

## Baseball Basics for Brits

### Volume 2: Rosters

In this volume of Baseball Basics for Brits we will be looking at MLB rosters (in British sporting parlance: Squads). This includes:

- 25-man and 40-man rosters
- How a standard roster is broken down into player categories
- The disabled list/bereavement list
- Transactions

#### Total players

A manager of a British sports team will pick his side from a group of players including regular first-teamers, squad players and youngsters. The size of this squad is normally limited by cost considerations and practicalities (e.g. if an individual isn't playing regularly he may want to move to another team) to a manageable size. Some competitions do have rules around squad sizes, such as the Premier League in which a squad has 25 players as well as 'home grown' youngsters who don't count towards the total.

In MLB, the manager also has a strict 25-man roster he can choose from (for most of the season); however this works very differently to the Premier League model. The 25-man roster isn't set in stone twice a year, subject to rare emergency changes, as it is in the Premier League.

An MLB 25-man roster is taken from a larger 40-man roster and players can be moved between the two during a season in line with certain rules. An MLB organization will also

have many more than 40 players in total on their books as each organization has teams throughout the levels of the Minor League system. Some of these players will make their way through the system and ultimately play for the Big League team.

#### The MLB roster

Regardless of the number of players within an organization, a Major League manager generally has twenty-five players potentially at his disposal for every game. This is the **25-man roster**.

If a team is playing two games on the same day – a 'double-header' – the team is able to add a **26<sup>th</sup> player** to their squad for that day. If the second game was only scheduled within 48 hours (e.g. a rain-out from the night before) then the 26<sup>th</sup> man is only eligible for the second game rather than for both games.

Most teams will split their 25-man roster into 12 pitchers and 13 position players, although there are no strict rules to prevent a team doing otherwise. The exact make-up of the

roster will depend on several factors (e.g. personnel available), but as a guide the roster will normally be constructed in the following way.

### Position players

2 Catchers  
6 Infielders  
5 Outfielders

Only eight can play at any one time; the rest will be seated on the **bench** and can be brought in as a substitute at any point in the game. Players who enter the game to hit are referred to as **pinch-hitters**, while a manager may bring on a **pinch-runner** if the game is level and a speedy base-stealer is required. A weak defensive player may also be replaced in the later innings of a game by a better fielder.

Some teams will have a batter on the bench who is particularly skilled at hitting left or right-handed pitchers (or, more specifically, good at hitting one but not the other). At the extreme, this could involve two players

#### Left and right

Within the battle between a pitcher and batter, the batter tends to find it more difficult to face a pitcher of the same handedness (i.e. a right-handed hitter finds it harder to face a right-handed pitcher). There are various reasons for this, but the main one is the relative path of a breaking ball thrown by a pitcher.

A breaking ball is harder to hit if it breaks away from the batter rather than in towards the batter. If the pitcher and batter are the same handedness, the breaking ball will move away from the batter and the pitcher will have the advantage. A good way to remember this is to think of the letter 'P': a Pitcher Prefers to Pitch in a Pair (right paired with right, left paired with left).

One of the things that separates regular players (position players in the line-up most days, starting pitchers, the best relief pitchers) from bit-part players is the ability to overcome this trend and to perform well (or at least well enough) regardless.

in a team who form a **platoon**, one regularly playing against right-handed starting pitchers and one against left-handed starting pitchers.

Subject to absences through injury, the main position players on a team will play upwards of 150 games in a regular season, and each year a handful of players in the Majors will take some part in all 162 of their respective team's games.

### Pitchers

5 starters  
7 relievers

Major League teams generally use a **five-man starting rotation**. The rotation is necessary because of the intense schedule of MLB in which teams play virtually every day for six months in the regular season. By rotating five starting pitchers, each will receive four or five days of rest between starts. The best starting pitcher will be the number one starter and is often referred to as the team's **ace**. The next-best starter will be number two and so on, with the fourth and fifth spots referred to as the **'back of the rotation'**.

The spots in the rotation are not official, so teams can change the sequence around for tactical reasons if they wish. Generally this is avoided as teams like to keep their starting pitchers on a regular schedule. Additionally teams may use a four-man or six-man rotation at times depending on their schedule and the pitchers they have available.

A pitcher who is moved forward from his standard spot is said to be pitching on **short rest** (i.e. they haven't had their standard period of rest between starts) and some starters can struggle when placed in this position. Conversely, starters (and relievers) can be ineffective if they have had too much time off between appearances.

A team will hope for around 30-32 appearances from their main starting pitchers during the regular season, throwing

approximately 200 innings all told, although it's becoming less common for pitchers to reach this mark as teams look to reduce the workload on their pitchers in an attempt to avoid injuries.

While a starter's objective is always to throw a **complete game** (to pitch all nine innings), in the majority of cases they are relieved of their duties part way through. This may be due to their pitch count (once a starter gets above 100 pitches they are generally taken out of the game fairly soon after), being ineffective or suffering an injury.

The manager will call on his **relief pitchers** in the **bullpen** to take up the pitching.

How the bullpen is used will be determined by the state of the game. If a starter has completed eight innings and his team is in the lead, the manager will call on the **closer** to get the final few outs to 'save' the win. If the starter is pulled after seven innings, the manager may call in the **set-up man** to bridge the gap to the closer. If a starter is knocked-out of the game by the opposition after just three innings, the manager may call on a **long-relief** pitcher to handle the next three or four innings.

Additionally, a reliever might be called upon solely to face one or two batters before he is taken out of the game and another reliever takes over. This is typically when a pitcher specializes against left or right-handed batters.

All of these tactical decisions are one of the key parts of a manager's job and how they use their bullpen can be the difference between a successful season and a disappointing one.

The amount of appearances a relief pitcher makes will depend on their role. Closers typically appear in between 60-70 games, while other relievers can pitch in between 70-80 games. Relievers tend to average one inning pitched per appearance.

#### 40-man roster

The 25-man roster is part of an extended **40-**

**man roster.**

The other fifteen players are either injured or have been sent on an optional assignment to one of the team's minor league affiliates. For the final month of the regular season (i.e. from 1 September), the whole of the forty-man roster becomes active for selection.

Not all forty players will be used, not least because they would all have to be paid the Major League minimum salary. Teams who are certain to be in the play-offs may use a few additional players to let some of their regulars get a bit of a rest, while teams that are completely out of contention might want to give some of their younger players a taste of the big leagues, referred to as a '**cup of coffee**'.

Rosters are paired back down to 25 for the play-offs.

#### Injuries – “The Disabled List.”

As each team is restricted to picking from a pool of 25 active players for most of the season, the problem of injured players has to be addressed in a more structured way than British sports fans are used to.

When a player suffers an injury, his team is able to add a replacement to the twenty-five man active roster; however, the injured player has to be removed from the active roster and placed on the **disabled list** (more commonly referred to as the “DL”) to make room.

So that teams can't make a mockery of the 25-man restriction, there are two rules attached to the DL. Firstly, a medical certificate is required to prove the player is genuinely injured, although that's pretty much a formality. Secondly, the time period that a player spends on the DL is strictly defined. There are two main disabled lists, a **10-day DL** and a **60-day DL**, plus a seven-day DL specifically for concussion-type injuries.

A player who is placed on the 10-day DL cannot return to the Major League roster for at least 10 days, 60 for the 60-day DL. This

ensures that a team cannot abuse the rule and switch players back and forth on a daily basis for tactical reasons.

As a player will be ineligible for at least ten days, teams have to carefully consider whether it is in their interests to place someone on the DL.

If Player A takes a knock that will require just five days to heal, the team may simply keep him on the active roster and get by with 24 players in the meantime. If after those five days it becomes clear that Player A will actually need another week to heal, they can retroactively place him on the DL from the day after the injury occurred so that they don't effectively lose the player for 15 days.

A player can be upgraded (if that's the right word) from the 10-day DL to the 60-day DL, but cannot be downgraded from the 60-day DL. The length of time is a minimum, so someone on the 10-day DL can be kept there for as long as the team needs (i.e. beyond 10 days). The reason for moving a player to the 60-day DL is a rostering decision. A player on the 10-day DL will remain on the team's 40-man roster, while a player on the 60-day DL does not count towards the 40-man limit.

Like many sports, in recent years baseball has also become more mindful of the impact of concussions and ensuring that symptoms are properly assessed. Since 2011 an additional seven-day disabled list has been added for concussion-type injuries. This encourages players and teams to take some caution with brain injuries and not to worry that doing so will mean the player has to miss the full 10 days before returning to the field if not needed (prior to the 2017 season, MLB had a 15-day DL rather than 10-day so that made it all the more important to introduce a shorter period to encourage teams to rest players with concussion-type

injuries.

### **Bereavement and paternity lists**

A player on the 25-man roster can be granted leave if an immediate family member is taken seriously ill or dies, or to take a few days if their partner is giving birth. To allow the team to keep their full complement of 25, the player in question is placed on the bereavement list or paternity so that a new player can be added to the roster. Players can be on the bereavement list for between three and seven days and get one to three days off under the paternity list rules.

### **Making changes to the roster: Transactions**

There are various ways in which a team can add/remove players from their 25 and 40 man rosters.

The most obvious is via a trade with another team. Players can also be signed/lost as free agents during the off-season (the baseball equivalent of a 'Bosman free transfer' – although, for reasons described in Volume 3, this situation is much more common in baseball than it is in football).

The rules in regards to moving players between the 25-man roster and the Minor League affiliates are altogether more complicated. Further details can be found in the links below and in Volume 3 of the Baseball Basics for Brits series.

### **Additional information**

For more information on rosters and player contracts, take a look at Cot's Baseball Contracts:

<https://www.baseballprospectus.com/com-pensation/cots/>

Archived ESPN Transaction Primer:

<http://assets.espn.go.com/mlb/s/transanctionsprimer.html>