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Wainwright finishes with flourish

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By Matthew Leach / MLB.com

PITTSBURGH -- After a rough start in his second-to-last outing of the year, Adam Wainwright vowed not to make the same mistakes again. He lived up to his promise on Saturday night, displaying just one more reason the Cardinals are so fond of their young right-hander.

Wainwright pitched seven strong innings for his 14th win as St. Louis beat the Pirates, 7-3, at PNC Park. He was hit hard in the first, allowing three runs on three doubles and a single, and then wasn't hit at all after that. Wainwright retired 18 of the last 20 batters he saw, facing one batter over the minimum after the first.

"I was just so far out ahead of myself that my body was drifting and my hands were dragging in the first," Wainwright said. "And when you do that, your ball is up in the zone. ... So I came out of the inning, I knew I wasn't sharp that inning, but I knew what I had to do to make the adjustment."

In his previous game, on Monday in Milwaukee, Wainwright acknowledged that he wasn't concentrating like he needed to. With the Cards freshly eliminated from the National League Central race, he had a difficult time summoning the same intensity as he'd managed for games that mattered.

On Saturday that was no issue. Wainwright convinced himself of the stakes -- which included a winning record and 200 innings pitched for him personally, and a fourth straight victory for his club. So although he fell behind early, it wasn't from any lack of focus.

"I just thought he was amped and strong," said manager Tony La Russa. "The ball had a lot of life early. Then he started keeping his delivery together and he made better pitches. The big problem is when you're not smart enough or tough enough to make the adjustment. A lot of guys go out there not quite right. But he's been very good at adjusting."

Wainwright went 7-5 with a 2.71 ERA in the second half, averaging over six innings pitched per start. He ratcheted up his strikeout rate, dropped his walk rate and virtually eliminated home runs after the All-Star break, pitching like the ace that the Cardinals hope he will become.

Now, he looks to do it for a full year.

"I know I have a lot of things to improve on," he said. "You can't be a No. 1 starter and have a poor first half, an entire half. You can be a No. 1 starter and have bad games here and there, but the No. 1 guys that you see in the league are guys that go out there consistently -- day in and day out -- and keep their teams in the ballgame until the late innings of the game. For me to feel like that, I'm going to have to come in next year and really have a solid entire year."

To get the win on Saturday, of course, Wainwright still needed help from his teammates. He received it largely in the form of three hits and three RBIs from Rick Ankiel. Ankiel singled in the second to get the Cards on the board, and they cut it to 3-2 on Gary Bennett's single in the same inning. Ankiel's fourth-inning solo homer tied the game at 3, and he added an RBI single in the fifth to stretch St. Louis' lead to 5-3.

Ankiel slumped badly in early September, but he's rallied over the final couple of weeks of the season. He's 12-for-31 since Sept. 22.

"I think it's a good sign to show, absolutely," Ankiel said. "I feel good about the whole year. I feel like I had a good year. I feel like with my talent and my ability, that I belong in the big leagues. I'm just happy."

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