

In a year when most of the attention given to the National Pastime has been towards its off-the-field episodes, interest can finally be directed to the games themselves as the regular season wraps up and the real season begins.

Again, the Beasts of the East are picked to dominate the off-season. The Atlanta Braves have won their eleventh division title in a row and their American League counterparts in the East, the New York Yankees, are working on their own streak winning their fifth consecutive division title, their sixth in seven years, and their eighth consecutive playoff appearance.

The surprise of the season would be the Minnesota Twins taking the AL Central in a year which some thought would be their final year in existence. Under the threat of contraction, the Twins surpassed the 90 win mark and won their first division title since the divisions were realigned in 1994.

In the NL Central, the St. Louis Cardinals are also a team that overcame obstacles to march to a division title. The loss of a pitcher and team leader such as Darryl Kyle would have devastated a lesser team, but the Cards showed great heart under the leadership of Albert Pujols, Jim Edmonds, and the late season acquisition of Scott Rolen to take their division.

The two most hotly contended races in both leagues, however, have been in the west. At the time of this writing, it appears that the Oakland Athletics and the Arizona Diamondbacks will eek out the Anaheim Angels and the San Francisco Giants respectively for their respective divisions. Anaheim and San Francisco will each get a consolation prize with their league's wild card.

Favorites are always hard to pick in baseball, especially in the best-of-five Division Series which have the tendency to go to the hottest team at the time and not necessarily the team that "deserves it." If the playoff match-ups remain as they are as the time of this writing, the Yanks are favored to take the Angels and the A's are picked to beat the Twins. In the National League, the Braves are the favorites to take out the Giants and the defending champion D-Backs have a huge advantage over the Cards with their one-two punch of Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling.

Once in the League Championship Series, the ALCS could depend on if the A's can remain hot and get the Big Apple monkey off their shoulders to advance for the championship. In the NL, the Braves are always a good pick. At the same time we all know what the D-Backs are capable of after last year's World Series.

No matter what the outcomes are for this year's Series, there is nothing like playoff baseball. Do yourself a favor and forget the off-the-field shenanigans of these clowns and enjoy them for their talent and their drive to win the Fall Classic.