

American League's Best Teams

Chapter Fourteen

The 1996-2001 New York Yankees: Beginning of a New Yankee Dynasty

After Major League Baseball aligned each league into three divisions in 1994, the American League East belonged to the New York Yankees and the American League Central to the Cleveland Indians, at least until the early twenty-first century. From 1995 to 1999, the Indians became the first team since the 1970s Oakland Athletics to win five consecutive division titles. No other team in the Central Division came close to beating out Cleveland. The Indians' best historical run since the 1950s—when they finished second to the Yankees five times in six years, beating them out for the pennant once—really began in 1994, the year they were moved from the AL East into the new Central Division, when they were within a game of first place on the day the players' strike brought an end to a season that might have ended with Cleveland's first pennant after forty years in baseball's wilderness (although they were still a good team in the first few of those forty years). The highest the Indians had ever finished in their 25 years in the AL East was fourth—three times when there were six teams in the division, and once when there were seven.

The 1990s also saw the New York Yankees return with a vengeance from their own sojourn in the wilderness. From 1996 to 2001, the Yankees made the post-season all six years, won five division titles, five pennants, and four World Series. Unlike the Indians, the Yankees had some close calls in winning their division titles. Beginning in 1998, after winning the wild card the previous year, the Yankees would win nine straight division titles before being beaten out by the Boston Red Sox in 2007. And even then, they won the wild card to extend their streak of post-season finishes to 13 straight years. That streak ended the next year.

For the Yankees, a new dynasty was built that has now extended into the second decade of the twenty-first century. To be honest, it doesn't seem like it will ever end—not with the tremendous financial resources available to Team Steinbrenner (in the hands of George's two sons, beginning in 2008). For the Indians, however, there would be no dynasty—and, indeed, their commanding successes in winning five straight division titles, within which they also won two pennants, were a deceptive consequence of the new divisional alignment. Put quite simply, except for Cleveland, the American League's Central Division was not very good.

If not for the Yankees, the best American League team to close out the final decade of the twentieth century would have been the **1994 to 1999 Cleveland Indians**. Cleveland was a game out of first place in the AL Central in 1994, behind the Chicago White Sox, on a pace to win 96 games, when the season was brought to a premature close on August 12—a date that will live in baseball infamy as the players began the most costly strike in major league history to protest the owners' insistence that a new labor agreement must include a team salary cap to control escalating player contracts under free agency. The next five years, however, all belonged to the Indians in the AL Central:

- In 1995, despite a season reduced to only 144 games to give time for spring training because the labor impasse wasn't resolved until scheduled games were supposed to begin, the Indians still won 100 games. Their winning percentage of .694 was the third highest in American League history to this point, after the 1954 Indians and the 1927 Yankees, although in three years they would be displaced by the 1998 Yankees as the new team with the AL's the third-highest winning percentage ever. The Indians won their 1995 division title by a colossal 30 games over the second-place Kansas City Royals, who (truth be told) had a losing record, then went on to win their first American League pennant since 1954 before losing to Atlanta in the World Series.
- In 1996, Cleveland again had the best record in the league, finishing 14½ games ahead of second-place Chicago in the AL Central, but the Indians were derailed by the wild card Baltimore Orioles in the first round of playoffs known as the Division Series.
- The Indians had their worst season of the six in 1997, with only 86 victories and the fourth-best record in the league, but still won their division by six games over the White Sox. Hardly the dominating team they were the two previous years, Cleveland beat Baltimore in the League Championship Series and then lost the World Series in dramatic fashion to the Florida Marlins—the first major league team to win a pennant without finishing first, thanks to the wild card. Needing only two outs in the bottom of the ninth in Miami to win the World Series, the Indians watched the Marlins tie the game on a sacrifice fly and then go on to win in the last of the eleventh on a two-out single.
- In 1998, the Indians won their division by nine games with the third-best record in the league, and in 1999 they won their division by a whopping 21½ games but with the second-best record in the American League. The Indians failed to advance to the World Series either year.

- Although not part of this run, the Indians would finish second by five games in 2000 and reclaim the division title again in 2001 by six games before Cleveland's front office decided it was time to cut expenses and rebuild through prospects.

The Cleveland Indians were not nearly as dominant as their series of five blowout division titles in a row suggests because the Central Division was the weakest in the American League. Of the four other teams in the AL Central, only one—the 1996 White Sox—had a winning season when the Indians were winning their five straight division titles, and Chicago had only the fifth-best record of the fourteen American League teams that year. The second-place Royals in 1995 had the eighth-best record in the league, the second-place White Sox in 1997 were sixth in consolidated league standings, the second-place White Sox in 1998 were seventh, and in 1999 the second-place White Sox were ninth-best. The Indians would have finished 14 games ahead of the league's second best team (Boston) in 1995 in consolidated American League standings and 7½ games ahead of the second-best Yankees in 1996, but 11½ games behind Baltimore in 1997, 25 games behind the 114-win Yankees in 1998, and a game *behind* the Yankees in 1999 even though they won their division by 21½ games. Cleveland had a .596 winning percentage during their string of five straight division titles from 1995 to 1999; the rest of the AL Central had a winning percentage of .452—and these were still years of the balanced schedule in which AL teams played only one game less against every team outside their division than within their division.

The 1994-99 Indians were a genuinely very good team only from 1994 to 1996. Cleveland had an imposing team offensively those three years, leading the league in scoring in 1994 and 1995 and being outscored by only the Seattle Mariners in 1996. Of their core players, left fielder Albert Belle (since 1993) and center fielder Kenny Lofton (since 1992) were two of the three best outfielders in the American League, and both were among the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade for the 1994-99 Indians, according to me. Lofton was an excellent outfielder and superb lead-off batter who led the league in steals for five straight years from 1992 to 1996. Belle had a superb season in 1995, leading the league in runs and runs batted in, and in doubles with 52 and home runs with 50 in the 144-game season. Sixty percent of Albert Belle's hits were for extra bases, he also led the league in total bases and slugging percentage, and yet somehow lost out to Boston's Mo Vaughn in the MVP voting. Belle led the league with 148 RBI in 1996, of which 48 were himself crossing the plate on his own home runs. In 1997, both were gone—Belle leaving as a free agent to play for division rival Chicago, and Lofton traded to the Braves (although he would return as a free agent in 1998). Right fielder Manny Ramirez and first baseman Jim Thome were now powering the Indians, and in 1999 Cleveland became the first team since the 1950 Red Sox to score 1,000 runs in a season. Thome, who began his major league career at third base before shifting over to first in 1997, was the American League's best multi-position regular between 1995 and 1999, according to me.

The primary difference between the Indians from 1994 to 1996, when they were the best team in the league, and the Indians from 1997 to 1999—when they were not really an elite team despite their continuing to run away with the AL Central—comes down to pitching. Cleveland surrendered the fewest runs in the league in 1995 and 1996, both years when they had the best record in the league. The combination of their potent offense and strong pitching enabled the Indians to outscore their game-opponents by 416 runs those two years. The next three years, however, Cleveland was no better than seventh, fifth, and eighth in the league in giving up runs. In 1997 and 1998, the Indians outscored their opponents by only 124 runs (an average of 62 per year). That the Indians outscored their opponents in

1999 by 149 runs was more a tribute to their tremendous offensive productivity, strengthened by their free agent signing of outstanding second baseman Roberto Alomar, than to their relatively mediocre pitching staff.

While Cleveland actually had relatively stable starting pitching, Charles Nagy is the only starting pitcher who I count as a core regular for the 1994-99 Indians. Dennis Martinez from 1994 to 1996 and Orel Hershiser from 1995 to 1997 strengthened the Tribes' starting rotation, but both were free agent signings who pitched for Cleveland only three years each—(remember, I require a core regular to have been at least four years with the franchise, three of which include the seasons under consideration for their team). By 1998, Nagy had been joined in the starting rotation by the veteran Dave Burba, acquired in a trade with Cincinnati, and the young, up-and-coming Bartolo Colon—neither of whom counts as a core starter for this Cleveland team because they pitched for only the last two seasons of their six-year run. None of Cleveland's starters were among the five best in the league during these years.

This Tribe had no players or pitchers with a full century or half-century legacy, according to me. The **1951-55 Cleveland Indians**, by contrast, had center fielder Larry Doby and pitchers Early Wynn and Bob Lemon with century-plus legacies for their best seasons including the majority of years under consideration for that team, according to me, and third baseman Al Rosen has a half-century legacy. Rosen, Doby (as one of three outfielders), and second baseman Bobby Avila were the best at their positions in the American League for the 1951-55 Indians, as were Lemon, Wynn, and Mike Garcia among the AL's five best starting pitchers during those years. The 1994-99 Indians may have won five straight division titles, dominating their division each year, but the 1951-55 Indians, despite only one pennant to go along with four second-place finishes in five years, were the best Cleveland team of the twentieth century, at least according to me.

Meanwhile, by the end of the twentieth century, the Yankee dynasty was back, and as intimidating as ever. After winning the 1981 split-season AL pennant by virtue of qualifying for the playoffs because they were in first place by half-a-game when that year's players' strike interrupted the season between June 12 and August 10, it was not until 1994 that the Yankees were again at the top of the heap in the American League. Only it didn't matter that the Yankees had the league's best record at the time because baseball's next big players' strike terminated the season in early August and, with no post-season to be played, the owners declared there to be no division winners.

When baseball found labor peace in 1995, the Yankees became the first American League team to take advantage of the new wild card format, making it to the post-season for the first time since 1981 by finishing with the best record of any *second*-place club in the new three division alignment. A shocking loss to the Western Division-winning Seattle Mariners in the first round of playoffs—(they had led two-games-to-none in the best-of-five Division Series)—ended the Yankees' season but set the stage for the dynasty to come. Buck Showalter may have brought the Yankees back into contention, but he was not brought back as manager after he objected to George Steinbrenner's decision to fire his coaching staff for their failure to advance to the ALCS. Showalter had the longest tenure—four years!—of any Yankee manager since Steinbrenner bought the team, and now it appeared the managerial merry-go-round was back in operation. Joe Torre, not at all in the mold of Billy Martin who defined the Yankees' dugout leadership carousel in the 1970s and 1980s, was named Yankee manager for 1996 after three preferred candidates declined or were unavailable. He would

last twelve years as manager, because nothing breeds longevity in the Yankees' world more than success.

While the Yankees began making their move in 1994 and 1995, it is the **1996 to 2001 New York Yankees** that marked the beginning of the trans-millennial Yankee dynasty. Key players who defined this era for the Yankees were either rookies or in just their second year with the team in 1996: shortstop Derek Jeter, first baseman Tino Martinez (acquired from Seattle), starting pitchers Andy Pettitte and David Cone (signed as a free agent after being obtained in a mid-1995 trade from Toronto), and closer Mariano Rivera. They joined center fielder Bernie Williams and right fielder Paul O'Neill as cornerstone players for the Yankees' resurgence. Jorge Posada became the Yankees' regular catcher in 1998, the same year free agent Scott Brosius took over at third, and Roger Clemens, who had resurrected his career with the Blue Jays, was added to the starting rotation in 1999.

Although the Yankees remained the team to beat many years beyond, even to this day, 2001 is the logical transition from this Yankee team to the one that would win five more consecutive division titles beginning in 2002—and not just because only one of those seasons (2003) led to a pennant, and none had the traditional Yankees' happy ending of a World Series championship. Three players who were central to the Yankees' success from 1996 to 2001 left after the 2001 World Series loss to the Arizona Diamondbacks. O'Neill and Brosius retired, and Martinez was allowed to leave as a free agent. Cone—a clubhouse leader from the day he joined the Yankees—had left as a free agent the year before that, after the Yankees concluded (correctly) that his career was about done. Jeter, Rivera, Williams, Pettitte, Clemens, and Posada continued on, but Jeter strongly implied, and many professional baseball observers and most Yankee fans fervently believe, that the New York Yankees were not the same after 2001.

Nineteen ninety-eight was the signature season of the 1996-01 Yankees. The 1998 Yankees, despite having no players with the magnitude of Ruth and Gehrig, DiMaggio, Berra, or Mantle, had arguably the best single season of any team ever.

- They won 114 games during the regular season—the most ever by an American League team (until Seattle did them two wins better three years later)—but that was still only the third-best winning percentage in league history, behind the 1954 Indians and the 1927 Yankees who played shorter 154-game seasons.
- They won their division by 22 games, and since the second-place wild card Red Sox had a better record than both the AL Central and AL Western Division winners, that meant they were 22 games better than any other team in the American League. With the exception of the 1902 Pittsburgh Pirates, who finished 27½ games in front in a year when the entire rest of the National League was frankly pretty pathetic, no other team in modern baseball history was that much better than the second-best team in the league; the 1927 Yankees finished 19 games ahead, the 1936 Yankees came out on top by 19½ games, and the 1906 Cubs—who still hold the record for the most wins (116) and the highest winning percentage (.763) in modern baseball history (since 1901)—were out front by 20 games.
- The 1998 Yankees led the league in both runs scored and fewest allowed, outscoring their game opponents by 309 runs. They won 42 games by blowout margins of five runs or more. The two other American League teams with arguably the best single

season ever—the 1927 Yankees and the 1939 Yankees, both of which also led the league in scoring and fewest runs allowed—outscored their opponents by greater margins of 411 and 376 runs, respectively, as did the 1936 version of the Bronx Bombers by 334. The 2001 Seattle Mariners, who set the new American League record for single-season victories with 116 only three years later, likewise led the league in both runs scored and fewest allowed, but outscored their game opponents by nine fewer runs than the 1998 Yankees.

- And in three post-season series, this Yankee team lost only two of thirteen games, sweeping Texas in three games in the Division Series, requiring six games to beat Cleveland in the League Championship Series, and sweeping the Atlanta Braves in the World Series. Taking account of their 11-2 record in the post-season, the 1998 New York Yankees, with a .704 winning percentage for the regular season, had an even higher .714 winning percentage for the entire year. The 1927 Yankees of Ruth and Gehrig may have swept through their post-season without a loss, but that was only four games in the World Series.

The accomplishments of the 1996-01 New York Yankees rival that of any of the best teams that came before them—including the six pennants and five World Series triumphs in seven years by the 1936-42 Yankees and the five-and-five-in-five 1949-53 Yankees. Those earlier Yankee teams had but one post-season series to win every year—the World Series; the 1996-01 Yankees had three—the Division Series, the League Championship Series, and then the World Series. The turn-of-the-century New York Yankees lost only two of the sixteen post-season series they played in six years (the 1997 Division Series against Cleveland and the 2001 World Series to Arizona)—a remarkable feat considering the potential for being tripped up in a short playoff series. Just ask the Atlanta Braves, with only five pennants and one World Series triumph to show for 14 straight division titles.

But all of this does not necessarily make them one of the very best American League teams of the twentieth century.

What their win-it-all (except for 1997 and 2001) successes in the post-season proved was that the 1996-01 Yankees were at their best when the games counted the most, even if they did not always have the better team. The Yankees had a .601 winning percentage during the regular season from 1996 to 2001; their percentage in winning 56 of 78 post-season games from 1996 to 2001 was .718. Of their five division titles in six years, however, the Yankees had the best record in the American League only twice—their one great season in 1998, and again in 1999—even though they went on to win the pennant each year. In 1996, the Yankees won the AL East with the league's second-best record; in 2000, they went from having the second-best record in the league—on a pace to win 95 for the year—with only eighteen games remaining when they went into an uncharacteristic funk, losing 15 of their final 18 to finish with a mediocre-seeming 87 wins and only the fifth-best record among AL teams; and in 2001, the Yankees' 95 wins gave them their division title in a row with only the third-best record in the league, which did not prevent them from going on to win their fourth pennant in a row.

And while having a stranglehold on both the Eastern Division and the American League pennant for all but one of their six years, the 1996-01 New York Yankees were hardly a dominating team. The only year they won 100 or more games was the 114 in 1998.

This Yankee team won their division by eight or more games only twice, by 22 in 1998 and by 13½ games in 2001, and finished no more than four games ahead in their three other division titles, although they did hold a nine-game lead in mid-September 2000 before their inglorious 3-15 record to complete the regular season left them only 2½ games on top at the end (after which they breezed through the post-season with an 11-5 record to ultimately win their third straight World Series). They led the league in runs scored and fewest runs allowed only once each, both in 1998. In a fourteen-team league, the Yankees were no better than ninth in the league in scoring when they won their first division title in 1996, sixth in 2000, and fifth in 2001. Pitching was the foundation for their success, especially with Rivera setting himself up in these years as ultimately the greatest relief pitcher in baseball history. The Yankees from 1996 to 2001 were typically the second- or third-most difficult club to score against, and fourth in 2000 (giving up only one more run than the Athletics, the league's third stingiest team).

Of the seven position players who were core regulars on the 1996-01 Yankees for at least half of those years, only center fielder Bernie Williams was the best in the league at his position (as one of three outfielders) during the majority of years under consideration for this team. Derek Jeter, in most respects the heart and soul of this team, was neither the best nor even the second best at his shortstop position during these years only because Alex Rodriguez and Nomar Garciaparra were better all-around shortstops at the time. Jeter, however, and Williams were two of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. No Yankee position players had five or more consecutive best years during this period that were good enough for them to be among the league's best position players for the second half of the twentieth century, let alone the full century, according to me. Jeter's best consecutive years of 1998 to 2006, based on his player value as measured by wins above replacement (WAR) that give him a legacy as one of the 50 best position players in American League history, according to me, included three for this Yankee team, but those three—while the beginning foundation of his century-plus legacy—were not good enough in and of themselves to vault him into even a half-century legacy for best players for the 1996-2001 Yankees.

Indicative of this team's strength being pitching, the split between position players and pitchers in the Yankees' collective WAR for these six years was nearly exactly 50:50, with a slight edge (51-to-49 percent) to pitching. In 1996, 1997—when they won the wild card—and 2001, the collective player value of Yankee pitchers was substantially higher than the combined wins above replacement for the Yankees' position players. This is misleading, however, in terms of assessing the relative balance between offense and pitching because player value for position players includes their defensive contributions and, according to the WAR metric, the Yankees' collective defensive WAR was *worse* than the zero-based standard for replacement level players every year between 1996 and 2001, except for their terrific 1998 season. The balance between offense and combined pitching and defense for this Yankee team was 55:45, which still makes the argument for pitching being the particular strength of the 1996-01 Yankees. Indeed—

—Outstanding pitching was a hallmark of most of the great Yankee teams in history. Not unusual as baseball's business model adapted to the consolidation of the free agency era, however, the 1996-01 Yankees' starting rotation was continuously being reworked as Team Steinbrenner sought to improve the pitching after virtually every season. Andy Pettitte, homegrown in the Yankee system, and David Cone, about to become a free agent when he was acquired from Toronto in a trade for no-name career minor leaguers in late July 1995 for a pennant-drive that ended up with a wild card draw to the post-season, were the only

pitchers in the Yankees' starting rotation for all six years. Cuban defector Orlando Hernandez (for four years) and Roger Clemens (for three) were also core starters for this team. Clemens became the object of the Yankees' desire after having resurrected his career with two stellar back-to-back 20-win seasons for Toronto in 1997 and 1998 (quite possibly with a little help from performance-enhancing drugs), inspiring Team Steinbrenner to trade David Wells—who had contributed 34 victories, including a perfect game, to New York's cause in 1997 and 1998—to get him for 1999. Wells, Japanese import Hideki Irabu, and Mike Mussina—signed as a free agent before the 2001 season—were also featured starters for the Yankees during these years.

Clemens and Cone were both among the league's five best pitchers for three or more years of their team's six-year run and during the surrounding decade. Both have century-plus legacies as two of the 30 best starting pitchers in American League history, but not for this Yankee team. The years that established Roger Clemens as the American League's best starting pitcher in the second half of the twentieth century and third-best in the league all-time (behind Lefty Grove and Walter Johnson), according to me, sad to say for Yankee fans, were mostly more than a decade earlier, from 1986 to 1992, when Clemens was with the hated rival Boston Red Sox. David Cone's century-plus legacy is more complicated because his best consecutive years of 1993 to 1999 included four seasons for this Yankee team, but I am not inclined to count his legacy for these Yankees because only one of the four foundation seasons that established that legacy—1997, when he had the highest pitcher value of his border-line-potential Hall of Fame career—came in a Yankee uniform; the three other years in which Cone had a pitcher value higher than six wins above replacement, 1993 to 1995, included only 13 starts for the Yankees in 1995 after his trade from Toronto. As for his Yankee years during his best consecutive seasons, Cone missed nearly all of the 1996 season with an aneurysm in his pitching shoulder that limited him to 11 starts—in which he went 7-2 with eight “quality starts” of six or more innings with three or fewer runs—and his 1998 and 1999 seasons were good enough to count as part of his legacy (to give him at least five best consecutive years) but were not sufficient by themselves, together with his 1997 season, to have given him a twentieth century-plus legacy.

Despite the gravitas of Clemens and Cone, if only by name alone, it was Andy Pettitte who was the anchor of the Yankees' rotation. Pettitte was in the mold of Ed Lopat of the 1949-53 Yankees: a southpaw who was consistently dependable and durable with a high winning percentage. Pettitte's .648 winning percentage (103-56) from 1996 to 2001 was 47 percentage points better than the Yankees' overall record during those six years.

With Mariano Rivera, at the beginning of a career that would leave little doubt he was the best there ever was to pitch out of the bullpen, the 1996-01 Yankees validated the critical importance of the developing trend of having a strong corps of relievers. Three relievers—Rivera, Jeff Nelson, and Mike Stanton—accounted for nearly a quarter (24 percent) of the collective pitcher value of the Yankee staff between 1996 and 2001, despite averaging barely over an inning in the 1,040 games they relieved. Rivera alone had 16 percent of the pitchers' WAR. Mariano Rivera is the only member of the 1996-01 New York Yankees with a century-plus legacy based on best consecutive years that count for this team.

By accomplishment alone—five pennants that could only be won by surviving two rounds of post-season series and four World Series championships—the 1996-01 New York Yankees merit consideration as to whether they were the best American League team since at least the

advent of the division era in 1969. The **1969-74 Baltimore Orioles**, however, have a steadfast claim to still being the best by virtue of their complete dominance of the league during most of those seasons.

The relative achievements and dominance of this Yankee team with the **1971-75 Oakland Athletics** are comparable. The Yankees won four straight pennants from 1998 to 2001 and three straight World Series from 1998 to 2000; the A's won three consecutive pennants and World Series from 1972 to 1974. While the Yankees' achievement was more impressive because they had to survive a Division Series (which the A's did not) in addition to the League Championship Series, Oakland had a far better winning percentage against the other division winners *and* other teams with 90 or more wins than New York (.574 to .507). Moreover, the Athletics had a higher differential than the Yankees in outscoring their game opponents, scoring 25 percent more runs over their run compared to the Yankees' outscoring their opponents by 21 percent. This figure is even more significant when you consider that AL teams averaged 5.1 runs per game between 1996 and 2001, compared to only four runs per game from 1971 to 1975—meaning, the turn-of-the-century Yankees outscored their opponents by fewer runs than the 1970s A's at a time when run-production was more than 27 percent higher. Further in the 1971-75 A's favor, they were more consistent in their run differential against their opponents over the five years, always between 23 and 25 percent, except for 1972 when they scored nearly a third more runs. The 1996-01 Yankees, on the other hand, outscored their opponents by less than 15 percent in 1996 and 2001, and by only 7 percent in 2000—the year they won only 87 games.

The most decisive factor for me, however, in assessing that the 1971-75 Athletics were the better team comes down to the historical legacy of their players. Both teams were comparable in the number of their core players who were the best at their position and in the surrounding decade, but the 1970s Athletics had two players—Reggie Jackson and Sal Bando—whose best consecutive seasons included at least four of the A's five straight division titles to give them a twentieth century-plus legacy, according to me, and Catfish Hunter with a half-century legacy. And relief ace Rollie Fingers came close. The turn-of-the-century Yankees had only one such player, Mariano Rivera, whose 1990s emergence bumped Fingers out of the top five among AL relief pitchers in the twentieth century, according to me. The 1996-01 New York Yankees were very good. The 1971-75 Oakland Athletics were better.

The 1996-01 Yankees' five pennants and four World Series championships in six years were more impressive than the accomplishments of the **1976-80 New York Yankees**, and they were certainly a more coherent "team" than the Yankees' '70s show—consumed by the drama of Reggie's giant ego (transplanted from Oakland to New York via one year in Baltimore), the constant dueling between "Boss" Steinbrenner and manager Billy Martin, and a chaotic clubhouse environment that relief ace Sparky Lyle christened the "Bronx Zoo" in his memorable tell-all book of the 1978 season. But that does not necessarily make them the better team. While the 1976-80 Yankees had no single season to match 1998 in debates about the greatest ever (although the 1978 pennant race certainly counts as one of the greatest comebacks of all time), they were the more dominant team over the long term of their run. And despite missing the playoffs one year with a damaging fourth-place finish in 1979, while the only year the end-of-the-century Yankees failed to win their division they not only still made the playoffs in 1997 as a wild card but had the second-best record in the league—better than either winner of the two other divisions—the '70s Yankees still had a better overall record that included three 100-win seasons. Moreover, the 89 games won by the 1979

Yankees when they finished fourth in their division was also good for the fourth-best record in the American League, while the 87 games won by the division-winning Yankees in 2000 was only fifth-best in the league. The 1996-01 Yankees were very good. The 1976-80 Yankees, who are underrated in both the Yankee lineage and in discussions about the best teams of all time, were better, according to me.

One can even argue, based on relative dominance of the league and player legacies in both contemporary and historical context, that the **1988-92 Oakland Athletics** were a better team than the 1996-01 Yankees. After all, they had Rickey Henderson and Dennis Eckersley with AL century-plus legacies, according to me, not to mention the Bash Brothers—Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire—and their indomitable pitching ace, Dave Stewart, the one with the death stare. But I won't make that case. Five division titles leading to five pennants and four World Series championships, plus making the playoffs by way of the wild card in 1997, and being the last team as of 2011 to play in three straight World Series—let alone four, which they did from 1998 to 2001—gives a decided edge to the Yankees. The 1988-92 Oakland A's were very good. The 1996-01 New York Yankees were better.

5 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1969-2001

	D-P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
Baltimore Orioles, 1969-74	5 - 3 - 1	586-374 .610	38	58	24	120
Oakland Athletics, 1971-75	5 - 3 - 3	476-326 .594	44	20	29	93
New York Yankees, 1976-80	4 - 3 - 2	489-317 .607	37	35	24	96
New York Yankees, 1996-2001	5 - 5 - 4	582-387 .601	46	21	21	88
Oakland Athletics, 1988-92	4 - 3 - 1	486-324 .600	36	30	25	91
Cleveland Indians, 1994-99	5 - 2 - 0	537-366 .595	33	42	12	87
<i>Kansas City Royals, 1976-80</i>	<i>4 - 1 - 0</i>	<i>466-344 .575</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>67</i>

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

The **1960-64 New York Yankees**—representing the end of the “original” Yankee dynasty—were the lowest hurdle that the 1996-01 Yankees—the apparent foundation for a new, still developing Yankee dynasty—needed to leap to be one of the five best American League teams in the second half of the twentieth century, according to me. Despite winning five consecutive pennants and having Mickey Mantle with a century-plus legacy and Whitey Ford with a half-century legacy for their team, the 1960-64 Yankees fall short on achievement in comparison because they did not have to go through two rounds of post-season playoffs to win the pennant, and they lost three of the five World Series they played. Nonetheless, they dominated the league to a greater extent than did the turn-of-the-century Yankees and also had a singularly great season—1961—and another, 1963, for which I made a case in AL Chapter 9 was actually even better. The two teams have a comparable “players” score by my methodological approach, but the “best players” advantage, according to me, is with the 1996-01 Yankees, who had five position players and pitchers who I count among the best in the surrounding decade, compared to four for the 1960-64 Yankees when the league also had six fewer teams.

Not without significance, however, is that the 1960-64 Yankees played better against their rivals for the pennant than did their end of the century successors. From 1960 to 1964, seven other teams in the American League won 90 or more games, against whom the Yankees had a .568 winning percentage while winning five of those season series and losing only one, with one split. The 1996-01 Yankees, on the other hand, won 12 of 21 season series against the other AL division winners *and* teams with 90 or more wins, with a record barely over .500 at .507 (and they in fact had a losing record against the 90-win teams). The 1960-64 Yankees also outscored their game opponents by a greater margin than the 1996-01 Yankees—26 to 21 percent—and did so at a time when AL teams averaged 19 percent *fewer* runs per game than from 1996 to 2001. Finally, the 1996-01 Yankees had the best record in the American League only twice, notwithstanding five first-place finishes in the AL East that turned into five pennants. The argument that their overall record in relation to the rest of the league is less relevant than in the past before there were three divisions in each league is muted by the fact that only three of the twelve other American League teams to win at least 90 games during those six years were in the same division as the Yankees, and that until 2001—the last year for this Yankee team—their schedule was relatively balanced, between ten and thirteen games, in the number of times they played each other American League team. Nonetheless—

—Winning five pennants in six years in the wild card era is a true testament to the resilience, fortitude, and refuse-to-lose ethos of this team. The 1960-64 Yankees were very good, but I believe the 1996-01 Yankees were the better team.

5 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-2001

	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, 1976-80	4 - 3 - 2	489-317 .607	37	35	24	96
New York Yankees, 1996-2001	5 - 5 - 4	582-387 .601	46	21	21	88
<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

In the pantheon of great Yankee teams, the 1996-01 Yankees were atypical of the mold. Like their predecessors, these Yankees were unmerciful in beating inferior teams. But they were not as successful against other 90-win AL teams. Miller Huggins' 1920-24 Yankees, Casey Stengel's 1949-53 and 1954-58 Yankee teams, and the 1960-64 Yankees all had winning percentages of .545 or better—the equivalent of at least 88 wins in a 162-game season—against teams that won 90 or more games. With a winning percentage of only .484 against their 90-win American League competition, the 1996-01 Yankees had the second-worst record against such quality competition of any Yankee team considered in this “best teams” analysis. Indeed, only one other Yankee team had a lower combined percentage of games played against other teams with at least 90 wins and winning percentage against those teams. That team, ironically, was the 1936-42 Yankees, who faced off against only two other 90-win teams in seven years and won barely 40 percent of their games against them. Despite that

anomaly, there is no doubting the historical legacy of *that* Yankee team—the greatest of all time.

The 1996-01 team was also not in the mold of the “Bronx Bomber” tradition of the New York Yankees. They could be just as relentless in scoring runs and putting their opponents away, but this Yankee team had no sluggers with the stature of Ruth or Gehrig or DiMaggio or Mantle or Berra or Maris or Reggie. Most of the great Yankee teams had very good pitching—that has nearly always been a key ingredient to the Yankees’ dynastic successes—but their offensive firepower significantly eclipsed the strength of their pitching. While this Yankee team was also very tough on opposing pitchers, pitching was what really carried the 1996-01 Yankees to the level of accomplishment they attained; more than 50 percent of their collective player value belonged to the pitchers. Of the great Yankee teams in history, the turn-of-the-century Yankees had the lowest percentage by which they outscored their game opponents.

1996-01 Yankees vs Yankee Teams Since 1951	WAR Balance		Vs. 90-Win Teams (does not include division winners with less than 90 wins)			% Outscore Game Opponents
	WAR % Position	WAR % Pitchers	% Games	Win %	Combined	
1996-2001 Yankees	49	51	16.6	.484	650	20.8
1949-53 Yankees	69	31	20.0	.578	778	33.3
1954-58 Yankees	77	23	14.3	.545	688	35.9
1960-64 Yankees	75	25	15.6	.568	724	26.0
1976-80 Yankees	66	34	23.7	.492	729	22.5
8 BEST AL TEAMS (chrono) 1901-2000	WAR Balance	WAR %	Vs. 90-Win Teams			% Outscore Opponents
	WAR % Position	WAR % Pitchers	% Games	Win %	Combined	
1910-14 Athletics	78	22	11.2	.506	618	36.6
1926-32 Yankees	80	20	18.4	.515	699	30.9
1928-32 Athletics	60	40	20.2	.455	657	34.6
1936-42 Yankees	65	35	4.1	.409	450	43.5
1954-58 Yankees	77	23	14.3	.545	688	35.9
1969-74 Orioles	69	31	14.2	.547	689	31.7
1971-75 Athletics	74	26	13.0	.558	688	25.3

The 1996-01 Yankees most resemble the five-and-five-in-five **1949-53 New York Yankees**. Both teams had remarkable runs of success without being nearly as dominant as the storied 1926 to 1932, 1936 to 1942, 1954 to 1958, or 1960 to 1964 Yankees. Neither was even as dominant in their time as the relatively unheralded 1976-80 Yankees were in theirs. The 1949-53 and 1996-01 Yankees both were excellent teams, sharing the characteristics of a deep bench and generally very good pitching, but each had only one player with a twentieth century-plus legacy for best consecutive years that included all or most of the years under consideration for the their team, according to me: Yogi Berra for Stengel’s 1949-53 Yankees, and, of course, Mariano Rivera for Joe Torre’s turn-of-the-century Yankees. These two teams may not be among the American League’s best of the twentieth century, at least not according to me, because they neither dominated the league nor had as many dominating players as the others, but they certainly were among the most successful, if not *the* most

successful relative to what any other team in history accomplished over any five- or six-year period.

FINAL STANDINGS
BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS OF THE 20TH CENTURY
(ACCORDING TO ME)

8 BEST AMERICAN LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-2001

	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
New York Yankees, 1976-80	4 – 3 – 2	489-317 .607	37	35	24	96

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

Many will, and perhaps even should, protest my ranking the 1996-01 New York Yankees as only the fifth-best American League team in the second half of the twentieth century—and, worse, that they fail to make my cut as one of the eight best AL teams of the full century—while I consider the **1991 to 1997 Atlanta Braves** to be the second-best team in the National League since 1951, and the third-best National League team of the century in its entirety. After all, the 1996-01 Yankees turned each of their five division titles into a pennant and won four World Series besides, including four consecutive pennants and three World Series, from 1998 to 2001; the 1991-97 Braves had four pennants to show for their six division titles, twice winning back-to-back pennants without any three-peats, and only one World Series championship.

By any measure of winner-take-all accomplishments, the Yankees easily have the Braves beat. But were they really the better team relative to their league? I would remind the reader that the Braves, in winning their six division titles in seven years from 1991 to 1997, not only thoroughly dominated their division (of course, so did the Indians in the first six years of the unimposing AL Central), but had the best record in the National League in five of those six years. The Yankees had their league's best record only twice in winning their five division titles between 1996 and 2001. Six times the Braves led the league in fewest runs allowed; the Yankees led the league in runs scored or fewest runs allowed only once each—and that in their truly great 1998 season. That 1998 season may have been the best single year any major league team ever had, but it was also an anomalous season for the New York Yankees in the six years between 1996 and 2001. The 1991-97 Atlanta Braves had no such truly great season, but were consistent from year to year, averaging 99 wins per season over the seven years (taking into account the number of games they were on a pace to win in

the strike-shortened seasons of 1994 and 1995). Take away their 114 victories in 1998, and the 1996-01 Yankees averaged only 94 wins the five other years of their run.

Still, the 1996 to 2001 New York Yankees were the defining team that ushered in the new twenty-first century—the Yankee dynasty reborn. And whatever anyone might say about the potential for a rival to supplant the Yankee dynasty—say, the Boston Red Sox, because they won two pennants and two World Series over a four-year period between 2004 and 2007 and appear committed to do whatever it takes (including spending the money) to get into the post-season and win championships, or perhaps (to foolishly forecast ahead) the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim now that they have signed both Albert Pujols and C.J. Wilson as free agents—it is the New York Yankees that remain *the one enduring dynasty* in major league baseball today. And in this new era of augmented divisional alignments with wild card teams in the playoffs, the New York Yankee franchise may be the *last* dynasty in major league baseball.

The last dynasty?

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

NEW YORK YANKEES, 1996-2001

5 AL Eastern Division Titles (1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001)
5 Pennants (1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001)
4 World Series Wins (1996, 1998, 1999, 2000)

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	1 x 1 = 2	0	4 x 1 = 4	
+ 5 pennants = 5	+ 1 wild card = .33			
+ 2 AL1 (x .5) = 1				
21	2.3	0	4	27.3

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 27.3 / 6 years x 10 = **45.5**

DOMINANCE

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

DOMINANCE SCORE = 5 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **21**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR '96-2001	BEST at POSITION	Decade '94-2003	2 nd 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Tino Martinez, 1996-2001	13.1	no	no		
2B-If Chuck Knoblauch, 1998-01	6.6	no	no		
SS Derek Jeter, 1996-2011+	31.7	s/o	'97-2001	^	^
3B Scott Brosius, 1998-2001	8.1	no	no		
CF Bernie Williams, 1991-2006	30.2	1995-2000	'95-2000	no	
RF Paul O'Neill, 1993-2001	15.0	no	no		
C Jorge Posada, 1998-2010	12.5	no	no		
P Andy Pettitte, 1995-2003	24.3	no	no		
P Roger Clemens, 1999-2003	13.0	1996-2001	'96-2001	^^	^^
P David Cone, 1995-2000 (-1)	17.6	1993-99 (-1)	1994-99	^^	^^
P Orlando Hernandez, 1998-'02	11.6	no	no		
P/RP Ramiro Mendoza, 1997-2002	9.4	no	no		
RP Jeff Nelson, 1996-2000	5.5	no	no		
RP Mike Stanton, 1998-2002	6.1	no	no		
RP Mariano Rivera, 1995-2011+	22.6	1996-2010	'96-2003	yes	yes
TEAM WAR, 1996-2001 = 278.7	227.3				
Core WAR= 81.6 % of Team War 46.5 Av. Team WAR + 81.6 %	84.4 / 10 8.4	4.5 / 15 3.0	5 x 1 5	1 x 2 2	1 x 3 3

^ Jeter's century-plus legacy for his best years of 1998 to 2006 does not count for this team.

^^ Clemens has a century-plus pitcher legacy for his best years of 1986-92, and Cone's century-plus legacy for his best years of 1993-99 (-1) does not count for this team.

PLAYERS SCORE = 8.4 (Base WAR) + 3 (Best at Position) + 10 (AL Best) = **21**

CLEVELAND INDIANS, 1994-1999

5 AL Central Division Titles (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999)
2 Pennants (1995, 1997)
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
5 x 3 = 15	1 x 2	0	0	
+ 2 pennants = 2				
+ 2 AL1 (x .5) = 1.0				
18	2	0	0	20

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 20 / 6 years x 10 = **33**

DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	AL1/Runs Scored	AL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
1	4	3	2	10

DOMINANCE SCORE = 10 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **42**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1994-99	BEST at POSITION	Decade '92-2001	2 nd 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
SS Omar Vizquel, 1994-2004	17.8	no	no		
3B-1B Jim Thome, 1995-2002	25.3	1995-99	no		
LF Albert Belle, 1991-96	17.5	1993-98	1993-98	no	
CF Kenny Lofton, 1992-2001 (-1)	27.6	1992-96	'93-99 (-1)	no	
RF Manny Ramirez, 1995-2000	23.1	s/o	no		
C Sandy Alomar, 1990-2000 (-1)	7.4	no	no		
P Charles Nagy, 1991-99	18.0	no	no		
RP Paul Shuey, 1996-2002	2.6	no	no		
RP Paul Assenmacher, 1995-99	2.8	no	no		
RP Eric Plunk, 1992-98	7.1	no	no		
RP Jose Mesa, 1994-98 *	9.3	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1994-99 = 256.8	158.5				
Core WAR= 61.7 % of Team War 42.8 Av. Team WAR + 61.7%	69.2 / 10 6.9	3.5 / 12 2.9	2 x 1 2	0 x 2 0	0 x 3 0

* Jose Mesa was a starting pitcher for Cleveland in 1993.

PLAYERS SCORE = 6.9 (Base WAR) + 2.9 (Best at Position) + 2 (AL Best) = **12**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1995-99 INDIANS		1996-2001 YANKEES
10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1992-2001		10 BEST AL POSITION PLAYERS, 1994-2003
Ken Griffey, Jr., OF, 1993-98		Alex Rodriguez, SS, 1996-2003
Alex Rodriguez, SS, 1996-2001		Nomar Garciaparra, SS, 1997-2003 (-1)
Pudge Rodriguez, C, 1996-2000		Ken Griffey, Jr., OF, 1994-98
Frank Thomas, 1B, 1993-97		Pudge Rodriguez, C, 1996-2000
Bernie Williams, OF, 1995-2000		Jason Giambi, 1B, 1999-2003
<i>Kenny Lofton, OF, 1993-99 (-1/NL)</i>		<i>Bernie Williams, OF, 1995-2000</i>
Edgar Martinez, DH, 1995-2001		Edgar Martinez, DH, 1995-2001
Roberto Alomar, 2B, 1996-2001		Roberto Alomar, 2B, 1996-2001
Derek Jeter, SS, 1997-2001		Manny Ramirez, OF, 1999-2003
Albert Belle, OF, 1993-98		<i>Derek Jeter, SS, 1997-2001</i>
5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1992-2001		5 BEST AL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1994-2003
Roger Clemens, 1996-2001		Pedro Martinez, 1998-2003
David Cone, 1993-97		<i>Roger Clemens, 1996-2001</i>
Mike Mussina, 1994-2001		Mike Mussina, 1997-2003
Kevin Appier, 1993-97		<i>David Cone, 1994-99</i>
Brad Radke, 1997-2001		Brad Radke, 1997-2001
Mariano Rivera, RP, 1996-2001		<i>Mariano Rivera, RP, 1996-2003</i>

BEST AT POSITION

1B	Thomas-----→Giambi-----→Texeira-----→(?)
2B	Knoblauch-----→Alomar-----→Soriano-----→Cano-----→(?)
SS	(83) Ripken----→A.Rodriguez-----→Jeter-----→ GarciaParra-----→
3B	Ventura-----→Chavez-----→A.Rodriguez-----→
OF	(90) Griffey-----→ Suzuki-----→(?) Williams-----→
OF	Lofton-----→ Damon-----→Guerrero-----→
OF	Belle-----→Ramirez-----→Sizemore-----→
MP	(90) Phillips, IF/OF-----→ Sweeney, 1B/DH-----→Young, SS-3B---→(?) Thome, 3B-1B-----→
DH	(91) Molitor→E.Martinez-----→Ortiz-----→(?)
C	P.Rodriguez-----→Posada-----→Mauer-----→(?)
P	(90) Appier-----→Radke-----→Zito-----→F.Hernandez→?
P	(91) R.Johnson-----→P.Martinez-----→Sabathia-----→(?)
P	(91) McDowell-→Clemens-----→Halladay-----→
P	Mussina-----→Santana-----→Verlander→
P	Cone-----→Hudson-----→Buerhle-----→
RP	(89)Montgomery→Rivera-----→(?)
	92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10