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A storied ALCS

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A storied ALCS
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I certainly don't want to belittle the significance of what happened in the American League Championship Series this past ten days, but I would like to cast some doubt on the universal praise gushing through the baseball media emanating as it does from the Northeast. Certainly one cannot doubt that the achievement of the Boston Red Sox in coming back from a 0-3 deficit to win the series is factually the greatest comeback in post-season baseball history. You can look it up, as Casey used to say.

Certainly one cannot diminish the achievement of the Red Sox players who came from the brink of elimination over and over again in games four and five of the series only to win in extra-innings. The performance of Curt Schilling with a severely damaged ankle stitched up to allow him to take the mound was heroic in a classical sense even though aided by the needle. The big game winning hits by David Ortiz earned him the MVP of the Series and made him eligible for deification in New England.

One cannot but wonder at a series that began with the Red Sox praying for rain to rest their pitching and ended with their pitching dominating the mighty Yankee bats. When the rain ended the Yankees came back and put runs up on the board at will, and many Sox fans began to hope for forty days and forty nights of rain. Analysts will be plowing through this one for the remainder of this new century trying to find the definitive answer to the question, "What happened here?" The debates about a Yankee collapse or a Red Sox miracle will go on and on. George Steinbrenner will hold endless meetings in Tampa to fathom the cause of this extraordinary event and determine what must be done to improve a team that won 105 games.

All that aside, and I admit that is a lot to put aside, I am not ready to put this series under glass as the greatest ever. I would suggest that over the past century there were post-season series that featured better play and near equal drama, and for those with very short memories I would toss out the World Series of 2001 and 1991 as nominees.

One also need not look much further than the just concluded National League Championship Series to find some very high

quality baseball, dramatic games, and heroic achievements. The Cardinals and Astros unfortunately toiled for much of the time in late afternoon games (lunchtime affairs on the West Coast) before a limited national audience. Game one of the series was on Fox Sports Net. And in the case of one of the best games in the series, the National League drama was relegated to a network called "FX" while the Red Sox and Yankees plodded through extra-innings in the main tent.

The one thing this series featured was high quality play and a brisk pacing that seemed sorely lacking in the Sox/Yankee series. The Cards/Astros series had it all and was a much better example of well-played baseball which explored all the intricacies of the game: High quality starting pitching, great relief pitching, playing for one run while showing even a suicide squeeze, the dramatic long ball, and the great individual performances and dramas.

The Sox/Yanks extravaganza was a plodding poorly played affair whose tension came from the extra-innings, which also dragged on into the night begging to have someone pull the plug. Yes, I watched it all, yes it had drama, but it hardly was a great advertisement for the game itself.

I don't attribute this to some qualitative difference between play in the two leagues. I don't make that "AL/NL Ball" distinction which is a National League created myth dating from the Nineteen-twenties when the National League didn't have Babe Ruth in their league. The ALCS was not the great exhibition of quality baseball that it is being made out to be. Indeed if you compare it to the pacing of the Yankee/Twins series it comes up short in that regard. The Designated Hitter does change the style of the game, but pacing is not to be confused with style. You can find slow, sloppy, and molasses paced games anywhere in any league. The five-hour plus game is not simply the function of extra-innings.

The most telling contrast came in Game Five when the Yankees and Red Sox were "humiliated" by the television people and forced to start play just after 5 p.m. and then played through most of the Astros-Cardinal game which started close to 8:30 p.m. The overlap, if you had access to "FX" the Network of Baseball in Exile, was instructive. Through the magic of one of the greatest inventions in the history of mankind, the remote, those with quick reactions could fly electronically between games.

It was in this process that the profound difference in the two styles of these games was revealed. Pitches came at a ratio of about two, and sometimes three, to one, as indeed did innings. It was startling and disconcerting. It also added to the tedium of watching the Yankees and Red Sox slog on through the night. The National League series was of course aided by the fact that Tim McCarver was covering the American League, which made the AL games seem even slower than they were.

I would say however that the one thing that the AL Series had that the NL series did not have was incredible intensity in the stands, especially among the long suffering Red Sox faithful. The tension, the anxiety, the impending sense of doom written all over the faces of Sox fans was a thing a wonder. This is not to discount the fans of other teams, but Sox fans are one of the great wonders of nature.

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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