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Toronto: The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down

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Sunday morning Radio Canada was playing "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" while the Blue Jay announcers could be heard calling the last play of the World Series. It has been an historic World Series: The first outside the United States and the first won by a team based in Canada. And Pat "North of the" Borders was named MVP. Catchers in fact figured heavily in the course of this series.

It was a World Series that demonstrated certain truisms of baseball: Good pitching dominates good hitting, and in a close series the weaknesses of a team become glaring. In both the case of the Blue Jays and the Braves this latter proposition was true. For the Blue Jays the biggest weakness coming into the Series was the inability to hold runners on base. As a result the Braves ran nearly at will.

For the Braves their biggest weakness was their bullpen. They had been having difficulties all year long finding someone who could become a consistent closer. They never did, and in the World Series this became fatal. It could be argued that with a closer the Braves might have swept the Series. Jeff Reardon was not the answer. His nickname "The Terminator" should have been changed years ago to "The Equalizer."

The Series was marked by tremendous tension, as all but one game was close, and as each inning rolled past the tension increased to the breaking point. Toronto's four wins were all by one run.

Game one in Atlanta set the dramatic tone. Joe Carter's home run gave Toronto an early lead, and then Damon Barryhill, playing only because Greg Olsen had a broken leg, hit a three-run shot off Jack Morris ending his consecutive scoreless innings streak in the World Series at 18 2/3, all against Atlanta. Tom Glavine was near perfect.

Game Two started with Gomer Pyle and Sargent Carter leading the Marine colorguard handling the Canadian flag. In addition the Canadian singing "Oh! Canada" blew the words, umpires blew calls costing the Jays runs, and Jeff Reardon blew the game by laying up a batting practice fast ball that was crushed by back-up catcher Ed Sprague. John Smoltz's excellent pitching performance was wasted.

Game Three in Toronto saw Steve Avery of the Braves outpitch Juan Guzman, and the Braves unable to execute fundamentals. Blauser failed on a sacrifice, Sanders couldn't move a runner to third, Pendleton ran past Sanders on the bases, and Justice tried to take third base for no apparent reason and was out by several meters. How many runs this cost the Braves is incalculable. The evening was topped off when the bullpen failed again and the Braves lost 3-2. The game highlight was Devon White's game saving catch, one of the great plays in Series history.

Clearly the Braves should now consider a spring training pre-camp starting in mid-January where for six weeks players could work on fundamentals such as bunting, the hit and run, baserunning, and moving the runner over. Any number of Little League coaches could be hired to run the camp. The Braves played like they were the ones that had not been in the World Series before.

Game Four was more of the same. Jimmy Key pitching on 15 days rest was rusty in the first inning but bad base running got him off the hook. He then went on to retire sixteen in a row, twenty out of twenty-one. Tom Glavine pitching on three days rest authored another masterpiece. Again the Braves failed to execute fundamentals. Tom Henke slammed the door. Final Score 2-1, Blue Jays.

Game Five started like all the others. Braves take lead, Blue Jays tie it. This happened twice. But then in the fifth inning the goat of the 1991 World Series Lonnie Smith crushed a Jack Morris pitch to the opposite field for a grand slam home run and suddenly it was 7-2. John Smoltz pitched a courageous six innings, and Stanton pitched three strong innings in relief. Had the Braves found a closer? And was it soon enough? Yes, and No.

Game Six offered more of the same kind of tension, only this time with extra innings. The Jays led 1-0 and 2-1 behind great fielding by Alomar and Winfield and great pitching. Steve Avery and David Cone pitched well. Then in the bottom of the ninth with one pitch to go for a Toronto victory, Otis Nixon singled to tie the game, the first run given up by the Toronto bullpen in the Series. In the eleventh inning with two men on and two out Charlie Liebrant, the losing pitcher in game six in Minnesota last year, was facing Dave Winfield whose lifetime average against Liebrant was over .300. Reardon was in the bullpen but Bobby Cox did not make the change having lost all faith in "The Equalizer." But why Liebrant ever threw Winfield a strike is a mystery. But he did, and Winfield at age 41 after

forty plus trips to the plate in two World Series got an extra base hit to drive in two runs. The game was not over.

In the bottom of the inning the Braves scored one, had a man on third with two out, and again it was Otis Nixon at the plate. But the Braves were out of miracles, and Nixon made an odd decision to bunt. He was an easy out, and the Series ended, not with a bang, but a wimper.

Good night Ted! Good night Jane! See you next year, eh!

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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