

### Baseball Basics for Brits

#### Volume 1. The Major League Baseball Season

In this volume of Baseball Basics for Brits, we will be looking at how a Major League Baseball (MLB) season is structured.

This includes:

- Leagues and Divisions
- Why the teams are divided in the way they are
- How each team's schedule is structured
- The standings
- The post-season: division series, championship series and World Series

There are **thirty teams** in Major League Baseball. They are split into two **leagues**, the American League (AL) and the National League (NL), and then divided into three geographic **divisions**: East, Central, and West.

American League		
East Division	Central Division	West Division
Baltimore Orioles	Chicago White Sox	Houston Astros
Boston Red Sox	Cleveland Indians	Los Angeles Angels
New York Yankees	Detroit Tigers	Oakland Athletics
Tampa Bay Rays	Kansas City Royals	Seattle Mariners
Toronto Blue Jays	Minnesota Twins	Texas Rangers

National League		
East Division	Central Division	West Division
Atlanta Braves	Chicago Cubs	Arizona Diamondbacks
Miami Marlins	Cincinnati Reds	Colorado Rockies
New York Mets	Milwaukee Brewers	Los Angeles Dodgers
Philadelphia Phillies	Pittsburgh Pirates	San Diego Padres
Washington Nationals	St Louis Cardinals	San Francisco Giants

### Dividing the teams

Since the 2013 season there has been an equal 15 teams in both the American League (AL) and the National League (NL).

### Promotion and relegation?

These leagues and divisions are not classifications in the promotion/relegation sense seen in most British sports. They do not denote different levels of competition: the thirty teams all play in the overall Major League.

There is no promotion or relegation from the Majors. A city only loses its Major League status when the franchise (a dirty word in Britain) is picked up and moved somewhere else. The most recent victims of this ordeal were the citizens of Montreal, whose team, the Expos, became the Washington Nationals in 2005.

The professional leagues below MLB are collectively known as the Minor Leagues and are made up of teams that are affiliated to each of the Major League franchises. In British sporting parlance, they could be described as 'feeder clubs'.

### Why split the teams at all?

Well, let's start with the two leagues. The leagues are a legacy of the way in which professional baseball developed in North America.

They were initially two separate, rival competitions that over time came to fall under the overall umbrella of "Major League Baseball" (the National League is still often referred to as the **Senior circuit** as it preceded the American League). Each league is predominantly a competition in itself, although **interleague** games are played during the season.

The winners from the two leagues play each other in the **World Series**. The divisions are there essentially to reduce the amount of travel over the course of a season (i.e. you play against the teams closest to you more regularly than the rest).

### Differences between the two leagues

Although they represent the same level of competition, there is a crucial difference between the two leagues.

In the American League, the pitcher does not have to bat and his place in the batting line-up is taken by a **Designated Hitter** (a 'DH') who does not have to field. Although there are a few pitchers who can hit, most are the baseball equivalent of a 'walking wicket'. Swapping out a weak-hitting pitcher for a big-swinging home-run hitter potentially makes for a much more formidable batting line-up in the AL compared to an NL line-up.

An NL manager also has to make more tactical decisions during the course of a game than an AL manager does. If an NL manager makes a pitching change, he has to take into consideration when that pitcher is next coming up to bat as he will generally have to take the pitcher out of the game at that point, to replace him with a stronger batter. An AL manager doesn't have to worry about such things.

### Spring Training

Before the regular season gets under way, there is a pre-season period lasting approximately six weeks.

Known as **Spring Training**, baseball's pre-season is more of an event than you will find in other sports. The thirty teams each have a Spring Training base in either Arizona or Florida, taking advantage of the glorious weather and allowing teams to play each other in pre-season friendly games without travelling halfway across America every few days. The pitchers and catchers report to Spring Training first, with the position players following a week or so later.

Pre-season games are played throughout March, although 2018 sees an earlier start with games being played in the final week of February. Predominantly these games are played between the Major League teams based in the local area as part of a league (the **Cactus League** in Arizona and the **Grapefruit League** in Florida), although

occasionally teams play against local colleges and minor league teams. As in all sports, results at this time of year count for little and the emphasis is on players 'getting their work in', in preparation for the coming season.

Over the first half of March, the Major League regulars will be joined by younger players from their respective organization as well as fringe players hoping to earn a place on the Major League roster. As the regular season draws near, most of the younger players will be sent to their respective Minor League teams as the Major League players receive more playing time.

### The regular season

The MLB regular season typically runs from the start of April to the end of September, although from the 2018 season things will begin a little earlier - at the end of March – to introduce a few more rest days during the season.

Over this period, each team will play **162 games**. Once the season begins, teams play virtually every day, with a four-day break in July for the **All Star game**. Teams will generally play on six days out of seven, with Monday being the usual day off; however it is not uncommon for teams to play eighteen days in a row, enjoy one day off, and then go another fifteen days (or more) before taking another single day off. And that schedule doesn't include fitting in games that are postponed for one reason or another.

These games will often be made up by playing a **double-header**, where the teams play two games on the same day. This punishing schedule is a key feature of the MLB season.

### The 162 game schedule

There isn't a simple structure to each team's fixture list, such as playing every other team a specific amount of times. Instead, teams play an **unbalanced schedule** constructed each year. The result is that two teams competing in the same division will not necessarily face the same opponents the same amount of times.

142 games of a team's schedule are played against teams from their own league. They will play 19 times against each of their division rivals (76 games) and then face each of the other 10 teams in the division either 6 or 7 times (totalling 66 games).

'Interleague' games – against teams from the other league - make up the remaining 20 games of each team's schedule.

Every team is paired with a rival team from the opposite league, which in some cases refers to a genuine local rivalry (e.g. New York Mets v New York Yankees) and in other cases is just simply putting two teams together with no real history behind it (e.g. San Diego Padres v Seattle Mariners) just to

As an example, here is a breakdown of the Houston's 2018 regular season schedule:

**AL West** (HOU's own division) = 76 games in total (19 each against LA Angels, Oakland, Seattle and Texas)

**AL East and Central** (the other two divisions in HOU's league) = 66 games in total (7 each against Boston, Detroit, Kansas City, NY Yankees, Tampa Bay and Toronto. 6 each against Baltimore, Cleveland, Minnesota and Chicago White Sox).

**Interleague** = 20 games in total (4 against their 'rival' team Arizona, 16 against their matched division - the NL East in 2017 – comprising 4 against Atlanta then 3 each against Miami, NY Mets, Philadelphia and Washington)

fit the structure. The 'rivals' will play 4 games against each other at the end of June, 2 games at one of the home ballparks followed by 2 at the other.

The other 16 interleague games will change on a yearly basis as each division is paired with another division from the other league on a three-year rotating basis. In 2018, the divisions will match up against their equivalent in the other league (AL East and NL East etc). A team will play 4 games

against one of the teams from their matched division and 3 games against the remaining four teams from that division.

### Split into series

It would be impossible for teams to fly to a new city every day; therefore teams do not just play single games against each other. Instead, they will play a series of games, normally consisting of three.

For example, the L.A. Dodgers might play in San Diego on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and then play a three-game series in San Francisco over Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

As the season is such a long haul, this is a good way for a team to break their schedule down. You go into a three-game series hoping to win it (two games to one) and if you win the first two games then you aim for the 3-0 **sweep**. Supporters can be seen waving brooms in the air if a series 'sweep' is on the cards.

### Day and night

There is a healthy mix of day and night games, naturally with weekday fixtures often being played under floodlights and weekend games often beginning at around 13.00 local time. Some day games are played during the week though, particularly on a Thursday as at least one of the teams, if not both, will have to catch a flight later that day to play in another city on Friday. Thursday is sometimes referred to as the '**get-away day**' as a result.

Due to the time difference, day games in the States take place during the evening in British time, while the night games are in the early hours of the morning.

### Home stands and road trips

Teams are normally either playing a **home stand** or they are on a **road trip**, they do not move from a home series to an away series and back again on a consistent basis. The length of the home stand/road trip at any time is simply determined by how each team's schedule pans out. A team can be scheduled to play fifteen games on the

road and then play nine in a row at their home park, followed by six on the road and then six at home etc.

### Three points for a win?

Teams don't play for points in MLB. The standings in each division are determined by the **win-loss record** of each of the teams. The team with the best record in the division naturally leads the way, with the other teams listed in descending order based on how many **games behind/back** they are from the leader.

Let's look at an example. *Figure one* shows the state of the NL Central on 10 September 2015. You will notice that the percentages are written as numbers with three decimal points: a common practice in baseball.

You'll also notice that there are three teams out on front, with Milwaukee and Cincinnati a long way off the pace and already resigned to a play-off free year.

	Wins	Losses	Winning %	Games behind
St Louis	88	52	.629	-
Pittsburgh	83	56	.597	4.5
Chicago	80	58	.580	7.0
Milwaukee	62	78	.443	26.0
Cincinnati	58	81	.417	29.5

Figure 1 – NL Central, 10 Sept 2015

St Louis lead the way and the third-placed Chicago Cubs are listed as being 7 games behind them (games behind is always calculated against the league leader, not otherwise against the team immediately ahead in the standings, 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> etc). A quick glance at the win totals would make you think it should be 8 games, as St Louis has won 88 to Chicago's 80; however, the games behind figure takes into account the number of games each team has played.

St Louis has played 140 games, whilst Chicago has played 138. The difference between the teams in wins is eight (88-80), the difference in losses is six (Chicago has lost 58 to St Louis's 52). Add the two figures together (8+6 = 14) then divide by two and you get 7.0.

The team in second, Pittsburgh, are 4.5

games behind St Louis.

The .5, or half a game, comes about when the trailing team has played an odd number of games more/less than the division leader. In this case, the difference in wins is 5, the difference in losses is 4, add together and divide by two and you get 4.5.

What does this mean in practice? Concentrating on St Louis and Pittsburgh, let's consider how the standings might look on the following day:

- If the two teams played each other, the team that won would either increase or decrease the gap by one whole game
- If they played against different opponents and either both won or both lost, the gap would stay the same.
- If both teams played against different opponents, one winning and one losing, the gap would increase or decrease by one whole game
- If only one of the teams played, the gap would increase or decrease by .5 depending on who was playing

and what the result was (e.g. if Pittsburgh played and won, they would decrease the gap to 4.0. If St Louis played and won, the gap would increase to 5.0).

As the season reaches its conclusion, some website standings will also show an **Elimination number**.

This relates to the pursuit of winning the division and the number goes down by one when either the team in question loses a game or when the division-leading team wins one.

When a team's elimination number hits zero it is impossible for them to win the. The second-placed team's elimination number also doubles as the division-leader's **magic number**. The magic number represents the number of games, a combination of wins by the division-leader and losses by the second-placed team, which the team needs to win the division.

## The post-season (the 'Play-offs')

The post-season traditionally takes place during October and sometimes people will refer to the month as a way to talk about the play-offs (e.g. a team hoping that they will be 'playing in October').

### Who qualifies?

Since the 2012 season, ten teams across the two leagues will qualify for the post-season each year.

In each league, the three division winners qualify automatically for the Division Series stage of the post-season. The two teams in the league that didn't win a division and have the next-best win-loss records play each other in a single Wild Card game, with the winner heading on to the Division Series.

If two teams are tied for one of these post-season qualification positions, they will play an extra game against each other to decide who goes through. That includes cases when the top two teams in a division finish with the same win-loss record and are both heading to the post-season. The difference between qualifying as a division winner (straight to the Division Series) and as a Wild Card (on to a single-game 'play-in' contest first) means that it's only fair that a tie is decided by a game between the respective teams. Such a game would take place on the day after the final day of the regular season.

There are four stages to the post-season: the **Wild Card 'play-in'**, the **Division series**, the **Championship Series**, and the **World Series**. For the first three stages, the teams stay within their own league.

### Wild Card 'play-in'

In each league, the two teams with the best win-loss record that didn't win a

division will face each other in a single game. The winner heads on to the Division Series, the loser sees their post-season end in one game. Such all-or-nothing contests are rare in baseball. The Wild Card game in each league will take place two days after the regular season comes to an end.

### Division series

Known as the ALDS or the NLDS (depending on the league), the division winner with the best record faces the wildcard winner, while the remaining two division winners meet in the other match-up.

Each compete in a best-of-five game series, or more accurately a first-to-three-wins series. The first two games will be played in one city, the next two in the other, and the final game being played back at the original venue if necessary.

### Championship series

The two winning teams from the ALDS go through to the ALCS, with the two NLDS winners facing each other in the NLCS. The format now switches to best-of-seven (first to four), with two games played at one venue, three games played at the other, and then the final two played back at the original venue if necessary.

### World Series

The **'Fall Classic'** is the climax to the season. The winner of the ALCS face the NLCS winner in the World Series to crown the 'World Champions'.

This follows the same format as the Championship series stage: best-of-seven, two at one venue, three at the other, final two at the original venue if necessary. 'Home field advantage', the team that would play four home games if the series went to seven games, goes to the team with the better regular season record. This was

implemented in 2017 after a period from 2003 when home-field advantage went to the representative of the league that won that year's All-Star game. Prior to 2003, 'home field advantage' simply alternated year-to-year between the AL team and the NL team.

Whereas players in British competitions are awarded medals when they win something, in North America they receive a decorative ring. Although the victors get to lift the World Series trophy after the final out is recorded, the players do not receive their specially made rings until the start of the following season. Typically an elaborate ceremony will be staged at the team's first home game of the new season where the rings are handed out. It's traditional for the World Series winners to be invited to the White House for a celebratory meeting with the U.S. President.

Many cynical Brits will snort at the final stage being known as the World Series when it's between two North American teams. There is a story that it was called this because of the New York World Telegram, which would be a nice way to counter accusations of American bombast if it was true, but it is not.

It's generally believed that the name has its roots in 1903 when the owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates challenged the owner of the Boston Americans (now the Red Sox) to a "World's Championship Series". This stuck, as did the practice of the two league winners facing each other from 1905 onwards, and was ultimately shortened to World Series.

The one thing we can say is that with the ever-increasing spread of baseball across the globe and the number of 'international' (i.e. non-North American) players in the Majors and Minors today, it's certainly much more than a bunch of Americans playing against each other for the entertainment of Americans alone.

As evidenced by the Baseball Basic for Brits series!

#### **Further Information**

The main website for information regarding Major League Baseball is [www.mlb.com](http://www.mlb.com)

The explanation of the World Series name is taken from: <http://www.livescience.com/8857-called-world-series.htm>