

A Big Baseball Article: Reimagining MLB's Regular Season and Post-Season

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Summary: *With a hat-tip to the NBA's Play-in Tournament, it is proposed that MLB conducts its own Play-in Tournaments (one each in the American and National Leagues). Each league's Play-in Tournament commences at the conclusion of the 162 game Regular Season. While Qualifiers 1-5 (based on Regular Season play) advance to each league's Wild Card Series as Seeds 1-5, each league's Play-in Tournament (comprised of single elimination Play-in Semi-Final and Final games) features Qualifiers 6-9 competing to earn #6 Seeds. The #6 Seeds advance to their respective league's Wild Card Series, where MLB's post-season continues as currently constructed: per league, two (best-of-three) Wild Card Series, two (best-of-five) Division Series, and one (best-of-seven) League Championship Series. Winners of each league's LCS qualify for the World Series. Qualifiers 1-9 (in each league) are determined, in part, via earning 'Post-Season Tickets'. Post-Season Tickets are earned by winners of each division at the conclusion of three 54 game 'seasons': Games 1-54, 55-108, and 109-162. Teams earning three 'Post-Season Tickets' qualify at positions higher than those earning two (followed by one). Each league's complement of nine Qualifiers is completed by consideration of the remaining teams' 162 game won-loss records.*

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I. [The NBA and Its Play-in Tournament](#)

Many (but not all) casual NBA fans know that 'The Association' recently instituted an annual play-in tournament.

The *SoFi Play-In Tournament!* Here's how it works.

Currently, thirty NBA teams are divided into two fifteen team conferences (Eastern and Western); each conference is further divided into three five team divisions.

At the conclusion of the regular season, the top ten teams (in each conference) are ranked 1-10, with division champions and best overall won-loss records at or near the top of both lists.

In each conference, **teams ranked 1-6 automatically qualify** for the first round of the NBA Playoffs and are assigned Seeds 1-6, respectively.

A play-in tournament involving teams ranked 7-10 (in both Eastern and Western conferences) is utilized to complete each conference's complement of first round playoff qualifiers.

In other words, the 'winners' of the SoFi Play-in Tournament earn Seeds 7 and 8 in each conference, therefore filling out each conference's eight team playoff bracket.

II. Some NBA Play-in Details

The *SoFi Play-in Tournament* consists of a total of four play-in games (two in each conference) and two No. 8 seed game.

In each conference, one Play-in Game matches teams seeded 7 and 8 while another Play-in game matches teams seeded 9 and 10. **The winner of the 7-8 game qualifies for the NBA Playoffs as Seed 7**; the loser of the 9-10 game is eliminated from further play.

In each conference, the No. 8 seed game matches the *winner* of the 9-10 game with the *loser* of the 7-8 game. **The winner of this game qualifies for the NBA Playoffs as Seed 8.**

All of this means that, each season, when SoFi Play-in Tournament games are defined as post-season games, a total of twenty (out of thirty) NBA teams qualify for post-season play. After the Play-in Tournament, sixteen NBA teams participate in the First Round of the NBA Playoffs (the Conference Semi-Finals).

Every spring, the NBA's television partners are delighted to televise a total of six additional post-season games. Of course, the NBA and its players are also delighted with the additional revenues that the television partners supply (in the form of rights fees) in exchange for the right to televise said games. Everybody wins!

The graphic that follows shows the results of the 2024 NBA Play-in Tournament where the 76ers and Heat (7th and 8th seeds in the Eastern Conference) and Pelicans and Lakers (7th and 8th seeds in the Western Conference) advanced to their respective Conference Semi-Finals.



The balance of this article is an attempt to apply principles of the NBA's SoFi Play-in tournament to Major League Baseball, and propose changes to MLB's Regular Season as well.

III. Meaningful (and Meaningless) September Baseball?

There is nothing quite like the atmosphere in and around a big league baseball stadium, in September, when the home team is contending for a spot in MLB's post-season playoffs.

Baseball's oldest of old-timers talk about 'pennant fever'.

On game day at the ballpark, everybody from ushers inside to the traffic cops outside seem to know why they are there—there's a pennant race in the air.

Former Cardinals manager Tony La Russa refers to those September games as 'meaningful'.

To this observer, it seemed that, as manager, La Russa's primary spring training goal each year was for his team to be fortunate enough to play 'meaningful games' in the September that followed.

How did La Russa make his way to St. Louis as the Cards' manager?

The 1995 Cardinals season was dreadful in several ways; baseball's labor problems delayed the start of the regular season (after **cancelling** the 1994 post season), the team's owners (the Anheuser-Busch corporation) were in the process of selling the team, the team traded perhaps its best player (Todd Zeile), fired manager Joe Torre (basically doing the well-liked Torre a favor), and replaced Torre with long-time organizational man Mike Jorgensen.

All on the way to a 62-81 won-loss record, and September 1995 Cardinals' games were barely 'meaningful'.

And the atmosphere around a ballpark before, during and after *meaningless* September games is the opposite of that described above for meaningful September games; at times it seems likely that out-of-contention teams would be unable to fill their stadia *even if they gave away September tickets for free*.

Alas, in St. Louis, Tony La Russa was hired prior to the start of the 1996 season, and in large part was charged with bringing meaningful September baseball back to Busch Stadium.

As the first draft of this article is written (September 21, 2024), the Cincinnati Reds and Pittsburgh Pirates are in fourth and fifth place in the NL Central division, 13 and 16.5 games behind the first-place Milwaukee Brewers. With about one week left in the 2024 regular season, both teams have been eliminated from Wild Card contention.

Cincinnati played host to Pittsburgh earlier today. The announced paid attendance (25,574) at The Great American Ballpark dwarfed the actual crowd; TV shots suggested the actual number of fans in attendance was about half the announced attendance. Or less.

The game featured two high-profile rookie starting pitchers as well as real-life budding position player superstars on both rosters. While the weather was typical for late-summer Cincinnati (hot-and-humid)...well, typical Ohio River-area September weather alone doesn't normally prevent some of the midwest's best baseball fans from showing up at the downtown Cincinnati riverfront ballpark.

But in terms of post-season possibilities...the late-September game was meaningless for both teams. Ergo, a paltry number of fans gathered in a stadium devoid of atmosphere.

Even with MLB's expanded wild card format, there are dozens of meaningless MLB games each September.

With its still-recent rule changes (including instituting a pitch clock and larger bases, placing limitations on defensive shifts and restrictions on baserunners breaking up double plays), MLB's decision-makers have shown that they are willing to think outside of the box as far as making improvements to what used to be referred to as The National Pastime.

Let's put MLB's open-mindedness to the test!

Is there a way to reduce the number of meaningless September MLB games? In essence, is there a way to 'energize' MLB's annual six-month long regular season?

IV. A Three-Part Regular Season? The MLB T-Mobile Play-in Series?!

Baseball's regular season more-or-less runs from April through September, with 162 games spread over six months—April & May (Spring), June & July (Summer) and August & September (Fall). [For the purpose of this article, the small number of March regular season games are included with April's totals.]

Baseball's 162 game regular season divides nicely into thirds...

Suppose baseball's single 162 game regular season was split into three equal 54 game seasons: **Spring** (basically, April & May); **Summer** (June & July); and **Fall** (August & September)...with each individual 'season' ending with a declared champion.

Baseball's current thirty team, two league/three division set-up (a total of six divisions) therefore would result in, **for each division in each league**, the crowning of 'champions' after the games played at the end of the 54-game Spring Season (Opening Day through the end of May), 'champions' crowned after the 54-game Summer Season (early June through the end of July), and 'champions' crowned after the 54-game Fall Season (early August through the end of the regular season).

For each season, then, a total of eighteen 'champions' (nine per league) would result:

*American League: Spring, Summer and Fall champions (in AL East, Central & West divisions)

*National League: Spring, Summer and Fall champions (in NL East, Central & West divisions)

Each season will have eighteen pennant races.

It is proposed here that each 'champion' earns one 'Post-Season Ticket' per championship; and that a team earning (at least) one 'Post-Season Ticket' automatically qualifies for post-season play.

Therefore, six teams (three in each league) qualify for post-season play at the end of May, at the end of July, and at the end of September (season's end).

At season's end, the qualifiers are 'ranked' according to their 162 game won-loss record, best (Qualifier #1) to worst (Qualifier #9).

Restating: each MLB regular season results in nine (9) post-season Qualifiers, per league.

Of course, in each season it is likely that, instead of nine different teams (per league) earning exactly one Post-Season Ticket, at least one team will earn two, or even three 'Post-Season Tickets'.

A team (or teams) that earns three Post-Season Tickets is placed at the top of their league's ranking list (and teams that earn two Tickets are placed behind those earning three but ahead of those earning one Ticket).

In the event that more than one team earns three Tickets (or, more than one team earns two Tickets), their qualifying order will be according to each team's 162 game won-loss record.

It follows that, in each league, any season with at least one team earning at least two Post-Season Tickets requires that fewer than nine teams qualify for that league's post-season play via earning a Post-Season Ticket.

For example, if **one** National League team earns three Post-Season Tickets while **another** earns two...this scenario demands that **four** other NL teams earn exactly one Post-Season Ticket—for a total of six NL teams that qualify for the post-season via Post-Season Tickets.

But as described, nine qualifying teams, per league, are required to initiate post-season play.

In the above scenario, the three remaining qualifying positions will be filled by teams (not earning Post-Season Tickets) with the best full-season 162 game W-L record.

For ranking purposes, won-loss records for qualifying teams that did not earn a Post-Season Ticket are compared with won-loss records for qualifying teams that earned (exactly) one Post-Season ticket.

In other words, a bit of re-ordering often occurs with these two groups of qualifiers (those earning exactly one Post-Season Ticket and those filling out each league's list of qualifiers to nine).

Restating (and fleshing out) the Proposal:

Each League has nine qualifiers; the Qualifiers are ranked 1-9.

It is proposed that Qualifiers 1 & 2 automatically advance to each league's Division Series as Seeds 1 & 2, and that Qualifiers 3-5 automatically advance to the Wild Card Series of playoffs as Seeds 3-5.

What follows is best understood as a straightforward mechanism that reduces the four remaining Qualifiers (6, 7, 8 and 9 in each League) to the one remaining place in each league's Wild Card Series (the #6 Seed in each League). [Currently, Seeds 3-6 qualify for the Wild Card Series in each League.]

A name for the 'tournament' that yields a #6 Seed in each League? **The T-Mobile Play-in Series (!)**.

Simply put, in each league, the T-Mobile Play-in Series opens with a pair of single elimination games, where Qualifier 6 plays Qualifier 9, while Qualifier 7 plays Qualifier 8.

These two games comprise the Play-in Semi-Finals.

Per league, the winners of each Play-in Semi-Final game then advance to the Play-in Finals, a single game in which the winner earns the #6 seed for what is currently referred to as the Wild Card Series.

At this point, the MLB post-season would continue as currently constructed where, in each league, teams seeded 1 & 2 receive byes, while (in each league) in a pair of three-game series (currently known as the Wild Card Series), Seed 3 plays Seed 6 (the winner of the Play-in Series), while Seed 4 plays Seed 5.

Again, in each league, the winners of these two three-game series (the Wild Card Series) are matched with Seeds 1 and 2, in what are now referred to as Division Series. As it is now, these are five game series.

Finally, in each league, the winners of each five game series (the Division Series) advance to their respective American and National League seven game League Championship Series.

And the winner of each league's Championship Series advances to the seven game World Series.

V. Applying the T-Mobile Play-in Series and Split-Season Plans to 2024 American League Results

For the American League’s just-completed 2024 regular season, the necessary parameters for the T-Mobile Play-in and Wild Card Series set up as follows [Spring, Summer and Fall ‘Champions’ W/L records in **RED**):

2024 American League Regular Season Results and Proposed Post-Season Qualifier Rankings

	Spring W/L Record	Summer W/L Record	Fall W/L Record	Number of Post-Season Tickets	2024 Season W/L Record	Proposed Qualifier	Actual 2024 Seed
	Games 1-54	Games 55-108	Games 109-162		Games 1-162	Rank/Seed	
<u>AL Central</u>							
Chicago Sox	15-39	14-40	14-40	0	41-121	-	-
Cleveland	36-18	30-24*	26-27	2	92-79	2/2	2
Detroit	27-27	25-29	34-20	1	86-76**	6/Play-in	6
Kansas City	34-20	25-29	27-27	0	86-76**	5/5	5
Minnesota	30-24	30-24*	22-32	0	82-80	8/Play-in	-
<u>AL East</u>	Games 1-54	Games 55-108	Games 109-162		Games 1-162		
Baltimore	35-19	29-25	27-27	0	91-71	4/4	4
Boston	27-27	30-24	24-30	1	81-81	9/Play-in	9
NY Yankees	37-17	26-28	31-23	2	94-68	1/1	1
Tampa Bay	26-28	29-27	25-29	0	80-82	-	-
Toronto	25-29	26-28	23-31	0	74-88	-	-
<u>AL West</u>	Games 1-54	Games 55-108	Games 109-162		Games 1-162		
Houston	24-30	32-22	32-21	2	88-73	3/3	3
LA Angels	21-33	26-28	26-28	0	63-99	-	-
Oakland	22-32	22-32	25-29	0	69-93	-	-
Seattle	28-26	28-26	29-25	1	85-77	7/Play-in	7
Texas	25-29	27-27	26-28	0	78-84	-	-

*Summer W/L records for Cleveland and Minnesota: **30-24**. Cleveland won all five of their Spring and Summer games with Minnesota; Cleveland wins tie-breaker.

2024 Season W/L records for Kansas City and Detroit: **86-76. Kansas City won seven of thirteen Regular Season games vs Detroit. Kansas City wins tie-breaker.

Details and Explanations

Qualifiers 1-3 [Teams with 2 **Post-Season Tickets**; 1-3 ranking based on 2024 season W/L record]:

- #1 NY Yankees (94-68); Seed 1
- #2 Cleveland (92-79); Seed 2
- #3 Houston (88-73); Seed 3

Qualifiers 4-9 [Teams with 1 or 0 **Post-Season Tickets**; 4-9 ranking based on 2024 season W/L record]:

- #4 Baltimore (91-71); Seed 4
- #5 Kansas City (86-76**); Seed 5
- #6 Detroit (86-76**); Play-in
- #7 Seattle (85-77); Play-in
- #8 Minnesota (82-80); Play-in
- #9 Boston (81-81); Play-in

Note that the list of Actual 2024 Seeds (#1 NY Yankees; #2 Cleveland; #3 Houston; #4 Baltimore; #5 Kansas City; #6 Detroit) is identical to the list of the top six proposed Qualifiers.

VI. Applying the T-Mobile Play-in Series and Split-Season Plans to 2024 National League Results

For the National League’s just-completed 2024 regular season, the necessary parameters for the T-Mobile Play-in and Wild Card Series set up as follows [Spring, Summer and Fall ‘Champions’ W/L records in **RED**):

2024 National League Regular Season Results and Proposed Post-Season Qualifier Rankings

	Spring W/L Record Games 1-54	Summer W/L Record Games 55-108	Fall W/L Record Games 109-162	Number of Post-Season Tickets	2024 Season W/L Record Games 1-162	Proposed Qualifier Rank/Seed	Actual 2024 Seed
NL Central							
Chicago Cubs	27-27	24-30	32-22**	0	83-79***	9/Play-in	-
Cincinnati	24-30	28-26	25-29	0	77-85	-	-
Milwaukee	31-23	30-24*	32-22**	3	93-69	1/1	3
Pittsburgh	25-29	30-24*	21-34	0	76-86	-	-
St. Louis	27-27	29-25	27-27	0	83-79***	8/Play-in	-
NL East							
Atlanta	31-23	28-26	30-24	1	89-73****	5/5	5
Miami	19-35	21-33	22-32	0	62-100	-	-
NY Mets	22-32	25-39	42-12	1	89-73****	6/Play-in	6
Philadelphia	38-16	27-27	30-24	1	95-67	3/3	2
Washington	25-29	24-30	22-32	0	71-91	-	-
NL West							
Arizona	25-29	32-22	32-22	1	89-73****	7/Play-in	-
Colorado	19-35	19-35	23-31	0	61-101	-	-
LA Dodgers	33-21	30-24	35-19	1	98-64	2/2	1
San Diego	27-27	30-24	36-18	1	93-69	4/4	4
San Francisco	27-27	26-28	27-27	0	80-82	-	-

*Summer W/L records for Milwaukee and Pittsburgh: 30-24. Milwaukee and Pittsburgh evenly split their ten Spring & Summer games (5-5). Milwaukee outscored Pittsburgh 44-39 in those ten games. **Milwaukee** wins tie-breaker.

Fall W/L records for Chicago Cubs and Milwaukee: 32-22. Milwaukee won eight of thirteen Regular Season games with the Cubs; **Milwaukee wins tie-breaker.

***2024 Season W/L records for Chicago Cubs and St. Louis: 83-79. St. Louis won seven of thirteen 2024 Regular Season games with the Cubs; **St. Louis** wins tie-breaker.

****2024 Season W/L records for Atlanta, NY Mets and Arizona: 89-73.

--Atlanta won seven of thirteen 2024 Regular Season games with the Mets; Atlanta wins tie-breaker.

--Atlanta won five of seven 2024 Regular Season games with Arizona. Atlanta wins tie-breaker.

--NY Mets won four of seven 2024 Regular Season games with Arizona. NY Mets win tie-breaker.

Details and Explanations

Qualifier 1 [Team with 3 **Post-Season Tickets**]:

#1 Milwaukee (93-69); Seed 1

Qualifiers 2-9 [Teams with 1 or 0 **Post-Season Tickets**, 2-9 ranking based on 2024 season W/L record]:

#2 LA Dodgers (98-64); Seed 2

#3 Philadelphia (95-67); Seed 3

#4 San Diego (93-69); Seed 4

#5 Atlanta (89-73**); Seed 5**

#6 NY Mets (89-73**); Play-in**

#7 Arizona (89-73**); Play-in**

#8 St. Louis (83-79*); Play-in**

#9 Chicago (83-79*); Play-in**

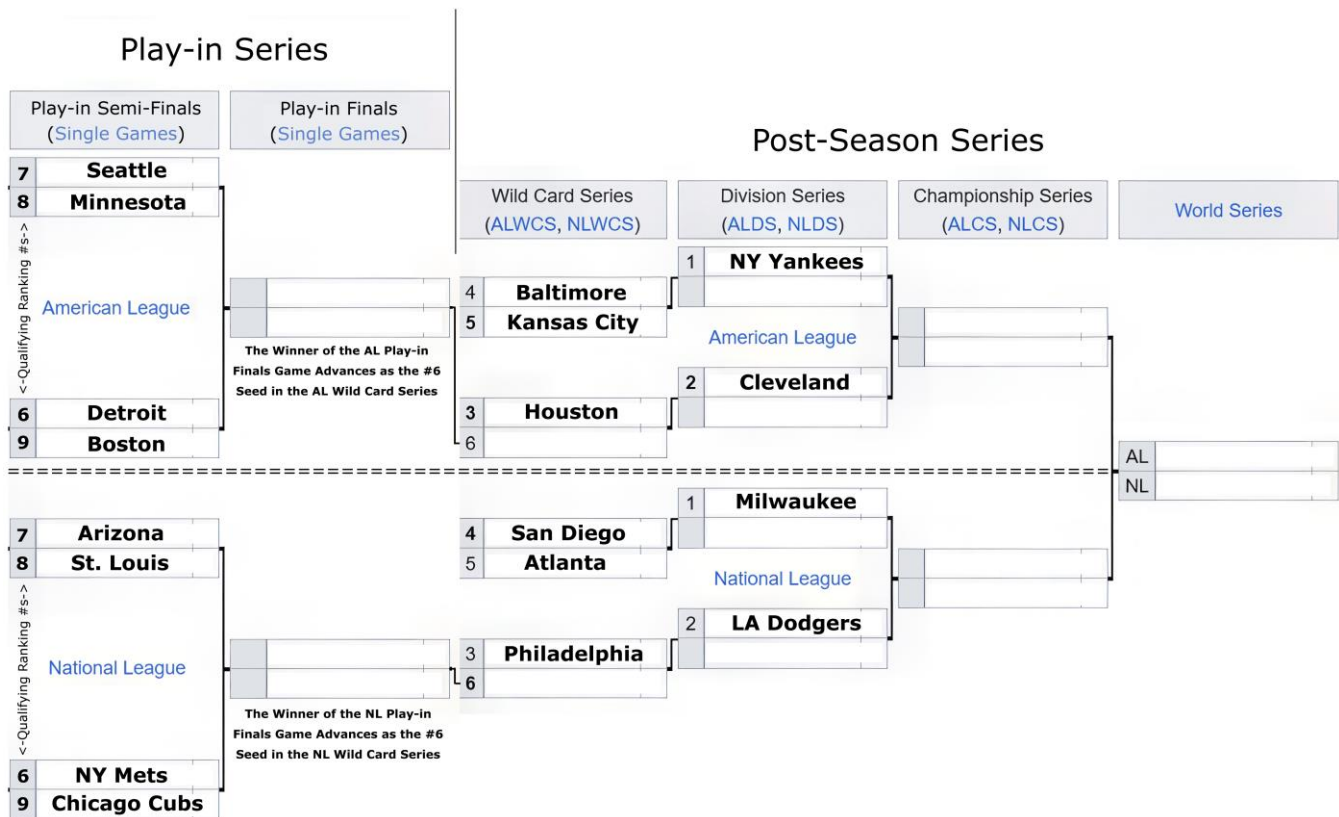
Note that Actual 2024 Seeds 1-6 are the same teams as the top six proposed Qualifiers (different order).

VII. A Bracket, a Summary, a Caveat and a Look Back at 2023

A Bracket is worth a thousand words.

The results of the 2024 MLB Regular Season, when massaged according to the ‘system’ described in V. and VI. above, populate a proposed 2024 MLB Post-Season Bracket as shown below.

A Proposed 2024 Major League Baseball Post-Season Bracket



A Summary: There are two primary new ideas within **A Big Baseball Article: Reimagining MLB’s Regular Season and Post-Season**.

First, the 162 game Regular Season and the Wild Card, Division, League Championship and World Series remain in place, but for Post-Season play qualification, the Regular Season is split into three, equal 54 game ‘seasons’: Spring, Summer and Fall. Baseball’s current two-league three-division structure is utilized, and teams with the best record, within each division, for each 54 game season, qualify for post-season play.

Second, within each League, Qualifiers 1-5 (as described in the article) automatically advance to Wild Card Series play as Seeds 1-5, but Qualifiers 6-9 compete in a two-day Play-in Series to determine Seed #6. Seed 6 advances to the Wild Card Series.

Ramifications of **Reimagining MLB's Regular Season and Post-Season**:

*Pennant races result, in all six divisions, in late-May, late-July and late-September. Each team has three opportunities to earn a Post-Season Ticket via, in essence, a single two month stretch of games

*For the purposes of seeding and tie-breakers, 162 game records matter, and every run scored matters

*The six single-elimination Play-in Games, because they are single-elimination games, will generate interest all their own. In essence, they are their own stand-alone Game Sevens!

*The Play-in Series adds length to each year's playoffs—pitchers for Seeds 1-5 get additional time to rest

*Including the Play-in Series, while eighteen of thirty MLB teams qualify for some form of post-season play, only twelve (as it is now) participate in the Wild Card Series and Division Series rounds

*In virtually every conceivable scenario, **the nine Post-season Qualifiers in each League will be teams with the nine best W/L records in their respective leagues.** *In essence, the regular season serves as the laboratory where post-season seedings are earned*

*The men and women who construct the MLB regular season schedule will have extra work on their hands as they attempt to 'balance' the Spring, Summer and Fall seasons as far as fairness is concerned

A Caveat: Any comparison of the 'results' of **Reimagining MLB's Regular Season and Post-Season** with the current 2024 regular and playoff protocols is somewhat limited in utility because the protocol proposed here was not in use. As contending teams approach regular season games 54, 108 and 162, it is likely that managers would optimize their lineups and starting rotations as the conclusions of the Spring (Game 54), Summer (Game 108) and Fall (Game 162) seasons approach—in efforts to collect Post-Season Tickets.

A look back at the 2023 MLB regular and post-season playoffs reveals that every team that qualified for the 2023 post-season would have also qualified when applying the 2023 Regular Season results to **Reimagining MLB's Regular Season and Post-Season.**

Qualifiers 1-5 (American League: Baltimore, Texas, Minnesota, Houston and Tampa Bay; National League: Atlanta, LA Dodgers, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Arizona) would have been awarded the corresponding seeds in each league's Wild Card Series.

Qualifiers 6-9 (American League: Blue Jays, Mariners, Yankees and Guardians; National League: Marlins, Cubs, Reds and Giants) would have competed in the Play-in Series to determine each league's #6 seed, and move on to the Wild Card Series.

Actual 2023 MLB Post-Season Play included the following twelve teams (seeds):

AL: Baltimore (1); Houston (2); Minnesota (3); Tampa Bay (4); Texas (5); Toronto (6)

NL: Atlanta (1); LA Dodgers (2); Milwaukee (3); Philadelphia (4); Miami (5); Arizona (6)

Note the high degree of agreement between the Actual Post-Season seeds and the qualifiers resulting from applying **Reimagining MLB's Regular Season and Post-Season** to the 2023 Regular Season.

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Author's Note: When your children are grown (and living far away) and your spouse is quarantining at home (while successfully recovering from COVID)...well, it's time to write **A Big Baseball Article.**

Thanks for reading. Mark Bausch; mark@stlsports.com [Graphics from Wikipedia]

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