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Baseball's Night

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It was approximately 12:45 a.m. in London when Mark Teixeira's bases loaded blast reached the seats in The Can, and the Yankees added four runs to the one they were gifted in the first inning. It was 5-0. David Price had very little, and I turned off my computer and went to bed. At the time the Braves were 1-1 with Philadelphia, the Red Sox and O's were scoreless and that seemed not to matter at that point. The Cardinals and Astros had not yet begun.

When I woke in the morning the baseball earth had shifted significantly. The baseball gods had been extremely busy overnight. The Tampa Bay Rays were in the playoffs, the St. Louis Cardinals were in the playoffs, and both the Atlanta Braves and Boston Red Sox were heading home after recording two colossal collapses of the record breaking, mind numbing, variety. It was a night of nightmares for one current and one former Boston team.

Alex Rodriguez of the Yankees made the understated observation of the night, and one that ranks as a truism for baseball fans. Commenting on what had taken place in just a matter of minutes he said, "That's what makes baseball the greatest game."

It is also what makes improbable heroes and unforgettable goats. It can create stars and destroy careers.

For those who asked at the beginning of the season, "Will Carl Crawford find happiness in Boston?" We may now have the answer. Carl Crawford is likely to take his place as the new Bill Buckner for this generation of Red Sox whiners. And if he does it will be unfair because this was a total team effort.

A baseball team that gives up a nine game lead in less than a month can only do so with a total team effort. You have to have a breakdown in nearly every facet of the game: Starting pitching, bullpen (especially the closer), hitting, fielding, base running, managerial decisions, and of course key injuries. The latter of these is generally the least significant in a true collapse. In fact if there are a multitude of injuries down the stretch, then it is not really a collapse at all.

This of course marks one difference between the Atlanta Braves and the Boston Red Sox in this "September to Remember." The Braves lost two key members of their starting rotation and

starting rookies down the stretch is not generally a formula for winning baseball. Still it was the lack of hitting that killed the Braves as much as anything.

The other thing that makes the collapse of Boston more stunning than that of the Braves is that it was a collapse of the Boston Red Sox. If it happens to the Yankees or the Red Sox it is by definition a bigger event and rivets a nation. Indeed in their self-importance Red Sox fans have come to refer to "Red Sox Nation." Can we now lay that one to rest? Please!

The world of baseball is bigger than Ken Burns' myopic vision.

But I digress.

When I turned on my computer and saw what had happened, I was amazed, but not shocked. When I went to bed I thought the Rays were done, but I have watched this game long enough to know that anything can happen, and that as the great Earl Weaver once said, "You can't run out the clock in baseball."

But consider this. The Rays were down 7-0 after seven innings and had only two hits. The fans that remained in The Can were on a death watch, diehards who felt a need to suffer with their team. For their faithfulness they were rewarded with a six-run eighth inning, a home run in the bottom of the ninth by a guy with the lowest batting average in the majors. Dan Johnson couldn't carry Mario Mendoza's jock strap. But he hit one out to tie the game. So the fans were treated to extra innings and Evan Longoria ended the night in grand fashion with his second home run of the night, this one a walk off in the 12th inning.

Five minutes earlier in Baltimore the Red Sox watched as their petulant closer caved after two outs in the bottom of the 9th and no one on base. The topper came when Carl Crawford entered Sox Lore with his lame and futile attempt to put a sinking liner in his glove and the Red Sox in the playoffs.

In the *New York Times* today the statistics guy, Nate Silver, was busy pointing out that on September 3 with a nine game lead over the Rays, the Red Sox had a 99.6% chance of winning the wild card over the Rays. With two out in the 9th inning last night the Sox had a 95.3% chance of winning.

There was also a zero percent chance of rain in The Can last night. It didn't rain in The Can, it did in Baltimore, and after the rain delay the Red Sox overcame the odds and lost in fine fashion. And don't forget the base running, as Marco Scutaro hesitated on the base paths to watch Carl Crawford's hit, and

the hesitation some would argue, got him thrown out at the plate. He who hesitates is. . . generally thrown out.

Silver also noted that at their low point at the end of the 7th inning the Rays had a 0.3% chance of winning. If like all these numbers and probabilities head to the today's *Times*.

Meanwhile the Braves took extra innings to lose to Philadelphia as they were swept, while the Cardinals waltzed to an 8-0 win over Houston. Cards in, Braves out.

After the games on Tuesday I saw some video from ESPN on the net. In one of these sound bites one of their baseball experts looking forward past Wednesday, boldly predicted there would be two more games on Thursday. I knew then that there wouldn't be any games on Thursday, because that's baseball.

On this kind of night I am always brought back to the immortal words of Joaquin Andujar who once said: "In baseball there is only one word, you never know."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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