

American League's Best Teams

Chapter Eleven

The 1971-75 Oakland Athletics: More Dominant Than History Suggests

No sooner had the Baltimore Orioles won three straight American League pennants at the beginning of the divisional era than the Oakland Athletics in 1972 began their own string of three pennants in a row. They also won three World Series in a row, the first team to do so since the 1949-53 Yankees. The **1971 to 1975 Oakland Athletics**, in winning the American League's Western Division every year of their run, were also only the third team in history—after the 1949-53 and 1960-64 New York Yankees—to finish in first place five consecutive years. The core players on this team included right fielder Reggie Jackson at the peak of his great career, third baseman Sal Bando, and shortstop Bert Campaneris who were the best at their positions in the AL during all or most of these seasons and who were three of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. They also had Joe Rudi in left all five years and, beginning in 1973, Bill North in center and Gene Tenace playing catcher and first base. The pitching staff featured starters Catfish Hunter, Ken Holtzman, and Vida Blue in their prime and splendid relief ace Rollie Fingers in his. Hunter was one of the league's five best starters and Fingers the league's best reliever in both contemporary context and in the surrounding decade, and Blue—a 20-game winner in 1971, 1973, and 1975—probably would have been too had he not had poor season in 1972. Based on their best consecutive years for this team, Jackson and Bando both have century-plus legacies among the American League's 50 best position players since 1901, according to me, and Hunter has a half-century legacy as one of the AL's 18 best pitchers from 1951 to 2000. And yet—

—The five (division titles)-and-three (pennants)-and-three (World Series)-in-five 1971-75 Oakland A's, while recognized as the best team in baseball at the time, seem

somehow diminished in historical retrospect because they were hardly as dominant as the great teams that preceded them. Only once did they win 100 games (with 101 in 1971), only once did they win their division by a blowout margin (by 16 games in 1971), only once did they lead the league in runs scored (in 1973), and only once did they lead the league in fewest runs allowed (in 1974). Of the American League's "best teams" to date, the 1971-75 Athletics, with a .594 winning percentage, were the only one to win less than 60 percent of their games. The 1946-50 Red Sox and the 1951-55 Indians, who each won only one pennant in five years, both had appreciably higher winning percentages than the 1971-75 Athletics. In historical context they seem, at first glance most akin to the 1949-53 five-and-five-in-five New York Yankees, winning what counted the most when it counted the most—except that these Oakland A's had a big advantage in dominant players compared to those Yankees.

Did then the 1971-75 Oakland A's overachieve for their relative lack of dominance in the league? Or was this a team that underachieved and was possibly overrated, despite winning five division titles in a row and having great success in the post-season, because of their relative lack of dominance in the league with the quality players they had? Or were these Oakland A's a team that was in fact more dominant—and, hence, a legitimate "best team"—than its measure against the dominance factors of my methodological framework would suggest? I am inclined to go with this last perspective because—

—The excellence of the **1969-74 Baltimore Orioles** alone precluded the 1971-75 Oakland Athletics from scoring high on the dominance factors of my methodology.

- Consider: in winning five straight Western Division titles, Oakland had the highest winning percentage in the American League only in the two years, 1972 and 1975, that Baltimore did not win the East. In each of the three years that both teams won their division—1971, 1973, and 1974—the Orioles had the best record in the league, with the A's a very close second. In 1971, the two teams won exactly the same number of games (101), but Oakland had three more losses as Baltimore did not need to make up four games that had been postponed by weather. The Athletics' 94 wins in 1973 were three fewer than the Orioles, and in 1974 Baltimore had only one more victory than Oakland's 90.
- Consider: as good as Oakland's pitching and defense were, Baltimore's was better. From 1971 to 1975, the Orioles led the league in fewest runs allowed four times, the Athletics once. Otherwise, the A's were either the second or third stingiest team in the league.
- And consider: while the Orioles led the league in runs scored in 1971 and the Athletics in 1973, Oakland otherwise was more productive in scoring runs—finishing second twice and third twice, with Baltimore finishing as high as third only once between 1972 and 1975. The A's outscored their game opponents by an annual average of 141 runs from 1971 to 1975, the Orioles by 134 runs.

Although the Athletics won only one of their five straight division titles by a blowout margin, they nonetheless dominated the American League West every year of their run. In three of the five years, they moved into first place to stay by the end of May. In all five years, Oakland led the division on the Fourth of July. After Independence Day, the A's in five years spent a grand total of only fifteen days—five in 1972 and ten in 1973—out of first

place. In all five years, Oakland was also in first place come September, their smallest margin entering any of the five Septembers being a 1½-game lead in 1972. Three times they had a comfortable lead of 7½ games or more on the first day of September. In the five Septembers, the Oakland A's never spent a day out of first place.

The new vagaries of divisional alignment—where teams played eighteen games against every other team in their own division and twelve games against the teams in the other division—meant 90 of Oakland's 162 games each year were against Western Division rivals. But it cannot be said that Oakland's dominance of the division was because the AL West these years was a weaker division than the AL East. It was not. Teams in the American League East won only seven more games than American League West teams between 1971 and 1975, a meaningless difference. Including the division winners, seven AL West teams won at least 90 games during these five years (Oakland accounting for five of those 90-win seasons), while six Eastern Division teams won 90 or more games (Baltimore accounting for four).

It can be fairly said that in the first seven years of divisional alignment, the American League had a dominating team in both of its divisions—Baltimore in the East and Oakland in the West. Through 1975, only two of the American League's fourteen divisional races were competitive, both in the Eastern Division—Detroit winning over Boston by half-a-game in 1972, and Baltimore over New York by two games in 1974. The 1969-74 Orioles were the better, more dominant team; among American League teams, only the 1936-42 Yankees have a higher "dominance score" than the Orioles in my methodology. The excellence of the Orioles in 1971 and 1973 and Baltimore's consistently leading the league in fewest runs allowed were the key factor in suppressing the dominance score of the 1971-75 Athletics.

While not the measure of the 1969-74 Orioles, the 1971-75 Athletics were a dominating team in their own right, and perhaps with more killer instinct. The Orioles won three straight pennants, but only one World Series, and they lost both the 1973 and 1974 League Championship Series to the Athletics. Oakland was the first team in major league baseball's new divisional alignment to win three straight pennants and World Series. To get there, the Oakland A's—like the Baltimore Orioles from 1969 to 1971—had to win three consecutive League Championship Series that at the time were only five games, meaning there was greater chance of a superior team being derailed in such a short series than in the longer seven-game World Series format. Moreover, the best-of-five format of the LCS was the first two games at one division winner's ballpark and however many of the last three as were necessary at the other's park, the opening locale alternating each year between East and West regardless of which division champion had the better overall record. Either way, losing the first two games was a very significant handicap to overcome. The Athletics lost the first two games of both the 1971 and 1975 League Championship Series, both on the road, and went on to be swept in the only two years of their great run that they did not win the pennant *and* the World Series.

What the 1971-75 Athletics accomplished is more remarkable given the open feuding on the ball club, the players' near universal hatred of Oakland owner Charles O. Finley, and Finley's interference with his managers. Dick Williams, who led the A's to the first three of their five straight division titles, quit as Oakland's manager after winning the 1973 World Series in disgust over Finley's attempts to deceitfully manipulate his roster by trying to have second baseman Mike Andrews removed and replaced on the roster by declaring him injured

following two critical errors on back-to-back plays in the twelfth inning that cost them the second game. For Williams, that was the final straw in having to put up with Finley.

Williams' successor, Alvin Dark, who led the A's to their third straight World Series championship in 1974 and a fifth straight division title in 1975, had his own problems with Finley, who used his aide—a young man who would become famous in the not-to-distant future as the hip hop artist MC Hammer—to pass in-game instructions to his manager in the dugout. Dark was also forced to employ exclusively as a pinch runner a world-class sprinter named Herb Washington. Fast, he certainly was—Herb had set several world records—but Washington had no actual baseball skills. The skills he lacked included the fine art of running the bases and how to steal off the pitcher. There is, after all, more to stealing a base and attempting to score from first on a hit into an outfield gap than speed alone. Herb Washington, who came around to score about 30 percent of the time he was inserted into games as a pinch runner (33 runs scored in 105 games), was successful in 65 percent (31 of 48) of his stolen base attempts, only slightly better than the overall 62 percent success rate for the league as a whole. (National League teams were successful in their stolen base attempts 67 percent of the time.) For comparison purposes with a skilled professional, Oakland shortstop Bert Campaneris, one of the most prolific base stealers of his generation, was successful 77 percent of the time in his career, during which he stole 649 bases. Washington had the dubious distinction of being picked off first base as a pinch runner representing the potential tying run in the ninth inning of Game 2 in the 1974 World Series, quashing what had been a two-run rally. His was the second out of the ninth and left the bases empty in the only game Oakland lost to Los Angeles in that World Series.

For Oakland's players, Finley was not only mercurial and a tightwad, but disreputably untrustworthy. After Catfish Hunter had won 88 games in four consecutive 20-win seasons from 1971 to 1974, Finley refused to make payment on an annuity clause in his contract (because he was unhappy he wouldn't get a tax benefit)—which led to arbitration, a ruling that Finley had violated Hunter's contract and so no longer had claim on the pitcher, and Catfish becoming a free agent to be snapped up by a rival owner, the Yankees' George Steinbrenner, who was definitely not cheap when it came to paying star players. The end of Oakland's Western Division dynasty came with Finley's decision to exploit the expiration of baseball's Collective Bargaining Agreement by cutting key players' salaries the maximum allowed after they won for him the A's fifth consecutive division title in 1975. The CBA—negotiated to end the 1972 players' strike that cost the first thirteen days of the season—including an important provision for salary arbitration; most of Oakland's stars, refusing to sign for less money, opted to play the 1976 season without contracts in order to become unconditional free agents at the end of the year according to the terms of baseball's standard uniform contract. Seeking value for his best players, Finley traded Reggie Jackson and Ken Holtzman to the Orioles just days before the 1976 season but was foiled by the Commissioner in his efforts to sell Fingers, Rudi, and Blue for a huge payback during the season. When free agency became a reality following the 1976 season, all of the remaining core players of the 1971-75 Athletics, except for Vida Blue still under contract, took advantage of the opportunity to find more hospitable environs.

The 1971-75 Oakland Athletics lorded over the AL West but hardly dominated the American League because they were nearly direct contemporaries with the 1969-74 Baltimore Orioles. By winning five straight division titles, their accomplishments are very close to comparable with the **1949-53 New York Yankees'** five pennants and World Series in five years

(remember, those Yankees did not need to go through a League Championship Series to reach the World Series they way these Athletics did.) Both teams were capable of explosive outbursts at the plate (the Athletics were first, second, or third in the league in home runs each year; the Yankees the same) and had an impressive trio of starting pitchers—Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, and Ed Lopat for the Yankees; Catfish Hunter, Ken Holtzman, and Vida Blue for the A's—who were collectively overshadowed by a trio from a rival contender (Cleveland's Bob Lemon, Early Wynn, and Mike Garcia in the case of the Yankees; Baltimore's Jim Palmer, Mike Cuellar, and Dave McNally in the case of the Athletics). Oakland, however, has a clear "players" advantage, including five whom I count among the league's 10 best position players, five best starting pitchers, or the best reliever in the surrounding decade, compared to only two such players on that Yankees team, based on their best consecutive years. And the A's had three players with at least a half-century historical legacy, compared to only one (Yogi Berra) for the 1949-53 Yankees. The 1971-75 Oakland Athletics were the better team.

The more pertinent question is where this Oakland team stands relative to the two Yankee teams that followed the five-and-five-in-five Yankees. I believe they were also better than the **1960-64 New York Yankees**, who likewise finished first five consecutive years—all pennants because this was before the divisional era. Although their achievement occurred during the first major league expansion, that does not diminish the Yankees' dominance of the league at the time. My reason for considering the A's the better team comes down to the players. Those Yankees had four total players I consider to have been among the league's best position players and pitchers in the surrounding decade; the Athletics had five. Those Yankees had three players or pitchers who were the best at their positions in contemporary context; the A's had five. And those Yankees had Mickey Mantle with a century-plus historical legacy and Whitey Ford with a half-century legacy based on their performance for that team; the Athletics had Reggie Jackson and Sal Bando with century-plus legacies, according to me, and Catfish Hunter with a half-century legacy. Overall, the two teams were comparable in their offensive productivity (relative to their times), but the Oakland Athletics had superior pitching, including Rollie Fingers coming out of the bullpen.

A compelling case can be made for the 1971-75 Athletics possibly being a better team than the **1954-58 New York Yankees**, winners of four pennants and two World Series in five years, especially taking into account that Oakland's three consecutive pennants and World Series triumphs came in the divisional era. In this comparison, the two teams match up nearly perfectly on the "players" side of my equation, both in contemporary (best at position and surrounding decade) and historical context. Both teams had two position players with century-plus legacies for their accomplishments with these teams—Mantle and Berra for the Yankees, Jackson and Bando for the A's—and their ace starter with a half-century legacy, Ford for the Yankees and Hunter for the Athletics. Notwithstanding that the A's were direct contemporaries of the 1969-74 Orioles, the best team in the American League since the Joe DiMaggio Yankees, the relative dominance of the 1954-58 Yankees to the rest of the league is too significant to ignore. Perhaps not by much, but I consider them the better team.

5 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1975

| | D-P-WS | W - L % | Ach | Dom | Play | Total |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| Baltimore Orioles, 1969-74 | 5 - 3 - 1 | 586-374 .610 | 38 | 58 | 24 | 120 |
| New York Yankees, 1954-58 | 4 - 2 | 486-284 .631 | 32 | 45 | 31 | 108 |
| Oakland Athletics, 1971-75 | 5 - 3 - 3 | 476-326 .594 | 44 | 20 | 29 | 93 |
| New York Yankees, 1960-64 | 5 - 2 | 505-296 .630 | 34 | 35 | 22 | 91 |
| New York Yankees, 1949-53 | 5 - 5 | 487-280 .635 | 40 | 20 | 21 | 81 |
| <i>Cleveland Indians, 1951-55</i> | <i>1 - 0</i> | <i>482-288 .626</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>25</i> | <i>36</i> | <i>83</i> |

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

We are not talking about a team better than the Oakland A's great grandfather, the 1910-14 Philadelphia Athletics, however, or the 1926-32 New York Yankees, who would have been even more dominant than they were had they not been direct competitors of the Oakland A's granddaddy—the 1928-32 Philadelphia Athletics.

7 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1975

| | D-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 |
| Baltimore Orioles, 1969-74 | 5 - 3 - 1 | 586-374 .610 | 38 | 58 | 24 | 120 |
| 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 |
| Oakland Athletics, 1971-75 | 5 - 3 - 3 | 476-326 .594 | 44 | 20 | 29 | 93 |
| <i>New York Yankees, 1960-64</i> | <i>5 - 2</i> | <i>505-296 .630</i> | <i>34</i> | <i>35</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>91</i> |

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

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

OAKLAND ATHLETICS, 1971-1975

5 AL Western Division Titles (1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975)

3 Pennants (1972, 1973, 1974)

3 World Series Wins (1972, 1973, 1974)

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 | 3 x 1 = 3 | |
| + 3 pennants = 3 | | | | |
| + 2 AL1 (x .5) = 1.0 | | | | |
| 19.0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 22 |

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 22 / 5 years x 10 = **44**

DOMINANCE

| 100 Wins | 8 Games Ahead | AL1/Runs Scored | AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed | Score |
|----------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |

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

PLAYERS

| CORE REGULARS | WAR 1971-75 | BEST at POSITION | Decade 1969-78 | 2 nd 1/2 20 th C | 20 th C + |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------------------|----------------|--|----------------------|
| 2B Dick Green, 1964-74 (-1) | 4.0 | no | no | | |
| SS Bert Campaneris, 1965-76 | 19.1 | 1971-76 | 1970-74 | no | |
| 3B Sal Bando, 1968-76 | 27.4 | 1969-74 | 1969-74 | yes | yes |
| LF Joe Rudi, 1970-76 | 19.0 | no | no | | |
| CF Bill North, 1973-76 | 15.6 | no | no | | |
| RF Reggie Jackson, 1968-75 | 33.3 | 1969-78 | 1971-76 | yes | yes |
| C/1B Gene Tenace, 1973-76 | 15.6 | no | no | | |
| P Catfish Hunter, 1965-74 | 16.6 | 1970-76 | 1971-75 | yes | no |
| P Vida Blue, 1971-77 | 17.6 | no | no | | |
| P Ken Holtzman, 1972-75 | 10.3 | no | no | | |
| P Blue Moon Odom, 1968-74 | -1.8 | no | no | | |
| RP Darold Knowles, 1971-74 | 1.0 | no | no | | |
| RP Rollie Fingers, 1969-76 | 7.6 | 1971-76 | 1971-76 | no | |
| TEAM WAR, 1971-75 = 220.4 | 185.3 | | | | |
| Core WAR= 84.1 % of Team War | 81.2 / 10 | 5 / 13 | 5 x 1 | 3 x 2 | 2 x 3 |
| 44.1 Av. Team WAR + 84.1 % | 8.1 | 3.8 | 5 | 6 | 6 |

PLAYERS SCORE = 8.1 (Base WAR) + 3.8 (Best at Position) + 17 (AL Best) = **29**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

| 1971-75 ATHLETICS | |
|--|--|
| 10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1969-78 | |
| <i>Reggie Jackson, OF, 1971-76</i> | |
| Rod Carew, 2B-1b, 1973-77 | |
| <i>Sal Bando, 3B, 1969-74</i> | |
| Carlton Fisk, C, 1972-78 (-1) | |
| Bobby Grich, 2B, 1972-76 | |
| Graig Nettles, 3B, 1971-78 | |
| Carl Yastrzemski, OF/1B, 1970-74 | |
| Thurmon Munson, C, 1973-77 | |
| <i>Bert Campaneris, SS, 1970-74</i> | |
| Roy White, OF, 1971-76 | |
| 5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1969-78 | |
| Jim Palmer, 1970-78 | |
| Bert Blyleven, 1971-77 | |
| Nolan Ryan, 1972-77 | |
| Gaylord Perry, 1972-77 | |
| <i>Catfish Hunter, 1971-75</i> | |
| <i>Rollie Fingers, RP, 1971-76</i> | |

BEST AT POSITION

| | |
|----|--|
| 1B | (61) Cash-----→Powell-----→Scott-----→Murray-----→ (84) |
| 2B | Carew-----→Grich-----→ |
| SS | (63) Fregosi-----→Campaneris-----→Yount-----→ |
| 3B | (60) B.Robinson----→Bando-----→Brett-----→ |
| OF | (63) Yastrzemski-----→White-----→Lynn-----→ |
| OF | Oliva-----→Jackson-----→Wilson---→(84) |
| OF | F.Robinson-----→Otis-----→Singleton-----→ |
| MP | (59) Killebrew, 3B/1B---→Yastrzemski, OF/1B-----→Molitor---→(89) |
| DH | McRae-----→ |
| C | Freehan-----→Munson-----→Fisk-----→ |
| P | (62) Chance-----→Cuellar-----→Eckersley-----→ |
| P | (63) Peters-----→McNally-----→Ryan-----→Stieb→ (90) |
| | McDowell-----→Blyleven-----→ Morris---→(86) |
| P | Perry-----→ |
| P | Stottlemyre-----→Palmer-----→John-----→(83) |
| P | McLain-----→Hunter-----→Guidry-----→(85) |
| P | (61) Wilhelm----→ Fingers-----→ Gossage-----→(83) |
| RP | Wood, RP-SP-----\Lyle, RP-----→ |
| | 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 |