

The Boston Red Sox Sunday, September 22, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Nate Lowe's homer in 11th sends Rays past Red Sox

Julian McWilliams

Rafael Devers first saw Butch Hobson's at Red Sox Fanfest which kicked off the 2019 season. He had no idea who he was until Xander Bogaerts gave Devers a rundown of Hobson's resume. That was the first time Devers and Hobson's connected, but on Saturday, their paths crossed again.

In the top of the eighth inning with the Tampa Bay Rays leading the Sox, 3-1, Devers stepped to the plate after Mookie Betts' one-out single against Rays' reliever Nick Anderson. To that point, Devers was 0 for 3 with two strikeouts, but on a 1-1 pitch Devers squared belted a two-run shot to left-center field. It tied the game, 3-3, but the homer held some deeper history, too. He came into the at-bat tied with Hobson's for the most homers ever by a Red Sox third baseman (30). The two-run blast marked Devers' 31st of the season.

Now, he stands alone. "It's pretty cool," Devers said afterward. "It's a record that I broke now, but there are more records I want to continue to break, so it's just about trying to stay healthy and break as many records as I can."

The Sox would lose this one, 5-4.

Mitch Moreland brought the thunder yet again Saturday night, but much like Friday, it didn't last and it meant little.

After hitting two, two-run homers in Friday night's contest against the Rays, he homered again in the top of the 11th Saturday to put the Sox ahead, 4-3.

But in the bottom half of that frame, with Josh Smith on in relief, Travis d'Arnaud doubled and Nate Lowe belted a two-run homer to give the Rays a 5-4 walkoff win. It was the second night in a row the Sox lost in 11 innings.

"It's a situation where it's a tight game and we had to use a lot of guys," said Smith, who hadn't pitched since. Sept. 8. "Every inning you have to be ready to go. I just didn't execute."

Manager Alex Cora, though, doesn't want the result to overshadow the quality of baseball the team's played the last two games. Even though the club is out of playoff contention, he thought they played a good game.

"We're playing good baseball. We're playing until the end," said Cora. "We're going to keep playing hard and make it hard on every team. We know that they're a great team and are playing for a lot."

Seeing a season through while knowing it's over after Sept. 29 is certainly a tough pill for a team and organization that expects a World Series, but it's the Sox' reality. Cora said before the game that in addition to remaining competitive in each game, he'll give his players a chance to go after history as long as it's not forced and fit into the concept of team. Devers' history mark was the perfect example.

"It's fun," Cora said. "Like I said all along [Devers] did an outstanding job in the offseason to get in shape and be ready for the grind and he didn't prove us wrong. I still remember earlier in the season when the on-base percentage was up but he wasn't driving the ball a lot of people were doubting him but he stayed with the process. We got the final product and we're very proud of him."

Bogaerts hit his 32nd home run of the season and now has 110 RBIs this season to lead all shortstops. The homer by Devers scored Betts' 132nd run this year, which also leads the league. The pitching struggled this year, but the offense — particularly at the top of the order — remained potent with a young Devers in the No. 2 spot in the order.

“It feels great,” Devers said. “Records are meant to be broken. Someone much younger will probably break it later on. At the end of the day I’m trying to continue to play my game and do everything I can to help my team win. It’s been tough but we’re still giving 100 percent every day because that’s what we’re here to do.”

What stops World Series champions from repeating? Alex Cora tries to explain

Peter Abraham

For a second, it looked like Mike Piazza had tied the game with a home run off Mariano Rivera. But Bernie Williams caught the ball in center field, a step away from the warning track at Shea Stadium.

The final out of the 2000 World Series gave the Yankees their third consecutive championship.

Rivera turns 50 later this year; Piazza is 51; Shea Stadium is a parking lot and no team has repeated as World Series champions since.

The Red Sox became the latest of 19 consecutive teams who couldn’t figure out how to do it again when they were officially eliminated Friday.

The NFL, NBA, NHL, and Premier League have all had repeat champions during that time. The same is true for NCAA Division I football, basketball, and hockey.

But no MLB team since those dynasty Yankees under Joe Torre has found a way to win again. The Sox are the fifth defending champions in seven years to miss the playoffs

Outside of the Phillies in 2009 and the Yankees in 2001, no team has returned to the World Series a year after winning it, and only seven got as far as the League Championship Series.

“I wish I knew what it was about baseball that causes that,” Red Sox reliever Brandon Workman said Saturday before the Sox lost to the Tampa Bay Rays, 5-4, in 11 innings. “Maybe we could have changed it.”

I asked manager Alex Cora his thoughts about it Friday night after the Sox were eliminated and he asked for a day to think about it. Fair enough.

“It’s not easy, man,” he said. “We talk about hangover or whatever. The grind of going through the whole thing is gratifying. We only lost 57 games last year as a group.”

But Cora acknowledged for the first time that preparing for this year felt rushed and that it affected the first month of the season. The Sox started 11-17 and, other than a brief surge in July, were never really in serious contention.

It went back to the beginning. Depending on your view, the Red Sox were either justifiably cautious or alarmingly cavalier in spring training. Rick Porcello threw only 12 innings against major league opponents, Chris Sale nine, Nate Eovaldi seven, and David Price 6⅓.

That group is 27-26 with a 4.99 earned run average and so far has pitched only 479⅓ innings. Eovaldi, Price, and Sale also spent long stretches on the injured list.

Their poor performance and lack of durability helped to wear out the bullpen and exposed the organization's lack of rotation depth. The Sox had \$88.3 million of their payroll tied up in the rotation and it failed.

The one starter who had a traditional spring training workload, Eduardo Rodriguez, is 18-6 with a 3.53 ERA.

The Sox are on pace to surpass the 876 runs they scored last season. But their pitchers went into Saturday already allowing 128 more. Their earned run average climbed from 3.75 to 4.63.

But Cora defended the approach in spring training, saying he had no regrets.

Eovaldi and Price had appeared in six of the 14 postseason games, Porcello and Sale five. All four also had other games when they warmed up and didn't get in.

The feeling was they needed to be protected in spring training after the stress of October.

"We did what we thought was right," Cora said.

The other question is motivation. Price and Sale spoke passionately throughout last season about wanting their first championship. The same was true for J.D. Martinez, Mookie Betts, Mitch Moreland, Andrew Benintendi, and other key players.

But there was less fervor to repeat. The Sox blasted out of the gate in 2018, going 17-2, and stayed in first place all season except for some scattered days in May and June. This team started slowly and hoped their talent would make up for it.

It never did.

"People can say whatever they want about were they satisfied with what happened last year," Cora said. "What we talked about in spring training was the other way, nobody had [repeated] in 20 years.

"We were the only ones in the big leagues who could say we won, too. But this year we didn't pitch. We didn't put everything together."

The Sox should benefit from a fresh approach to roster building following the firing of Dave Dombrowski. Cora also promised to "attack" the offseason given the extra time he will have.

"You turn the page on the things that are bad. You continue doing the things you're supposed to do to get better," he said.

In the end, maybe the following season is just the price you have to pay for a championship.

"At the end there's no excuses, we didn't play well," Cora said.

Nathan Eovaldi looking to regroup, come back strong in 2020

Julian McWilliams

The Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas was where the Red Sox and Nathan Eovaldi solidified a four-year, \$68 million contract. The Sox held the news conference during Major League Baseball's annual winter meetings in December, and Eovaldi, decked out in a burgundy suit with a matching tie, received his reward for a stellar postseason.

Seated to Eovaldi's right was former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski and to Eovaldi's left was manager Alex Cora, who had high hopes for the starter coming into this season.

“Throughout the regular season we made some adjustments as far as usage and the way he was attacking hitters,” Cora told reporters at the time. “I can’t wait to see him again with us. He’s going to be a huge part of this rotation.”

The Eovaldi from late last season, the one who helped the Red Sox capture the 2018 World Series, was absent this season. Collectively, the team didn’t play well, and, on Friday, they were officially eliminated from postseason contention.

“It’s definitely frustrating,” Eovaldi said prior to their 5-4 loss in 11 innings Saturday night against the Rays. “We all had high expectations. There’s a lot that goes into each season, and we’ve had our ups and downs.”

Eovaldi — who has a history of injuries, most notably two Tommy John procedures — missed three months of the season with a loose body in his elbow. When the Sox finally activated him at the end of July, it was mainly to serve in a bullpen role. But the Sox struggled to find consistent starting pitching, forcing the team to put Eovaldi back in the rotation.

Eovaldi hasn’t found his footing in his original role, either. In six starts and just 22½ innings, Eovaldi owns a 6.85 ERA, allowing 17 earned runs. Teams are hitting .279 against him with a .927 OPS. In his last outing against the Giants, Eovaldi lasted four innings and gave up five earned runs.

Eovaldi, 6-7 this season, will take the ball for the Sox on Sunday afternoon in what will be his second-to-last start of the season. Health, however, is important to Eovaldi as he heads into the offseason.

“I’m going to try and make sure I’m 100 percent,” Eovaldi said. “I need to keep developing my pitches. I felt like my cutter this year is a little bit inconsistent. The same with my splitter. I’m going to take the time off I need but get after it and be ready to go out there and compete [next spring].”

Winding down

In addition to Darwinson Hernandez and Josh Taylor, you probably won’t be seeing a lot of the other high-leverage relievers after the Tampa Bay series.

As for the position players, Cora said they will have conversations with them, too, to see where they’re at.

“Obviously there are some special seasons going on,” Cora said. “There are certain goals they want to accomplish, but we’ll talk about it. I’ll be honest with them, too. One hit, one homer, or five RBIs isn’t going to change your season. Don’t worry about it. Just worry about the right things.”

Hembree wants in

Cora said Heath Hembree feels good coming out of his simulated game and, despite the Red Sox being out of the playoff picture, Hembree wants to see the season through.

“He wants to pitch,” Cora said. “Obviously if he’s healthy and we feel that he’s able to compete the way he is we will pitch him. And I understand it. He said he put so much work into this and he wants to finish the season on the mound.”

Cora reiterated that if he feels good for the next couple of days, Hembree will be active for the Texas Rangers series.

Betts back in right

Mookie Betts hadn’t played right field since Sept. 12 against the Blue Jays before playing there Saturday night. He’ll have Sunday off and will be back out in right Monday. J.D. Martinez was back in at the

designated hitter's spot and will play right Sunday. Andrew Benintendi is day-to-day after jamming his thumb in his first at-bat of Friday night's game.

Hughes heads west

Gary Hughes, a major league scout with the Sox since 2012, joined the Arizona Diamondbacks in the same capacity after being freed from his contract. Arizona general manager Mike Hazen was an assistant GM with the Sox when Hughes was hired.

Some context for Mookie Betts's thoughts on legacy, contracts

Alex Speier

On Thursday morning, Mookie Betts contemplated the nature of a player's legacy in a city where he performs. He'd seen a Fenway lovefest for Carl and Mike Yastrzemski for three days — a nod to the reverence in which the grandfather is held after his 23 years with the Red Sox — and earlier this month, Betts saw the adulation showered upon David Ortiz in his first Fenway appearance since getting shot.

Still, the displays did not suddenly fill Betts with sentimentality as he considered his own potential place in Red Sox history.

"It's pretty cool that they have their career in one place, but you can be remembered in that same fashion even if you put on a couple different jerseys," said Betts. "It definitely doesn't hurt to only put on one jersey . . . [But the Yastrzemski celebration] doesn't sway me [about the future] one way or the other."

For many, it was natural to see the comments as evidence that Betts was and is counting down days until he leaves Boston. Yet such a perspective is incomplete. Some context:

- In the same story, Betts noted his eagerness to return to the lineup despite a sore foot. "I'm not going to quit. I'm just not going to quit on myself or the team no matter where we are in the standings," he said. Betts is committed, as he's always been, to being the best player possible for the Red Sox.
- Betts didn't rule out a return to the Red Sox on Thursday. Nor has he ever done so. He's always been consistent: He's enjoyed and appreciated his time with the Red Sox, and has great and respectful relationships throughout the organization.
- That said, Betts's long-term future is a business decision. He believes in the notion of establishing a value for himself and sticking to it. If the Red Sox accept that value and offer it to him, then it seems he'd welcome the opportunity to sign long term for what he deems his worth.
- To date, every time the subject of a long-term deal has been broached, there's been a significant gap between what the team has offered and what Betts has believed he's worth. And at every turn, it seems like Betts has been right (at least in a financial sense) not to sell himself short. Every time the Red Sox have talked about a long-term deal, they've shown a willingness to move the goalposts and to offer more money with their next proposal. Betts is following a pattern established by other stars such as Max Scherzer: Don't be afraid to bet on yourself if you know you're good. That outlook is often a trademark of the most ferocious competitors and best players.
- When the Red Sox drafted Betts in 2011, he asked for a \$750,000 signing bonus. The Red Sox initially offered him roughly half of that. Betts balked and said that while he appreciated the team's interest, he'd go to school if they didn't meet his asking price. Just before the deadline to sign Betts, the Sox made him the offer he'd been seeking, and signed him for \$750,000.
- Betts won his arbitration hearing after 2017. He got a record agreement with the Red Sox for a player with his service time after 2018. Every time he's held the line in negotiations, he's gotten what he sought.

- That history surely informs Betts's perspective moving forward. Baseball is a business where both sides can seek to maximize leverage — and remain respectful while doing so. The Sox didn't unilaterally decide to pay Betts \$10 million as a pre-arbitration-eligible player in 2017 after he was runner-up in American League MVP voting in 2016. (Nor should they have done so.) Betts understood that.
- Even so, it's hard not to see statements such as the one Betts made about being unswayed by sentiment and think that Betts won't test free agency — unless the Red Sox ask him what he wants in a deal this offseason, he and his agents offer the team terms, and the team more or less accepts them.
- Yet if the Red Sox do trade Betts because of their belief that he won't sign, or if they retain him and he leaves in free agency, at first glance it's hard to think it won't affect his place in franchise history. Mariano Rivera and Derek Jeter wouldn't have been the same iconic players had they left the Yankees. By contrast, Roger Clemens and Wade Boggs damaged their relationships for a time with the Red Sox fan base. That said, it's also possible that Betts could be proven right: Albert Pujols just enjoyed a royal welcome home in St. Louis as a member of the Angels. Pedro Martinez left Boston but has reestablished himself as a part of the Red Sox franchise fabric.
- In most professions, when people change jobs for a reason of their choosing — money, family, geography, or anything else — they're congratulated for taking advantage of an opportunity to make such a choice, a reflection of career accomplishment. The same is true if, after considering alternate job opportunities, they decide to remain in the same place and role (sometimes with a pay bump).
- But an athlete's right to exercise such a choice is typically viewed differently, through a tribal prism. To fans, business and contract decisions don't necessarily reflect how a player feels about where he's playing, yet they are almost necessarily viewed as a form of judgment on a franchise or region.
- Could the Red Sox, a jewel franchise with a multibillion-dollar valuation, afford to give Betts just about anything he wants and remain profitable? Yes. Is it his fault that the team may consider itself hamstrung by the roughly \$80 million committed for the next three years to David Price, Chris Sale, and Nathan Eovaldi? Yet the team, like Betts, views this as a business decision, and wants to make what it considers a smart investment, not one borne of sentiment.
- If both sides view contracts as a business matter, then a player's commitment to the organization should be viewed as something separate from the question of whether he stays with a team for the entirety of his career. Betts surely could have asked to delay his return to the lineup beyond the Tropicana Field turf, but he was reinstated atop the lineup on Friday as a designated hitter not because the Sox needed him to but because he believes it is his responsibility. That's par for the course: Throughout his career, Betts has been committed to the Red Sox on the field and off. He plays hard, plays hurt, and plays well.
- In fact, he plays very well — always. This year, with a surge since the start of July, he's once again having a standout year, ranking fourth among American League position players in WAR (as calculated by Fangraphs), just ahead of teammate Xander Bogaerts. For the second time in three years, Betts's "down" season will nonetheless likely see him land in the top five or 10 in MVP balloting.
- Betts's run from 2015-19 will stand as one of the greatest five-year runs in Red Sox history given the overall contributions. If the Red Sox decide to trade Betts or if he leaves as a free agent, it's probably a safe guess that he thinks that on-field performance — along with a 2018 World Series title — should define his Boston legacy, rather than the possibility (again, not the certainty) that he goes somewhere else.

Baseball will miss Giants manager Bruce Bochy

Peter Abraham

The San Francisco Giants have a small rug with the team logo that they bring from city to city and put down near the door of the visitors' clubhouse. It's a small, team-building reminder to the players about sticking together.

Not that they need much help with that considering who manages the team.

At a time in baseball when managers are increasingly button pushers directed by the front office, it was revealing to spend a few days around the Giants and Bruce Bochy.

He's not the last of his kind, but he's one of the few left.

Bochy has managed for 25 consecutive seasons, the longest tenure in baseball. The last 13 have been with the Giants and included three World Series championships.

The Padres went to the playoffs four times under Bochy from 1995-2006 and haven't been back since. Outside of John McGraw, Bochy has managed and won the most games in Giants history.

"It's been a pleasure to play for him," said rookie outfielder and first baseman Chris Shaw, a Lexington native and former Boston College player. "There aren't a lot of guys like him left in the game, and it's refreshing in that regard. He's been around so long, but he shows up every day with energy and enthusiasm."

You heard the same thing from veteran players such as Buster Posey and Jeff Samardzija. As Bochy prepares to step away, it's clear how much he'll be missed.

"Being around Bochy has been a lot of fun. But not just because he's a Hall of Fame manager, but because of how he treats us," lefthander Tony Watson said. "He has that competitive drive and wants to win every game."

When the Red Sox and Giants played a 15-inning game on Tuesday, Bochy used four relievers in the 13th inning alone.

"He managed that game like the World Series," Watson said. "It was fun to see."

It goes beyond baseball for Bochy and his players. Bochy met his wife, Kim, in college in 1975 and they have been married since 1978. They have two sons and now two grandchildren.

"He's a good guy to look up to just in terms of how to lead your life. He talks about that kind of thing with us," Shaw said. "Married, kids, the whole thing, and he's always happy. Who wouldn't want that?"

Bochy started Shaw on Tuesday and got him two more plate appearances on Thursday, making sure he enjoyed his time back in Massachusetts. Bochy also showed his understanding of what it meant for Mike Yastrzemski to be at Fenway Park by hitting him leadoff and playing him in left field for the first game.

Bochy got career win No. 2,000 on Wednesday, and he was pleased it came at Fenway, where he managed the National League in the 1999 All-Star Game.

"That was one of the special moments of my career. I love the history of this ballpark," said Bochy, who ducked inside the Green Monster on Thursday to take a look around.

Bochy, 64, isn't sure what will come next.

"I'll guess I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," he said. "Right now I have no plans. There's things I'd like to do like anybody else. Initially I'm going to like having an empty plate and not worrying about having a schedule."

"I'm good with it. I'm not going to say it hasn't been hard at times, especially with a lot of great things that have happened this year, things that have been said. But I'm good with it."

Lexington, by the way, did a good job of celebrating Shaw when he came home. Wednesday was “Chris Shaw Day” in the town and he received a proclamation, a flag flown over the famed battlefield, and a jar of dirt from all the fields he played on in the town.

The Boston College players and coaches also visited Fenway that day.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Some difficult calls to make

It isn't clear if the Red Sox will hire a president of baseball operations or a general manager to replace Dave Dombrowski. But whatever the title shakes out to be, presumably the team will want a new leader in place ahead of the GM meetings in Phoenix, which start Nov. 11.

The new person almost certainly won't have the same amount of decision-making power Dombrowski had. But he or she will have a large role in shaping the roster.

The big call will be on Mookie Betts, whether to trade him over the offseason or hold on to him while attempting to sign him.

Here's the big question: How much value can you extract for one season of Betts? Any potential trade partner is not going to want to give up much for a player they know is determined to enter free agency.

In this view, it's better to hold on to Betts, shoot for a championship in 2020, and work diligently between now and next November to sign him.

Betts is too good to give up on for some prospects. He has never once said he dislikes Boston and wants to leave. He has said only that he wants to be paid according to his value.

Find a way to work with him. He's worth it.

The Sox also need to entertain the idea of extensions for Eduardo Rodriguez and perhaps Rafael Devers and decide how — or if — Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr. fit in down the road.

Bradley has averaged 3.1 WAR over the last four seasons, Benintendi 2.7 over the last three.

A few other observations on the Red Sox:

- The Sox used nine pitchers in a nine-inning game at Toronto on Sept. 12. They are one of four teams to do that this season, with the Rockies managing it twice.

If Red Sox games feel particularly tedious this season, you're right. They are averaging 3 hours and 25 minutes, the longest in the majors and well above the average of 3:05.

The Sox have played four games lasting at least five hours, the most in the majors. They had 12 other games that were at least four hours.

- Something for the Red Sox to be aware of this coming week: The Rangers have stolen home four times. The Rays have done it twice, and no other team has done it more than once.

- The Sox own the baseball rights to University of Florida quarterback Feleipe Franks, who is out for the season after dislocating his right ankle. Franks was taken in the 31st round of this year's draft and signed for \$40,000.

He has eligibility remaining with the Gators and still hopes to play in the NFL.

The Red Sox also have the rights to 26-year-old Detroit Lions backup quarterback Jeff Driskel, who was taken as an outfielder in the 2013 draft. He also played at Florida.

Driskel has played only nine NFL games since being drafted by the San Francisco 49ers in 2016 but isn't ready to try baseball.

■ Carl Yastrzemski on the state of the Sox: "They're scoring runs. When you lose [Chris] Sale and pitchers of that caliber, it's going to bother you. It's going to hurt you. I've always said that over 162 games, pitching is the key."

ETC.

Catching up with Dempster

Ryan Dempster started 29 games for the 2013 Red Sox then pitched in relief in the postseason. He retired after that season and now, at 42, works for MLB Network as an analyst and with the Cubs as a special assistant to Theo Epstein.

Here's a chat we had:

Q: What stands out from your time in Boston?

A: "I played there one year and it felt like 10. It was remarkable what a special group we had and what happened in the city that year. I'll never forget that team dinner we had in Cleveland and how we jelled together after the bombings at the Boston Marathon. It felt like everybody we had on the roster made a big contribution. It was great for the city that we had that kind of season."

Q: You saw Xander Bogaerts at the start of his career. Did you envision what he has become?

A: "He was a big kid at 20, but I'm not sure I thought he'd hit 30 home runs and drive in 100. But he had an incredible demeanor about him, the way he carried himself. His at-bats as a rookie showed a lot of control. He had that ability to stay in the moment. I love seeing what he's done."

Q: As a pitcher, what do you think is going on this season with all the home runs?

A: "That's easy. It's the baseball. You pick up a ball now and it feels different. The seams are tighter and the way the ball moves has changed. It's just science, physics. There's less friction and it carries more. I hope they do something to fix it."

Q: Have you been back to Boston often?

A: "Not as much as I'd like to. But every time I do go back, people are incredibly nice. Probably because I hit [Alex Rodriguez], right? But that was one of the best times of my career. I always feel the warmth there and the fans shared in the moment with us. They always welcome me back nicely."

"That team had a group text message that lasted two years after the season, that's how close we all were. Being on the same team with people like [Mike] Napoli, Jonny Gomes, David Ross, Jon Lester, [Dustin] Pedroia, and [David Ortiz], it was special."

Major league turmoil in Pittsburgh

Neal Huntington is one of baseball's longest-tenured executives, becoming general manager of the Pirates back in 2007. Clint Hurdle has been his manager since 2011.

Other than Dayton Moore and Ned Yost in Kansas City, no current combination of GM and manager have been together longer.

Add in team president Frank Coonelly and the Pirates have had the same leadership for nine seasons.

But Huntington and Hurdle, who are both signed through 2021, are facing a crisis that could lead to changes once this season ends.

As the Pirates finish up their fourth straight losing season, All-Star closer Felipe Vazquez is in jail facing multiple felony charges in Pennsylvania and Florida involving sexual assault on a minor.

There also were at least three incidents this season involving fights between players or players and staff members, including what one player described as a “full-out brawl” between Vazquez and fellow reliever Kyle Crick earlier this month that resulted in Crick needing season-ending surgery on an injured finger.

A third reliever, Keone Kela, was suspended in July for a profane exchange with Hurdle and the team’s mental skills director.

On the field, the Pirates were 21-43 in their first 64 games after the All-Star break and got outscored by 108 runs.

Huntington, a New Hampshire native, built a team that made the playoffs three seasons in a row from 2013-15. That ended a run of 20 consecutive years with a losing record. He turned around an organization that was an afterthought.

But the current state of the team and all the off-field incidents have to result in change of some kind.

Owner Bob Nutting has been silent throughout the entire mess. That can’t last for much longer.

Extra bases

Drew Pomeranz had a 1.03 WHIP and 15.3 strikeouts per nine innings in his first 21 games with the Brewers and has played a big part in Milwaukee surging into contention for a wild card. Pomeranz has a career 2.74 ERA and 1.12 WHIP as a reliever compared with a 4.25 ERA and 1.41 WHIP as a starter. He signed a \$1.5 million make-good deal with the Giants as a starter last offseason. The former Red Sox lefthander would be wise to market himself as a reliever this time around. “He’d get a multiyear deal as a reliever, in my opinion,” one National League scout said. “His fastball was 92-93 as a starter but 94-95 as a reliever. A lefty who throws like he does is valuable.” . . . It got lost when compared to the Yastrzemski family hoopla at Fenway, but the Giants-Red Sox series also was a big three days for the Flemmings. Will Flemming, one of the radio voices with the Red Sox, got to work the games with his brother, Dave Flemming, who has been with the Giants for 16 seasons. The brothers grew up in Alexandria, Va., and graduated from Stanford. Dave also called games for Triple A Pawtucket, as Will did. Will said it was the first time he called the same game as his brother . . . In Bo Bichette, Cavan Biggio, and Vladimir Guerrero Jr., the Blue Jays have a rookie infield they can build around, and it’s a good story that all three are sons of former major league All-Stars. Don’t be surprised if Biggio turns out to be the best of the group. Red Sox coaches have raved about his command of the strike zone. He had 64 walks in his first 391 plate appearances, a percentage that has him among the best in the game. Biggio also struck out 112 times, but he swings at strikes and better contact should come . . . Northeastern product Aaron Civale has a 1.82 ERA in nine starts for the Indians. He has yet to give up more than two earned runs in a game. Civale has a 2.05 ERA since going into the rotation after Trevor Bauer was traded to Cincinnati. Bauer had a 6.39 ERA for the Reds . . . The Astros went into the weekend with a 49-18 record against teams in the American League West, 30-5 at Minute Maid Park. They were 10-0 against the Mariners at home and 9-0 against the Rangers. In all, they had outscored division teams, 247-109, at Minute Maid. Astros manager A.J. Hinch, by the way, has not called for an intentional walk this season and the Astros have only 10 sacrifices. That’s a smart way to play . . . Luis Tiant and Saul Wisnia will be at Newtonville Books on Langley Road at 7 p.m. Wednesday to discuss their book “Son of Havana, A Baseball Journey From Cuba to the Big Leagues and Back.” Tiant’s life makes for an incredible story and the book captures it well . . . Happy 88th birthday to Ken Aspromonte, who made his major league debut with the Red Sox in 1957. He was the Opening Day

second baseman in 1958, but that lasted only five games before he was traded to the Washington Senators. Aspromonte played seven seasons in the majors for six teams. His brother, Bob Aspromonte, played 13 seasons in the majors.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Nate Lowe's 11th inning HR lifts Rays to another walkoff win against Red Sox

Steve Hewitt

Everything seemed to go the Red Sox' way last season on their dominant march to the World Series, but this season, it's seemed to be just the opposite.

Now officially out of playoff contention, the Red Sox are doing their best to play spoiler this weekend against one of their division rivals, but for a consecutive night, their best effort came up short.

A night after the Red Sox rallied late before falling in an 11th-inning walk-off loss, it happened again. Mitch Moreland gave the Red Sox the lead in the 11th on a solo homer, but Nate Lowe responded in the bottom half of the inning with a two-run walkoff homer to lift the Rays to a dramatic 5-4 victory at Tropicana Field.

The Rays (92-63) seem to be on a mission right now, as they moved a game up over the Indians for the second wild-card spot with the victory. And they're continuing to leave the Red Sox (80-74) in the dust while they do so.

"We're trying to win every ballgame and that just shows the type of season we're having," said Rafael Devers. "Last year, we had a great season winning these ballgames. Now, this year, we're on the other end of it. It's been tough but we're still giving it 100 percent every single day trying to win these ballgames because that's what we're here to do."

It looked like the Red Sox might steal one. Devers hit a two-run game-tying homer in the eighth — his team record 32nd home run for a third baseman — which ultimately sent it to extras. After a scoreless 10th, Moreland — who hit two homers Friday, including the game-tying one in the ninth — tried to play hero again, smashing a go-ahead two-out homer to center off Diego Castillo's first-pitch slider.

But once again, it wasn't enough. Josh Smith came on in the 11th and gave up a leadoff double to Travis d'Arnaud that landed just out of reach of a diving Jackie Bradley Jr. And after Alex Cora came out for a mound visit, Smith served up a fastball to Lowe that he snuck inside the left-field foul pole for the winner, sending the Rays into celebration.

Smith hadn't pitched in almost two weeks, but Cora was staying away from Darwinzon Hernandez and felt that Smith was fresh enough to take that spot.

"It's a tough spot for everybody," Cora said. "I'm just happy that we're playing this way. We're fighting it, we know that they have a great team and they're playing for a lot, it's not going to be easy. We're going to keep coming."

Cora said he'll use a different lineup for Sunday's afternoon game against the Rays as he attempts to give guys who are banged up some rest.

The manager didn't seem too upset about the loss. The Sox are playing mostly for pride now with eight games left in the season, and for a second consecutive night, he saw the fight he wanted. But as been the case all year, it came out on the short end.

“It is what it is,” Cora said. “The positive is that we’re playing good baseball. Playing until the end. ... We’re going to keep playing hard and making it hard on other teams, trying to win every game. That was the case here.”

Red Sox notes: With a defined role, Darwinzon Hernandez looks forward to 2020

Steve Hewitt

Darwinzon Hernandez always had the confidence he’d make it to the big leagues, but no one — not even him — expected it would happen as soon as it did.

Now, the 22-year-old is looking like he’ll become a fixture of the Red Sox bullpen for years to come.

Hernandez began the season as a starter in the minors and one of the Sox’ top prospects. He started in his major-league debut in June, was quickly sent back down but returned in the bullpen. He never returned to the minors, becoming a lightning rod in relief. It was certainly a unique path to stardom, one he didn’t exactly expect when he started the season with Double-A Portland.

“I just knew that I had to work hard and work with my coaches and try to improve my craft, so that I can get that chance up here,” Hernandez said Saturday through a translator. “But in terms of my goals, it was just improve on my game so that I knew when the opportunity presented itself, I’d be here. I was a bit anxious at times, but I knew that I would get here eventually.”

Hernandez gave up three runs in one-third of an inning in Friday night’s loss to the Rays, but it was his first appearance in more than a week. After a heavy workload over the last two months, manager Alex Cora is purposely resting his prized rookie to end the year. The plan was for him to pitch one more time this weekend before shutting it down for the rest of the season.

Hernandez has become that important to the Red Sox’ future. In mostly one-inning stints, the lefty has displayed overpowering stuff that has produced a 39.8 percent strikeout rate (57 punchouts in 143 batters faced), showing he’s best suited for the bullpen. Cora recognizes that, and said Friday he sees Hernandez as a reliever long term.

The potential of Hernandez one day closing is a question for later, but he certainly wouldn’t say no.

“Wherever they’re willing to put me, I’m willing to do it,” Hernandez said. “Whatever it is to help the team win.”

For now, Hernandez has a definitive role in the bullpen going into 2020, and that excites him as he enters the offseason looking to get even better.

“It feels good, but obviously I just want to maintain my focus,” Hernandez said. “I know I still have a lot of work to do in improving my game, but it’s something that going into next year, it’s one thing that I’ve always had is every year I want to improve. Knowing next year I’ll have a good chance with what my role is here, I have a good feeling about it.”

Martinez DHs, Betts moves to RF

Cora said Friday he wanted to avoid playing Mookie Betts — who returned from a toe injury to be designated hitter on Friday — in the outfield this weekend, but he changed his plan. Betts returned to right field on Saturday night, as J.D. Martinez returned from a groin injury as the DH.

Cora said he wanted Martinez to handle the DH role first before he played right field. The plan now is for Betts to sit on Sunday, and Martinez to play right field. Betts will be back Monday, and they’ll decide then who will play outfield. ...

Andrew Benintendi, who left Friday's game with a thumb contusion, is day to day but was available off the bench if needed on Saturday. Cora was hopeful he'd return Sunday.

Hembree nears return

Heath Hembree (elbow) responded well from his simulated game on Friday, and the plan is for him to be activated for next week's series against the Texas Rangers. Cora said the reliever could potentially pitch as an opener.

Hembree was placed on the injured list in early August and has worked hard to return before the season is over.

"Regardless of where we're at now, he wants to pitch," Cora said. "Obviously if he's healthy and we feel like he's able to compete the way he is, we'll pitch him either one inning or two innings, whatever it is. I understand. He said that he put so much work into this and he wants to finish this season on the mound."

Alex Cora reflects on how Red Sox missed playoffs after winning World Series

Steve Hewitt

The Red Sox' inevitable reality came Friday when they were officially eliminated from reaching the postseason, but Alex Cora doesn't have any regrets about how it all unfolded.

After emptying the tank with a win-at-all-costs approach to capture the 2018 World Series, Cora reduced the workload for his starters in spring training in a plan that ultimately backfired, with the Red Sox getting off to an abysmal 11-17 start in which starting pitching was a key culprit.

The manager, though, still believes it was a necessary approach after what the starters had to do to win a championship last season.

"What these guys did last year, you guys lived it," Cora said. "I mean, I still remember Game 3 in Houston, David (Price) is in the tub, he calls me in, 'Hey, come here.' He said, 'I'm in the bullpen.' I said, 'Yeah, tomorrow.' He said, 'No, no, no, I'm in the bullpen tonight.' The grind and what they went through, it wasn't easy. We structured our spring training based on that. It wasn't that far off from what we did two years ago and it just happened that we didn't pitch well. ..."

"I think obviously this is a group that has been doing it for what, three years in a row, playing all the way to the end. Sometimes, hey, that grind costs you. I think at the end, there's no excuses, we didn't play well. We were very inconsistent. When we got hot, other teams stayed hot."

The Red Sox became the fifth team in the last seven years to win the World Series and fail to make the playoffs the following year, joining the 2012 Giants, 2013 Red Sox, 2014 Giants and 2015 Royals. Cora wasn't sure exactly the reason, but believes they had a target on their back after winning the World Series.

Cora saw it early in the season. During the first week, one opposing pitcher struck a Red Sox player out, and Cora described the emotion he had as "October-like." Teams seemed a little bit more amped to play the Sox.

"There's something about coming in the next year and the level of play on a daily basis, night in and night out, it's a little bit different emotionally," Cora said. "I don't know if that's the reason. I feel like that's something that I learned this year. It's different. It's different. I don't know. Last year, when we went to Houston, we were very excited, going over there. When they came home, it was the same thing. I don't know. I don't know if that's the reason teams haven't made it or whatever but that's one of the reasons the season is different."

Cora also didn't rule out a hangover effect. If the Sox were taxed coming into the season after last October, it certainly showed in the first month.

"It's not easy, man," Cora said. "The grind of going through the whole thing is gratifying. We were talking about it yesterday. We only lost 57 games as a group. Locked in mentally. And then the offseason becomes short. Sometimes, it's great ... give me the short offseason the whole time. As far as preparation and all that, you're in a rush. I do feel that going into the season, you prepare the right way, you do everything possible but that first month is very important. You have a target."

Cora said he was looking forward to a full offseason — one that he hasn't had in a long time — to develop a plan and put what he learned this season into action.

"There's no excuses," the manager said. "We will get better. We will attack the offseason the right way. You see it right now. The way they're going about their business, that's very gratifying because they have to earn it. It's not that we come in here and, hey, go ahead, win three out of four and move on. There's certain things we're going to get better at and we're taking a look at a few things. Obviously there's still a question mark of what's going to happen with the organization in the upcoming days and weeks or months, you don't know. But as far as the staff and what we're doing, I'm already working for next year."

Pedro Martinez sympathizes with Red Sox, asks for fans' support

Jason Mastrodonato

Eleven years after throwing his final big league pitch, Pedro Martinez can't help but wonder what it would be like to pitch in today's game.

The strikeouts "don't really matter," he said. The baseballs are flying out of the park. The information is overwhelming. Players have notecards on their wrists, in their pockets and on top of their heads.

"We're seeing a lot of statistics in their hats," Martinez said in a sit-down with the Herald at Fenway Park this week. "Back in my day you had to pretty much memorize it or do it on your own whenever you felt like."

But the biggest difference Martinez notices, the one that makes him wonder if he'd be able to survive as a modern day big leaguer, is the cell phones.

Everybody in the park has one. Most of them will point it at the field at some point during the game. They'll post about it on social media. Any interesting quotes from players or managers or front office executives can reach fans from New York to California, Europe to Asia in a matter of seconds after they're spoken.

Martinez as we know him, the Hall of Fame pitcher with a Hall of Fame personality, might not exist in the modern-day game.

"I imagine that's the only part I don't want about this game nowadays, is how exposed the players are," he said. "It's got to be difficult. I'm interested to know how they feel about being so exposed. Every phone is looking at you, every camera is looking at you, every eye is looking at you from all angles. It's got to be difficult to be so exposed, to be at risk of everything blowing up."

Martinez was full of memorable quotes because he wasn't afraid to be himself or speak his mind, something that's becoming increasingly rare as players in today's game become more and more cautious with what they say.

"Imagine in my days, when I dropped one of those quotes like, 'the Yankees are my daddy,' or, 'wake up the Bambino' and all that," Martinez said. "Imagine all the exposure I would've gotten if it was these days. So for the players, I can relate to that and I don't miss that."

“One thing I was always honest, though. I said it from my heart. I said it when I said it. I never thought I would work on television. And little did I know, because of baseball, I’m working on television (for TBS and MLB Network). That’s how much I love the game though. Those 20-strikeouts, imagine how much media and social media that would’ve gotten nowadays, if I was able to do that nowadays.

“I miss competing, but don’t miss the exposure.”

Pondering the Dombrowski firing

This is the part of Martinez’ job that gets tricky.

He’s technically a member of the Red Sox front office as a special assistant and has previously been in the war room with Dave Dombrowski when important decisions were made during the winter months. But he’s also on the payroll at MLB Network and TBS, where he’s expected to critically examine the team he works for, among others.

It’s not something Martinez does easily, but he admits he’s been skeptical about the firing of Dombrowski as the Red Sox look to move in another direction in the front office.

“I’m a little bit confused,” Martinez said. “I didn’t see why this would happen in the middle of the season. I didn’t see that he would be leaving just like that. I didn’t see the reasons. I didn’t see it coming. It was surprising to everybody, the way way he left. The circumstances, I still don’t know. It was unexpected for everyone.”

What made Dombrowski’s dismissal unsurprising was the state of the payroll (growing and inflexible) and the farm system (ranked among the worst in the game), paired with a disappointing season in 2019 in which a \$240-million team is struggling to win 85-88 games.

“Anything we did this year that wasn’t 108 wins or plus was going to be disappointing,” Martinez said. “That was one of the seasons for the ages. It never happened in Boston. That was the only time. And it would be unfair to say that we’re going to repeat the same thing or do even better.”

Martinez’ point is a fair one, but missing the playoffs is obviously inexcusable with the talent and payroll the Red Sox had this year.

The Yankees have done more with less, and dealt with more injuries to star players than most teams in baseball.

“When you look at how many key players we’ve had on the injured list, the kind of season we’re having is not bad,” Martinez said. “When you lose your ace, your second ace and you lose J.D. for a certain amount of time and lose key players like that, it’s expected that the team is going to shake up a little bit. It’s not easy. And the long haul they had for the World Series really affected them.”

The Sox’ plan for the World Series hangover has now been written about and discussed ad nauseum. Rest the pitchers in February, March and April to get more out of them in September – that was the plan anyways.

Instead, they’ll end up with 181 days on the injured list from Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi this year. Eduardo Rodriguez, who pitched less than any of the starters last October, is the only one having a good season.

Martinez never experienced anything like that. He pitched deep into the postseason four times in his career and came back the next season ready to roll three of those times (he retired after the 2009 run with the Phillies). Some of his strongest seasons (2000, 2005) came in the year after he pitched deep into October.

But Martinez thinks the Red Sox had the right idea, even if it didn't work in 2019.

"If you track what happened to every rotation that was out there after the World Series, there is a bad rap around it," he said. "Most of the time you look at all the teams that went and won the World Series, most of those guys ended up on the DL. So they probably had the proper idea about trying to rest those guys, especially knowing how we used them toward the end, but it didn't pan out."

Martinez also offered a different explanation.

"I guess some of those guys were already a little bit hurt," he said. "Even though we were able to win the World Series, they were a little bit hurt. And we didn't have enough time to recoup from all the things. Even though we tried to give them extra rest in spring training they never totally recouped and you could see it. Starting the season, they weren't totally healthy."

Sale was the only pitcher who knowingly had arm problems during the World Series. The shoulder had been an issue in the second half and his velocity was way down.

But neither Price nor Eovaldi had any injury concerns last October. Price had dealt with carpal tunnel earlier in the year but never went on the disabled list. There was no word of either battling injuries in October, though both have been hurt for much of 2019.

Martinez' explanation makes sense. If other pitchers were injured, too, extra rest in the spring was necessary.

Yet there are no clear answers to the mess the Red Sox rotation is currently in. Martinez said he expects the Sox to "patch up some of the needs they have and hopefully start off fresh in spring training and not having any distractions."

Pedro's other project

The same exposure that makes him wonder if he'd survive in baseball today is also giving him a chance to reach out to his fans and ask them for help.

Martinez is doing that now. One of his dreams in retirement was to go back to his native Dominican Republic and open the door for the financially unfortunate. He wants to give the less privileged some opportunities he never had.

And he wants young baseball players in the Dominican to study in an exchange program with kids from Winchester and Lawrence and Malden.

"I would like the kids to have an opportunity from pre-K to high school to become elite students and have the exchange with the American kids that we're hoping we can bring over from another high school from here, from Winchester or Malden or wherever and have them exchange," he said. "Have them come over and compete and have fun and exchange."

Martinez and his wife, Carolina, recently purchased 10 acres of land in the Dominican and donated it to the Pedro Martinez Foundation. Construction will soon be underway on a school. Underprivileged children who excel in school or sports will have a chance to get free education at the school, which they hope will host as many as 1,700 children.

"Hopefully they will get the opportunity I never got," he said. "I was always a public school kid and never had the opportunity to go to Puerto Rico to represent as a Little Leaguer. I'm hoping none of those kids go through the needs I had to figure out."

The foundation, which relies on the generosity of others, has also donated school supplies to kids in Mattapan and hopes to build their next school in Lawrence.

“This is a dream come true for us,” Martinez said. “Fans here have always been supportive and I’m expecting them to support us this time again and make this a routine, something we can do. And also expand.”

His connection to the city will never fade. Neither will his love for baseball.

“The game remains a lot of fun but for me it’s totally different,” he said. “I’ve seen the changes. It seems like yesterday that I was pitching (the 17-strikeout game in Yankee Stadium). Even though it was the steroid era, I still believe the game was strategically different than nowadays. The strikeouts don’t really matter. Long balls are up by far. The quality of located pitches is not the same. So it’s totally different, but remains a lot of fun.”

*** *MassLive.com***

Ryan Fitzgerald, Boston Red Sox undrafted prospect: ‘I don’t think I could have lived with myself if I didn’t at least try’

Christopher Smith

Red Sox prospect Ryan Fitzgerald, an avid Red Wings fan, grew up in Michigan and played hockey for 15 years.

“That’s why I still keep the long hair,” Fitzgerald told MassLive.com. “That’s always a part of me. I usually say I’m a hockey player playing baseball. That’s kind of the mentality I bring out onto the field.”

Fitzgerald has needed to play with an edge after he went undrafted out of Creighton University. He spent 2017 playing for the Gary SouthShore RailCats of the independent American Association before the Red Sox signed him in 2018.

The 6-foot, 188-pound shortstop, who turned 25 on June 17, received the 2019 Red Sox minor league Defensive Player of the Year award. He and five other minor leaguers were honored at Fenway Park on Thursday. It marked his first ever trip to Boston. He took advantage of his time here with dinner in the North End.

The 2019 Carolina League All-Star posted a .960 fielding percentage at shortstop for High-A Salem this season.

He continues to improve as a hitter. He slashed .271/.345/.375/.721 with 25 doubles, seven triples, three homers and 65 RBIs in 127 games this year. He has 34 doubles, 10 triples, 11 homers and 103 RBIs in 207 games (779 at-bats) since joining the Red Sox organization.

Why did he go overlooked?

“Multiple reasons,” Fitzgerald explained. “Obviously I didn’t have the senior year (at Creighton) that I wanted. My junior year was really my best year. I thought that was my best chance probably to get drafted. I knew deep down I was good enough. That’s why I kept playing. I knew I could play with guys that had gotten drafted. I don’t think I could have lived with myself if I didn’t at least try. If I tried and I don’t make it, I’m all right with that because at least I gave it a shot.”

Fitzgerald had a solid junior year at Creighton. He batted .279 with a .357 on-base percentage, .437 slugging percentage, .794 OPS, 19 extra-base hits and 35 RBIs in 51 games (218 plate appearances). But he then slashed only .230/.289/.321/.610 with 13 extra-base hits and 24 RBIs in 55 games (239 plate appearances) as a senior.

“I never really learned how to hit,” Fitzgerald said. “And obviously it’s still a long process, a long road ahead.”

The left-handed batter hit only .239 with a .301 on-base percentage, .394 slugging percentage and .695 OPS for the RailCats. But his defense continued to stand out. He also showed the ability to hit for some extra-base power with 12 doubles, six triples and seven homers in 84 games (318 plate appearances) there.

Gary manager Greg Tagert recognized Fitzgerald’s potential. He contacted Red Sox professional scout David Scrivines, who holds a tryout in February before spring training.

“After my Indy ball season in 2017, Greg asked Scrivines if I could go to that,” Fitzgerald said. “I went to that and the rest is history. They ended up signing me two months later.”

Fitzgerald attended Gary’s first spring training practice in 2018.

“As I was driving home, the Red Sox called and I had to turn around and pack up my stuff,” he said. “I was on a flight the next day to Fort Myers.”

Fitzgerald officially signed with Boston on May 8, 2018.

Fitzgerald is a proud independent ball alum. He even mentions in his Twitter profile (@RyRyThisGuy) that he’s a former Gary Railcat.

“If I hadn’t gone and played Indy Ball with Greg Tagert and the SouthShore RailCats, I don’t think I’d be where I’m at today,” he said. “I learned so much from the players and different veterans that were on the team. It made me mature quicker.”

Fitzgerald who lives in Illinois during the offseason, began working with Devin De Young, a former coach for the Windy City Thunderbolts (Crestwood, Ill.) of the independent Frontier League.

The Red Sox hired De Young this past January. He serves as assistant coach for Low-A Greenville. He’s a launch angle guru who helped Fitzgerald realize the importance of hitting the ball in the air.

De Young then introduced Fitzgerald to Justin Stone, a biokinematic hitting coach on the North Side of Chicago. Stone also serves as a hitting consultant for the Cubs.

“I linked up with him this past offseason and just went to town kind of revamping my swing and learning how to hit balls hard and get them in the air because that’s what they pay you for,” Fitzgerald said.

Defense kept his professional baseball dream alive when he struggled offensively at Creighton.

“I was always a defense, glove-first guy,” he said. “That is something Creighton has been known for. They’re usually top five in fielding percentage every year. My sophomore year, we were No. 1. We were top five all the other years. I played short and second for them. That’s really where I learned to play defense is at Creighton.”

The Hinsdale, Ill., native moved to Michigan with his family at 4 years old because of his dad’s job.

“I was growing up during the whole Hockeytown era with the Red Wings,” Fitzgerald said. “I’m a huge Red Wings fan. They won back-to-back Stanley Cups. In Michigan, you play hockey. That’s just the thing you do.”

His family returned to Illinois in 2005. He continued to play both hockey and baseball.

Fitzgerald has spend the majority of his time at shortstop in the Red Sox organization. But he also has played second, third and first base. He understands the importance of being a versatile player like Brock Holt and Marco Hernandez.

“Especially a guy in my position, being that Swiss Army knife — being able to play anywhere — it’s going to be huge for me,” he said. “I actually played with Marco for a month this year when he was on a rehab down in Salem. So I learned a lot from him. He’s a great dude.”

Boston Red Sox lose, 5-4, on Nate Lowe walkoff homer in 11th inning

Chris Cotillo

For the second straight night, Mitch Moreland’s late heroics were for naught as the Rays walked off the Red Sox at Tropicana Field.

Nate Lowe hit a two-run, walk-off homer off Josh Smith to give Tampa Bay a 5-4 win over the Sox in 11 innings.

Moreland, who hit two homers in Friday’s loss, hit a go-ahead, solo homer to put Boston up, 4-3, in the 10th. A night after Willy Adames followed Moreland’s game-tying homer in the ninth with a walk-off single in the 11th, Lowe ended Saturday’s game with a blast off Josh Smith to beat the Red Sox by the same score for the second straight day.

Moreland’s homer followed a two-run, game-tying homer by Rafael Devers in the eighth. The Sox, who were mathematically eliminated from postseason contention Friday, failed to successfully play the role of spoiler against a Rays team that picked up a game on the Indians in the wild-card race.

Righty Travis Lakins tossed 1 ½ scoreless innings, marking his second consecutive clean start as an opener. Tampa Bay jumped ahead against relievers Mike Shawaryn and Colten Brewer in the third, going up 2-0 on RBI singles by Travis d’Arnaud and Joey Wendle.

Xander Bogaerts cut Tampa Bay’s lead in half by leading off the fourth with his 32nd homer of the season, a 371-foot blast off Yonny Chirinos. After Adames extended Tampa Bay’s lead with a mammoth, 462-foot shot off one of the catwalks in center field, Devers took Nick Anderson deep to the opposite field to tie things up in the eighth.

Tampa Bay threatened in the 10th, as Brandon Workman walked leadoff man Austin Meadows before retiring the next two batters he faced. Sandy Leon gunned down Meadows as he was trying to steal second to end the inning.

After Moreland’s homer, Smith allowed a leadoff double to Travis d’Arnaud. Lowe’s shot traveled 338 feet and landed over the short wall in left field.

Boston fell to 80-74 and 6-11 in the season series against the Rays. The two teams will be back in action Saturday afternoon with righty Nathan Eovaldi on the mound opposite lefty Ryan Yarbrough at 1:05 p.m.

Red Sox notebook: Benintendi (thumb) day-to-day, Rodriguez’s 20th win a focus in last week

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox outfielder Andrew Benintendi is day-to-day after leaving Friday’s game with a left thumb contusion, manager Alex Cora said.

Benintendi is out of Saturday’s lineup but could be available off the bench if needed. The hope is that Benintendi returns tomorrow.

Benintendi's absence caused Cora to veer from his original lineup plans Saturday. Though he originally intended to use Mookie Betts exclusively as a designated hitter this weekend on the turf at Tropicana Field, he decided to use Betts in right field as J.D. Martinez returned to the lineup as the DH.

"We can't have two DHs," Cora said. "We need a right fielder and we need one DH. We wanted J.D. to DH first before he goes to the outfield."

Betts, who injured his foot playing on the turf in Toronto last week, returned Friday after a six-game absence. Martinez has missed the last three games with a groin issue.

Betts will not play Sunday and Martinez is likely to DH. Both players could be in the lineup for Monday's series finale.

No setbacks for Hembree

Reliever Heath Hembree (elbow) has responded well after throwing a simulated game Friday and Cora expects him to be active for the team's series in Texas, which begins Tuesday.

Hembree hasn't pitched since Aug. 1 and received a plasma-rich platelet (PRP) injection to resolve inflammation in his elbow in early August. He's expected to make one more appearance this season before heading into the winter healthy.

"He worked so hard to get to this point, so regardless of where they are now, he wants to pitch," Cora said. "Obviously, if he's healthy and he's able to compete the way he is, we'll pitch him one inning or two innings, whatever it is. I understand. He said he put so much work into this and that he wants to finish the season on the mound."

Cora said it's possible Hembree serves as an opener for the Sox instead of coming out of the bullpen. They'll need an opener for Thursday's series finale against the Rangers.

"You have structure. You warm up, you pitch and get out of the game," Cora said. "We'll see. It looks like that'll be the case. At least he'll pitch one game."

High-leverage relievers to be shut down

After Boston was mathematically eliminated from postseason contention Friday night, Cora said he planned to play at full strength through Monday's series finale against the Rays before letting off the gas a bit. He said Saturday that he planned to stay away from the team's high-leverage relievers-- including Matt Barnes, Brandon Workman, Josh Taylor, Darwinzon Hernandez and Marcus Walden-- over the final week.

"They've pitched a lot," Cora said.

Cora will also be careful with his position players and plans to talk with some individually about how much they want to play in the final six weeks. He will be mindful of certain milestones players are approaching.

"If there are certain goals they want to accomplish, we'll talk about it," Cora said. "I'll be honest with them, too. One hit, one homer, five more RBIs. It's not going to change your season so don't worry about it."

Cora believes his players will lobby him to be in the lineup for Eduardo Rodriguez's two remaining starts. Rodriguez is two wins short of 20 on the season.

"They know that," Cora said. "As you know, everyone is pulling so hard for him to accomplish that. I'm betting those who are banged up will feel better and play."

Cora believes there's value in 20 wins, even in an era in which the win has been devalued. Rodriguez is sitting at 18 wins and 191 ⅓ innings with starts scheduled for Tuesday and Sunday.

"If you win 20, you did a lot of good things," Cora said. "I think 200 innings is more important to him than anything else. I think it's a good number. If he gets a chance to do it, we'll push for it."

*** *RedSox.com***

For 41 seasons, Butch Hobson held a little-known record in Red Sox history

Ian Browne

For 41 seasons, Butch Hobson held a little-known record in Red Sox history.

All of 22 years old, Rafael Devers broke it on Saturday night at Tropicana Field when he smashed his 31st homer of the season, the most ever by a Boston third baseman.

The game-tying shot in the eighth inning put the Red Sox in good position in a game they ultimately lost, 5-4, to the Rays in 11 innings.

In the same number of innings and by the same score, the Sox were defeated for the second straight night by a team that is fighting for its playoff life every night.

There will be no parade -- or playoffs -- for Boston this season.

But there have been individual developments to make the team proud, none bigger than the breakout of Devers.

"It's fun," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Like I've been saying all along, he did an outstanding job in the offseason to get in shape, to be ready for the grind, and he didn't prove us wrong. I remember early in the season when the on-base percentage was up but he wasn't driving the ball. A lot of people were doubting him, and he stayed with the process and controlled the strike zone. We're very proud of him."

As of May 8, Devers had hit just one homer. From then on, the left-handed hitter has been a wrecking machine, belting 30 homers in 480 at-bats.

And that led him to a record on Saturday night that he didn't know about until apprised of it after the game.

"This is actually the first time I'm hearing of this, so it's pretty cool, but obviously it's a record that I broke now but there's more records I want to try to continue to break," Devers said. "It's just about trying to stay healthy and moving forward, trying to work as much as I can."

Devers got a kick out of hearing it was Hobson's record that he broke because the two of them had a chat a few months back.

"Yeah, I actually had a conversation with him at [Red Sox Winter Weekend in January]," Devers said. "And Bogey [Xander Bogaerts] was the one that told me he was a really good third baseman."

Hobson, who went on to manage the Red Sox from 1992-94, had a decent career, with 98 homers.

But Devers looks primed to be one of the most impactful hitters in the game for the next several years. He leads the American League with 85 extra-base hits and 340 total bases.

Over the final week of the season, Devers could go back and forth with his close friend Bogaerts with some impressive stats.

Bogaerts has 51 doubles, one more than Devers. Bogaerts has 32 homers, also one more than Devers.

Devers claims the two of them aren't having a friendly competition, but that's hard to believe.

"We're just trying to help the team win, whether it's Xander, myself, Mookie [Betts], J.D. [Martinez], we're just trying to do whatever it takes to help the team win ballgames," Devers said.

The wins -- the Red Sox have 80, with eight games left in their season -- haven't come nearly often enough.

But the hits have come in bunches from the big bat of Devers, who hopes to be performing his heroics in the middle of a pennant race at this time next year.

Cora: Year after 'a little bit different emotionally'

Ian Browne

A day after the Red Sox were officially eliminated from postseason contention, manager Alex Cora dealt with the reality of many others who have been in his shoes in recent years.

Forget about the fact that no team has repeated as World Series champions since the 2000 Yankees. A more telling stat is that the 2019 Red Sox are the fifth defending champion in the past seven years not to make the playoffs.

The two exceptions are last year's Astros and the '17 Cubs.

Cora shed light on a few reasons why it's so tough for teams to duplicate the pinnacle of success from one season to the next.

"It's not easy, man. We talk about hangover or whatever. The grind of going through the whole thing is gratifying," Cora said. "We were talking about it yesterday. We only lost 57 games last year as a group. We were locked in mentally. And then the offseason becomes short.

"Sometimes, it's great. Give me the short offseason the whole time. As far as preparation and all that, you're in a rush. I do feel that going into the season, you prepare the right way, you do everything possible, but that first month is very important. You have a target. We talk about it."

The Red Sox found themselves not executing during a brutal start to the season, and also perhaps failing to match the intensity of their opponents at that point.

"I'm not going to say the name of the pitcher, but there was a pitcher in Game 4 or 5 of the season this year, we had a man at third, two outs in a 0-0 game in the third inning," Cora said. "He struck somebody out, and the emotion that he showed was kind of like, October-like. It's not that last year people didn't want to beat us.

"There's something about coming in the next year and the level of play on a daily basis, night in and night out, it's a little bit different emotionally. I don't know if that's the reason. I feel like that's something that I learned this year. It's different."

Cora then remembered how up Boston was to face the defending World Series champion Astros last season.

"Last year, when we went to Houston, we were very excited going over there," Cora said. "When they came to play us at home, it was the same thing. I don't know. I don't know if that's the reason teams haven't made it or whatever, but that's one of the reasons the season is different."

While Cora has taken a lot of heat for the conservative approach he took with his pitchers in Spring Training, he doesn't think he had a choice.

Boston's veteran starting pitchers were completely taxed in October, serving as "rovers" back and forth between the rotation and the bullpen. For the sake of their careers -- and with the hope they would have something left for this October -- Cora felt he had to let them recover in Spring Training.

It didn't work, as ace Chris Sale and No. 2 starter David Price both had injury-marred and inconsistent seasons, and so, too, did Nathan Eovaldi. Rick Porcello stayed healthy, but he has struggled mightily for much of the season.

Does Cora wish he had done things differently in Spring Training?

"Not at all," Cora said. "What these guys did last year, you guys lived it. I mean, I still remember Game 3 in Houston, David is in the tub, he calls me in, 'Hey, come here.' He said, 'I'm in the bullpen.' I said, 'Yeah, tomorrow.' He said, 'No, no, no, I'm in the bullpen tonight.' The grind and what they went through, it wasn't easy.

"We structured our Spring Training based on that. It wasn't that far off from what we did two years ago, and it just happened that we didn't pitch well."

Though nobody wanted to miss the playoffs, Cora thinks the extra time off this October could benefit his team going into next year. Cora -- who was the bench coach with the Astros in '17 before going right into his job with the Red Sox once that World Series ended -- will also have much more time to decompress.

"There's certain things we're going to get better at, and we're taking a look at a few things," Cora said. "Obviously there's still a question mark of what's going to happen with the organization in the upcoming days and weeks or months, you don't know. But as far as the staff and what we're doing, I'm already working for next year. Looking forward for a different offseason. It's been a while since I've been home in the beginning of October, but I'll have plenty of time off to structure a few things that I want to do in the offseason and in Spring Training."

Worth noting

- Originally, Cora didn't plan on using Mookie Betts on the turf of Tropicana Field in this series, as the right fielder was coming off of left foot inflammation. But with J.D. Martinez back in the lineup for the first time since Tuesday, Cora changed his plans. Betts started in right and Martinez was the DH.

"We can't have two DH's," Cora said.

- Left fielder Andrew Benintendi, who exited Friday's game with a left thumb contusion, was out of the lineup on Saturday. The hope, Cora said, is that Benintendi will start Sunday.

- Reliever Heath Hembree, who missed most of the second half with right elbow woes, remains on track to pitch in a game before the season ends. Cora mentioned the possibility of Hembree serving as an opener for his one outing, because it would give him a defined structure.

*** *WEEI.com***

The Sunday Baseball Column: Why can't free agency be fun anymore? That's what players like Mitch Moreland want to know

Rob Bradford

Mitch Moreland summed up the stark reality of what most likely awaits.

“The way free agency has become it’s not fun anymore,” the Red Sox first baseman said.

It’s hard to argue.

It’s the reason you’re seeing the trend of elite players signing contract extensions come back into vogue, with others doing whatever they can to get some sort of certainty heading into those years of free agent eligibility. But some don’t have the kind of choices free agents used to enjoy, such as players like Moreland, who will become a free agent for the third time in the last four offseasons this winter.

“It seemed like when people were getting deals it was fun,” he said. “I think I missed it by about a year. Stuff is valued differently now.”

It was a dynamic that Moreland first experienced when finishing off his 2016 season with the Rangers, leading to a one-year deal with the Red Sox. That was followed up by the current two-year, \$13 million contract he is riding out.

“As far as phone calls went, I had a ton of phone calls from other teams and I think Boston was the last team I actually heard from but they were the first team to come in and be serious, make offers and that kind of stuff. Obviously, I loved it here and wanted to be a part of it,” said Moreland regarding his last foray into free agency.

“I wasn’t really worried about the waiting around part. The first time around I had offers for probably better money but I wanted to play here. I was excited about that opportunity. I’m at the point now to where am I going to enjoy it the most and where is my family going to enjoy it? We’ll worry about the rest later.”

But ...

"It's kind of tough to have priorities with the way the market has been the last couple of years," he lamented.

But now free agents such as Moreland — who just turned 34 years old — have seen their options dwindling. And that is a landscape that doesn’t figure to be turning in their favor this coming offseason.

The days of bidding wars for any level of players are seemingly a thing of the past, at least until the next collective bargaining agreement. Remember these comments from J.D. Martinez to WEEI.com back in spring training after a second-straight offseason where players were left waiting for deals that often times never came ...

"I knew it was. Why wouldn't it? They got away with it last year, why wouldn't they do it again? What's going to happen? Nothing," Martinez said. "It's embarrassing for baseball, it really is. It's really embarrassing for the game. You have a business. They say, 'The market is down, the market is changing.' The market is higher than it's ever been. People are making more money than ever, and they're trying to suppress it. It's more of a race towards the bottom now than a race towards the top. You can go right now through everyone's lineup and you already know who's going to be in the playoffs. What's the fun in that? We might as well just fast-forward to the end of the season."

That brings us back to Moreland.

A strong case could be made that despite the injury woes that to 86 games heading into Sunday he would be a good fit going forward. The Red Sox have a trio of young, right-handed-hitting first base options (Michael Chavis, Bobby Dalbec and Sam Travis), who would seemingly be complemented perfectly by the likes of Moreland.

But the guy who made the two previous decisions on Moreland inking with the Red Sox, Dave Dombrowski, is gone, leaving the first baseman -- along with fellow free agents-to-be Brock Holt and Rick Porcello -- with even more unknowns and potential uneasiness than anticipated.

"There is a lot of uncertainty in it," Moreland said. "In the end I've been fortunate. I've played on some great teams throughout my career and I've been able to do it for a while. I'm looking forward to it. Looking forward to seeing what it brings and playing again. Would I like to be back here? Absolutely. It's a great place. Great place to play baseball. Great fan base. Obviously, the year hasn't gone the way we wanted but the future is bright. That part of it I'm definitely excited for and I've been happy to be part of it the last few years."

MAYBE J.D. MARTINEZ HAS A MARKET, AFTER ALL

Most in baseball seem to be of the same mind when it comes to deciphering whether or not Martinez will opt-out of his contract after this season: Who will give him a better deal than what he already has in his pocket?

The outfielder's defensive limitations -- which have been highlighted in recent weeks -- would seem to take National League teams out of the equation. That leaves the 32-year-old with whatever American League clubs might be in the market for a designated hitter valuable enough to pay more than the \$64 million he has coming to him over the next three seasons with his current deal.

But there might be one team that is lining up to offer Martinez the temptation to opt-out: the White Sox.

This is a team that is flush with the kid of young hitters Martinez can influence both on and off the field in a positive way. It clearly has the money to make a splash in the free agent market (as was evident by their pursuits of Manny Machado and Bryce Harper last offseason). And Chicago undeniably has a hole at designated hitter, a spot it had the worst production at (.607 OPS) of any team in the American League.

The best fit? All things considered, it's still the Red Sox.

CAN YOU IMAGINE EDUARDO RODRIGUEZ WITH THE ASTROS?

We know what Rodriguez has become, which -- as we sit here -- is the Red Sox' ace. His presence is a testament to Ben Cherington's maneuvering at the 2014 non-waiver trade deadline when he wrestled the then-minor-leaguer from the Orioles in exchange for Andrew Miller, outbidding Dombrowski's Tigers.

But the Red Sox and Tigers weren't the first to make a hard push at Rodriguez.

According to a major league source, the year before Rodriguez became a Red Sox Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow went hard after the lefty. Houston, however, was told by then-Orioles GM Dan Duquette he was unavailable. It was another early example that Houston had a pretty good idea what they were doing.

XANDER BOGAERTS IS READY TO ADJUST HIT GOALS

Bogaerts has a good chance at landing in the Top 10 in MVP balloting, which would be a first for the shortstop. It is a new existence that has him rethinking 2020.

"Coming into this year for sure it wasn't," Bogaerts said when asked if MVP was ever a goal for 2019. "Maybe when you start getting better and better and better. Once you see yourself getting better maybe it becomes a possibility and you try and get it. Next year my mindset will be different and I'll have higher expectations."

Then there is the reality of overtaking the guy who rolls out of bed at the end of March and lands with that season's MVP, Mike Trout.

"That's kind of hard," said Bogaerts of somehow surpassing the likes of Trout. "We'll see."

Believe it or not, Bogaerts fell well short of one of his main goals for this season - stealing more bases.

Despite showing better "sprint speed" than any other season in his career, Bogaerts in target to finish with his fewest number of stolen bases since 2014, heading into Sunday with just four in six attempts.

He has an explanation ...

"I think where I'm hitting is a little bit tougher," Bogaerts said. "Sometimes I'm hitting in front of J.D. or hitting in front of (Rafael) Devers. It's kind of harder to run into an out knowing those guys can hit a double or J.D. hits one out of the park and I can score. If I was fifth maybe a little more.

"I have to be a little smarter and a little more for the team and not as selfish. Maybe if you're hitting fifth the third or fourth hitter has already hit so maybe you can create something for the other guys. It's hard, man. It's hard.

"The other day I almost had one. I had an easy stolen base against Toronto. Devers had two strikes and I didn't want to go when someone goes with two strikes and I hear, 'He's running!' I don't like that. I don't want to do something to others that I don't like. I do. I feel stronger. I should be able to get more, but it's just the position. It sounds good but when you get in the middle of it it's different."

RYAN WEBER HAS A DOOZY OF A FAN STORY

The Red Sox pitcher brought up an interesting comparison the other day: Watching NASCAR and baseball.

"It's kind of the same," Weber said. "Obviously there's the first lap and then in the middle — like the middle of the game or the middle of a race — it gets repetitive. It's a lot like baseball. It's an individual sport but they have a team behind them. There's one guy out there doing it but he's counting on other people, like baseball. It's long. It's going to take three hours. And there are obviously some heightened moments.

"What might set it apart is the noise, and the atmosphere. The fans are the best fans, I believe, in any sport. Everyone is friendly. You can bring in whatever you want to bring into the race and everyone shares everything. Security is nice. Concessions are nice, reasonable prices. Everyone has a good seat."

Weber knows of what he speaks. He has lived the life of NASCAR fan, having attended 10 events since first getting an invitation to the Daytona 500 at the age of 22.

More proof? Get your arms around his favorite story from attending a NASCAR event:

"It was Daytona 500 in 2014, pre-race. Probably 30 minutes until start. We're up probably 10 roads from the top, good seat, Turn 4. I'm putting sunscreen on, getting ready, locking in, already had a few cocktails in me pre-race. I hear a voice behind me, 'Hey, can I get that when you're done.' I kind of give a half-turn, don't make eye-contact but say, 'Sure, no problem.' So I'm done, get out of my seat, start walking back, trying to picture who had said because nobody is really looking at me who I would think would want this sunscreen. Then I lock eyes on this guy, probably mid-60's, there solo by himself. Leather skin. Skin of an alligator. I further investigate and I see this man has no arms. We lock eyes even more and he's not with anyone, so I'm looking around. OK, this guy is in a bit of a pickle so I lather him up with sunscreen and that was that and that's just classic NASCAR because someone would do that for me if I was incoherent and needed to put sunscreen on."

THE EDUCATION OF BOBBY DALBEC

Bobby Dalbec had already made his presence felt with the Red Sox' big league coaching staff. That's why he survived until the very last cuts of spring training.

But even after 1 1/2 months in Fort Myers, and then a minor-league season which saw the 24-year-old hit a combined 27 home runs between Double- and Triple-A, the most impactful impression may have come courtesy Dalbec's week or so visit at Fenway Park earlier this month.

"We got to spend so much time on him, one-on-one time," said Red Sox assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett. "He's a really smart kid and communicates really well so in that time you're able to go back and forth and talk through things. The adjustments he made while he was here was really cool. Tim, him and I started a texting thread and so we're going to keep in touch throughout as he prepares for the Premier 12. But I thought it was huge.

"These were like private lessons every day. It was a week's worth of Bobby Dalbec and us. Spring training it's transient. You have one guy in and one guy out. This was complete focus and we were able to prepare for it before he got here."

And while many had hoped Dalbec's existence in Sept. would be participating in real major league games instead of partaking private lessons preparation for an international tournament in Nov., this ultimately might have been the best path to prepare him for his shot at the big leagues next season.

"Move to the ball. His connection with his lower half. His path. These are all things we worked on," Barkett said. "He cleaned all of that up during that time. He had done it during the season but I think he took it to another level of understanding and application. It was good."

RYAN BRASIER FINALLY FACES OFF WITH HIS DOPPELGÄNGER

When Brasier took the mound at Fenway Park Sept. 17, he found himself in a unique situation. The Red Sox reliever was suddenly staring in the mirror (or that was at least how some viewed it).

For the first time in the major leagues, Brasier was squaring off with the player so many had confused him with throughout the pitcher's professional career, Stephen Vogt.

"You know it's funny because right before I signed with the A's somebody said, 'Man, you really look like Stephen Vogt.' I had played against him in the minor leagues and stuff and never really thought about it," Brasier said. "But when we played with each other everybody started saying it. And then every year since then, especially guys who had played with him, they say, 'Dude, you look exactly like Vogt.' He was just would be like, 'What's up brother?'"

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Bruce Bochy knows the Red Sox' pain, pending free agents

Sean McAdam

It's a good bet that no one can relate more to the 2019 Red Sox season than outgoing San Francisco Giants manager Bruce Bochy.

Bochy won his 2,000th career game Wednesday night at Fenway and won three World Series while managing the Giants — 2010, 2012, and 2014.

It was a staggering achievement, winning three titles in the span of five seasons. But in each of the years following a championship, Bochy's Giants — like this year's Red Sox — failed to get back to the postseason.

Each time the Giants slid backward, there were obvious contributing factors. In 2011, they lost Buster Posey for the season following a horrific collision at the plate in the second month of the schedule. Another

time, Tim Lincecum, who had won two Cy Young awards, began his precipitous decline, posting a 5.18 ERA in 2013, nearly twice what it was a season earlier.

It was if, in retrospect, the Giants needed a year to recover from the toll winning the World Series had placed on them. And that's not far from the truth.

Nor does it make them unique in modern history. Now that the Sox won't be taking part in the 2019 postseason, six of the last nine World Series champs failed to even make the playoff the following years: the 2010 Giants, the 2012 Giants, the 2013 Red Sox, the 2014 Giants, the 2015 Kansas City Royals and the 2018 Red Sox.

While all the talk has centered around the difficulty of repeating as champions — something that hasn't been done since the Yankees won three straight from 1998-2000 — perhaps the focus should shift just qualifying for the tournament the year after.

That's hard enough, apparently, and you don't have to remind Bochy.

"It's hard," said Bochy. "A lot of things have to go right for you to win a championship. You've got to have a lot of your guys have their normal years, if not better-than-usual years. You've got to have some surprises, maybe the ball has to bounce your way a bit, or you get some calls. To go all the way, it's really, really difficult. Now, to do it again, I mean, it's tough. It's just that difficult.

"This team (the Red Sox) is a very good club over there and they've had to deal with injuries. You lose a guy like (Chris) Sale and it affects your ballclub. They're going to bounce back; they're too good not to. But I think this re-affirms that winning a championship is not that easy."

And, more to the point, positioning yourself to defend the title the following year may be even harder.

As Bochy sat in the visitor's dugout and looked across the way, he mused about the culture shock the Sox are now going through. At this time a year ago, the Sox were discussing their postseason roster and getting their pitching in order. This September, they were playing meaningless games and that's a big comedown.

"It is, it is," he said. "We've been through it. When you're trying to get there and you're approaching the postseason, you're running on adrenaline. And it's hard to maintain that (when you're not in contention). That's one of the toughest things in this game. But we all have a job to do, and a responsibility. As much as you say it, though, it's still tough for these players. We play so many games and to get yourself up to that level every day, it takes something really special. You sometimes have to remind yourself — as a team, as a player — and that's what we do."

Among current Red Sox players, a handful will be eligible for free agency this winter: Brock Holt, Steve Pearce, Mitch Moreland and Rick Porcello.

Of the four, Holt probably has the best chance of returning in 2020, since the Red Sox don't have anyone who has played second base full-time for an extended period in the big leagues. Pearce, meanwhile, is a virtual certainty not to be back.

Moreland and Porcello are unlikely to return. The team could throw first base open to competition between Michael Chavis and Bobby Dalbec while Porcello, who had a poor season, doesn't fit into the payroll structure.

Those are tough decisions, and strictly from a performance basis, it would be hard to justify bringing back either.

But some things will be lost if Moreland and Porcello don't return.

Porcello has played a significant role in Eduardo Rodriguez's development and is acknowledged as the leader of the rotation. He's the epitome of a good teammate, ready to help or contribute in any way possible — often voluntarily.

The same can be said of Moreland, who, despite cultural and language differences, has been instrumental in helping Rafael Devers. When Devers slumped in the field the first month or so, Moreland put him in touch with his former teammate in Texas, Adrian Beltre, recognized as one of the best defenders at third base in recent history.

Moreland knew that Beltre — like Devers, from the Dominican — could offer invaluable insight to the position and do so in the infielder's native language.

Pitching coach Dana LeVangie, meanwhile, recently noted to me that Moreland had joined a mini-pitching summit in Toronto early in the season designed to help Rodriguez.

Moreland was asked to participate — not because he had been a pretty good pitching prospect in college and briefly considered becoming a pitcher when he struggled in the low minors — but because he's adept at watching how a pitcher's lower half can be key to his delivery.

For Moreland, it was the right thing to do. But he wonders if that sort of intangible gets overlooked when teams evaluate a player's contributions.

"I think it does a little bit, especially lately," said Moreland. "I felt like early in my career, the veteran players influenced us as younger guys. We were told, 'Talk to this guy ask him questions ...' I don't feel like you see it as much anymore. It is something I try to take pride in. I've been fortunate enough to play with some great players along the way and have been in some situations where if I've been through something or seen something, maybe I can pass it along and help those (younger) guys that way.

"It's definitely something I try to do and enjoy."

In Texas, where he played seven seasons, Moreland was mentored by Michael Young and Beltre.

"They had an open-door policy," recalled Moreland. "It didn't matter if it had something to do with the media, or something off the field, on the field, situations in the game ... they had the right answer. They were always calm and it kind of calmed you down as a player, so when you got into the situation the next time, you knew what to do without ever thinking about it."

Perhaps Moreland and Porcello can be replaced by younger, less expensive options. But if they leave, they'll be taking their experience, and just as critically, a willingness to share with younger teammates with them.

Red Sox outfield prospect Jarren Duran has had quite a year. In the first two months of this season, the speedy outfielder was leading all of minor league baseball with a .387 average and an OBP of .456. That sort of start earned him a spot in the Future's Game, part of All-Star Week, in Cleveland and a promotion to Double-A Portland.

But when Duran arrived in the Eastern League, he struggled mightily initially, hitting just over .200 in his first 41 games at Double-A. Eventually, he made some adjustments and settled in, and for the final 41 games of year, hit .297.

Part of the problem, as he looks back, was his confidence.

"The struggle was really fighting myself," said Duran, who was honored this past week as the organization's best baserunner. "When I first got (to Portland), I was asking myself, 'Do I actually belong here? Am I supposed to be here?' It was self-doubt that held me back. It was a humbling experience.

“Everyone has their struggles. It’s the ones who are mentally strong who are going to thrive. That’s why baseball is 90 mental and 10 percent physical.”

Duran credits teammates with helping get over his crisis of confidence.

“Once I started having some of the older guys come up to me and tell me to relax and have fun, I was OK,” said Duran. “Tate Matheny and Cody Asche, they were always saying ‘You belong here; just do your thing.’ That was a huge confidence booster and really pumped me up.”

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

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox lost (again) in 11 innings (again) to the Tampa Bay Rays, 5-4 (again). Here are three things we learned.

1. Don’t blame Mitch Moreland.

The Red Sox have lost back-to-back 5-4 games in 11 innings at Tropicana Field, but Mitch Moreland has done everything he can to prevent both losses. On Friday night, Moreland’s first two-run homer gave them a 2-0 lead. Then, after the Sox fell behind 4-2, Moreland struck again in the top of the ninth with

another two-run shot to send the game to extra innings, when the Sox lost. It was more of the same Saturday night. In a tie game in the top of the 11th inning, Moreland hammered a solo homer to right, giving the Sox a lead. Some may argue that there’s no such thing as a clutch hitter, but consider: of Moreland’s 18 homers, six have been either game-tying or go-ahead homers after the seventh inning. With a better bullpen, Moreland may have been the hero on consecutive nights at Tropicana Field.

2. Jackie Bradley took a foolish risk.

Given that the Rays won the game with a two-run homer one batter later, it might not have mattered. But with the Red Sox leading by a run in the top of the 11th, leadoff hitter Travis d’Arnaud hit a sinking liner to center field. Bradley came charging in for the ball and went to the ground, trying to make a shoestring catch. Instead, he missed and the ball got behind him. Only smart positioning and hustle by left fielder Gorkys Hernandez, who was backing Bradley and raced to retrieve the ball from the warning track, kept d’Arnaud from getting a triple or perhaps even circling the bases. In that situation, Bradley’s better approach would have been ensuring that the ball stayed in front of him, fielding it on a hop and conceding the single. Instead, by being overly aggressive, he allowed the Rays to put the potential tying run in scoring position to start the inning. As noted, Nate Lowe’s homer probably made his decision moot — the Rays seemed destined to win anyway. But Bradley made things easier for them.

3. Marco Hernandez had a tough night — to say the least.

Hernandez has gotten plenty of playing time at second lately — both because Brock Holt has been needed at other positions and because the Red Sox want to evaluate him for second base in 2020. With that in mind, Hernandez might want to burn the tape of this game and hope the Red Sox forget it. It was bad enough that Hernandez was 0-for-4 with four strikeouts at the plate. But his real struggles came in the field. In the first few innings, Hernandez failed to glove a ball that should have been fielded. It seemed as if Hernandez wasn’t accounting for the speed of the ball on the artificial turf in the infield and failed to get over in time. Then, he leaped to glove a liner, only to have the ball pop out of the pocket in his glove and fall to the ground for a generously-scored base hit. Finally, on another liner, the ball grazed off his glove and rolled into right field for a run-scoring single. Everyone has off-nights occasionally, but Hernandez happened to have on in the batter’s box and in the field.

* *The Athletic*

The hitting guru and the subtle fix that turned around Mookie Betts' season

Chad Jennings

The first phone call came on July 2, the American League MVP speaking privately to a man he barely knew, about a swing he'd carefully honed, which he'd apparently lost somewhere between Fenway Park and Boston Common during the World Series parade. It had been with him all of last year. Where the hell had it been this year?

The first hitting lesson came on the morning of July 5, in the batting cage of Detroit's Comerica Park, with no one in the stands and few people in the know. One of the game's mostly closely watched superstars tried to remember where his hands should be when he swings a bat, while the only people watching were one teammate and the man throwing them the ball.

For two months this went on, the undisturbed salvation of Mookie Betts. He'd quietly suffered the disappointment of his own expectations, rarely letting on just how frustrated — if not desperate — he'd become in the first half of this season. He'd try one thing, try another, get hot, get cold, grow discouraged and start over again. His own MVP numbers taunted him. He knew he could be better.

And in the second half, he has been. Betts has been so good, in fact, that he's back on the shortlist for league MVP. He won't win, but he should finish top 10, maybe top five. His resurgence has been the public awakening of something that stirred behind the scenes for months. Betts worked throughout July and August with a Miami-based hitting consultant who could blend in with fans watching pregame batting practice, then get up the next morning and spend an hour and a half with the Red Sox right fielder, helping put his swing in order and restoring his confidence to let it fly.

"There were a couple of little technical things," Betts said. "But for the most part, it was kind of, 'Be you' ... I don't know if he necessarily said that, but that's definitely what I learned."

That was the lesson he needed most.

Betts could have a Hall of Fame career and never repeat his 2018 numbers. Ranked by bWAR, it was the greatest single season since Barry Bonds. In Red Sox history, it's second only to Carl Yastrzemski and the impossible dream. Betts spent so much time with new teammate J.D. Martinez last season, learning new drills and soaking in the value of hitting the ball in the air, that he didn't have much time to think about the result. Fresh perspective pointed the way, and Betts followed where it led. He finished with the highest batting average and slugging percentage in the league. His OPS was more than 100 points higher than ever before in his career.

A season like that should leave breadcrumbs to follow, but Martinez knew better. His own swing revelation came six years ago, and his breakout season ended with a .914 OPS in 2014. Thirty games into the following season, though, his OPS was 200 points lower and his batting average was down to .216.

"You're going to have to go through another adjustment period," Martinez said. "Because it's like when you're driving and you let go of the wheel. I mean, the car's going to go straight for a little bit, but then at one point, it's going to go to the right or the left, and you've got to figure it out again."

Betts was all over the road in the first three months of this season. In April, he hit .094 through one 10-game stretch, then .447 the next 10 games. His second half of May was pretty good, but his first half of June was awful. After the Yankees series in London on June 29 and 30, Betts was hitting .261 with a .835 OPS, good for top 30 in the American League, but Betts knew he was capable of more.

He was inconsistent. His swing felt late. Fly balls were dying at the warning track. When he made an adjustment, he'd take it into a few games, abandon it, and try something else. He could still rely on Martinez when needed but didn't want to ask too much of a teammate. He had Tim Hyers and Andy Barkett, the hitting coaches who'd helped guide him through last season, but they had 12 other players to work with in a batting cage with a line out the door. Betts didn't want to ask for special attention.

But Christian Vazquez knew a guy. The Red Sox catcher had overhauled his swing this offseason while working with a guy in Miami named Lorenzo Garmendia, and when the Red Sox got to Toronto from London on July 2, Betts talked to Garmendia on the phone and hired him for a two-month, one-on-one consultation. Garmendia was already looking at video and studying spray charts. When the Red Sox got to Detroit three days later, so did Garmendia. His first session with Betts was that Friday morning, Vazquez was there, and Betts went 3-for-5 that night. There was another session the next morning, and Betts had another three-hit game. In the 62 games since he and Garmendia began working together, Betts has 1.062 OPS and a third-highest fWAR in the American League.

"You think I was surprised?" Garmendia said. "Hell no. I knew I was going to get that. You think I flew out to Detroit to fail?"

There's an important distinction between trying to hit the ball in the air and trying keep the ball off the ground. In an effort to lift the ball, Betts was dropping his hands. That was the basic mechanical problem Garmendia diagnosed. Betts also had gotten away from a tried-and-true all-fields approach. His home run power is to the pull side, but when he takes outside pitches to the opposite field, Betts needs line drives for doubles. Fly balls in that direction are almost always outs, and indeed, Betts leads the majors in fly ball outs of at least 335 feet to right field this season.

Garmendia told Betts to think not about hitting the ball in the air but to think about hitting the ball forward. He helped Betts get his hands in the right place, then helped get the rest of his swing sequence on track.

Weeks later, Betts makes clear that Garmendia's insights were vital. Betts needed that outside perspective and knowledge, but he also needed the repetition, and all of that guilt-free time in the cage helped him grind through his own issues. Different swings jogged different memories, and with them came his old ability to trust his talent and stop chasing numbers.

"I feel like from here on out, I can maintain what I need to do," Betts said. "I can go to the cage and I know what I need... My drills that I need to do, the feel that I need to get, the flight of the ball that I need to see. Once I know that's kind of consistent, then I know I'm giving myself a chance."

When his two months with Garmendia were up, Betts went to the Red Sox hitting coaches to discuss his summer revelation. Hyers and Barkett have strong track records and small egos. Betts trusts them. He loves them, he said. But three months into this season, Betts felt he needed a different voice, a fresh perspective, something to break the early cycle of disappointment and frustration.

"I remember the conversation," Barkett said. "He's like, 'I just need to go up there and be confident.' I was just like, that's exactly word for word the things I've been saying to you ... You've driven us to drink for six months – probably me more than Tim – but now you're good (and) I'm glad. We've been saying that to him all year long, and it's basically that: Just be you! Just go be confident Mookie Betts! You don't need to find what you did last year. You have it."

Betts lost it for a while, but it's back. And so is he.

*** *The Tampa Bay Times***

Rally Rays do it again, beat Red Sox 5-4 in 11 innings

Marc Topkin

The Rays aren't making it easy. That's for sure.

But they're getting it done.

And that's what matters.

A third straight game came down to their last at-bat in extra innings.

And for the third straight time they pulled it out.

Saturday they beat the Red Sox 5-4 in 11, as rookie Nate Lowe hit a two-run walkoff homer after Travis d'Arnaud led off with a double, which was after Diego Castillo gave up a go-ahead homer in the top of the inning.

"We don't have a choice," manager Kevin Cash said. "A lot of guys are doing some big, big things for us. But the way we're playing, the other teams are playing, we've just got to find ways. And the guys, give them a lot of credit. They certainly do that."

The Rays remained two games behind the wild-card leading A's, who Saturday won for the ninth time in their last 10 games.

The homer Castillo gave up to Mitch Moreland with two outs in the top of the inning would be deflating to most teams.

But not to these Rays, not after what they've been doing recently.

Wednesday, the Rays rallied to tie in the ninth off Dodgers star closer Kanley Jansen then won it in the 11th. Friday, they bounced back after their closer, Emilio Pagan, blew a two-run lead and walked it off in the 11th on a single by Willy Adames.

So looking at the one-run deficit Saturday, they insisted they remained confident and even excited.

"Everyone was coming into the dugout screaming, 'Let's go, let's go! Game's not over. We can still win it!' " d'Arnaud said. "This team's been like this since I've been here. And it's contagious."

As "irritating" as the deficit was, Cash sensed the same.

"I think everything that led up to that, and these last couple games allows us that confidence that we're one swing of the bat away or a couple big hits away," he said.

That d'Arnaud started the rally was the least surprising part. "He's so clutch, it's amazing," Cash said.

That Lowe delivered the big hit, well, that kind of was surprising. As the powerful lefty walked to the plate to face Josh Smith, the 11th Boston pitcher of the night, he was 6-for-37 with 17 strikeouts since being called back up, and hadn't homered since Sept. 1.

"That was huge," Cash said. "I know he needed it. It's funny, we were talking, it might have been his longest homerless drought that he's had as a professional player. ... Certainly his at-bats have been challenging. We talked about it the other day, where we've asked him to go up and face the best reliever off the bench. That's not ideal to ask a young player to do, and certainly not judging him on it. We know he's got a lot of power, a lot of potential and he's going to be a big part of us moving forward. He came up big today, for sure."

The ball sliced down the leftfield line and eventually over the low wall, and Lowe threw up his arms in celebration quickly.

“I kind of had a pretty good feeling. It was a fair or foul situation. Fortunately, it stayed fair and carried far enough,” he said.

“As cliché as it sounds, there’s not a whole lot better than hitting a walkoff home run in a pennant race. Being able to do here it today, it’s great and I’m thankful for it.”

Lowe was the third player in Rays franchise history to hit a homer that took them from losing to celebrating a walkoff win, joining Jonny Damon (2011) and Kevin Stocker (1998), and his feat was celebrated wildly as he was stripped of his jersey and undershirt on the field and bathed in sports drink.

It was the ninth walkoff win for the Rays this season, seventh in the last 20 home games.

“As corny as it sounds, I feel like since the beginning of the year, it’s felt pretty special,” starter Tyler Glasnow said. “As it creeps closer to playoff time and as when finish games like that, there’s definitely a little extra spice in there. (Friday) and (Saturday), it was pretty unbelievable so hopefully we can carry that into the next couple games.”

The franchise-first three straight extra-inning games have been both exhilarating and exhausting.

“I feel bad for my mom,” Cash joked. “I’ve got to check on her when we’re done here.”

The Rays went up 2-0 early and took a 3-1 lead to the eighth only to see an unexpected turn of events, as reliever Nick Anderson, so dominant since they acquired him July 31 from Miami, gave up a two-run game-tying homer to Rafael Devers, eventually sending it into extra innings.

The Rays had taken the 2-0 lead with a rally that include d’Arnaud singling in Austin Meadows, then Joey Wendle lacing a bases loaded liner that second baseman Marco Hernandez couldn’t handle, scoring Ji-Man Choi. They had a chance for more, but d’Arnaud was thrown out at the plate.

The night started well for the Rays, with three scoreless innings, seven strikeouts and a bunch of 98-99 mph fastballs from Glasnow in his third start back from the injured list.

The Rays then moved on to their next rehabbing-in-a-race project, as Yonny Chirinos made his first appearance since being sidelined in early August by an inflamed middle finger.

Chirinos got off to a rough start, his second pitch hit out of the park by Xander Bogaerts. But Chirinos settled in after that and got the next three out to make a solid, albeit brief.

The Rays made it 3-1 in the seventh on a massive homer by Adames, a careerbest 462-foot blast to center that struck the D-ring catwalk on the way down, his 19th of the season.

Anderson blowing the lead in the eighth was unexpected, as he’d allowed only one run in his first 19 games for the Rays.

But the Rays rallying to win it, for the third straight game in 11 innings, not so much.

“We’re excited about winning the games the way we are,” Lowe said. “This has been huge for us.”

And, as d’Arnaud said, “11’s our lucky number.”

*** *Associated Press***

Lowe's homers in 11th, lifts Rays into 2nd wild card

Every win these days is extra special for the playoff-contending Tampa Bay Rays.

Nate Lowe hit a two-run homer in the 11th inning and the Rays beat the Boston Red Sox 5-4 on Saturday night to move one game ahead of Cleveland for the second AL wild card.

Tampa Bay won its third straight game, all in 11 innings.

"You look at teams that go down to the wire like we're doing, you have to have some fortunate things go your way," Rays manager Kevin Cash said.

A day after the defending World Series champion Red Sox were mathematically eliminated, Mitch Moreland put Boston ahead 4-3 with a two-out homer in the 11th off Diego Castillo (5-8).

"That just shows the type of season that we're having," Boston third baseman Rafael Devers said through a translator. "Last year we had a great season, winning these ballgames and now this year we're on the other end of it. It's been tough but we're still giving 100 percent every single day trying to win these ballgames because that's what we're here to do."

Travis d'Arnaud doubled off Josh Smith (0-3) in the bottom half, and Lowe sent an opposite-field drive down the left-field line.

"There's not a whole lot that's better than hitting a walkoff homer in a pennant race," Lowe said.

Xander Bogaerts and Devers also homered for the Red Sox.

Boston's J.D. Martinez 0 for 5 with four strikeouts as a designated hitter after missing three games with left groin tightness.

D'Arnaud and Joey Wendle had run-scoring singles as the Rays took a 2-0 lead in the third, and Willy Adames put the Rays ahead 3-1 with a long homer off Josh Taylor in the seventh.

Devers hit a two-run homer off Nick Anderson that tied it 3-all in the eighth. He has 31 homers, breaking a tie with Butch Hobson (1977) for the most by a Red Sox third baseman.

"This is actually the first time I'm hearing of this," Devers said. "It's pretty cool."

Rays starter Yonny Chirinos, reinstated from the 10-day injured list after being sidelined since Aug. 5 by right middle finger inflammation, entered in the fourth and allowed Bogaerts' leadoff homer.

Bogaerts has a career-high 32 homers and 110 RBI. He got his 51st double during the first.

Tyler Glasnow made his third start for the Rays after missing four months with a strained right forearm. He struck out seven in three scoreless innings.

"This is definitely one of the more memorable wins for us," Glasnow said.

"Eleven's our lucky number," d'Arnaud added.

BUSY BULLPENS

Boston used 11 pitchers on a bullpen day. With Glasnow on a pitch count of around 50, the Rays used nine pitchers.

FULL CLUBHOUSE

With the addition of Chirinos, the Rays now have a team record 39 active players. This is the last season that a team can expand to any number from the 40-man roster in September. Next year teams will carry 28 players during the month.

NUMBERS

Tampa Bay (92-63) is 29 games over .500 for the first time since ending the 2010 season at 96-66. ... The Rays have won six in a row over Boston to tie their longest winning streak against the Red Sox. The other six-game run came in 2011.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: LF Andrew Benintendi (jammed left thumb) pinch ran in the ninth. ... RHP Heath Hembree, out since Aug. 2 with right elbow inflammation, will likely be opener in a game during the season's final week.

Rays: All-Star 2B Brandon Lowe (bruised right shin and strained left quadriceps) played four innings in an instructional league game. ... OF Avisail Garcia, who left after six innings Friday with dizziness, felt better but didn't play.

UP NEXT

Rays LHP Ryan Yarbrough (11-4) will face Red Sox RHP Nathan Eovaldi (1-0) Sunday.