

# So much for a Dodgers-Red Sox World Series

With the loss on Wednesday night, the Los Angeles Dodgers meekly went away in five games in the National League Championship Series, so all the talk of former Boston Red Sox slugger Manny Ramirez returning to Fenway Park to ruin the Sox's efforts at repeating as champions this season has since vanished.

For the Red Sox, though, any thoughts of having an easy American League Championship Series against the once-laughing-stock Tampa Bay Rays has long since been forgotten. Then again, this is familiar territory for the Red Sox, as the Sox were behind three games to one to the Cleveland Indians last season, and even down three games to none to the New York Yankees in 2004, before winning the remainder of the games in both series to move onto the World Series, where the Sox then went on to sweep for the title.

The obvious question is if the Sox in 2008 can repeat the magic of those two seasons.

Opening that door to that possibility was the final nine outs of what looked to be another ugly loss for the Sox, as they had fallen behind 7-0, with even closer Jonathan Papelbon failing to stop the bleeding in the seventh, allowing two inherited runners to score.

For those first six-plus innings Thursday night, it seemed to be an identical Sox team to the one that one could argue had been going through the motions for most of this series.

Anyone who watched the first two at Fenway — 9-1 and 13-5 losses, with Boston becoming the first team to allow nine or more runs

in three straight ALCS games, seemed to be more than enough evidence for there to be little hope heading into Game 5.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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Helping to foster some of that hope was that Boston's only starting pitcher in this series to actually have a handle on the potent Rays: Daisuke Matsuzaka, who had entered the ALCS having frustrated Sox watchers with his on-and-off control issues that would drag out games, despite his 18-3 regular season record. With Matsuzaka having shut out the Rays in the series' opening game, and the Rays having exploded for 31 runs in the next three, Sox fans were banking on a similar performance Thursday night.

For Matsuzaka, though, lightning would not strike twice, as the Rays jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the first, before stretching it to 5-0, forcing Matsuzaka out before he could pitch five innings.

With the Sox still alive and kicking this morning, having not yet set up their golf tee times, though, the thoughts entering Game 5 was that the decision by Rays manager Joe Maddon for choosing to change things up by surprisingly moving Scott Kazmir up to pitch Thursday,

instead of one of their top hurlers in James Shields would be a benefit to the Sox.

Of any of Tampa Bay's pitchers, Kazmir is clearly the one who has stumbled the most recently against the Sox, with his Rays only earning the win in Game 2 because Sox pitcher Josh Beckett was even worse in a game that featured seven home runs — tying a postseason record — in a 9-8 Rays win.

For Kazmir, though, that was the second straight tough outing against the Sox, with him lasting only 4 1/3 innings, allowing five earned runs on six hits in Game 2. As bad as that performance was, the left-hander was torched on Sept. 15, when he lasted just three innings, allowing nine earned runs on six hits and four walks. Things got so bad for Kazmir in that game in Tampa, that constant glances by Kazmir to the dugout during the third inning made it clear that Kazmir was begging to be yanked, knowing he just didn't have it that night.

If Maddon did have anything positive riding on his switch, it was that Kazmir's last two poor performances against the Sox were at Tropicana Field, while his last decent outing, just six days earlier from the three-inning debacle, was much different as he pitched six innings at Fenway, allowing two runs in a no-decision that resulted in a 5-4 win for the Rays.

Game 5 for Kazmir was even better, as he stymied the Sox on just two hits over six innings.

So much for a bad decision by Maddon.

Even though Kazmir had thrown 111 pitches, usually a point where a manager pulls his pitcher, one could wonder if he should have gone

longer.

Especially considering the complete blowup of the Rays bullpen, considered one of the best in baseball.

The same was argued about the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim — who are now sitting at home — with their superstar closer Francisco Rodriguez, who had finished with a major-league record 62 saves, only to give up a crucial game winning home run in the previous series to the Sox.

And like the Angels, the Sox chose to feast on the Rays' bullpen in Game 5 to offer them new life. In the seventh, with Dustin Pedroia driving in the first run, David Ortiz then stepped up to the plate with two on against Grant Balfour, and blasted a three-run home run.

The next inning, J.D. Drew came up against Dan Wheeler, and hit a ball to the same right field wall to bring the Sox within one.

Down a run, Coco Crisp, inserted as the leadoff hitter for the first time this series, had a 10-pitch at-bat later in the inning, and came through with the hit to tie the game.

Drew proved not to be done, coming up again in the bottom of the ninth, in part to the poor misplay by Rays rightfielder Gabe Gross, to deliver another one of his improbable hits to win the game.

With the win, the momentum has swung back in the Sox's favor, but when you think of it — one game has made all the difference in this series, the 9-8 loss in Game 2, which could have easily gone the Sox' way, and had the Sox going back to Tampa only needing to win one of two on the road.

With the Sox able to get it back to Tampa, the prospects of having the Sox trot out the likes of Beckett

and Jon Lester would usually elicit all sorts of confidence. When realizing that one has been a World Series MVP, and was up for Cy Young consideration in 2007, and the other was deemed the ace of the staff this year, one might think it would be natural to try to get tickets for a Game 1 in the World Series at Fenway against Philadelphia.

Instead, with the poor performance by Lester in Game 5, and the atrocious performance by Beckett a game earlier — to the point where some reporters are pointing to a possible oblique tear injury — the odds look still to be against the Sox, but followers were guilty of the same concerns last season and 2004 as well. Especially for those real believers who watched the whole game to witness the greatest playoff comeback since 1929.

Not only have the Sox have had their share of stinkers, but so have the New England Patriots. For a team that was staring at a bunch of creampuffs on their regular season slate this year, 13 to 14 wins seemed a lock, especially for a team that won each of its 16 regular season contests in '07.

With the injury to league MVP Tom Brady for the full season, though, Pats fans were forced into accepting backup Matt Cassel as the one who would take control of the reins.

After the ugly game against Miami 38-13 in Week 3, Pats fans were hoping that it was a solitary clunker on this season. While a nine-point win against San Francisco calmed down most of the boo-birds, the thoughts of facing a 2-3 San Diego team, especially after they were nipped by Miami, 17-10, seemed to be promising.

For Cassel, though, even without having to face sack machine linebacker Shawne Merriman because of his own season-ending injury, the ugly visions of former 1980s quarterback Tony Eason returned last Sunday night. Whenever the San Diego pass rush even got near Cassel, the "turtle" appeared, as Cassel would recoil at the prospect of getting hit.

With all the years that Cassel watched under the tutelage of Brady, talent unfortunately isn't something that can be taught to you.

Learning to stay in the pocket until the last moment before getting hit — a Brady trademark — though, is something well within reason to pick up, but Cassel has shown little mettle in that department.

Unfortunately, for the Patriots, head coach Bill Belichick has chosen to stubbornly stick with a quarterback without a single start in college, and none in the NFL until he was forced into service with the surprising Brady injury in Week 2. With the team's bye week having taken place after just three games, the perfect opportunity to bring in a replacement would have been after the blowout against Miami.

As said in this space before, an ideal choice to jump right in would have been Daunte Culpepper, who had paired with Randy Moss to make the Minnesota Vikings the most potent offense at that time, and threw for 4,717 yards as recently as 2004, before retiring in September at the young age of 31.

Without such a move, Pats fans will just have to hope for the best for the rest of the season.

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