

The long-gone Athletics are still the gold standard in Philadelphia sports. Today's Phillies could be their match.

By William C. Kashatus

The Philadelphia Athletics are the most successful professional sports franchise in the city's history, and they haven't played a game here since 1954, the last season before they relocated to Kansas City.

The old Athletics were the winners of five World Series and nine American League pennants, most of which came during two championship dynasties: 1910 to 1914, and 1929 to 1931.

None of the city's other major professional sports franchises — the Phillies, Eagles, Flyers, or Sixers — can claim as many championship titles. But the current Phillies, who begin their fourth straight postseason Wednesday, may yet challenge the old A's.

Greatness in baseball is determined by a team's ability to repeat a championship performance. A team that captures two or more world championships and three or more pennants in five years or less is typically regarded as a dynasty. Teams that can accomplish that feat in three years are considered elite.

Connie Mack's 1929-31 A's were such a team. In fact, they toppled the 1926-28 New York Yankees from their dynastic pedestal, and those Yanks are widely considered the greatest team in the history of the sport.

Premier sluggers

What distinguished the A's dynasty was an explosive offense, scrappy defense, and strong pitching — qualities also demonstrated by the Phillies over the last three seasons.

Like the 1929-31 A's, the 2008-10 Phillies are an offensive powerhouse. The A's dynasty generated 2,710 runs and 365 home runs, while this Phillies team has produced a comparable 2,371 runs and an astounding 604 home runs over the last three seasons.

The A's offense, much like the Phillies', featured a first baseman who was one of the premier sluggers in the majors. Jimmie Foxx, the marquee A's player, blasted 100 homers and 393 RBIs over a three-year span. But over the last three years, Ryan Howard has hit even more homers (124) and RBIs (395) than "Double X."

Offense is only part of the story, though. Like the old Athletics, today's Phillies boast a tight defense. The A's dynasty compiled a

.975 fielding average, with 389 double plays and 432 errors, while the 2008-10 Phillies have a better fielding average, .986, with more double plays — 431 — and just 249 errors.

However, as the legendary Mack said, pitching is "75 percent of the game," which is why he stacked his starting rotation with two perennial 20-game winners, Lefty Grove and George Earnshaw. A third starter, Rube Walberg, could assure another 13 to 20 wins. That trio won 197 of the 313 games the A's won between 1929 and 1931. The team held the opposition in check with a combined ERA of 3.42 over that period.

The Phillies have also enjoyed strong starting pitching over the last three years, though most of the faces have changed. Cole Hamels has been the lone constant, teaming up in various seasons with Brett Myers, Cliff Lee, Jamie Moyer, J.A. Happ, and now Roy Halladay and Roy Oswalt. Over the last three years, the top three starters from among that group have combined for a total of 121 of the team's 282 wins and a 3.43 ERA.

Greater adversity

To be sure, the Phillies have to win another World Series — and do so this year — to be mentioned in the same breath as the 1929 A's. But if they achieve that milestone, they will have done it in the face of greater adversity than the A's did.

The A's regulars enjoyed remarkably good health throughout their dynasty, while the Phillies struggled with injuries to key players for extended periods throughout this season.

In addition, the Phillies must prevail in divisional and league playoff series before the fall classic. That means they play seven to twelve more postseason games each year than the Athletics, who automatically won the pennant and went directly to the World Series by finishing in first place.

Of course, the harsh reality is that when it comes to baseball championships, none of these footnotes count; only the end result does.

In the final analysis, these Phillies will be remembered as merely one of the best teams in our city's checkered sports history or as one of the greatest baseball teams of all time. We'll know the answer by the end of the month.

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