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# What This Winning Streak Really Means

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By johnny was

It's hard not to leave the ballpark with a smile on your face when Your Jays have just laid a savage beating on a worthy opponent like the Twins as they did on Wednesday afternoon at the Rogers Centre. The runs wouldn't stop coming in the 6th, when the flood gates opened en route to a club record-tying 11-run inning. Trust me, no one in attendance was the least bit bothered to see a get-away day game run a little longer than expected.

Wednesday's crowd was louder and more boisterous than it had been at any point since late April. And with good reason, because this was more than a single-game outburst. Through this 5-game winning streak, the Jays have done more than play their best baseball of the year: they have exceeded even the most optimistic of preseason expectations and given hope for those of us who are hanging on through the rest of this year and looking forward to 2008.

We knew this group was capable of putting up crooked numbers on a nightly basis, but who amongst you expected the simultaneous emergence of stellar sophomores Marcum and McGowan as viable mid-rotation starters in addition to the gutsy rookie performance of Jesse Litsch? Put it another way: did you see this team being 5th of 14 in the AL for team ERA when it started the season with a rotation consisting of crusty Japanese shit-baller Tomo Ohka and a Josh Towers who was coming off what was one of the worst seasons from a starter in team history, while lackluster Dollar Store Specials John Thomson and Victor Zambrano bided their time in Syracuse as injury replacements? Don't make me call you a liar; the rotation as it now stands has surpassed all of our wildest expectations by leaps and bounds.

To underline my point, let's look at the last tour through the rotation:

\* Saturday, July 21: 1-0 victory over the Mariners on the back of 6 2/3 strong innings from resident whipping boy Josh Towers, who is motivated by Fear and pitching like his 2005 smoke-and-mirrors self.

\* Sunday, July 22: 8-0 victory to close out the Mariners series featuring a complete game shutout 3-hitter (and the superlatives could carry on to the next page...) from Doc, who finally appears to be fully recovered from his appendectomy in May.

\* Monday, July 23: 6-4 victory to welcome the Twins into town. Marcum's Achilles' heel has been the long ball and he surrendered 3 of them this night. Reigning AL MVP socked a deuce and Torii Hunter, no slouch in the power department, added a solo blast. It was good enough to best His Excellency, Johan Santana, who surrendered a career worst 4 dingers himself. There was just something in the air that night and even if it wasn't the best we've seen of Marcum this year, it was more than good enough to beat a very talented ball club.

\* Tuesday, July 24: 7-0 victory over the Twinkies as Dustin McGowan was at his Dustin McGowan-y best through 7 1/3 shutout innings. He's been accused of inconsistency this year by some. Funny that, because 7 of his last 10 starts have been "quality" (6+ IP and >3 ER). He just might be on his way to becoming the pitcher JP thought he added when AJ Burnett came to town.

\* Wednesday, July 25: 13-1 trouncing of the Twins, who left T.O. with their collective tails between their legs. We all remember the 11-run 6th, but Jesse Litsch rebounded from what was probably an injury-shortened start against the Mariners on July 20 to go 7 strong, allowing only one earned run. As Justin Morneau stepped into the box in the top of the fourth with a runner on third, 2 outs and the score knotted at zero, I was expecting to see this very dangerous bat intentionally walked. He wasn't, and predictably rapped a RBI single to right to cash the runner from third. Torii Hunter followed by knocking a lazy fly to V-Dub in deep centre to end the inning.

When all is said and done, it's hard to knock a manager when his team wins as big as it did on Wednesday, but this very easily could have been the Jays' 4th shutout in 5 days. Wrap your heads around that.

Counterfactual history aside, that's a very wicked team ERA of 1.00 through the streak.

After the euphoria of today's effort wears off, however, it's time to confront the grim reality that faces the 2007 Jays down the home stretch. This club has just passed the 100 game mark and is a mere game over .500. at 51-50, 10.5 games back in the AL East and 7.5 back in the Wildcard. The resurgent Yankees stand between the Jays and a very formidable Indians club in its own right that is currently leading in the WC standings. And here's the massive buzzkill: the Jays are likely going to have to play .670 ball or better the rest of the way to even entertain the remotest of Hail Mary long shot hopes of making the playoffs. Sorry to break the bad news.

There is a historical precedent for the defy-all-odds hopers out there. The '89 Jays—the textbook example of a very talented club that tanked early and rallied just enough late in the season to squeak into the playoffs—were 50-50 on July 25th. They went 39-23 (.629) over their final 62 games to finish 89-73, 2 games up on the Orioles (yes, they used to be

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good a VERY long time ago, before the internet hit big). I wouldn't bet any of my own money on the 2007 Jays getting that hot AND the Yankees and Indians tanking hard, but I won't tell you where to place your hopes.

We've heard rationalizations for this club's disappointing season to date repeated ad nauseam and I have no intention of rehashing them here. Through it all, though, adversity has been overcome for the most part (well, as much of it as one could hope for; we're still out Money Closer BJ Ryan while Burnett is enjoying his annual mid-summer DL vacation). This season probably blew up before the Jays' recent heart-wrenching 3-5 road trip through Boston and New York. Their inability to translate the momentum of a late June sweep of the Rockies into a .500+ record going into the All-Star break was more than likely the last nail in the coffin. It's hard to admit that the season is most likely over just as the Jays have started to play their best baseball, but as JP says, "there's optimism, pessimism, and then there's realism."

Nevertheless, what we've seen from the Jays over the past week bodes well for the future, a future that appears to have begun in May when injuries to Burnett and Chacin and underperformance from Tomo Ohka prompted Gibby and JP to juggle the rotation into its present makeup. A team with good starting pitching, which the Jays now appear to have in spades, will always leave itself in a position to win games. Halladay is a Jay for as long as he wants to be; Marcum, McGowan and Litsch are under club control years to come. Janssen remains an appealing option should anyone falter. Burnett will likely throw 15-20 mostly good games next year. Chacin, well, for all we know he still exists. I haven't even mentioned how sick this bullpen is going to look next year with Accardo and League setting up for BJ Ryan. Did I mention that the 1993 Jays won a World Series with the 5th ranked team ERA in the AL? Now if only the offence could fulfill expectations...

Thoughts?

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