

'72 Rewind: A New Murderers' Row?

(The Chicago Baseball Museum will pay tribute to Dick Allen and the 1972 White Sox in a June 25 fundraiser at U.S. Cellular Field. We will chronicle the events of that epic season here in the weeks ahead. Sport magazine published this story in its August, 1972 edition.)

By George Vass

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In Chuck Tanner's mind there is no question that he has a new "Murderer's Row" in the making in his White Sox.

"I'm already convinced that this is the most powerful hitting team the Sox have had in their history," said Manager Tanner, "although I don't know if you could call it a 'Murderers' Row' in the old sense.

"But potentially it is a 'Murderers' Row' of a different kind. What I mean by that is that while we have great home run power we also have a balance of fine line-drive hitters, men like Pat Kelly. We have both power and .300 hitting in good balance in our line-up.

"When the phrase Murderers' Row is used it brings to mind the kind of teams in the past that had great home run power, but not necessarily the line-drive hitting, the balance of speed and power that we have."

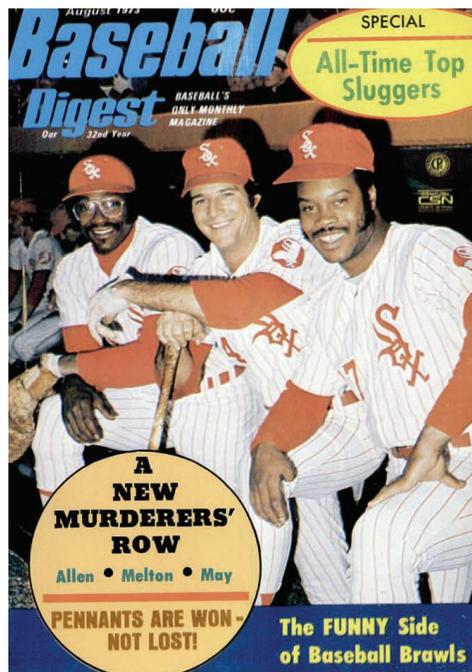
As the Sox amply demonstrated by their early foot this season, led by the bombardment of Bill Melton, Dick Allen, Carlos May, Ed Herrmann, and Ken Henderson, they have the kind of power attributed to legendary clubs of the past.

One thing you have to keep in mind is the big ballpark we play in," Tanner said. "Some of the great power teams of the past benefited from their home fields – that's where they hit the majority of their home runs.

"Clubs that played in New York's Polo Grounds, in Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, in New York's Yankee Stadium, all were helped by short foul lines or moderate power alleys. Like the Brooklyn Dodgers of the early 1950's, when they had Duke Snider, Gil Hodges, Roy Campanella and the rest. The park helped their home run totals.

"The Yankees, although they had great hitters like Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Hank Bauer and Yogi Berra, in the early 1960's, benefited from the short right field line. The Boston Red Sox were helped by the short wall in left.

"We don't have this kind of help in our big ballpark. (White Sox park foul lines are 352



Allen, Melton and May form one of baseball's potent power trios.

feet, distance from to center, 400 feet.) Yet our hitters, like Melton, Allen and May, can hit them at home as well as on the road. The fact we had 30 home runs in our first 36 games, 20 of them at home, shows what I mean.”

A fine example of this is that Allen, who led the American League in home runs with 37 in 1972, hit 20 of them in White Sox Park. The year before AL home run leader Melton also hit most of his 33 at home.

“These two men being able to lead the league in homers although they played in this big ballpark shows what kind of power we have,” Tanner said. “Melton was the first White Sox in 74 years to lead the AL in home runs.

“The fact that no other Sox player was able to do it in the previous 73 years goes to show how hard it really is to hit home runs in this park. It shows what kind of power we have on this team.”

The explosive Sox of 1973 are much stronger than the team that finished the 1972 season by challenging the eventual champion Oakland Athletics almost to the end.

“We've got two men we didn't have last season in Melton and Henderson,” Tanner noted. “Melton should be good from 25 to 35 home runs and Henderson is capable of hitting between 15 and 20. That's added power of maybe 30 to 45 home runs for us this year.”

Melton sat out most of the 1972 season with a back ailment. The Sox acquired center fielder Henderson in a deal for pitcher Tom Bradley from the San Francisco Giants between seasons.

“When we got Henderson that rounded out the ball club,” Tanner said. “Throughout this lineup we have the kind of explosive power that some of the teams of the past used to have.

“When you can bring up guys like Kelly, Andrews, May, Allen, Melton, Herrmann, Rich Reichardt and so on, one after the others, you can break a game up at any time.”

Allen, the AL's most valuable player of 1972 with .308 and 113 RBI in addition to his 37 home runs, went into mid-season of 1973 at a nice pace. Melton immediately showed he had overcome his back problems by staying with the league leaders in RBI and home runs.

Kelly flirted with .350 in the early going and newcomer Henderson, who hit 18 homers for the Giants in 1972, was batting around .300 and providing punch when needed.

“Most of our players are still young men on the way up,” Tanner said. “You can reasonably expect them to do better. May is only 25. Melton at 28 should be reaching the most productive years. He could be another Harmon Killebrew, hit between 35 and 40 home runs a year.

“I don't have to say any more about Dick Allen. He's just the greatest hitter in the league.”

Without question there's a lot of power on this '73 Sox team, whether or not it could be regarded as having a “Murderers' Row” kind of lineup.

After all, when you're talking about "Murderers' Row" you're bringing some formidable statistics and great teams into the picture.

For some reason, not even the powerful Yankee team of 1961 has been considered quite in this category, although it hit 240 home runs, a major league record.

The Yankees of 1961 had six hitters who belted 20 or more homers, led by Maris' 61, with Mantle providing 54. The other 20-home run plus men were Moose Skowron (28), Berra (22) and Elston Howard and John Blanchard (21 each).

In my playing days – and I can speak only of the National League – in the '50's, the most powerful clubs I can recall are the team I played on, the Milwaukee Braves, and the Cincinnati Reds," Tanner added.

"I'd say the Braves of 1955-58 were the most powerful team I ever saw, with Hank Aaron, Joe Adcock and Eddie Mathews coming up one after the other. And the Cincinnati Reds of those days, when they had Ted Kluszewski, Wally Post, Gus Bell and Smoky Burgess, were close.

"But I'd have to pick those Braves as the hardest-hitting I ever saw. They were limited by the ballpark, which helped the Reds at home. They were just as dangerous on the road as in their own park."

The Braves of '56 did have a formidable mid-section in the lineup. Here are the figures for the top three sluggers:

Joe Adcock 38 HR, 103 RBI, .291 BA
Hank Aaron 26 HR, 92 RBI, .328 BA
Ed Mathews 37 HR 95 RBI, .272 BA

Every fan no doubt has his own favorite power team of the last couple of decades or so. Boston fans would point to the 1950 Red Sox, who hit .302 as a team and didn't have a man in the lineup under .295.

San Francisco Giant followers would recall the 1961-64 club, which had as its heart Willie Mays, Willie McCovey and Orlando Cepeda. The figures for 1963 of this big three:

Orlando Cepeda 34 HR, 97 RBI, .316 BA
Willie Mays 38 HR, 103 RBI, .314
Willie McCovey 44 HR, 102 RBI, .280

Actually, you could skip around and find quite a few teams with this sort of mid-lineup punch at various periods.

But when the talk gets around to "Murderers' Row" it goes beyond a strong three or four batters in the mid-section of a lineup. The term even goes beyond such a strong up-and-down lineup as the Red Sox of 1949 (when Vern Stephens and Ted Williams each drove in 159 runs) or 1950 had.

It may not even take in the 1947 New York Giants, who hit 221 home runs, a total matched by the Reds in 1956 and standing second only to the Yankee total of 240 in 1961.

In our view, “Murderers' Row” refers to baseball's greatest hitting teams which were winners. They could hit at home, they could hit on the road and they could hit almost at any time against almost any pitcher. They were the best.

Being selective, here's our list of the five teams that figure as having the credentials to be referred to as “Murderers' Row” lineups:

- 1927-28 New York Yankees
- 1929-30 Philadelphia Athletics
- 1929-30 Chicago Cubs
- 1938 New York Yankees
- 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers

The term “Murderers' Row,” surprisingly, existed even before the great Yankee team of 1927. It was applied first to the Yankees shortly after Babe Ruth joined the club in 1920 and referred to the heart of the lineup: Ruth, Home Run Baker, Wally Pipp and Bob Meusel.

But it was 1927 that gave the label its greatest currency and its inseparable connection with the team. That was the year when almost every man in the formidable lineup chose to have his greatest season.

And the 1927 Yankees are widely recognized as the greatest of all baseball teams. A poll of newspapermen in 1944 and one a quarter of a century later got the same result: The Yankees of 1927 were voted the best ever.

Those Yanks won 100 games and finished 19 games ahead of the second place Athletics. Other teams have done about as well but the key to recognition of the Yankees' greatness, which continued in 1928, can be found best by putting down the lineup and statistics:

Earl Combs, cf 6 HR, 64RBI, .356 BA
Mark Koenig, ss 3 HR, 62 RBI, .285 BA
Babe Ruth, rf 60 HR, 164 RBI, .356 BA
Lou Gehrig, 1b 47 HR, 175 RBI, .373 BA
Bob Meusel, lf 8 HR, 103 RBI, .337 BA
Tony Lazzeri, 2b 18 HR, 102 RBI, .309 BA
Joe Dugan, 3b 2 HR, 43 RBI, .269 BA
Pat Collins, c 7 HR, 36 RBI, .271 BA

As a team the Yankees batted .307, which has been surpassed. So has their team total of 158 home runs. But you have to consider them in their time and also think of the tremendous impact on pitchers of having to face Combs, Koenig, Ruth, Gehrig, Meusel and Lazzeri in order.

Here came six men to the plate, five of them hitting over .300, three of those .350 or better. Here were four men in a row with 100 RBI or better. Here came a total home run output that represented one-third of those hit in the entire league in 1927.

And here came Ruth and Gehrig, year after year the best one-two punch in baseball history.

Yet this “Murderers' Row” didn't remain unchallenged long, despite its successes in 1927 and 1928, when the Yankees demolished Pittsburgh and St. Louis in successive World Series.

Connie Mack built up a powerhouse team in Philadelphia that was not far from equaling the Yankees as the all-time great club.

In fact, Jimmy Dykes, third baseman of those A's and later manager of the Chicago White Sox and other teams, has been bold enough to think Mack's 1927-30 teams had an edge over the 1927-28 Yanks.

Dykes admits the Yanks were great but think his A's “shaded” them. With all credit to Ruth, Gehrig and the rest, he asserts that the A's hit as well as the Yanks – in some respects better – and gave his team an edge in fielding.

Here's the 1929 Athletic lineup:

Max Bishop, 2b 3 HR, 36 RBI, .232 BA
Mule Haas, cf 16 HR, 82 RBI, .313 BA
Mickey Cochrane, c 7 HR, 95 RBI, .331 BA
Al Simmons, lf 34 HR, 157 RBI, .365 BA
Jimmy Foxx, 1b 33 HR, 117 RBI, .354 BA
Bing Miller, rf 8 HR, 93 RBI, .335 BA
Jimmy Dykes, 3b 13 HR, 79 RBI, .327 BA
Joe Boley, ss 2 HR, 47 RBI, .251 BA

A glance at the lineup shows that the A's, while not up there with the Yankees of 1927 in home run punch, fare well in comparing batting averages.

As Dykes pointed out: “Six of us batted over .300 – one more than the five Yankees. We may not have had the home run power they had but we could take charge of most games on our hitting alone.”

Dykes may be prejudiced but he firmly says “When I'm asked what was the greatest ball club I've ever seen I reply, 'The champion Athletics of 1929.'”

Like the Yankees of 1927, the A's had a “Murderers' Row,” with every man from the second batter through the seventh hitting over .300, and solid power throughout.

The 1929 Cubs, who lost the World Series to the A's, also are deserving of having their lineup rated as a “Murders' Row.” Without an in-depth look as at the A's and Yanks, there are some figures to back up that assertion.

Rogers Hornsby batted .380, hit 40 HR and had 149 RBI for the 1929 Cubs. Hack Wilson batted .345, with 39 HR and 159 RBI. Riggs Stephenson batted .362, Kiki Cuyler .360 and Cliff Heathcote .313.

Of course, it must be pointed out that this period was the most inflated hitting stretch in baseball history. If you didn't hit .320 as an outfielder you didn't belong in the lineup -- or even in the league.

Yet the figures do impress, and the balls did fly out of the parks all the same.

The fourth “Murderers' Row” we've mentioned is that of the Yankees of 1938, Gehrig's

last full year as a player. The Yankee lineup of that year ran like this:

Frank Crosetti, ss 9 HR, 55 RBI, .263 BA
Red Rolfe, 3b 10 HR, 80 RBI, .311 BA
Tommy Henrich, rf 22 HR, 91 RBI, .270 BA
Joe DiMaggio, cf 32 HR, 140 RBI, .324 BA
Lou Gehrig, 1b 29 HR, 114 RBI, .295 BA
Bill Dickey, c 27 HR, 115 RBI, .313 BA
George Selkirk, lf 10 HR, 62 RBI, .254 BA
Joe Gordon, 2b 25 HR, 97 RBI, .255 BA

The above lineup, with Rolfe, Henrich, DiMaggio, Gehrig and Dickey at the heart of it, is representative of the Yankees' great power of the 1930's when they won pennants in four consecutive seasons, 1936-39.

Some of the same ingredients, particularly DiMaggio, Henrich and Dickey, figured in later pennants, with such added ingredients as Charlie Keller and Johnny Lindell continuing the power output.

In the postwar era, particularly the early 1950's, the Dodgers were the most successful National League power team, the "Murderers' Row" of their day.

The most unsuccessful "Murderers' Row" was that of the Giants of 1947, the first team to hit 221 home runs. Just for the record, here's how the Giants accumulated most those home runs on their way to fourth place:

John Mize (51), Willard Marshall (36), Walker Cooper (35), Bobby Thomson (29), Bill Rigney (17), Sid Gordon (13) and Lucky Lohrke (11) put many a pitcher through their mental agony.

The Dodgers of the early '50's could never match those figures and did not succeed in winning the World Series until their last try in Brooklyn in 1955. And their lineup, called the greatest of all by Branch Rickey, who developed most of the players, is worth recording.

Here's how the 1955 Dodgers came to the plate:

Pee Wee Reese, ss 10 HR, 61 RBI, .282 BA
Junior Gilliam, 2b 7 HR, 40 RBI, .249 BA
Duke Snider, cf 42 HR, 136 RBI, .309 BA
Jackie Robinson, 3b 8 HR, 36 RBI, .256 BA
Gil Hodges, 1b 27 HR, 102 RBI, .289 BA
Roy Campanella, c 32 HR, 107 RBI, .318 BA
Carl Furillo, rf 26 HR, 95 RBI, .314 BA
Sandy Amoros, lf 10 HR, 51 RBI, .247 BA

Obviously, this was one of Robinson's off-years, as he was hampered by injuries, but there's no doubt that the heart of this lineup was murder on pitchers. Much the same team had won pennants in 1949, 1952-53 and 1956.

As Tanner noted, this team benefited greatly from the small dimensions of Ebbets Field. But it was a "Murderers' Row" all the same and will be cherished as such by baseball fans as long as memory lasts of one of the great teams of all time.

There are many other teams, as we have indicated, who could boast of having had formidable batting orders.

Yet when it comes to labeling these "Murderers' Row," we'll limit our choices to the five teams we've listed in the foregoing.

After all, they were winners and that's what really counts.

Tanner's White Sox may be on a par with them but we can't be sure until they've hung up a pennant or two.