

The craziest seventh inning we've ever seen sent the Blue Jays to the ALCS

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By Israel Fehr

10/15/2015

TORONTO – Inside the Toronto Blue Jays clubhouse, the stickiness of celebratory champagne was everywhere. It was loud and festive. Jose Bautista smoked a much-deserved victory cigar. Marcus Stroman gave hugs to every teammate he could find. Josh Donaldson went out of his way to spray anyone near with some bubbly and beer, and made sure to drink some too.

But as the celebration went on, there was one thing about the decisive Game 5 win that entered every conversation: That wild, wild seventh inning.

This wasn't any seventh inning. No, it might just be the craziest inning in the long, winding history of postseason baseball.

Not a single player remembered seeing – let alone experiencing – anything like it. That's what happens when a team making three straight errors in the field to load the bases is the third (maybe even fourth) most talked about sequence in an inning that ran 53 minutes, featured five runs, two lead changes, two replay reviews, two long delays to clean debris off the field, two bench clearing tussles and the biggest home run Toronto has seen in over 20 years.



"I've never seen a game like this," said Mark Buerhle, a man who has seen and played in his fair share of ballgames during his 36 years of life, as he described the Blue Jays' [6-3 win](#) over the Texas Rangers in Game 5 of the ALDS on Wednesday night at Rogers Centre.

It started fairly innocently, really. Though in this series, that didn't mean much. After Edwin Encarnacion blasted a ball over the wall in left field to lift Toronto into a 2-2 tie with Texas heading into the seventh, little didn't anyone know that Rounned Odor's single to left off Aaron Sanchez to lead off that inning would be the spark for the chaos about to ensue.

After the Odor single, Sanchez needed just three pitches to get two outs, but Odor was able to move up to second on the first out and to third on the second. With Odor at third, Shin-Soo Choo stepped to the plate. No one could have predicted what would happen next.

Here's the moment that set everything into motion: Sanchez threw 94-mph fastball to Choo for a ball to make the count 2-2. Just like he would after every other pitch, Martin tossed the ball back to the pitcher. Problem was, this time the ball never got to the mound. It deflected off Choo's bat and dribbled down the third-base line. Odor [scrambled home from third before anyone realized exactly what had happened](#).

"Where I throw the ball and I hit Choo's bat, it's the first time it's happened in my life," said Martin. "What I understood was that [home-plate umpire Dale Scott] waved it off at first and I was like, 'Thank God,' but then they overturned it. I don't think Choo did anything illegal. He was in the box. He just held his hand out there. I didn't really see it. I threw the ball like I always do. I've done it probably over a million times. It's never happened. I definitely wasn't expecting that."

He wasn't alone. Initially, Odor was sent back to third. It didn't take long for Rangers manager Jeff Banister, a former catcher, to step out of the dugout for a chat with the umpires. Banister knew that if the call was made correctly, the run should count.

"I've been involved in that play before. I've done that before," said Banister. "I've done that exact play as a catcher where I've actually thrown it off the hitter's hand, bat before, so I was aware of the rule."

The rule – No. 603(a)(3) in MLB's rulebook – states if a batter doesn't intentionally interfere with the throw back, then the ball is in play. Scott took accountability for the confusion.

"That was my mistake. I was mixing up two rules and I called time. But then it started clicking," said Scott. "I went wait a minute, there's no intent on the hitter. He's in the box, the bat's in the box. So to make sure I'm on the right page, I got everybody together and that's what we had. If there's no intent, if he's not out of the box, that throw's live."

And while the umpiring crew felt that Choo's action weren't nefarious, Troy Tulowitzki wasn't quite ready to give Choo the benefit of the doubt.

"I was making a pretty strong case out there, [asking] 'how could you make that call?' " said Tulowitzki. "How could you say that he wasn't doing it on purpose? It could have been a play that they had drawn up where he just stands there and holds the bat out. I just think it opens up for too much air. Who's doing it on purpose and who isn't? I was pretty frustrated with the call. Obviously things worked out for us, but I still don't like that call."

Neither did the fans inside Rogers Centre. A vocal minority began tossing debris from the stands and the crew came rushing onto the field to clean up the mess. It was during this 18-minute delay that the Blue Jays came to realization they had no choice but to toss out their own proverbial garbage – the play they felt had cost them a run and might cost them the series – if they wanted to extend their season.

"It was just bad luck," said Martin. "So you can either feel bad about it or you can do something about it. We decided we're going to do something about it."

Considering what had just happened to them, they never would have believed how fortunate they were about to be as Rangers starter Cole Hamels came back out for the bottom of the seventh to hold a 3-2 lead. Then came the errors:

- Error No. 1: Rangers shortstop Elvis Andrus couldn't handle a Martin ground ball – runner at first, no outs.
- Error No. 2: Kevin Pillar hit a soft grounder to first baseman Mitch Moreland. Moreland tried to get Martin at second



but threw it in the dirt and Andrus wasn't able to pick it off the ground – runners at first and second, no outs.

- Error No. 3: Ryan Goins' bunt was fielded cleanly by Adrian Beltre, Beltre turned and made a strong throw to Andrus covering third, but Andrus couldn't handle this one either – and just like that the bases were loaded with no outs.

"This is the toughest time in my career right now," said Andrus. "I can make those plays 100 times. I can make them 100 times, for sure. It's a lot of pain right now. I feel like I let down my team, my city. It hurts. The reason we're here is to win and play hard. It's not a good feeling. The last thing I'm going to look for is an excuse. Everybody's ready. I just didn't make the plays. It's something I'll learn from, deal with it, and it's going to be a long offseason."

What went wrong? Banister offered his hypothesis.

"Well, I think about a group of players in a tough situation, the sequence of events that happened prior to that inning of not being able to slow the heart rate down," said Banister. "It's a challenge, it's tough. I feel for them."

Hamels was able to get Ben Revere to ground into a fielder's choice and the Rangers were able to get a force-out at home. Hamels' day was done then, and hard-throwing right-hander Sam Dyson emerged from the bullpen. Even Hercules wouldn't have wanted a sniff of Dyson's task: Donaldson and Bautista, two of the best hitters in the world, were due up, and the bases were still loaded.

Donaldson popped a ball in the air just beyond the infield that the second baseman Odor misjudged. It landed just beyond Odor's outstretched glove. The best Odor could do was get the runner at second, and Pillar crossed the plate to tie the game 3-3.

"I was pretty pissed at what I just did," said Donaldson. "Based loaded, one out, and I get sawed off like that."

But Bautista, in the postseason for the first time in his 12-year big-league career, would make up for it. On the third pitch he saw, he smashed a Dyson fastball to left for what's already being called the biggest home run in Blue Jays franchise history after Joe Carter's World Series clinching shot in 1993. Bautista completed it with a [majestic bat flip that ratcheted the emotion in the stadium to another stratosphere](#).



"I can't really remember what was going through my mind, to be quite honest with you," said Bautista. "After I made contact, I just, you know, I didn't plan anything that I did and so I still don't even know how I did it."

The fans, this time in celebration, poured even more trash onto the Rogers Centre turf. Edwin Encarnacion forcefully gestured toward the crowd to stop. Dyson, upset, embarrassed and feeling slighted after giving up the homer to Bautista, sniped at Encarnacion. With emotions already running high, the benches and bullpens cleared. When the inning finally ended, they cleared again, when Dyson and Tulowitzki got into it. How else would it have ended after everything that had just unfolded?

There was no time to process it, though, the show must go on. Before you knew it, 20-year-old Blue Jays closer Roberto Osuna struck out Will Venable to end the game and the series. Toronto became just the third team in the wild-card era to win a division series after dropping the first two games at home.

"The whole thing is a blur," said general manager Alex Anthopoulos, standing in the clubhouse soaked in champagne sounding as bewildered as he looked. "That was just insane. I'm glad we won."

Most people that experience a blur and smell like booze end up face down in a ditch. The Blue Jays' blur admittedly has a much softer and more rewarding landing spot: a trip to the ALCS and a chance to battle for a spot in the World Series.

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