

The Boston Red Sox Sunday, April 7, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox walked off in desert after another lost lead

Alex Speier

PHOENIX — Part odyssey, part oddity, the Red Sox' long journey west will conclude on Sunday.

In ancient mythology, such an undertaking typically would offer an opportunity for a hero's self-discovery and definition. In the case of the 2019 Red Sox, however, a two-week misadventure across America has served primarily to raise questions, foremost about when this year's team will start to resemble its title-winning predecessor.

A 5-4, walkoff loss to the Diamondbacks on Saturday — decided when Arizona catcher Carson Kelly laced a two-out single to left off of Red Sox reliever Colten Brewer — added to the cloud of uncertainty. The defeat dropped the Red Sox to 2-8 in the still-young season, and clinched a third straight series loss to open the year — a mark that wasn't crossed in 2018 until mid-May.

It is the franchise's worst record through 10 games since 2011. The losses are greeted not with shock but instead grim realism.

"They understand that we're not playing good baseball," said manager Alex Cora. "If we were playing good and we were getting beat playing good baseball, probably we'd be shocked, but we haven't played well."

The loss to Arizona both followed and fought against form.

The Red Sox forged a 3-0 lead against D-backs starter Luke Weaver in the top of the second inning, an opportunistic rally in which starting pitcher David Price played a key role. After Xander Bogaerts walked and advanced to third on a Rafael Devers single, Eduardo Nunez delivered a run-scoring groundout to the right side on which Devers advanced to second.

Devers moved up 90 feet on Jackie Bradley Jr.'s long flyout to left-center, and with two outs, the Diamondbacks elected to walk Christian Vazquez intentionally to set up Weaver to face Price. Price did not suffer the slight lightly.

The pitcher whacked a first-pitch fastball for a single through the right side, the lefthander's fourth career hit and first career RBI in 55 big league plate appearances, giving the Sox a 2-0 lead. Andrew Benintendi then continued his recent surge (2 for 3 with a double and walk on Saturday; 7 for 13 with two doubles, a triple, and a walk since his final at-bat on Wednesday), crushing a run-scoring, ground-rule double to left-center and staking Price to a 3-0 advantage.

As has often been the case this year, it didn't last. Price gave back the lead with interest in the bottom of the second, the latest instance in which a Red Sox starter handled an advantage as if it was a wet bar of soap.

Price allowed four runs in the bottom of the second, as the vaunted Red Sox outfield once again struggled to make the plays that so routinely occurred last season. With a runner on first and one out, Eduardo Escobar ripped a liner to left-center. Benintendi attempted a diving catch — one that might have echoed the final play of ALCS Game 4 — but couldn't corral the double that put runners on second and third.

Nick Ahmed then lofted a flyball to shallow right-center, a ball the Red Sox' gifted outfield typically turns into a routine out. But Mookie Betts — who was playing deep to cover the gaps — couldn't get to it, the ball hopping on the turf for a run.

"I take responsibility for that," said Betts. "I have to come up with that somehow."

But he didn't — continuing an early string of seemingly routine flyballs that have found turf this year — and Kelly added to the second-inning carnage by clubbing a changeup to left for a game-tying, two-run double. After Weaver fanned for the second out of the inning, Adam Jones crushed a fastball — intended to be in on his hands, instead located up and over the outer third of the plate — off the fence in right for a long single and a 4-3 advantage. (Jones ran into the final out of the inning at second when Bogaerts tagged him as he came off the bag after his slide.)

Price bemoaned the one-inning lapse of command.

"I was trying to throw fastballs in, they were running back middle-away [and] away," said Price.

The four-run second continued a pattern. Already, the Sox have given up at least four runs in an inning five times — often wiping out a lead that the offense had just taken.

"That's probably the third or fourth time that we scored three and give it right back," said Cora. "It's not perfect right now, obviously."

But in defiance of early-season trends, Price recovered from the bad inning with a precise four-pitch mix over the remainder of his six-inning, four-run effort in which he walked one, struck out four, and became the first Red Sox starter this year to emerge from an outing without allowing a homer. The lefthander kept Arizona in check long enough to permit the Red Sox to rally against the Diamondbacks bullpen.

Bradley led off the seventh inning with a walk against Yoshihisa Hirano, then scampered to third on a single by pinch-hitter J.D. Martinez. Benintendi worked a walk against lefty Andrew Chafin to load the bases, setting the stage for a game-tying sac fly by Betts against righthander Archie Bradley. But after Mitch Moreland walked as a pinch-hitter to reload the bases, Bogaerts grounded into a fielder's choice, leaving the fate of the game to be decided in the ninth.

Cora chose Brewer based on how well the righthander has thrown to date, and how he thought the pitcher's stuff matched up against the heart of Arizona's order. The choice did not go as the manager hoped.

Escobar ripped a single down the right field line with one out. Though Mookie Betts hustled to the ball to hold him at first, the runner advanced into scoring position when Christian Vazquez could not cleanly handle a first-pitch fastball to Ahmed.

Ahmed nearly played the role of hero, singling to right, but Betts — the three-time Gold Glover — again foiled the Diamondbacks by cutting down Escobar at the plate. But that merely delayed the agony for the Sox of yet another loss, with Kelly ripping a 96 mph fastball to leave Boston trudging off the field.

"Everybody in here is frustrated. But we've been through a lot together, this group of guys, over the past two or three years," said Price. "We'll be OK and I think everybody in here understands that, just like we did last year when we won 108 games and 119 on the season and were World Series champions. We just need to get back home and our fans will remind us of how good we are."

Or will they?

Though the answer seems obvious, given that the team will be celebrating last year's championship on Tuesday, the occasion also will represent Fenway Park's first opportunity to offer a referendum on the early-2019 Red Sox — a team whose talent is unquestioned but whose performance to date has been poor.

What is the proper greeting for such a group?

“Cheers, I hope,” said Price. “I don’t think anybody has ever gotten their World Series rings and gotten booed.”

The Red Sox can take a step to avoid such an inglorious first by salvaging a win on Sunday in the final contest of their Fort Myers-to-Mesa-to-Seattle-to-Oakland-to-Phoenix-to-Boston itinerary. As the team managed not to dwell on its successes while focusing on each day’s game in 2018, the 2019 club must now show that it can start to do the same after defeats.

“There’s no frustration. We’ll show up tomorrow,” vowed Cora. “Hopefully we’ll have a happy flight [after a win], go home, see the family on Monday, hang out with your kids, all of that, kind of put everything in perspective and move forward.”

Red Sox are among teams committing increased resources to analytics

Peter Abraham

The most significant offseason acquisitions by the Red Sox were Brad Alberts, Jeb Clarke, Connor McCann, Kayla Mei, and Dave Miller.

They were additions made to the research and development department, part of a long-range plan to add staff put together by assistant general manager Zack Scott at the behest of president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski.

Alberts and Miller are analysts. McCann is a software developer. Clarke is embedded with the major league team and Mei is an assistant in analytics. They were chosen from a group of about 75 candidates that was narrowed down from about 100.

Mei, who attended Northeastern and the London School of Economics, was the team’s David Ortiz Fellow last year.

The additions were the product of a lengthy recruiting process.

“We took a more aggressive approach. We wanted to do even more,” Scott said.

The Sox believe their 15-person analytics staff is among the five largest in the game, but don’t know that for certain. The Rays are thought to have 25 people and Yankees even more. The Dodgers have a large group, too.

There’s a bit of a spy vs. spy mentality to the whole thing, clubs scouring the media guides and staff lists of opposing teams trying to figure out who is doing what.

Oakland Athletics executive vice president of baseball operations Billy Beane is enthused by what he sees happening around the game.

Beane helped start the sports analytics revolution about 20 years ago. Now it’s an industry with thousands of employees.

“Not just in baseball, but in other sports. Data created a meritocracy,” Beane said. “You don’t just get these jobs because you played the game. It’s more dynamic and more diverse.”

“In my opinion, baseball is one of the smartest industries in the world. One of the reasons is because we’re looking for the same skill sets that Silicon Valley and Wall Street are looking for. The difference is these really smart people will come work for a baseball team for 20 cents on the dollar.”

But that is changing, too. When the Red Sox were seeking to fill their open positions, Scott successfully appealed to ownership for a larger budget so he could attract better candidates.

“We were competing with Google and Facebook in some instances,” Scott said. “Plus, every team has grown. The number of jobs is up 30-40 percent.”

In an era where player payrolls are restricted by luxury tax considerations, advantages can be gained behind the scenes.

Clarke, who played at Skidmore College, interned with the Reds last season then was hired by the Red Sox to serve as a bridge between the coaching staff and analytics department.

Instead of manager Alex Cora texting or calling Scott with a question, he can go directly to Clarke. Faster answers can mean success on the field.

“Alex wanted somebody with the team on the road,” Scott said. “He felt like somebody with an analytics background was important to have on the travel party.”

The Rays did something similar when Jonathan Erlichman was named their “process and analytics coach” and given a uniform.

This is where baseball is going, finding even small advantages in player development, scouting, game planning, and pitch calling that can’t come from traditional coaches.

“We used to ignore people who didn’t play the game,” Beane said. “Now you think about [Giants president of baseball operations] Farhan Zaidi. He didn’t grow up in this country. He’s got a PhD from Berkeley and an undergrad from MIT. That’s great. To me, that’s a good thing.”

“We’re a better, smarter business because of it. The ratio of analysts to other employees is higher than many other businesses. Someday I won’t be qualified for my job, and that’s a good thing.”

The Athletics, ironically, have one of the smallest analytics groups. Part of it is Beane prefers it that way. But there are budgetary considerations, too.

“What helps us is that it’s been part of our culture for 20 years,” Beane said. “You can have culture clashes within organizations and it takes a while to change. For us, it’s part of our DNA. We’ve been making decisions with this process for such a long time.”

The Red Sox, once among the industry leaders in analysis, fell back for several years and are now regaining lost ground under Scott, who joined the organization in 2004.

“With the larger staff we can attack more of what we have been doing and explore new things,” he said. “There’s a backload of projects we want to get to. We’ve been talking about it for five years.”

Some of the greatest strides have been made in player development. The Sox are using technology to improve their analysis of individual players and target areas for improvement.

By outfitting their minor league parks with TrackMan systems, pitchers can be instantly evaluated. The team also invested in Rapsodo devices to better judge the biomechanics of their pitchers and hitters.

Now data on velocity, spin rate, horizontal and vertical breaks, efficiency, and other factors can be gathered and analyzed quickly.

“There’s so much intellectual curiosity, a hunger for information,” Scott said. “With pitch-tracking data, we can give our pitchers a better chance to succeed.”

Beane sees the next frontier of analytics being health.

“It’s the one area none of us have gotten our arms around and are completely comfortable with,” he said. “You think about how much injuries cost teams. A team’s success is usually attributed to the health of the club.

“You’re never going to solve injuries. But if you can be more predictive when injuries might happen and prevent them from happening, that’s going to be driven by data. It’s an area where we can improve and get granular about performance.”

But privacy issues will come into play. Wearable technology creates streams of data, but players are understandably wary about how teams will use that information.

The Players Association has said medical privacy issues will be a topic when the next collective bargaining agreement is negotiated.

The Red Sox already have their medical department working closely with the analytics staff. Michael Cianciosi was hired as the organization’s sports science coordinator a year ago. He travels with the team and advises Cora on workload management and when to time days off.

“More and more, we’re working with the medical people,” Scott said. “There’s a lot to be gained.”

As Scott added to his staff, he balanced academic qualifications with a willingness to work as a team. The idea is to win a game, after all.

“We don’t tell people to stay for the game. They have families, things to do. I understand that,” Scott said. “But you do want people who embrace what we’re trying to do here. That’s important.”

Beane turned down a chance to run baseball operations for the Red Sox in 2002, deciding to stay in Oakland. Now 57, he does not look back at what might have been.

“I don’t, and people don’t believe it,” Beane said. “Boston ended up getting the right guy, they got Theo Epstein. Two world championships with Theo, they had an amazing run. Things turned out fantastic for the Red Sox, and for me I feel the same.

“My whole family was in California. I wouldn’t have changed it for the world. Boston is a great city. It’s an amazing sports town. But my life’s in California and I’m happy here.

“I was 40 at the time. I wasn’t planning on failing. But the process led to the right guy for them and things turned out great for me.”

WEAK LINK?

Sox’ Rodriguez still a mystery

Eduardo Rodriguez has been shockingly bad in two starts, allowing 11 earned runs on 16 hits and six walks over eight innings.

But more than the statistics, it’s how often Rodriguez has fallen behind hitters at important junctures and given in with pitches over the plate. At 26, he all too often exhibits the same lack of focus he did when he was 22.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora and pitching coach Dana LeVangie want to see Rodriguez have better command of pitches in the strike zone. His stuff plays, but he still doesn’t trust it.

The Red Sox tried overpraising Rodriguez early in spring training to build his confidence, his fellow starters joining the chorus of compliments. Then Cora became annoyed at the lefthander for not challenging hitters and there was some tough love.

What now? Rodriguez was effective for much of last season but remains largely untrustworthy. He has been part of three playoff teams but made only one start in the postseason.

Part of the issue has been a lack of competition. For three years now, the Sox have started spring training with Rodriguez locked into a rotation spot. If his next start is not an improvement, maybe Rodriguez should be skipped for a turn or replaced. Sometimes that's what it takes.

Other observations on the Red Sox:

- Cora does not buy the idea that the Sox have a poor farm system.

"It's a good core," he said. "Outside our walls, people don't feel we have a good minor league system. But you can see it's getting better. There are a few athletes position-player wise, they can be good big league players and impactful. There are a few arms in the lower levels, they're going to be good."

- Will Craig Kimbrel be at Fenway Park for the home opener on Tuesday to get his World Series ring? Kimbrel is said to be working out at a small college near his home in Tennessee and could attend the ceremony. He is now into his sixth month of free agency.

- Cora used social media to send a subtle message to the fan base after Thursday's ugly 7-3 loss in Oakland. He posted an emoji of a plane on Twitter along with an Apple Music link to the song "Calma" by Puerto Rican pop star Pedro Capo.

Translation: We're headed to a new series, everybody stay chill.

ETC.

Athletics make the best of it

Oakland Coliseum, which opened five months after Anaheim/Angel Stadium in 1966, is the fourth-oldest ballpark in the majors. But while Fenway Park, Wrigley Field, and Dodger Stadium are cherished museums to the game, Oakland is a dusty old relic with little charm.

But after covering four games there this past week, I can report the A's are trying their best to make it work.

The A's have improved their concession offerings by bringing in four or five food trucks for every game and making it easy for fans to venture outside the stadium and come back in.

There are vegetarian concession offerings now, a Boba Tea stand, and assorted craft beers. Fans also have a number of general admission areas where they watch the game.

The main concourse also has been spruced up with photos of players such as Dennis Eckersley, Rickey Henderson, and Mark McGwire, and tributes to championship teams of the past. There used to be a feel of grim resignation at the Coliseum. Now there's a sense that at least there's a chance to have fun. The Athletics don't draw many fans, but those who do show up are engaged.

The Athletics hope to build a waterfront ballpark in downtown Oakland. But that is years from happening, if it happens at all. Their initial design, which came from a Danish architecture firm, appears unrealistic.

So the Coliseum may hang in there for a while.

Some minor announcements

The minor league seasons are underway. Triple A Pawtucket has its home opener on Thursday and Double A Portland is in the middle of a homestand that ends Wednesday.

You also can catch games in Hartford (Double A Rockies) and Manchester, N.H. (Double A Blue Jays). When the Rookie level New York-Penn League opens in June, you have options in Lowell (Red Sox), Norwich, Conn. (Tigers), and Burlington, Vt. (Athletics).

There are some new rules on the field to keep in mind.

In Triple A and Double A, pitchers will be required to face three consecutive batters or end the inning. This experiment will be watched closely by Major League Baseball, which plans to try the same thing, with some revisions, in 2020.

At all levels, extra innings will begin with a runner at second base. If the last batter of the previous inning was the pitcher, the runner would be the player in the order before the pitcher's spot.

Triple A teams will be allowed five mound visits. Double A teams get seven and Single A teams nine. Those are reductions from last season. There are no limits for Rookie-level teams.

Off to a painful start

The Yankees now have Miguel Andujar, Dellin Betances, Jacoby Ellsbury, Didi Gregorius, Aaron Hicks, CC Sabathia, Luis Severino, Giancarlo Stanton, and Troy Tulowitzki on the injured list.

That's \$641,975 a day down the drain, although the Yankees are only responsible for the major league minimum with Tulowitzki after he was released by the Blue Jays.

Extra bases

Terry Francona agreed to a contract extension with the Indians that will take him through the 2022 season. That would give him 10 years with the Indians, or two more than he had with the Red Sox. Hard to believe, right? . . . The coaching staff at Westminster Christian High School in Palmetto Bay, Fla., includes former big leaguers Raul Ibanez, Mike Lowell, and Joel Piniero. All three have sons on the team . . . Dick Manville, who played 12 games for the Boston Braves from 1950-52, died in February at 92. That leaves only four living players who were members of the Braves while they played in Boston: Clint Conatser (97), Bert Thiel (92), Del Crandall (89), and Johnny Antonelli, who turns 89 on Friday. Thanks to Bob Carvin of North Easton for pointing this out . . . And a very happy 40th birthday to the one who got away, the great Adrian Beltre. He was an All-Star for the Red Sox in 2010, then they let him go as a free agent, deciding instead to trade for Adrian Gonzalez and move Kevin Youkilis to third base. I was in the Dominican Republic at the time and along with former Herald writer Scott Lauber broke the news to Beltre. He hoped to stay in Boston and was furious when we told him. Beltre signed with the Texas Rangers and will probably go into the Hall of Fame with their logo on his cap.

The Field of Dreams fund-raising event will be at Fenway Park on June 18. Sponsors play a six-inning softball game at Fenway with up to 22 players per team and can invite an unlimited number of friends to watch from the stands. The Summer Works program administered by the nonprofit Action for Boston Community Development is the beneficiary. Call Amelia Aubourg at 617-348-6238 for sponsorship information.

Brock Holt heads to injured list, via his son Griffin

Alex Speier

PHOENIX – In retrospect, it was precisely the sort of injury oddity that seemed a fitting tonesetter for the surprising start to the Red Sox' 2019 season — a literal and figurative poke in the eye to the reigning champions.

On Opening Day in Seattle, the cornea of Brock Holt's right eye got scratched. After going 1 for 16 through nine games and struggling to pick up the spin of the baseball in the batter's box, Holt recognized that he had to go on the 10-day injured list.

How did the injury happen? A tag? A baserunning play?

"It was actually a play at the hotel," Holt grimaced.

When he woke up, he went to pick up his son, Griffin. As 2-year-olds are wont to do, Griffin poked his dad in the eye with a fingernail.

"It's not funny, but it is funny," said Brock Holt. "[Griffin] walks around and tells everyone he poked me in the eye. He got me. It's something I thought I could play through and still be able to do my job, but the vision in my right eye is really different. It was obviously affecting me on the field. I don't want to be out there if I can't help us."

Holt visited with an eye doctor in Seattle who gave him drops. He tried playing with a contact lens to protect the scratched area, but his eye watered too much to see. Holt tried playing with glasses, but those didn't help, resulting in his sidelining.

"It's getting better," said Holt. "It's just not where it needs to be right now for me to do my job and perform at this level, but I'll see someone when we get back to Boston and hopefully we can get it figured out and in 10 days be back."

With Holt out, Tzu-Wei Lin was called up from Triple A Pawtucket to play the role of superutility man. He grounded out as a pinch hitter in the ninth of Saturday's 5-4 loss.

Johnson sidelined

Lefthander Brian Johnson, during a relief appearance in Friday's 15-8 loss to the Diamondbacks, felt discomfort in his elbow on a curveball in the middle of the inning. Mindful that the Red Sox bullpen has been taxed, he didn't alert the team, and instead attempted to gut through what ended up being a seven-run sixth inning during which his fastball velocity dropped to the 87-mile-per-hour range.

On Saturday, Johnson landed on the injured list with what the team is describing as elbow inflammation.

"I just felt like I couldn't really finish [pitches]," Johnson said. "Probably now, looking back, they would probably advise me to call somebody out. But, at that point, I felt like I could save some arms."

To take Johnson's spot, the Red Sox called up righthander Marcus Walden from Pawtucket. Walden posted a 1.42 ERA with 13 strikeouts in 12⅓ innings in spring training.

Team doctors will examine Johnson on Monday to determine what tests are necessary.

Hector Velazquez is expected to start on Sunday against the Diamondbacks.

"We need him to pitch well," said manager Alex Cora. "All outs are welcome."

No place for excuses

While the Red Sox opened the year by traveling more than 6,000 miles to Arizona, Seattle, Oakland, and back again to Arizona, Cora downplayed the travel as a reason for the team's 2-7 start.

"It hasn't been easy but at the same time, we're not making excuses. Seattle went to Japan and they're, what, 8-1?" said Cora. "This is the big leagues. We don't travel in middle seats. We don't stay in motels. The way they treat us in the clubhouse is five stars. It's what the schedule says. It's 11 games in a row on the road. But we're not making excuses. We just aren't playing well."

Cora has been both appreciative of and amused by the elevating concern about the team's difficult season-opening stretch.

"It's amazing how many texts I've gotten the last two days. My brother texted me today, 'Don't forget it's a game. Keep having fun.' I'm like, 'Joey, I'm good. Relax.' But it's cool that people are so worried about us," said Cora. "We're going to get to a point where we play good baseball. We're going to be the team that everybody feels we're supposed to be, and we're going to look back like, it wasn't fun at the beginning, but you look back and learn from it."

So far, so good

Dustin Pedroia came out of Friday's rehab game with the Single A Greenville Drive after five innings, feeling good after playing in back-to-back games for the first time since last May.

"The workload was high," said Cora. "But he was fine."

Pedroia rested Saturday and is expected to play nine innings Sunday in advance of an evaluation Monday to determine if he is ready to come off the injured list or if he needs more time on his rehab assignment.

Pitching in

Cora had a simple question for Eduardo Nunez in the seventh inning of Friday's 15-8 blowout loss: Had the versatile infielder ever pitched? Nunez answered in the affirmative, citing his experience on the mound as a Little Leaguer 20 years earlier.

Cora asked if Nunez would like to add to his mound resume.

"His eyes got big, like, 'Oh yeah, I'm ready,'" recounted Cora. "I was jealous, because I always wanted to do that."

Nunez allowed a run (a solo homer to Alex Avila that had both batter and pitcher laughing) in his inning of work.

"It's no fun to be in that situation," said Nunez, "but it's fun to pitch in the big leagues."

Among his 14 offerings, Nunez featured a two-pitch mix of a low- to mid-80s fastballs and a loopy breaking ball that was in the low-60s. The homer by Avila came on a fastball on a 2-and-2 count.

"He wanted to throw a slider," said Cora. "He comes in the dugout and he's like, 'Blake [Swihart], why did you call a fastball?'"

Nunez became the first Sox position player to pitch in a game since Mitch Moreland in 2017. Cora said he hopes that Nunez is the last to assume that responsibility in 2019.

Kinship with Kimbrel

Diamondbacks reliever Greg Holland can relate to Craig Kimbrel's current plight like few others.

After a 2017 campaign in which the righthander led the National League with 41 saves, Holland remained unsigned through the entire offseason before reaching a one-year, \$14 million deal with the Cardinals shortly after the start of the 2018 season.

Holland struggled badly with the Cardinals, posting a 7.92 ERA in 32 games before getting released midseason. He found his footing after joining the Nationals in August, posting a 0.84 ERA in 24 games, but his early-season struggles underscored the potential difficulty Kimbrel faces with a delayed start to the year.

“Hopefully for him, when he signs, he can just step in and not skip a beat. But it’s a tough thing,” said Holland. “It’s a process I hope I don’t have to go through again. Let’s leave it at that.”

Holland, who signed a one-year, \$3.25 million deal with Arizona, said that he never had meaningful conversations with the Red Sox this winter.

“If there were talks, there wasn’t anything that had any kind of substance,” said Holland.

Tanking is prevalent in baseball, but why is it tolerated?

Christopher L. Gasper

There’s no crying in baseball — unless you count the Major League Baseball Players Association bemoaning the death of the golden goose of free agency. But there is tanking in baseball.

What else do you call teams that aren’t actively trying to maximize their win total and are content jockeying for a high draft pick? Compared to the NFL and NBA, baseball gets a free pass. Nobody balks at intentionally bad baseball teams.

Visionary former Philadelphia 76ers general manager Sam Hinkie, who was hustled out of the NBA for competitive heresy, simply chose the wrong sport. In baseball, everyone Trusts the Process. Purposely going south in the standings to change a franchise’s direction has become baseball’s new pole star, and it’s not even polarizing.

It’s not tanking in baseball. Nope. It’s repackaged with Ivy League elan and analytics and rebranded as resetting, retooling, or rebuilding. It’s an acceptable plan without the stigma it carries in other leagues, especially the NBA, which has actively taken anti-tanking measures to assure public competitive confidence.

The sabermetric set can feel free to deride me, but I still enjoy engaging with baseball through boxscores. It’s part ritual and part research. This season, I’ve been confounded by the names staring back at me. Apparently, anonymity is the new “Moneyball” market efficiency. While name free-agent pitchers Dallas Keuchel and former Red Sox closer Craig Kimbrel find their careers in abeyance and MLB awards a championship belt to the team that best limits salaries in arbitration, unheralded players populate unrecognizable rosters.

No sport is more easily distorted by short sample sizes than baseball. That’s why a competitively apathetic outfit like the Seattle Mariners, holders of an offseason fire sale, can win seven of their first nine games. Ignore the deception of the too-early standings. Here are some MLB tanking rankings.

The Toronto Blue Jays, Baltimore Orioles, Miami Marlins, and Detroit Tigers are full-on in the tank. The Kansas City Royals are tacitly tanking, merely fielding a representative team. The Mariners are on the outskirts of tanking and will sell off valuable veterans when their season slips away by the summer. The Texas Rangers appear ambivalent, unable to fully commit to tanking or to improving a 95-loss roster from 2018 with anything more than stopgap veterans and reclamation projects. That’s seven of 30 teams essentially engaged in some form of competitive seppuku.

Luckily for the lethargic Red Sox, 40 percent of the American League East isn’t even trying. The Blue Jays and the Orioles are emptying the tank. Toronto (salary) dumped DH Kendrys Morales in a deal the day before their season started and traded starting center fielder Kevin Pillar just five games in. Randal Grichuk, who signed a five-year, \$52 million deal last Tuesday, and infielder Lourdes Gurriel Jr. are Toronto’s only players with money guaranteed beyond 2019.

The Blue Jays have some promising prospects such as Vladimir Guerrero Jr., but as is the wont of MLB teams today — and another tanking tool — they’re stashing them in the minor leagues to prevent the

accrual of service time toward free agency and ensure the preservation of another precious year of team control.

Swell.

Only the perpetually cash-strapped Miami Marlins and Tampa Bay Rays (the real “Moneyball” miracle of MLB without the movie) have lower payrolls than the Orioles, who imported former Houston Astros assistant GM Mike Elias and Astros analytics guru Sig Mejdal, an ex-NASA engineer, to engineer their tank job. Who says tanking isn’t rocket science?

We have the Astros and Theo Epstein’s Chicago Cubs to blame for the virtues of tanking in MLB. By design, they were the two biggest losers in baseball from 2012 to 2014: the Astros were 176-310 (.362 winning percentage) and the Cubs were 200-286 (.412). That poured the foundation for their World Series winners and perpetual playoff contention. Such planned ineptitude enabled them to draft Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber, Carlos Correa and Alex Bregman.

Objectively, the tanking strategy is sound. So, the question is why this is condoned as sensible in MLB and condemned as sacrilege in other leagues?

The NBA is so sensitive to tanking talk that it altered the NBA Draft Lottery format to reduce the odds of the team with the worst record getting the No. 1 pick from 25 percent. Starting with this year’s Draft Lottery, the three worst teams all have an equal 14 percent chance. The team with the worst record could drop down as far as fifth. In baseball, winning the race to the bottom guarantees the No. 1 pick.

The argument against labeling baseball teams as tanking is that baseball teams have minor league systems, and that distilling which draft picks toiling in the minors are capable big league players is much more time-consuming and challenging than plugging in “can’t miss” NBA or NFL draft picks.

There’s some truth to this, but the sheer unpredictability of prospect evaluations shouldn’t render MLB teams immune from tanking blowback.

The New York Knicks, owners of the NBA’s worst record this season, aren’t all that different from a baseball team trying to develop its young players and discern which ones are part of the future. The Knicks have some interesting young talents such as rookies Mitchell Robinson and Kevin Knox that they’re feeding minutes.

Other NBA teams condemned as tankers don’t fit the narrative. The Phoenix Suns were playing their best player, Devin Booker, who had back-to-back 50-point games at the end of March, right up until he injured his ankle last Wednesday.

Yet, the stigma of intentionally stinking seems to stick to NBA teams, and NFL ones, more than it does MLB clubs.

Could part of the reason for that perception gap be the racial makeup of the sports? Around 75 percent of NBA players are African-American, according to The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports. In the NFL, the percentage of African-American athletes is about 70 percent. The most recent racial report card for MLB from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, which used 2017 numbers, pegged the percentage of white players in MLB at 57.5 percent.

There seems to be some implicit bias involved when it comes to a gentler, kinder representation of prioritizing a long-term view in MLB. It’s a double-standard that aids the sport that plays double-headers.

Even if tanking is more tolerated in baseball, its pervasiveness still creates a problem. If the imbalance between the contenders and the tankers becomes too stark, the sport loses some appeal in an already oversaturated entertainment market. This was displayed last season when at one point seven teams were on pace to lose 100 games — three did, and the Tigers lost 98.

Tanking in baseball is real. So, let's call it what it is, and either acknowledge it's a distasteful yet successful strategy in all sports or evenly apply outrage over its employment.

Baseball's free passes should be limited to the ones issued on the field.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox fall to Diamondbacks, 5-4, on walkoff loss

Jason Mastrodonato

PHOENIX — It wasn't supposed to be the most difficult road trip to start the year, with just one likely playoff contender of the three teams on the schedule.

But the Red Sox began the season by losing all three series after getting walked off by the Diamondbacks in a 5-4 loss on Saturday evening.

The Sox took a 3-0 lead in the second inning, when David Price hit an RBI single and Andrew Benintendi had a ground-rule double, but Mookie Betts left both runners stranded to end the inning and Price allowed four runs in the bottom of the frame as the Sox' lead lasted less than 15 minutes.

After the Sox tied it in the seventh, Colten Brewer allowed three hits for the walkoff loss in the ninth.

"It's frustrating," Price said. "Everybody in here is frustrated. We've been through a lot together, this group of guys together, for the last two or three years. So we'll be OK. I think everybody in here understands that. And we just have to take it one game at a time, just like we did last year when we won 108 games, 119 on the season and were World Series champions. We just need to get back home and all our fans were remind us how good we are."

Getting back home to Boston, where the Sox will have Monday off and open their home schedule on Tuesday against the rebuilding Blue Jays (the Mariners and Diamondbacks are also supposed to be rebuilding, but have gone 5-1 against the Sox so far), seems to be on the forefront of their minds this weekend.

"Right now I'm looking forward to tomorrow, taking care of tomorrow, get a win so we can have a happy flight," Betts said. "That's the primary right now."

The Sox knew this could be a tiring trip to start the year, which is why they scheduled two exhibition games in Arizona on the Monday and Tuesday of the first week of the season. Getting the players adjusted to the time zone was thought to be a good idea.

Instead, they've started the year 2-8 and have yet to take a lead into the ninth inning in any of the 10 games. It's the worst start by a Red Sox team since the 2011 group went 2-10, then finished with a 90-72 record.

"There's no frustration," manager Alex Cora said. "Just keep grinding. We'll show up tomorrow, hopefully we'll have a happy flight, go home, see the family on Monday, hang out with your kids, all of that, kind of put everything in perspective and move forward."

"We're talented. We'll be fine. We will be fine. Just show up tomorrow, play hard, win the game, have a better taste, get on the flight, and kind of breathe a little bit. On Monday, there's no workout, there's no nothing, enjoy your family. Can't wait to see my twins and my daughter, just hang out, and just kind of get away from the whole madness and get them again."

Nearly every time the Red Sox take a lead, they give it right back.

They haven't held a lead for more than two innings at any point this season. They've played 86 innings in total and have led for only 8-½ of them.

"Obviously they think about it probably," Cora said. "But at the same time, I think they're over it now. They know they're going to pitch well. Obviously we haven't. We haven't held leads. I can remember that's probably the third or fourth time that we scored three and give it right back. It's not perfect right now, obviously, but the quality of at-bats was better today. They kept fighting. David kind of found it after that. Too bad we didn't win."

It has to be getting draining on the hitters, who are scoring about 4-½ runs per game but are almost always playing from behind.

"I mean, we have to continue to score runs," Betts said. "There are two sides to everything. We can't win with zeroes and we're putting up a lot of zeroes. We need to score some more runs and give our guys some confidence."

The Sox rallied for the tying run in the seventh, when J.D. Martinez hit a key pinch-hit single and Betts lifted a sacrifice fly to score Jackie Bradley Jr. from third.

Brandon Workman and Ryan Brasier pitched a pair of scoreless frames to get the Sox to the ninth, but Brewer allowed three straight singles as the Diamondbacks walked off on a hit by Carson Kelly to ignite a celebration.

"I thought there were some good pitches in there," Brewer said. "They were ready for them I think."

Price became the first Red Sox pitcher to finish a start without allowing a home run, though he did give up four runs for the second straight game. He also began his 2018 season with a 5.11 ERA through seven starts, then finished his season strong.

The one big inning has killed him.

"That's been one of my Achilles' heels for a lot of my career, having that one tough inning, and it cost me a ballgame," Price said. "Today was tough, but we'll keep going."

What kind of reception does he expect from the Fenway crowd on Tuesday?

"Cheers, I hope," he said. "I don't think anybody has ever gotten their World Series rings and gotten booed. I think we'll get cheered."

Why Alex Cora used Colten Brewer instead of Matt Barnes

Jason Mastrodonato

PHOENIX — The Red Sox lost Saturday's game with their best reliever warming up in the bullpen.

But that's the way manager Alex Cora intends to use his bullpen, with the best pitchers being saved for what he perceives as the highest leverage situations.

In Cora's mind, the ninth inning of a tie game in the Red Sox' eventual 5-4 loss to the Diamondbacks on Saturday was not the spot for Matt Barnes, who was warming in the 'pen but never entered.

Instead, it was Colten Brewer who took over in a 4-4 game to face the No. 5 spot in the lineup, where the Diamondbacks had the pitcher due up but pinch-hit with Alex Avila.

Avila struck out, then Eduardo Escobar, Nick Ahmed and Carson Kelly hit three straight singles to walk off on the Sox.

“Where they were in the lineup, the way that Brewer has been throwing the ball, we liked him there,” Cora said. “We felt the matchups were good for us. It just didn’t work out.”

Brewer said the strikeout to Avila put him in a good spot.

“I thought there were some good pitches in there,” he said. “They were ready for them I think. I was just trying to get a ground ball and get out of the inning, maybe weak contact, maybe a swing-and-miss. Ended up shooting it through the left field for the walkoff.”

Betts threw out Escobar at home on the single by Ahmed for his second outfield assist on the season, but Ahmed advanced to second on the throw, then scored on the hit by Kelly.

Brewer entered the game with a 0.00 ERA and just one hit in three innings while collecting six strikeouts and four walks. The Sox like his ability to spin a curveball and throw a mid-90s fastball.

Barnes has pitched just twice in 10 games so far, allowing just one baserunner while striking out four.

Red Sox place Brock Holt, Brian Johnson on injured list

Jason Mastrodonato

PHOENIX — The Red Sox need reinforcements.

Prior to Saturday evening’s game against the Diamondbacks, the Sox placed utility man Brock Holt and lefty Brian Johnson on the 10-day injured list and recalled infielder Tzu-Wei Lin and right-hander Marcus Walden from Triple-A Pawtucket.

Holt has been an important piece for the Sox early on, but has a scratched cornea in his right eye, the Sox announced. It’s unclear how that happened.

Johnson was shelled for seven runs in 1-½ innings of work in the 15-8 loss on Friday and now has elbow inflammation, the team said. He was supposed to start Sunday’s game, but that could fall on Hector Velazquez or the Sox could add someone else from the minors to start that game.

More to come from Phoenix.

Brock Holt suffers eye injury while taking care of 2-year-old son

Jason Mastrodonato

PHOENIX — Brock Holt’s difficult start to the season at the plate can be somewhat attributed to a child.

Holt was placed on the 10-day injured list before the Red Sox’ game on Saturday with a scratched cornea in his right eye, an injury he sustained before the Opening Day game, when he picked up his 2-year-old son, Griffin, and took a fingernail in the eye.

“I went and got Griff up out of bed, was bringing him back to our bed, and one of his fingernails got me good,” Holt said. “I thought at the time it just poked me in the eye, but the first two days in Seattle were rough. I was wearing sunglasses inside. I couldn’t open my right eye. Obviously I needed to go see an eye doctor. Went to see someone in Seattle. I put a contact lens in it to protect the scratch. Every time I was blinking, it was rubbing, making my eye water. Couldn’t really see out of my right eye. Gave me some drops, started clearing up, but my right eye was still pretty blurry in Seattle.”

Holt's son became somewhat of an internet sensation as he's often seen in social media photos wearing his signature glasses. Holt said his son is more often recognized than he is when the family goes out to eat in Boston.

"It's not funny, but it is funny," Holt said. "He walks around and tells everyone he poked me in the eye. Being a dad, he got me. It's something I thought I could play through and still be able to do my job, but the vision in my right eye is really different. It was obviously affecting me on the field. I don't want to be out there if I can't help us."

Holt didn't play the first two games in Seattle, then went 0-for-2 with a walk and two strikeouts in his first start of the year in Game 3.

Without clear vision in his right eye, Holt has had a difficult time picking up the ball at the plate. He's just 1-for-16 with seven strikeouts to start the year. He's still played well on defense, making a game-saving on-the-run throw from shortstop in Oakland and a few nice plays at second, though he did miss a line drive off his glove Friday in Arizona.

"I can see, but there's still a little blurry spot in my right eye," he said. "I wasn't able to pick up spin. I wasn't able to do anything in the box. Yesterday, I decided, 'Hey, I think I might need to see another eye doctor here or do something.'"

The Red Sox called up Tzu-Wei Lin from Triple-A Pawtucket to replace Holt on the active roster.

The eye doctor told Holt this type of injury can vary in recovery time and he's unsure how long he'll miss.

Second baseman Dustin Pedroia is still an option for Opening Day at Fenway Park on Tuesday. He played five innings with Single-A Greenville Friday after playing nine on Thursday. He'll play nine Sunday and if he feels good, could be activated in time for Tuesday's game.

Sunday starter revealed

Hector Velazquez will get the start on the mound in the series finale Sunday afternoon against the Diamondbacks.

Brian Johnson was originally in line for the start, but Johnson was needed out of the bullpen early in Friday's 15-8 loss and suffered an elbow injury while giving up seven runs in 1- $\frac{1}{3}$ innings.

After touching 92 mph during his impressive relief appearances in Seattle, Johnson's velocity dipped on Friday night. He was placed on the 10-day injured list with elbow inflammation on Saturday.

"I didn't feel right on the mound yesterday, just didn't feel comfortable," he said. "It was a curveball I threw. It was more of a one-pitch thing and I just kept going."

"I just felt like I couldn't really finish. I ultimately knew I needed to stay out there. Probably now looking back they would probably advise me to call somebody out. But at that point I felt like I could save some arms."

Johnson has no idea how long he'll be out of action and said there has been no testing done on his arm.

Right-hander Marcus Walden was recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket to take his place on the roster. Walden made the team out of spring last year, though he pitched just 14- $\frac{2}{3}$ innings with a 3.68 ERA with the big league club, spending most of the year in the minors.

Position players pitching

When manager Alex Cora approached Eduardo Nunez about pitching in the eighth inning of a blowout loss on Friday, he did it with a bit of jealousy.

Cora never got to make a relief appearance during his big league career.

“I always wanted to do that,” Cora said. “At one point in my career we were in Baltimore in 2008 and Tito asked me to go to the bullpen and get ready and I was like, ‘yeah, I can do this.’ I went to the bullpen to get ready and I think David Ortiz hit a home run, so instead of being down seven we were down five. Tito felt like we were down five, we had a shot. I wasn’t able to come in.

“It wasn’t fun in a sense, but you know what, let’s make the best out of it. It’s not the first team that’s done it, not going to be the last team. Hopefully we don’t have to do it again.”

Why Nunez instead of Mitch Moreland, who pitched in college, or catcher Christian Vazquez, who has a strong arm?

“Mitch fouled a ball off his knee the other day so I didn’t feel comfortable putting him out there,” Cora said. “I knew about the Brock situation. It’s like we were running out of position players, too. Christian was the other option but he had surgery a couple years ago so I’m not going to go that route.

“Eduardo is a team player. He understood why. It was funny. Now we can laugh. That 2-2 count he wanted to throw a slider. He said Blake Swihart didn’t call it so he went with a fastball. He gives a home run so he comes in the dugout and he’s like, ‘Blake, why did you call a fastball?’ He’s a pro.”

Travel not an excuse

The Red Sox aren’t using travel as an excuse for their bad start, despite going from Florida to Arizona to finish spring training, then to Seattle to begin an 11-game West Coast trip to start the year.

“Seattle went to Japan and they’re, what, 8-1?” Cora said. “This is the big leagues. We don’t travel in middle seats. We don’t stay in motels. The way they treat us in the clubhouse is five stars. It’s what the schedule says. It’s 11 games in a row on the road. But we’re not making excuses. We just aren’t playing well.”

What is Cora telling his team right now?

“Show up, keep showing up,” he said. “Don’t forget about this. We’re going to get to a point that we play good baseball. Hopefully it starts today. Just talking to the guys, we’re going to start playing better. We’re going to be the team everybody feels we’re supposed to be. We’re going to look back like, ‘you know what, it wasn’t fun in the beginning but you look back and you learn from it and move on.’

“The joy and having fun, it’s amazing how many texts I’ve gotten in the last two days. My brother texted me today, ‘don’t forget it’s a game, keep having fun.’ I’m like, ‘Joey, we’re good, relax.’ It’s always cool that people are so worried about us. That’s part of the process. I keep telling the guys, we’re going to be fine. We’re going to play good baseball. We’ll look back at this road trip and be like, ‘wow, we were that bad.’”

Beware the Tampa Bay Rays in American League East

Michael Silverman

Tuesday’s home opener marks a stretch of four series in a row – Blue Jays and Orioles at Fenway, then Yankees and the Rays on the road – in which the Red Sox will face their four AL East opponents for the first time this season. The Red Sox play each of the four teams 19 times a season for a total of 76 games, which is essentially half their schedule. As the Red Sox begin their quest for their fourth divisional title in a row – an important mission, since it will eliminate them from a wild card chase – the question to be asked

is, is there a team out there who poses a real threat to the Red Sox? There most certainly is, and it's not just the Yankees.

Each of the four intra-divisional foes has its own strengths and flaws but make no mistake that the strengths of three teams – Red Sox, Yankees and Rays – outweigh by a sizable margin whatever strong-points Baltimore and Toronto possess.

Let's take a look at what and who's in store for the Red Sox in the AL East, going in order of the schedule:

BLUE JAYS

Last year: 73-89, 4th in AL East

Red Sox 2018 record vs. Toronto: 15-4. Runs scored: 108; runs against: 77.

Look out below. In the last two weeks alone, the Blue Jays have traded away two key veterans – DH Kendrys Morales to Oakland and center fielder Kevin Pillar to San Francisco – and there's no telling who will or will not be on the roster by the time the team shows up in Boston on Tuesday. The team is in full-fledged rebuild mode and while a few recognizable faces such as Justin Smoak, Marcus Stroman and Aaron Sanchez remain, few believe that the Blue Jays will not be shopping them or at least listening to offers for them as the season goes along. There are two very good players in the lineup, right fielder Randal Grichuk and second baseman Lourdes Gurriel Jr., each of whom is capable of a breakout season.

Rookie hitting sensation Vladimir Guerrero Jr. will not be with the team this early in the season, not with that oblique injury of his that was conveniently timed, for Toronto's purposes, so that he will not need to be called up before May and at a time where the Blue Jays will be able to squeeze an extra year of service time from him before he enters free agency. Both spring training games between the Red Sox and Blue Jays were rained out so nobody got a close look at him, but there certainly appears to be universal agreement that he possesses offensive skills way beyond his years. He has a thick body, to be kind, and the Blue Jays will have to be conscious of his conditioning for the rest of his career, but in another year or two we should all be singing his actual versus potential praises. By late May, when the Red Sox play the Blue Jays again, Guerrero should be up and playing. Whether or not Toronto will have been mathematically eliminated from the playoffs by then remains to be seen as well.

Good luck to Charlie Montoyo, one of the two new skippers in the division.

ORIOLES

Last year: 47-115, 5th in AL East

Red Sox 2018 record vs. Baltimore: 16-3. Runs scored: 127; runs against: 66.

Does everyone understand how difficult it is to win only 47 games over the course of a six-month, 162-game baseball season? It's the equivalent of going 8-19 each month, a mind-numbing rate of failure that in a Stranger Things-like world of reverse logic is worthy of praise for how the Orioles finished last season. And the funny thing is, there is no reason to believe that 2019 bodes any better for Baltimore. You'll be hard-pressed to recognize many Orioles at the plate or on the mound, what with Manny Machado and Jonathan Schoop long gone, and now Adam Jones gone too. One name who stayed is Chris Davis, the same Chris Davis who slugged .296 and hit 16 home runs last year, the latest piece of evidence in his alarming decline from when he was a legitimate slugger. He is signed for four more seasons, while this will be the last year for another faded slugger, Mark Trumbo. Ex-Royal Alcides Escobar lost his shortstop job to Richie Martin, who leads a cast of young unknowns whom the Orioles hope will form their core three or four years down the road.

On the mound, disappointing Dylan Bundy and underwhelming Alex Cobb and Andrew Cashner will be tasked with keeping their ERA's below 5.00 as they face formidable lineups in and out of their division.

Brandon Hyde is the other rookie manager in the division. The smart money shouts that both Hyde and Montoyo are not going to enjoy as much success as Alex Cora did in his rookie season a year ago. The best

futures bet might be if the combined wins of Toronto and Baltimore top the win total of the top AL East team this year.

YANKEES

Last year: 100-62, 2nd in AL East

Red Sox 2018 record vs. New York: 10-9. Runs scored: 116, Runs against: 102.

Assuming you didn't skip ahead, your excruciating wait to find out what's in store from the Yankees is over. And assuming you don't want to read glowing things about the Yankees, you might be in more luck than you think. Had these words been written before the season, that wouldn't be the case. But a rash of early injuries has stalled what many have felt was the Yankees' best shot in years to finally overtake the Red Sox atop the AL East, especially with the Red Sox off to their own slow start. But the Yankees' entire roster is enduring an ongoing barrage of health problems. Their best starter, Luis Severino, did not pitch in spring training and is out until at least early May, with CC Sabathia out for another week or so with his recurring knee injury. In their outstanding bullpen, Dellin Betances has a right shoulder issue that could keep him out for another week or two, and then there is the position player MASH unit. Slugger Giancarlo Stanton (biceps) is out until early next month, with shortstop Troy Tulowitzki (calf) and Aaron Hicks (back) out for an undetermined amount of time. And then there's third baseman Miguel Andujar, who has a labrum tear in his shoulder. If Andujar, who finished second in AL Rookie of the Year voting last year, responds to rest and rehab, he's out for a few more weeks. If he doesn't respond, then he'll have surgery and miss the rest of the season.

The Yankees lineup still has Aaron Judge, Gary Sanchez and Luke Voit, but a third of the starting nine is out of commission early, plus there are the pitching woes which, combined, make the Yankees outlook for the first month or two look on paper worse than what's afflicted the Red Sox. This is still an immensely talented team, and the addition of starter James Paxton and reliever Zack Britton were particularly savvy moves from Brian Cashman to shore up the pitching staff's weak spots. There's always the possibility that the flurry of blows this early in the season could add up to some sort of death by a thousand paper-cuts. Or maybe the injuries to Severino, Stanton and Andujar in particular linger longer than expected. But the Yankees have seldom been timid when it comes to making moves that can help them in the short-run when they think they have a chance.

With the Red Sox looking vulnerable early, and the two punching bags in Toronto and Baltimore, a healthier Yankees team by the end of May will be a far more dangerous team than it is now. In other words, don't be lulled into a false sense of complacency from the current rough patch the Bronx Bombers are in right now. They'll be back.

RAYS

Last year: 90-72, 3rd in AL East.

Red Sox 2018 record vs. Tampa Bay: 11-8. Runs scored: 72, Runs against: 80.

Even before the Red Sox stumbled out of the gate and the Yankees stepped on a rake, this was the team to keep an eye on in the division and that's even more the case now. In other words, if you are in a state where sports betting is legal, a wager on the Rays to sneak to the top of the AL East standings at season's end is a wise one given the steep but shortening odds. The Rays have the best starter in the league (until proven otherwise) in Blake Snell, plus the perennially underappreciated Charlie Morton and up-and-coming Tyler Glasnow in the rotation behind him. They will still use an "opener," usually Ryan Stanek, this season, with soft-tossing Ryan Yarbrough getting starts as well, but this is a team with a deep pitching staff. The bullpen, featuring Stanek, Jose Alvarado and Diego Castillo is a hard-throwing unit that was successfully tested last season. This staff was as good as what the Red Sox and Yankees had last year.

Nobody in the lineup is likely to vie for an MVP award, but it there are a few like Tommy Pham, Avisail Garcia, Austin Meadows and Mike Zunino who each could take strides all at once.

This was the best team in the division last September, when it went 19-9, and its 41-25 second-half record was on par with the Red Sox at 40-24. Their biggest need is in the lineup. Should they be able to maintain

their current pace of play and take advantage of how the Red Sox and Yankees started, the Rays, with one of the best farm systems in all of baseball, could – and hopefully will – opt to go for it by adding another bat this summer. If they click on that, then we’ve truly got a “watch out” type of team.

*** *MassLive.com***

Alex Cora explains using Colten Brewer instead of Matt Barnes in ninth inning

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Red Sox manager Alex Cora chose Colten Brewer to pitch the ninth inning even though Matt Barnes, his best reliever, still was available.

Barnes has allowed one hit and no walks while striking out four in 2.1 scoreless innings so far. Brewer entered having allowed one hit and four walks while striking out six in 3.2 scoreless innings.

“Where they were in the lineup. The way he (Brewer) has been throwing the ball. We liked him there,” Cora said. “We thought the matchups were good for us. It just didn’t work out.”

The Red Sox lost 5-4 to the Diamondbacks here at Chase Field.

Brewer entered with the fifth, sixth and seventh spots in the Diamondbacks batting order due. Alex Avila pinch hit in the fifth spot, which had become the pitchers’ spot. Brewer struck out Avila.

Eduardo Escobar followed with a single to right field and reached second on Christian Vazquez’s passed ball.

Nick Ahmed, an East Longmeadow High grad, singled to right. But Mookie Betts threw out Escobar at the plate for the second out.

With Ahmed at second base and two outs, Carson Kelly ripped a walkoff single to left field against Brewer.

“I was basically just trying to get a groundball and get out of the inning,” Brewer said about the Kelly at-bat. “Maybe weak contact, maybe a swing-and-miss. But he ended up shooting it to left field.”

Boston Red Sox lose on Carson Kelly’s walkoff single after Mookie Betts threw out Eduardo Escobar at home on previous play

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — The Red Sox dropped to 2-8 one play after Mookie Betts had extended the game with a tremendous throw to the plate.

Diamondbacks’ Eduardo Escobar singled to right field with one out. He reached second on Christian Vazquez’s passed ball.

Nick Ahmed, an East Longmeadow High grad, singled to right. But Betts threw out Escobar at the plate for the second out.

With Ahmed at second base and two outs, Carson Kelly ripped a walkoff single to left field against Colten Brewer.

Boston lost 5-4 here at Chase Field

David Price pitched 6 innings, allowing four runs, all earned, seven hits and one walk while striking out four. All four runs came in the bottom of the second inning after the Red Sox had scored three times in the top half of the frame. He failed to produce a shutdown inning.

But his defense didn't help him. It appeared Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. experienced another miscommunication, this time on Nick Ahmed's 76.7 mph RBI single to right-center that dropped them.

Betts and Bradley let a ball drop between them during the final game in Oakland. What should have been the final out that fourth inning turned into a 6-3 Oakland lead. They also collided during a game in Seattle.

Red Sox starters remain winless after 10 games. They are 0-7 with a 9.13 ERA (46.1 innings, 47 runs).

Manager Alex Cora pulled Price for a pinch runner at 83 pitches. J.D. Martinez, hitting for Price, ripped a single vs. reliever Yoshihisa Hirano with an 108.2 mph exit velocity to left field, putting runners at the corners with one out.

Andrew Benintendi walked to load the bases. Mookie Betts then delivered a game-tying sacrifice fly to right field.

Price delivers RBI single

David Price recorded the first RBI of his career. The Red Sox starting pitcher hit an 89.1 mph single between first and second base to put the Red Sox ahead 2-0 against the Diamondbacks. It was part of a three-run second inning for Boston.

Price is 4-for-49 (.081) in the regular season and 0-for-3 in the postseason.

Andrew Benintendi followed with a ground-rule double to left field that scored Christian Vazquez who the Diamondbacks intentionally walked with two outs to get to Price.

David Price: Red Sox 'just need to get back home. Our fans will remind us of how good we are'

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — The Red Sox have gone 0-for-3 on their disastrous opening road trip. Three series, three series losses.

They dropped three of four games in both Seattle and Oakland. Boston has dropped the first two games of a three-game series against the Diamondbacks here at Chase Field. The Sox lost 5-4 in walkoff fashion Saturday.

"It's frustrating," David Price said. "Everybody in here is frustrated. We've been through a lot together, this group of guys over the last two and three years. So we'll be OK. I think everybody in here understands that. We've just gotta take it one game at a time like we did last year when we won 108 games and 119 on the season and (were) World Series champions. We just need to get back home. Our fans will remind us of how good we are."

The Red Sox will receive their World Series rings at the home opener Tuesday. But first, they will try to salvage the final game here.

How does Price expect the Fenway crowd to react Tuesday?

"Cheers, I hope," Price said. "I don't think anybody's ever gotten their World Series rings and gotten booed. I think we'll get cheered."

Diamondbacks' Eduardo Escobar singled to right field with one out in the bottom of the ninth. He reached second on Christian Vazquez's passed ball.

Nick Ahmed, an East Longmeadow High grad, singled to right. But Mookie Betts threw out Escobar at the plate for the second out.

With Ahmed at second base and two outs, Carson Kelly ripped a walkoff single to left field against Colten Brewer.

Game over.

"There's no frustration, man," manager Alex Cora said. "We just keep grinding. We show up tomorrow. Hopefully we have a happy flight, go home. See the family on Monday. Hang out with your kids and all that. Kind of put everything into perspective and move forward."

Boston Red Sox lefty David Price first mentioned changing his number to home clubhouse manager Tom McLaughlin approximately halfway through the 2018 season.

Cora doesn't think his players are shocked right now.

"I think they understand that we're not playing good baseball," he said. "If it was kind of like we were playing good and we were getting beat playing good baseball, probably they'd be shocked. But we haven't played well. ... Sometimes it's defense and base running and pitching. Sometimes we don't hit. So I don't think they're in shock."

Cora felt the team played better Saturday.

"We didn't win today but the energy was good," he said. "They grinded out at-bats. They play good defense. They played to the last pitch. We've got to find ways to win ballgames."

Cora won't hold a workout at Fenway Park on Monday. He said players need to see their families and relax.

"I can't wait to see my twins and my daughter," Cora said. "And just hang out and disconnect from the whole madness."

Price was asked about his team's challenging schedule. Boston is opening with 11 games out west after a stop in Arizona to play the Cubs for a pair of spring training games — and after six weeks in Fort Myers.

"I'm not going to complain about the schedule," Price said. "We're the Red Sox. Getaway day is usually night games. We get in at 4 or 5 in the morning. I see the Yankees do it all the time."

Will Dustin Pedroia play for Boston Red Sox on Opening Day at Fenway? 'It might be an option,' Alex Cora says

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia (knee) played nine innings during a rehab game for Low-A Greenville on Thursday, then five innings Friday.

He'll rest Saturday and then play nine innings Sunday. He went 3-for-5 with a double and walk in the two rehab games so far.

The Red Sox will make a decision about the next step for the second baseman after Sunday's game. There's a chance he'll be activated from the injured list for the Red Sox home opener vs. the Blue Jays at 2:05 p.m., Tuesday.

“It might be an option,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said Saturday here at Chase Field.

Assistant athletic trainer Paul Buchheit is evaluating Pedroia’s progress in Greenville.

“See how he holds up, see if he needs more innings,” Cora said. “So far, so good though.”

Pedroia 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 in late July 2018 in Arizona.

Brian Johnson elbow injury: Boston Red Sox pitcher to visit doctor Monday after feeling discomfort when he threw a curveball

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Brian Johnson, who the Red Sox have placed on the 10-day injured list with elbow inflammation, experienced discomfort after throwing a curveball Friday. But he remained in the game.

“I knew the bullpen needed it,” Johnson said. “Once adrenaline kind of takes over, I just kept going.”

Johnson relieved Rick Porcello who allowed seven runs. Johnson then allowed seven runs in just 1.1 innings. He gave up six hits (two homers) and one walk while striking out two.

“Now looking back they probably would have advised me to call somebody out. But at that point in time, I felt like I could have saved some arms, saved some innings,” Johnson added.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora added, “He’ll see the doctor Monday and then obviously the doctor will decide which tests he’ll go through. We’ll know more Tuesday morning.”

The Red Sox recalled Marcus Walden to take Johnson’s roster spot.

Brock Holt injury: Boston Red Sox’s son scratched dad’s cornea; ‘It’s not funny but it is funny. He walks around and tells everyone he poked me in the eye’

Christopher Smith

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Brock Holt suffered a right eye scratched cornea during Opening Day in Seattle. It didn’t happen during the game though.

The Red Sox placed Holt on the 10-day injured list before Saturday’s game here at Chase Field.

“It was actually a play at the hotel,” Holt explained. “It was the morning of Opening Day. I went and got (son) Griff up out of bed, and I was bringing him back to our bed and one of his fingernails got me good. I thought at the time he just poked me in the eye. But the first two days in Seattle were rough and I was wearing sunglasses inside. And I couldn’t open my right eye.”

He visited an eye doctor in Seattle who placed a contact lense in his right eye to protect the scratch. The doctor also gave him eye drops.

“It’s not funny but it is funny. He (Griffin) walks around and tells everyone he poked me in the eye,” Holt said.

Holt hopes to return in 10 days. The doctor told him the healing process “can vary.”

"I can see but (it's) still a little bit blurry," Holt said. "A blurry spot in my right eye. And I just wasn't able to pick up spin. I wasn't able to do anything in the box. ... I wasn't helping us by being out there. I thought I could play through it."

*** *RedSox.com***

Betts' misplay in the field proves costly for Sox

Jesse Sanchez

PHOENIX – It's a play Mookie Betts makes 80 percent of the time.

It's known as a bloop single, a flare or a "Texas Leaguer," but whatever you choose to call it, the Nick Ahmed single in Arizona's four-run second inning, which landed in front of Betts in right-center field, will be remembered as part of the reason the Red Sox were walked off 5-4 Saturday night at Chase Field. They have now lost eight of their first 10 games to start the season.

It was an uncharacteristic miss for the reigning American League Most Valuable Player, who later threw out Eduardo Escobar at home -- on a base hit by Ahmed in the ninth -- before Carson Kelly's game-winning hit. It's been an unusual start for the defending World Series champions.

"I think [the players] understand that we are not playing good baseball," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "If we were playing good and getting beat playing good baseball, they would be shocked, but we have not played well. Sometimes, it's defense and baserunning and pitching. Sometimes, we don't hit. I don't think they are in shock. We didn't win, but the energy was good."

It's the second time in less than a week that Boston's stellar outfield defense has come up short. On Thursday, in Oakland, a flyball to the warning track dropped between Jackie Bradley Jr. and Betts and landed over the wall for a two-run, ground-rule double in the eventual 7-3 loss to the A's. It was the type of play Bradley makes 99 percent of the time, and Betts makes 95 percent of the time.

What it means, is that a Red Sox pitching staff that has struggled to start the season could use a little more help on defense. In some combination of bad luck, poor defense and unfortunate positioning, Sox pitchers have allowed an expected batting average of .211 -- excluding home runs and based on quality of contact -- but they've allowed an actual average of .234. The gap of 23 points of added production for the opposing hitters is the second-largest in baseball, behind only the Rangers. In other words, Red Sox pitchers are not finding the results that their quality of contact on non-home runs would indicate.

So not only do the Red Sox have to pitch better overall. They have to defend better, too.

In the eventful second, the Red Sox led 3-0 with starter David Price on the mound when D-backs left fielder David Peralta led off the inning with a single. One out later, Escobar followed with a double, and Ahmed's bloop single near Betts drove home Peralta for the home team's first run of the game. Kelly followed with a two-run double to tie the game 3-3.

Betts said he should have caught Ahmed's ball.

"Here, the gaps and everything are so big, you have to play a couple of steps deeper," Betts said of the play in the second inning. "I take responsibility for that. I have to come up with that somehow."

Price struck out the next batter, D-backs starter Luke Weaver, on four pitches, and right fielder Adam Jones drove Kelly home with a base hit to push the D-backs ahead, 4-3.

“Here, with the dimensions, it’s a little bit different,” Cora said. “You have to play deep. From my angle, [Betts] went in and he wasn’t able to catch it. I haven’t seen the video and I haven’t asked Mookie. I’m not getting caught up on that. I’m trying to manage after that.”

In the seventh, the Red Sox tied the game at four on a sacrifice fly by Betts that scored Bradley Jr. Price was charged with four runs on seven hits in six innings -- he struck out four and walked one.

“It’s been one of my Achilles’ heels for a lot of my career, having that one tough inning and it cost me a ball game,” Price said. “Today was tough, but we will keep going.”

The Red Sox will have a day off Monday. They’ll receive their World Series rings Tuesday before the home opener.

“There’s no frustration, we just keep grinding,” Cora said. “We’ll show up [Sunday] and hopefully, we’ll have a happy flight. Go home and see the family on Monday, and hang out with the kids and all of that, and put everything in perspective and move forward.”

Holt, Johnson to IL; Lin, Walden recalled

Jesse Sanchez

PHOENIX – The Red Sox placed infielder/outfielder Brock Holt and left-handed pitcher Brian Johnson on the 10-day injured list on Saturday and recalled infielder/outfielder Tzu-Wei Lin and reliever Marcus Walden from Triple-A Pawtucket.

Holt has a scratched cornea in his right eye that he sustained on the morning of Opening Day in Seattle. Johnson is dealing with left elbow inflammation.

“I went and got [two-year-old son Griffin] up out of bed and was bringing him to our bed, and one of his fingernails got me good,” Holt said. “I thought at the time, he just poked me in the eye, but the first two days in Seattle were rough. I was wearing sunglasses inside, I really couldn’t open my right eye.”

Holt, who is hitting .063 this season in 19 plate appearances, played on Friday night and went 0-for-4. He saw an eye doctor in Seattle and will see another doctor when the club returns to Boston.

“It’s something I’ve been dealing with for a little while now,” Holt said. “I thought it would get better, thought I could play through it, and it hasn’t really cleared up too much. Figured we’d take the 10 days and hopefully, by then, I’ll be able to see a little bit clearer.”

As for Johnson, he has allowed eight earned runs in 5 2/3 innings this season, while posting a 12.71 ERA in four appearances. He pitched 1 1/3 innings on Friday night and allowed seven earned runs -- including two home runs. He’ll also be evaluated again in Boston.

“I didn’t feel right on the mound yesterday. Just didn’t feel comfortable,” Johnson said. “It was more of a one-pitch thing and I just kept going. You feel like you’re out there, you just kind of have the adrenaline going. I know I felt like I needed to be out there.”

It’s the third injured-list stint of Johnson’s Major League career, but his first due to an elbow injury. He spent time on the injured list in 2018 with left hip inflammation and in '17 with a left shoulder impingement.

“It’s never easy when you get hurt, especially when you’re not doing well and feel like you could help,” Johnson said. “It’s frustrating for sure. “

Sunday starter

Hector Velazquez will likely start against the D-backs in the series finale Sunday, manager Alex Cora said.

“He started. He came in relief. He pitched in high-level situations and he was amazing for us,” the manager said of Velazquez. “We trust the guy. ... We need zeros. We need him to pitch well. All outs are welcomed.”

It's been the club's plan all along to plug in a sixth starter on the last day of the 11-game road trip to give the five starters extra rest.

Chris Sale will pitch the home opener Tuesday against the Blue Jays at Fenway Park.

Dustin Pedroia (left knee) remains an option for the club's home opener. The veteran second baseman went 1-for-2 on Friday in five innings with Class A Greenville in his second rehab game with the club. He'll play nine innings Sunday and the Red Sox will likely decide on his status Sunday night.

“We'll see how he holds up or if he needs more innings,” Cora said. “So far, so good.”

He said it

“I'm like, ‘Joey, I'm good, brother. Relax.’ It's always cool that so many people are worried about us. That's part of the process. I keep telling the guys that we will be back, and we will play good baseball. In time we will look back on this road trip and go, ‘We were that bad.’” -- Cora on receiving texts from family and friends reminding him to have fun, and that baseball is just a game after the club's 2-7 start.

*** *WEEI.com***

Red Sox roster moves: Brian Johnson, Brock Holt head to injured list

Rob Bradford

The Red Sox are making some moves.

The team will put both Brian Johnson and Brock Holt on the injured list, calling up Marcus Walden and Tzu-Wei Lin. Johnson's ailment is left elbow inflammation, while Holt is suffering from a scratched cornea his right eye.

Johnson is coming off a rough outing against the Diamondbacks Friday night allowing seven runs in just 1 1/3 innings in relief of starter Rick Porcello. The lefty made four appearances this season.

Holt has struggled in his six games this season, managing just one hit in 16 at-bats. He started in each of the Red Sox' previous four games, manning second base in all but one.

Walden is no stranger to appearing on the Red Sox roster in early April making the Opening Day bullpen last season. The 29-year-old appeared in seven big leagues games in 2018, giving up six earned runs on 14 hits over 14 2/3 innings (making one start).

The righty appeared in the Pawtucket Red Sox' season opener Thursday, pitching 1 2/3 scoreless innings. He also turned in a solid Grapefruit League showing, striking out 13 in his 12 2/3 innings while giving up just two earned runs.

Lin impressed in his 62 games with the Red Sox last season managing a .256 batting average and .728 OPS.

He also was one of the better spring training performers for the Red Sox hitting .321 with a .959 OPS. The 25-year-old infielder went 1-for-4 in the PawSox's opener.

Griff Holt puts his dad on the injured list

Rob Bradford

Griff Holt has been an Instagram star thanks to some of the posts from his father, Brock.

Now he has put his dad in the news.

The Red Sox infielder revealed Saturday that the impetus for the scratch on his right eye was due to some playing around with his 2-year-old on the first day of the regular season.

"It happened on Opening Day," Holt told reporters. "I went and saw an eye doctor in Seattle, got some drops, tried to work through it. I can see, but there's still a little blurry spot in my right eye. I wasn't able to pick up spin. I wasn't able to do anything in the box. Yesterday, I decided, 'Hey, I think I might need to see another eye doctor here or do something.' I wasn't helping us by being out there. I thought I could play through it and do my job. I wasn't able to do that. Hopefully, take the 10 days and come back once those 10 days are up."

Holt added, "It was actually a play at the hotel. The morning of Opening Day, I went and got Griff up out of bed, was bringing him back to our bed, and one of his fingernails got me good. I thought at the time it just poked me in the eye, but the first two days in Seattle were rough. I was wearing sunglasses inside. I couldn't open my right eye. Obviously, I needed to go see an eye doctor. Went to see someone in Seattle. I put a contact lens in it to protect the scratch. Every time I was blinking, it was rubbing, making my eye water. Couldn't really see out of my right eye. Gave me some drops, started clearing up, but my right eye was still pretty blurry in Seattle and then Oakland felt a little bit better, but it's obvious, when I close my left eye, close my right eye, I can tell the difference. It's a freak thing. Like I said, hopefully, the 10 days, it will clear up and I'll be ready after that."

Holt had struggled at the plate throughout the young season, notching just one hit in 16 at-bats while striking out seven times. He had started the previous four games before being placed on the injured list Saturday.

"It's not funny, but it is funny," he told reporters. "He walks around and tells everyone he poked me in the eye. Being a dad, he got me. It's something I thought I could play through and still be able to do my job, but the vision in my right eye is really different. It was obviously affecting me on the field. I don't want to be out there if I can't help us."

Tzu-Wei Lin replaced Holt on the 25-man roster.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: The Red Sox' poor start, through the eyes of an opposing scout

Sean McAdam

On the beleaguered starting rotation: "I think the big thing that I saw from the starting pitching primarily was, they're all missing a lot to the middle of the plate. You've got to give credit to the A's and Mariners hitters — they made them pay almost every time when they left pitches out over the middle. They had the right game plan and laid off the stuff around the edges.

I know they're kind of slow-playing (Chris) Sale and he's holding back a little with the velo, but watching him, there's a lot of shoulder involved (in his delivery). In the past, he was more free and whip-like and he wasn't getting that same extension at the end. That tells me that he's got some discomfort in the shoulder area.

With (Nathan) Eovaldi, his stuff is good. But personally, I think he throws too many (different) pitches. I would have him simplify his repertoire. Pick certain games and focus on an opponents' weakness and tailor to that lineup. The stuff's good and that cutter is wicked. But he's kind of all over the map and while that can be good if you've mastered all of them, it can be a lot to deal with. When he misses location, especially with his fastball, they hit it because it's straight.

I know (Rick) Porcello hasn't gotten the results, but I've really liked Porcello. He pitches aggressive in and I like his mix. He's got good stuff, but he can really pitch. Obviously, he hasn't shown good command. He's missing out over the plate and that's unusual for him; he's usually around the edges. I'm fairly confident he's going to get it back. You don't lose that unless there's an injury or a real mechanical issue, and I haven't seen either."

On the catching tandem: "From the games I saw, the pitchers just appear more comfortable with (Christian) Vazquez. With the experience he has, the game just flows better with him behind the plate. I don't know if that's in any of the pitchers' heads, but that's what it looked like. You look at the two of them and one of them looks like he's sitting on the couch, watching TV and the other (Blake Swihart) is stiffer, with a little more edge, not as smooth. Maybe that will change the most (Swihart) catches."

On the defensive sloppiness: That ball dropping in between (Mookie) Betts and (Jackie) Bradley Jr., that was more of a mental mistake, an outlier. I don't think you'll see that again. In the infield, (Rafael) Devers still can be inconsistent with his throws. He had a feed to second and pulled the second baseman off the bag. I can't say it's careless. It's just this his arm will drop. I don't know if that's by design, but they need to get rid of that and get him back to three-quarter release. When the arm drops, it drags a bit. I do see him moving better to his left. On balls to his right, he bends at the waist rather than getting down on his legs a little bit."

On the offense: Mookie's at-bats have been the best on the team, even if he hasn't gotten the results (until Friday). He just hasn't centered the ball as much. He's gotten a little bit under it, or gotten out and around it. But the plate discipline and the way he's been staying in the zone? He was very impressive without producing the way he usually does."

On the "intangibles": I spoke to some friends on the coaching staff and they told me there's been no World Series hangover, or that sort of thing. They're happy with the work that's been put in. They told me that these guys showed up (in spring training) ready to win another World Series. It's just that the inconsistency is rearing its head. There's a few mechanical things with individual guys and as Alex (Cora) said, the "paying attention to details." I think those little things have contributed to the poor start. It's just that everything's a little off-center, you know? I think that's what Alex was getting at (in his comments following Thursday's loss in Oakland). When you make some mistakes and still win, sometimes the details get covered up. They don't look as bad when you win the game. They're in a serious rut right now. It's like they're all waiting around and thinking, 'What's going to happen today to lead to a big inning? What mistake is going to cost us?' It's that snowball effect, the 'doom-and-gloom.' They're going to figure it out soon enough. There's too much talent for them not to."

The one consolation for the Red Sox so far is that the Yankees are just 4-4 themselves, beset by a rash of injuries that appear almost biblical in nature.

Here are the players currently on the DL for the Yanks: Starting pitchers Luis Severino and CC Sabathia; reliever Dellin Betances; infielders Troy Tulowitzki, Didi Gregorius and Miguel Andujar; outfielder Aaron Hicks, Giancarlo Stanton and (naturally) Jacoby Ellsbury.

That's a staggering list, featuring 40 percent of the projected starting rotation, the entire left side of the infield with a spare player to boot, one starting outfielder, a DH and a key high-leverage reliever.

Other than that, the Yankees are completely healthy.

Some injuries appear relatively short-term in nature. Others are more troubling in their severity and duration. Gregorius (Tommy John surgery) is out until at least mid-season, Stanton (left biceps strain) isn't expected back until early May and Severino (shoulder inflammation) has the same timetable.

Tulowitzki (calf strain) is tougher to predict for a return, but given his history of lower-leg injuries — he missed more than a season and a half with heel injuries, requires two surgeries — it's an ominous development.

Andujar, who finished second in the Rookie of the Year voting last year, has a small tear in his labrum and is hopeful that rehab will allow him to avoid season-ending surgery.

All of which has combined to lead the Yankees to a 3-4 start. Sure, the Tampa Bay Rays are off to a 6-2 start and remain a potential playoff team. But given the choice between the Rays streaking to a quick start and the Yankees, the Sox would far prefer trying to play catchup to the Rays.

Is it finally coming together for former Red Sox prospect Yoan Moncada?

The first week or so of the season suggests it might be. Moncada, who, along with Michael Kopech, was the centerpiece of the deal the Sox made with Chicago to obtain Sale, underachieved in his first full season with the White Sox.

But through the first six games this year, Moncada was slashing .458/.519/.875 with two homers and four doubles.

The most important number, however, might be this: just four strikeouts in six games. Moncada has become far more selective and has swung at far fewer pitches out of the strike zone.

Last year, Moncada fanned a stunning 217 times, the most in the majors. His whiff rate was 33.4 percent. But this season, a more selective approach has him making more consistent contact, and hitting the ball hard when he does, with an average exit velocity of 96.1 mph.

"He's been having really good at-bats," teammate Jon Jay told reporters. "You see him working pitches and swinging at strikes, and that's the name of the game. He's just doing a really good job of controlling the zone right now. He's not chasing pitches."

For the better part of the last decade, Double-A has been the real prospect level in pro ball, with Triple-A evolving more in a collection of 4A veterans and serving almost as a taxi squad for the big league team.

That being the case, Portland is where to head this spring and summer if you want to check out the future of the Red Sox.

On the Sea Dogs' Opening Day roster were starting pitchers Darwinzon Hernandez, Tanner Houck and Denyi Reyes, closer Durbin Feltman, third baseman Bobby Dalbec, shortstop C.J. Chatham.

That represents — depending on the list — five of the top nine prospects in the organization and six of the 20.

It's not inconceivable that Hernandez and Feltman could receive call-ups to Boston in the second half of the season, depending, of course, on their development.

The Sox are loathe to rush young pitchers, but as they've demonstrated in recent seasons, aren't afraid to double jump players straight from Double-A to the big leagues. Andrew Benintendi came directly from

Portland in 2016 and a year later, Devers nearly did as well, stopping for a brief six-game stint in Pawtucket in between his time in Portland and his graduation to Boston.

Top 3/The List

In honor of the freakish display put on by Oakland A's center fielder Ramon Laureano earlier this week — who cut down three Red Sox baserunners on the basepaths in the span of four games — I thought I'd list the three best Red Sox outfield throwing arms of my lifetime:

1. Dwight Evans. Evans remains the gold standard by which all Red Sox outfield arms are judged. He patrolled the big expanse in right as well as anyone and his arm was a strong deterrent. In 19 seasons in the outfield, he amassed 157 assists, a figure which undoubtedly would have been far bigger had not his well-earned reputation stopped so many baserunners from even thinking about running on him.
2. Reggie Smith In terms of pure arm strength, Smith might deserve the top spot here. Most outfielders with plus-arms are usually stationed in right, but Smith mostly played center in his time in Boston. Legend has it that he once, on a dare, stood in front of the Red Sox dugout and fired the ball over the screen that sat atop the left field wall. Twice in the span of three years (in 1969 and again in 1971), Smith racked up 14 assists while patrolling center in Fenway.
3. Jackie Bradley Jr. Bradley is capable of some off-target throws for sure, but he also possesses an incredibly powerful arm, capable of unleashing missiles from the triangle to limit advances by baserunners.

Honorable mention: Carl Yastrzemski

Also given consideration: Mark Whiten, Andre Dawson.

Both players had tremendously strong throwing arms in their prime, though Whiten could be erratic. But by the time they arrived in Boston, Dawson was 38 and his knees were shot, limiting him to a mere 20 games in the outfield over two seasons. Whiten, meanwhile, was around only long enough to play 31 games in right in 1995 — and still racked up four assists.

Not given consideration: Jose Tartabull. Who, as Ned Martin reminded us, had a “weak arm, coming on...” Just don't try telling that to Ken Berry.

BSJ Game Report: Diamondbacks 5, Red Sox 4 – Red Sox blow another three-run lead

Sean McAdam

Another three-run lead blown: This has become almost habit-forming for the Red Sox. It happened last Sunday in Seattle, when the Sox scored three times in the top of the first, only to have that wiped out by the third inning. It happened again on Thursday, with two quick runs in the first and another in the third, again lost when the A's answered with a three-run homer in the third. And Saturday night, another three-run lead — this one in the top of the second — didn't last for a whole inning as David Price gave up four in the bottom of the inning. There was so much focus on the bullpen at the start of the season, with the fear that it wouldn't protect late-inning leads. That hasn't been the case for the relievers — in part because they haven't been given many leads. The problem, instead, has been the starters coughing up early-inning leads. Rick Porcello did it last Sunday, followed by Eduardo Rodriguez on Thursday and Price on Saturday. If the Sox had merely held on to those leads, they'd be at .500 right now. Instead, those blown leads have resulted in morale-sapping defeats and their current hideous 2-8 record on this first road trip.

Losing streaks piling up: A year ago, the Red Sox managed to avoid long losing streaks for the entire season. They went the whole way without having a losing streak of more than three games. But this year is a completely different story. Through the first 10 games, they've already had a four-game streak and have a three-game in the works. Should they lose the road trip finale, they'll have two four-game losing streaks

before they play their first game at Fenway. Also, regardless of what happens Sunday, the Sox have already lost each of the first three series. Know how long it took them to lose their third series last season? May 10. Talk about turning the page. The Red Sox were a consistent team last year, avoiding long droughts. Much of that, of course, can be credited to the starting rotation, which managed to keep them in most games. That hasn't been the case this year. Through the first 10 games, the Sox haven't had a pitcher get through the sixth inning and don't have a win from any of their five starting pitchers.

Lineup not 'doing damage': As demanding as this trip has been for the Red Sox, they haven't exactly faced a series of Cy Young Award winners from the Mariners, A's and Diamondbacks. And yet, after a pretty good start (offensively, at least) when they averaged six runs per game in Seattle, the Sox haven't been beating up some average-at-best pitching. Luke Weaver is an inexperienced starter in a hitter's ballpark, but other than a stretch in the second inning, the Red Sox did little against him. Boston scored three runs in the second, but thereafter, sent one batter over the minimum to the plate over the next four innings — three of them against Weaver. Of the six hits the Red Sox collected, five were singles. One extra-base hit in a bandbox like Chase Field? That's not nearly good enough.

TURNING POINT

The Sox managed to tie the game at 4-4 in the seventh with a sacrifice fly from Mookie Betts but should have gotten more out of the inning. They had the bases loaded with one out and the 2-3-4 hitters due. But after the Betts' sac fly, the Sox got a walk from pinch-hitter Mitch Moreland to re-load the bases and then Xander Bogaerts left the bags stranded with a force-out at second. It marked the fourth time in the last three games the Sox left the bases loaded.

TWO UP

Andrew Benintendi: Back in the leadoff spot for the second straight day, Benintendi is swinging a hot bat. He had an RBI double in the second, a single in the fifth and a walk in the seventh.

Brandon Workman: Workman retired the Diamondbacks 1-2-3 in the seventh inning. In four scoreless appearances, he's faced 13 hitters and retired all but one while piling up six strikeouts.

TWO DOWN

Christian Vazquez: He was 0-for-3 with two strikeouts and also committed a passed ball in the ninth, putting a baserunner in scoring position.

Jackie Bradley Jr.: Bradley is really scuffling at the plate. On Saturday night, he was 0-for-3, including two hitless at-bats with runners in scoring position.

QUOTE OF NOTE

"That's been one of my Achilles heels for a lot of my career — having that one tough inning — and it cost me the ballgame." David Price.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

David Price collected his first career RBI with a second-inning single to right.
J.D. Martinez extended his hitting streak to 10 games with a pinch-hit single in the seventh.
The game marked the first time this season that Red Sox pitchers didn't allow a home run.

UP NEXT

The last game of the road trip — mercifully, for the Sox — will see RHP Hector Velazquez (0-0, 4.76) vs. RHP Merrill Kelly (1-0, 4.50).

*** *The Arizona Republic***

Carson Kelly's game-winning hit lifts Diamondbacks over Red Sox

Nick Piccoro

Carson Kelly wasn't just buried behind Yadier Molina during his time in St. Louis. He was buried by bad results. Kelly is barely more than a dozen at-bats into a new season with a new organization, but already he has tasted something unfamiliar to him at the major league level.

Kelly is producing. And he likes how it feels.

"It's a good feeling, it really is," Kelly said after delivering his second game-winning hit of the season – and his first walk-off hit – in the Diamondbacks' 5-4 win over the Boston Red Sox on Saturday night at Chase Field.

"Realistically, in past years, I haven't really started off hot. I wouldn't say I'm considered hot now, but I'm a big believer in my routine right now and I'm sticking with it."

In beating the Red Sox for the second time in as many days, the Diamondbacks assured themselves a series victory over the defending World Series champs. They also pulled themselves over the .500 mark for the first time. They are 5-4 after nine games.

Are you a sports fan? Stay in the know. Subscribe to azcentral.com today.

Kelly was one of the stars of the night. In the second, he stayed back on a David Price change-up and drove it into left-center for a game-tying, two-run double. Then in the ninth, only minutes after a deflating Diamondbacks out at the plate, Kelly ripped the game-winning single into left field.

For Kelly, it was a moment that seemed to resonate. For three seasons with the St. Louis Cardinals, he was blocked behind one of the game's best and most durable catchers in Molina. There were only a handful of stretches in which Kelly started back-to-back games. It figured his fortunes would change for the better when he was sent to the Diamondbacks in December as part of the Paul Goldschmidt trade.

So far, the situation he has found himself in hasn't been drastically different. He has started just three times in nine games. But he said he feels so good with the pregame routine he has established that he believes he's staying ready to produce despite the limited action.

Carson Kelly knew he needed to remain calm when his opportunity came to win the game with a walk-off hit Saturday for the Arizona Diamondbacks. Mark Faller, azcentral.com sports

Kelly said he is strict about what time he gets to the ballpark and what time he heads outside to the field. He is particular about when he'll stretch and hit in the cage in the afternoon. He stopped short of comparing himself to Dodgers' Clayton Kershaw, a known freak when it comes to his start day schedule, but Kelly said his routine is working for him.

He also is hopeful that with more success will come more opportunities. Manager Torey Lovullo said that with three catchers on his roster he doesn't want anyone getting "stale," but he also left the door open for the playing time situation to fluctuate as the season progresses.

"It's sticking with the approach each day, the routine and continuing to learn and grow," Kelly said. "I'm 24 years old. There's a lot to learn. It's really good to see the success early and get the opportunity to come through for my team."

Luke Weaver overcame tough second inning to keep Diamondbacks in tight game against Boston Red Sox Saturday night. Mark Faller, azcentral sports

Diamondbacks right-hander Luke Weaver, who came over with Kelly in the Goldschmidt trade, didn't see anything on Saturday night he hadn't already seen from Kelly during their days together in the Cardinals' farm system.

"I've seen that man hit," Weaver said. "He just needs the at-bats. I think more than anything he needs to have that confidence to get up there and not take too much time off. He kind of fell into a trap where he wasn't getting many at-bats. It's hard to hit like that."

Kelly has only 13 at-bats, but he already has four hits, a far cry from the slow starts he experienced during his previous big league stints.

With the game tied at 4, the Diamondbacks thought they had the game-winning hit when, with a runner on second, Nick Ahmed shot a single into right field with one out. Eduardo Escobar motored around third and headed home, where Mookie Betts' throw beat him to the plate by roughly 10 feet.

"Your heart stops when you have a runner thrown out at home plate," Lovullo said. "It didn't stop us. I was really proud of the way we just kept pressing on."

Ahmed was alert enough to advance to second on Betts' throw, setting up Kelly's game-winner.

"He does so many little things during the course of a game that not many people see, such as that," Lovullo said of Ahmed. "But they all add up. All those little things get you those big moments."

Kelly followed by pulling a 1-1 fastball from Red Sox reliever Colten Brewer into left for the walk-off hit. He also delivered a go-ahead double into right field at Dodger Stadium in the club's season-opening series last week.

"You're starting to see what he's got in the tank," Weaver said. "We'll take a lot more of those."

*** *Associated Press***

Red Sox fall, tie worst start in team history at 2-8

PHOENIX -- Carson Kelly watched teammate Eduardo Escobar get thrown out at home plate on Nick Ahmed's hit in the bottom of the ninth inning. Kelly was on deck, and the play served as motivation for the Arizona Diamondbacks catcher.

Kelly then drilled a single into the left-field corner, scoring Ahmed with two outs to lift the Diamondbacks over the struggling Boston Red Sox 5-4 on Saturday night.

"You want to get it done even more. Nick did a great job. We were that close," Kelly said. "It gave me that little extra boost to maybe hit it over the third baseman."

Boston dropped its third straight and fell to 2-8 overall, matching its worst start through 10 games in franchise history, most recently done in 2011, according to ESPN Stats & Information research. The 2011 Red Sox opened 2-8 and came back to win 90 games but missed the playoffs.

Colten Brewer (0-1) allowed consecutive singles to Escobar, Ahmed and Kelly in the ninth. Right fielder Mookie Betts threw out Escobar at home on Ahmed's hit, but Kelly's liner to left allowed Ahmed to score easily.

Ahmed had taken second on the throw home from Betts.

"I thought I threw some good pitches in there, but they were ready for them, I think," Brewer said. "I threw [Kelly] a two-seam in and he just turned on it."

Kelly had two hits and three RBIs. The game-ending hit was the first of his career.

"Your heart stops when you have a runner thrown out at home plate ... but that didn't stop us," Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo said. "I was really proud the way we kept pressing on."

Greg Holland (1-0) pitched a scoreless inning for the win.

The Diamondbacks led 4-3 after two innings, but neither team scored again until the seventh. Jackie Bradley Jr. drew a leadoff walk against Yoshihisa Hirano and went to third on J.D. Martinez's pinch-hit single. Andrew Benintendi drew a walk, and Betts drove in the tying run with a sacrifice fly.

The Red Sox loaded the bases against one of Arizona's top relievers, Archie Bradley, but he got Xander Bogaerts to ground into an inning-ending fielder's choice.

Boston starter David Price worked six innings, allowing four runs and seven hits with four strikeouts.

Luke Weaver improved from his last start for Arizona, giving up three runs, five hits and two walks with four strikeouts over five innings. Weaver yielded four earned runs in 4½ innings against the Dodgers on March 30.

The Red Sox scored the game's first three runs in the second. Bogaerts led off with a walk and went to third with heads-up baserunning on a single to shallow center by Rafael Devers. Eduardo Nunez's groundout scored Bogaerts, and one out later, Devers came home on Price's single past first base. That was Price's first career RBI and his fourth hit in 50 at-bats.

Benintendi hit a ground-rule double to center field, scoring Christian Vazquez to make it 3-0.

The Diamondbacks took the lead in the next half-inning. Ahmed singled in David Peralta from third base with one out, and Kelly followed with a two-run double. Adam Jones singled in Kelly, who crossed home before a close play on Jones at second base. Jones was first called safe at second, but the Red Sox challenged and the play was reviewed and overturned.

"That's been one of my Achilles' heels for a lot of my career, having that one tough inning, and it cost me a ballgame," Price said. "We just need to get back home, and our fans will remind us how good we are."

Red Sox manager Alex Cora tried to keep things positive.

"It's not perfect right now, obviously, but the quality of the at-bats were better today," Cora said, vowing the defending champs will be fine. "They kept fighting. ... There's no frustration. We just keep grinding."

ROOF IT

The retractable roof at Chase Field opened with no problems as the top of the fourth inning got underway. The roof malfunctioned Friday during the Diamondbacks' home opener.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: INF-OF Brock Holt and LHP Brian Johnson were placed on the 10-day injured list. Holt has a scratched cornea in his right eye, and Johnson has left elbow inflammation. ... INF Tzu-Wei Lin and RHP Marcus Walden were called up from Triple-A Pawtucket. Lin grounded out as a pinch hitter in the ninth.

Diamondbacks: LHP T.J. McFarland (shoulder) threw 20 pitches in a simulated game and Lovullo was encouraged. ... RHP Taijuan Walker is set for a 40-pitch bullpen as he comes back from elbow surgery a little less than a year ago.

UP NEXT

Diamondbacks RHP Merrill Kelly (1-0) is set for his second start of the season Sunday against Boston. He allowed three runs in six innings at San Diego to earn the win. Cora said RHP Hector Velazquez, who has appeared in three games as a reliever this season, will start for Boston.