

# THE SPORTIER

## Game 162

Game 162. The final game of the MLB regular season after six months of baseball nearly every day. For many teams, the playoff picture is already set; in both the National and American leagues, 3 out of the 5 teams on each side of the postseason bracket are set into their seeded positions. For the remaining 4 postseason spots, Sunday can change a whole lot.

The National League West has been one of the most chaotic divisions across all of baseball. The San Diego Padres, who were recently eliminated from postseason contention, were thought to be sure locks for the postseason before the regular season started. After being given an 80.2% chance to make the playoffs on August 10th according to FanGraphs, when they held the second Wild Card spot in the National League with a record of 67-49, the Padres proceeded to spiral, going 11-32 in their next 43 games, taking them out of any hopes of postseason contention. This leaves just the Los Angeles Dodgers. The Dodgers are simple: there was never a doubt that they would make the postseason (given a 98.4% chance to do so at the beginning of the season). Even while being 20 games over a .500 win percentage entering the trade deadline, the Dodgers, who had lost their star free agent signing, pitcher Trevor Bauer, after he was repeatedly placed on administrative

leave, the Dodgers decided to trade for future Hall of Fame pitcher Max Scherzer. For no particular reason, the Dodgers also decided to acquire Scherzer's All-Stars teammate, shortstop Trea Turner, in the same trade with the Washington Nationals. In 50 games with the Dodgers to date, Turner is batting .335 with 9 home runs, and Scherzer, in 11 starts, owns a 1.98 ERA and 89 strikeouts. Finally, the San Francisco Giants. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, the Giants were not given any thought of playing postseason baseball before the season started (5.7% chance to make the playoffs at the start of the season). With some

outstanding play from veterans, from 33-year-old Brandon Belt (29 home runs), 34-year-old Buster Posey (.302 batting average), and 34-year-old Brandon Crawford (24 home runs), amongst others, the team has risen in the standings, and currently holds the best record in all of baseball with 106 wins. Unfortunately for the Giants, the team with the second-best record to date happens to be the Dodgers, with 105 wins entering Sunday. With both teams having one game remaining, this sets up an interesting scenario with implications for postseason play. The Giants, who play the Padres today, will clinch an NL West Division championship and a first round bye in the playoffs if they either win today or the Dodgers lose. The Dodgers, who face the 95-win NL Central Division champion Milwaukee Brewers, must win today and must hope that the Giants lose to the Padres in order to set up a 163rd regular season game. In this scenario, the Giants would face the Dodgers in one additional regular season game, hosted by the Giants (because they have a 10-9 record against the Dodgers this season). The



winner of this game would be the NL West Division Champion, earning a first round bye and playing the winner of the NL Wild Card Game. As for the loser, they would have to play the surging St. Louis Cardinals, who recently set a franchise record for 17 straight wins in the NL Wild Card game. To recap, with a Giants win, they are automatically the champions of the NL West Division, leaving the Dodgers to play in the Wild Card. The only scenario in which a 163rd game will be played is if the Giants lose and the Dodgers win. Both teams are already locked into playoff contention, but who will get the automatic bid to the NL Division Series? We may get some answers to this question today.

Though one could be very excited about the happenings in the NL West, the honest truth is that both of those teams are guaranteed a playoff spot. In the AL Wild Card, though, we may see one team play not just a 163rd



game, but also a 164th game. As it stands now, the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees would face off in the AL Wild Card game. While the Red Sox and Yankees have the same record, the Red Sox have a better head-to-head record against New York this season, which would give them home field advantage in this Wild Card scenario. But, there are other teams in the mix. First, let's set the scene just the AL East. The Yankees boasted a 91.3% chance to make the playoffs on Opening Day, and for good reason: they had one of the best pitchers in all of baseball as their ace in Gerrit Cole, they had added depth within their starting pitching staff in the form of Jameson

Taillon and Corey Kluber, and they retained likely the most devastating power duo in the league in Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton. Everything looked great for the Yankees ... until it wasn't. On July 16th, after a 4-0 loss to the Red Sox at Yankee Stadium, the Yankees were barely floating at 46-44, good enough for 4th place in the AL East. With the season seemingly slipping away, the Yankees made two key acquisitions at the trade deadline: they acquired Cubs first baseman Anthony Rizzo and Rangers outfielder Joey Gallo. Suddenly, the Yankees were 2.5 games out of the second Wild Card spot on August 14th, a month after the lowest point in their season. And starting on August 14, the Yankees didn't lose for 13 straight games, good for their longest winning streak in 60 years. Now, they are in good position to make the Wild Card, after the Tampa Bay Rays, with the 4th lowest payroll in baseball (at just \$43,741,666), have already clinched the AL East Division, and enter Sunday with an even 100 wins. As for the Red Sox, while thought of as a middle of the pack team to start the year (38.9% chance to make the playoffs on Opening Day), they replaced the Yankees as the main competitors for the AL East crown throughout the season. Though they held a 4.5 game lead in the division on July 5 over the Rays, being 9 games ahead of the Toronto Blue Jays and 10.5 in front of the Yankees, the Red Sox soon went on a skid. Throughout the whole months of July and August, the Red Sox went a disappointing 25-28, which greatly hurt their chances at making the postseason. Though the Red Sox have been able to stay in the race in the AL Wild Card, they were once in a position with a division lead halfway through the season. While the Yankees and Red Sox provide the most probable outcomes for a Wild Card matchup, there are two more teams to account for: the Blue Jays and the Seattle Mariners.

The Blue Jays, simply put, have been carried on the shoulders of many players, but none stronger than that of 22-year old Vladimir Guerrero Jr. In contention for the Triple Crown (leader in one's league for RBIs, home runs, and batting average) as late as mid to late September, "Vladdy" has 47 home runs while batting .311. Even though he will likely lose out in the AL MVP race to the 2-way phenom Angels pitcher/DH Shohei Ohtani (who has 45 home runs and a 3.18 ERA in 130.1 innings pitched), Guerrero Jr. and his teammates, such as 31-year old second baseman Marcus Semien (41 home runs), 28-year old Teoscar Hernandez (32 home runs), and 23-year old Bo Bichette (28 home runs, .298 batting average) have allowed an up-and-coming Blue Jays team a chance at the postseason. They are currently 1 game out of the second Wild Card spot. Finally, the Seattle Mariners, are also only 1 game out of the second Wild Card spot. Seattle was given just a 2.9% chance to make the playoffs to start the



year. They have not reached the postseason since their 116-win 2001 season, and they have never even appeared in a World Series in the franchise's history (they first played in 1977). Throughout it all, the Mariners have been led by 30-year old Mitch Haniger (39 home runs) and veteran 33-year old Kyle Seager (35 home runs), who have taken on the brunt of the offensive load for this ball club, and their ability to play nearly every game (Haniger at 156, Seager 158 entering Sunday) has been invaluable to the Mariners. The highly-touted top-5 prospect in baseball, Jarred Kelenic, was called up earlier this season to the big leagues, and though his first stint in the Majors didn't pan out (.096 average after 92 plate appearances, including an 0-for-37 stretch of hitting), he is hitting .240 in his last 15 games with 4 home runs, providing much-needed energy to the team late in the season. The formerly designated-for-assignment Chris Flexen pitched nearly 180 innings for the Mariners this season, posting a 3.61 ERA and by far has been the most consistent starter on the team during this season. Right now, the Mariners, too, are just one game behind the second Wild Card spot.

## The AL Wild Card: Scenarios

The situation in the AL Wild Card is a much more complex one than in the NL. Beginning with a nearly inconceivable **four-way tie for two spots**. If both the Red Sox and Yankees lose their games today, and both the Blue Jays and Mariners win their games today, all four of the Wild Card teams will have a record of 91-70. In this situation, each team would choose a letter, A-D. Team A would play Team B, and Team C would play Team D. The winner of these games would determine the Wild Card teams. To determine who ends up as which letter team, there is an order of selection, based on combined winning percentage against each of the other teams this season. The Red Sox own the best record against the remaining teams, followed by the Blue Jays, Yankees, and Mariners, so that would be the order of selection. Another

