Angels Salvage a Playoff From Out of the Rubble

By RICK WEINBERG
ANAHEIM, Calif., Oct. 1 — The improbability of the California Angels salvaging a playoff berth from their long season-long slide was becoming increasingly remote late yesterday. But after blowing the biggest lead in the shortest time period in baseball history — 10 1/2 games in 35 days — the Angels completed a four-game sweep of the Oakland Athletics with an 8-2 victory, forcing the one-game playoff on Monday in Seattle.

"I'm not shocked," said Angels Manager Marcel Lachemann about the remarkable turnaround. "Every saw the way we were capable of playing. We just turned it around.

"To play at this level after being so down and people kicking dirt on our, it's a great achievement by this team."

The assignment on Monday will be a difficult one for the Angels: the Mariners will start their ace, Randy Johnson, who is 17-2 with a 2.54 earned run average and 282 strikeouts, both best in the American League. The Angels will counter with left-hander Mark Langston, who has a strained left biceps.

The Angels forced the one-game playoff with the stellar pitching performance of their ace, left-hander Chuck Finley, and with two rallies in the first three innings against Oakland starter Todd Stottlemyre. All afternoon, Anaheim Stadium was a sea of emotions, of celebration and relief. Moments before the Angels took the field at 1 P.M., they were whooping it up in their clubhouse when Texas' Mickey Tettleton slammed a three-run, first-inning home run against Seattle starter Tim Belcher.

When the Rangers were increasing their lead in the fourth inning, the Angels were beginning their first-inning rally. As Ivan Rodriguez scored to give Texas a 4-1 lead, Angels third baseman Tony Phillips led off the first inning with an opposite-field double down the left-field line off Stottlemyre. Phillips scored moments later when Jim Edmonds lined an opposite-field single to left for his 105th run batted in of the season.

As Belcher was being knocked out of the game in Texas, J. T. Snow was giving California a 2-1 lead with a single to right field. Oakland catcher Terry Steinbach sliced the Angels' lead to 2-1 with a homer off Finley in the second inning, and down in Arlington, the Rangers were knocking the Mariners around, taking a 7-1 lead, keyed by Juan Gonzalez's two-run double.

The Angels began knocking the A's around in the third, scoring three times to take a 5-1 advantage. At about the same time in Arlington, the Rangers were increasing their lead to 9-3, and the improbable was becoming reality.

When the final score from Arlington was displayed on the Anaheim Stadium scoreboard in left field in the top of the sixth inning, the fans erupted with a three-minute standing ovation.

Who would have thought it would come to this? Two months ago, the Angels had a 13-game lead over Seattle. On Aug. 24, the lead was 11 1/2. On Sept. 13, the lead was 6. Then in the ensuing 18 days, the Mariners went 12-3, the Angels 5-10, enabling Seattle to take over first place.

California's collapse was being considered the biggest in baseball history. Bigger than the 1978 Boston Red Sox, who blew a 14-game lead. Bigger than the 1951 Brooklyn Dodgers, who lost a 13 1/2-game lead. The Angels' fall was considered the worst because they lost it in such a short span of time.