**Fantasy Baseball Draft: An Optimization Analysis**

Submitted to Dr. S. Sebnem Ahiska King

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Submitted by:

Jacob Norman

**Abstract**

As one of the oldest fantasy sports, fantasy baseball has a rich history of using mathematics and statistics to gain a competitive edge. The foundation of any fantasy team is the players that are selected during the draft at the beginning of the season. An integer program was developed in the Juilia programming language to model the behavior of a 5x5 roto fantasy draft. The decision that needs to be made is simple: what player should be selected in each of the 25 rounds of the fantasy draft. The optimal team is that which maximizes the improvement over the target set for ten scoring categories, including one base percentage, home runs, and strikeouts. The model was solved to optimality and determined that drafting starting pitchers, then relief pitchers, and finally, hitters was the best overall strategy given the set of constraints. In addition, five key inputs to the model were adjusted to determine if there were alternative strategies or specific players that should be considered in a real-world draft. This includes changing the projection system used, adjusting the proxy for player draft value, starting at three different positions in the first round, giving up on one or more goals, and relaxing bound constraints on the goal values. It was determined that “punting” saves and holds, a common strategy in the fantasy community, is a viable option as well. Additionally, several players were identified as have superb value relative to their position in the draft and should be considered as candidates to be rostered. This includes, but is not limited to, Zack Wheeler, Kyle Schwarber, Cedric Mullins, Daulton Varsho, and Matt Chapman. It is noted that there are several key limitations of the model, mainly related to uncertainty, that restrict the utility of applying the optimal roster in its entirety. The value of the model is primarily derived from what-if analysis that uncovers common players and draft strategies that lead to success.

**Section 1: Introduction**

Most people are familiar with one professional sport or another, such as football, hockey, or baseball. Fans routinely choose to engage with these sports through something called fantasy leagues. These are essentially groups of individuals who compete against each other with their own teams. In a fantasy baseball league, these teams are made up of real-life professional players from Major League Baseball (MLB) that the fantasy team owners select. Even within a single type of fantasy sport, there are many different permutations of league rules; however, the performance of a team’s players in real-life games is always tracked and then converted into some sort of point system. Generally, a player’s fantasy team competes against another player’s fantasy team each week in an effort to have the most points. Winning these weekly matchups allows a team to potentially qualify for the playoffs. This is where the top teams in the league compete in a single-elimination tournament and the ultimate winner is crowned champion of the league.

Of course, there needs to be an equitable way to distribute the player pool, otherwise most teams would end up composed of the same, top performing players and the league would be very homogenous. There are two primary means of selecting players: auction drafts and snake drafts. Auction drafts assign a fixed budget to each team and allow them to bid on players. Through the bidding process, the equilibrium price is determined, and the player is assigned to the team with the highest bid. The draft ends when each team has a complete roster based on league requirements. Alternatively, snake drafts involve assigning each team a number between 1 and the number of teams in the league. There are then a certain number of rounds in which teams select players in sequential order. The “snake” part of the draft refers to the fact that the team with the last pick in round has the first pick in round . As an example, in a 12-team league the team with pick 12 would select 12th in the first round, 13th in the second round, 36th in the third round, and so on. The draft ends after the final round when all selections are made. Snake drafts are generally more common, but auction drafts are gaining popularity due to the belief that they truly level the playing field.

There is a limited amount of background knowledge assumed on the topic of baseball as this model is discussed (see *Appendix I* for more information). The focus of this analysis on a 12-team fantasy baseball league that has a 25-round snake format draft. This league follows many of the common rules that govern all fantasy leagues, but there are several key differences. While there are weekly head-to-head matchups, there are not points in the traditional sense. There are ten statistical categories that each team accumulates throughout the week based on the performance of actual MLB players. The fantasy team with the best total in a category at the end of the week wins one point. Put another way, points per category only have three outcomes: win, lose, or tie. This means there are a maximum of ten points won each week. Additionally, there are 25 roster spots on a team, but only 18 can accumulated points each day. Of those 18, there are positional requirements that mimic the makeup of an actual baseball team; the team cannot be entirely made up of one or two positions.

The goal of the model to draft the optimal fantasy roster subject to a set of constraints that are based on the author’s fantasy baseball league. Targets for scoring categories were determined based on the winning team in the prior year’s fantasy baseball league. Specifically, the objective of the model is to maximize the amount that the drafted roster exceeds the established target in all categories. This is conceptually similar to a workforce balancing problem where a business seeks the greatest benefit subject to a set of worker position and other constraints that must be satisfied in order to conduct operations.

By conducting this analysis, the author seeks to gain a competitive advantage in the fantasy baseball league relative to the eleven other teams and make the playoffs. While there are various statistical models and software that are designed to aid team’s in constructing a competitive roster, online research suggested that it is uncommon to use an optimization model to achieve this. Since this approach is relatively novel, there is a high probability that insights gained from this analysis will result in arbitrage opportunities for undervalued players and unorthodox draft strategies that can be employed to build the optimal roster in a real-life fantasy baseball league draft.

The optimization model is an integer programming (IP) model that is an original formulation since the objective function and constraints were specific to the author’s unique use case. Development went through several different platforms, starting with small-scale models developed in Microsoft Excel. The model was then ported to GAMS as a proof-of-concept with a subset of the total data. After exceeding the maximum number of decision variables allowed on an academic license, the model was subsequently re-written in Julia, an open-source programming language, using the *JuMP.jl* library. The solver that was used was *HiGHS*, an open-source solver that excels at linear programming and mixed-integer programming models.

**Section 2: Problem Description**

The IP model is built to simulate a fantasy draft and select the roster that will maximize the benefit in each statistical category. Since the model is applied to a niche use case, the components of the model will be discussed as they are presented in mathematical form. Firstly, the sets and indices of the model will be defined.

Sets

= [1-579]; Player name

= [1-25]; Round in draft

= [HR, R, RBI, SB, OBP, W, SOLD, SO, ERA, WHIP]; Statistical category

= [C, 1B, 2B, 3B, SS, INF, OF, UT, P]; Position

There are four different sets in total. The players are represented by , while the rounds in the draft are defined by . To allow for algebraic and compact formulations, two additional sets are needed. There are ten scoring categories in the fantasy league, and these will be represented by . Definitions of each item can be viewed in *Appendix II*. Additionally, the defensive positions that the fantasy roster must contain are modeled with . Descriptions of each defensive position and where they play on the field can be found in *Appendix III* and *Appendix IV*, respectively.

Parameters

= [275, 1000, 1000, 200, 4.55, 100, 1200, 80, 37, 12]; Target total for category

= [1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, -1, -1]; Weight for objective

= Projected end season total for category for player

= Average draft position for player in similar 12-team fantasy drafts

= [1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 5, 4, 11, 7]; Minimum required players of position

= Binary indicator if player is eligible to player position

= 6; Starting draft position in round 1

= 12; Number of teams in league

Next, the parameters, or given data, will be discussed. As mentioned previously, there are targets for all ten categories, . Values of array range from +1 to -1 and represent the direction of improvement for category , with WHIP and ERA being the only negative categories. Each player has a projected season total in category , which is obtained from a CSV file and defined in the two-dimensional array . Similarly, each player has an average draft position, or ADP, which dictates the latest pick in the draft where that player could be selected by the model, . Like there are targets for categories, there are also minimum thresholds for each position that was previously defined, . Each player also has an indicator field for each position , .

Decision Variables

,

= Normalized deviation of total of category k from target k, ∀

The main set of decision variables, , is an indicator variable for if player was selected in round of the draft. Given that there are 579 players and 25 rounds in the draft, that means there are 14,475 decision variables. This is why the model moved from GAMS to Julia. Additionally, is the subobjective for each statistical category , meaning that there are ten objectives.

Objective Function

The objective function maximizes the sum of each goal multiplied by the direction of improvement. While this is a goal programming problem, each goal is weighted equally, but each category must be normalized by its target since the scale of them can be wildly different.

Expressions and Constraints

Objectives)

An expression must be defined that links the decision variables to the subobjectives. In this case, the projected total in category is normalized by its target and then the target is subtracted. This results in the deviation from the target for category as the subobjective.

The RoundMax constraint helps model the correct behavior of a fantasy draft. It ensures that exactly one player is selected in each round of the draft. This is because each fantasy team is only allotted one selection per round and cannot decide not to select a player.

RoundMax)

PlayerMax)

The PlayerMax constraint makes certain that each player is only selected a maximum of once in the draft. This is because a player is removed from the draft board once they a chosen by a team; no other team can take them, and the same team cannot select them again later.

ADPEvenMax)

ADPOddMax)

These two constraints mimic the behavior of the snake draft for a fantasy team drafting in the 12th position of the first round. Odd and even rounds follow different patterns, hence why there must be multiple expressions. To illustrate why this is necessary, please refer to the figure in *Appendix V*.

The PositionMin constraint makes sure that the positional requirements of the final drafted roster meet the minimum requirement for position . As an example, there must be at least one catcher on the roster, at least seven pitchers, and so on.

PositionMin)

Bounds)

Finally, the bounds for the decision variables must be set. As mentioned earlier, is binary. To ensure that the resulting roster is well-balanced, the total for each category must at least meet the target. In the case of WHIP and ERA, these means that is must be non-positive. All other categories must be non-negative. As stated earlier, winning a category is binary, which means that the team needs to just do more than the opponent; there are no extra points for the winning by a large amount.

**Section 3: Numerical Analysis**

The base model has been solved to optimality and yields the following roster:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Player** | **Round** | **Player** |
| 1 | Zack Wheeler | 14 | Jose Berrios |
| 2 | Luis Castillo | 15 | Willy Adames |
| 3 | Framber Valdez | 16 | Daulton Varsho |
| 4 | Zac Gallen | 17 | Tyler O'Neill |
| 5 | Camilo Doval | 18 | Starling Marte |
| 6 | Evan Phillips | 19 | Jeremy Pena |
| 7 | Andres Gimenez | 20 | Kyle Finnegan |
| 8 | Kyle Schwarber | 21 | Ryan Mountcastle |
| 9 | Dansby Swanson | 22 | Tommy Edman |
| 10 | Chris Bassitt | 23 | Matt Chapman |
| 11 | Merrill Kelly | 24 | Jose Siri |
| 12 | Cedric Mullins | 25 | Harrison Bader |
| 13 | Logan O'Hoppe |  |  |

The model targeted pitching early in the draft, beginning with starters and then moving to relievers after round four. This is counter to most modern draft strategies that tend to prioritize hitters in the first several rounds. The resulting projected totals by category are shown below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Actual** | **Delta** |
| HR | 275 | 312 | 37 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,069 | 69 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,002 | 2 |
| SB | 200 | 250 | 50 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | -0.031 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 0 |
| SOLD | 75 | 96 | 21 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,470 | 270 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 0.00 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.68 | -0.03 |

Nearly all objectives have been satisfied, apart from OBP. This is due to the conversion of ratio statistics from average to summation required to preserve linearity. Home runs and strikeouts are two categories with a strong surplus relative target. The strong emphasis on pitching, particularly starters, early in the draft is driving the strikeout volume. Hitters who specialize in power, like Kyle Schwarber and Logan O’Hoppe, are key players that are contributing to the home run total.

Projection System

A key requirement of fantasy drafts is to have an estimate of how the players will perform in the upcoming season. The naïve method might be to use the most recent season’s results, but best practice is to use one of the industry standard projection systems. This includes *ZiPS*, *Steamer*, *ATC*, *THE BAT*, and *THE BAT X* (see *Appendix VI* for a brief summary of each system). In the base model, *THE BAT X* projections was utilized for hitters, while *ATC* was used for pitchers. By running the model for each scenario, the follow rosters were constructed:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Base** | **ZiPS** | **Steamer** | **ATC** | **THE BAT** |
| 1 | Zack Wheeler | Elly De La Cruz | Kevin Gausman | Zack Wheeler | Max Fried |
| 2 | Luis Castillo | Emmanuel Clase | Framber Valdez | Luis Castillo | Zack Wheeler |
| 3 | Framber Valdez | Yoshinobu Yamamoto | Pablo Lopez | Framber Valdez | Pablo Lopez |
| 4 | Zac Gallen | Framber Valdez | Max Fried | Zac Gallen | Framber Valdez |
| 5 | Camilo Doval | Raisel Iglesias | Camilo Doval | Logan Gilbert | Camilo Doval |
| 6 | Evan Phillips | Camilo Doval | Grayson Rodriguez | Camilo Doval | Evan Phillips |
| 7 | Andres Gimenez | Kyle Schwarber | Kyle Schwarber | Kyle Schwarber | Dylan Cease |
| 8 | Kyle Schwarber | Jackson Chourio | Pete Fairbanks | Clay Holmes | Kyle Schwarber |
| 9 | Dansby Swanson | Tanner Scott | George Springer | Chris Bassitt | Chris Bassitt |
| 10 | Chris Bassitt | Esteury Ruiz | Esteury Ruiz | Esteury Ruiz | Dansby Swanson |
| 11 | Merrill Kelly | Salvador Perez | Carlos Rodon | Salvador Perez | Hunter Brown |
| 12 | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins |
| 13 | Logan O'Hoppe | Gerrit Cole | Trevor Story | Jose Berrios | Logan O'Hoppe |
| 14 | Jose Berrios | Jordan Montgomery | Mitch Garver | Jose Alvarado | Christopher Morel |
| 15 | Willy Adames | Matt McLain | Mason Miller | Willy Adames | Daulton Varsho |
| 16 | Daulton Varsho | Willy Adames | Daulton Varsho | Daulton Varsho | Willy Adames |
| 17 | Tyler O'Neill | Charlie Morton | Starling Marte | Starling Marte | Nestor Cortes |
| 18 | Starling Marte | Kodai Senga | Steven Kwan | Tyler O'Neill | Starling Marte |
| 19 | Jeremy Pena | Jack Suwinski | Reid Detmers | Jonathan India | Ryan McMahon |
| 20 | Kyle Finnegan | Jake McCarthy | Jonathan India | Jack Suwinski | Jonathan India |
| 21 | Ryan Mountcastle | Tommy Edman | Ryan Mountcastle | Matt Chapman | Nathaniel Lowe |
| 22 | Tommy Edman | Ceddanne Rafaela | Anthony Rendon | Zach Neto | Tommy Edman |
| 23 | Matt Chapman | Jasson Dominguez | Jose Siri | Eugenio Suarez | Jose Siri |
| 24 | Jose Siri | Victor Scott II | Josh Bell | Jose Siri | Matt Chapman |
| 25 | Harrison Bader | Pete Crow-Armstrong | Jake Fraley | Jake Fraley | Jake Fraley |

There are numerous commonalities between the different scenarios since at four of them follow the exact same draft strategy: prioritize starting pitching, then relief pitching, and, finally, hitters. In all cases, the IP model is targeting position players that excel at one or two categories in the middle to late rounds. Examples include the speedy Esteury Ruiz, whose primary contribution is stolen bases, and Cedric Mullins, who offers moderate power and speed, ultimately adding to home runs and steals, respectively. Mullins is actually drafted in the same round in all five scenarios, identifying him as a player of interest.

The *ZiPS* model is clearly unique and is worth exploring further. The model makes two early selections that would be considered high-risk: Elly De La Cruz and Yoshinobu Yamamoto. De La Cruz is an electric combination of power and speed who set the fantasy world on fire with his debut last season. While he has had tremendous success in Japan, Yamamoto has not thrown a major league pitch prior to 2024. Investigating further, it becomes clear that there is a player profile that *ZiP*S is bullish on: young players with top prospect pedigree. In addition to those already mentioned, this includes Jackson Chourio, Ceddanne Rafaela, Jasson Dominguez, Victor Scott II, and Pete Crow-Armstrong. The other systems discount the value of these players since it is rare that a first-year player becomes immediately fantasy relevant, but *ZiPS* is gambling on the potential upside these players offer. The fantasy team should investigate the underlying model parameters to ensure they are aligned and believed to be better predictors of future outcomes.

The projected totals for each category in each scenario are presented below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Base** | **ZiPS** | **Steamer** | **ATC** | **THE BAT** |
| HR | 275 | 312 | 275 | 315 | 312 | 317 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,069 | 1,138 | 1,151 | 1,023 | 1,061 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,002 | 1,091 | 1,032 | 1,002 | 1,001 |
| SB | 200 | 250 | 351 | 246 | 213 | 214 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | 0.317 | 0.328 | 0.319 | 0.320 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| SOLD | 75 | 96 | 139 | 98 | 97 | 75 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,470 | 1,372 | 1,647 | 1,495 | 1,515 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.18 | 1.19 | 1.19 | 1.19 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.68 | 3.46 | 3.49 | 3.58 | 3.69 |

Since they followed the same draft strategy, the base case, *Steamer*, *ATC*, and *THE BAT* have similar team totals. These scenarios exhibit strong categorical balance, but usually one or two statistics are favored slightly. As an example, *Steamer* has the most projected RBIs and strikeouts among the group. *ZiPS* is the outlier once again, producing a somewhat unbalanced team. This case projects for the least number of total home runs but greatly exceeds target stolen bases and SOLDs. This can partly be explained by the players on the *ZiPS* roster leaning towards speed over power, but it seems like this system is more aggressive in its projections.

Wins are clearly a bottleneck since no model has more than the minimum target of 100. This observation also helps explain the primary draft strategy the models are following. Wins are a difficult stat to project since they are more prone to randomness than most of the other categories. Starting pitchers are the most reliable source of wins, therefore, the best starters need to be selected early in the draft to ensure that the 100-win threshold is met.

In summary, the projection system applied to the draft pool is a key consideration when evaluating which players to draft. The fantasy team should investigate the underlying model parameters to ensure they are aligned and believed to be better predictors of future outcomes.

Draft Value

In the base model, average draft position (*ADP*) is used as a proxy for market value, but there are other options that could be applied. This includes the latest pick a player was selected, *MaxDP*. ADP will also be adjusted 15 percent lower (*LowDP*) and 15 percent higher (*HighDP*) to account for potential randomness in the fantasy draft. The resulting roster in each case is shown below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Base** | **LowDP** | **HighDP** | **MaxDP** |
| 1 | Zack Wheeler | Zack Wheeler | Shohei Ohtani | Spencer Strider |
| 2 | Luis Castillo | Luis Castillo | Zack Wheeler | Fernando Tatis Jr. |
| 3 | Framber Valdez | Zac Gallen | Zac Gallen | Luis Castillo |
| 4 | Zac Gallen | Framber Valdez | Kevin Gausman | Randy Arozarena |
| 5 | Camilo Doval | Andres Munoz | Max Fried | Framber Valdez |
| 6 | Evan Phillips | Kyle Schwarber | Framber Valdez | Zac Gallen |
| 7 | Andres Gimenez | Ryan Helsley | Kyle Schwarber | Raisel Iglesias |
| 8 | Kyle Schwarber | Andres Gimenez | Andres Munoz | Andres Munoz |
| 9 | Dansby Swanson | Chris Bassitt | Clay Holmes | Evan Phillips |
| 10 | Chris Bassitt | Cedric Mullins | Andres Gimenez | Blake Snell |
| 11 | Merrill Kelly | Logan O'Hoppe | Esteury Ruiz | Kyle Schwarber |
| 12 | Cedric Mullins | Jose Berrios | Chris Bassitt | Andres Gimenez |
| 13 | Logan O'Hoppe | Willy Adames | Cedric Mullins | Chris Bassitt |
| 14 | Jose Berrios | Daulton Varsho | Merrill Kelly | Jarren Duran |
| 15 | Willy Adames | Brayan Bello | Logan O'Hoppe | Dansby Swanson |
| 16 | Daulton Varsho | Starling Marte | Christopher Morel | Cedric Mullins |
| 17 | Tyler O'Neill | Ryan McMahon | Daulton Varsho | Christopher Morel |
| 18 | Starling Marte | Tommy Edman | Willy Adames | Willy Adames |
| 19 | Jeremy Pena | Matt Chapman | Starling Marte | Esteury Ruiz |
| 20 | Kyle Finnegan | Jose Siri | Tyler O'Neill | Rhys Hoskins |
| 21 | Ryan Mountcastle | Jose Abreu | Kyle Finnegan | Daulton Varsho |
| 22 | Tommy Edman | Eugenio Suarez | Jeremy Pena | Matt Chapman |
| 23 | Matt Chapman | Harrison Bader | Ryan Mountcastle | Jordan Montgomery |
| 24 | Jose Siri | Andrew Nardi | Matt Chapman | Henry Davis |
| 25 | Harrison Bader | Javier Baez | Jose Siri | Starling Marte |

The *LowDP* model essentially increases the value of each player in the draft. This model opts for many of the same players as the base model, albeit drafted several rounds sooner. This suggests that players like Matt Chapman, drafter four rounds sooner, are exceptional values at their *ADP*. Camilo Doval is not selected in the *LowDP* model because his draft value was increased to the point that it is no longer optimal to select him given his output. The *HighDP* and *MaxDP* models essentially relax the draft value constraint, resulting in all players having decreased draft values. Since the model can select better players at certain spots, Shohei Ohtani, a once in a lifetime talent, is selected in the first round of the *HighDP* model. The *MaxDP* model instead opts for Spencer Strider in the first round, widely considered the top fantasy baseball pitcher coming into 2024. Otherwise, both of these cases have many of the same players present in the base case, just selected in later rounds of the draft. The total team statistics for each scenario are outlined below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Base** | **LowDP** | **HighDP** | **MaxDP** |
| HR | 275 | 312 | 310 | 335 | 341 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,069 | 1,049 | 1,115 | 1,161 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,002 | 1,006 | 1,035 | 1,062 |
| SB | 200 | 250 | 222 | 276 | 311 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | 0.316 | 0.322 | 0.327 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| SOLD | 75 | 96 | 84 | 95 | 100 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,470 | 1,464 | 1,471 | 1,557 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.09 | 1.17 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.68 | 3.63 | 3.25 | 3.48 |

As anticipated, the *HighDP* and *MaxDP* models have similar or better statistics in all categories when compared to the base model. This is an obvious consequence of lowering the draft value of all players. While the *MaxDP* model is superior to the *HighDP* model in nearly all categories, the *HighDP* roster’s pitching ratios have a strong advantage. Similarly, the *LowDP* model has improved ERA and the same WHIP as the base model. This might indicate that ratio categories are resistant to changes in draft value. The *LowDP* model is the most conservative and probable scenario and is still able to achieve all model objectives except OBP. A shrewd fantasy manager would be wise to construct their team with this in mind.

Starting Draft Position

Within the fantasy community, there are differing opinions on where the optimal starting draft position is which stem from the snake-like nature of traditional drafts. Three popular philosophies assert that starting at the beginning, middle, or end of the first round will ultimately construct the best team. This analysis will investigate the impact of starting with *Pick* 1, *Pick 6*, and *Pick 12* in the first round, starting with the different rosters:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Pick 1** | **Pick 6** | **Base (Pick 12)** |
| 1 | Ronald Acuna Jr. | Fernando Tatis Jr. | Zack Wheeler |
| 2 | Zac Gallen | Luis Castillo | Luis Castillo |
| 3 | Luis Castillo | Zac Gallen | Framber Valdez |
| 4 | Max Fried | Max Fried | Zac Gallen |
| 5 | Framber Valdez | Framber Valdez | Camilo Doval |
| 6 | Andres Munoz | Andres Munoz | Evan Phillips |
| 7 | Evan Phillips | Evan Phillips | Andres Gimenez |
| 8 | Dansby Swanson | Andres Gimenez | Kyle Schwarber |
| 9 | Andres Gimenez | Chris Bassitt | Dansby Swanson |
| 10 | Esteury Ruiz | Esteury Ruiz | Chris Bassitt |
| 11 | Chris Bassitt | Dansby Swanson | Merrill Kelly |
| 12 | Jose Berrios | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins |
| 13 | Cedric Mullins | Jose Berrios | Logan O'Hoppe |
| 14 | Willy Adames | Willy Adames | Jose Berrios |
| 15 | Christopher Morel | Christopher Morel | Willy Adames |
| 16 | Daulton Varsho | Daulton Varsho | Daulton Varsho |
| 17 | Brayan Bello | Henry Davis | Tyler O'Neill |
| 18 | Jack Suwinski | Brayan Bello | Starling Marte |
| 19 | Jeremy Pena | Ryan McMahon | Jeremy Pena |
| 20 | Ryan Mountcastle | Jeremy Pena | Kyle Finnegan |
| 21 | Matt Chapman | Ryan Mountcastle | Ryan Mountcastle |
| 22 | Tommy Edman | Tommy Edman | Tommy Edman |
| 23 | Shea Langeliers | Matt Chapman | Matt Chapman |
| 24 | Jose Siri | Jose Siri | Jose Siri |
| 25 | Andrew Nardi | Andrew Nardi | Harrison Bader |

In very rare cases, there is a consensus top pick in a fantasy draft. Coming off a 50-home run and 70-stolen base season, Ronald Acuna Jr. was that player. The *Pick 1* model capitalizes on his strong projections in all five offensive categories and selects him in the first round. Beyond that single deviation, the strategy employed by the *Pick 1* model is nearly identical to the *Pick 12* model. The roster of the *Pick 6* model only differs from the *Pick 1* model by three players. This is likely because Fernando Tatis Jr. is selected in the first round instead of Acuna. His profile is reminiscent Acuna, but with a lower floor and weaker projections in certain categories, like steals. The remaining two player differences attempt to close this gap. The statistical differences between the models are shown below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Pick 1** | **Pick 6** | **Base (Pick 12)** |
| HR | 275 | 315 | 306 | 312 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,104 | 1,100 | 1,069 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,001 | 1,004 | 1,002 |
| SB | 200 | 305 | 289 | 250 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | 0.320 | 0.319 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| SOLD | 75 | 87 | 87 | 96 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,417 | 1,417 | 1,470 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.20 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.62 | 3.62 | 3.68 |

Overall, this analysis does not clearly indicate that starting at any of these positions is markedly better than the others. All three scenarios, even *Pick 1* and *Pick 12*, have very similar categorical outputs, with the only notable statistic that differs being steals. The presence of either Acuna or Tatis is the reason for this difference, which suggests that their skillsets are rare. If anything, this suggests that the snake format draft is reasonably effective at distributing player value. The best strategy seems to identify a specific player of interest in the first round and attempt to draft in a position where they will be available.

Goal Reduction

It can be difficult to construct a roster than is balanced enough to excel at all ten categories, so a common approach is to purposefully give up, or “punt,” a category (or two) to strengthen all others. This is akin to reducing the number of goals in the model. The most common strategy is to punt saves and holds since they depend on several factors beyond the player’s skill level, but there are two additional strategies that will be explored. The resulting rosters are shown below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Base** | **Punt SOLDs** | **Punt Wins** | **Punt SOLDs & Wins** |
| 1 | Zack Wheeler | Zack Wheeler | Kevin Gausman | Aaron Judge |
| 2 | Luis Castillo | Luis Castillo | Jose Ramirez | Jose Ramirez |
| 3 | Framber Valdez | Framber Valdez | Josh Hader | Jazz Chisholm Jr. |
| 4 | Zac Gallen | Zac Gallen | Edwin Diaz | Randy Arozarena |
| 5 | Camilo Doval | Logan Gilbert | Blake Snell | Blake Snell |
| 6 | Evan Phillips | Bobby Miller | Andres Munoz | J.T. Realmuto |
| 7 | Andres Gimenez | Andres Gimenez | Pete Fairbanks | Kyle Schwarber |
| 8 | Kyle Schwarber | Kyle Schwarber | Dylan Cease | Dylan Cease |
| 9 | Dansby Swanson | Esteury Ruiz | Dansby Swanson | Dansby Swanson |
| 10 | Chris Bassitt | Chris Bassitt | Tanner Scott | Esteury Ruiz |
| 11 | Merrill Kelly | Jarren Duran | Jarren Duran | Jarren Duran |
| 12 | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins |
| 13 | Logan O'Hoppe | Logan O'Hoppe | Logan O'Hoppe | Christopher Morel |
| 14 | Jose Berrios | Jose Berrios | Jose Alvarado | Nick Pivetta |
| 15 | Willy Adames | Daulton Varsho | Daulton Varsho | Rhys Hoskins |
| 16 | Daulton Varsho | Willy Adames | Willy Adames | Daulton Varsho |
| 17 | Tyler O'Neill | Starling Marte | Tyler O'Neill | Tyler O'Neill |
| 18 | Starling Marte | Tyler O'Neill | Starling Marte | Starling Marte |
| 19 | Jeremy Pena | Jeremy Pena | Jeremy Pena | Reid Detmers |
| 20 | Kyle Finnegan | Jack Suwinski | Jack Suwinski | Yusei Kikuchi |
| 21 | Ryan Mountcastle | Tommy Edman | Tommy Edman | Griffin Canning |
| 22 | Tommy Edman | Ryan Mountcastle | Ryan Mountcastle | Tommy Edman |
| 23 | Matt Chapman | Jose Siri | Jose Siri | Jose Siri |
| 24 | Jose Siri | Matt Chapman | Matt Chapman | Matt Chapman |
| 25 | Harrison Bader | Harrison Bader | Yuki Matsui | JP Sears |

By removing the SOLD goal, the model forgoes drafting any relief pitchers and instead replaces them with starters. The strategy for drafting the remaining players remains unchanged. By punting wins, the model chooses to take only two starters and fill the rest of the pitching rotation with a bounty of premium relievers. This could be an effective strategy since relief pitchers generally have better ratios than starting pitchers. Also, it is no mistake that the model took Kevin Gausman and Blake Snell as the only starters; both of those players are strikeout machines, something a roster built entirely of relievers would struggle to accumulate. Punting both categories results in the roster prioritizing hitters in the first dozen rounds and entirely forgoing relievers. The first starter, Blake Snell, is not taken until round five and the bulk of the pitchers are not taken until the end of the draft. This is sure to affect the project category totals, which is pictured below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Base** | **Punt SOLDs** | **Punt Wins** | **Punt Solds & Wins** |
| HR | 275 | 312 | 331 | 307 | 414 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,069 | 1,185 | 1,076 | 1,373 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,002 | 1,067 | 1,004 | 1,259 |
| SB | 200 | 250 | 323 | 259 | 380 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | 0.317 | 0.321 | 0.327 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 100 | 56 | 64 |
| SOLD | 75 | 96 | 0 | 219 | 0 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,470 | 1,415 | 1,201 | 1,201 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.17 | 1.18 | 1.26 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.68 | 3.74 | 3.21 | 4.07 |

Punting saves and holds dramatically increases all offensive output, other than OBP, with very little decrease in projected strikeouts. While WHIP improved, ERA deteriorates due to their being no relievers on the roster. Even though wins appeared to be a binding constraint in the model, punting wins is not an objectively better strategy than punting SOLDs. The strongest aspect of this model is that an all-reliever roster has made SOLDs, ERA, and WHIP elite categories that the fantasy team should win almost every week. The data suggests that punting SOLDs and wins is tantamount to giving up on all pitching and only focusing on offense. Even with the strength of the offense, this is not a strategy that is not a formula to win most weeks. In fact, punting saves and holds appears to be the only viable strategy to remain competitive in all remaining fantasy categories.

Relaxed Goal Bounds

The final scenario will remove the bounds on the for every , which will allow the model the flexibility to not meet all goals. While this is similar to punting a category, this approach allows the IP model to choose which categories to limit. The resulting roster is shown below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Round** | **Base (Strict)** | **Relaxed** |
| 1 | Zack Wheeler | Aaron Judge |
| 2 | Luis Castillo | Jose Ramirez |
| 3 | Framber Valdez | Edwin Diaz |
| 4 | Zac Gallen | Josh Hader |
| 5 | Camilo Doval | Camilo Doval |
| 6 | Evan Phillips | Andres Munoz |
| 7 | Andres Gimenez | Kyle Schwarber |
| 8 | Kyle Schwarber | Pete Fairbanks |
| 9 | Dansby Swanson | Esteury Ruiz |
| 10 | Chris Bassitt | Dansby Swanson |
| 11 | Merrill Kelly | Jarren Duran |
| 12 | Cedric Mullins | Cedric Mullins |
| 13 | Logan O'Hoppe | Logan O'Hoppe |
| 14 | Jose Berrios | Jose Alvarado |
| 15 | Willy Adames | Willy Adames |
| 16 | Daulton Varsho | Daulton Varsho |
| 17 | Tyler O'Neill | Starling Marte |
| 18 | Starling Marte | Tyler O'Neill |
| 19 | Jeremy Pena | Kyle Finnegan |
| 20 | Kyle Finnegan | Jeremy Pena |
| 21 | Ryan Mountcastle | Ryan Mountcastle |
| 22 | Tommy Edman | Tommy Edman |
| 23 | Matt Chapman | Matt Chapman |
| 24 | Jose Siri | Jose Siri |
| 25 | Harrison Bader | Harrison Bader |

Since the *Relaxed* model chooses to only draft relief pitching instead of starting pitching, the model has essentially chosen to punt wins. This is not surprising given that wins are difficult to accumulate, as we have not seen any permutation of this model have a win total above the 100-win threshold. Early in the draft, the model chooses a pair of prolific hitters, Aaron Judge and Jose Ramirez, and two of the best relievers in the entire draft, Edwin Diaz and Josh Hader. The *Relaxed* model takes the minimum required number of pitchers in order to maximize offensive statistics. The table below displays these values:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Target** | **Base (Strict)** | **Relaxed** |
| HR | 275 | 312 | 389 |
| R | 1,000 | 1,069 | 1,319 |
| RBI | 1,000 | 1,002 | 1,223 |
| SB | 200 | 250 | 333 |
| OBP | 0.350 | 0.319 | 0.324 |
| W | 100 | 100 | 25 |
| SOLD | 75 | 96 | 230 |
| SO | 1,200 | 1,470 | 567 |
| WHIP | 1.20 | 1.20 | 1.17 |
| ERA | 3.70 | 3.68 | 3.14 |

As predicted, all offensive team totals have been greatly improved in the *Relaxed* model, this is heavily driven by Judge, Ramirez, and the additional three hitters that the model is able to select. A further consequence of not having any starters is that the strikeout total has fallen quite short of the target. Total wins and strikeouts are not enough to be competitive most weeks, but since they are non-zero, there is the potential to steal a point in certain matchups. As was the case where wins were punted, a roster built entirely of relievers means that the pitching ratios are a major point of strength for this roster.

**Section 4: Conclusion**

This analysis affirms that a fantasy baseball draft is well-suited as an optimization problem and can be successfully modelled using integer programming. Several generalizations must be made in order to satisfy the certainty and linearity assumptions, including deterministic player draft values and summation of ratio statistics. Fantasy baseball leagues are famous for their seemingly endless set of rules that can be customized, and a model such as this could be adapted to nearly any use case to conduct similar analyses. The real power of the IP model comes with stress testing different parameters that are input to the model. Normally, different draft strategies take an entire season to play out. By formulating the problem as a mathematical model, it becomes easy to quickly determine the effects of various inputs on the resulting fantasy roster.

Through numerical experimentation, there were several important discoveries that came to light. The primary theme that kept recurring in nearly all scenarios was that starting pitching should be targeted in the early rounds of the draft. This is surprising because almost all current draft strategies favor hitters at the top of the draft. This underscores the impact wins has on fantasy baseball leagues and helps explain why many leagues are beginning to phase out that category in favor of one that occurs more frequently, like quality starts, to allow for more flexible roster construction. Additionally, the scenario analysis confirmed that punting saves and holds is a valid strategy, although it is not the optimal strategy. The optimal strategy avoids starting pitchers entirely to prioritize offense, SOLDs, and pitching ratios. Next, snake-format fantasy drafts are an equitable means of distributing players and a successful fantasy team can be selected regardless of the starting draft position. If

Of course, following the recommendations of the optimization model does not mean that the drafted team will be the best in the league. There is uncertainty in all aspects of any fantasy league. Fantasy managers behave irrationally and unexpectedly during draft, which can entirely derail a planned strategy. Projection systems are essentially educated guesses as to what each player will do in the upcoming season; there are always overperformers and underperformers. A major risk that this analysis completely ignores is player injuries. It is an unavoidable part of the game and impacts every team throughout the course of the season. As an example, Spencer Strider was the consensus top fantasy pitcher coming into the 2024 season. After his second start of the year, he had season-ending elbow surgery. Depending on how the roster was constructed, that could be a debilitating loss for a fantasy team. These effects compound and essentially render the exact roster that the base model selects as entirely theoretical. This does not mean that the analysis is useless, in fact, quite the opposite. The draft strategies, player valuations, and other what-if analysis can lead to insights that can be applied in real-world situations. Based on this analysis, the author followed a punt saves strategy and targeted many of the same players that were continually drafted in all scenarios, like Cedric Mullins and Daulton Varsho, in an actual fantasy draft.

In future iterations, there are numerous extensions that can be made to the model to make it more robust. Introducing random variables and factoring in additional inputs, like a proxy for injury risk, would make the specific roster selected by the model more actionable. One other idea is to adjust the model to be quickly used live during a fantasy draft. This would allow it to essentially function as an assistant and make recommendations based on the current available pool of players, while also accounting for the random behavior of other teams in the draft.

**Appendix**

*I: Baseball Rules*

Baseball is widely considered to be America’s pastime and for good reason: it is one of the oldest competitive sports in the nation’s history. Throughout the decades, there have been significant changes to the game; however, the fundamental rules have remained largely unchanged. The primary action revolves around hitting a baseball; a batter uses a wood bat to attempt to hit a ball thrown to them by the opposing team’s pitcher. Therefore, batters, or hitters, are the primary means of generating offense, which is known as scoring runs. This takes place when a ball is batted into the field of play and a player rounds all four bases. Pitchers must throw the baseball to batters, but their objective is for the ball to be turned into an out. This can happen if the batter earns three strikes by swinging and missing or failing to swing on balls thrown in the strike zone. There are other means of generating outs, where defensive players in the field of play catch a ball before it hits the ground, or tag a player with the ball when he is not touching one of the bases. These defensive players play eight positions on the baseball field that all have a unique role. After three outs are earned, the teams switch sides and the process repeats. This goes on for nine iterations, called innings, after which the team with the must runs wins the game. The baseball season is comprised of 162 games for each team.

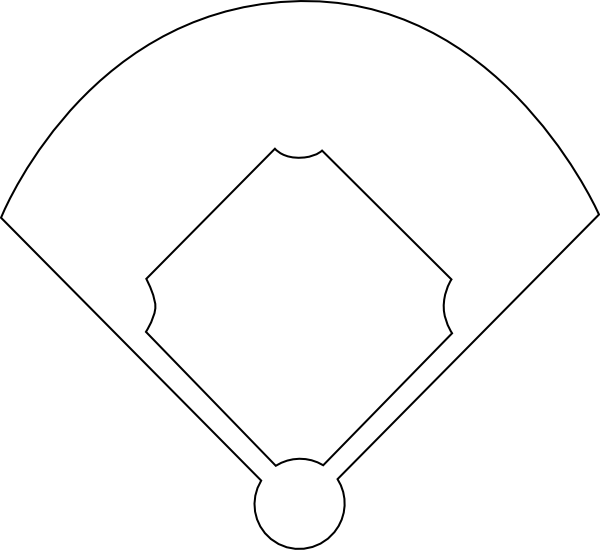
*II: Statistics Glossary*

* Home run (HR): A batted ball leaves the fair field of play before touching the ground. Essentially, the ball is launched in the air over the outfield fence. Hitting statistic that can take integer values only.
* Runs scored (R): A player rounds all four bases and is not declared out. Hitting statistic that can take integer values only.
* Runs batted in (RBI): A batter hits a ball in play that scores a run, including their own. Hitting statistic that can take integer values only.
* Stolen base (SB): A baserunner advances a base without being a ball hit in play. Hitting statistic that can take integer values only.
* On base percentage (OBP): The percentage of time a batter successfully reaches a base per at bat. Hitting statistic that ranges from 0 to 1.
* Win (W): A pitcher is the active pitcher when the winning team took the lead and ultimately won the game. Pitching statistic that can take integer values only.
* Saves plus holds (SOLD): A pitcher successfully maintains a lead or closed a game out when the team was winning. Pitching statistic that can take integer values only.
* Strikeout (SO): A pitcher records three strikes from a batter during an at bat. Pitching statistic that can take integer values only.
* Earned run average. The number of runs attributed to a pitcher divided by the number of innings pitched multiplied by 9. Pitching statistic that can take floating point values.
* Walk plus hits divided by innings pitched (WHIP): The number of walks and hits a pitcher gives up in an outing divided by the number of innings pitched in the same outing. Pitching statistic that can take floating point values.

*III: Positions Glossary*

* Catcher (C): Sits behind home plate and catches the ball throw by the pitcher. Responsible for communicating which pitch type the pitcher should throw, often leading to them being known as game-callers.
* First Baseman (1B): Positioned near first base and is responsible for fielding balls in play and managing baserunners. Typically considered the least skilled infield position.
* Second Baseman (2B): Positioned between first and second base and is responsible for fielding balls in play and managing baserunners.
* Third Baseman (3B): Positioned close to third base and is responsible for fielding balls in play and managing baserunners.
* Shortstop (SS): Positioned between second and third base and is responsible for fielding balls in play and managing baserunners. Typically considered the most difficult infield position.
* Infielder (INF): Grouping of players including 1B, 2B, 3B, and SS
* Left Fielder (LF): Positioned behind third base in the outfield and fields balls in play. Generally considered one of the least skilled defensive positions on the entire field.
* Center Fielder (CF): Positioned behind second base in the outfield and fields balls in play. A premium defensive position as it requires athleticism and range to successfully cover the massive territory they are responsible for.
* Right Fielder (RF): Positioned behind first base in the outfield and fields balls in play. Requires superior arm strength of make high leverage throws to successfully contest runners at third base and home plate.
* Outfielder (OF): Grouping of players including LF, CF, and RF
* Utility (UT): Any hitter; C, 1B, 2B, 3B, SS, INF, OF
* Pitcher (P): Positioned on the pitcher’s mound in the infield and throws the ball to the batter standing at home plate. Arguably the most important position on the field.

*IV: Position Map*



P

C

1B

3B

2B

SS

CF

RF

LF

UT

*V: Snake Draft*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Starting Position** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** | **11** | **12** |
| **Round 1** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| **Round 2** | 24 | 23 | 22 | 21 | 20 | 19 | 18 | 17 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 13 |
| **Round 3** | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 25 | 36 |
| **Round 4** | 48 | 47 | 46 | 45 | 44 | 43 | 42 | 41 | 40 | 39 | 38 | 37 |
| **Round 5** | 49 | 50 | 51 | 52 | 53 | 54 | 55 | 56 | 57 | 58 | 59 | 60 |