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1991 Pittsburgh Pirates Roster

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A Deep Dive into the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates Roster: The Team That Almost Went All the Way

The 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster represents one of the most memorable and talented squads in franchise history. Coming off a National League East division title in 1990, the Pirates were determined to not only repeat but to finally break through to the World Series. Under the leadership of manager Jim Leyland, the team featured a mix of young superstars, gritty veterans, and a powerful pitching staff. For baseball fans and historians alike, looking back at the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster offers a fascinating glimpse of a club that dominated the National League during a golden era of baseball. This article explores every facet of that unforgettable team, from its everyday lineup to its bullpen workhorses, and examines why this roster remains a benchmark for Pirate baseball excellence.

The Core Position Players: The "Outfield Curtain" and Infield Stability

The 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was built around one of the most productive outfields in baseball history. Known as the "Outfield Curtain," the trio of Barry Bonds, Andy Van Slyke, and Bobby Bonilla provided power, speed, and defensive prowess. Bonds, then in his prime, put up staggering numbers: 25 home runs, 116 RBIs, and a .292 batting average that earned him his second consecutive National League MVP award. Van Slyke anchored center field with gold-glove defense while hitting .278 with 17 homers and 83 RBIs. Bonilla, playing right field, slugged 18 homers and drove in 100 runs, providing a fearsome right-handed bat in the middle of the order.

Infield Anchors

The infield of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was equally impressive, though perhaps less flashy than the outfield. First baseman Orlando Merced split time with Gary Redus, combining for solid production. Second baseman Jose Lind was a defensive wizard, turning double plays with smooth precision, while shortstop Jay Bell enjoyed a career year, slashing .270/.348/.383 with 16 home runs. Third base was manned by Jeff King, who offered 14 homers and solid defense. Catcher Mike LaValliere handled a stellar pitching staff and hit .280, providing both leadership and timely hits.

Pitching Staff: A Deep and Dominant Rotation

The success of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was not solely due to its lineup; the pitching staff carried the team through many tight games. The rotation featured a remarkable blend of power arms and crafty veterans. Doug Drabek, the ace, won 15 games with a 3.07 ERA and finished third in Cy Young voting. John Smiley, a left-hander with a big fastball, posted 20 wins and a 3.08 ERA, earning an All-Star nod. The other members of the rotation—Randy Tomlin, Bob Walk, and Zane Smith—each contributed invaluable starts. Tomlin won 15 games with a 3.28 ERA, while the 40-year-old Walk provided veteran savvy and a 12-4 record. Zane Smith, acquired

mid-season in 1990, quietly posted a 3.70 ERA in 34 starts.

The Bullpen That Locked Down Games

Behind the rotation, the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster boasted a deep bullpen anchored by closer Stan Belinda. Belinda saved 16 games and struck out batters at a high rate. Setup men like Roger Mason, Bob Kipper, and Rosario Rodriguez provided reliable innings. Left-handed specialist Bob Patterson delivered crucial outs against tough lefty hitters. The bullpen's ability to protect leads was a key reason the Pirates posted a 98-64 record and won the NL East by 14 games over the St. Louis Cardinals.

Role Players and Bench Depth

No championship-caliber team can thrive without a strong bench, and the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster had several key contributors off the bench. Outfielder Lloyd McClendon provided right-handed power and a memorable personality. Infielder Curtis Wilkerson offered flexibility in the infield. Catcher Don Slaught backed up LaValliere and hit .269. Utility man Gary Varsho could play the outfield and catcher, giving Leyland plenty of match-up options. This depth allowed the Pirates to rest regulars without significant drops in performance.

Manager Jim Leyland: The Architect of Success

At the helm of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was Jim Leyland, a master strategist who commanded respect and loyalty from his players. Leyland's ability to handle diverse personalities—from the mercurial Bonds to the stoic Drabek—was crucial. He deftly managed pitching changes, platooned effectively, and created a clubhouse culture focused on winning. His National League Manager of the Year award in 1990 and 1992 underscores his immense contribution to the 1991 team's dominance.

The 1991 Season: A Campaign of Dominance

The 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster wasted no time asserting itself. The team jumped out to a hot start and never looked back, winning the division by a wide margin. Offensive fireworks were common: the Pirates led the NL in runs scored (769) and home runs (126). The pitching staff posted a 3.44 ERA, third-best in the league. Key series against the Mets, Cubs, and Cardinals showcased the team's ability to win in multiple ways. Perhaps the most memorable regular-season moment came on September 1, when the Pirates swept a doubleheader in Chicago to effectively put the division out of reach.

Postseason Heartbreak

After winning the division, the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster faced the Atlanta Braves in the National League Championship Series. The Braves were a young, upstart team themselves. The series went the full seven games—a classic battle of pitching and clutch hitting. The Pirates took a 3-2 series lead back to Three Rivers Stadium, but lost Game 6 in extra innings after a controversial call at first base. In Game 7, the Pirates held a 1-0 lead into the ninth inning, but the Braves rallied and won 3-1, ending Pittsburgh's World Series dreams. It was a crushing defeat for a team that seemed destined for greatness, yet the 1991 roster remains beloved by fans for its talent and tenacity.

Key Batting Statistics of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates Roster

To truly appreciate the strength of this team, looking at the numbers helps. Barry Bonds posted an OPS of 1.017 and stole 43 bases. Bobby Bonilla's 100 RBIs and 104 runs scored anchored the lineup. Andy Van Slyke added elite defense and a .425 slugging percentage. The team's collective on-base percentage of .339 was among the league's best. Even the lower part of the order contributed: second baseman Jose Lind hit .268, and shortstop Jay Bell's 16 home runs were a career high. The balance and depth of the batting order made the

1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster one of the most difficult to pitch against in all of baseball.

Pitching Depth: The Unsung Heroes

While the stars get the headlines, the unsung heroes of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster were pitchers like Randy Tomlin and Bob Walk. Tomlin, a finesse lefty, went 15-8 with a 3.28 ERA and just 91 walks in 224 innings. Walk, despite his age, posted a 12-4 record and a 3.63 ERA, serving as a mentor to younger arms. Zane Smith, acquired in 1990, threw 185 innings with a 3.70 ERA. The rotation's durability meant bullpen usage was strategic rather than desperate. Closer Stan Belinda saved 20 of 28 opportunities, while the setup corps of Roger Mason (2.65 ERA) and Bob Patterson (3.10) provided shutdown innings.

Defensive Excellence

The 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was also exceptional defensively. The Pirates led the NL in fielding percentage and turned the second-most double plays. The outfield of Bonds, Van Slyke, and Bonilla won multiple Gold Gloves collectively. Bonds' powerful arm in left, Van Slyke's range in center, and Bonilla's solid glove in right made it nearly impossible for opponents to get extra bases. In the infield, Jose Lind and Jay Bell formed a brilliant double-play combination. This defensive cohesion gave the pitchers confidence to induce ground balls and flyouts, knowing the defense would make the play.

The Legacy of the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates Roster

Even though the team fell short in the NLCS, the 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster left an indelible mark on the franchise and its fans. It marked the peak of a three-year run where the Pirates won division titles in 1990, 1991, and 1992. After that, free agency and trades dismantled the core: Bonds left for San Francisco, Bonilla for New York, and Drabek for Houston. The 1991 team remains a "what if" story—what if they had held on in Games 6 or 7 of the NLCS? Yet, the roster's talent and chemistry are still celebrated. For historians, the 1991 Pirates exemplify a small-market team that built a powerhouse through scouting, development, and savvy trades.

Conclusion

The 1991 Pittsburgh Pirates roster was a harmonious blend of superstar talent, reliable role players, and a deep pitching staff. From the majestic outfield curtain to the steady infield, from the brilliant starting rotation to the lockdown bullpen, this team had all the ingredients for a championship. Manager Jim Leyland orchestrated a season of dominance that resulted in 98 wins and an NL East crown. Though postseason heartbreak prevented a World Series appearance, the legacy of the 1991 Pirates endures. For fans of baseball history, examining this roster provides a masterclass in team building and a reminder of how thrilling the game can be when all the pieces align.

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