

Mighty Mauer at the Bat

by Martin "Red" Fredricks

Bottom of the 9th. Down three runs. One runner on, two outs, behind in the count... Wham!

Closer Jon Papelbon and his Red Sox teammates could only gawk as the ball jumped, climbed, soared into the highest collapsed seats of right center field, then turn away, hang their heads and watch from under their brims as the batter circled the bases. Whatchya gonna do? Papelbon seemed to say with a dejected head shake and shoulder slump. It's Joe Mauer.



It was May 25, the beginning of the four-game home series against Boston. In the bottom of the 9th the Twins were down 6-3, and down to their last hope to pull out a win.

Jason Kubel led off with a single to right, and the rally caps were on. Michael Cuddyer stepped up but struck out looking. Brian Buscher's fly to center was out number two. Mike Redmond was next in the order, but Manager Ron Gardenhire called for a pinch hitter. A rumble rose from the lower level seats to the upper deck and on up to the cover of the Metrodome. People got up, clapping like crazy, cheering, "Joe! Joe! Joe!" Twins fans sensed a little of that May Mauer Magic.

Mauer strode confidently to the plate. He'd been sitting all day because of a hand injury suffered against the Brewers the previous evening, but no matter. The low rumble rose, louder and louder to become the "lusty yell" that greeted Mighty Casey in Mudville.

After each pitch there was a hush, then a slow rebuilding of the lusty yell, a hush, and again the dull roar would build again. Then, down in the count, one ball and two strikes, Ka-Blam! Everyone in the place knew it was gone the moment he made contact, and we went wild.

Not that anyone – from the Twins, the Sox, the media or among the fans – was surprised. Mauer had been doing it throughout May. He had been so hot with the bat that, according the Twins beat writer for MLB.com, Kelly Thesier, the chit-chat in the Twins bullpen wasn't the usual about opposing batters, but what each pitcher would do if he had to face Joe Mauer. As opposing teams have been saying week in and week out, Watchya gonna do?

The long ball against Boston was the catcher's third in three consecutive games. In May, Mauer went yard 11 times, and he had a club record 32 RBIs. "Mauer's month has not just been impressive, it's been historic," wrote Thesier. "His .414 batting average, .500 on-base percentage and .838 slugging percentage were the best in May among any player in baseball who recorded at least 75 plate appearances." He hasn't slowed much since. Three weeks into June, Mauer was still batting .407.

The Shot, as I'll forever call it, was one for the ages. It wasn't just that Mauer hit the ball so hard, so high or so far, but that he did it ice cold after sitting on the bench all day. Ice it was, too, because that's clearly what flows through Mauer's veins. And it isn't that he hit the dinger, but that everyone expected, or feared, he would. I'm guessing Mauer had the same expectation, and that's what makes him so fun to watch and cheer for, even if you're a fan of the other team.

After the din died in the Dome, Delmon Young came to the plate. But the rally caps faltered; it was a fly out to right. Game over. Sox, 6; Twins, 5.

In the great scheme, The Shot didn't mean much. It came in a losing effort in a run-of-the-mill game on an average day in the regular season. But there isn't anything run-of-the-mill, average or regular about the guy who provided its signature moment. Unlike Casey, this guy delivers.

There's a new might in M-ville, and his name is Mauer.