

American League's Best Teams

Chapter Seven

The 1949-53 New York Yankees: Five and Five in Five Doesn't Make Them One of the Best

No team in baseball history can claim a greater accomplishment than the **1949 to 1953 New York Yankees**, winners of five pennants and five World Series in five years. (Of course, this was before divisional alignments, so there were no wild card or league championship series that needed to be navigated through to get to the World Series.) One might argue, perhaps, that maybe the 1936-42 Yankees can make such a claim, what with six pennants and five World Series titles in seven years, but if you extend the run of the 1949-53 Yankees two more years, their accomplishments are the same. If you extend each team another year (to 1943 and 1956, respectively), their accomplishments are still the same. So to repeat: Casey Stengel's 1949-53 New York Yankees are unsurpassed in achievement. Yet nobody I've read argues they were the best team ever over a five-year period, and I certainly am not going to suggest they were. A "best team," according to me, should also be a dominant team (and it appears that I'm in agreement with most baseball historians and researchers on this point), but the 1949-53 Yankees did not *DOMINATE* the league by their obvious superiority, even while they *dominated* major league baseball by winning everything for five years straight. How were they *not* dominant?

- The 1949-53 Yankees did not once win 100 games. Of the five best American League teams I've identified for the first half-century, the 1936-42 Yankees had five 100-win seasons, the 1928-32 Philadelphia Athletics had three, as did the 1926-32 Yankees, and the 1910-14 Athletics and 1912-18 Boston Red Sox each won a hundred games twice.
- Only the last of the 1949-53 Yankees' five straight pennants was run-away dominant, when they finished first by 8½ games. None of their first four pennants

were decided until the final week of the season. Three of those were won by three games or less, the first (in 1949) on the very last day of the season in a must-win game. Even in 1951, when the Yankees came out five games on top, they were a game behind with 14 games remaining and, with only 10 games left, were tied for first before sprinting to the finish and making the final outcome seem not as close as it really was. Earlier in American League history, by contrast, all six of the pennants won by the 1936-42 Yankees were by blow-out margins of eight games or more, as were all three of the pennants won by the 1928-32 Athletics; three of the four pennants won by the 1910-14 Athletics (who also were never really challenged in the fourth); and two of the four won by the 1926-32 Yankees. Only the 1912-18 Red Sox had as few decisively-won pennants as the 1949-53 Yankees, and that Boston team twice won 100 games.

- The 1928-32 Athletics were the only one of the AL's best teams in the first half-century with as few combined seasons of leading the league in runs scored or fewest runs allowed as the 1949-53 Yankees. While all of Philadelphia's three such seasons were for fewest runs allowed, Jimmie Foxx, Al Simmons, and Mickey Cochrane made those Athletics an imposing offensive team that failed to lead the league in scoring in any of their five years only because the contemporary Ruth-and-Gehrig Yankees were even more imposing offensively. You can't really hold that against them. The 1949-53 Yankees were similarly well-balanced between pitching and offense, never finishing worse than second in the league in either runs scored or fewest allowed, but had formidable competition in both of those categories from first the Boston Red Sox, and then the Cleveland Indians. The Yankees led the league in runs scored only once (when they won their blowout pennant in 1953) and gave up the fewest runs in the league twice (in 1952 and 1953). While the 1949-53 Yankees did not dominate the league in either scoring or giving up the fewest runs, what allowed them to win five straight pennants was the balance they maintained between a consistently good offense and consistently good pitching. They had the highest differential between runs scored and runs allowed in each of the last three seasons of their run, tied for the league lead in run differential with the Red Sox in 1950, and were second to the Red Sox in 1949.

The 1949-53 Yankees won five consecutive pennants without dominating the league because they were relentless, resourceful, and virtually unbeatable when they had to be. This was a team that was perceived even at the time as overachieving when considering the quality of their rivals for the pennant; the Yankees were not pre-season favorites in any of Stengel's first four years as manager, according to Casey biographer Robert W. Creamer. How did they do it?

Well, for one thing, the Yankees' winning percentage down the September stretch in the four consecutive years they did not clinch the pennant until the final week was an exceptional .688 (75-34). For another, facing off against seven other AL teams in those five years that won at least 90 games (including three in 1950 alone), and an eighth—Cleveland in 1949—that just missed with 89, they did not lose a season series against any of them. Given that the Yankees were involved in tight, down-to-the-wire pennant races in all but one of those years, winning season series against their pennant race rivals was a decisive factor in their favor. They won five of their seven series against 90-win teams and split two others. One of those splits—against Cleveland in 1953—was relatively meaningless because, even

had they lost the season series, this was the one year this Yankee team did dominate the American League, winning the pennant by 8½ games. From 1949 to 1952, the number of victories over losses the Yankees scored over their pennant-race rivals turned out to be the difference in close pennant races. The Yankees played 20 percent of their games between 1949 and 1953 against 90-win competition—the equivalent of a single 154-game season—winning 89 and losing 65.

When considering the 1949-53 Yankees, it is important to keep in mind that the New York Yankees were transitioning from the Joe DiMaggio era to the Mickey Mantle era. DiMaggio was still dangerous—as the Red Sox learned to their chagrin in the 1949 pennant race—but at the end of his career (his best years behind him), and would retire after the 1951 season. Mantle, called up by the Yankees in 1951, was at the beginning of his career (his best years ahead of him), giving every indication of the superstar player he would become. The cornerstone players of the 1949-53 Yankees were shortstop Phil Rizzuto—who deservedly won the AL's Most Valuable Player award in 1950; Gil McDougald (who could, and did, play every infield position other than first base); Gene Woodling, DiMaggio (for the first three years), Mantle (for the last three years), and Hank Bauer in the outfield, with Woodling and Bauer often used as a platoon by Manager Stengel; catcher Yogi Berra, at the beginning of his terrific career; and a trio of very fine starting pitchers in Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, and Ed Lopat.

Berra, Rizzuto, McDougald (as a multi-position regular), DiMaggio, and Reynolds (as one of five starting pitchers) were the best at their positions during all or most of the five and five in five years, according to me, but only Berra and Rizzuto were among the league's 10 best players in the surrounding decade whose best consecutive years included at least three of the years under consideration for this team. DiMaggio was also one of the league's 10 best in the encompassing that 1946 to 1955 ten-year period, but he does not earn a decade legacy for the 1949-53 Yankees, according to me, because only two of his best years—1949 and 1950—came within those five years. Yogi Berra was the only player on this team whose best consecutive years give him an American League century-plus legacy for the five-and-five-in-five New York Yankees. Despite their superior record of achievement, the 1949-53 Yankees' "players score" of 21 is *much lower* than any of the AL's four best teams of the first half-century; the fifth best team—the 1912-18 Red Sox—also had a players score of 21.

But the players score for the 1949-53 Yankees is slightly misleading because this was a team that was very much the sum of its parts. Casey Stengel was a master manipulator of his roster, platooning or rotating players during these years at one or two outfield positions, first base, and third base, and having to go through a transition at second base in 1952 when Jerry Coleman was drafted and replaced by Billy Martin, who himself would be drafted in 1954. Stengel also went to his bench frequently during games. They who were not core regulars—players like Johnny Mize and Joe Collins who shared first base in 1950 and 1951, and Bobby Brown and Billy Johnson who platooned at third in 1949 and 1950, and Tommy Henrich before he retired after the 1950 season—were nonetheless significant contributors to the Yankees' success. The average collective player value as measured by the wins above replacement (WAR) metric of the 1949-53 Yankees over five years compares favorably to the 1910-14 Athletics, the 1926-32 Yankees, and even the 1928-32 Athletics—

—Which is not to suggest that that this Yankee team should be considered better than any of those teams because of their extraordinary five-and-five-in-five achievement. They were not. Not even close.

6 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1955

	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
New York Yankees, 1949-53	5 – 5	487-280 .635	40	20	21	81
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

It is even fair to ask whether the contemporary **1951 to 1955 Cleveland Indians** might have been a better team, even though the Indians won only one pennant in those five years—in 1954, interrupting a string of nine Yankee pennants in ten years. Like the 1949-53 Yankees, the Indians had a well-balanced team. Leading the league in runs scored in 1952 and second to the Yankees in each of the next two years, Cleveland featured a high-powered offense led by center fielder Larry Doby—who, we should never forget, integrated the American League—and third baseman Al Rosen. The Indians led the league in home runs every year from 1951 to 1954, and were second to the Yankees in 1955.

While Reynolds, Raschi, and Lopat gave the 1949-53 Yankees one of baseball’s best pitching staffs at the time, theirs was not as good as Cleveland’s. Featuring one of the very best starting rotations in baseball history with Bob Lemon, Early Wynn, Mike Garcia, and a fading but still effective Bob Feller, the 1951-55 Indians twice led the league in fewest runs allowed, and were third the three other years. With three 20-game winners in both 1951 (Feller, Garcia, and Wynn) and 1952 (Wynn, Garcia, and Lemon), Cleveland became the first AL team to have three pitchers win 20 games in back-to-back seasons since Boston in 1903 and 1904, and the first major league team since the NL New York Giants in 1904 and 1905. Only the 1970-71 Baltimore Orioles have done it since.

Despite having only one 100-victory season—when they won the 1954 pennant—and only one blowout pennant, by eight games over the Yankees in 1954, and leading the league runs scored or fewest allowed a combined total of only three times, the 1951-55 Indians have a higher dominance score than the 1949-53 Yankees by my methodological approach. Of greater significance, however, this Cleveland team had the *third highest* players score of all the American League’s best teams considered to this point in the twentieth century, behind only the 1936-42 Yankees and the 1928-32 Athletics. The Indians had three position players who were the best at their positions and among the 10 best in the American League in the surrounding decade—second baseman Bobby Avila, third baseman Rosen, and center fielder Doby. And this was a team with a superlative pitching staff that included Lemon, Wynn, and Garcia as three of the five best pitchers in the league for all or most of the years between 1951 and 1955. Doby, Lemon, and Wynn all have century-plus legacies, according to me,

and Rosen has a legacy as one of the AL's 25 best position players in the second-half of the twentieth century, according to me, based on their best consecutive seasons including the majority of years for this Cleveland team.

Notwithstanding the 1951-55 Indians having many more "best players" among their core regulars, the 1949-53 Yankees had much better depth on their roster, even with regard to their core regulars. Of Cleveland's ten core regulars, the six who are counted both among the best at their positions in the American League and among the best position players and pitchers in the surrounding decade accounted for 88 percent of their combined wins above replacement; the Indians four other core regulars—including Feller, at the end of his great career—all had a WAR player value in the single digits over the course of the five years considered for this team. Shortstop George Strickland, for example, was not going to make anybody forget Phil Rizzuto. The Yankees' may have had only Yogi Berra with a century-plus legacy to compare to the Indians' Doby, Lemon, and Wynn and the half-century legacy of Rosen, but unlike the Indians, none of their ten core regulars had a total player value less than 12, and that player with 12—Gil McDougald—was at the beginning of his career and on the 1949-53 Yankees for only the last three of those years.

Cursed was the Indians' fate that they were up against the relentlessly determined and ever-resourceful Yankees, finishing second four times while winning only their one pennant.

In 1951, Cleveland was a game ahead of the Yankees with ten remaining when they went into New York for a two-game series. The Yankees' Reynolds and Lopat each threw complete game victories over Feller and Lemon, the Indians scoring only two runs in the two games. Cleveland won only three of its remaining eight games, while the Yankees won nine of their last twelve, deciding the pennant by five games in favor of New York. In 1952, the Indians could get no closer than half-a-game out in the final three weeks, but never trailed by more than 2½ before being eliminated with only two games to go on their schedule. Cleveland was last in first place on August 22, when Garcia beat Reynolds to boost the Indians into a tie with the Yankees, but the next day a 1-0 shutout by Raschi over Wynn left New York atop the standings alone, and the Yankees never had to so much as share the lead again in a pennant they won by a mere two games.

The Yankees and Indians traded blowout pennant victories the next two years, but in 1955 the two teams were back in an epic struggle for the pennant. By now, Stengel's Yankees were a different team based on who were their core regulars; in particular they were now without Reynolds, Raschi, and Lopat. But once again, it was the Yankees that got the better of the Indians. Cleveland led by a game over New York with eight remaining, only to lose five of their last eight to finish three games out of first. Four of those losses were to second-division teams.

Cleveland's inability to beat out New York more than once was reflected in their season series with the Yankees:

- In 1951, the Yankees overwhelmed the Indians in their season series, winning 15 of 22 games. Their trio of big-game starters—Reynolds (5-1 against Cleveland), Raschi (3-2), and Lopat (5-2)—won 13 of those 15 games, while losing five. For the Indians, Feller—who led the league in wins with 22—won only two of six decisions against the Yankees, while Lemon (3-3), Wynn (1-4), and Garcia (1-3)

accounted for the remainder of Cleveland's seven triumphs over New York, but also for ten losses. The Indians' formidable pitching—they led the league in earned run average, lowest batting average and on-base percentage against, and fewest home runs surrendered—held the Yankees to their second lowest run total against any team in the league, but the Bronx Bombers still outscored the Tribe by an average of one run per game, 99 runs (4.5 per game) to 78 (3.5 per game).

- The Indians fared better head-to-head against the Yankees in 1952, but still lost the series winning 10 and losing 12. As befitting the only other team in the American League to win 90 games, Cleveland held the Yankees to their worst record against AL teams and was the only team to batter New York pitchers, who led the league in ERA, for 100 runs. The Yankees, for their part, scored 105 runs against the Indians. This time the Yankees' trio of starters had an 8-7 record against the Indians, while Lemon, Wynn, and Garcia went 7-6, with Feller—at the beginning of the end of his great career (9-13 on the season)—winning one of four decisions against New York.
- The Yankees won their first run-away pennant under Stengel in 1953, never behind in the standings after only their seventh game of the season. Not that it did them any good, but this time the Indians split their season series, once again being the most difficult team for New York to beat. Reynolds pitched mostly in relief in 1953 and had no decisions against Cleveland; Raschi and Lopat won five and lost three. Lemon, Wynn, and Garcia had a combined 11-9 record against New York, accounting for all but two of the Indians' decisions against the Yankees.
- The two teams split their series again in 1954, this time with Cleveland winning the pennant decisively—by eight games—or as decisively as can be, considering the runner-up Yankees won 103 games of their own. Reynolds and Lopat won five and lost three against the Indians, and Raschi was denied any ability to contribute having been unceremoniously banished to the Cardinals in a pre-season trade. Lemon and Wynn went 8-5 against the Yankees, while Garcia failed to gain a victory in three decisions. This was the first time in the four years that the Indians outscored the Yankees in the season series, but just barely by 99 to 95.
- Finally, in 1955, the Indians beat the Yankees in their season series, taking 13 of 22 games. This was the first time in the Stengel era that the Yankees lost a season series to any pennant race rival, of whom they faced off against eleven from 1949 to 1955. The Indians' trio of aces had an 8-8 record against the Yankees, while New York's vaunted trio was no longer there. But, of course, New York again came out on top of the AL standings.

Even if the 1951-55 Cleveland Indians had many more “best players” with regard to both contemporary and historical legacy, the five-and-five-in-five 1949-53 New York Yankees were the far better team. Indicative of their superiority, despite the more powerful offense and overall better pitching staff of the Indians, the Yankees outscored their game opponents by a much larger margin than did the Indians—averaging 203 runs per season over five years, compared to Cleveland's 148. While it is true that scoring in the American League was 5 percent higher during the Yankees' five-and-five in-five years, that Yankee team outscored their game opponents by 37 percent more than the 1951-55 Indians outscored theirs. And while only Allie Reynolds among the Yankees' three aces was among the

league's five best pitchers from 1949 to 1953, and all three of the Indians' top pitchers were among the league's five best for all or the majority of years from 1951 to 1955, it was New York's trio that outperformed Cleveland's in their match-ups from 1951 to 1953. Going head-to-head those three years, Reynolds (7-6), Vic Raschi (10-5), and Ed Lopat (9-5) combined for 26 wins and 15 losses—a .634 winning percentage—for the Yankees, while Cleveland's Lemon had a losing 8-9 record, Wynn was 6-9, and Garcia alone had a winning 9-7 record against New York for a combined 23 wins and 25 losses.

2 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1955

	P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
New York Yankees, 1949-53	5 - 5	487-280 .635	40	20	21	81
Cleveland Indians, 1951-55	1 - 0	482-288 .626	22	25	36	83

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

The 1949-53 New York Yankees are a team that would seem to contradict my argument that having many “best players” is a necessary foundation for sustained success. Why was that? Perhaps it was because of that indefinable quality called character. Perhaps it was because they still had Joe DiMaggio and his expectation to win every year, even if he was past his prime, and no other team had a comparable such player. Perhaps it was also because of the leadership of players like Yogi Berra—a legitimately great player—and Phil Rizzuto, having his best years. Or perhaps it was the magic manipulations by maestro Manager Casey Stengel that made them as successful as they were. But that is another tale to tell.

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

NEW YORK YANKEES, 1949-1953

5 Pennants (1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953)
5 World Series Wins (1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953)

ACHIEVEMENT

1 st place (x 3)	2 nd place (x 2)	3 rd place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
5 x 3 = 15	0	0	5 x 1 = 5	20

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 20 / 5 years x 10 = **40**

DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	AL1/Runs Scored	AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
0	1	1	2	4

DOMINANCE SCORE = 4 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **20**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1949-53	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1946-55	2 nd 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
SS Phil Rizzuto, 1941-54	24.3	1949-53	1949-53	no	
IF Gil McDougald, 1951-59	12.3	1951-58	no		
LF Gene Woodling, 1949-53	16.5	no	no		
CF Joe DiMaggio, 1936-51	13.8	1936-51	*		^
RF Hank Bauer, 1949-58	13.9	no	no		
rf-CF Mickey Mantle, 1951-68	13.5	no	no		
C Yogi Berra, 1948-59	23.8	1948-59	1950-54	yes	yes
P Allie Reynolds, 1947-54	16.9	1946-52	no		
P Vic Raschi, 1948-53	16.7	s/o	no		
P Ed Lopat, 1948-54	18.2	s/o	no		
TEAM WAR, 1949-53 = 241.9	169.9				
Core WAR= 70.2 % of Team War 48.4 Av. Team WAR + 70.2 %	82.4 / 10 8.2	6 / 10 6	2 x 1 2	1 x 2 2	1 x 3 3

* DiMaggio one of decade's best position players for best years of 1946-50, but only two years for this team.

^ DiMaggio has century-plus legacy for best consecutive years of 1937 to 1950.

PLAYERS SCORE = 8 (Base WAR) + 6 (Best at Position) + 7 (AL Best) = **21**

CLEVELAND INDIANS, 1951-1955

1 Pennant (1954)
0 World Series Wins

ACHIEVEMENT

1 st place (x 3)	2 nd place (x 2)	3 rd place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
1 x 3 = 3	4 x 2 = 8	0	0	11

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 11 / 5 years x 10 = **22**

DOMINANCE

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

DOMINANCE SCORE = 5 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **25**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1951-55	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1948-57	2 nd ½ 20 th C	20 th C +
2B Bobby Avila, 1951-57	22.9	1951-55	1950-54	no	
SS George Strickland, 1953-57	4.8	no	no		
3B Al Rosen, 1950-56	25.3	1950-54	1950-54	yes	no
LF Dale Mitchell, 1947-53	9.1	no	no		
CF Larry Doby, 1948-55	26.6	1950-54	1950-54	yes	yes
C Jim Hegan, 1946-56	0.9	no	no		
P Bob Lemon, 1948-56	19.8	1948-56	1948-56	yes	yes
P Early Wynn, 1949-57	22.6	1950-56	1951-56	yes	yes
P Mike Garcia, 1949-57	23.3	1949-54	1951-55	no	
P Bob Feller, 1937-53	3.9	no	no		^
TEAM WAR, 1951-55 = 211.7	159.2				
Core WAR= 75.2 % of Team War 42.3 Av. Team WAR + 75.2 %	74.1 / 10 7.4	6 / 10 6	6 x 1 6	4 x 2 8	3 x 3 9

^ Feller has century-plus legacy for best consecutive years of 1938-1947.

PLAYERS SCORE = 7.4 (Base WAR) + 6 (Best at Position) + 23 (AL Best) = **36**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1949-53 YANKEES		1951-55 INDIANS
10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1946-55		10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1948-57
Ted Williams, OF, 1946-55 (-2)		Mickey Mantle, OF, 1952-57
<i>Yogi Berra, C, 1950-54</i>		Ted Williams, OF, 1948-57 (-2)
Larry Doby, OF, 1950-54		Yogi Berra, C, 1950-56
Joe DiMaggio, OF, 1946-50		<i>Larry Doby, OF, 1950-54</i>
<i>Phil Rizzuto, SS, 1949-53</i>		Minnie Minoso, OF, 1953-57
Bobby Doerr, 2B, 1946-50		<i>Al Rosen, 3B, 1950-54</i>
Vern Stephens, SS, 1946-50		Gil McDougald, IF, 1951-57
Johnny Pesky, SS-3B, 1946-51		<i>Bobby Avila, 2B, 1951-55</i>
Dom DiMaggio, OF, 1946-50		Nellie Fox, 2B, 1953-57
George Kell, 3B, 1946-50		Hank Bauer, OF, 1951-55
5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1946-55		5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1948-57
Hal Newhouser, 1946-50		<i>Earl Wynn, 1951-56</i>
Bob Lemon, 1948-52		Billy Pierce, 1951-56
Early Wynn, 1951-55		<i>Bob Lemon, 1948-56</i>
Mel Parnell, 1948-52		Mel Parnell, 1948-52
Mike Garcia, 1949-54		<i>Mike Garcia, 1951-55</i>
Ellis Kinder, RP, 1950-55		Ellis Kinder, RP, 1950-55

BEST AT POSITION

1B	York-----→Fain-----→Skowron-----→(60)
2B	(39) Gordon----→Doerr-----→Avila-----→Fox---→(60)
SS	Boudreau-----→Rizzuto-----\Carrasquel-----→
3B	Keltner-----→Rosen-----→Yost-----→(59)
	Kell-----→
OF	(36) DiMaggio~-----→Mantle-----→(62)
OF	(39)Williams-----→
OF	Keller-----\D.DiMaggio----\Doby-----→Kaline----→(65)
MP	Pesky, SS-3B~-----→McDougald, IF-----→
C	Rosar-----→Berra-----→(59)
P	(34) Bridges----→Newhouser-----→Wynn-----→
P	(37) Feller-----→Garcia-----→Lary-----→(61)
P	(39) E."D"Leonard-----→Reynolds-----→Pierce-----→
P	Trout-----→Parnell-----→Ford-----→(64)
P	Hughson-----→Lemon-----→
RP	Page-----→Kinder-----→Staley→(60)
	40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58