



## Cards fight hard to end for La Russa

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By Matthew Leach / MLB.com

PITTSBURGH -- Cardinals manager Tony La Russa congratulated his team following Sunday's season finale -- not for its 6-5 win, not for its five straight wins to end the year, and not for its 78 victories on the season. La Russa praised his club for never quitting during a year that threatened to knock them down on seemingly a weekly basis.

"You can understand not being good enough," La Russa said. "You can never understand losing your heart. And this club never did."

The season-ending streak added some good feelings to a year that didn't have nearly enough of them. The Cardinals finished seven games out of first place and six games under .500 -- both foreign territory for a 21st-century St. Louis club. They had to earn win No. 78, jumping to a 6-1 lead before watching the Pirates bring the go-ahead run to the plate in the ninth.

"That was so typical of how we kept bouncing back all year long, no matter what the blow was that we took," La Russa said.

Skip Schumaker was the offensive star, going 5-for-5 to finish his best big league year to date. After receiving a total of 78 at-bats and offering minimal offensive contributions in his first two tastes of the Majors, Schumaker put up a .333/.358/.458 (batting average/on-base/slugging) line in 88 games in 2007.

His place on the 2008 team remains unclear, given a glut of outfielders, but he certainly gave the Cardinals brain trust something to chew on over the winter.

"Every year is a big year for me," said Schumaker, who will be out of options in 2008. "As a backup guy, you've got to prove yourself every year. Nothing is guaranteed for me. Every day, I have to prove myself as a backup guy. I had a decent year in the Minors and I played well here, enough to maybe get a job somewhere next year. I'm pretty happy with the way it ended."

Schumaker drove in two runs with a single in a four-run Cardinals sixth that proved critical in the victory. St. Louis led, 2-1, before the sixth-inning outburst. Scott Spiezio homered and scored three runs for the Redbirds. Pittsburgh rallied against several St. Louis relievers, but Jason Istringhausen got Jose Bautista to fly out to end the game. It was Istringhausen's 32nd save in 34 chances.

Troy Percival pitched a single inning as the starter in a "bullpen game" for the Cardinals. The veteran right-hander set a Major League record by making his first career start after 638 relief appearances, more than any other pitcher in his first start. Kip Wells pitched three excellent innings of relief to pick up the win.

St. Louis used 10 pitchers in the game, tying a Major League record for a nine-inning game. Five of those pitchers recorded exactly one out. The Cards and Buccos combined to use 18 pitchers, which set a new record for a regulation game.

Despite the late rush and the noble effort, the Cardinals will not participate in the postseason for the first time since 2003 and the second time since 1999. They had not had a losing season since '99.

"We finished on a winning streak, but that doesn't mean anything," said Albert Pujols. "We still didn't take care of business like we wanted to take care of it. It doesn't matter what happened. We didn't take care of business, even if we would have won 10 games in a row. Obviously, it's positive at the end of the season, but still, we fell short."

*This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

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