TWINS PREVIEW WEEK

Shifts are gone. Will thrills come?

By MARYJO WEBSTER, JIM FOSTER, MARK BOSWELL and STEVE ZIMMERMAN • Star Tribune staff

The use of defensive shifts has jumped in recent years as a strategy vs. hitters prone to pulling the ball. It has been deployed against Twins hitters, especially lefthanded hitters. Just ask Max Kepler. With those shifts now banned, we'll see this season if Kepler and Co. improve at the plate. What we do know is that defensive shifts stifled several Twins hitters, and we explore that on this page.

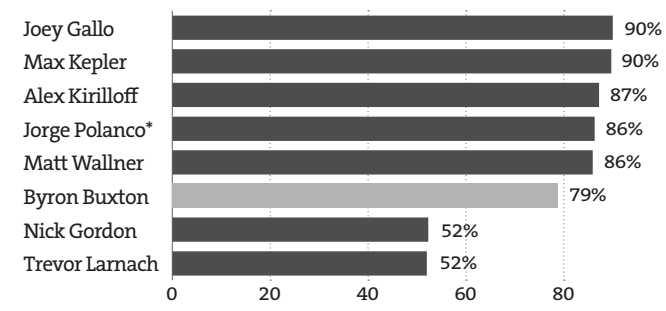
.227
Max Kepler's batting average when facing a shifted or strategic defense the past three seasons. He faced them 93.3% of the time in 1,050 plate appearances.

Photo by
BRUCE KLUCKHOHN
Associated Press

SHIFTED INFIELDERS COMMON FOR SOME

Most Twins batters who frequently faced a shift in 2022 are lefties — Byron Buxton was the only righthanded batter who frequently had shifted defenses. Jorge Polanco, a switch hitter, saw shifted infielders most when he batted left.

Percentage of plate appearances facing shifted defense



*Polanco faces a shift only 36% of the time when he bats righthanded.
Source: Fangraphs.com

THE SHIFT WAS ON

IT WAS A CHESS MATCH

The ban on shifts and strategic defenses means lefthanded hitters such as Kepler and Joey Gallo, who signed a one-year deal with the Twins in the offseason, will no longer face stacked sides of the infield or infielders positioned on the outfield grass. By restoring traditional outcomes of batted balls, MLB seeks to stem a decline in batting averages.

Shifted defense
Infield positioned with three fielders to left or right side of second base.
The aim: To capitalize on batters who are prone to hit exclusively to one side of the infield.
Status: Now prohibited.

Strategic defense
An infielder is positioned beyond the infield boundary on the outfield grass.
The aim: To prevent sharply hit balls from reaching the outfield for hits.
Status: Now prohibited.

TARGETED HITTERS

Max Kepler
How he fared against shifted and strategic defenses since 2020:

.092: Batting average on grounders pulled to right field into shift.

.358: Average on grounders and line drives hit to center.

.467: Average on grounders and line drives hit to left.

Joey Gallo
How he fared against shifted and strategic defenses since 2020:

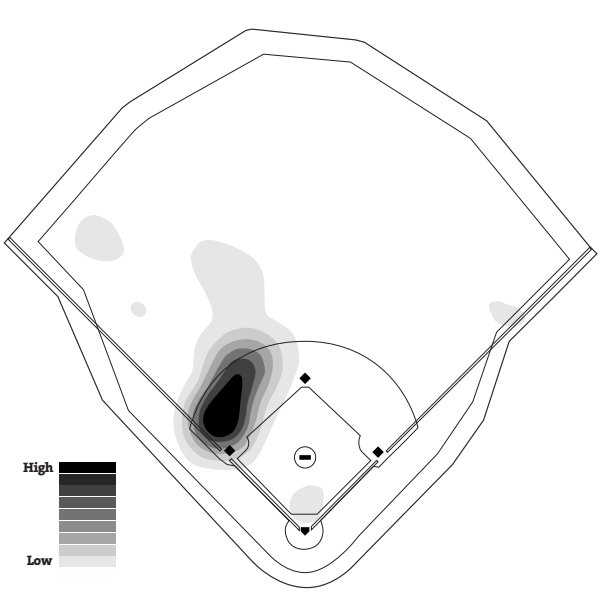
.100: Batting average on grounders pulled to right field into shift.

.333: Average on grounders and line drives hit to center.

.667: Average on grounders and line drives hit to left.

THE HEAT SHOWS UP

The major reason teams used shifts so frequently against select Twins hitters is because they had a tendency to pull the ball into expected areas of the field. The darkest shaded areas designate the highest concentrations of balls batted into play — and does not account for every ball put in play — for Byron Buxton, Max Kepler and Jorge Polanco in 2022.

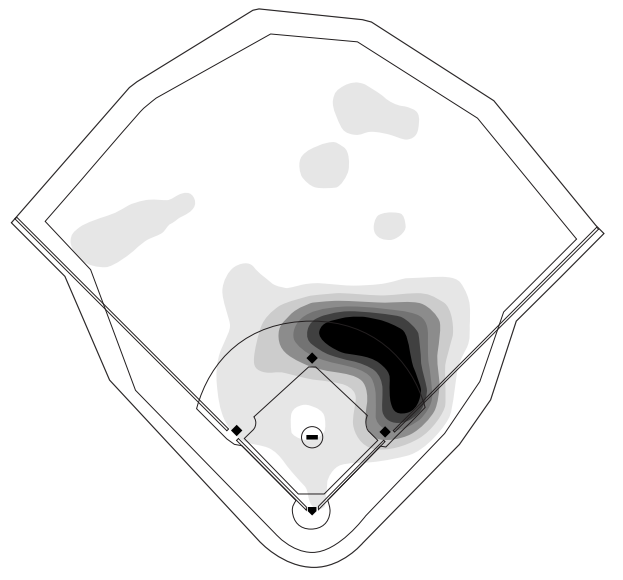


BYRON BUXTON • RIGHTHANDED

Hot-corner hot zone

Buxton's status as a power hitter has emerged in recent years and has included faster exit velocities of balls hit and greater home run frequency. What has also followed is a trend for Buxton, if he isn't hitting home runs (28 in 2022), to pull toward shortstop and third base.

	PA vs. shift	BIP vs. shift	BA vs. shift	BIP % into shift
2022	310	185	.206	54.5

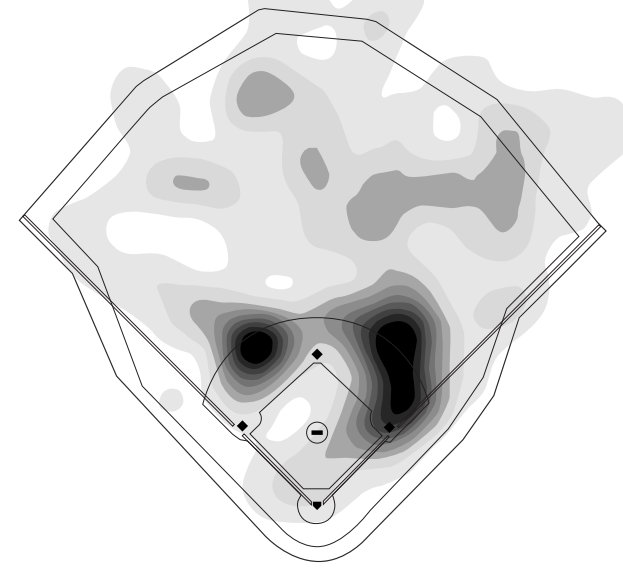


MAX KEPLER • LEFTHANDED

An unbalanced look

The scouting report on Kepler was clear last season: overload the right side of second base with fielders and challenge him to beat the shift. Oftentimes, he wasn't able to punch the ball through and instead hit ground balls between first and second 127 times.

	PA vs. shift	BIP vs. shift	BA into shift	BIP % vs. shift
2022	417	308	.235	41.2



JORGE POLANCO • SWITCH HITTER

More room for hits

As the lone switch hitter on the Twins, Polanco had the potential to be one of the least-shifted batters on the Twins with an ability to spray the ball to all fields. Instead, it was neutralized by his knack for pulling the ball into shifts.

	PA vs. shift	BIP vs. shift	BA into shift	BIP % vs. shift
2022	328	203	.234	50.7%

PA: Plate appearance • BIP: Batted into play • BA: Batting average

Source: Major League Baseball/Baseballsavant.com