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## The Beauty and Appeal of Baseball Shines Again in Playoffs

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If you have been watching baseball the last few weeks, and you didn't get it before, you should now fully understand the beauty and appeal of this intricate and always surprising game.

When the New York Mets rolled into Atlanta only one game out of first place with less than two weeks left in the season you knew this would decide their fate. After being rolled in Atlanta, and then a week later hammered in New York by the Braves, the Mets were clearly and unequivocally dead. A few days later they pounded the Cincinnati Reds and headed into the playoffs against the Arizona Diamondbacks, the best team that money could buy this year.

This was the beginning of the improbable set of first round playoffs.

The Texas Rangers, the best hitting team in the American League, came into Yankee Stadium and were beaten soundly twice and then went back to Doby Bush Stadium in Arlington and lost again. This powerful team scored two runs in three games. There is no logic to this, but it keeps happening year after year. Ranger Manager Johnny Oates says it's a mystery to him, he simply can not understand it. Somebody better understand it in Texas because the American League Championship is likely to keep going through Yankee Stadium.

In the other half of the A.L. show the Red Sox won again with smoke and mirrors, some heavy hitting, and Pedro. The Indians lost with no pitching. Mike Hargrove was then fired by John Hart because Hart didn't get Hargrove the pitching he needed to win. You make the call!

Diamondbacks are not forever and in this series with the Mets the great mystery is that Randy Johnson did not win, and apparently can not win a playoff game. Why? For the same reason Texas can't hit the Yankees. It is a mystery and that's baseball. In the decisive game the Mets backup catcher hits a walk-off homer and that's baseball too.

As for the Braves and Astros they played four very interesting games with the Braves using four different starters to get the three wins, and once again Bagwell and

Biggio disappeared as hitters. When the Braves beat Hampton, the best starter in the National League this year, it was another testimony to the "You never know" School of Baseball Wisdom. This is a Braves team that lost two of its best hitters, Gallaraga and Lopez, and its closer and remains essentially anemic at the bat. In many ways it is a team that shouldn't have been here. Bobby Cox makes all sorts of odd managerial moves and in this series they work. And that's baseball.

The Red Sox saw their smoke and mirrors run ended by the Yankees in a series overshadowed by the Braves-Mets drama. The Yankees showed those winning elements of great starting pitching, dominating closing pitching, timely hitting and solid play. There was one exception in the Clemens fiasco, but then that too added to the drama of a rather pale series. The Red Sox had the always awesome pitching of Pedro Martinez, the good pitching of Ramon Martinez, and some decent relief pitching. They displayed an error filled defense that far outdid any of the blunders of the hapless umpires.

Red Sox fans showed their ability to outdo the New York fans in bad behavior and bad taste, making a run at taking the title for crude fan behavior away from the City of Brotherly Love where Michael Irvin's spinal injury drew the taunts of Philadelphia's fanatics.

At some point during all these proceedings across America I heard it said that there are fifty starting pitchers in the major leagues from the Dominican Republic. And I thought it was shortstops.

As for the Braves-Mets Series what more can be said. The Braves ran all over the Mets with a lot of help from the Mets and went up in the Series three games to none. The Mets were again declared dead. Well, not quite. No team has ever come back from a hole like this in baseball, and that hasn't changed. On the other hand the Mets did not go quietly into the night. Games five and six were for the ages, comparable to the sixth and seventh games of the 1991 World Series.

Both games went extra innings, both saw all sorts of scoring chances missed, both saw strange managerial decisions and bizarre behavior on the bases, both saw gut check after gut check. Robin Ventura's grand slam single

will become part of baseball lore down through the next millenium, as will the Henderson-Bonilla card game, and Kenny Rodgers' name will never pass the lips of a Met fanatic without an obscenity attached to it somewhere.

As the third ball was thrown to Andruw Jones well after midnight in Game Six Joe Simpson on Braves radio began to shout, I can't believe it could end this way. I can't believe it. But it did. And he probably still doesn't believe it. After all that great baseball, and all those lead changes and ties, it came down to the decisive and always high drama of a bases loaded walk. What a way to close it out.

But then that's baseball and that's why it will be very difficult for the World Series to match the drama, excitement, and sheer lunacy of the past few weeks.

The great thing is that it could.

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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