

## *National League's Best Teams*

### *Chapter Ten*

#### **The 1984-88 New York Mets: Squandered Greatness**

Cincinnati and Los Angeles were the dominant National League teams in the 1970s, winning all eight Western Division titles and six National League pennants between them from 1972 to 1979, after which no Western Division team would have such a measure of sustained success until the Atlanta Braves from 1991 to 1993. Meanwhile, back in the East, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia finished first in nine of the first eleven years of divisional alignment, from 1969 to 1980, and St. Louis and New York had the best record in the East in six of the next eight years. Of these teams, only the 1984 to 1988 New York Mets can be considered in the “best teams” debate.

The Pittsburgh Pirates are a storied franchise, with roots in history dating back to 1882, whose record of achievement—pennants won—in the twentieth century is somewhat disappointing given their generally winning ways. From 1901 to 1968, before each league was aligned into divisions, Pittsburgh had more winning or break-even seasons, with 45, than any other National League franchise except the New York-to-San Francisco Giants, who had 54. Only the Giants, with twenty-nine, had more years with 90 or more wins than the Pirates’ eighteen, although the Cardinals and Dodgers also had eighteen such seasons. But while the Giants won 15 pennants in the first 68 years of the century, and the Dodgers 13, the Cardinals 12, and the Cubs 10, the Pirates had only seven pennants for Pittsburgh—and three of those were in the first three years of the century, four in the first ten. The Pirates won pennants again in 1925 and 1927, then endured a long drought until 1960, although they were competitive for much of the 1930s, finishing second three times. After Bill Mazeroski’s World Series walk-off home run stunned the Yankees in 1960, the Pirates—despite their great right fielder Roberto Clemente having his best seasons and Willie Stargell besides—for the most part were not in the pennant equation until the advent of divisional play.

The “amazing” “miracle” Mets won the first NL Eastern Division title in 1969, but the **1970 to 1975 Pittsburgh Pirates** won five of the next six, losing out only in 1973 (finishing third, 2½ games behind) to the “you-gotta-believe” Mets, who managed to win the

East barely above .500 with an 82-79 record. Nineteen seventy-three, played after the tragic death of Clemente on a relief mission to earthquake victims in Nicaragua the previous New Year's Eve, was quite the anomalous season for this Pittsburgh team. In a pennant race of mediocrity, the Pirates were fifth in the six-team division, 10½ games out, on July 4 but rallied to a tie for first with the Cardinals on September 1. Meanwhile, the Mets who had been dead last on the Fourth of July, two games behind the Pirates, and 4½ games behind on September 1, finished the season winning 19 of their remaining 27 games. Pittsburgh lost 14 of their last 31, had a losing 80-82 record for the season, had only the seventh-best record in the league (even though that was good enough for third in the East), and could only wonder what might have been had they not lost 13 of their 18 games against New York.

Still, five division titles in six years from 1970 to 1975 is reason to consider the place of these Pittsburgh Pirates among at least the best National League teams of the second half of the century. The 1970-75 Pirates won only one pennant—in 1971, when they also won the World Series—losing the League Championship Series four times. They had the league's best record twice, in 1971 and 1972, two other times finished first in their division with the league's second-best record, and in 1974 won the division title with the league's third-best record, after Los Angeles and Cincinnati. Although they never won 100 games—in fact, in 1970 and 1974 they won the division without even winning 90—and secured only one of their five division titles by a blowout margin, in 1972 by 11 games over the Cubs, the Pirates generally were in command of the NL East in most of their division-winning seasons. In all five of their division-winning seasons, the Pirates were in front on September 1, and in those five seasons, only in 1974 did Pittsburgh spend any of the final month not in first place. Indeed, 1974 was Pittsburgh's toughest time winning the division. They were in fourth place on July Fourth, 5½ games behind the Chicago Cubs, with a losing record before finishing the season with a 53-33 record to come in a game-and-a-half ahead of St. Louis. They trailed the Cardinals in mid-September that year by as many as 2½ games and were tied for first with only two games remaining before prevailing.

As impressive as winning five division titles in six years may seem, and despite usually being in command down the stretch, the 1970-75 Pirates were not a dominant club. Maybe they couldn't be, not with the Big Red Machine also in the league. Pittsburgh led the league in runs scored only once (in 1971, when they won it all) and also only once in fewest runs allowed (the following season). Otherwise, however, the best they did was third in runs scored (three times) and twice were second in fewest runs allowed. In both 1973, when they had a losing record, and 1974, when they struggled to outlast the Cardinals, the Pirates gave up the sixth-most runs in the twelve-team league.

Thirteen players were core regulars on this team for at least four of the six years, and three others—including Clemente, who certainly would have returned for more if not for his untimely death—for three years. Left fielder Willie Stargell (who moved to first base to begin the twilight of his career in 1975), however, was the only one of these Pirates to be the best at his position, according to me, and he and Clemente were the only members of this team to be among the NL's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. Pittsburgh's other core regulars during these years included second baseman Rennie Stennett, third baseman Richie Hebner, center fielder Al Oliver, catcher Manny Sanguillen, starting pitchers Dock Ellis and Bob Moose, and relievers Ramon Hernandez and Dave Giusti for at least four of the six years. I consider Giusti a "significant other" behind Cincinnati's Clay Carroll as one of the National League's top relievers during this time.

None of the 1970-75 Pirates have either a century or half-century legacy for this team based on their best consecutive years as measured by the wins above replacement (WAR) metric. While still a potent force in Pittsburgh's line-up and one of the National League's premier players right up until his unfortunate date with destiny, only two of Roberto Clemente's best consecutive years from 1964 to 1971 that earned him a place among the league's 50 best position players since the turn of the twentieth century, according to me, were for this Pirates team. As for Willie Stargell, the best years of his deserved Hall of Fame career—1969 to 1974—did fall within this timeframe, but he does not crack my half-century or full-century “best players” threshold because of the variability in his performance from year to year. Based on definitions of WAR player value in *baseball-reference.com*, Stargell had MVP-caliber seasons in 1971 and 1973 and an All-Star-caliber season in 1974, but also had two seasons during this time (1970 and 1972) that were merely good, not great.

The **1976 to 1980 Philadelphia Phillies**—whose core regulars included third baseman Mike Schmidt, shortstop Larry Bowa, left fielder Greg Luzinski, center fielder Gary Maddox, catcher Bob Boone, pitching ace Steve Carlton, and relief pitchers Ron Reed and Tug McGraw—succeeded the Pirates in commanding the NL East for the next five years, winning four division titles and losing out only in 1979 to a different Stargell-led Pirates team. Philadelphia lost three consecutive NLCS to superior Cincinnati and Los Angeles teams, however, before finally winning only their third National League pennant in 1980 and what would prove to be their only World Series championship in the twentieth century. The Phillies had the best record in the league only once, in 1977, and in two of their division-winning seasons, their record was no better than third-best in the league. Twice the Phillies won 101 games (in 1976 and 1977, finishing nine games up the first time, and five games up the second).

While the Phillies were good enough to rule the NL East, they like the Pirates before them were not a league-dominating team during their run. The Phillies required a 20-2 stretch from the end of July to late August in 1977 to go from 2½ behind to 7½ up and a safe lead for the September stretch. In 1978, Philadelphia won only 90 games to win their third consecutive division title, fending off Pittsburgh at the end by only a game-and-a-half. Their quest to become the first National League team to win four straight division titles came to naught in 1979 with a fourth-place, 84-78 record; the Phillies were 6½ games out by July 4 and their failure to be better than only two games above .500 the rest of the way sealed their fate long before the September stretch. In 1980, Philadelphia competed throughout the final month of the season with the Expos for the Eastern Division title, going into Montreal for the final three games of the schedule with the two teams tied for first place. They cinched the division by winning the first two of those games.

Powered by Mike Schmidt and Greg Luzinski, Philadelphia's strength was on the offensive side. Position players accounted for 72 percent of the Phillies' collective team WAR between 1976 and 1980. They led the league in scoring in 1977 and were second twice (in 1976 and 1980). Notwithstanding Carlton and a flexible bullpen, Philadelphia's pitching was not exceptional. The Phillies as a team were in the top three in the league in fewest runs allowed only twice in five years. Indeed, Steve Carlton alone accounted for nearly 43 percent of the total WAR compiled by the Phillies' pitching staff from 1976 to 1980.

Schmidt and Carlton were the only Philadelphia players during these years to be the best at their position, and both have a century-plus legacy for their best consecutive years

including these seasons under consideration for their team. Carlton's best years come with a caveat, however, since the seasons that were decisive in his century-plus historical legacy were the four years from 1980 to 1983, only one of which was for this team. As for Schmidt, I consider him to be the best third baseman in major league history. *With Mike Schmidt the pre-eminent player in the league, at least beginning in 1977 when he eclipsed Cincinnati's Joe Morgan, according to me, and Steve Carlton one of the league's very best pitchers, the 1976-80 Philadelphia Phillies were a superior team to the 1970-75 Pittsburgh Pirates, at least according to me.*

If the National League's best teams in the 1970s were in the Western Division, National League excitement in the 1980s centered in the Eastern Division where the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Mets became fierce rivals, winning five division titles and four pennants between them in seven years from 1982 to 1988. (The Philadelphia Phillies won in 1983, and the Chicago Cubs took the NL East in 1984.) The '80s Cardinals and Mets could not have been more different. The 1982-87 Cardinals were a team that overachieved with the talent they had—testimony, I believe, to the excellence of their manager, Whitey Herzog. They won three division titles (1982, 1985, and 1987), each by a margin of three games, and went on to win the National League pennant all three times. All three of their World Series went the full seven games, with St. Louis emerging with the championship only in 1982. The 1984-88 Mets, on the other hand, were a team that can only be said to have underachieved given how they dominated the league in performance and, perhaps even more so, in attitude.

The **1984 to 1988 New York Mets** were a team that various baseball researchers, historians, and pundits say could have been, indeed should have been, one of the best of the century. They won two division titles by whopping margins in 1986 and 1988, winning the pennant and World Series the first time, but losing to Orel Hershiser, Kirk Gibson, and the rest of an inspired Dodgers team in the 1988 National League Championship Series, thus not getting to the World Series that year. They finished second the three other years. In 1984, the Mets held a 4½-game lead as late as July 27, but just as a 21-4 stretch brought them to that point, following that up with a 3-13 performance had them 4½ games back of the Cubs on August 10, from which they were not able to recover. Although they finished only three games out in 1985 and 1987, the Mets were not as competitive as their finish would lead one to believe because they had difficulty getting untracked at the beginning of both seasons and spent few days in first place.

The 1984-88 Mets were the most dominant team in the major leagues in their time, the best team in the major leagues over any five-year period in the 1980s, and certainly the most hated. They had swagger, which played especially well in New York since the 1980s Yankees had lost theirs, which happens when—despite high-profile free agency signings—the team failed to live up to the expectations of a demanding owner and a demanding city fan-base, perhaps made more demanding by the expectations of Boss Steinbrenner. Anyway, the Mets had swagger. They had no doubt they were the best on the field. They were great in their own mind.

They had pitching, including out of the bullpen. They led the league in fewest runs allowed in 1985 and 1988, and gave up the second fewest when they had their greatest season in 1986. In 1985, 1986, and 1988, the Mets' collective WAR for their pitching staff was better than any other team in the National League. And they could score runs, leading the

league—indeed both major leagues—in scoring in 1986, and in 1987, and again in 1988. They led the league in slugging percentage and in on-base plus slugging all three of those years as well. More than a quarter of their victories (25.7 percent, to be exact) from 1986 to 1988 were by blowout margins of five runs or more. They outscored their game opponents by an average of 167 runs those three seasons, and by 121 runs for the five years in total.

For all or most of their five-year run—including for both their division titles—the Mets had historically renowned players Keith Hernandez at first, Darryl Strawberry in right field, Gary Carter behind the plate, and the phenomenal Doc (as in Doctor K) Gooden on the mound. They had Lenny Dykstra in center field, who gave the team a gritty tough as “Nails” persona, as did second baseman Wally Backman and, in 1986 at least, third baseman Ray Knight. One of their core regulars was an effective reliever named Roger McDowell, who is better known to my daughter for his cameo star turn as the “second spitter” on a *Seinfeld* episode. (It is not known whether McDowell employed a spitter on the mound when he was pitching for the Mets, a team not above playing below the belt to win.) And they had Davey Johnson as manager, a man who was on the cutting edge of computer literacy and quantitative analysis—a trait he likely inherited from Earl Weaver when Johnson played for the 1969-74 Baltimore Orioles—to guide him strategically over a full season and tactically in making in-game decisions about pitchers and hitters.

Alas, however, the 1984-88 Mets turned out to be mere pretenders to greatness. Of the four teams discussed in this chapter, they won the fewest division titles—only two, compared to five in six years for the Pirates, four in five years for the Phillies, and three in six years for the Cardinals. Their run was one of fast and furious underachievement for what could (and maybe should) have been, and they burned out too soon. Burned out, perhaps, because of undisciplined immaturity, a sort of teenage-like belief in their own indestructibility, all of which manifested itself in the wild lifestyles of the Mets’ best players—most notably Strawberry and Gooden—that epitomized, in part, an American culture that many condemned for drug and alcohol abuse and an emphasis on individual fulfillment rather than any collective good.

So what was the claim to fame of the 1984-88 New York Mets? Well, their pennant and World Series wins in 1986 were mythic: a dramatic 16-inning victory in Game 6 of the NLCS over the Houston Astros, and an even more stunning comeback victory in the World Series when they were one-strike away from losing the Series in six games, only for the Red Sox (courtesy of Bill Buckner, but he not alone) to be snakebit once more and be denied their first World Series championship since 1918. In both 1985 and 1987, when the Mets lost the division title to the St. Louis Cardinals by three games each time, they still had the second-best record in the National League. Their 1988 loss to the Dodgers in the NLCS was a disappointing coda to what probably should have been a great team. It took the Mets more than a decade to recover from that, although they remained competitive and even favored to win the NL East with essentially the same team for the next two years, finishing second each time, before they self-destructed in 1991.

Winning only two division titles was a major disappointment because the New York Mets, from 1984 to 1988, dominated and intimidated the rest of the National League. They won 108 games in 1986 to win the division by 21½ games, and were 12 games better than the Western Division-winning Astros that year. Their 108 victories were the third most in the regular season by a National League team in the twentieth century (along with the 1975

Reds), trailing only the 1906 Cubs and 1909 Pirates. They won 100 games to win their division in 1988, this time by 15 games. Their record in 1988 was 6½ games better than the Dodgers who would upend them in the post-season. Taking into account that they also led the league in scoring three times and in fewest runs allowed twice, the 1984-88 Mets have the third highest “dominance score”—along with the 1910-14 Giants—in my methodological framework of any National League team in the twentieth century; the 1906-10 Cubs and 1941-46 Cardinals are the only National League team to have scored better. This perhaps says more about league parity than anything else, but the Mets were the only one of twelve NL teams that was legitimately competitive all five years from 1984 to 1988.

If a great team is supposed to have great players, then the 1984-88 New York Mets do not measure up. The core of this team included two players on the threshold of greatness who never quite crossed over, either for these Mets or for their careers. They were Doc Gooden and Darryl Strawberry. Both could have been among the National League’s best players in the second half of the twentieth century, if not the full century, but fell prey to their own addictive demons. And the core of this team included two of the best players of their generation, but whose best seasons were behind them by the time they became New York Mets. They were Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter.

Dwight Gooden burst on the scene as a nineteen year-old rookie in 1984 with 17 wins, 9 losses, and 276 strikeouts in 218 innings, thus becoming Doctor K. His 24-4 record and nearly invisible 1.53 ERA in 1985 was one of the best seasons ever by a pitcher in the twentieth century. He was only 17-6 and 18-9 in the Mets’ two division-winning seasons of 1986 and 1988, but the rotation was stronger with three other starters also winning 15 or more games in 1986 and two other starters winning at least 17 games in 1988—including young David Cone with a 20-3 record. That Gooden started only 25 games in 1987, in which he went 15-7, was attributable to his missing the first fifty games of the season, the Mets winning only half, while undergoing treatment for cocaine abuse. Given that the 1987 Mets had to battle from behind from that point forward and wound up losing the division title to the Cardinals by only three games, Gooden’s rehabilitation time for a non-baseball related cause can plausibly be argued as the reason for the Mets’ failure to defend their 1986 World Series championship. Lesson not learned, living on the wild side, with all its attendant curses, remained a problem for Gooden throughout the rest of his career.

Through his first five years in the majors, 1984 to 1988, Gooden won 91 games and lost only 35 for a .722 winning percentage. He was the best pitcher in the league those five years and one of the NL’s five best in the surrounding decade, just missing out, at least according to me, on establishing for himself a legacy as one of the NL’s 18 best starting pitchers, based on five or more consecutive best seasons, in the second-half of the twentieth century. Shoulder problems limited Gooden to only 17 starts and a 9-4 record in 1989, leaving us to ponder whether the Mets—who finished second with only 87 wins, six games behind the Cubs—might have overtaken Chicago had Dr. K been healthy all season, especially since he followed that with 19-7 and 13-7 marks the next two years.

Darryl Strawberry preceded Gooden to the Mets by one year, winning Rookie of the Year honors in 1983. In his next five years as the Mets’ right fielder (1984-88), Strawberry hit 160 home runs—including back-to-back season with 39 in 1987 and 1988—drove in 474 runs, and was possibly the most feared hitter in the league. In 1985, Strawberry missed more than a quarter of the season with a torn ligament suffered in early May, quite possibly the

decisive reason why the Mets lost out to the Cardinals by only three games; the Mets went 20-23 when he was on the disabled list, falling from first place to 3½ games out. Strawberry had gotten off to a slow start when he was injured, with only six home runs, 12 RBI, and a .215 average, but he concluded the season with a flourish—23 home runs, 67 RBI, and a .301 average over the last three months. Strawberry (succeeding Dale Murphy), according to me, was one of the league's three best outfielders from 1986 to 1991, alongside Tony Gwynn (1984-97) and Tim Lincecum (1981-87) succeeded by Barry Bonds (1988-2004). He was also one of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. (As always, these judgments are mine alone, based on analysis of best consecutive seasons derived from the WAR metric.) Like Gooden, Strawberry's best consecutive years were not quite good enough to buy him a legacy as one of the National League's 30 best position players in the second half of the twentieth century.

That Strawberry does not have at least a half-century legacy, according to me, was to a great extent of his own making. On top of his own out-of-control lifestyle issues—which included alcohol and drug abuse, not to mention domestic abuse allegations in 1987—Strawberry was often accused of being less than diligent in his approach to the game. You know that's a problem when his manager, Davey Johnson, made a point of saying Strawberry was as good as anyone in baseball . . . when he wanted to be. Collectively, Strawberry's behavior in uniform and out was becoming an unwanted distraction for the Mets, however outstanding he was as a player. Strawberry played with the Mets through the 1990 season before leaving as a free agent, his best years behind him even though he was only 28.

While the Mets' homegrown Strawberry and Gooden were the indisputable stars of the team, the acquisitions of Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter were perhaps most important in providing the veteran, stabilizing leadership on the field that outstanding teams require. Hernandez came to the Mets in a lopsided trade in New York's favor from St. Louis in June 1983, about a third of a baseball season after he had been part of the Cardinals' 1982 World Series championship. He was the National League's best first baseman at the time, terrific defensively and a dangerous hitter, and would be one of only three Mets players from this team—along with Strawberry and Gooden—who was the best at his position for a majority of the years under consideration. Hernandez was also one of the league's 10 best position players in the surrounding decade. The majority of his best years as a player, however, were with the Cardinals.

The back story of why Hernandez, still one of baseball's premier players, was made available to the Mets for so little in return (okay reliever Neil Allen and untested big league pitcher Rick Ownbey) was that his off-the-field activities and clubhouse influence were unwelcome by St. Louis manager Whitey Herzog. Any mystery as to why Herzog had problems with the Cardinals' best player became clear when Hernandez was implicated in a Pittsburgh cocaine trial that revealed the extent of drug abuse among major league ballplayers. Given the addictive sensibilities and lifestyle choices of the Mets' young stars, Strawberry and Gooden, the addition of Hernandez *might* have been an unfortunate reinforcement toward their undoing. That said, whatever influence toward socially bad behavior Hernandez *might* have had in the Mets' clubhouse, he was a great baseball influence in the dugout and on the field of play.

Gary Carter came to the Mets in 1985 by way of a trade from the Montreal Expos, having already established himself as one of the best catchers in baseball history. He was, however, already 31 years old, and while he remained the Mets' regular catcher for the next

four years, Carter was on the downside of his career. Nonetheless, he hit 32 home runs for the Mets in 1985 and 24 in 1986, driving in at least 100 runs both seasons. Carter's best consecutive years based on WAR that earn him a century-plus legacy were from 1977 to 1985, according to me, all but one of those years with the Expos. Carter was also a straight-arrow, perhaps even a bit of a scold, not in keeping with his younger party-hearty Mets teammates.

Led by Carter, Hernandez, Strawberry, and Gooden, the New York Mets were a sufficiently dominant team that the St. Louis Cardinals really should not have won the National League East against them in either 1985 or 1987. The Cardinals outlasted the Mets both of those seasons by having a better first half. In 1985, the Cardinals led the Mets by 4½ games on July 4 and by two games on September 1. Both teams finished in a rush down the stretch, with St. Louis going 23-12 from then till the season's end, and New York 21-12. The Cardinals put together two seven-game winning streaks in September, which was probably necessary because they lost two of the four games they played against the Mets in the final month (although they took the season series, winning ten of eighteen games).

In 1987, the Cardinals had a less successful second half of the season than the Mets, but had the advantage of being seven games ahead of New York (then in third place) on the Fourth of July. That's why the axiom that the games played in April are as important as those played in September is true, even though a 162-game season offers lots of time to make up ground. Even a team that could be as dominating (and cocky) as those Mets cannot afford to spot a tough and resilient rival a relatively large lead in the standings early in the season with the expectation that their overall superiority would win out.

Let there be no mistake, however: the 1985 and 1987 New York Mets were a superior baseball team to the St. Louis Cardinals. That the Cardinals beat out the Mets to win the NL East in down-to-the-wire pennant races those two years reinforces the almost mythic idea in baseball that a savvy, gritty, fundamentally-sound team of overachievers can outlast, over a long 162-game season, a better and more dominant team. This underdog ideal is much less realized over the course of a full season in other team sports, like football or basketball, where the teams with the best players almost always win the regular season because the best players to a much greater extent can take control of the action.

The **1982 to 1987 St. Louis Cardinals** had a knack for winning close pennant races. They were in the mold of what had become the Cardinals' trademark—a fundamentally sound baseball team with few, if any players, among the league's best at the time or in historical legacy, but a reputation for scrappy perseverance. They were a team built around speed. Speed was essential because the Cardinals had little home run power. St. Louis was last in the league in home runs in five of the six years, and next-to-last in 1985, averaging only 77 round-trippers per year; the other eleven National League teams averaged 125 home runs from 1982 to 1987. The Cardinals made up for their power shortfall by leading the league in stolen bases every year from 1982 to 1987, averaging 242 per year, including 314 in 1985. Left fielder Vince Coleman stole over 100 bases in each of his first three major league seasons from 1985 to 1987.

The indispensable man on the Cardinals was their dazzling shortstop Ozzie Smith, probably the best defensive wizard to ever play the position. He emerged during this time as a better offensive player, especially given his speed on the bases, than he is generally given

credit for being. The Wizard Oz was the only core regular on the 1982-87 Cardinals who I count as the best at his position or among the NL's best players in the surrounding decade. Ozzie Smith, in fact, has a century-plus legacy for his best consecutive years of 1985 to 1989, the first three years for this team.

When the Cardinals were good, they were very good. Their 92 wins in 1982 were the most in the National League, and they were the league's stingiest team in giving up runs; in 1985, they needed 101 wins—more than any other major league team—to outpace the Mets' 98, led the league in scoring, and were second to the Mets in fewest runs allowed, giving up only four more runs; and in 1987, they beat out New York with 95 wins—making them again the NL's winningest team—and were second in scoring (after the Mets) and fourth in fewest runs allowed. But in the three years they did not win the NL East, and then the league pennant, this St. Louis team struggled; they were not in the hunt for first place in any of those seasons and twice finished with a losing record. *This puts them, in my judgment, behind the 1984-88 Mets, 1976-80 Phillies, and 1970-75 Pirates as the best teams in the first 22 seasons of the NL's Eastern Division alignment*, despite the fact that the 1982-88 Cardinals were the only one of these teams to win more than one pennant.

#### 4 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE EASTERN DIVISION TEAMS, 1969-1990

	D-P-WS	W - L %	Ach	Dom	Play	Total
New York Mets, 1984-88	2 – 1 – 1	488-320 .604	30	45	13	88
Philadelphia Phillies, 1976-80	4 – 1 – 1	467-343 .577	29	20	16	65
Pittsburgh Pirates, 1970-75	5 – 1 – 1	542-422 .562	30	13	10	53
St. Louis Cardinals, 1982-87	3 – 3 – 1	530-441 .546	26	13	13	52

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

Determining the 1984-88 Mets' legacy in the twentieth century, or at least the second half thereof, must begin with a comparison to another major underachieving NL team of the century's last fifty years—the **1956-60 Milwaukee Braves**. Squandered greatness is the legacy of both these teams. They each could have had, and probably should have had, four first-place finishes (league pennants for the Braves in the traditional format, division titles for the Mets in the modern format).

The Mets were a much more dominant team relative to the rest of the league than the Braves, but with essentially the same outcome: two first-places finishes, each by blowout margins, and three times finishing second. Milwaukee's pennants were back-to-back in 1957 and 1958, both eight games ahead of the runner-up, but the Braves won those pennants with only 95 victories the first year and 92 the next. Milwaukee finished the scheduled season in first place a third time, in 1959, but so too did Los Angeles; a best-of-three playoff series settled the National League pennant in favor of the Dodgers. The Braves had only three total 90-win seasons in five years between 1956 and 1960. The Mets' two division titles, on the other hand, were not consecutive but were secured by much more impressive margins—21½ games in 1986 and 15 in 1988—and they won at least 100 games both times. They won at least 90 games every year between 1984 and 1988. While the Braves were the class of the

National League, certainly from 1957 to 1959, the Mets, in the two years they had the best record in the league, were a juggernaut.

When it comes to the core regulars on their respective teams, however, the 1956-60 Braves have a decisive advantage over the 1984-88 Mets. The Mets did not have even one player with a half-century or full-century legacy, according to me; the Braves had three with century-plus legacies—Hank Aaron, Eddie Mathews, and Warren Spahn—whose best consecutive seasons spanned the years from 1956 to 1960. As I noted in NL Chapter Six on this Milwaukee team, the Braves were likely handicapped by their core regulars accounting for nearly all of the team’s collective player value as measured by WAR from 1956 to 1960—a lack of depth that may have cost them in pennant races they lost by one game (in 1956) and in the playoff to the Dodgers in 1959. The Mets, with more player value beyond their core regulars, had greater depth, but the absence of any players whose best consecutive seasons with the team would have merited at least a half-century legacy may have been the reason why, ultimately, they were not more successful than the two division titles they won. *It is hard to see the 1984-88 New York Mets with Hernandez and Carter towards the end of their careers, Strawberry and Gooden as dysfunctional superstars, and a cast of characters like Dykstra as being a better team than the 1956-60 Milwaukee Braves with Aaron and Mathews at the height of their careers, Spahn ever dependable and still having some of his best years, and a cast of solid regulars like center fielder Bill Bruton, shortstop Johnny Logan, catcher Del Crandall, underutilized first baseman Joe Adcock, and a pitching staff rounded out by Lew Burdette and Bob Buhl.*

There is no doubt, however, that the 1984-88 Mets were a better team than the 1974-78 Los Angeles Dodgers, notwithstanding that they won one fewer division title and two fewer pennants.

### 5 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1951-1990

	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
<b>New York Mets, 1984-88</b>	<b>2 - 1 - 1</b>	<b>488-320 .604</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>88</b>
Los Angeles Dodgers, 1974-78	3 - 3 - 0	475-335 .586	34	40	10	84

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

Before leaving the 1984-88 Mets, it’s worth saying that their accomplishments may not even measure up to those of the “amazing,” “miracle,” “you-gotta-believe” New York Mets of 1969 to 1973. The 1969 Mets captured the baseball world’s imagination by rising from an abysmal ninth-place finish in 1968—the last year of a single pennant race in each league—and overcoming a large mid-summer deficit to the Chicago Cubs in 1969 on their way to winning the very first National League Eastern Division title, a National League pennant, and a World Series triumph over the heavily-favored and, let’s be blunt, much better Baltimore Orioles. And in 1973, the Mets captured the imagination yet again by coming from behind to

win a very mediocre NL East with an unbelievably poor 82-79 record, and then toppling, let's be blunt again, the much better Cincinnati Reds (who won 99 games) in the League Championship Series. The 1973 Mets were tied with Houston for the fourth-best record in the National League, which meant that three teams in the West were better, but relief ace Tug McGraw's rallying cry of "you gotta believe!" inspired them to victory. The 1969-73 Mets had two players who were the best in the league at their position—Bud Harrelson at shortstop from 1966 to 1972, more because of the absence of any NL shortstop who was better than his own dim stardom, and Tom Seaver, indisputably one of the greatest pitchers ever.

### 8 BEST NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS, 1901-1990

	<b>D-P- WS</b>	<b>W - L %</b>	<b>Ach</b>	<b>Dom</b>	<b>Play</b>	<b>Total</b>
Chicago Cubs, 1906-10	4 - 2	530-235 .693	32	60	33	125
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
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

### NEW YORK METS, 1984-1988

2 NL Eastern Division Titles (1986, 1988)

1 Pennant (1986)

1 World Series Win (1986)

#### ACHIEVEMENT

1 <sup>st</sup> place (x 3)	2 <sup>nd</sup> place (x 2)	3 <sup>rd</sup> place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
2 x 3 = 6	3 x 2 = 6	0	1 x 1 = 1	
+ 1 pennants = 1				
+ 2 NL1 (x .5) = 1				
8	6	0	1	15

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 15 / 5 years x 10 = **30**

#### DOMINANCE

100 Wins	8 Games Ahead	NL1/Runs Scored	NL1/Fewest Runs Allowed	Score
2	2	3	2	9

**DOMINANCE SCORE** = 9 / 20 (4 x 5 seasons) x 100 = **45**

#### PLAYERS

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1984-88	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1980-90	2 <sup>nd</sup> 1/2 20 <sup>th</sup> C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
1B Keith Hernandez, 1983-88	22.1	1979-86	1980-86	no	
2B Wally Backman, 1984-88	8.9	no	no		
3B Howard Johnson, 1985-91	10.1	no (1987-91)	no		
OF Mookie Wilson, 1984-88	13.8	no	no		
CF Len Dykstra, 1985-88	13.7	no	no		
RF Darryl Strawberry, 1983-90	24.0	1986-91	1985-90	no	
C Gary Carter, 1985-88	11.5	no (1977-86)	*	^	^
P Doc Gooden, 1984-93	29.1	1984-88	1984-88	no	
P Ron Darling, 1984-89	14.8	no	no		
P Sid Fernandez, 1985-92	10.9	no	no		
RP Roger McDowell, 1985-89	5.5				
RP Jesse Orosco, 1982-87	6.1	no	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1984-88 = 222.2</b>	170.5				
Core WAR= 76.7 % of Team war 44.4 Av. Team WAR + 76.7 %	78.4 / 10 <b>7.8</b>	3 / 12 x 10 <b>2.5</b>	3 x 1 <b>3</b>	0 x 2 <b>0</b>	0 x 3 <b>0</b>

\* Carter was one of 10 best position players in surrounding decade for best consecutive years of 1980-85, but only one for this team.

^ Carter has century-plus legacy for his best consecutive years of 1977-85.

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 7.8 (Base WAR) + 2.5 (Best at Position) + 3 (NL Best) = **13.3**

**St. LOUIS CARDINALS, 1982-1987**

3 NL Eastern Division Titles (1982, 1985, 1987)  
3 Pennants (1982, 1985, 1987)  
1 World Series Win (1982)

**ACHIEVEMENT**

1 <sup>st</sup> place (x 3)	2 <sup>nd</sup> place (x 2)	3 <sup>rd</sup> place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
3 x 3 = 9	0	(2) 1 x 1 = 1*	1 x 1 = 1	
+ 3 pennants = 3				
+ 3 NL1 (x .5) = 1.5				
13.5	0	1	1	15.5

\* Cardinals' third-place finish in 1986 not counted because of losing record.

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 15.5 / 6 years x 10 = **26**

**DOMINANCE**

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

**DOMINANCE SCORE** = 3 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **12.5**

**PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1982-87	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1980-90	2 <sup>nd</sup> 1/2 20 <sup>th</sup> C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
2B Tommy Herr, 1981-87	16.7	no	no		
SS Ozzie Smith, 1982-94	29.5	1982-89	1985-89	yes	yes
3B Terry Pendleton, 1985-90	6.0	no	no		
LF Vince Coleman, 1985-90	6.2	no	no		
CF Willie McGee, 1982-90	18.0	no	no		
RF George Hendrick, 1978-84	5.4	no	no		
C Darrell Porter, 1981-85	9.6	no	no		
P Joaquin Andujar, 1982-85	12.4	no	no		
P Bob Forsch, 1975-87 (-1)	7.0	no	no		
P Danny Cox, 1984-87	7.6	no	no		
RP Bruce Sutter, 1981-84	5.7	no	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1982-87 = 214.6</b>	124.1				
Core WAR= 57.8 % of Team war 35.8 Av. Team WAR + 57.8 %	56.5 / 10 <b>5.7</b>	1 / 11 x 10 <b>.9</b>	1 x 1 <b>1</b>	1 x 2 <b>2</b>	1 x 3 <b>3</b>

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 5.7 (Base WAR) + 1.0 (Best at Position) + 6 (NL Best) = **12.7**

**BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE**

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

<b>1982-87 CARDINALS and 1984-88 METS</b>		
<b>10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1980-90</b>		
	Mike Schmidt, 3B, 1980-88	
	Gary Carter, C, 1980-85 *	* Only one of Carter's five best consecutive years were with 1984-88 Mets.
	<i>Ozzie Smith, SS, 1985-89, StL</i>	
	Dale Murphy, OF, 1982-87	
	Tim Raines, OF, 1983-87	** Only one of Hernandez's five best consecutive years were with 1982-87 Cardinals.
	<i>Keith Hernandez, 1B, 1980-86, StL-NYM **</i>	
	Tony Gwynn, OF, 1984-88	
	Barry Bonds, OF, 1986-90	
	<i>Daryl Strawberry, OF, 1985-90, NYM</i>	
	Pedro Guerrero, OF/3B, 1982-87 (-1)	
<b>5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1980-90</b>		
	Steve Carlton, 1980-84	
	Orel Hershiser, 1985-89	
	Fernando Valenzuela, 1981-87	
	<i>Doc Gooden, 1984-88, NYM</i>	
	Mario Soto, 1981-85	
	Lee Smith, RP, 1982-87	

**BEST AT POSITION**

1B	(74) Garvey-----→Hernandez-----→W.Clark-----→
2B	(65) Morgan-----→Sandberg-----→
SS	(73) Concepcion-----→Ozzie Smith-----→Larkin-----→(99)
3B	(74) Schmidt-----→H.Johnson-----→
OF	(72) Cedeno-----→Dawson-----→Gwynn-----→(97)
OF	Foster-----→Raines-----→Bonds-----→(04)
OF	Parker-----→Murphy-----→Strawberry-----→
MP	Rose, 3B-1B-----→Guerrero, OF/3B/1B-----→Bonilla, OF/3B-----→(95)
C	Carter-----→Scioscia-----→
P	(67) Seaver-----→Ryan-----→Maddux-----→(02)
P	(70) Carlton-----→Hershiser-----→Drabek-----→(94)
P	(73) Rogers-----→Gooden-----→Smoltz-----→(98)
P	(73) P.Niekro-----→Soto-----→Scott-----→Rijo-----→(94)
P	Richard-----→Valenzuela-----→D.Martinez-----→
RP	Sutter-----→Lee Smith-----→Dibble-----→
	75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93

**PITTSBURGH PIRATES, 1970-1975**

5 NL Eastern Division Titles (1970, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1975)

1 Pennant (1971)

1 World Series Win (1971)

**ACHIEVEMENT**

1 <sup>st</sup> place (x 3)	2 <sup>nd</sup> place (x 2)	3 <sup>rd</sup> place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
5 x 3 = 15	0	(1)	1 x 1 = 1	
+ 1 pennants = 1				
+ 2 NL1 (x .5) = 1.0				
17	0	0	1	18

\* Pirates' third-place finish in 1973 not counted because of losing record.

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 18 / 6 years x 10 = **30**

**DOMINANCE**

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

**DOMINANCE SCORE** = 3 / 24 (4 x 6 seasons) x 100 = **12.5**

**PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1970-75	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1968-77	2 <sup>nd</sup> 1/2 20 <sup>th</sup> C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
1B Bob Robertson, 1970-74	10.1	no	no		
2B Rennie Stennett, 1972-79	6.9	no	no		
SS Gene Alley, 1965-72	2.6	no	no		
3B Richie Hebner, 1969-76	18.6	no	no		
LF-1b Willie Stargell, 1964-79	31.5	1970-74 OF	1969-74	no	
CF Al Oliver, 1969-77	15.9	no	no		
RF Roberto Clemente, 1955-72	16.7	s/o (1966-71)	1968-72	^	^
C Manny Sanguillen, 1969-76	21.2	no	no		
P Steve Blass, 1968-72	10.7	no	no		
P Dock Ellis, 1969-75	11.6	no	no		
P Bob Moose, 1968-73	5.5	no	no		
P Jim Rooker, 1973-79	10.1	no	no		
P/RP Bruce Kison, 1971-79 (-1)	2.9	no	no		
P/RP Luke Walker, 1968-73	3.7	no	no		
RP Ramon Hernandez, 1972-76	5.7	no	no		
RP Dave Giusti, 1970-76	8.4	s/o	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1970-75 = 232.5</b>	182.1				
Core WAR= 78.3 % of Team war 38.7 Av. Team WAR + 78.3 %	69 / 10 <b>6.9</b>	1.5 / 16 x 10 <b>0.9</b>	2 x 1 <b>2</b>	0 x 2 <b>0</b>	0 x 3 <b>0</b>

^ Clemente has century-plus legacy for his best consecutive years of 1964-71, only two of which for this team.

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 6.9 (Base WAR) + 0.9 (Best at Position) + 2 (NL Best) = **9.8**

**PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES, 1976-1980**

4 NL Eastern Division Titles (1976, 1977, 1978, 1980)  
1 Pennant (1980)  
1 World Series Win (1980)

**ACHIEVEMENT**

1 <sup>st</sup> place (x 3)	2 <sup>nd</sup> place (x 2)	3 <sup>rd</sup> place (x 1)	World Series (x 1)	Score
4 x 3 = 12	0	0	1 x 1 = 1	
+ 1 pennants = 1				
+ 1 NL1 (x .5) = .5				
13.5	0	0	1	14.5

**ACHIEVEMENT SCORE** = 14.5 / 5 years x 10 = **29**

**DOMINANCE**

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

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

**PLAYERS**

CORE REGULARS	WAR 1976-80	BEST at POSITION	Decade 1974-83	2 <sup>nd</sup> 1/2 20 <sup>th</sup> C	20 <sup>th</sup> C +
SS Larry Bowa, 1970-81	11.0	no	no		
3B Mike Schmidt, 1973-87	40.8	1974-87	1974-83	yes	yes
LF Greg Luzinski, 1972-80	12.5	no	no		
CF Garry Maddox, 1976-82	21.0	no	no		
C Bob Boone, 1973-81	12.0	no	no		
P Steve Carlton, 1972-84	24.3	1970-83	1977-83	^	^
P Jim Lonborg, 1973-78	1.6	no	no		
P Dick Ruthven, 1978-82	5.5	no	no		
P Larry Christensen, 1975-82 (-2)	2.7	no	no		
P Randy Lerch, 1977-80	-1.2	no	no		
RP Ron Reed, 1976-83	6.0	no	no		
RP Tug McGraw, 1975-81	4.9	no	no		
<b>TEAM WAR, 1976-80 = 202.3</b>	141.1				
Core WAR= 69.7 % of Team war 40.5 Av. Team WAR + 69.7 %	68.7 / 10 <b>6.9</b>	2 / 12 x 10 <b>1.7</b>	2 x 1 <b>2</b>	1 x 2 <b>2</b>	1 x 3 <b>3</b>

^ Carlton's century-plus legacy is for his best consecutive years of 1977-85, but his 1980 to 1983 seasons were decisive for that legacy, only one year for this team.

**PLAYERS SCORE** = 6.9 (Base WAR) + 1.7 (Best at Position) + 7 (NL Best) = **15.6**

**BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE**

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

1970-75 PIRATES		1976-80 PHILLIES
<b>10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1968-77</b>		<b>10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1974-83</b>
Joe Morgan, 2B, 1971-77		<i>Mike Schmidt, 3B, 1974-83</i>
Johnny Bench, C, 1969-75		Gary Carter, C, 1977-82
<i>Roberto Clemente, OF, 1968-72</i>		Dave Parker, OF, 1975-79
Pete Rose, OF-3B, 1969-76		Ron Cey, 3B, 1974-79
Cesar Cedeno, OF, 1972-76		Ted Simmons, C, 1975-80
Bobby Bonds, OF, 1969-73		Andre Dawson, OF, 1978-83
<i>Willie Stargell, OF-1B, 1969-74</i>		George Foster, OF, 1975-79
Tony Perez, 3B-1B, 1969-73		Johnny Bench, C, 1974-79
Ron Cey, 3B, 1974-78		Dave Winfield, OF, 1976-80
Ted Simmons, C, 1973-78		Joe Morgan, 2B, 1974-83
<b>5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1968-77</b>		<b>5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1974-83</b>
Tom Seaver, 1968-77		Phil Niekro, 1974-79
Bob Gibson, 1969-72		Tom Seaver, 1974-78
Ferguson Jenkins, 1968-72		<i>Steve Carlton, 1977-81</i>
Phil Niekro, 1971-77		Steve Rogers, 1975-80
Steve Carlton, 1969-74		J.R. Richard, 1976-80
Clay Carroll, RP, 1970-74		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-----→Cedeno-----→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