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Brown leads San Diego to win in Series opener

Brown, Johnson clash in the opening game of the National League series

By Bernie Wilson

HOUSTON — The marquee matchup between Randy Johnson and Kevin Brown lived up to expectations - close, tense and full of strikeouts.

The kicker, though, was that Brown did an awesome imitation of Johnson, showing up the Big Unit in the Astrodome as the San Diego Padres beat the Houston Astros 2-1 in the opening game of their NL division series.

Brown struck out 16 and allowed just two hits in eight innings in a brilliant performance as the Padres stole home-field advantage in the best-of-5 series.

Brown's strikeouts were the most ever in division series play and just one short of Bob Gibson's postseason-record 17 in the 1968 World Series.

The right-hander said this was a bigger game than the no-hitter he pitched for the Florida Marlins in 1997.

"I'll take this one any time because of the impact of the situation," he said. "Being in the regular season, that didn't have the meaning for the team that this one

Astros manager Larry Dierker said Brown was "as dominant as you can be, other than pitching a no-hitter. There wasn't more he could have done."

Both aces were obtained in trades to try to get their teams to the World Series. Brown was there last year, winning a ring with Florida, but became expendable along with the other high-priced Marlins and was snapped up for three prospects. The Astros got Johnson from the Seattle Mariners at the July 31 trading deadline.

No one likes facing Johnson, and the Astros found out how brutal it can be facing Brown.

"It was a very dominating performance," said Johnson, who has lost his last four postseason deci-

"Now I know why a lot of the hitters drag their bats back," added Johnson, who struck out 12 Padres in an interleague game on June 24. "He defies the law of gravity with the pitches he throws. With his forkball and sinker, it's no fun facing a guy like that, so I can imagine what it's like for our hitters who were dialed in and focused."

Brown's previous strikeout high was 11, which he did three times in his final 11 regular-season starts.

Brown, 18-7 during the regular season, beat Atlanta's Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine in last year's NL championship series despite being weakened by the flu, and now has added Johnson to his list.

Brown said his job was to concentrate on the hitters, not on

"Thank goodness I did a good job," Brown said. "That was my focus, and I did that probably as well as I've done it in quite some

Johnson had been practically untouchable at home, going 5-0the first four wins were shutouts since coming over to the As-

