

When we saw them last, the Royals had threatened to emerge as a consistent contender but had fallen back. The Brewers' progress had been much slower, but they appeared to be approaching mediocrity.

The Royals: Years Seven through Nine

Joe Burke was Cedric Tallis's replacement as general manager of the Royals, and Burke largely stood pat with the roster that had underachieved against high expectations in 1974. The only changes were signing an on-his-last-legs Harmon Killebrew to DH and promoting a highly impressive rookie righthander—Dennis Leonard—into the rotation.

The 1975 Royals started well and were in first place in early June, but then they sputtered. In late July they were 50-46, 11 games behind Oakland, and Burke made his first big move: he fired manager Jack McKeon and installed Whitey Herzog as the Kansas City skipper.

Herzog, shall we say, didn't come with a glittering resume. In 1973, in his first major league managerial stint, he hadn't lasted out the season before being fired by the last-place Texas Rangers. Then in '74 he'd spent a few days as the interim manager of the Angels. That was it: 142 games as a major league manager and a record of 49-93.

But whether it was the effect of Herzog's brashness contrasting with the quieter McKeon, or whether it was just coincidence, the 1975 Royals sparked under his command. They won 14 of their first 18 games upon Herzog's arrival, and ended up winning a franchise-record 91 games. They finished second, but it was clear that the Royals had achieved the status of serious contender that they'd been threatening for several years. In the organization's seventh season, Herzog was its fifth manager, but it appeared this one might be a keeper.

In 1976, the Royals' nemesis—those dynastic Oakland A's—began to disintegrate, and the Royals were perfectly poised to take advantage of the opening. The Royals that year took over first place in mid-May and never let it go. They won the division championship in their eighth year of existence, tying the New York Mets for the distinction of quickest achievement of a flag by an expansion franchise. But the Royals' story had followed a very different arc: the Mets had been a laughingstock, a disaster, a pitiful doormat, whose sudden success in their eighth season was stunning, a "miracle." When the Royals won in 1976, no one was stunned; it seemed nothing more or less than the natural, predictable next step along the path they'd been forging since their inception. The '76 Royals were defeated in the ALCS (by the New York Yankees, in a very close, exciting five-game decision), but it was obvious that this team was a new power to be reckoned with.

The Kansas City Royals had been something very close to a perfectly operated expansion franchise. They had made a few mistakes, but only a few, and their list of astoundingly shrewd decisions dwarfed the boo-boos. They had enjoyed some good luck, no doubt, but from their extraordinary eye for young talent on draft day, to the remarkable sequence of buy-low-sell-high trades, to their establishment of a first-rate farm system, the Royals had done everything the right way.

At a point when most expansion teams are hoping to attain respectability, the Royals were facing the challenge of managing excellence. It's the challenge every franchise hopes to face, but it's a challenge nonetheless. Many ball clubs have frittered away opportunities to yield championships from abundant talent.

The Royals took a major step toward meeting the challenge in December of 1976. Burke made a big trade with the Brewers that would prove to be a steal worthy of the best of Tallis; for three undistinguished young talents, none of whom would amount to a whole lot (Jim Wohlford, Jamie Quirk and Bob

McClure), Kansas City received the dependable workhorse pitcher Jim Colborn and the extremely talented young catcher Darrell Porter.

Porter did wonderfully well, much more than filling the last remaining hole in the Royals' lineup, and Colborn came in extremely handy in a starting rotation that needed a replacement for the young star Steve Busby, who'd encountered disastrous arm trouble. The Kansas City ball club coalesced in 1977 into a juggernaut, winning 102 games and running away with their second straight division flag, only to lose a second consecutive exasperatingly close, hard-fought Championship Series to the Yankees.

The Brewers: Years Seven through Nine

Milwaukee had been inching toward respectability in the early 1970s, but their modest progress stalled in 1975 and 1976. Some things continued to go well: George Scott and Don Money remained superior performers (though Money was badgered by minor injuries), and the extraordinarily young Robin Yount settled in as a bona fide everyday shortstop (though his hitting was still awaiting development). Two other impressive farm system products stepped into front-line roles: outfielder Sixto Lezcano and starting pitcher Billy Travers.

But many things didn't go well. Hank Aaron was acquired from the Braves (in exchange for Dave May), and the home run king returned to Milwaukee for a two-year farewell tour as DH, but he hit poorly in the role. Johnny Briggs was pointlessly traded to the Twins in June of 1975 for Bobby Darwin, who wasn't nearly as good. Pedro Garcia, who had looked quite promising as a rookie in 1973, fizzled completely, and second base remained a major hole. Gorman Thomas, a prodigious minor league slugger and a good defensive outfielder, was given repeated opportunities and repeatedly failed to master making contact at the major league level. And Darrell Porter, the power-hitting young catcher, frustrated the Brewers by failing to make progress at improving his batting average through 1975, and then regressed to a miserable .208, five-homer performance in '76.

Jim Baumer, who had taken over as GM from Jim Wilson in late 1974, felt it was time to stir things up in a big way. In November of 1976, in the first big free agent market in history, the Brewers signed Sal Bando, the long-time star third baseman and team captain of the Oakland A's. Then on December 6, 1976, Baumer made two blockbuster trades:

- The Porter and Colborn to Kansas City deal, which we saw above, which brought the Brewers three young second-tier talents.
- George Scott, Milwaukee's marquee talent since 1972, was returned to the Boston Red Sox along with platoon outfielder Bernie Carbo, in exchange for line-drive-hitting first baseman Cecil Cooper.

The results would be mixed. Bando's acquisition moved Money to second base, which weakened the team defensively at two positions, but Bando hit so much better than their previous second basemen that it was still a positive impact. Of the three players netted in the Porter trade, the lefty reliever McClure proved useful, though nothing special, and Wohlford and Quirk both failed to hit, while Porter blossomed in Kansas City into the star they'd hoped he'd become in Milwaukee. Cooper had shown flashes of promise in Boston, but over several years he had never won a full-time job; with the Brewers he was given a regular shot, and he emerged as a star with both the bat and glove.

Overall, 1977 proved to be yet another season of disappointment, as the Brewers went 67-95, the seventh time in nine years of existence that they lost more than 90 games. Owner Bud Selig, longingly observing his expansion-fellow Royals win 102 games and their second consecutive division championship (worse still, with

his gift-wrapped Porter as a major cog), shook things up yet again. He fired Baumer and hired Harry Dalton as the franchise's fifth General Manager.

The Royals: Years 10 through 12

John Mayberry had proven to be an enigma for the Royals. At his best, he was tremendous, one of the very most productive hitters in the major leagues. But he wasn't always at his best, too frequently suffering the effects of indulgence in a hard-partying lifestyle. Herzog finally lost patience, and at his urging, on the eve of Opening Day in 1978, Kansas City unceremoniously dumped Mayberry in a straight cash sale to the Toronto Blue Jays. It was a bold move; the Royals had no serious replacement for Mayberry at first base. But the statement was loud and clear: this organization would accept nothing less than serious effort and commitment. The 1978 Royals survived the loss of Mayberry's power to capture a third straight division title—but lost a third straight ALCS to, yet again, the Yankees.

In 1979, Kansas City encountered pitching difficulties, and their string of division titles was snapped. Herzog was dismissed as manager and replaced by rookie skipper Jim Frey. Under Frey, the team rebounded strongly in 1980. The pitching staff revitalized around tireless new relief ace Dan Quisenberry, the lineup was revitalized by the inclusion of young talents Willie Wilson, U.L. Washington, and Willie Aikens, and the Royals made a shambles of the American League West Division race, running away by 14 games. And in that year's Championship Series—facing the dreaded Yankees for the fourth time—Kansas City finally prevailed, in a three-game sweep, no less. In the third game, at Yankee Stadium, George Brett's gargantuan three-run seventh-inning homer off Goose Gossage, turning a 2-1 deficit into a 4-2 lead, was the culminating climactic moment of the Royals' ascendance.

They lost to the Philadelphia Phillies in that year's World Series, but nonetheless the Royals' achievement in their first dozen years was tremendous, far and away the most impressive of that of any expansion team up to that time. They never finished last, were a winning team in their third season, a serious contender soon following that and a four-time division champ and one-time pennant winner after 12 seasons. The textbook on how to build a baseball team might have been written by Ewing Kauffman's Kansas City Royals.

The Brewers: Years 10 through 12

Dalton had previously enjoyed tremendous success as GM of the Baltimore Orioles from 1966 through 1971 and mixed results with the California Angels since. Immediately upon joining the Angels, he had engineered the spectacularly advantageous Jim Fregosi-for-Nolan Ryan trade, but overall the team had remained mediocre through his tenure.

Upon arriving with the Brewers, Dalton made three major moves. In November of 1977, he signed veteran outfielder Larry Hise as a free agent. In December, he traded longtime workhorse starter Jim Slaton to Detroit for outfielder Ben Oglivie. Then early in the new year, he hired George Bamberger, for many years the Baltimore pitching coach under Earl Weaver, as manager.

Hise had experienced an up-and-down career with the Phillies and Twins. He'd always had very good power and pretty good speed, but for years he had struggled mightily to make consistent contact. But Hise was a very hard worker, and in recent years he had meaningfully reduced his strikeout rate, and at age 30 in 1977 he had enjoyed by far his best all-around season, leading the league in RBIs.

Oglivie was a player with a background interestingly similar to Cecil Cooper's. Like Cooper, Oglivie had come up through the Boston organization, and like Cooper, he was a lanky left-handed line-drive hitter with some power, and still like Cooper, he was in his late 20s and had yet to establish himself as anything more than a good

platoon player. But like Cooper, he would get his chance with Milwaukee and emerge as a star.

Under Bamberger in 1978, the Brewers suddenly broke through, not just as a competitive team, but as an outstanding team, a serious contender: they finished 93-69, ahead of Baltimore and in third place behind only that year's storied Yankees and Red Sox. Everything fell into place at once for the '78 Brewers:

- Hise, splitting his time between DH and the outfield, had a tremendous year and finished third in the league's MVP vote.
- Mike Caldwell, a knockabout 29-year-old soft-tossing southpaw picked up off the scrap heap by the Brewers in mid-1977, suddenly bloomed under Bamberger's tutelage, going 22-9, 2.36 and finishing third in the league's Cy Young Award vote.
- Lary Sorensen, a 22-year-old righthander, displayed tremendous control, and won 18 games and made the All-Star team.
- 27-year-old Gorman Thomas, a failure in several previous trials, banished to the minor leagues and then let go by the Brewers' organization in 1977, was reacquired by Dalton, and finally figured out major league pitching in '78, cracking 32 homers and winning the regular center field job.
- The lineup that had been riddled with holes was suddenly flush with booming bats: Hise and Thomas joined Cooper, Bando, Money, an improving young Lezcano and late-blooming Oglivie, to form a murderer's row that led the major leagues in home runs and runs scored.
- The 22-year-old shortstop Yount continued to improve, hitting .293 with nine triples and nine homers. He was joined in the middle infield by 21-year-old rookie flash Paul Molitor, whose emergence presented Bamberger with the pleasant problem of deciding how to deploy five good infielders in four positions.

After years of languishing in or near the basement, the Brewers had suddenly leapt over the middle of the pack and were an overnight powerhouse. It was no fluke: in 1979 with essentially the same cast (but with Slaton returning, signed as a free agent), and despite Hise being shelved by a rotator cuff injury that would prove to effectively ruin his career, the Brewers were even stronger than before, going 95-66, finishing in second place behind the Orioles, and now ahead of both the Yankees and Red Sox.

In 1980 they would fall back a bit, but Yount was now emerging as a superstar. The foundation was in place for the Milwaukee ball club that would make the postseason in 1981, and win the pennant and make it all the way to the seventh game of the World Series in 1982.

The Brewers were overshadowed by the shining success of their counterpart Royals through the 1970s. But though they struggled for quite a bit longer, Milwaukee's outstanding team that emerged late in the decade was a result of essentially the same formula as Kansas City's: a strong farm system that produced not just a franchise centerpiece (Yount in Milwaukee, George Brett in Kansas City) but a deep cast of good players, who were blended with sound trade acquisitions, "bought low" as young and/or unfulfilled talents. Unlike the Royals, the Brewers were also active in the free agent market; both Bando and Hise were keys to their 1978 breakthrough, though it is the case that the eventual Milwaukee championship team of the early 1980s didn't have many significant free agents on the roster. Despite a precarious start and several setbacks, Bud Selig's early Brewers were a success story.