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Rays' improbable surge becomes reality

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September 29, 2011

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. – Champagne flowed through the clubhouse of the Tampa Bay Rays just after midnight Thursday, matched only by the soaring spirits of a baseball club that had just authored a script too improbable for Hollywood.

You had to see it to believe it. And even then, you might not.

Even the Rays team that had just lived through the moment was still trying to absorb what had just happened in the jubilant blur of a waking baseball dream.

"I haven't processed it quite yet – all I know is we won and we're going to playoffs," said pitcher James Shields, smiling and soaked with bubbly.

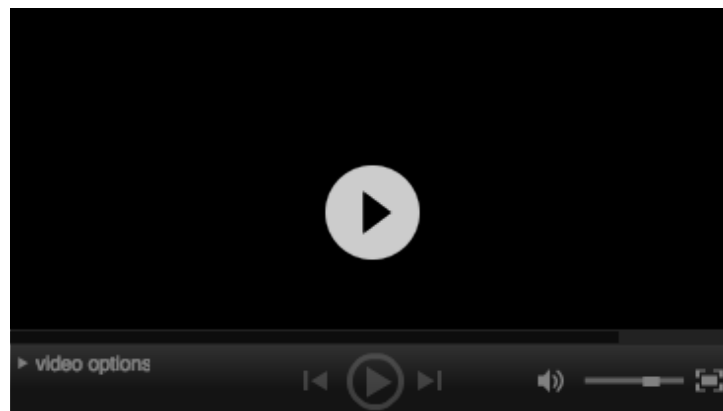
"I'm a stats guy and I can't even put a number on the chances of this happening," said equally drenched outfielder Sam Fuld, a noted math wiz out of Stanford.

With their season on the verge of a disheartening end, their hopes for a landmark run to the postseason virtually done, they somehow battled back from a seven-run deficit in the eighth inning against the New York Yankees and won 8-7 in 12 innings to reach the playoffs. And they did it on the final night of the regular season.

But the story of how it happened will now be etched in Rays history – and perhaps baseball history, period.

For starters, the club might have to build a statue of .108-hitting Dan Johnson in the concourse of Tropicana Field.

Only recently recalled from Durham



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RAYS FS FL FS.COM

David Price wins AL Cy Young Award

B.J. Upton one of many to reject offers



Rays' David Price a finalist for AL Cy Young

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after struggling as a starter earlier this season, the journeyman first baseman delivered the pinch-hit home run that saved the game and the season for the Rays -- a two-strike, two-out rocket shot to right field that tied the score 7-7 in the bottom of the ninth and ignited a surreal blend of elation and disbelief inside the thunderous Trop.

Yes, the same Dan Johnson who notched arguably the biggest Rays home run ever in 2008, when he was called up from Durham only hours earlier, came into the game as ninth-inning pinch-hitter and blasted a shot at Fenway Park that helped propel his team to the AL East Division title en route to the World Series.

If Red Sox fans hated Johnson for that one, they definitely will curse his name for generations to come after this latest one – a homer from a guy who once again stepped up out of nowhere to drive a dagger through their hearts.

Up until that moment, the Red Sox and their fans had to be feeling pretty good about the way the evening had unfolded. They entered the night tied with the Rays for the AL wild-card spot with identical records of 90-71. And despite their monumental collapse – falling from first place in the AL East by losing 17 of 23 games in September – they appeared on the verge of edging out Tampa Bay late Wednesday.

They led the upstart Baltimore Orioles 3-2 in the seventh when a torrential storm forced a prolonged rain delay at Camden Yards. Meanwhile, the Rays were going quietly into the night – managing only a pair of Casey Kotchman hits and trailing by seven runs to a bevy of mostly minor league arms employed by the AL East champion Yankees.

But then came the memorable six-run rally in the bottom of the eighth — keyed by Evan Longoria's three-run homer that brought the crowd



back to life – setting the stage for Johnson's heroics.

HOW THE RAYS WON THE WILD CARD: Check out a timeline of events from Wednesday night that led to the Rays winning the AL wild card spot over the Red Sox.

And, as it all turned out, Longoria was setting the stage for himself.

In the top of the 12th, he made the defensive play of the game – only one night after helping save the game for Tampa Bay by initiating a crucial bases-loaded triple play. With the Yankees threatening with runners on the corners and none out, Longoria snagged a hard grounder by the third base bag by ever-dangerous designated hitter Jorge Posada and caught speedster Greg Golson leaning off the base – tagging him out and helping rookie reliever Jake McGee work his way out of a potentially disastrous jam.

Then, just before the Rays came to bat in the bottom of the 12th, a deafening roar from the crowd of 29,518 – at least those who had stuck around after the dismal first seven innings — almost blew the top off the Trop.

At precisely 11:59 p.m. ET, fans following the Boston-Baltimore game had just learned that the Orioles had tied the score 3-3 with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, with a pair of back-to-back doubles off Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon.

Suddenly, the chances once again seemed good for a one-game playoff between the Rays and Red Sox on Thursday at Tropicana Field to determine the wild-card winner.

Then, at 12:02 a.m., another roar swept through the stadium. The final score from Baltimore flashed on the scoreboard: Orioles 4, Red Sox 3 – an outcome that instantly assured that the Rays could do no worse than a wild-card tie with Boston, forcing the playoff in St. Petersburg.

That's when Longoria stepped to the plate again and followed with his tour de force – ripping a low liner toward the left-field corner that had just enough height to clear the low portion of the wall and win the game.

In a heartbeat, the Rays had completed their implausible journey – becoming the first team in major league history to trail by nine games on Sept. 4 and still reach the postseason, becoming the first American League ever to start the year 0-6 and make the playoffs. Their 16-8 magical mystery ride through the month of September – coupled with Boston's 6-18 disappearing act – had done the trick.

Players, coaches and manager Joe Maddon raced onto the field to celebrate a moment that rivaled the unforgettable scene of the Rays' winning the ALCS in 2008 against Boston. Minutes later, they poured

into the jubilant clubhouse – along with the bottles of fizzing bubbly dousing everyone in sight – to try to wrap their minds around what had just transpired.

"Me, who believes everything can happen – I'm saying, 'I can't believe this,'" said eternally optimistic manager Joe Maddon as players sprayed each other with bubbly non-stop. "I mean, really, it's so contrived, drawn-up, fiction. Hollywood would say, 'Get out of here. We've already done *The Natural*.' It's going to last a long time. This one left a mark."

And none bigger than the one left by Johnson, a forgotten man who hadn't gotten a hit for the Rays since April 27. Still, Maddon was well-aware of Johnson's track record for clutch homers – the fabled shot in '08, a walk-off homer to beat Boston last season, his two homers in one game against the Yankees last Sept. 15 to put the Rays back in first place over New York, and his three-run homer in the ninth against the White Sox that gave the Rays their first win this season after the 0-6 start.



Check out the Rays' top moments (so far) from the 2011 season

So, with his team down to its last out and trailing 7-6, Maddon sent in Johnson off the bench. Johnson worked the count to 2-2 – taking his team's fortunes down to one final strike against reliever Corey Wade.

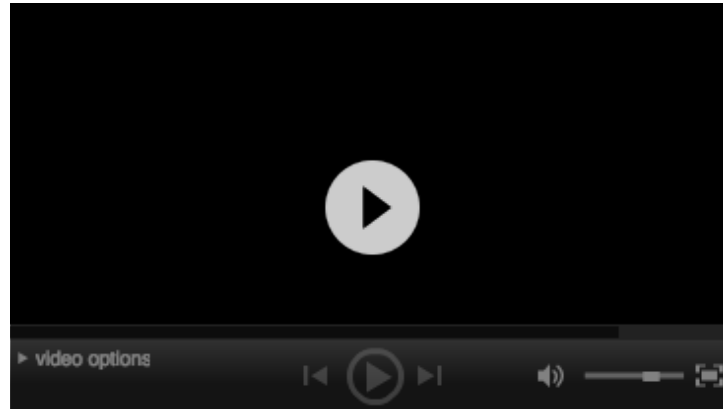
Then came the swing that will forever be remembered in the annals of Rays baseball – driving the pitch toward the right-field pole that stayed fair and found a most welcome home in the stands amid delirious Rays fans.

"It's under the category of the right thing to do at that moment," Maddon said of his decision to put Johnson in the game with one out left. "I mean, what else can you do? He's the best shot to do that. He's taking batting practice every day. You know that he's capable of that. So your backs are against the wall and he was the best option and he came through."

Maddon, who has seen more than his share of professional baseball in a 35-year career, tried to put in perspective the magnitude of Johnson's home run under the circumstances.

"This is going to go down with (Bobby) Thomson's home run back in the day as this is all played out years from now, Joe Carter's home run (for Toronto that beat Philadelphia in the 1993 World Series)," he said. "I know it's not the World Series. But this is going to be attached to a lot of significant baseball lore as we move forward."

Longoria's twin homers – his 30th and 31st of the season after an injury-plagued start to the season – were equally significant on this night. But Longoria was more interested in talking about the big picture than any personal accomplishments.



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"It's just a bunch of guys who have put together an incredible season and now we don't have to be talking about how good it was or how good it could have been to make the playoffs," he said.

Almost forgotten in the celebration was the horrendous start the Rays had in the game. Nothing went right for starter David Price, who left after the shortest start of his season – four innings, five hits and five earned runs – including a grand slam yielded to Mark Teixeira in the second and a solo shot in the fourth. The only run that wasn't Price's fault came in the first inning, when normally sure-handed second baseman Ben Zobrist booted a grounder that allowed the Yankees to take a 1-0 lead.

And things got progressively worse until the eighth, when first-year Ray and team leader Johnny Damon touched off the pivotal six-run rally with a single.

"It's incredible," Damon said afterward. "What an amazing accomplishment by our guys."

Zobrist, who contributed a double in the big eighth inning, was at a loss to describe what he'd just experienced.

"Unbelievable, just unbelievable," he said. "I mean, we're down 7-0, Red Sox are up their whole game pretty much. And next thing you know, we're right back in our game and the last inning in the 12th, it was just meant to be."

It was indeed for Dan Johnson, who rose to the occasion despite going 0-5 since returning from Durham on Sept. 14.

"All I was thinking about was get on base, just get on base," he said. "I didn't go up there thinking, 'I have to hit a home run.' But he threw me a pretty good pitch and I was just fortunate enough to swing through it and keep it fair. And when it left the park, it was just an unbelievable feeling."

You had to see it to believe it.

Tags: New York Yankees, Tampa Bay Rays, Evan Longoria, Boston Red Sox, Dan Johnson, AL Wild Card, 2011 Playoffs



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