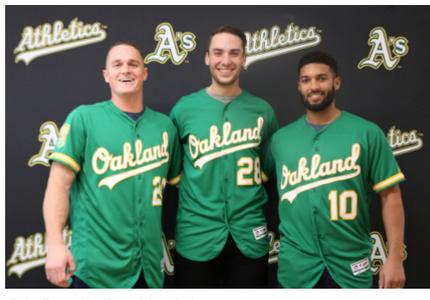


# Early Overachievers: The 2018 Oakland Athletics

By [Alex Veroulis](#) • 30 May 2018 • 10 min read



The Mercury News; from L to R, Matt Chapman, Matt Olson, and Marcus Semien

At the beginning of the 2018 MLB season, many experts thought the Oakland Athletics would once again sport one of the worst records in baseball. According to Baseball Prospectus, the Athletics were projected to have a 76-86 record this year, which would be a miniscule improvement from their 75-87 record last year. The oddsmakers at Bovada had even lower expectations for the squad, as the over/under for their win total was set at 74.5. Given that the team has been in the American League West cellar for three years straight, even the most optimistic A's fans had to acknowledge that a playoff appearance might not be in order for at least a couple of years. So, you can't really blame all the people who slept on the A's going into the season, especially since Oakland didn't do much over the offseason to improve themselves. But, the A's have given their fans some hope with their impressive start to the season; after the first 54 games of the campaign, Oakland stands at 28-26, good for a .519 win percentage. People around the game might be surprised at this kind of run, but when looking at the roster makeup and the major statistics on both sides of the ball, one can better understand why the A's are experiencing this kind of success.



MLB.com; Stephen Piscotty

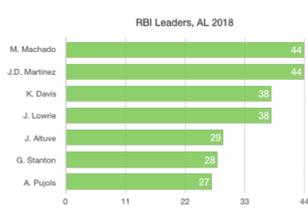


MLB.com; Jonathan Lucroy

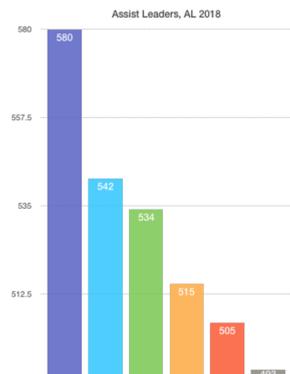
As a team not in contention going into the 2018 year, the Oakland Athletics didn't make any splashes with trades or free agency. As a result, much of the team from last year has been kept intact, as only a few moves were made here and there. First of all, the A's traded away first baseman Ryon Healy to the Seattle Mariners in order to give emerging youngster Matt Olson more playing time. As a result, Olson has performed admirably as a starter, as the 6'5" power hitter has carried the momentum of his 24-home run effort last year into 2018. Then, the A's traded for St. Louis Cardinals' outfielder Stephen Piscotty to bolster their outfield depth, which was important given they were bringing up guys from Triple-A to fill those spots last year. Later on, they traded away struggling pitcher Jesse Hahn to the Kansas City Royals and received a dependable reliever in Ryan Buchter as a result. And in March, Oakland signed a quality catcher in Jonathan Lucroy, who was a hot item on the trade market not too long ago due to his 2014 and 2016 All-Star credentials. And just before the season, the A's brought on Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson, both former A's, to solidify the starting rotation. Nothing flashy, but Oakland filled a couple of key needs heading into 2018.

A quick look at the depth chart gives us an idea of the main contributors this year. First, the newly-acquired Lucroy has been the predominant starter at catcher for Oakland, and his presence behind the plate has arguably calmed the nerves of the young pitching staff. For the infield, Olson has been the guy at 1st base, Jed Lowrie has been excellent as the starting 2nd baseman, Marcus Semien has been stationed at shortstop, and Matt Chapman has played stellar defense at third base. In the outfield, it's mainly been some combination of Matt Joyce, Dustin Fowler, Stephen Piscotty, and Chad Pinder. Joyce has played in left field for the most part, Fowler has been in center field, and Piscotty has been in right field. Pinder is a utility guy, so he has filled in for any of the three aforementioned players when they had an off day. In the designated hitter slot, Khris Davis has gotten his fair share of hacks as the team's best power hitter, but a recent leg injury has sidelined him for the past few games. Thankfully, he should be back this week. Finally, the pitching rotation has been arguably the weakest link for Oakland recently, as an array of injuries has forced quite a bit of shuffling to occur. As it stands now, the five main starters are ace Sean Manaea, Daniel Mengden, Trevor Cahill, Daniel Gossett, and Frankie Montas. This is a relatively young rotation, as Cahill is the elder statesman at 30 years of age, while the others are all either 25 or 26 years old. They have held it together up to this point, but we'll have to see if the A's staff can maintain this level of consistency.

Although the Athletics struggled to win last year, they have bounced back in 2018 with a winning record so far. This success is largely due to the offensive efforts of the squad, as young guns and veterans alike have enjoyed their fair share of triumphs at the plate. As a team, the Athletics rank 6th in the American League (AL) with 66 home runs and have a slugging percentage of .412, good for 7th in the AL. Clearly, these metrics demonstrate the offensive power of the A's. After all, five A's players rank in the top 50 in the AL with at least 7 home runs on the year: outfielder Khris Davis (ranked 8th with 13), 2nd baseman Jed Lowrie (ranked 24th with 9), 3rd baseman Matt Chapman / 1st baseman Matt Olson (both tied for 32nd with 8), and utility player Mark Canha (ranked 43rd with 7). In particular, Lowrie has had quite the year so far; he possesses a .303 batting average, good for 14th in the AL, and he has 38 runs batted in (RBIs), tied with Davis for 5th in the AL. And in terms of hits, shortstop Marcus Semien and Lowrie are tied for 9th with 63 apiece. Clearly, Oakland has the firepower to hit with the best offensive teams in the league, and their ability to do so has been why they have a winning record.



Above is a chart detailing some of the RBI leaders in the American League thus far in the 2018 season. Manny Machado and J.D. Martinez are tied for the league lead with 44 apiece, but A's teammates Khris Davis and Jed Lowrie aren't too far behind them. With 38 RBIs each, Lowrie and Davis are tied for 5th in this category, which makes for a formidable pairing in the heart of the Oakland lineup. In fact, they have the 3rd-highest combined RBI total for two teammates in the league, trailing a couple of Red Sox pairs for that honor. Now, Lowrie and Davis aren't exactly your household names when you think of Major League Baseball. No, you'd probably think of reigning AL MVP Jose Altuve, defending NL MVP Giancarlo Stanton, and Future Hall-of-Famer Albert Pujols. Well, Davis and Lowrie have clearly outproduced these big names in the RBI department so far, as the closest player to them, Altuve, comes up a full 9 RBIs short of the Athletics' duo. Comparing small market players like Lowrie and Davis to the big guns emphasizes the fact that Oakland's offense has been underrated this year, but if the A's can continue to produce at this level, maybe they'll get some attention from national networks like ESPN.



Moving on, the Athletics' defense has improved markedly from past seasons. The A's have been one of the worst defensive teams in the AL for the past couple of years, as they have been notorious for committing tons of errors and not converting simple putouts. Part of that was the youth of the team, but many of these guys now have some major league experience, which has presumably given them confidence to field better. The numbers from this year suggest that they are an above-average defensive team. First of all, it's quite impressive that Oakland ranks 1st in the AL in total assists with 580, a full 38 more than the Texas Rangers, the next-highest total. Even the league average, 493, is almost 100 assists less than what the A's have tallied so far. Moreover, they rank 5th in the AL in putouts with 1499 and are 3rd in the league in defensive efficiency ratio at .705. This statistic is basically a measure of how likely a team's defense is to convert a ball in play into an out. So, the A's have been able to do this roughly 70% of the time. Plus, some individual performers have stood out on defense. For one, 3rd baseman Matt Chapman has been a consistent playmaker, as his 144 assists are good for 3rd place in the league among all fielders. Also, 1st baseman Matt Olson has a tremendous 530 putouts to lead the league in that category; not only is he high playing, but he has started every game for the A's thus far. Additionally, he sports a relatively high fielding percentage of .995, as he has made only 3 errors on the year. Overall, these defensive strides have allowed the pitching staff to relax and get to the dugout even faster.

Speaking of the Oakland pitchers, the A's slingers have held their own in the home-run era of Major League Baseball. After all, they rank 5th in the AL with an impressive 3.94 Earned Run Average (ERA), a vast improvement from their 4.67 ERA from 2017. Their pitchers also do a good job of not giving away too many walks; Oakland has only issued 153 free passes, the 4th-lowest total in the AL. As for individual performances, the two headliners in the starting rotation have been youngsters Sean Manaea and Daniel Mengden. Manaea, the decided ace of the staff, has a no-hitter to his name against the dangerous Boston Red Sox from this past April. And amongst qualified AL starters, he ranks 15th with a 3.34 ERA and 12th in innings pitched with 70.0. Perhaps his most impressive stat is the low amount of walks and hits he gives up per inning (WHIP), as his 0.96 WHIP is 6th among AL starters. Similarly, Daniel Mengden's early success has also yielded some stellar statistics. In fact, he bettered Manaea in ERA, as his 2.85 figure is 9th in the AL, while he matched Manaea with a 0.96 WHIP. It's nice that Oakland can depend on these two workhorses for quality starts, especially since the rotation as a whole has been prone to injury. As for the bullpen, Blake Treinen has assumed the role of closer ever since he was traded from the Washington Nationals last year. Although he struggled quite a bit in D.C., he has thrived as a hard-throwing reliever in Oakland thus far. Through 27 innings pitched in 2018, Treinen has accumulated an ERA of 1.00, and opponents are batting a mere .196 against him. Plus, he is tied for 4th in AL in saves, as he has converted on 12 out of 14 save opportunities. If Oakland can minimize any kind of regression from their current efforts, then they will give their offense a better chance to win games for them.

While the Oakland Athletics have overachieved in the first third of the 2018 season, we still have to remember there is a ton of baseball left to play. Major questions still loom over the Oakland pitching staff with respect to both health and consistency, and they need to get themselves together for Oakland to have a realistic shot at a wild card berth. We know the pitching will be pretty solid, but as they say, defense wins championships, so the A's offensive firepower will be a moot point if the pitching unravels. But at this point, a fanbase that last experienced the playoffs in 2014 is glad that their team is giving them hope to believe that 2018 will be a successful season. Only time will tell if Oakland will clinch a playoff berth or wallow in the cellar of the competitive AL West.

\*Stats updated as of 5/29

Sources: [athletics.mlb.com](#), [Baseballprospectus.com](#), [Baseball-reference.com](#), [mlb.com/stats](#)

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