The 1921 New York Yankees are the team that started it all. As the most successful franchise in baseball history, the Yankees (as of 2020) have won 27 World Series championships, 40 American League pennants, and 18 American League East titles. When Babe Ruth joined them in 1920, the Yankees had never won the pennant. Led by Ruth, that changed in 1921 as the Yankees won their first pennant, before losing to the New York Giants in the World Series. The Yankees would go on to win six pennants and three World Series during the decade as their dynasty began.

The Yankees were one of eight teams when the American League began in 1901. Originally, they played in Baltimore and were known as the Orioles (no relation to the current Baltimore Orioles). In 1903 the team was sold and moved to New York City, where they played at Hilltop Park as the Highlanders. In 1913 they moved to the Polo Grounds as tenants of the New York Giants and were renamed the Yankees. The early versions of the Highlanders and Yankees did not meet with much success, never finishing higher than second in the American League. Everything changed in the winter of 1919 when the Boston Red Sox sold Ruth to the Yankees for $100,000. In 1920, his first season with the Yankees, Ruth shattered his own major-league record by belting 54 home runs as the Yankees finished third, three games behind the pennant-winner Cleveland Indians.

In 1921 the Yankees finished first, ahead of the Indians, as the 26-year-old Ruth broke his own single-season home-run record yet again, hitting 59. After trailing Cleveland by a small margin for most of the season, the Yankees took three of four from the Indians in late September and won the pennant with a club record 98 wins. In addition to his 59 home runs, Ruth led the AL with 168 RBIs and narrowly missed the Triple Crown, with a .378 batting average, good for third in the league.

Ruth played almost exclusively in left field in 1921, with 24-year-old Bob Meusel in right. Ruth also played 20 games in center field, a position that was usually manned by a combination of Elmer Miller, Chick Fewster, and Ping Bodie. Behind the plate was Wally Schang, who had come to the Yankees from the Red Sox in an offseason trade, At first base was Wally Pipp, who would become famous for his injury in 1925 that led to Lou Gehrig replacing him in the lineup to begin Gehrig’s streak of 2,130 consecutive games played. Twenty-four-year old Aaron Ward saw action at both second base and third base, Roger Peckinpaugh (in his ninth season with New York) was at shortstop and 35-year-old Frank “Home Run” Baker played the majority of games at third.

The Yankees’ top pitcher was Carl Mays, a submarining right-hander best remembered for one of the darkest moments in baseball history. On August 16, 1920, Mays threw a fastball that hit Indians shortstop Ray Chapman in the head, fracturing his skull. Chapman died the next morning, the only time a player has died from an injury sustained in a major-league game. Despite being part of that traumatic incident, Mays had a tremendous 1921 season as he led the league with 336⅔ innings pitched, tied for the league lead in wins with 27 (27-9) and had a 3.05
ERA. Future Hall of Famer Waite Hoyt was 19-13 with a 3.09 ERA. Bob Shawkey was 18-12 with a 4.08 ERA. Rounding out the rotation were Rip Collins, Bill Piercy, and Jack Quinn. Ruth pitched in two games, including one start, and had a 2-0 record despite an ERA of 9.00 and nine walks in nine innings pitched.

As the 1921 season began, optimism reigned for the upstart Yankees. With Miller Huggins in his fourth season as Yankees manager, New York was expected to compete for the pennant against the defending champion Indians. Cleveland was led by manager, center fielder, and future Hall of Famer Tris Speaker (.362 with 52 doubles in 1921). In addition to Speaker, four other regulars batted over .300: catcher Steve O’Neill, shortstop Joe Sewell, third baseman Larry Gardner, and left fielder Charlie Jamieson. Several backups, including George Burns, Riggs Stephenson, and Smoky Joe Wood, also hit over .300 as Cleveland had a team batting average of .308. On the mound, Cleveland was led by future Hall of Famer Stan Coveleski (23-13, 3.37 ERA), 22-year-old George Uhle (16-13, 4.01 ERA), Duster Mails (14-8, 3.94 ERA) coming off a sensational debut in 1920, and veteran Jim Bagby (14-12, 4.70 ERA).

The Sporting News picked the Indians to finish first ahead of the Yankees “who seem to be the only dangerous rivals of the world champions.” There was concern about Ruth’s weight since he was “carrying about 226 pounds and is striving madly to reduce.” The Yankees “collectively still lack speed on the bases” so “the Yankees, in order to win the pennant, will have to hit harder behind better pitching than Huggins developed last season.” At the same time, the Indians were “strengthened enough” that it was difficult to “figure out how the Yankees can finish better than second.”

According to The Sporting News, the Yankees pitching was a question mark with “only two really dependable pitchers” in Mays and Shawkey. “Quinn is nearly through, while Hoyt and [Harry] Harper have shown nothing in the last two years to warrant a feeling of optimism.” Cleveland had better pitching, bolstered by having Mails in the rotation for a full season. The Indians were “equipped with confidence and experience,” giving them “a profound advantage over the Yankees,” who had question marks at various positions, including second base and third base.

As predicted, the Yankees and Indians battled it out for the pennant in a race that was very close from start to finish. New York began with a bang on Opening Day, routing the Philadelphia Athletics 11-1 at the Polo Grounds. Ruth went 5-for-5, Ward hit a home run, Bodie hit a bases-loaded triple and Mays pitched a complete-game three-hitter. The rest of April did not go as well, as the Yankees ended the month 6-6 and in third place. The 11-5 Indians were tied for first with Washington.

After beating Detroit two straight on May 12 and 13, New York was 12-9, two games behind first-place Cleveland, with a big four-game series coming up on the road against the Indians. In the series opener, on May 14, the Yankees rallied late to beat Cleveland 6-4 on a long home run by Ruth. The Yankees won the next two games to extend their winning streak to five and take a one-game lead. When the Indians beat them, 4-2, on May 17, the two teams were tied in the standings.
After losing to the Chicago White Sox on May 18, the Yankees fell to second place and remained there throughout May and June. They faced off against the Indians in a four-game series at the Polo Grounds in early June. After winning the first two games to move within a half-game of first place, they lost the last two. The second game of the series, on June 8, was a classic, as the Yankees scored two in the bottom of the ninth to pull out a 4-3 victory. After Ward had tied the game with a one-out RBI single, leadoff hitter Braggo Roth\(^20\) won it with a two-out, bases-loaded single off Coveleski, who had relieved Uhle.

The Yankees were still second on July 15, when they beat the Browns, 7-3, in St. Louis, as Ruth hit his 35th home run. The Yankees won their next five to extend their winning streak to nine games, including a 10-1 win over Detroit on July 18 when Ruth hit number 36. The streak culminated in a 7-1 win over the Indians on July 20 that put them in a tie with Cleveland for first place – the first time the Yankees had been in first since May 17. However, they were right back in second the next day when the Indians routed them 17-8 in Cleveland, in a game that featured a total of 16 doubles.

New York remained in second place until August 5, when they beat Detroit, 7-3, at the Polo Grounds, to take a half-game lead over Cleveland. Once again the Yankees dropped to second the very next day, losing to Detroit 9-8, despite Ruth’s 39th home run. A five-game home series followed with the White Sox. After splitting the first four games, the Yankees won the final game on August 10, by a score of 14-8, to move within a half-game of first. The aging Baker had a career day with two home runs and five RBIs.\(^21\)

The following day, August 11, the Yankees beat the Athletics in Philadelphia to tie for first place before once again dropping to second the next day. They remained second until August 24, when they beat the Indians in Cleveland, 3-2, to move a half-game ahead. The power-hitting Yankees won this one with baserunning as Ruth, Meusel, and Pipp all stole second, and New York broke a 2-2 tie in the ninth to win it. Following a familiar pattern, the Yankees were back in second the next day following a 15-1 drubbing at the hands of the Indians. August ended with the Yankees still second, a half-game behind Cleveland.

The pennant race continued into September as the Yankees hosted the Washington Senators. New York swept four games, extending their latest winning streak to six games and taking their largest first-place lead of the season – two games! After beating the Red Sox in Boston on September 5 in the first game of a doubleheader, New York had won seven in a row before losing the nightcap.

The Yankees continued to maintain a slim hold on first place as September unfolded. On September 9 and 10, they routed the Athletics 14-5 and 19-3. On September 15 they swept a doubleheader against the Browns 10-6 and 13-5. Ruth hit number 55 in the first game. Even with these wins, they led by only a half-game. They were tied for first going into their home game against Detroit on September 19, when disaster struck. Leading 4-0 in the eighth inning, the Yankees blew the game, and first place, as starter Mays and relievers Shawkey and Hoyt were shelled for eight runs in the frame. The final score was 10-6 Tigers. The next day’s *New York Times* noted that “on several occasions during the pennant chase now drawing to a finale the
Yankees have been bad, but it is doubtful if they ever suffered a form reversal in a few minutes as that which marked the close of yesterday’s affair in Harlem.”

New York bounced back the next day to beat Detroit 4-2 and again moved into first place by a half-game. In the series finale against Detroit, on September 22, Detroit took a 5-1 lead in the third only to see the Yankees rally to a 12-5 win. Jack Quinn relieved Shawkey in the third inning and pitched brilliantly, shutting out the Tigers on three hits over the remaining 6 2/3 innings. The win left the Yankees tied for first place with Cleveland, at 91-53, with a huge series against the Indians about to start in New York.

Cleveland and New York faced off for four games beginning on September 23, with the pennant on the line. Tickets for the series were in such great demand that “extra police were needed to keep the fans in line [at the Yankees offices on West 42nd Street] and the office force had a busy day trying to keep the pasteboards out of the hands of speculators.” In the Friday opener, Hoyt pitched a complete-game victory as New York scored two in the bottom of the sixth to turn a 2-1 deficit into an eventual 4-2 win. Ruth was 3-for-3 with a walk, including three doubles, giving him 43 two-baggers for the season.

On Saturday Cleveland came right back to tie for first as they routed the Yankees 9-0. Uhle pitched a four-hit complete-game shutout, despite six walks. Harry Harper started for New York and was sent to the showers in the fourth. Shawkey, in relief, did not fare better as Cleveland scored nine runs on only nine hits, taking advantage of eight walks by the two Yankees hurlers. With the teams again tied for first, New York regained the lead on Sunday, September 25, with a resounding 21-7 win. The Yankees had 20 hits and eight walks, as Meusel went 3-for-6 with a home run (his 24th) and five RBIs. Carl Mays was not at his best but pitched a complete game to gain his 26th win.

With the Yankees holding a one-game lead for the pennant and only one week to go in the season, the final game of the series on Monday, September 26, was a critical one, to say the least. In what is considered one of the best games of all time, the Yankees rallied from an early 3-1 deficit and held on for an 8-7 win. Ruth came up big when it counted, going 3-for-3 with two home runs (57 and 58) and four RBIs. For the Babe, “it was doubtful if [he] ever had a bigger day in his major league career than in this game, which meant so much to the Yankees.” Hoyt got the win in relief in a “gripping, nerve-racking battle which did not lose its tenseness until Carl Mays [who came in to close it out] swished a third strike past Steve O’Neill’s bat with two gone in Cleveland’s ninth inning.” The win gave the Yankees a two-game lead over Cleveland with six games to go. While there was “still some fighting to be done,” the Yankees’ “glorious victory” all but “settled the pennant race in their favor,” sending 30,000 fans “home with a lot of repair work for the nerve specialists.”

On September 27 the Yankees were shut out 2-0 by Urban Shocker of St. Louis, who won his 27th game of the year. With their first-place lead cut to 1 1/2 games, New York gained a game back when Shawkey shut out the Athletics 5-0, in Philadelphia, on September 29. New York now held a 2 1/2-game lead over Cleveland with only three games remaining on the Yankees schedule.
Any hope the Indians had of catching the Yankees ended when New York swept a doubleheader on October 1 against the Philadelphia Athletics. The Yankees clinched the pennant by winning the opener, 5-3, as Mays pitched a complete game for his 27th win. The New York Times marked the occasion, reporting that “[t]he long fight of the Yankees for the pennant symbolizing the championship of the American League was ended and won,” that “the outcome settled the abiding place of the cherished gonfalon for the Summer of 1922” and that there was “joy that the game quest of many years had been rewarded at last.” The Times went on to report that “the two Colonels, Jacob Ruppert and T.L. Huston, owners of the Yankees, were compelled to submit, willy-nilly, to a congratulatory reception from their crowding friends … as the Yankees had captured their first pennant and the world’s series of 1921 would have only one stage.”

The second game of the doubleheader turned out to be an “eleven-act comedy that wound up the happy afternoon, with Babe Ruth as chief comedian, and the newly crowned sovereigns of the younger big league finally won the verdict by the score of 7 to 6.” With many of the Yankees regulars getting a rest, New York took a 6-0 lead only to see it disappear in a wild eighth inning. At that point, Ruth “allowed it to be understood that an invitation to pitch would not be regarded as an affront … and was allowed to clamber into the saddle.” With Ruth on the mound, the Athletics “had the Babe where they wanted him” and “shot out a fusillade of ardent drives and tied up the score.” After the disastrous inning, with Ruth yielding all six runs, the Babe settled down and pitched three scoreless innings. He became the winning pitcher when the Yankees won it, 7-6, in the bottom of the 11th.

New York won its final game of the season, on October 2 at home against Boston to finish the season at 98-55. Cleveland finished 94-60, 4½ games behind. The final standings did not do justice to how close the pennant race was throughout the season, as New York’s lead was never greater than two games until September 29.

The 1921 World Series was best of nine, for the last time. It was also a Series of many firsts. The Yankees played in the World Series for the first time; all the games were played at the same site (the Polo Grounds) for the first time; and it was the first Series broadcast on radio.

The Yankees took a 2-0 Series lead, beating the Giants twice by identical 3-0 scores. In Game Two, Ruth stole second and third base but scraped his elbow in the process. The elbow became infected, hampering Ruth’s play, and eventually caused him to miss the last three games.

The Giants tied the Series with 13-5 and 4-2 wins in Games Three and Four. Ruth reinjured his elbow in Game Three and was expected to miss the rest of the Series. In a surprise, he started Game Four and had two hits, including his first World Series home run.

In Game Five, Ruth played with a bandaged arm, as the Yankees won to take a 3-games-to-2 Series lead.

Ruth was out of the lineup in Games Six and Seven when the Giants won both to take a 4-3 Series lead. In Game Eight, Ruth again sat out, before coming up as a pinch-hitter in the bottom of the ninth with the Yankees trailing 1-0. He Ruth grounded out. The Yankees then rallied and
might have tied the game except for a baserunning blunder by Ward that led to the final out, a 1-0 Giants victory, and a World Series championship for the other New York team.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite their World Series loss, the 1921 season will always be remembered as the year the Yankees won the pennant – for the first time – but certainly not the last.

Sources

In addition to the sources cited in the Notes, the author relied on Baseball-Reference.com and Retrosheet.org.

The author also acknowledges Steve Steinberg and Lyle Spatz, authors of \textit{1921: The Yankees, the Giants and the Battle for Baseball Supremacy in New York} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), for their assistance in identifying some of the significant games and highlights of the Yankees’ 1921 season.

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} The 18 titles do not include finishing first in the 1994 season, which was canceled after the players struck. The Yankees also finished first in the AL East in the first half of the 1981 season, when the season was split into two halves due to a players’ strike.
\textsuperscript{2} The nickname Yankees had been occasionally used by sportswriters since the team moved to New York.
\textsuperscript{3} In 1919, his last season with the Red Sox, Ruth hit 29 home runs, the most in a single season at the time.
\textsuperscript{4} The Chicago White Sox finished second, two games behind Cleveland. Cleveland’s AL pennant and its World Series championship was the club’s first. Like the Yankees, Cleveland was one of the eight original American League teams. The team was nicknamed the Blues, Bronchos, and Naps before becoming the Indians in 1915.
\textsuperscript{5} Ruth’s 59 home runs were more than were hit by five of the other seven teams in the American League. The Philadelphia Athletics hit 82 home runs and the St. Louis Browns hit 67. Ruth hit 42 more home runs than the entire Red Sox team. In 1920 his 54 home runs were more than every one of the seven other teams.
\textsuperscript{6} Harry Heilmann of Detroit led at .394. His teammate, Ty Cobb, was second at .389. Ruth’s 59 home runs were 35 more than the second-place finisher, teammate Bob Meusel, who hit 24, as did Ken Williams of the St. Louis Browns.
\textsuperscript{7} Gehrig’s streak was the major-league record for many years until Cal Ripken broke it in 1995. Ripken ended up playing 2,632 consecutive games, the record as of March 2021.
\textsuperscript{8} Baker got the nickname “Home Run” as a result of leading the AL in home runs in four consecutive seasons (1911-1914) playing for the Philadelphia Athletics. Baker’s league-leading home-run totals in those four years were 11, 10, 12, and 9, respectively. “Home Run” seemed like an odd moniker as Ruth began shattering all the home-run records. After joining the Yankees in the 1916 season, Baker never hit more than 10 home runs in a single year before retiring after the 1922 season.
\textsuperscript{9} Hoyt and Shawkey as well as Ruth and Meusel were also on the 1927 Yankees, considered by many to be the greatest team of all time.
\textsuperscript{10} Huggins began his managerial career in 1913 as a player-manager with the St. Louis Cardinals. After managing the Cardinals through the 1917 season, Huggins became the Yankees skipper at the start of the 1918 season. He managed the Yankees in 12 seasons, winning six pennants and three World Series championships. He fell ill during his final season, 1929, and died in September 1929 at the age of 51. Huggins was inducted into the Hall of Fame, as a manager, in 1964.
\textsuperscript{11} Speaker played 22 years in the majors, mostly with the Red Sox and Indians. He was player-manager for the Indians from 1919 through 1926, leading them to the World Series championship in 1920.
Wood was a pitcher for the early part of his career, from 1908-1915, with the Red Sox and in 1917 with the Indians. Beginning in 1918, with Cleveland, Wood became a position player. In 1921 he batted .366 in 194 at-bats, the best average of his career.

Cleveland’s .308 average was only second best in the AL, as were their 925 runs scored. Detroit led the league at .316, despite a sixth-place finish. The Yankees led in runs scored with 948 on the strength of a league-best 134 home runs, 52 more than the next best team (Philadelphia).

Mails was purchased by Cleveland from Sacramento (Pacific Coast League) late in the 1920 season and was 7-0 with a 1.85 ERA.


“Doing Best He Can with What He’s Got.”

“Doing Best He Can with What He’s Got.”

Joe Vila, “Doing Best He Can with What He’s Got.”

Roth, playing right field, was in the last of his eight seasons in the majors, his first with the Yankees. In 1921 he played in 43 games and hit .283.

Baker also hit two home runs on July 14 (with four RBIs). In previous seasons, he hit two home runs in a game three times, including a five-RBI game on June 26, 1914.


No game was played on September 21.


Typical of the era, Mays started 38 games and also relieved in 11, as he led the league with 336 ⅔ innings pitched. He also tied for the league lead with 27 wins and in saves with 7. (Saves were not kept as a statistic in 1921 and his saves were only credited years later after the statistic became part of official baseball records.)

“Great Ruth Leads Yanks to Victory.”

“Great Ruth Leads Yanks to Victory.”

Shocker began his career with the Yankees in 1916 before being traded, prior to the 1918 season, to the Browns. After the 1924 season, Shocker was traded back to the Yankees. The then 34-year-old Shocker became a mainstay of the Yankees rotation including an 18-6 season with the 1927 Yankees, his last full season in the major leagues.

New York was 95-55 at that point. Their September 4 game against Washington was rained out and not made up. As a result, their season was 153 games instead of 154.

According to the Oxford online dictionary, a gonfalon is “a banner or pennant, especially one with streamers, hung from a crossbar.”


“Yankees Are 1921 League Champions.”

“Yankees Are 1921 League Champions.”

“Yankees Are 1921 League Champions.” Ruth started the game in left field before moving to first base in the fourth inning and then to the mound in the eighth.

“Yankees Are 1921 League Champions.”

The Giants victory broke a streak of having lost in their last four World Series appearances (1911, 1912, 1913, and 1917). The 1921 championship was their fourth World Series crown; they had previously won in 1888, 1889, and 1905.