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Baseball Playoffs: Atlanta and Toronto Move On

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Most of Wednesday it looked as though it would be the year of the bridesmaids in the World Series. But not quite. Francisco Cabrerra and Jose Lind saw to that. Lind's error extended the ninth inning, and Cabrerra's single ended it. Facing certain defeat the Atlanta Braves scored three runs to win 3-2 and the Pirates remain bridesmaids for the third consecutive year. Earlier in the day Toronto got a major monkey off its back by eliminating the Oakland A's.

Every baseball game, every series, and every season has a certain personality or character.

The National League Series won by Atlanta had a split personality. In the first two games the Braves dominated. In Game one John Schmoltz overpowered the Pirates and the Braves won with relative ease. In game two Steve Avery dominated the Pirates for six innings while the Braves hammered Pirate pitching, topped off by Ron Gant's grand-slam off ex-Brave Bob intentional-Walk.

Tim Wakefield, the knuckleballer from Eau Gallie High School and FIT, gave a mesmerizing pitching performance in Game three which the Pirates won, 3-2. The good news for the Braves was that Tom Glavine pitched well.

The Braves' pitching was dominating the Pirates, especially the middle of the Pirate order, Van Slyke-Bonds-King. And Braves hitters were pounding the Pirate bullpen.

Game Four was more of the same with John Schmoltz, his psychologist, and the Brave bullpen, controlling the Pirate hitters. This game belonged to Otis Nixon who was 4 for 5, with three singles and a double, two RBIs, and two runs scored. When Schmoltz stole second base in the sixth inning and then Nixon followed with a double into the gap the Pirates were bleeding badly and Series looked nearly over.

And then it turned around. Bob intentional-Walk was back pitching the best game of his career, and the Pirate bats woke up. Steve Avery was gone in 1/3 of an inning. In Game six Tim Wakefield was back to baffle the Braves, and this time it was Tom Glavine who was blasted, leaving the game in the second inning. The use of these pitchers on three days rest was one of the great errors of the Series, and Bobby Cox is fortunate not

to have repeated his feat of losing a Series after having a three-one lead, as he did in 1985 with the Blue Jays.

In the American League it is now clear that the god's of baseball no longer care if the World Series goes outside the United States. The Oakland-Toronto Series from the start looked like a heavyweight fight. Two powerful teams with strong pitching and high powered offenses slammed away at each; each game filled with tension that began to mount from the opening pitch, for the first five games. In game one it was all long-ball with Jack Morris and Dave Stewart, two veteran money pitchers, going at it pitch-for-pitch. In the ninth inning with the score tied Harold Baines reached the upper deck off Morris, and in the bottom of the inning Eckersly sealed the victory with his 7 millionth save.

Game two was another heavyweight affair. This time David Cone pitched nearly perfect baseball for eight innings, and outdueled Mike Moore. Kelly Gruber had the big home run in this one.

Game three was revealing. Neither Juan Guzman nor Ron Darling was all that effective, but something amazing happened. The A's made three errors, three wild pitches, and at least one major mental mistake when McGuire tried to score from third on a short fly to Joe Carter in right-field. The fact is that the A's played very poor fundamental baseball and made several mental mistakes. In addition the A's couldn't hit with runners in scoring position. They had fifteen men left-on-base. Did they miss Jose Canseco?

Then in Game four the J's rallied in the eighth and ninth innings with Roberto Alomar hitting the game tying home run off Dennis Eckersly, ending a myth of invincibility. The A's would make one more grand gesture in Game Five when Dave Stewart willed one more victory. But this series really did end in Game Four. And if you are wondering if the A's missed Canseco think about the A's lineup with and without him. The World Series will be played in Canada.

It seems as though the Jays have a slight advantage. Both managers might well consider using a four-man pitching rotation as Glavine, Avery, Cone, and Morris looked less than their normal selves on three days rest and both teams are deep in starting pitching. It would also appear that the Jays hitters are a bit stronger than the Braves. Almost everyone in the Toronto lineup seems to be swinging the bat well, while the Braves hitters have been off-duty since Game three.

But of course in four games, if the Series goes seven, the designated hitter will not be used, and the Toronto line-up will be significantly weakened. In the other three games the Braves will be allowed to use the DH and significantly strengthen their line-up.

The Braves seem to be able to find a way to win, and their experience in last year's World Series should serve them well. I won't need my homer hankie, but I do have my tomahawk ready. And if you're going to Toronto don't forget your toque, 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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