

National League's Best Teams

Chapter Four

The 1941-46 St. Louis Cardinals: NL's Most Dominant Team Since Cubs, But What About the War?

In the first half of the twentieth century, no team other than the 1906-10 Chicago Cubs was as dominant in the National League as the **1941 to 1946 St. Louis Cardinals**. Beginning in 1942, the Cardinals won four pennants and three World Series in five years. This St. Louis team proved they could both overwhelm the league and win the close calls. Their first and fourth pennants went down to the wire, one having to go to overtime in a playoff, and their two middle pennants were won by blowout margins. Billy Southworth was the Cardinals' manager for the first five years over of this run, winning three pennants and two World Series, before leaving for another opportunity (with the Boston Braves, who he led to the 1948 pennant). Eddie Dyer, Southworth's replacement, took St. Louis to their fourth pennant in five years in his first year as manager in 1946. The Cardinals had now won nine pennants and six World Series in 21 years; it would be another 18 years before they next appeared in a World Series.

With three World Series triumphs, these Cardinals have a higher achievement score than the 1906-10 Cubs—who won but two—over a five-year span. I'm extending the Cardinals' run of success to 1941 and six years, however, because the Second World War had its greatest impact on major league rosters from 1943 to 1945, which would be the middle three years if I looked at only the 1942-46 Cardinals. It is important to do so because wartime baseball is invariably dismissed as not having been up to historical major league standards and because the Cardinals were hurt less by the loss of star players to the armed services than their principal rival, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Going back to 1941 allows three years for this St. Louis team in which baseball was operating under normal circumstances—(only a select handful of big leaguers were off to war in 1941, most notably Hank Greenberg, Bob Feller, and Cecil Travis)—as well as three years played with depleted rosters. Taking into account three normal years is critical to determining whether the Cardinals' four

pennants in five years—two of which were in wartime—stands as an achievement that should be considered legitimate by historical standards, or just a happenstance of external events.

The Brooklyn Dodgers and St. Louis Cardinals were both positioned for an extended run of success in the 1940s. Since winning a pennant in 1920, the Dodgers had sunk to being a mediocre team in the National League, with enough ineptitude, haplessness, and colorful personalities to make the team the butt of many a joke—even by the Ebbets faithful—through the 1930s. In 1937, however, Brooklyn traded for Leo Durocher—a scrappy overachieving shortstop for the St. Louis Gashouse Gang champions of 1934 whose mouth was bigger than his talent. Durocher may have been brash, but he was a leader, and in 1939 he was named player-manager of the Dodgers, bringing them home third in his first year in charge, a significant improvement over the seventh-place team he had inherited. The 1939 Dodgers already had Dolf Camilli, one of the league's best players, at first base; Dixie Walker in the outfield, although he missed most the year with injury; and Hugh Casey about to embark on a career as baseball's best reliever in the 1940s. In 1940, they added Pee Wee Reese, and Durocher was astute enough as manager to step aside as shortstop, recognizing a superior player when he saw one; pitcher Whit Wyatt to anchor the starting rotation; outfielder Joe Medwick, acquired from St. Louis during the season; and Pete Reiser as a late-July call-up, ultimately to play center field. Brooklyn finished second. And in 1941, pitcher Kirby Higbe, second baseman Billy Herman, and catcher Mickey Owen found homes in Brooklyn. The Dodgers were no longer a laughing stock, but genuinely competitive.

St. Louis, meanwhile, was recovering from the swoon that Manager Frankie Frisch had led them to, after he had taken the Gashouse Gang Cardinals to ultimate triumph in 1934. A manager can make a significant difference. After Frisch was let go at the close of a disastrous 1938 season, his replacement Ray Blade guided St. Louis into second place in 1939. As was typically of the Cardinals for most of the 1930s, the 1939 team led the league in scoring. What was different was their improvement from allowing the second most runs in the league under Frisch in 1938 to giving up the second fewest in 1939 without Frisch; with the exception of Mort Cooper coming into his own as a starting pitcher, the pitching staff was largely the same. After the Cardinals got off to a horrid start in 1940, Billy Southworth took over as manager and, from that point to the end of the season, only the eventual pennant-winning Cincinnati Reds had a better record in the National League. The Cardinals were no longer in a funk, but genuinely competitive.

Brooklyn and St. Louis squared off against each other in each of the next two pennant races, their rivalry becoming fiercely competitive. The Cardinals started the 1941 season strong, with a 31-11 record through May, but it was the Dodgers who finished strong by going 40-18 in the last two months to win the pennant by 2½ games over St. Louis. The Cardinals trailed Brooklyn by half-a-game with nine remaining, but lost four while the Dodgers won seven of their last nine. Still, St. Louis won 97 games.

The Dodgers looked certain to repeat in 1942, with a ten-game lead over the Cardinals as late as August 5. From then until the end of the year, however, St. Louis had a phenomenal 44-9 record—their .830 winning percentage was the same as the 1951 New York Giants' historical comeback, with a 39-8 record, from a 13½-game deficit in mid-August)—12 games better than 31-20 for Brooklyn. The Cardinals erased what was down to a 3½-game deficit at the start of September by winning 21 of their final 25 games, while the

Dodgers won 16 of 26. When the season ended, Brooklyn had 104 victories—four more than in 1941 and the most in franchise history up till then—but ended up two games behind St. Louis, whose 106 wins were the most by a National League team since the Pirates won 110 back in 1909. Only the Chicago Cubs of that year won as often as the 1942 Dodgers and failed to finish first. The Cardinals' secret weapon in 1942 was the emergence of a rookie outfielder by name of Stan Musial.

The 1942 Cardinals went on to stun the powerful and favored (although, with 106 wins, I believe not necessarily justifiably favored) Yankees in five games, the first World Series loss for Joe McCarthy as Yankee manager and for Joe DiMaggio as their brightest star.

Building on that success, St. Louis completely dominated the league in 1943 and 1944, winning 105 games each year without ever being really challenged. Their margins of victory were 18 and 14½ games. Brooklyn, meanwhile, dropped to third and seventh. But these pennants were won in commanding fashion while US involvement in World War II was taking a heavy toll on major league rosters. In 1945, St. Louis won 95, but that was good for only second place to the Cubs, three games behind. (This was the last time the Chicago Cubs were to win a National League pennant in the twentieth century, with 65 years remaining.) The Cardinals reclaimed the pennant with 98 wins in 1946—the first postwar year in which most players were back in baseball—although not without having to win a best-of-three playoff (in two games) after completing the regular season in a tie with Brooklyn. For those who weren't counting, that's 606 wins in six 154-game seasons—an average of 101 per year, more than any other team in history over six years except for the Chicago Cubs' 622 victories from 1906 to 1911. (The most any of the great New York Yankee teams won over six seasons was 599, from 1937 to 1942. The Yankees won 598 in six years from 1936 to 1941.)

From 1942 to 1946, the Cardinals had the league beat in virtually every facet of the game. In those five years, they led the league in runs scored three times and in fewest runs allowed four times, won 100 games or more three times, and won the pennant twice by eight games or more—all of which gave the Cardinals a dominance score equal to that of the 1906-10 Cubs. Of course, I chose to begin their run of achievement in 1941 so that this St. Louis team could be judged with at least three years not being when major league baseball rosters were depleted by wartime, which drops their overall and dominance score because of a sixth year. As a result, according to my methodology, their dominance score is only the second highest for a National League team, after the 1906-10 Cubs, for the twentieth century.

And here finally was a National League team that could not only get to the World Series, but win most of the ones they were in. They won three of their four World Series, losing only to the 1943 Yankees. Now, perhaps one of those World Series wins might be considered a bit tarnished because they beat the historically woebegone St. Louis Browns in 1944, a team that probably would not have been there had it not been for war-ravaged American League rosters, but the 1942 Yankees and 1946 Red Sox, whom they also bested in the World Series, were genuinely outstanding ball clubs.

Like all the other successful St. Louis teams in the century, the 1941-46 Cardinals were a team whose whole (achievements and dominance) was greater than the sum of its parts. While the 1906-10 Cubs had a total of seven players who were the best at their positions, seven who were among the league's best positions players and pitchers in the surrounding decade, two with century-plus legacies, another with a half-century legacy, and

still another whose century-plus legacy misses the cut for that team because only two of his best consecutive years were between 1906 and 1910, the 1941-46 Cardinals have a much more modest player legacy for a team whose overall achievements and dominance basically matched the Cubs.

Of the seven position players who counted as core regulars on this team for at least three of the six years under consideration, only two were the best at their position and among the league's 10 best players in the surrounding decade—Stan Musial and Enos “Country” Slaughter—and I’ll count shortstop Marty Marion as a “significant other” because he was the league's best shortstop in the three years the Dodgers’ Pee Wee Reese was serving during World War II. Marion avoided a wartime call-up because a leg injury from his youth caused his draft board to consider him unfit for military service, even if he was perfectly fine to play baseball and be the National League's MVP in 1944. With his best consecutive years including these seasons, Musial is indisputably one of the very best to ever play major league baseball. Slaughter was one of the league's 25 best players for his best consecutive years between 1942 and 1949, according to me, but he was a draft pick for the war from 1943 to 1945, meaning only two of his best consecutive years were for this team. Because his player value in 1941 as measured in wins above replacement (WAR) does not get him into the first-half century best players club, according to me, Slaughter's half-century legacy does not count for the 1941-46 Cardinals.

The Cardinals' pitching during these years was exemplary, accounting for 41 percent of the team's collective WAR between 1941 and 1946. In five of those six years—every year but 1945—the St. Louis pitching staff had the National League's best adjusted earned run average, which normalizes ERA to take account of the offensive level of the league at the time and the team's home park. The Cardinals had a fairly extensive turnover of pitchers when they were winning four pennants in six years. Their top three starters in 1941 were Lon Warneke, Mort Cooper, and Ernie White; in 1942, Cooper, Johnny Beazley, and Max Lanier; in 1943, Cooper, Lanier, and Harry Gumbert; in 1944, Cooper, Lanier, and Harry Brecheen; in 1945, Red Barrett, Ken Burkhart, and Blix Donnelly (Cooper had been traded to the Braves); and in 1946, Howie Pollet, Brecheen, and Murry Dickson. Cooper, Lanier, and Brecheen are the only pitchers to count as core regulars on this St. Louis team. Cooper and Brecheen were each among the league's best starting pitchers for at least half of the years under consideration as well as in the surrounding decade, according to me based on WAR.

Perhaps because of disruptions to his pitching staff caused by the war years, Manager Billy Southworth's practice of preparing young pitchers to be mainstay starters in the near future by using them in both starting and relief roles early in their careers proved particularly effective for the Cardinals. Extensive relief roles for Lanier in 1941 and Brecheen in 1943, both of whom also started, helped set them up for more substantial roles in the starting rotation the following year. They same would have been true for Beazley had he not been drafted in 1943.

How much should depleted rosters around the major leagues owing to World War II discount the Cardinals' accomplishments from 1941 to 1946, especially their overwhelming dominance of the National League in 1943 and 1944? On the surface, it appears as if St. Louis was not harmed as much by player losses to the war effort as other teams. Of their core regulars during this run, only Slaughter and their outstanding defensive center fielder Terry Moore spent as many as three years—1943, 1944, and 1945—in the service. The one season

Stan Musial missed because of World War II—1945—was the only year between 1942 and 1946 that St. Louis did not win the pennant. Had Musial not been in the military that year, it's not too much of a leap to believe that the 1942 to 1946 St. Louis Cardinals—and not the 1949 to 1953 New York Yankees—would have been the first team in major league history to win five consecutive pennants.

It is a bit misleading, however, to say that Slaughter and Moore for three years, and Musial for only one, were the only significant players the Cardinals lost to the war effort. While shortstop Marty Marion, third baseman Whitey Kurowski, catcher Walker Cooper and his brother—and ace of the pitching staff—Mort, Harry Brecheen, and Max Lanier played through the war years, St. Louis did have holes to fill as a result of wartime players becoming soldiers. The second baseman on the 1941 and 1942 Cardinals, Frank “Creepy” Crespi, spent the next three years in the service and never again played in the major leagues, and versatile infielder Jimmy Brown served two years in the military, returning to play in only 79 major league games (for Pittsburgh) once it was over, over there. The St. Louis pitching staff was particularly hard hit by the war: Johnny Beazley, who won 21 games in 1942, wore Uncle Sam's uniform the next three years; Ernie White, who tied for the team lead with 17 wins in 1941, missed much of the next two seasons with a sore arm and the two after that in the service; and Al Brazle and Howie Pollet both served two years just as they were on the verge of becoming established as major league pitchers.

Still—notwithstanding the loss of Slaughter, Moore, and one year without Stan the Man—the perception is that the Cardinals were fortunate to be able to keep more of their essential core players together than other teams during the war years. Look at what happened, by contrast, to the Brooklyn Dodgers—the Cardinals' arch rival—during the war years. The two teams, you recall, were involved in two epic pennant races in 1941 and 1942, each winning once, and in a third in 1946 that required a playoff to decide. Those were all non-war years, with few players in the service, as far as major league baseball was concerned. During the three years that major league baseball was most affected by the war—1943 to 1945—the Cardinals ran away with two pennants and finished a close second, while the Dodgers finished a distant third, a horrible seventh, and a distant third. Of the core regulars on the 1941 and 1942 Dodgers, shortstop Pee Wee Reese, second baseman Billy Herman, third baseman Cookie Lavagetto (for four years, 1942 to 1945), center fielder Pete Reiser, starting pitcher Kirby Higbe, and relief ace Hugh Casey all spent two or more years in the military. Unquestionably the Dodgers lost more *important* players to the war than the Cardinals, but still—

—How much of an impact did that really have on the Cardinals' place in history? The 1942 Dodgers were an older team than the 1942 Cardinals, and it seems unlikely that their aging veterans would have kept pace with the younger Cardinals even if there hadn't been US involvement in a world war to deplete rosters. Five of Brooklyn's regular position players and two of Brooklyn's three pitchers with 20 or more starts were 30 years or older in 1942, compared to only one core regular—30-year old center fielder Terry Moore—on the Cardinals. Back then, unlike today when professional baseball players are so much better conditioned and benefit from the marvels of modern medicine and surgery to keep them going longer, being 30 years old was to be on the slippery slope toward the end of one's baseball career. Of those seven Brooklyn 30-year olds and older who were regulars before full-scale US entry into World War II, only right fielder Dixie Walker—who was not called into service during the war—was a regular on the 1946 Dodgers.

Looking more broadly at the better National League players who lost two or more years to the war, the Cardinals may have fared a bit better than other teams, but their loss of Slaughter and Moore was actually about comparable to the losses of similar caliber players on other teams. The Dodgers were hit harder than the Cardinals, with Reese, Reiser, Herman, probably Higbe, and maybe Casey being comparable losses of talent to Slaughter and Moore. Elsewhere in the league, other *established* players whose impact was comparable to Slaughter and Moore and who were lost to their teams because of the war were first baseman Johnny Mize, catcher Harry Danning, and pitcher Hal Schumacher of the Giants; second baseman Lonny Frey and pitcher Johnny Vander Meer of the Reds, and first baseman Elbie Fletcher of the Pirates. These were all players still at the peak of their careers. Several future National League stars who served in the war, most notably Warren Spahn and Gil Hodges, had yet to establish themselves as major leaguers.

So where should the 1941-46 St. Louis Cardinals rank among the best National League teams of the first fifty years of the century, considering that three of those years were war years, during which they won two of their four pennants? Indisputably, half of the Cardinals' record of dominance was built during the war years. But 1941, 1942, and 1946 were *not* war years, and the Cardinals were an outstanding baseball team all three years, winning two pennants and just missing out with 97 wins in 1941. Given their core of young players, especially Musial, it seems highly plausible if not likely that the Cardinals' achievements in 1941 and 1942, when they along with the Dodgers were by far the best team in the league, would have given them momentum into the years ahead, even if the war had not depleted major league rosters and Brooklyn had been able to keep its core in tack. St. Louis was a young team. And I am not convinced that the Cardinals were actually that much better off than other teams in terms of losing key core players to the war effort.

World War II or not, these Cardinals were a great baseball team—the National League's second best of the first half-century after the **1906-10 Chicago Cubs**, according to me. The 1941-46 Cardinals' record of achievement and relative dominance of the league were clearly comparable to the Cubs. An argument can perhaps even be made that, wartime aside, St. Louis was slightly better than Chicago in both categories. The 1906-10 Cubs, however, have a clear advantage in best players in both contemporary and historical context. Moreover, the Cubs had to play against all-around better competition for the pennant—the Giants and Pirates—relative to their era than the 1941-46 Cardinals, whose only real rivals for pennants were the Dodgers (notwithstanding the Cubs beating them out in 1945). In five years between 1906 and 1910, the Cubs played against eight other teams with at least 90 wins, while the Cardinals faced off against only five 90-win teams—and never more than one in any season—in six years between 1941 and 1946; runner-up Cincinnati won only 87 in 1943. St. Louis had a better winning percentage than Chicago against 90-win competitive—.589 (66-46) compared to .560 (98-77)—but played only 12 percent of their games against them, compared to 23 percent for the Cubs. Combining percent of games against 90-win competition and winning percentage against those teams, the 1906-10 Cubs stand at 789 (.229 + .560), the 1941-46 Cardinals at 710 (.121 + .589).

5 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1950

	P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
Chicago Cubs, 1906-10	4 - 2	530-235 .693	32	60	33	125
St. Louis Cardinals, 1941-46	4 - 3	606-319 .655	32	50	21	103
New York Giants, 1904-08	2 - 1x	487-278 .637	22	40	24	86
New York Giants, 1910-14	3 - 0	478-286 .626	26	45	21	92
New York Giants, 1920-24	4 - 2	461-306 .601	32	25	22	79

x = no World Series in 1904

P = Pennant WS = World Series Ach = Achievement Score

Dom = Dominance Factors Score Play = Players Score Total = Total Score

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

St. LOUIS CARDINALS, 1941-1946

4 Pennants (1942, 1943, 1944, 1946)
3 World Series Wins (1942, 1944, 1946)

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	2 x 2 = 4	0	3 x 1 = 3	19

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 19 / 6 years x 10 = **32**

DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
3	2	3	4	12

DOMINANCE SCORE = 12 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **50**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1941-46	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1939-48	1 st 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
SS Marty Marion, 1940-50	21.8	s/o	no		
3B Whitey Kurowski, 1942-47	17.7	no	no		
OF/1B Stan Musial, 1942-63 (-1)	33.6	1943-55 (-1)	'42-48 (-1)	yes	yes
CF Terry Moore, 1935-48 (-3)	7.0	no	no		
RF Enos Slaughter, 1938-53 (-3)	15.7	1939-49 (-3)	'40-48 (-3)	*	
OF/1B Johnny Hopp, 1940-45	13.1	no	no		
C Walker Cooper, 1941-44	8.8	no	no		
P Mort Cooper, 1939-44	18.3	1940-46 (-1)	1940-44	no	
P Max Lanier, 1940-44	11.7	no	no		
P Harry Brecheen, 1943-50	13.7	1943-49	1943-48	no	
TEAM WAR, 1941-46 = 288.4	161.4				
Core WAR= 56.0 % of Team 48.1 Av. Team WAR + 56 %	75 / 10 7.5	4.5 / 10 x 10 4.5	4 x 1 4	1 x 2 2	1 x 3 3

* Slaughter one of NL's 25 best position players of first half-century for best years of 1942-1949 (-3).

PLAYERS SCORE = 7.5 (Base WAR) + 4.5 (Best at Position) + 9 (NL Best) = **21**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1941-46 CARDINALS		
10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1939-48		
	<i>Stan Musial, OF/1B, 1942-48 (-1)</i>	
	Johnny Mize, 1B, 1939-48 (-3)	
	Lonny Frey, 2B, 1939-43	
	Arky Vaughan, SS, 1939-43	
	Dolph Camilli, 1B, 1939-43	
	<i>Enos Slaughter, OF, 1940-48 (-3)</i>	
	Dixie Walker, OF, 1941-45	
	Elbie Fletcher, 1B, 1939-43	
	Bill Nicholson, OF, 1940-44	
	Billy Herman, 2B, 1939-43	
5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1939-48		
	Bucky Walters, 1939-44	
	<i>Mort Cooper, 1940-44</i>	
	Whit Wyatt, 1939-43	
	Claude Passeau, 1940-45	
	<i>Harry Brecheen, 1944-48</i>	
	Hugh Casey, RP, 1940-47 (-3)	

BEST AT POSITION

1B	(29) Terry-----→Mize-----→
2B	Herman-----\Frey-----→Stanky-----→
SS	Vaughan-----→Reese-----→(54)
3B	Hack-----→B.Elliott-----→(51)
OF	(29) Ott-----→Moore---\Slaughter-----→
OF	(31) Berger---→Goodman-----→D.Walker-----→
OF	Medwick-----→Nicholson-----→Kiner-----→(53)
MP	(31) Martin, 3B/OF--→Ott, 3B-OF-----→Musial, OF/1B-----→(55)
C	(24) Hartnett-----→Lombardi-----→W.Cooper-----→
P	(29) Hubbell-----→Passeau-----→Spahn-----→(62)
P	(30) French-----→Vander Meer-----→
P	Warneke-----→Walters-----→Jansen-----→(51)
P	Dean-----→Derringer-----→Brecheen-----→
P	Lee-----→M.Cooper-----→Roe-----→(52)
RP	Root-----→Casey-----→
	32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50