

National League's Best Teams

Chapter Six

The 1956-60 Milwaukee Braves: They Should Have Done Better, Or Maybe Not

When Brooklyn's run of success effectively ended in 1957, as age caught up with the core players on the 1949-56 Dodgers, the Milwaukee Braves were poised to begin their own extended dominance of the National League. The **1956 to 1960 Milwaukee Braves** had three of the greatest players in history at the beginning—outfielder Hank Aaron; the middle—third baseman Eddie Mathews; or the end—pitching ace Warren Spahn—of an impressive string of best consecutive seasons that gave them high century-plus legacies, according to me, and a secure place in baseball's Hall of Fame, according to voters from the Baseball Writers Association of America. In addition to these all-time greats, the 1956-60 Braves had Lew Burdette and Bob Buhl teamed with Spahn to give Milwaukee the most formidable starting rotation in the league—(okay, they weren't exactly Maddux, Glavine, and Smoltz from the end-of-the-century Atlanta Braves, but they were tough to beat)—a solid relief ace in Don McMahon, and quality position players in catcher Del Crandall, first baseman Joe Adcock, shortstop Johnny Logan, and center fielder Bill Bruton.

Yet history was suggest these Milwaukee Braves were not as successful as they should have been with the caliber players they had.

After finishing one game behind the Dodgers in 1956, the Braves won consecutive pennants by identical eight-game margin in 1957 and 1958, although never with a 100-win season (winning 95 games the first year and 92 the next), and then failed to capitalize on the core talent they had. They finished the 1959 season in a tie with the Dodgers, by now in Los Angeles, to whom they lost the pennant in a best two-of-three playoff. The Braves won only 86 games that year. By 1960, when Milwaukee finished second, seven games back of Pittsburgh, the Braves' decline into the long-term mediocrity that went with them to Atlanta had begun.

The Braves were a revelation in 1956, but not an unexpected one. Since moving to Milwaukee in 1953 after a seventh-place finish in their original home town of Boston, the Braves had finished second, third, and second—although they had never seriously been engaged in the pennant race. In 1955, their second-place finish was still 13½ games off Brooklyn's pace. The revelation in 1956 was the team's surge from fifth place, barely over .500 in mid-June, when Fred Haney took over as manager. The team had been in a death-defying spiral by losing 12 of the 17 games they had played so far in June when the managerial change was made, but 40 games later held a 5½-game advantage that seemed destined to end with a pennant. While their lead was down to 2½ by the beginning of September, the Braves had the advantage of playing 20 of their final 27 games against teams that would finish the season with losing records, but fell one game short of the pennant by ending the season with a decidedly mediocre 14-13 mark.

Although Milwaukee won back-to-back pennants decisively in 1957 and 1958, theirs was a relatively soft dominance of the league. The Braves were the only team in the National League to win 90 games both seasons, and in 1958 there were only three teams—Pittsburgh and San Francisco were the others—to have a winning record. Both years, Milwaukee spent all of July and some of August in tight pennant races. The Braves in 1957 led the league in scoring—the only time they would do so during this five-year period—and were second in fewest runs allowed. In 1958, Milwaukee was only third in the league in scoring, but the Braves' pitching was by far the stingiest in the National League, giving up 66 fewer runs than the staff with the next best ERA, and 136 fewer than the league average. This was one of two seasons—1956, the other—in which the Braves gave up the fewest runs in the league.

In 1957, Milwaukee did not begin running away with the pennant until a ten-game winning streak in early August lifted the team from a game behind St. Louis to an eight-game lead by mid-August. That lead was whittled down to 2½ games with only twelve remaining before Milwaukee ran off eight straight wins to take a commanding lead and win the franchise its first pennant since 1948, back when they were the Boston Braves. They went on to stun the New York Yankees in the World Series that made Burdette—with his three victories—famous. And in 1958, a 23-11 month of August secured Milwaukee a 7½-game lead going into September after what had been a hot July battling San Francisco for first place. In 1958, it was the Braves turn to be stunned in the World Series as the Yankees overcame a three-games-to-one deficit to gain a measure of revenge for what happened to them in the previous Fall Classic.

As two-time defending NL champs, the Braves were unable to gain any separation from the rest of the league in 1959 and found themselves in the heat of a three-team race with the Dodgers and Giants. From the Fourth of July until one week before the end of the season, the Braves were in first place only one day. They lost the pennant by playing less than .500 baseball (a 42-44 record) in June, July, and August, and by going 10-12 in their scheduled season series with the Dodgers. A strong final month of the season, however, when Milwaukee went 16-7, was good enough to finish the scheduled season in a tie with Los Angeles, necessitating another of the National League's three-game playoff series. This time, the playoff went only two games, and ended for the Braves on a throwing error in the twelfth inning . . . which was after Milwaukee had a three-run lead and needed only three more outs in the ninth to force a winner-goes-to-the-World Series third playoff game.

Curiously, manager Fred Haney had his slugging third baseman, Eddie Mathews, batting second in 1959—compared to his more logical third in the batting order in previous

years, including the two pennant-winning seasons of 1957 and 1958. Aaron batted third in 1959 (he had hit fourth in 1957 and 1958), with three players—Wes Covington, Joe Adcock, and Frank Torre—hitting fourth and fifth. Second in the order hardly seems the most appropriate spot in the line-up for a power hitter who led both major leagues that season in home runs with 46, and was fifth in the National League in runs batted in with 114, particularly when Covington, Adcock, and Torre batting in the power slots in the line-up combined to hit a mere 33 home runs and drive in only 154 runs. Can't help but think that the Braves would have won the pennant without a playoff, even if by only a game, if Mathews had batted third in Haney's line-up in 1959.

In 1960, Haney was gone as manager, Charlie Dressen was in, and Mathews was back to hitting third and Aaron fourth. But the Pirates got off to a fast start, the Braves to a slow one, and the seven-game lead that Pittsburgh had on September 1 was too much for Milwaukee to overcome despite a strong September finish. Even with Spahn, Burdette, and Buhl having good seasons, the Braves' staff was fifth in runs allowed in 1960, perhaps explaining why Milwaukee wasn't more competitive with Pittsburgh.

The Milwaukee Braves in the second half of the 1950s would seem to have been one of the great underachieving teams in history, notwithstanding consecutive pennants won by identical eight-game margins. With an imposing line-up that led the league in scoring once and was second in runs scored three times between 1956 and 1960, and which led the league in home runs three times; with a pitching staff that was first or second in fewest runs allowed the first four of those five years; and with three of the greatest players in history—Aaron, Mathews, and Spahn—in the midst of their best seasons, one could argue Milwaukee should have won four consecutive pennants. The two years they did not win—1956 and 1959—the Braves were not eliminated until the final day. The 1959 Los Angeles Dodgers for certain, and the 1960 Pittsburgh Pirates probably, should not have been as good, let alone better, than the Milwaukee Braves.

Why, then, did this Braves team underachieve, when they should have won at least three (1957 to 1959) and could have won four (in 1956, when they finished one game out) pennants in five years?

My answer lies in the fact that their ten core regulars over those five years accounting for nearly 97 percent of the total wins above replacement (WAR) compiled by Milwaukee Braves players as a team. In baseball, a team's success depends more on the strength of the team than the greatness of any particular individual than other team sports because the game's design is such that your best offensive players can come up to hit only once every nine at bats for the team, your best starting pitcher can take the mound only once every four or five days, occasionally more frequently in a pinch, and your best defensive players can play only one position at a time and his position may or may not be where the ball is put into play. The 1956-60 Braves were recognized even at the time as not being an especially well-balanced team, taking account of bench strength and pitching depth beyond the top of the rotation, but what it means when their ten core regulars accounted for 97 percent of the team's collective WAR for those years is that the remaining players together were barely of marginal major league caliber. The core regulars of the other National League teams we have considered so far generally accounted for between 61 and 79 percent of the total player value for their teams, with outliers on either side.

It should be acknowledged that the **1906-10 Chicago Cubs'** core regulars accounted for about 94 percent of their team's collective WAR for their five years, but there are significant differences. The first is that their core regulars accounted for all eight field positions and all five of their primary pitchers for the entire five years, whereas the Braves had six core regulars among position players and three among their starting pitchers. For the Braves, this means that other players held down starting positions in the field and in the pitching rotation who do not count as core regulars because they failed to meet my longevity status for being a regular at least half the years under consideration, but they nonetheless had player value that factored into the team's overall WAR. The second big difference is that in the Cubs' time, regular position players were expected to play virtually every inning of every game unless indisposed by injury or illness or losing their job to someone who played better, and starting pitchers were not only expected to pitch complete games but also to help out in relief when necessary. By the 1950s, however—and well before—platooning for offensive advantage depending on the pitcher, defensive substitutions and double-switches occasioned by pitching changes, and pitching changes made both early and late in games had become prevalent. Bench players and relievers were expected to contribute to the team much more than in the past, not just in extremis.

Only about three percent of the collective player value as measured by WAR for the Braves from 1956 to 1960 came from players other than the three starting pitchers and six position players who were this team's core regulars. Relief ace Don McMahon was also a core regular, but his contribution to the team's WAR was minimal.

A closer look at the breakdown of wins above replacement between the Braves' core regulars and their teammates shows that the fundamental weakness of the Milwaukee Braves was that—notwithstanding the historical legacies of Hank Aaron and Eddie Mathews, both outstanding during these years—*this was a team with largely marginal talent among position players*. Aaron and Mathews alone combined for 56 percent of the WAR player value of the Braves' position players for the five years. The four other core regular position players—catcher Crandall, first baseman Adcock, shortstop Logan, and center fielder Bruton—accounted for about 45 percent. Add that up and you've got—yes, that's right—101 percent of the collective position player WAR value for the 1956-60 Braves. But they played only 64 percent of the Braves' position games (calculated as total games times eight positions in the field other than pitcher). This means that, at least as measured by WAR, the players who accounted for the other 36 percent of the Braves' position games during those years collectively contributed, at best, to Milwaukee's success at a marginal major league level of performance, and actually slightly below that.

Since the 1906-10 Cubs' core regulars also accounted for a very high percentage of their team's collective WAR, it is worth noting that their core position regulars contributed to 99 percent of the team WAR for position players. But, this being a different era and the Cubs having a remarkably stable line-up during their run of greatness, Chicago's eight core regulars in the field played 82 percent of the team's total position games. That the remaining Cubs position players collectively barely contributed to Chicago's success is much less of an indictment on the overall strength of this team, it being they played only 18 percent of the their team's total position games from 1906 to 1910.

Milwaukee's failure to win a third consecutive pennant in 1959 can perhaps best be explained by the offensive inadequacies of their position players other than Aaron, Mathews, Crandall, Logan, and Adcock. Even Bruton's player value, as measured by WAR, was below

the standard set for a starting position player, as defined in *baseball-reference.com*. Of ten other position players who played in at least 20 games for the 1959 Braves, only two had a player value above replacement level, and just barely so. Most significantly, however, first baseman Frank Torre, left fielder Wes Covington, and infielder Felix Mantilla—with nearly 1,000 plate appearances between them—all had a negative player value below the major league replacement level of performance, according to the WAR metric.

As for the pitching, Spahn, Burdette, and Buhl—despite his missing virtually the entire 1958 season with arm problems—accounted for 53 percent of the innings thrown by the Braves pitching staff between 1956 and 1960, and for 87 percent of the collective player value, as measured by WAR, for Milwaukee pitchers. The difference of 7.4 wins above replacement-level for the rest of the staff for the five years is indicative of the Braves' pitching being deeper beyond their three top starting pitchers than the Braves' offense was after their six core regulars among position players. The Braves led the league in complete games all five years of this run, with Spahn, Burdette, and Buhl combining for 240 of the 320 completions, or 75 percent. While Spahn was indisputably one of the league's five best pitchers at the time, notwithstanding he was already 35 years old in 1956, neither Burdette nor Buhl could make a similar claim, according to me. They were crowded out by the likes of Robin Roberts, Johnny Antonelli, Don Drysdale, Bob Friend, and Larry Jackson for the NL's five best pitchers—along with Spahn—in either the surrounding decade or the majority of years under consideration for their team.

With only about three percent of the Braves' five-year collective WAR from 1956 to 1960 coming from players who were not core regulars, it is much less convincing to argue that Milwaukee should have done better than they did. The Milwaukee Braves were carried mostly by Aaron, Mathews, and Spahn. They were great players, but great players alone cannot guarantee success—even three on the same team.

The 1956-60 Braves would seem to validate both propositions made in Chapter Three on the NL side of this site—"How Important are Best Players to Achievement"—which were: *having many "best players" may not be a necessary condition for significant achievement, but is a necessary condition for a team to be consistently competitive for many years.* Despite having Aaron, Mathews, and Spahn in the midst of their best consecutive years, plus Burdette and Buhl to round out an impressive starting rotation, and a competitive environment that included only three other teams besides the Braves to win 90 games between 1956 and 1960—pennant-winning Brooklyn and third-place Cincinnati in 1956, and pennant-winning Pittsburgh in 1960—Milwaukee went to the World Series only twice. The Braves weakness was, it turns out, most of the rest of the team. On the other hand, *only because of Spahn, Mathews, and Aaron was Milwaukee in the pennant chase in four of the five years, and within striking distance of first place in the fifth (1960), although never closer than five games after mid-August.*

2 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1960

	P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
Brooklyn Dodgers, 1949-56	5 - 1	767-466 .622	28	31	37	96
Milwaukee Braves, 1956-60	2 - 1	453-319 .587	26	25	29	80

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

Whether they overachieved or underachieved, should the 1956-60 Milwaukee Braves have a place among the best National League teams through the first six decades of the twentieth century?

The team they most closely match up with in total “best teams score” according to my methodological approach are the **1920-24 New York Giants**, with a marginal advantage to the Braves. The primary distinguishing characteristics in the breakdown of their nearly identical scores is that the Giants achieved much more in the way of success—four pennants, which were consecutive, and two World Series championships—and the Braves scored much higher in the historical legacies of their great players. Neither team won a hundred games in any season; Milwaukee twice failed to win even 90 (with 86 in 1959 and 88 in 1960). While the Braves had *three* century-plus legacy players, based on their best consecutive years including the years under consideration for their teams, and the Giants only one—Frankie Frisch—and a second, Ross Youngs, with a half-century legacy, Manager John McGraw had the superior team overall. Four of his Giants’ nine core regulars were the best at their position at the time, compared to three of ten for the Braves.

More importantly, the nine core regulars of that Giants team accounted for only 64 percent of their team’s collective player value over the five years. I do not mean to suggest there is some optimal percentage of their team’s collective WAR that the best teams’ core players should account for—that would be dependent on many variables, such as era, the number of core regulars, and how many of those players were core regulars for all of the seasons under consideration—but the 1920-24 New York Giants clearly had many more players meaningfully contributing to their success than the 1956-60 Braves, whose success was almost exclusively derived from only nine players (ten, if you include McMahan). Just as Milwaukee would not have been as successful without their three historical century-plus legacy players (and Burdette and Buhl), in fact would likely not have won any pennants without them, New York in the first half of the 1920s would not have won four consecutive pennants without the players who complemented the Giants’ core regulars. And so—

—No, the 1956-60 Milwaukee Braves do not deserve a place among the best National League teams through the first six decades of the twentieth century.

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

MILWAUKEE BRAVES, 1956-1960

2 Pennants (1957, 1958)
1 World Series Win (1957)

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	3 x 2 = 6	0	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	2	1	2	5

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

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1956-60	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1953-62	2 nd 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Joe Adcock, 1953-62	14.8	no	no		
SS Johnny Logan, 1952-60	16.9	no	no		
3B Eddie Mathews, 1952-66	35.5	1952-63	1953-62	yes	yes
CF Bill Bruton, 1953-60	11.7	no	no		
RF Hank Aaron, 1954-74	39.8	1957-69	1955-62	yes	yes
C Del Crandall, 1953-62	17.1	no	no		
P Warren Spahn, 1946-65	24.2	1946-62	1953-59	yes	yes
P Lew Burdette, 1952-62	13.8	no	no		
P Bob Buhl, 1953-61 (-1)	12.9	no	no		
RP Don McMahon, 1957-61	0.5	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1956-60 = 193.4	187.2				
Core WAR= 96.8 % of Team	76.2 / 10	3 / 10 x 10	3 x 1	3 x 2	3 x 3
38.7 Av. Team WAR + 96.8 %	7.6	3.0	3	6	9

PLAYERS SCORE = 7.6 (Base WAR) + 3.0 (Best at Position) + 18 (NL Best) = **28.6**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1956-60 BRAVES		
	10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1953-62	
	Willie Mays, OF, 1954-62	
	Hank Aaron, OF, 1955-62	
	Eddie Mathews, 3B, 1953-62	
	Ernie Banks, SS, 1955-60	
	Duke Snider, OF, 1953-57	
	Stan Musial, OF/1B, 1953-57	
	Frank Robinson, OF/1B, 1956-62	
	Richie Ashburn, OF, 1953-58	
	Ken Boyer, 3B, 1958-62	
	Gil Hodges, 1B, 1953-57	
	5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1953-62	
	Warren Spahn, 1953-59	
	Don Drysdale, 1957-62	
	Johnny Antonelli, 1954-59	
	Robin Roberts, 1954-60	
	Bob Friend, 1955-63	
	Roy Face, RP, 1955-62	

BEST AT POSITION

1B	Hodges-----→Cepeda-----→
2B	J.Robinson-----→Schoendienst-----→Mazeroski-----→
SS	(42) Reese~~~~~→Banks-----→Wills-----→(65)
3B	B.Elliott-----→Mathews-----→
OF	(39) Slaughter-→Ashburn-----→F.Robinson-→(65)
OF	Kiner-----→Mays-----→(66)
OF	Snider-----→Aaron-----→(69)
MP	(43) Musial, OF/1B-----→F.Robinson, OF/1B---→ Gilliam, 3B/2B-----→
C	Campanella-----→Bailey-----→
P	(43) Brecheen--→Roberts-----→Friend-----→
P	Spahn-----→
P	Roe-----→Antonelli-----→Koufax-----→(66)
P	Jansen-----\Maglie-----→Drysdale-----→(66)
P	Newcombe-----→Jackson-----→(65)
RP	Wilhelm-----→Face-----→
	46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64