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*** *The Boston Globe***

Brian Johnson gets first big-league win as Red Sox drop struggling Blue Jays

Peter Abraham

TORONTO — Brian Johnson made his major league debut in 2015, starting a game for the Red Sox at Houston. He couldn't get through the fifth inning and was sent back to the minors that night.

In the 21 months that followed, his career fell apart.

Johnson finished that season unable to pitch because of an elbow injury. He was then the victim of a carjacking a few weeks later, living through an incident in Florida when he and some friends had a pistol pointed at them.

In 2016, Johnson took a leave from baseball to deal with anxiety issues and appeared in only 19 minor league games.

Johnson pitched only three games this spring training before the Red Sox sent him back to the minors. When the season started with Triple A Pawtucket, Johnson was hit in the head with a line drive in his second start.

The former first-round pick seemed to be steadily slipping out of the team's plans. Johnson wondered many times if he would ever get another opportunity to show what he was capable of.

"I think I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a little thought that I might not, just from everything that happened," he said.

So don't look only at a box score line to judge Johnson's performance against the Toronto Blue Jays on Tuesday night. In ways tangible and otherwise, he was the winning pitcher.

Johnson worked five innings as the Sox beat the Jays, 8-7. He allowed four runs but left with a lead that the bullpen maintained. The Sox (9-5) have won four straight and five of six.

The Sox collected 15 hits against six Toronto pitchers. Mitch Moreland was 3 for 5 with a double and three RBIs. Mookie Betts was 3 for 5 with a home run and two RBIs.

After starting the season 4 for 23 with no extra-base hits or RBIs, Betts is 12 of 22 with four extra-base hits and five RBIs in the last five games.

"Been taking some better swings, working on some things in the cage," Betts said.

Johnson was called up to make the start when lefthander Eduardo Rodriguez went on paternity leave. Johnson will be returned to Triple A, but made a case to return when the next need arises. Johnson allowed seven hits and walked three but also struck out six. He retired eight of nine at one point, allowing the Red Sox to rally from an early deficit.

"It's huge," Johnson said. "I didn't even think about a win until about the seventh. I didn't put it together. In the last inning, I felt like my heart was racing a little bit."

Toronto, down four runs, scored three times off Matt Barnes in the bottom of the ninth. With two outs, he allowed an RBI single by Steve Pearce before pinch hitter Ezequiel Carrera hit a two-run homer. But Barnes finished it off and Johnson had his win.

“I feel good for him,” catcher Christian Vazquez said. “We all know he went through a lot.”

Johnson had a rough first inning, giving up two runs on four hits, while throwing 35 pitches. Kevin Pillar led off with a double and scored on a single to left field by Kendrys Morales. Troy Tulowitzki singled ahead of a Justin Smoak’s double to center field and the Jays had a 2-0 lead.

With the infield shifted to the left, Russell Martin grounded to second baseman Marco Hernandez. From an odd angle, Hernandez fired to the plate to cut down Tulowitzki.

Johnson then struck out Pearce to end the inning. He then left the bases loaded in the second inning, striking out Morales and getting Tulowitzki on a line drive to right field.

“He was able to keep his composure and make a couple of pitches,” manager John Farrell said. “On a night when we responded offensively, he gave us five solid innings.

Smoak (third inning) and Martin (fifth inning) hit solo home runs off Johnson, but he was able to hand a 6-4 lead over to the bullpen after five innings and 97 pitches.

The Red Sox beat up Toronto starter Marcus Stroman for six runs on 11 hits over 4 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Good base running contributed to three Red Sox runs scoring in the third inning. Xander Bogaerts and Andrew Benintendi had singles with one out. When Betts grounded a single into center field, Bogaerts scored. Benintendi took third and Betts second on the throw to the plate.

Hanley Ramirez struck out, but Moreland delivered a two-run single to left field.

Betts singled with one out in the fifth inning and scored when Ramirez doubled to right field. Jose Bautista, whose days as a competent defender are past, missed the cutoff man with his throw.

Moreland followed with an RBI double. Blue Jays manager John Gibbons called in lefthander Aaron Loup to turn Pablo Sandoval around. Sandoval was 0 for 10 batting righthanded, but this time he singled to center field and Moreland scored.

Betts hit his first home run of the season in the seventh inning, a line drive to left field off Joe Smith that just missed going into the second deck.

Heath Hembree put three runners on base over the sixth and seventh innings but was able to hold the Jays scoreless.

With two runners on in the seventh, Hembree made an off-balance throw on a dribbler down the first base line to throw Darwin Barney out and end the inning.

Blue Jays aching to start over

Nick Cafardo

TORONTO — The Blue Jays will become the Blue Jays any day now, right?

They are 2-11 after an 8-7 loss to the Red Sox. What was supposed to be a hotly contested American League East race has become no contest at all.

Wasn't this the team the contrarians chose to upset the Red Sox in the AL East? Wasn't this the team that — even without Edwin Encarnacion — was supposed to be dynamite because it had the best starting rotation in the American League last season and managed to re-sign Jose Bautista and still had one of the best players in the game in third baseman Josh Donaldson?

After 13 games, the Blue Jays look, in a word, awful. As President Trump would say, this could be a disaster.

Although they have taken the attitude that the season begins today, it didn't begin Tuesday night as the Jays couldn't even beat fill-in starter Brian Johnson.

The Jays have sold a lot of tickets, so it'll be tough for the fans to bail out on this team. The Jays recently gave manager John Gibbons a multiyear extension, feeling he had done a great job keeping the team in contention the past two seasons.

Donaldson (calf strain), a perennial superstar, along with last year's 20-game winner J.A. Happ (elbow), who is 0-3, and No. 1 starter Aaron Sanchez (blister) are all injured. The Jays have already missed 52 man-games to injuries.

Bautista entered Tuesday's game against the Red Sox hitting .136 (6 for 44) with one RBI. Catcher Russell Martin was even worse, at .097 (3 for 31) with no RBIs. Second baseman Devon Travis was hitting .105 and outfielder Steve Pearce was hitting .156.

Together, they were 2 for 15 Tuesday, and although Martin did smack a solo homer, Travis hasn't had a hit in 32 at-bats.

Nobody has been spared. While the Red Sox were hit hard with the flu, the Jays have simply looked sick. It's a teamwide slump to start the season, and when that happens, you start hearing things like, "Well, you know, it's an old team."

How many times did we hear that about the Yankees? After a few years, it eventually became true; they did get old — and then Alex Rodriguez, Mark Teixeira, and Carlos Beltran were gone.

But are the Jays too old? You hear the "old" description about Bautista (36), Martin (34), and Troy Tulowitzki (32). But they don't seem ready for the retirement home quite yet.

Bautista has gone 54 at-bats without a home run, his fifth-longest drought since joining the Jays in August 2008. He once went 85 at-bats without a homer in the summer of 2009. He's also hit 41 homers against the Red Sox, which is the most of any active player.

As Bautista and Red Sox hitting coach Chili Davis embraced before Tuesday's game, Davis said to him, "You're not worried about that [expletive] are you?" referring to Bautista's slow start. Bautista indicated that he wasn't.

But when you're 36 and you're not hitting the way you always have, doubt crops up. Maybe not in Bautista's mind, but in those around him.

Donaldson is the heart and soul of this team, and when he's not playing, the dropoff is severe. Darwin Barney started at third base against the Sox; that's how severe the dropoff is.

You'd say they miss Encarnacion, but he's hitting .212 with two homers and five RBIs for the Indians.

After a comeback last night, the Jays have lost five one-run games and four two-run games. Few losses have been blowouts.

This from MLB Network researcher Elliott Kalb: Of the 186 teams to qualify for the playoffs during the wild-card era, only one started with at least 10 losses in its first 12 games: the 2001 A's. The 2-10 start was also the worst 12-game start for a team that made the playoffs the previous year since the 1998 Marlins, who started 1-11 after winning the World Series in 1997.

The Red Sox were hitting .287 entering Tuesday's game, tops in the majors; the Blue Jays were at .212, 27th. The Red Sox went into the game with the fewest home runs in the majors (6), with the Jays right behind (7). The Jays had scored only 2.83 runs per game, last in the majors.

Tuesday's starter Marcus Stroman continued to struggle vs. Boston. He allowed six runs in 4⅓ innings, and last season he was touched up for 18 earned runs in 16⅓ innings (9.92 ERA).

"We feel we have the talent to turn it around," said Blue Jays bench coach DeMarlo Hale. "We have good hitters who just, for some reason, have slumped early in the season.

"We've played a lot of close games, and it just seems that we get to a point in the game and we just can't get the big hit when we need it. But we're hoping it turns fast.

"It's so early in the season and there's no reason for any panic situation here. We have to find our rhythm offensively and we expect that's going to happen."

Some theorize that the Jays lost that rhythm when they lost players to the WBC. Bautista was one of them, but he had a very good tournament for the Dominican Republic, posting a .935 OPS.

The rhythm will come back, right? The nightmare will end soon?

Maybe, but not on Tuesday night. In fact, it just got worse.

Marco Hernandez steps in for resting Dustin Pedroia

Peter Abraham

TORONTO — For the first time this season, second baseman Dustin Pedroia was out of the Red Sox lineup. He didn't play in an 8-7 victory Tuesday night in Toronto.

That was not unusual. Tuesday was the 12th of 17 games in as many days for the Sox and was the team's first game on artificial turf this season.

The 33-year-old Pedroia had started the first 13 games this season. Only one other player, first baseman Mitch Moreland, had done that.

"Just giving him a day down," Red Sox manager John Farrell said.

More interesting is that Marco Hernandez started in Pedroia's place, not Brock Holt.

At a time when opportunities have been plentiful because of injuries and sickness, Holt started only five of the first 14 games and was 1 of 11. Tuesday was Hernandez's seventh start. He was 0 for 3 with a walk and is hitting .231.

Still, Hernandez has clearly impressed Farrell.

"There's been a lot to like. His at-bats have been overall aggressive, with the exception of an occasional at-bat against a lefthander," the manager said before the game. "I thought he has swung the bat well. He's played with a lot of athleticism and energy. So he's a good fit to be able to play in multiple positions."

The roots of the decision go back to spring training, when Hernandez had a 1.105 OPS in 22 games and impressed the coaching staff.

For now, Holt is bolted to the bench. The one-time All-Star utility man has temporarily fallen out of the rotation.

“You try to keep everybody involved as best possible,” Farrell said. “But the fact is, Marco’s at-bats have probably been a little bit more consistent. . . . Brock is still going to play a vital role in this team as we go forward.”

Price pushed back

The Red Sox said on Saturday that David Price was lined up to face hitters early this week, a significant step in his recovery from the elbow injury that has him on the disabled list.

But on Tuesday, Farrell said that exercise is “not planned yet.”

Price played catch from 90 feet and on Wednesday is scheduled to get out to 120 feet.

“Coming out of that we’ll determine the next step, as we’ve been doing,” Farrell said.

Price threw 45 pitches in the bullpen on Saturday at Fenway Park. But Farrell claimed that going back to long toss did not represent a setback.

“He’ll be back on the mound,” the manager said. “We just know that with the volume and the intensity that last week presented to him, we’re making sure that he goes through some long toss and continues to build. He’ll get back on the mound in the coming days.”

Other than to say he felt fine, Price offered no comment.

“I’ll let them talk to the media,” he said.

Bradley gets start

In Charlotte, N.C., Jackie Bradley Jr. started in center field for Triple A Pawtucket in the first game of an injury rehabilitation assignment. He played five innings and was 0 for 2.

Bradley, who is coming back from a strained right knee, is scheduled to play nine innings on Wednesday then take a day off on Thursday before rejoining the team in Baltimore on Friday.

Infielder Josh Rutledge, on the disabled list with a hamstring strain, also started a rehab assignment with the Paw Sox. He was the DH and went 1 for 3 with a home run.

Pitching moves

Brian Johnson, who went five innings for the win, is expected to be optioned back to Pawtucket. The Sox will have a fresh pitcher in the bullpen for Wednesday’s game, perhaps lefthander Eduardo Rodriguez. He started paternity leave Monday, but could work in relief then make his next start Sunday . . . The Red Sox signed 35-year-old righthanded reliever Blaine Boyer and assigned him to Triple A Pawtucket. Boyer has played parts of 10 seasons in the majors with seven teams. He appeared in 61 games for Milwaukee last season, posting a 3.85 earned run average and 1.47 WHIP. Boyer struck out only 9.2 percent of the batters he faced last season . . . With Aaron Sanchez on the disabled list with a blister, the Blue Jays will have righthander Marco Estrada start on Thursday. He is 0-1 with a 3.50 earned run average in three starts . . . Rick Porcello, who starts on Wednesday, allowed 25 hits — five of them home runs — over 16⅔ innings in his first three starts. Farrell wants to see Porcello get back in the bottom of the strike zone with his sinker. “That’s the pitch that really allows everything else to work,” Farrell said. “I thought the other night was certainly missed location. There may have been a tendency to overthrow [his fastball] at some times, which can lead to sacrificing location. He just has to get back to that signature pitch.” . . . First baseman Josh

Ockimey was named the Carolina League Player of the Week for April 6-16. He was 17 of 38 with five extra-base hits, 10 RBIs, and eight runs in 10 games.

Brian Johnson eager to step up for Red Sox

Alex Speier

For Brian Johnson, Tuesday marks a milestone. The same can be said of the team for which he'll be taking the mound.

Twenty-one months ago, the lefthander made his big league debut, an unspectacular four-run, 4 1/3 inning effort against the Astros. The performance seemed unrepresentative of his abilities given that he was working on 15 days of rest, but no matter: At a time when the Red Sox were looking for potential contributors to their 2016 rotation, Johnson seemed likely to get another opportunity in the big leagues after the trade deadline.

It didn't come. Johnson – who was about to be called up – was shut down due to ulnar nerve irritation after an August 2nd start for the PawSox. The prescribed period of rest ran into the offseason and limited his ability to follow a normal strength and conditioning program during the winter.

When he came back in 2016, his stuff was diminished. Physical challenges intermingled with increasingly suffocating symptoms of anxiety until Johnson, with the support of the Red Sox, made the decision to step back from his pitching career to focus on his mental health.

When he returned to the mound in the minors, he performed well – an impressive show of his competitiveness and makeup – but his arm strength still hadn't returned. A pitcher whom the Sox expected to be a key depth contributor last year never made it back to the big leagues in 2016.

Now, he gets his chance. With Eduardo Rodriguez on paternity leave, Johnson was summoned by the Red Sox from Triple A Pawtucket to start Tuesday against a struggling Blue Jays team. (It is worth noting that Toronto's early-season offensive struggles have been far more pronounced against righties than lefties.)

For Johnson – who in his most recent start in Pawtucket worked at 86-91 miles per hour with excellent fastball command and good action on his curveball and slider – the day is a landmark that he will not take for granted.

“Being healthy and having a chance to do it again is everything I would hope for,” said Johnson. “You're not guaranteed that chance again. Now that I have that opportunity, I hope to make the most of it.”

For the organization, what Johnson can demonstrate is likewise significant. His start marks the first of 2017 by a starter who was either drafted or signed as an international amateur. It's been a decade since the Red Sox went at least 13 games to open the year without a single start from a homegrown pitcher.

Johnson has an opportunity to offer the hint of an answer about whether the somewhat dire assessment of the Red Sox' homegrown starting pitching depth has been exaggerated, and whether the long-term internal options – foremost, Johnson and Henry Owens – have a chance to help the organization break the pattern of trades by necessity.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Mookie Betts powers Red Sox past Blue Jays

Jason Mastrodonato

TORONTO — One perfect swing from Mookie Betts might be just what the Red Sox offense needed.

Betts hit his first homer of the season last night, and it was a loud one, as he tattooed an inside fastball from Blue Jays reliever Joe Smith into the upper deck of the Rogers Centre in the seventh inning for his third hit of the game.

Last year's runner-up in American League MVP voting helped the Sox to an 8-7 win against the whimpering Jays.

The offense produced 15 hits in the Sox' fourth straight victory, and Betts has had multiple hits in three of those games.

"When Mookie gets hot, he's like, ridiculous, you know?" Xander Bogaerts said. "He just goes on these runs and you can't get him out."

Brian Johnson threw five serviceable innings to pick up career win No. 1 in a spot start. He allowed four runs while filling in for Eduardo Rodriguez (paternity leave).

Clearly this is a different team with Betts' hot bat in the No. 3 hole. He missed two of the first nine games with the flu and began the year just 4-for-23. But he's 12-for-21 since, and his streak without a strikeout stands at 127 regular-season plate appearances.

"Pretty irrelevant," Betts said of the strikeout-less streak. "An out's an out. I don't care about that at all."

Said Bogaerts: "I don't even want to talk about it. I don't want to jinx it. So I ain't going to be that guy."

With the Sox trailing 2-0 entering the third inning, Betts delivered an RBI single to key a three-run rally. He then began a three-run fifth inning with another single. In the seventh, he added the homer.

"It feels good," Betts said. "But it just counts for one, so whatever."

It must have been a relief for the Red Sox to see Betts go yard the way he did, turning loose on an 87-mph fastball in on his hands and lifting it to left field. He underwent offseason surgery to repair cartilage in his right knee, which bothered him occasionally last year, and had been a singles machine this season prior to the blast. (He does remain without a stolen bases after posting 26 in 2016).

The Red Sox, last in majors with just seven home runs, are relying on another monster year from Betts.

"He's a balanced, confident hitter," manager John Farrell said. "He's seeing the ball so well. He's just taking great swings."

Mitch Moreland also had a big game, with three hits, including his MLB-leading 10th double, and three RBI. He drove in a pair of runs with a single in the third inning and pushed another across with a long double in the fifth.

It wasn't an easy night for Johnson in his second career start. Toronto, off to a 2-11 start, banged out four hits and scored twice in the first inning, and had another runner thrown out at the plate.

The first out he recorded was a strikeout of Jose Bautista on an 89-mph fastball right down the pipe. A soft-tosser, Johnson sat around 86-89 mph with a heavy dose of offspeed stuff that was mildly effective. He served up two homers and completed the five innings on 96 pitches.

The Blue Jays' Marcus Stroman entered with a 1.76 ERA through his first two starts, but the Red Sox roughed him up for six runs on 11 hits and forced him out of the game in the fifth.

With the bullpen options limited, Matt Barnes worked the final 1 1/3 innings. Barnes allowed three runs, including a two-run homer to pinch-hitter Ezequiel Carrera with two outs in the ninth.

Mitch Moreland filling David Ortiz void in Red Sox lineup so far

Michael Silverman

TORONTO — It's possible that Mookie Betts or Xander Bogaerts or Hanley Ramirez or Dustin Pedroia is going to go on an extended, hot-as-blazes run one of these days.

But as of now, two weeks into the season, none of the above rivals Mitch Moreland as the most dangerous and productive hitter in the Red Sox lineup.

In other words, he's your mid-April front-runner for helping New England forget about David Ortiz.

Yes, we're talking Mitch Moreland, the 31-year-old first baseman who was picked up for a mere \$5.5 million last December, when he was heralded for his defense and flashes of power.

He's been better than advertised.

On Saturday, he hit his first home run (plus a single and a double).

On Monday, he delivered the key two-run single in a victory over the Rays.

And last night, he had three more hits and knocked in three runs in the Red Sox' 8-7 victory over the Blue Jays.

Leading the team in batting average (.358), on-base percentage (.443), slugging percentage (.604) and hits (19), Moreland is also ahead, by a wide margin, of all other hitters in baseball with 10 doubles (he hit his 10th last night).

Again, we're two weeks into the season.

But the 9-5 Red Sox are on a four-game winning streak, and they've climbed onto Moreland's back more than anyone else's in that run.

It's not the script anybody predicted, but right now, the Red Sox' reality show stars Moreland.

"It's been fun so far," he said. "It's still early though, just trying to go up there and keep it simple and have fun. Games like this are kind of back and forth, they're always fun. I'm glad we came out on top."

Moreland's not the type to put a lot of thought into the process when he goes up to the plate, or at least when he talks about it afterward.

"I think always, when you start thinking about it, it's never a good thing, I don't think, so just try to ride it out, keep my head down, keep doing my work and try to prepare every day the same and focus on that," Moreland said.

No doubt he studies opposing pitchers as much as he works on his own swing, but however he's doing it, it's working.

For an example, note that when Moreland came up in the third and fourth innings with runners in scoring position and Marcus Stroman on the mound, he stayed with the pitches and drove them to left field.

It's that sweet and easy opposite-field swing — and not the violent hacks he is capable of when chasing (he leads the team in strikeouts, too, with 14) — that is responsible for Moreland producing in big situations lately.

“In the RBI situations, he’s using the whole field, that’s the best I can say it,” said Sox manager John Farrell. “He’s got good plate coverage. He’s not making himself susceptible to one area of the strike zone or on one particular pitch. He might be giving up a little bit of power for the all-field approach. It’s been working for him.”

Moreland’s got a good sense of self-deprecating humor when it comes to that hit or miss swing of his. Always a high-strikeout type of hitter, he was reminded that last night as Mookie Betts extended his streak of plate appearances without a strikeout to 128 as well as hitting his first home run of the season.

“That streak is unheard of. I told him mine’s probably about six or so,” Moreland said.

Moreland’s hit in strong lineups before with Texas, the only other team he has played for, but he is thriving in this one.

With Betts starting to heat up, and others probably getting closer as well, Moreland’s early production likely bodes well for further down the road when his bat cools off. He has this stretch to fall back upon, plus the knowledge that he has plenty of support around him.

Ortiz is not walking through that door again, but at least Moreland’s doing a pretty good imitation of coming with the big hit at the right moment.

“He’s just having great at-bats,” Betts said. “Timely hitting. He’s playing great at first. We can’t ask for anything more than what he’s doing.”

Red Sox notebook: David Price rehab workouts toned back

Jason Mastrodonato

TORONTO — David Price has gone backwards in his steps toward a recovery from an elbow strain, but Red Sox manager John Farrell said it’s not because of any new soreness that has cropped up.

It seems as though the Red Sox aren’t viewing this as a setback, but more of a slowing down after Price pushed himself hard last week.

Even though the lefty threw his third bullpen session on Saturday, getting up and down multiple times to simulate game action, he is now back to throwing from flat ground and the Red Sox have not yet determined when he will throw off the mound again.

“He’ll be back on the mound (at some point), we just know the volume and intensity that last week presented to him,” Farrell said. “So we’re making sure he goes through some long-toss and continues to build.”

Price threw from 90 feet yesterday, Farrell said, and will throw from 120 feet today. He began with a similar progression in early April, slowly building arm strength with long-toss until he was able to throw from 150 feet, then he pitched off the mound.

He threw two bullpen sessions last week and Farrell thought Price might be able to face live hitters this week. At this point, a time frame is uncertain.

Tomorrow marks seven weeks since he first felt the soreness in his elbow.

Holt on hold

It’s always a catch-22 for Brock Holt: Find a way to stay consistent while only playing once a week.

But if the Red Sox don’t give him at-bats, how can he find that groove?

Holt was again passed over yesterday, when Farrell chose Marco Hernandez as the second baseman on a routine day off for Dustin Pedroia. Hernandez was 0-for-3 with a walk and two strikeouts in the Sox' 8-7 win over the Blue Jays.

Even though the Red Sox have played without Jackie Bradley Jr., who is on the 10-day disabled list, and missed multiple games from Mookie Betts (flu), Xander Bogaerts (bereavement) and Hanley Ramirez (flu), Holt has made only four starts through the first 13 games.

Holt was the most-used replacement for Pedroia at second base last year and often Farrell's go-to outfielder when someone needed rest or Farrell preferred a left-handed bat against a right-handed starter.

Farrell explained yesterday that he thinks Hernandez and Chris Young have been more consistent.

"I mean, you try to keep everyone involved as best possible," Farrell said. "The fact is, Marco's at-bats have probably been a little bit more consistent. Whether that's coming out of spring training a little bit more timely — he's had more opportunities as the season has begun."

Holt is 1-for-11 this season, but is a career .270 hitter with a .700 OPS against right-handed pitching.

"Brock's at-bats (in spring training) were typical of Brock — they were quality," Farrell said. "Timing's been off. And I know the flip side is, it's hard to get your timing when you're not getting at-bats. That's the life of a guy that's a bench player or a platoon player."

"So we've got some work to do to get him going again."

Young, who typically mashes lefties, has been surprisingly good against righties in the early going. He's 11-for-38 (.289) with two doubles and five walks to go with six strikeouts.

"He's done a very good job, even when the at-bats might not show an on-base results, the at-bats have been quality," Farrell said. "He's done everything we've hoped with a guy coming in as planned to be an extra outfielder."

The Sox were planning to rest Pedroia yesterday.

"We're in a stretch of I think 30 of 31," Farrell said. "He's been in all 13 games."

Bounceback needed

One good start by Rick Porcello tonight could go a long way to cooling the concerns over the Sox' starting rotation. Four of the five starters, all but Chris Sale, are currently nursing ERAs over 5.00.

His last time out, Porcello allowed eight runs, including four homers.

Last year's Cy Young winner needs to "get back in the bottom of the strike zone with his sinker," Farrell said. "That's the pitch that really allows everything else to work off of."

It sounds like the same issue Porcello dealt with in 2015, when he finished with a 4.92 ERA.

"You can say it's somewhat similar," Farrell said. "But I think he's much more clear on what his needs are as far as a pitcher goes, what works best for him and a lot of innings under his belt to prove that to him." . . .

Eduardo Rodriguez could return from the paternity list as soon as today and be used out of relief. If Rodriguez isn't ready to return, Farrell said the Sox would add a pitcher from the minors to provide length in the 'pen. . . .

Bradley and Josh Rutledge began their rehab assignments with Triple-A Pawtucket. Bradley was 0-for-2 with a strikeout and Rutledge was 1-for-3 with a home run. Bradley is expected to return to the Red Sox on Friday.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox 8, Blue Jays 7: Diverse offense supports Brian Johnson's first big-league win

Brian MacPherson

TORONTO — Brian Johnson's fastball did not touch 90 on Tuesday night. His curveball, described this week by his Triple-A pitching coach as "probably his one plus pitch," was inconsistent all night. A pitcher who relies on command twice walked the No. 9 hitter.

But in earning his first major-league victory in an 8-7 win over the Blue Jays, Johnson showed off his best quality as a pitcher.

His perseverance.

Johnson is the kind of guy who bounced back from a recent line drive to the side of his head by recalling the more gruesome one that struck his face in 2012.

"The only way you can shake it off is to take one in the face before that," he said earlier this week, almost pithily.

Just to reach his second major-league start, Johnson had to overcome an untimely elbow injury, a terrifying carjacking and anxiety issues — all since his first big-league game in July 2015. He admitted Tuesday night that he wondered if this second chance would ever come.

For a man in Johnson's spikes, the adversity between the actual lines can pale in comparison.

And so Tuesday's rocky start did little to faze him. Pressed against the ropes in the first two frames, Johnson never fell to the mat. With two runs in and two more in scoring position one out into his start, he got a key forceout and strikeout to escape further damage.

With the bases loaded and the heart of the Toronto order staring him down in the second, another punchout and flyout extricated him from trouble.

"What I've been through helped me get through those first two innings, knowing my back's not against the wall and I could do it," Johnson said. "I remember points last year where I felt I was already beaten going out, because I wasn't mentally in the right spot. Especially in that first and second inning, I know that even though things are bad on the field, they could be much worse."

After surviving the traffic jam in the first two innings, Johnson settled in for the next three. He retired nine of the last 12 men he faced, with solo home runs from Justin Smoak and Russell Martin two loud exceptions.

Even though his fastball sat around 88 most of the night, he picked up four of his six strikeouts and six of his nine swing-and-misses with it.

Johnson's final line was pedestrian, as he allowed four runs on seven hits in five laborious innings. But it was more or less what the Red Sox asked of him as he made the start on short notice, filling in for new father Eduardo Rodriguez.

“While there were a number of baserunners, he was able to keep his composure and make a couple of pitches,” manager John Farrell said.

Heath Hembree, Fernando Abad and Matt Barnes combined to get the final dozen outs.

Of course, the story would be a touch different for Johnson were it not for the offensive support provided by Boston’s bats. The Red Sox once again flexed their quantity-over-quality muscles, bunching together hits against Toronto’s Marcus Stroman.

Mookie Betts, Mitch Moreland and Pablo Sandoval all had three hits. Betts knocked his first home run of the season in the seventh, while Moreland notched yet another double — his 10th of the season — while driving home three on the night. Sandoval picked up his 10th RBI of the season with his first hit from the right side all year in the fifth.

Boston rapped out 15 hits — the fourth time in their last eight games that the Sox have recorded at least 14 knocks.

Betts, who was at second base the day Johnson was hit by that line drive at Fenway Park in 2012, could appreciate his teammate’s journey.

“I’ve been with him since Lowell and every step of the way,” he said. “He’s someone I grew up with. It’s definitely special to be a part of their first everything.”

David Price back to long toss; Red Sox not sure when he’ll next throw off a mound

Tim Britton

TORONTO — After ramping up his throwing during three bullpen sessions last week, David Price is taking a step back in intensity this week.

Price is back to throwing long toss on flat ground, with Boston unsure of when the left-hander will next get off a mound.

“He’ll be back on the mound. We just know the volume and intensity that last week presented to him, [and] we’re making sure he goes through some long toss and continues to build,” manager John Farrell said Tuesday at Rogers Centre.

Price threw out to 90 feet on Tuesday and will throw to 120 feet on Wednesday. After that, the Red Sox will determine what’s next.

Asked if Price was dealing with any kind of soreness, Farrell said, “No.”

Price had been making progress with those three bullpen sessions last week on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. In his most recent session on Saturday, Price got up and down a few times to simulate innings.

The left-hander still hasn’t thrown a breaking ball off a mound.

“I haven’t had any setbacks yet. It’s going pretty smooth,” Price said on Saturday. “We’ve put in the work and I expect to be myself whenever I come back.”

How does Blue Jays’ woeful start affect the Red Sox?

Tim Britton

TORONTO — What does it mean for the Red Sox to see their presumed top competition in the division get off to such a poor start?

The Blue Jays kick off their three-game series with Boston at Rogers Centre at 2-10 — the worst 12-game start in franchise history.

“I don’t know that their record changes our approach or how we view them,” manager John Farrell said Tuesday. “That’s still a very dangerous lineup. And watching games and watching video prior to this series opening up, they’ve had pitchers that have gone against them and executed extremely well. We’re going to need to do the same.

“I don’t know what the reasons are that led to their first 12 games. We can all see the numbers and what the standings say. Still, there is no loss of respect here.”

Injuries have certainly played a part and will continue to do so: Josh Donaldson, Aaron Sanchez and J.A. Happ are all on the disabled list for the Jays.

A dozen games do not provide enough dirt to bury a season, especially for a team expected to contend like Toronto. Teams have started 2-10 and won 90-plus games (the 1982 Orioles and 2011 Red Sox). Teams have started 2-10 and made the playoffs (the 1974 Pirates and 2001 Athletics). Teams have started 2-10 and won the pennant (the 1951 Giants).

It is harder for a team like Toronto to make that comeback if the division has already started to stratify. The Blue Jays enter play Tuesday 6.5 games back in the American League East — 5.5 behind Boston.

The last team to win the division despite being down at least five games on April 17 was the 2011 Diamondbacks. The last to do so in the American League was before realignment: the 1991 Twins, who were six back after a 2-9 start and won the World Series anyway.

Boston pitching coach Carl Willis was on that team.

“It sounds like a cliché but it’s really not: You have to focus on that it’s a long season,” he said. “You just have to break it up and take it day-to-day or series-to-series and look at smaller segments as opposed to looking at the great big picture. It always gets magnified at the beginning because you have nothing else to go off of.”

But just because there are historical predecessors for a comeback doesn’t mean it’s wise to dismiss this kind of start unequivocally. A nine-game losing streak to open the 2016 season essentially ended any outside hope the Twins had of contending. While the 2011 Red Sox would have made the postseason under the current format, they would have made it under the old format if they hadn’t dug themselves such a hole in the first two weeks of April.

The first few months are especially pertinent for a team like Toronto, who has a number of key players set to reach free agency by the end of next season. The oldest team in the American League, the Blue Jays may have to consider undergoing a longer-term rebuilding — and perhaps losing much of the goodwill they’ve built up over the past two seasons — by the summer.

The three games at Rogers Centre this week are the only between these two teams before June 30.

What can the Red Sox expect from Brian Johnson?

Tim Britton

TORONTO — This won’t be a simple task for Brian Johnson.

Johnson will make his second major-league start on Tuesday night against a Blue Jays team that has traditionally mashed left-handed pitching. Toronto’s team OPS is almost 200 points higher against southpaws than right-handers, and the Jays are 1-1 against lefty starters (compared to 1-9 against righties).

After a poor spring training, Johnson has been solid in his first two Triple-A starts, in particular his most recent one Thursday against Syracuse. In that game, Johnson pitched into the seventh and allowed only one earned run and only one walk.

That command is especially significant for Johnson, whose stuff can't live in the strike zone the way Henry Owens' can. When Johnson was at his best in Pawtucket in 2015, he possessed near pinpoint command with his fastball, which he then complemented with his curve. Since injuring his elbow in the middle of that season, he hasn't been quite as in control of his heater.

(Prior to the injury, Johnson walked 7.1 percent of batters in 2015. After the injury through 2016, he walked 11 percent of opposing hitters. Thus far this season, he's at 8.9 percent.)

"I've never felt like Brian was a big velocity guy. You're not going to see 94-95 out of his hand," Triple-A pitching coach Bob Kipper said. "What you're going to see is 88 to 92 with some deception and the ability to move the ball inside and out."

When Johnson is going well, his curveball plays off the better fastball command.

"That's probably his one plus pitch," said Kipper. "We're seeing him re-establish the sharpness, the lateness in break that we saw in '14 and early '15. "I look at the takes; they're defensive. The swings, defensive. He's starting to get the swing-and-miss and show the confidence he can throw it in different counts. That's Brian Johnson."

Even without Tyler Thornburg, Red Sox bullpen has been one of American League's best so far

Brian MacPherson

BOSTON -- When he woke up Monday morning, Ben Taylor thought his most important task would be to get himself to McCoy Stadium in time to catch the bus that would take his Triple-A Pawtucket team to the airport to catch its flight to Charlotte.

By Monday afternoon, Taylor was pitching in a pivotal moment at Fenway Park, facing Tampa Bay's Steven Souza Jr. and Logan Morrison with the bases loaded and the Red Sox clinging to a lead. He gave up a line-drive single to Souza but got Morrison to pop up on a fastball in on his hands, stranding three runners.

By Tuesday, Taylor nonetheless was on his way to Charlotte to join the PawSox, having been sent back to Triple-A to make room for the newly recalled Johnson.

That Taylor had to pitch in such a decisive moment -- and still was optioned out after the game -- demonstrates just how mix-and-match the Boston bullpen has been to this point in the season. That Taylor did his job demonstrates the extent to which the mix-and-match bullpen has thrived.

"He showed up today and next thing you know he's in a bases-loaded ballgame," said Heath Hembree, who pitched a scoreless eighth inning after Taylor departed. "We have a lot of really good arms down there, a lot of guys who really get along with each other and who really feed off each other. It's just a fun group to be a part of. Once the first person comes out of the bullpen and sets the tone, we like to keep that tone and finish the game off."

"Once they get a little success," Boston manager John Farrell said, "their confidence is starting to grow."

Red Sox relievers entered play Tuesday with the third-lowest ERA in the American League (1.84). The Red Sox are one of only two American League teams whose relievers not have allowed more than one home run this season. They're even in the top half of the American League in stranding inherited runners.

They've done that despite being without two relievers who would be pitching high-leverage innings if healthy -- Carson Smith and Tyler Thornburg, trade acquisitions in each of the last two winters who have combined to make fewer appearances for Boston than Taylor has.

Boston's three straight wins over Tampa Bay saw nearly every relief pitcher make a critical contribution -- the lone exception being Fernando Abad, a polarizing lefty who has been all but buried so far. That the team's bullpen did what it did was all the more impressive considering that four of its five starting pitchers had failed to pitch more than 5 1/3 innings in the turn through the rotation that ended Sunday.

Neither Barnes nor Scott has been charged with an earned run yet this season -- and Scott has stranded four of five inherited runners.

Barnes pitched the eighth inning in a 2-1 win over Tampa Bay on Saturday, inducing a pivotal double-play ball in a one-run game. Joe Kelly pitched 2 2/3 scoreless innings of relief in a 7-5 win on Sunday, and Barnes and Scott combined to get three outs in the eighth inning after Kelly did what he did.

Even before Hembree or Taylor entered the game on Monday, Robbie Ross Jr. got a pair of important strikeouts in the seventh inning -- including a strikeout of Brad Miller on a full-count slider with the bases loaded.

"The ball was moving a lot more than normal to the glove side," Ross said. "I tried to stay on it a little longer. I was hoping they'd be swinging a little more, but they stayed back and waited for me to throw a strike. It was working better than it had been."

Each of those outings contributed to getting the ball to Kimbrel, who struck out seven of the nine hitters he faced in back-to-back-to-back spotless save conversions. Since a rocky outing in Detroit a week ago, Kimbrel has allowed just one of the 12 hitters he has faced to reach base.

Farrell said that his initial inclination Monday was to stay away from Kimbrel, who had pitched on back-to-back days already. But Kimbrel deemed himself good to go, and so Farrell sent him back out to close the door one more time.

It took the work of unlikely heroes like Hembree, Ross and Taylor to get the ball to Kimbrel, however.

"It's been great to watch guys settle into roles and get into some opportunities and situations that guys haven't really had a lot of chances to do in their career yet," Kimbrel said. "Our bullpen is really good. If we're going to win games, our bullpen's going to have a lot to do with that."

*** *The Springfield Republican***

Pablo Sandoval, Boston Red Sox 3B, accomplishes something he hadn't done since Aug. 14, 2015

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- Pablo Sandoval has struggled early on this season. He's batting just .196 (9-for-46).

But he stroked three singles and drew one walk to help the Boston Red Sox win 8-7 over the Toronto Blue Jays here at Rogers Centre on Tuesday.

It marked Sandoval's first three-hit game since Aug. 14, 2015 at Fenway Park vs. the Seattle Mariners when he went 3-for-5 with two doubles, three RBIs and two runs.

The switch-hitter also stroked his first hit from the right side of the plate since early in the 2015 season.

Sandoval went just 2-for-41 batting right-handed to begin 2015, then hit solely from the left side for the rest of the season.

Sandoval -- who took just six at-bats during 2016 before undergoing season-ending shoulder surgery -- has returned to switch-hitting this year after he worked with Detroit Tigers slugger Miguel Cabrera on his right-handed swing this past offseason.

He began this season 0-for-10 from the right side before stroking an RBI single in the fifth inning against left-handed reliever Aaron Loup here Tuesday.

"I've been working hard with (hitting coaches) Victor Rodriguez and Chili Davis in the cage," Sandoval said. "So I've been putting (in) all the work to ... get in the right position and get my swing back the way that I was swinging in spring training. So that's what I've been doing. That's why I'm watching videos: to compare the swings."

He said he wasn't using his hands enough during his previous at-bats from the right side this season.

"I need to trust my hands," Sandoval said. "I was using my body. The last two at-bats I started using my hands, trusting my hands. I've been putting the ball in play."

The Red Sox will face Blue Jays left-handed starter Francisco Liriano on Wednesday and manager John Farrell indicated Sandoval likely will start.

"For him, I'm sure he knows what the attention has been when he's facing a left-hander," Farrell said. "But stayed through the middle of the field. Gets a ground ball base hit for an RBI. So hopefully that's a boost for him as he's going to see some left-handers and likely with Liriano tomorrow."

Brian Johnson: 'What I've been through helped me get through those first 2 innings'

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- The first two innings vs. the Blue Jays certainly were tough for Brian Johnson here Tuesday at Rogers Centre.

But the two innings were easy compared to what the 26-year-old lefty has been through since the Red Sox drafted him 31st overall in 2012.

"I think what I've been through helped me get through those first two innings," Johnson said. "And knowing my back's not against the wall and I can do it."

Johnson earned his first major league victory in his second career start. The Red Sox won 8-7 over the Blue Jays.

Johnson went 5 innings, allowing four runs, all earned, seven hits (two homers) and three walks while striking out six.

Johnson certainly has overcome many obstacles during his professional career.

He has been hit in the face with comebackers twice. He fractured multiple bones when a line drive hit him in the face while he was pitching for the Lowell Spinners at Futures at Fenway during 2012.

He missed about two months during last season while being treated for depression and anxiety.

Elbow irritation in the ulnar nerve area caused him to miss his chance to pitch in the Red Sox rotation during the second half of 2015.

He even got carjacked in October 2015 but luckily wasn't hurt.

Johnson made his major league debut July 21, 2015 in Houston. And so he went 21 months between his debut and his second big league start.

He did wonder if he'd ever make it back.

"I think I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a little thought that I might not just from everything that happened," Johnson said. "After spring training, after my exit meeting with John (Farrell) and (pitching coach) Carl (Willis), I just felt like this year was going to be a big year for me and I knew I'd be back then."

Johnson was dealing with the elbow irritation when he made his major league debut.

"I had no feeling in my hand at that point in time on certain innings, certain pitches to where I would throw one and not know where the ball was going because I couldn't feel my fingers," Johnson said about his major league debut. "Today, I felt like myself."

Johnson didn't receive much help from his defense during a two-run first inning. Pablo Sandoval got a glove on a smash down the third base line by Kevin Pillar to begin the first but he couldn't make the play. It ended up going for a double.

Sandoval also charged and fielded a weak grounder from Troy Tulowitzki but he fumbled the baseball transferring it to his throwing hand. It was ruled a hit.

Johnson escaped a bases loaded jam with one in the second inning by striking out Kendrys Morales and getting Troy Tulowitzki to line out to right.

"He was able to get enough outs to get us through five innings and no bigger were the two that he got in the bottom of the second inning when he was in a bases loaded situation," Farrell said. "He was able to strike out Morales and then get the final out of the inning. While there was a number of base runners, he was able to keep his composure and make a couple of pitches.

"I thought he had a pretty good, tight curveball with some bite to it to get some swing-and-miss," Farrell added. "And then when he got them sitting looking for curveballs, he was able to throw some fastballs by them."

Johnson allowed a solo home run to Justin Smoak in the third inning and a solo shot to Russell Martin during the fifth.

He said he didn't think about the possibility of earning his first major league win until the seventh inning. It started to get real for him then.

"Especially the last inning, I felt like my heart was racing a little bit just because of the adrenaline," he said. "It was exciting."

Johnson said he hopes his velocity will continue to increase but he thinks this start showed the Red Sox he can help the big league club more here during 2017.

Mitch Moreland, Mookie Betts power Sox past Blue Jays; Brian Johnson earns 1st major league win

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- Mitch Moreland has been an offensive machine for the Boston Red Sox since game No. 3.

After starting the season 0-for-9, the Red Sox first baseman since has gone 19-for-44. He went 3-for-5 with three RBIs, one run and his major league-leading 10th double here Tuesday at Rogers Centre.

Mookie Betts, meanwhile, went 3-for-5 with three runs, two RBIs and his first homer of the 2017 season after he bashed 31 last year.

The Red Sox won 8-7 over the Blue Jays.

Moreland is batting .358 with a .443 on-base percentage and .604 slugging percentage.

He stroked a two-run single the opposite way to left field to put the Red Sox ahead 3-2 in the third inning. He then knocked home Hanley Ramirez with his 10th double in the fifth inning, putting Boston ahead 5-3.

Betts has stroked multiple hits in four of his past five games. He has two three-hit games and one four-hit game during the five-game stretch.

He's batting .356 with a .420 on-base percentage and .489 slugging percentage.

Pablo Sandoval with 3-hit game

Pablo Sandoval went 3-for-4 with three singles and one walk. He stroked three hits in a game for the first time since Aug. 14, 2015 at Fenway Park vs. the Seattle Mariners when he went 3-for-5 with two doubles, three RBIs and two runs.

Brian Johnson's earns first major league win

Brian Johnson went 5 innings, allowing four runs, all earned, seven hits (two homers) and three walks while striking out six.

But it was good enough for his first major league win in his second career start.

Johnson didn't receive much help from his defense during a two-run first inning. Pablo Sandoval got a glove on a smash down the third base line by Kevin Pillar to begin the game but he couldn't make the play. It ended up going for a double.

Sandoval also charged and fielded a weak grounder from Troy Tulowitzki but he fumbled the baseball transferring it to his throwing hand. It was ruled a hit.

Johnson escaped a bases loaded jam with one in the second inning by striking out Kendrys Morales and getting Troy Tulowitzki to line out to right.

He gave up a solo home run to Justin Smoak in the third inning and a solo shot to Russell Martin during the fifth.

Red Sox bullpen hurls 4 innings

Heath Hembree hurled 2 scoreless innings, allowing two hits and one walk while striking out one.

Fernando Abad recorded two outs without allowing a run. He gave up one hit.

Matt Barnes recorded the final four outs. He allowed three runs with two outs in the ninth after he retired the first two batters.

Stroman continues to struggle vs. Red Sox

Marcus Stroman went 0-1 with a 9.92 ERA in three starts vs. the Red Sox last year. Boston hitters posted a .371 average against him.

Those struggles have now carried into 2017. He entered his start Tuesday vs. Boston with a 1-1 record and 1.76 ERA in two starts this season. He hurled a complete game in the loss.

But the Red Sox knocked him out after just 4 2/3 innings. He allowed six runs, all earned, 11 hits and one walk while striking out four. His ERA increased from 1.76 to 4.05.

Xander Bogaerts went 2-for-3 with a run vs. Stroman from the leadoff spot. Bogaerts now is 10-for-20 (.500) in his career vs. the Blue Jays righty.

David Price injury: Red Sox slowing down lefty's throwing program after 3 bullpens last week

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- David Price (elbow) threw bullpen sessions last Monday, Wednesday and Saturday.

The plan was for him to potentially throw live batting practice sometime this week if he came out of his Saturday bullpen session feeling strong enough.

But the Red Sox seem to be dialing his throwing program back some.

There's no live BP scheduled. Nor is there another bullpen scheduled as of yet.

Price threw long toss at 90 feet today. He'll throw long toss again tomorrow at 120 feet here at Rogers Centre.

"Coming out of that, we'll determine the next step as we've been doing of late," Red Sox manager John Farrell said.

Farrell said this wasn't the result of Price feeling any soreness.

"And he'll be back on the mound," Farrell said. "We just know that with the volume and the intensity that last week presented to him, we're making sure he gets through some long toss and continues to build."

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

Boston has embarrassment of sports riches

Tom Caron

Has there ever been a better time to be a Boston sports fan?

The answer, at least this past weekend, was clearly no. This is truly the Golden Age of Boston sports, and we reveled in it over the long holiday weekend.

TD Garden was humming with playoff action, with the Bruins and Celtics making the playoffs in the same year for the first time since the 2012-13 season.

Sunday night's Celtics game was the start of four consecutive nights of playoff action at the Garden, with the "bull gang" picking up and laying down the parquet each night.

This used to be a regular thing at the old Boston Garden. Back in the '70s and '80s it was shocking if at least one of the teams wasn't playing through Memorial Day or beyond. That seemed to change in the '90s, and when the teams moved into their new home in 1995, the mystique and aura of the Garden was hard to find.

That magic returned in 2008 when the Celtics hoisted banner No. 17, and continued into this decade with the Bruins winning the Cup in 2011 and returning to the finals in 2013.

The electricity was back Sunday when the Garden faithful showed its support for Isaiah Thomas as he took the court for Game 1 of the playoffs with a heavy heart. Despite losing his sister to a fatal car accident just the day before, Thomas was the Celtics' best player in the opener against the Bulls.

The trouble is, Boston's supporting cast wasn't up to the task and Chicago's bench was the difference in a 106-102 Celtics loss.

A day later the Bruins brought the Garden to life as they roared back from a 3-0 deficit and batted the Ottawa Senators with everything they had. Unfortunately they didn't have enough. Boston ultimately succumbed to the Senators in overtime, while four injured Bruins defensemen watched from the ninth floor.

Tommy Cross was 10th on the Bruins' defensive depth chart this season, but he was on the ice when the game ended in overtime. The former Boston College standout did all he could to cover for a bad Zdeno Chara shift change that left the Bruins undermanned as the Senators attacked. Boston needs to have its best personnel on the ice if it hopes to survive and advance.

While the Garden was humming with hoops and hockey playoffs, Fenway Park has been hopping with the start of the baseball season. The Red Sox held their annual morning game on Patriots Day and finished off a 5-2 homestand that brought their home record to 7-2.

This team was expected to contend primarily on the strength of its starting rotation. That rotation has not been as good as expected, at least not yet. Steven Wright's outing Monday was just the second quality start this year from a pitcher not named Chris Sale or Rick Porcello. And Porcello gave up four home runs in his last outing.

Yet the Sox hit the road three games above .500, largely because of an offense that has the best batting average in baseball. They're hitting .325 from the seventh inning on, the best team batting average in the game. That has led to five Red Sox wins in games they trailed or were tied after six innings.

Those kind of come-from-behind wins can build confidence in a team and can get fans thinking about the playoffs. The Sox got there last year but are looking to do better than the three-and-out run of last October.

On a weekend like this, a major event like the 121st running of the Boston Marathon ranks no better than fourth on our list of sporting events worth keeping an eye on. Yet it's a reminder that this is truly the best sports town in America. We might have an embarrassment of sports riches, but we'll never be embarrassed to call Boston home to our favorite teams.

*** *RedSox.com***

Red Sox use 15-hit attack to edge Jays

Gregor Chisholm and Ian Browne

TORONTO -- A trip to Rogers Centre might have been just the cure for what was ailing the Red Sox's lineup.

Mookie Betts, Pablo Sandoval and Mitch Moreland all had three hits as Boston's lineup enjoyed arguably its best game of the season in an 8-7 win over the Blue Jays on Tuesday night. Left-hander Brian Johnson picked up the first victory of his big league career and the Red Sox extended their winning streak to four games with the impressive showing.

Boston finished with 15 hits, which included Betts' first home run of the season and Moreland's Major League-leading 10th double of the year. Not to be outdone, Sandoval reached base four times to finish 3-for-4 with an RBI single and a walk. Most of the damage was off Blue Jays right-hander Marcus Stroman, who allowed six runs on 11 hits and one walk over 4 2/3 innings.

The win moved the 9-5 Red Sox into a share of first place in the American League East with the Yankees and Orioles.

"We're kind of coming around it seems like, putting together some good at-bats, building innings," said Moreland. "It's always nice to be able to do that. We've just got to keep it rolling."

Johnson was making his season debut, and he survived a shaky start to pick up the win in his second Major League start. He allowed two runs in the first but pitched his way out of trouble in the second and finished with four earned runs on seven hits and three walks over five innings. The way Boston was swinging the bat against Stroman and the rest of Toronto's pitching staff, that was enough.

"Oh, it's awesome," Johnson said of the win. "It's everything I dreamed it would be. I want to give basically all the credit to [catcher Christian Vazquez]. He got me through especially the first two innings. But I'm very excited about it."

Toronto made things interesting in the bottom of the ninth against a Red Sox team that had closer Craig Kimbrel unavailable after he pitched in three consecutive games and four of the last five. Key setup man Joe Kelly was also unavailable due to his recent workload. Steve Pearce had an RBI single and then pinch-hitter Ezequiel Carrera cut the lead to one with a two-run homer to left field. That brought the tying run to the plate, but Boston righty Matt Barnes got Devon Travis to hit a weak flare to shortstop for the final out of the game.

"We had to mix and match on a night both Kelly and Kimbrel were unavailable," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "This was a good team win all the way around tonight."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

More from Moreland: Moreland opened the season 0-for-12, but that seems like a distant memory. He has been red hot lately and his upward trend continued in the top of the fifth with an RBI double to left.

Moreland leads the Majors with 10 doubles, and he also leads the American League with 11 extra-base hits. He has reached base in 11 consecutive games and the latest double came as part of a three-run inning that chased Stroman from the game. Hanley Ramirez also had an RBI double in the fifth while Sandoval added an RBI single from the right side after lefty reliever Aaron Loup entered the game.

"In the RBI situations, he's using the whole field. That's the best I can say it," said Farrell. "He's got good plate coverage. He's not making himself susceptible to one area of the strike zone or on one particular pitch. He might be giving up a little bit of power for the all-field approach. It's been working for him."

The turning point: Toronto was up 2-0 in the bottom of the second with runners on second and third when Farrell decided to intentionally walk Jose Bautista. That loaded the bases for Kendrys Morales, who already had an RBI single in the first. Johnson, who appeared to be on the ropes, responded by starting the at-bat with a couple of strikes and then got Morales to strike out swinging on an inside curveball that was low and outside of the zone. Troy Tulowitzki then flew out to right field as Johnson escaped without any runs allowed and then watched his offense score three in the top of the third to take the lead.

"We put up a lot of hits tonight, they just had more," Blue Jays manager John Gibbons said. "They had the big ones, more of them with guys on base. There were some good signs there. That doesn't win you anything but it'll happen."

QUOTABLE

"I'm not going to look too deep into this. I feel great. I just didn't execute in certain situations, but it's all part of it. Keep it moving and focus on my next one." -- Stroman, on allowing 11 or more hits for the third time in his career

"When Mookie gets hot, he's like, ridiculous, you know? He just goes on these runs that you can't get him out." -- Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts, on Betts

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Sandoval's caught-stealing in the fourth inning marked the first baserunner Toronto has thrown out this season. Blue Jays catchers previously were 0-for-7 in their attempts.

UNDER REVIEW

Gibbons used his challenge in the top of the eighth inning because he wanted the umpires to take a closer look at a disputed call at first base. Sandoval dove back into the bag after a pickoff attempt by Russell Martin, and he was called safe by umpire Laz Diaz. Following a review, the call on the field stood.

WHAT'S NEXT

Red Sox: Right-hander Rick Porcello will try to bounce back from a tough outing five days ago, when he was pounded for eight hits, eight runs and a career-high of four homers over 4 1/3 innings. First pitch of Wednesday's game is scheduled for 7:07 p.m. ET.

Blue Jays: Left-hander Francisco Liriano (0-1, 9.00 ERA) will take the mound when the Blue Jays continue this series against the Red Sox. Liriano bounced back from a rough season debut to allow just two runs over 6 2/3 innings vs. the Orioles in his last outing. The biggest difference was his command, as he went from five walks to eight batters in his first start to just two walks his last time out.

Mookie appears ready for takeoff

Ian Browne

TORONTO -- Mookie Betts is the ignition for the Red Sox's offense, and the fact that the electrifying right fielder is in the early stages of a hot streak could spell a lot of trouble for opposing pitchers over these next few days.

When Betts gets hot, he tends to stay hot for a while. And when he does, the Red Sox tend to win.

Backed by a 3-for-5 performance from Betts that included three runs scored and a home run (his first of the season), the Sox staved off the Blue Jays, 8-7, on Tuesday night at Rogers Centre.

"When Mookie gets hot, he's like, ridiculous, you know? He just goes on these runs that you can't get him out," said Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts. "He just will be hitting balls hard, home runs and stuff like that. We're feeling good as a team, playing good as a team. Hopefully that continues."

That's four in a row for the Red Sox after a 5-5 start, and no surprise that the winning has happened while Betts has raked to the tune of 12-for-22 in that stretch.

When Betts reaches base two times or more this season, the Red Sox are 7-1. With his speed and power in the No. 3 spot in the batting order, his positive performances can't help but be impactful.

"He's a special player," said Red Sox first baseman Mitch Moreland. "This team is full of young, special players, but he's fun to watch. He's one of those guys -- you go to the ballpark and your eyes are on him for all nine innings. I think it's that way for me and I'm out there trying to play, too."

Moreland is hot himself, as a 3-for-5 performance put his average at .358. But Betts is the team's finest all-around player, and he is now hitting .356 with, you might have heard, zero strikeouts.

The last time Betts struck out in a regular-season game was Sept. 12, 2016. He has gone 128 plate appearances without a K.

"Pretty irrelevant," Betts said. "An out's an out. I don't care about that at all."

Betts is always the last person to give credit to himself, particularly in interviews. But his teammates can appreciate what he is doing.

"Having a front-row seat getting to watch him every day is pretty special. That streak is unheard of -- I told him mine's probably about six or so," quipped Moreland. "He's something special to watch, his hands are so fast, it seems like there's no holes in his swing. It's tough to pitch to a guy like that. He's catching fire at the right time."

The stretch without a strikeout is the longest in the Majors since Juan Pierre in 2004. But the speedy Pierre -- a slap hitter -- fits the profile of someone who would have a streak like that.

Betts has a ferocious swing that he used to swat a home run on Tuesday that was projected by Statcast™ to travel 424 feet. It is the third longest homer Betts has hit over the last three seasons, and the best distance he has had on a homer since May 28, 2016, at Baltimore.

"Balanced, confident hitter," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "He's seeing the ball so well and so much has been made about the run of at-bats where there's been no strikeouts. And I'm sure everybody is aware of it, but what's great to see is he's still working counts. He's still working the at-bats. There's damage inside the streak that he's on. He's just very balanced and taking great swings."

Johnson savors first big league victory

Ian Browne

TORONTO -- Unlike his Major League debut 21 months ago, which was, in many respects, a night he would like to forget, Brian Johnson savored the aftermath of his long-awaited encore performance on Tuesday night at Rogers Centre.

Afforded an opportunity to be called up from Triple-A Pawtucket for one night only due to Eduardo Rodriguez going on the paternity list, Johnson's second career appearance for the Red Sox resulted in his first win -- 8-7 over the Blue Jays.

It wasn't a piece of art that Johnson turned in. But after throwing 35 pitches in the first inning, the fact the lefty was able to go five innings was crucial for a Boston team that had taxed the bullpen of late. The 26-year-old scattered seven hits and four runs, walking three and striking out six.

In a way, the outing was symbolic of the way Johnson has persevered over the last couple of years, dealing with arm issues and a bout with anxiety/depression that led to him taking a medical leave in the middle of last season.

All that Johnson has gone through had to make it sweeter, right?

"Without a doubt," said Johnson, who is ranked Boston's No. 11 prospect by MLB Pipeline.com. "I think what I've been through helped me get through those first two innings and knowing that even if my back is against the wall, I could do it."

And even though Johnson was optioned back to Triple-A Pawtucket after the game, he proved that he is someone the Red Sox can call on the next time the need arises. Also, he has a win to take with him back to the Minors.

"Oh, it's awesome," said Johnson. "It's everything I dreamed it would be."

As for the night of July 21, 2015, when Johnson took the loss at Houston and gave up three hits and four runs over 4 1/3 innings, he doesn't have to think about it anymore.

In that debut, Johnson was going through left elbow woes, but he didn't tell anyone until after the fact.

"I had no feeling in my hand at that point in time on certain innings, certain pitches to where I'd throw one and not know where the ball was going because I couldn't feel my fingers. But today I felt like myself," said Johnson.

And he has the win to prove it.

"I didn't even think about a win until about the seventh," said Johnson. "I didn't even put it together. Especially the last inning, I felt like my heart was racing a little bit, just because of the adrenaline. But it was exciting."

*** *ESPNBoston.com***

Wait ... when was the last time Mookie Betts struck out?

Scott Lauber

TORONTO -- For all the things Mookie Betts did that got the attention of Boston Red Sox amateur scout Danny Watkins, it was something he didn't do that stood out most.

"I don't remember seeing him swing and miss," Watkins said.

And it wasn't like Watkins watched Betts play only once or twice. He spent weeks around the John Overton High School baseball team in suburban Nashville, Tennessee, in 2010 and 2011 and saw dozens of games. Watkins has plenty of stories about the ease with which Betts hit line drives to every part of the field, terrorized opponents on the bases and made diving stops and leaping catches at shortstop.

But swing and miss? No, that was never Betts' thing.

So consider Watkins impressed as ever, though utterly unsurprised, to learn that Betts hadn't struck out in 128 consecutive regular-season plate appearances for the Red Sox through Tuesday night's 8-7 win over the Toronto Blue Jays. It's the longest streak in the majors since Juan Pierre went 147 plate appearances without striking out for the Florida Marlins in 2004, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. Not since Denny Doyle in 1975 (159 plate appearances) has a Red Sox player gone so long between strikeouts.

Betts' run is even more impressive when you consider strikeouts are on the rise across baseball. Last season, 102 players fanned at least 100 times, an increase from 63 players in 2006. Since Baltimore Orioles reliever Oliver Drake fooled Betts with a splitter in the sixth inning of a game last Sept. 12 at Fenway Park, four players -- Byron Buxton, Randal Grichuk, Danny Espinosa and Chris Davis -- have each struck out more than 40 times.

Save for a strikeout in his first postseason at-bat last year, the only "K" associated with Betts lately is the one he needs to spell Mookie.

"When I was scouting Mookie, that was clearly one of the things that was so good about him," Watkins says. "He had total command of the strike zone at that point, and he just didn't swing and miss very much. Generally, his contact was off the barrel. I didn't see him really get off-balance, which indicated he was able to identify spin early. That's why it was clear to me that the guy had a chance to hit."

What makes Betts so good with his bat? An elite level of hand-eye coordination and an uncanny ability to recognize pitches long before they enter the strike zone. Jim Rogash/Getty Images
Betts struck out 13 times during his four years at Overton, according to records kept by the school's longtime baseball coach, Mike Morrison. He struck out only once as a junior and four times as a senior.

At every stop in the minor leagues, from short-season Lowell through Double-A Portland, Betts had fewer strikeouts than walks. Since the beginning of the 2015 season, he has made contact on 87.1 percent of his swings entering the series in Toronto, the sixth-highest rate in the American League, according to Fangraphs.

It isn't like Betts always swings early in the count either. Sixty of his plate appearances during the streak have reached two strikes, with 21 resulting in him reaching base (15 hits, six walks). In the seventh inning Monday, Betts ran the count to 2-2 against Rays reliever Chase Whitley before calmly lining a double to the gap in left-center.

What accounts for Betts' extreme ability to get his bat to almost any ball?

Start with his hand-eye coordination, which is off the charts, even by the standards of major league hitters. But it's more than that. According to Red Sox assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez, who worked with Betts in the minors, Betts possesses a freakish ability to recognize the location of pitches long before they approach the strike zone.

"He's aggressive and he's ready to swing the bat, but he always swings at good pitches. You rarely see him swinging at bad pitches, and when you do that, the chances are you're going to put the ball in play," Rodriguez says. "We were in instructional league [in 2011], and I saw that right away, an ability to control the strike zone, ability to hit the ball to all fields, an ability to get the head of the bat to the ball. That's something you cannot teach. It's something that comes with him, and he had it from day one."

Indeed, Betts' cognitive skills were evident from the well-chronicled time that he aced a series of neuroscience tests administered by the Red Sox before the draft. Betts, who solved a Rubik's Cube in less than two minutes during a pregame show segment in 2015, was asked to tap the space bar on a computer as soon as he saw a baseball spinning in a particular direction.

"Mookie was the most observant kid I have ever coached," Morrison says. "He picked up things in a game better than kids his age usually do. He watched how pitchers worked his teammates. He watched sequences that pitchers were using -- what they threw in hitters' counts, what they threw behind in the count and what pitchers were throwing in two-strike counts. He used that information to make himself an extremely good hitter."

Oddly, Betts has only two home runs since his streak of plate appearances without a strikeout began, including his first homer of the season Tuesday night against Toronto Blue Jays reliever Joe Smith. He isn't off to a particularly scorching start this season, with only four extra-base hits in 45 at-bats, though a three-day absence because of the flu messed with his timing coming out of spring training.

But Rodriguez says Betts' ability to make contact allows him to have productive at-bats even when he isn't producing runs. In fact, Betts was still contributing to rallies by getting on base at a .420 clip and moving runners when he doesn't reach.

Betts is so adept at putting his bat on the ball that Tampa Bay Rays right-hander Chris Archer said it's best if a pitcher doesn't think about trying to strike him out, even in a two-strike count.

"I think what makes Mookie good is he never gets out of his approach," Archer said. "With two strikes, he's still a well-balanced hitter. He's not trying to pull everything. He's not trying to choke up. He's a well-balanced hitter with elite bat-to-ball skills. I don't know if it's hand-eye or what. Guys like him that don't strike out, you don't try to strike them out. You just have to execute your pitch and let it go from there."

Nobody will be surprised if Betts' streak continues. He still has a long way to go to catch former Philadelphia Phillies second baseman Dave Cash, who holds the expansion-era (since 1961) mark with 223 consecutive plate appearances without a strikeout, according to Elias.

"I think he learned a lot in the minor leagues through the hitting coaches that he had about the importance of a good at-bat," Rodriguez said. "It doesn't necessarily have to always be a homer or double. It's being able to see pitches, work counts, put the ball in play with two strikes. If you continue to do that, the homers and the doubles are going to come."

After long journey, Boston's Brian Johnson earns first career win

Scott Lauber

TORONTO -- In the top of the ninth inning Tuesday night, three outs from his first major league win, Brian Johnson sat next to Mookie Betts in the Boston Red Sox dugout and talked about old times together in the minors.

After all, Johnson's journey is what made this night so special.

Drafted 31st overall by the Red Sox in 2012, Johnson always figured it would be smooth sailing to the big leagues. But as recently as last summer, he was almost overwhelmed by self-doubt over whether he would see the bright lights of a major league ballpark ever again.

That's what happens when you get hit in the face by a line drive in only your fourth minor league appearance in 2012 and pitch through numbness in your left hand three years later during your first major league start, a 4 1/3-inning grind in which you walk four Houston Astros batters and get sent right back to Triple-A.

The numbness was caused by an irritated ulnar nerve, an issue Johnson hid from the Sox in order to maintain a chance to get called up. He finally succumbed to the injury, but apprehension over his status on the organization's depth chart led to an anxiety disorder that required him to step away from the game for six weeks last season and seek treatment.

Brian Johnson earned his first win Tuesday, allowing four runs and striking out six over five innings against Toronto. John E. Sokolowski/USA TODAY Sports
And just when it seemed like Johnson finally was back on track, there was another scare two weeks ago when another line drive struck the side of his head in a start for Triple-A Pawtucket. This time, it was only a glancing blow. He didn't miss a start, and when Red Sox lefty Eduardo Rodriguez took paternity leave Sunday for the birth of his son, the 26-year-old Johnson got called up to make a spot start in the opener of a three-game series against the Toronto Blue Jays.

It took 21 months, but Johnson was back on a big-league mound. So he wasn't about to come unglued over allowing eight of the first 11 Blue Jays batters to reach base.

"I think what I've been through helped me get through those first two innings," Johnson said. "Knowing my back's not against the wall and I could do it."

Johnson gave up a long home run to Justin Smoak to open the third inning, then retired eight of the next nine batters while the Red Sox offense went to work and built a three-run lead. Johnson gave up four runs in five innings before turning it over to the bullpen for the final 12 outs of an 8-7 victory.

"I didn't even think about a win until the seventh. I didn't even put it together," Johnson said. "Especially the last inning, I felt like my heart was racing a little bit just because of the adrenaline. But it was exciting."

With Rodriguez set to rejoin the team, the Red Sox optioned Johnson to Triple-A almost as soon as they gave him the ball as a memento from career win No. 1. But unlike two years ago, when Johnson's mind was racing about his health and whether he blew his chance to get back to the majors, he's at peace now.

"I think I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a little thought that I might not [ever make it back], just from everything that happened," Johnson said. "But after spring training, after my exit meeting with [manager] John [Farrell] and [pitching coach] Carl [Willis], I felt like this year would be a big year for me. I don't know what it was, but I felt like I would make it back at some point in time."

*** *Associated Press***

Johnson earns first win as Red Sox edge Blue Jays 8-7

TORONTO -- Twenty-one months removed from his first and only start, Brian Johnson was back on a major league mound Tuesday night.

He certainly made the most of it, helping the Boston Red Sox to an 8-7 victory over the Toronto Blue Jays, picking up his first win in the process.

"It's everything I thought it would be," he said after helping the Red Sox run their season-high win streak to four.

Promoted Tuesday morning from Triple-A Pawtucket, Johnson (1-0) gave up four runs and seven hits and struck out six in five innings. He lost his only other start, at Houston on July 21, 2015 -- when he was dealing with ulnar nerve irritation in his pitching hand.

"I had no feeling in my hand at that point in time on certain pitches to where I would throw one and not know where the ball was going because I couldn't feel my fingers," he said. "But today, I felt like myself."

Johnson's win was nearly taken away as the Blue Jays rallied in the bottom of the ninth. Facing an 8-4 deficit, Steve Pearce drove Russell Martin in with a single. Ezequiel Carrera then hit his first home run of the season, a two-run shot into the Blue Jays' bullpen in left field, to make the score 8-7. But Devon Travis popped out to shortstop to end the game.

The Red Sox offense got going in a big way. Mookie Betts was 3 for 5 and got the team rolling with an RBI single in the third inning, before he hit a drive into the second deck to lead off the seventh with his first home run of the year.

Mitch Moreland, who reached based for the 12th straight game and hit his league-leading 10th double, was 3 for 5 and drove in three runs. Pablo Sandoval collected three hits for the first time since Aug. 14, 2015, as Boston hit the 15-plus-hit mark for the third time this season.

"We're always ready at any given point," Betts said. "Whether it's first inning or the seventh inning, at any given point we can take off and I think that's the beauty of our offense."

Martin, Carrera and Justin Smoak hit home runs for the Blue Jays, who went just 3 of 12 with runners in scoring position, although they snapped a streak of eight games of scoring four runs or less.

Marcus Stroman (1-2) had his shortest outing of the season, surrendering six earned runs and 11 hits before being removed in the fourth inning with two outs.

"Some balls found holes early and then they capitalized on some bad pitches later on," he said. "It's baseball. I'm not really worried about it, to be honest. I'll bounce back next start."

The Blue Jays' loss dropped them to 2-11, tying the 1998 Florida Marlins for the worst start to a season by a playoff team from the previous year. Kevin Pillar, who doubled three times in a game for the first time in his career, said while there is time for the Blue Jays to turn things around, it has to start soon.

"This is not how we envisioned it going, but at the end of day it's early," he said. "We can't sit here and use that as an excuse or a crutch for much longer, but the reality is it's early. Teams go through this."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: 2B Dustin Pedroia was given the night off. ... LHP Eduardo Rodriguez (paternity) could rejoin the team as soon as Wednesday. ... OF Jackie Bradley Jr. (right knee) and 3B Josh Rutledge (left hamstring) made their first rehab appearances on Tuesday in Triple-A. Bradley was 0 for 2, while Rutledge went 1 for 3 with a home run.

Blue Jays: RHP Aaron Sanchez, on the 10-day DL because of a blister on his middle finger, underwent a procedure Monday to remove a portion of his nail. He will try playing catch in the next few days. ... RHP Danny Barnes was recalled from Triple-A. He takes the roster spot of LHP Matt Dermody, who was optioned to Buffalo on Monday.

HAPP HALTED

The Blue Jays placed left-hander J.A. Happ on the 10-day disabled list and recalled infielder Ty Kelly from Triple-A Buffalo.

Happ, who won 20 games for the first time last year, left Sunday's start against Baltimore in the fifth inning with a sore elbow. On Monday, he had an MRI that revealed no structural damage.

Manager John Gibbons is optimistic Happ will be ready to return at the end of his DL stint, or shortly after. Happ is 0-3 with a 4.50 ERA.

MOVING ON

The Blue Jays traded catcher Juan Graterol to the Los Angeles Angels on Tuesday for a player to be named later or cash considerations. The 28-year-old Graterol had been designated for assignment on Friday to make room for utilityman Chris Coughlin on the 40-man roster.

UP NEXT

Red Sox: RHP Rick Porcello (1-1, 7.56 ERA) makes his fourth start of the season. The reigning American League Cy Young Award winner was 3-0 in five starts against Toronto last season.

Blue Jays: LHP Francisco Liriano (0-1, 9.00 ERA) is 2/3 with 5.97 ERA against Boston in six career starts.

*** *The Toronto Star***

Stroman struggles as Jays drop opener to Boston

Laura Armstrong

The Blue Jays' starting rotation was billed as the club's strength coming into the season, full of potential aces in pursuit of a third consecutive playoff berth.

But early cracks have surfaced and the worst start in franchise history continued with an 8-7 loss to the Boston Red Sox on Tuesday night at the Rogers Centre, dropping the Jays to 2-11.

Marcus Stroman — one of only three healthy starters left with Aaron Sanchez (blister) and now J.A. Happ (elbow) on the 10-day disabled list — was knocked around for six runs on 11 hits in the opener of a three-game series between the American League East rivals.

The World Baseball Classic MVP got the hook after 4 2/3 innings, and it marked only the third time he had ever allowed 11 or more hits in his career.

“Just baseball,” Stroman said following his second loss of the season. “Just got to wash it and focus on my next start. Not going to look too deep into this. I feel great, just didn’t execute in certain situations, but it’s all part of it. I’m going to keep it moving and focus on my next one.”

Jays manager John Gibbons said that after a tidy 1-2-3 first inning, the right-hander’s breaking ball wasn’t as sharp and his pitches strayed up in the strike zone.

“But they hit over there,” said Gibbons, giving credit to the deep Red Sox batting order. “They’ve seen plenty of him. You make a mistake or two here or there, they hit you. They’ve got a pretty good lineup.”

The Jays — who will call up a pair of starters from Triple-A Buffalo in time for Friday and Saturday road games against the Los Angeles Angels — will rely heavily on Stroman, Francisco Liriano and Marco Estrada until Sanchez and Happ can return, possibly by the end of the month.

Sanchez, last year’s American League ERA leader, had part of a nail removed on Monday in an attempt to curb a recurring blister issue on the middle finger of his right hand, while Happ is suffering from inflammation in his left elbow. Both are expected to resume throwing in the next couple of days.

Stroman’s off night wasted a breakout night by the Jays offence, which included three doubles from Kevin Pillar and home runs by Russell Martin, Justin Smoak and Ezequiel Carrera — a pinch-hit two-run blast in a three-run ninth to make it interesting.

*** *The Toronto Sun***

Scoreboard flatters Jays in loss to Red Sox

Rob Longley

Blue Jays manager John Gibbons isn’t big on looking too far into the future — and these days, especially, to the past.

But with Boston counterpart John Farrell sending spot starter Brian Johnson to the mound for Tuesday’s opener of a three-game series with their AL East rivals, it certainly sounded like a warm invitation for the struggling Toronto offence.

With all the sporting noise in town just down the street these days, turns out it was mostly wishful thinking as the Jays continued to be mostly run-shy in an 8-7 loss to the Red Sox.

The final score was somewhat flattering to the home side, which pulled to within a run on a two-run, two-out, opposite-field homer by pinch-hitter Ezequiel Carrera in the bottom of the ninth. In the end, the Jays left 11 runners on base as the offence continues to struggle producing timely runs.

With the latest setback, the Jays plunged to 2-11 overall and 1-6 at home. And the Rogers Centre is becoming a place to go for some peace and quiet from all the activity at the nearby Air Canada Centre and Maple Leaf Square.

And now with AL Cy Young Award winner Rick Porcello up on Wednesday followed by the man who might be the best pitcher in the league this year — lefty Chris Sale on Thursday — the opportunities only get leaner for the Jays to snap out of their funk.

“It gets real tough the next couple of days,” Gibbons said. “But that’s the big leagues. That’s just the way it is at this level.”

Gibbons acknowledged what is becoming obvious of late: That even though the calendar says April, there is an urgent need for something positive to happen.

“You’ve got to put an end to it,” Gibbons said. “You can’t dig too deep of a hole. The division’s too good. We need to turn it around quickly that’s for sure.”

They sure do. Just as sure as the order will be especially tall with the anticipated quality coming from the Red Sox arms the next two days.

GAME ON

Marcus Stroman remains the lone Jays starter to have a win this season, but he was in no danger of getting a second on Tuesday night.

Though he was staked to a 2-0 lead after a successful first in which he retired three Boston batters on 10 pitches, Stroman didn’t have an easy half the rest of the way. By the time he was done after 4.2 innings, the Jays right-hander had doled out 11 hits and six earned runs, striking out just four.

n The Jays didn’t waste any time getting on the board, taking advantage of a leadoff double by Kevin Pillar (his first of three two-baggers on the night.) Follow up singles by Kendrys Morales, Troy Tulowitzki and Justin Smoak gave them that 2-0 lead. But the Red Sox kept pecking away at it, taking over for good in the fifth with RBI doubles from Hanley Ramirez and Mitch Moreland.

GET IT TOGETHER

He had three extra-base hits for the first time in his career (all doubles), but Pillar was taking no joy from the night. In fact, Pillar suggested frustration is starting to build.

“(The struggles are) going to continue unless we start playing better,” Pillar said. “Nobody in here is going to quit. Nobody is going to feel sorry for ourselves. We’ve just got to flat out play better and do it all on the same day.”

Pillar is keeping a brave face, suggesting that a couple of series wins (which the Jays have yet to manage this year) could get them to .500. So it’s a mix of still early but getting urgent.

“At the end of the day it’s early ... (but) we can’t sit here and use that as an excuse or a clutch for much longer. We’re going to play better. There’s too much talent, there’s too much will. There’s too much level of compete in this room to pack it up and go home.”

STRO SHOW

While Stroman acknowledged he didn’t have his best stuff as his record slipped to 1-2, Gibbons suggested the Red Sox are getting familiar with him, which could have contributed to their success on Wednesday.

“They hit over there,” Gibbons said. “They’ve seen plenty of him. Make a mistake or two and they’ll hit you.”

Stroman wasn’t buying it, however.

“No, not at all,” the pitcher said when asked if the Red Sox have his number. “It’s baseball. I’m not really going to worry about it. I’ll bounce back in my next start. Just got to wash it. I’m not going to look too deep into this.”

IT’S A STRUGGLE

Early, anyway, it looked like the Jays bats were ready to burst out of their light-scoring ways early in Wednesday’s first of 19 vs. the Red Sox.

With the fresh meat of a triple-A callup on the mound the Jays jumped on Johnson early with five hits (three doubles and two singles) and a pair of walks in the first two innings. But from that burst, they only managed to get two runs across, an opportunity lost against the big-hitting Bosox.

“There are some good signs there, but that doesn’t win you anything,” Gibbons said. “We’ve been searching for those kind of nights all year. They just out-hit us.”

The Jays did manage some power, however, with Smoak and Russell Martin hitting their second and first home runs of the season, respectively.

JUST JOSHIN’ AROUND

Third baseman Josh Donaldson bounded into Gibbons office more than two hours before first pitch with no trace of a limp and the energy often seen in the Jays clubhouse.

That doesn’t mean the team is in any rush to get him back in the lineup, however.

Though he’s eligible to come off the disabled list next Monday, Donaldson will not accompany the team on a trip that includes four games in Anaheim and three in St. Louis.

“I couldn’t tell you, but he’s moving around pretty good,” Gibbons said when asked about the status of his former AL MVP, who is nursing a calf injury. “But I’ve got no idea.”

Donaldson, who had just finished a session in the Jays weight room said he was “feeling better.” But with two setbacks in the calf since spring training, the Jays won’t be rushing their star back.

Ken Rosenthal of the MLB Network reported on Tuesday that Donaldson will be out for between two to four weeks.