

ROYAL DECADE

The Kansas City Royals Of 1976-85



INTRODUCTION

For those of us that came of age as baseball fans in the late 1970s, the Kansas City Royals were a playoff mainstay. Prior to realignment they competed in the AL West and they were the gold standard of that division. From 1976-85, they won six division crowns and at a time when they meant an automatic ticket to the ALCS.

Those Royals played some of the most memorable postseason series of all-time once they got to October. They weren't always—or even usually—on the right side, but the moments were electric. There were heartbreaking losses to the Yankees from 1976-78 before their own time finally came in the Bronx in 1980. There was the World Series loss to Philadelphia that same year, a couple years on the outs and then a return to the playoffs in 1984.

Finally, 1985 came. The Royals won an exciting pennant race with the California Angels to win the AL West again, then had to twice rally from 3-1 series deficits in the postseason, getting past the Toronto Blue Jays and St. Louis Cardinals to win it all.

The *Royal Decade* of 1976-85 included a pitching workhorse in Dennis Leonard, a crafty lefty in Larry Gura and a submarine-style closer named Dan Quisenberry. By the end of the run, a young Bret Saberhagen was turning into an October hero. The everyday lineup gave you names like Amos Otis, the fleet center fielder who could drive the ball in the gaps. Or Frank White, and his everyday consistency at second base. And how about Hal McRae, the outstanding designated hitter?

But above all, the *Royal Decade*—and this franchise as a whole—is marked by the presence of George Howard Brett. One of the great third basemen of all-time, the most complete hitter of his era and an eventual Hall of Famer, Brett's greatness is the common thread that links the first Royal breakthrough season of 1976 to the championship vindication of 1985.

Each season and each postseason series has its own individual article published on TheSportsNotebook.com. For convenience, those twenty articles—ten regular season narratives and ten game-by-game reviews of each playoff round—are all pulled together into one download, with modest editing done to eliminate obvious redundancies.

A point of reminder that most readers likely don't need—in the major league baseball alignment that existed prior to 1994 there were only two divisions per league, an East and a West. With centrally located teams like Kansas City needing to split up, the Royals were in the West. So were the Chicago White Sox, Minnesota Twins and Texas Rangers. These three teams joined the California Angels, Oakland A's and Seattle Mariners to comprise the AL West. And as noted at the top, only the first-place team qualified for postseason play.

I hope you enjoy this ride through a *Royal Decade*. Let's start the journey...

1976

It was September 29, 1976, and the city of Kansas City had reason to be nervous. The Royals had arrived in Oakland needing one win in three tries to clinch the AL West title. The first two chances had gone by the boards. The Royals' lead, at 4.5 games when they arrived in Oakland, was down to 2.5, and there was still a weekend of games left.

The Oakland A's had been the dominant team in the AL West in the 1970s—they'd won the previous five division titles and won three straight World Series from 1972-74. Kansas City was the team on the rise. The Royals came into existence in 1969 and by 1971 they produced a winning team. They went on a bit of a roller coaster, slipping below .500 in 1972 & 1974, but winning 88 games in 1973 and hitting a high point with 91 wins in '75.

Kansas City had been managed by some good names—Bob Lemon shepherded the '71 team to the winning record. Lemon would later win a World Series with the New York Yankees in 1978. And Jack McKeon was manager through much of the '75 season. But though McKeon would later win a World Series with the Florida Marlins in 2003, he was replaced with the '75 Royals at 50-46.

The team tapped unknown Whitey Herzog, and they promptly finished on a 41-25 tear. It would be the start of great things for both the franchise and the manager.

Herzog would become legendary in St. Louis in the 1980s for the frequency with which his teams stole bases. It was a style that became evident in Kansas City. The '76 Royals only had two players who hit more than 10 home runs—John Mayberry at first base and Amos Otis in

centerfield. But seven players stole 20 or more bases, led by shortstop Freddie Patek who swiped 51.

The team was also young, with Patek the only starter in the everyday lineup over the age of 30. No starter was younger than the brightest star. Third base was occupied by 23-year-old George Brett, starting a career that would mark him the franchise's greatest player—indeed one of the great third basemen and pure hitters to ever play.



Brett hit .333, and designated hitter Hal McRae hit .332 to key the offense. Mayberry led the team 95 RBIs, and Otis was a complete offensive and defensive player. The Royals finished fourth in the American League in runs scored.

Herzog's pitching was even better. The staff finished second in the AL in ERA, led by Dennis Leonard, who won 17 games with a 3.51 ERA and logged 259 innings to lead the rotation. The pitchers were as young as the hitters, with only Al Fitzmorris as old as 30, and Fitzmorris won 15 games with a

3.06 ERA. Doug Bird and Paul Spletter rounded out the staff, combining for 23 wins and each having ERAs under 4.00.

The bullpen was deep, with Mark Litell, Marty Pattin and Steve Migori piling up the innings in the days when roles weren't as strictly defined as they are today, and all three having sub-3.00 ERAs.

But in spite of all these names, the man who was getting the ball on the crucial September night in Oakland was a lefthander named Larry Gura. He would go on to a career with 126 wins, some big postseason performances and get a reputation as a Yankee-killer after the Pinstripes were the ones that cut him loose and available to be picked by Kansas City.

All that was ahead of him—but in 1976, he'd only appeared in 19 games, just one of them a start, before he took the ball in Oakland.

When the 1976 season started, Kansas City had stumbled out of the gate to 5-7, but by May 18 they were at 18-10 and tied for first with the Texas Rangers. The A's were lagging behind and KC promptly beat them twice in late May. The Royals started to build their lead and pushed it up to five games by June 18, but Oakland was in a deep hole, eleven games out.

The end of the 1976 season was going to be the first year of modern free agency and A's owner Charlie Finley was focused on dumping his stars—it didn't work, as commissioner Bowie Kuhn voided his sale of Joe Rudi and Gene Tenace, the outfielder and catcher who'd been key parts of the championship years, but it was a big distraction in the early part of the season.

Kansas City pushed its lead to seven games at the All-Star break and were riding high at plus-twelve on August 6 after they swept a doubleheader in Chicago. Then the veterans in Oakland decided it was time to make a last stand.

The Royals lost five of seven after August 6 and then in late August/early September they dropped nine of eleven. Oakland was barreling down their neck, and when the A's staved off elimination two straight times in the teams' final head-to-head series before the untested Gura on the mound for the finale, there was plenty of reason to be nervous.

The best way to stave off nerves is an early lead, and that's what the Royals got, although even their first run was a mixed blessing. In the top of the second, McRae and Mayberry singled. Then Al Cowens hit a line drive that resulted in a double play. Fortunately, utility man Cookie Rojas saved the inning with a two-out RBI single. It was 1-0, but it could have been more.

More was what the Royals got in the third. Patek doubled and Tom Poquette followed with a single. Otis ripped a double that scored one run and left runners on second and third. Brett didn't get a hit in this key game, but he pushed a ground ball to the right side to bring in a run and make it 3-0.

The 3-0 lead might have seemed like the same score in a hockey game, because Gura was locked in. The A's threatened in the third, but the lefty induced speedy centerfielder Bill North to fly out and then veteran shortstop Bert Campaneris lined out to Otis in center.

That line drive out was the last break Gura needed. Oakland mustered only three singles the rest of the game and two were wiped out on the double play ball. Otis homered in the fifth for some insurance. Gura completed the game in appropriate fashion, going straight through key hitters of the Oakland dynasty. Campaneris bounced back to Gura for one out. Rudi flied out to right. And when Tenace popped out to Mayberry at first base it was time for the celebration to begin.

1976 ALCS

The American League Championship Series featured two teams making their first appearance on this stage. Kansas City's opponent was the New York Yankees. Yes, this was the Yanks' first appearance in the ALCS. New York had not been relevant since winning the pennant in 1964 and the LCS round was not instituted until 1969, part of the expansion that brought the Royals into the league. So you had baseball's proudest franchise combining with one of its young upstarts starting what proved to be a rivalry that defined the late 1970s.

The League Championship Series round was best-of-five until 1985, and used a 2-3 homefield format that rotated between the divisions without regard to regular season record. The series opened in Kansas City and concluded in the Bronx.

New York came out on the attack in Game 1, and Brett had defensive problems in his first inning of postseason play. Mickey Rivers had an infield hit and Brett's throwing error put the speedy runner on second. He came on to score and another Brett error would make it 2-0 before the inning was over.

Yankee starter Catfish Hunter was in command and not until the eighth would the Royals get on the board. Royals' pitcher Larry Gura kept the Yanks under control, but in the ninth the Pinstripes added two insurance runs. Ninth-place hitter Fred Stanley got the last of his three hits to start the rally, Rivers singled and White doubled them both in.

New York had guaranteed a road split and now enormous pressure shifted to Kansas City for Game 2. The Royals answered the bell immediately with a pair of singles setting up a Brett sacrifice fly, then a stolen base and throwing error by Munson setting up a two-out RBI single by Poquette.

Leonard was on the mound for Kansas City, but he could not hold the lead. In the top of the third, with the lead down to 2-1, White and Munson both doubled. Then first baseman Chris Chambliss hit an RBI single. Leonard was removed for Splittorff, but now the Royals trailed 3-2.

Splittorff would earn a reputation as a Yankee-killer and he saved the day here, throwing 5 ²/₃ innings of shutout baseball. Brett tripled to leadoff the bottom of the sixth and scored the tying run. After a Mayberry single, Poquette got another big hit with a double to put the Royals up 4-3.

In the bottom of the eighth, Poquette again got things started, drawing a walk to lead off an inning where the Royals would score three times and break the game open. It ended 7-4 and the American League pennant was now down to a best-of-three, to be settled from Tuesday through Thursday in the Bronx.

If Kansas City was intimidated by the bright lights of Broadway, they didn't show it. A single and stolen base in the first inning set up Brett for an RBI single. The jitters of Game 1's first inning were well past the third baseman and he was on his way to a big series. He later scored on a sac fly by Hal McRae, and Poquette showed up again with a two-out RBI double.

New York starter Dock Ellis settled down though, and the Royals wouldn't score again. New York went to work on that 3-0 deficit in the fourth. Lou Piniella hit a two-out double and then Chambliss, in a moment that would prove to be foreshadowing, homered to right-center. The Yankees chased Royal starter Andy Hassler with three runs in sixth, Chambliss again picking up an RBI.

The 5-3 Yankee win had them in position to play for the pennant in the late afternoon start for Game 4 on Wednesday. They sent Hunter, a veteran of the Oakland dynasty, to try and clinch it, but the Royals got to him early. With two on and two out in the second inning, it was the bottom of the Kansas City lineup that did the damage. Patek hit a two-run double and then Buck Martinez singled Patek home.

Chambliss got the Yankees going with a leadoff single in the bottom of the inning, and Nettles homered. Gura was quickly removed for Doug Bird, with Kansas City still ahead 3-2. The Royals opened it up with two runs in the fourth, with another unknown, Jamie Quirk, hitting a big triple. Quirk later added a sac fly and with the 7-4 win, it was down to one game for a trip to the World Series.

Game 5 of the 1976 American League Championship Series would earn its place on the list of the best games ever played. Both offenses came out on the attack. Brett hit a two-out double and McRae homered to stake KC to a 2-0 first inning lead. Rivers answered with a leadoff triple. Roy White drove him in and promptly stole second. Chambliss eventually picked up White with a sac fly.

Herzog didn't hesitate to pull Leonard in the first inning and gave the ball to Splitteroff. The lefty pitched well, but not quite as dominant as in Game 2. Kansas City was able to get a 3-2 lead in the second when Martinez hit a two-out RBI single, but the Yankees came grinding back.

Rivers, White and Munson came up to lead off the third and produced the tying run with runners on first and third. Chambliss again was in the middle of things with an RBI single to put New York up 4-3. In the sixth, Rivers singled, took second on a sac bunt and scored on a RBI base hit by Munson. Lest we forget Chambliss, he drove in another run. Now it was 6-3, and when it stayed that way going to the eighth, it looked all but over.

Ed Figueroa had settled down as the New York starter, but was removed after Al Cowens singled. New York manager Billy Martin summoned lefty Grant Jackson.

I don't understand the logic behind Martin ignoring Sparky Lyle, one of the game's top relievers. The latter was his closer, and though that role wasn't defined as precisely as it is today, that's even more of an argument for bringing Lyle in. He had a 2.26 ERA and like Jackson, was a lefthander who could face Brett, now in the on-deck circle with a man aboard. Nor was there an injury factor—Lyle had pitched in this series and would resume normal duty in the World Series.

After another single, Brett showed why we second-guess Martin's bullpen decisions. The third baseman unloaded a home run that tied the game and stunned the crowd. It was 6-6, and the Yankees did not answer in the eighth.

The Royals couldn't score in the ninth, and Mark Littell, who'd had a solid year was on the mound. Chambliss was the leadoff hitter. In a fitting climax to his dominant series, Chambliss homered into right-center and in the days before crowd control was a priority, had to make his way through a mob to stomp home plate and secure the pennant.

One of the great games, great series and great moments was now in the books. LCS MVP honors were not given in 1976, but with a .524 batting average, eight RBIs, seemingly all of them at big moments and a walkoff home run to win the pennant, it seems safe to say Chambliss deserves the honor retroactively.

The Yankee run ended with this dramatic win. New York ran into Cincinnati's Big Red Machine and were swept out of the World Series. As for Kansas City, they might have gone home with broken hearts. But they were now on the national stage.

1977

Kansas City was built on pitching and speed—the '77 team ranked first in the American League in ERA and were second in stolen bases. Leonard anchored the rotation with 20 wins, a 3.04 ERA and chewed up over 290 innings. Jim Colborn won 18 more and Splittorf went 16-6 with a 3.69 ERA.

The bullpen was deep and Herzog made full use of it. Four relievers—Bird, Pattin, Gura and Littell all worked over 100 innings and most made some spot starts during the years. Steve Mingori, who threw 64 innings with a 3.09 ERA would have been the second-best reliever on a lot of teams. On this Royal staff, he was just fighting for his place in the pecking order.

Herzog liked to run, both here and in his future managerial job across the state in St. Louis. Patek stole 53 bases, easily tops on the team. Otis and Frank White each swiped 23 bags. Patek and White were both marginal hitters, so this gave them an additional way to contribute to the offense and keep runners moving.

The muscle in the Kansas City lineup started with the 24-year-old Brett, who posted a .373 on-base percentage/.532 slugging percentage. Brett hit 22 home runs and had 88 RBIs. Similar numbers were put up by McRae and Cowens, the latter leading the team with 112 RBIs.

Further contributions were made by 25-year-old catcher Darrell Porter, at .353 OBP/.452 slugging, and Mayberry.

Kansas City opened the season by winning three straight in Detroit, but mediocrity set in quickly and by the end of May, there were 21-23 and trailing the Minnesota Twins by 6 ½ games. The Chicago White Sox were hot on the Twins' heels, while the Royals languished in sixth place. June didn't start a whole lot better—the Royals went 7-8 in the first part of the month and fell seven games off the pace.

Minnesota, with their MVP first baseman Rod Carew, who made a run at the .400 mark throughout 1977 before settling at .388, came to KC for a three-game weekend set over June 17-19. The Royals were ready.

Kansas City banged seven doubles in taking the opener 7-1. Early on in Saturday's game, Patek stole home and Splitorff won a 2-1 pitchers' duel. On Sunday, the bullpen blew leads of 6-1 and 7-5, and the Royals came up in the bottom of the ninth with the score tied 7-7. Brett promptly singled, stole second and scored on a double by Mayberry. With the sweep, Kansas City was within four games of the AL West lead.

The Royals took the momentum and won 20 of their final 27 games before the All-Star break, capping the first half off with a sweep of the Yankees. The Royals were 2 ½ games out, but the Twins had faded hard and now the White Sox were setting the pace.

Kansas City's momentum crested briefly at the end of July. They visited Chicago's South Side for a four-game set with the leaders. Bird blew two saves, the Royals lost three of four and were 5 ½ out. Chicago paid a return visit in early August, another big weekend series in KC.

Otis and Porter set the tone in Friday night's opener, each homering as a part of a five-run second inning and Kansas City won 12-2. On Saturday, the Royals trailed 3-1 in the seventh when Brett hit a three-run jack and KC won 6-3. On Sunday, with the game tied 2-2 in the ninth, Otis walked, was bunted over and scored the game-winner on a single by backup catcher John Wathan. Another big home series sweep cut Chicago's margin to a game and a half.

The Royals then lost six of nine, but the White Sox were also starting to fade, and the skid didn't cost KC any ground. They were able to recover. Chicago wasn't.

Kansas City swept the Boston Red Sox three straight in the latter part of August and during that series, got a hold of first place. The Royals won 11 of 12 in a sequence of games against the Red Sox and Orioles, both serious challengers to New York in the AL East.

The Royals' AL West lead was nudged out to three games and they took over in September, reeling off a 25-5 stretch. After all the stops and starts of the first four months of the year, Kansas City ended up coasting home with a second straight division title and a 102-60 record that was the best in baseball. They were headed back to the ALCS where the Yankees were waiting.

1977 ALCS

Splitteroff got the ball for Game 1. Given the Royals had blown away the AL West, the fact that the lefty, and not Leonard, was the Game 1 starter was clearly a sign of Herzog's confidence in Splitteroff against the Yankees. It proved to be well-justified.

Kansas City got after Yankee starter Don Gullett quickly, scoring two runs in each of the first three innings. McRae, Cowens and Mayberry all homered. It was an easy Royals' win, with the Yankees able to take one consolation from the 7-2 drubbing—when Dick Tidrow came on in relief, he was able to get twenty outs for Billy Martin and avoid chewing up the pen—and Cy Young award winner Sparky Lyle—in a lost cause.

Ron Guidry provided an answer for New York the next night, and Kansas City could muster only three hits. But the game was still tied 2-2 in the bottom of the sixth. With one out, Thurman Munson singled. With two outs, there was still only Munson aboard, and Herzog pulled starter Andy Hassler. It was a move that didn't work.

Lou Piniella, a roving utility player who batted .330 during the season without a full-time position, singled. Cliff Johnson, the DH, who would be the most consistent Yankee hitter in this series, doubled in Munson. After an intentional walk to Chambliss, Brett booted a grounder that resulted in two more runs. New York rolled on to a 6-2 series-tying win.

Kansas City could still feel good about themselves—in spite of Brett having gone 1-for-9 and making a huge error, the Royals had still picked up a win in New York and now had the pennant reduced to a best-of-three, with all the games in their backyard.

That backyard was very good to the Royals for Game 3. Leonard threw a complete-game four-hitter. Although this does beg the question of why Leonard hadn't pitched the second game. The logic of overlooking him as staff ace for Game 1 made sense, in light of Splittorff's track record against New York. Overlooking him again in Game 2 seemed to be pushing the point.

In any event, Leonard was dominant, Brett got back on track with a 2-for-4 night, McRae and Porter each had multi-hit games and the Royals moved to the brink of their first American League pennant with a 6-2 win.

A sunny Saturday afternoon dawned in Kansas City for Game 4 and the offenses on both sides came out blazing. Mickey Rivers got four hits to jump-start the Yankee attack and they led 5-2 in the bottom of the fourth. Then the Royals got consecutive RBI doubles from shortstop Freddie Patek and second baseman Frank White. Brett was coming to the plate with two outs.

Martin managed this at-bat and the rest of the game exactly as he should have—like nothing else mattered. He summoned Lyle. It was a lefty-on-lefty matchup for the Yankees and it also ensured that if the season ended, Martin would go down firing his best shots.



As it turned out, it wasn't the end of the season and Lyle had the greatest moment of his career. He got Brett, then finished the rest of the game. He allowed only two singles, never allowed the tying run to second base and the Yanks finally got an insurance run in the ninth to win 6-4. It would be winner-take-all on Sunday night for the American League pennant.

Game 5 could be the subject of an entire book onto its own. Splittorff was pitching for the Royals and of all the Yankees, no one had a more difficult time handling him than Reggie Jackson. Martin made the gutsy call to sit Jackson, with the backing of the players who said Reggie couldn't hit Splittorff, "not with a paddle."

Then the game itself broke into several movements, like the great symphony that it was. After a first-inning single by McRae, Brett ripped an RBI triple. He slid hard into Graig Nettles at third, who responded by kicking his Royal counterpart. The benches cleared and there was real fighting. In a sign of how different baseball was back then, no one was ejected—and lest you think that it was just because of the magnitude of the game, there weren't any fines after the fact either.

Brett would score on an RBI groundout from Cowens. The Yankees got one back in the third when Rivers singled and stole second with two outs, then scored on a base hit by Munson. The Royals quickly answered in the bottom of the second with the same trio of hitters who did it in the first. McRae doubled, Brett moved him to third and Cowens picked up the RBI single.

The 3-1 score held through seven and Splittorff was rolling. Then a leadoff single got him removed. This is another questionable pitching move by Herzog. By today's standards, it's

perfectly normal. But in the late 1970s, it was still customary to let pitchers finish their business and the lefty was by no means in trouble. The winning run hadn't even reached base.

What's more, Martin was now liberated to bring Reggie into the lineup and Jackson delivered an RBI single that cut the lead to 3-2. Herzog turned to Mingori, who got the final two outs of the inning with the tying and lead runs aboard and it looked like Kansas City might survive.

Leonard opened the ninth for KC and clearly didn't have it. He gave up a single to Paul Blair and a walk to Roy White. Had Leonard pitched Game 2, he would have been on three days' rest here (allowing for the travel day) rather than one day rest after pitching Game 3. It's hard to see how that doesn't make a difference.

Whitey Herzog was a great manager at this time and he would further prove his greatness in St. Louis through the 1980s. But one big part of this series is that Martin made correct decisions, while Herzog did not.

With the lead runs aboard, Rivers singled to right to tie the game and move White up to third. A sacrifice fly by Willie Randolph gave New York the lead. Brett made another big error, allowing the Yankees to get ahead 5-3.

In the bottom of the ninth, Lyle was on the mound. Frank White hit a one-out single. Freddie Patek was up next, with the trio of McRae-Brett-Cowens behind him. The moment was at hand for more drama. Lyle squelched the moment, inducing a ground ball to Nettles, who started a 5-4-3 double play and the Yankees were going to the World Series.

New York would go on to defeat the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games and claim their first World Series title since 1962. For Kansas City, this loss, coming after they had the series lead at 2-1, the Game 5 lead in the ninth inning and played the decisive games at home, would be harder to swallow than even the heartbreak of 1976.

1978

Kansas City was equally balanced between pitching and offense in 1978, ranking third in the American League in each.

Brett missed some time and the future Hall of Fame third baseman played 128 games and only hit nine home runs. He still ended up with a good stat line of .342 on-base percentage/.467 slugging, but the lack of a vintage Brett year is the biggest explanation for why 1978 wasn't quite as strong for the team as a whole.

To make matters worse, the key offensive contributors behind Brett—McRae and Cowens also saw slippage. The offense was picked up by Otis, who had a solid year in centerfield, at .380/.525, hitting 22 home runs and driving in 96 runs. Darrell Porter was a productive catcher, at .358/.444.

Leonard was the horse of the pitching rotation. If you go through enough stats from seasons gone by, you see a lot of reminders of how much the game has changed, particularly with regard to the workloads of pitchers. But there are still numbers that can jump off the screen and Leonard's year in 1978 is one of them. He made *forty* starts—every fourth game without fail. His won-loss record was 21-17—yep, he got the decision in 38 of those 40 starts. Leonard worked 294 innings.

Splitteroff wasn't far behind, making 38 starts and going 19-13. Gura went 16-4, joining Splitteroff as a reliable lefty in Herzog's rotation. Rich Gale, a young righty, went 14-8. The bullpen, which had failed so notably in the decisive game of the 1977 ALCS, was strengthened by the acquisition of closer Al Hrabosky from St. Louis, and "The Mad Hungarian", as the intense Hrabosky was known, saved 20 games with a 2.88 ERA.

Depth was lacking though. The Royals had Colborn to Seattle, costing the rotation another workhorse starter, getting cash and two prospects back in return. The Royals also sold Mayberry to the Toronto Blue Jays in April, and gave the first base gig to Pete LaCock, who ended up with a pedestrian .335/.419 stat line in 1978.

Kansas City started the year 11-2, but in the first part of May they played poorly against AL East powerhouses. A string against the Yankees, Milwaukee Brewers and Red Sox, resulted in a 4-9 stretch and the Oakland A's took the early lead in the AL West.

The Royals answered with a seven-game win streak against weak teams from their own division and pulled back even. They struggled in June, going 13-17, but were still part of four teams (including the California Angels and Texas Rangers) within two games of first place.

A stretch from July 7-25 saw the Royals of 1976 and 1977 resurface, the ones who could compete with the best the AL East had to offer. Kansas City went 13-2 in a run of games against the Brewers, Red Sox and Yankees and built a three-game lead. But in August, the struggles returned and the Royals lost 16 of 29.

The mediocrity of the AL West was saving Herzog's team, and on Labor Day, the Royals and Angels were the only teams over .500, with the top five teams of the AL East all with records good enough to lead the West. There was no unbalanced schedule at this time, so it's not a case of AL West teams just beating up on each other. The American League had the look of a "A League" and a "B League" and the Royals led the B League by a game.

From Labor Day through September 19, Kansas City went 12-3, and in spite of losing four of the six head-to-head games with the Angels, the Royals still managed to build a 5 ½ game lead with a week and a half left. On the Tuesday of the final week, Kansas City clinched a third straight AL West crown.

The record was 92-70, and was now "good" enough for fourth in the AL East. But the playoffs are a whole new ballgame and Kansas City got a third chance to knock off New York.

1978 ALCS

The Yankees came in with a rotation that was out of whack, as they had just won an epic one-game playoff with the Red Sox for the AL East title on Monday and had to open the ALCS in KC on Tuesday.

It was tailor-made for Kansas City to take control, as they sent Leonard to the mound to face a relatively untested Jim Beattie for New York. But the Royals missed their opportunity.

The Yankees got a run in the second when Roy White hit a one-out double, and Bucky Dent—fresh off his heroics at Fenway the previous afternoon—hit a two-out RBI single. The Royals missed a chance in the bottom of the inning, getting two walks with one out, but failing to score.

Reggie Jackson hit a two-out double off Leonard in the third, which was immediately followed by an RBI triple from Nettles. The Yanks got two more in the fifth and chased Leonard, with an RBI single from Chambliss and a two-out RBI single from second baseman Brian Doyle.

Beattie was cruising and only in the sixth did the Royals score, when Brett doubled and came around on a sac fly. It was still a game at 4-1 in the eighth when Jackson came up with two on and two outs and blasted a three-run shot to ice it. New York had their road win, 7-1.

Gura got the ball for the Royals in a must-win Game 2 on Wednesday afternoon. This time it was KC who got off to the fast start. Brett hit a leadoff single in the first, moved to third on a one-out base hit by Otis and scored on a sac fly by Porter.

Kansas City added on in the second. Singles by young Clint Hurdle and Cowens were followed by a Dent error that led to a run and put runners on second and third. Frank White drove in both runs with a base hit. Another single by McRae set up a two-out RBI hit from Patek, handing Gura a 5-0 lead.

Gura was rolling and not until the top of the seventh did New York get to him. Chambliss, Roy White, Dent and Rivers all hit singles, bringing in two runs with one out. With the tying run now at the plate, Herzog pulled Gura for Pattin, who got the final two outs—though Lou Piniella did hit one on the screws with two outs, right at Otis in center.

The lead was still 5-2, and Kansas City immediately responded by putting the game away. LaCock doubled, Hurdle tripled, and Patek went deep. It was 8-2, the teams traded two-spots in the eighth and the final was 10-4. The American League pennant was again down to a best-of-three, this one starting Friday afternoon in the Bronx.

Game 3 of the 1978 ALCS proved to be one of those special games, fraught with storylines. On an individual level, Brett started one of them by homering to open the game. Splitterff was on the mound for the Royals and his reputation against the Yankees in general—and Jackson in particular—had achieved national prominence the previous October. Reggie started to take his revenge with a solo home run in the second.

Brett came up in the third and hit another home run. The Yankees came back with a pair in the fourth, as Jackson drove in Thurman Munson with an RBI single, and then later scored on a single by Pinellia and an error by Patek. With the score 3-2 in the top of the fifth, Brett hit *another* home run. Three home runs in an ALCS game was amazing enough, but Brett had his before the game was even halfway done. Fortunately for New York, no one was on base, so the score was still 3-3.

The story of Reggie's Revenge continued to run parallel to Brett's magnificence, as he delivered a sac fly following singles by Roy White and Munson. The Yankees clung to a 4-3 lead and manager Bob Lemon went to dominant closer Goose Gossage in the seventh inning.

In the eighth, KC got to the Goose. Otis ripped a leadoff double, and Porter singled to tie the game. Patek followed with another single, sending Porter to third, where he scored on a productive ground ball out from Cowens. At 5-4, Kansas City was six outs from getting the series lead.

1978 hadn't been a very good year for Munson, the American League MVP in 1976 and Yankee captain. He came to the plate in the eighth to face Bird, just on in relief of Splittorff, after a one-out single. In the late 1970s, the left-centerfield fence at Yankee Stadium was so deep it was called "Death Valley." Munson crossed the Valley, with a massive two-run shot. Gossage closed the game, and showing that fate can be cruel, it was Brett who made the game's final out.

It was hard to believe New York could lose the pennant when play resumed on Saturday in prime-time. Not after winning a game like they just had, and not with Ron Guidry on the mound. The 25-game winner and Cy Young Award winner was getting his first chance to pitch after having started the one-game playoff with Boston. The Royals needed to be ahead in the series when Guidry got the ball and instead they were facing elimination.

Brett showed it didn't matter who faced him, as he opened Game 4 with a leadoff triple and scored on a single by McRae. For the next seven innings though, Guidry was in control, as he and Leonard battled in a good pitcher's duel. Nettles hit a solo shot in the second to tie it, and Roy White homered in the sixth for a 2-1 lead.

The next Kansas City threat didn't come until the ninth, when Otis led off with a double against Guidry. Gossage was summoned. He promptly struck out Hurdle, meaning Otis could no longer score on productive outs. The Goose then closed the inning, the game and the pennant.

This ALCS might not have gone the full five games, but it was almost as heartbreaking as what happened the previous two years.

1979

The 1979 Kansas City Royals were built on a potent offense and that offense was back to being led by Brett. Healthy the whole season, the future Hall of Famer batted .329, hit 23 home runs, drove in 107 runs, scored 119 runs and finished third in the voting for AL MVP.

Brett wasn't the only contributor. Porter had the best season of his 17-year major league career. He finished with a dazzling .421 on-base percentage, hit 20 home runs and drove in 112 runs. That Porter provided this kind of punch from the catcher's position, yet finished just ninth in the MVP results, is a severe indictment of the voters.

McRae, the steady designated hitter posted a stat line of .351 on-base percentage/.466 slugging percentage. Otis had a stat line of .369/.444. Speedy Willie Wilson stepped into the left field job and his OBP was .351. Even as Cowens had a disappointing year in right field, even as Frank White continued to be a good-field/no-hit at second base, even as the Royals had offensive holes at first base and shortstop, they still scored the second-most runs in the American League.

It was pitching that undid the '79 Royals. The names in the rotation look reliable—Leonard, Splitorff and Gura. Except they all chose 1979 for mediocrity, all finishing with ERAs north of 4. Gale, who won a number of key games in 1978, had a rough year with a 5.65 ERA. Hrabosky was mediocre in the bullpen and no one behind him who worked any significant number of innings was any better. The end result was a staff ERA that finished 10th in the American League.

After opening the season with three straight wins over lowly Toronto, Kansas City's roller-coaster ride of 1979 kicked in. They lost eight of ten. Then found their footing with six straight wins over bad teams in the White Sox and Indians. At the Memorial Day turn, the Royals were a game and a half back of the Angels and part of a four-team race that included the Rangers and Twins.

KC came out of Memorial Day and won series against Baltimore, who ultimately won the American League and Milwaukee, who won 95 games. Then the roller coaster kicked in again. The Royals lost nine of thirteen against the powers of the AL East—Orioles, Red Sox, Brewers and Yankees.

Kansas City responded by then winning eight of ten, including a big road sweep of the Angels., where the Royal bats unloaded for 27 runs in the three games. But on the return trip, California saw that offensive burst and raised it—the Angels hammered Royal pitching for 28 runs in a three-game road sweep of their own.

KC was still tied for first as late as June 28, but a disastrous close to the first half saw them lose 14 of 16 going into the All-Star Break. They were now under .500 at 44-47, ten games back of the Angels and still looking up at the Rangers and Twins in between.

The Royals came out of the break and stopped the bleeding by going 8-5 to close out July. In August, the weather sizzles in Kansas City and during this franchise's halcyon era, the baseball team often did too. 1979 was no exception.

From August 1 to Labor Day, the Royals rolled to a 20-12 record. They actually wiped out the entire deficit and spent one day in first place. By the conclusion of the holiday weekend, KC was 72-64, 1 ½ back of California with Minnesota three games off the pace. Texas had faded, so the stretch drive would be a three-team race.

Kansas City and Minnesota played two series in the first couple weeks of September and the Royals lost two of three both times. But the Twins struggled in games not against KC and the Royals could only split two series with the lowly Mariners. It was a missed opportunity for Kansas City, but they were still within three games and they would play the Angels seven times in the final two weeks.

California came to Kansas City to begin the penultimate week. It was time for a veteran team to assert itself against a plucky challenger. In Monday's opener, that's exactly what happened. Porter and Cowens each drove in four runs, leading a 16-4 rout.

But the next night, Gale could only get one out, allowed four runs in the first and KC lost 6-4. They bounced back on Wednesday, with Porter driving in three more runs and getting a 6-4 win. In the finale, the pitching failed one more time. In a game tied 2-2 in the seventh, the Angels unloaded off starter Craig Chamberlain and the rest of the bullpen. The final was 11-6.

The Royals went out west and won a weekend series in Oakland to keep their hopes alive as the final week started in Anaheim. And in Monday's opener, that KC offense quickly hit Nolan Ryan for three first-inning runs. But the bats, having carried the team this far, ran out of steam. Kansas City ultimately lost that series opener 4-3 and then went quietly on Tuesday in a 4-1 loss. The race was over—not called or projected, but mathematically finished. Kansas City finished the season 85-77.

There was offseason fallout. Herzog was fired and Jim Frey became the new manager. Cowens, who had been declining since his breakout year of 1977, was traded to the Angels and KC got a power-hitting first baseman, Wille Mays Aikens, in return. The Royals moved on from Patek at short and went to young U.L. Washington. Hrabosky was allowed to move on and Kansas City promoted a promising submarine-style pitcher in Dan Quisenberry to the closer's role. An organization hungry to get to the World Series wasn't standing pat.

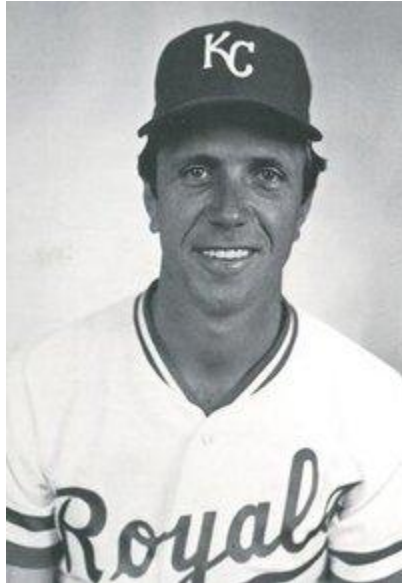
1980

Infused with new talent, the Royals were poised for a comeback year. Aikens boosted the offense, with a .356 on-base percentage, hitting 20 home runs and finishing with 98 RBI. The Royals got a good year from Wilson, with his .357 OPB. Hurdle was steady in right, a .349 OBP/.458 slugging percentage. Darrell Porter had a .354 OBP from behind the plate.

But the Royals got down years from mainstays, notably Frank White and Amos Otis. And while Hal McRae had a good year, at .342/.483, it wasn't what the DH had produced at his peak.

In the end though, Kansas City finished a solid fourth in the AL in runs scored because one man stepped in a big way.

That man was George Brett. In the best year of his Hall of Fame career, Brett made a run at batting .400, trying to become the first player to do so since Ted Williams did it for the Boston Red Sox in 1941. Brett ended up at .390, with an on-base percentage of .454 and his slugging percentage soaring at .664. He hit 24 home runs and finished with 118 RBIs. Brett was an easy choice for American League MVP.



Gura had his best year on the mound, and the lefty won 18 games with a 2.95 ERA. Leonard churned out 20 wins and 280-plus innings, with an ERA of 3.70. Splittorff started to fade a bit after his strong years in the 1976-78 run, but with 14 wins and a 4.15 ERA, the lefty was still steady. Gale was a young arm that stepped up, winning 13 games, helping to fill out the rotation.

The bullpen lacked quality depth, but the Royals now had a bona fide closer, the lack of which had hurt them in previous Octobers. Quisenberry saved 33 games, won 12 more and finished with a 3.09 ERA. Pattin helped fill out the pen, while Renie Martin shuttled back and forth between the pen and making spot starts.

Kansas City started off the season fairly ho-hum, at 16-14 against mostly AL East competition. They picked up the pace going into Memorial Day, winning five of six games against the Angels. It helped stick California into a 7 ½ game hole and they never recovered. By the holiday, the Royals had a 2 ½ game lead on the White Sox, with the Rangers, Mariners and A's, the latter now managed by Billy Martin—all close in the rearview mirror.

The start of June saw KC start to get some separation. After losing the opener of a home series with the Yankees, Kansas City ripped off a 10-2 stretch that included a four-game sweep in Texas. The lead in the AL West grew to seven games, and the rest of the division was starting to struggle. Even though Kansas City slowed down and lost 11 of 21 going into the All-Star break, they actually widened their lead during that stretch, holding an 8 ½ game cushion at the midway point, the division's only team over .500.

Kansas City didn't let anyone off the mat in the second half. They went 15-6 out of the break playing a schedule that had a regular dose of excellent AL East teams in the Yankees, Orioles and Red Sox. The Royals took three of four from the White Sox, and then in August, Kansas City tore off a 23-7 stretch that put the division to bed.

The real focal point of Kansas City in August—and all of baseball—was Brett's pursuit of .400, and the high point came in a series at Milwaukee. Over a three-game set, Brett went 8-for-12,

with one night that bordered on magical, as he went 5-for-5 and lifted his average to .407. At that point, on August 26, it looked like he might do it.

Brett and the Royals both cooled, with the third baseman finishing at .390, and the team going 12-19 through September and the handful of early October games. They still finished with a record of 97-65, and won the AL West by fourteen games over the A's.

Kansas City had beaten one old "friend" in Martin. Now it was time to take care of business against another, with their fourth ALCS battle against New York, coming off a 103-win season, at hand.

1980 ALCS

The rotation that determined home field had Kansas City hosting the first two games, with the balance of the series in the Bronx.

The opening of the series was delayed one day by rain, so Game 1 was in the afternoon, rather than prime-time. The Yankees threw Guidry, while the Royals countered with Gura.

Willie Randolph doubled to lead off the game, but Gura escaped the inning. One inning later though, Rick Cerone and Lou Piniella hit back-to-back home runs. In a quick 2-0 hole, were Royal fans thinking "here we go again?"

If so, their team rallied quickly. Otis singled and Wathan drew a walk to start the bottom of the inning. With two outs, a wild pitch moved them up and Frank White tied the game with a double. In the third, with Brett aboard and two outs, Otis hit a ground-rule double and Aikens knocked both runners in with a single.

Gura was settled in and in the seventh, a Brett home run off Yankee reliever Ron Davis gave some insurance and a 5-2 lead. Gura finished the game, scattering ten hits and Kansas City tacked on a couple more runs in a 7-2 win.

Kansas City came back with Leonard the following night. New York curiously did not turn to 22-game winner Tommy John, who had won big postseason games for the Los Angeles Dodgers in both 1977 and 1978. It's not that Rudy May was a bad choice—he won 15 games and had pitched the AL East clincher with two days left in the season, but John was clearly the battle-toughened veteran.

The Royals got to May in the third. With one out, after Porter and White had singled, Wilson tripled down the right field line. U.L. Washington followed with a double and it was 3-0.

May settled in though and the Royals never threatened again. Graig Nettles hit an inside-the-park home run in the fifth to get New York on the board. That same inning, Leonard inexplicably walked light-hitting Bobby Brown with two outs and Randolph picked up Brown with an RBI double.

The game stayed 3-2 into the eighth, when the Kansas City defense saved the game. Randolph hit a one-out single. With two outs, Bob Watson doubled to left. Wilson got the ball and fired to Brett, who completed the relay and nailed the speedy Randolph at the plate.

In the ninth, Reggie Jackson singled with one out. Kansas City went to Quisenberry. Cerone hit a one-out single. Then a ground ball off the bat of Nettles went to White at second base, who started a 4-6-3 double play. Kansas City had the game 3-2, and the series two games to none.

The rain that started the series eliminated the travel day off, so the teams resumed on Friday night in the Bronx, with John on the mound against Splittorff. The game was scoreless through four innings, with the one threat—Kansas City in the second inning—being wiped out on a double play ball off the bat of Clint Hurdle.



White homered in the fifth, but the Yankees countered in the bottom of the sixth. Reggie Jackson hit a one-out double to start a rally.

Jim Frey quickly went to closer Quisenberry—while closers pitched more innings than is the case today, the sixth inning was still a little extreme. The move didn't work, albeit not due to fault from Quisenberry. An infield hit and an error by White tied the game, then a Cerone single gave New York a 2-1 lead.

In the top of the seventh, with two outs, Wilson doubled.

Another closer arrived early, with Goose Gossage coming in. Washington beat out an infield hit. Brett was at the plate. Gossage fired a pitch clocked at 98 mph. Brett simply unloaded, blasting a towering shot into the third deck of the old Stadium. The crowd was in stunned silence and the Royals led 4-2.

New York still had a rally left in them. Watson tripled to start the eighth, then Jackson and Gamble walked. Cerone ripped a line drive. But, as if to demonstrate that Kansas City's time had come, Washington speared the line drive at short and quickly doubled off Jackson at second base. The threat was over and the Yankees did not mount another.

White was named ALCS MVP. At long last, Kansas City was going to the World Series.

1980 WORLD SERIES

Homefield advantage for the World Series belonged to Philadelphia, as the National League was on the right side of the rotation system this year. It would also be the first all-artificial turf World Series.

Kansas City's sweep meant their rotation was fresh, with Leonard and Gura set to go for the first two games. Philadelphia played a draining NLCS with the Houston Astros where the last four games went extra innings, and they sent lightly regarded Bob Walk to the mound.

The Royals took advantage early as Otis hit a two-run homer and Aikens hit another as Kansas City built a 4-0 lead. Aikens would not have a long career in baseball, but he was a tough out in this series, as this early home run indicated.

The Phils' comeback capacity was already becoming a national story though, thanks to the NLCS, and they did it again in Game 1. In the bottom of the third, Larry Bowa singled with one out, stole second and scored on a double from Bob Boone. Lonnie Smith drove in Boone and the lead was quickly cut in half. Even though Smith was out trying to stretch a hit into a double, the rally continued. Pete Rose was hit by a pitch, Mike Schmidt drew a walk and Bake McBride homered to right. Philadelphia was suddenly ahead 5-4.

Leonard couldn't recover and he gave way early to Renie Martin. The Phillies added runs in the fourth, on a two-out RBI double from Boone, and in the fifth, McBride singled and eventually came around on a sac fly from Garry Maddox.

Kansas City tried to get back in it—Brett doubled and Aikens homered again to cut the lead to 7-6, but Philadelphia closer Tug McGraw came on and closed the door on the Game 1 win.

It was the battle of lefthanders for Game 2, as the Phils sent their ace, Steve Carlton to the mound, with his nasty slider. The Royals countered with Gura. Both pitchers controlled the game early, before Trillo delivered a key hit that gave the Phils a 2-0 lead in the fifth.

What Trillo, the MVP of the NLCS had given with his bat, he quickly gave back with his glove. An error on a ball hit by Aikens created an unearned run for KC. In the seventh, the Royals got a bases-loaded double from Otis, scored three times and turned the game over to Quisenberry.

The closer would be no mystery to Philadelphia throughout this series though, and consecutive doubles from McBride and Schmidt keyed a four-run eighth. The game ended 6-4 and Philly had held serve at the Vet.

One of the more amusing stories in this series was that Brett was suffering from a case of hemorrhoids and it was wondered if he would be able to play. He had to leave in the sixth inning of Game 2 due to the pain. The third baseman said he would be in the lineup and joined the national chorus of jokes by saying "All my troubles are behind me."

Brett proved it with a home run in the first inning of Game 3 in Royals Stadium, but Philadelphia immediately answered in the second inning with singles from Trillo and Bowa, and Lonnie Smith ultimately tying the game with an RBI groundout.

The punch-counterpunch dynamic stayed all the way through the game. Aikens tripled and scored in the fifth to put the Royals up 2-1. Schmidt homered to lead off the fifth and tie it. Otis hit a solo home in the seventh. Bowa singled with one out in the eighth, and with two outs, stole second and scored on a base hit by Rose. The game went to extra innings tied 3-3.

Washington led off the home half of the tenth inning with a single off McGraw. Willie Wilson drew a walk, but Washington was quickly wiped out trying to steal third. The inning was going to get

away from Kansas City when Wilson stole second with two outs. Aikens singled to score the winning run and this time the rules prevented the Phils from immediately tying it back up.

The sun splashed over Kansas City for Game 4, as prior to 1985, Games 4 & 5 were day games on Saturday/Sunday, in the early afternoon and late afternoon respectively. For Royal fans, the start to Game 4 added to the sunshine.

Philadelphia starter Larry Christenson had nothing and only got one out, after Wilson singled to start the bottom of the first. Brett tripled and Aikens homered for a 3-0 lead. Hal McRae and Otis hit back-to-back doubles and Kansas City had staked Leonard to a 4-0 lead.

One pattern didn't stop, it was the inability of Royal pitchers to have a shutdown inning Philadelphia got a run back in the second. A throwing error on a double play attempt moved Trillo to scoring position and Bowa singled him in with two outs. But Aikens homered *again* in the bottom of the second and Leonard settled in.

To the credit of Phillies' long reliever Dickie Noles, the game stayed at 5-1 into the seventh. The Phils picked up a run in the seventh, when Trillo doubled and came around on a sac fly from Boone. In the eighth, Rose doubled and Quisenberry came in for Leonard. The run scored thanks to productive outs, but Quisenberry closed the door on the 5-3 win without further incident. It set the stage for a pivotal Game 5 on Sunday.

Marty Bystrom pitched for Philadelphia, while Gura followed Leonard in taking the ball on short rest. The Royals missed a chance in the third inning, when they had runners on first and second, no outs and the top of the order up. But Wilson, White and Brett couldn't get the job done. In the top of the fourth, a defensive miscue by Kansas City was costly—Aikens made an error at first and Schmidt hit a two-run shot the other way for a 2-0 Philly lead.

The Royals manufactured a run in the fifth, with singles from Washington and Wilson, a sac bunt from White and an RBI groundout from Brett. KC tied it an inning later the easy way—a home run from Otis. Then they took the lead when Hurdle and Porter singled and Washington hit a sac fly. But another Kansas City mistake came when Wilson doubled to right and Porter was thrown out at the plate.

Quisenberry came on early, with one out in the seventh inning. Schmidt beat out an infield hit, and then Del Unser ripped a double into the right field corner that tied the game. He was bunted over to third. With two outs, Trillo then beat out an infield hit. With only one ball hit into the outfield, the Phils had scored two runs and taken a 4-3 lead.

McGraw was on for the save and he made sure it got interesting. He went walk/out/walk/out/walk, to give Jose Cardenal a chance to be a hero for Kansas City. McGraw struck him out and the Phils were going home with two chances to clinch the World Series.

Game 6 shaped up as Philadelphia's best shot—Carlton was pitching on full rest against Gale, a decent starter, but certainly not in Carlton's class. The Royals would turn to Leonard in Game 7

and could probably squeeze a couple innings out of Gura if they needed. The Phillies had to see Tuesday night as their moment.

Carlton was razor sharp and for seven innings, the Royals never seriously threatened scoring. Schmidt delivered a two-run single in the third for the game's first runs. In the fifth, Smith doubled and scored on successive productive outs. In the sixth, with Gale out and lefty Splitorff in, Bowa doubled and scored on a single from Boone.

Kansas City started to make headway in the eighth. Wathan walked and Cardenal singled. Carlton was removed for McGraw. White fouled out, but Wilson walked to load the bases and Washington picked up the first KC run with a sac fly. In a key moment, Brett singled, but Cardenal had to stop at third. Consequently, McGraw was able to get McRae and keep the game 4-1.

In the top of the ninth, Aikens worked a walk with one out. Wathan singled, ensuring Kansas City had two chances with the tying run at the plate. Cardenal singled. The security police were lined up around Veterans Stadium on horses to keep the crowd from celebrating. Was it really possible that Kansas City would do the work for Philly's finest?

White was at the plate and he popped up behind home plate. Boone moved behind it. The ball popped out of his mitt. This is normally the kind of moment that haunts a franchise. But not when an alert player like Rose in effect "backs up" his catcher. Rose was near the play and he snagged the ball before it hit the ground. McGraw struck out Wilson, the record 12th strikeout for the Royal leadoff hitter and the Phillies were champions.

1980 was a breakthrough year. Kansas City had finally tasted World Series play. But there was still one more step left to take.

1981

1981 was a rough year for both the Royals and for baseball as a whole. There was a players' strike in mid-season. The good news for Kansas City was that it created a temporary expansion of the playoff system that allowed a subpar Royals team to deliver another postseason appearance.

Kansas City's offensive production fell hard in the odd 1981 MLB season, ranking 12th in the American League in runs scored. Brett still produced, with a stat line of .361 on-base percentage/.484 slugging percentage. Aikens hit 17 home runs in the shortened year and Wilson swiped 34 bases. Otherwise, offense was hard to come by.

The Royals had parted ways with Porter, who left via free agency, and Wathan did not swing the bat well as the permanent replacement. White, Otis and McRae, mainstays all struggled at the plate in 1981.

Pitching was decent, but still middle of the pack, so it wasn't enough to compensate for the lack of runs. Leonard still piled up 201 innings in a season that was a little over one hundred games

and posted a 2.99 ERA. Gura was 11-8 and a 2.72 ERA. Gale and Splitterff each struggled in 1981 and some of the slack was picked up when Mike Jones stepped in and went 6-3 with a 3.21 ERA.

The strength of the staff was in the bullpen, with Quisenberry saving 18 games with a 1.73 ERA and Renie Martin posting a 2.77 ERA. Still, while the pitching was good enough to win, it had a heavy load to carry with the struggling offense.

Kansas City lost 10 of their first 13 games, were ten games back of the streaking Oakland A's by April 24 and never got the deficit into single digits when the players went on strike on June 12. When play resumed in August, the Royals got a big break.

Commissioner Bowie Kuhn decided to wipe the slate clean, and declared those teams that led their divisions at the strike to be "first-half winners." Everyone would start fresh, and the "second-half winners" would then advance to play the first-half winner in the Division Series, a concept heretofore unheard of in major league baseball.

Furthermore, another twist on the rule worked even better for Kansas City, and the 22 other teams that had not led their divisions at the strike. Even if the first-half winner also won the second-half, there would still be a Division Series—in that case, the second-place team in the second half would advance, with the only penalty being the loss of one home game in the best-of-five Division Series round.

Essentially, Oakland, whose great starting rotation had them in command of the AL West, had nothing to play for in the second half.

The Royals split their first ten games out of the strike. On August 29, after a 4-3 loss at lowly Toronto, KC fired Jim Frey. Given that Frey was 1-for-1 in winning pennants as KC manager, it might look premature. But the replacement was even better. Dick Howser had managed the Yankees in 1980 before the ALCS loss to the Royals led to his firing. Kansas City gave that already-sweet win in the '80 ALCS even sweeter by hiring Howser for themselves.

Under the guidance of Howser, the Royals went 20-13 the rest of the way and essentially ran away with the second-half title. The White Sox, who had been competitive in the first half, collapsed. So did the Angels. Oakland was in the mix, but the only team that mattered was the Rangers. Kansas City finished with a 4 ½ game margin on Texas. The key was an 8-1 stretch in early September that started at home with the Angels and then went through Oakland and California.

Kansas City went on to the Division Series in spite of having an overall 50-53 record, marking them the only sub-.500 team to ever qualify for the MLB playoffs until another strange year, the pandemic season of 2020 where the postseason expanded to 16 teams.

1981 ALDS

The Division Series format would be best-of-five. Second-half winners hosted the first two games with first-half winners getting the balance of the series at home. The Royals hosted the A's for Game 1 on a Tuesday afternoon in Kansas City. Leonard faced off with Oakland's young Mike Norris.

Kansas City got the first threat of Game 1, loading the bases with one out. Norris, pitching like a postseason veteran, got White and Brett, to escape unscathed. Oakland quickly made KC pay. Dwayne Murphy drew a one-out walk in the fourth, and then Brett committed a two-out error. Oakland third baseman Wayne Gross ripped a three-run blast and the A's had a 3-0 lead.

Norris was only challenged one more time, when Kansas City loaded the bases with none out in the fifth. Norris got Wilson to pop up, and then a White line drive went right at Gross, who turned it into a double play. Murphy gave Oakland some insurance in the eighth with a solo home run.

With other Division Series involving big-market teams like the Yankees, Dodgers and Phillies, the A's and Royals got stuck playing weekday afternoon games. Kansas City sent Jones to the mound on Wednesday afternoon to face Oakland's Steve McCatty.

Murphy again got Oakland going, this time right away in the first, with a one-out single. He scored on a double by DH Cliff Johnson. The inning might have been bigger, but Johnson mysteriously only advanced one base on a subsequent double, and Kansas City was only behind 1-0.

It looked like Oakland's failure to make the first inning bigger would hurt them. Both pitchers settled in, and with two outs in the fifth, the Royals tied it on successive singles from Wathan, Washington and Wilson.

But Murphy once again came through, this time in the eighth inning for Oakland. He singled to lead off, was bunted up by Johnson and scored on a double by Tony Armas. McCatty delivered a complete-game six-hitter and Oakland had come into KC's house and taken the first two games.

After a travel day, Game 3 in Oakland was a 2:10 PM local start, set up that way so what was an early evening start could swing into a prime-time game in the Bronx. Kansas City turned to Gura to try and keep the season alive. Oakland countered with Rick Langford, who'd pitched as well all year as Norris and McCatty. And Langford continued the trend of great A's starting pitching.

The A's gave Langford a quick run when Rickey Henderson drew a walk, stole second with two outs and scored on a single by Armas. In the third, Henderson singled and again took off for second—this time he would have been out...but for an error by Washington at short that kept Henderson on the basepaths. Wathan dropped a foul-ball out on Murphy. Then Murphy beat out in an infield hit, and Henderson kept on chugging all the way home.

It was 2-0 and Kansas City did not look like the experienced veteran team. Oakland loaded the bases with no outs, but consecutive strikeouts by the A's weak bottom of the order forced Martin to try something improbable—Murphy took off on a steal of home, but it didn't work. The Royals weren't playing well, but they were breathing.

White led off the KC fourth with a single. Aikens singled to right. White took third on the hit and scored on an RBI grounder by Otis. But as quickly as Kansas City got on the board, Oakland had an answer, and once again Murphy was in the middle of it.

It began with a solo home run by Dave McKay. With two outs, Henderson again singled and Murphy slashed an RBI double and it was 4-1.

Kansas City didn't go quietly—they got four singles in the top of the fifth, but the combination of Hurdle being picked off, runners moving up just one base at a time and a couple infield pop outs, meant no runs. In the top of the eighth, the Royals put two on with one out. Martin summoned Tom Underwood in relief of Langford, and he struck out the Aikens who represented the tying run. Martin then turned to Dave Beard to get Otis.

That was the last shot for the Royals. Beard slammed the door in the ninth and for the first time since 1975, the A's were AL West champs. Oakland ended up losing the ALCS to New York. As for Kansas City, they were as happy as the rest of major league baseball was to put 1981 in the rearview mirror.

1982

The Royals got back to playing the kind of baseball their fans had become accustomed to in 1982. They were a good team and they contended to the final weekend, although this edition came up just short.



An offense that ranked fourth in the American League in runs scored was the engine behind the success. McRae hit 27 homers, drove in 133 runs and finished fourth in the AL MVP voting. Wilson stole 37 bags and won the batting title with a .332 average.

Frank White slugged .469 by using the alleys of Royals Stadium, to the tune of 45 doubles. Brett rolled on at third base, with an on-base percentage of .378 and a slugging percentage of .505. And on this fast team, even the catcher could run—Wathan stole 36 bases.

It was pitching that caused the '82 Royals to come up a bit short. Kansas City sought to address this area in the offseason when they traded four players to San Francisco in exchange for veteran lefty Vida Blue. The deal worked out—Blue won 13 games with a 3.78 ERA and none of the players dealt made a major impact. But Blue was the best they had and those numbers for an ace weren't going to cut it.

Gura won 18 games, but his ERA was a touch over 4. The same went for Splitorff. Leonard was only able to make 21 starts and he ended with a 5.10 ERA. Gura, Splitorff and Leonard had all been instrumental on this franchise's best teams. Now they were sliding to mediocrity and no one else was stepping up.

Quisenberry continued to be a reliable closer, one of the game's best and the submarine-style pitcher saved 35 games and logged 136 innings. Mike Armstrong also put on a lot of mileage for a reliever, with 112 innings with a 3.12 ERA. Veterans Don Hood and Bill Castro were respectable. But the bullpen shortcomings couldn't cover for the rotation and the KC staff ERA ranked 10th in the American League.

The first couple months of the season were up and down. The Royals swept the Brewers, the eventual American League pennant winner and scored 29 runs in the three games. Kansas City was also swept by a subpar Toronto team, scoring five runs in those three games. These two contrasts captured the spring pretty well. Kansas City was 24-21 on Memorial Day. They were 5 ½ games out of first place. California was in first, Chicago was in second and KC pulled in third as we headed into early summer.

A three-game series at home with the White Sox offered a chance to get some momentum. The Royals took advantage. They won the opener 11-4 behind three hits apiece from Wilson and Wathan in the top two spots of the batting order. Kansas City won the second game 4-3 behind a nice outing from Blue and three shutout innings from Quisenberry to close it.

In a wild finale, they led 5-4 in the ninth before Quisenberry gave up the tying run, and then the lead run in the 10th. Down to their last out in the bottom of the tenth, Aikens worked a walk and then scored on a triple from White. Kansas City broke the 6-6 tie in the 11th on consecutive singles from Wathan, Brett and Otis. The sweep was complete and it kickstarted an eight-game winning streak in June.

But the ups and downs continued. Kansas City went west and lost three of four to the Angels. In early July they bounced back by sweeping California when the Halos made the return trip, behind brilliant starts from Blue, Gura and Bud Black. Kansas City took the lead in the AL West by as many as three games. But then they slid again and lost three straight to Milwaukee to go into the All-Star break.

We had a jam-packed race in the AL West. The Angels, Royals and White Sox were all tied in the loss column. The surprising Seattle Mariners were only four games back.

Kansas City often heated up in the late summer during this era of success and 1982 was no different. They went 12-4 during a stretch of games that started in late July. A schedule that was jam-packed in August saw the Royals play 32 games and win 21.

Within that stretch KC went 6-1 against Chicago, pushing the White Sox into third and 5 ½ games out on Labor Day. Seattle faded. The Royals led the Angels by two games as we headed into the stretch.

The first two weeks of September were so-so and California pulled even. The penultimate week of the season opened with the Royals in Anaheim for a three-game set.

Gura got the ball for Monday's opener and he pitched well. But the bats went silent, going 1-for-8 with runners in scoring position and KC lost 3-2. The offense continued to stay quiet on Tuesday and even though Leonard was terrific, the game was tied 1-1 in the ninth. Quisenberry came on and gave up the winning run. The trend finally broke on Wednesday's finale and the KC bats put up five runs. But Blue was chased in the second inning and they still lost 8-5.

The devastating sweep left Kansas City 3 ½ games back with a week to play. They nudged the lead down to 2 ½ by the time Oakland, who collapsed hard in 1982, came to town for a four-game set to end the regular season.

There was no margin for error. Aikens homered twice on Thursday, drove in seven runs and led the way to an 11-4 win. With the Angels idle, the Royals were within two games.

More offensive fireworks came on Friday night. McRae homered and drove in five runs. Aikens homered again. KC won 12-7, but California held serve. Still two games out and only two games to play.

In an early Saturday afternoon start, the Royals were down 4-3 in the eighth. Then Aikens singled. White dropped a bunt and reached on an error. Another bunt moved the runners to second and third. A Wathan single tied the game, a sac fly brought in the lead run and Kansas City won 5-4. They had hope when the Angels took the field out west later that afternoon. But by nightfall, California had clinched.

It was a good season by any reasonable measure—the 90-72 record was fourth-best in the American League and would be a playoff season by the standards of today. But the Royals of this era were used to playing in October. And the shortcomings did indicate that changes needed to be made.

1983

The 1983 Kansas City Royals were the outlier in this otherwise outstanding era, finishing under .500 and unable to make a serious run at the division crown.

Kansas City's offense fell hard. Brett, posted his numbers—stat line of .385 on-base percentage/.563 slugging percentage, but missed time with injuries. The same was true with Aikens, who hit 23 home runs. The only player who had a strong season and was regularly in the lineup was McRae, whose stat line clocked in at .372/.462.

Otherwise, the lineup was marked with disappointments. Wilson saw his production fall off. He still stole 59 bases, but wasn't on base enough for it to be impactful. White and Washington had bad years at the middle infield spots. So did Pat Sheridan in the outfield.

The biggest falloff though was the effective end of the career of Amos Otis. His numbers drastically tailed off. Otis left KC after this season and only played one more year in the majors before handing it up.

All told, the offense ranked 12th in a 14-team American League for runs scored. And the pitching wasn't a whole lot better.

Gura was the only starter to make at least thirty starts and the veteran lefty finished with an ERA of 4.90. Bud Black and Splitorff were each respectable in a left-handed heavy rotation. But they only combined to make 51 starts and the back end of the rotation had absolutely no one who was consistent.

You simply couldn't win with a rotation this ransacked with inconsistency. So Quisenberry's 45 saves and 1.94 ERA were terrific for him individually, but they weren't going to impact a staff ERA on its way to ninth in the AL.

The season didn't start badly. Kansas City won 9 of 15 against competitive teams from the AL East. They continued to play mostly outside their division through May and the second month of the season was a little shakier. On Memorial Day the Royals were playing .500 ball at 20-20.

The good news for KC in 1983 was that no one else was really coming out strong. They were in second place as the calendar flipped to early summer and within 4 ½ games of a packed divisional race.

Kansas City's schedule shifted to playing AL West rivals through June and early July and the results didn't change much. By the All-Star break, the Royals were 37-36 and still within 4 ½ games. Although now they were in fourth place, with Texas, California and Chicago ahead of them.

A general ho-hum pattern of baseball was interrupted by some excitement in...where else, but Yankee Stadium. On July 24, the Royals trailed the Yanks 4-3 with two outs in the top of the ninth. Brett came to the plate with a man aboard. He homered.

Billy Martin was back in New York for one of his many managerial stints here and was sitting on a hole card. Martin had noticed that the pine tar on Brett's bat went slightly past the legal limit. The Yankee manager chose now to point it out to the umpires. They ruled Brett out. The subsequent imagery of a furious and red-faced Brett storming out of the dugout and needing to be restrained remains a hilariously iconic image of the incident.

And the drama wasn't done. The Royals filed a protest. American League president Lee MacPhail ruled that while Brett indeed violated the rules, the punishment did not fit the crime. He restored the home run and ordered the teams to complete play on Thursday, August 18, a mutual off-day. Kansas City ended up winning 5-4.

August 18 marked a key benchmark date in the pennant race for other reasons. What both divisions had in common was that one team was starting to pick up steam. The Orioles were

humming in the East. And closer to home, the White Sox had a six-game lead over the Royals. The Royals would begin a stretch of games against both division leaders the very next night. Kansas City had to make a move now or this season would get away

The Royals went to Baltimore for a weekend series. They led 4-0 in the first game of a Friday doubleheader, but Quisenberry blew the lead and lost 5-4. In the nightcap and again on Saturday afternoon, the offense mailed it in. Ten hits and two runs in both games combined led to two more losses. Finally, McRae gave the team a boost on Sunday with three hits, a home run and four RBI to lead an 8-3 win.

But the urgency of the coming home series with Chicago was heightened even further. And the bats retreated into silence again, wasting a good Monday outing from Splittorff in a 3-1 loss. White stepped up on Tuesday with two hits and 3 RBI to lead the way to a 10-2 win. But in the Wednesday night finale, Quisenberry came on in a 3-3 game and gave up the lead run.

By the time this stretch was over, Kansas City was under .500 and nine games back. They played both teams in two-game sets right after this and lost all four games. In a division where everyone except the White Sox was fading, KC still finished the season in second place. But the final record was 79-83 and they were twenty games behind the leader.

1984

After the rough season of 1983, the Royals started getting some new pieces. The 1984 edition still wasn't one of the stronger teams in this era. The season looked lost several times and the final record was a mediocre 84-78. But in a year where the AL West was weak, the Royals put together a September surge that won them a division title.

Kansas City made two good pickups in power-hitting first baseman Steve Balboni from the Yankees and relief pitcher Joe Beckwith from the Dodgers. K.C. only gave up minor leaguers that never panned out. Balboni hit 28 home runs and had a nice career run in Kansas City. Beckwith logged 100 innings out of the pen and posted a 3.40 ERA.

Other young players included catcher Don Slaught and shortstop Onix Conception, though neither were very productive. Nor was right fielder Pat Sheridan. Two veterans, McRae and Frank White declined, but still managed to contribute something. White hit 17 home runs. McRae finished with a .363 on-base percentage.

Darryl Motley hit 15 home runs from the left field spot, while Wilson batted over .300 and stole 47 bases. Ultimately though, the Royals offense ranked just 11th in the American League in runs scored because of a relatively bad year from Brett.

The word "relatively" has to be emphasized. Brett finished with an on-base percentage of .344 and a slugging percentage of .459, which is hardly an embarrassment. But after years of production at Hall of Fame levels, this was a dropoff and he also only played 104 games due to a series of nagging injuries.

Pitching was better than the hitting, although the Royals were still only in the middle of the league in ERA. Black became the staff ace, winning 17 games with a 3.12 ERA. Black's 35 starts made him the only pitcher to go to the post 30-plus times as Dick Howser kept fishing for a combination that would work.

Mark Gubicza was a young arm on the rise and though he only finished 10-14, he posted a respectable 4.05 ERA in 29 starts. Gura was on the decline and the 36-year-old lefty struggled to a 5.18 ERA. Charlie Leibrandt, a finesse lefty in the Gura mold, although younger, was able to win 11 games with a 3.63 ERA.

Two young arms with bright futures ahead of them also got their share of work. Danny Jackson made 11 starts with a 4.26 ERA. And the man who would be a World Series hero by 1985, 20-year-old Bret Saberhagen made 18 starts along with a lot of relief work. He finished 10-11 and the ERA was a solid 3.48.



The entire pitching staff ultimately pointed to Quisenberry. One of the top relievers in baseball in the early 1980s, Quisenberry finished in the top three of the Cy Young voting four straight years, though he never won it.

This year he saved 44 games, at a time when every closer in baseball didn't routinely rack up huge save numbers. He finished second in the Cy Young race to another closer, Detroit's Willie Hernandez. And with Hernandez winning the MVP, Quisenberry finished third in that race.

The Royals stumbled right away out of the gate, starting 5-15. They played nine games against the two best teams in the AL East, Detroit and Toronto and lost eight of them. Kansas City was able to stop the bleeding, but by Memorial Day the record was still just 18-24. The good news was that .500 was good enough to lead the AL West, so they were only three games back.

A 6-2 stretch against Minnesota and Seattle had KC knocking on the door of the break-even mark, but they promptly lost nine of eleven to give the ground back and by June 20 they were in last place and 6 ½ games out. Once again, Howser steadied the ship and by the All-Star break the Royals had chipped back to a record of 39-43 and were within four games of first in a division where no one had any separation.

If anyone thought a rejuvenated KC team would come out of the All-Star break, their illusions were quickly shattered. The Royals went to Yankee Stadium for a five-game series and got swept, scoring just six runs in the process. Kansas City lost three of four to Cleveland. The season hit its nadir with a record of 40-51 and an eight-game deficit in the AL West.

Oddly, it was games against the far superior AL East that turned the season around. The Royals went on a 9-3 run against the other division, including a four-game sweep of Toronto where they scored 28 runs. In early August, Kansas City went to Detroit, who was having one of the great

seasons of the modern era. The Royals had another offensive explosion, scoring 27 runs in four games in a series sweep.

The White Sox were the defending divisional champs, but were starting to fade as the stretch drive approached. The Royals facilitated that fade, winning four of six games against their rival. By the time Labor Day arrived, Kansas City had reached the .500 mark at 68-68. They were in second place, just a game back of Minnesota. The Angels were only a game and a half out. These three teams would chase the watered-down AL West crown to the end.

KC would begin a run of head-to-head battles with a three-game home series against Minnesota on Labor Day. It didn't start well, when the Royals only mustered five hits in a 4-1 loss. But Gubicza and Leibrandt answered the bell with strong outings of eight-plus innings the next two games. Quisenberry closed out a pair of 4-1 wins for the Royals. When Kansas City followed that up with a weekend series sweep of Seattle, they were in first place.

The margin was still only a single game and KC now made the return trip to the Twin Cities the following week. Gubicza pitched the opener and only trailed 3-2 in the eighth inning before he finally cracked and Minnesota broke the game open. A similar pattern happened the next night. Leibrandt pitched well, trailing 1-0 in the seventh, but then came apart as the Twins took their revenge on the two pitchers who had beaten them in Kansas City.

In the series finale, Black did what an ace does—he pitched eight strong innings. The game was tied 2-2 in the ninth. Concepcion and Wilson both singled, were bunted over and Jorge Orta picked up the winning run with a sac fly. Kansas City then traveled to Seattle for the weekend and won two of three. The week ended with the Royals and Twins tied for first and the Angels a half-game back. There were two weeks to go.

Now it was time to play California, and Kansas City stayed out west for a four-game series. The offense unloaded in the first two games, with six home runs by six different players and the combined score was 20-1. That same offense went quiet in the next two games. They got eleven hits combined and lost a 4-3 game in extra innings and were shut out 2-0 in the series finale. The Royals returned home to take a weekend series from the A's. K.C. entered the final week still tied with Minnesota, and California a game and a half back.

For the fourth straight week, the Royals opened with a series against a fellow contender. The only thing that could have made this stretch run schedule any better was if these games were on the weekend. A Monday doubleheader began a four-game set and Saberhagen was brilliant in the opener, tossing a three-hitter in a 4-0 win. The bats came through in the nightcap. Brett drove in three runs and Motley unleashed, with a grand slam and six RBIs in a 12-4 win. The Twins beat the White Sox, but KC was at least starting to separate from California.

The Royals all but crushed the Angels chances on Tuesday in a great baseball game. Trailing 5-4 in the ninth, Wilson walked, stole second and scored the tying run on a base hit by Dane Iorg. Quisenberry came on in relief and tossed four innings of shutout ball as the game went to the 12th inning. Iorg came through again. He doubled, and it set up an RBI single from Balboni.

Even though Kansas City lost the finale 2-0, getting only four hits and wasting a good effort from Black, Minnesota had lost the final two games to Chicago. The last weekend began with K.C. up by a game and a half.

The Royals were off on Thursday and watched Minnesota blow a 3-0 eighth-inning lead in Cleveland and the margin extended to two games. On Friday night, with Kansas City having a late start in Oakland, they watched the Twins cough another one up, this one in stunning fashion. After scoring ten runs in the first two innings, Minnesota let Cleveland chip all the way back and closer Ron Davis blew it for the second straight night. The Indians delivered a stunning 11-10 win.

Kansas City played Oakland knowing that a one-game playoff was the worst they could do and one more win would clinch. After an up-and-down season and dramatic September, the Royals took care of business right away. The veterans came through, as White had three hits, including a triple and home run. Brett also homered, and the young Concepcion met the moment with a three-hit game. The 6-5 win clinched the division.

It was by no means the greatest of division titles, with five AL East teams having a better record and no one else in the AL West breaking .500. But it still added another piece to this era's legacy in franchise history. And in the short term, first place was first place--and it meant a shot at the 104-win Tigers in the ALCS.

1984 ALCS

There are times when a perceived mismatch leads to a magical upset or at least a riveting moment when a favorite has to turn back a determined challenger. The 1984 ALCS was not one of them. The Tigers came in as a heavy favorite, and while the Royals were able to make a couple of the individual games very good, the outcome of the series was never in doubt.

The series would open in Kansas City and each team had its ace ready. Detroit's Jack Morris and Kansas City sending Black. The Tigers wasted little time getting after Black and sending a clear message about their status as the top-heavy favorite to win the World Series.

Lou Whitaker led off the ALCS with a single and Alan Trammell promptly tripled him home. A sac fly from Lance Parrish had Detroit up 2-0 before anyone was even settled in. Larry Herndon and Trammell each hit leadoff homers in the fourth and fifth inning to extend the lead to 4-0. Another run came in the seventh when Whitaker took second on a misplayed liner to right and quickly scored on a base hit from Trammell.

Morris was rolling and the 5-0 lead was plenty, but the Tigers tacked on three more runs, including another leadoff homer, this one from Parrish. The Royals avoided a shutout with a run in the seventh but that was all they achieved. The final was 8-1.

Detroit went to 18-game winner Dan Petry in Game 2. Kansas City gave Saberhagen the ball. The Tigers wasted no time jumping on the kid. After a one-out error, Detroit pounced with

back-to-back doubles from Kirk Gibson and Parrish. The Royals again faced a 2-0 deficit before coming to bat.

Gibson padded the lead with a one-out solo blast in the third. It looked like another rout was on. But Saberhagen settled in and Detroit stopped scoring. Meanwhile, the KC offense started grinding its way back.

Sheridan worked a one-out walk in the fourth and took third on a base hit by Brett. A productive ground ball from Orta put the Royals on the board. In the seventh, Balboni singled with one out. A forceout replaced him on the basepaths with White and Iorg's pinch-hit single cut the lead to 3-2.

Willie Hernandez came on in the eighth inning. Kansas City, fighting for its life, found a way to tie the game. Lynn Jones singled to start the frame. McRae came through here with a game-tying double. Kansas City had gotten to Hernandez and still had their own great closer in the pen.

Tiger manager Sparky Anderson cut his losses on Hernandez and went to Aurelio Rodriguez. The move came through, as Rodriguez tossed two shutout innings, matching zeroes with Quisenberry as the game went to the 11th.

Parrish led off the Detroit half of the eleventh with a single. A sac bunt by Darrell Evans was booted by catcher Don Slaught and now there were runners on first and second. Ruppert Jones bunted both over and John Grubb came up with the biggest hit of this ALCS, a two-run double off Quisenberry.

Kansas City rallied in the bottom of the inning, putting two on with two outs. Jones came to the plate and lifted a long fly ball to right. But there was no walkoff magic...just a flyout to Gibson. Rodriguez finished the job in the 5-3 win.

Detroit took the field on Friday night knowing they had three cracks at home to clinch their first pennant since 1968. Milt Wilcox got the ball for the Tigers and pitched the game of his life.

Wilcox threw a three-hitter, with no Royal batter ever making it to second base. And it turns out he needed to be just that great, because Liebrandt was almost as good.

Detroit mounted a soft rally on the second. An infield hit by Barbaro Garbey started it. After a forceout, an Evans single put runners on the corners and Marty Castillo's productive ground ball out brought in the run. The Tigers threatened again the next inning, with Gibson on third and one out. But Liebrandt struck out Parrish and was able to escape.

The rest of the game was the two pitchers putting on a show. The 1-0 lead held and Hernandez came on for the ninth. When he got Motley to pop up to third, the city of Detroit could celebrate. And they kept on celebrating through a World Series triumph over the San Diego Padres. But Kansas City had gotten back atop the AL West. And their biggest moment was just ahead.

1985

The 1985 Kansas City Royals continued to be led by George Brett. The great third baseman won another batting championship in 1985, hitting .335. On the other side of the infield was Balboni, whose 36 home runs led the league.

The everyday lineup was filled with steady veterans of this era, from White to Wilson to McRae. But those vets mostly performed below career norms in 1985, and the result was an offense that was just 13th in the American League in runs scored.



A pitching staff that was second-best in the AL in ERA was the key to success. At the top of the rotation was Saberhagen who would win 20 games and bring home the Cy Young Award.

Behind Saberhagen was Liebrandt and Danny Jackson. The bullpen was still anchored by Quisenberry, and his league-leading 37 saves. Kansas City wasn't dominant, but they were a complete team.

It took time for the '85 Royals to find their rhythm. They had a pedestrian April, but were only two back of California after a month. The mediocrity in KC didn't stop, and the team was still only 46-44 in July and 7 ½ games back of the Angels. The Royals finally started their pivot into pennant race mode on July 23.

They swept a six-game homestand against a contending Yankees team, and the Indians. Kansas City took two of three from Detroit and cut the lead to two games by the time August began. The Royals held serve throughout the month, and then ripped off eight straight wins to open September by sweeping a homestand against the White Sox and Brewers.

Three of the wins came in walkoff fashion and Kansas City moved into first place by a game and a half when they went to California for a three-game series starting on September 9.

Saberhagen started the Monday night opener, but did not pitch well, dropping a 7-1 decision. Liebrandt was ready with the answer the next night, with a complete-game three-hit shutout. Lonnie Smith, acquired in early summer from the St. Louis Cardinals, and White each homered in a 6-0 win.

In the finale, Jackson hooked up with Angel starter Ron Romanick in a pitchers' duel that was scoreless in the seventh. White drew a leadoff walk and promptly stole second. Balboni worked a walk and a ground ball moved both runners up. Role players then came through, as Jamie Quirk singled and Orta doubled. The Angels got a run back in the seventh, but Quisenberry came in to close the 2-1 win and Kansas City was up by 2 ½ games.

Just when it seemed the Royals were ready to pull away with the AL West, the race took another turn. They lost 10 of the next 17, including being inexplicably swept at home by a bad

Seattle Mariners team. The bats were quiet in a sweep at Minnesota. Kansas City was one game behind California when the final week began—and it would begin with a four-game showdown between the Royals and Angels in KC.

Saberhagen again started the opener, and again faced California veteran lefty John Candelaria, a key part of the 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates team that won the World Series. The game started inauspiciously for the home team, as successive singles went to waste when Brett flied out and McRae hit into a double play. California third baseman Doug DeCinces homered to lead off the second and gave the Angels early momentum.

Brett answered in the fourth with a homer of his own and Saberhagen got settled in. Both teams missed chances, the Royals in the sixth when White was gunned down at the plate and the Angels in the seventh when leadoff man Gary Pettis was caught stealing to end the inning.

Kansas City broke through in the seventh when veteran catcher Jim Sundberg, acquired at the start of the season from Milwaukee, hit a home run. The Royals added an insurance run in the eighth, as Wilson tripled and scored on a sac fly from Brett. The AL West race was even with six days to go.

California sent their top starter, Mike Witt, to the mound on Tuesday night, although with an ERA on the high side of 3.80, he didn't fit the prototype of "ace." Second baseman Bobby Grich hit an early home run, and then in the fifth Brian Downing and Rod Carew delivered key hits in a three-run inning. Witt was solid throughout and the Angels won 4-2 to reclaim the division lead.

The pressure shifted back to Kansas City. Black took the ball and delivered one of the biggest outings of his career. He threw a three-hit shutout and a first-inning three-run blast from Brett enabled KC to coast to a 4-0 win.

Brett's presence loomed over the series finale on Thursday, as he walked in the first and then White hit a two-run homer. Brett homered himself in the fifth, while Jackson outdueled future Hall of Fame pitcher Don Sutton. Kansas City won 4-1 and took a one-game lead into the season's final weekend.

California lost on Friday night and when Kansas City won both Friday and Saturday the AL West race was over. The Royals were going back to the playoffs. They were going in as the underdog, but also the grizzled vets. This ALCS stuff was old hat for Kansas City. It would be the first postseason appearance for the Toronto Blue Jays.

1985 ALCS

It was a year of change in the MLB postseason structure for 1985. The League Championship Series expanded from a best-of-five to a best-of-seven. The 2-3-2 homefield format was in effect and the rotation system favored Toronto, who would host the opening and closing of the series.

Both teams had gone to the second-last day of the regular season to clinch their ALCS berths, but Toronto's pitching rotation fell more naturally aligned, with ace Dave Stieb available to start Game 1. Kansas City countered with Liebrandt.

The difference in pitching showed up immediately, as the Blue Jays attacked Liebrandt quickly. Jesse Barfield led off the bottom of the second with a single, Willie Upshaw was hit by a pitch, then Ernie Whitt and Tony Fernandez each hit RBI singles.

In the home half of the third, Cliff Johnson led off with a double, Barfield walked and Upshaw singled to load the bases. Liebrandt was removed, but Rance Mulliniks greeted reliever Steve Farr with an RBI single, Ernie Whitt drew an RBI walk and Fernandez hit a sac fly. The teams traded runs in the fourth, and Stieb turned in eight innings of three-hit ball to close out a 6-1 win for Toronto.

The teams came right back the next afternoon, with Black getting the ball for Kansas City against a young Jimmy Key for Toronto. The Royals got on the board in the third when light-hitting shortstop Buddy Biancalana singled and Wilson homered. They added another run in the fourth when Motley walked and scored on a double by Sundberg.

Toronto started to come back in the fourth when Brett committed an error and Johnson made it hurt with an RBI double. In the bottom of the sixth the Jays tied it. With two outs, Black hit George Bell with a pitch, and after a Johnson single, a wild pitch moved both runners into scoring position, Barfield cleaned up with a two-run single.

In the bottom of the eighth, the Blue Jays increased the pressure on the Royals, as Lloyd Moseby singled, stole second and took third on an errant throw. Bell's sacrifice fly put Toronto three outs from a win.

But KC answered with a home run from Pat Sheridan to tie it up, and in the top of the 10th they took the lead on a manufactured run of their own. Wilson singled, stole second and scored on a base hit from White.

Now Kansas City was ready to pick up the road split and move the series back home, with Quisenberry on the mound. But Fernandez quickly started the inning with an infield hit and moved into scoring position on a ground ball out. Moseby singled and the game was tied again. After a bad pickoff throw moved him into scoring position, Quisenberry got Bell to fly out. But Al Oliver, the veteran DH hit an opposite-field single and Moseby brought home the winning run.



All the pressure was on the Royals as they came home for the middle three games. Friday night's Game 3 can only be remembered as "The George Brett Game."

Brett came up in the first inning and homered. In the fourth, he doubled and came around to score on productive outs by McRae and White. Everything was going smoothly for the Saberhagen, as he took a 2-0 lead into the fifth inning.

Then it all got away from Saberhagen. After Whitt started the inning with a single, Barfield tied the game with a home run. With one out, Damaso Garcia doubled, Moseby singled and Mulliniks homered. In the blink of an eye, the Cy Young winner was out, the Blue Jays were ahead 5-2 and Toronto was in complete command of this series.

Sundberg got one run back with a home run in the fifth. One inning later it was Brett's time again. After Wilson singled, Brett hit a game-tying home run. Then in the eighth, he singled and was bunted up by McRae. With two outs, Steve Balboni singled to center and the Royals had the lead.

Steve Farr had come out of the bullpen for Saberhagen in the fifth and Farr closed the game—appropriately enough the final out was a pop fly gloved by Brett. The ALCS was competitive again.

It was a Liebrandt-Stieb rematch in Game 4, in an era when pitchers often went on three days' rest in the postseason. Each team missed a scoring chance early and the pitchers got settled in. It was scoreless in the sixth, when Lonnie Smith led off the Royal half of the frame with a walk. Wilson singled and Brett was intentionally walked. McRae then drew a walk to force in a run.

There was still no one out, and Kansas City and the chance to open the game up. But Sheridan popped out, White hit into a double play and it stayed a one-run game. And the missed chance would come back to haunt the Royals.

In the top of the ninth, Garcia drew a leadoff walk and Moseby followed by ripping a double into right field and the game was tied. Quisenberry was summoned, but quickly gave up a single to Bell and Oliver then slashed his own double to right. It was 3-1 and even though Toronto closer Tom Henke walked a couple KC batters in the bottom of the ninth, he was able to close the win.

Just a year earlier, the Game 4 heartbreaker would have eliminated Kansas City. Under the new format, they were still breathing, albeit barely.

A late Sunday afternoon start saw Toronto aim to bring the World Series north of the border for the first time. Key was on the mound, while Kansas City answered with Jackson.

Kansas City got a run in the first when Lonnie Smith doubled and eventually scored on a RBI groundout by Brett. They got another in the second when White beat out a bunt, took third on a Balboni single and scored on McRae's sac fly. Then Jackson took over.

Toronto threatened in the fifth, getting runners on second and third with one out. But a Fernandez groundout failed to pick up a run and Jackson escaped. The Jays also got second and third in the sixth, this time with two outs. Jackson got Whitt, then ripped through the next nine hitters in order to close the 2-0 shutout.

The Blue Jays were still in good shape, with two games at home at the old Exhibition Stadium ahead. The series resumed Tuesday night with Kansas City sending out Gubicza, while Toronto went to Doyle Alexander, the Game 3 loser to try and clinch.

Both teams struck quickly. Wilson and Brett drew first-inning walks and McRae ripped an RBI single. Toronto answered right back with a Garcia double, a Moseby single and even though Mulliniks hit into a double play, Garcia scored through the back door.

Kansas City got the lead in the third, again keyed by Wilson and McRae, who singled and doubled, and the score was 2-2. Again, Toronto had an answer. Fernandez drilled a one-out double, took third on a wild pitch and Moseby picked up the run with a productive ground ball out.

Brett took over again in the fifth with a solo home run. In the sixth, after a Sundberg walk was followed by a sac bunt, consecutive doubles from Biancalana and Lonnie Smith made it 5-2. In between the two RBI hits, Alexander was removed.

Toronto again came back in the sixth, as Moseby singled and Upshaw walked, bringing the tying run to the plate with one out. Gubicza was pulled and Black came out of the bullpen. Johnson greeted him with an RBI single and a wild pitch moved the tying runs to second and third. Black then got Bell to pop out, perhaps the biggest out of the Royal season to date.

After escaping the sixth with the score still 5-3, Black settled in and closed out the remainder of the game with shutout relief. We were going to a decisive Game 7 on Wednesday night, and it would be the aces—Stieb and Saberhagen on the mound. At the risk of sounding clichéd, it's tough to get much better than that.

The ace-on-ace storyline took a hit though, as Saberhagen had to leave after three innings. He was hit in the hand when trying to field a comebacker, and Liebrandt had to come on.

Sundberg had never been known for his hitting prowess, but he became a Royal legend on this night. In the second, after Sheridan bunted his way on and moved up to second, Sundberg hit a two-out RBI single. It was 2-1 in the sixth when he came through even more dramatically.

Stieb lost his control early in the inning, walking Brett, hitting McRae with a pitch and walking Balboni. But with two outs, the Blue Jay ace was in position to escape. Sundberg came up and crushed a pitch to center. It stayed in the park, but it cleared the bases. Sundberg was on third with a triple. White tacked on an add-on run with a single. It was 6-1 and all but over.

There were no more push backs from Toronto. Liebrandt pitched 5.2 innings, the game ended 6-2 and Kansas City had the American League pennant. Brett was an easy choice for ALCS MVP. Kansas City's Comeback Saga rolled on and had its greatest chapter still to come.

1985 WORLD SERIES

The 1985 World Series was the year the Fall Classic went exclusively prime-time—all games at night for the first time ever, something that has not changed since. And it was a Series that was ready for prime-time, with the St. Louis Cardinals winning the National League pennant and producing some compelling storylines...

- The most obvious was the regional rivalry. The state of Missouri was the center of the sports world and the matchup was dubbed “The Show-Me Series”.
- Whitey Herzog in the Cardinal dugout. Herzog had won a World Series title for St. Louis in 1982 and now looked to torment his old employer.
- Both teams were riding high on comebacks. The Cardinals had also lost the first two games of their LCS battle with the Dodgers. St. Louis stormed back to win in six games.

The series opened in Kansas City, per the rotation system. St. Louis had its ace, 21-game winner John Tudor, ready to face Jackson. A pitcher’s duel ensued.

Kansas City picked up an early run in the second when Sundberg drew a one-out walk, followed by base hits by Motley and Balboni. With runners on the corners, Motley was thrown out trying to steal home to keep the game 1-0.

What seems at first glance like a foolhardy play, has some logic. Light-hitting shortstop Buddy Biancalana was at the plate and Jackson was due up next. There was no DH in play in the 1985 World Series, as the rules of the time said that whatever league did not have home field advantage used its rules for the entire series.

St. Louis tied it in the third, when Terry Pendleton and Darrell Porter hit consecutive singles and Willie McGee picked up the RBI with a ground ball. In the fourth, Tito Landrum and Cesar Cedeno hit back-to-back doubles for a 2-1 lead.

Tudor settled in and worked seven sharp innings. St. Louis added an insurance run in the ninth and young reliever Todd Worrell closed out the 3-1 win.

Another pitcher’s duel followed in Sunday night’s Game 2, as Danny Cox worked for St. Louis against Liebrandt. The Royals grabbed two runs in the fourth, when Wilson singled and Brett and White each doubled. Liebrandt was locked in and it was still 2-0 in the ninth as he looked to close the complete game.

McGee opened the ninth with a leadoff double, but Liebrandt got the next two batters. Even when Jack Clark singled and Landrum doubled, Liebrandt still had the 2-1 lead, with runners on second and third. Showing how much differently games were managed then, Kansas City manager Dick Howser let Liebrandt stay in the game, even with closer Quisenberry available. After an intentional walk, Pendleton lined up a double into the left field corner. The bases cleared and St. Louis had a 4-2 win.

The combination of the heartbreaking loss, along with the fact St. Louis had two straight wins on the road seemed to indicate this Series was already all but over, as the teams traveled I-70 to play the next three games at Busch Stadium. But Kansas City would not fold in the face of the road crowd.

Saberhagen was on the mound for the must-win Game 3. He was facing Joaquin Andujar, who had won 21 games himself and just three years earlier, won Games 3 & 7 of the 1982 World Series. But Andujar had struggled in his two starts in the 1985 NLCS and that continued here.

After three scoreless innings, the Royals got to Andujar with a light rally. Sundberg drew a walk and Biancalana beat out an infield hit. After two were out, Lonnie Smith ripped a double into the gap for two runs. In the fifth, Brett singled and White homered. It was 4-0 and Andujar was out.

St. Louis mustered a run in the sixth on consecutive singles from Ozzie Smith, Tom Herr and Jack Clark, but Saberhagen finished off a complete-game six-hitter, the Royals added two runs in the seventh and the 6-1 final made the Series competitive again.

Tudor was on the mound for Game 4, and seemed to just as quickly turn the lights off on this whole Series. He was dominant, throwing a complete-game five-hitter. Landrum and McGee hit early home runs and St. Louis coasted to an easy 3-0 win. Only in the seventh, when the Royals loaded the bases with two outs, did Tudor face trouble. He got McRae to ground to third, ending the threat.

St. Louis was in command, but if you wanted to look for signs of trouble, they weren't hard to find. The Cardinals weren't hitting at all. They had eleven runs in four games and four of those runs had come in a single inning, the late rally of Game 2. And with two home games still ahead, if KC could somehow survive Game 5, this Series could be put back in play.

The middle three games at Busch Stadium had been defined by great pitching and that continued in Game 5. Jackson joined Saberhagen and Tudor in throwing a dominant complete game, as he kept Kansas City alive.

KC eased the pressure on themselves with a run right away in the first inning, as Lonnie Smith and Wilson each singled, followed by productive outs from Brett and White for a 1-0 lead. St. Louis was able to tie it with consecutive doubles from Herr and Clark in their own half of the first, but Jackson shut it down from that point forward, throwing five-hitter.

The Royals essentially finished the game in the top of the second. Sundberg doubled and Biancalana singled off St. Louis vet Bob Forsch. After a Lonnie Smith walk, Wilson tripled and the game was 4-1. It stayed that way most of the night, until KC tacked on runs in the eighth and ninth for their second 6-1 win in three games.

Game 6 back in Kansas City on Saturday night would become legendary—or infamous if you lived in St. Louis. Cox and Liebrandt staged a reprise of their Game 2 pitchers' duel. The Royals missed an earlier opportunity when a Lonnie Smith double resulted in him reaching third with less than one out and Brett at the plate. But in a rare occurrence, Brett failed to come through in October, striking out. The Cards missed a chance in the sixth when Cox was unable to get a bunt down after the inning started with consecutive singles.

Not until the eighth did a run score and it was the Cardinals who broke through. With one out, Pendleton singled and Cedeno walked. With two outs, Brian Harper came up to pinch-hit and appeared to make himself a World Series hero with an RBI base hit that put St. Louis six outs from a championship.

Cardinal lefty Ken Dayley handled the eighth, and the righty Worrell came on for the ninth. Jorge Orta was at the plate to start the Royals' final chance.

Orta hit a bouncer to Clark at first base. The ball was fielded cleanly, tossed to Worrell who beat Orta to the bag by a good couple steps. Don Denkinger called Orta safe.

The Cardinals exploded, and rightly so. Replay clearly showed Orta was easily out. Denkinger later said he was watching Orta's foot, while listening for the sound of the ball hitting Worrell's glove—a common umpiring practice. But the crowd noise prevented him from hearing it.

Denkinger had committed a big blunder, but it also needs to be said that from this point forward, the 1985 St. Louis Cardinals ceased to be a functioning baseball team. The next hitter, Balboni, hit a harmless pop-up into foul territory. Clark completely misplayed it, and Balboni followed with a single.

Sundberg tried to bunt, but the Cards got the force out at third. Even now, if Worrell could simply get two outs, Denkinger would be forgotten. Instead, a passed ball ensued, moving both runners up. Dane Iorg came to the plate and singled to right, scoring both runs for a 2-1 win. The Royals were improbably alive.

Game 7 should have been a baseball delight, as the aces, Tudor and Saberhagen matched up. But Tudor had nothing and St. Louis was still furious over the Denkinger call. The game was perhaps the worst Game 7 ever played in any sport by any team.

Tudor was gone by the third, the Royals were up 5-0 and in the fifth inning the Cardinal meltdown went on full public display.

Kansas City hit six singles, a double and ripped through five St. Louis pitchers in scoring six more runs. One of them was Andujar who got upset at a ball-strike call, and exploded off the mound in a fury—not coincidentally, the home plate umpire was Denkinger. Andujar was suspended for the first ten games of 1986. The Royals won the game 11-0.

Saberhagen was Series MVP, for his two gems, one in Game 7 and the other a virtual must-win spot on the road in Game 3. That's the right choice, with honorable mention also going to Brett (10-for-27), Balboni (8-for-25), and Wilson (11-for-30)

The St. Louis interpretation of the 1985 World Series is that if Denkinger makes the correct call, they close it out in Game 6. That's reasonable—getting the leadoff man aboard in a one-run game isn't exactly insignificant. But it also has to be said that the Cardinals completely lacked championship toughness in how they responded to the adversity.

Let's say St. Louis lost because Orta was bunted up, a bloop single tied the game and Kansas City won in, say, 11 innings. And then won a tough 4-3 game in Game 7. If that had happened, I'd be all for blaming the bad call, because you can't overcome everything.

But when you follow a bad call by blowing a popup that would embarrass a Little Leaguer, allow a passed ball to move the winning run into scoring position and then completely melt down for a national audience the next night, you've demonstrated that your ability to handle adversity is not that of a champion.

By contrast, Kansas City showed they could handle all the adversity. They had come from behind to win the AL West race, the ALCS and now the World Series. They were the first team to win the Series after losing the first two games at home. They remain the only team to rally from 3-1 series deficits in both the LCS and World Series. Did they get a major break in the ninth inning of Game 6? Absolutely. But they had the heart of a champion.

CONCLUSION

The *Royal Decade* came to a crashing and tragic conclusion in 1986. On the field, Kansas City played losing baseball. Off the field, the beloved Howser was diagnosed with a brain tumor that proved fatal. Royal baseball has not been the same since.

There have still been moments though. Most notably, the great Kansas City postseason runs of 2014-15. In 2014, they stormed through the American League playoffs undefeated, got to Game 7 of the World Series and were only undone by San Francisco's Madison Bumgarner having the greatest postseason pitching run of all-time. A year later, the Royals came back and finished the job, winning a title on the 30th anniversary of the beloved 1985 team.

But baseball in Kansas City during the *Royal Decade* was special. And even those of us from outside the geographic rooting area who grew up amidst it remember those teams and that era fondly. Thanks for reading about this decade-long ride of Royals baseball.