

What's Actually Going On With Walker Buehler

Jackson Hicks · Baseball Savant Data, 2021 vs. 2026

Walker Buehler used to be one of the most promising and exciting young pitchers in baseball. But since his second Tommy John surgery, his results have suffered significantly, going from a top-5 finisher in the Cy Young race to a guy with an ERA over 5. I dove into the data to see what's going on, and if there's a way for him to regain his success, even if his stuff is never the same as it was before surgery.

What Actually Changed

His stuff has genuinely diminished, not just shifted around. He's throwing about 2 mph slower across the board on every pitch compared to 2021, he's lost real carry on his fastball, and he's lost the unique cut-ride shape that used to define it. His arm slot has also dropped from 51 degrees in 2021 to 45 degrees in 2026 — six degrees lower — which likely explains a lot of the shape change.

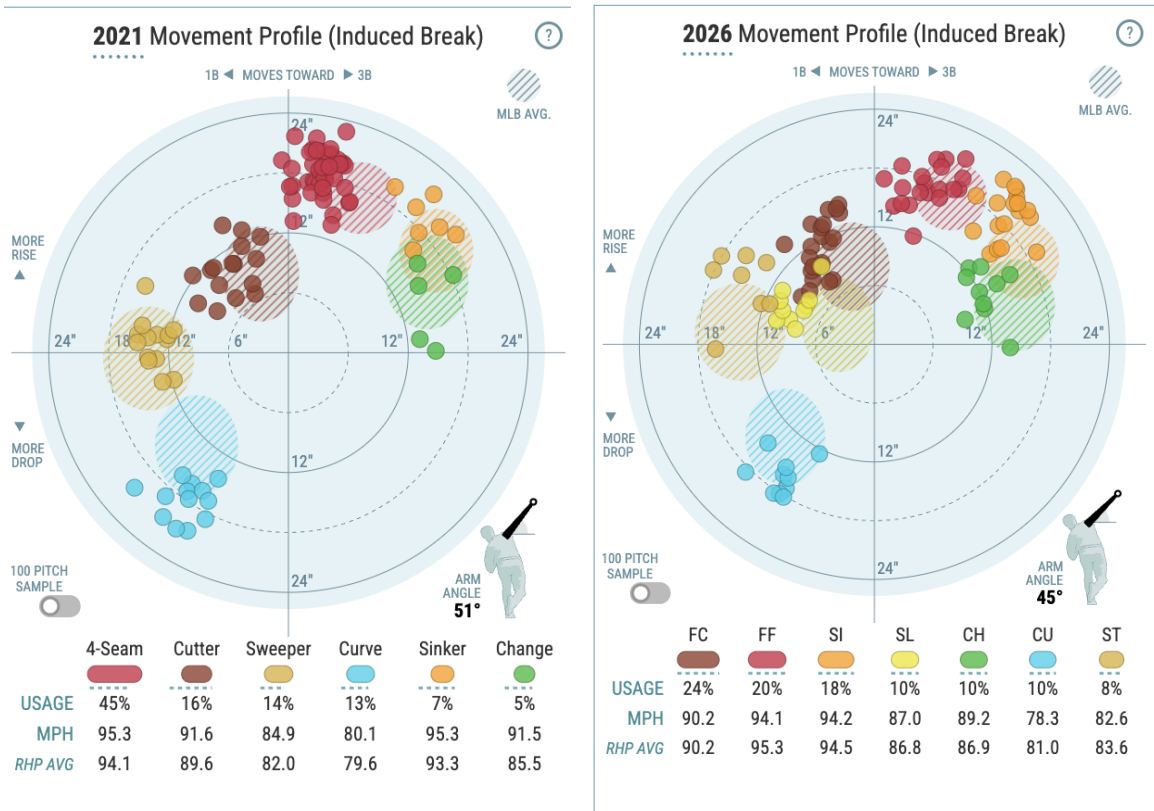


Figure 1. Movement profile (induced break), 2021 vs. 2026. Baseball Savant.

Metric	2021	2026
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Arm Slot	51°	45°
Fastball IVB	18.0"	16.0"
Fastball Horizontal Break	3.0" arm-side (vs. comp -4.7)	4.8" arm-side (vs. comp -3.0)
Curveball IVB	-14.8"	-13.7"
Curveball Horizontal Break	10.7" glove-side	10.7" glove-side

The fastball's horizontal break has moved noticeably closer to league-average — in 2021 it had an extreme, distinct cut-ride shape well outside the norm; by 2026 that shape reads as far more ordinary. The curveball has moved too: its IVB has gone from -14.8" to -13.7", meaning less spin-induced drop than it used to have — a real loss of depth, even though its horizontal break hasn't changed at all. That's the pitch every hitter sets their timing and eye level off of, so a change in the fastball's shape compresses tunneling for the entire arsenal, and the curveball losing its own depth on top of that compounds the problem.

The Cutter and Changeup: Same Shape, Different Results

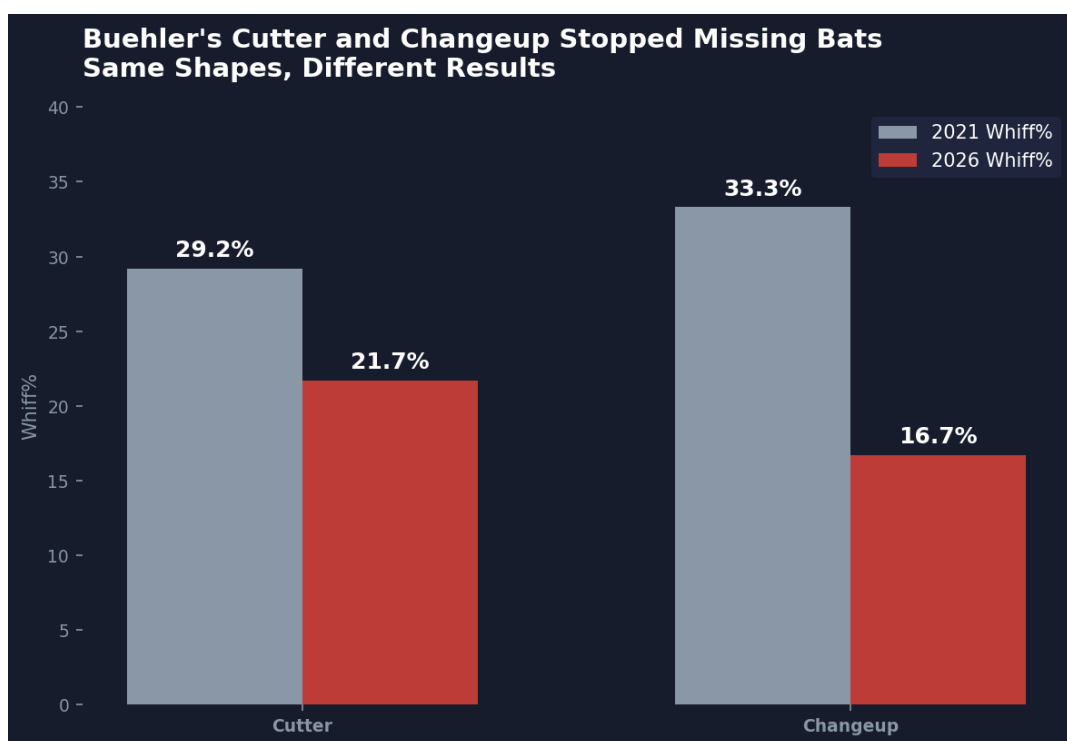


Figure 2. Whiff% by pitch, 2021 vs. 2026, from Baseball Savant.

His cutter and changeup, graded purely on their own shape, actually look about the same or arguably better in a vacuum than they did in 2021. But their real performance has collapsed — cutter whiff rate down from 29.2% to 21.7%, changeup down from 33.3% to 16.7%, nearly cut in half. The reason isn't the individual pitches — it's that they no longer tunnel off the fastball the way they used to, because the fastball itself has changed and slowed down. For reference, in 2021 his curveball, changeup, and cutter all generated 29%+ whiff rate, with the fastball itself sitting at 22% whiff against right-handed batters.

So What Can He Actually Do?

None of this brings back his 2021 stuff. But three process-level adjustments — not physical ones — are available to him right now, and they're the kind that keep a diminished arm firmly rosterable instead of finished.

1. Stay Ahead in Counts

His first-pitch strike rate is still well above league average to both righties and lefties, but his Early-and-Ahead and Ahead-count rates are both below average — meaning he isn't converting that first-pitch edge into staying ahead deeper into at-bats. Both of those count states are directly tied to strikeout and walk rate.

2. Change Two-Strike Pitch Selection

With two strikes against right-handed hitters, he's going to his fastball 38% of the time and getting under an 8.5% whiff rate on it — that pitch isn't playing anymore in that count, and he should be leaning into his sweeper and slider instead. Against lefties, he should keep pushing the cutter, slider, and changeup rather than returning to the diminished fastball.

3. Optimize Location by Hand, Deliberately

To lefties, he's living down-and-in with his four-seam fastball — the worst location for it based on pitch run value — and his cutter is concentrated at the heart of the plate. Elevating the fastball and getting the cutter to the edge can help him limit damage and may generate more swings and misses. To righties, everything he throws is to the glove side. He doesn't have to live on the inner third, but he does need to go there occasionally to keep hitters from getting comfortable leaning over the plate and cheating to the outer half.

None of this brings back his 2021 stuff. But it's the version of “be effective anyway” that's actually available to him right now — and it's exactly the kind of adjustment that keeps a diminished arm firmly rosterable instead of finished.