

Major League Baseball

Opposites attract: A seesaw season

By Devra Māza
Special for USA TODAY

To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. No sport exemplifies this basic law of physics more than baseball: A ball pitched at a certain velocity, hit by a bat with a certain force, will travel a certain distance. Accordingly, it seems that this year every highlight in baseball was met with an opposite lowlight.

If baseball is America's game, then each year America gets the baseball season it deserves. In 2010, fans were mesmerized as moments of dazzling

achievement, exhilaration and euphoria were invariably followed by others that were disheartening, frustrating or downright shocking. But all were compelling to behold. For baseball's seesaw season, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . .

Screenwriter Devra Māza writes articles about film and baseball. Her poem *The Great Greg Maddux* and her article *Curtain Calls*, written for this newspaper, are in the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.



Go to baseball.usatoday.com and vote for whether instant replay should be used in situations where history (perfect or playoff games) is on the line

The best: 27 up ...

Once upon a time, in a quest for more offense, baseball lowered the mound. Now, as the steroid era appears to be winding down, pitchers are on a more level playing field. This season, numerous pitchers flirted with no-hitters, with five going all the way, including two perfect games.

On May 29, Roy "Doc" Halladay of the Philadelphia Phillies pitched the 20th perfect game in MLB history, adding the gem to his Cy Young Award credentials.

But the most moving outing came from the Oakland Athletics' Dallas Braden, who, having lost his mother to skin cancer, threw his perfect game on Mother's Day, with his grandmother in the stands. It was his first complete game and his 18th career victory, three fewer than Halladay earned just this year. Afterward, Braden's grandmother cried tears of joy in his arms. "She deserves this," he said. On this day, so did he.



By Cary Edmondson, US Presswire

Perfect Mother's Day present: The Athletics' Dallas Braden hugs his grandmother, Peggy Lindsey, after pitching the majors' 19th perfect game May 9. It was his 18th career win and first complete game.



By Kirthmon F. Dozier, Detroit Free Press

Of all the times to blow it: Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga, taking the throw at first, lost a perfect-game bid when Jim Joyce ruled the Indians' Jason Donald safe on this play. It would have been the last out.

The worst: ... 28 down

Umpires aren't perfect. On June 2, right-handed pitcher Armando Galarraga of the Detroit Tigers got the 27th out in 27 chances . . . or so it seemed, until first-base umpire Jim Joyce blew a call, setting off the ire of Detroit fans and a debate about instant replay.

After the play, Galarraga just went back to work and got the next batter out.

Despite a tearful mea culpa from Joyce, baseball did not reverse the call, not wanting to set a precedent.

Galarraga's gracious acceptance of the situation muffled the uproar.

After a ceremony the next day in which he was honored for his performance, Galarraga brought out the lineup card to Joyce, offering empathy and forgiveness to the beleaguered umpire with a handshake.

The pitcher might have lost out on a perfect game, but, with one perfect gesture, he gained the respect of baseball fans worldwide.

The best: Passing the torch ...

Catching the ceremonial first pitch from Hank Aaron on opening day was just the beginning. Hammerin' Hank must've put some magic on that ball as Jason Heyward, the Atlanta Braves' newest outfielder, homered on the first swing of his first major league at-bat, launching his career with an All-Star year and impressing his Cooperstown-bound skipper.

Bobby Cox, who calls the rookie of the year candidate gifted, received his own tribute Oct. 2, honoring a 29-year career in which he led the Braves to a record 14 consecutive division titles. But it's his ejection record of 158 that testifies to his commitment of always going to bat for his players. Happily, the only thing retiring about Cox is his position as manager with 2,504 wins. He'll stay on as an adviser for team baseball operations, keeping one of baseball's best minds in the game.



By Dale Zanine, US Presswire

Cool debut: Jason Heyward's first major league hit was a three-run homer on opening day.



By Kirby Lee, US Presswire

Celebration cut short: After Kendry Morales, center, was injured, the Angels ended celebrations at the plate.

The worst: ... Breaking a leg

The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Angels that May day. The score stood tied at one with the 10th inning's end to play. Then mighty Kendry Morales, with just one swing of his bat, whacked a grand slam to the faux rocks for the win and that was that. As he ran to greet his teammates, who gathered at home plate, he leapt to score the run and they all jumped to celebrate.

But then, amid the tumult, there was a frightening cracking sound as Morales yelled, grabbed a stem and crumpled to the ground. No more would the Angels allow a walk-off celebration. Players could only high-five now to show their jubilation. Some would plead to laugh and jump and some of them would beg, but there is no joy in Anaheim — Kendry Morales broke his leg.

The best: The 600 club ...

The position of closer is unique to baseball's modern game, and on Sept. 7, all-time saves leader Trevor Hoffman of the Milwaukee Brewers set a new standard with his 600th. But Hoffman, more than anyone, knows that all things must come to an end. As his career nears its final out, he can see the New York Yankees' Mariano Rivera closing in.

With 559 saves, Rivera is already a New York hero and also the best postseason reliever in history with 39 saves and counting.

Watching either of these ninth-inning specialists is a scene true baseball fans cherish, and a memory worth saving.



By Morry Gash, AP

Savior: Trevor Hoffman is carried away after getting his 600th save. "If you love the game, it will love you back," Hoffman said.



By Jim McIsaac, Getty Images

There it is: Alex Rodriguez tacked on 13 more homers to his career total after hitting No. 600 on Aug. 4.

The worst: ... The 600* club

The New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez on Aug. 4 became the seventh player and youngest in history to hit 600 home runs, putting him in select company. He finished the season at 613, sixth all time behind Ken Griffey Jr.'s 630.

But Rodriguez, who has admitted he used steroids, has also joined "The Asterisk Club," which might include former teammate Roger Clemens, who is battling steroid-related charges.

Yet if the steroid era is a given, it is also a given that Rodriguez and Clemens are among the greatest to have played in it. That is why it is fitting that Rodriguez's milestone long ball landed in Yankee Stadium's Monument Park, one more homer as he chases Barry Bonds' record of 762 — the mother of all asterisks.

The best: Class acts ...

He'd better be smiling on the plaque. It's how we always picture Ken Griffey Jr., whose face glowed with the joy of his quick bat, fearless fielding and sparkling play. In the 1990s, there was no one better than the Seattle Mariners legend who, after injuries and artificial turf took their toll, returned to Seattle, where he quietly called it a career June 2. But Junior won't be gone long. We'll soon see him in the Hall of Fame, beaming again in bronze.

One of the game's great ambassadors, Luis Gonzalez had his own reason to smile Aug. 7, when he became the first player in the Arizona Diamondbacks' short history to have his number retired. The five-time All-Star might be best known for his 2001 World Series-winning hit that beat the New York Yankees, but he is most beloved for a bit of Bazooka. It was sometime after his 30-game hitting streak that Gonzalez spit out the fateful gum that somehow ended up on eBay. When the wad's authenticity was questioned, Gonzo simply chewed another piece and offered it as surety. Now that's class.



By Rick Scuteri, AP

Arizona's finest: Luis Gonzalez was the first Diamondbacks player to have his number retired.

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File photo by Carlos Delgado, AP

In happier times: Jamie and Frank McCourt, pre-postnup battle, enjoy a Dodgers game in 2008.

The worst: ... Class action

Team owners Frank and Jamie McCourt lived down to their name, dragging the Dodgers through Los Angeles divorce court for baseball's first custody battle. But how can the kids play when Daddy and Mommy are always fighting? As the Dodgers' play-off hopes fizzled, the nightly news sizzled with reports of infidelities and he-said/she-said accusations. As the plot twists thickened, even a lawyer confessed on the stand to altering documents.

Before the season was over, players would ask to be traded, the manager bailed out and a former owner would urge the McCourts to sell, leaving Dodgers fans wondering whether they could sue for emancipation from the major league soap opera. Cue music: But what's to become of Joe Torre? Will someone from Brooklyn buy the Dodgers? How will it all end?

For the answer to these and other burning questions, stay tuned.

The best: The boy of summer ...

On June 8, Nationals phenom Stephen Strasburg put Washington on the map with a dazzling debut, striking out 14 batters in seven innings, bringing his 100-mile-per-hour fastball and fans into stadiums.

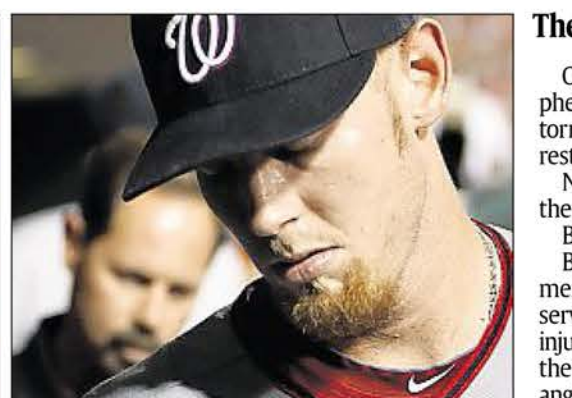
As patrons clamored to see the rookie sensation, his No. 37 jersey sold out in clubhouse shops nationwide.

But Nationals President Stan Kasten, formerly of the Braves, knows something about preserving great arms. He declared the team would not give in to the financial temptation of overuse but would limit Strasburg's pitch counts and innings to protect the young pitcher from injury.



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Superb start: Nationals rookie Stephen Strasburg struck out 14 Pittsburgh Pirates in his big-league debut.



By Ron Cortes, AP

Rise before the fall: Stephen Strasburg went on the disabled list twice before ending his season.

The worst: ... The winter of discontent

On Sept. 3, Washington Nationals phenom Stephen Strasburg had Tommy John surgery to repair a torn elbow ligament, taking him out of not only the rest of this season but perhaps all of next year.

Now those No. 37 jerseys will just have to sell themselves.

Baseball broke another pitcher. But legendary pitching coach, Leo Mazzone, formerly of the Braves, knows something about preserving great arms. He's noted that an increase in injuries over the years to pitchers can be traced to the lowered mound, which adds stress to the arm angle during delivery.

Something to ponder over the long, cold winter as we await the next baseball season with new hope for the best.