

The Boston Red Sox Thursday, May 18, 2017

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox rally to beat Cardinals in extras

Peter Abraham

ST. LOUIS — By the time the game finally ended, only a security guard was remaining in the visitors' bullpen at Busch Stadium. Every Red Sox reliever had been used.

And every one of them pitched well. The Sox got seven scoreless innings out of their bullpen and beat the St. Louis Cardinals, 5-4, in 13 innings on Wednesday night.

It was left to rookie Ben Taylor to finish the game and the 24-year-old came through, striking out Magneuris Sierra with a runner on first base. It was his first career save.

With the Sox down 4-0 after the second inning, starter Rick Porcello and eight relievers combined on 11 scoreless innings.

"This one tonight is a lot of grit, a lot of character," manager John Farrell said.

The winning run came on a pinch-hit single by Chris Young with two outs in the top of the 13th.

Mitch Moreland doubled with two outs off Sam Tuivailala, his fly ball down the line in left landing inside the foul line and bouncing into the stands. The Cardinals then intentionally walked Jackie Bradley Jr. to get to the pitcher's spot in the order.

Young came out of the dugout and knocked the second pitch he saw into center field to complete the comeback.

"It's one of those games when you stay loose waiting for an opportunity," Young said. "With a runner in scoring position, you're just trying to find a way to get your bat on the ball."

Sweeping a two-game series is usually not much of a statement. But the first-place Cardinals came in having won eight of nine.

"This is a big win. It's a huge shift," Farrell said. "Any time you get this deep in an extra-inning game, to come away with a win they feel like two at times."

Said Bradley: "This was a huge win. I feel like this is very pivotal."

Now 21-18, the Sox have won three of four and start a four-game series in Oakland on Thursday night with righthander Hector Velazquez making his major league debut.

No pressure, new guy. Just go deep in the game and pitch well because all your teammates will be tired.

Bradley was 2 for 5 with a walk and a mammoth two-run homer. Xander Bogaerts had two triples and drove in a run. Moreland reached base three times and scored two runs.

"That was a big effort by everybody," Porcello said.

After Porcello allowed four runs over six innings, the Sox used four relievers over the next two innings as Farrell matched up two lefthanders (Robbie Ross Jr. and Robby Scott) and two righthanders (Matt Barnes and Joe Kelly) to hold the Cardinals down.

Down 4-0, the Sox came back.

Moreland led off the seventh inning with an infield single off St. Louis starter Mike Leake and took second on a throwing error by shortstop Aledmys Diaz.

Bradley then launched a first-pitch sinker to straightway center field for his fourth home run. The ball landed just below the top of the batter's eye, 441 feet away.

Bradley has three home runs in his last seven games and is steadily emerging from what was a long slump.

Facing Trevor Rosenthal in the eighth inning, Dustin Pedroia drew a walk with one out. Bogaerts' second triple, almost to the same spot in right center field, scored Pedroia.

Andrew Benintendi's fly ball down the line in left was deep enough to score Bogaerts and the game was tied.

Benintendi was 0 for 5 otherwise. He is hitless in his last 26 at-bats.

The Sox used Craig Kimbrel against the top of the St. Louis order in the ninth inning and he retired three batters in 13 pitches. The closer has set down 26 of the last 27 batters he has faced. His earned run average is down to 0.96.

Heath Hembree worked a scoreless inning before Fernando Abad came on for the 11th inning. The lefthander got through two innings, throwing 32 pitches. He was the winner.

Abad tired in the 12th inning, walking Tommy Pham with one out. He got Matt Carpenter on a fly ball to left field. Catcher Christian Vazquez then threw Pham out trying to steal second to end the inning.

"Didn't want to have to go to Taylor in that inning if we could at all avoid it. That was a big out," Farrell said.

The Cardinals went to work on Porcello in the first inning when Dexter Fowler led off with a home run that cleared the home bullpen in right field and landed several rows deep in the stands.

St. Louis sent nine batters to the plate in the second inning and scored three runs.

Porcello was steady from there and that helped the Sox get back in the game.

Leake, who looks like a scrawnier version of Clay Buchholz, went seven innings and allowed two runs. He struck out five without a walk.

Red Sox' Jackie Bradley Jr. working on his throwing mechanics

Peter Abraham

ST. LOUIS — Jackie Bradley Jr. had 13 assists last season, the most in the majors from center field. Through Tuesday, he didn't have any.

Part of that is lack of opportunity as opposing runners are careful not to challenge his strong arm. But Bradley also feels he has missed some chances and needs to improve his throwing mechanics.

“Stop holding to the ball too long when I’m making throws. Get a little air under it instead of spiking it,” he said before the Red Sox played the St. Louis Cardinals on Wednesday.

Bradley said he has been cognizant of hitting the cutoff man and that had taken some loft off the ball. When at his best, Bradley is able to hit the plate on a bounce from most anywhere in center field.

This season, some of his throws have been a little wayward.

“When he overthrows a baseball he’ll pull it to the first-base side of the mound when he’s throwing to home. That’s on-going work,” manager John Farrell said.

“Jackie’s such a perfectionist when it comes to the defensive side of it. He knows it’s a very strong part of his game and takes a lot of pride in it.”

Bradley said it’s not a matter of needing more time. It’s more technique.

“I just need to make better throws. Recently my throws have been on line but I’m holding onto the ball too long,” he said. “If I let it go a tick higher I’ll get more carry on the ball.”

Sandoval set to DH

Sandoval sprained his right knee on April 23 when he crouched down to field a ball at Baltimore. He has not played since, missing 20 games.

“He’s going to need some games to get back into game shape,” Farrell said. “The fact is he’s done a lot of work to get back to this point. . . . He’s ready to get that rehab underway.”

Sandoval hit .213 with a .646 OPS in 17 games before the injury and committed four errors. But his return might actually represent an upgrade for the Sox.

Through Tuesday, Sox third basemen have hit .223 with a .599 OPS and committed 13 errors.

As a group, Sox third basemen have the lowest OPS in the American League and grade out the worst defensively.

“I feel ready to play,” Sandoval said. “But I don’t know how long it will take to get back. I’ll let them decide.”

Said Farrell: “He’s been down roughly about four weeks now. There’s going to be some timing to regain at the plate and want to see the mobility and the range at third base. We don’t have a date marked that he’s returning to us.”

A full life

Former Red Sox catcher David Ross was at Busch Stadium as part of ESPN’s crew. It was his debut game.

Ross was with the Red Sox briefly in 2008 and again in 2013-14. He played only 36 regular-season games in ’13 then caught seven games in the postseason, four in the World Series.

Ross signed with the Cubs before the 2015 season and last season helped them win the Series.

“It’s great seeing these guys again,” said Ross after talking on the field to Dustin Pedroia. “Boston will always be a special place for me.”

In addition to ESPN, Ross has a position with the Cubs and is a contestant on “Dancing With The Stars.” He also has a book coming out.

At 40, Ross is starting several new careers after 18 years of playing professionally.

“It’s been unexpected but very exciting, too,” he said. “For a backup catcher, it’s not what I’m used to.”

Holt in at DH

Brock Holt, who left Monday night’s Triple A game with concussion-type symptoms, was the DH for Pawtucket on Wednesday. Holt has been on the disabled list since April 21 with vertigo. “This is almost a day-to-day situation with Brock,” Farrell said . . . Righthanded reliever Carson Smith is moving closer to facing hitters as he continues his comeback from Tommy John surgery. Smith is throwing off a mound twice a week and has started using breaking pitches . . . The Sox start a four-game series in Oakland on Thursday. They were scheduled to arrive in San Francisco at approximately 2:30 a.m. Pacific time . . . So much for crisp games being played under National League rules. Through Tuesday, the Sox had played four interleague games in NL parks. All four games were at least three hours and 21 minutes with an average of 3:32 . . . The Cardinals honored their 1967 World Series title team before the game. Manager Red Schoendienst, 94, was on hand along with Tim McCarver, Mike Shannon, and Hall of Famers Lou Brock, Steve Carlton, Orlando Cepeda, and Bob Gibson. The Cardinals beat the Red Sox in seven games that season. Gibson won three of the games, allowing three runs over 27 innings.

Reminders in St. Louis of great Red Sox third basemen

Nick Cafardo

ST. LOUIS — A few things St. Louis/Boston:

■ If anything, Bill Mueller, now the assistant hitting coach of the Cardinals, is a reminder of what third base used to look like for the Red Sox.

He was the 2003 batting champion, a good third baseman, who just tore it up that season hitting mostly seventh and eighth in the most prolific offense of Grady Little’s managerial career. The switch-hitting Mueller hit .326 with 19 homers and 85 RBIs and played in 146 games after platooning with Shea Hillenbrand early in the season. Mueller hit mostly seventh and eighth, though as his prowess with the bat escalated he often hit in the No. 2 spot in the order in the second half of the season. Mueller had a .938 OPS, which included a .398 on base percentage.

Apprised of the Red Sox history at third since he and Mike Lowell departed, Mueller said, “It’s one of those cyclical things. I think all of us thought Pablo [Sandoval] would be their answer there. But it’s not an easy position to fill.”

Mueller loved playing third at Fenway.

“There may be some better places to hit, like Colorado and Arizona come to mind, but for 81 games, Fenway was great for me. We had such a great lineup those two years in ’03 and ’04. We scored a ton of runs. It was fun up and down the lineup just to see what each guy was going to do. It was great to be a part of it,” Mueller said.

As we watched Sandoval taking grounders Wednesday afternoon as he prepares for a rehab assignment, we have seen how far the Red Sox have fallen at the position.

Sandoval remains positive, saying all the right things. He says he’s 100 percent recovered from his knee injury and feels ready to start his rehab assignment.

“Everything feels really good,” Sandoval said. “I’m ready to get going. Nothing hurts.”

Well, except his batting average (.213) and his production as a Red Sox and the fact he’s spent more days away from the field than he has on it.

It was just a reminder of a more golden era of Red Sox third basemen when all Francona had to do was write in Mueller and later, Lowell.

■ Being here also reminds us of the July 2014 deal that sent John Lackey and minor league lefty reliever Corey Littrell to the Cardinals for Joe Kelly and Allen Craig. The prevailing theory is that the Red Sox got swindled on this one. The results haven't been good for the Red Sox, who have salvaged Kelly as a late-inning reliever while Craig has never regained the form that made him one of the best clutch hitters in baseball with the Cardinals. Lackey went 16-13 with a 3.10 ERA in the year and a half he spent in St. Louis and even played for the major league minimum of \$507,500. He departed as a free agent and signed with the Cubs in 2016.

Kelly loved playing in St. Louis. There's a loyal fan base, but not a hardcore one like you see in Eastern cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. So being traded from here can be a shock. It certainly was to Craig, who swung the bat well in spring training this season, giving rise to speculation he might be regaining his old form. But now he's barely playing in Pawtucket, earning \$11 million per year.

■ When the Red Sox clinched the 2004 World Series it was at the old Busch Stadium, which was located where the parking lot is here at the new facility. Players crying in disbelief of what they had accomplished came out onto the field and stayed around for hours, some until the sun came up.

The Red Sox also beat the Cardinals in the 2013 World Series in six games. That's when Craig was still a terrific hitter and almost singlehandedly beat the Red Sox on one leg. The two World Series wins for the Sox made up for the two they lost to the Cardinals in 1946 and 1967. Coincidentally, the Cardinals honored the '67 team Wednesday night, the 50th anniversary.

Tim McCarver, who was the catcher for the 1967 Cardinals, and was on hand for the '67 celebration, recalls vividly a scene from the '67 series he will never forget.

"Yaz went 0 for 4 in the first game of the Series and he was so mad at himself that the next afternoon, you could see him pulling the batting cage by himself out of the center-field storage area and brought it all the way to the batters' box. He took about two hours of BP. That impressed the Cardinal players so much. He had a great Series after that, hit a home run in Game 2 and I think three home runs in the Series," McCarver recalled.

He also recalled how difficult it was to see during Game 1 at Fenway because the Red Sox didn't have a batter's eye in center field. They sold the seats. McCarver was catching Bob Gibson that day and he recalled, "I could barely see and I'm catching Gibson! So I boxed a few balls that day, but Gibson did the rest."

The Cardinals won that game, 2-1, as Gibson, with a complete game and 10 strikeouts, bested Jose Santiago.

"I couldn't see Santiago's fastball," McCarver said. "That was a tough day, but we pulled it out."

Whatever happened to the prospects Dave Dombrowski traded?

Alex Speier

The time for midyear baseball trades hasn't arrived yet — it's rare to see player movement start before June — but when it does, the Red Sox believe they'll be in position to make moves if they see the possibility of upgrades.

"We've said that. I've said that," Sox chairman Tom Werner said at the end of April. "If we're in the hunt in July, we'll do what we can to give our players every chance to succeed."

President of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski reiterated that stance in a conversation with Nick Cafardo on Tuesday, noting that he's not "under any restrictions" regarding payroll when it comes to midyear trades to improve the team.

Of course, in many ways, the dollars are not the most precious resource involved when trading for a midyear upgrade. The real issue the Sox confront is how much they can part with comfortably in terms of prospects given the depletion of the farm system due to players such as Andrew Benintendi graduating to the big leagues and Dombrowski trading others.

What has Dombrowski given up? To offer an approximation of an answer, here's a look at the performances to date of the young, controllable players Dombrowski has traded:

Second baseman Yoan Moncada — dealt to White Sox for Chris Sale

Moncada has shown signs of being all the White Sox anticipated. Now the top-rated prospect in the minors, he's hitting .331/.401/.504 with six homers and 10 steals in Triple A Charlotte. His performance has leveled off a bit in recent games (.258/.303/.290 with 10 strikeouts in 33 plate appearances) as International League opponents get their second look at him, but he seems likely to begin a long tenure in the White Sox lineup this summer.

Righthander Michael Kopech — dealt to White Sox for Chris Sale

Kopech's starts remain an event in Double A Birmingham, where he's punching out 13.0 batters per nine innings (albeit with 5.3 walks per nine) while holding hitters to a .149 average. It remains to be seen if he can develop the control to stick in the rotation.

If he does, then he has a front-of-the-rotation ceiling. If not, then he could become a dominating late-innings presence.

Outfielder Luis Alexander Basabe — dealt to White Sox for Chris Sale

Basabe has yet to get on a roll in High A Winston-Salem, hitting .223/.338/.322 with seven steals in 32 games. The 20-year-old's OBP suggests a solid approach that seems likely to produce more impressive results as the weather warms and his power plays up.

Righthander Victor Diaz — dealt to White Sox for Chris Sale

Diaz, a 22-year-old whose stuff gives him a chance to fly through the minors as a reliever, has yet to pitch this year while rehabbing a shoulder injury.

Third baseman Travis Shaw — dealt to Brewers for Tyler Thornburg

Shaw is now hitting .283/.320/.543 with eight homers in 35 games. To this point, his absence is the one that's been felt most acutely among all of the young players traded by Dombrowski.

Infielder Mauricio Dubon — dealt to Brewers for Tyler Thornburg

Dubon is hitting .305/.355/.390 with 21 steals (tied for second-most in all of minor league baseball) in 25 attempts for Milwaukee's Double A affiliate. He continues to show the sort of bat-to-ball skills, gap power, speed, and defensive versatility to give him a floor of a valuable bench reserve and an everyday infielder's ceiling.

Righthander Josh Pennington — dealt to Brewers for Tyler Thornburg

The hard-throwing Pennington had elbow chips removed during the offseason and remains in a throwing program. He'll head to one of Milwaukee's A-ball affiliates once he's healthy.

Righthander Pat Light – dealt to Twins for Fernando Abad

Light, who is with the Pirates after being designated for assignment by the Twins in February, is pitching in Triple A this year, where he's 2-0 with a 4.15 ERA, 14 strikeouts, and 11 walks in 17⅓ innings.

Righthander Anderson Espinoza – dealt to Padres for Drew Pomeranz

Espinoza, a dazzling talent who is now 19, has yet to pitch this year due to forearm tightness and elbow soreness. He still possesses a tremendous ceiling, with mid- or even front-of-the-rotation potential, but between a 2016 season in which he was challenged in Single A (6-11, 4.49 ERA, 8.3 strikeouts and 2.9 walks per nine innings) and his injuries, his timeline for reaching the big leagues has been lengthened considerably.

Righthander Jose Almonte – dealt to Diamondbacks for Brad Ziegler

The 21-year-old is in High A, where he has a 4.78 ERA with 10.7 strikeouts and 6.8 walks per nine innings. He still looks like a pitcher with a reliever's ceiling.

Infielder Luis Alejandro Basabe – dealt to Diamondbacks for Brad Ziegler

The 20-year-old is back in Single A for the second straight year, where he's hitting .266/.339/.376. His ability to move around the infield with some speed and the ability to get on base suggest a potential utility future.

Second baseman Wendell Rijo – dealt to Brewers for Aaron Hill

Rijo is back in High A for the third straight year, where he's been playing less than every day in the Carolina League. The 21-year-old is hitting .238/.400/.357, with improved patience that suggests some promise, but he looks like a player with a utility ceiling.

Righthander Aaron Wilkerson – dealt to Brewers for Aaron Hill

The 28-year-old former indy leaguer is pitching for Milwaukee's Double A affiliate, where he has a 3.99 ERA with 9.8 strikeouts and 3.4 walks per nine.

Righthander Jonathan Aro – dealt to Mariners (along with Wade Miley) for Carson Smith and Roenis Elias

Aro, who made one big league appearance last year, is serving a 50-game suspension for violating the minor league drug policy.

Center fielder Manuel Margot – dealt to Padres in Craig Kimbrel deal

Margot is off to a solid start with the Padres, hitting .275/.322/.425 with five steals (though he's been caught a major league-leading five times). After he turned heads with three homers in his first nine games, Margot has leveled off with one additional homer in his last 31 games. His performance thus far in San Diego represents precisely the sort of player whom the Red Sox (and Padres) anticipated he would be: capable of offering solid across-the-board offensive skills with the sort of center field defense to make him an above-average everyday option.

Shortstop Javier Guerra – dealt to Padres in Craig Kimbrel deal

After an awful 2016 season, Guerra is repeating in High A Lake Elsinore. In 139 games with that team, he's hitting .198/.261/.318 while striking out in 32.7 percent of plate appearances. While Guerra looked like he had a chance to be an impact everyday shortstop based on his elite defense and strong showing in

Single A Greenville in 2015, his strikeout problems have been so far-reaching that his ceiling may now be that of a utility option who is limited to facing lefthanded pitchers.

Lefthander Logan Allen – dealt to Padres in Craig Kimbrel deal

After he missed two months of an otherwise strong 2016 season due to elbow trouble, Allen is back in the Single A Midwest League, where he's dominated. He's 2-2 with a 1.80 ERA, 11.6 strikeouts per nine innings and 3.9 walks per nine.

Utility player Carlos Asuaje – dealt to Padres in Craig Kimbrel deal

Asuaje, who made his big league debut last year, is hitting .232/.336/.344 in 34 games as a Triple A second baseman this year. Right now, the 25-year-old represents an up-and-down utility depth option.

The takeaway: To date, aside from Shaw, the short-term cost of Dombrowski's willingness to deal prospects hasn't been felt by the Red Sox at the major league level. Though Margot is proving a solid big leaguer, his fate as a trade chip seemed all but certain by the end of 2015, when Jackie Bradley Jr. and Andrew Benintendi both surpassed him in the team's long-term plans.

Besides Shaw and (arguably) lefthander Logan Allen, it's hard to identify a case where one of the traded prospects has seen his value rise significantly since being dealt. In some cases (Espinoza and other pitchers due to injuries, Guerra due to his performance decline) the value of the prospects has taken something of a hit, suggesting that Dombrowski may have either sold high or sold at something close to full value on the minor leaguers — save for the decision to accept a depreciated return on Espinoza once Drew Pomeranz's medical issues were discovered.

The Sox now have fewer compelling prospects available as trade chips to address emerging holes this year. At the same time, the deals involving Shaw and Dubon put them in a position where they may end up having to trade for a player at third (depending on whether Pablo Sandoval or, perhaps in the second half, Rafael Devers can help to stabilize the position).

Yet overall, Dombrowski's use of the farm system qualifies as more aggressive than reckless based on the performances of the players who were dealt.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Chris Young's RBI single in 13th caps Red Sox rally past Cardinals

Jason Mastrodonato

ST. LOUIS — For the majority of the 13 innings they played last night, the Red Sox were one clutch hitter short.

The David Ortiz-sized hole in the cleanup spot seemed even more noticeable for most of the evening at Busch Stadium, as Andrew Benintendi endured yet another disappointing game, driving in the game-tying run with a sacrifice fly in the eighth inning but finishing 0-for-5 to extend his hitless streak to 26 at-bats. He left four on base.

But the bullpen persevered and John Farrell managed his way through the St. Louis Cardinals lineup under National League rules until his last pinch-hitter saved the night and earned the Red Sox a 5-4 win and two-game sweep.

Chris Young, who has made just one start in the last eight days, came off the bench nearly 4 1/2 hours into the game to stroke the eventual game-winning RBI single to center field to score Mitch Moreland.

Young improved to 3-for-8 with four RBI as a pinch hitter this season and 7-for-21 (.333) since signing with the Sox before last season (the average for MLB pinch hitters in 2017 is .252). His heroics bailed out the offense and in particular Benintendi, who is in his first slump as a major leaguer but did produce a run in an important spot.

The first time Xander Bogaerts tripled was with two outs in the first inning, but Benintendi struck out. The second time Bogaerts tripled was with one out in the eighth inning to bring home Dustin Pedroia to make it a 4-3 game, and Benintendi followed with the game-tying sac fly.

A 10th-inning at-bat stood out as a golden opportunity for Benintendi to flip the script. With Josh Rutledge on second base and two outs, the Cardinals chose to intentionally walk Bogaerts and pitch to the cleanup hitter. Benintendi worked a full count before rolling over an outside fastball for a groundout to third.

Farrell said before the game he wasn't concerned about Benintendi's prolonged slump and would keep him at the No. 4 spot, a move that clearly backfired in this one.

Benintendi is hitting .317 out of the No. 2 hole but just .205 in 10 games as the cleanup hitter.

Sox starter Rick Porcello can dial his four-seamer up to 96-97 mph at max effort, but his first four-seamer of the game was just 90 and on a 1-1 count, Dexter Fowler hammered a long home to give St. Louis the early lead.

The second inning was mostly a case of Porcello hurting himself with mislocated pitches. A high slider was ripped by Yadier Molina for a double to start the inning. Aledmys Diaz bunted for a single and Magneuris Sierra turned a weak curveball into an RBI single.

Another run scored later in the inning on a fielder's choice, giving the Cardinals a 4-0 lead.

Porcello settled in to work six innings on 87 pitches and was lifted for a pinch hitter in the seventh. His ERA stands at 4.23 and he has allowed a majors-high 66 hits. On the positive side, he has 58 strikeouts in 55 1/3 innings.

It's a remarkably similar season as the one David Price had through nine starts last year, when he threw 55 1/3 innings with 70 strikeouts but allowed 56 hits and a 5.53 ERA. Price also took an early lead in hits allowed and held it all year long.

Robbie Ross Jr., Matt Barnes, Joe Kelly and Robbie Scott combined to keep the game scoreless until the ninth, when Craig Kimbrel fired a clean inning. Heath Hembree handled the 10th inning and Fernando Abad took over in the 11th, throwing two innings until the Sox scored a run. Ben Taylor worked the 13th for the save.

The Sox first got on the board in the seventh when Jackie Bradley Jr. hit a moonshot of a 441-foot, two-run homer, his second blast in as many games.

Carson Smith eager to help Red Sox, prove his worth

Chad Jennings

ST. LOUIS — Every day is Dec. 7, 2015.

The same sense of opportunity. The same need to prove himself all over again. The same anticipation for what's to come.

Nearly a year and a half later, Carson Smith still feels the way he did the day he was traded to the Red Sox. He throws his bullpen sessions, does his rehab work, and waits for an honest-to-goodness second chance to make a first impression.

“Definitely still in that mode,” the sidelined reliever said. “Coming over here last year, you get an opportunity to come to a big-name team like this and hopefully have an impact, and it didn’t work out last year. And it was frustrating. I know the playoff chances and the opportunities they had last year were there, and it was frustrating not to be able to contribute with that.”

“But here we are this year, getting near the end of this rehab process, and we’ve got all the talent in the world in this clubhouse, and I’m looking forward to being a part of it.”

Less than a year removed from Tommy John surgery, with last year’s three Red Sox appearances basically long forgotten, Smith is throwing bullpens again. He thinks he’s a week or two away from facing hitters. Then a rehab assignment. Then back to a spot in the bullpen, quite possibly as the go-to set-up man in front of Craig Kimbrel.

David Price is making a minor league start tomorrow, Pablo Sandoval is about to start a rehab assignment of his own, and Smith now looks to be the third missing piece that could at last make the 2017 Red Sox whole again.

“When we acquired him, it was the vision or intent to build him late in the game,” manager John Farrell said. “We’ve got some work, obviously, to get him back to that point, but he can be a huge lift to this bullpen once he gets back to normal strength.”

Smith thinks he’s getting there. He’s throwing fastballs and changeups in his bullpens, and he’s adding sliders off flat ground. He’s still getting some of the feel back, but the early results have been encouraging.

“Velocity-wise, I don’t know where I’m at right now,” he said. “I haven’t thrown in front of a radar gun, but I feel good, and that’s the most important thing. Everybody says that I have live action on my ball, which is something I depend on.”

When the Red Sox traded for Smith, he’d just emerged as a late-inning force in Seattle. He made 70 appearances for the Mariners in 2015 and struck out nearly 12 batters per nine innings. He struck out two in 22/3 innings with the Red Sox last year before needing the surgery May 24.

Recovery, he said, has been everything he expected and more (and more was not a good thing). It was long and frustrating, but it’s telling that Smith has a seat on the Red Sox charter and a locker in the visiting clubhouse, with a No. 39 jersey hanging on the bar.

He’s traveling as if he’s an active part of the team. Can’t say the same for Tyler Thornburg, the other supposed set-up man who’s rehab from shoulder soreness keeps hitting snags.

The Red Sox say they want Smith around because the big league training staff knows him, and the coaches want to see him first-hand, but Smith seems to notice a different benefit.

“Being with the team this past month has helped extremely,” he said. “Just being around the guys and watching them compete out there (has been) putting me in the game mode, not just rehab and getting my body back in the right shape. I’m excited to get out there.”

If Thornburg’s return is nowhere in sight, Smith stands out as the best bet to solidify a bullpen that’s cycled through the ups and downs of Matt Barnes, Heath Hembree and Joe Kelly as go-to right-handed relievers.

Seventeen months ago, Smith was waiting to assert himself with the Sox. He’s still waiting, but for the first time in a long time, there’s a light at the end of that tunnel.

“I’m always trying to make a splash out there,” Smith said. “Whether it’s a new team, same team, coming back from injury or not, I’m always trying to do my best and contribute as best I can. So, I’m always

excited to get out there, no matter the circumstances. But it will be a little extra special after the 12- to 13-month grind.

“I definitely haven’t made a name for myself as a Boston Red Sox player right now. I’m excited to get out there and represent Boston and the Red Sox, and I’m ready to get going.”

Red Sox notebook: Pablo Sandoval begins rehab stint with PawSox

Jason Mastrodonato

ST. LOUIS — If the PawSox weren’t already fielding the most expensive minor league team in baseball history, tomorrow’s roster should put them over the top.

Add Pablo Sandoval to the list, since he’ll be joining the ranks in Triple A Pawtucket to begin a rehab assignment and work his way back from a sprained right knee.

“I don’t know how much time I’m going to need,” Sandoval said yesterday. “I just want to focus to have a nice rehab and feel healthy. That’s one of the things that I’m looking forward to, feeling 100 percent to be back on the field and play the game.”

With David Price (\$30 million salary in 2017) due to make a rehab start for the PawSox tomorrow in Buffalo, Sandoval (\$17 million) will join a team that also includes Allen Craig (\$11 million), Rusney Castillo (\$10.5 million) and Brock Holt (\$1.95 million), among others, for a total payroll of more than \$70 million. For comparison, the entire Tampa Bay Rays payroll was less than \$70 million on Opening Day.

How Price comes out of that start will determine if he’s to join the big league club for his next one five days later.

For Sandoval, it’s just the beginning.

“I’m going to be in the DH spot the first couple of games. I want to see how the knee reacts,” he said. “As soon as I feel better, I’ll jump to third.”

Sandoval said he’s been pain-free in his knee after resting for nearly a month. He hasn’t played since April 23.

“He’s been down roughly four weeks now, so there’s going to be some timing to regain at the plate,” Red Sox manager John Farrell said. “Want to see the mobility and the range at third base. We don’t have a date marked that he’s returning to us, but he needs to get some repetition.”

Farrell hasn’t been able to find a consistently productive third baseman this year. Sandoval was hitting just .213 with a .646 OPS and four errors in 17 games before he got hurt.

“I felt good when I was healthy, so that’s one of the things that I’m looking forward to after last year,” he said. “It’s one of the things that I can handle. If I’m healthy, then I can play right.”

After missing a day with recurring vertigo symptoms, Holt was back in the PawSox lineup yesterday, though he was the DH instead of at third base. Farrell said Holt is day-to-day, and Sandoval likely will be ready to return first. . . .

Deven Marrero made his fourth straight start at third base for the major league club last night in St. Louis.

Benny goes fourth

Stuck in an 0-for-21 slump that has dropped his average from .339 to .290 and his OPS from .916 to .809, Andrew Benintendi was in the cleanup spot again last night.

“Any player is going to through some ebbs and flows along the way,” said Farrell, who is committed to the 22-year-old. “He’s been pitched to, getting a steady dose of change of speeds. A lot of good hitters are going to see that. But no, there’s no wavering confidence in his abilities and what he’s done in a very short period of time. He’s a really good looking young player.

It’s not like Farrell has many options. Mookie Betts has been on fire since moving to the leadoff spot, so it would be silly to move him, and other than Hanley Ramirez, nobody else has shown much power. Ramirez has only had one good week this season, has been battling injuries and will not see time at first base in the near future, so he was on the bench last night.

“(This has) been a productive lineup for us (despite) four, five games that he’s come up a little bit dry,” Farrell said of Benintendi. “(Tuesday) night he’s on base a couple times, scores a run. There are other ways he can contribute.”

In the throws

Jackie Bradley Jr. has yet to pick up an outfield assist this season after collecting 13 last year. But he thinks he knows the problem.

“I’m just going to continue to keep working, get better, stop holding onto the ball too long when I’m making throws,” he said. “Get a little airborne, get a little air under it instead of spiking them.

“I have to keep the ball down. A lot of guys who have decent arms like to usually throw it pretty far and sometimes overthrow cutoff men. I tried to make a habit of making sure I didn’t overthrow my cutoff man. So I just kind of made an adjustment to where I’m not releasing it as high. But I’ll work on it.” . . .

Red Sox pitchers haven’t done much with the bats this season, going 0-for-6 with four strikeouts.

Since Rick Porcello recorded a hit against Atlanta last April, Sox pitchers are 0-for-28 with 22 strikeouts. Only once have they dropped down a successful bunt, when Kyle Kendrick did it last week in Milwaukee. Eduardo Rodriguez grounded out to advance runners to second and third Tuesday and said it was the first time he made contact since he was 15. . . .

Right-hander Hector Velazquez was on his way to California yesterday and will make his MLB debut for the Red Sox tonight against the Oakland A’s.

Heath Hembree making the best out of difficult role in Red Sox bullpen

Jason Mastrodonato

ST. LOUIS -- Trying to find another strong a strong set-up man hasn’t necessarily been the problem for the Red Sox.

But if the set-up guy is being saved for the seventh or eighth, who pitches earlier?

That’s been the problem. Depth, not talent.

Right-hander Heath Hembree, whose ERA has jumped from 1.15 to 4.05 in the last 10 days, is learning that first-hand.

Hembree has been one of Red Sox manager John Farrell’s favorite relievers. He’s been used in close games in the eighth inning, ninth inning and 10th inning.

But he’s also been used in much lower-leverage moments. He’s been used in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh innings, with the Red Sox leading by as many as four runs or losing by as many as three.

Farrell is using Hembree almost everywhere, in any situation.

“It really is at any point,” Hembree said. “I have to be ready for anything.”

As it is, he’s been quite the pick-up for the Red Sox since they acquired him from the San Francisco Giants in the Jake Peavy trade in 2014, holding a career 3.08 ERA and eight strikeouts per nine innings. But one might wonder how good Hembree could be if he had a more consistent role, if he knew when he was going to be called upon most nights and could prepare as such.

“In the minors it was a lot different,” he said. “It was easier for me to ask for a day off if I needed an extra day to feel better for the next one. I knew I was most likely going to be closing unless I really needed to get in the game and I knew when that was.

“This is just a different breed than being in the minors, knowing when you’re throwing and feeling good every time out. Here we’re trying to win every game. Every game matters. Every out matters. Just have to be ready for any situation.”

The Red Sox haven’t had the luxury of using Hembree in one set role. He was pitching the seventh for a while, holding it down until Matt Barnes pitched the eighth and Craig Kimbrel took the ninth. But then Barnes got suspended and that threw everything off.

“We’ve got a couple of guys that are stressed in terms of the frequency to usage,” Farrell said. “I think (Hembree) has held up well. I think there’s been improvement from a year ago with the attack plan to left-handers. He’s been better getting the left-handers out.

“Yeah, there’s been an outing where it happened quick against him versus the Cubs when it was more first pitch swinging and bunched some basehits together. The other day, quite frankly, I didn’t anticipate using him. But as the ninth inning unfolded, Robbie Ross’s pitch count is getting near 50, and you go to the bullpen in the fourth, unfortunately some guys are going to have to get to the mound that your’e not otherwise planning for”

That’s been the story of the Red Sox season. Hembree is trying to make the best of it.

“I don’t feel good every time out to be honest with you,” he said. “Not many times I feel like I have my best stuff. Those are more of the rare nights when everything feels like it’s clicking and your body feels great. But that’s part of being a big leaguer.

“I definitely feel like everybody here knows what I’m capable of doing. I think especially here everybody in the bullpen can pitch in pretty much in any situation. You have a lot of good arms down there. The main role that you can’t complain about is getting the ball consistently. As long as I know that, they have faith in me, then it’s easier to pitch and know they have my back.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Hector Velazquez to start for Red Sox against A’s on Thursday

Brian MacPherson

A year ago Hector Velazquez was pitching for Acereros de Monclova, a team based in Mexico’s most prolific steel-producing city, unknown to nearly all baseball fans in the United States. Velazquez was on loan from Piratas de Campeche, the team for which he’d pitched his first six seasons and even winning Rookie of the Year honors in Liga Mexicana de Béisbol in 2010.

Velazquez, a right-hander, made 22 starts for a Monclova team that finished second in its division. He struck out more than seven batters for every one he walked, easily the best ratio of any pitcher in the league who made at least 10 starts. It was a significant jump over the previous season, when he'd struck out fewer than two hitters for every walk issued in his final season with Campeche.

It's that improved control and command that caught the attention of the Red Sox, who signed him in mid-February and will hand him the ball in the major leagues for the first time on Thursday in Oakland.

"It's not about sheer velocity," Boston manager John Farrell told reporters this week in St. Louis. "It's about pitching ahead in the count. There's a lot of savvy and strike-throwing ability there."

"No. 1 is throwing strikes," PawSox manager Kevin Boles said last weekend. "It's hard to recommend if a guy doesn't throw it over the plate."

Velazquez, 28, becomes the third starting pitcher promoted this season from Triple-A Pawtucket. The first call-up went to lefty Brian Johnson, who struck out 15 against four walks in the two starts he made for the PawSox before the Red Sox summoned him. He struck out six and walked three in his five innings for Boston in his start at Toronto, keeping under control a game the Red Sox led comfortably until a late Blue Jays rally.

The second call-up went to Kyle Kendrick, a veteran of 10 big-league seasons who had a 6.00 ERA in Pawtucket but had struck out 20 hitters against five walks. He walked three and struck out three in his two starts for the Red Sox but was tagged for 12 earned runs on 18 hits in 8 1/3 innings.

The third call-up now goes to Velazquez, who has an identical 20 strikeouts against five walks but a 1.55 ERA. He struck out three and didn't allow a walk in seven strong innings on Saturday against Rochester, keeping Red Wings hitters off-balance.

Noteworthy in his omission has been Henry Owens, once a well-regarded prospect who has stagnated at Triple-A thanks to an inability to throw strikes. The delivery adjustments Owens made after an early assignment to minor-league camp in spring training haven't had the desired effect. Owens has walked more than 15 percent of the Triple-A hitters he has faced this season, up from 13.6 percent a year ago and 11.2 percent the year before that.

And so Owens has been left behind in Pawtucket, passed now by Velazquez, an unknown if intriguing new addition.

*** *The Springfield Republican***

Xander Bogaerts watched boyhood idol Derek Jeter's ceremony on phone with Eduardo Rodriguez

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Xander Bogaerts grew up idolizing longtime Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter and he wears No. 2 in his honor.

So it's not surprising he made time to watch Jeter's number retirement ceremony Sunday.

"I saw it with (Eduardo) Rodriguez on his phone," Bogaerts told MassLive.com here at Busch Stadium on Wednesday. "I mean, they did it real nice job over there in New York. They had all his teammates, his coaching staff, his manager, his family. It looked very nice from afar."

Bogaerts went 2-for-5 with two triples, an RBI and one run in the Red Sox's 5-4 comeback victory in 13 innings over the Cardinals here Wednesday.

Bogaerts played in his 500th career May 5. And his statistics are fairly similar to Jeter's stats 500 games into his career, as MLB Network showed in a graphic this week:

Jeter's batting average was 24 points higher. But Bogaerts struggled as a rookie in 2014, batting just .240 in 144 games. Since the beginning of the 2015 season, he has batted .310.

Bogaerts initial reaction when showed the MLB Network graphic?

"I mean, he has some pretty good numbers up there," Bogaerts said about Jeter.

"It's nice any time you're mentioned in the same category as him or someone of his status," Bogaerts added. "It's just definitely an honor."

Bogaerts can't exactly remember the first time he saw Jeter play.

"It had to be ESPN or something," Bogaerts said. "ESPN. It'd be like a Sunday night game, Yankees/Red Sox. Because I don't think I would have known who he was any other way."

Bogaerts is slashing .338/.396/.456/.852 with eight doubles, four triples and 12 RBIs in 35 games this season. After he blasted 21 homers last year, he's not concerned about being without any so far this season.

"I care about winning, getting hits. That's all that matters."

Red Sox better than record, Jackie Bradley Jr. better than stats as seen in sweep over Cardinals

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- The Red Sox swept a two-game series against the St. Louis Cardinals here at Busch Stadium. In the process, Boston looked like a completely different team from the one that lost an 11-2, 4-hour, 32-minute snoozer against the Tampa Bay Rays on Sunday.

It looked much different from the team that had lost seven of its previous 13 games entering this series.

With a 6-3 victory Tuesday and a 5-4 win in 13 innings here Wednesday, the Red Sox are back ...

Well, at least Boston played much better baseball here in St. Louis than it had at any other point this month.

This 13-inning victory saw manager John Farrell use nine pitchers, including all eight relievers. He used 21 players in all. Every position player played except Chase d'Arnaud.

Boston overcame a 4-0 deficit in the seventh.

"Yeah, this is big for us," Farrell said about sweeping the previously red hot Cardinals. "Particularly tonight. This is a big win. It's a huge shift. I think any time you get this deep into an extra-inning game, when you're depleting your bullpen, to come away with a win, they feel like two (wins) at times."

The Red Sox haven't exactly played pretty baseball this season. They rank third in the majors in errors (32). After a loss earlier this season, Dustin Pedroia described the way Boston threw the ball recklessly around the infield as "a snowball fight."

Farrell pointed to how his club played a strong game in every phase, particularly defense, Tuesday.

After Wednesday's win, he pointed to the team's resolve.

"This one tonight is a lot of grit, a lot of character, a lot of competitive at-bats late in the game," Farrell said. "Jackie (Bradley Jr.) the big two-run homer that kind of got us off nothing."

The Red Sox certainly have their flaws -- most notably third base and starting pitching depth. But this is a better team than its 21-18 record indicates.

And the Sox won these two games against a Cardinals team that entered 8-2 in its past 10 games and in first place in the NL Central. The Cards had just taken two of three games against the defending World Series champion Cubs.

"This was a huge win," Bradley said. "Very pivotal. With the way the game started off and momentum swinging their way the whole night, we were able to put some runs on the board and then just kind of fight and claw our way back to tie the game."

Bradley crushed a two-run homer in the seventh inning 441 feet to cut the deficit to 4-2. It was his second homer in two days.

He went 2-for-5. All four of his hits this series went to the opposite field and/or center. Bradley is 6-for-15 with two homers and one double in his past four games.

Like the Red Sox, he's capable of more than his .212 batting average indicates.

Farrell said about Bradley's success in these past two games, "I think you can trace it back to his ability to hit the ball to left field. It's allowed him to stay on some pitches. He gets a pitch down the middle of the plate and hits it a long way. So to his credit, he's worked hard. He's worked long. He's fought a little bit of a downturn and hopefully he's coming out of it."

The Red Sox also have fought a little bit of a downturn. They entered this series 6-7 during May. But after two big wins, they now are off to Oakland where they need to take advantage against the 17-23 Athletics.

Good teams take care of business against bad teams. Boston did so last year. The Sox should take at least three of four games in Oakland.

Chris Young delivers go-ahead hit, Boston Red Sox erase 4-0 deficit to beat Cardinals in 13 innings

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- Chris Young, pinch hitting for reliever Fernando Abad, delivered the go-ahead RBI single with two outs in the 13th inning.

It came after Mitch Moreland hit a ground-rule double with two outs and the Cardinals intentionally walked Jackie Bradley Jr.

The Red Sox posted an impressive 5-4 comeback victory.

Boston rallied after being down 4-0 in the seventh inning.

Jackie Bradley Jr. blasted a 441-foot home run to center field on an 89.3 mph sinker from St. Louis starter Mike Leake in the seventh inning to cut the deficit to 4-2.

Xander Bogaerts tripled home Dustin Pedroia in the eighth against setup man Trevor Rosenthal to make it 4-3, then Andrew Benintendi's sac fly to left field tied it 4-4.

Brand new ballgame in the eighth.

Young connected on a 79 mph curveball from reliever Sam Tuivailala for his single.

Porcello struggles early but gets through 6

Mookie Betts led off Tuesday's ballgame against the Cardinals with a homer.

Here Wednesday, Dexter Fowler did the same for St. Louis.

He belted a 90.3 mph four-seamer from Rick Porcello into the right field bleachers to lead off the bottom of the first inning.

The Cardinals scored early against the reigning AL Cy Young winner, plating three more runs in the second.

St. Louis stroked four straight hits against Porcello to begin the second inning. Yadier Molina doubled, Aledmys Diaz singled, Magneuris Sierra singled and Kolten Wong doubled.

Porcello settled down. He hurled a scoreless third, fourth and fifth and sixth. All four runs were earned. He gave up nine hits and three walks while striking out six. His ERA increased from 4.01 to 4.23.

Ben Taylor pitched a scoreless 13th inning.

Jackie Bradley Jr. heating up?

Bradley Jr. delivered his second homer in two days and his third in seven games. His blast traveled 441 feet to center field on an 89.3 mph sinker from St. Louis starter Mike Leake.

He went 2-for-5. Three of his four hits this series have been to the opposite field and the other to center field.

Bradley is 6-for-15 with two homers and one double in his past four games.

Joe Kelly's velocity down

Joe Kelly recorded two outs in the eighth inning and allowed a single. He threw 10 pitches (six curveballs and four fastballs).

He has reached the upper-90s and 100-plus on the radar gun routinely this year but he topped out at 93.3 mph, per MLB.com Gameday.

Boston Red Sox still hope Tyler Thornburg will pitch in 2017 but Carson Smith is 'ahead of him'

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- The Red Sox still hope Tyler Thornburg, who they acquired Dec. 6 to be their setup man, will return to pitch in 2017. He has yet to appear in a big league game this season because of a right shoulder impingement.

Right now though, the Red Sox know Carson Smith, who they acquired the previous offseason to be their setup man, likely will return before Thornburg. Smith underwent Tommy John surgery May 24, 2016.

"It's not hard to say that at this point we think that Carson is ahead of him by the sheer fact that he's on the mound and he's throwing bullpens," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "But I don't think any of us have conceded the fact that Tyler won't be back to us at some point this year."

Smith has been throwing two bullpens per week. He has begun to throw some breaking balls during these sessions.

Farrell said the hope is for Smith to face some hitters when the Red Sox return from their six-game road trip to Fenway Park next week.

"And that would be for a couple of times before we start to get him out in game action (minor league rehab assignment)," Farrell said. "But since he came from Florida back up to us here it's been encouraging the progress that he has made."

Smith has a 2.00 ERA and 0.98 WHIP in 82 career outings (81 innings). He has averaged 11.6 strikeouts per nine innings compared to 2.9 walks.

"When we acquired him, it was with vision or the intent to build him late into games," Farrell said. "We've got some work to do obviously to get him back to that point but he can be a huge lift to this bullpen once he gets back to normal strength."

Pablo Sandoval is pain-free and set to begin rehab assignment; Brock Holt to play Wednesday

Christopher Smith

ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- After Pablo Sandoval did some work on the field here at Busch Stadium early today, he headed home to Boston before the game.

He's expected to begin a rehab assignment with Triple-A Pawtucket at Buffalo on Friday.

He'll be the DH.

"For couple of games," Sandoval said. "Going to see how the knee reacts. As soon as I feel better, jump to third."

The Red Sox placed Sandoval on the disabled list April 25 with a right knee sprain. He said he doesn't know how many rehab games he'll need to play before he's ready to be activated. Sandoval said he is pain free.

"He's going to need some games to get back into game shape," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "The fact is that he's done a lot of work to get back to this point. Some early work again today. And he's ready to get that rehab underway."

Sandoval, who took only six at-bats last season before undergoing season-ending shoulder surgery, has gone 13-for-61 (.213 batting average) with a .269 on-base percentage, .377 slugging percentage, .646 OPS, three homers and 10 RBIs in 17 games.

"He's been down roughly about four weeks now," Farrell said. "So there's going to be some timing to regain at the plate. And want to see the mobility and range at third base."

Brock Holt to DH

Brock Holt will serve as the DH for Pawtucket tonight. A recurrence of vertigo symptoms caused him to be removed from Monday's game.

"Some of the symptoms that he's been dealing with lately have subsided and he's back in the lineup tonight and will DH," Farrell said. "So this almost is a day-to-day scenario situation with Brock."

*** *RedSox.com***

Young's pinch-hit single lifts Sox in 13th

Jenifer Langosch and Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- Five innings after erasing a four-run deficit, the Red Sox capitalized on a stellar night from their bullpen by pushing across a two-out run that lifted them to a 5-4, 13-inning win over the Cardinals at Busch Stadium. St. Louis, which fell to 2-6 in Interleague Play, went scoreless in its final 11 innings on Wednesday.

After getting two quick outs to open the 13th, Cards reliever Sam Tuivailala allowed a pair of perfectly placed bloop hits to ignite Boston's rally. Mitch Moreland dropped in a ground-rule double that, with a 75.6 mph exit velocity and 51 degree launch angle, had a 7 percent Hit Probability, according to Statcast™. Left fielder Tommy Pham couldn't reach it in time. The same went for pinch-hitter Chris Young's single, which came off his bat at 69.6 mph. Moreland scored easily.

"It was just one of those games that you stay loose and be ready for a pinch-hit, be ready for a double switch," said Young. "You just never know what [will] happen. Just trying to stay ready." Said Tuivailala: "I felt like I made some good pitches out there. The ball just didn't fall in the right spots."

Ben Taylor sealed the win with his first career save in his 10th appearance to complete a run of seven scoreless innings from the 'pen. The Red Sox ran through their entire eight-man bullpen to get there and combined to allow three hits and two walks.

"This is big for us," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "This is a big win. It's a huge shift. I think anytime you get this deep into an extra-inning game, when you're depleting your bullpen, and you get the win, it feels like two [wins] at times."

Long before the Red Sox stole the extra-inning win, Mike Leake had positioned the Cardinals for a win. Leake needed to look no further than at his opponent on Wednesday to see a pitcher transform from average to elite in a year's time. That was Rick Porcello last year. This year, it's been Leake. Even after allowing a late two-run homer to Jackie Bradley Jr., Leake still leads National League starters with a 2.03 ERA.

"It was big," Bradley said. "Just to be able to put some runs on the board, I mean, it brought us within two. We know we have a good enough offense to string together some quality at-bats and see what happens."

With this seven-inning start, Leake has notched quality starts in all eight appearances this season.

Porcello, on the other hand, is still seeking to replicate last year's American League Cy Young Award season. The Cardinals strung together four consecutive hits against him to open the second inning and had a 4-0 lead by the end of it. Porcello settled in with four scoreless innings to follow in order to keep the Red Sox within striking distance.

"Yeah, I mean, really, who cares about my performance tonight? I think the story of the game is the bullpen coming out there and throwing seven goose eggs," Porcello said.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Momentum halted: Though he didn't enter the game until the 11th, Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez helped squelch a Cardinals rally by throwing out his fifth runner of the season. On first with two out, Pham tried to get himself into scoring position by taking off on Fernando Abad's 1-0 pitch. Vazquez threw him out easily to end the inning with Cardinals cleanup hitter Jedd Gyorko at the plate. The Cards were not able to advance a runner into scoring position over the final six innings.

"Vazqy is so good back there, but everybody is looking to get 90 feet," said Farrell. "Didn't want to have to go to Taylor in that inning if we could at all possible stay away from it, because we're looking at another double switch and CY's spot doesn't come up right there. That's a big out, a momentum shifter."

Late strike: After halving the deficit with Bradley's two-run homer in the seventh, the Red Sox erased the rest of it against reliever Trevor Rosenthal in the eighth. Dustin Pedroia drew a one-out walk after Rosenthal didn't get a favorable call on a 2-2 pitch that, according to Statcast™, was in the zone. Xander Bogaerts drove him in when he became the first Red Sox shortstop to record a two-triple night since Johnny Pesky in 1947. A struggling Andrew Benintendi added a game-tying sacrifice fly.

"That's a shame," Cardinals manager Mike Matheny said of the call that cost Rosenthal against Pedroia. "I took a look at it, and that's strike three. I thought it was a shaky strike zone, and I thought it happened a number of times in big situations. We're never ones to give excuses, but it's a fact. Enough pitches got missed in big situations, and it ended up hurting pretty bad."

QUOTABLE

"This was a huge win. I felt like it was very pivotal with the way the game started off and momentum swinging their way pretty much the whole night. We were able to put some runs on the board and fight and claw our way back to tie the game, and, obviously, stayed in extras for some innings, but we were able to scratch together one more run." – Bradley

"When it's up on the board, it's tough not to. That's the extent of what I pay attention to." -- Leake, on whether he's noticed where he ranks among the NL ERA leaders

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Despite entering the game with the fifth-highest ground-ball percentage (54.3 percent) in the National League, Leake did not induce his first double play of the season until Wednesday. It came in the fifth off the bat of Deven Marrero to erase a leadoff single by Sandy Leon.

WHAT'S NEXT

Red Sox: Right-hander Hector Velazquez makes his Major League debut on Thursday night when the Red Sox open a four-game series in Oakland. Velazquez's contract was purchased from the Mexican League on Feb. 18. The 28-year-old has pitched well at Triple-A Pawtucket, going 2-1 with a 1.55 ERA. The A's counter with ace Sonny Gray. First pitch is scheduled for 10:05 p.m. ET.

Cardinals: After an 11-day layoff, Michael Wacha will make his return to the mound on Friday, when the Cardinals open a three-game series against the Giants at Busch Stadium. First pitch is scheduled for 7:15 p.m. CT. Wacha is 2-0 with a 2.92 ERA in four home starts this season.

No doubt about it: JBJ hits 441-foot homer

Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- This time, there was no doubt. Jackie Bradley Jr. smoked Wednesday night's two-run homer to center with such authority that Dexter Fowler took one or two steps and stopped moving.

It was perhaps the pivotal hit for the Red Sox in a 5-4, 13-inning victory over the Cardinals.

Bradley had also gone deep on Tuesday night to help his team to a 6-3 win, but after that drive, he bowed his head in frustration, thinking it would be a flyout.

Not this time.

"Yeah, this one, off the bat, I knew that one was gone right away. No guessing on that one," Bradley said.

Before Bradley's rocket in the seventh, Boston was trailing, 4-0, and Cardinals right-hander Mike Leake was rolling.

One hit by Bradley cut that deficit in half and gave the Red Sox life.

"Jackie with the big two-run home run that got us off from nothing, because Leake was very good," said Red Sox manager John Farrell.

Though Bradley still thinks his two-run shot onto Eutaw Street at Camden Yards on April 22 was his most impressive long ball, the projected distance of 441 feet on Wednesday was his longest in the Statcast™ era, which dates back to 2015.

"It felt good off the bat," said Bradley.

For Bradley, it felt particularly good, because he is starting to emerge from the depths of a prolonged slump.

During the two games in St. Louis, Bradley was 4-for-8 with the two homers and two walks. For the season, he is slashing .212/.377/.388 with four homers and 10 RBIs, a long way from the production he displayed while becoming an All-Star in 2016.

"It feels great," Bradley said of the two games in St. Louis. "I'm going to still continue to work. I'm a work in progress. Obviously I got off to a slow start, so I've got a lot of ground to catch up on."

What Bradley has done the past two games could be a product of the extra cage work he did from May 6-9 when Farrell held him out of the lineup for three straight games.

"I think you trace it back to his ability to hit the ball to left field," Farrell said. "It's allowed him to stay on some pitches. He gets a ball over the middle of the plate and hits it a long way. So to his credit he's worked hard, he's worked long. He's fought a little bit of a downturn and hopefully he's coming out of it."

Panda to begin rehab assignment Friday

Ian Browne

ST. LOUIS -- David Price will have some familiar company when he starts for Triple-A Pawtucket on Friday at Buffalo. Pablo Sandoval will also be in the lineup in that game, serving as the designated hitter for the start of his Minor League rehab assignment.

Given the lack of production the Red Sox have had at third base this season, the fact Sandoval is ready to start playing in games again is a significant development.

Sandoval sprained his right knee fielding a grounder on April 23.

"I'm going to be in the DH spot the first couple of games. I want to see how the knee reacts," said Sandoval. "As soon as I feel better, I'll jump to third."

Sandoval is confident the injury is behind him and it's simply a matter of building back up at this point. The length of the rehab assignment is open ended.

"He's been down roughly four weeks now, so there's going to be some timing to regain at the plate," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "Want to see the mobility and the range at third base. We don't have a date marked that he's returning to us but he needs to get some repetition."

Before the injury, Sandoval was slashing .213/.269/.377, though he at least flashed some power, belting three homers with 10 RBIs in 61 at-bats.

"I felt good when I was healthy, so that's one of the things that I'm looking forward to after last year," said Sandoval. "It's one of the things that I can handle. If I'm healthy, then I can play [the game] right."

The Red Sox got some more good news on the third-base front, as Brock Holt was cleared to return to Pawtucket's lineup on Wednesday. Holt has been shut down multiple times in his rehab assignment due to recurring symptoms of vertigo.

Velazquez making big league debut vs. A's

Ian Browne

As the Red Sox and Athletics open a four-game series in Oakland on Thursday night, one starting pitcher will be making his Major League debut and the other will be trying to get into a groove after opening the season late due to injury.

On Feb. 18, Boston purchased the contract of Hector Velazquez from the Mexican League in an effort to add organizational depth to the starting rotation. On the three-month anniversary of his acquisition, the 28-year-old Velazquez gets the call from Triple-A Pawtucket to make the start for the Red Sox, temporarily filling out the final spot in the rotation until David Price returns. Velazquez has been impressive for the PawSox, going 2-1 with a 1.55 ERA in five starts.

Meanwhile, Athletics ace Sonny Gray (0-1, 3.78 ERA) is making his fourth start of the season after starting the season on the disabled list with a lat injury. Gray's last start was his best so far, as he gave up two runs over six innings in Oakland's loss to the Rangers.

Three things to know about this game

- After playing under National League rules the past two games in St. Louis, the Red Sox get designated hitter Hanley Ramirez back in the lineup for this series. Ramirez had a strong power streak in late April, but he has yet to display the form that made him one of the most productive hitters in the American League last year.
- From 2015-16, opponents' batting average and slugging percentage against Gray's fastballs has soared from .267/.363 to .321/.513. But through three starts in '17, Gray's fastball results (.250/.386) have bounced back.
- A veteran of the AL West before coming to Boston this season, Mitch Moreland easily has the most experience of any Red Sox player against Gray, going 5-for-18 with three homers and five RBIs.

Red Sox not losing faith in Andrew Benintendi

Scott Lauber

ST. LOUIS -- Andrew Benintendi began his first full major-league season by batting second for the Boston Red Sox. Two weeks ago, with the offense straining to score runs, he was moved to the cleanup spot. He has started all but one of 39 games and played all but nine of 359 innings.

By now, it's clear that Red Sox manager John Farrell wouldn't trust Benintendi any more if he was his doctor.

So, it will take a lot more than an 0-for-26 skid for Farrell to consider dropping Benintendi down in the batting order or, heaven forbid, sit him down for a few games, a la center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. earlier this month when he was in the midst of a slump.

"There's no wavering confidence in his abilities and what he's done in a very short period of time," Farrell said Wednesday before the Red Sox wrapped up a two-game interleague series here against the St. Louis Cardinals with a 5-4 win. "He's a really good-looking young player. Because of four, five games that he's come up a little bit dry, there are other ways he can contribute."

A few hours later, right on cue, Benintendi stepped to the plate with one out, the tying run on third base and "0-FOR-3" staring at him from the center-field scoreboard at Busch Stadium. Facing hard-throwing Cardinals reliever Trevor Rosenthal, Benintendi took a 100-mph fastball for a called strike, laid off a 101-mph dirt-diver, then got enough of his bat on another 100-mph heater to lift it into left field for a sacrifice fly.

Impressive at-bat for a guy who hasn't gotten a hit in nine days.

"Right now, obviously, they're not falling for me, so I just want to do whatever I can to help the team win," Benintendi said after the Red Sox got seven scoreless innings from eight relievers over 13 innings. "In that situation, going against Rosenthal, who's throwing 101, I was just trying to put the barrel on it and get something to the outfield. So, yeah, it was nice."

One reason Farrell is able to show so much faith in Benintendi is the 22-year-old's astute knowledge of the strike zone and uncanny knack for making contact. In the minors, Benintendi drew more walks (74) and had more extra-base hits (74) than strikeouts (63). Among 92 American League hitters with at least 120 plate appearances entering Wednesday night, he was the 14th-hardest to strike out, whiffing only once every 6.59 at-bats.

Even during his drought, which extends to a three-hit game in Milwaukee on May 9 and has dropped his average from .339 to .280 and his on-base percentage from .400 to .355, Benintendi has struck out only four times in 32 plate appearances. His outs have been mostly productive, moving runners on the bases, and he has managed four walks and one hit by pitch.

It doesn't mean he isn't frustrated by the lack of results. But Benintendi is seeing enough pitches and having competitive at-bats that he isn't panicking over a slump that would have most young players locking themselves in the batting cage to find answers.

"I mean, I feel like I'm working hard with [hitting coach] Chili [Davis], just trying to keep things simple," Benintendi said. "Sometimes they just don't fall. It'd be one thing if I was striking out half the time. But it's just not finding holes right now. I mean, all you can do is keep playing. A lot of games left, a lot of at-bats left, so we'll figure it out."

The Red Sox could have flown to Oakland overnight on the high they derived from Wednesday night's win. They used 21 players -- everyone save utility man Chase d'Arnaud and starting pitchers Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez and Drew Pomeranz -- and came all the way back from an early four-run deficit. Xander Bogaerts tripled twice, Bradley belted a two-run homer and Chris Young delivered a pinch single in the 13th inning to drive in Mitch Moreland with the go-ahead run.

"This is a big win. It's a huge shift," Farrell said. "This one tonight is a lot of grit, a lot of character and a lot of competitive at-bats late in the game."

Including one from Benintendi, even if he had to pack the hitless streak along with the rest of his equipment.

"I mean, I feel like I can only go up from here," Benintendi said.

And you know as well as Farrell that he will.

*** *WEEI.com***

Red Sox 5, Cardinals 4: Bullpen Comes Up Big In Gritty Comeback Win

Ryan Hannable

Despite injuries to two of their better relievers in Carson Smith and Tyler Thornburg, who haven't appeared in a game this season, the Red Sox bullpen has been one of the biggest surprises so far this year.

Entering play on Wednesday, the bullpen had an ERA of 2.90, good for fourth in baseball, and that was before arguably its best performance of the season.

The Red Sox bullpen combined for seven scoreless innings in their 5-4 win in 13 innings over the Cardinals.

For a complete game recap, [click here](#).

Starter Rick Porcello allowed four runs in the first two innings, but did settle down as he finished the game by going six innings and allowing four runs on nine hits, while walking three and striking out six.

Following Porcello, every member of the bullpen got into the game with Fernando Abad (win) delivering the best performance by going two innings. Other relievers to get in were Robbie Ross Jr. (2/3 of an inning), Matt Barnes (1/3 of an inning), Joe Kelly (2/3 of an inning), Robbie Scott (1/3 of an inning), Craig Kimbrel (one inning), Heath Hembree (one inning) and finally Ben Taylor (one inning, save).

The group combined to retire 20 of the 25 batters it faced, as the Cardinals never threatened much once Porcello exited the game.

The Red Sox seemed out of the game most of the way, as it was 4-0 from the second inning all the way until the seventh when they scored two runs in the seventh and two more in the eighth to tie the game at four. It took until the 13th inning to plate the go-ahead run and it came with two outs.

Mitch Moreland had a two-out bloop ground rule double, which was followed by an intentional walk to Jackie Bradley Jr. This set the stage for pinch-hitter Chris Young, whose RBI single was the difference.

The performance of the bullpen is encouraging considering it has been asked to do a lot not only with the absence of Smith and Thornburg, but having to log a lot of innings with the issues the No. 4 and 5 starters in the rotation have had.

Once those two pitchers return, and if the group continues to throw like it has, the Red Sox could have one of the best bullpens in baseball come the second half of the season.

Before Wednesday, the Cardinals were 19-0 this season when leading after seven innings.

*** *CSNNE.com***

Why Joe Kelly's 100 Mph Fastball Disappeared Vs. Cardinals

Evan Drellich

ST. LOUIS — The Red Sox bullpen was already one of their strengths, well before all eight relievers they have combined for seven shutout innings Wednesday night in a 13-inning, 5-4 win over the Cardinals.

“I mean really, who cares about my performance tonight?” said starter Rick Porcello, who accounted for the Cardinals' runs. “I think the story of the game is the bullpen coming out there and throwing six or seven goose eggs, whatever it was . . . They were phenomenal. They were the reason why we won.”

They weren't supposed to be this good without Carson Smith and Tyler Thornburg, and yet they continue to excel.

Robby Scott's ERA is down to 0.87. His career ERA is 0.55. He debuted on Sept. 2. From that day on, only one reliever (among those with a minimum of 10 innings thrown) has been better: Orioles closer Zach Britton, at 0.41.

"As a whole, we've got a great group of guys down there right now," said Joe Kelly, a former Cardinals farmhand. "It's something that we take pride in. You know we've had guys go on the DL that aren't part of the unit right now, but something that we take pride in. We get our name called and go out there and try to perform the best we can. Since Game 1 of this season, I feel like for the most part we've gone out there and done our jobs.

"It gives us even more confidence as a whole [knowing] when we get the ball it's going to be shutdown innings."

Kelly's night was an oddity, and an encouraging one. He's been one of the hardest throwing pitchers anywhere this season, but per BrooksBaseball.net, the hardest pitch he threw on Thursday was 94 mph. He's hit 102 mph already this season.

No, he wasn't hurt as he recorded two outs and allowed one hit, he said. This was a purposeful attempt to gain better control and more run to his two-seamer against hitters he's familiar with.

Pitching in the eighth inning right after the Red Sox scored two runs in the top half of the inning to tie the score at 4-4, Kelly threw 10 pitches, six of them breaking balls. He threw seven strikes in all.

Aledmys Diaz grounded out to third, Magneuris Sierra struck out looking on a fastball and Kolten Wong singled.

"Coming up in this organization is, the hitters that I ended up facing . . . I've seen 'em in spring training, I've seen 'em throughout their whole careers," said Kelly, who chatted with old friends during batting practice both days. "These are hitters that are very patient. If you start trying to blow it out and throw it as hard as you can and start throwing balls, these guys will take pitches.

"It's one of those things where I mentally went into the game knowing that if I paint, you know, with a little bit of movement, they're going to be taking pitches. If I throw strikes with my breaking ball — Wong got that hit. It wasn't hit hard. But, before that, I got two strikes on him. Swing and miss with the breaking ball.

"I know Diaz too. Early in spring training, I threw fricken 99 down and away and he ripped a line drive over the first baseman's head. So it was one of those things where I was conscious. Coming back, I didn't want to go out there and overthrow [in a] tie game and put guys on base for free. So just try to get out there and throw strikes with a little bit of movement."

Kelly said he expects to try this again going forward. He's done it before as a starter.

Robbie Ross Jr. Was Shocked To Be Sent To Pawtucket

Evan Drellich

ST. LOUIS - The same thing that made Robbie Ross Jr. miserable was something Kyle Kendrick literally had negotiated into his contract.

By his own words, Robbie Ross was shocked when the Red Sox optioned him last month.

He said in spring training that he was starting to feel established. All winter, he was regarded as the team's top lefty reliever. But he didn't get off to a great start (his ERA is currently at 6.14) and because he had options remaining, the Sox could send him to the minors at their will.

They did on April 28.

“It’s a shock when you got optioned, especially when you do feel like you are established, and you know, I feel like, you know, you’ve worked as hard as you have and you’ve done what you needed to do the right thing and put yourself in the right situation,” Ross said. “But sometimes, it’s pulled out from under you and you don’t realize it. So, yeah it’s shocking sometimes. And sometimes like I said, it’s a good thing.

“Ultimately you have to man up and go prove what you can do, do what you have to do to get back. And ultimately it’s not that feeling — there’s a difference between feeling established and a different feeling of comfortable. I think I felt established to the point where I proved for two years where I’m capable of doing it here in Boston...Comfortable’s a totally different feeling.”

Kendrick, 32, is a veteran. And without getting too technical, veterans are generally protected from being optioned.

When you’re trying to re-establish yourself as Kendrick is, being optioned can be a help. You may want the ability to be able to move freely between Triple-A and the majors. Better than go through waivers, where other teams can claim you, and you may enter a less favorable situation.

There was language in Kendrick’s contract that allowed the Sox to option him: advance consent, it’s called. And after Kendrick did poorly in two starts, the Sox optioned him on May 11.

They recalled the 27-year-old Ross.

Ross knows there will probably be a time in his career he’s thankful he’s out of options and someone else on the team isn’t. And he knows he could be in Kendrick’s position too.

“Options could be a good thing and they can be a bad thing,” Ross said. “Sometimes in a career, you see some guys that are good pitchers and do really well and have good seasons. But, they end up getting put in a situation where everyone else doesn’t have one [option] and you have, you are the odd man out.

“You’re ultimately the one person that has something left, so the only one they can do it with where they can send you down. And sometimes that sucks, obviously, and it doesn’t matter ... how good you’re pitching or not pitching sometimes. It just depends really on like, I guess, what they’re looking for in the situation.”

Ross has seen the scene play out in his time with the Rangers, too.

“Multiple times I saw guys with Texas and with Boston where I was like...dang man, I’m shocked that move is made,” Ross said. “And then understood that, OK, somebody had an option. And sometimes it sucks man.”

It’s not just leaving the major leagues that hurts on its own. Matters like arbitration salaries can be impacted. Ross has one year of arbitration left.

“I guess you could say you get in that situation where number games matter. You know, like, personally,” Ross said. “But there’s a lot of guys who have burnt options and it ends up being good for them. But then there’s times when you’ve burnt your options and it’s not good and you just happen to have a slip up where you didn’t pitch well and you don’t have an option...and they have to designate you. So that’s where it hurts.”

“It’s a double-edged sword.”

*** Associated Press**

Young breaks tie in 13th, Red Sox rally past Cardinals 5-4

ST. LOUIS -- Chris Young waited a long time for his opportunity Wednesday night and made the most of it.

Young drove in the tiebreaking run with a pinch-hit single in the 13th inning, and the Boston Red Sox rallied past the St. Louis Cardinals 5-4 to sweep their two-game interleague series.

"In that situation, you get a runner in scoring position and you're just trying to find a way to put the bat on the ball," Young said. "We battled and our bullpen did an amazing job to give us the opportunity to win the ballgame and we're grateful for that."

Jackie Bradley Jr. hit a two-run homer in the seventh off starter Mike Leake to begin Boston's comeback from a four-run deficit. The Red Sox tied it in the eighth against reliever Trevor Rosenthal when Xander Bogaerts hit an RBI triple and scored on Andrew Benintendi's sacrifice fly.

Mitch Moreland doubled with two outs in the 13th and Bradley was intentionally walked before Young singled to left-center off Sam Tuivailala (2-1).

"This win felt big, the way we had to get it," Young said. "It was just one of those we had to persevere and we fought for."

Fernando Abad (1-0) tossed two scoreless innings for the win, and Ben Taylor got three outs for his first major league save.

"This one tonight was a lot of grit, a lot of character, a lot of competitive at-bats late in the game," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "Jackie with the big two-run homer that kind of got us off nothing because Leake was very good. This was big for us, particularly tonight. This is a big win. It's a huge shift. I think anytime you get this deep into an extra-inning game when you're depleting your bullpen, to come away with a win, they feel like two at times."

Dexter Fowler hit a leadoff homer for the Cardinals, who had won eight of 10. It was his fifth home run this season and the 22nd leadoff shot of his career.

Boston improved to 3-17 when trailing after seven innings, while St. Louis fell to 19-1 when leading after seven.

The Cardinals had 12 hits but did not muster one in the final five innings.

"Not a lot of opportunities," manager Mike Matheny said. "They came in throwing the ball well out of the bullpen and we just couldn't put hits on top of each other."

St. Louis scored three times in the second. Rookie outfielder Magneuris Sierra had an RBI single, extending his hitting streak to seven games. Kolten Wong followed with an RBI double, and Tommy Pham's run-scoring groundout made it 4-0.

Bradley cut it to 4-2 with a drive to center field, his second homer in two games and fourth this year.

Leake allowed two runs and seven hits over seven innings, striking out five without a walk.

Red Sox right-hander Rick Porcello, who lost five of his previous six starts, gave up four runs and nine hits in six innings with six strikeouts and three walks.

1967 CARDS HONORED

The Cardinals celebrated the 50th anniversary of their 1967 championship season with a pregame ceremony. Bob Gibson, Lou Brock, Orlando Cepeda, Steve Carlton, Tim McCarver and Mike Shannon were among the members of that team, which beat Boston in the World Series.

COLD STRETCH

Benintendi went 0 for 5 with an RBI and is hitless in his last 26 at-bats.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: LHP Drew Pomeranz, who left his start Sunday because of tightness in his left triceps, threw a bullpen and is expected to pitch Saturday. ... 3B Pablo Sandoval (knee sprain) is expected to begin a rehab assignment Friday. ... LHP David Price (left elbow strain) will make a rehab start for Triple-A Pawtucket on Friday.

Cardinals: INF Jhonny Peralta (upper respiratory) and RF Stephen Piscotty (right hamstring) could both be activated from the disabled list this weekend. ... LHP Tyler Lyons (right intercostal strain) is expected to make one more rehab start in the minors.

UP NEXT

Red Sox: RHP Hector Velazquez will make his major league debut Thursday night in Oakland to open a four-game series. He has allowed two earned runs over 24 1/3 innings in his last four starts for Triple-A Pawtucket.

Cardinals: After an off day, RHP Michael Wacha (2-1, 3.19 ERA) opens a three-game series Friday against visiting San Francisco. He is 2-0 with a 2.92 ERA in four home starts this season.

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

'Shaky strike zone' impacts Cardinals in 13-inning loss to Red Sox

Derrick Goold

If Wednesday's late-night, last-ditch at-bat proves to be one of the last of Magneuris Sierra's sensational sneak peek in the majors, let it be noted that he did not go down swinging.

And he let the umpire hear about it, too.

The Cardinals built a four-run lead for Mike Leake, their best pitcher this season at holding leads, and neither the lead nor Leake was around in the 13th inning as Boston pocketed a 5-4 victory at Busch Stadium. If the Red Sox gripe about their red-eye flight and early landing in Oakland, they have only themselves to blame. Boston scored five unanswered runs, capitalized on an odd call against Trevor Rosenthal in the eighth, and its bullpen helped hold the Cardinals scoreless for the final 11 innings of the evening.

Sierra sparked the Cardinals' early rally with a little dash of history, and then ended the game at the plate frustrated by a called strike 3. In between was a snapshot of all that the 21-year-old rookie has done in seven games in the majors – and some of why the team plans on returning him to the minors in the coming week.

"He's approached this perfectly," manager Mike Matheny said late Wednesday. "He comes in and he's asking a lot of questions, and he's not looking overwhelmed, whether it is reacting to an umpire or whether

it is getting in a big situation and feeling like he cannot get it done. That just isn't in his makeup. He's just a guy who is very advanced for as young as he is."

Their bullpen thinned by ineffectiveness and some concern about Kevin Siegrist's aching neck, the Cardinals leaned on Sam Tuivailala for two innings. He got the first five outs of his evening without a runner reaching second. That ended with a curveball that fluttered and Mitch Moreland flipped for a ground-rule double. Moreland then scored on pinch-hitter Chris Young's lofted single to left-center field. Ben Taylor pitched a scoreless 13th for the save, but not before bringing young, Sierra to the plate as the potential winning run.

In his first two at-bats of the game, Sierra lashed singles to extend his hitting streak to seven games and, according to the club's calculus, match a rookie record set by Enos Slaughter in the 1930s and matched in 2002 by Bo Hart.

In his next four, he struck out three times.

The last one was looking, and Sierra, like a few other Cardinals before, let home-plate umpire Jeff Kellogg know of his dissent. The advanced-tech readings of the strike zone will do the same if the umpire takes a look. Most egregious for the Cardinals was a 2-2 pitch from Rosenthal that, by many measures, cut through the strike zone at 90-mph. Dustin Pedroia took it. Kellogg called it a ball. The next pitch sailed and Pedroia walked. That ignited the two-run inning against Rosenthal that knotted the game, 4-4, and forced extra innings. Helped that time, Pedroia and Randal Grichuk and, at the end, Sierra were each called out by a pitch that stayed outside the zone, or low.

"That's a shame," Matheny said. "Took a look at it (the 2-2 pitch from Rosenthal). That's strike 3 and that's a different game. I thought it was a shaky strike zone. And that it happened a number of times in big situations. We're never going to give excuses, but it's a fact. Enough pitches got missed in big situations that ended up hurting pretty bad."

The series sweep gave Boston something they had previously saved for when it really mattered, in October — a series victory against the Cardinals. The Cardinals had taken the series when last Boston visited during interleague play, and a win Wednesday would have given the Cardinals a 3-2 lead in the regular season series at Busch III. The Red Sox have had slightly better success against the Cardinals in colder times, such as 2004 and 2013 when these modern Sox took a World Series from the Cardinals. The last group to topple Boston in October was present Wednesday as the team celebrated the 1967 World Series champions with a reunion and a parade of cars around the field before first pitch.

The pacesetter followed.

Dexter Fowler drilled a leadoff home run off Rick Porcello for a quick 1-0 lead and the 22nd leadoff home run of his career. The Cardinals sent nine batters to the plate against Porcello in the second and left it with a 4-0 lead against the American League's reigning Cy Young Award winner. Yadier Molina started the gush in the second inning with a double, and it was Sierra that scored him with an RBI single. True to his speedy reputation, Sierra didn't stop there.

The nimble outfielder got to third on Kolten Wong's double and then scored easily on a groundout. Sierra's RBI was the first run, his run was the final run of the three-run second.

In the third, Sierra singled again and then did what he never had in the majors.

He stole second.

"A lot of this inner-confidence that he has, that he knows he can do that," said Matheny of the rookie with a .367 average in his first 30 big-league at-bats. "And he gets rewarded with some results. That just amplified it."

While Sierra momentarily teased a .400 average, Leake continued shaving away his NL-best ERA. By the time he started the seventh inning, Leake had a 1.72 ERA. He was about to complete his eighth quality start in eight starts this season, and at no point last year did he have a similar streak. Though, his strong start to this year as roots in last year's struggles. Undermined at times by the defense, Leake found new ways to get outs, and he has been able to blend them this season. He lauded catcher Yadier Molina for the "fun" they had in the game Wednesday.

In the first, the true-believer sinkerballer had a runner at third and two outs, so he elevated a four-seam fastball for a strikeout.

"I hadn't really used it in the past," Leake said. "I think it's definitely a pitch that I'm learning and I'm trying to expose a little more."

The Red Sox cleaved the Cardinals lead in half in the seventh with a two-run homer by Jackie Bradley Jr. His second homer in as many days was one of the first mistakes by Leake, who promptly retired the next three batters to finish the seventh. He struck out five and scatted seven hits, though Bradley bruised the ERA enough to leave it at 2.03.

It's the first time all season it's been higher than 2.00.

Porcello settled after the second and was efficient enough through six to buy the offense time. The Cardinals got nine of their 12 hits in the game off Porcello, and by the time the relievers were done they had faced 26 Cardinals and allowed six baserunners. With a chance to walk-off a winner twice in the late innings, Cardinals' No. 3 hitter Matt Carpenter launched a ball deep into the outfield – but shy of drama. Against Craig Kimbrel, the Boston closer who has retired all 32 of the righthanded batter he's faced this year and 26 of the last 27 hitters overall, Carpenter drilled a pitch to left-center that was tracked down at the wall. He hit another one close to that in the 12th. All that mileage and nothing to show for it.

Carpenter had expressed his issues with the strike zone a few times during the game, setting the stage and even the mannerisms for Sierra in the 13th.

The Cardinals expect to have Stephen Piscotty and Jhonny Peralta back from the disabled list as early as this week, and that will two roster moves. Promoted from High-A to the majors, Sierra has dazzled and even helped the Cardinals steal a couple wins, especially on a recent road trip. He's shown what the Cardinals know – his defense and speed plays at any level – and confirmed what they believed. His bat needs seasoning. This past spring, Sierra showed an improved approach and strength at the plate. He was swinging the bat, and not the other way around. In his first two at-bats Wednesday, he sliced singles to the outfield. By the time he was facing Boston relievers, he was stuck, out.

He struck out in all three at-bats against relievers.

He saw 13 pitches, only two balls. In the at-bat that ended the game, he gamely fouled off two pitches – a fastball and a changeup – and then took a fastball that caught a shaky zone.

Welcome to the majors.

"He's made a great impression," Matheny said.

Won't be his last.