

## MLB USA TODAY SPORTS' POWER RANKINGS

Team	LW	Comments by Steve Gardner
1. Tampa Bay Rays	1	The Rays have been baseball's hottest team for more than a month and have won 23 of their last 28 games since May 13.
2. San Francisco Giants	2	Kevin Gausman won't win Cy Young with Jacob deGrom in the National League.
3. Chicago White Sox	4	Who said Tony La Russa, 76, was too old to manage in the big leagues still.
4. Los Angeles Dodgers	6	Max Muncy's injury the latest blow to the Dodgers.
5. Boston Red Sox	5	The Red Sox, 20-10 on the road, begin a nine-game road trip on Tuesday.
6. Oakland Athletics	7	Starting pitchers have dominated the last two weeks.
7. San Diego Padres	3	Their latest skid comes against two first-place teams: the NL Central-leading Cubs and NL East-best Mets.
8. Houston Astros	T-8	Astros hitters own MLB's best batting average and have struck out the fewest times.
T-9. Chicago Cubs	9	In his first 10 starts, 3B Patrick Wisdom hit eight homers, tying Aristides Aquino for the most by any player in his first 10 games with a team since 1900.
T-9. Milwaukee Brewers	T-8	Ten of their next 13 games against the Rockies, Diamondbacks.
11. New York Mets	11	Signing Taijuan Walker (2.07 ERA in 11 starts) looks like a stroke of genius.
12. Cleveland	12	Offense has heated up in June, with the club batting .280 collectively.
13. Toronto Blue Jays	13	Vladimir Guerrero Jr. leads the majors with 21 home runs.
14. New York Yankees	15	Tough week ahead with three-game series against Blue Jays and Athletics.
15. Philadelphia Phillies	17	Zack Wheeler with 46 strikeouts over his last four outings.
16. St. Louis Cardinals	14	Nolan Gorman, the organization's No. 2 prospect, is on a tear in the minors.
17. Cincinnati Reds	18	RHP Hunter Greene is moving closer to the big leagues. His next start likely will be for Triple-A Louisville after his dominant start in Double-A.
18. Atlanta Braves	16	The Braves sit five games back in the NL East and three games below .500.
19. Kansas City Royals	19	Veteran catcher Salvador Perez showing no signs of slowing down.
20. Los Angeles Angels	23	Justin Upton thriving in the role as a leadoff hitter.
21. Miami Marlins	22	Second baseman Jazz Chisholm Jr. commands your attention with his electric persona, power, speed and defense.
22. Seattle Mariners	20	Mitch Haniger, with 16 homers and 40 RBI, having another All-Star season.
23. Washington Nationals	21	The chances of Max Scherzer becoming a trade candidate increase after every loss.
24. Minnesota Twins	24	The Twins still know how to hit the long ball with 95 homers.
25. Detroit Tigers	25	Utility man Harold Castro has pitched two innings this year without allowing a hit or a run.
26. Colorado Rockies	T-27	Road woes I: The Rockies own MLB's worst road record (5-27).
27. Texas Rangers	T-27	DH-OF Khris Davis, a three-time 40-HR hitter, is designated for assignment.
28. Pittsburgh Pirates	28	Ke'Bryan Hayes has five extra-base hits since his return from the IL.
29. Baltimore Orioles	29	Road woes II: The O's have lost 15 straight road games, their worst skid since the St. Louis Browns moved to Baltimore in 1954.
30. Arizona Diamondbacks	30	Team woes: The D-backs are 5-33 in their last 38 games.

## Young stars lead early voting for 2021 MLB All-Star Game

Gabe Lacques

USA TODAY

Even as Major League Baseball contends with stultifying games, offensive ineptitude and a looming reckoning with pitchers' use of banned substances, its gaggle of young stars often find a way to paper over the game's warts.

The first batch of fan voting for the July 13 All-Star Game certainly reflects that.

Blue Jays slugger Vladimir Guerrero – likely the American League MVP front-runner – received more votes than any other player in balloting returns announced Monday. Guerrero, the 22-year-old son of a Hall of Famer, tops the entire American League slash line, ranking first in batting average (.344), on-base percentage (.450) and slugging (.688), for a major league-best OPS of 1.137. He also leads the majors with 21 home runs and 55 RBI and has received nearly 858,000 votes in early All-Star balloting.

Meanwhile, fans have an avenue to vote two-way star Shohei Ohtani into the game – he's the leading vote-getter at designated hitter; he's slugged 17 home runs with a .961 OPS and has nine stolen bases.

(For good measure, he's also struck out 68 batters in 47 1/3 innings with a 2.85 ERA as a pitcher.)

In the National League, Braves outfielder Ronald Acuña Jr.'s 804,000 votes lead the pack and ensure he'll receive his second career All-Star nod.

This year, Fernando Tatis Jr. should join him.

The wildly talented Padre with the \$340 million contract leads an impressive group at shortstop, tallying 701,000 votes. They are well-earned: He leads the NL with 19 home runs and a .654 slugging percentage.

All-Star starters will be announced July 1 and the remainder of the squad revealed July 4. MLB moved the game from Atlanta to Denver after a series of voter restriction laws were passed in Georgia.



Blue Jays first baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr., the MLB homer leader, received the most votes in the initial All-Star Game tally. WENDELL CRUZ/USA TODAY SPORTS

## Nightingale

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panacea to all the offensive woes in the game, but the threat of the crackdown has already had a huge impact.

## Spin rates drop, batting averages up

In the 11 days since MLB owners were told that the league was going to strictly enforce the ban of foreign substances, the spin rate (2,290 on fastballs), strikeout rate (23.4%) and walk rate (8.4%) are the lowest of any month this season.

The leaguewide batting averages, home runs, slugging and OPS (on-base-plus-slugging percentage) is the highest of any month. Hitters are batting .247 this month – compared to .232 and .239 the first two months – with a .318 on-base percentage, .419 slugging percentage and .737 OPS. The home run rate has soared from 12.7% to 14.7%.

Pitchers' average spin rate last week was the lowest this season. More than two-thirds of pitchers (67.2%) have had a reduced spin rate since June 3, including 37 pitchers by at least 100 rpm, according to theScore.com.

The argument by pitchers that they need sticky substances to improve their

grip to avoid hitting batters also lost considerable merit with walks decreasing from 9% to 8.4% with hit-by-pitches remaining flat at 1.2% per plate appearance.

There have been several noticeable decreases in spin rates in recent weeks, involving everyone from Trevor Bauer and Kenley Jansen of the Dodgers to Gerrit Cole of the Yankees to closers James Karinchak of Cleveland and Josh Hader of the Brewers.

The Red Sox pitching staff, coincidence or not, has badly struggled since owners were informed the league would begin its crackdown. The Red Sox have yielded a 9.23 ERA and 66 hits over 39 innings in the past nine games. The Red Sox deny any cheating. According to Statcast, four of their starters have had a reduction in spin rates.

"These guys are getting an extra 400, 500 rpms on their spin rate," Nationals first baseman Ryan Zimmerman told the Sports Junkies on 106.7-FM in Washington, D.C., last week, "which is basically taking a very mediocre pitcher who could be in the big leagues and propelling them to a level that is elite.

"Whether it is all their pitches, one pitch or whatever it is. To me, that's cheating. I can't do that with anything in the batter's box. I think that's where the problem lies."

Bauer, who signed a three-year, \$102 million contract, has drawn the most scrutiny. The spin rate on his four-seam fastball has increased by 550 rpm the last four seasons, and he leads all pitchers with his 2,822 fastball spin rate this season. His four-seam spin rate was 2,277 rpm in 2017 and has risen each year. Yet in his last two starts, his spin rate dropped by an average by 200 rpm.

Bauer is the one who called attention to pitchers cheating in 2018, pointing out the Astros' dramatically increased spin rate, and says he's all for the enforcement, as long as everyone is treated equally. "That's been the whole point this entire time," Bauer said. "Let everyone compete on a fair playing field. So if you're going to enforce it, enforce it. And if you're not, then stop sweeping it under the rug, which is what they've done for four years now. ... It would be nice as players to know what rules we're competing by and what rules are going to be enforced. As everyone knows, a rule that's written down that's never enforced is not a rule."

MLB tried to issue warnings before the start of the season, letting teams know it would routinely confiscate baseballs from pitchers, and track the difference in their spin rates. Managers were encouraged to freely ask umpires to check opposing pitchers if they were suspicious of illegal substances. Yet

with managers knowing their own guys were cheating, too, no one had the courage to ask.

The warnings clearly weren't working as the average spin rate for sliders increased by 353 rpm, curveballs 252 rpm and cut-fastballs 208 rpm since 2015, according to Statcast. The soaring increases don't happen unless your velocity suddenly soars or you're cheating.

Soon the cheating should come to an end, with Rule 6.02 (c) enforced by every umpire in the game and applied to every pitcher who takes the mound.

Baseball's dirty little secret, as Cardinals manager Mike Shildt called it, will finally be exposed.

You want to take a chance on being caught?

Feel free.

But don't come crying when you are publicly humiliated and booed everywhere you go on the road.

The warnings have been loud and clear. Now, it's time for action.

Who knows? Maybe we'll actually start to see a return of offense in the game, too.

"I actually think it's a good thing because one of the things we've been fighting is the non-action in our game," Phillies manager Joe Girardi said. "I think this could change things. I really do. It will be interesting."

Gentlemen, start your checkpoints.

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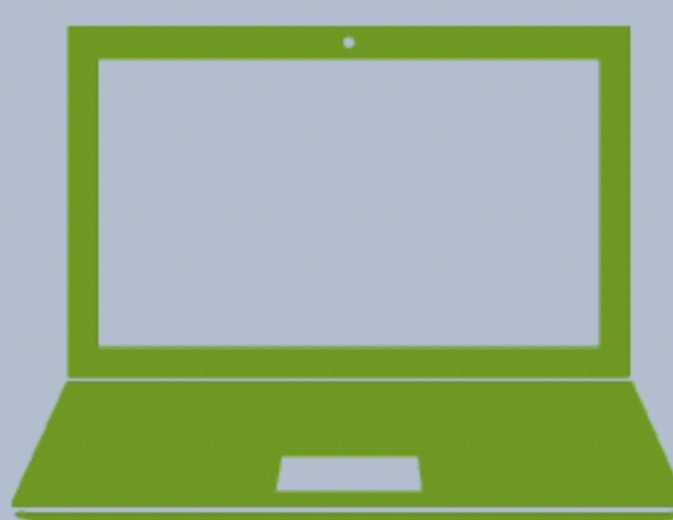
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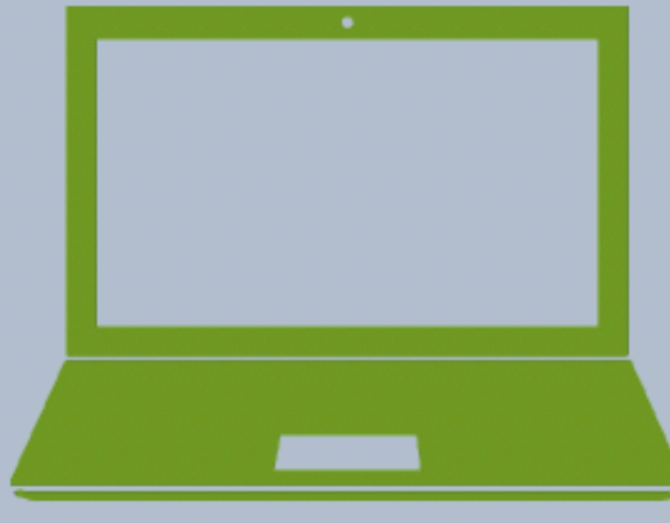
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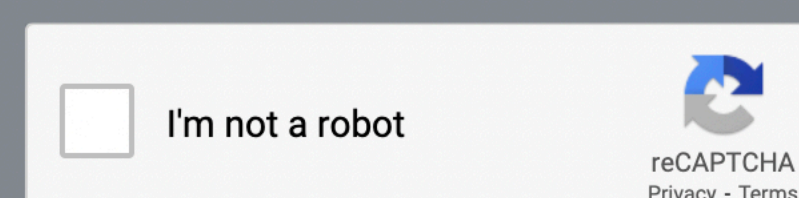


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