



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	Los Angeles Angels
Boston Red Sox	Cleveland Indians	Oakland Athletics
New York Yankees	Detroit Tigers	Seattle Mariners
Tampa Bay Rays	Kansas City Royals	Texas Rangers
Toronto Blue Jays	Minnesota Twins	

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

Dividing the teams

There are fourteen teams in the American League and sixteen in the National League. This means there are an even number of teams in each league so that there isn't an odd team left over without an opponent to play on any given day.

Why are there four teams in one division (the AL West) and six teams in another (the NL Central)? Basically it's down to the location of each team, although anyone with a decent knowledge of North American cities will quickly notice that the boundaries have been well and truly stretched in some cases to make up the numbers.

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 some **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 lineup 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 lineup in the AL compared to an NL lineup.

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 much more of an event than you will find in any other sport. 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. 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. In 2011 the season will actually start on 31 March.

Over those 183 (or 184) days, each team will play **162 games**. Once the season begins, teams play virtually every day, with a three-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.

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.

The 162 game schedule

There isn't a standard annual 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.

A team will play all but eighteen games (at the most) against teams within their own league.

Prior to 1997, the only time teams from the AL and NL would meet was in the World Series. Now we have two periods of **interleague** play. The most common make-up of these games is that a team will play a designated rival from the opposite league three or six times, and will then play three or four three-game series against teams from a division in the rival league. Not all teams have designated rivals however and, because there isn't an equal number of teams in each league, there will always be an NL-only contest during interleague play.

Within their own league, a team's most frequent opponents will be the teams in the same division. A team will generally play each of its division opponents eighteen times, nineteen for the four-team AL West division.

The rest of the games are played against teams from the other two divisions in league, between

six to ten games against each side.

As an example, here is a breakdown of who the Philadelphia Phillies played during the 2010 regular season:

NL East (Phillies' own division) = 72 games in total, 18 against each of the other four teams.

NL Central = 40 games in total (6 against Chicago, Milwaukee and Pittsburgh, 7 against Cincinnati and Houston, 8 against St. Louis)

NL West = 32 games in total (6 against Arizona, Los Angeles and San Francisco, 7 against Colorado and San Diego)

Interleague = 18 games in total (6 against Boston, 3 against Cleveland, Minnesota, New York and Toronto)

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.

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 West on 14 September 2007. You will notice that the percentages are written as numbers with three decimal points: a common practice in baseball.

Arizona head the way, with San Diego in second place and listed as being 3.0 games behind. Arizona have played 148 games; San Diego have played 146. The difference between the two teams in wins is four (83 - 79); the difference in losses is two. Add the figures together (4+2=6) and divide by two and you get 3.0.

However, Los Angeles are 4.5 games behind Arizona. 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 Arizona and San Diego, 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 San Diego played and won, they would decrease the gap to 2.5. If Arizona played and won, the gap would increase to 3.5 etc).

As the season reaches its conclusion, attention will turn to the final column listed in *Figure One*: the **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 division (in the above example, San Francisco have already been eliminated, hence the 'E' in their row of the column). 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, that the team needs to win the division.

Figure one: the NL West on 14 September 2007

	Wins	Losses	Winning %	Games behind	Elimination number
1) Arizona	83	65	.561	-	-
2) San Diego	79	67	.541	3.0	13
3) Los Angeles	78	69	.531	4.5	11
4) Colorado	76	71	.517	6.5	9
5) San Francisco	66	81	.449	16.5	E

The post-season

Who qualifies?

The final regular season standings determine which eight teams will move on to the **post-season** (also known as the **play-offs**). Four teams qualify from each league: the three division winners and the second-placed team with the best record, who goes through as the **wildcard**.

If two teams are tied for one of these positions, they will play an extra game against each other to decide who goes through. This happened most recently in 2009, when the Minnesota Twins and Detroit Tigers both finished with 86-76 records in the AL Central. As the Twins had got the better of the Tigers over the season (winning 11 games to the Tigers' 7), they had home-field advantage and made it count with an extra-inning 6-5 victory.

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').

This has been stretched a little in recent years as a slightly later start to the season combined with the introduction of some extra rest days in the play-offs has meant that the World Series could go into November if it went to six or seven games. The MLB season will begin a few days earlier than usual in 2011 largely so that the baseball season doesn't extend into cold November.

There are three stages to the post-season: the **Division series**, the **Championship Series**, and the **World Series**. For the first two stages, the teams stay within their own league.

Division series

Known as the ALDS or the NLDS (depending on the league), the division winner with the best record faces the wildcard, while the remaining two division winners play each other. That's unless the team with the best record and the wild card come out of the same division, in

which case the former will play whichever of the other two teams won the least amount of games.

Each compete in a best-of-five game series (or more accurately, a first-to-three-wins series), with the first two games being 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 representative from the league that won that year's All-Star Game. This was introduced in 2003 as a way to make the mid-season exhibition 'mean something'. 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.

Further Information

The main website for information regarding Major League Baseball is www.mlb.com.

