

National League's Best Teams

Chapter Nine

The 1974-78 Los Angeles Dodgers: More Balanced Successor to the '60s Dodgers

The team that kept the Big Red Machine from five consecutive NL Western Division titles by winning the division and the pennant in 1974, and then put an end to Cincinnati's mid-1970s dynasty with consecutive National League pennants in 1977 and 1978, was the **1974 to 1978 Los Angeles Dodgers**. The Dodgers were poised to become the NL's best team whenever the Big Red Machine lost its edge, which began when Cincinnati—after back-to-back World Series championships—began to retool in 1977 as age and free agency began to take their inevitable toll.

By 1977, Pete Rose was 36, though still capable of 200 hits for the year, and Johnny Bench was a seasoned veteran in his tenth year at the demanding position of catcher before all the modern accoutrements of catching armor, which made him an old 29. Although still a potent force with 31 home runs and 109 runs batted in 1977, Bench was not quite the dominant impact player he had been until then. An aging Tony Perez was traded to Montreal. Cincinnati's pitching staff, meanwhile, was diminished by the departure of Don Gullett as a free agent and Gary Nolan succumbing to his injuries. They were the Reds' aces and two of the finest pitchers in the league when not plagued by injuries. Gullett had started only 42 games in 1975 and 1976 because of a broken finger one year and a shoulder injury the next, but had an outstanding 26-7 record nonetheless. Nolan, who had spent 1973 and 1974 on the disabled list, was 15-9 in both 1975 and 1976, but was no longer pitching effectively and his career would end shortly after being traded in the middle of the 1977 season. The Reds, however, added the great Tom Seaver in a mid-season trade with the Mets and stayed competitive for five more years (1977 to 1981).

The Dodgers, still managed by Walt Alston when they interrupted Cincinnati's dominance of the league by taking the NL West in 1974, and now managed by infectiously enthusiastic motivator Tommy Lasorda—and with much better starting pitching than Cincinnati's—took advantage of the Reds' slow start in 1977, which left them trailing by 9½ games by the end of May, to run away with the division title, making it all the way to the

World Series. The Dodgers' repeating in 1978 marked the end of the Sparky Anderson era in Cincinnati. Anderson had his team close through most of the summer, but eight losses in eleven games in the middle of August proved quite damaging, and the Reds began September behind LA by seven games with only 29 remaining. Although they ultimately finished only 2½ games out, the Reds were never back in the race and Anderson—despite having managed one of the best teams in history—was not asked to return in 1979. So much for sentiment.

Without Anderson at the helm, and with Rose now gone too, Cincinnati won the division title in 1979 and two years later posted the best record in the major leagues. Amazingly, this did not qualify them for the post-season in that 1981 season because of Major League Baseball's ridiculous (in my opinion) split-season solution to a devastating players' strike. (Cincinnati was not in first place when the strike occurred and failed to finish first after the strike ended, despite having cumulatively the most wins in baseball.) They may have been the best team that year, but the Cincinnati Reds were no longer the Big Red Machine.

Nobody outside of southern California would make the case that the 1974-78 Dodgers were as good as the 1972-76 Reds, but their record of achievement was, in fact, almost on par. This Dodgers team won three division titles and three National League pennants in five years, including in 1974 when they won 102 games to interrupt the Reds' dominance of the West. They did not, however, win any of the three World Series they played in. The 1974-78 Dodgers actually scored higher than the 1972-76 Reds in dominance factors, according to my methodology, primarily because of their pitching; nobody, however, should mistake them for being nearly as dominant a team. They had only one 100-win season and won only one pennant by more than eight games (in 1977, by 10 over the Reds).

These Dodgers were not a team of great players, which contributes to their being somewhat lost in baseball history. As had also become somewhat typical of Dodger teams since the 1949 to 1956 Brooklyn "Boys of Summer" were assembled, the 1974-78 Dodgers had a central core that would play together for many years—extending really into 1981, when they also won the division and went on to win the pennant and World Series. (They did so in 1981 without the best record in the NL West, courtesy of Commissioner Bowie Kuhn's split season solution to the major league's first extended players' strike.) None of the players on this team, however, had even a half-century legacy as one of the NL's 30 best position players or 18 best pitchers from 1951 to 2000, let alone a full-century legacy.

The '70s Dodgers were best known for their infield, first to third, of Steve Garvey, Davey Lopes, Bill Russell, and Ron Cey who would play together for nine years, 1973 to 1981. Garvey was the best first baseman in the league from 1974 to 1978, according to me, and Lopes and Cey would have been the best in the league at their positions during this time were it not for the fact that they were direct contemporaries of the best NL second baseman in history, Cincinnati's Joe Morgan, and the best NL third baseman in history, Philadelphia's Mike Schmidt. (This is not to suggest, however, that it was any sort of close call for Morgan and Schmidt over Lopes and Cey.) Ron Cey was the only Dodgers' position player who was among the league's 10 best in the surrounding decade. If I was looking at the 11 best position players, then Garvey would have made the cut too.

As had become expected of the LA Dodgers since the days of Koufax and Drysdale, pitching was a strong suit for the 1974-78 Dodgers. They led the league in fewest runs

allowed four times in five years—1976 being the exception, when they were second. Future Hall of Famer Don Sutton was the ace of an excellent pitching staff that also included Tommy John—who missed the entire 1975 season recovering from the surgery that would bear his name—Burt Hooton, Doug Rau, and reliever Charlie Hough, yet not one of their core pitchers is counted by me among either the five best in the league over the majority of years between 1974 and 1978 or even within the surrounding decade, based on their pitcher value as measured by the wins above replacement (WAR) metric. I count Sutton as one of the league's five best pitchers from 1971 to 1975, but that included only two years for the 1974-78 Dodgers. Moreover, Sutton's best pitcher value seasons with the Dodgers were either before the years being considered for his team, or after.

Unlike the 1962-66 Dodgers, who were so successful primarily because they had superior pitching, the 1974-78 Dodgers were a much better offensive ball club, and hence better balanced. They led the league in scoring twice—in both their first and last pennant seasons—and were third in runs scored when won their middle pennant in 1977. Harkening back to their Brooklyn heritage, although with not nearly the same fearsome line-up, these Dodgers also led the league in home runs in all three of their pennant-winning seasons. The 191 home runs hit by LA in 1977 was the most by a Dodger team since the Boys of Summer clubbed 201 for Brooklyn back in 1955. With superb pitching and an offense that relied on speed, sacrifices, and situational hitting to score runs—each deemed uniquely precious—the 1962-66 Dodgers outscored their game opponents by an average over only 96 runs per year. With the league's best pitching and a better all-around offense than LA had a decade before, the 1974-78 Dodgers outscored their opponents by a considerably greater average annual margin of 151 runs.

The 1974-78 Dodgers are an exception to my argument made in NL Chapter 3—“How Important Are Best Players to Achievement?”—that teams with a low “players” score, especially with none of their players having at least a half-century historical legacy based on their best consecutive years including the seasons under consideration for their team, are not only unlikely to be a dominant team, but also more likely to have a poor season in the midst of their run of achievement. Of the National League teams examined so far, only the 1964-68 Cardinals have a lower players score. This Dodger team had only two “best players”—Steve Garvey as the NL's best first baseman at the time, and Ron Cey as one of the NL's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade and as a “significant other” at his third base position. But they never had a bad season. The two years they did not win the NL West—in 1975 and 1976, when the Big Red Machine was at peak performance—the Dodgers finished second, with 88 wins and the league's third-best record the first year, and 92 wins and the fourth-best record the next.

Notwithstanding that the **1962-66 Los Angeles Dodgers** had a substantially higher “players score” of 24 to 10, according to my methodological approach (which does give me pause)—primarily because of the century-plus legacies of Koufax and Drysdale—I consider the 1974-78 Los Angeles Dodgers to be the better team because they had a commendable offense to go along with their league-best pitching. They remain to this day the best team put on the field by the Dodgers since they left Brooklyn, according to me.

Although these Dodgers also have substantially higher achievement and dominance scores than the **1956-60 Milwaukee Braves**, by my methodological approach, they were not the better team. Those Braves surely underachieved for the talent they had, and perhaps these

Dodgers overachieved, but I am more inclined to believe the 1974-78 Dodgers were no more than a very good team that played up to its collective talent. The Braves had three great core players—Hank Aaron, Eddie Mathews, and Warren Spahn—whose best consecutive years included 1956 to 1960 (as well as many other years), and the Dodgers had none whom I would consider among the NL’s best for even the half-century. Led by Aaron and Mathews, Milwaukee had a much more imposing offense and, with Spahn, Lew Burdette, and Bob Buhl, probably the NL’s best pitching staff of their time. Only once in five years did that Milwaukee team finish worse than third in runs scored or fewest runs; by contrast, while consistently at the top of the league in fewest runs allowed, the ‘70s Dodgers twice (in 1975 and 1976) were in the bottom half of the league in runs scored, no better than seventh. Aaron, Mathews, and Spahn were just more formidable than Garvey-Lopes-Russell-Cey around the horn behind Sutton. I wasn’t around for the earliest part of the twentieth century, but I’m pretty sure that Cey-to-Lopes-to-Garvey were no Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance. (Sorry, couldn’t resist.)

5 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1980

	D-P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
Cincinnati Reds, 1972-76	4 - 3 - 2	502-300 .626	41	35	32	108
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
Los Angeles Dodgers, '74-78	3 - 3 - 0	475-335 .586	34	40	10	84
Los Angeles Dodgers, 1962-66	3 - 2	473-340 .582	26	20	24	70

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

TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

LOS ANGELES DODGERS, 1974-1978

3 NL Western Division Titles (1974, 1977, 1978)

3 Pennants (1974, 1977, 1978)

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	0	0	
+ 3 pennants = 3				
+ 2 NL1 (x .5) = 1				
13	4	0	0	17

ACHIEVEMENT SCORE = 17 / 5 years x 10 = **34**

DOMINANCE

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

DOMINANCE SCORE = 8 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **40**

PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1974-78	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1971-80	2 nd 1/2 20 th C	20 th C +
1B Steve Garvey, 1973-82	22.4	1974-78	no		
2B Davey Lopes, 1974-81	20.6	no	no		
SS Bill Russell, 1972-83	10.6	no	no		
3B Ron Cey, 1973-82	26.6	s/o	1974-79	no	
LF Dusty Baker, 1976-83	5.2	no	no		
C Steve Yeager, 1974-83	11.3	no	no		
P Don Sutton, 1966-80	15.0	no	no		
P Tommy John, 1972-78 (-1)	11.4	no	no		
P Bert Hooton, 1975-83	15.5	no	no		
P Dou Rau, 1974-78	13.0	no	no		
RP Charlie Hough, 1973-79	4.4	no	no		
TEAM WAR, 1974-78 = 229.5	156.0				
Core WAR= 68 % of Team WAR	77.1 / 10	1.5 / 11 x 10	1 x 1	0 x 2	0 x 3
45.9 Av. Team WAR + 68 %	7.7	1.4	1	0	0

PLAYERS SCORE = 7.7 (Base WAR) + 1.4 (Best at Position) + 1 (NL Best) = **10**

BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE

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

1974-78 DODGERS		
	10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1971-80	
	Joe Morgan, 2B, 1971-77	
	Mike Schmidt, 3B, 1974-80	
	Johnny Bench, C, 1972-77	
	Pete Rose, OF-3B, 1972-76	
	Cesar Cedeo, OF, 1972-76	
	Dave Parker, OF, 1975-79	
	<i>Ron Cey, 3B, 1974-79</i>	
	Ted Simmons, C, 1973-78	
	George Foster, OF, 1975-79	
	Dave Winfield, OF, 1976-80	
	5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1971-80	
	Phil Niekro, 1974-79	
	Tom Seaver, 1972-77	
	Steve Carlton, 1969-74	
	Steve Rogers, 1975-80	
	J.R. Richard, 1976-80	
	Bruce Sutter, RP, 1976-80	

BEST AT POSITION

1B	(65) McCovey-----→Garvey-----→Hernandez-----→(86)
2B	(65) Morgan-----→
SS	(66) Harrelson-----→Concepcion-----→Smith-----→(89)
3B	(64) Santo-----→Schmidt-----→(87)
OF	(66) Clemente-----→Cedeo-----→Dawson-----→
OF	Rose-----→Foster-----→Raines-----→(87)
OF	Stargell-----→Parker-----→Murphy-----→
MP	Perez, 3B-1B-----→Rose, 3B-1B-----→Guerrero----→(87)
C	Bench-----→Carter-----→(86)
P	(64) Gibson-----→Rogers-----→
P	(66) Perry-----→Sutton-----→Richard-----→Valenzuela-----→(87)
P	Seaver-----→Ryan-----→(87)
P	Jenkins-----→P.Niekro-----→Soto-----→
P	Carlton-----→
RP	Carroll-----→Sutter-----→L.Smith----→(87)
	67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85