

# Mets win fourth straight, take 1-0 series lead

By Ben Walker  
The Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Mike Hampton and Mike Piazza quickly put their play-off problems in the past.

Pitching every bit like an October ace, Hampton won for the first time in the postseason, leading the Mets past the St. Louis Cardinals 6-2 Wednesday night in Game 1 of the NL championship series.

"I wanted to be a contributor instead of a liability," Hampton said. "I just wanted to do my part and help this team win. I didn't do that in the first series."

Piazza, who had zero RBIs in the opening round against San Francisco, hit an RBI double in a two-run first inning that sent New York on the way to its fourth straight postseason victory.

"He came out swinging tonight," Mets manager Bobby Valentine said.

Behind Hampton, the Mets extended their postseason scoreless streak to a team-record 26 innings before allowing two unearned runs with two outs in the ninth.

Hampton kept the big guy — pinch-hitter deluxe Mark McGwire — on the St. Louis bench and left af-

ter the seventh with a 3-0 lead. Relievers John Franco and Armando Benitez finished up.

"There had been some doubts cast over Mike because of a small sample of postseason play, and I think he erased those doubts," Valentine said.

Todd Zeile and Jay Payton homered in the ninth and Edgardo Alfonzo scored a run and drove in another for New York.

And it was a good-luck victory for the wild card Mets — the last seven teams to win the NLCS opener went on to reach the World Series.

"I liked the way we played, I just didn't like the final score," Cardinals manager Tony La Russa said. "Hampton and the Mets were a little better."

Game 2 will be Thursday night at Busch Stadium with Al Leiter starting for the Mets against rookie Rick Ankiel.

Acquired from Houston last winter to win at crunch time, Hampton delivered. He outpitched former Astros teammate Darryl Kile, blanking St. Louis on six hits and silencing the sellout crowd of 52,255.

Hampton began the evening with a career postseason record of 0-2

and a 5.87 ERA in four starts.

A loser last week in the opening round at San Francisco, prompting some to suggest Leiter should start the opener, Hampton tamed a Cardinals team that averaged eight runs a game in its first-round sweep of the Braves.

Not that St. Louis didn't have its chances. It went 0-for-13 with runners in scoring position, stranding 11.

The Cardinals left the bases loaded in the first when Carlos Hernandez grounded out.

"Everyone wants to score as soon as possible," Hernandez said. "They had a big hit when they had men in scoring position, and that was the ballgame."

Still, St. Louis threatened to tie it in the seventh. Trailing 3-0 with two on and one out, Edgar Renteria sliced a long fly that right fielder Timo Perez ran down on the warning track.

Jim Edmonds followed with a high fly that left fielder Benny Agbayani caught just short of the wall, and Edmonds gave an "aw-shucks" skip as he rounded first base.

"I thought it had a chance of going out," Agbayani said. "The ball kind of died down and tailed back."

Hampton struck out four and

walked three. He also got the benefit of a defense that paid extra attention to its positioning, making subtle shifts that paid major dividends.

Meanwhile, not even the presence of a few St. Louis Rams — the NFL team scoring 43 points per game — helped boost the Cardinals hitters.

Several of the Mets recently expressed relief that their No. 1 nemesis, Atlanta, were out of the playoffs. Secretly, maybe they also knew how well they matched up against St. Louis.

The Mets went 6-3 against the Cardinals this season, mainly because New York's left-handed pitchers could cancel out the Cardinals' lefty hitters. St. Louis was just 17-23 in games started by opposing left-handers.

With nearly every Mets player in the dugout leaning on the top railing, Perez got them off to a fast start. Keeping up his role as late-season sparkplug, he led off the game with a double and took third when Kile bounced a curveball for a wild pitch.

After Alfonzo walked, Piazza grounded a double down the third-base line. It was a good sign for the Mets — the All-Star catcher began the night as a career .211 postseason hit-

ter. Robin Ventura's sacrifice fly made it 2-0.

"I swung the bat a lot better tonight, only because of my teammates getting on ahead of me, giving me the opportunity to drive in the runs," Piazza said.

"A good start for us, we know it's far from over," he said. "Got to keep the pedal down."

Hampton beat out an infield single in the fifth and later scored on Alfonzo's single.

The Mets tacked on three runs in the ninth off Mike James. Zeile led off with a home run, Agbayani singled and Payton homered over the left-field wall.

Mike Bordick was up next, and James hit him with a pitch. There was no trouble between the teams, though, and Bordick left for X-rays on his right thumb, which were negative.

Those extra runs turned out to be meaningful, too.

In the bottom of the ninth, Kurt Abbott, who replaced Bordick, threw away Renteria's two-out grounder as a run scored. Edmonds then hit a single that skipped past Perez for a two-base error, allowing another run to score.

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### Horoscope by Linda C. Black

**TODAY'S BIRTHDAY** (Oct. 12). You're persuasive this year. Win a prize by choosing your words carefully. You've got everybody's attention in October. Rake in the coins in November. You'll be surprised at what you find in December. A fantasy comes true, but not as expected, in February. Your partner's hot in April. Gain from distant elders in June. Be graceful and succeed in July.

To get the advantage, check the day's rating: 10 is the easiest day, 0 the most challenging.

**ARIES** (March 21-April 19) — Today is an 8 — A long-distance connection you make soon could be the start of something big. Excitement, new experiences — maybe even a new language to learn. Why not? You hate limits, so break through a few by taking on a whole new world.

**TAURUS** (April 20-May 20) — Today is a 5 — Offer to take over chores for a person who's too busy. For relatively little effort, you could become even more indispensable. Listen at keyholes, too. That way, you'll know what needs to be done.

**GEMINI** (May 21-June 21) — Today is an 8 — You're the brains behind the operation, so speak up! You're usually verbal, but around some people you can get a little tongue-tied. Don't let a flamboyant person intimidate you. Your idea might be the one everybody's been waiting for!

**CANCER** (June 22-July 22) — Today is a 4 — New information could cause a flurry of activity. Make sure you stay up to date by asking leading questions. They don't need to know what you know, as much as the other way around. Don't worry; they'll talk your ear off.

**LEO** (July 23-Aug. 22) — Today is a 9 — You're lookin' good, and so is somebody else. The attraction's mutual and could lead to great ideas. A partnership? Perhaps. The two of you bring out the best in each other. This is a relationship definitely worth developing.

**VIRGO** (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) — Today is a 4 — Somebody else's idea of a great adventure could give you the heebie-jeebies. Stay calm, or at

least look like you are. Don't let anybody gamble with your money. Conditions are changing too fast. What looks like a sure bet now could fall flat tomorrow.

**LIBRA** (Sept. 23-Oct. 22) — Today is an 8 — A relationship with a different kind of person could turn out well. There's something fascinating about this individual. Even if you never fully understand him or her, it's never boring to try. Ask questions, and you'll gain insight.

**SCORPIO** (Oct. 23-Nov. 21) — Today is a 7 — The money could be good but not steady. The work requires lots of energy, and it may not last long. If you can do a job matching this description, it should be a good deal. You could make enough to get that thing you've wanted for the house.

**SAGITTARIUS** (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) — Today is an 8 — You're so cute. Your wit is sparkling, and even you don't know what you'll come up with next. You might surprise yourself and blur out a commitment. It might as well happen sometime, and now is as good a time as any.

**CAPRICORN** (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) — Today is a 7 — A treasure you discover in a closet or attic could be the perfect thing. With a little paint and some imagination, voila! You'll have something good enough to sell so you can buy the thing you really want.

**AQUARIUS** (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) — Today is a 6 — A friend makes an interesting suggestion. Well, why not? What could go wrong? That is the pivotal question. Don't cram too much into your schedule 'cause if anything can go wrong, it will. Something that looks easy could be impossible.

**PISCES** (Feb. 19-March 20) — Today is a 6 — Continue with negotiations, cautiously. Something that looks too good to be true is. A job you're counting on may not pan out, so don't rely on any one thing too much. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

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