MLB

Yankees, Twins renew one-sided rivalry in wild-card game

By JAKE SEINER
Associated Press

AL Wild Card

Minnesota Twins (85-77) — **New York Yankees (91-71)**

- **Tues., 5 p.m. (TV: ESPN)**
- **at Yankee Stadium**

NEW YORK — Twins star Joe Mauer remembers well all those October losses to the Yankees. So too, surely, do Minnesota's fans.

Around the rest of the Twins clubhouse, though, it may as well be ancient history.

Back in the playoffs for the first time in seven years, Mauer and upstart Minnesota will face New York in the AL wild-card game Tuesday night hoping to turn around what has been a one-sided postseason rivalry.

New York eliminated the small-market Twins in the Division Series four times from 2003-10, repeatedly dashing the World Series aspirations of a largely home-grown lineup.

"Somebody asked me earlier, 'Does it feel like seven years?'" Mauer said. "I said, 'Yes, and all of that.'"

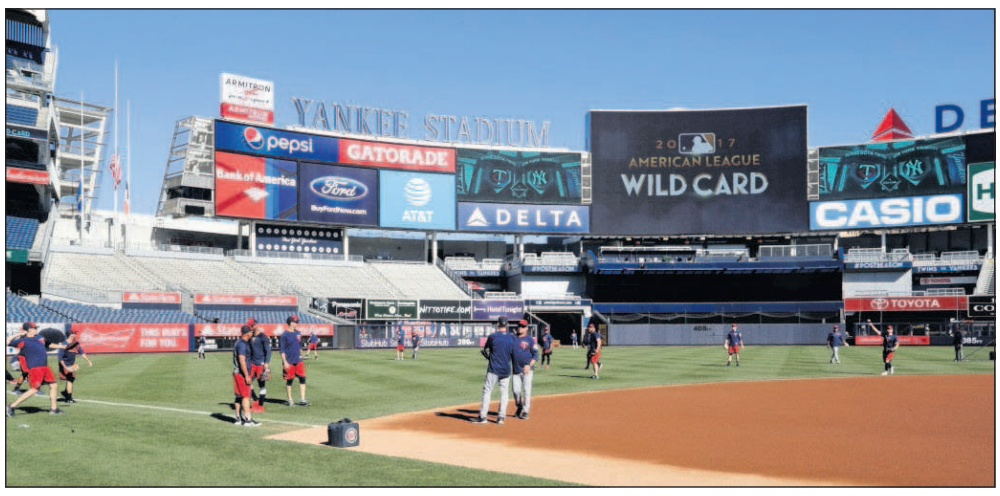
Mauer is the only holdover from that era. Minnesota now has a new batch of budding young stars, and it's a group that's already wrecked some history. Powered by Miguel Sano and Byron Buxton, these Twins became the first team ever to go from 100 losses one year to the playoffs the next.

"I'm really excited for this group to experience this," Mauer said. "There's a lot of guys in our clubhouse that this is their first go-round. I was just real happy. It's been a special year to see these guys kind of grow."

This time, Minnesota won't be running into playoff-proven Yankee greats like Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera.

Like the Twins, New York has been fueled by its burgeoning big leaguers. AL MVP hopeful Aaron Judge headlines the crew, which also includes Tuesday's starter Luis Severino and catcher Gary Sanchez. Only Brett Gardner, Greg Bird, Didi Gregorius and Chase Headley started for New York in their previous wild-card appearance, a 3-0 loss to Dallas Keuchel and the Astros in 2015.

"The faces have changed so much," said Yankees manager Joe Girardi, who managed New York past Minnesota in the 2009 and '10 ALDS.



AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

The Minnesota Twins workout at Yankees Stadium, Monday in New York. The Twins face the New York Yankees in the American League wild card game on Tuesday.

The 6-foot-7 Judge set a rookie record with 52 homers this year and has become the new face of the franchise. He even has his own cheering section at Yankee Stadium — The Judge's Chambers in right field, which will host a group of Bronx school kids Tuesday.

Limiting Judge may be the most pivotal task for Twins starter Ervin Santana.

"Have to be careful with him," Santana said. "Don't try to leave any cookies right there."

Here's some more to chew on before New York and Minnesota vie to face the reigning AL champion Indians in an ALDS:

DECIDING ON SANO

As of Monday afternoon, Twins manager Paul Molitor hadn't decided on Sano's status for the game, although he was optimistic Sano would play. The slugger has been recovering from a stress reaction in his left shin.

Sano missed 38 games before returning to action Friday, and then he was pinch hit for Sunday after feeling some discomfort in the leg.

Molitor thinks Sano will at least be available off the bench.

"Whether he's going to start or not, I still haven't inked it in yet," Molitor said.

MORE FUN WITH FUNDAMENTALS

So how did Minnesota go from 59-103 in 2016 to the playoffs this year? A big key was a renewed focus on fundamentals.

In spring training, the Twins packed players into classrooms to talk baserunning and defense.

"We cleaned a lot of that up," leadoff hitter Brian Dozier said.

Sure did. Minnesota finished 10th in the majors with 17 defensive runs saved after finishing 28th at minus-49 runs in 2016.

The Twins also led the majors with 28 bunt hits, according to Baseball Info Solutions, and they were the best team on the bases in the majors this year, according to Fangraphs' advanced baserunning metric.

Buxton was key in all those areas. The 23-year-old is a Gold Glove Award candidate in center field, led the team with 11 bunt hits and was the best baserunner in baseball this year, as measured by Fangraphs.

"He just has a lot of ways to impact the game," Molitor said. "He might not get a hit and might be the most important player on the field, and there's not a lot of people who can fill that bill."

WHAT A RELIEF

The Yankees have a trio of All-Stars at the back of their bullpen in Aroldis Chapman, Dellin Betances and David Robertson, plus two of baseball's best middle relievers in Chad Green and Tommy Kahnle. In a winner-take-all game, Girardi figures to get to those arms sooner than usual.

He also says he won't hesitate to use Betances, who has struggled with his control this year.

"I do feel good about Dellin," Girardi said.

On the other side, Molitor may use starter Jose Berrios out of the bullpen. Berrios made his first relief appearance in the majors Friday, getting the win with 1 1/3 scoreless innings against Detroit.

Mariners falter down stretch as playoff drought reaches 16 years

By TIM BOOTH
Associated Press

SEATTLE — There are many reasons the longest playoff drought in baseball is now at 16 years and counting.

Seattle Mariners fans aren't interested in that, though. Until Seattle is finally back in the playoffs, every season is going to be considered a failure.

This was supposed to be the year Seattle's postseason drought finally came to an end. Instead, the Mariners' season was derailed by injuries that left them just trying to tread water. The fact they were in playoff contention into September was the result of the Mariners' resolve and mediocrity in the American League.

They fell short in the end at 78-84. Seattle never had a prolonged winning streak — the longest being six games in late June. And it was a six-game losing streak in September that finally knocked them out of contention.

AP Photo/Alex Gallardo

Seattle Mariners' Nelson Cruz reacts after home plate umpire Ron Kulpa called Cruz out on strikes during the first inning of the Mariners' baseball game against the Los Angeles Angels in Anaheim, Calif. on Sept. 29.

"I kept saying we had a good streak in us. I said it all year long," manager Scott Servais said. "We never got the consistent rhythm of our starting pitching to allow that to happen. Believe me I was wishful. I was hoping it was coming."

Pitching proved to be Seattle's biggest issue, mostly due to injuries in the rotation and the resulting overuse of the bullpen. Seattle used a major league-record 40 pitchers this season. Seventeen pitchers started at least one game. Most teams expect to go eight or nine deep with starters. Seventeen? No one plans for that.

James Paxton, Felix Hernandez and Hisahi Iwakuma all spent significant time on the disabled list. Drew Smyly, one of Seattle's big offseason acquisitions, never threw a regular-season pitch due to arm troubles that eventually led to Tommy John surgery.

"The injuries that we went through this year are a big deal," Servais said.

Here are other things to know about the Mariners' season and what's ahead in 2018:

ROTATION'S FUTURE: The status of Seattle's starting rotation going into next season will be one of the team's biggest questions. A handful of spots appear set. Paxton is clearly Seattle's No. 1 starter going into next season with the challenge of finally staying healthy for an entire year. The strained pectoral he suffered in August played a huge factor in the team's fade.

Mike Leake would appear to have another spot. Leake shined after being acquired from St. Louis in late August.

If he can stay healthy, Hernandez will continue to hold a spot in the rotation but without the expectation of being Seattle's ace.

The rest of the rotation is in question. The Mariners have plenty of options and proved this year there can never be enough depth. But who emerges as the fourth and fifth starters from a group that includes Marco Gonzales, Andrew Moore, Ariel Miranda, Erasmo Ramirez and any offseason acquisitions remains a major concern.

CRUZ CONTROL: Nelson Cruz continued to defy his age with another stellar season at the plate. Cruz hit .288 with 39 home runs and 119 RBIs. He was unable to reach 40 homers for the fourth straight season but Cruz led the American League in RBIs and had his fourth straight season of hitting above .270. Cruz deserves recognition for playing through a variety of injuries and never being gone for an extended period. He appeared in 155 of 162 games.

ESTABLISHING THE FUTURE: Mike Zunino will be the Mariners catcher going forward. After major struggles at the plate early in his career, Zunino finally established himself as a capable, consistent hitter to go along with his excellent defense. Zunino hit .251 with 25 home runs and 63 RBIs.

Zunino wasn't the only younger player to carve out a place in Seattle's plans going forward. The outfield appears set with Guillermo Heredia, Ben Gamel and Mitch Haniger all posting solid seasons.

ONE OPENING: Most of Seattle's positions appear set going into next season with the Haniger-Heredia-Gamel trio in the outfield, and Kyle Seager and Jean Segura on the left side of the infield and Cano at second. First base would appear to be the only question mark. Danny Valencia and Yonder Alonso were both on one-year contracts.

Cano remains one of the better defensive second basemen in the game but there has been talk in the past of moving him to first later in his career. That could be something Seattle examines in the offseason.

As calendar flips to October, the MLB postseason from A to Z

By BEN WALKER
AP Baseball Writer

All those home runs by Aaron Judge, all those wins by the Los Angeles Dodgers, nicely done. Except none of that matters now — a sinker that bounces to the backstop, a liner that hooks barely foul, the whole script flips.

October has a way of doing that. A look at the 2017 postseason, from A to Z:

A: ALTUVE'S ASTROS — Generously listed at 5-foot-6, Jose Altuve is baseball's little big man. The do-everything second baseman won his third AL batting title and aims to lead the Astros to their first World Series crown. With the Houston area recovering from Hurricane Harvey, they're the sentimental favorites.

B: BULLPENS — Kenley Jansen and Aroldis Chapman going long, Andrew Miller entering early, Clayton Kershaw as a closer. The old rules were out last October when it came to relief roles. We'll see what pops up in the 'pens this year.

C: CUBS VS. CLEVELAND — Kris Bryant, Anthony Rizzo, Corey Kluber & Crew, once more? It's been a while since a World Series rematch, when Reggie Jackson led the Yanks over the Dodgers in 1977-78. But, it's already been a ripe year for repeats — Warriors vs. Cavaliers, Alabama vs. Clemson.

D: DEBUTS — Strikeout king Chris Sale makes his first playoff appearance when Boston starts at Houston on Thursday in the best-of-five AL Division Series. Rockies bopper Nolan Arenado and Twins slugger Brian Dozier are postseason newbies, too. So is Nationals backup Adam Lind, after 12 years and more than 1,300 games.

E: EXTRA — Hmmm, anyone remember the last time a postseason game went to extra innings? Hard to top the Cubs' 10-inning, rain-delayed, 8-7 thriller over Cleveland in Game 7. The Red Sox are the experts of extras this year — they're 15-3, including seven straight wins.

F: FREE AGENTS — Sure, 20 teams are done. But their fans can always dream. Cubs righty Jake Arrieta, Royals third baseman Mike Moustakas and Rays thumper Logan Morrison are on the list of who'll soon be available. The most intriguing possibility might be Shohei Otani, a star pitcher and hitter in Japan.

G: GOOD TO SEE YA — Rockies outfielder Carlos Gonzalez returns to the playoffs for the first time since 2009, when he was 10 for 17. Twins star Joe Mauer has been absent since 2010. And Nationals ace Stephen Strasburg has pitched just once in Washington's three trips, heading into this matchup with the Cubs.

H: HOME FIELD — World Series home-field advantages goes to the team with the best record. Thankfully, it's no longer based on who wins the All-Star Game. That means the Dodgers (104 wins) get first dibs, followed by Cleveland (102), Houston (101), Washington (97), Boston (93) and the Cubs (92).

I: INJURIES — Nationals ace Max Scherzer tweaked his hamstring, teammate Bryce Harper is getting over a bad knee. Banged-up All-Stars Miguel Sano of the Twins and Michael Brantley of the Indians might be able contribute this week. Might not.

J: JOE MADDON — A cool cat, he keeps his Cubs loose. He reveled in last year's rallying cry: "Try Not to Suck." The skipper became the toast of Chicago, ending that century-old drought. Funny, all those warm-and-fuzzy Wrigley Field feelings are gone now, at least beyond the Friendly Confines.

K: KERSHAW — He tied for the major league lead in wins and won his fifth ERA title. He's a three-time Cy Young Award winner and seven-time All-Star. But will anyone get more scrutiny in the postseason than Clayton Kershaw? Probably not, because the LA lefty is 4-7 with a 4.55 ERA in the postseason.

L: LOUSY WEATHER — Too bad, the temperature is often better suited for snowballs than baseballs. It was in the low 40s at Wrigley last year, and just imagine how it might feel in Denver or Minneapolis. If you want clear conditions, root for Arizona vs. Houston and their retractable roofs.

M: MANAGERS — Twin Cities native Paul Molitor, Torey Lovullo of the Diamondbacks and Bud Black of the Rockies are first-time skippers in the playoffs. Washington's Dusty Baker is back for his ninth try, still seeking that elusive first World Series championship.

N: NETTING — Fan safety has drawn special focus ever since a 1-year-old girl was recently hit by Todd Frazier's 105 mph foul ball at Yankee Stadium. Of the teams in these playoffs, three already had extended the netting to screen spectators: Houston, Washington and Minnesota. The Yankees say they'll have it next year.

O: OCTOBER — Of course. But if the World Series goes to Game 7, they'll go beyond Halloween and play on Nov. 1.

P: PUERTO RICO — Carlos Beltran, Francisco Lindor and Carlos Correa are among the many players from Puerto Rico trying to raise money and awareness for the damage done to their island by Hurricane Maria. Look for messages on caps and shoes over the next few weeks.

Q: QUICK? — Extra mound conferences, longer TV commercials, more pitching changes, they all contribute to slowing down the pace in the playoffs. MLB wants to speed up the action and avoid a repeat from last year, when postseason games averaged almost 3 1/2 hours. Not a good sign that regular-season games this year took more than 3 hours, 5 minutes on average, the longest ever.

R: ROOKIES — Yankees behemoth Aaron Judge broke the major league record with 52 home runs by a rookie, Dodgers surprise Cody Bellinger set the NL mark with 39. Other newcomers who could make an impact: Red Sox outfielder Andrew Benintendi, Cubs outfielder/infielder Ian Happ and 33-year-old Astros first baseman Yuli Gurriel.

S: STREAKS — Jose Ramirez and the Indians set an AL record by winning 22 straight, the Dodgers dropped 11 in a row for their worst skid since moving from Brooklyn. A year after winning its first six postseason games, and in this season of streaks, Cleveland hopes to do it again.

T: TRADES — Justin Verlander (5-0, 1.06 ERA for Houston), J.D. Martinez (29 homers in 62 games for Arizona) and Jose Quintana (7-3, 3.74 for the Cubs) are some of the stars who were acquired in midseason trades. Yu Darvish, David Robertson and Eduardo Nunez also gave their new teams a boost.

U: UMPIRES — It won't be long before some team is hollering about an ump's strike zone. Those calls can't be contested, but others can. Some teams are very good at getting them overturned (Joe Girardi and the Yankees won 72 percent of their challenges). Others, not so much (the Nationals were right only 36 percent).

V: VOTING — All ballots for MVP, Cy Young and other major awards must be sent before the playoffs begin. These honors will generate plenty of debate before the winners are announced in November. Altuve or Judge, Kluber or Sale?

W: WILD CARDS — Madison Bumgarner and the 2014 Giants are the only wild-card team to win the World Series since MLB went to a one-and-done format in 2012. Before that, five wild cards took the title: Cardinals (2011), Red Sox (2004), Marlins (2003, 1997) and Angels (2002).

X: XANDER BOGAERTS — Perhaps the Boston shortstop might be the next infielder to really break out in postseason. Think Javier Baez, Daniel Murphy, Ben Zobrist and Alcides Escobar in recent years.

Y: YANKEE STADIUM — The playoffs begin the Bronx, with Yankees youngster Luis Severino starting the AL wild-card game, taking on Ervin Santana and the Twins.

Z: ZACK GREINKE — The Arizona ace is set to start Wednesday's NL wild-card game at home against a familiar opponent. He's 2-1 in five starts vs. Colorado this year.