

Frenzied Finish On Deck: 4 Teams, But Only 2 Spots

BY BEN WALKER
AP Baseball Writer

A startling triple play. A spirited comeback. Huge hits by a rookie — a Yale philosophy major, at that — and monumental collapses on the brink.

After six months, 161 games and more than a half-million pitches, the playoff picture was still a blur with one day to go. Boston, Tampa Bay, Atlanta and St. Louis, desperate to play a little longer.

In fact, they did. The Rays made an amazing rally from a seven-run deficit Wednesday night, tying the New York Yankees on pinch-hitter Dan Johnson's solo homer with two outs in the ninth inning. The Braves went to extras, too, when Philadelphia nicked closer Craig Kimbrel for a run in the ninth.

Talk about a fantastic, frenzied finish, more than anyone in the majors could've asked for. And it's not even October yet.

"I think it's really good for baseball," Red Sox manager Terry Francona said. "Not so good for my stomach."

The regular season was supposed to wrap up Wednesday, but surely many fans were rooting for bonus baseball. In both leagues, the possibility loomed.

Boston and the Rays went into the final day even for the AL wild-card spot, the Braves and Cardinals were deadlocked for the NL wild-card berth. If they stayed that way, the slots would be decided with one-game tiebreakers Thursday in Tampa Bay at 4:07 p.m. EDT and in St. Louis at 8:07 p.m.

Chris Carpenter and the Cardinals struck first, winning 8-0 at Houston. The Red Sox, meanwhile, took a slim lead and waited out a rain delay at Baltimore.

Having fun, guys? "It's like living out a bad dream," Braves star Chipper Jones said.

A few weeks ago, there didn't seem to be a single race left.

The Red Sox held a nine-game lead over Tampa Bay on the morning of Sept. 4. The Braves were 10 1/2 games ahead of St. Louis before play on Aug. 26.

"It's kind of fed us here the last

few days, 120 years of baseball and this is one of those historic runs to tie," Cardinals manager Tony La Russa said.

This is the third time in the wild-card era where a pair of play-off spots were open going into the last day, STATS LLC said. In 1995, the Angels, Yankees, Astros and Rockies were still competing; in 2005, the Indians, Red Sox, Phillies and Astros were in play.

This much was certain: The Yankees will host an AL playoff opener on Friday night, the Philadelphia Phillies will be home for Game 1 in the NL on Saturday.

Detroit and Texas had clinched AL spots, Milwaukee and Arizona had earned them in the NL. But no pairings had been set as those division champions scrapped for home-field advantage, down to the last out.

"We don't feel like we have anything to lose. We've had a great run," Tampa Bay's Ben Zobrist said. "We're hoping to cap it with a playoff berth."

Boston stranded the potential tying run at second base in the ninth, holding on for an 8-7 win at Baltimore on Tuesday night. The Red Sox haven't won consecutive games since sweeping a double-header against Oakland on Aug. 27.

Looking for a sign of serendipity, Red Sox Nation? Rookie Ryan Lavanway, the Yale thinker who never played a big league game before August, started because of injuries to catchers Jarrod Saltalamacchia and Jason Varitek and hit a three-run homer and a solo shot.

"Everybody's been watching the scoreboard and knowing that we need to win tonight so we can come back tomorrow and fight through it again," Boston star David Ortiz said. "I hope if I'm still here next year we can make it easier. We're playing like this is a play-off already."

At Tropicana Field, the Rays turned a 5-4-3 triple play to beat the Yankees, only the third in franchise history.

"Everybody's thirsty for offense, and we'd like to score more," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "But we're built around pitching and defense."

Huskers, Badgers Have Date With History

BY K.C. JOHNSON
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(MCT) — Given the passion with which Camp Randall Stadium typically is filled on Saturdays, it's not often Wisconsin coach Bret Bielema fields a question about season-ticket holders selling seats to a visitor's fan base.

Then again, this Saturday's showdown in Madison, Wis., isn't the typical game.

For starters, it's tradition-rich Nebraska's first-ever Big Ten game after leaving the Big 12 and joining the tradition-rich conference in which Cornhuskers coach Bo Pelini once played for Ohio State. To make matters juicier, Wisconsin and Nebraska rolled through their nonconference schedule at 4-0 and are ranked seventh and eighth, respectively, in both national polls.

A 2008 game pitting No. 10 Ohio State against No. 3 Penn State is the only other game in the last five seasons that two Big Ten teams ranked in the top-10 squared off.

"If you're going to have season tickets, this would be the one you want to see," Bielema said on the Big Ten coaches' weekly teleconference. "I know Nebraska has their little black shirt mojo going. I'm sure there will be a few of them that get in the stands. But hopefully the Wisconsin fans stand strong, wear the red and make that environment second to none Saturday night."

The football should be just as entertaining as the secondary ticket market.

Featuring dynamic quarterback Russell Wilson, Wisconsin has outscored opponents 194-34. Wilson is ranked second nationally in passing efficiency, posting 11 touchdowns to just one interception. Add the one-two punch of tailbacks Montee Ball and James White, who have combined for 664 yards and 12 touchdowns while averaging 6.1 yards per carry, and a Nebraska defense that has bended but not broken will be severely tested.

"They're physical and tough and execute very well," Pelini said of Wisconsin. "Everything they do is very well thought-out. They have balance in everything they do. It's obvious that they have talent. But they're an extremely well-coached team."

Pelini is to hype what a candle



RICK WOOD/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL/MCT

Wisconsin fans party during the second half of action against South Dakota at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wis., on Sept. 24. The Badgers welcome Nebraska to the Big Ten this Saturday.

snuffer is to flame and downplayed the significance of Nebraska's first Big Ten game. But Bielema said he follows the lead of his predecessor and current athletic director Barry Alvarez and embraces history.

"I told our team (Sunday), 'How many times can you, as a player or coach, say you're going to be involved with the start of league play in a new division alignment against an opponent the caliber of Nebraska?'" Bielema said, referencing the Big Ten's new structure of Legends and Leaders divisions. "The tradition, the history, everything they bring with themselves, in addition to being just a really good team this year."

Indeed, though the defense has allowed more yardage and points than Nebraska's fan base might like, a solid ground game with quarterback Taylor Martinez, tailback Rex Burkhead and a deep offensive line has led to 16 rushing touchdowns.

"This is two teams that have done things right that had a little bit of hype going into the year," Bielema said. "So, yeah, this game has built up some momentum."

Huskers

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backfield," he said. "That's what we lack at times is aggression — getting on bodies and getting hands on people."

Cooper, a redshirt freshman, appeared on special teams and as a backup safety in the first three games. His coaches like his size and speed, thought he could be a sound cover man, and moved him to cornerback on Sept. 19.

His initiation in the 38-14 win at Wyoming didn't go smoothly. He had trouble handling the 7,220-foot elevation and got sick to his stomach in the first quarter. He gave up a 48-yard touchdown to Mazi Ogbonna, who beat him on a slant in the second quarter.

"I just wanted to play a perfect game," Cooper said. "I know it's not possible. I just wanted to make the coaches right by putting me out there."

Stafford made three tackles and broke up two passes against the Cowboys.

Pelini said Cooper and Stafford adjusted well, for the most part.

"When the mistakes happened in the game and they were corrected on the sideline, the next time that route combination or run came up, they had made the correction, and that's good to see," Pelini said. "We wouldn't have tried to make those moves and gone so fast with it if those guys didn't have good instincts."

Dennard, the most experienced player in the secondary, played three quarters against Wyoming and made four tackles.

"He came off the field healthy, and I think he is really confident," coach Bo Pelini said. "It was his first time out there and I thought technique-wise he needs to get cleaned up and get back into who he is."

Wisconsin's balanced offense presents a huge challenge.

Montee Ball and James White are averaging 90 and 76 yards a game, respectively, after each went over 900 yards last season. Russell Wilson is second nationally in pass efficiency and is an explosive runner.

"Any time you have a great running game, if you have a quarterback who is as good as he is, they force you to defend the run and put a lot of pressure on your defensive backs," Carl Pelini said. "You need them in run support but at the same time they have to be disciplined in their keys and cover their guys."

Cassidy said the Nebraska defensive backs won't be intimidated after facing receivers such as Justin Blackmon of Oklahoma State and Ryan Broyles of Oklahoma last year. They beat the Cowboys and lost to the Sooners.

"It helps in the secondary because we know what we're capable of," Cassidy said. "That doesn't mean we're going to go out there and shut people down every single play. ... Playing defensive back, you can't be scared or intimidated to go against someone because that's just a recipe for disaster."

Allen

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didn't appreciate being lied to. I was told I'd get an extension and everything, and the way things played out, my biggest thing was, 'Listen, I don't lie to you guys. I show up and bust my tail for you. Don't lie to me,'" Allen said.

Peterson's 20-year run as president, general manager and chief executive of the Chiefs ended after the 2008 season. Hunt is the chairman of the board.

Displeased by Allen's two drunken driving arrests, Peterson traded Allen to the Vikings for three draft picks, one in the first round and two in the third. The Vikings also got a sixth-round draft pick that became starting center John Sullivan. Allen then signed a six-year contract with Minnesota potentially worth about \$74 million with at least \$31 million guaranteed.

That was quite the bounty for the Vikings, but it's hard to argue the trade and the money for an elite defensive end has not paid off.

Allen had a quiet season in 2010, one of a litany of reasons why the Vikings went from NFC runners-up and four points from a Super Bowl appearance to the laughingstock of the league on their way to an embarrassing 6-10 finish.

But even during a down year he had 11 sacks, his lowest total since 2006. The 29-year-old, beginning his eighth NFL season, has the second-most sacks in the league since the trade with 44 1/2 and counting behind DeMarcus Ware of the Dallas Cowboys.

"I just know in my conversations I had with him when we came to training camp, you could sense the commitment that he had to have a great start and a great year," coach Leslie Frazier said. "He was so intent and so disappointed a year ago that the work he put into this offseason, he felt like it was going to pay

dividends. And, boy, he's off to a great start."

Allen has 4 1/2 sacks through three games this year, leading a pass rush that has been one of Minnesota's strengths surrounded by a number of flaws. He's eager to face the Chiefs, who have also started 0-3.

"One of us will get our first win down there. I'm excited to go back down there and play," Allen said.

Quarterback Donovan McNabb knew Allen from past Pro Bowls and as a fellow offseason resident of Arizona, where they've trained during the winter. Allen, McNabb and left guard Steve Hutchinson spoke to the team last week, the day after the second loss, to try to keep the confidence and energy level high.

"Being a teammate of his, you realize how hard he works and how he prepares, and that's all really you want to do as a player," McNabb said. "You want to be able to be who you are, prepare and get ready for game day and other guys begin to see it.

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