

American League's Best Teams

Chapter Five

The 1936-42 New York Yankees: No Question the Greatest Team in History

By 1933, the Yankees were beginning their transition from the Babe Ruth era, and they finished second in the league that year (behind Washington) . . . and the year after that (behind Detroit, now managed by the fiery Cochrane) . . . and the year after that (behind Detroit again). Then, in 1936, came Joe DiMaggio to the New York Yankees. The rest is history. Or to be more precise, no team ever dominated major league baseball the way the New York Yankees did over the next seven years. Let's go to the bullet points:

- The **1936 to 1942 New York Yankees** won six pennants and five World Series in seven years—four American League and World Series championships in a row from 1936 to 1939, and two pennants and one World Series in 1941 and 1942. They won a seventh pennant and sixth World Series in 1943, but I'm not counting that as part of this team's run because many of the Yankees' core players—including DiMaggio—were serving their country during World War II that year. If you discount their terribly disappointing year in 1940, when the Yankees finished third with an 88-66 record, but only two games out of first after floundering for most of the season, the 1936-42 Yankees in their six pennant-winning years won two of every three games they played. Their winning percentage for those six years was .668 (613-305).
- And their World Series triumphs were truly decisive, with the Yankees requiring as many as six games to win a World Series only once, in 1936. They swept the 1938 and 1939 World Series in four straight and needed only five games to win the 1937 and 1941 World Series. The only World Series they lost was also a short affair, five games to the St. Louis Cardinals in 1942.

Thebestbaseballteams.com
1936-42 New York Yankees

- In winning their six pennants, the Yankees did so with 100 or more victories five times—they won 102 games in 1936 and 1937, 106 in 1939, 101 in 1941, and 103 in 1942—and the one pennant they won without 100 wins, in 1938, they won 99 in 152 decisions, meaning that one game postponed because of weather and another of their five games that ended in ties were not made up. Their winning percentage that year was .651, equivalent to 100 victories had they completed their 154-game schedule. So is that like six 100-win seasons? Just about.
- And all six of the American League championships won by the 1936-42 New York Yankees were by decisive margins—19½ games in 1936, 13 games in 1937, 9½ games in 1938, 17 in 1939, 17 in 1941, and nine in 1942. So dominant were the Yankees in winning their six pennants that they were not seriously threatened after July in any of those seasons. In 1938, the Yankees won 50 of 63 games from June 24 to the end of August to open up a 13-game lead going into the final month of the season, *never once losing more than one game at a time*. In case you missed the significance of that, in addition to their .794 winning percentage during that stretch, for more than two months the longest Yankee losing streak was one game, 13 times.
- A uniform characteristic of the Yankees these years was their taking over first place early in the season and relentlessly building up an insurmountable lead. Okay, so in 1938 they didn't take over first place for good until July 17, and in 1941 they didn't take over first place for good until June 29—but, really, how late in the season is mid-July and the end of June? And the only year this team did not win the pennant, in 1940, the Yankees still dominated the last two months and almost stole off with the league championship; they were fifth with a losing 50-51 record, 11½ games behind as late as August 8, and seemingly out of the running for a fifth straight pennant, only to close with an outstanding 38-15 run—a .717 winning percentage—to join the Tigers and Indians in a taut three-team race to the wire. From August 8 till the end of the season, the Yankees were seven games better than the next-hottest team in the league (the never-in-contention Chicago White Sox), 9½ games better than Detroit (who ultimately won the pennant), and 10 better than Cleveland (who ended the season in second place). New York's tremendous late surge did not carry them to the top yet again, but it sure gave a fright to the Tigers and Indians, who by August must have thought the American League pennant race was all about them and blessedly for once not the Yankees.
- The 1936-42 New York Yankees dominated the league offensively. They led the American League, indeed both major leagues, in runs scored in five of the seven years of their run—1936 through 1939, and 1942; they were third in scoring in 1940, and second in 1941. They won 38 percent of their total of 701 victories during these seven years by blowout margins of five runs or more. Not only that, no other team was as efficient as the New York Yankees when winning their four straight pennants from 1936 to 1939 in runs-to-hits ratio (only 1.56 hits for each run scored) or in scoring total runners on base (one run for each 2.1 base runner). And that includes teams from the “steroid era” in the 1990s and beyond, when offensive productivity was unprecedented since the early days of major league baseball back in the nineteenth century.
- The Yankees of these years solidified their reputation as the Bronx Bombers by leading the league in home runs in every one of the seven years. The only major

league team to hit more than the Yankees in any of those years was the cross-river New York Giants in 1942, whose 109 homers were one more than the Yankees. Indicative of the Yankees having power up and down the line-up, only twice between 1936 and 1942 did they have the AL's leading home run hitter—Lou Gehrig in 1936 and DiMaggio in 1937. The Yankees' offense, however, did not live by the long ball alone. Notwithstanding their 174 home runs in 1938—27 percent more than the second-best team (Detroit) in driving them out of the park—the Yankees also led both major leagues in stolen bases with 91, with Frankie Crosetti's 27 steals topping both leagues. Three times, the Yankees were above the league average in steals, and once just below.

- And the 1936-42 Yankees also dominated the league in pitching, allowing the fewest runs of any American League team in all six of their pennant-winning seasons, and they gave up the second fewest runs in 1940, even with Lefty Gomez sidelined most of the year. Behind their excellent pitching was stellar defense. The Yankees' pitching staff led the league in strikeouts only once, in 1936, and characteristic of an era when striking out was close to a cardinal sin, they struck out only 3.8 batters per game. Fourteen percent of the outs the Yankees made on their game opponents therefore were by strikeout, meaning that the Yankees' fielders had to account for the other 86 percent of their outs. And they were better at defense than any other team in baseball; in every year but 1940, this Yankee team led the league in defensive efficiency—turning balls put into play into outs.
- It was the offense that made them so dominant. It was the pitching that made them so dominant. It was the defense that made them so dominant. *The 1936-42 Yankees dominated every aspect of the game on the field.* Indeed, no other team in history was so dominant year-after-year in both scoring the most runs and giving up the fewest runs in their league as the 1936-42 New York Yankees. In 1939, most notably, the Yankees allowed 144 runs fewer than the AL's next stingiest team, scored 77 runs more than the AL's next most prolific team, and outscored their game-opponents by an absolutely phenomenal 411 runs. No wonder there are many baseball historians and researchers who consider the Yankees of 1939, not the Yankees of 1927, as having had the greatest single year of any major league team in history. (And that was the year Lou Gehrig was forced out of the line-up by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.) But their run differential in 1936 was almost as amazing, when the Yankees in Joe DiMaggio's rookie season outscored their game-opponents by 334 runs. And in 1937, the Yankees scored 308 runs more than their opponents. Taking the full seven years, the 1936-42 Yankees outscored their opponents by an average of 278 runs per season—that's about 1.8 runs per game.

Who were these guys, the core players of the 1936-42 Yankees? Let's go to some more bullet points.

- At second base, Joe Gordon. Replacing Lazzeri in 1938, Gordon succeeded Charlie Gehringer as the American League's best second baseman from 1939 to 1943, after which he went off to war; was also one of his league's 10 best position players in the surrounding 1934 to 1943 decade; and his player value from 1939 to 1943 according to the wins above replacement (WAR) metric make him, according to me, one of the 50 best position players in American League history, based on his best consecutive

years. Yet it was not until 2009 that he finally made the Hall of Fame, a generous explanation being that his major league career was only eleven years and interrupted in his prime by two years of service in the Second World War.

- At shortstop, Frankie Crosetti. The Yankees' regular shortstop from 1932 to 1940, Crosetti averaged only 2.9 wins above a replacement-level player for the first five years under consideration for this greatest of Yankee teams. With 37 percent of his player value attributed to defense from 1936 to 1940, he solidified the Yankees' middle infield. After hitting only .194 in 1940 with an on-base percentage (OBP) a shade under .300—horrible numbers for a lead-off batter and certainly not helping the Yankees' losing cause that year—Crosetti was sent to the bench in 1941 when Phil Rizzuto became the regular shortstop. He partially reclaimed the shortstop position when Rizzuto was off to war from 1943 to 1945. Back to Crosetti's bad year in 1940: it was Manager Joe McCarthy's decision to drop his shortstop from first to eighth in the batting order in early August that helped spur the Yankees' serious surge back into contention. The Yankees were only two games over .500 on August 5 when McCarthy made that change, after which they finished the season with a 39-19 run—20 games above .500, and 6½ games better than any other team in the American League for the remainder of the schedule. Gordon, who replaced him at the top of the order, hit .318 with a .392 OBP in that spot, compared to Crosetti's .199 and .306.
- At third base, Red Rolfe. The Yankees' regular third baseman from 1935 to 1941, Rolfe was considered by many to have been the league's best at the position for those years. Based on WAR, I give the nod to the St. Louis Browns' Harland Clift, but just barely, for two reasons. The first is that Clift had three consecutive years with a player value of 5.0 or better, including two just shy of 6.0, and the second is that he had better player values from 1940 through 1942. This is important because in determining best players at their position, as noted in **Transparency Annex B**, I require a minimum stretch of five years, and it was not until 1943 that Cleveland third baseman Ken Keltner was consistently good enough, according to the WAR metric, to take over as the AL's best at third. Rolfe gets a very honorable mention as a “significant other” at third, however, because he and Clift were so comparable in performance in the last half of the 1930s. Illness essentially ended Rolfe's career in 1942, when he played in only 69 games after averaging 145 the previous seven years.
- In left field, Charlie Keller. Aside from DiMaggio, the Yankees' outfield was relatively unsettled from 1936 to 1938, with George Selkirk, Myril Hoag, Jake Powell, and Tommy Henrich at various times a principal in one of the corner outfield positions. And DiMaggio was too, in his rookie season of 1936 before center field became his place of business. Once Keller was called up from the Yankees' top minor league affiliate in Newark, he became a permanent fixture in the outfield, splitting time between the corner positions his first two years before settling into left field in 1942. Keller, according to me, was the best at his position (as one of three outfielders) from 1940 to 1946 (which includes two years when he was in the service during World War II), counting for only three of the seven years under consideration for this team. His 1939 season, however, combined with what he did the next four years, made Charlie Keller one of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade, so I'll account for that by naming him a “significant other” as one of the AL's very best outfielders during the last four years for this team. (Keller's best at position years *would have started in 1939* were it not for DiMaggio, Boston's Ted Williams in

his rookie season, and Philadelphia's Bob Johnson in the last of six years when he was one of the league's three best outfielders.) Like Gordon, Keller had a relatively short career—only six years as a regular before back problems prematurely ruined his career—and like Gordon, Keller's best consecutive years that included four for the 1936-42 Yankees merits him, according to me, a century-plus legacy as one of the American League's all-time 50 best position players.

- In center field, Mr. DiMaggio. By the end of the 1942 season, when duty called and he became a Selective Service draft pick, Joe DiMaggio had already established himself his century-plus legacy as one of the all-time greats of the game. No need to even mention his 56-game hitting streak.
- At catcher, Bill Dickey. Yet another member of the 1936-42 Yankees with a century-plus legacy for his best consecutive years as a player (1935-39) including at least four of the seasons under consideration for this team. An outstanding catcher for years before, he finally succeeded Mickey Cochrane as the best at his position in 1936, based on WAR.
- The core of the best pitching staff in the league during these years included Red Ruffing and Lefty Gomez as starting pitchers. Ruffing has a century-plus legacy for his best consecutive seasons of 1935-39, during which he went 82-33 (.713) in the years the Yankees won four straight pennants. He was best at his position (as one of five starting pitchers) from 1935 through 1941, when his career was beginning to wind down but a year in which he still went 15-6 (.714). Gomez has a half-century legacy for his best years from 1934 to 1939 and I count him as one of the league's five best starting pitchers from 1931 to 1938 when he was displaced, according to me, by Dutch Leonard (no relation to the earlier Dutch Leonard who pitched from 1913 to 1918 for the Red Sox). While Gomez's years as one of the five best contemporary pitchers in the league does not count for this team because they included only three of the seven years under consideration, his pitching performance in 1939—12 wins, 8 losses in 26 starts—nonetheless merits his having “significant other” status. No doubt a very fine pitcher, Gomez in his career did not have consistently high pitcher values as measured by wins above replacement year in and year out, with his highest cumulative WAR score for any three consecutive years coming between 1937 and 1939.
- Johnny Murphy in the bullpen. The Yankees' starting rotation was sufficiently strong every year that they led the league in complete games four times between 1936 and 1942, but McCarthy was astute in recognizing the value of having a dedicated reliever to win or to save close games. In 1937, 1939, and 1942, the Yankees led the league in *both* complete games *and* saves, which had been done only once previously—by the 1926 St. Louis Cardinals—and has been done only once since—by the 1988 Los Angeles Dodgers. Murphy was the first relief ace with the nickname “Fireman,” giving an obvious appreciation for his valuable role on the team. He was the best reliever in his time and has a half-century legacy as one of the AL's three best relievers in the first half-century.

So to summarize: that's four of the Yankees' core regulars who were the best at their position and two who I count as “significant others”; seven who were among the American League's best position players or pitchers in the surrounding decade; seven who have a half-

century legacy; and five who have a century-plus legacy. And that's not even mentioning Lou Gehrig, the first baseman for this great Yankee team in only the first three years of its run because the disease that would bear his name so tragically ended his career in 1939 and his life soon thereafter.

In making the judgment that the 1936-42 Yankees were the best American League team in the first half of the twentieth century and—not to spoil the ending (so please keep reading)—for the entire century, as it will turn out, does it matter that only two other AL teams during these seven years won as many as 90 games? They were the Tigers with exactly 90 wins to win the 1940 pennant (against whom the Yankees were 8-14) and the Red Sox in 1942 with 93 wins (against whom the Yankees went 10-12). That accounts for only 4 percent of the total games the Yankees played between 1936 and 1942. By contrast, six other AL teams won 90 or more games during the five years of the 1928-32 Athletics' run, and the 1926-32 Yankees had nine rivals with 90 or more wins during their seven years, and it was four other AL teams winning 90 times or more when the 1910-14 Athletics were dominating the league. My answer, therefore, is—

—No, it does not matter. Aside from the obvious that the 1936-42 Yankees were legitimately great in any era when you look at their accomplishments, their total dominance of the league, and who their best players were, the American League during these years was competitively more balanced. Sure, the bottom-dwelling Browns and Athletics were truly awful, and the Nationals sank to that level a few times, but the Tigers, Indians, Red Sox, and even the White Sox fielded winning teams all or most years. They just couldn't compete with the Yankees, except for in 1940. In four of the seven years of the 1936-42 Yankees' reign of dominance, five of the eight American League teams finished with winning records. The competitive balance may have slipped a bit, however, during the last two years of the Yankees' run, when only three teams in both 1941 and 1942 had a .500 record or better, but even then, only one team in 1941 and two in 1942 were truly bad.

But let's extend the argument. Taking into account all the teams that finished second from 1936 to 1942, whether they won 90 games or not, the Yankees' record against their putative competition during these years was still a very pedestrian 89-84 for an unimposing .514 winning percentage. If you don't count 1940, when they finished third, the Yankees posted a 69-60 record (.535) against the runner-up in their six pennant-winning seasons. Still not impressive. The Yankees' experience, however, was not unusual for at least two other teams that can be fairly said to have dominated the American League over a five-year period during the first half of the century. The 1910-14 Philadelphia Athletics had a worse winning percentage—.508 (65-63)—against teams that won 90 games or finished second without meeting that victory threshold, and the 1928-32 Philadelphia Athletics were worse than that with a 70-84 (.455) record. This, of course, begs for some kind of explanation.

All of the pennants these three teams won were comfortably in hand when the season turned to the September stretch. The smallest lead the 1910-14 Athletics had going into September in their four pennant-winning years was 4½ games in 1911, a race they eventually won by 13½ games. The 1928-32 Athletics took leads of 12½, 6½, and 15½ games into September when they won their three straight pennants from 1929 to 1931. And the 1936-42 Yankees had a double-digit lead going into September in five of their six winning races, and an eight-game lead (extended to nine) in 1942. This sort of dominance raises the question of

whether one paradox of dominant teams is that *the more dominant the team, the less important it is for that team to have to beat the league's other best teams.*

The suggestion here is that it is less important to beat the league's other best teams when the pennant race is, realistically, decided relatively early in the season by a team that totally dominates the league. With no fight for the pennant, there is no particular urgency to beat the closest distant rivals, no matter how good they might be, when the pennant is well in hand from early on. In effect, the league's other best teams are the same as the rest of the league from the perspective of the dominating team. While the dominating team might not feel the urgency of their games, however, the league's other putative contenders—no matter how lost the season—still have something to prove, and because they usually *are* very good teams, they might prevail against the dominant team more often than they might otherwise were there a real fight for the pennant. In 1940, New York ran off six straight wins against the two teams ahead of them—three against Detroit followed by three versus Cleveland—in late August, when they were desperately scrambling to get back into the pennant race, reducing their deficit from ten to six games. These were must-win games. Unfortunately, three losses in five games against those same two teams in mid-September ultimately helped doom the Yankees' quest to become the first team to win five pennants in a row.

The flip side, of course, is that when dominant teams—like the 1936-42 Yankees—have relatively mediocre records against the league's next-best team, they make up for that by demolishing teams that *should* have no chance against them. This has been a Yankee tradition over the decades, and it certainly was for McCarthy's Yankees. Against the American League teams with losing records in those seven years, the Yankees played 53 percent of their games, winning 400 while losing only 171 for a .700 winning percentage. That includes going 52-14 (.788) against three teams with a collective .356 winning percentage in 1939 and 78-32 (.709) against five teams with losing records in 1942.

To raise the question again: does their mediocre record against the other best competition in the league matter to the judgment that the 1936-42 New York Yankees were by far the best, most dominant team in baseball history? And again, my answer is, No. They were by far the best team in the American League and all of major league baseball in their time, dominant in every facet of the game, and unquestionably had the best collection of playing talent around of any major league team in any era.

5 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1945

| | P-WS | W - L % | Ach | Dom | Play | Total |
|----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| New York Yankees, 1936-42 | 6 – 5 | 701-371 .654 | 34 | 78 | 51 | 163 |
| Philadelphia Athletics, 1928-32 | 3 – 2 | 505-258 .662 | 30 | 45 | 39 | 114 |
| Philadelphia Athletics, 1910-14 | 4 – 3 | 488-270 .644 | 32 | 50 | 31 | 113 |
| New York Yankees, 1926-32 | 4 – 3 | 677-400 .629 | 29 | 43 | 27 | 99 |
| Boston Red Sox, 1912-18 | 4 – 4 | 632-409 .607 | 29 | 32 | 21 | 82 |

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

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

NEW YORK YANKEES, 1936-1942

6 Pennants (1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1942)
5 World Series Wins (1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1941)

ACHIEVEMENT

| 1 st place (x 3) | 2 nd place (x 2) | 3 rd place (x 1) | World Series (x 1) | Score |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| 6 x 3 = 18 | 0 | 1 x 1 = 1 | 5 x 1 = 5 | 24 |

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 24 / 7 years x 10 = **34**

DOMINANCE

| 100 Wins | 8 Games Ahead | AL1/Runs Scored | AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed | Score |
|----------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------|
| 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 22 |

DOMINANCE SCORE = 22 / 28 (4 x 7 seasons) x 100 = **78**

PLAYERS

| CORE REGULARS | WAR 1936-42 | BEST at POSITION | Decade 1934-43 | 1 st 1/2 20 th C | 20 th Cent. |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--|------------------------|
| <i>(1B Lou Gehrig, 1926-38)</i> | (22.6) | (no) | (1934-38) | (yes) | (yes) |
| 2B Joe Gordon, 1938-46 | 29.3 | 1939-43 | 1939-43 | yes | yes |
| SS Frank Crosetti, 1933-40 | 11.0 | no | no | | |
| 3B Red Rolfe, 1935-41 | 20.9 | s/o | no | | |
| LF Charlie Keller, 1939-46 | 30.3 | s/o (1940-46) | 1939-43 | yes | yes |
| CF Joe DiMaggio, 1936-51 | 52.0 | 1936-51 | 1937-42 | yes | yes |
| C Bill Dickey, 1929-43 | 27.0 | 1936-42 | 1935-39 | yes | yes |
| P Red Ruffing, 1930-42 | 28.7 | 1935-41 | 1935-39 | yes | yes |
| P Lefty Gomez, 1930-41 (-1) | 20.4 | s/o (1931-38) | 1934-39 | yes | no |
| P Monte Pearson, 1936-40 | 13.2 | no | no | | |
| P Spud Chandler, 1938-43 (-1) | 8.3 | no | no | | |
| RP Johnny Murphy, 1934-43 | 8.2 | 1936-41 | 1936-41 | yes | no |
| TEAM WAR, 1936-42 = 369.5 | 249.3 | | | | |
| Core WAR= 67.5 % of Team War 52.9 Av. Team WAR + 67.5 % | 88.6 / 10 8.86 | 6.5 / 10 6.5 | 7 x 1 7 | 7 x 2 14 | 5 x 3 15 |

(Gehrig does not count as a core regular for this team because he played only three years on the 1936-42 Yankees, but is noted nonetheless because of his historical significance.)

* Gomez one of AL's 15 best pitchers, 1901-1950, for best years of 1934-38.

PLAYERS SCORE = 8.9 (Base WAR) + 6.5 (Best at Position) + 36 (AL Best) = **51.4**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

(based on best consecutive years, informed by wins above replacement)

| 1936-42 YANKEES | | |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| 10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1934-43 | | |
| | <i>Joe DiMaggio, OF, 1937-42</i> | |
| | Lou Gehrig, 1B, 1934-38 | |
| | Hank Greenberg, 1B, 1934-40 (-1) | |
| | Charlie Gehringer, 2B, 1934-38 | |
| | Jimmie Foxx, 1B, 1934-39 | |
| | <i>Bill Dickey, C, 1934-39</i> | |
| | <i>Joe Gordon, 2B, 1939-43</i> | |
| | Luke Appling, SS, 1935-40 | |
| | <i>Charlie Keller, OF, 1939-43</i> | |
| | Harland Clift, 3B, 1936-40 | |
| 5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1934-43 | | |
| | Lefty Grove, 1935-39 | |
| | Bob Feller, 1937-41 | |
| | <i>Red Ruffing, 1935-39</i> | |
| | Lefty Gomez, 1934-39 | |
| | Thornton Lee, 1937-41 | |
| | <i>Johnny Murphy, RP, 1936-41</i> | |

BEST AT POSITION

| | |
|----|--|
| 1B | (26) Gehrig-----→ York-----→ (29) Foxx-----→ Greenberg~~~~~→ |
| 2B | Gehringer-----→ Gordon-----→ Doerr-----→(50) |
| SS | (29) Cronin-----→ Appling-----→ Boudreau-----→ |
| 3B | (29) Sewell-----→ Clift-----→ Keltner-----→ |
| OF | (20) Ruth-----→ B.Johnson-----→ Keller-----→ |
| OF | (28) Simmons-----→ DiMaggio-----→(51) Averill-----→ Williams-----→(57) |
| MP | (28) McManus--→ Travis, SS/3B-----→ Pesky, SS-3B-----→(50) |
| C | (25) Cochrane-----→ Dickey-----→ Rosar-----→ |
| P | (26) Grove-----→ Trout-----→ |
| P | (28) Crowder-----→ Ruffing-----→ Hughson-----→ |
| P | (29) Ferrell-----→ Feller-----→ |
| P | (29) Marberry---→ Bridges-----→ Newhouser---→(49) Gomez-----→ E."D" Leonard-----→ |
| RP | Murphy-----→ Page-----→(49) |
| | 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 |