of the last five full seasons, with 95 in the other one and their Pythagorean Win-Loss that season of .622 implied that they should have won 101 games. I don't have an official wager here, but the over is the pick for the article.

STRONGER LEAN: OVER 95.5





How New MLB Rules Will Impact Betting

By Adam Burke

Major League Baseball is going to look a lot different in 2023. A handful of rule changes are likely to have a significant impact on betting the game. At least with these – unlike the baseball, which changes from season to season – we know what they are and they are well-defined. Players got a crash course in how they would be implemented and enforced in Spring Training and the data was rather eye-opening.

The three main rule changes are the pitch clock, bigger bases and a ban on infield shifts. I'll break these down one by one to look at the data from Spring Training and the potential impact for bettors.

PITCH CLOCK

- Pitchers are required to start their pitching motions within 15 seconds with nobody on base and 20 seconds with men on base
- The batter must be ready and looking at the pitcher with 8 seconds on the clock
- Pitchers are allowed two "disengagements" and batters are allowed one timeout (the number of disengagements resets if a runner advances to another base; a third disengagement is considered a balk)
- The penalty is an automatic strike or an automatic ball depending on the offending party

Rob Manfred's biggest goal as MLB Commissioner has been to speed up the game, and these rule changes have absolutely done that. I couldn't find a more recent tweet update, but as of March 8, Spring Training games were about 24 minutes shorter (2:37) than last season's exhibition affairs (3:01). Regular season games averaged 3:11 last season.

From a betting standpoint, there is a lot to unpack here. Obviously, a ball or a strike in any given plate appearance is a huge deal, so those could be tremendously impactful. After a 1-0 count, MLB hitters slashed .255/.371/.428 last season. After a 0-1 count, they slashed .213/.258/.334, so even a violation to begin a plate appearance could be significant. Some of those will cancel out, as both pitchers and hitters will be guilty of infractions, especially early in the season.

The bigger one to me is actually the "disengagements" rule. Pitchers can only step off or throw over twice in a given plate appearance, which makes it really hard to hold runners. Furthermore, a baserunner can peek at the clock and time up a pitcher perfectly because the penalty is a ball and a stoppage in play anyway.

In Spring Training, we did see a major increase in stolen base attempts and about a 6% increase in successful stolen bases year over year. Last year, there were 811 caught stealings out of 3,297 attempts, so base stealers were successful 75% of the time; in Spring Training, we've seen an 81% success rate.

There are some caveats to this - some of the better catchers have been playing in the World Baseball Classic (WBC) or haven't played a lot of innings, and a lot of minor leaguers with great speed who lack other tools are trying to make an impact and make a team - but, it does appear that the stolen base success rate will go up league-wide with pitchers unable to control the running game.

In theory, all teams should be more aggressive, but the teams with the most stolen bases last season were the Rangers, Marlins, Guardians, Cubs, Phillies, Diamondbacks, Royals and Yankees, who all had 102 or more. The Twins, Rockies, Tigers, Padres, Red Sox, Reds and White Sox all had 58 or fewer steals.

Catchers had 191 throwing errors last season (not all on stolen base attempts). I'd assume this number goes up with more hurried throws, so there could be some extra bases taken in that regard. Catchers will also try to throw behind runners more in hopes of keeping them close.

I'm also speculating here - and it's hard to use the Spring Training data to confirm or debunk my theory - but I think pitch velocity will be down overall this season. Pitchers have less recovery time between pitches and may be less likely to throw with max effort. I also think the pitch clock will be a much bigger issue for relievers, who are generally slower than starters. They also throw harder on the whole.

BIGGER BASES

- Bases went from 15 square inches to 18 square inches

There could be a very modest correlation between the successful stolen base rate and the bigger bases, but this was primarily a decision based on the safety of the players. The distance between first, second and third base is about 4.5 inches shorter. It is three inches shorter from home plate to first base or third base to home plate.

Home plate remains the same size.

SHIFT BAN

- Two infielders must be on each side of second base
- All four infielders must be on the dirt when the pitcher is on the pitching rubber
- Infielders cannot switch sides (i.e. make the third baseman play second base and the second baseman play third against a left-handed batter)
- If the infielders are not aligned at the time of the pitch, the batting team can choose an automatic ball or the result of the play

So, this is the big one and the one that has been analyzed the most by baseball scribes. It is not nearly as cut and dry as looking at last season's batted balls to see how many hits a batter had taken away. This is going to completely change the mindset of a batter, particularly a left-handed batter who pulls the ball a lot.

On Mar. 19, @CodifyBaseball had a tweet that batting average was down one point, on-base percentage was up eight points and slugging percentage was down 18 points from the previous Spring Training. Singles were up 3% on a per-game basis, while home runs were down 14% on a per-game basis. Keep in mind, though, that a lot of elite hitters have been playing in the World Baseball Classic. (Stolen bases, by the way, were up 60% on a per-game basis)

Tom Tango, one of the most respected analysts in baseball, had a Mar. 17 tweet that the Spring Training batting average on balls in play (BABIP) was .320; from 2006-2022, the ST BABIP averaged .312, with a high of .318 and a low of .305. Spring Training comes with a grain of salt with pitchers working on things, lesser fielders, etc., but that seems to line up with the increase in singles from the other tweet. Also, home runs don't count towards BABIP because they are not balls in play (nobody can field them), so we are seeing a big increase in balls in play and an increase in BABIP.

The tweet that really got a lot of run was from ESPN's Jeff Passan on Mar. 9 when he noted that BABIP on ground balls was up 23 points year over year in Spring Training. It was .235 in 2022 and .258 at the time of Passan's tweet in 2023. Another CodifyBaseball tweet on Mar. 20 noted that the BABIP for left-handed batters this spring was .329—a direct impact of the shift ban. That was up 15 points from last year. Righties saw a two-point increase in BABIP from .311 to .313.

Last regular season, the league batting average was .243 with a BABIP of .290. Left-handed batters hit .245 with a BABIP of .294. However, using Baseball Savant (Statcast) search results, lefties had a batting average of just .226 on grounders. That number will undoubtedly go up this season.

From a betting standpoint, I'm curious to see how this all plays out. Without a shift, lefties won't shy away from pulling the ball, but they may be less likely to hit the ball in the air over the shift. The increase in singles with a decrease in home runs makes some sense based on the mindset and psychological approach for a hitter in a post-shift world. We may have more baserunners, but could ultimately end up without a big increase in offense.

MLB had a batting average problem. In the era of rising strikeout rates (though K% actually decreased for the second straight year), the last three years (.243, .244, .245 dating back to 2020) represent the lowest batting averages since the 1960s. Hitters only struck out about 16% of the time back then. Now they strike out 22-23% of the time.

In a lot of ways, we have to take something of a wait-and-see approach. Some of the best hitters have been playing in the WBC. The offensive environments in Florida and Arizona are typically conducive to offense, though it has been a little cooler than normal in AZ.

One thing we do know for sure is that teams that don't strike out should greatly benefit from all of the new rules, so teams like the Guardians, Astros, Mets, Cardinals and Blue Jays should be helped, while teams like the Angels, Pirates, Tigers, and Marlins could be negatively impacted. In some respects, I think the rule changes absolutely make the rich richer, so to speak. They disproportionately benefit the good teams with the best hitters and the best fielders, so we could see an even more defined chasm between the haves and have-nots.

I'll be looking for some concrete regular season data, but that will take some time. For now, I'll handicap based on these three suspicions:

1. More stolen bases will be attempted and more attempts will be successful
2. Singles and the number of baserunners will increase
3. Fly ball pitchers won't be as affected as ground ball pitchers and I will try to bet on more of those

It will be a learning curve for both bettors and bookmakers, but I'll be tracking as much of the data as I can with my baseball work throughout the season - and hopefully, we can pick up on some things before the betting markets and the sportsbooks do.



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