

The Boston Red Sox Friday, September 27, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

A Rangers pitcher took a controversial route to his statistical milestone

Julian McWilliams

Alex Cora stared down Mike Minor and the Texas Rangers after the Red Sox' 7-5 loss on Thursday afternoon.

In a game that featured mostly reserves and teams that are out of playoff contention, the contest had little to no reward, unless of course, some personal gain was involved.

Entering Thursday's start, Minor sat on 191 strikeouts. With just nine more, he and Lance Lynn would become just the second duo in Rangers history to each reach 200-plus innings and 200-plus strikeouts in the same season.

With one out in the ninth inning, Minor had 199 strikeouts, after fanning eight Sox. On a 1-and-1 pitch, Chris Owings popped a ball into foul territory near the first base line. First baseman Ronald Guzman had an easy play on it, but he intentionally pulled up and let the ball drop, so Minor could have the chance for strikeout No. 200. On the telecast, you could even see Minor telling Guzman not to catch it. When Guzman didn't make the play, the players in the Rangers dugout clapped. The fan reaction was mixed. Some clapped. Some booted.

On the very next pitch, Minor got Owings looking for his 200th strikeout. Guzman turned toward right field and smacked his hand into his glove, as if he had been vindicated. Rangers manager Chris Woodward then removed Minor from the game after a career-high 126 pitches. Cora was obviously displeased, but he didn't reveal much after the game.

"I don't know," Cora said when asked what he thought of the play, or in this case non-play. "I'm just happy our guys are playing the right way. You saw the effort. It's been two weeks since we've been eliminated but we've gone about it the right way. I don't manage the Rangers."

Said Woodward: "I didn't love the idea that we dropped the popup at the end. But on the other side of that, they swung at three pitches in a row in the eighth inning down by two [runs]. So, if they have any beef with that — I'm pretty sure Cora did — they chose not to try to win the game. They were trying to keep him from striking a guy out."

The Red Sox have players that have reached — or are within reach — of milestones, too. There's Rafael Devers and his quest for 200 hits. There's J.D. Martinez, who recently reached 35-plus homers and 100-plus RBIs for a fourth season. And, of course, there's Eduardo Rodriguez, who on Sunday has a chance to become the first Red Sox lefthander since Mel Parnell in 1953 to win 20 games.

Cora said he doesn't mind his players going after milestones, as long as it fits into the confines of the game. He doesn't want his players blatantly chasing statistics. However, could a case be made that the Red Sox did the same for Rodriguez on Tuesday, when he got win No. 19 against the Rangers?

Rodriguez surrendered four runs in the first inning and one in the second. If he got through the fifth inning, however, he would still be eligible for the win. Yet he gave up two more runs in the fifth, and with runners on first and third and two outs, Cora went out to talk to Rodriguez.

"I'll give you one more. And you'd better get him out," Cora told Rodriguez.

Catcher Christian Vazquez bailed out Rodriguez when Delino DeShields inexplicably attempted to steal second, and got thrown out. Rodriguez's final line was five innings, seven earned runs on 11 hits, three walks, and six strikeouts. He threw 113 pitches. Cora tried to put his decision in perspective.

"We gave [Rodriguez] one out," he said. "But actually, he's been our best pitcher. We didn't go to the bullpen because, yeah, we're trying to get him five innings. At the same time, he was our best pitcher in that situation."

On Thursday afternoon, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Chris Owings hit home runs, but it wasn't enough to overcome the Rangers and Minor, who improved to 14-10.

When asked how he thought Minor pitched, Cora paused for a moment and then smirked. "Umm," Cora uttered. "He was good."

Red Sox first base coach Tom Goodwin looks back at Globe Life Park

Tom Goodwin

Red Sox first base coach Tom Goodwin played parts of three seasons (1997-99) with the Texas Rangers. The best season of his 14-year major league career came in 1998, when he hit .290 with a .378 on-base percentage while stealing 38 bases.

With Globe Life Park closing its gates after 25 years, the Rangers will move across the street to the new Globe Life Field. Before Thursday afternoon's series finale, Goodwin reflected on some his memories of the ballpark.

"That was the first time I actually got to play for something in September," said Goodwin, as the Rangers of 1998 and '99 made it to the American League Division Series before losing in both years to the Yankees. "It was that old pennant fever. That was a great experience. We ended up winning the AL West both years."

But the thought of Globe Life Park closing didn't make Goodwin feel sad. In fact, it was just the opposite.

"It's hot out there, bro," he said.

Tuesday and Wednesday night's games were 91 and 94 degrees, respectively, at first pitch. It was in the high 80s at first pitch on Thursday, but the temperature shot up to 96 degrees by the third inning. The new stadium will feature a retractable roof, so the Rangers can play more day games.

"This is a beautiful stadium, don't get me wrong," Goodwin said. "But for the betterment of the game and even for the Rangers, those guys get worn down playing in that heat. I know we did."

Goodwin stole 93 bases while with the Rangers. Asked how he was able to do that in the heat, he didn't have an answer. Or maybe this was it.

"I don't know," said Goodwin. "But now I know why I got thrown out so many times."

During the 1998 season, sure enough, Goodwin led the AL in being caught stealing.

Hernandez pressing

This was supposed to be a big month for Marco Hernandez. With Brock Holt's impending free agency, Hernandez — who is finally healthy — seemed like an obvious choice to replace him. But after going 1 for 5 with three strikeouts in Thursday's 7-5 loss, Hernandez is hitting just .160 in September.

He's struggled in the field, too, often looking jumpy at second base. Manager Alex Cora indicated prior to the game that Hernandez is pressing a bit.

"It's not that easy," Cora said. "Sometimes you try to prove to people that you belong and you get off what you usually do. One of the things we need him to do is control the strike zone. Three walks in 150-plus at-bats isn't good enough. He's trying to prove to everyone he belongs here. He doesn't have to do that."

Strikeouts have hurt Hernandez, too. In September, he's fanned 22 times. Hernandez will play winter ball in Puerto Rico, which Cora said will be important. He will move around as a utility player, which is Holt's role. Cora said with where the game is going, that will make Hernandez more valuable.

"Just go out there and play," Cora said. "He needs repetitions. You look at the Yankees and what [DJ] LeMahieu has done for them. He plays second, third, first base. It's been great for them. I think going down there and getting reps and moving around is going to benefit [Hernandez] and it's going to benefit us."

Banged up

Andrew Benintendi fouled a ball off his right calf in the fourth inning on Thursday and was taken out of the game shortly after. "He's banged up," Cora said. "He'll get treatment tomorrow. He's hurting. Nothing serious. But he was in a tough spot, so I just decided to take him out." . . . Mookie Betts should be a go for the season-ending series against the Orioles, Cora said . . . David Price had surgery on his left wrist to remove a cyst . . . Rafael Devers recorded his 87th and 88th extra-base hits of the season on Wednesday night, tying him for most in the majors. He also passed Ted Williams (86 in 1939) for the most extra-base hits by a Red Sox player in a season before turning 23 . . . On Wednesday, Devers also recorded his 52nd double of 2019, passing Wade Boggs (51 in 1989) for the Sox' record for a third baseman.

Why the Red Sox should still pursue Theo Epstein, and other thoughts

Dan Shaughnessy

Picked-up pieces while wondering if John Henry and Tom Werner are still upset at Theo Epstein for pushing Carl Crawford on them back in 2010 . . .

■ On Wednesday, Theo told reporters that he's not coming home to Boston. He says there's nothing to the speculation. Understood. But I still think the Red Sox should go after him. The Cubs have a price. Theo has a price. He's still the best man for the job, even though he just went through his Chicago version of the 2011 Red Sox with the 2019 Cubs.

I believe Theo will work for the Red Sox again someday. He's still a long-lost son to Henry, and his attachment to Sox CEO Sam Kennedy is considerable.

Epstein and Kennedy went to Brookline High together, where they were teammates on the varsity baseball squad. ("Theo mostly coached third base," Kennedy teases.)

After graduating from college in 1995 (Theo from Yale, Sam from Trinity), Epstein caught on with Larry Lucchino in Baltimore while Kennedy — who grew up next door to scribe Peter Gammons — secured an internship with the Yankees.

When Lucchino bought the Padres, he took Theo with him to San Diego. It was there that Lucchino handed Epstein a radar gun and said, "Kid, go behind home plate. In baseball, you'll always be a second-class citizen unless you know pitching."

In 1996, Gammons recommended that Lucchino hire Kennedy in San Diego. With the Padres, Kennedy worked in corporate partnerships, while Epstein — who started off handing out press notes to lowly writers — wound up as director of baseball operations.

When Henry bought the Red Sox in 2001 and hired Lucchino to run the team, Lucchino brought Epstein and Kennedy back to Boston. This was not easy; Padres owner John Moores initially resisted the departures, but Lucchino wore him down with a “Free the Brookline Two” campaign.

As we all know, Epstein wound up becoming a Hall of Fame executive with three World Series championships (two in Boston), breaking curses in two huge baseball markets. Kennedy, meanwhile, was made Red Sox club president in 2015 when Lucchino was nudged to the curb by Henry and Werner. Kennedy was elevated to CEO in 2017.

Even though Theo is killing buzz for a possible return to Boston, it makes a lot of sense. Deposed Red Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski proved to be the only guy on the planet who could not get along with Kennedy. With Dombrowski and Lucchino out of the picture, it behooves Henry to ask the Cubs for permission to talk to Theo, who is under contract with Chicago through 2021.

Everyone will downplay the possibility, but it would be good for the Red Sox. We won't stop speculating until the Sox name Dombrowski's successor. Which needs to happen soon. And it's past time for Sox ownership to come out of the bunker and discuss.

- Boston sports fans are truly spoiled in this century. When the Red Sox were eliminated from wild-card contention last week, it marked the first time since April 2016 that any of our four major sports teams (Bruins, in this case) failed to qualify for the postseason.

- My head will explode if I read one more planted account about how Bob Kraft knew nothing about Antonio Brown's baggage. On game day in Miami, it was reported that if Kraft had known about the pending civil lawsuit, he never would have allowed AB on the Patriots roster (and yet Kraft watched him play in the game).

This week, we had the whopper report that Bill Belichick acted alone, bringing AB to New England without even informing his owner. Please. As if Belichick could agree to a \$9 million signing bonus without informing Kraft.

It would be so much better if Kraft just went all Jerry Jones and admitted that all he cares about is winning and making money.

Kraft and the Patriots knew what they were getting in Antonio Brown. Tom Brady offered to put up AB at his house. The Patriots elected to let Brown play in the 43-0 win over the Dolphins. In all likelihood, they will lose the \$9 million bonus that is being grieved. It's their own fault.

On the flip side, Kraft had a good day in court when the Foxborough Freedom Fighter shed one of his lawyers in his prostitution solicitation case. This from Tuesday's Globe news story: “The court [Florida Fourth District Court of Appeal] approved a motion from Kraft attorney Jack A. Goldberger, who previously represented the disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, to withdraw from the case and noted that attorney Frank A. Shepherd [a former judge on the Florida Third District Court of Appeal] has joined Kraft's appellate team.”

- In an unrelated matter, attorney Jonathan Abady represents both Britney Taylor (one of Brown's accusers) and rapper Meek Mill, one of Kraft's new besties.

- Quiz: Carl Yastrzemski singled in his first major league at-bat on April 11, 1961, at Fenway Park against the Kansas City Athletics. Young Yaz was then thrown out attempting to steal second base. Name the catcher who caught Yaz stealing. (Answer below.)

- My favorite moment of the Dombrowski Era came when the Red Sox fired John Farrell and Dombro held a presser, opening with, “I'm not going to share facts.”

- Moving on to roundball, Team USA finished seventh in the FIBA World Cup. They lost to France. Anybody bothered by the fact that Team USA had four Celtics?
- Let the record show that David Price never won another game after foolishly teeing off on Dennis Eckersley again July 17.

Price was sailing along with a 7-2 record and a 3.16 ERA at that moment.

From that day forward, Price went into the tank. In his first start after the Eck comments, he gave up six runs in four innings of an 11-2 loss to the Orioles. On the night the Sox' season-ending losing streak hit eight games, Price gave up nine hits and seven runs in 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings of a 7-4 loss to the Yankees.

He finished the season 7-5 with a 4.28 ERA in 107 $\frac{1}{3}$ measly innings. Now he's having surgery for a cyst near his pitching wrist. Four years down, three to go. Price no longer holds all the cards.

- It was no small distinction when the Red Sox introduced Carl Yastrzemski as "the greatest living Red Sox" on the night Yaz threw a ceremonial first pitch to his grandson. The David Ortiz lobby would argue.

- Major league managers who played for Terry Francona in Boston: Dave Roberts (Dodgers), Rocco Baldelli (Twins), Kevin Cash (Rays), Gabe Kapler (Phillies), Alex Cora (Red Sox). Mets manager Mickey Callaway was Francona's pitching coach in Cleveland. Farrell was Francona's pitching coach in Boston.

- UMass football (0-4) has surrendered 207 points in only four games.

- Billy Gibbons, who coached women's basketball at Holy Cross for 34 years before he was fired last January, is suing HC, accusing the school of breach of contract, defamation, age discrimination, infliction of emotional distress, and other wrongdoing. Gibbons is one of the finest men and coaches I have ever met, and it would have been an honor to send a daughter to Holy Cross to play basketball for him.

- USA Today ranked the top 100 college players from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and came up with a top five of Jerry Rice (Mississippi Valley State), Walter Payton (Jackson State), Deacon Jones (South Carolina State), Willie Lanier (Morgan State), and Buck Buchanan (Grambling).

- Former Red Sox infielder Tim Lincecum, now part of the Yankees front office, would look good working at Fenway. Believe it or not, there also has been back-channel lobbying for Dan Duquette, who did a good job in Baltimore before things fell apart with the Orioles.

- Steve Pearce hit more home runs (two) in Game 5 of the 2018 World Series than he hit in the 2019 season (one).

- Quiz answer: Haywood Sullivan.

* ***The Boston Herald***

Red Sox uncertain at second base going into 2020

Jason Mastrodonato

With second base wide open, Marco Hernandez had a golden opportunity to prove himself ahead of the Red Sox offseason.

It didn't happen.

Hernandez struck out three more times in a 1-for-5 game Thursday as the Red Sox took a 7-5 loss to the Rangers. He's hitting .248 with a .616 OPS and has struck out 41 times in 145 at-bats this year while drawing just three walks.

"Three walks in 150 at-bats is not good enough," manager Alex Cora said. "We have to figure this out because you see the at-bats. Against righties he is spinning off, pulling everything and swinging and missing and then he faces (Tampa Bay's) Blake Snell and he stays on the pitch and hits a line-drive the other way."

But Cora said he's not disappointed.

"Not really," he said. "It's not that easy. I've been in that situation. Sometimes you try and prove to people you belong and you get off what you're used to. I understand how it works. He's trying to prove to everybody he belongs here. He doesn't have to do that. The fact that he's playing is good enough because he was in a bad spot the last two years physically. I'm very proud of him but now it's kind of like, 'OK, you're here, you're healthy, you're an important piece of our puzzle. Now this is what you need to do.'"

Hernandez, 27, originally was acquired from the Cubs for Felix Doubront in 2015 and was growing into a favorite of former manager John Farrell. Cora liked Hernandez too, until a shoulder injury required surgery and made it difficult to come back until mid-season this year. Now the Sox want to see him play winter ball and work on his plate discipline and defense.

They have limited options at second base next year. Cora refused to close the door on Dustin Pedroia, who seems unlikely to suit up again, and Brock Holt is set to become a free agent. Michael Chavis is the only other viable option as the Sox look to find a second baseman for 2020.

"It starts with Pedey, obviously," Cora said. "Hopefully whatever happens in the offseason he's healthy enough that he can come back and contribute. Brock has done an outstanding job. ... Marco, he's been on and off. When he got called up the first time he's been really good and now he's been struggling, not only offensively but defensively. We'll see where it takes us.

"Even Chris Owings, when he makes contact he's a great player. We love the defense. We love the fact he can hit the ball out of the ballpark, but at the same time you have to make contact. That's very important, especially for him.

"We'll look at it in the offseason. We'll talk about it. Chavis, he played great at second so he's part of the mix," Cora said. "I think we're in a good position going into the offseason with certain guys and whatever we decide to do, I'll be OK with it."

Lakins wants to start

After firing two scoreless innings as the Sox' opener Thursday, rookie reliever Travis Lakins said he wants to come back as a starting pitcher in 2020.

"I'm going to lose 15 or 20 pounds," he said. "I'm going to get in better shape. I'm going to prepare myself as maybe a starter next year and go from there. I've really enjoyed opening."

The 25-year-old right-hander has impressed with a 3.86 ERA and 19 strikeouts with 10 walks in 23½ innings this year. A former sixth-round pick out of Ohio State, he had a 4.03 ERA in the minors, though he hasn't started regularly since 2017.

"He's made some progress," Cora said. "He's a guy we like. The velocity, the action of his pitches. Like everybody, this is going to be a different offseason for all of us and we're going to attack it the right way. He's one of those guys, I think he can contribute next year."

Betts to return once more

Mookie Betts is expected to return from his toe injury to play at least one game at Fenway Park this weekend against the Baltimore Orioles.

“I guarantee you he’ll play this weekend,” Cora said.

The reigning American League MVP won’t win the award again this year, but has hit a respectable .294 with 29 homers and a .916 OPS.

“I wish I could’ve had a grinding season like Mookie,” Cora said. “He dominates the game. That’s something I keep talking to him the whole season about it. He wasn’t pleased with his swing until actually Anaheim (at the end of August). I think he found a few things between Colorado and Anaheim that put him in a good spot. He started pulling the ball and hitting line drives behind the shortstop. Some of those line drives went out of the ballpark. There were a lot of fly balls to center, fly balls to right. Good contact, but empty.

“I think going into the offseason, he understands what he has to do. It’s not that he didn’t, but at the same time, I think now he’s like, ‘OK, this is who I am.’ He’s a great player. He dominates the game defensively, running the bases. Obviously from the leadoff spot I love what he does up there. He’ll be fine next year.”

Red Sox, Rangers both look bad after Mike Minor’s phony 200th strikeout

Jason Mastrodonato

We’ve reached the point in the baseball season when the wins and losses no longer matter.

Gathering those final hits and strikeouts to cross important milestones can be meaningful, though. Diving catches and nasty sliders are still fun to watch. Fans are still buying tickets and coming to the games, which are still aired on television.

And as long as the athletes are still being paid to play, the games are considered professional. The players are expected to act like professionals. The managers are supposed to manage like professionals.

Instead, we ended up with an embarrassing ending to a three-game series in Texas, where the Red Sox and Rangers couldn’t do the few thousand fans in attendance the courtesy of trying their hardest to win the game.

The play that caused all the drama occurred with one out in the ninth inning of the Red Sox’ 7-5 loss to the Rangers on Thursday. Rangers starter Mike Minor, having a career year at 31 years old, had been one strikeout away from 200 since the fifth inning. Chris Owings popped up down the line and as first baseman Ronald Guzman approached it to make the catch, Minor could be seen yelling at him, “No, no, no!”

So Guzman intentionally let the ball drop. Minor, who also had a play on the ball, wanted no part of catching it. Catcher Jose Trevino was right there, but never stuck his glove out. The ball dropped in foul territory and the ballpark was stunned.

Teammates congratulate Texas Rangers starting pitcher Mike Minor, second from left, on the field after he recorded his 200th strikeout for the season in the ninth inning of a baseball game against the Boston Red Sox, Thursday, Sept. 26, 2019, in Arlington, Texas. (AP Photo/Louis DeLuca)

Even the home plate umpire, CB Bucknor, looked in on the fix, calling the very next pitch a strike, even though it looked three or four inches inside, and maybe a little high. But he pumped his fist, Owings struck out and Minor reached his milestone.

“I didn’t love the idea that we dropped a popup at the end,” said Rangers manager Chris Woodward. “But on the other side of that, they swung at three pitches in a row in the eighth inning down by two. So if they

have any beef with that, obviously, I'm pretty sure Cora did. They chose to not try to win the game as well."

So much for the spirit of competition. Blaming the other team isn't a good look, either.

Woodward might have a point. Maybe the Red Sox started it. And if so, shame on them.

The first three batters of the seventh, Jackie Bradley Jr., Sandy Leon and Chris Owings, all swung at the first pitch. But Bradley and Owings each homered, giving the Sox at least some reason to keep hacking.

Then in the eighth, Minor had a three-pitch inning when Brock Holt, Gorkys Hernandez and Bradley each swung at the first pitch again. Two of them were balls. One of them was six inches inside.

"I haven't seen a three-pitch inning, I don't think in my career, to be honest," Woodward said.

Good riddance to the 2019 baseball season. Get out of our sightlines. Go home, clean it up, think about what happened and come back better in 2020. Because the few loyal fans who still care about this game deserve more than the phony season they were given in 2019.

First they were treated to MLB's not-so-subtle plan to inflate home runs. MLB purchased Rawlings last June, then the baseballs suddenly became 3 percent more aerodynamic and began flying out of the park at a rate never seen before. Commissioner Rob Manfred said it wasn't intentional, even though he had been preaching the need for more offense for years.

Kind of funny to think back to the late-90s and early-2000s, when Bud Selig was determined to clean up the game, get rid of steroids and earn back the public's trust.

And kind of hypocritical to come back 20 years later and erase any sense of mutual respect by using baseballs that players have been calling "juiced."

Now we've reached the point in the season where non-playoff teams no longer care about winning, don't seem interested in trying their hardest to play the game and often seem more concerned about their stats.

"I don't know, I'm just happy our guys are playing the game the right way," Cora said when asked about the Rangers' embarrassment. "We're playing hard until the end. You saw the effort. That's what it's all about. We have goals set in mind, they didn't happen. It's been two weeks that we've been eliminated but we've been going at it the right way. That's all I ask. I don't manage the Rangers."

It's kind of hard for Cora to sit on his soapbox and preach about playing the right way when he already admitted Eduardo Rodriguez would've been taken out of the game in the first inning on Tuesday if he wasn't chasing 20 wins. Instead, Rodriguez became the first pitcher all year to throw 110-plus pitches while allowing seven runs, just so he could complete five innings and get his 19th win.

Rodriguez admitted he didn't deserve the win.

"Actually he's been our best pitcher," Cora said Thursday. "We're trying to give him five innings but at the same time he was our best pitcher in that situation."

Except that Rodriguez had nothing going from the first inning on, and Cora said as much two days earlier.

The pretending isn't doing anybody any good. If the game is all about stats now, at least they can say as much, be truthful with the fans and let them join the fun.

Woodward admitted that what the Rangers did was "borderline crossing the line," but then kept flipping it back on the Red Sox, blaming them for not striking out earlier in the game.

Sure, it's the other team's fault for trying not to strike out.

The whole thing was bad theatre and only more of a reason for folks to turn off the televisions, stop going to games and demand better from everybody involved.

Mike Minor didn't deserve his 200th strikeout just like Rodriguez won't deserve his 20th win if he gets it on Sunday.

The stats matter less and less when they're earned like this. And baseball fans aren't naive enough to believe otherwise.

Red Sox drop finale to Rangers, 7-5

Jason Mastrodonato

Thursday offered a brief reminder why the Red Sox won't be going to the postseason this year.

Brian Johnson, Ryan Weber and Mike Shawryn, three pitchers who had thrown important innings when the Sox were still in contention, were knocked around by the Texas Rangers in an afternoon game that had a spring training feel to it.

The Red Sox lost, 7-5, in a game that ended with the Rangers defense intentionally dropping a fly ball so Mike Minor could get another chance at his 200th strikeout of the season.

Chris Owings popped one up to the infield in foul territory with one out in the ninth and the Rangers defense, including Minor, watched the ball hit the ground. Minor then struck out Owings for the 200th strikeout of the season and got a standing ovation from the Rangers crowd.

He was removed after 126 pitches, a new career high.

The Sox used the bullpen to pitch the whole game in this one. And after Travis Lakins went two scoreless to start the game, Johnson gave up two runs in 1-²/₃ innings to move his ERA to 6.02 this year.

Shawryn, a favorite of manager Alex Cora's back in June, gave up a grand slam to Danny Santana in the fifth inning. Shawryn now has a 9.74 ERA.

And Weber, who started two games in May, allowed two home runs as his ERA jumped to 5.09.

Jackie Bradley Jr. and Owings homered for the Sox.

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox lose as Rangers' Guzmán lets pop-up drop so Minor could record 200th strikeout

Christopher Smith

Jackie Bradley Jr. and Chris Owings bashed solo home runs in the seventh inning to tie game, but the Red Sox ended up losing 7-5 to the Rangers on Thursday.

Bradley went 2-for-4 with two RBIs. He led off the seventh with a solo homer. Owings' blast came with one out.

But Willie Calhoun and Roughned Odor both belted home runs to give Texas another two-run lead.

The most interesting storyline came during the top of the ninth inning when first baseman Ronald Guzmán allowed an easy pop-up drop in foul territory during Owings' at-bat. It gave Rangers starter Mike Minor a chance to strike out Owings for his 200th punch out of the season. He did.

Minor appeared to yell to Guzman to let the ball drop.

Minor pitched 8 ⅔ innings, giving up five runs, all earned, 10 hits and two walks while striking out nine. He threw 126 pitches.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora didn't seem pleased. He stared at Rangers players as they celebrated the win.

"I don't know. I'm just happy our guys are playing the game the right way," Cora told reporters when asked about it postgame.

Cora added, "I don't manage the Rangers. That's a question for (Chris Woodward) over there. He probably has the right answer."

It marked the Red Sox's final road game of the 2019 season. They will return to Fenway Park on Friday for a three-game series against the Orioles to close out the season.

Betts contract: Red Sox star once considered extension offer but then 'took the emotion out of it'

Christopher Smith

Red Sox star Mookie Betts is prepared to test free agency after the 2020 season. It remains highly unlikely he would sign an extension before hitting the market.

Betts' reluctance to sign an extension could lead the Red Sox to trade him this coming offseason. Boston's 2020 payroll already is at approximately \$218 million. Betts likely will receive more than \$30 million in arbitration.

Dealing Betts not only would free up some money, but it would help the Red Sox rebuild their farm system. Baseball America ranks Boston's system No. 22 in the majors.

Mookie Betts addressed the possibility of being traded before the July 31 deadline or during this upcoming offseason.

Betts spoke with WEEI's Rob Bradford and told him he has taken the emotion out of contract negotiations.

"As a whole, when it comes to business in general, whether it's buying a building or contract negotiations or whatever it is, you have to take emotions out of it," Betts told Bradford.

Betts considered an offer from the Red Sox after the 2016 season, when he finished second to Mike Trout for the AL MVP.

"That was a really emotional time because I was like, 'Mom, we've never seen this amount of money.' She was like, 'OK, cool. It's a lot of money. I think we know it's a lot of money. So let's focus on the facts. Let's focus on what is real and we took the emotions out of it.' The first one was definitely the hardest (not to accept)."

Red Sox GM search: Has Theo Epstein operated similar to Dave Dombrowski in recent years?

Christopher Smith

Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein denied speculation Wednesday over interest in returning to the Red Sox.

“There’s nothing to that story,” Epstein said, via ESPN’s Jesse Rogers. “I’m here. We have a lot we need to work on to get back to the level we’re accustomed to. I’m invested in that. That’s what I’m focused on, so yeah, there’s nothing to that.”

Should the Red Sox want Epstein back? Let’s start there.

The Cubs missed the postseason in 2019 for the first time since 2014 thanks to a miserable September (9-14 record).

In recent years, has Epstein operated similar to Dave Dombrowski who the Red Sox fired earlier this month? You could build a case for it.

His questionable decisions aren’t limited to regrettable free agent signings. Craig Kimbrel (three years, \$43 million), Yu Darvish (six years, \$126 million) and Jason Heyward (eight years, \$184 million) have underperformed their contracts. Kimbrel, the ex-Red Sox closer, has a 6.53 ERA in 20 ⅔ innings since he signed with Chicago on June 7.

Baseball America ranks the Red Sox’s farm system No. 22 out of 30 major league organizations. Epstein’s Cubs are seven spots behind Boston at 29th.

Dombrowski gutted the Red Sox farm system to win a World Series. Under Dombrowski, the farm system went from No. 1 in the majors to No. 30, but it crept back up eight spots during this season.

Both the Red Sox and Cubs have a strong young core of players. Top prospects graduate to the majors. As a result, teams drop in MLB Organization Talent Rankings. Maybe criticism directed at winning teams with weak farm systems is unfair.

But to drop from a top-five farm system to a bottom-five farm system is significant.

Epstein helped the Cubs win their first World Series in 108 years. He and GM Jed Hoyer obviously know how to rebuild farm systems. They initially did it in Chicago from 2012-15.

But Epstein traded then-prospect Gleyber Torres (now a 22-year-old star with 38 homers this season) to the Yankees for three-month rental closer, Aroldis Chapman.

He traded then prospect Daniel Vogelbach (30 homers this season) to Seattle for Mike Montgomery.

After winning the World Series, Epstein traded Jorge Soler to the Royals for one year of closer Wade Davis. Soler leads the American League with 45 home runs in 2019.

Epstein traded Eloy Jiménez, who has 30 homers for the White Sox, in 2017 for Jose Quintana who has a mediocre 4.18 ERA in 77 outings (76 starts) for the Cubs. Quintana has a 4.55 ERA this year.

He dealt Tommy La Stella, a 2019 AL All-Star, to the Angels last November for a player to be named later.

That brings us to another important question: Was Dombrowski’s firing underserved? Should he have received the chance to rebuild the farm system after winning a World Series?

Epstein, who has the 29th ranked farm system, is considered a genius while Dombrowski is considered a farm system destroyer.

Red Sox ownership will continue to perform a thorough search for a new head of baseball operations to replace Dave Dombrowski but the best candidate has been a member of the organization since February 2006.

It's also much more difficult to rebuild a farm system in Boston where longterm losing isn't tolerated. Epstein and Hoyer's Cubs lost 101 games in 2012, 96 games in 2013 and 89 games in 2015 while they rebuilt their team. Keep this in mind for any Red Sox head of baseball operations candidate, including Epstein.

Epstein's denial was too strong. It's very unlikely he would return to Boston.

MLB Network's Jon Heyman views Hoyer and Diamondbacks executive Amiel Sawdaye, who previously worked in Boston, as the top two candidates. Hoyer worked in Boston under Epstein.

ESPN's Buster Olney wrote, "Why nobody might want to be Boston's GM."

It makes sense because of the short leash Red Sox ownership has had with their past two head of baseball operations, both of whom won World Series titles.

As noted on MassLive.com earlier this week: It's not a great look that Ben Cherington and Dombrowski combined for more championships in seven years than Yankees GM Brian Cashman has in the past 18 years — and yet ownership fired both.

Boston Red Sox 2020 payroll: At least \$62.7M freed up with pending free agents but early estimate (with raises) nearing \$218M

Christopher Smith

The 2019 Red Sox payroll came to an estimated \$240 million. Not exactly ideal for an organization that missed the postseason.

The Red Sox have at least \$62.7 million coming off the books in 2020 with Rick Porcello (\$20.625M), Pablo Sandoval (\$19M), Mitch Moreland: (\$6.5M), Steve Pearce (\$6.25M), Eduardo Nunez (\$5M), Brock Holt (\$3.575M) and Tyler Thornburg (\$1.75M).

J.D. Martinez (\$22M) has an opt-out clause. Therefore, \$82.7 million potentially will be freed up. But the Red Sox will make a serious effort to re-sign Martinez. If he leaves, Boston presumably would replace him with another power hitter. The Sox wouldn't want to repeat the same mistake they made in 2017 when they failed to replace David Ortiz after he retired.

Although money is coming off the books, Chris Sale and Xander Bogaerts' contract extensions will kick in for the first time in 2020. Sale's average annual value will increase \$10.6 million to \$25.6 million. Xander Bogaerts' average annual value will raise \$8 million to \$20 million.

Guaranteed contracts for Sale, Bogaerts, Martinez, David Price, Nathan Eovaldi, Dustin Pedroia and Christian Vazquez will total \$133.87 million.

The Red Sox also will pay an estimated \$63.7935 million (see calculation explanation below) for arbitration-eligible players, bringing the payroll to \$197.6635 million.

Add another \$6 million in pre-arbitration salaries and \$14 million for medical costs, health benefits, spring training allowances, moving and traveling expenses, etc. That brings the early payroll projection to \$217.6635 million.

The base tax threshold for 2020 is \$208 million. The first surcharge threshold is \$228 million. The second surcharge threshold is \$248 million.

The Red Sox, as three-time CBT payers, would owe the steepest tax penalties for each threshold they exceed. Their 2021 draft pick would be moved back 10 spots if they were to exceed \$248 million.

FREED-UP MONEY

Money coming off books: Rick Porcello (\$20.625M), Pablo Sandoval (\$19M), Mitch Moreland: (\$6.5M), Steve Pearce (\$6.25M), Eduardo Nunez (\$5M), Brock Holt (\$3.575M), Tyler Thornburg (\$1.75M). Total: \$62.7 million

*J.D. Martinez has opt out.

NEW CONTRACTS

Both Chris Sale and Xander Bogaerts received contract extensions.

Sale's contract increases from a \$15 million average annual value to \$25.6 AAV.

Bogaerts' contract increased from a \$12 million average annual value to a \$20 million AAV.

GUARANTEE CONTRACTS (AAV) (\$133.87 million):

David Price: \$31 million

Chris Sale: \$25.60 million

*J.D. Martinez (can opt out): \$22 million

Xander Bogaerts: \$20 million

Nathan Eovaldi: \$17 million

Dustin Pedroia: \$13.75 million

Christian Vazquez: \$4.52 million

ARBITRATION CONTRACTS (estimated \$63.7935M):

Andrew Benintendi and Marco Hernandez are arbitration eligible for the first time in 2020.

Let's say all the other arbitration players receive the same raises as they received from 2018 to 2019. Of course, multiple players, including Brandon Workman and Eduardo Rodriguez, will receive significantly higher raises.

But just for estimate purposes, if all eight other arbitration players received the same raise, the salaries for the eight combined would equal \$57.7935M.

Let's estimate Benintendi to receive \$5 million and Hernandez to receive \$1 million. That brings the estimate to \$63.7935M

Mookie Betts: \$20M in 2019 (\$9.5M raise from 2018): \$29.5M

Jackie Bradley Jr.: \$8.55M in 2019 (\$2.45M raise from 2018): \$11M

Eduardo Rodriguez: \$4.3M in 2019 (\$1.925M raise from 2018): \$6.225M

Matt Barnes: \$1.6M in 2019 (\$995,000 raise from 2018): \$2.595M

Heath Hembree: \$1.3125M in 2019 (\$731,000 raise from 2018): \$2.0435M

Brandon Workman: \$1.15M = \$315,000 (\$1.465M raise from 2018): \$1.78M

Steven Wright: \$1.375M (\$275,000 raise from 2018): \$1.65M

Sandy Leon: \$2.475M (525,000 raise from 2018): \$3M

Andrew Benintendi: \$5 million estimated

Marco Hernandez: \$1 million estimated

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

No doubt Rick Porcello gave Red Sox everything he had

Chris Mason

A free agent at season's end, uncertainty awaits Rick Porcello.

He walked off the mound a winner on Wednesday night in Texas, and if he's thrown his final pitch in a Red Sox uniform, Porcello can hang his Boston hat proudly.

There's no doubt that he gave the organization everything he had.

Over five years with the Sox, Porcello's stats were solid — 73-55 with a 4.43 ERA — but his value in Boston always went beyond the box score.

"We don't know what's going to happen but we're very proud of what he's done throughout his years here," Alex Cora told reporters in Arlington. "This is a guy that, for me, he means a lot, not only on the field what he did last year and the way he fought this year, but in the clubhouse. He's one of those guys that I rely on... We like those kind of players. Those are the kind of players we want in our organization as far as being a pro and prepared regardless of the situation. He's been amazing for us."

When the Sox went on their World Series run, Porcello was the first starter to offer to pitch out of the bullpen. It was the ego-less move of a leader, something he certainly grew into. Cora took him up in that in Game 1 of the ALDS, and soon everybody else in the rotation followed suit. They were better as a team for it.

A fierce teammate, there was never any doubt that Porcello had his guys' backs.

In Minnesota last season, J.D. Martinez was knocked down by Twins starter Kyle Gibson in his first at-bat. It was the latest in a string of brush-back pitches to the newly-signed slugger, and Porcello had seen enough. In the bottom half of the inning, Minnesota's best player, Eduardo Escobar, wore a fastball. Message sent.

As a competitor, Porcello did everything he could to maximize his talent. In an era of launch angle, sinkerballers have been faced with extinction. It's a simple matter of physics: Players are swinging up and croaking pitches that are sinking down.

Porcello did everything he could to buck that trend. He took a sinker that used to be his bread-and-butter pitch and threw it less than a quarter of the time this year. It still didn't bring a ton of success, but when he struggled, nobody on the Sox staff was more accountable.

As a writer, the first thing you learn is a big league clubhouse is to never talk to a starter on the day that he pitches. It's always been curious to study their varying routines. Some are nonchalant, you'd have no idea they were pitching, others don't-even-look-at-me intense.

With Porcello, you could usually find him in one place: The video room that adjoins the clubhouse, armed with a binder. Though he's been in the majors for 11 seasons, Porcello still did everything he could to gain any advantage on the hitters he'd be facing. Work ethic like that is contagious.

On the mound his body of work was decidedly up-and-down.

There was a Cy Young and a World Series, and two seasons where his ERA was over 4.90, but no matter the result, Porcello was going to take the ball and give his team innings. Over five years he logged 964, close to 200 innings a season.

And he sure as heck appreciated the chance, too.

"I don't want to get too emotional or close the door on anything," Porcello said after winning his final start of 2019. "Who knows what's going to happen in the offseason. But from the bottom of my heart it's been an absolute pleasure to wear this uniform and pitch for the Red Sox organization the last five years for Mr. (John) Henry and Mr. (Tom) Werner and all these guys.

"The coaching staff, all these players, it's as good a group as you're going to find. I know this year hasn't worked out the way we wanted to but it doesn't take away from the special human beings we have in this clubhouse and that's really for me, sitting there and soaking that in, was nice."

If this is it for Porcello in Boston, there's no doubt he left everything he had on the Fenway Park mound.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sox wrap trip; 5 things to look for at Fenway

Ian Browne

The Red Sox checked their final road game off from their 2019 schedule with a 7-5 loss to the Rangers at Globe Life Park on Thursday afternoon, and attention quickly shifted to the team's final three games at Fenway Park this weekend against the Orioles.

Ideally, the Sox would have spent this weekend either A) preparing for the playoffs or B) fighting for a playoff spot.

But as you've gathered by now, Boston's attempted title defense in 2019 was far less than ideal.

The Red Sox made it close when, trailing 5-3 in the seventh, Jackie Bradley Jr. led off with a home run, and after Sandy Leon popped out, Chris Owings followed with a solo homer to tie the game. But Willie Calhoun led off the bottom of the inning with a homer of his own, followed later in the inning by a Rougned Odor dinger, and that's where the scoring, and the Red Sox road schedule, ended.

And with that, the Sox head home for the final Fenway series against the Orioles, where interesting storylines still await.

Devers chasing 200 hits

When we look back at what went right for the 2019 Red Sox, the first thing likely to come to mind is the breakout season of Rafael Devers, and the joy for the game he displayed.

The 22-year-old has already had a collection of milestones this season. His 32 homers are a club record for a third baseman. So, too, are his 52 doubles. If he can hit another homer, he will pass Tony Conigliaro for most in a season by a Boston player before turning 23.

And if he can get four hits over the three games against Baltimore, he will reach the 200-hit milestone for the season.

“He doesn’t want to be good,” said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. “He wants to be great. And that’s the cool thing about it.”

Mookie going for 30

At one point, it looked like Mookie Betts would have a significant downturn this season. But in July, he got hot. And in September, he got even hotter. The right fielder will finish with his typical All-Star-caliber season, though a tick below his American League Most Valuable Player Award-winning performance of a year ago.

With one home run this weekend, Betts will reach 30 for the third time in the last four years. If it happens, the Sox would have the first 30-homer quartet in team history. J.D. Martinez (35), Xander Bogaerts (32) and Devers are already in the 30-homer club, marking just the third time Boston has had three players reach that number in the same season.

Betts could also join franchise legend David Ortiz as the only Boston players to record 30-plus homers and 40-plus doubles in as many as three seasons.

“I wish I could’ve had a grinding season like Mookie. He dominates the game,” said Cora. “He’s a great player. He dominates the game defensively, running the bases. Obviously, from the leadoff spot, I love what he does up there. He’ll be fine next year.

J.D.’s final chapter with Boston?

Martinez has been a run-producing masher since he was signed by the Red Sox as a free agent in February 2018.

That contract was for five years, but it includes an opt-out clause after both this season and next season. Martinez could take the buyout if he believes he can top the \$62.5 million he would make over the next three seasons for the Red Sox.

However, Martinez could be tentative about returning to free agency, given that it took him the entire offseason and more to get a job just two years ago.

This will be an interesting call. At any rate, the Fenway faithful should show some appreciation for Martinez this weekend for the firepower he has given the club the last two seasons.

E-Rod looks for 20/200

Left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez emerged as the Red Sox ace this season. And there is a built-in storyline for the final game of the regular season as Rodriguez pushes for his 20th victory.

There is another number that is perhaps as meaningful for Rodriguez, as he looks to reach 200 innings for the first time in his career. He only needs 3 2/3 innings to get there.

Look for Cora to go with his “A” lineup on Sunday in an effort to get Rodriguez his 20th win.

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

Opportunity for fans to connect

The Red Sox are using the final weekend of the season as an opportunity to allow their fans to connect with players on a personal level.

Players will greet fans at all Fenway Park gates as they enter the park from 5:45 to 6:15 p.m. ET, and will help distribute schedules for the 2020 season.

Prior to Sunday's 3:05 p.m. ET game, players will be available on the field from 1:15 to 2 p.m. to take photos with fans as they walk around the warning track. Fans will be invited to run the bases after the game.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

No Red Sox return? Theo Epstein says he's staying in Chicago, and here's why I believe him

John Tomase

With speculation about a return to the Red Sox reaching a low boil, Theo Epstein decided to put the whispers to rest on Wednesday by declaring his allegiance to the Cubs.

And so naturally the first question for many of us was: Do you believe him?

Having lived through 2011, when rumors about Epstein joining Chicago dogged him for most of the season, it's worth noting that this feels different.

Back then, Epstein let a couple of stories from plugged-in reporters Peter Gammons and Buster Olney hang in the air for two months. At the start of September, before the epic collapse that no one saw coming, Epstein finally addressed the rumors. It's worth comparing what he said back then to what came out of his mouth on Wednesday.

Here's what he said in 2011:

"I try to avoid commenting on things that are so speculative," Epstein said. "I know there are a couple of articles which have appeared, but I'm completely focused on the Red Sox of 2011, first and foremost, and what potentially lies ahead for this club.

"We're trying to get to the postseason and win the World Series and I spend all my time working with my staff to make this the organization we want it to be for now and in the future. That's where my exclusive focus is."

That didn't sound like a denial, so we pushed for a more concrete answer, and this was the best he could offer.

"Something like that I can't even contemplate it long enough to comment on it," he said. "I'm all Red Sox, all the time. I'm really happy to be with the Red Sox."

You could drive the equipment truck through the opening he left in that non-denial, and a month later he took it, cruising to Chicago for \$15 million and a chance to end an even more hopeless curse than the one he exorcised in Boston. By 2016, he had made the Cubs champions, too.

Now compare those words with what he told reporters in Pittsburgh on Wednesday.

"There's nothing to that story," he said. "I'm here. We have a lot we need to work on to get back to the level we're accustomed to. I'm invested in that. That's what I'm focused on, so yeah, there's nothing to that. I will say, I have really good relationships with a lot of people there (in Boston). I certainly wish them the best. It's just, there's nothing to the story."

Whatever misgivings he felt about addressing speculation in 2011, they didn't bother him on Wednesday. And unlike his inability even to formulate a thought on leaving for Chicago — who could contemplate such a thing! — this time around he did not mince words, twice saying there was nothing to the story.

For Epstein's many achievements, we shouldn't forget this one: he's a law school graduate who passed the California bar exam. He retains a lawyerly precision with language, and if he wanted to leave himself an out for returning to Boston, he could've done so.

Instead he slammed the door. If he leaves now, after a collapse with echoes of 2011, he'd have a lot of explaining to do and not a lot of wiggle room to do it.

So as much as I thought momentum for a reunion would continue building, Wednesday's comments suggest otherwise, and I'm left with an unexpected (and frankly disappointing) answer to the question that kicked this all off.

Yeah, I believe him.

Mookie Betts reveals the time a Red Sox contract offer nearly blew him away

John Tomase

Mookie Betts seems content to take the Godfather approach to contract negotiations — nothing personal, only business.

But in an interview with WEEL.com's Rob Bradford, he reveals the one time that strategy was sorely put to the test.

Before the 2017 season, the Red Sox came to Betts with a long-term contract extension. Though terms weren't disclosed, only a year later Betts would turn down a reported eight-year, \$200 million offer.

Prior to 2017, Betts wasn't even arbitration-eligible, but he was clearly a burgeoning superstar. He had just finished second in the MVP voting to Mike Trout at the age of 23, and the Red Sox made an aggressive offer to keep him long-term.

Betts consulted with his family, who had instilled in him the belief that decisions should be made only when they were divorced from emotion.

"That was a really emotional time because I was like, 'Mom, we've never seen this amount of money,'" Betts told Bradford in Texas. "She was like, 'OK, cool. It's a lot of money. I think we know it's a lot of money. So let's focus on the facts. Let's focus on what is real and we took the emotions out of it.' The first one was definitely the hardest. At the time we had never seen anything like that."

Betts ended up playing that season for \$950,000 before earning \$10.5 million a year later in arbitration and then winning the MVP award. He avoided arbitration this year by agreeing to a one-year, \$20 million contract, and barring an extension this winter, he'll probably play next season for around \$30 million.

Though 2019 feels like a down year, Betts has surged since July to post .294-.29-.79 numbers with 134 runs and a .917 OPS.

The Red Sox face a crossroads decision this winter, since Betts is entering his final year of arbitration. If they don't believe they can sign him, they may have to trade him. Either way, Betts believes he will earn what he deserves.

"It's how I was raised to look at the thing," he said. "As a whole, when it comes to business in general, whether it's buying a building or contract negotiations or whatever it is, you have to take emotions out of it."

That's what people forget. Fans and media get caught up in emotions and that's just not how I was raised and that's just not what my point of view with my agents is. We take emotions out of it and we focus on the business part. Of course, I love it here. This is all I know. But you also have to take that emotional side out of it and get to what is actually real."

Rick Porcello gets emotional after probable last start in Red Sox uniform

John Tomase

Rick Porcello loves pitching in Boston, which is not a feeling shared by every member of the Red Sox rotation. He offered to take less money to stay here over the winter, but the team declined.

He then went out and authored the kind of season that made them look smart for saying no, gutting his way to the worst ERA of his career during a trying 2019.

On Wednesday, his Red Sox career likely came to an end in a start that pretty much perfectly encapsulated his five years here: six innings, three runs, lots of run support, win.

After the 10-3 victory in Texas that saw Porcello allow three runs in the first and then find his groove, he laid bare his emotions over what his Red Sox career has meant to him.

"I sat there and said, '(Expletive)! It's been a tough one this year,'" Porcello told reporters in Texas. "I don't want to get too emotional or close the door on anything. Who knows what's going to happen in the offseason? But from the bottom of my heart, it's been an absolute pleasure to wear this uniform and pitch for the Red Sox organization the last five years for Mr. Henry and Mr. Werner and all these guys. The coaching staff, all these players, it's as good a group as you're going to find. I know this year hasn't worked out the way we wanted to, but it doesn't take away from the special human beings we have in this clubhouse and that's really for me, sitting there and soaking that in, that was nice."

Despite posting one of the worst ERAs in baseball for a full-time starter (5.52), Porcello actually finished the season with a winning record (14-12) but on a little bit of a roll. He went 2-0 with a 2.65 ERA in his last three starts, striking out 20 and walking one.

He's still probably looking at a one-year, incentive-laden, make-good contract for 2020, which means it's possible he returns to Boston at a greatly reduced salary.

"Who knows what's going to happen?" he told reporters. "You never close the door on anything. It was definitely a special night for me. Just to go out there and get a win with all these guys who have gone through a lot together the last five years, it was a lot of fun. I knew going into it it was going to be my last one for the year but other than that you can't predict what's going to happen in the future. That was it."

If there's an argument to be made for retaining Porcello, it centers on (a) his durability, and (b) the possibility that he's a different pitcher next year if he reverts back to the sinker-balling style that helped him reach the big leagues at age 20 with the Tigers a decade ago.

On the former front, Porcello takes great pride. He has made at least 32 starts in each of the last four seasons.

"My body hurts," he told reporters. "It's not easy to do. Definitely take a lot of pride in that. We have a lot of guys who go out there and play every day as position players and things like that and that's the one responsibility and thing I can control as a starter is preparation, putting myself in position to take the ball every fifth day. Through some of the tough results and some good results, that was definitely something I can hang my hat on since I've been pitching here for the Red Sox."

In the end, after a Cy Young Award and a World Series title, Porcello hopes he leaves behind a positive impression, if this is indeed the end.

"I love every part of the game and I put everything I have into it," he told reporters. "Hopefully that sets a good example for guys coming up who take the ball for this organization and have success in the future. That's what it's all about. You're not good for anybody if you can't take the ball. That's one thing I've always prided myself on. Hopefully that's kind of a leadership that rubs off on some of the young guys and leave an impression like that."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox unhappy with Rangers' efforts to reach strikeout milestone

Sean McAdam

Warning: Unwritten baseball rules ahead!

It's that time of year in baseball. Teams out of contention — yeah, I'm talking to you, Red Sox and Texas Rangers — are just trying to get to Game 162 without incurring additional injuries and then head home for the offseason.

Along the way, with the games of little consequence, some players are in pursuit of some personal milestones.

The other night, Eduardo Rodriguez got credit for a win despite being shelled for seven runs in five innings. The only reason Rodriguez was still in the game was a chance to qualify for his 19th win, which in turn would allow him to go for No. 20 on Sunday.

It got dicey for a while Tuesday night and at one point, Alex Cora went out to warn Rodriguez that the manager's patience had its limits. With two on and two runs in, Rodriguez would be left in for one more hitter. Get the next guy, or you're gone, was Cora's message.

Fortunately for Rodriguez's sake, it all worked out. He got the final out, qualified for the win and now has a chance to reach his goal Sunday.

While some may have been a little put off by a team standing on its head in order to help one player reach a personal goal, the Sox never stopped playing hard nor forgot the object of the game.

Fast forward to Thursday, when Texas starter Mike Minor was trying to get his 200th strikeout of the season. Stuck at 199 after eight innings, having already thrown 120 pitches, he was sent out for the ninth by manager Chris Woodward.

So far, so good.

Sandy Leon flied out to center for the first out, leaving Minor to smile and shrug as he looked toward the dugout. Next was Chris Owings who, with one strike, hit a foul popup between home and first. Rangers first baseman Ronald Guzman came racing in to catch the ball in foul territory, only to have Minor yell at him to let the ball drop. Perplexed, Guzman did as he was told.

That gave Guzman another chance, and thanks to an overly generous strike zone on the part of home plate umpire C.B. Bucknor, got a called third strike on the next pitch. Everyone goes home happy!

Well, not exactly.

At the top step of the visitor's dugout, Cora couldn't believe what he had just witnessed. He was seething and was caught mouthing an expletive by TV cameras.

With Minor then pulled, having accomplished his goal, the Texas bullpen recorded the last out. But still, Cora, who hadn't moved from his spot, glared at the Rangers as they went through their post-game handshake line. Cora remained in the dugout long after the third out had been recorded.

Afterward, he chose his words carefully. Too carefully.

Asked for his reaction, Cora said: "I'm just happy our guys are playing the game the right way. We're playing hard until the end. It's been two weeks since we've been eliminated but we've been going at it the right way. That's all I ask. I don't manage the Rangers."

It would have been nice for Cora to drop the gentlemanly act and properly call out the Rangers. Instead, he held fire.

Incredibly, things got even worse when Woodward spoke to reporters after the game. After first acknowledging that he wasn't initially comfortable with the ball dropping in, he then quickly noted that the Red Sox had spent the eighth inning swinging early in the count, and therefore, were conspiring to keep Minor from reaching his milestone.

Since when are hitters required to get into deep counts to help inflate the opponents' strikeout totals?

It should be noted that while Minor was upending the game's norms, 19 pitchers had already recorded 200 strikeouts. It's a nice baseball moment, but it hardly qualifies one for baseball immortality.

(Red Sox fans of a certain age will recall a somewhat similar scenario playing out in 1986, when Rogers Clemens had his first 20-strikeout game. First baseman Don Baylor appeared to purposely miff a foul popup near the Red Sox dugout late in the game, thereby buying his pitcher another opportunity to ring up an additional Mariner. Two key differences: 1) At the time, no one had ever had 20 strikeouts in a game. 2) Clemens wasn't yelling at him to do it.)

Such are the pitfalls of putting statistical achievement above winning the game, I suppose.

We can debate the merits of "unwritten rules" and whether they should exist at all. But Thursday had the feel of a game that went off the rails at the end.

BSJ Game Report: Rangers 7, Red Sox 5

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox fell short of a sweep of the Texas Rangers, dropping a 7-5 decision in their final game ever at Globe Life Park. Here are three things we learned:

1) Hopefully, this is the last bullpen game for a while

Thanks to season-ending injuries to Chris Sale and David Price, the Red Sox have had to keep their starting rotation with duct tape for the past month, using a variety of pitchers to fill in for the missing starters. In general, most of the pitchers have done a serviceable job, including Thursday's start by Travis Lakins, who gave the Sox two scoreless innings. It's not an easy assignment for these relievers, many of whom are not accustomed to the routine of starting and competing to the best of their ability.

But at some point, the use of eight, nine or 10 pitchers per game becomes tough to take. Yes, the Red Sox are eliminated and the games don't carry a lot of weight. And it's certainly not anyone's fault that two cornerstones in the rotation are hurt and unable to take their regular turns. But the steady stream of pitchers trudging from the bullpen to the mound every few batters has become baseball's version of the March of the Wooden Soldiers. It turns the games into long, drawn-out contests and fans are paying big league prices to watch the equivalent of spring training approaches being employed. The Sox have Nathan Eovaldi set for Friday and Eduardo Rodriguez Sunday, with Jhoulys Chacin going Saturday. Chacin has slowly been

stretched out and can probably give the Sox four or five innings at this point. Good. And next September — with a cap on rosters at 28 players — can't get here soon enough.

2) The Sox are a banged up group heading into the final weekend

The team may have a seemingly endless supply of relievers — 22 at last count — but the number of healthy and available position players seems to be dwindling. Brock Holt, who had been slowed by a knee issue the last few days, got pressed into duty at third base. Mookie Betts, who missed five games recently with inflammation in his left foot, missed Wednesday and Thursday after aggravating the condition Tuesday when he ran into the wall in right field. Then, during the game, Andrew Benintendi fouled a ball off his calf and soon came out of the game. After the loss, Alex Cora said the injury wasn't thought to be serious, but Benintendi may need a day or so to recover. The Sox were short enough that they played out the game with Sandy Leon as their first baseman, after first baseman Sam Travis was forced to go to left to take over for Benintendi. There are just three games remaining, but the Sox are literally staggering to the finish line.

3) Travis hasn't taken advantage of his opportunity

*** *The Athletic***

8 thoughts on what lies ahead for the Red Sox as they play out the string

Chad Jennings

When the 2019 baseball schedule was announced, it was easy to look at this final weekend series at Fenway Park and know someone would be playing out the string. The Red Sox, it turns out, are indeed some 30 wins better than the Orioles, but the two teams are in identical situations. Both are just killing time before the offseason.

Eduardo Rodriguez will take a shot at 20 wins on Sunday. Mookie Betts is one away from another 30-home run season. Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers are competing with each other for the league lead in doubles. But in the grand scheme of things, this final series doesn't mean much, and there's far more interest in the hunt for a Red Sox general manager than their hunt for 85 wins.

With that in mind, here are a few thoughts heading into this final weekend of Red Sox baseball before a fascinating winter in which basically anything seems possible.

1. First, just a comment on a couple of Red Sox stories from *The Athletic* this week. First, Steve Buckley wrote about the idea of trading Betts during the offseason. Then Ken Rosenthal wrote about the challenges of finding a new GM who, yes, might have to consider trading Betts. I tend to wonder if the timing just never worked for the Red Sox to trade Betts. Now that he's in his final year of team control and likely to make something like \$30 million next season, how much can they really get in return? What team is going to pay him that much money and also give up premier prospects, all while knowing he's hell bent on hitting the open market? To really get a huge return, the Red Sox would have needed to trade him last winter or the winter before, and at neither point did a deal make any sense. Rosenthal referenced the Diamondbacks' trade of Paul Goldschmidt in his final year before free agency. Three things to consider: Goldschmidt was making roughly half what Betts will make next year, which added to his trade value; Goldschmidt did not seem quite so determined to hit the open market and indeed signed an extension with the Cardinals; and Goldschmidt fetched a prospect package built around Carson Kelly and Luke Weaver, two former top prospects who had not performed especially well in three partial seasons in the majors. Both have worked out really well for Arizona, but would the Red Sox be satisfied with a similar return for Betts? Would a team give up such a package knowing they also have to pay him \$30 million? The Red Sox missed their best opportunity to trade Betts at maximum value, and that's OK.

2. I can't say with any confidence whether this is the final weekend for J.D. Martinez in a Red Sox uniform. For whatever reason — based on nothing but a gut feeling — I think he's going to opt out, even though I logically believe he's being paid good market value for an elite designated hitter with the added flexibility to opt out after either of the next two seasons. That seems like a good fit — basically as good as he could find in free agency — but I might be wrong, and Martinez might feel the need to test those waters again. I don't necessarily think either choice is terrible — he knows what he has in Boston, and even if the market isn't to his liking, he's not going to have a hard time getting paid next season — but the question does have massive ramifications for the Red Sox going forward. Without Martinez, maybe they go cheap at DH and try to keep their outfield together. With him, maybe they try to trade an outfielder to save some money or patch a hole elsewhere.

3. After my first season on the Red Sox beat in 2017, people always asked for my first impressions of the team, and I inevitably talked about Jackie Bradley Jr. I used to cover the Yankees, so I'd seen him play quite a bit. But seeing him every day felt like a revelation. Not that he was one of the 10 best players in the game, but he was thrilling to watch in center field, he could crush mistake pitches and his low batting average climbed considerably in run-scoring situations. I just really enjoyed watching him play and I still do (his final slash line has been incredibly consistent my three years covering the team). But I do wonder if this is the last weekend we'll see him in a Red Sox uniform. If the Red Sox are looking for ways to save payroll, Bradley should be a trade candidate with his salary jumping over \$10 million for next season. I know he's been a maddening player for a lot of fans — his bat has disappeared for long stretches and his success with runners in scoring position has not carried over to this season — but I still find him to be one of the most enjoyable players on the field. Try to soak in the good things he does this weekend, just in case we never get to see him play in quite the same way again.

4. Rick Porcello's comments after Wednesday's game really spoke to the heart of who he is as a leader in the clubhouse. Accountable. Deferential. Logical within his emotions. "I know this year hasn't worked out the way we wanted to," he said. "But it doesn't take away from the special human beings we have in this clubhouse, and that's really — for me sitting there and soaking that in — (it) was nice." Porcello doesn't turn 31 until late December and only seems older because he got to the big leagues at 20. I do wonder if the Red Sox would and should offer him a one-year deal to reestablish his own value while giving the team a much-needed source of rotation stability good for 170-plus innings a year. Even in this brutal season, the Red Sox were 18-14 in his starts, and they're going to need a short-term innings guy for next year. Could Porcello be back even after a career-worst season? Should he be back for the good of both parties? I'm sure there's some thought of changing a little bit of the clubhouse dynamic — especially after this season of monotony — but I don't think Porcello's been a drag on the culture. Even in a bad year, he knew how to stand up and take it.

5. Surely there will be some kind of ovation for Brock Holt this weekend, a salute to a guy who's had a real impact on the field and in the community. He deserves it. But Mitch Moreland deserves some kind of acknowledgment as well. The guy was a really nice player for the Red Sox the past three years. Injuries cost him playing time and he was typically best used in a platoon situation, but he's going to finish with close to 60 homers, more than 200 RBIs and one of the biggest moments of last year's World Series. He also was a valuable mentor to Devers, spent months playing on a broken toe and basically did whatever the Red Sox asked without complaint. The Red Sox signed him twice and they should have no regrets about either of those contracts. He was a really nice player for three years.

6. Time for another round of "What If I Told You?" I know we've been over this before, but it's worth reiterating heading into the final games: What if I told you in spring training Rodriguez would have a real shot at 20 wins, Christian Vazquez would have a chance to hit 25 homers, Bogaerts and Devers would become MVP candidates, Chris Sale would have the second-most strikeouts-per-nine of his career, Brandon Workman would emerge as one of the better relievers in the American League, David Price would have a 3.24 ERA at the break, Betts and Martinez would take a step back but still have an OPS well above .900, and as replacements for Dustin Pedroia, Holt would hit over .300 and Michael Chavis would play 95 games with 18 homers? So many of the questions we had at the start of the season seemed to really go the Red Sox way, but the collective just didn't work. Alex Cora always says it starts with starting pitching. Man, did it ever.

7. Speaking of Bogaerts and Devers being MVP candidates, I have to turn in my MVP ballot in three days and I'm still not entirely sure what's the right order for the three Red Sox candidates (and whether all three should make my 10-person ballot). I've talked to people in and around the team and gotten various suggestions, with some putting Bogaerts as the top MVP candidate on the team and others saying the total picture favors Betts. My gut feeling has been Bogaerts for his consistency — not as my MVP choice, but maybe fifth on the ballot, highest of all Red Sox candidates — but now I'm pretty torn between him and Betts. They might end up back-to-back on my ballot. When I started working on my rankings, I had Devers pretty high on the list — his summer was incredible — but his slower September and slow April likely leave him closer to the bottom. Hell of a season for him, though.

8. Finally, is there any chance we'll see Pedroia with the team this weekend? I assume not, but who knows? I can't help but feel for the guy. He tried to play through his knee issues so many times, and it just hasn't worked. My guess is he'll give it one more go next spring, but with an understanding that it just might not work. That said, I don't know what his knee feels like right now or what it will feel like during the winter. Another try might not be realistic and certainly the Red Sox have to proceed under the assumption that he won't play a meaningful role. It would be cool to see him back with the team for this weekend though.

*** *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram***

How 3-pitch inning, dropped popup and bad call added up to Minor's 200th strikeout

Jeff Wilson

Mike Minor has his 200-inning, 200-strikeout season.

The way he achieved it Thursday in the Texas Rangers' 7-5 victory over the Boston Red Sox might not sit well with some, but it's sitting just fine with the All-Star left-hander and his teammates.

The way they saw it, they were simply playing the same game the Red Sox were playing beginning in the eighth inning.

"They were trying to mess with me because they knew what I was trying to do," Minor said. "They were laughing about it."

The Rangers contended that Boston was doing whatever it could to keep Minor from his 200th K, and they simply reciprocated in the ninth inning.

Here's what went down:

Minor had eight strikeouts after the seventh inning, in which he surrendered two solo homers to cough up a 5-3 lead and was nearly removed by manager Chris Woodward. Willie Calhoun and Rongned Odor homered after the stretch for a 7-5 lead.

And there was Minor, jogging back to the mound at 117 pitches.

Each Red Sox hitter swung at the first pitch, making an out and giving Minor a three-pitch inning. Two outs on two pitches isn't unusual, but the third hitter almost always takes the third strike to avoid that gift of an inning for an opposing pitcher.

Also, the patient, grind-a-pitcher-into-the-dirt Red Sox were down two runs and swinging at the first pitch. Minor said that Brock Holt, the former Stephenville High School star, looked at the Rangers' dugout and laughed after his first-pitch popup in the eighth.

“I haven’t seen a three-pitch inning, I don’t think in my career, to be honest,” Woodward said. “I’ve seen a guy swing at the third pitch of an inning, but not to hit it fair and get out. I’ve never seen a three-out on three consecutive swings. It is what it is.”

As Minor went to the dugout, Woodward told him he wasn’t finished even though he was now at 120 pitches.

“I said, ‘If they’re going to do that, you’re going back out,’” Woodward said.

And there was Minor, jogging back to the mound for the ninth and with a plan. He threw Sandy Leon a first-pitch knuckleball at 64 mph and about seven feet short of the plate.

Leon lofted the next pitch to left field.

Then came Chris Owings, who took the first pitch for a strike. Minor threw him ball before he popped up the third pitch just off the plate down the first-base line.

First baseman Ronald Guzman raced into to catch it, and then pulled up as the ball fell for a foul ball and strike two.

That’s what left the Red Sox in a huff.

Minor said that he told Guzman to let it fall. Guzman said that everyone at Globe Life Park was telling him to let it fall.

“I heard a lot of, ‘Drop it,’” Guzman said.

Minor still had a chance his 200th strikeout, and, by God, plate umpire CB Bucknor was there to help.

The next pitch wasn’t a strike, not until Bucknor said it was.

Strikeout 200.

“It was borderline,” Minor said. “But I liked it.”

Woodward immediately came to the mound to remove Minor, who finished with 126 pitches, a 14-10 record, and an accomplishment he doesn’t believe is tainted by how he got there.

“It’s an accomplishment that I was looking at this last offseason,” Minor said. “A lot of guys were talking about it. The last couple games I was trying to get there but had some duds in there. Today I got closer and I knew we were a couple strikeouts away, so I tried to get it.”

Red Sox manager Alex Cora wasn’t clearly displeased. He hung around in the dugout, staring at the Rangers as they did their customary post-victory handshake.

He took his shot while talking with Red Sox writers.

“I’m just happy our guys are playing the game the right way,” Cora said. “I don’t manage the Rangers. That’s a question for Woody over there, and he probably has the right answer.”

Woodward said that he would likely talk to Cora about how the end of the game unfolded.

“I’m not worried about that,” Woodward said. “I guess that they kind of set the tone in the eighth inning by swinging at three pitches.”

"I didn't love the idea that we dropped a popup at the end, but on the other side of that, they swung at three pitches in a row in the eighth inning down by two. So if they have any beef with that, obviously, I'm pretty sure Cora did. They chose to not try to win the game as well. They were trying to keep him from striking a guy out, which worked in our game to winning the game eventually."

Minor joined Lance Lynn in the 200-200 club, and they became only the second duo in club history to reach that mark (Nolan Ryan and Bobby Witt in 1990).

And Minor isn't sweating how it might look to some.

"We felt like Cora was telling guys to swing first-pitch no matter what," Minor said. "So Woody was OK for me to keep going out there because I felt fine."

*** *Associated Press***

Minor gets 200 Ks as Rangers beat Red Sox 7-5 to avoid sweep

Mike Minor finally got the 200th strikeout he wanted so badly, on a borderline pitch right after the Texas Rangers purposely let a foul pop drop in the ninth inning.

"It's just an accomplishment that I was looking at this past offseason of wanting to improve on this year," Minor said after the Rangers beat the Boston Red Sox 7-5 on Thursday to avoid a three-game sweep.

Minor (14-10) entered needing nine strikeouts to reach the season milestone and got off to a fast start by striking out six of the first 11 batters. He fanned another in the fifth but didn't get his eighth until Sam Travis ending the seventh on his 117th pitch, which matched Minor's career high.

The 31-year-old lefty had a 1-2-3 eighth with the Red Sox swinging at his only three pitches of the inning for outs, so he came back in the ninth and lobbed a knuckleball for a ball before Sandy Leon flied out. Chris Owings, who had tied the game at 5-all with a homer in the seventh, then popped up a 1-1 pitch. First baseman Ronald Guzman was coming in to make the catch when he started to hear Minor.

"Everybody was yelling. ... I heard a lot of 'drop it!' So I had to drop it," Guzman said.

"I didn't love the idea that we dropped a popup at the end, but on the other side of that, they swung at three pitches in a row in the eighth inning down by two," Rangers manager Chris Woodward said.

Woodward's next thought was that Minor better strike out Owings. And Minor got the milestone K on the next pitch when umpire C.B. Bucknor called strike three on a pitch that appeared to be up and maybe out of the zone.

"It was borderline, but I liked it," said Minor, who finished with 126 pitches to get to a career-high 208 1/3 innings.

Owings left the clubhouse without talking to the media, and Red Sox manager Alex Cora wouldn't directly address the dropped foul pop that extended Owings' at-bat.

"I'm just happy our guys are playing the game the right way," Cora said.

"If they have any beef with that ... they chose to not try to win the game as well," Woodward said. "They were trying to keep him from striking a guy out."

Willie Calhoun led off the Rangers seventh with his 21st homer to break a 5-5 tie, and Rougned Odor added his 29th homer later in the inning. Danny Santana's grand slam in the fifth had put Texas up 5-3.

When Minor walked the batter before Travis in the seventh, on a sunny day with temperatures in the mid-90s and feeling hotter than that, Woodward took a step toward the mound. Minor waved him back to the dugout.

"I felt I owed it to him," Woodward said.

Minor, the seventh overall pick by Atlanta in the 2009 amateur draft, was a first-time All-Star this season, and was the Rangers opening day starter in only his second season back in a rotation since missing all of the 2015 and 2016 seasons because of surgery for a torn labrum in his shoulder. He was a full-time reliever with Kansas City in 2017 before turning down a \$10 million player option with the Royals and signing a \$28 million, three-year deal with Texas.

After the Rangers were cautious with him most of last season, with 22 of his starts coming on extended rest, Minor made 32 starts this year. He already had a career-high for innings before Thursday, with 200 strikeouts in reach.

"Last year there were some restrictions," Minor said. "This year Woody let me go. Hopefully it's a building block for next year going into the new stadium and have a better team on the field and see if we can get to the playoffs."

200-200 TIMES 2

Minor and RHP Lance Lynn because the only the second duo in Rangers history to both have 200 innings and 200 strikeouts in the same season. The last was Nolan Ryan and Bobby Witt in 1990. Lynn (201 innings, 236 strikeouts) is scheduled to start the season finale Sunday.

SHORT HOPS

Boston finished 46-35 on the road but is just 37-41 at Fenway Park. ... Jackie Bradley Jr. also hit a solo homer for the Red Sox in the seventh. ... Elvis Andrus, already the Rangers career leader in stolen bases, got his 300th.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: LF Andrew Benintendi fouled a pitch off his right calf in the fourth and was replaced by a pinch hitter the following inning. ... RF Mookie Betts missed his second game in a row since coming out of Tuesday's series opener after he jammed his left toe against the wall while playing defense. Cora said the 2018 AL MVP will play at home this weekend. ... LHP David Price had a cyst removed from his left wrist. Cora said everything went fine and that Price should be ready for a normal spring training.

UP NEXT

Red Sox: LHP James Paxton (15-6) pitches for the Boston to open a season-ending three-game series at Fenway Park against Baltimore.

Rangers: The AL East champion New York Yankees are in town Friday night for the opener of a three-game series that is the last for Texas before the team moves across the street into a new stadium next season.