

The 2025 MLB All-Star break came and went this past week with an exciting Home Run Derby on Monday night and the first-ever tiebreaker via swing-off in Tuesday's annual game between the American and National Leagues. Fans were invested in each, perhaps more than usual, but some underlying issues during the festivities distracted from what should have been a fantastic All-Star period during the dog days of summer.

First and foremost, props Seattle Mariners slugger Cal Raleigh on his Home Run Derby win. He seemed like an obvious pick to win the event given the catcher's display of extreme power with an MLB-best 38 dingers on the season — a mark which put him in rare air with more homers at the All-Star break than any other player in MLB history sans Barry Bonds' 2001 record of 39. Raleigh looks like a true superstar in this league and his MVP-caliber season means he's now known for something other than his voluptuous posterior, a defining feature which affectionately earned him the nickname "Big Dumper" from former teammate Jarred Kelenic (clearly, the name has stuck with the M's catcher).

However, Raleigh nearly missed the chance to make it into the Derby's elimination rounds outright. He tallied 17 home runs during the opening round of the event at Atlanta's Truist Park, a mark which tied he and Athletics star Brent Rooker for the fourth-most on the night thus far. With the top three batters all out ahead and just one spot remaining for one of Raleigh and Rooker, fans asked whether there would be a brief swing-off to determine the tiebreaker.

Spoiler: there was no such battle as the distance of the batters' longest home runs was used to determine who would advance to the knockout stages. In the end, Raleigh's had traveled 470.62 feet, just barely edging out Rooker's biggest blast of 470.54 feet. The determination that sent Raleigh on to the semis and an eventual victory felt like a massive letdown compared to what could have been, and it admittedly feels a little bit ridiculous that a matter of inches got in the way of a true high-stakes spectacle that would've created both great television and a treat for fans in attendance.

Rooker himself was quoted as saying he wished the league would display the decimal point of each long ball's distance *during* the Home Run Derby rather than waiting 'til the bitter end if needed. Clearly, he felt some type of way about the situation — to be fair, most people probably would in his position.

The very next night, another tiebreaker took place, and fans finally got the swing-off they wished for as the American League and National League All-Stars remained tied at six runs apiece after nine innings. Instead of going into extra frames, three batters emerged for each side to compete in a mini-Derby to decide a winner. However, the players who took part were certainly not the ones most people expected to come out of the dugout.

As ESPN's Jeff Passan tweeted, we could've seen Raleigh, Aaron Judge and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. battle against Shohei Ohtani, Pete Alonso and Kyle Schwarber. Instead, we got Rooker, Jonathan Aranda and Randy Arozarena lining up against Alonso, Schwarber, and Kyle Stowers. It was far from the superstar showdown that could've been and made for a bit of a letdown, all things considered.

Per reporting from Passan which followed, the managers of each All-Star team were left shorthanded as some of the game's most-recognizable names had left the ballpark entirely after being substituted out for some of the bench options earlier in the night. The ESPN insider said around half the players were gone from the stadium by the time the swing-off rolled around.

I'm not writing this to debate whether the players were right or wrong to leave for the evening. Instead, I'm just here to present the facts.

The MLB had an opportunity to make a splash with their annual showcase of the league's best talent. It's not that the events underperformed — they were fun and did show off the elite of the elite — but with the lineup already lacking some of the initial top All-Star vote-getters after many players opted out for various reasons, the swing-off could have been so much more.

It's just a real shame that exhibitions intended to grow the game and produce memorable moments are hampered by a matter of inches or an early trip to the showers (and whatever vacation destination followed the ensuing flight). Baseball's All-Star break was fine, sure, but can be so much better than this.