

Angels Salvage a Playoff From Out of the Rubble

By RICK WEINBERG

ANAHEIM, Calif., Oct. 1 — The task was not only improbable, it was close to impossible.

But after blowing the biggest lead in the shortest time period in baseball history — 10½ games in 35 days — the California Angels today forged a one-game playoff for the American League West title by erasing a two-game deficit in the final 48 hours of the season.

While the Seattle Mariners lost their final two games of the season to the Texas Rangers, including a 9-3 defeat today in Arlington, Tex., the Angels completed a four-game sweep of the Oakland Athletics in Anaheim 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. "Everyone saw the way we were capable of playing. We just turned it up."

"To play at this level after being so down and people kicking dirt on us, 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's 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.

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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 2-0 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 quickly 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 11½. 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 13½-game lead. The Angels' fall was considered the worst because they lost it in such a short span of time.

But when Finley defeated the Mariners by 2-0 last Wednesday in Seattle in the final game of a two-game series, the Angels' losing streak had finally been halted. They then returned home to face Oakland in a four-game series, needing a minor miracle.

And they got it.

"We never felt we were done," said Snow. "We kept persevering."

Finley, who allowed just four hits and struck out nine in seven and one-third innings, said he was determined to pitch aggressively today. "It was a nerve-racking situation to be in," he said. "I didn't want a lot of things people were saying to creep into my mind, so I got out of the clubhouse before the game and sat in the dugout by myself."

But Finley's effort would have proved futile if not for help from the Rangers. They beat the Mariners back to back over the weekend, allowing the Angels a new life.

"Thank you, Texas," said Chili Davis. "Beating Benes and Belcher, that's clutch."

Now all the Angels have to do is beat Johnson, in the Kingdome.

"That's exactly the type of atmosphere you love being in," said Edmonds. "It's going to be great. Fifty thousand fans screaming their lungs out. That's fun. That's the type of situation you hope for, especially after what we've been through."

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