

## *American League's Best Teams*

### *Chapter Two*

#### **The 1912-18 Boston Red Sox: Keeping Speaker and Ruth Would Have Sealed a Dynasty**

Once upon a time in the twentieth century—notably the ‘teens—the Boston Red Sox were perennial contenders and frequent pennant and World Series winners. That was before “The Curse,” before they let go of the Babe. In 1915, the Red Sox picked up where Connie Mack’s disbanding Athletics left off—as the best team in the American League. Boston had already won a pennant and World Series in 1912, in the middle of Philadelphia’s four pennants in five years, and would go on to win pennants and World Series in 1915, 1916, and 1918.

Unusual for the time, however, the **1912 to 1918 Boston Red Sox** won their four pennants and four World Series in seven years under three different managers. Player (first baseman)-manager Jake Stahl led Boston to the first of those pennants in 1912, but was replaced amidst a poor season and executive management politics in 1913 by catcher Bill Carrigan. After managing Boston to back-to-back pennants in 1915 and 1916, Carrigan decided to retire and was replaced by second baseman Jack Barry (formerly the shortstop in Connie Mack’s \$100,000 Infield). Barry managed only one year, however, before being called into the service for World War I in 1918, at which point Ed Barrow was lured from his tenuous position as President of the International League to take over the Red Sox. It was Barrow who managed Boston to its last World Series championship of the twentieth century in 1918, Barrow who decided by 1919 that Babe Ruth’s prodigious productivity merited converting him from star pitcher to full-time home-run slugging outfielder, Barrow who was in on the deal that sent Ruth to the Yankees, and Barrow who followed Ruth to New York to share in the Babe’s reflected glory and become a Hall of Fame executive.

Nineteen-eighteen, of course, became progressively more infamous (the closer the century came to its end) as the last World Series championship Boston had won. This was, it was said, because of The Curse brought on by Boston owner Harry Frazee selling the Red

Sox' soul—Babe Ruth—to the New York Yankees after the 1919 season. If this is so, then the pre-Curse to The Curse surely was the decision of the previous Boston Red Sox owner, Joseph Lannin, to sell his team's "heart"—that would be outstanding center fielder Tris Speaker—to the Cleveland Indians just before the start of the 1916 season (after the 1915 championship), in part because Speaker balked at taking a large salary cut now that the disbanded Federal League was no longer competition for the established major leagues. Speaker's cause to keep at least most of the salary boost he was given to stay away from the Feds wasn't helped by the fact that, in addition to being his team's best player, he was also a divisive figure in the clubhouse. Boston got pitcher Sad Sam Jones as part of the deal, and Jones would go on to have a quite decent career, including being an important member of the pitching staff in 1918, but this deal really was about the money. The Red Sox went on to win two more World Series, but the precedent was set—plus it sometimes takes time for curses to become apparent.

The 1912-18 Boston Red Sox can almost be considered two different teams—before and after Tris Speaker. The best offensive player in baseball at the time besides Ty Cobb, and arguably a better all-around player because of his defensive brilliance in center field, Speaker was the only position player on this Red Sox team whom I consider to have been the best at his position during at least four years of this run. Speaker was flanked in the outfield by Duffy Lewis in left and Harry Hooper in right, forming one of the most famous outfields in history. Lewis, Hooper, shortstop Everett Scott, and third baseman Larry Gardner as core position players overlapped the Speaker-Ruth eras, so there was in fact continuity at the key positions after Speaker left.

Boston's only dominant seasons from 1912 to 1918 were with Speaker in the line-up. After having won only 78 games and finishing fifth the year before, the Red Sox stunned the two-time defending World Series champion Athletics by winning 105 games in 1912 and finishing first with 14 games to spare—over Washington, not Philadelphia. A phenomenal 34-5 season by Smokey Joe Wood and the best of his many terrific seasons by Speaker, according to the wins above replacement (WAR) metric, led the Red Sox' charge to the pennant, which they capped with a World Series triumph over the New York Giants that turned on a dropped fly ball in center field in the bottom of the tenth in an eighth game that was necessitated by one game called for darkness ending in a tie. Led by Speaker's offensive excellence, 1912 was the only season in this stretch that Boston was first in the league in runs scored.

There followed a fourth-place and a second-place finish as Philadelphia reassumed its role as the dominant American League team. I'm not so inclined to hold 1914 against Boston because the Athletics were a superior team, but in 1913 the defending champion Red Sox could not even break the .500 barrier for good until September 2 and they went on to finish 15½ games out of first place.

Connie Mack beginning the breakup of his great team may have been a contributing factor, but Boston returned to dominance in 1915 and might well have beaten out the Athletics even if Eddie Collins, Home Run Baker, Eddie Plank, and Chief Bender had remained in Philadelphia. Despite winning 101 games, the Red Sox' margin of victory in the pennant race was only 2½ games because the Detroit Tigers won 100. (Notwithstanding only one victory's difference, Boston was not required to make-up two postponed games with Cleveland and one with Washington because they were deemed by AL officials to be

irrelevant.) This was Speaker's last year as a Red Sox, but it was southpaw Babe Ruth's first. The twenty-year old Babe went 18-6 in his rookie season, on the way to maybe becoming one of the game's best pitchers of all time . . . had he not been such a productive slugger. Boston made quick work of the Philadelphia Phillies in five games in the 1915 World Series.

After Speaker was sent packing to Cleveland, Boston lost a bit of its offensive edge, but none of its competitiveness. Without Speaker, the Red Sox won in 1916 by two games over the White Sox, finished second nine back of the White Sox in 1917, and won again in 1918 by only a game-and-a-half over the Indians. They may have been fortunate that the 1918 season was called early (on September 2) because of America's involvement in the war that *didn't* end all wars, it being that the 6½-game lead Boston enjoyed on July 22 had nearly disappeared by then. Without Speaker, the team was never better than fourth most in runs scored from 1916 to 1918, even with Ruth picking up some of the slack; only *some* because Ruth's principal role was to be pitching ace of the staff.

Pitching was a particular strength of the Boston Red Sox during their seven-year run and was instrumental in carrying them to their three pennants in four years from 1915 to 1918, all of which were won in tight races decided by 2½ games or less. Five times in the seven years from 1912 to 1918 the Red Sox led the American League in fewest runs allowed. They were the toughest to score against in the league in 1912 and 1914, gave up the second fewest runs when they won the 1915 pennant, and led the league each of the next three years. Smokey Joe Wood, who was battling arm problems and left Boston when Speaker did, Dutch Leonard (who made his debut in 1913), and Carl Mays (who came up in 1915, along with Ruth) were all among the league's five best pitchers for at least four of the seven years of this run. And Babe Ruth was one of the league's best pitchers as well for three years—1915 to 1917—before it was clear that the Babe's future was as a feared batsman in the outfield, rather than on the mound, where he was merely excellent; by 1918 Ruth was a semi-regular in the outfield with substantially fewer starts than the league's other elite pitchers. Boston also got some exceptional pitching from the likes of Hugh Bedient (1912), Rube Foster and Ernie Shore (1915 and 1916), and Sad Sam Jones and Bullet Joe Bush (1918).

The 1912-18 Boston Red Sox were hardly as imposing as the **1910-14 Philadelphia Athletics**, but were a worthy successor to the Athletics once Mack began disbanding his team. Philadelphia not only had a more dominant team at the time it was winning four pennants in five years, but a better all-around team with two players—Eddie Collins and Home Run Baker—having century-plus legacies based on their best consecutive years including all five years of this run, and a pitcher—Eddie Plank—whose performance during those years would have merited him a half-century legacy if he didn't already have a century-plus legacy for best consecutive years that came before the achievements of the 1910-14 Athletics. Tris Speaker was the only member of the 1912-18 Red Sox with a half-century or full-century legacy based on his best consecutive seasons including at least half the years under consideration for this team. Ruth was clearly on the fast track to greatness, but his best consecutive years would not begin till he had converted to full-time outfielder in 1919.

Perhaps because the Red Sox were involved in some many close pennant races, they had a much better record against other 90 wins teams than did Mack's great Philadelphia team. Eight other teams won at least 90 games in the seven years between 1912 and 1918, against which Boston played 17 percent of their games and had a .526 (92-83) winning

percentage. In 1915, the Red Sox beat the 100-win Tigers 14 out of 22 times in their season series, without which they would not have won the pennant by 2½ games over Detroit. The Athletics, by contrast, faced off against only four other AL teams that won 90 or more games between 1910 and 1914, and none when Philadelphia cruised to their first two pennants in that five-year period by 14½ and 13½-game margins. Mack’s men were barely over .500 at 43-42 against those teams, which accounted for only 11 percent of the games they played. The **1907-11 Detroit Tigers**, for their part, were only 38-50 against the four teams they played with 90 or more wins, only two of which were during their three consecutive pennants.

### 3 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1918

	<b>P-WS</b>	<b>W - L %</b>	<b>Ach</b>	<b>Dom</b>	<b>Play</b>	<b>Total</b>
Philadelphia Athletics, 1910-14	4 – 3	488-270 .644	32	50	31	113
<b>Boston Red Sox, 1912-18</b>	<b>4 – 4</b>	<b>632-409 .607</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>82</b>
Detroit Tigers, 1907-11	3 – 0	455-308 .596	24	20	23	67

P = Pennant    WS = World Series    Ach = Achievement Score  
Dom = Dominance Factors Score    Play = Players Score    Total = Total Score

By this point in the twentieth century, the Boston Red Sox had six American League pennants to their credit and had won all five World Series they played in (remember, there was no World Series in 1904). With Connie Mack’s Philadelphia Athletics (also with six AL pennants, and winners of three of five World Series) lost in the wilderness, Boston was the dominant franchise in the American League—although some in Chicago might have argued otherwise (at least until that tawdry 1919 affair). And then—

—Then came “The Curse.” Boston finished fifth with Babe Ruth firmly established in the outfield in 1919, after which he was sold to the Yankees, and then Boston finished last nine times in eleven years from 1922 to 1932 as they continued to give the Yankees key players to help *them* win pennants. Besides Ruth, other core regulars who played for Boston between 1912 and 1918 who contributed to the early success of the burgeoning Yankee dynasty were shortstop Everett Scott and pitcher Carl Mays. Mays, for his best consecutive years of 1917 to 1921—the first two-and-a-half years in Boston and last two-and-a-half in New York—would become one of the American League’s 15 best starting pitchers of the first half of the century, according to me based on WAR. Sam Jones and Joe Bush, who pitched for this Red Sox team for only the 1918 season, helped stabilize the Yankees’ staff in the early-to-mid 1920s, and catcher Wally Schang, also with Boston in 1918, was the league’s best catcher during his years helping the Yankees win pennants in the early 1920s.

The Boston Red Sox won only four more pennants the rest of the century. Their last World Series in the twentieth century? Who could forget 1986, the Red Sox failing to get the last crucial out with a three-run lead in Game Six of the World Series and nobody on base . . . moments away from exorcizing The Curse . . . when . . . when Mookie Wilson’s ground ball met . . . er . . . failed to meet Bill Buckner’s glove at first base. No more need be said, except that it wasn’t until the twenty-first century when, four years therein, the Red Sox shed that curse in most dramatic fashion at the Yankees’ expense. (And I have the DVD box set to prove it really happened.)

As for the “pre-Cursor” to “The Curse”—unceremoniously dispatching the brilliant Tris Speaker to the Cleveland Indians . . . well—

—Speaker continued to play at an extraordinarily high level for a full decade after leaving Boston. He never had the satisfaction of claiming the mantle of undisputed best player in baseball because, when Speaker finally eclipsed Ty Cobb beginning in 1920, there was Babe Ruth. But Speaker did have the satisfaction of becoming Cleveland manager in mid-season 1919 and leading the Indians to their first pennant and a World Series triumph the very next year. The 1920 Indians included two other former Boston players: third baseman Larry Gardner, who was traded to Cleveland in 1918 and who I consider the best in the league at his position from 1915 to 1922, and Smokey Joe Wood, now an outfielder in a right field platoon.

The precursor “curse” came back to haunt the Red Sox in 1948, when Boston and Cleveland finished tied for the American League pennant, and it was the Indians who won the American League’s first-ever playoff to go to the World Series.

## TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

### BOSTON RED SOX, 1912-1918

4 Pennants (1912, 1915, 1916, 1918)  
4 World Series Wins (1912, 1915, 1916, 1918)

#### ACHIEVEMENT

1 <sup>st</sup> place (x 3)	2 <sup>nd</sup> place (x 2)	3 <sup>rd</sup> place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
4 x 3 = 12	2 x 2 = 4	0	4 x 1 = 4	20

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 20 / 7 years x 10 = **28.5**

#### DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	AL1/Runs Scored	AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
2	1	1	5	9

**DOMINANCE SCORE** = 9 / 28 (4 x 7 seasons) x 100 = **32**

#### PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1912-18	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1910-19	1 <sup>st</sup> 1/2 C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
SS Everett Scott, 1914-21	6.6	no	no		
3B Larry Gardner, 1912-17	20.9	s/o (1915-22)	no		
LF Duffy Lewis, 1910-17	15.1	no	no		
CF Tris Speaker, 1909-15	37.0	1909-23	1910-10	yes	yes
RF Harry Hooper, 1910-20	23.6	no	no		
P-of Babe Ruth, 1915-19	24.1	1915-19 MPR	1915-19	*	*
P Dutch Leonard, 1913-17	22.2	1913-18	1913-17		
P Carl Mays, 1915-19	12.8	1915-21	no		
P Smokey Joe Wood, 1909-15	24.4	1910-15	1911-15		
P Ernie Shore, 1914-17	10.7	no	no		
P Rube Foster, 1914-17	9.1	no	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1912-18 = 281.9</b>	206.5				
Core WAR= 73.3 % of Team	69.8 / 10	5.5 / 11 x 10	4 x 1	1 x 2	1 x 3
40.3 Av. Team WAR + 73.3 %	<b>7.0</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

\* Ruth's best consecutive years were as an outfielder from 1919 to 1933.

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 7 (Base WAR) + 5 (Best at Position) + 9 (AL Best) = **21**

**BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE**

1912-18 RED SOX	
<b>10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1910-19</b>	
Ty Cobb, OF, 1910-19	
Eddie Collins, 2B, 1910-17	
<i>Tris Speaker, OF, 1910-19</i>	
Frank Baker, 3B, 1910-14	
Shoeless Joe Jackson, OF, 1911-19 (-1)	
<i>Babe Ruth, P-OF, 1915-19</i>	
Sam Crawford, OF, 1911-15	
Bobby Veach, OF, 1915-19	
Wally Schang, C/OF, 1914-19	
George Sisler, 1B, 1915-19	
<b>5 BEST AL PITCHERS, 1910-19</b>	
Walter Johnson, 1915-19	
<i>Dutch Leonard, 1913-17</i>	
Chief Bender, 1910-14	
Eddie Cicotte, 1913-19	
<i>Smokey Joe Wood, 1911-15</i>	

**BEST AT POSITION**

1B	(01) H.Davis-----→McInnis-----→Sisler-----→(25)
2B	E.Collins-----→(26)
SS	Bush-----→Peckinpugh-----→Sewell-----→(28)
3B	Baker-----→Gardner-----→
OF	(03) Crawford-----→Jackson-----→Heilmann--→(27)
OF	Cobb-----→Ruth-----→(33)
OF	Speaker-----→
MP	Hartzel, OF/3B-----→Ruth, P-OF-----→Dykes, IF-----→(27)
C	Carrigan-----→Schalk-----→Schang-----→
P	Walsh-----→Cicotte-----→Hoyt-----→(28)
P	Plank-----→H."D" Leonard-----→Shocker-----→(24)
P	Johnson-----→(25)
P	Bender-----→Mays-----→
P	Wood-----→Coveleski-----→
	06 07 08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24