

SUPERHEROES DO EXIST

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The 2019 major league baseball season had not gone as planned for the Philadelphia Phillies, at least through mid-July. The men wearing white with red pinstripes were just two games over .500 heading into the night, finally succumbing in the standings to the surging Washington Nationals and slipping to third in the National League East. On top of a hard season, this ongoing series was against the Los Angeles Dodgers, the best team in the majors at 63-33 and the only team with more than 60 wins.

The night before had been dreadful. The Phillies were eviscerated on their home ground by the Boys in Blue, losing 16-2. Philadelphia gave up 19 hits and five walks and allowed two 5+ run innings. Offensively, the Phillies were limited to a Scott Kingery solo shot and down 13 runs in the 8th – a too-little, too-late sac fly. Philadelphia needed someone to climb the steps of the Art Museum and urge the faithful to follow. To get up off the floor. To fight. Tonight, the Philly fanatics needed a Superhero.

The Phillies opened strong as Vince Velasquez mowed down the Dodgers 1-2-3. In the bottom half, Kingery who now had Bryce Harper hitting behind him – was seeing more fastballs because the Dodgers didn't want to face Harp with men on base. But Kingery liked fastballs, like the one he gave to a fan last night in deep left center. And like the bomb he launched to left on a high fastball in the bottom of tonight's 1st. Phillies lead 1-0.

With the black skies looming, Velasquez looked to continue the momentum in the 2nd. He struck out Cody Bellinger, this year's NL MVP candidate and premier outfielder for Los Angeles. But the next man up, Max Muncy, blasted a moon shot to right, tying the game at one. The Dodgers weren't backing down.

Neither were the Phills. In the bottom of the 2nd with a man on first, Brad Miller cranked one off the scoreboard in right to put the Phillies up 3-1. Later in the frame, Harper came to the plate in exactly the situation the Dodgers didn't want: men on. Bases empty, he was hitting .163. But with ducks on the pond? Harp was spitting bullets with a smoking .363 average. Building on a 6-pitch walk in the first, Harper worked a 2-0 count. He swung through the next pitch but still maintained count leverage, sitting comfortably at 2-1. On the next pitch – a 98mph heater – Harper cashed in the advantage by depositing the ball in to the camera well in dead center. 6-1 Phillies.

Undeterred, the Dodgers kept fighting. In the 4th, Bellinger annihilated one with a man on first, followed by an A.J. Pollock solo shot one batter later. And in the top of the 5th, Joc Pederson lost a ball to right on a 2-1 count to pull the Dodgers within one, 6-5. Later in the inning, Phillies manager Gabe Kapler was forced to go to the bullpen when Bellinger came up with 2-outs.

Lefty specialist Jose Alvarez stemmed L.A.'s momentum, striking out Bellinger swinging, and then getting the Dodgers in order in the next frame.

Harper came to the plate in the 7th looking to give the Phillies some insurance. He had been seeing the ball well at the plate all night, having earned walks in the 1st and 5th and homering in the 2nd. Harper promptly worked a 2-0 count. Pedro Baez threw him a 87mph change-up on the next pitch, catching Harper looking to make it 2-1. Sitting in a fastball count, Harper must have been anticipating one of Baez's wicked fastballs. But Baez doubled down on the change-up fooling Harper and eliciting a soft flyout to left.

Heading into the 9th it was still a one-run game. Philly pitcher Hector Neris had thrown only warm-up pitches before the skies opened, leading to a 22-minute rain delay. When the game resumed, the Dodgers brought the thunder. After a first pitch strike, Muncy drew a walk. Pollock then sent a dying quail over the head of Kingery on a 2-0 count to put men on first and second. After a Corey Seager strike-out, Matt Beaty came to the plate looking to build on his pinch-hit double last night. Beaty took a splitter for ball one. Then, knowing Neris didn't want to go 2-0 on a second straight batter, Beaty sent an 87mph splitter over the fence. Phills were now down 8-6.

Perhaps in frustration, Neris threw a 1-0 fastball shoulder high at the next batter David Freese, who ducked and took a ricochet off the right shoulder. Homeplate umpire Chris Conroy promptly ejected Neris. After Conroy warned both dugouts, Kapler got hot but was quickly cooled with a trip to the showers. The home team was unraveling. Dejection loomed. In a lone bright spot, Ranger Suarez came on and induced an inning-ending double play.

In the bottom of the 9th, the dreadlocked juggernaut Kenley Jansen strode to the mound for the Dodgers. The closer had 23 saves in 26 opportunities and 51 strikeouts in 38 1/3 innings pitched. Conroy let Jansen know warnings had been issued.

The leadoff hitter ricocheted a ball off Jansen but was tagged out at first. Even still, the gauntlet had been thrown.

With one out, Andrew Knapp stepped to the plate and cashed in a 1-0 count for a quick double. It was the first hit for the Phillies since the 2nd inning. That was followed by a single to right, putting men on first and third. Kingery then lobbed one into center just in front of a diving Pollock, making it 8-7. The tying run was at second, the winning run was at first. The Phillies needed a moment. The faithful needed hope. The prize of the off-season stepped to the plate.

Harper, one of the most patient players in the league, averaging 4+ pitches every time he came to bat, had seen 18 pitches over four plate appearances resulting in a homerun, two walks, three RBI, and a run. The one time they got him was a 2-1 count on a change-up. On the other 2-1 count, he had done damage. Harp knew they wanted count leverage, so when Jansen opened the plate appearance with a ball in the zone, Harper ended it by lacing a shot to center on the first pitch he saw. The ball glanced off Pollock's glove and rolled to the wall, allowing both men to score. No need to worry about working a hitter's count, Harper stood on second before being driven to centerfield by the celebration tsunami.

Phillies win 9-8; Harper's first walk-off hit in his new uniform. More importantly, the Philly masses had found their Superhero.