

# With sports betting boom comes increase in problem gamblers, experts say



*A clerk counts money at the sports book at Freehold Raceway on Oct. 24, 2020, in Freehold, N.J. With advertisements for sports betting blanketing the airwaves, some in the industry and their pro sports and technology partners are starting to ... more >*

By Jacob Calvin Meyer - *The Washington Times* - Thursday, February 10, 2022

Two percent. That's the figure everyone talks about in the sports gambling world.

No, that isn't the chance that you'll hit that six-team parlay.

That number — 2% — is the one most experts use when citing the percentage of problem gamblers.

---

It's a small number, but that's the tricky thing with percentages. Even small ones can wreak havoc.

With sports gambling now legal in 33 states and the District of Columbia, the number of problem gamblers will inevitably increase. Marc Lefkowitz, a certified gambling counselor for more than 20 years and a recovering gambler for nearly 40, is especially concerned about this week leading up to the Super Bowl. He expects a heavy dose of advertisements from sportsbooks — you know, the ones in which they offer a “risk-free bet” — to entice people to wager on the big game.

---

“I worry about the Super Bowl being a gateway for first-time gamblers,” Mr. Lefkowitz said. “They should know what they’re getting into before they place that first bet.”

### **Rock bottom**

Billy Hoffman placed his last bet on Feb. 5, 2001. The date means a lot to him, as it does for all other recovering gamblers.

Mr. Hoffman started when he was a teenager. By his 20s, he bet on horse racing, cards, sports — everything. He was married twice, divorced twice and filed for bankruptcy twice.

When he was 30, a year after his second wife left him, Mr. Hoffman hit a wall. He was in another relationship and was about to take her money to gamble.

“I realized then it didn’t matter who the woman was or where I lived,” Mr. Hoffman said. “I was always going to be this miserable, lying, manipulative person that was gambling all the time and feeling like crap.”

He finally called Virginia’s gambling help line. Twenty-one years later, he is a certified gambling counselor at Williamsville Wellness, a residential addiction treatment center in Hanover, Virginia.

The shame Mr. Hoffman felt is common for problem gamblers.

It exists with all addictions, but it's even more pervasive with gambling disorder than with addictions to alcohol or nicotine, said Mr. Lefkowitz, whose clean date is Feb. 9, 1983. Drug or alcohol addictions, Mr. Lefkowitz said, are more "normalized" in society, but gambling addicts don't have that same level of understanding.

That's because gambling disorder is about money — something that's vital to survival and a tangible representation of a person's worth.

"There is a lot of shame when it comes to money," said Mr. Lefkowitz, who has worked as a counselor in California and Arizona for the past two decades. "It's one thing to tell somebody you can't stop drinking. They can understand that. But people are afraid to tell somebody that they can't handle their money."

Another aspect that stigmatizes gambling disorder, the counselors said, is that it doesn't show the physical signs that other addictions do. Will Hinman, a certified peer recovery specialist for the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling, calls it an "invisible addiction."

"Once it's spiraled out of control is when we realize it's a problem," said Mr. Hinman, who started gambling in college and began his recovery journey on Nov. 2, 2013.

"You can't smell blackjack on somebody's breath," Mr. Lefkowitz said.

In the brain, the effect of addictive sports betting is similar to that of cocaine, said Lyndon Aguiar, a clinical director of Williamsville Wellness Center.

"The immediacy of it is so intoxicating," said Mr. Aguiar, who is also a licensed clinical psychologist and a gambling specialist. "There's no drug involved, but there's that immediate dopamine hit. There's anticipation, excitement, and if they win there's euphoria. But it's short-lived."

On top of the shame gamblers feel is the belief that if they go into recovery they lose the opportunity to win back their losses.

For problem gamblers, the yin and yang of the game means they keep playing until they win, trapping them in a vicious cycle. If you bounce out when you go on a cold streak or after you lose your entire paycheck or after you empty your retirement accounts, then you forgo the opportunity to get on a hot streak, win the money back, fix your problems and, most important, feel the high.

"People with gambling disorder are treatment-resistant," Mr. Hoffman said. "The addiction offers false hope. Alcohol and drugs are both very serious addictions, but people don't get drunk or high and think that when they wake up from this stupor that their problems are going to be solved."

The shame, the hidden nature, the lying and the financial hardship are among the reasons gambling disorder has the highest suicide rate of any addiction. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, 20% of people with "severe gambling problems" attempt suicide. The NCPG estimates that 2 million people in the U.S. meet the criteria for gambling disorder and another 4 million to 6 million show signs of problem gambling.

"When someone is losing everything and chasing their losses, it can lead to a really ugly situation," Mr. Hinman said.

## **Explosive growth**

Before the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act in 2018, opening the way for states to legalize sports betting, people who didn't live in Nevada either used bookies or offshore websites to place wagers. Now, with 30 states up and running, and about half of them legalizing sports gambling in the past two years, the system is overall safer for bettors, said Casey Clark, senior vice president of strategic communications at the American Gaming Association.

"I think because of the growth of the sports betting market, players are better protected and problem gambling resources are better funded than ever before," Mr. Clark said. "What you see in every advertisement are help lines and resources available that are not present in the pervasive, predatory, illegal market that was driving this country for a long time."

While some believe the gambling industry can operate in a way that encourages problem gambling, Mr. Clark disagrees.

"Responsible gaming is inherent to how we operate," he said. "It's bad for business for a lot of reasons. We offer a form of entertainment for adults, and that's the way it should be treated."

Aside from more states legalizing in recent years, another reason sports betting is booming is simple.

It's fun.

For many people, putting a few bucks on a game increases the enjoyment, and the vast majority of people who gamble can do so responsibly. It gives them a reason to watch, something to cheer for and a topic of conversation with friends and family.

"I'm not against gambling. Most people can gamble and be perfectly fine. I'm not saying it's always a problem," Mr. Lefkowitz said. "But it can be a problem, and it moves really fast."

Through November, sports gambling revenue in 2021 was up 205% from 2020 and 382% from 2019, according to the AGA. The \$666 million the industry raked in from sports gambling in November is the most ever in a single month. October's \$7.55 billion handle, the total amount of money wagered on sports bets, was also a record.

In at least one state, though, sports bettors are losing more than ever.

According to data compiled by David Schwartz of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada sportsbooks are keeping a much higher percentage of bets now than they did in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1984, the year Mr. Schwartz's data begins, the state's sportsbooks kept 2.34% of the total amount bet. In 2020, that number was 6.05%. From 2018 to 2020 was the first time in the 37-year sample with three straight years of Nevada sportsbook win percentages over 6%.

Despite this trend — and the fact that sports wagering has a built-in imbalance with the odds that sportsbooks set — many action gamblers, including those who play blackjack, poker and other games that require skill or knowledge, believe they are smart enough to beat the odds. In fact, sports bettors may be at a greater risk than other gamblers. According to an

NCPG survey last year, sports bettors are more likely to engage in “problematic play,” and younger players are at an even higher risk of developing gambling problems.

This boom in the sports betting industry has led to a significant increase in those seeking out problem gambling services. Despite the pandemic, Mr. Aguiar said, Williamsville Wellness has had a 25% increase in the past two years.

Nationally, the NCPG’s help line received 45% more calls last year than in 2020, said spokesperson Cait Huble. Texts increased by 85% and chat messages were up 117%, Ms. Huble said.

In Maryland, Mr. Hinman, one of five peer recovery specialists who work the state’s 1-800-GAMBLER help line, said he is getting more calls from young adults and college students.

The increase in people seeking out problem gambling services causes some to wonder whether there will be enough staff to meet the increased demand. Carolyn Hawley, president of the Virginia Council on Problem Gambling, said there aren’t enough treatment professionals to work the state-mandated help line.

“We don’t have the workforce capacity yet,” Ms. Hawley said. “We train clinicians on how to treat gambling disorder, but we don’t even have the treatment professionals at this point available to manage the callers we get from the help line.”

## **Uncharted territory**



The year Brianne Doura-Schawohl started working as a problem gambling advocate is the same year the American Psychiatric Association first recognized gambling addiction as a “disorder.” For the 33 years before 2013, the APA defined it as “pathological gambling” — a classification that many believed stigmatized problem gamblers.

“This is still considered, as a public health issue, to be relatively new,” she said.

Even though the federal government takes in more than \$7 billion per year in taxes from gambling, it isn't putting any money toward problem gambling prevention or treatment — making it one of the only addictions without federal funding, Ms. Doura-Schawohl said. Meanwhile, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration had a \$6 billion budget last fiscal year with none of the money going to gambling addiction services.

“I've been in statehouses talking to members and staff who say, ‘Maybe if they just stopped’ or ‘Maybe if they just had religion, it wouldn't be a thing,’ as if it's a moral deficit of someone,” said Ms. Doura-Schawohl, who now runs her own government relations and gambling consultancy firm. “There's so much misunderstanding, shame, stigma and lack of awareness for this addiction for not seeing it for what it is: a true addiction and one that needs funding.”

Maryland, Virginia and some other states provided problem gambling funds when they legalized sports gambling, but nine states set aside no additional funding for problem gambling prevention or treatment when their legislatures legalized sports betting, said Linda Graves, executive director of the National Association of Administrators for Disordered Gambling

Services. She said only about 6% of gambling expansion bills introduced across the country include a provision for increased funding for problem gambling services.

"That is irresponsible," Ms. Graves said.

## **Changing demographics**

When Mr. Lefkowitz first entered recovery at 24, he was one of the only young people there. Now, nearly 40 years later, that has changed. Many of the people seeking gambling treatment are younger.

"Sports betting is right in the wheelhouse of young males," said Mr. Lefkowitz, who now works for Kindbridge, a teletherapy service for process addictions and mental health. "We're going to see them develop more problems."

He said the sports gambling ecosystem does a good job with some of its prevention work. The lessons of keeping gambling fun, setting limits and making a budget are all important.

The missing link for him is the lack of "informed choice" on the part of gamblers. For the most part, he said, people are aware of the serious dangers of drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and doing drugs. But that same reality isn't front and center with gambling.

"Unlike drugs and alcohol, you can only do so much in one day before you pass out and die," Mr. Lefkowitz said. "With gambling, it's unlimited. There's no saturation point. All of a sudden, the family wakes up one day and the car is being repossessed or the house is being foreclosed or they're going to jail because they embezzled money."

Although the resources being provided to today's problem gamblers are better than ever, it's still possible that now is the most difficult time to have a sports gambling addiction.

Sportsbooks are everywhere. They're not just in casinos but are also in arenas and stadiums. Caesars Sportsbook is at Capital One Arena. BetMGM last week debuted one at Nationals Park. And in almost 20 states, sportsbooks can operate online, where bettors can place wagers from their phones.

Additionally, advertisements for sports gambling websites are ubiquitous — from radio spots to television commercials to ads online. They often offer “free” or “risk-free” bets, with the caveat that the money is refunded in a site credit.

“GET YOUR FIRST BET RISK FREE. UP TO \$1,000 BACK IF YOU DON'T WIN,” reads a promotion on FanDuel Sportsbook's website.

“NEW CUSTOMER OFFER. RISK-FREE FIRST BET UP TO \$1,000 PAID IN FREE BETS,” says BetMGM.

“GET 56/1 ODDS FOR FOOTBALL'S PLAYOFFS. BET \$5 TO WIN \$280 IN FREE BETS,” says DraftKings Sportsbook.

Advertisements like these, the counselors say, are harmful for portraying gambling as something that could be “risk-free.”

“There's always a risk,” Mr. Lefkowitz said. “Stop giving away ‘free’ things. You aren't allowed to give away free cigarettes.”

Those advertisements don't just rope new people into sports gambling. The bombardment of them — making it nearly impossible to consume sports media without hearing or seeing an enticing ad — also makes it challenging for those trying to quit.

Remember, they're always just a hot streak away, in their minds, from getting all that money back.

"For people who are compulsive gamblers, they already know," Mr. Hoffman said. "I just want people to know it's a progressive illness, and it gets nasty. You can't gamble your way out."

***Problems with addiction? Call 1-800-GAMBLER in Maryland, 1-888-532-3500 in Virginia or visit [www.ncpgambling.org/help-treatment](http://www.ncpgambling.org/help-treatment).***

*Correction: An earlier version of this story misnamed the sportsbook operation at Capital One Arena. It is Caesars Sportsbook.*

- *Shen Wu Tan contributed to this report.*
- *Jacob Calvin Meyer can be reached at [jmeyer@washingtontimes.com](mailto:jmeyer@washingtontimes.com).*

# Formula One is back in the U.S. this weekend. What's behind the racing circuit's sudden success?



Red Bull driver Max Verstappen of the Netherlands powers his car during the Japanese Formula One Grand Prix at the Suzuka Circuit in Suzuka, central Japan, Sunday, Oct. 9, 2022. (AP Photo/Toru Hanai, Pool) [more >](#)

By Jacob Calvin Meyer - *The Washington Times* - Thursday, October 20, 2022

Formula One returns to the U.S. this weekend in Austin, Texas, along with the attendant mobs of celebrities, paparazzi, reporters and enthralled American fans who have helped catapult the circuit from a niche, Euro-centric sport into one of the hottest “see-and-be-seen” tickets in the world.

Austin hosts its annual Grand Prix and the second F1 event in the U.S. this year after the booming league held the inaugural Miami Grand Prix in May, attracting a who's-who of A-listers, including Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Serena Williams, Matt Damon, DJ Khaled and hundreds of other party-goers to glitzy southern Florida.

The surging global racing circuit sees North America as the New World for its races and drivers, and Austin and Miami are just the beginning.

---


---

"I've been to a couple of Super Bowls, and this feels like a similar vibe," seven-time F1 champion Lewis Hamilton said in May of the over-the-top atmosphere in Miami.




“Celebrities have always gone to Formula One races, but Miami was on another level,” said Matt Gallagher, presenter for the WTF1 YouTube channel, which features content and news about F1 and has more than 1.1 million subscribers. “It is showing that Formula One is becoming one of those sports that everyone wants to get involved in. [The U.S.] is an untapped market in a lot of ways. It has so much potential.”

---

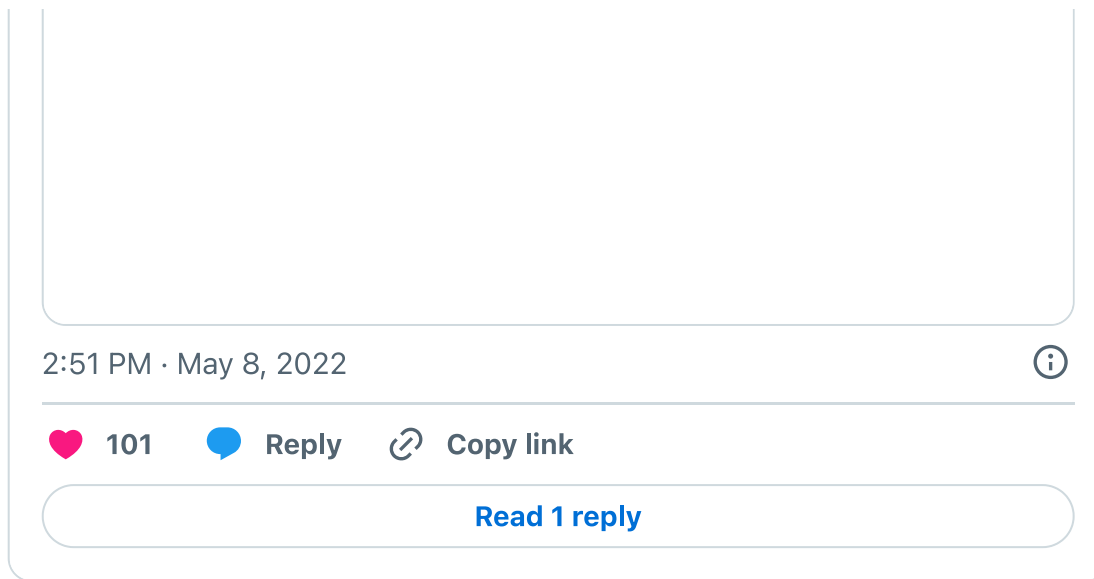
---

**ClutchPoints**   
@ClutchPointsApp · [Follow](#)

Star-studded photo at the Miami Grand Prix:

Lewis Hamilton   
Michael Jordan   
David Beckham   
Tom Brady 

(via [@TomBrady](#))



However, the phenomenon that is now F1 was far from that six years ago.

In 2016, the sport was irrelevant in the U.S. and declining worldwide. F1's global viewership that year was down 22% compared to 2012. Much of the ire was drawn at then-longtime CEO Bernie Ecclestone, who transformed F1 into a profitable and popular sport back in the 1980s but whose reign was souring.

"F1 up until that point had been run by the same man for 40-odd years. Bernie Ecclestone was a real megalomaniac, to be quite frank. He ran everything," said sports journalist James Gray, who has covered F1 since 2014 and currently works for The i newspaper in London. "Credit to Bernie, because he was a successful businessman from a very humble background. But by the end, it wasn't a mindset that was very forward-thinking."

So, in an oddly American twist, in comes a billion-dollar U.S. corporation to gobble up a depreciating asset. Liberty Media Corporation, which also owns MLB's Atlanta Braves and the uber-profitable SiriusXM, swooped in to buy F1 in 2016 for \$8 billion — 11% less than what it was valued at four years earlier.



Once Liberty Media's takeover was official in January 2017, its first move was to force out Ecclestone as CEO. Then, it started a campaign to tap into the unactualized \$80 billion North American sports market.

"I don't necessarily think Liberty Media are some kind of marketing gods that have changed the world," Gray said. "I just think whoever came into that space was going to have a massive opportunity."

F1 wasn't unknown to sports fans in the U.S. Many knew what F1 was: an international racing circuit with super fast cars on unique, zig-zag courses — some purpose-built, some taking place on actual city streets. Faster than NASCAR and with a lot more than just left turns.

But American sports fans just weren't that interested, as F1 was marketed mostly to a European audience and the sport lacks U.S. drivers.

So Liberty Media sought to make F1 relevant to Americans. But how? Turns out, to get Americans to care about something — competitive chess, a cannibalistic serial killer, Formula One — just create a Netflix show about it.

F1 and Netflix combined to create a docuseries about the sport's 2018 season, welcoming fans under the hood of F1, its teams and its drivers as the 20-plus race series bounces all over the world from Australia to China to 10 different European countries. Think of HBO's "Hard Knocks," but instead during the season for the entire F1 circuit.

The first season of "Formula 1: Drive to Survive" premiered in March 2019 to significant success that has only burgeoned in the years since. When season 4 debuted in March — documenting the 2021 F1 season — Netflix's audience figures revealed that at least 4 million people tuned in to watch,

accumulating 28 million hours watched worldwide. The show has already been greenlit for two more seasons to cover both the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

More than just boosting the racing series' brand, the show displayed the faces and personalities of drivers that spent all of their competitive time in helmets. Sure, someone like Hamilton — widely considered the best driver in F1 history — was well known, but youngsters like Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Ferrari's Charles Leclerc have gained massive followings in this new era of F1. Verstappen, a Belgian-Dutch driver who just secured his second consecutive F1 world title, and Leclerc, from Monaco, both have over 9 million Instagram followers — each more than Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, Yankees slugger Aaron Judge and Capitals superstar Alex Ovechkin combined.

"It's clear that 'Drive to Survive' has really broken down the barriers to Formula One," Gallagher said. "I think that's a big thing that F1 has always struggled with: How do you make a sport that's so complex, with so many different rules and regulations, how do you get the standard person to watch a Formula One race and understand what's going on? I think 'Drive to Survive' has done a really good job of humanizing the drivers."

The success of the Netflix show has the other streaming services chasing the F1 dollar signs. Apple, for example, has acquired the rights to a movie about an F1 driver — starring Brad Pitt — to stream exclusively on its platform. Pitt and Hamilton will co-produce the film together, while Joseph Kosinski, director of the summer blockbuster "Top Gun: Maverick," will steer the ship for the F1 film.

“Drive to Survive” managed to boost Netflix’s bottom line and stoke fan interest in the sport. According to a Morning Consult poll in March, 53% of American F1 fans said the Netflix series was a reason they were following the sport, including 30% who said it was a “major reason.”

Also according to Morning Consult, interest in F1 has increased 33% over the past two years, with 28% of respondents identifying as fans. That put F1 on par with IndyCar (previously considered the second-most popular racing circuit in the U.S.) and 12% behind NASCAR.

In May, an analysis by Nielsen concluded that the Netflix show could be credited with bringing about 360,000 more American eyeballs to F1 races at the start of the 2022 season.

“In my 16 years coming over here, it’s been such a slow build, trying to bring awareness to the sport,” said Hamilton, who races for Mercedes, in May, according to The Associated Press. “But I think the new step that’s been taken into bringing awareness, you know, the Netflix show, it’s really brought in that amazing fanbase.”

The overall television ratings are up exponentially as well since broadcasts of the races themselves moved from NBC to ESPN four years ago. Since 2018, when F1 races averaged just under 550,000 American watchers, viewership has increased by more than 130%.

The biggest gains have come in the past two seasons. Last year, races on ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 averaged 934,000 viewers — the most-watched season in the U.S. in F1 history. The previous all-time high was 748,000 in 1995 — two years before Verstappen and Leclerc were born.

The growth shows no sign of slowing. Through the first five months of the 2022 season, average viewership was at a record 1.3 million. While F1 is still solidly behind NASCAR, which is averaging about 4.5 million viewers per race this season, its performance in the 18-49 demographic is neck and neck with the pre-eminent motorsport series. The Miami Grand Prix — the one with all the celebrities earlier this year — racked up a record average viewership of 2.6 million on ABC — narrowly behind NASCAR's race at Darlington on the same day, which garnered 2.61 million viewers on Fox Sports 1.

"There is a massive market [in the U.S.] that if you crack you can pick up a lot of customers very quickly," said Gray, who wrote a book last year about Verstappen titled "Max Verstappen: The Inside Track on a Formula One Star." "The U.S. has just been a massive piñata, and I think they've finally broke that open."

The ratings boom netted F1 a lucrative new TV deal with ESPN. According to Sports Business Journal, F1 and ESPN agreed this summer to a three-year contract through 2025, with the Disney-owned network paying around \$75 to \$90 million per year.

That's far from the \$7 billion media rights deal that the Big Ten Conference just signed or the \$2.6 billion per year agreement between ESPN and the NFL for "Monday Night Football." But the price tag is still nearly 20-times higher than the shockingly low \$5 million ESPN is currently paying to air F1 events.

F1 fans are even putting their money where their TV clickers are, as the U.S. is now the most lucrative market for F1 merchandise on Fanatics' website. According to F1, merchandise sales have increased by 200% since Liberty Media's takeover in 2017.

The boom in popularity, viewership and merchandise are all part of the reason why F1's revenue was up 87% in 2021 to \$2.1 billion. That figure still puts F1 squarely behind the four major American professional sports, with the closest being the NHL at \$5.3 billion during the 2021-22 season, and far behind the NFL's \$18 billion. But F1 is now ahead of MLS, another growing league in the U.S. that brought in \$1 billion last year.

With the success in the U.S., F1 is only going to invest more. This season is the first since 1984 with two races in the U.S. The upcoming event at Circuit of the Americas in Austin has been on the F1 slate for years, while this season is the first of a 10-year commitment to race in Miami.

Next year, F1 will feature three events in the U.S. when the circuit adds a visit to the Sin City for a race on the Las Vegas Strip. The 2023 calendar — with a record 24 total events — will also add races in Qatar (host of the upcoming 2022 World Cup) and Shanghai.

But the addition of Vegas in 2023 could be just the beginning for F1's venture into the U.S.

"I think, easily, there will be five races in America in a few years," Gallagher said. "If the trend keeps going up and more and more Americans are getting into Formula One, I don't see how [F1] could say no."

• *Jacob Calvin Meyer can be reached at [jmeyer@washingtontimes.com](mailto:jmeyer@washingtontimes.com).*

# Baseball lifer Dusty Baker has another chance at elusive World Series ring with Astros

Former Nationals manager could solidify Hall of Fame resume with title



*Houston Astros manager Dusty Baker Jr. smiles during induction before Game 1 of baseball's World Series between the Houston Astros and the Philadelphia Phillies on Friday, Oct. 28, 2022, in Houston. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip) more >*

---

By Jacob Calvin Meyer - *The Washington Times* - Tuesday, November 1, 2022

PHILADELPHIA — Dusty Baker isn't thinking about the past.

It's been 41 years since his first and last World Series championship as an outfielder with the Los Angeles Dodgers and 20 years since his first Fall Classic as a manager with the San Francisco Giants. At 73 years old, Baker now has another chance, perhaps his final one, with the Houston Astros to manage a club to a World Series title — a feat that's been more elusive for him than any other skipper in MLB history.

"You've got to leave that back there where it is, and you got to live in the present here," Baker said Monday about whether being in the World Series brings back memories of the 1981 or 2002 Fall Classics. "It comes in your mind every once in a while, but you try not to look back. You've got to look to today and look forward."

As one of 12 men in baseball history with more than 2,000 wins, he's the only one without a ring as a manager. It's the lone blemish on an otherwise masterful career for one of baseball's ultimate lifers.

"I'm just a ballplayer that's trying to play ball and trying to win," Baker said last week before the Astros' series against the Phillies began.

---

e

---

"I've always said, if I win one, I want to win two," added Baker, who is expected to be back with the Astros in 2023, according to the New York Post's Jon Heyman. "So you got to win one first and then we'll work on number two at that time."

Baker's 55-year career in professional baseball has put him in the vicinity of several historic moments. He was the on-deck hitter when Hank Aaron hit home run No. 715 to pass Babe Ruth. He was in the dugout for two of the most memorable scenes in postseason history — the first with the Giants when his young son and bat boy, Darren Baker, was picked up by J.T. Snow as he crossed home plate, and the second with the Cubs during the Steve Bartman incident.



Now, Baker is a few wins away from not just claiming his first World Series title as a manager, but also solidifying himself as a sure-fire Hall of Famer and one of the best skippers in MLB history. Of the 22 managers in the Baseball Hall of Fame, only four were inducted without a World Series ring. Baker's resume likely puts him in the Hall either way, but his induction becomes a slam dunk if the dominant Astros can defeat the plucky Phillies.

"Every [manager] who has stuck around long enough and been successful is in the Hall of Fame," said James Buckley Jr., author of "The National Baseball Hall of Fame Collection."

"Everyone who has won 2,000 games — except for current managers Bruce Bochy and Dusty Baker — is already in the Hall of Fame. You don't get to be a manager in the major leagues for 2,000 wins, for that many games, and not be good at what you do."

For someone with Baker's pedigree — 1,981 hits and 242 home runs as a player with the Braves, Dodgers, Giants and Athletics, and 2,093 wins (ninth all time) and 12 postseason appearances as a manager with the Giants, Cubs, Reds, Nationals and Astros — it's almost inconceivable that Baker's current stint with Houston may be the most impressive of his long career.

After his time with the Washington Nationals ended on a sour note in 2017, many assumed the then-68-year-old would walk away from the game. Baker led the Nationals to NL East titles in both of his seasons, but he was let go after losing in the NLDS for the second straight year — a move that Baker said "surprised and disappointed" him.

But now in his third season with the Astros, a franchise that was engulfed in its self-inflicted sign-stealing scandal when he took over in 2020, Baker has kept his positive public image intact despite leading a club that is largely despised by baseball fans. He's also blended his old-school style with the analytically driven Astros front office better than other veteran managers.

"I don't think it could be overstated the mess that Dusty inherited from a PR standpoint," said Sean Pendergast, a host at SportsRadio 610 in Houston. "He came in and embraced the hate the Astros were feeling and continue to feel. He was the perfect guy to embrace the atmosphere that the Astros faced in opposing ballparks."

After losing in the ALCS in his first season, Baker led the Astros back to the Fall Classic last year, which the Braves won in six games. Now, Houston — arguably the best-run organization in baseball, cheating scandal notwithstanding — is in the World Series for the fourth time in six years.

The Astros won an AL-best 106 games in the regular season and swept the Mariners and Yankees for another crack at a championship ring. They entered the World Series against the Phillies, a team that squeaked into the postseason with just 87 wins, as significant favorites by oddsmakers.

While his time with Houston has only strengthened Baker's resume, that could backfire if he and the Astros can't bring the championship trophy home to Texas. It would be Baker's third loss in a World Series, and second straight defeat with a team that's considered a juggernaut. Forever attached to his illustrious regular-season credentials and beloved personality would be the "yeah, but" comments about his teams wilting away in the postseason and never reaching the mountaintop.

“If he doesn’t win a World Series with this team,” said Landry Locker, a host at SportsRadio 610 in Houston, “because he loses to the Braves and now the Phillies, I will say, despite the fact that he’s a Hall of Famer, he should definitely have a World Series. I don’t know if I could have said that before, but there will be zero excuse after this year for him to not have that World Series.”

• *Jacob Calvin Meyer can be reached at [jmeyer@washingtontimes.com](mailto:jmeyer@washingtontimes.com).*