



Ten Years of Seeking to Exploit Inefficiencies in High Yield

Long-tenured manager uses a flexible, concentrated approach.

August 2023

KEY INSIGHTS

- Kevin Loome celebrated 10 years of managing the T. Rowe Price US High Yield Strategy, with the Composite ranking in the top 8% of the 226 funds in eVestment's U.S. high yield fixed income universe since inception for annualized total return.¹
- The Strategy seeks to take advantage of market inefficiencies and generate alpha through credit-intensive, bottom-up fundamental research.
- The high yield market is constantly evolving, but the team sees many opportunities to continue to exploit inefficiencies through its rigorous investment process.



Kevin Loome, CFA
Portfolio Manager, US High Yield Strategy

The US High Yield Composite outperformed its benchmark, the ICE BofA US High Yield Constrained Index, and returned 4.91% annually over the 10 years ended April 30, 2023.¹ Over this same time period, the Composite annualized total return ranked in the top 8% of the 226 funds in eVestment's high yield fixed income universe and offered strong relative risk-adjusted returns.¹

In this Q&A, Kevin Loome discusses the team's investment process and how in-depth research into individual companies and industries gives him conviction to actively position the Strategy in the team's best ideas through a concentrated approach. Additionally, he shares his insights on the evolution of the U.S. high yield market over the last

10 years and key factors that he expects will influence the market in the future.

How would you describe your investment approach?

I think of our approach to managing high yield debt as flexible and nimble. The core of our team has been together for over 15 years and has managed together through multiple market cycles. Our flexibility, in particular, is a key differentiator versus competitors, in my view. As a relatively small portfolio, we can rapidly pivot to become more defensive or to take advantage of opportunities when the market environment changes.

For instance, when oil prices began to drop in 2014, pressuring the energy-heavy

¹**Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance.** Net of fees performance reflects the deduction of the highest applicable management fee that would be charged based on the fee schedule contained within this material, without the benefit of breakpoints. Performance from a past firm prior to May 1, 2017 is linked to the ongoing performance of the composite and continues to be managed with the same investment strategy and objective as the composite. See Standardized Performance table in the Appendix, which includes quarter-end annualized performance data and rankings information. Please see the GIPS® Composite Report for additional information on the composite.

“
The entire
investment team
is dedicated to
only this one
single Strategy....”

broad high yield bond market, this flexibility allowed us to quickly reduce risk in the portfolio. Some of our larger peers were not able to sell all of a particular holding if they needed or wanted to.

In an example of pivoting to offense, we expeditiously moved to add risk exposure at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic when certain bonds became available at dislocated prices that did not reflect their true credit quality. We believe our ability to recognize and take advantage of these opportunities serves as a sustainable long-term advantage of our investment approach that can lead to meaningful alpha² generation over time.

Your Strategy takes a concentrated, best ideas approach, typically investing in just 100 to 200 issuers. How did you arrive at these guidelines?

As we have written about recently, we are strong believers in the benefits of active management in high yield. With around 100 to 200 issuers typically in the portfolio, our portfolio is significantly more concentrated than the benchmark—the ICE BofA US High Yield Constrained Index has about 1,000 names—and most peers.

We believe this level of concentration strikes an appropriate balance between providing proper diversification and delivering a portfolio of best ideas to our clients. It also reflects the fact that we strive to add alpha primarily through credit selection and, to a lesser extent, through our top-down macro views. We perform in-depth bottom-up fundamental credit analysis to uncover and take advantage of market inefficiencies that may arise due to an issuer's size, geography, lack of coverage by sell-side analysts, or general misconceptions in the marketplace. When building the portfolio, we manage individual position

sizes based on our level of conviction while taking factors such as liquidity and other risks into account.

What are some of the key features and unique aspects of your team's investment process?

Our team has a very collaborative culture—the traders, credit analysts, and me all sit in the same location to facilitate easy, rapid information sharing. The entire investment team is dedicated to only this one single strategy, which is relatively uncommon in the industry. All team members actively participate in the investment process, which includes two or three individual credit reviews per week, monthly attribution meetings, and twice-yearly offsites where we analyze and review every portfolio holding. Our collaborative team in combination with a concentrated approach helps ensure that every name in our portfolio has been heavily vetted and that no name gets overlooked or left unattended. It also creates constant friction for best ideas.

In terms of the credit research process itself, we assign a proprietary credit rating, spread³ target, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) score to every issuer we assess. These proprietary ratings help us be more forward-looking so that we can identify inefficiencies, stay ahead of market trends, and anticipate ratings actions before they happen. Our spread and total return targets force us to identify future potential sources of alpha and create a natural sell discipline in our portfolio. We also meet quarterly with T. Rowe Price Investment Management's team of ESG analysts, who provide valuable company-specific and portfolio-level insights from an ESG point of view.

Because new issuance is a huge component of the high yield bond market,

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² Alpha is the excess return of an investment relative to its benchmark.

³ Credit spreads measure the additional yield that investors demand for holding a bond with credit risk over a similar-maturity, high-quality government security.

Attractive Risk-Adjusted Returns

(Fig. 1) 10-year returns, risk-adjusted returns, rankings

Name	Return	Alpha	Information Ratio	Sharpe Ratio	eVestment Percentile (U.S. High Yield Fixed Income Universe)	eVestment Numerical Ranking (U.S. High Yield Fixed Income Universe)
T. Rowe Price US High Yield Composite*	4.91%	0.89	0.47	0.50	8th	13/226
ICE BofA US High Yield Constrained Index	3.93	0.00	—	0.42	—	—
Peer Group Average	3.57	0.02	-0.21	0.39	—	—

As of April 30, 2023.

Sources: eVestment, T. Rowe Price.

*The Strategy commenced operations on May 19, 2017. Performance from a past firm prior to May 1, 2017 is linked to the ongoing performance of the composite and continues to be managed with the same investment strategy and objective as the composite.

Returns include reinvestments of dividends and capital gains if any. Returns greater than one year are annualized.

Information ratio measures a portfolio's returns beyond the index divided by the volatility of returns.

Sharpe ratio measures a portfolio's returns beyond the risk-free rate divided by volatility of the excess returns.

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Net of fees performance reflects the deduction of the highest applicable management fee that would be charged based on the fee schedule contained within this material, without the benefit of breakpoints. Net performance returns reflect the reinvestment of dividends and are net of all non-reclaimable withholding taxes on dividends, interest income, and capital gains.

See Standardized Performance table in the Appendix, which includes quarter-end annualized performance data and rankings information as well as the GIPS® Composite Report for additional information on the composite.

T. Rowe has paid a fee to eVestment to obtain and display these ratings /rankings. Peer group average is the average for the eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe. eVestment returns shown include all realized and unrealized gains and losses plus income. eVestment rankings are based on annualized total returns. The above numbers indicate the percentile rankings for that period. eVestment's U.S. High Yield Fixed Income Universe represents fixed income products that invest in noninvestment-grade bonds primarily from U.S. issuers. For the percentile column, a lower percentile equates to a higher ranking versus other strategies in the same classification or universe (e.g., a percentile ranking of 25 means that the strategy's total return for that period is greater than 75% of all strategies within the respective category over a given period). The ranking column shows the total number of strategies in the classification or universe and the numerical ranking. The material is provided for information only and is not intended to be investment advice or a recommendation to take any particular investment action.

our credit analysts review and provide a written analysis, including a proprietary credit rating and spread forecast, for every new deal. This helps us stay on top of key market developments, facilitates access to company management teams, and provides a foundation of research even for deals we did not participate in, which we can later come back to if the relative value of the investment improves.

What do you typically look for in an investment? What common qualities characterize the issuers in your portfolio?

We concentrate on finding bonds that offer attractive relative value compared with issuers in the same industry, weighing credit quality against credit spread to locate value. We focus on finding issuers that generate strong cash flows rather than just earnings growth

as we think healthy cash flow is a better indicator of an issuer's ability to meet its debt obligations in the long term. We tend to be forward-looking when looking at issuers—often modeling a company's financials four or five years out so that we can get a better sense of what an investment looks like over the full life of the bond—and time our investment horizon accordingly.

Enterprise value is another measure that we closely examine in order to track an issuer's credit quality and default risk. By adding an issuer's total debt to its equity market capitalization and subtracting any cash on its balance sheet, enterprise value not only provides an idea of the company's value to an acquirer, but it also helps us better understand room for error. It's worth noting that a large portion of our market consists of small private issuers where access to information can

“We have had no defaults in our portfolio in the 10 years since the Strategy inceptioned.

be limited. By comparing and evaluating private companies against public firms in the same industry, we can determine the size of a private issuer’s equity cushion even without readily available data. This method of measuring the amount of equity that would absorb losses before debt in an issuer bankruptcy underscores the importance of our proprietary research efforts.

We also closely examine each bond’s covenants, which define the legal agreement between the issuer and debtholders. Covenants provide legal protection for debtholders against a deterioration in the borrower’s fundamental credit metrics. We primarily rely on our own examination of covenants, though we also use some covenant research from outside providers.

In terms of bank loan analysis, we apply many of the same techniques. We look at loans as a natural extension of our investment universe and primarily consider loans of companies that also already issue bonds in our market. As we analyze a company’s overall capital structure, we will occasionally invest in loans (in vehicles that allow them) if they offer attractive relative value as a result of their higher position in the capital structure or duration⁴ profile.

How do you think about risk management given the Strategy’s concentrated approach, particularly given that defaults are an inherent part of the high yield bond asset class?

Despite taking a concentrated approach, our Strategy is very risk aware. We have had no defaults in our representative portfolio⁵ in the 10 years since the Strategy inceptioned. One of the key benefits of fewer holdings is that we can more frequently and thoroughly vet our holdings. In high yield, risks are asymmetric—our goal is to mitigate

the downside while participating in the upside, in that order.

Our approach to managing risk is dynamic and multifaceted. As you might expect, our overarching focus is on credit analysis. We have a number of different processes in place—including daily monitoring and our monthly attribution meeting—that can help provide us with early warning signs. If we detect a deteriorating trend in credit quality, we can quickly take action to reduce the size of a position or eliminate it entirely if necessary.

In periods of extreme market stress, our concentrated approach grants us the ability to go back and efficiently re-underwrite our portfolio to regain comfort with positions or right-size them accordingly. Our collaborative approach allows us to discuss ideas and flag key concerns with the group to solicit feedback and test each other’s thinking. We regularly take advantage of opportunities to meet with management teams, sponsors, sell-side contacts, and our equity research counterparts to further inform our thinking.

Liquidity is another important risk management consideration. As I mentioned earlier, we actively take liquidity into account when determining the size of individual positions and are more cautious in sizing exposures that may be less liquid.

What are some of the key factors that will influence the high yield market moving forward? How do you expect the market to evolve from here?

Speaking of liquidity, it could become even more challenging in high yield going forward. We continue to feel the impact of post-global financial crisis regulations that have caused bond dealers to hold fewer issues in their inventory, worsening the liquidity situation for many bond issues.

⁴ Duration measures a bond’s or bank loan’s sensitivity to changes in interest rates

⁵ The representative portfolio is an account in the composite we believe most closely reflects current portfolio management style for the strategy. Performance is not a consideration in the selection of the representative portfolio. The characteristics of the representative portfolio shown may differ from those of other accounts in the strategy. Please see the GIPS® Composite Report for additional information on the composite.

“In our view, the best way to invest, both in the asset class and in our approach, is to stay the course—don’t jump in and out.

On a more positive note, I think that ESG will become even more important in the high yield market. In time, we could see high yield mandates that exclude holdings in the energy sector, which would be a major shift from the current high yield benchmarks and their relatively high exposure to energy. But we are not there yet.

From a structural point of view, direct private lending could eventually encroach on the high yield market. This would provide high yield companies with additional sources of funding and could hold down the level of new supply of high yield bonds, providing some technical support to the market.

What do you think is being overlooked by investors in the high yield market today? Where do you expect to see opportunities moving forward?

Many investors are focused on spreads and default rates, generally feeling anxious over what a slowdown in growth and tighter credit conditions might mean for the overall high yield market. While the fundamental backdrop is beginning to erode, corporate fundamentals have entered the current environment from a position of strength. Looking at current default forecasts, the general expectation is that defaults will rise, but only to roughly 3% by year-end, which puts them back in line with their long-term historical averages.⁶

Although most high yield issuers do not face a near-term formidable “wall” of

maturities, companies still face significant refinancing risk as interest rates have rapidly climbed. This is something that the market seems to underappreciate, but it is one of the factors that we closely monitor when analyzing credit quality.

While some investors are fixated on credit spreads, others appear to ignore them, as all-in yields in the asset class also climbed in 2022. We think that our rigorous relative value analysis—which incorporates spreads—presents an opportunity to capture attractive yield while benefiting from our credit research. In addition, the outlook for total returns, which include both yield and price appreciation, in 2023 is much brighter than it was in early 2022 as the Fed began to tighten policy.

As an investor in this approach, what would you tell fellow investors?

We think of high yield as a strategic, long-term investment. In our view, the best way to invest, both in the asset class and in our approach, is to stay the course—don’t jump in and out. Effectively timing the market is nearly impossible, and staying invested gives you the opportunity to benefit from our goal of outperforming over the full credit cycle. Though we won’t outperform every single quarter, and inevitably we will make some mistakes, over the long term, our time-tested approach has enabled us to provide strong performance compared to the benchmark.

⁶ Actual outcomes may differ materially from estimates and forward-looking statements made, which are subject to limitations. For any historical data taken into account, past results are not a reliable indicator future results.

Appendix

Standardized Performance

(Fig. A1) Total returns and eVestment rankings through periods ended June 30, 2023

		T. Rowe Price US High Yield Strategy
10 Year (7/1/2013- 6/30/2023)	Return (annualized)	5.29%
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe rank	6
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe percentile	3
	# of investments ranked in eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe	202
Five Year (7/1/2018- 6/30/2023)	Return (annualized)	3.33%
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe rank	100
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe percentile	41
	# of investments ranked in eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe	252
One Year (7/1/2022- 6/30/2023)	Return (cumulative)	9.61%
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income category rank	44
	eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income category percentile	14
	# of investments ranked in eVestment U.S. High Yield Fixed Income universe	276

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Net of fees performance reflects the deduction of the highest applicable management fee that would be charged based on the fee schedule contained within this material, without the benefit of breakpoints. Net performance returns reflect the reinvestment of dividends and are net of all non-reclaimable withholding taxes on dividends, interest income, and capital gains.

See the GIPS® Composite Report for additional information on the composite.

Sources: eVestment, T. Rowe Price.

T. Rowe has paid a fee to eVestment to obtain and display these ratings /rankings. eVestment rankings are based on annualized total returns. The above numbers indicate the percentile rankings for that period. eVestment's U.S. High Yield Fixed Income Universe represents fixed income products that invest in noninvestment-grade bonds primarily from U.S. issuers. For the percentile row, a lower percentile equates to a higher ranking versus other strategies in the same classification or universe (e.g., a percentile ranking of 25 means that the strategy's total return for that period is greater than 75% of all strategies within the respective universe over a given period.) The ranking row shows the total number of strategies in the classification or category and the numerical ranking.

Performance from a past firm prior to May 1, 2017 is linked to the ongoing performance of the composite and continues to be managed with the same investment strategy and objective as the composite. Returns greater than one year are annualized.

Fee Schedule

First 50 million USD 45 basis points

Next 50 million USD 35 basis points

Above 100 million USD 35 basis points on all assets.¹

Above 250 million USD 32.5 basis points on all assets.¹

¹ A transitional credit is applied to the fee schedule as assets approach or fall below the breakpoint.

Minimum separate account size 100 million USD.

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GIPS® COMPOSITE REPORT

US High Yield Bond Composite

Period Ended December 31, 2022. Figures Shown in U.S. dollar.

	2013 ²	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Gross Annual Returns (%) ²	7.06	4.40	-0.79	17.23	9.63	-3.33	17.36	8.66	5.65	-14.06
Net Annual Returns (%) ^{1,2}	5.76	2.49	-2.62	15.10	7.63	-5.11	15.24	6.68	3.72	-15.65
ICE BofA US High Yield Constrained Index (%)	2.49	2.51	-4.61	17.49	7.48	-2.27	14.41	6.07	5.35	-11.21
Composite 3-Yr St. Dev.	N/A	N/A	N/A	5.15	4.58	4.21	4.58	10.56	10.22	12.07
ICE BofA US High Yield Constrained Index 3-Yr St. Dev.	N/A	N/A	N/A	6.02	5.59	4.64	4.13	9.38	9.14	11.09
Composite Dispersion	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.05	0.26
Comp. Assets (Millions)	26.6	25.4	26.7	52.0	123.1	758.4	1,084.0	2,099.9	2,597.0	2,124.1
# of Accts. in Comp.	1	1	1	1	1	6	6	7	8	10
Total Firm Assets (Billions)	696.3	749.6	772.4	817.2	1,000.2	972.7	1,218.2	1,482.5	1,653.6	1,237.4 ⁴

¹The fee rate used to calculate net returns is 1.85%. This represents the maximum fee rate applicable to all composite members. **Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance.**

²Performance from a past firm prior to May 1, 2017 is linked to the ongoing performance of the composite and continues to be in the same investment strategy and objective as the composite.

³April 30, 2013 through December 31, 2013.

⁴Preliminary—subject to adjustment.

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Gross performance returns are presented before management and all other fees, where applicable, but after trading expenses. Net of fees performance reflects the deduction of the maximum fee rate applicable to all composite members as shown above. Gross performance returns reflect the reinvestment of dividends and are net of nonreclaimable withholding taxes on dividends, interest income, and capital gains. Gross performance returns are used to calculate presented risk measures. Effective June 30, 2013, portfolio valuation and assets under management are calculated based on the closing price of the security in its respective market. Previously portfolios holding international securities may have been adjusted for after-market events. Policies for valuing portfolios, calculating performance, and preparing compliant presentations are available upon request. Dispersion is measured by the standard deviation across asset-weighted portfolio returns represented within a composite for the full year. Dispersion is not calculated for the composites in which there are five or fewer portfolios.

Some portfolios may trade futures, options, and other potentially high-risk derivatives that may create leverage and generally represent in aggregate less than 10% of a portfolio.

Benchmarks are taken from published sources and may have different calculation methodologies, pricing times, and foreign exchange sources from the composite.

Composite policy requires the temporary removal of any portfolio incurring a client initiated significant cash inflow or outflow greater than or equal to 15% of portfolio assets. The temporary removal of such an account occurs at the beginning of the measurement period in which the significant cash flow occurs and the account re-enters the composite on the last day of the current month after the cash flow. Additional information regarding the treatment of significant cash flows is available upon request.

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US High Yield Bond Composite.

The US High Yield Bond Composite seeks total return and income primarily through investment in fixed income securities rated below investment-grade in the U.S. bond market.(Created May 2017; incepted April 30, 2013)

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