

American League's Best Teams

Preface

Perspective on the 20th Century

Although an upstart start-up whose significance the established National League first tried to ignore, then to diminish, and finally accepted as a major league, the American League quickly proved itself every bit a competitive equal. Perhaps more importantly, the AL quickly proved its attraction to the American fan base and within two years consistently drew more people to its baseball games than attended National League games. With the two leagues playing independent regular season schedules until the advent of limited inter-league play in 1997—the only inter-league competition being the annual World Series for the major league baseball championship beginning in 1903 between the pennant-winning teams in each league (and “exhibition” All-Star games beginning in 1933 for league bragging rights)—it would be perhaps unfair to call one league superior to the other. But the American League has been far more successful in the World Series, winning 57 of the 96 World Series played in the twentieth century compared to only 39 World Series championships for National League pennant winners. The major reason for this can be summarized by the words—“the New York Yankees,” baseball’s most successful and dominating franchise in history.

How dominating were the Yankees? Although well-known, this history bears repeating. The Yankees were winners of 37 American League pennants and 26 World Series in the 100 years of the twentieth century—and they got a late start, not winning their first pennant until 1921, and their first World Series triumph wasn’t until 1923. (Through 2010, the Yankees have 40 AL pennants and 27 World Series championships to their credit.) Their most dominant stretch was from 1921 to 1964, when the Yankees won 29 pennants and 20 World Series in 44 years. (Of the 15 American League pennants not won by the Yankees during that stretch, each of the seven other original AL franchises had at least one.) And of

Thebestbaseballteams.com
American League Perspective on the 20th Century

those 29 pennants, only two (1932 and 1947) were not in back-to-back years. Three times, the Yankees won pennants in three consecutive years; twice, they won pennants four straight years; and twice, they won five pennants in a row. The longest the Yankees went without winning a pennant in those 44 years was three seasons, three times. In 46 years from 1919 to 1964, the Yankees had only one losing season—1925, when Babe Ruth spent much of the season sidelined with his infamous alleged belly ache. Beginning in 1926, the Yankees put together a streak of 39 consecutive winning seasons. From 1965 to 1995, the Yankees won only four AL pennants and spent time in the wilderness of bad teams in the latter half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1990s, but they closed the twentieth century and charged into the twenty-first as—once again—the dominant team in major league baseball.

As for how the rest of the American League's original eight franchises fared in the twentieth century—there were the good, most with the shared experience of the best of times and the worst of times; there were the awful; and then there were the cursed.

Notable among the *good* were the Philadelphia-to-Oakland (via Kansas City for 13 dreadful seasons) Athletics, winners of 15 of the century's AL pennants and nine World Series championships—nine and five in Philadelphia (all by 1931) and six (out of 11 Western Division titles) and four after moving to Oakland. Those were their best of times. On the flip side, however, the Athletics had the most 100-loss seasons (16) of any major league team in the twentieth century, most of them (11) when they were in Philadelphia. And only the NL Philadelphia Phillies lost 90 or more games more often—37 times, including their 100 loss seasons—than the Athletics' 35 such seasons, 20 of which were in Philadelphia. Between them, Philadelphia's two major league teams helped to establish the City of Brotherly Love as a city of baseball losers. (OK, that was a bit harsh.) The Detroit Tigers had good teams most every decade, winning nine pennants and four World Series, and really had only one bad decade—the very last of the century, it turned out. And the Baltimore Orioles were one of the league's most successful franchises in the second half of the century, at least from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s when they won six pennants and three World Series, and the words "the Orioles' way" meant admiration for a philosophy of player development and fundamentals that kept the team consistently competitive for years.

Of course, the Orioles' progenitors were the St. Louis Browns, who epitomized the *awful*. From 1902 (when the franchise was re-located after one year in Milwaukee) until 1953 (after which they moved to Baltimore), the Browns had only 12 winning seasons in 52 years. Their only pennant was in 1944, when the biggest stars of potential contenders the Yankees, Tigers, and Red Sox were in the world at war. And then there were the Washington Senators (who may or may not have suffered from an identity crisis since they were often also called the Nationals), who were consistently awful enough to inspire the famous line about Washington—first in war, first in peace, and last in the American League—although their 10 last place finishes from 1901 to 1960 (after which the franchise moved to Minnesota and became off-again/on-again successful) was substantially fewer than the 18 times the Athletics finished last while in Philadelphia, to say nothing about the eight additional times the Athletics finished last in their thirteen years in Kansas City.

And finally, the *cursed*. The Boston Red Sox, of course, are the most famous cursed team in baseball lore, ostensibly for selling their soul (Babe Ruth) to the Yankees. In the first eighteen years of the twentieth century, the Red Sox won six pennants (the most in the new league, along with the Athletics) and five World Series (more than any team in the major

Thebestbaseballteams.com
American League Perspective on the 20th Century

leagues). In the nineteenth year, they said good-bye to Ruth. In the remaining 81 years of the century, all they had to show for success was four pennants without any World Series triumphs. The Chicago White Sox were cursed for selling their soul to gamblers in the 1919 World Series. They had been winners of four pennants in their first 19 years, then won only one the rest of the century. And then there were the Cleveland Indians, a team that seemed more genuinely cursed than any other (the Red Sox included)—what with pitching ace Addie Joss, still in his prime, dying of tuberculosis in 1911, and popular shortstop Ray Chapman becoming the only major league player in history to be killed by a pitched ball (in their World Championship season of 1920, no less), and then fielding solid teams in the 1930s and 1950s that were not, alas, good enough to compete with the Yankees of those years. It wasn't until the artificial "curse" of trading Rocky Colavito after the 1959 season that Cleveland deserved its reputation for futility, from which the Indians did not recover until the mid-1990s.

But the American League in the twentieth century (and beyond, so far) was all about those damned Yankees—the greatest dynasty ever in any sport. As a business enterprise committed to victory, the twentieth century Yankees were astute in their evaluation of talent, skilled on the trade market, willing to spend what it took to assemble winning teams, and organizationally built to succeed. And these were characteristics that transcended many baseball generations beginning in the 1920s, with only a few anomalous periods. This was the Yankee tradition, and the rest of the league had a hard time competing. So, needless to say, unlike in the National League where the eight best teams of the century, according to me, were from six different franchises, various Yankee teams figure to dominate the discussion to follow on the eight best American League teams of the twentieth century. That doesn't mean it won't be interesting, even if only to see how different Yankee teams compare to each other.

With this background, and a quick look (below) at the success of each American League franchise from 1901 to 2000, let us proceed to the question at hand—which were the best American League teams of the Yankee, I mean twentieth, century?

**RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT, AMERICAN LEAGUE FRANCHISES,
1901-2000**

	P-WS	Total 1st	1901-68 P – WS	1969-2000 D – P - WS	Record + -
New York Yankees	37–26	38 >	29 – 20	9 ** – 8 – 6	78 – 22 y
Philadelphia-KC-Oakland	15 – 9	20	9 – 5	11 – 6 – 4	45 – 55
<i>Philadelphia Athletics</i>	9 – 5	9	9 – 5	--	26 – 28
<i>Kansas City Athletics (1955)</i>	0	0	0	--	0 – 13
<i>Oakland Athletics (1968)</i>	6 – 4	11	0	11 – 6 – 4	19 – 14
Boston Red Sox	10 – 5	13	8 – 5	5 – 2 – 0	63 – 37
Detroit Tigers	9 – 4	11	8 – 3	3 – 1 – 1	62 – 38
St. Louis-Baltimore	7 – 3	10	2 – 1	8 – 5 – 2	43 – 56 y
<i>St. Louis Browns</i>	1 – 0	1	1 – 0	--	12 – 40 y
<i>Baltimore Orioles (1954)</i>	6 – 3	9	1 – 1	8 – 5 – 2	31 – 16
Washington-Minnesota	6 – 3	8	4 – 1	4 – 2 – 2	37 – 63
<i>Washington Nationals</i>	3 – 1	3	3 – 1	--	19 – 41
<i>Minnesota Twins (1961)</i>	3 – 2	5	1 – 0	4 – 2 – 2	18 – 22
Chicago White Sox	5 – 2	9 >	5 – 2	0	56 – 44
Cleveland Indians	5 – 2	8	3 – 2	5 – 2 – 0	56 – 44
Toronto Blue Jays (1977-x)	2 – 2	5	--	5 – 2 – 2	14 – 10
Kansas City Royals ('69-x)	2 – 1	6	--	6 – 2 – 1	17 – 15
Milwaukee Brewers (1969x -1998)*	1 – 0	2 **	--	1 – 1 – 0	11 – 18 y
Washington-Texas (1961-x)	0	4 >	--	4 – 0 – 0	15 – 25
<i>Washington Senators</i>	0	0	0	0	1 – 10
<i>Texas Rangers (1972)</i>	0	4 >	--	4 – 0 – 0	14 – 15
California Angels (1961-x)	0	3	--	3 – 0 – 0	16 – 24 y
Seattle Mariners (1977-x)	0	2	--	2 – 0 – 0	6 – 18
Tampa Bay D-Rays (1998x)	0	0	--	0	0 – 3

(year in parentheses after team name is first year there)
(x = expansion team)

P = Pennant **WS** = World Series **Total 1st** = Total 1st-place finishes

1901-68: **P** and **WS** before division alignments

1969-2000: **D** = Division title, **P**, and **WS** after division alignments

Record: + = number of seasons at .500 or better; - = number of seasons below .500

* Milwaukee Brewers transferred to the National League during 1998 expansion.

** 1981 split season: Milwaukee had the best record in the Eastern Division, but New York won the playoff for the Division title.

> No division titles awarded in 1994 because of players' strike; New York, Chicago, and Texas are credited with finishing 1st (but no division) in this table.

y New York Yankees franchise moved from Baltimore (1901-02); St. Louis Browns franchise moved from Milwaukee (1901); Milwaukee Brewers franchise moved from Seattle (1969); California Angels franchise moved to Anaheim from Los Angeles (1961-1964) and became the Anaheim Angels in 1997.