

ALDS Game 5: Victory Is Mine, Saith Detroit – by Mark Pattison

In a short series, they say, anything can happen. And when that “anything” happens, it’s usually detrimental to your team. But if your playoff series mirrors your regular season, then you’re in pretty good shape.

And that is precisely what happened in Game 5 of the Tigers-A’s AL Division Series. Justin Verlander was on his game – with a vengeance – and Miguel Cabrera turned on mistake pitch for a two-run homer in the fourth inning to propel Detroit to a 3-0 win over Oakland.

Verlander, he of the middling (for him, anyway) 13-12 regular-season record and 3.46 ERA, was simply unstoppable. He found his rhythm early and never found a need to deviate from it. He struck out 10 Athletics in eight innings, yet he kept his pitch count to 111 – just a shade under 14 pitches per inning on average.

He flirted with a perfect game, retiring the first 16 Oakland batters in a row. (If you remember last year’s Annual Gathering game against Seattle – the one with the monsoon just as the bottom of the second inning started -- you will recall that Doug Fister retired the first 16 Mariners in a row, too.) Even after issuing a walk to Josh Reddick, Verlander still had a no-hitter going into the seventh inning, until Yoenis Cespedes laced a clean single into center field.

One member of our Mayo Smith Society informal viewing party, watching the game, noted during the second inning that Verlander had that “bite me” look about him. A Cleveland Indians fan who watched the game, reported the next day that he was impressed at how quickly Verlander was opening and closing his glove after the Cespedes single. “I was a pitcher for 11 years,” this Tribe guy said, “and he wanted the ball. He was in his rhythm and he didn’t want anything to be interrupting it.”

Verlander now owns the longest scoreless streak by one pitcher against any single team in postseason play, having extended his string against the A’s to 30 innings. He topped such luminaries as Christy Mathewson, who silenced the Athletics’ bats when they were holed up in Philadelphia, and Lew Burdette, who stilled the New York Yankees’ sluggers in the 1957 World Series.

If you’re keeping count – and we certainly are – Verlander has not given up a run since Sept. 18, when he coughed up a home run to Seattle’s Justin Smoak. And if you’re really keeping count, that’s 78 outs, or 26 innings’ worth of shutout ball. The Tigers themselves were shut out four times in September, and Verlander was on the mound for three of those games, which may account in part for that 13-12 record. Keep in mind Detroit was also scoreless in Game 2 of this ALDS, with Verlander on the hill against Oakland’s Sonny Gray in their first matchup.

Had Gray been able to match Verlander inning for inning a second time like he had in Game 2, then we might have seen a different result. We might well be anointing Gray as the new pitching phenom of our age. But to expect a rookie, a midseason callup at that, to pull off such a feat is really asking too much. Gray did not have the location and command of his pitches in Game 5 that he had five evenings earlier. That much was evident on the fastball up in the zone to Cabrera. While Miguel is a great waste-pitch hitter, rocketing balls into the seats thrown way outside and way inside, his accumulated maladies have sapped him of much of this Samson-like strength. But Gray’s offering was one that Cabrera could pull – which he did, depositing it over the fence in front of some unoccupied steps beyond left field. At the viewing party, I could tell that Cabrera had connected for a four-bagger even before TBS switched the camera angle, the rainbow trajectory was that obvious.

Detroit’s third run should not be left to oversight. In the sixth inning, Gray got chased after giving up singles to Victor Martinez up the middle and then to Jhonny Peralta to left field. Avila got Martinez to third on a fielder’s choice that Oakland first baseman Brandon Moss flung over to A’s shortstop Jed Lowrie to nail Peralta at second base. Then Omar Infante hit his own fielder’s choice, with A’s third baseman Josh Donaldson flagging down a hard grounder, but second sacker Alberto Callaspo (making his first start in the series) bobbled the ball, finally gaining control of the spheroid as Avila was bearing down on him, sliding through the base to

spoil any hope of an Oakland double play, with Martinez scoring as a result. The run loomed large, and was plenty of insurance for Verlander in his last two innings of work. Closer Joaquin Benoit gave up a two-out single to Lowrie, then hit Cespedes with a pitch. But Seth Smith, who had the potential to tie up Game 4 in the ninth inning against Benoit only to strike out, lofted a harmless fly ball to right field that Torii Hunter snagged to seal the victory, and the series.

So now it's on to Boston, where Cabrera can bang balls all game long off the Green Monster if he lacks the power to push the ball over it. Game 1 is likely to feature AL ERA champ Anibal Sanchez vs. Red Sox ace Jon Lester. All games will be on Fox. Hitting may get you into the playoffs, but it's pitching that advances you through the playoffs. And Detroit's rotation is loaded.

Short Stripes

Most annoying fan of the game: Well, it's a tie. In the "obnoxious" category, it was an middle-aged A's fan who was seated behind home plate right behind a TBS field microphone, who was waving his gold rally towel up and down with both hands when Verlander was pitching. He even lifted up his sweatshirt to expose his chest at one point until one of those Oakland Coliseum "fan assistance" types told him to cool it. In the "sour grapes" category, a poster-painter was hoping to get on camera with his idea of a clever use of TBS' initials. It read:

Cabrera

Too

Bad U

Suck

TBS didn't zero in on the poster, but it was still visible as Cabrera stepped to the plate in the fourth inning – and launched that home run.

Austin Jackson and Oakland's Brandon Moss share a bit of ignominy. They now share the record for most strikeouts in a Division Series, with 13 each. Jackson did his in 20 at-bats, while Moss was better (or worse, depending on your view), needing only 18 at-bats to whiff 13 times.

Prince Fielder's slugging percentage on fastballs has gone down each year since 2011, when he signed with Detroit in the offseason. The slump has continued in the 2013 postseason, where his SLG is a measly .322. That number belies the muscular, tattooed arms he flashed during the Tigers' postgame locker room celebration.

Cabrera has now tied Bill "Moose" Skowron with nine RBI in do-or-die postseason games. Thanks to baseball-reference.com for digging up that stat. Meanwhile, in the do-or-die digest, Oakland is now 0-6 in do-or-die games, including 0-5 at home. They're just 1-11 in the Billy Beane era in postseason clinchers. The sole win was the ALDS sweep over Minnesota in 2006; the A's promptly got swept by Detroit in the ALCS.

Detroit's batting order was tweaked to accommodate Don Kelly in left field, as Kelly went 2-for-3 against Gray in Game 2. Jhonny Peralta moved to shortstop – another wise move, since when opposing batters make contact against Verlander, those balls more often are hit in the air than on the ground. Oakland did even more tweaking, inserting Callaspo as a starter at second base over Eric Sogard, and moving Moss, Reddick and Vogt down in the order, while making Cespedes the cleanup hitter.

Detroit and Boston have no postseason history. They were both in the AL East from 1969, the start of divisional play, through 1997, when Detroit joined the Central upon the admission of Tampa Bay to the American League. Detroit's salad days didn't start until 2006, but their paths have not crossed until now. The closest they've come in the past?

1967: Boston's "Impossible Dream" team took the AL flag on the last day of the season when Detroit, the last contender of a four-team scramble for the pennant, could not win both ends of a home doubleheader against the Angels to force a playoff.

1972: A players' strike got the season started late and commissioner Bowie Kuhn decreed that games lost from the strike would not be rescheduled. Detroit was at it hammer-and-tong with the Bosox up to the season-ending series. Detroit took the first two games to clinch the division, but lost the season finale, with Boston finishing second, a half-game behind the Tigers.

1988: Detroit played bad baseball for most of the month of September and lost its AL East lead to Boston. The Crimson Hose clinched the East with a week to go. Boston stumbled the final week of the season and the Tigers caught fire, but it was to no avail, as Detroit finished one game behind the Rex Sox.

Remember, Mayoites: The Mayo Smith Society has its own Facebook page. Just type in “Mayo Smith Society” and ask to join. However, if we don’t know who you are and lack any apparent Tigers or Michigan connection, we may ask you to state how you became a Tigers fan. While our ranks are steadily growing, we’ve also been getting requests lately from folks in countries we didn’t even know followed baseball.

E-Mayo Flash is a publication of the Mayo Smith Society -- Tigers Fans Who Always Care!
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