
FREE EDITION
VSiN
FREE EDITION
BASEBALL
BETTING PRIMER
SPRING HAS SPRUNG
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO BET ON BASEBALL THIS SEASON
OUR FREE PRIMER INCLUDES
• WORLD SERIES FUTURES ANALYSIS
• HOW TO BET ON SPRING TRAINING
• USING SABERMETRICS IN MLB BETTING

Hello, everybody.

Spring Training is underway and it is time to start thinking about the upcoming Major League Baseball season. I'm Adam Burke, the Managing Editor at VSiN.com and our resident MLB analyst.

My interest in baseball predates my career in the sports betting content creation space by a whole lot of years, but my preseason MLB Betting Guides also predate the start of my VSiN tenure in 2021. I brought the tradition with me and will be putting together team previews and more detailed overviews as the season gets closer over at VSiN.com, but the Baseball Betting Primer is designed to be both an intro to betting on baseball and a quick look at some of the concepts, thoughts, and perspectives that I have on handicapping the Great American Pastime.

The hope is that you like what you read and are interested in joining us at VSiN, where we're covering all of the sports with picks, predictions, and prognostications every single day. Once baseball gets going, we'll be doing that, too.

In this Primer, you will read about:

- The basics for betting on baseball
- How to bet on Spring Training
- Thoughts on betting World Series futures
- My passion for and application of sabermetrics in betting

This merely scratches the surface of what is to come, but serves as an introduction that should pique your interest in the upcoming season and maybe a different way to look at the game.

Happy Spring Training and thanks for reading!

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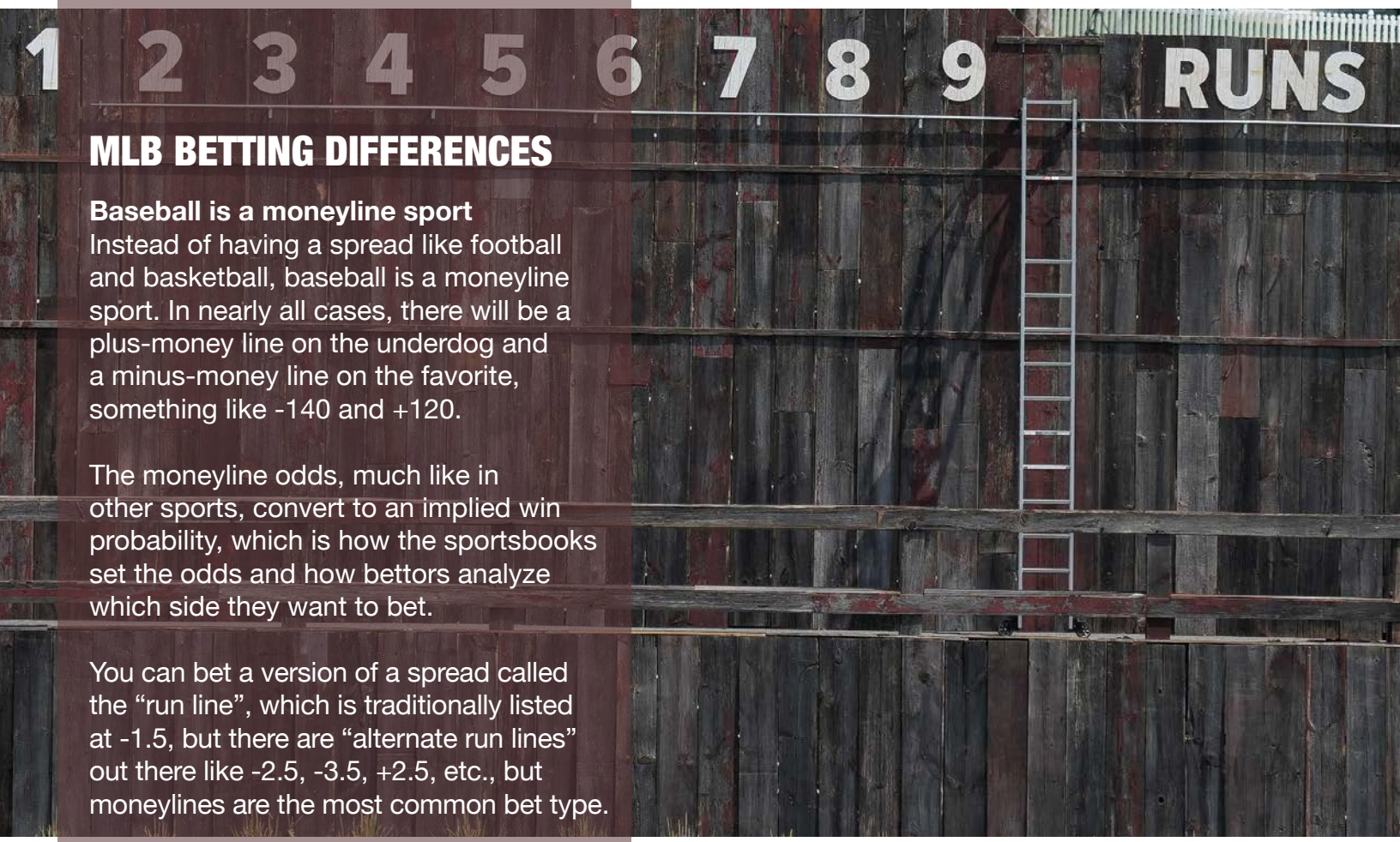
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ALL STATS, REFERENCES TO STANDINGS AND ODDS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Basics of Betting on **Baseball**

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



MLB BETTING DIFFERENCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MLB BETTING STRATEGIES

Shop around for the best odds

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

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

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

Analyze the weather and the ballpark

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

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

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

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

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

Picking out props

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

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

Be prepared for the grind

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

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



HOW TO BET ON SPRING TRAINING BASEBALL

Many people will scoff at the notion of betting on Spring Training baseball, but there are some tips and strategies that could prove to be very profitable. Some of my friends and colleagues in the sports betting world, specifically sharp MLB handicappers, have been able to find edges on the games and get their seasons off to a really good start.

Here are some tips to keep in mind for betting Spring Training baseball.

LISTEN TO THE MANAGERS

Much like preseason football, we get an advance copy of the script. Spring Training is long and it is a great time for beat writers and national reporters to get access. Managers are way more accessible and much more forthcoming with information than they are during the regular season.

They will discuss playing time for position players and the list of pitchers that will be available that day. The beat reporters and even team PR personnel will tweet those things out on social media. More often than not, we'll know how many pitches a starter is going to throw, who will follow, and in what order.

That information can be extremely valuable, as you could have one team using five or six actual Major Leaguers and another team using a bunch of minor leaguers or guys on the roster bubble.

You also get pitchers working on things and the managers (or players themselves) may address that. Sometimes a guy will be working on his fastball command and throw 90% fastballs. Another guy might be working on breaking balls, which are harder to control and lead to more walks and shorter outings. All of these things can provide a betting edge.

LINEUPS

This is pretty simple and a tenet of handicapping the regular season as well, but lines move quickly once lineups are released. Who's in and who's out?

A lineup full of Major Leaguers and top prospects against a lineup with a lot of minor leaguers and fringe roster guys is going to get the benefit of the doubt, so that line will move.

That feeds into my next point…

BET EARLY

It does not take many bets or a lot of money to move Spring Training lines. Also, betting limits are a lot lower for these games than a normal regular season game. You want to try and bet as quickly as possible when information breaks regarding the lineup and the pitchers that will be used.

If you jump in early, you are way more likely to get closing line value (CLV). Depending on how much CLV you have, you can choose to let it ride and have a really good wager compared to the market line or even consider betting the other team in the game to give yourself the opportunity to guarantee profit or "free roll" the game no matter who wins.

By getting the best line that you can early on, you get a lot more bang for your buck and have the best chance at having success.

CHECK THE WEATHER FORECAST

Spring Training takes place in Florida and Arizona. Hot, humid conditions are the best for offense and you'll get a lot of that in the Sunshine State, even in the months of February and March. Arizona is dry, but still warm and sunny, and some games feature a little bit of elevation in and around the Phoenix area. Scottsdale is about 2,200 feet above sea level. Any ballpark in that area would rank second in elevation in MLB.

Wind is also a factor in both places. You can get some games with the winds blowing out at 20+ mph and the sportsbooks may not adjust quickly enough.

CHECK THE TV SCHEDULE

With sports networks cutting costs left and right, not all Spring Training games are broadcast to the fans back home. Messaging may come down from the front office to give the home fans something to be excited about for a game on TV, especially one that is on in primetime. You'll often see something closer to the Opening Day lineup in a game like that than you would a random road game in the middle of the week.

Players are on schedules during the Spring Training period because the goal is to get everybody some work, but also to hit the regular season healthy. Some of the more important games may get preferential treatment from the coaching staff, so you can assume when star players will get their reps in and when they'll be working on back fields or have a day off.

BET RESPONSIBLY

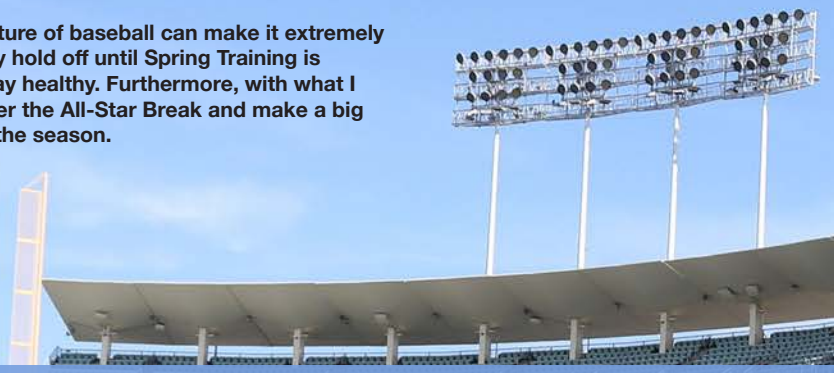
While there are ways to get line value and have good bets, it is still Spring Training. You're still going to have minor league relievers pitching the ninth inning and have to rely on minor league hitters in the late innings. The variance and volatility are high, but there are people out there who do a really great job of getting closing line value or picking winners just by following the information that is out there.

As always, bet responsibly and maintain proper bankroll management, but don't just shy away from Spring Training because of the perception of the games. Any bet can be a good bet if you have actionable information and work hard to find an edge.

WANDERING THROUGH THE WORLD SERIES FUTURES ODDS

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

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



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

2024 WORLD SERIES ODDS

TEAM	ODDS *(as of Feb. 21)*	TEAM	ODDS
Los Angeles Dodgers	+350	New York Mets	+4500
Atlanta Braves	+450	Boston Red Sox	+5000
Houston Astros	+800	San Francisco Giants	+5500
New York Yankees	+1000	Detroit Tigers	+6000
Baltimore Orioles	+1200	San Diego Padres	+6000
Texas Rangers	+1400	Cleveland Guardians	+7000
Philadelphia Phillies	+1500	Miami Marlins	+7000
Toronto Blue Jays	+2000	Milwaukee Brewers	+9000
Seattle Mariners	+2000	Kansas City Royals	+13000
Minnesota Twins	+2000	Los Angeles Angels	+15000
Chicago Cubs	+2800	Pittsburgh Pirates	+15000
Arizona Diamondbacks	+3500	Washington Nationals	+20000
Tampa Bay Rays	+3500	Chicago White Sox	+25000
St. Louis Cardinals	+3500	Colorado Rockies	+40000
Cincinnati Reds	+4500	Oakland Athletics	+40000

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

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



RECENT WORLD SERIES BETTING HISTORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WORLD SERIES FUTURES BETTING TIPS

Depth is critical

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ANALYTICS OF BETTING BASEBALL

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

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

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

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

WHAT ARE ANALYTICS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HOW TO USE ANALYTICS WHEN HANDICAPPING BASEBALL



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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