

The Road to October: Sept. 29, 2011

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The Road to October has been paved, torn up and repaved thanks to a thrilling end to the regular season unlike anything seen in recent memory. With the Wild Card spots and two opportunities to clinch home-field advantage in the Division Series up for grabs, Game No. 162 throughout baseball brought an early start to October and a finish nobody could have predicted -- concluding in simultaneous collapses by the Red Sox and Braves that rank right up there with the largest in baseball history.

In the end, it was the Rays and Cardinals who enjoyed champagne showers and celebratory gear as they punched their tickets as the American League and National League Wild Cards. But their success was merely the end result of the wildest of Wild Card finishes, and it took an eye-popping night of baseball to get there.

In a year that saw more thrilling finishes than any in recent history, it was only fitting that the last day of the regular season ended in such dramatic fashion. Baseball fans were treated to 243 walk-off victories this season, more than the total from any season from 2008-10. The next-closest tally was in 2008, when there were 228.

Little did we know that the season would be saving some of the best for last.

The chaos began with what appeared to be simply an ill-timed rain delay during the seventh inning in Baltimore. However, it was during that rain delay that the Rays began their comeback in the face of what seemed like an insurmountable 7-0 deficit.

After the Rays chipped away to trail 7-3, Evan Longoria blasted a three-run, eighth-inning home run to cut the Yankees' lead to 7-6. The late-inning chase was on. Meanwhile, the Red Sox reconvened in their dugout, knowing the Rays' had turned up the heat on a damp night in Baltimore.

The Red Sox were on the verge of adding an insurance run in the top of the eighth when Carl Crawford stroked a double to the left-center field gap, but a seamless relay from Adam Jones to J.J. Hardy to Matt Wieters cut down Marco Scutaro at home, keeping the score 3-2. At a time when insurance runs were worth their weight in gold, the Red Sox couldn't have envisioned just how valuable that missed opportunity would be.

"We didn't extend the lead, and if you make a mistake, it can cost you," said Red Sox manager Terry Francona.

Minutes later, the Red Sox again looked up at the Camden Yards scoreboard and saw that their Wild Card nemesis and their historic rivals were tied at seven in the bottom of the ninth

after Dan Johnson hit a two-out, two-strike home run just inside the right field foul pole off Cory Wade, the Yankees' 10th pitcher of the night. His blast sent Tropicana Field into a frenzy and further ratcheted up the pressure on the Boston bench.

"I was just trying to get a good pitch to hit and it ended up well for me. I was just so fortunate to be able to get that chance and then capitalize on it," Johnson said. "We just kept grinding it out again. We knew we needed a big inning. When it started out, in the eighth, I believe, we started to get the runners on, and the big hit-by-pitch, I think that turned everything around.

But the ninth-inning dramatics were not only reserved for the East Coast. In Anaheim, in a game that slipped into the collective oversight of Wednesday's Wild Card action, Rangers catcher Mike Napoli victimized his former team the Angels, with his second home run of the night and 30th of the season. His ninth-inning, go-ahead bomb solidified the Rangers home-field advantage in the AL Division Series, when they will welcome the Rays in a rematch of last season's ALDS showdown.

"I was talking to [the ball]," Napoli said. "I got into a hitter's count. Walden throws pretty hard. I was just trying to get my barrel out in front a little bit. I got lucky enough to do that with. It was a great feeling. It got us home-field advantage. We are all happy."

Like a pinball ricocheting throughout the country, the celebration then carried on to Milwaukee. John Axford finished the game and locked down home-field in the NL Division Series for the Brewers, for whom starting the playoffs at home is perhaps most important given their Major League-best 57 victories at Miller Park this season. Milwaukee will host the D-backs in the NLDS.

A jump across Lake Michigan to Detroit saw the Tigers end their season with a sweep of the Indians, punctuated by Jose Valverde earning his 49th save in 49 chances this season. The Tigers will travel to New York for Game 1 of the ALDS, which will feature CC Sabathia squaring off against Justin Verlander.

Yet, while Valverde reveled in his perfect season, Boston's crack closer Jonathan Papelbon was teetering on the brink. Responsible for protecting 3-2 lead, Papelbon was one out away from ensuring at least a tiebreaker in Tampa on Thursday, but then it all unraveled. Consecutive doubles by Chris Davis and Nolan Reimold tied the score at three. Robert Andino followed with a sinking line drive that was trapped under Carl Crawford's glove, scoring Reimold to win the game and hand the Red Sox their first loss in 78 attempts this season when leading after eight innings.

"What do you expect my reaction to be? ... I was pumped up to be in that situation. It's a situation that I enjoy, but I think I was overthrowing the ball. ... It just boiled down to not executing," Papelbon explained.

Papelbon's blown save left the Red Sox to await their fate.

They didn't wait long.

Eight minutes after Andino's single, Evan Longoria ripped a game-winning home run off Scott Proctor -- the Yankees' 12th pitcher of the night -- clinching the AL Wild Card and banishing the 2011 Red Sox into the same company as another infamous Boston squad, the 1978 club that squandered a 14 1/2-game divisional lead to the Yankees, only to lose in historic fashion in a one-game tiebreaker.

"That was the incredible thing. I had heard that [the Orioles] had tied it up and everyone was cheering about that," Longoria said. "Then I get up to the plate, and I hear [the Orioles] win, and everyone is cheering and I'm up there trying to focus on my at-bat"

The Road to October has reached the on-ramp to the Division Series, but after such diamond theatrics on the season's final day, one must ask -- what will October offer?

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