

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, April 17, 2018

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox face a new challenge in Shohei Ohtani

Nick Cafardo

The focus and intrigue will be on Shohei Ohtani as the Red Sox open up a three-game series in Anaheim, Calif., against the Angels Tuesday night. But let's not forget about David Price.

Price will make his first start since feeling numbness in his fingers against the Yankees last Wednesday, when he had to come out after allowing four runs in the first inning with the temperature at Fenway Park in the low 40s. Price said he regained feeling in his fingers later that night and played catch the next day. He has done his normal bullpen work and appears fit to pitch Tuesday.

Price opened the season with 14 scoreless innings before last week's abbreviated start.

Ohtani had his scheduled start Sunday in Kansas City pushed back after the game was postponed because of rain.

The Red Sox are expected to have Mookie Betts back in the lineup after he suffered a left foot contusion Saturday in a home plate collision. Betts lobbied to play Sunday but manager Alex Cora gave him a day off, which turned into a two-day break with Monday's postponement.

This will be Ohtani's third start, with the first two coming against the A's. He retired the first 19 batters he faced in his last start and allowed just one hit and one walk over seven innings while striking out 12. He has retired 35 of the last 38 batters he's faced.

Sox hitters will be watching Ohtani's split-fingered fastball. Not many pitchers throw one these days, and batters have been baffled by his. They don't have a hit off it and have missed 26 times in 37 swings.

Batters also have to contend with Ohtani's fastball velocity that averages 97.2 miles per hour, which ranks third among pitchers with at least two starts.

The Red Sox won't see Ohtani as a hitter until perhaps Thursday, as Angels manager Mike Scioscia has given Ohtani the day off in games after he pitches.

In seven starts at DH, he has hit three home runs and knocked in 11 runs.

Overshadowed by Ohtani has been the great Mike Trout, who in his last seven games has hit .385 (10 for 26) with four homers, eight RBIs, and eight runs.

Also hot is Justin Upton, who is 8 for 20 (.400) over his last five games, and Luis Valbuena, who is hitting .387 (12 for 31) with two homers and six RBIs in his last nine games.

Bullpen was big

Cora has been very happy with the Red Sox bullpen, and for good reason. He said he thought about taking out Chris Sale after four innings Sunday because of the poor weather conditions, but Sale went five. Heath Hembree gave the Sox two scoreless innings, which was a huge performance in a 3-1 win. Matt Barnes pitched a scoreless eighth and Craig Kimbrel struck out two batters to record his fifth save. Kimbrel has been lights-out this year and should be available Tuesday after Monday's postponement . . . Cora kind of gave away the fact that there would be no game Monday when Brian Johnson, Monday's scheduled starter,

was warming up late in Sunday's game. Johnson will now stay in the bullpen as a lefty reliever with Bobby Poyner on the DL . . . Dustin Pedroia was heading to Fort Myers, Fla., to complete the rehab on his reconstructed knee. Pedroia looks close to turning the corner and playing in games, but the Sox will hold off on that for a while. It's not known how many games Pedroia would need to play in extended spring training, but he's eager to return to the lineup.

About the only problem the Red Sox have is what to do with Blake Swihart

Nick Cafardo

All's well on the Red Sox front.

Alex Cora has used the roster to perfection. He seems to have found the right combinations, the right places to rest players and get everyone involved in a 13-2 start. But the one subject that keeps him up at night? What to do about Blake Swihart.

Swihart is an extremely talented 26-year-old who has the unusual quality of being an athletic catcher who can play other positions. If he were in a mid-market/small-market organization, he'd be someone's starting catcher, and that team would absorb any growing pains associated with such a move.

In Boston, Swihart had to be kept on the 25-man roster or the Red Sox would risk losing him through waivers if they tried to outright him to Pawtucket. There's virtually no chance Swihart would have gone unclaimed.

While the Red Sox have tried to make him a versatile, multipositional player, the fact is, he is a catcher. That's his position. That's the position that Swihart wants to play in the major leagues. That's the position the Red Sox groomed him for.

At the height of his prospect status, Swihart was highly coveted. Remember the Cole Hamels discussions with the Phillies? Then-Phillies general manager Ruben Amaro Jr. (who became Boston's first base coach and is now the Mets' first base coach) wanted Swihart in the worst way.

If the deal had happened, Swihart would be the Phillies' starting catcher right now.

So Cora tries to find places to utilize him. When Mookie Betts went down with a foot contusion after an awkward slide into Orioles catcher Chance Sisco Saturday, Cora slotted Swihart in left field, moved Jackie Bradley Jr. from center to right, and moved Andrew Benintendi from left to center.

When I asked Cora if he had any master plan for Swihart, he said, "Not really. It's a work in progress.

"With Xander [Bogaerts] down and with [Tzu-Wei] Lin and [Brock] Holt and a matchup thing on who we're going to play, it's tough. We thought about putting him at second but we put him in left. He made the plays he had to make. And he swung the bat well [hits from both sides of the plate].

"From Day One, he knew the situation. He won his job. He takes grounders everywhere and he keeps swinging. He's been OK."

Could Cora find a place to insert him behind the plate?

"I would love to," said Cora. "He's a catcher. The other two guys are good and we're mixing and matching and trying to get Sandy [Leon] at-bats too. We'll find a way."

But barring an injury to one of the catchers, it will be hard to find a way.

Rick Porcello has now settled in nicely with Leon catching him. Pitchers love Leon behind the plate. Any notion of trying to deal Leon to make room for Swihart is likely not realistic. Nor is the possibility of

trading Swihart. The last thing Dave Dombrowski wants is to deal Swihart, have a catcher go down here, and then watch Swihart turn into a star someplace else.

Right now it's a lousy situation for Swihart. The only good thing is that he's in the major leagues. His public comments have been noble — that, 1. he's glad to be in the big leagues, and 2. he'll do anything, play anywhere they ask him to.

The Red Sox thought about trying him at second base in spring training but didn't. They used him mostly as a catcher, with some work in left, at first, and at third. That he can be respectable at other positions is a tribute to his athleticism. Which is why so many teams remain intrigued with Swihart. It doesn't appear that Dombrowski would have much trouble drumming up business for him.

The question most heard from scouts in spring training was, "What are the Red Sox going to do with Swihart?" And quite frankly, that question really hasn't been answered.

The Red Sox certainly don't want Swihart becoming the modern-day Roger LaFrancois, who in 1982 spent a full season as the Red Sox' third catcher but got to the plate only 10 times (with four hits, for a career .400 average).

It was his only year in the majors, and LaFrancois started only one game behind Rich Gedman and Gary Allenson. He didn't get into a game until May 27.

The Mets have had two catchers go down with long-term injuries. Travis d'Arnaud is facing Tommy John surgery and is out for the year and Kevin Plawecki had his hand broken and is looking at a month. The Mets are looking, but it doesn't appear the Sox would deal Swihart or Leon unless they got a huge return.

What messed up Swihart's career, at least temporarily, was that he fractured his ankle while playing the outfield and missed most of last season. No question that set him back, but he had an excellent spring training, and as Cora pointed out, he earned his spot on the roster.

In this era of expanded pitching staffs and fewer extra players, it seems that every team has to carry a player or two who can play multiple positions. When Dustin Pedroia returns, somebody has to go. Right now the Sox are carrying Holt, Eduardo Nunez, and Swihart as multipositional players. Mitch Moreland isn't going anywhere because of his obvious skills as a defensive first baseman and effective lefthanded bat.

If Cora is having problems figuring out a role for Swihart now, he will have a monumentally tough decision to make when Pedroia returns, perhaps in mid-to-late May.

But that's what happens on good rosters where depth is prevalent and when a team is clicking and the whole roster is performing.

The manager seems to have it all figured out, except for one guy. And Swihart is worth losing sleep over.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Angels' Shohei Ohtani gives Red Sox plenty to fear

Michael Silverman

About the only upside to this continent-wide spate of nasty weather is it has allowed the Red Sox to step into the center ring of the greatest spectacle in baseball right now, the Shohei Ohtani Show.

Sunday's cold-out in Kansas City meant the two-way Angels phenom's third major league start was pushed back to tonight's opener against the Red Sox.

Because the Angels have been giving Ohtani a day off before and after each start, the Red Sox pitchers likely will have to face him only once, in the series finale Thursday.

What can the Sox expect from Ohtani on the mound and at the plate?

Ohtani the pitcher

In two starts — both against Oakland, one at home and one on the road — Ohtani has showcased an arsenal fully capable of shutting down an elite lineup such as the Red Sox.

He allowed three runs in six innings in his pitching debut April 1, then was nearly unhittable on April 8, when he held the A's to one hit with 12 strikeouts and one walk in seven spectacular innings.

The lanky, 6-foot-4 right-hander has thrown just 183 pitches so far, but it's the mix and movement as analyzed by the invaluable Brooks Baseball site that hints strongly at Ohtani becoming a legitimate ace.

He throws five different pitches, but since he has thrown one sinker and five curveballs to date, let's zoom in on the other three.

Ohtani has shown a tendency to pitch in the bottom half of the zone, even with his four-seam fastball. It's a swing-and-miss pitch he has thrown close to 50 percent of the time. In his second start, he began to dial up the velocity.

His second-favorite pitch is his split-fingered fastball, which he has thrown about a third of the time. He throws it at 88 mph with late, sharp drop, and hitters have found it hard to lay off. He's thrown it 39 times, and nobody has managed to get a hit off it yet, swinging and missing at it approximately seven out of every 10 tries.

"I just saw him against Oakland," said Red Sox senior vice president Allard Baird, who scouted Ohtani in Japan. "He's always had a very good split-fingered, but the other day, it was taken to the level where it was one of the best split-fingers I've ever seen, it was that good."

Ohtani's slider sweeps across the plate at 82 mph, and he's using it around 20 percent of the time. It's generating more contact, mostly ground balls with one glaring exception: a three-run home run hit by Matt Chapman in the second inning of his first start.

"Luckily he just left that one out over the plate," Chapman told the Orange Country Register. "He threw a slider first pitch, and it kind of backed up on him. The next one he left out over the plate.

"My plan was to attack strikes, and he looked like he was throwing strikes right away, so we were trying to jump on the first pitch we saw because we knew he has a lot of good stuff to put people away. Unfortunately we weren't able to do that too much."

Ohtani the hitter

Ohtani's offense — he hits lefty, by the way — was considered by most teams to be his weaker half. After looking lousy in spring training, he has become a threat. In 33 plate appearances, the designated hitter has three home runs, a triple and 11 RBI. In spring training, he had a noticeable leg kick, but that's gone now, replaced by a more subtle toe tap that's allowing him more time to reach pitches on the inner half. That's where he should be looking, as pitchers, including Corey Kluber, already have surrendered three home runs on pitches on the outer half of the plate. The conventional wisdom is that Japanese pitchers were wary of pitching Ohtani inside because of his value to the game and not wanting to injure his exposed right arm. Pitchers in MLB will not be so concerned.

Whatever happens, the Red Sox respect Ohtani.

“It’s impressive. I know how hard it is to get out there every fifth day just pitching. He’s got a laundry list of other things to do in terms of hitting,” Chris Sale said. “I don’t know if I’d like to do it, but it’s impressive. He throws 100 mph and can take you deep at the same time. If you don’t respect that, I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Price to face Angels’ phenom Ohtani

Bill Koch

Track suits were the designated road trip attire for the Red Sox as they departed for the West Coast on Monday afternoon, seemingly appropriate for two reasons.

The 122nd running of the Boston Marathon wound its way through the city and its western suburbs on a miserable day, with heavy rain and cold wind pounding competing athletes for the entire 26.2-mile distance. Boston’s baseball players were somewhat warmer and dryer in their charter buses, headed for a private plane that would carry them to sunny Los Angeles.

The Red Sox also find themselves sprinting into series with the Angels, Athletics and Blue Jays at a clip never before seen to start a season in their history. Boston has won 13 of 15 games to open 2018, leaving the 11-2 start by the 1918 World Series winners in the dust. Starting pitching set the tone early and what was expected to be an improved offense broke out over the first homestand of the year, a potent combination the Red Sox will need to click against the resurgent Angels.

“You can always play better,” Boston outfielder Andrew Benintendi said. “You can always find little things you need to work on. We’re hot right now.”

The same could be said for the Angels, who feature one of the top individual stories in the game. Japanese phenom Shohei Ohtani takes the mound against Boston on Tuesday night after having his Sunday start pushed back due to inclement weather in Kansas City. One hundred years after Babe Ruth played his penultimate season with the Red Sox, Ohtani is in the early stages of attempting to be an impact two-way player in his rookie campaign at the big-league level.

“Showtani,” Boston manager Alex Cora said with a grin last week. “That’s some power.”

Ohtani has already done damage at the plate, totaling five extra-base hits and three home runs in eight games. The right-hander has also struck out 18 in 13 innings over two starts, hitting triple digits on the radar gun with his fastball. His matchup against Boston left-hander David Price will be among the juiciest of the young season to date, with Los Angeles sitting at 13-3 and leading the American League West.

“That split-finger [Ohtani is] throwing right now — that’s dirty,” Cora said. “Throwing 100 [mph]. They’ve got a good one. It seems like they’re playing good baseball.”

Like Ohtani, Price wasn’t initially expected to have the ball on Tuesday. His one-inning stint against the Yankees on Wednesday night had the Red Sox adopting a cautious approach, with Price exiting after feeling what the team called a “sensation” in his pitching hand. Boston suffered a 10-7 loss, the lone defeat for the Red Sox in their nine games at Fenway Park.

“It’s something I’ve always had, even when I was a little kid,” Price said. “My hands and my feet are two things that are always cold. When it’s cold outside, it intensifies that.”

Price threw just 16 of his 35 pitches for strikes on a 42-degree night, a lack of command that stood in contrast to his first two starts this season. Price was razor-sharp twice against Tampa Bay, turning in seven

shutout innings each time. His cut-fastball command has been particularly impressive, a pitch that allows Price to operate on both sides of the plate at will.

"We've been praising him about hitting his spots, and he didn't," Cora said. "And you could see him walking around the mound and trying to get a grip and feel the ball, and it wasn't there. Hopefully, it's something that just happened today in the cold weather and we move on."

Blue skies and temperatures in the low 70s would seem to be just what the doctor ordered for Price and his teammates to thaw out.

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox prospects 2018: Catcher Jhon Nunez has 'electric arm,' Roldani Baldwin is 'very athletic'

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Christian Vazquez is the Boston Red Sox's catcher of the present and future. After all, he and Boston agreed to a three-year extension through the 2021 season. It includes a club option for 2022.

Still, it's extremely important the Red Sox continue to develop catching talent/depth in their minor league system, a difficult task for any organization.

Boston signed Daniel Flores, the No. 2 international amateur prospect, to a \$3.1 million bonus July 2. But the 17-year-old catcher died of an aggressive form of cancer Nov. 8. Flores already had ranked the No. 5 prospect in Boston's system.

MassLive.com caught up with Red Sox minor league catching coordinator Chad Epperson to discuss the top catchers in the system.

Roldani Baldwin, Jhon Nunez, Samuel Miranda and Austin Rei, all discussed below, are Rule 5 eligible at the end of this season.

Roldani Baldwin

Baldwin, who turned 22 on March 16, is ranked the No. 1 catching prospect in Boston's system. Baseball America ranked him the Red Sox's No. 15 prospect entering 2018.

The Dominican Republic native has some power potential. He hit 14 home runs, 35 doubles, one triple, drove in 66 runs and slashed .274/.310/.489/.800 in 95 games for Low-A Greenville during 2017.

He threw out 41 of 124 base stealers (33.1 percent).

"Last year was the first year where we fully committed to him just catching," Epperson said. "So that really allowed him to take some strides."

Baldwin played third base and caught in previous seasons.

"He's a very athletic kid. Has really good hands," Epperson said. "Right now what we continue to work on is his throwing, staying under control. Staying under control when he's throwing and just continuing to get another full season under his belt. Obviously the thumb issue here set him back."

Baldwin fractured a bone in his thumb when hit by a pitch while hitting during spring training. He'll miss approximately four weeks.

"We were real pleased on the defensive side with what he did last year," Epperson said. "He's such a good athlete you can throw him places (other positions). ... But we really kind of said, 'We need to figure this out and get him behind the plate.' The target was 100 games last year. He really held up and did a good job."

Jhon Nunez

Nunez threw out 20 of 51 base stealers (39.2 percent) at High-A Salem last year.

The 5-9, 165-pound switch-hitter, who will be 23 for the entire 2018 season, batted .286 with a .328 on-base percentage, .396 slugging percentage, .724 OPS, three homers, nine doubles, one triple and 32 RBIs in 55 games in 2017.

He batted .323 in 62 at-bats with runners in scoring position and .321 in 56 at-bats vs. lefties.

"Nunez is another guy like Baldwin we're trying to get everyday reps," Epperson said. "He had a really good year in Salem, splitting the time with (Austin) Rei. He's at Salem again this year to start the year. He's going to get a lot of reps at Salem. Look for this guy to move to Double A quickly. Electric arm. Probably the best arm we have in the system. And another kid that's really starting to figure out how to control his actions. He's a really exciting player."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing what kind of year this guy puts together. If he builds on what he did last year, we could be talking about Nunez real quick."

Samuel Miranda

The 20-year-old from Venezuela has caught 88 of 144 base stealers (38 percent) during his minor league career so far.

"He is very dependable behind the plate," Epperson said. "He's been down in Fort Myers and you see a lot of these rehab guys go down and throw and they love throwing to him. You'll hear them when they come back to Double A or they pass through and they'll say, 'Oh, I love throwing to Miranda.' Very into what he does. He loves to catch. And as he's growing and getting mature, he's growing into that body, and his size."

The 6-foot-1, 175-pounder has batted .246 in 145 minor league games.

Austin Rei

The Red Sox drafted Rei in the third round in 2015 out of the University of Washington.

He had a reputation as both an offensive and defensive catcher entering professional ball but he has struggled offensively thus far. The 24-year-old has a .208/.322/.319/.642 line in 226 minor league games.

He has thrown out 85 of 221 base stealers (38 percent). He already has thrown out 5 of 8 base stealers for Double-A Portland this year.

"Very good defender. He won our minor league defender of the year. So that ought to tell you something about the kid," Epperson said. "So this will be a good year for him in Double A to be able to play in that upper-tier. But he just continued to work on all phases of catching, really. Really focus in on the throwing."

Rei was a non-roster invitee to big league spring training camp.

"He's so quick footed that sometimes the arm doesn't catch up to the feet. And he's trying to keep it simple with the exchange and everything. Good, athletic body. And he does a really nice job so looking to see good things out of him this year."

Nick Sciortino

Sciortino, who the Red Sox drafted in the 17th round in 2016 out of Boston College is another minor league catcher with a strong arm but who hasn't done much offensively.

The 22-year-old -- who's on High-A Salem's roster with Nunez -- has thrown out 35 percent of base stealers in 63 minor league games.

"Nick's very dependable back there with what he does. So he's come in, he's adapted to our philosophies, our program. He's a plus-thrower. And just getting him acclimated now into pro ball, which he has, and getting solidified in these daily routines. He's done a good job. He had a very good camp. He's at Salem and doing a very nice job early on."

*** *The New Hampshire Union Leader***

Let's play 2 if it's too cold for 1

Mike Shalin

As the Red Sox were shivering their way through another victory at frigid Fenway on Sunday, there was all kinds of bad news on the left field scoreboard.

All kinds of postponements. Many teams are facing difficult pitching times down the road to make up games as a ridiculous April continued.

The Red Sox-Orioles made it 22 postponements, the Cubs 23 (Monday) for MLB, with Bob Nightengale of USA Today reporting that's already the second-most in any April since 2000. And Monday, we even lost a dome game in Toronto because of falling ice damaging the roof.

It's April 17, folks.

But as Mother Nature continues hinting there's something indeed wrong with the environment, there was some good news for Red Sox fans on the scoreboard full of postponements.

If you can stay up late Tuesday, you can see David Price pitch against ... Shohei Ohtani.

The Japanese sensation was slated to pitch for the 13-3 Angels in frigid Kansas City Sunday. The Royals wanted to bag the game with a wind chill of 11 degrees but MLB wanted it played. Finally, baseball came to its senses and the game was postponed, setting Ohtani up as a pitcher rather than as a DH for the opener of the Red Sox' road trip.

Ohtani grew up in a cold part of Japan and didn't even have a coat on when he entered the clubhouse in K.C. But he was nervous, saying, "I was a little worried about pitching in the cold weather. I couldn't feel my fingertips. I couldn't feel the ball. It was a concern of mine."

One would think the risk of injury is higher in those conditions. Nightengale notes that the 13-2 Red Sox have won six straight games played in under 40 degrees. Now they're off to Anaheim, Oakland and Toronto and don't play at Fenway again until April 27. Hopefully, things will be better by then.

Saturday in Chicago, the Braves led the Cubs 10-2 and surrendered 12 unanswered and lost the game in a game played in a freezer.

"If we all don't come out of here with pneumonia I think we'll be alright, I think we'll have won this trip. That's pretty ridiculous," said Braves reliever Luke Jackson.

Added Joe Maddon, whose team WON the game: That's not baseball weather. The elements were horrific to play baseball. It's not conducive.

"We'll do what we're asked or told to, but those were the worst elements I've ever experienced in a game. Ever. And I've been in some pretty bad stuff."

Sunday, Chris Sale, who pitched well but with a high pitch count that limited him to five innings, said it was the coldest he's ever been on a mound — and he used to call Chicago home.

"This is the most miserable I've ever been on a baseball field, by far," Sale said. "Not even close. Not even close."

Is there an answer to all this? Can baseball start the season later and not play well into November? I heard an interesting suggestion on WFAN in New York on Sunday.

They played single-admission double-headers every Sunday in the old days. Obviously, the owners don't want to surrender dates so it won't happen. But what if the fan had to pay more for a twin bill? A \$50 ticket might cost \$75 for two games, and while that's a loss for the owners, the fans would be in the ballpark longer, thus spending more money.

To do something crazy like this, you would also have to increase the rosters, which should be done anyway. In this day and age of crowded bullpens, 25 players is simply not enough.

All of this will have to be dealt with. Meanwhile, crowds announced at over 32,000 (like Sunday at Fenway) will actually be 12-15 thousand, which is also a significant financial loss.

Big start

The Red Sox are only the sixth team in American League history to start 13-2 or better, the first in the AL since the 1987 Brewers.

Column pal Jon Couture, citing Baseball Perspective, notes:

"The 2018 @RedSox are the 16th team in the modern era to start a season 13-2 or better. Five of the prior 15 won a pennant, but seven failed to make the playoffs and two didn't even top .500 at year's end."

According to a chart, the 1907 Cubs, the 1955 Dodgers and '84 Tigers have started 13-2 or better and won the World Series.

Sunday marked Jackie Bradley Jr.'s second time batting leadoff for the Red Sox, something he had done 90 percent of the time in the minors. The other time saw him end a 29-game hitting streak. Sunday, he was 0-for-4.

The O-fer dropped Bradley to .191 — with one RBI — on the young season.

Foul or no foul?

When the Bucks took the ball out of bounds trailing by three with half a second left in regulation at TD Garden on Sunday, many assumed the Celtics would foul immediately on the inbound pass, sending Milwaukee to the line with little chance of tying the game (a tip-in off the second shot intentionally missed).

But here's the problem: Middleton caught and shot. The risk was there for a three-shot foul if the defender didn't foul quickly enough. Brad Stevens elected not to foul and Middleton drilled a 35-footer to force overtime.

I'm with Stevens on this one.

“No. No, no, no. Too much — too much variable if he catches it and he’s into his shooting range — motion — you’re, you’re done,” Stevens said. “He still has to make the shot. It’s a hard shot over a guy. I just think the shot before that we gave up to (Malcolm) Brogdon, we should’ve, we could’ve done better. That one we could’ve done better. We’ll watch tomorrow and improve from it.”

Big names missing

No Brady. No Gronk. No worries.

Probably.

Tom Brady was returning from charity work in Qatar too late for Monday’s OPTIONAL workouts. But Rob Gronkowski just decided not to be there, continuing the saga that began right after the Super Bowl.

Will the big fella play this coming season?

The guess is he will and there’s a growing sentiment this is all about money. Karen Guregian of the Boston Herald said progress is being made in that area.

Wrote WEEL.com’s Ryan Hannable:

“It’s easy to see why the tight end would be upset with his current contract, as he’s set to make \$8.9 million in cash this season and then \$10 million in cash next season. Keep in mind after his incentives in 2017, he made just over \$10 million in cash as he was named a first-team All-Pro.

“Not only that, Gronkowski can take a look at the deals free agent tight ends and even receivers have signed this offseason, and it isn’t hard to see just how underpaid he is.

“By having just under \$14 million in cap space right now, the Patriots have some extra money to spend, which they didn’t before the trade of Brandin Cooks. Being so late in the offseason, it feels like some of this money could go towards a new contract for the tight end.”

After canceling a workout for Colin Kaepernick because he refused to say he won’t kneel for the anthem, the Seahawks signed a backup QB, Stephen Morris, whose NFL experience totals ZERO playing time since getting out of Miami in 2014. ZERO.

Someone is going to pay for not giving Mr. Kaepernick a job.

First impression

New Lions coach Matt Patricia is already making his mark in Detroit.

“I like him a lot,” running back Ameer Abdullah said. “I think he’s going to bring a special dynamic to the team.”

Added Abdullah: “He comes from a very knowledgeable background, very smart guy. He studied all different type of things in school and now he’s a football coach. So that brings a lot of personality, and I think he’s going to be cool.”

In the gone-but-not-forgotten department, check out Terry Rozier after Sunday’s Celtics victory.

“We definitely feel like they’re not as quick laterally as us, but they’re very tall and athletic,” he said. “We just tried move the ball offensively and get great shots, while defensively, we wanted to play long and show our arms. Giannis (Antetokounmpo), he loves to push the ball. Drew Bledsoe, he loves to push the ball. Khris Middleton, he makes tough shots. We just try to limit them at what they’re good at by just being long

off the ball and showing our presence. I feel like we did a great job of that throughout the majority of the game.”

DREW Bledsoe is, of course, ERIC Bledsoe.

Around the horn

Old friend Deven Marrero lost a home run the other night when he passed teammate Alex Avila on the bases, reducing Marrero’s hit to a single. ... As if the Rays aren’t bad enough: they lost Kevin Kiermaier for up to 13 weeks with a torn thumb ligament. ... This from ESPN’s Tim Kurkjian, from the Elias Sports Bureau: “The @Angels became 1st team since 1960 Orioles to use 9 different SPs in 1st 15 games,” ... The Nationals lost three of four to the Rockies over the weekend and were 7-9 and six games behind the Mets when they hit New York for a three-game series. ... Despite the skipper’s early problems, the Phillies were 9-5 through the end of the weekend. ... The Red Sox zoomed to No. 1 in the ESPN latest power rankings. ... The ageless Bartolo Colon took a perfect game into the eighth inning Sunday. ... The Pirates, 11-4 through 15 games, lost Josh Harrison for six weeks to a broken hand. ... Finally, the Indians and Twins are playing in Puerto Rico this week as the island attempts to rebuild. This can’t hurt.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sox-Angels clash begins with Price-Ohtani duel

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- For April showdowns, it doesn't get any better or more compelling than the Red Sox-Angels matchup that opens tonight in Anaheim.

Take the two hottest teams in the American League and mix in the most intriguing early-season storyline in many years (two-way sensation Shohei Ohtani), and you should have riveting drama from the first pitch of this three-game series.

That first pitch, by the way, will be thrown by Ohtani due to some intervening from Mother Nature. The Japanese star was supposed to start for the Angels on Sunday in Kansas City, but that game was rained out.

The Red Sox have a pretty good pitcher of their own on the mound in lefty David Price, a five-time All-Star.

Ohtani was tremendous in his first two starts against the Athletics, allowing three earned runs over 13 innings. But he hasn't faced a challenge yet like the one the smoldering-hot Red Sox will present. Boston is 13-2, marking the best start in franchise history. In fact, it is the best start any AL team has had since the 1987 Brewers went 14-1.

"I know they have a great team," said Ohtani. "They're off to a great start, so it's not going to be easy."

Price won't have it easy, either. The 13-3 Halos are every bit as hot, riding into this series with a seven-game winning streak.

The Angels and Red Sox rank first and second in the AL in offense in several categories, including OPS, runs, batting average and slugging percentage.

This has all the makings of a great series. Both teams have also pitched well, though Boston has set itself far apart from the rest of the pack with the performance of its rotation.

"The Red Sox are doing a lot of things well, and we're going to have to play good baseball," said Halos manager Mike Scioscia. "Again, it comes down to how you're playing the game, not who you're playing or

where you're playing. We need to continue with our momentum that we've built up and go out there and play with the confidence we played and hopefully get a game on your terms and win it, no matter who you're playing."

There will probably be a break from Ohtani-mania on Wednesday, as he typically doesn't DH the day after he pitches. But he could be in the lineup by Thursday.

While Ohtani's pitching heroics were somewhat expected, his hot start at the plate (.367, three homers, 11 RBIs) has been a revelation considering his woes in Spring Training with the bat.

Not since Babe Ruth has someone demonstrated such equal prowess with the bat and arm.

"Yeah, it's impressive," said Boston ace Chris Sale. "I know how hard it is to get out there every fifth day, just pitching. And he's got a laundry list of other things to do in terms of hitting. I don't know if I'd like to do it, but it's impressive. He throws 100 mph and can take you deep at the same time. If you don't respect that, I don't know who you are or what you're doing."

The Red Sox were one of the many teams hoping to land Ohtani last offseason.

"Wow, Show-tani!" Red Sox manager Alex Cora said of his hot start. "Has some power. As you guys know, we did our homework and we made our pitch, but we weren't in the finalists. But just watching him and watching the videos and all that, he's a good athlete -- fast and has some pop. And that split thing he's throwing right now, that's dirty. Throwing 100, they've got a good one and they're playing good baseball."

There would clearly be something for Boston to gain by being the first team able to have success against Ohtani the pitcher.

"We will go with the same game plan that's been working," said Red Sox center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. "Try to go out there and beat him. He's a big name who is getting a lot of coverage, and we're looking forward to playing the Angels."

*** *WEEI.com***

Shohei Ohtani almost signed with Red Sox once, but not when you think

Rob Bradford

The Red Sox never had a chance to land breakout star Shohei Ohtani this winter. But five years ago? That's the real story.

Traveling the world as international scouts, Jon Deeble and Eddie Romero encountered their share of oddities. But the Red Sox talent evaluators had no idea what awaited them at Hanamaki Higashi High School, a two-hour bullet train ride outside Tokyo, in 2012.

They had come to interview schoolboy phenom Shohei Ohtani, and all of Japan evidently knew it.

"The media sitting out in front of the school at the front entrance was unbelievable," Deeble recalled. "When we went in to interview him, there were cameras as we walked in, and when we walked out they were asking us how it went. It was a media circus."

"It was crazy," Romero added. "I remember when we interviewed him after we got clearance from MLB on meeting him. There was paparazzi at the high school."

As representatives from the Dodgers and Rangers also discovered in meetings sandwiched around the Red Sox, this wasn't your run-of-the-mill get-together.

Then as now, there was nothing ordinary about Ohtani.

As the Red Sox prepare to face the talk of baseball in Anaheim on Tuesday, the question is obvious: How close did they come to landing the two-way star this winter? Not close at all, it turns out. Ohtani didn't give them a meeting.

Like most teams in baseball, they had hoped to make an impression if granted the opportunity. Presentations were organized and talking points prioritized. Celtics, Bruins, Patriots and, of course, Red Sox jerseys were prepared with "Ohtani" and the No. 11 emblazoned on the back. It wasn't enough. He chose the Angels.

The far more interesting courtship took place about five years earlier.

"After that meeting, we thought we had a good chance to sign him," said Romero of the pitch he helped deliver while serving as the Red Sox' director of international scouting.

It was a sentiment shared by Deeble, the team's former chief Pacific Rim scout who now works for the Dodgers.

"Absolutely," he said when asked if the Red Sox were considered a favorite to sign the then-high school star. "I think from what I understand it would've come down to the Red Sox and the Dodgers. At that point the Dodgers had a very good relationship with him also through someone who was working for them at the time. The Red Sox were definitely one or two to be able to get him, for sure."

Both Romero and Deeble easily recall the tiniest details of their pursuit, even though much of it took place more than half a decade ago. It's not simply because Ohtani has become one of the most compelling stories of this young baseball season while dominating on the mound and at the plate.

Sure, both men have made it a point to watch Ohtani's first two starts, in which he has allowed just three runs while striking out 18 in 13 innings. They're equally impressed by his production at the plate, which includes a .367 average, three home runs and 1.191 OPS at DH.

No, it was what Ohtani had already accomplished as a teenager that sent the Red Sox to his doorstep.

"It's the best pitching report that I've ever done," said Romero, who saw Ohtani seven times as an amateur. "At the time, he was the best pitching prospect I had ever seen. He's got the highest grade I've ever given a pitcher."

"I was there the day he touched 100 mph in a high school game and hit a ball over the batter's eye on a wet, dreary day," said Deeble, remembering a performance seen by only other one MLB scout when Ohtani was just a junior. "He stood out from everyone."

For two years, the Red Sox were all-in on Ohtani, with Deeble and Romero leading the way.

Both men had developed solid contacts in and around the teenager's inner circle, not an easy feat in the world of Japanese baseball. Whether it was Ohtani's high school coach, Hiroshi Sasaki, or the player's parents, Toru (a former player in the same industrial league that produced Junichi Tazawa) and Kayoko (a badminton player of some note), connections were made.

The Red Sox had separated themselves to the point where Ohtani granted them the unthinkable: a private bullpen session.

"It was really hard to put a full-court press on him," Deeble said. "I think the one thing for Eddie and me that was key was getting in the back way and getting him to throw for us."

"We had done a lot, a lot of work. Our preparation to sign him out of high school, we couldn't have done anything else."

By the time Ohtani's final scholastic days rolled around, the Red Sox had seen enough. General manager Ben Cherington gave his scouts the go-ahead to prioritize Ohtani above any international amateur, even agreeing to let him remain a two-way performer.

"That was where Eddie played a big part with our front office people," Deeble said. "At the time, we told him he was going to be a two-way guy because that was the only way we were going to be able to sign him. He wasn't interested in going anywhere that he was just going to pitch."

"I saw him a lot," Romero said. "He was the top guy on our list that year, overall. We were aggressive with him. Ben Cherington at the time gave us the green light. We made a run at him."

The chase culminated with the meeting in Ohtani's high school. The Red Sox produced a video, as well as a plan for how they envisioned the young star's career unfolding.

Ohtani's coaches and parents asked questions through a translator. Every once in a while, the 6-foot-4 prospect himself chimed in.

"He was quiet for most of the interview, but there was definitely a presence there," Romero said. "When he came into the room, there was plenty of presence to him. He didn't speak much, but the few questions that he asked were good questions about his preferences and how he wanted to be utilized. He was very open to ideas from our end, as well. But the coach directed most of the conversation, taking questions from the parents and asking us. It was a good conversation. It was cordial and professional."

When it was over, Deeble and Romero took questions from the media horde staking the school before returning stateside, where the waiting game commenced.

It appeared Ohtani would choose MLB rather than play in the NPB Japanese professional league. He admitted as much in interviews. This desire buoyed the hopes of the Red Sox.

But something changed. The Yomiuri Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters drafted Ohtani and convinced him to stay home.

They reportedly made their pitch by highlighting the negatives of minor league baseball -- the long bus rides, the sparse crowds, even the lack of Japanese restaurants.

A call from Sasaki to one of Deeble's contacts sealed the Red Sox' fate, and that was it. The chase had ended.

"That was disappointing," Deeble said. "Eddie did a lot of work in this whole thing, and I did a lot of work. And Eddie's conviction in wanting to sign this guy was amazing, and the support I got from him was amazing trying to get this guy. The day we heard he was staying was tough. But I'm a big believer you have to move on and move on to the next player. We did everything we possibly could and we were right there to the end."

"I thought we had put our best foot forward," Romero added. "We knew there weren't too many teams that had gotten a chance to meet with him. I thought we had as good a chance as any. There were a couple of teams that had done the legwork to be in position to sign him and I thought we were one of those clubs."

"I understood the decision to stay at home, but we were obviously disappointed. We were hoping to get him. That year he was a clear No. 1 for us on our internal preference list."

With Ohtani off to a blistering start, Boston's decision to go all-out for him feels vindicated. We'll never know what might've been.

"I'm thrilled," Romero said. "I hope it opens the door for future players who want to come over from anywhere in the world. He's a unique talent who was able to succeed in his home country and his home league, and take on a challenge, one where money wasn't everything to him. That says a lot of about him, wanting to just compete at the highest level. It's great for the game. I've watched every one of his starts. I'm very intrigued by him. I root for him except when he pitches against us."

Red Sox attendance down compared to last year

Alex Reimer

The weather this April has been terrible. By my unofficial count, only two of the Red Sox' eight homes games have been played in acceptable baseball weather — meaning you didn't have to bundle up with a parka, gloves and scarf to sit outside for a few hours.

Unsurprisingly, these dreadful January-like conditions have seemingly hampered attendance. The Red Sox are averaging roughly 2,500 fewer fans per game this season compared to 2017, per Yahoo Sports' Jeff Passan. Two weeks ago, Red Sox president Sam Kennedy said ticket sales are down around six percent.

Other teams in the East Coast and Midwest are experiencing significant attendance declines, too. According to Passan, the Cubs and Cardinals have seen their attendance drop by nearly 5,000. The Indians' average crowd has dipped more than 5,000, the Rangers' more than 7,000 and the Pirates' more than 7,500. The Blue Jays, Tigers and Royals are hovering near 8,000, with the Marlins checking in at 10,000. Baltimore is averaging almost 16,000 fewer, which is staggering.

The putrid weather isn't the only factor that could be negatively impacting attendance. Several teams opted to abstain from free agency this offseason and tank in pursuit of a high draft pick next year. That means there's lots of bad baseball being played, and fewer teams worth making a trip to see.

But with the Red Sox starting 13-2, it seems as if their problems are largely weather-related. Sunday's contest against the Orioles, for example, featured the lowest game-time temperature at Fenway Park since April 17, 2003. The official crowd was announced at 32,849, but that seems generous.

Baseball is a parochial game, so these numbers are probably causing some angst in the commissioner's office. The silver lining is that the weather should get better — or at least we think. In 2007, the last time the league endured this many postponements in April, attendance eventually leaped to the largest figure ever.

MLB, and the Red Sox, are surely hoping history repeats itself. Because if not, the sport has bigger problems than some gloomy weather. Frigid temperatures are temporary. Teams that are too bad to draw is a season-long issue.

*** *The Boston Sports Journal***

Sleeveless Sale played mind game with self, not Orioles, in brutal chill

Sean McAdam

Growing up in Lakeland, Fla., Chris Sale never had to deal with the cold much. When he went off to college, he actually traveled further south — to Fort Myers, and Gulf Coast University — where, again, heat was far more of an issue.

When he reached the big leagues in Chicago, he got introduced to freezing temperatures and wind chill for the first time. Over nine years in the big leagues, he's been exposed to plenty of cold days and nights.

But Sunday at Fenway was a whole different category.

“I was miserable,” acknowledged Sale after five innings of one-run ball in the Red Sox’ 5-3 win over the Baltimore Orioles. “Nothing short of miserable...(Today) was the worst. I said it when I came out of the game: Today was the most miserable I’ve ever been on a baseball field. By far. Not even close. Not even close.”

Notice the key words here, the time-stamp, as it were, on the comments: “...when I came out of the game.”

In the dugout, when he had finished and wrapped himself in a jacket, Sale could admit the obvious. Yes, it was nearly impossible to properly grip some pitches. No, he couldn’t generate his usual velocity, with his fastball sometimes topping out at 87-88 mph. His strategy at times, he conceded, was to “flip it up there and let them hit it.” After all, how far was it going to go?

Speaking with reporters in the relative warmth of the home clubhouse, he could admit how tough it was (he had difficulty gripping the ball, and his velocity) ... but not until then.

With temperatures in the low-to-mid 30s, Sale went out to the mound in bare arms. Some of this was related to routine; some pitchers, regardless of freezing conditions, feel constricted and unnatural with a sleeve covering their pitching arm.

But there was more to it than this. This was part of a mental game Sale was playing. And winning.

Years ago, Sale was counseled by a former White Sox teammate — he wouldn’t reveal who it was — to never wear sleeves.

In football, sometimes lineman go bare-armed in sub-zero temperatures to send a signal to the opposition: I’m not cold. Are you?

It’s psychological warfare, with players intent on establishing some sort of advantage over the guy lined up across the line of scrimmage. In refusing to recognize the conditions, the message is being sent: I won’t be defeated — by you, or by the weather.

But for Sale, the game he’s playing is different. He’s not trying to prove anything to the hitters; rather, he’s intent on winning the mental battle with himself. Keep playing those mind games, forever.

Sale said going out sleeveless was all about convincing himself that, evidence to the contrary, it was not ridiculously cold and windy. He had enough to worry about with the Orioles lineup.

So with virtually no body fat to protect him from the elements, Sale pretended otherwise. Between innings, he would dash into the runway and try to stay warm near some heaters.

But once it was time to compete, he waged a war of will with himself.

So you were trying to convince yourself you weren’t miserable?

“Oh, I was plenty miserable,” he confided to BostonSportsJournal.com. “But I wasn’t going to allow myself to admit it until I was done.”

Alex Cora, who is in the business of preserving his team’s assets, wasn’t playing along. He lifted Sale after five and admitted he came close to doing so after just four innings. This was an afternoon not fit for man or beast, or certainly, front-line starters capable of carrying on every five days the rest of the way.

So even when Sale needed just 11 pitches in the fifth and seemed to be winning the war of attrition — or himself — he was given the hook. The bullpen patched together the final 12 outs as Sale wrapped himself

in a coat, warmed by the satisfaction that he had, for a while anyway, convinced himself that it wasn't that cold.

If he could silence the doubts in his head. If he could mentally defeat the elements, then surely, his magical left arm could defeat the Orioles.

A run in the fifth inning by his teammates got him a no-decision.

But something an unidentified teammate told him long ago, something that has stuck with him for years now, got him the win of a different sort.

*** *The Athletic***

Red Sox are ready to try to solve the Shohei Ohtani puzzle

Jen McCaffrey

Inclement weather has wreaked havoc on the baseball schedule across the country at the outset of the season.

The Red Sox were forced to postpone their annual Marathon Monday 11 a.m. game because of torrential rain, and winter weather in several cities scrapped contests on Sunday and Monday.

Perhaps one good thing to come out of the wild weather pattern is that the Red Sox will, as a result, get the chance to face Angels phenom Shohei Ohtani on Tuesday night in the opener of their nine-game road trip. David Price will be on the mound for Boston.

Ohtani has been on a once-per-week pitching schedule as the Angels created a six-man rotation to accommodate his unique abilities as a starter and designated hitter. Ohtani had been pitching every Sunday but the Angels' game in Kansas City was postponed Sunday due to below-freezing temperatures and snow. An off day on Monday meant Ohtani's start was moved to Tuesday.

Since signing with the Angels as an amateur free agent out of Japan this winter, the two-way player has been one of the most fascinating stories in baseball.

Not only has he dominated from the mound, but he's been equally impressive at the plate.

In two starts against Oakland, Ohtani has allowed three runs on four hits and two walks. He's struck out 18 of 45 batters he's faced.

The Red Sox offense, which has averaged the second-most runs per game in baseball (5.93), will be a different test for Ohtani.

What is the plan for the Sox?

"Get the ball up, hunt strikes, put good swings on them," manager Alex Cora said.

At the plate, the 23-year-old has appeared in eight games as the Angels' designated hitter. He has a double, triple and three homers in 33 plate appearances, posting a .367 average and 1.191 OPS.

"It's good for baseball," Cora added. "He's swung the bat well. Haven't seen too much of him pitching, but he's 'Show-tani.'"

Chris Sale, who's had his fair share of success in the majors over the last eight seasons, marveled at Ohtani's ability.

“It’s impressive,” Sale said. “I know how hard it is to get out there every fifth day just pitching. He’s got a laundry list of other things to do in terms of hitting. I don’t know if I’d like to do it, but it’s impressive. He throws 100 mph and can take you deep at the same time. If you don’t respect that, I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing.”

In an age when baseball is looking to appeal to younger fans while also expanding internationally, Ohtani’s story is a gold mine.

“It just makes it more interesting,” Sale said. “I think it brings in a broader crowd. Any time someone does something that’s different than something that’s normal, people are going to raise their eyebrows and people are going to pay attention to it. You probably have baseball fans, or people that aren’t fans of baseball, tuning in to see this. Like I said, if you don’t respect it, or if you don’t like or appreciate what’s going on, you’ve got to find something else to do. You’ve got to tip your cap to that. It’s fun to watch.”

The Red Sox will have a front row seat to Ohtani on Tuesday night.

*** *The USA Today***

MLB power rankings: Red-hot Red Sox claim No. 1 spot

Gabe Lacques

Grim weather conditions finally forced a postponement at Fenway Park on Monday, though that may do little to quell the Boston Red Sox's historic start.

The Red Sox are on a 13-1 roll, their best 14-game stretch since 2006, and have surpassed the Houston Astros for the No. 1 spot in USA TODAY Sports' power rankings.

The Los Angeles Angels, winners of seven straight for a 13-3 record, were the biggest risers, moving up five spots, while the slumping Washington Nationals dropped seven spots.

From 1 to 30, how they stack up based on voting from our nine-person panel:

TEAM. MOVEMENT

1. Boston Red Sox (+1)

▶ 13-2 is nice, but not as impressive as getting in nine games at Fenway before first postponement.

2. Houston Astros (-1)

▶ Justin Verlander has 77 strikeouts, 10 walks as an Astro.

3. Los Angeles Angels (+5)

▶ #SmallSampleSize, but: Shohei Ohtani has a 195 ERA-plus, and a 233 OPS-plus.

4. Arizona Diamondbacks (-1)

▶ Have won all five series, facing Rockies, Dodgers, Giants and Cardinals.

▶ Another chance to bedevil the struggling Nationals this week.

6. Cleveland Indians (+3)

► More than 60 friends and family set to fete Francisco Lindor in Puerto Rico homecoming.

7. New York Yankees (--)

► Sonny Gray allowing nearly two baserunners an inning.

8. Pittsburgh Pirates (+4)

► Gregory Polanco (.887 OPS), Starling Marte (.947) and Josh Bell (.797) an imposing middle of the order.

9. Chicago Cubs (-5)

► Brandon Morrow has yet to give up a run; then again, he's had just two games to save.

10. Colorado Rockies (--)

► D.J. LeMahieu nearly halfway to his career high of 11 home runs.

11. Minnesota Twins (+3)

► Puerto Rico as permanent April home might not be a bad idea.

12. St. Louis Cardinals (+3)

► First shot at Cubs this week.

13. Washington Nationals (-7)

► Among qualified NL hitters, Ryan Zimmerman last in average (.122), second-to-last in OPS (.428).

14. Toronto Blue Jays (+3)

► Ryan Tepera, Roberto Osuna form potent late-inning duo.

15. Los Angeles Dodgers (-2)

► Clayton Kershaw is just fine. Now, for everything else.

16. Milwaukee Brewers (-5)

► What's your favorite Josh Hader stat? How about, opponents are batting .065 (2 for 31) against him.

17. Seattle Mariners (+1)

► Dee Gordon doing an above-average job in center field so far.

18. Philadelphia Phillies (+4)

► Jake Arrieta pays his first dividends.

19. Atlanta Braves (--)

► Their +26 run differential tied with Arizona for best in National League.

20. San Francisco Giants (-4)

▶ For now, call him Chris Stratton, staff ace.

21. Baltimore Orioles (-1)

▶ With nine of next 13 vs. Tigers and Rays, a chance to get better.

22. Texas Rangers (-1)

▶ Will things get chippy in future games vs. Angels after Elvis Andrus' fractured elbow?

23. San Diego Padres (+4)

▶ Joey Lucchesi has struck out 25 and walked four.

24. Oakland Athletics (+2)

▶ May lose 100 games but produce a pair of All-Stars in Sean Manaea and Matt Chapman.

25. Chicago White Sox (-1)

▶ Starters yielding 5.25 runs per game; Michael Kopech strikes out 11 in first 10 Class AAA innings.

26. Kansas City Royals (-1)

▶ Bullpen (6.99 ERA) and offense (three runs per game) both worst in baseball.

27. Detroit Tigers (-4)

▶ April in the D: A half-dozen postponements and three straight days off

28. Tampa Bay Rays (+1)

▶ Averaging 4.5 innings per start, last in the majors. At least that was by design.

29. Cincinnati Reds (-1)

▶ Homer Bailey's reemergence one of the few bright spots in 2-15 start.

30. Miami Marlins (--)

▶ They meet up with Giancarlo Stanton having hit seven home runs, fewest in NL.