**Winning vs. Good Teams: Important for Postseason Play?**

*Is a team who wins against winning teams in the regular season more likely to do so in the postseason, as well?*

**By Rivka Boord**

The New York Mets and Atlanta Braves are in a furious race for the National League East Division crown. Lately, both teams seem to be doing their best to give it away, particularly the Mets, who have the softest September schedule of any team in baseball but have lost more than they’ve won so far (5-6 since the end of the Dodgers series on Sept. 1). The Mets’ offense has gone cold, and Atlanta’s hasn’t been too hot, either. The Mets maintain a half-game lead in the division, but if they continue to lose against inferior competition with ice-cold hitting and shaky pitching, it is questionable how far they can go in the postseason regardless of whether they are a division winner or Wild Card team.

Although the Braves lead the Mets in most offensive statistical categories and are ahead or narrowly behind in many pitching categories, as well, there is one area in which the Mets have significantly outplayed Atlanta this season: record vs. winning teams, meaning teams that have a .500 record or better. The Mets are currently 39-30 against winning teams, whom they have not faced since the conclusion of the Dodgers series. Meanwhile, the Braves are 28-32 against winning teams, having recently dropped two of three to the Mariners.

It’s easy to think that a team which feasts on poor opposition but struggles against quality competition is not long for the playoffs. After all, every playoff team in MLB history has been at or above .500 in the regular season. However, let’s dig into the numbers to see if that’s really the case.

Let’s first take a look at the teams in playoff position in 2022 and how they’re doing against winning teams this year.

**Astros:** 39-23, .629 (62 GP)

**Dodgers:** 35-21, .625 (56)

**Mets:** 39-30, .565 (69)

**Yankees:** 51-40, .560 (91)

**Guardians:** 38-34, .528 (72)

**Mariners:** 40-37, .519 (77)

**Rays:** 38-42, .475 (80)

**Braves:** 28-32, .467 (60)

**Blue Jays:** 39-45, .464 (84)

**Cardinals:** 26-30, .464 (56)

**Phillies:** 29-34, .460 (63)

**Padres:** 23-33, .411 (56)

One thing that stands out off the bat is that the American League teams have mostly played more games against winning teams than their National League counterparts, with the exception of the Astros. That’s largely because there are more winning teams in the AL than the NL (9 vs. 7). Another noticeable trend is that the teams with the two best records in baseball, the Astros and Dodgers, have also played among the fewest games against winning teams. Perhaps that means nothing, or maybe it’s the reason that those two teams have each won one World Series in the past six seasons despite fielding stacked teams, winning the division each year, and entering the postseason as favorites to win it all.

Furthermore, there is an unusually high number of playoff teams with losing records against winning team: six, or exactly half of the teams in playoff position. The quantitative number may be due to the expanded playoff field, but the percentage is a little strange. The explanation is pretty readily available, though: the Astros and Dodgers have beaten up on winning teams--and that may bode well for them in the postseason despite a lower total of competitive games.

# **Does it mean anything in the postseason?**

The question is if beating winning teams in the regular season has any impact on the playoffs. You’d think it would, because you’re playing winning teams in the playoffs. But let’s take a look at the numbers.

We’re going to look at playoff numbers since 1996, the first full season which included Wild Card play. The situation was significantly different when there were two playoff teams in each conference instead of four. Obviously, that has further changed with first the Wild Card one-game playoff and now the Wild Card Round, but limiting to those years will make our data too narrow.

Without controlling for round, here are the average numbers against winning teams for playoff teams since 1996:

**Wins:** 37.7

**Losses:** 34.3

**Total Games Played:** 72

**Win Percentage:** .520

**Worst Win Percentage:** .235

**Winning Records:** 161

**Losing Records:** 73

In other words, the heavy majority (68.8%) of playoff teams since 1996 have had winning records against winning teams. The average win percentage is .520, since obviously if most playoff teams win against winning teams, then they’re beating each other. But still, they win more often than they lose against good teams.

Let’s take a look at the breakdown by round (All numbers represent averages unless indicated otherwise; WT = winning teams):

| **Round** | **Wins vs. WT** | **Losses vs. WT** | **GP vs. WT** | **Win % vs. WT** | **Worst Win % vs. WT** | **# teams >=.500 vs. WT** | **# teams < .500 vs. WT** | **% Teams >= .500 vs. WT** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Won WS | 37.8 | 34.7 | 72.5 | .525 | .446 | 18 | 8 | 69.2% |
| Won LCS/  Lost WS | 40.3 | 34.7 | 75 | .539 | .404 | 21 | 5 | 80.8% |
| Won LDS/  Lost LCS | 38.9 | 34.7 | 73.6 | .526 | .235 | 38 | 14 | 73.1% |
| Lost LDS | 37.8 | 34.4 | 72.2 | .518 | .333 | 70 | 34 | 67.3% |

Most of the numbers round-by-round seem similar, but a few slight differences stand out.

First of all, although it’s not a very large difference, teams who lost in the Division Series had the lowest winning percentage against winning teams. Furthermore, among these four categories, there was the lowest percentage of teams with winning records against good teams among the losers of the Division Series (again, not a very strong difference).

Ironically, the second-lowest percentage of teams with winning records against good teams is among World Series winners, as eight out of the 26 winners since 1996 have had sub-.500 records against winning teams.

One other important factor stands out, though: the lowest win rate against good teams among World Series winners is .446, which is higher than in any of the other three categories. You generally can’t have played *too* poorly against good teams to win the World Series. However, among 2022 teams in playoff position, only the Padres have a lower win rate than that… and there are many other reasons to believe that the Padres will be a quick exit in this year’s playoffs, though stranger things have happened.

Overall, from looking at the data and running a linear regression, there is very little correlation between winning against good teams in the regular season and advancing to the postseason.

Getting back to the Mets and Braves, though the Mets’ .565 win percentage against good teams is significantly better than Atlanta’s .467, that does not seem to make a difference come playoff time. Most playoff teams have already been good against winning teams in the regular season, and if they’re not, how far they get in the postseason seems spread out among the different rounds.

It’s yet another disappointing sign for the flailing Mets. Right now, they can thank their lucky stars for maintaining the lead in the division and hope that the remaining 18 games on the schedule will be enough to right the ship. Or perhaps when the schedule turns tougher, the Mets will wake up, as they did against the Dodgers just two weeks ago.