

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, September 25, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox go a long way to get Eduardo Rodriguez his 19th win

Julian McWilliams

Mookie Betts was supposed to have a day off Tuesday against the Texas Rangers. But late Monday evening, the 2018 MVP went into manager Alex Cora's office at Tropicana Field and told him he wanted to play.

Why? Betts wanted to help ensure Eduardo Rodriguez could capture his 19th win of the season the following evening.

Betts told Rodriguez the same thing when they got on the team bus Tuesday and made their way to Globe Life Park.

“‘He told me, ‘Hey, you know I’m going to play today because of you, right?’” said Rodriguez, paraphrasing the conversation.

It took 113 pitches for Eduardo Rodriguez to get there.

It took a 49-minute first inning in which Rodriguez and Texas Rangers starter Edison Volquez were equally as bad, yielding four earned runs in the 91-degree heat — somehow, Rodriguez working in long sleeves.

It took a fifth inning in which, staked to a 12-5 lead, Rodriguez was one batter away from being pulled after the Rangers cut the lead to 12-7 and had runners on the corners with two outs.

It took a visit from Cora at that moment. Rodriguez thought that was it right there, but Cora offered something else.

“‘You’ve been the horse all season, you deserve this,’ Cora said, recounting the conversation. “‘I’ll give you one more. And you better get him out.’”

It took a bailout by catcher Christian Vazquez, who gunned down Delino DeShields trying to steal second for the third out of the inning.

It took over two hours to play just five innings, but when it was finally over the Red Sox had won, 12-10. The game took 3 hours 59 minutes to complete, but, at the end, Rodriguez had his 19th win of the year.

“I love that kid,” said Cora. “I’ve been very honest with him from the get-go. As a staff we push him because we know the potential.”

Rodriguez can now go for No. 20 this weekend when the Orioles help end the season at Fenway Park. No Red Sox lefthander has won 20 games since Mel Parnell won 21 in 1953.

“This one wasn’t even mine,” Rodriguez said of the win. “Everything [the offense] did right there to get the win for me is special. I told them this 19 is not mine, it’s yours.”

The 19 was ugly and came at an expense. Betts has been hampered by a bad left foot since the Blue Jays series a few weeks ago. He had hit his 29th homer in the top of the second inning Tuesday, but banged that

same bad foot on the wall while going back on a ball in the bottom of the inning. Cora took him out for precautionary reasons in the third.

It's unlikely that Betts will play in the remainder of this series, but he should be a go for the last one at Fenway.

With it being a lost season for the Sox, Betts is now focused on getting Rodriguez to 20.

"We got one more," Betts said.

Rodriguez (19-6) ended up allowing 11 hits and three walks, his ERA leaping to 3.76. But the 26-year-old lefty could hang in there as long as he could because the offense scored in each of the first five innings. They spread out 14 hits in all, with J.D. Martinez (2 for 5, 3 RBIs) doing the most damage.

Brandon Workman, the fourth reliever, took over in the ninth and earned his 16th save.

"It was not his best one," Cora said of Rodriguez's outing. "Everything was cutting, the changeup wasn't there. But it's been a great season. He's been really good the last seven or eight starts."

Pitchers don't have complete authority over the win in baseball, which is why, in a way, it can be fluky. Yet, it also could represent a team's rally behind a pitcher who just didn't have it.

Rodriguez bailed out the Red Sox all season. It was time for his teammates to return the favor.

"I know you guys saw that line [the offense] put up today," Rodriguez said. "They tried to get me that win. They did it."

Rick Porcello not yet free from down year

Julian McWilliams

Rick Porcello let out a slight chuckle recently when asked about his pending free agency at the end of the season.

"I'm not even thinking about it right now, man," Porcello said. "I haven't gotten anybody out in two months. I got to figure out how to get somebody out again before taking those steps.

"Whatever's going to happen is going to happen. It's going to take care of itself. It's been a very frustrating year. I'm still here with the Red Sox, and I plan on finishing this contract up and taking it from there."

The time to think about it, perhaps, is here for the 30-year-old righthander as Wednesday's start could be his final one in a Red Sox uniform. He goes into the game at 13-12 and a career-worst 5.56 ERA.

"We talked a little bit about it," manager Alex Cora said before the Red Sox' 12-10 win over the Rangers.

"We'll see what the future holds, the guy is a pro. All the cool things he did in the regular season [in 2018]. The outing against New York [in August] the complete game. That was awesome. Those two outs he got in Game 1 of the ALDS kind of set the tempo for what was coming."

Porcello's looked like the best version of himself in his last two starts, something that was missing the entire season. In 11 innings, Porcello's surrendered just two earned runs with 12 strikeouts.

Despite the struggles this season, he's been durable. In his five seasons with the club, he's been on the injured list just twice. Both times in 2015.

“He’s a pro,” Cora said. “The way he goes about his business. I’ve been saying all along, he wins, he tries to find something to go out there and get better. He loses, it’s the same thing.”

Betts ailing

Mookie Betts left Tuesday’s game in the third inning with left foot pain. Betts injured that foot a couple of weeks ago after a series against the Blue Jays.

In the second inning Tuesday, Betts banged that same bad foot on the wall while going back on a ball. Cora took him out for precautionary reasons. It’s unlikely that Betts will play the remainder of this series, but he should be all set for the final homestand.

Both Cora and Betts said the injury was because of the turf in Toronto. It kept Betts out of action for five games. He returned for the series against the Rays

Before he left Tuesday, Betts was 1 for 2 and hit his 29th homer of the season when he led off the second. He was replaced by Gorkys Hernandez.

Milestones

Cora is looking for a balance: He wants his players to reach certain milestones, while also not getting into bad habits.

“You’ve been watching lately, when you get off your plan or start chasing numbers bad things happen,” Cora said. “Whenever [Rafael Devers] hit 29 homers, he started chasing everything outside the strike zone. We got to be careful with that.”

Another milestone for Devers would be reaching 200 hits. He went 2 for 4 Tuesday to get to 194 for the year.

Devers recently became the first Sox third baseman to hit 31 homers in a season, breaking Butch Hobson’s record, set in 1977.

Betts, meanwhile, has scored 134 runs — which leads the league — with 29 homers and 16 stolen bases. If he were to hit one homer and steal four bags, he would become the first Sox player to hit those marks in the same season.

Eduardo Rodriguez (19-6) started Tuesday on the cusp of 20 wins, but his most important goal is 200 innings. He struggled through five innings Tuesday to get to 196½ for the year. His teammates are helping him reach his milestones however they can.

“Mookie was supposed to have an off-day,” Cora said. “We had a conversation after the game [Monday] and he was like, ‘No I’m playing tomorrow.’ We have something cool going on here and we just had a bad season. They care about each other. They’re not happy with what happened this year, but at the same time it’s baseball.”

Martinez, in context

J.D. Martinez has grinded at certain points of the season with his swing. Yet he has recorded his fourth season of 35 homers and 100 RBIs, second straight with the Sox. He is the ninth Sox player to reach those totals in multiple years

“It hasn’t been as easy as last year,” Cora said. “But at the end, the guy can hit. He’s going to work until the end. We had a day game on Sunday and he text me the night before, ‘Hey can we hit early?’ We usually don’t hit during day games. That’s what makes him one of the best hitters in the big leagues.”

Amid the Red Sox speculation, there's an intriguing name: Theo Epstein

Alex Speier

More than two weeks removed from Dave Dombrowski's firing as Red Sox president of baseball operations, the search for his replacement remains in its preliminary stages. The groundwork for that search has been, to date, deliberate and methodical.

The team appears to be spending as much time examining where it stands with relation to the operation of the other 29 teams and considering what it wants from its next leader(s) as it does thinking about actual candidates. No names have been attached to the team's pursuit, creating an information vacuum in which inkblots can be interpreted any number of ways.

Yet there is one star-caliber executive who, above all, continues to maintain intrigue as a subject of speculation: Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein. While the 45-year-old Epstein — who remains under contract with the Cubs through 2021 — represents an obvious potential target for the Sox given both his record of success and his upbringing in and near Fenway Park, it's also fair to wonder whether either or both sides might be open to exploring the possibility (or if the Cubs would permit such a conversation).

The recent restructuring that elevated Mike Rikard to VP of scouting and featured promotions within the amateur scouting department suggests the possibility of continuity. At the least, those moves offer evidence that the team's owners, who had to sign off on them, believe strongly in the members of the baseball operations department.

It seems clear the team would like an incoming general manager or president of baseball operations to be able to work well with the existing group. Some see an obvious possibility that the Red Sox could choose an internal replacement for Dombrowski from the current Gang of Four — assistant GMs Brian O'Halloran, Eddie Romero, Zack Scott, and senior VP Raquel Ferreira.

The team seems unlikely to limit itself to those with Red Sox ties. There are numerous potential candidates, whether it's ex-Sox executives such as Arizona assistant GMs Jared Porter and Amiel Sawdaye, Cubs GM Jed Hoyer and VP Jason McLeod, or Mets assistant GM Allard Baird, or those with no prior experience working for the Sox, such as Rays senior VP Chaim Bloom or Brewers assistant GM Matt Arnold.

Multiple industry sources are convinced the Red Sox also will want to see if they have a chance of reeling in some of the biggest fish in the executive seas. Given that the team is forever in win-now mode, the idea of finding an executive with a known track record is significant.

But there's skepticism in the game that several of the executives with such a track record — Arizona's Mike Hazen (the former Red Sox executive who just signed an extension with the Diamondbacks); Oakland's Billy Beane and David Forst; Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff in Cleveland; Andrew Friedman of the Dodgers; or Jeff Luhnow of the Astros — would leave their jobs to pursue another that is increasingly perceived as unstable. While the resources that come with the Sox job are appealing, the ouster of Ben Cherington less than two years removed from a championship and the departure of Dombrowski after one down year have led to a perception in some corners that the position comes with impossible-to-satisfy demands.

Epstein understands the particulars of working for the Red Sox better than anyone. For now, there's little more than inkblots to interpret. But it's worth revisiting both Epstein's history with the Sox and his departures from them to gain some insight into factors that could be at work.

When he moved from the Red Sox to the Cubs, Epstein — in an op-ed for the Globe — explained his decision to leave his dream job:

“Football legend Bill Walsh used to say that coaches and executives should seek change after 10 years with the same team. The theory is that both the individual and the organization benefit from a change after so much time together. The executive gets rebirth and the energy that comes with a new challenge; the organization gets a fresh perspective, and the chance for true change that comes with new leadership. This idea resonated with me.”

Epstein’s planned timetable for departure accelerated, however, after the Red Sox collapsed in September 2011 and fired manager Terry Francona.

Epstein is now eight years into his position as Cubs president of baseball operations. Chicago is spiraling, having gone from a 63.6 percent likelihood of making the playoffs on Sept. 17 to a 2.1 percent chance entering Tuesday. Manager Joe Maddon is almost surely out after this year, meaning that Chicago will soon embark upon a search for his replacement.

In other words, the organizational circumstances facing Epstein right now bear some similarities to those that prompted him to leave Boston with one year left on his contract.

Meanwhile, there are factors that might appeal to Epstein about a potential return to the Sox.

In contrast to his sometimes strained relationship with former CEO/president Larry Lucchino, Epstein is extremely close with Lucchino’s successor, Sam Kennedy, who went to Brookline High with Epstein.

Moreover, any bad feelings that may have existed with principal owner John Henry (who also owns the Globe) or chairman Tom Werner at the time Epstein left for Chicago seem to have been soothed. In recent years, the Sox have supported charitable activities of Epstein’s Foundation To Be Named Later.

Meanwhile, the Boston area events of the foundation underscore that Epstein’s Boston roots remain strong. He worked closely with many members of the team’s baseball operations department. While Epstein at times struggled with the visibility of his life in Boston early in his GM career, he seemed to make peace with the role over the course of his tenure. It’s not hard to imagine why a return could carry appeal.

On the other hand, there are reasons the idea of Epstein coming back right now wouldn’t make sense. The Cubs are amid a structural transition that runs deeper than just the manager, with a chance to reorganize their scouting and player development in ways meant to push Chicago forward in a changing era — exactly the sort of process-based challenge that Epstein loves.

Epstein’s immediate family is now established in Chicago, and whenever Epstein does move on from the Cubs, after the round-the-clock grind of being at the baseball operations helm for the past 18 years, it’s fair to wonder whether a.) Epstein might want a “life buffer” before jumping into another baseball job and b.) whether another job as a president of baseball operations appeals to Epstein, or if he is more likely to seek a different role such as ownership.

Henry and Werner tried to persuade Epstein to stay in Boston in 2011 with a position that went beyond the same thing he’d been doing as GM.

“John and Tom were kind enough at some point late in the summer to tell me that they wanted me to stay with the Red Sox, to stay with [Fenway Sports Group] in any capacity I could imagine. I could tailor my role or do what I wanted,” Epstein said at his 2011 introductory news conference at Wrigley Field. “It meant a lot to me. I was really appreciative . . . [But] I just couldn’t envision a role at the Red Sox that would have satisfied the principles that [Bill] Walsh espoused that were resonating with me so much.”

Might his outlook be different now, at a different life and career stage? If so, if he does eye a broader range of interests and responsibilities and curiosities, then the varied holdings of Fenway Sports Group might represent a particularly intriguing challenge, much as Beane (who has an ownership stake with the A’s) has found ongoing satisfaction in Oakland while mixing his involvement in the team’s baseball activities with partial ownership of soccer teams.

In other words, at some point, the Red Sox could make an awfully interesting pitch in hopes of bringing back Epstein. Whether he'd be willing to listen now, however, is another matter entirely — with a decent chance that even if the Red Sox could present a perfect job to entice him, they'd be doing so at an imperfect time.

Still, speculation about Epstein seems unavoidable. After all, in December 2005 — at a time the Sox hired Cherington and Hoyer as co-GMs when Epstein temporarily had left the organization — Lucchino somewhat famously suggested the team would “leave a light on” for Epstein’s potential return. The next month, Epstein responded to that beacon, returning to the GM role.

Might the team once again flip on a bat signal for Epstein, either by pursuing him directly or hiring someone who was close to him? And if so, would he be interested in responding? Would the Cubs permit him to do so? These are just a few of the many questions associated with the Red Sox opening, where silence has created a void filled not by information or a known candidate list but instead by conjecture.

In baseball, defense still matters, and Mookie Betts’s throw was a reminder

Peter Abraham

By now you’ve likely seen a replay of the remarkable throw Red Sox right fielder Mookie Betts made against the Tampa Bay Rays on Monday night.

Or maybe you were watching NESN as it happened in the sixth inning and couldn’t quite believe what you saw.

Avisail Garcia of the Rays lined a pitch down the line at Tropicana Field, the ball bouncing around in the corner at the 322-foot mark.

Betts picked up the ball with his bare hand a step from the warning track and threw it like a javelin toward third base. It reached third baseman Rafael Devers on the fly a few feet in front of the bag, and he slapped the tag down on the chest of a stunned Garcia.

Major League Baseball’s Statcast software measured the throw at 305 feet, more than the length of a football field.

“Fun to do something you didn’t know you could do,” Betts said after the game.

A day later, the throw was still causing a buzz. It was one of ESPN’s Top 10 plays — somehow only No. 7 — and the story Julian McWilliams wrote for the Globe was among the most read on our website.

It was heartening to see a defensive play get so much attention at a time when baseball has turned — for the worse — into a game of home runs and strikeouts with precious little action in between.

Through Monday, a record 6,550 home runs had been hit, 445 more than the previous mark, with six days left to play. This also will be the 12th consecutive season the strikeout record will fall as players flail away trying to hit one out.

The average major league game in 2019 has featured 17.5 strikeouts, about a third of the outs.

So when Betts makes an extraordinary play like he did, fans numbed by all the strikeouts and home runs take notice.

“There’s probably something to that,” said Tom Goodwin, who coaches first base for the Sox and is their outfield instructor. “It’s an offensive game now and there’s less focus on defense.”

“As coaches we preach defense because it will help win you a ballgame. But it’s not always a priority for them.”

As strikeouts rise, assists plunge and outfielders have fewer chances to throw a runner out. The rise of analytically-driven decisions have teams so averse to even slight risks that outfielders are instructed to play deep and always hit the cutoff man to keep the double play in order.

Don’t take chances, that’s the standing order.

It’s why Red Sox fans should consider themselves fortunate to see Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. in the outfield. They each have 10 assists this season, tied for third-most in the majors.

“They push each other, absolutely,” Goodwin said. “It’s in a healthy way. Mookie wants to be like Jackie defensively. His throw was the kind you’d expect from Jackie. That’s why we were all so excited by it.”

“You still get outs on the bases when the outfield hits the cutoff man. But those lasers like the throw Mookie made, those are rare. It was his inner Jackie coming out.”

What made Betts’s throw so memorable was it had the power of Bo Jackson or Vladimir Guerrero with the precision of Ichiro Suzuki.

To get an expert’s opinion on the throw, let’s call in Dwight Evans, a right fielder who earned eight Gold Gloves with the Red Sox.

“For me, it was not unexpected,” Evans said by telephone from Boston. “Mookie does everything well and he’s always prepared for the situation. It didn’t surprise me.”

Betts came up as a second baseman and Evans believes the habit of staying low on the ball to field a grounder helps him in the outfield.

“Mookie gets in the right position as the ball comes to him and he’s able to get his legs into the throw. That’s the biggest thing,” Evans said. “He may not have the strongest arm out there but when you use your legs, you can make a throw like that.”

“That’s what I always tried to do. A good throw starts with the legs.”

With no runner behind Garcia, Betts didn’t have to worry about the cutoff man. He could let it fly.

“I loved it,” Evans said. “When you make a throw like that, everything feels right. It’s an exciting moment.”

Evans was one of the instructors who worked with Betts when he made the transition to the outfield. Betts has since won three Gold Gloves and would seem to be a lock for a fourth.

As Betts came to the plate against the Texas Rangers in the second inning on Tuesday, the Fox Sports Southwest telecast showed a highlight of his throw.

“I saw it everywhere,” Goodwin said. “People love good defense.”

Evaluating the Red Sox roster, player-by-player

Chad Finn

The Red Sox were officially eliminated from playoff contention Friday night. Unofficially, it happened long before the math confirmed it. A season after winning 108 games and another 11 in the postseason en route to their fourth World Series title since 2004, the Sox will finish with 20-something fewer wins (they

have 81 with six games remaining) and could finish more than 20 games behind the juggernaut Yankees in the AL East.

Not everything went wrong this year; Rafael Devers became a star, Xander Bogaerts delivered a vintage Nomar year, and Brandon Workman and Eduardo Rodriguez were bright lights on an otherwise burned-out pitching staff. But it's been a lost season for a while now.

In the waning days, it's a worthwhile exercise to take a look at the individual performances among the 2019 Red Sox players as we figure out who might be a part of this going forward, and more important, who should and shouldn't be.

LINEUP

Mookie Betts: The bar is so high for him that a superb season like this one (28 homers, 40 doubles, 133 runs, .911 OPS) feels like something of a letdown. It's a shame if the Red Sox choose not to pay a player of this magnitude, especially since he's not going to bring even close to an equal return in trade given that he has one year left on his deal.

He should be a generational player here, and I'll never get the Red Sox fans who are cool with dealing him. You probably would have traded Carl Yastrzemski in 1968 and Jim Rice in 1979, too.

Rafael Devers: Butch Hobson was my favorite player at 8 years old, which means he's my favorite Red Sox player of all time. For 42 years, he held the franchise record for home runs in a season by a third baseman (30). Devers, an immense talent who plays with the joy of someone who wouldn't want to be doing anything else, broke that record this season. Can't think of a more worthy successor.

Xander Bogaerts: A soon-to-be-27-year-old shortstop with 30-plus homers, 50-plus doubles, an OPS well above .900, a personality that connects different corners of the clubhouse, and he's signed to a team-friendly six-year deal? Thank goodness he wanted to stay.

J.D. Martinez: He has to be considered one of the best free agent signings the Red Sox have ever made, right? Entering Tuesday, he had 78 homers and a .986 OPS in two seasons with the Sox. Call him the anti-Jack Clark.

Andrew Benintendi: The 25-year-old outfielder seemed a decent bet to emerge as a genuine star this season. Instead, he has taken a bewildering step back, with just 13 homers and 138 strikeouts, second-most on the roster to Jackie Bradley Jr. Forget those heady swing comparisons to Yaz and Fred Lynn. He's not even Mike Greenwell at this point.

Michael Chavis: His home run surge upon recall from Pawtucket in April was briefly a saving grace for a struggling team, but perhaps the best development this season is the realization that he can play three infield positions with competence. He's not going to be star, but the power is legit.

Christian Vazquez: He's basically the opposite of what he was supposed to be when he arrived in the majors, hitting for unexpected power (22 homers) but getting by defensively on reputation more than results.

Brock Holt: His contract status will get overshadowed with the Betts/Martinez situations, but he's probably the best utility player the Red Sox have had in my lifetime (current manager included). Here's hoping he gets a nice salute at the season finale.

Jackie Bradley Jr.: I know, I defend him the way he defends center field. Sure, he's the only regular with an adjusted OPS below 100 (89), but he does have 20 homers, and there's never been a better defensive center fielder to roam Fenway for the home team.

ROTATION

Eduardo Rodriguez: The one and only positive in the rotation this year, he finally got the results to match his repertoire. Entering his start Tuesday, he was 17-5 with a 2.77 in his last 22 starts. And to think he started slowly, with a 5.04 ERA at the end of May.

Chris Sale: Who knows what to expect going forward? The best lefthander in the American League for the last half-dozen years became an enigma this year, striking out 218 batters in 147 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, but getting hit around and/or losing his command all too often. And then he got hurt.

Question: What would he get on the free agent market right now if he hadn't been signed to a \$145 million extension in spring training?

David Price: He was OK before a cyst on his wrist ended his season, but he's not being paid \$31 million a year to be OK. Price has pitched more than 200 innings in six seasons, but he gave the Sox just 107 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings in 22 starts this year, failing to make it beyond the fifth inning in half his starts. If he's not going to be an ace, he at least has to be a workhorse.

Rick Porcello: It's been a lousy year (5.56 ERA) by just about any accounting, but is it a silly idea to think the Red Sox should try to bring him back? He's accountable, doesn't succumb to the pressures of this market, and they're going to need someone to give them about 180 league-average innings next year.

Nate Eovaldi: The most memorable thing he did this season was give up a bomb at Fenway to a Yastrzemski.

BULLPEN

Brandon Workman: Just imagine where they would have been without his welcome breakthrough after years of trying to find his form following Tommy John surgery. How great has he been? Opponents have a .170 slugging percentage against him.

Matt Barnes: Was asked to do too much early and ran on fumes for a while, but will finish with an elite strikeout rate (15.3 per nine innings) and generally did his job well.

Marcus Walden: He had some Joe Kelly-like inconsistencies in the summer, but all in all, a fine season (3.55 ERA, nine wins, team lead in relief innings with 76).

Josh Taylor: Getting Taylor, who has 62 strikeouts in 47 innings, for Deven Marrero was the rare subtle good move by Dave Dombrowski.

Ryan Brasier: He has a 5.03 ERA in something of a lost season, has allowed nine homers in 53 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, and somehow rates second on the team with seven saves.

Darwinzon Hernandez: He's averaging 16.9 strikeouts per nine innings, and if/when he gets better control of his high-voltage stuff, look out.

Colten Brewer: He has pitched in 55 games and I'm not sure I remember one of them.

Heath Hembree: It feels like he was one of the more reliable bullpen options when healthy, which tells you just how bad the bullpen was considering he gave up seven homers in 38 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, with a 4.87 FIP.

Brian Johnson and assorted others: The Red Sox got 25 starts from Johnson, Hector Velazquez, Andrew Cashner, and Jhoulys Chacin, with none of them having an ERA under 5.63. You know, in case you were looking for another reason why this season went off the rails.

BENCH

Marco Hernandez: Looked like he was in line to fill Holt's role on the roster (presuming Holt doesn't return), but a .457 OPS in the second half doesn't exactly help his case.

Sandy Leon: His most similar batter through age 29 is Gary Allenson. Makes sense to me. As far as good-field/no-hit backup catchers go, he's a decent one to have around.

Sam Travis: He's 26, has a .669 OPS in 267 major league plate appearances, and has never hit more than 13 homers (majors and minors combined) in a season. The solution at first base shouldn't include him.

Mitch Moreland: Quintessential pro who probably will be elsewhere next season. We'll always have Game 4 of the World Series.

Steve Pearce: In case you forgot, his home run (singular) came on May 23 against the Jays' Ryan Feierabend. We'll always have Game 5 of the World Series.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox win, but Eduardo Rodriguez' chase for 20 loses luster

Jason Mastrodonato

Eduardo Rodriguez was hardly deserving of win No. 19, but he got it anyways.

In his worst start of the season, Rodriguez labored in 90-degree heat, allowing seven runs on 11 hits and three walks in the Red Sox' 12-10 victory against the Texas Rangers.

Still, manager Alex Cora hung with him.

Desperate to get Rodriguez through five innings with the lead (his final start Sunday will give him a chance at win No. 20), Cora stuck with Rodriguez through 113 pitches.

So ridiculous was the outing that Rodriguez became the first major league pitcher this year to throw at least 110 pitches while allowing seven earned runs or more.

"It's not even my win, that win is for the team, the lineup, everything they do, up there grinding to score more runs," Rodriguez said. "I would say that's not my win. The ones I had before were mine, but this one wasn't mine."

It was clear he didn't have his best stuff on Tuesday.

When the Sox jumped all over 36-year-old Edinson Volquez for four runs in the first inning, Rodriguez gave them all back in the bottom of the frame.

The Sox added another run when Mookie Betts homered in the second inning, then Rodriguez gave it right back to make it 5-5.

"Changeup wasn't even moving, it was like a cutter," Rodriguez said. "Everything was straight to home plate. That's what happens."

Up 12-5 going into the bottom of the fifth, all Rodriguez needed was three outs.

The lead made it certain Cora was going to stick with his starter. The team has been talking about getting him to 20 wins for so long that the exhaustion of the conversation (combined with the Sox being well out of playoff contention) is starting to dull the accomplishment.

Rodriguez started the fifth by jumping ahead 0-2 on Danny Santana but couldn't put him away. Santana roped a high fastball for a single. Rodriguez then hung a lazy changeup to Rougned Odor, who hammered it out of the park for a two-run homer.

Any other day, that would've ended his outing.

"If we were in the hunt or something like that, in the middle of the wild card race, he was probably going to be out in the first inning," Cora said. "He was off."

After recording two outs, Rodriguez gave up back to back singles to extend the inning further.

Cora jumped out of the dugout and walked toward his struggling pitcher but never lifted an arm to call for a reliever. Instead, they had a quick chat on the mound, and it was Rodriguez who patted his manager on the back as Cora walked away.

"He's been the horse the whole season," Cora said. "I wasn't going to let it get ugly. You know, it was kind of ugly, but at the same time, he's still our best pitcher. I told him, 'Hey, you deserve this, I'll give you one more, but you better get him out. This is it.' I mean, I love that kid. I've been very honest with him from the get-go about as a staff, we push him because we know of the potential and I think it was the right move."

Finally, Christian Vazquez put an end to the quest when he threw out Delino DeShields trying to steal second base, assuring Rodriguez would be the winner if the Sox kept the lead.

Betts was supposed to have Tuesday off but told Cora he wanted to play. He started the game and hit his 29th home run in the second inning but was removed in the third after hurting himself running into the wall.

"Coming out of the hotel, he tells me, 'I'm going to play today because of you,'" Rodriguez said. "I said, 'Thank you bro, appreciate it.'"

It was all in the name of getting Rodriguez to win No. 19.

The Red Sox did it, even if his ERA jumped from 3.53 to 3.76 and the chase for 20 is looking a little less like an accomplishment and a little more more like an obligation.

Mookie Betts removed from Red Sox game after collision with wall

Jason Mastrodonato

After running into the wall, Mookie Betts stayed in the game for another inning before the Red Sox removed him on Tuesday night in their 12-10 win against the Rangers.

Betts later said he re-injured his toe on his left foot, which caused significant pain.

"Just kind of made it mad, kind of jammed it," Betts said.

In the bottom of the second inning, Rangers center fielder Delino DeShields smoked a line drive toward the wall in right-center. Betts put out his hands to brace himself but still hit the wall mid-sprint and bounced backwards, tripping over himself as he chased after the loose ball.

The Texas Rangers broadcast caught Betts looking confused afterward, grabbing his nose and shaking his head. Jackie Bradley Jr. motioned to the Red Sox dugout for the trainer, but nobody came out.

Did he get shaken up?

“No, just got sore after that so was trying to get off of it,” he said.

Betts then caught a fly ball down the foul line the very next play and finished the inning, but was removed an inning later and replaced by Gorkys Hernandez.

“He was fine,” manager Alex Cora said. “With him and Jackie we know, we know when they’re good. There are some other guys, they are acting the part and it’s very iffy. But they are very honest with us. He was OK. He came in and was like, ‘I can keep going.’ I’m like, ‘No, let’s shut it down.’ Get some treatment and see where we’re at the next few days.”

Betts previously injured his toe in Toronto two weekends ago.

“There’s no structural damage so it’s fine,” he said.

He said he hopes to play again before the season ends on Sunday.

Red Sox’ Rick Porcello to make final start before free agency

Jason Mastrodonato

Rick Porcello hasn’t missed a start in four years, but this last one could mean a little bit more than the others.

Porcello will take the mound against the Rangers on Wednesday night for what could be his final start in a Red Sox uniform as he prepares to enter free agency for the first time at age 30.

“I’m not even thinking about it man,” he said when asked about it last week. “I haven’t gotten somebody out in two months. I have to figure out how to get people out again before you take those steps. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen. It’ll take care of itself.”

Traded from the Tigers to the Sox by Dave Dombrowski in the deal that sent Yoenis Cespedes to Detroit before the 2015 season, Porcello then signed a four-year, \$82.5 million contract extension on Opening Day before throwing a single pitch in a Red Sox uniform. Former general manager Ben Cherington saw something in Porcello, who broke out of his mold as an innings-eater to win the Cy Young in 2016.

After winning the coveted award and tearing up on MLB Network during the announcement, Porcello’s productiveness fell off a cliff. The veteran sinkerballer has struggled to adjust to the new style of pitching, one that relies on fastballs up and breaking balls down while sinkers have slowly been phased out.

Despite his struggles during the regular season, he had some moments of brilliance out of relief in the 2018 postseason, something manager Alex Cora won’t soon forget.

“That outing against New York,” Cora said. “Those two outs he got in Game 1 of the ALDS kind of set the tempo of what was coming. I got booed when I took him out. I’m getting booed at Fenway because I took out Rick Porcello in the eighth inning and Craig Kimbrel was coming in.”

Porcello tossed 15½ innings with a 3.53 ERA and the Sox were 4-1 in his appearances last October.

He’s been a steady workhorse, missing only five weeks because of injury (all in 2015) in five years with the Red Sox, amassing a 72-55 record and a 4.43 ERA heading into his final start.

“He’s a pro, the way he goes about his business,” Cora said. “I’ve been saying it all along, he wins and he tries to find something the next four days to try and get better. He loses and the same thing. He’s very consistent at what he does and I’m very happy that we’ve been together these two years and let’s see what the future holds.”

Said Porcello, “It’s been a tough year, frustrating year. It’s been a grind, physically, mentally. I’m still here with the Red Sox and plan to finish this contract up and take it from there.”

Too much focus on individual stats?

With the season going nowhere, the Red Sox have turned their attention to individual milestones, for better or worse, Cora said.

“They’re not happy with what happened this year but at the same time this is baseball and there’s some special things going on,” the manager said.

Eduardo Rodriguez needs two more wins for the first 20-win season by a Red Sox pitcher since Porcello in 2016. And Rafael Devers entered Tuesday needing eight more hits for 200 on the season.

“It’s a good lesson for them, some of them, because when you get off your plan or you start chasing numbers, bad things happen,” Cora said. “Raffy, whenever he hit 29 home runs, you could see that he started chasing and swinging at everything outside the strike zone because his swing rate is kind of like the same.

“We’ve got to be careful with that but at the same time, it’s a good lesson because he knows that when he dominates the strike zone, he’s very dangerous. But if you don’t dominate the strike zone the way he’s capable of, then things like this happen. Hopefully this week he can slow down a little bit.”

J.D. joins 35-100 club again

J.D. Martinez crossed his personal milestone with his 100th RBI on Monday. He now has four seasons with 35 homers and 100 RBI, including the past two with the Red Sox.

“It’s funny because it was a grind right?” Cora said. “We’ve been talking about him the whole season and it’s kind of like he’s been, not scuffling, not struggling, but it hasn’t been as easy as last year. At the end, the guy can hit.”

Polar Bear Park update

Folks from the soon-to-be Worcester Red Sox announced that Polar Bear Park, set to open in 2021 as the new home of the Triple-A Red Sox, will open the world’s first autonomous checkout store in a pro sports and entertainment venue. The store will be in left field at the new stadium when it opens.

“We have long sought to reduce time spent waiting in lines in our venues,” said Larry Lucchino, Worcester’s principal owner and chairman.

The store will be utilizing breakthrough technology to charge people on an app that will allow them to enter the store, grab what they want and leave without having to stop at a checkout counter.

John Henry’s invisible, and now Red Sox are too

Bill Speros

John Henry might be trying to keep busy until he lands an ambassadorship in the President Warren administration.

We’re not sure what’s left for him when it comes to owning the Red Sox.

Henry delivered a World Series championship in 2004 after 86 years of Sox angst, then added three more in the following 14 years. Henry’s group revived Fenway Park, even if its grandstand seats were designed before Americans discovered carbohydrates. Henry also dragged the Red Sox roster out of its monochromatic era, annoying PSAs notwithstanding.

The Red Sox won the World Series 11 months ago. They now are Boston's forgotten franchise. The lack of October baseball can be fatal in a city where success is measured in championship banners hanging in the rafters above Terminal C at Logan Airport.

The 2018 Red Sox shredded a pair of 100-win opponents in the American League playoffs, dropped a 16-spot at Yankee Stadium in the ALDS and came within one Ian Kinsler error of sweeping the almighty Dodgers in the World Series.

No team in this city had, has, or ever will again win 119 games in a single season.

Just 98 days after the Sox beat Los Angeles in the World Series, the Patriots beat Los Angeles in the Super Bowl. And in the post-2004 New England sports universe, the Lombardi Trophy outweighs the Commissioner's Trophy.

To quote the SEC, "It just means more."

Fans were brainwashed all offseason — you remember that eight-day period between the Patriots Super Bowl LIII parade and the arrival of pitchers and catchers in spring training — that this team was 2018 Red Sox 2.0.

All the big names returned — except for that closer who gave us all angina in the playoffs.

The 2019 Red Sox were doomed the first time Alex Cora invoked the success of 2018. Cora and the Red Sox never let go of the past until the present meant no future.

Not even "second wild card" unicorn dust could keep Red Sox Nation hooked this time.

The 2019 Red Sox season highlight DVD peaks with Michael Yastrzemski hitting a home run at Fenway Park for the Giants and his grandfather throwing him a ceremonial first pitch the following night.

Henry, meanwhile, dropped \$242 million on his hopes for a 2018 sequel. But it flopped with all the historic throw-weight of "No, No, Nanette." Instead of Babe Ruth being caught in the mythical riptide, this time it could be Mookie Betts.

The masses have collectively moved on from baseball in Boston, but the Red Sox face their most pivotal offseason since they signed Curt Schilling and briefly traded Manny Ramirez, Jon Lester and cash for Alex Rodriguez.

Losing Betts would sting as much as losing Carlton Fisk, Roger Clemens or Jeff Bagwell. Betts is 27. He should be the face of the Red Sox until 2028. If the Red Sox are unable to keep him, it might indeed signal the beginning of the end for this ownership group.

Henry paid \$380 million for the Red Sox in 2002. The team is now worth \$2.7 billion, via Forbes. Henry is 70. And his ownership cabal would enjoy a sweet capital gains tax rate on any sale, thanks to President Trump and those evil Republicans.

Henry was absent last fall when the Red Sox won the pennant in Houston and has yet to face the press en-masse or the public since firing Dave Dombrowski.

And being the guy who runs the Red Sox is not nearly as much fun as it used to be. Theo won't be walking through that Gate A door, either, unless he owns a piece of it.

Poor performance on the field and convoluted leadership off it act like morphine on our baseball sensibilities.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

When do the Bruins start?

Given the Red Sox' proclivity toward off-hour news-dumps, they'll probably trade Betts for prospects at midnight on Christmas Eve.

And that is the only barometer that truly matters this time.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox top 15 prospects (2019 final): Power-hitters Triston Casas, Bobby Dalbec, fireballer Bryan Mata lead list

Christopher Smith

The Boston Red Sox farm system moved up from 30th to 22nd this season in Baseball America's MLB Organization Talent Rankings.

Power hitters Triston Casas and Bobby Dalbec as well as 20-year-old starter Bryan Mata earned spots on Baseball America's top 100 list after the preseason list included no Red Sox prospects.

Below is MassLive.com's final prospect rankings for 2019. Michael Chavis began 2019 as the No. 1 prospect. He graduated after belting 18 homers in 95 games for Boston.

Casas, Boston's 2018 top draft pick, has assumed the top prospect spot.

MassLive.com's 2019 preseason top 15 prospect list: 1. Michael Chavis; 2. Jay Groome; 3. Triston Casas; 4. Tanner Houck; 5. Darwinzon Hernandez; 6. Bobby Dalbec; 7. Antoni Flores; 8. Bryan Mata; 9. Durbin Feltman; 10. Nick Decker; 11. Jarren Duran; 12. Brandon Howlett; 13. Mike Shawaryn; 14. C.J. Chatham; 15. Travis Lakins.

MassLive.com's 2019 postseason top 15 prospect list: 1. Triston Casas; 2. Bryan Mata, 3. Bobby Dalbec; 4. Jay Groome; 5. Thad Ward; 6. Tanner Houck; 7. Gilberto Jimenez; 8. Noah Song; 9. Jarren Duran; 10. Matthew Lugo; 11. C.J. Chatham; 12. Nick Decker; 13. Chris Murphy; 14. Ryan Zeferjahn; 15. Antoni Flores.

1. TRISTON CASAS, 1B/3B

Baseball America has Casas ranked No. 66 on its top 100 list.

The Red Sox drafted the 19-year-old in the first round (26th overall) in 2018 out of American Heritage, the same high school where Eric Hosmer starred.

Casas, who's listed at 6-5, 240-pounds, earned Red Sox minor league Offensive Player of the Year. He batted .256 with a .350 on-base percentage, .480 slugging percentage, .830 OPS, 20 homers, 26 doubles, five triples and 81 RBIs in 118 games at Low-A Greenville and two games at High-A Salem.

Boston drafted him as a third baseman, but he started 96 games at first base and eight games at third base.

Boston Red Sox 2018 first-round draft pick Triston Casas is only 19 years old but he already is bigger than 6-foot-3, 232-pound J.D. Martinez.

2. BRYAN MATA, RHP

Baseball America has Mata ranked No. 82 on its top 100 list.

He added a swing-and-miss slider in 2019 to complement his 95-98 mph fastball and changeup.

The 6-foot-3, 160-pound right-handed starter from Venezuela turned 20 on May 3. He dominated at High-A Salem with a 1.75 ERA, .201 batting average against, 1.09 WHIP, 52 strikeouts and 18 walks in 10 starts (51 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings) at High-A Salem.

He struggled in some starts after a promotion to Double-A Portland (5.03 ERA in 11 starts, 53 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings there), but he was one of the youngest pitchers in the Eastern League. His future looks bright.

3. BOBBY DALBEC, 1B/3B

Baseball America has Dalbec at No. 84 on its top 100 list.

The 6-foot-4, 234-pound slugger batted .239 with a .356 on-base percentage, .460 slugging percentage, .816 OPS, 27 homers, 19 doubles, two triples and 73 RBIs in 105 games at Double-A Portland and 30 games at Triple-A Pawtucket combined.

Dalbec, who turned 24 on June 29, belted seven homers in 123 plate appearances for Pawtucket.

His batting average for balls in play (.278) was 40 points lower than at any other time during his professional career. That indicates he experienced some bad luck and his .239 batting average should have been higher.

He reduced his strikeout percentage from 37.1% in 29 games at Portland during 2018 to 25.1% in 105 games at Portland this year and 23.6% in 30 games at Pawtucket.

The Red Sox will add him to the 40-man roster in November.

4. JAY GROOME, LHP

Groome, who Boston selected 12th overall in 2016, returned in late August after he missed the entire 2018 season. He began last year on the injured list, then underwent Tommy John surgery May 16, 2018.

He returned Aug. 21. He allowed only two runs, seven hits and three walks while striking out nine in 7 innings (four starts) for the Gulf Coast League Red Sox and Short Season Lowell.

His fastball reached the mid-90s. His curveball had the same bite as it did pre-injury.

He just turned 21 on Aug. 23. The 2020 season is incredibly important for him.

"My goal (next year) really is just to throw as many innings as I can and just stay healthy," Groome said. "I've got a brand new arm, basically. So I know if I can maintain it and keep it healthy, the sky's the limit."

5. THAD WARD, RHP

The right-handed starter earned Red Sox minor league Pitcher of the Year.

The Red Sox drafted him in the fifth round in 2018 out of UCF. He went 8-5 with a 2.14 ERA, 1.16 WHIP, .198 batting average against, 157 strikeouts and 57 walks in 25 starts (126 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings) between Low-A Greenville (13 starts) and High-A Salem (12 starts).

Ward, who's listed at 6-3, 182-pounds, turns 23 on Jan. 16. He likely will begin 2020 at Double-A Portland.

He throws a sinker, cutter, four-seam fastball that reaches the mid-90s, slider and curveball. He added the cutter this year.

6. TANNER HOUCK, RHP

The Red Sox converted the 2017 first-rounder out of Mizzou to a relief pitcher in July with a short-term outlook in mind. They thought he might help the 2019 major league bullpen.

But Boston never promoted the 6-4, 210-pounder despite a 3.24 ERA, .209 batting average against and 1.32 WHIP in 25 innings at Triple-A Pawtucket.

He likely will begin the 2019 season in Pawtucket's starting rotation. He's not on the 40-man roster yet but he's on track to debut for Boston at some point in 2020.

7. GILBERTO JIMENEZ, OF

Jimenez received only a \$10,000 bonus when Boston signed him out of the Dominican Republic on Aug. 2, 2017. He since has emerged as a top organizational prospect.

The speedy switch-hitter batted .359 with a .393 on-base percentage, .470 slugging percentage, .863 OPS, three homers, three triples, 11 doubles, 19 RBIs, 14 steals and 35 runs in 59 games (254 plate appearances) for Short Season Lowell.

He turned 19 on July 8.

"Obviously there's exciting four- or-five tool potential there," assistant GM Eddie Romero said. "And for him to have success this early on, especially with not having been a switch-hitter for a long time, we're really excited to see about his potential. The fact that he's gotten off to this kind of start is really, really good for him."

Gilberto Jimenez is batting .366 with a .398 on-base percentage, .480 slugging percentage, .878 OPS, three homers, three triples, 11 doubles and 19 RBIs in 57 games (246 plate appearances) for Short Season Lowell.

8. NOAH SONG, RHP

The Red Sox drafted the 22-year-old Song in the fourth round in 2019 out of the United States Naval Academy. They knew they might need to wait for him because of his required active duty service.

The 6-4, 200-pounder received permission from the Navy to pitch at Lowell this summer. He allowed just two earned runs in 17 innings (1.06 ERA) and posted a .167 batting average against. He struck out 19 and walked five.

9. JARREN DURAN, CF

The Red Sox drafted the 23-year-old in the seventh round in 2018 out of Long Beach State. He earned 2019 Red Sox minor league Baserunner of the Year.

The left-handed hitting speedster posted off-the-chart statistics at High-A Salem to begin the 2019 season. He batted .387 with a .456 on-base percentage, .543 slugging percentage, .998 OPS, four homers, 13 doubles, three triples, 19 RBIs, 18 steals and 49 runs in 50 games.

He struggled after a promotion to Double-A Portland. He posted a .250/.309/.325/.634 line, one homer, 11 doubles, five triples, 19 RBIs, 28 steals and 41 runs in 82 games.

He has incredible speed that has allowed him to leg out 19 triples in 199 minor league games.

He's playing in the Arizona Fall League right now. He's 5-for-12 with one stolen base and two runs.

The Boston Red Sox drafted Jarren Duran out of Long Beach State in the seventh round of the 2018 Draft. He's batting .397 with a .440 on-base percentage, .538 slugging percentage and .979 OPS.

10. MATTHEW LUGO, SS

The Red Sox drafted the 18-year-old Puerto Rico native in the second round this June out of the Carlos Beltran Baseball Academy. His uncle is the great Carlos Beltran.

Lugo posted a .337 on-base percentage with seven extra-base hits in 39 games for the Gulf Coast League Red Sox and two games for Short Season Lowell.

PROSPECTS 11-15 —

11. C.J. Chatham, SS/2B: The Red Sox are expected to add the 24-year-old to the 40-man roster this November. He slashed .298/.333/.408/.741 in 110 games for Portland and Pawtucket. He made 15 starts at second base. He certainly has the size (6-4, 181 pounds) to hit for more power. He's 5-for-16 (.375) with a .474 on-base percentage, three doubles, two RBIs and seven runs in four Arizona Fall League games.

12. Nick Decker, OF: The 2018 second-round draft pick, who turns 20 on Oct. 2, slashed .247/.330/.471/.801 with six homers, 11 doubles, five triples and 25 RBIs in 53 games for Lowell and two games for the Gulf Coast League Red Sox.

13. Chris Murphy, LHP: The Red Sox drafted the 21-year-old in the sixth round this June out of San Diego. He posted a 1.08 ERA (33 ⅓ innings, four earned runs), 0.90 WHIP, .197 batting average against, 34 strikeouts and seven walks in 10 starts for Short Season Lowell.

14. Ryan Zeferjahn RHP: Boston drafted the 21-year-old in the third round in 2019 out of Kansas. The 6-5, 225-pound righty recorded a 4.50 ERA, 1.64 WHIP and .279 BAA in 12 starts (22 innings) for Lowell.

15. Antoni Flores, SS: The 18-year-old from Venezuela slashed just .193/.293/.227/.520 with four doubles, one triple and 12 RBIs in 55 games for Short Season Lowell. He's still very young (turns 19 on Oct. 14) and has exciting potential. He signed for \$1.4 million.

Eduardo Rodriguez earns 19th win for Boston Red Sox despite allowing 7 runs; Mookie Betts belts team's record-tying 238th homer

Christopher Smith

Eduardo Rodriguez earned his 19th win despite pitching poorly Tuesday.

The Red Sox left-handed starter hurled 5 innings. He allowed seven runs, all earned, 11 hits and three walks while striking out six. But he left with a 12-7 lead after five innings and Boston's bullpen held on, barely.

The Red Sox won 12-10 over the Rangers at Globe Life Park.

Rodriguez will receive a chance for win No. 20 on Sunday at Fenway Park in the regular season finale vs. Baltimore. He would become the second major league pitcher to reach 20 wins in 2019. Houston's Justin Verlander, the frontrunner for the 2019 AL Cy Young award, already has recorded 20 victories.

Everyone in the Red Sox lineup recorded at least one hit. Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts, J.D. Martinez and Andrew Benintendi each stroked two hits.

Mookie Betts blasted his 29th homer in the second inning to put Boston ahead 5-4. It marked the 238th home run the Red Sox have hit this year, tying the 2003 Red Sox for the single-season franchise record.

J.D. Martinez (35 homers), Xander Bogaerts (32), Rafael Devers (31), Betts (29), Christian Vazquez (22) and Jackie Bradley Jr. (20) make for six Red Sox players with 20 or more homers. That's tied for the most in club history with the 2003 Red Sox who also had six hitters with 20 or more.

Boston Red Sox ownership should promote Eddie Romero to head of baseball operations to replace Dave Dombrowski I Christopher Smith

Christopher Smith

As principal owner John Henry and chairman Tom Werner conduct a thorough search for a new head of baseball operations to replace Dave Dombrowski, the best candidate is right in front of them. He has been a member of the organization since February 2006.

Assistant GM Eddie Romero, who has served as one of the four interim GMs since ownership fired Dombrowski, deserves the job.

The most important trait for any GM is to keep one eye on the present and one eye on the future.

Dombrowski often failed to keep an eye on the future, although he deserves credit for keeping both Rafael Devers and Andrew Benintendi. But Dombrowski traded too many prospects to complete trades such as he did when he dealt four players for Tyler Thornburg. Under Dombrowski, the farm system went from No. 1 in the majors to No. 30. It has crept to 22nd this season.

Ben Cherington, who served as GM before Dombrowski, often held onto too many prospects for too long. He could have sold high on Henry Owens, once Baseball America's No. 40 prospect and MLB Pipeline's No. 19 prospect. Same can be said about Blake Swihart, who Baseball America and Baseball Prospectus once ranked No. 17.

Owens posted a 4.69 ERA for the Kansas City T-Bones, an independent league team, in 2019. The Red Sox designated Swihart for assignment in April.

Scouting your own farm system arguably is baseball's most important form of scouting. The baseball operations department must know who to trade and who to keep.

Romero, native of Puerto Rico, has a background in international scouting and player development. He knows Boston's minor league farm system inside out. Who better to lead the rebuild than someone who already has a strong pulse of what's happening internally?

Who better than someone who will place an incredible importance on international scouting? Dealing for international amateur signing bonus pool space and pursuing the top 16-year-old international prospects on a yearly basis is essential to an organization's sustainability. The Orioles have lost 106 games this year in large part because they weren't aggressive enough scouting internationally during Dan Duquette's tenure from 2011-18.

Romero, the son of former Red Sox infielder Ed Romero, helped sign Rafael Devers and Tzu-Wei Lin as well as several minor league prospects such as Bryan Mata, Gilberto Jimenez, Antoni Flores and Denyi Reyes. He has overseen scouting in Latin America, the Pacific Rim and Europe. He has experience with amateur scouting in the United States as well.

Romero was in charge of the international scouting department when Boston committed signing bonus violations (package deals) that prevented them from signing any international amateurs during the 2016-17. This is a violation other teams were believed to be practicing. Evan Drellich, then of NBC Sports Boston, reported the Red Sox felt they were "singled out." But it might not go overlooked during the GM search.

The former prosecutor for the state attorney's office (fourth district) in Jacksonville, Fla., is bright and likable. He's a strong communicator like manager Alex Cora. He's also a straight shooter. He doesn't project as someone who would be a corporate leader who tries to convince the media and fans everything is fine when he doesn't believe it himself.

He should receive the chance to become a GM who establishes a middle ground between the way Cherington and Dombrowski operated. Cherington did hold onto too many prospects but his core of players helped Boston win the World Series title in 2018. He deserves more credit than he probably has received.

There's no need to hire a candidate with GM experience. Romero worked under Theo Epstein, Cherington and Dombrowski. He has plenty of experience observing the best and worst of all three who won a combined four World Series titles.

Every GM will make mistakes. Every big-market GM gives out some regrettable contracts. But a GM must keep those mistakes to a minimum and use creativity when building a roster. A big-market GM should operate with both small-market and big-market principles.

Meanwhile, Red Sox ownership must commit to Romero — or whoever it selects as next general manager — like the Yankees have done with Brian Cashman.

It's not a great look that Cherington and Dombrowski combined for more championships in seven years than Cashman has in the past 18 years — and yet ownership has fired both.

President Sam Kennedy — and ownership — also shouldn't meddle. Ownership obviously must sign off on big deals, but let Romero (if he is hired) do his job despite his lack of previous GM experience.

*** *RedSox.com***

E-Rod grinds through 5 in Texas for 19th win

Ian Browne

Unlike many of the sparkling outings Eduardo Rodriguez has produced this season, Tuesday night presented a sweaty and laborious struggle in the stifling Texas heat.

Though the process contained nothing in the way of artistic beauty, the lefty made it through five innings and rode his team's offensive barrage to a 12-10 victory over the Rangers at Globe Life Park.

This wasn't just any win for Rodriguez. It was No. 19 on the season, putting him in position to hit the milestone of 20 in his final start -- the season finale for the Red Sox on Sunday afternoon at Fenway Park against the Orioles.

The last lefty to win 20-plus games for the Red Sox was Mel Parnell in 1953.

Although Rodriguez was largely responsible for his first 18 wins, he knew he had little to do with this one, giving up 11 hits and five runs while throwing 113 pitches in just five innings.

"It's not even my win," Rodriguez said. "That win is for the team, the lineup, everything they do. They are up there grinding to score more runs. The ones I had before were mine, but this one wasn't mine. I was part of the team but everything they did there to get a win for me was really special. Just sitting there, everybody pitching up there, hitting the ball, making plays and everything, that was special to watch."

And Rodriguez didn't forget that manager Alex Cora also made it possible.

With Rodriguez in yet another jam in the bottom of the fifth and his pitch count climbing close to a season high, Cora came to the mound. At that point, Rodriguez was still one out short of qualifying for a win.

Cora told Rodriguez he could face Elvis Andrus, but that would be it.

"I mean, the way I said it [to him] was true. 'You've been the horse the whole season.' I wasn't going to let it get ugly," Cora said. "You know, it was kind of ugly but at the same time, he's still our best pitcher. I told him, 'Hey, you deserve this, I'll give you one more, but you better get him out. This is it.'"

Rodriguez threw two pitches to Andrus, and Delino DeShields gave him a gift on the second one, trying to steal second. Catcher Christian Vázquez fired a strike for the third out, and Rodriguez's night was over.

When Rodriguez saw Cora come out of the dugout just moments before that, he did fear that his night was over.

"You were watching the game -- I gave up seven runs," Rodriguez said. "With two runs [in], men on base, I thought they'd take me out of the game, but he gave me one more chance. And with [Vázquez], I was about to catch the ball because I thought he threw it back to me. I saw it go to second base, they called him out, and that was special to watch."

Rodriguez went back to the dugout and gave Cora a hug.

"I mean, I love that kid," Cora said. "I've been very honest with him from the get-go about as a staff we push him because we know of the potential, and I think it was the right move. If we were in the hunt or something like that, in the middle of the Wild Card race, he was probably going to be out in the first inning because he was off."

Aside from the potential 20-win carrot that awaits him, Rodriguez will go into Sunday needing just 3 2/3 innings to get 200 for the first time in his career. He went over the 200-K mark in this one, and now has 205 for the season.

"At the end, what matters is that he has a shot for 200 innings and the 20 wins," Cora said.

It looked like Rodriguez would have an easy time of securing the win when the Boston bats got him four runs before he even threw a pitch. But Rodriguez gave the four right back in the bottom of the first.

On a day Cora played his "A" lineup to give Rodriguez all the support he needed, the offense kept churning. Mookie Betts belted a solo shot to center in the second to give the Sox the lead back.

In fact, Betts gave up a scheduled day off to support Rodriguez's cause, though he did leave the game in the third with soreness in his left foot.

"With Mookie, coming out of the hotel, he tells me, 'I'm going to play today because of you.' I said, 'Thank you bro, appreciate it.' You see the lineup they put out today to try to get me that win, and they did it," Rodriguez said.

And now it will all come down to Sunday. But Rodriguez realizes that either way, this season has been a victory for him from an individual standpoint.

"Just finish strong," Rodriguez said. "That was the plan when I got here in Spring Training. Finish the season strong, and get ready for the next one."

Mookie swats 29th HR, exits with foot pain

Ian Browne

A day after Mookie Betts made highlight reels all across the baseball universe with the best throw of his career, Boston's star right fielder had to exit the Red Sox's 12-10 victory over the Rangers on Tuesday night with pain in his left foot.

Though Betts might not play in the remaining two games in Texas, manager Alex Cora doesn't plan on shutting him down. Look for Betts to see some action in the final series of the season this weekend at Fenway Park against the Orioles.

"He will get [Wednesday] off. I don't know if he will play Thursday, but hopefully he will be ready to play during the weekend at home," Cora said.

Betts had been dealing with inflammation in that same foot, forcing him out of action from Sept. 13-19.

He aggravated it in the bottom of the second inning on Tuesday, when he banged into the wall in pursuit of a triple by Delino DeShields.

"It's fine. Just kind of made it mad," Betts said. "Kind of jammed it. Just precautionary."

When the Red Sox went out for defense in the third inning, Betts was replaced in right field by Gorkys Hernández.

"I just got sore after that, so trying to get off of it," Betts said. "It was getting a little better and then re-aggravated it. There's no structural damage so it's fine."

In the second inning, Betts belted his 29th homer of the season.

Final week could bring milestones for Red Sox

Ian Browne

Ideally, the Red Sox would be playing for playoff positioning in this final week of the season. Instead, the talk is of milestones.

J.D. Martinez reached his 100th RBI on Monday, marking the fourth time in the past five years he's hit that mark. Eduardo Rodriguez went into Tuesday's start in Texas two wins from 20 for the season.

Meanwhile, third baseman Rafael Devers entered Tuesday just eight hits shy of 200 for the season, a rather impressive feat for a 22-year-old.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora has noticed that the players are openly pulling for each other to reach their numbers. An example of that was Tuesday's lineup.

Mookie Betts was originally supposed to have the night off, but he asked to play so he could support Rodriguez's effort.

What does that type of attitude tell Cora about the chemistry of his team?

"That we have something cool going on here and we just had a bad season," Cora said. "That's the way I see it. They care about each other. They're not happy with what happened this year, but at the same time, this is baseball and there's some special things going on."

Though Martinez hasn't been as consistent a force as he was in last year's championship season, he is still one of the most productive hitters in the game. He was hitting .301 with 35 homers, to go along with the 100 RBIs.

"We've been talking about him the whole season, and it's kind of like he's been not scuffling, not struggling, but it hasn't been as easy as last year," Cora said. "At the end, the guy can hit. He keeps working hard at it. We had a day game on Sunday and he texted me the night before, 'Hey, can we hit early? Can we take BP tomorrow?' Usually we don't hit on day games.

"He kind of found something Saturday night and he wanted to work at it, and he goes the other way and gets two or three hits. He's going to work till the end, regardless of the situation we're in. That's what makes him one of the best hitters in the big leagues."

As for Devers, his breakout has been one of the best stories of the season.

"Somebody joked around, like, if he gets up in the morning [of the last game], he'll get whatever hits to get 200 because he's that talented," Cora said.

Porcello's last stand?

Wednesday's start in Texas could mark Rick Porcello's final appearance for the Red Sox.

The righty is eligible for free agency this offseason, meaning his five-year run with the Red Sox is in danger of ending.

Cora has been with Porcello the past two years, and has appreciated the righty's professionalism.

Although Porcello has been used almost exclusively as a starter in his career, Cora will always remember the two key outs he got out of the bullpen in Game 1 of last year's AL Division Series against the Yankees. The manager thinks that was a tone-setter for the postseason run, in which the starting pitchers all became "rovers" for Boston.

"We'll see what the future holds, but the guy is a pro," Cora said. "Just the way he goes about his business. I've been saying it all along, he wins and he tries to find something the next four days to try and get better. He loses and the same thing. He's very consistent at what he does, and I'm very happy that we've been together these two years, and let's see what the future holds."

*** *WEEI.com***

Thanks to Eduardo Rodriguez, the Red Sox finally found a feel-good moment

Rob Bradford

In many respects, this one had all the makings of that sort of meaningless Game No. 157 that suggests everyone is counting the minutes toward Sunday's final pitch.

Two teams with no hopes of playing beyond September, trudging through a 90-degree Texas night while avoiding pulled muscles and broken bones.

And while many traits of the Red Sox' 12-10 win over the Rangers Tuesday night screamed meaningless baseball, there was a noteworthy story built within the 3 hours and 59 minutes. For that they can thank Eduardo Rodriguez and the remnants of the cohesiveness that last season's World Series run was built on.

Rodriguez needed to win this game in order to gain his 20th of the season Sunday. He knew. Alex Cora knew it. And his teammates knew it. And everyone acted accordingly.

"With Mookie (Betts), coming out of the hotel ... he tells me, 'I'm going to play today because of you.' I said, 'Thank you, bro, appreciate it.' You see the lineup they put out today to try to get me that win and they did it," Rodriguez said after becoming the first Red Sox lefty starter since Jon Lester in 2010 to win 19

games. "I was just part of that win. I didn't even do nothing today. I would say get through five but I don't feel really good about it. I just feel good to get to 19."

Rodriguez deserved a mountain of credit to get to this point, serving as the undeniably most reliable pitcher on the staff. But this time around he needed help, from all corners of the clubhouse.

First, it was the bats who picked up the starter, managing to score in each of the first five innings for a 12-5 lead heading into the bottom of the fifth. Considering Rodriguez had allowed four runs in the first and another in the second, it was understood early on this was not going to mirror his recent outings.

"It's not even my win," said Rodriguez, who came just the second Red Sox starter in the last 24 seasons to earn a win in an outing of five innings and seven or more runs allowed. "That win is for the team, the lineup, everything they do, up there grinding to score more runs. I would say that's not my win. The ones I had before were mine, but this one wasn't mine. I was part of the team but everything they did there to get a win for me was really special. Just sitting there, everybody pitching up there, hitting the ball, making plays and everything, that was special to watch."

There was also the faith exhibited by his manager Alex Cora. That was put on display when Rodriguez got into trouble once again in the fifth, putting runners on the corners after already giving up two runs in the frame. So with the left-hander sitting at 111 pitches and Elvis Andrus at the plate, Cora gave his guy a mandate.

Two pitches later, Christian Vazquez was ending the drama by throwing out Delino DeShields curiously trying to steal second.

"This is the last hitter, if you get him out good for you, if you don't get him out you're coming out of the game," said Cora when asked what he said during his mound visit. "I forgot the part where Christian throws him out."

"He just told me you got one more hitter, you decide what you're going to do," Rodriguez said. "You're either going to take yourself out of the game or you're winning this game."

Now Rodriguez gets to pitch again Sunday, with the Red Sox rolling out another regular lineup against the Orioles because of the occasion. With 3 2/3 innings he will reach 200, and with one win the Sox will have their first 20-game winner since Rick Porcello in 2016.

As was evident by the Red Sox' reaction this time around, they'll take it.

"It's another game, the last game of the season, still another game for me," Rodriguez said. "Just finish strong. That was the plan when I got here in spring training, finish the season strong, get ready for the next one."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Going, going, gone? Saluting four Red Sox who probably won't return

John Tomase

The 2018 Red Sox, it turns out, stayed together one year too long. But that's about to change.

The ugly, painful, unwieldy dismantling process will begin with some light pruning before the really tough decisions — Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez — must be confronted. Unless ownership has decided that both must go in service of dropping below the \$208 million luxury tax threshold, how to handle their respective futures will be the job of whomever ends up in charge of baseball operations.

A few decisions can be made right now, however, and they'll require saying goodbye to championship stalwarts. Three are free impending free agents, and one is likely to be traded, and before they go, let us take one look back at what they meant to the Red Sox.

We'll start with right-hander Rick Porcello. The 2016 Cy Young Award winner loves pitching in Boston and desperately wants to stay. While there's a chance his market will be so meager that the Red Sox bring him back on a one-year deal, it's probably best for both sides to move on.

Of the 58 pitchers to make at least 75 starts over the last three years, only three posted worse ERAs than Porcello (4.80). He has been below-average for the majority of his Red Sox career, outside of the one obvious outlier, but that doesn't mean he didn't deliver in some big moments.

He one-hit the Yankees last August, joining Pedro Martinez as the only Red Sox hurlers to turn that trick in the last 50 years. He outlasted former teammate Justin Verlander for the 2016 Cy Young Award in one of the closest votes ever.

But if we remember Porcello for anything, it should be the trend that he started last October. With the Red Sox holding on for dear life vs. the Yankees in Game 1 of the ALDS, Porcello recorded two of the most pivotal outs of the game out of the bullpen to start the eighth, allowing closer Craig Kimbrel to finish off a four-out save in a 5-4 win.

The rest of the starters followed suit, and their relief contributions helped lift the Red Sox to their fourth title since 2004.

Another key contributor last October was first baseman Mitch Moreland. The former Gold Glover made his first All-Star team at age 32 in 2018, but injuries derailed each of his three seasons in Boston. That didn't stop him from delivering one of the biggest hits of the playoffs, his mammoth three-run homer with two outs in the seventh starting the Red Sox on their comeback from a 4-0 deficit en route to a 9-6 win in Game 4 of the World Series.

Moreland arrived from Texas with as much postseason experience as anyone on the roster outside of Dustin Pedroia, thanks to seven playoff trips with the Rangers. A title had always eluded him — he can thank David Freese of the Cardinals for that — which is why he was as overjoyed as anyone to finally win it all last season.

Another 2018 supporting player might've been the ultimate supporting player, period. Where do we start with Brock Holt? The impending free agent has likely been made expendable by the younger and cheaper Marco Hernandez, but it doesn't change the impact he made after arriving as a throw-in from the Pirates with closer Joel Hanrahan.

All Holt did was earn Rookie of the Year votes in 2014, make an All-Star team in 2015, and deliver the first postseason cycle ever during a savage beatdown of the Yankees during the ALDS.

Holt completed the accomplishment in style with a ninth-inning homer off catcher Austin Romine, racing around the bases with an grin that screamed, "CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS!?" Outside of Chris Sale striking out Manny Machado or Andrew Benintendi's diving catch in Houston, it might've been the most joyous moment of the postseason.

And that brings us to the final name on this list. Center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. is technically arbitration eligible, but with his offensive production once again frustratingly intermittent and the Red Sox looking to cut costs, there's a strong chance he'll be moved rather than paid \$10 million-plus. If that's the case, the ups will eventually outnumber the downs in our memories.

He debuted on Opening Day in 2013 after a monster spring training, eventually working a walk off Yankees left-hander CC Sabathia that keyed a ton-setting victory. He quickly wowed us with his glove,

establishing himself — with all due respect to Fred Lynn, Jacoby Ellsbury, and Ellis Burks — as the greatest center fielder in franchise history.

You could run highlight-reel catches for three hours and still leave jaw-dropping plays on the cutting room floor, but his brief offensive explosions were nearly as memorable, whether it was his 29-game hitting streak and All-Star start in 2016, his insanely hot out-of-nowhere August in 2015, or best of all, his one-man wrecking crew act vs. the Astros in last year's ALCS.

Bradley only batted .200, but he made his three hits count, blasting two homers and a double for nine RBIs en route to the series MVP award.

It turned out to be his high-water mark, because he spent most of 2019 batting below .200. It is now clear the team can sacrifice a little defense in center to gain a better bat, and that means Bradley is expendable.

He won't be forgotten, though, and neither will the other three players on this list.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

In a strange season, even personal milestones are proving tough to come by

Sean McAdam

The drama was drained out of this Red Sox' season long ago, though it may hard to pinpoint exactly when. Certainly, since the team was officially eliminated from the postseason last Friday night, the games have taken on the feel of Grapefruit League games, with little context or significance.

But however briefly, it returned Tuesday night during, of all things, the fifth inning at Globe Life Park.

Wanting to give 18-game winner Eduardo Rodriguez every opportunity to win 20 games for the first time in his career — and become the first Red Sox lefty since Mel Parnell in 1953 to do so — the Sox lined it up so that he would pitch twice more this week: Tuesday night and again on Sunday, the final day of the season.

When the Red Sox staked him to a 4-0 lead in the top of the first, it seemed as though Rodriguez was well on his way. The early offensive burst was hardly unexpected — after all, the Sox had provided him with an average of 7.63 runs of support before Tuesday. Rodriguez was accustomed to working with plenty of backing.

But in the bottom of the first, he gave the four runs right back. And when the Sox got him another in the top of the second, Rodriguez gave that back, too.

Finally, the Sox gave him more runs that he protected — one in the third, two in the fourth and four more in the fifth. All Rodriguez needed was to get through the fifth.

That would prove difficult, as it turned out.

“Mechanically, he was off,” acknowledged Alex Cora to reporters after the game. “Everything was cutting and his changeup wasn’t there. It wasn’t his best one.”

Not by a long shot. In the bottom of the fifth, needing just three more outs to qualify for the victory and in possession of a seven-run lead, Rodriguez made things interesting.

Having escaped a bases-loaded jam in the fourth without doing further damage, Rodriguez got himself right back in trouble in the fifth. First, he allowed a two-run homer to Rowned Odor, narrowing the lead to 12-7. Then, after getting two outs, he allowed consecutive singles, putting runners at the corners.

In the dugout, Cora paced nervously, torn between trying to give his pitcher a chance to inch close to his 20th win, while still trying to win the game.

With Elvis Andrus due, Cora marched to the mound with a message: Time was almost up.

“It was his last hitter,” said Cora afterward. “(I told him), ‘You get him out, good for you; if you don’t get him out, you’re coming out of the game.’ I wasn’t going to let it get ugly. It was kind of ugly (already), but at the same time, he’s still our best pitcher.

“So I told him, ‘You deserve this. I’ll give you one more. But you better get him out. This is it.’”

Rodriguez didn’t ultimately get Andrus out, but then, he didn’t have to. Catcher Christian Vazquez threw out Delino DeShields attempting to steal second (or maybe he didn’t; the Rangers were out of replay challenges and had to accept the close call on the field) and the inning was over.

Crisis averted. Goal still attainable.

From the very beginning of the night, it was clear that the team had invested a lot in getting the win for Rodriguez. The lineup Cora fielded Tuesday was closer to his regular lineup than Monday’s series finale at Tropicana Field. Mookie Betts, for instance, was supposed to get the night off, but talked himself into the lineup because of what was at stake for Rodriguez.

The commitment wasn’t lost on the pitcher himself.

“Everything they did out there to help me get that win ... that was really special,” he said, the appreciation evident on his face.

“I think it was the right move,” Cora told reporters. “If we’re in the hunt or something like that, in the middle of the wild card race, he was probably going to be out in the first inning.”

So Cora did a balancing act: give Rodriguez every chance he could, while still eyeing the scoreboard and remembering the ultimate goal was to win as a team.

“In the end, what matters is that he has a shot at 200 innings and 20 wins,” Cora said. “He’s worked hard for this. We’ll give him Sunday. I’m glad he’s going to get a shot at it.”

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 12, Rangers 10 – Three things we learned

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox opened their last road series of the year with a 12-10 win over the Texas Rangers; here are three things we learned:

1. The Red Sox will finish with a winning record!

That exclamation point, of course, is meant to be ironic. When the team gathered in Fort Myers, the goal was not to finish above .500. Especially considering the fact this team was coming off a world championship, a winning record in the following year is hardly any sort of accomplishment.

Their sights were, properly, set considerably higher. And yet here the Red Sox are. Even if the Sox were to run the table the rest of the way — an unlikely proposition, given how inconsistent the Sox have been all season — they would finish with just 87 wins. But there is this to consider: at least the Red Sox avoided bottoming out the way they did in 2012, 2014 and 2015. In each of those seasons, the Sox not only missed the playoffs, but also managed to finish last in the division. This year, they fell well short of their goal, but at least managed to be mediocre — which is better than in recent history.

2. Mookie Betts left the game with a sore left foot.

Betts ran into the right field wall while chasing a ball hit by Delino DeShields and came out of the game in the bottom of the third. Ordinarily, this wouldn't be terribly newsworthy. Minor injuries happen all the time and players leave, only to return the following night. It seems that Betts merely aggravated the foot and while he'll be held out as a precaution Wednesday night and perhaps Thursday afternoon, too, he's expected to be available for the final series of the year, which begins Friday. Betts missed five games recently with inflammation in the same foot and didn't return until the team began the road trip in Tampa Bay. With just five games remaining on the schedule, if the injury was any more serious, it's possible that Alex Cora and the training staff wouldn't want to risk putting him back on the field, given that these games have little significance. Further, with the uncertainty surrounding his future in Boston, it's possible that Betts is traded this winter rather than the Sox risking the chance of him leaving as a free agent after 2020. All of that seems moot, now, as Betts confirmed that he came out of the game as a precaution and expected to play again soon.

3. Sox almost play another four-hour game.

Watch a game like Tuesday night and try to convince yourself that baseball doesn't have a pace-of-play program. The first inning alone between the Red Sox and Rangers took 50 minutes. Repeat: the first inning took almost an hour. That isn't sustainable for the game in terms of its business model. Even the hardcore Red Sox fans tuning in to an otherwise insignificant game had to feel their patience being tried. Ultimately, the game fell exactly one minute shy of the four-hour mark at 3:59. And to think, one more foul ball, or a one more hitter re-adjusting his batting gloves would have pushed this one over the limit, too. That would have been historic, too, since the Sox have already played 16 games that have lasted four hours or more, tying the all-time record. Granted, some of those were extra-inning contests — the Sox are second in the American League with 17 of those, too — but they're also fully capable of playing marathons within nine innings, as last night (nearly) demonstrated. Even if the Sox don't play another four-hour game, they'll finish the season averaging one every 10 games.

*** *The Athletic***

The 12 worst losses in a painful Red Sox season

Jen McCaffrey

Throughout this underwhelming season, Red Sox manager Alex Cora chided his team for its consistently inconsistent play.

If the Red Sox were good at one thing as a whole, it was the two-steps-forward, one-step-back approach. In a season full of disappointment, that meant gut-punch, back-breaking, stomach-turning losses became something close to common.

The pitching was the biggest culprit: The bullpen blew good starts, followed up by rough starts forcing the bullpen to make up innings, further taxing the whole group. It wasn't sustainable and it often wasn't pretty.

Boston's 29 blown saves are tied for second-worst total in baseball, right up there with wild card contenders Oakland and Tampa Bay. But while the Rays and A's ranked top 10 in the league in ERA and WHIP, the Red Sox rank 19th in both categories.

Close wins were hard to come by, too. The Red Sox were just 22-22 in one-run games and 8-11 in two-run games. And though the offense was good for some tremendous outbursts, the inability to hit with runners in scoring position for a good chunk of the season cost them many of those close games.

Even the breakthrough campaigns of Eduardo Rodriguez, Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts weren't enough to stabilize the seesaw season.

So with a just a few games left on the schedule, here's a look back at some of the worst losses this year, ones that sunk the Red Sox deeper into a hole they would never get out of.

April 2: Athletics 1, Red Sox 0

The story: The first series of the season in Seattle was rough, with the Sox dropping three of their first four games. At the time, it was concerning, but it was just one series for the defending champions. Then they went to Oakland and also lost three of four, and the unease began to set in. The April 2 loss was particularly frustrating. Chris Sale allowed just one run over six innings, despite just two strikeouts and a worrisome low 90s fastball. But the Red Sox offense could do nothing against Mike Fiers and finished the game 0-for-7 with runners in scoring position. The most galling part came when Xander Bogaerts tried to stretch a one-out double in the ninth inning into a triple, getting thrown out at third by Ramon Laureano. Mitch Moreland walked in the next at-bat, but Brock Holt struck out swinging. This team was desperate for a win after a 1-5 start and it showed in overaggressive baserunning and mental mistakes.

The quote: "Right now, nothing is going our way. The ball should go out, doesn't go out, he makes a great play at third. You tip your hat to him." — Cora

April 17: Yankees 5, Red Sox 3

Ryan Brasier shows his frustration after being part of the bullpen meltdown (Adam Hunger / USA Today)
The story: The losses of the first few weeks of the season were troubling, no doubt, but it really wasn't until the first series in New York that panic began to materialize. The previous day, Chris Sale had allowed four runs on seven hits to the Yankees in yet another loss and called himself an embarrassment to his family. Nathan Eovaldi started this game and gave the Red Sox six innings, surrendering one unearned run thanks to an Eduardo Nunez error and leaving with a 3-1 lead. But the bullpen imploded in the seventh when Brandon Workman loaded the bases with two walks and a single and Ryan Brasier gave up a grand slam to Brett Gardner. This game would be the last for Dustin Pedroia this season as he exited following an awkward swing. Making matters even worse, it was also Eovaldi's final start before heading to the injured list for the next two-and-a-half months.

The quote: "We've been struggling as a team. As I said, we were in position to win one today and I came in there and loaded the bases and got one out so it's definitely difficult to swallow that." — Workman

April 23: Tigers 7, Red Sox 4;
Tigers 4, Red Sox 2

The story: Coming off a sweep of the Rays on the road, it felt like the Red Sox might be finally heading in the right direction. Then they were swept themselves in a doubleheader by the Tigers at Fenway. In the first game, Sale lasted just five innings, allowing just two runs, but those two runs tied the game after the Red Sox had taken a lead. The bullpen once again faltered with Colten Brewer giving up three in the eighth inning. In the second game, the Tigers took a 3-0 lead off Hector Velazquez. The Red Sox scratched out two in the seventh and eighth innings, but Travis Lakins allowed a Tigers insurance run in the ninth.

The quote: "It just didn't click offensively. It's been going on for the first part, this 20, 20-something days offensively. We know we can be better. We haven't had like, a big offensive output out there that we can enjoy it and breathe and relax and just have fun offensively. Hopefully we can get it together and keep working at it, and it happens soon." — Cora

June 1: Yankees 5, Red Sox 3

The story: The Red Sox had lost their previous two series to the Astros and Indians and the loss on this night solidified a third straight series loss to AL playoff contenders. Eduardo Nunez made a costly baserunning blunder the previous night that further compounded the misery.

In this game, the offense gave Rick Porcello a 1-0 lead that he turned in a 3-1 deficit. The Red Sox tied the score 3-3, but in the bottom of the fifth inning, Porcello gave up a two-run homer. The Red Sox put two on in the ninth, but J.D. Martinez grounded into a double play and Rafael Devers grounded out.

The quote: “They’ve played well. We haven’t hit. I think we’re, like, 2-for-24 with men in scoring position against them. That should change. We’ve got talent and we’ve got a good offensive club. Just keep making adjustments and hopefully it starts tomorrow.” — Cora

June 11: Rangers 9, Red Sox 5

Cora argues after being ejected. (Billie Weiss/Getty Images)

The story: The previous night, the Red Sox had lost 4-3 in 11 innings after Sale had gone seven, allowing only one unearned run. The frustrations boiled over in the fifth inning of this game when Andrew Benintendi grounded out and was ejected by first base umpire Vic Carapazza, who thought Benintendi had cursed out home plate umpire Angel Hernandez. Cora ran out to defend Benintendi and was ejected too. In the next inning, things fell apart when Mookie Betts made an off-target throw, allowing a run to score. On the next pitch, Hunter Pence hit an inside-the-park home run to right field as Brock Holt misplayed the ball and Betts didn’t back him up. It was a comedy of errors that looked awful in the midst of a tough season.

The quote: “I think guys are frustrated. We try not to be, but games like tonight, it’s embarrassing. We’re not playing well. We’re not playing up to our capabilities. We know we’re good. We haven’t clicked. We haven’t put it together. That’s something we need to get going, because we have talent in this clubhouse and we feel like we’re a good team. We just haven’t been that good team yet.” — Holt

June 30: Yankees 12, Red Sox 8

The story: The London series was arguably the lowest point of the season for the Red Sox, as they were walloped 17-13 in the first game and 12-8 in the second game. Granted, the trip across the pond wasn’t good for either team’s pitching staff, but the optics of getting crushed on the international stage in the season’s marquee event were not good for an already struggling Red Sox team. In this second game, the Red Sox took a 4-0 lead and held a 4-2 edge heading into the seventh, when the bullpen imploded — allowing nine runs.

The quote: “Obviously we’re not in the position that we envisioned for ourselves in the beginning of the year, especially after last year. There’s a lot of ways you can improve the team. I think these last few games heading into the All-Star Game are pretty huge and can turn a lot. Hopefully we can win most of them and go into the All-Star break with a fresh mind and ready to start the second half strong.” —Bogaerts

July 21: Orioles 5, Red Sox 0

The story: The Red Sox dropped two of three to the lowly Orioles 10 days before the trade deadline, which likely had some impact on the decision not to trade for pitching help. The loss in the series finale was especially brutal, considering the Red Sox were no-hit for six innings by Asher Wojciechowski, a journeyman pitcher with only a handful of major league starts to that point. He ended up holding the Red Sox to one hit over 7 1/3 innings.

The quote: “It’s a tough one. Of course, it was a bad day today overall as a team.” — Cora

Aug. 1: Rays 9, Red Sox 4

Tampa’s Jesus Aguilar scores on a walk. (Kathryn Riley/Getty Images)

The story: The Red Sox followed up their awful losses in Baltimore by winning five of their next six, including three of four from the Yankees just days before the trade deadline. But then the season's pendulum swung back in the opposite direction. The Red Sox made no moves to bolster the pitching staff at the deadline, effectively signifying the team wasn't worth adding to for a playoff push. Their lone July addition, Andrew Cashner, allowed seven runs in 5 2/3 innings to cap the Rays sweep.

The quote: "I think it might be probably the most disappointing loss of the season so far. It's a crucial time and a time when we need a win. It feels like one win is hard to come by right now. Try to find a way to forget these last few games, try to remember the good times and try to go on a run again." —Bogaerts

Aug. 4: Yankees 7, Red Sox 4

The story: It didn't get any better with a trip to New York as the losing streak stretched to eight games, the club's longest since 2015. The Yankees' four-game sweep of the Red Sox, which included a doubleheader, was their first since 2009. David Price lasted just 2 2/3 innings allowing seven runs on nine hits in the series finale.

The quote: "I just think we didn't hit, we didn't pitch, we didn't play well. That's it. But I don't think it has to do with making trades or not making trades." — Cora

Aug. 12: Indians 6, Red Sox 5

The story: It was another gut-punch loss to open a series against a team they were battling in the wild card chase. The Red Sox came back to tie the game in the top of the ninth, only to watch the Indians win in walk-off fashion in the bottom of the inning when Carlos Santana homered off Marcus Walden. The loss was made even more difficult after they'd fallen the previous day at home in 10 innings, blowing a 4-3 lead in the eighth.

The quote: "We're all together. I don't think there's any separation or any pointing fingers at anyone. It's just like, 'oh man, it's rough.' It's been like that for a little bit. It's rough, man." — Bogaerts

Aug. 25: Padres 3, Red Sox 1

The story: Even at this point, the Red Sox were still in the wild card hunt — albeit six games back of the top spot. Two of the three teams ahead of them that day had already lost and the Red Sox could have gained ground, but failed to capitalize, missing out on a badly needed series sweep of the struggling Padres. They dropped the finale with Brian Johnson exiting after allowing three runs in three innings.

The quote: "Got a long ways to go. I'm not saying the amount of games, but I'm saying in us as a whole. We feel like we're not where we want to be. All we can do is control what we can control and continue to play hard, compete and win ballgames and see where we lie at the end." — Jackie Bradley Jr.

*** *Associated Press***

Rodriguez labors for 19th win as Red Sox beat Rangers 12-10

The Boston Red Sox are still playing for something the final week of the season, even though last year's World Series champions are out of playoff contention.

Eduardo Rodriguez can still be a 20-game winner after a laborious effort, and Rafael Devers is closing in on 200 hits.

Rodriguez was down to his final batter and needed 113 pitches to get through five innings for his 19th win, allowing more runs than he had in his previous seven starts combined, and Boston held off the Texas Rangers for a 12-10 victory Tuesday night.

"I think it was the right move," manager Alex Cora said. "If we were in the hunt or something like that, in the middle of the wild-card race, he was probably going to be out in the first inning because he was off."

Devers had two hits, including an RBI double, giving him 194 hits with five games remaining after the Red Sox (82-75) clinched a winning record.

Rodriguez (19-6) exited with a 12-7 lead. He struck out six while giving up a season-high 11 hits and walking three on a night when the Red Sox scored in all five innings he was in the game -- and not again after that.

"I would say the win was the team. ... I would say that's not my win," said Rodriguez, who has 205 strikeouts and is 3 2/3 innings short of 200 innings. "I was part of the team in that game, but everything they do right there just to get a win for me was special."

The 26-year-old left-hander will get a shot at 20 wins in Boston's season finale at home Sunday against Baltimore, which is 0-3 against him this year. Rodriguez had allowed only five runs over 45 innings (1.00 ERA) in seven games since mid-August.

Rougned Odor hit a two-run homer, his 28th, in the Rangers fifth, and they had two more runners on base when Cora went out to visit the mound.

"I wasn't going to let it get ugly. It was kind of ugly, but at the same time, he's still our best pitcher," Cora said. "I told him, 'Hey you deserve this. I'll give you one more but you better get him out. This is it.'"

Two pitches later, the inning ended when catcher Christian Vazquez threw out DeShields trying to steal second.

"I forgot the part Christian throws him out," Cora said smiling.

"To see the ball going back to the second base, and then tagged him out. That was special too," Rodriguez said. "I didn't get that out. (Vazquez) got that out."

The Rangers (75-82), who opened their final homestand before moving into a new stadium next year, will have their third straight losing season after losing for the eighth time in nine games. But in manager Chris Woodward's first season, Texas already has eight more wins than last year.

Brandon Workman, the fourth Boston reliever, worked the ninth for his 16th save in 22 chances. The first appearance at Texas for the Arlington-born reliever came in his 187th game and fifth big league season.

Rodriguez had a 4-0 lead before his first pitch, but had thrown 38 pitches and the Rangers too had batted around to tie the game at 4 after a 49-minute first inning. The game lasted 3 hours, 59 minutes.

"We did a good job, I thought, offensively," Woodward said. "We hit (Rodriguez) pretty good."

The Red Sox went back ahead when Mookie Betts led off the second with his 29th homer. But Delino DeShields opened the Texas second with a triple to right, on a play when Betts banged his left toe against the wall, and scored on a sacrifice fly by Elvis Andrus.

Betts didn't go back to the field in the third, on a night when he was scheduled to be off anyway but told Cora he wanted to play with Rodriguez on the mound.

An unearned run in the third put Boston ahead to stay at 6-5. Mitch Moreland had a leadoff double off Ariel Jurado (7-11) and scored on a two-out error by second baseman Odor.

SHORT HOPS

Rodriguez is only the second Boston pitcher in the past 24 seasons to earn a victory while allowing seven runs in five innings. Tim Wakefield did at Detroit in August 2004. ... It was the first time both teams scored at least four runs in the first inning of a Rangers home game since April 21, 2006. Texas led Tampa Bay 5-4, and won 13-7.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Rangers: OF Hunter Pence (lower back strain) said he was "very frustrated" after a setback in rehab over the weekend that definitely ended his season. "Unfortunately, this is not something I can just willpower through and overcome," said the 36-year-old Pence, who last played Aug. 22. "The goal now is to get healthy to potentially play next year. And if not that, to have a healthy life and a quality of life." In his first season with his hometown team, Pence hit 18 homers and 59 RBI in 83 games and was an All-Star for the fourth time.

UP NEXT

Right-hander Rick Porcello (13-12, 5.56 ERA), the last Red Sox pitcher to win 20 games when he was 22-4 as the AL Cy Young Award winner three years ago, makes what could be his final start for Boston. He is eligible for free agency this offseason after five years with the Red Sox. Rookie lefty Kolby Allard (4-1, 4.25 ERA) pitches for Texas.