

MLB Postseason: Just Right

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By Joe Flaherty

As a Cubs fan, I'm used to not having a rooting interest when it comes to October baseball. But as a fan of the game itself, I love the format of Major League Baseball's postseason.

For those not in the loop, I can understand how the League Championship Series and the World Series may seem like they drag on forever. The obligatory off day in between games can be a bit of a pain for anyone: for non-fans because it prolongs the season, and for baseball lovers because the next game can't come soon enough.

But on the whole, I think the new MLB playoff format is the most complete system in any professional or college sport. The key lynchpin is the recent addition of two wild-card teams, raising the total number of playoff teams from eight to 10.

The argument has been made before that having a 16-team field in the NBA and NHL playoffs makes the regular season "pointless". But I believe adding two teams to the mix in MLB makes the regular season more exciting for more teams.

The extra spots give the smaller market teams who can't regularly compete with the powerhouses a shot. Just this year, we saw how a city with a great history of baseball like Baltimore was able to revive its fan base because the Orioles were involved in a division race all season long. This usually wouldn't happen because historically, the Yankees or Red Sox would be atop the division, leaving the O's to compete with 11 other teams in the American League for a single wild card spot.

The extra spot in each league allows more teams to remain in the hunt until the very end.

Scoreboard watching is a pastime within baseball that I believe everyone should have the joy of doing at least once in their lives. Unless your team is 10+ games out of the second wild card spot, it has a shot at getting hot down the stretch and making it an exciting race for a playoff berth.

Just as it took a while for fans to warm up to the original Wild Card idea, it will take some time for casual fans to get used to this idea. But even though two teams have been added now, it's not as if you can just field a team and make the playoffs. With only one-third of the 30 teams in MLB qualifying, it's still an exclusive club of the game's elite.

A playoff berth is a playoff berth; even though they may be weighted differently with home field advantage, it still means a team has a shot at making it to the top.

By adding the two wild card games, MLB has made its playoffs a perfect mix of luck and skill. We now have a dash of the "any given Sunday" mentality from football mixed in

with the two sudden-death games. In a one-game “series,” records don’t matter. Anything can happen.

Following up a play-in game with the five-game divisional rounds continues to key in on luck. Just as any team can win one game on any given night, any team can also get on a brief hot streak and win three in a row or three out of four. By cutting out six teams from the 10-team field in the span of six games, the first two rounds of the playoffs have become a high octane mixture of talent and good fortune.

But when the dust settles and the top four teams are finally decided, it can take up to 14 games to find out which team is truly the best. You can be a streaky team and unexpectedly find your way into the Championship Series, and a Cinderella Story is always fun to watch. But it’s incredibly hard to have continued success over not one, but two full seven-game series against the game’s elite teams.

This is why I feel the current MLB playoff format does the best job of determining the best team from the rest of the bunch out of any professional sport.

The only problem I still have with the MLB playoffs is how late into the year they run. I remember when the playoffs first broke the November barrier back in 2001. In the 11 years since, the playoffs seem to be running deeper and deeper into fall.

Baseball is a game meant to be played in the warm weather of the summer, but at the rate it’s going now, we may not be too far away from December baseball. Forget hockey---the World Series might have to be renamed the “Winter Classic”.

But in all seriousness, I think this is the only problem the MLB has to worry about. Maybe they can start the season two weeks earlier in the spring so that the playoffs wrap up in late October like they used to. Or if they continue playing into November, maybe MLB can consider playing the World Series in a dome on a different neutral site every year like the Super Bowl.

But I digress. The addition of the two wild card teams was spot on and has instantly amplified the importance of the regular season. More fans and teams can experience the excitement of the hunt for the playoffs. And with more teams involved in the race, more fans will show up to support the teams.

It takes the late-season spotlight from being squarely on the perennial playoff contenders and spreads it out all over the league. Baseball is better off when more teams are successful. I feel that baseball is slowly rising back to its pre-strike prominence on the national scene, and the playoff rule changes have aided that effort.