

Alone in spotlight, baseball performs brilliantly

Unparalleled drama evokes visions of Thomson and Mazeroski



By Peter Gammons | MLB.com Columnist | [Archive](#) 09/29/11 1:36 PM ET

There are those moments, to once again repeat the repeatable Vin Scully, when in a season of the improbable, the impossible happens. Yankees history is like no other history in North American sports, and when the upstart, irrepressible Rays were behind by seven runs in the eighth inning, the Elias Sports Bureau reminded us that the Yankees had lost only two games in that situation.

Once in 1931, once in '53.

Then Dan Johnson, the one-time Minnesota hockey prodigy batting .108, was one strike away from what could have been the end of the Rays' season, with Boston beating Baltimore at the time. And in the month of the improbable, the impossible happened. Johnson hooked a line drive inside the right-field foul pole, and the road went on forever.

Nearly an hour later, Longoria was in the on-deck circle in the 12th inning. It appeared the Red Sox were still going to win, with Jonathan Papelbon in to close it out -- only up there on the video board, Robert Andino's hit ticked off Carl Crawford's glove, the second time in a week Andino notched a game-winner off one of the game's elite closers. Baltimore had won.

There's a train, every day, leaving either way. Longoria then stepped in against Scott Proctor, jacked another line drive down the left-field line for a home run to win the American League Wild Card, and the Red Sox Express that on Sept. 9 led Tampa Bay by nine games, was on its way north. On its way home.

Was this one of the greatest days in baseball history? You bet your Sean Casey it was. It had eight meaningful games, games that decided home-field advantage, games that were season walk-offs or tie-makers, teams making the playoffs from the biggest September deficits in both leagues.

We should thank Charlie Manuel and the Phillies for playing their hearts out against the Braves for no reason other than pride, to force Atlanta to have to attempt to beat them to make it to a Thursday tiebreaker with the Cardinals. We should thank the Baltimore Orioles,

out of contention and yet winning series against the Angels, Yankees, Rays and Red Sox. The O's beat the warrior Papelbon with two runs in the ninth, the fifth time in seven games the last two weeks they beat the Red Sox for no reason other than they care.

"This has been the month that reaffirmed the integrity of September," Brewers GM Doug Melvin said. He knows.

Milwaukee, which won its division for the first time since more than a decade before Bryce Harper was born, when the Brewers had the fourth-highest payroll in the Majors, had wanted to start ace Zack Greinke in the playoff opener.

But because the Brewers have the best home record in the league, they wanted a better record than Arizona so they didn't have to face the Phillies in Philadelphia in the National League Division Series. So Greinke pitched. And won. And while undefeated at home, Greinke may have to pitch Game 3 of the NLDS in Phoenix. The final game meant that much.

Ask the 2007 Padres, who figured they could beat the Brewers on the final day of the season a game up on the Rockies to save ace Jake Peavy for the playoffs. They lost, 11-6, on Sunday, then they lost the tiebreaker with Peavy when the Rockies scored three runs in the 13th inning off Trevor Hoffman.

We watched as a longtime ace named Chris Carpenter threw a shutout for the Cardinals, who then watched as the Phillies beat the Braves on a Hunter Pence cue shot. The Cardinals had overcome the biggest September deficit in NL history to make the postseason; the Rays overcame the biggest deficit in AL history.

And we ached, for Craig Kimbrel and Papelbon, who left their hearts on the September grounds. For Dustin Pedroia, whose hits and life-on-the-line double plays seemingly promised another day.

For baseball, it had its own fall stage. With the games in mid-week, there was no competition from college football, even the Longhorn Network. MLB.com had record traffic and MLB Network had record ratings, and baseball was the story.

Baseball is learning its lesson to play the important games mid-week. (Check the ratings!) If this had been a Saturday and Sunday finish, per tradition, it would have been buried under Florida-Alabama.

The season ended when it did so that the World Series can start and end in mid-week, not Saturday (the worst television night) and Sunday (the third-worst TV night). It ended with MLB attendance back to 2008 levels, despite the Dodgers and Mets being down 800,000.

On Wednesday night, I had the same feeling I had as a kid watching replays of Bobby Thomson's home run, or sitting in a dorm room in Groton, Mass., when Bill Mazerowski hit his, or hearing Ned Martin chant, "There's pandemonium on the field," in 1967.

It was a night when heroes like Longoria, Carpenter and Greinke won, and heroes like Kimbrel and Pedroia proved that baseball, like so much of life, can be unfair.

It was a game on its own stage, without ideals or violence. We were reminded that it's true, like ice, like fire.

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