

ALCS Game 6: You Can't Keep Walking the Tightrope – By David Raglin

I was optimistic going into Game 6. Saturday was my birthday, and the Tigers would not dare lose the pennant on my birthday, would they? As my wife and I sat down to watch Game 6, I was thinking about my plans to watch Sunday night's Game 7.

This series has been a very interesting one in the Raglin-Mantegani household. My wife, Barb Mantegani, is a New England native who is as big a Red Sox fan as I am a Tigers fan. For the first 11 seasons of marriage, we had avoided a Detroit-Boston playoff matchup, pretty amazing considering that one (but not both) teams had been in the playoffs in six of the last seven seasons. We watched Game 1 separately (Barb and home and I at Mark Pattison's house), and Barb was out of town for Game 3, but otherwise, we watched the other four games together. As we sat down for Game 6, I figured we were in for another game full of twists and turns. How right that was.

The first two-and-a-half innings fit the pattern of the series -- good pitchers mowing down the hitters. The Tigers had three singles, one in each inning, and the Sox had two on in the first after a single and a walk, but none of those situations really felt like scoring situations. Despite the lack of action, the game dragged very slowly, mostly due to Clay Buchholz's notorious slow pace. I timed him at 45 seconds between pitches. It's bad enough having to put up with that when you are rooting for him (which I usually do since I root for the Sox when they are not playing my Tigers), but when he is the opposing pitcher, it is maddening.

The bottom of the third was the first time it seemed like the scoreboard might change. Max Scherzer walked Xander Bogaerts and Jacoby Ellsbury to start the inning. Shane Victorino, the switch-hitter batting right-handed against Scherzer, tried a sacrifice bunt, but he popped the bunt up just fair along the first base line. Scherzer made an amazing dive to catch the ball. The next batter, Dustin Pedroia, tried to bring back the memory of Carlton Fisk with a long fly ball down the left field line. I thought it was gone, but it hooked -- just foul! Pedroia then hit into a double play to end the inning.

Despite the two walks, I was really happy after that half inning. Breaks even out over a long season, but they don't in a game, and I took it as a sign that the breaks were going our way. Unfortunately, the Tigers could not capitalize on them the next inning, going out meekly, 1-2-3.

In fact, nothing much happened until the bottom of the fifth, when a two out double by Bogaerts and a single by Ellsbury gave the Sox the first run of the game. The inning ended with Alex Avila throwing out Ellsbury at second trying to steal.

But the Tigers got the run back and more in the next half inning. A Torii Hunter walk and a Miguel Cabrera single knocked Boston starter Clay Buchholz out of the game. The Sox brought in lefty Franklin Morales to face the left-handed hitting Fielder. Morales's weak spot has been his command, and there were many Boston rooters on Twitter and Facebook condemning the move. Their fears were born out when Fielder walked on four pitches, none close to the strike zone.

Victor Martinez, the offensive stalwart for the Tigers against his old team, hit what we thought at home (me happing, Barb, not so much) was a sure grand slam. Instead it hit high up on the Green Monster. Still, it was two runs, and with first and third and nobody out, it looked like we could be in for a big inning.

Then came the play that rightly or wrongly defined the series, and Prince Fielder, for Tiger fans. Jhonny Peralta hit a slow grounder to Pedroia at second. Martinez stopped between first and second to make it harder for Pedroia to tag him. Pedroia made the tag, but for some strange and unbelievable reason, Fielder had run three-quarters of the way to home and then turned around and tried to return to third. He attempted some sort of belly flop-slide but ended up well short of the bag. He was a dead duck, and the Tigers had only a man on second (Peralta, who kept running), and two out, instead of runners on first and third and one out, the rally still

strong. Avila struck out to end the inning.

That play capped a dreadful postseason for Fielder. With Cabrera not Cabrera, Fielder needed to step up his game. Instead, he went 9-for-40 (.225) with only one extra-base hit, a double, and made the key mistake in the deciding game. This was after a season that was much worse than his first season in Detroit. We will be focusing on Fielder in a future issue of Tigers Stripes, but we certainly hope this year was an aberration and that Fielder will be better in 2014.

It looked like the Red Sox might make the Tigers pay right away for not piling on the runs, but after hitting Victorino and walking Pedroia, Scherzer got David Ortiz to line out to left, Mike Napoli to strike out, and Jason Saltalamacchia to pop to short.

The top of the seventh saw the Tigers make one of the many baserunning blunders that we saw in this postseason. Austin Jackson singled with one out but was promptly picked off first. A single by Jose Iglesias was followed by Hunter reaching on an error when relief pitcher Brandon Workman could not pick up Hunter's bunt, but with Jackson in the dugout the rally fizzled after Cabrera grounded out.

The next inning effectively ended the game and the season for the Tigers. Johnny Gomes led off with a double off the Monster. Scherzer then struck out Stephen Drew but walked Bogaerts on a 3-2 pitch that was a strike. After 100 pitches, manager Jim Leyland brought in Drew Smyly. Smyly got the ground ball he wanted, but Iglesias bobbled it and the bases were loaded. Leyland made another pitching change, bringing in Jose Veras. Veras got Shane Victorino down 0-2 in the count, but the next pitch went over the Monster for the second game-changing grand slam of the series for Boston.

The Tigers went out 1-2-3 on 10 pitches in the eighth, and in the ninth, the first two hitters made outs. Austin Jackson then got a single, prolonging the game one batter until Iglesias struck out to end the Tigers 2013 season.

The only good news about the Jackson single was that it pushed the game a couple of minutes longer. It ended at 12:01 Eastern Daylight Time. That meant the Tigers were not eliminated on my birthday.

There will be a lot of valid questions asked about the Tigers and their team in the wake of this series loss. The lack of offense meant the Tigers, especially their starters, were always walking a tightrope. One bad move, and they would fall off. Yes, the Red Sox are a very good team, but the Tigers often beat themselves. As much as we liked, and still like, the trades Dave Dombrowski made to get the Joses -- Iglesias and Veras -- these recent acquisitions did not look good in the decisive bottom of the seventh. It is fair to question Jim Leyland's decisions to pull Max Scherzer in Games 2 and 6; although Justin Verlander, in the in-game Fox interview in Game 6, noted that 110 pitches in a playoff game is much more taxing than in a regular season game. Twice Leyland played the one-pitcher-per-batter game and both times it ended up with a grand slam home run. It is also fair to wonder why the Tigers insisted on playing a severely hampered Miguel Cabrera, and still batting him in key spots in the batting order, when he could not play due to his groin injury. He made a key error in Game 5 and was not a major threat at the plate.

A lot of this is being written out of frustration, but we know that the good news is that we did reach the Final Four of baseball for the third straight year. The frustration is that this team should have won the World Series, and they did not make the Series, not because they were outplayed, but because of their own faults. Let's hope 2014 is better!

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