

Formats of Baseball Postseason Championship Series

By Stew Thornley

Championship procedures in the 19th century varied. For example, for its first eight seasons, the National League determined its standings by the team that won the most games, not by winning percentage.¹

Although a number of postseason intra- and inter-league tournaments achieved prominence in the early years of professional baseball, the first recognized World's Series between the champions of the National League and American Association was in 1884 between the Metropolitan (of New York) of the American Association and Providence of the National League. The series had no set format regarding the number of games or with the location of those games.²

When the organizations merged into the National League and American Association of Professional Base Ball Clubs in 1892, a split season was held as a means of having a postseason championship series. Boston, which finished first in the first half of the season, beat Cleveland, champions of the second half. Boston won the series, five games to none with one game ending in a tie.³

American League-National League World Series

The first championship series – which became known as the World Series although World's Series was often used in the early years – between the first-place finishers in the American and National leagues was an unsanctioned event in 1903, became a codified annual series in 1905 (after no series took place in 1904), and has been played every year since then except for 1994, when a strike wiped out the final months of the season. The 1903, 1919, 1920, and 1921 World Series were a best-of-nine format; All others were best-of-seven.

Charlie Bevis, in the “The Evolution of World Series Scheduling,” wrote, “In the early World Series schedules, only the first six games were affixed sites ahead of time. The site of the seventh and deciding game, if one was necessary, was not predetermined.”⁴ (The possibility of a neutral site for the seventh game may have been considered, but it never happened, and a coin toss was used to determine the site of the seventh game.)

Bevis said by 1909, the schedule followed two general principles:

- When the contesting clubs were located in the same city or within close proximity by train, the games alternated between the two clubs.
- When the clubs were farther apart, the first four games were played in sets of two in each city and then alternated between cities for the next two games [2-2-1-1 with seventh game determined by a coin toss].⁵

The first 2-3-2 format (two at one site, as many as three at the other site, and, if necessary, the final game or games at the original site) happened in 1924 although this was not predetermined since the site for the seventh game wasn't known until a coin toss before the fifth game. Washington, the American League team, won the coin toss and hosted Game Seven.

The 2-3-2 format was adopted beginning in 1925.

During World War II, a 3-4 format was used to reduce travel in 1943 and 1945. The 1944 World Series was a 2-3-2 since all games were played in Sportsman's Park between the St. Louis Browns and St. Louis Cardinals.

The 2-3-2 format originally called for the National League team to open at home in odd-

numbered years and the American League in even-numbered years. In 1935, the order was switched with the American League opening at home in odd-numbered years. When the 1994 World Series wasn't played, the order went back to the National League opening at home in odd-numbered years beginning in 1995.

In 2003 the home-field advantage (who opened at home and who had the extra game at home if the series went the distance) was determined by the league that had won the All-Star Game. In 2017, the team with the better regular season record earned the advantage. A tiebreaker criterion was used if both teams had the same record.

In 2020, because of the pandemic, all of the World Series games were played at the Texas Rangers' stadium.

Days Off

The current policy is for a travel day between changes in the location of the games. This was the case even in 2020, when all the games were played in one place. A day off is held after the second and fifth games.

Bevis, in his article on World Series scheduling, wrote that before 1957, games were played on consecutive days with exceptions made based on restrictions on Sunday baseball in some locations and/or lengthy travel between the sites.

Bevis noted that the 1956 World Series was the last with no days off, and the 1960 World Series the first to be played with scheduled days off even though the distance between the cities (New York and Pittsburgh) would not have required a travel day in the past.⁶

Tiebreaker Games

If teams tied for first, a tiebreaker game or best-of-three series was held. All games and statistics were considered an extension of the regular season, and are not considered to be postseason games. Prior to expansion in 1969, the National League had four tiebreaker series – in 1946, 1951, 1959, and 1962 – and all were best-of-three.⁷

The American League had a one-game playoff to break a tie in 1948. By having one game instead of a series, the league was not setting a precedent for a single-game tiebreaker. As four teams went into the final weekend of the 1967 season, the American League planned to have a best-of-three series if needed and also prepared for the possibility of more than two teams being tied. Four years earlier, the National League had the possibility of a three-way tie on the final day of the season. In both cases, 1964 and 1967, no tiebreaker games were needed.

Division Playoffs

When the leagues each expanded to 12 teams in 1969, a best-of-five series for the league championship was held between the division winners. Following a 2-3 format, the series opened at the East Division champions in the American League in odd-numbered years and at the West Division champion in even-numbered years. The opposite was the case in the National League (West Division opened at home in odd-numbered years and East Division in even-numbered years.)

This format continued through 1984. In 1985, the league championship became a best-of-seven series following the 2-3-2 format. The West Division champion opened at home in odd-numbered years and the East champion in even-numbered years. The National League did the opposite – East champion opening at home in odd-numbered years and West champion in even-numbered years. The format continued through 1993.

1981 Split Season

A strike wiped out the middle third of the 1981 season. In the agreement to the strike, the owners had the right to decide how to resume the season opted for a split-season. All teams that had finished first when the season was interrupted after games of June 11 – New York Yankees, Oakland Athletics, Philadelphia Phillies, and Los Angeles Dodgers – were declared division champions for the first half and would advance to a “mini-playoff” round to play the second-half champion from their division in a best-of-five series with a 2-3 format. The plan was for the second-half champion to open at home with two games with the remaining games played at the home of the first-half champion.

The owners also decided that if a team won both halves, it would still have to play in the mini-playoffs, against the team from its division with the second-best overall record for the season. If this happened, the opening game of the mini-playoff would be hosted by the non-champion (the team with the second-best record). The remaining games would be played at the home of the division champion.

A potential problem was quickly discovered with the Baltimore Orioles of the American League East used as an example. The Baltimore had finished second to the New York Yankees in the first half, and the teams were scheduled to conclude their regular season playing against one another. What if the Yankees were fighting for first place in the second half against a team that had finished lower in the standings during the first half? If the Orioles did well enough in the second half to ensure the second-best overall record during the season, but did not have a shot at winning the second-half title, it could go to the mini-playoff – but only if the Yankees won the division again. Otherwise, whichever team won the second half would go to the playoffs instead of Baltimore.

It could leave Baltimore in a position that by beating New York and knocking the Yankees out of a second-half champion, the Orioles could knock themselves out of the postseason and a chance to win the World Series.

When informed of this possibility, Commissioner Bowie Kuhn wasn't too concerned. Quoted in an editorial in *The Sporting News*, Kuhn said, “Our feeling is that the matter of percentage in this happening is small. If it should occur, to maintain the integrity of the game, we would have to make an adjustment. I'm not prepared to say what that adjustment would be at this time, but I assure you an adjustment would be made.”⁸

The 1981 season resumed with the All-Star Game on Sunday, August 9 and the regular season the following day. By the weekend, the question of a team hurting its chances of making the postseason by winning a game flared up. Although only Baltimore and New York, among teams where this could be an issue, were concluding their seasons against each other, the possibility of a no-win conundrum for a team could still happen.

In the American League West, which Oakland won in the first half, the Chicago White Sox and Kansas City Royals were surprise teams – Chicago, a dismal team in 1980, by finishing third in the first half and Kansas City, the defending league champions, a distant fifth.

Chicago and Oakland were scheduled to meet in the penultimate weekend of the season, close enough that the win-to-lose-out scenario was possible. What if Chicago did well enough in the second half to ensure the second-best overall record but not enough to challenge Oakland for the second-half title? And what if Kansas City performed more to expectations and was challenging Oakland for the second-half title? Chicago could make the postseason but only if Oakland won the second-half title.

Less than a week into the resumed season, the *Chicago Tribune* polled White Sox players on what they'd do in such a situation. In its August 14 edition, the *Tribune* wrote, "All but two Sox players polled – including seven starters and three starting pitches – say that, put in that position, they would try to help Oakland by throwing their late-season series."⁹

In another *Tribune* story that day, Robert Markus wrote, "[White Sox] Manager Tony LaRussa, speaking for the record, said he would tell his players to lose although 'to play a series where you don't play to win would go against everything in my brain and body.'"¹⁰

By the next day La Russa¹¹ said he would be willing to forfeit the series against Oakland rather than send his players out with the intention of losing. La Russa added, "How do you define winning? The rules say you have to play to win. But the stated objective of every team is also to get into the playoffs to have a shot at the World Series. If you try to win a game, and that means you lose a chance to go to playoffs, are you winning or losing? I don't know how to answer that."¹²

The flap with the White Sox – who were asked a question that doesn't have a good answer – caused Kuhn to revise the plan before the weekend was out. Instead of a team with the second-best season record advancing if the same team won both halves of the division, the team advancing in such a case would be the one with the second-best record in the second half of the season.

The plan for home field, as before, called for a dual-division winner to open on the road and have the remaining games at home. With separate division winners, the first two games would be played at the home of the second-half champion and the remainder at the first-half champion.

Kuhn said the owners considered a dual division winner to bypass the mini-playoff but used the excuse that it wasn't possible since baseball had to set its dates for the playoff format immediately.

The White Sox may have done baseball a favor by forcing it to modify the system because of the controversy generated by the *Tribune* poll, even though the team was blasted by some. Dick Cullum, an astute columnist for decades on Minneapolis sports pages, wrote, "The very suggestion that games could be thrown, for any reason, deals the beautiful game of baseball a damaging blow. The White Sox are still remembered, after 62 years, as the team involved in that scandalous World Series."¹³ The comparison with the 1919 White Sox is ludicrous.

Through the years references have been made to the 1981 White Sox emulating their notorious predecessors by saying they would intentionally lose games. Often the subject is broached by people with a passing knowledge (that is, next to nothing) of the situation or more maliciously by not giving the full context of the no-win situation the White Sox players were in when polled.

At least Kuhn got it, to an extent. In announcing the revised format, he also said he would not discipline La Russa (for saying he would forfeit games) nor St. Louis manager Whitey Herzog, who agreed with LaRussa. "The administration of baseball put them in the position they found themselves in," Kuhn added, possibly the most cogent statement made about this subject.¹⁴

Expanded Playoffs

In 1994 the American and National Leagues split into three divisions – East, Central, and West – with the champions of each advancing to the playoffs along with a wild-card team, the non-champion team with the league's best record. The opening round was best-of-five originally in a 2-3 format, switching to a 2-2-1 format starting in 1998. Home field was based on seeding of the teams by record (with a tiebreaking system if teams had the same record). The higher seed

opened at home and would be back if the decisive fifth game were needed. The wild-card team always had the lowest seed, even if it had a better record than any of the division champions. The matchups were adjusted, if needed, to not allow teams in the same division to play each other in the opening rounds.

A tiebreaker game was played only to determine a playoff qualifier, not if two teams tied for first place and both were making the playoffs. (Starting in 2020 tiebreaker games were eliminated and a tiebreaker system – starting with teams’ head-to-head record against one another and progressing into deeper dives if needed – was used. The last tiebreaker games were played in 2018.)

The seeding system continued through the 2-3-2 best-of-seven league playoffs. In 1994, the World Series was still alternating years for the league whose team would open at home and have a home-field advantage should the series go all seven games.

Because a strike wiped out the end of the 1994 season, the expanded playoffs with a wild-card team did not take place until 1995. The World Series opened in the home park of the National League team because of the one-year gap, reverting to the system of the National League getting the advantage in odd rather than even-numbered years. (The system of determining home field remained through 2002, then was based on the league winning the All-Star Game through 2016, and then went to the seeding system starting in 2017.)

In 2012 baseball added a second wild-card team in each league, having these teams play one game to either be eliminated or advance to the playoff system that had been in place since the leagues had broken into three divisions. At this time, it became possible for teams from the same division to play in the opening round of the playoffs.

The pandemic season of 2020 created a new format on the fly, and eight teams from each league – the three division champions, the three second-place teams, and the next two teams with the best record – made it to the postseason. In the initial round, the top four seeds hosted the other teams from their league in a best-of-three playoff with all games scheduled at the home of the higher seed.

The second round was best-of-five with the games played at neutral sites, Minute Maid Park in Houston; Globe Life Field in Arlington, Texas; Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles; and Petco Park in San Diego. (The Los Angeles Dodgers, San Diego Padres, and Houston Astros, even though their home stadiums were used, played their games at other ballparks.)

The National League Championship series (best-of-seven) was played at Globe Life Field in Arlington and the American League Championship Series at Petco Park.

The World Series was played at Globe Life Field. Although all prior series had no days off between games, the World Series had the customary days off after the second and fifth games.

In 2021, the playoffs went back to the pre-2020 format.

Starting in 2022, six teams from each league advanced. The division champions with the best record bypassed the first round, which consisted of the division winner with the worst record among the three along with three wild-card teams. The higher seeds hosted the opening best-of-three round with all games scheduled at the home of the higher seed.

Make-up Games

In the past, regular seasons often ended with the teams playing an irregular number of games and having unplayed decisions even when such games affected a pennant race. These included suspended games not being resumed, tie games not being replayed, and “No Games” (those called by darkness or weather before becoming regulation games) not being made up. Now such

games will be played/resumed after the conclusion of the scheduled close of the regular season if they affect teams making the playoffs. Researcher Cliff Blau found that the practice of making games up if needed did not occur until the second half of the 20th century. He wrote, “The American League did not permit such make-up games to be played after the scheduled end of the regular season until 1951 and the National League until 1955, with the exception that starting in 1951 games postponed on the last day of the season could be made up the next day.”

Notes:

Thanks to Philippe Cousineau, Marc Alan Jones, and Cliff Blau for their assistance.

¹ It wasn't until 1884 that the National League joined the American Association by defining its champion as the club which won the greatest percentage of games rather than the greatest number of games won regardless of how many games a club lost.. (Source: Annual league constitutions of the National League, formed in 1876, and American Association, formed in 1882.)

² Two years earlier, the champions of the two organizations, Cincinnati of the American Association and Chicago of the National League, played a pair of games following the regular season although these were not considered to be a series to determine an inter-league titlist. A number of postseason series between teams were held but not considered championship series, including the Temple Cup, which was played between the first- and second-place teams in the National League between 1894 and 1897.

³ L. Robert “Bob” Davids, in “1892 Had a Split Season” (*Baseball Research Journal*, Society for American Baseball Research, 1981, p. 180, <https://sabr.org/journal/article/the-1892-split-season>), wrote that the schedule called for three games to be played in Cleveland, three in Boston, and three in New York although when the series ended in six games (including a tie game), the games in New York were not necessary.

⁴ Bevis, Charlie, “The Evolution of World Series Scheduling,” *Baseball Research Journal*, Society for American Baseball Research, 2002, p. .22.

⁵ Bevis, p. 22.

⁶ Bevis, pages 25-27.

⁷ The National League constitution of 1883, in Section 79, was the first to address the possibility of a pennant playoff with, “ , , In case two or more clubs be tied for first place on games won and lost, the Board shall at once arrange a special series of five games between any two of such clubs, such games to be played in the month of October, and the games so played shall be included in the championship record and counted in determining the award of the championship.”

⁸ “Our Opinion: A Terrible Flaw,” *The Sporting News*, August 22, 1981, p. 6.

⁹ “Sox willing to throw games in order to make playoffs,” *Chicago Tribune*, Friday, August 14, 1981,” p. 1, Section 1.

¹⁰ “Sox: We’d throw games to make playoffs” by Robert Markus, *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 1981, p. 1, Section 4.

¹¹ The accepted spelling of La Russa’s name today is with a space although all newspaper references in 1981 wrote his name as LaRussa.

¹² Associated Press, “LaRussa: Sox may forfeit series, ‘win,’” *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 15, 1981, page 1D.

¹³ Cullum, Dick, *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 20, 1981, page 3D.

¹⁴ Associated Press, “Kuhn: Second-season format to be revised,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Monday, August 17, 1981, p. 1C.