

Braves favored to win division series

Atlanta expects its strong pitching staff to help it dominate in its seventh-straight National League Championship Series

By Paul Newberry
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — The surest bet in sports? It might be the Atlanta Braves in the division series.

While the Braves have struggled in the World Series, winning only once in four tries this decade, they've owned the best-of-5 round that was added in 1995.

Atlanta finished off its third straight sweep with a 6-2 victory Saturday over the Chicago Cubs. Overall, the Braves are 4-for-4 in the first round, losing only once in 13 games.

The Braves move on to play in their seventh straight NLCS, a feat that's even more remarkable considering the extra round of playoffs they've had to get through the last four years.

After beating Colorado 3-1 in 1995, Atlanta swept Los Angeles, Houston and now the Cubs. During the last three years, the Braves have given up only 14 runs in nine first-round games.

Atlanta, 4-2 in the championship series since 1991, will meet San Diego.

In a champagne-soaked clubhouse, the Braves were in no mood for reflection. As usual, the season won't be considered a success unless they win another World Series title, so there's eight more victories to go.

"It really hasn't sunk in yet," Cox said. "The organization has had tremendous success. We have had great teams for a long time, and to be able to (play in the NLCS seven straight times) is really something,

trying to keep it all together, keeping your players as healthy as you can, things like that."

As long as the Braves keep their magnificent pitching staff together, they will always be a contender. Just ask the Cubs, who averaged more than five runs a game during the season but managed only four in three games against the Braves, hitting a minuscule .181 as a team.

"I've always thought that good pitching beats good hitting," Maddux said. "We pitched them good and came away with the win."

He'll get no argument from the Cubs — especially Sammy Sosa. After hitting 66 homers in his memorable duel with Mark McGwire, he went 2-for-11 in the division series with no homers or RBIs.

"They've got a better team," Sosa said. "They've got better pitching."

The Atlanta starters were masterful. John Smoltz went 7 2-3 innings in Game 1, surrendering five hits and a run. Tom Glavine gave up only three hits and a run in Game 2. Then Maddux finished it off by allowing seven hits and two runs in Game 3.

Still, the difference was in the bullpen. While Chicago's relievers surrendered nine runs in 6 1-3 innings, their no-name Atlanta counterparts — Kerry Ligtenberg, John Rocker, Rudy Seanez and Odalis Perez — pitched 6 1-3 scoreless innings, giving up just two hits.

Atlanta didn't even need its other two starters, 17-game winner Kevin Millwood and 16-game winner Denny Neagle.

The Braves expressed no preference about their opponent in the next round.

"I'm just glad we're going," Maddux said.



Cleveland leaves Yankees motivated

Some players feel the team worked harder after last year's five-game loss to the Indians in the playoffs

By Ronald Blum
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Thank you, Cleveland.

Some Yankees think the Indians are responsible for New York's record-breaking season. The five-game loss in the first round of last year's playoffs motivated the Yankees to work extra hard in the weight rooms last winter.

And that extra urge for revenge figures to be a factor when New York opens the AL championship series against the Indians at Yankee Stadium on Tuesday night.

"We're a year removed from losing to them in the playoffs last year, but I think it's fresh in people's minds," David Cone said after a two-hour workout in a drizzle Sunday. "If we had gotten by Cleveland, maybe we could have gotten to the World Series and we'd be thinking about three in a row."

And believe this: This is not a team that takes a slapping lightly. The Yankees were four outs away from advancing before Sandy Alomar Jr. homered off Mariano Rivera in the eighth inning of Game 4 at Jacobs Field.

"It's hard to forget they beat us last year," Paul O'Neill said. "It's a different year, a different team. There's a lot more at stake. Last year was the first round. This year's a ticket to the World Series."

New York manager Joe Torre is shaking up his rotation slightly, choosing David Wells to open, Cone to pitch Game 2, Andy Pettitte to start Game 3 in Cleveland and Orlando Hernandez to pitch Game 4. If the series extends, Wells would pitch the fifth game, followed by Cone in Game 6 and Pettitte in Game 7.

"Hopefully it won't go seven," said Pettitte, who pitched the second game in the opening sweep of Texas. "Hopefully, we can take care of business and get out of there."

New York won seven of 11 from Cleveland during the regular season and broke the AL record for wins set by the Indians team that went 111-43 in 1954. With the three-game sweep of Texas in the first round, the Yankees moved within a game of the record for wins in one year — regular and postseason — in one year, set by the 1906 Chicago Cubs (118).

"I don't think there's a feeling of

revenge," Tino Martinez said. "We just want to do our job. Because they beat us last year? That's history."

Yankees manager Joe Torre decided to move up Cone from Game 3 for two reasons: Cone made only 85 pitches in the rain-shortened clincher Friday night, and Torre wanted Cone to pitch at Yankee Stadium. Since arm surgery in 1996 and 1997, Cone has lost some feeling in his fingers in cold weather, and Torre thinks it will be colder in Cleveland than in New York.

Cone wants revenge more than most Yankees. He started the 1997 postseason opener against the Indians and was pounded for six earned runs and seven hits in 3 1-3 innings in a game New York won 8-6.

"But you can't get caught up in last year," Torre said. "You can't try any harder than you tried."

Notes: Torre has to decide who will take Darryl Strawberry's spot on the active roster. If Scott Brosius shows no sign of being slowed by his sprained left ankle, outfielder Ricky Ledee will be the replacement. If Torre is worried about Brosius, third baseman Mike Lowell would be added to the roster. Brosius tripped over first base when Texas catcher Ivan Rodriguez picked him off Friday night.



Strawberry stable after surgery for cancer

By Ronald Blum
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Hearing the good news secondhand wasn't good enough, so half a dozen New York Yankees visited Darryl Strawberry on Sunday, a day after a cancerous tumor was removed from the outfielder's colon.

Pitcher David Cone intended to bring one of the Yankees' caps, which now have Strawberry's number 39 stitched in white on the back.

"We just want to show him how much we care — and we got the job done he wanted us to do," Cone said before joining teammates Chili Davis, Joe Girardi, Derek Jeter and Tim Lincecum on the trip to Columbia-Presbyterian

Medical Center.

Strawberry was on the Yankees' minds as they prepared for Tuesday's start of the AL championship series against Cleveland. Dr. Stuart Hershon, the Yankees' team physician, held a clubhouse meeting and gave an update on Strawberry's condition.

Hershon told them doctors believe the cancer had not spread, but they won't know for sure until tests come back in about 10 days. Doctors removed a 16-inch portion of Strawberry's large intestine to get rid of a tumor almost 2 1/2 inches long.

"I think we felt a lot better because everything came out well," Tino Martinez said. "There's a lot of relief around here."

Strawberry remained in stable condition Sunday. He is expected to remain in the hospital for a week.

"He's doing well. His family is with him," Columbia-Presbyterian spokeswoman Szuping Di said.

Strawberry also got a visit from George Steinbrenner.

"I was with him all day," Steinbrenner said at Yankee Stadium.

The Yankees were shaken when they learned last Thursday that Strawberry had a cancerous tumor.

New York manager Joe Torre, who also visited the 36-year-old outfielder, predicted Strawberry's illness will increase the awareness of colon cancer among the Yankees.

Oregon Emerald

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