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The Washington Senators' Roger Peckinpaugh is shown Aug. 28, 1924, at Griffith Stadium. | AP Photo

HISTORY DEPT.

When Baseball Was Bigger Than Politics

In 1924, a slow-starting Washington team got hot and rode a wave of capital support all the way to the World Series. Sound familiar?

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER | October 22, 2019

The last time Washington won a World Series title, the Houston Astros didn't exist. There weren't even divisions, much less a wild card—the ticket the Nationals punched to make the postseason.

To make it to the Fall Classic in 1924, the Senators had to finish first in the American League, and nobody saw them coming. Washington was coming off a fourth-place finish the year before, a woeful 23½ games out of first place. The New York Yankees, anchored by Babe Ruth, who hit .393 with 41 home runs, had won the 1923 pennant going away, their third straight AL title.

Toppling one of the greatest baseball teams ever assembled endeared the Senators not only to their hometown fans, but the nation as a whole, which picked up the banner of the underdogs from Washington as they stared down an equally formidable New York Giants roster in the World Series. In the Roaring '20s, the country's mood was too buoyant to harbor any partisan ill-will toward the capital. The Republican president was kind of quiet and didn't like to say nasty things about his opponents, even in an election year. Nobody was screaming about a "deep state," though the previous occupant of the White House hadn't exactly distinguished himself in the ethical department. Baseball—the only team sport that mattered at the time—was, like bathtub gin, something everyone could get behind. Especially when it was as unpredictable as the 1924 season.

Like this year's Nats, who started out 19-31, the Senators got off to a slow start. They were a team in flux, with their fifth manager—untested 27-year-old player-manager Bucky Harris—in as many seasons. Nevertheless, their owner, Clark Griffith, had somewhat improbably predicted in spring training, "Those boys are going to get somewhere this year." In mid-June, they hadn't come close to justifying their boss' optimism. The team's record was 24-26, good for sixth place, 4½ games behind the first-place Yankees. Then they won five in a row heading into a four-game series at Yankee Stadium and stunned the Bronx Bombers by sweeping the series to take the top spot.

"Oh You Nationals!" the *Washington Post* exclaimed. "Washington fans for the first time in their lives will experience the thrill of seeing the home representatives take the field tomorrow afternoon as the official defender of first place."

"Washington got hot quicker than almost any club I ever saw," Babe Ruth later wrote in his autobiography.

The Senators (also known as the Nationals back then) streaked to a .636 second-half winning percentage, nearly identical to the Nats' .630 this year, and won the affection of the nation by disrupting the stranglehold the Yankees had on the American League. Fans were especially rooting for the Senators' aging pitching icon, 36-year-old Walter Johnson, who had never had a chance to pitch in the World Series.

Johnson had a reputation as one of the nicest guys in baseball. One of his nicknames was “The Big Swede,” even though he was of German descent, but he never corrected it. “There are a lot of nice Swedish people, I guess,” he said. “I don’t want to offend anybody.”

Will Rogers seemed to capture the national mood in a syndicated column titled, “Everybody Is Pulling for Walter.”

“There is more real genuine interest in him than there is in a presidential election,” Rogers wrote in the late September piece, about five weeks before President Calvin Coolidge won reelection in a landslide. “He is not sick, yet there are lots and lots of people in all parts of our country that never saw him or hope to see him, that are actually praying for fate to smile on this Big Old Country Boy.”

Johnson didn’t disappoint that season, going 23-7 with a 2.72 ERA, leading the league in earned run average, strikeouts and shutouts.

“Even in New York,” Rogers wrote, “among the rabid Yankees rooters, if they must be beaten, they want Walter to beat them.”

This year, some people outside Washington have expressed a similarly warm feeling toward the Nats. Both the Senators—who didn’t win a pennant until that 1924 season, and the Nats, who won their first pennant this year—were seen as deserving of their turn in the sun.

Indeed, after the Nationals swept the St. Louis Cardinals in the National League Championship Series, Bernie Miklasz, a sports talk show host in St. Louis and contributor to *The Athletic* St. Louis, said on his show: “If the Cardinals had to go down, have them go down to Washington, which has not experienced a World Series in our lifetime.”

Walter Johnson paced a Senators pitching staff that posted a league-best 3.34 ERA. Washington’s offense, meanwhile, couldn’t match the high-octane power of the Yankees—Babe Ruth’s 46 homers were more than twice Washington’s *team* total—but Washington had an effective small-ball style of play. Outfielder Goose Goslin led the team with a .344 average and 12 homers, one of three regulars to hit over .320, along with outfielder Sam Rice and first baseman Joe Judge.

So enamored of the Senators were fans around the country that they often rooted for the swashbuckling Washingtonians against their own teams. The unusual boost helped the Senators play .584 on the road that year. A key test came late in the season. The Senators had a two-game lead over the Yankees as they embarked on a 20-game, season-ending road trip—16 games in the Midwest, before wrapping up the season at Fenway Park in Boston.

Bucky Harris told his players: “Let’s not make any enemies if we can help it. Most of the western clubs would rather see us win the pennant than the Yankees. Let’s beat ’em, but treat ’em nice.”

During the road trip, fans in Washington congregated around office buildings and grocery stores, where the scores were posted every half-inning on scoreboards.

“There is no doubt as to the popularity of a Washington victory,” the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial after the Senators inched close to the pennant with a late-season victory in Boston. “All over the major league circuits the fans have been cheering for the Senators. In Boston, the crowd stood up and cheered every time they scored. ... In New York there is no question that if the Yanks cannot win, Washington is the next choice.”

That afternoon, in the penultimate game of the season, Washington clinched its first pennant with a 4-2 victory over the Red Sox. The road-field advantage the Senators enjoyed burst into full display in an incredible scene: Hundreds of Boston fans stormed onto the field to mob the victorious players.

And in Washington, despite a soaking rain, fans followed the action on the scoreboards and threw their umbrellas and hats into the air when the final score was posted.

“All over the city tonight baseball talk was humming,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported, in a sentence that could have described Washington after the Nats clinched their first pennant last week. “Cigar stores, hotel lobbies, fashionable cabarets, everywhere it was baseball. The sandlot spirit of Main street held the city. Washington, excited and happy, gurgled like a 2 year old over his first toy.”

A couple of days later, 100,000 people attended a celebratory parade on Pennsylvania Avenue. At the Ellipse, Coolidge referred to the baseball mania that had swept the city by joking about lost productivity in the city: “When the entire population reached the point of requiring the game to be described play-by-play, I began to doubt whether the highest efficiency was being promoted.”

Washington had gone 14-6 in that season-ending road trip—the same record the Nats had in their final 20 games this year.

Tuesday night, the Nats will take the field in Houston as big underdogs; the Senators faced similar odds against the New York Giants in the 1924 World Series. The Giants, like the Astros, had won the World Series two seasons earlier and had a formidable lineup and

pitching staff. The Giants hit a league-best .300 and led the league in on-base percentage and slugging percentage—three categories Houston also paced the league in this year.

New York was stacked with future Hall-of-Famers such as Hack Wilson, Frankie Frisch and Ross Youngs, and had won their fourth straight National League pennant, edging out yet another good New York team, the Brooklyn Robins—later known as the Dodgers.

But the Senators batboy, identified as “Frankie” in a newspaper story, said the experts had it all wrong: *“What’s all the fuss about? Goodnight, the time to shout was a month ago. Why, it was a cinch. We had that pennant all ironed out and properly creased with a special place built for it in my bat bag four weeks ago. The Giants? Say, you’re not kidding me, are you? If you’ve got any extra money and want to make a lot more, easy, see, soak it all on the Nats. They’re there, I tell you.”*

The *New York Times* noted the Senators “are liked everywhere because they are young and dashing and enthusiastic. New York is hated because it has won too many pennants and possesses too much money and is too powerful.”

Most agreed that if Washington were to have a shot at pulling off an upset, it would need a strong performance from ace Walter Johnson, who was the obvious choice for the Game 1 start at Griffith Stadium in Washington. Coolidge threw out the first pitch, but it was umpire Tom Connolly who showed athleticism by leaping for the errant throw from the president to make a one-handed catch.

For eight innings, Giants lefty Art Nehf outpitched Johnson and took a 2-1 lead into the bottom of the ninth, but Washington rallied to tie the score. In an era before pitch counts, both starters soldiered on for three more innings, before Johnson tired in the 12th. He walked two and surrendered a single, loading the bases with no outs, and the Giants cashed in for two runs. Washington clawed back for one run in the bottom of the frame but left the potential tying run at third — and fell 4-3.

The Senators took two of the next three games to tie the series at two games each, and Johnson returned to the mound for the pivotal fifth game. But once again he didn’t have his best stuff, giving up 13 hits and six runs (four earned) in eight innings, losing 6-2 in his last scheduled start.

“It’s not very encouraging to know that I’ll finish up my career in the big leagues with two World Series defeats, but I don’t think I’ll come back next year,” a dejected Johnson said.

Washington won Game 6 to even up the series, setting up a decisive seventh game at Griffith Stadium in Washington. Trailing 3-1, the Senators rallied to tie the score in the eighth inning when Harris hit a ground ball to third base that took a bad bounce over the third baseman's head, scoring two runs.

Fans threw hats and coats and ripped up newspapers on the field, and the game had to be stopped for several minutes.

In the top of the ninth, Harris, the player-manager, summoned Johnson from the bullpen, offering him a chance for redemption. But the pitcher nearly lost the game and the series, giving up a one-out triple to Frisch. He wriggled out of the jam, though, and lasted four scoreless innings.

In the bottom of the 12th, the Senators put two runners on base with one out. Earl McNeely hit a smash to third base—and Washington's friendly infield gave this one a providential nudge, too. The ball took another bad hop past the third baseman, and Washington catcher Muddy Ruel came around with the winning run at 5:04 p.m.

Thousands of Washingtonians celebrated well past midnight. "It was an Armistice Day and Mardi Gras blended into one," the *Post* reported. "It was the thrilling outburst of a city's joy [that] knew no bounds."

The Senators won the pennant the next year and again in 1933 but lost the World Series both times. In fact, Washington would go 95 years before winning another postseason series, when the Nationals beat the Dodgers to win the National League Division Series this year.

In doing so, they seemed to channel the 1924 World Series team. Both the Senators and the Nationals won their decisive games by erasing 3-1 leads in the eighth inning; both teams brought in a starting pitcher who had struggled earlier in the series—in the Nats' case, Patrick Corbin—and both games finished on Oct. 10.

Now the Nats face their toughest challenge—upsetting a battle-tested machine in Houston that finished off the powerhouse Yankees in six games to win the American League pennant. In fact, the Astros are the biggest World Series favorites since 2007.

But the Nats have been overcoming long odds all season. Who saw them as contenders in late May, when they were 12 games under .500? The players are probably using their underdog status as a motivation, the way the Senators did nearly a century ago.

Before the 1924 World Series, Senators first baseman Joe Judge had a quick rejoinder to a New York reporter who had predicted the Senators would be easy prey for the Giants: “This bird is going to be a lot wiser, but sadder, when this series is over.”

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

POSTEVERYTHING

The weird similarities between the beginning and end of D.C.'s baseball woes

The 1924 Senators and the 2019 Nationals both triumphed after comeback victories — and both featured 36-year-old heroes.



Perspective by Frederic J. Frommer

Frederic J. Frommer, a writer and a sports and politics historian, is the author of several books, including “You Gotta Have Heart: Washington Baseball from Walter Johnson to the 2019 World Series Champion Nationals.”

November 1, 2019 at 10:13 a.m. EDT

The Washington Nationals’ dramatic World Series victory has extinguished nearly a century’s worth of D.C. baseball heartache — including two gut-wrenching Fall Classic losses, five decades of awful baseball, losing two franchises and having no team for 33 years, and then crashing out of the playoffs in agonizing fashion more recently.

From those depths, these Nationals have taken us on a roller coaster of emotions that, many times this year, felt like (gulp) a repeat was in the offing. But that made their win over the heavily favored Houston Astros all the sweeter.

“First in war, first in peace, and last in the American League” was an often-accurate description of baseball in the District. The old Washington Senators (also known as the Nationals) started out with 11 straight losing seasons at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1904, they were historically bad, losing or tying their first 13 games and finishing with a .252 winning percentage.

Things improved when Clark Griffith took over as manager in 1912 — a move his friends tried to talk him out of — and purchased a 10 percent share of the team. He eventually amassed a controlling interest and replaced himself as manager, and his shrewd baseball moves led to Washington’s first pennant and World Series title, in 1924.

Until Wednesday, that was the high-water mark in Washington baseball history.

In 1925, after repeating as American League champs, Washington took on the Pittsburgh Pirates in the World Series. The favored Senators jumped out to a three-games-to-one lead, but the Pirates won the next two games to force a decisive Game 7 in Forbes Field.

After rain forced a postponement, Walter Johnson, the hero of the 1924 championship, took the mound on a wet, muddy field. “The Big Train” had won his first two series starts, but he strained his leg in the second one and was not himself in the series finale. The Pirates pounded him for 15 hits and nine runs and erased a 4-0 lead to win the game 9-7.

The Senators fielded good teams in the next several years, but they were blocked from the World Series by the Murderers’ Row Yankees and the dynastic Philadelphia Athletics. Washington finally won another pennant in 1933, posting a .651 winning percentage, still the best in D.C. baseball history, and took on the underdog New York Giants in what would be the last World Series here until this fall.

After dropping the first two games in New York, the Senators won Game 3 in Washington, with President Franklin D. Roosevelt throwing out the first pitch, and they had the chance to take control of the series with the next two games at home, too.

But the Senators couldn’t capitalize on their home field (sound familiar?), dropping both games in extra innings. The Game 3 victory in 1933 remains the last time a Washington team won a World Series game at home.

The finale was particularly hard to stomach: In the top of the 10th, Mel Ott hit a ball to center field that Senators outfielder Fred Schulte deflected into the stands for a home run. Initially, Ott stood at second base, but the umpires ultimately awarded him a homer.

A year later, the cash-strapped Griffith sold off his popular star player-manager Joe Cronin, a future Hall of Famer, to the Boston Red Sox for \$250,000 and a marginal player. (Cronin, a shortstop, had recently married Griffith’s niece.)

That move pretty much signaled the end of competitive baseball in Washington in the 20th century. The Senators mounted just one pennant race — in 1945, with a team of misfits in the final year of World War II, including a half-deaf outfielder — but they were eliminated on the final day of the season.

The Senators, playing poorly and drawing few fans, moved to Minnesota for the 1961 season and almost immediately improved, winning the American League pennant there in 1965. Meanwhile, a new expansion Washington Senators team was as bad as the old one, posting just one winning season in 11 years, before they, too, abandoned the city to become the Texas Rangers. That move ended an unbelievably bad run of baseball in Washington: From 1946 to 1971, covering the two franchises, Washington managed just two winning seasons.

Still, most fans would agree it’s better to have a bad team than none at all, and an entire generation missed out. Major League Baseball seemed to view Washington as a two-time loser and was reluctant to try again, staying away for 33 long years until it moved the Montreal Expos moved here for the 2005 season.

But the newborn Nationals, after a surprisingly competitive first season, seemed to pick up where the old teams left off: They lost 100-plus games in 2008 and 2009, finishing with the worst record in the majors both years. Even when the team turned things around early in this decade, it ended badly, with several excruciating losses in the National League Division Series.

That's why it was such a breakthrough when the Nats beat the heavily favored Los Angeles Dodgers in the NLDS this year. The club still hadn't proved anything, but the talk of being a postseason choker evaporated.

And they seemed to have captured the magic of the '24 Washington Senators, until now the only D.C. team to win the World Series. There are some striking similarities between the two ballclubs — from their struggles early in the season to their unlikely championships.

By now, most fans have memorized the numbers 19-31 — the Nats' record over the first third of the season, when their chances of winning the World Series were calculated at a pitiful 1.5 percent. The Senators were a bit better in 1924, starting off 24-26. Neither team was expected to contend after such slow starts.

But "Washington got hot quicker than almost any club I ever saw," Babe Ruth would later write in his autobiography. If he had been around to see the 2019 Nats, he might put them in the same category.

Both teams finished the regular season with 14-6 records over their final 20 games. The Nats had a longer path to the World Series: They needed to win the wild-card game, the NLDS and the National League Championship Series to get there, while the Senators went straight to the Fall Classic by having the best record in the American League in an era before divisional play.

Both Washington teams were heavy underdogs to World Series rivals that had led their respective leagues in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage and had won the World Series two years earlier. And both fell behind three games to two, forcing them to win the final two games of the series. They even both trailed by two runs late in the seventh game — the seventh inning for the 2019 Nats, the eighth inning for the 1924 Senators.

Thanks to the whizzes at baseball-reference.com, we can reconstruct games to see a team's expected chance of winning at specific points. When Adam Eaton grounded out leading off the top of the seventh on Wednesday night with the Nats trailing 2-0, just before Anthony Rendon's home run, their win probability was a skimpy 16 percent.

Ninety-five years ago, at old Griffith Stadium, the Senators' Ossie Bluege fouled out to begin the bottom of the eighth with the Giants leading 3-1, dropping Washington's win probability to an even slimmer 13 percent. Then the Senators rallied for two runs to tie the score, before winning the game in extra innings.

Here's another fact that binds the two Washington ballclubs: Only five teams in World Series history have ever overcome a multirun deficit in the seventh inning or later of Game 7. The Senators were the first to do it. The Nats are the last. (Alas, the second was the Pirates in the '25 World Series against the Senators.)

There's more — of course — because this is baseball. Both teams had 36-year-old heroes: Howie Kendrick, who hit the go-ahead homer in the seventh inning, and Walter Johnson, who came in from the bullpen in the ninth inning after the Senators tied the score. He would pitch four innings in relief to win the game after losing his two World Series starts. Johnson had been pounded in his previous start — something he had in common with Nats pitcher Patrick Corbin, who like Johnson found vindication with several scoreless innings of relief to win Game 7.

By taking their fans to the brink of elimination five times this postseason, including twice in the World Series, the Nationals have made the exorcism of all the bad baseball karma complete. The Red Sox vanquished their burden of historical failure in 2004, and the Chicago Cubs neutralized theirs in 2016. Now it's finally Washington's turn.

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