

Regular-season records meaningless; Underdogs thrive when it's October

by *bendweekly*

Twenty-one of 22 teams. Count 'em. Now count 'em out.

Indeed, of the last 22 clubs to win 100 or more games, only the 1998 New York Yankees prevailed as World Series champions. But teams don't win 100 games anymore. With their 90-72 record, the Arizona Diamondbacks have fewer wins than any league leader since the season was expanded to 162 games in 1961.

While major league baseball has achieved its desired parity, entering the playoffs with the best record has seemed tantamount to the kiss of death.

In each of the past five World Series, at least one of the pennant winners qualified for the playoffs as a wild card, starting with a 2002 matchup in which neither the Anaheim Angels nor the San Francisco Giants were division champs.

Colorado Rockies, World Series champions of 2007? Sounds a bit odd, but why not?

Consider the reigning champions, the St. Louis Cardinals, nowhere to be found this postseason. St. Louis last year won a division with a middling 83-78 record, eventually beating the wild-card Detroit Tigers in the World Series.

"The Cardinals are the classic example for all teams of what can happen," said Padres veteran Morgan Ensberg, who played third base for the wild-card, pennant-winning Houston Astros of 2005. "Once you get in, if you've got the right mix of people, anything can happen."

Keeping all this in mind, the eight-team playoff field of 2007 can be thankful nobody among them finished with a triple-digit win total, the result of a concerted attempt at balance that's clearly working.

This year's two NL West representatives, the Diamondbacks and Rockies, were the worst clubs in the division 12 months ago. More than half of the major league teams were still in contention for postseason berths Sept. 1.

"Once you get in, you almost throw away what you did in the previous six months," said Padres GM Kevin Towers, whose two-time defending division champions were eliminated Monday in their 163rd game of the regular season. "You get there and you're not chasing anybody anymore, not worrying about somebody catching you from behind. Everybody's just trying to be the hot team."

"It really is all about whichever team gets hot at the right time," said Padres utility man Geoff Blum, who earned his ring with a Chicago White Sox team that blew through the 2005 postseason with an 11-1 record. "It's gotten to be like the NCAA (basketball) Tournament."

With what has gone down since 2001, the word "underdog" simply no longer applies to the postseason, almost to the point where all eight clubs must be considered equal contenders. The wonder is whether it might actually be a disadvantage for a club to breeze to its division title, whether even the most dominant of teams can lose its competitive edge in late September and fail to re-ignite itself when the calendar flips to October.

Conversely, the club that scratches and claws its way through the last couple of weeks is primed for the postseason fight.

"Momentum's a huge factor, and if a team's playing well late in the year and into October, that can have a tremendous carryover into the playoffs," said Padres manager Bud Black, who pitched for a Kansas City Royals team that knocked off the 101-win Cardinals in a World Series. "At the same time, I won't say (the Angels) limped in in 2002 (Black was the pitching coach), but we weren't playing our best at the end. We righted the ship once we went to New York, where the matchup helped us. The Angels just always played well against the Yankees, for whatever reason.

"That's where we got our momentum, or rather, just a tremendous amount of confidence going into the ALCS and World Series. On the way, we won low-scoring games and high-scoring games. How? I don't know. We just pitched well enough to win the low-scoring games and scored enough runs to win the high-scoring games."

In the playoffs, payrolls don't seem to matter as much. Nor does star power or even home run power, necessarily.

"I've only been involved in one postseason, but it seems pretty simple to me how you win over a 30-day span," Pittsburgh Pirates manager Jim Tracy said. "You play the best baseball."

At the best possible time.

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