

# 2026 MLB SEASON PREVIEW

## BILL BURT'S ELITE 8: REAL WORLD SERIES CONTENDERS



**1 L.A. DODGERS**  
Loaded top to bottom. Best rotation and lineup in baseball

**2 N.Y. YANKEES**  
No more excuses. Return of ace Cole gets them AL East

**3 TORONTO BLUE JAYS**  
Added No. 2 Cease and possible star at 3B Okamoto to WS team

**4 CHICAGO CUBS**  
Due for post-season run adding perennial all-star 3B Bregman

**5 PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES**  
Time to win. Now. Re-signed Schwarber, Realmuto and added bullpen arm Keller

**6 BOSTON RED SOX**  
Ascending young talent led by Anthony, a future star, and three-plus arms in rotation

**7 SEATTLE MARINERS**  
Need to prove 2025 wasn't fluke. Need another MVP-caliber season from Raleigh

**8 DETROIT TIGERS**  
Like Red Sox, potentially great young group with maybe best 1-2 pitching tandem in Skubal, Valdez

## Explaining MLB's 'luxury tax' system

The luxury tax, formally known in MLB as the Competitive Balance Tax (CBT), is a financial penalty imposed on baseball teams whose total player payroll exceeds a set annual threshold. It acts as a "soft cap" to discourage excessive spending, with tax rates increasing based on how many consecutive years a team surpasses the limit.



### KEY ASPECTS OF THE MLB LUXURY TAX

**Thresholds:** The tax threshold is set by the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and increases yearly (e.g., \$237 million in 2024, \$241 million in 2025).

**Calculation:** Tax is based on the average annual value (AAV) of player contracts, not their actual cash salary in a given year.

**Penalties:**

**First-time offenders:** 20% tax on the amount over the threshold.

**Consecutive years:** 30% for two consecutive years, 50% for three or more consecutive years.

**Surcharges:** Additional surtaxes apply if a team exceeds the threshold by \$20 million, \$40 million, or more.

**Draft Penalty:** Teams exceeding the threshold by \$40 million or more have their highest draft pick moved back 10 places.

**Purpose:** The collected funds are used to cover player benefits and to fund teams with lower revenues, aimed at improving competitive balance, says Baseball Connect.

If a team drops below the threshold for one season, their penalty rate resets to 20%.



Associated Press.

**Shohei Ohtani has helped the talent-rich Dodgers to two straight World Series titles. All that talent in 2025 adds up to an expensive luxury tax bill this year.**

## Dodgers to pay \$169.4M for 2025

The Los Angeles Dodgers are set to pay a record-shattering \$169.4 million in Competitive Balance Tax (CBT)—commonly known as the luxury tax—for the 2025 MLB season.

This amount, which is higher than the entire payroll of 12 other MLB teams, marks the fifth consecutive year the Dodgers have exceeded the threshold and cements their 2025 squad as the most expensive in baseball history.

### THE DODGERS' 2025 LUXURY TAX SITUATION:

» **Total CBT Payroll:** The Dodgers' 2025 tax payroll was \$417.3 million, surpassing the previous record of \$374.7 million set by the 2023 New York Mets

» **Luxury Tax Payment:** \$169.4 million

» **Total Roster Cost:** Combining payroll and tax, the team cost over \$586 million in 2025

» **Consecutive Years Over:** 5 (2021–2025)



Associated Press photos

Trying to keep pace with the Dodgers — both in free agency and on the field — has been frustrating for Major League teams the last several years. Among those best positioned to do so in 2026 are, from left, the Red Sox and Garrett Crochet; the Phillies and Bryce Harper; the Cubs and Seiya Suzuki; and the Mariners and Cal Raleigh.

# CHASING L.A.

## Top challengers begin the difficult pursuit

BY BILL BURT  
CNHI NORTH OF BOSTON

Where have we seen this chase before?

Here's one possible place: Saturday mornings; national television; 74 years — "The Road Runner Show" pitting Wile E. Coyote and, of course, the Road Runner.

In each episode, the devious and ravenous coyote repeatedly attempts to catch and eat the road-runner, but is, humorously, always unsuccessful.

Welcome to the 2026 Major League Baseball season where it's the Los Angeles Dodgers and, well, everyone else.

While "devious" might be the wrong parallel and "humorously" definitely the wrong description, the rest of the analogy fits as the new baseball season is ready to begin.

The two-time defending World Series champs are better than they were last year, adding one of the game's best outfielders in Kyle Tucker, paying him \$60 million per year, on average, over the next four years.

What that means is the team with the best pitching staff, best lineup and best player (see Shohei Ohtani) added the best free agent.

While the Toronto Blue Jays almost pulled it off, losing in Game 7 in last October's Fall Classic, almost only counts in horseshoes.

There is legit competition, particularly the one franchise, the New York Mets, that has somewhat attempted to chase the Dodgers spending limits — Dodgers at \$398.4 million vs. N.Y. Mets at \$373.3 million — though the talent gap is much bigger considering the Mets were 83-79 in 2025.

The second tier, as in those really "chasing the Dodgers," is made up of the Blue Jays, Cubs, Mariners, Phillies, Red Sox, Tigers and Yankees, which have bandwidth — high-pitching and high-end offense — to make it interesting.

The 162-game regular season is one thing. A seven-game series, as

## Key Dodgers' salaries

Lineup	Salary in '26
1. DH: Shohei Ohtani	\$70M
2. RF: Kyle Tucker	\$60M
3. SS: Mookie Betts	\$30.4M
4. 1B: Freddie Freeman	\$27M
5. C: Will Smith	\$14M
6. 3B: Max Muncy	\$10M
7. LF: Teoscar Hernández	\$22M
8. CF: Andy Pages	\$2.2M
9. 2B: Hyeoseon Kim	\$4.2M
Rotation	Salary in '26
1. Yoshinobu Yamamoto	\$27.1M
2. Blake Snell	\$36.4M
3. Shohei Ohtani	\$70M
4. Tyler Glasnow	\$27.3M
5. Emmet Sheehan	\$2.3M
Bullpen	Salary in '26
(CL) Edwin Díaz	\$23M
Tanner Scott	\$18M

the Blue Jays, which improved on paper, is another. All of the "chasers" rank in the

top 10 in payrolls, with the Mariners (\$183 million) the outlier.

The Red Sox, Tigers and Yankees have, arguably, the three best starters in the American League with Garrett Crochet, Tarik Skubal and Gerit Cole, respectively, while the Mariners have two MVP candidates, last year's runnerup in Cal Raleigh and Julio Rodriguez. The Phillies have both, a Cy Young challenger in Christopher Sanchez and two-time MVP winner Bryce Harper.

The Cubs potent offense returns three 30-HR hitters in Michael Bush, Seiya Suzuki and Pete Crow-Armstrong and All-Star ace Ben Brown.

And with the Yankees and their reigning MVP Aaron Judge, Ohtani's equal in the American League, the best of the best have talent to compete with the Dodgers.

But catching and, really, beating them, appears to be akin to Wile E. Coyote's pursuit of the Road Runner.

October couldn't get here soon enough.

# Ball or strike?

## New 'ABS' system will help make the call

BY BILL BURT  
CNHI NORTH OF BOSTON

At long last, player protest with ball or strike calls can be handled with something other than ineffectual arguing.

Beginning with this 2026 MLB season opener (March 25, Yankees at Giants), players will have the power to appeal the strike-zone judgments of human home-plate umpires by turning to the Automated Ball-Strike (ABS) challenge system — an advancement that will not only help ensure the most important calls are made correctly but also add a fun layer of strategy to the sport.

The challenge system makes its formal debut on Opening Night when the Giants host the Yankees at 8:05 p.m. ET in the first-ever live MLB broadcast on Netflix.

As we saw on the final pitch of the USA-Dominican Republic WBC

semifinal, a ball that was called a strike — it will affect the games, hopefully at the right time.

Players are optimistic about correcting bad calls but recognize the need for strategy, such as when to use their limited challenges to avoid wasting them on minor calls.

You get two "mistakes" or wrong calls by the players — only pitchers, batters and catchers can challenge a pitch.

Those watching at home or in attendance at the respective parks will see the rulings live, electronically, similar to tennis, which shows the challenges to all.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora noted, "We talked about it. By the fifth inning, hopefully, we have (not used our) challenges. So if we do that, we did our job early on. I think at the end, the last week, you know, we're going to transition to strategy."

## Other recent rule changes

**Pitch Clock (2023-24):** While it speeds up the game, some players noted the pressure that comes with it. Pitchers mentioned having to throw quickly even when not fully prepared, and catchers felt "hung out to dry" by limited pickoff attempts.

**Shift Bans (2023):** Generally accepted as part of the game to increase action — second basemen and shortstops must stay on their sides of the second base bag — though it changed how infielders approach positioning.

**Position Players Pitching (2023):** Players supported restrictions on when position players can pitch to maintain game integrity, following a surge in such instances.

### OVERALL SENTIMENT OF RECENT RULES

**Faster Pace:** Players acknowledge that the new rules make the game move faster, which is generally viewed positively.

**Adaptation:** Despite initial hesitation, many players adapted, leading to fewer violations as seasons progressed.

**Strategy:** The rules have added a new layer of mental and strategic preparation to the game. The new ABS rules on balls and strikes will add more.

## CAN METS FINALLY CONTEND?

It's not about the money, because if it was the Mets would be shoulder to shoulder



with the Dodgers. The 2025 Mets were ninth in runs scored (4.7 per) and middle of pack in runs allowed (4.4). Added all-star Bo Bichette (2B) on offense and arm Devin Williams (BP). Paid \$111M luxury tax for non-post-season team last year. Anything less than NLCS would be huge disappointment.

## JAYS ONE-HIT WONDERS?

The Blue Jays almost pulled off the miracle, staying Goliath (see Dodgers) last October. Lost Bo Bichette to free agency and didn't replace that offense, instead adding all-star starter Dylan Cease to a formidable staff with rookie Trey Yesavage, a possible CY Young candidate in making. In tough AL East, KOing Yankees and Red Sox, again, a big chore.

## ROOKIES TO WATCH?

Top Rookie of the Year candidates are: Blue Jays pitcher Trey Yesavage, who shined after his late 2025 call-up, and Royals catcher Carter Jensen in the American League; Mets pitcher Noah McLean, who started for Team USA in the WBC finale against Venezuela, and Cardinals shortstop J.J. Wetherholt in the National League.



Carter Jensen

## RED SOX NEW ROTATION BETTER?

The Red Sox could pitch last year, ranking among the top five in most categories related to the starting rotation and bullpen. But they added three new faces, all with different positives/negatives — Sonny Gray, experience yet old; Ranger Suarez, grit yet pressure of new contract; Johan Oviedo, raw ability yet consistency. All have question marks. Could be great? Yes. Could be average? Yes.

## PHILLIES DO OR DIE?

Close, but no cigar describes the Phillies with four straight postseason runs, but none deep since losing in seven to Dodgers in 2023 and losing World Series to Astros in 2022. Fans are restless, wanting the ultimate prize, with a lineup and starting staff equal to nearly every team not named Dodgers. Need an MVP year from Bryce Harper, badly.

## HOW PATIENT ARE CARDS FANS?

The Cardinals, really President of Baseball Ops Chairm Bloom, traded four All-Stars away in Nolan Arenado (Arizona), Sonny Gray (Boston), Brendan Donovan (Seattle) and Willson Contreras (Boston). Why? Rebuild, save money and let the kids play. The problem is this will mark the fourth straight season without October baseball. This is a respectful but passionate fan base, but will they accept a 90-loss team?



— Bill Burt