

The Rocket Burns Dimmer in October

By JAY JAFFE

‘Amped’ was the term Roger Clemens used in anticipation of pitching in Saturday night’s World Series opener against the White Sox. Clemens’s Game 1 assignment was exactly what he envisioned when he ended his brief retirement two winters ago to front the rotation of the Houston Astros, his hometown team. The start would mark not only the first World Series game in the Astros’ rainbow-hued history, but the first time any Texas team had participated in the Fall Classic. Had the NL won this year’s All-Star Game and secured home-field advantage for its league’s representative, Clemens would have thrown the first Series pitch on Texas soil. The hype would have been as overbearing as a heater from its native son.

The reality of a 43-year-old pitcher dogged by hamstring injuries for the past two months intervened, though. Not only did the Series open in chilly Chicago, but Clemens’s outing was brief and rocky. One strike from a spotless first inning, he lost a nine-pitch battle to Jermaine Dye, who smacked a solo homer. In the second, a pair of singles, two ground balls, and a Juan Uribe double added two more runs for the Sox as the Astos bullpen churned.

When Clemens finally escaped the 29-pitch inning by striking out Scott Podsednik, TV cameras showed him visibly limping as he descended the dugout steps back to the clubhouse. He didn’t return, and after reports that he aggravated his left hamstring covering first base, his status for the remainder of the series is in doubt. Though the Astros rallied to tie the game, a fourth-inning solo homer by Joe Crede off reliever Wandy Rodriguez gave Chicago a 4-3 lead it never relinquished.

The anticlimactic outing added another line to a growing list of Clemens’s postseason disappointments. For a pitcher with 341 wins (ninth all-time), 4,502 strikeouts (second all-time), and a record seven Cy Young Awards (with an eighth a legitimate possibility after his league-leading 1.87 ERA this year), Clemens has been mortal in October. In 33 postseason starts — the equivalent of a full season — his record doesn’t measure up to his regular-season excellence.

SHORT FUSE

Here’s a comparison of Roger Clemens’s 33 postseason starts with his career statistics in the regular season (per 33 starts).

	GS	REC.	IP/G	K/9	K/BB	ERA
regular season*	33	17-8	7.0	8.6	2.9	3.12
postseason	33	12-8	5.9	7.9	2.5	3.71

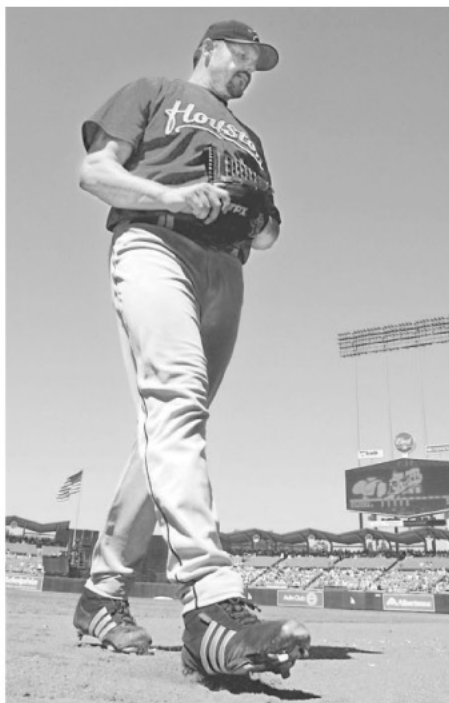
*PER 33 STARTS

Reeling off a list of the pitcher’s playoff lowlights:

• **1990 ALCS Game 4 (Red Sox-A’s):** A flus-

tered Clemens is ejected in the second inning for swearing at the home-plate umpire after loading the bases with a walk. At the time, Oakland leads the series 3-0; Clemens’s replacement, Tom Bolton, is greeted with a two-run double as the A’s complete the sweep and the Rocket takes the loss.

• **1999 ALCS Game 3 (Yankees-Red Sox):** Returning to Fenway in the enemy’s pinstripes, Clemens is hammered for five runs in two-plus innings, much to the Boston boo-birds’ delight. The Yankees lose 13-1, their only postseason defeat en route to their second straight World Championship.



STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY

TOWERING FIGURE Roger Clemens allowed three runs in two innings before leaving Game 1 of the World Series with an injury.

• **2003 ALCS Game 7 (Yankees-Red Sox):** Having already announced his retirement, Clemens looks headed for the showers for good after being battered for four runs in three-plus innings. But the Yankees wait out Pedro Martinez, tie the game in the eighth after Sox manager Grady Little leaves his tired ace in too long, and the Yanks win the pennant in the 11th inning on Aaron Boone’s home run.

• **2003 World Series Game 4 (Yankees-Marlins):** Boone’s homer earns Clemens another chance that he nearly blows, yielding a three-run homer to Miguel Cabrera in the first. Clemens guts out seven innings without allowing another run; the Yanks tie the score

but lose the game in 12 innings and the series before Clemens can get another shot.

• **2004 NLCS Game 7 (Astros-Cardinals):** Taking a 2-1 lead into the sixth, the Rocket runs out of fuel as the Cardinals rally for three runs, snatching Houston’s first-ever pennant out from under them.

To be fair, Clemens has had notable October successes as well. He pitched Boston into the World Series with his third LCS start against the Angels in 1986. He won the 1999 Series clincher against the Atlanta Braves, nailing down a four-game sweep and his first championship to thunderous Yankee Stadium applause. He dominated a pair of starts in the Yanks’ 2000 title run, first sending Alex Rodriguez and the Mariners sprawling with a 15-strikeout one-hitter in the LCS, then vexing the Mets with a nine-K two-hitter that’s notorious for the jagged bat shard he tossed in the vicinity of Mike Piazza.

Most recently, he came out of the bullpen in the 16th inning of Game 4 of the NLDS against the Braves, pitching three stellar innings (only his second relief stint, and his first since 1984) before teammate Chris Burke homered to end the longest playoff game ever, and with it, Atlanta’s season.

Even after Saturday night, Clemens maintains a 2.37 ERA in eight World Series starts, with 49 strikeouts, 12 walks, and just two homers allowed in 49.1 innings. Tellingly, Clemens has just a 3-0 record to show for that performance. His inability to last into the late innings — a byproduct of battling deep into counts in pursuit of strikeouts — coupled with the presence of strong Yankee and Astro (but not Red Sox) bullpens, has meant many games decided after his departure. Most memorably, he left a 1-1 tie in Game 7 of the 2001 World Series against Arizona after 6.1 innings, having struck out 10 Diamondbacks. The Yanks took a 2-1 lead in the eighth, but nearly infallible Mariano Rivera ... well, you know how that one ended.

On the whole, Clemens pitched decidedly better in the postseason with the Yankees than with the Red Sox Astros. In 17 pinstriped starts, he had a 3.24 ERA and won two World Series rings; with the other two teams, his ERA is 4.19 with no championships. If his Octobers haven’t always matched his lofty reputation, remember that many of the performances have come after age 40. The Yanks and Red Sox aren’t going to win in 2005, but the Astros, despite Saturday’s defeat, still can. Whether Clemens can aid that effort and earn some redemption remains to be seen.