

## *American League's Best Teams*

### *Chapter Nine*

#### **The 1960-64 New York Yankees: Five (And Two) in Five and the End of the Yankee Dynasty**

If the 1949-53 Yankees were in transition from the DiMaggio to the Mantle era, and the 1954-58 Yankees were the heart of the Mantle-Berra era, the **1960 to 1964 New York Yankees** were the consolidation and the climax of the Mantle era coming after a most un-Yankee-like third place flop in 1959. The controlled chaos of Casey Stengel gave way (after 1960) to the unrelenting stability of Ralph Houk as manager (for three years), and then, with Yogi Berra as manager, to the end of the great Yankee dynasty that won 29 American League pennants and 20 World Series championships in 44 years from 1921 to 1964. Twenty nine and twenty—

—Those were sacred numbers when I first gained baseball consciousness. Along with 714, 60 and 61, 56, 3,120, 4,191, 511, 96 and 102: 29 and 20.

The 1960-64 Yankees are the only team in history to match the five consecutive pennants won by the 1949-53 Yankees, but they won only two World Series. Their World Series losses were all dramatic in their fashion: Bill Mazeroski stunning the Yankees with a World Series-ending home run in the seventh game at Pittsburgh in 1960; Sandy Koufax racking up strikeouts and pitching brilliantly to lead the Los Angeles Dodgers' unexpected sweep of the Yankees in 1963; and Bob Gibson's 31 strikeouts in three starts and 27 innings and virtuoso performances in games five and seven in 1964 to give the World Series championship to St. Louis.

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1960-1964 New York Yankees

The 1960-64 Yankees twice won 100 games (109 in 1961 and 104 in 1963) and three times won the pennant by eight or more games, although in 1960 it required a 15-game winning streak to close out the season to break away from the upstart Baltimore Orioles, who were tied for first with the Yankees as late as September 14. In 1961, the Yankees led the Detroit Tigers by only a game-and-a-half at the end of August in a heated pennant race, both teams on a pace to win at least 105 games, before going on a 13-game winning streak at the beginning of September—starting with three in a row over the Tigers at Yankee Stadium—that extended their lead to 11½ games by September 12 in a pennant they won by eight games. The Yankees were in first place to stay in the 1962 pennant race by July 8, with almost exactly half the season to go, on their way to prevailing over Minnesota by five games, one more than their 11-7 margin of victory in their season series with the Twins. In 1963, the Yankees had a double-digit lead in the standings by mid-August that they never relinquished, winning the pennant ultimately by ten games.

The fifth consecutive pennant for this Yankee team in 1964 was much as the first, requiring an end-of-season sprint to come out on top. With Berra in his first year as a manager having had difficulty making the transition from teammate to exercising authority in the dugout, the Yankees were superb in September and the first week of October—winning 28 of their final 37 games—to come out on top in a tight three-way pennant race by one game over the Chicago White Sox and two ahead of the Orioles. Despite that surge to the pennant, the Yankees' front office management saw fit to unceremoniously replace Berra after losing a taut World Series in seven games. They replaced him with the manager of the World Series winners, Johnny Keane of the St. Louis Cardinals. That move didn't work out all that well for the Yankees, as they immediately plummeted to sixth in 1965 and to tenth (and last) place in 1966. Keane was declared a failure after the Yankees opened 1966 with only four wins in 20 games and was replaced by Houk, who had stepped up to General Manager in 1964 to make room for Berra.

Along with the Yankees' 1927 and 1939 teams, the 1961 Yankees are always in the debate about the greatest team ever in a single season. Their 109 wins was only one fewer than the 1927 Yankees, and they had to contend against another team—the Detroit Tigers—that also won 100 games (the Tigers won 101). This was the year of the great Maris-Mantle duel for the single-season home run record, which Roger Maris famously won with his “asterisked” 61 long balls. Mantle finished with 54, and the Yankees as a team had 240 home runs, shattering the record of 221 set by the New York Giants in 1947. Meanwhile, on the mound, Whitey Ford had the best season of his career with 25 wins against only 4 losses, and Luis Arroyo set a new major league record for saves in a single season with 29, although this would be retroactive, since the “save” was not yet an official statistic. (The Yankees' Joe Page in 1949 and the Red Sox' Ellis Kinder in 1953 shared the previous single-season high of 27 saves.) And the Yankees crushed the Reds in the World Series in five games.

This was, however, an expansion year in the American League, which went from eight teams to ten, and I am here suggesting that the 1963 Yankees, with 104 wins, were actually better than the 1961 Yankees. And that's even though Mantle missed most of the season, appearing in only 65 games, with a broken foot from when he crashed into the outfield fence in Baltimore and Maris played in only 90 games because of back problems. My reasons suggesting this are two: first, the overall quality of competition in the American League was somewhat better three years into the expansion era than in the first year; and second, the quality of the Yankees' pitching in 1963 was much better than in 1961.

The Yankees were second in the league in fewest runs allowed both years, but the 1963 Yankees' pitching staff had a collective 14.4 wins above replacement-level (WAR) performance for pitchers, compared to only 10 wins above replacement for Yankee pitchers collectively in 1961, an appreciable 44 percent difference. But to name names and accomplishments, the 1961 Yankees had Ford with his 25-4 record, but no other pitcher had 200 innings pitched, and the three other pitchers besides Ford who started at least 20 games were Ralph Terry (16-3), Bill Stafford (14-9), and Rollie Sheldon (11-6). Terry is not exactly unknown, but the names Stafford and Sheldon do not resonate in either baseball history or Yankee lore as pitchers of a certain stature. The 1963 Yankees, on the other hand, had two 20-game winners—Ford (24-7) and Jim Bouton (21-7)—Terry with 17 wins, and a dynamic rookie left-hander named Al Downing with a 13-5 record. Bouton had two outstanding years with the Yankees before arm problems ruined his career and would later become best known for his tell-all book about the Yankees, including these years, in the very controversial and much-acclaimed *Ball Four*. Downing had a very respectable career, although he might be best known for throwing the pitch that Hank Aaron hit over the fence to break Ruth's longstanding career record of 714 home runs. Of course, the Mick not being there for most of the year and the Yankees being ignominiously swept by the Dodgers in the World Series are heavy counts against the 1963 Yankees being better than the 1961 team. But not to me.

Unlike the 1954-58 Yankees—indeed, unlike the Yankees throughout Stengel's reign—line-up stability returned to the Bronx in 1960. Whereas the 1954-58 Yankees had one outfield (left field) and three infield positions (second, short, and third) perennially unsettled, the 1960-64 Yankees had a stable line-up with Bill Skowron at first (replaced by Joe Pepitone in 1963), Bobby Richardson at second base, Tony Kubek at shortstop (except when he was hurt or in the US armed forces), and Clete Boyer at third, Mickey Mantle in center, Roger Maris in right field, and Elston Howard behind the plate. Left field was the one unsettled position, but not really, because that became Yogi Berra's position in 1960 as he began the twilight of his career. Hector Lopez and then Tom Tresh, who played admirably at short when Kubek was in the service for most of 1962, also played left, and Tresh filled in ably for Mantle in center when the Mick was badly injured in 1963.

Throughout his tenure as manager, Casey Stengel played with his line-up from game-to-game and within games, much to the chagrin of many of his players. Rizzuto in his last two years as a regular with the Yankees, and especially in his last year as the team's *mostly* day-to-day shortstop—1954, when he batted only .195 in 127 games (97 of which he started)—could never count on being on the field at the end of games he started, or entered as a defensive replacement for that matter, because Stengel would frequently pinch hit for him if Rizzuto was due up in a run-scoring opportunity, even as early as the middle innings.

Stengel's creative manipulation of the line-up was most apparent in the infield. Looking at his best team, the 1954-58 Yankees, Stengel started only two infielders in more than 100 games in 1954 (Andy Carey at third for 115 games and McDougald for 107 between two positions); the same two again in 1955; three infielders started at least 100 games in 1956 and 1957, but none more than Carey starting 128 at third the first year and McDougald starting 118 the next; and in 1958, Kubek started 133 games at short, with Skowron starting 114 at first base and McDougald 113 at second. In 1959—the one bad season in Stengel's resume as Yankee manager—Richardson started the most games at a single infield position, 107 at second, while no other infielder had more than 73 starts—less than half a season—at

any one infield position. In winning the 1960 pennant in his last year as Yankee manager, however, Stengel had three-fourths of his infield (first baseman Skowron, second baseman Richardson, and shortstop Kubek) start at least 133 games.

In all, Casey Stengel averaged 68 starting line-up combinations among his position players from 1954 to 1960. In his three years as the Yankees' manager, by contrast, Ralph Houk used 42 different starting line-ups in 1961, 67 in 1962 (in part because Kubek was missing in action, serving his country), and 58 in 1963. These were in 162-game seasons. Infield stability was the rule, with all four of his regular infielders starting at least 138 games at their positions in 1961—and in 101 starting line-ups together—and 130 in 1963. With Kubek gone in 1962, the three other regular infielders started at least 123 games at their positions, and Tresh started 111 at short. And while Stengel made an average of 219 position player substitutions in the field from 1954 to 1960 (and an average of 211 for the entirety of his Yankees' managerial career), based on *retrosheet* data, Houk averaged only 151—and it was that high only because he had to account for assorted physical problems that required Mantle or Maris to leave games early in 1962 and 1963 if the outcome was virtually certain. Unlike Stengel, who made frequent in-game infield substitutions based on game situations, Houk's infielders were far more likely to finish games they started.

With greater line-up stability, the 1960-64 Yankees won five pennants in a row—the same as Stengel's 1949-53 Yankees—but only two World Series. But greater line-up stability does not necessarily mean the five-and-two-in-five Yankees had an all-around stronger core group of players than the five-and-five-in-five Yankees. The two teams have nearly identical “players scores” by my methodological approach.

Both teams had one player with a century-plus legacy: Yogi Berra for the five-and-five Yankees and Mickey Mantle, whose best consecutive years extended from 1953 through 1964, for the five-and-two Yankees. Indeed, Mantle was nearly as dominant in these five years as he had been from 1954 to 1958. Excluding the 1963 season, when that broken foot limited him to 65 games and a player value of only 3.3 wins above replacement—quite good for only about 40 percent of the season—Mantle averaged nearly 8 wins above replacement from 1960 to 1964. That included a WAR player value of 11.9 in his homeric 1961 campaign (so it wasn't just the competition with Maris to out-do the Babe)—the third-best year of his career (after 1956 and 1957). The 1960-64 Yankees also had Whitey Ford with a second-half twentieth century legacy, for the best consecutive years of his career from 1961 to 1965, and four players who were among the American League's 10 best position players and five best pitchers in the surrounding decade—Ford, Mantle, Elston Howard, and Roger Maris—compared to only Berra and Phil Rizzuto for the 1949-53 Yankees.

The 1960-64 Yankees have the advantage, even a significant one, in the best of their integral players, but their other core regulars—including the entire infield and the pitching staff other than Ford—stood out less relative to the other players in the league than did the core cadre of the 1949-53 Yankees. This is reflected in the five-and-five Yankees having five of their ten core regulars counted as the best at their positions for the majority of years under consideration for each team, according to me—shortstop Rizzuto, infielder Gil McDougald (as a multiposition regular), DiMaggio (as one of three outfielders), catcher Berra, and Allie Reynolds (as one of five pitchers)—compared to only Mantle (as one of three outfielders), Howard, and Ford (as one of five starting pitchers) for the five-and-two Yankees. Maris may have been one of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade, but was not

one of the AL's three best outfielders over any five-year period during this time; he was crowded out by the likes of Al Kaline (all five years), Rocky Colavito (1958-63) succeeded by Tony Oliva (1964-68), and his teammate Mantle (1952-62) succeeded by Carl Yastrzemski (1963-69).

The Yankee infield from 1960 to 1964, while solid defensively, was probably not as good as its reputation. First baseman Bill Skowron was the best in the AL at his position from 1954 to 1960, according to me, more by a process of elimination against few other first basemen of sufficient longevity than by outstanding performance; by 1961, he was eclipsed as best at his position by Detroit slugger Norm Cash. Joe Pepitone, his replacement at first after Skowron was sent packing in 1963, had unusual and often unwelcome flare and seemed brimming with the potential to have a very successful career, but played barely at the level of an average starting position player in 1963 and 1964. The same was true for second baseman Bobby Richardson, who may have hit .367 with 12 RBI (and a grand slam home run) in the 1960 World Series and then set a World Series record with 13 hits (and a .406 average) in 1964, but during the regular season was neither a threat at the plate nor a threat to get on base. Shortstop Tony Kubek, when he was healthy or not in the service, and third baseman Clete Boyer had player values according to the WAR metric that made them no better than the average starting position player over the five years for the five-and-two Yankees.

It's a good thing Yankee Stadium crowds got to witness Mantle, Maris, and Howard as that generation's Bronx Bombers because Kubek and Richardson, batting first and second (or the other way around in 1961) were notoriously poor in getting on base for being at the top of the order, a skill that was perhaps not as appreciated then (at least not explicitly) as it is now. From 1960 to 1964, while American League lead-off batters collectively got on base about 32 percent of the time, according to *retrosheet* data available in *baseball-reference.com*, the Yankees' lead-off hitters got on base over 30 percent of the time only once—in 1962 when Richardson hit .302 and walked a career-high 37 times. (Here was one top-of-the-order batter who insisted on hitting his way on base, .266 lifetime batting average be damned.) And while second-in-the-order hitters in the American League those five years got on base a third of the time, the Yankees' second-place hitters had three seasons in which their on-base percentage was less than .300. Managers Houk and Berra persisted in batting Richardson first or second despite his having an OBP over .300 only once in four years from 1961 to 1964; that's on-base percentage, not batting average, lest the point be lost. (Stengel, more astutely, batted Richardson eighth more often than not in his 1960 starting line-ups.) Under the circumstances, it seems almost remarkable that the Yankees were either first or second in runs scored every year. But, then again—

—They had Maris and Mantle. Between them, despite both losing significant time to injury in 1963, the M & M Boys hit 356 home runs for the 1960-64 New York Yankees, driving home 577 runs on those “Ballantine Blasts” (as Mel Allen called them for those of us listening at home), accounting for 15 percent of the total runs scored by the Yankees. Maris led the league in RBI in 1960 and 1961, and Mantle finished in the top five twice—fifth in 1961 and third in 1964. Had the Yankees' top-of-the-order batters been more productive in getting on base, how many more runs batted in might each have had? Maris, who typically hit third in the line-up ahead of Mantle and sometimes fifth after him, blasted 54 percent of his round-trippers with the bases empty. Mantle, who usually batted fourth, hit 53 percent of his home runs with nobody on base, but of course Maris had often cleared the bases before his at bats.

Notwithstanding that the five-and-two Yankees did not have as strong an overall core of position players and pitchers as the five-and-five Yankees, they were clearly a more dominant team. As already mentioned, they twice won 100 or more games and three of their pennants were won by at least eight games, while the 1949-53 Yankees never won 100 games and won only the last of their five straight pennants by a blowout margin. They led the league in scoring twice and were second the three other years, whereas the 1949-53 Yankees led the league in scoring once and were second every other year. The 1949-53 Yankees, however, had overall better pitching with Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, and Ed Lopat than the 1960-64 Yankees with Whitey Ford and much lesser lights. The Reynolds-Raschi-Lopat Yankees were either first (twice) or second in the league in fewest runs allowed all five years, while the Ford-driven Yankees were never the stingiest team in the league, but they were second in fewest runs allowed in 1961, 1962, and 1963.

To what extent should the 1960-64 Yankees' dominance be mitigated by the fact of the 1961 expansion, which arguably diluted the overall talent level in the league by virtue of there being a 25 percent increase in roster positions for two new teams? Whether one argues talent was diluted because the threshold for major league-caliber players was lowered to fill rosters, or because many major league-caliber players whose advance had been stymied in the minor leagues were now able to break into the Show, the perception was that, at the very least, mediocre and marginal players represented a greater proportion of the major league talent pool than in the past, compared to the finite number of the "best players" there are at any given time regardless of how many teams there are in the league.

Even if the proposition of talent dilution is accepted as a given, however, each team's relative dominance can only be addressed in the context of its time. True, the 1960-64 Yankees may have had the advantage of two expansion teams to beat up on, not to mention the perennially bad Kansas City Athletics, but they also faced off against some very good competitive teams. Final standings make it look as though these Yankees were involved in only one dog-fight pennant race—1964, which went down to the wire with two games separating the top three teams in the league—but two of their three blowout margins of victory, in 1960 and 1961, obscure the fact that the Yankees went into the final month of both those seasons engaged in a highly competitive race, no more than a game (in 1960) or a game-and-a-half (in 1961) separating them from a would-be contender for the AL throne. Like the 1949-53 Yankees, this Yankee team faced off against seven other teams that won at least 90 games, and an eighth (third-place Cleveland in 1949, and second-place Baltimore in 1960) that just missed with 89 triumphs. While the five-and-five-in-five Yankees won six of those season series, split two, and did not lose any with a record of 101-75 (.574) between 1949 and 1953, the five-and-two-in-five Yankees won six of their season series against their top competitors, split one, and lost one with a record of 84-63 (.571) between 1960 and 1964. Projected over a single 162-game season, that's a difference of less than a third of a win (92.8 versus 92.5) in favor of the five-and-five Yankees, which is virtually no difference at all.

My bottom line: even though the 1960-64 Yankees won only two of five World Series while the 1949-53 Yankees won all five of theirs, and even though their core regulars leave more to be desired once we acknowledge that Mantle, Maris, Howard, and Ford were among the league's best players, I'm inclined to believe that this Yankee team was better than that

Yankee team. They were a more dominant team in a league whose overall talent may have been diluted by expansion but still had enough other very good (90-win) teams to challenge the Yankees' annual quest for supremacy.

Five pennants and two World Series championships in five straight years, however, does not make the 1960-64 Yankees a better team than the 1954-58 Yankees, with their four pennants and two World Series triumphs in five years. That team, with Mantle and Berra at their best, and Ford close to his best, was the more dominant and better team.

#### 4 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1965

	<b>P-WS</b>	<b>W - L %</b>	<b>Ach</b>	<b>Dom</b>	<b>Play</b>	<b>Total</b>
New York Yankees, 1954-58	4 - 2	486-284 .631	32	45	31	108
<b>New York Yankees, 1960-64</b>	<b>5 - 2</b>	<b>505-296 .630</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>91</b>
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

How about better than the 1926-32 Yankees? Let's not get carried away. There's no discussion. They were not.

#### 7 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1965

	<b>P-WS</b>	<b>W - L %</b>	<b>Ach</b>	<b>Dom</b>	<b>Play</b>	<b>Total</b>
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
New York Yankees, 1954-58	4 - 2	486-284 .631	32	45	31	108
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
<b>New York Yankees, 1960-64</b>	<b>5 - 2</b>	<b>505-296 .630</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>91</b>
New York Yankees, 1949-53	5 - 5	487-280 .635	40	20	21	81

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

## TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

### NEW YORK YANKEES, 1960-1964

5 Pennants (1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964)  
2 World Series Wins (1961, 1962)

#### 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
5 x 3 = 15	0	0	2 x 1 = 2	17

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 17 / 5 years x 10 = **34**

#### DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	AL1/Runs Scored	AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
2	3	2	0	7

**DOMINANCE SCORE** = 7 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **35**

#### PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1960-64	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1958-67	2 <sup>nd</sup> ½ 20 <sup>th</sup> C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
1B Bill Skowron, 1956-62	9.1	no	no		
2B Bobby Richardson, 1959-66	5.0	no	no		
SS Tony Kubek, 1957-64 (-1)	10.3	no	no		
3B Clete Boyer, 1960-66	13.5	no	no		
ss-LF Tom Tresh, 1962-68	11.5	no	no		
CF Mickey Mantle, 1952-66 *	34.7	1954-62	1958-64	yes	yes
RF Roger Maris, 1960-66	26.8	s/o	1960-64	no	
C Elston Howard, 1959-64	21.8	1960-64	1960-64	no	
P Whitey Ford, 1953-67	20.4	1954-64	1961-65	yes	no
P Ralph Terry, 1960-63	7.8	no	no		
P Jim Bouton, 1962-66	8.5	no	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1960-64 = 201.4</b>	169.4				
Core WAR= 84.0 % of Team War 40.3 Av. Team WAR + 84.0 %	74.2 / 10 <b>7.4</b>	3.5 / 11 <b>3.2</b>	4 x 1 <b>4</b>	2 x 2 <b>4</b>	1 x 3 <b>3</b>

\* Mantle finished his career with the Yankees at 1B in 1967-68.

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 7.4 (Base WAR) + 3.2 (Best at Position) + 11 (AL Best) = **22**

**BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE**

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

<b>1960-64 YANKEES</b>	
<b>10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1958-67</b>	
	<i>Mickey Mantle, OF, 1958-64</i>
	Al Kaline, OF, 1961-67
	Harmon Killebrew, 1F/OF, 1961-67
	Brooks Robinson, 3B, 1962-67
	Jim Fregosi, SS, 1963-67
	Carl Yastrzemski, OF, 1963-67
	<i>Elston Howard, C, 1960-64</i>
	<i>Roger Maris, OF, 1960-64</i>
	Rocky Colavito, OF, 1958-62
	Bob Allison, OF, 1961-65
<b>5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1958-67</b>	
	Camilo Pascual, 1959-63
	<i>Whitey Ford, 1961-65</i>
	Jim Bunning, 1957-62
	Dean Chance, 1962-67
	Gary Peters, 1963-67
	Hoyt Wilhelm, RP, 1961-65

**BEST AT POSITION**

1B	(47) Fain-----→Skowron-----→Cash -----→
2B	Avila-----→Fox-----→Lumpe-----→
SS	Carrasquel-----→Aparicio-----→Fregosi-----→(70)
3B	Rosen-----→Yost-----→B.Robinson-----→
OF	(39) Williams~-----→Colavito-----→Oliva-----→
OF	Doby-----→Kaline-----→F.Robinson-→
OF	Mantle-----→Yastrzemski-----→(69)
MP	McDougald, IF-----→Killebrew, 3B/1B/of-----→(69)
C	(48) Berra-----→E.Howard-----→Freehan----→(69)
P	(48) Lemon-----→Pascual-----→McDowell----→(70)
P	(48) Parnell---→Ford-----→McLain---→(69)
P	(49) Garcia-----→Lary-----→Chance-----→
P	Wynn-----→Bunning-----→Peters-----→
P	Pierce-----→Pappas-----→Stottlemyre→(69)
RP	Kinder-----→Staley-----→Wilhelm-----→
	50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68