

Metz' love of baseball lasts year-round, past All-Star game

The 1994 All-Star game is in the books and baseball is now ready to plunge into the second half of the season, for better or for worse.

For true baseball fans, this season has offered a wide variety of surprises and great stories that makes the looming strike seem all the more devastating.

Never mind the fact that the Cleveland Indians are in first place at the break for the first time since Elvis was first coming into the American vocabulary.

A team like Montreal, who didn't even know what first place was, much less what it felt like to be in it, has taken the reins in baseball's toughest division, at

the expense of the Atlanta Braves. Texas doesn't even need to win to be in first place in the A.L. West. Three games under .500 is all one needs to lead the worst division in baseball.

And don't tell the citizens of New York that a strike could end the season. It's been over a decade since the Yankees have won their division, and they have led the American League East for most of the season.

Individually, three players are on pace to break one of the most heralded records in the game: Roger Maris' single season home run record of 61.

When the strike comes and ruins this, we can all sit around



CHRIS METZ

when we are 60 and reminisce about the 1994 season, the season of the juiced ball and the records that could have been.

Next year they'll probably go back to the "non-juiced" ball and Ken Griffey, Frank Thomas and Matt Williams will be back to hitting 40 home runs, and talk of

breaking Maris' record will be put back on the shelf.

All these problems we baseball fans face. Is the ball juiced? I don't know, and who cares? Are the players greedy, money grubbing ego-maniacs? Of course. Are the owners greedy, money grubbing tyrants? Without a doubt.

But all this garbage doesn't seem to matter when the players get out there between the lines.

None of the bad things matter when you get to your seats in the outfield bleachers of Wrigley Field, your nosebleed seats at Skydome.

I saw my first game in, I think, 1975 at County Stadium in Milwaukee, WI. The Brewers took on

the California Angels. To this day I remember the untainted magic of that game.

The fun of baseball lies in buying the guy next to you a beer, keeping score and seeing how many hot dogs you can possibly eat on a sunny, 90 degree day.

On a bad day your team loses and you still ate three bags of peanuts and laughed a lot. On a good day you caught a Lenny Dykstra home run ball, ate four hot dogs, only got beer spilled on you once and laughed a lot.

You've got to love baseball.

Chris Metz is the Emerald's sports editor.

Italian team in the running for fourth World Cup title

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. (AP) — In 90 glorious minutes, with a roar as deafening as any back home, Roberto Baggio and Italy erased years of doubt.

Eight days ago they were called underachieving bums, two minutes away from a humiliating second-round exit. On Wednesday, before a singing, chanting, cheering throng that made New Jersey seem like an Italian province, Baggio scored twice in a five-minute span of the first half, leading the Azzurri over Bulgaria 2-1 and bringing Italy within one victory of an unprecedented fourth World Cup title.

"Incredible. Too beautiful," Baggio said. "I'm happy for Italy. I hope I gave people some moments of glory."

They had been questioned for so long: Italy for failing to qualify for the 1992 European Championship, Baggio for an eight-game scoreless streak that extended through the first round of the World Cup. Baggio, the world player of the year in 1993, was in tears from the joy of it all.

"This is my job, which is made with sacrifice and pain and today also of tears because I was deeply happy," the 27-year-old forward said.

With Italy about to be sent home, Baggio scored with two minutes left against Nigeria, won the game in overtime and then scored the winning goal in the quarterfinal against Spain.

With his ponytail flopping across the back that has carried Italy for three games, Baggio scored a pair of brilliant goals that raised his tournament total to five and put Italy in the final for the first time since the Azzurri won the championship in 1982.

"I have always been strong inside. I never surrendered to difficulties," said Baggio, who played with a broken tooth and was forced out with a pulled right hamstring in the 71st minute.

The Italians will play Brazil or Sweden on Sunday at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif. In Italy, the victory set off midnight parties in the streets. Silvio Berlusconi, the new prime minister and the owner of European champion AC Milan, is expected to come to America for the final.

"If he has no money for the trip, I'll pay for his ticket," said Antonio Matarrese, president of the governing body of Italian soccer.

Four years ago, when soccer-mad Italy was host to the tournament, the Azzurri won five straight games before losing to Argentina on penalty kicks in the semifinal.

This time, they came to America after an unimpressive run, even losing an exhibition game against a third-division club. Coach Arrigo Sacchi said he would be satisfied with making the semifinals.

"Sacchi's team wins and entertains," Matarrese said. "But we also suffer a lot in each match. It has been like this from the beginning."

Bulgaria, which hadn't even won a World Cup game until last month, had few good chances. The Bulgarian goal came on a penalty kick by Hristo Stoitichkov with a little more than a minute to go in the first half after Alessandro Costacurta pushed Nasko Sirakov over goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca.

"Italy, despite the heat and the fatigue, kept attacking all the time," Sacchi said.

It was 93 degrees at gametime and the sun slowed the pace. But the Italian fans virtually the entire crowd of 77,094 in Giants Stadium never stopped cheering.

Hours before the game, they filled the streets of Manhattan, wearing jerseys of the Azzurri and many of the top clubs in Italy. Even an hour before the game, the crowd was chanting "I-tal-ia! I-tal-ia!" banging drums, clanging bells and cymbals, and blowing trumpets and horns. And they were not disappointed.

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