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How do the Orioles and Adley Rutschman compromise?

Adley Rutschman is a star that plays one of the hardest positions in baseball. Naturally this makes him very valuable to a small market team like the Orioles. In his debut year, Rutschman totaled a 5.6 WAR (FanGraphs) mostly because of his ability to draw walks, hit for power, and become an elite defender behind the plate. 2023 was Rutschman's peak form where he slugged 20 HR, had a 126 wRC+, and a 5.5 WAR (FanGraphs). Totaling 5+ WAR in each of his first two seasons at catcher put Rutschman in elite company; only Johnny Bench, Thurman Munson, Carlton Fisk, and Mike Piazza had accomplished this rare feat. The 2024 O's signed big names like Corbin Burnes and Craig Kimbrel to add to the young core of Adley and Gunnar they've been developing. Early on, Rutschman looked like he was positioned for another great season as he was voted an all-star for the 2nd straight season. But, in the 2nd half hitting struggles developed as his walk rate was down and was only able to hit 3 HR after the all-star break. Rutschman's production was further limited in 2025 with an oblique injury that only allowed him to play in 90 games. Even when he played, his OPS+ was 90, which was the first time in his career it dropped below 100.

Despite a disappointing 2025 season, the Orioles still hope Rutschman can get back to his dominant 2023 performance and be the franchise cornerstone catcher that the Orioles need. Overall, Rutschman in his first three full seasons of play was in elite company at the catcher position. Rutschman posted a total of 13.8 fWAR in 3 seasons, Cal Raleigh posted a 13.9, and Will Smith a 12.7 fWAR.

Now, we should understand where the 2026 Orioles sit. The Orioles have been one of the busiest teams this offseason by signing key FAs like Pete Alonso and Ryan Helsley. They also made a huge splash with their trade for Shane Baz and re-signing of Zach Eflin to solidify a great rotation. The addition that caught my eye was the extension of Samuel Basallo. In August 2025, Basallo signed the longest pre-arbitration extension for a catcher in MLB history at 8 years and \$67 million. For Rutschman, this proves very concerning as Basallo can be seen as a replacement for him. This move does make sense for the O's because it allows them to lock up a rising star for many years to come so that they will have a catcher and a DH through the 2027 season.

Let's dive into Rutschman's projections for the 2026 season. Adley Rutschman is now in his 2nd year of arbitration because he was called up early enough to be one of the "Super Twos." This means he will be under team control through 2027. So, if Rutschman doesn't sign a long-term deal soon, he has two more seasons left with the Orioles and then will hit the market. Currently his average WAR over the past 4 seasons is 3.75. This relates closely to THE BAT projection for his 2026 WAR, which is 3.8. Since Rutschman will be 28 this year, he should remain in his prime and produce the same WAR numbers until he turns 30 in 2028. According to Bill James's studies, once a player hits 30, their estimated WAR reduces by 0.5 every season. If this is the case, over 5 years Rutschman would total 17.5 WAR. 6 seasons would be 19.8, 7 seasons 21.6, and for 8 years it would be a total of 22.9 WAR. This projection is assuming that Rutschman gets closer to his 2023 performance, but more importantly stays healthy through these years. Now that fWAR does encapsulate catcher framing into the metrics, the 22.9 WAR over 8 years is a more accurate number for a catcher. It is important to note that fWAR still relies on imperfect defensive metrics like UZR, and doesn't quantify clutch factor, but it is the most comprehensive projection estimate we have.

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The average cost per WAR does fluctuate with time, but recently has hovered around \$8M/WAR for free agents. All MLB teams have different formulas, and there is a notable difference between large and small market teams. Large market teams have an incentive to use their financial status and overpay free agents to lock up star athletes. They may pay up to \$10M/WAR. But small market teams, like the Orioles, have to be more cost-conscious and will seek deals under the generally agreed upon \$8M/WAR deal. Let's start with the \$8M/WAR baseline. For 5 years this would put Adley's value at \$140M, and for 8 years it would be \$183.2M. It's important to keep in mind that these are market rates, and the Orioles being a small-market team will have reason to structure the deal intelligently.

My proposal: The Orioles offer Rutschman a massive 7 year, \$160M deal. The AAV would be \$22.85M, which would be the second highest on the team behind Alonso. This deal makes sense for the Orioles because 7 years would lock up Rutschman throughout his prime until he's 35 years old. Based on my WAR projections this deal would be about \$7.4M/WAR. The Orioles can get away with paying a little less during arbitration because they should point to Will Smith's and Cal Raleigh's contracts. Smith was extended for 10 years at \$140M, and AL MVP runner-up Cal Raleigh inked an extension for 6 years \$105M. Both of these deals have less AAV than Rutschman's offer, and from the early career WAR comparisons earlier, these players are all of similar value. The Orioles are in win now mode, so they should take advantage of deferred compensation to Rutschman as well. The first couple years they can pay Rutschman under his AAV, maybe \$12-\$15M and then increase it to \$30M in future years, so that they don't have too high of a payroll in the years they are also paying Alonso and O'Neill. Luckily, the luxury tax won't be an issue and the deferred compensation can open up opportunities for more additions this year.

Now, Rutschman will have a decision to make about his future. If he will only settle for market value, there is a small chance he will take this deal. But, if this deal is offered to him he should be willing to listen because of his injury plagued season in 2025 and his declining numbers. He may be questioning whether he will ever get back to 2023 form, and this may be his biggest opportunity to lock-up a huge sum of money. If Rutschman decides to pass, 2026 and 2027 will mean so much more as he will have to prove he can be the guy to lock up market value in free agency. If he doesn't want that pressure and if he believes Baltimore is built to win a championship, he would be smart to take this deal. Weighing his options, I think that Adley would have a high chance (60 to 75%) to accept this offer.