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Braves clinch

Braves fulfill promise as the team of destiny

By Eric Minton
Independent-Mail

ATLANTA - 1991's team of destiny fulfilled their promise on Saturday.

The Atlanta Braves clinched the National League West Division title with a 5-2 victory over the Houston Astros.

Coupled with the Los Angeles Dodgers' 4-0 loss at San Francisco, the Braves took an insurmountable 2-game lead into the last day of the 1991 regular season today.

It was the Braves' first Western Division title since 1982. They won it then when the Giants beat the Dodgers on the last day of the season.

This time they didn't have to go to the last day, but the ending was no less dramatic.

The Braves and Dodgers were tied going into the last weekend

of the season. The Braves, coming off a six-game winning streak on the road, came home to stretch the streak to eight with Saturday's win. It is their longest winning streak of the year.

Even after right-fielder Dave Justice flagged down Andujar Cedeño's fly ball for the last out, unleashing a rush of Atlanta players onto the field for a battle royale celebration, the team and fans had to wait for assurance that they had clinched the title.

The players crowded on the mound watching the final out of the Giants-Dodgers game on the huge Diamond Vision screen above center field while the fans chanted "Beat L.A."

When San Francisco did just that, the jubilation erupted anew. The Braves were heading into the playoffs in search of their

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Braves become team of destiny

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first World Series championship since the Milwaukee Braves of 1957.

John Smoltz (14-13) got the win, pitching his fifth complete game of the year.

He gave up eight hits and struck out two while walking none.

It was fitting that Smoltz would go over the .500 mark for the season with a pennant-clinching win. He started the year with a 2-11 record and a 5.16 ERA, but anchored the starting staff since the All-Star break, going 12-2.

After the players had rushed onto the field for the celebration around Smoltz, Atlanta Manager Bobby Cox strolled out of the dugout last, letting the players alone to have their moment.

Smoltz, seeing him, ran out of the crowd and hugged Cox at the first base line.

"The man deserves a lot of credit," Smoltz said. "The way he stuck with me, he believed in me. I've got to do it a lot myself, yes, but he gave me the ball, and that counted for a lot."

Braves pitching coach Leo Mazzone also credits Smoltz's turnaround to Cox.

"The reason Smoltz turned it around was that Bobby didn't take him out of the rotation," Mazzone said. "He kept giving him the ball."

Smoltz only got in trouble in the second when he had runners at first and third with two outs, and in the fourth, when he allowed three hits and both Astros runs.

Ron Gant was again the hitting star, going two for three with a home run, two RBI and scoring two runs.

Atlanta came out swinging and connecting, scoring four of its five runs in the first three innings, safely putting this game away as fast as they could.

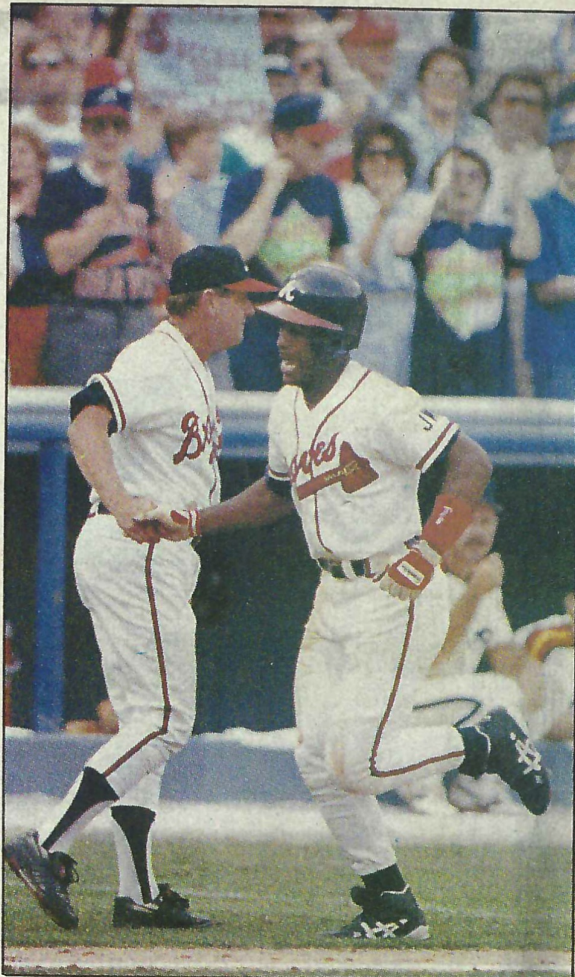
"We just wanted to control our destiny," Gant said. "It didn't matter what the situation was or the team we were playing, they could beat us.

We stayed focused and played the way we always played, and that's why we're where we are."

The Braves chased Houston starter Mark Portugal (10-12) three batters into the third inning. By then he had given up four runs, three of them earned, on seven hits and two walks.

Lonnie Smith, Mark Lemke and Terry Pendleton led off the game with back-to-back singles, scoring Smith. Then Cedeno muffed a Justice grounder to load the bases, and Gant knocked in Lemke with a sacrifice fly.

It was the second day in a row Cedeno helped the Braves to the pennant with two errors in a game;



Ken Ruinard Independent-Mail

Ron Gant shakes hands with third-base coach Jimmy Williams following his seventh-inning solo home run.

his second came in the third inning.

Rafael Belliard led off the second with a single, and moved to second on Smoltz's sacrifice bunt. Smith brought him home with a ground-rule double, a shot up the left-center field alley that bounced over the fence.

Gant led off the third with a single, moved to second on a walk, and scored when Cedeno caromed Greg Olson's grounder into center field.

Gant needed no help in the fifth inning when he tacked on the fifth and final run.

As the players celebrated in the locker room, each wearing T-shirts saying "Braves: 1991 Western Division National League Champions" they received after the game, Gant reflected on what he and his teammates had just accomplished.

"We can celebrate all night," he said, "but we've got a tough job to do. We've got to play Pittsburgh."

Atlanta savors magical moment in dream year

By Eric Minton
Independent-Mail

Usually the best moments in life pass by too quickly.

But the moment that had been so long in coming for Atlanta Braves fans lingered on the pitcher's mound at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium late Saturday afternoon.

The Braves had already won, 5-2 over Houston. And they had celebrated that win more exuberantly than they would most wins over the Astros, knowing the Giants had a 4-0 lead over L.A. in the ninth inning.

Then the players on the field and the fans in the stands turned to watch the Diamond Vision screen above center field show the last out in San Francisco.

With that out, the Atlanta Braves became champions of the National League West, their first trip to post-season play since 1982.

"Nobody gave these guys a real chance, but they are real champions," said John Schuerholz, the Braves' general manager.

"It's a dream season for me and this organization; to become champions in the NL west overnight after all we've been through as an organization is just a dream."

A dream day capped this dream season.

It dawned with a threat of rain, but by game time, the sky was clear and the temperature 86 degrees.

Almost 45,000 tomahawking fans had arrived, and they pumped and shouted

lustily for nine full innings and beyond.

"That last batter, I can't explain how much the crowd picked me up and got that fast ball to rise," winning pitcher John Smoltz said.

"The fans have been really coming out and giving us a lot of support and kept us in some games," said outfielder Ron Gant. "We'd just like to say thanks - and hope they come out for the play-offs."

Saturday was Fan Appreciation Day, with giveaways ranging from dinners at local restaurants to a 5-day vacation in Walt Disney World. But the fans appreciated the pennant more and the players who brought it to them.

When third baseman Terry Pendleton came to bat in the seventh inning, the crowd chanted "M-V-P,z" casting a 45,000-voice vote for the league's Most Valuable Player award.

By the seventh inning, every time the Braves made a routine out, the stadium erupted in loud, prolonged cheers. Everybody knew the Giants were ahead of the Dodgers 4-0. The players did not need to watch the scoreboard.

"I was too intent on winning our game to worry about the scoreboard," said catcher Greg Olson. "But in one inning I was out there and heard a sudden roar from the crowd, and I figured they were watching the Giants game.

After the inning, I looked up and saw the scoreboard go 'Giants, 1...2...3...4.' Four-oh is a lot of runs."

The Diamond Vision provided the rest. The players watched, and the fans chanted "Beat L.A.," except when the screen showed Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda or former Brave Brett Butler. Then they booed.

When Will Clark pumped his fist on the screen with the last out of the pennant race, pandemonium broke out on the Atlanta field and in the stands.

As the players ran off the field, they threw their baseball caps into the stands.

Then the entire team emerged again wearing T-shirts emblazoned with "Braves: 1991 Western Division National League Champions." They circled the field, frolicking, dancing and bowing to the crowd.

"Only kids dream about these things," Gant said amid the clubhouse celebration. "And I'm one of those kids."