

The Early Struggles of Henry Davis & Jordan Walker

Checking in on two former top prospects

Josh LaFronz

May 18, 2025

Introduction

After around a year of service time, a pair of top prospects have been struggling mightily at the big league level. The Pirates' Henry Davis and the Cardinals' Jordan Walker. Expectations were extremely high for both players, but in 2025, they appear farther away from stardom than ever. It's time to discuss their situations, reasons for optimism, and if it's time to panic yet.

Henry Davis

Let's start with Davis. His situation is one that highlights the importance of stability and consistency in the development of young prospects. Davis, the former number one pick, turns 26 in September and has yet to log 162 games at the MLB level. Thus far in his career, he's slashed .186/.276/.298. That plus-plus power has not broken out yet:

MLB Percentiles	xSLG	Avg EV	Barrel%	HardHit%	
2023	15	40	41	59	Min 250 PA
2024	1	8	26	30	Min 120 PA

Figure 1: Henry Davis's StatCast power stats

Davis has struggled to drive the ball like he did in the minor leagues. He posted a .239 ISO across five seasons in the minor leagues compared to .112 in the major leagues. Davis had a 4.6% HR-rate in the minor leagues compared to 2.2% in the MLB. That giant power Davis was lauded for possessing as a prospect has yet to translate. His batting approach clearly has some holes, but also some encouraging features:

MLB Percentiles	BB%	BB/K	K%	
2023	68	48	23	Min 250 PA
2024	81	32	2	Min 120 PA

Figure 2: Davis's walks and strikeouts

Those strikeouts are concerning, but his walk-rate was already mature when he was called up to the bigs. Davis struggled in 2024, so it's a testament to his discipline and

patience that he did not compromise those facets of his approach amidst the difficulties. There are many players who accumulate a higher walk rate without taking the bat off their shoulder, but Davis is not an example. His swing decisions do not pose a glaring issue:

MLB Percentiles	O-Swing%	Swing%	Z-Contact%	Contact%	Called Str%	
2023	35	26	52	36	29	Min 250 PA
2024	82	44	5	7	71	Min 120 PA

Figure 3: Davis's swing metrics

Davis limits swinging outside of the zone and staring down strikes, meaning he has a good feel for the strike zone. His swing percentage is on the lower side, further reinforcing that he is patient and selective at the plate. His contact rates are where the concern comes in. It's not limited to a certain pitch type; his run value for every pitch except knuckle curves has alternated between being positive and negative across 2023 and 2024. Davis struggled to hit sliders in 2023 and struggled to hit fastballs and sinkers last season. Davis's offense has stalled in the bigs in 2023-24, so how has 2025 gone so far?

14 G, 42 PA, .135/.220/.216, 1 HR, 24 wRC+, 7.1 BB%, 16.7 K%

42 plate appearances is a small sample size, but those stats are ghastly. Davis started the season in AAA-Indianapolis, and since being called up, it has not been encouraging.

2025 Percentiles	
Stat	Percentile
XSLG	27
Avg EV*	1
Barrel%	17
HardHit%	2
BB%	42
BB/K	79
K%	58
O-Swing%	16
Swing%	73
Z-Contact%	99
Contact%	64
Called Str%	77
*Lowest EV in the MLB	
**Highest Avg LA in the MLB	

Figure 4: Davis's brief 2025 season

Davis's power output is very lacking yet again. His plate discipline and swings have been a mixed bag. The O-Swing% cratered, but his K%, BB/K, contact rates, and overall swing rate all increased. Davis appears to be taking a more aggressive approach at the plate. The results clearly have not been there, but is Davis getting unlucky? Through those 42 PA, Davis has a .138 BABIP, which is the seventh-lowest among players with 40+ PA. Part of Davis's low BABIP must be attributed to his inability to square up the ball, but that figure is still ridiculously and unsustainably low. In fact, his expected batting figures are well ahead of the actual results:

Pitches per Plate Appearance	
2023	4.04
2024	4.28
2025	3.93

Figure 5: Davis's pitches per plate appearance

Unlucky?				
Stat	Actual	Expected	Difference	Diff. Percentile
BA	0.135	0.244	0.109	100
SLG	0.216	0.346	0.13	93
wOBA	0.206	0.299	0.093	99

Figure 6: Davis's expected vs actual batting stats

Although Davis's expected stats far surpass his actual stats, it eclipses the ugly truth that a sub-.300 wOBA is still not very good. The answer to the previous question is yes, Davis is getting unlucky, but even if his stats were on par with the expected figures, it would still not be very good.

In my personal opinion, I believe that the Pirates have butchered Henry Davis's development plan. As I stated before, it is crucial to give a prospect adequate and consistent playing time to develop, especially when a team is as bad as the 2025 Pirates are. They have nothing to lose by playing Davis, yet they insist on giving him an unpredictable schedule. Davis's defense was not his hallmark ability, but when they promoted him in 2023, they stuck Davis in right field. He played 18 games in RF in the minors, and then played 49 games and over 400 innings in right at the MLB level. Henry Davis spent two innings behind the dish for the Pirates in 2023. He was awful:

Among RF with 400+ innings:

-6 OAA (4th last)

-9 DRS (t-2nd last)

-8.2 UZR (2nd last)

-31.2 UZR/150 (last by such a wide margin, 2nd last is -15.2)

Remember, the first three are accumulative statistics; Davis is being compared to players who spent hundreds of more innings in right. That's why his rate adjusted UZR per 150 games is so low. Henry Davis is not an MLB-caliber outfielder. The only argument I could see in favor of doing this is that Davis's wRC+ was higher as a RF than at DH (81 vs. 51).

This is the crux of my issue with the Pirates' development plan: they seem unwilling to fully commit to their former number-one overall pick. The Bucs also have Endy Rodriguez in their system, whose constant injuries have given Davis some extra playing time. The Pirates have placed an emphasis on acquiring good defensive catchers: Austin Hedges, Yasmani Grandal, Jason Delay are all guys who have been on the team the last two years. The most recent roadblock for Davis is Joey Bart, a young-ish catcher who flamed out as a top prospect with the Giants before resurrecting his career with the Pirates (119 wRC+ as a Buc, 77 wRC+ as a Giant). Bart is a mediocre defender, but he has fashioned himself into a very good hitter. Between Bart, Davis, and Rodriguez,

Endy's 2023 season was the best defensive stretch behind the dish, but his 2025 returns have not been very good. His injury, Davis's struggles and Bart's good performance make Bart's status as the number one very comfortable. The Bart trade looks excellent now, but it created confusion of what the Pirates' desires for future catcher were. If the Bucs weren't satisfied with Davis's defensive ability, they should have given him more consistent ABs at either DH or 1B, or, if they were serious about putting him in the outfield, then give him offseason training at RF so he has a chance of improving. Tyler Soderstrom of the A's has been playing LF and posting positive DRS numbers, and he received consistent ABs on a team with Shea Langeliers behind the plate. If they insist on keeping Bart, Davis, and Endy, they have to designate roles and expectations for the three. I understand that Davis's struggles and Endy's injuries make it difficult to find stability, but Davis must be given ample time to figure it out, as Colt Keith was given last year. Keith alternated great stretches with awful ones, but the Tigers allowed him to continue playing, and he found that confidence and comfort. I think if Davis was developed with an intentional, thoughtful and proactive plan, he would be in a better position at this point. The least the Pirates can do now is give the man more playing time.

Jordan Walker

On to Jordan Walker. Unlike Davis, Walker has received an ample amount of consistent playing time. Davis has played 113 career games, and Walker played 117 games in his rookie age-21 season. Walker has crossed the 200-game threshold and has not yet turned 23; he is certainly getting the chance to develop. At 6'6" and 250 pounds, Walker was an elite prospect with his profile headed by an 80-grade power (according to FanGraphs) and similar to Davis, it hasn't shown yet:

Slashed	G	PA	BA	OBP	SLG	wRC+
2023	117	465	.276	.342	.445	116
2024	51	178	.201	.253	.366	72
2025	38	145	.189	.255	.273	51

Figure 7: Jordan Walker's first three seasons' slash lines

Season	BB%	K%	HR%	Perc.	ISO	Perc.	
2023	8.0	22.4	3.4%	49	0.169	40	Min 450 PA
2024	5.6	28.1	2.8%	49	0.165	62	Min 170 PA
2025	6.9	30.3	2.1%	24	0.083	8	Min 140 PA

Figure 8: Walker's walk, strikeout and power rates

Walker has been on a downward trajectory since his rookie season. His offensive output has not been as advertised, resulting in an early demotion in 2024. He was recalled in August and finished the season on a solid note (.253/.286/.494 in September), highlighted by a five-hit day on Sept. 1. His 2025 campaign has been only slightly better than his early 2024 pre-demotion stretch (.155/.239/.259, 42 wRC+ in March/April 2024). There's no pleasant way to describe Walker's season thus far; he has been one of the worst hitters in the league:

Stat	Perc.
fWAR	6
wRC+	3
xwOBA	2
BB/K	12
xSLG	5
xBA*	1
*Lowest in the MLB	

Figure 9: Walker's batting percentiles

Walker doesn't hit for power, for average or get on base. If there's hope about improvement as the season moves along, a 26 wRC+ in May is very discouraging. I was curious about Walker's contact statistics. A huge narrative surrounding Walker's demotion last year was his launch angle, or lack thereof. Walker has never had a high launch angle, and this year is no different:

Stat	Perc
HardHit%	42
Barrel%	21
LA	40
Avg EV	64

Figure 10: Walker's contact percentiles

Walker's raw strength allows him to still consistently hit baseballs hard, but he is struggling to square up the barrel, which causes the low barrel and hard-hit rates. His launch angle is below average, but I don't believe that is Walker's biggest issue. Among the 173 players with 140+ PA, wOBA and launch angle had a correlation coefficient of 0.14, and 4000 bootstrap replicants showed similarly uncorrelated results (95% CI [0.0025, 0.2697]). His maligned launch angle is not the biggest concern; his swing decisions and contact ability present greater problems:

Stat	Perc.
O-Swing%	14
Swing%	71
Z-Contact%	35
Contact%	5
SwStr%	6
CStr%	57
CSW%	4

Figure 11: Walker's swing metrics

Swing% is highlighted, but it is a more neutral statistic than the other ones. Swinging more often is not inherently a positive or negative facet of a player's profile; a player can be productive while swinging less often (Soto, Betts, Ozuna) and more often (PCA, Kerry, Stowers). Swing% is included to illustrate the gravity of Walker's contact and

decision issues. He swings more often than 70% of the MLB while also whiffing, failing to make contact, missing in the zone, and swinging at pitches outside the zone at alarming rates. As we've seen, when Walker does make contact, the ball does not go very far. Those low contact rates must be accompanied with high power output and a high on-base percentage to be productive.

Walker's offense is not developing very well, but his first demotion in 2023 had another reason besides the ground ball rate: defense. Walker was originally a third baseman before being hastily converted to an outfielder to avoid a logjam with Nolan Arenado. His rookie season was a nightmare on defense:

2023 rankings among 48 OF with 900+ innings:
 -16 DRS (2nd last)
 -15.9 UZR/150 (last)
 -14 OAA (last)

In the minor leagues, Walker played 249 innings in the outfield and then another 237 innings after his demotion in May 2023. Similarly to Henry Davis, he was thrust into a position that he was not sufficiently prepared to play. The good news is that Walker's defense is improving:

The Right Direction	Innings	DRS	OAA	FRV
2023	771 1/3	-9	-7	-5
2024	367 1/3	-4	-4	-5
2025	310 1/3	1	2	0

Figure 12: Walker's defensive metrics

Walker is now a positive contributor in right field! It's not a premium defensive position, but this development is a testament to the commitment Walker possesses. Clearly, Walker is working hard to make sure he can stay on the diamond and that should give confidence that he will turn his offense around. It's difficult to measure work ethic and coach-ability, but it does speak volumes that Walker has improved his defense despite his offensive struggles.

Concluding Remarks

Jordan Walker and Henry Davis are both incredibly talented players who have struggled to establish their expected stardom for different reasons. Walker needs to improve his craft in the batter's box and Davis simply needs more reps to have a chance to grow. Walker is receiving a lot of playing time and demonstrates a strong work ethic on defense. The combination of talent and work ethic is difficult to doubt, especially when combined with his youth. Davis was drafted as a franchise catcher and he has not had the opportunity to grow in that role, or even grow as an everyday offensive cornerstone. He will turn 26 and is caught in a depth chart log jam with Joey Bart and Endy Rodriguez; I am a little nervous at his prospects with the Pirates' unwillingness to commit to him.

Glossary

- **xSLG** - StatCast's Expected Slugging Percentage
- **Avg EV** - Average Exit Velocity
- **Barrel%** - Percentage of player's balls put into play that resulted in a barrel (a "perfectly hit" ball) (Barrels/Balls in Play).
- **HardHit%** - Percentage of player's balls put into play that were hit at 95+ mph
- **BB%** - Percentage of plate appearances that resulted in a walk (BB/PA)
- **K%** - K/PA
- **O-Swing%** - Percentage of pitches outside the strike zone that a batter swings at
- **Swing%** - Percentage of pitches that a batter swings at
- **Z-Contact%** - Percentage of pitches within the strike zone that a player swings at and makes contact
- **Contact%** - Percentage of a player's swings that result in contact
- **Called Str%** - Percentage of a pitches that result in a called strike
- **wOBA** - Weighted On-Base Average - A fancier on-base percentage that weighs that result (ex. BB, Hit, XBH) more proportionately to its value
- **OAA** - Outs Above Average
- **DRS** - Defensive Runs Saved
- **UZR** - Ultimate Zone Rating
- **ISO** - Isolated Power (SLG - BA)
- **wRC+** - Weighted Runs Created Plus; a number that states a player's wOBA relative to the run-scoring environment where 100 is average; a fancier version of OPS+
- **xWOBAB** - expected wOBA
- **SwStr%** - also called Whiff%, percentage of pitches that a batter swings and misses at
- **CSW%** - (Whiffs + Called Strikes)/Number of Pitches seen
- **FRV** - StatCast's Fielding Run Value

References

- [1] Data was taken from FanGraphs, Baseball Savant and Baseball Reference.
- [2] Henry Davis data was as of May 16; Jordan Walker data was as of May 18.
- [3] Data manipulation and figures were done using Excel and R.