

Pennant Won: Tigers Shake Off a Vegas Scare, Now It's Pittsburgh

By a Detroit Tigers beat writer, filed the morning of World Series Game 1

DETROIT — The 107-win Tigers were always going to be favored in October, but nobody said it would be a coronation, and for three days in Las Vegas it very much wasn't. Detroit is headed to the World Series after closing out the Athletics 4–2 in the ALCS, but the path ran through a genuine speed bump: a two-game skid on the road that turned a laughier into a real series, before Guo-fang Hou slammed the door on regular rest with a 10–4 Game 6 clincher back at Comerica Park. The opponent is set — the Pittsburgh Pirates, fresh off their own six-game grind past Milwaukee — and Game 1 is tonight.

How Detroit Got Here

The ALDS was never in doubt. Detroit swept the Yankees in three, winning a taut 4–3 Game 1 at Comerica, following with a 6–4 decision in Game 2, and closing it out 3–2 in the Bronx behind a strong Jackson Jobe start (6 IP, 7 K, just 3 hits allowed) that turned into a bullpen finish. Three games, three wins, and a full week of rest built into the schedule before the ALCS began.

The Athletics series started the same way. Detroit blitzed Las Vegas 12–4 and 9–4 in Games 1 and 2 at home, then took Game 3 on the road, 9–5, to push to the brink of a sweep. That's when the series turned: the Athletics won back-to-back games in Las Vegas, 4–2 and 5–1, turning a laughier into a real series and sending the Tigers home needing a Game 6 win to avoid a decisive Game 7. Hou made sure it never got there, working on regular rest for a 10–4 clincher that was every bit as dominant as the final score suggests.

The three-start postseason run for Hou is the headline of the pitching staff so far: 17 innings, 23 strikeouts, and a single walk across the ALDS and ALCS, good for a 3.71 ERA and a 12.18 K/9 that undersells just how untouchable he's looked in the biggest spots. Tarik Skubal (12 IP, 11 K, 4.50 ERA) and Jackson Jobe (11 IP, 13 K, 4.91 ERA, the number inflated by one rough outing) have given Detroit length behind him, and Isaac Coffey's surprise call for the ALCS's pivotal Game 5 assignment turned into the best individual start of the postseason for either rotation option not named Hou — 6 innings, 5 strikeouts, a single earned run, and a 3.00 ERA that locks him into the World Series rotation over Eury Perez, who has yet to appear this October.

At the plate, the top of the order has carried the offense through all nine playoff games: Michael Arroyo (1.188 OPS), Ethan Petry (1.130 OPS, 5 HR), Juan Soto (1.062 OPS, 4 HR), and Riley Greene (1.091 OPS) have combined to make this a completely different lineup than its regular-season numbers alone would suggest. Hao-Yu Lee, the one clear soft spot in the everyday lineup all year, has been outstanding in October too — a .997 OPS and .333 average that's turned a roster weakness into a strength, at least for now. The two regulars still waiting to break out are Kevin McGonigle (.425 OPS) and Thayron Liranzo (.550 OPS), both of

whom have combined for real defensive value without much to show at the plate yet.

Meet the Pirates

Pittsburgh's path to the pennant was longer and messier than Detroit's. The Pirates dispatched Cincinnati 3–1 in the NLDS — a 1–0 Game 1 squeaker, a Game 2 loss, then back-to-back road blowouts (11–7, 9–3) to close it out at Great American Ball Park. The NLCS against Milwaukee was the real test: Pittsburgh dropped Game 1 at home, 6–5, then alternated results the rest of the way — an 8–5 win, a road win in Milwaukee, a lopsided road loss, a 2–0 road shutout, and finally a 6–4 clincher back at PNC Park. Like Detroit, this is a team that has already had to win a series after losing the opener.

The engine of that run is Bubba Chandler, and he's been every bit the ace his 63-potential grade promises: 18 innings, 17 strikeouts, just 3 walks, and a 2.00 ERA across three starts, with a 0.83 WHIP that's the best of any starter remaining in October. Behind him, the results get considerably shakier — Framber Valdez (9 IP, 7.00 ERA) and Zebby Matthews (9 IP, 7.00 ERA) have both struggled, and rookie Josh Pfister, a 52/68 grade and the single highest-ceiling arm in either rotation, has been electric and erratic in equal measure (13 strikeouts in 8 innings, but a 5.62 ERA). Inmer Lobo has quietly been outstanding out of the bullpen in the closer's role, 5 saves and a 0.90 ERA over 10 innings.

Offensively, Pittsburgh doesn't have a Soto or an Arroyo, but it has more balance than the box score reputation suggests: Ryan Jeffers (1.001 OPS, 3 HR) and Henry Bolte (.995 OPS) have both hit all postseason, Yordany De Los Santos has been steady (.833 OPS), and Paul Young has drawn walks at an excellent clip (9 BB in 43 PA). The bottom of the order — Starlyn Caba, Edward Florentino, Wyatt Sanford — has struggled to do much of anything, which is the clearest opening for a Detroit pitching staff loaded with swing-and-miss stuff.

The Matchup

Detroit holds home-field advantage (107–55 in the regular season against Pittsburgh's 94–68) in this year's 2-3-2 format: Games 1–2 and, if necessary, 6–7 are at Comerica Park, with Games 3–5 at PNC Park. The rotation plan mirrors the ALCS cycle almost exactly — Skubal in Game 1 against Chandler, Jobe in Game 2, Sanchez in Game 3, Coffey in Game 4, and Hou lined up for Game 5, with Skubal and Jobe available again on regular rest for Games 6–7. Pittsburgh counters with Chandler going twice, in Games 1 and 5, around Burrows, Matthews, and Pfister.

On paper this is a rotation mismatch in Detroit's favor beyond the top slot: Chandler is a legitimate ace-level arm this October, arguably the best pitcher either team has thrown out, but Pittsburgh's Games 2 through 4 starters have combined for a 6.61 ERA this postseason against a Tigers trio (Jobe, Sanchez, Coffey) that's been considerably more reliable outside of one hiccup from Jobe. The bullpens are the more interesting question — Pittsburgh's Inmer Lobo (0.90 ERA, 5 saves) has been the single most trustworthy relief arm of anyone in this series, while Detroit's own closer, Bradgley Rodriguez, is still searching for his command in October (0.00 ERA, but 4 walks in 3 innings) and hasn't yet been tested in a real save situation. If this series

comes down to a one-run game in the ninth inning, that's the matchup to watch most closely.

The lineups favor Detroit clearly. The Tigers' 107 regular-season wins and the sheer number of hitters running postseason OPS marks above 1.000 — Arroyo, Petry, Soto, Greene, and now Lee — gives this offense a depth that Pittsburgh, a good-not-great 94-win team built more on pitching and defense, simply doesn't match hitter for hitter. Pittsburgh's counter is that its best players (Chandler, Jeffers, Bolte) have all performed above their regular-season levels in October, and a short series has a way of humbling even the best offenses when they run into the right matchups.

What to Watch

Three things will decide this series. First, whether Bradgley Rodriguez finds his control before Detroit needs him in a save situation that actually matters — every high-leverage inning so far has come in games already comfortably decided. Second, whether Josh Pfister's stuff or his command shows up in Game 4; a rookie that talented is capable of either a signature October start or a short, ugly one. And third, whether Pittsburgh's bottom-of-the-order bats can find anything at all against a Detroit staff that has racked up strikeouts at a double-digit-per-nine clip all postseason.

Detroit is the better team by record, by run differential, and by the composition of its rotation and lineup. But this exact Tigers team has already needed a Game 6 to escape the ALCS after cruising through the first three games, and Pittsburgh has shown all October that it doesn't fold after a series-opening loss. Expect a competitive World Series that Detroit should still be favored to win — just not the coronation a 107-win, 25-game-division-margin regular season might have promised back in March.

An ALCS wrap-up and World Series preview written in the voice of a Tigers beat writer, built from the live 2031 postseason save data through the end of the ALCS (Tigers 4, Athletics 2) and the Pirates' NLDS/NLCS results, filed ahead of World Series Game 1 on Oct. 21.