

Walk-off wins-day delivers grandest finales



By Anthony Castrovince | **MLB.com Columnist** | [Archive](#) 09/29/11 3:33 AM ET

"Moneyball"? Haven't seen it yet. By all accounts, a fine flick.

But what happened Wednesday night was the kind of theater you simply couldn't script.

Though it's easy to get hyperbolic at times like this, it's certainly safe to assume we'll be talking about what transpired on Wild Card Wednesday for years and, God willing, decades to come. After all, it's not exactly a common occurrence for two of the most sizzling surges/colossal collapses in the history of the sport to be completed on the same night.

Let alone within 25 minutes of each other.

We knew a night in which four games with Wild Card implications were scheduled was bound to be must-see TV.

But this?

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Nobody imagined this.

Nobody imagined three blown saves in the ninth and two extra-inning tilts. Nobody imagined that the collapses turned in by the Red Sox and Braves would culminate in actual collapses by two of the more trusted closers in the game.

But that's what we got. A night of epic collapses and home-run strokes. (By the way, remember when Mike Napoli smacked a two-run shot to secure home-field advantage for the Rangers? If you forgot, you're forgiven, considering the circumstances.) A night when the name Dan Johnson is suddenly Witness Protection Program-worthy no more. At least, not in St. Pete.

America's pastime kept us up past our bed time. And the exact pacing of the plot was what made this all the more awesome. Even Mother Nature got involved, delaying the proceedings in Baltimore for an hour and a half with rain and lightning, simply to ensure -- we know now, in retrospect -- that Jonathan Papelbon's blown save and Evan Longoria's prodigious pop would transpire in rhythmic succession.

The dramatic dynamic that unfolded simultaneously in Baltimore and Tampa Bay had a way of pushing the deafening silence that enveloped Atlanta to the back-burner. Perhaps that's the Braves only saving grace.

But it was Craig Kimbrel's inability to provide saving grace with a 3-2 lead in the ninth that set up a stunning sequence of events. For when the Phillies tied it on Chase Utley's sacrifice fly and the Braves and Phils drifted toward extras -- all the while knowing the Cardinals were runaway winners in Houston -- something truly special began to brew.

There was Michael Martinez running down Chipper Jones' blistering line drive in the 10th inning in Atlanta, preventing Michael Bourn from sprinting home with the winning run.

And then, minutes later, there were the Rays, charging back from a 7-0 deficit by ripping into Boone Logan and Luis Ayala for six runs, with Longoria's three-run shot serving as the capper.

There was the rain pummeling Camden Yards, leaving the Red Sox, clinging to a 3-2 lead when play was halted, to sit. And wait. And think. And watch.

What did they see? The same thing as the rest of us. One of the most improbable pinch-hit home runs you'll ever see.

If there were any doubt Joe Maddon ought to be American League Manager of the Year, it was erased when he inserted Johnson as a sub for Sam Fuld. The Legend of Fuld would have to be reserved for another day. This was Johnson's moment. And regardless of his .108 average and the fact that he hadn't notched a hit in the big leagues since April 27, he capitalized on it. The Rays were down to their final strike, and Cory Wade, the Yankees' 10th pitcher of the night, tried to deliver it. But Johnson turned on the pitch and sent it hurtling over the right-field wall, just fair of the foul pole.

Game tied, 7-7.

As for that game in Baltimore? It resumed. And the Red Sox had to be feeling the heat.

The Sox and O's played on, and the Rays and Yanks worked overtime. The clock inched toward midnight.

It was about 20 till when it ended in -- and for -- Atlanta. The Phillies had taken the lead on a broken-bat bloop of an infield single that scored the go-ahead run in the top of the 13th. And in the bottom of the inning, Freddie Freeman grounded into the 3-6-3 double play that put the Braves out to pasture, his slam of his helmet as he crossed first base saying it all.

If you wanted to digest the moment, the heartache streaked across the faces of the Braves players, you had all of ... oh ... 10 minutes to do so. Because then it was time to tune back into Baltimore, where Papelbon was looking to lock down the 3-2 lead.

And it sure looked like he would, didn't it? He got Adam Jones and Mark Reynolds to go down swinging. He and the Sox were one out away from at worst a tiebreaker in Tampa and at best a Wild Card win. Then Chris Davis roped a double to right. And then Nolan Reimold swatted a double to right-center, pinch-runner Kyle Hudson flying home. It all happened as if written in the stars. Where was *this* O's team all season?

It had to end that inning, because time and timing were of the essence. And it ended when Robert Andino (Mr. September?) lined the game-winning RBI single to left, a ball trapped and dropped by Carl Crawford.

Crawford. The ball had to go to him, didn't it? The former face of Tampa Bay baseball who, like so many other big stars in small markets, became just another big fish in an even bigger pond when he left the Rays for a raise. The guy who has been, sad to say, a bust in Boston thus far. That ball fell before him, allowing the winning run to score, allowing the Rays that last open walkway to the Wild Card.

Of course it did.

The O's players celebrated on the field like *they* had just clinched a postseason berth. The Red Sox players shuffled off the field and into the clubhouse, knowing full well the Rays and Yanks were still tied.

Not for long.

Not quite three minutes had elapsed when Longoria stepped in against Scott Proctor and smacked that line drive that hooked just inside the left-field foul pole, capping a night for the ages.

The best night in baseball history? Eh, let the appraisers of history and lovers of exaggeration have some fun with that query.

Personally, I'll just settle for reveling in the fun we had on Wild Card Wednesday. It will be a tough act for even the postseason to follow. Because it was better than a movie.

Anthony Castrovince is a reporter for *MLB.com*. Read his [columns](#) and his blog, [CastroTurf](#), and follow him on Twitter at [@Castrovince](#). This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.