

Canadian Morneau wins home run derby

John Lott , Canwest News Service

Published: Monday, July 14, 2008

NEW YORK - Josh Hamilton thrilled the Yankee Stadium crowd with a jaw-dropping performance in the first round, and a storybook ending seemed inevitable. But Canada's Justin Morneau hung tough and upset Hamilton in Monday night's Major League Baseball home run derby, sending nearly 54,000 fans home disappointed.

Hamilton, the Texas Rangers outfielder, hit a record-breaking 28 homers in the first round and 35 in all. But Morneau, the Minnesota Twins first baseman from New Westminister, B.C., hit five to Hamilton's three in the last round, when the two finalists started from scratch.

"I was lucky they reset (the score) after the first round," Morneau said.

Morneau was the last player invited to participate. He was reluctant at first. Last year, he entered the all-star break with 24 homers. After participating in the home run derby in San Francisco, he hit only seven the rest of the season.

Some suggested going for the fences in the derby sabotaged his swing in the second half. But he decided to give the derby another shot when he considered the alternative.

"It came down to me sitting on the sidelines going, 'Man I wish I was doing that.' That's what it came down to: not wanting to sit on the sidelines while the derby was going on."

Morneau hit a total of 22 homers in the three rounds. Despite Morneau's victory, Hamilton was the fan favourite. In his first round, he did not just hit home runs. He clobbered them high into the night, whacked them off the facing of a billboard above the seats in right-centre field, launched them like so many missiles into the upper deck.

The Texas Rangers outfielder was already the season's feel-good story. Out of baseball and near death's door several years ago, he has rebounded from a life of drug and alcohol abuse to become a star.

He added to his legend by inviting his high school batting-practice pitcher, 71-year-old Clay Council of Raleigh, N.C., to pitch to him in the derby.

Teammate and fellow all-star Joe Mauer gave Morneau a nudge when the invitation came.

"Mauer said, 'I don't think two hours of taking batting practice is going to mess up your swing for the rest of the season.' That's kind of another thing that pushed me to want to do it," Morneau said.