

# **HOW OFTEN DO TEAMS WITH THE BEST REGULAR-SEASON WINNING PERCENTAGE CAPTURE THE POSTSEASON CHAMPIONSHIP?**

## **PART IV: OBSERVATIONS**

**by**

**Angelo J. Louisa**

Based on the findings shown in the previous three lists, having the best regular-season winning percentage (BWP) is more of a curse than a blessing when it comes to capturing the postseason championship of Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Basketball Association (NBA).<sup>1</sup> Taken together, the regular-season “champions” of the three sports organizations have to date (March 1, 2021) emerged triumphant from the postseason a disappointing 46.7% of the time, a statistic which raises various questions. Were the clubs with the BWP necessarily the strongest? How many of the postseason victors were teams that got hot at the right time? Were some clubs “marathoners,” whereas others were “sprinters”? Is the importance of matchups underrated? And what role does game location play?

Equally interesting is that the NFL, which used a single-elimination postseason game to determine its champion from 1933 through 1966<sup>2</sup> and then multiple single-elimination games from 1967 through 2020, has a higher percentage of BWP clubs winning postseason championships than either MLB or the NBA, both of which used series formats to determine their champions. Conventional sports wisdom says that the more games a favored team plays against an opponent, the greater the chance that it

will be victorious, but the results of this study demonstrate that is not the case, at least not for these leagues. And the question here is: why?

Two other matters stand out. First, during the time that the NFL's postseason championship was decided by one game, the team with the BWP had an 18-16 record, as opposed to 26-28 for the period after that. However, when MLB evolved from having its BWP club win one series to two and eventually three to become the postseason crown holder, the statistics changed drastically from 43-35 to 7-17 and then 7-20.<sup>3</sup> As for the NBA, when it required its BWP club to win two series to claim the league trophy or, during the 1953-1954 season, finish at least second in a divisional round-robin minitournament and then be victorious in two series, the outcome was 11-4, which was a sharp contrast to the 7-15 mark for having to win three series and 17-20 for four series.<sup>4</sup>

And second, MLB and the NBA each have a dominant franchise that has a number of more "doubles"—i.e., coming out on top in BWP and postseason success in the same year—than its closest competitor. As might be expected, for the former, the New York Yankees have accomplished the feat 19 times, whereas the second-place franchise, the Boston Red Sox, have done it "only" six times. For the latter, there is no surprise either: the Boston Celtics are first with 12 sweeps, followed by the Minneapolis/Los Angeles Lakers with six. But the NFL is a much tighter race. The Chicago Bears have a slight lead—six to five—over the Green Bay Packers and are just two ahead of the San Francisco 49ers and three in front of the Dallas Cowboys, the New England Patriots, the Philadelphia Eagles, and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

To the questions already asked, the observations found in the previous two paragraphs add several more: Is the NFL consistently different from MLB and the NBA because of its shorter regular season and/or its use of single-elimination games? Why did NBA BWP teams have a better record during the four-series format than the three-series format? Why were the Yankee and Celtic franchises able to achieve so many sweeps? And what factors would assist BWP clubs to win postseason championships?

---

<sup>1</sup>The National Hockey League is not included in this study because it uses a point system to determine its best regular-season team.

<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of this study, NFL playoff games prior to 1967 that were used to break ties between division or conference champions to decide which team would advance to the championship game are not considered as part of the postseason.

<sup>3</sup>To capture the postseason crown in the MLB, the BWP team had to win one series prior to 1969, two from 1969 through 1980 and from 1982 through 1993, and three in 1981 and from 1995 through 2020.

<sup>4</sup>To be the NBA's postseason champion, the BWP team needed to win two series from 1946-1947 through 1947-1948 and from 1954-1955 through 1965-1966, three from 1948-1949 through 1952-1953 and from 1966-1967 through 1982-1983, and four from 1983-1984 through 2019-2020.