



The hugs? The Rays have shared plenty of those this season, on the field and in the locker room. *Ditto for the blood, sweat and tears.*

Even the scent of champagne had a familiar feel for the American League champions, who had parties preceding Sunday night in which they celebrated clinching a playoff spot, an AL East banner and an AL Division Series win.

So what made the Rays' Game 7 victory celebration over the Red Sox on Sunday night any different?

It was the young club's biggest achievement on one of the biggest possible stages. "This is why you play baseball," center fielder B.J. Upton said, amid champagne sprays and squeals that sounded more Britney Spears than ball players. "This is what you dream about when you are a little kid playing baseball, to go to the World Series. And to be in this position is unbelievable."

Indeed, it was a surreal scene that unfolded once Akinori Iwamura's putout had put Sunday's game in the books. A mosh pit of bodies greeted rookie David Price on the mound as the Rays raced around the field hugging, screaming and thanking the throng of standing fans who filled Tropicana Field's capacity to watch Tampa Bay punch a ticket to the World Series. "I can't believe this," Rays outfielder Jonny Gomes said. "No one has got a script planned for this. No one has got the token thanks for this and that. We are doing it on the fly right now. ... We are going to celebrate this like crazy right now. We truly are."

Gomes made good on his word early on, tackling various players to the ground with childlike glee.

Several yards away, designated hitter and Major League veteran Cliff Floyd stood beside the Rays' dugout a mixture of awe and appreciation.

"Never would have thought this in a million years," Floyd said. "But I think a lot of people on our side know it's amazing what can happen when you put a bunch of athletes on the field that start to believe over the course of the season. It's only a matter of time before it became this."

The same Rays team that opened the season with 200-to-1 Vegas odds to go to the World Series was dancing around with freshly printed AL champion hats.

"We don't have to prove anything to anybody," pitcher James Shields said. "We know that it's not supposed to happen like this," Gomes said, with a freshly corked bottle of champagne in his hands. "And that's why it tastes so good."

And with every subsequent bottle popped, the shrieks became screams and the screams became chants.

The players gathered together to celebrate the culmination of true team effort. "A lot of people thought that we were done when we lost those two [previous] games," catcher Dioner Navarro said. "But we came back today ... so it's really exciting for us to be able to go to the World Series."

The Rays hope one more celebration lingers.

"We got a list of five parties," reliever Grant Balfour said. "This is just number four." But as Rays manager Joe Maddon likes to point out, each one gets better with time. "It hurts right now," Maddon said of the stinging champagne in his eyes. "To be sans goggles right now is not a good thing."

But with any luck, it won't be the last time the skipper and his young club break out the bubbly.

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