

Cardinals' remarkable run to World Series an amazing story of determination

Written by Bryan Burwell / St. Louis Post-Dispatch
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Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina celebrates after winning Game 7 of the World Series against the Texas Rangers in St. Louis. The Cardinals won 6-2 to win the series. (AP photo)

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As the giant scoreboard in center field was gleaming with the most amazing sight of all in dazzling Cardinal red and white — 2011 World Series champions — the star and the journeyman just kept and smiling and looking at each other the way athletes do when they have shared a unique championship experience.

So Chris Carpenter reached out and hugged Gerald Laird with the biggest, most joyful bear hug you ever saw in the midst of the most unlikely championship party St. Louis has ever seen.

"Man, Carp, can you believe this?" Laird said.

"Yeah, I can," Carpenter said.

"This is unbelievable. But we all kept battling and now look at us."

The team that was left for dead in August, got up off the floor in September, then repeatedly basked in baseball's intense postseason glare in October, is on top of the baseball world.

This was the best storybook end to the best and most improbable season this historic franchise has ever seen.

There are 10 World Series flags flying above the right field scoreboard, and soon they will be adding one more.

How do you crawl out of a 10 1/2-game deficit Aug. 25 and wind up champions of the world?

By writing your own history and letting everyone else figure out how it happened.

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As he stood in the rain laughing, this is what Carpenter said when someone asked him how to write this tale.

"I'm not an author, I don't think I can," Carpenter said with a smile peeking through his scruffy beard.

"I'll have somebody else do it and I'll just enjoy the moment and this great group of guys."

The Cardinals are World Series champs and the story ended with the most perfect ending of all. For the night, this is what you will remember:

The bases were loaded and so were the folks inside Busch Stadium, 47,399 towel-waving Cardinal loyalists fired up on Redbird fever, an assortment of malted barley products and the dizzy adrenaline of a World Series seventh game.

They were hoping, begging, pleading for some spectacular wall-banging heroics from Allen Craig or Albert Pujols, Lance Berkman, David Freese, Yadi Molina or Rafael Furcal.

As the night moved on, a chorus line of skittish Texas Rangers pitchers couldn't find the strike zone with a GPS.

After the exhilarating thrill ride of Game 6, Game 7 turned out to be easier on the heart, and an anti-climatic 6-2 victory that was basically over in this unusual game- and Series-winning fifth-inning blur.

Walk ... hit by pitch ... walk ... walk ... hit by pitch ... two runs scored.

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The Cardinals took a 4-2 lead on this offensive outburst and the record audience spent the rest of the night taking photos, slapping high fives and waiting for the game to end so they could revel with their heroes in the franchise's 11th MLB crown.

The drama of Thursday night was replaced by the business-like march Friday night.

After two months of endless, nerve-jangling, backs-to-the-wall grinding, on the last night of their impossible dream season, these Cardinals finally flipped the script.

The Cardinal Way wasn't so gut-wrenching after all.

All of a sudden, baseball looked as easy as could be.

Twenty four hours earlier, the Rangers were one strike away from a World Series title.

Twice.

But now they were suffering from the same fate of the Philadelphia Phillies and Milwaukee Brewers.

The Phillies could have saved themselves the trouble of dealing with the Cardinals in the playoffs by simply letting the sagging Atlanta Braves win one game down the stretch of the last week of the regular season.

The Brewers could have choked them off with one more win over the last two months of the regular season.

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And the Rangers could have done in the Cardinals at any number of critical moments Thursday night.

But now at the end of this chilly Friday night, they had to stand by and watch the Cardinals slip on those championship caps, hoist the World Series trophy and gallop around the infield.

Impossible Dream complete.

Allen Craig was way out in left field waiting for the final out to fall wonderfully into his glove.

And after getting beyond the crazy nightmare that he just couldn't drop it, this is what he remembered most:

"You see this on TV growing up and now I'm with these guys winning a World Series," he said.

"It took a lifetime of work to get here, and to be able to celebrate and experience it with this group of guys."

Before the game, Albert Pujols said, "We don't need any baby sitters. It won't take much for everyone to be ready to play. It's Game 7, so you lay everything on the line. ... Our job is not done."

A few hours before the game, MLB Commissioner Bud Selig was in a great mood because he could sit around bragging on his sport for this one exceptional night.

"This World Series has been great," Selig said.

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"David Freese? If you wrote a story like that, a guy gets traded comes back to his hometown, he's a hero? If you sent that script in, it would get thrown back in your face.... Somebody on television said baseball has had a coming out party since Labor Day. I don't think so. I think it's always there."

For me, playoff baseball is not the same as regular-season baseball.

Selig may believe his sport is the sport of kings, but for me my love of the game always rises when the temperatures fall.

And the Cardinals decided that they were going to extend that exhilarating playoff-like environment from late August to the end of October.

Even Selig thought they were toast in August.

"Oh yeah," he said.

"The Cardinals were dead in August. No doubt about it."

As they stood in the middle of the Busch Stadium infield hugging each other and caressing that World Series trophy like it was a genie's lamp, there was no need to rub the magic lamp at all, because they already had their wildest wish granted.