

Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh

The 1970s Pittsburgh Pirates



INTRODUCTION

The opening of the 1970s was the start of a new era for baseball generally and for the Pittsburgh Pirates in particular. Major league baseball had expanded to 24 teams, and in 1969 split the National and American Leagues into divisions for the first time. The Pirates got a new stadium—Three Rivers Stadium replaced old Forbes Field midway through the 1970 season. With the change in venue happening at the same time the Pirates became one of the league's top teams, Three Rivers Stadium would see a lot of big baseball (to say nothing of football) moments throughout the 1970s.

From 1970 through 1975, Pittsburgh was the class of the old NL East, winning the division title five times in six years. After a brief step-back period from 1976-78, where they continued to contend, but ran second to cross-state rival Philadelphia, the Pirates returned to the top of the division in 1979. They reached the World Series in both 1971 and '79, and won the Fall Classic over the Baltimore Orioles both times.

This compilation covers all ten seasons of the 1970s in Pittsburgh. Each article—a seasonal narrative for each year, and then game-by-game recaps of the six NLCS battles and two World Series trips—are all published individually on our main site. All of these articles are pulled together here and edited for obvious redundancies to complete the compilation.

You'll see the great names that defined Pittsburgh Pirates baseball, many of whom have statues outside the franchise's current home facility of PNC Park, located right next to where old Three Rivers Stadium used to be. Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell were all-timers and postseason heroes. Dave Parker was an MVP and an emerging star. You'll read about the

pitchers, from Steve Blass and John Candelaria in the rotation, to Dave Giusti and Kent Tekulve in the bullpen.

This was an era when a Pirate legend—Danny Murtaugh—unretired, retired, and came back again, all the while winning. Murtaugh gave way temporarily to Bill Virdon early in the decade and then to Chuck Tanner later on. All of these names, and many more, are covered in this look back on 1970s baseball in Pittsburgh.

It was a different era in Major League Baseball. Each league had just two divisions, an East and a West. Pittsburgh shared the NL East with that division's current franchises, the Philadelphia Phillies, New York Mets, and Montreal Expos (today's Washington Nationals). A couple of modern-day Central teams, the St. Louis Cardinals and Chicago Cubs joined Pittsburgh in filling out the division. The Miami Marlins were still years from existence and MLB's decision to place the Cincinnati Reds and Atlanta Braves in the NL West was geographically challenged to say the least.

Moreover, only the first-place team qualified for the playoffs, moving directly into League Championship Series play. Pennant races sizzled and regular season games for really good teams had an urgency rarely seen in our own day. The playoffs were also different. The LCS round was only a best-of-five. Homefield advantage for both the LCS and World Series was done on a rotation basis, rather than merit.

Ultimately, the first half of the 1970s is a time when the small markets ruled the world. The other great teams of that era were Cincinnati, Baltimore and the Oakland A's. It wasn't until the latter part of the decade that larger market-teams in New York, Los Angeles and Boston began to step up. And even given that, 1979 was a "Bookend Year", if you will, when the Pirates, Reds, and Orioles all got together for a little October reunion.

In a different, and marvelous era for baseball, Pittsburgh was right in the middle of it all. Let's get on with our narrative.

1970

The 1970 Pittsburgh Pirates said goodbye to an institution, old Forbes Field, which they moved out of at the All-Star break. They said hello to an institution, bringing back manager Danny Murtaugh, who had been at the helm for their 1960 World Series title. And the 1970 Pittsburgh Pirates ultimately said hello to their first NL East title.

Murtaugh inherited a team that had gone 88-74 in 1969, though they finished twelve games behind the eventual World Series champion New York Mets. In 1970, the Pirates would be built around a balanced pitching staff and a lineup that didn't wait around, but attacked.

Pittsburgh's pitching staff was third in the National League in ERA without a true ace. Dock Ellis was the best of the regular rotation and the 25-year-old went 13-10 with a 3.21 ERA. Bob Veale, the 34-year-old lefty went 10-15 with a 3.92 ERA. Steve Blass and 22-year-old Bob Moose were both close to the .500 mark with ERAs in the high 3s. Veale's 202 innings were the biggest workload among the regular four starters, and this was an era when it wasn't uncommon for top starters to end up between 250-300 IP.

What the Pirates had was depth. Their 43 saves look low by today's standards, but in 1970 it was second-best in the National League. Luke Walker represented this staff the best—he made 19 starts, 23 relief appearances, won 15 games and finished with a 3.04 ERA. Dave Giusti saved 26 games and won nine. Bruce Dal Canto added nine more victories. Pittsburgh had the depth to survive the long haul.

Offensively, the Pirate strength was finishing fourth in the league in slugging percentage, but it wasn't home run power driving that, where Pittsburgh was only seventh in a 12-team league. The Pirates did it with a sustained attack that was second in batting average and fourth in doubles. What they didn't do very well was be patient—the worst in the league at getting walks and that ultimately kept them at eighth in runs scored.

Pittsburgh was strong at the corners, both infield and outfield. The great Roberto Clemente was 35-years-old and still going strong in rightfield. Clemente finished with a .407 on-base percentage/.556 slugging percentage. In left field was 30-year-old Willie Stargell, who would eventually succeed Clemente as the heart and soul of the team. For now, Stargell was the heart and soul of the lineup, leading the Pirates in home runs (31) and RBI (85).

The corners of the infield were filled with young 'uns. Bob Robertson, the 23-year-old first baseman, hit 27 home runs and drove in 82 runs. Richie Hebner, age 22 and playing third base, finished with a .362 OBP/.464 stat line.

Manny Sanguillen was a solid offensive threat at catcher, hitting .325, although the fact his OBP was just .344 shows he was a microcosm of the team's offense, in all its strength and all its weakness. The rest of the team up the middle were liabilities at the plate.

Centerfielder Matty Alou's OBP was just .329 and he lacked power. Shortstop Gene Alley couldn't hit. And at this stage of his career, one-time World Series hero Bill Mazeroski couldn't either. Mazeroski only hit .229 and the Pirates would have been better off giving more of his at-bats to young Dave Cash, who batted .314 in part-time duty.

Pittsburgh started well, taking three of four from New York over the course of the first two weeks and began 9-4. But they followed that with a 3-10 stretch that included being swept in Cincinnati, giving up 24 runs in three games to a powerful Reds lineup.

The Pirates stabilized after that, but still reached Memorial Day with a record of just 20-23. The rest of the NL East was also off to a slow start though, and the Pirates were only 3 1/2 games back of the Cubs, with the Mets and Cardinals nestled in between.

The week of June 22-28 was the turning point of the season and appropriately it was the final week for Forbes Field. The homestand that ended on the 28th gave way to a lengthy road trip that would lead into the All-Star break and the subsequent opening of Three Rivers Stadium on July 16.

It was a stacked week, with eight games, beginning with a Monday doubleheader against St. Louis. After dropping the opener, the nightcap went scoreless into the tenth inning. Two of the weak links in the Pirate lineup came through—Alley singled, was bunted over and Alou drove him in.

After a 7-2 win on Tuesday, more walkoff heroics came on Wednesday. Pittsburgh trailed 3-2 in the ninth and tied the game with the aid of a wild pitch. They won it in the eleventh with the help of an error, setting up reserve Al Oliver's game-winning single. Pittsburgh kept up the thrills in Thursday's finale, trailing 2-0 in the ninth. Triples from Robertson and Cash keyed a three-run rally and a win.

Had enough of the late-inning drama? The Pirates hadn't. The Cubs were in for the final weekend at Forbes and a great pitcher's duel between Ellis and Fergie Jenkins was tied 1-1 in the ninth. Consecutive singles from Hebner, Clemente and Oliver won the game.

It was the dream sendoff week for the old ballpark and it culminated with a Sunday doubleheader sweep. In the seventh inning of the final game, Mazeroski doubled. It was the final hit of Pittsburgh's 4-1 win. Appropriately enough, the man who had the most famous hit in this park—the walkoff home run that ended Game 7 of the 1960 World Series—also had its final hit in a week of walkoff wins.

Pittsburgh didn't slow down when they went on the road. They went 10-4 into the All-Star break and took the lead in the NL East. They led New York by a game and a half at the break, with Chicago five games back. St. Louis fell from contention and the balance of the season would be a race between the Pirates, Cubs and Mets.

The last week of July was not kind to Pittsburgh, as they dropped five of seven and briefly slipped a half-game behind New York. Then the Pirates started August with a 7-1 stretch and by the middle of the month they were four games up. No one in the division played well for the next couple weeks—Pittsburgh went 3-10, but still arrived at Labor Day with a two-game lead on Chicago and plus 2 ½ on New York.

Chicago came to Three Rivers the Tuesday after Labor Day and took two of three, with Veale and Blass both getting their eras pinned back. By week's end, the Pittsburgh lead was down to a half-game, with all three teams stacked within a game.

The following weekend brought a four-game set in New York's old Shea Stadium. The Friday opener was scoreless into the seventh when Robertson hit a two-run blast that was the big blow in a three-run rally. The Mets cut the lead to 3-2, but Giusti was able to save it for Blass.

Saturday's 2-1 win captured everything that was best about this pitching staff—Walker went five solid innings and bullpen-by-committee, at a time when such was hardly the norm, got the final twelve outs. New York took the opener of the Sunday doubleheader and the nightcap went to extra innings tied 5-5. Stargell homered to lead off the tenth, it triggered a four-run outburst and the Pirates moved 3 ½ games ahead of the Mets, while the Cubs were still within two.

There was a week and a half left, and a four-game split with lowly Montreal was modestly disappointing, but both Chicago and New York were starting to fade. Pittsburgh entered the last weekend of the season with a 2 ½ game lead on both teams, but the Mets would get a head-to-head shot in Three Rivers, while the Cubs played a bad Phillies team.

Alou and Sanguillen each had three hits on Friday and led the way to a 4-3 win. The Cubs lost and the lead was 3 1/2. Saturday afternoon saw Blass pitch his way in and out of trouble—he gave up twelve hits and didn't make it out of the seventh inning, but kept the game tied 3-3. In the bottom of the seventh, an error set up the winning run for the Pirates. Another loss by the Cubs clinched a tie for first and Pittsburgh still had four games left to play.

Ellis got the ball for Sunday's home finale and similar to Blass, kept working his way out of trouble. Ellis gave up ten hits as he worked into the eighth inning, but allowed only one run and Giusti relieved him with a 2-1 lead. The closer got the final four outs without incident and it was time to celebrate on the confluence of the Three Rivers. Pittsburgh's final record of 89-73 was only one game better than the previous year, but sipping champagne makes it feel like a world of difference.

1970 NLCS

This NLCS would open with two games in Pittsburgh, with the balance of the series to be played in Cincinnati. It was the postseason debut for a couple of new ballparks. Three Rivers Stadium and Riverfront Stadium were seeing the first of what would be plenty of playoff and World Series baseball in the years ahead.

The Reds mounted early threats in Saturday afternoon's Game 1. Cincy put two on with two out and both the first and second inning. Each time, Pirate starter Dock Ellis got the key out that kept the Reds off the board.

Pittsburgh had their own missed chance in the third. Gene Alley was on first base with two outs, and was unable to score on a double. With runners on second and third, Cincinnati starter Gary Nolan killed the threat. The Pirates missed another two-on/two-out chance in the bottom of the fourth

The scoreless tie went to the sixth inning when Cincy's Tony Perez ripped a double into the leftfield gap to start the frame. Johnny Bench's fly ball moved Perez to third. Lee May had the chance to break the scoring drought...but he grounded out to third. Ellis escaped and yet another rally ended with nothing.

It was the Pirates' chance in the bottom of the eighth when Willie Stargell slashed a one-out double. Nolan responded with consecutive strikeouts. In the bottom of the ninth, Pittsburgh's Matty Alou beat out an infield hit with two outs. He made an understandable attempt to steal second. Bench threw him out. There had been plenty of action in this first game, but no runs as we went to extra innings .

Ty Cline batted in Nolan's spot and opened the top of the 10th with a triple. Pete Rose singled and we finally had someone on the board. With two outs, Bench was intentionally walked. The move didn't work. May doubled in both runs for some insurance. Clay Carroll came on in relief of Nolan and closed the bottom of the 10th without incident. Cincinnati had a road win, 3-0.

The Pirates sent Luke Walker to the mound the following afternoon for Game 2. The Reds went to lefty Jim Merritt. And the top of the first in Game 2 went much the same as the opener. After Walker hurt his own cause with an error and then gave up a single, Cincy had two on with no one out. Bench's line drive went directly to Alley at shortstop, who promptly doubled off Rose. End of threat.

In the top of the third, speedy Reds' centerfielder Bobby Tolan began to put his imprint on the series. He singled to left, stole second and then took third on a throwing error. Moments later, Tolan scored on a wild pitch. Having shown his speed, Tolan demonstrated his power in the top of the fifth. A solo blast put the Reds up 2-0.

The fans of Pittsburgh had yet to see their team score a run through a game and a half when the Pirates came to bat in the top of the sixth. Second baseman Dave Cash doubled with one out, prompting the Cincinnati manager to summon Carroll. It didn't stop the great Roberto Clemente, whose base hit finally put Pittsburgh on the board. Manny Sanguillen followed with another single. There were runners on first and second with one out in a 2-1 game. Carroll buckled down, got the two outs he needed and preserved the lead.

And that was the last time the Pirates made a real threat. Tolan got his team an insurance run in the eighth, singling and then scoring on a double by Perez. Both games had been tight and nerve-wracking. But 3-1 final meant the road team had taken both. Cincinnati was going home in complete command of this NLCS.

Night baseball had been in place since 1935, but it still was not used in postseason play. So Monday's Game 3 took place in the afternoon, right alongside the ALCS Game 3, where the Baltimore Orioles were also looking to close out a home sweep.

Their back to the wall, Pittsburgh got right after Cincinnati starter Tony Cloninger. Freddie Patek worked a leadoff walk and moved up on a groundball out. Patek tried to force the action and was thrown out stealing third. Which was unfortunate, because behind him, Clemente singled, Stargell walked and Al Oliver singled.

The Pirates led 1-0, but it could have been more. Stealing third with those bats coming up smells of desperation. Which Pittsburgh's offense could hardly be blamed for after the first two games, but was costly nonetheless. It got even more costly when Perez and Bench hit back-to-back homers in the bottom of the inning to put the Reds up 2-1.

Cloninger walked two men to start the top of the second. Moose dropped a sacrifice bunt, which only partially worked. He got the runner to third, but the Reds picked up the force at second. The double play was still in order and that proved decisive. Patek's rough start to Game 3 continued when he grounded into a 5-4-3 twin killing.

Moose was settled, but his lineup missed a chance in the fourth when Richie Hebner doubled with one out in the fourth, but was stranded. In the fifth, Alou hit a one-out single and was on second with two outs. Stargell's single to right finally tied the game 2-2. In the top of the sixth, Hebner hit another double, this time to start the inning. Bill Mazerowski's bunt attempt failed and the Reds got the out at third and then killed the threat.

It was another tense pitcher's duel as we reached the bottom of the eighth. Moose got the first two outs, but then walked Cline and allowed a single to Rose. Joe Gibbons came on in relief. Tolan was at the plate. He singled to left, the Reds were up 3-2 and were on the threshold of a pennant.

Wayne Granger was on in relief. After getting the first two outs, he couldn't get Clemente, who singled to right and kept the series alive. Reds' manager Sparky Anderson, with a hook that would be normal today, but was quite unusual in 1970, called on young Don Gullett. Stargell singled to right. There were runners on the corners. But it wouldn't be the 1970 NLCS if the pitcher didn't get the key out in a tight spot. Gullett induced Oliver to ground out to second. And, as a beloved Cincinnati Reds radio announcer might say, this National League pennant belonged to the Reds.

There was no MVP for NLCS play given until 1978. If we can double back and hand one out retroactively, it would have to be Tolan. He had gone 5-for-12 with a home run in a series where few hitters did anything. He had driven in the winning run of the series opener. Kudos also have to go to Perez, who collected four hits in the three games. On the Pittsburgh side, only Stargell's 6-for-12 performance stood out among players who played the entire series. Hebner acquitted himself in his two starts, going 4-for-6.

Cincinnati's good fortune in close games ran out when they lost a couple tough ones to Baltimore to open the 1970 World Series, and the Reds ultimately lost the series in five games. But they—and the Pirates—were just getting started.

1971

In this '71 season, the Pirates were even better—they again reached the postseason. This time, they won the NLCS. And at World Series time, the great Roberto Clemente secured his baseball legacy in leading Pittsburgh to a championship.

Clemente, now 36-years-old, was not slowing down in rightfield. He hit .341, and his slugging percentage was up over .500. Clemente finished fifth in the National League MVP voting. But he wasn't the best player in the Pirate lineup this season. That honor belonged to the man on the opposite corner of the outfield.

Thirty-one-year old Willie Stargell had a spectacular season in 1971. Stargell hit 48 homers, drove in 125 runs, scored 104 runs, slugged an astonishing .628 and posted an excellent on-base percentage of .398. This, along with playing on a division winner, would normally have made Stargell a slam-dunk pick for MVP. But with Joe Torre, then playing third base in St. Louis, having a spectacular season of his own, Stargell had to settle for runner-up in the final MVP tally.

Stargell and Clemente were the keys to the lineup, but a team that scored more runs than anyone else in the National League had other weapons. Bob Robertson played first base and finished with a stat line of .356 OBP/.484 slugging, while popping 26 home runs. Dave Cash played second base, hit leadoff and posted an OBP of .349. Manny Sanguillen was behind the plate and his stat line was a respectable .345/.426. Al Oliver slugged .446 in centerfield. Richie Hebner played third base and slugged .487.

Pittsburgh's pitching staff was led by Steve Blass and Dock Ellis, who combined to make 64 starts. Blass' 2.85 ERA was the best among staff regulars and he won 15 games. Ellis went 19-9 and finished with a solid 3.06 ERA.

Bob Johnson and Luke Walker had ERAs in the mid-3s. Bob Moose and 21-year-old Bruce Kison were adequate at the back end of the rotation. Dave Giusti saved 30 games and finished with 2.93 ERA. Nelson Briles shuffled between the rotation and the pen, finishing with an ERA of 3.04.

All in all, it added up to a staff that was in the "good but not great" category, finishing fifth in a 12-team National League for ERA. But that was more than good enough to win, given the bats Pittsburgh had.

After a month of mediocre play, the Pirates started to pick it up in May. They went 6-5 against the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants, the teams who would battle it out to the final day in the NL West. Pittsburgh took three of five from Cincinnati, the defending NL pennant

winner, but headed for a rough year in 1971. On the down side, the Pirates dropped four of seven games to the New York Mets.

All in all though, Pittsburgh was consistent enough to reach Memorial Day with a record of 28-19. They were in third place, 2 ½ games back of St. Louis, with New York nestled in between.

While the start was pretty good, it was still a big series when St. Louis came into Pittsburgh on June 1. Cash got the party started in Tuesday night's opener with a leadoff double, the first of his three hits, and it keyed a five-run outburst that included a two-out, two-run single from Ellis. Dock wasn't too bad on the mound either, tossing a three-hitter and winning 9-0.

It was more of the same on Wednesday night, with Cash getting three more hits. Vic Davalillo, a reserve outfielder with great bat control, had three hits in the 2-spot of the order. Stargell drove in three runs and Pittsburgh won 10-1 behind six good innings from Walker. Even though Bob Johnson had a rough night and lost the finale to Cardinal ace Steve Carlton 7-1, the series got the Pirates moving in the right direction.

The return visit to St. Louis came on June 10 for a sort-of weekend series that would go on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Blass took the ball for the opener and won 3-1, with the key hit being a two-run single in the sixth from Sanguillen. Friday night was another offensive party. Sanguillen had three more hits. Stargell homered. Ellis did it again with his bat, driving in three runs. And the Dock did it again on the mound, winning 11-4 for his ninth win of the year.

Saturday night's finale was a good baseball game and a taut affair. With two hits and two RBIs from Stargell, Pittsburgh was tied 3-3. With two outs in the top of the ninth, Oliver homered. Pirate reliever Mudcat Grant closed it, getting Torre to ground out to end the game.

The sweep was complete. Beating the Cardinals five times in six tries had moved Pittsburgh into first place in the NL West. Then they went 18-9 up until the All-Star break. Their record was a sparkling 57-31 and their division lead was a healthy 9 ½ on the Cubs, 10 on the Mets and 11 on the badly slumping Cardinals.

The latter part of the summer saw the Pirates slump. They went 9-10 in a home-and-home sequence against the three West Coast teams, the Giants, Dodgers and Padres. Pittsburgh's lead was big enough for that not to be a big deal, but it combined with a disastrous four-game set at home with St. Louis. The Pirates only scored six total runs, lost all four games and the Cardinals surged to within 3 ½ games.

Then Pittsburgh lost three of four in Cincinnati. Facing the possibility of a collapse, the Pirates planted their feet and won 10 of the next 13. By Labor Day, the Pirates were still 84-57 and their margin on the Cardinals was 5 ½ games. No one else was in the race. Pittsburgh was in control, but still had five head-to-head games with St. Louis in September.

They responded like a battle-tested team would, immediately winning five straight. The lead was pushed to 7 ½ in mid-September. St. Louis came to old (then new) Three Rivers Stadium for two games. Even one win would all but finish off this race.

Actually, the Pirates won both. Ellis beat Carlton 4-1 with help from a two-run shot by Oliver. On Wednesday night, Walker pitched well, while the Cardinals beat themselves with walks and errors. Pittsburgh won 6-1.

It was the following Wednesday night—appropriately enough on the return trip to St. Louis—that the division was clinched. Facing the great veteran, Cardinal Hall of Famer Bob Gibson, the Pirates won 5-1 behind good work from Walker and Giusti out of the bullpen. When the closer induced Joe Hogue to hit a ground ball to Robertson and the first baseman took it himself, the champagne could flow.

1971 NLCS

This series would open with two games out west, at San Francisco's Candlestick Park, and then finish at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh.

The Giants sent future Hall of Famer Gaylord Perry to the mound. The Pirate rotation was lined up with staff ace Steve Blass set to pitch Game 1. It was Pittsburgh who struck first. Shortstop Jackie Hernandez singled in the 8-spot of the batting order, enabling Blass to drop down a sac bunt. Dave Cash doubled to right to score the first run of the series. Richie Hebner then hit a ground ball at the great Willie McCovey. The Hall of Fame first baseman misplayed it and the Pirates enjoyed a 2-0 lead.

San Francisco responded immediately in the bottom of the third and in almost identical fashion. Chris Speier, the #8-hitting shortstop singled. Perry bunted him up. Ken Henderson doubled. It was 2-1.

In the bottom of the fifth, Speier again started a rally with a base hit. Perry again did his job with the sac bunt. A Henderson groundball moved Speier to third, but there were two outs. Blass was on the verge of escaping. Until Tito Fuentes homered. San Francisco was up 3-2. Then the great Willie Mays worked a walk. McCovey atoned for his defensive miscue with another home run. Blass was gone and the Giants were ahead 5-2.

Pittsburgh made a run at Perry in the top of the seventh. Gene Alley, batting in the pitcher's spot, singled. Cash followed with another single. The heart of the order was coming up with the tying run at the plate. Roberto Clemente, another all-time great in a series filled with them, worked a one-out walk to load the bases. Perry got Willie Stargell to pop out. With the rally on the verge of flaming out, Al Oliver knocked a two-run single, cutting the lead to 5-4.

But Perry buckled down. He got out of that inning and allowed just one more single the rest of the way. Even though San Francisco missed a chance to add on in the bottom of the eighth when they wasted a first-and-second with no outs situation, the Giants still grabbed Game 1, 5-4.

Any loss in a series this short is a big one, but in 1971 this first game might have seemed even bigger. In 1969 and 1970, the LCS round in both leagues ended up in sweeps. Baltimore would deliver another sweep in the 1971 ALCS. So, we were still waiting for a series where the team that lost the first game could answer—even once.

Pittsburgh would turn to Dock Ellis for Sunday afternoon's Game 2. San Francisco had to go to the final day of the season to clinch the NL West and this spot was where that showed up in the pitching rotation. Juan Marichal joined with Perry in giving the Giants a 1-2 punch of future Hall of Famers. But Marichal had to win the season finale and was thus unavailable until Game 3.

John Cumberland was a pretty good swingman, going back and forth between the rotation and the pen. But he wasn't Juan Marichal.

Cumberland worked around singles from Cash and Clemente in the first, thanks to a strikeout/caught stealing double play that took Cash off the bases. And the Giants went to work right away on Ellis. Fuentes singled with one out and moved up on a passed ball. Mays ripped an RBI double for the game's first run. After McCovey was intentionally walked, Dave Kingman singled. The bases were loaded, there was one out and San Francisco was poised to break this open early.

Instead, Ellis struck out Dick Dietz, a good-hitting catcher. Al Gallagher grounded out and the Pirates stayed within 1-0. They promptly tied it up in the top of the second with a double by Bob Robertson and an RBI single from Manny Sanguillen.

Speier was proving to be a problem for Pittsburgh pitching and the #8 hitter again got something going with a double to start the bottom of the second. He eventually scored on a single from Henderson. San Francisco took that 2-1 lead into the top of the fourth.

Robertson homered to tie the game. After a Sanguillen single, Cumberland was removed for Jim Barr. Sanguillen stole second and scored on a single from Hernandez. The Pirates were up 3-2 and that extended to 4-2 when Gene Alley homered in the fifth.

Ellis had settled down by the sixth inning, when San Francisco made their next move. Gallagher was hit by a pitch. Speier singled. With no one out and two aboard, Ellis was removed. Bob Miller came out of the Pittsburgh bullpen. A walk to Henderson was sandwiched between two strikeouts. With the bases loaded, Mays was at the plate.

In a moment of high drama, Miller got the out he could tell his grandchildren about, getting the great San Francisco outfielder to fly out to right. After all that, it was still 4-2 Pirates.

Pittsburgh then took out insurance—a lot of it—in the top of the seventh. Cash doubled. Oliver and Clemente singled. It was 5-2. Robertson blew it open with another home run, extending the lead to 8-2. For good measure, Robertson hit his third blast of the game in the ninth to make it 9-2. A two-run shot by Mays in the bottom of the ninth was too little, too late for San Francisco in a 9-4 loss. We finally had a League Championship Series that would not be a sweep.

Day baseball was still the order of the day for LCS play, so Tuesday's game at Three Rivers was in the afternoon, even as the Baltimore-Oakland ALCS matchup was also during the day. Marichal was on the mound for San Francisco against Pittsburgh's Bob Johnson. The Giants were still in good position, with the two aces, Marichal and Perry lined up for these next two games.

Enter Bob Robertson. The Pirate first baseman homered again for a 1-0 lead in the second. At which point, Marichal went into lockdown mode. But so did the more unheralded Johnson. It was still 1-0 when San Francisco batted in the top of the sixth.

Henderson singled. When the ensuing sac bunt attempt went to Hebner, the Pirate third baseman threw the ball away—so badly, that Henderson came all the way around with the tying run. The Giants eventually loaded the bases with two outs. Johnson got Gallagher to ground out and kept the score 1-1.

Hebner tried to atone for his mistake with a single to lead off the bottom of the sixth. An error put runners on first and second with one out. The heart of the order was at hand. Marichal struck out Stargell, got Oliver and kept the game tied.

The duel between Marichal and Johnson went into the bottom of the eighth. There were two outs and no one aboard. Hebner, at the heart of so much of the action all day long, was there again. He homered. Pittsburgh turned the game over to closer Dave Giusti, who set down the side in order in the ninth. The Pirates had both the game and the series, 2-1.

Game 4 provided a Perry-Blass pitching rematch. Their back to the wall, San Francisco came out on the attack. After a Cash error opened the game, Fuentes and McCovey each singled. A run was on the board and there were men on first and second.

Blass struck out Bobby Bonds, limiting the damage and keeping it a 1-0 game. Cash promptly redeemed himself with a single and then took third on a Hebner double. Clemente's base hit scored both runs and Pittsburgh had the lead.

Speier's big series continued with a home run in the top of second. With one out, Henderson and Fuente singled. With two outs, McCovey came to the plate. The big first baseman went deep. The Giants were up 5-2 and while it was very early, there was every reason to think Perry could now take them to a Game 5.

Instead, the lead didn't even last the inning. Sanguillen led off the bottom of the second with a single. Bill Mazeroski, the veteran hero of the Pirates' 1960 World Series champs, came off the bench to bat for Blass. Maz singled with one out. Hebner came to the plate with two outs. He ripped a three-run jack and we were tied 5-5.

Pittsburgh threatened again in the third and fourth, but Perry twice wiggled out of situations with two runners on. The 5-5 tie held to the bottom of the sixth.

Cash got something going with a one-out single, and then moved to second on a groundout from Hebner. The veteran Clemente stepped up and delivered the two-out RBI single that put Pittsburgh ahead 6-5. Perry was gone. San Francisco's excellent reliever, Jerry Johnson was on to try and keep this a one-run game.

After an intentional walk to Stargell, Oliver came to the plate. Power had defined this game and Pittsburgh's play in this NLCS generally. So perhaps it was fitting that a three-run jack from Oliver all but sealed the deal.

Bruce Kison had come in for Blass and the young Pirate pitcher was outstanding into the seventh. The tying run never came to the plate in what was now a 9-5 game. Giusti nailed down the final seven outs. When Bonds grounded out to third, the Pirates were going to the World Series.

1971 WORLD SERIES

The 1971 World Series was the first time the Fall Classic played even a single game at night. The Series as a whole was one worthy of prime-time. The Pittsburgh Pirates and Baltimore Orioles staged an epic seven-game battle that was decided by a single run.

1971 was the American League's year to host. So it was at Baltimore's old Memorial Stadium, on a Saturday afternoon, that this World Series began.

Clemente sought to immediately put his mark on the Series, but his two-out double in the first did not lead to any runs. In the top of the second, Bob Robertson worked a leadoff walk against Oriole starter Dave McNally. Robertson moved up on a wild pitch. Then, on a groundball to short, the normally reliable Mark Belanger made a throwing error. The Pirates had a run and a man on second base.

Baltimore's miscues continued when Jackie Hernandez laid down a bunt. This time it was a throwing error by catcher Elrod Hendricks. Another run was in, another runner went to second base. With two outs, Dave Cash knocked an RBI single. It was the only hit of the inning...and enough to stake Pittsburgh starter Dock Ellis to a 3-0 lead.

Frank Robinson quickly cut into that lead with a solo home run in the bottom of the second. Pittsburgh threatened again in the third when Clemente singled and Stargell walked. There was no one out.

It was at this point that McNally not only escaped the inning, but turned the entire game around. He struck out the side to keep it a 3-1 run game. In the bottom of the inning, Belanger and Don Buford singled. Merv Rettenmund went deep and the Orioles had a 4-3 lead.

McNally was now locked in. From the fourth inning through the eighth inning, he retired 15 batters in a row. Only another Belanger error in the ninth broke the streak. Buford homered in the fifth to provide an insurance run and Baltimore grabbed the opener, 5-3.

A rainout pushed Game 2 back to Monday afternoon. The Orioles went to future Hall of Famer Jim Palmer. Pirate starter Bob Johnson didn't have the same renown, but he was fresh off outdueling another future Hall of Fame pitcher, San Francisco's Juan Marichal, in the NLCS.

Game 2 began in a way similar to Game 1. A Clemente hit in the first inning didn't lead to anything. The Pirates put runners on first and second with no outs in the second. This time though, the Orioles weren't giving out any defensive gifts. Palmer struck out the side and kept the game scoreless.

Frank Robinson led off the bottom of the second with a single. Hendricks worked a walk. Brooks Robinson singled and Baltimore was on the board. Any hopes of a further rally were squelched when Davey Johnson's line drive went right at Cash and Hendricks was doubled off second.

Clemente kept trying to rally the Pirate offense, with a third-inning double that gave Pittsburgh another opportunity with two men aboard and one out. Palmer got Al Oliver and Robertson to kill the threat.

After another Frank Robinson single in the bottom of the fourth, Bob Johnson got wild, with a walk and a hit batsman. The bases were loaded and there was no one out. Davey Johnson singled to left and scored two runs. Bruce Kison was summoned from the Pirate bullpen to try and limit the damage.

Kison was also wild, walking Belanger and then Palmer (there was no DH even in existence until 1973), scoring another run and keeping the bases loaded. At 4-0, Pittsburgh manager Danny Murtaugh kept going to his bullpen, this time for Bob Moose. This move worked. Don Buford flied out to left, and Davey Johnson was thrown out at home trying to tag up. The Pirates were in a hole, but they still had a shot.

But Baltimore had momentum and they kept coming in the bottom of the fifth. Five of the first six batters—Rettenmund, Boog Powell, Hendricks, Brooks Robinson and Davey Johnson—singled. It was 7-0, there were two runners on and one out. Bob Veale came out of the bullpen. Again, Belanger and Palmer were walked at the bottom of the order. It was 8-0 and the bases were loaded. Rettenmund delivered his second single of the inning for two more runs.

At 10-0, it was all over but the shouting. The Orioles later added another run. The Pirates' Richie Hebner hit a three-run homer in the eighth. But with an 11-3 win and a 2-0 Series lead, Baltimore was firmly in control as the World Series shifted to Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh's fate was essentially in Blass' hands for Tuesday afternoon's Game 3. He faced off with Mike Cuellar.

Dave Cash started the Pirate first inning with a double down the left field line. An error set up runners on the corners with no outs. Clemente's ground ball out picked up the run. Stargell worked a walk to keep the rally going. Robertson then hit a line drive, but it went to Brooks Robinson at third, who doubled a runner off to end the inning. It was still 1-0 Pittsburgh.

Blass settled in quickly and the first Baltimore hit didn't come until a Brooks Robinson single in the fifth inning. Pittsburgh missed a couple chances with a runner on second and one out to add to the lead. But they didn't miss their chance in the bottom of the sixth. Manny Sanguillen started the frame by slashing a double into the right-centerfield gap. A base hit by Jose Pagan extended the lead to 2-0.

Frank Robinson replied with a solo home run in the seventh that got Baltimore on the board. But Blass was dealing and Pittsburgh would take out insurance. A Cuellar throwing error opened the door in the seventh. Then a walk. Robertson went deep again here. It was 5-1. That's where it ended as Blass closed out a three-hitter.

So, we had a Series on our hands again as the lights went on for the first time in the Fall Classic for Wednesday night's Game 4. The Pirates went with Luke Walker, while the Orioles countered with Pat Dobson.

Baltimore wasted no time. Paul Blair started the game with a single. Belanger and Rettenmund legged out infield hits. A passed ball scored one run. After an intentional walk to Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson picked up another run with a sac fly. The futile throw home allowed Rettenmund to take third, where he scored on a sac fly from Powell. With only one hit out of the infield, the Orioles had three runs. And, hard luck or not, Walker was taking an early shower.

Kison was now entrusted with a game the Pirates simply had to win. And the young reliever got some quick help from his own offense. With a runner on first and two outs in the bottom of the first, Stargell doubled into the gap to put Pittsburgh on the board. Oliver blooped another double. It was 3-2, and there was still a long way to go.

Oliver came through with another two-out RBI in the third, finishing a rally that began with base hits from Hebner and Clemente and tying the game up 3-all.

Pittsburgh missed chances to get the lead in the middle innings. With the bases loaded and one out in the fourth, the speedy Cash grounded into a double play. The bases were filled with one out again in the fifth. This time, Robertson popped up and Sanguillen grounded out. With runners on the corners and one out in the sixth, Oriole manager Earl Weaver went to the bullpen for lefty Grant Jackson.

Hebner hit a line drive, but it went right at Brooks Robinson. After a walk to Clemente, Stargell grounded out. The Pirates had left the maximum of nine runners on base through the 4th-5th-6th inning. As for the Orioles, they had no such problems. Their own offense hadn't mustered a hit off Kison since the second inning.

Pittsburgh rallied one more time in the bottom of the seventh, against Baltimore's excellent closer Eddie Watt. Robertson and Sanguillen singled with one out. Vic Davalillo lofted a fly ball to center. Blair, one of the great defensive centerfielders of all-time, flubbed it. Amidst the mess, Robertson took third base...but Sanguillen got hung up between second and third. He was thrown out.

So, after all was said and done, there were runners on first and third, but now there were two outs. Were the Pirates about to let another chance go by the boards? Kison's spot was due up. Milt May came in to pinch-hit. He got the biggest hit of the Series to this point, a single to center that put the Pirates ahead 4-3.

Pittsburgh closer Dave Giusti picked up where Kison left off, allowing no hits. The Pirates had to fight and scratch and claw to a win game they had dominated, but this Series was now tied two games apiece.

We were back to midweek afternoon baseball for Thursday's Game 5. McNally was back on the hill for the Orioles. Robertson got him for a home run in the bottom of the second. Sanguillen singled, and then with two outs, the catcher stole second. It set up an RBI base hit from starting pitcher Nelson Briles.

That was all Briles would need, as Pirate pitching picked up where it left off the previous night. Briles went the distance and threw a two-hitter. Pittsburgh added a couple more runs, one of them thanks to a walk and a rare error from Brooks Robinson, another on a not-so-rare RBI hit from Clemente. The final was 4-0.

Over the final 16 innings of these games in Three Rivers Stadium, the Oriole offense had completely vanished, getting four hits total over that stretch. Baltimore undoubtedly welcomed Friday's travel day, as they went home with their backs now to the wall.

Homefield advantage and a rotation stocked with four 20-game winners still aren't a bad place to be. The Orioles trotted out Palmer for Game 6. The Pirates went to Moose, who swung between relief and the pen.

But Baltimore's bats stayed silent in the early going, while Pittsburgh gave Moose a lead to work with. In the top of the second, Oliver doubled to right, Robertson singled to left and it was quickly 1-0. Sanguillen singled. There were runners on first and second and no one out.

Palmer was able to take advantage of the bottom of the order, work out of that jam and temporarily keep it a 1-0 game. But in the top of the third, Clemente homered. The score was 2-0. It stayed that way until the sixth inning. With Baltimore's bats in a deep freeze, that two-run gap seemed massive.

Finally, Buford went the other way for an opposite field home run to cut the lead in half. An error by Hebner and a single from Powell set up the Birds with runners on the corners and no outs. Johnson came out of the Pirate bullpen. And facing the heart of the order, Johnson got it done. Frank Robinson popped up. Rettenmund struck out. Brooks Robinson grounded out.

In the bottom of the seventh, a one-out single from Belanger prompted Murtaugh to call for Giusti. With two outs, Buford came through again—this time it was with patience, drawing a walk that moved the tying run into scoring position. Davey Johnson singled. It was 2-2 and the Orioles had some fresh life.

Now it was the Pirate bats that had fallen silent, with Palmer locked in. The 2-2 tie went into extra innings. Weaver, naturally pulling out all the stops, had Dobson, another 20-game winner, come on in relief.

Cash tried to get something going for Pittsburgh, singling with one out in the tenth inning, then stealing second with two outs. Clemente and Stargell were walked. The only arm Weaver wasn't using today was Cuellar, whom the Orioles hoped would start Game 7. So, McNally came on in relief and induced Oliver to fly to center.

Bob Miller was on in relief for Pittsburgh. With one out, the trio of Frank Robinson, Rettenmund and Brooks Robinson was due up. The group that missed on a golden opportunity in the sixth, didn't miss here. Frank worked a walk and took third on a Rettenmund single. Brooks' fly ball to center was deep enough to win the game, 3-2. We were going to a Game 7.

It all came down to Sunday afternoon, with Blass and Cuellar again matching up. A walk and an error gave Baltimore the first scoring opportunity in the bottom of the second. But Belanger's ground ball to Cash turned into an inning-ending double play. In the third, Buford singled with one out. Blass promptly picked him off first.

So, we were still scoreless going into the fourth. It was time for Clemente. A solo home run to left-center gave the Pirates a 1-0 lead.

Both pitchers were dominating. A one-out double from Hendricks in the bottom of the fifth was the only thing remotely resembling a threat as the tense 1-0 game went into the eighth. That's when Stargell led off with a single, Pagan followed with an RBI double and Pittsburgh had a huge add-on run.

The run looked even bigger when the Orioles launched a desperate rally in the bottom of the eighth. Hendricks and Belanger singled to put the tying runs aboard with no outs. Tom Shopay, batting for Cuellar, dropped a bunt that moved the runners to second and third. Buford was at the plate. His ground ball to first scored a run, but it also gave Blass room to get Davey Johnson on a grounder to third and keep the lead.

It was still 2-1 when Baltimore came to bat for the last shot in the ninth. The Birds had the muscle of the order and could tie it with one swing. Powell grounded out. Frank Robinson popped out. Rettenmund hit a grounder to short, and that was it. The Pirates were champs.

Clemente finished this Series 12-for-29, and had been the one Pittsburgh player who performed throughout, even in the first two games. He homered twice, including the big Game 7 blast. He sparkled defensively throughout the Series. It's no surprise he was voted Series MVP.

There were other Pirate heroes. Blass, with two brilliant outings in must-win spots where Cuellar was also pitching well, would have been a worthy MVP himself. Sanguillen collected 11 hits over the seven games.

The ultimate legacy of Clemente would come one year later when he tragically died in a plane crash while on a humanitarian mission to Nicaragua. The 1971 World Series serves as the less-important, but still notable baseball part of his legacy.

1972

Even with a managerial change—Bill Virdon took over for Danny Murtaugh, who retired upstairs to the front office—the 1972 Pittsburgh Pirates were more of the same. They ran away with the division title, and it took an exceptionally dramatic NLCS to keep them from returning to the Fall Classic.

Pittsburgh's offense was quite different than what the modern game tends to offer. The Pirates weren't into taking walks. Their home run power was mediocre. But they put the ball in play. Four regulars—Al Oliver, Vic Davalillo, Richie Hebner, and the great Roberto Clemente all batted over .300. Two more, Willie Stargell and Manny Sanguillen, were over .290. Dave Cash hit over .280. A key reserve, Gene Clines, hit .334. The Pirates led the National League in batting average and were second in doubles.

And while Pittsburgh only finished sixth in the 12-team National League for home runs, Stargell did provide some muscle—33 homers and 112 RBIs for the first baseman. With everyone else making contact and hitting the ball in the alleys, the Pirates finished third in the NL for runs scored.

The pitching staff was anchored by Steve Blass, who went 19-8 with a 2.49 ERA. Bob Moose made 30 starts, won 13 more games, and finished with a 2.91 ERA. Nelson Briles and Dock Ellis combined to start 52 games, got 29 wins between them, and ERAs in the high 2s/low 3s. Virdon got reliable spot-start work from 22-year-old Bruce Kison. And Dave Giusti's 22 saves and 1.93 ERA led up a deep bullpen. Pittsburgh's composite staff ERA was second in the National League.

Major League Baseball started an unfortunate trend of owner-player disputes in 1972, with the players being locked out of spring training. The start of the season was delayed until mid-April and those early games were not made up. The Pirates were slow out of the gate, going 5-8. It was early May, when they won two of three from the playoff-bound Cincinnati Reds, that Pittsburgh took off. That series win triggered a 19-5 run through Memorial Day.

The Pirates were sitting on a solid 24-14 record after the holiday, but the New York Mets were riding high at 28-11. Pittsburgh was winning, but they had some work to do.

That work began in earnest with a West Coast trip in early June. The Pirates won eight of ten, and pulled to within a half-game. By June 23, Pittsburgh was in a virtual tie for first with New York, and Chicago was just two games back. The Pirates were going on the road to play both rivals, and it would start with a weekend in Wrigley Field.

On Friday afternoon, Cash was the spark plug, getting three hits at the top of the lineup. Clemente ripped a two-run triple. Blass worked into the ninth inning, and Giusti cleaned up the

4-2 win. On Saturday, trailing 1-0 in the seventh, Oliver tied the game with a home run. In the eighth, Sanguillen came up with a two-out/two-run single to put Pittsburgh ahead 3-1. Briles worked into the ninth and Giusti cleaned up.

Sunday's finale was tight again through seven innings and Pittsburgh trailed 2-1. Sanguillen came to the plate in another big two-out spot, this time with the bases loaded. The catcher hit a grand slam. The Pirates unloaded for four more runs in the ninth and completed the sweep with a 9-2 win.

Over the same weekend, the Mets lost three straight to the Cardinals. So, even when Pittsburgh lost both games in New York to start the following week, the Pirates still led the division by a game.

The following weekend, the Cubs made the return trip to Three Rivers Stadium, then in its second year of existence. A four-game series opened on Friday night. The Pirates lost the opener 4-3 when the tying run was stranded on third base in the ninth inning. On Saturday, Pittsburgh again trailed in the ninth, 3-2. This time, Clemente delivered—a two-run walkoff blast to centerfield for the win.

Pittsburgh's bats did what they did best on Sunday and that's simply hammer out hits. Davalillo had a three-hit game, while Oliver, Sanguillen, and Bob Robertson added two apiece. The result was a 7-4 win.

In the Monday finale, the Pirates again trailed in the ninth inning, this time 2-1. This time it was Stargell's turn to deliver the two-run walkoff bomb.

Pittsburgh had won six of seven games against Chicago, and in four of those wins, the Pirates trailed in the seventh inning or later. It was the most significant stretch in the portion of the season where the Bucs took control of the NL East. By the All-Star break, the Cubs had faded to 10 ½ back. The Mets were still very much in it, but Pittsburgh's strong push to the break had extended their lead to 5 ½ games.

If the early summer was when the Pirates set the tone, the late summer was when they dropped the hammer. Pittsburgh took two of three from the Mets right out of the break, then racked up three wins in four games against the Phillies. Pittsburgh was plus-seven by the end of July. They stayed consistent through August, going 17-11, while the Mets just fell by the wayside. By Labor Day, Pittsburgh was 80-46 and their division lead had ballooned to twelve games.

The race would never get remotely close again. Pittsburgh rolled to a final record of 96-59, the best in the major leagues, a half-game ahead of Cincinnati, who had dominated the NL West. The Pirates cleared the field in the NL East by eleven games.

1972 NLCS

The battles between the Cincinnati Reds and Pittsburgh Pirates defined the National League Championship Series in the 1970s, especially in the decade's early part. And their battles were never better than in the 1972 NLCS, a series that was decided on its final pitch.

This year, the rotation called for the first two games to be played in Pittsburgh, with the final three in Cincinnati. So, it was Three Rivers Stadium that hosted the series opener on a Saturday afternoon.

It didn't take long for the Reds to strike. Joe Morgan homered off Steve Blass and gave Cincinnati a 1-0 lead in the top of the first. But Pittsburgh immediately answered against young Don Gullett. Rennie Stennett led off the Pirate first inning with a single. Al Oliver followed with an RBI triple. After Roberto Clemente struck out, Willie Stargell doubled to give Pittsburgh the lead. And with two outs, Richie Hebner picked up Stargell with an RBI single.

With a 3-1 lead, Blass settled in. In the bottom of the fifth, the Pirates expanded their lead. Stennett again got it going, beating out an infield hit with two outs. Oliver homered. It was 5-1.

The Reds made a couple of threats to get back into the game. They had runners on the corners with one out in the sixth and put two on with two out in the seventh. Two runners reached with one out in the ninth. But the tying run never came to the plate, and Blass escaped all three jams without damage. He went the distance for the 5-1 win.

In a best-of-five format, the loser of Game 1 faced immediate urgency and that's how the Reds came out in Game 2 against Bob Moose. Pete Rose and Morgan opened the game with singles to right field. Bobby Tolan, Johnny Bench, and Tony Perez ripped consecutive doubles. It was 4-0 before an out was recorded.

Bob Johnson came out of the Pittsburgh bullpen and kept it at 4-zip. The Pirates tried to respond right away by putting two on with one out. But Jack Billingham got Stargell to ground into a double play and kill the threat.

Pittsburgh got on the board in the bottom of the fourth. Oliver hit a leadoff double and scored on a base hit from Milt May. Then, in the bottom of the fifth, Gene Alley was hit by a pitch. Bill Mazerowski, the franchise legend who had been the hero of the 1960 World Series, came off the bench to bat for Johnson, who had done yeoman's work in keeping the Pirates in the game. Mazerowski singled. The Pirates were in business, runners on first and second, no outs and a top of the order that had already been productive coming to the plate.

Billingham got Stennett to pop out, but Oliver legged out an infield hit to load the bases. Clemente hit a ground ball. The Reds got an out at second base, but didn't turn two, and a run scored. Tom Hall came out of the Cincy bullpen, a lefthander to face Stargell. Hall got the big strikeout and kept the Cincinnati lead at 4-2.

But the Pirates kept coming. Manny Sanguillen hit a one-double in the sixth and scored on a single from Dave Cash. It was 4-3.

That was all Pittsburgh could do against Hall, though. The reliever worked the balance of the game without allowing any more hits. Morgan homered in the eighth for an insurance run. The Reds won 5-3 and picked up the road split.

Even though the remainder of this series would be during the work week, all games would be in the afternoon. On Monday in Riverfront Stadium, the Reds gave the ball to Gary Nolan, who had been terrific all season. The Pirates went with Nelson Briles in the pivotal Game 3.

Cincinnati threatened in the first when Rose doubled to lead off. But Briles struck out Morgan, got Tolan and Bench and the game stayed scoreless.

In the third inning, though, the Reds got on the board. Darrell Chaney began the frame with a single to right, then moved up on a groundout by Rose. Morgan singled to right to score the game's first run, then stole second. Tolan singled to center, and it was 2-0 Cincinnati.

Clemente tried to rally Pittsburgh with a leadoff double in the fourth, but Nolan went through Stargell, Oliver, and Hebner and kept the Pirates off the board. The Reds missed their own opportunity in that inning's bottom half. Bench tripled to left to get it going. But Perez popped out. Cesar Geronimo flied out to left. Bench tried to tag up, but Stennett threw him out at the plate. After an action-packed fourth inning, it was still 2-0.

Sanguillen put Pittsburgh on the board with a solo blast in the fifth. The game stayed 2-1 into the seventh. Pedro Borbon was on in relief of Nolan. And the Cincy reliever plunked Hebner to start the inning. Sanguillen singled. Alley got a sacrifice bunt down to put runners on second and third with one out, and the lineup flipped over.

Stennett's single tied the game 2-2. Cash got a fly ball to right. Sanguillen tried to tag. And for the second time this afternoon, a catcher was thrown out at the plate. This time, it was Geronimo making the throw. We were still tied going into the eighth.

Cincinnati's great closer, Clay Carroll, came on. But Stargell worked a one-out walk and Oliver followed with a double. There were runners on second and third. Hebner was intentionally walked to put the double play in order. Facing Sanguillen, Carroll got the ground ball. But he didn't get the double play. The Reds got an out at second, but the Pirates got the go-ahead run.

Now trailing 3-2, the Reds got a one-out double from Rose. Pittsburgh turned to their own excellent closer, Dave Giusti. He got Morgan and Tolan to pop out, cleaned up the ninth without further incident and the Pirates had a 2-1 series lead.

Cincinnati was again facing urgency, and relying on 22-year-old Ross Grimsley to keep their season alive on Tuesday afternoon. Pittsburgh was hoping Dock Ellis could secure a return trip to the World Series.

Rose started the Reds' first inning with a base hit and was bunted up. But, trying to take third, on a Tolan groundball, Rose was cut down. At risk of seeing the inning get away, Bench singled to right. The great young catcher then stole second, and the errant throw from Sanguillen led to a run. Cincinnati was ahead 1-0.

Bench got another rally going in the bottom of the fourth, again with his legs. He led off with a single. With two outs, the inning was on the verge of dying. Bench again stole second. Geronimo hit a short pop fly into left that Alley made an error on. Bench scored and Geronimo ended up on third, where he scored on a bunt single from Chaney. It was a soft rally to be sure, but the Reds had some real breathing room with a 3-0 lead.

In the bottom of the sixth, Cincinnati struck again. Denis Menke doubled with one out and took third on a groundout. Chaney was intentionally walked to bring up Grimsley. The young pitcher was already in thorough command on the mound. Now, he delivered a dagger blow with his bat, a two-run double.

Grimsley went the distance with a two-hitter. Only one of those hits—a solo blast from Clemente in the seventh—left the infield. Cincinnati added two more runs. The only rout of this series went to the Reds, 7-1.

Everything was coming down to Wednesday afternoon's Game 5 and the Blass-Gullett rematch. After a scoreless first inning, Pittsburgh drew first blood in the top of the second. Sanguillen led off with a single and scored on a double by Hebner. Cash's RBI single staked Blass to a 2-0 lead. There were still none out, but facing the bottom of the order, Gullett stopped the damage there.

Cincinnati started to answer in the bottom of the third. Chaney hit a leadoff single. Gullett got a sac bunt down and set up Rose for the RBI double to cut the lead in half. But the Pirates immediately responded in the top of the fourth. Sanguillen, Hebner, and Cash hit consecutive singles. It was 3-1 and there were no outs.

With no margin for error left, Reds' manager Sparky Anderson went to Borbon. The reliever came up big. He got Alley, then induced a double-play ball from Blass. Pittsburgh had the lead at 3-1, but this could have been worse. While one can't be too hard on the Pirates, given that it was the bottom of the order, including the pitcher's spot, that left some meat on the bone early, there had been a missed chance to kill the Reds quickly.

Geronimo's solo homer in the fifth cut the lead to 3-2. Now, it was time for the long tension to settle in. Both pitchers were dealing. It was still 3-2 in the top of the eighth. Stennett, trying to help his team take out some insurance, hit a leadoff single. Oliver bunted him into scoring position. Clemente was intentionally walked.

Tom Hall again came out of the bullpen for the lefty-lefty matchup with Stargell. And again, the Reds reliever won the battle with a strikeout. Hall retired Sanguillen. The game stayed 3-2.

Joe Hague came off the Cincy bench to bat in the pitcher's spot in the bottom of the eighth and worked a leadoff walk. Rose got the sac bunt down. Ramon Hernandez was summoned from the Pirate bullpen. Hernandez came up big, getting Morgan on a grounder to second and striking out Tolan. Pittsburgh was three outs away.

Giusti came on in the bottom of the ninth. Bench greeted him with a home run. We were tied 3-3.

Then Perez singled to center. George Foster came on to pinch run and moved up to second on a base hit from Menke. Suddenly, the Reds went from the brink of elimination to having the winning run in scoring position with none out. Bob Moose came out of the Pittsburgh pen.

Geronimo flew out to right, but Foster tagged and took third. Then Moose got Chaney to pop up. Pittsburgh was on the verge of escaping. Hal McRae came off the Reds' bench to bat in Carroll's spot. The Pirates had their #2 starter on the mound in a game where both closers were gone. If they could survive this inning, the advantage would seem to be with Pittsburgh in extra innings.

A Moose curveball darted away from McRae. It also darted away from Sanguillen. Foster raced home and the Reds won the pennant.

Any list of the great NLCS battles ever played needs to include this 1972 edition. Cincinnati had played from behind the whole way—losing Game 1, losing Game 3, and trailing in the ninth inning of Game 5—before finally prevailing.

There was no LCS MVP award given out in this era. The best statistical performer in the series was Rose, who went 9-for-20. On the Pirate side, while no one batted .300 for the series, Oliver, Sanguillen, and Stennett all had their share of key hits and Blass had been exceptional in his two starts.

But if we can pick a 1972 NLCS MVP retroactively, my choice would be Bench. His overall numbers were good—6-for-18. He had gotten the Reds' going in the must-win Game 4, and his Game 5 home run started the winning rally.



For Pittsburgh, the NLCS loss was simply heartbreaking from a sports standpoint. The offseason was tragic from a human perspective. Nicaragua was devastated by an earthquake. The right fielder made a humanitarian flight to bring supplies. Clemente died in a plane crash at sea. Major League Baseball continues to honor his legacy with the Roberto Clemente Award, given out based on a player's off-the-field work.

1973

The 1973 Pittsburgh Pirates came into the season looking for a fourth straight division title and to win their second World Series title in that same time period. The Pirates did indeed contend in '73. But it took a mediocre division to keep them in the race, and in the end, they still came up short.

The step-back was certainly no fault of Willie Stargell. Now 33-years-old, but still playing leftfield, Stargell put together the best year of his brilliant career. He finished with an on-base percentage of .392 and a slugging percentage of a stunning .646. He hit 44 home runs and posted 119 RBIs. He batted .292 and came in second in the National League MVP voting.

Stargell was joined in the Pirate outfield by Al Oliver, who popped 20 homers of his own, and Richie Zisk, who finished with a stat line of .364 OBP/.526 slugging. Another Richie, third baseman Hebner, hit 25 home runs. Even though Pittsburgh didn't get good years from notables like Manny Sanguillen behind the plate, Bob Robertson at first base or second baseman Dave Cash, they still finished fourth in the National League for runs scored.

The pitching was more mediocre. There was a nice core three in the starting rotation, with Nelson Briles, Bob Moose and Dock Ellis. But in an unexpected development, Steve Blass, the team's best pitcher in recent years, just completely lost it. Blass was only 31-years-old and there were no injury factors. But he made 18 starts, finished with a mammoth ERA of 9.85 and was out of baseball by the following season. It was a shocking fall from grace for a man who had been an October hero.

Losing depth in the rotation accentuated the problem that none of Briles, Moose or Ellis was really a true #1 starter. Manager Bill Virdon pieced together starts from Bruce Kison, Jim Roker, Luke Walker, and others. Dave Giusti was still a good closer. But it wasn't enough to stop the Pirate staff from finishing seventh in the National League for staff ERA.

Pittsburgh swept the St. Louis Cardinals to start the season, got out of the gate at 8-3 and it looked like all was well in the Steel City. But the Pirates dropped three straight at home to a good Los Angeles Dodgers team at the end of April. They were swept three straight at home by the New York Mets. By the time Memorial Day arrived, Pittsburgh was stumbling at 17-21, in fourth place in the NL East and facing a 7 ½ game deficit.

The Pirates swept the Atlanta Braves out of the holiday weekend, then won a series over the eventual NL West champion Cincinnati Reds. But a corner had not been turned. Pittsburgh promptly went into a free-fall, lost 11 times in 13 games and were in a 10 ½ game hole by June 18.

An 11-6 stretch against divisional rivals stopped the bleeding, but the Pirate roller-coaster continued into the All-Star break. Fortunately, the roller coaster turned upward with a four-game sweep of the San Diego Padres to close the first half. Pittsburgh's record was only 46-49, but that was good enough to be within 4 ½ games of the Cubs and Cardinals, who were tied for first. The entire NL East was within 7 ½ games. This race could go to anyone who wanted to step up and grab it.

The latter part of summer saw Pittsburgh mostly tread water, while the division as a whole—if this were possible—became even more defined by collective mediocrity. On August 31, Pittsburgh was 63-65. But St. Louis, setting the pace, was only a game over .500. Chicago was 64-67. The Pirates and Cubs were meeting at old Three Rivers Stadium over Labor Day weekend.

A Friday doubleheader got the series started. Stargell ripped a three-run blast that was the highlight of a six-run third inning. Rocker tossed a complete game in a 7-0 win. The nightcap was tied 2-2 in the fourth. Hebner's solo blast started a three-run burst. Reliever Bob Johnson did good work in shutting things down, as Pittsburgh beat Chicago ace Fergie Jenkins 5-2.

On Saturday afternoon, Kison and Cub starter Burt Hooton dueled in a scoreless tie through eight innings. In the bottom of the ninth, Hebner singled to right with one out. An Oliver double set up a second and third situation for Zisk. He singled to center, and the Pirates had a 1-0 win. Even though they lost on Sunday, the Pirates were back to .500, only one game back and in second place. The entire division continued to be packed within seven games of each other.

With St. Louis coming to town next, opportunity was at hand. But tensions between Virdon and the team had been boiling all year. When Pittsburgh lost three of four games to the Cardinals, they boiled over. Virdon was fired. Danny Murtaugh, a lifer with the organization, who managed the 1970 division champs and the 1971 World Series champs, moved from Farm Director back into the dugout for the stretch drive.

The Pirates had also made a callup that would help them in the present and significantly impact their future. Dave Parker, at the age of 22, got 144 plate appearances down the stretch in this 1973 season. He slugged .453 and got a fantastic career started.

There was still time to turn this season around. Pittsburgh won two of three over Philadelphia. When the Pirates went to St. Louis for a weekend series on September 14, their record was up to 72-71 and that was good enough to hold a one-game lead.

Briles pitched Friday night's opener and worked six good innings to lead a 3-1 win. On Saturday, a big seventh-inning was keyed by Parker's three-run blast and the Pirates won 7-4. Pittsburgh lost on a Sunday, but the big series win had pushed St. Louis two games back with two weeks to play.

As those who watch horse racing know, when a race is packed, what often happens is the horses that have been lurking in the middle, or even all the way back, suddenly make a burst at the end. That's what was starting to happen in the NL East. The Expos were only a half-game back. And the horse with the Mets logo on it, who lingered in last place in August, was starting to come on strong down the stretch.

Pittsburgh and New York would play in a strange five-game stretch that would cover Monday through Friday, the first two at home and the latter three on the road. The Pirate bats pounded the great Tom Seaver for a 10-3 win in the opener and all looked well. But Pittsburgh's pitching problems came home to roost. Over the next four games, they allowed 27 runs and lost all four. The Mets were now in first place. The Pirates were a game back. The Expos, Cardinals and Cubs were two back. There was a week and change to go.

Taking three of four from Montreal delivered the Expos a big blow, but Pittsburgh then lost a series to Philadelphia. Coming into the final weekend, the Mets were 80-78, the Pirates were 79-79 and the Cardinals were hanging on at 2 ½ out.

Pittsburgh would get the break they needed. The Mets lost once on the final weekend and opened the door. But the Pirates lost two quick games against the Expos and their bid was over. Pittsburgh finished the season 80-82. For all the excitement the division race brought, this was still only the eighth-best record in the National League and tied for 14th among 26 major league teams overall. It was mediocrity for an organization that had become used to excellence.

1974

The 1974 Pittsburgh Pirates were looking to bounce back and reassert control of their own backyard. It took a long time, and a lot of stops and starts, but they won a sizzling pennant race and returned to postseason play.

Willie Stargell was 34-years-old, but the leftfielder continued to put up good numbers. Stargell finished 1974 with a stat line of a .407 on-base percentage/.537 slugging percentage and drove in 96 runs. He was one part of a productive outfield. Al Oliver played center and his stat line was .358/.475. Richie Zisk drove in 100 runs with a .386/.476 stat line in rightfield.

The outfield trio got help from third baseman Richie Hebner and his 18 homer runs. Rennie Stennett played second base and batted .291. A platoon at first base got some power from Bob Robertson, who slugged .479, and some on-base consistency from Ed Kilpartrick, with his .367 OBP. Collectively, it all gave the Pirates the third-best offense in the National League.

Pitching was more problematic. Individually, it was hard to fault any one particular member of the staff. Jerry Reuss, Ken Brett, and Dock Ellis all had ERAs in the 3s. So did Bruce Kison, who did spot-starting and relief work. Dave Giusti worked over 100 innings out of the bullpen and posted a 3.32 ERA.

The staff ace was Jim Rooker, who finished with an ERA of 2.78 and won 15 games. That's a nice year. Perhaps the problem lies with the fact that, in an era with a lot of good pitching staffs, it was a year that was the best on the Pittsburgh staff. With no one who stood out, the Pirate staff ERA ranked seventh in the 12-team National League. Although the flip side is that with no obvious weak points, they were well-built for a 162-game haul. And it would take all of those games for Pittsburgh to reclaim their place atop the NL East.

But Pittsburgh spent the early part of the year in the funk that had marked their 1973 campaign. The Pirates started 3-10, including losing five of six to St. Louis. Pittsburgh didn't win a series until the end of April. In May, they lost five of six to Philadelphia. By Memorial Day, the Pirates were limping at 14-26, in last place, and staring at a nine-game deficit.

More losses came in early June. The Reds and the Los Angeles Dodgers were the National League's two best teams this year, and Pittsburgh went on the road to both places and lost five of six. The first signs of a spark came at the end of that road trip, when they split six games in San Diego and San Francisco, and then came home to sweep the Dodgers in a return series.

A roller-coaster ensued. Six losses in eight games against the Cubs and Cardinals were followed by a nice 6-1 stretch against the Phillies and Expos. Then a 4-9 sequence that included getting swept four straight at home by the Reds. But the first half ended with a seven-game winning streak. Pittsburgh was 45-49 and in fourth place at the All-Star Break. It wasn't inspiring, but this was again a year where no one really wanted to grab the NL East. Thus, that mediocre record, had them within 3 ½ games of the lead.

August 6 was when things started to change for the better. Sitting on a record of 52-57, the Pirates tore off 18 wins in 24 games. That included taking five of six from the Dodgers, winning a series with the Reds, and sweeping the Mets, who had lost their magic from 1973.

By the time that stretch was over it was Labor Day. And in spite of their many stops and starts, Pittsburgh was 70-63 and in first place. St. Louis was just a game and a half back, while Philadelphia was four games out. Everyone else had fallen by the wayside.

The Pirates delivered a death blow to the Phillies when they first swept a Labor Day doubleheader, then capped off a series sweep the next day, scoring 26 runs in the process. The bats then thumped Expo pitching for 24 runs in another sweep.

With their lead pushed out to a 2 ½ games, Pittsburgh stumbled. A disastrous 1-6 week against the Cubs, Expos, and—most importantly—the Cardinals, let St. Louis completely reverse the race. On September 15, the Pirates trailed the Cards by a game and a half. And the first of two remaining series against St. Louis was set to begin in old Three Rivers Stadium on September 17.

Oliver homered in the first inning of Tuesday night's opener. Reuss was brilliant. But it wasn't enough. The Pirates only mustered four hits the rest of the way and didn't score again. Reuss pushed the game to extra innings—in fact he pitched all 13 frames—but the Cardinals got the last word in a 2-1 win.

The Pirates got more good pitching on Wednesday night, this time from Rooker. They got another big hit from Oliver, a two-run double. In this game, that was enough for a 4-1 win.

Both offenses, quiet for the first two nights, opened up in Thursday night's rubber match. Pittsburgh trailed 4-3 in the bottom of the seventh. Stargell ripped a two-run double to get the lead. Hebner blasted a three-run homer to break it open. Pittsburgh won 8-6 and closed to within a half-game.

A series loss to the Mets pushed the Pirates a game and a half back again when they made the return visit to St. Louis. There were just ten days left in the season.

Rooker took the ball on Monday night. He was brilliant and he needed to be. The game went to the 10th inning still scoreless. Finally, Hebner's RBI single got Pittsburgh on the board. Giusti came out of the bullpen to close the 1-0 win.

The bats got rolling on Tuesday night. Stennett had three hits at the top of the order. Stargell drove in three runs in the middle. The young backup outfielder, Dave Parker, drove in two runs with a key pinch-hit single. Pittsburgh won 7-3 and moved into first place.

When the Pirates dropped five runs in the first inning on Wednesday night, thanks to a three-run blast from Manny Sanguillen, they were poised to sweep and get control of the race. The pitching collapsed so thoroughly that Pittsburgh was down 9-6 after five. Then they rallied and tied it. Another extra-inning game, the third in the last week between these two teams, went down. Giusti pitched three shutout innings and the game went to the 11th, still tied 9-9.

Pittsburgh scored three runs. That should have been enough. But with Giusti now out, St. Louis got off the mat. The Cardinals scored four times and had a stunning 13-12 win. The Pirates were back to trailing by a half-game.

What Pittsburgh had was control of that half-game, and by this point, that was no small thing. They went to Shea Stadium for a four-game weekend set, won three times and pulled even. For the final three days, the Pirates would be hosting the Cubs, while the Cardinals were in Montreal.

Kison came up with a clutch start on Monday night, winning a 2-1 pitcher's duel. St. Louis answered, and the race was still tied.

The eighth inning of Tuesday's games would be a critical moment in this NL East race. Pittsburgh was trailing 5-4. St. Louis was ahead 2-0. The Pirates got a two-run blast from Robertson and won 6-5. The Cardinals coughed up the lead and lost 3-2. Pittsburgh had control going into the final day.

There was rain in Montreal, so St. Louis would watch and wait. If the Pirates lost, the Cardinals and Expos would make up their game on Thursday, with the possibility of a potential tiebreaker game on Friday. When the Pirates trailed 4-2 in the ninth inning, it looked like some more baseball would still be necessary.



Pittsburgh scraped out a run. Robertson came to the plate with two outs and a man in scoring position. He struck out. But the ball got away from Cub catcher Steve Swisher. Robertson not only reached base, but the tying run scored.

Oliver tripled in the 10th inning, and the division-winning run was just 90 feet away. Sanguillen hit a ground ball on the infield. There was no play at the plate. The Pirates won the game 5-4

and had finally prevailed in an amazing NL East race.

1974 NLCS

The Los Angeles Dodgers are a playoff mainstay in our own day. But in 1974, they were in the postseason for the first time since 1966. This series would open with two games in Pittsburgh. The remaining games would take place in Los Angeles.

Saturday afternoon's opener saw Don Sutton take the mound for the Dodgers. Jerry Reuss would one day be a postseason hero in Los Angeles. But in 1974, he was a Pirate, and their Game 1 starter.

L.A. got something going in the top of the second when Joe Ferguson led off with a single, and then moved to third on Bill Russell's one-out base hit to rightfield. Reuss struck out Steve Yeager and had a chance to escape unscathed with Sutton coming to the plate. But Reuss suddenly lost his control—he walked Sutton to load the bases and walked Davey Lopes to force in the game's first run.

Reuss rebounded and pitched well the balance of the afternoon. But it was already too late. Sutton was dealing. He tossed a complete-game four-hitter. Even with Dodger third baseman Ron Cey booting a couple errors, Sutton only allowed a runner to reach second base once.

The game stayed 1-0 all the way to the top of the ninth. At which point, Sutton stepped up with his bat. He singled to lead off the inning. With two outs, Jimmy Wynn doubled home a big insurance run, and Ferguson's single added one more. The final was 3-0.

A big sports Sunday was next, with both cities also having top NFL teams. The Pittsburgh Steelers were an emerging power, en route to what would be the first of four Super Bowl titles in this decade. Pittsburgh fans would have to choose whether to watch Game 2 or to catch the Steelers down in Houston. The Los Angeles fans had it easier—the playoff-bound Rams would play Detroit later in the day. Baseball started at 1 PM EST, with the Dodgers going to Andy Messersmith against the Pirates' Jim Rooker.

Lopes opened the game by working Rooker for a walk, and then went to third when Bill Buckner singled to right. Wynn's fly ball was too shallow to score a run, but Steve Garvey followed with a single to put L.A. up 1-zip. Ferguson walked and the bases were loaded with one out. Cey's rough start to this series continued when he popped out. Bill Russell lined out and Rooker had kept it a 1-0 game.

But Cey was about to turn his game around, and that started in the top of the fourth. He homered for a 2-0 lead. The Dodgers threatened in the fifth, when Lopes singled, stole second and took third on an errant throw. But Buckner, Wynn, and Garvey all failed to pick him up. Another chance to expand the lead died in the seventh when Garvey struck out with two runners on base.

The Pittsburgh bats were still doing nothing, but they were also in the game when the bottom of the seventh arrived. With the bottom two spots in the order up, it was pinch-hitters who got the Pirates going. Paul Popovich and Richie Zisk both singled. Rennie Stennett put down a sac bunt to set up the tying runs on second and third with just one out.

Richie Hebner grounded out to first, as the Dodgers took the out and allowed the run. Al Oliver then legged out an infield hit. The game was tied 2-2.

Dave Giusti was on in relief for Pittsburgh. Cey, on his way to a four-hit day, led off the top of the eighth with a double. Russell beat out an infield hit. Willie Crawford singled to left and just like that, the Dodgers had the lead back. This time they built on it. Manny Mota singled. It was 4-2, there were runners on the corners and still no one out. Giusti was pulled. Lopes promptly singled to make it 5-2.

It could have been worse. A wild pitch moved the runners to second and third. But Buckner tapped one back to the pitcher that failed to score a run. After an intentional walk, Garvey's tap-back to the mound turned into an inning-ending double play. But the Dodgers had all they needed. Their Cy Young Award-winning reliever Mike Marshall set the last six hitters down in order. L.A. won 5-2 in a game where they had left twelve runners on base. And they were going home in complete command of this series.

Prime-time baseball was still not a thing in the LCS, so the midweek games ahead would all be played during the day. Tuesday afternoon's Game 3 began at 12:40 PM local time. Bruce Kison shouldered the burden of keeping the Pirates alive. Doug Rau was looking to put the Dodgers in the World Series.

Pittsburgh came out like a team with their back to the wall. Stennett opened the game with a single to right. Oliver drew a one-out walk. And Willie Stargell homered. The Pirates had their first lead of the series at 3-0 and they weren't done. A Garvey error with two outs led to a home run by Hebner. Kison had been staked to a 5-zip lead.

Kison's life was made even easier in the top of the third when singles from Oliver, Zisk, Hebner, and Mario Mendoza produced two more runs. Kison worked into the seventh, allowing just two hits. The 7-0 score held, and Pittsburgh still had life.

What Los Angeles had was Sutton going back to the mound for Wednesday's Game 4. He would rematch with Reuss.

The Dodgers needed to re-establish their momentum, and they wasted no time in doing so. Lopes opened the home half of the first with a walk and a stolen base. He scored on a double from Wynn. In the third inning, Wynn walked. Garvey homered. It was 3-0, and with no time to waste, Pirate manager Danny Murtaugh pulled Reuss. Ken Brett, the older brother of a soon-to-be-more-famous third baseman in Kansas City, came out of the Pittsburgh bullpen.

It didn't work, and it didn't matter. In the fifth, Garvey followed another Wynn walk with another two-run blast. In the sixth, after a Yeager walked, Lopes tripled, and then scored on a throwing error. It was 7-0. The reason it didn't matter, is that Sutton was as dominant today as he'd been in the series opener. The afternoon turned into one long party in Dodger Stadium.

Pittsburgh got their lone run when Stargell hit a solo blast in the seventh. But Los Angeles scored twice in the seventh, and three more times in the eighth. Sutton added an RBI single and pitched eight innings of three-hit ball. Marshall came on to close. He wrapped up the 12-1 win by striking out Hebner, and the champagne could flow.

There was no MVP given out in NLCS play until 1977, but there's little doubt Sutton would have won the award. He pitched 17 innings, and allowed just seven hits, getting two of his team's three wins. He'd also contributed at the plate in each game.

Other notable performers for Los Angeles included Garvey and Russell, who each collected seven hits. Lopes went 4-for-15, and the speedy leadoff man also drew five walks. Stargell's six hits and two home runs were the only noteworthy positive for Pittsburgh.

1975

The Pittsburgh Pirates were one of the most successful organizations in the National League in the early part of the 1970s. They won the NL East each year from 1970-72 and took a World Series title in 1971. In 1974, the Pirates again won the NL East. The 1975 Pittsburgh Pirates continued the pattern of success their home city was enjoying across the board in sports—from the NFL's Steelers to Pitt football.

Power and pitching were what keyed the 1975 edition of the Pittsburgh Pirates. The team led the National League in home runs and was second in slugging percentage. Willie Stargell, the 35-year-old first baseman hit 22 home runs. Catcher Manny Sanguillen slugged .491. Richie Zisk popped 20 home runs in left field, while centerfielder Al Oliver hit 18 home runs.

No one was better than Dave Parker. The rightfielder slugged .541, hit 25 home runs and had 101 RBIs. He finished third in the MVP voting, an award that ultimately went to Cincinnati Reds' second baseman Joe Morgan. While Morgan had the better numbers, he also hit in the stacked lineup that was the Big Red Machine.

Pittsburgh had at least three dead offensive spots in their lineup, while Cincinnati had offensive depth. Parker bore greater proportional responsibility for the Pirates, and there is at least a credible argument that he deserved the 1975 National League MVP.

Whatever runs were produced, the Pirate pitchers made the most of them. They finished second in the NL in ERA. Jerry Reuss was an 18-game winner with a 2.54 ERA. Jim Rooker, Bruce Kison, Dock Ellis and John Candelaria all had ERAs ranging from 2.76 to 3.23. No matter whose turn was up, the Pirates were going to have a good chance to win. Dave Giusti and Ramon Hernandez effectively handled the most important bullpen innings.

Pittsburgh's start to the season was stop-and-go. They swept the Phillies at home and took three straight from the Mets in New York. But they also lost six of ten on a West Coast trip. The Pirates pattered into Memorial Day with a record of 19-18. Although, with no one taking a hold of the NL East, they were tied for second with the Mets in a four-team race that included the first-place Cubs and the Phillies.

The early part of summer were good times. Pittsburgh won 10 of 14 out of the holiday weekend, including taking three of four from eventual NL West champion Cincinnati. That moved them into first place. Then they ripped off an 11-2 stretch. The Pirates were out to a five-game lead.

A visit to Philadelphia brought Pittsburgh quickly back to the pack, with four straight losses. Two strange series with Chicago proved the right antidote. The Pirates played a six-game series with the Cubs at home, replete with two doubleheaders over a Thursday-to-Sunday stretch. The

return trip to Wrigley the following week was a five-game set. Pittsburgh went 8-3 in the eleven games.

In the final week before the All-Star break, they won five of seven, and reached the midpoint at 55-43. It was good for a comfortable 6 ½ game lead on Philadelphia, with everyone else well in the rearview mirror.

With another chance to take firm control of the NL East race, the Pirates again settled into mediocrity, going 10-10 on the far side of the break. Mediocrity then turned into simply awful baseball—a 14-game road trip resulted in twelve losses. Pittsburgh was in full-scale meltdown in late August. Their lead dangled at a half-game. The Cardinals and Mets joined the Phils in being back in the race. And the Big Red Machine was coming to town for a four-game set. The Pirates needed to make a stand.

An old-fashioned Friday night doubleheader—starting in the early evening with just twenty minutes between games—got the series started. Zisk homered twice. Rennie Stennett knocked three hits at the top of the order. Larry Demery, who toggled between relief and spot-starting, took the mound and gave eight good innings. Pittsburgh won 7-2.

In the nightcap, the Pirates trailed 2-0 in the bottom of the eighth. In danger of wasting a strong outing from Candelaria, Stennett doubled following a leadoff walk. With runners on second and third, Bob Robertson popped out. A productive groundball from Oliver picked up a run, but there were two outs and Pittsburgh still trailed 2-1. Enter Parker. The big rightfielder homered for the lead. Hebner homered for some insurance. The 4-2 win capped a sweep of the twinbill.

The Pirates bolted to an early 4-0 lead on Saturday afternoon, but Kison melted down in the fifth. The Reds scored eight runs and Pittsburgh lost 12-7. But in the Sunday finale, Reuss went the distance, Stennett and Oliver each had two hits, and the latter homered and drove in three runs. A 5-1 win gave Pittsburgh a clutch series win and got them breathing again.

By Labor Day, Pittsburgh was 75-58, up four games on St. Louis and Philadelphia and plus-5 on New York. They were in Shea Stadium to start an important three-game series with the Mets.

The late afternoon holiday game on Monday was a matchup between Candelaria and the great Tom Seaver. Candelaria pitched well, but the Pirates mustered only four singles off of Seaver and lost 3-0. They needed to respond, and they did. On Tuesday night, Stennett set the table at the top of the order with three hits and a home run. Shortstop Frank Taveras had three hits at the bottom of the order. In between, Bill Robinson and Sanguillen homered. The result was an 8-4 win.

Reuss delivered another big complete-game win on Wednesday, winning 3-1 behind another Robinson home run. Pittsburgh had pushed back at least one challenger back a bit. And they followed this up with consistent baseball, winning 10 of 15 and holding a commanding six-game lead as we moved into the latter part of September.

The lead was still at six games when Pittsburgh hosted Philadelphia to open the season's final week. A win could clinch it. The Pirates led a tight 4-3 game in the bottom of the seventh. Second baseman Dave Cash ripped a clutch two-run double for breathing room. In the eighth, the avalanche started, and Pittsburgh scored five times. When Tekulve got Philly's Mike Rogodzinski to fly out to Parker in right, the NL East race was finally over.

Pittsburgh finished the regular season with 92 wins and moved into their fifth National League Championship Series in six years.

1975 NLCS

Cincinnati and Pittsburgh got together one more time in the 1975 NLCS. The series opened on a Saturday in Cincinnati's old Riverfront Stadium. Each team had its rotation lined up, and the aces—Don Gullett for the Reds and Jerry Reuss for the Pirates—ready to go.

Pittsburgh drew first blood when rightfielder Dave Parker was hit by a pitch with two outs in the top of the second. Richie Hebner picked up the RBI with a double and then light-hitting shortstop Frank Taveras singled to make it 2-0.

Cincinnati got one back in the bottom of the inning with consecutive two-out singles and then Gullett helping his cause with an RBI base hit. It was just the beginning of what the Reds' pitcher would do at the plate.

In the bottom of the third, Cincy's MVP second baseman Joe Morgan drew a walk and then swiped both second and third. Johnny Bench was walked. Tony Perez singled in the tying run. Reuss got two outs and looked like he might escape with a 2-2 tie, but Ken Griffey slashed a two-run double and the Pirate starter took an early shower.

The fifth inning broke the game open. Three straight singles from Perez, George Foster and Dave Concepcion loaded the bases with no one out. A productive ground ball out from Griffey made the score 5-2. Cesar Geronimo hit a sac fly to add another run. The coup de grace came from Gullett—the pitcher hit a two-run homer to make it 8-2, and the game ended with an 8-3 final.

Cincinnati came back on Sunday and didn't take their foot off the gas. Pete Rose singled to lead off the home half of the first inning. Pittsburgh starter Jim Rooker was able to get Morgan and Bench, but Perez took it deep for a 2-0 lead.

Pittsburgh's veteran first baseman Willie Stargell got a run back in the top of the fourth with an RBI double off Cincy pitcher Fred Norman, but the Reds came roaring right back in their own half of the fourth frame.

Three straight singles from Foster, Concepcion and Griffey made the score 3-1 and had runners on first and second. The aggressive Reds then employed a double steal and both Concepcion and Griffey were safe.

For the second straight game, a Cincinnati pitcher helped himself at the plate—Norman picked up a run with a sac fly and it was 4-1. And for the second straight game a Pittsburgh starter didn't make it through five innings.

The Reds added some insurance when Griffey singled to lead off the sixth, stole both second and third and scored on a balk. Perez later delivered an RBI single in the same inning, and the 6-1 final put Cincinnati on the brink of a pennant.

No team had rallied from on 0-2 deficit since LCS play was instituted, but Pittsburgh would get the rest of the series at home in Three Rivers Stadium. They sent John Candelaria to the mound and the lefty did what he could to keep his team's season alive.

The Reds were able to get a run in the second when the normally light-hitting Concepcion went deep for a solo home run. It stayed 1-0 into the sixth when the Pirates got to Cincy starter Gary Nolan. A single from Hebner and a home run by Al Oliver made it 2-1.

Candelaria bailed his team out in the seventh. Bench reached on an error, and even the catcher got in on the basestealing display, taking his own turn at swiping both second and third. Candelaria came up with a big strikeout of Perez, got out of the inning and with the 2-1 lead intact, it looked like the Pirates might live to fit another day.

Fate was cruel in the eighth though. Candelaria got the first two batters out. Then, after having controlled the Big Red Machine's lineup of future Hall of Famers all night long, he walked pinch-hitter Marv Rettenmund. It flipped the lineup to the top and Rose homered.

Cincinnati was three outs from a pennant, but they wouldn't get them in the ninth. Stargell and Zisk both singled, and Pittsburgh would load the bases with two outs. Now it was their turn for a no-name pinch-hitter to drive opposing fans crazy. Duffy Dyer drew a game-tying walk and we were going extra innings.

Griffey got one more Reds rally going in the 10th, with a leadoff single. He moved up to second on a balk, and took third on a ground ball out by Geronimo. A sac fly from Ed Armbrister brought in the lead run. For all of the firepower the Reds had, they could move baserunners and execute in key spots, and it gave them the last lead they would need in the 1975 NLCS.

Consecutive hits from Rose and Morgan added an insurance run and reliever Pedro Borbon set the side down in the 10th. The 5-3 win gave the Cincinnati Reds their third National League pennant in six years.

There was still no MVP award given in LCS play in 1975. Candidates would include Concepcion, whose .455 batting average led Cincinnati regulars. Morgan stole four bases, the leading total on a team whose 11 steals defined this series. Gullett had virtually won Game 1 by himself with his arm and his bat.

All of those were good candidates, but I think the best candidate would be Perez. He hit .417, had four RBIs and his two-out, two-run shot early in Game 2 solidified all the momentum the Reds established at home early in the series.

1976

Danny Murtaugh was an institution in Pittsburgh. And speaking of institutions, the Pirates themselves were one in the NL East. The 1976 Pittsburgh Pirates marked the end of both institutions. It was Murtaugh's final campaign, and the Pirates ceded control over the division.

Some trades that didn't work out were one key reason for the slippage. Pittsburgh acquired starting pitcher Doc Medich from the New York Yankees. Medich wasn't bad, but the price included an even better starter in Dock Ellis. Even worse, a talented young second baseman in Willie Randolph was shipped to the Bronx. Pittsburgh then swung a deal to get a veteran second baseman, Tommy Helms. At the age of 35, Helms was fading. The player the Pirates gave up to the Houston Astros was Art Howe, who turned into a reliable third baseman.

Even so, Pittsburgh still had a good team in '76. The everyday lineup was led by the outfield. Rightfielder Dave Parker slugged .475 and drove in 90 runs. Al Oliver played centerfield and hit .323. Richie Zisk was in left, and he batted .289 and popped 21 homers. At first base, Willie Stargell was now 36-years-old, but he still hit 20 home runs. And then there was Bill Robinson. Grabbing playing time around the outfield and at first when the other players took a day off, Robinson got 416 plate appearances. He batted .305 and hit 21 homers.

Manny Sanguillen was behind the plate and had a nice bat, hitting .290. The problem came in a lack of production from second base, third base, and shortstop. None of Rennie Stennett, Richie Hebner or Frank Taveras were productive.

The pitching was well-balanced and had no real weak points. John Candelaria was 22-years-old, and the young lefty won 16 games with a 3.15 ERA. Jerry Reuss, Jim Rooker and Bruce Kison combined to win 43 games, and all had ERAs in the 3s. Medich's ERA was 3.51. The bullpen got good work from Bob Moose, Larry Demery and Kent Tekulve.

With the pitching the problem is that no one was a standout. ERAs in the 3s are good, but in the 1970s, it wasn't as impressive as it is today. Pittsburgh lacked a clear stopper, just as the offense lacked anyone having a signature year. The Pirates finished third in the 12-team National League for runs scored and fourth for composite ERA. They were certainly good. But the bar was being set high in the NL this season.

Pittsburgh opened the season with two games in Philadelphia. The Pirates took a 3-1 lead into the eighth inning before giving up three runs. But in the ninth, Parker worked a walk, Hebner doubled, and Robinson tied it up with a sacrifice fly. Demery came out of the bullpen and kept the game tied 4-4 into the 11th inning. With two outs, a misplayed fly ball in rightfield put Hebner on third base. He scored on a base hit from Mario Mendoza. The Pirates stole a 5-4 win. They came out on Sunday and attacked Phillie lefty Steve Carlton. Sanguillen's three hits led a balanced attack and keyed an 8-3 win.

All was well in the Steel City, as these wins keyed a 6-1 start. But when Philadelphia came west to Pittsburgh, the Pirates dropped two straight. Then they went on a road trip west and lost six of nine. They did rebound and played pretty well in May. But the Phillies got red hot. By Memorial Day, Pittsburgh's record was a respectable 24-18. But Philly was soaring at 29-10, the best record in baseball and 6 ½ games in front.

The Pirates went on to lose three of four to the Cincinnati Reds, fresh off winning the World Series in 1975 and destined to repeat this coming October. But Pittsburgh bounced back by going 8-3 on a road trip through Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, and Montreal, none of whom were very good. The Pirates swept the Cubs three straight at home back in Pittsburgh.

But an opportunity to make up some ground at home against Philadelphia was missed when the teams split a four-game set over Fourth of July weekend. Pittsburgh went on to split four more with Cincinnati in the last series before the All-Star break. The Pirates were a healthy 46-35. But the Phillies were 56-25.

A late July visit to Philadelphia was an absolute disaster. Pittsburgh lost four of five by a combined score of 39-17. The Pirates were as many as 14 ½ games back as late as August 12. But they got hot. And the Phils finally cooled down.

Pittsburgh ripped off a sizzling 17-6 stretch. By the time they started a big three-game set with Philadelphia on Labor Day, the record was 77-58 and the margin was 7 ½ games. It was a tough row to hoe, to be sure. But with five head-to-head games in September, no one could write off the veteran Pirates.

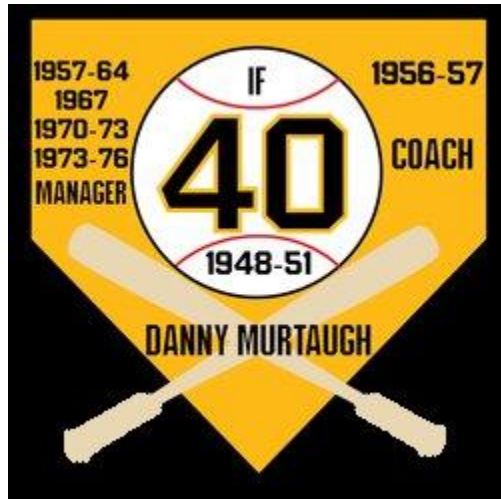
A Labor Day doubleheader in old Three Rivers Stadium started the must-win stretch. In an opening game that started at 10:30 AM, Kison pitched eight good innings. Pittsburgh scored three runs in the third, thanks to four straight two-out singles from Zisk, Stargell, Parker, and Robinson. They won 6-2. In the 1:30 PM "nightcap," Demery got a start. He made the most of it, dealing a four-hitter. He got support from an RBI double by Sanguillen in the second, and a two-out/two-run triple from Robinson in the third. Pittsburgh won 5-1.

Hebner took over the finale, driving in four runs against Carlton. Rooker went the distance for Pittsburgh. The 5-1 win cut the lead to 4 ½ games and let everyone in Philadelphia know this race wasn't over yet.

The Pirates stumbled at home, losing three of five to the Expos and Mets and the margin was back to six when Pittsburgh went to Philadelphia for two games on September 15-16. Once again, the proud veteran team wouldn't go quietly. Parker had four hits and homered in the opener. Robinson and Zisk also went deep in an easy 7-2 win.

In the Thursday night finale, Robinson homered again and drove in four runs. Stargell homered. This one was tied 6-6 in the top of the ninth. Duffy Dyer was hit by a pitch. Stennett ripped an RBI double to center. The Pirates were still within four games and there were still two-plus weeks to play.

But games with the Mets, Cubs, and Cardinals—with New York the only team above .500—were another disaster. Pittsburgh lost eight of the twelve games. By the time the final week of play began, the NL East race was over.



On the last day of the season, Pittsburgh swept a doubleheader from St. Louis. Both games were 1-0, and the latter was a walkoff. It was a nice way to end Murtaugh's terrific career.

The Pirates finished the season 92-70. It was still one of the top records in baseball. In fact, only Philadelphia, Cincinnati and the New York Yankees won more games. But in the world of 1976, it wasn't enough.

Murtaugh retired, and sadly passed away from a stroke a little more than a month after the season was over. A Pirate legend was gone.

1977

The Pirates got aggressive in going after the manager they wanted. The front office traded starting catcher Manny Sanguillen to the Oakland A's to get skipper Chuck Tanner. A new era was ready to start in Pittsburgh. The Pirates would be better in 1977—but still not good enough.

They had a balanced starting rotation led up by 23-year-old John Candelaria. The lefthander made 33 starts and posted a dazzling 20-5 record with a 2.34 ERA. It was only good for fifth in the NL Cy Young voting—which was probably too low, but if you look at the contenders, you can see there was a high bar among National League starters. Either way, “the Candy Man” gave Pittsburgh a legitimate ace.

Jerry Reuss, Jim Rooker and Bruce Kison filled out the rotation. They all had their ups and downs. But they consistently took their turns, combining to start 95 games. And there was help behind them. The bullpen had been strengthened by offseason trades.

Pittsburgh acquired Grant Jackson and Terry Forster for some depth. But the big piece was Rich “Goose Gossage.” Only 25-years-old, the Goose would one day become the most feared flamethrower of his day. He came at a price—the Pirates gave up a good outfielder in Richie Zisk to get Gossage from the Chicago White Sox. But the Goose saved 26 games, won 11 more, and finished with a 1.62 ERA. He got further support from submarine-style reliever Kent Tekulve, who picked up ten wins with a 3.06 ERA.

The depth, combined with Candelaria and Gossage's excellence, gave Pittsburgh the third-best staff ERA in the National League.

The everyday lineup underwent a bit of a makeover. Zisk was gone. The Pirates also lost corner infielder Richie Hebner in free agency—to Philadelphia no less. Pittsburgh also had a strange relationship with veteran second baseman Tommy Helms. After a trade to get Helms in '76 didn't work out, the Pirates sold him to Oakland. Then they got him back as the signature piece in a deal that cost them five players—including future stars in starting pitcher Rick Langford and outfielder Tony Armas. After all of this, Helms didn't play much and was well past his prime.

In addition to all the maneuvering, veteran first baseman Willie Stargell also struggled with injuries. Knee, elbow, and hamstring problems limited “Pops” to 63 games.

But there was still plenty of talent on hand, and it started with rightfielder Dave Parker. “The Cobra” won the batting title with a .338 average. He hit 21 homers, drove in 88 runs, and finished third in the MVP voting. After an off-year in '76, second baseman Rennie Stennett exploded with a .336 batting average. Leftfielder Al Oliver finished with a .353 on-base percentage and slugged .481. Bill Robinson was 34-years-old, but he stepped in at first base for Stargell and batted .304 with 26 home runs and 104 RBIs.

Tanner also committed the Pirates to a running game. In an era where stolen bases were a bigger part of the game than they are today, Pittsburgh stole more bags than anyone. Shortstop Frank Taveras led the way with 70 steals. Speedy centerfielder Omar Moreno swiped 53. Stennett stole 28 bags. As running games go, the Pirates might not have rivaled the great duo of Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier with the Steelers as the best in Pittsburgh. But the baseball version of the ground game was pretty good.

The Tanner era got off to a less than auspicious start, when the Pirates lost three straight at home to the St. Louis Cardinals, giving up 28 runs in the process. But Pittsburgh bounced back pretty quickly. They took a couple games from Philadelphia at home in late April. They swept the Cincinnati Reds, the two-time defending World Series champs in early May, scoring 26 runs in the three-game set. Those series wins over the Phils and Reds were part of a red-hot 15-2 stretch that vaulted Pittsburgh to a 2 ½ game lead in the NL East.

But a visit to Wrigley Field in Chicago, where the Cubs were a key contender in the East, resulted in three straight losses over Memorial Day weekend. Pittsburgh dropped two of three in Philadelphia out of the holiday. On June 1, the Pirates were 27-17, 1 ½ games behind Chicago, with both St. Louis and Philly also in the mix.

The Pirates won two of three from the Cubs in a home series that nudged them back to within a half-game of the lead. But a sequence against teams from the West Coast went poorly. Pittsburgh went 6-11 against the Los Angeles Dodgers, San Francisco Giants, and San Diego Padres. The Pirates dropped three of four in St. Louis later in the month. They went on to Philadelphia and got four straight defeats handed to them.

On July 8, Pittsburgh was in the danger zone, 8 ½ games off the pace. The Phillies were making a return visit to old Three Rivers Stadium. The four-game weekend series had considerable urgency.

Trailing 7-3 in the eighth inning of Friday night's opener, the Pirates got rolling. A four-run rally was keyed by doubles from Oliver and Stennett. In the ninth inning, consecutive two-out singles from third baseman Phil Garner, catcher Ed Ott, and Parker set up Pittsburgh to win on a bases-loaded walk.

Saturday afternoon was even more dramatic. An anticipated pitcher's duel between Candelaria and eventual NL Cy Young winner Steve Carlton turned into a back-and-forth slugfest. The game went 12 innings. Forster and Jackson had kept the Pirates afloat with 5 1/3 combined innings of solid relief. They were rewarded when backup infielder Mario Mendoza, legendary for his light-hitting, knocked a two-out RBI single to win 9-8.

Sunday would be an old-fashioned doubleheader, with just 20 minutes in between games. Pittsburgh churned out a 5-1 win in the opener behind a good outing from Reuss and a solo blast from Garner to get the early lead. The second game was another wild offensive affair. Trailing 10-7 in the bottom of the seventh, Garner ripped a bases-loaded/two-out double that tied the game. Robinson promptly knocked him in with the go-ahead run. The 12-10 win capped off a big four-game sweep. Pittsburgh was back in the race.

By the All-Star break a week later, the Pirates were 50-42. They trailed the Cubs by 5 ½ games. The Phils were 2 ½ back in second place. The Cardinals were starting to fade, 8 ½ back and in fourth.

Cincinnati would fall from their championship perch this season, and Pittsburgh swept Cincy three straight out of the break. It was the start of an 8-0 homestand that slashed the NL East lead to 2 ½ games. The Cubbies were starting to fade when they came to Pittsburgh on August 8 for a three-game set. Philadelphia was now dead even in the NL East, and the Pirates were hot on the heels of both teams.

On Monday night, Pittsburgh trailed Chicago 6-5 in the ninth inning. A double from Moreno and single from Stennett set up runners on the corners. After a sac fly tied the game, Ott ripped a triple to center to win it. Pirate bats went quiet on Tuesday night, mustering only six hits in a 4-1 loss. They handed the ball to Candelaria to try and secure the series win on Wednesday night.

Candelaria gave seven solid innings, but left in a 1-1 tie. A long night ensued. Gossage pitched four shutout innings. Jackson put five zeroes on the board. We got to the 18th inning still tied 1-1. Finally, Ott came through again—a sac fly for the win.

Pittsburgh was moving past Chicago, but Philadelphia was sizzling in the late summer. The Pirates swept the New York Mets five straight but failed to move the needle in the division race. By Labor Day, Pittsburgh had a solid 77-59 record. But they were seven games behind the Phils.

Taking two of three from Philly in a series that started on Labor Day, chipped away at the lead a little bit. A week later, the Pirates and Phils split a pair. That just wasn't going to be enough. Pittsburgh played well in September, including a 10-1 stretch. But Philadelphia never gave an inch. The Pirates trailed by as many as nine games, and never got closer than five, which is where it ended up.

The final record was 96-66. That's excellent by any measure, third-best in the National League and seventh-best in baseball overall. In our own era, it would be an easy playoff season and with Pittsburgh playing well down the stretch, who knows what might have happened in October. But that wasn't the way it worked in 1977. The Pirates went home.

1978

The 1978 Pittsburgh Pirates closed the gap on Philadelphia and set the stage for an even bigger comeback one year later.

Pittsburgh made its first effort to shake things up with a big trade in the offseason. The Bucs were part of a four-team deal involving ten players. They parted ways with Al Oliver. But they got back 27-year-old Bert Blyleven, a workhorse pitcher with a Hall of Fame career ahead of him. And they mitigated the damage caused by Oliver's loss by adding a nice lefthanded bat in John Milner.

The Pirates further strengthened their depth when they signed Jim Bibby in March, who would be one of several pitchers whose versatility between spot-starting and relief work made him valuable. And they added 34-year-old Manny Sanguillen in early April.

Pittsburgh made their offense go by running. Their National League rankings in most statistical categories were decent, but nothing special—fifth in batting average, seventh in doubles, seventh in home runs. They weren't very good at taking walks, where they ranked ninth. But they lead the 12-team NL in stolen bases and that keyed an offense that was fourth-best in the league at scoring runs.

Omar Moreno was the chief base thief, swiping 71 bags. Shortstop Frank Taveras stole 46 and third baseman Phil Garner added 27. The heart and soul of the team, first baseman Willie Stargell, didn't run, but he hit 28 home runs, drove in 97 and had an on-base percentage of .382.



But none of that would have made a real difference if not for the work of one man in rightfield. Dave Parker was nicknamed “The Cobra” for his ability to uncoil and strike.

He was big, strong and fast and in the late 1970s that was an unusual package in any one player. He had a terrific arm defensively. He hit 30 home runs, stole 20 bags, drove in 117 runs and scored 102 more. He won the batting championship at .334. And he was a deserved winner of a landslide National League MVP vote.

The starting rotation was steady. Blyleven made 34 starts, won 14 games and had a 3.03 ERA. John Candelaria added 12 wins with 3.24 ERA. Don Robinson, age 21, went to the post 32 times and won 14 more games with 3.47 ERA. Robinson finished third in the Rookie of the Year voting, trailing only Atlanta's Bob Horner—one of the game's signature sluggers through the early 1980s—and San Diego's Ozzie Smith, one of the greatest defensive shortstops to ever play the game.

Kent Tekulve was an excellent closer with 31 saves and a 2.33 ERA, and his submarine-style delivery secured the end of games for Pittsburgh. But what really made the difference was depth. Bibby and Bruce Kison shuttled between the rotation and the pen and each had ERAs in the 3s. Grant Jackson and Ed Whitson provided solid relief work. The end result was a staff ERA that ranked fifth in the National League.

The Pirates had a tumultuous start to the season. They won the first two games over the Cubs. The first was a brilliant 1-0 shutout win from Candelaria and the second was 4-3 in extra innings. But Pittsburgh promptly lost seven of the next eight. Then they won six in a row. After the crazy first ten games, the team basically stabilized around the .500 mark for a long stretch. They reached the All-Star break with a record of 40-41. It was good for third place in a soft NL East, but still seven games behind the Phils and the Cubs were nestled in between.

Pittsburgh gained steam in the late summer and by Labor Day the gap on Philly had closed to 2 ½ games, with Chicago close behind in third. With the NFL's Steelers starting what would be a Super Bowl-winning campaign, the Pirates had at least given the local fans a reason to keep checking on baseball.

The roller-coaster of the early season returned in early September. Pittsburgh slashed the lead to a half-game when they hosted the Mets and swept a three-game series that included a Labor Day doubleheader. The pitching was brilliant, with shutouts from Bibby and young lefty Jerry Reuss. But the ensuing weekend's rematch in Shea Stadium had the opposite result—Pirate pitching gave up 20 runs in three games, lost all three and slipped four games out.

A two-game series with the Phillies could have been the death knell, but the Pirates stopped the bleeding enough to get a split and stay alive. Then they ripped off five straight wins. The margin was back to two games. But then a stumble at mediocre Montreal knocked Pittsburgh back into a four-game hole as the final week began.

Things looked bleak, but there was one significant hole card left to play—the Phils were coming to town for a four-game set on the final weekend. The question was if it would matter.

The Pirates did their part by sweeping the Cubs, who had collapsed at the outset of September. Philadelphia didn't give much, but they did split a doubleheader with Montreal and that narrowed the margin to 3 ½ games. It was all-or-nothing. Pittsburgh had to sweep the final series in Three Rivers Stadium.

It started with a Friday night doubleheader. In a sign of how much quicker games finished in those days, the opener didn't begin until 6 PM. It went to the ninth inning tied 4-4. Catcher Ed Ott led off the bottom of the ninth and crushed a pitch to dead center. On its own, it was good for a triple, but a mishandle sent Ott all the way home. Pittsburgh was alive.

The nightcap, starting just before 9 PM, was no less dramatic. Against the great Philadelphia lefty Steve Carlton, the game was tied 1-1 into the ninth and Carlton was finally out. Parker led off the ninth with a double. He would ultimately score on a balk.

Sweeping a doubleheader on an inside-the-park home run from your catcher, plus a balk, had to give Pittsburgh a feeling of destiny. But when Robinson took the mound Saturday, he didn't have it. The rookie gave up two home runs to opposing pitcher Randy Lerch. The Pirates trailed 10-4 in the bottom of the ninth and it was all but over.

Or was it. Five singles off Philly closer Tug McGraw, with an error mixed in and suddenly it was a 10-8 game, the tying run was on first and only one man was out. Strolling to the plate was Stargell.

If this were one year later, Pops probably comes through. But 1978 wasn't quite the Pirates year.. He struck out, Garner grounded to short and the pennant bid was over.

It was still a season of growth for the 1978 Pittsburgh Pirates. Even though the final 88-73 record represented a step back from the previous two years, the gap with the Phillies had been significantly cut.

1979: Don't Ever Take Sides Against The Family...Ever

In '78, a slow start had left the Pirates with too big a margin to make up. As such, it was disappointing to start the 1979 season by losing 10 of their first 14 and to still be sub-.500 at Memorial Day, 6 ½ games out.

The Pirates had a balanced team though, finishing third in the NL in ERA and leading the league in runs scored. Dave Parker was a star in right, finishing with a .380 on-base percentage, hitting 25 home runs and driving in 94 runs. Bill Robinson hit 24 home runs in the left field spot. Tim Foli and Omar Moreno were solid at getting on base, and played good defense at shortstop and centerfield respectively. Phil Garner was inserted into the second base job and finished with a .359 OBP.

Pittsburgh's pitching was well-balanced and suited for the long haul. Bert Blyleven, John Candelaria and Bruce Kison all finished between 12-14 wins, with ERAs between 3.19 and 3.60. Don Robinson and Jim Bibby could both start and come out of the bullpen.

Grant Jackson and Enrique Romo were solid relievers with ERAs just under 3.00. And manager Chuck Tanner could turn to Kent Tekulve and his submarine pitching style to close the door. Tekulve saved 31 games and finished with a 2.75 ERA.



But no one was better than the 35-year-old first baseman, Willie "Pops" Stargell. He hit 32 home runs, finished with a .352 OBP, provided incomparable leadership and his fingerprints were on virtually every big moment this team had, both in the regular season and October. Stargell shared the NL MVP award with St. Louis Cardinals' first baseman Keith Hernandez.

Pittsburgh's rallying cry would become nationally known—they adopted the Sister Sledge song "We Are Family" to underscore their togetherness, and in June the team began to find its footing, helped in no small part by the acquisition of third baseman Bill Madlock from San Francisco. Madlock finished with a .390 OBP and .469 slugging percentage, further juicing up the attack.

The Pirates were 46-39 by the All-Star break, though they were still in fourth place, trailing the Montreal Expos and Chicago Cubs, along with the Phils. To no one's surprise, Chicago fell apart in the season's second half. To everyone's surprise, Philadelphia did as well. The race would come down to the Pirates and the Expos.

Pittsburgh closed July by taking three of four in Montreal, then sealed Philadelphia's fate with a stunning stretch in which the teams played eight times in early August, and the Pirates won all eight. Pittsburgh then went 8-2 on a West Coast trip and they rolled into Labor Day with a record 80-54 and a 3 ½ game lead.

Montreal was an up-and-coming team though, and even as the Pirates went 7-4 in early September, the Expos wiped the lead out and the teams were tied on September 17 when Pittsburgh went north of the border for a two-game series.

Don Robinson faced off with Montreal ace Steve Rogers in Monday night's opener, and Robinson met the moment—a six-hit complete game delivered a 2-1 win. Tuesday's game was tied 3-3 in the 11th inning, when Pops came through, blasting a two-run homer to dead center. Pittsburgh was now up two games.

But the Expos played better coming out of the series. The Pirates split their next six, Montreal capitalized and Pittsburgh trailed by a half-game when the teams began their final head-to-head series of the year, a four-game set that would open the regular season's final week.

Monday was a doubleheader and Bill Robinson hit a big home run in a three-run sixth inning that keyed a 5-2 win. Pittsburgh was poised to sweep when they led the second game 6-3 in the eighth inning, but a blown save by Tekulve allowed Montreal to rally and reclaim first place with a 7-6 win.

Pittsburgh took over the next two nights, the biggest nights of the 1979 NL East race. Tuesday's game was tied 3-3 in the fifth, when the Pirates unloaded and won 10-4. Then on Wednesday, they bashed Rogers for ten more runs, and took a 1 ½ game lead with four days left.

On Thursday, Pittsburgh lost a makeup game with St. Louis. Their record was 96-63, while Montreal was at 94-63. The potential for two days of Expo makeup games loomed if the weekend didn't settle things. Both teams were at home, Pittsburgh with the Cubs and Montreal with the Phillies.

On Friday night, Parker hit a second-inning home run, kickstarting a four-run rally and the Pirates won 6-1. The Expos went to 11 innings, but lost to the Phils. Pittsburgh now had the lead in the loss column and controlled their own fate.

Just as quickly, fate reversed itself. Blyleven coughed up a 3-0 lead on Saturday, and the Pirates ultimately lost 7-6 in 13 innings. Montreal won 3-2, and the loss column was again even.

Pittsburgh at least knew that if they won on Sunday, Montreal would need to first take its own finale, then win two makeup games and then meet the Pirates in a one-game playoff. In a big game who better than Stargell to take over? Pops homered, Parker had three hits and the pitching combination of Kison and Tekulve delivered a 5-3 win. And the word from Montreal was good—Philadelphia sent their ace, lefty Steve Carlton to the mound and he shut out the Expos 2-0. The NL East race was over.

1979 NLCS

The Reds were also back in October after a brief absence. The series opened in Cincinnati by virtue of the rotation system that determined homefield. The series would see two games in Cincy, with the balance being played in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh sent 25-year-old lefty John Candelaria to the mound to face Cincinnati veteran Tom Seaver, who had helped the New York Mets win a World Series in 1969 and an NL pennant in 1973.

Johnny Bench tripled for the Reds in the bottom of the second with one out, but Ray Knight and Dan Driessen failed to pick him up. It would be the Pirates who struck first in the top of the third, with a solo homer by Phil Garner, then a one-out triple from Omar Moreno, followed by a sac fly from Tim Foli. The Pirates had a 2-0 lead.

Cincinnati showed their own muscle in the fourth when Dave Concepcion singled, and George Foster tied the game with a two-run homer. The pitching took over, the starters gave way to the bullpens and the game went to 11th inning still tied 2-2.

Foli led off the top of the 11th with a single off of Cincinnati's Tom Hume, who had been in since the ninth. Dave Parker then singled. Willie Stargell then delivered the big blow, a home run to put Pittsburgh up 5-2.

Cincinnati tried to rally with two outs in their own half of the 11th. Concepcion singled and Foster worked a walk. Pittsburgh summoned righthander Don Robinson to replace lefty Grant Jackson, with righty hitters Bench and Knight coming up. Bench walked, but Knight struck out to end the game.

The teams came right back the following afternoon and the tense games continued. Each team turned to a pitcher who had split time between the bullpen and rotation, Jim Bibby for Pittsburgh and Frank Pastore for Cincinnati. The Reds got on the board first, with Pastore helping himself, delivering a sac fly following hits by Driessen and Knight.

Pittsburgh tied the game in the fourth with consecutive singles by Foli, Parker and Stargell to start the inning. But Stargell was thrown out on the bases and an inning that might have been big, ended with the score still tied 1-1. The Pirates got the lead in the fifth when Garner singled to start the inning and Foli drilled a two-out double.

The Reds didn't rally until the eighth, when they loaded the bases with two outs against Pirate closer Kent Tekulve. Knight flied to center. In the ninth though, the Reds broke through. With one out, Hector Cruz pinch-hit for Hume and singled. Dave Collins doubled him in to tie the game. Conception and Foster missed chances to end it right here and for the second time in less than 24 hours, we were going extra innings.

Doug Bair was on for the Reds, and Moreno started the Pittsburgh tenth with a single. He was bunted over and Parker drove him in. The Reds went quietly in the 10th, with Knight again making the last out. The young third baseman was the replacement for Pete Rose, and while Knight had hit .318 in '79, the NLCS just wasn't going his way.

After a day off, the teams resumed play in Pittsburgh, but it was all over but the shouting. Moreno got it started quickly against Cincy starter Mike LaCoss, drawing a walk, stealing second and scoring a sac fly from Parker. The Pirates got another run in the second when Garner tripled and scored on a sac fly from Foli.

Stargell homered to start the third and Madlock went deep later in the inning. The barrage continued in the fourth when Pirate starter Bert Blyleven singled, as did Parker and Stargell pulled a two-out double down the right field line. It was 6-0, and other than a solo home run by Bench, the Reds went quietly in a 7-1 final.

The selection of NLCS MVP was easy—Stargell was 5-for-11, he drew three walks, hit two home runs and had six RBIs. That included the biggest hit of the series, the three-run blast that won Game 1. Honorable mention goes to Garner, who was 5-for-12, and Parker's 4-for-12 showing, including the winning hit of Game 2.

1979 WORLD SERIES

Baltimore was another team who had dominated their division in the early '70s, settled for runner-up status in the latter part of the decade, and then returned to the top in 1979. It was fitting that the Orioles and Pirates would reprise their 1971 battle in the World Series. .

Baltimore held homefield advantage. It was old Memorial Stadium, "the house on 33rd Street" as it's still called to this day in Charm City, where the Series began. The Orioles sent Cy Young winner Mike Flanagan to the mound for Game 1, while the Pirates countered with Bruce Kison.

It didn't take Baltimore long to get started. Al Bumbry blooped a single to lead off the home half of the first and Mark Belanger drew a walk. A ground ball out moved them both up, a walk filled the bases and an error on Pittsburgh second baseman Phil Garner plated two runs. Then a wild pitch scored a third run and Oriole third baseman Doug DeCinces homered. It was 5-0 before anyone was even settled in.

Kison didn't survive the inning and one person who did settle in was reliever Jim Rooker. He pitched 3 2/3 innings of shutout ball, allowing just two hits. And the Pirates began to grind their way back.

Tim Foli and Dave Parker led off the fourth with singles and productive groundouts scored a run. In the sixth, Parker and Bill Robinson led off with singles. Flanagan got two outs and was poised to escape when three straight ground balls were hit toward DeCinces. He booted two, one got through for a clean single and the Pirates cut the lead to 5-3.

In the top of the eighth, Willie Stargell homered. Now it was a 5-4 game and Baltimore hadn't remotely threatened since the first. They were just hanging on and ultimately, they barely survived. Parker singled with one out in the ninth, his fourth hit of the game. But Rick Dempsey gunned Parker down trying to steal.

Stargell popped out to end the game. It seems fair to question Pittsburgh manager Chuck Tanner on why Parker was running when his team's best clutch hitter, one who had already authored several big moments in the stretch drive of the regular season and NLCS, to say nothing of having just homered in his previous at-bat was at the plate. Baltimore took the opener 5-4.

Jim Palmer had won three Cy Young Awards in his great career with the Orioles and though he was no longer that caliber of pitcher, he was still pretty good and he got the ball in Game 2. Bert Blyleven went for the Pirates.

Pittsburgh got to Palmer in the second with singles from Stargell, John Milner and Bill Madlock, along with a sac fly from Ed Ott, to get two runs. Baltimore's Eddie Murray promptly cut that in half with a home run to lead off the home half of the inning.

Murray then tied the game in the sixth, as he doubled in Ken Singleton, and subsequently moved up to third with one out. Parker then came up big defensively. Murray tried to tag on a line drive out off the bat of John Lowenstein, and Parker nailed Murray at the plate. The game remained tied 2-2.

It was still a 2-2 game in the ninth and both starting pitchers were out. Bill Robinson led off with a single for Pittsburgh. Oriole manager Earl Weaver summoned Don Stanhouse. The closer had trouble in the ALCS win over the California Angels and the trouble didn't stop here.

Even though Dempsey threw out Robinson trying to steal, Stanhouse allowed a two-out single to Ott, walked Garner and then surrendered a base hit to Manny Sanguillen. The soft spot of the Pirate lineup had beaten the Oriole closer and Pittsburgh tied the series with a 3-2 win.

The action shifted to Pittsburgh for Friday night's Game 3. There was no travel day, as the opening of the Series had been postponed by a day due to a rain. Scott McGregor had pitched the clinching game of the ALCS for Baltimore and he got the call, facing John Candelaria, who won the opener of the NLCS for Pittsburgh.

Weaver inserted Kiko Garcia into the lineup at shortstop for Mark Belanger. The latter was the best defensive shortstop of his time, but his bat was woeful. Weaver was clearly looking to kickstart an offense that had been quiet for 17 innings, and had required the Pirates beating themselves for even that five-run outburst in the first inning of Game 1.

Garcia didn't waste time making his manager look good. He doubled to start the game, the first of his four hits. But the Orioles wasted a first-and-third with no outs opportunity. Pittsburgh scored in their own half of the inning when Moreno hit his own leadoff double and came around on productive outs.

Pittsburgh got two more runs in the third, as Garner followed singles by Stargell and Steve Nicosia by doubling both in. But Garner tried for a triple and got thrown out, so in spite of a later single by Candelaria, McGregor got off the hook with the score still 3-0.

The Orioles started coming back in the third when Garcia walked and Bennie Ayala homered. Their own potential big inning got cut down when they got two more runners aboard, and Gary Roenicke singled, but Ken Singleton was nailed at the plate by Bill Robinson.

Baltimore tied the game an inning later when Rich Dauer doubled, Dempsey singled and Foli booted a grounder off the bat of McGregor. Then it got away from Candelaria. Garcia tripled in two more runs and chased the starter. Enrique Romo came on in relief, hit Bumbry with a pitch, gave up an RBI single to Singleton and an RBI groundout to DeCinces. Suddenly, the Pirates trailed 7-3.

Pittsburgh got a run back in the sixth when Stargell doubled and scored, but Dempsey did the same in the seventh and the Orioles won 8-4.

Game 4 was in the early part of Saturday afternoon, with Dennis Martinez pitching for Baltimore and Jim Bibby on the mound for Pittsburgh. The Pirates were feeling the heat and Stargell set a quick tone, homering to dead center in the second inning. That was followed by a base hit from Milner and consecutive ground-rule doubles from Madlock and Ott to make it 3-0.

Garner then singled, but Ed Ott was thrown out at the plate. Martinez didn't survive the first inning, as Weaver went to Sammy Stewart. Moreno drove in another run with a single, but Stewart picked him off first base. The Pirates led 4-0, but had lost two runners on the bases.

Those missed chances didn't take long to start appearing consequential. A Madlock error in the third gave Baltimore life, and it was followed by a Bumbry single and two-out doubles by Garcia and Singleton to cut the lead to 4-3. Madlock came to bat in the bottom of the inning with the bases loaded, one out and a chance to redeem himself. He grounded into a double play.

Pittsburgh scored twice in the fifth. Milner drilled an RBI double and there were runners on second and third with one out. Madlock was given an intentional walk, but Ott's ensuing fly ball to left was too short to score even the fast Parker who was on third. The Pirates added another run in the sixth when Parker lashed a two-out double to score Foli. But 6-3 was still a game going into the late innings and there was no reason for it to be so.

Baltimore finally made Pittsburgh pay in full for their sins. Garcia and Singleton singled to start the eighth. DeCinces drew a one-out walk. Tanner called for his closer, Kent Tekulve. Weaver sent up pinch-hitter John Lowenstein, who had hit an extra-inning walkoff home run in the ALCS. This time Lowenstein ripped a two-run double to cut the lead to 6-5. After an intentional walk, Weaver sent up another pinch-hitter, Terry Crowley. He smacked a two-run double and Baltimore had the lead.

Weaver had emptied his bench so thoroughly, the pitcher Tim Stoddard had to bat for himself. No matter. Stoddard singled and another run came home. A Bumbry grounder scored yet another run and it was 9-6. Stoddard pitched the final two innings without incident.

Baltimore now had Flanagan ready to go for Game 5 and home games with Palmer and McGregor and reserve. It was a long road back for Pittsburgh. On Sunday morning, prior to the fifth game, Tanner's mother passed away. Was it the extra jolt of motivation the Pirates needed, to win it for the skipper? Or was the comeback about to happen something that would have taken place anyway?

Who knows, but the trajectory of this Series was about to alter, and in more ways than just the Pirates starting to take over. The pitchers also began to take over.

Rooker got to start for Pittsburgh in lieu of Kison, whose turn was up, after the reliever had significantly outpitched the starter in Game 1. The game was scoreless until the fifth. The Orioles picked up a run when Roenicke doubled, DeCinces singled and Dauer's double play grounder brought the run in the back door.

It was the sixth when Pittsburgh got to Flanagan. Foli drew a leadoff walk, Parker singled, both were bunted up and Stargell tied the game with a sac fly. Madlock then singled with two outs, a clutch hit that marks the moment the 1979 World Series really turned.

Blyleven had come on out of the pen in the sixth inning and shut down Baltimore the rest of the way. Pittsburgh got two runs in the seventh. With two outs, Foli tripled to score Garner and Parker then doubled. In the eighth, four singles and an intentional walk scored three more and Pittsburgh stayed alive, 7-1.

After five days of non-stop baseball, the teams got a chance to catch their breath on Monday, with the flights back to Baltimore. Candelaria matched up with Palmer for Game 6 and the result was a tense pitcher's duel.

Palmer escaped a jam in the first with the Pirates put runners on second and third with no outs. The Oriole starter got Parker and Stargell no less to keep the game scoreless. But Candelaria returned the favor in the same inning when Baltimore had first and third and one out, and he induced Murray to hit into a double play.

No one threatened through six innings, when the Pirates finally got to Palmer in the seventh. Moreno singled with one out and Foli followed suit. Parker singled to right and Stargell picked up another run with a sac fly. Baltimore never threatened and Pittsburgh added two more runs in the eighth, with an RBI double from Garner, who moved up to third and scored on a sac fly from Moreno. With the 4-0 win, the Pirates had forced a seventh game.

McGregor and Bibby were on the mound. It was not an ideal situation for Pittsburgh—Bibby was on three days' rest and even though that wasn't incredibly uncommon in the world of 1979, it still wasn't the norm and Bibby wasn't one of Pittsburgh's best. But the need to use Blyleven for four innings in the must-win Game 5 had thrown the Pirate rotation out of whack.

It didn't matter. Baltimore got a run in the third when Dauer homered, but the Orioles couldn't mount sustained threats. McGregor looked like he might make it stand up when he kept the 1-0 lead into the sixth. Bill Robinson hit a one-out single and Stargell came to the plate.

Stargell hit a fly ball to deep right. It looked like Singleton might have a play on it near the wall. He nearly did. The rightfielder leaped, but the ball cleared the fence. Pittsburgh had a 2-1 lead, and with these teams playing games whose style resembled the modern-day defensive football brawls of the Steelers and Ravens, that one-run margin seemed enormous.

It was 2-1 in the eighth, when Baltimore finally rallied. Lee May and Bumbry drew one-out walks. Tekulve was summoned. He got Crowley to ground out, and the runners moved up. Singleton was intentionally walked. The decision was to pitch to Murray. The 23-year-old had enjoyed a great year, was embarking on a Hall of Fame career and had been red-hot in the ALCS. But he was 4-for-25 in the World Series. And it was about to be 4-for-26. Murray hit one to deep right, but this one stayed playable for Parker.

Pittsburgh added two insurance runs in an incredibly sloppy ninth. Weaver used five pitchers, four of them facing just one batter. There were to hit batsmen, and with a 4-1 lead, it was all but over. Tekulve closed the door without incident.

It was a comeback that remains at least modestly historic. While coming back from 3-1 down wasn't unprecedented, nor was winning the last two on the road, the 1979 World Series was the last time the latter feat was achieved until 2014. The fact Pittsburgh beat three high-quality starting pitchers in the process only adds to how impressive the accomplishment was.

Stargell was World Series MVP, an easy choice. He finished 12-for-30 and drove in seven runs. His three home runs were the only homers for any Pirate player. One of them happened to win Game 7. So yes, even though Foli and Garner both peppered Oriole pitching consistently, Pops was an easy call.

1980 Epilogue: The September Fade Of A Champion

The 1980 Pittsburgh Pirates made a strong run at repeating. But a September fade foreshadowed a long decade ahead.

Willie Stargell was now 40-years-old. He was still good, posting a .351 on-base percentage and .485 slugging percentage. But that was in just 231 plate appearances. John Milner started getting more time at first base and while his .378 OBP was solid, Milner lacked Stargell's power.

The rest of the infield didn't hit at all. Shortstop Tim Foli was there for his defense and not expected to produce offensively, but the other spots were a disappointment. Phil Garner had pushed Rennie Stennett out at second base during the 1979 title run, but Garner had an off-year. More disappointing was third baseman Bill Madlock, one of the National League's consistently best hitters, slipping to a stat line of .341 OBP/.399 slugging percentage.

1980 was a tough year for Parker. He was limited to 139 games and only hit 17 home runs. The RBI total slipped to 79. And while he batted .295, the lack of walks led to a meager OBP of .327.

So how did Pittsburgh manage to rank fifth in a 12-team National League in runs scored? The first answer is that Mike Easler had the best year of his career in left field. His batting average of .338 keyed a stat line of .396/.583. Omar Moreno in centerfield wasn't a good hitter, but any time he got on base it was as good as a double—Moreno swiped 96 bags in 1980.

And the Pirates had depth. In addition to Stargell, Lee Lacy and Bill Robinson had really good years in limited playing time. Lacy's stat line was .394/.511, while Robinson slugged .463. It was enough to keep the Pirate offense afloat.

The pitching staff was hurt by the loss of reliable starter Bruce Kison to free agency, but the rotation of 1980 was still steady. Jim Bibby, at age 35, won 19 games and finished with a 3.32 ERA. John Candelaria and Bert Blyleven each had sub-.500 records, but the ERAs were respectable and each went to the post over 30 times, making handling the rest of the staff easier for manager Chuck Tanner.

Don Robinson and Rick Rhoden were reliable at the back end of the rotation. So was Kent Tekulve, Enrique Romo and Grant Jackson in the bullpen. Eddie Solomon swung both ways and pitched well both starting and in relief.

What hurt the Pirate staff was that while a lot of people were respectable, no one was really outstanding. So they settled for sixth in the National League in staff ERA.

Pittsburgh came out of the gate looking the part of defending champs. They went to Montreal and won two of three north of the border.

Montreal made a return visit to Pittsburgh in April. Parker drove in three runs in the opener and the game was tied 4-4 going into the 10th inning. Stargell singled and was pinch-run for by Matt Alexander. A double by Madlock won the game. Bibby threw a complete-game shutout the next night, while Garner hit two home runs. In the finale, the Pirates and Expos again went extra innings. Again, Stargell singled and was pinch-run for by Alexander. Again, Alexander scored on a walkoff double, this one from Bill Robinson.

Pittsburgh got off to a 12-5 start and their lead in the division grew as high as five games in the early part of May. A trip to face a contending Dodger team in Los Angeles brought them back to earth with three straight losses. But the Pirates still reached the Memorial Day turn with a record of 22-15. They were a game up on the Phillies and plus-2 ½ on the Expos.

In May it was time to match up with Philadelphia, who had taken the NL East title three straight years from 1976-78 before slipping back the year before. The Pirates and Phils split four in Philly and then reconvened in Pittsburgh for a three-game set.

The Pirates won the opener, but trailed the second game 3-2 in the eighth. Phils' closer Tug McGraw was on the mound. Stargell tied it with a home run. In the bottom of the ninth, with the bases loaded and two outs, catcher Ed Ott singled home the winning run. Pittsburgh lost the series finale, but their lead in the NL East still grew to four games in the early days of June.

But the arrival of summer produced the first serious slump of the season. The Pirates lost 14 of 21 and fell 3 ½ games off the pace. They won a series in Montreal to start a stretch of seven wins in 11 games. By the All-Star break, Pittsburgh's record was 42-37. The division race was red-hot, with the Expos in the lead, the Phils a half-game back and the Pirates a mere game off the lead.

Pittsburgh came firing out of the All-Star break with a 13-5 stretch. They won two of three in Philly, scoring 31 runs in the process. They won three of four at home over Los Angeles. In that series finale, the nightcap of a Sunday doubleheader, the Pirates trailed 7-6 in the ninth. With one out and the bases loaded, Milner coaxed a walk that tied the game. Ott again delivered in the clutch with a base hit that won the game. Pittsburgh was back up top in the NL East by three games.

A wild ride through August ensued. The Pirates lost six straight. They won eight straight. They continued their mastery of the Expos, winning three of four over Montreal behind brilliant outings from Bibby, Blyleven and Rhoden.

But Pittsburgh then lost three in a row at eventual NL West champ Houston. The Pirates responded by winning three in a row over the contending Cincinnati Reds, an NL West team prior to the '94 realignment. Pittsburgh was two games up in the NL East as the calendar neared Labor Day and they began a homestand with the lowly Atlanta Braves.

The homestand, which led into the holiday, was an utter disaster. Seven straight losses. Neither the Phils or the Expos were hot either, so Pittsburgh maintained a half-game lead on both rivals. But with all of the Pirates' losses being at home, this was a serious missed opportunity.

And it got worse. Pittsburgh paid a return visit to Atlanta and was swept again. The Pirates went to Philadelphia, hoping to reassert their mojo.

It was the city of Pittsburgh's time in the sun. The Steelers had won the previous two Super Bowls and opened their season by beating the archrival Houston Oilers. Now the Pirates just had to take care of the Phils and the City of Champions could be back in business.

But the bullpen failed. Tuesday night's opener was tied 2-2 in the eighth when Romo gave up four runs and lost 6-2. The Pirates led the Phils 4-2 in the eighth inning the next night. Tekulve gave up the lead and Pittsburgh lost 5-4 in extra innings.

The Pirates were 3 ½ back with the Phils and Expos running neck-and-neck. There was still time to turn the ship around, but the margin for error was slipping away. Pittsburgh went to Montreal for a weekend series. Pirate ownership of the Expos came to an end, with two losses in the three-game set, both by shutout. Pittsburgh was 4 ½ back.

On September 22 there were two weeks to go and a two-game set at home with Montreal had to represent the last stand. The Pirates won the opener 4-2, but Blyleven was hit the next night in a 7-1 loss.

Anyone who still harbored hope after this two-game set was quickly brought to reality when Pittsburgh lost six of their next eight. By the time the Phils and Expos began their epic weekend series to end the season, Pittsburgh was eight games out. The Pirates ended 83-79, and watched Philadelphia go on a dramatic ride through October to win the World Series.

The fade in September of 1980 was more than just an aberration. The Pirates slipped under .500 in the strike year of 1981. They had winning seasons the two years following, but they were of the 84-78 variety and not ones that produced real pennant excitement. The bottom fell out for this franchise by the middle of the 1980s and they did not contend again until the division-winning year of 1990.