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Pyle

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to face New York (114-48), and the wild-card Boston Red Sox (92-70) will be in Jacobs Field to face the defending league-champion Cleveland Indians (89-73).

The Rangers-Yankees series marks the second time in the last three seasons that the teams have squared off in the first round of the playoffs.

Although Texas boasts a formidable lineup that includes outfielder Juan Gonzalez, catcher Rodriguez and first baseman Will Clark, it will not be able to match New York's pitching and superior depth. AL batting champion Bernie Williams, shortstop Derek Jeter and a pitching staff that includes starters David Wells and David Cone, as well as closer Mariano Rivera, should lead the Yankees to the AL Championship Series.

Boston finished the regular season with a better record than Cleveland, but the Indians get the home-field advantage because they won the weak AL Central, while the Red Sox finished a distant second to New York in the AL East.

This series should be a close one.

In Pedro Martinez, Boston has a genuine ace who could be the difference if the series goes to five games. But Cleveland has more postseason experience on its side and can score runs in bunches on anybody.

Look for the Indians to win, but barely.

In the National League, the

San Diego Padres (98-64) will meet the Houston Astros (102-60), and the Atlanta Braves (106-56) draw the winner of last night's wild-card playoff between the Chicago Cubs and San Francisco Giants (both 89-73).

The Padres-Astros matchup could prove to be the most intriguing, exciting showdown of the first round. Gwynn, Kevin Brown, Greg Vaughn, Ken Caminiti and Trevor Hoffman lead a talented San Diego squad, but the Killer B's (Jeff Bagwell, Craig Biggio and Derek Bell),

"Fifty years from now — when we are the old-timers — the records, players and magical moments of this season will still be revered."

Moises Alou and the Big Unit (former Seattle Mariner Randy Johnson) should parlay Houston's home-field advantage into a second-round ticket.

Atlanta's awesome pitching staff (Mad-dux, Tom Glavine and John Smoltz) and improved hitting should effectively handle whichever team advances to face the Braves.

But let's return to the hair-raising regular season, which re-established baseball as America's pulse.

Fifty years from now — when we are the old-timers — the records, players and magical moments of this season will still be revered.

Then, I will be able to tell you, and all the young whippersnappers who will listen, that the 1998 season was the best ever. At least as far as I remember.

Tim Pyle is a sports reporter for the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail at tpyle@gladstone.uoregon.edu.

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