

Ninety Feet Away

The Story of the 2014 Kansas City Royals



Kent Krause

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by

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For Dad and Mom,

who took me to my first Royals game on June 21, 1976

Other books by Kent Krause:

The All-American King

Men Among Giants

Behind in the Count

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Chapter 1

“We’re Back”

He stood alone atop the mound. The surrounding roar amplified into a deafening crescendo that shook the ground beneath his cleats. As ace of the staff, he was the obvious choice to start. Who better to handle the pressure than the man they called Big Game James? Years earlier he had won a World Series game. None of the other starters in the rotation had faced even a single batter in the playoffs. Eight of his nine teammates in the lineup had similarly never experienced postseason action. For them, this was their big game—the biggest game of their careers. After five tense innings, Kansas City nursed a one-run lead over Oakland. It was the 2014 American League Wild Card Game. The winners would advance, the losers would go home. Their season over, with nary a meaningful at-bat in six long months.

Big Game James—aka James Shields—finished his warmup tosses before the sixth inning. A’s outfielder Sam Fuld stepped to the plate. Energy pulsed through Kauffman Stadium—more than 40,000 long-suffering fans yelled their support for a team that had not reached the postseason since 1985. The near three-decade span of futility marked the longest playoff drought of any team in the four major American sports.

More than half the Kansas City players had not been born when the Royals last appeared in the postseason. Ronald Reagan occupied the White House. Bill Cosby and J.R. Ewing dominated TV ratings. People listened to music on cassette tapes and vinyl records. The Soviet Union existed. The Internet did not. And phones were not so smart. Spectators taking pictures of the last Royals postseason game did so with cameras that used film rolls that had to be developed—a process that could take hours or even days.

Shields had yielded two runs in the first. Since then, he had cruised along with four shutout innings. The sixth started promisingly for the Kansas City ace when he shattered Fuld’s bat with an inside fastball. The resulting blooper, however, dropped into shallow right for a single.

Next up was Josh Donaldson, Oakland’s power-hitting third baseman. The batter worked the count full, before taking ball four on a fastball that just missed the outside corner. The A’s had runners at first and second with nobody out.

Up in the stands, TBS field reporter Matt Winer interviewed an 87-year-old Kansas City fan named Rich Burstein. A Royals season ticket holder since the team’s inception in 1969, Burstein maintained that he knew this day was coming—his

confidence not wavering, despite a playoff drought that had spanned one-third of his life. When Winer asked what this day meant for the fans in the stadium, Burstein replied, “*This game ... it’s just the reemergence of the Royals. We’re back.*”

On the field, meanwhile, Kansas City manager Ned Yost made a critical decision. He removed Big Game James, even though his ace had thrown only 88 pitches. Now tasked with holding the 3-2 lead was Yordano Ventura, a flame-throwing 23-year-old rookie starter who had made just one relief appearance during the season. This pitching change would be the most scrutinized move of the game. Why didn’t Yost bring in a southpaw like Danny Duffy or Brandon Finnegan to face the lefty slugger Brandon Moss? Or why not turn to Kelvin Herrera, a fireballing reliever with a 1.41 ERA who specialized in these situations?

The manager had made his decision. Ventura would face Moss, who had crushed a two-run homer off Shields in the first. Though unorthodox, the move offered a reasonable chance for success. Moss had slumped badly in the second half of the season. After August 1st, he had hit just two home runs during a two-month decline that dropped his average to .234. He got lucky once in this game, but surely not again.

Ventura quickly fell behind with two balls. He fired in his third pitch—Moss connected with a mighty swing, launching the fastball over the centerfield wall. When the 432-foot blast landed, the Royals’ one-run lead had become a 5-3 deficit. Stunned silence blanketed Kauffman Stadium. The tide had turned.

The next batter, Josh Reddick, lined a single off Ventura. A wild pitch from the rattled hurler sent the runner to second. He moved to third on a sacrifice fly from Jed Lowrie.

Yost trudged to the mound amid a chorus of boos. He took the ball from Ventura and summoned Herrera from the bullpen. Inheriting a difficult situation, the reliever got a huge out by inducing a pop up from Stephen Vogt. With two down, Kansas City could escape with no further damage. Derek Norris, batting next, had other ideas. He singled to drive in Reddick. Two more hits followed to plate the fifth tally of the inning. When the disastrous frame finally ended, the Royals trailed 7-3.

With Kansas City now headed for certain defeat and a quick exit from the postseason, the fans rendered their judgment on who was to blame for this debacle. Yost! With just 12 outs left in the Royals’ season, questions about the future already started to materialize. At the top of the list for KC: would their much-maligned skipper survive to manage another year?

WATER OFF A DUCK’S BACK

Thirty-four years earlier Ned Yost debuted as a catcher for Milwaukee in 1980, the same season Royals legend George Brett flirted with .400. The Brewers acquisition of slugging backstop Ted Simmons the following year ensured that Yost would watch most of his team’s games from the bench. When Milwaukee reached the 1982 World Series, Yost had one plate appearance—a walk.

In 1983 the Brewers increasingly used Simmons as a designated hitter, allowing Yost more opportunities behind the plate. He caught 61 games for the Crew, but hit just .224. That offseason Milwaukee traded him to Texas for Jim Sundberg. Yost batted .182 for the Rangers, who released him after one season. He signed as a free

agent with Montreal in April 1985, but played just five games for the Expos. At age 30, Ned Yost's playing days had ended.

In 1991 Atlanta Braves manager Bobby Cox hired Yost as his bullpen coach. It was a good time to be in Atlanta. During his twelve years coaching for Cox, the Braves reached the World Series five times, including a world championship in 1995.

Following the 2002 season, Milwaukee offered Yost a chance to manage at the big league level. Though a great opportunity for the 47-year-old, the job presented a daunting challenge. The Brewers had finished the previous year with an abysmal 56-106 record—the franchise's tenth consecutive losing season.

Yost looked to be the right man for the job. Not only did he bring a wealth of baseball knowledge from his time with Cox, he had also learned about winning and determination from his longtime friend Dale Earnhardt. When he started managing the Brewers, Yost wore Number 3 as a tribute to the late NASCAR legend. Though it didn't happen overnight, the new skipper righted the ship in Milwaukee. In Yost's third season the Brewers finished 81-81, avoiding a losing record for the first time in 13 years. In 2007 the Crew raced out to an eight-and-a-half-game lead in National League Central. Led by young sluggers Prince Fielder and Ryan Braun, Yost's team brought excitement back to a city that had been lacking in baseball enthusiasm since the early 1990s.

The Brewers, however, faltered in the stretch run. A brutal September allowed the Chicago Cubs to vault ahead, capturing the division by two games. Yost was ejected from four games during the last month, raising questions about whether his combative temperament was hurting the team. Despite the Brewers' recent success, their manager had never gained widespread favor with fans in Wisconsin. Sometimes bristly and defensive in interviews, Yost gained a reputation as an inflexible decision-maker with questionable judgment.

The following season, Milwaukee again surged in the standings, seemingly headed for a playoff spot. But another September swoon threatened to drop the Crew out of the race. Desperate to avoid a second consecutive stretch-run collapse, Milwaukee fired Yost with twelve games left in the season. The team held on to capture the NL Wild Card. Yost retreated to his home in Georgia.

No longer interested in the pennant race, the beleaguered ex-manager did not watch baseball after his firing. Yost instead built feeders for his 700-acre farm and went hunting with his sons and comedian Jeff Foxworthy.

Yost's exile from baseball would not last long. Just a season later, Kansas City general manager Dayton Moore convinced him to accept a consulting position with the Royals. When the team stumbled through the first five weeks of the 2010 season with a 12-23 record, Moore fired skipper Trey Hillman and named Yost the new manager of the Kansas City Royals.

Sailing would not be smooth. As with the Brewers years earlier, he inherited a team with dismal prospects for success. Kansas City had not posted a winning record since 2003. Yost's arrival would not alter this trend—not right away. The team went 55-72 after his hiring to finish 28 games below .500.

More of the same followed in 2011 and 2012 as the Royals continued to hit 90 in the loss column. But in 2013, Yost led the team to a promising 86-76 record. Once again, he had piloted a moribund franchise out of the depths of the second division.

While Royals Nation certainly appreciated this upturn in fortunes, they did not shower the manager with accolades. His popularity still paled in comparison with earlier KC skippers Whitey Herzog and Dick Howser.

Even as the team marched to a postseason berth in 2014, fans found much to criticize in Yost's managing style. His handling of pitchers, especially relievers, often defied conventional logic. His affinity for sacrifice bunts seemed outdated and counterproductive in the 21st century game. The manager's head-scratching moves even resulted in the word *yosted* becoming a social media term for poor decision making. While it could be debated whether his surname deserved such an honor, Yost did buck baseball zeitgeist with his persisting preference for "small ball" tactics. Prevailing dugout wisdom instead favored the statistic-driven sabermetric approaches employed by Oakland GM Billy Beane and popularized in the Michael Lewis bestseller, *Moneyball*. In the film adaptation of the book, Brad Pitt played Beane. If a film were made about the Royals, who would play Yost? According to Paul Sullivan of the *Chicago Tribune*, the role would go to Steve Carell for his mastery at portraying bumbling idiots.

Yost's own comments sometimes added to his strained relationship with fans. He ruffled feathers during the season by complaining about low attendance at Royals home games. He even admitted a preference for managing on the road due to the increased pressure of trying to please the fans at home. Nonetheless, Yost maintained the favor of Kansas City's front office. Dayton Moore appreciated his manager's competitive nature, describing Yost as "an incredible leader and very passionate."

In 2014 Yost defied his inflexible reputation by applying some of the lessons learned from his many years in the dugout. One of which was to loosen the reins on his players. "They play hard for each other," the manager said. "Just letting them be themselves. It was a big lesson I learned." His team appreciated the new hands-off style of allowing players greater autonomy. First baseman Eric Hosmer voiced this approval of the new Yost. "He's changed along with the players, and we all really respect and appreciate that."

Indeed, Yost's players remained his staunchest defenders. Taking issue with the many criticisms of his manager, pitcher Wade Davis pointed out, "A lot more of his decisions turn out to be right than wrong." Danny Duffy added that Yost "always has your back, always." Catcher Salvador Perez concurred: "He loves us like we were his own children, and you want to play hard for someone like that."

But did the criticism and lack of respect in the sports pages and blogs ever bother Yost? Described by Moore as "thick-skinned," the manager maintained that it did not. Commenting on his status as a punching bag, Yost said, "When people boo me or say bad things about me, it's just water off a duck's back."

A SEASON SLIPPING AWAY

While the boos raining down on him in the sixth inning of the Wild Card Game may not have bothered Yost, the score certainly did. His Royals trailed 7-3 against Oakland's Jon Lester, a top-of-the-rotation ace who thrived in the postseason. Billy Beane had traded away one of baseball's best young sluggers, Yoenis Cespedes, to acquire Lester in a midseason deal with Boston. Given Lester's 4-1 record the

previous postseason for the Red Sox, including two wins in the World Series, Oakland appeared to have the right man on the mound for this “win-or-go-home” contest. Especially considering that Lester had owned the Royals, shackling them with a 1.84 ERA in 13 career starts against Kansas City.

Lester sent the Royals down in order in the bottom of the sixth. Kansas City managed a bunt single in the seventh, but again did not score. Oakland maintained its four-run lead and now needed just six outs to finish off the home team. At this point in the game, the A’s win probability stood at 96%.

Alcides Escobar led off the bottom of the eighth. The Royals infielder sent a chopper up the middle that barely eluded the glove of Oakland shortstop Jed Lowrie for a base hit. With the next batter, Nori Aoki, at the plate, Escobar stole second. Devotees of sabermetrics frown upon sending runners in such situations. The risk is too great. If Escobar had been caught, the Royals would have squandered what little opportunity they had to get back in this game. According to modern statistical experts, teams should attempt fewer steals.

Ned Yost’s Royals led the majors with 153 stolen bases in the regular season.

Aoki hit a sharp grounder to second. Though Oakland retired Aoki at first, the runner advanced to third. Escobar’s theft had saved his team from a double play, but now the Royals teetered only five outs from elimination.

Kansas City centerfielder Lorenzo Cain stepped into the batter’s box to face Lester. The situation remained dire. But as they did in 1985, Royals fans refused to surrender even when their heroes faced near-hopeless circumstances on the field. With Kansas City’s season slipping away, the crowd at Kauffman Stadium broke into a familiar rallying cry: “Let’s go Royals ... Let’s go Royals ...”

Chapter 2

Glory Seasons

Even if Yost's boys fell in the AL Wild Card Game, as it seemed certain they would do, the 2014 Royals had already made history. As Rich Burstein pointed out, just by claiming a Wild Card spot the team had revived a rich baseball tradition in Kansas City.

Major league baseball in KC dated back to the nineteenth century when the city fielded teams that played in the Union Association, the American Association, and the National League. While these clubs had little success during their brief existences, the 1889 Kansas City Cowboys did feature a future Hall of Famer in "Sliding" Billy Hamilton, whose 914 career stolen bases would stand as the MLB record for eight decades.

KC sports fans went without big league baseball from 1890 until 1914, when the Federal League emerged to challenge the two major leagues of Organized Baseball. The Kansas City Packers struggled during their first season, but rebounded in 1915 to finish in fourth place with an 81-72 record. The Federal League folded after just its second season, however, leaving Kansas City again without a major league team.

The 1920s marked a baseball renaissance in Kansas City with the establishment of a Negro League franchise in town. Founded by sports executive J.L. Wilkinson, the Kansas City Monarchs won the first Negro League World Series in 1924. The team won eleven league championships in the span of three decades. Pitcher Satchel Paige became the Monarch's top draw in the 1940s, helping Kansas City prevail in the 1942 Negro League World Series over the Homestead Grays. Jackie Robinson, Ernie Banks, Cool Papa Bell, and Buck O'Neil were among the many star players who wore a Monarchs uniform.

The return of major league baseball to Kansas City in the 1950s marked the end of the Monarchs' run as the city's top diamond attraction. In 1955 industrialist Arnold Johnson moved his newly-acquired Philadelphia Athletics franchise to Kansas City. Enthusiasm for baseball swelled in the region, with the team drawing nearly 1.4 million spectators during its first season—a total the Athletics had never approached in Philly.

The Kansas City Athletics won their 1955 home opener over Detroit by a score of 6-2. After that, things went downhill for pretty much the next thirteen seasons. The Athletics routinely lost 90-plus games and never finished higher than sixth place. The franchise became best known as an unofficial farm team of the New York Yankees.

Roger Maris, Ralph Terry, Ryne Duren, Enos Slaughter, and Bobby Shantz were among the Athletics sent east to help the Bronx Bombers remain atop the American League.

Team fortunes somehow worsened after Charley O. Finley acquired the franchise in 1960. Though he livened up the uniforms to Kelly green and bright gold, the new owner ruled with a heavy hand, frequently berating his players and managers in public. To draw fans Finley employed several outside-the-box gimmicks, such as a sheep herd grazing beyond the outfield wall, a mule mascot named Charlie O, and a mechanical rabbit that popped out of the ground to present baseballs to the umpire. Perhaps the best promotion came in 1965 when 59-year-old mound legend Satchel Paige appeared in a game for the Athletics. Pitching three scoreless innings, Paige became the oldest player ever to compete in a major league baseball game.

Despite Finley's unconventional ideas, the losing continued and attendance dwindled. After the 1967 season, Finley gained permission from the league to move his team to Oakland. Missouri U.S. Senator Stuart Symington summarized the views of many Kansas Citians when he called Finley "one of the most disreputable characters ever to enter the American sports scene."

BUILDING A CONTENDER

Though not heartbroken to see Finley's A's depart, Kansas City fans, including Symington, refused to accept the absence of big league baseball from their town. Motivated by the senator's threats to instigate congressional action against baseball's antitrust exemption, American League officials moved quickly to return baseball to KC. In 1969 MLB would place expansion franchises in Kansas City and Seattle. The American League accepted the bid of pharmaceutical giant Ewing Kauffman to become the new owner of the Kansas City team, nicknamed the Royals as a nod to the American Royal livestock show held in the city since 1899.

In one of his first moves, Kauffman hired Cedric Tallis as the team's general manager. A longtime executive for the Los Angeles Angels, Tallis brought two decades of front office experience to the Royals. Kauffman's choice turned out to be a gift that would keep on giving for many years.

Similar to the Monarchs and Athletics, the new franchise played its home games at Municipal Stadium at East 22nd Street and Brooklyn Avenue. The Royals won their first game in a come-from-behind twelve-inning victory over Minnesota. But, as expansion teams tend to do, the 1969 Royals lost much more than they won. Lou Piniella captured the Rookie of the Year Award, but the team dropped 93 games under manager Joe Gordon.

Following a dismal sophomore season, the Royals surprised the baseball world by posting an 85-76 record in 1971. In only its third year in existence, Kauffman's team had already logged the winningest major league campaign in Kansas City's history. Regression set in the next season, unfortunately, resulting in another losing record. Kauffman responded by sacking popular manager Bob Lemon and replacing him with Jack McKeon.

The 1973 season brought the excitement of a new home—Royals Stadium at the Harry S. Truman Sports Complex. The beautiful ballpark featured a twelve-story

“crown” scoreboard and multicolored fountains in the outfield. This state-of-the-art venue helped draw a franchise record 1,345,341 fans that year. The team responded with its best campaign to date: 88 wins and a second-place finish in the American League West.

Throughout these early years, Tallis engineered a series of one-sided trades to bolster the Kansas City roster. Among the future stars netted in these shrewd deals were Amos Otis, Cookie Rojas, Freddie Patek, John Mayberry, and Hal McRae. In addition to Tallis’s annual plundering of opposing rosters, the team established a baseball academy to find and develop new talent. This controversial brainchild of Kauffman lasted only five years, but delivered to the parent club perennial Gold Glove winner Frank White and U.L. Washington.

Despite an impressive assemblage of talent, the 1974 Royals dropped to fifth in the standings. Dissension festered within the organization. Kauffman fired his star GM Tallis. When the team struggled in the first half of the 1975 season, Kauffman lowered the axe on his manager too. To replace McKeon, the Royals hired Whitey Herzog, a former Texas manager who had once played infield for the Kansas City Athletics. The new skipper rallied the team to a 41-25 finish to close within seven games of the A’s for the division title. Despite the early-season turmoil, at 91-71 Kansas City had recorded its most successful season to date.

Herzog arrived in town at an opportune time. The team’s farm system, much blessed by the work of Art Stewart and other keen-eyed scouts, was yielding a crop of talented players. Ace right-hander Steve Busby won 56 games from 1973 to 1975, tossing two no-hitters in that span. Paul Splitteroff and Dennis Leonard had also emerged in the Kansas City rotation. Frank White was showing promise as a middle infielder and the team had a kid at third base with some potential.

Drafted as a shortstop in 1971, George Brett steadily advanced through the Royals farm system. In 1973 he batted .284 in Omaha with 117 RBI. Winning the third baseman job for Kansas City the following year, Brett became a devoted student of team hitting instructor Charlie Lau. Rigorously applying Lau’s precepts, Brett led the AL in hits in 1975, just his second full season in the majors. Emulating teammate Hal McRae’s aggressive baserunning, Brett also tied for the lead in triples. And Number 5 was just getting started.

YEARS OF TRIUMPH AND HEARTBREAK

After six years of savvy trades and visionary draft picks, Kansas City boasted one of the most talented rosters in baseball. With the addition of Whitey Herzog’s baseball knowledge and competitive spirit, many predicted the Royals would soar to new heights in 1976. Standing in their way, however, were the Oakland A’s. Since leaving Kansas City, Charlie Finley’s team had won three World Series and five straight AL West titles. To Kansas City fans, baseball had no larger villain than Finley.

Following a slow start in April, the Royals caught fire in May, winning 16 out of 19 to grab the division lead. Kansas City built its cushion over Oakland to a comfortable 12 games by early August. But the A’s chipped away at the lead, aided by a disastrous stretch in which Kansas City lost nine of ten. On September 28th, the Royals’ division lead had shriveled to two and a half games. And the team had one

more showdown in Oakland. Having lost Busby to injury earlier that summer, Herzog sent the unheralded Larry Gura to the mound. The southpaw reliever had started only one game the entire season. Brett and his teammates wondered if their skipper had lost his mind.

With legions of fans across the Heartland hanging on the play-by-play descriptions from Royals radio announcers Fred White and Denny Matthews, Gura pitched a crucial four-hit shutout to lower the team's magic number to one. Two nights later the A's lost at California, giving Kansas City its first AL West title. The Royals were headed to the playoffs.

Awaiting Kansas City in the American League Championship Series were the New York Yankees, led by fiery manager Billy Martin. After dominating baseball by winning 20 world championships and 29 pennants from 1921 to 1964, the Bronx Bombers had hit a dry spell. The team had not reached the postseason in twelve years. The glory days of Ruth, DiMaggio and Mantle seemed like ancient history to Yankee fans starved for a pennant.

The ALCS opened at Royals Stadium. Aided by two Brett errors, the Yankees scored twice in the first inning of Game 1. The Royals never recovered, eventually losing 4-1. Making matters worse, Amos Otis suffered an ankle injury that ended the star centerfielder's season. Despite this setback, Kansas City evened the series by capturing Game 2. The pattern continued in New York with the Yankees winning Game 3 and the Royals taking Game 4.

In the pennant-deciding contest, John Mayberry put the Royals up early with a two-run homer in the top of the first. The Yankees quickly tied it and pulled ahead with two scores in the third. After seven innings, New York had increased its lead to 6-3. The Royals season appeared to be over. But with one dramatic swing, Brett clubbed a three-run homer in the eighth to tie the game.

As the Bronx crowd fell silent, elation and renewed hope swept through the multitude of Royals fans watching the action on television or listening on their radios. Sadly, this joy would prove ephemeral. Chris Chambliss led off the Yankee ninth with a drive that barely cleared the right field wall. New York advanced to the World Series, while Kansas City slunk home with a gut-wrenching loss.

The Royals entered 1977 with a loaded roster and unprecedented confidence. After losing the pennant by one run the previous October, the players were determined to break through. Two months into the season, however, the team languished below .500. By mid-June, the Royals fell seven games behind in the division. Then, as the summer got hotter, so too did the Royals. An eight-game July winning streak pulled KC within two games of the division lead. In August the Royals reeled off ten straight wins to vault to the top of the AL West. And Whitey's boys were not finished. Like Secretariat at the Belmont Stakes, the Royals accelerated in the stretch run—winning an astonishing 24 of 25 games—to easily claim the division. The historic string of wins propelled Kansas City to a 102-60 record, a franchise mark that still stands.

Though he later won three NL pennants with the Cardinals, Whitey Herzog called the 1977 Royals the best team he ever managed. Indeed, the Royals had hitting: six players drove in more than 75 runs, including 112 RBI from Al Cowens; the Royals had power: four players hit 20-plus home runs; the Royals had speed: six players

reached double digits in stolen bases, paced by Freddie Patek's league-leading 53. And finally, the Royals had pitching: Dennis Leonard led the starters with 20 wins and 244 strikeouts. Jim Colborn won 18 games, including a no-hitter. Paul Splittorff topped the AL in winning percentage with a 16-6 mark.

Again facing New York in the playoffs, Kansas City took two of the first three games. Needing to win just one of the next two contests, both at Royals Stadium, Whitey's boys had the pennant within their grasp. But in Game 4, first baseman John Mayberry showed up in a daze after partying late with relatives the night before. He dropped two throws and a foul pop, and twice struck out. Herzog replaced him in the fifth with John Wathan, but Kansas City could not overcome Mickey Rivers's four hits and Sparky Lyle's five-plus scoreless relief innings. New York prevailed 6-4.

Taking the hill for the decisive Game 5, Splittorff allowed only one run through seven innings. The Royals led 3-2 heading into the ninth. Needing just three outs for the pennant, Herzog called on Leonard to preserve the one-run lead. Given that the right-hander had thrown a complete game only two days earlier, and had made just one relief appearance that season, this move would provoke an avalanche of second-guessing.

Yankee outfielder Paul Blair fell behind in the count 1-2, before looping a single into center. And so began the worst nightmare inning in Royals history. A walk put runners at first and second. Gura replaced Leonard and surrendered a single to Mickey Rivers that drove in the tying run. With the season slipping away, Herzog summoned Mark Littell, who allowed a sacrifice fly that put New York ahead. A throwing error by Brett gave the Yankees another run. The Royals dominating season ended with a crushing 5-3 defeat.

Hal McRae considered the playoff loss his biggest disappointment in baseball. His teammates concurred. "It was the worst defeat ever for me," said Frank White, "and I'm talking about every game I'd played since Little League." Calling the 1977 team the best in franchise history, Brett expressed similar feelings. "We had it and we gave it away," the third baseman said. "It's never stopped hurting."

A bitter Herzog forced the team to send Mayberry packing. Otherwise the 1978 Royals featured much of the same cast from the previous year. Leonard, Splittorff, and Gura combined for 56 wins and Kansas City again captured the AL West.

And Kansas City again faced the Yankees in the ALCS. Following a familiar script, the teams split the first two games at Royals Stadium. Brett hit three home runs in Game 3 to give Kansas City a one-run lead heading into the bottom of the eighth. Waiting in the bullpen was "The Mad Hungarian" Al Hrabowsky, who had saved 20 games for the Royals during the regular season. Herzog instead summoned Doug Bird and his 5.29 ERA. Yankee catcher Thurman Munson blasted a mammoth two-run homer off Bird. The Yankees won 6-5.

The following night, New York finished off the Royals behind Ron Guidry's lights out pitching. Three straight seasons Kansas City had lost in the playoffs to the Yankees. And in all three series, the Royals bullpen gave up late-inning runs to lose crucial games.

Believing that Ewing Kauffman and his wife Muriel did not like him, Whitey Herzog predicted he would be fired if the Royals ever failed to win their division.

Despite big offensive years from Brett, outfielder Willie Wilson, and catcher Darrell Porter, Kansas City finished second in the AL West in 1979, three games behind California. The prescient Herzog was fired.

General Manager Joe Burke maintained that it was more than just personal feelings that resulted in the move. He believed the skipper had repeatedly put the team in impossible situations. Others criticized Whitey for trying to make himself bigger than the organization. His questionable pitching moves in the playoffs did not help matters. The manager's support among the players, moreover, had diminished after he shipped off Mayberry and fired the popular hitting coach Charlie Lau.

Herzog had taken the Royals to new heights, but the team plateaued and management believed "the White Rat" could elevate them no further. If Kansas City was going to reach the next level, it would be with someone else at the helm.

VANQUISHING THE EVIL EMPIRE

The Royals hired longtime Baltimore coach Jim Frey to lead the team into the 1980s. While the core of Herzog's division winners remained in place, this edition of the Royals featured several new pieces. Burke traded Cowens to California for power-hitting first baseman Willie Aikens. Switch-hitting Academy graduate U.L. Washington (and his toothpick) replaced Patek at shortstop. And submariner Dan Quisenberry gave Frey a legitimate closer in the bullpen.

After starting slow in 1980, the Royals again heated up with the rising temperatures of late spring. The team moved into first place on May 23rd and never looked back. Paced by Leonard (20 wins), Gura (18 wins), and Splittorff (14 wins), Kansas City built its lead to 20 games by the end of August and cruised to another division title.

Wilson turned in a stellar season, hitting .326 and stealing 79 bases, while setting a then-MLB record with 705 at-bats. Wathan, Aikens, and McRae also produced at the plate, but it was George Brett who grabbed national headlines that summer of 1980. Slashing hit after hit, the star third baseman made a run at .400, a mark that had not been reached since 1941. Though hampered by injuries, Brett finished the season with a .390 average, 24 homers, and 118 RBI—numbers that earned him the AL MVP.

Again looming in the ALCS, however, were the New York Yankees and their major league-leading 103 wins. Undaunted, Gura and Leonard pitched KC to victory in the first two games. Never before had the Royals reached this position. The team arrived in New York needing to take just one game out of three.

Red hot Frank White homered to give Kansas City a fifth-inning lead in Game 3. But when New York pulled ahead 2-1 in the bottom of the sixth, Royals fans wondered if yet another playoff series was starting to slip away. With two outs in the top of the seventh, Wilson doubled off Tommy John. Yankee skipper Dick Howser summoned the flame-throwing Goose Gossage. Firing bullets that reached the high 90s, the nearly unhittable closer had posted a 2.27 ERA during the season. Battling Gossage to a full count, U.L. Washington chopped a ball up the middle that he barely beat out for an infield hit. The Royals had runners at the corners with Number 5 stepping to the plate.

Casting aside past playoff demons, Brett launched Goose's first offering into the upper deck of Yankee Stadium. While New York owner George Steinbrenner fumed,

the crowd sat in stunned silence. “We were going crazy in the dugout,” Frank White said, “and as George ran the bases, there wasn’t a sound from the stands. It was so sweet.” Quisenberry pitched three and two-thirds innings of scoreless relief to preserve the 4-2 lead. At last the Royals had won the pennant. And they did it in the Bronx, against their perennial tormenters.

Riding a huge wave of momentum, the Royals arrived in Philadelphia to open the 1980 World Series against the Phillies. Two-run homers from Otis and Aikens gave KC an early 4-0 lead in Game 1. But Philadelphia struck back for five runs against Leonard in the bottom of the third. The Royals fell 7-6.

The next day, Philadelphia rocked Quisenberry with four runs in the eighth to take Game 2. Brett, meanwhile, made headlines when he removed himself from the game due to a severe pain in his posterior. During the off-day, he underwent minor surgery to remove hemorrhoids. As he later assessed, “My ailment will go down in the annals of World Series history.”

With his problems behind him, Brett homered to help Kansas City win Game 3. Aikens hit two more home runs in Game 4 to fuel another KC victory. With the Series tied, the Royals took a one-run lead into the ninth inning of Game 5. But once again, the Phillies tagged Quisenberry with a heartbreaking loss. Philadelphia ace Steve Carlton shut down the Royals in Game 6 to close out the Series.

It was a familiar story for Kansas City—a season filled with exciting performances and dramatic victories ended with disappointment. Questions lingered: How did a team with the league-leader in saves blow two late-inning leads? How did Wilson, who led the league with 230 hits, strike out twelve times against the Phillies? And why did the world’s most famous case of hemorrhoids have to strike when it did?

REACHING THE SUMMIT

The players’ strike divided the 1981 campaign into two mini-seasons. After the Royals played poorly in the first half and started the second half with similar mediocrity, Burke axed Jim Frey and replaced him with former Yankee skipper Dick Howser. The new manager rekindled the team’s fire, leading them to a first-place finish in the second mini-season. But Billy Martin’s Oakland A’s swept Kansas City in the first round of the playoffs.

In 1982 Whitey Herzog led his new team, the St. Louis Cardinals, to the world championship. His former team in Kansas City, meanwhile, missed the playoffs for only the second time in seven seasons. The Royals again missed the playoffs in 1983, finishing 20 games behind the Chicago White Sox. For Kansas City the season is most remembered for George Brett’s infamous “Pine Tar” game and the federal indictment of Willie Wilson, Willie Aikens, Vida Blue, and Jerry Martin. All four pleaded guilty to drug possession and served short prison sentences. Only Wilson would return to the Royals.

Howser’s boys rebounded in 1984 to win a weak American League West. But their return to postseason play ended quickly when Sparky Anderson’s Detroit juggernaut swept KC in the ALCS. Of greater significance, however, were the roster moves the Royals had been making.

John Schuerholz, promoted to GM three years earlier, returned to a time-tested

Royals strategy of making shrewd trades and developing young talent in the farm system. In deals reminiscent of Tallis a decade earlier, Schuerholz acquired southpaw Charlie Leibrandt from the Reds, slugger Steve Balboni from the Yankees, and veteran catcher Jim Sundberg from the Brewers. Early in the 1985 season, Schuerholz filched speedy outfielder Lonnie Smith from the Cardinals. From the farm, the Royals had promoted in '84 the promising pitching trio of Bret Saberhagen, Danny Jackson, and Mark Gubicza. These newcomers joined KC's seasoned veterans Brett, White, Wilson, McRae, Wathan, and Quisenberry.

To say the 1985 Royals did not do anything easily is perhaps the biggest understatement in franchise history. Streaky and mediocre play left the Royals 7.5 games behind the Angels on July 21. With little more than two months remaining in the season, postseason hopes faded. The team then reeled off a seven-game winning streak to claw back into the race. With a 13-2 run in September, Kansas City vaulted into first with just two weeks to go. But the Royals proceeded to drop four straight at home to the hapless Mariners. A week later Minnesota swept Howser's boys in the Metrodome. Kansas City trailed California by one game with five left to play.

With the season on the line, lefty Bud Black shut out the Angels to move his team into a tie for the division lead. Danny Jackson bested California the next night to push Kansas City into first. On the final weekend of the season, the Royals took two of three from Oakland to secure the division title.

Opposing Kansas City in the ALCS were Bobby Cox's Toronto Blue Jays, winners of 99 games (eight more than the Royals) during the regular season. After Toronto ace Dave Stieb shut down Kansas City in Game 1, sloppy play cost the Royals a late lead in Game 2. Returning home in a two-game hole, Brett unleashed a four-hit barrage, including two homers and four runs scored, to propel his team to a 6-5 victory. Leibrandt pitched eight shutout innings in Game 4, but Toronto scored three runs in the ninth to bury KC with a crushing loss.

Facing a disheartening 3-1 series deficit, Danny Jackson weaved a shutout in Game 5 to stave off elimination. Back in Toronto, Gubicza, Black, and Quisenberry yielded just three runs, while Brett drilled a go-ahead homer, to tie the series at three games apiece. An already tense Game 7 grew tighter when a comebacker forced Saberhagen from the mound with a swollen hand after just three innings. Leibrandt took over and kept the Blue Jays in check. Batting in the sixth with the bases loaded, Sundberg launched a triple off the top of the right field fence to break open a one-run game. Three innings later, Kansas City was heading to its second World Series.

Waiting to face the Royals was the team on the other side of Missouri—Whitey Herzog's St. Louis Cardinals, winners of 101 games. Unfortunately for the Royals, the I-70 Series started just like the ALCS when Cardinal ace John Tudor shut them down in Game 1. The following night, the Royals blew a two-run lead in the ninth to waste a stellar outing from Leibrandt and drop Game 2. Much like Ned Yost three decades later, Howser faced a firestorm of criticism for his pitching decisions—in this case failing to replace his tired starter in the ninth.

Unlikely cleanup hitter Frank White provided the power in Game 3 as Saberhagen pitched the Royals to victory. Tudor, however, followed with a dominating five-hit shutout to claim Game 4 for the Cardinals. Once again, Kansas City found itself buried

in a three-games-to-one series deficit. And once again, Danny Jackson responded with a much-needed complete game victory to stave off elimination for the Royals.

The Series returned to Kansas City for Game 6. Leibrandt battled Danny Cox in a tense pitchers' duel. In the eighth, St. Louis blooped home a run to break a scoreless tie. Leibrandt once again appeared destined for a tough late-inning loss. With the Royals trailing 1-0 heading into the bottom of the ninth, Cardinal fireballer Todd Worrell took the mound to get the final three outs needed to wrap up the World Series. Pinch hitter Jorge Orta led off with a bouncer that first baseman Jack Clark fielded and tossed to Worrell for the out ... until umpire Don Denkinger called him safe. Replays confirmed that the throw beat Orta. Herzog and the Cardinals vigorously argued, but in 1985 managers could not call for a video challenge. The umpire's call stood—Orta remained on first with nobody out.

Steve Balboni hit a foul pop that Clark failed to catch. With new life, the Royals slugger grounded a single into left. After Sundberg bunted into a force out, the Royals had runners at first and second with one down. With his former teammate McRae batting, St. Louis catcher Darrell Porter allowed a passed ball to advance the runners. Herzog ordered Worrell to walk McRae and load the bases. Former Cardinals World Series hero Dane Iorg stepped to the plate. Swinging at a 1-0 fastball, Iorg looped a single to right. One run scored and Sundberg rounded third, sliding home just ahead of Porter's tag. The Royals won 2-1, tying the series at three games apiece.

The Cardinals arrived at the ballpark for Game 7 embittered and shell-shocked. Kansas City's lineup pounded their ace Tudor and six other pitchers for 11 runs. Saberhagen meanwhile tossed a masterful five-hit shutout. The team that had suffered so much postseason heartbreak had won an unprecedented six elimination games. The Kansas City Royals were world champions.

As George Brett later said, "Even when your grandkids have grandkids, nobody will win it the way we did in eighty-five."