

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, May 17, 2017

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox won't shut down Brock Holt

Peter Abraham

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"Brock is a frustrated guy right now," manager John Farrell said.

Specialists the Sox have consulted with, including head trauma expert Dr. Michael Collins, have said Holt needs to continue to try to play until his brain adapts.

Collins treated Holt when he sustained a concussion last season.

"The system has to recalibrate when it's stressed with game activity, the vision and focus required," Farrell said.

Holt will remain with Pawtucket and will try to play again once the symptoms subside.

Drew Pomeranz good to go for Saturday start

Peter Abraham

Red Sox lefthander Drew Pomeranz, who came out of Sunday's game with a sore triceps after three innings, is scheduled to pitch on Saturday as scheduled.

"I've thrown for a few days and felt fine," he said.

The lefthander had an MRI on Monday and played catch at Fenway Park. The testing showed no injury and Pomeranz threw again Tuesday. He will throw his usual bullpen session on Wednesday.

"It would seem like he'd be ready to go for Saturday," manager John Farrell said.

Pomeranz attributed his soreness to a delivery flaw. He had a similar issue in spring training that was corrected in a few days.

"It's a mechanical thing. My mechanics are a little different from last year, slightly," Pomeranz said. "It's something I'm going to have to adjust. I was a little longer, a little more behind my body. That's what started it in the first place.

"Now that I know what the problem is, it's a matter of me fixing it. I was shorter last year and I got real long this year for whatever reason."

Pomeranz's velocity has fallen since the start of the season. He does not see that as an issue.

"When I get the right mechanics, I don't care how fast it's coming out," he said. "It's going to come out better."

Pomeranz is 3-3 with a 5.29 ERA in seven starts.

Eduardo Rodriguez gives Red Sox a little something extra in win

Peter Abraham

ST. LOUIS — Eduardo Rodriguez threw strong innings on Tuesday night to beat the St. Louis Cardinals, a first-place team that has been playing its best baseball of the season the last few weeks.

But the Red Sox lefthander was more excited about his offensive contribution to a 6-3 victory.

With runners on first and second in the fifth inning, Rodriguez took a mighty swing at a 92-m.p.h. fastball from Lance Lynn. He made enough contact to push the ball in front of the plate.

The only play the Cardinals had was to first base. The two runners who moved up later scored to give the Red Sox a one-run lead.

It wasn't a sacrifice, but was a productive out. Not bad for a guy who before Tuesday was 0 for 6 with six strikeouts.

"It was crazy and I was so happy. I had never put the ball in play before," said Rodriguez, who also grounded to second in the second inning. "To move the runners up, that was great."

Rodriguez said he had not put a ball in play since he was 15 and playing in Venezuela.

"It's good I'm in the American League," he said.

Rodriguez (2-1) allowed three runs, walked two, and struck out five. He was able to stay in the game long enough for the Red Sox to set up their bullpen.

"He turned in another quality performance," manager John Farrell said.

Three relievers finished up, with Craig Kimbrel picking up his 12th save.

Kimbrel retired the side in order to continue what has been a run of incredible dominance. He has set down 43 of the last 46 batters he has faced, including 23 of the last 24. His ERA is down to 1.02.

The teams, who have met four times in the World Series, wore 1967-style uniforms for the game. The May classic it wasn't as the Cardinals committed three errors that led to the Sox scoring three unearned runs.

It was only the second loss in 10 games for the Cardinals.

Mookie Betts hit the fourth pitch of the game from Lynn out to center field for his seventh home run. It turns out that a fastball over the plate is not the best way to pitch Betts, who is 13 of his last 35 with five home runs and 13 RBIs.

Betts has 10 leadoff home runs in his career, matching Jacoby Ellsbury's team record.

Jackie Bradley Jr. homered in the second, drilling a two-seam fastball the other way to left center. Bradley was 2 for 3 with a walk and two runs scored.

The home run came on a pitch low and away that Bradley drilled to a deep part of Busch Stadium. But he wasn't that impressed.

"I put a pretty decent swing on it. Actually thought I missed it. I didn't think I got all of it and it would be caught," said Bradley, who is slowly emerging from a slump.

The lead vanished in the third inning when the Cardinals scored three runs.

Kolten Wong led off with a single before Rodriguez hit Lynn with a pitch, something he immediately regretted. Dexter Fowler followed with a double to left field that scored Wong and sent Lynn to third. Tommy Pham's fly ball to center scored Lynn.

Matt Carpenter's fly ball to shallow left field should have been a harmless second out. But Andrew Benintendi was slow coming in and Xander Bogaerts was forced to make a play on the ball over his shoulder.

Bogaerts slid after making what was a difficult catch. An alert Fowler tagged up and scored on the rare sacrifice fly to the shortstop.

"With the sky the way it was. I don't know that [Benintendi] got a real good read on the ball off the bat," Farrell said.

It was a 29-pitch inning for Rodriguez. When he came back to the dugout, Chris Sale and Rick Porcello were waiting with advice.

"Sale was like, 'This is where the men go out and show who you are. Just go out there and try to limit the damage and fight,' " Rodriguez said. "I think that helped me a lot."

Rodriguez did not allow another runner past first base before turning a lead over to the bullpen.

The Cardinals made their own defensive mistake in the fifth inning when the Sox took that lead.

Bradley drew a leadoff walk on five pitches. When Deven Marrero hit a hard ground ball to third, it could have been a double play. But the ball deflected off Jedd Gyorko for an error.

After Rodriguez's groundout, Betts' grounder to shortstop scored Bradley. Dustin Pedroia then singled to center to score Marrero.

Lynn (4-2) went six innings and allowed four runs, two of them earned.

Betts helped Rodriguez out in the fifth inning, throwing out Carpenter when he tried to take second on a ball down the line.

The two-game series finishes Wednesday at 8:15 p.m. with Rick Porcello facing Mike Leake. The Sox are 7-3 in interleague games this season.

Hector Velazquez will start for Red Sox on Thursday

Peter Abraham

ST. LOUIS — The Red Sox arrived at spring training with so many starting pitchers that there was supposed to be competition for the final two spots in the rotation.

Now, on Thursday, they will start a 28-year-old Mexican League veteran they purchased for \$30,000.

Hector Velazquez is the choice to face the Oakland Athletics in what would be his major league debut. He was 2-1 with a 1.55 earned run average in five starts for Triple A Pawtucket.

Velazquez was impressive with the PawSox. He had a scoreless streak of 21½ innings and threw 69 percent of his pitches for strikes. Over 29 innings, Velazquez allowed 18 hits and walked five with 20 strikeouts.

His fastball is low 90s, but Velazquez throws an assortment of offspeed and breaking pitches.

“If he commands the baseball, that’s what it’s all about,” Red Sox manager John Farrell said Tuesday before the Sox faced the St. Louis Cardinals. “It’s not about sheer velocity. It’s about pitching ahead in the count.

“This is a guy who’s got a lot of experience, albeit not at the major league level. There’s a lot of savvy and strike-throwing ability.”

Lefthander Brian Johnson has two games of major league experience and is 2-0 with a 2.92 ERA at Pawtucket. But with three lefthanders in the rotation, the Sox preferred another righthander.

“Another righthander would give us another different look,” Farrell said.

Velazquez made 41 starts and threw 246 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings in Mexico last season, counting winter ball. The Red Sox purchased him from Campeche of the Mexican League on Feb. 18.

Worn down from the rigorous schedule in Mexico, Velazquez pitched only 11 innings in spring training. The Sox were then cautious with how he was used in Triple A.

Velazquez did not make his first start until April 11 and pitched only four times over a stretch of 27 days. Not until his last start did Velazquez work with four days rest.

“Most of that was by design,” Farrell said.

Velazquez went seven innings and threw 96 pitches on Saturday. Farrell said there were no restrictions on his use. Velazquez will face righthander Sonny Gray, who is 0-1 with a 3.78 ERA in three starts since coming off the disabled list.

Pomeranz on track

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Betts is best

Mookie Betts was named the American League player of the week for the second time in his career. He had three home runs, 11 RBIs, and seven extra-base hits . . . Third baseman Pablo Sandoval worked out on the field before the game and took batting practice. He could start a rehab assignment as soon as Friday with Pawtucket. He has been out since April 24 with a sprained left knee . . . The Sox will need a 40-man roster spot for Velazquez. It is likely that Steven Wright, who is out for the season following knee surgery, will be placed on the 60-day disabled list . . . Laura Rutledge, the wife of Sox infielder Josh Rutledge, was named the host of ESPN's "SEC Nation" pregame show. Noted Mets minor leaguer Tim Tebow is one of the analysts on the show.

Dave Dombrowski insists he'll make a move if Red Sox need it

Nick Cafardo

ST. LOUIS — The Red Sox are in quicksand, looking for rope, something to drag them out.

They go into Tuesday night's game at 19-18, and they're better than this. They know it.

This team was designed to win it all — yes, even without David Ortiz, who evidently won't be walking through that door.

We've opined before that the return of David Price will help stabilize the rotation, if Price is the effective, dominating pitcher he has been throughout his career. If he isn't, that would be another blow to this team.

President of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski wanted to clear up one misconception that he feels media people like me have perpetuated: He does have payroll room to make a move to improve the team if he feels he has to, though he would prefer to stay under the luxury-tax threshold.

Dombrowski is not with the team here in St. Louis. He has not been on the last two road trips, which is rare for him. Instead he has spent time monitoring his minor league organization, first in Double A Portland last week and this week in Salem, Va., evaluating the Single A team. He may even stop in to Greenville, S.C., to take a look at the low Single A affiliate.

"I did this last year as well," Dombrowski said. "Just looking at our kids. I was very impressed with our talent in Portland and I'm looking forward to seeing our kids here in Salem."

Dombrowski likes to see players who might come up in trade talks. It doesn't mean he's trading anyone, but he wants to see for himself what depth he has at every position.

One thing he didn't dispute was the uneven nature of the Red Sox' performance — or Bill Parcells's famous line, "You are what your record says you are."

The silver lining right now is that the Red Sox started Tuesday's action only four games out of first place in the AL East, with plenty of time to be what they ought to be — the best team in the league.

At some point, this team will need outside help. How significant a player could it acquire?

"I never speak about payroll," Dombrowski said. "I will say we're not under any restrictions to improve the club if need be."

Maybe not, but at some point you'll cross the luxury-tax line, which is something the Red Sox owners don't want, so they can reset that tax threshold in upcoming years.

Dombrowski doesn't sound like someone who would risk the team not making the playoffs just to stay on a budget. Nor would that go over with the fan base.

The Red Sox seem to be committed to their \$17.5 million third baseman, Pablo Sandoval, who is on a rehab assignment, at least until John Farrell can't take anymore. It's awfully tempting to promote 20-year-old Rafael Devers, who has a .984 OPS in Portland, which is doubly encouraging since it's happened amid the miserable weather of the Eastern League.

Dombrowski was cautious about Devers's immediate future, saying, "He's only been at Double A for a short time." Dombrowski is impressed with Devers's talent but feels he needs the seasoning that Double A will afford him.

Asked if he had to promote Devers should there be an emergency at third and whether he could handle it, Dombrowski said, "I don't think you ever know the answer to that."

Dombrowski is looking for Sandoval to return healthy and for Price to take his spot in the rotation. He expects Drew Pomeranz, who got a clean bill of health after some triceps tightness in his last start, to be consistent.

In this interleague series against the Cardinals, the Red Sox have a chance to pull themselves out of that quicksand that seems to be pulling them toward .500 with nearly a quarter of the season gone.

It's not quite to the point where in-team evaluations are beginning in earnest. That usually comes around June 1, when there's serious introspection about what's gone right and what's gone wrong.

At that point, you look at everything.

Is the manager getting the most out of his players?

Are the coaches doing their best to improve the players who are struggling?

What would jump-start the team? A trade? A call-up like Devers or Sam Travis? A shuffle in the lineup? The benching of a star player?

Or maybe the best option is to do nothing at all.

There's the thought that the team will automatically get better simply because it hasn't hit full stride. The Sox have not been able to execute their game plan of having the Big Three at the top of the rotation, and their rotation at first base/DH with Hanley Ramirez, Mitch Moreland, and Chris Young. They have not gotten the best out of Jackie Bradley Jr.

But there seems to be no panic in Dombrowski's voice. He appears confident that things will get better, and if they don't, he's just as confident that he can do something about it.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Mookie Betts' leads Red Sox into St. Louis with game-opening homer

Jason Mastrodonato

ST. LOUIS — Mookie Betts didn't win the American League Player of the Week award without prompting a significant question in Boston: Will another outstanding season from the right fielder be enough?

MVP candidates are going to have MVP candidate weeks, and Betts didn't stop just because a new week started.

Betts homered to lead off last night's 6-3 win against St. Louis at Busch Stadium, drove in the game-tying run in the fifth with a groundout and then made a remarkable spin-and-throw to kill a potential Cardinals rally in the same inning.

"Just trying to give us a jolt of energy to start the game," Betts said of his seventh homer of 2017. "However it is I get on base or whatever happens, happens."

Jackie Bradley Jr. (2-for-3, home run, walk) and Eduardo Rodriguez (six innings, three runs allowed) played solid supporting roles.

The Sox were just 2-4 last week, when Betts went 9-for-24 with four doubles, three homers and 11 RBI to earn the weekly AL honor. At some point, somebody else has to step up.

Bradley had been ice cold and he wasn't the only one. Mitch Moreland is in a 1-for-17 stretch, Hanley Ramirez has barely played and is just 1-for-7 in the last week and Andrew Benintendi is now 0-for-21 in his last six games.

Betts' hot bat could light a fire under the 20-18 Red Sox. But doesn't think he's on roll.

"I feel OK," Betts said. "I had a good first at-bat and not really another one after that. Just trying to put it all together and just string some good games together. I just feel like I'm not really consistent yet. I have a good game and then a couple bad ones. That's part of the game. It's going to take a while."

Bradley hasn't been hot since his 29-game hitting streak ended last year, but he took some nice swings last night, following Betts' leadoff homer in the first inning with a solo shot to left-center in the second.

Could the homer be a sign?

"It tells me that I got the pitch to do it," Bradley said. "It was a ball away instead of being pitched in. And I put a pretty decent swing on it. I actually thought I missed it. I didn't think I got all of it, thought it was going to be caught. But I'm happy it went out. Got another hit the other way again on a pitch outside."

Rodriguez allowed the three runs in the second but otherwise cruised through six innings on 110 pitches. His ERA did take a jump from 2.80 to 3.05.

Betts saved Rodriguez in the fifth with a fine defensive play to end the inning. He fielded a liner off the side wall in right and, without taking a step, made a backward spin before firing a bullet to second base to throw out Matt Carpenter trying to stretch a single into a double.

“I practice that every day,” Betts said. “Just for times like that. I think that’s one of the first opportunities I’ve had to do one in a game. I’ve done it so many times it was kind of second nature.”

Betts had driven in the tying run on a groundout in the fifth and Dustin Pedroia had singled behind him to put the Sox ahead for good.

The visitors added two more runs in the eighth. Xander Bogaerts reached on a one-out single and stole second on eight-time Gold Glove-winner Yadier Molina. The catcher’s throw had Bogaerts beat, but a crafty swim move got the runner into second just ahead of the tag. The play was reviewed and upheld. Two walks later, Bogaerts scored on a sacrifice fly by Christian Vazquez.

“I think I’ve done that before,” Bogaerts said. “I’ve seen a lot of guys do that. They did it on me the other day, a guy in Milwaukee. It’s kind of nice to do when you get a chance.”

With two outs, Bradley lofted a fly ball to left field that was dropped by Tommy Pham, allowing Benintendi to score, but Moreland was cut down at the plate to end the inning.

In the ninth, Craig Kimbrel needed just eight pitches to record his 12th save.

“When you’re turning it over to Kimbrel the way he’s going right now, it’s a pretty good position to be in,” manager John Farrell said.

With or without major problems at third base, no need for Red Sox to rush Rafael Devers

Chad Jennings

ST. LOUIS — In the close quarters of the Double-A Portland clubhouse, Rafael Devers takes up more than his share of space and gets more than his share of attention. The kid can’t help it. When you’re that strong and that good, it just comes with the territory.

“Well deserved, too,” Sea Dogs outfielder Danny Mars said. “We have a lot of guys that really do stand out. Devers, I mean, that guy is absolutely unbelievable.”

People are starting to believe. Maybe a little too much, actually. That comes with the territory, too.

At 20 years old, with seven home runs and the fourth-best OPS in the Eastern League, Devers is generating the sort of fast-track buzz that comes with a perfect combination of Baseball America hype, minor league production and major league need.

The Red Sox can’t find a third baseman. Why not try the kid who’s destroying baseballs in Double A?

For right now, it’s because the Sox aren’t in the business of knee-jerk reactions that risk addressing a short-term headache by creating a long-term problem.

“I think his name has come up certainly in conversation,” manager John Farrell said. “You’re looking at a 20-year-old guy that is performing well, one of the better, young-looking third basemen in all of baseball. But that’s where you rely on the development staff to say, look at the worst-case scenario and how would that player handle that adversity.

“He’s doing a very good job, he’s gaining a lot of momentum with his play in Portland. I think for the time being we let him stay the course and continue to grow as a good-looking left-handed third baseman.”

Not that the idea is without merit. Just last year, the Red Sox pushed outfielder Andrew Benintendi straight from Double A to the majors at 22. He hasn’t looked back.

But this is an opportunity to appreciate how special Benintendi has been, not to place Benintendi-sized expectations on the next best thing to come along in a farm system depleted by trades.

Devers is very good. He's also two years and almost four months younger than Benintendi, without the benefit of college competition to speed his professional development. It's not an apples-to-apples comparison.

"I think he's where he needs to be," assistant general manager Eddie Romero told WEEI's Rob Bradford. "As Dave (Dombrowski, president of baseball operations) mentioned last week, and we've said in our discussions over the past few days, he's progressing well. He's in a good spot. I think (Portland manager) Carlos Febles and the staff down there has done a great job developing. They know there's another level to go to Triple A, and then the big league level, so he's really only two notches away. Maturity. More at-bats. More games for him."

Given the circumstances, the desire to push the envelope makes sense. Prospects are nothing but possibility, and when they're hitting in the minors, it's easy to imagine take those numbers carrying over to the big leagues.

Devers has been putting up numbers at a time when third base is a mess for the Red Sox. Deven Marrero started at third for the third straight game last night, and he's a fifth-string option bumped to the top of the depth chart because of injury and poor performance.

Pablo Sandoval, Brock Holt and Marco Hernandez are on the disabled list. Josh Rutledge didn't exactly take hold of the job. And so Marrero is getting the nod despite his unthinkable low .389 OPS in Triple A this year. He had a .487 OPS last year in Pawtucket, so his ceiling — all glove, not much bat — seems limited.

Quite the opposite with Devers.

"I think if he continues to perform and continues to learn and work the way he's working, there's no doubt in my mind that he's going to be an impact player in the big leagues," Febles said. "It all depends on health with him, because besides his tools, he works his (butt) off every day."

That conversation with Febles occurred three weeks ago, when the idea of a Devers fast track to the majors — for this season, anyway — seemed pie-in-the-sky at best, believable to maybe one person.

"Finish in the big leagues," Devers said of his 2017 goal.

Teammate Williams Jerez was acting as translator, and either as part of the quote, or as his own aside, the reliever added: "He doesn't want to play a lot in Double A."

Since then, Devers has continued to rake, with six homers in the past two and a half weeks, and the Red Sox have continued to cycle through options. Sandoval hurt his knee, Holt hasn't been able to get past vertigo and Hernandez might need shoulder surgery.

Want to make this team better? Get David Price off the disabled list and into the rotation, center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr.'s batting average above .200 and designated hitter Hanley Ramirez hitting home runs again.

Third base shouldn't determine whether the Red Sox succeed or fail this season, and neither should Devers.

Eduardo Rodriguez gets a pep talk and a Red Sox victory

Chad Jennings

ST. LOUIS — This game was on the very verge of falling apart, and Eduardo Rodriguez knew it.

He'd just thrown a fastball that hit a bunting pitcher in the gut. He'd allowed an RBI double immediately after that, then a sacrifice fly after that. He'd blown a two-run lead with a three-run third inning.

Rodriguez walked back to the dugout and found two pitchers who'd been there before.

"I got out of that inning and Porz and Sale come to me," Rodriguez said.

Rick Porcello and Chris Sale, the top two pitchers on the Red Sox staff, giving the emerging No. 3 starter exactly what he needed to get back on track in a 6-3 win against the Cardinals last night.

"Sale just tells me, 'Hey man,' " Rodriguez said. "That was the key to get back in the game. He just tells me, 'This is where the men go out and show who you are. Just go there and try to limit the damage and fight,' you know what I mean? I think that helped me a lot to get back in the game."

Two strikeouts helped him pitch around a walk in the fourth inning, and Mookie Betts threw out a runner to help him out of the fifth, and Rodriguez struck out Randal Grichuk to leave a runner stranded in the sixth.

The Sox came back, and Rodriguez had his second win of the year, keeping his ERA at 3.05 with his fifth straight start of at least six innings with no more than three earned runs.

"I thought he turned in another quality performance here tonight," manager John Farrell said. "Particularly the fifth and sixth inning, where we were able to take back the lead with the two runs in the top of the fifth, and he was at his best to go out and have a nine-pitch inning in the bottom of the fifth, kept his pitch count in order to be able to go out and really allow us to kind of set up the bullpen in a favorable way with some of the matchups."

The low point was the pitch that Rodriguez yanked to hit Lance Lynn, who was trying to sacrifice. With a runner at first base, Lynn was trying to give the Sox an out, and Rodriguez was trying to take it, he just missed and hit Lynn in the stomach. That set the stage for the three-run third.

"That was really bad," Rodriguez said. "It's because I hit him, and he's a pitcher, and they have a man at first base. That's a free out, and I want to take the out."

By getting back on track, Rodriguez stayed in to throw a season-high 110 pitches. He has not allowed a home run in his past three starts, and his five straight quality starts is the longest such streak of his career.

But that's not what Rodriguez seemed most proud of after the game.

His 0-for-2 at the plate included two groundball outs, one of which legitimately helped the Sox by moving two runners to second and third. Those runners would become the tying and go-ahead runs.

Why didn't Rodriguez bunt in that situation?

"Because I hit the ball in the first at-bat, and just tried to do something and put the ball in play," he said. "And I did better than a bunt."

It was the first time Rodriguez had swung a bat and put a ball in play since he was a kid. He'd come into the game 0-for-6 with six strikeouts and one sacrifice bunt in his career.

*** *The Providence Journal***

In wake of last postseason, are teams using closers more aggressively?

Tim Britton

As the wildcard playoff game between the Orioles and Blue Jays extended into extra innings, the incredulity across baseball peaked.

How come Baltimore's Zach Britton wasn't in the game yet?

Britton had just completed one of the most dominant relief seasons in history. He had allowed one home run — in April to Mookie Betts. He had allowed just four earned runs all season. He had not blown a save.

And yet, with the season on the line, a manager known for his wise bullpen machinations trusted the mound to the likes of Brian Duensing and Ubaldo Jimenez.

Buck Showalter's decision-making that October night in Toronto, which ended when Edwin Encarnacion took Jimenez deep to left-center in the 11th inning, wasn't groundbreaking. In fact, it was baseball orthodoxy: When on the road, you save your closer for when you take the lead — for an actual save situation.

We can debate the merits of this idea, weighing the quantifiable pressure of pitching with zero margin for error versus the less measurable stress of closing a game with the lead. But suffice to say: Seeing a team lose a deciding playoff game in extra innings without using its best reliever was enough to shake the foundations of that conventional thinking.

Last Thursday in Milwaukee, Red Sox manager John Farrell turned to closer Craig Kimbrel with one out in the bottom of the eighth inning of a tie game. It was the most aggressive deployment of a closer on the road this season in the major leagues, and the most aggressive use of a closer by Farrell during his tenure with the Red Sox.

Major-league managers used their closer in a tie game in the bottom of the eighth three times all of last season.

The move clearly worked out for Boston: Kimbrel escaped one threat, the Sox scored in the top of the ninth, and Kimbrel had enough bullets left in the tank to close the game out.

But Farrell isn't alone in loosening the strictures of his road bullpen management. Whether this is a direct response to last year's postseason or a more organic evolution of thought, closers are being used more aggressively on the road in 2017 than in 2016. Just in the last few days, three different closers were called on in the bottom of the ninth of tie games — Pittsburgh's Tony Watson, Seattle's Edwin Diaz and Milwaukee's Corey Knebel.

About a quarter of the way through this season, a team has used its closer in a tie game on the road to start an inning 16 times — well ahead of last year's pace, when it happened 38 times overall. Ten of those 16 occurrences have come in the ninth inning or earlier; that happened only 19 times all of 2016.

(Watson, Diaz, Kenley Jansen and Addison Reed have already been used twice each in those situations. Their managers used their closer in such spots only four times combined last season.)

This may be the lasting legacy of the 2016 postseason on how bullpens are deployed. Using Andrew Miller for six outs every day isn't possible in the regular season. Using Britton in a tie game on the road is.

Farrell has never been against using his closer earlier on the road than convention dictates. He occasionally brought Koji Uehara into tie games in the bottom of the ninth; more frequently, he brought Uehara in during extra innings even if his team had yet to take the lead.

Like some other managers, Farrell has mentioned being more willing to bring his closer in early on days when he can pitch two innings. That's one reason he didn't do it more often with Uehara, who was typically a three-out closer.

In that sense, Kimbrel's increased efficiency — he's averaging about a pitch fewer per out this season compared to last — makes him a more viable option for extended work. So does the fact that he's striking almost everybody out.

"He's pitching with more of a calm mind, he's more in sync, the timing in his delivery is so much more consistent. It's what's allowed him to get through innings in nine to 12 pitches," Farrell said on Sunday. "And knowing that, that makes you a little bit more aggressive to use him in the eighth inning because there's going to be pitches left in the tank to close out the ninth inning."

Of course, it still takes some acclimation. Closers excel in part because, unlike most other relievers, they can stick to a set routine and prepare for a specific situation in which they'll pitch. When that situation is going to be different, Farrell and pitching coach Carl Willis let Kimbrel know as soon as possible.

That Thursday in Milwaukee, the Sox called down to the bullpen in the top of the seventh inning to let Kimbrel know he may be required for more than the standard three outs.

"He hadn't pitched in two days, so obviously from a physical standpoint and a workload standpoint, it lined up well," Willis said. "Usually we see how the game's unfolding and there will be a phone call down to the bullpen to give him a heads up that we're thinking about one-plus today or the eighth inning. It's just a matter of communication, so it allows him to be prepared for it and not be caught off-guard."

"There were a lot of variables that put me in the game," Kimbrel said. "Throw the save situation out the door. My job is to help this team win and I was able to do that."

*** *The Springfield Republican***

Jackie Bradley Jr. put his head down in disappointment -- then the ball sailed over the wall

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Jackie Bradley Jr. thought his 399-foot blast to left-center field would end up being a long flyout.

"Look at my replay. I put my head down and threw my bat to the side," Bradley said. "I literally put my head down and went, 'Missed it.'"

But he didn't miss it.

Bradley -- whose prolonged slump dates back to his return from the disabled list April 21 -- went 2-for-3 with a homer, walk and two runs to help lift the Red Sox to a 6-3 victory over the St. Louis Cardinals here at Busch Stadium on Tuesday.

How big a boost could one of his offensive surges give this ballclub?

He's probably always going to be a streaky hitter. That's something that needs to be accepted. But when he's hot, he can carry a team.

"I put a pretty decent swing on it," Bradley said. "I didn't think I got all of it. ... But I'm happy it went out and got another hit the other way again on a pitch outside."

Bradley also singled to the opposite field against right-handed reliever Jonathan Broxton to lead off the seventh inning.

His average now is up to .200.

He has hit two opposite-field homers in the past week. He also has stroked two hits in three of his past six games.

Can he feel when one of his hot streaks is coming on?

"You know you feel good," Bradley said. "You can't necessarily bank on results, so to speak because you can hit the ball hard and don't have anything to show for it. Or you can hit the ball soft and have plenty to show for it. So I'll take the results over hitting the ball hard."

Bradley said he feels good at the plate right now.

"It's good to see Jackie swing the bat like he did here tonight, particularly with his ability to use the whole field," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "That for him is such a key where he's not leaving any plate coverage by being too pull oriented."

Mookie Betts does it all to lift Boston Red Sox over Cardinals; Eduardo Rodriguez earns victory

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Mookie Betts' first inning blast marked his 10th career leadoff homer, tying him with Jacoby Ellsbury for the franchise lead.

Betts also fired a perfect strike from right field to shortstop Xander Bogaerts covering second base to throw out Cardinals' Matt Carpenter who was trying to extend a single into a double during the fifth.

Betts had a big game despite going 1-for-5. He tied it 3-3 in the fifth with an RBI groundout. Dustin Pedroia delivered a two-out, go-ahead single to center field to put the Red Sox ahead 4-3 for good.

Boston won 6-3 over the St. Louis Cardinals here at Busch Stadium.

Eduardo Rodriguez earns win

Eduardo Rodriguez put together another strong start for the Red Sox. The lefty went 6 innings and allowed three runs, all earned, five hits and two walks while striking out five.

Rodriguez improved to 2-1 with a 3.05 ERA and 1.14 WHIP in eight outings (seven starts). The opposition is batting .204 against him.

All three runs came during a tough third inning.

Kolten Wong led off with a single. Rodriguez then hit Cardinals pitcher Lance Lynn with a 1-2 fastball.

Dexter Fowler delivered an RBI double. Tommy Pham delivered a sacrifice fly to center field and Matt Carpenter hit a sac fly to shortstop. Xander Bogaerts dived to make the catch as he ran into left field for it. Fowler hurried home to make it 3-2 Cardinals.

BJB goes the opposite way again

Jackie Bradley Jr. has been struggling but he has bashed two home runs in the past week and both have gone to the opposite field.

He drove a 90.4 mph four-seamer from Lance Lynn into the left-center field bleachers for his third homer of the season in the second inning. It put Boston ahead 2-0.

Bradley also singled to the opposite field against right-handed reliever Jonathan Broxton to lead off the seventh inning.

Mookie Betts' 10th leadoff homer ties Boston Red Sox franchise record

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Mookie Betts led off today's Red Sox-Cardinals game with his seventh home run of the season.

It also marked his 10th career leadoff home run.

That ties him with Jacoby Ellsbury for the Red Sox franchise record in leadoff homers to begin a game.

Betts blasted a 92.4 mph four-seam fastball from Cardinals right-handed starter Lance Lynn over the left-center field wall.

The 24-year-old right-fielder has been red hot lately. He was named the American League Player of the Week for the second time in his career yesterday. Betts batted .375 (9-for-24) with three homers, 11 RBIs, eight runs, four doubles and one stolen base in six games last week.

David Price's return: Boston Red Sox 'not ruling out' lefty needing just one rehab start

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- David Price still is on schedule to make a rehab start Friday for Triple-A Pawtucket at Buffalo.

Price (elbow) threw a bullpen at Fenway Park today.

"Came out of that fine so everything is arranged and scheduled for him to pitch for Pawtucket," Red Sox manager John Farrell said.

Price -- who pitched a simulated game at McCoy Stadium on Sunday because the PawSox got rained out the day -- will be in the 85-90 pitch range.

He might need just this one rehab start before being inserted back into the Red Sox rotation.

"I think we'll reserve our planning until he gets through Friday but I wouldn't rule it out at this point," Farrell said.

If Price needs just one rehab start, he then likely would pitch for Boston on May 24 or 25 against the Rangers at Fenway Park.

Boston Red Sox third base: Pablo Sandoval getting back into 'game shape,' Brock Holt 'frustrated'

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- The Red Sox rank 29th in the majors in OPS from the third base position (.615). They also have committed the most errors (13) at the position.

Boston certainly needs help at the hot corner but Brock Holt experienced a setback Monday in a rehab game for Triple-A Pawtucket.

Holt was replaced to begin the bottom of the fifth inning because he experienced a recurrence of his vertigo symptoms.

"It looked like the days leading up to yesterday he was starting to turn the corner with the way he felt, with the way he swung the bat," Red Sox manager John Farrell said about Holt. "But the onset of the symptoms caused us to remove him from the game. Like I said, Brock is a frustrated guy right now."

Holt will remain with Pawtucket and work out "as capable."

"As we go through this, it's a matter of how he's responding day to day with the symptoms," Farrell said. "Part of that frustration is the unknown from one day to the next."

Dr. Micky Collins and the Red Sox medical staff have recommended Holt stay active based on the type of symptoms he's experiencing.

"That system has got to recalibrate when it's stressed with game-activity or the vision and the focus required," Farrell said. "And that's the plan that will continue to be carried out."

Meanwhile, Pablo Sandoval could begin a rehab with Triple-A Pawtucket on Friday if all goes well here in St. Louis as he continues to condition.

"Went through some early work today, ran the bases," Farrell said. "Now that he's back to baseball activities, we've got to get him back into game shape. That's going to be required to get out on rehab. So we're hopeful that will begin when we leave here and go to the West Coast. He'd return to join Pawtucket and start getting some games under his belt."

Hector Velazquez to make major league debut for Boston Red Sox vs. Athletics on Thursday

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Hector Velazquez will make his major league debut for the Boston Red Sox on Thursday in Oakland.

Velazquez is 2-0 with a 1.55 ERA and 0.79 WHIP in five starts for Triple-A Pawtucket. Opponents are batting just .180 against him.

The Red Sox signed the 28-year-old right-handed hurler out of the Mexican League in February. He has 20 strikeouts and five walks in 29 innings.

Boston needed someone to replace Kyle Kendrick in the rotation until David Price (elbow) is ready to return. Price might need just one rehab start before he's ready to return. He'll start for Pawtucket on Friday in Buffalo.

"Just the overall command," Farrell said about why the Red Sox chose Velazquez, who's not on the 40-man roster yet. "The strike throwing ability. The quality command within the strike zone. The performance that he's had there. While Brian Johnson has thrown the ball well there as well, just felt like with the number of left-handers in our rotation currently, another right-hander would give us another different look."

Velazquez will join the team in Oakland on Thursday.

Chris Sale will pitch Friday. Drew Pomeranz is expected to pitch Saturday.

"If he commands the baseball, that's what it's all about," Farrell said. "It's not about sheer velocity. It's about pitching ahead in the count. I like the fact that late in camp he started to come up with a little bit more of an offspeed curveball to help him spread the strike zone top to bottom a little bit. But this is a guy that's got a lot of experience, albeit not at the major league level. But still, there's a lot of savvy and strike-throwing ability here."

* **RedSox.com**

Red Sox shuffle Cards behind Betts, E-Rod

Jenifer Langosch and Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- Local excitement about a rare two-game Interleague visit by the Red Sox wasn't exactly shared by Cardinals manager Mike Matheny, who acknowledged beforehand that he's still haunted by World Series losses to Boston in 2004 and '13. Tuesday's outcome, albeit in a game with far more moderate stakes, did nothing to placate those emotions, either.

Behind a quality start from Eduardo Rodriguez and a jolt from Mookie Betts, the Red Sox earned a 6-3 win to slow the surging Cardinals at Busch Stadium. Betts, in his first game since earning American League Player of the Week honors, opened the night with a homer, later tied the game with an RBI groundout and then helped preserve the lead by throwing out Matt Carpenter when he tried to turn a two-out, sixth-inning single into an extra-base hit.

"Yeah, just trying to get a jolt of energy to start the game," Betts said.

Red-hot closer Craig Kimbrel (1.02 ERA) finished with a 1-2-3 ninth, notching his 12th save in 13 opportunities.

"We played a strong game in every phase here tonight, particularly some very good defensive plays," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "Mookie cuts down Carpenter going into second, Deven [Marrero] makes a nice play going to the backhand side so we're able to put ourselves in position, capitalize on some of their miscues and then when you're turning it over to Kimbrel the way he's going right now, it's a pretty good position to be in."

Jackie Bradley Jr. matched Betts with a solo home run to give the Red Sox an early 2-0 lead against Cardinals starter Lance Lynn, who has now served up eight homers in eight starts. Lynn may have gotten through the rest of his six-inning start unscathed if not again hurt by his defense. This time it was an error by third baseman Jedd Gyorko that led to two unearned runs.

"It's a play I have to make," Gyorko said of Marrero's sharp grounder that hit off the heel of his glove. "It's a big play in the game. We could have had two outs and the pitcher coming up [and] Lance probably goes deep in the game. It's a tough one."

Rodriguez gave up three third-inning runs before shutting down the Cardinals' offense for the remainder of his six-inning performance. Rodriguez has a 2.54 ERA over his last six starts, five of which the Red Sox have won.

A pep talk from Red Sox co-aces Rick Porcello and Chris Sale helped inspire Rodriguez after his lone mishap in the third.

"I got out of that inning and Porc and Sale come to me, and Sale just tells me, 'This is where the men go out and show who you are. Just go there and try to limit the damage and fight.' I think that helped me a lot to get back in the game," Rodriguez said.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Extra out, extra runs: The Cardinals gifted the Red Sox two baserunners -- Bradley reached on a walk and Marrero on Gyorko's error -- in the fifth inning, and Boston capitalized to steal the lead back from St. Louis. A productive groundout by Betts plated the game-tying run. Dustin Pedroia, who entered the game having hit .300 in his last 10 games, then delivered a two-out RBI single to score Marrero. The Cardinals committed three errors in the game, bringing their season total to 32. Only the A's have more.

Short sacrifice: Dexter Fowler helped the Cardinals' offense awaken in the third inning when he drove in the team's first run with a double off the left-field wall and used his speed to give St. Louis the lead. Fowler aggressively advanced to third on Tommy Pham's fly to center, and he alertly came sprinting home when shortstop Xander Bogaerts had to make an over-the-head catch in left field on a ball that outfielder Andrew Benintendi appeared to lose in the lights. It was the fourth sacrifice fly to the shortstop in the Majors this season, and, oddly, Carpenter has now hit two of them.

QUOTABLE

"They gave me a chance to win, and I didn't get it done. So that's on me. I didn't pick them up tonight, and it cost us the game." -- Lynn, who had a personal four-game winning streak snapped

"I'm thinking maybe [Malik] Monk. He may help [Isaiah Thomas]. Got a couple games in the playoffs to see and then I can answer that. I'm going to study it." -- Betts, when asked who the Boston Celtics should take just hours after they won the NBA draft lottery

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The leadoff homer by Betts was the 10th of his career to tie Jacoby Ellsbury for the franchise record. And the Statcast™ readings demonstrate that he got all of it. The blast had an exit velocity of 103.3 mph and a projected distance of 414 feet. Entering the night, Lynn had allowed one home run and one RBI to right-handed batters this year.

UPON FURTHER REVIEW

The Cardinals lost their challenge in the eighth inning after asking for a review of Bogaerts' steal of second base. Though the ball beat Bogaerts to the bag, a stealthy slide helped him evade the tag. A replay review confirmed the safe call and set up Boston's two-run inning. It also compounded things for struggling reliever Brett Cecil, who walked the only two batters he faced after the unsuccessful pickoff.

"He comes in and makes a perfect pickoff, we have a guy out by two steps, and [Bogaerts] pulls a Houdini act to get in safe at second base," Matheny said. "That's kind of how things roll when you're having trouble getting on a good roll."

WHAT'S NEXT

Red Sox: Rick Porcello draws the start in Wednesday's finale of this two-game series. The righty has turned in five consecutive quality starts. First pitch at Busch Stadium is scheduled for 8:15 p.m. ET. Both teams are wearing 1967 throwback uniforms this series to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of a World Series matchup that the Cards won in seven games.

Cardinals: The Cardinals will send the National League's ERA leader, Mike Leake, to the mound at 7:15 p.m. CT Wednesday following a pregame ceremony to honor the '67 World Series champs. Leake has never beaten the Red Sox, but he'll enter the night having made seven quality starts to open the season.

Mookie's spin move an #ASGWorthy effort

Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- Leave it to Mookie Betts to tie a franchise record for leadoff homers and have it be just the second most impressive thing he did on Tuesday night while helping the Red Sox to a 6-3 victory over the Cardinals at Busch Stadium.

The most highlight-reel-worthy thing Betts did in this one was an exquisite spin-and-throw in the right-field corner to nail Matt Carpenter trying to stretch his hit into a double in the fifth inning.

It is a play Betts practices constantly, and one he executed to perfection when the Red Sox needed it.

The first thing Betts did was play a potentially tough carom perfectly, and then uncork a perfect strike to Xander Bogaerts, who swiped the tag on Carpenter.

"Yeah I practice that every day," Betts said. "For times like that. I think that's one of the first opportunities I've had to do one in a game. I've done it so many times it was kind of second nature."

Cardinals manager Mike Matheny had no issue with Carpenter's decision to run on Betts.

"That's a good try. We needed a run," Matheny said. "There are two outs, need a perfect throw, and that's exactly what Betts gave. He gave a perfect throw."

After winning his first Gold Glove Award last season, Betts looked primed to add another one to his trophy case this year.

He hopes to get more chances to pull off the spin-and-fire play.

"I practice trying to get rid of it as fast as possible," Betts said. "So I'll make bad throws in practice trying to get rid of it so fast and eventually I'll get to make good throws. That's one of the better ones I've had so far."

Betts makes his living beating teams in a multitude of ways. The home run was the 10th leadoff smash of his career, tying Jacoby Ellsbury for the franchise record. Of course, Ellsbury was Boston's primary leadoff man for six seasons. Betts is in the early stages of his third full season and has hit in numerous spots in the batting order.

His move back to leadoff on May 6 has helped rejuvenate Boston's lineup. Betts won the American League's Player of the Week last week. In his 40 at-bats since returning to the top of the order, Betts has belted five homers and with 14 RBIs and had a 1.238 OPS.

"I'm just trying to have a good at-bat to start the game and put a good swing on a good pitch," Betts said. Though others might be impressed that a 24-year-old is on the verge of a team record for leadoff home runs, Betts is typically unfazed.

"Yeah, just trying to get a jolt of energy to start the game," he said. "However it is I get on base, or whatever happens, happens."

As usual, Betts is making things happen for the Red Sox with his bat, arm and glove.

Red Sox tab Velazquez for Thursday start

Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- The Red Sox will reinsert a fifth starter into the rotation on Thursday, when right-hander Hector Velazquez is called up from Triple-A Pawtucket to make his Major League debut on the road against the Oakland Athletics.

Velazquez's contract was purchased by the Red Sox from the Mexican League on Feb. 18. In five starts for Pawtucket, the 28-year-old Velazquez is 2-1 with a 1.55 ERA.

Thanks to the off-day the Red Sox had on Monday, they could have waited until Saturday to start Velazquez.

But manager John Farrell instead opted to use this as an opportunity to split up Rick Porcello and Chris Sale in the rotation. Porcello starts the finale of this two-game series against the Cardinals on Wednesday, and Sale will start Friday night in Oakland.

The way the rotation sets up right now, Sale will pitch when the Red Sox face the White Sox in Chicago from May 28-30 in his first meeting with his former team since the trade to the Red Sox in December.

Velazquez's stint with the Red Sox could be one or two starts, depending on when David Price returns to action. Price hasn't pitched this season due to a left elbow strain incurred on Feb. 28.

What was supposed to be the first start of Price's Minor League rehab assignment on Sunday for Pawtucket turned into a 75-pitch, indoor sim game. The lefty will start for Pawtucket in Buffalo on Friday and will throw 85-90 pitches.

Farrell has left open the possibility Price could pitch for the Red Sox on May 24 against the Rangers. If not, his debut for 2017 would probably be in Chicago against the White Sox on May 29.

Sale would be lined up to pitch either the first or second game in Chicago, depending on when Price is slotted in.

Meanwhile, the Red Sox look forward to getting at least one look at Velazquez. What has worked for the right-hander in the early stages of his career in the United States?

"Just the overall command," Farrell said. "The strike-throwing ability, the overall command in the strike zone, the performance that he's had there. While Brian Johnson has thrown the ball well there as well, [we] just felt like with the number of left-handers in our rotation currently, another right-hander would give us another different look."

Holt slowed at Triple-A by recurring vertigo

Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- At a time the Red Sox are depleted at third base, Brock Holt continues to be stalled in his return to the team.

The infielder/outfielder had another setback on Monday night in his Minor League rehab assignment for Triple-A Pawtucket, as he had recurring symptoms of the vertigo that placed him on the disabled on April 21.

"He had to be [taken] out of yesterday's game just because of the recurring symptoms. I know it's frustrating for Brock," Red Sox manager John Farrell said before Tuesday's game against the Cardinals. "It looked like the days leading up to yesterday he was starting to turn the corner with the way he felt, the way he swung the bat. But the onset of the symptoms caused us to remove him from the game, and Brock is a frustrated guy right now."

The Red Sox will continue to monitor Holt with the hope he can get in a steady flow of rehab games without having any symptoms.

"As the symptoms subside, yeah, that's been the path and the repetition we've gone through with Brock. So I'd like to give you a date in which he'd be back in, but it's dependent upon how he feels," Farrell said.

Starting third baseman Pablo Sandoval, out since April 24 with a right knee sprain, had another productive day on Tuesday and could start a rehab assignment with Pawtucket by this weekend.

"Now that he's back to baseball activity, we've got to get him back into game shape," Farrell said. "We're hopeful [a rehab assignment] will begin when we leave here and go to the West Coast, he'd join Pawtucket and start getting some games under his belt."

Deven Marrero started his third straight game at third for Boston on Tuesday, as he at least provides defensive stability.

*** *ESPNBoston.com***

Will the fire that makes Chris Sale great burn him out in Boston?

Jason Schwartz

LAST JULY, Chris Sale stunned the baseball world when he used scissors to shred a set of 1976 White Sox throwback uniforms because he did not want to pitch in them. The story quickly went viral: Who on earth would do that? Chicago team president Kenny Williams thought he was being pranked when his GM called to inform him. But here is a sampling of reaction from people who have known Sale well over the years:

Seven-year White Sox teammate John Danks: "I wasn't completely shocked by it."

High school teammate and Pittsburgh Pirate Drew Hutchison: "I wouldn't say I was surprised."

High school pitching coach Bob Gendron: "Nothing surprises me with him." Summer league and college pitching coach Derek Tate: "I smile; I just smile."

His own father: "I can't say it surprised me."

Informed that so many people were not exactly floored by his actions, the newly minted Red Sox ace laughs.

"That means you're talking to the right people."

ALMOST A YEAR later, in the first inning of Boston's May 2 game against Baltimore, Sale rocks back and fires a 98 mph fastball behind Manny Machado's knees. The teams have been feuding for weeks, and while Machado screams at the ump and manager Buck Showalter runs out to complain, Sale stands still, glaring toward home plate. Minutes pass; Sale barely blinks. When play resumes, he strikes out the Orioles star with another 98 mph fastball -- this one on the correct side of his knees -- and strides to the Red Sox's dugout, where he high-fives every teammate he can find and yells. A lot.

Lounging in that same dugout a day later, the 6-foot-6 lefty pauses when asked whether he is angry when he pitches. "I'm competitive," he says. "I would say there might be a little bit of anger. But I just really like competing. I really like it. It's fun."

Says his father, Allen, "He has that intensity if he's playing pingpong with his mother."

Sale has harnessed his over-the-top energy mostly for good, riding it to five All-Star Game selections with the White Sox before being traded to the Red Sox in the offseason. Through May 10 of this season, he led MLB in strikeouts, was second in WAR and had a 1.92 ERA.

But Sale's intensity may also be the greatest threat to his continued success. It can overtake him on the mound, causing him to lose focus. "He can still get pissed," says Don Cooper, his pitching coach for seven years with the White Sox. "I still think there's things he's got to master there."

It can also lead to blowups -- Sale is usually good for at least one per year. In 2015, he tried to bust into the Royals' clubhouse to continue an on-field brawl. Last season, months before the uniform ordeal, he lashed out at Williams after the White Sox banned Adam LaRoche's son from the clubhouse.

"You get in between the lines and you're a little amped up, and sometimes it spills over outside the lines," says Sale, 28. "Nobody's perfect; you're going to make mistakes. You just try to learn from them."

Heading into the season, a popular question around Boston was whether such a combustible player could withstand the pressure of pitching in Fenway Park. But those who know Sale say he's all but impervious to the outside world -- he hasn't had a social media account since he deleted Facebook in college. How he'll do in Boston has nothing to do with the city and everything to do with him.

ACCORDING TO HIS father, once Chris decides something is right or wrong, it is near impossible to move him. "A trait he has had since he was 2 is persistence," Allen says. "That comes from the Sale side of the family. We are that way. Me, his grandmother and his great-grandfather Scamahorn."

His sister is the same way. Allen recalls once referring to her as "stubborn" during a parent-teacher conference. The teacher chided him, saying that the school preferred more positive verbiage, like "persistent." "I said that's fine, she's as persistent as a mule," Allen says.

Chris also is, you might say, as persistent as a mule. "We used to say that he'd try to go through the table instead of around it. Something got in his way, he just bowled it over," Allen says. "He is that intense. That is part of his persistence."

Growing up in Lakeland, Florida, though, Sale did not have the talent to match his emotion. He could always locate the ball, but entering high school he was 5-8 and rail thin. He couldn't throw hard and didn't make varsity as a freshman or sophomore. Then one day the next summer, he got sick with what his parents figured was mono. When he finally popped out of bed four days later, he was suddenly taller than Allen, a former college swimmer who stands 6-3. Seeing him for the first time, his mother asked, "What are you standing on?"

Sale's stretched-out limbs gave him newfound leverage, increasing his velocity. He couldn't hit 90 on the gun, but his command allowed him to mow down hitters.

On the mound, though, his emotions were unrefined. "If a batter got a hit off him the time before, he'd throw at him the next time," says Lakeland JV coach Ron Nipper. "He was trying to be the baddest guy on the field."

"He could beat up a cooler a little bit with a bat," his father says.

Then there was the truck. Allen and Chris got ahold of a gray Dodge pickup and souped it up with giant mud tires, a body lift and custom speakers. Chris and his friends would drive around blasting music -- Jeezy was a favorite -- at inconceivable volumes.

The police used to call Mike Campbell, the varsity coach, begging him to get Sale to turn it down. "He had more sound ordinances," Campbell says.

Says Allen: "He liked to do the things that he liked to do, and if somebody didn't like that he played his music too loud or drove his truck somewhere he wasn't supposed to, sometimes he cared and sometimes he didn't. But I have always said he was always good to children and small animals."

Even as Sale improved, college recruiters stayed away. When Allen reached out to the University of North Florida's baseball staff, nobody even replied. Sale's only bite came from Florida Gulf Coast, a D2 program that was getting ready to move up to D1 the next season.

Rusty McKee, the FGCU coach who scouted Sale, recalls being mocked by a North Florida recruiter over the signing. "He said, 'Ha, you got the Sale kid? You didn't do your homework.'"

STILL ONLY THROWING in the 80s, Sale struggled as a freshman at FGCU. That summer he went to Wisconsin to play for the La Crosse Loggers in the Northwoods League. "I was getting crushed," he says.

"He wasn't in throwing shape," says Tate, the Loggers' pitching coach. Sale was so stiff, he could barely touch his toes. Every time he got shelled, he'd beat himself up, driving himself into a downward spiral.

About halfway through the summer, Sale went to Tate and told him he was ready to quit. "He said, 'Coach, I almost drove home last night, I'm so frustrated,'" Tate says.

The team's manager, Andy McKay, remembers having a long conversation with Sale in the bullpen. Sale decided to stay, and from that moment, McKay says, he took his preparation and conditioning more seriously.

"It ended up being a kind of life-changing summer for him," says McKay, a trained sports psychologist who now serves as the Mariners' head of player development.

At McKay's urging, Sale increased his focus on the mental side of the game. "That was something that I had never even put my foot in the water in," he says. "Baseball is a physical game, it's a sport; you just go out there and play. And he brought a different aspect of the game to me. When you have a positive mind frame and when you think more clearly and more positively, it's going to be better."

Crucially, McKay and Tate also adjusted Sale's delivery, lowering his arm slot to give him the deceptive three-quarters motion he has today. "I saw some pretty immediate success in terms of velocity and depth of pitches and movement," Sale says. "It just felt more natural coming out."

By the time he returned to Florida Gulf Coast for his sophomore season -- along with Tate, who joined the Eagles as their pitching coach -- he was a different player. "He'd show up to 5:30 a.m. weights at FGCU and was excited to be there," Tate says.

Sale's velocity climbed into the 90s, and by his junior year, scouts were swarming to Fort Myers, trying to divine whether the stick-figure lefty with the funky delivery could hold up in the majors. Allen Sale, who then weighed 250 pounds, got so fed up with their questions about his son's build that he made himself a T-shirt to wear to games. On the front was the FGCU Eagles logo; on the back, beneath the word SALE, it read, "MY FAT ASS IS PROOF HE'S GOING TO PUT ON WEIGHT."

Sale was virtually unhittable that season, earning National Collegiate Player of the Year honors in 2010. He gave up the truck, and in May, his future wife gave birth to their first son. Allen says Chris left college far more mature than when he entered.

Come draft day, Sale was projected to go as high as No. 4, but many teams still saw him as a reliever. After Kansas City selected Christian Colon at 4 and the Indians took Drew Pomeranz at 5, he began to slide.

Sitting at pick 13, the White Sox were surprised to see Sale still available. They envisioned him as a starter long-term, but the team needed immediate bullpen help. Kenny Williams, then the team's GM, turned to Doug Laumann, his scouting director, and asked where Sale would fit on the current club.

At that moment, there happened to be a lefty throwing in the Chicago bullpen, visible from the draft-room window. "I can tell you right now, he's better than that guy," Laumann replied. Chicago picked Sale.

STANDING IN THE hallway of the White Sox's spring training facility in Glendale, Arizona, pitching coach Don Cooper needs no prompting to discuss his prize pupil.

"I'll just start talking, I guess," he says.

"He had all the physical, I knew that from day one," Cooper says. "It was more the mental side. And keeping him under control and not throwing pitches out of anger. And just continue to focus on the next pitch. He would hate it when somebody got him. He would come out of his shoes."

Just two months after he was drafted and with only 10 innings of minor league experience, Sale was called up by the White Sox in August and dropped into the middle of a division race. In 23 innings down the stretch, he had a 1.93 ERA.

After spending the next season in the bullpen, Sale was inserted into the rotation to start 2012. He relied heavily on his slider early in the season, though, and came down with arm soreness. When manager Robin Ventura announced that he was moving Sale to the bullpen to protect his health, Sale protested to Williams.

But the GM told him he agreed with Ventura. "He took exception to that," Williams says, "so we had a very animated phone call in which he certainly expressed himself, and I encouraged it to a point, and then I expressed myself.

"Hell, it was a 25-minute conversation, and it was in the first 10 minutes that I told him, 'OK, you can go back into the rotation.' And he kept arguing with me that it was a bad decision in the first place.

"At the end of it, I got off the phone and I called [owner] Jerry Reinsdorf, and I said, 'We have an ace.'"

Cutting down on his sliders, Sale made his first All-Star Game and stayed healthy through the season. He continued working with both Cooper and Jeffrey Fishbein, a sports psychologist who served as the White Sox's mental skills coach, on harnessing his intensity.

"I just think for me, it's channeling it, like finding a tunnel," Sale says. "Early on as a starter, when I'd get into trouble, I went for more. And Coop's big thing was, it's never more stuff, it's just more focus."

As Sale grew into an ace, he became one of the most popular players in the White Sox's clubhouse. A lot of pitchers are aloof, says former Chicago slugger Paul Konerko, but Sale was "one of the guys." He'd dole out gifts to teammates and staff, like golf clubs or gift cards. And on the road, Sale often got a suite so teammates could hang out, order room service and play video games (mostly FIFA). "Give Chris room service and video games and he's happy," Konerko says.

Perhaps most appreciated, though, was that for all his fury on the mound, he made a point of never showing up teammates. "I don't get upset at anybody other than myself on a baseball field," Sale says. He believes so strongly in the sanctity of the clubhouse that he won't even discuss what happens inside it with his father.

"Sale will do anything for anybody," says White Sox infielder Tyler Saladino. "He's got your back. And you love those guys that aren't afraid to show it."

All of which means that Sale is most vulnerable to boiling over when he believes his team or teammates have been wronged. In 2014, he appeared to accuse the Tigers of using binoculars to steal signs -- miming binoculars from the dugout and motioning to the outfield -- and beamed Victor Martinez, causing a massive brawl. The next year was when Sale, after being ejected in a fight, tried to continue the festivities in the Kansas City clubhouse.

"With him, you need to see it coming and talk him down before it gets to that point," says Mark Parent, the White Sox's bench coach from 2012 to '15. But even when Sale snapped, teammates often appreciated the support.

"If you're telling me one of his issues is that he cares too much and he flies off the handle when he doesn't like somebody insulting his team or insulting him or one of his teammates and he goes nuts, like, I'm cool with that," Konerko says.

Says Cooper, "The old term 'I'd rather tame a tiger than push a donkey' comes to mind."

Last spring Williams decided that Adam LaRoche would no longer be able to bring his son to the clubhouse every day. LaRoche responded by retiring, setting off something of a national furor. In protest, Sale hung LaRoche's and his son's jerseys in his locker. He alleged that Williams had misled the team about the reasons behind his decision. "We got bald-faced lied to," Sale said last March. "Somebody walked out of those doors the other day, and it was the wrong guy, plain and simple."

Williams says he is back on good terms with Sale, though their relationship never fully recovered. "I certainly took exception to what he said because it wasn't accurate," Williams says. "But I can walk away and say, 'OK, I hope everyone else is fighting that hard for a teammate.'"

The throwback uniforms were not a totally different situation. The shirts had long tails, and Sale's close friend Carlos Rodon had trouble pitching in them the year before. "It kind of sucked," Rodon says. "You got your jersey stuck on your leg." Sale asked the team to move the throwbacks to a day when he wasn't pitching, but the club declined. He thought the shirts would hinder his pitching, which meant they would hurt the team. "That was the only part of it," Sale says.

Simply put, he was sure he was right and the White Sox were wrong.

WHEN HE TRADED for Sale, Red Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said he looked into the pitcher's behavior and was satisfied. "He's got an edge to him, a good edge," Dombrowski told reporters. "His teammates love him."

But not all blowups are created equal. The Red Sox's clubhouse is about a third of the size of the White Sox's, and whenever a controversy emerges in Boston, reporters pour in and the airwaves overheat. Life quickly becomes miserable for everyone within a square mile of Fenway Park. This is a city that is still not quite over the great chicken and beer debacle of 2011.

Back in the dugout, Sale glances at team PR man Kevin Gregg nearby. "I'm trying to keep it easy on him this year," he says.

Discussing his past incidents, Sale uses the phrase "learning experience" so often that he apologizes. "I hate to keep going back to it," he says. He's keenly aware of how his temper works and believes the explosions are behind him. "I've apologized for my actions to the people I needed to apologize to, and I've stood my ground where I thought I've needed to stand my ground," Sale says. "I'm not here to change the past, I'm just here to try to do better in the future.

"I'm not ashamed of anything I've done on the field," he adds. "That's adrenaline going, that's being competitive."

A season ago, Sale tried to pitch more to contact, cutting down on his velocity and strikeouts so that he could go deeper into games. This year he came to camp in better shape than ever -- "I trained really hard this offseason," he says -- and has turned Cooper's old advice sideways. He believes he can have more stuff and more focus. "I'm trying to find a way of raising both of those bars at the same time," he says. "It's a combination of both physically and mentally being in, I don't want to say a better spot but just being in a different scenario."

So far, it's working: Sale is piling up innings and strikeouts. During Sale's eight-inning, 11-K performance against the Orioles, Pedro Martinez tweeted, "Chris Sale is already surpassing everything I've done."

The question, of course, is whether he can keep it up. "Probably, at some point, something will happen that he thinks is not right, and he'll try to correct it," Allen Sale says. "And if he can't get it corrected, he'll correct it in the way he sees fit at the time."

Sometimes he will still get pissed on the mound. "I can't change that," Sale says. "I don't think I want to change it completely. It's what makes me who I am."

Mini Yadi? For Christian Vazquez, there's no greater compliment

Scott Lauber

ST. LOUIS -- Near the end of the 2014 season, a few weeks after he was traded from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Boston Red Sox, right-hander Joe Kelly came up with a nickname for his new favorite catcher.

"Mini Yadi," Kelly said then. "I call him that."

Three years later, the sentiment still applies to Christian Vazquez, even though the moniker hasn't caught on for general consumption. Even after Tommy John elbow surgery erased Vazquez's 2015 season and slowed his projected maturation into the second coming of Cardinals star Yadier Molina, Vazquez, 26, continues to draw rave reviews from pitchers who adore throwing to him.

To Vazquez, there is no compliment higher than being mentioned in the same breath as Molina, the gold standard for defensive excellence behind the plate for nearly a decade and the most accomplished active backstop from Puerto Rico, a hotbed for catchers.

Remember when the Dominican Republic was known for churning out shortstops? Well, Puerto Rico has been a cradle of catching talent for 30 years. Other Latin American countries have spawned their share of solid backstops, but consider the roster of All-Star catchers who hail from Puerto Rico: Ellie Rodriguez, Ozzie Virgil Jr., Benito Santiago, Sandy Alomar Jr., Javy Lopez, Jorge Posada, the Molina brothers (Bengie, Jose and Yadier), Geovany Soto and, of course, newly elected Hall of Famer Ivan Rodriguez.

"We see them like idols," said Vazquez, who hails from Bayamon. "Growing up, you want to be like them. Those guys were very good, man. They give a good reputation to being a catcher, so the kids want to be there too."

There's a brotherhood, literal and figurative, among catchers from the island. The Molinas are the only sibling trio to catch in the majors, and each brother has won two World Series rings to boot. They also lend their expertise and advice to young catchers who come along.

For years, Vazquez and Jose Molina worked out together in the offseason in Puerto Rico. Yadier Molina would join them from time to time, and even now, after he relocated to Jupiter, Florida, in the winter, Yadi routinely keeps tabs on Vazquez through text messages.

When Vazquez was recovering from elbow surgery, he said he received frequent encouragement from Jose and Yadi.

"They texted me a lot during my rehab: 'How are we doing? How do you feel?'" Vazquez said. "It was very good to know those guys were thinking about me. It kept me going."

When Vazquez was recovering from elbow surgery, he received text messages from Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina (above) -- encouragement that kept him going. Denis Poroy/Getty Images
Like the Molinas' father, Benjamin Sr., Christian's father, Rafael Vazquez, was a catcher in the amateur leagues in Puerto Rico. He nurtured young Christian's interest in playing the position by handing down his equipment, from the mask and bulky mitt to the chest protector and shin guards. To the less adventurous, they are the tools of ignorance. To the Vazquez men, they formed a suit of armor.

But the father's real selling point to his son came in the form of an instructional video featuring Rodriguez.

Rodriguez was in the midst of a 21-year career in which he caught more games than anyone in big league history (2,427), was named an All-Star 14 times and won 13 Gold Gloves. He raised the bar for the catching position, with his reflexes behind the plate and his take-charge approach to calling a game.

What's more, Rodriguez's rocket arm served as a speed trap on the bases. There wasn't a runner he didn't dare pick off with throws from his knees, nor was there a base stealer he wasn't sure he could catch. At his peak, from 1995-2001 with the Texas Rangers, Rodriguez threw out an average of 53.9 percent of would-be base stealers, including 68 percent (35 of 58) in 2001.

Vazquez's father helped his son hone his skills by showing him an instructional video featuring the rocket-armed Ivan Rodriguez (above). Brett Davis/USA TODAY Sports
With Rodriguez setting the example, it's little wonder that a generation of young baseball players in Puerto Rico wanted to become catchers.

In 2011, after Rodriguez played his final game in the big leagues for the Washington Nationals, he went home to play a few games for Caguas in the Puerto Rican Winter League. He made a point of watching young catchers take infield practice, and Vazquez, then 20 and fresh off his first full minor league season as a catcher, caught Rodriguez's eye with his arm strength and fearlessness.

"You could tell he watched a lot of videos of me, because I wasn't afraid to throw the ball, either," Rodriguez said in 2015, after Vazquez reached the big leagues. "When you're not afraid to do that, you're going to play the game for a long time. That's good to see from a young catcher."

Rodriguez complimented Vazquez on his throwing, a moment that meant everything to a young catcher struggling to find his way in the minor leagues. A few years later, they met again in Fort Myers, Florida, where Vazquez was working out after the season and Rodriguez's son was pitching for the Minnesota Twins' instructional league team.

The Red Sox called up Vazquez midway through the 2014 season, and he threw out 15 of 29 attempted base stealers, a 51.7 percent success rate that would make even a Molina blush. It took longer than expected, but Vazquez's arm is back to pre-surgery form. He threw out three of the first four runners who tried to steal against him this season and was 7-for-11 entering this week's series against the Cardinals.

Looking back, Vazquez said he believes the encouragement he received from Rodriguez helped propel him to the majors.

"Everybody wants to be like Pudge, you know?" Vazquez said. "That's a good push, to hear from a guy like him that he thinks you're doing a good job."

Vazquez said he wonders whether the passion for catching will continue to grip the island's young players. He returns home in the winter and sees kids idolizing shortstops Carlos Correa of the Houston Astros and Francisco Lindor of the Cleveland Indians. Perhaps the next generation of Puerto Rican talent in the big leagues will come at shortstop.

"Correa and Lindor, they are the stars now," Vazquez said. "I think they don't want to put all that [catcher's] gear on and get hit and block the ball and go through all that. But for my age [group], for us growing up, Yadi and Pudge, Jose Molina and Posada, we wanted to be like them. That was very special to us."

With latest homer, Jackie Bradley Jr. surprised even himself

Scott Lauber

ST. LOUIS -- Jackie Bradley Jr. figured it was just another out.

Never mind that the Boston Red Sox center fielder had barreled a 90 mph sinker, low and away, the other way to the gap in left-center field in the second inning Tuesday night. Bradley has struggled so much over the past month that it seems he has stopped giving himself the benefit of the doubt. Even the well-hit balls have started to feel the same as the ones that die on the warning track.

"If you go look at my replay, I put my head down and threw my bat to the side. I promise you," Bradley said. "I didn't think I got all of it. I thought it was going to be caught."

Well, it wasn't caught, and not for a lack of trying, either. St. Louis Cardinals center fielder Dexter Fowler leaped at the wall but couldn't bring back Bradley's third homer -- and only his fifth extra-base hit -- in 88 plate appearances this season. The solo shot gave the Sox a two-run lead en route to a 6-3 victory in the opener of a two-game interleague series at Busch Stadium.

So, Bradley surprised even himself. He'll take it, of course, especially considering his numbers entering the game. Of the 267 major leaguers with at least 75 plate appearances, Bradley ranked 261st in on-base

percentage (.238), 251st in batting average (.182) and 258th with a .537 OPS that was lower than the slugging percentage of 38 players.

All together now: Blech.

The Red Sox have come to expect more from a player who broke through last season as an All-Star with 30 doubles and 26 homers. And when manager John Farrell benched Bradley for all but one pinch at-bat in three recent games -- all against right-handed starting pitchers, no less -- he also described him as "pivotal to us for many reasons." The point, quite clearly, was to give Bradley a few days to clear his mind, work on his swing and get back on track, not to simply sit him in favor of veteran Chris Young, who is best used as a fourth outfielder at this point in his career.

But the Sox have come to expect extreme streakiness from Bradley, too. When he's hot, the way he was during his 29-game hitting streak last season, he can carry the offense every bit as much as Mookie Betts or Dustin Pedroia. But when he's cold, as he was over a 33-game spell last summer when he went 20-for-121 (.165) with a .560 OPS, he's one of the least productive hitters in the league.

Farrell says he believes a hot streak is coming when he sees Bradley hit the ball to left-center field. It's when Bradley tries to pull everything to right field, according to Farrell, that he begins to go cold. In that case, the opposite-field homer and a single to left field in the seventh inning must have been positive signs for Bradley, right?

"You know you feel good," Bradley said of whether he can tell when he's about to go on one of his tears. "You can't necessarily bank on results, so to speak, because you can hit the ball hard and don't have anything to show for it, or you can hit the ball soft and have plenty to show for it. I'll take the results over hitting the ball hard."

By now, the Red Sox will tolerate the bad Bradley because they know how valuable the good Bradley can be. And they need the good Bradley more than ever. Without retired icon David Ortiz to rely on, Bradley, rookie Andrew Benintendi and Mitch Moreland are the left-handed hitters capable of doing the most damage in a batting order that leans decidedly to the right with Pedroia, Xander Bogaerts, Hanley Ramirez and Betts, who just so happened Tuesday night to smash his 10th career leadoff homer to tie Jacoby Ellsbury for the franchise record.

Before the game, Farrell was asked about the Red Sox's lack of production at third base and whether light-hitting fill-in Deven Marrero might merit playing time even after Pablo Sandoval (knee sprain) returns from the disabled list, possibly as soon as next week.

"Given the way the bottom half of our lineup has been for a little bit of time now, the ability to impact the baseball in the bottom third would be important," Farrell said.

As much as anyone, it's Bradley to whom the Red Sox are looking to provide that boost.

Perhaps Tuesday night was a step in that direction, even if Bradley didn't know it.

*** *WEEI.com***

Red Sox Assistant GM Eddie Romero Explains Why Devers Is Still A Ways Away From Majors

Rob Bradford

For those wanting Rafael Devers to come in and save the day at third base for the Red Sox, it sounds like you're going to have to wait a while.

Appearing on the Bradfo Sho podcast, Red Sox assistant general manager Eddie Romero offered the reality when it comes to where Devers is in his progression toward becoming a major leaguer.

(18:40) “I don’t know what the plan is for him,” Romero said. “I know he is progressing very well. I think he is where he needs to be. As Dave mentioned last week, and we’ve said in our discussions over the past few days, he’s progressing well. He’s in a good spot. I think [Double-A Portland manager] Carlos Febles and the staff down there has done a great job developing. They know there’s another level to go to Triple-A and then the big league level, so he’s really only two notches away. Maturity. More at-bats. More games for him. And the fact that he’s still refining his approach which is a big thing. Our hitting coach, Lee May, is really emphasizing that with him. We’ve seen some results over the past month or so, or the past two weeks, that are encouraging in that regards where he’s refining his approach. That league knows who he is now, as well. He’s being pitched to difficulty and differently and now it’s his turn to make that adjustment and progress in that.”

Romero also explained that just because Andrew Benintendi made the jump from Double-A to the majors a year ago with some success, the organization isn’t looking at Devers’ situation in the same light.

(20:30) “I agree with that,” said Romero when it was suggested that Benintendi’s scenario was different than Devers because of age and experience. “Benny has played through high school and then he had his two years of college at a major school in probably the best conference of college baseball. Where Raffy comes from the riskiest and hardest to project and the market where he have the least experience before being thrown into professional baseball. We have to remember, he’s still 20 years old. He won’t be 21 until after the season. I know I keep saying it, but he’s in a good place developmentally. There are some things he needs to work on and he knows what those things are and that’s what he’s doing right now.”

So, what is Devers prioritizing?

(21:20) “I think it’s refining the approach,” Romero said. “I think that’s the biggest thing. He’s never been a guy to strikeout that much, but he also hasn’t walked that much. I think that’s one thing that more than walks or strikeouts, handling what pitchers are giving you and making sure you’re swinging at pitches you can do damage with. That’s something, especially at a young age, without that many minor league at-bats, he continues to work on. I think he knows the importance of that and that will only improve his numbers. That will allow to get to his power more. And I think that’s been the area of concentration for him. And I know chatting with him, he’s always working on his defense, as well. Whether it’s positioning, what he can get to with his range and coming in on balls and accuracy of his throws. That’s always on his mind, as well. It’s not always just about the bat.”

*** *CSNNE.com***

Why Mexican League Pick-Up Hector Velazquez's Red Sox Debut Matters

Evan Drellich

ST. LOUIS - If not him, then who?

The Red Sox are dipping further into their thin starting pitching depth this week, scheduling righty Hector Velazquez to start Thursday in Oakland.

Velazquez was signed out of the Mexican League over the winter for \$30,000, a price that can escalate depending on his time in the big leagues.

The Sox would surely love to pay more for Velazquez — if that means they, in fact, have a reliable pitcher. He doesn’t throw hard, but has a strong mix of pitches and was doing very well at Triple-A Pawtucket, with a 1.55 ERA, 20 strikeouts and five walks in 29 innings.

Kyle Kendrick's big league stint did not work out. Kendrick could get another shot, but he'd be hard to sell as a viable long-term option right now. So the Sox move down the short list to Velazquez.

After him, there seems only one other Triple-A pitcher in the major league mix: Brian Johnson.

Arguably, the Sox already need one starting pitcher to emerge. How Velazquez fares, therefore, could impact their trade deadline approach.

One of the reasons his signing was smart was because he's not entirely green at age 28, but has minor league options. He can be sent to the minors and recalled freely.

So much about the Sox rotation depends on David Price, who may return to the majors after his Pawtucket start Friday. But even if Price comes back healthy and effective, the Sox could use a sense of reliability from their No. 6 starter, so to speak. And even their fifth, if you want to really get ambitious.

Lefty Drew Pomeranz is set to throw a bullpen tomorrow after his left triceps scare Sunday. Maybe Pomeranz is fine. But he's also hard to believe in as a long term option right now, if for no other reason than his history of health issues.

Velazquez was a smart, low-risk signing by the Sox that might not prove fruitful right away, if ever. But if it doesn't work out this go-around, the 2017 Sox don't have many other places to turn for rotation help aside from the trade market.

*** *Associated Press***

Betts, Bradley go deep to lift Red Sox over Cardinals 6-3

ST. LOUIS — Mookie Betts hasn't felt great about his performances lately, even if the results for the Boston Red Sox right fielder look just fine.

Betts homered and drove in two runs to back six quality innings by Eduardo Rodriguez and the Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals 6-3 on Tuesday night in the opener of a two-game interleague series.

"I feel OK," Betts said. "I had a good first at-bat and then not really another good one after that. So I'm just trying to put it all together."

Betts went 1 for 5 and is batting .371 (13 for 35) with five homers and five doubles over his last eight games. He won AL player of the week Monday, but still says he is searching for better rhythm.

"I just feel like I'm not really consistent yet," Betts said. "I have a good game and then a couple bad ones. That's part of the game. It's going to take a while."

Jackie Bradley Jr. had two of Boston's six hits, including a home run, and Rodriguez (2-1) allowed three runs and five hits. Rodriguez walked two, struck out five and threw a season-high 110 pitches.

"Overall he was solid," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "We played a strong game, I think, in every phase here tonight. Particularly some very good defensive plays."

St. Louis made three errors and lost for just the second time in 10 games. Lance Lynn (4-2) gave up four runs, two earned, and three hits in six innings, striking out four and walking one.

"I gave up two early with the homers and the team fought back and gave me a lead and I gave it away," Lynn said. "They gave me a chance to win and I didn't get it done."

Betts began the game with his seventh homer and 10th career leadoff shot, tying Jacoby Ellsbury for the franchise record. Bradley added a solo homer in the second for a 2-0 lead.

Craig Kimbrel pitched a scoreless ninth for his 12th save in 13 chances.

In the third inning, St. Louis' Dexter Fowler smacked an RBI double off the left field wall, and Tommy Pham and Matt Carpenter followed with sacrifice flies.

The Red Sox scored twice in the fifth after a leadoff walk and an error. Bradley scored on an RBI groundout by Betts. Deven Marrero, who reached on an error by Jedd Gyorko, scored on Dustin Pedroia's single to center to make it 4-3.

Boston scored twice in the eighth, on Christian Vazquez's sac fly and then a dropped fly ball by Pham that was the third Cardinals error.

VELAZQUEZ TO START THURSDAY

Farrell said right-hander Hector Velazquez will be called up from Triple-A to start Thursday at Oakland. Velazquez, whose contract was purchased from the Mexican League in February, is 2-1 with a 1.55 ERA in five starts at Pawtucket.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: LHP Drew Pomeranz, who left his start Sunday because of tightness in his left triceps, is scheduled to throw a bullpen session Wednesday. ... INF Pablo Sandoval (knee sprain) could begin a rehab assignment Friday. ... LHP David Price (left elbow strain) will make a rehab start for Pawtucket on Friday.

Cardinals: General manager John Mozeliak said INF Jhonny Peralta (upper respiratory) could be activated Friday and RF Stephen Piscotty (right hamstring) sometime over the weekend. ... LHP Tyler Lyons (right intercostal strain) is expected to make one more rehab start. ... RHP John Gant (groin) has been activated from the DL and optioned to Triple-A Memphis.

UP NEXT

Red Sox: RHP Rick Porcello (2-5, 4.01) is 1-1 with a 1.80 ERA in three road starts this season.

Cardinals: RHP Mike Leake (4-2, 1.94) is coming off a 3-2 loss to the Cubs in which he allowed two runs on five hits in six innings.

*** *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch***

Defensive drop-off hurts Cardinals

Rick Hummel

Boston Red Sox lefthander Eduardo Rodriguez hasn't had a hit in eight interleague at-bats in his career.

But the fact that he hit the ball at all in the fifth inning Tuesday night was a key to the DH-less Red Sox dropping the Cardinals 6-3 at Busch Stadium as the Cardinals fell to 3-11 in their last 14 interleague games here.

Cardinals starter Lance Lynn, who gave up solo homers in the first two innings, allowed just one other hit through six. But, holding a 3-2 lead, he issued his only walk of the game, to Jackie Bradley Jr., to open the sixth. Then Devan Marrero slashed a potential double-play grounder to third baseman Jedd Gyorko, who

had the short hop glance off the heel of his glove and into the outfield for just his second error of the season and the Cardinals' second of three on a night when their ugly defense resurfaced.

"I didn't really have enough time to get around it or come and get it," said Gyorko. "But it's a play I've got to make. It's a big play in the game. I could have had two outs and ... the pitcher coming up, so it's a huge play."

In a sacrifice situation, Rodriguez took a mighty swing and hit a tapper just far enough in front of and to the right of the plate that catcher Yadier Molina had only one play, to throw out the Boston pitcher at first as the other runners advanced. Soon, they both would score.

Mookie Betts' grounder to short, with the infield back, plated the equalizing run and Dustin Pedroia singled home the go-ahead run.

Cardinals manager Mike Matheny called Rodriguez's swinging away "an odd play. It worked out really well for them. He couldn't have put it in a better spot, really. We were thinking he was bunting there and it ended up working better than a bunt because the runners got good jumps."

Lynn took himself to task for not clamping onto the lead once he had it. "I gave it away," he said. "They gave me a chance to win and I didn't get it done, so that's on me."

He did not blame his defense, although he seemed to question the Cardinals having their infield back on the left side when Betts was hitting in the sixth.

"When you have second and third and the infield's back and we give up a run, that's difficult to swallow," Lynn said.

But Cardinals lefthander Brett Cecil, who has been horrid lately, had something to do with the outcome, too, as did some more slipshod Cardinals defense.

Cecil, after nearly picking a runner off first in the eighth — Xander Bogaerts slid hand-first around Aledmys Diaz's tag at second — then walked the only two hitters he had been brought in to face, lefthanded-batting Andrew Benintendi and lefthanded-hitting Mitch Moreland. The second pass, on four straight balls, induced a round of boos from many in the paid house of 41,514, and loaded the bases with one out.

The Red Sox scored an insurance run on Christian Vazquez's fly ball to medium center as Bogaerts outran Dexter Fowler's throw home. That should have been it, but left fielder Tommy Pham, chasing a fly by Bradley to the left-field line, overran the ball and dropped it as it drifted back into fair territory. Benintendi scored, although Pham threw out Moreland at the plate to end the inning.

"I was sprinting hard and it came back in on me," said Pham. "You have to catch that ball. You can't drop it."

In a perfect world, Cecil would have the good feeling of picking off the first runner and perhaps wouldn't have walked the two hitters.

"He comes in and makes a perfect pickoff and we have a guy out at two steps and (Bogaerts) pulls a Houdini act to get in safe at second base," said Matheny. "I mean, he went around the glove. I mean, you put the glove down. You put it in the right spot and (Diaz) almost got kicked in the face in the meanwhile."

"There's some things you can work on, maybe try and go up the line a little bit to get the runner, but he was in good position. Carp (first baseman Matt Carpenter) gave a great feed. Just one of those fluky things."

Cecil has allowed lefthanded hitters to bat .464 against him, and he's walked six others.

“He is just going to have to keep fighting his way through this,” said Matheny. “I know he’s not where he wants to be right now. He’s got to fix it.”

Matheny didn’t have a choice in his lefthanded bullpen Tuesday because Kevin Siegrist, who had appeared in three of the previous four games, was unavailable with a stiff neck. And Tyler Lyons still is on a rehab option.

“We need a lefty right there,” said Matheny. “We’ve got two lefthanded bats. We’ve got an opportunity to get us out of that and keep it a one-run game. We can try to figure out some other roles, other spots, to get him in. But we’ve got to have some help.”

Betts, starting his third full season in the majors, belted the 10th leadoff home run of his career when he carried a Lynn fastball over the wall in right-center to start the game. Lynn had given up just one home run and one run batted in to righthanded hitters before Tuesday when three righthanded hitters knocked in runs.

In the second, Bradley, hitting .143 (nine for 63) against righthanded pitching this season, hit his third homer of the season to the opposite field, left center.

Rodriguez made a huge mistake in the Cardinals’ second when he threw a diving pitch that hit Lynn, who was trying to bunt, in the ribs. Lynn, who had jackknifed to the ground, remained there for several seconds and then as medical help arrived, got up and slammed his bat to the turf as he discarded it.

“No one likes to get hit,” he said.

This was a good thing for the Cardinals, however, because now with Kolten Wong, who had singled, and Lynn both on base, Fowler larruped a double off the left-field wall. Wong scored and Lynn slid into third with still nobody out.

Lynn then came home and Fowler made third as Pham flied to center.

With the score now tied, Carpenter skied a pop into short left field. Shortstop Bogaerts, with his back to the infield, made a sliding catch, but left fielder Benintendi should have taken the play. When Fowler saw that Bogaerts was taking charge of the ball, he alertly took off and slid home safely with the go-ahead run.

“Then I was happy,” said Lynn, who, forgetting his pain, now had the lead.

The Cardinals’ loss was just their second in their last 10 games. But three errors, leading to three unearned runs, and bad lefthanded relief, cannot be trends. Nor can losing interleague games at home.

Fowler contributes with bat, glove and legs in loss to Boston

Joe Lyons

Dexter Fowler is back. This time, he believes, for good.

“I hope so,” the Cardinals center fielder said following Tuesday’s 6-3 loss to the Boston Red Sox at Busch Stadium. “We’ll see.”

Fowler, who strained his throwing shoulder in a 5-4 loss to visiting Milwaukee on May 4, has been somewhat limited since. He did return to the starting lineup against the Cubs, making starts on Friday and Saturday.

On Sunday, he was limited to pinch-hitting duty, hoping to take full advantage of Monday’s off day.

"The main thing is giving it a little more rest; that's the point of not playing everyday," he said. "When you can't play, you try to stay in the game as much as you can and just try to be ready when you get a chance again."

Fowler returned to the starting lineup Tuesday and turned in a solid game, contributing with his bat, his glove and his legs.

With the Cardinals down 2-0, thanks to solo homers from Mookie Betts to lead off the game and Jackie Bradley Jr. with one out in the second inning, Fowler was firmly in the middle of a three-run third inning that allowed the home team to take its only lead of the night.

Kolten Wong led off the inning with a base hit up the middle and then, after failing twice on sacrifice bunt attempts, pitcher Lance Lynn was hit by a 1-2 pitch. Fowler followed with a run-scoring double over the head of left fielder Andrew Benintendi and off the wall in left.

Tommy Pham followed with a sacrifice fly to center to score Lynn, with Fowler beating the throw to third.

Matt Carpenter followed with a blooper toward left. Benintendi appeared to get a late start, but shortstop Xander Bogaerts somehow made the play, coming up with a sliding catch with his back to the infield. He quickly spun and threw a strike to the plate. But Fowler beat it, giving the Cardinals a short-lived 3-2 lead.

"Great base-running, obviously, making that tag play with the shortstop going back," Cardinals manager Mike Matheny said. Dexter is "swinging the bat extremely well. I like where he is right now."

Signed to be a catalyst at the top of the Cardinals' lineup, Fowler was simply trying to make something happen.

"When the opportunity is there, you have to take it," he said.

Fowler, who's batting .228 with four homers, 13 RBIs and one steal, was robbed of another extra-base hit while leading in the fifth as Boston third baseman Devan Marrero came up with a nice back-hand play on a shot that appeared headed for the left-field corner.

On a day when the Cardinals made three errors, Fowler turned in the home team's best defensive play when he made a running catch before making contact with the wall on a shot to the left-center gap by Mitch Moreland.

"I'm fine," he said. "I feel fine."

The Cardinals, who entered Tuesday's action having won eight of nine games, allowed a pair of unearned runs in the sixth fifth, allowing the Red Sox to regain the lead at 4-3. In the eighth, a botched pickoff and a dropped fly ball helped Boston close out its 6-3 win.

"It's one of 162 games," Fowler said. "You make mistakes, they capitalize _ it's a loss. All you can do is try to put it behind you and make sure you're ready to play tomorrow."

After getting hurt in the final game of the Redbirds' last homestand, Fowler sat out two games and spent several more limited to pinch-hitting duty _ where he excelled.

On May 9, he singled and drove in the game-winning run in a 6-5 come-from-behind road victory over the Miami Marlins. The next night, in the sixth, he came on and delivered a two-run triple and then scored on a Kolten Wong sacrifice fly as the Cardinals scored six times in the inning to turn a 4-0 deficit into a 6-4 lead.

The Redbirds went on to a 7-5 win to complete a historic 6-0 road trip that included three-game sweeps in Atlanta and Miami.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Cardinals had never gone undefeated on a trip of six or more games in their 126-season history.

With Fowler and right fielder Stephen Piscotty (hamstring) out, the Cardinals have received excellent play from call-ups Pham and Magneuris Sierra. But getting Fowler back is key for this club moving forward.

Dexter is "swinging the bat extremely well," Matheny said. "I like where he is right now."