

Mike Trout's Mounting Injuries Could Cost Him Baseball History



As the best player in baseball heads back to the IL, lost time is starting to jeopardize his pursuit of the home run and WAR records

By [Zach Kram](#) May 19, 2021

Mike Trout's injuries are mounting. From 2012 through 2016, the first half-decade of his reign as the best player in baseball, Trout never took a single trip to the injured list, nor did he ever miss more than three Angels games in a row after being called up for good from the minor leagues.

But over the last half-decade, the Angels' star center fielder has become far too acquainted with the IL. He missed 39 games in 2017 with a torn thumb ligament. He missed 19 games in 2018 because of wrist inflammation. He missed 19 more games in 2019 after foot surgery. And now he's expected to miss six to eight weeks in 2021 with a calf strain, suffered while jogging on the basepaths Monday night.

This latest injury is a crushing blow, in the present, to the Angels' playoff hopes; at the start of the season, the ZiPS projection system unsurprisingly labeled Trout as the most irreplaceable player in the sport. And it's also a crushing blow for the future: With Trout, baseball history is always top of mind, but injuries keep costing him chances to further his statistical legacy.

Trout isn't typically considered an "injury-prone" player, and all of his long-term injuries have been to different body parts. But his career is now a tale of two half-decades, and in the latter, he has missed a frightening amount of time. Assuming a return from his calf injury after six weeks—the short end of the projected timeline—Trout will have missed a quarter of the Angels' games since the start of 2017.

Years	Long-Term Injuries	Proportion of Possible Games Missed
2012-16	0	2%
2017-21	4	24%

He's still the most valuable player in that span, which speaks to the massive chasm between Trout and every other player in the majors. But that performance in a more limited sample also means we can't help but lament his missed opportunity to rack up counting stats by combining his per-game greatness with the consistent health of his early career.

So let's estimate just how much production Trout has lost from his historical ledger, focusing on two monumental statistics whose career records he could theoretically challenge: home runs and WAR.

In 2017, Trout tallied 33 home runs and 6.9 WAR, according to Baseball-Reference. But he missed 46 games due to injuries. Prorating his stats over those 46 missed games means Trout "lost" an additional 13 home runs and 2.8 WAR. Run those calculations for every Trout season and injury since 2012, and we can estimate his lost stats. And for one additional step, we can project his production over the 102 games he lost due to the pandemic-shortened schedule last season, to see just how far this opportunity cost extends.

(A quick methodological aside: We're ignoring 2011 because Trout was lackluster in his first MLB exposure, and in defining injuries, we're counting any stretch in which Trout missed multiple games at a time, except for his paternity leave in 2020. For 2021, we'll assume that Trout will miss the next 40 Angels games, which span the next six weeks.)

What do these projected lost stats mean in terms of Trout's historical standing? Below is the career leaderboard for home runs through a player's age-29 season, Trout's age now.

"Lost Statistics"	Actual Total	"Lost" to Injury	"Lost" to 2020 Schedule	Sum
Home Runs	310	30	33	373
WAR	76.2	6.2	3.5	85.9

Most Career Home Runs Through Age 29

Trout is in 14th place, with about half of this season left after he returns from the IL; without any more time missed in the second half, he'll probably move up to 11th by season's end. But he'd already be fifth if he hadn't lost more than a full season's worth of games—with a surefire chance to finish second or third by season's end.

The top two players on this list saw their chases for the home run record derailed by missed games in their 30s—Rodriguez to injuries plus suspension, Griffey to injuries and more injuries. For Trout, apparently, that lost production is coming in his late 20s instead.

On the career WAR leaderboard, Trout leads through ages 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, and 27. (He fell to second place through his age-25 season, narrowly behind Ty Cobb.) But although he would easily clear the number 1 mark through age 29 by season's end if not for his injuries and the shortened 2020 schedule, all those missed games mean he's no longer within striking distance of the top.

Rank	Player	HR
1	Alex Rodriguez	429
2	Ken Griffey Jr.	398
3	Jimmie Foxx	379
4	Mickey Mantle	374
5	Eddie Mathews	370
6	Albert Pujols	366
7	Hank Aaron	342
7	Andruw Jones	342
7	Mel Ott	342
10	Juan González	340
11	Frank Robinson	324
12	Miguel Cabrera	321
13	Adam Dunn	316
14	Mike Trout	310
15	Giancarlo Stanton	308

Most Career WAR Through Age 29

Granted, Trout is not the only MLB great to miss large swaths of games. Other players have been injured, of course, and external factors analogous to the shortened 2020 schedule have interfered with the collection of stats: The season used to be shorter than 162 games; the likes of Ted Williams and Willie Mays missed entire seasons for military service; everyone playing in 1994-95 missed months of games due to the strike.

But in the moment, watching Trout's trajectory stall for a month here, a month there, is just an incredible bummer. Even if Trout puts this recent run of injuries behind him and never misses another game, it's not hard to fathom a scenario in which just his injuries thus far keep him from breaking records. Before the 2020 season, ZiPS [gave Trout](#) a 17 percent chance to reach 700 homers. Incidentally, 700 is exactly 63 home runs shy of breaking Barry Bonds's career record—and as calculated above, Trout is up to 63 “lost” home runs.

Trout is still the best player in baseball, but the historical record is a tougher judge, and now his statistical résumé is sullied by more than 100 lost games due to injury, and more than an additional 100 due to the shortened schedule in 2020—and all of those lost at-bats in his prime, when he's producing at ludicrous levels.

Gawk, in other words, at his .333/.466/.624 slash line this season—and then frown at the thought that he won't be able to continue that performance for another six to eight weeks. And then expand the time frame and despair at the thought of Trout, a decade or more into the future, retiring within striking distance of a momentous career record or two—records he could have set, perhaps, if not for a fluky calf injury on a random Monday in May.

Rank	Player	WAR
1	Ty Cobb	86.4
2	Rogers Hornsby	86.1
3	Mickey Mantle	84.7
4	Alex Rodriguez	80.5
5	Mike Trout	76.2
6	Mel Ott	76
6	Babe Ruth	76
8	Hank Aaron	73.9
9	Albert Pujols	73.8
10	Tris Speaker	72.1