

National League's Best Teams

Preface

Perspective on the 20th Century

Although the more established of the two major leagues, with a history dating to 1876, the National League did not enter the twentieth century from a position of strength. Bedeviled by its own organizational difficulties, including leadership uncertainties, resentful players, and having downsized from twelve to eight teams only one year earlier (in 1900), the National League faced a significant challenge from the upstart American League, whose president, Ban Johnson, unilaterally declared his league a “major league” in 1901. The American League challenge included teams in three National League cities—Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia—and within another two years would include two more NL cities, St. Louis and New York. Even more seriously, the American League challenge included sufficient financial backing that a significant number of the National League’s best players were enticed to the new major league by higher salaries, including Cy Young, Napoleon Lajoie, Jimmy Collins, Joe McGinnity, and John McGraw to name five of the more prominent stars crossing over. The high caliber of American League play and the obvious realization that the new league was not going to disappear caused National League owners to finally accept, however reluctantly, the AL as a legitimate major league. The two leagues made peace following the 1902 season, and the rest is history.

The first decade of the new century was to a great extent a jockeying for position between the two major leagues, with the National League—smarting from the loss of so many of its star players to the Americans—seeking to affirm the superiority of its baseball. Ban Johnson, of course, was presenting the American League as not only providing a higher quality of baseball, but also a more fan-friendly environment (to cop a phrase from a century later). This was a major factor in why the World Series, which emerged as part of the peace

accord between the two leagues, became such a compelling annual event in American sports, indeed, in American society writ large.

Alas, for the National League, the American League soon established itself as the better, even dominant, league for much of the century. This began in the 'teens, when AL teams won eight of ten World Series between 1910 and 1919, and the only two NL World Series victories were somewhat anomalous, the underdog 1914 "Miracle" Boston Braves beating one of the best teams in history—Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics—in a four-game sweep, and the 1919 Cincinnati Reds beating the Chicago White Sox in a World Series that eight "Black Sox" conspired to lose (or, arguably in some cases, were merely witting of the conspiracy) to enrich some notorious big shot gamblers. And then came Babe Ruth and the New York Yankees in the 1920s, ushering in nearly half-a-century of American League, Yankees-led dominance. National League teams would win only 39 of the 96 World Series played in the twentieth century.

Unlike in the American League with the Yankees, no single franchise dominated the National League in the twentieth century. In many ways, this makes selecting the eight best National League teams of the century more interesting because most NL franchises were, at some time or another (and sometimes more than once), the team to beat. Of the original eight NL franchises that began the century, only one—the Philadelphia Phillies—can be said to never have had a best team in the National League over some five-year period between 1901 and 2000, although two others—the Cincinnati Reds and the Boston-to-Milwaukee (in 1953)-to-Atlanta (in 1966) Braves—couldn't make such a claim either until relatively late in the century. And the four most successful franchises had long periods of disappointment, as well as success.

- The Brooklyn-to-Los Angeles (in 1958) Dodgers ended the century with the most National League pennants—18—yet had won only three pennants through World War II before becoming a near-perennial contender for the next forty-some years.
- The New York-to-San Francisco (also in 1958) Giants, by contrast, had most of their success in New York, where they won 15 pennants, compared to only two the rest of the century after moving to the Bay Area. And 13 of those 15 pennants were won in a third-of-a-century between 1904 and 1937.
- Hard to believe for those versed more in historical angst than historical breadth, Chicago was a very successful National League franchise in the first half of the century, winning 10 pennants between 1906 and 1945. Unfortunately for their fans (but fortunately for Americana), the Cubs have won none since—including a decade into our present century—and have only two division titles and a wild card to show for the last 65 years. We have now passed the centennial of the Chicago Cubs' last World Series triumph, in 1908.
- The St. Louis Cardinals took the opposite path, going from being a rather pathetic franchise in the first quarter of the century, without a single first-place finish, to nonetheless boasting fifteen pennants—the third most in the National League—by the end of the twentieth century. And the Cardinals ended up as the century's most successful National League franchise in World Series competition, with nine Series championships. (The Dodgers are second with six, with only one of those famously won in Brooklyn.)

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With this history of ebb and flow among franchises, it is not surprising that no one NL franchise had a preponderance of the league's best teams in the century past. This is not to suggest any sort of parity within the league. Rather, the fortunes of National League franchises shifted, with who was up and who was down at what point in history due in no small measure to the brilliance (or lack thereof) of field managers, the innovativeness of front offices, the quality of scouting and minor league systems and major league player transactions (for kind or cash), and (of course) who had the financial resources that are so often the necessary foundation of success. While this made the NL less dominant than the AL—at least come World Series time—it also made the National League the more exciting and dynamic of the two major leagues.

And so, with that background, and a quick look (below) at how successful each National League franchise was between 1901 and 2000, let us proceed to the question at hand: which were the best National League teams of the twentieth century?

**RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT, NATIONAL LEAGUE FRANCHISES,
1901-2000**

| | P-WS | Total 1st | 1901-68 P - WS | 1969-2000 D - P - WS | Record + - |
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Brooklyn-Los Angeles | 18 - 6 | 21 > | 13 - 4 | 8 ** - 5 - 2 | 62 - 38 |
| <i>Brooklyn Dodgers</i> | 9 - 1 | 9 | 9 - 1 | -- | 30 - 27 |
| <i>Los Angeles Dodgers (1957)</i> | 9 - 5 | 12 | 4 - 3 | 9 ** - 5 - 2 | 32 - 11 |
| New York-San Francisco | 17 - 5 | 21 | 16 - 5 | 5 - 1 - 0 | 71 - 29 |
| <i>New York Giants</i> | 15 - 5 | 15 | 15 - 5 | -- | 43 - 14 |
| <i>San Francisco Giants (1957)</i> | 2 - 0 | 6 | 1 - 0 | 5 - 1 - 0 | 28 - 15 |
| St. Louis Cardinals | 15 - 9 | 18 ** | 12 - 8 | 6 - 3 - 1 | 62 - 38 |
| Chicago Cubs | 10 - 2 | 12 | 10 - 2 | 2 - 0 - 0 | 47 - 53 |
| Pittsburgh Pirates | 9 - 5 | 16 | 7 - 3 | 9 - 2 - 2 | 62 - 38 |
| Cincinnati Reds | 9 - 5 | 14 ** > | 4 - 2 | 8 - 5 - 3 | 54 - 46 |
| Boston-Milwaukee-Atlanta | 9 - 3 | 15 | 4 - 2 | 11 - 5 - 1 | 46 - 54 |
| <i>Boston Braves</i> | 2 - 1 | 2 | 2 - 1 | -- | 15 - 37 |
| <i>Milwaukee Braves (1953)</i> | 2 - 1 | 2 | 2 - 1 | -- | 13 - 0 |
| <i>Atlanta Braves (1966)</i> | 5 - 1 | 11 | 0 | 11 - 5 - 1 | 18 - 17 |
| Philadelphia Phillies | 5 - 1 | 8 | 2 - 0 | 6 - 3 - 1 | 35 - 65 |
| New York Mets (1961-x) | 4 - 2 | 4 | 0 | 4 - 4 *** - 2 | 18 - 21 |
| San Diego Padres (1969-x) | 2 - 0 | 3 | -- | 3 - 2 - 0 | 11 - 21 |
| Florida Marlins (1993-x) | 1 - 1 | 0 | -- | 0 - 1 *** - 1 | 1 - 7 |
| Houston Astros (1961-x) | 0 | 5 | -- | 5 - 0 - 0 | 21 - 18 |
| Montreal Expos (1969-x) | 0 | 1 > | -- | 1 ** - 0 - 0 | 14 - 18 |
| Arizona D-Backs (1998-x) | 0 | 1 | -- | 1 - 0 - 0 | 2 - 1 |
| Colorado Rockies (1993-x) | 0 | 0 | -- | 0 | 4 - 4 |
| Milwaukee Brewers (1998)* | 0 | 0 | -- | 0 | 0 - 3 |

(year in parentheses after team name is first year there)
(x = expansion team)

P = Pennant **WS** = World Series **Total 1st** = Total 1st-place finishes

1901-68: **P** and **WS** before division alignments

1969-2000: **D** = Division title, **P**, and **WS** after division alignments

Record: + = number of seasons at .500 or better; - = number of seasons below .500

* Milwaukee transferred from the American League in the 1998 expansion.

** 1981 split season: Cincinnati had the best record in the Western Division, but Los Angeles won the playoff for the division title; St. Louis had the best record in the Eastern Division, but Montreal won the playoff for the division title. Neither Cincinnati nor St. Louis, despite having the best record in their divisions, advanced to the post-season because neither team finished first in either half of the split season.

*** Florida in 1997 and New York in 2000 won the pennant as a wild card entry.

> No division titles awarded in 1994 because of players' strike; Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and Montreal are credited with finishing 1st (but no division) in this table.