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<td>San Diego Padres</td>
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<td>San Francisco Giants</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
An Introduction and Thanks

There is no offseason for Major League Baseball bettors. At this point in time, there is no offseason for any of the sports betting markets. That is one of many reasons why the 2020 MLB Betting Guide is the earliest release we have ever had to preview the upcoming season. Season win totals came out before the first of the year in some places and were popping up throughout the month of January.

You really have to love what you do to worry about sports that aren’t even in-season and I’m fortunate in that I love what I do. Even though it wasn’t easy to make that transition from football to baseball in the midst of the NFL Playoffs, it was necessary. It was actually welcomed. I’m out for retribution this season.

No, not for the MLB Betting Guide and the season win totals. Those went 21-9 last season. It was a rough season with the day-to-day grind. The springloaded baseball and some preemptive baseball burnout caused me to start poorly in the months of March and April and things never got on track. Last year’s regular season started with me on a flight back from Las Vegas after a round of promotion for the MLB Guide. I was in the third row of a Southwest flight watching Opening Day games on my laptop.

As the season got away from me, it dawned on me that I needed to start earlier for 2020. I did, but so did the oddsmakers. They had season win total lines and a bevy of futures up before I put my first keystrokes down about the Baltimore Orioles. I always start with the Orioles and finish with the Giants, going in alphabetical order by division.

Fortunately, with the accelerated timelines provided by the oddsmakers, the flurry of transactions during the MLB offseason was completed relatively early. Unlike last season, when big names were still looking for jobs as Spring Training began, most players signed early in the process. That made my job somewhat easier and a little less stressful, though it is always stressful writing over 100,000 words on everything.

The baseball community is awesome. There are writers from all backgrounds and almost as many different viewpoints as there were home runs last season. Resources like FanGraphs, Baseball-Reference, Baseball Savant (Statcast), Baseball Prospectus, The Athletic, RosterResource (now part of FG!), and various other team blogs and fan hangouts provide a bevy of information that I can pass along to my readers.

My belief is that my style of writing is unique in this space. There are plenty of people analyzing baseball data on a team, player, and league level, but a much smaller portion of the scribes and scribblers are doing it in the context of betting. You will find a lot of advanced metrics, in-depth statistics, and analysis in these pages that you aren’t going to find just about anywhere else in the gambling space. I’m proud of that. I’m proud of the presentation and the thorough nature of the writing.

For some readers, these concepts will be new and difficult to understand. For other readers, these concepts will speak to the core of your baseball fandom and handicapping.
Most will fall somewhere in the middle. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know wOBA from OPS or xFIP from ERA. This is designed to be both a learning tool and a way to get ready for the season, whether you are looking at betting futures, just want to read more about the teams, or are looking for some fantasy impact.

For this year’s guide, I decided to grab the futures odds from 5Dimes Sportsbook for the divisions, pennants, World Series, and, most importantly, the player futures because there are a lot more players listed. The season win totals are from BetOnline. As always, shop around for the best odds.

As I mentioned above, there are several resources I reference all the time, so heartfelt thanks go out to the staffs at FanGraphs, Baseball-Reference, Baseball Savant, The Athletic, RosterResource, Baseball Prospectus, and everybody else producing awesome baseball content.

Thanks to Ryan, the owner here at BangTheBook.com, for the platform, the opportunity to write about what I want, and guidance and assistance with the layout on the site and also within the pages of this PDF/Kindle file.

Thanks to my Dad, who instilled my love of baseball by playing wiffle ball with me in the yard until the sun went down or going up to the open field at the top of the hill to hit me fly balls after working a long shift. I’m a sports fan and a baseball fan because of him. I’m also a hard worker because of him.

Last, but far from least, thanks to my wife, who endured countless hours of House Hunters on Hulu so that I could research, write, edit, revise, write, edit, revise, research, revise, and edit again in order to meet the deadline that I set for myself. She’s awesome.

Without further ado, I present to you, my labor of love, the 2020 MLB Betting Guide.
Glossary of Stats & Terms Used In The Betting Guide

The world of sports betting requires handicappers to constantly adapt and evaluate. Things that worked 10 years ago don’t work as well today. Things that worked five years ago don’t work as well today. There are some concepts and philosophies that will always work, but have also been accounted for by the oddsmakers and by other bettors that probably get to the market faster.

Fortunately, we live in an era when there is a lot of new data and people are coming up with new ways of breaking down the games and the players that play them. It creates so many opportunities for fans and bettors to look through different lenses in order to see things with a unique perspective.

When it comes to baseball, specifically, that perspective for me comes in the form of sabermetrics. Over a decade ago, I wanted to know how my favorite team, the Cleveland Indians, makes decisions and values players. So, I researched. And I studied. I won’t say that I was early to the party, but I certainly didn’t arrive all that late. It is something that has been a huge part of my fandom and my handicapping ever since.

There continues to be a pretty sharp divide between old school and new school when it comes to player evaluation. A lot of fans cling to stats like batting average and RBI, while others proselytize about wRC+ and wOBA. While I certainly believe in the advanced metrics far more than the traditional ones, I hate the holier-than-thou attitude some in the stats community have. The best way to induce change and induce a new way of thinking is to reach common ground. I feel like that is part of my skill set when it comes to talking about baseball and I’ll try to do that today with some of the stats that I will reference heavily in my MLB season win totals.

First, we’ll start with some team-oriented metrics:

**Pythagorean Win-Loss** – Most people don’t care about what should have happened. They only care about what actually happened. Pythagorean Win-Loss records can be a good barometer for teams in line for regression. It is a standings metric based on run differential. Teams that excelled in one-run games may regress the following season. Similarly, teams that got blown out a lot should have better personnel the next year.

As an aside, one-run games are a big deal when it comes to Pyth W-L. Generally, teams are within a couple of games above or below .500 in one-run games. Significant outliers are likely to regress the following season.

**BaseRuns** – I like to refer to the BaseRuns standings from Fangraphs as well. BaseRuns takes all of a team’s outcomes for and against and removes the context. Think of it like this: If a team goes HR, 1B, 1B, K, K, K, that team scores one run that innings. If a team goes 1B, 1B, HR, K, K, K, that team scores three runs that inning. The same six individual outcomes produced two very different outcomes overall. BaseRuns eliminates
that element of randomness and spits out a measure of runs per game and runs allowed per game given all of the individual outcomes. Then, it produces a win-loss record.

**3rd Order Win%** - An alternate standings metric at Baseball Prospectus that looks at a team's strength of schedule and "underlying statistics" to come up with a win percentage based on the team's performance.

Now, some individual stats for hitters and pitchers:

**wOBA** – wOBA is my favorite statistic of all. It stands for Weighted On-Base Average. Unlike its predecessor, on-base percentage, wOBA assigns a weighted value to each way of reaching base. When it comes to on-base percentage, there is no distinction between a single or a home run. wOBA has changed that. The weights of the outcomes are assigned based on the offensive climate around Major League Baseball. For example, the weight of a home run was 1.98 runs, the lowest mark since 2007. Walks, however, were the highest since 2011 at .693 runs.

Quite simply, wOBA actually distinguishes between the value of ways of getting on base, thus making it better than most every other offensive metric.

**wRC+** - Weighted Runs Created Plus is another popular statistic. The + simply means relative to league average, wherein league average is 100. A player with a 110 wRC+ was 10 percent better than league average when adjustments are made for park factors and the current run environment. Now that we’re in the Juiced Ball Era, or so they say, the run environment is higher, so the baseline is higher. Not that it’s relevant to my win totals or overall handicapping, but you can use wRC+ to compare hitters from previous eras because the stat is adjusted for park factors, leagues, and run environments.

**K% & BB%** - These seem pretty obvious, but are worth mentioning. These are (Strikeouts / Plate Appearances) and (Walks / Plate Appearances). Those are important stats for hitters, but I will use them more frequently with pitchers.

**BABIP** – BABIP stands for Batting Average on Balls in Play. Keep in mind that traditional batting average factors strikeouts into the equation because those are at bats. BABIP is a good measure of luck. Hitters with a high BABIP are either making terrific contact, are fast, or are getting lucky. Hitters with a low BABIP either have poor contact quality or are getting unlucky. The same can be said about pitchers in terms of contact quality and luck. Home runs are NOT factored into BABIP because they are not balls in play. Traditionally, the “average” range for BABIP is between .290 and .310, but extreme fly ball pitchers and hitters need to be graded accordingly. Last year, the league average BABIP for hitters was exactly .300.

**FIP** – I hate ERA. It is such a tremendously flawed statistic. Let’s remember that a pitcher that allows three runs over six innings has a 4.50 ERA, which is widely considered to be bad, but it is a “quality start”. FIP is a better metric and one that I use
often. FIP stands for Fielding Independent Pitching. It is a run metric derived from things that a pitcher can “control” – strikeouts, walks, home runs, and hit by pitches.

It takes the defense out of the equation. Bad defenders can really hurt a pitcher’s ERA by not catching balls that should be caught. FIP takes that element out of the equation. Once the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand, he has no control over what happens. It is all subject to variance, especially once it is put in play. This is a far better way to assess a pitcher’s performance.

xFIP – A derivative of FIP is xFIP, which stands for eXpected Fielding Independent Pitching. The difference between FIP and xFIP is that it recalculates the home run portion of FIP by assuming a league average home run to fly ball rate. Last season, obviously, we had a significant number of home runs hit. The HR/FB% league-wide rose from 12.8 percent to 13.7 percent. It was just 11.4 percent in 2015. The relevance of that will become clearer as we move forward.

The important takeaway here is that we can use xFIP in a similar context to BABIP. Sometimes pitchers are getting unlucky with fly balls that hit a jet stream or just keep carrying. Other times, they are simply making bad pitches. Like any statistic, we have to dig deeper to find out the root cause, but xFIP is a good predictor of future performance. It eliminates some of the noise of small sample sizes.

Pitchers with high ERAs that have lower FIP and xFIP marks are generally pitchers to circle for positive regression. Pitchers with low ERAs that have higher FIP and xFIP marks are likely to regress negatively. There are always outliers, and I’ll discuss them in the season previews and on a day-to-day basis, but keep that in mind.

SIERA - SIERA stands for Skill Interactive Earned Run Average. This is how we get a little bit deeper. If you find FIP to be too oversimplified because it doesn’t take into account whether a pitcher is more of a ground ball guy or a fly ball guy, this is for you. Think about it. Ground ball pitchers will have a higher HR/FB% because they have a smaller sample of fly balls. Fly ball pitchers will generally allow more home runs, but they also allow more fly balls, which will cut into the HR/FB%. Pitchers that allow a lot of line drives are going to give up more hits. Hard contact is a bad thing, no matter how good the defense is. SIERA is probably the best ERA estimator we have, though there are some very good ones at Baseball Prospectus.

The big thing about these stats is that they carry predictive value. That’s what we’re looking for. We’re not looking for what happened in the past. We’re looking for what will happen in the future.

DRS – DRS stands for Defensive Runs Saved. One of the last great frontiers to explore for baseball stat geeks like me is defense. Errors are a poor stat. They only count if the fielder gets to the ball and are based on subjective discretion by the official scorer. Because fielding percentage uses errors, it is also a poor measure of defensive ability.
DRS is somewhat complex. Players are graded on a plus/minus scale, where zero is average. It is measured on location of a batted ball, type of batted ball, and a general description of the speed of the ball. All of these plays are catalogued and a baseline is set. If a ball has a 70 percent catch probability and the fielder fails to make the play, that accounts for -0.7 defensive runs saved. If that play is made, the fielder gets +0.3 defensive runs saved.

Now that we have Statcast data, we’re getting a much clearer picture of defensive metrics based on Catch Probability, Sprint Speed, and a variety of other metrics. Fans and writers have merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Statcast data, but it is very important.

Statcast is remarkable. Those that really want to go down a rabbit hole of baseball statistics are going to fall in love with the data. It is something that I have studied a lot and can be found at BaseballSavant.com.

Here are some of the Statcast metrics I’ll be using:

**Exit Velocity** – We think of pitchers with high BABIPs as “unlucky”. We think of pitchers with high ERAs and low FIP and xFIP marks as “unlucky”. Well, now that we have exit velocities to factor in, we can see if pitchers are simply getting hit really hard. Balls that are hit harder are more likely to go for doubles, triples, and home runs and are also likely to be tougher plays for fielders to make.

I often refer to the "percentile" that the player fell into with regards to Exit Velocity or Hard Hit%. A 97th percentile Hard Hit% means that the player ranked in the top 3% in Hard Hit%, which is percentage of batted balls with an exit velocity of 95+ mph.

**xwOBA – wOBA** – Statcast does its calculations based on batted ball distance, launch angle, and exit velocity. Using that data, it can estimate hit probabilities, including whether or not balls should be home runs, doubles, singles, etc. xwOBA stands for eXpected wOBA. xwOBA – wOBA is a good indication of pitcher luck. This is a stat I will be utilizing a lot more this season. It is a measure of the gap between a pitcher’s expected wOBA and actual wOBA against. It can work for hitters as well and will be something I utilize in my DFS pieces.

**xBA – BA** – This is a similar stat. This is eXpected Batting Average minus actual batting average. Pretty simple and straightforward.

**Barrels & Barrel% & Barrels/PA%** - Barreled balls are a recent development at Statcast to suggest batted balls with a very high likelihood of positive outcomes. A "barreled ball" as defined by Statcast using primarily launch angle and exit velocity is a ball with a xBA of .500 and a xSLG of 1.500. More often than not, those would be doubles, triples, or home runs.
Pitchers that allow a lot of barrels or a high Barrel% have bad command. Hitters that have a lot of barrels or a high Barrel% would grade well in exit velocity, launch angle, and contact quality as a whole.

As far as my MLB analysis goes, these will be the most popular terms and statistics, so I certainly encourage readers to familiarize themselves with these concepts. I will also use additional PITCHf/x and Statcast data.

I would encourage readers to check out more detailed definitions at FanGraphs with the Offensive Stats and the Pitching Stats.
AL Pennant Futures

Major League Baseball could use some new blood in the playoff picture, but it doesn’t seem like that will happen in the American League this season. In fact, it would be rather surprising if we didn’t have the same five playoff teams in 2020 that we had in 2019.

If that is the case, those five playoff teams would be the New York Yankees, Houston Astros, Minnesota Twins, Tampa Bay Rays, and Oakland A’s. Not surprisingly, those teams are first, second, third, and tied for fourth as far the futures odds board goes at 5Dimes Sportsbook.

The Yankees, Twins, and Astros are all at minus prices to win the AL East, AL Central, and AL West, respectively, so it stands to reason that those three teams would have the shortest prices to play for, as Rob Manfred called it, that piece of metal. You know, the COMMISSIONER’S Trophy.

Major League Baseball has sort of gone the way of the NBA recently. There aren’t a whole lot of teams that seem to have a great shot at immortality by winning it all. In fact, over the last three World Series, only four teams have made appearances – the Astros twice, the Red Sox, the Dodgers twice, and the Nationals.

The Athletics have been to the Wild Card Game in back-to-back years. The Yankees and Twins appeared in the Wild Card Game in 2017. The Cleveland Indians did bow out of the playoff picture last year, as they won the most games of any team to fall short of the Wild Card Game. That ended a streak of three straight playoff appearances.

Of the 15 teams in the AL, Houston, Boston, New York, Oakland, Tampa Bay, Cleveland, and Minnesota are the only ones to make the playoffs the last three years. In other words, more than half of the league has failed to qualify. You have to go back to 2016 to find the Toronto Blue Jays and Baltimore Orioles.

That would seem to leave us with some slim pickings as far as the AL Pennant futures market goes.

Here are the AL Pennant futures odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>New York Yankees</td>
<td>+150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston Astros</td>
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<td>Oakland Athletics</td>
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<td>Cleveland Indians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tampa Bay Rays</td>
<td>+1250</td>
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<td>Chicago White Sox</td>
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<td>Team</td>
<td>Price</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Rangers</td>
<td>+4000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Mariners</td>
<td>+25000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Tigers</td>
<td>+50000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kansas City Royals</td>
<td>+50000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore Orioles</td>
<td>+50000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the plus side, there are only four teams we can definitively eliminate from playoff contention this season. In past years, we’ve been able to eliminate teams like the Blue Jays and the Chicago White Sox from consideration. The Blue Jays are well behind the Yankees and Rays, and probably even the Red Sox, but at least they have a ceiling this year. Most years we can also remove the Los Angeles Angels from consideration, but they have Anthony Rendon now and some pitching improvements.

That being said, we still don’t really have a lot to pick from. There are a few things you really want to avoid with AL Pennant futures. The first is that you want to avoid the Wild Card Game if at all possible. A one-game crapshoot doesn’t yield much hedging opportunity and also complicates the process. Your futures team will have to burn a starting pitcher and will go into the Division Series at a clear disadvantage.

Another is that you want to avoid a really short price. In this case, the New York Yankees. You really don’t have any equity until you get to the World Series. And, if the Los Angeles Dodgers were to have home field advantage, as they probably will, the Yankees would be available at a price point close to +150 anyway and that wouldn’t require a seven-month hold of your money.

Finally, you want to avoid a team that cannot win its division. This is different than the Wild Card Game. Sometimes things happen and a good team like the Twins or Yankees could get beaten by the Indians or Rays. That happens.

What I mean is that you don’t want to bank on a long shot like the Blue Jays or the Angels. Why? Because they have to beat two teams to win the division. The Jays would have to outlast the Yankees and the Rays. The Angels would have to top the A’s and the Astros. It is hard enough to beat one of those teams let alone two.

So, with that in mind, are there any teams that have AL Pennant futures value?

To me, there are two. The Tampa Bay Rays and the Cleveland Indians, who are both priced at +1250. The Rays are likely to have the best pitching staff in the American League. They took the Astros to five games last postseason and even outhit Houston in a series where they faced Gerrit Cole, Justin Verlander, and Zack Greinke. It was a small sample, but it was an example of the ceiling of the Rays and their pitching staff is likely to be better this season with Tyler Glasnow and Blake Snell contributing more often.

Why the Indians? For starters, they only have to beat the Twins in the AL Central. Second, they have starters. Great starting pitching can be an equalizer in the playoffs. The offense is probably going to fall around league average, but the Indians definitely have
pitching. They also have the superstars in Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez. Believe me, the court of public opinion is low on that team for 162 games, but nobody wants to face Mike Clevinger, Shane Bieber, and maybe Aaron Civale or Carlos Carrasco in a five-game series.

Those are the only two options in the AL, with the Rays as the preferred one between the two. I think the Rays have a better chance at beating the Yankees than the Indians do of beating the Twins, so that would be my position for the AL.
NL Pennant Futures

We can cancel the season, right? The Los Angeles Dodgers got Mookie Betts and the best team in the National League from last season is now even better. There is no point in playing out the rest of this whole charade.

Ah, but remember what happened on Washington’s path to the World Series? The Nationals won Game 5 on the road at Dodger Stadium and used that as a springboard to win the Fall Classic. Furthermore, the Nationals did so as a Wild Card team. If you ever need a reminder of how crazy the MLB Playoffs, aka the Tournament of Variance, can be, think back to that one. And countless other examples.

Like the AL Pennant chase, it would be nice to see some new blood in the mix in the Senior Circuit. We could get it, to be totally honest. This author is actually high on the Cincinnati Reds as one example. The New York Mets are another example of a team that could make an appearance. Some would even suggest the San Diego Padres as a Wild Card contender.

Over the last three years, the Dodgers, Cardinals, Braves, Brewers, Cubs, Diamondbacks, Nationals, and Rockies have made the playoffs. In the AL, only seven different teams have qualified for the postseason. Eight teams have made it in the NL, so there has been a little more parity, at least in terms of qualifiers. It is entirely possible that we add a new one or two to the list for this season.

That being said, only four teams across the league have made the World Series the last three seasons – the Nationals, Astros, Dodgers, and Red Sox. The Dodgers certainly look poised to have a third bite at the apple in the World Series again this season, but we all thought that last season, too.

The Braves have won back-to-back NL East titles. The Dodgers have won seven NL West titles in a row. The Cubs, Brewers, and Cardinals have taken turns in the NL Central. Two of the division races look pretty wide open, while the third is already decided.

Here are the NL Pennant futures odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Los Angeles Dodgers</td>
<td>+190</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atlanta Braves</td>
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<td>St. Louis Cardinals</td>
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<td>Washington Nationals</td>
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<td>Cincinnati Reds</td>
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<td>Chicago Cubs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milwaukee Brewers</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Diamondbacks</td>
<td>+2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
San Diego Padres   +2350  
San Francisco Giants +7000  
Colorado Rockies    +9000  
Pittsburgh Pirates  +15000 
Miami Marlins       +35000  

It kind of astounds me that the Yankees have lower odds in the AL than the Dodgers do in the NL at 5Dimes. First of all, the Dodgers won their division by 21 games last season and are a virtual lock to do so again and avoid the Wild Card Game. It is nowhere near as hard to see a path to Tampa Bay winning the East in the Junior Circuit as it would be to see the Diamondbacks or Padres doing so.

Also, the Yankees would have to likely face the Astros in the ALCS and the Astros are a better team than any non-Dodgers team in the NL. This seems like a pricing error. I wouldn’t take the Dodgers at +190 because anything can happen in the playoffs, but there is no way that the Dodgers should have longer odds than the Yankees.

In any event, we see the byproduct of not having a real clear second team like we have in the AL with the Astros. Prices are depressed on teams like Washington, St. Louis, and the Mets.

There are two very obvious picks in the NL if you are so inclined. They both come from the Central Division. The Chicago Cubs are clearly mispriced at +1350. They were 82-68 through 150 games last season and were right there with the Cardinals before going 2-10 over the final 12 games. The Cardinals are going to take a step back this season and I do not really see a path for them to repeat in the NL Central. If the Cubs can win the division and avoid the Wild Card Game, that would be a really nice advantage. They would play the winner of the NL East in all likelihood and none of the top three teams in that division would be a massive favorite over the Cubs.

The second is the Reds at +1300. In my mind, either the Cubs or the Reds win the NL Central more often than anybody else. That would mean a chance to get right into the NLDS as opposed to the Wild Card Game. It is entirely possible that both of these teams make it in to be totally honest.

In the NL East, any one of the Braves, Nationals, or Mets could win the division and I wouldn’t be shocked. If the Cardinals or the Brewers win the NL Central, I will be surprised.

Therefore, the Cubs and the Reds carry the most value to me in the NL Pennant futures market.
World Series Futures

Only four teams have made the World Series in the last three years. The Washington Nationals are the reigning champions. The Boston Red Sox won in 2018. The Houston Astros won in 2017. The Los Angeles Dodgers have tried and failed twice. That is the list of World Series participants in the last three Fall Classics.

When we look at the construction of the league for 2020, it seems like we are pretty likely to get at least one of those four teams back in the battle for the Commissioner’s Trophy once again.

With big favorites in both leagues, it may not be a great year for betting long shots, but think back as far as June. The Nationals were a rudderless mess with a 19-31 record. They won the World Series. It can happen. Crazy things can happen in Major League Baseball. That is a Nationals team that was +1600 coming into the season and much higher than that after the disastrous start.

The chalk doesn’t always come through. Over 162 games, the best teams are very likely to be the best teams. Once we get to the tournament with rounds of five and seven games, things can be very, very different.

For example, remember the 2014 season? Both World Series participants, the San Francisco Giants and Kansas City Royals, had under 90 wins. The last time that happened was the strike-shortened season of 1981. The last time it happened before that? How about 1918?

Fluky things can certainly happen in October. That is why Dane Cook famously told us “There is only one October!”

Here are the World Series futures odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York Yankees</td>
<td>+360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Dodgers</td>
<td>+425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Astros</td>
<td>+850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Braves</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota Twins</td>
<td>+1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Nationals</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Cardinals</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Mets</td>
<td>+1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland Athletics</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee Brewers</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati Reds</td>
<td>+2800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland Indians</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia Phillies</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Cubs</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago White Sox</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tampa Bay Rays | +3000  
| Los Angeles Angels | +4250  
| Boston Red Sox | +4500  
| Arizona Diamondbacks | +4500  
| San Diego Padres | +5500  
| Toronto Blue Jays | +6600  
| Texas Rangers | +10000  
| San Francisco Giants | +20000  
| Colorado Rockies | +20000  
| Pittsburgh Pirates | +35000  
| Seattle Mariners | +50000  
| Miami Marlins | +100000  
| Detroit Tigers | +100000  
| Kansas City Royals | +100000  
| Baltimore Orioles | +100000  

Look, we all know that the most likely outcomes is Yankees vs. Dodgers. Maybe it holds up. Maybe the two short prices get there. Or maybe the Dodgers face the Astros again, at which point 49 states are rooting for the Dodgers. Maybe we don’t get any surprises.

But when you have two short prices at +360 and +425, value is out there. Value is almost always out there as far as a championship goes, but especially in the unpredictable, high-variance world of Major League Baseball.

Let’s go ahead and take a look at some of those:

**Tampa Bay Rays (+3000)** – They may not hang banners for being the BaseRuns AL East Champion or the 3rd Order Win% AL East Champion, but those two things mean something to me. Are the Yankees better this season? Of course they are with Gerrit Cole, but Luis Severino has had a setback and James Paxton is also hurt. Even without those two developments, this price is absurd on Tampa Bay.

Let’s aim low to start. The Rays are extremely likely to have one of the five best records in the AL, which means at least a puncher’s chance in the Wild Card Game. The Rays won that Wild Card Game last year and then took the Houston Astros to the brink and the series was very much hanging in the balance before Houston got off to a 4-0 lead in Game 5.

Let’s aim higher. Is it that crazy to say that the Rays can win the AL East? I don’t think so. The Yankees look awesome on paper, but the injury bug has already arrived and plenty of the position players have been hurt recently. The Rays have the best pitching staff in the American League as far as I’m concerned. A 30/1 price is lunacy for this team, especially when they are going to make the playoffs far more often than they are not.
**Chicago Cubs (+3000)** – The Cubs pitching staff would worry me greatly in the playoffs, but the NL Central is as open as a four-lane road in rural Illinois. There is no clear-cut favorite in the division. Frankly, the favorite is the Cardinals and I think they will stink. In a relative sense, of course, given that only winning like 82 or 83 games is bad for them. The Cubs have been negatively impacted in the court of public opinion by a 2-10 finish to last season when they seemed to quit on Joe “Old Man Yells at Cloud” Maddon.

Imagine a 30/1 price for a team that has a great chance of winning the division and avoiding the Wild Card Game scenario.

Imagine a team at 30/1 that is the second favorite to win the division, while the third favorite (Milwaukee) is 25/1 and the FOURTH favorite (Cincinnati) is 28/1. I don’t know what I’m missing here, but this price is out of whack.

**Minnesota Twins (+1500)** - I like this one decidedly less than the other two, but it still warrants a mention. The Twins are going to win the AL Central more often than they won’t. That means a trip right to the ALDS. They will probably run into the Rays, Yankees, or Astros in that scenario because they won’t have the best record and the luxury of playing the Wild Card team, but the Twins are plenty capable of outscoring the Astros and could certainly hang with the Yankees or Rays.

Their likelihood of winning the AL Central makes this one pretty interesting because you can hedge out very quickly if you want to. The Twins are going to be an underdog in just about every first-round scenario, but depending on the draw, you could have some good meat on the bone for a hedge. Let’s say you bet $100 to win $1500 on the Twins and they run into the Astros. Houston might be a -175 favorite? So $350 to win $200? $525 to win $300? Make a little bit for the time and effort. Maybe wait and see how Game 1 goes and get a reduced price. That is, if you are convinced that the Twins can’t win. If you think they can win, it’s $100. Let it ride. After all, you would need hedging margin for the second round if they got there.

Either way, you are more likely than not to have a 15/1 ticket live going into the playoffs and you can decide what you want to do at that point.
Home Run King Futures

One of my favorite futures to consider is the Home Run King prop. To my recollection, winner Peter Alonso wasn’t even listed anywhere before the season. You could find Eugenio Suarez at 80/1 and he finished second. Jorge Soler was third and also not listed.

It seems unlikely that somebody so far off the radar could win it this season, but you never know. The really unfortunate thing for readers of the guide is that it came out so early this season that a lot of sportsbooks either didn’t have odds up or didn’t have a big collection of players listed. There were 162 players listed last year at BetOnline when I wrote up the article. This year, there are 29. At time of writing, Bovada had 25. It is a real bummer that we cannot go far enough down the rabbit hole to look at some extreme long shots.

The BetOnline prices range from +1000 to +6600 and the Bovada numbers range from +800 to +5000. We’ll make the most of it, but I’ll try to throw in some other names that I may like from a long shot standpoint.

Before we get into the odds, let’s get into a few things to help narrow down the field. First, I need guys that hit fly balls. Ten players hit at least 40 homers last season – Alonso, Suarez, Soler, Cody Bellinger, Mike Trout, Christian Yelich, Alex Bregman, Nolan Arenado, Ronald Acuna Jr., and Nelson Cruz. Trout was 2nd in FB%. Bregman was 8th. Arenado was 12th. Bellinger was 22nd. Suarez was 23rd. Alonso was 29th. Soler was 31st. Cruz was 38th. Acuna was 60th. Yelich was 74th. All of those are out of 135 qualified hitters.

Ideally, I would like guys that pull the ball. Suarez was 3rd, Bellinger was 16th. Soler was 21st. Alonso was 25th. Bregman was 29th. Arenado was 54th, but his ballpark renders that less important. It isn’t a be-all, end-all since so many of these guys have elite power to all fields, but it does matter to me.

Extreme strikeout rates are typically bad. Suarez was the only player with a K% in the bottom 10 to hit at least 40 homers. Alonso was 15th, with Acuna Jr. 16th and Soler 17th. Walks seem to be less detrimental, as Trout was 1st in BB%, Bregman was 3rd, Bellinger was 11th, and Yelich was 13th.

I’m looking for guys that have elite contact quality metrics, put a good number of balls in play in the air, and pull the ball more often than anything else.

With that in mind, here are the players listed and the odds from BetOnline Sportsbook as of February 21, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Judge</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey Gallo</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Alonso</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Trout</td>
<td>+1100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ronald Acuna Jr | +1200
Cody Bellinger | +1400
Giancarlo Stanton | +1400
Yordan Alvarez | +1400
Christian Yelich | +1600
Eugenio Suarez | +1600
Gleyber Torres | +2000
Matt Olson | +2000
Nolan Arenado | +2000
Rhys Hoskins | +2200
Alex Bregman | +2500
Franmil Reyes | +2500
Jorge Soler | +2500
Nelson Cruz | +2500
Bryce Harper | +3300
Eloy Jimenez | +3300
Trevor Story | +3300
Vladimir Guerrero Jr | +3300
JD Martinez | +4000
Khris Davis | +4000
Miguel Sano | +4000
George Springer | +5000
Kris Bryant | +5000
Josh Bell | +6600
Josh Donaldson | +6600

Because home runs are a counting stat, we have to be really careful with guys that have major injury issues or are coming off of procedures. To me, that would actually eliminate Aaron Judge, Giancarlo Stanton, Eugenio Suarez, and even Joey Gallo. Gallo is also moving to a different park and an environment that will suppress power when the roof is closed. The hot, open air of Globe Life Park will be missed by the power hitters.

Any one of those four guys could win the Home Run King crown, but they are not worth my money because of those concerns.

Who is on my list? First, Yordan Alvarez at +1400. Alvarez hit 50 home runs between Triple-A and the Major Leagues last season with prolific power. I mentioned that Alvarez is actually a guy I like for the MVP at 100/1, even though he will predominantly play DH and the voters may hold that against him. Alvarez showcased violent contact quality and didn’t even carry all that high of a FB%. He also used the whole field with his power. As the Astros work with him to get out in front of the ball more, he is likely to elevate and pull, which is likely to increase his home run total.

Alvarez was 7th in Barrels/PA%, which is a very good indicator of elite power and contact quality. Among those in contention here, Nelson Cruz was 1st, Mike Trout was 3rd, Miguel Sano was 4th, and Aaron Judge was 7th. The difference for Alvarez was
either a lower launch angle and lower Hard Hit% relative to the other guys. As he sees pitchers around the league again, I fully expect those areas to improve.

Another guy I like at +2500 is Franmil Reyes of the Indians. Reyes goes from the marine air of Petco Park to Progressive Field for the full season. Cleveland’s ballpark does play better for left-handed batters with the 19-foot wall in left field to punish righties, but Reyes does have immense power to all fields. He was 14th in Barrel% last season, but his 51% Hard Hit% ranked in the 98th percentile and his exit velocity was in the 99th percentile.

Reyes does strike out a lot, but he doesn’t walk as much as several of the other hitters on this list. That should give him something of an advantage by having more opportunities to put balls in play. The one big area of concern for Reyes is his lower launch angle, but the Indians have morphed several of their players into launch angle disciples, like Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez.

Lindor’s launch angle went from 7.7 degrees in 2016 to 13.6 degrees in 2017 and peaked at 14.5 degrees in 2018. Ramirez went from 9.4 degrees in 2015 to 12.9 in 2016 to 14.8 in 2017 to 18.8 in 2018 and then 19.8 last season.

Now that the Indians have Reyes, they can look to unlock his power potential even further. With his violent contact quality, don’t be surprised if he flirts with 50 homers this season.

Lastly, at +4000, Miguel Sano’s value is too good to pass up. Sano was 4th in Barrels/PA% last season and had the highest Hard Hit% in all of baseball at 57.2%. That means that 57.2% of Sano’s balls in play were hit at 95+ mph. Sano hit 34 home runs in only 439 plate appearances. His exit velocity and Hard Hit% were both in the 100th percentile. He, too, increased his launch angle last season. After coming in at 13.2 in 2017 and 12.9 in 2018, his launch angle skyrocketed to 15.9 degrees in 2019. The high K% is a concern here with Sano, but the contact quality metrics are exceptional for hitting for power. He’s always hit the ball violently and his average exit velocity was just about 7 mph higher than league average.

The +4000 price tag is a disservice to his power.

My three picks for Home Run King are Yordan Alvarez, Franmil Reyes, and Miguel Sano.
AL MVP Futures

The AL MVP chase is going to be fascinating. Why? Because Mike Trout has such a short price according to the odds at 5Dimes Sportsbook. That means we have a ton of really good players to pick from at very reasonable prices. The departure of Mookie Betts actually made Trout a -125 favorite with everybody else at +1000 or higher. This seems too good to be true.

Sure, Trout has won the award three times already, but it seems like writers sort of get bored with how good he actually is. I’m not sure how that’s possible, but it does feel like the writers try to reward other guys whenever they can.

With that in mind, that creates a whole lot of value in a lot of different ways. It is also nice that unlike the NL MVP, which wasn’t posted at 5Dimes at time of writing for some reason, we can go back to the 5Dimes odds, where there are a lot more players listed. For what it’s worth, the AL MVP odds came from BetOnline Sportsbook.

Here are the AL MVP odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike Trout</td>
<td>-125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gleyber Torres</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Judge</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Bregman</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco Lindor</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shohei Ohtani</td>
<td>+1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Devers</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Chapman</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Rendon</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Ramirez</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrit Cole</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giancarlo Stanton</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus Semien</td>
<td>+3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Olson</td>
<td>+4000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Altuve</td>
<td>+4000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary Sanchez</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.D. Martinez</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey Gallo</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloy Jimenez</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvis Andrus</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoan Moncada</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Guerrero Jr.</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin Meadows</td>
<td>+5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xander Bogaerts</td>
<td>+5500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ LeMahieu</td>
<td>+6000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Springer</td>
<td>+6000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If we’re being honest, a lot of these guys have no business being listed. The MVP won’t come from a bad team unless his name is Mike Trout, so a lot of these guys aren’t even considerations.

There are a lot of really good players with double-digit prices because Trout is lined so low and some of those 10/1 to 20/1 prices are really worth extended looks. I do think that a guy like Alex Bregman, who was the runner-up last season, will be hurt by the sign stealing scandal, so I will be shying away from all of the Astros that are listed...except for one.
I will also shy away from guys like Aaron Judge, Shohei Ohtani, and Giancarlo Stanton. Health isn’t as important as it has been in the past, but players need time to put up those counting numbers that the old-school members of the electorate need to see. Trout and Betts each played less than 140 games the last two seasons, but they had the numbers regardless. That just isn’t something that I would want to bet on.

There are also a lot of guys that we can remove that are good hitters that put up great numbers, but elite numbers are required to win the MVP. Each of the last four awards has gone to a guy with an OBP over .400. Four of the last seven and five of the last eight to hitters have gone to guys with a SLG over .600. Only four qualified hitters did that last season. Only seven hitters had an OBP over .400.

The risk is there to take somebody like Anthony Rendon because he could split votes with Trout, but at +2500, he is hard to pass up. Rendon was one of the seven hitters that had an OBP over .400 last season. He fell just shy of that .600 SLG mark at .598, but he hit 34 home runs, played excellent defense, and could be the missing piece for an Angels playoff run. If Rendon is the guy that helps put the Angels over the top and back into the playoffs, he has a real legitimate chance to steal the award from his teammate. The 25/1 price certainly takes into account Trout’s presence, but if you look at Rendon’s numbers from last season, he fits the bill as a guy capable of winning the MVP.

Yordan Alvarez did not have enough plate appearances to qualify, but he had the numbers. Over 369 plate appearances, Alvarez slashed .313/.412/.655 with stupid power. He hit 50 home runs in 622 plate appearances between Triple-A and the Major Leagues. He is a guy that the voters can excuse from the sign stealing scandal because he was playing in A-ball and had no involvement whatsoever.

If the Astros have a huge season offensively, and they probably will, it will be hard to shut them out completely. The easy default is to Alvarez, who should have the power, should have the OBP, and should have all of the counting stats. At 100/1, this price is ridiculous. The value here is astonishing, to be totally honest with you. That is absolutely my favorite bet of the AL MVP odds.

To be honest, at the prices, those are the only two guys I would consider. If Judge was healthier, 10/1 on him is a great gamble with that bandbox in the Bronx. If the baseball plays differently, Yankees hitters won’t be as affected.

Nelson Cruz is kind of fun at 300/1, but the last DH to win was Barry Bonds and he was putting up obscene numbers. Albert Pujols won twice in the NL, but he was still a first baseman at that point.

There are a lot of very good players on this list, but the pickings are slimmer than you would think.
NL MVP Futures

As predictable, to a degree, as the Cy Young voting can be, the MVP voting is a little bit harder to figure out. The one constant is that all of the players that get picked are really, really good, but we don’t necessarily have certain criteria.

When it comes the Cy Young, either 20 wins or 200 strikeouts are a prerequisite. We’ve seen players win the MVP with numbers that are all over the place. They are always good numbers from highly productive players, but some guys hit for a lot of power, while others really don’t. We can’t even point to a .300 batting average being a prerequisite. Guys just have to be really good and have to get a lot of attention for it.

When it comes to the 2020 National League MVP Award, newcomer Mookie Betts could very well spoil the party. The award honestly looks to be really top-heavy with Betts, Ronald Acuna Jr., 2018 MVP Christian Yelich, and reigning MVP Cody Bellinger. It is entirely possible that Yelich would have won another one had he not missed most of September. Yelich could have hit 50 homers and could have won the award in back-to-back years. He would have been the first NL player with back-to-back MVP awards since Albert Pujols in 2008-09.

Still, there are a lot of guys that have a good chance at taking down the award.

For some reason, at time of publish, 5Dimes didn’t have lines up, even though they have them up for the AL MVP and the Cy Young in both leagues.

In order to get this posted, we’ll defer to the BetOnline Sportsbook odds for this one as of February 20, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mookie Betts</td>
<td>+500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Acuna Jr.</td>
<td>+600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Yelich</td>
<td>+700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cody Bellinger</td>
<td>+850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando Tatis Jr.</td>
<td>+1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce Harper</td>
<td>+1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Soto</td>
<td>+1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nolan Arenado</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ketel Marte</td>
<td>+1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javier Baez</td>
<td>+2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freddie Freeman</td>
<td>+2200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eugenio Suarez</td>
<td>+2500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kris Bryant</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manny Machado</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Goldschmidt</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor Story</td>
<td>+2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob deGrom</td>
<td>+3300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Scherzer</td>
<td>+3300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Peter Alonso  +3300
Rhys Hoskins  +3300
Corey Seager  +4000
Anthony Rizzo  +5000

This is a fairly limited list of players, but it hits all of the big ones. If there is one prerequisite for winning the MVP, playing on a good team would be it. Most of these guys do or will, so that isn’t that much of a concern. Mike Trout is the only player that regularly wins the MVP on a team with a lackluster record.

With that, we can cut the field down a bit. I don’t think Fernando Tatis Jr. can win it with a Padres team that won’t win a lot of games. He’ll be overshadowed by guys like Betts and Bellinger in the NL West on a better team. That would also eliminate Nolan Arenado, Ketel Marte, Manny Machado, and Trevor Story. We can also knock off the two pitchers. Clayton Kershaw in 2014 was the first pitcher to win the award since 1968.

As great as Ronald Acuna is, he probably strikes out a little too much to have enough chances to put up extra-base hits and high slugging numbers. His .552 SLG in 2018 would have been the lowest outside of Andrew McCutchen in 2013 and Buster Posey in 2012 since Jimmy Rollins in 2007. Given the power bats in the league, I don’t think his numbers will stand up.

Juan Soto may not have the SLG either, but if he truly posts an OBP over .400 like the projection systems suggest, that might be enough to give him a look at 12/1. He’s probably my favorite price in the mid-range once you get past the top four guys. I think it will be hard for Bellinger not to get serious consideration for another one and +850 is a pretty decent price.

In fact, Bellinger is my pick to win it. He cut his K% down from 23.9% to 16.4%. What happened with that is he was able to post a higher SLG with more balls in play and his BB% also increased from 10.9% to 14.4% to increase his OBP from .343 to .406. Those look like two sustainable developments, not to mention he plays for the best team in the NL and also stole 15 bases while playing very good defense.

I think we’re looking at our first repeat winner since 2008-09 with Bellinger edging out his new teammate in Betts and the 2019 runner-up in Yelich.
**AL Cy Young Award Futures**

As a general rule, there are way too many names listed on the board for the Cy Young Award. National League voters have been a little more lenient than American League voters. As far as the AL Cy Young Award goes, every pitcher since 1994 has had either 20 wins or 200 strikeouts and a few guys have had both.

Remember, though, that 1994 was a strike year and that went to David Cone with a 16-5 record, a 2.94 ERA, and 132 K in 171.2 innings of work. Prior to that, you have to go back to 1992 when Dennis Eckersley won and then in 1984 when reliever Willie Hernandez won.

In other words, winning the award in the American League is very hard. You have strict criteria that you have to meet. Let’s look at the odds and then narrow the field down.

Here are the AL Cy Young Award odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pitcher</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gerrit Cole</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Sale</td>
<td>+500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Verlander</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Severino</td>
<td>+800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane Bieber</td>
<td>+1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas Giolito</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Glasnow</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Paxton</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey Kluber</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Keuchel</td>
<td>+1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake Snell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike Clevinger</td>
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<td>Shohei Ohtani</td>
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<td>Zack Greinke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose Berrios</td>
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<td>Charlie Morton</td>
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<td>Matthew Boyd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlos Carrasco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eduardo Rodriguez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masahiro Tanaka</td>
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<td>Sean Manaea</td>
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<td>Justus Sheffield</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Means</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose Urquidy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan Cease</td>
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There were 24 pitchers that had at least 200 strikeouts last season. Only 10 were in the American League. They were Gerrit Cole, Justin Verlander, Shane Bieber, Lance Lynn, Charlie Morton, Matthew Boyd, Lucas Giolito, Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, and Mike Minor.

There are two pitchers, Mike Clevinger and Tyler Glasnow, that would have been on a 200-strikeout pace had they stayed healthy. Trevor Bauer also would have been, had he stayed with the Indians for the entire season.

In this era of strikeouts, only Rick Porcello (22 wins) in 2016 and Cliff Lee (22 wins) in 2008 have failed to get 200 strikeouts and win the Cy Young dating back to 2006. It is almost a prerequisite to winning the award. If not, you have to be on a really good team with the opportunity to get wins. Lee was the lone exception with the wins because the 2008 Indians were bad.

That narrows down the list a lot for us. We need guys that have 200-strikeout upside. If a guy like Jesus Luzardo at 225/1 or Frankie Montas at 100/1 could stay healthy enough to throw 170ish innings, they’d have a chance. Luzardo at 225/1 is about the only really big balloon number I would consider, but it would be a tall task to work that many innings.

Because of that, quite frankly, we’re left looking at a lot of short prices. A guy like Michael Kopech at 80/1 has the strikeout upside, but he is coming off of Tommy John and will likely be limited. Same with Lance McCullers Jr.

The longest price on the board with a shot at 200 K is Eduardo Rodriguez at 50/1, but it seems unlikely that he will have the wins or the ERA, since that is still an important stat in the minds of voters.
Enough beating around the bush, eh? Here are three Cy Young Award candidates to consider:

**Charlie Morton (+2500)** – Charlie Morton had everything you wanted in a Cy Young candidate last season. He struck out 240 in 194.2 innings. He had 16 wins and an ERA of 3.05. He also allowed the fewest home runs of any pitcher with at least 150 innings pitched. He was really special. The obvious worry here is for a setback in his age-36 season, but Morton had a 2.32 ERA with 142 K in 112.2 innings in the first half. A 68% LOB% in the second half hurt his ERA. His K% did fall to 28.8%, which still classifies as elite, but he got unlucky with runners on base.

Morton has the bullpen to get the wins. He has the team to get the wins. He has the strikeout upside. He could also have a pretty good story if he decides that this is his last season and looks to retire after the year. The voters may give him a nod as a result.

**Mike Clevinger (+1600)** – Mike Clevinger is going to miss a few starts in April and that is the concern. In all honesty, once we get a clearer picture of how much time he will miss, there is a good chance that his price goes up into the 25/1 range. At the very least, you’ll probably be able to find a better number than this.

When Blake Snell won the Cy Young Award in 2018, he only pitched 180.2 innings, so it can be done. Clevinger would need over 200 strikeouts, a good record, and probably a very good ERA. Snell’s ERA was 1.89. Clevinger had a 2.71 ERA over his 126 innings last season with 169 strikeouts. He actually struggled immediately following his return from the injured list. He allowed 12 runs in 6.1 innings.

From July 3 through the end of the season, Clevinger had a 2.17 ERA with 138 K in 107.2 innings of work. If we take away his last start, Clevinger allowed 20 runs in 16 starts from July 3 to September 24. There is a path for him to win the Cy Young, assuming he doesn’t miss too much time in April.

**Chris Sale (+500)** – In all honesty, this is Gerrit Cole’s award to lose. I don’t know if the Red Sox are going to be good enough or if Chris Sale is going to be healthy enough, but Sale will have the numbers. He only pitched 147.1 innings and struck out 218 batters. Sale should have won the award in 2017 with 308 strikeouts, but for some reason, he didn’t.

Sale was hurt by three things last season. Actual injury. Sequencing luck. Home runs. Sale was limited to 25 starts. He had a 66.7% LOB% that drove his ERA up to 4.40, despite a 3.39 FIP. His xFIP was 2.93. His HR/FB% ballooned to 19.5%. He was never really right last season.

I wouldn’t bet Sale at 5/1, but if you find a higher price in the 8/1 or 9/1 range, he’s worth it. He has a chance to really bounce back with a vengeance. I don’t know if he’ll have the wins on a mediocre Red Sox team, but he’s going to have the strikeouts and should have the ERA and FIP.
I have much better long shot options in the National League.
NL Cy Young Award Futures

Voters have been a little more forgiving in the National League Cy Young Award process than those in the American League. In the AL, you either need 200 strikeouts or 20+ wins. In the National League, each of the last three winners have hit the 200+ strikeout plateau, but Jacob deGrom is a two-time Cy Young Award winner with just 21 wins to his name and Max Scherzer only won 16 games in 2017.

By and large, however, you need 200 strikeouts and/or 20 wins. The last NL Cy Young Award winner with less than 200 strikeouts was Brandon Webb in 2006. Given that Trevor Hoffman finished second and only Carlos Zambrano and John Smoltz had over 200 strikeouts among those that got votes, it was clearly an outlier type of season.

That means that we have our baseline. You need 200 strikeouts, a lot of wins, or a low ERA. That really does limit the field quite a bit. It always does. I won’t say that Cy Young voters always get it right, but in just about every case, the player is very much deserving of the award.

Here are the NL Cy Young Award odds per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Odds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob deGrom</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Scherzer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jack Flaherty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walker Buehler</td>
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<td>Yu Darvish</td>
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<td>Stephen Strasburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noah Syndergaard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luis Castillo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clayton Kershaw</td>
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<td>Aaron Nola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick Corbin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike Soroka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris Paddack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brandon Woodruff</td>
<td>+3000</td>
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<tr>
<td>German Marquez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madison Bumgarner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max Fried</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sonny Gray</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike Foltynewicz</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trevor Bauer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zack Wheeler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyle Hendricks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcus Stroman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josh Hader</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose Quintana</td>
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</table>
Man, a lot of these guys have no business being listed. That being said, I have a couple
more long shots of interest here than I did in the American League. The AL actually
looks really, really chalky if I’m being honest. There are not many big prices that I would
have any interest in at all.

In looking at the National League, I really do like Walker Buehler, but he is +600, so
there really isn’t a ton of reason to take him. With something like a pitching award, there
are so many things that can go wrong health-wise. If a favorite or a short price wins, you
tip your cap and move on. The best thing to do is take some mid-range prices or some
bombs and hope for the best.

That’s what I’ll look to do with three guys to consider:

**Clayton Kershaw (+2000)** – This is my co-favorite pick on the list. Clayton Kershaw
has the reputation and already has a few of these things. While everybody was busy
celebrating so many other things about the Dodgers, it seemed to pass a lot of people by
that Kershaw’s second half was absurd. Kershaw had a 2.95 ERA in 79.1 innings of
work. He did still give up 15 homers and people obsess over that way too much.

You know what else Kershaw did? He pulled his strikeout rate up from 23.1% to 31.1%.
Kershaw is going to have a ton of chances to get wins. As long as his back is healthy,
he’s going to go back to being a workhorse and he’s probably going to cut back that
second half BB% of 7.9% while not sacrificing strikeouts. I’m guessing he found
something in the second half of last season to get himself back on track.
That is scary. Maybe the command isn’t good enough anymore to carry the low ERA, but I think he’s very close to being back to elite and it is going to get a lot of run if he is.

**Luis Castillo (+2000)** – Now let’s get serious. This is my co-favorite Cy Young Award bet of them all. To be honest, I’m using 5Dimes numbers because they list more players, but there are better prices out there on Castillo, like 25/1 at BetOnline.

Did Luis Castillo have 200 strikeouts? Yes. He struck out 226 batters in 190.2 innings. Did Castillo have the ERA? Close enough at 3.40. Did he have the wins? Well, he had 15 of the 75 that the Reds had, so that seems good enough for me.

Here’s why I love Castillo: his ERA jumped from 2.29 in the first half to 4.78 in the second half. You know what else happened? His BB% fell from 12.3% to 7.4%. His K% went up from 28.8% to 29.1%. Castillo fell victim to a 68.4% LOB%. His xFIP was actually 3.07 in the second half compared to 3.81 in the first half.

That is why ERA is such a misleading stat. His BABIP went up from .224 to .305, so he experienced an overcorrection in that department and it happened to coincide with a command hiccup in terms of his HR/FB%.

With another offseason with pitching coach Derek Johnson and a new-look changeup, Castillo is going to shine. Find the best price (it’s not at 5Dimes) and fire away.

**Trevor Bauer (+5000)** – Let’s add another Red to the list here. This price is way too high on Trevor Bauer. Bauer was a finalist in 2018 and may have been trending that way in the first half with the Indians last season. Bauer has the strikeouts. We know that. He’s also extremely durable, so we know we are going to get the innings that we need in order to run up that strikeout rate.

Sure, Bauer ran an ERA of almost 5 in the second half, but his K% also jumped from 26.8% to 29.4%. That’s what I’m worried about. Things happen with a change to a new team and a new ballpark and whatever. Bauer had the entire offseason to communicate with Johnson. The Reds hired Kyle Boddy of Driveline Baseball. A lot of things are trending in the right direction for Bauer. The home run issue in a small park is the only thing that worries me, but Justin Verlander gave up like 80 home runs last year and won it.

If we get a 200-inning season from Bauer, he has a legitimate chance at 250 strikeouts again and that would be enough if he also has the wins and posts a good ERA.

We haven’t seen many of those good ERAs, but this feels like the right kind of situation and the price is attractive at 50/1.

**Zac Gallen (+30000)** – What the hell. How about one more?! Zac Gallen is 300/1. Admittedly, this is risky, as the Diamondbacks said right away in Spring Training that he
is not a lock to make the starting rotation. I don’t know why not, but I guess it isn’t my call.

Gallen worked 171.1 innings across Triple-A and the Major Leagues last season. He struck out 208 batters. That’s a good start. In particular, he had over a strikeout per inning pace in the Majors over his 80 innings. He had a 2.81 ERA in his 15 starts, so he looks like a guy that could have the right ERA and strikeout numbers.

Gallen also has the support of one of the best defensive teams in baseball behind him to help keep that ERA low. Gallen’s K% went up slightly with the Diamondbacks and his BB% decreased slightly. Both good developments.

Look, the kid is 300/1. I’m not expecting him to win the award, but he has the most upside of anybody in the long shot crowd and it really isn’t close. I actually don’t mind his teammate Robbie Ray at 100/1, assuming that the baseball plays a little bit differently this season.

I’ve made worse bets than Zac Gallen at 300/1 to win the Cy Young Award.
**AL East Futures**

Certain divisions are going to have a lot of drama this season. The American League East is probably not one of them. As great of a season as the Tampa Bay Rays had in 2019, they still finished seven games behind the New York Yankees. The Yankees certainly got better with the signing of Gerrit Cole and will hope for the healthy returns of Luis Severino, Aaron Judge, and Giancarlo Stanton.

The Rays are the chief threat once again. The Boston Red Sox spent their offseason trying to shed money because the tax of having too many luxuries became too burdensome for owner John Henry. That resulted in the trade of Mookie Betts and David Price to the Los Angeles Dodgers. A good package of players returned, but only one, Alex Verdugo, will make an impact in 2020.

The Toronto Blue Jays will be much better with full seasons of Vladimir Guerrero Jr. Bo Bichette, Cavan Biggio, and a revamped starting rotation of Major League pitchers with actual track records. The Baltimore Orioles will still be a bottom-feeder.

With that, here are the odds to win the AL East per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

- **New York Yankees** -425
- **Tampa Bay Rays** +650
- **Boston Red Sox** +1025
- **Toronto Blue Jays** +5350
- **Baltimore Orioles** +85000

There are only two options in this division. The first is to lay -425 to tie up your money for more than seven months on the Yankees to win the AL East. The other is to take the BaseRuns and 3rd Order Win% AL East champs of 2019 at +650. The Yankees won by seven games based on the actual records of games played, but the Rays had the better record per the alternate standings metrics of BaseRuns, a context-neutral run differential metric, and 3rd Order Win%, which is adjusted based on strength of schedule and “underlying concepts” as calculated by Baseball Prospectus.

You can read more about it in the team preview for the Yankees, but New York was much better with men on base than with the bases empty and that created a rather big gap between the team’s actual record and the BaseRuns record.

Ultimately, the game is played between the lines and the Yankees are still very likely to win this division. The -425 price tag implies that the Yankees win the division about 81% of the time. That seems a little bit high to me.

The February announcement that Severino had a setback after last season’s injury-plagued campaign does make the Rays a little bit more interesting. The Yankees are
missing Domingo German for a domestic violence suspension and James Paxton had a surgical procedure on his back that will keep him out until at least June.

The Rays could very well win the AL East. They are the only other team that can. If you wanted to take the +650 price, you could and you could easily justify it, given that this is a two-team race and one of the horses is already limping out of the starting gate. The +650 price tag implies a 13.33% likelihood of the Rays winning this division and that seems light to me, particularly when they really are the only other team with the chance to do so.

Tampa Bay +650 is really the only option for a division future here and it is a pretty good one all in all.
Baltimore Orioles

The 2016 Wild Card Game feels like an eternity ago. More than 300 losses later, the Baltimore Orioles are in Year 3 of what is going to be an uncomfortably long rebuild. Over the last two seasons, the Orioles are 101-223. Last season they flirted with being the first team since the 1999 Colorado Rockies to allow 1,000 runs. As it is, the Orioles became the first team since the 2008 Texas Rangers to allow over 900 runs. The Rockies, Detroit Tigers, and Pittsburgh Pirates followed them with that dubious honor last season.

The Baltimore pitching staff set the single-season record for the most home runs allowed...on August 22! The previous record was 258. The Orioles topped it with 34 games to go and eventually gave up 305. For what it’s worth, three other teams – the Colorado Rockies, Los Angeles Angels, and Seattle Mariners – also topped the old record.

The Orioles actually improved by seven games from 2018 to 2019 and scored 107 more runs. Of course, they also allowed 89 more runs and gave up a lot of souvenirs. The youth movement is in full swing, though. Baltimore’s average age per Baseball-Reference for batters was 26.5 years, nearly two full years younger than the 2018 team that set a franchise record in losses with 115.

Looking at the Orioles with the glass half-full is virtually impossible, but their actual record of 54-108 was six games worse than their record by Pythagorean Win-Loss and five games worse by BaseRuns. I’ll reference these records a lot in the intros, but Pyth W-L is a standings metric derived from run differential. BaseRuns is a standings metrics derived from a context-neutral environment of all hitting and pitching outcomes put into a run differential formula. By 3rd Order Win%, a standings metric at Baseball Prospectus, the Orioles were more like a 59-103 team.

Things did get mildly better for the O’s as the season went along. After going just 27-62 before the All-Star Break, Baltimore went 27-46 after the All-Star Break. The Orioles scored 4.85 runs per game after the Break compared to 4.2 runs per game before the Break. They still gave up over six runs per game in the second half, but they were clearly more competitive.

This will be another season focused on individual development, both at the MLB level and within the system. When the Orioles went from old-school skipper Buck Showalter to new-school manager Brandon Hyde, it was a decision made in concert with the changes taking place at the front office level. The Orioles plucked Mike Elias from the think tank of the Houston Astros and also grabbed Sig Mejdal to help the team into the 21st century and make up for nearly 20 years of lost ground.

It is a process to say the least and one that isn’t likely to generate positive results in the standings again this season.

Season Win Total Odds
BetOnline: 56.5

2019 Standings Data

Actual Record: 54-108

Run Differential: -252

Pythagorean W/L: 60-102

BaseRuns Record: 59-103

BaseRuns Run Differential: -236 (4.49/5.95)

3rd Order Win% Record: 58.8-103.2

Record in One-Run Games: 11-22

Offseason Transactions


Losses: Aaron Brooks, Gabriel Ynoa, Mark Trumbo, Tayler Scott, Dylan Bundy, Jonathan Villar

For a team with a lack of MLB-caliber players, it sure seems like losing Jonathan Villar and Dylan Bundy is a bad idea, but the Orioles have no reason to say that any trade is off-limits. The Orioles sent Bundy to the Angels for Isaac Mattson, Kyle Bradish, Kyle Brnovich, and Zach Peek in early December. Bundy made some strides last season, but the fact is that he needs to be in a park that suppresses power and be outside of the AL East. He was of little use to the Orioles, so trading him for a package of youngsters made a lot of sense.

The Villar thing is a little bit different. Villar was coming off of a four-win season with 24 HR, 40 SB, and he was the second-best regular hitter for the O’s behind Trey Mancini, whose name will be popping up in a lot of trade talks as the season goes along. The Orioles got low-minors arm Easton Lucas for Villar and also opened up some playing time, but it is fair to say that the Orioles traded away two Major League players and signed maybe three in Tommy Milone, Wade LeBlanc, and Jose Iglesias.

Offense
2019 Ranks:

BA: .246 (21st)
OBP: .310 (24th)
SLG: .415 (24th)
wOBA: .308 (25th)
wRC+: 88 (22nd)
BABIP: .293 (21st)
K%: 23.2% (15th)
BB%: 7.5% (26th)

If you thought last year’s Baltimore offense was bad, get a load of this one. As far as wRC+ goes, where 100 is considered league average, the Orioles had four hitters with an above average wRC+. Pitcher John Means, who drew a walk in one of his three plate appearances, Austin Hays, who had 75 impressive plate appearances late in the year, Trey Mancini, and Jonathan Villar.

Renato Nunez hit 31 home runs and absolutely pummeled left-handed pitching, but he doesn’t walk a lot and a major component of both wOBA and wRC+ is the ability to not make outs. Nunez hit 31 dingers, but he only batted .244 and had a .311 OBP. Anthony Santander hit 20 homers, but had a sub-.300 OBP and wound up with a 97 wRC+.

This is going to be a low-average, low-OBP lineup once again and more than likely worse than last year’s group. It is possible that guys like Hays, who turns 25 in July, can be a consistent hitter at the MLB level, but we’re also looking at a guy that batted .254/.304/.454 in Triple-A before his small-sample size aberration at the MLB level. Santander hit 20 homers in High-A for the Indians in 2016 with a .290/.368/.494 slash, so his offensive upside is certainly in there, but injury-plagued seasons in 2017 and 2018 took away some important development time. Santander’s 20-homer barrage last season came with an anemic walk rate and a rather low 15.6% HR/FB% for a pull hitter, so the chance is there that he can keep up this home run binge, but it is unlikely that he will contribute in other ways.

Even with some of the surprising power numbers from guys like Nunez and Santander, the Orioles still finished 23rd in home runs. They don’t walk a lot. They don’t have many guys that make quality contact, as they rated 25th in average exit velocity.

The ceiling of the Baltimore lineup may simply be tied to one player and that is Trey Mancini. The concern here is that the Orioles could trade Mancini this winter. He has two years left of contract control after going through the arbitration process for the first time this past winter. Teams would want to capitalize on that control and the Orioles may be wise to capitalize on his offense.

Mancini went from a .308 wOBA and a 91 wRC+ in 2018 to a .373 wOBA and a 132 wRC+ in 2019. There was nobody else to really fear in the Orioles lineup, so Mancini’s walk rate spiked from 6.9% to 9.3%. He did bang out a career-high 35 home runs, but his
.326 BABIP looks like something I would expect to regress. He does make a lot of quality contact and has a career .320 BABIP, but you don’t normally see home run spikes and BABIP spikes within the same year. In fact, projection systems like Depth Charts and Steamer have Mancini down for BABIPs in the .313 range, which lowers his wRC+ from 132 to 113 and drops his wOBA just under 30 points.

The biggest problem for Baltimore on the offensive side is that help is not ready to come from below yet. What you see on the Major League roster is what you get, so guys like Hanser Alberto, Nunez, Santander, Mancini, and even a journeyman like Jose Iglesias will have to hold it down. Advanced college bat Adley Rutschman will be up sooner rather than later, but he has a lot of work to do on the catching side in order to handle a pitching staff.

Ryan Mountcastle will make his debut this season at some point after banging out 25 homers last season with a .367 wOBA in Triple-A, but he is another guy with a low walk rate dependent on BABIP and power to put up numbers. That isn’t the type of profile I like to rely on with the leap from the minors to the Majors.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 5.67 (30th)
- **FIP:** 5.56 (30th)
- **xFIP:** 5.23 (30th)
- **K%:** 19.5% (29th)
- **BB%:** 8.8% (17th)
- **LOB%:** 68.5% (29th)

If you think the Baltimore offense is bad, I would encourage you not to look at the Orioles pitching staff. Dylan Bundy was the second-best pitcher with a 2.5 fWAR and a 4.79 ERA, a 4.73 FIP, and a 4.58 xFIP. John Means turned in a fine season with 3.0 fWAR, but he is a primary candidate for regression with a 3.60/4.41/5.48 pitcher slash. Means is an extreme ground ball guy and his home run prevention skills are why he managed a 3.60 ERA with a 5.48 xFIP, but his .256 BABIP against is likely to increase one way or another.

As it is, the K% for Means did decrease in the second half as he got around the league a second and third time. Pitch-to-contact starters have such a minimal margin for error without elite command and Means saw a 4.96 FIP in the second half with a big home run spike and a 3.4% decrease in K%. He went from nine homers allowed in 82.2 first-half innings to 14 HR allowed in 72.1 innings. His SLG against spiked from .370 to .467. Even if the balls are different this year, Means could just be beaten in other ways. He was in the 90th percentile in average exit velocity, so at least that is something to build off of as the staff “ace” and a cause for some optimism about keeping that BABIP down.
The Orioles did not retain Andrew Cashner, who was third in fWAR for them last season. Right now, it looks like Alex Cobb, Asher Wojciechowski, Kohl Stewart, and Brandon Bailey could round out the starting five in the rotation. Bailey was a Rule 5 Draft pick, so he’ll need to stay on the MLB roster all season or be offered back to the Astros. Wojciechowski had a brief moment of pitching clarity last season, but ultimately wound up with a 4.92 ERA, a 5.30 FIP, and a 5.61 xFIP after a dynamite month of July.

Cobb’s return could be a sight for sore eyes, but he could also be an eyesore. His days with the Rays feel like eons ago, even though he was a 2.2-win pitcher as recently as 2017. In two years with the Orioles, Cobb has been limited to 31 starts and has an ERA over 5.00 with a FIP in the same range. He allowed 16 runs in 12.1 innings in April last season before missing the rest of the year.

The Orioles were last in bullpen ERA, but maybe deserved a slightly better fate. Their FIP of 5.38 was still abominable, but a 4.58 SIERA and a 68.4% LOB% suggest that the group could have been a bit better. Even Mychal Givens was not exempt from whatever sickness plagued the bullpen, as he turned in a 4.57 ERA and a 4.50 FIP. His 3.62 xFIP suggests better fortunes this season following a year in which he posted a 22.8% HR/FB%. He could be a bright spot. Miguel Castro’s under-the-hood metrics, specifically his fastball velocity and the spin rate on his slider, suggest that he could be a hidden gem this season.

**Positives & Negatives**

The positives really are few and far between with the Orioles. Fortunately, expectations are extremely low, particularly with the Blue Jays having an active offseason and three pretty solid teams in the AL East in the Yankees, Rays, and Red Sox.

I do think there is some more hope for the bullpen. The HR/FB% spike for Givens looks like an outlier to me. I love the raw stuff for Castro, but it would be nice to see him actually harness it. Former top prospect Hunter Harvey will get some relief reps. Baltimore has other intriguing relief arms that could see innings in the pen like Cody Carroll, Dillon Tate, and recently-acquired Isaac Mattson.

The negatives do far outweigh the positives, though. Mancini is something of a regression candidate in my mind. He’ll still stand out as the best offensive player on this team, but a repeat of last season would surprise me a little bit. The Orioles will hit for some power, but solo home runs don’t do a lot of good when you allow over six runs per game. This is a low-AVG, low-OBP offense and it is hard to see that changing with the current personnel and the lack of high-upside minor league talent.

**Pick: Over 56.5**

In these season win total write-ups, I make a pick on every team. Some are strong and some are weak. This one is definitely on the weak side. Rarely do I want to tangle with a
team that I know will be really bad or really good because I don’t have a wide range of outcomes. I just have 100 losses or 105+ losses to pick from.

The Orioles did play a touch better than their actual record last season and this win total line splits the difference between what happened and what should have happened per the alternate standings metrics.

Baltimore got better in the second half and I’m a firm believer that the teams that go all-in on analytics can improve at the margins as time goes on. With teams that are more advanced on the personnel side, like the Minnesota Twins and Milwaukee Brewers, the results appear a lot more impressive with playoff berths and division titles. The Orioles won’t get any of those, but I do think the organization should show some improvement this season.
Boston Red Sox

Depending on who you talk to, the most disappointing team of the 2019 season is likely to be either the Chicago Cubs or the Boston Red Sox. The 2016 World Series Champs and the 2018 World Series Champs both missed the playoffs and finished 84-78. All things considered, my personal answer would be the Red Sox as the biggest disappointment.

Alex Cora’s team may have had something of a postseason hangover on both a team and individual level. Chris Sale only made 25 starts and they weren’t as good as usual. David Price made 22. The inability to replace Craig Kimbrel left the bullpen in a state of flux for the majority of the season.

There are a lot of factors that we could point to as to why the Red Sox fell short of expectations. They were 35-41 in the 76 games against division foes, including a combined record of 12-26 against the Yankees and Rays. With that playing a big role, the Red Sox were just 28-45 against teams .500 or better. They beat up on bad teams to the tune of a 56-33 record, which is the sole reason why they finished over .500.

Some bad luck played a role. Injuries are hard to use as a crutch because they happen to everybody, but missing out on six or seven starts from Sale put an already-suspect pitching staff in a tough spot and the absence of Price didn’t help either, especially with Rick Porcello and the rest of the depth not where it needed to be.

The Red Sox were also uncharacteristically bad at home. A 38-41 record at Fenway Park and two “home” losses in London marked the first time the Red Sox finished under .500 at home since 2014. They lost 91 games that year. By comparison, the Red Sox won over 70% of their home games in 2018. Combine that shortcoming with a sub-.500 record in the second half and some misfortune relative to Pythagorean Win-Loss, BaseRuns, and 3rd Order Win% and you get a team that fell short of where it should have been.

Normally, the Red Sox would be an obvious bounce back candidate, but ownership cried poor over the winter. The escalating cost of superstar Mookie Betts seemed to be a financial sticking point for the team and he was ultimately traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers. While the New York Yankees were busy signing Gerrit Cole, the Red Sox were busy trying to find a trade partner to send away their best player. They eventually found one.

Along with the additions of Alex Verdugo, Connor Wong, and Jeter Downs from the Betts trade, the Red Sox made smaller pickups like Jose Peraza, Jonathan Arauz, and Kevin Plawecki. They signed Martin Perez. Those aren’t moves of a storied franchise with deep pockets. Those are the moves of a small-market team trying to improve at the margins.

I guess we’ll see how strong the core of the Red Sox is. The offense should be great, though “elite” is not really an option now without Betts. The rotation and bullpen have
some upside. But the AL East is strong again and it is impossible to say that the Red Sox are better or better prepared than they were last season. With the firing of Alex Cora due to his involvement in the Astros sign-stealing scandal, the optics of the offseason look pretty bad as we take a glance at the 2020 season.

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline:** 84.5

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 84-78

**Run Differential:** +73

**Pythagorean W/L:** 87-75

**BaseRuns Record:** 89-73

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** +82 (5.51/5.01)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 88.2-73.8

**Record in One-Run Games:** 23-22

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Jonathan Lucroy, Kevin Pillar, Cesar Puello, Trevor Hildenberger, Kevin Plawecki, Jett Bandy, Nick Longhi, John Andreoli, Mike Kickham, RJ Alvarez, Jose Peraza, Martin Perez, Alex Verdugo, Connor Wong, Jeter Downs Matt Hall, Jeffrey Springs, Austin Brice, Adenys Bautista, Chris Mazza, Jonathan Arauz

**Losses:** Juan Centeno, Andrew Cashner, Brock Holt, Jhoulys Chacin, Rick Porcello, Steve Pearce, Chris Owings, Gorkys Hernandez, Josh A. Smith, Steven Wright, Mookie Betts, David Price, Travis Lakins, Jhon Nunez, Sam Travis, Angeudis Santos, Sandy Leon, Trevor Kelley

As mentioned in the intro, these are not the moves that you would expect from a contending team in a big market. The Red Sox lost a lot of MLB-caliber talent and returned very little of it. I do think Jose Peraza is a fun, low-risk upside play, but the team doesn't seem to have really improved in any area.

The Mookie Betts trade is a tough pill to swallow, but I do like the return depending on the health of Alex Verdugo. Verdugo missed time with a stress fracture in his back, but was a 2.2-win player in 106 games. He hit at every level in the minors and has been an above average MLB hitter in his 488 PA. Connor Wong and Jeter Downs are nice pieces,
as Wong has good power to overcome the big holes in his swing and Downs is a top-100 prospect with pop, speed, and a good eye. Downs enters the year with 69 professional stolen bases, which is, well, nice. For this season, though, Verdugo is the only player that will have an impact.

Andrew Cashner and Rick Porcello are probably replaceable with much cheaper innings at league average or better, but the loss of David Price means another starting spot that has to be filled. The third-biggest loss could be Brock Holt and his extremely versatile skill set. There was some thought that the freed-up Betts funds would go to him, but he signed with Milwaukee.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .269 (3rd)
- **OBP:** .340 (3rd)
- **SLG:** .466 (5th)
- **wOBA:** .338 (5th)
- **wRC+:** 106 (6th)
- **BABIP:** .313 (3rd)
- **K%:** 21.3% (7th)
- **BB%:** 9.1% (11th)

The Red Sox weren’t as dependent on the home run surge as a lot of other offenses. In fact, they may be the best equipped of the great ones to sustain last season’s production if the ball does in fact play differently. The Red Sox finished 10th in home runs with 245, but still finished top-five in slugging percentage. They led all of baseball in doubles, with 23 more than the Astros. They were fifth in walks.

We are all speculating how the baseball may play and the fact of the matter is that we won’t know until games start. The Red Sox led all of baseball in hits and only the Astros had more hits + walks. If home runs do in fact go down, run-scoring opportunities will be limited even more in the age of the strikeout. At least the Red Sox look about as home run recession-proof as a team can look.

Mookie Betts is a huge loss. Even though Betts was out-WARed by Xander Bogaerts last season, he slashed .295/.391/.524 with a .380 wOBA in a “down” year. He didn’t replicate the success of his 2018 campaign, but he’s been worth over 37 wins above replacement per FanGraphs in just 794 games. Bogaerts did have a career offensive year in his age-27 season, and mix in some Rafael Devers and JD Martinez and you have a fearsome middle of the order. Both Devers and JDMart cracked over 30 homers and posted wOBA marks of .377 and .386, respectively. Devers started a little slow and hit all 32 of his homers from May 1 on with a .385 wOBA and a 138 wRC+. 
The ceiling for the Red Sox, though, will be defined by guys like Andrew Benintendi and Michael Chavis. Benintendi was perfectly average last season at the plate with a .266/.343/.431 slash and a 100 wRC+. That was a big drop from 2018’s 122 wRC+, but there are some signs that 2019 was the exception and not the new normal. Benintendi’s SwStr% spiked to 11.6% and his Swing% jumped to 51.2%. It seemed like there was a call for him to be more aggressive, but it backfired. He chased more often, swung and missed more often inside the zone and outside of it, and just never really seemed to get going. He wasn’t pitched all that differently, as he saw a slight increase in sliders and curveballs, but nothing out of the ordinary relative to league-wide pitch-selection trends. I would expect a bounce back.

The hope would be that Chavis, who turned 24 in August, can cut down the swings and misses. His 18.6% SwStr% was the fifth-highest mark in baseball among players with at least 300 plate appearances. The power production is there, but Chavis needs to supplement the long ball with some free passes to offset the low batting average. It wouldn’t hurt if Jackie Bradley Jr. and Jose Peraza could wreak some havoc at the bottom of the lineup with some knocks and some stolen bases.

There are some depth concerns for the Red Sox. They are pretty top-heavy on offense and have been fortunate to stay healthy. Some of the projected bench bats are backup catcher Kevin Plawecki, Rule 5 Draft Pick Jonathan Arauz, homegrown prospect CJ Chatham, and utility man Tzu-Wei Lin, who only had 22 plate appearances last season. Rusney Castillo looks like a sunken cost. Marcus Wilson and Bobby Dalbec could provide help from below, but it will be imperative that the Red Sox stay healthy on offense.

**Pitching**

2019 Ranks:

- **ERA**: 4.70 (19th)
- **FIP**: 4.28 (12th)
- **xFIP**: 4.39 (13th)
- **K%**: 25.5% (5th)
- **BB%**: 9.5% (27th)
- **LOB%**: 70.8% (22nd)

There is extra incentive for the offense to stay healthy because the Red Sox are going to need to outscore teams. The burning question for Red Sox Nation is what will Chris Sale do in 2020? Sale had a 4.40 ERA, but a 3.39 FIP and a 2.93 xFIP. He got torched by last season’s home run barrage with an HR/FB% of 19.5%. Sale’s career HR/FB%, even with last year’s numbers, is just 11.9%. He had never been higher than 12.5%.

Sale also struggled in key spots with men on base. His career LOB% is 77.4% and he finished with a 66.7% mark last season. The K% numbers were fine and the walk rate was a tad elevated, but it looks like it was just an outlier season of bad luck for Sale. We can also point to a lack of health, as he was limited to 147.1 innings and saw a very
noticeable drop in fastball velocity, particularly early in the season. He still generated swings and misses at an elite rate. It was just the long ball and some sequencing that did him in. The Red Sox need Sale to return to form and I fully expect that he will.

Eduardo Rodriguez was a saving grace with another fine season over 203.1 innings of work so it wasn’t all doom and gloom. Rodriguez’s performance, particularly in the second half, was a really big boost for Boston. Durability had been a question for Rodriguez with an on-again, off-again knee issue, but he made 34 starts and worked over 200 innings for the first time in his career.

We’ll see if the Nathan Eovaldi gamble works out better this season. He only worked 67.2 innings and posted an ERA and FIP of almost 6.00. Martin Perez used a newfound cutter to have a quality first half last season with a .296 wOBA against over his first 95 innings, but his second half was awful with a .382 wOBA and a 6.27 ERA and 5.94 FIP over 70.1 innings.

The loss of David Price hurts because the Red Sox don’t have a lot of great starting pitchers. Even though Price was limited to 107.1 innings, his fewest since 2009, he still had some upside that most of the in-house options don’t have.

Say what you will about Price, Rick Porcello, and Andrew Cashner, but the Red Sox have to replace 335.1 innings from last season. The hope is that Chris Sale can account for about 70 or so more of those, but there is no guarantee that Eovaldi, Perez, Matt Hall, Darwinzon Hernandez, Hector Velazquez or any of the other options are any better. In fact, they could be worse and that would be really hurtful for the Sox.

Maybe Boston finds a way to figure this out. Maybe interim manager Ron Roenicke can milk some extra production out of Sale and Rodriguez, but the other options are just not inspiring a lot of confidence. Major League Baseball may need to put parental controls on the games that Perez starts against the Yankees and other talented offenses just to keep the children from seeing something so horrifying.

The Red Sox bullpen was better than I expected last season, but there were some worrisome trends. Brandon Workman appeared in 73 games with a 1.88 ERA, but he lived on a .209 BABIP and a 2.6% HR/FB%. He, like Matt Barnes, had major walk issues that didn’t hurt as much as they could have. Barnes had a 3.78 ERA, but a 2.93 xFIP as his 19.5% HR/FB% was well above the league average. On the plus side, I don’t know how many leads the group will have to protect, particularly on days that don’t begin with Sale or E-Rod.

**Positives & Negatives**

The positive this year for the Red Sox is that what we see is what we get. Last season I spent ample time discussing how the Red Sox overachieved offensively and defensively in high-leverage situations. That did lead to some regression, though a large part of Boston’s fall last season came because of pitching injuries. Fifteen different pitchers
made starts and the only pitchers with an ERA under 4.00 to make more than one start were Rodriguez and Travis Lakins.

The fallout from the Astros scandal brought about an investigation into the Red Sox and it was found that manager emeritus Alex Cora brought over some of those same cheating tactics to the Red Sox for their 2018 run. As such, he lost his job and also received supplemental discipline from Major League Baseball. The Red Sox have a new manager and it remains to be seen how that will go. Cora pushed all the right buttons in the 2018 playoffs and seemed to have learned from a good teacher in AJ Hinch, but those opinions are very much in doubt now.

The new skipper is Ron Roenicke, who has tons of coaching experience, but this is a bad situation for any manager to walk into. The Red Sox are good, but likely not good enough. Ownership is crying poor in advance of the likely labor stoppage. This has to be a demoralized team to a degree and Roenicke is left to try and pick up the pieces because the World Series-winning manager was (correctly) forced out.

**Pick: Under 84.5**

Doesn’t 86 or 87 wins feel like the ceiling for this Red Sox team? The rotation is bad beyond Sale and Rodriguez and Sale, who had a platelet-rich plasma injection last season, is a major injury risk. Rodriguez just turned in his first 200-inning season because he has a chronic knee issue that bothers him. I’m sure he was also bothered by the Red Sox taking him to arbitration over a $600,000 difference in salary proposals. I’m not saying that Rodriguez would take that personally, though it wouldn’t surprise me if a little bit of body maintenance comes into play to get that pay day down the line. It is a consideration all players dealing with something.

If the Red Sox don’t get 60 starts from those two guys, they’ll be up the Charles River without a paddle. And by that I mean out floating away in the Atlantic Ocean.

The offense is still really good and has some upside. I just can’t get past the worst-case scenario for this pitching staff because it is not that far from becoming a reality. Outscoring the opposition is always the goal, but it is the method of victory for the Red Sox, so the offense will have to stay healthy, too. I just don’t see any margin for error with this squad. They are clearly the third-best team in the division, they know it, and it wouldn’t be terribly shocking to see a guy like JD Martinez or E-Rod shopped as the cost-cutting measures continue in July.

All of that being said, the floor is probably pretty high for this team, too, with an above average offense and a top-five pitcher in baseball in Sale. Rodriguez is very good, too, if he stays healthy.

The Red Sox likely land somewhere between 82 and 87 much more often than not and I want a wider range of outcomes to make a bet. This is just a pick because I make one on every team and the pick is on the under.
New York Yankees

Major League Baseball is at a critical juncture. When teams like the Red Sox and Cubs are crying poor, it is not good for the league as a whole. We are now in a time period when simply spending money provides a competitive advantage for everybody that does it. All teams used to spend money, but the haves spent more than the have-nots and that’s just the way it was. Now, even the haves aren’t spending nearly as much.

The New York Yankees are the exception. There is a misperception out there about the Yankees that they just frivolously spend money and deal with the consequences. While they do continue to have one of the highest annual payrolls in baseball, free agent spending has been curtailed because Brian Cashman and the rest of the front office invested serious time and resources into building up a tremendous pipeline of homegrown talent.

That being said, the Steinbrenner trust is still rich with cash and that was evident when the Yankees scored the biggest fish in the free agent market by signing Gerrit Cole. As a result, the Yankees, who were already among the World Series favorites, are even stronger now and are a clear-cut favorite in the AL East. With the Rays infinitely cash-strapped and the Red Sox looking to cut payroll, the Yankees struck while the iron was extremely hot and look poised to improve upon last season’s disappointing ending.

Three teams won over 100 games in the American League last season. The Yankees were one of them, even though only two position players had more than 550 plate appearances and Luis Severino was limited to 12 innings. It wasn’t always pretty, but a dominant bullpen and a lot of depth helped the Yankees to 103 victories. The season ended in the ALCS with a loss to the Astros in six games.

While the finish was a bit of a bummer for the Pinstripe Faithful, the season was a huge victory overall. Aaron Judge missed 60 games. Giancarlo Stanton only played 18 games with 72 plate appearances. DJ LeMahieu proved to be a stud even after leaving Coors Field. Guys like Gio Urshela and Mike Tauchman stepped up in a big way. When you can fill holes with organizational pieces, you can extend your finances to land a pitcher of Cole’s magnitude. After all, the two pitchers with the most starts last season were Masahiro Tanaka and his 4.27 FIP and JA Happ and his 5.22 FIP.

The Yankees really are poised to do great things in 2020 and maybe even end what has to be an agonizing 10-year World Series drought for the most spoiled fan base in history. I don’t know if this season ends with a 28th championship, but the Yankees will be in the postseason tournament again with the opportunity to take it down.

The games still have to be played and the Yankees have to win a whole lot of them to go over their season win total in what should be a more balanced American League as a whole.

Season Win Total Odds
BetOnline: 101.5

2019 Standings Data

Actual Record: 103-59

Run Differential: +204

Pythagorean W/L: 99-63

BaseRuns Record: 94-68

BaseRuns Run Differential: +134 (5.60/4.77)

3rd Order Win% Record: 95.5-66.5

Record in One-Run Games: 18-19

Offseason Transactions

Additions: Chad Bettis, Tony Zych, Dan Otero, Wynston Sawyer, Luis Avilan, Chris Iannetta, Nick Tropeano, Adam Warren, Gerrit Cole, Zack Granite, James Nelson


There sure are a lot of recognizable names on the transaction list for the Yankees. Many of them left the team. One did not. That is Gerrit Cole. The prized possession of the free agent class on the pitching side can just barely afford the New York City cost of living with his new nine-year, $324M contract.

Don’t sleep on some of the other additions. Chris Iannetta could be an excellent coach to Gary Sanchez during Spring Training and has a pretty good chance at taking the backup catcher job from Kyle Higashioka. Nick Tropeano showed flashes when healthy. Adam Warren won’t be a factor until late 2020, if at all, but his minor league deal runs through 2021 after Tommy John surgery. Luis Avilan wasn’t great for the Mets last season, but has carved out over six years of service time as a lefty reliever.

There are some household names on the departures side, but the Yankees didn’t need any of those players. Sure, they would have liked to see more of Stephen Tarpley, Nestor Cortes Jr., and Chance Adams. They would have liked to retain the services of Dellin Betances, but Betances is a gamble and the bullpen is already excellent. Greg Bird was replaced by Luke Voit and Mike Tauchman. Jacoby Ellsbury’s body has failed him.
Edwin Encarnacion is a DH and Giancarlo Stanton is also one of those. The only real big loss is Didi Gregorius, but Gleyber Torres and DJ LeMahieu made him redundant.

The Yankees are better for having Gerrit Cole. That is the primary takeaway here. Don’t let the big names concern you.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA**: .267 (4th)
- **OBP**: .339 (4th)
- **SLG**: .490 (3rd)
- **wOBA**: .346 (3rd)
- **wRC+**: 117 (2nd)
- **BABIP**: .306 (6th)
- **K%**: 23.0% (12th)
- **BB%**: 9.1% (12th)

Brian Cashman doesn’t get enough credit. Everybody just assumes that the Yankees work with no financial cap and can spend like drunken sailors in a port city whenever they please. Maybe that is the case, but look at how this roster was constructed. DJ LeMahieu was punished for playing at Coors Field and wound up being a borderline top-20 position player in baseball last season at a cheap free agent cost. Aaron Judge is homegrown and so are Brett Gardner, who has been a reliable player for over a decade, and Gary Sanchez.

Giancarlo Stanton’s acquisition was a coup from a Marlins team desperate to cut salary, but the Yankees also acquired Gleyber Torres, Mike Tauchman, Luke Voit, and Clint Frazier via trade. They picked Gio Urshela off of the scrap heap. The Yankees minor league system is rich with talent pulled from the international free agent markets and the MLB Draft.

The Yankees were top five in several offensive categories, even though Stanton missed most of the season and Judge also missed a couple of months worth of plate appearances. I know, Yankee Stadium is a Little League field. That’s fine. Even with that bandbox, the Yankees were second in wRC+, which is both league adjusted and PARK adjusted. New York did everything well. They had a high level of contact quality with the top average exit velocity in baseball. They hit for average and for power. They probably could have drawn a few more walks, but I can’t help but think the park factor plays into that. After all, the Yankees did walk more often on the road than at home.

New York finished one home run behind the Minnesota Twins, who set the all-time record for home runs in a season with 307. That was one of two teams to top the Yankees in SLG. The other was the Astros. Eight guys hit at least 15 home runs for the Yankees. They were also without the services of power hitter Miguel Andujar, who missed most of
the season. Judge’s home run number was suppressed by the amount of time he missed and Stanton only hit three.

It isn’t just about power for the Yankees, but it helps and it is the biggest component of their offensive success. The high exit velocities also lead to the ability to hit for a lot of power. Remember that home runs do not count towards BABIP because they are not balls in play that can be fielded. The Yankees still ranked sixth in that department because of their contact quality.

In all, 15 players posted a wRC+ over 100. Twelve of those players are still with the organization, though Aaron Hicks had Tommy John surgery and his outlook for the season remains up in the air. If you are looking for regression from this offense, you are unlikely to get much of it. Home runs may decline across the board, but the Yankees will still be among the league leaders. Even if the clock strikes midnight for guys like Urshela, Tauchman, and even an aging player like Gardner, the Yankees will get more from Judge and Stanton to offset any drops in production.

There are some signs of cluster luck regression. The Yankees batted .293/.364/.518 with men on base and .249/.320/.469 with the bases empty. In that respect, which we can see via BaseRuns, the Yankees are a mild regression candidate. However, they should do better with the bases empty this season to create more run-scoring opportunities. They had an average exit velocity of 89.9 with the bases empty and a .286 BABIP. Of course, they had a .334 BABIP with runners and an average exit velocity of 89.3 mph. Defensive alignment matters and a lot of teams are going to do better with men on base than the bases empty in BABIP, but this was a stark contrast. Only the White Sox were better in BABIP with men on base last season.

All in all, aside from the expected league-wide drop in power, the Yankees look roughly on par with last season and will be in the top five offensively again.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

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Now, for some earth-shattering analysis. It is a good thing that the Yankees got Gerrit Cole. I’m not going to say that James Paxton was bad, but the park factor change did impact his numbers. He also battled some injury issues over the course of the season. Masahiro Tanaka was pretty average. Domingo German is suspended for the first half of the season stemming from a domestic violence incident. JA Happ isn’t very good.
We saw three starts from Luis Severino in the regular season as he worked his way back from a major injury. Severino also made a couple of playoff starts. But, you can just look at the full-season numbers and see that the Yankees needed Cole. To finish 14th in ERA and 17th in FIP with this bullpen and this talent simply isn’t good enough. Most of it was the starting staff, too. The bullpen was ninth in FIP and ninth in ERA, which, admittedly, was well below my expectations, but the Yankees need better from their starters if they are to take that next step. It would also help to stave off some of the regression suggested by the alternate standings metrics and the offensive cluster luck that I mentioned earlier.

Paxton is likely to miss at least most of the first three months of the season after undergoing a lumbar discectomy. Even though he didn’t replicate his Seattle numbers, he was pretty good, particularly late in the year. He is a big loss to a team that entered last season with some big starting rotation questions.

The southpaw wound up with a sub-4.00 ERA and FIP and a 3.5 fWAR pitching half the time in Yankee Stadium. The irony is that Paxton as actually substantially better at home than on the road. Paxton did get better as the season went along and he was actually outstanding over August and September with just 18 runs allowed over his last 61 innings of work.

The problem was everybody behind Paxton. German had a flashy 18-4 record, but he had a 4.72 FIP in his 143 innings and got extremely fortunate with some batted ball luck and a high LOB%. Tanaka had a 4.45/4.27/4.29 pitcher slash with a decreased strikeout rate and his usual home run concerns. JA Happ had a 4.91 ERA with a 5.22 FIP and a 4.78 xFIP, which basically makes him below replacement-level. CC Sabathia wasn’t much help and he has since retired.

The thing about a guy like Cole is that 200 innings previously accounted for by lesser pitchers now go to one of the game’s best. If we consider the same thing with Severino, who only worked 12 regular season innings, the Yankees are getting a monumental upgrade in their rotation in those two guys. They do lose German’s contributions, but will also get him back fresh at the start of July.

Remember that upgrades are twofold. First, the obvious upgrade of adding a world-class pitcher to the roster, but second, the replacement of a below average pitcher. In Cole, we’re likely talking about a difference of 5-6 wins above replacement player. I don’t want that to be misconstrued to say that Cole upgrades the Yankees roster by 5-6 actual wins, but it is simply to say that he represents a dramatic upgrade to what was in place. If Severino returns similar to his 2017-18 form, the Yankees rotation suddenly goes from pedestrian to well above average, if not great, and would add Paxton in June and German in July.

And that can only boost the bullpen. As it is, the Yankees are loaded with talent, starting with Aroldis Chapman and going on down to guys like Tommy Kahnle, Adam Ottavino, and even Chad Green, who was simply outstanding in the second half with a .252 wOBA
against. This bullpen is deep, highly talented, not affected by the three-batter rule, and can get reinforcements from the minor leagues with starters like Jonathan Loaisiga, Jordan Montgomery, and maybe even Albert Abreu or Michael King. Don’t be surprised if Deivi Garcia makes his MLB debut early as well.

Depth is a big part of my handicapping process for season win totals and the Yankees have a lot of it, as we’ve seen over the last couple of seasons.

**Positives & Negatives**

The Yankees remain stuck in the AL East, where they’ll go against the Red Sox and the Rays for 38 of their 162 games. That is far better than what some teams have to contend with within the division, so they are somewhat fortunate in that regard. The problem here is that this win total is just so high that it leaves very little margin for error, even if the Yankees are going to be the better team in the vast majority of their games.

A deadened baseball won’t have as much impact at Yankee Stadium as it would in other ballparks. If the pitching staff can improve upon its home run prevention, the offense is likely to supply plenty of power and that would put New York in an extremely advantageous position in the 81 home dates. I would anticipate that the Yankees lead all teams in home runs this season at home and overall.

**Pick: Over 101.5**

As a general rule, I don’t really like to toy with high season win totals, especially those over 100. We all know that the Yankees are going to be really good. I like to focus my energies and bankroll on teams that have a wider range of outcomes.

That said, with a weakened Red Sox team, Toronto and Baltimore, a top-five bullpen in baseball, a top-five lineup, and quite possibly a top-10 starting rotation, it is very hard to see the Yankees falling short of 100 victories.

The luck factor with runners in scoring position and the alternate standings metrics that paint something of a pessimistic picture are all considerations and concerns. So, too, is the Paxton injury. With Severino coming back after a lost year, no German until about the All-Star Break, and the never-ending potential for more pitching injuries, the ceiling for the Yankees is lowered enough that I cannot bet this win total over with confidence.

I do provide a pick on every team, though, so I have to list something and I think that the chance at triple digits is quite high. Outside of the Dodgers, this is the team with the highest floor in baseball. The problem is that a win total north of 100 caps the ceiling and makes it too hard for me to bet on the over in most cases. Even if the rotation was fully available, it would be tough to do.

But, if I was in a win total pool or a contest or something, it would be the over as opposed to the under.
**Tampa Bay Rays**

Innovation and aggression can level the playing field in any line of work or any sport. The Tampa Bay Rays have already had to be on the cutting edge because they can’t compete financially. They cannot carry the nine-figure payrolls of the Yankees or Red Sox. For a long time, the Rays were well behind the Blue Jays and Orioles in spending.

The thing about spending in baseball is that we can’t see a lot of it. We all know what the player salaries are and see the major free agent deals. What we don’t see is the investment in organizational infrastructure. In the minor league system. In the braintrust. In the scientific and physiological advancements. In the things that the Rays have always prioritized.

It is not a coincidence that the league’s front offices are full of smart minds from teams like the Rays and Indians. Teams that consistently have to walk a fine line because of budget constraints. Teams that have to be creative and innovative. Teams that have to display a different kind of aggression.

When it translates to wins, that is when people take notice. It took a long time last season for people to realize just how good the Tampa Bay Rays were. They won 96 games and beat the Oakland Athletics in the Wild Card Game. They took the eventual AL champion Houston Astros to the brink of elimination in the ALDS. Anything can happen in a five-game sample size, but imagine the Rays outhitting the Astros when having to go up against guys like Gerrit Cole, Justin Verlander, and Zack Greinke. It was only five games. It was only a snippet of the total picture. In some ways, though, it illustrates just how good and how underappreciated Tampa Bay was as a whole last season.

For us in the betting community, it is an unfortunate realization. Much like stocks or the latest fads, you have to try to get in on the ground floor. You have to get in before other people realize what is happening. The 2020 Rays won’t sneak up on anybody. They’ll be priced like the upper-echelon team that they are. And we’ll just have to deal with that. After all, what we’ve most recently seen is all that we remember, right? The Rays were 44-27 in the second half of last season, 34-18 over the final two months, and went five games with the Astros.

They were consistently good, too, with just one losing month. They were 48-33 in front of the worst attendance in the AL at Tropicana Field and 48-33 on the road with a higher run differential than at home. They were innovative. They were aggressive. They were good. Really good.

And they look to be really good again.

Teams like Tampa Bay seem to do better with the ability to fly under the radar. Now all eyes are on them as the primary contender to take down the Yankees and to likely wind up in the Wild Card Game again. There is no flag to fly for being the BaseRuns AL East
Champion or the 3rd Order Win% AL East Champion, but the Rays did have better records than the Yankees in both of those categories.

Will they live up to the hype? After tying the record for the second-most wins in franchise history, can they reach up and touch the new ceiling again? One win over their last two games would have tied the franchise record for wins and two victories would have set a new one. Is this the new normal for the Rays? That is the decision bettors have to make with a high win total number like this.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 90.5

**2019 Standings Data**

*Actual Record:* 96-66

*Run Differential:* +113

*Pythagorean W/L:* 93-69

*BaseRuns Record:* 98-64

*BaseRuns Run Differential:* +160 (4.90/3.91)

*3rd Order Win% Record:* 99.2-62.8

*Record in One-Run Games:* 23-16

**Offseason Transactions**

*Additions:* Deck McGuire, Brooks Pounders, Aaron Loup, Sean Gilmartin, John Curtiss, Dylan Covey, Ryan LaMarre, Kevan Smith, Chris Herrmann, Yoshi Tsutsugo, Manuel Margot, Logan Driscoll, Peyton Battenfield, Cal Stevenson, Randy Arozarena, Jose Martinez, Hunter Renfroe, Xavier Edwards, Brian O’Grady, Curtis Mead

*Losses:* Guillermo Heredia, Matt Duffy, Avisail Garcia, Eric Sogard, Hoby Milner, Travis d’Arnaud, Johnny Davis, Emilio Pagan, Austin Pruitt, Matthew Liberatore, Edgardo Rodriguez, Jake Cronenworth, Tommy Pham, Cristopher Sanchez, Jose De Leon, Jesus Aguilar, Cole Sulser

I would be reluctant to make any sort of trade with a team like the Rays. I would want to know what it is that I’m not seeing. That didn’t stop the Cardinals from sending Jose Martinez and Randy Arozarena to the Gulf Coast for Matthew Liberatore and Edgardo Rodriguez. Scouts are high on Liberatore, who has front of the rotation potential, but the Rays opted to cash in on the 20-year-old’s value to bolster the outfield and the bench.
The Rays also made a late-winter trade to acquire Manuel Margot from the Padres in exchange for reliever Emilio Pagan. The Rays traded from a position of strength to get an elite defensive outfielder in Margot. Maybe there is some offensive upside left, too.

Yoshi Tsutsugo was another big move for the Rays, who grabbed the Japanese infielder/outfielder for two years and $12 million. Over a 10-year sample size in the Nippon Baseball League, Tsutsugo hit .285/.382/.528 with over 200 homers, including 139 over the last four seasons. Interestingly, Tsutsugo was said to have higher offers, but went with the Rays because of his comfort level with the organization following their pursuit of him for several years. Eno Sarris profiled Tsutsugo for The Athletic ($) and compared him to Brandon Belt and Ji-Man Choi.

The Rays also grabbed Hunter Renfroe in a fairly shocking deal that included Tommy Pham. The Rays seemed to have acquired Renfroe at low point coming off of a 98 wRC+ season, but I have to give them the benefit of the doubt at all times.

**Offense**

2019 Ranks:

- BA: .254 (12th)
- OBP: .325 (13th)
- SLG: .431 (15th)
- wOBA: .321 (13th)
- wRC+: 102 (9th)
- BABIP: .306 (7th)
- K%: 23.8% (21st)
- BB%: 8.6% (15th)

To a degree, my concerns about the Rays offense were justified. The team went down four points in batting average, eight points in OBP, and dropped 11 points in BABIP from 2018 to 2019. The difference is that Tampa Bay, like just about everybody else, hit for more power to nearly match last season’s wOBA. The Rays were on an interesting trend of hitting a lot of ground balls. They were looking to take advantage of defensive shifts and also utilize the exit velocity skills of their hard hitters by hitting it where fielders had less time to react.

Tampa Bay still hit the ball on the ground a lot, but slightly less often than they had in 2018. They also happened to post a HR/FB% that was over 4% higher from 2018 to 2019. Had it not been for the juiced ball and the league-wide power surge, I’m not sure what would have become of the Rays offense.

I’ve discussed this a lot, but what makes good teams really good is that they aren’t running out bad players at multiple spots. The Rays don’t have any stars as far as position players go, though a repeat of the .291/.364/.558 slash and .380 wOBA from Austin
Meadows could turn him into one. The Rays ditched their second-higher player in fWAR in Tommy Pham, so we’ll see if that move ends up working out, but nine players hit at least 14 home runs. Ten players posted a wRC+ of at least 103. The guys that didn’t really hit made up for it by playing quality defense, like Mike Zunino and Kevin Kiermaier. Manuel Margot will likely be part of that list for 2020.

The Rays have to develop from within because there are no water wings for the free agent pool. Though the Rays signed Tsutsugo, who may very well be the team’s DH, they needed guys like Willy Adames, Brandon Lowe, and Nate Lowe to all develop last season and they did. Brandon was actually second in wOBA in his 327 PA. Nate only had 169 PA, but posted a solid .328 wOBA and 107 wRC+. Adames struck out a little too much to post a league average wRC+, but hit 20 homers and posted a .339 wOBA with a 115 wRC+ in the second half.

With this group, the Rays have versatility. They have average or better production at just about every position. They have very few weaknesses. There are some questions as they head into 2020 with some guys that have little or no track record at the MLB level, but they are well-equipped to have balance up and down the lineup and they will be a really tough team to match up with in the late innings with the new three-batter rule. The Rays and their lineup, which, admittedly, was middle of the pack last season, is a testament that you don’t need “great”. You just need “good”.

Don’t let the full-season numbers fool you. Tropicana Field is a graveyard for offense. Rays games at The Trop averaged 8.3 runs per game, with 4.52 of those coming from the home team. On the road, the Rays scored nearly five runs per game. You can see by their wRC+ mark that the home ballpark did have a big impact on their relatively mediocre finishes in BA, OBP, and SLG.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 3.67 (3rd)
- **FIP:** 3.65 (1st)
- **xFIP:** 3.89 (3rd)
- **K%:** 26.6% (2nd)
- **BB%:** 7.4% (3rd)
- **LOB%:** 73.8% (11th)

This is unquestionably the strength of the Rays team. The lineup is very solid, but the pitching staff is exceptional. Unlike the position player side, where there are some shakeups and new faces, the pitching staff from last season is basically still in tact. The only addition is a full season of Nick Anderson, the fireballing reliever that was acquired from the Miami Marlins around the Trade Deadline. Otherwise, all the same faces are back from a pitching staff that was simply dominant last season.
Furthermore, it was a dominant pitching staff that only got 107 innings from reigning Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell and breakout candidate Tyler Glasnow only threw 60.2 innings due to injuries. Glasnow had a 1.78 ERA with a 2.26 FIP and a 2.94 xFIP over his 12 starts. He was worth 2.3 fWAR in just 60.2 innings.

There are concerns going into 2020. Snell was mostly bothered by weird and freak things, but his fastball velocity was down a little bit after working 180.2 innings in his Cy Young season. It seems unlikely that 36-year-old Charlie Morton can follow up his career year, particularly after working a career-high 194.2 innings in the regular season. Morton had a career-best 2.81 FIP to go along with a strong 3.05 ERA and 3.28 xFIP. Morton is already planning retirement after his current contract. I’m not sure if I should read into that for 2020, but this may be his swan song, even with a vesting option for 2021.

As exciting as Glasnow’s impending stardom looked to be last season, injuries again sidelined the once top prospect. To this point, Glasnow has worked 150 innings in a season once and that came in 2017 when he made 28 starts across Triple-A and the Major Leagues. It goes without saying that the Rays have excellent depth, which is how they got through last season with Snell and Glasnow limited, but another year of that would put a lot of pressure on the team.

Of course, the flip side is that better health for Glasnow and Snell would potentially give the Rays the best pitching staff in baseball. Hell, they were top-five with less than 170 innings from those guys.

Ryne Stanek made 27 starts before he was sent to Miami in the Nick Anderson deal. Outside of that, the Rays didn’t use the opener all that much, even though Snell and Glasnow missed ample time. Yonny Chirinos actually hung a 3.85 ERA with a 4.44 FIP and a 4.10 xFIP primarily as a starter and Ryan Yarbrough posted a 4.13/3.55/4.24 pitcher slash in 14 starts and 14 relief outings. He actually made nine straight starts to end the regular season.

The thing about the Rays is that they may have the best Triple-A rotation in baseball. Both Chirinos and Yarbrough have options, so Trevor Richards could very well break camp with the team. Two-way player Brendan McKay showed some flashes with 56 strikeouts in his 49 MLB innings. Brent Honeywell and Anthony Banda are both back from major arm injuries. The Rays essentially run nine deep with starters and that doesn’t even include bulk reliever Jalen Beeks, who came up through the Red Sox system as a starter.

Manager Kevin Cash has an embarrassment of riches in the bullpen. Everybody throws hard and everybody misses bats. Only the Astros, Padres, and Twins had a higher K%-BB% than the Rays. The Rays pen ranked third in SIERA, second in FIP, and fifth in BB%. All Anderson did in his 23 appearances was strike out 41 in and walk in 21.1 innings of work. Emilio Pagan struck out 96 in 70 innings, but he was traded for Margot and the bullpen still won’t miss a beat. Now Anderson will be the frontrunner to close and the Rays will survey their options for adding another arm to the relief corps.
Chaz Roe has one of the game’s filthiest sliders. Colin Poche and Diego Castillo miss a lot of bats. Oliver Drake wound up being very reliable and allowed just a .247 wOBA against with 44 K in 35.1 innings in the second half. This bullpen projects to be one of the best in baseball yet again and they just keep finding dudes. Journeymen. Prospects. Underappreciated minor leaguers. It doesn’t matter. It’s insane what this org does year in and year out.

**Positives & Negatives**

The Rays have one of baseball’s best managers in Kevin Cash. The quantifiable impact of a manager has been up for debate for a long time, but I can’t help but think that Cash adds at least 3-5 wins to the Rays just by being so adept at putting his players in the best possible position to succeed. There is a level of harmony from front office to the personnel on the field that really seems to elevate the Rays year in and year out. Cash is the bridge between the front office and the players and it just works. We saw how much a toxic environment can hurt a team with the Pirates and we’ll see if it does the same with the Rockies and an unhappy Nolan Arenado. Baseball is hard enough without adding more to it.

The Rays really have a big advantage at home. I mentioned this last year with regards to their ground ball and opposite field approach. When they don’t have to play Home Run Derby, they do a lot of things really well to position themselves to win games. Last season, they even hit for more power. But, they are well-equipped to win low-scoring, close games at home. Remember, their home games averaged 8.3 runs per game, so we’re talking a lot of bullpen involvement and they’re going to have the better bullpen more often than not. On the road, they were just as successful with an identical 48-33 record. The Rays were 22nd in home runs at home with 99. They were 12th in road homers with 118. This team is like a chameleon and those types of teams have really high ceilings. They can win a shootout on the road and can win more 50/50 games at home.

**Pick: Over 90.5**

As far as the AL East goes, this is my favorite season win total and one that would indeed classify as a bet. This team is really good. I think there is an inherent hesitance in accepting how good the Rays are because of how hard it seems to be to maintain a winning record with a low payroll. Nobody is more adept at it than the Rays. They find so much surplus value from within by having one of the smartest analytics departments in the world.

Imagine being first, second, or third in most key pitching stats as a team with less than 170 innings from Snell and Glasnow. Imagine a team that keeps finding ways to push the envelope on offense and find something new that other teams aren’t doing in order to level the playing field.
As I mentioned, Kevin Cash is one of my favorite managers in baseball. It all works for the Rays. They were the BaseRuns and 3rd Order Win% AL East champions last season and won 96 games. There is no way you can tell me that this season’s team is worse than last year’s. Nothing about the alternate standings metrics suggests regression. Nothing about the roster suggests regression. If anything, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Rays win as many or more games than they did last season.

This is a case where the ceiling is high enough for me to go over with a team that has an extremely high floor.
Toronto Blue Jays

As a general rule, it helps to have a sense of direction. You have to know where you are going in life. The Toronto Blue Jays have been virtually directionless for the last three seasons. After back-to-back ALCS appearances in 2015 and 2016, the Blue Jays have finished with 76, 73, and 67 wins and have finished 35 and 36 games out of first place in the AL East.

Attendance has cratered. In 2017, Rogers Centre welcomed 3,203,886 fans. That number dropped by nearly 900,000 in 2018 and dropped another 575,000 spectators in 2019. In order to help the attendance figures, perhaps the players cycling through the team over the course of the season should count. Over the last three seasons, the Jays have used 61, 63, and 60 players total and 39, 36, and 34 pitchers.

Health has played a role, but ineffectiveness has played a bigger role. Quite simply, the Blue Jays haven’t had enough good players to compete on a regular basis. Now that some of the minor leaguers, like Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Bo Bichette, and Cavan Biggio, have graduated to the Major League level, that is starting to change.

Better pitchers are making their way up the system, with guys like Nate Pearson, Anthony Kay, and TJ Zeuch just about ready to crack the MLB roster full-time. The organization has been bare of pitching talent in the minor leagues since guys like Marcus Stroman and Aaron Sanchez made it to The Show.

I’ll preface my write-up by saying this: The Blue Jays are really intriguing for 2020. They aren’t going to challenge for a playoff spot, but the lineup looks to be much improved and the Toronto front office was pretty aggressive in the offseason about upgrading the pitching staff. Four newcomers are penciled into the starting rotation and Shun Yamaguchi was signed out of Japan to likely be a primary setup man to closer Ken Giles. Yamaguchi wants to start. We’ll see what the Jays decide.

For the first time in a while, the Blue Jays actually have some semblance of a plan and a direction. The arrow is actually pointing up, as opposed to down, which is what has been the case the last three years with declining win totals and attendance. Signings of Tanner Roark and Hyun-Jin Ryu aren’t going to bring attendance back to its previous levels, but the Blue Jays don’t look like a complete doormat for every other team to walk over this season.

Quite frankly, I sympathize with Blue Jays fans. The team is far from cash-poor, but ownership doesn’t seem to want to put much investment into the team. Head exec Mark Shapiro left Cleveland in search of more operating income and hasn’t really gotten much of that. He brought former farm director Ross Atkins with him as the GM. It hasn’t worked. To some degree, an entire overhaul is needed. After all, this is a team with two playoff appearances since the World Series win in 1993.
They won’t get to the playoffs this season, either, but maybe this year will provide a glimmer of hope and a view into the not-so-distant future.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 75.5

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 67-95

Run Differential: -102

Pythagorean W/L: 71-91

BaseRuns Record: 70-92

BaseRuns Run Differential: -114 (4.51/5.21)

3rd Order Win% Record: 66.4-95.6

Record in One-Run Games: 18-23

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Brian Moran, Jake Petricka, Rafael Dolis, Caleb Joseph, Joe Panik, Ruben Tejada, Hyun-Jin Ryu, Travis Shaw, Shun Yamaguchi, Tanner Roark, Justin Miller, Phillippe Aumont, AJ Cole, Patrick Kivlehan, Chase Anderson, Anthony Bass

**Losses:** Derek Law, Jason Adam, Luke Maile, Ryan Tepera, Devon Travis, Clay Buchholz, Clayton Richard, Justin Smoak, Buddy Boshers, Justin Shafer, Chad Spanberger, Breyvic Valera, Richard Urena

[Hank Hill voice] I’ll tell you what [end Hank Hill voice], the Blue Jays look a LOT better on paper than they did last season. I like Hyun-Jin Ryu, Tanner Roark, and Chase Anderson. I think all of them have some upside, though the division and the park factor changes, particularly for Ryu, could be a bit problematic. The Jays added a lot of experienced innings to a rotation that sorely needed them.

We’ll also see what Japanese import Shun Yamaguchi can do. I’ll talk more about him in a bit, but this is totally revamped and retooled starting five on the pitching side.

Joe Panik and Travis Shaw are competent Major Leaguers to add with a young and growing position player core. All in all, I think the Jays had one of the better offseasons in baseball. They lost very little of consequence and upgraded several positions on the big
league roster. I like the offseason quite a bit. We also see a win total line pumped up by what looks to be a pretty good set of additions.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA**: .236 (30th)
- **OBP**: .305 (27th)
- **SLG**: .428 (17th)
- **wOBA**: .310 (23rd)
- **wRC+**: 92 (20th)
- **BABIP**: .280 (30th)
- **K%**: 24.9% (25th)
- **BB%**: 8.4% (19th)

All of the sudden, this Toronto roster looks pretty good. The youth movement fully took hold last season with the call-ups of Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Bo Bichette, Cavan Biggio, and some extra playing time for catchers Danny Jansen and Reese McGuire. Lourdes Gurriel Jr. is only 26. Teoscar Hernandez will turn 28 later this year. Derek Fisher is only 26. The Blue Jays are in an exciting position to see how their kids develop. Sure, they will take some lumps in a division with the Yankees, Rays, and, to a lesser degree, the Red Sox, but there will be something to follow night in and night out and that is huge for the fan base, particularly with the attendance drop I mentioned in the intro.

I’ll start by saying this. This offense is going to be quite a bit better this season. The .280 BABIP is going to be on the rise with a much higher level of contact quality across the board, so I would expect the Jays to move up quite a few spots in batting average. Young hitters are always going to strike out, but the Jays were in the middle of the pack in average exit velocity at 88.3, which doesn’t quite correlate to a .280 BABIP. Now, of course, home runs don’t count towards BABIP and the kids should hit quite a few of those, but I still expect this offense to be a lot better overall.

The nice thing for the Jays is that their young guys didn’t just have cameo appearances. Vladdy Jr. had 514 plate appearances. Biggio had 430. Bichette had 212, but showed a tremendous offensive profile with a .311/.358/.571 slash, a .384 wOBA, and a 142 wRC+ in that span. Guerrero started with a .318 wOBA and a 97 wRC+ in the first half, but finished strong in the second half with a .340 wOBA and a 112 wRC+. Biggio was consistent across both halves and his extremely high walk rate in the 16.5% range is solely needed for an offense that has rarely walked a lot.

It isn’t just the homegrown talent that shows promise. Randal Grichuk had a .340 wOBA and a 115 wRC+ in 2018, but dropped to a .307 wOBA and a 90 wRC+ in 2019 with less BABIP luck and fewer fly balls. Generally, fewer fly balls would lead to a higher BABIP since ground balls go for hits more often than fly balls. He’s something of a bounce back
candidate. Hernandez and Gurriel have 30-homer power. Hernandez was in the 85th percentile in exit velocity this past season and the 93rd percentile in 2018.

We’ll see if it translates to the big leagues, but Fisher has plus power and borderline plus-plus speed. If he can get on base more and translate his minor league success to the big leagues, that would deepen this lineup. Jansen profiles as the better offensive catcher, with McGuire the better defensive catcher, but it should be a valuable tandem. Jansen’s offense didn’t translate to the Majors last season, but his minor league track record was impressive.

I look at Toronto’s offense and I’d call it streaky. Last season had some learning curves. Young lineups that strike out a lot can go through prolonged slumps, but also long periods when hitting is contagious.

I’ve also mentioned before how much depth factors into the equation for me. With the graduation of several prospects, a guy like Brandon Drury becomes a super utility player and injury replacement. Joe Panik is a nice, low-risk signing. The Jays have some versatility and some MLB-caliber depth in the minors in guys like Billy McKinney, Anthony Alford, and Jonathan Davis.

All in all, this group looks like a lot of fun to watch. There are going to be frustrating, bang-your-head-against-a-wall days, but also days when this group hangs some huge numbers. To me, the Blue Jays look like a team that will struggle against good pitching staffs and obliterate bad ones.

**Pitching**

2019 Ranks:

- **ERA:** 4.79 (21st)
- **FIP:** 4.82 (20th)
- **xFIP:** 4.88 (27th)
- **K%:** 21.1% (26th)
- **BB%:** 9.6% (29th)
- **LOB%:** 71.8% (19th)

This is the area under the microscope for the Blue Jays. We can all agree that the offense will be better. How much better will the pitching staff be? In all honesty, I was surprised to see the Jays only rank 21st in ERA and 20th in FIP. It sure seemed like they were a lot worse than that. Marcus Stroman was traded away at midseason after 21 really good starts. Aaron Sanchez was traded to the Astros after 23 pretty bad starts. The only other pitchers to accumulate at least one fWAR were Trent Thornton, a personal favorite of mine, and closer Ken Giles, who was limited to 53 games.

Toronto had 21(!) different starting pitchers last season, ranging from Thornton, Sanchez, and Stroman with 21+ starts to Edwin Jackson, Clayton Richard, Clay
Buchholz, Jacob Waguespack to openers like Derek Law, Daniel Hudson, Ryan Feierabend, and Neil Ramirez. Basically, the team was all over the map.

From the starters, the Blue Jays got a 5.25 ERA with a 4.90 FIP and a 5.01 xFIP over 711.1 innings of work. That is terrible. We can see from a comparison of the starter-only numbers to the full body of work that Toronto’s bullpen was actually pretty decent. A 4.35 ERA is decent enough in last year’s run environment, though it is worth noting that the relievers collectively posted a 4.75 FIP and a 4.74 xFIP with some massive home run and walk rate problems.

For the sake of argument, let’s replace Stroman’s 2.96 ERA, 3.51 FIP, and 4.06 xFIP with Hyun-Jin Ryu, who, quite frankly, is probably only good for about 125 innings with his injury history. I think his numbers will regress more than that going from Dodger Stadium to Rogers Centre and the American League with a full-time DH. But, I doubt he’ll be that far off.

For this experiment, let’s also replace Sanchez’s 6.07/5.02/5.09 with a league average-ish starter like Tanner Roark. Let’s take Clay Buchholz’s 6.56/5.62/5.18 pitcher slash and add in Clayton Richard’s 5.96/6.28/5.32 pitcher slash over 104.1 combined innings to replace it with Chase Anderson, who had a 4.21/4.83/5.26 in 139 innings with the Brewers last season.

I don’t think that Ryu will pitch like a #1 starter with the move to Rogers Centre and the move to the AL East. His home/road splits aren’t bad, but keep in mind that he has a career 2.58 ERA in 11 starts at Oracle Park, which is his most frequent road venue. He did struggle through nine starts at Chase Field and six more at Coors Field. Other than that, he hasn’t made more than four starts in any other road venue. Rogers Centre is no picnic and neither are Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park.

That being said, he is still part of an upgraded starting rotation and the sum of all of the parts makes Toronto a much better team.

Ryan Borucki is still around, and hopefully healthier, but he has already been slowed by shoulder discomfort in Spring Training. Matt Shoemaker is also in the fold with a bevvy of health questions. The young kids that were serviceable, like Sean Reid-Foley and Jacob Waguespack are a year older and wiser. We’ll likely see top prospect Nate Pearson at some point after the Super Two deadline and the Jays also have plenty of prospect arms like Anthony Kay, TJ Zeuch, and Thomas Hatch.

I’m also a big believer in Thornton, who posted a 4.84 ERA with a 4.59 FIP and a 4.94 xFIP. I would love to see some usage changes for him. Thornton was hurt by cluster luck, as he allowed a .305 wOBA with the bases empty and a .352 wOBA with men on base, including 13 of his 24 home runs. Solo homers are okay. Multi-run homers are no-nos. Thornton, who hails from the Houston Astros pitching factory, ranked in the 88th percentile in fastball spin rate and 88th percentile in curveball spin rate. Among pitchers with at least 400 slider results, Thornton had the highest average spin rate and it wasn’t
close with #2 (Chaz Roe). Adam Ottavino was third. Sonny Gray was fourth. Marcus Stroman was fifth. We’re talking about guys considered to have elite sliders. Opposing batters only posted a .261 wOBA on Thornton’s slider. They decimated his fastball and cutter.

The stuff is there to be really good. His first full season in the Majors had some bumps in the road, but he pitched well in September with something to build on. Let’s see the Jays up his slider usage to 35-40% and bump the curveball up to 10% or so. He’ll be a completely different pitcher. His stock is one I will buy quickly if I see some usage changes. He also has potential to be an elite reliever in my estimation if Toronto goes that route.

Admittedly, the bullpen worries me. Ken Giles is solid. Anthony Bass had a terrific second half with the Mariners last season, holding the opposition to a .198 wOBA in 110 plate appearances. Yamaguchi could be a starter or could be a reliever, but likely ends up in relief, where his 10.0 K/9 in Japan last season can play up a little more. Depth is a question beyond that and Bass and Yamaguchi are questions themselves. Wilmer Font, who was wildly valuable for the Jays in the second half of last season, may be the second-best pitcher behind Giles. Let’s see how he is deployed.

**Positives & Negatives**

Toronto went 7-21 in May and 10-17 in June. Once the kids really took hold for the second half, the Blue Jays were 33-38 and were only outscored by 18 runs. If we extrapolate that .465 win percentage to the full 162 games, we end up with 75.33 wins, which is essentially where the season win total sits for this season. With a young, developing, and wildly talented position player core and a lot of upgrades on the pitching side, we have to consider if they can play at that pace or better, while keeping in mind that 57 of 162 will be against the Rays, Yankees, and Red Sox.

It can be dangerous to make assumptions about young players. The sophomore slump isn’t just a media narrative. Pitchers adjust. Teams adjust. Sometimes hitters don’t adjust. Sometimes the numbers just don’t show up. Sometimes those players press to impress with that first full season. The rotation is significantly better than last season, but still full of injury risks and concerns. The offense will define the ceiling for this team because there will still be a lot of nights when the Jays need to outhit the other team to win. It will be up to the kids to accomplish that.

The jury is out on Charlie Montoyo, but I do have relatively high hopes. Expectations still aren’t high, but the pedigree is impressive. He worked his way up the Rays org in spite of a ton of challenges along the way. I find Kevin Cash to be one of the best skippers in baseball and Montoyo got to work alongside him before taking the Jays job. I would expect him to do well with better talent across the board.

**Pick: Over 75.5**
I honestly didn’t expect to like the over here. This is a pretty big adjustment off of last season, but when you look at the upgrades in the aggregate, you find that this team is just vastly more talented than last year’s version. You have all the young kids in the lineup that graduated from the minor leagues to the bigs. You have Ryu and Roark and Anderson and actual competent Major League pitching. You have upside in Thornton and Pearson and Yamaguchi.

I am usually a little bit hesitant of big leaps like this, but like I mentioned, the Blue Jays we saw after the Midsummer Classic were a lot different than the Blue Jays that we saw in May and June. You could see and feel the energy. You could feel the promise and potential. You could feel a different vibe. And at that point, they played like a 75-win team with a much weaker pitching staff than what they have now.

Depending on how the rest of Spring Training goes, I may add this one to my list of bets. I really need to see everybody get through healthy to March 26 because depth is still a bit of a concern for me with multiple parts of the roster. I truly believe a healthy team can flirt with .500, but that could all go by the wayside in a flash. Some pitchers are already hurt and others have injury histories. Toronto could outscore the opposition with some slow-pitch softball games, but there are some other very good offenses in the American League. Toronto needs that improved pitching staff to balance some things out.

This one is on the cusp of making it as a bet, but I really do like what I see and the off season that the Blue Jays, so the pick is easily on the over.
AL Central Futures

The American League Central Division was won by somebody other than the Cleveland Indians for the first time since 2015. The Minnesota Twins put it all together, won 101 games, and outlasted the Indians, who limped to the finish line with five straight losses to end the season. The eight-win gap between the two teams really wasn’t that big, as Cleveland and Minnesota were actually tied for the top spot as late in the season as August 11. The Twins led by as many as 11.5 games on June 2.

When all was said and done, Minnesota had 101 wins and Cleveland had 93 and that was that. The Indians were the team with the most wins ever to miss the Wild Card Game in its current format dating back to 2012 and the Twins went on to lose to the Yankees.

Perception matters a lot in the betting markets for the AL Central. The Twins got better by adding Josh Donaldson, Kenta Maeda, and several others. The Chicago White Sox got better by signing Yasmani Grandal, Gio Gonzalez, Dallas Keuchel, and by welcoming Luis Robert and eventually guys like Nick Madrigal and Michael Kopech to the fold. The Indians? Well, they signed Cesar Hernandez and Domingo Santana.

To further hurt the Indians in the court of public opinion, Mike Clevinger tore his meniscus and Carlos Carrasco found himself on crutches before the first Spring Training game.

The Twins are the clear favorite to repeat as the AL Central champs. The question is whether or not somebody else has a good enough chance to place a bet.

Here are the odds to win the AL Central per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

- Minnesota Twins -147
- Cleveland Indians +335
- Chicago White Sox +385
- Kansas City Royals +30000
- Detroit Tigers +42500

This will come as a shock to some, but we can effectively cross out the Royals and Tigers.

That leaves us with three contenders. The favored Twins in search of a repeat, the 2016-18 champion Indians, and a team that hasn’t made the playoffs or won the division since 2008. Decisions, decisions.

A line of -147 implies a little less than a 60% chance that the Twins win this division. Quite frankly, that looks low to me. The Indians could very well have the four best players in the division in Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Mike Clevinger, and Shane Bieber, but the supporting cast is lacking. Lindor, Ramirez, Clevinger, and Bieber could
all end up in the top-20 in fWAR among position players and pitchers and yet the Indians are still +335. Isn’t that telling enough?

The White Sox have the makings of what could be a stellar offense with Yoan Moncada and Eloy Jimenez and Grandal and Robert, but they don’t have the pitching for a playoff push. The White Sox may make a big leap after last season’s 72-90 showing, but they are not ready to make a push at the division yet.

That leaves bettors with one question – Are the Indians good enough? Even as an Indians fan, I must reluctantly say no. The Twins are the play to win the Central Division here, though it is extremely tough to justify a -147 price tag for a seven-month hold on your money. There isn’t a ton of value here in this division with the odds-on favorite, but an implied probability of 59.5% does look a little bit low for those that just want to play on the value rather than focus on the hold of your money.
**Chicago White Sox**

How many times have we seen it in sports?

“If these 25 things go right for the Bills or Jets, they can challenge the Patriots in the AFC East!”

“If these 16 things happen, the Los Angeles Lakers will not win the Western Conference!”

“32 Ways the Seattle Mariners Can Win the AL West!”

It gets nauseating, to be totally honest. Writers, by and large, do an outstanding job covering the sports and teams that they follow, but the clickbait these days! The what if. Drinking the Kool-Aid. And, look, I understand it. Being a fan of a bad team is awful. Knowing that your team is rebuilding or playing for draft position makes for a long season. So does writing about them.

Some writers may have actually hurt themselves prior to the 2019 season straining to get the Chicago White Sox into the playoff race. Some serious mental gymnastics were taking place. It was like they were trying to huff and puff and blow the houses down of the Cleveland Indians and the Minnesota Twins. I never bought into any of it. The White Sox won 72 games.

This isn’t a victory lap. This isn’t to rub it in with White Sox fans. I have nothing against the White Sox. I have nothing against any MLB team. I may be an Indians fan, but my job doesn’t allow it. I just never understood the hype. I never understood the appeal. I never understood the mindset.

En route to going 72-89, the White Sox did actually have a winning record against my Indians. They were also 15 games under .500 after the All-Star Break and got beaten by five or more runs 30 times. That happens when you can’t pitch. That happens when your top pitching prospect misses the season with Tommy John surgery. That happens when you score just 4.4 runs per game.

The reason I bring up all of this isn’t to throw salt in old wounds. It isn’t to hurt myself with an awkward self-pat on the back. It is to bring up that the White Sox train is picking up steam again. The difference is that it is far more warranted this year than it was last year. Yasmani Grandal, Luis Robert, Edwin Encarnacion, Dallas Keuchel, and Gio Gonzalez are all nice additions to pair with the guys that are already here. We’re also likely to see Michael Kopech, Nick Madrigal, and maybe even Dane Dunning and Luis Alexander Basabe at some point this season. Robert and Eloy Jimenez have already graduated to the big leagues.

As a general rule, hype like the White Sox got last season usually ends up being a year early. It is a big leap from the minor leagues to the big leagues and it is a process to build
up a team that hasn’t made the playoffs since 2008 and hasn’t had a winning season since 2012.

I can tell you that this year’s White Sox team is much closer than last year’s. Now let’s see if that means we can look for a season win total over ticket.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 84.5 (-115/-105)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 72-89

Run Differential: -124

Pythagorean W/L: 69-92

BaseRuns Record: 69-92

BaseRuns Run Differential: -113 (4.38/5.09)

3rd Order Win% Record: 66.3-94.7

Record in One-Run Games: 14-18

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Alex McRae, Drew Anderson, Jaycob Brugman, Adalberto Mejia, Bryan Mitchell, Andrew Romine, Steve Cishek, Edwin Encarnacion, Dallas Keuchel, Cheslor Cuthbert, Gio Gonzalez, Yasmani Grandal, Nomar Mazara, Jonah McReynolds

**Losses:** Thyago Vieira, Yolmer Sanchez, Hector Santiago, Ivan Nova, Jon Jay, Ryan Cordell, Ryan Goins, Charlie Tilson, Steele Walker, Welington Castillo, Dylan Covey, Josh Osich

A tradition as old as time is that the teams that win the offseason wind up getting overvalued in the preseason betting markets. The White Sox are one of the big winners of the winter. They signed MLB talent in Steve Cishek, Dallas Keuchel, and Gio Gonzalez to upgrade the pitching staff. They acquired Edwin Encarnacion, Yasmani Grandal, and Nomar Mazara to upgrade the offense. Grandal will also have a huge impact defensively, particularly in the pitch framing game.

And the White Sox lost very little of consequence. Yolmer Sanchez was a nice player, but he is replaceable. All of the other guys are also very replaceable. And they’ve been replaced by guys that are much better or have much higher ceilings. Add these offseason
moves to the sweet contract extension signed by Luis Robert, the return of Michael Kopech, and hopefully a healthier year for Eloy Jimenez and you have the makings of a team getting a lot of helium going into the 2020 season.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .261 (8th)
- **OBP:** .314 (23rd)
- **SLG:** .414 (25th)
- **wOBA:** .309 (24th)
- **wRC+:** 93 (18th)
- **BABIP:** .329 (1st)
- **K%:** 25.6% (28th)
- **BB%:** 6.3% (30th)

You also have a team that needs to make a 13-game leap to go over its season win total. Are they 13 games better based on the offseason transactions and the development of in-house talent?

If we consider all three alternate standings metrics, the White Sox were actually much worse than their 72-89 record. They lived off of BABIP. The White Sox led the Majors in batting average on balls in play at .329. Remember that home runs do not count towards BABIP, as they are not balls in play. The White Sox only hit 182 home runs. That was 15 more than the Giants, but 28 fewer than the Cardinals to finish 25th in that department.

They didn’t walk. They struck out a lot. You could make a case that they got really fortunate in the BABIP department and that is the sole reason why this wasn’t one of the worst offenses in baseball. The White Sox were 11th in average exit velocity, so they did hit the ball harder than average, but a big reason why they performed so well in BABIP is that they had the highest percentage of opposite field contact at 28.7% per FanGraphs. In the era of defensive shifts, you can carry a high BABIP by going oppo, even if the contact quality isn’t as great. The Rays did it in 2018 and led the league in BABIP. It is hardly a coincidence that the Marlins and Pirates were second and third in oppo contact and were 12th and fourth in BABIP, respectively.

Those teams didn’t hit for any power! Neither did the White Sox. The Marlins led baseball in GB% at 48.5%. The White Sox were second. The Pirates were third. It is not a coincidence that all of those offenses were bad. Ground balls are not good. Opposite field contact is generally not good, unless you can really drive the ball oppo. To their credit, the White Sox were ninth in wOBA on fly balls and line drives to the opposite field, so maybe they did drive it some, but in the current run environment, it helps to pull the ball when you make hard contact.
So, yeah, there are some promising players on the White Sox. But, I’d be surprised if Yoan Moncada runs a .406 BABIP this season. At least he hits for a little power and makes a ton of contact, but Moncada led all of baseball with that .406 BABIP. Teammate Tim Anderson was second en route to winning the batting average title with a .335 average and a .399 BABIP. Leury Garcia was sixth in BABIP among qualified hitters at .353.

To put this into perspective, Pittsburgh’s Bryan Reynolds was third in BABIP at .387. Trevor Story was fourth at .361. There were nine players at .350 or higher. The highest BABIP in 2018 was JD Martinez at .375. Avisail Garcia was at .392 for the White Sox in 2017 to lead the league.

That isn’t to take away from Moncada or Anderson, who are very good hitters, but simply to say that Chicago cannot rely on the BABIP gods again. They’ll need to walk more to offset the BABIP and BA drops. Of their top 12 hitters in plate appearances from last season, Yonder Alonso is the only one that posted an above average walk rate. He slashed .178/.275/.301.

Yasmani Grandal will help the walk rate and so, too, will Edwin Encarnacion. Maybe this is the making of a good offense. I’m still skeptical. Moncada had a .344 BABIP in 2018 with a .235/.315/.400 slash. Surely he’s gotten better, but .379 wOBA and 141 wRC+ better? I’ll pass on that. Tim Anderson’s previous BABIPs? .289, .328, .375. I’ll pass on the .399 repeat. In fact, projection systems have him for a BABIP in the .330s with a .310 OBP and a big drop in SLG.

Remember how Eloy Jimenez hit 31 homers? He had a 27.2% HR/FB% because he hit the ball on the ground so much. That was the eighth-highest mark in baseball. Maybe he belongs with these names, but the guys above him were Christian Yelich, Nelson Cruz, Franmil Reyes, Peter Alonso, George Springer, Eugenio Suarez, and Jorge Soler. Jimenez’s GB% was at least 3.8% higher than any of those guys.

It is entirely possible that the White Sox just make enough hard contact to keep doing this. After all, Moncada was fifth in MLB in average exit velocity among qualified hitters. Jose Abreu was 10th. Jimenez was 24th. They’ve also added Grandal, who was 48th, and Encarnacion, who was 55th. They also add in promising prospect Luis Robert, who slashed .328/.376/.624 across three levels with 32 HR.

I think the White Sox can be very good. I also think the White Sox offense can fall well short of everybody’s expectations.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 4.91 (22nd)
- **FIP:** 4.89 (24th)
The White Sox had better hit a lot because the pitching staff doesn’t look great. Lucas Giolito’s breakout season was the best development of 2019 for the White Sox and we’ll see if he will be able to keep up that level. He posted a 3.41 ERA with a 3.43 FIP and a 3.66 xFIP. His 5.1 fWAR in 176.2 innings of work gave him 4.8 fWAR for his career. Giolito posted a 6.13/5.56/5.46 pitcher slash in 2018. If the light truly came on for him, the White Sox have a legitimate ace. He more than doubled his K% from 16.1% to 32.3% and lowered his BB% from 11.6% to 8.1%. His LOB% was 14.2% higher in 2019 compared to 2018. His velocity came back and his changeup was among the best in baseball.

We still have to assume something of a drop-off, no? It may not be as big as the projection systems are expecting, but I’m not sure I’d bank on a 15% swinging strike rate or 14.7% infield fly ball percentage. Those were a lot of easy outs with pop ups and strikeouts. Perhaps this is the new Giolito. I need more than one season to call this the new normal.

Reynaldo Lopez is better than the 5.38 ERA, 5.04 FIP, and 5.27 xFIP that he posted last season, but how much better? Well, that remains to be seen. He, like Giolito, tilted heavily towards the fly ball side last season. The biggest difference for him is that his command took a tumble with a 14% HR/FB%. With a career mark that now sits at 11.1%, Lopez is one of the guys that would benefit the most from a fixed baseball. I’d put him somewhere around a 4.50 ERA for this season with a FIP in the 4.75 range. He could do a bit better than that, but I don’t see a repeat of the 3.91 ERA he had in 2018.

Gio Gonzalez’s career has come full circle. He was originally drafted by the White Sox and is now back with the White Sox. He is back in the AL for the first time since 2011, when he posted a 3.12/3.64/3.73 pitcher slash. Gio is a fine addition, but he did only work 87.1 innings last season while trying to find a job early in the year. He had a fine 3.50 ERA with a 4.04 FIP and a 4.45 xFIP, but he goes from a Brewers team that was above average defensively to a White Sox team that was not. At least he gets to throw to Grandal again. Catcher ERA is not a reliable statistic, but he did throw to Grandal for 70 innings last season and had a .228/.310/.382 slash against with a 68/31 K/BB ratio.

The White Sox also picked up Dallas Keuchel. Keuchel is a reliable middle of the rotation type of guy. A different ball would help him lower his 23.9% HR/FB% and drop that 4.72 FIP by quite a bit. We all know what Keuchel is as a pitch-to-contact ground ball artist. His GB% last season in 112.2 innings was 60.1%.

The White Sox let their best infield defender go in Yolmer Sanchez. They do upgrade a ton with the difference from Welington Castillo to Grandal behind the plate, as Castillo was one of the worst defensive catchers in baseball. Tim Anderson is a subpar defender.
Moncada is below average by defensive runs saved, but average by UZR. All in all, we’ll call him “fair”. Jose Abreu is passable at first.

The White Sox aren’t going to get a lot of strikeouts from their rotation. Giolito is the primary swing-and-miss generator. The only big bullpen addition is Steve Cishek, who fits right in with a below average strikeout rate and a high walk rate. Cishek is also an extreme ground ball guy that ran a 2.95 ERA with a 4.54 FIP and a 4.95 xFIP last season.

The White Sox ranked 26th in reliever K% last season. They were also 26th in BB%. Projected closer Alex Colome had the second-highest wOBA-xwOBA difference in baseball at .063 (min 500 results), with his expected wOBA 63 points higher than his actual wOBA. I’m not a huge fan of this bullpen to begin with, but regression from Colome would really set it back even more. Cishek also had a 26-point difference on the bad side in wOBA-xwOBA.

For all of Chicago’s BABIP luck on offense, they had some on the pitching side, too. The bullpen was ninth at .285. The rotation was not good with the sixth-highest BABIP. Michael Kopech will increase the team’s K% when he takes over a rotation spot at some point, but it looks like the fortunes on balls in play will also dictate how the pitching staff does.

**Positives & Negatives**

The White Sox did make a concerted effort to get better this winter and they are better. They picked up a lot of upgrades on offense, defense, and on the pitching side with Gonzalez and Keuchel. That is definitely a positive.

According to the win total lines, the AL Central is no longer a two-team race between the Twins and the Indians. Of course, if you talk to certain people, it is the Twins division to lose. Maybe that is the case. The White Sox are improving. They were only 6-13 against the Twins and got outscored by 60 runs, but did take 11 of 19 from the Indians.

Do not underestimate what Yasmani Grandal means to this team. Outside of the enormous free agents like Gerrit Cole and Anthony Rendon, this fit with Grandal may be the best of any. A lackluster pitching staff gets a huge boost with Grandal’s framing and a lineup lacking power and patience gets both. He may be the single most important newcomer to his team given the situation. The Yankees would be good without Cole and the Angels would still be okay without Rendon. Grandal adds several wins to the White Sox.

**Pick: Under 84.5**

To be totally honest, I went into this expecting to love the under so I could go against the hype again. You can probably guess that by the tone throughout the write-up. It felt like a lot of people were putting forth strenuous effort to get the White Sox into the AL Central title picture for the second year in a row. At least it makes more sense this season. The
White Sox are very much improved at three key positions and guys like Moncada and Jimenez are steadily improving as players.

As a general rule, these are the win totals that I like to play. To me, the White Sox have a very wide range of outcomes, but a low ceiling. I think their win total line is pretty close to their ceiling. Far too many things have to go right for the White Sox to win 90 games and be in Wild Card and maybe even Central Division contention. I just can’t see that being the case under any circumstances.

I can’t get past this whole batting average on balls in play discussion. The White Sox could score a lot of runs if they keep up these high BABIP numbers and get some additional pop from guys like Robert, Encarnacion, and Grandal. On the other hand, regression is very possible across the board and this is a team that only scored 708 runs while running three of the 10 highest individual BABIPs in baseball and the highest team BABIP in baseball.

The pitching staff just isn’t that good. I have concerns about Giolito keeping up what he did last season. The league switch makes me think that Gonzalez will be more of a league average type of guy and the projection systems are far lower on him than that. Keuchel is fine, but BABIP-dependent. I’m done expecting anything from Carlos Rodon. Lopez is the hidden upside guy, but his upside isn’t all that high. The bullpen is unimpressive.

It has to be the under for me. The personnel is better. The kids are improving. The veteran free agent fill-ins will help the bottom line. I just don’t see 12 or 13 wins worth of improvement and even more than that relative to the alternate standings metrics. This will be a better team. This won’t be a team that gets outscores by 124 runs. I just don’t think it will be a team that flies past .500.

Keep in mind that last season, the White Sox were 42-44 at the All-Star Break. They were also -71 in run differential. They were never that good last season and the 72 wins that they eventually finished with was actually a pretty fortunate outcome. There is just too much growth and too much improvement that has to happen for the White Sox to get to the mid-80s.

This one is on the fringes of being a bet for me. I’ll take a couple positions early on win totals I think will move and wait and see how the Spring goes for others. This one is on my shortlist of one I’m pretty confident I will play as the season gets closer. Hopefully it gets bet up a little bit more.
Cleveland Indians

I cannot definitively say that starting the season with Eric Stamets and Max Moroff up the middle is the reason why the Cleveland Indians became the team with the most wins in the Wild Card Game era to miss the playoffs, but it certainly didn’t help. None of the injuries that the Indians endured last season helped the team, but the ones to Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez early in the season set the tone for what was a frustrating, yet silver-lined season.

Mike Clevinger and Corey Kluber both went down with injuries in April. Kluber wasn’t pitching well before the comebacker that fractured his arm and ended his 2019 season, so who knows how he would have turned out, but Clevinger was limited to 21 starts and still finished top-20 in fWAR if you lower the threshold to 120 innings pitched.

Twelve different pitchers made starts for the Indians, led by All-Star Game MVP and fourth-place Cy Young Award finisher Shane Bieber, whose breakout campaign is one of many reasons why the Indians were a contender for the playoffs into the final week of the season. The Indians traded Trevor Bauer. Carlos Carrasco was limited to 80 innings because of leukemia. Adam Plutko and Zach Plesac combined for 41 starts. Jefry Rodriguez made eight.

It was quite a season for the Indians. It was the type of season that is a massive disappointment in the present, but a major positive for the future.

The doom and gloom surrounding the fan base and the Lindor trade talks have obscured the fact that this is still a good team. Let’s put it this way. Lindor’s 4.4-fWAR season was the worst full season of his career. It ranked tied for 29th out of all qualified position players. Ramirez’s 3.3-fWAR season was his lowest output since 2015, when he only played 97 games. Bieber and Clevinger were top-20 in fWAR and a full-season of Clevinger would have likely given the Indians two starters in the top 10. Brad Hand’s late-season injury is a major concern going into 2020, but he was a top-15 reliever by fWAR.

Ownership groups around the league are under fire for crying poor and cutting costs, even though TV revenues and team valuations have never been higher. It is an annual thing in Cleveland, where Paul Dolan did extend the payroll during the Indians run from 2017-19, but the Kluber trade has been viewed as a cost-cutting measure by many and the Indians did very little to improve the team. The Indians have a lack of MLB-caliber depth going into this season as well and spent very little money to improve the 26-man roster.

Is what they have enough? The Indians have two of the 15 best position players and starting pitchers in baseball. They have the makings of a dominant back end of the bullpen with Hand, trade acquisition Emmanuel Clase, and young fireballer James Karinchak. Is that enough, though? Is the supplemental cast good enough?
Because that’s the thing with the Indians. They’ll be good. They have been. They’ve won at least 91 games each of the last four seasons. They’ll contend to go over their win total. They’ll contend for the AL Central crown. Where will they end up?

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 86.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 93-69

Run Differential: +112

Pythagorean W/L: 93-69

BaseRuns Record: 88-74

BaseRuns Run Differential: +67 (4.74/4.33)

3rd Order Win% Record: 86.7-75.3

Record in One-Run Games: 15-16

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions**: Domingo Santana, Cameron Rupp, Dominic Leone, Cesar Hernandez, Beau Taylor, Emmanuel Clase, Delino DeShields, Sandy Leon

**Losses**: Kevin Plawecki, AJ Cole, Cody Anderson, Danny Salazar, Tyler Olson, Tyler Clippard, Yasiel Puig, Dan Otero, Jason Kipnis, Eric Haase, Corey Kluber, Adenys Bautista, Andrew Velazquez, Nick Goody

That isn’t the offseason you want to see when a team is coming off of three straight division titles and came up eight games short of a fourth. The Indians needed a second baseman and got a clear upgrade with Cesar Hernandez. They also, apparently, needed to clear some money, so they traded Corey Kluber for Emmanuel Clase. Clase is widely-regarded as one of the best relief pitcher prospects in baseball, but the return seemed light for a two-time Cy Young Award winner in the eyes of most.

Domingo Santana has been thrown into the glut of OF/DH that the Indians have, which also features Delino DeShields, who was acquired in that Kluber/Clase trade.

Otherwise, the Indians cried poor, the owner pissed off everybody that doesn’t own a suite, and everybody that will miss Francisco Lindor. Maybe fans were directing the vitriol of the boring offseason at Dolan for a quote said in the company of people that
weren’t average fans, but perception is clearly lower on the team than it has been in previous seasons and has never been lower on the ownership group.

There is a snowball effect in the betting markets to those types of things. The appearance is that the Indians were one of the losers of the offseason, while the Twins seemingly got better and the White Sox clearly got better.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .250 (15th)
- **OBP:** .323 (15th)
- **SLG:** .432 (14th)
- **wOBA:** .319 (15th)
- **wRC+:** 94 (17th)
- **BABIP:** .289 (25th)
- **K%:** 21.8% (10th)
- **BB%:** 9.2% (10th)

I watch the Indians virtually every day and somehow it never occurred to me just how pedestrian last season’s offense was. It did not help whatsoever that Francisco Lindor was hobbled most of the season by an ongoing ankle injury and wasn’t quite himself. His numbers cratered in September with a 72 wRC+ and a .286 wOBA, but he was pretty good prior to that. He just wasn’t the Lindor that we’ve come to expect.

Lindor’s 2019 season was more like his 2017 season and the Indians needed 2018. In 2017, Lindor slashed .273/.337/.505 with a .353 wOBA and a 116 wRC+. In 2019, Lindor slashed .284/.335/.518 with a .349 wOBA and a 114 wRC+. In 2018, which stands as his career-best season offensively, Lindor slashed .277/.352/.519 with a .368 wOBA, a 130 wRC+, a career high in BB% and also career-bests in home runs, stolen bases, runs scored, and RBI.

The Indians are very dependent on Lindor and Jose Ramirez to provide their offensive punch. It would be unfair to say that 2019 was a complete throwaway for Ramirez, but he, too, was hurt early in the season and then suffered a broken hamate bone. He slashed .255/.327/.479 with a .334 wOBA and a 104 wRC+. Across the board, his numbers declined after consecutive seasons with a 146 wRC+.

There may be bigger bounce back candidates in baseball, but none that mean as much to their teams as Ramirez means to the Indians. Had it not been for a career year at age-33 for Carlos Santana, the Tribe offense would have been downright bad. Santana slashed .281/.397/.515 with career highs in all three categories, a .380 wOBA, and a 135 wRC+ in a more comfortable setting back at home. Santana set a career high in fWAR with 4.4.
With Santana very likely to regress towards his career averages, the Indians absolutely need Lindor and Ramirez to shoulder as much or more of the load. Roberto Perez had a breakout offensive season with regular playing time to hit 24 home runs. Jordan Luplow pummeled lefties with a .320/.439/.742 slash in 155 plate appearances, but the Indians seem poised to play him full-time, despite a .207/.276/.320 slash in 225 PA against right-handers at the MLB level. Oscar Mercado had a 15/15 rookie season over his 482 plate appearances, but he doesn’t walk much and ranked in the 16th percentile in average exit velocity and 24th percentile in Hard Hit% per Statcast. He is a tremendous defensive center fielder, though, with some of the highest Outs Above Average and Sprint Speed metrics in the league.

Cesar Hernandez is a league average or better bat at second base, which is a dramatic upgrade to Jason Kipnis. The infield looks fine, but the outfield is a mess. Mercado will bring defensive value, but his offensive ceiling seems rather low. Tyler Naquin is recovering from a torn ACL. Jake Bauers is recovering from reality slapping him in the face repeatedly over his 423 plate appearances with a .226/.312/.371 slash. Franmil Reyes has light tower power, but also strikes out a ton and may be tasked with playing more outfield out of necessity. Reyes will hit 40 home runs. What he provides in the other stat categories is anybody’s guess. Domingo Santana will assume a lot of DH responsibilities as another guy with pop and some Grand Canyon-sized holes in his swing.

The saddest part about all of this for me as an Indians fan is that there were a plethora of reasonably-priced outfielders in free agency and the Indians wound up with none of them. Five of their hitters grade out around average or better from last season. None of the outfielders do if we assume Luplow to cut into his overall numbers by facing more right-handers. The outfield could be a complete failure and any long-term injury to Lindor or Ramirez would be catastrophic.

This group looks league average-ish again, but a higher ceiling with Lindor and Ramirez can convince me that the Indians wind up somewhere around the top 10 or 12 offensively. Whether or not that’s good enough hinges on the pitching staff.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- ERA: 3.79 (4th)
- FIP: 4.06 (5th)
- xFIP: 4.30 (10th)
- K%: 25.1% (6th)
- BB%: 7.5% (5th)
- LOB%: 76.0% (2nd)

The nice thing for the Indians is that they really only need an average offense to be a factor in the AL playoff chase. Despite all of the doom and gloom about the Indians going into 2020, they won 93 games last season with Lindor hobbled, Ramirez out of
action for about 35 games, and neither of those guys really themselves for most of the year.

How was that possible? The pitching depth within the organization. As mentioned in the intro, the Indians lost Corey Kluber to a freak injury, Carlos Carrasco to cancer, Mike Clevinger for six weeks with a back strain, Trevor Bauer for the last two months of the season, and still finished top-five in ERA, FIP, and BB%, while finishing up sixth in K% with a bullpen that was relatively low on the strikeout totem pole at 13th in the league.

When Clevinger was out there, he was dynamic. Shane Bieber morphed into a legitimate ace. Aaron Civale rode some luck and elite command to a 2.34 ERA (we will talk more about his 4.61 xFIP later). Bauer was awful for the Reds, but good enough for the Indians with a 3.79/4.15/4.29 pitcher slash. His loss goes beyond his on-field performance, as he was instrumental in the development of the breaking balls of Bieber, Clevinger, and to lesser degrees Civale and Zach Plesac.

The room to grow for the Indians rotation is staggering. It feels like we’ve just started to scratch the surface with Clevinger, whose K% peaked last season at 33.9% with a K%-BB% of 26.5%. When Clevinger made his Indians debut, he ran walk rates of 12.5% and 12.0%. Now he is above average in that department with an outstanding strikeout rate. The increased strikeouts were a contributing factor, but we also saw Clevinger’s BABIP go up from .280 over 200 innings in 2018 to .306 in 126 innings in 2019. Clevinger ranked in the 91st percentile in average exit velocity against and in the 70th percentile in Hard Hit%. That doesn’t translate to a BABIP over .300. His xwOBA, xBA, and xSLG ranked in the 92nd, 89th, and 89th percentiles.

Of course, after I wrote the first draft with my glaring review of Clevinger, he suffered a torn meniscus that will likely cause him to miss at least some of April. The Indians are a team with a limited margin for error and missing more than a few Clevinger starts makes a tall task even harder to reach.

In his first full-season, Bieber was a top-five finalist for the Cy Young Award, won the All-Star Game MVP by striking out the side in his only inning at home, and posted a 259/40 K/BB ratio. In 277 minor league innings, Bieber struck out 260 and walked 19. He allowed just 12 home runs. His elite command and control in the minors eventually played up at the MLB level to translate to more strikeouts. The Indians have two top-15 starting pitchers in Clevinger and Bieber to lead this rotation.

Bieber, though, has fallen out of favor to a degree with some analysts because his exit velocity and Hard Hit % against were rather poor last season. Bieber ranked in the 4th percentile in exit velocity and the 5th percentile in Hard Hit%. This will be something to watch closely as the season goes along.

It wasn’t always the sexiest stat line for Aaron Civale, who did tire and lose his control a bit late in the season, but Civale allowed two earned runs or fewer in his first nine starts. Like the rest of the staff, he exhibited plus to plus-plus command. He just didn’t have the
strikeouts that the others had. Given how the Indians have developed pitching, and with Ruben Niebla now on the Major League staff, it is far from a stretch to see Civale as a guy that takes a big leap this season. Civale was in the 83rd percentile in average exit velocity, the 78th percentile in Hard Hit%, and the 84th percentile in xwOBA. His raw stuff isn’t as flashy or dominant as Clevinger or Bieber, but the tools are there.

The Indians are hoping to get a return to normal for Carlos Carrasco the person and the pitcher. Carrasco made 12 starts with some unlucky peripherals before returning in September for 12 emotional relief outings. Plesac flashed some signs and he’s another Indians talent that exhibited elite command in the minor leagues.

The Indians will have one of the better Triple-A rotations with Logan Allen, Sam Hentges, Triston McKenzie, Scott Moss, and Eli Morgan, all of whom have MLB ceilings, in Columbus. There is plenty of starting pitching depth in the organization.

As great as the rotation is, I do have bullpen questions. Brad Hand was good until the wheels fell off last season when he worked five games in six days in late June and never really bounced back. The Indians have a ton of young arms knocking on the door, but Emmanuel Clase and James Karinchak are the only ones penciled into the Opening Day bullpen. They’ll rely on the Nick Wittgrens and Oliver Perezes of the world. Perez and Cimber are mostly matchup type guys that could be badly impacted by the three-batter rule. The Indians bullpen should get better as the season goes along if they are aggressive with their relief prospects, but it could be cobbled together early in the year.

You see a big gap for the Indians between their actual record and the other metrics. The Indians led baseball in LOB% at 9.4% with runners in scoring position. The next-highest team was the Diamondbacks at 6.6%. The Indians were sixth in K% in that split. They got very fortunate with balls in play in high-leverage spots and it helped to hide a lackluster offense. I wonder if they get that lucky again.

Positives & Negatives

And that concerns me. The Indians were challenged in the AL Central for the first time in four years and they came up short. They made history as the team with the most wins to get shut out of the Wild Card Game, which has probably had something to do with the lack of activity this winter, but they have to stop punting the early part of the season.

Under Terry Francona, the Indians are 84-89 in March/April, 341-294 in the first half, and 297-200 in the second half. Imagine if this team could figure it out early. A big part of that has to do with the offseason complacency of the front office and the tight payroll constraints. The front office has opted to take the change rolled by ownership to the bank at the Trade Deadline to improve for the stretch run. I’m not sure how having a player for two months instead of six months makes sense with a division that is more competitive now, but it is easy to see why people are pessimistic about the Indians in the early going.

Pick: Over 86.5
Full disclosure here is that everybody knows I’m an Indians fan, so take this with as many grains to a full shaker of salt as you wish. This is not a ruined team. Should this team have done more to improve its playoff chances? Absolutely. But is there still a path for the Indians to win the Central Division? Absolutely.

I’m a big believer in Civale and a believer that Bieber and Clevinger can continue at the same levels and possibly even improve in certain areas. Healthier and more motivated stars in Lindor and Ramirez have all the incentive in the world to come back stronger and better after last season’s disappointing ending. The outfield situation will work itself out, as the Indians still have Daniel Johnson in the minors and enough options to cobble together something resembling a useful group. If nothing else, the Indians should get 70 home runs or more from Reyes and Santana and you don’t need a ton of margin for error with a rotation like this.

The reason why this is just a pick and not a bet is because the Indians have such a small margin for error. They already have the Clevinger injury that will wipe out his April for a team that annually starts slow anyway. Winning 93 games last year was something of a miracle, as the alternate standings metrics show, but this is also a team that lost its last five games to finish with “just” 93 wins. I think a healthier Indians team is better than last season’s version, but the good fortune may not be as strong, which puts this team likely somewhere in that 85-90 win range.

More often than not, I think the Indians go over this number, but I cannot lock it in as one of my favorite win total picks. The top-tier talent on this team is right up there with the best in the league. Unfortunately, the supporting cast will determine the ceiling for the Indians and I am not sure how high it is. This is a team that has a very high floor. I just don’t know how much wingspan it would take to reach the ceiling.

For that reason, this is a pick, not a bet, but I do think the sensationalism about this team from the mainstream media has been over the top.
Detroit Tigers

Some seasons are not about wins and losses. The 2020 season is not about wins and losses for the Detroit Tigers. It is about trying to pick up the broken fragments of an organization and putting them back together. Years of ill-advised spending and a lack of internal development have put the Tigers into quite possibly the worst spot in baseball.

The Baltimore Orioles can make a really strong case for that title, but the Tigers are just a special kind of disaster. It really is unfortunate to see, but playing exclusively for the now with no forethought into the future has repercussions and ramifications. Those are currently being dealt with in the Motor City.

Dave Dombrowski and Mike Ilitch are front and center in this dumpster fire. Explaining Ilitch’s involvement in all of this is pretty easy. He wasn’t getting any younger and he wanted to bring a title to Comerica Park. You can see the thought process. From 2011-14, the Tigers won four straight division titles and won a playoff series in three of those years. Detroit had World Series appearances in 2012 and 2006. The division seemed to be ripe for the taking on an annual basis. The Indians were in a rebuild. The Twins had fallen off after their decade of dominance in the 2000s. The White Sox just sort of existed and hadn’t made the playoffs since 2008.

It was the Royals. The pesky Royals that stood in the way of the Tigers and perennial trips to the postseason. Ilitch would stop at nothing to win. That meant high payrolls. That meant huge contracts to guys like Prince Fielder and Miguel Cabrera, who would both ultimately break down physically with large sums of money owed to them. That meant big money to Justin Verlander, who needed a career resurgence in Houston.

From 2008-17, the Tigers ranked outside the top five in year-end payroll just twice. They were 10th in 2011 and sixth in 2015. By 2018, the Opening Day payroll was slashed nearly $75 million from what it was the previous year. The 2019 Tigers had an Opening Day payroll of $115 million and change. That was nearly $85 million lower than 2017.

The cost of spending money hits more than a bank account. It blocks younger players from moving up the system, so many of them are traded in the quest for division titles and World Series appearances. The Tigers also forfeited draft picks to sign free agents and failed with most of the ones they did draft.

Nick Castellanos was a win, albeit as something of a late bloomer with a position change after being a supplemental first-round pick in 2010. Matt Manning should crack the rotation at some point this season or next. Christin Stewart has shown flashes. The Tigers have just been mismanaged up and down throughout the decade.

We’re seeing exactly what that means. The Tigers lost 114 games last season. That wasn’t even a franchise record, but the team still had its lowest Pythagorean Win-Loss
win percentage in franchise history. Attendance has fallen off by 1.2 million spectators over the last four years.

There really is no end in sight for a team that has won 64, 64, and 47 games over the last three years. The win total odds suggest that. Is there something to get excited enough over with this team to consider an over?

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline:** 56.5 (-135/115)

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 47-114

**Run Differential:** -333

**Pythagorean W/L:** 49-112

**BaseRuns Record:** 54-107

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** -277 (3.94/5.66)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 48.9-112.1

**Record in One-Run Games:** 14-22

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Cameron Maybin, Kennys Vargas, Hector Santiago, Ivan Nova, Alex Wilson, Jonathan Schoop, CJ Cron, Zack Godley, Shao Ching-Chiang, Austin Romine, Jorge Bonifacio, Jhon Nunez, Eric Haase, Dario Agrazal, Rony Garcia

**Losses:** Drew VerHagen, Edwin Jackson, Gordon Beckham, Josh Harrison, Matt Moore, Tyson Ross, Blaine Hardy, Daniel Stumpf, John Hicks, Victor Alcantara, Dustin Peterson, Eduardo Jimenez, Zac Reininger, Matt Hall, Marcos Diplan, Ronny Rodriguez

I love the idea of the offseason for the Tigers. With one-year contracts to guys like Jonathan Schoop, CJ Cron, Zack Godley, and Ivan Nova, they are trying to buy prospects. The Tigers are going to be terrible and have one of the lowest season win totals in baseball. But they can pay for four months of an established Major Leaguer to look to trade him in July to get some futures for one of the worst farm systems in baseball.

More bad teams should do this. The Marlins seem to be at the forefront of this approach. After this season, the Tigers are down to one albatross contract (Miggy). They actually
have only one player under control for next season. There are several arbitration-eligible
guys, but Matt Boyd and Cabrera are the only players making over $4M in line for
contracts next season.

The Tigers are on the hook for $6M of Prince Fielder’s contract for the last time.
Between Fielder, Miggy, and Zimmerman, the Tigers owe $61M of their $101.3M
projected payroll. When you are destined to lose over 100 games, you have to get
creative with your spending and buying players to trade for prospects isn’t a bad idea.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .240 (26th)
- **OBP:** .294 (30th)
- **SLG:** .388 (29th)
- **wOBA:** .290 (29th)
- **wRC+:** 77 (30th)
- **BABIP:** .308 (5th)
- **K%:** 26.4% (30th)
- **BB%:** 6.5% (29th)

It would be hyperbole to say that injuries are undefeated, but they are pretty damn close.
Miguel Cabrera gutted it out through 136 games to lead the team in games played and
also plate appearances with 549, but to say he is a shell of his former self is an
understatement. Miggy batted .282 with a .346 OBP. Those numbers are fine. A .398
SLG with 12 home runs is not fine. Cabrera wound up with a .318 wOBA and a 96
wRC+.

Comerica Park is one of the worst parks for offense in all of baseball. The Tigers only hit
64 home runs in 81 home games. They scored 285 runs, which averages out to 3.52 runs
per contest. Here’s the worst part, though. The Tigers only scored 12 more runs on the
road. They were robbed of a game because it didn’t need to be made up, but they scored
3.71 runs per game on the road. Unfortunately, the Comerica Park excuse doesn’t fly
with that kind of futility.

Offensive positives were few and far between. Niko Goodrum looks like a pretty good
Major League player with the ability to play multiple positions and a decent speed/power
combo, but even with the sympathy provided by the park-adjusted wRC+ stat, Goodrum
was still 6% below league average offensively. Nick Castellanos was easily the Tigers
best hitter before he was traded to Chicago. After that, it was prospect Victor Reyes with
a .304/.336/.431 slash, a .325 wOBA, and a 100 wRC+ in 292 plate appearances. He was
3% above league average in the International League before his call-up.

Jonathan Schoop and CJ Cron are serviceable offensive players, but they go from decent
hitters parks in Baltimore/Milwaukee/Minnesota to Comerica Park, where fly balls go to
die. In both cases, these guys are dependent on the long ball. Cron has hit 55 of them over the last two seasons with a .253 batting average and low walk rates. Schoop has walked even less, posted a batting average of .244, and has hit 44 home runs.

Cron hit 25 HR in 499 PA last season and posted a 101 wRC+. Schoop hit 23 in 464 PA and posted a 100 wRC+. The park factor change will likely zap the power from both of them and it could really impact the trade value that the Tigers get down the line.

Maybe Jeimer Candelario comes back healthy. Maybe Christin Stewart can actually translate some pretty good minor league numbers to the Majors.

Maybe not and the Tigers don’t have a single league average offensive player. The best hopes are Reyes and Travis Demeritte, who came over from the Braves and posted a .225/.286/.343 slash with a 65 wRC+ and a 33.9% K% in 186 plate appearances after the Shane Greene deal. At least he’s hit well in the minors.

This looks like the worst offense in the American League and I don’t even think I’d lump the Orioles or Mariners in with the Tigers in that department.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- ERA: 5.26 (28th)
- FIP: 4.84 (22nd)
- xFIP: 4.75 (21st)
- K%: 21.6% (23rd)
- BB%: 8.5% (14th)
- LOB%: 68.8% (27th)

It should come as no surprise with a win total in the 50s that the ceiling is very low for the pitching staff as well. Matt Boyd was the biggest story for the Tigers in 2019 and yet his final numbers don’t show it. Boyd finished with a 4.56 ERA, a 4.32 FIP, and a 3.88 xFIP. Boyd’s massive K% spike stuck throughout most of the season with a 30.2% K%, a 7.8% increase from 2018.

Unfortunately, Boyd allowed 39 homers in his 185.1 innings of work. To say it was a tale of two halves is to undersell it. In the first half, Boyd did allow 19 HR in 107 innings, but he limited the opposition to a .242/.283/.435 slash with a .301 wOBA. In the second half, Boyd allowed a .254/.325/.505 slash with a .344 wOBA against. Boyd allowed 20 HR in nearly 30 fewer innings and his BB% nearly doubled. His K% also fell 4.1%.

What Boyd did early in the season did appear to be unsustainable, but he should be better than his second half for the upcoming season. The weirdest thing about all of it is that Boyd allowed 26 of his 39 home runs at home, even though he worked 12.2 more innings
on the road. I’m not really sure how to handle that information, but it doesn’t paint a pretty picture going into this season in a lot of ways.

Throughout the league are pitchers that I love. Spencer Turnbull is one of them. Turnbull made 30 starts in his first full season as a big leaguer and only won three of them. He was 3-17 with a 4.61 ERA, but a 3.99 FIP and a 4.63 xFIP. He did an excellent job of keeping the ball in the park with a 10.1% HR/FB% to go along with an elite GB% at 48.3% and a solid enough K% at 22.3%. Turnbull is the upside guy in this rotation for me. His Statcast peripherals aren’t stellar with a lot of hard contact from last season, but he’s in the right park to get away with mistakes. The downside is that he’s getting no run support and the Tigers project to be bad defensively again.

Beyond Boyd and Turnbull, there isn’t much here. Michael Fulmer will be out until at least midseason after undergoing Tommy John surgery and who knows how he will look when he gets back. Jordan Zimmermann is playing out the string of a big contract in which he has rewarded the Tigers with 508.2 innings of 5.61 ERA ball with a 4.86 FIP and a 4.90 xFIP. Ivan Nova is a placeholder for a guy like Matt Manning, who will debut this year. The Tigers could very well see debuts from Alex Faedo, Joey Wentz, Tarik Skubal, Beau Burrows, Kyle Funkhouser, Anthony Castro, and Manning all in one season. Who knows, maybe even Casey Mize will make the huge leap for a spot start.

Daniel Norris quietly held the opposition to a .316 wOBA in 53.2 innings in the second half last season. Maybe he’s something of a league average starter, though he did allow 10 HR in that sample size.

The bullpen may not be as terrible this season, but that is a low bar. The Tigers had one of the lowest K% among bullpens and one of the highest BB%. Buck Farmer was good and he returns. Shane Greene was good and he does not. It is a collection of mostly unproven homegrown talent and guys with MLB track records of being inconsistent.

**Positives & Negatives**

I give Ron Gardenhire a hell of a lot of credit for taking this gig. He wanted to manage again and knew what he was getting into. I’m not sure he expected 114 losses, but he’s been tasked with doing what he can while not losing his mind. Props to him for that.

The Tigers project to be poor defensively once again. They won’t be as bad without Nick Castellanos hailing cabs to track down fly balls in right field, but they won’t be great. They were a bottom-five defensive team last season and won’t escape the bottom 10 this season. It would be nice if they could for the sake of the pitching staff, but they won’t.

It can’t be easy to go into a season knowing that you will be a terrible team. I made the mistake of talking myself into the Tigers exceeding expectations last season. I won’t make that mistake again and I can’t imagine they are jazzed up for the start of the year. At least other bad teams around the league have some prospects to inject some life into
the org or something. Not the Tigers, though the pitching prospects are starting to look better.

**Pick: Under 56.5**

To me, this is the worst team in baseball yet again. I know people want to look at the Orioles, but the Tigers are going to be worse than the Orioles in my estimation. Cabrera spent the winter dieting and trying to stay healthier, but the Tigers may not have a single league average hitter on this ballclub and I am not even exaggerating.

The pitching staff will look a lot different late in the year. With any luck, Zimmermann will pitch well enough to get traded. The Tigers have had talks about Boyd with interested parties. Most of Detroit’s top pitching prospects are in camp as non-roster invites, so guys like Manning, Skubal, Faedo, Wentz, and Mize could all see time this year. They have a lot more upside than what we currently see, especially Manning, who is a top-20 prospect in baseball.

The Tigers should look much better in the second half as the youth movement takes shape, but their one-year rental players will be hurt badly by the park factor in Detroit and the carryover Tigers just aren’t very good.

As a rule of thumb, I don’t bet on teams with win totals this low because we’re simply trying to figure out exactly how terrible they are going to be. That being said, this line is juiced to the over at time of publish and I would consider going under if the line moved up to say 59 or 60. This is not a team that can avoid 100 losses in my mind. A lot of guys will be learning on the fly in the back portion of the season.

I give a pick on every team. Some are deemed actionable and some are not. This one is not, but I do think this is the worst team in baseball and under 56.5 is the way I’d look.
Kansas City Royals

Things started bad and never really stopped for the Kansas City Royals in 2019. The team started 9-20 over the first month-plus of action and eventually wound up with 103 losses. It was the first time that Kansas City cracked the century mark in the ‘L’ column in consecutive seasons since 2004-06.

The thing about the Royals is this. When they’ve been really good, they’ve been really good, as evidenced by their back-to-back World Series appearances in 2014 and 2015, including the flag that will fly forever in 2015. They just haven’t been very good all that often.

They’ve also lost 100 games six times since the Y2K scare and have lost 90+ games in six other seasons. It certainly seems like 2020 could be another one of those years. Falling short of 60 wins in back-to-back seasons is really hard to do and the team is clearly in a transitional state.

The Royals are one of two AL squads with a new manager. That is Mike Matheny, who made the trip west on I-70 after being the Cardinals manager from 2012-18. Matheny was previously a special adviser in the Royals player development department. He was essentially a manager-in-waiting with Yost close to retirement a couple times before.

It will be really interesting to see how Matheny does in a role like this. He took over for Tony LaRussa the year after the Cardinals won the 2011 World Series. He inherited a terrific situation and a Cardinals team that hasn’t had a losing record since 2007. That is the only one in this century for St. Louis.

Matheny doesn’t have that anymore. He doesn’t have The Cardinal Way™. He doesn’t have the same kind of pipeline to the Major Leagues. He doesn’t have the same kind of payroll. He doesn’t have a lot of the things that have made the Cardinals such a strong organization with two World Series titles, two NL Pennants, and a whole bunch of division titles and playoff appearances over the last 25 years. In fact, he has the polar opposite here in Kansas City. He has a team that had two flash-in-the-pan seasons and one that resulted in a World Series win.

The Royals aren’t bereft of talent. Trade winds have been blowing the last couple of years about Whit Merrifield, but nothing has ever come of it. The Royals could reap the benefits of Jorge Soler’s career resurgence and also have a very exciting youngster in Adalberto Mondesi to build around. They also have a patchwork pitching staff and a journeymen bullpen with closer Ian Kennedy.

Something to consider with any team is how things might look in July. Even though the Royals have been bought by new owner John Sherman, this is a rebuild. Kennedy is in the final year of his deal. Danny Duffy has two left. Jorge Soler is looking at a big arb-4
payout in 2021. Merrifield’s name always comes up. The Royals could be open for business as the season goes along to stock a farm system in need of high-impact talent.

With that in mind, we’re looking at a bad Royals bunch again this season. Just how bad? That’s the question.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 65.5 (105/-125)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 59-103

Run Differential: -178

Pythagorean W/L: 64-98

BaseRuns Record: 64-98

BaseRuns Run Differential: -173 (4.25/5.32)

3rd Order Win% Record: 59.0-103.0

Record in One-Run Games: 15-25

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Greg Holland, Maikel Franco, Braden Shipley, Matt Reynolds, Chance Adams, Stephen Woods Jr.

**Losses:** Cheslor Cuthbert, Jorge Bonifacio, Jacob Barnes, Trevor Oaks

The biggest transaction for the Royals this winter was the sale of the team from David Glass to John Sherman. Glass passed away shortly after he sold to Sherman and the deal became official on November 26. The second-biggest transaction was the hiring of Mike Matheny that I mentioned above.

Other than that, it was a very quiet offseason for the Royals. Chance Adams really intrigues me because he’ll get opportunities with the Royals and Maikel Franco will have a chance to resurrect his career with regular playing time for a team not going anywhere.

Otherwise, the transaction that didn’t happen and hasn’t happened with Whit Merrifield is what stands out the most.

**Offense**
2019 Ranks:

**BA:** .247 (19th)
**OBP:** .309 (25th)
**SLG:** .401 (27th)
**wOBA:** .302 (27th)
**wRC+:** 84 (27th)
**BABIP:** .301 (11th)
**K%:** 23.1% (14th)
**BB%:** 7.5% (25th)

The Royals aren’t going to go around winning a bunch of offensive accolades or anything like that, but at least this offense has some interesting pieces and parts. The first is Jorge Soler, who defected from Cuba with a lot of hype and a nine-year, $30M deal to play for the Chicago Cubs. Times were tough for Soler. He didn’t care for the minor leagues and everything that came along with it. Eventually, the Cubs gave up on him in the Wade Davis trade. The Royals allowed Soler to rebuild himself and his swing in Triple-A in 2017.

I thought 2018 would be the start of something for Soler and it was to a degree. He was hurt and was limited to 257 plate appearances at the MLB level, but he slashed .265/.354/.466 with a .354 wOBA and a 123 wRC+. In 2019, he had the exact same batting average and the exact same on-base percentage. There was just one difference. His SLG increased 103 points as he hit 48 home runs. He ranked in the 96th percentile in both Exit Velocity and Hard Hit%. He was in the 95th percentile in xwOBA and 97th percentile in xSLG. This was no fluke based on the batted ball data, as Soler was in the top 2% in Barrel%. We’ll see if he can continue it, but he is the run producer in the middle of an intriguing Royals lineup.

Whit Merrifield hit .300 once again and could be in line for a bounce back this season from a stolen base standpoint. Merrifield walked less often and got a little more aggressive at the plate, but lost some of his aggression on the bases as he went from 45 steals down to 20. He was also caught 10 times. It is entirely possible that the 31-year-old’s legs are starting to go a little bit, as he has now played 320 games over the last two seasons and 465 over the last three seasons, so we’ll have to watch for that as the season goes along.

Hunter Dozier wound up being pretty good with his 26 homers and a 124 wRC+. It was the breakout season that the 28-year-old needed to cement himself as a fixture in the lineup after posting a 79 wRC+ in 388 PA in 2018. Dozier made a good bit of hard contact and increased his walk rate more than 3% year over year. If Adalberto Mondesi can make some similar strides and, most importantly, stay healthy, that would go a long way for the Royals.
Mondesi stole 43 bases, despite only playing 102 games. It would help a lot if he could get on base more often, as he doesn’t walk much and is very dependent on carrying a high BABIP. When he does get on base, though, he has 89 steals in 249 games and is actually an excellent defensive shortstop.

Ah, and let me talk more about Salvador Perez. There seems to be a really big disconnect between his perceived value and his actual value. In 2018, he ranked 111th out of 118 in framing runs above average per Baseball Prospectus. He was 103rd out of 111 catchers in 2017. He’ll throw some guys out here and there, but he is a terrible receiver and a bad offensive player. I’m not sure how it got to the point that people viewed him as some sort of elite, or even good, player. He isn’t. He won’t really help the Royals or the pitching staff.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 5.20 (27th)
- **FIP:** 4.90 (26th)
- **xFIP:** 4.98 (28th)
- **K%:** 19.5% (30th)
- **BB%:** 9.2% (26th)
- **LOB%:** 70.2% (24th)

The Royals pitching staff was terrible last season. They were actually relatively healthy, too. That is a major concern. If a pitching staff is bad and you can point to injuries, you can make a compelling case for improvement the next season. The Royals only used 10 different starting pitchers and seven pitchers made 13 or more starts.

Jake Junis made 31 starts to lead the group, but he wound up with a 5.24 ERA, a 4.82 FIP, and a 4.63 xFIP. For the second straight season, the long ball crushed him, as he followed a 16.2% HR/FB% in 2018 with a 16.7% HR/FB% in 2019. Junis has allowed 63 homers over the last two seasons. He added to the long ball trouble with 15 more walks in 1.2 fewer innings. A 20-point increase in BABIP and a 4.5% decrease in LOB% all added up to an ERA over 5.

I do think there’s a case to be made for Junis to be better this season. If he can cut the walk rate back and scale the home runs back a little bit, a repeat of his 4.37 ERA in 2018 isn’t that farfetched. Granted, that’s still not very good, but at least it takes him from below average to roughly league average.

That seems to be the range for Brad Keller, who posted a 4.19/4.35/4.94 pitcher slash a year after hanging a 3.08/3.55/4.26. What changed for him? His LOB% dropped and his walk rate went up. He was also a full-time starter in the Majors for the first time and his HR/FB% went up more than 4%. Keller, an extreme ground ball guy with a 52% career
GB%, can’t have that type of increase in homers. His walk rate is too high and too many grounders go for hits.

It is worth noting that before Keller got shut down for September, he went from a 15.9% K% in the first half to a 20.1% K% in the second half and his walk rate went down from 11.3% to 6.7%. He really did finish on a high note with a .278 wOBA against in his final 54.2 innings. That is something to build on.

I don’t think there is much to build on with Danny Duffy, who has turned in back-to-back poor seasons after a really good 2017. He’s got a lot of injuries on that left arm. Fellow southpaw Mike Montgomery is a lot more interesting, as he has held opposing batters to a .323 wOBA as a starter over 1,527 plate appearances. His numbers aren’t as good starting as relieving, but the bar is low for the Royals, so he should be serviceable and could very well be league average.

Jorge Lopez grades really poorly in a lot of the Statcast metrics in terms of exit velocity, Hard Hit%, xwOBA, xBA, and xSLG. He’s more likely to be replaced than be productive. The Royals could do that with Chance Adams or Glenn Sparkman or turn it over to somebody like Scott Blewett or Foster Griffin. Maybe Brady Singer gets a chance. It’s not like anybody is blocking these guys.

I was as surprised as anybody to see that Ian Kennedy could be a good closer. Kennedy is also a pending free agent, so his time in Kansas City is limited. He had a strong year with a 3.41 ERA, a 2.99 FIP, and a 3.77 xFIP. Scott Barlow had a 3.41 FIP and Kevin McCarthy and Tim Hill rode high ground ball rates to decent success. As bad as the Royals pitching staff was, the bullpen was 17th in FIP. The rotation did a lot of the heavy lifting to post bad numbers as a team.

Bullpens are important for bad teams when it comes to season win total picks because they will need to hold as many leads as possible to get wins. Bullpens on bad teams that can’t hold leads make a bad situation much, much worse. The Royals were 47-9 with a lead going into the seventh inning. That .839 win percentage was just below the league average at .874.

**Positives & Negatives**

Kennedy is really the only surefire trade piece for the Royals. Merrifield is locked in at a cheap contract and the Royals have one more arbitration year next season with Soler. Alex Gordon could be a trade piece, but his value is quite low. This is likely the Royals team we will see most of the season, depending on the prospects that get a call. At least there is that, since so many of these bad teams will experience firesales in July.

The Tigers are a doormat and are much worse than the Royals. The White Sox, Twins, and Indians are all much better than the Royals. Those 57 head-to-head meetings will be tricky and the Royals are well below most of the rest of the American League as well.
The Matheny hire doesn’t really excite me. Matheny walked into an excellent situation with the Cardinals after Tony LaRussa moved on. This is a rebuild. This is an altogether different beast. Managers don’t have a real dramatic impact on the number of wins and losses, but I have no idea how Matheny will handle a situation like this.

**Pick: Under 65.5**

I like the offense a little bit, but not nearly enough to consider the Royals a team capable of avoiding 100 losses. The starting rotation is abysmal and the best reliever in the bullpen will be traded if he stays healthy. I don’t know if I would say that the AL Central is better, as the Indians seem to be poised for a step back, but the White Sox are going to be better. Nevertheless, the Royals are the fourth-best team here and the division games will be a struggle again.

I’m not enamored with the Matheny hire at all. He doesn’t have to same infrastructure and talent here. I think that this will be a challenging year for him and many Cardinals fans and scribes weren’t impressed with his work for a much better team.

The Royals are thin on depth all over the place. Any injury to Merrifield, Soler, or another loss of Mondesi will hurt the offense a lot and there are some guys that had one-year spikes that need to prove to me that they can repeat what they did. This just isn’t a very good team and the rebuild will be painstakingly slow with a pretty weak minor league system and virtually no help on the horizon for 2020.
Minnesota Twins

The historic pace that the Minnesota Twins offense carried over the first couple months of the season eventually regressed, but not enough to keep the team from winning its first AL Central Division title since 2010. When the Twins got to the playoffs and faced the Yankees, the outcome was inevitable, simply because the Twins just can’t seem to beat New York in the postseason, but it was a wildly successful year.

The Twins fell one win shy of setting a new franchise record for regular season wins with 101. They spent 182 days in first place and were never more than one game behind after April 18. The Twins were 38-18 through May and had a 10-game lead by Memorial Day. Eventually, that lead was cut to zero, as the Indians tied the Twins for the division lead on August 9 and August 11, but Minnesota ultimately prevailed by a full eight games over their closest competitor.

As a team, the Twins got their slugging percentage up over .500 by April 20. It took until June 26 for Minnesota’s slugging percentage to fall below .500. The lineup even flirted with .500 into September. Including the Steroid Era, the Twins wound up with the second-highest SLG ever as a team. The #1 spot? The 2019 Houston Astros. The Twins did finish the year #1 in something, though. They hit one more home run than the Yankees and hold the all-time record with 307.

The revamped front office and player development staffs have made a tremendous impact. Hiring local with former Indians assistant GM Derek Falvey was a brilliant idea, as was bringing in cerebral ex-Tampa Bay Ray Rocco Baldelli to manage. The Twins went unconventional with pitching coach Wes Johnson, who had no MLB experience, but was a highly-regarded college pitching coach at Arkansas, Mississippi State, Dallas Baptist, and Central Arkansas. The Twins hired PITCHf/x guru Josh Kalk. Teams that go heavy in the analytics have been handsomely rewarded and the results for teams like the Brewers and Twins speak for themselves.

The Twins are set up really well. Baldelli was the AL Manager of the Year. Johnson oversaw a pitching staff that made enormous strides from 2018 to 2019. The offense remains in tact and the punching bags of the division are still there, though the White Sox appear better this time around. Minnesota was 28-10 against the Tigers and Royals.

All of that being said, the Twins are not a lock to keep up last season’s pace. A 23-win improvement year over year is very hard to sustain. A 55-26 road record is tough to repeat. A 23-12 record in one-run games is as well. The baseball is likely to be very different this season after all of the press it received last season. Can the Twins be as successful without the ability to play Home Run Derby?

Will the pitching staff’s improvements carry over to the next season? As you’ll see, the differences were staggering. Regression from one or both of those areas could make it really tough, even with the margin for error that comes with 38 games against the Tigers and Royals. When we’re talking about high win totals, you have to consider the ceiling
and the floor. The floor remains relatively high, but don’t be surprised if the ceiling is lower than it was last season.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 92.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 101-61

Run Differential: +185

Pythagorean W/L: 97-65

BaseRuns Record: 98-64

BaseRuns Run Differential: +184 (5.75/4.61)

3rd Order Win% Record: 96.7-65.3

Record in One-Run Games: 23-12

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Cory Gearrin, Jhoulys Chacin, Josh Donaldson, Rich Hill, Homer Bailey, Tyler Clippard, Cody Asche, Jack Reinheimer, Wilfredo Tovar, Danny Coulombe, Caleb Thielbar, Alex Avila, Blaine Hardy, Juan Graterol, Ryan Garton, Jair Camargo, Kenta Maeda, Hunter McMahon, Matt Wisler

**Losses:** CJ Cron, Trevor Hildenberger, Kohl Stewart, Sam Dyson, Jonathan Schoop, Kyle Gibson, Ian Miller, Ronald Torreyes, Ryan LaMarre, Martin Perez, Brusdar Graterol, Luke Raley, Ryne Harper, Stephen Gonsalves, Sergio Romo

Another strong offseason for the Twins, which is why opinions are so low on the Indians and so high on the Twins. The reigning AL Central champs got better with the pickups of Josh Donaldson and the depth at the back of the rotation with Rich Hill, who won’t be ready until midseason, and Homer Bailey. Tyler Clippard is also an excellent signing for the bullpen because he had great splits against both sides last season and won’t be affected by the three-batter rule.

The early February acquisition of Kenta Maeda was huge for a rotation that does have some question marks. The cost of doing business was a high-upside arm in Brusdar Graterol, but he would have had less of an impact on the 2020 season than Maeda.
None of the losses are overly significant. It is a shame that former first-round pick Kohl Stewart didn’t work out, but he’ll get a better chance in Baltimore with a clean slate. CJ Cron was a one-trick pony with power and not much else and Schoop was essentially the same way. The Twins are better now than they were last season and that should be the goal of every winter.

Furthermore, another offseason of study and improvement with the current roster, the front office and analytics department additions, and a second year for Rocco Baldelli. It’s hard not to be impressed.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA**: .270 (2nd)
- **OBP**: .338 (6th)
- **SLG**: .494 (2nd)
- **wOBA**: .347 (2nd)
- **wRC+**: 116 (3rd)
- **BABIP**: .300 (13th)
- **K%**: 20.9% (4th)
- **BB%**: 8.2% (20th)

The Twins weren’t just about power. It was a huge part of the equation with the all-time leading total of 307 home runs, but the Twins also hit the ball extremely hard and avoided strikeouts. That is critically important. Producing a lot of high-velocity contact and barreled balls is a great attribute, but having the opportunity to do that more often with a contact-focused lineup adds that much more to the offensive outlook.

Minnesota was first in baseball in xwOBA, which is Expected Weighted On-Base Average, a statistic produced by looking at the batted ball types, exit velocities, and launch angles, among other things. The better the contact quality, the better the expected outcome. The Twins finished at .347 in xwOBA, a full seven points better than the Astros, who actually led the league in SLG and wOBA.

Those numbers are unlikely to go down this season. Nelson Cruz led all of baseball in average exit velocity and Barrel% among qualified hitters. Josh Donaldson was sixth in Barrel% and fourth in average EV. If we lower the requirement to 250 PA, Miguel Sano was second, pushing Cruz to third. Mitch Garver was 39th. CJ Cron graded well in the exit velo and Barrel metrics, but he didn’t walk much and was a low-average, low-OBP guy to go along with the high SLG. As a team, the Twins were third in average exit velocity with the Yankees and Red Sox ahead of them.

The Max Kepler breakout that many were waiting for came, as he hit 36 homers and led the Twins with 4.4 fWAR. He did carry a rather low .244 BABIP with that extra power
bump, but still managed a .336 OBP with a 10.1% walk rate. Kepler’s never been one to run a high BABIP, but there is room for improvement to a degree this season.

Nelson Cruz doesn’t age. The big man slashed .311/.392/.639 with a .417 wOBA and a 163 wRC+. He’s a DH and even with the positional adjustment, he managed 4.3 fWAR. Jorge Polanco gave the Twins a third four-win player with decent defense and a .295/.356/.485 slash line. Mitch Garver could be the gem of them all with 31 homers in just 359 PA and an 11.4% BB%. He posted a .404 wOBA and a 155 wRC+.

There’s Miguel Sano, who hit 34 homers and got back on track with his 439 PA. Byron Buxton remains an elite center fielder and manages to carry just enough offensive value. Eddie Rosario hit 30 homers, but suffered from a big BABIP drop to bring his OBP down to .300. He could bounce back. Now the Twins also add Josh Donaldson, who posted a .377 wOBA and a 132 wRC+ last season.

I’ve talked about this before, but teams that are average or better at every position have a huge leg up on everybody else because it is extremely rare. There are below average players all over baseball and most teams have at least a couple of them in the starting lineup. The Twins essentially have zero. They make a ton of hard contact, hit for power, and make a lot of contact in general. This offense is poised for big things again, even if the baseball is deader this season.

Smart teams around the league are piling up on dudes that hit the ball really hard. Strikeouts are not the major sticking point they used to be because those guys walk and also make violent contact when they do hit the ball. You know what’s scary about the Twins? They have a bunch of dudes that make violent contact and don’t strike out a lot.

To me, this is about as complete of an offense as you can get and this group is right there with the Astros and Yankees as far as AL teams go.

Pitching

2019 Ranks:

ER: 4.18 (9th)
FIP: 4.03 (4th)
xFIP: 4.27 (5th)
K%: 23.4% (12th)
BB%: 7.2% (2nd)
LOB%: 71.8% (18th)

Remember what I said in the intro. The pitching improvements were dramatic from 2018 to 2019. The Twins went from 22nd in ERA at 4.50 to ninth at 4.18. They went from 22nd in FIP at 4.39 to fourth at 4.03. They went from 23rd in xFIP at 4.33 to fifth at 4.27, which is a sign of the offensive environment that we had last season. Their K% jumped
1.5% and their BB% dropped 1.9%. Those are all huge changes. They may very well stick around with Wes Johnson’s influence and a numbers-driven front office.

They also may not. This unit defines the ceiling for the Twins. The offense is going to be good and among the best in baseball. If this pitching staff can sustain last season’s gains and possibly even improve upon them, the Twins are going to the playoffs again. If they avoid the Yankees in the first round, they might even win a series.

Jose Berrios did not end the season on a high note. After a brilliant first half with a 3.00 ERA and a .285 wOBA against, Berrios’s second half saw a 30-point jump in batting average, a 35-point jump in OBP, and a 40-point jump in SLG. Berrios’s K% did go up from 21.6% to 25.2%, but his BB% rate also went up from 4.8% to 7.8%. Berrios’s command drop was the biggest development, as his BABIP went from .276 to .333 and his HR/FB% went up from 11.5% to 12.6%. Berrios’s IFFB% (pop up rate) went from 16.9% in the first half to 6.9% in the second half.

Berrios saw a velocity drop in July and August that did come back in September and his one October start, so maybe it was a mechanical problem. Maybe it was a dead arm period. But we found that Berrios with diminished velocity wasn’t the same guy. I’ll be watching him very, very closely early in the season.

Are we sure that Jake Odorizzi has completely turned a corner? Odorizzi went from a 4.49 ERA, 4.20 FIP, and 4.87 xFIP in 164.1 innings for the Twins in 2018 to a 3.51 ERA, a 3.36 FIP, and a 4.33 xFIP in 159 innings in 2019. His K% went up from 22.8% to 27.1%, a theme among Twins pitchers with more focus on getting punchouts across the organization, and his BB% dropped from 9.9% to 8.1%. For the second straight season, Odorizzi kept his HR/FB% low, but he is also an extreme fly ball guy.

Odorizzi’s SwStr% went from 10.2% to 12.7%, so the strikeout increase seems pretty legit, but he also got away with a good amount of hard contact, as he rated about average in Exit Velocity and Hard Hit%. The strikeouts were a lifeline for Odorizzi and maybe the biggest key for the Twins rotation this season. If Odorizzi isn’t above average, they will need more from Berrios and Kenta Maeda.

In order to compensate for the questions with Berrios and Odorizzi, the Twins filled a need and got Maeda. There are two very different sides to the coin with Maeda, who owns a career 3.87 ERA with a 3.71 FIP and a 3.76 xFIP across 589 innings with the Dodgers. The first is that Maeda goes from one smart organization to another and I can’t help but think being unshackled in terms of innings restrictions and competition is a positive for him. The Twins are a good fit for Maeda overall, especially with a decent defensive roster. It isn’t on the level of the Dodgers, but it’s still more than fine.

The second is that Maeda will no longer be protected by Chavez Ravine. In 303.1 home innings, Maeda allowed a .217/.274/.361 slash with a .273 wOBA. He had a 3.23 ERA with a 3.43 FIP and a 3.76 xFIP across 589 innings with the Dodgers. The first is that Maeda goes from one smart organization to another and I can’t help but think being unshackled in terms of innings restrictions and competition is a positive for him. The Twins are a good fit for Maeda overall, especially with a decent defensive roster. It isn’t on the level of the Dodgers, but it’s still more than fine.
went from very good at home to a little bit above average on the road and will now face an extra hitter with the DH.

It is worth noting that 25 of the 40 home runs that Maeda allowed on the road came in his first two seasons, so he did make some strides in those road efforts, despite the 5.12 ERA he had last season. A 65.5% LOB% was a big reason for that. I do think Maeda is something of a higher-variance addition, but I think his absolute floor is league average, which is better than most of the options for the Twins.

Homer Bailey goes from Oakland Coliseum to Target Field, so that worries me. He had a solid 4.11 FIP last season, but I’m not buying a lot of that stock, considering he worked 160 innings for the first time since 2013. Guys like Randy Dobnak and Devin Smeltzer are in line for a lot of starter innings with Michael Pineda suspended and Rich Hill recovering from elbow surgery. A lot hinges on Berrios, Maeda, and Odorizzi this season.

The Twins bullpen was way better than expected last season, as the team was fourth in SIERA, first in FIP, and a rather unlucky 10th in ERA. I am looking for some regression here. Closer Taylor Rogers was unbelievable with a 2.61/2.85/2.84 pitcher slash and a 32.4% K% to go along with an excellent 4% walk rate. Rogers, though, only had a 10.9% SwStr%. He had an 11.3% SwStr% in 2018 and had a 28.9% K%. Not that I’m expecting a big drop, but he likely won’t perform as well in the K% department and that means a decrease in his 86.2% LOB%.

Trevor May had a 2.94 ERA with a 3.73 FIP and a 4.15 xFIP. He became more of an extreme fly ball guy, but cut his home runs, worked around walks, and his BABIP was 65 points lower in 2019 compared to 2018. The light came on for Tyler Duffey, who almost doubled his K% to 34.5% and ran a 15.4% SwStr%.

On one hand, way too many players improved for this to be a coincidence and it is entirely possible that the Twins have found a magic code, especially with the overall increase in velocity. On the other hand, it is tough to expect all of these guys to be that good again.

**Positives & Negatives**

Rocco Baldelli is already one of my favorite managers in baseball. I saw him make some very proactive decisions in games against the Indians and he seems to be a perfect blend of analytics and a player’s mentality, as he isn’t that far removed from being an outfielder in the Rays organization. That being said, I would like to see even more aggression. The Twins were fourth in most plate appearances against the third time through the order versus a starter. The Mets, Nationals, and Indians were first, second, and third and boast elite rotations. The Twins do not have an elite rotation. Not surprisingly, opposing batters hit .296/.347/.478 against the Twins in those plate appearances. That .825 OPS was in the middle of the pack, but it felt like an unnecessary risk. On the plus side, Berrios was the most frequent 3TTO guy and he was pretty decent overall. Kyle Gibson and Martin Perez
were both awful and they are gone. Odorizzi was really bad at it, but he only had 130 of those plate appearances.

The Twins are doing a lot of things right. They’ve put forth a big investment in analytics and have made some outside-the-box hires, like Baldelli and pitching coach Wes Johnson. The proof is in the pudding. They won 101 games last season and were the most dominant team in baseball for a time. Every area of the team improved dramatically. Now we wonder how much improvement is left and if that new bar can be kept as high as it was last season.

**Pick: Over 92.5**

This line looks too low to me. The Twins are better than they were last season with the additions of Donaldson and Maeda. These smart teams get better or sustain their performances as the analytics take hold because they put the right people in position to translate that information to the players.

The Twins are innovating. They are sharp. They are smart. And they are spending. They added Maeda and his salary. They added Donaldson and a big free agent deal. They are making moves. They aren’t playing the role of a smallish-market team. They are proactively trying to improve the roster while they have the chance, with no regard for what happens with the upcoming CBA mess. Fortune really does favor the bold. And the Twins are bold right now.

This could very well be the best offense in baseball. I realize that the Twins padded their numbers against the Tigers, Royals, White Sox, and Orioles, but they’ll have that chance again. The contact quality 1 through 9 in the lineup is virtually unmatched. The Twins are also among the teams best equipped to deal with a different ball if there are changes.

The Twins won 101 games last season, got better, and their alternate standings metrics were still comfortably over this win total line. The White Sox are better, but not 13 games better. The Indians are probably not winning 93 games. The Tigers and Royals are still doormats. With 76 division games last season, the Twins won 50 games. I find it hard to believe that they can’t get at least halfway to this win total with those division games. That leaves another 86 games to get enough wins to go over.

This one is on my shortlist as a bet as the spring goes along. I want to see how healthy the Twins rotation is going through the ramp up for the season because that group is thin on depth and a little bit low on ceiling. For now, I do like the over as a pick and it will likely be a bet before the teams head out for Game 1 of 162.
AL West Futures

Even if you don’t want to bet into the division futures market, you can still use the odds to your advantage. You can get a look at how things are expected to shake out and get a feel for what the oddsmakers and the market believe about these teams.

In looking at the American League West Division, two things really stand out. The first is that the Houston Astros have their lowest price in a few years to win the division. The second is that the gap between the Oakland Athletics and the Los Angeles Angels does imply that the A’s are getting the respect that they very much deserve after back-to-back 97-win seasons.

Remember that the offseason can shape and mold a lot of narratives about these teams. The Astros lost Gerrit Cole, went under the Commissioner’s microscope for stealing signs, and have become Public Enemy #1 for anybody outside of Houston. And that includes MLB players from around the league.

The A’s did next to nothing of consequence in free agency or the trade market. In fact, it was the other California team that made the big splash by signing Anthony Rendon. And, yet, the A’s still have a much shorter price than the Angels do.

We also have one team sort of on the fringes and one team completely out of it, as the Texas Rangers will hope to rely on Lance Lynn, Mike Minor, and newbies Corey Kluber, Kyle Gibson, and Jordan Lyles to make a push. The Seattle Mariners will not be making any push at all.

Here are the odds to win the AL West per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

- Houston Astros -240
- Oakland Athletics +450
- Los Angeles Angels +750
- Texas Rangers +1850
- Seattle Mariners +15000

This is such a strange season for the Astros. They have already embraced the “us against the world” mentality and it seems to get stronger with each passing day. The Astros will get everybody’s best shot. In theory, they already should have been, given that they have won the AL Pennant two of the last three seasons, including a World Series win. All of their games are just going to take on a different feel.

I mentioned in the intro that it is nice to see the A’s get some respect, but they are also a team with 194 wins over the last two years still sitting at +450. If you really, truly believe that the Astros are going to regress a little bit, wouldn’t this be a little bit shorter? This line only implies about an 18.2% chance that the A’s win the West. Now, some might say that is too high, especially with the Astros only at about 70.6%.
If Jesus Luzardo and AJ Puk make a leap and guys like Sean Manaea and Frankie Montas stay healthy, the A’s have the chance to match up and maybe even surpass the Astros on the pitching side. Those are a lot of “ifs”. The Astros are still going to have the best offense in this division bar none.

The Angels are something of a wild card with Rendon in the mix and that Mike Trout guy, but the pitching just isn’t up to par with the Angels. They won’t contend for the AL West crown and neither will the Rangers, who have neither the offense nor the bullpen.

The way I see it, you have three choices. Take the Astros at the minus price. Take the A’s at the plus price with a lot of pitching questions. Stay away altogether. To me, the third option is the best, but if pressed into taking something, it would be the Astros to repeat as champs. That offense is simply too good.
Houston Astros

The Houston Astros won the AL West and won another AL Pennant. They also won a Charmin-soft punishment from Rob Manfred and Major League Baseball. By now you know the story. The Astros enlisted the help of John T. Garbagecan to let hitters know which pitches were coming by stealing signs.

This stunning revelation came shortly after the season when former Astros pitcher Mike Fiers stated on the record that the Astros were using video technology to steal signs and then relayed them to the batter by banging on a garbage can. Astros personnel did not really dispute the allegations and Major League Baseball followed up with some weak disciplinary action. Rob Arthur found a ton of damning evidence and posted it on Baseball Prospectus($). Basically, Houston’s offense got way better, particularly in key situations, after the sign stealing began. For a free look, Jake Mailhot wrote about it for FanGraphs.

For the cliff notes version, Houston’s chase rate went down and Zone-Contact rate (Z-Contact%) went way up. Contact made with pitches outside of the hitting zone leads to much weaker contact and less favorable results. Obviously the inverse is true, if you are swinging at and making contact with more pitches in the hitting zone.

Astros fan Tony Adams even started a website to display all of his findings from the 2017 season. From the fallout, manager AJ Hinch was fired. The Astros replaced him with Dusty Baker just before the end of January. GM Jeff Luhnow was also fired.

As far as the impact on the field, well, the Astros can’t do that anymore, at least until they find another way to do it. It happens in baseball. Using technology to do it is the illegal part. Hand signals from baserunners and whatnot have always been part of the game. Using 21st century technology like ballpark cameras is verboten. Banging a stick like a caveman seems creative, anyway.

In any event, the Astros could not be punished from a player personnel standpoint, but the team did get slapped with some heavy penalties, including suspensions, fines, and forfeiture of draft picks. The forfeiture of draft picks is somewhat significant because the Astros could very well be heading towards something of a rebuild. At a minimum, let’s call it a retooling. Zack Greinke and Justin Verlander are signed through 2021. Jose Altuve went up to $29.2M this year for a contract that runs through 2024. Alex Bregman is also signed through 2024, but his cost is $30.5M annually in the last two seasons. George Springer, Michael Brantley, and Yuli Gurriel are free agents at season’s end. Carlos Correa has one arbitration year left.

The Astros have a very healthy minor league system, but the core of the team is getting more expensive or reaching free agency. That won’t have a dramatic impact on 2020 in all likelihood, but it is something to watch for on the horizon.
It is amazing to me that the 2020 version of the Astros literally lost just 50 of their final 155 games. Imagine going 105-50 over 155 games. That’s nuts. The Astros did it. That’s a .677 clip. Yes, Houston actually started the season 2-5. Actually, the Astros had 12.7% of their losses for the season during a seven-game losing streak in June. They also had a five-game losing streak in August. Between two losing streaks and the first week of the season, the Astros had 17 of their 55 losses.

Embrowed in controversy, and fresh off of a World Series loss, the “us against the world” mentality is strong here with a team expected to have another excellent season, even with the loss of one of its two aces.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 94.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 107-55

**Run Differential:** +280

**Pythagorean W/L:** 107-55

**BaseRuns Record:** 109-53

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** +300 (5.90/4.05)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 116.5-45.5

**Record in One-Run Games:** 24-19

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Jared Hughes, Austin Pruitt, Blake Taylor, Kenedy Corona

**Losses:** Garbage Can, CODEBREAKER, Gerrit Cole, Aaron Sanchez, Collin McHugh, Hector Rondon, Robinson Chirinos, Wade Miley, Will Harris, Peyton Battenfield, Cal Stevenson, Jake Marisnick

The Astros are worse than last season, especially on the pitching side. Not listed here is Lance McCullers Jr., who does come back from Tommy John and the subsequent recovery. He is basically like a free agent signing in that regard, but the loss of Gerrit Cole is huge. Wade Miley was also pretty valuable for the Astros. Will Harris, Collin McHugh, and Hector Rondon are quality arms.

The Astros appear poised to replace those guys internally, with the exception of Austin
Pruitt, who came over from the Rays in a January trade. Francis Martes is essentially a loss for this season after popping a second positive PED test.

If we’re being honest, though, this team didn’t need much and this organization is loaded with talent. They’re worse on paper and may be a few wins worse, but they’re still among the league’s elites.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .274 (1st)
- **OBP:** .352 (1st)
- **SLG:** .495 (1st)
- **wOBA:** .355 (1st)
- **wRC+:** 125 (1st)
- **BABIP:** .296 (16th)
- **K%:** 18.2% (1st)
- **BB%:** 10.1% (1st)

Seems good, right? First in BA, OBP, SLG, wOBA, wRC+, K%, and BB%. It’s almost like they knew what was coming!

All kidding aside, the second saddest part about all of this is that a team this talented felt the need to cheat. The saddest part is that this whole unfair advantage cost other players around the league money and in some cases jobs.

The Astros offense will be great again. You don’t lead in all of those categories and suddenly become a bad team, particularly with just about the same lineup on offense. The bench pieces are a little bit different, but just about the entire starting lineup returns in tact from last year’s second half.

The Astros will have a full season of Yordan Alvarez, whose only position should really be in the batter’s box. Alvarez had 369 plate appearances and posted a team-leading .432 wOBA and 178 wRC+. He is a legitimate MVP candidate.

He wasn’t the only one with elite numbers and plus power. Alex Bregman had a .418 wOBA and a 168 wRC+ to go along with his career-best 41 dingers. Jose Altuve had a .374 wOBA and a 138 wRC+. George Springer missed 40 games, but finished second by a large margin in fWAR with a .400 wOBA, a 156 wRC+, and plus defensive metrics.

Michael Brantley stayed healthy and had a .367 wOBA with a 133 wRC+ and a ton of extra-base hits. Yuli Gurriel, Carlos Correa, Kyle Tucker, Aledmys Diaz, and Myles Straw all posted above average wRC+ marks in their respective plate appearances.
This offense is a well-oiled machine. Martin Maldonado didn’t hit quite as well as Robinson Chirinos, but the Astros certainly seem comfortable with him behind the plate and standing next to it.

What makes Houston so dangerous? A lot of things. Seven holdovers from last season posted walk rates of 10% or higher. The Astros were among the league leaders in average exit velocity and barreled balls. They also struck out the least of any team. In today’s offensive environment, with more strikeouts than ever before, teams that consistently make contact have a leg up on everybody else. If you add in a high level of contact quality, that offense is nearly unstoppable. The Astros were virtually unstoppable last season.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this team is that their BaseRuns run differential suggests that the offense should have been even better than it was. Houston was first in all of those above categories overall, but 10th in batting average with RISP, ninth in OBP, fourth in SLG, and fifth in wOBA. With the second-most plate appearances with a runner in scoring position in baseball, the Astros, amazingly, left some runs out there. Their .287 BABIP with RISP was 24th in baseball.

They’re going to add some more baserunners via beanballs this season. For better or worse, pitchers are going to be coming inside a lot on the Astros. In some respects, it could play to their power if those pitches don’t get in enough or leak back out over the plate.

All I can do is handicap what I know and I know that this offense is loaded with exceptional hitters and all the characteristics of a top-five offense.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- ERA: 3.66 (2nd)
- FIP: 3.98 (3rd)
- xFIP: 3.80 (1st)
- K%: 27.9% (1st)
- BB%: 7.5% (4th)
- LOB%: 76.8% (1st)

Will the Astros have to outscore teams to win games this season? It doesn’t seem like it will be a problem if that is the case, but it certainly looks like a lot of these numbers could take a tumble. It isn’t just the loss of Gerrit Cole, though replacing 212.1 innings of 2.50/2.64/2.48 ball with the league’s highest K% among starting pitchers is not easy.

Somehow, Justin Verlander won the Cy Young over Cole. He was terrific with a 2.58 ERA, a 3.27 FIP, and a 3.18 xFIP, but he rode an 88.4% LOB% to the award and managed to be fortunate enough to allow 28 of his 36 home runs with nobody on base. I
guess Verlander won the award because he allowed a .229 wOBA in the second half with a 147/15 K/BB ratio over his last 96.1 innings of work. He also only allowed 10 homers in that span compared to 26 in the first 126.2 innings of work.

Verlander’s 88.4% LOB% was the second-highest in MLB history dating back to 1960. That distinction goes to John Candelaria in 1977. Blake Snell has the third-highest for his 2018 season when he posted a 1.89 ERA with a 2.95 FIP and a 3.16 xFIP. Snell did contend with some injuries and other bad luck last season, but his ERA jumped to 4.29 with a 3.32 FIP and a 3.31 xFIP. Verlander has now had back-to-back career years in his age 35 and 36 seasons. He ran a career-low .218 BABIP against last season. He’ll be great, but maybe fall short of elite.

What I try to do with my individual player focuses in these win total write-ups is see if there are a lot of players in line for positive or negative regression. If the list is imbalanced to one side or the other, it can have an impact in my view for the team’s future. In the case of Verlander, he’s still going to be very, very good, but probably not as good and that could hurt more without somebody like Cole as the 1a to his 1b.

Zack Greinke was solid with a 3.02/3.28/3.72 pitcher slash in his 62.2 innings for the Astros in the regular season. His GB% spiked from 41.8% to 52.4% and his K rate dropped a bit. There was slightly more dependence on sliders and changeups for Greinke with the Astros. I’m a bit curious how a full season goes here. I think Greinke will still be very good, but I think those expecting an ace could be more likely to get a #2 or really good #3.

The rest of the rotation is littered with bigger questions. McCullers Jr. was solid across 44 starts and three relief appearances from 2017-18, but missed all of 2019 recovering from Tommy John surgery. McCullers had some walk troubles before the procedure and those could be a sticking point early in the year. Jose Urquidy finished with a solid 3.95 ERA, 3.68 FIP, and 4.30 xFIP in his 41 innings, but his 140 innings last season were the most of any in his career and he missed all of 2017. How will every fifth day treat him? How will it treat Brad Peacock, who missed the second half last season and had a 4.24 ERA with a 4.32 FIP and a 4.56 xFIP in his 80.2 innings as a starter. Peacock is already dealing with nerve damage in his neck, so his timeline for the season is in question.

Forrest Whitley, Houston’s top pitching prospect, struggled through 59.2 innings in his return from injury and also missed most of 2018. Rogelio Armenteros and Cionel Perez appeared at the MLB level. Cristian Javier pitched well in the minors, but he is a raw 23. Francis Martes is no longer an option after popping a positive PED test in consecutive seasons. He is suspended for the full year. I think the Astros have some mild depth concerns right now.

The Astros were second in bullpen ERA, but also had the second-largest gap between ERA and FIP at 0.50 runs. Their 4.24 FIP ranked 11th because they had some long ball issues. Roberto Osuna and Ryan Pressly were both terrific, but Will Harris signed for big free agent money elsewhere. Collin McHugh is gone and Chris Devenski has really fallen
off the last couple of seasons. The Astros bullpen is still in the upper half of the American League, but I don’t think this group is on par with last season, at least not right now. Josh James needs to make a big leap, but it seems as though he’ll get every chance to be a starter.

It could very well be guys like youngster Bryan Abreu, Framber Valdez, and new addition Austin Pruitt that need to make a leap. The Astros have certainly done well developing arms, so my fears may be a touch overblown here, but I do think that there are at least questions.

**Positives & Negatives**

That “us against the world” mentality could suit the Astros well. They are coming off of a World Series loss, too, so I would expect them to be invested to “prove all the haters wrong” all season. Of course, the Astros will also get just about every other team’s best effort because there are a lot of pissed off players around the league.

I don’t know how all of this will play out. Players around the league are furious with Major League Baseball’s inaction, but punishing the players would have opened Pandora’s box and the league could have lost that battle in arbitration or court in a really drawn-out process. The players may end up policing the game themselves. What that means for the Astros is anybody’s guess. It could mean more run-scoring chances from beanballs or pitches that don’t quite get in enough. It could also mean more injuries from 96 mph projectiles. I don’t know.

Dusty Baker is a really interesting managerial hire. Baker is not an analytics guy. I think the players will like him and his affable personality, but he is a square peg in a round hole for this organization. I wonder how that translates to the field. AJ Hinch did not believe in sac bunts and intentional walks. Baker, who has his roots in the NL, has done a lot of both. That doesn’t jive with the Astros as they are constructed.

You’ll see some college football teams have a figurehead and a PR voice as the head coach and the coordinators do all of the work. I can’t help but wonder if that’s the structure here and if Baker just wants another crack or two at that elusive World Series ring. If he’s willing to take more of a backseat and just be a friend and confidant for the players, I think this could work out really well. If not, lineup construction could be a problem and there could be a lot of –EV decisions.

As if the Astros weren’t good enough, they also ranked fourth in defensive runs saved last season. That defense had a major impact on some of the LOB% numbers for the pitchers last season. I would expect Houston to be very good in that department again and that will allow the pitchers to keep up some of the metrics that might meet negative regression on another team. Furthermore, a deader baseball will help some of the homer-happy hurlers for the ‘Stros.

**Pick: Over 94.5**
I’ll just go ahead and say that I’m staying far away from betting this win total. As far as a pick goes, I’ll defer to the over because this is still a remarkably talented team that is definitely not 13 games worse on paper just because Gerrit Cole and Will Harris are gone. This is still a top-five offense in baseball and a pitching staff that will rank in or around the top 10 in all likelihood. That is the recipe for winning a whole lot of games.

I do think that there are questions. I do think that there are concerns. I do think that the loss of Cole compounded with the uncertainty of guys like McCullers, Urquidy, and James could really set this rotation back. I also think injuries are very much possible as players around the league exact their own form of punishment against the Astros.

The AL West is also better. The A’s are still strong and the Angels added Rendon. The Rangers look better, maybe not from a wins and losses standpoint, but as an overall team. The Mariners are bad, but Houston won 18 of 19 over them last season anyway.

You will not see my shocked face if the Astros win the AL West for a fourth straight time and go into the playoffs as the team that everybody is rooting against. There are just enough unknowns to keep me on the sidelines from betting this one, but the over is the only way I would go.
Los Angeles Angels

In the race for second place in the AL West, the Los Angeles Angels have not fared particularly well. This past season marked the fourth year in a row that the Angels finished with a losing record. It was the first time since 1999 that the Angels lost 90 games. Ironically, the interim manager that finished out the season was Joe Maddon.

Well, Maddon is back in California and he will look to turn around the fortunes of a team that has had losing records in four straight seasons for the first time since the California Angels had seven straight losing seasons from 1971-77. Of course, those Angels teams didn’t have the benefit of having the absolute best player on the planet.

I feel like I harp on this every year, but I should. It is a major embarrassment and a complete and utter failure that Mike Trout has 15 career plate appearances in the postseason. Trout made his debut at 19 in 2011. The Angels have one division title (2014), two second-place finishes (2011 and 2017), and have finished at least 18 games out of first place five times. How the Angels, who generally run a pretty high payroll, have been unable to build more around Trout is simply astonishing.

At least signing Anthony Rendon is a start to rectifying that unforgivable situation.

Last season, the Angels were actually 54-49 on July 24. They went 18-41 the rest of the way. After the two-game sweep of the Dodgers that took the Angels to 54-49, they won consecutive games just four times the rest of the season. In fairness, this was a team that I looked to pick against in my guide last season because of the lack of starting pitching depth. Tyler Skaggs tragically passed away early in the season. Andrew Heaney and Griffin Canning got hurt. In fact, not a single starting pitcher for the Angels made more than 18 starts last season.

The Angels did incorporate the opener quite extensively throughout the year, as 19 different pitchers received at least one start, but they were almost forced into it out of necessity. Quite frankly, none of their starting pitchers had that high of a ceiling anyway. Heaney and Skaggs had similar ceilings to be at the front of the rotation, but they had both experienced all sorts of injuries throughout their careers and it was a tall ask for them to stay healthy for 30 starts and lead the staff.

I’m always a bit leery of teams that can use injuries as a crutch. Not only did the Angels have a bevy of pitching injuries, but Trout missed 18 games. Andrelton Simmons was limited to 103 games. Shohei Ohtani could not pitch at all because of UCL damage and only played in 106 games as a DH. Tommy La Stella’s breakout season was cut short by a broken leg. Teams that point to injuries often fool themselves into thinking that they are better than they are and then don’t act aggressively enough in the offseason. The Angels seem to be bucking that trend, but have they done enough?

With an outsider’s perspective, I’m also a bit skeptical of the Maddon hire. Maddon initially managed on the cutting edge with the Tampa Bay Rays and even with the
Chicago Cubs. Recently, he’s gotten more ornery and seems to have eschewed some of the more advanced analytics and philosophies. I don’t know if he’s the cure-all for an organization that has seemingly been viewed as a laggard in the analytics community.

I guess we’ll see. At least the best player in baseball is a good place to start.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 85.5 (-120/100)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 72-90

Run Differential: -99

Pythagorean W/L: 72-90

BaseRuns Record: 71-91

BaseRuns Run Differential: -103 (4.69/5.33)

3rd Order Win% Record: 73.5-88.5

Record in One-Run Games: 18-22

**Offseason Transactions**

Additions: Ryan Buchter, Jason Castro, Neil Ramirez, Elliot Soto, Julio Teheran, Anthony Rendon, Hoby Milner, Matt Andriese, Kyle Keller, Garrett Williams, Dylan Bundy, Jose Quijada, Mike Mayers, Parker Markel

Losses: Adalberto Mejia, Kevan Smith, Kole Calhoun, Trevor Cahill, Justin Bour, Kaleb Cowart, Luis Garcia, Miguel Del Pozo, Nick Tropeano, Jeremy Beasley, Jose Estrada, Will Wilson, Zack Cozart, Isaac Mattson, Kyle Bradish, Kyle Brnovich, Zach Peek, Luis Madero, Jake Jewell, Kean Wong

Quality over quantity. That’s the story for the Angels. They lost a lot of players, but they brought in the best position player free agent in Anthony Rendon to finally give Mike Trout some help. The Angels also made a sneaky good signing in January to bring in Jason Castro, who was 23rd in average exit velocity among players with at least 250 plate appearances. He also had the seventh-highest Barrel%. That adds some much needed offense to the Angels lineup.
The pitching side remains a question, but Julio Teheran and Dylan Bundy might find a soft landing spot in the AL West and specifically at Angel Stadium, which is much kinder to fly ball guys like Teheran and guys with shoddy command like Bundy.

I’ve been lower than the market on the Angels for several years in a row, but this type of winter gives me some newfound optimism. The volume of movement was lower compared to some teams, but Rendon and Castro are two big upgrades.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

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<th>Metric</th>
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<tr>
<td>BA</td>
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<td>.324 (14th)</td>
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<td>SLG</td>
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Non-pitchers for the Angels accumulated 20.4 fWAR last season. Mike Trout accumulated 8.6 of that and only played 134 games. David Fletcher was a very pleasant surprise with 3.4 fWAR, most of that coming on the defensive side, as he was a league average hitter. Kole Calhoun and Tommy La Stella were the only other players with 2.0 fWAR or more.

The imbalance for the Angels year in and year out is staggering. Andrelton Simmons and Shohei Ohtani missed ample time, however, and that played a role in what happened with the Angels on the offensive side. Ohtani was also relegated to just being a DH because of a torn UCL. Ohtani was actually a productive hitter at .286/.343/.505 with a .352 wOBA and a 123 wRC+, but the positional adjustment of being a DH dragged his fWAR down. He’s expected to pitch a little bit more this season, but not until May or June.

Simmons only played 103 games and his offensive profile took a huge tumble with poor contact quality and a lack of power. Simmons hit 25 HR over 1247 plate appearances from 2017-18, but only hit seven in 424 last season. His SLG sat at .364 and his BABIP fell to .277, more in line with his career averages when he was a light-hitting SS for the Braves. Simmons is a bounce back candidate to a degree offensively and should add more defensive value with a healthier season.

Trout finally has help in the person of Anthony Rendon. Rendon owns a career slash of .290/.369/.490 with a .366 wOBA, but he has outperformed those numbers each of the last three seasons, including a ridiculous .319/.412/.598 slash line with a .413 wOBA last season. His offensive numbers are likely to fall with a league change and a big park factor change, but he’s still going to be a well above average hitter to put with Trout,
Ohtani, and Justin Upton, who was limited to 63 games last season with persistent knee issues.

Rendon adds a lot to this lineup, particularly on the power side. The Angels didn’t strike out much and saw some nice walk rate increases. Rendon will fall in line in both of those departments, but add that power punch that has been missing. He is a perfect fit for this lineup. Of course, he’d have been a perfect fit for any lineup.

Upton is only a year removed from 30 homers and a .257/.344/.463 slash with a .348 wOBA for the Angels. Those are far from Troutian numbers, but they are solid enough to add back into the middle of this lineup if he can stay healthy. Leg injuries to outfielders, especially on teams where he cannot DH, are problematic. It would be nice if the Angels would move on from Albert Pujols for the sake of the lineup, but they aren’t going to do that.

I would say that the Angels will go as far as Mike Trout carries them, but let’s be honest, Trout has been carrying the team forever and they still can’t get anywhere. It is no fault of his own. After his rookie cameo in 2011, Trout has posted wOBAs of .409, .423, .402, .415, .418, .437, .447, and .436. He has been at least 67% above league average offensively in each of his eight seasons. He’s a freak and the best baseball player on the planet. Trout’s lowest fWAR in a season is 6.8. He only played 114 games. He was still fourth in fWAR and the three guys ahead of him played 155, 153, and 159. One of them also cheated (Jose Altuve). By the way, Rendon was sixth that year.

I’ve never been high on the Angels lineup, but this year I am. It scares me, but I’ve sold their stock while other people have bought their stock. Now most of us are buyers. After all, this was just about a league average offense last season without Rendon and Upton. Add those in and the Angels may actually be looking at a top-10 offense in wRC+ and could crack the upper half in a lot of offensive categories despite the detrimental effects of the home park.

Remember, too, that the Angels with Rendon, Upton and maybe Jo Adell, who is coming very soon, are better equipped to take advantage of the shortened wall in right center. Other teams were taking more advantage of that than they were last season, though it did help a guy like Brian Goodwin to a career high with 17 homers and helped Tommy La Stella to 16 after having 10 in over 900 MLB plate appearances going into last season. Jason Castro will be a benefactor this year with a lot of hard contact and a high barrel rate.

This offense may take the biggest leap of any team in the American League.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

**ERA: 5.12 (25th)**
FIP: 5.04 (28th)  
xFIP: 4.80 (23rd)  
K%: 22.3% (17th)  
BB%: 9.2% (23rd)  
LOB%: 71.0% (21st)

Unfortunately, there is still the issue of this pitching staff. The death of Tyler Skaggs hurt a lot from a personal standpoint, but it also hurt the Angels a lot in a personnel sense. This was not a deep rotation. This was a rotation littered with injury risks. As I mentioned in last year’s write-up, the Angels were reliant on Skaggs, who had maxed out at 125.1 MLB innings a season, Andrew Heaney, who threw 180 innings for the first time in his career in 2018 after throwing just 27.2 innings over the previous two seasons combined, and then rotation fodder like Jaime Barria, Matt Harvey, and Trevor Cahill.

When all was said and done last season for the Angels, 19 different pitchers made a start. Trevor Cahill led the team with 102.1 innings. He had a 5.98 ERA with a 6.13 FIP and a 5.11 xFIP. Griffin Canning got hurt and lost valuable development time with only 90.1 innings. Skaggs had the best FIP of the regular starters. Matt Harvey was terrible. Dillon Peters and Jaime Barria weren’t any better. The Angels used a lot of openers late in the year out of necessity.

There is some more hope this season. The betting markets don’t like Julio Teheran for his career 3.67 ERA, 4.23 FIP, and 4.37 xFIP. They really don’t like the two prior years with ERAs of 3.94 and 3.81 to go along with FIPs of 4.83 and 4.66. He had an xFIP over 5 last season. Teheran did find the IDEAL landing spot, though. Angel Stadium is kind to fly ball pitchers with that marine air. The ball also doesn’t carry well in Seattle or Oakland.

Teheran’s walk rate is really concerning, but Jason Castro is a decent framer and he’s always been able to minimize damage in one way or another. He grades about average in exit velocity and Hard Hit% against, but he’s gotten better at home run prevention for more of a fly ball guy and, perhaps most important, he’s been very healthy. Teheran has made at least 30 starts in each of the last seven seasons. That is a sight for sore eyes for the Angels.

We’ll see if Dylan Bundy tilts back towards being an extreme fly ball guy, but getting out of the AL East should help him in a big way. He’s had xFIPs of 4.28 and 4.58 the last two seasons, which aren’t great, but they are markedly better than what the Angels had last season. Bundy has also made 89 starts the last three years. The Angels aren’t going to be playing musical chairs at the same rate with this rotation.

It would enhance the ceiling of this rotation if Andrew Heaney and Griffin Canning can stay healthy. Heaney was having a breakout season from a strikeout standpoint before the injury bugs found him yet again. His 2018 was really solid with a 4.15/3.99/3.68 pitcher slash over 180 innings. Canning had over a strikeout per inning last season. That was only his second season in pro ball, so there is some risk attached to him, but scouts like him and his minor league numbers were mostly fine.
Shohei Ohtani has finished Tommy John rehab, so he could very well be back pitching every fifth or sixth day for the Angels, depending on how they set this up. Ohtani only worked 51.2 innings over 10 starts in 2018, but they were excellent with a 3.31/3.57/3.53 pitcher slash. The plan is for Ohtani to pitch a little more often as spring turns to summer.

The bullpen still doesn’t excite me. But I don’t hate it. It’s sort of like going to McDonald’s. You’d rather get something better, but that fountain coke with those fries, man. It’s a nice combo out on the road in a pinch.

Anyway, the Angels were 20th in bullpen ERA and 20th in bullpen FIP. They didn’t add anybody to the unit except for Matt Andriese, the starter turned reliever that had a 3.72 FIP and a 3.88 xFIP to go with a 4.71 ERA in 70.2 innings last season.

Hansel Robles was really good last season. Ty Buttrey was very good early and fizzled out late with a 58.3% LOB% in the second half. There is hope for a bounce back from him. Some of last year’s failed starters are also likely to slot in relief with Teheran, Bundy, and Ohtani now in the fold. Keynan Middleton, who had a solid year in 2017 with some okay peripherals, is now fully back from surgery and got to spend the winter strengthening instead of rehabbing. Cam Bedrosian has also been pretty reliable with a career 3.76/3.64/3.98 pitcher slash in 274 appearances.

The bullpen is fine. It has a low ceiling without a ton of upside or promise, but it shouldn’t actively hurt the club too much.

**Positives & Negatives**

On these very pages last season, I talked about how I was not a Brad Ausmus fan. This year, I feel bad for Ausmus. He inherited a very flawed team last season. Then he had to try and navigate a heartbroken squad through the Tyler Skaggs stuff. They just weren’t good enough and ran out of gas physically and emotionally as the injuries mounted in the second half.

Now Joe Maddon has taken over. I’m not a big Maddon guy these days. He used to be an innovator and a creative manager. Now he’s just a crotchety, irritating, get-off-my-lawn kind of old man. Maybe he had just grown stale in Chicago or had gotten bored. Maybe this fresh start is good for him and the Angels. I’m going to keep my expectations very low for his impact on the team.

This team should have a buzz early in the season. Ohtani is back full-time. JUp is back. Rendon is in. The rotation looks better. The offense looks better. The team seems more stable all the way around. I never bought the Angels hype early in the process, but it appears that I have gotten caught up in it this year to a degree.

The one thing about all season win totals is health. Some teams are good all around and can withstand an injury or two. Other teams are very top-heavy. If Mike Trout got hurt
for an extended period of time, the Angels would be screwed. I am always concerned about betting a win total over on a team like that. Not only does a major injury to a stud lower the margin for error dramatically, but any additional injuries hurt that much more.

**Pick: Over 85.5**

I wavered back and forth on this one for a little bit before I got tired of the blinking cursor on Microsoft Word. I don’t think that the Angels have a high ceiling. I don’t think that they are a playoff contender. I think they still finish third in the AL West. But they are going to be better. This is a team that was 54-49 through 103 games with a +17 run differential last season before everything just completely fell apart.

That clip would have given the Angels 85 wins. Sure, it doesn’t always work that way, but this is an improved team from last year’s version with Rendon in the mix and some other starting pitchers.

This is not a pick that I am confident in. Rendon is a huge addition to the lineup and a fine wingman for Trout, but there are several other areas of the team that are lacking. The pitching staff has no true ace and a lot of fourth and fifth starters. Heaney is the only one with real upside and he can’t stay healthy. The bullpen is also not among the top half of the league in my opinion and could end up being a real detriment.

However, I went with the over as the pick for the guide, which will not be an official bet. This is one of my least favorite win total picks in the guide, just because I don’t think that the Angels can finish a whole lot higher than this. I just can’t ignore that they were on an 85-win clip last season with a severely flawed roster and everything that they went through emotionally and mentally, so I have to look over the total because this year’s team is better and hopefully won’t have to go through anything remotely close to that again.

Assuming the ceiling is lower for the Astros and A’s, assuming that the Rangers regress a little and assuming the Mariners fall back some more, which are all developments that I anticipate; there are some additional wins there for the taking. This is just not a team I will have a bet on.
Oakland Athletics

Like I mentioned in my write-up about the Angels, the AL West has basically become a race for second place for teams not located in Houston. The Astros have won three straight division titles, all in dominant fashion. To their credit, the Oakland Athletics have answered the bell the best that they can. Oakland has back-to-back Wild Card Game appearances and has won 97 games each of the last two seasons.

Unfortunately, the A’s have lost both of those Wild Card Games, so they have had exactly two playoff games to show for 194 wins, which is a legitimate flaw in the system. To some degree, it also keeps bettors and scribes unaware of just how good this Oakland team is and has been. Perhaps the Astros are at their most vulnerable point now that Gerrit Cole has moved on and Justin Verlander is a year older, but it still looks like the A’s will be hoping that the third time is the charm as far as the Wild Card Game goes.

Each of the last three seasons, Oakland overs have been among my favorite season win total bets. Last season, Oakland was my absolute favorite in the AL. All three of them cashed, the last two seasons with ease. Oakland’s season win total in 2017 was 73.5 and they narrowly got over it at 75-87. Oakland’s season win total in 2018 was just 74.5 and it was just 83.5 last season. Adjustments have been made for this season, but this A’s squad is still clearly the second-best team in the AL West in my estimation.

The thin financial margins for the A’s oftentimes create a narrative that doesn’t match the reality with this team. Many have a negative outlook on Oakland from the jump because of the strength of the Astros and the annual success of teams with much larger payrolls. Generally speaking, that mindset inherently creates value on the A’s year in and year out. They did have some down years in the 2010s, but for the most part, they competed well, despite the financial shackles and the inability to dole out big free agent contracts that draw headlines and generate buzz over the winter.

They’ve got a lot of terrific homegrown talent and have really done well plucking trade acquisitions from other teams. They were also one of the teams at the forefront of the bullpen spending barrage in the mid-2010s. Everybody soon followed suit and as prices for relievers got higher, the A’s had to get more creative. The investment on the player development side, which is a much smarter use of assets for small-market teams than free agency, has yielded a lot of positive returns.

While Oakland has limited playoff success, with one playoff series win since 1992, the A’s have still managed to compete in a financial system that is stacked against them. That being said, the A’s don’t get any help from their fans, with just over 3.2 million fans combined over the last two 97-win seasons. Perhaps a new ballpark, which will open in 2023, will bring that spark and that attendance revenue, but we are still a long way away from that.
The A’s were one of the healthiest teams in baseball last season and also had one of the oldest pitching staffs. I’m looking for some regression from the A’s, but will the fallback be enough to prevent the team from surpassing its win total for the fourth straight season?

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 89.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 97-65

Run Differential: +165

Pythagorean W/L: 97-65

BaseRuns Record: 93-69

BaseRuns Run Differential: +122 (5.03/4.27)

3rd Order Win% Record: 94.6-67.4

Record in One-Run Games: 27-22

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Donnie Hart, Ronnie Freeman, Dillon Thomas, Jordan Weems, Carlos Perez, Nate Orf, Ryan Goins, Ian Gardeck, Jaime Schultz, Lucas Luetge, Brian Schlitter, Zach Lee, Burch Smith, Tony Kemp, Buddy Reed, Vimael Machin, Austin Allen, TJ McFarland

**Losses:** Blake Treinen, Josh Phegley, Ryan Buchter, Brett Anderson, Homer Bailey, Marco Estrada, Matt Harvey, Tanner Roark, Alfonso Rivas, Jurickson Profar, Jharel Cotton

In general, this is not the type of offseason that you would want to see from a team that just won 97 games and went to the Wild Card Game. You want to see them attempt to build off of their success, but all we see here are far more Major League players going than coming.

But, you have to put this in the proper context. The A’s gave up Blake Treinen, who had struggled late last season, and also let starters Brett Anderson, Homer Bailey, Marco Estrada, Matt Harvey, Tanner Roark, and Jharel Cotton go. They also get back healthier versions of Jesus Luzardo, a top-25 prospect in baseball, AJ Puk, Sean Manaea, and hopefully James Kaprielian.
The A’s effectively traded Major League track record for youthful upside and I think there is a legitimate chance that they are better for it. Just because there are a lot of recognizable names leaving a team doesn’t mean that team is any worse. This is an example of that.

**Offense**

2019 Ranks:

- **BA**: .249 (16th)
- **OBP**: .327 (11th)
- **SLG**: .448 (10th)
- **wOBA**: .327 (10th)
- **wRC+**: 107 (5th)
- **BABIP**: .282 (28th)
- **K%**: 21.3% (6th)
- **BB%**: 9.2% (9th)

With the limited number of Major League transactions, particularly on the offensive side, we are looking at just about the same lineup as last season. The A’s have a very deep lineup. They are skilled 1 through 9 and even add in a top-30 prospect in baseball from last season in catcher Sean Murphy, who slashed .308/.386/.625 in the hitter-happy PCL before getting a Major League look for 60 plate appearances with a .245/.333/.566 slash with four homers and the same plate discipline he exhibited in the minors.

The reason I start with Murphy is because you know everybody else. Tony Kemp and Chad Pinder will likely form some sort of platoon that Franklin Barreto could also be a part of this season. Beyond that, all the regulars are back. I’m not sure anybody realized that Marcus Semien was worth 7.6 fWAR last season with a breakout offensive year that featured 33 homers, a .285/.369/.522 slash with a .373 wOBA, a 137 wRC+, and a strong follow-up to the best defensive season of his career.

Matt Chapman is the best defensive third baseman in baseball (sorry, Nolan) and also slashed .249/.342/.506 with a .354 wOBA and a 125 wRC+ as a 6.1-fWAR player. Chapman is even a positive regression candidate on the offensive side because his .270 BABIP was 31 points lower than his career average. Chapman also bumped his BB% from 9.4% to 10.9%. If the BB% increase and K% decrease are both legit, Chapman’s OBP will rise as his batting average regresses positively towards his mean and we could be looking at a season more closely resembling his 2018 campaign. People don’t talk enough about how good this guy is.

In general, the A’s player development staff doesn’t get enough love. Matt Olson posted a 134 wRC+ with 36 dingers and will turn 26 just a few days after Opening Day. He also only played 127 games. He exceeded his 2018 home run total by seven with 113 fewer plate appearances. His walk rate was down, but his contact authority was up, which is a trade that the A’s were happy to make. With just under 1,500 plate appearances for a guy
in what I’d call Season 2 of his offensive prime, a 40-homer season is not out of the question.

Ramon Laureano fell just shy of a four-win season with 3.9 fWAR and a 126 wRC+ with 24 HR and 13 SB. I am expecting some regression from Laureano, whose average exit velocity probably isn’t good enough to carry a .342 BABIP, but his walk rate should be higher this season to offset some of the decrease.

Stephen Piscotty is a big bounce back candidate. Injuries limited him to 93 games and 393 plate appearances last season with a .306 wOBA and a 93 wRC+. Piscotty posted a .351 wOBA and a 126 wRC+ in 2018 over 151 games and 605 plate appearances.

Mark Canha is a guy I am a little skeptical of. He hit 18 HR against RHP with a .297/.418/.548 slash in 340 PA. In two other full seasons against righties, he batted .271/.334/.486 and .227/.323/.343. Small sample sizes are always taken with a grain of salt, but I’d find it hard to believe that Canha would carry a .355 BABIP against righties, particularly with a repeat of that power. I think he’ll still be solid, but I don’t see a 4.0 fWAR again with a .386 wOBA and a 146 wRC+. It is worth noting that Canha became much more selective at the plate and cut his O-Swing% from 31.1% to 25%, which is a metric of how often a batter swings at pitches outside the strike zone. As a result, Canha walked more and also got into more favorable counts. Maybe it’s sustainable. I doubt it, but he also won’t suddenly crater I don’t think.

There just aren’t any easy outs with this Oakland team and you really have to respect the power production in a bad hitter’s park like Oakland Coliseum. That’s how the A’s finished fifth in wRC+, which is a park-adjusted and league-adjusted metric. A score of 100 is exactly league average. The A’s play in a poor offensive environment for 81 games, not to mention their games in Anaheim and Seattle in lower-scoring environments, and they managed to have a top-five offense in that metric. They don’t strike out a lot. They walk at a high clip. They have a lot of guys that make quality contact and carry high SLG. It is a pretty perfect offense for the current run environment in baseball.

Oakland is not set up quite as well to overcome injuries on the position player side as they were last season, but guys like Dustin Fowler, Skye Bolt, Jorge Mateo, Sheldon Neuse, and Seth Brown are all capable of being competent fill-ins at a variety of positions. Depth is a big factor for me when it comes to season win total betting. The A’s have a lot of it and this is likely to be among the best lineups in baseball in that adjusted wRC+ metric again.

Lastly, the discrepancy between Oakland’s actual record and other metrics systems isn’t a big concern to me. Sometimes we’ll see a difference between actual record and BaseRuns and see that a team was uncharacteristically good with RISP or something. Oakland’s offensive numbers actually ticked down a little bit across the board with RISP. Most teams generally fare better in those scenarios compared to their overall numbers. Perhaps
Oakland’s offense could be even more productive in the run-scoring department next season.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 3.97 (6th)
- **FIP:** 4.34 (13th)
- **xFIP:** 4.72 (19th)
- **K%:** 21.1% (25th)
- **BB%:** 7.8% (7th)
- **LOB%:** 75.1% (5th)

What the A’s were able to do on the pitching side last season was remarkable. It helped that Brett Anderson had an outlier season in terms of staying healthy to throw 176 innings of 3.89 ball, but he is gone and we’ll save him for another win total preview.

The A’s actually played musical chairs with their rotation. Fourteen different pitchers made starts and they didn’t utilize the opener all that often. In fact, Liam Hendriks had one start and Joakim Soria had one start. The other 160 games were started by 12 different guys. Whistleblower Mike Fiers led the team with 33 starts and one of the most amazing sets of splits I’ve ever seen. Fiers, who was the first player to publicly out the Astros for their sign-stealing operation, had a 2.90 ERA at home with a 4.68 FIP and a 5.29(!) xFIP. He allowed just a .225 BABIP at home and carried an 11.4% HR/FB%.

On the road, Fiers pitched to a 5.14 ERA with a .273/.332/.463 slash against and a .335 wOBA against. His road BABIP jumped to .288 and he had a 5.33 FIP and a 5.07 xFIP. His HR/FB% was 17%. So, Fiers was not good at home from the advanced metrics, but relied on a low BABIP against and an 83.3% LOB% to have success. He pitched to the park is the best way to put it, I guess, but it sure seems like he got pretty fortunate as well.

At least the A’s won’t have to rely as much on Fiers, who is without a doubt one of the biggest potential regression candidates in baseball with numbers like that. Oft-injured southpaw Sean Manaea made five starts at the MLB level and 13 overall last season after dealing with a major shoulder injury. Manaea had a strong 3.59 ERA with a 4.26 FIP and a 4.32 xFIP in 27 starts in 2018 and even started the AL Wild Card Game for the A’s last season. He’s a soft contact machine capable of carrying a low BABIP against and solid HR/FB% numbers. He won’t wow you and the projection systems are low on him, but I’ve always had my eye on him and I expect a solid season if he’s healthy.

Frankie Montas found a splitter and was simply unhittable until injuries took him out of commission. Montas was limited to 16 starts with a 2.63/3.00/3.47 pitcher slash. He struck out 103 and only walked 23 in 96 innings of work. Montas paired the split with
one of the best sliders in baseball on a per-100 pitch basis. His SwStr% went from 8.6% in 2018 to 11.5% in 2019. Like so many A’s hurlers, health is the question. Montas only threw 96 innings last season after 136.2 in 2018, 61.1 in 2017, 16 in 2016...and so on. The guy has a high ceiling, but he cannot seem to stay healthy. It is tough to rely on him, but the potential is clearly visible.

Chris Bassitt was a solid two-win guy with some pretty good contact management skills of his own, but Jesus Luzardo is the guy I want to focus on. Luzardo is Nasty with a capital N. He’s racked up obscene strikeout numbers in the minor leagues with 234 in 195.2 innings of work. He has good control and command and runs it up there in the upper 90s with action, a plus curveball, and a plus changeup. We only saw six relief appearances with Luzardo for the A’s last season, but they were special.

Again, though, health. Luzardo worked 55 innings last season across four levels. Back in 2017, he pitched 109.1 innings. That was only his second year of pro ball. The 22-year-old won’t turn 23 until September and has elite upside, but let’s hope he stays healthy. Same for AJ Puk, who also made his MLB debut last season. Puk missed all of 2018 and threw 36.2 innings last season. He, too, has ridiculous strikeout numbers when he’s been out there, but who knows how long he can be out there.

Not surprisingly, the A’s are poised to have an excellent bullpen again. Liam Hendriks was one of the best relievers in baseball last season. Yusmeiro Petit may be the most versatile reliever in the game. Joakim Soria still gets it done and Jake Diekman was an excellent add at the Trade Deadline last season. A bounce back from Lou Trivino would help, but the A’s have committed a lot of time and resources to bullpen building and it has paid off.

**Positives & Negatives**

No team in baseball uses its home park better than the A’s. They’ve cracked the code of hitting for power there and their pitchers are masters of inducing as much harmless contact as possible. This organization is brilliant and always has been.

I’ve talked about this a lot before as well, but this is not a fun park for road teams. A new ballpark is being built, but the current one is not well-liked by visiting teams. The facilities are not great and the ballpark can be rather cavernous with limited fan support and its expansive size. It is also a place where a lot of hitters have bad numbers. Year in and year out, the best teams in the AL go to Oakland and lose series and even get swept. It’s just a hard place to play and that gives Oakland a big advantage in that they can keep beating up on the stiffs, but also seem to have the upper hand on their AL counterparts.

The A’s are an excellent defensive team. They were 10th in defensive runs saved last season, but led all of baseball in UZR. Per the FanGraphs all-encompassing Def metric for defensive value, the A’s were the best team in baseball.

**Pick: Over 89.5**
I still really like the Oakland A’s, but for the first time in four years, I will not have any action on their season win total. The markets have finally corrected this team enough. The secret is out. Generally, when the markets adjust to something in this dramatic of a manner, it is a good sell high opportunity. I don’t see it that way. I think the A’s are plenty capable of being a 90-win team again and will probably play Tampa Bay or New York in the Wild Card Game. To me, this is probably the fifth-best team in a very top-heavy American League, trailing the Yankees, Astros, Twins, and Rays.

I don’t think you make money betting against this team from a win total standpoint, so my pick is on the over. The lineup is excellent and this could very well be the best defensive team in baseball, at least in the American League.

On the other hand, I cannot wager money on this rotation. I love this group. I think the upside is extremely high and this rotation should be substantially better than last season with Luzardo and Puk. Unfortunately, I have no idea if anybody stays healthy. Fiers should, though he might get a severe case of whiplash if he gets too many road starts. Luzardo, Puk, Manaea, and Montas are all guys that have missed substantial time over the last three seasons. The remaining depth options are almost all unproven and even Luzardo and Puk are unproven to a degree.

If I ran a lot of simulations with the A’s, they would soar over 90 and win a lot of games in most of them. But this is a one-shot deal with 80% of the rotation shrouded with injury risk.

To me, the better way to attack Oakland is to take a longer shot flyer on them to win the World Series or the AL Pennant. If they make the playoffs, you have a low-risk position with a pretty decent ROI. With a win total, it is a black and white, yes or no, and a higher bet amount with -110 as opposed to 30/1 or higher for the World Series.

In the event that this rotation stays healthy and lives up to its potential, the Athletics could very well win the AL West. If the rotation doesn’t, the floor is high enough for the A’s to compete, but the ceiling collapses. I think the A’s have a pretty big range of outcomes. One in which the over is the pick because they could very well flirt with 100 wins again, but I could also see an injury-riddled rotation that winds up with 84-85 wins.
Seattle Mariners

Surely you’ve heard the expression “15 minutes of fame”. Well, the Seattle Mariners had 15 games of fame. Thought to be an absolute doormat, particularly after the trades of James Paxton and Edwin Diaz, the Mariners started the 2019 season with a 13-2 record after 15 games. They promptly lost six straight and wound up with a 26-39 record over their first 65 games.

That’s right, sports fans. The Mariners went from 13-2 in their first 15 to 13-37 in the next 50. When all was said and done for the season, the Mariners finished 68-94, so they went 55-92 over their last 147 games. It wasn’t even a great season for individual development. Mitch Haniger isn’t young at 28, but he was looking to build off of a mammoth 2018 and only played 63 games. New starting shortstop JP Crawford was limited to 93 games in his age-24 season.

Even on the pitching side, the Mariners didn’t see much from young guys. Marco Gonzales showed some promise in his age-27 season, but the team got 32 poor starts from Yusei Kikuchi and would up getting a lot of starts from has-beens and journeymen like Felix Hernandez, Wade LeBlanc, and Tommy Milone. Justus Sheffield threw 36 innings to start his MLB career and Erik Swanson looked badly overmatched in his 58 innings. I’m not sure there were many silver linings for the Mariners coming off of such a lost season.

In all, the team used 67(!!) different players. Only eight of them were under 25 as of June 30th, which is how Baseball-Reference defines player age for that season. That isn’t the way you want to draw it up as a rebuilding team.

On the plus side, Seattle competed well against three of its division rivals. The Astros were the exception, as they won 18 of 19 games against the Mariners. The Mariners were 9-10 against both the Angels and A’s and 8-11 against the Rangers. So, at least there’s that. I guess that would be a shred of something to build off of going into 2020. In fact, the Mariners were actually 46-35 against teams with losing records. They just happened to be 22-59 against teams .500 or better. Only the Detroit Tigers had fewer wins with 19.

These are usually my least favorite teams to handicap from a win total standpoint. There isn’t much to latch on to from the previous season, so they are going to be bad again. Generally speaking, making a bet on exactly how bad (or how good) a team will be with a low win total (or a high win total) is a challenge. It’s what I like to call the Degree of Awful. Awful comes in a lot of forms. The Degree of Awful for a team might be 90 losses. It might be a team with a hideous Pythagorean Win-Loss record that gets blown out a ton, but manages to win close games. It might be 114 losses in a complete dumpster fire of a season like what the Tigers just endured.

The starting point for my win total capping is to figure out the floor and the ceiling. When the floor and ceiling are pretty close, as they seem to be in the case of the
Mariners, it can be a real tough task to pick a side, which I do on every team in this guide.

Let’s evaluate the roster and see if we can find areas of improvement or if the song will remain the same. Just imagine where the Mariners would have been last season without the 13-2 start!

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 67.5 (105/-125)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 68-94

Run Differential: -135

Pythagorean W/L: 69-93

BaseRuns Record: 72-90

BaseRuns Run Differential: -88 (4.73/5.28)

3rd Order Win% Record: 72-90

Record in One-Run Games: 23-26

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Collin Cowgill, Cody Anderson, Taijuan Walker, Carlos Gonzalez, Wei-Yin Chen, Yoshihisa Hirano, Alen Hanson, Carl Edwards Jr., Patrick Wisdom, Dustin Garneau, Kendall Graveman, Adam Hill, Nestor Cortes Jr., Jose Siri, Nick Margevicius, Sam Haggerty, Yohan Ramirez, Phillips Valdez

**Losses:** Domingo Santana, Tim Beckham, Arody Vizcaino, Felix Hernandez, Tommy Milone, Keon Broxton, Chasen Bradford, Connor Sadzeck, Ryon Healy, Wade LeBlanc, Omar Narvaez, Ricardo Sanchez, Reggie McClain, Anthony Bass, Matt Wisler

Some people are addicted to meth. Some people are addicted to heroin. Some people are addicted to sex. Or gambling. Or alcohol. Mariners GM Jerry DiPoto is addicted to trading. DiPoto became the Mariners GM on September 28, 2015. He completed his 100th trade on August 10, 2019. The fine folks over @CespedesBBQ listed all 100 at the time of that benchmark deal. At the time, he had completed trades with 25 of the league’s 30 teams.
DiPoto sure is active. I like some of the moves this season. Wei-Yin Chen is the new Wade LeBlanc and he could do well in an environment like T-Mobile Park. Yoshihisa Hirano could very well be the closer, though that says something about the state of the bullpen. Carl Edwards Jr. and Taijuan Walker are actually my favorite grabs of the bunch, but there are some interesting players on the additions list, including Nestor Cortes Jr.

The players on the subtraction list aren’t that of a big deal. A lot of those guys played key roles on a bad team last season. Anthony Bass was terrific in the second half, so he could be a loss to the bullpen, but Domingo Santana and Omar Narvaez are the only others that move the needle at all for me.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- BA: .237 (29th)
- OBP: .316 (21st)
- SLG: .424 (19th)
- wOBA: .314 (20th)
- wRC+: 98 (13th)
- BABIP: .287 (27th)
- K%: 25.5% (27th)
- BB%: 9.5% (5th)

Walking a lot is great, but it certainly helps to do something with those baserunners. The fact of the matter is that the Mariners struck out too much and didn’t make enough quality contact. In fact, two of the top three players in fWAR for the Mariners were catchers Tom Murphy and Omar Narvaez. Murphy was actually one of the better defenders, but he also slashed .273/.324/.535 with a .355 wOBA and a 126 wRC+. He struck out a ton and didn’t walk enough, but hit 18 homers in 281 PA when he made contact.

There are a lot of questions about the offense. Mitch Haniger was limited to 63 games with 283 plate appearances last season and has already had surgery that will keep him out for a good portion of the season. Haniger slashed just .220/.314/.463 last season after a monster 2018 with a .285/.366/.493 slash and a .367 wOBA. That full-season sample was enough for people to believe that what he did in 2017 in 410 PA was also legit. Then injuries happened and now he has already had a procedure this season. I don’t know how much we want to count on Haniger for and if he can’t get back to his 2017-18 levels, the Mariners offense is going to suffer the consequences.

Kyle Seager had a really nice bounce back year after a poor 2018, but I worry about him if the ball is altered a lot. His BB% did come back up to 9.9%, which was huge because his BABIP numbers have been very poor the last three seasons. Seager has been something of a launch angle disciple over the last three years, but he’s middle of the pack
in exit velocity and Hard Hit%. The projection systems put Seager around league average. I’m a little bit higher on him than that, but the Mariners really need him to be better than he has been. Last season’s contributions were fine, but it would be good to see another leap if possible.

There are some young players of interest for the Mariners. Shed Long had 168 PA and posted a .333 wOBA with a 111 wRC+. That isn’t bad at all in a limited sample size. Dan Vogelbach hit 30 home runs and walked a ton with a 16.5% BB%, but his contact quality is a big question mark. It seems like he rode a big spike in launch angle to the power production and I have my doubts that he can repeat it this season. First-round draft picks Kyle Lewis and Evan White will feature prominently in the lineup. White, who was a top-100 prospect going into last season, had solid numbers in Double-A, but has to make a big leap this season with a low walk rate and some strikeout concerns.

Lewis is a huge upgrade defensively in the outfield and has shown a propensity to walk throughout his minor league career. If his power projection can graduate to the Majors, he could be a really good player for this team. He’ll turn 25 in July. Braden Bishop also walked a lot in the minors. The Mariners may generate some more traffic on the bases, but they need to guys with track records and the power to cash those opportunities in and I’m not real confident in that.

One plus for the Mariners is that they should be a bit better defensively this season. Last year they were 28th in the FanGraphs all-encompassing Def metric accounting for -31.5 runs. They were -86 defensive runs saved and among the worst in baseball in UZR. With guys like Domingo Santana (-17 DRS!), Narvaez (-20 DRS!), and Beckham gone, and some better options in the outfield other than Mallex Smith in CF, the Mariners should help their pitchers out some more.

There isn’t much to be excited about with this offense. The pitching has improved in the AL West with some of the additions for the Rangers and the Angels. The Mariners actually posted a .295/.370/.565 slash during that 13-2 start to the season. They hit 36 home runs(!) in those 15 games. In the other 147 games, they batted .231/.309/.408 and hit 203 home runs.

Ask yourself which sample size is more indicative of this Mariners team.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

**ERA:** 5.00 (23rd)
**FIP:** 5.00 (27th)
**xFIP:** 4.85 (26th)
**K%:** 19.8% (27th)
**BB%:** 8.1% (9th)
**LOB%:** 68.4% (30th)
And their pitchers will need all the help that they can get. As you can see, the Mariners were 30th in LOB% last season, which is a reason how they wound up with a 5.00 ERA while pitching at a pretty good pitcher’s park half of the time. That being said, the FIP of 5.00 also says a lot. The Mariners were way too low in strikeouts given the current offensive environment. They just don’t have upside in the rotation.

The low ceiling for the rotation is on display again this season. Marco Gonzales is the de facto ace of the staff, though that could be Justus Sheffield by season’s end. Gonzales led the Mariners in fWAR with 3.7 and a 3.99 ERA, a 4.15 FIP, and a 5.11 xFIP. Credit to Gonzales for the sub-4 ERA with a 69.2% LOB%. He was much better at home than on the road, which makes a ton of sense, but his ERA splits do not. At home, Gonzales allowed a .284 wOBA with a 3.98 ERA. On the road, he allowed a .335 wOBA and a .471(!) SLG, but a 4.00 ERA. Sixteen of his 23 homers came on the road, where his ERA was only slightly higher. Why? His LOB% at home was 64.5% and it was 73.5% on the road. It was a weird year for Gonzales. I assume he’s around a 4.15 FIP guy again, but his road numbers were really bad and he’s likely a fade there.

Yusei Kikuchi’s rookie season was fascinating and not in a good way. He made 32 starts and worked 161.2 innings with a 5.46 ERA, a 5.71 FIP, and a 5.18 xFIP. His K% was too low and he allowed way too many homers. He gave up 36 gopher balls. He was awful in his last 21 starts with an ERA over 6.50 as the league got a better feel for him. There was also this interesting nugget, though. Kikuchi had a 6.78 ERA against AL West teams in 15 starts. He was actually halfway decent against everybody else, allowing 47 earned runs in 94 innings for a 4.50 ERA. It wasn’t great, but Kikuchi got lit up by the teams that saw him the most. Can he change that this season? I’d be surprised and it is entirely possible he gets worse against everybody else with better advance scouting reports. He may simply be a bust.

The Mariners have a bunch of pitch-to-contact guys. Erik Swanson spent last summer impersonating a Christmas tree with how often he got lit up in his MLB debut. Kendall Graveman, Nick Margevicius, and Wei-Yin Chen are all pitch-to-contact types. Chen, who worked as a reliever last season for the Marlins, was terrible home and away, but back in 2018, he had a 1.62 ERA in 78 innings at Marlins Park with a .230 wOBA against. Maybe he can tap into that reserve at T-Mobile Park.

Justus Sheffield and Justin Dunn are the ceiling guys. Sheffield had a bad 2019, though. He was good in Double-A for 12 starts, but struggled badly in the hitter-friendly PCL and then posted a 5.50 ERA with a 4.71 FIP and a 4.68 xFIP in 36 MLB innings. The Mariners are in a position to allow him to have some on-the-job training at the MLB level, but it’s fair to wonder if he is ready for that challenge yet.

Dunn made four late starts and had a 2.70 ERA, but had control problems. Dunn struck out a lot of batters in Double-A last season over 131.2 innings, but he also needs some
more seasoning. This rotation could look a lot different late in the year, but I just don’t know if I like the ceiling of these guys for 2020.

The bullpen also looks pretty bad. Maybe Carl Edwards Jr. bounces back and Yoshihisa Hirano can be closer to his 2018 than his 2019. A bounce back in LOB% will help Hirano and he did see a nice strikeout spike last season, but he goes from an elite defensive team to a below average one, so the strikeout spike absolutely has to stick around for him to be effective. Anthony Bass was the most consistent reliever last season and he is gone. Brandon Brennan probably has the most upside, but he had a 4.56/4.40/4.14 pitcher slash last season with command issues.

**Positives & Negatives**

There is no telling what this team looks like by the Trade Deadline and especially at the end of the year. Jerry DiPoto needs his trading fix. The Mariners don’t have a lot of trade fodder at the MLB level because of some high salaries and some options for 2021 and 2022. They also just don’t have a whole lot that other teams are going to want. Hirano will probably be the most sought-after asset. It wouldn’t be a total surprise to see Seager traded with a guaranteed year left at $18.5M and an option for 2022.

This is a last-place team in this division. I would be beyond stunned to see any other outcome. The Rangers have a solid rotation and the Angels, A’s and Astros are just a lot better. Could that lead to more of a sell-off? This is not a particularly good minor league system and any infusion of talent would have to help.

I cannot overstate how bad the Mariners were defensively last season. They will be better this season and the pitching staff will get help by not having Narvaez and by having some more athletes in the outfield. Still, they will be a below average defensive team in all likelihood and a low K% means more balls in play.

**Pick: Under 67.5**

This is one of my favorite season win total under bets. The Mariners are a very bad team locked in a division with two excellent teams and potentially another very good team in the Angels if everything comes together. The Rangers are probably a .500 team in most confidence intervals, but that’s still a lot better than where the Mariners are going to end up.

This rotation is just not good. I don’t like pitch-to-contact anything in this era of power and of strikeouts. K% marks continue to get higher and higher with each passing year and teams that don’t record a lot of strikeouts are heavily penalized for not doing that. The Mariners don’t have much K upside in the bullpen either.

Their 76 division games are not likely to go well and that makes up such a big chunk of the season. There are areas in which the team could be better than last season, but not by enough of a margin to make up for all of the concerns that I have. Seattle’s 22 wins
against teams .500 or better were the second-fewest last season. Only Detroit was worse. I’d expect that again. And I would also expect them to have less success against teams on their level. They were 46-35 against teams with losing records last season.

The Mariners have a lot of hopes and dreams with some of their prospects like Lewis and White, but those guys still have to conquer the biggest learning curve in pro sports. It seems like they may be committed to giving some of those younger guys every chance at learning on the job. While that helps in the future, it doesn’t help in the present.

The Mariners haven’t lost 100 games since 2008, but I really, truly feel like that is possible this season. The 89-73 record in 2018 was as fraudulent as it gets, as the Mariners were 16 games over .500 with a -34 run differential. This has been building for a while – a complete bottoming out. I think this is it. Take away that 13-2 start and this is a team that was on a 61-win pace over 147 games. That is who they are.

This one is a bet and also a pick for the guide.
Texas Rangers

Admittedly, I wound up being way too low on the Texas Rangers last season. Overall, my season win total picks came in at 21-9, but this was one of the losers and one of the teams I had the biggest error in judgment on. They flew past their win total of 70.5 wins with a 78-84 season.

The pitching staff still wasn’t great, though there were some bright spots that I didn’t fully anticipate. The offense was actually better than I thought as well. The Rangers also fell on the plus side of luck a little bit, as they went 45-36 at home despite a -28 run differential. The trade-off was that they went 33-48 on the road with a -40 run differential.

All in all, though, the team was just much better than expected with first-year manager Chris Woodward. The Rangers were actually 58-54 after 112 games before losing 30 of their last 50. They were quite competent in the first half, but the second half was a much different story. Texas went from scoring 5.3 runs per game to scoring 4.5 runs per game after the All-Star Break and went from allowing 5.1 runs per game to 5.8 runs per game.

The second half performance was more of what I expected from the Rangers last season. I felt like they were just in a bad spot as a team lacking Major League talent with a thin minor league system. Low expectations in a division headlined by the Astros and A’s. It was truly a race for third place. The Rangers just happened to be better than the Angels and Mariners.

Most of Texas’s higher-upside prospects are extremely low-level guys. Nick Solak wound up being a pleasant surprise and Willie Calhoun’s power display was some hope for the future, but the Rangers didn’t get a ton of contributions from young players otherwise. On the other hand, Joey Gallo was limited to 70 games and 297 plate appearances, so the team’s overall offensive performance without his presence for two-thirds of the season is another reason to be optimistic.

The Rangers are opening a new ballpark this season, as they apparently outgrew Globe Life Park, which turned 25 last year. They could really use some positive vibes as play begins at Globe Life Field. We know that the venue formerly known as the Ballpark in Arlington was a hitter’s haven and it was also a place where the infield dirt played like asphalt in the summer months. Balls sped up, took spring-loaded hops, and gave infielders all sorts of issues.

The new ballpark is a retractable roof facility, so it will be closed in extreme heat and will be climate controlled. The field is also going to be carpeted with synthetic grass. The new stadium and the accoutrements will create a buzz going into the season, which is good because the team probably won’t. Of course, we don’t know how this new ballpark will play. It could really help the Rangers and the pitching staff in particular. A more pitcher-friendly environment could provide quite a boost.
With a new ballpark comes a lot of unknowns. With a team that overachieved for a half and then performed to expectations for a half comes unknowns. Let’s see if we can answer some of those questions heading into the 2020 season.

**Season Win Total Odds**

*BetOnline:* 79.5 (-105/-115)

**2019 Standings Data**

*Actual Record:* 78-84

*Run Differential:* -68

*Pythagorean W/L:* 75-87

*BaseRuns Record:* 71-91

*BaseRuns Run Differential:* -103 (4.82/5.46)

*3rd Order Win% Record:* 70.8-91.2

*Record in One-Run Games:* 25-21

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Taylor Jungmann, Cody Allen, Greg Bird, Derek Law, Matt Duffy, Juan Nicasio, Todd Frazier, Yadiel Rivera, Luis Garcia, Robinson Chirinos, Henry Ramos, Blake Swihart, Brian Flynn, Arturo Reyes, Joely Rodriguez, Jordan Lyles, Nick Ciuffo, Rob Refsnyder, Kyle Gibson, Sam Travis, Corey Kluber, Steele Walker, Adolis Garcia, Jimmy Herget, Nick Goody

**Losses:** Adrian Sampson, Hunter Pence, Jesse Biddle, Logan Forsythe, Zack Granite, Nate Jones, Shawn Kelley, Welington Castillo, Jeffrey Springs, Emmanuel Clase, Delino DeShields Jr., Nomar Mazara, Jonah McReynolds, CD Pelham, Phillips Valdez

The Rangers were bizzzzzzzy this offseason. They revamped 60% of their starting rotation, reshuffled the deck on offense and in the bullpen, and got some more upper-level depth in the minor leagues. Ultimately, the only losses of great significance are Hunter Pence and Emmanuel Clase. Clase is thought to be a top-five relief prospect and was traded for Corey Kluber. Pence was productive in his 316 plate appearances, but the 37-year-old has battled his fair share of injuries the last two seasons.

I like the overall body of work this winter from Jon Daniels and his staff. The Rangers certainly look better than they did last season and the Kluber gamble is completely worth it for a team that really needs a lot of things to go right in order to be in the playoff...
picture. If not, no harm, no foul and the Rangers would even have a chance at retaining the native Texan when his contract runs out.

I really like the Robinson Chirinos reunion and guys like Todd Frazier, Matt Duffy, Blake Swihart, and Sam Travis add some depth that the Rangers were lacking last season. Greg Bird isn’t a bad grab either.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .248 (17th)
- **OBP:** .319 (20th)
- **SLG:** .431 (16th)
- **wOBA:** .317 (16th)
- **wRC+:** 88 (23rd)
- **BABIP:** .304 (10th)
- **K%:** 25.4% (26th)
- **BB%:** 8.6% (16th)

Imagine playing in a hitter’s haven like Globe Life Park and being below league average in just about every offensive category. Now imagine a team doing that and still going 78-84. Finishing six games under .500 is hardly an accomplishment, but when you consider the way the season played out for the Rangers, you have to like their chances to add some more wins to the ledger this season.

Let’s put it this way. Joey Gallo led the Rangers position players with 3.3 fWAR and he only played 70 games. He was 1.4 fWAR higher than anybody else, too. Gallo slashed .253/.389/.598 with a .401 wOBA and a 144 wRC+. He missed most of June and didn’t play another game after July 23. Prior to his first DL stint, Gallo had actually slashed .276/.421/.653 with a .431 wOBA and a 164 wRC+ over 214 plate appearances. He was in line for a career year, but injuries sidetracked him.

I don’t really think Gallo can run a .385 BABIP and a .376 ISO over a full season, but he grades out as elite in the exit velocity and Barrel% metrics. His career BABIP of .275 does suggest regression and a fair amount of it, but it is entirely possible that the 26-year-old was just finding his groove at the MLB level with over 1,300 plate appearances to his name.

Gallo needs some help. Danny Santana had 1.9 fWAR and Shin-Soo Choo had 1.7 fWAR. Santana slashed .283/.324/.534 with a .352 wOBA and a 111 wRC+ while running a .353 BABIP. Santana, like Gallo, was high in the exit velocity charts in 17th among qualified hitters. His teammate, Choo, was 18th at 91.3, but he was lacking the right launch angle to generate a lot of power. As a result, Choo only slugged .455, but had a .353 wOBA and a 112 wRC+ to offset some of his positional adjustment. Choo walked, while Santana didn’t.
Given Santana’s track record, particularly on the power side, I’m not enamored with this profile or the sustainability of his contact quality. Playing inside more often at Globe Life Field will lower the power projections for a lot of guys. Even though Santana could still be a 20-homer guy, the low walk rate and high strikeout rate do lower his ceiling.

The Rangers got 30 really empty homers from Rougned Odor, which is crazy to say, but his 77 wRC+ was the worst for any hitter with 30 home runs by a large margin. In fact, only three players that hit 24 or more homers posted a wRC+ below 100 (Renato Nunez & Randal Grichuk). Odor was 23% below league average with a .283 OBP because he struck out a ton and only had a .244 BABIP.

If they could ever find a position for Willie Calhoun where he didn’t provide a lot of negative defensive value, his 30+ HR potential would play better. He hit 21 in 337 PA with a .351 wOBA and a 110 wRC+. Robinson Chirinos put up a career-best 2.3 fWAR season with the Astros with good defensive numbers and a 113 wRC+. I’m not sure how much Todd Frazier has left, but he did have a fine offensive season last year coming in with a 106 wRC+. His high launch angle at 17.3 degrees will enhance his power potential in Texas, too, assuming the roof is open often enough.

The Rangers are going to get power from a lot of sources. A few guys walk a lot. We also have to wonder how the new ballpark impacts power. It is a covered surface when the weather dictates, so it could play a lot different open versus closed. We actually go into the season a little blind in that regard. Considering that the Rangers are fairly power-dependent with the current construction of the lineup, I am a little bit scared to go all-in with this offense.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 5.09 (24th)
- **FIP:** 4.84 (21st)
- **xFIP:** 4.82 (25th)
- **K%:** 21.7% (22nd)
- **BB%:** 9.2% (25th)
- **LOB%:** 70.5% (23rd)

The Rangers pitching staff was really top-heavy last season. Lance Lynn had a career year with 6.8 fWAR with a 3.67 ERA, a 3.13 FIP, and a 3.85 xFIP. He also worked over 200 innings for the first time since 2013. He was extremely good. We had an idea that improvement was coming after he posted a 4.77 ERA with a 3.84 FIP and a 3.98 xFIP in 2018, but not to the degree that we saw.

Lynn was actually dominant. He had a 9.9% HR/FB%, which was a throwback to the prime of his Cardinals career. He had the highest K% of his career with a 28.1% mark,
which was almost 4% better than any other season as a full-time starter. He also cut his BB% down to 6.7%, a 4.2% decrease from 2018. Most importantly, he didn’t get crushed by lefties. Lynn allowed a .267/.332/.386 slash with a .310 wOBA to lefties in 458 plate appearances. Over his previous seven seasons, Lynn allowed wOBAs of .317, .366, .340, .314, .350, .349, and .366 to lefties. He was basically a platoon pitcher. That all changed last season.

Lynn traded his poor sinker for more four-seamers, sliders, and cutters with great success. His SwStr% went up to 10% in 2018, which was a career-high, before going up to 12.5% last season. His O-Swing% stayed about the same and was right in line with his career average. What changed is that Lynn got more swings and misses in the zone and also pitched from ahead more. While I see some regression signs, I don’t see anything that makes me believe that Lynn will do a 180 and really fall off this season. I don’t expect another 3.13 FIP, depending on how the new park plays, but 3.75ish across the board seems fair.

Mike Minor is a bigger regression candidate than Lynn. He had a 3.59 ERA with a 4.25 FIP and a 4.60 xFIP in 208.1 innings. I’m worried about Minor coming off of his first 200-inning season since 2013. I’m worried about the 80.3% LOB% coming back to earth. I’m worried about the disturbing trends in the second half of last season. In the first half, Minor held the opposition to a .274 wOBA with a 2.54 ERA and 12 HR allowed in 117 innings. In the second half, Minor allowed a .332 wOBA, had a 4.93 ERA, and allowed 18 HR in 91.1 innings.

Maybe he just got fatigued. Maybe it was more than that. If I had to bet on a guy to regress between the two, it would be Minor. In fact, I’m sort of worried that the bottom falls out this season with him.

That would make the acquisition of Corey Kluber that much more important. I told anybody that would listen a cautionary tale about Kluber going into last season. I was worried about the big K% drop from 2017 to 2018. Maybe 2017 was just the outlier, as 2018 fell more in line with his career numbers, but the stuff was in decline. The command was decreasing. That was a two-year trend with HR/FB% marks of 13.5% and 13.1% in 2017 and 2018.

Kluber allowed 26 runs on 44 hits in 35.2 innings before a comebacker hit him in Miami and he fractured his arm. That was the last pitch he threw for the Indians. I don’t know how the season would have ended up for him, but the velocity was down again and the control went the way of the command.

Truth be told, I have no idea what the Rangers are getting here. While Kluber was hurt, it was a freak bone injury, not something ligament or shoulder-related. From 2015-18, the only pitcher to work more innings than Kluber was Max Scherzer. Chris Sale was third, 48 innings behind Kluber. Can Kluber return to Cy Young form with a little bit of time to rest that right arm? He very well could. I think he is one of the hardest starting pitchers in all of baseball to project this season, particularly with the team and park change.
Kluber isn’t the only newbie in the Rangers rotation. They added Kyle Gibson from Minnesota and Jordan Lyles from like 12 different teams. Lyles has an elite curveball and Gibson has spent a lot of time over the last few seasons trying to refine his secondary pitches.

I actually like these two moves. Gibson’s K% has gone up the last two seasons. He’s an extreme ground ball guy, so we’ll see how that plays in the new park. It didn’t play well at the old park with the sun-baked infield, but Gibson is likely in that 4.25-4.30 FIP range, even with the park change from Target Field. He was 3.62/4.13/3.91 and 4.84/4.26/3.80 with the Twins the last two seasons. The Rangers seem to have their fingers on the pulse of something from a pitcher development standpoint at the MLB level right now.

Lyles has a little bit lower of a ceiling to me, but he, too, has seen his K% increase with more focus on his secondary pitches, particularly that curveball. I think all of these guys have a solid catcher to throw to in Chirinos.

The Rangers bullpen isn’t overly impressive to me, but there is a path to a good unit. Jose Leclerc was better after a terrible start to the season. Jesse Chavez pitched through some stuff last season and had offseason surgery to remove some loose bodies from his elbow. I’d expect a bounce back from him, particularly with a better LOB% than last year’s 66.2% showing. Joely Rodriguez went to Japan and found a cutter and a splitter and some increased velocity, so he is back stateside. It just isn’t a bullpen that I find to be overly reliable.

**Positives & Negatives**

I feel like Chris Woodward did an excellent job last season. The first-year skipper had a LOT of moving parts. His best hitter barely played a third of the season in terms of plate appearances. You can see from the alternate standings metrics that the Rangers really overachieved by being +7 in 3rd Order Win% and BaseRuns.

That is an area of concern, though, too. The Rangers were 17th, 20th, 16th, 16th, and 23rd overall in average, OBP, SLG, wOBA, and wRC+. With RISP, the Rangers were 9th, 12th, 9th, 9th, and 14th. That is a concept called Cluster Luck, as outlined by Joe Peta in his excellent book, *Trading Bases*. The Rangers got very fortunate in some of their higher-leverage spots to have some of their best outcomes.

Even on the pitching side, that was the case. The Rangers had a .328 wOBA against and a .298 BABIP against with RISP. They allowed the highest BABIP in baseball with nobody on base at .315 and the third-highest wOBA against at .342.

That is how you get a big discrepancy between actual record and the alternate standings metrics.
Pick: Under 79.5

The Rangers are a regression candidate. I give them credit for not resting on their laurels with what the alternate standings metrics had to say. They went out and had a nice offseason with Kluber, Gibson, and Lyles. The pitching staff looks more promising than it has in a while, but I just don’t love the overall composition of this team.

Like I said, they were +7 in 3rd Order Win% and BaseRuns, so those are some built-in areas of regression, especially in those higher-leverage spots. There are some individual players, like Minor, Lynn, and Santana that are unlikely to replicate what they did in 2019. Even with more, and likely a lot more, from Gallo, there just aren’t enough players I can rally behind with this team. This is also a pretty poor defensive team, which is something I don’t think is accounted for enough when looking at a team’s season-long prospects.

This is also a team that should be very much open for business at the Trade Deadline. Shin-Soo Choo will be a nice rental. Corey Kluber has an option for 2021. Mike Minor is an impending free agent and so is Jesse Chavez. There just aren’t a whole lot of guys that could be around in the months of August and September and the minor league system is stronger at the lower levels.

As far as whether or not I would put money on this, I would say that it is closer than most picks in the American League. I still think the Astros and A’s are among the five best teams in the AL and the Angels have more upside than the Rangers. For now, it is just a pick for the guide, but we’ll see as the spring goes along if it gets added to the list of bets.
**NL East Futures**

Two of the division races in the National League are pretty wide-open and the first of them is the NL East. The reigning champion Atlanta Braves have the shortest price, but the reigning World Series champs and the best third-place team in 2019 also reside in this division.

On one hand, these types of divisions are nice because everybody is available at a plus price. On the other hand, these types of divisions are tough because you aren’t going to find any really big plus prices that you can sink your teeth into like you can in the AL East or the AL West.

There also isn’t a clear “winner of the offseason” in this division. The Braves lost Josh Donaldson, but picked up Marcell Ozuna and signed the best free agent reliever in Will Smith. The Nationals could be considered a loser because they lost Anthony Rendon, but they also managed to retain Stephen Strasburg when he opted out of his contract. The Mets have a new manager and also made a few moves to strengthen the bullpen and the depth of the roster, but also lost Zack Wheeler.

Offseason transactions frequently shape the market and shape the viewpoints of those betting into the early MLB futures market. As far as the three most likely contenders go in this division, nobody really stands out. That is true of how the offseason went and true of the odds as well.

Here are the odds to win the NL East per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

- **Atlanta Braves** +193
- **Washington Nationals** +255
- **New York Mets** +335
- **Philadelphia Phillies** +385
- **Miami Marlins** +37500

The poor Miami Marlins. We can scratch them off the list. In my estimation, we can also scratch the Philadelphia Phillies off of the list. There is very little upside with that team relative to the other three top dogs in the division. That is a team that just doesn’t stack up in my humble opinion.

In all honesty, it is a little bit of a surprise to see the Braves lined the way that they are. They won the NL East last season, but became an afterthought because of a first-round playoff exit. They became more of an afterthought when a division rival won the World Series as a Wild Card, becoming the first team to do that since the 2014 San Francisco Giants.
The Braves also overachieved per their alternate standings metrics. The Nationals were actually 5.5 games better than the Braves per 3rd Order Win% and five games by BaseRuns.

While I personally do like the Braves, I couldn’t bet them as a favorite. The Nationals could also be subject to a World Series hangover and also have the production of Rendon to replace.

The team right there to take advantage is the New York Mets. Admittedly, I do wish the price was bigger than +335 because the Mets are a flawed team in their own right. Most of their flaws are on the health side, so this is really a question of whether or not this team can stay healthy and really make a big push. They do have a big gap to overcome from where their alternate standings put them, both relative to the Braves and the Nationals, while not having added much of consequence to the roster.

With a lot of different ways that things could play out in the NL East, there just isn’t enough line value to really take any of the teams in this division, but the Mets at +335 would be the closest one for me. This is one where we can definitely shop around as the season approaches and possibly find a better number.
Atlanta Braves

We’ve made it to the National League section of the MLB Betting Guide and the best division in baseball. That is the National League East. The reigning champion Atlanta Braves won’t have an easy path to repeating as the division king, but they’d probably settle for being a Wild Card and a World Series champion like the Washington Nationals.

The Braves prevailed by four games to secure their second division title and second playoff appearance in as many years. They also exited the postseason in the first round, though they did win one more game this time around. The problem is that the decisive Game 5 started about as bad as it possibly could. The Cardinals scored 10 runs in the first inning off of Mike Foltynewicz and Max Fried. That was curtains for the season and for what was a very impressive season for the Braves.

Sports are such a bottom-line business, so a first-round playoff exit, especially in consecutive seasons, looks like a major failure. That point of view really takes away from what the Braves were able to accomplish. Atlanta won 97 games for the first time since 2003. The 97-65 campaign marked a seven-game improvement from the previous season. The Braves also scored 96 more runs. Key contributors played an even bigger role in the team’s success.

Of course, our focus here is on the regular season and from a betting standpoint. For Braves fans, the frustration that comes with not having won a playoff series since 2001 is certainly understandable. If it’s any consolation, the Braves are set up really well to give it another shot in 2020, but they do look to have more competition for the playoffs this season from four very capable contenders. At least everybody can still beat up on the Miami Marlins.

Right off the top, there are some worrisome signs for the Braves, though. They were 28-16 in one-run games, a mark that tends to regress the following year. They were 97-65, but 91-71 per Pythagorean Win-Loss and finished second to the Nationals in 3rd Order Win% as outlined by Baseball Prospectus with a record of essentially 89-73. BaseRuns also paints a negative picture with a record of 90-72. When all three alternate standings metrics show such a big discrepancy from the actual results, it is more than fair to be skeptical. The Braves opened and ended the season with three losses, so they were 97-59 in the other 156 games. Prettay, prettay good. Just maybe not as good as it should have been.

The Braves are also growing up as a team, though, and there is something to that. Mike Soroka turned 22 in August. We all know how good 22-year-old Ronald Acuna Jr. is. Austin Riley had a mediocre debut, but he’s another young player in the mix. Ozzie Albies had a huge age-22 season. Max Fried turned 26 in January. And the youth movement isn’t coming to a close anytime soon. Christian Pache and Drew Waters are likely to debut this season. Kyle Wright, Bryse Wilson, Ian Anderson, Touki Toussaint, and Kyle Muller are just some of the names that will either make the Braves or make up
one of the best rotations in the minor leagues. The system is rich with talent to say the least.

How quickly that talent has an impact could determine how the Braves do this season. So will the 57 games against the Phillies, Nationals, and Mets. This is still a strong team, but the ceiling may be lower than people think.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 90.5 (110/-130)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 97-65

Run Differential: +112

Pythagorean W/L: 91-71

BaseRuns Record: 90-72

BaseRuns Run Differential: +96 (5.26/4.67)

3rd Order Win% Record: 89.1-72.9

Record in One-Run Games: 28-16

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Yonder Alonso, Marcell Ozuna, Felix Hernandez, Chris Rusin, Yangervis Solarte, Peter O’Brien, Cole Hamels, Travis d’Arnaud, Will Smith

**Losses:** John Ryan Murphy, Anthony Swarzak, Dallas Keuchel, Francisco Cervelli, Jerry Blevins, Josh Donaldson, Josh Tomlin, Matt Joyce, Julio Teheran, Billy Hamilton

The Braves really didn’t need to do much this winter. The loss of Josh Donaldson could prove to be a very big deal after the huge year that he had in 2019, but the Braves have pretty good depth and some very exciting young players to build around. With the loss of Donaldson, the Braves looked to recoup some of that power with Marcell Ozuna.

Timing is sometimes everything when it comes to offseason transactions. I will admit that I totally forgot that the Braves signed Cole Hamels and Will Smith very early in the offseason. Hamels is still a very solid starting pitcher, but he was slowed by an injury in Spring Training and probably won’t return until late May or early June once he gets back on schedule.
Smith could very well have been the best relief arm on the market this winter. We all know that the Braves had some bullpen questions much of last season and Smith is a true stabilizing force.

All of the sudden, the Braves rebuilt their bullpen in a five-month span with Smith and the 2019 Trade Deadline acquisitions of Shane Greene and Chris Martin. Not too shabby.

**Offense**

2019 Ranks:

- **BA**: .258 (9th)
- **OBP**: .336 (7th)
- **SLG**: .452 (8th)
- **wOBA**: .332 (7th)
- **wRC+**: 102 (10th)
- **BABIP**: .305 (9th)
- **K%**: 23.3% (18th)
- **BB%**: 9.8% (3rd)

This is a pretty good set of numbers from last season. The Braves do lose Josh Donaldson, who was second on the team among regular players with a .377 wOBA and a 132 wRC+, so some production most definitely needs to be replaced. Maybe Austin Riley, who hit 18 homers in just 297 plate appearances, is that guy. Maybe Johan Camargo will bounce back with more consistent playing time. Carmargo did post a .272/.349/.457 slash with a .346 wOBA and a 116 wRC+ back in 2018. His numbers fell off dramatically last season with a .233/.279/.384 slash, a .279 wOBA, and a 67 wRC+.

Maybe it will be new acquisition Marcell Ozuna, who has reliably been worth 2.8 and 2.6 fWAR over the last two seasons. He hasn’t found the magic to replicate his .312/.376/.548 slash, .388 wOBA, and 143 wRC+ from 2017 yet, but he could have had that chance last season if not for a .259 BABIP. Ozuna was 14th in average exit velocity and in the 96th percentile in Hard Hit%. His xBA ranked in the 86th percentile. He had a .243 BA with a .288 xBA. The Braves signed Ozuna to a one-year pact and hope that his elite contact metrics lead to increases in BA and subsequently OBP. It isn’t hard to see Ozuna getting back up to those 2017 numbers this season.

If Ozuna has a season that falls somewhere in between, that will be plenty good because the Braves are one of those teams with average or better players just about everywhere. They’re building around Ronald Acuna Jr., and why wouldn’t you? Acuna hit 41 homers last season with a .280/.365/.518 slash, a .369 wOBA, and a 126 wRC+.

The scary thing is that Acuna’s 2018 was even better with a .388 wOBA because his BABIP was higher and he carried a higher SLG. As good as last season was, we’ve probably barely scratched the surface with this kid. His BB% increased last season and he also got more aggressive on the bases with 37 steals. With true 40/40 potential, good
contact skills, an improved walk rate, and likely fewer strikeouts as he keeps progressing, Acuna is on the verge of being one of the game’s elites. It feels like he’s been around forever, but he just turned 22 in December and has only 1,202 plate appearances to his name at the MLB level.

Acuna is the star, but he isn’t the only well above average player on the team. Freddie Freeman led the team in wOBA and wRC+ last season at .387 and 138, respectively. He hit 38 homers, set career-bests in K%, HR, RBI, R, and it wasn’t even one of his two best seasons. It was, however, the best season of Ozzie Albies’s young career with a .354 wOBA and a 117 wRC+. He’s also a plus defender and looks to be on pace for his first career five-win season. Albies walked more and struck out less than he did in 2018 and, once again, we’re talking about a player that just turned 23.

Nick Markakis took a cheap deal to hang around and be part of what the Braves have built for another season. He’s not going to light up the stat sheet, but he’s an extremely reliable contact hitter in an era laced with strikeouts. The catcher tandem of Travis d’Arnaud and Tyler Flowers is solid and guys like Dansby Swanson, Ender Inciarte, and Adam Duvall are plenty capable.

The Braves also have more outfield help coming from below in Cristian Pache and Drew Waters. These two guys just reached legal drinking age over the winter and were consensus top-25 prospects in baseball heading into 2019. Both Pache and Waters struggled a little with their promotions to Triple-A, but scouts love these two guys.

The Braves are one of the deepest offensive teams in the NL. They have the star power and they also have the supporting cast. There is a lot to like about this group and continued improvement, particularly from the young guys, would not surprise me.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 4.20 (10th)
- **FIP:** 4.39 (14th)
- **xFIP:** 4.42 (16th)
- **K%:** 22.3% (18th)
- **BB%:** 8.8% (18th)
- **LOB%:** 73.8% (10th)

To be honest, I’m a little bit perplexed by the Braves pitching staff. On the whole, I like it. Mike Soroka and Max Fried had really nice seasons. Soroka, specifically, won’t turn 23 until August, and already has 200.1 innings under his belt, with 174.2 of those coming this past season. In those 29 starts, Soroka hung a 2.68 ERA with a 3.45 FIP and a 3.85 xFIP. Regression is likely to come for the youngster. The Braves are very solid defensively, but you don’t see a lot of 50+% ground ball guys running .280 BABIPs against. He also had a 79.9% LOB% with a below average K% at 20.3%.
That isn’t a knock on Soroka, who is plenty capable of adding more strikeouts to his repertoire as he continues to develop. His 10.3% SwStr% is about average for a starter, so his K% should reflect that moving forward and he could get more whiffs and continue to carry a high strand rate. He is also likely to see some ERA regression towards his FIP and xFIP. He’ll still be very good, but we’re looking at the aggregate in these win total write-ups. Most win total lines are expectations based off of the previous season or the transactions completed over the winter. If we see enough areas of regression – positive or negative – it can be the reason and justification for a play. So, Soroka, while still projected to be very good, has clear-cut regression signs.

On the flip side, Fried presents positive regression signs with a 4.02 ERA, a 3.72 FIP, and a 3.32 xFIP in his 165.2 innings of work. Fried also posted a GB% north of 50%, but he fell victim to the BABIP gods with a .336 mark against. He had a better K% than Soroka, but also had almost double the HR/FB% at 20.2%. If the ball is different this season, Fried projects to gain a lot from that. Fried also finished the second half on a high note with a .298 wOBA against in 277 plate appearances in the second half.

We’ll say that Soroka and Fried cancel out each other’s regression to both be very good starters. The other full-time rotation holdover from last season is Mike Foltynewicz, who was limited to 117 innings because of injuries. He threw 183 innings with a 2.85/3.37/3.77 pitcher slash in 2018. He had a 4.54/4.97/4.73 pitcher slash this past season. He made strides in the BB% department, but his command totally disappeared. After allowing 17 HR in 2018, he allowed 23 HR in 66 fewer innings this past season. He never found his slider. That pitch was 22.9 runs above average in 2018, but -2.3 runs in 2019. If 2018 was the outlier, Folty worries me a lot. Last season may be more of who he is, particularly if the velocity doesn’t come back.

Cole Hamels was a solid addition to the rotation, but another injury has popped up. Injuries did limit him to 141.2 innings last season, but his 2.5 fWAR was the most he has had in a season since 2016. While waiting to return, he can mentor the youngsters and work with the lefties like Fried and Newcomb. When he gets back, he can be productive for however long he is out there every fifth day. He is probably going to a better situation with the Braves and a better defense overall, so those things should all help. It’s just a matter of how many innings he can actually throw.

Atlanta’s pitching depth is absurd. Sean Newcomb has shown flashes at the MLB level and will compete for the final rotation spot with Kyle Wright, Bryse Wilson, Touki Toussaint, and prospects even further down the line like Ian Anderson, Patrick Weigel, Huascar Ynoa, and Tucker Davidson. The Braves run at least 12 deep with guys that have MLB-caliber upside. That means a lot to me because pitcher injuries are inevitable, as we’ve already seen.

The Braves have a lot more bullpen depth now, too. I’m not a huge Mark Melancon guy, but a 62% GB% and a 23.9% K% can make me more of a believer. Will Smith is the best reliever in the bullpen and is a top-10 reliever in baseball with enormous K numbers and
3.2 fWAR over the last two seasons. Shane Greene was traded midseason and went from the outhouse to the penthouse, but couldn’t live up to the expectations. Now that he’s more settled, he should be fine, and Luke Jackson should also bounce back from a mediocre second half in a less-stressful role. Chris Martin is also a huge upside guy that doesn’t walk anybody and saw a huge K% spike last season.

The Braves are loaded with depth at the MLB level and some of the starters that fall short of rotation spots could help in the bullpen, a la Toussaint and Newcomb last season.

**Positives & Negatives**

As I’ve mentioned multiple times here, depth is tremendously important to me. The Braves have two legit stars in Ronald Acuna Jr. and Freddie Freeman. There are a lot of teams with two stars. For some of those teams, though, the stars are all that they have. For the Braves, the stars are just the best players on a very good team with a ton of competent Major Leaguers.

What do we make of the fact that the Braves outperformed their alternate standings metrics by so much? Well, the 28-16 record in one-run games is a big part of it. That was the third-best win percentage in one run games in the league. The Mets were the only other team in the division over .500 and that was at 24-23. Regression could very well take place in that department, but this Braves bullpen is much better than last season’s, so I wouldn’t plan on that being the case to any large degree.

The Braves had a .258/.336/.452 slash overall with a .332 wOBA, a 102 wRC+, and a .305 BABIP. With the bases empty, Atlanta slashed .253/.332/.452 with a .333 wOBA, a 103 wRC+, and a .303 BABIP. With runners in scoring position, the batting average did leap to .271 with an OBP of .359 and a SLG of .447. The .334 wOBA and 103 wRC+ suggest that it was not Cluster Luck on offense.

Was it Cluster Luck on defense? With the bases empty, the opposition batted .244/.311/.407 with a .292 BABIP against. With runners in scoring position, the opposition batted .257/.348/.423 with a .301 BABIP.

It wasn’t that either. Usually when there is a big discrepancy between actual record and the alternate standings metrics, we see teams with some interesting splits with bases empty and RISP. We don’t have that for the Braves. It looks like it was just the one-run record and I don’t see any reason to be worried.

**Pick: Over 90.5**

It doesn’t surprise me to see the Braves win total line at 90.5. A survey of the alternate standings metrics would seem to suggest that is the right number, even though the Braves won 97 games. I seem to be a little bit higher on this team than the market, given that the under was juiced to -130 at time of publish.
I understand the notion of regression and I think it is very much a possibility for the Braves. It would still take quite a bit of regression to see this team win fewer than 91 games. Maybe I am too high on Ozuna, but I don’t think it is crazy to see him recoup some of the offensive losses from Donaldson leaving via free agency.

The bullpen is clearly better with Smith and last year’s Trade Deadline acquisitions. I see a lot of upside for the young pitching staff as well. I’m not exactly sure if this would classify as a bold call, but the Braves are going to finish ahead of the Nationals. I think this is a very complete team with a lot of depth, plenty of help in the minor leagues, and good room for individual growth.

I would not, however, call this a bet at time of publish. The Hamels injury is a concern, as any other pitching injuries that pop up in Spring Training could hurt the ceiling for this team. This one is on my shortlist for consideration, though. It is a solid and firm over pick for the guide, but it is not quite one of my favorite National League win total picks.
Miami Marlins

My expectations were so low for the Miami Marlins last season that they actually exceeded them with a 57-105 record. One of my top NL season win total bets was Miami under. That is rare air for me. I generally don’t want to invest in teams that are supposed to be really good or really bad. There tends to be a really small margin for error because we are simply talking about degrees of being good or being bad. More often than not, I gravitate towards numbers in the 70s or low 80s because those are teams that are more high-variance in nature.

There was no variance for the Marlins. They were not going to win many games. They were locked into a really tough division with the Braves, Nationals, and Mets. As it turned out, the Phillies weren’t as good as anticipated with a .500 record, but the Braves won the division, the Nationals won the World Series, and the Mets had the highest win total of any third-place team with 86.

With 76 head-to-head meetings against those four teams, the Marlins were really up against it. Guess what? They are again. The Marlins had a season win total of 63.5 after winning 63 games in 2018. I actually got a little bit of a sweat at one point with that one, but the Marlins cleared their under by seven games, so my heightened blood pressure was all for naught.

That being said, the alternate standings metrics painted a little bit different of a picture, as the Marlins were four games better than their actual record by Pythagorean Win-Loss, five games better by BaseRuns, and about 3.5 games better by 3rd Order Win%. My sweat was justified in that regard. I really expected this team to have the chance at 110 losses. Fortunately, they were made aware of my position and had single-digit wins in July, August, and September. Miami was 25-55 over the final 80 games. That means that they were actually 32-50 over the first 82. In other words, right on pace to land at 63 wins midway through the season.

If you wanted to know what makes me so leery of playing low win totals, that is exactly why. A team that is essentially 18 games under at the midway point of the season doesn’t need a lot to go right in the second half to go over. Fortunately for us, the Marlins managed to be even worse after the All-Star Break than they were before it, but there were a couple of tense moments as the season played out.

Ultimately, the team really wasn’t very good. They were 16-28 in one-run games and got beaten by five or more runs on 36 different occasions. A winning record against the Phillies (shame on you, Philadelphia) wasn’t enough to keep the Marlins from being one of three teams with 50+ losses against division foes. The others were the Orioles and Tigers. The Tigers lost 18 of 19 to the Indians and 14 of 19 to the Twins. The Orioles were stuck with the Yankees, Rays, and Red Sox.
The Mets, Braves, and Nationals combined to outscore the Marlins 297-190. Miami was 14-43 in those 57 games. I wouldn’t expect much better this year and we could even add the Phillies, who lost 10 of the 19 head-to-head meetings, but did outscore Miami by 10 runs in those games.

It’ll be another long year with low attendance in Miami. Is it going to be bad enough to get me to jump in on the under again?

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline:** 64.5 (-120/100)

**2019 Standings Data**

- **Actual Record:** 57-105
- **Run Differential:** -193
- **Pythagorean W/L:** 61-101
- **BaseRuns Record:** 62-100
- **BaseRuns Run Differential:** -184 (3.76/4.90)
- **3rd Order Win% Record:** 60.4-101.6
- **Record in One-Run Games:** 16-28

**Offseason Transactions**

- **Additions:** Brad Boxberger, Sean Rodriguez, JT Riddle, Matt Joyce, Brandon Kintzler, Ryan Cook, Pat Venditte, Corey Dickerson, Francisco Cervelli, Matt Kemp, Aaron Northcraft, Christian Lopes, Ryan Lavarnway, Josh A. Smith, Yimi Garcia, Gosuke Katoh, Stephen Tarpley, Diowill Burgos, Angeudis Santos, Jose Estrada, Jonathan Villar, Jesus Aguilar


I love this offseason for the Marlins. Not only are they a better team with a lot of Major League caliber talent, but they are effectively trying to buy prospects. Sign a free agent to contract, trade the free agent in July, acquire prospects to help what is a pretty barren system.
None of these guys are earth-shattering signings. But they are lottery ticket vouchers. Any one of the guys like Matt Joyce, Brandon Kintzler, Corey Dickerson, Francisco Cervelli, Matt Kemp, Jonathan Villar, and Jesus Aguilar that can stay healthy and be somewhat productive will yield a trade opportunity. It is honestly a brilliant plan for a team that is very clearly the last-place team in the division and a team with limited financial resources to play for big names in free agency.

For those considering a season win total bet on the Marlins, be very mindful of the fact that a lot of these players will be traded in July and there are homegrown or previously acquired players that will also be on the move. This team is going to look vastly different in August.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- BA: .241 (25th)
- OBP: .298 (29th)
- SLG: .375 (30th)
- wOBA: .288 (30th)
- wRC+: 79 (29th)
- BABIP: .300 (12th)
- K%: 24.3% (23rd)
- BB%: 6.5% (28th)

Nobody is scared by the Marlins lineup, but you have a collection of young guys looking to make names for themselves or grizzled veterans trying to get themselves into a pennant race. Never underestimate the potential of motivated players. The Marlins have an entire roster full of them. That’s not to say that other teams don’t have motivated players. It is simply to say that virtually nothing is guaranteed for anybody on this Miami team.

Corey Dickerson and Miguel Rojas are the only players with guaranteed contracts for 2021. That means that everybody else is playing for arbitration, an extension, or a chance to play for another team that is in a more competitive spot. Miami has $500,000 guaranteed for 2022 and that is the buyout for the Rojas club option year. These guys have to earn every cent.

There weren’t a lot of big earners last season. Brian Anderson is easily the best player on this team and he was the only player to accumulate at least 2.0 fWAR in 2019. He slashed .261/.342/.468 with a .342 wOBA and a 114 wRC+. Only Anderson, Garrett Cooper, Jon Berti, and Bryan Holaday posted wRC+ marks above 100. Remember that wRC+ is park-adjusted, so it does factor in just how bad of an offensive venue Marlins Park is. Anderson hit for more power, despite playing 30 fewer games, and managed to carry career highs in wOBA and wRC+ with a mild K% increase and a big BABIP drop.
Cooper carried a .357 BABIP to be an above average bat. He hit 15 homers in 421 PA, so he did contribute in some ways, but with a 26.1% K%, his .357 BABIP did a lot of heavy lifting, particularly with a below average walk rate. Berti stole 17 bases and also carried a high BABIP at .360 to be above league average. Holaday only had 129 plate appearances.

In other words, this offense was as bad as it seems. The Marlins had one of the league’s lowest walk rates, hit the fewest home runs in baseball, and only the Tigers scored fewer runs.

The lineup has some more potential this season at least. Jonathan Villar has some pop and some speed and will likely be able to carry a high BABIP at the top of the order. Villar’s walk rate actually isn’t that bad for his career and he should provide a nice spark for a team that will likely be a lot more aggressive this season. Villar had a .274/.339/.453 slash with a .335 wOBA, a 107 wRC+, and 24 homers to go with 40 steals. He’s also slated to play center field with very little experience there, so we’ll see how that goes. Sometimes learning a new position negatively impacts a player’s offense.

Corey Dickerson slashed .304/.341/.565 with a .367 wOBA and a 127 wRC+, but he was again limited by injuries. Dickerson had over 500 PA in three straight years before falling back to 279 last season. He battled a lot of injuries early in his career. Dickerson is predominantly a platoon player against righties, but teams see a righty about 70% of the time on average. He’ll provide some value to this lineup and if he can prove he is healthy, he’ll get the biggest non-Anderson return of any player on the roster with that extra year of control if he is traded.

Jesus Aguilar is one season removed from posting a .374 wOBA, a 134 wRC+, and 35 homers for the Brewers. Last season didn’t go all that well for him, as his contact quality tumbled and he really fell off in the power department, but he draws walks, which will help the Marlins lineup tremendously.

Jorge Alfaro hits for power, but nothing else. That makes Francisco Cervelli a pretty good complement, since he carries a high OBP, but hits for no power. Garrett Cooper is a nice bench bat on the short side of the platoon against lefties and Jon Berti had that nice season last year.

Ultimately, though, this is a lineup with a really low ceiling. These are guys that made their way to the Marlins because they are all flawed. Some hit for power and do nothing else. Others don’t hit for power and rely on high averages on balls in play. Some, like Miguel Rojas, are good enough defensively to play every day.

As the veterans are traded, guys like Monte Harrison, Jesus Sanchez, and maybe even Jazz Chisholm will get a chance.

The fences are coming in at Marlins Park. The center field fence is five feet closer and so is the fence in right center. The playing surface will also change to synthetic grass. I guess we’ll see what that means for ground balls in due time.
Pitching

2019 Ranks:

ERA: 4.74 (20th)
FIP: 4.89 (25th)
xFIP: 5.06 (29th)
K%: 22.1% (20th)
BB%: 9.8% (30th)
LOB%: 72.2% (17th)

This is the part about the Marlins that greatly intrigues me and was almost the reason why last year’s under bet didn’t come through. There are some building blocks here. Of course, the Marlins also traded away some of the most interesting guys like Zac Gallen and Trevor Richards, but there are still a lot of fun arms to handicap here.

Sandy Alcantara led the team in fWAR, which is probably surprising with his 3.88 ERA, 4.55 FIP, and 5.17 xFIP. Alcantara did work 197.1 innings and fWAR is a counting stat to a degree, so the fact that he made four more starts and worked 44 more innings than anybody else helped. I’ve talked a lot about Alcantara over the years. He’s got good contact metrics, but they haven’t produced results. He actually rates in the 81st percentile in exit velocity against and the 68th percentile in Hard Hit%.

To his detriment, he doesn’t miss a lot of bats. He also has a slightly elevated walk rate. He’s dependent on defense and that could be a problem for the Marlins this season with some of the fly-by-night acquisitions. Alcantara did hold the opposition to a .296 wOBA in the second half with improved strikeout and walk rates last season. There is a buy sign here.

Caleb Smith does, however, miss a lot of bats. Health is always a question for the southpaw, who doesn’t have the cleanest mechanics and 32% slider usage rate. He generates a ton of swings and misses, but command is an issue, as evidenced by his 33 HR allowed in 153.1 innings of work. He had a 4.52 ERA with a 5.11 FIP and a 5.05 xFIP.

Similarly, Jordan Yamamoto has some of those xFIP concerns as a fly ball guy with some command considerations and a high walk rate. He had a 4.46 ERA with a 4.51 FIP and a 4.89 xFIP. Yamamoto only allowed four earned runs over his first five starts covering 29 innings. Perhaps everything caught up with him after some time to sit and think during the All-Star Break. He had a 6.34 ERA with a 5.51 FIP and a 4.95 xFIP in his last 49.2 innings and that includes a final start with six shutout, one-hit innings and 10 K against the Mets.

Pablo Lopez is the guy that a lot of people in the advanced metrics community like. He throws a power sinker with decent secondaries and average swinging strike rates that
haven’t translated to strikeouts. When you look at the raw movement numbers, you see names like Stephen Strasburg, Aaron Nola, and Lance Lynn as comps for velo and movement. You just don’t really see that in the numbers, though Lopez cut his walk rate down last season and made some strikeout strides. The command isn’t there, but if it ever clicks, he may be a guy with a higher ceiling than originally thought.

The Marlins bullpen actually isn’t that bad, but I’m not a big Brandon Kintzler guy. Pitch-to-contact relievers scare me more than anything. Jose Urena should be better if moved to a bullpen role, though it does seem he will start again. Flamethrower Ryne Stanek is really interesting and I’ll always have a soft spot for Adam Conley, though his 2019 was horrible. He went from a respectable 4.09/3.60/3.84 slash in 2018 to last season’s 6.53/5.19/5.41 disaster.

All in all, the Marlins have guys that are interesting to follow to see if they take a leap, and that includes prospects like Sixto Sanchez, Nick Niedert, and Edward Cabrera, but they are probably more interesting for a nerd like me than anything else. Their stats are unlikely to translate to good performances and wins.

**Positives & Negatives**

The Marlins are the worst team by far in the probably the most balanced division in baseball. Miami has 76 head-to-head meetings with Atlanta, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington and I cannot imagine that those meetings go well. Last season the Marlins won 24 of those games. I actually set a win total line of 23.5 in my preview last year for those 76 head-to-head meetings and they went over thanks to 10 wins over the Phillies. I’d peg them around the same this season, even with the infusion of MLB talent.

While I mentioned the motivational angles for this team earlier in the write-up, this is also going to create something of an uncomfortable scenario. Guys aren’t going to be here for the long haul and everybody knows it. Once the Trade Deadline does come around, this is a team that will be playing on pins and needles wondering who will go where. The veterans that signed here have to understand the business and know that this is a very real possibility, but these guys are still human, with families to uproot or families to be away from because they are all on one-year deals. It comes with the territory and it is part of the business, but it is still a lot to take in while focusing on a really hard job.

**Pick: Under 64.5**

You know how the XFL has “Team 9”? A bunch of practice squad dudes just trying to stay in game shape? That’s how I feel about the Marlins lineup. The only guy that is a long-term solution is Brian Anderson. The other guys are part-timers or platoon players. They’re all pretty good at what they do and maybe that eventually creates a good offense, but these are all guys just waiting to leave and go somewhere else. Even Jonathan Villar is a question mark. His 2019 was great, but his 2018 and 2017 were not.
The pitching staff has all the intrigue here and that could be enough to keep Miami competitive. There are things to like about Smith, Alcantara, Urena, Lopez, and Yamamoto. The bullpen might even be decent with a lot of young guys that throw hard or have good stuff.

Unfortunately, you still have to score runs and I don’t think the Marlins will do enough of that. I will not be betting on the Marlins under this season. This is a pick for the guide and one that I do like more than some others, but not enough to put actual dollars on. There is a chance that this cobbled together, patchwork offense is good enough to be competitive early in the season until anybody putting up numbers gets traded. Last year’s team was on pace to fall around here and this year’s team is better.

So, it’s the under in a tough decision with the Marlins likely ticketed for 100 losses and a second half of random, no-name dudes getting the plate appearances. It just won’t be a ticket I’m sweating this season.
New York Mets

There are never enough adjectives to describe the New York Mets. For the second straight season, the Mets got off to a pretty good start, fizzled out, and then finished strong. It wasn’t enough for Mickey Callaway to keep his job. Callaway did himself no favors with his handling of the team and the media at various points throughout the season, but he was also not on agent turned executive Brodie Van Wagenen’s good side.

The Mets were like a Coney Island roller coaster last season. They started 9-4 and spent 24 days in first place, but managed to carry a losing record into the All-Star Break at 40-50. They also managed to play .639 baseball in the second half with a 46-26 showing following the Midsummer Classic. The Mets looked like a different team. It was too little, too late, but it did provide some hope for the future.

Pete Alonso hammered 53 dingers. Michael Conforto had a really strong bounce back season. Jeff McNeil was simply outstanding until an injury cut short his season. Amed Rosario figured it out with the bat. JD Davis proved to be a cornerstone offensive player. Noah Syndergaard stayed healthy enough to make 32 starts. So did Jacob deGrom. So did Zack Wheeler, though the Mets are no longer worried about what happens to him.

A carousel of bullpen failures proved to be too much for the Mets to overcome, but the lineup looks pretty good. We’ll see what happens beyond deGrom, Syndergaard, and Steven Matz in the rotation, but the Mets have a pretty strong core group. They also have to deal with the winds of change again. Callaway was replaced by first-time manager Carlos Beltran, who was then replaced by first-time manager Luis Rojas. Beltran was caught up in the Astros sign-stealing scandal and the Mets and Beltran decided it was best to part ways.

The Mets also tabbed 33-year-old Jeremy Hefner as the new pitching coach. Hefner comes over from the Twins, where impressive things are being done on the pitching side. Hensley Meulens was a fine hire as bench coach and will provide some experience for the staff.

I’ll sound like a broken record with four of the five NL East teams. The Marlins are destined for the basement. The Mets are one of four teams with a legitimate chance at winning the division and it really wouldn’t be a stunning development if both Wild Card teams come from this division. The head-to-head meetings will determine a lot. The Phillies, Nationals, and Braves are all solid ballclubs. Add the Mets to the mix and head-to-head matchups make up over 35% of the schedule. If those teams largely split those games, or at least trade wins back and forth, it could lower the ceiling for the division as a whole.

The Mets were 40-36 in division play, including a 13-6 record against the Marlins, so they need to play better against their chief competitors. Ironically, they were 12-7 against
the World Series champs. The Mets also went 15-5 in interleague play, so they were essentially a .500 team against the NL. That, too, needs to improve.

Let’s see if it does. Let’s see if the Mets stay as healthy on the pitching side as they did and if the new blood in the dugout produces some positive change. The atmosphere under Callaway seemed to be a little bit on the uncomfortable side. Every little bit helps in a division like this.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 86.5 (-125/-105)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 86-76

Run Differential: +54

Pythagorean W/L: 86-76

BaseRuns Record: 87-75

BaseRuns Run Differential: +56 (4.97/4.63)

3rd Order Win% Record: 87.9-74.1

Record in One-Run Games: 24-23

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Matt Adams, Rob Whalen, Erasmo Ramirez, Eduardo Nunez, Yefry Ramirez, Francisco Rios, Johneshwy Fargas, Jake Hager, Dellin Betances, Pedro Payano, Rick Porcello, Michael Wacha, David Rodriguez, Jarrett Parker, Max Moroff, Chasen Shreve, Jake Marisnick, Stephen Gonsalves

**Losses:** Chris Flexen, Drew Gagnon, Donnie Hart, Joe Panik, Ervin Santana, Rajai Davis, Todd Frazier, Zack Wheeler, Juan Lagares, Blake Taylor, Kenedy Corona, Sam Haggerty, Chris Mazza

Amazingly, not all of the additions are CAA or former CAA clients of GMBVW. Jokes aside, the Mets made a lot of moves. It looks like Van Wagenen is continuing to put his personal stamp on the team, following up on the bevy of transactions heading into 2019 with a whole lot more.

The Mets lost Zack Wheeler, but they anticipated that would be the case. I’m not real big on Rick Porcello or Michael Wacha, but the winner of that rotation battle will be tasked
with replacing Wheeler. At least the other four guys in the rotation all look pretty damn good.

The Mets swapped out their previous Major League depth for some new depth. All in all, I just see a lot of lateral movement for the Mets, with the exception of the Wheeler loss. Dellin Betances is a tremendous add to the bullpen, so it may all cancel out one way or another.

**Offense**

2019 Ranks:

- **BA**: .257 (11th)
- **OBP**: .328 (10th)
- **SLG**: .442 (11th)
- **wOBA**: .325 (11th)
- **wRC+**: 104 (7th)
- **BABIP**: .299 (14th)
- **K%**: 22.0% (11th)
- **BB%**: 8.2% (21st)

If you don’t like change, I present the New York Mets lineup. Of the top 11 players in plate appearances last season, nine are back. The only two not back are Todd Frazier and Juan Lagares. Frazier was a pretty valuable player, but Lagares was not. The most important players are all back and hopefully with better health.

Brandon Nimmo was limited to 254 plate appearances and just 69 games because of injuries. When he was out there, Nimmo slashed .221/.375/!!/.407 with a .340 wOBA and a 114 wRC+. Nimmo walked or struck out in 46.1% of his plate appearances, so he didn’t have many chances to work on the batting average or the slugging percentage. Nimmo slashed .263/.404/.483 with a .385 wOBA and a 148 wRC+ in 140 games in 2018. The Mets are hoping for a return of that, but a 2019 stat line over more games is also okay.

Breakout sensation Jeff McNeil managed to stay mostly healthy until the end of the season. The oft-injured superutilityman started 24 games at second, 16 at third, 45 in left, and 38 in right and had a stellar season with 23 homers and a .318/.384/.531 slash, a .384 wOBA, and a 143 wRC+. McNeil was extremely valuable in 248 PA and 63 games in 2018 and then followed it up with almost a full season of being better. His health is an enormous key to the season for the Mets. He plays so many roles, puts a ton of balls in play, and has some really good extra-base hit power. If he can stay healthy, that would go a long way for this offense.

Pete Alonso hit 53 home runs in his rookie season. And that massive total didn’t even include what he did in one of the best Home Run Derbies ever in his head-to-head matchup with Vladimir Guerrero Jr. Alonso slashed .260/.358/.583 with those 53 jacks.
I’ll say this, I think Alonso’s power production goes down. League-wide, I am expecting a decrease, but nearly 37% of Alonso’s plate appearances ended in a homer or a walk. He actually hit a fairly high number of ground balls. His HR/FB% of 30.6% was the fourth-highest in baseball. Alonso will still be a highly productive hitter, but I’d probably look to regress him back to around 40 homers.

A healthy season from Michael Conforto was a good sign for the Mets as well. He posted a .358 wOBA with a 126 wRC+. Citi Field played a lot better for offense than it has in past seasons. Part of that was the health of the improved Mets offense, but the park actually played well for lefties all-around. In fact, by OPS, it was the 16th-highest park for left-handed batters. I wouldn’t have expected them given the pitcher’s haven it had always been, but maybe that was more of a commentary on the Mets lineup.

If all of these guys stay healthy this season, the Mets are ticketed for a top-10 offense. Robinson Cano just might be slowing down with injuries the last two years, but he was also in the 82nd percentile in exit velocity and the 87th percentile in Hard Hit%, so he is a bounce back candidate. He had a .256 average with a .280 xBA and a .428 SLG with a .450 xSLG. Let’s put it this way, Cano actually hit the ball harder on average than Alonso.

JD Davis is the guy that I’m watching closely. Davis made a ton of hard contact and posted a .373 wOBA with a 136 wRC+. He was terrible in the outfield and even worse at third, but his offensive profile looks really solid. Among hitters with at least 250 PA, he was 26th in average exit velocity and could do even more damage with a full season worth of PA. He only had 410 last season.

Amed Rosario’s sudden offensive outburst to be league average while providing great defense was a big step. Jed Lowrie will attempt to return just one year removed from posting a 123 wRC+ with Oakland over 680 plate appearances. Jake Marisnick will help in the outfield as a pinch runner and defender.

I can’t say enough good things about this Mets lineup if everybody stays healthy. This is a top-10-caliber unit paired with what should be one of the best rotations in baseball.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

**ERA:** 4.25 (12th)
**FIP:** 4.10 (6th)
**xFIP:** 4.29 (7th)
**K%:** 24.4% (9th)
**BB%:** 8.0% (8th)
**LOB%:** 73.1% (14th)
It doesn’t seem like there are a lot of people in the baseball world that like Mickey Callaway. One thing I can say as an Indians fan is that he is able to get the most out of elite talent. Jacob deGrom has always been good, but I don’t think it is a coincidence that the two best seasons of JDG’s career were on Callaway’s watch. He won the Cy Young in 2018 with a 1.70 ERA, a 1.99 FIP, and a 2.60 xFIP. In 2019, he followed it up with a lot of similar numbers with a 2.43 ERA, a 2.67 FIP, and 3.11 xFIP. deGrom was hurt by the baseball changes and the power surge. His HR/FB% went up from 6.3% to 11.2%. His pop up rate fell from 16.3% to 14.2%, which is essentially a decrease in strikeouts given the percentage of pop ups converted into outs. So, deGrom saw a small bump in his batting average against.

I don’t know how the baseball will play, but I have to assume deGrom exhibits better command this season and a league-wide power decrease would help bring that HR/FB% back down a bit. It was barely up above his career mark, but any slight improvement is going to help deGrom. I’m not saying he was bad by any means. Just saying as good as he was last season, I wouldn’t be shocked if he falls in line between 2018 and 2019.

Priority #1 for Jeremy Hefner is getting Noah Syndergaard to be consistent and live up to his potential. Syndergaard posted a 3.03/2.80/3.29 pitcher slash in 2018. In 2019, he had a 4.28 ERA with a 3.60 FIP and a 3.83 xFIP. His K and BB rates were about the same as 2018, but there were two big differences. Like deGrom, Syndergaard saw a bump in HR/FB%. Thor’s was just a LOT more noticeable. Unlike deGrom, whose LOB% stayed consistent, Thor’s LOB% dropped from 76.6% to 68.9%. That led to the big ERA, as evidenced by his FIP and xFIP.

It sure feels like what we saw back in 2016 should be the normal for Syndergaard. He posted a 2.60/2.29/2.67 slash over 183.2 innings that year. Let’s see if Hefner can unlock that consistency for one of the game’s most talented hurlers.

Something really odd happened with Marcus Stroman when he joined the Mets. His K% went up from 19.3% to 23%. Now, being in the NL with the pitcher batting helped, but what makes it odd is that Stroman’s usage didn’t exactly support a K% increase. His sinker usage increased 6.5%. It seems like it was a classification issue, but his SL% went from 35.2 to 21.4% with an increase of over 7% on cutters. I’m guessing that it was a classification bug or maybe the Mets changed the shape of his slider with a grip adjustment or a mechanics change.

Whatever the case, Stroman saw the K% bump, but also allowed a much higher rate of line drives and saw his HR/FB% go up. I really don’t know what to expect from Stroman this season. It was only 11 starts for the Mets, but it was so much different from what he did with the Jays that I simply don’t know. That concerns me. I feel like one of my strengths is in projecting players to be better, worse, or make changes. Stroman’s GB% went up 8% with the Mets, too, and ground balls are his bread and butter. I’m worried that he’ll be good, but not as good as he could be.
A third straight year of watching Steven Matz give up a bunch of homers was tough to swallow, but even with the high home run rates, he has still been able to carry some pretty decent ERA and FIP marks. He made 30 starts again last season, which was good. Hefner has another job to do here. If Matz can suddenly give up fewer long balls, the Mets could very well run four starters with ERAs under 4.00.

I am not keen on either Rick Porcello or Michael Wacha. One thing that I can say for Porcello is that he has been extremely durable. From 2014-18, Porcello was actually third in innings pitched behind workhorses Max Scherzer and Corey Kluber. His numbers won’t be great, but he is a lot more durable than Wacha and maybe getting out of Fenway Park and the AL East will help. Maybe he has a decent ceiling.

Seth Lugo’s elite curveball found a home in the bullpen and it couldn’t have come at a better time with all of Edwin Diaz’s issues. Lugo had an elite K/BB ratio with a 2.70 ERA, 2.70 FIP, and 3.24 xFIP in 61 appearances over 80 innings. He’s one of the most valuable relievers in baseball with his ability to pitch multiple innings. Lugo’s emergence was really big with Diaz running a 5.59 ERA, a 4.51 FIP, and a 3.07 xFIP. Circle that xFIP, though. Diaz’s 26.8% HR/FB% is extremely likely to come down. His Barrel% against jumped from 3.8% to 10.1% last season. He still struck out 39% of opposing batters, but his command just wasn’t there all the time. I like him to bounce back and lead what projects as a very good bullpen with Dellin Betances and the return of Jeurys Familia.

**Positives & Negatives**

As is the case with all of the NL East contenders, those 57 games with each other will define a lot. They could very well decide the division winner, the season win totals for all four teams, and possibly more. A healthy Mets team is quite possibly the best of the bunch in my estimation.

I *think* Mickey Callaway being gone is a positive for the Mets. For starters, he wasn’t Van Wagenen’s guy. Every new GM wants to hire “his” guy as coach, manager, whatever. Second, Luis Rojas is very highly thought of and the Mets are very much going in that direction that so many other teams are that are run by Ivy Leaguers. It is about getting players to buy in with the numbers. Rojas is bilingual and served as the quality coach last season, a role that, as Tim Britton said at The Athletic ($), included “synthesizing advanced information and translating it into useful pieces for the rest of the coaching staff and the players”.

I think Minnesota Twins. I think Rocco Baldelli. The difference is that Rojas has a ton of minor league managing experience. I think this is a slam dunk hire and I think it’s actually quite a bit better than the Beltran hire.

**Pick: Over 86.5**
I may regret this when all is said and one, but I like the Mets a lot and I even like a piece of the Mets to win the NL East. This is a team that performed just about to expectation last season per the alternate standings metrics, but took a rather circuitous route to get there. I really believe that the second half Mets are what we can expect to see from this team going forward.

The bullpen is much improved with the addition of Betances and what should be a return to normalcy for Diaz. The starting rotation is deeper with a full season of Stroman and then the guys like Porcello and Wacha battling it out for the fifth spot.

My biggest worry with this team is health and it is very hard to overlook. There is not much depth in the minor leagues with the starting pitching, so the Mets will have to stay in tact in that department. A lot of the better talent in the minors is ticketed for High-A or Double-A. There are a lot of guys on this team that have had health issues or carry extra risk. I do think that the MLB bench is better this season than it was last season, particularly if Jed Lowrie can make it back.

When we talk about ceilings, the Mets have a very high one. They are going to carry an extremely high OBP and have plenty of power to go around. They have maybe the best pitcher in the NL with deGrom, a guy with elite upside in Syndergaard, and then Stroman and Matz, who both have shown flashes.

Also, with that kind of talent, the Mets have a high floor.

I’ll wait and make sure that all pieces and parts are in working order throughout Spring Training. If we get to the last week of March and nobody’s arm has fallen off or torn an ACL, the Mets season win total over will be a bet for me. This is one of my stronger picks in the National League and an NL East champions bet will also be coming.
Philadelphia Phillies

The Philadelphia Phillies improved from 2018 to 2019, but not in the way that most people expected. In fact, not at all in the way that most people expected. Philadelphia went from 80 wins all the way up to....81.

It turns out that winning the offseason doesn’t always translate to results. The Phillies actually had a season win total last season of 89.5. I, too, drank the Kool-Aid. The Phillies finished exactly .500 and never came remotely close to threatening that win total line. Of course, the season should have ended differently. The Phillies won on September 3 to improve to 72-65 and it looked like they had a chance of being a contender in the Wild Card hunt. Instead, the team went 9-16 over the final 25 games to end up with a disappointing fourth-place finish in the NL East.

The alternate standings metrics suggest that the Phillies were lucky to finish .500. 3rd Order Win% had the Phillies more like a 74-88 team and BaseRuns had them at 75-87. Factor that into the post-mortem of last season and it looks even worse.

Several young pitchers regressed last year. Rhys Hoskins had a decent season, but failed to take the next step that many people expected. Bryce Harper was quite good after a slow start to the season, but it just wasn’t enough. Gabe Kapler became the scapegoat of the underwhelming season and he has been replaced by former Yankees skipper Joe Girardi.

Kapler was unconventional in his two seasons with the Phillies and landed on his feet with the Giants, but many viewed his aggressive managing as a detriment. Defensive shifts and early hooks for pitchers didn’t always go over well and it did seem like there was a disconnect at times between Kapler and the front office that hired him. From the outside, it looked like there was no chemistry between the players and the manager. So, the Phillies changed tracks and went with Girardi, who I believe to be one of the better managers in baseball.

Girardi was replaced by Aaron Boone in New York and word seemed to circulate that the Yankees players weren’t fully on board with the approachability of the bench boss. This article is a bit dated now, 3.5 years after the fact, but Girardi graded very well back then in terms of bullpen management and I would expect more of the same here. As much as I appreciate Kapler’s sabermetric background, I do think Girardi is an all-around upgrade for the Phillies. He remains in a major market and I think it helps that he has that experience from his days in NYC.

As I have said with the other NL East teams, this is the best division in baseball and those 57 head-to-head meetings with the Phillies, Mets, Nationals, and Braves taking turns beating each other could loom quite large within this division race. The Phillies were just 5-14 against the Nationals, but 10-9 against the Braves and 12-7 against the Mets. Their biggest faux pas of the season was not beating up on the Marlins like everybody else. Miami actually won 10 of the 19 meetings.
In a general sense, a team that falls short of some increased expectations one year meets those levels the next year. That may be tough for the Phillies within this division, but the talent is there, I believe that the manager is there, and now the onus is on the players to perform up to their capabilities.

With more reasonable odds this season, the Phillies are likely to be a popular team for two-way action with their season win total.

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline: 85.5 (110/-130)**

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 81-81

**Run Differential:** -20

**Pythagorean W/L:** 79-83

**BaseRuns Record:** 75-87

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** -57 (4.76/5.12)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 74.1-87.9

**Record in One-Run Games:** 20-20

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Anthony Swarzak, Logan Forsythe, Neil Walker, Francisco Liriano, Bud Norris, Drew Storen, Ronald Torreyes, Mikie Mahtook, TJ Rivera, Matt Szczur, Didi Gregorius, Zack Wheeler, Josh Harrison, Kyle Garlick, Cristopher Sanchez, Deolis Guerra, Reggie McClain, Nick Martini, Trevor Kelley, Robert Stock

**Losses:** Cesar Hernandez, Maikel Franco, Blake Parker, Edubray Ramos, Jerad Eickhoff, Mike Morin, Jose Pirela, Brad Miller, Corey Dickerson, Drew Smyly, Juan Nicasio, Logan Morrison, Nick Vincent, Sean Rodriguez, Tommy Hunter, Jared Hughes, Jason Vargas, Pat Neshek, Curtis Mead

The Phillies wasted very little time this winter. After working on things with their own players, they signed Zack Wheeler in early December and followed that up with Didi Gregorius six days later. After that, it was all about trying to acquire MLB-caliber depth for the bullpen and the bench. The Phillies signed a bunch of players to non-guaranteed minor league deals.
The losses aren’t a big deal at all. Cesar Hernandez is a noteworthy loss as a pretty good second baseman at a position of annual weakness around baseball, but the Phillies have Scott Kingery and Jean Segura and wanted Didi Gregorius. They had a lot of infield options and Hernandez became redundant in lieu of guys with more upside.

I am a tad surprised that the Phillies weren’t more aggressive about improving the bullpen, but Seranthony Dominguez is something of a free agent signing after missing the second half of last season. I’m just surprised they didn’t do more to fill the void of David Robertson, who was lost to Tommy John surgery last season. Hard-thrower Robert Stock could be the surprise of the group and could very well work his way up the depth chart quickly.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .246 (22nd)
- **OBP:** .319 (19th)
- **SLG:** .427 (18th)
- **wOBA:** .314 (18th)
- **wRC+:** 91 (21st)
- **BABIP:** .293 (19th)
- **K%:** 23.2% (16th)
- **BB%:** 9.0% (14th)

Is it fair to say that the Phillies were the most disappointing offensive team in baseball last season? I think it is, but maybe the problem was us. Maybe we overvalued the Phillies going into the season. Things would have gone a little bit differently if Andrew McCutchen hadn’t suffered a torn ACL, but that wasn’t the only problem.

Cutch did slash .256/.378/.457 with a .358 wOBA and a 120 wRC+ in his 262 plate appearances before his season stopped after just 59 games. He was on pace for his best OBP since 2015 and was falling right in line with the previous two seasons from a wRC+ standpoint. He’s a really solid player and it would help this lineup in a lot of different ways for him to be back and healthy.

Prized free agent Bryce Harper finished the last two months on a tear with 17 homers in 51 games, but his first half was pretty mediocre by his standards with a .253/.370/.470 slash and a 117 wRC+. His second half was more of what the Phillies expected with a .270/.376/.564 slash, a .383 wOBA, and a 136 wRC+. Harper even lived on high BABIPs throughout April and May and still wasn’t putting together the right types of numbers. His K% was 29.5% and 31.4% in April and May before cutting that down dramatically the rest of the season. It sure seems from the numbers that there was some pressure to live up to the mega contract. Now that Harper is settled back in, I would presume we see a more consistent season and something more in line with his career averages.
Projection systems are looking at a bounce back for Harper up to a 134 wRC+ and his first 40-homer season since 2015, so that would provide a big boost for the Phillies to say the least. A bounce back for Rhys Hoskins would also do wonders. Hoskins had a strange power outage in the best offensive season in MLB history. He went from 34 HR to 29 HR in 45 more plate appearances. His SLG fell 42 points. Even though Hoskins put up a better OBP thanks to more than a 3% increase in BB%, he was a lot less valuable with a 113 wRC+ compared to a 128 in 2018. Hoskins didn’t take that next step that most of us anticipated. His batting average was also down 20 points with a K% increase and a slight decrease in BABIP.

It seemed like Hoskins actually hurt himself with an average launch angle that was just too high at 24 degrees. His pop up rate increased 4%, which is problematic when over half of your batted balls are hit in the air. Like with Harper, the projection systems are looking for a bounce back. Personally, I’m not as bullish on that, seeing as how Hoskins slashed .180/.318/.361 in the second half with just nine home runs and a 78 wRC+ in 313 PA. I’m actually really worried about him.

JT Realmuto is arguably the best offensive catcher in baseball and he provides a ton of defensive value, so we can rely on him for another big year so long as he stays healthy. He posted a 108 wRC+ last season, but 5.7 fWAR because of the positional adjustment and his excellent defense. Scott Kingery hit 19 homers and stole 15 bases, but his profile is a little concerning with a high K rate and a low walk rate. His exit velocity and other offensive metrics don’t paint a pretty picture, but he is a very good defender.

The Phillies should get a boost at shortstop with Didi Gregorius on a one-year deal as he looks to rebuild his value after what was mostly a lost season. He had an 84 wRC+ in 344 plate appearances. In 2017 and 2018, Gregorius accounted for 8.8 fWAR with the Yankees. Citizens Bank Park isn’t quite as friendly for offense as the Little League field in the Bronx, but Gregorius puts a ton of balls in play and has good power with 30-homer upside if he can stay completely healthy.

The more I look at this Phillies roster, the more I think we all oversold the offensive potential of this unit last season. Injuries did play a role last season, but I do think that we were a little bit too optimistic. I even said that they would be an “average offense” in last year’s write-up and they still came short of that relatively tepid projection.

The offense was “better”, as the Phillies were 30th in BA, 19th in OBP, 23rd in SLG, 21st in wOBA, and 21st in wRC+ in 2018, but I was expecting bigger gains than that and it has soured my projection for the upcoming season.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

**ERA: 4.53 (17th)**
FIP: 4.88 (23rd)
xFIP: 4.55 (17th)
K%: 22.2% (19th)
BB%: 8.7% (16th)
LOB%: 74.7% (7th)

The Phillies improved dramatically on defense from 2018 to 2019, so it would have made sense for the pitching staff to be better. It was not. At all. The Phillies fell victim to the long ball barrage like everybody else, but they were over a run higher in the FIP department. Even with a better defense that took the team from 23rd in LOB% to seventh, the Phillies turned in a worse season on the pitching side.

Eight pitchers had 10 or more starts. They ranged in FIP from 4.03 (Aaron Nola) to 6.51 (Jerad Eickhoff) and Nola’s 3.4 fWAR was only 0.6 away from what the rest of the group did combined with exactly 4.0 fWAR. Nola wasn’t even himself last season. He had major command issues with a 17.4% HR/FB%, the worst of his career, and his walk rate took a big leap to 9.4%. Nola had a 3.87 ERA with a 4.03 FIP and a 3.82 xFIP, which wasn’t bad at all relative to league average last season, but it wasn’t what we’ve come to expect from Nola.

Nola had a 3.54/3.27/3.38 pitcher slash in 2017 and then a 2.37/3.01/3.21 pitcher slash in 2018. He wasn’t going to replicate that 2018 season because he had a .251 BABIP against and an 82.5% LOB%, but I really didn’t expect a FIP north of 4 last season and I wouldn’t have even if you would have told me about the big power surge league-wide.

The silver lining is that Nola was pretty good for long stretches in the middle of the season. He also got crushed by the third time through the order penalty. His wOBA against was .283 the first time through, .289 the second time through, and then .356 the third time through. That was a huge departure from last season, when Nola’s TTO wOBA splits were .276, .226, and then .239.

So, maybe it was just an outlier season for Nola. It was an outlier season in HR/FB% for a lot of guys. That would help because the Phillies rotation looks unimpressive for 2019. Philadelphia’s big investment this offseason was five years and $118M to Zack Wheeler. Wheeler had a 3.96 ERA with a stellar 3.48 FIP and a 4.06 xFIP last season for the Mets. After only throwing 86.1 innings from 2015-17 at the MLB level, Wheeler has thrown 182.1 and 195.1 innings the last two seasons.

Wheeler should, like the rest of the staff, get a nice boost from Realmuto behind the plate. He’s the least of my worries, though the injury questions are always lingering in the back of my mind. The rest of the rotation just doesn’t inspire me. Jake Arrieta picked up his $20M player option, which was the easiest decision ever after posting a 4.64 ERA with a 4.89 FIP and a 4.46 xFIP in 135.2 innings of work. Arrieta’s body is starting to fail him and his numbers are going with it. Generally we see an ERA improvement going from a 68.1% LOB% to a 73.8% LOB%, but we didn’t with Arrieta.
Arrieta would benefit from a change with the baseball after running a career-high 19.4% HR/FB%, but he’s very clearly in decline. Vince Velasquez’s command remains a question mark with his 4.91/5.21/4.75 pitcher slash. If it’s not one thing for him, it’s another, not to mention the Phillies would be fortunate to get 130 innings from him. His strikeout rates are impressive, but his walk rate and his shoddy command are a lot to overlook with his projections.

Zach Eflin was actually second in pitcher fWAR for the Phillies with a 4.13 ERA, a 4.85 FIP, and a 4.76 xFIP. He doesn’t miss enough bats for my liking and throws way too many fastballs. His slider usage went down in 2019, despite a higher first-pitch strike percentage. His SwStr% also fell as a result and so, too, did his K%. Those are all negative developments to me.

The Phillies have very little starting pitching depth. If injuries arise with something of an injury-prone rotation, the options are Enyel De Los Santos, Cole Irvin, or to expedite the development process for guys like Spencer Howard, Adonis Medina, or Mauricio Llovera. None of those seem like good options.

As I mentioned in the transactions blurb, I’m a bit surprised that the Phillies weren’t more aggressive in adding bullpen pieces to the equation. Hector Neris was extremely good with a 2.93/3.83/3.53 pitcher slash to lead all relievers in fWAR, but his 83.6% LOB% and .240 BABIP against suggest regression. I do like Seranthony Dominguez coming off of injury. He was dominant in 2018 in 58 innings with some excellent numbers, but there is some risk attached to him this season.

There just aren’t a lot of guys with tremendous upside in this bullpen. Maybe Nick Pivetta takes a leap as a reliever, but his command woes followed him from the rotation to the pen. Of the four contenders in the NL East, this one is clearly the weakest to me.

**Positives & Negatives**

That is a big consideration for me here. Somebody has to lose games in this division. Perhaps the Big Four are all .500 or better again this season, but the Phillies look like they will draw the short end of that stick once again. I like the lineups and pitching staffs of the other three teams a lot more. It really isn’t a coincidence that the Phillies were the only NL East team to struggle with the Marlins last season at 9-10. I think it is almost microcosmic of how they were the weakest of the bunch.

One great big positive for the Phillies is the hiring of Joe Girardi. I do like him a lot and think he will help the Phillies to some wins that they wouldn’t have otherwise gotten. He’ll have to navigate without a high-upside bullpen for the first time in a while, so there’s that, but I think he is a toned-down version of Gabe Kapler and that is likely what the Phillies need. He’s still in tune with the analytics, but he isn’t as hard-lined as Kapler seemed to be.
The depth for this Phillies team is terrifying. The Major League bench is okay, but the rotation depth options are really concerning and the minor league system is lacking impact guys in the upper levels beyond Alec Bohm. Bohm started last season in Single-A and moved up two levels, but he still needs some more seasoning time in all likelihood.

**Pick: Under 85.5**

This is my favorite season win total under in the National League. I am much higher on the Mets, Braves, and Nationals than I am on the Phillies. Keep in mind, this is a team that won 81 games last season, but did so by spitting in the face of the alternate standings metrics. The .500 record was actually quite a fortunate outcome for the Phillies. By BaseRuns and 3rd Order Win%, the Phillies were not very good at all with a record in the mid-70s.

There is a case to be made for a Hoskins bounce back and more consistency from Harper and more from McCutchen, but that isn’t enough for me. This just might be the worst pitching staff in the NL East and I’m including the Marlins in that discussion. I love Nola as much as the next guy, but my view of Wheeler doesn’t seem to jive with what the Phillies saw by prioritizing him so quickly in free agency.

Arrieta, Velasquez, and Eflin all project to be below average in my estimation. This bullpen will rank in the bottom half of baseball and probably even in the bottom third.

I said it. Somebody in this division has to lose games. That somebody is the Phillies. While Girardi could very well be an upgrade as the manager and the vibe around the team may be better in general, this is a deeply flawed team with little margin for error on the injury front locked into the hardest division in baseball at the top.

This one is a bet. Generally speaking, if I like an under, it is a lot easier to play early in Spring Training because injuries are just going to lower the line or add to the juice. I’m more likely to be patient with overs. I had no reason to wait here.
Washington Nationals

Once a city of heartbreak, Washington D.C. is now something of a city of champions. Well, not the Wizards, but the Capitals and Nationals. And who knows? Maybe the DC Defenders! The Nationals emphatically ended a decade of playoff heartbreak with a World Series title. The Nationals had four chances to get past the first round and failed each time, losing the last two times in Game 5. I guess all it took was a first-round win to go all the way.

Washington earned it, man. Of course everybody knows the story, but the Nats were 19-31 through the first 50 games of the season. They won their last eight games of the regular season to ride a big ol’ wave of momentum into the postseason. But, realistically speaking, it was 112 games worth of momentum. The Nationals went 93-69, which means that they went 74-38 after that hellacious start to the season. That is .661 baseball over the last 112 games.

A Wild Card Game win over the Brewers, a Game 5 win on the road over the Los Angeles Dodgers, a four-game sweep of the Cardinals, and then a Game 7 win on the road at Minute Maid Park ended the season with a bang for the Nats. (See what I did there? Yeah you did.)

It wasn’t just the World Series. It was the fact that the Nationals improved by 11 games from 2018 to 2019 with some better fortunes. They also scored 102 more runs than they had the previous season. This wasn’t a flash in the pan World Series champion that got hot at the right time. This was a very good team that underperformed early in the year. A .661 clip over 112 games would equal 107 wins in a full season. Coincidentally, that’s how many wins the team that the Nationals beat in the World Series had.

The question for World Series winners is always the same. How do they follow it up? How do they avoid the World Series hangover? In particular, a Nationals team that had never won a playoff series in franchise history. The 1981 Expos lost in the NLCS, but there was no NLDS at that time.

I’ll be able to talk more about the World Series hangover and what it truly means in the sections of this win total preview because there are a LOT of things it could mean for the Nationals.

Before we get to that point, I’ll echo everything I have said in the write-ups for the Braves, Phillies, and Mets win totals. Those 57 head-to-head games will be tough. The Nationals were able to beat up on the Phillies last season with a 14-5 record, but that was the exception and not the norm for 2019. This division remains a gauntlet. The Marlins are likely to be a punching bag again, but Washington has a challenging path to simply return to the playoffs, let alone make history once again. Washington had 29 of its 44 wins against the Marlins and Phillies, which is to say that they struggled with the Braves and Mets, though Washington did outscore Atlanta despite losing 11 of 19.
It will be another war of attrition in the NL East. The Nationals overcame it last season by playing white-hot baseball for four consecutive months before going 12-5 in the postseason. What does 2020 have in store for the reigning champs?

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 90.5 (+110/-130)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 93-69

Run Differential: +149

Pythagorean W/L: 95-67

BaseRuns Record: 95-67

BaseRuns Run Differential: +139 (5.30/4.44)

3rd Order Win% Record: 94.6-67.4

Record in One-Run Games: 17-21

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** David Hernandez, Paolo Espino, JB Shuck, Tyler Wilson, Emilio Bonifacio, Kevin Quackenbush, Welington Castillo, Mac Williamson, Tyler Eppler, Carlos Tocci, Eric Thames, Starlin Castro, Will Harris, Fernando Abad, Kyle Finnegan, Ryne Harper

**Losses:** Koda Glover, Anthony Rendon, Brian Dozier, Fernando Rodney, Greg Holland, Jeremy Hellickson, Jonny Venters, Spencer Kieboom, Matt Adams, Hunter McMahon

It was a fairly quiet offseason for the reigning champs. They’ll have to figure out how to replace Anthony Rendon’s production, but players like that don’t just grow on trees. It will have to be a combined effort from newcomers like Eric Thames and Starlin Castro and the in-house options. With the exceptional second half that Castro had, a 2/12 price tag was really low for his services and the Nationals should be flexible to add at the deadline.

While they didn’t do much this winter and will need some internal options to make up for the loss of Rendon, there wasn’t a whole lot that the Nationals needed to add in order to be in contention for the division and possibly more. Just by adding Will Harris, the bullpen projection is completely different and the rotation is still anchored by Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg, and Patrick Corbin.
Superutilityman Carter Kieboom is also an in-house option whose flexibility makes him a lot like a free agent, but at the cost of the league minimum.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

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The biggest question for the Nationals this season is how far the offense falls without Anthony Rendon. As far as I’m concerned, the pitching staff could improve, but more on that later. Among players with at least 350 PA, only Howie Kendrick had a higher batting average and slugging percentage. Rendon had the highest OBP and also the highest wOBA and wRC+. His 12.4% BB% was third on the team. As a side note, Brian Dozier’s was second and he is also gone.

By no means are the Nationals hurting for offense, but Rendon leaves a massive hole in the middle of the lineup. He hit 34 homers, walked almost as much as he struck out, and played pretty well at third base for the Nationals. It wasn’t his best year at the hot corner, but it was plenty good enough, especially with the huge offensive numbers.

It really will be a group effort to fill the Rendon void. Juan Soto certainly has room for improvement as a 21-year-old that is only going to get better. He followed up his terrific 2018 with nearly identical numbers over the full 2019 season. Soto’s K% stayed the same and his walk rate ticked up. He had less success in the BABIP department, but traded that for power and a higher SLG. He also stole 12 bases for good measure.

You don’t see many 21-year-olds with over 1,150 plate appearances at the MLB level. Soto’s ceiling is basically uncapped at this point. As he learns the pitchers and continues to fill out physically, he is likely to become a top-five hitter in baseball. His O-Swing% did go up last season and he did swing and miss more, but pitchers also pitched him differently with fewer fastballs. He made more contact in the zone (Z-Contact%) and felt comfortable swinging a little more often. Soto is ready to make that leap. It would be nice if his defense improved a little to help the overall fWAR numbers, but his offensive profile is elite.

After Soto, however, there really aren’t any other guys with superstar potential. I’m not banking on a Kendrick repeat, as the 36-year-old, who has been a very good player throughout his career, set career highs in BA, OBP, SLG, wOBA, wRC+, and fell one
short in HR by only having 370 plate appearances. He hit 18 in 583 in 2011, which was previously his best season.

I really like the total package of Trea Turner, but I don’t see him shouldering much more of the offensive load. He had strong numbers with a .298/.353/.497 slash and a 117 wRC+, but there isn’t a ton of room for growth, I don’t think. The 26-year-old has hit 19 homers in back-to-back seasons. A spike in his BB% to his 2018 level would raise his OBP, but that could come at the expense of a slight power drop and I wouldn’t be surprised to see regression in his .348 BABIP.

Adam Eaton finally stayed healthy for a full season for the first time since 2016 and had good offensive numbers with a .365 OBP and a 15/15 season with a nice power and speed combo. His offensive performance fell mostly in line with his career numbers, though. His 107 wRC+ was indicative of the league-wide scoring environment, so it could rise, but I don’t see a lot of growth from him either.

It’s important at this point in time to clarify something for the readers. I’m not saying these guys stink. Quite the contrary. It’s just that we are talking about a high season win total line and every bit of regression, positive or negative, is something that I take into account. If multiple players have small or modest regression signs, that can add up to a lot. Similarly, if there are small positive regression signs for several players, that has to be considered. It’s all about the aggregate picture for me.

And so far, I see some offensive numbers that I am either concerned about or just don’t see a lot of room for improvement.

Maybe Victor Robles can be that guy. I’m not sure that there are a ton of encouraging signs from last year’s full season in the bigs, but he carried a good BABIP at .310, stole 28 bags, and hit 17 homers. He also made terrible contact with a horrible average exit velocity of 81 mph and a 23% Hard Hit%. Add that to a low walk rate and I’m not seeing it from him either. The speed is a potential weapon and the elite center field defense provides a ton of value, but the offensive profile isn’t there.

Asdrubal Cabrera is back in the fold after a .323/.404/.565 showing over the last 146 plate appearances he had in the regular season, but he also had a .235/.318/.393 for Texas and struggled with Philadelphia in the in the second part of 2018. I’m not buying anything more than league average for Cabby.

Maybe it’s Eric Thames, who had a 116 wRC+ and 25 HR in 459 PA for the Brewers. He has managed to work around a 30% K% the last three seasons with a lot of walks and a bit of pop. I mentioned Starlin Castro’s elite second half with a .302/.334/.558 slash and a 129 wRC+, but that doesn’t mean we can ignore his .245/.272/.336 slash and 60 wRC+ in 351 first half PA.

All in all, in a tl;dr way, the Nationals offense could take a pretty decent-sized tumble without Rendon. A lot of guys seemed to play to their peaks or above them last season,
which is what often happens in a World Series year. To me, the only guy with a much higher ceiling within this offense is Soto.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

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The Nationals rewarded Stephen Strasburg for his playoff heroics with a seven-year, $245M pact, which I have to admit carries a good bit of risk. Strasburg has been really good for the vast majority of his career, but he just threw 200 innings for the first time since 2014 and the second time in his career. He hadn’t even thrown 180 MLB innings since 2014 and had only done it twice prior to last season.

Then he went out and threw 36.1 more innings in the playoffs. The World Series hangover is a real thing, but not because of some narrative or some mindset. Winning the World Series is hard! Starters work another 30+ innings. They lose a month of recovery time. The drama of the postseason is impossible to replicate with regular season games in April and May. So on and so forth.

To me, it is about that workload. It is about pushing your body further than it has ever gone before. With someone like Strasburg, who has spent a lot of time in the trainer’s room, I can’t help but consider that for this season and beyond.

The same is true of Patrick Corbin with back-to-back 200-inning seasons to his name and 23.1 more in the playoffs. Max Scherzer battled injuries for really the first time last season and saw his run of 200+ inning seasons snapped at six. Only Justin Verlander has thrown more innings since 2010. Maybe Scherzer, like Verlander, is the freakish exception, but it is a hard standard to continue to uphold the older you get.

The Big Three was relied on a lot in the playoffs. Fourth starter Anibal Sanchez turns 36 this year. The depth options in Erick Fedde, Kyle McGowin, Ben Braymer, Wil Crowe, and maybe even Tim Cate if it goes down that far, are worrisome at best and terrifying at worst. The Nationals only needed 10 starters last season and their four spotlight guys all made at least 27 starts.

Make no mistake, a healthy Nationals rotation will be dominant again, but this is a six-month bet. This is a leap of faith regarding health. In a perfect world, all four guys are healthy. In the real world, they are all on the wrong side of 30 with substantial workloads last season and even prior to that.
The same can be said about the bullpen in all honesty. Daniel Hudson and Sean Doolittle have spent ample time in MRI machines. Will Harris, while dominant last season for the Astros, turns 36 this year. The rest of the Nationals arms weren’t really trusted enough to be used extensively in the playoffs.

Wander Suero is a positive regression candidate with a 4.54 ERA, a 3.07 FIP, and a 3.81 xFIP in 78 appearances. Tanner Rainey could be on the flip side of that coin with a 3.91 ERA, a 4.37 FIP, an ugly HR/FB% and a high walk rate. Roenis Elias only had four appearances after being acquired from the Mariners.

The bullpen is really top-heavy and that always worries me, especially with what Hudson and Doolittle have gone through in recent years.

**Positives & Negatives**

The elephant in room has gone back into the wild. The Nationals didn’t just win a playoff series, they won all of the playoff series. Organizationally, the removal of that weight should have some positive impact going forward. Getting back to the mountaintop isn’t easy, but at least the Nationals have gotten there once and took care of other dragons along the way.

As always in these good divisions, there are 57 tough games against fellow NL East contenders. Four of the five teams in the NL Central could also classify as contenders. The best team in baseball is in the West and the Diamondbacks and Padres look pretty legit. Furthermore, the Nationals draw the AL West in interleague play, where four of those five teams look pretty decent, including two AL elites. The margin for error thins when you talk about a gauntlet like that and specifically for a team that has a big loss on offense.

**Pick: Under 90.5**

This is perhaps my boldest call in the 2020 MLB Betting Guide. The Nationals are the prototypical team to fall victim to the World Series hangover. The loss of Rendon takes a huge chunk out of the team’s offensive upside. Scherzer, who seemed impermeable and impenetrable for so many years, finally showed some cracks in the exterior after turning 35. Strasburg pitched more than he ever has and had a month less to recover. Corbin had Tommy John not too long ago and also worked extensively, including some relief efforts.

There is a ton of talent on this ballclub and this is probably the year that Juan Soto cements himself as a top-10 player in baseball. I just feel like a lot of guys peaked or came very close to it last season and they are likely to regress, either because of the mean or because of injury. The Nationals put together one of the most dominant five-month stretches we have ever seen to erase that bad start and win the “piece of metal” known as the Commissioner’s Trophy.
That takes a lot out of a team and it takes a lot out of an individual. The drama. The excitement. The adrenaline. It’s all gone. It evaporates into thin air. It is hard to play “meaningless” games in April and May. It is hard to get going.

Can the Nationals flip the switch? Of course they can. We saw it last year. I just don’t think we see it this year. I think this is a very talented team that wins 86-88 games. The range of outcomes isn’t big enough for me to bet on this win total, so it may be the boldest pick without a bet in the guide, but I am approaching the Nationals with extreme caution after slaying the playoff dragon.
NL Central Futures

The four-horse race in the National League Central Division is going to make for a lot of interesting talking points. You’ve got the perennial contenders of the St. Louis Cardinals and Chicago Cubs. You’ve got the Milwaukee Brewers, who won the division in 2018 and also made the playoffs as a Wild Card in 2019. You’ve got the Cincinnati Reds, who made a lot of upgrades this winter and played much better than last season’s record would indicate.

You also have the Pittsburgh Pirates, who will be a non-factor.

This one is going to be a tough handicap for a lot of people out there. A really low PECOTA projection on the Cardinals induced some season win total under money, but it has not displaced them from the top spot in the NL Central Division futures list. Of course, that seems like it could all change quite a bit as we get closer to the season.

It is interesting to look back at last year’s odds and see where everybody was priced and how things shook out. These were taken from BetOnline Sportsbook on March 5. The Cubs were the +175 favorites, with the Cardinals at +225, the Brewers at +250, the Reds at +1200, and the Pirates at +1400.

What a difference a year makes.

Here are the odds to win the NL Central per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

St. Louis Cardinals +215
Chicago Cubs +265
Milwaukee Brewers +310
Cincinnati Reds +365
Pittsburgh Pirates +9500

The Reds, who went 75-87 last season, have gone from +1200 to under +400. This is a real challenge for me as somebody who does like the Reds a lot based on their commitment to analytics and their offseason additions. They are getting a lot of the respect that I have given them. Their season win total line last season was 79.5 in early March and there was a lot of interest on the over throughout the process.

Their season win total line this time around is 84.5, so they have gotten a good bit of attention and the adjustments have been made accordingly.

With that being said, there are three approaches to the NL Central Division. You bet the Cubs. You bet the Reds. You bet the Cubs and the Reds and look to get some profit with the two likeliest teams to win the division.

The odds may not bear out that last part, but the Cardinals are not worthy of being the favorites. They won the division last season, but they lost some pieces from last season
and are already dealing with pitching injuries that will force them to tap into some of their young, uncertain arms. The low PECOTA projection that pegged the Cardinals as a .500 team carries a lot of weight in my mind because it falls in line with the regression that I was expecting.

The Cubs went 84-78, so it looks like they weren’t very good on the surface. Maybe they weren’t. They also went 2-10 in their last 12 games to go from 82-68 and a pace of around 89 wins to 84-78. They could very well have given the Cardinals a run in the last week of the season. Because they didn’t, it feels like we are getting some decent value on that +265 price tag. While I am big on the Reds, the Cubs and their track record, particularly on offense, is more projectable.

The Reds at +365 are hard to pass up. A lot of people like this team and deservedly so. This is a team that was far better than that 75-87 record, with a BaseRuns record of 84-78 and a 3rd Order Win% record of 86.4-75.6. A regression to the expectation and a leap based on the new additions could very well put the Reds into that 88-90 win range and contention for the division.

To me, the Cardinals and Brewers will slide backwards, leaving the door open for either the Cubs or Reds. If you can only play one, it would have to be the Cubs, however you can bet 1 to win 2.65 on the Cubs and 1 to win 3.65 on the Reds. More often than not, one of these two teams wins the division. Obviously you can’t guarantee profit here, but you cover the two most likely bases.

That would be my approach to the NL Central if you want to get invested in the futures market.
**Chicago Cubs**

There are a lot of fanbases out there that would love to consider 84-78 a terrible year. As fans, and even as bettors, we take a lot for granted. One of the hardest things to do in professional sports is to be consistent. To set a standard and maintain it year over year. The Chicago Cubs set new standards with their four-year run from 2015-18. They won their first World Series in 108 years and won at least 92 games every season.

They fell short of that standard in 2019 with 84 wins. Even though the Cubs only finished seven games back of the division-winning Cardinals, which was the smallest gap for any third-place team, it was pretty clear that changes needed to be made. Joe Maddon and the Cubs kind of, sort of, mutually parted ways. That felt like a catalyst for an offseason full of news.

And yet it hasn’t been. Owner Tom Ricketts is among those that have cried poor in advance of arguably the biggest CBA negotiation in league history. Nothing has changed. The underwhelming, underachieving cast of characters that made up the 2019 season is almost entirely in tact. The same starters are all in place in the lineup and there aren’t many different nameplates in the clubhouse for starters or position players.

There hasn’t even been a token reshuffling of the deck. It is hard to feel optimistic about a team like that and those types of feelings often permeate the betting markets. The winner of the offseason almost always gets a bump and more often than not falls short of expectation. Teams that don’t do anything are chastised for their lack of proactivity and aggression. The Cubs are a good team with an awesome core of position players and enough working parts in the rotation to be a threat. They play in a big market with a world-renowned brand that allows for a good amount of offseason spending to plug holes and improve the ballclub. For some reason, it hasn’t happened and the Cubs will be lambasted and punished in the lead-up to the season for what, quite frankly, appears to be apathy.

For better or worse, I have a bone to pick with the analytically-inclined organizations in baseball that make a decision based on the alternate standings metrics. Believe me, I consider them and even use them as a handicapping tool in my win total picks. I fully grasp the importance and the suggestive nature of these metrics. But, I think using them as a crutch is a mistake.

The Cubs were 89-73 per BaseRuns, which would have put them just one game behind the Cardinals and four games ahead of the Brewers, so, the Cubs would have been a Wild Card team. By 3rd Order Win %, the Cubs were 88-74, or second in the NL Central and in the WC Game against the Braves. The Cubs were also 90-72 by Pythagorean Win-Loss. What happens when these numbers all come together to suggest bad luck is that front offices simply take it for granted and assume that regression to the expectation will occur.
I’ve seen the Indians do this for years. Sports are unpredictable. Baseball, inherently, is prone to a lot of variance. The Cubs are relying on some things that may never come to fruition at the expense of spending money on the ballclub and actively taking steps to improve the talent level of the team.

Let’s see if that course of action, or, well, inaction, is enough to allow the Cubs to bounce back and go over their season win total with a new manager in World Series hero David Ross.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 85.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 84-78

Run Differential: +97

Pythagorean W/L: 90-72

BaseRuns Record: 89-73

BaseRuns Run Differential: +78 (5.03/4.55)

3rd Order Win% Record: 88.0-74.0

Record in One-Run Games: 19-27

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Jason Kipnis, Ben Taylor, Caleb Simpson, Corban Joseph, Jeremy Jeffress, Steven Souza Jr., Josh Phegley, Tyler Olson, Jason Adam, Carlos Asuaje, Ryan Tepera, Ian Miller, Hernan Perez, Noel Cuevas, Dan Winkler, Casey Sadler, Alfonso Rivas, Jharel Cotton, Trevor Megill, CD Pelham

**Losses:** Addison Russell, Allen Webster, Ben Zobrist, Brandon Kintzler, Cole Hamels, Derek Holland, Jonathan Lucroy, Nick Castellanos, Pedro Strop, Steve Cishek, Xavier Cedeno, David Phelps, Kendall Graveman, Tony Barnette, Clayton Daniel, Tony Kemp

The allegedly cash-poor Cubs went from shopping for designer labels to shopping at Family Dollar. I’m just going to come right out and say it. This is an embarrassing offseason for the Cubs. I can understand why they’d look at the advanced standings metrics from last season and hope for the best, but you have to proactively try and go get that, particularly in a division that appears to be there for the taking.
The best thing that happened this winter for the Cubs is that Kris Bryant’s request for an extra year of service time was denied, which, coincidentally, is one of many reasons why a labor stoppage is coming in the not too distant future.

Anyway, the Cubs signed some guys and not a single one of them is a surefire Major Leaguer on Opening Day. Hernan Perez and Steven Souza Jr. look like good bets to make the roster as bench options.

If you want to say that there are no openings in the everyday lineup for the Cubs or that the rotation is already set with roster guys or guys like Adbert Alzolay or Colin Rea, go right ahead. A team of the Cubs’ magnitude crying poor is embarrassing for the sport.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA**: .252 (13th)
- **OBP**: .331 (8th)
- **SLG**: .452 (9th)
- **wOBA**: .330 (8th)
- **wRC+**: 102 (11th)
- **BABIP**: .297 (15th)
- **K%**: 23.6% (20th)
- **BB%**: 9.4% (6th)

The Cubs didn’t re-sign Nick Castellanos, who was actually sixth among position player fWAR despite only playing 51 games with 225 plate appearances after the trade from Detroit. In fairness to the Cubs, after being extremely critical to this point, it may not be a bad thing to bet on guys like Ian Happ and David Bote. Maybe they didn’t need to go out and get proven hitters at inflated costs when they have some in-house options that show potential.

I’m just a big believer in attempting to limit your variance as much as possible. I’m not sure how Kris Bryant will respond to losing his grievance, but maybe he’ll take his frustrations out on the baseball. It would be nice to see. Bryant has played well enough the last two seasons, but his run from 2015-17 was thought to be what we could expect. He slashed .288/.388/.527 with a .389 wOBA and a 144 wRC+ over those 2,014 plate appearances.

By no means would I say that Bryant has been bad, but he has a .278/.379/.476 slash with a .371 wOBA and a 131 wRC+ over the last two seasons covering 1,091 plate appearances. Bryant has accumulated 7.1 fWAR over the last two seasons, which is lower than his 2016 season alone. Bryant’s power did spike in 2019, going from 13 HR in 457 PA to 31 HR in 634 PA. His wOBA went up 20 points. It was good to see and we’ll see how he does this season, where projection systems place him somewhere between 2018 and 2019.
Anthony Rizzo had a strong bounce back season last year with better fortunes in the BABIP department, more power, and something that was more like his 2014-16 stretch. Once again, though, players that seemed to be setting new standards early in their careers have not fully lived up to them for the Cubs. That said, Rizzo did set a new high in OBP last season and posted the third-best wOBA of his career. He’s been reliable for his career, with 2018 as the outlier season dating back to 2014. He should bat leadoff, but the Cubs seem to be going with Bryant. I’ll save the lineup construction rant for another day.

Kyle Schwarber is still a mess in the field, but a threat in the box with his .250/.339/.531 slash and .357 wOBA. He hit 38 homers, walked 11.5% of the time, and even cut down on his strikeouts in his third full MLB season. Javier Baez didn’t hit 30 homers again, but he did hit 29 in 84 fewer plate appearances. He didn’t replicate his 2018 numbers, but he wasn’t that far off and even carried the high BABIP with some strong exit velocity and contact quality metrics. The K% did go up a little bit, but you’re always going to run that risk with an aggressive swinger. It’s what Baez does when he makes contact that matters.

Willson Contreras isn’t a great defensive catcher, but he’s a great offensive catcher. He would have had a shot at 35 homers had he not been limited to 409 plate appearances. Ian Happ could be a 30-homer cat with more PT this season after hitting 11 in 156 PA last season. David Bote also hit 11, but in 356 PA. He ran a 12.4% BB%. Even Jason Heyward was a league average stick with 21 HR and a quality walk rate.

A lot of guys performed well offensively and the team still struggled. The Cubs were even better with RISP than overall, which is how it generally works for a lot of teams. They had a .259/.353/.480 slash with RISP, a .340 wOBA, and a 108 wRC+. It wasn’t that.

The Cubs felt that they could pinch their pennies and bank on this lineup to be good again. I see no reason why it wouldn’t be, especially with a good backup catcher in Vic Caratini and a lot of versatility on the bench.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA**: 4.10 (7th)
- **FIP**: 4.25 (10th)
- **xFIP**: 4.29 (9th)
- **K%**: 23.3% (13th)
- **BB%**: 8.6% (15th)
- **LOB%**: 74.2% (8th)

Was it Cluster Luck on the pitching side that did the Cubs in? No, not really. The 74.2% LOB% was in the top third of the league. The Cubs weren’t necessarily any worse with
runners in scoring position on the pitching side than anybody else. In fact, they were seventh in LOB% in that department, too.

It’s also crazy that the Cubs primarily used five starters. Teams generally have some problems with run prevention when things are in a state of flux. Jose Quintana, Jon Lester, Yu Darvish, Kyle Hendricks, and Cole Hamels combined to start 150 of the 162 games. For the most part, too, the starters were just fine. Quintana was hurt by some Cluster Luck with a 65.9% LOB% that drove his ERA up to 4.68 with a solid 3.80 FIP. Lester is a guy that I faded a lot early in the season and his command profile continued to get worse with a 4.46 ERA, a 4.26 FIP, and a 4.35 xFIP. He had a 14.6% HR/FB% and a .347 BABIP against. He just didn’t throw a lot of quality strikes.

Neither did Darvish early in the year, as he ran a 22.8%(!) HR/FB%, but also finished up with a 3.98/4.18/3.39 pitcher slash. Keep a close eye on that 3.39 xFIP, as Darvish was awful in the first half with a .433 SLG against and 20 HR allowed in 97 IP. He had a 5.01 ERA with a 5.31 FIP and had an 11.7% BB%. In the second half, Darvish still allowed 13 HR in 81.2 innings, but he had an absurd 118/7 K/BB ratio (not a typo) and held opponents to a .254 wOBA. He found it and found it in a big way and I would not be shocked if we get a career year from him. His HR/FB% went from 25.3% to 19.7% from the first half to the second half and I was expect that to come down more.

Hendricks was solid enough with his 3.46 ERA, 3.61 FIP, and 4.26 xFIP. There are some guys where the xFIP doesn’t really matter and Hendricks is one of them. He doesn’t have eye-popping K numbers and will never run a league average HR/FB%. He just induces a bunch of weak contact and has great command, so his xFIP is irrelevant. He’ll be solid again.

Aside from Quintana, who ran the low LOB%, everybody else seemed to perform close to expectation and most of those numbers were fine.

So, was it the Cubs bullpen that led to the huge discrepancy between actual record and the alternate standings metrics? Not really. In fact, that group showed some big signs of negative regression with a 3.98 ERA and a 4.54 FIP. The Cubs bullpen actually had the largest negative difference between ERA and FIP last season. They were third in LOB% and actually got pretty fortunate in a lot of ways. The Cubs were also sixth in fewest number of home runs allowed with men on base.

I guess the 19-27 record in one-run games could be the culprit. But, still, this is my issue with metrics-based organizations and I’m a big believer in analytics and sabermetrics. Just because something should have happened doesn’t mean it will come to fruition the following year.

The Cubs didn’t lose a whole lot from last season’s rotation. They lose Hamels, which is a big loss if Tyler Chatwood, Adbert Alzolay, and Jharel Cotton can’t replace that production. It also puts a depth guy into the rotation, which means adding another if an injury arises.
The bullpen has undergone a facelift. Certainly the hope will be for more than 23 games and better than an 8.00 FIP from Craig Kimbrel. Kyle Ryan is back, but Steve Cishek, Brandon Kintzler, Pedro Strop, and Brad Brach were second, third, fourth, and fifth in appearances and all of them are gone. Brach was not very good with a 6.13 ERA. Strop wasn’t either with a 4.97 ERA. Kintzler was very good with a 2.68 ERA and a 3.56 FIP, but Cishek enters the year as a regression candidate with a 2.95 ERA and a 4.54 FIP.

Chicago will rely on Rowan Wick, who had 31 nice appearances last season, and then a whole bunch of acquisitions and flamed-out starters, and what looks to be a lot of really replaceable guys. This is the clear weakness of the team and not a particularly good one to have.

**Positives & Negatives**

There sure seemed to be quite a disconnect between Joe Maddon, the players, and the rest of the organization when all was said and done. As much as Maddon became a cranky old man late in his Cubs tenure, at least he was something of a known commodity. David Ross is not and, in fact, played alongside a lot of these guys in 2015 and 2016. I think that is an extremely weird dynamic. Will he be manager or friend? Will the players respect him as a coach or continue to view him as a peer? I think it is unique in a lot of ways and, admittedly, I don’t know how it will play out.

The Cubs are the only team in baseball running out a projected rotation with everybody over 30. The Nationals could end up going that route. I am always scared of pitchers as they get older and as the workload mounts. It is a very hard life on the arm. The Cubs do not have good depth on the pitching side at all, with either the bullpen or the rotation.

**Pick: Over 85.5**

Here is the answer to why the Cubs won 84 games: they went 2-10 in their last 12. That’s it. If you look at them as an 82-68 team with a .546 win percentage and extrapolate that out to 162 games, they would have had 88 or 89 wins. Where are they with the alternate standings metrics? Anywhere from 88-90 wins.

Sometimes there isn’t a big code to crack. It was just fun to keep you in limbo until the end. It is also worth noting that five of those last 10 losses were in one-run games, hence the 19-27 record in those. Otherwise, they were 19-22, which, while not great, falls pretty much in line with how one-run games tend to work.

As a result, I view the Cubs as something of a bounce back team this season. I don’t think they have that high of a ceiling to go out and win 95+ games or something, but I do see them in that 90-win range, which could very well be good enough to win the NL Central.

Admittedly, I don’t love the fact that they didn’t add to this team and I think the bullpen could take quite a step back, especially if Kimbrel doesn’t return to form.
While I do like the Cubs, I won’t be betting their season win total over. I think there is some value in maybe taking a Cubs to win the NL Central future, but there are some worries about the pitching staff. The starters stayed extremely healthy last season and had their numbers helped by Darvish’s second half. There are some concerning trends with Quintana and Lester. Furthermore, this is a team that could opt to trade some guys if Ricketts is really crying poor. Maybe the team parts ways with Bryant. Quintana is an impending FA. Arbitration costs are escalating for Baez, Schwarber, and Contreras. This isn’t a great minor league system outside of Nico Hoerner, who probably makes his MLB debut this season.

All in all, this is a pretty strong pick for guide purposes, but it still doesn’t quite make the cut as a bet heading into the 2020 season.
Cincinnati Reds

It will be in your best interest to get in on the Cincinnati Reds as quickly as you can. This isn’t a cart before the horse thing, as I still encourage you to read through my season preview for the Reds. This is simply to say that this will be one of the popular teams of Spring Training and the lead-up to the 2020 season.

We saw a lot of Reds interest last year before the season and it didn’t play out as anticipated, largely because the Reds were unlucky and on the wrong side of variance. When the dust settled on the 2019 season, the Reds finished 75-87...with a -10 run differential. The alternate standings metrics are far from the be-all, end-all, but the Reds spent most of the season under .500 with a positive run differential. This team deserved a better fate.

The Reds were -18 in run differential over their last nine games to push them to the negative side for the season as a whole. The only time the Reds had a winning record last season was at 1-0. They lost eight in a row after that to open the season. It was a hole that they could never climb out of. They were 24-33 in one-run games and 57 one-run games was the most in baseball.

I talked at length in the Cubs intro about the alternate standings metrics. The Reds were five games worse than their Pythagorean Win-Loss expectation, nine games worse than their BaseRuns expectation and more than 11 games worse than their 3rd Order Win% expectation. This will be a very popular team in the preseason markets and also in the day-to-day betting markets. The helium for this team is going to quite a sight to see.

It isn’t just about last season, either. It is about the fact that the Reds were one of the few teams to spend money of significance in the offseason. There were some big free agent deals that got inked, but a lot of teams sat on their hands. The uncertainty of the upcoming CBA has owners in big markets actually bending over to pick loose change off the ground and hoard it.

The Reds are going for it, man. And that’s good. It’s good for baseball when small-market teams seize free agent opportunities in what is something of a depressed market aside from what the big names like Gerrit Cole and Anthony Rendon raked in. They signed Mike Moustakas. They signed Wade Miley. They signed relative unknown Shogo Akiyama. They spent money to improve a ballclub that is right on the cusp of being very good. They tried and failed to trade for Corey Kluber prior to last season in their quest for another ace-like starter and wound up with Trevor Bauer at the Trade Deadline instead. Controlled aggression typically pays off, particularly for teams that already had a good talent base in place.

So, the Reds will be popular. They will be viewed as a legitimate contender to win what looks like a watered-down NL Central this season with the Brewers showing signs of regression and the Cubs and Cardinals unwilling to spend. Fortune favors the bold and
few teams have been as bold as the Reds this winter. That garners respect in the betting community and in the media and we all know what the court of public opinion can do to a team’s perception.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 84.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 75-87

Run Differential: -10

Pythagorean W/L: 80-82

BaseRuns Record: 84-78

BaseRuns Run Differential: +28 (4.51/4.34)

3rd Order Win% Record: 86.4-75.6

Record in One-Run Games: 24-33

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Pedro Strop, Nick Castellanos, Jesse Biddle, Nate Jones, Boog Powell, Brooks Raley, Shogo Akiyama, Matt Davidson, Tyler Thornburg, David D. Carpenter, Wade Miley, Mike Moustakas, Justin Shafer, Jose De Leon, Travis Jankowski, Mark Payton, Josh D. Smith

**Losses:** Jose Peraza, Kevin Gausman, Christian Colon, Derek Dietrich, Jackson Stephens, Keury Mella, Alex Wood, Jose Iglesias, Juan Graterol, Brian O’Grady, Jose Siri, Jimmy Herget, Nick Martini

If you aren’t a Reds fan, don’t read on. This is going to be a love fest. I love what the Reds did this offseason. It isn’t just the players that they replaced or who they replaced them with. It is a full-on, balls-to-the-wall buy-in with analytics.

It didn’t take long. Shortly after the season ended, the Reds hired Kyle Boddy to take over as the team’s director of pitching initiatives and pitching coordinator. The founder of Driveline Baseball has altered pitching around the league in ways that you cannot imagine. Driveline’s most notable client is Trevor Bauer, who, as we know, joined the Reds at the Trade Deadline in 2019. The Reds also hired Caleb Cotham, a Driveline client, as the director of pitching. Eric Jagers, also from Driveline, was a pitching strategist for the Phillies last season and now works for the Reds.
The Reds pulled Derek Johnson out of Milwaukee prior to the 2019 season, so their commitment to pitching development is far-reaching.

They also have a far-reaching commitment to hitting with a complete overhaul of the staff and development plans on that side. Cincinnati native, and now manager, David Bell was the VP of Player Development for the Giants before coming back to the Reds, where he was a minor league manager for four seasons after his playing career ended.

Commitment to player development is invaluable. And the crazy thing is that the Reds even spent a lot of money in free agency as well. They signed Mike Moustakas. They signed Nick Castellanos. They signed Wade Miley. They signed Shogo Akiyama. They even added to the bullpen with Pedro Strop and one of my favorite bullpen gambles in Tyler Thornburg.

I cannot say a single bad thing about the offseason for the Reds except that I wish the other Ohio team was as interesting.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA**: .244 (24th)
- **OBP**: .315 (22nd)
- **SLG**: .422 (21st)
- **wOBA**: .312 (22nd)
- **wRC+**: 87 (25th)
- **BABIP**: .288 (26th)
- **K%**: 23.5% (19th)
- **BB%**: 8.1% (22nd)

For all of this to work, this offense needs to get better. We saw the dramatic changes on the pitching side, which I will discuss in deeper detail in a bit. The offense has to be better. Great American Ball Park plays as one of the smaller parks in baseball, particularly when the hot summer sun shines down on the Ohio River. The fact that the Reds haven’t been more productive is concerning.

Rather than sit and wonder and hope about internal options, the Reds went out and spent money. They did so in one of baseball’s smallest markets while teams like the Red Sox and Cubs were crying poor. Do all of the puzzle pieces fit together? Admittedly, that remains to be seen. The Reds are just trying to load up on as many useful bats as they can and then make places for them.

Mike Moustakas will play second base when Eugenio Suarez is good to go, but his bat plays anywhere in the lineup. He has posted wRC+ marks of 105 or higher in each of the last five seasons. He is a solid and reliable, versatile, and generally healthy player, minus
the torn ACL he suffered in 2016. Moustakas was basically average as a second baseman in 359.2 innings last season. He’s an upgrade on offense and shouldn’t be too much of a downgrade on defense.

We can’t say the same about Nick Castellanos, who is a downgrade on defense. But, you know what? Castellanos is another good hitter and he goes from cavernous Comerica Park to Great American Ball Park, where his power should play up in a big way. Castellanos got out of a toxic situation and slashed .321/.356/.646 for the Cubs in 225 PA to finish out 2019. I don’t know if that is necessarily the Castellanos that we can expect, but he puts a lot of balls in play, should have 30-homer potential in Cincinnati, and ranked in the 90th percentile in xSLG last season. That will help a Reds lineup desperate for power and contact quality.

Eugenio Suarez is recovering from shoulder surgery, so we wait with bated breath to make sure that his power hasn’t gone, but he hit 49 homers last season with .381 wOBA and a 133 wRC+ in what was a career year for the third baseman. He also walked over 10% of the time for the third straight year. He actually had a higher wRC+ in 2018 with the lower run environment in baseball, but he set a career-high in wOBA and looks like an offensive stud for this Reds lineup again.

We’ll see how much Aristides Aquino plays this season, but he hit 47 home runs in 548 PA between Triple-A and the Majors last season. That’s not a bad bat to have in a pinch. We’ll have to see how Shogo Akiyama transitions to the big leagues after slashing .303/.392/.471 for Seibu in the NPB last season. He has three straight 20-homer seasons under his belt and owns a career .376 OBP in the NPB.

All of the sudden, the Reds don’t need Joey Votto to shoulder the entire load, which is good because it seems like he can’t anymore. Then again, maybe last season was just an outlier for Votto. His .357 OBP was the lowest of his career and he is only two years removed from posting a 163 wRC+. Votto saw a big K% spike last season, as pitchers stopped being afraid of his power. He has only hit 27 HR over his last 1,231 PA. I get the fear about Votto, but now he doesn’t have to be the run producer and the power guy. He can use his elite plate discipline and a little bit of a power bounce back would not surprise me.

Jesse Winker is an above average hitter. Freddy Galvis isn’t, but he is a strong defender at shortstop. Neither is Tucker Barnhart, but he’s a solid defensive catcher and does make up for his offensive shortcomings with a solid walk rate.

All of the sudden, the Reds have something that resembles a league average lineup with a chance to be a lot more than that. They have more guys with good walk rates and power. Remember, it isn’t just about who you add. It is about who you replace. Jose Iglesias was third in plate appearances and posted an 84 wRC+. Nick Senzel played a lot and only posted a 90 wRC+. Castellanos is a big upgrade to Yasiel Puig offensively. Jose Peraza played 141 games and had 403 plate appearances with an atrocious 62 wRC+. He is replaced by Moustakas.
Of the top eight in plate appearances, three had wRC+ marks over 100. All three – Suarez, Votto, Winker – are back. Barnhart and Senzel are still within the org, but won’t be called upon to shoulder a lot of the offensive burden.

I don’t think the Reds go from the bottom third of the league in just about every category to the top third of the league. I think league average is a good bar for this offense. With their pitching staff, that should be plenty good enough.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- ERA: 4.18 (8th)
- FIP: 4.23 (9th)
- xFIP: 4.10 (4th)
- K%: 25.6% (4th)
- BB%: 8.9% (19th)
- LOB%: 73.7% (12th)

Derek Johnson’s influence can be seen all over these numbers. Johnson really elevated the Milwaukee Brewers pitching staff when he was there from 2016-18. The Reds were 24th in ERA, 27th in FIP, 21st in xFIP, 24th in K%, 17th in BB%, and 20th in LOB% in 2018 before Johnson got his hands on this pitching staff.

What happened? Well, Sonny Gray figured it all out for starters. He had the best K% of his career and posted a 2.87 ERA with a 3.42 FIP and a 3.65 xFIP. He had an 11.3% SwStr%, which was the second-highest mark of his career. He looked like a more confident hurler, with elite pitching runs rates on his slider and curveball. His changeup returned as a weapon. His command profile was all around stronger and we have every reason to believe that this is the new and improved Sonny Gray. The .255 BABIP will go up a bit with a high ground ball rate, but I would expect his ERA in that 3.40 range where his FIP was. That’ll play.

Luis Castillo seemed to tire as the season went along, but I have some faith that his second half was the exception. For one thing, Castillo cut his walk rate from 12.3% to 7.4%. He fell victim to some BABIP luck and his command fell off a bit, but he found more strikeouts under the tutelage of Johnson. With an elite ground ball rate and a high K%, Castillo is going to have lots of success again this season. He is a Cy Young Award candidate and I’m not exaggerating. He racks up a ton of strikeouts and ground balls.

Admittedly, I don’t know what to really expect from Trevor Bauer. Bauer is the kind of guy that can swing out of balance really quickly. I think the trade from the Indians was a real shock to the system, particularly because Bauer had worked so hard to develop a rapport with his teammates. His numbers after joining the Reds were not good. His
wOBA against in the first half was .299 and he went to .343 in the second half. He allowed 17 HR in 132 innings in the first half and 17 in the second half over 81 innings.

I do think it takes Bauer a while to get comfortable somewhere, but his chief confidant in Boddy is now in the org. I know he respects a guy like Johnson. He’s been making a concerted effort to get comfortable with his teammates. How all of this comes together is a question for me, but Bauer won’t repeat last season’s 65.1% LOB% in the second half and his K% was actually better in the second half. I think he’ll be just fine.

Here’s one for you. Anthony DeSclafani had a .264 wOBA against in the second half over his final 80 innings. He was having a decent season up until that point, but he actually had the eighth-lowest wOBA in the second half minimum 150 results. His teammate, Sonny Gray, was fifth. The Reds also added Wade Miley, who is an extreme ground ball guy with a plus cutter and a really underrated profile. I like him, too.

In my estimation, the Reds have the best rotation in the NL Central and it could very well be fourth behind the Nationals, Mets, and Dodgers in the NL. Depth is a bit of a concern, with Tyler Mahle the only guy that has a lot of MLB experience, but the Reds have made that big investment into player development, so it wouldn’t be a stunner to see some of their minor league arms make a little bit of a jump.

The Reds bullpen also looks really strong for the upcoming season. I love the potential of Pedro Strop and Jose De Leon to link up with guys like Raisel Iglesias and Michael Lorenzen, who were top-20 caliber relievers in the second half. Strop struggled last season, but that season snapped a string of seven straight seasons with a FIP under 3.60 with a whole lot of appearances in that span. De Leon was once a top prospect for the Dodgers, but he just can’t stay healthy. The stuff is there.

Guys like Tyler Thornburg, who I think found a great landing spot in camp with the Reds, could add depth to the pen. Thornburg, who Johnson is very familiar with from their days in Milwaukee, had a 2.15/2.83/3.28 pitcher slash in 2016 before injuries cost him all of 2017, a bit of 2018, and also most of 2019.

The Reds are lacking a little bit of pitching depth and I preach a lot about depth. It is the only reservation I have about this team.

**Positives & Negatives**

Call me biased if you want, but teams that make a huge push towards analytics are always viewed in a favorable light by me. The Brewers and the Twins are the two biggest recent examples and it is hardly a coincidence that their market sizes are akin to that of the Reds. You have to win from within when you can’t spend a ton of free agent money.

The irony is that these teams have started to spend a little bit more. The Twins did that going into 2019 and won the division with a player like Nelson Cruz. The Brewers added a lot of money through trade, but also signed guys like Moustakas and Yasmani Grandal.
The Reds are building from within and they should take another big leap in that area this season. They’re also spending more in free agency. These are the types of moves that win divisions and lots of games.

**Pick: Over 84.5**

Even if you don’t like my love fest of the Reds, let’s consider what we saw last season. Okay, the Reds won 75 games. That’s not very good. They had a positive run differential last season until the final week of the year. Their BaseRuns record was 84-78. Their 3rd Order Win% had them with nearly 86.5 wins.

Can you honestly tell me that this team is not better than last year? A full season of Bauer, the additions of Akiyama, Moustakas, and Castellanos. Another season with Johnson. The Reds played 57 one-run games with a team that most would say was lacking last season, especially on the offensive side. The offense is better. The pitching staff should be about as good as last season, if not better.

The division, in my estimation, is weaker. The Cardinals have dropped a couple of pegs. The Cubs are fine. This is the first year in forever that I haven’t been all that high on the Brewers. The Pirates are a dumpster fire and in a half-assed rebuild.

The Reds could very well win this division and they’re going over this season win total. This is my favorite season win total bet in the National League.

It has only moved up from 83.5 to 84.5, but I anticipate this one going up even higher as the season approaches. This is the exact type of team that bettors look to back. A team that built up its personnel after underachieving badly last season relative to the advanced metrics is the type of team that takes action.

I like the over a lot. I think the Reds could very well win the division, too.
Milwaukee Brewers

Those that have read me in the past know that I have been a big proponent of the Milwaukee Brewers. I even stood by them last season as everybody was jumping ship in search of the next trendy team.

They racked up another over last season with 89 wins to surpass the early 86.5 line. I was on the over in 2018 when they won 96 games to blow away the win total of 84.5. I was on the over in 2017 when they won 86 games to blow away the win total of 70.5! For the first time in four years, I will admit that I have been put to a decision about the Brewers.

Consistent contention as a small-market team is hard. A lot of things need to go right. In this window for the Brewers, a lot of things have gone right. Christian Yelich has emerged as a perennial MVP candidate since the trade from the Marlins. The Brewers had ridden a dominant bullpen in 2017 and 2018 anchored by Josh Hader, Jeremy Jeffress, Corey Knebel, and some savvy acquisitions like Drew Pomeranz and Joakim Soria.

There were some areas of weakness in 2019. Hader regressed from a home run standpoint, perhaps from the workload, perhaps from the league-wide home run increase. Knebel spent another lost season battling injury. Jeffress fell apart from overuse and was actually released during the season. The Brewers were highly fortunate that Brandon Woodruff emerged as front-line starter because very little went according to plan with the rotation.

Surely you’ve heard of recency bias in betting. It is this idea that what we’ve most recently seen either clouds our judgment or creates price adjustments in the odds. The Brewers won 89 games last season. They finished 16 games over .500. They were also 20-7 in September and entered the final month of the season at 69-66. Milwaukee never touched .500 after beating the Mets 10-2 to improve to 14-13, but they flirted with it a lot and came within two games of .500 in the final week of August.

With that in mind, we have to decide what to base the 2019 season on. Do we look at the end result at 89-73 or do we look at the fact that the Brewers were on an 82-win pace as late in the year as August 30? Not all gaps of seven games are created equal. Not only would this have completely changed the season win total bet, but it also would have kept the Brewers out of the playoffs.

And here, my friends, is the reason why it matters. The Brewers had a Pythagorean Win-Loss record of 81-81 with a +3 run differential. In fairness, they were 85-77 by BaseRuns and essentially 87-75 by 3rd Order Win %. We are being pulled in a lot of different directions by the full body of work and also the one-month outlier.

The Brewers are always one of my favorite season win total previews to write because I have the utmost respect for their organization and the way that they do things. I’m even
more excited this year because I don’t have an easy position in mind like I have the last three years.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 83.5 (105/-125)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 89-73

Run Differential: +3

Pythagorean W/L: 81-81

BaseRuns Record: 85-77

BaseRuns Run Differential: +45 (5.03/4.75)

3rd Order Win% Record: 86.7-75.3

Record in One-Run Games: 27-18

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Brock Holt, Andres Blanco, David Phelps, Mike Morin, Jedd Gyorko, Logan Morrison, Justin Smoak, Eric Sogard, Jace Peterson, Ryon Healy, Avisail Garcia, Brett Anderson, Josh Lindblom, Keon Broxton, Justin Grimm, Omar Narvaez, Eric Lauer, Luis Urias, Chad Spanberger, Ronny Rodriguez, Eric Yardley

**Losses:** Jimmy Nelson, Junior Guerra, Travis Shaw, Tyler Saladino, Cory Spangenberg, Tyler Austin, Drew Pomeranz, Gio Gonzalez, Jordan Lyles, Matt Albers, Hernan Perez, Eric Thames, Mike Moustakas, Yasmani Grandal, Adam Hill, Trent Grisham, Zach Davies, Chase Anderson, Deolis Guerra

The Brewers remain on the cutting edge. They don’t do so with as much fanfare as some of the other teams out there like the Rays, Twins, and Indians, but they are looking for ways to beat opponents from within. They cannot regularly compete in the Wild, Wild West of free agency as a smaller-market team. They’ll pluck a short-term deal here and there, but the Brewers have been unwilling to commit to multi-year free agent deals, which is actually really smart on their part. Find players looking to rehab an image or looking for a bridge deal in hopes of getting a better payday with a multi-year deal. It is rather brilliant, really.

That’s how they’ve wound up with guys like Mike Moustakas or Yasmani Grandal. Those guys this season are Brett Anderson, Avisail Garcia, Justin Smoak, and Jedd
Gyorko. They are also looking for their own Miles Mikolas in former KBO hurler Josh Lindblom.

A late addition to the ballclub just as Spring Training started was Brock Holt. I love this move for the Brewers. He adds depth all across the diamond and gives the team the chance to platoon more often or wait on Luis Urias until they see he is ready to come up. I can’t believe it took until February for Holt to get signed, to be totally honest.

Overall, I wouldn’t say that the Brewers are better, as Grandal is a huge loss offensively and defensively, but everything else has a net neutral feel to it.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

BA: .246 (20th)
OBP: .329 (9th)
SLG: .438 (12th)
wOBA: .324 (12th)
wRC+: 97 (14th)
BABIP: .296 (17th)
K%: 24.8% (24th)
BB%: 10.0% (2nd)

Like I mentioned, the loss of Yasmani Grandal is huge for the Brewers. Christian Yelich led the team in fWAR with 7.8 after yet another monster offensive season. Grandal was a clear second with 5.2. Mike Moustakas was actually third with 2.8. Fourth was Keston Hiura, who did only play 84 games with 348 plate appearances as the Brewers manipulated his service time a little bit.

Outside of Yelich and Hiura, this could be a really pedestrian offensive team. Among the guys with at least 50 PA last season, Yelich, Hiura, and Ryan Braun are the only ones that posted a wRC+ that was above league average. Yelich had a ridiculous 174 wRC+ with a .329/.429/.671 slash as he hit 44 homers and even stole 30 bases for good measure. And he did it in just 130 games and 580 PA. Yelich could very well have hit 50 homers with 25-30 more games.

Yelich made a concerted effort to hit more balls in the air last season and it paid off. I still have some worries about the power with a 35% HR/FB% in 2018 and a 32.8% HR/FB% in 2019, but the fact that he followed that 2018 outlier with a similar number in 2019 eases some of my fears a little bit. That said, we’ll see how the ball plays. He also had a 37.5% HR/FB% at home and a 27.5% HR/FB% on the road and a massive GB% difference with a 37.2% at home and a 48.9% on the road.

I guess Yelich is just elite and savvy enough to pick his spots and I guess he knows how the Miller Park factor plays up. He also had remarkably elite contact quality at home and
simply really, really good contact quality on the road. He’s definitely an elite offensive player. I just wonder if last season was finally a ceiling for him.

Hiura is really interesting. He’s hit well at every level in the minors and had a .303/.368/.570 slash with a .388 wOBA and a 139 wRC+. He also ran a .402 BABIP with a 30.7% K%, so I’ve got some questions here, too. Hiura was top 25 in exit velocity minimum 250 PA and also had the 24th-ranked Barrel%. The UC Irvine product was in the 90th percentile in exit velocity and 97th percentile in Hard Hit%.

All of these metrics may seem like overkill to some, but not to me. I’ve always said that analytics simply quantify what the eyes can see. We know Hiura makes elite contact, but what does that produce? We see the .402 BABIP, which I would typically call for regression with, but then we see elite contact quality. The better the contact, the more likely the batted ball goes for a hit. That is Hiura’s offensive skill set and a lower K% is going to make him one of the most productive hitters in the NL.

After that, we have a big bag of unknown for the Brewers. I would like to think last year was an offensive outlier for Lorenzo Cain. He had an 83 wRC+ for the worst season he’s had since 2013. That was after posting a 124 wRC+ in 2018. Cain played through injury most of the year and it affected him most on offense. He was still an elite defensive center fielder. Will the offense bounce back?

It should. Cain’s Hard Hit% was the best of his career in the Statcast era and his exit velocity remained consistent. After running high BABIPs throughout his career, Cain had a career low at .301. At a minimum, I think Cain returns to being a league average hitter with his elite defensive profile, but he also turns 34 on April 13 and he’s a guy that lives on his legs.

Ryan Braun had a 117 wRC+ with a .354 wOBA and fared better in the BABIP department, but I see some concerning trends. His K% went up and his BB% went down. Keep in mind that Braun is now 36. His 12.1% SwStr% was the highest of his career aside from his rookie year in 2007. He still makes a lot of hard contact with an average exit velocity in the 87th percentile and an 85th percentile Hard Hit%, but if he’s making less contact, walking less, and not adding more power with a subpar launch angle, he has a capped ceiling. Plus, he’s a bad outfielder.

Avisail Garcia is another guy that hits the ball hard. We’re seeing this trend with the small-market teams. They are taking flawed players that have really good contact quality numbers. They may swing and miss a lot or not have positions, but the correlation between offensive success, exit velocity, and barrels is very strong. Garcia doesn’t hit for a lot of power and very rarely walks, but he had a 112 wRC+ for the Rays last season. Garcia’s exit velo did come down a bit last season and so did his Hard Hit%, but he’s been a guy capable of running high BABIPs throughout his career. Back in 2017, his average exit velocity was in the top 9% of the league. He’s actually an underrated outfielder, too.
The Brewers picked up launch angle disciple Justin Smoak, who walks a ton and also makes some pretty solid contact. I actually like betting on a Smoak bounce back, but we’ll see how much playing time he gets. Milwaukee also reunited with Eric Sogard, who had a career year with 2.6 fWAR and a 115 wRC+ last season with the Blue Jays and Rays. He is actually the outlier of the group with bad contact metrics. Brock Holt fills a similar role as Sogard with the ability to play all over the place. Holt is also coming off of his best offensive season against right-handed pitchers with a .357 wOBA and a 119 wRC+ in 231 PA.

All in all, I think the composition of this offense is really fascinating. The Brewers, like most smart organizations, are looking for surplus value at the margins anywhere they can find it. It just feels to me like there are a lot of things that need to go right for this offense to improve, even if somebody like Luis Urias is a clear upgrade to Orlando Arcia.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA**: 4.40 (16th)
- **FIP**: 4.46 (16th)
- **xFIP**: 4.42 (15th)
- **K%**: 24.0% (10th)
- **BB%**: 9.1% (21st)
- **LOB%**: 73.1% (13th)

This rotation looks a hell of a lot different. Brandon Woodruff is the lone constant. The Brewers will turn Adrian Houser back into a starter. They’ll hope and pray for the best with Brett Anderson, Josh Lindblom, and hope that the development path continues for Eric Lauer, who is a guy that I actually like quite a bit.

The Brewers had their Double-A affiliate in Huntsville, Alabama from 1999-2014 and their Triple-A affiliate in Nashville. Affiliation changes sent the Double-A team to Biloxi. The Triple-A team went to Colorado Springs. Biloxi is at sea level. Colorado Springs is at 6,000+ feet in elevation. From 2015-18, development was really difficult and obviously performance was extremely hard to gauge.

Now, the Double-A Brewers are still in Biloxi, but this will be Year 2 in San Antonio for the Triple-A team. When we evaluate the homegrown talent for the Brewers, we have to consider all of this when projecting Major League performance. That is probably one of the reasons why “nobody saw it coming” with Brandon Woodruff. Woodruff only pitched 113.2 innings in Biloxi and was very good. In two Triple-A seasons covering 146.2 innings, Woodruff had a 4.17 ERA and allowed 16 homers. Those were in elevation.

His 2017 cameo wasn’t very good, but his 2018 cameo was and his 2019 was the breakout season. Woodruff posted a 3.62 ERA with a 3.01 FIP and a 3.36 xFIP. He hung
an elite K% at 29% with a strong 6.1% BB%. He was a saving grace for the Brewers, who dealt with a lot of pitching injuries and turmoil on that side last season. We’ll see if the numbers are repeatable for Woodruff. His SwStr% was a little low to carry a 29% K% long-term, but he’s got a really nice command profile and that can play up in the strikeout department.

After Woodruff, though, what are we going to get? As a starter, Adrian Houser allowed a .264/.330/.439 slash with a .327 wOBA and had a 4.57 ERA in 80.2 innings across 347 plate appearances. He was dominant as a reliever, holding the opposition to a .227 wOBA. Houser also missed most of 2017 and a good bit of 2016. I’m not sure how reliable he will be.

Speaking of guys missing time, Brett Anderson just worked 176 innings and made 31 starts for the Oakland A’s. It was the second time since 2009 that he’s worked at least 175 innings. The last was 2015 for the Dodgers. He had one of the league’s worst strikeout rates, but also one of the league’s highest concentrations of killed worms with a 54.5% GB%. He wound up with a 3.89 ERA, a 4.57 FIP, and a 4.79 xFIP.

Oakland has one of the best defensive infields in baseball. The Brewers weren’t bad defensively, but they were pretty average overall. Perhaps Hiura improves at second in his first full MLB season. Perhaps Urias is an upgrade to Arcia, who is decent in his own right. By no means do I believe that Anderson will be a dud. I just wouldn’t be surprised to see a less effective version.

Josh Lindblom is a big question mark. Lindblom worked in 110 games from 2011-14 and then four more in 2017 with the Pirates. They weren’t awful, with a 4.10 ERA and a 4.27 FIP, but he could never latch on for a full-time gig. For Doosan in the KBO, Lindblom posted a 2.88 ERA with a 2.99 RA9 in 2018 and then followed it up with a 20-3 record, a 2.50 ERA, a 2.64 RA9, and a 189/29 K/BB ratio in 2019.

Lindblom could have one of the league’s best splitters and his fastball has good spin rates, as tracked by Brew Crew Ball back in December. To me, a realistic hope for Lindblom is to be league average. Korean hitters are not Major Leaguers, obviously, so Lindblom’s margin for error will be a lot lower.

Eric Lauer is a guy I do like. I’m a little worried about how the transition from Petco to Miller goes, as he trends a little to the fly ball and line drive sides. His ERA was higher in his second season, but his FIP was lower, as he increased his K% and cut down his BB%. His command profile was also better with a drop in HR/FB%, which is a big deal in the context of last season, and his BABIP dropped 16 points, though part of that was a better Padres defense. Still, Lauer is a guy I see a league average type of bar for right now. You won’t find many 24-year-olds with over 260 MLB innings. I see why the Brewers like him.

The Corbin Burnes as a starter experiment seems over for at least the time being. That leaves the depth to guys like Trey Supak, Shelby Miller, Jake Faria, and Aaron
Wilkerson. Maybe we see Zack Brown this season. The Brewers don’t have a lot of high-end pitching prospects right now.

As usual, I’ve gone long on the Brewers, as I always do, since they’re one of my favorite teams to follow. Josh Hader should be just fine at the back end of the bullpen. He had a 2.62 ERA with a 3.10 FIP and a 2.36 xFIP while carrying around that obscene 21.4% HR/FB%. Hader did allowed a .452 SLG in the second half over 32.2 innings, but he also improved his K% and cut his BB% last season. Those are good signs.

The rest of the bullpen is interesting. You’ve got some pitch-to-contact lefties like Brent Suter and Alex Claudio. You’ve got the elite fastball of Freddy Peralta. You’ve got the elite velocity of Ray Black. It’s just not a group that I love this season. It is maybe a little more top-heavy than previous years and any Hader injury would be catastrophic.

The numbers also fell off without Derek Johnson. Johnson now serves as the Reds pitching coach and Cincinnati saw similar gains from 2018 to 2019 that the Brewers saw from 2015 to 2016 and from 2016 to 2017. He proved to be a very big loss last season and that concerns me going into this one.

**Positives & Negatives**

The Brewers are very top-heavy. Yelich, Hiura, Woodruff, Hader. I’m always worried about teams like that. There are bounce back candidates on the offensive and pitching sides of the spectrum, but those four guys shoulder a lot of the load for the Brewers. Let’s hope that they stay healthy.

More often than not, I’ve given the Brewers the benefit of the doubt over the last few years because I respect how they do things. That front office is simply brilliant. In my estimation, you have to keep that in mind with win totals. The smartest and sharpest organizations are likely to get more out of their teams than others, even if they are flawed.

**Pick: Under 83.5**

I think the Brewers hit the skids in 2020. The top-tier talent on this team is very impressive, but I see too many holes across the rest of the roster and I don’t think the magic potion is there this year. The Brewers were on pace for 83 wins last season before September, when they somehow rallied together in the absence of Yelich.

That is the part that stands out to me, though. They were on an 83-win pace with Yelich going nuclear and the breakout campaign from Woodruff. How is that supposed to inspire any confidence going into the 2020 season?

As always, the Brewers made some creative and thought-provoking signings. I’ll always give them the benefit of the doubt with the guys that they get. The Grandal loss one year after losing Johnson is doubly damaging to this pitching staff. Grandal was third in
Framing Runs Above Average per Baseball Prospectus. New starting catcher Omar Narvaez was 110th out of 113 catchers. Manny Pina was pretty good, so maybe he can save the staff, but the Brewers will have to decide between offense or defense because Narvaez is a much better hitter.

I’m not confident enough in this one to make it a bet, but it is the pick for the purposes of the guide. After all, I preach how numbers-savvy teams and organizations tend to surpass expectations. The Brewers are brilliant in that regard. I am just anticipating a step back from this team and it is a team that simply cannot afford an injury to Yelich, Hader, Woodruff, or Hiura. Even with those guys, the ceiling is too low for the Brewers.
**Pittsburgh Pirates**

Out of 30 MLB win total picks, I had nine misses last season. The worst was far and away the Detroit Tigers, but the second-place prize goes to the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Pirates felt like a team that could contend in the NL Central to me going into last season, but that was absolutely, unequivocally not the case.

The toxic environment in Pittsburgh was far worse than I thought and things just got progressively worse as the season went along. The Pirates actually started 12-6 over their first 18 games, but by the end of October, Clint Hurdle was fired, Neal Huntington was fired, team president Frank Coonelly was fired, Felipe Vazquez was in jail for being a predator and a pedophile, and the organization had next to no direction.

So, it was a big swing and a miss to say the least, though I guess it spoke to my dislike of the NL Central as a whole. At least that part was true, as the Cardinals had six fewer wins than any other division champ and only the Diamondbacks had fewer wins among second-place teams than the Brewers.

Starling Marte and Josh Bell stayed mostly healthy, but Gregory Polanco was not and neither was Jameson Taillon. In retrospect, the Pirates had minimal margin for error and the bullpen didn’t perform up to the expectations that I had.

Of course, through it all, the Pirates still hit the All-Star Break at 44-45. I’m not saying it could have gone either way because they clearly weren’t that good of a team, but Pittsburgh only won three games in the month of July after the All-Star Break and then lost eight of nine to open August. After starting the year 28-28 through the month of May, the Pirates were 41-65 the rest of the way, including a 25-48 stretch in the second half in which they were outscored by 117 runs.

Pittsburgh was beaten 39 times by five or more runs. The pitching staff was simply atrocious. The offense wasn’t good either, but the Pirates pitchers never really gave the team a chance most nights. In fact, the Pirates allowed the fourth-most runs per game last season. Admittedly, that was something I did not expect. If I had expected them to be that bad, there is no question that I would have shied away with such a pedestrian offense.

But, it is a new season. The Pirates have a new manager in Derek Shelton and a new GM in Ben Cherington, who was most recently with the Toronto Blue Jays as the vice president of baseball operations. Huntington, one of many branches of the Cleveland Indians coaching/executive tree, never really seemed to translate analytics to the Pirates as well as we have seen from other former Indians employees. Cherington is not a branch of the Indians tree, but did work alongside Mark Shapiro and Ross Atkins in Toronto.

I don’t want to necessarily call this a rebuilding job in the Steel City, but a large-scale clean-up needs to take place. The culture of the organization needs to change and continued development needs to take place at the minor league levels because the Major
League talent leaves something to be desired. They just don’t have a ceiling consistent with the other teams in the division. I found that out the hard way last season.

With a brand new front office and a brand new outlook, the Pirates can wipe the slate clean in 2020. Does that mean we’ll see more of the Jolly Roger?

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 69.5 (105/-125)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 69-93

Run Differential: -153

Pythagorean W/L: 68-94

BaseRuns Record: 66-96

BaseRuns Run Differential: -157 (4.59/5.55)

3rd Order Win% Record: 65.9-96.1

Record in One-Run Games: 19-25

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Jarrod Dyson, Andrew Susac, Charles Tilson, Derek Holland, Robbie Erlin, John Ryan Murphy, Guillermo Heredia, Phillip Evans, Socrates Brito, Miguel Del Pozo, Luke Maile, Hector Noesi, Brennan Malone, Liover Peguero, Sam Howard

**Losses:** Elias Diaz, Wei-Chung Wang, Yefry Ramirez, Francisco Liriano, Lonnie Chisenhall, Melky Cabrera, Corban Joseph, Jake Elmore, Steven Baron, Starling Marte, Dario Agrazal, Alex McRae, Parker Markel

The best transactions for the Pirates this winter have come on the executive side. They fired Neal Huntington and Frank Coonelly. They are starting over as best as they can. Apparently starting over included trading Starling Marte to the Diamondbacks for Liover Peguero and Brennan Malone. The Pirates also got some international free agent money.

Peguero is only 19 and spent last season in the low levels of the minors. Malone is also 19 and worked just eight pro innings after being drafted in the supplemental part of the first round of the June draft. In other words, those guys won’t help the Pirates this season.
The Pirates got worse for 2020 by trading their best player and didn’t really get any better with the guys that they acquired.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .265 (7th)
- **OBP:** .321 (18th)
- **SLG:** .420 (22nd)
- **wOBA:** .313 (21st)
- **wRC+:** 92 (19th)
- **BABIP:** .309 (4th)
- **K%:** 19.5% (2nd)
- **BB%:** 6.8% (27th)

This offense just isn’t very good. Josh Bell is the best offensive player on the team. He hit 37 home runs and slashed .277/.367/.569 with a .378 wOBA and a 135 wRC+. Starling Marte was the only other player to hit at least 20 home runs. The high batting average for the Pirates is all well and good, but only the Royals, Tigers, and Marlins hit fewer home runs. Only the Marlins, Tigers, and White Sox walked less often.

It was good to see the power spike from Bell because he went from 26 home runs in 2017 to 12 in 2018. His 135 wRC+ was a career high. He is one of the few Pirates that walks a lot and he also falls in line with the team’s offensive strategy of not striking out. Bell makes a lot of quality contact, grading in the 90th percentile for exit velocity, Hard Hit%, xwOBA, and xSLG. He is the cornerstone and centerpiece of this lineup.

Bryan Reynolds is also an above average hitter. He slashed .314/.377/.503 with a .371 wOBA and a 131 wRC+. I’m not sure that a .387 BABIP is repeatable, but he does grade pretty well overall in the contact quality metrics. He actually led the Pirates in fWAR last season and hit 16 homers, which was third behind Bell and Marte. Those are your offensive building blocks.

Beyond that, the Pirates don’t have much. Colin Moran battled a hip injury in the second half and saw his numbers fall from .294/.335/.480 to .257/.308/.369, but he has a fairly low ceiling with a low walk rate and poor contact quality metrics. Gregory Polanco just can’t stay healthy. He had 167 plate appearances last season. He’s a fine player when healthy, but that has been rare. He did post a .254/.340/.499 slash with a good walk rate and a 123 wRC+ in 2018, so there is hope for him, but that’s only if he stays healthy.

Jason Martin struggled to hit in Triple-A in both 2018 and 2019 with little power and very little contact authority. That is kind of a theme throughout the lineup. Aside from Bell and Reynolds, the Pirates just don’t have a lot of guys that hit the ball hard and can carry respectable slugging percentages. That is the way to score runs in today’s offensive environment. You notice that the Pirates were a top-10 offense in batting average and
finished 21st in runs scored. It’s not about hits. It’s about quality hits. Doubles. Dingers. Things that the Pirates can’t really do.

Ke’Bryan Hayes will make his highly-anticipated debut at some point this season, but he struggled at Triple-A last year with a 92 wRC+ in 480 PA. Cole Tucker also struggled last year and has struggled at the upper levels, but has an interesting skill set to follow.

There is very little to get excited about with the Pirates on this side.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- ERA: 5.19 (26th)
- FIP: 4.78 (19th)
- xFIP: 4.72 (20th)
- K%: 22.6% (16th)
- BB%: 9.1% (22nd)
- LOB%: 68.9% (26th)

It sure feels like that disastrous Chris Archer for Tyler Glasnow and Austin Meadows deal has leaked over into every aspect of the Pirates organization. Getting pantsed that badly just seems to be looming over the team. Archer hasn’t been very good. Glasnow looks like a budding star if he can stay healthy and Meadows is on his way as well.

To make matters worse, Jameson Taillon will miss most or all of the season with Tommy John surgery. The Pirates are waiting and hoping that 23-year-old Mitch Keller will be the answer. They just don’t have a lot of guys with high ceilings and that is problematic with an offense as impotent as this one. They really need Keller to take a huge leap this season or for Archer to work his way into a premier trade candidate.

Archer was not healthy late last season, but that wasn’t the only reason he posted a 5.19 ERA with a 5.02 FIP and a 4.36 xFIP. His slider usage fell to its lowest point since 2014, but he still generated a good rate of swings and misses. He just had no command. Again. Archer allowed 25 homers in 119.2 innings, yielded at 20.2% HR/FB%, and the worst walk rate of his career. Maybe it was health. Maybe it was mental. Maybe it was something more, but the Pirates really need Archer to be better. His 4.38 SIERA and xFIP suggest better, but those are numbers you’d want for a fourth or fifth starter. Not a de facto ace.

Joe Musgrove continues to be underrated. The former Astro doesn’t have eye-popping numbers in any department, but the raw stuff is good and so is the command profile. Musgrove fell victim to a lot of Cluster Luck last season with a 63.2% LOB%. His 4.44 ERA came with a 3.82 FIP. I can’t really say that Musgrove will be better this season, but his ERA will be with better LOB% fortunes. He is likely to carry a lower LOB% than
average because of his lower K% and that will keep him from posting an ERA that resembles his FIP in all likelihood.

Trevor Williams and Steven Brault are guys. Rotation fodder. Williams saw a ton of regression last season and posted a 5.38/5.12/5.25 pitcher slash. Many wondered how he was able to posted a 4.07/4.03/4.49 in 2017 and especially a 3.11/3.86/4.54 in 2018. Brault is just a below average dude in general.

The ceiling guy for the Pirates rotation is Mitch Keller. In 11 starts over 48 innings last season, Keller hung a 7.13 ERA with a 3.19 FIP and a 3.47 xFIP. Projection systems have him down for an ERA in the upper 4.10s and a FIP around 4. That seems a touch pessimistic if he has better LOB% fortunes, but the command profile still needs time to grow. In 103.2 innings at Triple-A last season, he had a 3.56/3.60/3.87 pitcher slash. That would play at the MLB level for sure.

The Pirates have some more rotation fodder as depth guys like Derek Holland or Robbie Erlin. Keller is really the only pitcher with tremendous upside this season. Musgrove is solid. The rest is pretty blah, though I’ve always been lower on Archer and his command profile.

The biggest mistake I made with the Pirates last season was in my evaluation of the bullpen. I expected that group to be borderline elite. They were 23rd in ERA and 22nd in FIP. Felipe Vazquez was excellent until going to jail for being a complete piece of human garbage. Nobody else pitched all that well. Richard Rodriguez had a 3.72 ERA, but a 5.22 FIP and a 4.99 xFIP, so it was smoke and mirrors for him. Francisco Liriano had a 3.47 ERA with a 4.53 FIP and a 4.92 xFIP.

Rodriguez is back, Liriano is not. Keone Kela had a 2.12 ERA last season, but with a 3.52 FIP and only 29.2 innings of work. Kyle Crick went from a .316 wOBA against and a 3.23 ERA in the first half to a .389 wOBA and a 7.85 ERA in the second half, albeit in just 18.1 innings. His season ended when he got into a fight with Vazquez.

From a pure stuff standpoint, guys like Kela, Crick, Chris Stratton, with an elite spin rate on his curveball, and Michael Feliz are not bad. But, this is still a bullpen with a lower ceiling than most.

**Positives & Negatives**

Admittedly, I have no way to quantify this, but it was a toxic environment with the Pirates last season. Clint Hurdle was a dead man walking. Neal Huntington probably was, too, especially after that Archer deal. The Vazquez situation was ugly. A lot of the problem areas are gone now, with a new GM in Cherington, a new manager in Derek Shelton, who was previously in the Indians and Rays organizations, and Vazquez in jail.

It should be easier and more fun to come to the ballpark every day. Well, aside from that losing thing, of course.
**Pick: Under 69.5**

It looks to be a long year at PNC Park. The Pirates Opening Day payroll projects to be around $57 million and the team did very little of consequence in the offseason. Archer and Kela are trade candidates come July if they are healthy and performing well. At time of publish, the Pirates were on the hook for less than $20 million in guaranteed money in 2021 and exactly $1 million in 2022, which would be the Vazquez buyout, but the Pirates should be able to get out from under that money.

This just isn’t very good team and there isn’t a whole lot to get excited about going forward. As mentioned, Keller is the guy to watch in the rotation and it would be nice to see the baseball gods quit kicking Musgrove around. Bell could be an attractive trade piece with two arbitration years left, but he will be the best hitter alongside Reynolds in a poor lineup otherwise. Hayes and Double-A OF Oneil Cruz should make appearances this summer.

Otherwise, this is just a bad baseball team in a position to bottom out. This is a pick for the guide and not an official bet as far as season win totals go, but this is clearly the worst team in the NL Central and I don’t disagree with anybody that wants to go under this number with a bet.
**St. Louis Cardinals**

Good health goes a long way. Just ask the St. Louis Cardinals. Their four primary starting pitchers all made at least 31 starts and five relievers appeared in at least 64 games. It doesn’t hurt, however, to remain healthy and not be forced to tap into those second and third-tier players. In fact, it generally helps a team to great heights, like a division title.

The Cardinal Way is often the butt of a lot of jokes, but what it means to me is that the team has tremendous depth at the MLB level and also in the upper minors that allows the team the ability to play a lot of different platoons and also fill the void when somebody does get hurt.

It is impossible to overstate how important average players are. So many players in the Major Leagues are below average compared to their peers. When it comes to the Cardinals, one of the reasons why they have been so consistent over the last 20 years is that they never trot out a lot of “bad” players. They always have somebody waiting in the wings that can play at a competent level. That is why the Cardinals have one losing season since 1999 and 13 playoff appearances.

Last season, though, marked the first time that the Cardinals were in the playoffs since 2015. They only used 43 players total and only 23 pitchers. The 662 runs that they allowed were the fewest since 2015, which, coincidentally, was the last time that the Cardinals won the division.

I talk a lot about how people want to find teams that they can trust when they bet on sports. Sometimes the hardest bet to make is the right one, but there are people out there that simply cannot pull the trigger because it is too difficult. With the Cardinals, by and large, you know what you are getting. That played itself out this past season and could very well play itself out this season, too. After all, the Cardinals won fewer than 85 games just three times in the first two decades of the 21st century. The irony is that they actually won the World Series one of those years with an 83-78 record in 2006.

You know the floor is high for the Cardinals. It always is. The ceiling is always the question, particularly when it comes to season win totals because a level of consistency such as this invites higher expectations and higher projections. Last season’s win total line was 88.5. The last five years have been 88.5, 86.5, 83.5, 87.5, and 87.5. You don’t get a whole lot of margin for error and, interestingly enough, the 83.5 season was the year that the Cardinals finished with 83 wins.

The last five years, the Cardinals have won 91, 88, 83, 86, and 100 games. In other words, there is rarely a lot of value on the number itself. That means that you have to dig deep into this team and see how it stacks up against odds that suggest a Wild Card Game appearance or higher. You have to survey the rest of the division and see how many of those 76 games are there for the taking.
Let’s remember, this is a team that hit the All-Star Break at 44-44. St. Louis was 47-27 after the Break and that included four losses in the last five games. An 18-7 April gave way to a 9-18 May and a 13-13 June. Things all came together after the Midsummer Classic.

I don’t know if that necessarily gives us a starting point for 2020, but it sure gives us a lot to think about.

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline: 87.5 (120/-140)**

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 91-71

**Run Differential:** +102

**Pythagorean W/L:** 92-70

**BaseRuns Record:** 90-72

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** +85 (4.64/4.12)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 91.4-70.6

**Record in One-Run Games:** 25-22

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Brad Miller, Oscar Hernandez, Kwang-hyun Kim, Austin Dean, Matthew Liberatore, Edgardo Rodriguez, Ricardo Sanchez

**Losses:** Dominic Leone, Joe Hudson, Luke Gregerson, Marcell Ozuna, Michael Wacha, Tony Cingrani, Diowill Burgos, Randy Arozarena, Jose Martinez, Adolis Garcia, Mike Mayers, Ramon Urias

It was a pretty quiet and mostly boring offseason in St. Louis. The Cardinals will go into the 2020 season with most of what they had through the 2019 season. The lineup looks almost exactly the same, as the Cardinals do lose some depth in Randy Arozarena and Jose Martinez. It is rather amazing that six of the projected eight regular starters in the Cardinals lineup are homegrown. That is a rarity.

The rotation adds KBO pitcher Kwang-hyun Kim to replace Michael Wacha and the bullpen looks just about the same. It is a rather boring situation, but some would say that
the Cardinals didn’t need much after winning 91 games and the NL Central last season. Most of the depth in the minor leagues is homegrown as well.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .245 (23rd)
- **OBP:** .322 (17th)
- **SLG:** .415 (23rd)
- **wOBA:** .314 (19th)
- **wRC+:** 95 (15th)
- **BABIP:** .292 (22nd)
- **K%:** 23.0% (13th)
- **BB%:** 9.1% (13th)

It is kind of a wonder that the Cardinals won the NL Central with offensive numbers this bad, but they found a way. The Cardinals were tied for second in stolen bases, which is something we don’t really think about too often in this current run environment.

Like I’ve talked about before, you can go a long way by having a lot of good players, even if you don’t have a lot of great players. The Cardinals are mostly league average or better at just about every position. Nobody actively hurts the team on a regular basis and when that is the case, teams wind up being pretty solid.

The best offensive player for the Cardinals was Tommy Edman, who posted a 123 wRC+ and a .357 wOBA with a .304/.350/.500 slash and a .357 wOBA in 349 plate appearances. There were a lot of guys between 100 and 116 in wRC+, including top fWAR man Paul De Jong, who was league average on offense, but excellent on defense. It was something of a lackluster season for Paul Goldschmidt with a 116 wRC+ and a .346 wOBA. He did hit 34 homers, but had just a .303 BABIP and that hurt both his average and OBP. The .346 OBP was the lowest of Goldy’s career in a full season.

My take on the Cardinals is that they need a lot of these guys to be better offensively if they want to replicate last season. It feels like St. Louis just benefited from Jack Flaherty’s second-half run and the fact that the NL Central just wasn’t awesome last season. Goldschmidt can’t run a .346 OBP and a .476 SLG in the middle of the lineup. He just can’t.

It was Goldschmidt’s lowest season in average exit velocity and Hard Hit% in the Statcast era, though he still graded in the 70th and 72nd percentiles, respectively. I don’t know if the 32-year-old is on the decline or not, but I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt for this year and expect a modest bounce back effort.

As far as the rest of the lineup, Kolten Wong’s BABIP-based profile helped him to a .285/.361/.423 slash. Dexter Fowler had a nice season with a 12.9% BB% and a little bit
of extra pop to post a 103 wRC+. It was a lot better than the 63 wRC+ he posted in 2018, but nowhere near the 122 or 129 he had in 2017 and 2016. Those appear to have been outliers for Fowler, though.

Matt Carpenter is the guy that really needs to pick it up. Carpenter had a 95 wRC+ in 492 plate appearances and carried just a .226 average. Carpenter had a 140 wRC+ in 2018 with a career-best total of 36 homers and a 15.1% BB%. The projection systems are looking at a mild bounce back for Carpenter, but not to where he previously was. He turned 34 in November and this may just be a case where he is hitting the aging curve. On the other hand, he also contended with injuries most of the year. His contact metrics were poor and I am not optimistic.

The Cardinals offense worries me a lot. Harrison Bader is a platoon player. Wong doesn’t have much power. Fowler, Goldy, Carpenter, and Yadier Molina are all on the wrong side of 30 and seem to be in various phases of the aging curve. Edman looks like something of a regression candidate, particularly with how low walk rate. A BABIP-dependent profile always worries me.

The bench options are not super inspiring. We could see more of prospect Andrew Knizner and should see the debut of 21-year-old Dylan Carlson, who slashed .281/.364/.518 in Double-A over 483 plate appearances before slashing .361/.418/.681 in Triple-A over his final 79 PA of the season.

It is just kind of a blah lineup. And maybe that works for the Cardinals, as most of these guys are established with track records and fairly safe projections. Again, not a single one of these guys actively cripples the team. There is value in that.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA**: 3.82 (5th)
- **FIP**: 4.27 (11th)
- **xFIP**: 4.36 (12th)
- **K%**: 23.1% (14th)
- **BB%**: 9.0% (20th)
- **LOB%**: 75.8% (3rd)

Ultimately, though, the Cardinals made the playoffs last season because of their pitching staff and Jack Flaherty. This was a 58-55 team as of August 7 and the Cardinals would go 32-12 over the next 44 games to lock up the division before limping into the playoffs and actually beating the Braves in the NLDS.

Overall, Flaherty finished the season with a 2.75 ERA, a 3.46 FIP, and a 3.64 xFIP in his 196.1 innings with 4.7 fWAR. That doesn’t paint the proper picture. As one of my Cy Young picks last season, Flaherty struggled out of the gate. He hit the All-Star Break
with a 4.64 ERA, a .444 SLG against with 20 homers allowed in 97 innings, and a 4.74 FIP. Nobody saw his second half coming.

In the second half, Flaherty worked 99.1 innings with a 0.91 ERA, a .142/.208/.217 slash against, a .189 wOBA against, only five homers allowed, a 2.22 FIP, a 3.19 xFIP, a 33.9% K%, a .142 BAA, a .206 BABIP against, a 94.2% LOB%, and one of the most dominant second halves we have ever seen. Flaherty’s second half left the Cardinals seventh in pitcher fWAR after the All-Star Break. He accounted for 4.1 of the fWAR.

He wasn’t the only one that was good in the second half, but he was certainly the best. Miles Mikolas was better from the first half to the second half, going from a 4.46 FIP to a 4.05 FIP. FIP isn’t always the best barometer for a low-strikeout guy like Mikolas, but he continued to carry a low walk rate and shaved about 3% off of his HR/FB%. Adam Wainwright also went from a 4.53 FIP to a 4.18 FIP after the All-Star Break.

The bullpen also improved in the second half, as the Cardinals had a top-10 bullpen in ERA, FIP, and fWAR. In fact, the Cardinals were fourth in bullpen FIP in the second half. A big reason why is that Carlos Martinez came back healthy and looked good with a 3.68/2.77/3.96 pitcher slash over 32 of his 48 appearances. John Brebbia had a 2.57 FIP to go with his 4.30 ERA as a result of some bad luck.

My lineup concerns leak over onto the pitching side here. Flaherty is a Cy Young candidate again this season, but what about the guys after him? Mikolas would greatly benefit from some adjustments to the baseball, as his pitch-to-contact style would play a whole lot better with a 9.2% HR/FB% like he had in 2018 over last season’s 16.1% mark. Mikolas’s profile would definitely be elevated with a ball that isn’t spring-loaded.

Mikolas, though, has come down with a flexor tendon strain in Spring Training and his timetable is uncertain. At best, I would say we see Mikolas at some point in June or July. As a potential bounce back guy for a thin rotation, his loss is pretty damning.

Wainwright is what he is at this stage of his career, though his enormous home/road splits are something to consider. He had a 2.56 ERA at home over 95 innings with a .303 wOBA against. On the road, his ERA ballooned to 6.22 in 76.2 innings with a .360 wOBA against. His FIP was .75 points higher on the road.

Dakota Hudson is a tough guy to peg. The extreme ground ball hurler has plenty of control issues, but he’s got a 3.25 ERA in 202 MLB innings. He also has an ugly 4.78 FIP and a 4.58 xFIP, both of which would suggest copious amounts of regression. Hudson saw a BABIP spike from .238 to .274 year over year and his ERA shot up from 2.63 to 3.35, but this was his first full season as a starter. It is understandable to think that Hudson would regress some more, but extreme ground ball guys can cancel out low strikeout rates with double plays and contact less detrimental than fly balls and line drives. He’s an important cog for the Cardinals.
Over 12 seasons in Korea, all of which were with SK, Kwang-hyun Kim had a 3.27 ERA with 1,456 strikeouts in 1,673.2 innings. After missing all of 2017, Kim posted a K/BB ratio of about 4.5/1 over the last two seasons for SK. I don’t know exactly how he’ll translate to the Majors, but it looks like the Cardinals are hoping for another Mikolas. Given how things look right now, they’re going to need one and then some.

The pitching side for the Cardinals is really interesting because they have guys like Alex Reyes, Daniel Ponce De Leon, Austin Gomber, and Genesis Cabrera as options. They could start, they could relief, they could pitch in Triple-A. This is a St. Louis staff with a ton of depth, but the upside could very well be limited to Flaherty, given that Reyes is likely to pitch in relief since he has only pitched 67.1 innings since 2016. He missed all of 2017 and big chunks of 2018 and 2019. He is being stretched out as a starter in the spring, but I’ll believe it when I see it.

The bullpen looks a lot more promising than the starting rotation, but Carlos Martinez will have to move back to pitching every fifth day now, so the ceiling is a little bit lower. Giovanny Gallegos will get the first crack at saves with an excellent set of peripherals, but an 87.3% LOB% suggests a regression of his 2.31 ERA up towards his strong 3.05 FIP. He’ll be good, but probably not as great as last season. The same may ring true for John Brebbia if his HR/FB% regresses. He only had a 26.9% GB%, but managed a 6.4% HR/FB%. That is how you have a 3.59 ERA with a 4.63 xFIP as a reliever with a high K%.

The bullpen is honestly the least of the Cardinals’ worries, even if the ceiling for that unit is a tad lower without Martinez.

**Positives & Negatives**

While I’m not really high on the Cardinals in any way, they are deep, versatile, resourceful, and just have a knack for winning a lot of games. Previous teams have been far more talented, but the Cardinals almost always seem to perform right around expectation, as I mentioned in the intro. The question is whether or not the expectation is just a little bit too high this time around.

As a general rule, teams like the Cardinals are not my favorite season win total plays to make. I like variance. I like a wide range of outcomes so that I can make a call. We know what we’re getting with pretty much every player on the Cardinals. Consider last season when several hitters underperformed and the team still found a way to get to 91 wins. They’re almost too predictable.

**Pick: Under 87.5**

A very pessimistic PECOTA projection did a number on this win total line. Some people got in at under 88.5, but this was down to 87.5 and -140 on the under at time of publish. Hopes are not high in Cardinal land for this team. Flaherty really pushed a .500 type of
team to the postseason and the Cardinals did enough against the Braves to win a series before getting swept by the Nationals.

It is hard to envision the Cardinals falling so short of expectations because it would be rare air for them, but this could very well be the season. The offense looks pedestrian once again and the pitching staff behind Flaherty has some glaring weaknesses.

After wavering back and forth a little bit, I ultimately pulled the trigger and bet the Cardinals under. In fairness, I did find an 88.5 that was a little bit juiced to the under, but I wouldn’t bet it if I didn’t feel like I had a bigger edge than that. The Cardinals have all sorts of pitching concerns and the offense isn’t nearly as special as we’ve seen in past years. There are some well-known names, but those guys are either tailing off or just don’t live up to the name recognition.

This was a team trending towards .500 for the majority of the season before Flaherty took over. Flaherty could do that again this season, but I have much lower hopes for this year’s Cardinals team. It is extremely scary to take an under with such a consistent squad, but projection systems, friends I respect, and the latest Mikolas setback have taken me to the point of no return.

Cardinals under the total is the pick for the guide and a pick worthy of a bet.
NL West Futures

If you want division drama, you won’t find it in the National League West. It just won’t happen. The Los Angeles Dodgers are the largest division favorite in Major League Baseball and with good reason. After all, they won the NL West by 21 games last season and added the player some think is second to Mike Trout in the person of Mookie Betts.

It would take a serious amount of mental gymnastics to come up with a reasonable explanation as to why anybody other than the Dodgers would win the division. The Dodgers are not top-heavy like some teams in baseball. Sure, Betts and Cody Bellinger are going to carry the WAR torch for the Dodgers this season, but this is a team with depth, experience, flexibility, and a really good pitching staff that runs at least 8-10 starters deep with guys that can get outs.

Here are the odds to win the NL West per 5Dimes Sportsbook as of February 20, 2020:

Los Angeles Dodgers -735
Arizona Diamondbacks +1175
San Diego Padres +1325
Colorado Rockies +7500
San Francisco Giants +14500

Realistically speaking, the only question in the NL West is whether or not you want to lay the enormous -735 price tag on the Dodgers. To be honest, there is some value in it as far as I’m concerned. This line implies that the Dodgers win the NL West about 88% of the time. I think they win the NL West 100% of the time.

It would take a disbanding of the team or some sort of season-long suspension or something catastrophic for the Dodgers not to win this division. Nothing that happens on the field of play would change the outcome. Even if every young player for the San Diego Padres comes up and sets the world on fire, the Dodgers are still going to win the division. Unless some sort of extremely contagious illness rolls through the clubhouse, the Dodgers are going to win the division.

If you really want to post up a lot of money and have it tied up for seven months time, be my guest. If you really badly want those drink tickets or those comp dollars, be my guest.

It is a bummer when we get a division this lopsided and uncompetitive. That being said, the Diamondbacks and Padres could both be really good teams. The other two teams won’t be.

It is worth noting that the Dodgers were -400 last season. I said it should be at least -500. It turns out that was too low as well. Hell, -735 is too low.
There aren’t really any options here other than to tie up a bunch of money for a while. Enjoy those free domestic beers at the bar if you decide to do it.
Arizona Diamondbacks

The Arizona Diamondbacks were one of my big misses from last season. I’ve written in the introductions for a few of these win totals about the bump that teams that “won” the offseason receive. The Diamondbacks lost the offseason last year. They traded away Paul Goldschmidt and lost Patrick Corbin and AJ Pollock to free agency. The end result of the winter was a season win total line of 74.5.

Consider that during the season, the Diamondbacks even traded Zack Greinke to Houston. All that happened was that the Diamondbacks won 85 games, actually underperformed relative to their Pythagorean Win-Loss record, saw the breakout season of Ketel Marte and half-season Luke Weaver and stayed relevant in the playoff discussion into mid-September before hitting a serious rough patch with losses in eight of 10.

Unfortunately that breakout season for Weaver was stopped after just 12 starts because of injury, but Weaver is part of a rebuilt pitching staff that has given the Diamondbacks some unexpected hope for 2020. The Snakes aren’t going to unseat the Los Angeles Dodgers as the division winners, but a Wild Card berth would not be outlandish in any way, shape, or form.

All of the sudden, the Diamondbacks look really dangerous again. They have frontline starting potential in Weaver, Robbie Ray, Madison Bumgarner, and Zac Gallen, a Trade Deadline acquisition from the Marlins. They have a star in Marte and some other really good offensive pieces in Eduardo Escobar and Christian Walker, and just re-upped RHP killer David Peralta at a really reasonable cost.

I was wrong to get too low on the Diamondbacks last season. Torey Lovullo is a solid manager and Mike Hazen is a brilliant executive. What looked like a rebuild to outsiders actually wound up being anything but. Interestingly, Arizona really deserved a better fate in the first half of the season. The Diamondbacks were +53 in run differential heading into the All-Star Break, but only 46-45 to that point. It isn’t easy to go 11-17 in a month with a +19 run differential, but the Diamondbacks did just that in May.

It is always fascinating to see how the market evaluates teams that greatly surpass expectations, especially in such a quiet manner. The Diamondbacks got no fanfare last season and turned themselves into an afterthought with a mid-September swoon. Does anybody even realize that they flew past their season win total line by more than 10 games? Does anybody even realize that they were allegedly in rebuilding mode and were seventh in the National League in wins? All the attention remains on the Dodgers, the Padres and their endless cycle of optimism, and the races in the NL East and NL Central.

The Diamondbacks were only 38-38 against division foes, but they were 14-6 in interleague play and picked up 32 wins by five runs of more. They were 44-37 at home with a +29 run differential and just 41-40 with a +41 run differential on the road. Add it all up and I think the Diamondbacks are one of the most interesting teams to handicap for
2020 because you can make a case either way. As a general rule, these are the teams I look at the closest because I think their odds create the best value.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 83.5 (-130/110)

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 85-77

**Run Differential:** +70

**Pythagorean W/L:** 88-74

**BaseRuns Record:** 84-78

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** +35 (4.92/4.70)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 83.6-78.4

**Record in One-Run Games:** 24-26

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Edwin Jackson, Jon Jay, Trayce Thompson, John Hicks, David Huff, Joe Mantiply, Trevor Clifton, Hector Rondon, Kole Calhoun, Kyle Crockett, Madison Bumgarner, Junior Guerra, Stephen Vogt, Mauricio Cabrera, Keury Mella, Matt Grace, Starling Marte, Jeremy Beasley

**Losses:** Caleb Joseph, Steven Souza Jr., Taijuan Walker, Abraham Almonte, Adam Jones, Alex Avila, Jarrod Dyson, Robby Scott, Yoshihisa Hirano, Wilmer Flores, Brennan Malone, Liover Peguero, Matt Andriese, Pat Valaika, TJ McFarland

The Diamondbacks made a couple of really big moves and those are the ones that stand out to me. They signed reliever David Huff from the Japan Central League and also signed Klay Thompson’s brother Trayce.

Oh. Yeah. I mean, the Diamondbacks traded for Starling Marte and gave a five-year deal to Madison Bumgarner. Ketel Marte moves back to second base to allow Starling to play center field. Ketel is an upgrade defensively to Wilmer Flores and Eduardo Escobar at 2B to pair alongside elite fielder Nick Ahmed at SS. Starling in CF gives the Diamondbacks an incredible defensive outfield with David Peralta and the plus arm of Kole Calhoun.

Bumgarner may not have the ceiling he once had, but he is an extremely reliable left-hander that slots well into a rotation that was pretty heavy on the right-handed side.
The Diamondbacks did lose some decent depth with Jarrod Dyson, Adam Jones, and oft-injured Steven Souza Jr., but those players were mostly redundant. Stephen Vogt is an upgrade to Alex Avila. The biggest loss is likely Yoshihisa Hirano for a bullpen that was looking for arms at times, but Hector Rondon and Junior Guerra fit well.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .252 (14th)
- **OBP:** .323 (16th)
- **SLG:** .434 (15th)
- **wOBA:** .319 (14th)
- **wRC+:** 94 (16th)
- **BABIP:** .293 (20th)
- **K%:** 21.5% (8th)
- **BB%:** 8.6% (17th)

I will preface this by saying that I really like the Diamondbacks for 2020. I also think it is perfectly reasonable to say that I am worried about this offense. Perhaps Ketel Marte’s breakout is totally legit. The 26-year-old banged out 32 homers with a .329/.389/.592 slash, a .405 wOBA, a 150 wRC+, and wound up being one of the most valuable players in baseball with 7.1 fWAR.

His BABIP was 40 points higher than it was in 2018. He hit 18 more home runs in 48 more plate appearances. His OBP was 57 points higher, even though his walk rate went down nearly a full percent. Marte’s xBA of .299 was in the 94th percentile. His .370 xwOBA was in the 88th percentile and his .521 xSLG was in the 86th percentile. You notice that those numbers don’t exactly align with the actual numbers that he put up. Marte was in the 66th percentile in average exit velocity, so nothing overly special, and his Hard Hit% was in the 55th percentile. He also doubled his launch angle.

Over 444 batted balls in 2018, Marte’s xwOBA was .320 with a .396 xSLG. Maybe the breakout is legit. Maybe he just took a major leap as a launch angle disciple. He does make contact at a pretty elite rate with a career 7.4% SwStr%. Everything could have simply come together for him, but it seems really strange that would happen with the Chase Field humidor and some of the NL West road parks. Let’s just say I’m skeptical that it happens again, but it does seem like he made a fundamental swing change to elevate the baseball more and that swing plane seemed to lead to more contact authority.

If it doesn’t, somebody else needs to pick up the offensive slack. Wilmer Flores posted the second-highest wRC+ on the team and he is gone. Christian Walker hit 29 homners and slashed .259/.348/.476 with a .346 wOBA and a 112 wRC+ as he stayed healthy and got consistent MLB playing time for the first time in his career. I do worry about his 11.1% BB% relative to his annual marks in the minors.
Eduardo Escobar had another decent season, but his walk rate fell and so did his BABIP. He still had 3.7 fWAR, but went down five points in wOBA and nine points in wRC+. He also doesn’t have great contact quality metrics either, though his Hard Hit% and exit velocity went up from 2018 to 2019. Carson Kelly looked like a solid offensive piece with a high OBP and good pop as a catcher in 365 plate appearances. David Peralta was good again with a .275/.343/.461 slash, but he really needs to stay healthy and bounce back in the power department. He hit 30 homers and posted a 131 wRC+ in 2018. If Ketel Marte is going to regress, he needs to pick up some of the burden.

Maybe it will be the newcomers that help. Starling Marte is a 20-homer guy with a high batting average and really good speed. Marte doesn’t have the greatest exit velocity, but grades very well in xwOBA, xBA, and xSLG. Kole Calhoun hit 30 homers for the Angels last season. He’s a weapon in the outfield with his arm, which makes up for his mediocre range, but he also walked over 11% of the time to go along with the power that came with an increase in launch angle.

I don’t think the Diamondbacks lineup has a very high ceiling, but I do think league average is plenty attainable again, especially with the skill sets of the newcomers. Where the Diamondbacks will excel is defensively once again. Nick Ahmed actually contributed more offensively last season, but he’s one of the best defensive shortstops in baseball and Escobar will be back at third full-time again. This will be one of the best defensive teams in baseball.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 4.25 (11th)
- **FIP:** 4.40 (15th)
- **xFIP:** 4.42 (14th)
- **K%:** 22.9% (15th)
- **BB%:** 8.3% (11th)
- **LOB%:** 74.0% (9th)

This is the area with a really high ceiling in my estimation. Zack Greinke is gone, but the torch has been passed. Greinke did lead the Diamondbacks in fWAR over his 146 innings of work, but the past is the past. The future is now and that future is Luke Weaver and Zac Gallen.

Weaver was on his way to a breakout season. In 12 starts, Weaver had a 2.94 ERA with a 3.07 FIP and a 3.87 xFIP. He had 69 strikeouts against 14 walks in 64.1 innings and had only allowed six home runs. This was the step that most people expected after his strong 60.1 MLB innings in 2017. Unfortunately, we still go into 2020 with questions because Weaver got hurt and only pitched two innings after May 26. I’m a big believer in what we saw. His command was still a work in progress as evidenced by some the contact
quality metrics against him, but I will always buy high strikeout rates and low walk rates with an improved arsenal.

The other guy is Zac Gallen. Gallen came over from the Marlins in a Trade Deadline deal that featured young shortstop Jazz Chisholm. The Marlins felt that they had enough pitching and wanted a position player and they found a trade partner in Arizona. Gallen only made eight starts with the Snakes, but they were good with a 2.89/3.65/3.89 pitcher slash.

Overall, Gallen had a 2.81/3.61/4.15 over his 80 innings for the Marlins and Diamondbacks. He also had 14 dominant Triple-A starts. Gallen had a plus swinging strike rate at 12.8%, a good Z-Contact rate at 84.7%, and is one of my favorite pitchers to buy for the upcoming season. I like what the Diamondbacks have done developing starters and I really like where Gallen’s career arc is trending.

I’m probably nuts, but I would take a piece of a Zac Gallen Cy Young future if offered. He worked 171.1 innings last season, so we’d need a jump there, but he had 208 strikeouts. We need enough innings to get 200 K and some wins. The Diamondbacks are going to be an exceptional defensive team. This wouldn’t be the worst bet I’ve ever made as long as I find a place taking it. He’s a big time long shot, but he’s got the chance to be very special.

A trio of veterans give the Diamondbacks a really high floor with the rotation. The ceiling is defined by the kids, but we know what we’re going to get from Madison Bumgarner, Mike Leake, and Robbie Ray. It is crazy to think that Ray won’t turn 29 until October 1. He’s also only worked 790.2 innings because of various ailments, but has a career 4.11 ERA with a 3.97 FIP and a 3.72 xFIP.

Ray made 33 starts last season. Once again, he walked a bunch of dudes and allowed a bunch of homers, but you’ll get that with him. You also get a ton of strikeouts. Ray had 235 of those last season, which made up for the 30 homers and the 84 walks. A deader ball is going to help Ray tremendously, as homers have always been one of his two Achilles heels. The other, of course, would be the walk rate.

Ray just posted the second-best SwStr% of his career at 13.6% and had his highest O-Swing%, which is a big deal for him. It was actually the worst season of his career for his slider in terms of FanGraphs’s pitching runs metric at -6.8. So he didn’t have a feel for it or his curveball and still carried about the same K% as the previous season. I’m looking for Ray to maybe have a little bit of a breakout year depending on the ball.

Bumgarner could be something of a bounce back candidate with a deader ball, too. His HR/FB% last season spiked at 12.6%, the highest mark of his career. He still posted a 3.90/3.90/4.31 pitcher slash. He returned to a low walk rate at 5.1% and saw his K% bounce back to 24.1%. His 11.6% SwStr% was a nice response to that lost season of 2018. I can’t help but think that Bumgarner’s command gets better this season, too. He
allowed the highest Hard Hit% of his career at 41.5% and his exit velocity jumped to 89.4 mph. Even if it doesn’t, his margin for error is a good bit higher with this defense.

It seems premature to say that the command is dwindling at 30. I think Bumgarner may have just needed a change of scenery with his Giants tenure coming to a close. A guy that very much needed a change of scenery was Mike Leake. Admittedly, his Diamondbacks numbers were terrible, but he’s a pitch-to-contact guy that was with one of the worst defensive teams in baseball for the Mariners. I still don’t think he’s long for this rotation with Merrill Kelly, Jon Duplantier, and one of my favorites from last season in Alex Young. In fact, I think those guys are all better options and Leake would only make it as a financial decision if he is in the rotation. The Diamondbacks have pretty good starting depth and JB Bukauskas is coming soon. It’s a shame that Corbin Martin had to have Tommy John.

The bullpen looks a little bit better this season. Archie Bradley stabilized in the second half with a .260 wOBA against over 128 plate appearances after a .345 in 189 PA in the first half. Junior Guerra and Hector Rondon are nice additions. Guerra settled into his relief role more in the second half and held the opposition to a .242 wOBA. Rondon is one a year removed from a 3.20/2.79/3.39 pitcher slash. Yoan Lopez got tired in the second half, but was solid in the first half and Kevin Ginkel looked very good in his 24.1 innings.

**Positives & Negatives**

This is a pitching staff that will get a boost from the team defense as a whole. Maybe the Diamondbacks won’t record 117 defensive runs saved or finish second to the Athletics in FanGraphs’s all-encompassing Def metric. But they’re still going to be extremely good, particularly with the Starling Marte addition.

The NL West is a tricky division. With Mookie Betts in the fold and most of last year’s team, the Dodgers are the clear-cut favorites in the division and everybody else is looking up at them. The Diamondbacks are more established than a team like the Padres, who may have a higher ceiling in the minds of most and certainly have the best bullpen in the division, if not the entire NL. The Rockies should be better. The Giants probably won’t be. The Diamondbacks have 76 interesting games within the division making up a big chunk of the schedule.

**Pick: Over 83.5**

The Diamondbacks over is one of my favorite season win totals in the National League. It makes me giddy to think about this pitching staff, particularly with Weaver and Gallen set up for the success that they are. There are worries about guys like Leake, and to a lesser extent Bumgarner, but Leake is easily replaceable.

Defense is something that is never properly accounted for in these win totals. The worst of the worst defensive teams really hurt themselves and the best of the best really help
themselves. The Diamondbacks will be up near the top of the league once again in that department. That will elevate the pitching staff and can also elevate a league average offense by increasing the margin for error.

While I have questions about the ceiling for the Arizona offense, I think this offense has a high floor. I would be surprised to see anything other than league average in a lot of metrics and that will play if the pitching staff is as good as I anticipate.

If nothing else, I don’t see this team as any worse than last year’s version that won 85 games and fell within that 83-88 range in the alternate standings metrics. I think this team is better with more potential in the rotation and better depth on the position player side.

This looks like a legitimate Wild Card contender in the NL.
Colorado Rockies

What are we supposed to think about the 2019 season for the Colorado Rockies? There were a lot of bad teams in Major League Baseball last season, but most of them were expected to be bad and followed up bad 2018 seasons with something similar. The Rockies weren’t supposed to be bad. In fact, they were supposed to continue what they started with 87 wins in 2017 and followed with 91 wins in 2018.

The polar opposite happened. The Rockies went 71-91 and finished 35 games behind the Los Angeles Dodgers. They finished one game behind the Dodgers in 2018. It was a dramatic turn of events and one that left many people wondering what comes next.

It wasn’t a total failure of a season for the Rockies. In fact, they were 44-39 after a win over the Dodgers on June 29. It’s just that they lost six straight heading into the All-Star Break and then found themselves at 60-84 in mid-September before finishing on something of a high note with an 11-7 mark over the final 18 games. The Rockies lost 38 of 53 games in July and August and that was all she wrote for the season.

Colorado is at something of a crossroads now. The Giants are in rebuild mode. The Dodgers remain at the top of the mountain and aren’t showing any signs of slowing down. The Diamondbacks look to be solid once again. The Padres are eventually going to reap the benefits of one of the strongest minor league systems in baseball, or so we think. That leaves the Rockies with what, exactly? Player development is a challenge because nothing can fully prepare the pitchers for Coors Field and the Coors Field Effect on the road is a real thing for hitters.

After all, it was another home/road season full of splits for the Rockies. They scored 500 runs in 81 games at home. They scored 335 runs in 81 games on the road. Colorado went 28-53 away from the friendly confines of Coors and even got fortunate to go 43-38 with a -44 run differential in those 81 home dates. Colorado was outscored by 125 runs over the final 73 games of the season.

Colorado is a hard team to handicap every year because of the Coors Field elements. Hitters obviously perform better in the thin air and pitchers do not. When the Rockies go on the road, the hitters struggle with more spin and more movement on pitches at sea level and pitchers generally struggle to spot their pitches and get a feel for the conditions. This isn’t anything new. Colorado’s record is almost always better at home.

Regression was also expected. It can be really hard to evaluate Colorado because of the major home/road splits, but the 91-win team in 2018 was actually 85-78 by both BaseRuns and Pythagorean Win-Loss with the tiebreaker as Game #163. With a win total of 84.5, the Rockies fell well short of expectations in 2019, but maybe the expectations were just too high. Colorado was just 38-60 against teams .500 or better last season, including a 4-15 record against the Dodgers.
There is a lot to look at from an individual level in order to paint the proper 2020 picture for the Rockies. It does appear, at least at first glance, that this year could be a little less...rocky.

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline**: 73.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record**: 71-91

**Run Differential**: -123

**Pythagorean W/L**: 71-91

**BaseRuns Record**: 70-92

**BaseRuns Run Differential**: -123 (5.10/5.86)

**3rd Order Win% Record**: 69.8-92.2

**Record in One-Run Games**: 22-21

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions**: Tim Collins, Ubaldo Jimenez, Elias Diaz, Kelby Tomlinson, Chris Owings, Mike Gerber, Jose Mujica, Eric Stamets, Tyler Kinley

**Losses**: Yonder Alonso, Chad Bettis, Tim Melville, DJ Johnson, Rico Garcia, Pat Valaika, Sam Howard, Tyler Anderson

If there was an award for Most Boring Offseason, the Rockies would win it. None of these guys are players of extreme consequence. It would be a great story if Ubaldo Jimenez returned and pitched well, but we don’t really have any reason to believe that to be the case.

The only thing the Rockies truly accomplished this winter was ticking off star third baseman Nolan Arenado.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks**:

- **BA**: .265 (5th)
- **OBP**: .326 (12th)
SLG: .456 (6th)
wOBA: .328 (9th)
wRC+: 86 (26th)
BABIP: .321 (2nd)
K%: 23.9% (22nd)
BB%: 7.8% (23rd)

The offensive numbers are just about guaranteed to be decent thanks to the thin air of Coors Field. As you can see, however, the wRC+ for the Rockies ranked 26th. That is a statistic that is both league and park-adjusted. In other words, it accounts for the extremely hitter-friendly nature of Denver and puts the Rockies’ offensive numbers into a formula that levels the playing field.

To me, the Rockies weren’t the fifth-worst offense in baseball, but they surely weren’t as good as the traditional metrics would suggest. I do think that wRC+ may be a tad over the top as far as its adjustment to what Coors Field means, particularly when it does not the capacity to really account for the other side of the coin. We know that the Coors Field Effect isn’t just at home. Pitches that flatten out and become hanging sliders at home have a lot more movement on the road.

The fastball percentage seen by the Rockies offense at home last season was 30.57% of the total pitches seen for the season. On the road, it was 29.86%. It was only a difference of about 170 fastballs, but it still makes a difference. Colorado was dead last in batting average on the road. As you see, they were fifth overall, which gives you an idea of what Coors Field does to impact offense. The Rockies were 29th in wOBA on the road. Only the Marlins were worse.

The Rockies were top-heavy again in 2019. Collectively, the Rockies accounted for 10.5 fWAR on the position player side. 11.7 of that was from Nolan Arenado and Trevor Story. That should sound alarm bells in your head about the rest of the team, given that 11.7 is more than 10.5.

Anyway, Arenado had a .315/.379/.583 slash with a .392 wOBA, a 128 wRC+, and played his usual sterling defense at third base. Story stayed healthy again and had a .294/.363/.554 slash with a .380 wOBA and a 125 wRC+. Those two guys weren’t the only offensive players to shoulder the load. Charlie Blackmon had a .314/.364/.576 slash, a .387 wOBA, and a 125 wRC+ with his 32 homers, but he played poorly defensively, so that cut into his fWAR.

The only other regular bat above league average offensive, at least in wRC+, was David Dahl, who again battled injuries, but managed 413 PA with a .364 wOBA and a 110 wRC+. That was one of the big problems with the Rockies. Even with the help of Coors Field, they just didn’t have enough good hitters. Ryan McMahon hit 24 home runs, had a 10.4% BB%, and a .330 wOBA, which is solid, but not Coors Field solid, as his wRC+ was just 88. Similarly, guys like Daniel Murphy and Ian Desmond posted wOBA marks
just above the league average, but with Coors Field factored in, they graded out below average.

The most concerning thing here is that the Rockies didn’t get any better. They still have Blackmon, Story, Dahl, and Arenado, but that is it. The rest of the lineup is pretty much as it was. The hope is that Sam Hilliard, who posted a .407 wOBA in 87 plate appearances, can have an impact, but we’ll have to wait and see, as he was a pretty average hitter in the upper minors overall.

Another hope would be that top prospect Brendan Rogers can come back healthy from major shoulder surgery. And that Garrett Hampson would figure it out offensively. This is just a group with a low ceiling, even with offensive standouts in Arenado and Story. God forbid one of the two get hurt. Or traded...

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 5.58 (29th)
- **FIP:** 5.23 (29th)
- **xFIP:** 4.75 (22nd)
- **K%:** 19.7% (28th)
- **BB%:** 9.2% (24th)
- **LOB%:** 68.6% (28th)

Maybe the Rockies could have gotten by with their offensive shortcomings if their pitching had shown up the way it did in 2018. The Rockies are never going to post great pitching numbers because of Coors Field, but their definition of “great” came to fruition in 2018. The Rockies were 20th in ERA, 16th in FIP, and 8th in xFIP. As you can see, all of their numbers took a dramatic turn for the worse last season.

What happened? Well, quite frankly, it’s pretty simple. Kyle Freeland completely fell apart and German Marquez couldn’t maintain his dominance, at least not later in the season. We all remember Freeland as one of the best stories of 2018 with his 2.85 ERA, 3.67 FIP, and 4.22 xFIP. Somehow, someway, he managed to navigate the conundrums of Coors with a 20.5% K% and an 8.3% BB%. That somehow, someway was an 82.8% LOB% and a .285 BABIP against.

Freeland used his elite defensive infield, at least on the left side, anyway, to post a .285 BABIP against with a 46% GB% and a lot of weak aerial contact. Unfortunately, the genie went back into the bottle for 2019. Freeland had a 6.73 ERA with a 5.99 FIP and a 5.07 xFIP. His BABIP went up 23 points. His LOB% dropped 20.7%. His already bad K% went back down and his BB% went up. It was ugly. Now we go into 2020 not knowing exactly what to expect. Something better, but not his 2018. To me, a 4.10/4.57/4.70 like 2017 would be a win.
Things started pretty well for German Marquez. He allowed a .262 wOBA in 46 innings across March and April. He allowed a .297 wOBA in May over 39.1 innings. It all fell apart from there. Over the first two months of the season, he ran a 3.48/3.34/3.46 pitcher slash over 85.1 innings of work with solid peripherals overall. From June 5 until the end of his regular season on August 22, Marquez posted a 5.99 ERA with a 4.75 FIP and a 3.61 xFIP. His K and BB rates remained strong, but he totally lost his command with 20 HR allowed in 88.2 innings of work. Marquez allowed a .356 wOBA at home in 73.1 innings and actually got lucky that he worked 27.1 more innings on the road.

He’s still a very good pitcher, but replicating his 2018 also seems like a long shot. At least Jon Gray improved last season with a 3.84/4.06/3.89 pitcher slash. He was one of the unluckier pitchers in 2018 with a 5.12 ERA but a 3.47 xFIP. Home runs were still an issue, but his sequencing luck was not, as his LOB% jumped 8% to make up the ERA gap.

Still, this is one of those pitching staffs where a lot of things need to go right in order to be competent. Pitching at Coors Field is just hard. At least Gray and Marquez have some strikeout upside to fall back on. Most of the other starting pitcher candidates do not. Antonio Senzatela has embarrassing K rates as a starter. Jeff Hoffman has just never fully developed. Freeland pitches to contact. There just isn’t a lot of room for these guys to succeed. The margin for error as a hurler is much smaller in Coors than anywhere else and most of these guys have been negatively impacted.

Scott Oberg and Jairo Diaz were solid in relief last season, but that was about it. Closer Wade Davis was virtually unusable with his 8.65 ERA and 5.56 FIP. Carlos Estevez was fine, but Jake McGee, Bryan Shaw, and others just weren’t good enough. There is little reason to believe that this Rockies bullpen will be that much better. It is interesting that the Rockies locked up Oberg, who just turned 30, so they won’t have much incentive to trade him. If anybody else shows anything, like Davis, who has a team option for 2021, or an arbitration-eligible reliever like Estevez, the Rockies could look to capitalize on the trade value.

**Positives & Negatives**

Things are not well in Denver. Between Jeff Bridich publicly trying to trade Nolan Arenado to Dick Monfort predicting 94 wins for his team, it has been a comedy of PR errors for the Rockies. The fact of the matter is that this is a team that had a $145 million payroll on Opening Day 2019 and finished with nearly $179 million on the 40-man roster. The Rockies are projected to be around $150.5 million on Opening Day this season.

That is a LOT of money to finish fourth or fifth in the NL West. The Rockies even have over $105 million on the books for 2021. Story’s free agency is fast-approaching. The Rockies were trying to eat a lot of Arenado money to move him, as he is still owed $225 million through 2026. Blackmon is paid $21 million for the next three seasons with $10 million in 2023 to essentially be a DH when the NL adopts that next season.
Things are bad. And when things are bad and the playoff hopes are virtually non-existent, that can have an organizational impact in a big way. With the regression of the pitching staff last season, I’m not sure Bud Black, who is entering his fourth season as the manager, is completely safe. This is a toxic type of environment that could only get worse as the losses mount.

**Pick: Under 73.5**

This is a pretty low number for the Rockies, but things aren’t likely to get any better. The team is extremely top-heavy on offense with Story and Arenado, who were both just fine last season and the team only won 71 games. The fact that the Rockies did not make any upgrades going into this season is pretty telling as well. One of Arenado’s biggest sticking points was about the team not actively trying to get better when there are two superstars on the roster.

But too much money is tied up in too many mediocre players. The Rockies project to be pretty poor defensively in the outfield again because the National League still doesn’t have a DH. This pitching staff really does need all the help that it can get. Marquez managed to throw 27.1 more road innings, otherwise his numbers would have been worse. He threw 17.1 more road innings in 2018. I don’t know how things will set up this year, but his numbers are going to hurt if he makes 3-5 more starts at home than on the road any one of these years.

This just isn’t a good team and the deck is stacked against them. The Padres, Diamondbacks, and Dodgers are all much better than they are. They aren’t good enough at home and clearly aren’t good enough on the road.

Because Coors Field can be so unpredictable, I won’t have a bet on the Rockies under here. After all, with this same core group, they were pretty good in 2017 and 2018, but I really like feel like 2019 was a sign of things to come. This is a pick for the guide and not a bet, but the pick is on the under. Somebody has to lose in the NL West. I do think that the Rockies will have company in that department, but they’ll be side-by-side with the Giants for last place.
Los Angeles Dodgers

The Los Angeles Dodgers have to be pretty happy with what has transpired the last few months. The Houston Astros beat them in the 2017 World Series by cheating and the Boston Red Sox seem to have done the same thing in the 2018 World Series. They also lost a Game 5 at home in the NLDS against a Wild Card team. Something about getting kicked while you’re already down or something.

Maybe this is the year for the Dodgers. Maybe they should have kept up with the Joneses and stole signs themselves so that they could end what is now a 32-year World Series drought. They’ve certainly had their chances with seven straight NL West titles, but not one of those seasons has finished with a win in the last game. All of them have ended with a loss, twice in the World Series, twice in the NLCS, and three times in the NLDS.

Last season’s Dodgers team was the best of the bunch. The Dodgers won 106 games for the first time in franchise history. Their .662 Pythagorean Win-Loss percentage was the second-highest in franchise history. The highest one came back in 1942. The Dodgers outscored the opposition by 273 runs. The Dodgers also flirted with four million in attendance, which gives you an idea of just how loaded this team was and how excited people were about their chances.

Instead, it ended with Lucy pulling the proverbial football out when Charlie Brown went to kick it. Where do the Dodgers go from here? The regular season has to be pretty boring by this point. The 2017 hangover that led to 92 wins in 2018 was not evident in 2019. After losing in five games instead of seven, the Dodgers took out their frustrations by nearly setting a franchise record with those 106 wins.

In a lot of ways, the Dodgers have nothing to play for over the first 162 games. They’re an enormous favorite to win the West after doing so by 21 games last season. They’re a favorite to get home field advantage throughout the duration of the NL playoffs and probably won’t have a team in the American League finish higher than them overall. It’s all about focus and motivation, really. The Dodgers are more talented than just about every team that they play over the course of the season and dominated the division at 51-25.

Last year’s season win total was way too light at 94.5. The Dodgers “only” won 92 games in 2018, but underachieved by 10 games relative to their Pythagorean Win-Loss and nine games relative to their BaseRuns expectation. The funny thing about this Dodgers team? They won 106 games and STILL underachieved relative to their BaseRuns expectation and 3rd Order Win%. By 3rd Order Win%, they were one of the best teams ever.

With Mookie Betts now in the fold, the Dodgers went from the clear-cut favorite to win the NL Series to the clearest-cut favorite to win the NL and get to the World Series. Is there any way that they don’t go over their season win total number?
**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 101.5 (-110/-110)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 106-56

Run Differential: +273

Pythagorean W/L: 107-55

BaseRuns Record: 110-52

BaseRuns Run Differential: +286 (5.42/3.66)

3rd Order Win% Record: 113.8-48.2

Record in One-Run Games: 27-22

**Offseason Transactions**


**Losses:** JT Chargois, Yimi Garcia, Kristopher Negron, Hyun-Jin Ryu, Rich Hill, Russell Martin, Tyler Thornburg, Jedd Gyorko, Connor Wong, Jeter Downs, Alex Verdugo, Jair Camargo, Kenta Maeda, Casey Sadler

The Dodgers took it up a notch in their pursuit of a World Series. They traded for Mookie Betts and David Price from the Boston Red Sox in exchange for Connor Wong, Jeter Downs, and Alex Verdugo. Lumped into the three-team deal were Kenta Maeda to Minnesota and Brusdar Graterol to the Dodgers.

The Dodgers one of very few teams that can actually justify the enormous salary cost of Betts after his current contract runs out, so maybe this isn’t a one-year rental. Some would say that the two best players in baseball now participate for teams with Los Angeles in the name.

While Betts and Price get all the headlines, I really like some of the other additions, particularly those on the pitching side. Alex Wood is very underrated as a starter because of his health profile. Jimmy Nelson and Blake Treinen are really interesting pieces for the bullpen and the Red Sox loss could be the Dodgers’ gain with Graterol.
As far as other losses, the Dodgers do lose Hyun-Jin Ryu and Kenta Maeda, but they have plenty of pitching to spare and added Price and Wood, so they’ll be just fine in that department.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- BA: .257 (10th)
- OBP: .338 (5th)
- SLG: .472 (4th)
- wOBA: .338 (4th)
- wRC+: 111 (4th)
- BABIP: .291 (23rd)
- K%: 21.6% (9th)
- BB%: 9.7% (4th)

The Dodgers added a player that posted a .295/.391/.524 slash and a .380 wOBA in Mookie Betts. Betts does go from the hitter haven of Fenway Park to a little bit tougher yard in Dodger Stadium, but Betts is ticketed for 6+ wins above replacement once again it wouldn’t be a big surprise to see more. Betts had 10.4 fWAR in 2018 when he carried a career-best .368 BABIP and .438 OBP to go along with his elite defensive profile.

If I sat here and talked about all of the accolades and potential for this Dodgers lineup, we’d be here forever. Betts could very well be the missing piece. Cody Bellinger might be the second-best all-around hitter (player?!) in baseball after his .305/.406/.629 slash, .415 wOBA, and career-best 47 home runs. From 2018 to 2019, Bellinger shaved 7.5% off of his strikeout rate and increased his walk rate by 3.5%. He is one of the game’s best hitters and he got even better in his third full season in The Show. It is entirely possible that we have not even seen the best of Bellinger yet, which is absolutely terrifying.

Oh, yeah, and Bellinger is actually an elite defensive outfielder by Sprint Speed and Outs Above Average, two of the newer metrics made public through Statcast. Joc Pederson is a good outfielder that mashes against the fat side of the platoon against right-handed pitchers. The Angels nixed a deal that would have given them Pederson, so now the Dodgers just have more offense and more flexibility. Pederson slashed .252/.349/.571 with a 137 wRC+ and a .377 wOBA against righties last season.

So that’s your Dodgers outfield, with AJ Pollock, Chris Taylor, and Enrique Hernandez fighting for playing time against lefties. Around the horn, Justin Turner posted a 132 wRC+, primarily at third base. Max Muncy had a 134 wRC+ and played first, second, and third. Corey Seager had a 113 wRC+ at shortstop. The Dodgers can go with star prospect Gavin Lux or Taylor or Hernandez at second base and not even miss a beat.

Oh, yeah, and catcher Will Smith hit 15 homers in just 196 plate appearances and slashed .253/.337/.571.
If we go by wRC+, where 100 is league average, the best offense of all-time is the 1927 Yankees, who posted a wRC+ of 126 with a .307/.384/.488 slash line and a .400 wOBA. Given that wRC+ accounts for the park factors, the league, and the run environment, I would not be surprised to see the Dodgers with the highest wRC+ ever. Last year’s Houston Astros posted a wRC+ of 125. Remember that the 1927 Yankees only struck out 9.8% of the time, as the game was much different back then. It would be impossible to match that OBP in the current state of the game, but the Dodgers could very well have the best wRC+ ever.

As a general rule, I typically don’t like taking season win totals with no margin for error. I like to look for high-variance teams. The Dodgers, even with a win total north of 100, have an offense that is easily good enough to make me think long and hard about it. There is not a single weakness and the team has enough depth and flexibility to overcome injuries. Obviously an injury to Bellinger or Betts or somebody would lower the ceiling a bit, but the Dodgers still have top catching prospect Keibert Ruiz, Lux, and a versatile and talented bench.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 3.39 (1st)
- **FIP:** 3.73 (2nd)
- **xFIP:** 3.87 (2nd)
- **K%:** 25.7% (3rd)
- **BB%:** 6.6% (1st)
- **LOB%:** 74.7% (6th)

Ah yes. Adding Mookie Betts to a team that was first in ERA, second in FIP, second in xFIP, third in K%, and first in BB%. So, the offense got better and the pitching staff also got better with Betts motoring around the outfield in Chavez Ravine.

The Dodgers did get a lot of mileage out of Hyun-Jin Ryu last season. Credit to him for managing to stay healthy in a walk year because health had been an ongoing problem. He posted a 2.32 ERA with a 3.10 FIP and a 3.32 xFIP in his 182.2 innings of work. That 4.8 fWAR was a career-best, but not something I would have relied on again. Instead, he moved on to Toronto. Kenta Maeda also moves on, but he may need a clean slate. He posted a 4.04/3.95/4.04 pitcher slash in his 153.2 innings. Maeda, like Ryu, generally had issues staying healthy.

The Dodgers have to replace 336.1 pretty darn good innings from Ryu and Maeda. Where will they turn? Well, they’ll get to give Ross Stripling a long look now that the Angels backed out of the trade to acquire him. To be totally honest, I have no idea why the Dodgers would want to trade Stripling. His Statcast metrics suggest that he has elite stuff and he has a career 3.51/3.60/3.49 pitcher slash in 387 innings. He’s held the opposition
to a .308 wOBA in 1,063 plate appearances as a starter, but it was a .296 wOBA in 70 innings last season. He’s got almost a K per inning and really looks like the real deal to me.

Of course, the Dodgers could also turn to Julio Urias as a starter once again. Urias made eight starts and 37 total appearances last season with a 2.49 ERA, 3.43 FIP, and 4.28 xFIP over 79.2 innings. Health is and will always be the question for Urias.

To me, he’s better in a relief role for them, but we’ll see how the Dodgers try to use him. Getting Alex Wood back means that Urias could be ticketed back to the bullpen, as Wood looks to rebound from an ugly, injury-riddled season with the Reds. In his three-year stint with the Dodgers from 2016-18, Wood had a 3.29 ERA with a 3.39 FIP and a 3.49 xFIP in 62 starts and some relief outings.

The Dodgers are plenty used to putting kid gloves on their pitchers, so the David Price situation may work out just fine. Price is still plenty valuable while he’s out there and may fill sort of that Ryu role of being asked to throw 125-150 innings and be effective in the process. That may fit Price to a tee now. Last season’s command hiccup could be a thing of the past. Even if it isn’t Dodger Stadium will help. The increased K% from last season is a nice addition.

Clayton Kershaw may not be the dominant, perennial Cy Young candidate that we remember, but he worked 178.1 really good innings last season with a 3.03/3.86/3.50 pitcher slash. He was also remarkably consistent, as the opposition had a .281 wOBA in the first half and a .280 wOBA in the second half. That being said, his K% did spike from 23.3% in the first half to 31.1% in the second half. He may be closer to old Kershaw than we think. A lot closer. As in, that version may be back in 2020.

And I’ve saved the best for last. One of these years, Walker Buehler is winning a Cy Young. It may very well have been this past season, but the Dodgers screwed Buehler up in Spring Training and it took him a little bit of time to get on track. Buehler had some discomfort in Arizona and the Dodgers took it really easy with him, opting not to ramp him up. Buehler gave up 11 earned runs over his first 12 innings.

He gave up 55 over his last 170.1 innings. From April 17 on, Buehler had a 2.91 ERA and FIP with 206 K in 27 starts. He had some hiccups and bad starts along the way, but he also had games with 15 and 16 strikeouts and looked every bit the ace that he was supposed to be. If Buehler gets through Spring Training healthy, this is going to be the year for him.

When teams look as perfect as the Dodgers do, we try really hard to find something to criticize. This season, that something is the bullpen. But, Kenley Jansen anchors a group that has a lot of options. Yimi Garcia looks like a big loss with a 3.61 ERA over 64 appearances, but a 5.19 FIP and a 4.90 xFIP say otherwise. Joe Kelly had a 4.56 ERA, but also a 3.78 FIP and a 3.19 xFIP, so he should be fine. Dylan Floro had an identical 65.6% LOB% to Kelly and also posted a much better FIP at 3.56 than ERA at 4.24.
If Stripling or Urias aren’t starters, we’ll find them here. Blake Treinen is only one season removed from posting a ridiculous 0.78/1.82/2.42 pitcher slash in 68 appearances for the A’s. Adam Kolarek and Caleb Ferguson give the Dodgers some looks from the left-handed side. The Dodgers also have Dustin May, Tony Gonsolin, and Dennis Santana, among others, to consider.

Depth for days with the pitching staff, too.

**Positives & Negatives**

One worry that could pop up for the Dodgers is complacency. This team has one goal and that is to win a World Series. Nothing really matters until the playoffs. The Dodgers won the division by 21 games last season and will likely do something similar this season. A lot of good it did them, as they were bounced in the NLDS by the Washington Nationals. The two prior years, the Dodgers lost in the World Series.

As if the offense and the pitching weren’t enough, the Dodgers also led baseball in defensive runs saved last season with 136. UZR wasn’t nearly as kind to the Dodgers as DRS, so depending on how you quantify defense, you can say that the Dodgers were the best in baseball or a little bit above average. I tend to be on the side that puts them much closer to elite.

**Pick: Over 101.5**

As I’ve said several times over, I generally don’t bet overs or unders with extreme season win total lines. Man, is this one tempting. I actually bet the under Astros season win total back in 2018 and, boy, that was stupid. It was 98.5 and they flew over. I wouldn’t make that mistake with this Dodgers team. This may be the best team we’ve seen in the last 75 years, in all honesty.

The 2001 Seattle Mariners won 116 games and the 1998 New York Yankees won 114 games. I don’t think we are talking about the Dodgers as a team that can win that many games, but a similar level of dominance to the ’98 Yankees wouldn’t stun me. Remember that those Yankees also went 11-2 in the playoffs with a World Series sweep of the San Diego Padres. That team outscored the opposition by 309 runs in the regular season.

The 2019 Dodgers lost six in a row to fall from 8-2 to 8-8. From that point forward, they lost more than two in a row just twice. Once was going into the All-Star Break. The other was to end August. They responded by going 18-6 in September with a +57 run differential. They had a winning record against every NL West opponent and the closest season series was with the Diamondbacks at 11-8. The Dodgers outscored them by 26 runs.

This team is dominance personified. They even have the depth to withstand a few injuries. They were 52-24 in the first half after that 8-8 start and 46-24 in the second half.
Ridiculous. They never lost more than 11 games in a month. And they added Mookie Betts.

I don’t know if I will end up breaking my rule and betting on the season win total over here, but I don’t see how I could ever bet the under. Make of that what you will, but the pick for the guide is the over.
San Diego Padres

Prospects are a fickle group of players. The leap from the minor leagues to the Major Leagues is the greatest leap of any of the major sports. The game speeds up from college football to the NFL, college basketball to the NBA, and the AHL or college to the NHL, but it is largely the same game. Players are bigger and faster and stronger, but the learning curve isn’t nearly as sharp as it is in baseball.

Lots of guys throw hard in the minor leagues these days. They just don’t know where the ball is going. Some guys even have pretty good breaking balls or offspeed pitches. They just can’t command them consistently. In any pro league, you are talking about the best of the best. In baseball, it’s just different. Pitchers dictate the game to such a high degree and hitting 99 with no location in the minors is a lot different than hitting 99 on the black in the Majors. Breaking balls can have absurd spin rates in the minors, but hitters may be able to lay off or pitchers may not be able to throw them for strikes. At the Major League level, we see a lot of bad swings.

Teams whose hopes rely on young players to graduate to the Major Leagues and have success often come up short. Enter the 2019 San Diego Padres. Don’t get me wrong, there were a ton of bright spots. Fernando Tatis Jr. clearly belongs and may not be far away from being a top-10 player in the game. Chris Paddack came up and shined. Rotation mates Cal Quantrill, Nick Margevicius, and Eric Lauer all had their moments, too, and all before the age of 25.

The Padres are a work in progress. They have one of the best collections of prospect talent in the Major Leagues and it takes time for those guys to develop enough to get to the bigs and then time for them to get acquainted with that level. The irony is that a lot of the “established” Major Leaguers let the Padres down last season. Manny Machado was nowhere near his usual self, at least not in the second half of the season. The Eric Hosmer contract looks worse by the day. Ian Kinsler was so bad that he retired. Wil Myers struggled and had his worst season since an injury-shortened 2014 with the Tampa Bay Rays.

The problem with a rebuild is that a lot of things need to go right and most of them need to go right at the same time. That didn’t happen for the Padres in 2019. It hasn’t happened for several seasons in a row. The Padres haven’t made the playoffs since 2006 and haven’t had a winning record since 2012. It hasn’t always been a rebuild, and certainly not to the current degree since AJ Preller began his reign of terror, but this is a team desperate for things to work out.

We’ll see if the young players work out better this season and also see if the older guard can get back on track as well. We’ll also see if rookie manager Jayce Tingler is the guy to lead the Padres back to the promised land of the postseason. Tingler has been viewed as a rising star in the coaching world and has a background on both the executive side and the coaching side, not to mention the ability to communicate well with the Latin American players.
The Padres are something of a riddle. The talent is there to be really good, if it all comes together, but the possibility of another long and arduous season is also too real to ignore.

**Season Win Total Odds**

BetOnline: 82.5 (-125/105)

**2019 Standings Data**

Actual Record: 70-92

Run Differential: -107

Pythagorean W/L: 70-92

BaseRuns Record: 74-88

BaseRuns Run Differential: -67 (4.25/4.67)

3rd Order Win% Record: 73.5-88.5

Record in One-Run Games: 26-24

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Seth Frankoff, Juan Lagares, Gordon Beckham, Jerad Eickhoff, Pierce Johnson, Chih-Wei Hu, Jimmy Yacabonis, Kyle Barraclough, Drew Pomeranz, Emilio Pagan, Jake Cronenworth, Tommy Pham, Jurickson Profar, Trent Grisham, Zach Davies, Breyvic Valera


The Padres were busy this winter. Along with a new skipper in Tingler, the Padres have revamped the bullpen with a lottery ticket in Kyle Barraclough and two exceptional relievers in Drew Pomeranz and Emilio Pagan. They also essentially swapped Zach Davies for Eric Lauer and also swapped Trent Grisham for Luis Urias in a deal with the Brewers.

They signed Juan Lagares to replace departed outfielder Manuel Margot, who was the cost of doing business in the Pagan acquisition. Tommy Pham is an instant upgrade to the outfield and he’ll help in more categories than Hunter Renfroe.
All in all, I like the Padres offseason. Their ceiling will still be defined by the young guys, but they might have the best bullpen in baseball and enhanced the offense a little bit.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .238 (28th)
- **OBP:** .308 (26th)
- **SLG:** .410 (26th)
- **wOBA:** .305 (26th)
- **wRC+:** 88 (24th)
- **BABIP:** .293 (18th)
- **K%:** 26.3% (29th)
- **BB%:** 8.4% (18th)

The offense badly needed some enhancements. Petco Park isn’t as unforgiving as it used to be and the Padres offensive numbers were among the most disappointing in baseball. It didn’t help that breakout star Fernando Tatis Jr. was limited to 84 games and 372 plate appearances before his season ended due to injury. The 20-year-old was on a ridiculous pace with a .317/.379/.590 slash, a .398 wOBA, and a 150 wRC+, but he also got hurt twice. He was injured in late April on a play at second base and then hurt his back on a swing in August.

Now 21, Tatis will look to build on what he started last season. Strikeouts are a worry, but he did make a lot of quality contact with a Hard Hit% that ranked in the 80th percentile. He wasn’t particularly good at shortstop and there was some talk of moving him and his elite speed to center field, but that won’t be the case at the outset of the 2020 season.

What are the Padres going to get from Manny Machado? Machado’s first season with the Padres was something of a bust with a .335 wOBA and a 108 wRC+. He hit 32 homers, but also had the highest K% of his career and his BABIP fell to .274, a 30-point decrease from his huge 2018 career year. Machado still rated well in the contact metrics, but he wasn’t elite like he was in 2017 and 2018. Outside of a huge month of June, Machado was pretty pedestrian most of the year and was terrible in August and September with a .209/.305/.348 slash and a .285 wOBA in his last 213 plate appearances.

A return to normalcy for Machado would go a long way for the Padres. Machado and Tatis were the only position players to have at least 3 fWAR last season. Hunter Renfroe was next with 1.9, but he is now gone, taking his high SLG, low OBP offensive numbers with him. Fourth was Manny Margot, who derived just about all of his value from his defense.
It is crazy to think about Tommy Pham in this way, but Pham is the elder statesman of this lineup at almost 32 years old. Pham is an outstanding addition to this lineup. His 12.4% BB% would have been second behind utility player Greg Garcia. He stole 25 bases for the second time in three seasons and also hit 20 homers for the third season in a row. Pham’s launch angle is a bit of a downer when it comes to his offensive profile, but he has well above average contract metrics and actually was in the top 4% of the league in 2018 in Hard Hit%. He grades as an average outfielder per the more traditional metrics, but Statcast isn’t big on him as an outfielder. Either way, he’s going to outhit any of his defensive shortcomings in all likelihood and will definitely help a team that was 26th in OBP.

San Diego just has such a wide range of offensive outcomes. We know that Franchy Cordero has flashed some power and good speed in the minor leagues, but he also only played 24 games last season and 47 in 2018, so who knows what he will do. Eric Hosmer isn’t a very good player per the advanced metrics, but there is a chance that he hits 20 homers again with a respectable OBP. It probably can’t be worse than what he did last season with a .309 wOBA and a 91 wRC+. Wil Myers walks a lot and hits for some power, but also strikes out a ton. Of course, Myers also hit 58 homers over 2016-17 before falling back to 29 over the last two seasons.

Trent Grisham walks a lot and hit at every minor league stop for the Brewers. He actually ran a BB% in the minor leagues around 15%, so he seems promising. Francisco Mejia hasn’t developed into the hitter that everybody thought, but he was once considered the top offensive catcher in the minor leagues. Jurickson Profar has hit 20 homers in back-to-back seasons. The Padres also have Josh Naylor and Taylor Trammell in the minor leagues.

As always, what I am trying to ascertain is how much better the lineup can be and who got replaced. Unfortunately Hosmer is still there. He led the team in PA. Machado should be better, as his disastrous last two months pulled his numbers down a lot. Renfroe was third in PA and, while he hit 33 homers, he made outs over 71% of the time, so Pham is a big upgrade there. Myers was fourth and you take the good with the bad there and hope he gets back on track to being league average or better.

Margot was fifth in PA. He’ll be replaced by Cordero and I have no idea how that will work out, as we haven’t seen enough of Cordero to know how the offense translates. We do know that he is likely a defensive downgrade, simply because Margot was really good. Tatis was sixth and, well, he’s just another one of those elite 20somethings.

The Padres did lose Franmil Reyes and his 116 wRC+ to the Indians at the Trade Deadline last season. They also still have a black hole on offense at the catching position unless Mejia really hits. He’s nowhere near the defensive catcher that Austin Hedges is.

All in all, if we throw it all together, I think the Padres lineup is better, but I don’t believe we suddenly see a league average group. Roughly double the plate appearances for Tatis
will help and so will Pham and something closer to the status quo for Machado, but there are a lot of below average hitters around this team.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **ERA:** 4.63 (18th)
- **FIP:** 4.22 (8th)
- **xFIP:** 4.29 (8th)
- **K%:** 23.9% (11th)
- **BB%:** 7.5% (6th)
- **LOB%:** 70.0% (25th)

Generally, I start with the rotations. Not here. This Padres bullpen could be ELITE. Yes, all caps. That’s how you know I mean it. They are outstanding. Kirby Yates was one of the best relievers in baseball last season and now the Padres have added Drew Pomeranz and Emilio Pagan.

Pomeranz posted some uninspiring full-season numbers with a 4.85 ERA, a 4.59 FIP, and a 3.88 xFIP, but remember that he made 18 starts and 28 relief appearances. In the 18 starts, opposing batters slashed an absurd .291/.372/.526 with a .376 wOBA. Pomeranz had a 5.97 ERA in those 75.1 innings. As a reliever, however, he allowed a .165/.226/.278 slash with a .220 wOBA. He went from 18 HR allowed as a starter in 349 PA to three in 106 PA as a reliever. As a reliever, he ran a stupid 47.2% K%. That’s not a typo, y’all. It is very much a small sample size, but the Brewers unlock magic like that with relievers.

He won’t sustain a 47.2% K% I wouldn’t think, but he’s likely to be a well above average reliever. The Rays also used their pitcher whisperers to unlock the skills of Emilio Pagan. Pagan had a 2.31 ERA with a 3.30 FIP and a 3.15 xFIP over his 66 appearances. Pagan had a 36% K% with a 4.9% BB%. A refined slider and a velocity spike helped Pagan after coming over from the A’s. Pagan’s SL% went up to 36.4% last season and he wound up with a 17.6% SwStr% with the new-look arsenal.

Yates had a 1.19 ERA with a 1.30 FIP and a 2.25 xFIP in his 60 appearances, doubling down on the breakout 2018 campaign he had. He had 101 K against just 13 BB. The Padres also bring back workhorse Craig Stammen, who had a 3.29 ERA and outperformed against his 4.12 FIP. Matt Strahm is one of my favorite arms in the system. He only made 46 appearances, 30 of them in relief, and hung a 4.71/4.41/4.27 pitcher slash, but, like Pomeranz, he was so much better out of the pen. He allowed a .347 wOBA as a starter in 81.2 innings and a .270 wOBA in 33 innings as a reliever.

Andres Munoz struck out 30 in 23 innings in his debut season. Trey Wingenter was third in appearances and did hang a 5.65 ERA, but had a 3.61 FIP. His 58.3% LOB% was the reason his ERA looked so bad.
So, the bullpen could very well be the best in the National League if everybody stays in tact. There could even be some others that step up or some of the starters that fall short in the rotation battles could be added. At a minimum, it is possible that Yates, Pomeranz, and Pagan make up three of the top 10 relievers in the NL.

I’m pretty optimistic about the rotation, though maybe not to the degree of some. Joey Lucchesi made 30 pretty good starts with a 4.18 ERA, a 4.17 FIP, and a 4.36 xFIP. I know everybody likes Chris Paddack and Dinelson Lamet more, but I think this might be the year that Lucchesi makes a huge leap. He did see a decrease in his K% last season and a spike in his BB%, but his command numbers were just so much better. He went from a .306 BABIP to a .271 BABIP. He went from a 20.4% HR/FB% to a 13.9% HR/FB% when most pitchers saw increases. His Barrel% went down from 9.3% to 7.2%. His Hard Hit% went down from 40.5% to 36%. His average exit velocity against went down over a full mile per hour. I like all of those developments, even if his ERA was higher.

Paddack had a 3.33/3.95/4.05 pitcher slash in his 140.2 innings with strong K and BB metrics. The long ball caught up with him a little bit as the season went along, but he has had all winter to work on a third pitch. The fastball and the changeup were very good, but the separator would be a third pitch. You can see that with Paddack’s splits. He allowed a .194/.248/.351 slash with a .255 wOBA in the first half. He allowed a .218/.266/.418 slash and a .284 wOBA in the second half. All of those numbers are good, but he allowed 12 HR in 82.1 innings in the first half and 11 in 58.1 in the second half. As hitters got the book on him, he surrendered more homers, particularly during a rough August.

It was nice to see Dinelson Lamet come back last season. After showing flashes in 2017, Lamet had to undergo Tommy John surgery. He returned in 2019 and actually worked 73 MLB innings with a 4.07/3.91/3.44 pitcher slash. Command was an issue at times, but he’s had that problem in the past. The stuff had bite and he struck out 105 batters with a 33.6% K%.

We’ll see how long the Garrett Richards experiment lasts. When healthy, he can be great, but the health part has been really hard for him. He worked 207.1 innings for the Angels in 2015. Since then, across all levels, he’s worked 162 innings. He’s got a bowling ball sinker and a good slider to induce a lot of grounders if he can go every fifth or sixth day.

I’m also curious how long Zach Davies holds off the guys with more upside, like Cal Quantrill, Adrian Morejon, Michel Baez, and maybe even MacKenzie Gore and Luis Patino. Davies is a pretty average guy that has good enough command to offset a low strikeout rate. There are a ton of high-upside guys in this system for the Padres and they may get aggressive with them now.

**Positives & Negatives**
In theory, this should be a team that gets better every year. This is a very young squad. Even Machado won’t turn 28 until later this season. The Padres need the development curve to keep working and that will steadily increase the team’s ceiling. Of course, some of those guys won’t make an impact in 2020.

Tingler is a big question mark as well. Will he adopt a very aggressive managerial approach akin to Rocco Baldelli? I thought Baldelli was an asset for the Twins in a big way. It sure seemed like Chris Woodward also helped the Rangers overachieve. Young managers that understand the analytics seem to be having that effect league-wide. The Padres do have some five-and-fly contenders and will have a strong bullpen. I think the Padres are one of the teams with a manager that can have a big impact in the win-loss column.

**Pick: Under 82.5**

I’m not there yet with the Padres. I fully realize the exciting potential of the under-25 crowd that they have accumulated and some really high-upside arms are working their way up the system. This could very well be the year that the Padres make the leap that gets them to a respectable record and then 2021, if we have a season, could be the year that they really make a push for the Wild Card Game.

There are a wide range of outcomes with the Padres and those are typically the season win totals that I like to bet on, but this is not one of them. I think the Padres have both a high ceiling and a low floor. We saw the low floor last season with 70 wins. They’ll be better than that, but a 5-6 win improvement wouldn’t shock me. I do think that a 13-win improvement would, however, shock me. That is why the pick is on the under here.

I just don’t want to underestimate the young talent that they have. I don’t want to underestimate what a return to normal for Machado, a full season of Tatis, the inclusion of Pham, and the continued development of the pitching staff could mean. This is a team that could honestly finish anywhere from 90 wins to 70 wins.

I would maybe be more confident in betting the under if the bullpen wasn’t so good. The Padres had a good bullpen on a bad team last season, but they could have an elite bullpen on a decent team this season and that could very well be the difference between going over and going under. As I said, I believe this is the best bullpen in the National League. They are going to protect the vast majority of the leads that they are given. The question is just how many leads they will be given.

This is the highest-variance team in baseball this season for me. With 29 other betting options, I can confidently pass on a bet here, but the pick is on the under for the guide.
San Francisco Giants

You won’t find a bigger negative regression candidate in Major League Baseball than the San Francisco Giants for the 2020 season. The Giants were 38-16 in one-run games and overachieved relative to their alternate standings records by six games in Pythagorean Win-Loss, seven in BaseRuns, and more than seven games in 3rd Order Win %.

I fully understand that it is hard for people to separate what actually happened and what should have happened because THE GAME ISN’T PLAYED ON A SPREADSHEET, NERD! Yes, that is very true, and things happen that aren’t supposed to happen all of the time, especially over 162 games. But 38-16 in one-run games is not supposed to happen. For context, the most wins in one-run games in 2018 went to the Milwaukee Brewers at 33-19. The best record was the Oakland A’s at 31-14.

The 2016 Texas Rangers were 36-11 in one-run games. They went 95-67 with a +8 run differential. They were swept by the Toronto Blue Jays in the ALDS and went 78-84 the next season...with a 13-24 record in one-run games. The 1993 Kansas City Royals won 38 one-run games. They are the last team to do it and they were actually 38-32 in those games.

This isn’t a knock on the Giants. I don’t have some vendetta against them and I’m not badmouthing them. After all, I liked their season win total over last season. They were a 68-68 team going into September 2018 and went 5-21 the rest of the season. That created some value in the markets on them.

In 2019, their bullpen was very good and longtime manager Bruce Bochy pushed all the right buttons. You just have to look at a team that won 77 games, nearly half of them by one run, and expect regression. Bochy is now gone, replaced by phailed Phillies manager Gabe Kapler. It will be quite a change of pace for the players, the fans, and the organization. I’m sure Bochy was more in tune with analytics than we would expect from a 64-year-old man that has managed since 1995, but Kapler is more of a hardline sabermetrics guy.

After three straight losing seasons, change was necessary in San Francisco. Not because of anything that Bochy did wrong, but there is a reason that Farhan Zaidi was hired prior to the 2019 season to replace Brian Sabean, who now serves as a scout for the team. Zaidi comes from the A’s and Dodgers, so we know he is extremely well-versed in the analytics of baseball between that and his education, which includes MIT and Cal Berkeley. Zaidi is the President of Baseball Ops and doubles as the GM, so San Francisco is officially all-in on the numbers movement and the Kapler hire is consistent with that vision.

Along with the regression signs, this is an aging team. Using the “BatAge” stat at Baseball-Reference.com, which is weighted by at bats and games played, the Giants were the oldest team in baseball last season. They also used 64 players, the second-most of any
team. Only two of them were 25 or younger last season among the group that had at least 100 plate appearances.

All of that being said, we still have a lot to evaluate with the Giants, as veteran players tend to provide more consistency and maybe, just maybe, this team can overachieve again in 2020.

**Season Win Total Odds**

**BetOnline: 69.5 (115/-135)**

**2019 Standings Data**

**Actual Record:** 77-85

**Run Differential:** -95

**Pythagorean W/L:** 71-91

**BaseRuns Record:** 70-92

**BaseRuns Run Differential:** -100 (4.10/4.72)

**3rd Order Win% Record:** 69.8-92.2

**Record in One-Run Games:** 38-16

**Offseason Transactions**

**Additions:** Trevor Cahill, Billy Hamilton, Hunter Pence, Wilmer Flores, Brandon Guyer, Nick Vincent, Yolmer Sanchez, Darin Ruf, Rob Brantly, Jerry Blevins, Drew Smyly, Andrew Triggs, Matt Carasiti, Jamie Westbrook, Drew Robinson, Chadwick Tromp, Tyler Heineman, Tyson Ross, Kevin Gausman, Trey McNutt, Will Wilson, Jarlin Garcia, Jake Jewell, Dany Jimenez, Kean Wong, Rico Garcia, Trevor Oaks, Tyler Anderson

**Losses:** Kevin Pillar, Mike Gerber, Ricardo Pinto, Kyle Barraclough, Fernando Abad, Madison Bumgarner, Stephen Vogt, Will Smith

I guess I missed the memo that the active roster was going to be 35 players this season instead of 26. The Giants signed virtually every platoon bat under the sun this winter in hopes of finding something that sticks. This is a rebuilding year for the Giants, so it certainly makes sense to do what teams like the Tigers and Marlins have done. Sign yourself some rental veterans and see if you can spin them for prospects down the line.

Of that massive group of additions, Gausman, Smyly, Flores, Anderson and Pence are the only ones with guaranteed Major League deals. All of the others would have to make the
ballclub and then get added to the 40-man roster. That means more transactions for the Giants during Spring Training.

The Giants lost some Major League dudes in Kevin Pillar, Madison Bumgarner, Stephen Vogt, and Will Smith. Smith is the biggest loss as an elite reliever, but replacing Bumgarner’s annual above average stat line also won’t be easy.

There are a lot of Major League dudes on the additions list. Some of them are bound to make the team.

**Offense**

**2019 Ranks:**

- **BA:** .239 (27th)
- **OBP:** .302 (28th)
- **SLG:** .392 (28th)
- **wOBA:** .295 (28th)
- **wRC+:** 83 (28th)
- **BABIP:** .290 (24th)
- **K%:** 23.3% (17th)
- **BB%:** 7.7% (24th)

And they might as well. It’s not like the Giants could get a whole lot worse offensively. Only the Royals, Tigers, and Marlins hit fewer home runs. Only the Marlins and Tigers had lower on-base percentage marks. We know that Oracle Park suppresses offense. We’ve known that forever. Even with the grace of wRC+ with its park-adjusted formula had the Giants as the third-worst offense in baseball.

I don’t really see that changing a whole lot either. A full season of Mike Yastrzemski should help, as he led the team with a 121 wRC+ over his 411 plate appearances. He hit 21 homers to tie for the team lead and only trailed Brandon Belt in OBP, as Belt’s walk rate was 13.5% to Yaz’s 7.8%.

Outside of Yastrzemski, finding upside, ceiling, potential, hope, and optimism are not easy. Brandon Belt could be a bounce back candidate after posting a BABIP that was 47 points lower than his career average, but his exit velocity cratered and his launch angle was just simply too high. It seems like his best days are behind him and maybe the concussion problems he has had are simply too much to overcome. He did post a 108 wRC+ in 2018 with that .311 BABIP. He may leak above league average, but that’s probably about it.

Buster Posey turns 33 the day after the season begins and I don’t think we can expect much from him again. He’s hit 12 homers over the last two seasons. He hit 12 homers in 2017 alone and that was a previous career low in a season with at least 440 plate appearances. Credit to Posey for still being an excellent defensive catcher to recoup some
lost value from his offensive performance. I do wonder how long that is sustainable, though. There are a lot of miles on those legs.

Evan Longoria did well to be a league average bat last season after a disastrous 2018, but it was really just a doubling of his walk rate that allowed him to post a 101 wRC+. In fairness, Statcast had him down for a .498 xSLG and a .352 xwOBA. His actual marks were .437 and .322, so I guess we can point to how much Oracle Park hurt him. He did hit 14 of his 20 homers on the road and his OPS was 112 points higher away from home. He had a 78 wRC+ at Oracle and a 124 wRC+ on the road. Basically, Longoria is good on the road and useless at home and that doesn’t create a very good player.

I guess it is worth noting that the Giants were 15th in BA, 21st in OBP, and 19th in SLG on the road. So, the offensive profile for this team may not be as awful as it looks, but it still isn’t very good.

Kevin Pillar led the team in plate appearances and actually hit 21 homers, but they were pretty empty thanks to a poor walk rate and low contact quality otherwise. He wasn’t even as good of a defender as usual. His plate appearances are likely to go to Alex Dickerson or Hunter Pence, which is an upgrade. Dickerson slashed .290/.351/.529, but was limited to 171 plate appearances because of injury. He may end up being a nice pickup from the Padres last season.

The newcomers in Wilmer Flores and Hunter Pence seem fine. Pence put together a nice season and actually had much higher wOBA and wRC+ marks on the road than at Globe Life Park in that hitter’s haven in Arlington. Flores carried a high BABIP against righties to be useful, but really played well on the thin side of the platoon with a 151 wRC+ and a .405 wOBA in 109 PA against left-handed pitchers. Flores and Pence will play against lefties, likely in place of Brandon Crawford and his 60 wRC+ against lefties and Dickerson.

With an extra roster spot for a 26th man, the Giants are looking to utilize platoons for every position except for catcher, first, and the spot occupied by Yaz. Mauricio Dubon might as well get all the development time he needs at second base in what will be a losing season.

I do think this offense will be better, simply with the use of more platoons. The Giants were sixth in number of L vs. L plate appearances and 22nd in OBP in those scenarios. That is a number that will fall this season and that should help. Furthermore, with more flexibility, the Giants shouldn’t be as exposed by their .650 OPS in R vs. R plate appearances.

**Pitching**

**2019 Ranks:**

**ERA: 4.38 (15th)**
FIP: 4.55 (18th)
xFIP: 4.58 (18th)
K%: 21.9% (21st)
BB%: 8.3% (12th)
LOB%: 72.6% (16th)

The Giants will essentially replace Madison Bumgarner with Johnny Cueto. The problem is that we pretty much knew what Bumgarner was going to do. Cueto is a massive unknown at this point in time. The 34 starts and 207.2 innings from Bumgarner were pretty good with a 3.90 ERA, a 3.90 FIP, and a 4.31 xFIP. He is down in Arizona now.

Cueto made 25 starts in 2017 with a 4.52 ERA, a 4.49 FIP, and a 4.45 xFIP. He made nine MLB starts in 2018 with a 3.23/4.71/4.52 pitcher slash. He made just four starts last season and they were terrible. You have to go back to 2016 to find the Cueto that we all know and love. The excellent command and control could very well be things of the past. I hope not, but Cueto is now 34 and three years removed from being really good. He is also coming off of major surgery.

A lot of people were buying Jeff Samardzija stock before last season and he partially rewarded those people with a 3.52 ERA, a 4.59 FIP, and a 5.02 xFIP. He ran a 76.9% LOB% with a low strikeout rate, so I’m predicting regression. He also held opposing batters to a .240 BABIP with a below average exit velocity against and a below average Hard Hit% against. Samardzija is a regression candidate to me and it could be fairly substantial, particularly on the road, where the safety of Oracle Park is not afforded to the pitchers. He managed to run a .224 BABIP against last season on the road. That won’t happen again.

Kevin Gausman seems like a decent one-year gamble for the Giants. His HR/FB% issue should be mitigated to a degree in San Francisco. His strikeout spike last season for the Braves could hang around and he had a 3.98 FIP to go with a 5.72 ERA. He could end up being a nice pitcher for the Giants for four months and they could have the opportunity to spin him for a prospect or two at the Trade Deadline if he performs well. Hopes are lower for a guy like Drew Smyly, but that would be the end goal. His 12 starts for the Phillies went a lot better than his 13 appearances for the Rangers, though none of it was that impressive.

The only real upside I see in the rotation belongs to homegrown guys like Tyler Beede, Logan Webb, or Dereck Rodriguez. Beede seems to have the best chance, but his command is an ongoing question mark. He allowed 22 HR in just 117 innings last season. Webb made eight starts last season with a 5.22 ERA, but he had a 4.12 FIP and a 3.89 xFIP, which suggests some better fortunes. Health is a concern. Rodriguez just has a low ceiling as a pitch-to-contact type. It can work at home, but it is a tough sell on the road.

What saved the Giants last season was the bullpen. San Francisco was 38-16 in one-run games. Will Smith is gone. Mark Melancon is gone. Reyes Moronta had major shoulder surgery in September. Sam Dyson is gone. Tony Watson is back, but he had one of the
highest FIPs among regular relievers at 4.81. Trevor Gott was solid in his 52.2 innings with a 3.12 FIP, but the Giants need other guys to step up and that seems like a tall ask.

Tyler Rogers was great with a 1.02/2.08/2.87 pitcher slash in his 17.2 innings, but he posted an unsustainable walk rate and an unsustainably low BABIP for a ground ball guy at well over 60%. Sam Coonrod had a 3.58 ERA, but a 5.24 FIP in his 27.2 innings. Shaun Anderson doesn’t miss a lot of bats and projects to go from the rotation to the pen. Jandel Gustave didn’t miss many bats either.

The strength of the Giants last season was the bullpen and last year’s flurry of trades tore that group apart. This has gone from a strength to a weakness and the Giants don’t exactly project to have a lot of leads to hold.

**Positives & Negatives**

The dugout dynamics for the Giants are going to be fascinating. Bruce Bochy has retired and Gabe Kapler has taken over. Kapler seems to be a pretty hardline sabermetrics guy. I’m not sure how that will translate and go over. This remains a veteran team and Kapler’s brashness and intensity are going to be an enormous contrast from what we saw with Bochy. As far as I’m concerned, this is a big downgrade given the composition of the Giants.

I do like Kapler on the whole, but I don’t see this as the right fit for him. It makes sense that Farhan Zaidi and the others in the front office would align with Kapler, but I’m not sure how well this one goes over in the clubhouse.

**Pick: Under 69.5**

There is a very realistic possibility that the Giants post the second-lowest win total in the National League. The Marlins probably have the #1 spot sewn up, but the race to the bottom will include the Giants, Pirates, and the Rockies. This team is a major regression candidate coming off of the 38-16 record in one-run games. I really cannot stress that enough. The Giants won nearly 50% of their games by one run. The next closest team in that department was the Padres with 26 one-run wins and 70 total victories. That would be just over 37%.

That bullpen, which was such a big strength, is now a weakness. The bullpen was able to cover for a bad offense and a subpar starting rotation. The Giants were fourth in bullpen ERA, seventh in bullpen FIP, and seventh in bullpen LOB%, while being just 17th in K%. Not only did the bullpen lose a bunch of pieces, but it got lucky last season as well.

The Giants were outscored by over 100 runs at home and only scored 271 runs in 81 home games. They actually outscored the opposition 407-400 on the road, but I don’t see that happening again, particularly with major downgrades in both the bullpen and rotation.
This is an exception to the norm for me. I am playing this team under the total with a low number. That is how convinced I am that this is going to go poorly. Not only will the Giants regress badly in close games, but they are likely to fall off across the board.

I am also really worried about how this whole Gabe Kapler thing goes. Then there is the strength of the division, with the elite Dodgers, the very good Diamondbacks, and the potential of the Padres. Their alternate standings metrics were all a lot closer to this number and this is a worse team than last year’s version.

I wasn’t sure how much I would like this one going into the breakdown, but the Giants are going under this. This is a bet and one of my stronger season win total unders for the National League.