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Baseball's September and postseason

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Baseball's September and postseason
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It is difficult to think of any sport that could provide more than baseball has delivered over the past six months. Sure fire winners have tanked. Big payroll teams have missed the playoffs. Small payroll teams have gone to the wire and beyond. Improbable scenarios driven by individual stars have developed over the last six weeks in Milwaukee and Los Angeles. A dismal team playing in a dismal ballpark has gone from last to first passing the two most powerful teams in the American League. Two ballparks with substantial histories in New York have closed as both of their occupants missed the playoffs. A team that hasn't won a World Series in exactly one hundred years seems to have a very good shot at one this year. In the final four days of the extended regular season pitching performances of excellence were produced by stars and virtual unknowns. Teams that were out of the pennant races tortured those seeking to clinch a divisional title. This has been a remarkable year, and now the playoffs begin.

Let's start in Tampa Bay or St. Petersburg. In the off- season the Tampa Bay Devil Rays went through an exorcism with phenomenal results. Driving out the Devil they then changed uniforms and team colors and did everything they could to change their karma. What most of the country did not know was that the Rays had been transforming themselves quietly over the past two years with new ownership, a new front office, and a new manager who will surely be the American League Manager of the Year, Joe Maddon.

I saw the Rays in late April when they played a three game series at Disney World and swept the Toronto Blue Jays. These were also the first games for Evan Longoria who may be the AL Rookie of the Year. This was the beginning of their first significant winning streak as they went from Disney World back to St. Petersburg and swept the Red Sox. I saw them again in June as they swept the Cubs at the Can, (Tropicana Field). The pitchers who had been developing for the past couple of years were now maturing and the bullpen was looking invincible.

Then just before the All-Star break the Rays lost seven straight and it looked like the run may have ended. It did not and they came back from the break ending the free fall. More adversity struck when Evan Longoria went on the DL for several weeks and

Carl Crawford went out for the season. Despite these developments they remained nearly unbeatable at home, and began to win on the road as well. On September 19 the Rays clinched a playoff spot with a hammering of the Minnesota Twins in The Can. This is a very good team with a lot of young players, more future major leaguers in the minors, and a good mix of veterans. The only question that remains is will anyone ever go out and see them play on a regular basis? That question will be answered next season.

Another compelling story is the impressive season of the Chicago Cubs who also are dominant at home in the Friendly Confines. Like the Rays and Red Sox they look like a different team at home than the one that goes on the road. It is now one hundred years since the Cubs won a World Series, and since the beginning of the season many people have been saying this is the year for the string to be broken. True Cub fans know this is simply whistling in the dark as they wait to see what new version of the Black Cat or Bartman will sweep the Cubs away.

Mention also needs to be made of the two ballparks that have seen their last games. Yankee Stadium closed a week ago, a shock to many who thought it would close after the World Series. With the highest payroll in the game, surely this group could at least make the playoffs. Who was going to beat them out? The Devil Rays? No. The Rays and the Red Sox. Yes.

The history of Yankee Stadium overflows with baseball lore and the memories of multiple major events over the years. These were celebrated throughout the season and rightly so. Unfortunately the whole thing went over the top as is often the case in New York. At the end Joe Torre and Roger Clemens were written out of Yankee history. Then as a final classless gesture, as the doors closed, one could hear Young Hankenstein whining about the unfairness of the divisional system that denied the Yankees their rightful place in the playoffs. How pathetic was that?

Across town at Shea Stadium the closing was handled with more dignity and less hyperbole. It was all done within the agony of another Mets' failure to make the playoffs. For the second year in a row the Florida Marlins beat the Mets on the last day of the season to crush their hopes. On Saturday Johan Santana pitched one of the great pressure games of this or any season to keep the Mets in the hunt, only to see Carsten Charles Sabathia replicate the feat for the Brewers on Sunday, sending the Brewers to the playoffs. As for the Mets, their fans should celebrate the fact that this team was still in the race at the

end. The Mets had no closer for the final weeks of the season and an inadequate bullpen the entire season. This was not the dramatic collapse of last year, but rather an overachieving team stretching their hopes all the way to the end of the season.

One of the great things about baseball is that at the end of the season teams whose hopes were dashed in the early months of the season, who only wanted to go home as soon as possible, could swing into Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York and derail those about to clinch a spot in the playoffs. The Indians, Royals and Marlins did not have great seasons, but they were all a major factor in those final days.

With one extra game for the White Sox and the Twins the regular season ended last night with two more excellent pitching performances. Nick Blackburn and John Danks, two young and inconsistent pitchers, both stepped up and gave their teams a chance to win. In the end Blackburn gave up one solo home run and the White Sox were 1-0 winners. It was a great ending to a great regular season, full of drama and surprises. We can only hope that the next several weeks will produce more of the same.

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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