BLEACHER BUZZ

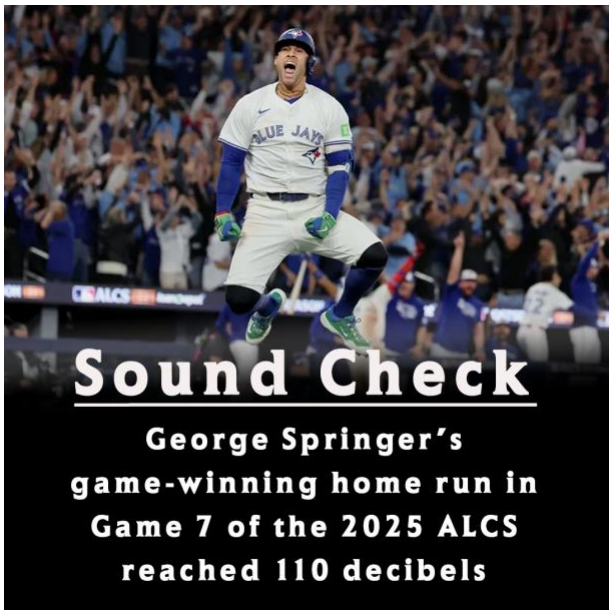
2026 Toronto Blue Jays Team Preview

Justin Oreskovich | January 18, 2026

Introduction

Out of all the local sports teams, the Toronto Blue Jays are my favourite. When an intense game is happening, the atmosphere is not only electric — but the kind that feels louder and more communal than any other sport.

When the Blue Jays are clicking, the entire country locks in; case in point, the 2025 postseason. As the Toronto Blue Jays made their first World Series appearance in over 30 years, Canada was ready to believe this could be the year the Commissioner's Trophy ends up on the northern side of the border. According to Sportsnet, Game 7 of the World Series became the most-watched English-language broadcast in Canadian history, outside of the 2010 Winter Olympics.



Now that the World Series is done, I wanted to create a guide breaking down everything one needs to know for this upcoming 2026 season. Covering every possible corner imaginable, the whole point of this team preview is to simplify things for new baseball fans, while also providing die-hard baseball fans with interesting facts to validate the verdict for where the Blue Jays could finish by the end of the regular season.

In order to make sense of it all, I broke it all down into several categories:

— The good

— How the World Series was so close

— The bad

— Questions/concerns I have moving forward

Notes

**anything in brackets explains baseball terminology for those new to the game.*

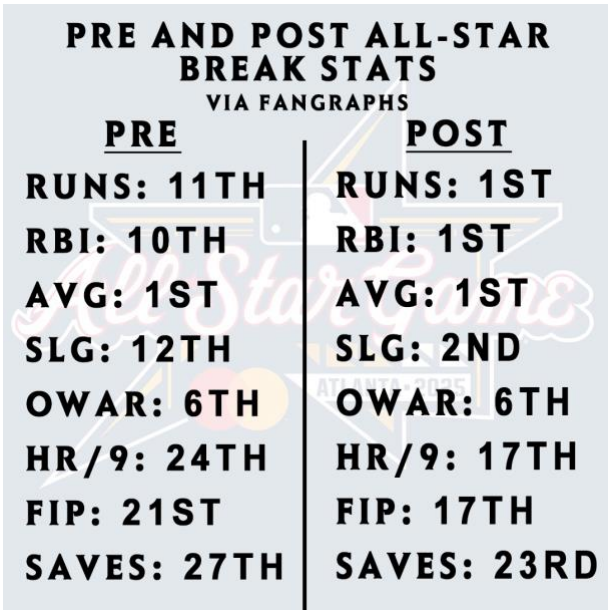
** Earned-run average (ERA) will not be discussed, as factors such as poor fielding can create an unfair perception of a pitcher's ability. In addition, the Home Run Factor (see final image) can give batters an inherent advantage on home runs, which in turn affects ERA.*

The Good

The Second-Half Turnaround

The Blue Jays were a fascinating team to watch in 2025 because they were a team of two halves. The first half, not very good and downright mediocre. The second half, a formidable team nobody wanted to play.

Offensively, Toronto became the hardest team in baseball to strike out. According to ESPN's David Schoenfield, the Jays posted the lowest strikeout rate *(K%)* in the majors**,** while increasing the average exit velocity *(velocity is how hard a hitter consistently makes contact with the baseball)* and batting average.



Rise of the Yesavage

If I had to describe rookie starting pitcher Trey Yesavage's season in one word, it would be unbelievable.

I think most people have heard this Yesavage kid is good, but I don't think they really know how much of a gamebreaker he can become. He's only had 17 starts in both the regular season and postseason combined, yet he's already ending up in MLB content creator's top-30 pitcher's list.

Yesavage generated 23 swinging strikes in that outing, good for a 44.2 per cent whiff rate**,** the best by any Blue Jays starting pitcher this season
(a "whiff" is a swing and miss. Whiff rate, or whiff %, measures how often hitters miss when they swing. Anything above 30 per cent is elite.)

Hitters simply couldn't square him up, especially his splitter, producing a 58 per cent whiff rate**,** one of the most effective in all of postseason baseball *(a splitter is when the pitcher splits their index and middle fingers on opposite sides of the baseball, reducing the spin and making the ball go down and away from the plate.)*

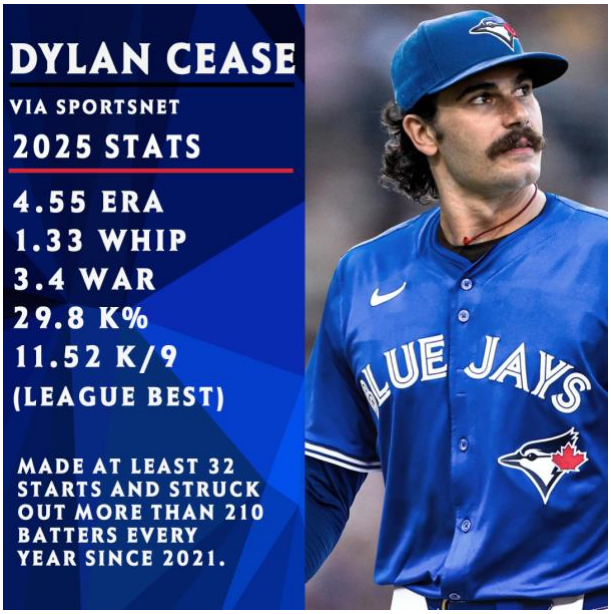
Part of the deception comes from how he throws. Baseball Savant data shows Yesavage delivers the ball at roughly 65 degrees, compared to an MLB average closer to 35 degrees. The unorthodox angle gives hitters a different visual look, reducing reaction time and increasing the velocity. Yesavage set an MLB record for strikeouts by a rookie in a single postseason with 39.

The question now is how teams will adjust. With a full offseason of video and scouting reports, 2026 will test whether his presence is still overwhelming once the surprise wears off. But if this rookie season was any indication, the Blue Jays may have found more than a breakout arm — they may have found an ace of the future *(An "ace" is the premiere pitcher in a team's rotation lineup)*.

Meaningful Additions

The Blue Jays added three players this offseason capable of making an immediate impact.

Starting pitcher Dylan Cease is the headliner. Making the *2026 Top 100 Players Right Now* list, Cease brings valuable swing-and-miss to a coaching staff that values contact prevention. In 2025, Cease went 193 innings with a 3.41 FIP *(Fielding Independent Pitching emphasis strikeouts, walks and home runs, stripping out defensive luck. A 3.41 FIP is considered very good.)* and came 6th in league strikeouts, placing Cease among Toronto's most valuable pitchers by WAR (*Wins Above Replacement estimates in numerical form how many more wins a player provides provide compared to a readily available "replacement-level" player.)*



Fellow starting pitcher Cody Ponce is more volatile than Cease, but also more intriguing. Ponce played in the MLB back in 2021, but it didn't work out. Then, he joined the South Korean baseball league KBO, changed his throwing mechanics and made history. Pitching for the Hanwha Eagles in 2025, Ponce went 17-1 with a 0.94 WHIP, while setting a KBO single-season record with 252 strikeouts, including a record 18 in a single game. *(WHIP or Walks and Hits per Innings Pitched measures how many baserunners —via walks or hits, a pitcher allows per inning. This stat measures how much control the pitcher has with ball placements.)* Even if Ponce could put up half the stats he did last year, he could be one of the best fifth options in the entire league.

Finally, utility man *(another way of saying multi-position athlete)* Kazuma Okamoto. The six-time NPB *(Japan's pro baseball league)* all-star and three-time Central League home run champion signed a four-year, $60-million deal. His batting profile stands out as a guy who doesn't chase *(swinging at pitches outside the strike zone)*, and makes meaningful contact for a powerful swing. He provides solid defence, which can be improved upon with help from management. Having Okamoto allows for fellow utility men Ernie Clement and Addison Barger to move to second-base and right outfield, respectively.

Development as a Competitive Advantage

The Blue Jays' depth doesn't come out of thin air — it comes out of Buffalo.

Toronto's scouting and player development pipeline has quietly become one of the organization's biggest strengths, with the Buffalo Bisons *(the Blue Jays Triple-A team)* serving as a reliable place for player development. Several key contributors to the 2025 Blue Jays roster arrived in the majors already prepared —not rushed. This is meant to highlight the scouting and analytics team's incredible ability to find talent who can make contact while also providing valuable defence.

Now let's give a special mention to the newly acquired hitting coach David Popkins**.** Normally, there wouldn't be a mention of a team's hitting coach — unless their impact was either really good…or really bad. Thankfully, it's the former. Popkins helped transform the Blue Jays into a team opponents feared because they were getting better at making quality contact as the season went along. Partnered with the team's incredible chemistry, the Blue Jays became a case study on investing in quality coaching, rather than spending every last dollar on the best talent. This team's depth went toe-to-toe with all the star talent the Los Angeles Dodgers could buy.

Why The World Series Was So Close

On paper, it might have looked like the Dodgers were going to easily win the World Series —but the reality couldn't have been farther from the truth. So how exactly did the Blue Jays go the distance when the Dodgers had the more talented roster?

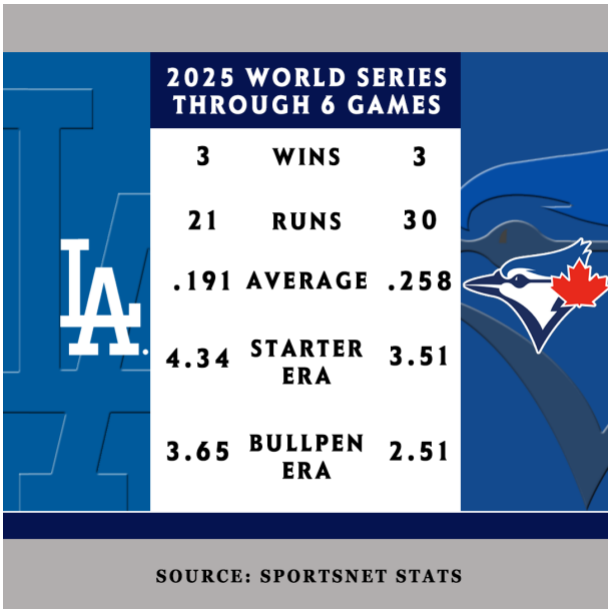
Elevating the Game

- **Vladimir Guerrero Jr.** set an all-time MLB playoff OPS record *(On-base Plus Slugging is a comprehensive metric for a player's offensive production, with 1.000 being league average)*, hitting eight home runs. He later earned the league's first Entertainer of the Year Award and an All-MLB First Team selection. Although his batting wasn't as great as previous years, he was reliable on first-base, making incredible catches with his signature splits.

- **Alejandro Kirk** had one of his best years yet, with career-highs in home runs and RBI *(Runs Batted In means how many baserunners the batter was able to help earn the team runs).* Additionally, Kirk tied the MLB record for home runs by a catcher in a single postseason with five. According to Sportsnet Stats, the Blue Jays won eight straight playoff games when Kirk homered.

- **George Springer** managed to step up. His 2025 accomplishments includes Blue Jays Player of the Year, an AL Silver Slugger, and posted a career-high batting average. His home run which defeated the Seattle Mariners to advance to the World Series was later described by none other than the Seattle Times as "one of the biggest non-World Series plays in baseball history".

- **Ernie Clement** set an MLB record with 30 hits in a single postseason, while **Addison Barger** recorded 14 hits over a 10-game stretch in the playoffs (via Sportsnet). **Andrés Giménez** entered the postseason with the lowest OPS among qualified AL hitters — then became tied with the 3rd-most RBI from the #9 spot in a batting in a postseason all-time.



As previously mentioned, the bats came alive for the Blue Jays. So what was the x factor that tipped the scales in the Dodgers favour? A historic performance from pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto**.**

In Game 7, he threw 105 pitches — 73 for strikes — becoming the first pitcher since 2015 to throw consecutive complete games in the World Series.

Yamamoto went 3–0, allowing just two errors over 65 batters faced while striking out 23 per cent of hitters. Although I don't like to reference ERA (Earned Runs on Average) for pitchers due to factors out of their control like bad luck with outfielding and the Home Run Factor (see image below), Yamamoto had an unbelievable 1.02 ERA.

But there's more to it than just one player. It was several factors, such as several costly baserunning errors from Bo Bichette, Addison Barger and George Springer in games three, six and seven respectively. Additionally, a dead ball that lodged in the outfield padding, a roster change in the outfield that resulted in a crucial out, and a blown pitch from Blue Jays reliever Jeff Hoffman.

The Bad

Runners Left Stranded

On the surface, the Blue Jays' offence looked good in 2025. Take a look at the stats and see Toronto finished 11th in Major League Baseball in home runs and seventh in slugging percentage. You might think 'why is this under the bad heading?'

The context behind these hits makes a difference.

The Blue Jays often relied on solo home runs, and struggled to string together quality at-bats to bring in additional runners. That inconsistency became especially noticeable against elite pitching.

Toronto was tied for 18th in "Runners Left in Scoring Position". For newer fans, this stat refers to how often a team strands baserunners on second or third base at the end of an inning. High totals suggest difficulty delivering timely hits rather than an inability to get on base.

It mirrored patterns from past years, raising questions about approach and in-game adjustments. Even though the new hitting coach David Popkins managed to turn the team around in the second-half of the season, the first-half demonstrated an issue many Blue Jays fans have: the team gets players on base, only to amount to nothing.

The Disappointment of Anthony Santander

To improve upon this, the Blue Jays went out and signed all-star slugger Anthony Santander. MLB Network listed Santander as the 53rd best player coming into 2025. Instead, he was arguably the most *disappointing* player in 2025.

Santander's overall impact fell short of expectations for a player coming off a season of 42 HR and 102 RBI. His struggles compounded the team's issues with runners in scoring position, particularly when injuries or slumps forced him out of the lineup.

Santander's presence did not sink the offence. However, his absence was certainly felt, to the point where fans were wondering how the lineup was going to work since the rest of the team picked up the offence while he was off with shoulder, ankle and back injuries.

Closer Jeff Hoffman's Inability to Close Games

Last season, relief pitchers *(otherwise known as closers or relievers)* were frequently forced into high-leverage situations earlier than expected, a by-product of close games. The role of a reliever is to remain cool, calm and collected and earn saves *(when a pitcher finishes a game, helping secure a team victory)*. However, when the team's best reliever lands fourth in blown saves *(a stat where a reliever in a save situation surrenders his team's lead in the game)* — there's a problem.

For the Blue Jays, Jeff Hoffman allowed a single-season franchise-record 13 home runs in the ninth inning or later**.** Although he had his moments, Hoffman struggled throughout the regular season.

One example happened on August 26 against the Minnesota Twins. Hoffman allowed two home runs in the ninth inning resulting in a 7-5 loss. requiring head coach John Schneider to explain why he would go back to Hoffman on back-to-back nights.

For years, the Blue Jays have failed to bring in elite talent in the bullpen. Aside from Jordan Romano's all-star season back in 2022, there has yet to be a pitcher Blue Jays fans can feel confident in to close a game in the ninth inning.

The Likely Loss of Bassitt's Production and Veteran Leadership

Starting pitcher Chris Bassitt's future with the Blue Jays remains uncertain, but his potential departure would leave a noticeable void.

Bassitt may not have been the flashiest arsenal of pitches at his disposal, yet his value extended beyond the box score. He consistently provided innings, a decent amount of strikeouts and served as ambassador for free agents to come to Toronto.

In the postseason, Bassitt willingly shifted to a bullpen role, delivering 6.2 scoreless innings with an 8.0 strikeout-to-walk ratio *(K/BB)* and a 28.2 whiff %. His performance also came with an interesting comment regarding the state of the bullpen.

Losing Bassitt would not simply mean subtracting a starter — it would losing a guy who *wants* to return "this team is the closest and most special team I've ever played with". Personally, signing Bassitt to a two-year $20 million contract doesn't seem impossible. The Blue Jays could have brought him in, cut reliever Brendon Little, and traded Berríos to free up the contract room.

The José Berríos Situation

José Berríos' 2025 season ended with more questions than answers.

During the World Series, Berríos was away from the club. An unusual situation even considering he did not pitch in the postseason and finished the regular season on the injured list with right elbow inflammation, per MLB.com. Earlier in September, when Berríos was moved to the bullpen, it was clear the decision did not sit well with the veteran starting pitcher.

Prior to that, Berríos wasn't having the greatest season. Since the beginning of July, Berríos posted a 5.37 ERA, with a noticeable drop in velocity *(the speed of the ball as it travels towards the plate)*. His WHIP and H9 *(hits allowed per nine innings)* were both his highest since 2022. Additionally, he logged his fewest innings pitched since that 2022 season.

Berríos remains under club control until 2028, with an opt-out that could allow him to test free agency at age 32. For Toronto, that creates an uneasy balance: whether to trust a bounce-back season, attempt to restructure his role, or explore trade options to manage payroll flexibility. Berríos will make $19 million in 2026, rising up to $24 million for each of the following two years.

Not to mention, with the addition of Cody Ponce, there can already be a full rotation without Berríos: Kevin Gausman, Trey Yesavage, Dylan Cease, Shane Bieber and Cody Ponce.

Regardless of the outcome, the situation was not an ideal look for a veteran leader during a World Series run. There's a reason why Mark Bowman of MLB.com predicts the Atlanta Braves would be willing to trade for Berríos.

These might be signs it's time to move on. If the Blue Jays eat a fraction of his contract before the full no-trade clause begins in July, it might be worth it.

The Question Marks Heading Into 2026

Will There Be a Kevin Gausman Extension?

Kevin Gausman will be a Unrestricted Free Agent *(UFA)* after the 2026 season, where he will be 36. Naturally, this would raise questions about whether an extension is worth it — especially for a starting pitcher.

But here's the thing: having contract negotiations loom over Gausman's head while performing in 2026 can become a locker room distraction. On top of getting into the right mental headspace before a game, Gausman would have to deal with reporters asking him about contract negotiations and where the two parties stand as of that moment.

So what exactly did Gausman accomplish last season that would warrant an extension?:

- He threw a complete game shutout in September against the Houston Astros
- He came 11th in WHIP and 18th in strikeouts among starting pitchers
- He pitched the 7th most innings in the regular season, with 30 in the postseason

The question isn't whether Gausman can still pitch at a high level — it's how long that arm can remain elite. On the other hand, Gausman has proven to reliable for the Blue Jays over the span of several years now.

Why Didn't Toronto Push Harder for an Elite Reliever?

The Blue Jays addressed the bullpen, but not by signing the best free agents available, and that's where questions linger.

Impact relievers who are superior to Hoffman and were available in free agency, included:

- Pete Fairbanks (signed for 1 year, $11 million with the Miami Marlins)
- Devin Williams (signed for 3 years, $51 million with the New York Mets)
- Edwin Díaz (signed for 3 years, $69 million with the Los Angeles Dodgers)

Yes, relievers are volatile year-to-year, and the cost to acquire elite closers has exploded over the years. There's a fair argument to be made. On the other hand, in October, bullpen depth can be the difference between ending the season on a high note, or ending on a whimper. So why not buy all the talent available?

Understanding the Payroll Part I: The CBA and CBT

* This is important for readers to know: The Collective Bargaining Agreement *(CBA)* and the Competitive Balance Tax *(CBT)*. The CBA is an agreement between the player's association and the MLB on issues such as salary and free agency. The CBT *(or luxury tax),* is a penalty on high-spending teams to discourage payroll excess, with funds redistributed to the smaller market teams.

Per Yahoo Sports, the CBT threshold for 2025 was $241 million, while Toronto's final payroll ballooned to $45 million over the limit. In that same article, the excess spending by the Blue Jays placed the ball club in 'Tier 3 offender territory', triggering escalating penalties:

Tier One: 20 per cent on the first $20 million

Tier Two: 32 per cent on the next $20 million

Tier Three: 62.5 per cent on the remaining $5 million

The Blue Jays had to pay a $13.6 million tax penalty in 2025**.**

Understanding the Payroll Part II: The 2026 Payroll Picture

The 2026 CBT threshold rose to $244 million — but Toronto blew past it again.

- Blue Jays 2026 payroll: $312 million | Amount over CBT: roughly $68 million

Understanding the Payroll Part III: Rogers Communications' net worth

Yes, the Blue Jays already pay more salary *and* more tax than most teams. Yes, those funds help support smaller markets, including division rivals. And yes, penalties escalate sharply once a team becomes a repeat offender.

But fans are also aware of this reality:
Rogers Communications has a reported net worth of nearly $20 billion.

From a fan perspective, the argument isn't whether to avoid the tax— it's whether absorbing additional penalties is *worth it*. For a team whose recent postseason exits have repeatedly hinged on bullpen reliability, the absence of a true, fear-inducing closer feels like a decision rather than an impossibility.

Will Coaching and Game Management Improve?

This is one of the most sensitive — and unavoidable — questions surrounding the Blue Jays.

Recent seasons have produced several high-profile decision points that continue to question the decision-making of the staff come playoff time:

- Pulling José Berríos early in the 2023 playoffs.
- Attempting (and failing) to remove Max Scherzer before a dominant outing that helped win Game 4 of the World Series.
- Bringing in Brendon Little in the eighth inning of Game 5, resulting in a blown save in the 2025 ALCS.
- Instructing Isiah Kiner-Falefa to take a conservative lead at third base, leading to a costly out at home in game 7 of the World Series

Individually, each decision can be defended, as each was justified using statistical analytics. Collectively, they emphasized micro-managing in the biggest moments.

Defenders will note Schneider was named runner-up in the 2025 AL Manager of the Year. Also, the decision to hire Popkins came from Schneider. Finally, it could be argued Schneider saw the importance of the splitter, resulting in the Blue Jays leading the league in splitters thrown. All might explain why Schneider's contract was picked up for an additional year, with the Blue Jays admitting to being open to a long-term extension.

The challenge for 2026 is balance. Data-driven decision-making is essential — something Schneider and team have demonstrated. But making decisions solely off analytics and not feel or adaptability can also backfire. This season will be a sign on whether Toronto's staff can avoid relying on analytics too much under pressure.

Will Ricky Tiedemann Perform Post-Tommy John Surgery?

Left-handed Pitcher Ricky Tiedemann remains one of the organization's most intriguing question marks. Ranking fourth on the Blue Jays' top 30 prospects list, Tiedemann climbed four different ranks of minor league ball in 2023 - similar to Trey Yesavage in 2025. However, he suffered a left bicep injury that required Tommy John surgery *(another way of saying a repair of a torn UCL muscle in the arm)*.

Post–Tommy John surgery outcomes vary widely, especially for pitchers whose profiles are built on velocity and deception. The good news: modern recovery timelines are better than ever, and at age 23, time is on Tiedemann's side. The concern is less about *if* he returns, and more about what version returns.

Prior to the injury, he was starting to show signs of promise, putting up 27 strikeouts across 17 innings. There were also some concerns, as he was allowing a good amount of hits and walking an average of eight batters per nine innings *(BB/9)*.

So how could Tiedemann help Toronto? The team will likely manage his workload carefully, by having him play reliever. This could actually be the best-case scenario, as Tiedemann can spend spring training with the Blue Jays pitching staff in Florida.

If Bassitt was able to go from starting pitcher to reliever and play great baseball, who is to say Tiedemann couldn't do the same? Tiedemann throws for velocity when he's not using his impressive sweeper *(a sweeper is when the ball goes side-to-side across the plate, like a frisbee.)*

Tiedemann will be a project, both in fixing his mistakes and how he's utilized on the roster. Hopefully he's a factor to us in our rotation," says General Manager Ross Atkins. "But we would be open to him impacting the team in a bulk role or some creative way." While it's not confirmed Tiedemann will for certain serve as a reliever, it could be the best way to answer the question of whether or not Tiedemann is capable of pitching in the Majors.

The Biggest Question of All: Are We Heading for a 2027 Lockout?

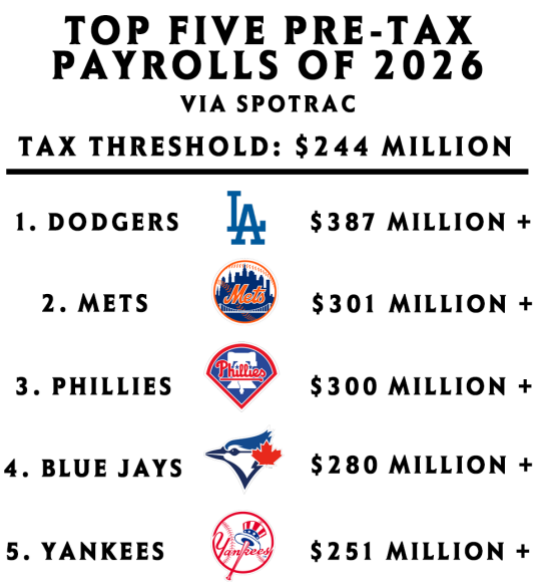
Hovering over everything the Blue Jays — and the rest of baseball —is a much bigger question than bullpen depth or roster tweaks: will there even be baseball in 2027?

The current CBA expires after the 2026 season, and there is widespread belief around the league that a lockout is coming. According to Sporting News, the last CBA expiration resulted in a work stoppage that lasted more than three months.

The main for this potential lockout: spending disagreements.

The Dodgers have pushed the system to its absolute limit. They are projected to spend more than $413 million in 2026 payroll, carry a combined $1.08 billion in deferred money *(when a player agrees to receiving a large share of their earnings after their contract has expired, in order to bring in more talent to the team.)*

In 2025, the Dodgers had to pay a record $169.4 million luxury tax in order to win its second straight World Series. Keep in mind, that number was reached *before* the addition of superstar outfielder Kyle Tucker, who signed for four years at roughly $60 million annually.



Most teams simply cannot afford to spend $60 million per year on a player, on top of paying the rest of the 40-man roster and all the other fees which goes into maintaining a Major League stadium. As a result, many expect ownership to push for some form of a salary cap — something the players have long rejected as artificial salary suppression.

The irony? Even some analysts believe a salary cap would backfire. Rosenthal has noted that a lockout would hurt franchise values. He believes owners are unlikely to get a cap without sacrificing part — or all — of the 2027 season.

Some fans agree. They argue that a cap would punish talent and limit earnings, especially when league revenues continue to grow. They also point to examples of ownership restraint — teams that choose to pocket revenue rather than reinvest it — as proof that a cap would not fix competitive balance within the league.

Ken Rosenthal of *The Athletic* reported that the Blue Jays actually offered Tucker a longer term than the Dodgers, but with a lower AAV *(Average Annual Value is how much a player makes per season)*. It highlights how teams like Toronto are trying to compete within the system, while others — namely the Dodgers — are using deferrals from Guggenheim Baseball Management; a conglomerate made up of nine investors with the controlling partner having a net worth of over $11 billion.

Whether the new CBA ends in compromise or confrontation remains to be seen. But one thing feels clear: the off-season proved the Blue Jays are going all-in this year.

Conclusion: The Win Total Projection

The best regular-season record in Blue Jays history remains 99 wins, set in 1985. Last year, the Blue Jays finished with 95 wins.

Taking into account the roster changes, injury risk, losing close games and bullpen volatility, my personal prediction is a 92-win projection for 2026. FanGraphs projects the Blue Jays to win 94 games, but similar to last year, I would expect a slow start as the new additions get used to the team dynamic.

This team has proved it can evolve, survive adversity and rise when it matters most. The question now isn't whether the Blue Jays are good enough. It's whether the Blue Jays are capable of getting back into the World Series.

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