

THE YANKEE RENAISSANCE

The 1976-81 Revival



INTRODUCTION

Baseball in the Bronx was on hard times in the early-to-mid 1970s. At least hard times by the lofty standards the New York Yankees had set in winning 20 World Series titles coming into the 1976 season. But it had been 1964 since the Yanks were last even in the Fall Classic, 1962 since they won it, between 1965-75, they broke the 90-win barrier just once.

The period of relative irrelevance coincided with CBS buying the team in the mid-1960s. Yankee Stadium itself underwent renovations and the team had to share Shea Stadium with the Mets while the work was being completed.

George Steinbrenner bought the team in 1973 and towards the end of the 1975 season, he hired Billy Martin as manager. The 1976 New York Yankees would be George & Billy's first run together, and they returned this proud franchise to prominence. This period of renaissance continued until 1981.

The history of the New York Yankees from 1976-81 is all here. There were big home runs off the bats of Chris Chambliss, Reggie Jackson and Bucky Dent. There was great starting pitching, especially from Ron Guidry. The bullpen, whether it was Sparky Lyle or Goose Gossage, was as good as any.

There were the turmoils, the managerial changes that Steinbrenner became renowned for, the slumps, and the moments when rivals—from the Boston Red Sox to the Baltimore Orioles to the Milwaukee Brewers—seemed ready to triumph, before New York finally won.

As a young baseball fan, born in 1970 and just coming of age, it was all very galling to me. I grew up in southeastern Wisconsin. The Brewers were an American League team at the time

and a division rival. I also loved the Red Sox and respected the Orioles. All took their turns battling the Yankees. New York won all too often for my taste. But nearly a half-century later, they and their rivals created indelible memories that I look back on with fondness.

Each season and each postseason series of The Renaissance Era has its own article on TheSportsNotebook.com. The purpose of this download is to pull all the articles together and present them as one cohesive compilation.

The moments—the big ones and the under-the-radar ones that marked the 1976-81 Yankee Renaissance—are here.

NOTE TO A YOUNGER GENERATION

Most people reading this download probably already know this, but a brief explanation of the baseball landscape prior to 1994 is in order. Each league was split into just two divisions, an East and a West and only the winner advanced to the postseason. The AL East included current members in the Yankees, Red Sox and Orioles. The Blue Jays came into existence in 1977. The division was rounded out by the Brewers, Tigers and Indians. And the AL East of this era was--by far--the toughest division in baseball.

1976

In the late 1970s, Steinbrenner's Yankees became synonymous with the phrase "The Best Team Money Can Buy", for their use of the financial wealth generated by the New York market to overcome poor decisions in player development, a trend that continues to this day. But it would not be fair to put that tag on the 1976 team. A series of smart trades took a decent team and made it into the American League's best.

New York dealt pitcher Doc Medich, a good, but not great starter, to the Pittsburgh Pirates for three players—they got back starting pitcher Dock Ellis in return, who won 17 games with 3.19 ERA for the Yanks in 1976. New York also got Willie Randolph, who would become a fixture at second base, reliable defensive, a base stealer and consistently on base.

A bigger move came when the Yanks shipped out Bobby Bonds (father of the infamous slugger Barry) to California and got Ed Figueroa and Mickey Rivers back. Figueroa won 19 games in '76 and was Martin's best starter. Rivers, a speedy centerfielder, hit .312 and stole 43 bases. New York also made a modest move to add right fielder Oscar Gamble and beef up the lineup, with Gamble's 17 home runs.

Not every trade made proved to be inspired—a nine-player deal with the Baltimore Orioles in June got the Yanks starting pitcher Ken Holtzman, a young Doyle Alexander and lefty reliever Grant Jackson. But Holtzman, an excellent starter on the Oakland A's championship teams from 1972-74, made only 21 starts and had a 4.17 ERA. And Alexander would be moved out of town before fulfilling his potential.

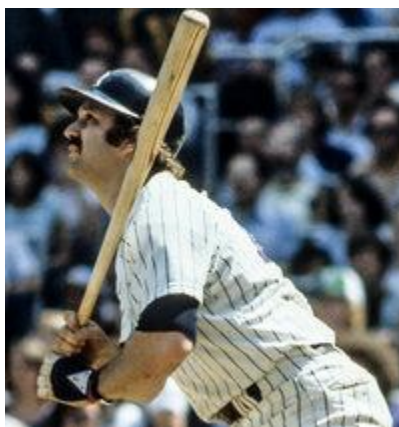
The Yankees gave up starting pitcher Scott McGregor, catcher Rick Dempsey and relief pitcher Tippy Martinez, all of whom would be instrumental for the Orioles in coming years. And another June deal got the Yankees a backup catcher in Fran Healy in exchange for lefty Larry Gura...who was shipped to the Kansas City Royals, ended up pitching the game that clinched his new team the AL West, became their #2 starter, and developed a reputation as a Yankee killer.

But when you make a lot of moves, some will blow up on you. Stepping back and looking at the larger picture makes it plain that whatever missteps were made, New York still made themselves better for 1976.

Figueroa and Ellis were the best starting pitchers, though Catfish Hunter was the nominal ace, winning 17 games with a 3.53 ERA. Sparky Lyle anchored the bullpen, saving 23 games with a 2.26 ERA, and Dick Tidrow was a reliable #2 reliever, ten saves and a 2.63 ERA. Yankee pitching was the best in the American League in 1976.

The offense was almost as good, ranking second in the AL in runs scored, and effective at all facets of offensive play. New York was second in batting average, second in steals, second in slugging percentage and second in home runs. The only thing the Yanks didn't do was take walks, where they ranked near the bottom of the league. But they hit so well that it didn't affect the final team on-base percentage, which was still second in the league.

Martin liked to play aggressively, and Randolph, Rivers and left fielder Roy White combined to steal 111 bases. Graig Nettles cleaned up, hitting 32 home runs. First baseman Chris Chambliss popped 17 home runs and had 96 RBIs. Carlos May, the designated hitter, had a solid .358 on-base percentage.



Then there was the catcher—Thurman Munson was the Yankee captain, and he batted .302 and drove in 105 runs. His offense, along with his leadership and work behind the plate, got Thurman the American League MVP award.

New York started fast, winning 10 of their first 13. This included taking two straight in Baltimore behind Hunter and Ellis, and knocking around Jim Palmer—who had won the Cy Young Award in 1975 and would do so again in 1976.

The Yanks only led the AL East by a half-game, but that margin was on the Milwaukee Brewers—a lowly team that no one took seriously as a contender, and who would quickly live down to expectations. The real contenders—the Orioles, and the defending AL champs, the Boston Red Sox, were slow out of the gate and below .500 at the end of April.

New York went 16-12 in the month of May, capping it by taking two of three from the Red Sox in Fenway Park. Boston was now eight back and would never recover, in a season filled with

underachievement. Baltimore was in striking range, five games out, but New York was simply too consistent.

There was no signature win streak, no singular dominating stretch for the 1976 New York Yankees. They just kept grinding away. A seven-game string at the end of June was able to nudge the lead out to nine games, they were 10 ½ up at the All-Star break, and the race never got closer than 8 ½ the rest of the way. New York finished the season 97-62, a healthy 10 ½ games up on Baltimore. An American League Championship Series date with the Kansas City Royals was next.

1976 ALCS

The League Championship Series round was best-of-five in 1976, 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 Kansas City's great third baseman, George Brett had defensive problems in his first inning of postseason play. 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.

Hunter started and was in command. 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 at least earned a 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 Tom Poquette.

17-game winner Dennis 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 lefty Paul Splitterff, but now the Royals trailed 3-2.

Splitterff 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 John 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 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. Freddie 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, but starting pitcher Larry 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. White drove him in and promptly stole second. Chambliss would pick up White with a sac fly.

Kansas City manager Whitey Herzog didn't hesitate to pull starter Dennis Leonard in the first inning and gave the ball to Splittorff. 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 and 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.

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. 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 postseason performance, 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.

This ALCS was a true laying-of-the-groundwork series. It was the first of four times the Yankees and Royals would meet in the American League Championship Series over a five-year period. A great rivalry was born in 1976.

1976 WORLD SERIES

It seems unthinkable to today's generation, but in 1976, the Yankees were the plucky underdogs and the Cincinnati Reds were the Establishment. The Reds were the defending World Series champs. They were in the Fall Classic for the fourth time in this decade. Their lineup was dotted with future Hall of Famers.

Cincinnati held home field advantage for the World Series based on the rotation system that existed up until 2003. There would also be an American League rule in effect for the first time in World Series play—the DH would be used in all games. The DH would alternate opposite homefield—i.e., it would be used in a year where the NL held home field advantage.

The Yankees' best starting pitchers were drained after their dramatic ALCS and they turned to untested 25-year-old Doyle Alexander. And it took the Reds precisely three batters to get to him. With two outs in the first, Joe Morgan homered and Cincy was up 1-0.

New York was able to quickly counter in the top of the second, as Piniella doubled to lead off the inning and scored on productive outs from Chambliss and Nettles. Cincinnati reclaimed the lead in the third, on a triple by Dave Concepcion and Pete Rose's sac fly.

Alexander settled down, and through the middle innings the Yankees had their chances against the Reds' staff ace Don Gullett. New York had two on with none out in the fifth, before Gullett got a double play ball to escape. And with two aboard in the sixth, Rivers took a lead off second base that was a bit too long, and was gunned down by Johnny Bench.

The Reds were an aggressive running team and made the first use of their speed in the bottom of the sixth. After Rose walked, he was replaced on the bases by Ken Griffey, who grounded into a force play. Griffey promptly stole second and then scored on a single by Tony Perez.

Gullett, having survived the fifth and sixth, worked a clean seventh and into the eighth inning. Cincinnati got some insurance when George Foster singled, Bench tripled him home and then scored on a wild pitch. Game 1 of the Series had gone to form, with the Reds getting a comfortable 5-1 win.

Cincinnati looked like it might blow Game 2 open quickly against Hunter. Dan Driessen, the excellent Reds' utility player who was getting his chance as the DH, doubled to start the bottom of the second, and scored on a single from Foster. Even though the latter was caught stealing, Bench doubled, Cesar Geronimo walked, and Concepcion singled to make it 2-0. Geronimo took third on the base hit and scored on a sac fly from Griffey.

It was 3-0, but the Yankees didn't go quietly into oblivion. Hunter escaped a jam in the third, and then put it on cruise control through eight. It gave his teammates a chance to get back in it, though every Yankee run seemed like pulling teeth.

Munson beat out an infield hit in the top of the fourth, followed by singles from Chambliss and Nettles. The latter was able to take second on a throw to third, and there was only one out. But Elliot Maddox, the DH, struck out and enabled Cincy starter Fred Norman to get out of the inning at 3-1.

Maddox had a chance to redeem himself with two on and one out in the sixth, but grounded into a double play. The Yankees finally pulled even in the seventh, on a single from Randolph, a double by Fred Stanley and another infield hit from Munson.

Jack Billingham came out of the Cincinnati bullpen and settled things down, keeping the game tied 3-3 in the bottom of the ninth. Hunter was still on the mound and he got the first two batters out. Griffey hit a grounder into the hole at short. Stanley made a bad throw, and Griffey wound up on second. Perez singled him in, and just like that, a strong Yankee effort still ended in a 4-3 loss.

It was time for the Fall Classic to return to the Bronx in Game 3. Driessen again made his mark early in, beating out an infield hit in the second inning, stealing second base and scoring a double by Foster. Cincinnati was all over Ellis. Bench beat out an infield hit. Cesar Geronimo replaced him on the bases after a force out that scored Foster. Geronimo promptly stole second and scored on a Concepcion single. Two innings later, Driessen delivered again, with a home run that made it 4-3.

Cincinnati starter Pat Zachry had a strong outing, and though the Yanks scraped over a run in the fourth, it was not until the seventh that New York made its first real threat at winning Game 3.

A light-hitting shortstop, Jim Mason, hit a surprise home run with one out to make it a 4-2 game. Rivers drew a walk, and with two outs, Munson singled. Zachry departed and Will McEnaney came on to face Chambliss, who represented the lead run. But there were no heroics this time—Chambliss grounded to first.

The Reds got singles from Rose and Griffey in the eight. Morgan knocked in Rose with a double, and then Griffey came around on a base hit by Foster. There were no more Yankee rallies. The Series was all but settled after the 6-2 win, but New York still hoped to avoid being swept in their own backyard.

Munson's two-out single in the bottom of the first inning in Game 4 was the first of four hits for Munson. He scored on a double by Chambliss, as they gave Figueroa an early run.

In an ideal New York world—where the rotation was lined up, Figueroa would have pitched one of the games in Cincinnati, but the extended ALCS kept him out until tonight. He kept the Reds quiet through three, but in the fourth inning, the Big Red Machine broke through.

Morgan walked and stole second, and then with two outs, the real damage came. Foster tied the game with an RBI single and Bench unloaded for a two-run homer. It was 3-1 and Cincy starter Gary Nolan had all the runs he would need.

New York had a rally in the fourth, two on and no outs, but this time it was Nettles' turn to stray too far off of second and be picked off by Bench. The Yanks did crawl to within 3-2 in the fifth when Rivers singled, stole second and scored on a base hit by Munson.

But the game went to the ninth, still at 3-2. In the top of the inning, Cincinnati stripped whatever minimal drama remained in this Series. After two walks, Figueroa was removed and Bench greeted Dick Tidrow by going deep. For good measure, Geronimo and Concepcion each doubled to make it 7-2.

We would say the Yankees went quietly in the ninth, but nothing with Billy Martin in the dugout ever happens quietly. The New York manager was ejected for throwing a baseball onto the field, the last fireworks before the Big Red Machine closed its second straight title.

Bench was named 1976 World Series MVP. He went 8-for-15 in the four games, homered twice and had six RBIs, in addition to his defensive prowess. If you want to pick a nit with this selection, it can be pointed out that virtually all of Bench's power damage—both home runs and five of the ribbies—came in Game 4, when the Series was already all but over. But he also went 6-for-11 in the first three games, and was a worthy selection.

Honorable mention goes to Driessen, for his tone-setting play in Games 2 & 3, along with the .429 average posted by Foster.

But the biggest honorable mention goes to the Big Red Machine itself. With two World Series titles to go with their four NL pennants and five NL West crowns, there was no denying they were a true dynasty.

As for the Yankees, they were back. And they had a man in the owner's box who wouldn't accept coming up short.

1977

Steinbrenner had, unsurprisingly, made the biggest splash on that winter's free agent market, when he signed right fielder Reggie Jackson, giving the team star power and one who would be a vital contributor to the Oakland A's dynasty in the early 1970s. The Yanks also signed Don Gullet, the ace of the Reds' rotation to bolster what was already a strong staff in New York.

Jackson hit 32 home runs and drove in 110 runs, joining Nettles (37/107) as the power leaders on the team. Munson was another 100-RBI man and hit .308 in the process. Chambliss hit 17 home runs and the 33-year-old Piniella played everywhere, and produced a .365 on-base percentage/.510 slugging percentage.

What helped the Yankees separate from their AL East rivals, the Boston Red Sox and Baltimore Orioles, was the balance in their lineup that was defined by speed. Rivers played center and batted leadoff, with a .350 OBP. Roy White in left field and Randolph at second base were similarly effective at getting on base and keeping pitchers anxious.

The combination of speed and power helped the Yankees finish in the top three in the American League in every significant offense category. While the power-laden Red Sox were boom or bust, the Yankees could always find a way to manufacture runs if the bats were quiet.

And if New York couldn't manufacture runs, they had excellent pitching, third in the American League in ERA. It was a top-heavy staff, built around three workhorse starters and one outstanding reliever.

Figueroa won 16 games with a 3.57 ERA. Mike Torrez, acquired in an early season deal with Oakland, won 14 more at 3.82 and 26-year-old Ron Guidry posted a 16-7 record and 2.82 ERA. All three worked over 200 innings. Gullet was effective, at 14-4 with a 3.58 ERA, but he only made 22 starts. Arm problems would eventually end his career. And the career of Hunter was already looking over, as he struggled to a 4.71 ERA in his nine starts.

But if the rotation failed. Martin had options in the bullpen and they started with Lyle. The tobacco-chewing lefty won 13 games, saved 26 more and finished with a 2.17 ERA. He worked 137 inning and won the Cy Young Award. Lyle was aided in relief by Dick Tidrow, who took on an even bigger workload, logging over 150 innings with a 3.16 ERA.

On the surface, the first four months of the season were fairly pedestrian. New York was good, but not great—a 58-45 record at the end of July, and a game back in the division. But this Yankee team was remembered for things being anything but boring.

The flamboyant Jackson was not well-liked by his teammates, and the landscape was cast as being about Jackson or Munson, and the need to pick a side. It would be reminiscent of a later rift this franchise would have between Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez.

Normally you look for the manager to be a diplomatic leader who pulls everything together. For all of Martin's many strengths as a manager, this wasn't one of them. His hatred of Jackson was more obvious than that of the players and it all boiled over for a national TV audience in Fenway Park.



A June trip to Boston went poorly on the field—the Red Sox won three straight, scored thirty runs and bashed 12 home runs in the process. During Saturday's NBC telecast, Martin felt Jackson loafed on a flyball. The manager removed Reggie in the middle of the inning to show him up. The two came to blows in the dugout, with the TV cameras on them.

The ESPN movie *The Bronx Is Burning* goes into detail about the soap opera that followed this team around. What's less well-remembered is that on the field, the Yankees calmly waited until the Red Sox showed up in the Bronx a week later and won three in a row of their own. There was no on-field drama, but New York twice beat Boston's own high-priced free agent, closer Bill Campbell.

In August, the comprehensive balance the '77 Yankees had in all phases of the game began to shine forth, and they ripped off a 22-7 month, building a four-game lead on both the Red Sox and Orioles. Neither rival went quietly in September, but New York was able to keep answering.

On September 13, a Tuesday night, that began a three-game Yankees-Red Sox series in New York, the Yanks began to salt it away. Rivers hit a two-run homer and Guidry threw a complete game to key a 4-2 win. One night later, Figueroa locked up in a scoreless duel with Reggie Cleveland. Munson led off the ninth inning with a single and Jackson did something to endear himself to the fans—who preferred the captain and the manager—when he homered to win the game.

New York carried a three-game lead into the final weekend on both rivals, and the Red Sox and Orioles had to play each other. Even though the Yanks lost on Friday and Saturday to a bad Detroit Tigers team, the Sox and Orioles split and knocked each other out in the process. After all the tumult, New York was returning to the postseason and another meeting with Kansas City.

1977 ALCS

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

Kansas City got after Gullett quickly, scoring two runs in each of the first three innings. Hal McRae, Al Cowens and John Mayberry all homered. It was an easy Royals' win, with the Yankees able to take one consolation from the 7-2 drubbing—Dick Tidrow came on in relief, he

was able to get 20 outs for Martin and avoid chewing up the pen—and Sparky Lyle—in a lost cause.

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, 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.

Piniella singled. Cliff Johnson, the DH, would be the most consistent Yankee hitter in this series, doubled in Munson. After an intentional walk to Chambliss, George 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. Dennis 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 Splitterff'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 Darrell 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. Splitterff was pitching for the Royals and of all the Yankees, no one had a more difficult time handling him than Jackson. Martin made

the gutsy call to sit Reggie Jackson, with the backing of the players who said Reggie couldn't Splitorff, "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 that same inning 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 Splitorff 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 Steve Mingori, who got the final two outs of the inning with the tying and lead runs aboard though 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 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. 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.

1977 WORLD SERIES

The New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers were old sparring partners in the World Series. Their eight previous meetings in the Fall Classic were the most of any matchup combination and they had met six times in ten years (1947-56) when the Dodgers were still in Brooklyn. They met again in 1963 after the Dodgers moved west. So perhaps it was appropriate that the Yankees' first championship under the ownership of George Steinbrenner came over the Dodgers in the 1977 World Series.

The Fall Classic began on a Tuesday night in the Big Apple. New York's rotation was shot to pieces after the draining ALCS and they opened with Don Gullett. Los Angeles wasted little time in getting after him.

Davey Lopes led off the Series with a walk and immediately scored on a triple by Bill Russell, who scored himself on a sacrifice fly. The inning might have been worse, with Gullett issuing two more walks, but Munson gunned down Reggie Smith trying to steal and the score stayed 2-0.

Los Angeles sent veteran Don Sutton to the mound, who had been brilliant in a must-win Game 2 of the NLCS against the Philadelphia Phillies. Sutton got the first two batters out, but was quickly peppered by consecutive singles from Munson, Jackson and Chambliss to cut the lead in half.

The pitchers settled in from there until Randolph homered to tie the game in the sixth. A potential Yankee rally in the seventh was cut off when Smith, the Dodger right fielder, turned the tables on the Yanks and threw out Piniella trying to stretch a single into a double.

In the eighth, Randolph drew a walk and came around on a Munson double. Jackson drew a walk, and both runners were bunted up. The Yankees had a chance to put the game away, but Elias Sosa came out of the bullpen. The Dodgers' best reliever, outstanding in the regular season, but roughed up in the NLCS, returned to form. He struck out Piniella and got Bucky Dent to escape.

Sosa's keeping it a 3-2 game proved vital, because LA got to Lyle in the ninth. Dusty Baker hit a leadoff single. Steve Yeager drew a walk, and Lee Lacy tied the game 3-3. We were going to extra innings.

Lyle stayed on the mound and redeemed himself with three scoreless innings. It bought enough time for Randolph to get something instigated one more time. He drilled a double to lead off the bottom of the 12th and then scored on a base hit by veteran outfielder Paul Blair. New York's first victory in a World Series game since 1964 was a long time coming, but they had Game 1, 4-3.

Hunter was the starter for Game 2, and once again the Dodgers jumped out of the gate fast. With two outs in the first, Smith doubled, Cey hit a home run and it was 2-0.

This time, there was no immediate Yankee response. Burt Hooton was outstanding for Los Angeles, tossing a complete-game five-hitter. He got more offensive help when Yeager hit a two-out home run in the third, and Smith drilled a two-run shot in the third.

The Yanks picked up a run in the fourth, but it came off of Jackson grounding into a double play that brought the run in through the backdoor but killed a bigger rally. Los Angeles won 6-1 after Steve Garvey hit one more home run in the ninth.

The World Series was shifting west for three games over the weekend, and it seemed the Dodgers might have the edge. But pitching matters more than home field, and the Yankees could finally throw two of their top starters, Torrez for Game 3 and Guidry for Game 4. These two pitchers decisively changed the course of the 1977 World Series.

New York continued the trend of the road team pouncing in the top of the first when they scored three runs to open Game 3. Rivers doubled and scored on another double from Munson. Jackson knocked in Munson with a single, took second on a misplay in left by Baker, and then scored on a single from Piniella.

Torrez had a hiccup in the third inning. With two on and two out, Baker redeemed himself for the error that put Jackson in scoring position. The LA left fielder ripped a three-run shot to tie the game.

But the Dodgers never threatened again. New York quickly got the lead back in the fourth, when Nettles and Dent each singled, were sacrificed up by Torrez and Rivers drove in a run with a productive ground ball to the right side. In the fifth, Jackson drew a walk, Piniella beat out an infield hit and Chambliss drove in Jackson. Torrez made the 5-3 score stand up.

Guidry got the ball for Saturday afternoon. The 16-game winner was a year away from an amazing 25-win Cy Young season and he gave the Dodgers a foretaste of what was to come in Game 4, with a complete-game four-hitter.

New York staked Guidry to a 3-0 lead in the second. Jackson doubled and scored on a single from Piniella, and then Chambliss doubled. LA manager Tommy Lasorda wisely did not give starter Doug Rau any rope and he quickly went to Rick Rhoden, another starter, who was in the bullpen for the playoffs. But Nettles got an RBI grounder, and then the light-hitting Dent took a single the other way with two outs.

Guidry already had all he needed, though Los Angeles kept it interesting. They picked up two runs in the second on a Rhoden double and a Lopes home run. In the top of the sixth though, Jackson took a home run the other way for New York. It was Jackson's first home run of this World Series and he was most definitely not done. This game was done though, as Guidry rolled home to a 4-2 win.

It was tough to find reason for optimism if you were a Dodger fan tuning in late Sunday afternoon for Game 5. Even if you won, there were still two games in the Bronx. But Los Angeles didn't lay down. In fact, they came out swinging off of Gullett.

Lopes hit a leadoff triple and scored in the first inning, at least allowing his team to play with a lead as they faced elimination. In the bottom of the fourth, Baker hit an RBI single and Yeager ripped a three-run homer.

Sutton was on the mound for Los Angeles and didn't ever let New York off the mat. Before the Yankees could get on the board, the Dodgers had added three more in the fifth to make it 8-0, and then Smith hit a two-run homer in the sixth. New York got four runs off Sutton in the final three innings, including back-to-back homers by Munson and Jackson, but by that point, everyone was mentally flying back to New York already. The Dodgers' 10-4 win had kept the Series alive.

Hooton again got the ball for Los Angeles, hoping to repeat his performance of Game 2. Martin turned to Torrez on three days' rest, though that wasn't nearly as dramatic an issue as it would be today. Los Angeles scored right away. After two were out, Dent booted a grounder, Cey walked and Garvey tripled both in for a 2-0 lead.



In the bottom of the second, Jackson walked on four pitches and Chambliss homered to tie the game. Smith answered right back for the Dodgers with a solo shot in the third. Then the sequence of events this World Series is most remembered for began to unfold. Reggie took it over.

In the bottom of the fourth, after Munson hit a leadoff single, Jackson took the first pitch from Hooton out and New York was ahead 4-3. Chambliss doubled and came around on productive outs by Nettles and Piniella before the inning was over.

In the bottom of the sixth, after a leadoff single from Rivers, two were out and the inning was set to die. Reggie came up, this time facing Sosa. Jackson took the first pitch deep. It was 7-3 and the Yankees could start to taste the champagne.

The score was still 7-3 in the bottom of the eighth. Charlie Hough was on for Los Angeles. Jackson came up. The first pitch was sent out of the yard. Keeping in mind that Jackson's early walk was on four straight pitches, this means he took only three swings on the night—and every one was a home run.

Los Angeles got a run in the ninth and had a runner on first. Pinch-hitter Vic Davalillo beat out a bunt single. After a similar bunt hit had started an improbable rally that turned the NLCS around, one would be loath to dismiss its consequence or any paranoia Yankee fans might have felt, with the tying run now on-deck. Lacy tried to follow suit, but his bunt popped up, Torrez caught it and the World Series was over.

Jackson was named World Series MVP. Normally I'm suspicious in situations like this, where an electric one-game performance overshadows the Series as a whole. But in this case, it's justified. Even if you throw out Game 6, Jackson was still 6-for-17 and had homered twice. Take that, and add one of the great individual performances in World Series history to it, and you have the makings of a Series MVP.

Munson had a strong Series, batting .320 and Torrez had a very strong case for MVP, with two complete game wins, one of them being the momentum-turner in Game 3 and the other being the clincher. I can see the case for Torrez. But Jackson was the right pick.

The New York Yankees had returned to the top of the baseball world. For all of Billy Martin's success as a manager, here and elsewhere, this was his one time as a World Series champ. Steinbrenner also had his first ring, although in that case, the Boss would be back for more.

1978

The 1978 New York Yankees went through a tale of two seasons, a managerial change and won some of the most dramatic baseball games ever played in October.



Pitching was the foundation and the '78 team finished with the best ERA in the American League. Guidry had an amazing season, winning 25 games with a 1.74 ERA and running away with the Cy Young Award. Figueroa won 20 and posted a 2.99 ERA. The depth wasn't great, but between the veteran Hunter, the versatile Tidrow and young Jim Beattie, the Yanks had plenty of arms.

And if you didn't beat New York early, you certainly weren't going to beat them late. Lyle didn't repeat his Cy Young campaign of 1977, but the tobacco-chewing lefty still worked 111 innings and had a 3.47 ERA. The Yankees had acquired closer Rich "Goose" Gossage from the Pittsburgh Pirates and Gossage saved 27 games—a good number at the time—with a 2.01 ERA. With a hard, rising fastball, the Goose looked unhittable.

Offensively, New York was led by Nettles at third base and Reggie in right field. Each hit 27 home runs and were 90-plus in RBIs, and each had solid on-base percentages. Piniella was a regular for the first time and had a .361 OBP/.445 slugging percentage in left. The Yankees had speedsters in Rivers, fourth outfielder Roy White and notable veterans in Munson and Chambliss. But it should be noted that none really had signature years in '78.

When we call 1978 a year of two seasons, it's important to emphasize that New York did not necessarily play badly in the first half. They were 29-17 at the end of May, a .630 pace. But the Boston Red Sox were blazing, out to a 34-16 record in the same timeframe, a .680 win percentage. The Yankees struggled along to a 14-15 record in June and fell nine games back of Boston.

July started even worse, as New York was swept on the road by the surprising Milwaukee Brewers and at home by the two-time defending AL West champions Kansas City Royals. The vaunted Yankee staff gave up 34 runs in those six losses.

On the night of July 17, the deficit hit 14 games. Boston was running away with it, with the Brewers in second place. Tensions between manager Billy Martin and owner George Steinbrenner were sky-high, with Jackson often being the object of contention.

Martin hated the right fielder and on a road trip, over drinks, he blurted to a reporter about the two of them “One’s a born liar, the other’s convicted.” (The latter was a reference to Steinbrenner’s conviction for an illegal campaign contribution to Richard Nixon’s re-election in 1972). When word got back to the Boss about the comments, there was really no choice left—Billy was fired.

It was now time to move into the second phase of the Yankee season, as easygoing Bob Lemon, recently canned by the Chicago White Sox, was hired as the replacement. But let’s not forget that Lemon did inherit a team that was starting to play well—the Yankees won their last five games under Martin and the size of their deficit was still much more about Boston playing at an insanely hot level. What if the Red Sox turned human?

That’s what happened, and the worm began to turn. New York chipped away at the lead, knocked it down 7 ½ games by August 25 and then turned on the juice. The Yanks won 12 of 14 and trimmed the lead to four games, just in time for a four-game set in Fenway Park over Labor Day weekend.

It’s become known in Red Sox lore as “The Boston Massacre” and there’s no exaggeration there. The Yankees took a 12-0 lead after four innings in the series opener and won 15-3, beating Mike Torrez, who had left New York for Boston the previous offseason. On Friday night, New York scored eight runs in the first two innings, keyed by a three-run shot from Jackson.

Guidry tossed a complete-game two-hitter on Saturday, supported by seven runs in the first four innings. Sunday was a little closer—New York only scored five times in the first two innings and won 7-4. And talk about consistency in an offense—the Yankees scored those runs on the strength of 18 hits—all singles. The AL East race was a dead heat and to say the momentum was in the Yankees’ corner understated the case.

Five days later the teams reunited in the Bronx and Guidry picked up right where he left off—he threw *another* complete-game two-hitter, an amazing display of dominance under any circumstances, but especially against the most potent offense of the late 1970s.

The Red Sox finally began to resemble a baseball team again on Saturday afternoon. It’s a game I still remember watching at my grandmother’s house. I was eight years old and was sitting here with an aunt from Chicago, a diehard White Sox fan. We both professed our hatred of the Yankees, and the game went to the ninth inning tied 2-2. Me and Aunt Julia ended up unhappy—Rivers hit a leadoff triple in the ninth and scored on a sac fly by Munson for another New York win. Boston finally won on Sunday, but the Yankees had a 2 ½ game lead.

Boston revived itself and began winning again, and chipped the lead back down to a game by the final week. From Monday thru Saturday, the Yankees and Red Sox kept answering each other with wins. The Red Sox won again on Sunday. New York needed only to win in Cleveland

and they sent Hunter to the mound. But the veteran didn't have it, and the Yankees were in a 6-2 hole by the third inning. Indians' lefty Rick Waits went the distance for Cleveland—and got a thank you posted on the Fenway Park scoreboard.

1978 AL EAST TIE-BREAKER

The 1978 Yankees-Red Sox playoff to settle the AL East title and trip to the American League Championship Series carries a special place in baseball lore. New York would send Guidry to Boston countered with an old Yankee friend in Torrez. It was the Red Sox who struck first, as Carl Yastrzemski, hungry for a World Series win, homered to lead off the top of the second.

The Yanks threatened in the third when Rivers hit a two-out double, but Munson struck out. Boston challenged Guidry again in the bottom of the inning, when George Scott, the first baseman known as “Boomer” for his big swing, doubled to lead off the inning. He was bunted over to third, but neither Rick Burleson nor Jerry Remy could pick him up.

The score stayed 1-0 until the sixth when Burleson doubled, Remy bunted him to third and Jim Rice singled him home. The lead was 2-0, but the inning ended when Fred Lynn flied out with two men on base.

It bears wondering if it was necessary for Boston manager Don Zimmer to be so bunt-oriented in this game, something decidedly un-Red Sox. The sac bunt in the third was done by ninth-place hitter Jack Brohammer and was understandable. But having Remy bunt when a man was already in scoring position, took away an out when Boston might have had a bigger inning. Then the fateful seventh inning arrived.

With one out, the Yanks got back-to-back singles, before Torrez induced pinch-hitter Jim Spencer to fly out. With the light-hitting Dent at the plate, the Sox were on the verge of getting out of the inning. Dent hit a lazy fly ball to left that Yastrzemski was sure he had. The ball drifted...and drifted...and drifted...and landed in the netting of the Green Monster. A stunned crowd saw the Yanks take a 3-2 lead.

Dent's home run has earned him the nickname “Bucky (expletive) Dent” in New England, but there was more drama packed in these final three innings than there were in the first six.

While the Red Sox couldn't finish off big innings, the Yanks added one more before the seventh was out, with Rivers drawing a walk, stealing second and then scoring on a double by Munson. In the eighth, Reggie hit a home run. The door for the New York offense had been opened and they bashed it down.

Just as Boston's regular season was about more than a blown lead, but about a comeback after that, so too was this game. The Red Sox didn't lay down and die, even trailing 5-2 and facing feared Yankee closer Goose Gossage, who came in during the seventh inning, as was the norm for closers in those days.

In the eighth, Remy doubled and Yastrzemski drove him home. Consecutive singles by Lynn and Fisk cut the lead to one run, and even though they couldn't tie it up, the top of the order would have a chance in the ninth.

After an uneventful top of the ninth, Burleson drew a one-out walk. Remy singled to right and Lou Piniella lost it in the sun. Another stroke of Yankee good luck saw the ball fall right in front of Piniella and Burleson could only advance to second.

It proved to be an enormous play when Rice hit a long flyout to right and Burleson could only go to third rather than scoring. With Yastrzemski at the plate, the stage was set for a storybook finish. But pre-2004, Red Sox-Yankee stories always ended badly in Boston. Yaz popped out to third and it was over. For the third straight year, and in the most dramatic fashion ever, the Yankees were AL East champs.

THE 1978 AL MVP DEBATE

Another facet of this race that deserves more historical consideration is the battle that went on for the 1978 AL MVP.

Jim Rice won the award and Guidry finished second. Rice won with room to spare, getting 20 of 28 first-place votes, with the rest going to Guidry. Was it the right decision?

It wasn't a hotly debated decision at the time and probably wouldn't be today, because enough voters have a natural bias against giving a pitcher the MVP award. If you share that view, then clearly this is a non-debate and we'd have to argue that philosophical premise before going into the specifics of Rice vs. Guidry.

But what if you're like me, and you feel starting pitchers should be on equal ground in MVP voting, given the inordinate impact they have on every game they pitch? Then the 1978 AL MVP vote should be subject to further review.

Here's the basics for each player...

Jim Rice: .370 on-base percentage, .600 slugging percentage, 46 home runs, 139 RBI. The slugging, HR and RBI totals all led the league. He also led the league in reliability, playing all 163 games and his 213 hits were the league's best. The final batting average was .315

Ron Guidry: His 25-3 record and 1.74 ERA were each, by far, the best in the league. He made 35 starts, including his win in the one-game playoff at Fenway. Guidry logged 273 innings (believe it or not, that was only seventh in the AL in those workhorse days) and he pitched nine shutouts.

The core statistical resumes for each player are dazzling and more than enough for either one to be MVP in a typical year. We need to go one level deeper and assess how their impact fit into their teams...

*Each was the focal point of a team strength. The Red Sox were carried by the second-best offense in the American League, while the Yankees key was a league-best pitching staff. Each team was good on the other side of the ball, so to speak. Boston ranked fourth in staff ERA and New York was fourth in runs scored. But this race was fundamentally about Yankee arms and Red Sox bats.

*Each had to carry a heavy load. Boston's lineup was significantly weak in at least four positions. New York's staff was top-heavy reliant on Guidry, Figueroa and closer Gossage. If either Rice or Guidry had been anything less than great, there could have been a free-fall for their teams.

We aren't getting any closer to separation, so let's go to the one-game playoff itself. Guidry pitched into the seventh inning and was good, but not vintage. The Red Sox got him for two runs and the early chances they missed against him are an untold part of this classic game.

Rice's day was similar—he had an RBI single in the sixth and made a couple nice defensive plays battling a brutal sun in the outfield. But a couple balls that he made reasonably good contact with ended as outs.

One of those came in the ninth inning. The Red Sox trailed 5-4 and had a man on second base with one out. Rice hit a long fly ball to right, but he was just under it a bit. It was deep enough to send the runner to third, but with this being the second out, that wasn't enough.

And that's why, in the most hair-splitting of decisions, I have to lean Guidry for the award. Both players had extraordinary seasons, worthy of the MVP if you could look at it in a vacuum. But we only get to pick one. Guidry barely survived in the great battle of October 2, while Rice narrowly missed adding to his legacy. But that's enough in a race this close. Let's retroactively give Ron Guidry the 1978 AL MVP award.

1978 ALCS

After winning in Fenway on Monday afternoon, the Yankees had to fly to Kansas City and be ready to go on Tuesday night. It was tailor-made for Royals to take control, as they sent staff ace Dennis Leonard to the mound to face 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 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 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 George 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.

Larry Gura, the Kansas City left, was originally in the Yankee system and had gone on to consistently pitch well against his old team. He 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 Amos Otis and scored on a sac fly by Darrell Porter.

Kansas City added on in the second. Singles by Clint Hurdle and Al Cowens were followed by a Dent error that let in a run and put runners on second and third. Frank White drove in both runs with a base hit. Another single by Hal McRae set up a two-out RBI hit from Freddie 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, KC manager Whitey Herzog pulled Gura for Marty Pattin, who got the final two outs—though 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. Pete LaCock doubled, Hurdle tripled, and Patek, a light-hitting shortstop, 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 down to a best-of-three starting Friday afternoon in the Bronx.

Game 3 of the 1978 ALCS proved to be one of those special games, fraught with storylines, and on an individual level, Brett started one of them by homering to open the game. Paul Splittorff was on the mound for the Royals and his reputation against the Yankees in general—and Jackson in particular—was so great that Jackson had been benched for the deciding game of the 1977 ALCS when Splittorff was on the mound. 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 Munson with an RBI single, and then later scored on a single by Piniella 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 the Yankee right fielder hit a sac fly following singles by Roy White and Munson. The Yankees clung to a 4-3 lead and manager Bob Lemon went to 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. He came to the plate in the eighth to face Doug 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 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.

There was no ALCS MVP chosen until 1980. The most logical candidate here would have to be Jackson. The Yankee slugger had provided an answer for Brett in Game 3, and had iced Game 1. Jackson was 6-for-13 for the series, hitting two home runs, drawing three walks and driving in six.

A reasonable case could be made for table-setting centerfielder Rivers, who had a .538 on-base percentage in the four games, although Jackson's mark on the series was much more dramatic. And of course there's Brett, who finished 7-for-18 and one of the great LCS shows of all time in Game 3, but it's tough to pick a player on a losing team when there's a viable alternative on the winner. Reggie was certainly that.

1978 WORLD SERIES

The World Series opened on a Tuesday night in Dodger Stadium. Tommy John, the veteran lefty, was on the mound for Los Angeles, while New York answered with Figueroa. But Figueroa had pitched poorly in his ALCS start, the one game the Yankees lost, and Game 1 of the World Series was no different.

Los Angeles got going in the bottom of the second when Dusty Baker homered. Rick Monday then blooped a double into left-center and Lee Lacy drew a walk. It looked like Figueroa might get out of it when he got a double play ball, but Davey Lopes promptly hit the first pitch into the

left field bleachers for a 3-0 Dodger lead. Lopes then added to the misery in the fourth, when a walk and an error set up his three-run shot off reliever Ken Clay.

The game ended 11-5, but New York never made it close. They didn't score until it was 7-0 and each team traded three-spots in the seventh. The Yankees picked up a couple meaningless runs in the eighth.

Game 2 was much better, and produced one of the World Series' most memorable confrontations. The Yanks got on the board first off of Burt Hooton when Roy White singled, Munson drew a two-out walk and Reggie pulled a double down the right field line to score both runs. The Dodgers got a run back in the fourth, but a double play ball off the bat of Baker killed a bigger inning.

Hunter was on the mound and he took a 2-1 lead into the sixth. Lopes and Reggie Smith each singled with one out, and then Ron Cey hit a three-run homer to left for a 4-2 Dodger lead. The Yankees cut that lead in half in the seventh, getting runners to second and third. Jackson drove in a run with a groundout, but Los Angeles maintained its 4-3 lead.

Dent singled for New York in the ninth and Paul Blair worked a one-out walk. 21-year-old righthander Bob Welch came on, bringing his heat to face the muscle in the Yankee order. Welch got Thurman Munson to fly out and then came his epic battle with Jackson.

The count went full. Jackson repeatedly kept fouling balls off. It was the veteran of October and MVP of the previous year's Series, facing the kid. On the ninth pitch, Welch reared back one more time. Jackson swung and missed. Dodger Stadium exploded. Los Angeles had a 2-0 Series lead.

Only once had a team come from 0-2 down to win a World Series and that was 1955—these same two franchises when the Dodgers, then in Brooklyn, won a seven-game set with the Yankees. At least New York was going home and had Guidry on the mound.

Rivers singled to lead off the Yankee first, but was promptly caught stealing. White finally got momentum going for the Pinstripes when he homered. In the second inning, a pair of walks issued by Dodger starter Don Sutton led to productive ground ball outs from Brian Doyle and Bucky Dent, the light-hitting middle infield combo, and it was 2-0.



The Dodgers manufactured a run off Guidry when veteran outfielder Bill North singled, stole second and scored on a base hit from Bill Russell. They were poised to get more when Nettles saved the Series.

LA loaded the bases in the fifth with two outs. Steve Garvey ripped a shot down the third base line. Nettles speared it and got the force out at second. The Dodgers loaded the bases in the sixth. Lopes ripped a liner down the third base line. Nettles did the same thing. He had saved at least four, and perhaps

five runs. The Yankees got three runs in the seventh to put the game away and with the 5-1 final, it was a Series again.

Game 4 was on Saturday afternoon, and proved to be a very good back-and-forth game, replete with controversy. It started with great plays in right field on both sides. Los Angeles had two on and a man aboard against Figueroa. Garvey hit a line drive to right field. Piniella made the catch and then doubled off Bill Russell at first to kill the rally. Then New York had runners at the corners when Munson hit a fly ball to Reggie Smith in right. The Dodger right fielder gunned Blair at the plate. The first inning ended scoreless.

The Dodgers broke through in the fifth when Steve Yeager doubled, Lopes walked and then Smith drilled a three-run shot for a 3-0 lead. It was the sixth inning when the Yankees started to rally against John. With one out, White singled, Munson walked and Jackson singled to drive in a run. Then the controversy broke out.

Piniella hit a soft liner to Russell. The Dodger shortstop was near second base and alertly let the ball hit his glove and drop so he could turn an inning-ending double play. He touched second base and threw to first. But Jackson was standing in the way, not moving and appeared to maneuver his hip to get in the way of the throw. The ball bounced away and a run scored. Lasorda argued furiously that Jackson was guilty of interference, but the play stood and the lead was now 3-2.

In the bottom of the eighth, with Los Angeles closer Terry Forster in the game for John, Blair singled and was bunted over by White. Munson drove in the tying run with a double. After Jackson was plunked, Forster got Piniella to fly out and the game ended up going to extra innings.

With two outs, New York started the winning rally. White walked. Jackson, appropriately enough involved in the final drama, singled. Piniella singled to center and the World Series was tied two games apiece.

Los Angeles could still turn to 19-game winner Hooton to regain momentum, while New York turned to Beattie. The Dodgers touched Beattie early. Lopes singled to lead off the game, stole second and scored on a base hit by Smith. Lopes again singled in the third and scored, this time on a double by Russell.

But Beattie had won a big division race game against the Red Sox and the opener of the ALCS against the Royals. He was young, but he was now battle-tested. He settled down and Los Angeles collapsed.

In the third, four singles, a walk, combined with a double steal by Rivers and White produced four runs for New York. In the fourth, another four singles produced a three-spot. In the seventh, three singles, a passed ball, a wild pitch and a double by Munson produced four more runs. The final was 12-2, with the Yankees literally pecking the Dodgers to death.

Los Angeles still had two games at home to look forward to, although New York knew they had Guidry in their back pocket for Game 7 if it came to that. It didn't. Lopes again tried to lift his team, homering in the first, but Sutton couldn't stop the Yankee lineup.

The top of the second saw Nettles single, then a walk was followed by a game-tying double from Doyle and a two-run single by Dent. The Dodgers picked up a run in the third, but a double play ground ball induced by Hunter kept the Yankee lead at 3-2.

It was still close in the sixth when Piniella hit a leadoff single. With two outs, he moved up on a wild pitch and Doyle drove him in. A bad decision to throw the ball to the plate allowed Doyle to move up to second where he scored on a single from Dent.

The score was 5-2 and with Gossage still in reserve, the game didn't seem in a whole lot of doubt, but Reggie made sure to put the finishing touches on. He came to the plate with White aboard in the seventh and homered to right. The pitcher on the mound? None other than Welch. Reggie knew how to answer.

Game 6 ended with a 7-2 final and another Yankee title. In a Series where the Yankees peck-peck-peck attack had reigned, it was appropriate that Dent was the MVP. The light-hitting shortstop had gone 10-for-24 and driven in seven runs. Doyle was 7-for-26, while Jackson and Munson each had big Series as well. But Dent was the appropriate choice.

New York was now the first team to win four straight World Series games after losing the first two. It was a fitting way to end a year that included a historic comeback from 14 games down in the AL East in July.

No one would have guessed that it would be eighteen years before the Yankees would win another title, with names like Joe Torre and Derek Jeter involved. In 1978, they had three straight pennants and two straight World Series titles.

1979

The 1979 New York Yankees still offered the drama and two different managers. And they were still a pretty good baseball team. But it never quite came together on the field and their season is ultimately remembered for the tragedy that happened off of it.

The problems started offensively. The Bronx Bombers fell silent in '79 and only ranked 10th in the 14-team American League for runs scored. Reggie was his reliable self in right field, hitting 29 home runs and posting an on-base percentage of .382. Randolph's OBP was .374 and he stole 33 bases. Nettles hit 20 home runs, Pinella flirted with a .300 batting average and Chambliss hit .280 with 18 home runs.

On the surface, you might be wondering what the problem was. Quite a bit actually. Nettles' 20 home runs came with a mediocre stat line of .325 OBP/.401 slugging percentage. If Graig wasn't going deep, he wasn't doing anything. Pinella's OBP was similarly meager at .320 due to a lack of patience at the plate.

The lineup could have survived Dent's bad year at the plate, but the fact centerfielder and ignitor Rivers also fell off was too big a blow. And at catcher, Munson, who summoned up all his veteran will to deliver some big hits the previous October, saw shoulder injuries take their toll and his power continued to collapse.

Some of the key pitchers of the previous seasons were also fading. Hunter made 19 starts, and the 5.31 ERA that resulted was the indicator that the eventual Hall of Famer was finished. Figueroa, a 20-game winner in '78, also saw the functional end of his career arrive. Beattie, a young pitcher who won big games down the stretch and in the postseason of 1978, struggled to a 5.21 ERA. Tidrow, valuable as a reliever and a starter, was terrible in 1979 and eventually traded to the Cubs.

It probably isn't fair to lump Guidry's season in with those mentioned above. Guidry won 18 games and his ERA was 2.78. But in 1978, Guidry had one of the great pitching seasons of all-time. His "failure" to repeat a year where he won 25 games with a 1.74 ERA was another decline for the staff as a whole.

But in the end, pitching wouldn't be the problem, thanks to big contributions from newcomers. Ron Davis, a hard-throwing 23-year-old reliever, won 14 games, saved 9 and posted a 2.85 ERA. Veteran free agents were added to the rotation. Tommy John came over from the Dodgers and promptly won 21 games in Pinstripes. Luis Tiant, formerly a Red Sox, made 30 starts and while his 3.91 ERA wasn't spectacular, Tiant was a reliable #3 starter. These additions are the reason the Yanks' staff ERA was still second-best in the American League.

The latter part of April provided the first indicator of how rough the season would be. Gossage, got into a clubhouse fight with designated hitter Cliff Johnson. Gossage ended up with torn ligaments in his thumb and missed two months. The missing time is the reason he only finished with 18 saves on the year and those two months deprived the Yanks of a 1-2 punch with Goose and Davis. Johnson ended up getting shipped out of town.

The Yankees were only 24-21 and in fourth place on Memorial Day, but they were still very much in the hunt. The Baltimore Orioles were setting the pace in the AL East and were five games up on New York. The Boston Red Sox and Milwaukee Brewers were nestled in between.

In the first part of June, New York struggled through a mediocre road trip to Kansas City, Minnesota and Texas, losing five of nine games. With a record of 34-31 and Baltimore starting to heat up, owner George Steinbrenner took action. He fired Lemon, who had just been hired the previous July and brought back Martin.

But it was going to be a tough hill to climb. The MLB format prior to 1994 had each league split into just an East and West and only the first-place teams went to the postseason. The AL East was by far the toughest division in baseball. New York's record of 49-43 at the All-Star break wasn't bad, if mildly disappointing. But it stuck them eleven games back of the Orioles.

In any other division, the Yanks, along with the Red Sox and Brewers, would have squarely in the race.

No one in baseball would write off this team though. Not when they had rallied from 14 games back in July of 1978 to catch Boston. That was the deficit the Yanks faced when they got set to host the Orioles for a four-game set to open the month of August. This would be their last stand.

But tragedy overshadowed all else. Munson, who owned a private plane, was flying to his home in Ohio on an off-day before the series began. The plane crashed and Munson died. A horrific tragedy under any circumstance, Munson was also the team captain, a favorite of Martin and his blue-collar play made him a hero to countless Yankee fans. A pall was cast over not only the Yankee season, but all of baseball.

New York played well under Martin, going 55-40 after he took over and they finished with 89 wins. It was the fourth-best record in the American League and playoff-caliber by the standards of today. But in 1979, they were well off the pace of the 102-win Orioles. And after the tragedy of early August, the on-field results seemed not to matter much.

1980

Steinbrenner had a new manager in town. After the combination of Billy Martin and Bob Lemon had overseen the previous four years, The Boss turned to quiet, low-key Dick Howser to run the team in 1980. It was just one part of a lot of changes the Boss made for 1980.

New York traded away Rivers in a deal where they got Eric Soderholm. The latter wasn't a big name and never had a big career, but he was a solid contributor in 1980, with a .353 on-base percentage/.462 slugging percentage.

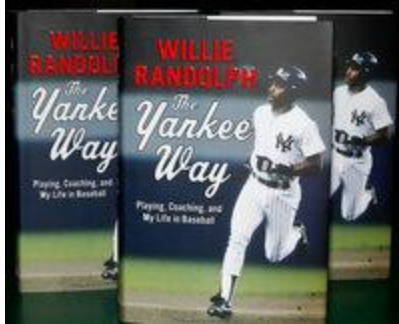
The Yanks dealt Chambliss as part of a package where they acquired a young catcher in Rick Cerone and a young pitcher in Tom Underwood. The former became the replacement to Munson, and was functionable, if not a standout. Underwood won 13 games and was the #3 starter on a staff that finished second in the American League in ERA.

Tommy John and Guidry anchored the staff. John, who had been a rival of the Yankees when he pitched for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1977 and 1978 World Series, won 22 games in Pinstripes. Guidry won 17. In the bullpen, Gossage saved 33 games with a 2.27 ERA. And Howser turned often to a talented young flamethrower in Ron Davis who worked 131 innings and finished with a 2.95 ERA.

Depth was lacking in the Yankee staff, and that made the role Rudy May played all the more important. May made 17 starts, came on in relief 24 more times, and won 15 games with a 2.46 ERA.

Offensively, the Yankees got down years from a number of spots, including Nettles at third base, now 35-years-old. Piniella had a respectable .343 OBP, but not much in the way of power. Ruppert Jones was an inadequate replacement for Rivers in center. Dent was an offensive liability at shortstop.

Three players stepped up with big years and helped the Yankees still produce the second-best offense in the AL in spite of it all. Bob Watson, the 34-year-old who replaced Chambliss at first, finished with a .368/.456 stat line. Randolph had the best year of his young career at second base, and the 25-year-old finished with a .427 OBP.



No one was better than Reggie. The right fielder was now 34-years-old, but produced one of the best seasons of his own career. He batted .300 for the first time and it didn't come at the expense of his power. Reggie hit 41 home runs and finished with 111 RBIs.

Normally, that would be an MVP year, if not for the fact George Brett made a run at .400 and was an easy pick for the award. Reggie finished second in the voting, and was the biggest reason the Yankees thrived in a tough division.

New York was a little slow out of the gate, losing six of the first nine. Then they met the defending AL pennant winners, the Baltimore Orioles, and swept three one-run games in the Bronx. The Yanks won seven of eight after that, and by Memorial Day they had a 3 ½ game lead that seemed larger. The nearest team was the Toronto Blue Jays, who were not a serious contender.

The Milwaukee Brewers and Boston Red Sox were 4 ½ back, but neither team would be as good as in previous years. The Orioles were slow out of the gate and were six games out.

New York further opened up the race in the early part of the summer. They won nine in a row against lower-level AL West teams and went to Fenway Park to hang a three-game sweep on the Red Sox. By the All-Star break, the Yanks were in command, with a record of 51-27. The lead in the AL East 7 ½, and it was nine over the Orioles.

The lead peaked at 9 ½ games on July 19. New York started to play a little sluggish, going 5-7 the balance of the month and Baltimore started to gain ground. The Orioles were within 5 ½ games on August 8 when they came to the Bronx for a three-game series.

An opportunity for New York to put the race away instead turned into an opportunity for it to tighten, as consistent late-inning failures led to a Baltimore sweep. The Yanks led the Friday night opener 2-1 in the eighth. Oriole first baseman Eddie Murray homered off Guidry to tie it and Baltimore scored three times off Gossage to win.

The Birds broke a 2-2 tie in the eighth with a pair of runs to win 4-2 on Saturday. In the Sunday finale, John was clinging to a 5-4 lead and was left in the game to try and finish the ninth inning. Baltimore scored twice, completed the sweep and closed to within 2 ½ games.

New York made a return trip to Baltimore just three days later, this time for a five-game series. Even though Jackson hit an early home run in the opener, the losing continued. Steve Stone, the eventual AL Cy Young winner, two-hit the Yanks and Baltimore won 6-1.

The Yankees finally got a couple wins. Jackson hit a two-run homer to key a 4-3 win, and then Gaylord Perry delivered. The veteran, known for his spitball and a career 300-game winner was at the tail end of his career. He only made eight starts for the Yanks in 1980, but none was bigger than the middle game of this series, when he won 4-1.

Perry's win averted disaster, as Baltimore won the next two games, 1-0 and 6-5 and the lead was still at 2 ½ games. In late August, it would shrink to a half-game and for six tantalizing days, it stayed right here, as the Yankees and Orioles either won or lost in tandem with each other.

There were no more head-to-head matchups between the two heavyweights and it was New York who struck the big blow in early September. A stretch of games against the Oakland A's—now managed by Martin, the California Angels, Toronto and Boston, provided an opportunity to get wins and the Yanks took full advantage. They went 15-2 and while it didn't knock the Orioles out, it gave New York some breathing room.

The Yankees led by as many as six games in September, but the Orioles knocked it back down to 2 ½ games with five days left. On the Wednesday of the final week, Reggie and Oscar Gamble each unloaded for a 4-RBI night in Cleveland and the Yankees hung 18 runs on the board. On Thursday, they came home to face Detroit for the final series. Again, Gamble and Reggie homered and Guidry beat Tiger ace Jack Morris.

The Orioles were idle on Thursday, so the lead was three games entering the final weekend—New York needed just one win, or one Baltimore loss, and there was still a one-game playoff in reserve if that didn't work out. After rain on Friday wiped out games in both cities, the Yankees finished the job on Saturday. Trailing 2-1 in the fifth, Reggie hit a three-run shot, May went seven strong innings and the 4-2 win clinched the division.

New York won 103 games, better than any of the three pennant-winning seasons already chronicled here. They had a date with an old friend--the 97-win Royals were up next.

1980 ALCS

The ALCS would open with two games in KC, and then end 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 their own southpaw, Larry Gura.

Randolph doubled to lead off the game, but Gura escaped the inning. One inning later though, Cerone and 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. Amos Otis singled and John 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 George Brett aboard and two outs, Otis hit a ground-rule double and Willie Mays Aikens knocked both runners in with a single.

Gura was settled in and in the seventh, a Brett home run off 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 20-game winner Dennis 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 Darrell Porter and White had singled, Willie Wilson tripled down the right field line. Shortstop U.L. Washington followed with a double and it was 3-0.

May settled in though and the Royals never threatened again. 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 in 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 singled with one out. Kansas City went to closer Dan 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 win 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 Paul Splitorff. 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. In 1977, Jackson had been held out of the decisive Game 5, because of the widespread belief—backed up by past performance—that he couldn't hit Splitorff. Properly motivated, Jackson hit Splitorff in the 1978 ALCS, and now Reggie hit a one-out double to start a rally.

Royal manager Jim Frey quickly went to closer Dan 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 at the fault of Quisenberry. An infield hit and an error by White tied the game, and 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 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. At long last, Kansas City was going to the World Series.

1981

New York made their usual big splash in the free agency market when they signed outfielder Dave Winfield to a then-record \$25 million contract. Winfield had a good year, with a stat line of .360 on-base percentage/.464 slugging percentage, but the offense as a whole struggled.

The Yankees finished 11th in the American League in runs scored. They got subpar years production from the entire infield—Watson, Randolph, Dent and Nettles. Reggie had a down year in right field, with a .330/.428 stat line. The Yanks got punch from designated hitter Bobby Murcer, with his .470 slugging percentage and Oscar Gamble, at .357/.439. In fact, the team finished second in the league in home runs, but there were just not enough runners aboard for it to really count.

Fortunately for the Yanks, and their new manager Gene Michael, pitching cured a lot of ills. A trio of lefthanders—John, Guidry and Dave Righetti, one a veteran sinkerballer, the other two younger power pitchers—led the best staff in the AL. Rudy May and Rick Reuschel filled out the staff.

And you needed to beat New York early, because you sure weren't doing it late. Gossage saved 20 games in a season of 100-plus games and had a 0.77 ERA. Ron Davis was an on-the-rise flamethrower himself, and he finished with a 2.71 ERA. George Frazier provided quality depth to the bullpen with a buck-63 ERA.

New York started well and won eight of their first twelve. They hovered around the lead in the AL East, a half-game either way, from late April to mid-May. Then right after Memorial Day, the Yankees had a hiccup in Baltimore, losing three straight to the Orioles and falling 4 ½ games behind the Birds.

The 1981 season was overshadowed by rumors of a strike. The tension between players and owners was building to its peak, and there was a deadline of June 12 for an agreement to be reached, overshadowing the sport in the early days of June. No one knew that the games being played were about to be decisive.

Baltimore made a return visit to New York in June. The Yankees trailed the Tuesday night opener 3-2 in the ninth before Nettles tied it up with a single. Then Dave Reever won the game with a two-blast in the 11th. The Wednesday night game also went 11 innings, this time Nettles hitting the two-run blast that won it. The Yankees made it easy on Thursday, taking a 7-0 lead after four innings winning 12-3 and moving into a tie for first place.

New York kept the winning going, taking five straight games before the strike hit. They held a two-game lead in the AL East because of it. The strike was not settled until mid-August, and it was then the Yankees reaped the fruit of their strong early June push.

MLB picked up the pieces of its shattered season by deciding to give everyone a clean slate. The way that was accomplished was to say that the four teams leading their divisions were champions. They would play whomever won the division's "second half" in a new playoff round—the Division Series.

What it meant for New York was that there was nothing for them to play for. Even if they finished first in the second half, MLB would still require a Division Series, against the second-half runner-up. The only carrot given to the first-half winners was the prospect of an additional home game in the Division Series--they could get four of five at home instead of three of five--if they won both halves.

It wasn't a lot to play for, and New York played like it. They went 25-26 after the strike. One man who found this performance unacceptable was George Steinbrenner. The owner fired Michael with 25 games to play. Job security wasn't a virtue of the Yankee managerial post. Bob Lemon would guide the Yankees into the postseason. The first step was facing the AL East's second-half champion, a new playoff face in the Milwaukee Brewers.

1981 ALDS

The Yankees and Brewers met in the old Milwaukee County Stadium in prime-time. New York had Guidry, while Milwaukee would rely on Moose Haas, a consistent, if unspectacular righthander.

Milwaukee could hit, and they got after Guidry in the second, with a two-out double from Sal Bando and an RBI base hit from Charlie Moore. In the third, Jim Gantner doubled off Guidry to start the inning. Paul Molitor laid down a sac bunt that was flubbed and the Brewers had runners on the corners.

It might have been a big inning, but Guidry settled down. Robin Yount picked up Gantner with a sac fly, but at 2-0, the Yankees had the bats to bet back into it. And that's what they did immediately, starting in the top of the fourth.

After Haas walked Reggie, Gamble went deep and the game was quickly tied. Then Watson singled and pesky Larry Milbourne beat out an infield hit. Cerone doubled to clear the bases. Haas was gone and the Brewers were staring at a 4-2 hole.

Milwaukee's offense got Guidry out of the game in the fifth, when the sequence of a Yount single, a walk of Cecil Cooper and a base hit by Ted Simmons made it 4-3. Lemon called in Ron Davis.

The move paid off—Davis got out of the inning with the one-run lead intact and he worked 2.2 innings of perfect baseball. Milwaukee never threatened again, and New York picked up an insurance run in the ninth to win it 5-3.

A fast turnaround brought both teams back for Game 2 on Thursday afternoon. Both sent left handers to the hill, although that was about all Righetti and Mike Caldwell had in common. Righetti was a hard-throwing young arm. Milwaukee's Caldwell was a veteran finesse pitcher. Both were brilliant on this day.

The Yankees' Lou Piniella got to Caldwell for a two-out home run in the fourth inning and into the seventh inning, the 1-0 game stood up, with nary a threat from either side. In the bottom of the seventh, Davis came on, but lacked the control of the previous night. Two walks and a single loaded the bases.

Lemon upgraded to Gossage, a future Hall of Famer. With one out, Gossage got Yount to pop up and struck out Cooper. In the top of the ninth, the Yankees got a two-run blast from Jackson.



The insurance runs weren't technically needed, although they undoubtedly improved Lemon's peace of mind when the Brewers got singles from Bando and Molitor with one out in the ninth. But Yount again popped out, Gossage slammed the door and with the 3-0 win.

The Yankees had two wins on the road, the balance of the series at home and the Brewers didn't even get a day off to lick their wounds. Friday night saw the series pick right back up in the Bronx with Game 3. New York went with John, while the Brewers put their season into the hands of journeyman Randy Lerch.

But Lerch was terrific. New York got a run in the fourth when Watson delivered a two-out RBI single, but even with John pitching great, the Yankee lead was only 1-0 into the seventh. And then the Brewer offense awoke.

It started small, with an infield hit by Cooper, but quickly went big, as Simmons homered for a 2-1 Milwaukee lead. Gorman Thomas singled, and was sacrificed up by Ben Ogilvie. Bando drove in the run with a single and Milwaukee had a 3-1 lead, with the league MVP—closer Rollie Fingers—in reserve.

But Fingers struggled in the seventh, and New York got four straight one-out singles from Watson, Milbourne, Cerone and Randolph to immediately tie the game back up. Milwaukee could have been forgiven for folding—but they didn't—Molitor homered to start the eighth and put his team right back on top.

Yount beat out an infield hit. John was removed, and Simmons again had a big RBI, this time a double for a 5-3 lead. Given a reprieve, Fingers rolled through the eighth and ninth. We would come back to Yankee Stadium on Saturday.

Milwaukee's Pete Vuckovich was a year away from an 18-win Cy Young season. He shouldered his team's fate against Reuschel, who had been the ace of some disappointing Cubs' teams in the late 1970s and now had the chance to be on the October stage.

Both pitchers rolled through three innings and the Brewers began chipping away in the fourth. Molitor and Yount both singled. A sac fly from Cooper plated the first run and Ogilvie's two-out double staked Vuckovich to a 2-zip lead.

An error and a double by Dave Winfield gave the Yankees second and third with no outs in the sixth. Vuckovich was removed for lefthander Jamie Easterly. It wasn't a long or noteworthy career for Easterly, but this is at or near the top of his greatest moments.

He struck out Jackson, and even though Piniella picked up one run with an RBI groundout, Easterly had maintained the lead.

And a Brewer tag-team of Jim Slaton from the right side, Bob McClure from the left and eventually Fingers, slammed the door. Milwaukee won 2-1 and this strange series, with the road team winning every game, would go to a decisive finale on Sunday night.

It was a Hass-Guidry rematch and the Brewers again showed they could hit the renowned Yankee ace. Thomas homered in the second. In the third, utility man Ed Romero singled, Molitor walked, Young legged out an infield hit, Cooper picked up the RBI with a sac fly and it was 2-0...just like it had been in Game 1.

And just like the opener, Haas couldn't hold the lead and it was the fourth inning, with the Jackson/Gamble duo doing the Brewer pitcher in. It began with a leadoff single from Milbourne. Jackson then went deep tie the game and Gamble immediately followed with a home run to put New York on top.

Haas was gone and Caldwell was in, but the Brewer lefty didn't have the stuff of Game 2. Graig Nettles and Watson each singled and with runners on the corners, Rick Cerone picked up the RBI with a productive ground ball.

It was still only 4-2, and just like Game 1, the Brewers got a run back. In the seventh inning, with Righetti on for Guidry, Yount tripled and came in on a Cooper base hit. But New York immediately answered when Cerone took Slaton deep.

In a battle of teams with great closers, it was New York who turned a lead over to Gossage, while Fingers could only watch. The Goose gave up a couple walks in the eighth, but got Don Money to fly out and keep the 5-3 lead. New York tacked on two insurance runs in the bottom of the inning, and it was all over, but the shouting, ending 7-3.

1981 ALCS

The New York Yankees and Oakland A's had combined to mostly own the American League in the 1970s. The A's won three straight pennants from 1972-74, taking the World Series each time. The Yankees won three straight pennants from 1976-78 and grabbed two Series titles. But the teams' paths had never crisscrossed in October. That changed when they met in the 1981 ALCS.

An interesting subplot was that Oakland's revival was under the leadership of manager Billy Martin. New York fans would now be rooting against their old favorite.

The series would begin with two games in Yankee Stadium on Tuesday and Wednesday, and then go to Oakland for the balance of the series.

It was John pitching the opener for New York, with Mike Norris going for Oakland. Norris had pitched brilliantly all year and in the Division Series, but the Yankees got to him right away in Game 1.

Milbourne hit a one-out single, and Winfield drew a walk. After another walk to Gamble, and two outs in the inning, Nettles hit a bases-clearing double and New York had a 3-0 lead before anyone was settled in.

Norris did get settled in, and the Yankees never scored—or even seriously threatened again. But the first-inning damage was enough. John allowed two singles to start the top of the second, but got out of it. Oakland got a run in the fifth, when Rob Picciolo singled, Rickey Henderson doubled him to third with one out and Dwayne Murphy picked up the run with an RBI grounder.

It was still 3-1 in the eighth, with Davis on the mound for New York. Davis lost his control and walked two with one out. Gossage came on and retired five straight batters to close the Game 1 win.

The teams had a quick turnaround, coming back on Wednesday afternoon. Oakland turned to Steve McCatty, while New York went to May. The Yankees again wasted little time getting on the board. Jerry Mumphrey led off the first with a double, took third on a base hit to left by Milbourne and then came home when Reggie delivered a productive ground ball out.

Oakland tied it up in the third with a double by Rick Bosetti and a one-out triple from Henderson. But the A's couldn't get their first lead of the series, as May struck out Murphy and went to escape the inning.

In the fourth, the A's did break through against May. Three straight singles produced one run and left runners on second and third after a throw home. May was pulled and George Frazier, who had pitched well all year, came on in long relief. Frazier did his job. After an intentional walk and an infield hit made it 3-1, Frazier got Henderson to bounce back to the mound and Frazier started a 1-2-3 double play to end the inning.

And in the bottom of the frame, the avalanche came for New York. Nettles singled. McCatty hit a batter with one out. Randolph singled to cut the lead to 3-2. Mumphrey walked, and Martin came out to remove McCatty.

The Oakland staff was heavily dependent on the starters, and Dave Beard couldn't stop the carnage. Milbourne singled to tie the game. Winfield doubled and the score was 5-3. Then Piniella administered the coup de grace, with a three-run blast and it was 8-3.

Nor did New York stop—they scored a run in the sixth and four more in the seventh, thanks to a three-run blast by Nettles and the final was 13-3.

The Yankees were in command, but after the scare of the Division Series, the ALCS going back west, and Martin having a quality starter at his disposal each night, this wasn't over.

Only it was. The A's bats weren't going to wake up and Righetti dominated Oakland in Game 3. The A's never registered any rally worthy of the name.

Matt Keough, the Oakland starter, responded well and matched zeroes with Righetti for five innings but Randolph hit a home run with two outs in the sixth. The game stayed 1-0 into the ninth. After a walk and an error to start the inning, Keough was removed.

Piniella promptly singled, though Oakland threw out Mumprhey at the plate. The bases were re-loaded with two outs and Nettles ended any doubt when he delivered a double that cleared the bases. The game ended 4-0.

Nettles finished 6-for-12 in the series, had a home run, along with two bases-loaded doubles with two outs, each in huge spots. His double in the first inning of Game 1 set the tone and then he repeated the feat in Game 3 to seal the deal. He was an easy choice for 1981 ALCS MVP.

1981 WORLD SERIES

Can we interest you in Yankees-Dodgers again? The networks were certainly pleased with this third New York-Los Angeles showdown of the last five years. The World Series began in Yankee Stadium on a Tuesday evening.

It was a battle of left-handers as Guidry took the mound for New York against Jerry Reuss for Los Angeles. Reuss was a steady veteran who had been nothing short of brilliant in the '81 postseason, especially the Division Series.

But the Yankees continued their pattern, established in the ALCS, of getting out quickly. Mumphrey singled with one out in the first. Piniella hit a ground-rule double and with two outs, Watson went deep for a quick 3-0 lead. Reuss was chased in the third when Mumphrey again singled with one out, stole second and scored on a two-out hit by Piniella.

The Los Angeles bullpen had control problems, and Bobby Castillo walked four straight batters to make it 5-0 New York. Dave Goltz came on for the Dodgers and finally brought some steadiness to the mound And the offense began to chip its way back.

Steve Yeager homered in the fifth to put Los Angeles on the board. In the eighth, two walks, a single and a passed ball set up two runs and the Dodgers had two chances with the tying run at the plate in a 5-3 game. Lemon called on Gossage to try and get Steve Garvey and Ron Cey. The Goose did it, although Garvey hit a line drive out.

The ninth inning went without incident on the scoreboard and the Yankees won 5-3, but there was a big incident on the field. Third baseman Graig Nettles made a diving stop, the kind he had tormented Los Angeles with in the 1978 World Series. In the process he broke his thumb. While he played Game 2, he would miss the next three games after that. And he wouldn't make the same contribution with his bat when he was in the lineup.

Burt Hooton was Los Angeles' MVP of the National League Championship Series, with two dominant outings to both open and close the triumph over the Montreal Expos. He got the ball in Game 2, matched up with former Dodger teammate Tommy John.

John and Hooton matched zeroes for four innings and the Yankees got a soft run in the fifth—an error by Davey Lopes and a sac bunt from John allowed Milbourne to pick up the RBI with a two-out double.

The score stayed 1-0 into the bottom of the seventh when the Yankees loaded the bases with one out. Hooton was removed for veteran reliever Terry Forster, who got Milbourne to ground into a double play. But one inning later, the Dodgers couldn't escape another jam.

Piniella and Nettles each singled off Steve Howe. Watson drove in a run with a base hit and a later error on a pickup throw moved runners up and allowed Randolph to make it 3-0 with a sac fly. New York closed out a Game 2 win and was in command.

Los Angeles turned to the NL Cy Young winner, 20-year-old phenom Fernando Valenzuela to try and turn the World Series around. Righetti pitched for New York, creating a matchup of young power lefties. Playing in front of their home fans, this time it was the Dodgers who got on the attack right away.

Lopes lead off the bottom of the first with a double and Bill Russell beat out a bunt. After Dusty Baker and Garvey each missed chances to drive in the run, Ron Cey came to the plate. Cey launched a three-run blast and Los Angeles had momentum.

But New York came right back. Watson homered to start the second, Cerone doubled and Milbourne drove Cerone in with a single. In the top of the third, Piniella singled and Cerone went deep. It was 4-3 and the Dodgers then missed a big opportunity. They put two on with none out, chasing Righetti. Frazier came into the game and escaped the jam.

The Yankees still had the lead and after World Series losses to the Pinstripes in both 1977 and 1978, Dodger fans had to be wondering if this would ever turn around. In the bottom of the fifth, it did.

Garvey beat out an infield hit, Cey drew a walk and Pedro Guerrero slashed a double to tie it up. After an intentional walk, Frazier got a double-play groundout, but the lead run came through the backdoor.

The Yankees had one more rally in the eighth and Cey had more heroics. After consecutive singles to start the inning, Murcer looked to put down a sac bunt. The left handed hitter's bunt got up in the air on a soft line. Cey charged in, dove out, caught it on the fly and immediately got to his feet to double off Milbourne. Rally done, Valenzuela completed the game with a 5-4 win, Los Angeles was back in it.

Saturday afternoon saw Reuschel take the hill for the Yanks against Bob Welch for the Dodgers. Game 4 would have a lot of twists and turns in which the starters would be long gone by the time it was settled.

Randolph started the game by tripling Welch and Milbourne promptly doubled him in. Winfield drew a walk and Reggie Jackson singled to load the bases. With no room for error, Dodger manager Tom Lasorda removed Welch and summoned Goltz. A sac fly from Watson added another run, but Goltz kept it at 2-0.

Randolph homered in the third, and the Yankees got two more in the fourth, with Rick Cerone drove in both Jackson and Watson. In the bottom of that same inning, Los Angeles started to come back from the 4-0 deficit.

Ken Landreaux started it with a leadoff double and came around a base hit by Lopes, who quickly stole second base. An infield hit and a productive ground ball scored Lopes, cutting the lead in half. An inning later the Dodgers got runners to second and third with one out. Reuschel was removed, and May came on and escaped with the 4-2 margin intact.

Cey delivered again in the fifth, following a one-out double by Garvey with an RBI base hit. But the Yankees quickly extended the lead in the sixth, with an error by Russell opening the door consecutive RBI singles from Oscar Gamble and Watson.

Trailing 6-3, Los Angeles pushed back again in the bottom of the sixth. Davis came on, but couldn't get it done. He walked Mike Scioscia and gave up a home run to Jay Johnstone.

Then the defense failed, as Jackson committed an error that put the speedy Lopes aboard. Lopes stole second *and* third, then tied the game when Russell singled. Davis was out, and Frazier was in.

Frazier couldn't stop the Dodger momentum though. LA picked right back up in the seventh, with an infield hit by Baker and a double by Rick Monday. After Guerrero was intentionally walked, Yeager delivered a sac fly to give Los Angeles the lead for the first time.

Steve Howe, the closer, batted for himself and bunted the runners up, allowing Lopes' infield hit to score a key insurance run. It proved to matter when Jackson homered with two outs in the eighth, but Howe closed the door after that. A wild 8-7 win for the Dodgers had the Series tied.

After the crazy back-and-forth of Game 4, a steady pitchers' duel was the perfect foil and that's what the Guidry-Reuss rematch of Game 5 on late Sunday afternoon provided. The Yankees again scored first, with Jackson hitting a ground-rule double and coming around on a Lopes error and Piniella infield hit. But that was the end of scoring—or even serious threatening—until the seventh.

Guerrero and Yeager came up in the bottom of the seventh and delivered the decisive blows of the World Series—they homered back-to-back. It was Guidry's only weak spot all day, but it was enough. Reuss completed a five-hitter and Los Angeles improbably had the Series lead.

The first four innings of Game 6 made it look like the Yankees might provide some pushback with the Series back in the Bronx. Randolph hit a solo home run in the third off Hooton, and while the Dodgers got singles from Baker, Monday and Yeager to tie it in the fourth, this was still a 1-1 game with the veteran John on the mound for New York.

Then the Yankees cracked. John was pinch-hit for in the bottom of the inning with runners on first and second and two outs. It's a legitimate scoring opportunity and Murcer, a good hitter, was the one who came off the bench. He hit the ball well, though it ended up a fly ball out to deep right. But that's just way too early to pull a veteran starting pitcher in a big game. And the roof caved in immediately.

Lopes started the top of the fifth by singling off Frazier. Lopes was bunted up and scored on a two-out single from Cey. Baker extended the inning with a single and Guerrero delivered the big blow with a triple that put LA up 4-1.

Davis came out of the Yankee bullpen in the sixth and issued a pair of walks, including one to Hooton. Russell drove in a run with a single, and now Reuschel came out of the Yankee pen to try and stop the bleeding. A double steal, a walk and an RBI grounder made it 6-1. Nettles, back in the lineup with his broken thumb committed a two-out error to reload the bases. Guerrero delivered again, with a two-run single to make it 8-1.

The Yankees got a run in the sixth, and Guerrero finished his magical night with a home run in the eighth. The final was 9-2. Howe worked the final 3.2 IP to close it out and Watson fled to Landreaux, the Dodgers were World Series champs.

Frazier proved an unfortunate goat for New York. He had been reliable in long relief all year and other than Game 6, didn't pitch all that badly in this series. But he ended up the losing pitcher in three games, the first time a pitcher had ever lost three in a World Series.

It was the first title for the proud Dodger franchise since 1965, meaning it was the first since the expansion of 1969 created playoff rounds prior to the World Series. It was the first for Lasorda, who became the skipper in 1977.

And it was a championship driven by comebacks—Los Angeles became the first team to win best-of-five series after losing the first two in the Division Series. They won two straight road games in elimination spots to win the NLCS. They had won the World Series after losing the first two. And they had returned the favor to the Yankees, who three years earlier became the first team to drop Games 1 & 2 and then win four straight.

A strange 1981 season ended with a thud. And it wouldn't be the Yankees if there wasn't drama. During the weekend in Los Angeles, Steinbrenner had gotten in a fight in a hotel elevator with a couple of Dodger fans. The owner lambasted Winfield for his poor performance in the Series.

The struggles of Winfield--whom The Boss would eventually dub "Mr. May" a few years later, contrasted sharply with the way Mr. October, Reggie, always came through. But the big contract given to Winfield at a time when Reggie's deal was expiring, meant the die was cast. Jackson left for California via free agency. The Yankees tried to remake their roster with an emphasis on speed.

The 1980s were marked by consistently good teams and a singularly great player in first baseman Don Mattingly. But the Yankees never got back to the postseason until Joe Torre and Derek Jeter came to town in 1996.