

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, October 10, 2017

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox bypassed the usual bullpen plan, and paid for it

Nick Cafardo

On the blame pie, Chris Sale has to get a nice piece, and so does the Red Sox' decision to have him come out for his fifth inning of relief.

Alex Bregman hit a 2-and-1 changeup over the Monster to tie the game at 3 in the eighth. It sucked the air out of Fenway after Sale had pitched brilliantly.

Houston manager A.J. Hinch said, "We did feel Sale was tiring a bit. But that doesn't make him easier to hit. So our guys just hung in there the whole time "

Sox manager John Farrell and his staff thought Sale was still strong.

But if you want to argue that Addison Reed should have taken his normal inning (the eighth) and Craig Kimbrel his normal inning (the ninth) — then have at it. Your arguments are valid.

Hinch's observations stem from Sale giving up some base runners in the seventh, but getting out of the jam.

It's the old argument: Should Grady Little have taken out the best pitcher on earth (Pedro Martinez) for an inferior bullpen pitcher in the 2003 playoffs against the Yankees? The majority of fans would say yes, though if you ask people who actually work in baseball, they still say Little made the right choice.

Things got worse when Sale gave way to Kimbrel. You'd think with a team's two best pitchers, they could take care of a 3-2 lead, but not this time.

The Red Sox were out of the ALDS in four games this year. Progress? Well, sure. The bottom line is for the second straight season the team they played was better. They have to get better and be able to match Houston and Cleveland.

They're just not there.

Farrell (who was thrown out of the game in the second inning), bench coach Gary DiSarcina, and pitching coach Carl Willis were in lockstep that Sale was strong, even though it looked as if he was starting to miss his location. He had given the Sox four dominant, shutout innings, and the Sox were up, 3-2, going into the eighth, thanks to Andrew Benintendi's two-run homer.

Sale pitched terrific out of the pen. He threw a bad changeup to Bregman and, of course, the naysayers are out in full force. The Sox should have taken him out before the eighth, blah, blah, blah.

DiSarcina and Willis saw no reason to take out Sale. They felt so strongly about Sale that Reed-to-Kimbrel eighth- and ninth-inning protocol was skipped to accommodate Sale. Kimbrel looked as tight as a drum.

Kimbrel might have been throwing up to 101 miles per hour, but he looked as lost as he did last season when the Sox clinched the division. Mark Teixeira hit a walkoff grand slam off Joe Kelly that day after Kimbrel couldn't get anyone out and looked very nervous.

Both teams decided they were going to bring in their pitching studs Monday. The Astros brought in Justin Verlander for his first relief outing ever and, against his first batter, gave up the go-ahead homer to Benintendi.

Sale was mowing everyone down.

“Felt good. Felt strong. Couldn’t get it done,” Sale lamented of the changeup that Bregman hit for the homer.

Sale started his career as a reliever so he knows the drill.

“I was given plenty of time to get loose. I’ve been there before so I used some of my old tricks,” Sale said.

“It’s tough,” he continued. “You come here to win. I worked hard. It came down to the wire. Close game.”

Sale took a long time to come to the reporter scrum after the game, his tired arm now able to rest finally. Sale said there was no pitch count or perceived notion of how far he could go. He made the comment that if he had to pitch in the bullpen or in Game 5, “I’ll pitch until my arm falls off.”

And that’s practically what he did.

When Bregman homered, the Astros dugout exploded. And the second-guessers had their validation that Reed should have started the inning.

Sale was asked about the heap of criticism that’s been laid on Farrell.

“This is a game that’s second-guessed for anything, any inning, every pitch, every move,” he said. “There’s a lot of room for debate and woulda, shouldas. But [Farrell] gave me every opportunity to succeed and I can say the same for everybody on this team.”

Farrell didn’t bite on the second-guessing.

“Very comfortable,” said Farrell of the decision to keep Sale in. “Especially the four innings Chris had pitched to that point . . . But in a position with six outs to go, up a run, and Chris Sale who was still strong, still throwing the ball extremely well, I felt like we were in a good position.”

Was it too much too soon?

“No, Chris was one day short of his normal rest, so he was in good shape from a physical standpoint. As efficient and as pinpoint in his control he was to that point, he was still in good shape, I thought.”

But would Reed have been a better choice than Sale with Bregman coming up?

“Yeah, considered it, recognizing where what his power numbers are and his splits are left, right, and not taking anything for granted,” Farrell said. “We wanted to be lefthanded through the bottom part of that order, particularly the reverse splits of [Yuli] Gurriel, and as well as he’s been swinging the bat this series. The 2-1 changeup stayed in the middle of the plate.”

Most of Sale’s season was electric, including most of Monday’s performance. But as the season wound down there were just too many of those moments where Sale had to say, “I just didn’t get it done.”

And Game 4 was one of them.

Justin Verlander contingency plan worked out fine for Astros

Julian Benbow

As the early morning rain was coming down and the forecasts only called for more, Houston Astros manager A.J. Hinch tried to put plans in place for both an ugly day and an ugly game.

He wasn't sure until around noon specifically, when officials from Major League Baseball met with the Astros and the Red Sox, how they would figure out a way to get nine innings in and how it might affect the Astros starter Charlie Morton.

But he had a contingency plan: Justin Verlander.

"We thought it could be a broken game from the very beginning," Hinch said. "So we talked to Verlander before the game and just said, 'Hey, if Charlie goes and then there's a pause or there's a break in the action and we need to resume and we have the lead, we may turn to you for the bridge to try to get to [Ken] Giles.'"

As it turned out, the rain cooperated enough to avoid any delays.

But with the Astros clinging to a 2-1 lead with one on and one out in the fifth inning, Hinch ended up in a game of cat-and-mouse with Sox manager John Farrell, who was directing things from the clubhouse after his second-inning ejection.

The Sox had pushed all their chips in the inning before by sending Chris Sale to the mound.

The more it became apparent rain wouldn't be an issue, Hinch realized he had to match ace for ace and went to Verlander in the fifth.

"Once I saw Sale pitch, before any sort of rain delay, there was an indication — they know the weather better than we do — there was a little bit of an indication that, 'Hey, we may have a bigger window than we expected.' And then as the game unfolded and we got the lead, I felt really good about it. And Justin Verlander wanted the ball."

When Verlander came in and immediately gave up a two-run homer to Andrew Benintendi, it seemed like the call backfired.

But Verlander ultimately ended up getting the win with his 2⅔-inning stint, by keeping the Astros in striking distance and help them rally to a 5-4 comeback win that sent them to their first league championship series since 2005.

It was the first relief appearance of Verlander's career — regular or postseason.

"He was very good about preparation," Hinch said. "It did cut out of his routine, which is the one thing you question. He's been doing this routine for 13 years, but he comes in and has the emotion of the home run, and just like that, kind of a lesser man might have caved in that situation because of the big moment, woke up the crowd, Benintendi's circling the bases.

"Those outs after that were pretty huge. And getting the ball to Ken Giles with the lead was the whole goal. I'm glad our team came back and ultimately got the lead for Justin."

Houston's strong

While the Astros celebrated their ALDS victory, they didn't lose sight of the recover that still faces the city of Houston in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Astros owner Jim Crane along with the Astros ownership group and the Astros Foundation, have pledged \$4 million to relief efforts. Players have continued to wear "Houston Strong" patches on their jerseys since debuting them in their return to Minute Maid Park after the storm in September.

“The city of Houston is still rebuilding and it’s easy for us to look in the rearview mirror and think that the hurricane is over, [but] the rebuild starts and is not going to stop for a long time. We’re proud to wear that Houston Strong patch, it was very emotional, probably the most emotions I’ve ever had on a field the day we played the doubleheader, when you had our city under water and some fans that came out. We want to win for them, we want to win for us, we want to win because we showed up in spring training to try to win a World Series.

Rare comeback

In the regular season, the Astros were just 8-48 when trailing after seven innings . . . Their eight homers in the series were the third most in a Division Series in franchise history . . . Yuli Gurriel went 9 for 17 in the series making him just the third rookie ever to post eight or more hits in a single Division Series, joining Ichiro Suzuki (12 in 2001) and Yasiel Puig (eight in 2013.)

Red Sox stars did not deliver when it mattered most in playoffs

Dan Shaughnessy

There were classic moments in the final hours of the 2017 Red Sox season. The last game of the season was a hardball epic, featuring multiple lead changes, Chris Sale and Justin Verlander locked in a late-game duel as relief pitchers, dozens of scoring chances, a (Red Sox) guy gunned down at home plate, the symbolic ejection of John Farrell, and a ninth-inning, inside-the-park homer by Rafael Devers — a doughboy third baseman who will be a Fenway thrill ride for years to come.

Despite all that, the last drops of blood drained from the Sox season at 5:16 p.m. on a gloomy Monday when Dustin Pedroia closed out a wildly entertaining 5-4 loss with a grounder to second base on a 3-and-2 pitch.

With that, the long-suffering Houston Astros are headed to the American League Championship Series.

The Red Sox? They are going home after yet another failed October foray (the Sox are a sorry 1-6 in their last two postseasons). In the end, Boston’s regular-season show horses, brought here to deliver postseason glory, again failed to “Do Their Jobs” when it mattered most. Red Sox starting pitchers were abysmal throughout the series (23 hits and 16 earned runs in an aggregate 11½ innings), putting Boston in a hole in every game. And then there was closer Craig Kimbrel, indomitable just about all season, failing dramatically in the eighth and ninth innings of the elimination game.

It would not be a Red Sox playoff loss without some serious second-guessing, and Farrell fed the talk show beast with his own Grady Little moment. Ejected in the second inning while defending Pedroia, who argued a called third strike, Farrell continued to call the shots via satellite (Fitbit, perhaps?) and failed to see that Sale was cooked after the ace lefty gave the Sox four stellar innings of relief. It was clear Sale was done after the seventh, but Farrell sent him back out for the eighth with a 3-2 lead only to watch Houston’s Alex Bregman tie the score with a solo home run to left.

Even that wasn’t enough to lift Sale. Eschewing Addison Reed, who was brought here to pitch the eighth, Manager John allowed Sale to continue. The veteran lefty promptly surrendered a hard single to Evan Gattis, which turned out to be the winning run thanks to the sloppy, nervous work of Kimbrel (wild pitch, walk, single). Kimbrel gave up another run on a hit batsman and two base hits in the ninth before he was lifted and walked off to a round of boos.

After the game, Farrell did what every manager does: he defended everything.

“With six outs to go, up a run, and Chris Sale who was still strong, still throwing the ball extremely well, I felt like we were in good position,” said Farrell. “Chris was one day short of his normal rest so he was in good shape from a physical standpoint.”

Late in the postgame presser, Farrell of course was asked if he is the man best suited to manage the local nine.

“Yes, I feel confident in that,” he said. “. . . Again, we just walked off the field 10 minutes ago.”

Farrell quite likely will be served up to the frustrated masses in the wake of this latest fall fold. His bosses are masters of PR and will likely fill the corner office the same way they fill the NESN booth (“Hey, wouldn’t it be a swell idea to bring back Jason Varitek? Fans love him!”)

But we all know the problem lies elsewhere with this team. Farrell is easy to harpoon and has delivered more than his share of head-scratchers in five years on the job, but the Sox’ problems are owed more to attitude than dugout management or talent.

Red Sox fans never embraced this team and it’s because the 2017 Sox were stubborn, thin-skinned, and ultimately not clutch. Travel back in time and remember how they bungled the Manny Machado episode early in the season in Baltimore. That was followed by David Price’s dressing down of Dennis Eckersley — a baseball crime that was applauded by Price’s teammates and never set straight with apologies from uniformed personnel.

The Sox ran the bases recklessly (Mitch Moreland was foolishly sent home for an easy out Monday — Boston’s 30th runner nailed at home this season), danced in the outfield after wins, and mocked authorities when they were caught using electronics to steal signs. They never admitted they were wrong about anything.

For the second straight year, they finished first in the AL East, but could not close out the season in good fashion. Including regular-season and postseason games, the Sox lost eight of their last nine in 2016, and eight of their last 11 this season.

That’s 16 losses in their last 20 games of 2016-17.

Playing like a group that found a leader in Price, they were awful in the playoffs. Sale, Drew Pomeranz, and Rick Porcello submitted terrible starts against the Astros. Kimbrel spit the bit in his only high-leverage game. The core players in the Sox lineup failed to deliver for a second straight ALDS (combined playoff numbers in 2016 and 2017: Xander Bogaerts, .138; Mookie Betts, .269; Jackie Bradley Jr., .160; Pedroia, .143. Combined 19 hits and 33 strikeouts.) Perhaps vaulting over the luxury tax threshold to get another bat would have been worth it.

Oh, and let’s not forget that weird moment in Game 1 when Eduardo Nunez collapsed running down the line in the first inning and no player emerged from the dugout to check on him or carry him from the field. The task was left to Farrell and a trainer.

He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother?

Not the theme song of the 2017 Sox.

This is not working. Change would be good. And it probably means more than just firing the manager.

Craig Kimbrel was ready, but he couldn’t deliver

Julian Benbow

Craig Kimbrel wasn’t sure when he’d get the call, how many runners would be on base at the time, or how many outs he’d be asked to get, but he knew the phone would ring eventually.

The Red Sox closer had only pitched once in the past week, but with the Sox on the brink of elimination against the Houston Astros, he said he was prepared for any situation.

“The phone rings, I get asked to warm up, that’s what I do,” he said.

Clinging to a 3-2 lead in the eighth inning of their 5-4 loss on Monday, the Sox were hoping to use their flamethrower to shut the door on Game 4 of the Division Series and force a decisive Game 5 in Houston.

But after Chris Sale gave up a tying home run to Alex Bregman and then a tricky single down the third base line to Evan Gattis, the Sox called on Kimbrel with two outs and one on to stop a fire from spreading.

Kimbrel wasn’t expecting to be on the mound so soon with the way Sale had pitched.

“Not the way Chris was throwing the ball,” Kimbrel said. “He was on a roll and I think that’s one of the reasons he went out there for the eighth. As well as he was throwing the ball, it’s kind of hard to take someone like that out.”

The situation wasn’t foreign to Kimbrel. He was 3-0 with three saves in the seven times he had to get more than three outs during the regular season.

But instead of keeping things under control, the game unraveled for Kimbrel and the Sox.

He promptly threw a wild pitch, and walked the first hitter he faced, George Springer, then gave up an RBI single to Josh Reddick that gave the Astros a 4-3 lead.

In the ninth, his command flickered. He struck out Carlos Correa on three pitches, but hit Marwin Gonzalez with a curveball in the next at-bat. He got Bregman to fly to center for the second out of the inning, but a looping single to right field by Yuli Gurriel kept the inning alive.

Carlos Beltran stepped to the plate as a pinch hitter, and the veteran got into an eight-pitch battle with Kimbrel that ended with Beltran launching a 3-and-2 curveball off the Green Monster for an RBI double that padded the Astros’ lead.

“The bloop hit to right, that kind of set up Carlos,” Kimbrel said. “We had a good battle and he put one off the Wall.”

The one run Kimbrel allowed proved to be decisive, pulling the plug on the Sox’ plans of pushing the series one more game.

“It’s always tough,” Kimbrel said. “Especially, I felt like we had the momentum going our way and in the late innings, it slipped away from us, unfortunately. We’ve got a good group of guys in here, we fought hard, and it’s tough to come up short like we did today.”

Kimbrel threw 24 of his 38 pitches for strikes but got just three swings and misses.

The two times Kimbrel faced the Astros in the final week of the regular season, they stung him for three hits and a run.

“Even in some of the appearances we saw before the end of the regular season and in the inning of work down in Houston, they put up tough at-bats against him,” manager John Farrell said. “Typically we’re so accustomed to seeing a lot of swing and miss when Craig is on the mound. They fought off some good pitcher’s pitches to get deep in counts and then were able to put some balls in play.

“I know he’s trying to run a fastball in closer to Reddick on the 3-2 pitch that leaks back over the outer half that’s he’s able to push a ground ball through the other side for the go-ahead run, but we had arguably our two best pitchers or two really good pitchers to close things out to get the final six outs, they got the job done.”

The Sox were sent into an offseason of what-ifs and what-nows.

“Any time you get knocked out, you always want to go back and [say], ‘What can I do?’ and do this and do that,” Kimbrel said. “But I feel like, this ball club, we went out there, we got two games down and came back yesterday and fought hard and came out today and fought hard. In games like this, that’s all you can really ask for is to ask your team to go out there and give everything they had and unfortunately, it wasn’t good enough today.”

Valiant in defeat, these Red Sox were anything but boring

Chad Finn

Playing Nine Innings (Game 4 edition) while getting 2009 Jonathan Papelbon-versus-the-Angels flashbacks from Craig Kimbrel . . .

1. So this is how it ends. With Chris Sale being great, but not quite great enough, and for not quite long enough. With Kimbrel, who struck out nearly every other batter he faced this year, giving up the go-ahead hit to Josh Reddick, an outfielder who grew as a prospect in the Red Sox organization but never convinced management that he’d develop enough plate discipline to become a big league regular. With Kimbrel, who allowed 11 runs all season, giving up an insurance run on a single by ageless Carlos Beltran to make it 5-3. With Rafael Devers circling the bases on a Little League home run to start the ninth, adding just a little more suspense. And with that suspense extinguished as Dustin Pedroia grounded to second for the final out, cuing an Astros celebration on the wet Fenway lawn.

2. It’s tempting to say there’s no justice. The Red Sox, accused of being baseball bores en route to a 93-win season and a second straight American League East title, were often accused of lacking charisma, or style points, or obvious camaraderie, or some other intangible. It was unfair, and they proved it in this series, even in defeat.

Returning home down, 2-0, they got four crucial bridge innings from the maligned David Price to win Game 3, then another $4\frac{2}{3}$ innings on three days’ rest in relief from Chris Sale. It doesn’t seem right that Sale, late in his valiant effort, gave up a tying home run to Alex Bregman, then was charged with the go-ahead run after Kimbrel relieved him. He was the losing pitcher, but that was anything but the performance of a loser.

3. But there is justice, if we’re being honest. The Astros, winners of 101 games in the regular season and three more in this series, are a superb baseball team, and a superior one. This is their justice. They deserved to win.

There are no consolation prizes in major league baseball (Red Sox fans learned this often from 1919 through 2003). But the Red Sox went down fighting. They never backed down. And these last two days, they were anything but boring. I wish we had one more game of this team. Don’t you?

4. The wiseguys among us, representing a loud majority, of course, were quick to proclaim John Farrell’s ejection in the second inning as the best managerial move of his five years in Boston.

That’s clever and biting for sure, and there’s so much to second-guess from this series and its final game, but I thought he had a pretty capable series all in all.

Hanley Ramirez, a disappointment all season, was at his best after his Game 1 benching. Farrell stuck with David Price for longer than he was expecting to in Game 3 and it paid off. Flipping Xander Bogaerts and Dustin Pedroia in the lineup in Game 4 worked for the former, at least.

Perhaps he did stick with Sale a few pitches too long Monday — come on, you know he was still running the show after the ejection — but how can anyone argue that, even in retrospect? The Red Sox made the

Astros beat their best. It's a tribute to the Astros, rather than an indictment of the Red Sox or their manager, that they did so.

5. Probably shouldn't admit this, but I was beginning to wonder whether Andrew Benintendi should be batting third going forward this postseason. He had a terrific rookie year by non-Aaron Judge standards (.271/.352/.424, 20 homers, 90 RBIs), and he was arguably the Red Sox' best hitter in the brief postseason stay last year (3 for 9 against the Indians, including a home run).

But he had just a .397 OPS through the first three games of this series, and with Ramirez coming off a 4-for-4 performance and carrying a career .373 postseason batting average into Game 4, I thought it might have been time to move Benintendi down and Ramirez up.

I'll get back to this subject as soon as Benintendi's two-run bomb off Justin Verlander, which put the Red Sox up, 3-2, in the fifth, returns to this atmosphere.

6. Rick Porcello's final line: 3 innings, 5 hits, 2 earned runs, 3 walks, 4 strikeouts, a wild pitch, and a hit batsman. Nine baserunners in three innings? About what we might have expected from the Red Sox starter, who followed up his 2016 Cy Young Award season (when he was 22-4 with a 3.15 ERA and had roughly 23 runs of support per start, give or take a grand slam) with an 11-17, 4.65 line, along with a major-league high 38 home runs allowed.

To put it another way: Porcello allowed 14 more home runs this season than the Red Sox' home run leader, Mookie Betts, hit (24). The pleasant surprise — perhaps shocking surprise — is that he did not allow a home run in the playoffs, especially since the Astros had five in the first inning alone through the first three games of this series.

7. Devers is an adventure at third base, occasionally in a good way. The 20-year-old made a barehanded play on a slow roller in the top of the fifth that Adrian Beltre would have been proud to call his own. On the downside, he also had an error in the sixth, his first of the series, and probably could have been charged with one in Game 3 as well.

During 58 games in the regular season, Devers had 14 errors on 149 chances. That's a .906 fielding percentage. While that's not quite 1978 Butch Hobson stuff (43 errors, .899 fielding percentage, elbow full of bone chips), it at least explains Deven Marrero's spot on the roster.

Devers's play on the slow roller was a hint that he has all the attributes to become a terrific third baseman. The error was a reminder that there's a long way to go.

8. At some point, we have to collectively acknowledge Dustin Pedroia's prolonged postseason struggles, right? It's overdue. He entered Monday's game 2 for 11 in this series, then promptly went 0 for 5, including the final out of the season.

I'm sure there are health reasons; the knee problem that plagued him for much of the season isn't going to miraculously heal in October. But this isn't just a 2017 thing. Pedroia has been a subpar offensive performer in the postseason since the 2009 ALDS loss to the Angels.

In five series and 26 games in that span, he has gone 21 for 103 (.204) with six extra-base hits — all doubles. He's had an OPS of .536 or below in five of those six series, including this one.

Pedroia's last excellent postseason series — heck, his last above-average postseason series — came in the 2008 ALCS against the Rays, when he slashed .346/.469/.731 with 3 homers in 32 plate appearances.

9. Go, Cleveland Titos, go. I think this much we can all agree on, right?

In the end, the Red Sox' best two pitchers faltered

Alex Speier

With the season on the line, the Red Sox likely couldn't have asked for a better blueprint than to entrust a late-innings lead to Chris Sale and Craig Kimbrel, their history-making strikeout artists.

Yet with the Sox just six outs from victory to force a winner-take-all Game 5, it was that very pair that couldn't close the door on the Astros and instead set in motion the end of Boston's season with a 5-4 loss in Game 4 of the American League Division Series.

The final innings Monday proved a fitting conclusion to a series that upended conventional roles of starter, reliever, and closer, with the game swinging on uncertainty about which pitcher to use for which leverage spot.

Rick Porcello navigated a tightrope through three innings, prompting the Red Sox to turn to Sale, the Game 1 starter, as a long reliever. Sale proved brilliant through four shutout innings as the Red Sox took a 3-2 lead. Then, while Kimbrel watched from the bullpen, Sale, who was vulnerable in his fifth inning of work, hung a changeup to Alex Bregman, who blasted it for a game-tying homer in the eighth inning.

With two outs and a runner on first in a tie game, Kimbrel finally entered, but after a regular season in which he'd been overwhelming, he too proved vulnerable.

A wild pitch, walk, and single resulted in a go-ahead run in the eighth, and the All-Star closer permitted what proved to be a vital insurance run in the ninth. A bullpen that deserved much of the credit for the Red Sox' ability to fend off the Yankees in the AL East uncharacteristically blinked, and with that, the dreams of a deep march in October came to a rapid halt.

A long offseason, possibly with significant changes, lies ahead.

Some key takeaways from Game 4:

- **A BRIDGE TOO FAR, AND A CLOSER WHO WASN'T ON POINT:** The Red Sox had Kimbrel available for as many as six outs. Yet with six outs remaining and the bases empty, the team — helmed by bench coach Gary DiSarcina, who took over after John Farrell was ejected — elected to bring Sale out for the eighth inning to face Bregman, a batter who'd homered against him in Game 1.

Not only did Bregman's homer erase the Sox' lead, but it also meant that when the Sox did go to Kimbrel with two outs and a runner on first, he was in the relatively unfamiliar spot of entering with an inherited runner. (Though Kimbrel stranded 12 of 13 inherited runners during the year, he hadn't come into a game with a man on base since Aug. 13.)

Kimbrel struggled with control while dealing with his adrenaline, walking the first batter he faced (while also uncorking a wild pitch) before giving up the go-ahead single to Josh Reddick. Kimbrel threw 15 pitches in the eighth — seven for balls, none for a swing and miss.

- **THE ASTROS WERE LOCKED IN:** The Astros had the lowest strikeout rate in the regular season. Their ability to fight off tough pitches played a significant role in their ability to drive Porcello out of the game after three innings, while later playing a considerable role in their rallies against Kimbrel.

Many were the instances this season when Kimbrel threw three pitches and elicited three swings and misses. Against Houston, he got just three swings and misses over his entire 38-pitch appearance in Game 4, with the phenomenal bat-to-ball skills of Houston's lineup on full display as it collected three hits and a walk over Kimbrel's one inning of work.

- **THE WRONG PEOPLE PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN THE OUTCOME:** The Red Sox appeared poised to break through early, loading the bases with no outs in the second inning. Plate ump Mark Wegner rang up Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia on curveballs in back-to-back plate appearances — both on pitches

that were at least borderline, if not outright balls. The result was an argument from Pedroia, a protecting-his-player ejection for Farrell, and a rally that sputtered without a run.

■ **THE SOX STARTER ONCE AGAIN PUT THE TEAM IN A BAD SPOT:** Four games, four instances of a Red Sox starter allowing Houston to score in the first inning and leaving his team with an immediate deficit.

While Porcello broke the streak of three straight contests in which the Sox gave up a first-inning homer as part of a multi-run inning, he nonetheless gave up a leadoff double to George Springer, who advanced to third on a wild pitch and, after a walk, scored on a double play grounder by Jose Altuve.

For the series, the Sox allowed eight first-inning runs. Their starters never walked off the mound with a lead. The starters' 12.71 ERA ranked as the fifth-worst ever by a team in a single postseason (minimum three starts).

■ **PRECOCIOUS YOUTH:** One day after Rafael Devers became the youngest Red Sox player to homer in a postseason game, Andrew Benintendi — who'd established the previous standard as a 22-year-old in 2016 — drilled a go-ahead two-run homer against Justin Verlander in the fifth inning.

At 23 years and 95 days, Benintendi became the seventh-youngest player ever to hit a go-ahead homer in a playoff game. Devers later returned serve, drilling an 0-and-2 pitch from Houston closer Ken Giles off the wall in left-center to lead off the ninth for an inside-the-park homer that narrowed the deficit from two runs to one.

Despite late heroics, Red Sox lose a memorable Game 4 at Fenway

Peter Abraham

All of the televisions in the Red Sox clubhouse were off because it didn't matter who won the other playoff games now. Several of the players were still in their uniform pants, sitting at chairs in front of their lockers wondering if they should pack up now or wait a few days.

After hugging a few teammates, Jackie Bradley Jr. slung a backpack over his shoulder and walked out into the rain.

"I guess I'll go home now," he said. "I didn't think it would be so soon."

Every team is dejected when its season ends and the Red Sox certainly were Monday after a 5-4 loss against the Houston Astros in Game 4 of the American League Division Series.

But there was more shock than sadness. The Sox were six outs away from tying up the series and had the game in the hands of their two best pitchers.

Chris Sale was on the mound with Craig Kimbrel warming up in the bullpen. In what had been a wildly entertaining game at Fenway Park, everything was lined up perfectly.

"I felt like we were in a good position," said manager John Farrell, who made his moves from the clubhouse after being ejected in the second inning.

But Sale and Kimbrel, two trustworthy All-Stars, let the lead and the season slip away. The Astros scored twice in the eighth inning and once in the ninth.

Down by two runs, the Sox tried to come back in the bottom of the ninth. Rafael Devers hit the first inside-the-park home run by a rookie in postseason history and for a few seconds, the crowd was roaring again.

But Ken Giles got three quick outs, the last when Dustin Pedroia grounded to second base.

"I'm exhausted, those are my emotions," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "They're not easy outs over there. So trying to match up with those guys, trying to win in this ballpark was tough."

The Astros, who won their first playoff series since the 2005 NLCS, will play in their first ALCS starting on Friday against either the Indians or Yankees.

For the second consecutive year, the Red Sox saw a 93-win season end with a first-round loss. That will invite even more scrutiny on Farrell, whose stilted style has been effective in the standings but not always popular with fans.

"You win the division, that's I think a major accomplishment," he said. "We didn't meet all of our goals, that's obvious by the ending here today."

Farrell, who has a year remaining on his contract, believes he should return in 2018.

"Personally, yes, I feel confident in that," he said. "There's a lot of good things that are going on here."

Sale, Pedroia, and several other players voiced their support for Farrell.

"I thought John did a great job," Pedroia said. "We won the division. There was never any quit in this team. Proud of everybody in here."

The Sox were left wondering what Game 5 would have been like after a thrilling Game 4.

Andrew Benintendi gave the Sox a 3-2 lead in the fifth inning, his two-run homer off Justin Verlander producing a roar from the rain-soaked crowd.

In the first relief appearance of his career, even back to Little League as far as he could remember, Verlander replaced Houston starter Charlie Morton with a runner on first.

Benintendi worked the count to 2 and 2 and pulled a slider to right field. The ball landed safely in the seats beyond the Pesky Pole.

For the second time in as many days, the Sox had come back on the Astros.

"We never thought that we were out of it," Benintendi said.

Sale was in the game at that point and pitching well. His fastball velocity was in the high 90s and the break on his slider was the sharpest it has been in weeks.

But the lefty had to work around two hits in the seventh inning and to that point had thrown 65 pitches on three days' rest. Still, Farrell stuck with Sale even with Addison Reed and Kimbrel available.

Alex Bregman, who homered off Sale in Game 1, did it again in the eighth inning. He hammered a changeup to left field, the ball thudding into the billboard between the foul line and the light pole.

With one out, Evan Gattis lined a ball down the line at third, just fair. When the ball girl picked the ball up by accident, the umpires decided to put Gattis at first base.

Sale got the second out before Kimbrel came out of the bullpen in the eighth inning for the first time since July 15.

He threw a wild pitch that advanced pinch runner Cameron Maybin to second then walked George Springer on five pitches.

Josh Reddick worked the count full, fouled off two fastballs, and then grounded another fastball into left field for an RBI single.

Kimble had stranded 12 of the 13 runners he inherited during the regular season.

Kimble put three more runners on base in the ninth inning. Carlos Beltran's pinch-hit RBI double made it 5-3.

"I gave it everything I had and it wasn't good enough," Kimble said.

Rick Porcello allowed two runs on five hits in three innings before Farrell turned to Sale. Xander Bogaerts's home run in the first inning helped keep the Sox in the game until Benintendi connected.

Farrell, for perhaps the final time, addressed the team afterward.

"It's always tough when you end the season so abruptly," he said. "But extremely proud for the way they compete, the work that they put in for seven full months, the way they care for one another.

"Just wanted to thank them from that. . . . You go 100 miles an hour and then all of a sudden it feels like you face-plant in a wall when the season's over."

John Farrell ejected while protecting his player

Peter Abraham

John Farrell watched the final seven innings of the season on television after he was ejected in the second inning on Monday's ALDS game.

The Red Sox manager left the dugout to protect Dustin Pedroia, who seemed about to get ejected for arguing balls and strikes with plate umpire Mark Wegner.

Jackie Bradley Jr. struck out looking at a fastball that was well off the outside corner. Pedroia was up next and got called out on a similar pitch, this one inside to him.

"My first at-bat he gave [Astros pitcher Charlie Morton] a fastball off the plate away," Pedroia said. "So I was under the assumption you're not going to give in off the plate.

"That guy's got good stuff. It makes it difficult to compete when you're trying to cover that much."

Pedroia shouted at Wegner and did not leave the area around the plate. Farrell motioned Pedroia away and within a few seconds was ejected.

"Obviously it was a key moment," Farrell said. "Pedey obviously disagreed with the call that was made. . . . I never argued balls and strikes, it was a really quick hook. The reason he gave me is I'm not going to have you stand here and yell at me."

Pedroia was 0 for 5 in the game and 2 for 16 in the series. The second baseman played the final month of the season with what seems to be a badly injured left knee, the result of damage from a hard slide by Baltimore's Manny Machado in April that worsened over time.

Pedroia said he had an exam scheduled for Tuesday.

"Obviously we had to try and find a way to do what we did so I could be out there," he said. "If you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time. I have a lot of things to weigh with the doctors."

Pedroia had surgery on the same knee last Oct. 12.

Devers delivers

Rafael Devers was 4 for 11 in the series with home runs in each of the last two games. His inside-the-park homer in the ninth inning on Monday was the first by a rookie in postseason play and the first to come in the ninth inning or later.

Devers hit a line drive that caromed off the wall in center and rolled into right field. He scored without a play at the plate.

“Just looking at [third base coach Brian Butterfield], he was waving me around and that’s how I figured that I’d be able to score,” Devers said via a translator.

Crowd control

The Sox announced an attendance of 37,305, a sellout, based on tickets sold. But Fenway Park was no better than half full at first pitch.

The rainy weather clearly kept many fans away. But another factor was the start time not being announced until 11 p.m. on Sunday.

MLB’s television partners greatly influence postseason start times and they would not commit to a slot for the Astros-Red Sox game until it was determined whether the Indians and Yankees would play a fourth game in their series on Monday.

Had the Yankees been eliminated on Sunday, the Sox and Astros would have played at 7:08 p.m. When the Yankees beat the Indians, the Sox were given a 1:08 p.m. start. It was the first of four playoff games on the day.

“It was a unique set of circumstances,” Farrell said. “Why is an organization waiting until [11 p.m.] to find out? It’s not like it’s 1 or 4. Day game or night game, it’s a pretty big swing.”

Farrell said the Red Sox noted their objection with the commissioner’s office.

Team president Sam Kennedy said he told MLB chief operating officer Tony Petitti that it was hard on the two teams and the fans. But that was as far as it went.

Lineup shift

Xander Bogaerts was 0 for 14 in the first three games of the series. Farrell dropped him to second in the order for Game 4 and hit Pedroia leadoff.

The idea was for Pedroia to see a few pitches and that would give Bogaerts a better idea of what Morton was doing.

“Allow him at least a hitter to settle into the game,” Farrell said.

Sometimes things work just as they were planned. Pedroia saw five pitches before he grounded to first base in the first inning. Then Bogaerts got ahead in the count and crushed a fastball into the Red Sox bullpen for his first career postseason home run.

Resisting temptation

A day after he threw 57 pitches over four innings, David Price reported to Fenway in the morning and said he felt fine. But Farrell was determined not to use the lefthander.

“I know that he wants to be available, which is impressive in its own way,” the manager said. “He far exceeded the initial thoughts [on Sunday] and just a great performance on his part.”

“At some point you have to factor in longer-term concerns and that’s health.”

Price worked 6⅔ scoreless innings in the series and struck out six.

In all, he made seven relief appearances since Sept. 17 and pitched 15⅓ scoreless innings. Price allowed eight hits with four walks and 19 strikeouts in those games.

Starters unraveled

Red Sox starters allowed 16 runs on 23 hits over only 11⅓ innings in the series, a 12.71 ERA . . . Eduardo Nunez said an MRI on his right knee showed no damage that would require surgery. He will be a free agent after the World Series . . . Mookie Betts is the Red Sox’ finalist for the Hank Aaron Award, which recognizes the most outstanding offensive player in each league . . . Farrell is 12-11 in postseason play with the Sox . . . Hall of Famer Jim Rice threw out the first pitch. He bounced it, which surely earned a ribbing from his buddy Luis Tiant.

John Farrell discusses pitching options for Game 4 and a possible Game 5

Peter Abraham

Here’s a transcript of John Farrell’s pregame meeting with writers who regularly cover the Red Sox. A few weather-related questions were omitted:

On David Price’s availability for Game 4: “He feels good. I know that he wants to be available, which is impressive in its own way. He far exceeded the initial thoughts [on Sunday] and just a great performance on his part.

“At some point you have to factor in longer-term concerns and that’s health. . . . Everything in my fabric says to stay away for the obvious reasons and that would be the preference.”

Could Chris Sale pitch today? “Yes he could. He’s available out of the bullpen.”

Joe Kelly? “He’ll be available.”

What about Sale for Game 5 if he pitches today: “Understand the question. Not even worried about Wednesday.”

How much to you balance having somebody ready to pitch in a possible Game 5? “We’ll deal with it at that point. Depending on who doesn’t pitch today [he] would be an available guy for Wednesday. It might not be a conventional approach. But I don’t know that anything so far in these three games has been conventional from a pitching standpoint.”

How many outs could you get from Addison Reed and Craig Kimbrel? “Nine. Comfortably, nine.”

On using Craig Kimbrel: “Expand his role but not to the point of leaving ourselves completely in foreign territory with other guys down there. Could we get six outs from Craig Kimbrel? Yes, and he is willing to do that. We feel comfortable we can get at least nine outs between he and Reed.”

If the game did get called, would Sale start [Tuesday]? “He would be a possibility. But everything’s pointing right now to we’re going to get underway here.”

On dropping Xander Bogaerts down to second and hitting Dustin Pedroia leadoff: “I just felt like in talking with both guys, that fact that Pedey can get an at-bat to unfold in front of Bogey, to see how it’s going to allow him at least a hitter to settle into the game.”

On whether small sample sizes in the postseason should affect decisions: “You can’t not go into a series or a couple of games stretch forgetting what guys have done on both sides of the ledger. We don’t play in a vacuum. We have good players. We have a good team.

“This is like the beginning of the year. For the first week everybody looks at the numbers and is it a really hot week you started the year off, or is it bad and the world’s coming to an end? It’s kind of the same dynamic.”

On waiting until 11 p.m. last night to find out the start time: “It was a unique set of circumstances. ... Why is an organization waiting until [11 p.m.] to find out? It’s not like it’s 1 or 4. Day game or night game, it’s a pretty big swing.”

*** *The Boston Herald***

Rafael Devers' finishing flourish a bright spot in Red Sox loss

Michael Silverman

Well, at least Rafael Devers got to finish his remarkable season on a remarkably high note.

On a day when the Red Sox were eliminated once again from the American League Division Series, at least their promising rookie concluded a postseason debut with an unforgettable exclamation point to a fantastic series.

Devers’ leadoff inside-the-park home run in the ninth inning of yesterday’s 5-4 loss to the Houston Astros seemingly was going to be the last spark the offense would need to overcome a two-run deficit, but instead it was the last gasp. The shot off Astros closer Ken Giles was to slightly left of center field, and George Springer crashed into the wall as he leaped for a catch he could not make. The ball bounced far away from the center fielder toward right, and by the time left fielder Marwin Gonzalez slid to retrieve it, Devers already was being waved home by third base coach Brian Butterfield.

“Just looking at Butter, the third base coach, he was waving me around and then I figured that I’d be able to score, and then when I looked back and saw that no one was really near the ball, that I was going standing up, then I knew I was going to get there,” Devers said.

For the four-game series, Devers hit .364 with a team-high two home runs and a team-high-tying five RBI. And the third baseman didn’t even start Game 2, when manager John Farrell thought the left-handed hitter might struggle against Astros lefty Dallas Keuchel.

In the aftermath of the ALDS loss, Devers did not seem that despondent. Being 20 years old and finding immediate success can do that to you. He earned the smile he wore.

Devers’ unique home run was the first to come in the ninth inning or later in a postseason game, he was the first rookie to hit such a home run in the postseason and he joined Hall of Famers Mickey Mantle and Jimmie Foxx as the only American Leaguers to homer in consecutive postseason games before turning 21.

“It’s a great feeling for me, but at the end of the day, I’m just focused on giving 100 percent of myself when I go out there,” said Devers, who hit .284 with 10 home runs and 30 RBI in 58 regular-season games. “I think every at-bat, with every swing that I take, I try to give 100 percent. Yeah, I’m one of the few that have done it. That’s cool. I’m going to take that and be proud of it.”

Devers expressed gratitude for the opportunity the Red Sox gladly gave him. Next up is turning 21 and preparing for his sophomore season with the Red Sox.

“Basically just get ready for next season, work out, basically get in form so I can help the team win a championship next year and have something for us similar to what happened this year,” Devers said.

Chris Sale, Craig Kimbrel can't seal deal; Red Sox' season again ends in ALDS

Jason Mastrodonato

If only they hadn't shown up flat-footed, blinded by the postseason lights and shaken by the thunderous bats of the Houston Astros in Games 1 and 2, the Red Sox' season might still be alive.

They made it entertaining till the final out, at least.

After a dramatic Game 3 win on Sunday, the Red Sox pushed the Astros to the brink of a Game 5 yesterday, riding a strong relief effort from Chris Sale a little too far while closer Craig Kimbrel shattered behind him in a heartbreaking 5-4 loss that ended the American League Division Series and the Sox' season.

“We just weren't good enough,” said Dustin Pedroia, who made the final out. “They beat us. They played better than we did at the right time. That's why they're moving on.”

The Red Sox were six outs away from forcing a Game 5 thanks in large part to Sale.

But instead of going with another reliever to start the eighth inning against Alex Bregman, the Red Sox chose to stick with Sale.

Sale, who had thrown 65 pitches in relief of Rick Porcello entering the eighth inning, threw a 2-1 changeup to Bregman and watched it sail out of the park.

“I felt good, I felt strong,” Sale said. “I wish I could have got it done.”

Bregman's solo homer tied the game and, after Craig Kimbrel replaced Sale three batters later, the Astros scored another in the eighth on a two-out single by Josh Reddick, who poked one through the left side of the infield.

Kimbrel was erratic. He walked the first batter he faced, George Springer, before Reddick singled. And in the ninth, he plunked Marwin Gonzalez with one out and then gave up a two-out single to Yuli Gurriel.

The Red Sox left him in the game and pinch-hitter Carlos Beltran hit a two-out RBI double that provided the eventual game-winning run.

“Then the second inning, I went out there and gave everything I had,” said Kimbrel, who threw 38 pitches, more than he had thrown in any outing this season. “It wasn't quite good enough.”

Sale, who was making his first relief appearance since 2012, was plenty good enough until the eighth.

With David Price unavailable, Sale played the role of Price and replaced Rick Porcello, who went three innings and walked a tightrope, giving up two runs on 70 pitches.

At the point Sale took over in the fourth, the Red Sox were down 2-1, their only run a solo shot by Xander Bogaerts in the first.

But the Sox flipped it around against Justin Verlander, who was making his first career relief appearance, to take a 3-2 lead in the fifth.

Verlander threw a 2-2 slider right to Andrew Benintendi and the rookie launched it high and deep enough to right for a two-run shot.

Sale's slider was much sharper than it was when he allowed seven runs in Game 1, and he cruised until the seventh inning, when he put two on base before escaping unscathed.

Kimbrel was warming up as Sale went out to start the eighth.

"Chris was rolling," Kimbrel said.

After the Bregman homer, Sale then recorded the second out before Kimbrel came on and allowed the go-ahead run.

"In a position with six outs to go, up a run, and Chris Sale who was still strong, still throwing the ball extremely well, I felt like we were in a good position," said manager John Farrell, who was ejected for arguing balls and strikes in the second inning.

Rafael Devers hit a leadoff, inside-the-park homer in the ninth, but the Red Sox did nothing else against closer Ken Giles.

It wasn't enough against a tough Houston team that outscored the Sox 16-4 in the first two games.

"I mean we didn't want it to take a few games to get going," Bogaerts said. "We wanted to win every game. Playing on the road is obviously a disadvantage. . . . Credit to them, they were swinging a real hot bat at home. When you play at your home you tend to have a lot more confidence, the fans cheering you on. The atmosphere is something you're used to.

"Just looking forward to next year, I guess."

Red Sox notebook: John Farrell questions his ejection

Jason Mastrodonato

Shortly after the Red Sox were eliminated from the playoffs in a 5-4 defeat at the hands of the Houston Astros yesterday, manager John Farrell still wasn't sure why he had been ejected in the second inning.

Farrell, who suffered his 19th ejection in five years as Red Sox manager, was thrown out for arguing balls and strikes with home plate umpire Mark Wegner, but Farrell said that's not what he was doing.

"I went out to get (Dustin Pedroia) away from Mark Wegner," Farrell said. "Obviously it was a key moment. Pedey obviously disagreed with the call that was made. I did not argue balls and strikes and yet that was a little surprising when I was ejected at that point. So for whatever reason, he felt like . . . there was nothing derogatory or directed straight at him. I never argued balls and strikes. It was a really quick hook."

So why did Wegner eject the Red Sox manager?

"The reason he gave me is, 'I'm not going to have you stand here and yell at me,' " Farrell said. "I said I'm trying to get my player away from him. It was more important to me that Pedey remain in the game and the rest took care of itself."

Pedroia argued an inside third strike call that was in a nearly identical spot as a called third strike to Jackie Bradley Jr. in the at-bat immediately before Pedroia's, both with the bases loaded.

Pedroia let Wegner hear it, standing just inches away from the ump when Farrell ran out to get between them. Words were exchanged, then Farrell got tossed. Xander Bogaerts flew out to end the bases-loaded no outs threat without any runs.

“Honestly, go look at it,” Pedroia said. “I just know my first at-bat, he gave (Astros starter Charlie Morton) a fastball off the plate away, a lot off, so I was under the assumption that you’re not going to give in off the plate. But it’s a part of the game. Obviously you’re trying to compete and the guy’s got good stuff, so it makes it difficult to compete when you’re trying to cover that much.”

Pedroia went 0-for-5 and 2-for-16 in the series.

Consoling words

After the game, Farrell spent time addressing his team in the locker room.

“I spoke to them,” he said. “I guess in short, it’s always tough when you end the season so abruptly. But I’m extremely proud for the way they compete, the work that they put in for seven full months, the way they care for one another. Just wanted to thank them from that. But it’s just you go 100 mph and then all of a sudden it feels like you face-plant in a wall when the season’s over. So that was pretty much the message.”

Closer Craig Kimbrel appreciated Farrell’s speech.

“He was there for us,” Kimbrel said. “He came out and we just got done losing a hard game and he came out and told us how proud he was of us and everything that we did this year. He watched us all year long, he knows each and every guy in here, he knows what we’re made of and for him to go out every night, put it together and try to help put the best team on the field.

“We won the East. Unfortunately we didn’t get where we want in the playoffs. But I think he did a great job.”

Chris Sale, who gave up the game-tying homer on his 69th pitch out of relief in the eighth inning, had no problem with how Farrell managed him the season.

“This is a game that you can second-guess anything,” Sale said. “Every game, every inning. We play 162 games, nine innings every time, sometimes extras, so there’s a lot of room for debate and would’ve should’ve. He gave me every opportunity to succeed. I can say the same for everybody on this team.”

Added outfielder Mookie Betts, “He’s done a great job and I know no manager has won back to back titles, so it shows he’s done a great job in managing personalities and put us in a position to win. He listens to us and he talks with us. He fits well.”

Error of their ways

In a game when every mistake looms large, the Sox can look back on plenty. Perhaps most notably was in the third inning when Hanley Ramirez roped a single to left field with Mitch Moreland, who has dealt with a broken toe and a sore knee this season, running from second base.

Left-fielder Marwin Gonzalez was playing shallow in front of The Wall and fielded it cleanly, but third base coach Brian Butterfield sent Moreland home anyway. Moreland was thrown out easily to end the threat with Rafael Devers on deck. . . .

Xander Bogaerts homered in the first and went 1-for-17 in the series. “I have a lot to improve on this offseason,” he said. . . .

Ramirez singled in his first two at-bats to reach in six straight appearances after going 4-for-4 on Sunday. He finished the series 8-for-14. . . .

The Astros took a lead in the first inning in each game of this series. . . .

The Red Sox are now 6-6 all-time in the ALDS, having lost their last two. They're now 17-7 in 24 elimination games since 1999. They're 15-9 at home in elimination games.

Dave Dombrowski owns Red Sox' failures this year

Michael Silverman

In the wake of another crushing and brief Division Series loss, it's hunting season for Red Sox scapegoats.

Naturally, the collective venom stored up in the fangs of Boston sports fans right now is being directed at a losing team's field general, in this case manager John Farrell.

I understand the impulse.

I'm not on board with the bull's eye.

Farrell's pretty much the low-hanging fruit when it comes to complaining about what went wrong — again — with the Red Sox.

Aim a little higher, fans.

Dave Dombrowski, president of baseball operations, is the chief architect of the 2017 ballclub, and as such, he earned the right to take responsibility for how and why his team fell short — again — in losing this best-of-five ALDS in four games to the Houston Astros.

Dombrowski was brought to town to finish the job Ben Cherington started when he assembled the young core of position players.

Two full seasons in, Dombrowski still has a lot of work left to do.

He and the very large baseball operations staff underestimated what it would take to make this a better team in 2017 than it was last year.

The Red Sox knew that with the loss of slugger David Ortiz, they would have to build around that core, while hoping a couple of veterans, like Pablo Sandoval and Hanley Ramirez, would return to form at the plate. The vets did not pan out as hoped: Sandoval was a bust and Ramirez underachieved.

Going after Chris Sale was a brilliant counter-move, the absolute perfect transaction needed to shore up a listing rotation at the perfect time.

In theory, replacing lost run production from Ortiz' departure with better run prevention made sense.

And in practice, the 2017 Red Sox were good. Good enough to win the AL East — again.

But the 2017 Red Sox were not a better team than the 2016 version, unless you consider one victory in ALDS as something to applaud.

I don't.

The Sox failed to build a playoff-series winner because their biggest regular-season flaw — not enough thump in a not consistent enough offense — was laid bare by the Astros in 3-of-4 games.

The Sox were outscored, 24-18, out-hit, 49-39, out-walked, 14-12, out-doubled, 9-7, out-homered, 8-5, and outslugged, .571-.445. Do I need to go on?

After yesterday's 5-4 season-ending loss, Mookie Betts found it easy to pinpoint where it went wrong.

“I think they did a great job with the pitching, they did great throwing the ball — we also have to hit more,” Betts said. “We should, we could do it, we were just a little inconsistent especially early. The first couple games we had some opportunities to score and we didn’t. But you have to give it to them.”

Remember, the Red Sox were not going to sweat the loss of a home run threat like Ortiz too much. They had so many good doubles hitters that they were going to score enough runs to get by. Their run production was at 4.85 runs a game, just a tick above the league average 4.71. Their home runs (168) were dead last, their slugging percentage (.407) was next to last.

And yet, they got by and here we are — again — right back where last year’s offseason began: One and done in October.

“I don’t know, it’s not offense or defense, you play as a team — we just weren’t good enough,” Dustin Pedroia said. “They beat us. They played better than we did at the right time. That’s why they’re moving on.”

The starting pitching cratered against the Astros, but amazingly enough, the bullpen, led by David Price, applied enough of a tourniquet to give the offense a chance to catch up.

And the lineup couldn’t — again.

Just as the offense was impossible to predict on a nightly basis how it would perform during the regular season, the hitters in three of the four games were predictably punchless.

Betts sounded lost about what needs to be done for the Sox to field a team capable of winning a playoff series.

“I’m not sure — I haven’t gotten past the ALDS so I’m not sure what it takes or what not,” Betts said. “We did better this year than last year, so hopefully we can continue to get here. I know it’s tough getting here, so as long as we continue to put ourselves in this position, something is going to breakthrough.”

Betts isn’t responsible for discovering the breakthrough.

Neither is Farrell.

It’s up to Dombrowski to do his job better and make the Red Sox better — once again.

Time has come for Red Sox to fire John Farrell

Steve Buckley

Let the record show the Red Sox made a spirited comeback in Game 3, and that they did a lot of things in yesterday’s Game 4 showdown against the Houston Astros to keep Fenway Park rocking and anticipant.

But now that it’s over — the game, the series, the season — it’s time for the Red Sox to end John Farrell’s managerial tenure.

While it’s true Farrell’s resume will show him as a success in his five seasons as manager — three division titles and a World Series championship — it is also true that 2017 was yet another campaign of unfulfilled expectations.

It was also the season of the David Ortiz hangover. The Sox missed his bat, sure, but they also missed his clubhouse presence. The result: It became the sullen, insecure, finger-pointing David Price clubhouse. Not only was Farrell unable to do something about it, but he appeared also to endorse it with his line about how accountability is a two-way street, this after Price’s sorry Yankee Stadium temper tantrum in June.

Now it is John Farrell who must be held accountable.

That's not entirely fair, of course. It's not his fault president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski didn't replace Big Papi's bat. It's not his fault Price got hurt, that Dustin Pedroia seemed to age 10 years, that knuckleballer Steven Wright missed most of the season, that Eduardo Nunez injured his knee.

OK, then. You want to limit this discussion to strategy? We shouldn't, because managing is so much more than that, but since you asked: Why was lefty Chris Sale, despite his heroic relief pitching yesterday, allowed to return to the mound in the eighth inning? Am I only the person who felt he might have been spent by then?

Besides, Houston's leadoff man in the eighth was Alex Bregman, a right-handed batter who hit .331 against lefties this season. He homered off Sale in Game 1. Sale remained in Game 4, and Bregman walloped a game-tying homer. Craig Kimbrel didn't exactly mow 'em down when he took over, but one wonders about an altered course had the eighth started with the Sox ace closer facing Bregman.

Managers like to stay with the guys who got them there, sometimes with disastrous results. Grady Little made that mistake with Pedro Martinez in 2003. Farrell made that mistake with Sale yesterday.

So, does Farrell expect to return in 2018?

"We just walked off the field 10 minutes ago," he said.

Not exactly. By the time the game ended Farrell was already in the runway, having been ejected in the second inning by plate umpire Mark Wegner.

One way to explain away Farrell's ejection is to applaud the man for coming to the defense of Pedroia, who had been rung up by Wegner on a Charlie Morton pitch on the inside corner.

As Farrell put it, "I said I'm trying to get my player away from him. It was more important to me that Pedey remain in the game, and the rest took care of itself."

While the pitch indeed looked inside, the call wasn't so atrocious that an investigatory panel should be convened. And Pedroia, a veteran of 12 big league seasons, shouldn't have been jawing to the degree that he was on the cusp of getting tossed in the second inning of a do-or-die playoff game.

Farrell said, ". . . there was nothing derogatory or directed straight at (Wegman). I never argued balls and strikes. It was a really quick hook."

Perhaps. But think about that: Farrell got himself tossed in the second inning of an elimination game. He couldn't just pull Pedroia back to the dugout and be done with it?

The symbolism here is striking. Once again Farrell went to extraordinary lengths to protect one of his players, only to have the cigar blow up in his face. It happened during the season when he made himself the guardian at the gate after Price verbally assaulted NESN analyst Dennis Eckersley. By not offering any remotely conciliatory words to Eck, other than saying over and over that "we have a professional relationship," Farrell came across almost as culpable as was Price.

Same with Pedroia getting rung up. He overdid the arguing, and so Farrell, again, overdid the defense. And if he winds up getting fired this week, it'll mean he ended his days as manager of the Red Sox wandering up and down a runway in back of the first base dugout as the season was slowly slipping away.

Pedroia was asked if he believes Farrell should return as manager. In response, he offered a press release.

“I thought John did a great job,” he said. “We won the division and, you know, there was never any quit in this team. I’m proud of everybody in here. We’ve dealt with a lot. And our fight continued every single day. We didn’t achieve our goals, but I’m proud of how everybody went about his business and showed up for everybody and played to win.”

Again, that was in response to a question about whether Farrell should return as manager.

Farrell was pitching coach of the Sox’ 2007 World Series team. He was manager of the 2013 World Series champs. He spoke eloquently in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings. Let us never forget he took time away as manager to beat cancer. And who among us wasn’t deeply moved to see Farrell take a day off so he could see his son Luke make his major league debut with the Kansas City Royals?

But mark my words: If they don’t find a way to rein in David Price, the Sox are going to suffer a major disconnect with their fan base in the years to come.

This is the challenge facing the next occupant of the corner office in the Fenway Park clubhouse.

Injuries leave Dustin Pedroia facing uncertain future

Chad Jennings

In the end, there was only Dustin Pedroia, or whatever’s left of him, fouling off a two-strike, 99-mph fastball, then taking a slider off the plate, fouling off another, and finally slapping a routine ground ball to second base.

He stumbled a bit coming out of the box, jogged halfway down the line, and slowed to a walk well before reaching first base. His head was down.

That was the moment of resignation, and we now have to wonder, how much defiance does Pedroia have left?

The final out of yesterday’s 5-4 Red Sox elimination by the Astros sent their iconic second baseman, forever revered for his don’t-tell-me-the-odds determination, toward an uncertain future.

His left knee is a mess, it has been all season, and his first order of offseason business will be a trip to a doctor’s office. He said he’s literally having it checked out today, wasting no time gathering information and assessing the odds.

Pedroia spent the past three months seeing just how difficult it can be to stay on the field in his current state. Now, he must consider the possibility of surgery, which will surely require more than a brief rehab stint.

“I’m going to go talk to the doctors about that,” Pedroia said. “Obviously, we had to try and find a way to do what we did so I could be out there (this season), but if you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time. So, I have a lot of things to weigh in with the doctors and figure it out.”

At 34 years old, Pedroia still has four years left on the contract extension he signed in 2013. This offseason, he had relatively minor surgery to clean up the meniscus in his left knee, but the issue kept popping up.

Manny Machado slid into his left leg in April, and Pedroia missed three games.

The Red Sox played four games in three days right after the All-Star break, and Pedroia was on the disabled list two weeks later. Workload had been too heavy, manager John Farrell said.

Pedroia returned for one game in early August and went right back on the DL through the first of September. The knee still wasn’t right.

This season, his number of career starts at designated hitter tripled.

“He’s a 100 percent of what he is right now,” Farrell said between Games 2 and 3 of this division series.

It was a telling description.

Hanley Ramirez had his ongoing shoulder problems, Mookie Betts was dealing with a sore wrist at the end, and Xander Bogaerts had a hand injury that lingered in the middle of the season. But all three had at least 90 more at-bats than Pedroia. Eduardo Nunez was the regular second baseman through much of the second half.

When he did play, Pedroia had three hits in his final 40 plate appearances of the regular season, then he went 2-for-16 in the American League Division Series. The year sure seemed to be even more of a grind than usual.

“Yeah, it was, but it was for a lot of guys,” Pedroia said. “You know, we dealt with a lot the whole year, injury-wise, but that’s the cards you’re dealt. You still have to find a way to play well.”

Pedroia did hit .293 this season, and his .369 on-base percentage was the best on the team. His power numbers were down, but he remained a productive hitter and reliable fielder when he was healthy enough to be on the field.

His .125 this postseason continued a recent trend of poor Octobers for Pedroia. Beginning with the 2009 ALDS, he’s played in 26 playoff games and hit just .204.

But that’s not the Pedroia anyone thinks of when he steps into the box. That’s not the version Farrell had in mind when he set yesterday’s lineup with Pedroia moved into the leadoff spot, where he’d hit just twice since early May.

Pedroia went 0-for-5 with a strikeout.

In sports, there’s a fine line between excuse and explanation. Pedroia has little time for the former, and even yesterday shrugged off the injury’s impact on his season.

Part of the game, you know.

But as an explanation for his current status, even Pedroia could not deny that his knee has created a murky future.

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “I’ve got to go get checked out (today) and go from there.”

Whatever Pedroia learns and whatever he decides could determine the Red Sox course of action this winter, including the possibility of bringing back Nunez or bringing in someone else, to serve as an insurance policy at second base.

The offseason came too quickly, and it starts with a visit to the doctor.

*** *The Providence Journal***

After second straight ALDS loss, what’s the status of John Farrell?

Tim Britton

BOSTON — It has been a persistent din in these parts for years now — a buzz that can become like white noise because it never seems to go away.

What's the status of Red Sox manager John Farrell?

After Boston's second consecutive ouster in the American League Division Series, his players expressed confidence in his leadership.

"John did a great job. We won the division," said Dustin Pedroia. "There was never any quit in this team. I'm proud of everybody in here. We dealt with a lot, and our fight continued every single day. I know we didn't achieve our goals, but I'm proud of how everybody went about their business and showed up for everybody and played to win."

This series probably shouldn't change anyone's mind about Farrell's capabilities as a manager. While he made some controversial decisions — sitting Rafael Devers in Game 2 for Deven Marrero didn't work out, riding David Price as long as he did in Game 3 did — the series showed, more or less, that he was playing against a better team.

Asked if he thinks he's the guy who can get Boston over the hump in the Division Series after consecutive exits, Farrell said, "Personally, yes, I feel confident in that."

"This is a game that you can second-guess anything — every game, every inning," Chris Sale said. "We play 162 games, so there's a lot of room for debate and would've, should've. He gave me every opportunity to succeed. I can say the same for everybody on this team."

Under Farrell's stewardship this season, the Red Sox were about as resilient a team as any in the American League. Boston seemed to play its best when it was most doubted, and it recorded a bunch of comeback wins to help stave off the Yankees in the American League East, winning the division in consecutive seasons for the first time in team history.

One of the main reasons Boston won the East was its ability to win close games. The Sox went 15-3 in extra innings, and Farrell's keen deployment of a flawed bullpen proved pivotal. He put his relievers in the right position to succeed more times than not.

"He was there for us," said closer Craig Kimbrel. "He watched us all year-long, he knows each and every guy in here, he knows what we're made of. For him to go out every night, put it together and try to help put the best team on the field ... I think he did a great job."

For several years, the brunt of the criticism against Farrell was his in-game managing. While still imperfect, he improved in that aspect in 2017, with his bullpen usage as Exhibit A. This was almost certainly his best season as a tactician.

The other criticism, which has grown recently, is that Farrell doesn't have the full support of the clubhouse, that he doesn't relate to his current players as well as he did the veteran group he steered to a championship in his first season in 2013.

There have tended to be more clubhouse fires the past few seasons — instances such as Pablo Sandoval's one-game suspension for using Instagram during a game in 2015 or Price's public feuds with a reporter and a broadcaster this year. While these are bad looks, Farrell has done a decent job extinguishing those fires. In Price's case, he was able to get something out of the left-hander when it looked like his season might have been lost.

And the team's resilience in each of these past two seasons suggests he hasn't lost the clubhouse — and that's important to his boss.

“As I’ve often told managers, to me, the most important thing for a manager is that their club plays up to their capabilities day-in, day-out, which means they’re communicating with their players and getting everything they can,” president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said at the end of last season. “That means their club is playing hard.”

Farrell is under contract for 2018 after the Red Sox picked up the option on his deal in December. Dombrowski and Co. have three options this winter. They can make the move now to dismiss Farrell with that year left on his deal if they believe the team has gone as far as it can go with him at the top. They can commit to him longer term with an extension beyond 2018, as they did before the 2015 season.

Or they can hedge, bringing Farrell back for 2018 but not extending him beyond. Boston has customarily prevented its managers from entering a season as a so-called lame duck. This ownership has let a manager enter the final guaranteed year of his deal once, paving the way for Terry Francona’s exit at the end of the 2011 season.

“I know that we have the opportunity to assess where we are as a team,” Farrell said. “I can’t begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what changes may be realized, but still there’s a lot of good things that are going on here.”

The manager believes he is one of them.

Astros 5, Red Sox 4: Blown lead late ends Boston’s season in Division Series

Tim Britton

BOSTON — The Red Sox, it appeared, had weathered the storm.

On a rainy Monday at Fenway, the Sox had rebounded from another early deficit. They had quieted an Astros offense that had seemed unstoppable. And they had crossed the murky waters of the middle innings to get to safe harbor — six outs away from an anything-goes, winner-take-all Game Five back in Houston.

And then Boston’s stars — its two stalwarts throughout the season — couldn’t close the deal.

Against Chris Sale and Craig Kimbrel, Houston scored twice in the eighth and once in the ninth to deliver a late knockout blow and defeat the Red Sox, 5-4, in Game Four of the American League Division Series at Fenway Park. The Astros have advanced to the ALCS for the first time in club history, winning the series 3-1.

Sometimes, dear Brutus, the fault does lay in your stars, and for a second consecutive postseason, Boston was betrayed by its best players. In last year’s Division Series sweep to the Indians, it was a vanishing act by the league’s best offense and disastrous starts from Rick Porcello and David Price. This year, it was a one-run lead in the eighth that a tiring Sale and a fresh Kimbrel couldn’t hold.

“I didn’t get it done,” said Sale, who was charged with the tying and go-ahead runs in the eighth.

“I wasn’t quite good enough today,” said Kimbrel, who allowed that go-ahead run to score after inheriting it on first with two outs.

“Probably one of the toughest losses I’ve had in my career so far,” said Xander Bogaerts, who snapped out of a series-long funk with a game-tying opposite-field home run in the first, “because we were so close to doing something special.”

“We just weren’t good enough. They beat us,” Dustin Pedroia said. “They played better than we did at the right time. That’s why they’re moving on.”

All series, the Red Sox had lamented the poor starts that had given them little chance in Houston and forced them to rally in Sunday's Game Three. Boston's biggest advantage in the series — a bullpen fortified by David Price — mattered little if it never had a lead to protect. Price showed how much the calculus changed on Sunday when ahead.

But Monday didn't play like that, as Boston was able to paper over its flaws. Porcello pitched passably — yes, two runs in three innings counts for passable for the Red Sox in the postseason these days — and Sale cruised through the middle innings.

The Sox arrived at the eighth in ideal position, up a run and with both Addison Reed and Kimbrel available in the pen.

"I felt like we were in a good position," said manager John Farrell, who had been ejected six innings earlier arguing with home-plate umpire Mark Wegner. "We had our two best pitchers to close things out and get the final six outs."

Boston opted first to stick with Sale, even as he had thrown 65 pitches in the previous four frames, even as the Astros had pieced together better at-bats against him in the seventh, even as Farrell had said pregame that Kimbrel would be available for six outs if needed.

"I felt strong," said Sale. "I felt fine. I just made a bad pitch."

The move backfired immediately, when Alex Bregman launched that bad pitch — an indifferent Sale changeup — over the Green Monster for his second homer off Sale in the series. With Kimbrel warm, Sale remained in the game, eventually allowing a soft single to Evan Gattis.

Kimbrel entered, having stranded 12 of the 13 runners he'd inherited this season — the lone exception scoring on a strikeout-wild pitch that would have ended the inning back in June.

"Obviously you never want to come out, but handing it over to him makes it a little easier," Sale said.

But the closer, in his first high-leverage postseason appearance since 2013 with the Braves, lacked the command that had distinguished his lights-out 2017 from his pedestrian 2016. A wild pitch moved the go-ahead run to second, a walk put another man on. And Josh Reddick, the former Red Sox right fielder, won an eight-pitch war with a single through the hole at short on a 99 mph 3-2 fastball.

Kimbrel allowed another run in the ninth on pinch-hitter Carlos Beltran's double off the Monster — and that one would come back to bite Boston as well. His ineffectiveness made the decision to stick with Sale in the eighth less controversial in retrospect; neither pitcher turned out to be an ideal option.

"Anytime you're knocked out, you always want to go back and say, 'What can I do?' I felt like the ballclub fought hard," Kimbrel said. "In games like this, that's all you can really ask for."

That fight extended, albeit briefly, into the ninth. An offense that had been silent since Andrew Benintendi greeted reliever Justin Verlander with a go-ahead homer in the fifth revived when Rafael Devers smoked a Ken Giles 0-2 slider off the Monster in left-center, then circled the bases when it caromed back toward right-center field for an inside-the-park homer.

It was to be a small reprieve. Giles calmed down to get a groundout from Christian Vazquez, a strikeout of Jackie Bradley, Jr. and a groundout from Dustin Pedroia.

"You work so hard together and go through so much," Pedroia said. "To come up short, it hurts."

Monday was emblematic of the series as a whole. Save for David Price and Hanley Ramirez, Boston received little from its stars. Houston received excellent starts from Verlander and Dallas Keuchel and a string of good at-bats from its top of the order.

“We just weren’t good enough. They beat us,” Pedroia said. “They played better than we did at the right time. That’s why they’re moving on.”

“You go 100 miles an hour, and then all of a sudden it feels like you face-plant in a wall when the season’s over,” Farrell said. “We had a number of challenges thrown our way, but as a team, they stuck together. They care for one another and they fully competed right to the end.”

Season’s over, but plenty of questions remain

Kevin McNamara

BOSTON — Thankfully, the Boston Red Sox aren’t the type of franchise that hangs division-winning banners high above home plate at Fenway Park.

If they were, the Sox would’ve packed their bags after Monday’s season-ending playoff loss to the Houston Astros and tucked an outsized sense of achievement alongside their gloves and cleats.

Instead, long faces and whispered tones dominated the Boston clubhouse after the Astros’ Division Series-clinching 5-4 victory. A second straight American League East flag is all the Sox can boast about heading into the winter but that’s not good enough for a team, and a franchise, that has hit its ceiling in the last two seasons.

These Sox win 90-plus games, spend oodles of money on player payroll and get wiped out with relative ease in the Divisional Series. That’s not going to fly on Yawkey Way.

Last October the Cleveland Indians swept the Red Sox out of the playoffs with remarkable ease. This time around the Sox put up a much stiffer fight. In fact, they played their rear-ends off once a one-sided series shifted to Fenway with the Astros holding a 2-0 lead.

But in the end the 101-win Astros brought much too much to the table. The 102-win Indians have it all over the Red Sox as well.

“It’s not offense or defense, you play as a team. We weren’t good enough. They beat us,” said veteran leader Dustin Pedroia. “They played better than we did at the right time and that’s why they’re moving on.”

Maybe it’s good that, in the end, it was clear that the Red Sox’ best wasn’t good enough.

The Sox threw their very best starting pitcher, Chris Sale, at the Astros for as long as they could. Actually, too long. Working on three days rest, Sale came out of the bullpen and was dominant in throwing four shutout innings. But clinging to a 3-2 lead, the Sox sent their ace lefty out for the eighth inning. The move backfired as Alex Bregman led off with a tying home run.

Then the Red Sox turned to Craig Kimbrel, their All-Star closer. He failed miserably. Josh Reddick singled in the go-ahead run and Kimbrel let up another in the ninth.

A miraculous inside-the-park home run by rookie flash Rafael Devers sparked some hope in the ninth but the Sox ran out of gas. The Astros were simply better.

In the quick jump to bury a season and look to the future, players and staff need to be forgiven. This is their life and they invest everything in it. But the Red Sox have limitations that are preventing a speedy return to the World Series stage.

“We’re very close,” Pedroia said. “We’re a couple balls here and there, that’s it. The team that beat us won 101 games. We were right there with them. To come up short hurts.”

Actually they weren't all that close. The Astros won the first two games of the series by 8-2 counts. They tore Boston's pitching to shreds for four games, hitting .333 with eight home runs and a .973 OPS. The Red Sox four starting pitchers — including Cy Young award contender Sale — combined to give up 16 runs in 11.1 innings for a whopping 12.97 earned run average. In short, they stunk.

The offense finally showed some life back at Fenway Park but it's almost amazing that the Sox won 93 games with the holes in their lineup. General manager Dave Dombrowski failed to come close to replacing David Ortiz' power numbers as his team finished last in the A.L. in home runs. No regular hit higher than .295 and questions need to be asked about several supposed building block players.

First up is Pedroia. He battled a knee injury for months and clearly wasn't himself. If the 34-year old needs surgery, he could be a question mark for Opening Day, 2018. After disappointing power numbers, is 25-year old Xander Bogaerts attractive trade bait? Is superb center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr., too much of an offensive liability to hang onto? Would anyone take the declining Hanley Ramirez (62 RBI) in a trade?

Dombrowski is tasked with answering those questions plus making a call on the elephant in the room: manager John Farrell.

It's awful easy to plug a manager in Boston. After all, pulling the strings for the Sox is the toughest job in New England sports and the frenetic media attention surrounding the franchise sparks months of second-guessing. Farrell has become an easy target but says he can lead this team deeper into the playoffs.

“Personally, yes, I feel confident in that,” he said. “I know that we have got opportunity to assess where we are as a team. I can't begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what the changes may be realized, but still there's a lot of good things that are going on here.”

Farrell keeps the ship sailing fairly steadily, brings young players like Mookie Betts, Andrew Benintendi and Devers along well and juggled the bullpen effectively. But five years is a long time in this job. He may own a World Series ring from 2013 but the Sox also imploded with last place finishes in 2014 and '15. The Red Sox finished 93-69 and topped their division in each of the last two seasons but the quick playoff exits give Dombrowski something to think about.

How far away is this team? Are more players rising or fading? What would it take to trade for a slugger like Giancarlo Stanton? Is it best for a fresh start without Farrell?

These questions have no clear answers but one thing is for sure: No one is satisfied with only hanging A.L. East banners.

*** *The Hartford Courant***

Looks Like It's Time For Red Sox To Let Farrell Go

Jeff Jacobs

Chris Sale was the best pitcher in the American League for most of 2017. Craig Kimbrel has been the best closer in baseball.

Yet after this long, rainy afternoon led to stinging season-ending defeat for the Red Sox, the most important question is not who is best. It is this: If a team is going to acquire Addison Reed at the trade deadline for the purpose of pitching him in the eighth inning of the most vital games, why would the hell wouldn't you use him?

The drama was so high, the narrative unraveled in such fascinating ways Monday, it was easy to get caught up in the theater. If anything, this one proved you don't need a 1-0 game to satisfy baseball aficionados.

Absorbing moments abounded in an 247-minute passion play, ultimately ending with a 5-4 Astros victory in Game 4 of the ALDS.

There was home plate umpire Mark Wegner's ultra-generous strike zone leading to punch-outs of Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia and the second-inning ejection of manager John Farrell. Duplicating David Price's performance of Sunday, Sale pitched four innings of shutout ball. Perhaps overreacting to Sale's appearance, Astros manager A.J. Hinch countered with Justin Verlander in relief for the first time in his 13-year career.

There was Andrew Benintendi, little Benny Biceps, greeting Verlander and his hanging slider with a go-ahead, two-run homer that hooked inside The Pesky Pole. There were 37,305 Fenway fans suddenly inspired to chant, "Up-ton! Up-ton!" Color me naïve, but pointing out that Kate Upton is his fiancée probably didn't discourage Verlander in the least.

And there was Rafael Devers in the ninth striking the first postseason Red Sox inside-the-park homer since 1916. Yet one needn't trace back 101 years for the burning issue of today, yesterday, last week, last month or last year: If you are owner John Henry, if you are baseball czar Dave Dombrowski, how do you not replace manager John Farrell?

Asked if he expected to be back in 2018, Farrell, who is under contract for next season, answered, "We just walked off the field 10 minutes ago."

Asked another way, if he felt he was the manager who can get these Red Sox over the hump of the division series, Farrell answered, "Personally, yes, I feel confident in that ... there's a lot of good things going on here."

Successive AL East titles have led to successive ALDS washouts. Yes, Farrell won the World Series in 2013. I certainly do not think he is some kind of managerial dunce. We can argue all night about the hundreds of things, good and bad, Farrell has done since replacing Stamford's Inventor of the Wrap. Not starting Hanley Ramirez and Devers in Game 1 certainly were not among his genius moves. Then again, I thought slumping Xander Bogaerts should hit eighth Monday and he crushed a home run in the first inning.

When Grady Little went out to the mound and decided to leave Pedro Martinez in Game 7 of the 2003 ALCS, you knew he was fired by the time he got back to the dugout. Was the eighth inning Farrell's Grady Little moment? Maybe. Maybe not.

First, Farrell deserves credit for stepping in so Pedroia, who carried on far too much for a veteran in an important situation, wouldn't get ejected.

"I did not argue balls and strikes," Farrell said. "There was nothing derogatory or directed straight at him. It was a really quick hook."

Second, anybody who thinks the eighth inning was up to Gary DiSarcina is delusional. Farrell is in charge and the thought of him operating from behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz must be a delicious one for his region of critics.

"Managers, we're judged on results, yet we work on process," Hinch said. "You can lose playing conservatively, too. It's very easy to go to the bullpen and leave Verlander out of it. But our job's to try to win. It's not to try not to lose."

There's also the truth that going with your best pitchers is not the best in certain situations. As terrific as Sale was in his first relief appearance in five years, he was pitching on three days rest and started to lose some location in a 24-pitch seventh. After 65 pitches, it seemed like the right spot for the lefty to turn the ball over.

"We did feel like he was tiring a little bit," Hinch said.

"As efficient and as pinpoint his control was to that point, he was still in good shape I thought," Farrell said.

Farrell said consideration was given to going to the righthander to start the eighth against Alex Bregman, but he wanted to stay with the lefty through the bottom of the order because of the reverse splits of hot-hitting righty Yuli Gurriel.

Sale left a 2-1 changeup in the middle of the plate to Bregman. Boom, over the Green Monster, it was tied. Sale gave up a single to Evan Gattis, got Brian McCann to line out, and Kimbrel was brought mid-inning to face the top of the Houston order.

Kimbrel likes to pitch clean innings. This was a messy situation of inherited runners. After Kimbrel walked George Springer, Josh Reddick ended a terrific eight-pitch at-bat by driving a full-count fastball that leaked back over the plate to left field for the go-ahead RBI single. In the ninth, pinch hitter Carlos Beltran ended another eight-pitch at-bat by driving a curve off the wall for the winning RBI double. Kimbrel, the great closer, had two chances to put away guys on two strikes. Didn't happen.

"We had arguably our two best pitchers to close things out to get the final six outs," Farrell said.

Farrell got greedy. Yes, it's on the players, but it's on the process, too. Reed got skipped over for the job he was hired to do when it mattered most. Nobody would blame him if he signed elsewhere as a free agent.

The Red Sox need a power bat, to be honest, need it more than a new manager. They also need some veteran leadership, the kind Jonny Gomes and David Ross brought in 2013. The Red Sox also bring a truckload of talent back in 2018.

At the end of the regular season, Dombrowski said Farrell did a "great" job. Yet if you had made all these personnel moves, with a monster payroll, don't you think, "I've given John a really good team and he has washed out two postseasons in a row?"

And if you are an owner, with interest clearly far below a decade ago, with seemingly all of New England having zero faith in Farrell, isn't it a wise business decision to say thank you, John, and move in a different direction?

*** *The Springfield Republican***

Chris Sale, Boston Red Sox's resiliency fall short in Game 4 ALDS loss to Houston Astros

Jen McCaffrey

BOSTON - Prior to Game 1 of the American League Division Series, Chris Sale said he'd pitch until his arm fell off.

He nearly did just that on Monday in Game 4 and it still wasn't enough.

Sale came out of the bullpen for 4 2/3 innings in relief of starter Rick Porcello, but a game-tying homer on his 69th pitch of the game put the Red Sox on the wrong side of the scoreboard in an eventual 5-4 loss, ending their season.

Through the first four innings, Sale was almost unhittable, silencing the Astros offense, save for two singles, and giving Boston a chance in a 2-1 game.

The tall lefty looked like that early-season version of himself, strong and in control. Not like the one that allowed seven runs in five innings in Game 1.

But when he came back out for a fifth frame, Houston second baseman Alex Bregman led off the inning by lofting a 2-1 changeup into the Monster seats, tying the game.

Two batters later a hard shot down the third-base line appeared foul and the ball attendant went to field it, not realizing it had been called fair.

The runner was granted first base. Sale got the next out before giving way to Craig Kimbrel.

The closer, entering with two outs in the eighth, allowed a walk and a single, scoring the go-ahead run and closing the book on Sale's 2017 season and in turn the Red Sox.

In many ways, Sale's efforts on Monday mirrored Boston's resiliency this year - both came up just short.

"I felt good, felt strong throughout," Sale said sullenly after the loss in a quiet Red Sox clubhouse. "Didn't get it done."

"We have to give him a lot of credit, man that's a workhorse," Xander Bogaerts said. "I didn't even know he was going to be pitching today. For him to come in and put up all those zeroes, gave us a lot of chance to score some runs also. That was a performance we needed, guys putting up zeros, and he did it for us today. We should have gotten him a few more runs and separate the game. We just couldn't do it."

Like they had for much of the season, Boston battled back in this series with a commanding Game 3 win, and fought hard in Game 4, but it was too late.

Glimpses of the team's tenacity in those 18 extra-innings games, and 43 come-from-behind victories, flashed in Game 4 like a flickering flame struggling to stay lit.

Xander Boagerts game-tying shot in the first. John Farrell's ejection. Andrew Benintendi's go-ahead homer off Justin Verlander in the fifth. Rafael Devers' inside-the-park homer in the bottom of the ninth.

Just like winning the American League East, Boston brought it down to the wire, but they had put themselves in too much of a hole and couldn't climb out of this one.

Sale wanted so badly to carry the Red Sox on his back and even the series at two games apiece.

"Extremely proud for the way we went out and worked," Farrell said. "We won a lot of baseball games. You win the division, that's I think a major accomplishment. We didn't meet all of our goals, that's obvious by the ending here today. But we have seen some really good young players continue to develop.

"We had a number of challenges thrown our way from individual injuries to performance, but as a team, they stuck together," he continued. "They care for one another and they fully compete right to the end. The resiliency we talked about, but this is a very competitive, close-knit team."

Craig Kimbrel, Boston Red Sox closer: 'I gave everything I have and it wasn't good enough today'

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Craig Kimbrel had arguably his worst outing of his dominant 2017 season here today. And it came at the very worst time possible.

Kimbrel relieved Chris Sale in the eighth inning. He allowed an inherited runner to score the go-ahead run. He then surrendered another run in the ninth. The Red Sox lost 5-4 to the Astros in Game 4 of the ALDS.

They lost their best-of-five series to Houston 3-1.

Sale left the game with a runner at first base and two outs.

Kimbrel walked George Springer to put two runners on. Josh Reddick delivered an opposite field RBI single to left field to give the Astros 4-3 lead.

"Came in, leadoff walk there, get two guys on, never want to do that," Kimbrel said. "Had a good battle against Reddick and he put a ball where nobody was and scored a run.

"And the second inning, I went out there and gave everything I have and it wasn't good enough today," Kimbrel added.

Reddick capped off his eight-pitch at-bat vs. Kimbrel with a single on a 99.3 mph fastball.

"It was a fastball away," Kimbrel said. "He just hit it through the hole."

Kimbrel struck out Carlos Correa to begin the ninth. But he then hit Marwin Gonzalez with a pitch. Alex Bregman flied out, Yuli Gurriel singled and Carlos Beltran hit an RBI double to make it 5-3.

The Red Sox pulled to within 5-4 during the bottom of the ninth inning when Rafael Devers led off with an inside-the-park home run.

"In games like this, all you can really ask for is to ask your team to give everything they have and unfortunately, it wasn't good enough today," Kimbrel said.

As Boston Globe's Alex Speier pointed out on Twitter, Kimbrel threw 37 pitches and got only three swings-and-misses.

A mere three swings-and-misses is almost unprecedented for a Kimbrel appearance. He averaged 16.4 strikeouts per nine innings in 2017.

"Even in some of the appearances we saw before the end of the regular season and in the inning of work down in Houston, they put up tough at-bats against him," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "Typically we're so accustomed to seeing a lot of swing and miss when Craig is on the mound. They fought off some good pitchers' pitches to get deep in counts and then were able to put some balls in play.

"I know he's trying to run a fastball in closer to Reddick on the 3-2 pitch that leaks back over the outer half that's he's able to push a ground ball through the other side for the go-ahead run."

Kimbrel's 2017 stats jump off the charts. His 16.4 strikeouts per nine innings were compared to just 1.8 walks. He posted a 0.68 WHIP and 1.43 ERA. The opposition batted .140 against him.

He recorded more than three outs in seven different games. He converted 35-of-39 save opportunities.

"I felt like we had momentum going our way," Kimbrel said. "And there in the late innings it slipped away from us, and it's unfortunate. We've got a good group of guys in here and we fought hard and it's tough to come up short like we did today."

John Farrell discusses job security & umpire Mark Wegner's 'really quick hook'

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia struck out looking on questionable strike calls with the bases loaded in the second inning.

Pedroia argued with home plate umpire Mark Wegner. John Farrell came out to make sure an angry Pedroia didn't get tossed. The Red Sox manager then got ejected himself.

Boston lost 5-4 to the Astros to lose its best-of-five ALDS 3-1.

"I went out to get Pedey away from Mark Wegner," Farrell said. "Obviously it was a key moment. Pedey obviously disagreed with the call that was made. I did not argue balls and strike. And yet that was a little surprising when I was ejected at that point. So for whatever reason, he felt like -- there was nothing derogatory or directed straight at him, I never argued balls and strikes, it was a really quick hook."

Wegner did give Farrell the reason why he ejected him.

"The reason he gave me is 'I'm not going to have you stand here and yell at me,'" Farrell said.

Pedroia struck out on an inside corner 78.8 mph curveball (pitch No. 6):

Farrell's job security has come into question at several different times over the past three seasons. He was asked at his postgame press conference if he expects to return in 2018.

"We just walked off the field 10 minutes ago," Farrell replied.

He said he feel like he's the right manager to take this team beyond the ALDS.

"Personally, yes, I feel confident in that," Farrell said. "I know that we have got opportunity to assess where we are as a team. I can't begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what the changes may be realized, but still there's a lot of good things that are going on here."

Dustin Pedroia suggests he could undergo surgery on knee; 'recovery is a long time,' he says

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Dustin Pedroia will visit with the doctor tomorrow to get his left knee examined.

Pedroia made two trips to the disabled list (29 days combined) this season because of left knee inflammation.

He underwent arthroscopic surgery on his left knee last October. He's not ruling out a more complex surgery this offseason which could cause him to miss significant time in 2018.

He was asked if he can do what he did this year again in 2018 after all he went through this season?

"I mean, I'm going to go talk to the doctor about that," Pedroia said after the Astros eliminated the Red Sox from the ALDS today. "Obviously we had to try to find a way to do what we did so I could be out there. But if you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time. So I've got a lot of things to weigh in with the doctors and figure it out."

You have to wonder if Pedroia could miss the entire 2018 season if he does undergo a major knee surgery.

The 34-year-old second baseman posted a .293/.369/.392/.760 line in 105 regular season games this year.

Boston Red Sox season ends with 5-4 loss to Houston Astros in Game 4 of ALDS

Christopher Smith

BOSTON -- Rafael Devers made things interesting. He led off the ninth inning with the most entertaining play in baseball: an inside-the-park home run to the cut the Red Sox's deficit to 5-4.

But Astros closer Ken Giles got Christian Vazquez to ground out, Jackie Bradley Jr. to strike out and Dustin Pedroia to ground out.

The Boston Red Sox lost 5-4 to the Houston Astros here at Fenway Park to drop their best-of-five ALDS 3-1.

This was a game of young stars -- not just Devers.

Andrew Benintendi hit the biggest home run of his life.

Then Alex Bregman, who was picked five spots ahead of Benintendi in the 2015 draft, belted the biggest homer of his life three innings later ... and it wiped out all the energy here at Fenway Park.

Justin Verlander entered for his first ever relief appearance after a one-out walk to Xander Bogaerts in the fifth.

Benintendi, the first batter he faced, took him deep for a two-run homer on an 87.9 mph slider to give the Red Sox a 3-2 lead.

Chris Sale hurled a scoreless fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh inning.

But Bregman bashed an 88.3 mph changeup over the Green Monster to tie it 3-3 with no outs in the eighth.

Sale left with the game tied and a runner at first base and two outs in the eighth. Closer Craig Kimbrel replaced him.

Kimbrel walked George Springer to put two runners on base. Josh Reddick delivered an opposite field RBI single to left field to put the Astros ahead 4-3.

Bogaerts goes deep to right for first time at Fenway

Xander Bogaerts tied it 1-1 with his first ever postseason homer. It also marked the first time he has homered to the opposite field at Fenway Park.

The Red Sox shortstop went 0-for-14 with four strikeouts in the first three games of the ALDS.

Farrell gets tossed, Red Sox squander opportunity

The Red Sox failed to score with the bases loaded and no outs in the second inning.

Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia struck out looking on questionable strike calls on the corners. Bogaerts flied out to right field to end the threat.

Pedroia argued and John Farrell came out to make sure Pedroia didn't get tossed. The Red Sox manager then got ejected himself.

Home plate umpire Mark Wegner was giving pitchers the corners.

Bradley struck out on an outside corner 80.2 mph curveball (pitch No. 5):

Red Sox starters with 12.71 ERA in ALDS

Red Sox starters have combined for 16 runs in 11 1/3 innings (12.71 ERA).

Chris Sale, ALDS Game 1: 5 innings, 9 hits, 7 runs, 7 earned runs, 3 homers, 1 walk, 6 strikeouts.

Drew Pomeranz, ALDS Game 2: 2 innings, 5 hits, 4 runs, 4 earned runs, 2 homers, one walk, one strikeout.

Doug Fister, ALDS Game 3: 1 1/3 innings, 4 hits, 3 runs, 3 earned runs, 1 homer, 1 walk, 1 strikeout.

Rick Porcello, ALDS Game 4: 3 innings, 5 hits, 2 runs, 2 earned runs, 0 homers, 3 walks, 4 strikeouts.

Two big outs on the base paths

The Sox led the league with 81 outs on the bases during the regular season.

Boston led the majors in outs at home plate (29) and outs at third base (19). It was second for outs at second base (25).

The Red Sox made two outs on the bases during the third inning Monday.

Mookie Betts lined out hard to third base. Bregman fired to first base to double off Benintendi.

Later in the inning, third base coach Brian Butterfield waved Mitch Moreland home from second base on a shallow single to left field. Moreland got thrown out by a mile at home plate.

Sale pitches 4 2/3 innings in relief, but gives up game-tying homer in Game 4 of ALDS vs. Astros

Jen McCaffrey

BOSTON - A day after David Price tossed four scoreless innings in relief in Game 3 of the American League Division Series, it was Chris Sale's turn.

The Red Sox lefty fired four scoreless innings of relief before Alex Bregman lofted a solo homer into the Monster seats to tie the game at 3-3, leading off the eighth inning.

Sale entered in the fourth inning to relieve Rick Porcello who allowed two runs over three innings of work. At the time, the Red Sox trailed 2-1..

Sale need just 14 pitches in his first inning, striking out the first batter, Brian McCann with a 99 mph fastball before getting a pop up and ground out.

In the fifth, Jose Altuve tried to lay down a bunt single to third, but Rafael Devers fielded the ball with ease on the slick grass for the out.

Sale struck out Carlos Correa and then got a fly out to center for his second scoreless frame.

The Red Sox took a 3-2 lead on a two-run homer from Andrew Benintendi off Justin Verlander, who entered for relief in the fifth.

After a one-out error at third base in the sixth, Sale struck out the next two batters.

In the seventh, he allowed two singles, but stranded both runners by striking out Marwin Gonzalez.

But in the eighth, Sale entered for his fifth inning with 65 pitches thrown already and allowed a solo homer to Bregman. He got the next out but allowed a single down the third-base line to Evan Gattis that the ball attendant fielded, thinking it was foul. The runner reached and Sale recorded a second out before bench coach Gary DiSarcina (managing for an ejected John Farrell) turned to Craig Kimbrel.

Kimbrel, though, walked his first batter then allowed a single scoring, Gattis for the go-ahead run.

Kimbrel finally got out of the inning with a fly out.

Sale finished with two runs allowed over 4 2/3 innings. He allowed four hits, walked none and struck out six on 77 pitches, 52 strikes.

Benintendi hits go-ahead homer off Verlander in fifth inning of Game 4 ALDS for Boston Red Sox

Jen McCaffrey

BOSTON - Despite leading 2-1, the Houston Astros turned to Justin Verlander out of the bullpen in the fifth inning.

Astros starter Charlie Morton had struck out the side in the fourth, but walked the first batter of the fifth and Houston manager A.J. Hinch turned to Verlander with Andrew Benintendi at the plate.

Benintendi went down 2-2 before swatting a slider from Verlander down the right-field line for a two-run homer to give the Red Sox a 3-2 lead.

In 402 career appearances, Verlander had never come out of the bullpen.

*** *The Worcester Telegram & Gazette***

Red Sox Journal: At least the rookies provided some power

Bill Ballou

BOSTON — One thing the Red Sox can take from their disappointing Division Series loss to the Astros is the emergence of some young power, something teams need more of every year, it seems, and something Boston had little of this year.

Three of their five playoff home runs were hit by rookies, including two by Rafael Devers and one by Andrew Benintendi. On Monday, Devers hit an historic inside-the-park home run leading off the ninth. It was the first postseason, inside-the-park homer in 77 playoff games at Fenway Park, which opened in 1912.

Devers smashed a drive to left-center that George Springer missed catching with a leap. The ball angled toward right-center and rolled forever. It was obvious early that unless Devers accidentally stepped in quicksand or a bear trap, he would have a home run.

“I was just looking at (Brian Butterfield), the third-base coach, and he was waving me around, and I figured I’d be able to score,” Devers said through a translator. “Then when I looked back and saw that no one was really near the ball, that I was going to score standing up and I knew I was going to get there.”

It was merely the third postseason, inside-the-park home run ever by a Boston batter and the first since third baseman Larry Gardner hit one at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn on Oct. 11, 1916. Patsy Dougherty had the other one on Oct. 2, 1903 at the Huntington Avenue Grounds, site of the first World Series. Dougherty also hit one over the fence in that game.

Opposing batters have hit two postseason, inside-the-park home runs against Boston. The Red Sox pitchers for those two? Cy Young on Oct. 1, 1903 and Babe Ruth on Oct. 9, 1916. The one off Ruth was hit in Boston, but at Braves Field, where the World Series was being played because that ballpark had more seats than Fenway.

“I’m just going to take it and be proud of it,” Devers said of his homer, adding that looking towards next season, “Basically, I’m going to work out and get in form so I can help the team win a championship next year.”

Devers and Benintendi are two of only six Red Sox rookies to hit postseason home runs. Devers, Dustin Pedroia (2007), Brian Daubach (1999) and Reggie Smith (1967) all hit two postseason home runs as rookies.

Fred Lynn hit one in 1975. Benintendi has accomplished the rare feat of hitting home runs as a rookie in two different seasons, one last year and a two-run shot on Monday.

Pedey struggled

Mookie Betts had a single off the wall in the first inning to extend his playoff hitting streak to six games in a row going back to last year. It is the longest by a Boston batter since Pedroia hit in six straight postseason games from Oct. 6-18 of 2008. Betts is batting .304 during his streak.

Pedroia was 0-for-5 Monday and had a terrible series at 2-for-16 (.125). Since the aforementioned hitting streak ended, Pedroia is batting just .202 in playoff action and while he is a career .300 hitter in the regular season, his career postseason average is just .233

Xander Bogaerts was moved into the second spot in the batting order and responded with a home run into the Boston bullpen in the first inning. It was the first time in his career that Bogaerts hit one into the bullpens. Including the regular season, Bogaerts has hit 52 home runs off 51 pitchers.

Diamond Dust

Jim Rice was the ceremonial first-ball tosser. The stands were half full, probably less, when Rice made his delivery. ... The Astros hit for the cycle as a team with Yuli Gurriel having the hard-to-get triple, a ball misplayed by Betts in the second. ... After their indoor celebration was over the Astros congregated in the soggy Boston infield, rain pouring down. They took team pictures and a few of them rolled around in the mud. ... Boston pitchers finished the postseason having allowed at least one home run in seven straight playoff games. ... The game lasted 4:07 and was the sixth-longest regulation postseason game in Sox history. ... Devers' home run was the first inside-the-park homer of any description by a Boston batter at Fenway since Jacoby Ellsbury on Sept. 19, 2011.

Kimbrel couldn't slam door when it mattered most

Bill Ballou

BOSTON — Craig Kimbrel's plaque for the Red Sox relief Hall of Infamy is on order.

His performance Monday afternoon, when he failed to maintain a 3-3 tie in Game 4 against the Astros, has him joining a list of other Red Sox closers who did the job almost every time they took the mound, except when it really mattered.

They saved the worst for last.

Kimbrel arrived with the score, 3-3, a runner on first and two out in the eighth.

Except that's not the way closers like things to work. They like the table set perfectly with every napkin lined up in order, every knife pointing due north and nary a fork with a bent prong. The term is "clean inning."

This was a very messy inning and Kimbrel made it messier. Facing George Springer, he immediately threw a wild pitch that moved Cameron Maybin up to second. Kimbrel walked Springer, then gave up an RBI single to ex-Red Sox outfielder Josh Reddick as the Astros took a 4-3 lead.

Even worse, Kimbrel allowed another run in the ninth and that was truly haunting as Rafael Devers led off the bottom of the ninth with an inside the park home run.

“I had a good battle against Reddick and he hit a ball where nobody was,” Kimbrel said. “The [next] inning, I went out and gave everything I had but it wasn’t good enough today.”

During the regular season, Kimbrel struck out almost half the batters he faced, 126 of 254. Monday, when he really needed strikeouts, Kimbrel faced eight Houston hitters and fanned one.

At least he didn’t use not coming in for a clean inning, or too much rest, as an excuse.

“I wouldn’t say a few days off in a situation like this means anything,” he said. “You’ve got to go out there, be ready to go, and be sharp. Some balls dropped that were unfortunate; that bloop hit to right [Yuli Gurriel in the ninth], that kind of set up Carlos [Beltran]. We had a good battle and he hit that ball off the wall.”

A strikeout is what Kimbrel needed.

Just as Lee Smith did in 1988.

An All-Star closer, Smith came in to work the ninth inning of Game 2 of Boston’s ALCS with Oakland. The Sox were down 1-0 in the series and it was a 3-3 tie heading into the top of ninth. Smith gave up a two-out RBI single to Walt Weiss and Boston headed west to lose twice more for a sweep.

In 1995, the Sox won the A.L. East and met the Indians in the Division Series. They had a 4-3 lead going into the bottom of the 11th of Game 1 in Cleveland and manager Kevin Kennedy called for closer Rick Aguilera.

Aguilera, acquired from the Twins for rookie Frankie Rodriguez in mid-summer, had converted 20 of 21 save chances for Boston during the regular season. This time, he gave up a game-tying home run to the first batter he faced, Albert Belle, and Boston wound up losing, 5-4, and being swept in three games.

It was Tom Gordon’s turn in 1998.

He had the greatest season ever by a Boston reliever, converting 46 of 47 save chances, including the last 42, during the regular season. Come playoff time, the Sox played the Indians again in the first round. Boston trailed the series, 2-1, and Game 4 was at Fenway Park.

Gordon was given a 1-0 lead to protect in the eighth and blew the lead, the game and the series when he surrendered a two-run double to David Justice.

Jonathan Papelbon’s meltdown in the 2009 Division Series is probably the worst of all. Papelbon was 38 for 41 in saves chances during the regular season with a 1.85 ERA. Against the Angels in the ’09 playoffs, Boston was down 2-0 in the series but led Game 3 at Fenway, 5-2, when Papelbon took over for Billy Wagner with two out and two on in the eighth

He allowed a two-run single, but the Sox added a run in the last of the eighth.

Boston was ahead, 6-4, with two out and nobody on in the top of the ninth and Papelbon gave up a single, a walk, a double, an intentional walk and another single in succession and the Red Sox wound up losing, 7-6, and being swept.

They were not swept this time around, but Kimbrel’s failure in the clutch was just as disastrous.

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

On Baseball: Boston must figure out why it fell short

Kevin Thomas

BOSTON — In the quiet of the Boston Red Sox clubhouse, players tried to figure out how it ended so quickly.

Yes, the Houston Astros were a better team. But Boston was putting up a fight, as it did in Sunday's win.

"We were grinding things out like we always do," Andrew Benintendi said.

And Benintendi looked to be the game's hero, swatting a two-run homer off the one-and-only Justin Verlander to give Boston a 3-2 lead.

"Slider. Put a good swing on it," Benintendi said, his voice subdued, not one bit of satisfaction in his home run.

There would be no celebrating.

Applaud Chris Sale for his gutsy relief effort, but he will be known more for giving up the tying run in the eighth inning.

"I felt good," Sale said. "Felt strong throughout. Didn't get it done."

But Sale, the veteran who just experienced his first playoff, figures he will get another chance.

"It's hard not to be optimistic about this team for a long time," Sale said.

And maybe he's right. If Boston won had Monday, we'd be praising the explosion of youth – the home runs from Xander Bogaerts (who's 25), Benintendi (23) and Rafael Devers (20).

Mookie Betts, who just turned 25 on Saturday, liked this Red Sox team, but knew it fell short of expectations.

"We got to score more runs," Betts said. "(Houston) did a great job pitching. But we have to hit more.

"We showed we could do it. But we have to be more consistent."

This makes two straight exits in the ALDS, though this one featured at least one win. But the 2016 playoff experience was supposed to make Boston better in 2017.

"I don't know what it takes (to get to the next level)," Betts said. "We did better this year than last ... as long as we continue to put ourselves in this position, something's going to break through."

Manager John Farrell did not feel ready to reflect on the season.

"You go 100 mph and then all of a sudden it feels like you face plant in a wall when the season's over," he said.

Despite being the only Red Sox manager to win three division titles (2013, '16 and '17), there is talk that Farrell's job is in jeopardy (granted, most of that speculation comes from the media, but it's out there).

Farrell was asked if he expected to be back. He wasn't joining in that conversation.

"We just walked off the field 10 minutes ago," Farrell said.

You never know with this Boston ownership group – the gang that brought Bobby Valentine to Boston.

The decision-making appears to be in the hands of Dave Dombrowski, the Red Sox president of baseball operations. Dombrowski obviously has his thoughts on Farrell, and hopefully that decision on next year is clarified soon.

“I thought John did a great job,” veteran second baseman Dustin Pedroia said. “We won the division. There was never any quit in this team. We dealt with a lot. (But) I know we didn’t achieve our goals ...

“We were right there with (Houston). Very close. A couple balls here and there. That part hurts the most. To come this close, it hurts.”

Boston’s problem was the routs it experienced in the first two games to Houston. Those weren’t close.

Boston did fight back. But it did not have enough muscle to fight with.

Pedroia, 34, is always full of fight, but you wonder how much more Boston can depend on him. His defense is sound, but he is not so much clutch with the bat. He went 0 for 4 Monday and was 2 for 15 in the series, after going 2 for 12 in last year’s ALDS.

And then there is Pedroia’s health. A sore left knee limited him to 105 games this year. He plans to see a doctor Tuesday. Major surgery might be the best option, with a long recovery time.

There is also David Price and his health issues. Will his touchy forearm and elbow allow him to start for a whole season?

These are questions Dombrowski has to worry about as he begins making plans for 2018.

But one obvious part of that plan is Devers, the kid who began the year in Portland and then came to Boston with poise and power the Red Sox desperately need.

This was Devers’ first playoff. He was disappointed, but still thrilled to be here.

“It’s cool because you’re one of the few teams that can play in the postseason,” Devers said through a translator.

Now what?

“Get ready for next season,” Devers said, “so I can help the team win a championship next year.”

Got to like the kid.

****Redsox.com***

Sox battle to end, but eliminated with G4 loss

Ian Browne and Brian McTaggart

BOSTON -- The celebration on the middle of the diamond of rainy Fenway Park on Monday afternoon was partly an exercise in tension release for the Astros.

The Astros had battled the Red Sox for more than four hours of drama-filled October baseball before second baseman Jose Altuve fielded a grounder off the bat of Dustin Pedroia and threw it to first base for the final out of a 5-4 win that locked up Game 4 of the American League Division Series presented by Doosan.

The Astros, who won the series, 3-1, danced and shouted after advancing to their first American League Championship Series presented by Camping World, beginning Friday against the winner of the Indians-Yankees series, while the Red Sox's season came to an end.

"It's pretty agonizing during the game, and we're pretty exhausted," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "But what an emotional day for us."

Backed by a game-tying homer by Alex Bregman off Chris Sale to lead off the eighth and a two-out RBI single later in the inning by Josh Reddick off closer Craig Kimbrel, the Astros won their first postseason series since the 2005 National League Championship Series.

"Our dugout was pretty quiet for most of the game with Sale in there," Reddick said. "For [Bregman] to pick us up right there, especially late, we knew they were riding him to the ninth until they had to get to Kimbrel. For him to come up big for us -- having big at-bats at home against him helped a lot -- and we couldn't overlook the Carlos Beltran [RBI] double [in the ninth], and that ends up being the deciding factor in the game."

Andrew Benintendi gave the Red Sox hope for a Game 5 when he greeted Astros ace Justin Verlander -- who was used in relief in this one like Sale -- with a two-run homer to right to make it 3-2, Boston, in the fifth. But it was Verlander's only damaging pitch, and he went on to get the win in his first career relief appearance.

"They asked me when I got there -- after they found out we were going to start the game -- they asked me if I would be good to pitch if we were in a delayed situation," Verlander said. "I said, 'Yeah.' When they found out we weren't in a delay anymore, they knew I was good and they said, 'Go down there and be ready for some at-bats. Can you get Benintendi?' I said 'Sure.' That didn't work out so well, but the rest of it did."

Sale, who came on to start the fourth with Boston down by a run at 2-1, had cruised through his first four innings, allowing two hits and no runs. He was at 65 pitches when he came back out for the eighth.

Bregman changed the game when he belted Sale's 2-1 changeup over the Green Monster to open the inning.

"Changeup," said Sale. "I tried to get him out in front. Didn't work."

With a runner on and two outs, George Springer worked Kimbrel for a walk. Reddick, who started his career with the Red Sox, put the Astros in front when he got enough of a 99.3-mph heater and put it into left for the RBI single.

"He's such a battler up there," Hinch said. "He knows the strike zone very well. He'll take a single. Nowadays when guys are trying to put up OPS, they're trying to hit homers, they're trying to drive the ball, it's uncommon to have a guy understand the game and just take a single and have a big moment."

The Astros added an insurance run against Kimbrel in the ninth, and that wound up being big when Red Sox rookie Rafael Devers led off the bottom of the ninth with an inside-the-park homer against closer Ken Giles that took a wild carom off the wall in left-center and just kept rolling.

"But even right down to the end, obviously with Raffy's inside-the-park home run, there was still energy, still life that you could feel," said Red Sox manager John Farrell.

Just as in every other game of the series, the Astros scored in the first inning to take the lead. This time, it was a trade-off the Red Sox didn't mind taking because the run came on a 1-4-6-3 double play that starter Rick Porcello induced off the bat of the dangerous Altuve.

Xander Bogaerts erased the deficit with one swing in the bottom of first, when he smashed a solo homer to end his 0-for-14 drought in the series.

Porcello (three innings, five hits, two runs) walked the tight rope again in the second, allowing an RBI single to Springer and loading the bases with two outs. But Porcello got one of the biggest outs of the early innings, striking out Correa and keeping it a 2-1 game.

In the bottom of the second, Farrell was ejected for arguing a called third strike on Pedroia. Bench coach Gary DiSarcina managed the rest of the game.

Astros starter Charlie Morton gave up seven hits and two runs over 4 1/3 innings.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Justin time: Hinch raised some eyebrows when he summoned Verlander from the bullpen in the fifth inning for the first relief appearance of his career. Benintendi stunned Verlander with a go-ahead home to right field, but Verlander didn't allow another hit and wound up throwing 2 2/3 innings to get the ball to closer Giles in the eighth. Verlander didn't strike out a batter for only the fifth time in his career.

"I think it was always in the back of our head that we would be able to utilize him if we needed to," Hinch said. "Not knowing the weather and the score of the game -- those are things that are the unknown going into today's game -- I told him this morning if we had the lead and there was a delay in the game, then I wasn't going to be afraid to use him."

Bregman not afraid of monsters: Bregman was 3-for-16 in the series when he stepped to the plate to lead off the eighth inning against Sale, who he took deep in Game 1 on Thursday in Houston. What followed was the biggest hit of Bregman's career, a towering home run to left field that sailed over the Green Monster to stun the hushed Fenway Park crowd and tie the game, setting the stage for the Astros to go ahead later in the inning.

"I saw a changeup out of the hand and got anxious and popped it up [in the sixth inning]," Bregman said. "I just tried to stay on the ball a little bit better, let it get a little deeper and was fortunate enough to tie this game up for the team."

QUOTABLE

"Extremely proud for the way we went out and worked, the way we were a very competitive team throughout. We won a lot of baseball games. You win the division, that's, I think, a major accomplishment. We didn't meet all of our goals -- that's obvious by the ending here today. But we have seen some really good young players continue to develop." -- Farrell More >

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The Astros hit .333 (49-for-147) in the series -- the team's highest mark ever in a playoff series.

WHAT'S NEXT

Astros: The Astros advance to their first ALCS, with Game 1 set for Friday against the winner of the Indians-Yankees. Game 1 would be in Houston if the Yankees win the series, or in Cleveland if the Indians win.

Postseason primes Red Sox for 2018 push

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- The end of 2017 was abrupt and a bit painful for the Red Sox, with Monday's 5-4 loss to the Astros in Game 4 of the American League Division Series presented by Doosan coming after the club couldn't protect a one-run lead with six outs to go.

But the one thing that cushioned the blow is that Boston's roster is stacked with cornerstone pitchers and position players who are in their prime or younger.

Unlike last season, when the iconic David Ortiz retired, the Red Sox aren't in danger of losing any marquee players.

"I mean, if you look around here and look at the names, we have a lot of guys coming back," said ace Chris Sale. "A lot of the guys that carried this team are young guys that are going to be here for awhile. It's hard not to be optimistic about this team for a long time."

Sale and closer Craig Kimbrel will be back to lead the pitching staff, and both will be motivated to erase the sour taste of their roles in Monday's tough defeat. No. 2 starter David Price, who was limited to 11 starts this season due to multiple left elbow injuries, should be back in the rotation to start 2018.

Right fielder Mookie Betts, at 25 years old, is one of the finest all-around players in the game. He was far more poised in this postseason (.313 average, several brilliant plays in right field) than in his first one a year ago.

Left fielder Andrew Benintendi, who hit a go-ahead, two-run homer against Justin Verlander that set him up to be a hero in Game 4, will be back for his second full season. Though shortstop Xander Bogaerts has been a key player since the magical 2013 postseason, he turned 25 just two weeks ago.

Rafael Devers, who filled the Red Sox with enthusiasm and big hits his first couple of months in the Major Leagues, will be 21 when next season starts.

"I would do this again with these guys in here," said Bogaerts. "Same exact group of guys, I would do it 100 percent."

As in any year, there will be some changes. First baseman Mitch Moreland, valuable utility infielder Eduardo Nunez, reserve outfielder Chris Young and setup man Addison Reed are all likely to head to free agency. But there should be many returning players from a team that won 93 games in each of the past two seasons while falling short in the Division Series both years.

"You win the division, that's -- I think -- a major accomplishment," said Red Sox manager John Farrell. "We didn't meet all of our goals, that's obvious by the ending here today. But we have seen some really good young players continue to develop. We had a number of challenges thrown our way, from individual injuries to performance, but as a team, they stuck together."

"I know that we have got opportunity to assess where we are as a team. I can't begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what the changes may be realized, but still there's a lot of good things that are going on here."

Farrell has another year left on his contract, and several players praised his leadership after Monday's loss.

"He's done a great job, and I know no manager has won back-to-back [division] titles [for the Red Sox], so it shows he's done a great job in managing personalities and put us in a position to win," said Betts. "He listens to us, and he talks with us."

If the Red Sox have an obvious need for 2018, it would probably be to add another slugger to the lineup. Predictably, Ortiz's shoes proved too big to be filled, and Boston's offense didn't produce at the same level as in '16.

"That's not on me," said Betts. "I only can control what I can control, and I think everybody in the front office knows what it takes to win and I'll leave that in their hands."

After the sting of Monday's defeat wears off, the excitement will start to build for 2018.

"I mean, this is the second time in a row we won the AL East, so our goal will always be to win it again next year," said Bogaerts. "I know we will have a good team. The Red Sox will always have a good team, so it's nothing to doubt. Just looking forward to next year, I guess."

Sale-Kimbrel closing plan goes awry in loss

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- With a chance to push the American League Division Series presented by Doosan to the limit against the Astros, the Red Sox had their two best pitchers lined up to close it out.

There is no other way Boston would have wanted it than to have Chris Sale and Craig Kimbrel entrusted with such pressure.

This time, however, the two All-Stars had misfires that proved costly in a tough 5-4 loss to the Astros on Monday in Game 4 -- which wound up being the elimination game for the Red Sox.

The Red Sox had taken a 3-2 lead in the fifth on Andrew Benintendi's two-run homer to right against Justin Verlander and the Fenway crowd was starting to believe there would be a Game 5 in Houston on Wednesday.

Sale created excitement when he came out of the bullpen in the fourth inning, his team down by a run at the time. He threw one nasty pitch after another for his first four innings, striking out six

When Sale came out for the eighth, he was at 65 pitches and pitching on three days' rest following his loss in Game 1 in Houston.

"Very comfortable," Red Sox manager John Farrell said of Sale coming back out for the eighth. "We're in a position with six outs to go, up a run, and Chris Sale who was still strong, still throwing the ball extremely well. I felt like we were in a good position."

But that position was no longer as good when Alex Bregman belted the fourth pitch of the inning, a 2-1 changeup, over the Green Monster for a stunning game-tying solo shot.

It was stunning because Sale had been in such control before that. It was Bregman's second home run of the series off Sale, as the Astros' third baseman also took him deep in the first inning of Game 1.

"I felt good, I felt strong. I wish I could have got it done," said Sale. "Changeup. I tried to get him out in front. Didn't work."

There was still hope for the Red Sox because they still had Kimbrel. He came on for Sale with pinch-runner Cameron Maybin on first and two outs, and the dangerous top of the order coming up for the Astros.

Kimbrel's first high-leverage appearance of the series started ominously, as he walked George Springer. The righty was one strike away from getting out of the eighth with the game still tied, but Josh Reddick placed his 99.3-mph fastball past the shortstop hole and into left for the go-ahead RBI single.

"I came in, had guys on, I wanted to get out of it," said Kimbrel. "Had a good battle against Reddick. He hit the ball where nobody was, scored a run. I felt like we had momentum going our way. It's a tough way for it to end, unfortunately. We have a good group of guys in here. We fought hard. It's tough to come up short at the end of the day."

In the ninth, Kimbrel again faltered, giving up an RBI double to Carlos Beltran in what proved to be a pivotal insurance run.

Rafael Devers opened the bottom of the ninth for the Red Sox with an inside-the-park homer that closed the deficit to 5-4, but that was the end of the rally.

"Any time [Kimbrel] steps on the mound, you have all the confidence in the world," said Sale. "He's one of the best to ever step out there. Obviously you never want to come out, but handing it over to him makes it a little easier."

Sale's first season in Boston resulted in his first career postseason appearance, but the end was bitter.

"It's tough," Sale said. "We come here to win. We worked hard. It came down to the wire, it was a close game. This one definitely stinks."

Inside job: Devers electrifies fans with HR

Quinn Roberts

BOSTON -- It may not have been the way the Red Sox envisioned their season ending, but Monday's 5-4 loss to the Astros in Game 4 of the American League Division Series presented by Doosan showed the club's bright future.

That was especially apparent when Rafael Devers stepped to the plate with the Red Sox losing, 5-3, in the bottom of the ninth inning. Devers belted an 0-2 pitch off of the Green Monster in left-center field that rolled far away from center fielder George Springer.

Seeing the opening, Devers sprinted around the bases and was waved home by third-base coach Brian Butterfield for the first inside-the-park homer by a Red Sox player in a postseason game at Fenway Park. It was the first inside-the-park home run in the postseason since Alcides Escobar hit one to lead off the bottom half of the first inning in Game 1 of the 2015 World Series.

"Just looking at Butter, the third-base coach, he was waving me around and then I figured that I'd be able to score," said Devers. "And then when I looked back and saw that no one was really near the ball, that I was going standing up, then I knew I was going to get there."

Devers was the hero in Game 3, hitting a go-ahead homer against Francisco Liriano in the Red Sox's 10-3 win, and his inside-the-parker in Game 4 was the 17th inside-the-park home run in postseason history.

"The leadoff inside-the-park home run put this place on fire," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "This is a loud stadium to play at. Boston fans know baseball and they know how to get excited."

That home run got the fans on their feet and every Red Sox player on the top step of the dugout put Fenway into a frenzy.

"You've got to think you're going to tie it, at least. You've got to stay positive," Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts said. "That made the game much more exciting for us and the fans. We definitely gave them a show. We did the best we could."

While the Red Sox couldn't score another run to extend game and the ALDS, Devers finished 4-for-11 with two home runs and five RBIs. Factoring in the homer in Game 3, he became the only other AL player to homer in consecutive postseason games before turning 21 years old. The other two are Mickey Mantle in 1952 and Jimmie Foxx in 1929.

"It's a great feeling for me, but at the end of the day, I'm just focused on giving 100 percent of myself when I go out there," Devers said. "I think every at-bat, with every swing that I take, I try to give 100 percent. Yeah, I'm one of the few that have done it. That's cool. I'm going to take that and be proud of it."

Devers made a splash immediately when he was called up from Triple-A Pawtucket on July 26 to play third base. One of his biggest hits of the season came on a ninth inning, game-tying home run off Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman on Aug. 13. Devers finished the regular season hitting .284 with 10 home runs and 30 RBIs in 58 games.

After Monday's hitting display, he left many wondering what's in store for 2018.

Loss -- and knee -- painful for Pedroia

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- The emotion of the moment -- and the season -- temporarily got to Dustin Pedroia, Boston's veteran leader, when he struck out looking on a close pitch in the second inning of Monday's 5-4 elimination loss to the Astros in Game 4 of the American League Division Series presented by Doosan.

Pedroia was irate, and manager John Farrell swiftly rushed out to the plate to take over the argument with home plate umpire Marg Wagner. Farrell was ejected, and Pedroia stayed in the game.

More than three hours later, Pedroia was at the plate, representing the final hope to keep his team's season alive.

It was not to be, as Pedroia hit a routine grounder that Jose Altuve scooped up and threw to first to put Houston in the AL Championship Series presented by Camping World and end the 2017 baseball season for Boston.

The ending of Pedroia's 11th full season in Boston was abrupt, and it ended months in which he played through significant discomfort in his left knee, creating some questions about whether he will be ready for the start of 2018.

"You deal with a lot of stuff all year to get to this point," said Pedroia. "When it ends, it stinks, man. It's just tough. Tough to deal with. That's really all I can say."

Heading into the offseason, Pedroia has never faced more uncertainty from a health standpoint. He had surgery on his left knee after the 2016 season, and it didn't fix the problem.

There's a chance Pedroia will need a more invasive procedure to get back to full health, but that could create questions about his availability for the start of 2018.

"I've got to go get checked out [Tuesday] and go from there," said Pedroia. "I'm going to go talk to the doctors about that. Obviously, we had to try and find a way to do what we did so I could be out there. But if you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time, so I have a lot of things to weigh in with the doctors and figure it out."

This was the first season Pedroia has played without longtime teammate David Ortiz, who retired following last season. Pedroia took on more of a leadership role this year on a team filled with young talent.

Before the offseason could set in, Farrell did what he could to make sure his veteran leader stayed in the game.

"I went out to get Pedey away from Mark Wegner," Farrell said. "Obviously, it was a key moment. Pedey obviously disagreed with the call that was made. I did not argue balls and strikes, and yet that was a little surprising when I was ejected at that point."

Pedroia made a nice diving play at second base, but he didn't impact the game offensively, going 0-for-5. He hit .125 for the series and was clearly hampered by his left leg. The 34-year-old, who is under contract

through 2021, was limited to 105 games during the regular season, slashing .293/.369/.392 with seven homers and 62 RBIs.

"You know, we dealt with a lot the whole year, injury-wise, but that's the cards you're dealt," Pedroia said. "You still have to find a way to play well, and they just played better than us. And it stings."

Red Sox tip caps to Astros' grit, attitude

Quinn Roberts

BOSTON -- In a hard-fought American League Division Series presented by Doosan that saw the Astros beat the Red Sox, 5-4, in Game 4 on Monday, Boston right fielder Mookie Betts may have summed up best what it was like facing Houston.

"We got down early a lot of the times, and when we did, they kept their foot on the gas," said Betts.

The Astros scored first and had 10 or more hits in all four games. The club also homered eight times during the series.

"Very deep. Tremendous offense. Their performance all year long showed that, proved that," Red Sox manager John Farrell said. "They're a quick-strike offense, two-out capability. You're never out of an inning."

Houston hit .333 during the series, and it had a .402 on-base percentage, the highest marks ever in a single postseason series for the club.

The Red Sox were most impressed by the way the Astros came back in Monday's series-clinching game.

"They had guys that have just been killing us the whole series. [Alex] Bregman is swinging a hot bat right there. Everyone in that lineup seemed pretty hot. They're swinging good," Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts said. "We still stayed right in there with them. We had our chances. You've got to give them credit. They fought back, man. Some teams would just give in and give us the win and we could go back, 2-2. They fought back."

Yet it wasn't just the Astros' hitting that hurt the Red Sox -- Houston's pitching staff stymied Boston's bats for three of the four games. All four starters allowed three runs or fewer.

"They did a great job pitching," Betts said. "We also just had to hit some more. We were a little inconsistent."

Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia knows what a threat the Astros are, not just because of their postseason play, but also because they won 101 games during the regular season.

"We're a couple balls here and there, but that team that beat us won 102 games or whatever," Pedroia said. "We were right there with them. We fought to the last out."

****ESPNBoston.com***

Verlander's Astros in ALCS, Sale's Red Sox going home after bizarre bullpen battle

Scott Lauber

BOSTON -- A few days ago, Houston Astros manager A.J. Hinch was asked how he is handling the pressure of baseball's postseason.

"I'm a nervous wreck," Hinch said, smiling and laughing. "Can't you tell?"

On Monday, it appeared that Hinch might not have been joking. Well, not entirely.

Never mind that the Astros were leading by one run in the fifth inning of Game 4 or that they had a one-game edge in the best-of-five American League Division Series or that they wound up winning 5-4 and moving on to the AL Championship Series. Hinch turned ace starter Justin Verlander into a human panic button, bringing him in for his first relief appearance in a 13-year professional career.

"I don't even think since Little League I've done that," Verlander said later from a champagne- and cigar smoke-filled Astros clubhouse.

When Verlander hung a slider that Red Sox rookie Andrew Benintendi launched into the right-field seats for a go-ahead two-run homer, it seemed that Hinch might stand alongside New York Yankees skipper Joe Girardi in this year's club of smart managers who inexplicably lose their minds in the postseason.

But the Red Sox helped take Hinch off the hook in the eighth inning by not giving the hook to Chris Sale, their own ace-turned-reliever. Sale had already thrown four scoreless innings -- a carbon copy of David Price's masterful Game 3 performance -- and Addison Reed and closer Craig Kimbrel were available for as many as nine outs, according to manager John Farrell's pregame plan.

Rather than watching the rest of the game on TV with Farrell, who was ejected in the second inning by plate umpire Mark Wegner for trying to protect Dustin Pedroia in an argument over a called third strike, Sale went back out for the eighth and gave up a game-tying leadoff homer to Alex Bregman.

"I felt good, I felt strong," said Sale, who was a reliever during his first two seasons in the big leagues but was making his first appearance out of the bullpen since May 8, 2012. "I wish I could have got it done."

Said Farrell, "Chris was one day short of his normal rest, so he was in good shape from a physical standpoint. As efficient and as pinpoint as his control was to that point, he was still in good shape, I thought."

The postseason has a strange effect on people's thinking. It can make a good hitter second-guess himself, as Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts seemed to do en route to going 1-for-17 in the series. It can turn Kimbrel, only the game's most lights-out closer all season, into a puddle who allowed Josh Reddick's go-ahead single in the eighth inning and another run in the ninth.

And managers? Faced with the potential rewards and consequences of a short postseason series, there's no telling what might happen, from Girardi's failure to challenge a third strike that was ruled a hit batter to Hinch's using a pitcher in a role he has never played.

"It's very easy to go to the bullpen and leave Justin Verlander out of it," Hinch said. "But our job's to try to win. It's not to try to lose. When it doesn't work out, as long as I'm prepared, as long as I feel like I did the right thing by what our plan was, then I can live with the result. Doesn't make you feel any better when Benintendi's running around the bases. That's a pretty low moment for a manager, probably just under the pitcher. But I'm proud of the fight that these guys have, and quite honestly, it's just a staple of who we are."

Hinch admitted that he was concerned about taking Verlander out of his normal routine as a starter. But he also explained that his interest in using Verlander in relief stemmed from an uncertain weather forecast. Although Major League Baseball officials were determined to start the game on time, the potential for heavy rain later in the afternoon left a strong chance of an interruption. Knowing that starter Charlie Morton might have to come out after a rain delay, Hinch wanted Verlander ready.

"It ended up the rain came on and off again, and once I saw Sale pitch before any sort of rain delay -- [the Red Sox] know the weather better than we do -- there was a little bit of an indication that, hey, we may

have a bigger window than we expected," Hinch said. "And then as the game unfolded and we got the lead, I felt really good about it. And Justin Verlander wanted the ball."

Verlander was lined up to start Game 5, if necessary, on Wednesday in Houston. The Astros would have had lefty Dallas Keuchel on full rest for a do-or-die game, but Verlander's appearance in the bullpen still raised more than a few eyebrows.

It made sense for the Red Sox to use Sale. After all, they had to win Game 4 in order to force a decisive game. They were the desperate team, yet Hinch's move seemed equally desperate.

Verlander blamed the wet mound, not the unfamiliar role, for his mislocated pitch to Benintendi. Before he left a slider over the plate, he bounced a fastball. If he had been making a start, he said he would have asked the umpires to instruct the grounds crew to work on the mound.

"I had a horrible time slipping all over the place, but I was like, 'Screw it. We're in the middle [innings]. Let's just go,'" he said. "Went to a slider, which was probably one of the worst pitches to go to when you're slipping. Hey, you live and you learn."

And if you're Verlander, you shut down the next nine Red Sox batters, even as a sold-out Fenway Park crowd serenades you with chants of "Jus-tin! Jus-tin!"

"It was exhilarating," Verlander said. "It was kind of fly by the seat of your pants. I just kind of figured it out. I was able to get out of that [fifth] inning and reassess and say, 'OK, treat this as a start where you give up a run early, and you've got to keep your team in the game.' That's what I did."

Said Keuchel, "He's that different DNA guy. He's got the makeup for anything, and that's why we got him."

In the end, Hinch was able to breathe easy for all the usual reasons. The Astros' offense was too much for the Red Sox to handle. Boston allowed nine first-inning runs in the four games, with the rotation -- Sale, Drew Pomeranz, Doug Fister and Rick Porcello -- combining to post a 12.71 ERA in 11 1/3 innings as starters.

"The emotion is great on the back end. It's pretty agonizing during the game," Hinch said. "I'm exhausted. Those are my emotions. Managers, we're judged on results, but we work on process. We're prepared. We want to put our guys in a position to be successful. When they're successful, it's the proud father moment. When they're not successful, you take all the blame."

It's enough to render a man a nervous wreck. As the Astros move on to the ALCS, the spotlight on Hinch will be turned up even more. Let's see how he responds.

At season's end, Red Sox mull manager John Farrell's fate

Scott Lauber

BOSTON -- Change will come to the Boston Red Sox.

It's almost inevitable now. A season that began six months ago amid expectations of a championship ended in the rain Monday at Fenway Park. The Red Sox lost 5-4 to the Houston Astros in a thrilling Game 4 of the American League Division Series and were booted from the playoffs 10 victories shy of winning a World Series.

And one of the first decisions that must be made is the fate of manager John Farrell.

Farrell has guided the Red Sox to a World Series championship and three AL East titles (and two last-place finishes) in five seasons at the helm, and he is the only manager in franchise history to win back-to-back division crowns. But he's also entering the final year of his contract, and after the Sox were beaten soundly

in consecutive AL Division Series, ownership and president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski must decide if a new voice is needed in the manager's office.

Red Sox's Farrell tossed for arguing strike call

Red Sox manager John Farrell has been ejected from Game 4 of the ALDS after leaving the dugout to argue a called third strike on Dustin Pedroia.

Farrell was ejected in the second inning of Monday's game for defending second baseman Dustin Pedroia during an argument of a called third strike. After the game, Farrell said he's "confident" that he's the right man to continue doing the job. But he also wasn't willing to engage in a discussion about his future.

"We just walked off the field 10 minutes ago," Farrell said. "I know that we have got an opportunity to assess where we are as a team. I can't begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what changes may be realized. But there's still a lot of good things that are going on here."

Farrell dealt with several brush fires en route to the Red Sox winning 93 games and holding off the charging New York Yankees in the AL East. There were questions about his hold on the clubhouse, particularly after Pedroia appeared to take sides against his teammates during an April beanball war in Baltimore, and Farrell took heat for not apologizing to broadcaster Dennis Eckersley after ace lefty David Price humiliated the Hall of Famer during a tirade on the team plane.

But in the aftermath of their season, several players spoke positively about Farrell while stopping short of openly lobbying for him to return.

"He's done a great job," right fielder Mookie Betts said. "I know no [Red Sox] manager has won back-to-back [division] titles, so it shows he's done a great job in managing personalities and put us in a position to win. He listens to us and he talks with us. [It's] one of those dynamics that he fits well."

Said ace lefty Chris Sale: "There's a lot of room for debate and would've and should've. He gave me every opportunity to succeed. I can say the same for everybody on this team."

And from closer Craig Kimbrel: "He was there for us. He watches us all year long. He knows each and every guy in here. He knows what we're made of. For him to go out every night and put it together and try to put the best team on the field, I think he did a great job."

As usual when a season ends, Farrell addressed his players in the clubhouse when they came off the field, thanking them for their effort throughout the season. It's a standard speech, a bookend to his annual talk before the first full-squad workout in spring training.

Dombrowski could use the latest playoff defeat as a reason to hire a manager of his choice. He inherited Farrell upon taking over late in the 2015 season.

But Dombrowski also has hired only two managers over the last 12 seasons. Jim Leyland has insisted he isn't coming out of retirement, while Brad Ausmus was recently fired after a last-place finish with the Detroit Tigers. It's unclear whether former Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek could be a candidate. Varitek works for the team in an advisory capacity but has never managed.

"I think [Farrell] has done a great job," Dombrowski said before the playoffs began. "He's a tough guy. He's a smart baseball man."

In time, the Red Sox will decide if Farrell is still the right man to lead them onto the field.

***WEEI.com**

Tomase: Was this it for Dustin Pedroia as we know him? Thoughts on a trying season

John Tomase

The 2017 Red Sox season ended with Dustin Pedroia trudging to a stop 20 feet short of first base while the Astros erupted in celebration. In many ways, it was fitting.

Pedroia had just grounded out to punch Houston's ticket to the American League Championship Series. The at-bat came seven innings after he got manager John Farrell ejected while arguing a borderline strike call, 14 weeks after he failed to stop David Price from embarrassing Hall of Fame broadcaster Dennis Eckersley on the team plane, and five months after he selfishly declared, "it's not me, it's them," for all the world to see against the brawling Orioles.

To say it was a regrettable, forgettable season for Pedroia would be an understatement. Long considered a heart-and-soul player, he saw his standing as a leader take hit after hit, much of it self-inflicted. The once loquacious Laser Show came off as sullen, perhaps worn down by years in a spotlight he has never sought.

On the field, he struggled with a chronically bad knee that leaves him facing a series of unsavory options this winter. He intimated that surgery might end his 2018 before it begins. But can a 34-year-old signed through 2021 survive a full year that unfolds like the last month, when he needed constant maintenance just to limp to the finish?

"I'm going to go talk to the doctors about that," Pedroia said. "Obviously we had to try and find a way to do what we did so I could be out there. But if you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time, so I have a lot of things to weigh in with the doctors and figure it out."

Pedroia has never appeared entirely comfortable with Boston's baseline levels of negativity. He consistently faces the cameras because he knows it's part of his job description, but he has generally been a reluctant spokesman, radiating the vibe that he'd rather be anywhere else.

Comcast exposed that side in May when it caught him squirming out of an uncomfortable interview with a petulant, "Can I go home?"

It was just one in a series of bad looks for Pedroia, from the way he threw his organization under the bus when his teammates were throwing at Manny Machado, to his failure to act when Price had made it clear that he planned to ambush Eckersley, to his defiant declaration that, "People say from the outside we don't have a leader. I'm standing right here," which felt belatedly forced after the Eck affair had proven stubbornly resilient.

It continued right through Monday's season-ending 5-4 loss when Pedroia took exception to a borderline strike three call with the bases loaded in the second. He unloaded on home plate umpire Mark Wegner and refused to yield even after Farrell had sprinted to protect him. Eventually, Pedroia's refusal to stand down led to Farrell's ejection.

"I was pretty emotional," Pedroia admitted, leaving unsaid that a veteran should know better.

But such was life for Pedroia this season. His off-field issues only magnified his struggles to stay in the lineup. His left knee bothered him all year, leading president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski to make the rather shocking admission that Pedroia will need to deal with it for the rest of his career. "He has a bad knee," Dombrowski said blithely.

Said knee limited Pedroia to 105 games and took a noticeable toll down the stretch. When Pedroia was thrown out at third to end an inning earlier in the ALDS, the focus was on whether Mitch Moreland had crossed the plate in time for the run to count. The real issue, though, was that Pedroia couldn't move. His knee frequently looked unstable in the field as well.

Pedroia has proven time and again that he's a tough SOB, but at some point the toll becomes too great. He only played six complete games after Sept. 1, batting .242 down the stretch and frequently departing in the late innings.

He followed with another poor postseason, batting .125 (2-for-16) with a pair of singles. His last good playoff series came in the 2008 ALCS against the Rays, when the league MVP batted .346 with three homers. In 26 games since, Pedroia is hitting .204 with zero homers.

His six-year, \$85 million extension kicked in this season, and it's hard to imagine Pedroia finishing it. In fact, as trying as 2017 may have been, here's the ominous question he and the team must ask:

What's to say next year won't be worse?

Craig Kimbrel on poor outing: 'It wasn't quite good enough'

Ryan Hannable

Craig Kimbrel picked a bad day to have one of his worst outings of the season.

Kimbrel entered the game in the eighth inning with the game tied at three and a runner on first base and two outs, a few batters after Chris Sale allowed a game-tying homer.

The hard-throwing righty then issued a wild pitch and walked the first batter he faced. Astros right fielder Josh Reddick then came through with a two-out, RBI single to left-center to make it a 4-3 game. Kimbrel stayed in the game for the ninth and he allowed a two-out double to pinch-hitter Carlos Beltran to give the Astros a 5-3 cushion.

That proved to be big when Rafael Devers led the bottom of the ninth inning off with an inside the park home run, but because of the insurance run in the top of the ninth, the Red Sox still trailed by one. After the homer, they went 1-2-3 to end the game, and the season.

"I came in, had guys on, I wanted to get out of it," Kimbrel said. "Had a good battle against Reddick. Hit the ball where nobody was, scored a run. Then the second inning, I went out there and gave everything I had. It wasn't quite good enough today."

Overall, Kimbrel totaled one inning of work and allowed one run on three hits, while walking one and striking out one. He had only one other appearance of allowing three hits this season and that came on Aug. 1.

In the regular season, the Red Sox were 60-7 in games he appeared in. They were 0-2 in the postseason. Overall, Kimbrel's teams are now 2-8 in games he appears in during the postseason.

"Any time you don't move on in the postseason, everyone's goal is to get as far as you can in the playoffs. Any time you're knocked out, you always want to go back and say, 'What can I do? Can I do this? Can I do that?'," Kimbrel said. "I felt like the ball club, we went out there, got down, came back yesterday, fought hard. In games like this, that's all you can really ask for. Just ask to go out there, give it everything you have. Unfortunately, we didn't get the win."

Although Kimbrel had a very good year, there wasn't always a sense of confidence when he stepped to the mound, mostly because of his occasional control issues.

As for any changes the team could make for next year, Kimbrel said it isn't his job.

"We've got a good team," he said. "What can we do different is not really my job. All I can really do is get back, get ready for the beginning of the season."

Chris Sale: 'It's hard not to be optimistic about this team for the next — a long time'

Ryan Hannable

Chris Sale's first season as a member of the Red Sox didn't end the way he would have liked -- taking two of the three losses of the ALDS against the Astros -- but he knows the team has a bright future.

"I mean, if you look around here and look at the names, we have a lot of guys coming back," Sale said after the 5-4 loss Monday. "A lot of the guys that carried this team are young guys that are going to be here for awhile. It's hard not to be optimistic about this team for the next — a long time."

It was the Red Sox' second straight ALDS loss following being swept by the Indians last year.

The left-hander came into the game as a reliever in the fourth inning with the Red Sox trailing 2-1 and went 4 2/3 innings, allowing two runs on four hits, while not walking a batter and striking out six.

The two runs allowed came in the eighth inning with the Red Sox leading 3-2. He allowed a lead off homer to Alex Bregman and then Craig Kimbrel allowed an inherited runner to score to allow Houston to take a 3-2 lead at the time.

"Fine, I felt good," Sale said. "Like I said, I felt good, felt strong throughout. Didn't get it done."

His 4 2/3 innings pitched were the fifth-most by a Red Sox reliever in a playoff game and the most since Pedro Martinez went six innings in Game 5 of the 1999 ALDS. This game comes the day after David Price went four scoreless innings of relief in the Game 3 win and appeared to give the Red Sox a ton of momentum.

"It's tough," Sale said. "We come here to win. We worked hard. came down to the wire, it was a close game. this one definitely sucks."

It was Sale's first postseason series and now that he's had his first taste, it appears he is ready for more next year.

"This is what we show up to spring training for," he said. "This is what we work all offseason for. Ups and downs all over the country. This is what we live for. This is what we are here for. Take a little time off, get back to the drawing board and make another run at it next year."

John Farrell backs decision to leave Chris Sale in game for 8th inning

Ryan Hannable

You knew there would be a decision somewhere in the game to be second-guessed, and it came leading into the eighth inning.

With the Red Sox leading the Astros 3-2, Chris Sale had already gone four scoreless innings of relief on 65 pitches and setup man Addison Reed was ready in the bullpen.

Instead of going with Reed, Sale stayed in the game, but the move didn't pay off as Alex Bregman hit a solo homer to lead off the inning to tie the game at three. Three batters later, Sale was removed from the game, but closer Craig Kimbrel allowed an inherited runner to score and the Astros took a 4-3 lead. Eventually, they held on for a 5-4 win to eliminate the Red Sox.

After the game, manager John Farrell, who was ejected in the second inning, defended the decision to keep Sale in the game.

"Yeah, considered [a right-hander], recognizing where what his power numbers are and his splits are left, right, and not taking anything for granted," Farrell said. "We wanted to be left-handed through the bottom part of that order, particularly the reverse splits of [Yuli] Gurriel, and as well as he's been swinging the bat this series, 2-1 changeup stayed in the middle of the plate."

"I felt like we were in a good position," he added.

Sale finished the game by going 4 1/3 innings, allowing two runs on four hits, while not walking a batter and striking out six. It was his first relief appearance since May 8, 2012. The six strikeouts in the game were the third-most by a Red Sox relief pitcher in postseason history, and his 12 strikeouts in the series were a Red Sox ALDS record.

"I felt good, I felt strong. I wish I could have got it done," Sale said.

Sale suffered the loss in two of the three losses in the series.

Astros 5, Red Sox 4: The end of the road

Rob Bradford

It was trending toward the improbable. The Red Sox had seemingly found the formula to beat the seemingly unbeatable Astros, heading into the eighth inning Monday with a one-run lead and their best pitcher playing the role of hero.

Then reality hit.

Chris Sale, who had come on to play the role of David Price in the fourth inning, finally threw a bad pitch when it counted, laying in a changeup to Alex Bregman to lead off the eighth and tie things up. Then came the dagger. With two outs and the count full, and closer Craig Kimbrel asked to get the inning's last out, Josh Reddick lined a single into left field that scored pinch-runner Cameron Maybin with the eventual game-winner.

The Red Sox' two best pitchers had allowed the American League's best offense to get the better of them. The result was a 5-4, Game 4 win for the Astros, and the end of the Sox' season.

The way things were shaping up prior to the eighth inning offered the foundation for a pretty good story. This team that had been absolutely smoked in the American League Division Series' first two games comes back to Fenway Park where they find the formula on how to beat Houston: Hit a few home runs and have your ace starters come in to carry the day in relief. Sunday it was Rafael Devers and David Price. This time Andrew Benintendi and Sale were getting ready to be deemed the heroes.

After Rick Porcello offered three innings of two-run ball to kick things off, Sale was called on to get to Kimbrel. And, up until the eighth, he did just that, replicating Price's efforts by holding Houston scoreless for four innings.

And while Sale was doing his thing, Houston was caught trying to ineffectively play copy-cat. With one out and a runner on first in the fifth inning, Astros manager A.J. Hinch replaced starter Charlie Morton with Justin Verlander. Verlander had never pitched out of the bullpen in his entire career, and it showed. While being showered with chants of "Justin" (his first name) and "Upton" (his fiance's last name), the Astros ace hung a 2-2 slider that Benintendi deposited into the right field bleachers.

The home run was seemingly all the Red Sox would need considering Sale's effectiveness, and the looming presence of Sale. It wasn't.

With Gary DiSarcina serving as the Red Sox' manager due to John Farrell's second-inning ejection, the decision was made to send Sale out for the eighth despite the fact Addison Reed had been warming up and the Sox' lefty was at 68 pitches four days after totaling 100 in Game 1.

It didn't work out.

Kimbrel wouldn't make it out of the ninth inning without allowing one more run, giving up a two-run RBI Carlos Beltran. That would prove important.

As they have done for much of the season, the Red Sox mustered a comeback, starting with Rafael Devers' inside-the-park home run to leadoff the ninth inning against Houston closer Ken Giles. But after a ground out from Christian Vazquez, strikeout by Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia's ground out to second the game was over, and so was the season.

Red Sox notes: Pedroia says fixing knee would be long recovery

Evan Drellich

BOSTON — Dustin Pedroia made the final out of the Red Sox' season on Monday in Game 4 of the American League Division Series. Just what kind of Pedroia the Sox will have next year remains to be seen. He's going to get his bothersome left knee evaluated on Tuesday, wasting no time, and surgery appears an option.

"I've got to go get checked out tomorrow and go from there," Pedroia said. "I'm going to go talk to the doctors about that. Obviously, we had to try and find a way to do what we did so I could be out there. But if you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time, so I have a lot of things to weigh in with the doctors and figure it out."

- Chris Young, Mitch Moreland, Addison Reed, Eduardo Nunez and Fernando Abad are the most notable Red Sox free agents.

- Astros manager A.J. Hinch brought in a pitcher who immediately gave up a go-ahead home run in two straight games. But his plan worked out. In his mind, Chris Sale was tiring by the time the eighth inning rolled around.

"The emotion is great on the back end," Hinch said. "It's pretty agonizing during the game and we're pretty exhausted. But what an emotional day for us. Obviously, it was a big game. You got a lot of different things working throughout the whole game, really from the very beginning. Was it going to rain, was it not going to rain, the two big boys, [Chris] Sale and [Justin] Verlander both get into the game, everybody did well. Nobody really wanted to concede the game.

"In the eighth inning, the [Alex] Bregman homer was really something that was very emotional for our dugout. I think that Chris Sale had pitched so well for the entire stretch, we did feel like he was tiring a little bit. But that doesn't make him easier to hit. So our guys just hung in there the whole time. We had a ton of opportunities early. So to be able to get back in the game, even though it was a one-run game. Was pretty emotional. Our dugout woke up."

Why did Sale stay in? Here's what John Farrell had to say.

"Considered [putting in a righty], recognizing where what [Bregman's] power numbers are and his splits are left, right, and not taking anything for granted," Farrell said. "We wanted to be left-handed through the bottom part of that order, particularly the reverse splits of [Yuli] Gurriel, and as well as he's been swinging the bat this series, 2-1 changeup stayed in the middle of the plate."

*** *The Boston Sports Journal***

McAdam: Postseason (again) reveals some uncomfortable truths about Red Sox

Sean McAdam

There was fight, yes, and for a time Monday in the middle innings, with Chris Sale chewing up the Houston Astros and spitting them out, there was reason to believe that, late start and all, these Red Sox were going to push things back to Houston.

Then, there would be tales of 0-2 comebacks in 1999 and 2003, and the Astros would have to answer lots of question, the first of which might have been: Is this going to be like 2015 all over again, when you allowed Kansas City to come back and steal the ALDS?

But hope began to wash away in the eighth. Sale, nearly perfect through his first four innings, surrendered a homer and the lead. Craig Kimbrel, who replaced him, couldn't maintain the tie, then made things worse with another run allowed in the ninth.

An inside-the-park homer by Rafael Devers in the bottom of the ninth electrified the ballpark for one last time in 2017, but it proved to be little more than a going-away present, a parting gift for the season that wasn't.

In a predictably downcast clubhouse, the Red Sox seemed somehow stuck in between celebrating their mettle in the last two games and acknowledging that they weren't good enough.

"Obviously, every team's goal is to go as far as you can in the playoffs and win the World Series," said Kimbrel, who allowed an inherited runner to score in the eighth, then allowed a run entirely of his own doing in the ninth. "Any time you get knocked out, you always go back (and ask), 'What could I do (differently)? Did I do this? Did I do that?'"

"I felt like this ballclub, we got two games down and we came back (Sunday) and fought hard and came back today and fought hard. In games, that's all you can really ask your team for – to go out there and give everything they had."

If we're grading, that's an 'A' for effort, but an 'F' for execution. And frankly, effort is the lowest of expectations to meet.

If one win in a best-of-five series is supposed to represent progress over a year ago – when they were ignominiously swept aside in three-straight by the Indians – then perhaps the standards have slipped. Not only weren't the 2017 Red Sox good enough to make a long run into October – for the second year in a row, they barely got out of the starter's gate.

Something is amiss. The same team which the last two seasons in a row captured first in a highly competitive division somehow seems to shrivel in the postseason. Is it talent? Leadership? Some other intangible?

"(I think we're) very close," said Dustin Pedroia, when asked how close the Sox are to being where they want to be. "A couple of balls here and there, that's it. The team that beat us won 101 games and we were right there with them. We fought to the last out. It's just part of it, but it's the part that hurts the most.

"You work so hard together and go through so much, and to come up short, it hurts."

Billy Beane has long said it's dangerous to read too much into postseason performance because the results carry a degree of randomness. And he's right. Go back to 2004, and if Dave Roberts is a millisecond slower and tagged out, the comeback doesn't happen. That's a perfect – and locally, the most obvious – example of how from small things, sometimes big things come.

A three-game losing streak in June or July barely merits notice, while a three-game losing streak in October can end a season.

But that's the point of the postseason, to separate the great from the merely good. And for two straight Octobers, the Red Sox have come up woefully short.

When you stare at the inability of the team's core to produce in the postseason, does that suggest they're not good enough, or only that they picked a bad time to underperform?

Over the last two post-seasons, Xander Bogaerts hit .138, Jackie Bradley Jr. hit .160 and Mookie Betts hit .269. As all three build service time, does their lack of production in the playoffs suggest their far better numbers in the regular season are somehow fraudulent, or at least misleading? Does it make the Red Sox think twice about trying to extend one or all of them?

And what of the vaunted Red Sox rotation, which was good enough to finish with the fourth-best ERA (4.06) in the league, just a shade behind the No. 3 Astros (4.03) and No. 2 Yankees (3.98), but somehow never recorded a single one-two-three inning in the postseason and posted a ghastly 12.70 ERA while managing 11.1 innings pitched in four games?

The same applies to Kimbrel, who appeared otherworldly over six months, but was substandard in Game 4 when only the season was on the line.

"We just weren't good enough," concluded Pedroia, an obvious enough point to anyone who watched over the last week.

Now comes the hard part: What to do about it?

Pedroia avoids ejection, but knee remains a question mark; Devers goes deep again

Sean McAdam

In this era of video replay and challenges, arguments with umpires are almost a thing of the past, but in the final game of their season, the Red Sox had themselves a big one Monday.

In the second inning, with the bases loaded and one out, Dustin Pedroia was rung up on a called third strike by home plate umpire Mark Wegner and made his displeasure well-known.

"I just know in my first at-bat, he gave me a fastball off the plate away – a lot off – so I was under the assumption that you're not going to give in off the plate," said Pedroia. "But it's part of the game. Obviously, you're trying to compete and (Houston starter Charlie Morton) has good stuff, so it makes it difficult to compete when you're trying to cover that much (of the plate)."

Quickly, things escalated between Wegner and Pedroia, and John Farrell dashed from the dugout in order to prevent his second baseman from being ejected in a must-win game.

Unsurprisingly, Farrell himself got run, but to him, it was a necessary tradeoff.

"I went out to get Pedey away from Mark Wegner," recounted Farrell. "Obviously, it was a key moment. Pedey obviously disagreed with the call that was made. I did not argue balls and strikes, so that was a little surprising when I was ejected at that point. For whatever reason, he felt like...there was nothing derogatory or directed straight at him. I never argued balls and strikes.

"It was a really quick hook. The reason he gave me is, 'I'm not going to have you stand here and yell at me.' I said I'm trying to get my player away from him. It was more important to me that Pedey remain in the game and rest took care of itself."

Pedroia dealt with a left knee injury for much of the season and had two stints on the DL. He faces some additional rehab, a possible surgical procedure and some tough decisions this winter.

“I don’t know yet,” said Pedroia. “I’ve got to go get checked out (Tuesday) and then go from there. I’m going to go talk to the doctors about (the options). Obviously, we had to try to find a way to do what we did so I could be out there.

“If you were to get it fixed, the recovery is a long time. I have a lot of things to weigh with the doctors and figure it out.”

The first postseason for Rafael Devers was an impressive one. He hit a mammoth homer off lefty Francisco Liriano in Game 3 that helped key the only Red Sox win and in Monday’s Game 4, opened the ninth inning by hitting an inside-the-park homer.

Devers drove a pitch from closer Ken Giles high off the wall, and as center fielder George Springer went over to field the ball, the carom sent it careening back toward center. Left fielder Marwin Gonzalez hurried over but by the time he was relaying the ball to the infield, Devers was rounding third base.

“Looking at (third base coach Brian Butterfield), he waved me around,” said Devers. “Then, when I looked back and saw no one was near the ball, I knew I was going to score standing up. I knew I was going to get there.”

It was the 17th inside-the-park homer in postseason history and the first to come in the ninth inning. It was the first one hit in the post-season by a rookie and the first Red Sox inside-the-park homer by anyone at any time since Blake Swihart hit one on Aug. 28, 2015, against the New York Mets.

John Farrell’s future already a hot topic

Sean McAdam

It didn’t take long for the subject to be broached and the question to be asked: should John Farrell, under contract for 2018, return as manager of the Red Sox next season?

Fresh off a season-ending 5-4 loss to the Houston Astros in Game 4 of the ALDS, the issue was raised almost immediately with the manager himself.

Asked if he considered himself the manager to get the Red Sox over the hump, Farrell responded: “Personally, yes. I feel confident in that. I know that we’ve got an opportunity to assess where we are as a team, I can’t begin to talk about what the off-season plans are and what changes may be realized, but there’s still a lot of good things that are going on here.

Pressed further on whether he expected to be back for a sixth season in the Red Sox dugout, Farrell seemed somewhat non-committal: “Again, we just walked off the field 10 minutes ago.”

In the Red Sox clubhouse, there was support from players who vouched for the job Farrell has done in winning three division titles, including the last two in a row.

“I thought John did a great job,” said Dustin Pedroia, the longest-tenured player on the team. “We won the division. There was never any quit in this team. I’m proud of everybody in here. We dealt with a lot and our fight continued every single day. So, I know we didn’t achieve our goals, but I’m proud of how everybody went about their business and showed up for everybody and played to win.”

“He’s done a great job,” echoed Mookie Betts. “No manager (in team history) has won back-to-back (divisional) titles. It just shows that he’s done a great job in managing personalities and putting us in position to win. He listens to us when we talk and it’s just one of those dynamics that he kind of fits well.”

Farrell has frequently come under fire for his in-game strategy, and the final game of the season will likely offer critics fresh ammunition after the manager elected to send out Chris Sale for a fifth inning of relief in the eighth rather than turn to set-up man Addison Reed.

Sale gave up a game-tying homer and was lifted four batters later for closer Craig Kimbrel.

“This is a game where you can second-guess everybody, every inning we play,” said Sale. “We play 162 games, nine innings every time and sometimes extra. So, there’s a lot of room for debate and wouldas and shouldas, but he gave me every opportunity to succeed and I can say the same for everybody (else) on this team.”

Final: Astros 5, Red Sox 4

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox’ comeback train stalled out in Game 4, with the team dropping a 5-4 decision to the Houston Astros in the ALDS, ending their season pre-maturely for the second straight October.

Trailing by two in the ninth, the Red Sox got a leadoff, inside-the-park home run from Rafael Devers. But Astros closer Ken Giles got the next three outs to secure the win and send Houston to the ALCS.

A pinch-hit double from Carlos Beltran in the top of the ninth provided what looked to be an insurance run, but it was very much needed by the Astros after the homer by Devers.

The Sox appeared to be riding a brilliant relief appearance from Chris Sale all the way back to Houston for a deciding Game 5 on Wednesday, as Sale took over from struggling starter Rick Porcello and gave the Sox four brilliant shutout innings out of the bullpen through the seventh.

But Sale was tagged for a leadoff homer by Alex Bregman to start the eighth and allowed a one-out single to Evan Gattis. Closer Craig Kimbrel took over and after a walk and a wild pitch, allowed a go-ahead single to Josh Reddick, scoring pinch-runner Cameron Maybin from second.

Earlier, as both teams deployed their No. 1 starters out of the bullpen, Andrew Benintendi greeted Justin Verlander by driving a slider down-and-in into the right field seats, scoring Xander Bogaerts ahead of him, giving the Sox a 3-2 lead.

After the teams traded runs in the first – with the Sox getting a solo homer from Bogaerts – Houston used a leadoff triple from Yuli Gurriel and a single by George Springer to grab a 2-1 in the second.

The Sox squandered a great chance in the second, loading the bases with no outs, but failing to score.

GAME NO.: ALDS Game 4

WHO: Red Sox (1-2) vs Houston Astros (2-1)

WHEN: 1:08 EST

WHERE: Fenway Park

RADIO: WEEI (93.7 FM)

TV: FS1

PITCHERS: RHP Rick Porcello (11-17, 4.65) vs. RHP Charlie Morton (14-7, 3.62)

BOX SCORE: MLB Gameday

SERIES TO DATE: This is Game 4 of the American League Division Series between the teams, with Game 5, if necessary, set for Wednesday in Houston. The Astros pummeled the Sox in the first two games

in Houston by identical scores of 8-2, but the Red Sox rebounded Sunday as the bats came alive in a 10-3 victory.

IN-GAME OBSERVATIONS:

Thrilling inside-the-park home run for Rafael Devers, his second homer in the last two games. Motored around the bases pretty well as the ball took a weird carom off the wall and landed back in center, with no out there to back up.

Kimbrel is not sharp and that's put the Red Sox behind again. He issued a walk, threw a wild pitch and a run-scoring single to the first two hitters he faced. He hasn't had a lot of work since the end of the regular season, with an inning of mop-up in Game 2 Friday the only appearance since then. Still, no excuses in the playoffs – pitchers have to be ready to adapt, as Price has done and as Sale did earlier.

Chris Sale leaves to a tremendous ovation, having thrown 4.2 innings while allowing a run on four hits. He's also responsible for a runner. He struck out six and did what Price did Sunday — bridge a poor start to the late innings, keeping things in check.

Sale has returned for the eighth, and it seems like Addison Reed is out of the equation. Kimbrel is warming and would be ready if Sale got into any trouble. Seems like this is pushing it.

This was likely the last inning for Chris Sale, who is at 65 pitches after four shutout innings. Addison Reed is warming and would likely get the eighth. Me? I'd get six outs from Kimbrel, who's plenty rested and available for two innings. Reed's habit of giving up solo homers (in a one-run game) would scare me if I'm the Sox.

This is the first relief appearance in the major leagues ever for Justin Verlander — and it's showing. Verlander is commanding like he normally does, with fewer than 50 percent strikes on his first 21 pitches, leading to two walks among the first five hitters faced. It could take a while for him to settle in.

Well. Andrew Benintendi, who had done virtually nothing in this series, makes up for it with just one swing — driving a darting slider into the right field box seats for a two-run homer and a 3-2 Red Sox lead. Prior to that, he had been 3-for-14, with all three hits singles and one of them of the infield variety. He impressed Cleveland last year as a rookie in the ALDS and was the Red Sox' leading hitter in those three games and the Indians were impressed with his approach and calm at-bats. It took a little while for him to make an impact with his bat this October, but he sure did that off Verlander.

Astros clearly saw that Devers had been having a tough time coming in on balls. Yesterday alone, he didn't make two players, with slower, looping throws to first. But Jose Altuve's bunt try was fielded bare-handed by Devers, and with no time to spare, he zipped a strong throw to first to nab him. Impressive adjustment. It seems Devers does better when he just reacts and doesn't have too much time to think.

Chris Sale is on for the Sox in the top of the fourth. Will be fascinating to see how long he goes here, since anything more than an inning or two likely takes him out a Game 5 start on Wednesday.

Mitch Moreland thrown out by a mile to end the third inning.

We're in the third inning of this series and no Red Sox starter has had a three-up, three-down inning to date. Chris Sale faced just three hitters in the third inning of Game 1, but that included allowing a one-out hit, then getting an inning-ending double play. Rick Porcello came close in the top of the third, with two outs and two strikes on Yuli Gurriel. But Gurriel then lined a double over Bradley's head and the "streak" was intact.

A bigger problem than the strike zone is the fact that the Sox had a bases-loaded, no-out opportunity and couldn't get a run home.

For the third straight game in this series, lots of unhappiness with the strike zone and home plate umpires. Both Jackie Bradley Jr. and Dustin Pedroia were unhappy with called third strikes by home plate umpire Mark Wegner, although looking at the MLB GameDay app strikezone, both looked to be right on the edge of the strike zone. Pedroia was in danger of getting himself run by Wegner before Farrell came out and took the bullet for him. He got his money's worth, hanging around after being ejected, then had additional words for crew chief Ted Barrett on his way off the field

A big pitch for Porcello has been the elevated fastball. On the final pitch to Carlos Correa, he threw a four-seamer up and out of the zone which Correa swung through. Porcello has allowed two runs, but having stranded five (!) through two innings, it could be much worse.

Porcello used a slider to fan Brian McCann for the second out and seemed on the verge of getting out of the man man-on-third, no-out jam he created for himself. But when he tried a slider against George Springer on a 2-and-1 pitch, the outfielder drilled it on a line to left, scoring the run

The stolen base by Mookie Betts was only the second steal of the series for the Sox. They had hoped to run more — Houston catchers threw out less than 10 percent of baserunners during the regular season — but Game 2 starter Dallas Keuchel made it extremely hard to run with a good move and in the other games, the Sox haven't had a lot of baserunners. And when they have had them, they've frequently been far behind on the scoreboard, making it difficult to take chances on the bases.

Mookie Betts took a chance in the outfield, and it cost him. Betts went diving to try to cutoff a ball hit by Yuli Gurriel, and while he got his glove on it, the ball got by him and rolled toward the warning track. Triple for Gurriel and the Astros are threatening again.

Before the game, John Farrell talked about taking Xander Bogaerts out of the leadoff spot, where he had gone 0-for-14 for the first three games of the series. Dropping him to second, Farrell thought, was a chance to take some pressure off and allow him to watch a Pedroia at-bat. Seemed to work, when Bogaerts homered into the Sox bullpen for his first hit of the post-season.

An inauspicious start for Rick Porcello, who's having difficulty with his command in the early going. He's issued two walks and hit a batter through the first five hitters. But he limited the damage to a run, which, incredibly, represents the first time this series that the Astros didn't score multiple runs in the first.

PRE-GAME NOTES:

MLB officials have informed the teams that the plan is to start on time at 1:08 p.m. "It's likely we'll be in some dampness for the first couple of hours," said John Farrell. "Some mist, light rain (is expected). The forecast says that moderate rain is more 3:30, 4:00. But everyone wants to get this game underway. I think if there was a forecast that suggested there would be a stoppage early in the afternoon, we wouldn't begin this one. There is the potential that the game might be interrupted but that wouldn't be until later on. Major League Baseball's effort and everyone else involved is to get the game underway."

David Price, who tossed four shutout innings with 57 pitches Sunday, told Farrell this morning that he was available again. "He feels good," said Farrell. "I know that he wants to be available, which is impressive in its own way. He far exceeded initial thoughts (Sunday) with a great performance on his part. At some point, you have to factor in longer-term concerns, and that's health. (It's going to depend) on some conversations (closer to game-time) to be had yet. But I know he felt good coming out of (Sunday). Everything in my fabric says to stay away for the obvious reasons — and that would be the preference."

Farrell added that both Chris Sale — the projected Game 5 starter — and Joe Kelly — who pitched Sunday — were both available today.

The manager said he could, if necessary, use Craig Kimbrel for six outs.

Farrell dropped Xander Bogaerts from the leadoff spot to No. 2 in the lineup. Bogaerts is 0-for-14 in the series so far, so Dustin Pedroia has been elevated from No. 2 to first. "In talking with both guys," said Farrell, "the fact that Pedey can give an at-bat to unfold in front of Bogey, to allow him to settle in at the start of the game, (is a positive)."

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Porcello had a very uneven year and tied for the American League lead in homers allowed. That's a concern against a powerful Houston lineup that has hit seven homers in the first three games. Once again, the Red Sox will have an "all-hands-on-deck" mentality when it comes to pitchers, though it's unlikely they'll have David Price available after he threw 57 pitches in the Game 3 win. The Boston offense slumbered awake Monday and scored as many runs in the first three innings as they had in their previous 18. They can only hope that that was the beginning of an offensive turnaround.

STAT OF NOTE: In Division Series play, the Red Sox are 11-4 (.733) at Fenway Park

LINEUPS

RED SOX

Pedroia 2B
Bogaerts SS
Benintendi LF
Betts RF
Moreland 1B
Ramirez DH
Devers 3B
Vazquez C
Bradley Jr. CF

ASTROS

Springer CF
Reddick RF
Altuve 2B
Correa SS
Gonzalez LF
Bregman 3B
Gurriel 1B
Gattis DH
McCann C

****NESN.com***

Red Sox Wrap: Boston's Bullpen Falters Late In Game 4 Loss To Astros

Adam London

The Boston Red Sox's bid for an American League Division Series comeback came up just short.

The Red Sox were six outs away from forcing a Game 5 against the Houston Astros, but the 2017 AL East champions ultimately fell 5-4 on Monday afternoon at Fenway Park.

Boston was well-positioned for victory when it held a 3-2 advantage in the eighth inning, but its bullpen struggles late in the ballgame allowed the Astros to surge for a series-clinching win.

With the loss, the Red Sox's 2017 season is over, while Houston moves on to the ALCS.

Here's how it all went down:

GAME IN A WORD

Deflating.

The Red Sox were riding high when Andrew Benintendi smacked a go-ahead, two-run home run in the sixth inning. Unfortunately for Boston, the rookie's blast wasn't enough to extend the series.

IT WAS OVER WHEN...

Rafael Devers made things exciting when he boomed an inside-the-park home run to bring Boston within one. That would be the only excitement in the ninth inning, though, as Astros closer Ken Giles eventually shut the door.

ON THE BUMP

— The Astros' first-inning prowess continued against Boston's starter Rick Porcello. George Springer led off the game with a ringing double and advanced to third on a wild pitch. After a Josh Reddick walk, Jose Altuve grounded into a double play which plated Houston's first run of the game.

Porcello got off to a less-than-ideal start in the second inning, as Yuli Gurriel led off the frame with a triple down the right-field line. Porcello responded by striking out Evan Gattis and Brian McCann, but Springer ruined the right-hander's chance of a clean inning by lacing an RBI single to left. Houston then loaded the bases, but Porcello got Carlos Correa to go down on strikes to end the messy inning.

The third inning was much kinder to Porcello, as he tossed a scoreless frame despite allowing a double to Gurriel. But after three laborious innings of work, Porcello's day was done.

— Chris Sale entered in the fourth and posted the Red Sox's first 1-2-3 inning of the game with a strikeout. The left-hander responded with three more scoreless frames in which he struck out five while only allowing three base runners. Sale came out for his fifth inning in the eighth, but Alex Bregman spoiled the lefty's outing when he led off the frame with a game-tying solo blast. Sale recorded two outs in the inning before being yanked from the game.

— Craig Kimbrel entered with two outs and a runner on first in the eighth. After Springer drew a walk, Reddick ripped a seeing-eye RBI single to give the Astros a 4-3 lead. Kimbrel stayed on in the ninth and allowed one run on two hits before being pulled with two outs in the inning.

— Addison Reed logged the final out of the ninth.

IN THE BATTER'S BOX

— Benintendi (2-for-4) provided the big hit of the afternoon, a go-ahead, two-run home run in the sixth inning. — Devers went 2-for-3, including an inside-the-park home run in the ninth inning.

— Hanley Ramirez continued to be Boston's best hitter in the postseason, posting a 2-for-4 line.

— Xander Bogaerts (1-for-3) clubbed a solo blast in the first inning.

— Mitch Moreland went 1-for-3 with a double.

— Mookie Betts reached base via single.

— Dustin Pedroia, Christian Vazquez and Jackie Bradley Jr. all went hitless in the game.

****The USA Today***

Promising season ends with bitter taste for Boston Red Sox

Maureen Mullen

BOSTON — It was a season that started out with so much promise — and even higher expectations. Acquiring left-hander Chris Sale from the Chicago White Sox in December in exchange for four prospects was supposed to deliver the ultimate prize to the Boston Red Sox.

Adding the perennial Cy Young Award top-six finisher to David Price, the 2012 American League Cy Young winner, and Rick Porcello, the reigning AL Cy Young winner, would give the Red Sox a big three at the top of their rotation unlike many others in baseball. Combine that with a solid bullpen, anchored by closer Craig Kimbrel, one of the best at his job, and an offense that might not be as potent as 2016 but would still be productive, and the Red Sox would be nearly impossible to beat.

That was the plan, but plans don't always turn out the way they're engineered.

Porcello had a dismal season, finishing 11-17, leading the majors in losses and with the most homers allowed, 38. Price missed 93 games to two stints on the disabled list and ended the season working out of the bullpen (where he performed admirably, including his brilliant performance in Boston's Game 3 American League Division Series win over the Houston Astros). And Sale — who was the leading Cy Young candidate for much of the year — faltered late in the season.

Boston's flaws showed up in their 5-4 Game 4 ALDS loss to the Astros on Monday afternoon at Fenway Park.

Manager John Farrell was gone in the second inning of Game 4, ejected by home plate umpire Mark Wegner while protecting Dustin Pedroia from a similar fate after arguing a called third strike.

Related: Astros win intense Game 4 to advance to first AL Championship Series

More: Cubs come back to edge Nationals in Game 3, take 2-1 NLDS lead

More: Dodgers on Chase Field pool party: 'That won't happen'

Sale entered in relief in the fourth and was excellent — until he wasn't, giving up a game-tying homer to Alex Bregman to lead off the eighth. Kimbrel replaced him later in the inning and allowing an inherited runner to score, before giving up another run in the ninth, which ended up being the difference in the game.

Now the Red Sox head home for the winter, left to speculate on what they could have done differently. It's a familiar situation for them. Winning the AL East two consecutive seasons — and finishing with the same record both years — they were bounced from the postseason in the first round both times, swept by the Cleveland Indians in the ALDS last season.

Farrell will have a lot of questions to answer, including what the team needs to get over its postseason hump — and if he is the manager who can lead them in that direction.

“Personally, yes, I feel confident in that,” Farrell said. “I know that we have got opportunity to assess where we are as a team. I can't begin to talk about what the offseason plans are and what the changes may be realized, but still there's a lot of good things that are going on here.

“Extremely proud for the way we went out and worked, the way we, I think were a very competitive team throughout. We won a lot of baseball games. You win the division, that's, I think, a major accomplishment.

We didn't meet all of our goals, that's obvious by the ending here today. But we have seen some really good young players continue to develop. We had a number of challenges thrown our way from individual injuries to performance, but as a team, they stuck together. They care for one another and they fully compete right to the end. The resiliency we talked about, but this is a very competitive, close-knit team.”

Sale worked out of the bullpen in Game 4 for the first time since May 8, 2012, while with the Chicago White Sox against the Indians. He took the loss in Game 4, giving him two of the team’s three losses in the series. It was his first postseason experience since the White Sox drafted him with the 13th overall pick in 2010.

“This is what we show up to spring training for,” he said. “It’s what we work all offseason for. Ups and downs, all around the country. This is what we live for. This is what we’re here for. Take a little time off, get back to drawing board and make another run at it next year.”

Asked about the criticism Farrell has faced most of the season — with likely more ahead after this loss — Sale replied:

“This is a game that’s second-guessed for anything, any inning, every pitch, every move. There’s a lot of room for debate and woulda, shouldas. But he gave me every opportunity to succeed and I can say the same for everybody on this team.”

Pedroia, the team’s longest-tenured player, made the final out of the season, grounding out to second base.

“There was never any quit in this team,” he said. “I’m proud of everybody in here. We dealt with a lot. ... We didn’t achieve our goals. But I’m proud of how everybody went about their business, and showed up for everybody and played to win.”

For some, it was too soon to answer those long-term, big-picture type of questions.

“Well, 2018, I need to process this loss, right,” shortstop Xander Bogaerts said. “Oh, man, I can maybe answer that in a few more days. But the team that we had this year was a fun one, great character.”

With that, Bogaerts wished the assembled media a good offseason, and the Red Sox were on to theirs.

****The Houston Chronicle***

Astros clinch first ALCS berth with comeback win over Red Sox

Jake Kaplan

BOSTON - The Fenway Park crowd fell silent as Josh Reddick rounded first base in the eighth inning Monday afternoon. In the same half-inning Alex Bregman got to the Boston Red Sox best starter, Reddick got to their best reliever.

On the eighth pitch of an at-bat against elite closer Craig Kimbrel, Reddick smacked a 99 mph fastball the other way and into left field. It scored Cameron Maybin, who represented the go-ahead run in a come-from-behind 5-4 victory that punched the Astros' ticket to their first American League Championship Series.

Reddick and Bregman played the heroes for the Astros, fueling a two-run eighth that decided Game 4. They bailed out Justin Verlander, who in his first career relief appearance allowed a go-ahead, two-run homer to Andrew Benintendi, and manager A.J. Hinch, who made the bold decision to deploy his ace in the middle of the fifth inning.

The Houston Astros advanced to the ALCS after defeating the Boston Red Sox in Game 4 of the Division Series on Monday.

Verlander gave the Astros eight outs in relief after Charlie Morton walked a tightrope for most of his 4 1/3 innings. Hinch called on closer Ken Giles for the six-out save, and Giles delivered.

Beginning Friday, the Astros will play the Cleveland Indians or the New York Yankees, who play a decisive Game 5 of their ALDS on Wednesday night.

Red Sox ace Chris Sale had pitched four scoreless innings when Bregman took him deep over the Green Monster to lead off the eighth. It was Bregman's second homer of the series against Sale, who started Game 1 for the Red Sox.

Evan Gattis sliced a one-out single before he was replaced by Maybin. George Springer worked a two-out walk to set the stage for Reddick, who fouled off our pitches, including a 90 mph curveball, before he delivered the hit that propelled the Astros to their first league championship series since 2005.

Carlos Beltran drove in an insurance run off Kimbrel in the ninth with a two-out, pinch-hit double off the Green Monster. It loomed large when Rafael Devers led off the bottom of the frame with an inside-the-park home run that caromed off the Green Monster.

Monday's game, played amid a light rain, began as a matchup between middle-of-the-rotation starters Morton and Rick Porcello but evolved into a battle between aces. Before Hinch tabbed Verlander for his first ever relief appearance, Boston deployed their would-have-been Game 5 starter in Sale in an attempt to preserve their season.

Sale, who figures to finish first or second in AL Cy Young Award voting, was filthy. The lanky, hard-throwing lefthander allowed only two hits in his first four innings. Leaning on a fastball he ran up to 99 mph and his wipeout slider, he struck out six without issuing a walk.

Verlander didn't give up another hit after his first but the one changed the complexion of the game. Benintendi was the first batter Verlander faced after Hinch summoned him to replace Morton with a runner on first base and one out. The pitch Benintendi deposited in the right field seats was an 87 mph slider in a 2-and-2 count.

After the Astros two-run eighth, Hinch replaced Verlander with Giles. Giles retired the side in order in the eighth. After the inside-the-park homer, Giles settled back in. He induced a groundout to Bregman from Christian Vasquez and struck out Jackie Bradley to set up a final at-bat against Dustin Pedroia. Pedroia worked a full count before grounding out to second baseman Jose Altuve.

*** *Associated Press***

Astros beat Red Sox 5-4 in Game 4, advance to ALCS

BOSTON — The Houston Astros poured back onto the field after advancing to their first AL Championship Series, posing for pictures with the Green Monster as a backdrop before a few players bellyflopped in the puddles in the infield dirt.

No matter, they were already soaked from celebratory beer and sparkling wine.

"Both teams were throwing their guys, and that's what you live for," Houston third baseman Alex Bregman said on Monday after Justin Verlander came out of the bullpen to beat Chris Sale in an aces-turned-relievers role reversal and helped the Astros eliminate the Red Sox in four games with a 5-4 victory.

"When we saw Verlander run to the 'pen we said, 'Our horse is on the mound, we need to win this game,'" said Bregman, who homered off Sale to tie it in the eighth before Josh Reddick's single gave the Astros the

lead. "That's kind of the whole energy that he's brought since we brought him over here. He's brought an energy with him that, 'Hey, when he's out there, we're going to win.'"

Verlander, who was acquired for the playoff run after spending his first 13 seasons in Detroit, gave up the go-ahead homer to Andrew Benintendi — the first batter he faced — before shutting Boston down for the next 2 2/3 innings.

The former AL MVP and Cy Young winner earned the victory in his first relief appearance after 424 starts in a major and minor league career.

"All the things that you would like to do as a starter, and I was able to do that," Verlander said. "Top to bottom, man, these guys grinded against two of the toughest competitors in this game in Sale and (closer Craig) Kimbrel."

The Astros will open the ALCS on Friday, either at Cleveland or at home against the New York Yankees. The Indians and Yankees will play a decisive Game 5 on Wednesday night.

The Red Sox forced a Game 4 after losing the first two games in Houston, and then took a 3-2 lead in the fifth on Benintendi's homer. Bregman tied it before Reddick's single off closer Craig Kimbrel made it 4-3.

Carlos Beltran added to his postseason legacy with an RBI double in the ninth — an insurance run that became the game-winner when Rafael Devers hit an inside-the-park homer off closer Ken Giles over leaping center fielder George Springer and off the Green Monster toward center.

The 20-year-old Red Sox rookie easily circled the bases before the throw to make it 5-4.

Giles retired the next three batters for the six-out save.

"The two big boys, Sale and Verlander, both get into the game. Everybody did well," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said. "Nobody really wanted to concede the game."

The Astros last reached the league championship series in 2005 as a National League team, and were swept in the World Series by the White Sox. This year's team, wearing "Houston Strong" patches to support the city that was flooded in Hurricane Harvey, is hoping to finish the job.

"The city of Houston is still rebuilding," Hinch said. "It's easy for us to look in the rearview mirror and think that the hurricane is over (but) the rebuild is not going to stop for a long time. ... We want to win for them, we want to win for us, we want to win because we showed up in spring training to try to win a World Series."

Springer and Yuli Gurriel each had three hits for the AL West champions, and Reddick's go-ahead single made up for misplaying a fly ball into a home run in Game 3 to force a fourth game. Reddick got a postgame drenching in the clubhouse while wearing a red, white and blue flag Speedo.

Verlander also beat Sale in the playoff opener and is now 7-0 for his new team. Sale, who had never appeared in the postseason before 2017, pitched 4 2/3 innings, allowing two runs and four hits, striking out six.

"This is what we show up to spring training for. It's what we work all offseason for. Ups and downs, all around the country," Sale said. "This is what we live for."

On a rainy day at Fenway Park — the fourth straight day game — the Red Sox again saw a starter struggle early, with Rick Porcello giving up Houston's eighth first-inning run of the series. The reigning AL Cy Young winner, who led the AL with 22 wins last year and the majors with 17 losses in 2017, gave up two runs in three innings, walking three and striking out four while allowing five hits.

Xander Bogaerts also homered for the AL East champion Red Sox, and Hanley Ramirez had two hits a day after going 4 for 4 in Boston's only postseason win since the end of the 2013 World Series.

SEE YA

Red Sox manager John Farrell was ejected by home plate umpire Mark Wegner in the bottom of the second inning after coming out to argue a called third strike on Dustin Pedroia. The previous batter, Jackie Bradley Jr., had also been called out strikes on a close pitch.

It is the 19th ejection of Farrell's career and his third this season.

INTERFERENCE

The Red Sox ball girl was called for interference when she tried to field Gattis' fair-ball grounder down the third base line in the eighth. Instead of a potential double, Gattis was sent back to first; pinch-runner Cameron Maybin took second on a wild pitch and scored the go-ahead run on Reddick's single.

PLAYING THE SCHEDULE

The teams finished Game 3 before 6:30 p.m. on Sunday but didn't find out until about 11 p.m. what time they would be playing Game 4, because TV wanted to keep the Yankees in prime time. That left the Red Sox and Astros with a brief afternoon window before the rain began to fall, as expected.

The game started on time and was not delayed, but the rain kept the grounds crew busy raking drying agent on the infield.