

Omar Narváez: Are 2020 offensive skill declines permanent? Can defense save his value?

2021 Opening Day Age: 29; Contract Status (Arb 2, earned \$2.73M in '20 prior to proration)

Since achieving semi-regular status in 2017, Omar Narváez has emerged as a productive offensive catcher (avg. wRC+ of 114 from '17-'19). However, do 2020's small-sample struggles (56 wRC+) change our impression of his future value? And does his recently elite pitch framing make up for any major holes in his offensive contribution?

Swing analysis of Narváez quickly informs one of his approach—he has a long bat path that generates both pull power, as well as many flare hits and soft contact. However, the power all but disappeared in 2020. I noticed a glaring difference: Narváez's prowess against his favorite pitch – fastballs – all but reversed in 2020, as seen below.

Season	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
wFB, Narváez	1.8	2.0	5.8	13.8	-4.4

What, specifically, was his issue against heaters? While his average exit velocity diminished on average by 5 MPH, his Whiff% spike was more drastic: in 2020, he missed on 34.1% of swings against fastballs, up from 20.1% in '19.

Interestingly, not only did Narváez struggle mightily against fastballs in 2020, but he saw far fewer of them (46.7% of pitches seen were FB, versus 55.2% in 2019). Perhaps he may have been less successful in guessing pitches, since he expected more fastballs than he saw. While this may be a logical leap, it could also be that fewer observed heaters meant deciding to cheat to them less, leading him to struggle to catch up to them when they *were* pitched.

While struggles against fastballs can signal timing issues and swing path inefficiency (the latter of which I believe Narváez possesses), the data suggests that Narváez's main problem was plate discipline and pitch recognition, against *all* offerings. His O-swing% has worsened each of the last few seasons (**23.2% in 2018, 28.9% in 2019, 35.7% in 2020**), pointing to a growing disregard for the strike zone, even in his strong 2019 campaign.

Which Narváez should the Brewers expect in 2021? Barring an injury-related reason for his lackluster 2020, his offensive performances from 2017-2019 are enticing enough to give him playing time next season—especially given the barren offensive market for catchers. However, his discipline has degenerated, even in periods of good output, and it seemed to catch up to him in 2020 and could beyond. Further, his contact rate on chase swings (Chart 1 in Appendix), usually much higher than the average hitter's, crashed to the league average in 2020. Thus, while success putting “bad balls” in play has historically been crucial to his bottom-line numbers, it may be difficult to replicate from here on out. To be fair, his larger body of work across three *full* seasons suggests that he excels at making contact on chases. However, 2020 should provide caution to his downside if this skill continues to weaken.

While 2020 represents just 11% of Narváez's seen pitches across four seasons, any future decline in plate discipline, as well as a failure to return to hammering fastballs, casts doubt on quality offensive production for 2021 and beyond. Additionally, an increased GB% and shifts against him may work against Omar in future seasons. I expect him to be better than he was in 2020, but with a wOBA much closer to .300 than his ~.345 between 2018 and 2019.

Can Narváez's elite 2022 pitch framing be sustained? And does it change our thoughts about his value?

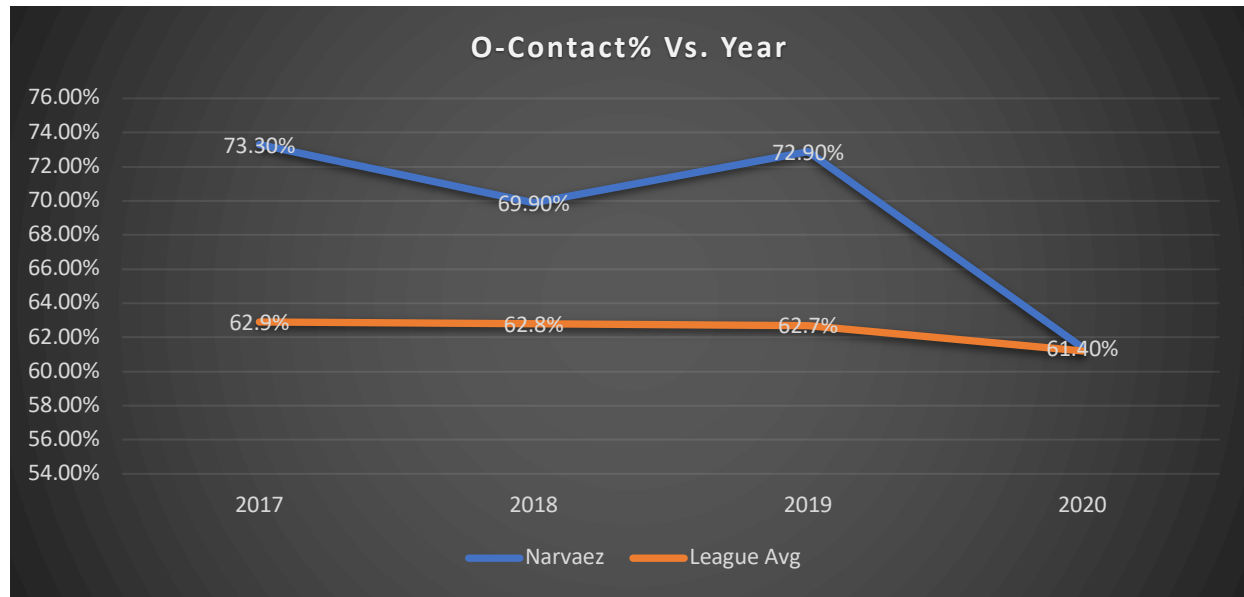
Hidden behind his brutal offensive showing was a stellar framing performance by Narváez in 2020, where he was best in baseball with 5 “Runs Extra Strikes.” However, this status as league best should be taken with a grain of salt.

Prior to joining the Brewers, Narváez ranked 59th and 58th in this metric in 2018 and 2019, respectively, when he was a member of CHW and SEA. Meanwhile, Brewers catchers were stellar, ranked 15th (Erik Kratz, 2018) and 4th (Yasmani Grandal, 2019) in those years. Therefore, it is hard to isolate Narváez's own ability from roles of coaching and Brewers-specific pitching in turning balls to strikes when using this metric. Furthermore, it's best to discount any future value of pitch framing, due to the potential implementation of robotic strike zones in years upcoming.

If he can sustain his framing prowess with the Brewers, and recoup a percentage of his strength vs. RHP (career .771 OPS), Narváez is worth tendering a contract to for the 2021 season as a platoon option versus right-handers—however, his declining plate and contact skills cast doubt on a return to 2018 or 2019 offensive levels.

Appendix

Chart 1: Narváez O-Contact% versus Year



Data Sources Used:

- Fangraphs.com
- Baseballreference.com
- Baseballsavant.mlb.com
- Spotrac.com

Data Sources Consulted:

- Brooksbaseball.net