

TWINS PREVIEW WEEK

What you need to know about the new rules



ADDITION OF PITCH CLOCK • LIMITED DISENGAGEMENTS

Pablo Lopez, left, and other MLB pitchers will have to adjust to a clock and three specific times: 15 seconds to pitch with the bases empty, 20 seconds if runners are on base and 30 seconds to resume play between batters. Hitters must also be inside the batter's box by the eight-second mark. The penalty for violations will result in an automatic strike for hitters and a ball for pitchers. Pitchers are also limited to two pickoff or step-off attempts per plate appearance. If a third pickoff attempt on the same plate appearance does not result in an out, runners will advance one base.



BIGGER BASES

Baserunners like Nick Gordon, above, will have shorter distances between bases this season — 4 1/2 inches closer from first-to-second and second-to-third bases; 3 inches closer from third-to-home and home-to-first — because the bases are larger. The goal is to spur more stolen-base attempts and help reduce injuries on collisions near bases.



DEFENSIVE SHIFTS PROHIBITED

The elimination of shifts to overload one side of the field will mean infielders like Carlos Correa, above, will be forced to play to the left or right of second base. The rule indicates two players must be completely on either side of the bag. Infielders must not be stationed on the outfield grass. Penalty: Offense picks an automatic ball or the result of the play.

Photos by JERRY HOLT • jerryholt@startribune.com

Clock starts now on rule changes

◀ **BASEBALL** from C1 according to MLB. “The game doesn’t have to be three, three-and-a-half hours, and we’re proving that right now. Get out there and throw strikes, attack hitters, and the games will be crisp.”

But the pitch clock is not the only way that the Twins’ season, which opens Thursday at Kansas City, will be strikingly different in 2023. The bases, 12 inches by 12 inches until now, will be 15x15, a change that will subtract 4 1/2 inches from the distance base-stealers must travel.

Infielders must be standing on the infield dirt when a ball is pitched, and two on each side of second base.

In addition, extra innings will begin with a runner on second base, a pandemic rule that has now been made permanent. And beginning this season, the Twins will play at least one series against all 29 MLB opponents each year.

“Part of our job is to adapt to change, and to do it well,” Baldelli said. “That’s never been more true than this year.”

Grinding to a halt

The need for change has been building for several years, as baseball’s popularity has declined relative to other sports.

Two of the three least-watched World Series since TVs became common have taken place in the past three years. Attendance peaked at nearly 80 million in 2007; even before the pandemic, it had slipped below 70 million and last season sunk to 64.5 million.

The game on the field had gradually changed as well. Pitchers throw harder than ever, leading to fewer hits and more strikeouts. Batters responded by simply trying to hit home runs, adding more strikeouts. Teams positioned their defenders according to each batter’s tendencies, squeezing still more offense out of the game.

Worst of all, the amount of time between pitches, as high-effort pitchers rested and hitters adjusted their batting gloves, turned most games into action-deficient slogs, particularly for TV viewers.

“We were always taught, slow the game down, make sure you’re comfortable, control what’s going to happen. Don’t rush into anything,” Twins outfielder Kyle Galko said. “I’ll admit, I was always a guy who liked to step out, collect my thoughts, take a breath and get back in. Think about my approach, what [pitch] I’m looking for, what his pitches are, the count, the game situation. It just becomes habit.”

Spread out over nine innings and nearly every at-bat, that habit added to a lot of dead time. The average major league game took 3 hours, 11 minutes in 2021, a record for a sport that in 1978 took only 2 1/2 hours.

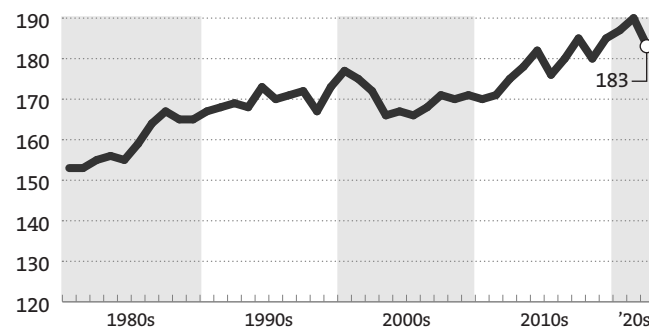
Moving things along

Manfred — whose previous attempts at cutting game times included limiting mound visits, requiring relief pitchers to face at least three

SHORTENING THE GAME

The average length of 9-inning games has increased by about 30 minutes since 1980, topping three hours consistently. New rules being implemented this year are expected to shave off 20 to 30 minutes.

Average time of a nine-inning game (in minutes)

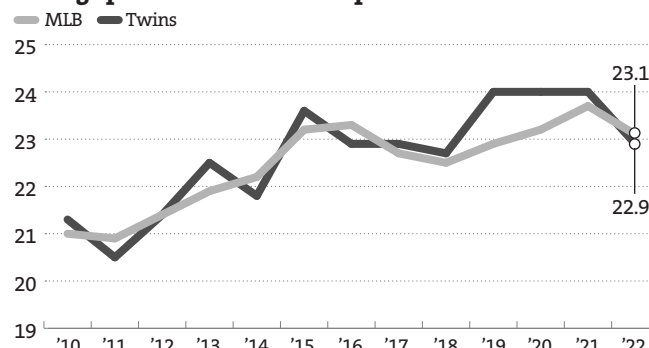


Source: Baseball-Reference.com

TIME BETWEEN PITCHES HAS RISEN

Although it declined slightly last year, the length of time between each pitch has been generally rising in the last decade, slowing down the game.

Average pace: seconds between pitches



Source: Baseball-Reference.com

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Twins manager Rocco Baldelli

batters and allowing intentional walks to be granted without throwing a pitch — decided more drastic action was needed.

Over the objections of the players’ union, the Playing Rules Committee decided a pitcher must be winding up to deliver a pitch within 15 seconds of receiving the ball, or 20 seconds if a runner is on base; an automatic ball is called if he is not. A batter must be in the box and looking at the pitcher when the clock reaches eight, or an automatic strike is assessed. Pitchers can step off the rubber, whether to attempt a pickoff or simply reset the clock, only twice per at-bat; a third time is a balk, unless the pickoff throw is successful. Hitters can call time only once.

Clocks have been installed behind home plate and in center field in every stadium, and umpires are strictly enforcing the new limits.

And the players, as Baldelli predicted, have seemingly adapted to the rules — and even appreciated them.

“It takes some getting used to. But it’s good. It’s going to be fun,” outfielder Joey Gallo said. “When you’re out on the field, when you’re in the box, when you’re on the bases, you just have to constantly remember there’s a clock. You can’t stop, you can’t just stand around. But over time, it will become normal for everybody. Seems like a lot of guys like it.”

Same goes for the ban on defensive shifts and the

larger bases, changes that are intended to create offense, not diminish the time it takes.

“I like that it’s rewarding athleticism,” infielder Kyle Farmer said. “You need players with range, some speed, strong arms, instead of just stacking one side of the field with three gloves.”

It also figures to benefit those players with pronounced habits of pulling the ball. Twins outfielder Max Kepler, for instance, has been affected by extreme shifts; of the 964 ground balls he’s hit during his eight-year career, only 57 of them, or 5.9%, have been hit toward left field. Gallo’s numbers are even more pull-heavy; just 11 grounders, a mere 2.8%, were hit the opposite way.

“I don’t mind having a little more room over there,” Gallo said. “When you hit the ball hard, you should be rewarded.”

The new rules, and in particular the pitch clock, might have an unexpected positive effect on the game, Baldelli theorized.

It might make the players play better.

“Focusing on anything for three and a half hours is not easy to do, I don’t care what it is. Show me a movie that’s going to keep your attention for 3 1/2 hours. It’s not easy,” Baldelli said.

“When you start making these games more like 2 1/2 hours, guys will be able to really home in on what they need to do, and maybe do their jobs even better than before.”