

WORKING TITLE
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The Los Angeles Dodgers clinched the National League West on Sept 10th. A week later, they welcomed the playoff-hopeful Tampa Rays into the theater of Dodgers Stadium. Even though the Dodgers were within two games of the best record in baseball, they had their collective sights set on winning a Championship.

Since his arrival in 2015, Dave Roberts' Dodgers had won four straight Divisional titles and appeared in back-to-back World Series. Roberts was leading his men toward a third consecutive Series appearance and, perhaps, their first victory since 1988.

Pitching was the challenge in 2018, with the team's ERA jumping from 3.38 (second best in the regular season) to second worst in the World Series (4.85). In 2019, their starters were first in ERA. Roberts was using September to resolve his bullpen.

In the pen was tonight's anticipated starter, Ross Stripling. Strip's splits between starter and bullpen - 3.38 ERA versus 2.16 ERA - were the difference between good and elite. Because Roberts needed the best for October, he wanted to see Ross out of the pen, choosing instead to give the starting nod to Caleb Ferguson. Roberts also wanted to evaluate other pitchers – some in new roles, others for a different type of workload – which meant it was up to the bats to keep the team in tonight's game.

The Dodgers' offense was prepared for the task, ranking first in the Senior Circuit in home runs. Cody Bellinger was hitting an electric .304 with 44 home runs; Corey Seager, the N.L. Rookie of the Year in 2016, was starting to get hot.

Rays manager Kevin Cash was hoping to keep 'em cool. Sixty feet, six inches from home plate, Cash deployed Blake Snell who had won the 2018 Cy Young. Blake had had a rough 2019, with his last start in the majors coming July 21. Tonight, Snell stood on the bump against the third best team in baseball. On the offensive side, Tampa had been scorching at the plate, with All Star Austin Meadows hitting .289 with 31 bombs. Tampa Bay hoped to catch lightning in a bottle.

Tampa Bay struck first in the top of the 2nd. With one out, Joey Wendle took a free trip to first when ball four was thrown over his head. Nearly before Wendle even reached the bag, the Dodgers pitching coach was out of the dugout to talk with Ferguson. Julio Urias, the lefty stalwart, promptly got up in the pen to ready for his post-season audition.

Wendle didn't spend much time at first before zip-lining to third, courtesy of his eighth stolen base and Ferguson's first career balk. Roberts seemed interested in how Ferguson would respond, so left the southpaw to his own devices to get out of the inning. Ferguson did get a second out, but it came on a sac fly resulting in a 1-0 Tampa Bay lead. Roberts beckoned, and Urias stormed the field, striking out the last batter on three pitches.

L.A.'s bats remained tongue-tied as Snell and touted reliever Oliver Drake threw two perfect innings apiece, striking out six of the first 12 batters. Once the two of them were out of the game, however, Los Angeles' bats awoke against one of the top three MLB bullpens. In the bottom of the 5th, the diamond burgeoned with runners on first and second and no one out. A groundout moved the men to 2nd and 3rd, before Corey Seager laced a ground-rule double to left, giving the Dodgers a 2-1 lead.

Dodgers pitching had done the job since the 2nd, with a scoreless 3rd, 4th, and 5th. Strip got into the game in the 4th as a reliever. And although he did give up the Rays' first hit, he also had more strikeouts (3) than innings pitched (2) – a good pitching metric.

Pedro Baez came on in the 6th with a 2-1 lead. But on a 3-1 count, Ji-Man Choi took Pedro to the moon. Baez finished the 6th and got one out in the 7th, when Roberts called on two more pitchers, with Kenta Maeda getting the third Rays' out in the 7th.

In the bottom of the 7th, the Dodger bats went to work, unloading for five runs and having seven men touch first safely, including doubles by Bellinger and Seager, giving Seager a 4-RBI night. Just like that, L.A. had breathing room heading into the 8th.

Post-season hopeful Maeda resumed his place, now in play for the win through benefit of being last on the mound before the go-ahead run scored in the 7th. Kenta had moved between starter and bullpen all season, but if he was going to make the post-season, it would likely be as a reliever. Maeda struck out the first man he faced in the 8th. But then it went sideways.

Austin Meadows doubled on a thunder clap to left. Travis d'Arnaud singled on a 1-0 hitter's count, bringing Meadows around to score, making it 7-3 Dodgers. Jesus Aguilar launched one to the big boy seats in right center, making it a save situation at 7-5.

Maeda was quickly replaced by juggernaut Kenley Jansen. Jansen had saved 29 games, but for his 30th, Roberts would up the difficulty and ask Jansen to collect four outs – more preparation for a potentially different, hopefully extended, post-season role.

Kenley accomplished the rare save of more than one inning, securing the win for Maeda and the team. The bats had done yeoman's work, putting up seven runs against the second-best pitching in the majors. And despite giving up four runs in relief, Roberts had seen what he needed to see out of his pen – different roles, different kinds of work. The win went to the 'pen, and even though the season still had a working title, tonight's victory went to Roberts and his team who gained insight into October.