

TWINS PREVIEW WEEK

A new challenge for defenses

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

Rocco Baldelli acknowledged during spring training this season was going to be unlike others in his tenure as Twins manager. “The feel of Twins baseball is going to be a little different this year than it was in the past,” he said. “I’m going to have to manage differently, we’re going to have to coach differently, and the players on the field are going to play differently than some of the seasons that we’ve had previously.” For the Twins in 2023, that means playing defense without the shift and guarding against stolen bases.

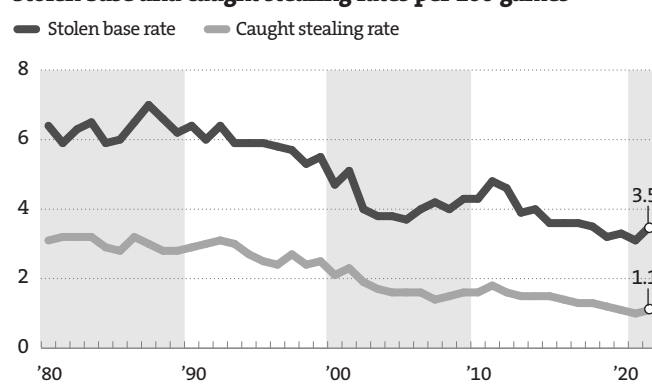
Adding a third infielder on one side or positioning an infielder in the outfield grass are prohibited by Major League Baseball. Last season the Twins used an infield shift 44% of the time — sixth most in the majors.

Larger bases and a limit on pickoff attempts are expected to generate more action on the base paths. That puts the onus on catchers to throw out runners.

STOLEN BASE RATES HAVE DECLINED

The new rules might make it easier for runners to steal a base, possibly reversing this decline in base stealing in recent years.

Stolen base and caught stealing rates per 100 games

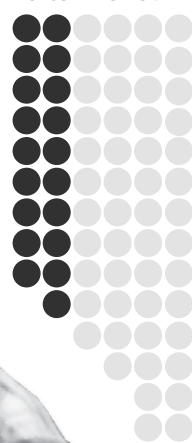


STOPPING STEALS

With fewer pickoff attempts allowed, slightly shorter distances between bases and a projected higher number of baserunners with more hits (due to removal of shifts), a catcher’s ability to throw runners out and deter baserunners from stealing bases will gain greater importance in 2023. The Twins added Christian Vazquez in the offseason to help.

EFFECTIVENESS

19 CS 51 SB



27%

Ratio of runners Vazquez caught stealing last season in 106 games with Boston and Houston. He threw out 19 on 70 attempts.

33.9%

Ratio Vazquez has thrown out on stolen base attempts in his career, seventh-best among active catchers in MLB.

TECHNIQUE

Instead of an above-average arm to throw out runners, Vazquez has one of the fastest catch-to-throw exchanges in the majors.

.67 Tenths-of-a-second average for exchanges for Vazquez in 2022. **MLB rank:** 3rd (tied).

1.84 Seconds of pop time to second base for Vazquez, classified by MLB as the moment the ball hits a catcher’s mitt to when it reaches a designated fielder. **MLB rank:** 52nd. **MLB avg.:** 2.0.

1.2-1.5 Range in seconds for most pitchers to deliver pitch to home plate.

3.33 seconds it took the average baserunner to cover 90 feet on a competitive play (27 feet per second) last season.

3.16 seconds it would take the same runner to cover 85.5 feet (4.5 inches less) in 2023.



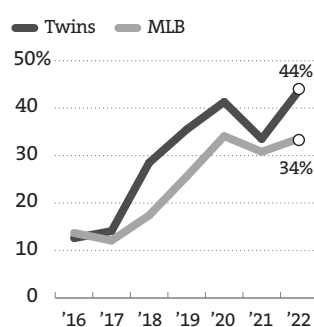
41.6%

Caught stealing rate for Christian Vazquez in 16 postseason games at catcher. He has thrown out five runners on 12 attempts.

Photo by GERALD HERBERT Associated Press

RAPID INCREASE IN INFILDER SHIFTS

The Twins began utilizing the infield shift above the major league average after Twins executives Derek Falvey and Thad Levine were hired after the 2016 season.



A STRATEGY NO MORE

How the Twins fare defensively will depend on how well infielders adjust to not having the shift to help neutralize pull hitters. The Twins used it 2,639 times last season, sixth most in the majors.

70.1%

Rate Twins used a shift against lefthanded batters. **MLB rank:** 4th • **MLB avg.:** 55%

1,723

Plate appearances the Twins used a shift vs. a lefthanded batter. **MLB rank:** 4th

25.7%

Rate Twins used a shift against righthanded batters. **MLB rank:** 6th • **MLB avg.:** 19.5%

LINE OF DEFENSE

How projected starting infield has performed most recently at each position:

3B • Jose Miranda
34 Games (2022)
3 Errors
.952 Fielding %

SS • Carlos Correa
129 Games (2022)
8 Errors
.983 Fielding %

2B • Nick Gordon
36 Games (2022)
4 Errors
.966 Fielding %

1B • Joey Gallo
35 Games (2018)
1 Error
.996 Fielding %

SHIFTING TEAMS

The Twins shifted infielders regularly, a practice that will stop under new rules starting this year.

