

# Blue Jays' hitters leaning on each other to lift offence to historic heights

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By Israel Fehr

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DUNEDIN, Fla. – You can add spring-training video coordinator to Josh Donaldson's resume.

With iPhone camera in hand, the Blue Jays' All-Star third baseman and reigning American League MVP walks around the batting cage to get a better angle of his target, but doesn't stop providing his running analysis of his teammates' batting practice performance.

Donaldson is the group's vocal leader, but the camaraderie runs throughout the roster and the information sharing between teammates creates an environment of rapid growth and development.

"There are a lot of pretty good hitters here and I think we can all learn from each other," says Chris Colabello. "There are some things, for Josh and myself particularly, that we've picked up in the last five years that have helped change our careers. More than anything, we're just trying to understand our moves at the plate a little better and really help each other get into good hitting positions over and over again."

There's no doubt Toronto had baseball's top offence last season, leading the majors in runs, home runs, doubles, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and walks.

It stands among the best offensive seasons in the history of the major leagues. The Blue Jays' 2015 Weighted Runs

Created Plus ([wRC+](#)) total is tied for third since 1995 and [ranks in the top 10](#) going all the way back to 1945.

What does that mean exactly? wRC+ is a rate stat that attempts to put all offensive contributions into a single number, adjusting for league and park factors. Using 100 as the league average score, every point above or below 100 is equal to one percentage point above or below that league average.

In short, while the Blue Jays didn't score as many runs as many of their offensive juggernaut predecessors, the Blue Jays' runs are worth more because offence is at a premium in this era, and that's reflected in their wRC+ number.

#### **BEST OFFENSIVE SEASONS BY wRC+ SINCE 1995:**

<b>TEAM</b>	<b>YEAR</b>	<b>RUNS</b>	<b>wRC+</b>
Red Sox	2003	961	120
Yankees	2007	968	119
<b>Blue Jays</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>117</b>
Yankees	2009	915	117
Red Sox	2011	875	117

And it's quite clear based off their conversations at camp that the Blue Jays are not settling for being among the best. They want to be the best.

Manager John Gibbons can already see the subtle mechanical adjustments his hitters are making in an effort to refine their approach at the plate and drive the ball to all fields when they make contact. He also can't remember seeing a team this dedicated to their craft.

"These guys are always talking hitting. They rely really on their teammates. They'll bounce things off each other they're experimenting with. It's kind of neat to see," says Gibbons.

"The other day I went into the cage, and there must have been 10 guys in there. Donaldson had [Domonic] Brown in there working on a tee. It was pretty impressive. I hadn't seen it before. I hadn't seen in anywhere. One thing they do is they really all help coach each other. That's really the ideal situation, but you don't get that too often."

The bar is set high for a repeat of last season's offensive dominance. The middle of Toronto's order is so prolific, it doesn't matter the Blue Jays haven't identified a leadoff hitter yet. Michael Saunders and Kevin Pillar are the favourites to fill that spot in the lineup on opening day.

"Do we have a prototypical leadoff guy? I don't know," says Saunders. "But I don't think we need a prototypical leadoff guy. For us, the leadoff guy needs to get on base, that's what's important."

If Troy Tulowitzki performs up to his All-Stars standards, Pillar and Ryan Goins make continued strides in their second full big-league seasons, and the rest of the lineup puts up similar numbers to what they posted, the potential exists for the Blue Jays to be even better at the plate than they were last year.

The most plausible explanation for a decline is injury, and given the depth on this team, it would take a rash of them for a steep drop-off to take place. Jose Bautista, Edwin Encarnacion, and Russell Martin played through injuries in

2015, but the Blue Jays stayed relatively healthy otherwise, as second baseman Devon Travis was the only position player regular to be sidelined for a significant amount of time.

"Obviously with the amount of home runs that we hit and things like that, it stands out on paper. What's even more impressive to me is that if you watch us every day, there are a lot of guys that put together at-bats, over and over again," says Colabello. "Typically when you say 'power hitter' you might not think (plate) discipline right away, but with this lineup, one through nine, it's going to be a tough at-bat. I don't think there's a place to take time off."

Actually, an opposing pitcher's best bet to slow down Toronto's lineup may be to get a hold of Donaldson's iPhone. Hitters around the league wouldn't mind seeing the video contents on there, either. It holds the secrets to the Blue Jays' historic offence, which has the chance to be the best offence in the history of baseball. And as a result, it may not be long before we see an iPhone on display in Cooperstown for the first time.

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