

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, April 3, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

'Nothing's going our way.' Red Sox lose despite holding A's to 1 run

Peter Abraham

OAKLAND, Calif. — Xander Bogaerts hesitated briefly as he rounded second base in the ninth inning on Tuesday night, remembering all too well what a powerful right arm Oakland Athletics center fielder Ramon Laureano has.

It was Laureano who threw Bogaerts out at the plate on Monday night. But Bogaerts took another chance, believing it was what the Red Sox needed to inject some life into their season.

Instead, a one-hop throw arrived on time, Bogaerts was out, and the Red Sox were 1-0 losers at Oakland Coliseum.

The Alex Cora Era has arrived at its first real challenge. After a joyride 2018 season that ended with a World Series championship, the Red Sox are tied for the worst record in baseball at 1-5 and already four games out of first place.

They were never more than two games out all of last season and that was for 48 hours in June.

"Right now nothing's going our way," Cora said.

On a night where Chris Sale compensated for a worrisome lack of fastball velocity with dozens of off-speed and breaking pitches over six one-run innings, the Sox were unable to back him and dropped their fourth game in a row.

Sale (0-2), Brandon Workman, and Ryan Brasier held the Athletics to three hits. But the Sox never came close to scoring against Mike Fiers (2-1) and a dominant Oakland bullpen.

The Sox have been shut out in consecutive games for the first time since July 17-18, 2015, on the road against the Los Angeles Angels.

There are still five games left on this road trip.

"Honestly, after tonight, I feel better," Cora said. "I feel better because it was a game. 1-0, we had a chance. We competed. ... I know what the record is, but honestly I can go home and get some sleep."

Sale needed 26 pitches to get through the first inning, including one high fastball that Matt Chapman drove over the fence in left field for his third home run.

Sale's fastball topped out at 91 miles per hour in the first inning with an average of 88.9. He then dialed back on his use of the pitch, throwing only 19 more over the next five innings.

Relying on his slider and changeup, Sale did not allow another run and let up only two more hits, both singles.

For the first time in his career, Sale pitched four or more innings and had only one strikeout. The 29 fastballs he threw averaged 89.3 miles per hour, the lowest velocity for a game in his career.

The Sox believe Sale can avoid his usual second-half regression by incrementally building velocity and perhaps that will prove true. But Tuesday it was much different look for a pitcher known for his sizzle.

“I relied on my defense a lot. I had to kind of revert over to my off-speed pitches. It seemed like they were kind of waiting on a fastball,” Sale said.

Sale said it was a function of what catcher Christian Vazquez called.

“That’s the evolution of the game. Even if I threw two or three fastballs in an inning, they were ready for it,” he said. “You see how the game goes, see the at-bats and adjust accordingly.”

Instead of meeting power with power, his method for nine seasons and nearly 1,800 strikeouts, Sale was a craftsman.

“The name of the game isn’t velocity. It’s giving your team a chance to win,” he said.

Cora professed no concern.

“Whatever he had, he did a good job of keeping them off-balance,” the manager said. “We’re trying to get outs and innings. We got six from him; they only scored one. We had a chance to win.”

Bogaerts nearly tied the game when he drove a Blake Treinen slider to right center field in the ninth. The ball hit the fence at the 388-foot mark. A foot more to the left and it would have been a home run.

Instead, it was an out at third as Chapman blocked the bag with his foot and dropped the tag down. Laureano, who has 11 assists in 55 career games, is not one to challenge.

“I’m like, ‘There’s no way he’ll do that again,’” Bogaerts said. “I didn’t see the replay. But once I dove into third, I felt Chapman hit me before I got to the bag. I knew I was out. How can he do that two nights in a row? The next time I won’t run.”

Mitch Moreland drew a walk to extend the game. After pinch runner Eduardo Nunez stole second, Brock Holt struck out swinging.

Cora did not question the decision.

“It took a five-star play to get him out at third,” he said. “The kid [Laureano], he’s a game-changer.”

The Sox missed their other chances, too.

Mookie Betts doubled with two outs in the third before Andrew Benintendi grounded out.

Rafael Devers led off the fourth inning with a single and remained there when Martinez and Bogaerts were retired on fly balls. Devers moved to third when Moreland singled, but Holt grounded out sharply to first base.

Benintendi reached on an infield single to open the sixth inning and stole second. But Devers popped out, Martinez grounded out, and Bogaerts struck out swinging at a low curveball to end a six-pitch at-bat.

Facing lefthander Mike Buchter, Vazquez doubled with two outs in the seventh inning and stole third. But Jackie Bradley Jr. struck out on a half-swing at a fastball. He then slammed his bat to the grass in anger.

Chris Sale is one of baseball’s best pitchers, but was it sound business for Red Sox to sign him long term?

Dan Shaughnessy

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Red Sox locked up Xander Bogaerts and Chris Sale in the last two weeks, committing \$265 million of John Henry's money to a couple of players that would have been free agents at the end of this season. It's a serious commitment that should warm the heart of Red Sox Nation.

I am a fan of the Bogaerts extension, but not so sure about Sale.

Sale delivered six solid innings of three-hit pitching in a frustrating 1-0 loss Tuesday. It was his longest outing since last July 27. The bad news is that he looked more like Jamie Moyer than Randy Johnson.

Sale threw changeups and sliders all night, striking out only one batter and topping out at 92 miles per hour. He surrendered a homer to Matt Chapman in the first. He threw 29 fastballs, averaging 89.3 miles per hour, the lowest of his career.

"The name of the game isn't velocity," he said after the loss. "It's giving your team a chance to win."

True. But the Sox didn't shell out \$145 million for Jamie Moyer. They were investing what they hoped would be something closer to Randy Johnson.

All of this leaves me wondering if the Sox contract to Sale was a sound baseball decision, or perhaps overcompensation for past sins.

Did the Sox let their mistake on Jon Lester rush them into a mistake on Sale?

This is not strictly about Sale's stinkbomb in the season opener, or his diminished velocity Tuesday. This is about committing \$145 million to a pitcher who has thrown a total of 41½ innings since last July . . . a pitcher who spent most of the post-All-Star break on the injured list with shoulder inflammation last summer . . . a 30-year-old pitcher who is throwing 5 miles per hour slower than he was last summer.

Is Sale going to fully recover and resume pitching seven innings per start and regularly cracking 97-98 m.p.h. on the gun? Is he physically sound?

"Of course we would never sign anybody to a long-term deal like that unless we were completely sure that all the medical information was good," Sox baseball boss Dave Dombrowski said last week in Seattle. "Doctors recommended, trainers recommended, MRIs were good, all those things. We were very thorough. You would never do anything like that. We had some of those tests last year, too. So we knew what was wrong. But all that was done again."

Why did the Sox rush to extend this pitcher before the start of the season instead of waiting to see if Sale returns to form?

"If you wait until the end of the year, then everybody has a chance to sign him," said Dombrowski. "In today's present market, he was willing to work with us to stay."

Former Cy Young-winning starter Rick Porcello didn't get that kind of love and his contract is up at the end of the season.

In Florida in February, Henry (who also owns the Globe) made it clear that Sale was the priority, admitting the Sox "blew it" when Lester went into his free agent season in 2014.

When Nick Cafardo asked the owner if he was worried about Sale's shoulder, Henry answered, "He's healthy. He has minor issues. It ended up taking a bit of time because he needed rest at one point. But he hasn't had any significant shoulder issues . . . I think Chris falls out of the norm because he is just such a . . . not just a great pitcher, but a great part of a team that just won a World Series. He had a great impact just being on the bench in the World Series. He is a special player so we would love to be able to sign him, and I think he would as well."

Sale made only two spring training starts against major league teams (part of the Red Sox' plan to save bullets for October), then submitted his Opening Day stinkbomb, surrendering seven runs on six hits (three homers), two walks, and a hit batsman. He did not induce a swing and miss on any of his 30 fastballs.

Tuesday was much better, but it's hard to feel great about one strikeout and 89 m.p.h. from Chris Sale.

"His velocity wasn't there," manager Alex Cora admitted after the game. "The way he did it was different, but he did a good job getting us six [innings]."

Cora and Dombrowski each said they believe Sale's slowdown is temporary and that the lefthander will again become the seven-inning, 99-mile-per-hour guy that dominated the American League. They say Sale will build his strength back up.

Sox fans love Sale. He's tough, he never complains, he ended the World Series by striking out three Dodgers in the bottom of the ninth, and he was 29-12 with a 2.56 ERA in his first two seasons with the Red Sox. He allowed a .196 opponents' batting average in 2017 and 2018.

But his career path indicates that he wears down during the season. His career September ERA is 3.78, easily his worst month. His lifetime September-October won-loss record (including postseason) is 12-18. In the final three months of the 2018 season (including the postseason), Sale pitched a total of 32½ innings, appearing in 10 games (eight starts). His 2018 workload (158 innings) was a career low.

According to BrooksBaseball.net, Sale was averaging 97 miles per hour on his fastball before he went on the shelf last summer. When Sale came back in September, he was throwing 93. In his first two starts this year, he's topped out at 92. Tuesday, he averaged 89.3.

Any player who signs a long-term deal can get hurt. Xander Bogaerts's durability and age (26) make him a good risk. Can we say the thing about Chris Sale?

For one A's reliever, trade from Red Sox started his career

Peter Abraham

OAKLAND, Calif. — When the Red Sox, Tigers, and White Sox put together a seven-player trade on July 30, 2013, the big news was that former Cy Young Award winner Jake Peavy would be joining the first-place Red Sox.

J.B. Wendelken was one of the three prospects the Red Sox gave up to improve their rotation. He landed with the White Sox.

"I remember being shocked when they told me," said Wendelken, who was 20 at the time. "You never expect to be traded. But it was for the better."

Wendelken was traded again in 2015, this time to Oakland. He went into Tuesday night's game having appeared in 24 games for the Athletics and, over the last two seasons, with an 0.86 earned run average in 16 games.

When the Athletics beat the Sox, 7-0, on Monday, Wendelken pitched a perfect eighth inning that included strikeouts of Jackie Bradley Jr. and Christian Vazquez.

"It wasn't weird; just another game. A lot of time has passed since that trade," Wendelken said. "It was an interesting process. But I never lost confidence that I could get to the majors. I was freaked out at first, but once I got traded [to Oakland] it all worked out. It seemed destined."

Wendelken was with Single A Greenville at the time of the trade. It was manager Carlos Febles who gave him the news.

“I remember they told me to stay by my phone,” said Febles, now the third base coach of the Red Sox. “It’s tough to tell a kid that. But I also told him that it means another team wanted you.”

Red Sox lefthander Brian Johnson was a teammate at the time.

“J.B. threw hard and I thought he had a lot of potential,” Johnson said. “It’s nice to see him succeeding now.”

Wendelken made his major league debut in 2016 and is now an important piece in Oakland’s bullpen. One of his best memories of his time in the Red Sox organization was playing with Mookie Betts.

“I knew he would be a great player from the beginning,” Wendelken said. “He has so many different talents. He’s an athlete who can do everything and is a genuinely good dude.

“That was around the time he took off. You knew it would happen. You could tell.”

Still not good enough

The Red Sox completed their first turn through the rotation Monday night when David Price went six innings against the Athletics and allowed four runs on five hits, three of them home runs.

That it stood as clearly the best start of the first five games spoke to how difficult the first week of the season has been for the Sox.

“We needed six innings. I know it doesn’t look great; they scored four. But he gave us a chance to re-set the [bullpen],” manager Alex Cora said. “It was good to see him compete the way he did . . . I do feel he threw the ball well.”

Khris Davis, Ramon Laureano, and Chad Pinder homered off Price. Matt Chapman hit another off Heath Hembree in the eighth inning.

Oakland righthander Aaron Brooks, making his first start in the majors since 2015, allowed two hits over six innings for Oakland and struck out six. The Sox were held to four hits, two by Xander Bogaerts.

“It’s tough for us right now,” Price said. “We’re all going through it and we’ll all get through it together. We’ll be fine.”

Minor matters

Double A Portland announced a preliminary roster that will include third baseman Bobby Dalbec, lefthander Darwinzon Hernandez, righthander Tanner Houck, infielder C.J. Chatham, righthanded reliever Durbin Feltman, and righthanded Denyi Reyes.

Dalbec (1), Hernandez (3), Houck (7), Chatham (10), and Feltman (11) are among the organization’s top prospects as ranked by Baseball America.

Pedroia ramping up

Dustin Pedroia played nine innings of an extended spring training game in Fort Myers, Fla. “He did well,” said Cora, who spoke to Pedroia after the game. “He said he felt fine.” The second baseman, who is recovering from knee surgery, will join Greenville on Thursday. He is scheduled to play Thursday and Friday, take Saturday off and then play nine innings Sunday. “We’ll go from there,” Cora said . . . Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeffrey Vinik, a minority owner of the Fenway Sports Group since 2002, sold his share late last year to a private investor . . . Red Sox president Sam Kennedy and Red Sox Foundation board member Linda Henry will join Mayor Martin J. Walsh, interim Boston Public Schools superintendent Laura Perille, and JetBlue chief commercial officer Marty St. George at Sarah Greenwood School in

Dorchester on Thursday morning to launch a donation of Red Sox caps to 46,000 students and staff at 104 schools.

Red Sox' future coming into focus, but questions remain

Alex Speier

The future of the Red Sox continues to come into focus.

The extensions for Xander Bogaerts (signed through 2025, with an opt-out after 2022) and Chris Sale (signed through 2024, with an opt-out after 2022), and the offseason decision to re-sign Nathan Eovaldi (through 2022) give the team an increasing number of players who are part of the team's future. The uncertainty that loomed beyond the 2019 season — after which Sale and Bogaerts were scheduled to become free agents — is diminishing.

Bogaerts, Sale, and Eovaldi are now part of a long-term picture that also includes David Price (signed through 2022), Andrew Benintendi (not eligible for free agency until after the 2022 season), and Rafael Devers (2023). The Red Sox are assured of a significant degree of continuity for at least three more years.

Yet that doesn't mean that questions don't exist, with one hovering above all others: What does all of this mean for the future of Mookie Betts?

Betts isn't eligible for free agency until after the 2020 season. Still, the reigning American League MVP, who reset the financial bar for players in his service time class by agreeing with the Red Sox on a one-year, \$20 million deal for 2019, is now at least close enough to the open market that the status of his future is a constant conversation not only outside the Red Sox but also inside the front office.

The Red Sox want to keep him. While it's clear that Betts is interested in receiving what he sees as full, fair value, the team is also convinced that he's open to staying in Boston beyond his eligibility for free agency.

That raises the question: What effect do the signings of Bogaerts and Sale have on Betts's future?

The deals for Bogaerts and Sale are hardly sea changes for the Red Sox. In 2020 — the first year of both deals, with Sale's carrying an average annual value (as calculated for luxury-tax purposes) of \$25.6 million, and Bogaerts coming in at a \$20 million AAV — the Red Sox finally have Pablo Sandoval and his \$19 million payroll hit coming off the books. Rick Porcello (\$20.63 million), Mitch Moreland (\$6.5 million), Steve Pearce (\$6.25 million), Eduardo Nunez (\$5 million), and Brock Holt (\$3.575 million) all will be eligible for free agency.

That's roughly \$60 million coming off the team's payroll, and the Red Sox have a chance to lower their payments with some homegrown options (Tzu-Wei Lin replacing Holt or Nunez, for instance, or Michael Chavis or Bobby Dalbec taking the place of Moreland and/or Pearce).

With the Bogaerts and Sale deals, the Red Sox have approximately \$133 million in guaranteed commitments to seven players (Bogaerts, Sale, Price, J.D. Martinez, Eovaldi, Dustin Pedroia, Christian Vazquez) — down from \$159 million in commitments to 10 players (including Sandoval) this year. Even with their recent extensions, the Red Sox have additional flexibility.

In other words, if the Red Sox are comfortable with something approaching their current spending levels, then they will have the financial wherewithal not only to pay Sale and Bogaerts but also to pay the arbitration increases on Betts, Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., Eduardo Rodriguez, and Matt Barnes for 2020.

(Side note: There's also a chance that Martinez will opt out of his current five-year, \$110 million deal. If that occurs, then the Red Sox would have another \$16 million in additional payroll space as calculated for luxury-tax purposes. If Martinez opts out, he would still count as \$6 million against Red Sox payroll in

2020 to even out the \$50 million he'd been paid by the team and the \$44 million calculation of his salary over 2018-19 for luxury-tax purposes.)

That said, there's a question of whether the Sox are indeed comfortable with their current spending levels. According to multiple major league sources, prior to the Bogaerts extension, the Red Sox had been trying to preserve the flexibility for 2020 to give the team the option — not the certainty, but the option — of lowering their payroll below \$208 million next season. Doing so would reset the surcharge the team must pay on all expenditures above that luxury-tax line.

If the Red Sox — who spent more than \$40 million beyond the luxury-tax line in 2018, and seemingly will approach similar levels in 2019 — stay above the luxury-tax threshold in 2020 for a third straight year, they'll owe a base tax of 50 percent on every dollar spent above \$208 million, with additional penalties for higher spending tiers (62 percent tax from \$228 million to \$248 million, and 95 percent on all spending beyond \$248 million).

At a certain point, the penalties become sufficiently onerous that the team may try to lower them. The only way to do so during the current collective bargaining agreement, which runs through the 2021 season, is by going below the luxury-tax threshold in one year to achieve a reset of the rates — following a strategy the team employed in 2017.

If the Sox go below \$208 million in 2020, then they'll reset their penalty rates starting in 2021 — the three spending tiers would be at 20 percent, 32 percent, and 65 percent. The tax savings from resetting the penalty rates can reach the tens of millions of dollars over a couple of years.

“No matter who you are, you have some limitations,” president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said over the weekend, before word of Bogaerts's agreement emerged. “[The luxury-tax implications] are always in your mind. There is a lot, as we go forward, those are things we're always concerned about. We're always not only planning now but looking towards the future . . . There's just so much that's involved.”

Even so, with Bogaerts and Sale under contract, it may be impossible to get below the luxury-tax threshold in 2020 unless Martinez opts out or some of the team's arbitration-eligible players are traded. In other words, not only will the Sox have to pay handsomely if they hope to keep Betts away from free agency, but they'd likely have to pay a premium to do so.

Betts thus wouldn't just represent a \$35 million-a-year proposition in a long-term deal — the team theoretically might have to pay anywhere from a 50 to 95 percent tax rate on part or all of his deal.

And so, even as the Red Sox get a clearer sense of those who will be with the team for multiple years moving forward, questions remain. The team has established anchors in the rotation and likewise has a clear foundation of its position players, but there are variables that remain in play with the future of others — including Betts and Martinez, as well as others who are nearing free agency.

“We've said all along we're not going to be able to sign them all. We're just not,” said Dombrowski. “It's a balancing act right now for us.”

Bogaerts and Sale demonstrated flexibility in their talks with the team to ensure that they'd be part of the team's future. Now, it remains to be seen who else will join them.

Taking a look at the Red Sox' starting pitchers one turn through the rotation

Chad Finn

One full turn through the starting rotation, one victory in five games, and 11 resigned half-turns by those starting pitchers to watch an opposing hitter's latest home run leave a contrail behind it, and yes, it's fair to

call the start to the Red Sox' championship defense either a surprising mess or a misguided tribute to John "Way Back" Wasdin. Probably both.

The Red Sox are off to a 1-4 start, and they're fortunate it's happened on the West Coast while many of us back home were snoozing through these faraway follies. Their late-night story is a simple one: Their starting pitching has been something worse than abysmal.

In five games, Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi, Eduardo Rodriguez, Rick Porcello, and David Price have allowed 26 earned runs in 21 innings. Opposing batters are slashing .351/.420/1.218 against them, for a 1.638 OPS. (For context, Barry Bonds had the highest OPS in baseball history in 2004 — 1.422.) They've allowed 11 home runs in those 21 innings. Their ERA as a group is 11.14. I should probably apologize to Mr. Wasdin. He was never like this.

The result of the lousy pitching is a lousy winning percentage. The Red Sox already have lost more games than they did last postseason, when they went 11-3 to win their fourth World Series since 2004. They did not lose their fourth game during manager Alex Cora's extraordinary rookie season last year until April 22. That dropped their record to 17-4. Good heavens, they're already 2½ games behind the Orioles, and the Orioles should be relegated to the International League.

I know, all of this is a small sample size. With Chris Sale making his second start of the season Tuesday in Oakland, it's possible the Red Sox may even have remedied their issues with what should be an outstanding rotation before they even play a game at Fenway this season.

But there are variables — an extended workload in October, when every starter also came out of the bullpen in a "rover" role along the way, then a resulting limited workload this spring — that might make you wonder whether the ugly small sample sizes might become more frequent than we expected.

Let's take a look at each of the five starters, what happened the first time around, and what should happen going forward:

Chris Sale

First start — 3 innings, 6 hits, 7 earned runs, 2 walks, 4 strikeouts, 3 home runs.

I'm not especially concerned about Sale's velocity in his first start, when his four-seam fastball averaged 92.3 miles per hour in the season-opening 12-4 loss to the Mariners. As Christopher Smith of MassLive.com pointed out, Sale's velocity was in a similar range last April and he gradually ratcheted it up into the summer. I am concerned that we've seen Sale throw more than five innings in a game just once since July 27, that coming in his Game 1 victory over the Yankees in the ALDS last October when he recorded 16 outs. I know starters don't go as deep into games as they used to even a couple of years ago, but Sale seems to have a hard time maintaining his command beyond a couple of innings. That contract extension makes me warier the more I think about it.

Nathan Eovaldi

First start — 5 innings, 8 hits, 6 earned runs, 2 walks, 3 strikeouts, 3 home runs.

In his eight-year career, Eovaldi has a 4.20 ERA and a 3.86 FIP. If he remains healthy over the full season and finishes with similar numbers, he's going to easily justify the four-year, \$68 million contract extension he received after his October star turn.

Eduardo Rodriguez

First start — 4⅓ innings, 8 hits, 5 earned runs, 3 walks, 5 strikeouts, 1 home run.

Seems obvious to me that we're asking too much of him, and have been for a couple of seasons now. His ceiling is as the lefthanded Clay Buchholz, a pitcher talented enough to dominate at times, and sometimes for prolonged stretches, but also a pitcher whose failure to trust his stuff or follow a plan leads to self-inflicted struggles.

Rick Porcello

First start — 2⅔ innings, 6 hits, 4 earned runs (but 9 total), 4 walks, 3 strikeouts, 1 home run.

I'll stick to my standard line: He's a conventional Tim Wakefield, a pitcher who chews up a bunch of slightly above-league-average innings, is an admirable teammate, and exasperatingly, seems to be pitching four of every five games I go to as a fan.

David Price

First start — 6 innings, 5 hits, 4 earned runs, 2 walks, 9 strikeouts, 3 home runs.

Ah, no worries here. We all know he's only good in the postseason anyway.

I suppose in regard to all of this — and probably life in general — we should chill out and welcome the wisdom of Pedro Martinez, who told Sox fans he was not concerned about the early struggles of the starters.

But I'll tell you, if the Sox rotation takes another collective whupping this time around, it couldn't hurt to ask Pedro if he might have another spot start or two left in that right shoulder.

Take that facetiously if you will. You probably should. But I betcha he wouldn't give up 11 homers in 21 innings.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Xander Bogaerts again thrown out by Ramón Laureano's cannon

Jason Mastrodonato

OAKLAND, Calif. — Had the Red Sox not been hitting so poorly in two games at the Oakland Coliseum, Xander Bogaerts wouldn't have tried for a triple against the best outfield arm in baseball.

But because the Sox were on the verge of a 1-0 loss to the A's to mark the second straight shutout, Bogaerts thought he had to try it.

On a blast that came just a few feet from exiting the park in center field, Bogaerts tried to turn a double into a triple with one out in the ninth inning on Tuesday night, only to get gunned down by Ramón Laureano's incredible arm for the second time in as many days.

"I mean, we've got to be honest, we haven't been playing our best these last two games," Bogaerts said. "Obviously our hitting hasn't been the way it normally is. I was just trying to get to third because the chances against that guy (Blake Treinen) with a runner at third are obviously bigger than with a runner at second.

"Obviously, after the result, I wish I'd stayed. But if I can get to third, I'm pretty confident in Mitch Moreland getting me in. That's what I had in my mind while turning second."

The ball bounced off the wall and rolled back toward the infield when Bogaerts hesitated at second base, then turned on the jets and tried for third.

“I’m like, you know what, go for it,” Bogaerts said. “I mean, go for it and trust Mitch coming behind me that he’ll have a better chance bringing me in from third. I was like, just try for it. In my mind, he had no momentum coming in like he’s going to home. I don’t know how he made that throw again. That’s impressive.”

Laureano made a perfect throw that nailed Bogaerts on a one-hopper to third. The A’s center fielder now has 11 assists in 55 major league games, more than twice as many as any other outfielder since his debut last August.

“I’m like, ‘there’s no way he’ll do that again,’” Bogaerts said. “The night before, I mean, he was coming in. He had a lot of momentum. But, I mean, that ball hit and I didn’t even see the replay, but I knew right away once I dove into third, I felt Matt Chapman hit me before I got to the bag, so I already knew I was out. How can he do that two nights in a row? The next time, I won’t run.”

This time it was 28-year-old journeyman Aaron Brooks and the 33-year-old Mike Fiers who held the Sox offense scoreless on consecutive nights in front of skeleton crowds at the Coliseum.

The Sox put runners in scoring position in the third, fourth, sixth, seventh and ninth innings but couldn’t get them in. They left a man on third base in three of those innings. They’re now 10-for-47 (.213) with runners in scoring position after leading the majors with a .289 average with RISP last year.

“We haven’t been playing our best baseball,” Bogaerts said. “We know the type of team we are once we’re going good. And we’re so close, man. We’re so close. Just that one clutch hit. We just haven’t been able to get it. And I know once we get that one, I think we’ll go on a nice roll.”

Chris Sale’s velocity, Red Sox offense concerning in another shutout loss

Jason Mastrodonato

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Chris Sale on the mound Tuesday at the Oakland Coliseum looked nothing like the pitcher the Red Sox have become used to seeing in his two-plus years in Boston.

In a start that was both impressive and concerning, Sale threw six innings of one-run ball despite having a fastball that was stuck in the high-80s. He all but ditched his heater and began pitching almost exclusively with his slider and changeup during the middle innings and still found a way to make it work.

But the start did more to create new questions than answer old ones, and it didn’t end well for the Sox, who couldn’t touch A’s starter Mike Fiers in a 1-0 loss.

Perhaps surprisingly, manager Alex Cora was upbeat after his team dropped to 1-5 on the year.

“Honestly, after tonight, I feel better,” Cora said. “It was a game. One nothing, we had a chance. We competed. It’s not that we haven’t been competing but most of the games we were out of it right away.”

A rally looked possible when Xander Bogaerts smoked one high off the 388-foot mark on the center field wall in the ninth inning off closer Blake Treinen, but he tried turning a double into a triple, and A’s outfielder Ramón Laureano threw him out with a perfect throw for the second time in as many nights.

After taking a 7-0 loss to the A’s on Monday, the Sox have now been shutout in back-to-back games for the first time since 2015.

But Sale’s outing will be the topic of conversation in Boston on Wednesday.

Sale faced only four batters in a scoreless first inning, but his fastballs were clocked at the following velocity: 88, 88, 88, 88, 91, 89, 89, 90 and 91 mph. One of those was a belt-high fastball that Matt Chapman smoked out of the stadium for the game's only run.

Sale hit 94 mph multiple times in the first inning of his Opening Day start then slowly tailed off slowly.

"I saw 92 mph in the fifth or sixth inning," Cora said. "I mean, he pitched. I try to stay away from the velocity thing. Sometimes you get caught up in it and it's like, is he going to be alright? But he gave us six. It was different, but he gave us six."

The velocity never jumped up Tuesday, and Sale almost ditched the fastball altogether. He finished with just 25 four-seamers averaging 89.1 mph, the lowest velocity of any of his 289 career major league appearances. Not once did he generate a swing-and-miss on his fastball. Catcher Christian Vazquez started calling a heavy dose of off-speed pitches instead.

"The name of the game isn't velocity," Sale said. "It's giving your team a chance to win. No matter what you're featuring that day, you've got to get as deep into the game as you can and leave your team a chance to win when you're out of there."

How unusual is that for him? He was averaging 97 mph midseason last year, touching 101 mph, only to average just 90 mph in his final start of the year against the Orioles after shoulder issues ruined his season.

It's not completely out of the ordinary for a pitcher to have dead arm this time of year, especially considering Sale made only two spring training starts.

"I'm still just trying to find it," he said. "Still working on some things with my mechanics and trying to find my space out there. Just trying to get comfortable and find the groove. That's half the battle with a pitcher, especially a starting pitcher is finding a groove and getting comfortable."

Last year, Sale made four spring starts, averaged 93-94 mph in his first three regular-season starts, then averaged 96 in his fifth start of the year and maintained his velocity until the shoulder inflammation became a problem.

"You guys want him to pitch the whole year or do you want him to go out and throw 100 mph right now and not be there for his team?" pitching coach Dana LeVangie said. "He's building. He had a long year last year. He's building up to be the guy he wants to be. He started last year similar, but we're getting to that point, but just not right now."

There was a time in 2013 that Sale had a similar case of missing velocity. That year, he averaged 91-93 mph first four starts with the White Sox then sat at 94-97 mph the rest of the way.

It could be nothing. It could be all part of the Red Sox' plan. They've been saying that it's better to get Sale throwing 98 mph in October than in April. And he was more than capable of getting outs with his slider and changeup on Tuesday night.

That he finished with only one strikeout — tying a career low — also was strange.

But the concern in the clubhouse was non-existent.

"Zero. Zero concern. Not at all," LeVangie said. "He dialed it up when he wanted to. It's there. But he knows how important he is to his team. He can pitch, regardless of the velocity."

At 1-5, the Red Sox have begun their title defense with unsettling form.

Red Sox notes: Early aggression costing pitchers so far

Jason Mastrodonato

OAKLAND, Calif. — The fine line between getting ahead of batters and being too aggressive early in the count has not been walked by Red Sox pitchers.

Entering Tuesday night's game in Oakland, they had allowed a .412 average on first pitches, including four home runs.

The starting rotation had thrown a first-pitch strike 73 percent of the time, highest rate in the majors.

It hasn't worked so far, but Cora doesn't think it's a bad strategy. The Red Sox just haven't executed it very well.

"That's a tough one because we really want them to get ahead," Cora said. "The one yesterday, David Price for example, it was a changeup to Khris Davis, but he cut it to the middle of the zone. That's a mistake. It's a strike but it's not a quality pitch. That doesn't mean because it's a strike it's a great pitch. That one is a home run. The one to Ramón Laureano was a two-seamer supposed to be in, left it over the plate and it was a home run.

"He's not trying to go down the middle. He just missed down the middle. We want them to be aggressive. Aggressive early in counts so we can expand after that. That's the way the game is going. You work ahead then you expand. Down and up, then you get people out. Give the A's credit. Yesterday they attacked some pitches early and hit it out of the ballpark."

Cora preaches the importance of swinging early in counts on offense, but the Red Sox pitchers have been taken advantage of early in counts so far this year.

"I think it's the quality of the first pitch," he said. "If you leave it over the plate in the era we're playing, you guys know it. I like guys (on offense) to be aggressive in the strike zone. If it's there, try to do damage. That's what the game is coming to. It's not the '04 Red Sox or the '04 Yankees that grind out at-bats and try to get to the bullpen. Now it's like, if you can get em early, get em early."

CATCHING CURVE

With Sandy Leon in the minors, Christian Vazquez started behind the plate for the fifth time in six games Tuesday night. Cora said Vazquez's game calling has been OK.

Red Sox have a 7.36 ERA throwing to Vazquez this year. They had a 3.84 ERA throwing to him last year compared to a 3.28 ERA throwing to Leon.

Vazquez has "done a good job," Cora said. "We saw that toward the end of last season. He caught most of the games in the playoffs. He understands pitching coach Dana LeVangie. At the same time, he uses information provided by our analytical team and he understands there has to be balance. Sometimes you feel that a team is doing this and all of a sudden Seattle happens. It's such a different team and different approach compared to last year. You have to make adjustments. It took us a while in Seattle but we finished well with the bullpen. He's been fine. We saw that in October."

ON THE MEND

Dustin Pedroia is about to take another step forward in his rehab after playing nine innings in an extended spring training game on Tuesday.

"He did well," Cora said. "I actually talked to him today. He was four at-bats, three quality at-bats, made some diving plays at second. He said he felt fine. Now the plan is to go to Greenville on Thursday, so most likely he'll go back to back the fourth and the fifth. Saturday off, Sunday he'll play nine and we'll go from there."

STATE OF THE SOX

The offense hasn't been much of a problem. Despite being shut out on Monday, the Sox entered Tuesday ranked third in the American League with 24 runs scored, third with 41 hits and fourth in home runs (six).

But the Red Sox scored first in two of the first five games and lost both of them.

Players on last year's team frequently commented about how important that was as the 2018 Red Sox scored first in 99 games last year, going 74-15 in those games.

"We've got to score some runs, find a way to score some runs and give our guys a lead because when we did that, they shut it down for us," said Mookie Betts.

The bullpen has been one of the few bright spots thus far, with Sox relief pitchers ranking second in the majors with 27 strikeouts entering Tuesday. Matt Barnes, Ryan Brasier, Colten Brewer and Brandon Workman have yet to allow a run in six innings of work.

"The bullpen has made some quality pitches," Cora said.

YANKEES HURTING

The Yankees are beat up and it's not getting any better. Already with Dellin Betances, Didi Gregorius, Aaron Hicks, Luis Severino and Giancarlo Stanton on the injured list, they added another with third baseman Miguel Andujar, who has a small labrum tear in his right shoulder. Reports out of New York indicate that season-ending surgery is a possibility, though the Yankees will let him rest for two weeks before any decisions are made.

ODDS AND ENDS

The Sox entered Tuesday on a three-game losing streak. The 2018 Red Sox never lost more than three in a row, the only MLB team to complete the season without a four-game losing streak. The last two times the Sox started the season 1-4 or worse were in 2011 (0-5) and 2012 (1-4). The 1998 Yankees ended up winning 114 games despite starting 1-4 while similarly opening the season on a seven-game West Coast trip.

The Red Sox teamed up with Mayor Marty Walsh, Boston Public Schools and JetBlue to provide more than 46,000 Red Sox caps to BPS students from Kindergarten through eighth grade. The hats will be distributed on Thursday across 104 schools.

Laureano, who had the wild outfield assist to nail Xander Bogaerts at home plate on Monday, has 10 assists in 54 major league games, twice as many as any other outfielder since his debut last August.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Sox aren't panicking over woeful start

Bill Koch

OAKLAND — When a baseball team is on its way to setting a franchise record for victories and capturing a World Series crown, these types of things generally break for the better.

The close call at home plate is overturned in its favor. The three pitches left out over the plate by its starting pitcher in a given outing are popped up or fouled away instead of being driven for home runs. The relative unknown on the mound for a given opponent performs like the Triple-A pitcher he's basically always been.

The Red Sox currently aren't that team. Xander Bogaerts was ruled out, David Price was punished for every mistake and Aaron Brooks was superb as the Athletics dealt Boston a 7-0 shutout on Monday night.

The venue has changed to Oakland Coliseum, but the result remains the same. The Red Sox scuffled against the Mariners in a four-game set over the weekend at T-Mobile Park and started another four-game set with a thud against Oakland.

"It's five games," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "You're going to go through stretches like this. It sucks that it's early in the season. But yes, we have to pick it up.

"It's not like we're saying, 'OK, we're going to get them whenever.' No. We want to play better. We know that."

There isn't any panic in the Boston clubhouse at the moment, and quite frankly there shouldn't be. This club figures to be far too talented for this to continue, and Price flashed the best raw stuff among the rotation during its first turn. The results simply haven't been there in the early going, and there is certainly some frustration setting in.

"Nothing good is happening right now," Price said. "We'd rather it happen right now than in the last two weeks of September. We'll get through this time and we'll be better for it."

The Red Sox managed a lone real chance against Brooks, who made 57 of his previous 60 appearances in the minor leagues. Bogaerts doubled in the top of the second inning and Mitch Moreland singled to center, forcing Ramon Laureano to come up throwing. Bogaerts was out at the plate and, despite what appeared to be a strong Boston case for a reversal, the call was upheld after a replay challenge.

"I don't know — the call could have gone both ways, I guess," Cora said. "It seemed like we were putting something together and Laureano changed the game with that throw."

Price struck out nine but paid dearly for each of his mistakes, hanging a pair of changeups and missing his spot on a first-pitch fastball to Laureano that strayed up and out over the plate. Khris Davis, Chad Pinder and Laureano each went deep to account for all four runs allowed by Price in his six innings of work. Red Sox starters have allowed 11 home runs through five games, matching a previous record held by the 1955 Milwaukee Braves and the 1978 Toronto Blue Jays.

"I felt like I threw the ball pretty good for the most part," Price said. "I made a couple mistakes and they made me pay for them."

Boston's offense was actually quite productive through the first four games against Seattle, averaging six runs and squandering a handful of chances for more. There were no such opportunities against Brooks, who worked at a brisk tempo while walking just one against six strikeouts. The Red Sox went without a hit after Moreland's single until there were two outs in the seventh, and by then it was far too late to muster a real comeback bid.

"It's just a little frustration, but that's a part of it," said Mookie Betts, who went 0-for-4 out of the leadoff spot. "It's a long season. You go through your ups and downs. It's just one of those times where you've got to continue to fight."

Cora defends his beleaguered starting pitchers

Bill Koch

OAKLAND — It's hard to imagine this can continue much longer for the Red Sox rotation.

Those first four starts in Seattle had to be a statistical anomaly, right? There can't be any way Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi, Eduardo Rodriguez and Rick Porcello are going to be pounded like this for a full 162 games.

That's certainly the feeling inside the Boston clubhouse, and you wouldn't expect anything else from a club coming off its ninth World Series title. Sale, Eovaldi and Porcello — along with David Price, Monday night's starter against the Athletics — were among the driving forces as the Red Sox outclassed the Dodgers in just five games last October. That they reentered the baseball landscape five months later with such a thud was jarring, as the Mariners hammered their way to three victories at T-Mobile Park.

"I'll run those guys out there every time," first baseman Mitch Moreland said. "Our starters are some of the best in the league. Just because it didn't go their way for a couple of games doesn't mean that's the way the season is going to go."

Boston's starters completed just 15 innings against Seattle, leaving the bullpen to cover another 18. Brian Johnson worked three times in the series, unusual for someone designated as one of the club's two expected long relievers entering the season. Matt Barnes and Ryan Brasier, the two co-favorites to serve as the closer, faced a mere seven batters.

"We didn't get innings from the starters, and that's hard to do," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "The only positive out of the whole weekend was the bullpen. They did an outstanding job."

Cora was on the defensive on Sunday after Porcello was tagged for nine runs in a 10-8 defeat. There was one less trip through the rotation this spring for the starters after their extended run in 2018, with the Red Sox coaching staff hoping to keep them fresh this season. Attempting to connect any lack of sharpness due to an absence of work in Fort Myers was an idea quickly shut down by the manager.

"It was the same plan," Cora said. "Whoever is doubting us, what we did this year — check what happened last year. We did the same thing."

Home runs have been the bane of Boston's existence so far. The Mariners slugged eight round-trippers against Red Sox starters, including three apiece against Sale and Eovaldi. Tim Beckham caught up to a pair of Sale fastballs out over the plate and Edwin Encarnacion crushed a changeup at the belt away.

"Most of the pitches were just out over the plate," Sale said. "You get behind guys, you get even in the count, you've got to attack a little bit more."

Johnson picked up the victory on Friday, striking out the side in the bottom of the eighth and giving Moreland a chance to win it with a pinch-hit three-run homer in the ninth. The left-hander pitched another 2 1/3 innings on Sunday, allowing only a Jay Bruce solo homer to right. That's the lone run conceded by Boston's bullpen over its last 14 innings, and the Mariners went 8-for-48 at the plate against them over the final three games of the series.

"I think it's all part of being ready," Johnson said. "I think that's part of your job. It doesn't matter if it's the first inning or the ninth inning. You've got to be ready. People are going to have off days. When they come, just be ready."

*** *MassLive.com***

Chris Sale allows only one run but four-seam fastball averages 89.1 mph in Boston Red Sox 1-0 loss to Athletics; Xander Bogaerts thrown out at third in ninth

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Red Sox ace Chris Sale held the Athletics to just one run in 6 innings but his four-seam fastball averaged only 89.1 mph here Tuesday at Oakland Coliseum.

The Red Sox offense, meanwhile, continued to slump. Boston lost 1-0 to the A's to drop to 1-5 to begin the 2019 season.

Xander Bogaerts tried to extend a 400-foot double off the top of the wall in right-center field into a triple with one out in the ninth but center fielder Ramón Laureano threw him out. The Red Sox challenged and the call stood.

Sale allowed just three hits and two walks but he struck out only one. This marks only the second time in his career as a starting pitcher he has struck out fewer than two batters. It also happened Sept. 16, 2018, vs. the Mets, his second start back from the injured list (shoulder inflammation) when he struck out one.

The lefty threw 25 four-seam fastballs, averaging 89.1 mph and topping out at 92 mph, per Baseball Savant. He added four two-seamers, averaging 90.6 mph and maxing out at 91.4 mph.

He recorded only six swings-and-misses: three with his slider and three with his changeup.

He threw 16 four-seam fastballs in the first and second inning. But he then threw only five four-seamers over the next three innings. He threw four in the sixth with three reaching over 90 mph.

Matt Chapman took Sale deep for a 103.0-mph, 374-foot home run to left field with one out in the first inning. Chapman connected on an 88.8 mph four-seam fastball.

The Red Sox offense did nothing against starting pitcher Mike Fiers who hurled 6 scoreless innings. Mookie Betts doubled with two outs in the third but Andrew Benintendi stranded him there when he grounded out to second base to end the inning.

Brock Holt grounded out to first base with runners at the corners to end the fourth.

Christian Vazquez doubled off reliever Ryan Buchter with two outs in the seventh. He stole third but Jackie Bradley Jr. struck out swinging against the lefty to end the inning.

Boston Red Sox scoreless in 18 innings vs. Athletics, but Alex Cora 'feels better' after Tuesday's loss; 'I can honestly go home and I can get some sleep'

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Red Sox finally received a strong starting pitching performance. Chris Sale lowered the rotation's ERA from 11.14 to 9.00.

But Boston still dropped to 1-5 because the offense failed to score for the second straight game against the Athletics. The Sox lost 1-0 here at Oakland Coliseum.

"Honestly, after tonight, I feel better. I feel better," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said, surprisingly. "Because it was a game. 1-0. We had a chance. We competed. It's not that we weren't competing but most of the games we were out of it right away. And we were right there with them."

Red Sox hitters are slashing .230/.293/.373/.666. The opposition is batting .313 against the starting pitchers. It's been a completely unexpected start to the 2019 season after the club won 108 games and a World Series title one year ago (and has returned almost the same roster).

"The score was 1-0. We lost. I know what the record is, but honestly I can go home and I can get some sleep," Cora said.

Boston went 0-for-7 with runners in scoring position and left seven men on base. There was obvious frustration. Jackie Bradley Jr. slammed his bat to the dirt after striking out with Christian Vazquez at third base to end the seventh.

“There was a lot of slamming bats and helmets,” Cora said. “That’s part of it. ... They have a good pitching staff. They’re throwing the ball well. You don’t want to see that. But obviously we haven’t been in this situation in a year and a few weeks, whatever. It’s what baseball players do.”

Cora also was pleased with the way his bullpen performed. He said Brandon Workman and Ryan Brasier, who pitched scoreless innings, threw the ball well.

Boston Red Sox's Xander Bogaerts tried to extend a 400-foot double off the top of the wall in right-center field into a triple with one out in the ninth but center fielder Ramón Laureano threw him out.

“It’s only the first two series of the season. Yeah, of course we want to play better. We want to win ballgames. But honestly, with the effort today, and the game that was played, I’m OK. We’ll come back tomorrow, try to save the series. Win tomorrow, try to win the next one and move on.”

Xander Bogaerts’ 400-foot double almost left the ballpark with one out in the ninth. Instead it hit high off the wall and Ramón Laureano threw out Bogaerts who tried to extend his double into a triple.

“Right now nothing’s going our way,” Cora said. “That ball should be out. It doesn’t go out. He should be at third and he makes a great throw. So you tip your hat to him.”

Boston Red Sox ace’s fastball was slowest average speed of career Tuesday, but Dana LeVangie has ‘zero concern’

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Red Sox ace Chris Sale held the Athletics to one run in 6 innings, but he averaged the lowest velocity of his career.

The lefty threw 25 four-seam fastballs, averaging 89.1 mph and topping out at 92 mph, per Baseball Savant. He added four two-seamers, averaging 90.6 mph and maxing out at 91.4 mph.

His previous low (minimum 10 fastballs) was 89.8 mph on July 27, 2012 (Baseball Savant).

The Red Sox lost 1-0 to the A’s here at Oakland Coliseum. Matt Chapman provided the only offense when he bashed an 88.8 mph four-seam fastball from Sale 103.0 mph and 374 feet to left field in the first inning.

“Zero. Zero concern,” pitching coach Dana LeVangie said. “Not at all. He dialed it up when he wanted to. It’s there. But he knows how important he is to this team. He can pitch regardless of the velocity.”

Sale dialed the velocity up higher than ever before last June and July. He topped out at 100 mph or more in four starts. But he then pitched just 29 innings during the second half. He spent two stints on the injured list with shoulder inflammation.

It’s likely the Red Sox want him to dial the velocity back this year to stay healthy for a full season and into the playoffs. But does such low velocity raise concern?

“I’m still just trying to find it,” Sale said when asked about his velocity. “I’m still working on some things with my mechanics. Trying to find my space out there. Just try to get comfortable and find a groove. I think that’s just half the battle with a pitcher, especially a starting pitcher: is finding a groove and getting comfortable. We’re still working. It’s a work in progress. But like I said, there’s no excuse. Gotta go out there and find a way.”

Red Sox manager Alex Cora said he tries not to focus on velocity.

“Sometimes you get caught up on it,” Cora said. “And it’s like, ‘Well, is he going to be all right?’ But he gave us six (innings). The way he did it, it was different. But he gave us six.”

Sale veered away from his fastball after the first two innings.

He threw 16 four-seam fastballs in the first and second inning. But he then threw only five four-seamers over the next three innings. He threw four in the sixth with three reaching over 90 mph.

Sale credits catcher Christian Vazquez for recognizing how the Athletics were waiting on his fastball and then for calling more secondary pitches as the game progressed.

Sale recorded only six swings-and-misses: three with his slider and three with his changeup.

Cora and LeVangie constantly check in with Sale (and other pitchers) to see how he feels physically.

“So far, everything’s good,” Cora said.

It’s difficult to believe anything is wrong with Sale’s arm structurally. He recently underwent a physical when he signed a five-year, \$145-million extension. The Red Sox never would have extended him had his scans revealed anything concerning.

But low velocity still make everyone speculate about the true health of his arm.

This marks only the second time in his career as a starting pitcher he has struck out fewer than two batters in a game. It also happened Sept. 16, 2018, vs. the Mets, his second start back from the injured list when he struck out one.

Still, Sale allowed just three hits and two walks. He pitched well.

“Regardless of the number of fastballs or whatever, he has great pitchability,” LeVangie said. “He has great deception. All his pitches work. It’s about commanding the baseball and when he does, he gets people out. He showed it again tonight.”

Christian Vazquez misses friend Sandy Leon but says Boston Red Sox catchers are in ‘good place’ and need to help starters throw fewer pitches in zone

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Catchers Christian Vazquez, Blake Swihart and Sandy Leon competed during spring training for two open spots on the Red Sox Opening Day 25-man roster. But they never let competition come between them as teammates and friends.

Vazquez and Swihart won the spots. The Red Sox outrighted Leon to Triple-A Pawtucket after he cleared waivers.

Vazquez has texted with Leon. Vazquez said Leon is “very positive” and always ready to work and improve.

“Of course, it’s tough. I’ve got Sandy for four years with me here,” Vazquez said. “I know him before that. We played against (each other) in the minor leagues. All leagues from rookie to Triple A. He’s a good friend. A good teammate. Great catcher. But it’s business. It’s part of the game, you know. It sucks. But like I said, it’s part of the game. But we’re in a good place right now. I think we need to adjust a couple pitchers. And we’re going to be fine.”

What was Vazquez's message to Leon?

"I tell him I miss him. He's a good friend and it's always going to be like that."

Leon is known as a tremendous game-caller. Vazquez, who has started five of the first six games this regular season, still is learning. Leon talked with Vazquez and Swihart a lot about game calling in recent years.

"He likes to help everybody," Vazquez said about Leon.

The Red Sox starting pitching staff has experienced a difficult start to the 2019 season. Chris Sale's 6 strong innings Tuesday lowered the rotation's ERA from 11.14 to 9.00. The opposition is batting .313 against the starters.

But don't blame Vazquez and Swihart. Don't call for Leon's return. Remember, Vazquez caught 10 of 14 postseason games last year when the pitching staff posted a 3.29 ERA.

What does Vazquez feel the important thing he and Swihart can do for starters at this point?

"Continue to do our job calling good pitches and trying to get less hard contact," Vazquez said. "I think expand more. I know it's the beginning of the season, but I think we need to maybe pitch more quality pitches not in the zone. Not pitching in the zone so the hitters chase more. And I think that's the goal."

Vazquez said location was the key to success last postseason.

"The pitchers were not throwing pitches in the zone," Vazquez said. "That level in the playoffs, I think the hitters want to do damage in the playoffs. And if you throw a pitch in the zone, they're going to hit it. There's good hitters. And I think we throw more pitches to chase and elevate the fastball and throw that breaking ball in the dirt, they're going to chase more. And I think we're not doing that right now. I think we're throwing more pitches in the zone. There's a lot of homers."

Red Sox starters have allowed 12 homers in 27 innings.

"It's early, but if we can do that (locate better), we'll be fine," Vazquez said.

Manager Alex Cora said Vazquez is doing a good job with game calling.

"We saw that towards the end of last season," Cora said. "He caught most of the games in the playoffs. He understands Dana (LeVangie, pitching coach). At the same time, he uses our information provided by our analytical team. He understands there has to be balance. Sometimes you feel a team is doing this and then all of a sudden Seattle happens. It's such a different team and a different approach compared to last year, although they have different players. So you have to make adjustments. Probably took us a while in Seattle. But I think we finished well with the bullpen. He's been fine. We saw that October."

Cora said Vazquez dug into the scouting reports and the information provided from the analytics department last postseason.

"I've been saying all along. We trust Blake with everybody, Christian with everybody, and before that, Sandy with everybody," Cora added.

Sale credited Vazquez for recognizing how the Athletics hitters were waiting on his fastball and then for calling more secondary pitches as Tuesday's game progressed.

The ace threw 16 four-seam fastballs in the first and second inning. But he then threw only five four-seamers over the next three innings. He threw four in the sixth.

“I think that was just Vazquey knowing what to do and being able to handle a game back there,” Sale said. “I even said something to him after. I said ‘that couldn’t have been easy for you back there tonight.’ He did a heck of a job navigating me through a game.”

Xander Bogaerts thrown out in ninth: Boston Red Sox star says, ‘We haven’t been swinging it the way we normally do. The chances were better if I had reached third’

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Xander Bogaerts’ 400-foot double almost left the ballpark with one out in the ninth. Instead it hit high off the wall and Bogaerts had a decision to make as he rounded second base.

Should he stay put or try to take third base against Athletics center fielder Ramón Laureano who has one of the game’s best arms?

“I was like, you know what? Go for it,” Bogaerts said. “Go for it and trust Mitch (Moreland) coming in behind me that he’ll have a better chance getting me in being at third. I was like, just try for it. In my mind, he (Laureano) had no momentum coming in. ... I don’t know how he made that throw again. But that’s impressive.”

Laureano threw out Bogaerts on the bases for a second straight game. The Red Sox offense also failed to score for a second straight game. Boston lost 1-0 to the A’s here Tuesday at Oakland Coliseum.

“We’ve got to be honest. We haven’t been playing our best these last two games. And obviously our hitting hasn’t been the way it normally is. I just tried to get to third because the chances against that guy (closer Blake Treinen) with a runner at third are obviously (better) than with a runner at second. Obviously after the result, I wish I had stayed.”

Bogaerts hesitated turning second base.

“We needed some type of energy, man,” Bogaerts said. “We just haven’t been the way we normally are. I think a spark there would have been much helpful.”

He said he likely would not have tried it had the game been in the seventh or eighth inning. But he had to risk it with Treinen pitching.

“That guy’s one of the best closers in the game. Lot of movement on his balls. Frankly, we haven’t been swinging it the way we normally do. I just feel with me on third, and with Mitch and Brock (Holt) next, the chances were better if I had reached third. Flyball, groundball. Go on contact.”

Laureano also threw out Bogaerts attempting to score when Moreland singled Monday.

“I’m like, ‘There’s no way he’ll do that again,’” Bogaerts said. “The night before, he was coming in. He had a lot of momentum.”

Bogaerts knew right away Laureano threw him out.

“Once I dove into third, I felt (Matt) Chapman hit me before I got to the bag,” Bogaerts said. “I already knew I was out. I mean, how can you do that two nights in a row? Next time I won’t run.”

Bryan Mata, Boston Red Sox No. 3 pitching prospect behind Darwinzon Hernandez and Jay Groome, to start 2019 season at High-A Salem

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Boston Red Sox pitching prospect Bryan Mata will begin the 2019 season at High-A Salem, Dave Dombrowski confirmed Tuesday.

Baseball America ranks the 19-year-old righty Boston's No. 3 pitching prospect behind Darwinson Hernandez and Jason Groome. Baseball America also noted in its prospect handbook Mata "will compete for a spot in the Double-A rotation to remain on an aggressive development track."

But the Red Sox have decided to keep Mata in High A for now instead of promoting him to Portland.

The Venezuela native was the Red Sox's lone representative at the 2018 MLB All-Star Futures Game. He went 6-3 with a 3.50 ERA, 1.61 WHIP and .229 opponent batting average in 17 starts (72.0 innings) for Salem during 2018. His season ended early because of back discomfort.

He struggled with his command as he began throwing his two-seam fastball more. He allowed 58 walks compared to 61 strikeouts in '18. He averaged 7.3 walks per nine innings, up from 3.0 in 2017 and 2.8 in 2016.

Hernandez will begin at Double-A Portland. Groome is rehabbing from Tommy John surgery.

Dustin Pedroia injury: Boston Red Sox second baseman made diving plays in minor league spring training game, told Alex Cora he felt fine

Christopher Smith

OAKLAND, Calif. — Dustin Pedroia (knee) played nine innings in a minor spring training game in Fort Myers on Tuesday.

"He did well," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said here at Oakland Coliseum. "I actually talked to him today. Think it was four at-bats. He had three quality at-bats. He made some diving plays at second. He said he felt fine. So now the plan is to go to Greenville."

Pedroia will join Low-A Greenville on a rehab assignment Thursday. He'll likely play back-to-back games Thursday and Friday, Cora said. He'll then take Saturday off and play nine innings Sunday.

"And then we'll go from there," Cora said.

Pedroia could rejoin the Red Sox for their home opener vs. the Blue Jays next Tuesday if all goes well.

He appeared in only three games last season. He underwent a left knee cartilage restoration procedure Oct. 25, 2017. He then had scar tissue removed during an arthroscopic surgery last July in Arizona.

*** *The Pawtucket Times***

PawSox catcher Leon taking it all in stride

Brendan McGair

PAWTUCKET — Sandy Leon was just dandy on Tuesday afternoon. He smiled for the TV cameras, posed for pictures, and appeased hungry autograph seekers all while standing in front of his locker.

Did we mention that said locker was located inside the PawSox clubhouse?

A pro baseball player since 2007, Leon has seen and been through a lot. If there's anyone who can handle the pangs of catching at the Triple-A level after winning a World Series ring the previous year, it's him. If

you think he's going to be a distraction and come to the ballpark with a forlorn look on his face, think again.

"No one is expecting any sort of issues," said first-year PawSox manager Billy McMillon when asked specifically about Leon during the annual media day fete at McCoy Stadium. "I think he's going to help our ballclub immensely."

A member of the Pawtucket baseball brigade for parts of the 2015 and 2016 seasons, Leon's best asset these days isn't his ability to call a good game from behind the plate.

It's his attitude. He knows the deck is stacked against him, yet it doesn't have to always remain that way.

"I can't change the past. What I can do is be ready to play and try to get better," said Leon, echoing words that should be taped up inside every locker room and read carefully by athletes who feel down on their luck.

The path that Leon traveled on his way to opening the 2019 season on Pawtucket's roster was one that was initially tough to digest, which given his veteran status is perfectly understandable. As spring training drew to a close, the Red Sox made the decision to keep Blake Swihart and Christian Vazquez while placing Leon on waivers.

Any team could have claimed Leon, but it appears the market is extremely razor thin for someone who's slated to make \$2.48 million this season and is coming off a 2018 season that in 89 games featured a slash line of .177/.232/.279. Leon batted .225 in 85 games in 2017.

"It wasn't easy. My family ... we took two days to think about it after clearing waivers," Leon said. "We decided to come back and see if we can help this team in any way. I like Boston and they've been really good to me."

What was the biggest factor that Leon took into account as he carefully mapped his baseball future?

"We just won the World Series last year. Hopefully we can do it and hopefully I'm a part of it later in the season," he said.

Leon was asked if he's seen or heard any distress signals after four Red Sox starters combined to surrender 22 earned runs in 15 combined innings for a ghastly 13.20 ERA against Seattle and David Price getting tagged for three home runs against Oakland on Monday night.

"I don't know," said Leon when asked if the Red Sox pitchers miss him. "They have a great pitching staff. There's 162 games. It's a long season."

In 16 games during spring training, Leon batted .233. It's an average that suggests that he's destined for the Hall of Fame when comparing it to the .132 mark that Vazquez compiled in 16 Grapefruit League games.

"I felt way better at the plate compared to last year," Leon said.

The Red Sox, perhaps begrudgingly, carried three catchers in 2018, from Opening Day until the final out of Game 5 of the World Series. Boston wasn't going to follow said script this time around, and Leon knew that before spring training commenced.

"You knew something was going to happen, but for me, every spring training is like a battle. You've got to get better and get ready for the season," Leon said.

Baseball-wise, Leon knows the importance of catering to a pitching staff. The Pawtucket pitchers he will work with figure to reap the benefits of someone of his caliber. He won't be the only catcher on the

PawSox roster with World Series credentials. Newcomer Juan Centeno appeared in 22 games for the Houston club that won it all in 2017.

“He’s really out there for the pitcher and he takes pride in his job,” said PawSox pitching coach Kevin Walker about Leon. “He’s one of the best when it comes to catching.”

There is a hitter lurking inside Leon. In 2016, he batted .310 in 78 games for the Red Sox. For the longest time, he looked like the second coming of Johnny Bench. In 12 games during June of that aforementioned season, Leon hit .467. In 18 games in July, he hit .355. In .306 in 25 games during August, he batted .306.

“You’ve got to watch the good stuff. You can’t always watch the bad stuff,” Leon said.

A TV person asked if Leon would be present for next Tuesday’s Red Sox ring ceremony at Fenway Park. Obviously, the media person didn’t look at the PawSox schedule. If he did, he would have seen that the team has a 6:05 p.m. game in Buffalo.

For now, Sandy Leon is property of the PawSox. We’ll see just how long that proves to be the case.

EXTRA BASES: The PawSox will be going with an all-right handed starting rotation out of chute in 2019. Mike Shawaryn will get the ball for Thursday’s season opener in Syracuse. In order, he’ll be followed by Chandler Shepherd, Josh Smith, Ryan Weber and Erasmo Ramirez.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sale outdueled by A's in bizarre start

Ian Browne

OAKLAND -- Of the 209 starts Chris Sale has made in his career, Tuesday’s had to be the most confounding.

Then again, that fits right in with the overall theme of his team. The first six games of the season for the defending World Series champion Red Sox (1-5) have also been confounding.

In a 1-0 loss to the Athletics on Tuesday, Sale represented a bright spot. This, even as he pitched with the lowest average fastball velocity (89.3 mph) of his career and had just one strikeout in a start longer than four innings for the first time.

Over six innings, the ace lefty did his Jamie Moyer best, holding the A’s to but three hits and one run (a homer in the first inning by Matt Chapman).

“Yeah, the name of the game isn’t velocity,” said Sale. “It’s giving your team a chance to win. No matter what you’re featuring that day, you’ve got to get as deep into the game as you can and leave your team a chance to win when you’re out of there.”

It was the first quality start by the Red Sox in the season’s first six games. And it was a big improvement from Sale’s Opening Day start, when the Mariners crushed him for seven runs and three homers in just three innings.

Sale achieved his mission of giving his team a chance to win, but winning has been unfathomably hard for a squad that had a franchise-record 108 victories a year ago.

The last reigning champion to start a season 1-5? The 1998 Marlins, who were in rebuilding mode. The Sox are tied with the Angels for the worst record in the Majors, a far cry from last year, when manager Alex Cora's team started 17-2.

Amazing play short-circuits comeback

A comeback certainly felt possible with one out in the top of the ninth when Xander Bogaerts crushed one to deep right-center against Oakland closer Blake Treinen. For an instant, it seemed the baseball would sneak over the fence for a game-tying home run. Instead, it caromed high off the wall. As stud center fielder Ramón Laureano made a leap in pursuit, the ball bounced well beyond him.

Bogaerts motored around the bases, and when he got to second, a split-second decision needed to be made. Play it safe and stop at second or bust it to third? After the slightest moment of hesitation, Bogaerts chose the more aggressive option. Laureano came up throwing, and his missile to third nailed a baffled Bogaerts. Remember, Bogaerts was thrown out at the plate by Laureano on a similarly ridiculous throw on Monday.

"Again, man," sighed Bogaerts. "I'm like, there's no way he'll do that again. I didn't even see the replay, but I knew right away once I dove into third, I felt Chapman hit me before I got to the bag, so I already knew I was out. How can he do that two nights in a row? The next time, I won't run."

Cora had no problem with his decision.

"I mean, it took a five-star play to get him out at third. Just like yesterday," Cora said. "The kid is a game-changer. The ball was what, two feet from going out? The guy jumps, goes to the fence, gets to the ball and throws all the way there. You get to third with less than two outs, fly ball, you score. That's the way the game goes. Right now, nothing is going our way."

It was the first time the Red Sox have been shut out in the first two games of a series since July 17-18 at the Angels.

More on Sale

Despite the frustration of the loss, and the amazing play by Laureano, Sale remained a focal point. The last time Sale's average fastball velocity was anything close to what it was against Oakland was July 27, 2012, when he averaged 89.8. But Sale won that game against the Rangers and had six strikeouts.

On Tuesday, only 29 of his 87 pitches were fastballs. Sale also went with 28 sliders and 30 changeups. On the night, he generated just six swings and misses.

The Red Sox had Sale pitch just twice in Spring Training and are building him up after his shoulder woes of last summer and the team's run to the end of October.

"You guys want him to pitch the whole year, or do you want him to go out and throw 100 right now and not be there for his team? He's building," said pitching coach Dana LeVangie. "He had a long year last year. He's building up to be the guy he wants to be. He started last year similar. We're getting to that point, but just not right now."

As for Sale, he expressed no health concerns. It was hard to argue with his bottom line.

"I just think that's kind of part of the evolution of the game," said Sale. "It seemed like even if I threw two or three fastballs in an inning, they were ready for it. You kind of see how the game goes, see how the swings are in the at-bats and adjust accordingly."

Cora sees light

Though Bogaerts and others were clearly frustrated after the game, Cora sounded the most upbeat he's been during the rut.

"Honestly, after tonight, I feel better," Cora said. "It was a game, 1-0. We had a chance. We competed. It's not that we haven't been competing, but most of the games we were out of it right away. We were a few feet from tying the game in the ninth inning. We lost. I know what the record is. But I can go home and I can get some sleep."

Pedroia may return for Red Sox's home opener

Ian Browne

OAKLAND -- For the first time in nearly a year, Dustin Pedroia played nine innings of baseball on Tuesday, and it went well.

The setting was a game at extended spring training in Fort Myers, Fla., the final step before Pedroia heads out on an official Minor League rehab assignment that starts at Class A Greenville on Thursday.

"He did well," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. "I actually talked to him today. He had four at-bats, three quality at-bats, made some diving plays at second. He said he felt fine."

Pedroia will look to pass another milestone later at Greenville when he plays in back-to-back games on Thursday and Friday.

"[He'll have] Saturday off. Sunday he'll play nine and we'll go from there," said Cora.

After his four-day stint in Greenville, Pedroia could be cleared to play in the home opener at Fenway Park on April 9 against the Blue Jays. That will be an even bigger day than normal in Boston, as the Red Sox will get their World Series rings in a pregame ceremony.

It will be the third in Pedroia's collection, though he was used sparingly last year, playing in just three games before his troublesome left knee reached the point of no return.

Sixth man Sunday

In the final day of this 11-game road trip on Sunday in Phoenix, the Red Sox will slot in a sixth starter to give the regular rotation members a break. Cora isn't yet saying who it will be, though it figures to be righty Hector Velázquez or lefty Brian Johnson.

The Red Sox are off on Monday, and ace Chris Sale will draw the home opener on Tuesday.

Vazquez evolving as game caller

With Sandy Leon being outrighted to Triple-A Pawtucket, there will be more focus on Christian Vázquez and how he handles the pitchers.

Leon has always been highly touted for his game-calling skills, and Sale and Rick Porcello threw regularly to him the last two years.

"He's done a good job," Cora said of Vazquez. "We saw that toward the end of last season. He caught most of the games in the playoffs. He understands [pitching coach] Dana [LeVangie]. At the same time, he uses information provided by our analytical team and he understands there has to be balance."

"Sometimes you feel that a team is doing this and all of a sudden Seattle happens. They have such a different team and different approach compared to last year. You have to make adjustments. It took us a while in Seattle but we finished well with the bullpen. He's been fine. We saw that in October."

* **WEEI.com**

Red Sox have more problems than just Chris Sale's velocity

Rob Bradford

OAKLAND -- To push aside Chris Sale's unique pitching presentation Tuesday night would be a mistake.

When you have a pitcher that has done it one way for so long and then shows up and takes a different path it should be noted. That's why Sale's six-inning outing against the A's represented something to put under the microscope.

Sale threw just 25 four-seam fastballs, averaging 89.1 mph, the lowest velocity for any of his 289 career starts. The 87-pitch outing also included 30 changeups and 28 sliders. And for just the second time in the lefty's career he finished a start with one or fewer strikeouts, coming away with a lone punchout this time around.

So ... Why?

"Just kind of seemed like I had to kind of revert over to my offspeed pitches more," said Sale, who only gave up one run (a Matt Chapman, first-inning homer). "Just seemed like they were kind of waiting for the fastball. We were kind of heavy on changeup/sliders tonight and that was kind of what we had to do. That was kind of the gameplan going through."

"You guys want him to pitch the whole year or do you want him to go out and throw 100 (mph) right now and not be there for his team? He's building," explained Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie. "He had a long year last year. He's building up to be the guy he wants to be. He started last year similar, but we're getting to that point, but just not right now."

Considering the final tally, both explanations were palatable.

The fact of the matter is that Sale proved he can pitch in such a manner with that kind of velocity and still be good. His secondary stuff is that next-level. Barring an undisclosed ailment, the velocity should go up, as it did toward the end of his outing when he maxed out at 92 mph in the sixth inning. And the fact that his new catcher Christian Vazquez was able to bob and weave Sale through such an outing while calling each and every pitch should also be a plus.

When it comes to Sale's existence, health should be the only concern. If the downward trend in velocity was a sign that left shoulder was going to give way this is a different conversation. But nobody is offering any signs of that.

"Zero. Zero concern," LeVangie said when asked if he was uneasy about Sale's current existence. "Not at all. He dialed it up when he wanted to. It's there. But he knows how important he is to his team. He can pitch, regardless of the velocity."

"The name of the game isn't velocity. It's giving your team a chance to win," the starter said after his team dropped to 1-5 with the 1-0 loss to Oakland. "No matter what you're featuring that day, you've got to get as deep into the game as you can and leave your team a chance to win when you're out of there. At the end of the day, like I said, just take this one off the chin and keep going. Got to keep grinding. We're not giving up, we're not worried, we're not anything. We know who we are and we know what we can do and tomorrow can be the start of a 10-game winning streak. We know what we've got and we're confident in what we've got going forward."

OK, so now we've got that out of the way, let's look at what should really be bothering the Red Sox: They can't win.

The hole is getting bigger, and when that happens at this time of year the problems are magnified. This was on display while Oakland starter Mike Fiers was mowing the Red Sox down, with bats being slammed and eyes rolling aplenty. This isn't a new group, but this is new to this group, and it is showing. The Sox were shutout seven times in 2018 but never in back-to-back games like this. They also went the entire season last year without losing four in a row, which is the stretch Alex Cora's team currently finds itself on.

They are four games in back of first-place Tampa Bay. That is insane, no matter where the calendar sits.

The Red Sox starters have yet to win a game while living with an MLB-worst 9.00 ERA. The lineup construction remains uneven with the leadoff spot hitting just .167. The second base position has a combined two hits in 26 at-bats. And only one starter (J.D. Martinez) is managing a batting average of better than .294.

Jackie Bradley Jr.'s new swing hasn't really clicked, so far resulting in just four hits in 23 at-bats to go along with seven strikeouts. Andrew Benintendi is even worse, collecting just his third hit on the season on a check-swing infield single, with the left fielder's batting average sitting at .150.

And now comes the next three starters -- Nathan Eovaldi, Eduardo Rodriguez and Rick Porcello -- who will now be the ones counted on to get the American League East standings tilted in an expected manner. They are pitchers who, like Sale, were left using the past few days attempting to uncover what went wrong in their respective stinkers.

The conversation regarding Sale's velocity isn't going anywhere, at least for a while. But when the pitcher delivers perhaps the biggest dose of optimism of the season without a few miles-per-hour, it should be something the Red Sox can live with for the time being.

The other stuff? That still needs some fixing.

"I'm curious how I'm going to sleep tonight or to be here tomorrow. It's part of baseball," Cora said. "It's 1-5. It's only the first two series of the season. Yeah, of course, we want to play better, we want to win ballgames. But honestly, with the effort today and the game we played, I'm OK. We'll come back tomorrow and try to save the series. Try to win the next one and move on."

Xander Bogaerts, Red Sox done in by Ramon Laureano's arm once again

Rob Bradford

OAKLAND -- After the Red Sox' 1-0 loss to the A's, @Athletics changed its Twitter handle to "Ramon Laureano's Arm." Well played.

It was the arm belonging to A's outfielder Ramon Laureano after all that left Xander Bogaerts rubbing his face in disbelief well after being gunned down at third base in the ninth inning.

"I shouldn't have gone. I shouldn't have gone. Bad foot," Bogaerts could be heard repeating to himself while walking away from his locker following a four-minute media scrum.

Bogaerts did have a bad foot, having rifled a foul ball off his right ankle area in that last at-bat in the ninth. But it was hard to blame him for trying to stretch his blast off the center field wall into a one-out triple. Two superhuman throws by the man who served as the impetus for the A's social media alteration in as many nights didn't seem plausible. It was.

"I'm like, you know what, go for it," Bogaerts said. "I mean, go for it and trust Mitch (Moreland) coming behind me that he'll have a better chance bringing me in from third. I was like, just try for it. In my mind, he had no momentum coming in like he's going to home. I don't know how he made that throw again. That's impressive."

The Red Sox shortstop added, "I'm like, there's no way he'll do that again. The night before, I mean, he was coming in. He had a lot of momentum. But, I mean, that ball hit and I didn't even see the replay, but I knew right away once I dove into third, I felt (third baseman Matt) Chapman hit me before I got to the bag, so I already knew I was out. How can he do that two nights in a row? The next time, I won't run."

As impressive as the throw home the night before was, this one by Laureano -- who has 11 outfield assists in 56 games, the most in MLB -- was better and more important.

To make the effort against the wall, bounce out, pick up the ball and fire it in on one bounce to a waiting Chapman was simply unworldly. And it also put fitting punctuation (for now) on what has been a dreadful 1-5 start to the season for the Red Sox.

"I didn't feel it at all running," said Bogaerts of his leg ailment. "I think adrenaline and a will and want to get to third and do something for your team. We needed some type of energy, man. We've gotten guys at third with two outs and we just haven't been the way we normally are, and I think a spark there would have been much helpful. But these two games, I mean, we're that close and still getting out."

Chris Sale only struck out one batter in his six-inning outing. It marked just the second start of his career that he has fanned one or fewer hitters, with his three-inning tune-up against the Mets last season serving as the only other such occasion.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

How Xander Bogaerts extension impacts J.D. Martinez, Mookie Betts

Darren Hartwell

This time Dave Dombrowski means it: The Boston Red Sox are done handing out contract extensions in the 2019 season.

That was the Red Sox president of baseball operations' message Monday after locking up Xander Bogaerts for the next six years, a move that followed a five-year extension for ace Chris Sale.

Per MLB Network's Jon Heyman, this is the breakdown of Bogaerts' contract extension, which includes an opt-out after the 2022 season but could keep the shortstop in Boston until 2026:

Retaining Bogaerts at \$20 million per year is good value for the Red Sox, who haven't employed a shortstop of his caliber since Nomar Garciaparra.

But after committing \$30 million per year to Sale, the money is starting to add up in Boston. As of now, the Red Sox have nearly \$100 million committed to just four players in 2020:

- SP David Price: \$32 million
- SP Chris Sale: \$30 million
- SS Xander Bogaerts: \$20 million
- SP Nathan Eovaldi: \$17 million

The next big domino to fall is designated hitter J.D. Martinez, who has an opt-out after this season and may explore free agency with a contract extension reportedly off the table.

If the Red Sox can pick up Martinez's option, that's another \$23.75 million on the books for 2020, which would add up to \$122.75 million for Martinez and the four players above. That's more than half Boston's 2019 payroll (\$237 million) committed to just five players.

The Red Sox will have some extra cash to work with next year: Pablo Sandoval's albatross of a contract (\$18.05 million against Boston's cap in 2019) can come off the books in 2020 thanks to a \$5 million buyout.

But they'll have to spend it wisely, for one primary reason: Mookie Betts. The reigning American League MVP hits free agency in 2021 and could command nearly \$40 million per year.

RED SOX NEWS: Assessing Mookie Betts' market after Trout and Harper deals

The Sox have said they want to keep Betts around, but if Martinez re-signs, that same group of five will still be under contract in 2021. Can Boston afford to spend upwards of \$160 million on six players while filling out a serviceable MLB roster?

They'll probably try, and they can cut corners elsewhere: Rick Porcello hits free agency after this season and may not come back if he seeks the \$21.2 million per year he's earning now, while young stars Andrew Benintendi and Rafael Devers still are on low-cost rookie contracts.

None of this is to say the Red Sox shouldn't have extended Bogaerts, who provides consistency at a position where Boston has historically lacked it. But their big spending on Sale and Bogaerts could make things a bit trickier over the next two offseasons.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

BSJ Game Report: Athletics 1, Red Sox 0 – Lineup unresponsive in another loss

Sean McAdam

Don't blame this one on the pitchers: When Matt Chapman took Chris Sale out of the ballpark with one out in the first inning, it looked like the start of another long night for Red Sox starters, who came into the game with a 9.00 ERA. But while Sale took an inning or so to find himself, the A's never threatened again, collecting just two hits after the first inning and none after the fifth. Sale deftly used mostly breaking pitches and changeups to keep the A's off-balance and Brandon Workman and Ryan Brasier each contributed an inning of scoreless relief. Though he barely resembled the power pitcher he's been in his career, Sale did contribute the first quality start of the young season for the Sox, taking the Sox through six and lightening the load at least somewhat for a beleaguered bullpen that had been called upon too early and too often in the first five games.

Lineup silenced: Maybe it's the A's pitchers. Or maybe it's the ballpark. But something happens to the Red Sox in Oakland. Recall that last year, they were no-hit by Sean Manaea in late April. Then, in this series, the Red Sox have been shutout twice in two games, held scoreless for the past 18 innings. (Credit should go to the A's starters, who have allowed just one run over the last 36 innings overall). The Sox actually out-hit the A's in this one 7-3, but couldn't collect the big hit when necessary, especially with two out. In the third, Mookie Betts doubled but was stranded. In the fourth, the Sox had baserunners at the corners with two outs but couldn't produce anything. And three times over the final four innings, the Sox had a baserunner in scoring position with two out, but failed to come through.

Challenging Ramon Laureano on the bases isn't working: In the series opener Monday night, Xander Bogaerts was thrown out trying to score from second on a single when the A's center fielder fired a missile on the fly and nabbed Bogaerts at the plate in the second inning. On Tuesday, Bogaerts slammed a ball high off the wall in right center with one out in the ninth and attempted to stretch it into a triple. Three problems. First, Bogaerts thought the ball was going out and wasn't running hard out of the box. Secondly, he hesitated for a split second as he turned the bat at second. Thirdly, Laureano fielded the ball. This time, he took the carom off the wall and fired a one-hop strike to third, where Bogaerts was out. Once again, the Sox challenged and once again, the call was upheld. Laureano now has 11 outfield assists in 55 career games.

TURNING POINT

The Sox' best chance came in the fifth when Andrew Benintendi reached on a check-swing slow roller to third. He then stole second with no out, with the No. 3, 4 and 5 hitters due. But Rafael Devers popped to third, J.D. Martinez grounded out to second and Bogaerts fanned.

TWO UP

Rafael Devers: Though Devers had just one hit in four trips, he made a number of impressive plays at third, where his confidence and overall play has shown improvement in the first week of the season. His best moment came when he ranged far to his left to glove a hot smash from Marcus Semien, then got to one knee from where he fired a one-hop strike to first.

Chris Sale: Sale reinvented himself for the night, throwing only one-third fastballs — and at a diminished velocity at that, instead keeping the A's off-balance with a mix of sliders and changeups. It was a pitching clinic that limited the A's to a single run over six innings.

ONE DOWN

Brock Holt: Getting his second start of the year at second base, Holt had himself a rough night at the plate, going 0-for-4 with three strikeouts, including the final out of the game with the potential tying run at second base.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“For whatever (Sale) had, he did a good job keeping them off balance and gave us a chance to win.” — Alex Cora.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Red Sox relievers have allowed just three earned runs in their last 18 innings for an ERA of 1.50

The 1-4 start is the worst for a Red Sox team since 2012.

After recording nine or more strikeouts in each of the first five games, the Sox staff produced just four strikeouts.

J.D. Martinez extended his hitting streak to six games with a check-swing single in the second inning.

UP NEXT

The Sox and A's play the third game of their four-game set Wednesday night with RHP Nathan Eovaldi (0-0, 10.80) vs. RHP Marco Estrada (0-0, 2.45).

* *The Athletic*

Chris Sale isn't alarmed. Instead, his second start looks like 'the definition of going out there and just figuring it out'

Chad Jennings

OAKLAND – It was almost exactly one month ago that Chris Sale sat in front of his spring training locker and inadvertently predicted almost exactly what happened to him on Tuesday night.

“Someone like Nolan Ryan, right,” Sale said. “If he didn't feel good for a day, the whole world didn't know it. He just threw at a lower speed.... If that happens to one of us? It's all over Twitter. It's all over everywhere. Something's wrong! Something's happened! He's lost it, right? Back then, they're just grinding. That's called grinding. That's the definition of going out there and just figuring it out.”

Chris Sale was grinding on Tuesday.

And, yes, the whole world knew it.

Oakland hitters stepping in the box knew it. Christian Vazquez calling the pitches knew it. Any schmuck with access to a television or the internet showing 89-mph fastball velocities knew it. This was a diminished version of the Red Sox ace. It was also an impressive version of the Red Sox ace.

Six innings. Three hits. One run. One strikeout. For the first time in his career, Sale threw more than three innings without notching more than one strikeout, but it was still the Red Sox' best start of the season, by a lot.

“The name of the game isn't velocity,” Sale said. “It's giving your team a chance to win. No matter what you're featuring that day, you've got to get as deep into the game as you can and leave your team a chance to win when you're out of there. At the end of the day, like I said, just take this one off the chin and keep going.”

Sale gave his team a chance. The problem for the Red Sox was not their starting pitcher. It was their lifeless offense being shutout for the second night in a row. It was Xander Bogaerts hesitating around second and being thrown out at third. It was those damned Oakland A's, again, with the kryptonite.

But Chris Sale averaging 89.1 mph on his fastball, basically abandoning that pitch in middle innings, and failing to record a strikeout beyond the third batter he faced? It was unusual. It was perhaps alarming considering last year's shoulder problems, but it was at the very least unusual.

“You guys want him to pitch the whole year or do you want him to go out and throw 100 (mph) right now and not be there for his team,” pitching coach Dana LeVangie said. “He's building. He had a long year last year. He's building up to be the guy he wants to be. He started last year similar, but we're getting to that point. But just not right now.”

Sale did, indeed, go through a build-up period early last year. His fastball averaged 93.36 mph last April. But it topped out at 92 on Tuesday, a maximum lower than his average fastball velocity on Opening Day. Only one of his first nine fastballs topped 90 mph, and in a 12-pitch third inning, Sale threw just two fastballs. He threw only two more in a six-pitch fourth, and four in a 15-pitch fifth. Sale said he never once talked to Vazquez about changing the mix. Vazquez simply knew it had to be done. Sale said it was the nature of the modern game, not the radar readings, that necessitated the change.

“I just think that's kind of part of the evolution of the game,” he said. “It seemed like even if I threw two or three fastballs in an inning, they were ready for it. You kind of see how the game goes, see how the swings are in the at-bats and adjust accordingly.”

Here's Sale's pitch selection in his first two starts of the season:

Game 1: 39 percent fastballs, 37 percent sliders, 24 percent changeups

Game 2: 33 percent fastballs, 32 percent sliders, 34 percent changeups

In his career, Sale's been closer to 50 percent fastballs than 30 percent fastballs. If one of Tuesday's changeups had been a slider instead, he would have thrown exactly 29 of each individual pitch (25 four-seam fastballs and four two-seam fastballs according to Statcast), an even mix that he'd never shown in the past. In his final inning, Sale did go back to his fastball when five of his last 13 pitches were heaters, with four of them registering 90.8 mph or higher (four of his seven highest velocity pitches of the night). But still, five days ago he averaged 92.3 mph and topped out at 94.5. Again, it was unusual.

“Zero — zero concern,” pitching coach Dana LeVangie said. “Not at all. He dialed it up when he wanted to. It's there. But he knows how important he is to his team. He can pitch, regardless of the velocity.”

So, what to make of this grinding version of Chris Sale?

It's all part of the plan. The slow build-up of spring training has carried into April, Sale's velocity will naturally build to its previous levels, the Red Sox are keeping him safe and healthy, and Tuesday was to be admired as an old-school display of pitch-ability.

It's not exactly part of the plan – velocity could be higher at this point – but it's not exactly a problem either. The build-up is taking a little more time than it has in the past, but Sale's talented enough to deal with it, and it's ultimately fine.

There's something wrong. Maybe it's the shoulder again, maybe it's his mechanics, maybe it's something else, but it's a minor issue that will naturally work itself out with time and effort. In Sale and LeVangie and Alex Cora We Trust.

We're going to inevitably look back at this start as a gigantic, waving, rippling red flag when Sale was able to admirably grind through a solid start to serve as a smokescreen for something more sinister.

The Red Sox say it's No. 1 — No. 2 at the worst — and given how protective they've been, it's worth noting that Sale was allowed to keep going up to 87 pitches, 11 more than he threw in his Opening Day start. Would the Red Sox let their ace do that if they thought he was hurt, or if they thought he was at risk of getting hurt? Probably not.

"I'm still just trying to find it," Sale said. "Still working on some things with my mechanics and trying to find my space out there. Just trying to get comfortable and find the groove. That's half the battle with a pitcher, especially a starting pitcher, is finding a groove and getting comfortable. We're still working. It's a work in progress. Like I said, that's no excuse. Have to go out there and find a way."

Sale found a way on Tuesday. It was called grinding. And it was unusual.

*** *The East Bay Times***

A's Ramón Laureano makes Boston Red Sox pay yet again

Martin Gallegos

OAKLAND — Reports of the A's starting pitching deficiencies may have been greatly exaggerated.

It's early in the season, but the A's starting rotation has been downright dominant. Mike Fiers was the latest starter to shine on the mound as he held the Boston Red Sox scoreless through six innings of work in Tuesday's 1-0 victory. The A's have now held the Red Sox scoreless through the first two games of their four-game series.

Fiers continued an impressive stretch that he began in the team's home opener last week as he turned in the sixth consecutive six-inning outing by an A's starter. In the past six games, starters have combined to allow just one run in 36 innings, good for a 0.25 ERA over that span.

For a club whose strength was considered to be its offense and bullpen entering the season, the starting pitching has been the reason for the majority of success in this six-game stretch. The A's (5-3) have won four in a row and five of their last six. Their only loss in that time came after the bullpen coughed up a two-run lead in relief of a scoreless six-inning performance by Marco Estrada against the Los Angeles Angels.

"It seems like when we're out on defense our pitchers have a quick pace and are putting up strikes," A's third baseman Matt Chapman said. "It's fun to play defense like that and gives your offense confidence. We don't have to put too much pressure on ourselves because we are always in the game."

Red Sox (1-5) ace Chris Sale did his best to match Fiers but slipped up in the first just two batters into the game when he surrendered a solo home run to Matt Chapman. It was Chapman's third home run of the season and second in as many games. The Gold Glove third baseman has reached base in each of the A's first eight games to begin the regular season.

Fiers allowed five hits with no walks and three strikeouts through six before handing it over to the bullpen.

The trio of Ryan Buchter, Lou Trivino and Blake Treinen had little room for error with the one-run lead. But they combined to shut the door with a scoreless final three innings. Treinen recorded his third save of the year, with an assist from Ramón Laureano, who for a second consecutive night made another jaw-dropping throw from the outfield to nail Xander Bogaerts for an out, this time in the ninth as he tried to take third base on a line drive off the wall in right-center. Laureano heaved the ball from center for a perfect one-hop strike to Chapman, who applied a quick swipe tag on Bogaerts for the second out of the inning.

"I was thankful it wasn't a home run and when I saw the ball kick off the wall and how quickly Bogaerts was coming around the bags I had a feeling there would be a play at third base," Chapman said. "I'm never betting against Ramón's arm. He just seems to make incredible throw after incredible throw and they are all on the money. He never ceases to amaze me."

Here are some takeaways from the A's second consecutive victory over the defending World Series champs:

1. Teams should probably stop running on Ramón Laureano

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times? I don't know what else to say.

This isn't the first time Laureano made a ridiculous play from the outfield, nor was the play he made Monday night. Laureano made arguably the play of the 2018 season in Anaheim last year when he threw out Eric Young Jr trying to get back to first base after a fly out with a missile to Mark Canha.

"The throw he made against the Angels, it's hard to top that one," Chapman said. "But this one is just as good. To be able to throw the ball like that on the money every time is just incredible."

A's manager Bob Melvin said that Laureano's throw Tuesday night surpassed any of his previous insane throws.

"We've seen three throws from him that I don't think anybody in the league makes," Melvin said. "Given the situation, that's probably the best throw we've seen him make. Probably better than the one in Anaheim."

It wasn't a 96 mph bullet like the throw he made Monday, but what made Laureano's throw Tuesday great was the fact that it only took him 0.6 seconds from the time he picked up the ball to actually make the throw.

"You have to throw it absolutely on the money and you better have his arm," Melvin said. "It's your only chance."

Laureano said there was no thinking involved on the throw. With Bogaerts' speed, that just was not a possibility. Laureano leaped up against the wall in an attempt to make a catch before hustling over to the ball and firing it to Chapman.

"I didn't even look at the runner," Laureano said. "I just grabbed it and threw it to third base. It was a heat of the moment thing."

“I just saw that he hit it pretty hard and the wall got to me pretty quick. I was trying to balance myself with the wall and trying to find it. Good thing it didn’t go too far from me.”

The friendly confines of the Coliseum may have saved Treinen from disaster by just allowing Laureano a chance. Bogaerts crushed the pitch from Treinen and the ball bounced right off the top of the wall in right-center field. If the ball landed just one more foot to the left, it would have been a game-tying home run.

“It would have been gone in most ballparks,” Laureano said. “We have to be grateful for that 388 sign on the wall.”

Bogaerts might not have learned his lesson after getting thrown out the first night, but you can bet he won’t be testing Laureano’s arm again anytime soon after falling victim to it for a second straight night.

“How can he do that two nights in a row?” Bogaerts told Boston reporters. “The next time, I won’t run.”

The putout at third was Laureano’s 11th assist in his 56 big league games, the most in baseball over that time since he was first called up last August.

2. Mike Fiers’ calf is something to monitor

Fiers appeared to pull his right calf on an infield single by Andrew Benintendi in the sixth inning. He was checked on by trainer Nick Paparesta after the play but was allowed to finish out the inning after throwing a few warm-up pitches.

Melvin revealed postgame that Fiers had been dealing with the calf issue in spring training, but said it is not serious to the point where he believes the right-hander will have to miss time.

“I think he’s learned to pitch around it and hopefully by his next start, he’s okay with it,” Melvin said. “He pitched as well if not better than last time out.”

Fiers also did not seem too concerned.

“I’m just dealing with things here and there,” Fiers said. “I’ve been dealing with the calf for a couple of weeks. Nothing too crazy. I just need to get over that hump.”

Fiers’ next start will come Sunday in Houston against the Astros.

3. Matt Chapman’s bat could soon match his glove

Matt Chapman announced his presence on defense in 2018 by winning his first Gold Glove after countless incredible plays at the hot corner. Could 2019 be the year his bat gets him in the serious MVP discussion?

Chapman upped his batting average to .345 Tuesday night and has now reached base safely in the team’s first eight games of the season.

“Everybody talks about his defense but he is going to be an elite offensive player,” Melvin said. “Since he’s been in the two-spot he’s hitting like one of the elite hitters in the league. It’s only going to get better with him.”

Chapman was considered to have a power bat throughout his minor league career, but strikeouts were an issue. That’s no longer the case.

Chapman has struck out just four times in 35 plate appearances to begin the year, no longer chasing after balls he once did in his younger years.

"I'm just trying to be consistent with the pitches I'm swinging at," Chapman said. "There are some days where you're not feeling good and might not have your best swing. But being able to go up there and battle is the best thing I've done. Just finding a way to compete. Whether that means choking up on the bat or trying to take what you can get."

*** *Associated Press***

Fiers, 3 A's relievers shut down Red Sox for 1-0 win

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Ramon Laureano didn't have time to think. Luckily, he had arm strength and adrenaline aplenty to help get the job done.

Mike Fiers gave Oakland another stellar start, Laureano threw out a baserunner for a second straight game and the Athletics made Matt Chapman's homer stand in a 1-0 win over Chris Sale and the Boston Red Sox on Tuesday night.

With one out in the top of the ninth, Xander Bogaerts drove a ball off the wall in right-center, well over Laureano's head. The center fielder chased down the carom, picked it up with his bare hand and whipped it to third base, delivering a one-hopper that nailed Bogaerts trying to stretch his double and helped closer Blake Treinen lock up his third save.

"It's just one of those plays that the heat of the moment just gets you going," Laureano said. "I just threw it."

Laureano threw out Bogaerts at home in the second inning of Monday night's 7-0 A's win against Boston.

"It took a five-star play to get him out at third," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Just like yesterday. The kid is a game changer."

Laureano has 11 assists in 56 career games, and Tuesday night's throw ranks among his most sensational.

"Given the situation, that's probably the best one that we've seen him make," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

Fiers (2-1) pitched six innings of five-hit ball. Oakland starters have allowed just one run over 36 innings in the last six games since the team returned from an 0-2 trip to Tokyo. The A's have won four straight and five of six.

"They're a very aggressive group," Fiers said of the Red Sox. "I've faced those guys quite a number of times, so I know them, they know me, I just wanted to slow them first and then attack them with the baseball later in the count, so it worked out for us."

The World Series champion Red Sox dropped their fourth straight and fell to 1-5.

The five hits were the most an A's starter has allowed during this dominant run. Starters had given up three or fewer hits in each of the previous five games.

Chapman's third homer and second in two days came on a 3-2 pitch from Sale (0-2), an 89 mph fastball he left up in the zone.

Sale was coming off a lousy opening day start in which he gave up seven runs in three innings in a 12-4 loss to Seattle.

The seven-time All-Star settled down, covering six innings while throwing three-hit ball.

"We just need to start winning some games," Sale said. "It's tough. At the same time we haven't played a single home game. Starting the year off on road -- kind of a long road trip. But I'm not going to sit here and make excuses. We need to win games on the road just like we need to win games at home. We need to find a way to get some runs on the board."

Ryan Buchter and Lou Trivino combined on two innings of one-hit ball.

SHORT HOPS: Red Sox DH J.D. Martinez singled leading off the second inning to extend his hitting streak to six games. ... A's SS Marcus Semien had his hitting streak snapped at seven games. Red Sox 3B Rafael Devers made a diving play on a grounder to rob Semien of a hit with one out in the fifth. ... The Red Sox are 15-37 in their last 52 games at Oakland and are 3-12-1 in their last 16 full series there. ... Treinen extended his scoreless inning streak to 24 dating to Aug. 25.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: 2B Dustin Pedroia (left knee inflammation) played nine innings in an extended spring training game in Fort Myers, Florida. The four-time All-Star had four at-bats and made some diving plays at second, manager Alex Cora said.

Athletics: 1B Matt Olson, who had surgery on his right hand on March 22, had stitches removed Monday and took some ground balls Tuesday, manager Bob Melvin said. Olson will start a strengthening program soon, but no timetable has been established for the Gold Glove first baseman's return from surgery that involved a right hamate excision.

UP NEXT

Red Sox: RHP Nathan Eovaldi (0-0, 10.80 ERA) gave up six runs and eight hits, including three home runs, against Seattle in his last start March 29.

Athletics: RHP Marco Estrada (0-0, 2.45) tossed six shutout innings against the Angels in his last start March 29.