Prompt Inquiry
a project of the Ishmael Policy Institute

WORKING PAPER NO. 2026-02 LEGACY SPORTS AND INSTITUTIONS

The Expansion Penalty

It began as one fan's question about his team. It turned into a study of what it costs to be born into baseball late, and how much of that is arithmetic, geography and money.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Are the Kansas City Royals unusually bad, or are they carrying the handicap every Major League Baseball expansion club carries for arriving late?

Prompted and verified by **Patrick Ishmael**, Founding Prompter, for Prompt Inquiry, a project of the Ishmael Policy Institute. Drafted with AI assistance (Claude and Mia) under the prompter's direction.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Research brief

RESEARCH QUESTION

Are the Kansas City Royals unusually bad, or are they carrying the handicap every Major League Baseball expansion club carries for arriving late?

METHOD AND SOURCES

The study's "Method, limits and sources" section lists the data, the market and payroll sources, and the limits. Sources are listed in full, with links where available, at the end of the study.

STARTING VIEW

Before the analysis, Patrick's working conclusion was that the Royals are middling: a poor all-time record, partly because they arrived late; not always in the playoffs; but strong in World Series appearances and wins for a club of their kind. (From the study's "How this started" note.)

OPENING PROMPT

Not saved as a prompt at the time. The study's own account of how it started gives the question: "the original question was simple: are the Royals unusually bad compared with other teams, expansion and not?"

AI TOOLS AND VERIFICATION

Primary agents. Claude (Claude by Anthropic): research, analysis, figures and drafting; **Mia** (Muse by Meta): research brief, coordination and checks.

Contributing agents. None on record for this study.

Verification: the prompter is responsible for verifying the evidence this study rests on. Its sources and data are published so any reader can check the findings.

HOW THIS STARTED

This began as a personal project. This project exists because Patrick Ishmael is a longtime Kansas City Royals fan, and the original question was simple: are the Royals unusually bad compared with other teams, expansion and not? His own working conclusion, before any of this analysis, was that they are middling: a poor all-time record, partly because they arrived late; not always in the playoffs; but strong in World Series appearances and wins for a club of their kind.

Testing that meant first answering a bigger question, *what does it even mean to have been an expansion team?* As a class, MLB's 14 expansion franchises have losing records and the 16 older clubs have winning ones, so the Royals' record means little until that gap is understood. Is it survivor bias (the old clubs are the ones that did not fold), head start (New York and St. Louis were big cities when baseball was a regional game), the start-up hole every new club digs, or money? The answers follow, and the Royals get their own section.

HOW THIS STUDY WAS MADE

Patrick Ishmael prompted this study and verified it. Claude drafted it and ran the analysis under his direction, on research he began, and should be read as a working study rather than a finished argument. Every figure is computed in the accompanying workbook with live formulas, so each can be checked and re-run.

The question

Major League Baseball has 30 franchises. Sixteen date from the league's early decades; fourteen joined in the expansions that began in 1961, among them the Kansas City Royals, who first played in 1969. As a group the older clubs have winning all-time records and the expansion clubs have losing ones. Patrick, a longtime Royals fan, wanted to know whether his team is unusually bad, or simply carrying the handicap of arriving late.

Answering that means first explaining the gap between old and new clubs. The page tests four explanations: survivor bias, since the old clubs may look good partly because the weak ones folded; the start-up hole every new club digs in its first decade; geography and market size, since the old clubs got the big cities first; and money, measured by payroll. Then it judges the Royals against clubs like them.

What we found

Being an expansion club costs about 2% of win percentage even after the start-up hole is removed, and the hole itself is deep. Throughout this study, percentages are percentage points of win percentage: 1% is .010, about 1.6 wins over a 162-game season. Survivor bias is real but belongs to the 19th century. Market size mattered a great deal before 1961 and since then works mainly through payroll.

−2.3%

Being an expansion club

Controlling for market size, an expansion club wins about 2.3% less than an older one, and a further 4.2% less in its first ten seasons.

.537 vs .468

Survivor bias is real, and old

The 8 of today's clubs that existed in 1871–1900 played .537 ball. The 90 clubs that folded played .468. After 1900 the filter is gone.

.491 vs .511

The hole explains about a quarter

The all-time gap is 2.6%. With each expansion club's first ten seasons removed it is still 2.0%.

~0

Market size, after payroll

A market twice the size was worth about 4 wins in the closed league, about 1 since 1961, and essentially nothing once payroll is in the model.

+4.3%

The Yankees remain unexplained

About 7 wins a season above what market, era and expansion status predict, with a t-statistic over 7.

.518

The Royals started well

Kansas City's first ten seasons were the best of any expansion club (Arizona was next at .505). Their record is dragged down later, not by a deep start-up hole.

St. Louis

Near the top

The Cardinals rank 5th of 30 on hole-free record and run 4.8% over what their market size predicts (1995–2025), behind the Yankees and Dodgers on both.

1 · SURVIVOR BIAS

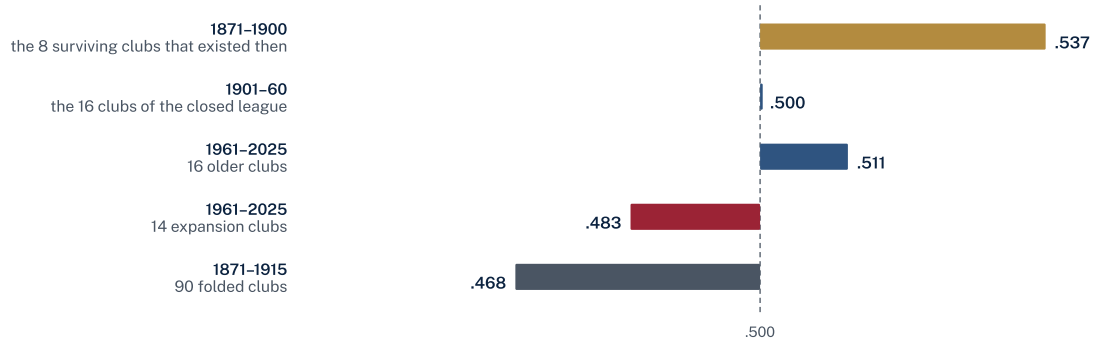
The old clubs won partly because they were the ones left

Include every club that ever played in the majors and the picture changes. In the 1870s–1900 era the 30 clubs that survived to today played .537 ball, against .468 for the 90 clubs that folded, counting the 25 clubs of the National Association (1871–75) as the method states. That is a real filter: weak clubs disappeared. But it ends by 1901. In the closed 16-club league (1901–60) the survivors were an average .500, because the league's standings must sum to .500.

FIGURE 1

Pooled win percentage by group

Dashed line = .500. Hover or tap a bar.



Reading it: survivor bias explains the 19th-century glow around the old names, not the 1961–2025 gap. Since 1961 the older clubs have beaten the expansion clubs by almost 3% on their own merits (.511 vs .483), no filter required. No expansion club has ever folded.

2 · THE HOLE

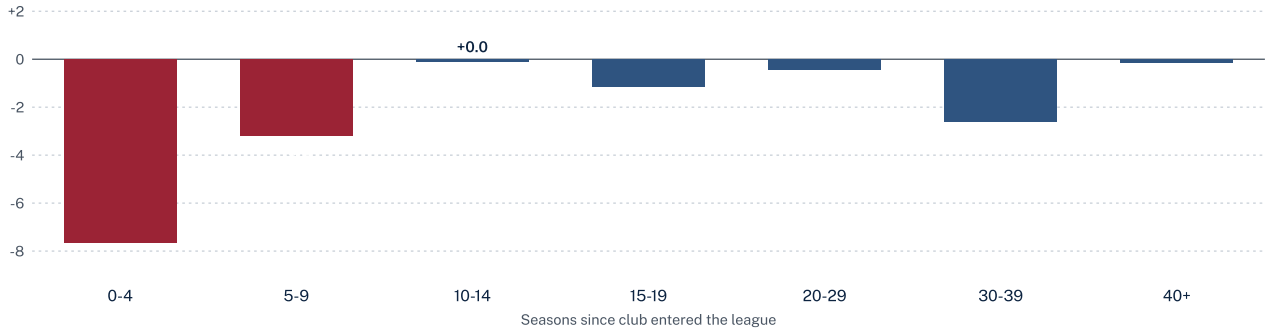
The first decade is a real hole, but not the whole gap

A new club loses heavily at the start, and then even a .500 club never recovers the games already lost. The measure below is each club's win percentage relative to .500 by age. Expansion clubs run about 7.7% below .500 in years 0–4, 3.2% below in years 5–9, and then roughly level.

FIGURE 2

Expansion-club win percentage versus .500, by age

70 club-seasons in each of the first four five-year blocks; the later blocks are wider, and fewer clubs reach them. Each bar = average across the clubs of that age.



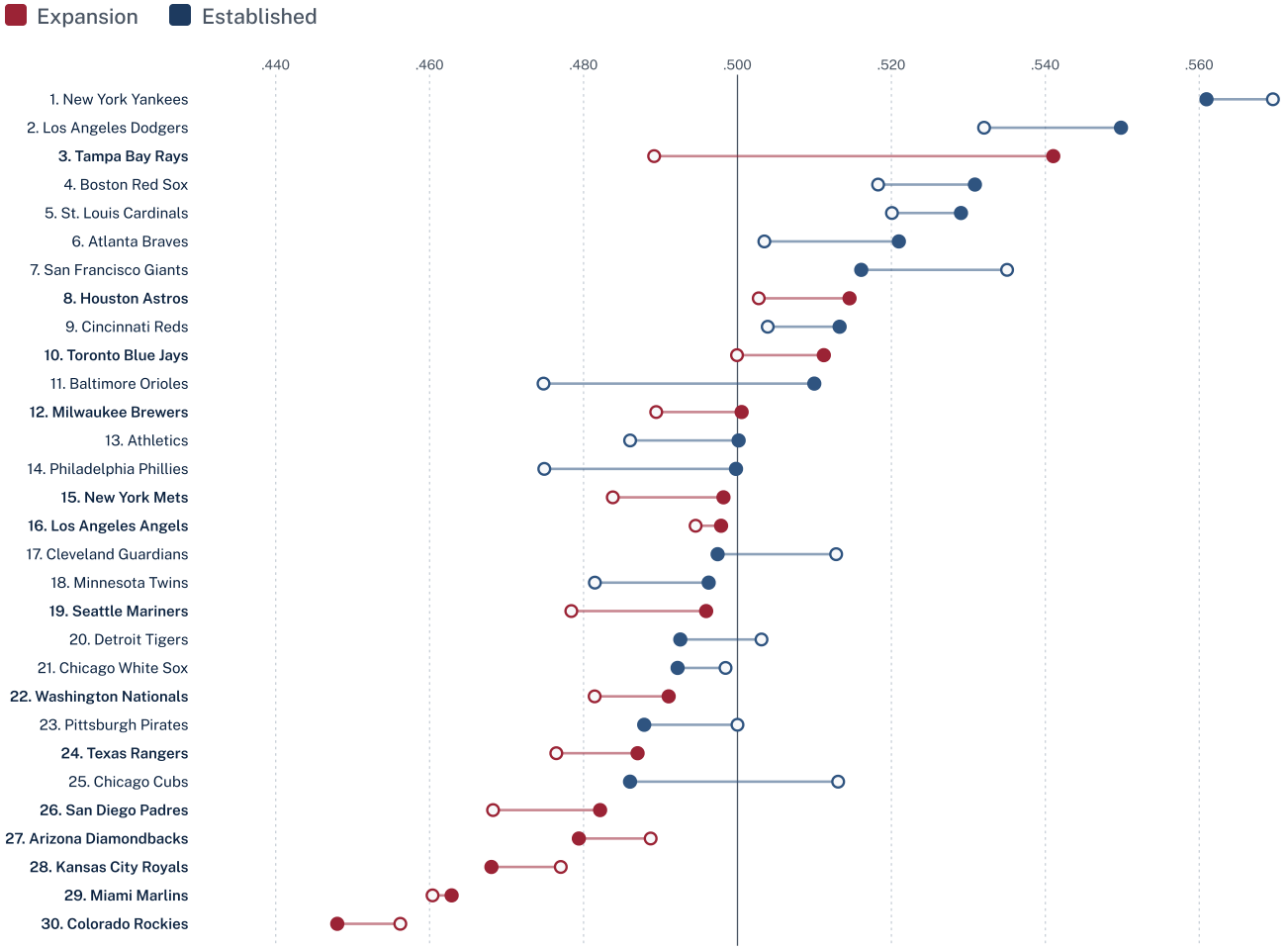
Established clubs average about +0.6% over the same calendar span. A club has to get past age ten before the comparison is fair.

So judge each club *after* the hole. Below, each club's all-time record (hollow) is moved to its hole-free record (filled): after season ten for expansion clubs, and 1961–2025 for the older clubs.

FIGURE 3

All-time versus hole-free win percentage

Sorted by hole-free record. Red = expansion, navy = established.



Without the hole the average expansion club is .491 against .511 for the older group (all-time: .482 vs .508). The hole closes only about a quarter of the 2.6% gap; the rest is genuine. Four expansion clubs are at or above .500 once the hole is removed, and two are above the older-club average. Tampa Bay ranks third of 30.

THE QUESTION THAT STARTED THIS

Are the Royals unusually bad? No: middling, with an unusually quick start

This study began as a check on Patrick's own team, as the introduction explains. Against the 13 other expansion clubs and the 16 older ones, Kansas City is a middle-of-the-pack franchise whose record looks worse than its trophy case. They did not dig much of a hole, though. Their first five seasons left them 17.5 games under .500, among the shallowest holes of the 14, and they were above water by year nine. The long middle is what costs them.

.518

First ten seasons
Best of the 14 expansion clubs; the next best was Arizona at .505.

+80

Peak, games above .500
Cumulative since 1969, reached in 1989 (season 21). They were below .500 cumulatively through year eight.

2 · 4

Titles · pennants
Third of 14 on both. Seven playoff trips came in 1976–85, then none until 2014.

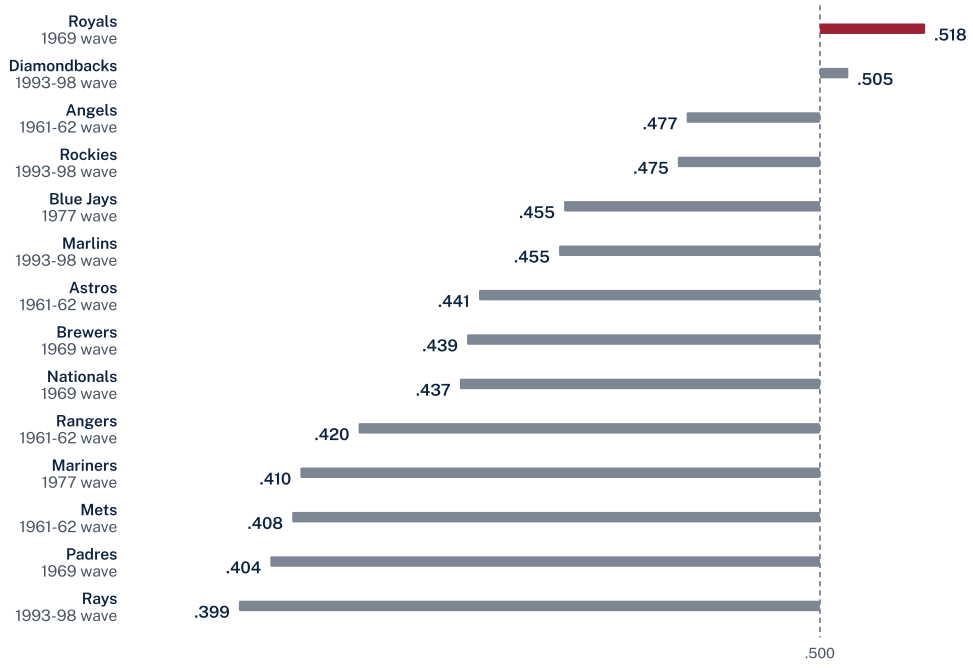
−4.1%

vs market prediction
Since 1995, 13th of 14 expansion clubs, in the second-smallest expansion market.

FIGURE 4

First ten seasons, club by club

Pooled win percentage over each expansion club's first ten seasons. Sorted high to low.

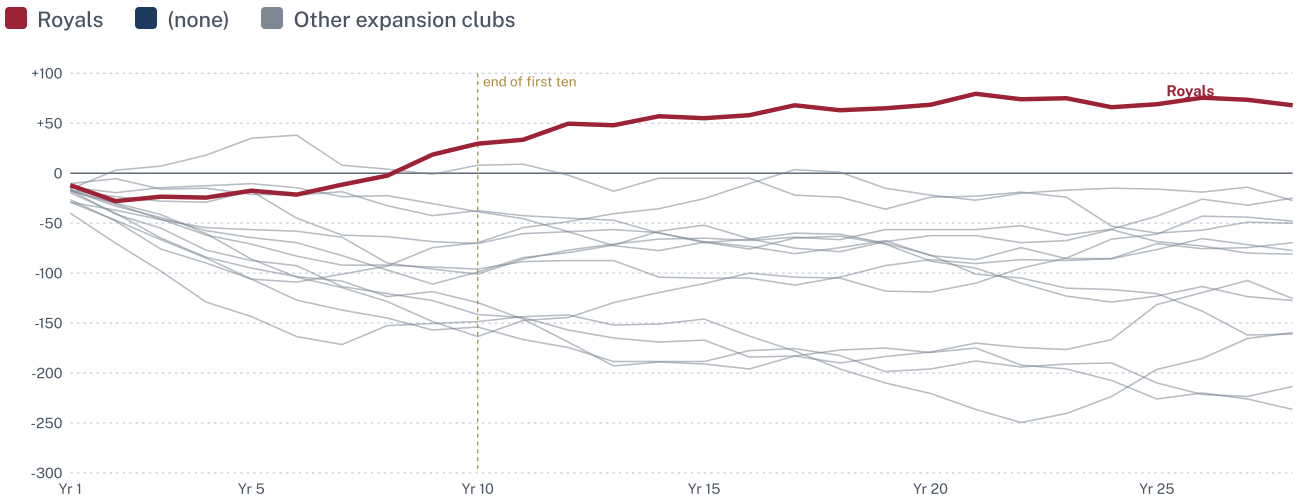


Reading it: only two of the 14 expansion clubs were above .500 across their first ten seasons: the Royals (.518) and the Diamondbacks (.505), and Arizona's came with a title in year four. The other twelve were all below .480, and the average expansion club was .446. This comparison is among expansion clubs only. Established clubs have no comparable first decade to measure.

FIGURE 5

Season by season, one to one

Cumulative games above or below .500, counted from each club's first season (year 1 = debut). Pick a club to highlight, and a second to compare.



The Royals bottomed out at 28 games under .500 in year two, climbed above zero in year nine (1977) and kept building to about 80 games over .500 in 1989 (year 21). Most other expansion clubs are deep below zero for most of their first 25 years. Arizona is the only comparable curve, and it started above .500. Kansas City's curve is a shallow hole, a fast climb, and a long slide after 1989, from 79.5 games over .500 to 206.5 under by 2025.

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY ABOUT KANSAS CITY

- **Record:** .476 all-time, 11th of 14 expansion clubs and 28th of 30 once the first ten seasons are removed (.468). The Royals' problem is the stretch after the early years, not the start.
- **Two eras:** 1976–85 they made the playoffs seven times (.528 over the 1970s, .529 over the 1980s). Then came a .468 decade in the 1990s and a .415 decade in the 2000s, with no playoff trip from 1986 to 2013.
- **Trophies for their class:** two titles (1985, 2015) and four pennants (1980, 1985, 2014, 2015), tied for the most titles among the 14 (with the Astros, Mets, Blue Jays and Marlins) and third in pennants. They are in the playoffs less often than most (8th per season played), but they convert them.
- **Market:** a metro of 2.19M puts them second smallest among expansion clubs. Since 1995 they run about 4.1% below what that market predicts,

13th of 14, so size alone does not excuse the record. Payroll is the likely channel, and the 1990s and 2000s are where it shows.

- **Verdict:** middling for a franchise that had the best first decade of any expansion club, with a World Series résumé better than the standings suggest.

3 · POPULATION, GEOGRAPHY AND MONEY

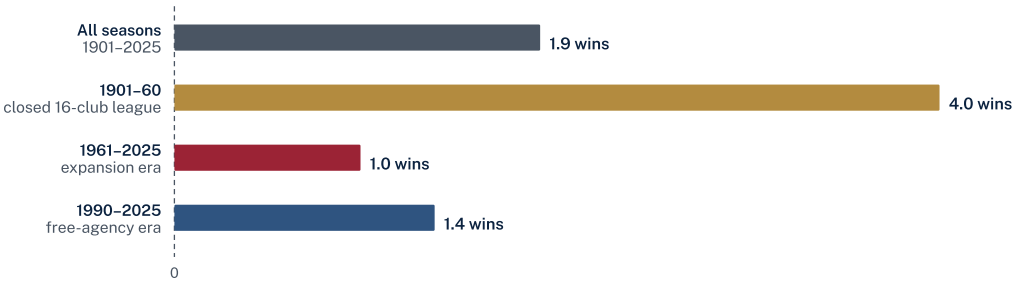
Market size mattered before 1961. It now works through payroll.

Each team-season is compared with its league average, against how big its home market was relative to the other clubs that year. The pull of size was strong in the closed league, fell sharply after 1960, and has stayed small.

FIGURE 6

Wins gained per doubling of market population (162-game season)

Each bar is a regression over the era shown.

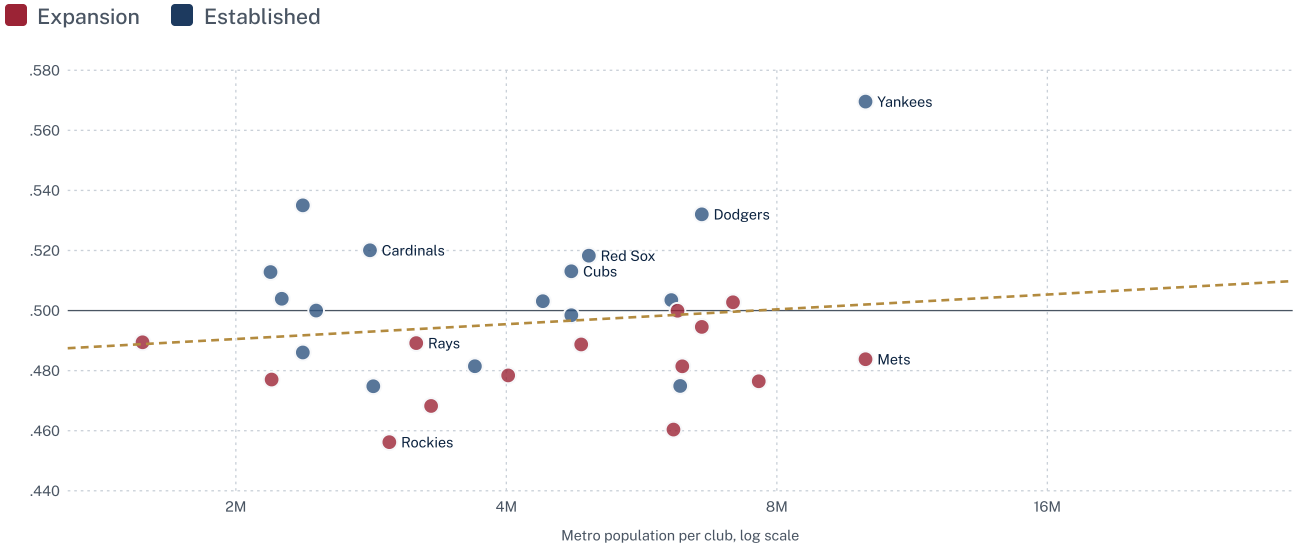


In the 16-club era a market twice as large was worth about 4 wins a year. Since 1961 it is about 1, and since 1990 about 1.4. Adding payroll to the model drives the market coefficient to essentially zero: bigger cities spend more (correlation .42), and spending wins (payroll versus win percentage, .36). A payroll twice the league norm is worth about 7.5 wins a season, and market size adds nothing beyond it.

FIGURE 7

Metro population versus all-time win percentage

Metro population per club on a log scale. Hover or tap a dot.



On the all-time records plotted, doubling the metro area goes with about +0.5% of win percentage (correlation 0.15). On 1995–2025 records the link is stronger: about +1.7% per doubling (correlation 0.37, so it explains about an eighth of the variation). The Yankees are the outlier: after adjusting for market and expansion status they still sit about 4.3% above everyone else.

Relocation does not settle it either. Across the ten moves, win percentage versus the league averaged 3.8% better in the ten seasons after than the ten before. Moves to a larger city improved by 6.4% (two moves) and the rest by 3.2%, so a new market is not obviously the cause. These are tiny samples and descriptive only.

4 · THE DECADE INDEX

Best teams of each decade after accounting for all of it

The index is actual win percentage minus the win percentage expected given market size, expansion status (including the first-ten-years flag) and, from the 1990s on, payroll. It is expressed in wins per 162 games. Choose a decade; "payroll-adj" periods also correct for spending.

ADJUSTED INDEX (WINS/162 ABOVE EXPECTATION) — 2020S PAYROLL-ADJ

1.	Tampa Bay Rays	+16.9
2.	Los Angeles Dodgers · 3 WS	+16.0
3.	Cleveland Guardians	+12.1
4.	Milwaukee Brewers	+11.1
5.	Houston Astros · 1 WS	+6.8

RAW: WINS/162 ABOVE AVERAGE

1.	Los Angeles Dodgers · 3 WS	+23.0
2.	Tampa Bay Rays	+10.7
3.	Houston Astros · 1 WS	+9.8
4.	Milwaukee Brewers	+9.2
5.	Cleveland Guardians	+6.2

The adjusted list is the ranking this study proposes. The raw list shows what the standings alone say. The raw list shown is for the same five clubs; the full top five on raw standings can differ.
Payroll is unavailable for 1980–84, so the 1980s are market-adjusted only. Payroll for 2017–2025 is from press compilations (Spotrac, AP, theScore) and should be treated as approximate.

5 · ALL 30 CLUBS

The ledger

Click any column to sort. "Over/under market" is the average win percentage in 1995–2025 versus what the club's market size alone predicts.

CLUB	GROUP	ALL-TIME W-L%	HOLE-FREE	RANK ▲	WS	PLAYOFFS	METRO / CLUB	OVER/UNDER MKT
New York Yankees	Est	.570	.561	1	27	61	10.0M	+6.1
Los Angeles Dodgers	Est	.533	.550	2	9	40	6.6M	+5.2
Tampa Bay Rays	Exp 1993-98	.493	.541	3	0	10	3.2M	+0.0
Boston Red Sox	Est	.518	.531	4	9	27	4.9M	+3.8
St. Louis Cardinals	Est	.520	.529	5	11	32	2.8M	+4.8
Atlanta Braves	Est	.504	.521	6	4	31	6.1M	+4.8
San Francisco Giants	Est	.534	.516	7	8	27	2.4M	+3.0
Houston Astros	Exp 1961-62	.503	.515	8	2	19	7.1M	+0.8
Cincinnati Reds	Est	.504	.513	9	5	17	2.2M	-0.2
Toronto Blue Jays	Exp 1977	.500	.511	10	2	11	6.2M	-1.0
Baltimore Orioles	Est	.475	.510	11	3	16	2.8M	-2.3
Milwaukee Brewers	Exp 1969	.492	.501	12	0	12	1.6M	+2.0
Athletics	Est	.485	.500	13	9	29	2.4M	+2.2
Philadelphia Phillies	Est	.475	.500	14	2	19	6.2M	-0.7
New York Mets	Exp 1961-62	.483	.498	15	2	11	10.0M	-1.9
Los Angeles Angels	Exp 1961-62	.493	.498	16	1	10	6.6M	-0.4
Cleveland Guardians	Est	.513	.497	17	2	19	2.2M	+5.0
Minnesota Twins	Est	.481	.496	18	3	18	3.7M	-0.7
Seattle Mariners	Exp 1977	.478	.496	19	0	6	4.0M	+0.5
Detroit Tigers	Est	.503	.493	20	4	18	4.4M	-4.2
Chicago White Sox	Est	.499	.492	21	3	12	4.7M	-2.0
Washington Nationals	Exp 1969	.481	.491	22	1	6	6.3M	-4.0
Pittsburgh Pirates	Est	.500	.488	23	5	17	2.5M	-4.1
Texas Rangers	Exp 1961-62	.477	.487	24	1	9	7.6M	-2.0
Chicago Cubs	Est	.513	.486	25	3	23	4.7M	-0.5
San Diego Padres	Exp 1969	.470	.482	26	0	10	3.3M	-0.4
Arizona Diamondbacks	Exp 1993-98	.490	.479	27	1	7	4.8M	-1.7
Kansas City Royals	Exp 1969	.476	.468	28	2	10	2.2M	-4.1

CLUB	GROUP	ALL-TIME W-L%	HOLE-FREE	RANK ▲	WS	PLAYOFFS	METRO / CLUB	OVER/UNDER MKT
Miami Marlins	Exp 1993-98	.461	.463	29	2	4	6.1M	-4.5
Colorado Rockies	Exp 1993-98	.453	.448	30	0	5	3.0M	-3.4

METHOD, LIMITS AND SOURCES

- **Records:** Lahman/Baseball Databank through 2025 and a coordinator-maintained spreadsheet (through 2026) of Baseball-Reference figures. The 2026 season is in the spreadsheet but excluded from the regressions. The World Series column runs through 2025; Milwaukee won the 2026 World Series, its first title, 4–1 over Tampa Bay (Baseball-Reference).
- **Folded clubs:** 90 major-league clubs from 1871–1915 (the 25 clubs of the National Association, 1871–75, and American Association, Union Association, Players' League, Federal League and early NL clubs). The National Association's clubs played only each other, so together they are exactly .500; its best club, Boston, is among the folded. The research workbook's Defunct sheet lists the other 65; the league code for National Association seasons is blank in the database release used, which had dropped them. The median club lasted one season. Negro leagues are not included.
- **Market population:** decennial census city populations, interpolated, with clubs sharing a city splitting it equally; 2020 Census counts for the metro areas in the cross-section, under the 2023 federal metro-area definitions (Toronto and Montreal: 2021 Canadian census). Several figures (San Francisco series, early Los Angeles, Boston 1960, Montreal series) come from general reference and are flagged in the workbook for verification.
- **Payroll:** Lahman salaries 1985–2016; 2017–2025 from press compilations. Opening-day versus end-of-year definitions differ between sources.
- **Limits:** these are associations, not causal estimates. Payroll and market size are strongly correlated, so the split between them is soft. Fourteen

expansion clubs is a small sample and the results for any single club are noisy. Postseason success is shown but not weighted into the decade index.

The numbers on this study were extracted from the workbook by script and checked against an independent recalculation.

SOURCES

Sources

Built from the research workbook's own source record (its Notes, Payroll_Sources and Summary tabs), which is published with this study. Where the workbook names a source without a link, none is printed.

1. Baseball Databank (Lahman database), Teams table, as packaged in pylahman 0.7.0: season-by-season records, 1871–2025, and postseason flags. Folded clubs are the Databank franchises that are not one of the 30 current clubs, including the 25 clubs of the National Association (1871–75), whose league code is blank in this release.
2. Baseball Databank (Lahman database), Salaries table, via pylahman 0.7.0: payrolls, 1985–2016 (season salary sums, not Opening Day payroll).
3. Baseball-Reference franchise pages: franchise totals, titles, pennants and playoff appearances through 2026.
4. Baseball-Reference. 2026 World Series. baseball-reference.com
5. NBC Sports, 2026 postseason bracket (October 2026), for the 2026 postseason field.
6. U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census city populations, 1900–2020, interpolated log-linearly by year (the era regressions).
7. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census counts for metropolitan statistical areas under the July 2023 Office of Management and Budget delineations (the cross-section in Figure 7), checked against the Bureau's population-estimate files, vintages 2021 and 2023–2025.
8. Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population, census metropolitan areas of Toronto and Montreal.
9. Payrolls, 2017–2025, as reported: 2017 Spotrac via CBS Sports (Opening Day); 2018 Associated Press via Forbes (final, 40-man roster); 2019 Spotrac (Opening Day); 2020 Associated Press via theScore (final, prorated to 60 games); 2021–2023 Associated Press via WTOP; 2024–2025 Associated Press final payrolls via the News-Gazette. League totals were checked for 2018, 2020 and 2021.

DISCLOSURES

Disclosures and citation

Prompted and verified by Patrick Ishmael, Founding Prompter, for Prompt Inquiry, a project of the Ishmael Policy Institute. Drafted with AI assistance (Claude and Mia) under the prompter's direction. Version 1.0, published November 25, 2026. Sources, method, and corrections are published with this study. See the Institute Charter for the verification standard.

Question from Patrick Ishmael, a longtime Royals fan.

ABOUT THE PROMPTER

Patrick Ishmael is the founder of the Ishmael Policy Institute and Prompt Inquiry's Founding Prompter and Editor. He has spent most of his career in and around Missouri public policy. He worked on political campaigns, and from May 2011 to January 2024 he worked at the Show-Me Institute, a Missouri public policy organization, where he wrote on state and local government and testified before Missouri legislative committees. Today he is a financial advisor and a Missouri attorney. He holds honors degrees in finance and political science from Saint Louis University and a law degree from Saint Louis University School of Law. Several of the questions he revisits here began as his own student work there.

This bio is the prompter's disclosure. It is the same on every study he leads.

Legacy study. First published as a Special Project on The Ishmael Record (patrickishmael.com), October 15, 2026, before this charter was adopted. It is republished as it was made, except that its notes on who did the work now match this site's byline. Against the current publishing standard it lacks the opening prompt, a challenge step stating the strongest counter-argument, and a full statement of what was searched and not found, because those requirements did not exist when it was made. They have not been reconstructed after the fact. Patrick Ishmael verified it for republication. Its versioning begins at 1.0, and any later change is recorded in the change log.

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