

THE LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES CHRONICLES

Volume 1 (1969-80)

1969 was a seminal year in the history of Major League Baseball. Four new teams were added to MLB, taking the American League and National League from 10 teams apiece to 12. The decision was made that it was time to split the leagues into divisions.

No longer would the pennant be settled over the six-month regular season. For the first time, a playoff round would be played prior to the World Series. That round would be called the League Championship Series (LCS).

The original divisional split kept each league at just an East and a West. Wild-cards did not exist in MLB until the realignment of 1994, which is also when the Central divisions were added to the landscape. Thus, while the new format in 1969 expanded the postseason, it still had baseball's old-school simplicity—you finished the season in first place, or you went home in October.

This first volume of *The League Championship Series Chronicles* covers this round up through 1980, as it began to take shape and become an accepted part of the American sports landscape.

The LCS began as a best-of-five affair and stayed that way through the course of this timeline. It's also important to note that homefield was done on a rotation basis, not by regular season record. It was pre-determined which division would host the first two games, and which one would be at home for the final three (if necessary).

Over the course of the 1970s, we began to see night baseball. While the World Series started this for weeknight games in 1971, it took four more years, in 1975, for games during the week to be played under the lights. And it took another year after that, until 1976, for day/night games on the weekend to be staggered so fans could watch both.

Nor was there an MVP given out in LCS play until 1977. And with both leagues having their own offices, that was only in the NL. It took three more years, in 1980, for the American League to pick up on the fact that this was a good idea.

By the conclusion of the 1980 postseason, we've seen over a decade worth of great moments. Any overview of 1970s baseball generally would naturally default to the Oakland A's and Cincinnati's Big Red Machine—and those teams are certainly seen in this narrative—but it's important to remember that our focus here is exclusively the games of the League Championship Series.

The stories here include the complete dominance of the Baltimore Orioles in this new era's infancy, the still-unmatched Yankees-Royals rivalry, and the greatest battle this round has ever

seen, which took place in 1980. All in addition to a breathtaking postseason in 1972 where the A's and Reds emerged triumphant.

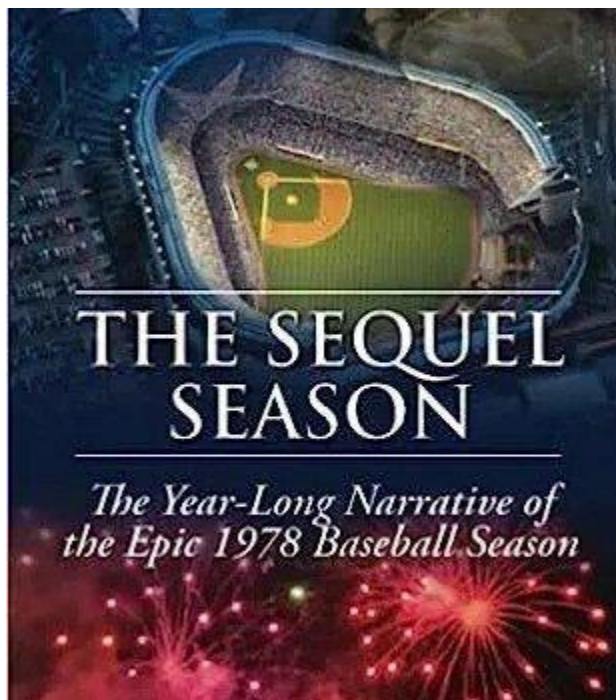
With all that said, let's begin our journey through the early years of the League Championship Series.

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There's nothing like stories of the playoffs and World Series—except when those stories are preceded by those of the entire regular season. That's what our book, *The Sequel Season*, does for the great baseball year of 1978.

Click the image to step inside this complete diary of that unforgettable year.



ORIOLE MAGIC

After winning the World Series in 1966, the Baltimore Orioles started to slip. Earl Weaver was hired as manager in mid-1968. His first full year as skipper coincided with the first year of divisional play. And it didn't take long for Earl to lay down the law to the rest of the AL East.

Over the three regular seasons from 1969 to 1971, Baltimore averaged 106 wins per year. They cleared the field in the division by an average of over fifteen games. They were simply never challenged from April to September.

These Orioles were built on pitching. In 1969, Mike Cuellar was added to a rotation that already included Dave McNally and future Hall of Famer Jim Palmer. Cuellar, having never previously done anything noteworthy, immediately turned into an ace under Weaver and he won the Cy Young Award in '69. A year later in 1970, all three pitchers finished in the top-5 of the AL Cy Young voting.

In 1971, this trio, along with Pat Dobson, all won 20 games. It was the first time in over 50 years a rotation produced four 20-game winners. It hasn't happened since. Given the way the handling of pitchers has changed, it will most certainly be the last.

Baltimore's excellence wasn't restricted to pitching. They had Hall of Famers in Brooks Robinson at third base and Frank Robinson in the outfield. Boog Powell was a slugging first baseman, and he won the MVP award in 1970.

Davey Johnson is known to the modern generation as a manager. In the early 1970s, he was a productive second baseman in Baltimore. Paul Blair was one of the great defensive center fielders of his day.

Plain and simple, the Orioles had no weaknesses. But postseason play can be funny, especially when it's just best-of-five. But in the first three years of the ALCS, Baltimore took the fun out of it, winning in a sweep each time.

The first-ever ALCS featured two managers who would get very familiar with each other. Billy Martin had managed the Minnesota Twins to the AL West crown. By the end of the 1970s, Earl and Billy would be rivals in the AL East when Martin began his many managerial tenures with the Yankees, and they would both become legendary for their on-field escapades with umpires.

Even though this 1969 ALCS ended up in a sweep, the Orioles faced hair-raising challenges in the first two games. In the opener at Baltimore's old Memorial Stadium, Twins' ace Jim Perry had outdueled Cuellar and held a 3-2 lead going into the ninth inning. But Minnesota missed a

chance to get a key insurance run. With a man on second and none out, Baltimore reliever Pete Richert got big outs against Rod Carew and Tony Oliva to keep it a one-run game.

Powell made the missed opportunity hurt when he homered to lead off the bottom of the ninth. Each team missed chances in extra innings and the afternoon stretched to 12 innings. The Orioles used an infield hit, a sacrifice bunt and a productive ground out to put the winning run on third with two outs.

Blair was at the plate. He put down a bunt and beat it out. Ballgame. The first ALCS game in history was an instant classic.

Sunday's Game 2 was even more nerve-wracking. McNally faced off against the Twins' Dave Boswell and both pitchers kept putting up zeroes. For the second straight game, we went to extra innings, this time to the 11th. For the second straight game, the Orioles had two outs and the winning run in scoring position. And for the second straight game, it was an unlikely offensive hero—this time reserve outfielder Curt Motton—who delivered. A single to right won the game.

Click image to watch Game 2 highlights on YouTube, courtesy of Max Carey



The underdog Twins, after coming so close, didn't have anything left in the tank when the series went back home. Baltimore closed out Game 3 without drama.

1970 was a rematch between the Orioles and Twins although Martin's now-legendary battles with management meant that Minnesota was managed by Bill Rigney. The Twins got a Cy Young season from Perry and overcame Carew missing several months, although the Hall of Fame contact hitter was healthy again when the ALCS arrived.

The pitching didn't set the tone this time. Even though Cuellar struggled in Game 1, Baltimore got after Perry and won the opener 10-6. The following day, the Orioles took a 4-3 lead into the eighth inning. Powell, enjoying a terrific ALCS following his MVP year, ripped a two-run double to get some insurance. Then Baltimore piled on, adding five runs and winning 11-3.

Boog continued his heroics for the home fans, with an early two-out RBI base hit that made it clear the Twins weren't getting off the mat. Baltimore coasted to a 5-1 win and another sweep.

The AL West had a new champion in 1971, one that baseball fans would get used to seeing in October. The Oakland A's had run away with the division behind the extraordinary pitching of Vida Blue, who won both the Cy Young and MVP awards. A young, rising team, the A's looked like a good matchup for the battle-tested Birds.

Nor did Oakland show any signs of cold feet playing on the road to open the ALCS. They struck early and staked Blue to a 3-0 lead. It was still 3-1 when Baltimore came to bat the seventh. Frank Robinson worked a leadoff walk and Brooks Robinson singled. After a flyball out, there were runners on the corners. But with the bottom of the order up, Blue had a chance to escape with the lead intact.

Mark Belanger was renowned for his defense at short, but not his bat. Today, he singled to cut the lead to 3-2. Motton came up with another big postseason hit, a double that tied the game and moved runners to second and third. Blair ripped another double to make it 5-3.

Would the series have gone down differently if Blue had held the lead and given his team some momentum? It's an interesting thought to speculate on. Oakland's time would certainly come. But not this year. Baltimore pitching dominated the final two games and secured another sweep.

Baltimore went through some heartbreak in the World Series over these seasons. As heavy favorites, they lost to the Amazin' Mets in 1969. They lost a seven-game heartbreaker to Roberto Clemente and the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1971. But they got a ring in 1970 when Brooks Robinson electrified the country with his glove and his bat and Baltimore steamrolled Cincinnati's Big Red Machine. And over the three years collectively, they had set a standard of dominance in the American League—a 9-0 run through the ALCS with only a handful of games that might have gone differently.

1972

This newfangled LCS thing might have been an Oriole showcase, but it wasn't producing much in the way of excitement. The National League had seen sweeps in both 1969 and 1970, before finally getting a four-game series in 1971. But we had yet to see the tension of a decisive Game 5. In 1972, that all changed. Both leagues went the distance.

Oakland was back in the American League. Beyond Vida Blue, the A's pitching staff included future Hall of Famers in the rotation with Catfish Hunter and the bullpen in Rollie Fingers. Sal Bando was at third base. They had a young Reggie Jackson in right field, along with Joe Rudi in left—the latter finishing second in the AL MVP voting in 1972.

Billy Martin had landed in Detroit and promptly started winning. The Tigers had proud veterans that included Mickey Lolich as the staff ace, along with Norm Cash and Al Kaline in the everyday lineup. When Baltimore finally slipped, the Tigers stepped up and survived a four-team AL East race that also included the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees.

Over in the National League, the Reds enjoyed a bounce-back season after a down season in 1971. The great catcher, Johnny Bench, won his second NL MVP award in three seasons. Pete Rose was in left field. Tony Perez had taken over at first base to replace Lee May, whom the Reds had traded. In that trade with the Houston Astros, Cincinnati acquired a second baseman named Joe Morgan.

Pittsburgh was the defending World Series champion and back for more. They had four .300 hitters in Clemente, Al Oliver, Richie Hebner and Vic Davalillo. They had a balanced rotation anchored by Steve Blass and a top reliever in Dave Giusti. And Pittsburgh had one of the league's best all-around hitters in Willie Stargell in left field.

Together, these four teams would juice up the LCS.

Hunter and Lolich squared off in Game 1 at Oakland and were in a 1-1 pitcher's duel in the ninth inning. After a leadoff double by Detroit's Duke Sims in the top of the ninth, A's manager Dick Williams called on Blue to relieve. After an error put runners on the corners with none out, Williams went to Fingers. Rollie promptly got a popup and a double-play ball. Crisis averted and extra innings loomed.

Kaline took Fingers deep in the 11th inning. Sims followed with a triple. But Fingers again pitched around the extra-base hit by Sims. The Tigers had the lead at 2-1, but the failure to get insurance would hurt.

Lolich was still in the game in the bottom of the 11th. After base hits from Bando and Mike Epstein, Martin went to his bullpen. A sac bunt put the winning runs in scoring position and little-known Gonzalo Marquez became a hero with a base hit to right that gave Oakland the win.

The A's went on to win Game 2 behind a shutout from Blue Moon Odom. But tensions boiled over. Oakland shortstop Bert Campaneris, a reliable basestealer, defender, and general sparkplug, didn't take kindly to getting thrown out. His response? Throw the bat back at the mound. It got him suspended for the rest of the series.

Watch Campy's bat-throwing incident on YouTube, courtesy of 1313otto



Detroit's Joe Coleman kept his team alive back home at Tiger Stadium by returning the favor. It set up Catfish and Mickey to rematch in Game 4.

Once again, Hunter and Lolich were in a 1-1 pitcher's duel late in the game. Fingers again pitched around a late Tiger rally. Marquez again played a vital role, getting a key hit in the 10th inning that triggered a two-run rally. Oakland was ahead 3-1 and three outs from the World Series.

All of the managerial chess to this point had led Williams to use both Fingers and Blue. The A's had to go to lesser-known Bob Locker to close it out. They were also stuck using Gene Tenace, a natural catcher, at second base. Both shortcomings hurt. With help from a Tenace error, Detroit scored three times and pulled out a 4-3 win.

With all the momentum on their side, the Tigers scored first in Game 5. Oakland needed to reverse fortune. It was time for Reggie to start building the resume that will eventually get him labeled "Mr. October."

Jackson worked a walk, stole second and took third on a sacrifice fly. But after Tenace struck out, Reggie risked being left on third. He stole home. And made it. The unfortunate consequence is that he tore up his knee in the process and was done for the season. But he

had tied the game and turned momentum. Oakland nudged ahead 2-1 in the fourth and then watched Blue Moon Odom keep dealing. Behind his second straight gem, the 2-1 final held, and the A's had survived.

The Reds and Pirates had already met in the 1970 NLCS, a Cincinnati sweep, and they would be regular dance partners throughout the decade. In 1972, they split the first two games in Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium. When the series got to Riverfront Stadium in Cincy, it started to heat up.

The Reds took an early 2-0 lead in Game 3 and starter Gary Nolan was sharp. Pirate catcher Manny Sanguillen hit a solo homer in the fifth, but it was still 2-1 in the seventh when Cincinnati manager Sparky Anderson went to his bullpen.

After a hit batsman, Sanguillen singled. A bunt moved runners to second and third and Rennie Stennett tied the game with single. One batter later, Sanguillen tried to tag and score on a fly ball to right. He was thrown out at the plate by the Reds' Cesar Geronimo. The score held 2-2.

Cincinnati had an outstanding reliever in Clay Carroll. But in the eighth, he walked Stargell and then Al Oliver hit a double. With the bases loaded and one out, Sanguillen was at the plate, again at the center of the action. Carroll got the ground ball he needed—but Sanguillen foiled the double play by beating out the play at first. Pittsburgh had the lead.

Pirate reliever Dave Giusiti pitched around a double from Rose in the ninth, getting Morgan and Bobby Tolan. Pittsburgh was one win from going back to the World Series.

Ross Grimsley was a starting pitcher who had a good career, with his best seasons being as a Montreal Expo. As a 22-year-old, he was handed the ball for the Reds and told to keep his team's season alive. He pitched a gem, hit a two-run double and Cincinnati forced Game 5.

It was Blass and young Reds' ace Don Gullett for the pennant in Game 5. Pittsburgh had early momentum and took a 3-1 lead. Cincinnati was saved by the relief work of Pedro Borbon. Sparky summoned Borbon in the top of the fourth with no outs and the bases loaded. Borbon got out the jam with no damage. A game that could have been a Pirate rout was instead still close. A Geronimo home run cut the lead to 3-2 in the fifth and then the long, tense battle settled in.

It was still 3-2 in the bottom of the ninth. Giusti was on the mound. Bench greeted him with an opposite field home run. It was 3-3 and Riverfront was a mad house.

Perez singled to center. A young George Foster came on to pinch-run and moved up to second on a base hit from third baseman Denis Menke. Now the Pirates were going to the pen in desperation, calling on starter Bob Moose to keep them alive.

Foster moved to third on a fly ball, but Moose answered by getting a popout. Pittsburgh was on the verge of escaping. Moose was their #2 starter, ready to pitch a long time, while the Cincinnati pen was emptied. Another young outfielder with promise, Hal McRae, came to the plate for the Reds.

McRae didn't need to do a thing. Moose threw a nasty curveball. So nasty that it bounced away from Sanguillen. Foster came racing home. In a series the Reds had spent chasing—losing Game 1, Game 3 and trailing almost the entire way in Game 5—they had managed to beat the defending champs.

Watch the Bench home run and the deciding wild pitch on YouTube, courtesy of the Cincinnati Reds.



The LCS round in 1972 was the start of a great postseason run for baseball. The World Series went seven games, with Oakland winning. In 1973, both the ALCS and NLCS again went the full five games. This time, the A's beat the Orioles, and the underdog New York Mets stunned the Big Red Machine. The 1973 World Series went seven games and ended with an Oakland repeat.

The 1972-73 stretch was the only time in the best-of-five era that both leagues saw their LCS rounds get a decisive Game 5. While there would be more than a few great Game 5s that we're about to see, and certainly plenty of good Game 7s in the years after this round expanded in 1985, it took until 2003 to again have an LCS round that saw each league settle its pennant with a single winner-take-all game.

THE RIVALRY

There have been some great LCS grudge matches over the years. We've seen the Pirates and Reds. The Philadelphia Phillies and Los Angeles Dodgers started to go around at this period in history and later resumed their battles in the late '00s. There were the Red Sox-Yankee Wars of 2003-04. But looked at strictly through the lens of League Championship Series play, no rivalry ran as hot as the one waged between the Yankees and Kansas City Royals from 1976 through 1980.

Big market and small-market. The sport's proudest franchise against one who had just been born in the expansion of 1969. These unlikely sparring partners squared off four times in five years and produced more than a few memorable moments.

Billy Martin was back in the ALCS with another team, returning home to the Bronx where he had spent his playing days and was beloved by the fan base. Martin came to New York late in 1975 and then did what he did best—engineer an immediate turnaround. A series of smart trades by executive Gabe Paul and the willingness of owner George Steinbrenner to take full advantage of the new free agent market expedited the process.

Catfish Hunter was now a Yankee. Dock Ellis and Ed Figueroa, both quality starting pitchers, were acquired. New York added Willie Randolph to play second and sparkplug center fielder Mickey Rivers. These pieces were added to a team that included Thurman Munson, Graig Nettles, Chris Chambliss, Roy White in the lineup, and Sparky Lyle in the bullpen.

Kansas City displaced Oakland in the AL West, ending an A's run that included five straight division titles and three straight World Series crowns. The Royals had one of the game's best young third basemen in George Brett. They had traded for Hal McRae, getting him out from under the stacked Cincinnati lineup. Another masterstroke had been a deal to get center fielder Amos Otis from the Mets. Dennis Leonard, a workhorse starter, anchored the rotation.

The Royals had also made a managerial change late in 1975 that bore immediate fruit. Whitey Herzog brought his running, aggressive style to K.C. and put this young franchise into the postseason in 1976.

Individually, none of the first four games of the 1976 ALCS were all that noteworthy. The good news is that the Yanks and Royals were trading wins, so that set the stage for Game 5 under the lights at Yankee Stadium.

The Royals might have been young, but they didn't fear the moment. They came out on the attack, with Brett hitting a double and McRae homering in the first inning. Kansas City led 3-2 in the third inning when a Yankee rally was keyed by an RBI single from Chambliss and New York took a 4-3 lead. They added two more in the sixth and led 6-3. It looked over for K.C.

In the top of the eighth, Martin made a controversial decision to ignore Lyle in the bullpen and opted for Dick Tidrow. Brett came to the plate with two men aboard. The third baseman unloaded a stunning home run that tied the game 6-6.

Chambliss was having a fantastic series though, and the best moment was yet to come. He led off the bottom of the ninth and homered to right-center field. In this era before crowd control was a priority, one of old Yankee Stadium's iconic memories is Chambliss having to make his way through the mob that stormed the field to circle the bases. New York was going to the World Series for the first time since 1964.

Click image to watch the Chambliss walkoff on YouTube, courtesy of MLB



After falling to the Big Red Machine in that 1976 World Series, Steinbrenner opened his wallet for the biggest free-agent prize yet, signing Reggie Jackson. The Yankees outlasted the Red Sox and Orioles in a good AL East race. As for Kansas City, they sizzled in late summer, won an MLB-best 102 games and were primed for revenge when the 1977 ALCS rolled around.

Herzog made a curious pitching decision to open the series. He didn't use his ace, Leonard, until Game 3. While the decision to use lefthander Paul Splittorff for the opener was understandable, given his mastery of the Yankees, holding Leonard back until the third game seemed to be pushing the point. But Kansas City won two of those first three games, they were playing the end of this series at home and were poised to get to the World Series.

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, both offenses came out swinging. The Yankees led 5-4 in the fourth inning. This year, Martin had no hesitancy about going to Lyle, who had enjoyed a dominant year that ultimately won him the Cy Young Award. The manager pulled the trigger

early and Sparky answered the bell. He allowed just two singles the rest of the way, the tying run never got to second base and New York evened the series with a 6-4 win. For the second straight year, it was Yanks-Royals in a prime-time Game 5.

Splitorff was pitching for the Royals. Martin, with a deep bench that included Lou Piniella, made the decision to bench Reggie, who struggled to handle the Royal lefty. Both teams came out swinging again, but this time it was literal. Brett ripped an RBI triple in the first inning and slid hard into Nettles. The Yankee third baseman kicked Brett, who responded by coming after his rival. The benches cleared and it turned into a genuine fight.

Click image to watch the Brett-Nettles brawl on YouTube, courtesy of MLB



It was a different time, and no one was ejected. The Royals took a 3-1 lead and Splitorff was rolling as the game went into the eighth inning. A leadoff single got him pulled. It's the kind of pitching decision that wouldn't get a second look today, but at a time when it was still customary to let pitchers finish their business, it was an early hook, given that the tying run wasn't yet on base.

Furthermore, pulling Splitorff liberated Martin to bring Reggie in off the bench and Jackson's RBI single cut the lead to 3-2. In the ninth inning, Leonard came out of the bullpen. Had he started Game 2, he would have been on three days' rest, including the travel day. By holding him to Game 3, Herzog had given his ace just a single day's rest. Leonard didn't have it. New York scored three runs in the ninth inning. Lyle, who had to be running on fumes after Saturday, closed it in the ninth.

It didn't seem possible, but the Royals had suffered an even bigger heartbreak than in 1976. The Yankees went on to win the World Series.

The two rivals came in on different paths in 1978. The Yankees had completed one of baseball's all-time great pennant drives, rallying from 14 games behind the Red Sox to win the AL East in

an epic tiebreaker game. The Royals, with Brett missing a chunk of time due to injuries in the summer, hadn't been as dominant, but it was enough to win the West.

Kansas City had an opportunity—a New York pitching staff that was gassed after going to the mat in the AL East, was a complete mess. The Royals at least had time to get their pitching lined up.

But the opportunity was missed. Leonard was knocked around in Game 1 and K.C. couldn't get to the untested Jim Beattie. The Yankees were able to get a road split. And as the series went back to the Bronx, New York had Ron Guidry—who had merely won 25 games, including the one-game tiebreaker in Fenway Park—in reserve for Game 4.

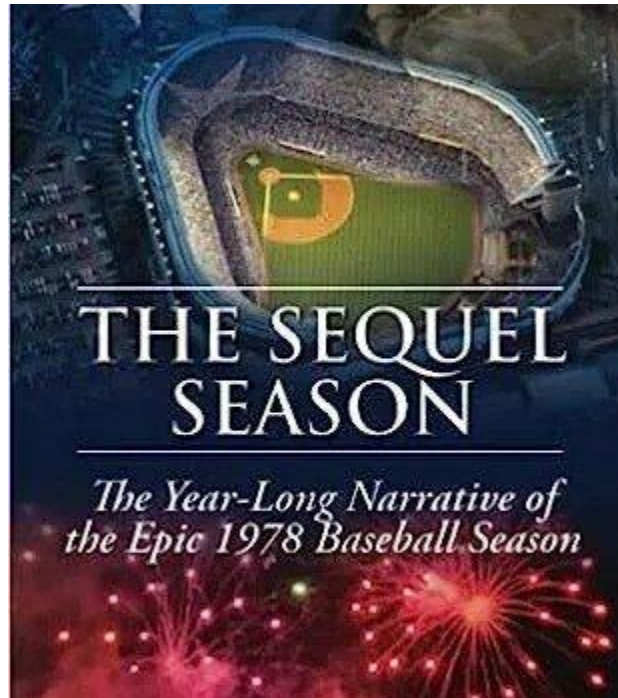
Thus, the stakes were set for Friday afternoon's Game 3. It was another classic. Brett hit three home runs off Hunter. The only problem was they were all solo shots. Splitorff was on the mound for Kansas City. The Yankees had a new manager as of July in Bob Lemon, and this time Reggie got in the lineup. He made the most of the opportunity, with two hits, including a home run, and three RBIs.

But Kansas City still clung to a 5-4 lead in the eighth inning. They had another Yankee-killing lefty, Larry Gura, who could pitch a potential Game 5. Win here, and the Royals would have some cushion when they faced Guidry the next night.

Enter Thurman Munson. The proud catcher had gone through a tough year and was physically hurting, especially his shoulder. What's more, the left-center field fence in Yankee Stadium was so deep it was called "Death Valley." Which makes what happened next even more incredible—Munson hit a two-run blast into the heart of the Valley.

New York won 6-5. Saturday night was a good pitcher's duel between Guidry and Leonard, but the Yankees won that one too, 2-1. They had a third straight pennant. The Royals had to be wondering if their year would ever come.

The 1978 ALCS was just one part of the story. Relive the entire season, day-by-day, in The Sequel Season. All roads lead here:



Both teams missed the postseason in 1979, a year that turned tragic for New York when Munson died in a plane crash, flying his private plane near his home in Ohio.

Each team had a new manager in 1980. This was par for the course in the Bronx by this point and Dick Howser was the Yankee skipper. Jim Frey took over the Royals, although Whitey would surface soon enough across the state in St. Louis.

Reggie had one of his best all-around seasons, batting .300 to go with his usual power numbers and he finished second in the AL MVP voting. The Yankees had also added Hall of Fame lefty Tommy John to the rotation. They won 103 games and survived a 100-win Oriole team in the AL East.

But no one was better in all of baseball in 1980 than George Brett. He made a run at batting .400, with his average soaring as high as .407 in August. He "settled" for .390, but it was enough to get him a deserved MVP award and Kansas City coasted home in the AL West. The 1980 ALCS opened in K.C. and the Royals got an easy 7-2 win to start. In a curious decision, Howser didn't pitch John in Game 2, instead opting for Rudy May to match up with Leonard.

Kansas City led 3-2 in the top of the eighth, but Randolph got aboard for New York with a one-out single. With two outs, Bob Watson doubled to left. Running on contact, it seemed certain the speedy Randolph would score. But Royal left fielder Willie Wilson got to the ball quickly, fired to Brett, who completed the relay and got Randolph at the plate. The Royals held on to win.

Even though New York had the best record in baseball, this still felt like Kansas City's year at the outset and even more so as they went to the Bronx seeking one more win.

The Yankees led 2-1 in the top of the seventh and there were two outs. Wilson doubled. Howser went quickly to the bullpen, bringing in the great flamethrower, Rich "Goose" Gossage. Shortstop U.L. Washington beat out an infield hit. Brett had a chance.

Gossage reared back and fired his 98mph rising fastball. Brett simply unloaded, blasting a towering shot into the third deck of the old stadium. The crowd was in stunned silence as Kansas City led 4-2.

Click image to watch Brett's massive home run on YouTube, courtesy of MLB



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

The Yankees and the Royals continued to be contenders in the immediate ensuing years, but their paths didn't cross in postseason play until the Division Series round in 2024. The battles they waged from 1976-80—four series, 17 games, iconic moments and dramatic storylines—provided more than enough fodder for the baseball nostalgia grist mill.

THE GREATEST EVER PLAYED

While the Royals were getting their redemption in 1980, the Phillies and the Houston Astros (a National League team until 2013) were staging the greatest battle this round has ever seen. Philadelphia was postseason-tested, but there were a lot of failures in those tests. They were swept out by the Big Red Machine in 1976. They lost to the Dodgers in both 1977 and 1978, each time in four games and suffered a ninth-inning collapse in 1977's Game 3 that is still called "Black Friday" in franchise lore.

The Phils were led by one of the best third basemen of all-time in Mike Schmidt, but Schmidt was developing a reputation for struggling in the playoffs. Philly had one of the game's all-time great left-handed starters in Steve Carlton—who had lost both of his starts to Tommy John in that '77 NLCS.

Philadelphia needed its stars to step up on the biggest stage. To address that, they had gone out and signed Rose prior to the 1979 season. Rose joined a lineup that included Manny Trillo at second base, Greg Luzinski and Bake McBride at the corner outfield spots, defensive wizard Garry Maddox in center field and Bob Boone (father of future major leaguers Bret and Aaron) behind the plate.

Houston had emerged as a contender in 1979, staying in the NL West race to the last weekend. Playing in the spacious Astrodome, they were built around pitching and speed. Joe Niekro floated his knuckleball and won 20 games. Vern Ruhle and Ken Forsch were steady starters. Nolan Ryan was throwing gas, and the bullpen had a good lefty-righty combo in Joe Sambito and Dave Smith.

The rotation would have been even better, if not for tragedy. J.R. Richard was one of the top young pitchers in baseball. Until July 30 when he was warming up on the sideline and suffered a stroke that ended his career.

In the lineup, the Astros had their own member of the Big Red Machine to help them win—Joe Morgan was playing second base. Jose Cruz was in right field and was the one part of the lineup that had some modest power. Cesar Cedeno and Art Howe (future manager of the Moneyball A's) played key roles. So did Terry Puhl, the right fielder who put a big mark on this series.

The drama in the National League began even before the postseason. Both the Phillies and Astros saw their seasons come down to head-to-head battles on the final weekend of the regular season.

Philadelphia was tied with the Montreal Expos going into a weekend series north of the border that would be a de facto best two-of-three playoff. After winning on Friday night, the Phils trailed 4-3 in the ninth inning. Carlton was in reserve for Sunday, but it would be ideal for Philadelphia if he could open the NLCS.

Rose started a rally with a walk, and Boone drove in the tying run with two outs. In the 11th inning, Schmidt capped off an MVP year with home run to left and the Phils had their fourth NLCS trip in five years.

Houston's road was supposed to be a little easier. They had a three-game lead on the Los Angeles Dodgers when they went to the West Coast for the final weekend. A one-game playoff would also be in Dodger Stadium, so the Astros basically had four shots to clinch. No one thought they would need all of them, or how many times they would get close to the prize before being pushed back.

Houston was three outs away on Friday night before losing. A great start by Ryan was wasted on Saturday in a 2-1 loss. On Sunday, the Astros led 3-0 early in the game and still clung to a 3-2 lead in the eighth. Los Angeles rallied for two runs and won 4-3. There would be a one-game playoff.

Niekro came out and saved the day, dominating the Dodgers for his 20th win. Houston knocked around a now-depleted Dodger staff and won 7-1. They were in the postseason for the first time, although their own ace had to be pushed back in the playoff rotation.

Houston had to make a fast turnaround and be in Philadelphia on Tuesday night for Game 1. The Astros led 1-0 in the sixth before the Phillies turned it around 3-1. It was a good enough game, noteworthy in this regard—it was actually the worst game of this NLCS, the only one not to go extra innings.

In Game 2, Houston broke open a 3-3 game in the top of the 10th with four runs. It turned out they needed all that insurance because Philadelphia got one run back, loaded the bases and brought Schmidt to the plate as the potential winning run. The MVP flied out, and the series was tied.

Game 3 was an extremely tense pitcher's duel on a Friday afternoon. Niekro was on the mound for the Astros, Larry Christensen for the Phils and neither offense could generate even a threat. Finally in the 11th inning, Joe Morgan, a future Hall of Fame second baseman, tripled and scored on a sac fly to win it.

This series already provided plenty of drama and the last two games were going to see it hit a crescendo. Game 4 was awash in controversy by the fourth inning. Philadelphia got consecutive singles to start the top of the inning in a scoreless game. A soft, low liner went back to pitcher Vern Ruhle. It was unsure whether Ruhle trapped or caught the ball before he threw to first. The

ruling on the field was no catch, meaning there were runners on second and third with one out. Seems simple enough.

Houston had alertly gone ahead and doubled off both runners just in case. The umpires conferred and determined Ruhle had caught the ball, which should have meant a triple play. The Phillies were furious and put the game under protest. However, the umpires decided to only call it a double play and put a runner back on second base. All that did was result in the Astros putting the game under protest as well.

The umpires weren't done being at the center of attention. The Astros led 2-0 in the sixth and had the bases loaded with one out. Gary Woods was on third base when a fly ball went to right field, deep enough to score the run. Woods tagged up and went home. Only he left the base too soon, the Phillies appealed and caught him.

Philadelphia made the mistake hurt and scored three runs in the eighth to take the lead. Houston tied it in the bottom of the ninth on an RBI single from Terry Puhl, who absolutely carved up Phillie pitching, lacing line drive singles to right as routinely as if he were taking batting practice.

Rose was on first base with two outs in the top of the 10th. Greg Luzinksi hit a pinch-hit double into the left field corner. Rose never hesitated in coming all the way home. He should have been thrown out by several feet, but the relay throw by shortstop Rafael Landestoy short-hopped a young catcher and Rose lowered his shoulder to prevent the catcher from getting back to the ball.

Click image to watch Rose's play at the plate on YouTube, courtesy of MLB



The ABC-TV crew, including Don Drysdale and Howard Cosell, were critical of the young catcher for not stepping up the line to simply make the catch and apply the tag, calling it the mistake of inexperience. This catcher would go on to considerable success in October, although in later years as a manager—Bruce Bochy would first win a pennant managing the San Diego Padres, then made his legend by leading the San Francisco Giants to three World Series titles and then accentuated that legend by doing it again with the Texas Rangers.

Philadelphia added one more run in this game. The 5-3 victory set up a Sunday night prime-time showdown from the Astrodome.

After the series that we already watched, a decisive fifth game that was tied 2-2 after six innings should have been exciting enough. Once more though, the Phils and Astros were just getting started as the late innings arrived.

Houston scored three times in the bottom of the seventh--the big blow being a triple from Art Howe. Nolan Ryan was on the mound with a three-run cushion. For the second straight game, the Phils were down to their final six outs and needing multiple runs to tie it up.

They rallied immediately, cutting the lead to 5-4 with one out, the bases loaded and Schmidt at the plate. When he struck out, it looked like a devastating blow. But second baseman Manny Trillo picked him up by ripping a ball into the left field corner. It cleared the bases and the Phils had gone from facing elimination to being ahead 7-5.

Are we done yet? Nope. Puhl, who hit .526 for the series, was part of a rally that produced two runs in the Houston half of the eighth to tie the game 7-7. After a scoreless ninth, this final battle was appropriately going extras.

In the 10th inning, the Phillies got doubles from Del Unser and Gary Maddox to take the lead. This time the lead finally stood up. With an 8-7 win they were going to the World Series.

We've already seen some great LCS battles in the years prior to this. There have been more than a few in the years since. But four out of five games going extra innings and multiple comebacks from both sides in the late innings? The 1980 NLCS remains the greatest series this round of postseason play has ever seen.

The history of the League Championship Series was just getting started. The years immediately ahead would see Blue Monday in Montreal, a dramatic comeback in Milwaukee and an incredible Saturday and Sunday in San Diego. The round would expand to best-of-seven in five short years. The 1969-80 time period laid the foundation for the LCS to become an integral part of the Major League Baseball landscape.

The *League Championship Series Chronicles* gave you the backdrop. *The Sequel Season* is the ultimate baseball diary.

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