

THE BLUE JAYS LOST -- AND SO DID I

by Jeffrey S. Rosenthal

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Like most Canadians, I experienced this year's baseball playoffs as a roller-coaster of tense emotions and highs and lows. Could our beloved Toronto Blue Jays pull it off, and win baseball's championship for the first time in 32 years? Every hit or run gave joy, while every opponent's success brought dread. Each game seemed more frightening than the last.

But unlike most, I also had a professional stake in the outcome. You see, I'm a professor of statistics, and I had accidentally stuck my neck out farther than I intended.

It all started innocently enough. As a statistician and frequent media commentator, I was asked to give a brief television interview once the Jays made it to the World Series. I knew what they would ask me: what are the odds that the Jays will win? So, I developed a simple statistical model, based on extrapolating the teams' regular-season performances. I took into account a few factors, such as home-field advantage, but didn't bother with more complicated variables like individual player performances or injury status or specific pitching assignments.

And what did I conclude? Since the Jays had a slightly better regular-season record than their opponents, the Los Angeles Dodgers (94-68 versus 93-69), and would have one extra home-field game in the Series (4 versus 3), my statistical model ended up giving them a slight edge, with a 52.46% chance of success. I explained my findings in that television interview, and was ready to move on.

Only later did I realize that everyone else considered the Dodgers to be heavy favourites. Most forecasters and gambling sites gave them well over 70 per cent chance of winning, with the Jays stuck in the mid-20s. Especially against the Dodgers' superstar hitter Shohei Ohtani, people said we had little hope. Some even predicted a Dodgers sweep, with the American team winning the first four games outright and going home early. Unknowingly, by giving the Jays a slight edge, I had gone way out on a limb. I started to get nervous, and worry that my forecast might be way off.

My precarious position was driven home to me just before the Series began, while I was being interviewed by a Calgary radio host. When I told her my forecast, she gushed, "That's incredible! Jeffrey Rosenthal, from the University of Toronto, with a PhD in math from Harvard, you calculate that the Toronto Blue Jays have a slight edge of winning the World Series!?!"

"That's correct", I replied, with far more confidence than I actually felt.

So, I was more nervous than most when the Series began. Would the Dodgers sweep? Would the Jays get crushed? Would people blame me? Would my credibility as a statistician and forecaster be ruined forever? Of course, a 52.46% chance for the Jays still leaves a 47.54% chance for the Dodgers, but no one noticed that. An edge for the Jays is an edge for the Jays, period, and my friends all seemed to interpret my statement as a guarantee that the Jays would win.

Fortunately, the Jays had an excellent first game, including a nine-run sixth inning, emerging with a strong 11-4 victory. Phew! "My prediction doesn't seem so crazy now, does it", I declared. With that convincing opener, my model now gave the Jays a solid 66.1% chance of victory.

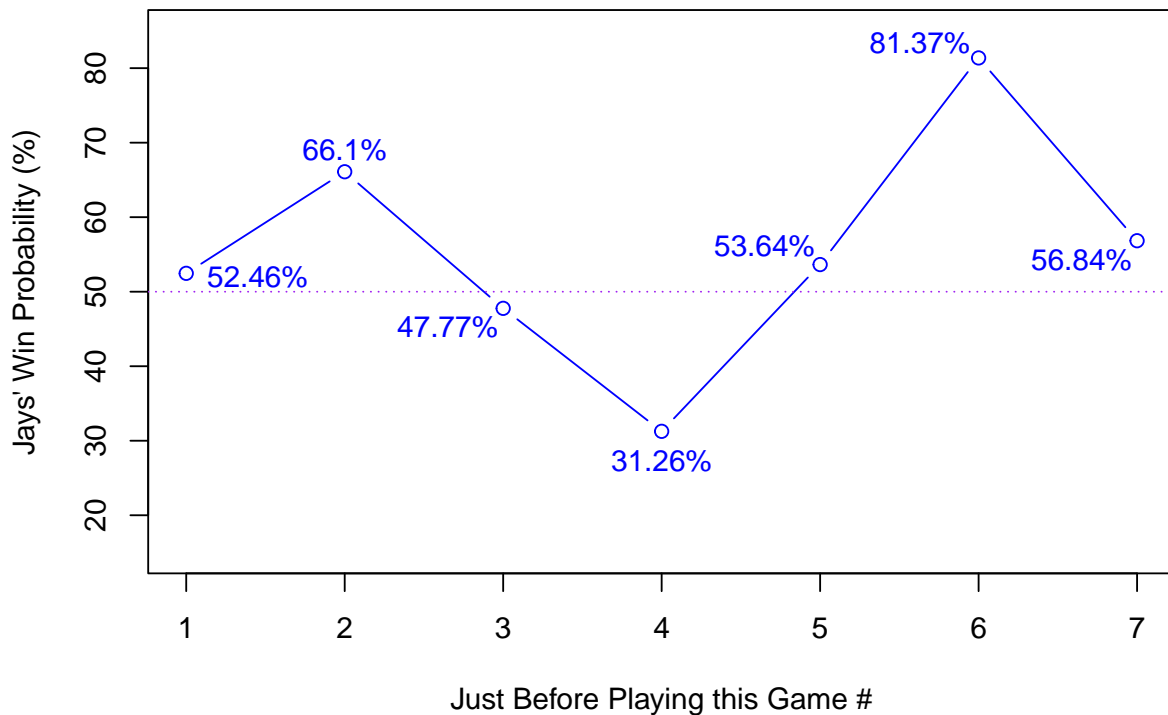
My euphoria didn't last. In the second game, Dodgers pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto stymied the Toronto bats, holding them to just one run in a 5-1 comeback. Then the third game went to an astonishing 18 innings before the Dodgers won again, 5-4. The Jays were now down to just a 31.3% chance of victory, according to my own model. My Toronto fandom -- and my statistical forecasting -- were both hanging by a thread.

And yet, I explained that 31.3% doesn't mean it's time to give up. And indeed, in the fourth game, the Jays fought back to a 6-2 win, evening up the Series at two games each and restoring their slight edge, now with a 53.6% win probability. Would they prevail after all?

The fifth game was key. Whichever team won would have a strong advantage going into the final weekend. Tensions were high. But I needn't have worried. The first two Jays batters each got a home run, and Trey Yesavage got twelve strikeouts, as the Jays lodged a convincing 6-1 victory. My statistical model now gave them an 81.4% chance of winning the Series. For the first time, I felt truly hopeful.

Once again, the hope didn't last. In game six, Yamamoto again kept the Jays to just one run for a 3-1 win, to even up the series and force a final game. My model now gave the Jays a 56.8% chance -- still favoured, by not by

The Jays' Up-And-Down Chances



much. And then that final, seventh game in Toronto -- so close, and so many opportunities for the Jays to put it away, before the Dodgers finally eked out a narrow 5-4 victory in the eleventh inning. The shock and disbelief upon realising that the Jays' near-triumph had suddenly collapsed into tragic defeat.

So, after all that, the Jays didn't quite make it. No World Series champions this year. As a Toronto fan, I was very disappointed. And as a statistician, did I feel ashamed? Well, not really. I hadn't really picked the "wrong" winner, since a 52.54% chance of winning is virtually fifty-fifty. Rather, while so many others thought the Dodgers had it in the bag, my statistical model predicted that the Series would be very close. Which it most definitely was. The Jays didn't quite pull it off, but they convincingly demonstrated that my nearly fifty-fifty prediction was pretty accurate after all. In their own way, despite losing the Series, our beloved Jays still had my back.

(Jeffrey S. Rosenthal is a professor of statistics at the University of Toronto, and the author of the book "Struck by Lightning: The Curious World of Probabilities".)