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One of the Greatest Baseball Seasons in my Lifetime

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

Everyone is saying it and so I am hesitant to say it too, but I will. This has been a great baseball season and maybe the best of my lifetime, and it continued into an extra day.

Sunday extended the season into Monday, and as frosting on the cake Roy Halladay of Toronto, making his second major league appearance, took a no-hitter to within one out of fruition only to see it broken up by a pinch hit home run. The NL wild card race ended in a tie when Houston beat the Cubs in the 11th inning, and Colorado crawled out of a 7-0 hole to win on a home run in the bottom of the ninth, 9-8. Then on Monday night the Cubs took a five run lead into the ninth and proved once again that no lead is safe with the Cubs in one of those very strange games that seem to be a Cub specialty.

The pennant race between the Angels and Rangers came down to the last week with Texas going into DisneyWest and sweeping Eisner's baseball cast. It was either a great clutch performance, or a big league choke. You make the call.

The biggest story of all has been the Home Run Derby with McGwire out in front of the pack early; then Sosa with his record June becoming a factor; and finally Junior keeping pace until August. The early angst of Mark McGwire which seemed most obvious in May and June began to fade as he was joined by Sosa. The development of their relationship was good to see and the public quickly took to both of them. McGwire's 70 is an awesome number and Sosa's 66 isn't exactly chopped liver.

Even the fans have done reasonably well in this hoopla, as few have demanded big money for the baseballs. This may be because there have been so many of these record-breaking balls and no one seems to have any clear sense of their value. Only a couple of lawsuits have emerged and the recent announcement by Sosa that he would sell ball number 62 and give the money to hurricane victims in the Dominican Republic seems to have muted the greed.

The McGwire-Sosa show brought a number of fans back to the game and helped others forget the scars of the strike.

Certainly the excitement generated has been great with Sosa and McGwire receiving international press attention. BBC Sports gave daily coverage to the home runs and McGwire's 62nd was on the front pages of the British papers.

At home the President has been busy calling Sosa and McGwire with congratulations, no doubt happy to have anything to deflect attention away from his troubles. Alan Greenspan had some comments the other day before going into a Congressional Hearing on the economy. The Federal Reserve Chairman said that Sosa should not be discounting his chances in the home run race. Even Vaclav Havel made use of the Sosa-McGwire story to try to point out to the American press how silly they are, but they are so silly they thought he was making a serious comment on the home run race.

Teams and individuals have rewritten the records up and down both leagues.

The Yankees set a new American League record for wins with 114 although they did fall short of the 116 by the 1906 Cubs, while the Padres, Astros and Braves all set franchise win records. On the loss side the Florida Marlins went from World Champion to doormat becoming the first team to lose more than 100 games, actually 108, as defending World Series champion. They finished with the worst record in the majors with plenty to spare completing a season they richly deserved. The only more appropriate end would have been Hurricane Georges leveling Pro Player Stadium and every Blockbuster Video Store in Florida.

Several milestones were reached with two players over sixty home runs for the first time and four at fifty or over. Barry Bonds joined the 400 HR and 400 stolen base club as its founding member. McGwire hit over 50 homers for the third straight year something never done before, and Griffey who finished with 56 for the second consecutive year is on pace to pass Henry Aaron. RBIs are moved up faster than Michael Eisner bonuses with Sosa and Juan Gonzalez challenging history. Sosa is the fourth player to hit over 50 home runs and drive in over 150 runs, joining Ruth, Hack Wilson, and Jimmy Foxx, while Juan Gonzalez finished just one RBI behind Sosa after being on an early season record pace.

Alex Rodriguez became only the third 40-40 club member and the first infielder to reach that level. Andruw Jones is the youngest player ever to reach the 20-20 club, and nearly made the 30-30 club coming up only three stolen bases short. And of course Cal Ripken's streak came to a close thus ending Cal's perpetual breaking and setting of a record not likely to be broken again. In the shadows Rickey Henderson in his late 30s still is the best thief in the game and continues to set career records for stolen bases.

David Wells entered the record books with his perfect game and that certainly will be seen as a major highlight in this Yankee season of seasons. Kerry Wood of the Cubs pitched an amazing 20 strikeout game against the Astros in only his fifth major league start. Roger Clemens won the pitching triple crown (Wins, K's, and ERA) on the way to what looks like another Cy Young season with wins in his last 15 decisions.

Two other players made amazing comebacks. Greg Vaughn, the fourth and final member of the 50 home run club, put up numbers in San Diego that will earn him serious consideration as MVP. A year ago he was ending a season that led to serious speculation that his career might be over. In the American League Eric Davis has had a year that will long be remembered following his battle with cancer most of the previous season.

On the down side it was difficult and puzzling to see the collapse of Mark Wohlers. He went from ace reliever to someone who couldn't get a ball over the plate, reminiscent of the tragedy of Steve Blass. Wohlers is another reminder of the fragility of fame and glory and how quickly an athletic career can head into free fall.

This will also be remembered as the year the Twins didn't move, the Expos didn't move, and the Devil Rays should have moved. The comparative attendance figures from Tampa Bay and Phoenix show how the American League once again got snookered by the National League. Playing in an outdated ballpark that has all the charm of a warehouse, the Tampa Bay franchise has been a major disappointment to its owners. In the end it seems destined to disappoint many others.

Finally 1998 will be remembered as the year that the Acting- Commissioner-for-Life, Bud Selig, was replaced by

the Permanent- Acting-Commissioner-for-Life, Bud Zelig, and it may also be remembered as the year Marge Schott was traded for Larry Flynt.

Yet even with that, 1998 will be cherished as a great year for the National Pastime.

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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