

Kang Baek-ho Offensive Evaluation

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Introduction

Kang Baek-ho		
1B	Bats: L	Throws: R
6'0", 215 lbs	7/29/1999	Age: 21

Kang Baek-ho might be the best young, power hitter that you've never heard of. At 21 years old, he's already developed into a strong power hitter for the KT Wiz in the Korean Baseball Organization (KBO). He pairs that power with strong contact skills and plate discipline that has improved every season that he's been in the KBO. With only three years of service time with the KT Wiz, Kang Baek-ho will likely be posted following the 2024 season (at the earliest). By the time he gets there, he may be one of the KBO's best hitting prospects in history. His power resembles Na Sung-bum's while his plate discipline may follow along the trajectory that Kim Ha-seong's has.

Kang Baek-ho was drafted out of high school at 18-years-old by the KT Wiz with the first overall pick. In his first season with KT, he slashed 0.290/0.356/0.524 with 29 home runs on his way to winning the KBO Rookie of the Year award. His HR total dropped in 2019, but much of that was attributable to the de-juicing of the KBO's baseball as he became one of the best hitters in the KBO relative to his peers.

He's a big left-handed hitter, and a lot of his power comes to the pull side, as do his ground balls. At the plate, he has a fairly fluid stance, holding his bat high and keeping it moving as he waits for the pitch. His stance is open, but as the pitcher starts their delivery, he has a large leg kick. Once he gets the leg down, it's a very powerful swing, but that leg kick may hamper his ability to catch up to MLB velocity. From what I've observed, he does a good job of catching the ball out in front of the plate, which produces that pull power. During the 2019 season, Kang hit an HR that was reportedly measured at 115.4 mph; that's a pretty incredible display of strength from when he was only 19-years-old.

Kang's defensive potential is a very interesting question and one that may change over the next few seasons before he's eligible to be posted. Before 2020, he was mostly an outfielder for the KT Wiz but spent most of his time at first base in 2020, playing 1064 IP there. He's young and should be capable of being an average first baseman. KT moved him out of the field due to poor route running and a lack of range in the outfield. He does have an incredible arm as a former high school pitcher who touched 93+ mph, but that poor outfield defense will likely keep him at first base which may limit his MLB potential.

Kang Baek-ho has four more seasons before he's eligible to be posted for a move to MLB. He's shown immense power potential with the Wiz and looks like a better pure contact hitter than someone like Na Sung-bum. Over the next four years, I'd like to see Kang become a more consistent fly ball hitter and continue to improve his plate discipline.

Stats & Graphics

Table 2: Stats from FanGraphs

Season	PA	BB%	K%	BB/K	AVG	OBP	SLG	OPS	ISO	BABIP	wOBA	wRC+
2018	585	8.9	21.2	0.42	0.290	0.356	0.524	0.879	0.233	0.329	0.376	116
2019	505	12.1	17.2	0.7	0.336	0.416	0.495	0.911	0.160	0.392	0.415	153
2020	574	11.5	16.2	0.71	0.330	0.411	0.544	0.955	0.214	0.367	0.422	148

Table 3: Kang Baek-ho Charted Stats

Hitter	Pitches	wOBA	ExwOBA	ExwOBACON	SwStr%	CS%	Swing%	Contact%
Kang	365	0.495	0.406	0.407	11.0	13.7	48.5	77.4
KBO	29734	0.337	0.338	0.361	10.4	17.2	47.1	77.8

Table 4: Kang Baek-ho Batted Ball Profile

Hitter	BBEs	GB%	FB%	LD%	PU%	Soft%	Medium%	Hard%	Pull%	Straight%	Oppo%
Kang	63	54.0	23.8	15.9	6.3	22.2	38.1	39.7	36.5	41.3	22.2
KBO		51.2	26.0	14.0	8.7	30.4	40.8	28.7	34.1	42.8	23.1

Table 5: Kang Baek-ho Stats by Pitch Type

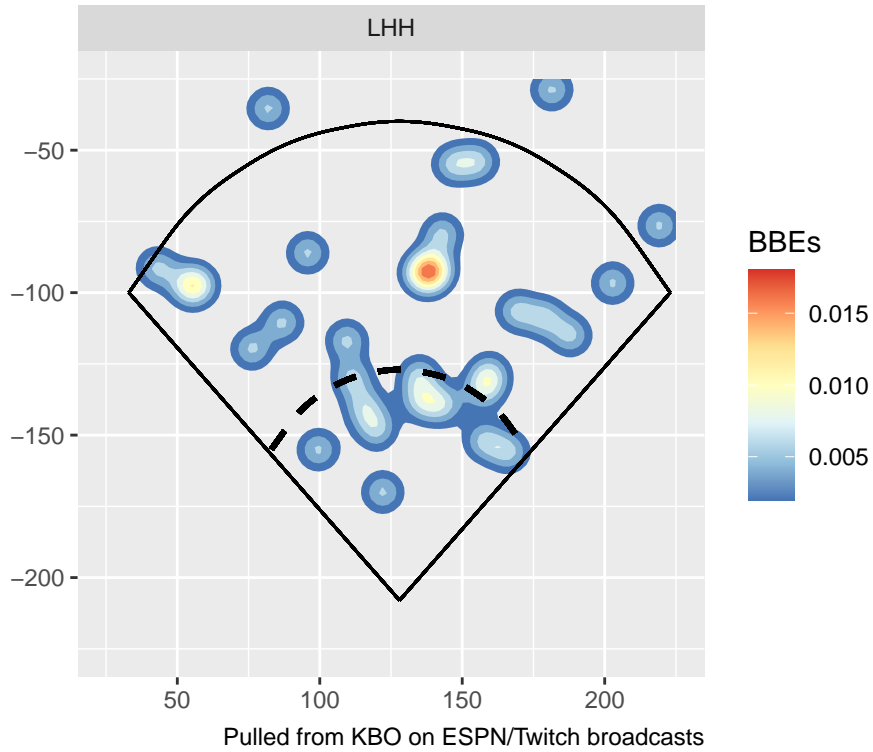
Pitch Type	Pitches	wOBA	ExwOBA	ExwOBACON	SwStr%	CS%	Swing%	Contact%
Fastball	197	0.541	0.412	0.418	10.7	14.7	43.1	75.3
Breaking	107	0.425	0.359	0.389	15.9	14.0	53.3	70.2
Offspeed	61	0.510	0.459	0.413	3.3	9.8	57.4	94.3

Table 6: Kang Baek-ho Batted Ball Profile by Pitch Type

Pitch	BBEs	GB%	FB%	LD%	PU%	Soft%	Med%	Hard%	Pull%	Strht%	Oppo%
Fastball	23	60.9	30.4	4.3	4.3	17.4	39.1	43.5	30.4	39.1	30.4
Breaking	21	42.9	28.6	19.0	9.5	28.6	38.1	33.3	42.9	42.9	14.3
Offspeed	19	57.9	10.5	26.3	5.3	21.1	36.8	42.1	36.8	42.1	21.1

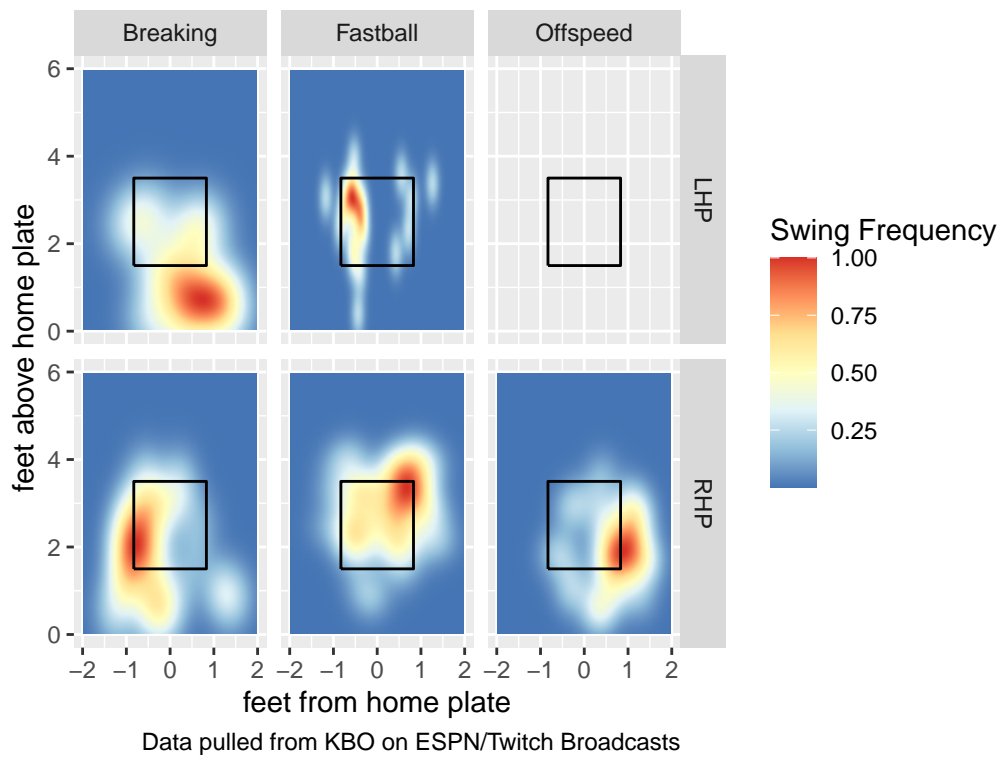
Batted Ball Data for Kang Baek-ho

Data for charted BBEs from ~ 9/03 to Present



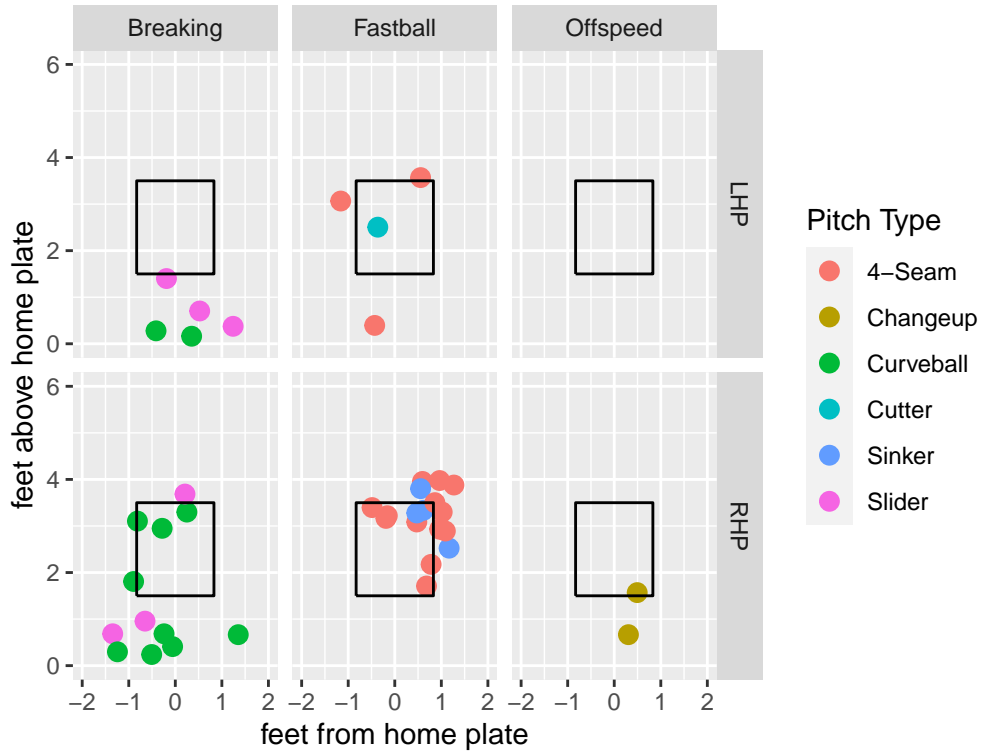
Kang Baek-ho Swing Profile

Pitcher Perspective



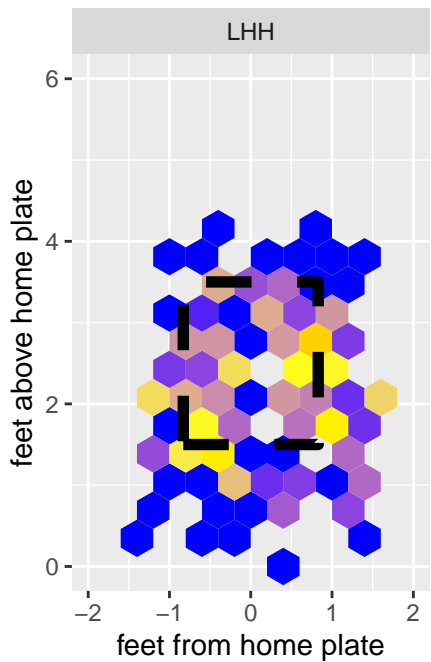
Kang Baek-ho Swinging Strikes

Pitcher Perspective



ExwOBA on Swings

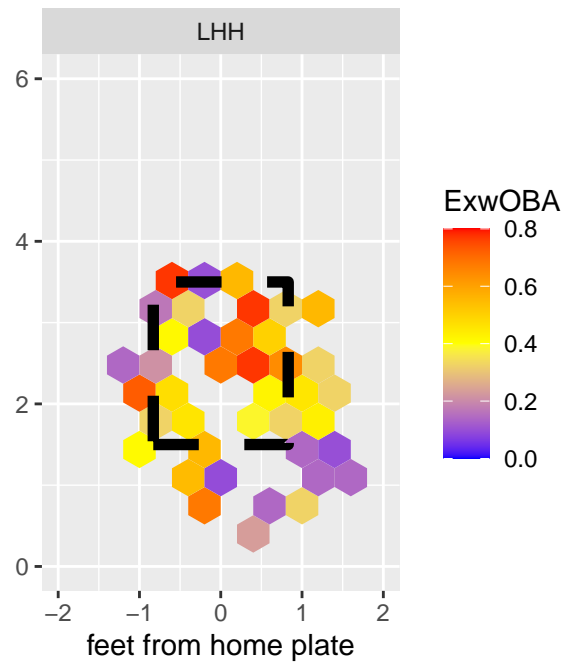
Pitcher Perspective



Includes BIP, Whiffs, foul balls

ExwOBA on Balls in Play

Pitcher Perspective



LHP and RHP combined to account for lack of LHP

Table 7: Kang Baek-ho Plate Discipline Stats

Region	Pitches	Swing%	Contact%	KBO Swing%	KBO Contact%
Chase	150	36.7	69.1	29.0	54.5
Shadow	141	58.2	78.0	57.0	83.3
Heart	55	70.9	89.7	72.2	87.4
Waste	19	5.3	0.0	4.4	25.9

Table 8: Kang Baek-ho Baserunning Stats

Season	Team	G	PA	SB	CS	Spd	wSB
2018	Wiz	138	585	3	5	3.8	-1.7
2019	Wiz	116	505	9	5	3.7	-0.5
2020	Wiz	129	574	7	2	4.0	0.4

Breakdown

Kang Baek-ho is a 21-year-old first baseman for the KT Wiz in the Korean Baseball Organization. He's played three seasons with KT after being drafted out of high school with the first overall pick and has been incredible thus far, winning Rookie of the Year honors in 2018 and becoming a top-ten hitter in the KBO the last two seasons. Kang should be an average first-baseman defensively and has room to grow; in high school, he pitched, caught, and played outfield. He stopped pitching upon entering the KBO and transitioned to the outfield. However, after two seasons there, the KT staff decided to move him to first base since his route running in the outfield was below average. As he gets more reps at first under his belt, Kang should be able to provide solid defense at first base.

Regardless of his defensive value, Kang Baek-ho is a hitter and an excellent one at that. I've grown cautious of saying that the KBO is "AA" or "AAA" level since it's a unique blend of playing styles and should be evaluated separately from our MLB-centric idea of baseball progression. However, to show how good Kang has been in the KBO, I'm going to make this comparison.

Over the last two seasons, his age-20 and age-21 seasons, Kang Baek-ho has posted a wRC+ of 153 and 148. The only 21-year-old to post a wRC+ above 153 in AA/AAA competition from 2015-2019 (and qualified in terms of PAs; sorry Juan Soto) is Kyle Tucker (2018 Astros AAA), who has been good for the Astros the last two seasons. Expand that to above 148, and we get Tyler O'Neill (2016 Mariners AA) and Rowdy Tellez (2016 Blue Jays AA). O'Neill and Tellez have seen mixed results, but the point is that there are very few hitters in MiLB who have been as good at their level as Kang Baek-ho has. I wouldn't read too much into this, but it is interesting to look at.

Kang Baek-ho's draw is his power, as it will need to be as an average defender. Fortunately, that power has been on display in the KBO. In his rookie season in 2018, Kang hit 29 HRs (when the ball was juiced). He followed that with 13 HRs in 2019 (de-juiced) and then 23 in 2020 (as the ball appeared to find an equilibrium). His XBH% also rebounded well in 2020, jumping from 29% in 2019 to 36% in 2020.

In the 2019 season, Kang reportedly recorded a max exit velocity of 115.4 mph; that would have ranked 15th in MLB in 2020, right behind Jo Adell and just ahead of George Springer (our friend Rowdy Tellez from earlier ranked 3rd at 117.4 mph). Max EV isn't a perfect measure since power without repeatability is worthless, but it does give us a glimpse of the power that Kang contains. That was frequently displayed when Kang mis-hit a ball, but it would still end up in the gap for a double or fly ball after carrying well.

Through the games that I watched of Kang's, he posted a wOBA of 0.495 with an Estimated xwOBA

(ExwOBA) of 0.406 and an Estimated xwOBACON (ExwOBACON) of 0.407. His ExwOBACON of 0.407 was the 13th-highest in the KBO despite his hard-hit% of 39.7%, which ranked ninth in the league. That difference is a result of a less than ideal batted ball profile and is the biggest area that needs improvement from Kang.

Kang Baek-ho's GB% of 54% is below the KBO average as is his FB% of 24%. He compensates for that a little bit with his LD% of 16%, which buoys his ExwOBACON, which is a big fan of hitting line drives. However, as a left-handed hitter with a Pull% of 37% (higher than average), if Kang hits the ball on the ground 54% of the time, teams will be able to shift against him and take away that part of the field. On his batted ball spray chart, we can see that batted balls on the infield are concentrated to the pull side even though he hits fly balls to all parts of the field. (I would like to note that the spray chart data was charted from September onwards, so it lacks a significant portion of the season).

However, power alone won't make Kang Baek-ho a good player in MLB. We saw Park Byung-ho come off a 184 wRC+ in 2015 with the Kiwoom Heroes to post a 79 wRC+ with a 33% K% in MLB. I expect that Na Sung-bum will face the same struggles that Park did with a high K% even though he will hit for some power. What separates Kang from Park and Na is that he has displayed good plate discipline that has improved each year he's been in the KBO.

In his rookie season, Kang posted a 9% BB%, a 21% K%, coming out to a 0.42 BB/K. That's improved to an 11.5% BB% and a 16% K% for a 0.71 BB/K in 2020. His Swinging Strike% of 11% was right around the KBO average, and I think he's a better contact hitter than Na Sung-bum is. To me, Kang profiles closer to Darin Ruf's KBO stint than someone like Park or Na.

Kang's performance varied drastically by pitch type. On fastballs, he performed extremely well to the tune of a 0.412 ExwOBA and a 10.7% SwStr%. He posted his highest FB% against fastballs at 30% and his highest GB% at 61% with a hard-hit% of 44%. He swung mostly at fastballs in the upper half of the strike zone and, while his SwStr% of 10.7% was about the KBO average overall, there is a little concern with where his whiffs came. Most of his whiffs on fastballs came on pitches that were up-and-away. That's worrisome because high spin fastballs up in the zone have become extremely popular in MLB recently. If Kang is struggling to hit those pitches against KBO pitchers throwing 88-90 mph, he'll struggle even more against MLB-caliber velocity (the average velocity on his fastball whiffs was 88.8 mph).

Kang struggled most against breaking pitches down in the zone. Interestingly, his lowest GB% of 33% and highest LD% of 19% came on breaking pitches, but his hard-hit% of 33% was his lowest. His swing profile on breaking pitches is much more varied than his profile on fastballs. Most of his breaking ball swings came down in the zone (from LHP) and on pitches inside (from RHP), resulting in an SwStr% of 16%, which is bad. I didn't see him face enough offspeed pitches to draw a strong conclusion, but he performed well against them, even if he swung mostly at offspeed pitches down-and-away. Cleaning up his swing decisions on breaking pitches would go a long way to bringing his BB/K closer to or above 1.00, which would increase his MLB potential.

MLB-caliber velocity is the big question that Kang will have to face. With his large leg kick, I expect he'll need to clean that action up and shorten it to be able to adjust. Kang isn't eligible to be posted until post-2024 (four more seasons in the KBO). He's shown that his power isn't just potential, and his plate discipline is improving. Over the next few seasons, Kang's biggest areas of improvement are becoming a more consistent fly-ball hitter and cleaning up his swing decisions on non-fastball pitches. He's an average fielder, but his offensive potential is tantalizing for such a young hitter.

Resources

- Check out Kang Baek-ho's player page on the KBO Wizard
- Kang Baek-ho FanGraphs page
- Kang Baek-ho MyKBO page