

Derek Jeter... But Better?

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While baseball's major headlines have been stolen by unprecedented mass contracts given to Harper, Machado, and Trout, the game's best young talent has somehow flown under the radar. With a World Series title, Home Run Derby Championship, and All-Star Game MVP all by the age of 25, it is baffling as to how the name Alex Bregman doesn't generate more buzz in discussions for the best position player in the MLB. Crazy as it may sound, I am willing to take the praise one step further. On his current career trajectory, I believe Alex Bregman will pan out to be a better version of legendary shortstop Derek Jeter. If this comparison sounds insulting or blasphemous to you, strap on your seatbelt because I promise there is logical backing to this bold claim.

Starting from square one, I believe the comparison begins at Bregman and Jeter's entry to the league, as both were captivating shortstops taken early in the first round of the MLB Draft. Though Bregman was quickly moved to 3rd base upon entering the league, it was apparent from an early age for both players that they would become cornerstone defenders on the left side of the infield with strong arms and unbelievable range. Furthermore, both players have excelled at the plate, each serving as prototypical contact hitters at the second spot in the batting order. It is also no coincidence they both sported the number two on their jersey, as Bregman chose it because he idolized Jeter as a kid and attempted to mold his game from watching him starting at a young age.

It's All in the Value



Far exceeding the lofty expectations thrust upon entering the league, Bregman has flown under the radar as one of the best players in the MLB, and more importantly one of the most VALUABLE players as well. This extremely important attribute is overlooked by the majority of organizations and is envied by the few that consistently contend for championship pennants year after year. Digging into the numbers, I will dissect the statistics and provide clear cut proof that Alex Bregman will be far superior to Derek Jeter in terms of overall value on the baseball diamond.

Looking into batting statistics through the early stages of each of their careers, I noticed that Jeter crushed Bregman in terms of hits and batting average, averaging 195 hits and batting at .307 through his first three full seasons in the league. These numbers make Alex Bregman's 169 hits and .281 season averages seem pedestrian when isolated, but I found evidence to justify this disparity. Though I don't buy into the mantra that power hitters should be held to significantly lower batting average standards, it should be noted that Jeter was the prototypical contact hitter whereas Bregman is more of a hybrid leaning towards the label of a power hitter. This can be seen by the fact that Alex Bregman has averaged 29 homeruns and 96 RBI per season through this point in his career, while Jeter lagged behind at only 13 homers and 87 RBI. I feel that Bregman's advantages in these vital categories more than negates the fact that he bats at a lower clip than Jeter, however my opinion would waiver if he only batted .250 or below. For this reason, I can confidently say that I believe Alex Bregman to be a much more complete player at the plate than Derek Jeter at this point in their respective careers.

Moving on from the offensive side of the game, I will crunch their defensive numbers and abilities which I believe to be negligible. First, I acknowledge the fact that both players are distinguished athletes with unparalleled range and playmaking ability that soars off the charts. There is no questioning the fact that they are both top tier defenders at their position who epitomize perennial Golden Glove fielders. That being said, I will say that Jeter has a noticeably higher fielding percentage early in his career at 97.7% compared to Bregman's 96%. I will argue part of this difference is caused by the Astros usage of Alex Bregman at several positions he hadn't played since little league such as 2nd base and even outfield at one point. Although the difference in these figures is less than two percentage points, the gap is relatively large when looking at fielding statistics across the league. As the result, I think it is clear that Jeter was a better defensive player than Bregman though the difference is marginal when compared to their offensive performances.

Last and certainly most important in my mind, I see the cost of service as the underlying determinant of value for any player of any sport. Especially in a sport that lacks a salary cap, MLB players hold the freedom to demand such an expensive contract from their organization that it disables their ability to sign solid supporting cast around him. Although I realize the Yankees massive inflow of annual revenue allows them to be an outlier, the details of a player's contract show how dedicated they are towards their team winning. Looking at the figures of Jeter's contracts throughout his career, he averaged less around \$1 million less nominally per year than Bregman's current extension. Scoping in closer to the real cost of his contract, he was actually much more of a financial liability towards his team when accounting for the 5-6% rate of inflation for MLB contracts. While Jeter accounted for over 30% of the average team's payroll at the time of his mass extension in 2001, Bregman takes up less than 15% of the average payroll of 2019. While taking up such a large percentage of cap space is common for stars in the NBA whose team consists of only 10-12 players, such a contract is quite the burden on MLB teams with expanded rosters totaling up to 40 players on their payrolls. This is not to say that Derek Jeter wasn't justified for demanding top dollar for his transcendent level of play, but it defaults his value to a lower level as a secondhand result of the matter.

Throughout this comparison, I toiled with the weight of the intangibles each player possesses such as leadership and voice in the locker room. Initially, I figured there to be a clear cut advantage in favor of Derek Jeter due to his larger than life personality and moxie constantly rubbing off on his teammates and instilling confidence in their games. However, upon further digging I realized that Alex Bregman has an equal if not greater meaning to the Astros organization. In fact, he learned Spanish in order to create a closer bond with fellow teammates such as Jose Altuve and Yuri Gurriel. On the topic of his relationship with teammates, his manager A.J. Hinch states that Bregman has made an effort to build strong relationships on every level of the organization and is even close with many of the Triple-A players in the Astros farm system.

Between the increased power numbers on offense, much higher production in terms of value, and the tremendous impact he's had as a leader for this young squad, I feel Alex Bregman will be a better MLB player than Derek Jeter. The career arc of Bregman is just beginning as well, and he still has many years to grow and perform at an even higher level if at all possible.