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Rick Porcello shouldn't be defined by down season

Peter Abraham

Rick Porcello has one start remaining this season, on Wednesday at Texas. It should not be his last with the Red Sox.

Porcello pitched six scoreless innings against the Tampa Bay Rays on Friday night, coming out of the game with a 2-0 lead. He then watched three relievers give up three runs in the seventh inning.

That's the kind of season it has been for Porcello and the Red Sox, who went on to lose, 5-4, in 11 innings.

The Sox were officially eliminated from playoff contention before their game was over. The remaining nine games have been rendered meaningless, except to get a better gauge on which players on the roster the team thinks can help next season.

Porcello should be on that list. He's 13-12 with an ugly 5.56 earned run average but has given the Sox 168⅓ innings. That's second on the team to Eduardo Rodriguez, who has a career-best 191⅓ with two starts left.

Since 2015, his first season with the Sox, Porcello's 958 innings are fourth in majors. Only Max Scherzer (1,055⅔), Justin Verlander (993), and Zack Greinke (991⅓) have more.

Porcello is obviously not in the same class of pitcher as Scherzer, Verlander, and Greinke. But the righthander has been on the disabled list once in the last five seasons and missed only five starts. He's 22nd in franchise history with 158 starts.

There's value in taking the ball every five games and working deep into games. Prior to this season, Porcello had a 4.19 ERA with the Sox. This season has been a clear outlier.

Porcello is at the end of a four-year, \$82.5 million deal and could be agreeable to a one-year deal at a modest salary with an option based on games started.

He turns 31 in December, young enough to believe he can recapture what allowed him to go 17-7 with a 4.28 ERA in 2018.

"I just want to pitch and I'd love to come back here," Porcello said. "You want to finish strong and try to leave a good impression."

Porcello has given up two runs on eight hits over 11 innings in his last two starts and struck out 12 with one walk. That doesn't begin to erase what came before, but it offers proof he can make the needed adjustments.

Porcello had gone back to his two-seam sinking fastball, working that pitch down in the strike zone instead of using four-seam fastballs up.

The idea is that if he can establish the sinker, it makes working up and down or side to side easier. The velocity doesn't necessarily matter as much.

“I’m focusing on trying to get the ball down and create a little more separation. Everything has been blending together in the middle of the plate,” he said. “These last two starts I’ve done a much better job with it.

“I’m going to keep building off it. We’ve had a little bit of success right now and keep going.”

He threw 35 two-seamers Friday night and only seven four-seamers. He also liberally mixed in a slider and changeup to shut down a Rays team fighting for its playoff life.

“He was outstanding again,” manager Alex Cora said. “I’ve been saying all along, regardless of the results Rick is always searching for something to get better. The last two, fastball command has been better and the changeup to lefties and righties has been outstanding. He’s been working hard at it.”

That’s part of the reason the Sox should take a long look at Porcello coming back. Established starting pitchers can be stubborn but he’s willing to adapt as the game changes around him.

The Sox also can’t overlook all those innings and starts. Chris Sale has pitched only 305½ innings the last two seasons and David Price 283½ innings. Sale was shut down this season because of an elbow issue and Price has had a variety of issues, the latest inflammation in his wrist.

Bringing Porcello back offers some security for what could be a hold-your-breath rotation.

“I take a lot of pride in taking the ball every five days and I believe people who understand the game appreciate that,” he said. “It’s the way I’ve always felt as a starter. Go out there and cover as much of the game as you can and get your team a win.”

The smart move for Porcello might be to join a National League team. He’s a good hitter for a pitcher and fields his position well. Put Porcello with a National League West team and the alarming 96 home runs he has allowed over the last three seasons should become less of an issue in those spacious parks.

But he’s also somebody who has proven he can succeed in Boston and that counts.

Wednesday could well be the last time we see Porcello in a Red Sox uniform. Whoever is named to run baseball operations can’t be blamed for wanting to clear the deck of players who underperformed.

Under Dave Dombrowski, the Sox always made the obvious move. Bringing Porcello back certainly isn’t that, which is why it could make sense.

World beaters: Red Sox officially eliminated

Julian McWilliams

The Mitch Moreland homer in the top of the ninth inning off Tampa Bay Rays closer Emilio Pagan didn’t shift the fate of this Red Sox squad. What was done was, in fact, done. Entering the day, a Sox loss or a Cleveland Indians win would eliminate the Red Sox from postseason contention.

As Moreland’s second two-run homer of the game tied the contest, Cleveland won their matchup against the Phillies, 5-2, sealing what’s felt inevitable for the Sox the past two weeks. In the bottom of the 11th inning, Trevor Kelley gave up a walk-off single to Willy Adames and the Sox would lose, 5-4. It put a stamp on the Sox’ season.

For the first time since 2015, the Red Sox won’t play in October.

“We’re disappointed,” manager Alex Cora said afterward. “It wasn’t a great season. We’re going to learn from it and we’re going to be better.”

The Sox' season sputtered at the end of July into early August when they lost a combined eight straight games to the Rays and New York Yankees. The Rays are tied for the second wild-card spot and the Yankees clinched the American League East after their win against the Los Angeles Angels Thursday.

"It's kind of been coming for a while now the last couple weeks," Rick Porcello said. "It's tough. We put a lot of work into it, had high expectations — especially for guys in this clubhouse. We came up short, I don't know what else to say. It's been a tough year."

Cora wants his guys to compete just as they did in this one for the remainder of the season. Porcello showed that competitive fervor Friday when he and Tampa Bay Rays starter Charlie Morton battled it out.

Morton has been one of the best starters in the American League this season. On the contrary, Porcello's season has trended in the opposite direction, sporting a career-high 5.77 ERA in 182 ⅓ innings pitched.

Yet he came off a solid showing against the Philadelphia Phillies where he allowed just two runs in five innings of work. He continued that Friday. Porcello surrendered just three hits and held the Rays scoreless through his six innings of work.

"I feel like my last two I kind of got back to doing some of things I do and that I do well," Porcello said. "I'm going to keep building off of it. I'm having a little bit of success right now."

Morton's stuff dominated the Sox through the first six innings, too. Like Porcello, he only gave up three hits in that span. But with one out in the bottom of the seventh, Brock Holt doubled to left field. Rays manager Kevin Cash went out to talk to Morton, ultimately deciding to leave him in the game. The next batter, Moreland, made the Rays pay with a two-run homer to center which gave the Sox a 2-0 lead.

In the bottom half of the frame, though, Cora decided to go with reliever Darwinzon Hernandez and he looked gassed. Hernandez recorded just one out that inning.

Travis d'Arnaud singled to center and two walks by Hernandez loaded the bases. Cora summoned Marcus Walden from the bullpen and a force out at second scored a run and an Adames double tied the game. Cora then went to Josh Taylor and a wild pitch scored the go-ahead run. In the eighth, the Rays' Ji-Man Choi's RBI double off Andrew Cashner extended their lead, 4-2. Moreland's two-run homer in the ninth that tied it wasn't enough after 11 innings of play, however. The hole the Sox put themselves in this season was too deep. Their season script, for some time now, already had been written.

"I don't like it," Jackie Bradley Jr. said before exiting Tropicana Field for the night. "We didn't win enough ball games. The other guys ahead of us, they won when they needed to. They got the job done."

Tony La Russa will take on a new role

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox front office will have a ton of moving parts this offseason, but Sox special advisor to baseball operations Tony La Russa isn't going anywhere. La Russa's title fell under former Sox head of baseball operations, Dave Dombrowski, but after Dombrowski was fired two weeks ago, La Russa's position could have been in jeopardy. The fact that he's staying on board is something that excites manager Alex Cora.

"He's a very important part of the organization," Cora said before the Sox' 5-4 loss to the Rays in 11 innings Friday. "I'm glad that he's always available. He sees the game in a different way that's positive for everybody. In this game, everybody thinks the game has to be this way numbers-wise. But, no, there's more than that. He's been through everything. He's a very successful person."

As a first-year manager last season, Cora said having a former manager to lean on was helpful, which was what the Sox wanted out of La Russa.

“He would give me a check-up like every 15 days,” Cora said. “He would write like a letter or some [of the] things he saw that were positive and the not so positive. In every season there are different things that go on.”

However, with Cora going into his third season, the Sox see La Russa taking on a different role, keying in more on staff development.

Shut-down mode

The Sox are now officially out of postseason contention, meaning Cora won't have to go to his high-leverage relievers as much, something the Sox relied on a ton this summer. One of the relievers you can expect to see shut down is 22-year-old Darwinson Hernandez. The Sox are being careful with Hernandez. He hadn't pitched since Sept. 12 after being a southpaw the club depended on for most of their summer run.

Cora said he'll make two appearances this weekend and then he will shut him down for the remainder of the year.

“This is the first time he's gone through this as far as relieving,” Cora said. “He never went back-to-back days in the minor leagues. He never pitched three days in a row in the minor leagues.”

In Friday's relief appearance, you saw some of what Cora's alluded to. Hernandez looked gassed. With one out in the seventh and the Sox clinging to a 2-0 lead, Hernandez allowed a single then two walks to load the bases. The velocity was there, but the command wasn't. He threw 16 pitches that inning, just seven of them were strikes.

Hernandez came up as a starter, but has made his mark in the Sox' bullpen, where he put together an impressive showing this year.

Before Friday's blunder, Hernandez posted a 3.68 ERA with 56 strikeouts in 29½ innings. He's pitched on back-to-back days three times since July 30. His most recent back-to-back outings came in early September against the Minnesota Twins.

“We've seen enough,” Cora said. “We know he's a guy we can count on. Just a [couple] more [outings] and that will be good for him. Get ready for next year.”

The Sox plan on using him in a relief role moving forward.

Sim city

There's just over a week left in the season, but Heath Hembree wants to finish it on the mound. He threw a simulated game Friday and said it was positive.

“It feels good,” Hembree said. “I worked hard these last few weeks just to kind of get back.”

Hembree was scheduled to throw the simulated game last Saturday. Then the team postponed it to Tuesday. That didn't happen after Hembree felt soreness in his elbow, putting his season in jeopardy. If Hembree's elbow responds in the coming days, Cora said most likely they'll activate him for their upcoming Texas series.

“It's a personal thing,” Hembree said. “I want to see the season out to the end. I take a lot of pride in being on the field.”

Chavis done for now

The Sox will shut down Michael Chavis (oblique) for the season. He'll play winter ball for Criollos de Caguas in the Puerto Rico Winter League. He will see some time in left field. Chris Sale (elbow) is here with the team in Tampa but there are no updates on when he'll see Dr. James Andrews again.

Where did Dave Dombrowski leave the Red Sox farm system?

Alex Speier

Dave Dombrowski arrived in Boston with a reputation as a decision-maker who concentrated an organization's resources at the big league level and wasn't shy about leveling the farm system to do so. With his five-year tenure in Boston now concluded, it's worth asking: How closely did the reality match the expectation?

■ Homegrown major leaguers

The supply of homegrown big leaguers has been a steady stream rather than a wave under Dombrowski — not shocking, perhaps, given that he aggressively filled holes with veterans.

Rafael Devers is a star and franchise cornerstone. Andrew Benintendi looked like one through the first half of 2018, but his future is less clear given his average performance over the last year and a half. Darwinzon Hernandez is a potential monster in the late innings, Michael Chavis showed everyday potential in 2019, and Sam Travis represents a missed trade opportunity, a player who had real value that has since declined.

Beyond these players, the Red Sox — like most of the industry — started to overhaul their development considerably and increase their investments in personnel and technology under the direction of farm director Ben Crockett.

The team installed TrackMan systems at every minor league affiliate, appointed Brian Bannister and Dave Bush to lead a more data-driven approach to pitcher development while overhauling a longstanding emphasis on a traditional three-pitch mix (fastball, curve, change), brought minor league pitchers to Fenway Park for high-speed video and biomechanical analyses of their deliveries, started using bat sensors to better understand swings, and more.

Over the last couple of years, the emergence of Hernandez, Jalen Beeks, Marcus Walden, Ryan Brasier, and Josh Taylor — pitchers who overhauled their arsenals in the minors to focus on the pitches that would allow them to contribute in the big leagues — offered a glimpse of the strides being made in pitcher development.

There's more to do. Some in the industry view the Red Sox as lagging behind the state-of-the-art development teams (particularly the Dodgers, Rays, and Astros) in the resources — human and technological — dedicated to player development.

There's also a cultural difference. In contrast to LA (Andrew Friedman), Houston (Jeff Luhnow), and Tampa Bay (Erik Neander and Chaim Bloom), where the leaders of baseball operations are deeply involved in player development, Dombrowski permitted change rather than leading it. If the Red Sox want to be considered a development powerhouse, their model likely will have to change.

■ Traded away

Dombrowski dealt 31 players in prospects-for-big-leaguer deals (30 if you exclude Travis Shaw, one of four players dealt for Tyler Thornburg), helping to explain some of the depth challenges now faced by the Sox, particularly on the pitching side.

Logan Allen (Craig Kimbrel trade in 2015), Shaun Anderson (Eduardo Nunez deal in '17), Jalen Beeks (Nate Eovaldi deal last year), and Ty Buttrey (Ian Kinsler deal last year) all have graduated to the big leagues. Still, to this point, just one player dealt by Dombrowski has shown star-level talent in the big

leagues: Yoan Moncada, the centerpiece of the Chris Sale trade, who is having nearly as remarkable a year with the White Sox as Devers is here.

Among the other highly regarded prospects at the time they were dealt, Anderson Espinoza (traded for Drew Pomeranz in 2016) has undergone multiple Tommy John surgeries and hasn't pitched in a game in three years, and Michael Kopech (Sale deal) will remain a wild card as he returns from Tommy John surgery next year.

Shaw and Manuel Margot (Kimbrel deal) have been average big league regulars. Mauricio Dubon (Thornburg deal) projects to the same level. The shortstop career of Javier Guerra (Kimbrel deal) stalled out; he's now pitching. And Luis Alexander Basabe (the third piece in the Sale trade) had a down year in Double A in 2019.

The players most undervalued by the Sox when dealt likely were Shaw and Buttrey, solid contributors rather than stars. Otherwise, the Sox traded nearly every player at or near his peak value.

■ Acquired in trade

The Red Sox made four trades for prospects under Dombrowski, the best of which was the acquisition last year of Taylor for Deven Marrero. Taylor at this point looks like a potential steal given that the Diamondbacks let Marrero go.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Dombrowski's trades for minor leaguers is how few he made compared with those he traded away, an imbalance that suggests why the next Red Sox head of baseball operations will be charged with rebuilding depth.

■ Drafted

As with player development, Dombrowski inherited an amateur scouting department that was more successful than the one he left behind in Detroit and didn't meddle with it, instead trusting the group he inherited (led by amateur scouting director Mike Rikard) to continue finding players while modernizing its processes.

Over the last four years, the Sox reduced their draft focus on size and clean deliveries that were thought (often wrongly) to prevent physical breakdowns while placing greater emphasis on deception and pitch data. The promotion of Chris Mears from an area scout to a national pitching crosschecker also gave the team a powerful scouting voice to sway conversations.

At a time when many teams have scaled back on boots-on-the-ground scouts, the Sox have expanded both their amateur scouting staff and their commitment to analytics in the department, a two-pronged approach that the team believes has contributed to later-round scouting finds in recent years such as Allen (2015 8th round), Anderson (2016 3rd round), Bobby Dalbec (2016 4th round), Thad Ward (2018 5th round), Jarren Duran (2018 7th round), Noah Song (2019 4th round), and Chris Murphy (2019 6th round).

The team has yet to see a player taken during Dombrowski's tenure emerge as either a big league regular or a top-50 prospect – at least in part a reflection of the fact that, while picking late in the first round (or this year, not until the second), the team has mostly had draft bonus pools that are among the smallest in the game.

Injuries have impeded the development of the team's one early-first round pick (2016 No. 12 overall pick Jay Groome), and 2018 first-rounder Triston Casas is still too young to vault to the top half of top-100 lists.

But the team landed plenty of players who built trade value; 2016 draftees Dalbec and C.J. Chatham as well as 2017 first-rounder Tanner Houck will be part of the big league depth equation for 2020; and 2018 selection Duran may not be too far behind.

The 2016, 2018, and 2019 drafts each show the potential to yield at least a few quality big leaguers – helping to backfill some of the depth gaps created by trades.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox officially eliminated from playoff contention, then lose to Rays in 11

Steve Hewitt

Stubborn as they may be, the Red Sox fought until their final swing, but it ultimately couldn't save them from the inevitable.

A year after a record-setting season that ended with a World Series celebration, the Red Sox' sorely underwhelming follow-up effort finally met its reality at Tropicana Field. The Sox were mathematically eliminated from the postseason picture Friday night, and that was before they fell in a 5-4 walk-off loss to the Rays.

The Indians' victory over the Phillies earlier in the night sealed their fate that was almost months in the making. The Sox (80-73) will miss the playoffs for the first time since 2015, less than a year removed from one of the most successful seasons in franchise history.

"It's tough," said Rick Porcello. "We put a lot of work into it. We had high expectations, especially for the guys in this clubhouse, and we came up short. I don't know what else to say, it's been a tough year.

"It's not for a lack of effort. The guys that are on the field right now are grinding their tails off until the end, so there's something definitely to be said for that."

It had been coming for a while now. On July 27, the Red Sox sat just a ½ game back of the second wild-card spot, but an eight-game losing streak that followed — which included three to these Rays — ultimately sank their season.

They could never recover. Alex Cora rightfully continued to believe in his group, repeating himself like a broken record that they were talented enough to overcome a dismal start to the season in which they began 11-17. But they remained inconsistent and could never go on a run.

"Disappointed," the manager said. "It wasn't a great season and we're going to learn from it and we're going to be better. That's the bottom line. ...

"We were very inconsistent from the get-go and it just carried over throughout the season. We never put one of the stretches that we knew we could put, but other teams were better."

The loss Friday was salt in the wound, even if they showed a valiant effort to stay alive as long as they could. Porcello submitted six shutout innings — his best start in three months — and Mitch Moreland hit a two-run homer in the seventh before the bullpen blew it, giving up three runs in the seventh and another in the eighth. But the Sox had one last gasp.

Moments after Cleveland's victory went final, assuring the defending World Series champs wouldn't be playing in October, Moreland hit another two-run homer to tie it up in the ninth. That ultimately sent it to extras, where Willy Adames hit a two-out RBI single off Trevor Kelley to win it.

"It would have been a lot cooler if I could have done it one more time, but it didn't work out," Moreland said.

With nine games remaining in the season, there's nothing left to play for besides pride. Cora will likely make some adjustments over the final week to give guys rest, but they also want to finish strong.

“Same thing with today, show up and play hard,” Cora said. “Doesn’t matter where we’re at. That’s what we preached from Day 1 last year. Show up, play hard, turn the page and move forward. That’s what we’re going to do the rest of the season.”

Said Porcello: “I want to see us play hard and win some ballgames. That’s it. That’s kind of what you look for in every game, so hopefully we can do that.”

Red Sox notes: Alex Cora happy to have Tony La Russa back

Steve Hewitt

Count Alex Cora among those happy Tony La Russa is sticking around with the Red Sox.

La Russa, the Hall of Fame manager who joined the Red Sox in 2017 as a special assistant and vice president of baseball operations under Dave Dombrowski, agreed to stay with the organization, according to multiple reports, even in the wake of Dombrowski’s recent firing. That pleases Cora, who has drawn on La Russa’s extensive experience in his first two seasons as the Sox manager.

“He’s a very important part of the organization,” Cora said. “A guy that’s always available. He sees the game in a different way where it’s positive for everybody. One thing about this game, everybody feels like it has to be this way, numbers-wise, but now there’s more than that when you have to deal with media and you have to deal with players and the fanbase and all of that, and he’s been through everything. ...

“I always like the fact that when he’s around, he can talk to players. He has the green light to do all that stuff. He’s a very successful person and it’s always good to keep people that are positive. They can bring something positive to the organization.”

La Russa’s specific role going forward is still to be determined as the Red Sox transition internally in their search for a new president of baseball operations, but La Russa will certainly be a key component. As presently constituted, the Sox’ front office is young, and La Russa brings 56 years of experience to the table.

He was especially useful to Cora last season as he navigated his first year as a manager. His presence as the Red Sox go through a critical stage will be just as valuable.

“He’s always on top of the game,” Cora said. “Watching what’s going on and he’ll give me a check-up every like 15 days, write like a letter or something, the things that he saw that were positive and then not so positive, which I think is good. Every season, there’s different things that go on and maybe you see it one way and then somebody sees it a different way and changes your mind, so I think that’s something that helped me last year and this year, too.” ...

Betts returns, Martinez ready

After missing the last five games with a toe injury, Mookie Betts was back and leading off as the designated hitter as the Red Sox opened a four-game series against the Tampa Bay Rays on Friday. Cora said Betts will play three of the four games, and avoid playing him in the outfield turf at Tropicana Field.

J.D. Martinez (groin) was available off the bench for the series opener, and Cora said he’s likely to play on Saturday. With Betts as the DH, Martinez would likely play the outfield as long as he responded well following a workout on Friday. ...

Cora said Michael Chavis, who has been out since Aug. 12 with a sprained left AC joint before injuring his oblique during rehab, stayed back in Boston for this trip and will likely be shut down for the rest of the season. The plan is for him to play a month of winter ball in Caguas, Puerto Rico. Cora said he’ll play first and second base defensively and likely be introduced to left field.

“While he plays, he can stop by my house and we can cook some good Latin food and he can have it with me,” Cora said. . .

Heath Hembree (elbow) pitched a simulated game on Friday that was successful and he could be activated for the Texas series that starts Tuesday.

Bullpen relief

Darwinzon Hernandez hasn't pitched in more than a week but Cora said the reliever is likely to pitch twice against the Rays this weekend before they shut him down until next season. The plan all along has been to give Hernandez and Josh Taylor — two relievers they've surprisingly relied on this season — some time off as they look to take pivotal bullpen roles in 2020.

“It's the first time he's gone through this, as far as like relieving,” Cora said of Hernandez. “Never went back-to-back days in the minor leagues, never pitched three days in a row in the minor leagues. We've seen enough to know he's a guy we can count on, so give us a few more and that will be good for him and be ready for next year.” . . .

Chris Sale, who resides in Fort Myers, is with the team this weekend. There's no timetable on a return visit to Dr. James Andrews as he continues to recover from left elbow inflammation that cut his season short. . .

Andrew Benintendi is day to day with a left thumb contusion after he was jammed in his first at-bat on Friday. He was removed from the game in the third inning, when Gorkys Hernandez took over for him in left field.

Rick Porcello looks to finish season on high note after another strong start

Steve Hewitt

It might have come too late, but it seems that Rick Porcello has found something that can help him finish a bad season on a high note.

After an encouraging outing in last week's win against the Phillies, Porcello built on it with his best start in three months in the Red Sox' 5-4 loss to the Rays on Friday night. The righty submitted six shutout innings in which he gave up just three hits and no walks while striking out six.

Better late than never?

It's been a maddening season for the 2017 Cy Young Award winner, who entered Friday with the worst ERA in baseball among qualified pitchers. But in the midst of all the struggles and frustration, he's continued to work to find the answers. Finally, it seems, some results are coming, and it hasn't gone unnoticed.

“I've been saying all along, regardless of the results, between starts he's always searching for something, trying to get better,” said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. “His last two, he's been very solid. . . He's been working hard at it, and regardless of the position we're in, and how many games we have left, he's still trying to improve. You appreciate that as a manager.”

The difference for Porcello the last two, Cora said, has been fastball command, and particular on his two-seamer, which he's been using more. In his victory over the Phillies last week, he threw his sinker the most he had since an outing against the A's in April. On Friday, he used it again more than any other pitch.

In Philly last week, Phillies manager Gabe Kapler noticed, and even mentioned it to Cora.

“(Kapler) said, ‘That was a different pitcher than what we saw in Boston,’” Cora said.

“It’s a game of adjustments.”

Cora noted that Porcello has been working ahead in the count a lot more, too, which has been huge. On Friday, he rarely ran into trouble. He put runners on first and third with no outs in the third, but was able to escape it unscathed.

“My last two, I’ve kind of gone back to some of the things I do and do well,” Porcello said. “So I’m going to keep building off it. We’re having a little bit of success right now, so keep going.”

Porcello has one more start left in his season — Wednesday at Texas — and another good start could go a long way for his confidence as he goes into the offseason and his impending free agency.

“I definitely would love to go out there and have a good one in my last one,” Porcello said. “It doesn’t change what’s happened this year, but it would be nice to finish on a good note.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Former Red Sox pitcher Pedro Martinez opens up on his charitable foundation, David Ortiz and more

Bill Koch

Pedro Martinez can still command your attention with his fastball.

His pitches are of the verbal variety these days. The former Red Sox right-hander retired in 2009 after 18 seasons and was comfortably elected to the Hall of Fame.

Martinez remains in the public eye through his analyst work on national television and with his charity, the Pedro Martinez Foundation. His voice is a strong and relevant one, and it’s worth listening when he offers opinions on a wide array of topics. Martinez did so in an interview with *The Journal* earlier this week while touching on a November gala in Boston, the shooting of his good friend David Ortiz and the failure of the Red Sox to make it four straight trips to the postseason.

“I live my life like I’m never going to go through anything bad,” Martinez said. “I don’t expect it and I don’t think I deserve it. That’s the way I approach life. I’m always happy and grateful that I have my life and that I’m healthy, and I get to share it with others.”

Martinez is on the verge of opening a charter school in his native Dominican Republic. His foundation – headed by his wife, Carolina, who serves as executive director – breaks ground on construction in October and expects to annually enroll up to 1,700 kids. Martinez has awarded more than 4,800 grants to kids pursuing high school, college or trade school degrees.

“As a father I have a really good understanding of what educating your kids is all about,” Martinez said. “It’s unfortunate that some of those kids don’t have the support that I got and that my kids got. That’s why I’m doing it.”

Martinez played for five different teams throughout his career, but he spent the most time – seven seasons – with the Red Sox. His genius on the mound was accompanied by a hint of mischief, as Martinez could often be found engaging in a prank or a light moment with a teammate. His personal relationships with several of them endure to this day, and he was among those with Boston connections to post on social media when Ortiz was wounded by a single bullet through the back on June 9.

“I can’t say enough about David,” Martinez said. “To see him well is a great joy for all of us. We love David dearly. Hopefully he’ll continue his recovery and be fine.”

Martinez, Ortiz and Jason Varitek each serve as special assistants with the Red Sox. Martinez and Varitek provide instruction to younger players while Ortiz carries out more of an ambassadorial role involving recruitment, special appearances and business development. The targeting of such a beloved public figure in their native Dominican Republic shocked Martinez, and Ortiz's surprise Sept. 9 appearance at Fenway Park brought him further relief.

"It doesn't matter if there are one or two bad guys out there who sometimes want harm for someone who doesn't really deserve it," Martinez said. "Just to feel the love that everybody has for David and what he's done for Boston, it gave me great joy. It made me feel really proud."

Ortiz has been among those to appear at the previous three editions of the Pedro Martinez Foundation Gala, which is scheduled for Nov. 1 at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. Martinez teased that "a couple of surprises" await his guests beginning at 6 p.m. More information can be found at pedromartinezfoundation.com.

"They can expect to have a lot of fun," Martinez said. "There are going to be a lot of celebrities. There are going to be a lot of great people from Boston, a nice dinner and I have a couple of surprises – I just can't let it out yet."

That particular date last season would have fallen less than a week after the Red Sox captured their fourth championship this century. Boston entered Friday one loss or one Cleveland victory from missing the playoffs, its three-year hold on the American League East title already snapped by the Yankees. Martinez recognized the signs of strain shown by Red Sox players throughout the first five months of the 2019 campaign.

"A lot of people don't understand," Martinez said. "They just see you as players and super athletes – believe me, those bodies get beat up. It's really difficult to come back the next year and, on a daily basis, go out there and feel fine."

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox left pondering how season went sideways after being eliminated from postseason hunt

Chris Cotillo

Shortly after 10:10 p.m. Friday night, what once appeared unthinkable became the reality for the 2019 Red Sox. A year after winning 108 regular season games and cruising through October to a World Series title, Boston's attempt at a title defense ended 10 days before the postseason even began.

To think the Sox would go from juggernaut to has-been in such short order would have been unconscionable in March as Alex Cora and a roster made up almost entirely of championship holdovers began their attempt at a repeat. The scenario began to look slightly possible when the Sox started 3-9 on the west coast and became more legitimate when they were blown out in London, but still seemed unlikely because the talent-- at some point -- seemed destined to overthrow the momentum and allow the Sox to go on a run that would put them back in their rightful place atop the American League standings.

That run never came. Instead, Boston limped out of the All-Star break, stood pat at the trade deadline and full-out collapsed with an 8-game losing streak against the Rays and Yankees from July 28 to Aug. 4. A 2-5 stretch against the Twins and Yankees all but sealed the Sox' fate, with president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski taking the fall before that homestand was finished.

It was fitting that Boston's playoff dreams died at Tropicana Field, the home of one of the A.L.'s surprise contenders this year. The Rays improved to 10-6 against the Red Sox with their extra innings loss Friday, dropping Boston to a combined 11-24 against their two chief divisional rivals.

“Other teams were better,” Cora said. “New York, Tampa in our division. They did an outstanding job. Head-to-head, they took advantage of it. We lost eight games in a row against Tampa and the Yankees. That was it.”

If someone told Cora in spring training he would get otherworldly seasons from Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts, a breakout campaign from Eduardo Rodriguez and steady outputs from Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez, he probably would have thought the Sox would be resting their starters in late September for a different reason. But the miserable performance of the starting rotation, the injuries to Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi and a bunch of ill-timed blown saves from an overworked bullpen trying to overcompensate for a bad rotation doomed a Sox team that could never recover.

The 3-9 start forced the Red Sox to tread water early. They finally drowned Friday night.

“Fought all year to put ourselves in a good position but it has just been an uphill battle the whole year,” said veteran first baseman Mitch Moreland. “We got off to a tough start there and it just seems like it snowballed on us. Never could really get on that run.”

The Red Sox became the fifth World Series champion in seven years and the second-winningest team in the wild-card era to fail to make the postseason the following year. The question that was posed throughout spring training-- why it's so hard for a team to repeat as World Series champions -- remains unanswered six months later.

“It's really hard to put your finger on it,” said righty Rick Porcello. “It takes a lot out of you to make a run and win a World Series. Maybe there's some carryover with that. You also are the one team with a bullseye on your back the next year and everybody wants to beat you. All those things are things you think you should be able to deal with. It's hard to answer that, really.”

Throughout the entire year, Cora stayed true to himself and his managing style, preaching that the process would eventually lead to results. The second-year manager always seemed to find the silver lining, even if it was hard to see from the outside. There was no positive spin Friday night as Cora tried to process the finality of a sideways season.

“Disappointed. It wasn't a great season and we're going to learn from it and be better,” Cora said. “That's the bottom line. We were very inconsistent from the get-go and we just carried that over throughout the season.”

In the coming weeks and months, the Red Sox will face a series of key questions that will shape their future. Dombrowski's replacement will be named. Martinez will decide whether to opt out or come back. Free agents like Porcello, Moreland and Brock Holt will either stay or sign elsewhere. And Betts' situation, entering a contract year, seems likely to be resolved one way or another.

Those answers will come in time. For now, the Sox are left pondering how such a talented team could come up so remarkably short of a goal that seemed within reach at the end of March.

“It's kind of been coming for a while now, the last couple weeks,” Porcello said. “It's tough. We put a lot of work into it and had high expectations. Especially the guys in this clubhouse. We came up short. I don't know what else to say. It has been a tough year.”

Boston Red Sox eliminated from playoff contention, lose to Rays, 5-4, in 11 innings

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox conceded the war Friday night. Then, they lost the battle.

Hours after being eliminated from the postseason hunt when the Indians beat the Phillies, the Sox lost to the Rays, 5-4, in 11 innings at Tropicana Field. Willy Adames hit a walk-off single off Trevor Kelley to score pinch-runner Johnny Davis and hand the Sox their eighth loss in 12 games.

The Sox had forced extra innings in dramatic fashion, as Mitch Moreland kept them alive with a two-run, game-tying homer off Emilio Pagan in the ninth inning minutes after Cleveland finished off the Phillies and ended Boston's postseason hopes. Moreland's heroics proved fruitless as the Sox fell to 80-73 and ensured they'd miss the postseason for the first time since 2015.

The Rays kept pace with the Indians in the wild card race while the Sox finally dropped out after a prolonged stay on the periphery. The Sox became the first defending champion to miss the playoffs since the Royals in 2016.

Starters Rick Porcello-- who turned in his best outing in months, allowing three hits and striking out six-- and Charlie Morton dueled for six shutout innings before Moreland plated the first runs of the game with a two-run shot in the seventh. Once Porcello was lifted, Boston's bullpen, which has seemed incapable of shutdown innings for most of the season, fell apart in the bottom of the seventh.

After lefty Darwinzon Hernandez struck out Ji-Man Choi for the first out of the inning, he allowed a single and issued two walks to load the bases for pinch-hitter Nate Lowe. Lowe drove in a run on a fielder's choice against Marcus Walden before Tampa Bay tied the game on a Willy Adames RBI double down the right-field line.

Walden was lifted in favor of lefty Josh Taylor, whose wild pitch to Joey Wendle scored Lowe and put the Rays up, 3-2. Ji-Man Choi added an insurance run with an RBI double in the eighth before Moreland tied it with his opposite-field homer.

The Sox will have to win at least two of their final nine games to finish over .500. They'll face the Rays again Saturday night with first pitch scheduled for 6:10 p.m.

Boston misses postseason for first time since 2015

The Sox snapped a three-year streak of appearing in the postseason, missing the playoffs for the first time since 2015. Boston has missed the postseason just seven times since 2003 (2006, 2010-12, 2014-15, 2019).

The Sox are the first defending World Series champion to miss the postseason since the Royals in 2016 and the 10th defending champion to miss the playoffs since 2001.

Boston Red Sox view Darwinzon Hernandez as reliever moving forward; rookie lefty will be shut down after weekend series

Chris Cutillo

As lefty Darwinzon Hernandez winds down his strong rookie season, the Red Sox are actively trying to be careful with him. To that end, Hernandez isn't expected to pitch during the final week of the season.

Hernandez, who recorded just one out while allowing two earned runs in the seventh inning Friday against the Rays, is expected to pitch in two of Boston's four games this weekend at Tropicana Field and then be shut down for the year. He will likely end his rookie campaign having made 28 appearances (27 out of the bullpen) in the big leagues.

Sox manager Alex Cora said Friday that the team views Hernandez as a reliever moving forward. The 22-year-old entered the year as a starter in the minors but has emerged as a solid bullpen piece (4.07 ERA, 47 strikeouts in 24 1/3 innings) since being added to the big-league bullpen July 16.

“It’s the first time he’s gone through this as far as relieving. He never went back-to-back days, never pitched three days in a row in the minor leagues,” Cora said. “We’ve seen him enough to know he’s a guy we can count on. Just a few more, and that’ll be good for him to get ready for next year.”

Cora is likely to take a similar approach with rookie lefty Josh Taylor. Entering Friday, Hernandez had not pitched in eight days and Taylor had thrown only five innings in September.

With 17 relievers available in the bullpen, Cora will be able to fill innings with lower-leverage options for the final 10 days of the season. He hopes to use some of his unheralded relievers in important spots this weekend against a Rays team that is fighting for its playoff hopes.

“It’s good because we don’t have to use our high-leverage guys all the time,” Cora said. “They’re getting a chance to pitch. This is going to be a good one for them, a test. It’s a good offensive team that’s playing for a wild card. Hopefully, it’s a learning experience and they can do the job.”

Tony La Russa expected to remain in Boston Red Sox front office: ‘He’s been an important part of the organization,’ Alex Cora says

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox are expected to retain Tony La Russa as a vice president and special assistant, as first reported by Alex Speier of the Boston Globe on Thursday. La Russa was originally brought in to the front office by former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski and was thought to be a candidate to depart the organization once Dombrowski was fired earlier this month.

The organization and La Russa have expressed mutual interest in continuing their relationship, which began in Nov. 2017. The ultimate decision will be up to the team’s new head of baseball operations though the expectation is that La Russa will be welcomed back into the organization next season.

Dombrowski, top lieutenant Frank Wren and special assignment Eddie Bane have all been let go in recent weeks and the team’s front office is expected to be restructured further in the coming weeks. Wren and La Russa were Dombrowski’s two closest advisors in the front office before his firing.

Since being hired before last season, La Russa has taken an active role in the organization. The Hall of Fame manager has traveled to nearly every road game, been in attendance for most home games and served as a mentor for manager Alex Cora.

“He’s been an important part of the organization, a guy who is always available,” Cora said Friday. "He sees the game in a different way where it’s positive for everybody. One thing about this game, everybody feels it has to be this way, numbers-wise. There’s more than that. You’ve got to deal with media, players and the fan base and all that. He has been through everything."

La Russa, who managed three different teams from 1979 to 2011 and won three World Series titles, spent more than two years in Major League Baseball’s league office before taking over the Diamondbacks as “chief baseball officer” in May 2014. He departed the Arizona organization after the 2017 season and immediately latched on with Dombrowski, with whom he worked in the White Sox organization in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

La Russa, who turns 75 early next month, was brought in at least partly to serve as a consultant for Cora in his first year at the helm in 2018.

“He’s always on top of the game, watching what’s going on,” Cora said. “Giving me a checkup every 15 days. Wrote me a letter with the things he saw that were positive and then not-so-positive. I think that’s good. In every season, there’s different things that go on. Maybe you see it one way and somebody sees it a different way and changes your mind. I think that’s something he taught me last year and this year, too.”

Cora is happy that he'll continue to have La Russa around moving forward, even with Dombrowski's eventual replacement taking over this winter.

"He's a very successful person and it's always good to keep people who are positive," Cora said. "It can be something positive for us."

Michael Chavis' season likely over; Boston Red Sox rookie will get outfield reps in winter ball

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox will likely shut down infielder Michael Chavis for the season, manager Alex Cora said Friday.

Chavis has been out since Aug. 12 due to shoulder and oblique injuries. The rookie has not progressed from the oblique injury he suffered Sept. 4 and stayed back in Boston while the team traveled to St. Petersburg for a four-game series against the Rays.

"He was sore the last few days," Cora said. "Too bad he has to end this way. He did his best to get back but obviously we're going to take care of him."

Chavis, who hit .254/.322/.444 with 18 homers in 95 games, originally hit the injured list in mid-August due to a sprained AC joint in his left shoulder. He played nine games at Triple-A Pawtucket before rejoining the Red Sox in Boston and hurting his oblique fielding grounders.

The plan is for Chavis to play winter ball in Puerto Rico, suiting up for Cora's hometown Caguas Criollos.

"Most likely, he'll go to Caguas and play a month down there," Cora said. "While he plays, he can stop by my house and we can cook some good Latin food and he can hang with me."

Cora said Chavis will play first base and second base and take some repetitions in left field in Puerto Rico. The 24-year-old has never played outfield in the pros but will try the new position in an effort to gain some positional flexibility moving forward.

"He'll get at-bats," Cora said. "Not too much, only a month if that. I think it'll be good for him to keep working at his craft and get ready for next year."

The Puerto Rican winter league schedule begins in mid-November and finishes at the end of December. It's unclear when exactly Chavis will play.

Red Sox injuries: J.D. Martinez will likely play Saturday, Chris Sale rejoins team in St. Petersburg

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox designated hitter J.D. Martinez is expected to be in the lineup Saturday after missing three straight games with a left groin injury.

Martinez was pulled after six innings Tuesday night and did not play Wednesday or Thursday against the Giants. He's not in Friday's lineup because manager Alex Cora is using Mookie Betts as a designated hitter so Betts doesn't aggravate his sore left foot on the turf at Tropicana Field.

"I can't have two DHs today so that's why J.D. isn't playing," Cora said. "He feels he can play the outfield. I'll wait and see how he reacts from the workout. If he's ready to play tomorrow, he'll play the outfield tomorrow."

Betts is scheduled to play three of four games this weekend, meaning Martinez will likely play the outfield twice and serve as the DH once.

Travis cleared to play

First baseman Sam Travis has been cleared to play after going through the concussion protocol, Cora said.

Travis took a throw off the back of his head Tuesday night and missed the final two games against San Francisco. He's out of the lineup Friday but available off the bench.

"He was fine," Cora said. "He just had to go through the protocol."

Hembree nearing activation

Reliever Heath Hembree (elbow inflammation) threw a simulated game at Tropicana Field on Friday and is likely to be activated for the team's series in Texas, which begins Tuesday.

Hembree hasn't pitched since Aug. 1 due to elbow soreness. He received a plasma-rich platelet (PRP) injection Aug. 6 and has been rehabbing for the last six weeks.

Hembree is likely to make a couple appearances before the end of the season.

Sale with team in St. Pete

Left-hander Chris Sale (elbow) is in St. Petersburg with the team this weekend after making the short trip from his home in Fort Myers.

Sale is still recovering from the PRP shot he received Aug. 19 from Dr. James Andrews. He won't return this season.

"Chris is here, hanging out. It's good to see him around," Cora said. "At the same time, he's enjoying the family. He feels good."

Sale hasn't resumed throwing since being shut down in mid-August. He will likely schedule a follow-up appointment with Dr. Andrews but there is no set date for that, according to Cora.

Chavis likely to be shut down

Infielder Michael Chavis (oblique) has not improved enough for the Sox to envision him returning this season, Cora said.

Chavis stayed back in Boston and will likely be shut down. The rookie originally hit the injured list Aug. 12 after spraining the AC joint in his left shoulder and was nearing his return when he suffered a setback with his oblique in early September.

Chavis hit .254/.322/.444 with 18 homers in 95 games.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sox 'disappointed' after postseason hopes end

Dawn Klemish

The Red Sox fought the good fight on Friday night, but in the end, Boston's playoff fate was out of its control.

With the Indians' 5-2 win over the Phillies, the defending World Series champion Red Sox were officially eliminated from postseason contention despite a final push behind Rick Porcello and Mitch Moreland during a 5-4 loss to the Rays at Tropicana Field.

Cleveland's success was all the more frustrating given that Boston came from behind to tie the Rays in the ninth inning on a two-run home run from Moreland -- his second of the game. Moreland's late homer came right after the Indians' game was done, the latter rendering the excitement from the former moot.

It was, however, fairly indicative of the way this season has played out for a team that has fought the good fight, only to repeatedly come up on the wrong side of the fence.

"Disappointed. It wasn't a great season," Boston manager Alex Cora said. "We're going to learn from it and we're going to get better; that's the bottom line. We were inconsistent from the get-go."

This time last year, the Red Sox were readying to ride a month-long wave to more hardware, championship rings and a Halloween-day parade through downtown Boston. While Boston's 2018 squad seemed to have a load of lucky breaks to match its talent, the team that followed seemed just as destined to dodge good fortune this time around.

Here's a look at four elements that hurt Boston's postseason hopes this season:

Starting slow

It's no secret that the Red Sox's season-starting funk caused some alarm. 0-1 on March 28 wasn't so bad, but when Boston's record fell to 1-5, 3-8 and then 6-13 by April 17, things looked bleak.

Of course, the team and its fans expected more after coming off a 119-win season and a fourth championship in 15 years. Despite taking its lumps early, Boston remained confident it could work its way back.

Except the Red Sox never really did, giving the Yankees and Rays a head start in the division and thus having to play catch-up the remainder of the season. Boston stepped one game over the .500 watermark on May 10 for the first time in 2019 but could never seem to keep pace in the American League East.

"Obviously it's tough," Moreland said. "You kind of fight all year to put yourselves in a good position, but it's just been an uphill battle. We kind of got off to a tough start there and it just seemed like it kind of snowballed on us."

Rotation, rotation, rotation

Eduardo Rodriguez has been exceptional all year, and he claimed his 18th win on Thursday to complement a 3.53 ERA and further drive that point home.

The arms who follow in the rotation, however, haven't been so fortunate. For -- ahem -- starters, there's been little consistency on the hill which led, at times, to extra pressure on the bullpen and the offense. Rodriguez is the lone Red Sox pitcher with more than one start and a sub-4.00 ERA, and after him Porcello is the only other pitcher with at least 30 starts this season (31).

The closest to him are Chris Sale (25) and David Price (22), both victims of season-ending injuries. The duo wasn't at its best even prior to that: Sale finished with a 4.40 ERA, his worst in his 10-year career. Price's 4.28 mark was the second highest in his 12-year career (he had a 4.42 ERA as a rookie in 2009).

"It's been coming for a while now ... but it's tough. We put a lot of work into it, had high expectations and came up short," said Porcello who, despite six scoreless innings on Friday still has a career-high 5.56 ERA.

Trending down

The Red Sox have put up some pretty strong overall offensive numbers this season, with six players hitting 20 or more home runs, four with 40 or more doubles and 233 team homers. But grand stats shouldn't overshadow the overall result with things like situational hitting, which has plagued Boston at crucial points throughout the year.

"I don't know what else to say; it's been a tough year," Porcello said. "It's not for a lack of effort. The guys that are on the field right now are grinding their tails off until the end, there's definitely something to be said for that."

Mounting late comebacks was also not Boston's strong suit in 2019, a marked difference from the comeback kings of last season. They are 3-57 when trailing after six innings, 3-60 after seven and 3-62 after eight.

Fenway funk

The natural assumption that a team plays better in front of its home crowd flew out the window this season in Boston, where the Red Sox are 37-39 at Fenway compared to 43-32 away from it. This number includes bizarre trends such as their home record against the Rays (1-8) as opposed to their 5-2 mark at Tropicana Field.

Tough breaks aside, the Red Sox still sit at 80-73. While it wasn't a good enough mark to help them defend their crown this year, it's definitely enough to inspire them to keep working. First task is playing spoiler to the Rays' playoff hopes. Tampa Bay is tied with the Indians for the second American League Wild Card spot and Boston has three more games in St. Petersburg to change that.

"Somebody asked me that yesterday, if we have to [beat the Rays] for the A's and the Indians," Cora said before Friday's game. "They have to take care of their business; we don't owe them anything. But we owe it to our fan base, to the organization, to go out there and play."

"We can come in here, win three out of four, even sweep them. I mean, it's not going to save our season, ya know? But just go out there and compete against them and see what happens."

Chavis most likely shut down, will play winter ball

Dawn Klemish

Michael Chavis' season appears over. Though there has yet to be an official announcement from the Red Sox, manager Alex Cora said Thursday that his talented rookie was headed for winter ball in Puerto Rico.

The original plan was for Chavis to travel with the team to St. Petersburg, but the 24-year-old felt continued discomfort in his sore right oblique.

"We're most likely going to shut him down," Cora said. "It's too bad he has to end this way. He did his best to get back."

Chavis hasn't played in the Majors since Aug. 11. A sprained AC joint in his left shoulder caused his first absence, and he tweaked his oblique while working back from the shoulder issue.

The Red Sox infielder slashed .254/.322/.444 with 18 homers and 58 RBIs in 95 games this season. Cora said that in addition to racking up some extra at-bats in the Caribbean Winter League, Chavis will also be introduced to left field while playing for Criollos de Caguas.

Chavis has played 49 games at first base, 45 at second, five at third and one as the Red Sox designated hitter this season. While his imminent trip to Puerto Rico marks a disappointing end to a promising year, there was a silver lining.

“Where he plays, he can stop by my house, we can cook some Latin food and he can hang out with me,” Cora said.

Walking wounded

- J.D. Martinez (left groin tightness) was not in Friday’s starting lineup for a third consecutive game but Cora said the slugger was available off the bench.
- Chris Sale (left elbow inflammation) joined the team at Tropicana Field. Sale, who is on the 60-day injured list, has been working out at the team’s Spring Training facility in Fort Myers, Fla.
- Heath Hembree (right lateral elbow inflammation) threw a simulated game Friday afternoon and reported no issues. If all goes well, Cora said the righty reliever will be activated for the three-game series against the Rangers that begins Tuesday in Texas.
- Infielder Sam Travis, who was hit in the head by a thrown ball while legging out a triple Wednesday, cleared concussion protocol and was cleared to play.
- Andrew Benintendi left Friday’s 5-4 loss to the Rays in the bottom of the third inning with a left thumb contusion and is day to day. The Red Sox left fielder was jammed on an inside pitch that he popped up to third base in the second inning. It stiffened up afterward, and he was replaced by Gorkys Hernandez in the third.

Cora was hopeful the injury was as minor as it initially appeared and guessed Benintendi would be back in action in 2-3 days.

* **WEEL.com**

The top Red Sox prospect who once strived to become a Navy SEAL

Rob Bradford

Jarren Duran isn't much of a secret anymore.

The outfielder was named Baseball America's Single-A Player of the Year and the Red Sox' Minor League Baserunner of the Year. When it comes to Red Sox prospects, he is at the top of most lists.

There is, however, one piece of Duran's puzzle that few people know about which would have sent the California native in a dramatically different direction.

Just six years ago he almost committed to striking out on a path to become a Navy SEAL.

"I just kind of kept it to myself," Duran said while being honored at Fenway Park Thursday afternoon. "Talked to my parents a little bit about it."

By the time his senior year at Cypress (CA) High came around Duran didn't have any college scholarship offers, having had to sit out most of his junior season with a back injury. His freshman and sophomore years? He was still waiting to grow past 5-foot-5.

So he started watching the movies and reading the books on all things involving the elite of the elite when it comes to military service. It drew him in.

"I've always admired the people that serve our country and how they defend us and give us all this freedom to do whatever we want," Duran said. "I wasn't getting highly recruited out of high school. I wasn't the

best. I was thinking a path that I wanted to take and I didn't think there was a better honor than to defend this country and give people the freedom they deserve.

"I was getting ready to go to the recruiter and talk to them, but then I started to get looked at for college for baseball and I started to realize this might be a thing so maybe I should pursue it a little bit. If it wasn't going to work out than I just would have gone to the recruiter and talked to them."

The mentality of the SEALs just fit him as was evident when Duran was hit in the face with a fastball while playing for Long Beach State. Despite two broken bones in the then-second baseman's face, he was back playing without any kind of mask or extra protection just a week later.

A seventh-round pick, Duran has proven his drive to always finish what he starts. It's a mindset he was fully prepared to take into the life he almost lived with the SEALs.

"I don't want to quit so if I'm going to get in there ...I wasn't going to ring the bell," said Duran, referencing the bell used during Navy SEAL training which is only rung by those participants who choose to quit the program. "I would have gone through the pain and try to make it."

Baseball hasn't worked out too badly for Duran, who finished this season having played 82 games with the Double-A Portland Sea Dogs, stealing 28 bases. The run in Maine came after 50 games with Single-A Salem where he hit .387.

"When I first got (to Portland) I was like, 'Do I actually belong here? Am I supposed to be here?'" Duran said. "I think it was just self-doubt that held me back. Once I started to believe in myself again I just did what I needed to do and went back out and had fun."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Events of Friday confirm what we've known about the Red Sox for some time

Sean McAdam

The end came in the top of the ninth inning, but really, the diagnosis had been made weeks and weeks ago.

When the Cleveland Indians beat the Philadelphia Phillies in Cleveland, the Red Sox were officially eliminated from the postseason.

Again, this was no sudden death. The Red Sox had been deteriorating for some time and had been on watch. They knew they didn't have much time left.

To their credit, they fought hard against the Tampa Bay Rays Friday night. They lead 2-0, lost the lead and trailed by four, and within minutes of the Indians win which sealed their fate, came back to tie the game again, only to ultimately lose, 5-4, in 11 innings.

Think of that second Mitch Moreland two-run homer as their last gasp, the final bit of will leaving their body.

Alas, it was too late. It had been too late for some time now.

Even management — including former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski — recognized a terminal case back at the trade deadline. Dombrowski examined what was before him, and by not making any acquisitions to bolster the bullpen, essentially told the team: "I'm sorry ... there's nothing I can do for you."

That good bedside manner didn't save Dombrowski's job, but it turned out his dark prognosis was correct.

Oh, there were the occasional signs of life. The Red Sox went to the West Coast and managed to win six-of-eight in late August and early September, briefly providing hope.

But then came a homestand with two playoff-bound teams — the Twins and Yankees — which brought a harsh dose of reality. Not only wouldn't the Red Sox be getting a chance to defend their 2018 title; they wouldn't even qualify for the playoff booby prize of a spot in the one-and-done wild-card round.

Then again, there were signs of the Sox being in distress from the very beginning. They stumbled and bumbled their way to a 2-8 start on their opening road trip, and never seemed to fully recover from that pratfall.

It took until early May for them to just reach .500. That was supposed to be their launching pad.

National broadcasters everywhere and opposing managers all said the same thing, ad nauseum: "The Red Sox will be just fine — you watch."

So, we watched. But that hot streak never really arrived. There were stretches of inspired play, like when the Sox won 13-of-19 and moved to within 5.5 games of first place. But that level could never be maintained for any extended periods of time.

The entire season felt like a team waiting for a hot streak that, like some rude guest, never bothered to show up to the party.

"We were very inconsistent from the get-go," acknowledged Alex Cora after Friday's extra-inning loss, "and that just carried over throughout the season. We never put together one of those stretches we knew could have."

An eight-game losing skid — tellingly, against divisional opponents New York and Tampa Bay — effectively did them in at the end of July, causing Dombrowski to discreetly place the "Do Not Resuscitate" sign outside the clubhouse.

The rest was just waiting.

The signs of distress were evident even before the start of the season, with the poorly conceived idea of putting training wheels on the starting pitchers was first deployed. That led to a rotten first month, which proved doubly costly: not only did the Sox lose games because their starters weren't stretched out, but they also overtaxed their bullpen, asking it to carry too much of the early-season workload.

In time, the starters gradually improved for a while, and the bullpen pitched credibly in the second half. But the rotation, in a bit of irony, collapsed because of a succession of injuries. Chris Sale and David Price both were sidelined and by August, it didn't matter that the bullpen was effective. Too often, by mid-game, there were no leads to protect.

Assuming the Sox find a way to win two of their remaining nine games, they'll finish with a winning record. And Friday was evidence that once again that, their record notwithstanding, the team continued to play hard and displayed some pride.

But in the end, the 2019 Red Sox will be properly viewed as a massive disappointment, and an expensive one at that. No team in franchise history ever earned more in salary and delivered less in performance.

There's plenty of blame to spread around and starting in another week or so, plenty of time to assess how and why the season went off the rails.

None of that mattered Friday night at Tropicana Field, where the magical 2018 season began and the hugely unsuccessful follow-up season came to its logical conclusion — competitively speaking, at least.

“It wasn’t a great season,” admitted Cora. “We’re going to learn from it and we’re going to be better.”

With nine completely meaningless games left to play, it’s not as if they have an alternative.

BSJ Game Report: Rays 5, Red Sox 4 (11) – Three things we learned

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox lost 5-4 to the Tampa Bay Rays in 11 innings and were officially eliminated from the playoffs. Here are three things we learned:

1. Mitch Moreland keeps swinging.

In a little more than a week, it’s quite likely that Mitch Moreland will take the Red Sox uniform off for a final time. The veteran first baseman is a free agent after this season, and given that the Red Sox will be looking to reduce payroll and have some other options (Michael Chavis, for one) at first base for 2020, it’s likely he’ll be somewhere else next season. But on a night when the Red Sox were officially eliminated from the playoffs, it’s somehow fitting that Moreland did everything he could to extend their season for another night. Remember that early in the year, when the Sox couldn’t get out of their own way and night after night couldn’t produce the big hit when necessary, Moreland singlehandedly won a few games for them with some clutch moments at the plate. He did his best to repeat that Friday night, hitting his first two-run homer in the seventh, then, minutes after a Cleveland Indians win mathematically eliminated the Sox, Moreland hit another two-run homer in the ninth when the Rays were a couple of outs away from wrapping this one up.

2. Rick Porcello tries to end on a positive.

Porcello has had a hugely disappointing season for the Red Sox, as his 5.77 ERA coming into Friday night illustrated. But for his second straight outing, Porcello provided the Red Sox with a strong start. After allowing just two runs over five innings to the Phillies last weekend, Porcello followed that up with perhaps his best start of the season, holding the Rays to just two hits over six innings. He didn’t walk a batter and fanned six. But what was particularly noteworthy was how Porcello dominated. For much of the last two seasons, Porcello had changed his approach in response to the “launch angle” trends in the game, effectively ditching his two-seamer down in the zone and pitching more at the top of the zone. But Friday night — and last weekend in Philly — Porcello seemed to revert back to his old style and the results have been telling. It’s too late to salvage his season, and like Moreland, he’ll likely be somewhere else next year. But if he can close out with another quality start Wednesday in Texas, he may give other teams reason to evaluate his otherwise down season.

3. Sox having trouble staying healthy down the stretch

For their most recent homestand, the Red Sox were without both Mookie Betts (inflammation in the foot) and J.D. Martinez (groin). On Friday, the start of the final road trip, the Sox got Betts back, although he was limited and served as DH. But before the game, the Sox officially shut down Michael Chavis, who has been battling a pulled side muscle for the past few weeks. Chavis suffered a setback hitting in the cage on Wednesday and with just over a week remaining, the Sox made the call Friday to end his season. But just as Betts was returning — and with Martinez getting ready to return Saturday — the physical issues kept piling up for the Sox. Andrew Benintendi lined out in his first at-bat in the second inning and was removed from the game with a thumb injury. Benintendi already had the thumb taped up some, but his swing apparently aggravated the issue further. That left the Sox with an outfield that included Gorkys Hernandez in left and Brock Holt in right.

*** *The Athletic***

The Red Sox have been eliminated. Here are 5 reasons why they sank to this point

Chad Jennings, *The Athletic*

Your long-held suspicions came to pass late on Friday night.

That's when the Red Sox were eliminated from playoff contention. Six American League teams have 90 wins. The best the Red Sox can do is win 89.

The moment had been inevitable for a few weeks. Maybe even months. That four-game sweep at Yankee Stadium felt like a death blow, and that was all the way back in early August. Reasonable hope was long gone by the time the Red Sox lost five in a row earlier this month. Friday was simply the unavoidable final straw.

How the Red Sox went from World Series parade to an early elimination from contending for a repeat in barely 10 months is a long story, but here are five key reasons for their slide to irrelevance.

1. The shockingly bad rotation

Shocking because the Red Sox starters were supposed to be a strength. Instead, they're 20th in the majors in rotation ERA. In games started by someone other than Eduardo Rodriguez — a group that included two Cy Young winners, a massive free agent signing, and one of the great strikeout pitchers of his generation — the Red Sox rotation had a 5.37 ERA with a 29-42 record. The only teams that got fewer innings from their starters were either awful or regularly used an opener.

This is, hands down, the biggest problem the Red Sox faced. Its trickle-down impact threw the bullpen out of whack and left the lineup in massive deficits it couldn't escape. Rodriguez was terrific, but the No. 1 problem fell firmly on those around him.

1a. Nathan Eovaldi

Signed for \$68 million and landed on the injured list after four starts. Rushed back to pitch in the bullpen before being pushed into emergency starter duty. He has a 6.19 ERA. Did not pitch well and did not pitch often.

1b. Rick Porcello

Seemed to get it together in the month of May, but it was a mirage. In the final year of his contract, Porcello has pitched to the highest ERA in the majors among qualified starters. Two mitigating factors: Porcello at least gave the Red Sox a decent number of innings, and the team surprisingly had a winning record in his starts.

1c. Chris Sale

A truly bizarre season. If Sale had enough innings, his strikeouts-per-nine would be second-best in the majors and his WHIP would be fifth-best in the American League, yet he won only six times and finished (due to an elbow injury) with a 4.40 ERA. He made 25 starts and the Red Sox won only 10 of them (they won 17 of Porcello's starts).

1d. David Price

For about half of the season, Price was more positive than negative. From April 14 to July 14, he made 15 starts with a 2.71 ERA. He did not regularly work deep into games, but that would have been a palatable downside if other guys were eating innings. A late wrist injury derailed his season and helped his ERA finish at an inflated 4.28.

2. Eight losses early, eight more in the middle

Two relatively small chunks of the season made a massive difference.

The first was the opening road trip when the Red Sox went to the West Coast and lost eight of their first 10 games. They actually played pretty well after that — they went 47-33 the rest of the way to the All-Star break, a 95-win pace that would have made them the wild-card leader at midseason — but they never escaped that early hole.

And when they came close to escaping that hole — pulling into second place in the American League East, tied for the second wild-card spot on July 27 — the Red Sox promptly lost eight in a row against the Rays and Yankees. By Aug. 4, they were back to third place in the division, 14 1/2 games behind the Yankees and 6 1/2 games out of the wild card.

Given a chance to set the tone early or reset in the middle, the Red Sox fell flat each time. Take away those two absurdly bad stretches, and the Red Sox played to a .591 winning percentage, which would have meant playing for wild card home field advantage down the stretch.

3. Two strategies that had to be scrapped

Barely a month after the World Series, Alex Cora announced he was making a change at the top of the Red Sox lineup. Mookie Betts would bat second this year. Andrew Benintendi would bat leadoff. In theory, it would put the reigning MVP in a spot better suited to his all-around abilities, but the change lasted just two months.

Through June 1, the Red Sox had the game's lowest first-inning batting average, the second-worst first-inning OPS, and they ranked 24th in first-inning runs scored. Last year's quick-strike ability was long gone, and coupled with the rotation woes, it left the Red Sox playing from behind far too often (with Betts back in the leadoff spot beginning in June, those first-inning numbers turned around).

The other Cora strategy that had to be largely abandoned was the non-closer bullpen. It nearly worked — Ryan Brasier was 6-for-7 in April save opportunities, Matt Barnes, Brandon Workman, Marcus Walden and Heath Hembree were each pretty good through June — but the strategy seemed to take its toll, especially on Barnes. By the end of June, Workman was more or less a traditional closer.

4. Free agent spending gone bust

Eovaldi was the Red Sox' biggest free agent expense of the winter, and while that money largely went to waste, it was at least spent in the right area. There was nothing the Red Sox needed more this season than a starting pitcher, and that's exactly what they spent most of their money on.

But what about the nearly \$12 million spent on Steve Pearce, Sandy Leon, Tyler Thornburg and Steven Wright? Forget about past sunk money with Eduardo Núñez and Pablo Sandoval, those four players were either re-signed (Pearce) or tendered arbitration-eligible contracts despite obvious red flags.

For \$6.25 million, Pearce played in 29 games and hit one home run (when Sam Travis and Michael Chavis were in-house alternatives making league minimum). Leon once again played at or below replacement level (while making basically what it would have taken to sign Brian McCann, James McCann or Martin Maldonado in free agency). Some of Wright's \$1.37 million salary was saved because of his second suspension in as many years, and Thornburg's \$1.75 million was the final blow in an unfortunate tenure marked by injury and a 6.54 ERA.

5. Depth that wasn't actually deep

This is partially a byproduct of the wasted free agent spending, but the Red Sox' depth proved to be a real problem throughout the season.

It was most evident in the rotation, where Wright's combination of suspension and injury took one option off the table. Brian Johnson's early injury eliminated another. And Hector Velazquez, though readily available, pitched to a 6.95 ERA in his spot starts. As various go-to starters got hurt and underperformed, the Red Sox were left scrambling to fill a fifth-starter role that proved a drain all season long.

It wasn't until mid-June that Josh Taylor fully emerged as a solution in the bullpen, and it wasn't until mid-July that he was joined by Darwinson Hernandez.

In the infield, both Pearce and Nunez were lost causes against left-handed pitching, an attempt to keep Blake Swihart proved fruitless, and the only non-regular Red Sox position player with an OPS above .700 was Chavis, who was not nearly as good after his first month.

'Tony helps us in a lot of ways': Red Sox explain why they're keeping Tony La Russa

Jen McCaffrey

With just a handful of games left on the schedule, the Red Sox are already well underway with a reorganization of their front office structure. But that future will include Tony La Russa.

The longtime manager came to Boston as a lieutenant of ousted president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, but the team is keeping him around as it undergoes a major internal rebuild.

"We're very happy that Tony is on board with us and (we're) discussing the role going forward," Red Sox assistant general manager Eddie Romero — one of four people running the team on an interim basis — told The Athletic. "We think it will evolve into a lot more overall staff development, not just major league-focused. But those are things we're still talking about and we're excited with the prospect of Tony continuing to bring his vast experience and knowledge. We realize we are a young front office and Tony helps us in a lot of ways."

La Russa's title under Dombrowski, who was fired last week, had been special assistant and vice president of baseball operations. He would often sit with Dombrowski in his Fenway Park box along with another Dombrowski hire, vice president of player personnel Frank Wren.

Wren was fired this week, and special assignment scout Eddie Bane was also let go.

In Dombrowski's absence, Romero along with fellow assistant general managers Brian O'Halloran and Zack Scott and senior vice president of major and minor league operations Raquel Ferreira, have taken over the day to day operations of the team.

La Russa's 33 years as a manager and executive will help a baseball operations staff in transition.

"I think Tony's been a really good resource for all of us just given his vast experience and knowledge," Romero said. "Not only that, but he really dove into everything and came in to mentor Alex (Cora) as a first-year manager last year and help him serve as a sounding board. There's not many opportunities to get a major league manager with 2,000 wins under his belt to help as honestly and without ego as Tony has. I think he's also been incredible in our office, he's around a lot and we love having Tony around. He sees the game in a brilliant way."

Many more changes are coming for the Red Sox. The Athletic's Peter Gammons and Evan Drellich reported that vice president of amateur scouting Mike Rikard will be reassigned to a broader role. Gammons said there may be a shift in roles for amateur scouting Paul Toboni too.

After a season full of injured stars, depth and consistency pave the way for October

Peter Gammons

In a span of 72 hours, Christian Yelich hit a foul ball off his kneecap and was ruled out until Nov. 1, by which time the World Series will have already passed. The Yankees thought they may have lost Gary Sánchez, J.A. Happ and Edwin Encarnación in one night; the Twins lost Michael Pineda to a PED violation and Byron Buxton to shoulder surgery; the Indians had Brad Hand flown to California for a tired arm and were informed Corey Kluber was likely done for the calendar year. The Astros were concerned about Carlos Correa, the Cubs appeared to have lost Javier Báez for the season and the Red Sox fired Dave Dombrowski after Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi were able to make just 56 of what they hoped would be approximately 90 starts, leaving the coaching staff pondering how different the season would have been had Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes and Josh Taylor gotten enough rest to better utilize their 252 strikeouts in 168 2/3 innings of work.

Granted, with less than two weeks left in the 2019 season, the only races for first place remaining were the two Central divisions, intriguing because the Cardinals and Cubs had seven upcoming games, while the Twins and Indians had similar home-and-home series that began with Minnesota sweeping a doubleheader in Cleveland. But in New York and Houston, the battle for the ALCS home-field advantage seemed important, twisting to the daily injury list reports. The Athletics, Rays and Indians vied for two seats, the Cubs, Cardinals, Brewers and possibly even the Phillies for the first place in the NL Central and the second wild-card spot for a one-game showdown with Washington.

And in the midst of it all, Luis Severino was making his first start of the season. Tyler Glasnow was making his first since May. Rich Hill made his first, and had to leave with a knee injury. The Cubs had no idea about the status of Craig Kimbrel. The A's were trying to bring back Sean Manaea, A.J. Puk and Jesus Lúzardo for some Angelic 2002-Francisco-Rodriguez miracle. The Braves brought back Nick Markakis. "I don't think anyone really knows how (their) roster looks going into October," mused Billy Beane.

Not when the Yankees still had Giancarlo Stanton in the lineup just nine times as of the Ides of September and had used the Injured List for a record 30 different players. Thirty. The Rays had used it for 24, including defending Cy Young winner Blake Snell and Glasnow, who in May looked as if he were a contender for the '19 award. The Dodgers used it for 23 players, the Nationals for 21, Braves for 19, Cubs 18, Cardinals 17, Brewers 16, A's 16, and the Indians 15, a list that over the season included Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Francisco Lindor and José Ramírez.

You will be glad to know the Royals only had to use the injured list for 11 players, fewest in the majors.

"What this season has taught so many of us is that it's important to have star players," says Braves general manager Alex Anthopoulos, "but depth is incredibly important to make it through the season. What Brian Cashman has done is remarkable. I remember when we made the run in 2015 in Toronto, the contributions José Reyes and Chris Colabello made. A lineup is more than the first four hitters; the bottom third can be a changing factor. It's the depth of the pitching staff."

Arizona's Mike Hazen couldn't afford to keep Paul Goldschmidt, Patrick Corbin, A.J. Pollock and Zack Greinke and found a way to put together a team with a winning record for a third straight season. "We will go as far as our ability to play good players at as many positions as possible," says Hazen. Hence finding Ketel Marte and Eduardo Escobar, and appreciating Nick Ahmed. "I think acceptance of those players is very important," continues Hazen. "If someone gets hurt, you can't be thinking, 'we're screwed.' We have to welcome players and give them the opportunity to succeed."

For example, the necessity to trade Goldschmidt meant finding a successor for a franchise player and person. Hazen's baseball operations staff believed 28-year old Christian Walker could hit. Goldschmidt's 2019 slash line is .259/.345/.471/.817; Walker's is .259/.342/.466/.808.

Walker's teammate on the 2008 East Coast Area Codes team (headlined by Mike Trout) was Mike Yastrzemski, who was released by the Orioles in spring training and went out to play in front of the Green Monster Tuesday night as the Giants' leadoff hitter and bearing down on 20 homers.

For amusement only, go to Baseball Musings to see teams' records when each player on their roster plays. Take the six division leaders and set the 'games played' at 70 or more. As of Sunday, Sept. 15:

Cameron Maybin, New York Yankees: 78-35, .690
Marwin González, Minnesota Twins: 68-40, .630
Jake Marisnik, Houston Astros: 78-35, .690
Charlie Culberson, Atlanta Braves: 69-39, .639
Tommy Edman, St. Louis Cardinals: 46-32, .590
Matt Beaty, Los Angeles Dodgers: 59-29, .670

To paraphrase Hazen, those teams could go to their bench and best utilize each players' contributing skills.

"One thing I learned spending two years working with Andrew Friedman and the Dodgers is that roster depth is vital to winning," says Anthopoulos. The night Los Angeles clinched the NL West on Sept. 10, David Freese started at first, Chris Taylor at third, Beaty came off the bench, Enrique Hernández was in right and two rookies called up after the trading deadline, Will Smith and Gavin Lux, played all nine innings at catcher and second base, respectively. "I like to think that's who we are," said manager Dave Roberts. "It's a great way to break young players in, playing in games that matter with a team around them where everyone matters."

And around the Yelich injury, the Brewers won eight of nine, and remained in the triangular division/wild-card races with the Cardinals and Cubs.

The night the Yankees worried they had lost Encarnación, Sanchez and Happ, Aaron Boone said, "we play on. We have good players here." Yet Michael Tauchman was hurt. So was Maybin. Severino and Dellin Betances hadn't thrown a pitch. Miguel Andújar played in 12 games.

Cashman and Boone built and honed an ecosystem where players relied upon and trusted one another. With the second-highest payroll, granted, they have stars, but their ecosystem, like the Dodgers, is similar to that of the Diamondbacks. Remember, when Max Muncy got hit by a pitch and suffered a cracked wrist in late August, it was reported as if they were losing a core player. They were. A core player who was signed after being released by Oakland.

"I think when you start putting a team together between the end of one season and the beginning of the next, you try to try to eliminate potential excuses in as many areas as possible," says Hazen. When the smoke from the major free-agent signings begins to clear, smart front offices have Gio Urshela waiting in line at third base or have a Yordan Álvarez from a brilliant trade from the past.

"Depth is really important," says Hazen, "but you need core players who post it every day if you're going to deal with the injuries in the game today."

"He won't come out of the lineup," Bob Melvin said about Marcus Semien, who through Sept. 14 had played in all 149 of Oakland's games. Freddie Freeman fouled a ball off his foot last week, limped around the next day, but insisted on playing. He hit two homers. "That's why you play every day," Freeman said. His teammates Ozzie Albies and Ronald Acuña Jr. had played in every game. Whit Merrifield and Jorge Soler did the same for the Royals. Same with Jonathan Villar with the Orioles.

In honor of Buck Showalter's love of players who "post every day," here are the innings leaders through Sept. 13 at three of the toughest positions to grind:

Catcher:

J.T. Realmuto, Philadelphia Phillies: 1,079 1/3
Yasmani Grandal, Milwaukee Brewers: 989 2/3
Wilson Ramos, New York Mets: 937 1/3
Robinson Chirinos, Houston Astros: 903
Roberto Perez, Cleveland Indians: 900 2/3

Shortstop:

Marcus Semien, Oakland Athletics: 1,309 1/3
Nick Ahmed, Arizona Diamondbacks: 1,255 2/3
Xander Bogaerts, Boston Red Sox: 1,252 1/3
Paul DeJong, St. Louis Cardinals: 1,227 1/3
Amed Rosario, New York Mets: 1,200 1/3

Third Base:

Matt Chapman, Oakland Athletics: 1,221 1/3
Nolan Arenado, Colorado Rockies: 1,220 1/3
Rafael Devers, Boston Red Sox: 1,219 1/3
Josh Donaldson, Atlanta Braves: 1,202
Eugenio Suárez, Cincinnati Reds: 1,180

Some teams emphasize defense, for their pitchers, and for consistency in times of adversity. Both from Sports Information Solutions' and FanGraphs' Defensive Runs Saved numbers, there are five teams that clearly separate themselves defensively — the Dodgers, Diamondbacks, Astros, Cardinals and Indians. All but, arguably, the Diamondbacks had legitimate October hopes in September. The Braves and A's fit in the 8-10 area, but the infield defenses were in the top 6, hence the landing spot for Dallas Keuchel and the remarkable 42-20 record of Mike Fiers, Brett Anderson, Homer Bailey and Chris Bassitt. The Indians are a top-six defense and 43 percent of their defensive runs saved total comes from their catchers, mostly Roberto Pérez, among framing, blocking and pitcher conviction leaders.

Looking back at the 2019 season, when the Yankees placed 30 different players on the Injured List 38 different times, history may show that the most valuable free agent signed was DJ LeMahieu for two years and \$24 million. He is a former batting champion who makes contact brought to a lineup prone to strikeouts. He has won three Gold Gloves, and given the Yankees 71 games at second base, 49 at third, 38 at first and been their defensive seams.

LeMahieu will certainly be in the MVP top 5. So should Semien. And, of course, Alex Bregman, who's missed six games, played third in 96, short in 59.

In the future, when spring training rosters are constructed and invites are sent out, 2019 will be remembered as the year that excuses weren't accepted. When teams told themselves "we're screwed," it may well have been because they didn't find the Urshelas and LeMahieus or realize that the backfields in Florida and Arizona matter, and that the scouting and analytics of the organization are more important than the promises agents made.

The Yankees, Astros and Dodgers will all get to the 100-win mark this week. How many \$100 million outside free-agent contracts, in total, did they get since last Nov. 1?

None.

*** *The Tampa Bay Times***

Rays come back twice, beat Red Sox to stay even in wild-card race

Marc Topkin

Of all the qualities that define this Rays team, one that stands out the most might be resiliency.

The way the players have handled a series of unfortunate events, from a long list of injuries, to a handful of crushing defeats, to mistakes and misplays that flipped scores against them.

But time after time, they have bounced back.

And Friday, as they opened the final homestand and nine-game stretch of the season in a tense battle for an AL wild-card spot, they did just that.

Twice, actually.

By the end of the long night, they had beaten the Red Sox, 5-4 in 11 innings, Willy Adames delivering a single that scored pinch-runner Johnny Davis for their sixth walkoff in their last 19 home games and eighth of the season.

That kept Rays tied for the second wild card at 91-63 with the Indians, who beat the Phillies 5-2, and also eliminated the Red Sox, who didn't do much for an encore after their 2018 World Series championship. The wild-card leading A's (93-61) beat Texas to maintain a two-game lead for the top spot.

(And, if you believe in this kind of thing, the Rays did all this on the 11th anniversary of them clinching their first playoff spot, Evan Longoria's catch of that foul ball still seared in many memories.)

"They know what's at stake," manager Kevin Cash said. "Our only choice right now is to find a way to come back and win the game."

Making it more meaningful, they did so after two of the pitchers who have contributed the most this season, top starter Charlie Morton and closer Emilio Pagan, let them down.

"With Charlie and with Emilio, they've picked us up so much this year, specifically those two guys, for the team to bounce back was pretty big," Cash said.

"We had to," Adames said. "They've been solid all year. We have to pick them up. They are probably the best two guys on the team we have pitching-wise. We have to pick them up. That's why we're a good team, we pick up each other."

The first time the Rays came back was in the seventh.

Morton, who has been so solid all year, faltered. He said enough to convince manager Kevin Cash, who always takes out the pitcher when he goes to the mound, to leave him in a scoreless game in the seventh after allowing a one-out double on his 100th pitch. Then three pitches later gave up a two-run homer to Mitch Moreland on an 0-2 curveball Morton didn't think was so bad.

No problem.

The other Rays instead picked him up, coming right back to take a 3-2 lead. It helped that the Sox pulled Rick Porcello, who came up with one of his best starts in a bad year, holding Tampa Bay to a mere three hits.

"Gritty teams do that – teams that fall behind and they fight back to tie the game or take the lead," Morton said. "It's really important, it's really telling. The teams put in positions like that in a deficit and come back to tie or take the lead, that's a big deal. That's a really big deal."

Travis d'Arnaud, who has more big hits than any Ray, started the rally with a one-out single. Lefty Darwinson Hernandez then walked Jesus Aguilar — pinch-hitting for struggling Kevin Kiermaier — and Mike Brosseau, who was batting because Avisail Garcia left the game after feeling dizzy.

The Sox switched to righty Marcus Walden. Cash went to the bench again, hitting Nate Lowe for Matt Duffy. Lowe got one run in, hitting a slow bouncer to the left side and beating the throw to foil the inning-ending double play.

That paid off when Adames delivered his first huge hit, driving a ball to right that scored the tying run.

With game on the line, it's never wrong to trust Rays' Charlie Morton

Manager Kevin Cash rolled the dice by keeping Morton on the mound in the seventh inning against the Red Sox on Friday. The result was not pretty.

The Rays got a bad bounce when Adames' ball hopped over the short fence in the corner for a ground-rule double, forcing Lowe to stop at third.

But then they got a good bounce when reliever Josh Taylor's 1-2 pitch skidded away from catcher Christian Vazquez, allowing Lowe to score the go-ahead run.

The Rays added a huge run in the eighth when Austin Meadows led off with a walk and Ji-Man Choi doubled him in and went to the ninth with an 4-2 lead.

They gave the ball as you'd expect to Pagan, who started the year at Triple-A but emerged as their closer, and had converted 14 of his last 15 save opportunities and posted scoreless outings in seven of his last eight.

But he failed them this time as well, allowing a two-run homer on a two-strike pitch to, guess who, Moreland.

It wasn't all Pagan's fault, anyway, as Brosseau, the rookie infielder playing rightfield in place of Garcia, was unable to make the play on a high fly by Gorkys Hernandez that hit off the corner wall and caromed away for a triple.

Cash said he heard it "might have have been a homer" (which would have been more interesting had the Red Sox thought so) and "it was not a play we expect Mike to make" based on his inexperience. The Rays had limited other options at that point, either just-called-up rookie Johnny Davis or infielder Kean Wong.

Brosseau thought he might have had a shot, but "maybe, potentially take a better route and get to the wall a little bit earlier."

It didn't matter, as Moreland turned on a 1-2 elevated fastball that Pagan said was "a pretty good pitch" and hit it over the leftfield fence to make it 4-4.

No problem, again.

Two-out walks by Brosseau and Daniel Robertson, to cap an impressive eight-pitch at-bat off Trevor Kelley, set up Adames' game winner before an announced 17,117 at Tropicana Field.

"Coming back speaks to the character of the guys in the room and the talent we have one through 40," Pagan said. "We're a great organization and a really good team. I was excited to see the guy who was going to win it. Tonight, it was Willy. Tomorrow, it might be somebody else. Just sitting there excited to see how it was going to end."

Adames welcomed the chance to deliver the third walkoff hit of his young career.

"Willy will be the first to tell you he wants to be up in that spot," Cash said. "That's what starts it, a player that wants to be there with the pressure and all that stuff. And then through multiple times you come up in those clutch situations you just build more and more confidence."

Adames shared the credit.

"The guys were pretty patient at the plate, taking all those pitches," he said. "That was good for me because I was able to see what kind of pitches they had, and in that situation what they were throwing. They took great at-bats to put me in that spot. Just happy that we got the win and we keep doing it. ...

"The guys were pretty passionate tonight. Fought hard the whole night. Never gave up. It was that kind of game. We have so much fight on this team."

The win was the second straight dramatic one for the Rays, who came back in the ninth Wednesday against Dodgers All-Star closer Kanley Jansen to tie and won it in the 11th.

"It feels like the playoffs right now," Adames said. "Everybody's competing. We all know that we have to win, that we have to put the best that we've got on the field and try to take advantage of everything we can."

"We're learning a lot about ourselves as we go," Cash said. "We want to continue being resilient because that's what it's going to take to see this thing through."

*** *Associated Press***

Defending champ Red Sox eliminated, lose to Rays 5-4

It's official: There will be no repeat in Boston.

The World Series champion Red Sox were mathematically eliminated in the late innings, then lost to the Tampa Bay Rays 5-4 Friday night when Willy Adames had an RBI single in the 11th.

A year after going 108-54 to win their third straight AL East title, the Red Sox (80-73) were knocked out during the ninth inning when Cleveland beat Philadelphia, around the time Mitch Moreland hit his second two-run homer.

Boston lost eight of its opening 10 games and 13 of its first 19, then struggled to recover. After moving into second place on July 27 at 59-47, the Red Sox skidded to a season-worst eight-game losing streak.

"We were very inconsistent from the get-go and it just carried over throughout the season," manager Alex Cora said. "We never put (together) one of the stretches that we knew we could, but other teams were better -- New York and Tampa in our division. They did an outstanding job."

There has not been a repeat World Series champion since the 1998-2000 New York Yankees. Ten of the last 18 champions failed to reach the playoffs in the year after their title.

"That's kind of the question we've been asking ourselves, why is it so difficult?" Boston starter Rick Porcello said. "It takes a lot out of you to make a run and win the World Series. Maybe some carryover to that. Also, you've got a bullseye on your back. All those things are things you think you should be able to deal with, so it's hard to answer that really."

Tampa Bay (91-63) remained tied with Cleveland for the second AL wild card, two games behind Oakland. While the Red Sox have the highest payroll in the major leagues at \$228 million, the Rays have the lowest at \$66 million.

"We're learning a lot about ourselves right now in this environment," Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said. "It's the best environment that we can be in going forward."

Mike Brosseau and Daniel Robertson drew two-out walks in the 11th from Trevor Kelley (0-3), and Adames lined a single to left that scored pinch-runner Johnny Davis from second base.

Diego Castillo (4-8) struck out Moreland with a runner on first to end the top of the 11th.

Moreland put the Red Sox ahead 2-0 with his seventh-inning homer off Charlie Morton on an 0-2 pitch, then tied the score against Emilio Pagan with an opposite-field drive to left.

"It's just been an uphill battle the whole year," Moreland said. "We got off to a tough start and it seems like it kind of snow-balled on us."

Porcello gave up three hits over six scoreless innings. After a pair of walks by Darwinzon Hernandez in the seventh, pinch-hitter Nate Lowe grounded into a run-scoring forceout, Adames hit an RBI double off Marcus Walden and Josh Taylor threw a run-scoring wild pitch.

Ji-Man Choi made it 4-2 on an eighth-inning RBI double off Andrew Cashner.

Morton, bidding for a career-high 16th win, allowed two runs and five hits over 6 1/3 innings.

"For us to be down by a couple runs late in the game and comeback, it's gritty," Morton said.

Mookie Betts went 0 for 5 as a designated hitter in his return to Boston's lineup after missing a week with left foot inflammation. Red Sox left fielder Andrew Benintendi came out in the third due to a bruised left thumb and will likely be sidelined for a few days.

Tampa Bay's Austin Meadows was hitless in four at-bats, ending a 16-game hitting streak.

REMEMBERING ROBERTO

The Rays took part in Roberto Clemente Day. The team wore T-shirts honoring Clemente during batting practice and Clemente's son, Luis, threw the ceremonial first pitch.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: OF J.D. Martinez (left groin tightness) could start Saturday night. ... Cora doesn't have a date for when LHP Chris Sale (left elbow inflammation) will resume throwing. Sale, rehabbing in Florida, spent time with teammates before the game. ... INF Michael Chavis (sprained left shoulder) will mostly likely be shutdown for the season.

Rays: CF Avisail Garcia left after six innings after feeling dizzy. Cash had no update postgame. ... INF Brandon Lowe, out since July 3 with a bruised right shin and later a strained left quadriceps, is to play in an instructional league game Saturday.

UP NEXT

Red Sox RHP Travis Lakins (0-1) will start a bullpen day Saturday night against Rays RHP Tyler Glasnow (6-1), who will be making his third start since returning from a right forearm strain.