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*** *The Boston Globe***

Chris Sale set to take center stage in AL East race

Alex Speier

Why complicate things? Evidently, the Red Sox are taking a straightforward approach to their pursuit of an AL East title. They plan on using their most powerful weapon as often as possible in pursuit of a division crown. And in 2017, there's little question that Chris Sale qualifies as the Red Sox' foremost separator from their primary rivals.

Tuesday marks the start of a run in which the Sox will dare the rest of the division to show that they can overcome the most dominant pitcher in the league. After his outing against the Rays on Tuesday, Sale's schedule has been mapped out to have him face the Yankees three times over the next three weeks. The Sox have the ability to slate Sale to make each of his next 10 starts this season against divisional rivals, all of them coming on four or five days of rest.

It's hard to fault the Sox for a desire to lean on their ace. They're 6-3 in the division in the games that Sale has started, and 15-19 when anyone else takes the mound against the Rays, Yankees, Orioles, and Blue Jays.

Among those who have made at least four starts this year against AL East teams, Sale has the lowest ERA (2.06), the lowest opponents' batting average (.172), OBP (.221), and slugging percentage (.279), the highest strikeout rate (41.2 percent of all hitters), and the best WHIP (0.79). He's doing all of this while averaging the most innings per start (7 1/3) of any pitcher against AL East foes.

Sale has been the single most significant mound figure in AL East competition this year, and there's not a close second. (Luis Severino of the Yankees ranks a distant second with a 4-1 record, 2.68 ERA, a .221/.272/.334 opponents' line, 1.07 WHIP, and 27.2 percent strikeout rate.) As such, the Red Sox seem prepared to leverage the lefthander to the greatest extent possible as they look to maintain their position atop the division.

In some ways, this run in which the Red Sox' remaining schedule approximates a divisional round-robin could represent a prelude to the postseason. Just as Sale is being positioned as a difference-maker down the stretch, the Sox likewise could try to do the same in a short series.

As such, Tuesday's start against the Rays marks a beginning of sorts. Sale hasn't pitched in late-season games with this kind of meaning since 2012. (Amazingly, he did not make a single start from 2013-16 for a team that had a record over .500 after July.) Now, he has an opportunity to demonstrate just how capable he might be of carrying the weight of a pennant race on his shoulders.

Chris Sale dominates Rays as Red Sox win seventh in a row

Peter Abraham

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The Red Sox took advantage of gaps in their schedule to give Chris Sale two extra days off before he faced the Tampa Bays on Tuesday night.

As he waited, Sale threw an extra bullpen session to fix the mistakes he made against Cleveland in his last start. The lefthander allowed seven runs over five innings in that game.

“I was flat-out embarrassed the last time I was on a baseball field,” Sale said. “That didn’t really sit right with too many people, especially myself. I wanted to come back and be good for this one.”

Not that he needed more incentive, but Sale also had his wife and two sons in the stands at Tropicana Field along with his parents, in-laws, high school coach and college coach.

The Rays walked into a whirlwind. Sale dominated over eight innings as the Sox extended their win streak to seven games with a 2-0 victory.

Sale struck out 13, walked one and allowed two hits, both singles. Craig Kimbrel then finished off the Rays for his 28th save, striking out all three more.

The 64-49 Sox are 15 games over .500 for the first time this season and lead the Yankees by four games in the American League East. The Yankees are 3-5 since being declared big winners at the trade deadline. The Sox are 7-0.

The Sox start a three-game series in New York on Friday and have Sale lined up to start on Sunday night.

For Sale, who has yet to appear in the postseason, this is what he wanted.

“It’s everything. That’s what we’re for. We’re here to play important games and win important games and we have been,” he said. “We’re going to keep trying to ride this wave as long as we can.”

Sale has struck out 10 or more batters 15 times in 23 starts, the most for an American League pitcher since 2000 when Pedro Martinez also did it 15 times.

The Red Sox record is 19, set by Martinez in 1999. Sale leads the majors with 229 strikeouts.

The extra rest was a factor against the Rays. Sale has started 24 games with six or more days of rest in his career. He has a 1.88 earned run average with 189 strikeouts over 167 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings in those games.

Sale was locked in from the start, retiring the first 10 batters in order before Trevor Plouffe reached on an error by rookie third baseman Rafael Devers.

“He had his best fastball right out the gate and was able to maintain it,” manager John Farrell said. “He was dominant. A lot of strikes, a lot of swing and miss. I thought his slider was one of the more sharp ones he’s had in quite some time. He was in command of this one.”

The Rays didn’t get their first hit until Wilson Ramos singled with one out in the fifth inning. Sale quickly handled the next two batters.

After Peter Bourjos singled in the sixth inning, Sale came back to strike out Plouffe and Evan Longoria.

Tampa Bay did not advance a runner into scoring position until the seventh inning.

Logan Morrison drew a leadoff walk then was thrown out at second by first baseman Mitch Moreland when Steven Souza Jr. bunted.

“That’s probably the turning point of the game. The biggest play of the game,” Sale said.

After a wild pitch, Sale struck out Ramos and Angel Hechavarria on seven pitches. In all, Sale struck out six of the last nine, his fastball still at 97 into the eighth inning.

“There isn’t a ton to talk about. We couldn’t quite figure him out,” Rays manager Kevin Cash said.

The temptation would be to use Sale every five days and get 34 or 35 starts from him. But he has a history of decreased performance in the second half and has yet to pitch in the postseason.

Scheduling extra days off for Sale in August and September could make a big difference in October.

“There’s been a lot of pitches thrown, a lot of strikeouts. They take their toll physically. Any time we can give him an additional day, we’ll look to do it,” Farrell said.

The Sox had 12 hits off four Tampa Bay pitchers but were 1 of 14 with runners in scoring position. Eduardo Nunez was 3 for 5 with two doubles. Xander Bogaerts had three hits and scored a run. Jackie Bradley Jr. had two hits and one RBI.

Tampa Bay rookie Austin Pruitt had faced the Red Sox twice in relief in April and allowed five runs on 11 hits over 3 1/3 innings. As a starter, he was much more effective, giving up one run over six innings.

Dustin Pedroia, who was activated off the disabled list before the game, walked and scored on a groundout by Devers in the fourth inning.

The Sox made it easier for Kimbrel, scoring a run off Ryne Stanek in the eighth on singles by Bogaerts, Moreland and Bradley.

Bradley somewhat atoned for losing track of the number of outs in the seventh inning and being doubled off first base to end the inning.

“I can’t make up for that,” Bradley said. “That was a mental mistake. That’s 100-percent unacceptable. I have to be better than that and I will be better than that. No excuses.”

Watching Sale was much more enjoyable.

“He’s been everything that we needed and more,” Bradley said. “He’s been very special all year.”

Do Craig Kimbrel’s struggles in one-run games extend beyond this season?

Alex Speier

Bill Ballou of the Worcester Telegram & Gazette questions whether Craig Kimbrel deserves elite closer status based on the frequency of his blown saves in one-run games.

While that might be a flawed means of examining Kimbrel’s body of work – after all, logically, all closers should feature a higher percentage of blown saves in one-run games than they do in two- and three-run games – it is worth noting that he has given up far more damage this year in one-run games than in any other situation.

Yet single-year flukes happen without serving as an indictment of a pitcher’s broader body of work. That being the case, it’s worth asking: Do Kimbrel’s struggles in one-run games extend beyond the 2017 season?

It does appear to be the case that Kimbrel has been more vulnerable in one-run games than in two- or three-run contests. In his career, 12 of the 26 homers he’s allowed have come in one-run games. And opponents have a lower average, OBP, and slugging mark against him in two- and three-run games than they do in one-run games.

That said, it’s also hard to view Kimbrel as anything but overwhelming for opposing hitters regardless of the game spread. In his career, opponents are hitting .179/.250/.278 against him in one-run games. Thus far in his career, the .265/.286/.647 line he’s permitted in one-run games this season represents an outlier. Put another way: The Red Sox are probably more than content to take their chances with Kimbrel in a one-run game.

Kimbrel by game situation entered (2017)			
Score	Average	OBP	Slugging
Tie Games	.191	.240	.191
1-Run Games	.265	.286	.647
2-Run Games	.056	.105	.111
3-Run Games	.089	.180	.111

SOURCE: Baseball-Reference.com

Kimbrel by game situation (career)			
Score	Average	OBP	Slugging
Tie Games	.178	.302	.244
1-Run Games	.179	.250	.278
2-Run Games	.142	.217	.225
3-Run Games	.115	.215	.151

SOURCE: Baseball-Reference.com

John Farrell, Red Sox have some juggling to do

Peter Abraham

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — It is never a problem to have too many good players to fit in the lineup. But for a manager, it can be a challenge.

With Dustin Pedroia coming off the disabled list on Tuesday, the Red Sox now have four infielders for three spots and all can make a good case to start.

Rookie Rafael Devers has taken over at third base since his call-up. Xander Bogaerts is established at shortstop and Eduardo Nunez has been the team's best hitter since being acquired from the San Francisco Giants on July 25.

The puzzle was solved on Tuesday by having Pedroia take a turn as the designated hitter. Nunez started at second base.

Nunez will be the player on the move given his ability to start at second base, shortstop, and third base.

"Whatever they want," he said before the Sox played the Tampa Bay Rays. "I'm used to it in my career. It's been a good job for me."

Pedroia, who missed 10 days with inflammation in his left knee, is likely to return to the field on Wednesday ahead of Thursday's day off.

"A gradual buildup," manager John Farrell said.

It was only the second time this season Pedroia was the DH. That is a spot Farrell could use more often with him given that the knee injury has bothered Pedroia since April.

"The options that are available to us are much greater at this point," Farrell said.

The Sox expect to get Hanley Ramirez back in the lineup on Wednesday. He missed several days with sore oblique muscles but is ready to return.

"I'm all set," Ramirez said. "Feeling good."

Ramirez wanted to start on Tuesday but Farrell decided to give him an extra day to make sure.

“While he feels like he’s ready to go, a work day was going to be important just to make sure we test it,” the manager said. “We didn’t want to do anything to put him in a spot where if he over-swings it sets him back. Hopefully he is ready to go [Wednesday].”

The Red Sox are likely to face two lefthanders in the weekend series against the Yankees in New York. Ramirez could play first base in those games, which would allow Pedroia or Nunez to DH.

Nunez started 17 games in left field for the Giants before he was traded but told the Red Sox coaches he was not comfortable there.

“Of all the defensive positions, I think he’d prefer others,” Farrell said.

The Sox have Andrew Benintendi, Chris Young, and Brock Holt available in left field.

First base, a position Nunez has never played before, is a possibility. But that would take some work before becoming an option.

“I wouldn’t rule it out,” Farrell said. “In fairness to him and in fairness to our team and infield defense, we’ve got to get some reps there. How that affords itself remains to be seen.”

For now, Farrell will deal with an issue any manager would welcome.

“We’ll take this a day at a time,” he said.

Rotation set

Rick Porcello, who starts Wednesday, will be working on five days of rest. Then Eduardo Rodriguez and Drew Pomeranz will face the Yankees on Friday and Saturday, respectively. They will have each had six days off.

Chris Sale, who pitched Tuesday, will stay on his regular turn and start against the Yankees on Sunday night.

Doug Fister, on seven days of rest, will face the Indians on Monday in the makeup of the Aug. 2 rainout.

Injured starter David Price made 28 throws from 60 feet in the outfield before the game. Price, out since July 25 with an elbow injury, still has several steps to take before being game ready.

Typically, injured pitchers go through long toss, a few bullpen sessions, and a simulated game before getting into a game. Price, at this point, may need a minor league game before returning to the majors.

Postseason schedule

Major League Baseball announced its postseason schedule. From start to finish, it could last as long as 28 days.

The American League wild-card game will be Oct. 3 on ESPN. The National League wild-card game will be Oct. 4 on TBS.

The two best-of-five AL Division Series start Oct 5 and could run through Oct. 11. They will be on MLB Network or FS1.

The NL Division Series start on Oct. 6 with potential Game 5s on Oct.12.

The best-of-seven ALCS starts Oct. 13 on Fox or FS1. The NLCS starts Oct. 14 on TBS.

The World Series starts Oct. 24 at the park of the team with the best regular-season record. The 2-3-2 format could run until Nov. 1. The Series will be on Fox.

Boggs in house

Hall of Famer Wade Boggs was the analyst for NESN and will remain in the booth with Dave O'Brien on Wednesday. Boggs, who ended his career with the Rays, lives in the area and has done some television work with the Rays in the past . . . To make room for Pedroia on the roster, righthanded reliever Blaine Boyer was placed on the disabled list with what the team said was a neck strain. The move was made retroactive to Sunday. Boyer, who is out of options, went to the disabled list with an elbow strain on July 16. He returned in 10 days . . . Rehabbing reliever Carson Smith pitched a scoreless inning Tuesday night for Triple A Pawtucket, allowing no hits with one walk and one strikeout. He threw 13 pitches, six for strikes . . . There was a moment of silence before the game for recently deceased major leaguers Don Baylor, Darren Daulton, and Lee May. Daulton and May were former Rays coaches

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*** *The Boston Herald***

Chris Sale returns to ace form with 13 strikeouts, two hits allowed in Red Sox' shutout of Rays

Jason Mastrodonato

How does Chris Sale follow up his worst start of the season?

With his best start of the season.

Sale looked exactly like the American League's best pitcher last night. Bouncing back from a seven-run performance against the Cleveland Indians, he took a business-like approach to Tropicana Field, where the Tampa Bay Rays didn't get their first hit until the fifth inning.

The second hit came in the sixth.

A third hit never came.

Sale had the Rays completely confused throughout eight shutout innings, striking out 13 while allowing just the two hits and a walk in the AL East-leading Red Sox' 2-0 win, their season-high seventh straight.

"Let's be honest, I was flat-out embarrassed last time I was on a baseball field," Sale said. "And that never sits right with many people, especially myself. I wanted to come back and be good for this one. My guys picked me up last time, so it was my turn to pick them up today."

The outing was Sale's 15th of the season with at least 10 strikeouts. He's four away from Pedro Martinez' franchise record of 19 with 10 or more K's set in 1999.

Sale has not allowed a run in five of his past seven outings.

"Chris did what Chris did — what another great performance," center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. said.

Sale entered this start having not pitched since the previous Tuesday. The extra rest seems to help: His career ERA while pitching on six days of rest or more dropped to 1.88.

"It's not called the dog days (of summer) for no reason," Sale said. "Any time you can get a little bit of a break, and not only that, a little more work, too. I actually threw two bullpens this week just to stay sharp and be able to fix some things that needed to be able to be taken care of. Especially this time of year, it's nice."

The offense had scored 40 runs in their previous six games, but manager John Farrell shook up the lineup the opener of the two-game series, and the Sox responded with just a whisper of production.

Eduardo Nunez, moved from the cleanup spot to the top of the order, had hits in each of his first three at-bats. But he was stranded after a leadoff double in the first inning, was picked off first base in the third after a single and was stranded again after a two-out double in the fifth.

Replacing Nunez in the cleanup role was Mookie Betts, who came a few feet from making his manager look like a genius in the fourth inning. With Dustin Pedroia and Andrew Benintendi on base, Betts crushed a ball just foul down the right field line, then grounded out to second.

Rafael Devers followed Betts' groundout with an RBI fielder's choice back to the pitcher. Rays starter Austin Pruitt allowed Pedroia to score from third base and Devers to reach when he tried, unsuccessfully, to start a double play.

Looking for more offense with Sale cruising into the seventh inning, Bradley Jr. hit a one-out single and Nunez sent a fly ball to the left field warning track. The ball was caught by Mallex Smith, and Bradley lost track of the outs and was standing just past third base when he was thrown out at first for a double play.

“That was a mental mistake,” Bradley said. “That’s 100 percent unacceptable. I have to be better than that, and I will be better than that. No excuses. Obviously you feel bad for making the mistake, but you still have to continue to go to work, and that’s what I was able to do tonight.”

Bradley redeemed himself with an RBI single in the ninth inning, just before closer Craig Kimbrel hammered this one shut by striking out the side for his 28th save of the season.

Jennings: Sandy Leon the secret to Chris Sale’s great season

Chad Jennings

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — There is comfort in familiarity, and there is satisfaction in a job well done. And in the case of Chris Sale, it’s worth wondering just how much the comfort and the satisfaction — the familiarity and the performance — go hand-in-hand.

Last night was Sale’s 15th double-digit strikeout game of the year and his 10th scoreless start, and we’re not even halfway through August. His season doesn’t measure up to peak Pedro Martinez, but it might be the next-best thing. He’s the Cy Young favorite in the American League without a close second.

And these gaudy numbers keep happening with the same guy behind the plate, a guy who’s seen another Cy Young winner up close.

“I work really well with (Rick) Porcello, too,” Sandy Leon said. “I like working with him, too. The only thing about Chris, he never shakes, you know? So I think that’s the only thing, so I want to be prepared and ready before the game about calling the game, the team we’re facing, having my own plan about that.”

Sale’s made 23 starts this season, and Leon’s been behind the plate for 22. He’s gone out of his way to praise his catcher ever since his Fenway Park debut.

The only time Leon didn’t catch him was last week’s dud against the Indians, when Leon was hurt Christian Vazquez was behind the plate, and Sale gave up seven runs in his worst start of the year.

“To be honest,” Sale said, “I was flat-out embarrassed last time I was on a baseball field.”

Any coincidence he was back to his old self when he was right back with Leon?

“The best thing I can say is there is a lot of familiarity between Sandy and Chris,” manager John Farrell said. “If (Vazquez) had been catching him for most of the season, you might say it would be reversed if Sandy is going to get the one time out of 20-plus starts because of the knee soreness Sandy was going through. I think you see a quicker tempo. Familiarity goes a long way.”

In 156 innings together, Sale has a 2.19 ERA with Leon behind the plate. He’s struck out eight batters for every walk, and opponents have hit .184 with a sub-.300 slugging percentage.

In his career, Sale’s numbers have been very good with every other catcher who’s spent significant time with him — Leon’s already caught more of his innings than all but two catchers — but no combination even approaches the success he’s had with Leon.

Sale has gone out of his way to say last week’s letdown was his own fault and had nothing to do with Vazquez, but managers keep starters and catchers together for a reason.

There’s a familiarity that develops, a trust on both sides. Leon puts down fingers, and Sale throws the pitch. There’s no time wasted in second-guessing. Sale really does almost refuse to shake when Leon’s behind the plate.

“I could have thrown to anybody in my last time out and I would have stunk,” Sale said. “But having him back though is nice. I know what he can do for our staff and what he can do for our team. Just get him back in the routine of things.”

During his seven seasons with the White Sox, Sale pitched primarily to A.J. Pierzynski and Tyler Flowers — the former early in his career as a reliever, and the latter after he settled in as a dominant starter.

The numbers were eerily similar, a higher strikeout rate and higher ERA with Flowers, but opponents hit .220 with a .277 OBP and .345 slugging percentage when Sale pitched to Pierzynski, and .221/.276/.340 when he pitched to Flowers.

Sale did put up decidedly better numbers with Flowers than he did with backup Josh Phegley in 2013 — Flowers would go on to catch every one of his starts the next two years — and last season, when he basically split between Dioner Navarro and Alex Avila, the results were noticeably better with Navarro, though he did throw a complete-game two-hitter to Avila.

Point is, Sale’s been good with almost anyone behind the plate. He’s pitched more than 20 innings to six different guys, and his ERA with each one is 3.53 or better. With four of them, it’s 3.02 or better. A guy named Bryan Anderson caught him one time four years ago, and Sale tossed 7²/₃ scoreless innings.

Sale’s the one in charge out there, and most of the credit and blame falls on his shoulders.

But even in a career filled with great numbers, what Sale’s done with Leon stands out. He’s never put up numbers like this with any other catcher, and Leon’s greatest responsibility the rest of the way is coaxing two more great months out of the Red Sox’ most important player.

Red Sox notebook: Activated off disabled list, Dustin Pedroia is designated hitter

Jason Mastrodonato

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Dustin Pedroia is back, but he’s playing a new position.

Pedroia was activated off the disabled list last night after missing the minimum of 10 days with left knee inflammation, and Red Sox manager John Farrell wasted no time getting him back into the lineup as the No. 2 hitter against the Tampa Bay Rays.

Instead of playing second base, Pedroia was the designated hitter. He went 0-for-4 with a walk in the Red Sox’ 2-0 win.

“Just getting back into it,” Pedroia said afterward. “Hopefully tomorrow I’ll wake up, feel good and it’s day by day.”

It was just the second start this season and fifth in his career at DH. He entered the night batting .500 in those games.

With Hanley Ramirez nursing a sore oblique on top of perennially sore shoulders, the DH spot has opened up, and the Red Sox intend to use it in an effort to rest regulars and keep Pedroia healthy.

“I felt like with today, (Pedroia) being in the DH spot, it’s kind of a gradual build-up,” Farrell said. “I wouldn’t say it’s unlikely he plays second base tomorrow, but we’ll see how he comes out of it tonight. And then with the Thursday off day, we’ve got a chance to maybe use both spots in these first two games. I’ll get a chance to talk to Pedroia tomorrow to see how he feels physically.”

Pedroia’s left knee has given him trouble dating to last year. He had it operated on in the offseason, and Red Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said recently it’s something the team will have to monitor for the rest of Pedroia’s career.

The versatile Eduardo Nunez started at second base last night.

Hanley hopeful

Ramirez wants to be back on the field tonight.

“With an oblique, with a hitter, while he feels like he’s ready to go today, a work day was going to be important just to make sure we test it,” Farrell said. “We didn’t want to do anything where we put him in a spot where if he over-swings, we set him back. Hopefully he is ready to go (tonight).”

Could Ramirez continue playing first base despite his ailments?

“We’ve got lefties Friday and Sunday, the way it looks right now in New York,” Farrell said of the potential pitching matchups. “Hopefully he mixes in as he’s been of late, and that’s at first base.”

Betts goes fourth

With the Sox on a six-game winning streak, having scored 40 runs in that span, Farrell shuffled the lineup like a deck of new cards.

Nunez, hitting .400 with four doubles and four homers in nine games since the Red Sox acquired him from San Francisco, was moved from cleanup to leadoff. He went 3-for-4 with two doubles last night.

Mookie Betts went 1-for-4 while batting fourth for the first time this year. He had hit leadoff in his past 81 games, batting .266 with an .815 OPS. He began last night a career .336 hitter with an .897 OPS in 38 games out of the cleanup spot.

On July 2, after Betts hit two homers with eight RBI in a win against Toronto, a reporter asked him about possibly moving down from the leadoff spot, where he had been hitting for 53 straight games at the time.

“I think things should just stay the way they are,” Betts said. “I think guys thrive or do well in certain situations due to where they are in the order, and in order to continue to put those guys in those situations, you leave them where they are.”

Just more than a month later, Farrell chose to shake it up. He said he talked to Betts about it before making the move.

“I gave him a heads up, so when he walked in, it wasn’t a shock to him that he found himself in the four-hole,” Farrell said. “We’ve had conversations on and off over the past month, Mookie and I, just on spots in the lineup and days in which he scuffled, that maybe give him a different . . . view of things.

“But I think our guys do a good job of not hitting to the spot in the lineup, where Mookie might try to do more than what his physical abilities allow just because he’s in the four-hole. He’s been in the spot before, and he’s been successful there, so that’s where the lineup is.”

Going forward, Farrell said he would not rule out using Nunez at first base but said the newcomer did not feel his most comfortable in left field.

Rehab for Smith

Carson Smith made his second rehab appearance, and first with Triple-A Pawtucket. He completed a scoreless seventh inning on 13 pitches (six strikes) while striking out one. His fastball sat at 91 mph, according to the PawSox. He averaged 93-94 mph when he last pitched regularly in 2015.

“He looked good,” Pawtucket manager Kevin Boles said. “He said he felt good after his outing and that was a positive step in a positive direction.” . . .

David Price hasn’t yet progressed in his recovery from elbow soreness. He threw about 25 times from 60 feet. . . .

The Red Sox will not skip anybody in the rotation with tomorrow’s off day and another one next Thursday, Farrell said. That leaves Eduardo Rodriguez, Drew Pomeranz and Chris Sale in line to start the three games against the Yankees.

Addison Reed, Matt Barnes both strong late-inning options

Chad Jennings

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — In his first week with the Red Sox, Addison Reed pitched four times in a span of five games.

He debuted in a traditional setup role, called on to protect a two-run lead in the eighth inning. Then he handled the seventh inning of a four-run game. Then another seventh inning, this time with the score tied. And finally, on Sunday night, he entered in the middle of an inning to face a pair of switch hitters with a runner at first base.

Reed’s arrival in a deadline trade with the New York Mets has done the obvious for manager John Farrell. It’s provided another effective and experienced late-inning reliever to bridge the gap to closer Craig Kimbrel, but it’s done so in a not-so-obvious way.

Breaking from the stale practice of assigned innings, Farrell has used Reed to provide depth and versatility in the late innings. Reed can pitch the eighth, he can pitch the seventh, or he can enter in the middle of an inning to quiet the running game.

His role is late-inning reliever, and there’s no need to be more specific than that.

“What he’s shown with a really late and tight slider, right-handed or left-handed hasn’t really been an overriding factor because he’s been successful against both,” Farrell said. “So he’s going to get the leverage inning. Not that Matt (Barnes) hasn’t. If we can use their skills to match up best, because both are good against left-handers, Addison has just been a little bit better against the running game.”

In Reed’s first week, he never pitched in a game that didn’t include Barnes as well.

Barnes once pitched the inning before Reed, and he three times pitched the inning after. It keeps save situations in Kimbrel’s hands and leaves Joe Kelly — freshly returned from the disabled list — to pitch lower-leverage situations for the time being.

“Matt and Addison know they’re going to be seventh inning and later based on their availability on a given day,” Farrell said. “They’re aware of it. I think that’s one of the things that we’ve tried to be really consistent with on who’s available on a given day, to communicate what you anticipate as best as possible.”

Reed is a more established late-inning weapon, but Barnes also has pitched well in that role this season, and both have pitched well against lefties. Farrell said Reed’s ability to hold baserunners is among the motivating factors in choosing which reliever enters a game first.

The first time Reed pitched the seventh, it was specifically because the White Sox’ top-three hitters were coming to the plate, and Farrell wanted to keep base-stealing opportunities to a minimum. The only runner who’s tried to steal with Reed on the mound this season — with the Mets or Red Sox — was thrown out.

“The last couple times Addison has been on the mound, it’s when we’ve had the potential of the running game to contend with,” Farrell said. “And while Matt Barnes has done a good job with that, Addison is outstanding. I don’t know that he’s had an attempt (successful) against him all year.”

It’s the kind of thing Farrell can take into account now that he has two otherwise interchangeable options in the late innings.

“I think a lot of times the seventh inning is the highest-leverage spot at the time, so having multiple options to do that is certainly a benefit,” Farrell said. “Just trying to use your guys to the best of the situation, and how are we best suited as a team.”

*** *The Springfield Republican***

Chris Sale's historic 2017 season continues with 8 shutout innings, 13 strikeouts; Sox beat Rays

Christopher Smith

Chris Sale's historic season continued in Tampa Bay.

The lefty pitched 8 scoreless innings, allowing two hits and one walk while striking out 13. He led the Red Sox to a 2-0 win over the Rays at Tropicana Field on Tuesday.

Craig Kimbrel struck out the side in order in the ninth.

Sale has recorded 10 or more strikeouts in 15 starts this season.

Only one other pitcher in Red Sox history has posted more double-digit strikeout games in a single season. Pedro Martinez posted 19 games with 10 or more strikeouts in 1999. Martinez also recorded 15 double-digit strikeout games during 2000.

Sale has 229 strikeouts compared to 29 walks. He's on pace for 328 strikeouts.

All the strikeouts:

He lowered his ERA to 2.57 and his WHIP to 0.88. The opposition is batting .193 against him.

Sale was coming off his worst start this season last time out (Aug. 1) against the Indians at Fenway Park. He allowed seven runs (all earned) and eight hits, including two homers, in 5 innings vs. the Indians.

Sale didn't allow a baserunner Tuesday until one out in the fourth inning when Trevor Plouffe reached on an error by Rafael Devers. He didn't allow a hit until Wilson Ramos' single with one out in the fifth inning.

The Red Sox took a 1-0 lead in the fourth.

Dustin Pedroia walked and Andrew Benintendi singled to begin the inning. Mookie Betts grounded to shortstop. Benintendi was forced out at second but Betts beat the throw to first.

Rafael Devers then grounded back to the mound but starting pitcher Austin Pruitt's throw to second was to the left of the bag. Shortstop Adeiny Hechavarria got the force out at second base but he didn't even attempt to throw to first base. Pedroia scored on the play.

The Red Sox added an insurance run in the top of the ninth inning. Xander Bogaerts and Mitch Moreland each singled to begin the frame. Bogaerts scored on Jackie Bradley Jr.'s one-out single to center field.

Dustin Pedroia activated, Blaine Boyer placed on disabled list with neck strain

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox have activated Dustin Pedroia (knee) from the 10-day disabled list and placed right-handed reliever Blaine Boyer on the DL with a neck strain.

Boyer's DL stint is retroactive to Aug. 6.

Pedroia has been the most clutch hitter on the 2017 Red Sox. He's batting .381 with a .466 on-base percentage and .536 slugging percentage in 105 plate appearances with runners in scoring position.

He's has a .419/.510/.535 line in 51 plate appearances with two outs and runners in scoring position.

Boyer is 1-1 with a 3.21 ERA (10 earned runs in 28.0 innings), 1.50 WHIP, 21 strikeouts and nine walks in 22 appearances this season.

The Red Sox play in Tampa Bay today and tomorrow.

Wade Boggs will join the Red Sox NESN broadcast as the color analyst for both games.

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

Fire Away: Time for the Red Sox heavy hitters to keep spark alive

Chris Mason

1. Dave Dombrowski's July moves have given the Red Sox a spark.

Now it's time for their big bats to keep that fire going. If they want to win the AL East, the Sox can't be reliant on Rafael Devers and Eduardo Nunez overachieving down the stretch.

"While additions have been a huge boost, this is a team that's going to be built top to bottom with the offense the way it was," manager John Farrell said. "It's good to see it click a little consistently right now. We can't overstate the importance of what Eddie and Rafy have done for us."

Devers and Nunez are both playing to their ceilings right now. Nunez has hit .400 since arriving from San Francisco, and his OPS is .477 points higher than it was with the Giants. He's bound to come back down to Earth soon or he'll be booking a ticket to Cooperstown.

2. It was less than a month ago that Devers earned a promotion to Triple A and Dombrowski said, "We again think Rafael Devers is going to be a very, very good player. But I don't want to put it on his back that we're counting on him in a pennant race."

It's simply too much to ask a 20-year-old to carry them.

To pull away with the division, Hanley Ramirez, Jackie Bradley Jr., Mookie Betts and Mitch Moreland need to do the heavy lifting.

3. While Betts, Bradley and Moreland are heating up, Ramirez remains the biggest question mark of the bunch.

Ramirez lifted the Red Sox to the postseason last year with a white-hot September. He tattooed everything in sight.

But in 2017 he's endured an array of injuries, most concerningly to his shoulders, and he's sidelined now was a bad oblique.

"He's battled some things physically this year, more so than a year ago," Farrell said. "It's common to look at a date on the calendar and say on this point he took off. In the first half of last year, when the power might not have been there, the average was.

"I think at times there was more consistent plate coverage with his approach a year ago," Farrell continued. "He's working hard to try and regain that right-center field and all field approach, which is when we feel he's best equipped to handle a number of different pitches. That's been in and out this year. That hasn't been as consistent."

4. A big weekend for Chris Young culminated in a two-homer, five RBI performance Sunday afternoon.

When asked about refining his swing, Young said one of the keys to his offensive outburst was simply getting on the field more.

"When you don't play much you find yourself in the cage messing with your swing all day every day," Young said. "So I'm always tweaking this and tweaking that. Like I said, I was able to play three games in a row. So if I feel something in the first game I can make that adjustment for the next game. I didn't feel great (Saturday) so I'm able to make an adjustment a little bit quicker just because the at-bats are more clumped up together."

5. Blake Swihart made his debut at first base yesterday, going 1-for-3 with a double for the Gulf Coast Red Sox.

Once a lock for the major-league roster, Swihart's career been derailed by injuries.

He damaged his ankle so severely last season that he's no longer a viable every day catcher, and a hand injury in Pawtucket has his offensive numbers way down this year.

6. First base is going to be one of the most interesting positions for Dombrowski to address this offseason.

Moreland's contract expires after the season and Ramirez remains anything but a certainty in the field. Moreland had been outstanding before his June toe injury, and looks to be making progress towards regaining his early season form.

Would Dombrowski bring him back and block Sam Travis's path? It won't be an easy decision.

Back in Pawtucket, Travis still shows promise, but his splits against right-handers and lefties remain severe. His lack of home run power may also be a deterrent.

Swihart is a longshot, but with a strong two months, perhaps he could at least enter a crowded conversation.

7. Doug Fister has earned back-to-back standing ovations at Fenway Park. A waiver wire pickup, the veteran sinkerballer continues to exceed expectations in the Sox rotation.

"That's definitely an honor to be a part of this club and to walk off to an ovation like that," Fister said after Sunday's win. "The fans that we have here, we've got great fans and they let us know that when we play good baseball they're going to support us. That's what they're doing right now."

8. Bradley was back in the No. 9 spot this weekend, and unsurprisingly, he produced.

Last season Bradley hit .341 with a .986 OPS in his 38 starts there, and for his career it's one of his hottest lineup spots. Farrell offered his theory on it.

"It might be because when he's in that nine-hole, he's got Mookie right behind him," Farrell said. "I think that has a lot to do with who is on deck. Pitchers are going to pick their poison on who they look to attack a little more generally or aggressively. Does he possibly benefit by that? You could make a statement that's one of the reasons."

9. The Red Sox continue to work in an extra day of rest for Chris Sale.

It makes sense to give Sale a breather, he's second in the American League in innings pitched. But the numbers suggest he's actually been better on regular rest this year.

Sale on 4 days rest: 2.37 ERA, 0.790 WHIP, (8-3)

Sale on 5 days rest: 4.36 ERA, 1.223 WHIP, (5-0)

*** *RedSox.com***

Sale fans 13 as Sox's winning streak hits 7

Bill Chastain and J. Scott Butherus

ST. PETERSBURG -- Coming off his worst start of the season, Red Sox ace Chris Sale returned to form in a dominating performance against the Rays on Tuesday night at Tropicana Field.

Over eight scoreless innings, Sale fanned 13 batters and scattered two hits as the Red Sox extended their winning streak to a season-high seven games in a 2-0 win.

"I think on both sides of the ball we've been great," said Sale, who notched his 15th double-digit-strikeout game. "We're pitching well, playing really good defense and scoring runs when we need to."

The Red Sox (64-49) widened their lead to four games in the American League East over the second-place Yankees (59-52), who lost to the Blue Jays, and to 6 1/2 games over the third-place Rays (58-56). Despite the loss, Tampa Bay remained tied with the Royals for the second AL Wild Card spot.

"Couldn't quite figure him out. He's really good," Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "Chris Sale makes it very difficult. It's not easy. It's not an easy at-bat. It's not easy to hit at this level, and it's so added on when you're facing probably the game's best. And [then] you're facing the other game's best when he comes in in the ninth."

Cash, of course, was referring to Boston closer Craig Kimbrel, who needed just 15 pitches to fan the side en route to his 28th save.

Rays rookie Austin Pruitt turned in his second consecutive quality start, as the right-hander allowed just one run on seven hits and a walk in six innings, but he came away with his third loss.

The Red Sox scored their first run of the game in the fourth on a forceout at second base that allowed Dustin Pedroia to score from third. Jackie Bradley Jr. singled off Ryne Stanek in the ninth to drive home Xander Bogaerts and put the Red Sox up, 2-0.

"Obviously winning Game 1 was big," Bradley said. "Hopefully we can get some momentum going and it continues."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Getting on the board: Pruitt issued a leadoff walk to Pedroia to start the fourth. Andrew Benintendi followed with a single to center. One out later, the Red Sox had runners at the corners for Rafael Devers,

who grounded to Pruitt. Even though Pedroia broke for the plate, Pruitt went to second hoping for the double play. But his throw to second was a little bit wild to the left field side of the bag and the Rays were only able to get the force at second. Pedroia scored to put the Red Sox up, 1-0.

"[Pruitt] got a comebacker, looked like he slipped off the mound a little bit fielding the ball and might have rushed his throw a tick," Cash said. "I don't think he slipped throwing the ball, but it looked like he rushed and that's what pulled [shortstop Adeiny Hechavarria] off the bag so he couldn't make the turn."

Bradley atones: Bradley was a little overzealous in the seventh when he tore off from first base on Eduardo Nunez's one-out fly ball to left. Bradley was rounding second base when Rays left fielder Mallex Smith made the catch, and he easily doubled-up Bradley at first for a 7-4-3 double play. Bradley made up for his blunder in the ninth when he singled with one out against the hard-throwing Stanek to drive home Bogaerts and give the Red Sox a two-run cushion.

"That was very uncharacteristic of Jackie," Red Sox manager John Farrell said of the baserunning blunder. "He always, to me, is a very heads-up baserunner, a very smart player. But in this case he lost track of the outs."

QUOTABLE

"The offense is going to get going. There's little doubt. We ran into a little bit of a buzzsaw against Milwaukee. And Chris Sale's the biggest buzzsaw. That's what he does." -- Cash, on the Rays' offense, which has been shut out in three of the team's last four games

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The Rays were shut out for the third time in their past four games, dating back to Friday against the Brewers. Tampa Bay has been held scoreless four times in 24 games since the All-Star break, matching its total from 90 games in the first half. The Rays have averaged 3.29 runs per game since the start of the second half, compared to 4.76 runs per game before it.

UNDER REVIEW

The Rays challenged with two outs in the third when Nunez was called safe on Pruitt's pickoff attempt at first. After a review, the call was overturned and Nunez became the third out of the inning.

WHAT'S NEXT

Red Sox: Boston will send right hander Rick Porcello to the mound to finish off a two-game set with the Rays on Wednesday. Porcello (5-14, 4.70 ERA) had one of his best starts of the season in his last outing against the Rays, allowing just one earned run on six hits over eight innings while striking out seven, but he was still credited with the loss. First pitch is slated for 7:10 p.m. ET.

Rays: Jake Odorizzi (6-4, 4.47 ERA) gets the nod in the finale of the Rays' two-game series against the Red Sox on Wednesday in a 7:10 p.m. ET contest at Tropicana Field. Odorizzi will be making his first start since going on the 10-day disabled list with a lower back strain on July 26.

Ace setting Sale into historic waters

J. Scott Butherus

ST. PETERSBURG -- With friends and family looking on, Red Sox ace Chris Sale turned in one of his best performances of an already-stellar season.

The left-hander tossed eight innings of two-hit ball in a 2-0 win against the Rays on Tuesday night at Tropicana Field. Sale tied his season high with 13 strikeouts and walked just one as the Red Sox (64-49)

extended their American League East lead over to four games over the Yankees and 6 1/2 games over the Rays.

A little home cooking and a hug from his son proved -- along with an extra day of rest thanks to a rainout -- to be exactly what he needed to bounce back from one of his shakiest starts of the year.

"To be honest, I was flat-out embarrassed the last time I was on a baseball field," Sale said in regards to his five-inning, seven-run performance against Cleveland. "I wanted to come back and be good for this one."

Sale spent Boston's off-day on Monday visiting family and friends from nearby Lakeland, Fla., where he grew up. The trips back home have always had a positive effect on the former first-round pick out of Florida Gulf Coast University. In his seven career appearances at Tropicana Field, Sale has a 2.03 ERA with 71 strikeouts in just 46 1/3 innings.

"It was a nice little reboot for everybody," Sale said. "[FGCU baseball coach Dave Tollett] was here. Coach [Mike] Campbell, my high school coach, was here. Parents, in-laws, couple of buddies made it, so it was fun to catch up with everybody."

Then again, nearly every field has felt like home for Sale in 2017 as he continued to make his case for his first AL Cy Young Award.

Tuesday was the eighth time in Sale's past 10 starts that he allowed four or less hits to an opponent. He now leads the AL in wins (14), strikeouts (229), ERA (2.57), and opponents' batting average (.189).

The 28-year-old was just the fourth pitcher in history to reach 200 strikeouts in 20 or fewer starts in a season. This century, only Randy Johnson had more double-digit-strikeout games in a season, with 23, than Sale has this year.

"I don't want to say it's a historic year, but it certainly is a powerful year on his part," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "Impressive is an understatement."

Johnson shares the all-time record of 23 games in a season with strikeout king Nolan Ryan, who achieved the feat with the Angels in 1973 -- the year he whiffed a modern-day record 383 batters.

Sale was especially dominant on Tuesday. He threw 80 of his 112 pitches for strikes.

"He had his best fastball right out of the gate and he was able to maintain it through 112 pitches and eight innings of work tonight," Farrell said. "He was dominant. A lot of strikes. A lot of swing and misses. I thought his slider was one of the more sharp ones he's had in quite some time. He was in command of this one."

The Rays didn't manage a baserunner until Trevor Plouffe reached on a throwing error by Boston third baseman Rafael Devers to lead off the fourth inning. Sale still managed to get through the frame on just nine pitches. Rays catcher Wilson Ramos finally broke up the no-hitter with a soft liner into center with one out in the fifth, but he was left stranded after Sale retired Adeiny Hechavarria and Daniel Robertson in order to end the inning.

It wasn't until the bottom of the seventh that a Rays player even reached second base. Tampa Bay outfielder Steven Souza Jr. reached base on a fielder's choice and was able to advance to second on a wild pitch. Sale struck out Ramos and Hechavarria to end the threat.

"I felt confident," Sale said. "Those extra workdays in between helped and you have a little extra fuel when you don't do so well your last time out."

After retiring the side on nine pitches in the eighth, Sale walked back to the dugout to a standing ovation from the visitors' side of the ballpark.

"It's definitely a lot of fun playing behind a guy like him," Boston center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. said. "What more can you say about him? It was huge to get that win tonight."

Pedroia returns to lineup in DH role

J. Scott Butherus

ST. PETERSBURG -- Dustin Pedroia was back in the Red Sox's starting lineup against the Rays on Tuesday, but his return to the field has not been set, said manager John Farrell.

Pedroia was activated from the 10-day disabled list Tuesday after being sidelined since July 29 with inflammation in his left knee. He batted second as the designated hitter, going 0-for-4 with a run scored in Boston's 2-0 win.

"It felt, with being in the DH spot today, that it'll be a gradual build-up," Farrell said. "I wouldn't say it's unlikely he plays second base [on Wednesday], but we'll see how he comes out of tonight with the Thursday off-day."

It was the second time this season that Pedroia had landed on the DL because of the surgically repaired knee. Farrell has plenty of defensive options at second base, so he won't press Pedroia, who entered the game hitting .307 with six home runs and 54 RBIs. Utility man Eduardo Nunez got the start on Tuesday. Farrell said that Brock Holt could also be in the mix for additional playing time.

"With our versatility, we've got a number of guys that we can move around the infield, and that's always a positive," Farrell said.

To make room for Pedroia on the active roster, right-hander Blaine Boyer was placed on the 10-day DL with a neck strain.

Hanley close to return, Price resumes throwing

Designated hitter/first baseman Hanley Ramirez said that he is ready to play. Farrell and the Red Sox, however, are being cautious. Ramirez has missed the past three games with an oblique muscle strain.

"With an oblique, honestly, with a hitter, while he feels like he is ready to go today, a workday was going to be important to make sure we test it," Farrell said. "I didn't want to put him in a spot where if he over-swings, we set him back."

With Boston expected to face left-handers on Friday and Sunday against the New York Yankees, Farrell is hoping to also mix Ramirez in at first base to allow Pedroia additional time at DH.

Heading into Tuesday, Ramirez was second on the team in home runs (17) while batting .250 with 42 RBIs.

After a slight setback over the weekend, left-hander David Price resumed his rehabilitation process after experiencing soreness in his throwing elbow. Price made 25-28 throws from 60 feet -- all fastballs -- before Boston's game against the Rays at Tropicana Field on Tuesday.

"We are approaching it day to day when it comes to his throwing program," Farrell said. Price has been limited to just 11 starts in 2017 due to the elbow inflammation, going 5-3 with a 3.82 ERA.

*** *ESPNBoston.com***

Rick Porcello and the 20/20 club no pitcher wants to join

Scott Lauber

When Rick Porcello took home the Cy Young Award last year, it was a victory for the win.

By any statistical measure, Porcello had a stellar season for the Boston Red Sox. But at a time when a pitcher's win-loss record is often dismissed as irrelevant, Porcello knew he was voted the American League's best based as much on his 22-4 mark as any other metric, including his 3.15 ERA or 189 strikeouts.

"As much as everybody wants to discount wins and losses -- there's definitely arguments against those, and I've said that -- there's also a lot of value to it," Porcello said in November. "If there wasn't any value to it, we wouldn't be keeping that statistic. It wouldn't be the first thing you see on the board when a guy takes the mound, his wins and losses. There's a way to go out and pitch to win a ballgame, and there's a way to go out and pitch not to lose a ballgame."

In that case, Porcello can't deny that the 5-14 record he will drag into his start Wednesday night against the Tampa Bay Rays is an indictment of how he has pitched this season. The Red Sox have gotten shut out in five of his 23 starts, and opponents' batting average on balls in play -- a relevant statistic for a contact pitcher like Porcello -- is up from .269 last year to .333 (.300 is considered average). But the bottom line is Porcello has pitched only well enough to lose nearly three-quarters of his decisions.

And with Porcello set to make at least nine more starts, the right-hander isn't out of the woods when it comes to joining the ignominious 20/20 club. In the past 60 years, seven pitchers have lost 20 games one season after winning 20. Only one, Hall of Famer Steve Carlton, was a reigning Cy Young winner. None played for a winning team in the 20-loss year.

In the past 60 years, seven pitchers have lost 20 games one season after winning 20. A look at the club nobody wants to join.

So what accounts for Porcello's reversal of fortune? Surely, it must be more than a lack of run support and balls being hit out of a defender's reach.

"The game has changed a lot. The hitters have changed a lot," Porcello said. "It's crazy to say, but the way we pitched five years ago is not the way we can pitch now. There's been a lot of adjustments since then."

And Porcello has been affected as much as any pitcher -- seemingly overnight.

Porcello is sinkerballer, his success rooted largely in his ability to pitch down in the strike zone and occasionally surprise a hitter by elevating a pitch. But the recent trend among hitters has been to swing in an uppercut fashion and lift more balls in the air to improve their chances of hitting a home run. With so much emphasis on "launch angle," or swinging underneath the ball, pitchers who thrive on keeping the ball down have been forced to either go even lower or reinvent themselves.

In his ninth big-league season and with a four-seam fastball that averages only 92.6 mph, Porcello isn't about to do the latter. But he also hasn't been particularly effective at the former, as evidenced by the career-high 26 home runs he has given up. Entering Wednesday, only five pitchers in the majors had allowed more, with Seattle's Ariel Miranda at the top of the list with 29.

"It's such a fine line, a gray area, whatever you want to call it," Porcello said. "Establishing the ball down in the zone to make your other stuff effective -- four-seamer up or breaking balls below the zone -- we still have to do that. But now we've got to find the right guys to do it against. If you want to live down there against guys that are aggressive, that are lifting the ball at the bottom of the zone, they'll get you in one pitch. Just trying to find out ways to combat that and make adjustments has been the dialogue that we've had going on back and forth."

The reassuring thing for Porcello is that he isn't alone. Hitters combined for 1,101 homers in June, the most for any month in history. Through Tuesday, 4,240 homers had been hit this season, putting baseball on pace to eclipse the record of 5,693 set in 2000.

"Hitters are consistently looking to do more damage with each swing," former MLB pitcher Brian Bannister, Boston's vice president of pitching development and assistant pitching coach, said. "There are less hitters utilizing the traditional small-ball tactics such as moving the runner with a ground ball to the right side. The concept of pitching to contact is therefore more dangerous, and it requires an adjustment by lower strikeout-rate sinkerball pitchers, who in the past benefited from hitters who were willing to hit the ball on the ground on a regular basis."

But pitchers can still be effective by getting outs on the ground. Strikeouts might be on the rise -- Porcello is averaging a career-high 8.2 strikeouts per nine innings, up from his nine-year average of 6.3 -- but it's not like pitchers are piling up 20-strikeout games either. Sinkerballers aren't suddenly obsolete.

In June, the Red Sox claimed Doug Fister off waivers as a way of adding depth to their starting rotation, a move that finally has paid off with the veteran right-hander posting back-to-back quality starts in victories last week over the Cleveland Indians and Chicago White Sox.

But an unintended benefit of adding Fister has been his ability to act as a sounding board for Porcello. Not only do they both pitch to contact with two-seamers down in the zone, but as teammates with the Detroit Tigers from 2011 to 2013, Porcello often referred to Fister as something of a kindred spirit.

"Strategy is something we definitely talk about a lot," Fister said. "It's a constant struggle because, yes, [the sinker] is a quality pitch, and it is something that we rely on heavily. But at the same time, we have to continue to evolve, whether it's the launch angle that changes where we locate our pitches or how we're mixing things up, changing eye levels a little bit more, changing speeds a little bit more. Whatever it takes."

There are signs Porcello is evolving.

After opponents batted .419, .400 and .367 on his sinker in April, May and June, respectively, they hit only .184 against it in July, an indication Porcello was more precise with the location of his signature pitch. He also owns a 3.76 ERA and has given up only 36 hits in 40 2/3 innings over his past six starts after posting a 5.06 ERA and allowing 138 hits in 105 innings through his first 17 starts.

"The nice thing for pitchers is [hitters] can't cover all four quadrants of the strike zone," Porcello said. "Where now they're covering down there, it used to be that up was the danger zone. Now you can elevate the ball a little bit more. There's ways around it. We've talked about the adjustments that we can make while still being in our game plan and what we're capable of doing."

But although Porcello might be trending in the right direction, last Thursday night's 9-5 victory over the White Sox marked his first win since June 23, a span of seven decisions.

It's further proof that wins and losses aren't entirely in Porcello's control. Neither, it seems, is avoiding the dreaded 20/20 club. Despite the outcome of many of his starts, Porcello has pitched well enough to keep the Red Sox in most games. And with the Sox vying for another AL East title, they aren't about to remove one of their most reliable pitchers from the rotation if he's closing in on 20 losses.

"While we're in season, my day-to-day thoughts are going out there and giving us a chance to win," Porcello said. "There's a lot of that's out of your control as far as wins and losses go. I just have to go out there and give us a chance to win a lot more games every fifth day. That's it."

In some years, doing that is enough to win the Cy Young Award. In others, well, it might just lead the league in losses.

Real or not? Chris Sale vs. Corey Kluber would be a dream postseason matchup

David Schoenfield

If the season ended today, we'd get a rematch of last year's American League Division Series between the Boston Red Sox and Cleveland Indians, which would be pretty awesome because that would mean the show of shows: Chris Sale versus Corey Kluber for a likely battle of aces in the series opener, followed by a second potential showdown in Game 5.

With the way these two guys are pitching, this would be like both teams flying in on their own personal fire-breathing Dragon, laying waste to enemy batters. Tuesday was one of those nights that makes you forget the barrage of home runs and all the talk about juiced balls, launch angles and exit velocity to appreciate greatness and enjoy two artists at their peaks.

Sale threw eight scoreless innings in a 2-0 victory over the Tampa Bay Rays, striking out 13 and allowing two hits. His Game Score of 90 was his highest of the season. Kluber had an even more dramatic result, allowing one run with 11 strikeouts in nine innings against the Colorado Rockies but trailing 1-0 in the bottom of the ninth before the Indians rallied for a 4-1 victory on Yan Gomes' two-out, walk-off home run off Greg Holland.

Kluber is on a run of dominance since June 1 that matches the best of Pedro Martinez or the best of Clayton Kershaw or the best of Sandy Koufax or the best of pretty much any other great you want to bring up. In his past 13 starts, Kluber is 7-1 with a 1.70 ERA, a .472 OPS allowed and 142 strikeouts in 95 1/3 innings. He has fanned at least eight batters in each of those starts, and only Randy Johnson, with two streaks of 15, has done that.

Kluber's curveball was unhittable on Tuesday -- as it usually is -- as the Rockies went 0-for-12 against it with seven strikeouts. That marks the best 0-for that Kluber has had with any pitch in his career. His 102 strikeouts with his curveball lead the majors, as batters are hitting .093 against the pitch.

The thing I liked best about this game was manager Terry Francona's leaving Kluber in to throw his second complete game. He finished with 116 pitches -- nothing extreme about that -- but I think most managers still would have gone to the bullpen for the ninth. Francona clearly wanted to give Kluber a chance at a win. Of course, Kluber isn't your normal starting pitcher.

"It's fun to watch," Francona said after the game. "It'd be nice to score some runs so he could really enjoy it. He spent two-and-a-half hours being grumpy, then you win."

Sale was also in a bit of a mood for his game. He gave up seven runs in five innings in his previous start -- against the Indians -- and after this game, he told reporters, "To be honest, I was flat-out embarrassed the last time I was on a baseball field." With six days off between starts, he threw two bullpen sessions to get his mechanics back in sync.

They were. He went heavy with his slider, throwing it 44 percent of the time, the second-highest rate of any start in his career. The Rays went 0-for-8 against it with five strikeouts, and as Sarah Langs of ESPN Stats & Info noted, Sale often followed a slider with another one. He did that 44 percent of the time, to be exact. It was a different approach that clearly befuddled the Rays. As for his previous outing, it was clearly a one-game slump: Sale has now thrown zeroes in four of his past five starts.

Start counting the days to Oct. 5. Obviously, neither team is locked into its current position, but we can dream of these two squaring off -- something that, remarkably, has happened just one time, despite their pitching in the same division until this year. In that game in May 2015, Kluber gave up one run in nine innings with 12 strikeouts, and Sale allowed one run in eight innings.

Stop the presses. The Los Angeles Dodgers lost. The Dodgers lost a game in which Justin Turner hit two home runs. They lost a game they led 2-0 and 3-1. This feels weird. The hero was Arizona Diamondbacks third baseman Jake Lamb, who belted a grand slam off Tony Watson in the seventh inning.

If there's one concern in Dodger Nation, it's the quality of the left-handed relief. Luis Avilan has been tough on lefties, but he's a true LOOGY you don't want facing right-handers in a key moment. That's why the front office acquired Watson and Tony Cingrani at the trade deadline, but neither was having a good season.

Manager Dave Roberts brought in Pedro Baez in the sixth inning to face the 3-4-5 hitters for Arizona: Lamb, Paul Goldschmidt and J.D. Martinez. That made sense. Baez has been tough all year, especially on righties, so you want him facing the meat of the order. It was a good idea ... until Lamb homered off him. Roberts then split the eighth between Brandon Morrow, who has been throwing smoke of late, and Watson. The weird thing was pulling Morrow after a single and strikeout and having Watson come on to face righty pinch hitter Adam Rosales. Watson hit Rosales, David Peralta grounded out, A.J. Pollock was intentionally walked, and then Lamb homered.

By the way, lefties are 1-for-34 against Morrow, so there wasn't really a need to pull him just to match up Watson with Peralta and Lamb. Right now, Morrow is simply the superior pitcher. At the same time, Roberts has to see what he has in Watson. This is a guy who has been a stellar reliever for the Pirates in the past. Can he pitch his way to Roberts' trust in the postseason? The early return is a resounding no.

Here's where the Dodgers stand after the loss:

Diamondbacks third baseman Jake Lamb's second career grand slam prevented the Dodgers from reaching the 80-win mark on Tuesday. Justin Turner hit 2 home runs. He has 6 career multi-homer games, 5 with the Dodgers. The Dodgers' win pace is now at 114, which would easily be a franchise record.

Catches of the day. White Sox center fielder Adam Engel races deep, climbs the fences and fends off a fan to rob Brian McCann. You have to love Avisail Garcia's reaction as well:

Was it even the best catch of the day, however? Check out Billy Hamilton's grab:

I mean, does anybody here want to make the playoffs? The Chicago Cubs lose, and the Milwaukee Brewers lose, but the St. Louis Cardinals beat the Kansas City Royals, and the Cardinals are just 2 1/2 games behind the Cubs in the National League Central. They have a plus-49 run differential compared to the Cubs' plus-38. Entering the day, FanGraphs gave the Cubs 86 percent odds of winning the division, the Cardinals 10 percent and the Brewers and Pittsburgh Pirates 2 percent. That's because the computers are still projecting the Cubs as the superior team and the best bet to play better the rest of the season (plus, they already sit in first place). But ... man, they're making it difficult to believe they're all that much better. The door has been left ajar. Will the Cardinals take advantage? Or, heck, even the Pirates, who are now just 3 1/2 back?

We can dream of a four-way tie for the division title.

*** *WEEI.com***

Chris Sale's remarkable history of bouncing back

Rob Bradford

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Addison Reed was there for that initial disaster. He was also there five days later.

Back on April 13, 2013, Chris Sale suffered through the first of what would be seven starts in which he gave up at least seven runs. It was the White Sox's starter's first chance to show how he was going to respond to this kind of adversity. As Reed, a Chicago teammate of Sale at the time, can attest, the next outing was telling.

Seven innings, two earned runs.

"A pitcher like that, it's pretty easy to forget about the bad ones when he has the stuff that he has. He doesn't let things bother him," Reed said after the Red Sox' 2-0 win over the Rays Tuesday night. "He has that short-term memory, which is a huge part of his game. It's a huge part of any pitchers game, but he's one of the best I've ever who can forget about a bad outing."

It became a trend for Sale.

The next time it happened, Aug. 23, 2013, the next start resulted in an eight-inning gem in which Sale allowed just one run. Sometimes it took two bad starts to figure things out, but the solution has always shown up. Back-to-back really bad starts in 2015 was followed by pure dominance, with Sale 14 2/3 innings in which he gave up just two runs. And then there was last season's seven-run stinker. Next start? Eight shutout innings.

Of course all of this is pertinent because of what Sale did against Tampa Bay.

Exactly one week after giving up seven runs over five innings against Cleveland, Sale was virtually unhittable against the Rays. The lefty gave up just two hits and no runs over eight innings, striking out 13. The trend had continued.

"The one that wakes up in the morning. That's the best one," said Reed when asked which version of Sale was the tops. "As long as he's waking up in the morning, there's going to be a pretty damn good Chris Sale coming at you."

And this time around, Sale was going to make sure he was coming at you.

"Let's be honest, I was flat-out embarrassed last time I was on a baseball field," he said. "And that never sits right with many people, especially myself. I wanted to come back and be good for this one. My guys picked me up last time, so it was my turn to pick them up today."

Asked what bothered him the most about that last start, Sale was quick with his response. "Getting my ass kicked," he said.

Motivation was just part of the solution for Sale, with rest and preparation also clearly factoring in. With the unusually long layoff between starts, the southpaw had executed not one, but two bullpens to iron out some kinks. It worked.

"Direction. Extension. There were a couple of things that Dana [LeVangie] and Banni [Brian Banniser] and Carl [Willis] and I, we sat down and talked about some things that needed to be corrected and fixed. I had two bullpen sessions this past week with the couple of extra days. This time of year you want to stay on top of things and make sure you stay clicking," Sale explained.

"I felt confident. Those extra work days in between helped. I was able to play some long-toss and get some more extension. It was nice. You have a little bit added fuel when you don't do so well your last time out. We know where we are at. We know this is going to be a pretty big and important road trip for us. I wanted to come out here and give my team a chance to win and start out the right way."

How Jackie Bradley Jr. made up for his mess up

Rob Bradford

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- It was the kind of miscue that looks really, really bad. The sort of thing that usually isn't going to result in any sort of postgame protection or sympathy.

When Jackie Bradley Jr. raced around the bases from first on a deep, but semi-routine, fly ball off the bat of Eduardo Nunez with one out in the seventh inning Tuesday night, it was a terrible look. The Red Sox baserunner had forgotten how many outs there were, leading to a piece of cake, inning-ending double play by the Rays.

"That was a mental mistake," Bradley Jr. said after the Red Sox' 2-0 win over Tampa Bay. "That's 100 percent unacceptable. I've got to be better than that and I will be better that. No excuses."

"Yeah he lost track of the outs," explained Red Sox manager John Farrell. "We made a couple mistakes inside of this one that thankfully Chris [Sale] was pitching the way he did to overcome it. A routine ball that Raffy [Devers threw away]. He'll iron that out. There are some throws where he gets a little bit of a sinker that handcuffs Mitch [first baseman Mitch Moreland]. But it's uncharacteristic from Jackie. To me he's always a very heads-up player, a very smart baserunner. But in this case he lost track of the outs."

Still, when it was all said and done, Bradley Jr. managed to play for the tie in the court of public opinion.

Even with Sale managing to keep the Red Sox' one run stand up through his eight innings, the slim advantage was getting uncomfortable heading into the final frames. So when Bradley Jr. singled in Xander Bogaerts with an insurance run in the ninth inning, it went a long, long way to giving the outfielder a pass for his earlier transgression.

"You just made a mistake. You have to move forward from it," said Bradley Jr., who managed two more hits out of the No. 9 spot. "Still have game left to play. Obviously you feel bad for making the mistake but you still have to continue to go to work and that's what I was able to do tonight."

Bradley Jr. was one of four Red Sox to claim multiple-hit nights, with Eduardo Nunez and Bogaerts each notching three hits and Andrew Benintendi coming away with a pair.

Red Sox 2, Rays 0: Meet Chris Sale, still the American League's most important player

Rob Bradford

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Right now, as we sit here, Jose Altuve is my American League MVP.

Chris Sale would probably get a vote somewhere within the Top 10. But unless you're in the midst of a season in which a pitcher was absurdly good, and no position player really distinguished himself, then I would have to prioritize a hitter in the MVP power power rankings. That's just me.

But there is another conversation to be had. One which was rekindled during the Red Sox' 2-0 win over the Rays Tuesday night. (For a complete recap of the Red Sox' win, which gave them a four game lead over the Yankees in the American League East, [click here](#).)

For my money, Chris Sale is the single most important player in the American League.

Considering what we know of the pitcher and the team, you take the starter out of the equation and the postseason hopes of these Red Sox take a severe nose-dive. The kind of fall of a cliff no team experiences because of the absence of one player.

Sure, it's easy to surface this premise after the Red Sox' seventh straight win. It was Sale (with a little help from Eduardo Nunez's three hits and RBIs from Rafael Devers and Jackie Bradley Jr.) who allowed for the lack of offense against Tampa Bay starter Austin Pruitt to be palatable, going eight, shutout innings. The Red Sox starter did allow a pair of hits, but it sure seemed like he was delivering no-hit stuff.

Is there anybody else in the A.L. who can even enter the discussion? Actually, there is.

The only American League pitchers that comes close to what Sale is offering right now are Corey Kluber and Luis Severino. Kluber continued his torrid stretch by giving up just one run over nine innings while striking out 11 Tuesday night against the Rockies. After a somewhat slow start, the Cleveland ace has totaled a 1.74 ERA since June 1 (13 starts). The Yankees' Severino has also been giving the same sort of vibe as the aforementioned duo, allowing just three earned runs over his last five starts (0.83).

Perhaps a case could be made for either Kluber or Severino for this mythical Most Important Player award. Certainly, the next-best starter for both the Indians (Carlos Carrasco) and Yankees (Sonny Gray) might not match up to the Red Sox' No. 2 starting options of Drew Pomeranz, or potentially David Price. But it's the way that Sale continues to do what he does that makes it seem like everything is tied to him.

When the Rays finally got a runner into scoring position with one out in the seventh inning, Sale did what everybody expected him to do -- he struck out the last two batters of the frame, Wilson Ramos and Adeiny Hechavarria (who fanned on the pitcher's 101st offering, a 97 mph fastball).

Then Sale punctuated his night like the script has detailed for most of the season, cruising through the eighth thanks to an 11-pitch inning that included a pair of strikeouts.

He helped bury a division rival a little bit deeper. He saved the bullpen for another day. He picked up the slack when his offense could do any better than a couple of runs. He dominated when domination was the only thing that would do.

As we were reminded of once again Tuesday night, Chris Sale is a luxury this Red Sox team simply couldn't do without.

Sale had his 15th double-digit strikeout game of the season, most in the majors since Randy Johnson's 15 in 2002 and most in the American League since Pedro Martinez's 15 in 2000. It was also his seventh scoreless start of the season and second of at least eight innings.

Red Sox notes: Why John Farrell is shuffling the lineup

Rob Bradford

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- The time-honored tradition of tinkering with a lineup usually takes place after a prolonged slump or losing streak. The Red Sox head into Tropicana Field Tuesday with neither, yet Red Sox manager John Farrell deemed it was time for somewhat of a change.

For the 37th time in his career, Mookie Betts started a game in the cleanup position, with Eduardo Nunez sliding up to replace the right fielder in the leadoff spot. With Dustin Pedroia serving as the designated hitter, he returns to his familiar spot as the second hitter in the batting order with the recently-rejuvenated Andrew Benintendi batting third. (For the entire lineup, [click here](#).)

Farrell explained that moving Betts out the leadoff position, where he has been all season, was a product of trying to take advantage of the righty hitter's success this season with runners on base (.348 with a .982 OPS). For the season, the Red Sox have the 19th-best OPS in the majors out of their No. 4 spot.

"As Pedey has come back to us, keeping guys in somewhat familiar spots in the lineup. And when you look at the combination, I felt like the one guy who has been in the four-hole a little bit more than others has been Mookie," Farrell said. "If we can get on base at the rate that they've been, the one through three guys, try to take advantage of Mookie's ability with men in scoring position, as he's been so good this year ... that's the combination today."

The move to hit Nunez at the top of the order seems in large part due to the righty hitter's hot bat and threat to steal a base. The infielder isn't known as an on-base guy, having walked just once in his 42 plate appearances with the Red Sox heading into the series opener. But the fact that he has helped spark what had

been a struggling offense with his .400 batting average and 1.229 OPS has led him to the leadoff spot for the fourth time this season.

"If they take their at-bats like they've been ... there was a time last year when I met with all three – Pedey and Mookie and Bogey [Xander Bogaerts] – and Mookie was in the leadoff spot. And while all were swinging the bat very well, felt like, OK, if there's a little bit of a realignment, do we have the potential to take advantage of some of the home runs that Mookie was providing at the time? It worked," Farrell said. "We were able to be a little bit more a step ahead with some runs scored. If that takes place in this scenario, all the better. But they know they're going to be in the lineup every day, and that's probably the biggest thing."

- While neither Pedroia or Hanley Ramirez were in the field Tuesday night, there seems to be a good possibility both will be when the Red Sox kick off their three-game series in New York Friday.

If all goes well Tuesday, Pedroia is likely to return to second base for the series finale against the Rays, Wednesday, while Ramirez was optimistic he would be able to man the designated hitter spot Wednesday, as well. The progress Ramirez has made after being sidelined over the weekend with oblique issues has been so encouraging that Farrell insinuated the plan was to play him at first base when southpaws are slated to start for the Yankees.

"With an oblique, with a hitter, while he feels like he's ready to go today, a work day was going to be important just to make sure we test it," the manager said. "We didn't want to do anything where we put him in a spot where if he over-swings we set him back. Hopefully he is ready to go tomorrow and we'll see where he's at after BP today."

"Based on where he was trending with the treatments over the last couple of days, and how he felt today -- he was in here roughly around noontime getting treatment and work done. We've got lefties Friday and Sunday, the way it looks right now in New York. Hopefully he mixes in as he's been of late, and that's at first base."

- With the Red Sox forced to make-up their rainout with Cleveland Monday, the team's original plan to give some of their starters an extra day of rest has gone out the window. Now, Farrell has Eduardo Rodriguez pitching Friday, Drew Pomeranz Saturday and Chris Sale Sunday. Doug Fister will go against the Indians at Fenway Park in the make-up game.

- David Price threw a baseball again, duplicating the 25-or-so throws from 60 feet out he had executed before having to draw back last week. None of the throws were breaking balls.

- During the off day, Nunez caught up with a former teammate.

Dustin Pedroia is back in lineup and batting second for Red Sox

Alex Reimer

Dustin Pedroia is back from the disabled list and hitting in his usual No. 2 spot against the Rays Tuesday. But instead of playing second base, he'll be at designated hitter.

The Red Sox placed Pedroia on the DL Aug. 1 with left knee inflammation, retroactive to July 29. He had been out of the lineup for the previous three games.

Pedroia, 33, had arthroscopic surgery on his left knee over the winter and then reinjured it when he was spiked by Baltimore's Manny Machado earlier this season. When asked about the condition of Pedroia's knee last week, president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski gave an ominous response.

"The problem for Dustin is, and will be, he has a bad knee," Dombrowski told reporters. "He has a bad knee that he's going to have to watch and we're going to have to watch for the rest of his career."

After starting slowly, Pedroia found his groove at the plate in July. The former MVP hit .337 with four home runs and a .903 OPS last month.

Eduardo Nunez primarily played at second base during Pedroia's absence. That's where he'll be Tuesday as well. Nunez is hitting .400 with four home runs in nine games with the Red Sox, who hold a three-game lead over the Yankees in the AL East.

It's also worth noting that Mookie Betts has been dropped to the cleanup spot. He has a .669 OPS since the All-Star Break.

The complete lineup for Tuesday's contest in Tampa Bay is as follows: Núñez 2B, Pedroia DH, Benintendi LF, Betts RF, Devers 3B, Bogaerts SS, Moreland 1B, Leon C, Bradley Jr. CF, Sale LHP.

*** *BostonSportsJournal.com***

With some extra rest and additional motivation, Sale unbeatable

Sean McAdam

Facing Chris Sale is never fun.

Facing a rested Chris Sale is a nightmare.

Facing an angry and rested Chris Sale may well violate the terms of the Geneva Convention. It's downright inhumane.

And yet, that was the situation the Tampa Bay Rays found themselves in Tuesday night.

With a little bit extra in his tank and a burning determination to make up for his worst start of the season last week, Sale proved to be too much for the Rays. Heck, he might have proven too much for the 1927 Yankees.

He limited the Rays to two measly singles over eight shutout innings, posting 13 strikeouts while allowing just one walk.

"He was in command of this one," remarked John Farrell after the Red Sox' 2-0 win, their seventh victory in a row.

"There isn't a ton to talk about," said a glum Kevin Cash, Rays manager. "We couldn't quite figure (Sale) out. He's very good. He makes it difficult."

Does he ever. Sale didn't allow a baserunner until the fourth, when Rafael Devers skipped a throw to first that Mitch Moreland couldn't contain. He didn't allow a hit until one out in the fifth. And it wasn't until Sale fired a wild pitch over Sandy Leon's head in the seventh that the Rays could claim a baserunner in scoring position.

By then, Sale had a whole run with which to work. What would have been a slim 1-0 cushion seemed almost insurmountable on a night when Sale was operating with extra power and, maybe, a little more motivation than usual.

"I don't know that I can pinpoint exactly," said Sale, when asked to identify the benefits of the two extra days of rest. "Overall freshness, I guess. These aren't called the 'dog days' (of the season) for no reason, so anytime you can get a little bit of a break (it helps)."

Of course, Sale didn't exactly kick back with the two days provided to him. He saw them as an opportunity to get some additional side work in, throwing two bullpens since his debacle against the Indians at Fenway last week "to kind of stay sharp and be able to fix some things that needed to be taken care of. Especially this time of year, it's nice."

Sale leads the American League in virtually every category imaginable – wins, strikeouts, innings pitched, strikeout-to-walk ratio – but that doesn't mean he's satisfied.

"I was flat out embarrassed the last time I was on a baseball field," seethed Sale, recounting the seven runs and eight hits he allowed in five innings. "That didn't sit right with too many people, especially myself. I got my ass kicked. I wanted to come back and be good for this one."

And having squandered the five runs the Sox scored while he was in the game against Cleveland, he figured it was payback time Tuesday. The one run the Sox scored in the first eight innings? That was plenty, thank you very much.

With input from bullpen coach Dana LeVangie, pitching coach Carl Willis and assistant pitching coach Brian Bannister, Sale determined that he needed some help with both his extension and direction in his delivery.

"This time of year," noted Sale, "you want to stay on top of things and make sure that you stay clicking. Those extra work days in between helped. And like I said, you have a little bit of added fuel when you don't do so well the last time out."

Sale's slider, normally his most effective pitch, was even more devastating after some tinkering. He used to both set up the Rays, and, on occasion, finish them with it, too.

"That," said Sale with typical understatement, "was a pretty big pitch for me tonight."

The 13 strikeouts by Sale gave him 15 starts with double-digit strikeouts this season, the most for an American League pitcher since one Pedro Martinez had 15 in 2000.

"I don't know if you can say it's a historic year," said Farrell. "But it's certainly a powerful year. He's been dominant. He's been so consistent with the exception of one or two (outings) of the 23 he's made so far. To maintain that kind of strikeout rate...impressive is an understatement."

And don't forget the work ethic. After Sale was done his night's work on the mound and finished answering questions from the media, he was spotted skipping rope, part of his post-start regimen, outside the clubhouse, in the bowels of Tropicana Field.

Return of Pedroia leads to lineup realignment

Sean McAdam

TAMPA — As the Red Sox begin a big five-game road trip against their closest competitors in the division, they own a six-game winning streak, and their moribund offense has come to life of late, averaging 6.7 runs in that span.

So that would, on the face of it, make this a strange time to re-arrange the lineup that is, after some fits and starts, finally firing at full efficiency of late. And yet, that's what happened.

For Tuesday's night opener at Tropicana Field, John Farrell had Eduardo Nunez hitting first, Dustin Pedroia (newly activated from the DL) second, Andrew Benintendi third and Mookie Betts fourth. It marked the first time this season that Betts had hit fourth, after spending the vast majority of the first 112 games hitting leadoff (81 times) and another 26 games hitting third.

“When you look at the combination,” said John Farrell, “the one guy who’s been in the four hole a little bit more than others (in the past) has been Mookie. And if we can get on base at the rate (they’ve been going), the 1-2-3 guys, we’ll try to take advantage of Mookie’s ability with men in scoring position. He’s been so good this year (.404).”

From the fifth spot down, the lineup remained essentially unchanged. But Farrell wanted to have Nunez and his base-stealing capability at the top, and provide some RBI opportunities for Betts.

Farrell said he had spoken to Betts about the change “so when he walked in, it wasn’t a shock to him. We’ve had conversations, off and on, in the last month, Mookie and I, about spot in the lineup and days in which he’s scuffled, how a different look might give him a different view of things. But I think our guys do a good job not hitting to the spot in the lineup and (don’t try) to do more than their physical abilities allow. He’s been in the spot before and he’s been successful there, so that’s what the lineup is.”

A year ago, when he finished runner-up to Mike Trout in AL MVP balloting, Betts hit fourth nearly a quarter of the season (36 games).

As for the shakeup in the top four spots at a time when the Sox are producing better than they have all season, Farrell said: “They’re all in the lineup. If they take their at-bats like they’ve been... There was a time last year when I met with (Betts, Xander Bogaerts and Pedroia), and Mookie was in the leadoff spot and all were swinging the bat very well. But we thought, ‘If there’s a little bit of realignment, do we have the potential to take advantage of some of the home runs that Mookie was providing at the time?’ It worked. We were able to be a little bit more ahead with some runs scored. If that takes place with this scenario, all the better. They know they’re going to be in the lineup every day and that’s probably the biggest thing.”

Farrell added that he liked having Nunez at the top of the order to take advantage of his base-stealing ability. Nunez is 3-for-3 in base stealing attempts since joining the Sox and was 18-for-23 with the Giants.

“That added component at the top is another benefit,” Farrell said.

*** *Associated Press***

Sale strikes out 13 Rays, Red Sox win seventh straight, 2-0

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Working on six days' rest, Chris Sale followed up his worst start of the season with one of his best.

Sale allowed two hits and struck out 13 in eight innings, and the Boston Red Sox won their seventh straight, 2-0 over the Tampa Bay Rays on Tuesday night. Last Wednesday, Sale gave up seven runs in five innings against Cleveland.

"To be honest, I was flat-out embarrassed last time I was on a baseball field," Sale said. "You have some added fuel when you don't do so well your last time out. I wanted to come back and be good for this one."

He was more than just good. Sale reached double digits in strikeouts for the 15th time this season, the first time that's been done since Randy Johnson in 2002.

The win pushed Boston's AL East lead over the New York Yankees to four games.

Dustin Pedroia, back in the Boston lineup as a DH after a stint on the disabled list, scored the first run on a fielder's choice in the fourth. A bad throw by Austin Pruitt (6-3) prevented a possible inning-ending double play on Rafael Devers' chopper to the mound.

It was the only run allowed by Pruitt in his fourth major league start.

The Rays were shut out for the third time in four games. The Brewers held them scoreless on Saturday and Sunday.

"We need to find a way to win when our pitchers do so well," Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "The offense is going to get going. We ran into a little buzzsaw against Milwaukee, and Chris Sale is the biggest buzzsaw."

Sale (14-4) gave up singles to Wilson Ramos in the fifth and Peter Bourjos in the sixth. The Rays did not get a runner to second base until the seventh, when Sale followed a walk to Logan Morrison with a wild pitch.

"Any pitcher can go out and dominate the first couple innings," said Jackie Bradley Jr., who drove in Boston's other run with a ninth-inning single. "He was able to do it throughout the game. That's what makes him a special pitcher."

Sale, who leads the majors with 229 strikeouts in 23 starts, has struck out at least 12 in all four of his starts against the Rays.

Craig Kimbrel struck out the side in the ninth for his 28th save.

Eduardo Nunez and Xander Bogaerts each had three of Boston's 12 hits.

PEDROIA'S RETURN

Pedroia, who missed eight games with left knee inflammation, hopes to return to second base for Wednesday night's game. "We'll see tomorrow," he said after going 0-for-3 with a walk. "Hopefully I'll wake up and not have any problems. I'm just kind of getting back into it."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: LHP David Price, on the 10-day disabled list with elbow inflammation, threw nearly 30 fastballs on Tuesday and will be re-evaluated Wednesday. ... 1B-DH Hanley Ramirez, sidelined since Friday with a sore oblique muscle, might be in the lineup Wednesday night, manager John Farrell said.

Rays: RHP Alex Cobb was placed on the 10-day disabled list with turf toe. LHP Blake Snell replaced Cobb on the roster and will pitch Thursday night against Cleveland. ... RHP Matt Andriese, on the 60-day DL with a right hip stress reaction, threw batting practice Tuesday and might make a rehab start this weekend.

UP NEXT

RHP Rick Porcello will pitch Wednesday night against Tampa Bay's Jake Odorizzi (6-4), who missed two rotation turns due to a lower back strain. Porcello (5-14) pitched a complete game at Tropicana Field on July 8, but lost 1-0.

*** *The Tampa Bay Times***

Rays put up little fight against Red Sox ace Chris Sale

Marc Topkin

ST. PETERSBURG — The Rays were the team without any hard knocks on Tuesday.

Though they got another sterling start, six innings of one-run ball from rookie Austin Pruitt, they couldn't get anything but two measly singles off Red Sox ace Chris Sale and closer Craig Kimbrel, losing the series opener against the division leaders 2-0.

Of greater concern to the Rays than dropping to 58-56 and 6½ games back in the American League East race (and staying even with the Royals in the second wild-card race) has to be the ongoing absence of their offense, though at least they had the proviso Tuesday of facing Boston's dynamic duo.

But since returning from Houston, the Rays have been shut out in three of four games and scored only two runs in the other, Sunday's walkoff win over the Brewers. They are also 0-for-their-past-24 with runners in scoring position.

"Yeah, it's probably a little frustrating," rightfielder Steven Souza Jr. said. "We put up two runs in the last four games, it's definitely not what we've been doing all year. Look around and there's some good pitchers. Sale's been doing it all year to everyone. But, yes, it's frustrating."

More so, because their starting pitching has been so good. Pruitt was the fourth straight Rays starter to work six innings and allow just one run, and they have three Ls and a no-decision to show for it.

"We've gone through a dry spell," Souza said. "The pitching's been great. So all we have to do is start getting the bats alive again. There's so much baseball left to be played. This is such a tough stretch, and we really haven't really had that tough of a stretch up until this point.

"If we thought it was going to be easy, it wasn't. And if we thought there weren't going to be bumps in the road, then we were mistaken. But we just have to come together collectively and start to get it going a little bit."

Pruitt again proved the Rays' trust wise in holding the Red Sox to one run over six innings, scattering seven hits and one costly walk.

Putting Dustin Pedroia on to open the fourth, in front of a bi-partisan crowd of 22,328 at the Trop, led to trouble. Though he would pitch his way out of other trouble, Pruitt couldn't turn a double play on a comebacker — he appeared to slip a little fielding the ball, though he claimed he didn't — that cost him the run.

"I threw the ball well. I got out of some tough jams," Pruitt said. "I was upset with myself about the comebacker."

The Sox added on in the ninth against rookie reliever Ryne Stanek, as manager Kevin Cash stuck to script to not use Tommy Hunter, who had been warming earlier, with the team behind.

Not only did the Rays have the usually arduous task of facing Sale, and at the Trop, where he typically pitches well, but of doing so when he was even more ornery, coming off a rough outing against the Indians when he was knocked out after five innings, having allowed seven runs.

Unsurprisingly, their night didn't start well with 10 up and 10 down — five on strikeouts, nothing hit hard. They got one man on when rookie third baseman Rafael Devers made a throwing error in the fourth, and they canceled the no-hitter alerts when Wilson Ramos singled with one out in the fifth.

Still, it seemed like they might need help from a higher authority, or Tim Tebow, who is coming to town if you haven't heard, to break through. When Logan Morrison walked to open the seventh against Sale, Souza — who was 1-for-17 with 12 Ks against him — tried to get creative and bunt for a hit but pushed it too hard, and Morrison was thrown out. They went quickly after that, as Sale struck out 13 and Kimbrel three more in the ninth.

"It's not an easy thing to do, hit at this level," Cash said, "and that is so added on when you're facing probably the game's best and then you face the other game's best when he comes in in the ninth."

If they are serious about their division title aspirations, they have to get that turned around tonight, against Boston's Rick Porcello and his 4.70 ERA.

"We'll get it going," Cash said. "We're going to get the offense going here sooner or later."