

As the opening day of the 1955 baseball season approached, diamond experts in the American League predicted that the Cleveland Indians, proud owners of a glittering 111-43 record in 1954, would once again battle the New York Yankees for supremacy. J. G. Taylor Spink of The Sporting News said that Cleveland was "too strong to be toppled." In contrast, veteran New York World-Telegram writer Dan Daniel picked the Yankees to regain their customary spot atop the standings. Writing for Street and Smith's 1955 Baseball Yearbook, Daniel warned that the Tribe had "proved itself in the American League race. But it did not prove itself in the World Series. It may suffer the fate of the two other Cleveland pennant winners, of 1920 and 1948, neither of which could repeat."

Writers covering the Senior Circuit agreed that the Milwaukee Braves and the defending World Champion New York Giants, who had swept the favored Indians in the 1954 World Series, would contend for top honors, with the Brooklyn Dodgers providing plenty of competition. In Street and Smith's, Ed Prell of the Chicago Tribune wrote, "Milwaukee was the choice here last year. We'll take another ticket on the Braves." J. G. Taylor Spink commented that the Giants "are strong in the field, powerful at the plate, and they have a winning, audacious manager" (Leo "the Lip" Durocher). Prell said that Dodger fans were looking for a "silver lining all over the baseball skies" as the '55 season got under way. Brooklyn's pennant hopes rested on comebacks by key veterans like Roy Campanella, Carl Erskine, and Don Newcombe.

As all baseball prognosticators must admit, however, championships are won on the field, not in the press box.

As with any baseball season-- past, present, or future--the 1955 season produced a few surprises, a few disappointments, and a lot of fun for novices and veteran fans alike. So, let's turn back the clock to a great season past and see how accurate our guest experts--Mr. Spink, Mr. Daniel, and Mr. Prell--proved to be.

In the American League, the Old Professor's Yankees, who had won five consecutive world championships (1949-1953) only to succumb to Al Lopez's Indians in 1954, bounced back in 1955 to edge the Tribe by three games and to help set up yet another New York World Series in October. Cleveland, who suffered a letdown after their record-shattering performance in 1954, slipped to second place, thus proving veteran baseball scribe Dan Daniel to be a prophet.

Paced by twenty-three-year-old Mickey Mantle's 25 doubles, 11 triples, 37 home runs, and .306 batting average, the Yanks reasserted their American League dominance, which would last until Al Lopez (that man again!) and his fabulous Go-Go Sox dethroned them of 1959. In addition to Mantle's heroics (Just wait until next year, folks!), the ruthlessly efficient Yankees were led by hill aces Whitey Ford (18-7, with 18 complete games and a 2.62 ERA) and "Bullet Bob" Turley (17-13, with 210 strikeouts and a 3.06 ERA). Ex-Marine Hank Bauer enjoyed a great season, smacking 20 circuit shots, and MVP Yogi "It Ain't Over Till It's Over" Berra slammed 27 homers, while driving in a team-leading 108 runs. What would these guys be worth in today's market?

During the 1955 season, the Yankees gave some youngsters long looks. Some of these kids provided a boost to the Yanks during the heated 1955 flag chase and for years to come. Elston Howard, described in the Sporting News as "the first Negro to wear the New York uniform in American

League competition," contributed 10 homers and a .290 batting average, mainly in the Bronx garden. Although young Bobby Richardson did not make the trip north with the big club, wise old Casey Stengel had praise for the fuzzy-cheeked infielder: "I sure hated to let Richardson go, but he needs another year out." Yankee insiders called Bobby Richardson "the next second sacker of the club."

The most insightful comment on the Yankees as the 1955 season began was provided by manager Casey Stengel. Asked to evaluate his club, Casey said, "I like my personnel, I like its spirit. This is a club fighting not to defend a title won often, but to get it back. There is a big difference."

The Cleveland Indians of 1955 discovered that duplicating their Herculean feats of the previous season was difficult, if not impossible. Many Indian regulars suffered through off-years, and first sacker Vic Wertz was stricken with polio in late August. Reliable Al Smith led the Tribe with a .306 average, while banging out 22 round-trippers. Larry Doby clubbed a team-high 26 homers, while batting a solid .291. Al Rosen, Bobby Avila, and newcomer Ralph Kiner were all disappointments for the Tribe, however. Even the Indian hurlers found the going a bit more difficult, slipping from an impressive 2.78 team ERA in 1954 to a solid, though unspectacular, 3.39 in 1955. No Cleveland pitcher from this assemblage of future Hall of Famers managed to win 20 games, though Bob Lemon tied Whitey Ford's 18 victories to lead the circuit.

The most exciting news in Cleveland during the spring of 1955 focused on a young left-handed hurler with a howitzer for an arm. According to reports from the Tribe's spring wigwam, Herb Score, a fireballing rookie

tabbed by the Sporting News as the American League's top newcomer, possessed three speeds: fast, faster, and faster still. Cleveland's bullpen coach Bill Lobe reported that Score would begin by throwing "good and fast," then steadily increase the velocity of his pitches until he he shifted into "third," delivering the ball at a rate guaranteed to alarm rival hitters. When the season began, Herb Score did not disappoint, as he compiled a 16-10 record, along with 245 strikeouts and a 2.85 ERA. What a future this young pitcher seemed to have.

The Chicago White Sox were able to hang tough with the Yanks and the Tribe most of the summer. Their .268 team batting average and 69 steals led the American League. Minnie Minoso (10 homers, 19 steals, .288) and Nellie Fox (.311)--why aren't these guys in the Hall of Fame, folks--provided most of the thrills for the Pale Hose offense, though veteran George Kell (.312), exciting "Jungle Jim" Rivera (25 steals), and steady receiver Sherm Lollar (16 homers) contributed good seasons to the South Siders' cause. On the hill, Billy Pierce enjoyed a banner season, checking in with a league-leading 1.97 ERA. Newcomer Dick Donovan and veterans Virgil "Fire" Trucks and Sandy Consuegra also provided solid performances. Although Chicago's Comiskey Park crew were able to mount a respectable campaign, they lacked the fire power to overcome the league-leading 175 homer runs of Casey's Yanks.

Next, the Red Sox checked in a full twelve games behind the Sluggers in Pin Stripes. After flirting with a world championship in 1946 and an AL flag in 1948 and 1949, the Sox, by 1955, had settled into a long slumber of mediocrity. Although they could boast of Ted "the Splendid Splinter" Williams (28 home runs, .356), solid Jackie Jensen (26 homers, 116 RBI, .275), and colorful Jimmy Piersall (13

homers, .283)--one of baseball's premier outfielders--the Bosox just did not have the arms to make a serious run for the top. Frank Sullivan was a workhorse on the mound, hurling a league-leading 260 innings, while compiling an 18-13 record (good enough to tie Ford and Lemon for the lead in wins) with a sparkling 2.91 ERA. After Sullivan, however, the Fenway pitchers were an anonymous collection of unfulfilled hopes and undistinguished careers.

The Detroit Tigers had one of the best young outfielders in baseball with sophomore sensation Al Kaline. Playing in his second season, the twenty-year-old Kaline, who had never played in the minor leagues, led the Junior Circuit with a sizzling .340 average. Adding to this gaudy figure, young Kaline had 200 hits to lead the league, 26 home runs, and 102 RBI. What a terrific future this young Bengal cub had; however, he would suffer through many frustrating seasons in the Motor City until he realized his dream of playing on a World Series club. Young Kaline had a solid, though unspectacular, supporting cast in Detroit. Harvey Kuenn, a ripe old veteran of twenty-four, hit .306, and long-time American League standout Ray Boone socked 20 taters for the Tigers. On the hill, young Billy Hoelt (16-7 with a 2.99 ERA) and rookie Frank, later "the Yankee Killer," Lary led the Detroit pitching corps.

The next three teams in the American League were, frankly, terrible. Whereas Detroit finished a distant seventeen games behind the pennant-winning Yankees, the sixth place Athletics, relocated in Kansas City for the 1955 season, finished somewhere out in the Asteroid Belt, a whopping thirty-three games off the pace. Aging slugger Gus Zernial (30 homers) and newcomers Vic Power (19 homers, .319) and Hector Lopez (15 homers, .290) were not enough to compensate for a (gulp!) 5.35 team ERA. The Baltimore

Orioles checked in next, carrying on the tradition of losing they inherited from their St. Louis Browns predecessors. Rookie Gus Triandos (12 homers) led the "offense" for the miserable Birds, who finished a "mere" thirty-nine games off the Yankees' pace. The less said about the Washington Senators the better. Although they lost 101 games to finish forty-three games out (somewhere beyond the orbit of Pluto), the Nats did have Roy Sievers (25 home runs) and Mickey Vernon (14 homers, .301) to patch together an occasional rally. Their team ERA, however, was 4.62.

The 1955 American League season, after the last pitch was thrown in anger, turned out to be a prototype for virtually the rest of the Eisenhower decade: the Yanks on top and the Nats on the bottom, with no one mounting a serious challenge to the Yankees' imperial, some might say "imperious," reign. Dan Daniel was, indeed, correct in his suspicions about the Indians. Fans on the shores of Lake Erie are still waiting for another pennant, waiting as the exploits of the 1954 Tribe fade into the stuff of legends.

Old Casey may have thought the restoration of the Yankee monarchy would be the top baseball story of 1955. Fate stepped in, however, and even the Old Professor and his Bronx Brutes had to step aside for "Dem Bums." The Brooklyn Dodgers, baseball's first integrated team, the National League's dominant force through much of the 1950's, rebounded from a disappointing 1954 to rule as America's Diamond Kings in 1955. In fact, the Dodgers buried the rest of the Senior Circuit, finishing thirteen and a half lengths ahead of the highly-regarded Milwaukee Braves and eighteen and a half lengths ahead of the defending World Champion New York Giants. Ed Prell's "silver lining" was, indeed, evident in the skies over Ebbets Field. Two hundred and one home runs will do that.

Brooklyn's juggernaut depended largely on Roy Campanella's recovery from a 1954 hand injury. The jovial Dodger receiver enjoyed an MVP season, slamming 32 home runs, driving in 107 runs, and batting .318. "The Duke of Flatbush," Edwin Donald Snider led the powerful Bums with 42 home runs, while batting .309. In addition, Duke drove in a league-leading 136 runs. Hoosier native Gil Hodges (27 home runs, .289) and strong-armed Carl Furillo (26 home runs, .314) also made key contributions to the Brooklyn attack. Don Newcombe and Carl Erskine bounced back from sub par 1954 mound performances, and Clem Labine emerged as a star fireman.

In addition, the Dodgers debuted a strong-armed former basketball star, whose season was curtailed by an ankle injury. Nevertheless, the young southpaw from Brooklyn's Lafayette High School and the University of Cincinnati displayed potential, striking out 30 and yielding only 33 hits in 42 innings. The Dodgers had hopes that some day this phenom named Sandy Koufax would learn to pitch at the major league level.

The Braves, a preseason favorite going into their second season in Milwaukee, fell far short of Ed Prell's expectations. Slugger Joe Adcock missed most of 1955 with a broken arm, and the boys from the city made famous by Schlitz beer missed him. Nevertheless, sophomore sensation Hank Aaron socked 27 home runs, drove in 106 runs, and batted .314, suggesting to National League fans that they were witnessing the birth of a super star.

Twenty-three-year-old Eddie Mathews, already a veteran of three National League campaigns, slugged 41 homers, knocked in 101 runs, and hit .289. Together, these young sluggers comprised one of the most formidable one-two punches in baseball. Though Warren Spahn, Lew Burdette, Bob Buhl, and

suffered through rather mediocre seasons, the Milwaukee pitching staff possessed tremendous talent. Indeed, the Braves appeared to be the National League's royalty in waiting, poised to seize the pennant should either Brooklyn or New York stumble.

In 1955, the New York Giants discovered how difficult it is to win back to back pennants. Age, injuries, and slumps took their toll on the World Champions, as they fell to third place in the National League. Despite the disappointing finish of the Giants, ebullient centerfielder Willie Mays slammed 51 home runs, drove in 127 runs, stole 24 bases, and batted .319. "The Say Hey Kid" was a one-man show, however. The heroes who had helped capture the 1954 flag had run out of miracles. The Polo Grounds would never see another pennant.

The City of Brotherly Love endured another season of mediocrity in 1955. After a brief glimpse of glory in 1950, the Phillies had grown accustomed to finishing somewhere in the middle of the pack. Led by league batting champion Richie Ashburn (.338), slugging Del Ennis (29 homers, .296), and ace hurler Robin Roberts (23-14, 305 innings, 3.28), the sole tenants of Shibe Park possessed talent, but not enough depth to make a serious run at the Dodgers.

Fans in Cincinnati certainly could not blame the Redlegs' fifth place finish on a power outage. The wrecking crew from Crosley Field slammed 181 homers, second only to the pennant-winning Dodgers. Ted Kluszewski (he of the short sleeves and the bulging muscles) socked 47 homers; Wally Post countered with an even 40; Gus Bell clipped 27; and Smoky Burgess, late of the Phillies, added 20 homers. The pitching, however, lacked depth and consistency.

After the Redlegs, the excitement in the National

League virtually disappeared. Individual stars shone amid the gloom of the National League dungeon. Silently, even the doormats of the NL were acquiring young talent, making plans, and dreaming impossible dreams.

Perhaps the brightest young star to play for an also ran was shortstop Ernie Banks. Defying the so-called "sophomore slump" (see also HANK AARON), the enthusiastic twenty-four-year-old Banks rewarded the Wrigley Field faithful with a monster season: 44 home runs, 117 RBI, and a .295 average. This from a shortstop (Cal Ripken, phone home). The rest of the Cubbies were mere footnotes: Eddie WHAT? Harry WHEN? Lloyd WHO? Jim (Wasn't he the Scarecrow in "The Wizard of Oz"?) Bolger.

The once proud St. Louis Cardinals checked in next, in seventh place, thirty and a half games behind the Dodgers. Despite the great Stan Musial (33 homers, 108 RBI, .319), the Red Birds had fallen on very hard times. St. Louis possessed young talent, rookies Bill Virdon (17 homers) and Ken Boyer (18 homers) and sophomore Wally Moon (19 homers); however, the pitching staff had the League's worst ERA, 4.56.

No one noticed in 1955, but the Pittsburgh Pirates had begun to assemble a respectable array of young talent. Although the Bucs dropped 94 games in 1955 to finish thirty-eight and a half games off the pace, rookies like strong-armed outfielder Roberto Clemente and former Duke basketball star Dick Groat and young hurlers like Bob Friend (14-10, 2.84), Vern Law, and Roy Face held the keys to the future for Forbes Field, a future in which this unpredictable young team of 1955 would improve, mature, and confront baseball greatest dynasty, Casey Stengel's New York Yankees, in the World Series.

After the Brooklyn Dodgers defeated the New York

Yankees in a thrilling seven-game Series, the Flatbush Faithful no longer had to "wait till next year." Sandy Amoros' great catch and Johnny Podres' clutch pitching evoked the cry "this IS next year" throughout the Borough of Brooklyn. Sadly, "this year" would be the only year.

Although the Yankees would remain in Gotham and reign over the baseball world in the years to come, the Brooklyn Dodgers and their bitter rivals the New York Giants would follow the Greenback Trail to California in 1958, vacating Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds. A new era in baseball was about to dawn.

But, if for only a moment, let's listen to the sounds of 1955: The crowd's roar as Mickey, Duke, or Willie blasts one deep, deep, DEEP. . . GONE! The gasp, followed by cheers, as a youngster named Clemente "fires his cannon" to nail an opposing base runner. The chatter in the stands as fans in Milwaukee and Chicago discuss their young super stars, Aaron and Banks. The mixture of cheers and boos that dogged baseball's greatest hitter, Ted Williams. And, the adulation that was shown to baseball's consummate gentleman, Stan Musial. Although many of the parks are gone, many of the franchises relocated, what these heroes of 1955 achieved, their greatness, lives in each of us. Because of them, we can all walk a little taller, dream a little bigger, hope a little harder. Listen, if for only a moment, to the sounds of a great season past.