

## *National League's Best Teams*

### *Chapter Eleven*

#### **The 1990-95 (?) Pittsburgh Pirates: The Best Team That Couldn't Be ?**

After the 1984-88 New York Mets, the next team to rule the NL's Eastern Division was the Pittsburgh Pirates, who won three consecutive division titles from 1990 to 1992 but failed to win a National League pennant. They lost the League Championship Series in six games to Cincinnati in 1990 and in seven games to Atlanta in both 1991 and 1992. These Pirates are a team that deserves mention because their building a legacy of greatness was cut short by free agency. I do not *officially* include them in this narrative on the best National League teams because it was for only those three seasons that the Pirates were competitive. The year before they won the first of three NL East titles in a row, the Pirates finished fifth in their division and had the third-worst record in the National League. The year after they won their third straight division title, the Pirates fell back to fifth in the NL East (now seven teams), although five of the National League's thirteen other teams had a worse record than theirs.

Much has been made about the impact of free agency on teams in lesser-revenue markets—some with great historical traditions (like Pittsburgh)—and how they cannot afford to sign expensive free agents. Even worse, lesser-revenue market teams cannot afford to keep great talent they developed and often have to trade them away for players of much lesser ability or lose them for a compensatory draft pick or even nothing at all. Various teams have been a poster child of notable achievement prematurely denied because free agency of their best players, or impending free agency, took them away just when the team was on the threshold of potentially significant accomplishments. The mid-1990s Montreal Expos are one of the more notable such teams, and look what happened to them: they became wards of Major League Baseball in 2002, had a strict budget that precluded improvement, played some of their home games in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and finally moved to Washington, DC, to become the Nationals in 2005.

But the 1990-92 Pirates were perhaps the best team to be undone by free agency since its rules came into effect in 1976. These Pirates, with their three division titles in a row—the first NL team since the Philadelphia Phillies from 1976 to 1978 to accomplish that—had an impressive record of achievement from which to build. The Pirates dominated their division, and even the league, from 1990 to 1992. After beating out the Mets by four games in 1990 with the best record in the league, they won their division decisively by 14 games in 1991, again with the league's best record, and by nine games in 1992, although the NL Western Division champion Atlanta Braves had the better record. And Pittsburgh was near the top of the game in both offense and pitching: the Pirates led the league in scoring in 1991 and 1992, and were second in 1990, and they gave up the second fewest runs in 1991 and the third fewest in 1992.

With core players that included left fielder Barry Bonds—who became one of baseball's greatest ever (even before he turned to the dark side of performance-enhancing drugs)—right fielder-third baseman Bobby Bonilla, center fielder Andy Van Slyke, shortstop Jay Bell, and starting pitchers Doug Drabek and John Smiley—the Pirates were poised to be a power in the National League for some number of years beyond 1992, perhaps to rule the NL Central Division to which Pittsburgh was moved in 1994 when Major League Baseball realigned to three divisions and a wild card in each league.

As early as the eve of spring training in 1991, however, in the afterglow of the 1990 Pirates' winning Pittsburgh its first division title since 1979, team president Carl Bargar gave a fiscal realities brief in which he contended his franchise was in a precarious financial situation. Despite setting a franchise record in attendance in 1990 and becoming the team to beat in the NL East, the Pirates suffered operating losses in excess of \$7 million. Various factors went into those operating losses, but most noteworthy was a significant increase in player salaries at the major league level. With the Pittsburgh metropolitan area only the nineteenth-most populous in the United States in 1990, according to census data, the Pirates could not compete in either attendance or local media revenues with much bigger cities that also hosted major league teams, even if they had the best team in the National League. Bargar identified this as a "serious and sobering dilemma" for smaller-market franchises in particular. The Pirates' best players, meanwhile, were not shy about saying they were underpaid for their skills and accomplishments and that they would be willing to go to teams that had fewer financial constraints. As it was, Bonds, Bonilla, and Drabek all went to salary arbitration that winter, and while Drabek was the only one of the three to win his case, they all got substantial increases contributing to a 1992 payroll nearly two-thirds higher than the previous year, according to data available on *baseball-reference.com*. This trend, Bargar clearly thought, would be unsustainable in the years ahead. And so—

—Bonilla and Smiley were gone from Pittsburgh after the 1991 season, Bonilla exercising his right to free agency and signing with the Mets, and Smiley, despite his 20-8 record and the best winning percentage (.714) in the National League, being traded to Minnesota one year before he would become a free agent so the Pirates could get some value in return. (They did in Denny Neagle, who became a pitcher of sufficient accomplishment that he too was traded before free agency could take him away.) After 1992 and a third straight division title, but the mission of bringing the National League pennant back to Pittsburgh still unfinished business, both Bonds and Drabek became free agents whose asking price was beyond what the Pirates were willing to pay. Their loss proved too much for Pittsburgh to bear, and in 1993 the Pirates were near the bottom of the league in both runs scored and runs allowed, explaining their fall to fifth place in their division. As of 2010, the

Pittsburgh Pirates have yet to recover. Pittsburgh has not had a winning season since 1992, an unmatched record of losing futility. Indicative of the Pirates' free agent losses, the collective player value for their team dropped from an average of 37.9 wins above replacement (WAR) from 1990 to 1992 to 14.3 in 1993, 7.5 in 1994, and 11.3 in 1995.

The loss of Bonilla after the 1991 season and Bonds after 1992 was devastating to the Pirates' offense because they provided the power in the heart of the line-up. Bobby Bonilla batted clean-up for the Pirates, between Andy Van Slyke and Barry Bonds, which gave Pittsburgh as strong a middle of the order as there was in the National League. He knocked out 32 home runs and drove in 120 runs in 1990, and while his home run total dipped to 18 in 1991, Bonilla led the league with 44 doubles and still drove in 100 runs while batting .302. After Bonilla left Steel Town for the Big Apple, Flushing zip code, Bonds moved into the fourth spot in Manager Jim Leyland's batting order.

Barry Bonds emerged as the truly great player he would become in 1990, when he hit better than .300, scored more than 100 runs, drove home more than 100 runs, and whacked thirty home runs for the first time in his now five-year career. This was also the first of nine consecutive years that Bonds had an on-base percentage over .400 and the first time he cracked the .500 barrier in slugging percentage; he would never see the south side of a .500 slugging percentage again. In all three of the Pirates' division-winning seasons, Barry Bonds led the NL in on-base plus slugging percentage. In all three of those years, Bonds was also indisputably the best player in the National League, according to the wins above replacement metric. Leaving for San Francisco as a free agent in 1993, Bonds was immediately thrust into a debate as to whether he or Ken Griffey, Jr., with Seattle in the American League, was the best player in major league baseball.

Pittsburgh carried on after 1992 without any players of their offensive stature, either developed in their farm system or obtained by trade. After having the National League's second highest WAR among position players in 1990 and the highest each of the next two seasons, the collective player value of the Pirates' position players dropped to ninth in the league in 1993, tenth in 1994, and dead last in the NL in 1995 in the absence of Mr. Bonds and Mr. Bonilla.

Of the core position players who remained with the Pirates after 1992, the two best were shortstop Jay Bell and center fielder Andy Van Slyke. At 27 years old going into the 1993 season, Bell was in the prime of his career. He had lost in salary arbitration the previous year, but entered the 1993 season with a new five-year deal with the Pirates, who needed to demonstrate that even if they could not afford Bonds, they would make an effort to keep at least some of their best players. With Bonds now gone, Bell had not only the best season of any Pirates player in 1993, but also the best season of his career, hitting .310 and scoring 102 runs . . . and displacing Ozzie Smith (who had earned thirteen in a row) as the NL's Gold Glove shortstop. Bell continued to play well for Pittsburgh until he was traded to Kansas City in December 1996 as free agency loomed on his horizon the year after. Bell hit second in the line-up, however, and could not—indeed, was not expected to—provide the offensive clout that Bonds and Bonilla had in earlier years.

Nor could Andy Van Slyke, who hit third in Pittsburgh's batting order, and was signed to a multi-year contract as Bonilla was becoming a free agent. After having the best season of his career in 1992, Van Slyke—who had won five consecutive gold gloves for his

outfield play—suffered a broken collarbone crashing into an outfield wall in mid-June of 1993 trying to make a catch and did not return to the starting line-up until September, seriously undermining an offense that most definitely was missing Barry Bonds. Van Slyke never fully recovered from that injury, played one more year with the Pirates, and signed with the Baltimore Orioles as a free agent in 1995—his last season as a major league player.

After the departures of Bonilla and Bonds, Manager Leyland had difficulty backing up Van Slyke with dangerous hitters in the fourth and fifth spots of the batting order. Third baseman Jeff King hit fourth for most of 1993, but where Bonds had knocked out 34 home runs batting mostly clean-up in 1992, King hit only nine home runs and only five in the strike-shortened 1994 season. Neither outfielder-first baseman Orlando Merced nor outfielder Dave Clark, who also hit fourth or fifth in 1993 and 1994, were renowned power hitters; they combined for only 38 home runs during those two years. Pittsburgh's clean-up hitters had a slugging percentage of at least .487 from 1990 to 1992, but only .401 and .420 the next two years, which was substantially lower than the .466 and .517 slugging percentages for the league's fourth-place hitters in 1993 and 1994. When the Pirates won their three division titles, the lowest percentage of their total hits to go for extra bases was 39 percent in 1991—when Bonilla was the primary clean-up hitter—but their highest percentage for extra-base hits the two years after Bonds left was 31 percentage in 1994. Clean-up hitters in the league averaged 36 percent of their hits going for extra bases in 1993 and 40 percent in 1994. With Bonds and Bonilla in the middle of the order, the Pirates scored 16 percent more runs than the league team average in 1991; with Bonds alone in 1992, 10 percent more; and without Bonds or Bonilla, the Pirates scored three percent *fewer* runs than the league team average in 1993 and nearly 14 percent fewer in 1994.

The loss of Smiley after the 1991 season and Drabek after 1992 was similarly disruptive to Pittsburgh's pitching staff. Southpaw John Smiley had been a mainstay in the Pirates' rotation since 1988, although a hand injury limited his effectiveness in 1990. In 1991, however, Smiley became established as one of baseball's elite pitcher when he led the NL in both victories and winning percentage, which made him an attractive proposition for when he would become a free agent after the 1992 season . . . which in turn motivated the Pirates to trade him to the Twins before that happened. Right-hander Doug Drabek had been a fixture in the Pirates rotation since 1987, but had his breakout season in 1990 with a 22-6 record, leading the league in wins and winning percentage (.786). He won only 15 games each of the next two years, but was still one of the premier pitchers in the National League. Granted free agency, along with Bonds, after the 1992 season, Drabek signed with the Houston Astros.

As with their position players, the Pirates carried on after 1992 without any pitchers having the stature of Drabek and Smiley, either developed in their farm system or obtained by trade. Pittsburgh's pitching staff, whose collective WAR was fourth in the league in 1991 and fifth in 1992, dropped to twelfth and thirteenth in a now-fourteen team league the next two seasons, and was no better than eleventh in 1995, without Masters Smiley and Drabek.

Bob Walk and Zane Smith were the only veteran starters the Pirates had remaining as the 1993 season began, but 36-year old Walk was nearing the end of his career and losing effectiveness—(1993 would be his last season)—and Smith was limited to only 14 starts with shoulder trouble. Rookie left-hander Steve Cooke proved to be the most durable pitcher on the staff that year, but nose-dived the following year and was injured the entire 1995 season. Denny Neagle, who was acquired from Minnesota in exchange for free agent-to-be-Smiley,

was worked into the starting rotation in 1994 and was the staff ace by 1995, when he proved himself on the threshold of becoming one of the best pitchers in the National League with a 13-8 record for a Pittsburgh team that had the worst record in the league. After starting the 1996 season with a 14-6 record for the last-place (now in the Central Division) Pirates, and with free agency pending in his not-too-distant future, Neagle was traded to the Atlanta Braves at the end of August for another pitcher—Jason Schmidt—with great potential, who would have his best years as a teammate of Bonds out in San Francisco after being traded on the cusp of his free agency.

How much did the Pirates miss their four premier departed players *in light of what they—the players—did after they left Pittsburgh?*

Barry Bonds, of course, was well on his way to becoming one of the greatest players to ever play the game when he went home to San Francisco in 1993. He remained at the pinnacle of his career for another decade before age, injury, and legacy-damaging controversy about whether he did or did not use steroids (with the general consensus being that he surely did) brought him down. Given his ability to dominate the game and carry a team for virtually an entire season, Bonds's departure was by far the most devastating loss for the Pirates. However, a superstar player alone cannot lead a team to championships. Bonds made the Giants instantly competitive in 1993—they went from fifth place and 72 wins the previous year to 103 wins losing out for the NL West title to the Atlanta Braves by a single game—but San Francisco went to the post-season only four times in Bonds's fifteen years playing ball in the Bay Area.

Bobby Bonilla played three-and-a-half seasons for the Mets after leaving the Pirates in 1992 and remained a formidable threat at the plate. After hitting only 19 home runs in his first season with the Mets, when he also spent time on the disabled list, Bonilla hit a career-high 34 home runs in 1993, 20 in the strike-shortened 114-game 1994 season, and 18 more in 1995 before he was traded to the Baltimore Orioles in late July. His player value as measured by WAR was not up to the standards he set when he played for Pittsburgh, but Bonilla remained the National League's best multi-position regular (since 1988)—alternating between the outfield and third base—until 1995, according to me, the last four of those years with the Mets. Moreover, again according to me, Bonilla's best consecutive years extending from 1988 to 1994 made him one of the league's 10 best position players in a putative surrounding decade of 1988 to 1997, assuming the 1990-92 Pirates had been able to hold onto their best players for two or three more years.

Based on their performances after leaving Pittsburgh, both Drabek and Smiley would have remained strong assets in the Pirates' starting rotation had they stayed. Doug Drabek's 9-18 record in his first year after signing as a free agent with the Astros was the worst of his career, but his adjusted earned run average was still better than the league average. Drabek returned more to form in 1994, going 12-6 with an ERA of 2.84 that was third best in the league before the season was aborted by the strike. From 1990 to 1994, the last two years with Houston, Drabek was one of the five best pitchers in the National League according to me based on WAR.

As for John Smiley, he had the best season of his career, as measured by WAR, in 1992 when he went 16-9 for the Minnesota Twins after being dispatched by Pittsburgh before his free agency year. This earned him a four-year free agency deal with the Cincinnati Reds.

After enduring elbow problems in the first year of his new contract that limited his effectiveness and ended his season in early July, Smiley was a significant contributor on the mound for the Reds in 1994 and 1995 when they finished first in the NL Central Division both years, although the first year did not officially count as a division title because of the players' strike that terminated the season in August. Despite a losing 13-14 record, Smiley had an even better year in 1996—the second best of his career, at least as measured by WAR, and better than any of his years in Pittsburgh—but watched his career come to a devastating end in 1997, after being traded to Cleveland, when he broke his arm while warming up prior to his first start after missing nearly a month with shoulder tendinitis.

“What If” is never an entirely serious historical proposition because history is as history was. Free agency was the new reality in major league baseball, and quite appropriate to a market economy, including for teams with the financial resources to spend big for the best free agent players available. Its structure could perhaps have been influenced by different rules for revenue sharing or frameworks such as salary caps that would have made it possible for the Pirates to hold onto some of their attractive corps of free agents or free agents-to-be who had left town by 1993, and the Pirates' front office has not been as adept as other small-market baseball franchises in building teams in the free agency era, but free agency surely determined the fate of this particular Pittsburgh team. Nonetheless, let us pose the question: *how much longer would the Pirates have been the dominant team in their division and possibly the best team in the National League had Bonds and Bonilla and Drabek and Smiley stayed in Pittsburgh (or at least the latter three of the four)?*

The Philadelphia Phillies won the NL Eastern Division in 1993, and their 97 victories would have been a challenge for the Pirates to beat even had their best players remained; the Phillies' triumph may simply have been their destiny for that year. And the up-and-coming Montreal Expos would have been a formidable challenge even had the Pirates been able to keep all four, or at least three, of their departed foursome—

—Except the Pirates by 1994 were no longer in the National League East. They were now in the National League's Central Division. And while the Expos suffered the same free agency-era fate as the Pirates and quickly dropped from being competitive to an afterthought, Pittsburgh did not have to contend with the Atlanta Braves, who were switched from West—where they had been in defiance of geographic common sense since the major leagues first went into divisional alignments in 1969—to East, which they went on to dominate into the new century. The Cincinnati Reds were in first place by half-a-game over Houston when the 1994 season came to its premature end and won the Central Division title by nine games in 1995, but they were not likely a team that could have held back the Pirates had Bonilla, Drabek, and Smiley stayed in Pittsburgh—and almost certainly not if Bonds did not take his heart to San Francisco. While the Reds did have shortstop Barry Larkin in the midst of his best consecutive years of 1991 to 1999 that give him a National League century-plus legacy, according to me, Cincinnati's other core players in 1994 and 1995—including first baseman Hal Morris, second baseman Bret Boone, right fielder Reggie Sanders, ace reliever Jeff Brantley, and . . . oh yeah, John Smiley (who, of course, could not have played for both teams at once)—would not have matched up with Bonilla, Bell, Van Slyke, Drabek, and . . . oh yeah, Smiley (who, of course, could not play for both teams at once), even if we concede that nothing was going to keep Bonds from going west.

Having moved to the NL Central, the Pirates would have added to their total of divisional titles with Bonds, Bonilla, Drabek, and Smiley still in Pittsburgh uniforms and would have merited my *official* consideration of, let us say, the 1990-95 Pittsburgh Pirates as one of the best National League teams in at least the second half of the twentieth century. But even keeping those players, Pittsburgh most likely would not have been the best National League team in their time. For one thing—

—The Montreal Expos were poised to be competitive for many years to come, if we assume a “What If” scenario that they might have avoided the loss of their star free agents and free agents-to-be. The Expos finished second by nine games to the Pirates in 1992, three games behind the Phillies in 1993, and were on top of the NL East with the best record of any major league team when the players went on strike in August 1994. Like Pittsburgh, Montreal had assembled a talented corps of young players but faced significant financial constraints when it came to keeping their best players as they entered or approached free agency. Montreal’s centerpiece players—the outfield of Larry Walker, Marquis Grissom, and Moises Alou; starting pitchers Ken Hill, Jeff Fassero, and Pedro Martinez; and ace reliever John Wetteland—were all gone within three years. The loss of Walker, Grissom, Hill, and Wetteland in 1995 precluded any hope of the Expos picking up where they left off when the players strike ended what turned out to be the last best hope of Montreal winning a National League pennant.

It was the Atlanta Braves, however, who would have been the biggest threat to the Pirates being the best team in the National League even if they still had the services of Bonds, Bonilla, Drabek, and Smiley. Winners of three consecutive Western Division titles—and twice National League champions by virtue of knocking off the Pirates in back-to-back League Championship Series—the Braves had established themselves as the best team in the league by 1994 when they were reassigned to the Eastern Division as part of Major League Baseball’s divisional realignments. Atlanta’s pitching, which now included Greg Maddux to go along with Tom Glavine and John Smoltz, would have been far superior to Pittsburgh’s pitching, even with Drabek and Smiley. And while Barry Bonds was certainly far-and-away the most dangerous and damaging hitter in the league, Atlanta’s overall offense—including the sluggers Dave Justice and Fred McGriff, and, by 1995, Chipper Jones—might have been at least a match for Pittsburgh’s with Bonds (of course), Jay Bell, Andy Van Slyke, and Bonilla.

Most likely, therefore, assuming free agency had not ripped apart the team that won three consecutive division titles from 1990 to 1992, I would have discussed the 1990-95 Pittsburgh Pirates as a very good team in my following chapter on the 1991-97 Atlanta Braves.

## TRANSPARENCY ANNEX

### PITTSBURGH PIRATES, 1990-92

3 NL Eastern Division Titles (1990, 1991, 1992)

0 Pennants

#### ACHIEVEMENT

1 <sup>st</sup> place	2 <sup>nd</sup> place	3 <sup>rd</sup> place	World Series
3	0	0	0
2 NL1			

#### DOMINANCE

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

#### PLAYERS

1990-92 PIRATES CORE REGULARS	WAR 1990-95*	WAR, '90-95		Best at Position	Decade 1988-97
		Pitts.	After '92		
1B-of Orlando Merced, 1991-96	10.6	10.6	7.6	no	no
2B Jose Lind, 1988-92	-2.6	-0.8	-1.8 KC [94]	no	no
SS Jay Bell, 1989-96	19.1	18.2	9.7	no	no
3B Jeff King, 1990-96 (-1)	5.1	0	5.1	no	no
<b>LF Barry Bonds, 1986-92</b>	<b>52.3</b>	<b>28.0</b>	<b>24.3 SF</b>	<b>1988-'04</b>	<b>1987-96 ^</b>
CF Andy Van Slyke, 1987-94	16.0	16.0	1.0 [94]	s/o	1987-92
<b>RF-3b Bobby Bonilla, 1986-91</b>	<b>19.3</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>11.1 NYM</b> (inc 1992)	<b>1988-95</b> <b>MPR</b>	<b>1987-94</b>
C Mike LaValliere, 1987-92	4.5	4.5	-- [92]	no	no
<b>P Doug Drabek, 1987-92</b>	<b>19.4</b>	<b>13.2</b>	<b>6.2 HOU</b>	<b>1990-94</b>	<b>1989-94</b>
<b>P John Smiley, 1987-91</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>8.9 CIN</b> (inc 1992 w/Minn)	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>
P Zane Smith, 1990-94	12.6	6.8	3.6	no	no
P Bob Walk, 1986-93	1.9	2.7	-0.8 [93]	no	no
RP Stan Belinda, 1990-93	3.5	2.0	1.5 3 tms	no	no

\* Inclusive player value for years 1990 to 1995 regardless of team.  
[94] indicates last year as a core regular for any team if before 1995.

^ Bonds has century-plus legacy for his best consecutive years of 1987-2004.

**BEST PLAYERS IN SURROUNDING DECADE**

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

<b>1990-92 + (?) PIRATES</b>		
	<b>10 BEST NL POSITION PLAYERS, 1988-97</b>	
	<i>Barry Bonds, OF, 1988-97</i>	
	Jeff Bagwell, 1B, 1991-97	
	Ryne Sandberg, 2B, 1988-92	
	Barry Larkin, SS, 1988-96	
	Mike Piazza, C, 1993-97	
	Craig Biggio, 2B, 1991-95	
	Will Clark, 1B, 1988-92	
	<i>Andy Van Slyke, OF, 1988-92</i>	
	Matt Williams, 3B, 1990-95	
	<i>Bobby Bonilla, OF-3B, 1987-94</i>	
	<b>5 BEST NL PITCHERS + BEST RELIEVER, 1988-97</b>	
	Greg Maddux, 1992-97	
	Jose Rijo, 1990-94	
	Tom Glavine, 1991-97	
	Dennis Martinez, 1989-93	
	<i>Doug Drabek, 1989-94</i>	
	Ron Dibble, RP, 1988-92	

**BEST AT POSITION**

1B	W.Clark-----→Bagwell-----→Helton-----→(05)
2B	(83) Sandberg-----→Biggio-----→Kent-----→(05)
SS	(82) Smith-----→Larkin-----→Furcal-----→(05)
3B	(74)Schmidt→ M.Williams-----→C.Jones-----→ H.Johnson-----→
OF	(84) Gwynn-----→A.Jones-----→(06)
OF	Strawberry-----→Walker-----→Sosa-----→
OF	Bonds-----→(04)
MP	Bonilla, OF/3B-----→Alfonzo, 3B/2B-----→Pujols→(05)
C	Scioscia-----→Piazza-----→
P	(80) Ryan--→Maddux-----→
P	(84) Hershiser-----→Drabek-----→Schilling-----→
P	(84) Gooden---→Smoltz-----→R.Johnson-----→(04)
P	Scott-----→Rijo-----→ Brown-----→Oswalt---→ P.Martinez-----→
P	D.Martinez-----→Glavine-----→
RP	Dibble-----→Hoffman-----→Wagner-----→(05)
	85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01 02 03