

MLB USA TODAY SPORTS' POWER RANKINGS

Table with 3 columns: Rank, Team, LW, Comments by Steve Gardner. Lists 30 MLB teams with their current standing and key news items.

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.

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 2/3 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

Nightengale

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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), strike-out 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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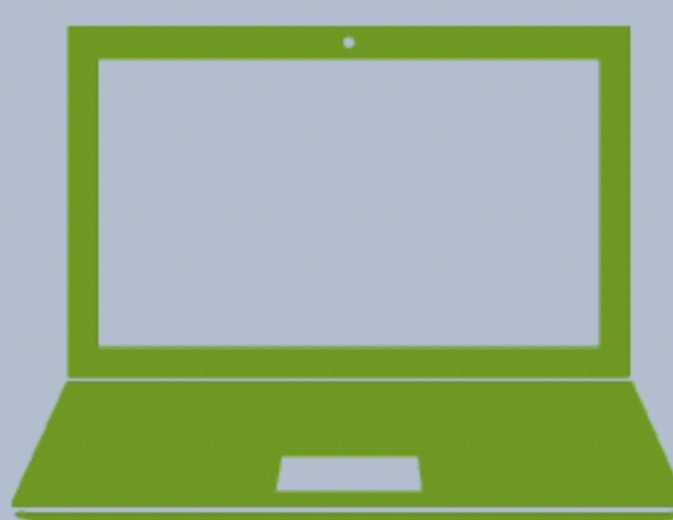
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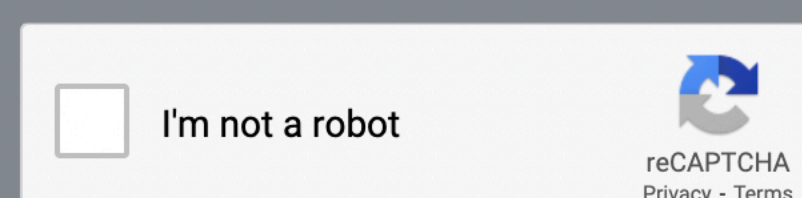


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