

Why MLB players are hitting home runs on a record pace

[Jorge L. Ortiz](#) Updated 2:18 a.m. ET Sept. 20, 2017



Sports Pulse: USA TODAY Sports' Bob Nightengale breaks down some of the playoff battles that are heating up in MLB. USA TODAY Sports

For devoted fans of the long ball, Tuesday was a bit like the day of the eclipse was for astronomers. Calculations were figured and projections made as to when the blessed event would take place.

In this case, the source of such expectation was not a natural occurrence, but it was a phenomenon nonetheless: The moment when the record for most total home runs hit in a single major league season would be broken.

The development was inevitable. Going into Tuesday, an average of 2.53 homers had been belted per game (by both teams), a figure representing a 9% increase over last season.

That left the record total of 5,693, registered in 2000 amid the so-called steroid era, just 16 dingers away. At about 9:15 ET, the Kansas City Royals' Alex Gordon homered off the Toronto Blue Jays' Ryan Tepera [to break the mark](#).

With 183 games left to play going into Tuesday, the question was less when but by how many the old mark would be broken. The current pace calls for a total of 6,139 — a stunning 47% hike since 2014.

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Perhaps the more salient questions are why is this happening and is it likely to continue? Plenty of theories have been proffered, including the possibility of juiced balls and juiced players. We try to shed some light on the circumstances leading to such a power display.

Ready for launch: The emergence of MLB's Statcast system has provided players a tool to assess what kind of drives are less likely to get caught, and as a result hitters have increasingly tailored their swings to get more loft and beat defensive shifts. Knowledge of exit velocity and launch angle has become an element of many hitters' approach at the plate.

The Los Angeles Dodgers' Chris Taylor, for example, added a leg kick in the offseason and focused on driving the ball instead of hitting it on the ground. After producing a total of one home run in 120 games over parts of three seasons before 2017, Taylor has banged out 20 this year, although it's worth noting he has played more regularly (130 games) than ever before.

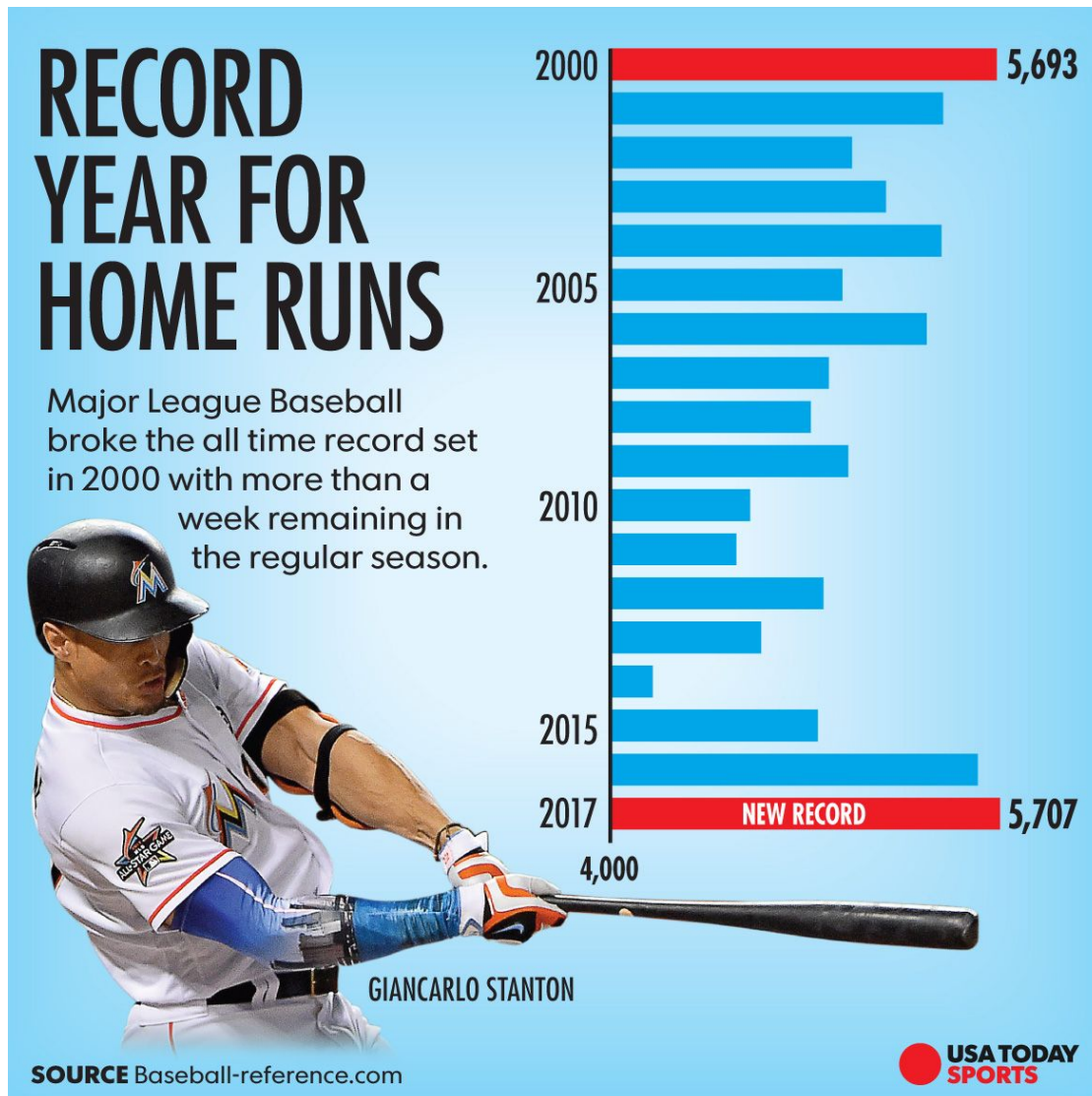
Taylor is one of 108 players who went into Tuesday's action with at least 20 homers, three shy of the big-league record set in 2016. The previous year there were only 64.

Strikeouts, schmrikeouts: A new emphasis on "doing damage" at the plate has been facilitated by the virtual disappearance of the stigma once attached to strikeouts, which many hitters now regard as no different than making an out any other way.

That's partly in response to the proliferation of overpowering pitchers — the average four-seam fastball now tops 93 mph — but also as a way to counter their dominance. In other words, batters will accept more whiffs in exchange for reaching the fences with greater frequency.

The average number of strikeouts per team per game has climbed every season since 2005, from 6.3 to the current 8.25. There are no indications the trend will reverse.

With 198 strikeouts so far, New York Yankees rookie Aaron Judge has a chance to erase the record of 223 set by Mark Reynolds in 2009. Yet Judge is a shoo-in for American League rookie of the year honors and a strong MVP candidate. His record-setting streak of 37 games with a strikeout did receive some attention, but not nearly as much as his flurry of majestic home runs.



Everybody join in: There was a time when sluggers were mostly employed by large-payroll clubs, who could afford to pay them. That's no longer the case.

Four teams among the bottom five in Opening Day payroll this year — the Cincinnati Reds (26th), Oakland Athletics (27th), Tampa Bay Rays (28th) and Milwaukee Brewers (29th) — rank in the top 10 in home runs.

Compare that to 2000, when the Kansas City Royals, then-Florida Marlins and Minnesota Twins ranked 28th-30th in payroll, and 28th, 30th and 26th, respectively, in home runs.

Seven clubs are on pace to set franchise records for home runs in a season. Five of those are in the bottom half of Opening Day payrolls.

Youth not wasted on the young: An infusion of productive young hitters has yielded a recent number of MVP awards won by players before they turned 25, among them Mike Trout, Bryce Harper and Kris Bryant.

And there's an array of other young power hitters quickly making their mark in the majors. According to Stats LLC, among players with a minimum of 150 plate appearances, the list of career leaders in fewest at-bats per home run reads like this: Rhys Hoskins, 7.2; Matt Olson, 9.1; Mark McGwire, 10.7; Bellinger, 11.5; Babe Ruth, 11.8.

Hoskins, Olson and Bellinger are rookies this year, a sign that the home run explosion may be here to stay for a while.

As for those juicy theories: Although several players have said the balls feel tighter this year, MLB officials have repeatedly denied they're any different, pointing to studies that confirm they fit within the usual specifications.

Do the players still fit within the uniforms? Many of them during the steroid era seemed to burst out of their jerseys, and it's hard to tell whether current players have found a new BALCO or Biogenesis-type clinic to circumvent doping rules. They're definitely getting drug-tested more frequently. Since baseball started testing urine and blood in 2012, the number of tests has increased from 5,136 that year to more than 11,000 in 2017.

In addressing the topic of the home-run spike yet again in early August,

Commissioner Rob Manfred said:

“I think the game ebbs and flows. We’re in a period where we have bigger, stronger, faster athletes, like all sports. You think about it — everybody has bigger, stronger, faster athletes. I don’t think it’s surprising that given that development, there’s an emphasis on power pitching, which produces strikeouts, and there’s an emphasis on power hitting, which gives you a lot of home runs and less balls in play. I think that someone will figure out a theory which they use to win with a little different approach to the game, and I suspect that the game will adjust once that happens.”

Gallery: Players with 50 or more homers in a season



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50-home run hitters of the 2000s