

National League's Best Teams

Chapter Three

How Important Are Best Players to Achievement?: 1926 to 1938 Cardinals, Cubs, and Giants

As we move on to consider the second quarter-century in the National League, allow me here to make a provocative proposition: *having the "best players" may not be a necessary condition for significant achievement, but it is a necessary condition for "best teams."*

The National League franchises with the most success from the mid-1920s until the 1940s were the St. Louis Cardinals, who won five pennants and three World Series in nine years between 1926 and 1934; the Chicago Cubs, with four pennants in 10 years (but no victorious World Series) between 1929 and 1938; and the New York Giants, with three pennants and one World Series triumph in five years between 1933 and 1937. (The Pittsburgh Pirates in 1925 and 1927 and the Cincinnati Reds in 1939 and 1940 won two pennants.) None of these teams are in the discussion of best National League teams of the twentieth century, or even the first half of the century, according to me. Their various fortunes, however, do raise the question: how important is the "players" part of my equation for helping determine the "best teams"?

Obviously, a team's core regulars playing well are instrumental to achievement, but *can a team with significant achievement—for the sake of argument, at least two (preferably three) pennants in five years—truly be considered one of the best if it has few "best players"*—those with half-century or full-century historical legacies, or who are either the best at their positions or among the league's best position players and pitchers in the decade surrounding their team's accomplishments? *Can a team with few "best players" be either dominant or win consistently, two measures that are appropriately associated with best teams?* And, alternately, how should one rate a team whose high "players score," according to my methodology, suggests it should have been more successful or dominant than it in fact was? To a great extent, this touches on the heart of any discussion about "intangibles" that are unquantifiable but so important in kibitzing about baseball: why it is that some teams overachieve and others underachieve with the talent they have? But this is not the subject of our inquiry.

Through the first quarter of the twentieth century, according to my methodology, the lowest players score of the five best teams in the National League is 21 for the 1910-14 New York Giants; the highest is 33 for the 1906-10 Chicago Cubs. My own expectation was that any team with a players score below 18 was not only unlikely to be in the debate about best teams of the century, but also should not have had much success. While I thought it possible—perhaps even likely—that any team in consideration to be one the best in the league for the century might have only one player with an historical legacy of a half-century or more, I expected for sure that all the best teams would have at least three or four of their core regulars who were the best in the league at their position at the time or among the surrounding decade's 10 best position players and five best pitchers. This was indeed the case with all the National League teams we have considered so far through the first quarter-century. That's what I expected, and that's as it was. Enter the St. Louis Cardinals.

The **St. Louis Cardinals** from 1926 to 1934 have to be considered among the great overachievers of all time, according to me. They won five pennants in nine years and fielded six future Hall of Famers who were core regulars—Jim Bottomley, Frankie Frisch, Chick Hafey, Pete Alexander, Jesse Haines, and Dizzy Dean—and that doesn't include Rogers Hornsby, who found himself traded away to the Giants for Frisch after leading the Cardinals to their first-ever pennant as player-manager in 1926, and Joe Medwick, who was in only the second year of his Hall of Fame career when the Cardinals won it all in 1934. Only one of those Hall of Fame players, however, was historically great for the Cardinals for the years under consideration based on his five or more best consecutive years. That would be the incomparable Dizzy Dean, and he was only present for the Cardinals' fifth and final pennant (in 1934) during that stretch; Frisch's best consecutive years were mostly with the Giants.

St. Louis was the last of the eight National League franchises that began the twentieth century to win a pennant. Through the first quarter of the century, the Cardinals were one of the worst teams in the league—finishing last or next-to-last ten times in 25 years, losing 90 or more games ten times, and posting a winning record in only eight seasons. By the mid-1920s, Branch Rickey was transforming the Cardinals—in fact, transforming all of white professional baseball—with his development of an extensive farm system and somewhat ruthless strategy of holding onto promising talent in his minor league system as an investment in the future and discarding veterans abruptly when he felt their skills were on the precipice of decline. Rickey's creative genius proved to be the foundation for Cardinals' success that would ultimately carry through World War II. Beginning with their first pennant in 1926, the Cardinals began fashioning a legacy that remains to this day of teams that play fundamentally sound baseball and know how to win by being pesky and gritty when they do not dominate the league. Many Cardinals' pennant-winning teams through history can be said to be overachievers. This was true of the Cardinals from 1926 to 1934, from 1964 to 1968, and from 1982 to 1987.

The Cardinals' run of success from 1926 through 1934 was accomplished by two different teams, according to me, with a transition from one to the other occurring during their pennant-winning seasons of 1930 and 1931. The **1926 to 1931 St. Louis Cardinals** may have logged four pennants and two World Series in six years, but they were hardly a dominant team. They were indisputably the best in their league only in winning their fourth pennant in 1931, when they won 101 games and finished 13 games in front. The first three of their four pennants—in 1926, 1928, and 1930—on the other hand, went down to the wire,

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with the Cardinals winning by two-game margins each time. And they just missed in 1927, finishing second to Pittsburgh by a mere 1½ games. St. Louis did not have a winning record against any of their rivals for first place in any of those four pennant races. The 1930 Cardinals, however, had one of the greatest stretch drives in history, winning 44 of 57 games (a .772 winning percentage) in August and September to rise from fourth place and 11 games behind, with a losing 48-49 record at the end of July, to win the pennant by two games.

While winning their four pennants in six years, the 1926-31 Cardinals led the league in runs scored twice (in 1926 and 1930), and were second two other times. They never allowed the fewest runs in the league, but gave up the second fewest when they won their pennants in 1928, 1930, and 1931. They were fourth or fifth in fewest runs allowed the three other years of their run, including when they won their first pennant in 1926, one of the years they (fortunately) led the league in runs scored. Ironically, while the Cardinals had the best defensive efficiency ratio for making outs on balls put into play when winning the 1926 and 1928 pennants (and they were second in 1927), they were only sixth and fifth best in the NL—below the league average both years—when they won the 1930 and 1931 pennants.

Perhaps of greatest significance for a team with this record of achievement, the Cardinals' players score was only 12 for their core regulars between 1926 and 1931. First baseman Jim Bottomley and aging veteran pitcher Grover Cleveland "Pete" Alexander (as one of five starting pitchers) were the only players on the team who were the best at their position for at least half the years under consideration, and neither beyond 1928. Frisch would become the league's best second baseman only in 1931, after injuries had finally all but ended Hornsby's career. Frisch and left fielder Chick Hafey were the only St. Louis position players among the 10 best in the league in the surrounding decade, according to me, and Alexander had that honor among the five best pitchers. Based on their best consecutive years, neither Frisch nor Alexander had even a half-century legacy for the 1926-31 Cardinals; both statistically earned their historical century-plus legacies with other teams. None of the team's core regulars have a legacy as one of the National League's best position players or pitchers for the first half-century. As always, these judgments are mine, based on wins above replacement (WAR).

The second Cardinals team during this period can be said to go back to 1930—when the transition between the two teams that brought five pennants in nine years to St. Louis began—and extends to 1934, when St. Louis won the National League pennant yet again by only two games. The **1930 to 1934 Cardinals** won three pennants, including the two that overlapped with the 1926-31 team, and two World Series (including the one that overlapped with the 1926-31 team), three times led the league in runs scored, and had that dominant season in 1931. In addition to their (already mentioned) phenomenal finish in August-September 1930 to win a close pennant race, the Cardinals in 1934 overcame a seven-game deficit on September 5 to overtake the New York Giants by winning 19 of their final 24 games. Dizzy Dean won six and his brother Paul won four of the Cardinals' total of 21 victories in the month of September to lead their come-from-behind rally to the pennant.

The 1930-34 Cardinals had a higher players score than the 1926-31 team—17 to 12—but the difference is entirely accounted for by Dizzy Dean, whose best consecutive years from 1932 to 1936 establish him in the top tier of the National League's best pitchers in the twentieth century. Besides Dean, however, the 1930-34 Cardinals had only two players who were the best at their positions—second baseman Frisch, who also became their manager in

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1933 and guided them to the 1934 pennant, and fireplug Pepper Martin as a multi-position regular playing third base and center field, depending on need—and Frisch was the only St. Louis position player for this team to be one of the 10 best in the surrounding decade.

Until the major leagues expanded to divisional alignments in 1969, no National League team did better over a six-year stretch than the 1926-31 Cardinals in winning four pennants in six years. The New York Giants won four pennants in four years from 1921 to 1924, and the Chicago Cubs from 1906 to 1910, St. Louis Cardinals from 1942 to 1946, and Brooklyn Dodgers from 1952 to 1956 each won four pennants in five years. But extend the run of each of those teams to six years and their achievement was exactly the same as (which is to say, no better than) the 1926-31 Cardinals—four pennants in six years. That’s really good company for the 1926-31 St. Louis Cardinals to keep. And yet, according to me, this Cardinals team does not merit consideration with any of those teams as being one of the best National League teams for even just the first half of the twentieth century because of their very low players score by my methodology.

Here’s why. Both the 1926-31 and 1930-34 Cardinals demonstrate that *teams with few “best players” are not only very unlikely to be dominant in their time, but are vulnerable to poor seasons. Indeed, they are more apt to have poor seasons than those teams with more “best players” on their roster.* And poor seasons are in fact what happened to the St. Louis Cardinals. While winning five pennants in nine years, the Cardinals also finished fourth in 1929 and had losing seasons while finishing fifth in 1932 and sixth in 1933. This is not a good resume for any team to be one of baseball’s best teams of the century, or half-century, or even third-of-a-century.

In general, the best teams ought to be able to sustain a consistently high level of achievement over at least five years. This does not mean winning the pennant every year; in major league baseball, that is very hard to do because there are enough good teams and variables in play (like injuries, slumps, and streaks) to derail even the best teams at least some of the time. But it does mean being in the hunt. The “best teams,” according to me, should be competitive for the pennant each season, even if they don’t always win. For “best teams,” being successful should be almost inevitable, and a core of regulars that includes several “best players” in the league—especially contemporary to the team’s achievement, but also in historical legacy—is the foundation for inevitability.

In point of fact, the **1904-08 New York Giants**—who had a substantially higher players score of 24 than the 1926-31 Cardinals with 12—also had a fourth-place finish far out of the running in the midst of their five years under consideration. The Cardinals actually have the higher achievement score between the two teams. Putting aside their noncompetitive 1907 season, however, and taking into account my dominance factors, the Giants were a much more dominant team over the course of their five years than the Cardinals were in their six. They were, and the Cardinals not, because they fielded more “best players” in both contemporary and historical context than their National League rivals.

Far be it for me, or anyone, to say that the Cardinals’ collective achievement between 1926 and 1934—five pennants in nine years—is somehow diminished by their having relatively unimposing teams when it comes to their core regulars. Indeed, the Cardinals earned a well-deserved reputation for playing scrappy, die-hard, we-ain’t-gonna-lose baseball that

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ultimately was enshrined in the 1934 Cardinals being given the gritty nickname, “Gashouse Gang,” which fit so perfectly the Depression Era. Living so close to the edge makes for exciting pennant races and terrific lore, and even embodies the American ethic of overcoming great odds to achieve success, but it does not make a case for being the best over time. These were good teams, and by definition the National League’s “best” in the years they won the pennant, but the relative absence of “best players,” compared to other teams in the “best teams” debate, makes their success more a matter of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts than of inevitability. Indicative of the point, despite five pennants in nine years, the Cardinals were not competitive in three of the four years from 1926 to 1934 that they did not win the pennant.

This became somewhat the hallmark of successful St. Louis teams in the twentieth century. Beginning in 1926, the Cardinals won 15 National League pennants before the century ended (and won another in 2006), but for all that franchise success, I consider the **1941 to 1946 Cardinals** to be the only St. Louis team in the argument about the best National League teams of the century, and even they did not have an imposing collection of players with significant legacies, although they did have one of the very greatest of all time in Stan Musial. The **1964 to 1968 Cardinals** won three pennants, but finished seventh and sixth, once with a losing record, the two other years. That team had only three stars—Bob Gibson, Lou Brock, and Curt Flood (four, if you want to include Tim McCarver)—among its core players for most of those years, but Gibson was their only player with either a half-century or century-plus legacy (he obviously has both), according to me, based on his best consecutive years as derived from WAR. Similarly, the **1982 to 1987 Cardinals** also won three pennants, but endured two losing seasons and third when they were never in the race in their six-year run. They had only one true star—Ozzie Smith, the best defensive shortstop ever—who has a century-plus legacy that includes those years under consideration. Like the 1926-31 and 1930-34 Cardinals, the later 1964-68 and 1982-87 St. Louis teams had great success with very few “best players,” which made them vulnerable to poor seasons in the very midst of otherwise impressive achievements of three pennants and two World Series in five and then six years.

But as a counterpoint to my argument that “best teams” must have more than just a few “best players,” having more “best players” does not necessarily make for “best teams” either. There are many teams, historically, that had more “best players” but failed to achieve the success in number of pennants or even competitive seasons that might have been expected for the talent they had. This very fact is one reason why the tales of scrappy, refuse-to-lose teams with more limited talent are so appealing, like the various St. Louis Cardinals teams over the years.

Ironically, the Cardinals from 1934 to 1938 could be a case study relevant to this point. This St. Louis team had three players with a century-plus legacy based on three or more of their best consecutive seasons including those years: Dizzy Dean, first baseman Johnny Mize, and outfielder Joe Medwick. Their combined 18 legacy points—(for being among the best in the surrounding decade, the first half-century, and historically since 1901)—alone exceed the total players score of both the 1926-31 and 1930-34 Cardinals. Moreover, none of the National League’s best teams in the first half of the twentieth century had as many players who earned a century-plus legacy based on their best consecutive seasons for the years under consideration for their team. The 1906-10 Cubs, with Three-

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Finger Brown and Johnny Evers, and the 1904-08 Giants, with Christy Mathewson and Roger Bresnahan, each had two.

Indeed, after winning it all in 1934, the St. Louis Cardinals seemed poised for an extended run as the best team in the National League. They had a dynamic offense that was prolific in scoring runs, which was further enhanced when Mize made the team in 1936. And with the Dean brothers—Dizzy and Paul—both young and having established themselves as excellent pitchers, with Dizzy arguably the best in all of major league baseball, St. Louis appeared to have the nucleus of a strong starting rotation for years to come.

In 1935, St. Louis won 96 games—one more than in 1934—but got off to a sluggish start that had them nine games off the pace on the Fourth of July. While recovering to move into first from August 25 through September 13, the Cardinals won only nine of their remaining seventeen games to finish second to the Chicago Cubs, four games out. The next year—1936—St. Louis spent most of the first half of the season and much of August in first place only to wind up second again, this time by five games to the New York Giants. An exactly .500 record of 29-29 in the final two months of the season proved their undoing. And then, the bottom fell out. The Cardinals finished fourth in 1937, out of the running by the end of July, and ended the 1938 season with a losing record in sixth place.

Scoring runs was not the problem—the reason why the 1934-38 Cardinals failed to be more successful. With Medwick and (beginning in 1936) Mize at the heart of the offense, the Cardinals led the league or were second in scoring every year; indeed, St. Louis outscored every other National League team even in 1938, when they finished sixth with a 71-80 record. Unfortunately, the 725 runs they scored that year were only three more than the 722 they gave up. After giving up the third fewest runs in the league in 1934 and the second fewest in 1935, St. Louis gave up the second *most* in 1936 and 1938, and was third from the bottom in 1937.

Manager Frankie Frisch was the problem. Notwithstanding the brothers Dean, Frisch badly managed his pitching staff. Or perhaps it was *because* of the Dean boys that Frisch badly managed his pitching staff. Either way, Frisch wore out his starting pitchers by using them too often in relief. Frisch used his staff ace, the brilliant Dizzy Dean, fifty times in both 1934 and 1935, and in 51 games in 1936. Forty-eight of those 151 appearances, or nearly a third of the time he took the mound, were in relief, during which Dizzy saved 23 games (leading the league with 11 in 1936) to go along with his 82 victories. And Frisch used Paul Dean in 85 games in 1934 and 1935. By 1936, the Cardinals' staff was breaking down. Paul hurt his arm in the spring and never recovered, and then Dizzy suffered a broken toe in the 1937 All-Star Game and injured his much overworked arm trying to compensate. He too was never the same. In 1937, the Cardinals' staff recorded only four saves all year (in 81 wins) and had 81 complete games, indicative of Frisch not trusting his bullpen with the game on the line—especially with the injured, overworked Dizzy not available to be his relief ace as well as top starting pitcher. Dizzy Dean was now damaged goods, and in 1938 he was no longer a Cardinal. He was a Cub.

If the Cardinals from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s were overachievers, the contemporary Chicago Cubs were surely underachievers. The Cubs, who won pennants every three years between 1929 and 1938, were also two separate teams—both with a core of outstanding players. The **1928 to 1932 Chicago Cubs** won two National League pennants, in 1929

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pennant by 10½ games and in 1932 by four games. They were a team that was *generally* strong in all facets of the game, twice leading the league in runs scored (in 1929 and 1931) and twice in fewest runs allowed (1928 and 1932); *generally*, because twice they were no better than fourth in scoring and, in 1930 and 1931, were sixth and fifth in the league in giving up runs. The Cardinals came out on top in the three seasons the 1928-32 Cubs did not.

The 1929 Cubs effectively put an end to the pennant race with 19 wins in a 22-game stretch in mid-summer, finishing with 98 victories. With star catcher Gabby Hartnett out virtually the entire year with an arm injury, the Cubs' offense was powered by second baseman Rogers Hornsby having a typical sensational Rogers Hornsby-type year and center fielder Hack Wilson. Between them they hit 78 home runs—more than half of the 139 blasted out by the team—and drove in 308 runs, with Wilson leading the league (159) and Hornsby finishing third in RBI. Next year it was Hornsby's turn to miss virtually the entire season (he fractured his ankle), and although Hartnett was back and Wilson set the new National League record for home runs with 56 and set what still stands as a major league record 191 RBI, the 1930 Cubs lost out to the Cardinals in a tight pennant race, finishing two games behind. Chicago trailed Brooklyn, who was not expected in any case to be in the race come the stretch drive, by only two games at the end of July, but stood nine ahead of third-place St. Louis. While the Cubs closed out the season with a respectable 32-23 record in August and September, the Cardinals overtook them (and the fading Dodgers) with a 44-13 record in the final months. And in 1932, when they won the pennant by virtue of a red-hot (22-6) month of August after changing managers from Hornsby (who had replaced the soon-to-be-famous Joe McCarthy in 1931) to first baseman Charlie Grimm, the Cubs nearly squandered their 7½-game lead at the end of August by finishing the season with a 15-13 month of September.

Three of the ten regulars who were the core of this team—Hartnett, Wilson (as one of three outfielders), and pitcher Charlie Root (as one of five starting pitchers)—were the best at their positions. These players and right fielder Kiki Cuyler were also among the best in the National League for the surrounding decade. Hartnett and Wilson were two of the NL's 25 best players in the first half of the twentieth century, according to me, although neither makes my full-century cut.

The **1932 to 1938 Chicago Cubs** were even better, winning three pennants, and just as dominant—twice leading the league in scoring and four times in fewest runs allowed. Six of their eleven core players were the best in the league at their positions during all or most of this run: Hartnett, second baseman Billy Herman, and third baseman Stan Hack among position players; three starting pitchers—Lon Warneke, Bill Lee, and Larry French, who was acquired from Pittsburgh in 1935; and Charlie Root, who by this time was used more in relief than as a starter. Herman, Hartnett, and Hack were among the NL's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. Gabby Hartnett is the only one of the three to have a half-century legacy, based on his best consecutive years from 1928 to 1935 (minus the 1929 season, when he was injured); he was in fact by far the best National League catcher in the first half-century and was one of the catching icons of the 1930s—Bill Dickey and Mickey Cochrane in the American League being the others—against which future great catchers would be measured. As imposing as the Cubs' players were in their time, Lon Warneke is the only member on this team to have a century-plus legacy, according to me. Indeed, his best consecutive years from 1932 to 1936 rivaled those of Dizzy Dean and the Giants' Carl Hubbell. Indicative of how strong this team was with regard to “best players,” according to

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my methodology, the 1932-38 Cubs have the second highest players score (27) of any NL team in the first half of the twentieth century, after the 1906-10 Cubs. And yet—

—With only their Chicago forebears having as many outstanding players for a National League team, should not the Chicago Cubs during the 1930s have been more successful than they were?

After winning the pennant in 1932—and being crushed in the World Series by the Yankees, now managed by Joe McCarthy, who had managed the Cubs to the 1929 pennant—Chicago finished third in both 1933 and 1934, neither year being really competitive for the pennant. In 1935, the Cubs won the pennant by four games after a poor start that had them in fourth place and 10½ games behind on July 4. They had an absolutely superb September stretch drive, however, winning 23 while losing only three times, to beat out the defending World Series champion Cardinals, against whom they sealed the pennant by winning the first three of five games in the final series of the season. Of the Cubs' four pennants between 1929 and 1938, this was the only time they won 100 games. Through the 2010 season, 1935 was also the last time a Chicago Cubs team won one hundred.

But then the Cubs finished second in 1936, never really challenging the Giants, and in 1937 finished second to the Giants again, by three games, after being in a first-place tie on September 1. In 1938, having once again changed managers mid-season (from Charlie Grimm, now retired as a player, to Gabby Hartnett), the Cubs rallied from seven games behind at the end of August to win the pennant by two games over Pittsburgh by virtue of a 22-7 record to close out the season. A three-game sweep of the Pirates at the end of September to cap off a 10-game winning streak sealed the pennant and established Hartnett's lore in history when he hit a game-winning home run against Pittsburgh in the gathering gloom of dusk.

The **1933 to 1937 New York Giants**, now managed by first baseman Bill Terry following John McGraw's retirement, won three pennants in five years—a nice achievement—but have the lowest dominance score (10), according to my methodological approach, of any of the 22 National League teams I looked at for consideration among the best in the twentieth century. They did not win 100 games, run away with any of their pennants, or lead the league in runs scored in any of the five years. Twice leading the National League in fewest runs allowed was all that saved this team from being shut out among the dominance factors I selected for my methodology.

None of the other teams we've examined so far had as few core regulars for all or most of the years under consideration as the 1933-37 Giants, but three—first baseman (and manager) Terry, right fielder Mel Ott, and pitching ace Carl Hubbell—are Hall of Famers. Only Ott and Hubbell, however, have century-plus legacies for their best consecutive years based on WAR falling within at least three of the years under consideration for this team. Bill Terry also has a century-plus legacy, according to me, but his best consecutive years were from 1929 to 1934, only two of which are relevant here. The league's best first baseman from 1929 through 1935, Terry replaced himself at first base with Sam Leslie the following year, essentially calling his playing career over, because he was physically worn out, especially around the knees. As manager, Terry led the Giants to the 1936 and 1937 pennants, playing sparingly the first year and not at all thereafter.

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Terry's Giants won their pennants by five games in 1933, when they also won the World Series, by five games again in 1936, and three games in 1937, and were in position where they could have won five pennants in a row. In 1934, the Giants led by 5½ games on September 1 and seemed on their way to a second straight pennant, increasing that lead to seven games by September 6, but ended the season in second place, two games behind the St. Louis "Gashouse Gang." They finished September with a 13-14 record, compared to 21-7 for the Cardinals, including three losses in four games to St. Louis in mid-month. Hubbell won three times down the September stretch, and Hal Schumacher won four, but they were not enough. Losing their last five games of the season, and six of their last seven when they still had a three-game lead, sealed the Giants' fate. The last two of those losses, famously, came on the final weekend of the season—which New York entered tied for first with St. Louis—when Terry's smartass sound bite back in spring training rhetorically asking whether Brooklyn was still in the league came back to bite him hard.

In 1935, there was another dramatic finish to a pennant race that had seemed well in hand for the New York Giants. Following a doubleheader sweep on the Fourth of July, the Giants were up by nine games over second-place St. Louis and 10½ ahead of fourth-place Chicago, presumably cruising to a pennant, only to finish the season 44-43 the rest of the way, while the Cubs went 62-23 after Independence Day to win the right to go to the World Series. New York ended up third, a rather far 8½ games back of Chicago, a 19-game swing in the standings between the two teams. Hubbell had 14 of his 23 victories after July 4, but Schumacher, who finished with 19 wins on the season, had none after September 6.

The next two years were very good for the New York Giants—pennants both years—except for the unfortunate circumstance of meeting up with the Joe DiMaggio-Lou Gehrig-Bill Dickey-Red Ruffing-Lefty Gomez-led New York Yankees, located just across the river from the Polo Grounds in the Bronx. They never had a chance, even with Mel Ott and Carl Hubbell.

With three pennants in five years, it's hard to argue that the 1933-37 Giants underachieved. But should they have been more dominant with Ott and Hubbell in the midst of great seasons, and Terry collecting 200 hits and hitting .354 and .341 in his last two full seasons in 1934 and 1935 (although with much reduced power)? Not necessarily, because a handful of great players with best-in-century legacies cannot alone drive a team to dominance. *They can, however, drive a team to victory*, which Ott and Hubbell surely did. Bill Terry's Giants were not especially potent offensively; they were third or fourth in the league in runs scored during each of their pennant-winning seasons. They did have strong pitching, however, finishing either first or second in fewest runs allowed in four of the five years.

As fate would have it, the 1933-37 New York Giants were the last of the Giants teams that enjoyed significant success over any five-year period, either in New York or later in San Francisco, with all due respect to Leo Durocher and his 1950 to 1954 Giants, and the Bobby Thomson home run that won the 1951 pennant, and the Willie Mays catch and Dusty Rhodes pinch hit home run in Game One that ignited a World Series sweep in 1954.

And so, at the end of this long essay, two questions remain: how important are "best players" in determining "best teams" and how should I rank the Cardinals, Cubs, and Giants teams just discussed relative to each other?

As to the first: *having many “best players” may not be a necessary condition for significant achievement.* The 1932-38 Chicago Cubs had many of the National League’s best players at the time, scored high in the dominance factors of my methodology, and probably should have won more pennants, especially given they were strong both hitting and pitching. The 1926-31 St. Louis Cardinals, with four pennants in six years, on the other hand, certainly make the case that a team can have quite impressive success with very few “best players.” But—

—*Having many “best players” is a necessary condition for a team to be consistently competitive over many seasons.* Teams with few of the league’s best players—such as the 1930-34 Cardinals, who won three pennants but flopped into the second division for two consecutive years—are more likely to have poor seasons that keep them out of the running, even in the midst of winning multiple pennants. The same could be said for the 1926-31 Cardinals, who had only one bad season—as did, for that matter, the much better 1904-08 New York Giants—but they were not a team that dominated the league when they were winning four pennants, except for in 1931, and therefore are not in the argument about the best National League teams of the twentieth century. All the teams so far that are in the argument (at least according to me) have players scores over 20.

As to the second question: while none of the National League teams from the mid-1920s to 1940 merit consideration among the best teams of the first half-century—

- —The **1932-38 Chicago Cubs**, according to me, were clearly the best of the five teams we’ve just examined. They had six of the league’s best players at their positions, three with half-century legacies, and were far more dominant than the contemporaneous Giants, especially their pitching in the years they won the pennant. Besides winning three pennants, these Cubs never finished worse than third or more than eight games behind.
- The **1933-37 New York Giants**, led by all-time greats Mel Ott and Carl Hubbell, were competitive every year. They won three pennants and might have won five straight, were it not for late-season implosions in 1934 and 1935. Had Bill Terry’s Giants scored higher on my dominance factors, I would have considered them among the five best National League teams in the first half-century.
- Sharing two pennants between them (in 1930 and 1931), I consider the **1926-31 St. Louis Cardinals** to be better than the **1930-34 St. Louis Cardinals**, despite the second Cardinals’ team having a higher players score. It’s hard to turn your back on four pennants in six seasons by the 1926-31 Cardinals, especially when the 1930-34 St. Louis team had not one, but two very poor seasons in the mix.
- Indeed, for me, because of those two bad seasons and despite their three pennants in five years, I would also rank the 1930-34 Cardinals behind the **1928-32 Chicago Cubs**, who never finished worse than third.

That’s according to me. You may feel differently.

5 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1926-1938

	P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
Chicago Cubs, 1932-38	3 - 0	631 - 442 .588	21	25	27	73
New York Giants, 1933-37	3 - 1	462 - 302 .605	26	10	23	59
St. Louis Cardinals, 1926-31	4 - 2	547 - 374 .594	27	17	12	56
Chicago Cubs, 1928-32	2 - 0	453 - 315 .590	20	25	18	63
St. Louis Cardinals, 1930-34	3 - 2	442 - 326 .576	22	25	17	64

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

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX**St. LOUIS CARDINALS, 1926-1931**

4 Pennants (1926, 1928, 1930, 1931)

2 World Series Wins (1926, 1931)

ACHIEVEMENT

1 st place (x 3)	2 nd place (x 2)	3 rd place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
4 x 3 = 12	1 x 2 = 2	0	2 x 1 = 2	16

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 16 / 6 years x 10 = **26.7****DOMINANCE**

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
1	1	2	0	4

DOMINANCE SCORE = 4 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **16.7****PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1926-31	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1924-33	1 st ½ 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Jim Bottomley, 1923-31	20.6	1923-28	no		
2B Frank Frisch, 1927-34	26.6	s/o	1924-30	no *	*
SS Charlie Gelbert, 1929-32	7.7	no	no		
LF Chick Hafey, 1927-31	22.3	no	1928-32	no	
CF Taylor Douthit, 1926-30	13.7	no	no		
C Jimmie Wilson, 1928-33	4.6	no	no		
P Pete Alexander, 1926-29	14.4	1911-28 (-1)	1925-29	no **	**
P Jesse Haines, 1920-36	17.2	no	no		
P Willie Sherdel, 1922-29	9.3	no	no		
P Flint Rhem, 1925-31 (-1)	5.7	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1926-31 = 233.1	142.1				
Core WAR= 61.0 % of Team	62.6 / 10	2.5 / 10 x 10	3 x 1	0	0
38.9 Av. Team WAR + 61.0 %	6.3	2.5	3	0	0

* Frisch one of NL's 50 best position players of century for best years of 1921-27.

** Alexander one of NL's 30 best pitchers of century for best years of 1911-20 (-1).

PLAYERS SCORE = 6.3 (Base WAR) + 2.5 (Best at Position) + 3 (NL Best) = **11.8**

St. LOUIS CARDINALS, 1930-1934

Pennants (1930, 1931, 1934)
World Series Wins (1931, 1934)

ACHIEVEMENT

1 st place (x 3)	2 nd place (x 2)	3 rd place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
3 x 3 = 9	0	0	2 x 1 = 2	11

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

DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
1	1	3	0	5

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

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1930-34	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1928-37	1 st 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Ripper Collins, 1932-36	10.4	no	no		
2B Frank Frisch, 1927-34	16.2	1930-34	1928-33	*	*
SS Charlie Gelbert, 1929-32	8.3	no	no		
RF George Watkins, 1930-33	9.7	no	no		
CF-3B Pepper Martin, 1931-36	9.5	1931-36 MPR	no		
C Jimmie Wilson, 1928-33	2.6	no	no		
P Dizzy Dean, 1932-37	17.8	1932-37	1932-36	yes	yes
P Bill Hallahan, 1930-35	12.5	no	no		
P/RP Jesse Haines, 1920-36	7.7	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1930-34 = 184.8	94.7				
Core WAR= 51.2 % of Team	55.9 / 10	3 / 9 x 10	2 x 1	1 x 2	1 x 3
37.0 Av. Team WAR + 51.2 %	5.6	3.3	2	2	3

* Frisch one of NL's 50 best position players of century for best years of 1921-27.

PLAYERS SCORE = 6.3 (Base WAR) + 3.3 (Best at Position) + 7 (NL Best) = **16.6**

CHICAGO CUBS, 1928-1932

2 Pennants (1928, 1932)

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
2 x 3 = 6	1 x 2 = 2	2 x 1 = 2	0	10

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

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
0	1	2	2	5

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

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1928-32	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1925-34	1 st ½ 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Charlie Grimm, 1925-32	7.2	no	no		
LF Riggs Stephenson, 1927-32	15.1	no	no		
CF Hack Wilson, 1926-30	30.2	1926-30	1926-30	yes	no
RF Kiki Cuyler, 1928-34	21.3	no	1925-30	no	
SS/3B Woody English, 1928-34	18.2	no	no		
C Gabby Hartnett, 1924-39 (-1)	14.1	1924-37 (-1)	'25-30 (-1)	'28-35 (-1)	no
P Charlie Root, 1926-33 *	16.5	1929-33	1926-31	no	
P Pat Malone, 1928-34	17.1	no	no		
P Sheriff Blake, 1925-30	8.0	no	no		
P Guy Bush, 1925-34	6.2	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1928-32 = 194.8	153.9				
Core WAR= 79.0 % of Team	69.8 / 10	3 / 10 x 10	4 x 1	2 x 2	0
39.0 Av. Team WAR + 79.0 %	7.0	3.0	4	4	0

* Charlie Root's career with the Cubs ended in 1942 as a relief pitcher.

PLAYERS SCORE = 7.0 (Base WAR) + 3 (Best at Position) + 8 (NL Best) = **18**

CHICAGO CUBS, 1932-1938

3 Pennants (1932, 1935, 1938)

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
3 x 3 = 9	2 x 2 = 4	2 x 1 = 2	0	15

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 15 / 7 years x 10 = **21****DOMINANCE**

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
1	0	2	4	7

DOMINANCE SCORE = 7 / 28 (4 x 7 seasons) x 100 = **25****PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1932-38	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1931-40	1 st ½ 20 th C	20 th C +
2B Billy Herman, 1932-41	31.8	1935-39	1935-39	no	
SS Billy Jurgens, 1932-38	14.4	no	no		
3B Stan Hack, 1934-46	18.8	1934-46	1935-40	no	
LF Augie Galan, 1935-39	11.8	no	no		
RF Frank Demaree, 1933-38 (-1)	11.9	no	no		
C Gabby Hartnett, 1924-39	23.4	1924-37	1933-37	1928-35	
P Lon Warneke, 1932-36	26.1	1932-38	1932-36	yes	yes
P Bill Lee, 1934-42	22.1	1934-39	no		
P Larry French, 1935-40	12.4	1930-40	no		
P Tex Carleton, 1935-38	6.3	no	no		
RP Charlie Root, 1934-40 *	10.6	1934-38	1934-38	yes	
TEAM WAR, 1932-38 = 279.4	189.6				
Core WAR= 67.9 % of Team 40.0 Av. Team WAR + 67.9%	67 / 10 6.7	7 / 11 x 10 6.4	5 x 1 5	3 x 2 6	1 x 3 3

* Charlie Root's career with the Cubs began in 1926 as a starting pitcher.

PLAYERS SCORE = 6.7 (Base WAR) + 6.4 (Best at Position) + 14 (NL Best) = **27**

NEW YORK GIANTS, 1933-1937

3 Pennants (1933, 1936, 1937)

1 World Series Win (1933)

ACHIEVEMENT

1 st place (x 3)	2 nd place (x 2)	3 rd place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
3 x 3 = 9	1 x 2 = 2	1 x 1 = 1	1 x 1 = 1	13

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 13 / 5 years x 10 = **26****DOMINANCE**

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
0	0	0	2	2

DOMINANCE SCORE = 2 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **10****PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1933-37	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1931-40	1 st ½ 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Bill Terry, 1927-35	14.2	1929-35	no	^	^
SS Dick Bartell, 1935-38	14.5	no	no		
LF Jo Jo Moore, 1933-41	13.5	no	no		
RF Mel Ott, 1928-45	34.4	1929-42	1931-40	yes	yes
C Gus Mancuso, 1933-36	5.2	no	no		
P Carl Hubbell, 1929-40	33.3	1930-38	1932-36	yes	yes
P Hal Schumacher, 1933-42	17.3	no	no		
P Fred Fitzsimmons, 1925-36	7.1	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1933-37 = 200.0	139.5				
Core WAR= 69.8 % of Team 40.0 Av. Team WAR + 69.8 %	68 / 10 6.8	3 / 8 x 10 3.75	2 x 1 2	2 x 2 4	2 x 3 6

^ Terry one of NL's 50 best position players of century for best years of 1929-34.

PLAYERS SCORE = 6.8 (Base WAR) + 3.8 (Best at Position) + 12 (NL Best) = **23**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1926-31 CARDINALS and 1928-32 CUBS		1930-34 CARDINALS
10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1924-34		10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1928-37
Rogers Hornsby, 2B, 1924-31 (-1)		Mel Ott, OF, 1929-36
Paul Waner, OF, 1926-29		Arky Vaughan, SS, 1933-37
Bill Terry, 1B, 1927-34		Bill Terry, 1B, 1929-34
<i>Hack Wilson, OF, 1926-30, Chi.</i>		Paul Waner, OF, 1928-34
<i>Frankie Frisch, 2B, 1924-30, NY-StL</i>		Wally Berger, OF, 1931-35
Travis Jackson, SS, 1926-31		Gabby Hartnett, C, 1928-35 (-1)
Chuck Klein, OF, 1929-33		Chuck Klein, OF, 1929-33
<i>Kiki Cuyler, OF, 1924-30, Pit-Chi</i>		<i>Frankie Frisch, 2B, 1928-33</i>
<i>Gabby Hartnett, C, 1924-30 (-1), Chi</i>		Pie Traynor, 3B, 1929-33
<i>Chick Hafey, OF, 1928-32, StL</i>		Chick Hafey, OF, 1928-32
5 BEST NL PITCHERS, 1924-34		5 BEST NL PITCHERS, 1928-37
Dazzy Vance, 1924-30		Carl Hubbell, 1932-36
<i>Pete Alexander, 1925-29, Chi-StL</i>		<i>Dizzy Dean, 1932-36</i>
Remy Kremer, 1924-29		Lon Warneke, 1932-36
Burleigh Grimes, 1927-31		Van Lingle Mungo, 1933-37
<i>Charlie Root, 1926-31, Chi</i>		Larry French, 1932-36

BEST AT POSITION

1B	Bottomley-----→Terry-----→Mize-----→(48)
2B	(20) Hornsby-----→Frisch-----→Herman-----→
SS	T.Jackson-----→Vaughan-----→
3B	(22) Traynor-----→Hack-----→(46)
OF	Cuyler-----→Ott-----→Moore-----→(42)
OF	P.Waner-----→Medwick-----→
OF	H.Wilson-----→Berger-----→Goodman-----→
MP	Grantham, 1B/2B----→Martin, 3B/OF----→Ott, 3B-OF----→(42)
C	Hartnett-----→Lombardi--→(42)
P	(11) Alexander-----→Root-----→Lee-----→
P	(20) Luque-----→Hubbell-----→
P	(22) Vance-----→Dean-----→Passeau---→(45)
P	Kremer-----→French-----→
P	Grimes-----→Warneke-----→
RP	Root-----→
	23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

	1932-38 Cubs and 1933-37 Giants	
	10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1931-40	
	<i>Mel Ott, OF, 1931-40, NY</i>	
	<i>Arky Vaughan, SS, 1933-40</i>	
	<i>Johnny Mize, 1B, 1936-40</i>	
	<i>Ducky Medwick, OF, 1935-39</i>	
	<i>Paul Waner, OF, 1932-36</i>	
	<i>Dolf Camilli, 1B, 1936-40</i>	
	<i>Wally Berger, OF, 1931-35</i>	
	<i>Billy Herman, 2B, 1935-39, Chi</i>	
	<i>Gabby Hartnett, C, 1933-37, Chi</i>	
	<i>Stan Hack, 3B, 1935-40, Chi</i>	
	5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST, RELIEVER, 1931-40	
	<i>Carl Hubbell, 1932-36, NY</i>	
	<i>Dizzy Dean, 1932-36</i>	
	<i>Lon Warneke, 1932-36, Chi</i>	* Only two of French's five best consecutive years were with 1932- 38 Cubs.
	<i>Van Lingle Mungo, 1933-37</i>	
	<i>Larry French, 1932-36 *</i>	
	<i>Charlie Root, RP, 1934-38, Chi</i>	