

**18. Chris Sale, BRAVES (15<sup>th</sup>)** – Like Adam sleeping off a bender in the garden, Chris Sale missed time with a rib injury in 2025, but was the same tornado of talent that he showed in his Cy Young campaign of 2024, easing anxieties about arm and shoulder issues. He posted a 2.58 ERA and struck out 165 hitters in 125 innings, which is a fantastic outcome for a guy who is supposed to be winding down.

**19. Framber Valdez, FREE AGENT (13<sup>th</sup>)** – Four-year average is 14-9, 3.21 ERA, 192 IP, and 188 strikeouts, which looks a *lot* like his 2025 season (13-11, 3.66, 192 IP, 187 K). I have some thoughts about him as a player, but they’re in the Houston team comments. I don’t root for him.

**20. Kevin Gausman, BLUE JAYS 10<sup>th</sup>)** – I rated him too high last year, but he paid off the overreach, posting another strong year as the anchor of the Jays rotation, and doing the same through the postseason. He feels like a throwback pitcher: he gets strikeouts, but he’s happy to allow contact if the situation allows it. Like Valdez, his talent is less about elite stuff and more about getting the work done: five-year average is 185 IP, 3.34 ERA, and 204 strikeouts, which is not too shabby. One year left on his contract: while pitching contracts are often fraught, he’s more than earned his dollars.

**21. Ranger Suárez, FREE AGENT (53<sup>rd</sup>)** – A great year: 3.20 ERA, terrific walk rate, kept the ball in the yard. He missed April but joined the Phillies looking like a Cy Young candidate over the first half, posting a 2.15 ERA before wearing down a little. His presence on the mound is unflappable: pitching in relief in a win-or-go-home playoff game, his body language suggested that he was getting the call for a Thursday get-away start again the Rockies.

**22. Geroge Kirby, MARINERS (7<sup>th</sup>)** – A down, down year: after three seasons of historically excellent strikeout-to-walk ratios, Kirby lost his command, walking an abysmal (only for him) 2.1 hitters per nine innings. A shoulder caused him to drop his arm angle, and he didn’t really look comfortable until late in the season. Where you rate him depends on how much faith you have in the underlying metrics, and in his stuff, which remains elite. Posted the best strikeout rate of his career: he feels like the kind of player where the parts haven’t

quite aligned to a coherent whole. I watched him closely in the playoffs, where he was excellent against a Tigers offense that was playing patient, and then clobbered by a Jays offense that decided to swing early. I wonder if that is a susceptibility for pitchers who throw a lot of strikes. Anyway, he should probably consider walking Kerry Carpenter from now on.

**23. Spencer Strider, BRAVES (14<sup>th</sup>)** – His return from Tommy John went poorly: he gave up a lot of homers (20 in 125 innings) and his strikeout rate dropped from elite to merely excellent (9.4 per nine last year). I’d bet on a bounce back season: his upside is probably higher than Kirby’s, and while he was maddeningly inconsistent last year, there were a couple stretches where you could sense he was close. Had a 2.50 ERA over his last six starts, putting more emphasis on location than trying to strike out everyone. Maybe that’s an adjustment. I like him a lot for 2026.

**24. Zac Gallen, DIAMONDBACKS (6<sup>th</sup>)** – A yeoman’s season: his stuff wasn’t where it’s been in years past (4.83), but he did the work (192 IP). The cause is his fastball, which has always sat on the periphery between being an effective set-up for his other pitches and being something that hitters can barrel: last year it was a barrel pitch. He is another one who should improve in 2026: his numbers after July were a 3.32 ERA over 65 innings, which is much more aligned with his career totals.

**25. Blake Snell, DODGERS (17<sup>th</sup>)** – First year in Dodgerland: Snell missed most of the season with shoulder inflammation but was excellent down the stretch (2.35 ERA) and into the postseason. Given the pitching depth on the Dodgers, his health issues, and the team’s annual playoff aspirations, it seems doubtful that the team will ask him to cross even 150 regular season innings. That might not be a bad strategy: keep him rested until the postseason and then let him shut down the teams that have to actually *play* their top-dollar starters every fifth day. Blah.

**26. Dylan Cease, BLUE JAYS (31<sup>st</sup>)** – Continued to rack up strikeouts (215 in 168 innings), continued to walk hitters (71 last year). He was a poor pitcher on the road last year (5.68 ERA, 3.61 at home), and it is the second time he’s showed that trend in San Diego. His 4.55 ERA last year was bolstered by a Fielding-