

The Boston Red Sox Sunday, September 29, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox' Steve Pearce contemplating retirement

Peter Abraham

Steve Pearce, the Most Valuable Player of the World Series last fall, is giving strong consideration to retiring after 13 seasons in the majors.

"I've been thinking a lot about what to do," Pearce said Saturday before the Red Sox' 9-4 loss to the Baltimore Orioles. "It could be time."

Pearce, who turns 37 in April, played only 29 games this season because of a strained left calf, a lower-back strain, and a partially torn ligament in his left knee. He has not played since May 31.

"I need to get healthy first of all and then I'll decide what I want to do," Pearce said. "I don't have any regrets about my career, that's for sure."

Pearce, a free agent after the season, flew to Boston for the weekend to reconnect with his teammates and visit with coaching staff.

"I wanted to be around to see everybody together one more time," he said.

Pearce has hit .254 with a .772 OPS, 91 home runs and 303 RBIs for seven teams in his career.

The Red Sox acquired Pearce from Toronto on June 28, 2018, to platoon with Mitch Moreland at first base. He had a .901 OPS in 50 regular-season games then was 11 of 38 with six extra-base hits, nine walks, 12 runs, and 11 RBIs in 13 postseason games.

Pearce hit a tying home run off closer Kenley Jansen in the eighth inning of Game 4 of the World Series at Dodger Stadium. He added a three-run double in the ninth inning in a game the Sox won, 9-6.

In the Game 5 clincher, Pearce had a two-run homer off Clayton Kershaw in the first inning and a solo shot off Pedro Baez in the eighth.

"Best part of my career, what we did last fall," Pearce said. "I'll never forget what we did as a team."

The Sox signed Pearce to a one-year, \$6.25 million contract 19 days after the Series ended. But he hit .180 with one home run and nine RBIs.

"I wish I could have done more this season," he said. "That's baseball, the ups and downs. We'll see where it goes; but I got more out of my career than I expected. Baseball treated me great."

Extra effort

Xander Bogaerts's two-run homer in the first inning off Orioles starter John Means was his 33rd of the season. The homer brought Bogaerts's extra-base hit total to 85, tying him with Nomar Garciaparra for the most by a Red Sox shortstop.

Garciparra did it in 1997 and 2002. The Bogaerts milestone came just after he reached another one Friday evening, recording the 500th RBI of his career. He's just the fourth Red Sox player to reach 500 RBIs before turning 27 years old.

200-hit watch

Like, Bogaerts, Rafael Devers keeps adding his name to the history books this season. He has 89 extra-base hits, which led the majors. He recently tied Tony Conigliaro for the most homers (32) by a Red Sox before turning 23. After Friday's game, Devers was just three hits shy of 200 on the year. Devers's line-drive single to right in the fifth on Saturday brought him closer to that total. If Devers does reach it, he'll be the first American League player to reach 200-plus hits before turning 23 since Starlin Castro in 2007.

Manager Alex Cora said recently that Devers changed his mind-set this past offseason, coming back more in shape by changing his diet. Devers set the bar for himself entering the season, and in many ways he's exceeded it.

"I said it in spring training, if you had to pick a guy that would impact this team, I had no doubt in my mind it was going to be [Devers]," Cora said. "He's not afraid of the stage. That's the most important thing. I saw in [2017 with the Houston Astros] we were trying to do everything possible to rattle him. And he looked at us and laughed at us. He doesn't just want to be good. He wants to be great."

Rodriguez goes for 20

If there's something for Sox fans to look forward to Sunday, Devers getting to 200 hits is certainly one of them. But you also have to include Eduardo Rodriguez possibly reaching 20 wins, which has been the topic of conversation for a couple of weeks now.

The Sox players and Cora willed Rodriguez through his last start against the Texas Rangers. He went five innings, giving up 11 hits and seven runs while also throwing 113 pitches. In the fifth inning, the Rangers' Delino DeShields attempted to steal but was thrown out by Christian Vazquez for the final out of the frame.

On Sunday, all the Sox' regulars will play. Mookie Betts — who was the designated hitter Friday — had the day off Saturday but will be in back in right field for the finale. If Rodriguez gets his 20th, he'll be the first Sox lefthander to do so since Mel Parnell in 1953. Just five Sox southpaws have reached 20 wins: Parnell, Lefty Grove, Babe Ruth, Ray Collins, and Jesse Tannehill.

Rodriguez, who is also at 196 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, wants to reach 200 for the first time. He's been the Sox' most durable starter, going five-plus innings in each of his 27 outings since the start of May.

Calling it a career

Best wishes to Bob Tomaselli, who is retiring after 27 years of manning Camera 5 in the home dugout at Fenway Park for NESN. His colleagues signed a No. 27 from the Fenway Park scoreboard for Tomaselli.

Still a field of schemes in Dominican baseball

Bob Hohler and Aimee Ortiz

One scandal followed another until Major League Baseball committed nearly 10 years ago to crack down on teams wrongly exploiting the player development system in this impoverished Caribbean nation. But progress has dragged, and young prospects like Steven Reyes remain exposed to improprieties and dangerous health risks as they chase the dream of big league stardom, a Globe review found.

Reyes is just 16, with high hopes for himself and a clear eye on the sport. Despite the "Say No to Syringes" posters that MLB has distributed to baseball facilities throughout the country, Reyes said he has witnessed

adolescent teammates inject potentially deadly chemicals to make themselves look bigger and stronger to major league scouts.

“From what I’ve seen, I’m pretty sure it’s happening everywhere,” Reyes said, wearing a Red Sox jersey at a baseball training facility in Santo Domingo, the nation’s capital.

Reyes is one of thousands of Dominican youths trying to make their way in a feeder system for Major League Baseball that has long been rife with exploitation and plagued by wrongdoing, much of it committed by MLB teams, including the Red Sox.

Reyes said he wants to be the next David Ortiz so badly that he dropped out of school after the eighth grade and entrusted his future to a series of Dominican talent brokers. If tradition holds, one or more of the brokers will take lots of Reyes’s money if he achieves his dream. If he doesn’t, they will discard him.

If Reyes is especially fortunate, major league scouts won’t encourage him to falsify his age and identity, steal some of his signing bonus, or turn a blind eye should he begin doping, as has occurred for decades with other Dominican prospects, according to interviews, court records, and former US senator George Mitchell’s landmark 2007 report on illegal steroids in baseball. Twelve years after publication, the report remains sadly relevant, as the treatment of young prospects has improved in some respects but remains a black eye for baseball.

Despite MLB’s nearly decadelong campaign to curb abuses in its lucrative Dominican pipeline, misconduct persists, some allegedly so serious that a federal grand jury in Washington is reportedly weighing evidence against team operatives.

The ongoing shame, some youth advocates here said, is that Major League Baseball, a multibillion-dollar enterprise with ties to the developing nation’s government, could do more to protect the Dominican boys it relies on to help stock its rosters.

“MLB could do wonders in this country if it worked harder to make things better,” said Homero LaJara, a buscone, or trainer, who runs a Dominican baseball academy for young boys competing for professional contracts. “It would be a win for MLB and the United States of America because they would be getting players who are educated, who aren’t changing their birth dates and identities, and who aren’t pumped up with steroids.”

Since 2010, when then-MLB commissioner Bud Selig responded to Mitchell’s report by dispatching a top executive to try to fix things in the Dominican Republic, advances have been incremental.

“We have made good strides there,” an MLB spokesman said, while acknowledging challenges remain.

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One major step has been enlisting dozens of Dominican baseball trainers in a partnership program aimed at cleaning up improprieties. The trainers have more than 1,000 youths under their control, and MLB is permitted under the partnership to test any player age 13 or older for banned performance enhancers.

The impact of the crackdown has been considerable, but the task is far from complete. Since 2012, the rate of positive steroid tests in MLB’s Dominican Summer League has dropped by 50 percent, but even now it’s more than three times higher than the rate for minor leaguers in the United States, according to documents provided by MLB.

Cases of age and identity fraud have also been sharply reduced under revised MLB protocols. In addition, MLB and most of its teams — all 30 operate academies for young Dominican players — have expanded their education programs.

Ramon Genao, one of the top youth trainers in Santo Domingo, said Major League Baseball had not acted aggressively enough in the past to improve the system, despite its influence in the country.

While Genao remains concerned about MLB's drug testing program, he credited commissioner Rob Manfred with promoting more rapid and positive change. He said the improvements reflect MLB's understanding that "if you want to fix your house, you can't just clean up the outside."

But the ongoing grand jury investigation could expose further predatory practices by MLB teams competing to sign the most gifted Dominican prospects. One burgeoning problem is teams verbally agreeing with impressionable boys as young as 13 to sign with them when they become eligible at 16, according to those familiar with the system.

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Nick Francona, a former Los Angeles Dodgers front office staffer, said in an interview that he became so disgusted by the alleged abuses he witnessed that he reported them to the FBI.

Francona, a Marine combat veteran, is the son of former Red Sox manager Terry Francona, who now manages the Cleveland Indians.

"The international side of Major League Baseball is a cesspool," said Nick Francona, who was fired by the Dodgers in 2016 and the New York Mets in 2018 over disputes about team policies and practices, some involving Dominican operations.

Notable in the documents Francona supplied to the FBI are surveys indicating that three Dodgers executives in 2015 rated the "level of egregious behavior" by the team's international scouts.

One document purports to show that Gabe Kapler, then LA's director of player development, assessed the behavior of three Dodgers scouts as "criminal."

Kapler's front office colleagues — former Red Sox executives David Finley and Galen Carr — each rated the behavior of the same three scouts as well as an additional Dodgers scout as "criminal," according to the documents, which Francona shared with the Globe.

The documents do not specify what constitutes criminal behavior, but Francona said there were suspicions of misconduct such as scouts improperly benefiting from international signings, among other issues. In an e-mail to Francona and other Dodgers staffers, one team executive allegedly wrote of a Dodgers scout, "I am more worried about him getting caught in customs with \$100,000 in cash strapped to his body."

Kapler, who won a World Series ring as a Red Sox outfielder in 2004, left the Dodgers in 2017 to manage the Philadelphia Phillies. Through a team spokeswoman, he declined to comment.

Finley and Carr remain with the Dodgers. A Dodgers spokesman did not respond to requests for comment from the two, or for the team to comment on the purported e-mail that Francona shared.

The four Dodgers scouts are among many former MLB staffers who have allegedly engaged in misconduct in the Dominican development system.

In 2013, three Chicago White Sox scouting officials went to prison for taking more than \$400,000 in kickbacks from the contracts of young prospects, mostly Dominicans.

In 2017, the Atlanta Braves general manager was banned for life by MLB and his special assistant was suspended for a year for scouting and signing improprieties involving 13 young prospects, more than half of them Dominicans.

Numerous other teams, including the Red Sox, New York Yankees, and Washington Nationals, have fired executives or scouts amid allegations they took kickbacks or sanctioned age and identity fraud by Dominican boys. The Red Sox dismissed their Dominican scouting supervisor, Pablo Lantigua, over

alleged kickbacks. Lantigua, in a 2008 Globe interview, denied knowingly doing anything wrong. He was, he said, just caught following a longstanding and accepted practice in Dominican youth baseball.

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Yet the largely lawless Dominican system endures, with boys as young as 10 leaving school and turning to coaches and talent hunters, some of them unscrupulous, for help securing professional contracts.

The process churns in plain sight, as the Globe observed last month at the sprawling Juan Pablo Duarte Olympic Center in Santo Domingo. On the fringes of poorly maintained dirt fields, influential coaches oversaw boys preparing for their big day, the July 2 after their 16th birthdays, when they become eligible to sign with MLB teams.

More than a dozen young prospects, idling in the tropical heat, snapped to attention when Genao, one of the region's best known trainers, rolled up in his luxury BMW SUV. Genao said the vehicle was a gift from Starling Marte, a boy he trained on these fields, who has earned more than \$30 million since he signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 2007 for \$85,000.

Genao, who goes by the nickname Papiro, described growing up poor in a barrio, "with nothing." Now he lives in a fine penthouse, he said, funded by the money he has made off boys he helped to become MLB multimillionaires, including Marte, Melky Cabrera, Pedro Alvarez, and Antonio Alfonseca.

Like many trainers, Genao generally has taken about 35 percent of his players' signing bonuses. He could take more: There's no limit because the Dominican government has never regulated such transactions and Major League Baseball has never effectively pushed for changes, even as MLB money flowing into the island country has swelled from a trickle to a torrent.

In 1988, the Dodgers signed 16-year-old Pedro Martinez, now a Hall of Famer, for all of \$6,500. Ortiz, one of the greatest clutch hitters in baseball history, signed with the Seattle Mariners four years later at the age of 16 for only \$10,000.

Over time, competition for the nation's best talent intensified, and on July 2, 2008, the Oakland Athletics signed a 16-year-old pitcher, Michael Ynoa, for \$4.2 million, then a record for Dominican prospects. A year later, the Red Sox made a July 2 splash by signing 16-year-old shortstop Jose Vinicio for \$1.95 million.

In the decade since, the Red Sox have joined many other MLB teams in making millionaires of Dominican 16-year-olds, including their star third baseman, Rafael Devers, in 2013, and a minor league pitcher, Christopher Acosta, in 2014. Both received \$1.5 million bonuses.

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But the rick kids are rare exceptions. Every year, thousands of Dominican teenagers exhaust their baseball ambitions and begin seeking other work. Few are educated, and jobs are scarce, with the youth unemployment rate in double digits.

MLB has addressed the problem in part by providing scholarships to attend universities and technical schools in the Dominican Republic since 2012 to more than 200 players who have been released by MLB teams.

But there is no similar program for the thousands who never even get that far — sent packing before they ever sign a professional contract. Some of these abruptly unemployed drift into trouble.

"All of these kids see baseball as their only way out," LaJara said, surrounded by unsigned prospects. "When that ends, some of them go in different directions, and the crime rate goes up."

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One of Genao's former players, Jesus Gomez, is among the relative few who have managed to sign contracts after they were passed over at age 16. Gomez's father, Francisco, said Jesus was able to sign with the Chicago Cubs in 2018, at age 19, thanks largely to physical conditioning he received from another prominent figure at the Olympic Center, Angel Presinal.

"The best physical trainer in the country," Francisco Gomez said.

Presinal, however, is banned from Major League Baseball because he was suspected in 2001 of transporting steroids into the United States for then-Cleveland Indians slugger Juan Gonzalez. Presinal denied it, and no one was charged in the incident.

Presinal came under scrutiny again in 2009 amid allegations he was traveling the baseball circuit with admitted steroid user Alex Rodriguez. Presinal again denied any wrongdoing, but Major League Baseball banned him also from the World Baseball Classic.

At the Olympic Center, Presinal presides over a squat concrete building outfitted with antiquated strength and conditioning equipment. He emerged from a massage room abutting his office, the walls adorned with photos of him with his star clients, including Ortiz, Martinez, and another former Red Sox great, Manny Ramirez.

Ramirez was twice suspended by Major League Baseball for using performance-enhancing drugs. He and Ortiz reportedly tested positive for performance enhancers in 2003, though both denied knowingly ingesting anything improper. Martinez has never been accused of any wrongdoing involving steroids.

At Presinal's facility, dozens of boys lingered about the grounds as he professed his innocence in MLB's decades-long steroid scandal.

"When you've never done it and they accuse you, you feel backed up against a wall," he said. "It has been very, very, very difficult for me, for my life, for my family."

Presinal, like LaJara and Genao, profits from boys at the Olympic Center who land professional contracts. When Jesus Gomez signed with the Cubs — for \$10,000, according to Baseball America — Genao took 35 percent and Presinal 5 percent, his father said.

The elder Gomez praised Presinal but said he is worried about the scourge of steroid use among Dominican prospects, perhaps for good reason.

Seated in Presinal's office was Steven Reyes, the 16-year-old hopeful, who discussed trying to avoid chemical enhancers. Beside him sat his father, Elvis Reyes, who once embodied the longtime practice of age and identity fraud among Dominican prospects.

The elder Reyes said he was 20 when an MLB scout advised him a generation ago to pass himself off as someone younger because he lacked the proper paperwork to sign under his real name. Elvis Reyes said he signed with the Milwaukee Brewers as 17-year-old David Pena, and though he never made it off the island, playing only two seasons for Milwaukee's team in the Dominican Summer League, MLB never detected his ruse, he said.

Reyes said he brought his son to Presinal to rehab knee and elbow injuries. Steven, a 6-foot-4-inch outfielder, has trained in various academies run by buscones. He said he does school work on Saturdays.

His big day comes next July 2, when he will first be eligible to sign an MLB contract.

"God willing," he said. "That's my dream."

Steven Reyes said he knows he might be disadvantaged by staying steroid-free, while others cheat. He described feeling helpless when he witnessed boys injecting the drugs, which are readily available in the Dominican Republic.

“It’s not fair, but I have to keep my mouth shut,” he said. “If I say anything, the people who run the academy would probably accuse me.”

Reyes declined to identify the baseball program he was involved with when he saw players injecting performance enhancers, other than to say it was not his current independent academy.

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Major League Baseball successfully lobbied the Dominican government to amend a labor law that prevented MLB from disciplining players who tested positive for steroids beyond referring them to counseling; the law now allows MLB to suspend players who test positive. In addition, the players’ union agreed to permit MLB to test the country’s top prospects for steroids before they are signed.

But the problem remains palpable at the Olympic Center, a training ground for many players who tested positive for performance enhancers after they signed MLB contracts. They include two of Genao’s top prodigies: Marte and Cabrera.

Some of the best amateurs at the Olympic Center one day will compete in MLB’s Dominican Summer League, whose ranks have been thinned since Jan. 1, 2018, by the suspensions of 23 players for steroid use. Three of those disciplined were Jesus Gomez’s teammates at the Cubs academy.

During the same period, 28 other minor leaguers, 11 of them Dominicans, have been suspended for using performance enhancers. An additional 18 major leaguers have been disciplined, nine Dominicans among them, including Minnesota shortstop Jorge Polanco, a 2019 All-Star.

Genao, who enlisted last year in MLB’s trainer partnership program, said he sees inequities and discrimination in the screening system.

“If Dominicans are using needles, so are the Americans,” he said. “I lived in the United States. I saw all those kids doping up. What I want to know is why Dominicans test positive, but Americans don’t.”

Major League Baseball denies there are any irregularities or bias in the system.

But the problem runs deeper, Genao said. MLB’s relationship with the Dominican government makes it “hard to stand up to the powerful,” he said. “There are things that people don’t touch for their own good.”

Abuses often go unpunished, several trainers said, while those who protest may find themselves at risk.

As LaJara put it, “This country can be dirty. Over here, you’ve got to be careful.”

Xander Bogaerts’s memorable season lost in Red Sox’ struggles

Julian McWilliams

Baltimore Orioles starter John Means tried to fool Xander Bogaerts with a 2-and-2 changeup Saturday afternoon. It’s a pitch Means goes to 29.1 percent of the time, second most behind his fastball. But Bogaerts was all over it, launching a 414-foot, two-run shot well over the Green Monster.

The homer tied the game, 2-2, in the first inning. It was Bogaerts’s career-high 33rd homer of the year and his 85th extra-base hit, tying him with Nomar Garciaparra for the most extra-base hits by a Sox shortstop.

But, like much of the season, Bogaerts’s milestones have come with a sour taste that has ultimately ended in a lost season.

“Obviously we have one more game to go,” Bogaerts said. “I was proud of the way I went out every day and gave it all that I have, but it didn’t work out.”

The Sox lost again Saturday, 9-4, and will try to avoid being swept for the final game of the season Sunday by a team that’s lost 107 games.

Bogaerts is disappointed the club’s year will end without a trip to the postseason, but he also took a glass-half-full approach, adding that he’s going to use this time to reflect on the season he had while sitting on the beach. He hasn’t seen his family in a while, so that’s a plus, too, and he’ll get to spend his 27th birthday (Oct. 1) at home.

When Bogaerts does get that time by himself on the beach in Aruba, there’s a ton he can reflect on. He grew as a leader in the clubhouse and has helped to shape Rafael Devers, who’s having a historic season of his own. Bogaerts has set career highs in RBIs (116), doubles (52), on-base percentage (.383), slugging (.556), and OPS (.940). He’s established himself as one of the premier shortstops in all of baseball. That should bring Bogaerts peace.

Moving forward, though, from a team standpoint, it’s a bit murkier.

On Friday, Sox owner John Henry spoke to reporters about the vision for next season. One of their goals is to shed salary and get under the competitive balance tax, which is \$208 million next season. That means whoever heads up the baseball operations side will have to lean on creativity, while still trying to remain competitive in a market that demands it. Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 million extension at the start of this season, but pointed to the teams with lower payrolls that still have success.

“If we look at teams like Tampa and the Oakland [Athletics], obviously, they have some big-name guys,” said Bogaerts. “It’s not like the whole roster has a lot of money. They have their ways of constructing teams and it works for them for years now.”

Both Oakland and Tampa Bay clinched postseason tickets by clinching the two American League wild-card spots Friday night.

“[Sox ownership] wants to take that approach,” said Bogaerts. “Obviously it’s worked for those teams, so, I guess I can understand their point of view in wanting to do that. Not always do you need the expensive team to win.”

Bogaerts has an opt-out after 2022. The way he’s played this season, you could make the argument that he left a lot of money on the table. But Bogaerts didn’t want the thoughts of free agency hovering over his head this season. He knew he wanted to play with the Red Sox, an organization that values winning. When Bogaerts signed back in April, the team was in the midst of a West Coast funk to start the year, but the club was confident it would turn its season around with the talent it had.

But injuries to starting pitchers, overall underperformance by the team, and the firing of Dave Dombrowski ultimately sealed the Sox’ fate.

“I have confidence in all the guys that are here,” Bogaerts said. “I love each and everyone on this team. We’ve had some great memories throughout the years. Seeing some faces that might leave will be tough. We’ll see what happens.”

In the ninth inning, Bogaerts grounded out to shortstop. It was a routine ground out, but Bogaerts ran hard down the line. Manager Alex Cora said that Bogaerts received a standing ovation from a section of the Fenway crowd.

“That’s who he is,” Cora said. “That’s the kid that everyone has grown to love here. He’s not the tall lanky kid from 2013. He’s a force at this level.”

He's also the Sox' shortstop for years to come, too. Everything else, though, is up in the air.

Alex Cora accepts that change is coming for Red Sox

Peter Abraham

Instead of having the highest payroll in baseball next season, the Red Sox will have to settle for only the second or third. It's the equivalent of flying first class now and then instead of taking a private jet.

But that still represents change for manager Alex Cora, who will be working under a new general manager with what is likely to be a remodeled roster next season.

Friday's revelation by ownership that they plan to cut payroll to dip under the salary tax threshold of \$208 million didn't come as a surprise to Cora. It's something he had already discussed with John Henry and Tom Werner.

"I had a pretty good idea what was going on even before this year," Cora said Saturday. "At the end of the day, we know the nature of the business and what you have to do."

Cora played for six teams in his 14 years in the majors before coaching with the Astros and then joining the Sox. His brother, Joey, was with four teams in 11 seasons and has since coached with four organizations. Change isn't unusual in baseball, it's expected.

"One thing for sure, this is an organization that regardless of the plan the main goal is to win the World Series," Cora said. "I don't see that changing."

The Sox won by brute force last season, building a payroll so high that not even the Yankees or Dodgers could jump over it.

The pile toppled this season when injuries to pricey pitchers Nate Eovaldi, David Price, and Chris Sale revealed a lack of rotation depth.

"There's a few things that are going to change in the upcoming days, weeks or months. We have to adjust to it," Cora said. "We understand what we have to do to be competitive next year. That's my job."

Baseball's salary cap discourages dynasties. The Joe Torre Yankees pushed their payroll higher to keep their star players and add others. Now teams like the Red Sox have to choose when to dial back and reset the penalties for exceeding the limit.

But Cora is confident that when the Red Sox reassemble in February, it will be with their core intact.

"The talent is still here," he said. "You've got [Andrew Benintendi], and you've got Xander [Bogaerts] and you've got Raffy [Devers] and Mookie [Betts] and Jackie [Bradley Jr.]."

"They're still young players, athletic players, that impact the game. Whatever decision is made in the offseason, I'll understand. But at the end I know we're going to be trying to win the World Series and that's the most important thing."

Henry, the principal owner, made it clear he wants to hire a new GM from outside the organization. Cora's biggest reaction to that news was that it meant he would probably have to fly back to Boston a few more times in the offseason to parley with his new boss.

Cora has been around baseball for a long time in various roles, including broadcasting for ESPN. It's unlikely the Red Sox will hire anybody he doesn't have at least some familiarity with.

“Throughout this process to become a manager I interviewed with five or six different organizations. Maybe somebody I talked to over the years will be here. You never know,” he said.

“I’m good at making adjustments. Whoever is running the operation — we’re going to connect. I think we’re going to be on the same page. That’s something I’ve done my whole career. It’s not going to change.”

Cora and the Sox won 108 games in 2018 then roared to a championship. At best they will win 24 fewer games this season.

Cora’s bottomless confidence got the best of him at times, his suggestions throughout the spring and much of the summer that the Sox would be fine proving hollow.

The pace of spring training has to be rethought after a season-defining slow start and maybe the coaching staff needs to be adjusted, although for now Cora expects all will return.

Year 3 will likely define his tenure much more than the first two.

“Last year it worked and this year it didn’t,” Cora said. “The goal here is not to win one and not make it to the playoffs in three years. You’ve got to be consistent. I think we have the core to do that.”

Cora has talked to the team about restructuring how the Sox go about their business. There are plans to remodel the clubhouse and become more advanced in areas such as conditioning and nutrition.

There are subtle advantages to be gained with such adjustments and those conversations have started.

“To talk about a few things I do believe that we can do better,” Cora said. “Not on the field but things that the guys need around here in Fenway. They’re listening and hopefully we can improve.”

Cora has been going full speed since 2017 when he was named the bench coach of the Astros. His girlfriend had twin boys, a hurricane devastated his native Puerto Rico, there were two World Series runs, and he even tangled with President Trump.

Some rest and reflection is coming up soon and it’s needed. But the coming offseason will be an eventful and important one. It starts Monday.

A complete explanation of the Red Sox’ luxury tax and payroll situation

Alex Speier

As the Red Sox navigate toward 2020, a giant number may do as much to define the team moving forward as whomever the Red Sox install to take over their baseball operations department. The number: \$208 million.

That figure is the line of demarcation for the Red Sox, the payroll threshold at which luxury tax penalties start to take effect. Red Sox principal owner John Henry stated flatly that the team plans to bring its payroll under that figure in 2020 for the purposes of resetting the rate at which it’s taxed moving forward. While Henry and chairman Tom Werner later amended that statement to suggest that the team has a goal – but not a mandate – to get below the luxury tax threshold next year, every potential transaction this winter now will be viewed through the prism of the team’s payroll.

So what does that mean, and why does that have implications that extend to Mookie Betts? Here’s a primer:

What is the luxury tax threshold?

Teams that exceed certain payroll thresholds get hit with progressive luxury tax penalties that go up for “repeat offenders” who surpass the luxury tax threshold for multiple years in a row. It’s a mechanism in the collective bargaining agreement that, depending on perspective, has either created a significant disincentive for teams to spend beyond certain levels or that has provided teams with political cover to remain under those levels. Either way, all things being equal, teams prefer to not pay taxes than to pay them (shocker!), and so the luxury tax threshold has served as a key factor in teams’ payroll plans.

Related

Owners aim to get Red Sox under luxury tax, and are looking outside for a baseball ops leader
What are the tax rates? And do the Red Sox push past them?

For the second straight year in 2019, the Red Sox will absorb a sizable luxury tax bill while spending more than any other team in baseball.

In 2017, the Red Sox kept their payroll under \$195 million in order to avoid paying any luxury tax that year and thus resetting the tax thresholds moving forward.

In 2018, when the luxury tax threshold was set at \$197 million, the Red Sox spent well beyond it, with a payroll of roughly \$240 million in their championship season. In so doing, they not only incurred the first-time offender’s base luxury tax rate of 20 percent on all outlays over \$197 million, but also got hit with a 32 percent tax on expenditures above \$217 million, and finally a 62.5 percent tax rate on all of their payroll expenses above \$237 million. The team got hit with a tax bill of roughly \$12 million.

In 2019, the luxury tax threshold is at \$206 million. The team blew past that baseline threshold – with the base tax rate moving up for a second-time offender to 30 percent – and the next luxury tax tier, with a 42 percent tax on all spending over \$226 million. But the team stayed below the third and highest luxury tax threshold, which would have resulted in a 75 percent penalty on any spending beyond \$246 million. The team’s payroll is just north of \$240 million but below \$246 million, with an estimated tax bill of roughly \$12 million.

In 2020, the team faces a bigger potential tax burden. Every dollar spent above \$208 million will be taxed at a 50 percent rate; the next thresholds are a 62 percent tax for anything over \$228 million, and a 95 percent tax on spending beyond \$248 million. If the team stays below the threshold, however, it will reset its tax rates – with the base tax rate falling back to 20 percent whenever the team next goes past the threshold.

My eyes have crossed. What does that mean in practical terms?

The team doesn’t particularly want to keep spending at a level that incurs the luxury tax. In theory, the idea of paying outfielder Mookie Betts \$30 million in 2020 (an estimate of his potential arbitration earnings for next season) carries considerable appeal. Even at that price, his likely production makes him a bargain.

But if the team is already committed to spending beyond the luxury tax threshold (\$208 million), then the actual cost to the team of his contract for 2020 would be more like \$43 million. So every player becomes considerably more expensive for teams that repeatedly blow past the threshold, helping to explain why every big market team – the Red Sox (2017), Cubs (2018), Dodgers (2018), and Yankees (2018) – played limbo in recent years to get under it for at least one season.

How is luxury tax payroll calculated?

There’s a bit more than meets the eye. It’s based on the average annual value (AAV) of player contracts. It also includes the salary of minor leaguers who are on the 40-man roster, as well as a standard benefits bill of a bit more than \$15 million that all teams must pay. On top of that, teams want to keep a war chest to take on more salary with in-season callups and trades.

OK, so if the luxury tax threshold is \$208 million next year, where are the Sox?

If they keep their current roster intact and J.D. Martinez (who has the right to opt out of his five-year, \$110 million deal this winter) remains on the roster, the Red Sox would already be spending beyond the threshold next year. Based on the current guaranteed contracts, projected arbitration earnings, and estimates for their players who aren't yet arbitration-eligible, the team has roughly \$220 million in commitments for next year – and that's without a fifth starter to replace Rick Porcello, without bullpen upgrades, and without a first baseman to pair with Michael Chavis. That figure also fails to account for a \$10 million in-season war chest.

So: The team is at \$230 million and counting.

So how could the Red Sox get below \$208 million?

Scenario 1: Martinez opts out

If Martinez opts out of his five-year deal, the Red Sox wouldn't quite shed his entire \$22 million salary. They'd still be on the hook for \$6 million – an amount that represents the difference between how his salary was calculated for luxury tax purposes in both 2018 and 2019 (a total of \$44 million based on the \$22 million AAV in each season) and how much he actually made (\$50 million – \$23.75 million salaries in 2018 and 2019, along with a \$2.5 million buyout). Still, that \$16 million – in combination with a decision to non-tender Steven Wright and Sandy Leon rather than offering them arbitration, thus saving about \$4 million – would get the Red Sox just below the threshold, albeit with one small problem: They'd still need a fifth starter, a first baseman, a DH, and of course they'd love to add a bullpen arm.

So the team might still have to keep shedding salary – possibly seeking to trade or even non-tender Jackie Bradley Jr. and his projected \$10 million salary, freeing resources for some low-dollar signings to address the holes on the roster – which, with the departure of Martinez and Bradley, would now include a starter, a first baseman, a DH, and a center fielder.

If the Sox want to get below the luxury tax threshold, they probably couldn't explore long-term deals for Betts or Rafael Devers or Eduardo Rodriguez until the 2021 season.

Scenario 2: Martinez opts in, gets traded

In some ways, the Sox might find it easier to gain flexibility if Martinez opted into his contract and then got traded – thus allowing the Sox to shed the entirety of his salary for 2020 (rather than having the \$6 million hit for his departure in free agency). An opt-in-and-trade scenario, along with the trimming of Wright and Leon from the roster, would get the Sox a bit of flexibility to start addressing needs ... but not that much. So they might still be left looking to deal Bradley.

Scenario 3: Martinez opts in, and Sox contemplate the unthinkable

If Martinez remains with the Sox at his current salary level of \$22 million a year, and the team is hell-bent on getting below the luxury tax threshold next year, then there's a direct path to doing so: Trading Betts, particularly if the club is convinced that he's not willing to sign a long-term deal. Perhaps the Sox could address some of their needs (low-cost starting pitcher and a starting outfielder) through such a deal while also freeing up money to spend on the rest of their needs.

The mere possibility of dealing Betts should be enough to sicken members of the organization, but it presents the clearest path to getting under the threshold in 2020 while also freeing resources to address other needs.

There's got to be a better way, right?

Maybe.

The team could also see if someone would take the last three years of, say, David Price's contract if it was heavily subsidized – though with the enormous limitation that any subsidy would count as payroll for luxury tax purposes. For instance, if the team found a taker to pay roughly \$10 million a year of Price's 2020 salary, the Sox would absorb a \$22 million payroll hit – as calculated for luxury tax purposes – to have the lefthander pitch elsewhere, so they'd probably also have to part ways with Bradley, Wright, and Leon. And, of course, they'd need to add two starters to their rotation, a centerfielder, a first baseman, and add to their bullpen.

There could be even more elaborate possibilities involving Price. Is there a deal to be had with a team that has payroll short-term payroll flexibility in which the lefthander could be sent to a team that would pay all of his 2020 salary – and then get all of Price's contract in 2021 and 2022 (\$32 million each year) subsidized by the Sox? Such a move – which would give a team three years of Price for \$32 million; presumably, the Sox could offer one or more prospects as deal sweeteners – would create the same kind of 2020 flexibility as a deal involving Betts, even if it guaranteed that the Sox would spend enormous sums in 2021 and 2022.

Such deals are incredibly hard to pull off. But it's worth recalling that the Braves and Dodgers made a dead-money deal involving Matt Kemp, Adrian Gonzalez, Scott Kazmir, and Brandon McCarthy before the 2018 season to exchange onerous contracts. The deal was close to financially neutral in the aggregate, but allowed the Dodgers to reduce their 2018 payroll and get under the luxury tax threshold while freeing up the Braves to have money to spend starting in 2019 (hello, Josh Donaldson).

Is there any chance Price could be dealt for a player or players who have similarly burdensome long-term obligations that are distributed over a longer time horizon? It would be hard to find a match given the lefthander's historically large contract. The mere exercise of trying to imagine such long shot possibilities underscores the difficulty of the Red Sox' task if they truly do intend to get under the luxury tax threshold.

Should a team really be so insistent on doing this?

When it comes to the luxury tax threshold, fans/players and teams/owners have competing, rational interests.

By staying below the threshold and resetting their luxury tax rates in 2017 — something that required them to decrease payroll by about \$6 million from 2016 levels — they saved a total of more than \$20 million in tax payments in 2018-19. Did those savings leave them more inclined to spend aggressively in the last two years, when they've outspent every other team in the game by a sizable margin? Probably.

Yet for an organization that was once willing to spend \$63 million as a one-off expense on a speculative investment, should \$20 million in prospective luxury tax savings (on top of the player's 2020 salary) truly determine whether the team retains or parts with an elite talent like Betts or Martinez? Can't the Sox — a team with revenues that are among the most sizable in the game — afford to retain their stars? How much can a team truly afford to spend while remaining profitable? Is it reasonable for a big-revenue team to carry a payroll of roughly \$200 million, or is there some obligation to spend closer to \$230 million to \$250 million?

Those questions hover not merely over the Sox but over the entire sport. But for the Sox, the answers will shape the future.

Here's a look at the baseball managerial openings and who may fit

Peter Abraham

The regular season ends Sunday, but already the Giants, Padres, and Royals are searching for new managers and could soon be joined by the Cubs, Mariners, Mets, Phillies, and Pirates.

The biggest opening is at Fenway Park, where the Red Sox are once again seeking a general manager.

The Red Sox owners discussed their situation on Friday. So let's focus instead on the managerial spots:

Giants — Bruce Bochy did new president of baseball operations Farhan Zaidi a massive favor by announcing his retirement before the season. San Francisco has had seven months to evaluate candidates.

Yankees bench coach Josh Bard makes sense. He has a connection to Zaidi from their shared time with the Dodgers, is analytically inclined, and played a big role with the Yankees.

Former Athletics manager Bob Geren, now the Dodgers' bench coach, is a possibility, too.

But given all the time he's had, Zaidi could pull a surprise.

Padres — San Diego missed its chance to hire Dave Roberts in 2015. Bochy, who managed the team from 1995-2006, appears content with the idea of retirement. Bard, a former Padres player, fits here. Astros bench coach Joe Espada will get a look, too.

Royals — With Ned Yost retiring, Kansas City is seeking a manager for the first time since 2010. Bullpen coach Vance Wilson, who has seven years of managerial experience in the Royals' minor league system, would be a smart choice. He knows the organization better than any outsider.

Kansas City already employs former Cardinals manager Mike Matheny as a special adviser to player development. But it hurts his cause that the Cardinals took off under Mike Shildt after Matheny was fired last season.

This could take a while. General manager Dayton Moore has said he won't name a manager until Major League Baseball approves the sale of the team to John Sherman.

Sherman has to first sell his 30 percent share in the Indians. The process should be wrapped up in November.

Cubs — Expect a decision on Monday as to whether Joe Maddon returns for a sixth season. The odds are against it.

Maddon did what he was hired to do and won the World Series in 2016. But the Cubs have been running in place since the 2018 All-Star break, and that group needs a change. Maddon probably does, too.

David Ross, a special assistant to Theo Epstein, is an obvious choice here. Ross has an engaging personality but has the edge to kick some of the butts that need to be kicked there.

Mariners — Seattle won 89 games last season and won't get to 70 this year. But that's more a product of the relentless roster churn by general manager Jerry Dipoto than anything Scott Servais can control.

Servais is the organization's fourth manager in the last 10 years, so change is always right around the corner there. But he is likely to return with what should be a better team.

Mets — Mickey Callaway was on the verge of being fired several times, team insiders said, before the Mets surged after the All-Star break.

The Mets failed to make the playoffs and now general manager Brodie Van Wagenen will decide whether he wants his own choice as manager. He almost surely does.

The Mets have a win-now roster, so an experienced manager such as Maddon would fit. It would be endlessly entertaining to have former Yankees manager Joe Girardi in Queens.

Phillies — It was an all-or-nothing move to hire Gabe Kapler, and Philadelphia has been essentially a .500 team in his two seasons. Kapler is a smart guy who tried new things, and to his credit he is up front and accountable for everything.

More than anything, this team needs an identity. They're below league average offensively and roughly league average in pitching and haven't been to the postseason since 2011.

The Phillies got Bryce Harper to create some buzz. But they don't need a celebrity manager such as Maddon; they need somebody with a plan, and at least Kapler has some fresh ideas.

Pirates — There's chaos in Pittsburgh. Clint Hurdle said Wednesday he was told he would return after a season that included several fights in the clubhouse. Then a day later GM Neal Huntington said only that a decision would come after the season.

The Pirates are a static team and ultimately are likely to leave Huntington and Hurdle in place.

But if they don't, third base coach Joey Cora would be a good candidate to manage. Alex Cora's older brother is a disciplinarian and the Pirates apparently need that. Plus, the Pirates play the Red Sox next season, and that would be fun.

ROTATION A DISAPPOINTMENT

In assessing Sox, start with starters

The Red Sox are fourth in the majors in runs. In the end, their bullpen also graded out among the top four or five in the American League. The reality was far better than the perception with that group.

It was the rotation that kept the Sox out of the playoffs. Eduardo Rodriguez was the only starter who stayed healthy and pitched well.

Rick Porcello had a 5.52 earned run average, second highest among the 64 qualified starters in the majors. Nathan Eovaldi, David Price, and Chris Sale combined to miss 41 starts.

For all that, the Sox were a half-game out of a playoff spot on July 27. They were 59-47, ahead of Tampa Bay and just behind Oakland in the wild-card race.

You're left wondering whether one trade or better organizational starter depth could have made a difference.

The only significant in-season trade Dave Dombrowski made before he was fired was obtaining Andrew Cashner from Baltimore to plug a hole in the rotation.

Cashner was 1-4 with an 8.01 ERA in six starts before being sent to the bullpen.

The Sox used Cashner and nine other replacement starters 37 times to fill in for Eovaldi, Price, and Sale. They were 3-15 and 6.75 ERA. The Sox were 13-24 in those games.

That's the season. The Sox wasted a powerful offensive team with poor starting pitching. There were a dozen or so days this season when Alex Cora didn't announce his starter until the night before. How can that happen with a \$236 million payroll?

A few other thoughts on the Sox:

- Michael Chavis had a .766 OPS, 18 home runs, and 58 RBIs over 95 games and 382 plate appearances, a relatively impressive rookie season at the plate.

He also started games at first base (43 times), second base (40 times), and third base (twice) and was better than expected in the field, although that still needs work.

But Chavis missed the final 41 games with a shoulder injury and oblique strain, time the Red Sox wanted to further evaluate him and determine where he best fits next season.

Mark Simon of Sports Info Solutions pointed out that Chavis was one of the luckiest hitters in the majors this season. He had a .347 batting average on balls in play and a .248 expected batting average on balls in play.

Expected batting average measures on balls in play the likelihood of a hit based on exit velocity and launch angle.

A wide gap between those averages suggests the hitter was lucky. In Chavis's case, a 99-point spread was the widest for any hitter with at least 250 plate appearances.

The Sox plan to send Chavis to the Puerto Rico Winter League for a month to pick up some at-bats and get introduced to left field. He'll play for Caguas, Cora's former team.

- Mitch Moreland was annoyed when he became a free agent following the 2016 season and the Rangers didn't make him an offer to stay. He has been taking it out on them since.

Moreland hit .442 with a 1.118 OPS in 13 games against the Rangers in three seasons with the Sox with 11 runs and 11 RBIs. That includes going 12 of 25 with four extra-base hits and five RBIs in seven games at Texas.

"Total coincidence," Moreland said with a big smile.

- Three members of the 2018 Red Sox are returning to the playoffs, or at least could go back.

Drew Pomeranz, who was traded from San Francisco to Milwaukee at the deadline, became a lockdown setup man. Joe Kelly hasn't pitched for the Dodgers since Sept. 18 because of a mysterious lower-body injury but could return for the postseason. That is if they want him to. Kelly has a 4.62 ERA and 1.40 WHIP. Lefthander Jalen Beeks is one of the many pitchers the Rays will consider for their bullpen.

- The minor leagues exist to produce talent for the major league roster. Winning is a happy byproduct on occasion, but not the goal. That said, the Sox farm teams had a .464 winning percentage this season. Only the Angels, Cardinals, and Tigers were lower.

- Congratulations to Jon Miller, WBZ's longtime Red Sox reporter. He was inducted into the Massachusetts Broadcasters Hall of Fame on Friday.

- Here's to Porcello, who came through five seasons with the Red Sox with a World Series ring, a Cy Young Award, 73 wins, and everyone's respect.

Porcello was accessible, honest, and accountable in his dealings with the media and was happy to talk informally about different topics. His views often helped me get a better feel for a story or column I was working on.

Porcello is a good candidate to bounce back from a poor season, and the Red Sox should give him that chance. But it's understandable if they don't and equally understandable if he wants to play in a climate less frenzied than Boston.

On Wednesday, after what was likely his final game for the Sox, Porcello was asked what he reflected on sitting in the dugout. He smiled and said, "Yeah, I sat there and I said, '[Shoot], this has been a tough one this year.'"

He was candid right to the end.

ETC.

When first-year Rangers manager Chris Woodward sits at his desk in the manager's office at Globe Life Park, it's directly below a mural featuring the 15 men who preceded him in the job.

It's hard not to notice that more than half of them lasted three or fewer seasons with the team.

The Rangers have yet to win a World Series, joining the Brewers, Mariners, Nationals, Padres, Rays, and Rockies. They were a pitch away in 2011 and haven't won a playoff series since. This season is their third straight with a losing record.

Woodward, 43, is tasked with figuring out how to break that drought.

"Where we are right now? I think we need to obviously make some additions," Woodward said. "But I think the mentality is there. We're not far off."

Alex Cora feels the same way. The Rangers will have payroll space for general manager Jon Daniels to make some moves and already have a strong bullpen in place.

"You see the arms," Cora said. "Pretty impressive. They're interesting. Tough division, of course, but it's an interesting team."

The biggest issue for the Rangers will be getting more from second baseman Rougned Odor and shortstop Elvis Andrus.

Odor has a .701 OPS over the last three seasons. He rarely gets on base. Andrus has a .693 OPS in the last two seasons. They are both signed through 2022 at a combined \$80.5 million.

"They're hungry. They want to win. That's all these guys talk about," Woodward said, speaking generally about his team.

"When I talk about process with our players, they need to understand that their process is their production every day. That's why I stress to them so often, every day, that we can't take one day off. Championship players, championship teams, do not take days off. The process is a recipe for winning."

Texas needs upgrades in its rotation behind Mike Minor and Lance Lynn, and a center fielder. But playing at a new ballpark should provide a lift, as attendance is sure to increase.

Extra bases

Cleveland's Terry Francona has had 15 consecutive seasons with a winning record, the longest stretch for a manager since Bobby Cox had 15 years with the Braves from 1991-2005. Joe McCarthy has the record of 24 straight from 1926-50 with the Cubs, Yankees, and Red Sox . . . Another longevity mark: 34-year-old Adam Jones, who was with Arizona this season, has 12 consecutive seasons with enough plate appearances to qualify for the batting title. Ichiro Suzuki was the last player to do that . . . Felix Hernandez is 1-15 with a 6.42 ERA in 25 games since the 2018 All-Star break. He will be a free agent after the season and at age 33 may merit only a minor league contract, if he's willing to accept it . . . It has to annoy the Rays and Athletics, who keep striking out in their bids for new stadiums, that the Braves and Rangers abandoned perfectly good ballparks for new ones in recent years. But it's easy to understand why the Rangers will finish up at Globe Life Park this weekend. Texas has played 759 games with first-pitch temperatures of at least 90 degrees since the park opened in 1994, according to the Dallas Morning News, more than twice as many as the next team. Globe Life Field will have a retractable roof and air conditioning. The Red Sox are there May 15-17 . . . The Astros nabbed Zack Greinke in a creative deal with the Diamondbacks and

Nicholas Castellanos raked for the ill-fated Cubs. But the best under-the radar move at the deadline was Milwaukee GM David Stearns obtaining Jordan Lyles from Pittsburgh for a Double A reliever. Lyles was 5-7 with a 5.36 ERA in 17 starts for the Pirates but is 7-1 with a 2.24 ERA in 11 starts for the Brewers. Milwaukee is 10-1 in the games Lyles has started and made a successful run to the postseason . . . Major league teams went into the weekend with a record 6,647 home runs, 542 more than the previous record with three games to play. No wonder commissioner Rob Manfred told Forbes magazine, "I do think that we need to see if we can make some changes that gives us a more predictable, consistent performance from the baseball." . . . The fourth-annual Pedro Martinez Foundation Gala will be Nov. 1 at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Boston. David Ortiz is expected to attend along with Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Corey Kluber, among other players. Go to pedromartinezfoundation.com/gala for information . . . Happy 43rd birthday to Calvin Pickering, who at 6 feet 5 inches, 285 pounds was one of the biggest Red Sox players ever. Pickering, a native of the US Virgin Islands, was selected off waivers in 2001 and played 17 games in September. He hit .280 with three home runs but didn't play the following season because of a torn quadriceps suffered in spring training.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox' lack of pitching on display again in loss to Orioles

Steve Hewitt

Among many other things, one of the top priorities for the next Red Sox president of baseball operations this offseason will be finding depth in the pitching rotation.

Saturday's 9-4 loss to the Orioles provided yet another reminder.

Dave Dombrowski last offseason re-signed Nathan Eovaldi to a massive contract and Chris Sale to a big extension that doesn't even begin until next year. He did little else to provide insurance for a rotation with injury history. When those arms inevitably went down, the Sox were forced to find options that proved inadequate.

One of those was veteran Jhoulys Chacin, whose best days seem to be well behind him.

The right-hander was acquired as a free agent at the beginning of September after a miserable season with the Brewers. He showed flashes — he struck out four in two perfect innings in his Sox debut against the Yankees — but ultimately regressed. Chacin wrapped up his season Saturday by giving up three homers, and he wasn't able to complete the third inning.

Chacin made six appearances with the Red Sox (83-78), including five starts, and had a 7.36 ERA. He allowed 12 earned runs and six homers in his final three starts. The Sox obviously need better.

"The same thing that he struggled with the Brewers, fastball location," manager Alex Cora said. "When your stuff is not 98, 99, you have to be precise."

David Price, Sale and Eovaldi are expected to be fully healthy for 2020, but there's obvious risk with that trio until they prove they can play a full season. Eduardo Rodriguez — the lone bright spot in the rotation who goes for his 20th win in Sunday's season finale — even has injury history. The Sox not only need to find a fifth starter in the very possible event Rick Porcello leaves in free agency, but reliable arms for much-needed depth.

Finally noticing a need for pitching depth, Dombrowski traded for Andrew Cashner — who was solid in three months with the Orioles — in July, but he didn't find the same success here, ultimately being demoted to the bullpen.

Cashner was solid in that role, but the Sox needed more. On Saturday, facing his former team, the right-hander was summoned in the sixth inning with the Sox trailing, 4-3, and let the game get away. He likely finished his season by giving up five hits and four runs as he failed to get out of the inning.

If that was it, Cashner produced a 6.20 ERA in 53⅔ innings with the Red Sox. He made just six starts.

“I do believe, if he wants to, he can be a force out of the bullpen,” Cora said. “It all depends what he wants to do, because I do believe he’ll understand a little bit more about himself. ... If he learns a little about that craft and he uses his pitches in certain areas, I think he can be successful.”

Bogaerts shines

The Red Sox might not be playing for much with a game left, but Xander Bogaerts is intent on finishing his breakout season strong. The shortstop was 3-for-4 Saturday, which included his 33rd homer and 116th RBI of the season. What stood out to Cora was his hustle on a groundout in the ninth inning.

“There was a group of fans above the dugout that gave him a standing ovation,” Cora said. “That’s who he is. That’s a kid that everybody has come to love here. He got here in ‘13, and he did some outstanding things in the playoffs, and now he’s not the tall, lanky kid from ‘13. Now he’s a strong man, and he’s a force at this level.

“He’s taking pride in a lot of things. To see that kind of effort in Game 161 when everybody knows that we’re going home after the game (Sunday) is great. That’s why we made the commitment, and that’s why we’re very confident that he’s going to keep doing these things for a long, long time here in Boston.”

Bogaerts was focused on Game 162 on Sunday, when they have a chance to get Rodriguez his 20th win.

“Obviously we have one more game to go,” Bogaerts said. “Obviously proud of the way I went out every day and gave it all that I have and try to help the team, but it didn’t work out. We’ve got one more game to go. We know Eddie is going for a big 20 tomorrow so I think we need to come in tomorrow with a little chip on our shoulder and try to get the job done.”

Staff decisions

With a busy offseason ahead that will likely include several roster changes, Cora was asked if coaching staff will stay the same next season.

“As of now, yeah,” Cora said. “As of now we’re having ongoing conversations, and we’ll make decisions over the next few days.”

John Henry: Alex Cora to manage Red Sox in 2020

Jason Mastrodonato

The question was clear. So was the answer.

Will Alex Cora be the manager of the Red Sox no matter who is hired to be the next general manager?

“Yes,” principal owner John Henry said on Friday while making his first public remarks since firing Dave Dombrowski.

The new era the Red Sox are about to begin will not only shake up the outlook in the front office but present Cora with a job he hasn’t had time to do.

Until now, taking a look at the entire organization, top to bottom, and creating a culture of player development that can nurture long-term success hasn’t been a priority. The primary focus of Dombrowski

and Cora was to get the most out of the 25 guys on the big league roster. The farm system was somewhat of an afterthought.

“I’ve been here for two years,” Cora said Saturday. “One of the things that I’ve been telling people, everything has been a sprint for me. In 2017, I had to meet a lot of people, and then we win the World Series (in 2018), and then it’s spring training. This is the first time I’m going to be able to slow down and go from there.

“I didn’t say we’re not (prioritizing the farm system), I’m just saying that we have to slow down and go over it now that we have time to check it.”

Cora has been nothing short of brilliant at getting the most out of his young players. Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts have turned into MVP candidates under his watch, while Mookie Betts won the award in Cora’s first year. Eduardo Rodriguez might win 20 games with the help of Cora’s guidance.

But there have been few instances of top prospects coming up to become regular contributors.

With a mostly veteran team, Cora had limited opportunities.

Michael Chavis, 24, was an immediate contributor, though he quickly faded and injuries dampened his rookie season. Darwinzon Hernandez, 23, had a few special moments and looks like he could have a potent arm for years to come, but he remains in need of development. Lefty Josh Taylor, 26, has probably had the most success among young rookies under Cora’s watch.

The manager said he’s hoping to have more time this offseason to think about a new direction.

“Now it’s time for me to be like, ‘OK, this is what’s going on, we have to improve this, or we have to do a better job with that,’” Cora said. “We’ll be fine. This organization has been successful for a while. It’s four World Series in (15 seasons), whatever it is. I think we’ve done a pretty good job. But if we have to improve we’ll improve.”

Henry’s announcement that the team wants to get under the \$208 million threshold for luxury tax purposes in 2020 was not a surprise to Cora.

“We’ve been talking a lot the last few weeks,” he said. “I had a pretty good idea what was going on even before this year, so it’s nothing that surprises me.”

He still thinks the team will compete for a World Series next year.

“I understand changes are part of it, but at the same time, I think the core, the talent is still here,” he said. “You go over and you’ve got (Andrew Benintendi) and Xander and Raffy and Mookie and (Jackie Bradley Jr.), they’re still young, athletic players that impact the game. Whatever decision is made in the offseason, I’ll understand. But at the end, I know we’re going to be trying to win the World Series, and that’s the most important thing.”

The goal, he said, is to win consistently, not just win a World Series one year and miss the playoffs the next.

He said he’s talked to the players about things they want to see improved next year — food, clubhouse, structure and conditioning were four things they mentioned to him — and plans to make changes.

But Cora doesn’t expect to be more involved in front office decisions than he was under Dombrowski. He said he’s given the front office some ideas, but he doesn’t plan on changing his input level.

“I’m good at making adjustments, and whoever is running the operations, we’re going to connect,” he said. “I think we’ll be on the same page. That’s something I’ve done my whole career, and that’s not going to change.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Alex Cora and Xander Bogaerts lead the Red Sox into an offseason of uncertainty

Bill Koch

Alex Cora will depart for his native Puerto Rico and visit his daughter, Camila. Xander Bogaerts will find his favorite beach in his native Aruba and reflect on what was the best individual season of his career.

These are the immediate plans of the Red Sox manager and shortstop. What comes next is decidedly more uncertain, as Sunday brings down the curtain on what has been a disappointing 2019.

What started as a mission to become the first repeat World Series champions in almost two decades has long since crashed and burned. There is talk of rebuilding heading into this particular October, with principal owner John Henry and club chairman Tom Werner stating their desire to slash payroll and slip under the first threshold of the Competitive Balance Tax early Friday evening.

“I had a pretty good idea of what was going on even before this year,” Cora said. “It’s nothing that surprises me. At the end of the day we know the nature of the business and what you have to do.”

“I don’t know how the team will be,” Bogaerts said. “Obviously there are a lot of rumors about a lot of stuff. I’m not in charge of any of those. Those aren’t my decisions.”

Their responses Saturday before and after a 9-4 skunking by the Orioles suggested a leader and his de facto team captain on the same page. If that’s the best thing to come out of the rather surprising stated goal by club brass to avoid paying taxes to Major League Baseball and potentially break up the core of a championship team, so be it. Cora’s communication skills and the old head on young shoulders displayed at all times by Bogaerts will lead this Boston team into its next iteration.

Mookie Betts is no guarantee to be here in 2020, his Most Valuable Player award and multiple Gold Gloves potentially headed out of town prior to his last year of arbitration eligibility. J.D. Martinez has the right to opt out of the five-year contract he signed prior to 2018 and test free agency yet again. Rick Porcello, Brock Holt and Mitch Moreland are among the clubhouse leaders also due to hit the open market.

“We’ve had some great memories throughout the years,” Bogaerts said. “Seeing some faces who might leave will be tough. We’ll see what happens. We don’t know what’s going to happen so far.”

Bogaerts deserves an Oscar if he was blindsided by any of this – his postgame remarks Saturday were those of a cool veteran. Cora played for six different teams through his 14-year career, learning the realities of the game’s business side the hard way. Watching Dave Dombrowski be fired in early September, the president of baseball operations who gave Cora his first chance to manage in the big leagues, is now just one more obstacle he must work through.

“I think my (general manager) years are over,” Cora said, alluding to his previous World Baseball Classic experience with Puerto Rico. “Somebody else has to make those decisions. I just have to attack the offseason the way I think is going to put us in a better spot next year, and we go from there.”

Cora has been meeting with Henry, Werner and a four-person group overseeing the club – Eddie Romero, Brian O’Halloran, Zack Scott and Raquel Ferreira – throughout the last three weeks. Their discussions have been frank and focused on the future. Cora, as he’s done since his November 2017 hiring, has served as the conduit between his players and the front office.

“I’m glad that they believe in me,” Cora said. “I know how it works in this business. We’ve got to be ready for next year. We’ve got to be better.

“It’s been good being part of it and understanding the vision. It’s not that I didn’t know the vision, because me and Dave had great communication and were actually making plans for the upcoming year. But to talk about a few things I do feel that we can do better – not only on the field, but things the guys need around here at Fenway – and they’re listening.

“Hopefully we can improve.”

Orioles 9, Red Sox 4: Baltimore blasts Boston in season’s penultimate game

Bill Koch

Performances like those offered Saturday by Jhoulys Chacin and Andrew Cashner help explain why the Red Sox are playing meaningless baseball on the regular season’s final weekend.

The pair of veteran right-handers combined to pitch Boston into a series defeat against the lowly Orioles, and only Sunday’s finale at Fenway Park provides hope of retribution.

Chacin and Cashner were each charged with four earned runs as the Red Sox home woes continued to the bitter end. This was a 9-4 defeat on what was otherwise a sun-splashed day, with the sellout crowd of 36,414 fans on hand only enjoying the weather.

Boston has dropped three straight into the last game of this lost season. Eduardo Rodriguez goes to the mound in search of his 20th victory, and the Red Sox expect to field a strong lineup behind him. Otherwise, Sunday’s 3:05 p.m. first pitch will be just as impactful on the standings as this forgettable afternoon.

“It’s obviously an individual accomplishment, but at this point we can’t make the playoffs anymore,” Xander Bogaerts said. “The way he’s been for us this year, I think he deserves a nice win.”

Chacin was designated for assignment after serving as the Opening Day starter for the Brewers, and he hasn’t been missed. Milwaukee is bound for the playoffs and could still capture the National League Central title. Chacin’s limited time with the Red Sox resulted in a 7.36 earned-run average, as he allowed 16 hits and seven walks in just 14 2/3 innings.

Three home runs doomed Chacin to defeat, as he recorded a mere eight outs. DJ Stewart lined a two-run shot to deep left in the top of the first and Richie Martin went the same direction with a solo homer in the second. Renato Nunez chased Chacin with a titanic blast toward Kenmore Square, a 433-foot bullet that gave Baltimore a 4-3 lead in the third.

“The same thing that he struggled with for the Brewers – fastball location,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “You saw it right away. The first pitch to (Jonathan) Villar was supposed to be down and away – it was right down the middle. The home run to Stewart, same deal.”

Cashner was a trade deadline acquisition from the Orioles, and he served up four earned runs to his old team on Saturday. The right-hander retired just two of the seven batters he faced in the top of the sixth, and Baltimore donated one of those outs when Stevie Wilkerson sacrificed. Cashner staggered to a 6.20 ERA in 53 2/3 innings with Boston.

RBI singles by Austin Wynns and Trey Mancini combined with an RBI double off the Green Monster by Martin were enough to chase Cashner. The Orioles enjoyed an 8-3 lead and were able to steer it through the finish thanks to a pair of double plays ending the seventh and eighth. Mancini added a solo homer to right in the ninth.

“He’s a free agent and obviously he’s been a starter his whole career,” Cora said. “I do believe that if he wants to he could be a force out of the bullpen. He’ll understand a little bit more about himself.”

Personal milestones are all the Red Sox can salvage at this point, and that generally means referring to Rafael Devers and Bogaerts. Devers moved two hits within 200 for the season and Bogaerts notched his 85th extra-base hit of the year, tying Nomar Garciaparra (twice) for the club record by a shortstop. J.D. Martinez cracked a solo home run in the first, the only other real highlight for the hosts.

Bogaerts went to Lansdowne Street with a two-run homer to deep left in the first, forcing a 2-2 tie. Martinez followed two pitches later with his 36th of the season, also a drive to left. The Red Sox were stymied the rest of the way aside from a Sandy Leon RBI single to shallow left in the sixth.

*** *MassLive.com***

Xander Bogaerts homers, records 3 hits but Boston Red Sox lose again to Orioles

Christopher Smith

Xander Bogaerts went 3-for-4 with his 33rd home run of the 2019 season. But the Red Sox lost 9-4 the Orioles here at Fenway Park on Saturday.

Bogaerts’ two-run blast in the first inning tied the game 2-2. It traveled 414 feet.

J.D. Martinez followed with a 389-foot solo homer to give Boston a 3-2 lead.

The Orioles tied the game in the second inning, took a lead in the third inning and then scored four runs in the sixth inning.

Jhoulys Chacín started for Boston. He allowed four runs on three home runs in 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

DJ Stewart, Richie Martin and Renato Núñez took Chacín deep. Trey Mancini homered in the ninth.

The Red Sox will play their final game of the 2019 season Sunday vs. the Orioles at 3:05 p.m. Eduardo Rodriguez will try for win No. 20.

Red Sox’s Cora doesn’t expect rebuild or bridge year: ‘The main goal is to win the World Series’

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox manager Alex Cora has been in baseball long enough to understand the business of the game. So Cora, who has managed the most expensive roster in baseball in his first two seasons, wasn’t taken by surprise when principal owner John Henry proclaimed Friday that the Sox would cut payroll this winter in an effort to get under the \$208 million luxury tax threshold.

“We’ve been talking a lot the last few weeks,” Cora said. “I had a pretty good idea what was going on, even before this year. It’s nothing that surprises me.”

Meeting with the media Friday afternoon at Fenway Park, Henry expressed a strong desire to get under \$208 million so that the Red Sox would reset their standing in the competitive balance tax system. After two years of paying significant taxes, it behooves Boston to reset so that future payroll overages won’t be taxed as drastically

A payroll cutdown from \$240 million to below \$208 million will likely mean significant roster shuffling this winter. Like Henry and chairman Tom Werner, Cora doesn’t necessarily believe that shuffling will come in the form of a rebuild or “bridge year.”

“Regardless of the plan, the main goal is to win the World Series,” Cora said. “I don’t see that changing. There are a few things that are going to change in the upcoming days, weeks or a month. We have to adjust to it. At the end on the field with the players, they understand what we have to do to be competitive next year. That’s my job.”

Though Cora will have some say in roster construction, the ultimate call on the makeup of the Red Sox will be made by the incoming head of baseball operations. Whoever replaces Dave Dombrowski will be tasked with getting the Sox under the \$208 million mark in payroll by Opening Day.

Cora will enter his third season at the helm with a different cast than he has had for his first two seasons. Key players like Rick Porcello, Mitch Moreland, Brock Holt and J.D. Martinez may depart in free agency and outfielders Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. are considered trade candidates.

“I think (roster turnover) just happens every year,” Cora said. “I understand that. Regardless of if you win or you don’t win, it’s not like the late ’90s-- you won and you added the two best free agents. It doesn’t work that way anymore. I understand changes are a part of it. At the same time, the talent is still here.”

Cora plans to begin his preparation for 2020 shortly after the season ends Sunday. He expects his future boss will aim for the Sox to contend next season.

“Whatever decision is made in the offseason, I’ll understand,” Cora said. “In the end, I know we’re going to try to win the World Series. That’s the most important thing.”

Boston Red Sox trying to avoid tax penalty that equals \$10M for exceeding CBT by \$20M and \$22.4M for \$40M overage

Christopher Smith

Red Sox ownership wants to avoid (and reset) tax penalties in 2020 by keeping the payroll under the \$208 million Competitive Balance Threshold.

That will mean slashing the payroll, which already is an estimated \$218 million for 2020 before any offseason transactions, including signing or trading for a fifth starter and adding to the bullpen as planned. Boston also might pursue help at first and second base.

“This (coming) year we need to be under the CBT,” Henry said Friday. “That was something we’ve known for more than a year now.”

Henry later added, “We may not be under. It’s our goal to be under.”

How much is the tax penalty that the Red Sox want to avoid?

Boston exceeded the CBT in both 2018 and 2019. The organization, therefore, is categorized as a three-time CBT payor. That means the Red Sox would receive a 50% tax if they exceeded the threshold by \$20 million or less in 2020.

They would receive a 62% surcharge for the next \$20 million overage. They would receive a 95% surcharge for being \$40 million or more over the \$208 million CBT.

The Red Sox, therefore, would pay a \$10 million tax penalty if their payroll reached \$228 million (a \$20 million overage) in 2020. They would pay \$22.4 million if their payroll reached \$248 million (\$40 million overage) in 2020.

If the Red Sox went to \$210 million — \$2 million over the CBT — ownership would pay a \$1 million tax.

Ownership is trying to reset their tax penalties so they can become a first-time CBT payor in 2021. That would mean a 20% tax for up to a \$20 million overage, 32% for between \$20-40 million and 62.5% for more than \$40 million.

Boston Red Sox trading Mookie Betts seems like realistic possibility; Ownership has ‘right to decide what they want to do,’ Alex Cora says

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox trading Mookie Betts this offseason seems like a realistic possibility if he won't sign a contract extension.

“We'll have some conversations with him going forward,” Red Sox chairman Tom Werner said Friday. “But obviously there will be a point where hopefully we can make a deal. Or we'll decide at that point what is Plan B or Plan C? But we haven't gotten to that point. And we're very open to continuing the discussions with him.”

Red Sox manager Alex Cora on Saturday was asked his reaction to Werner's comment.

“That's how they (ownership) feel about it and obviously that's the business side of the equation,” Cora said. “And they have a right to decide what they want to do in the future.”

The Red Sox should set a contract extension deadline this offseason.

The new GM, whoever it might be, must decide whether to trade Betts or keep him for the final year of his contract and receive draft pick compensation if he signs elsewhere in free agency.

Betts has made it clear he wants to become a free agent after the 2020 season.

Whether the Red Sox decide to trade or keep him should rest solely on the prospect package Boston is offered in return. Why trade him if the return isn't right? Just keep his bat in the lineup for one more year and receive the draft pick.

Trading Betts at next year's trade deadline is unrealistic. The Red Sox most likely will be in postseason contention next July 31. They never would trade their top hitter in the middle of a pennant race.

Cora said about roster turnover this offseason, “It just happens every year and I understand that. Regardless of whether you win or you don't win, it's not like the late-90s when you won and you add the two best free agents. It doesn't work that way anymore. So I understand changes are a part of it. But at the same time, I think the core, the talent is still here.”

Betts likely will receive more than \$30 million in arbitration this coming offseason. Boston's 2020 payroll already is at approximately \$218 million. Principal owner John Henry said Friday he wants to stay under the \$208 million Competitive Balance Threshold in 2020.

Boston Red Sox's Steve Pearce considering retirement: ‘I can lay my head down at night knowing I gave everything I had’

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox first baseman Steve Pearce is contemplating retirement after 13 seasons, he said Saturday.

Pearce, the reigning World Series MVP, has been limited to just 29 games this season due to injuries. After spending the weekend with the team in Boston, he will head home to Florida and spend time with his family as he assesses his future over the winter.

If this is the end for Pearce, he'll walk away with no regrets.

"I've accomplished a lot," Pearce said. "I'm 36. I'll be 37 next year. I've grinded my whole career and I can lay my head down at night knowing I gave everything I had. We'll see what the future holds."

Pearce was acquired from the Blue Jays last June and quickly became a threat against left-handed pitching. After a strong finish to the regular season, he broke out in late October, going 4-for-12 with three homers and eight RBIs in the World Series as the Sox defeated the Dodgers in five games.

His performance was rewarded with a one-year, \$6.25 million contract in November. But 2019 has amounted to a lost season for Pearce, who last played May 31 due to back and knee issues.

"It's unfortunate. It has been an unfortunate year for everybody," Pearce said. "Obviously, we had higher expectations coming into the year. Me personally, I had higher expectations. Then baseball happened."

Pearce hit .180 with one home run in 29 games before hitting the injured list and has been rehabbing in Fort Myers for most of the season. He has returned to Boston only a couple times since being injured and is relishing the opportunity to be around his teammates one last time.

"It means everything," he said. "Especially with last year's team, seeing everybody again. We've gotten really close. Personally, I've gotten close with a lot of guys. It's always good to see them. Watching baseball here at Fenway Park, there's nothing better."

Pearce was close to returning in early July before suffering a posterior ligament injury in his left knee while rehabbing with Triple-A Pawtucket. He just recently resumed running, meaning he likely won't be active for his final weekend as a member of the Red Sox.

If this is the end for Pearce, he'll retire having played 766 major league games with seven different clubs. In that time, he went from being a journeyman who was designated for assignment on three separate occasions to a postseason hero for one of the game's most iconic franchises.

"No regrets," he said. "I would have liked to have gone out a little bit different. If this year was a little bit different. But that's baseball. That's why it's the most beautiful game in the world."

Alex Cora: Boston Red Sox will 'make decisions' about coaching staff 'over the next few days'

Christopher Smith

Will the Red Sox bring back the same coaching staff in 2020?

"As of now we're having ongoing conversations and we'll make decisions over the next few days," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said Saturday here at Fenway Park.

It's a real possibility a change or two will be made to the coaching staff after Boston (83-77) missed the postseason this year for the first time since 2015.

It should be interesting to see if Boston retains pitching coach Dana LeVangie.

The Red Sox rank 19th in the majors in ERA (4.68). They rank 20th in starter ERA (4.93) and 16th in reliever ERA (4.39).

Red Sox ownership confirmed Friday that Cora will remain the manager no matter who is hired as the next GM to replace Dave Dombrowski.

*** *RedSox.com***

Bogaerts in elite company with career season

Craig Forde

Even as the defending World Series champions stumble towards the finish line, Xander Bogaerts continues to be a beacon of better things to come.

On Saturday afternoon at Fenway Park, toward the end of a career year, the Red Sox shortstop went 3-for-4 with a home run and 2 RBIs in the face of an 9-4 defeat at the hands of Baltimore.

With his team trailing, 2-0, Bogaerts followed up a first-inning leadoff single by Jackie Bradley Jr. with a tremendous 414-foot home run, per Statcast, to tie things up.

Bogaerts' 33rd big fly of the season, which had an exit velocity of 103.1 mph, departed the ballpark over the Green Monster seats in left field.

"To see that kind of effort in Game 161, when everybody knows that we're going home after the game tomorrow, is great," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. "That's why we made the commitment. That's why we're very confident that he's going to keep doing these things for a long, long time here in Boston."

It was the 85th extra-base hit for Bogaerts this season, tying him with Nomar Garciaparra (1997 and 2002) for the most extra-base hits by a Boston shortstop.

J.D. Martinez followed suit with a solo shot, his 36th home run, giving the hosts a 3-2 lead and their 10th back-to-back homers of the year, the last coming courtesy of the same two bats in Anaheim on Sept. 1.

Bogaerts' .309 batting average pulls him into the team lead going into the final day of play and puts him on the brink of becoming just the third shortstop in league history to hit over .300 on the season while collecting 85-plus extra base hits and 115-plus RBIs (Alex Rodriguez in 1996, 2001, '02 and '07; Garciaparra in '02).

On the year, the 26-year-old has set career highs in home runs, extra-base hits, RBIs (116), doubles (52), on-base percentage (.383), slugging (.556) and OPS (.940).

"That's a kid that everybody has grown to love here," Cora noted. "He got here in '13 and he did some outstanding things in the playoffs. Now he's not the tall lanky kid from '13; now he's a strong man, he's a force at this level and he's taking pride of a lot of things."

"I'm proud of the way I went out every day and gave it all I have to try and help the team, but it didn't work out," Bogaerts said.

The Red Sox's lead would be short-lived, as Boston starter Jhoulys Chacin served up home runs in each of the three innings that he appeared, allowing Baltimore to regain control of the game in the third before departing.

"The same thing that he struggled with the Brewers -- fastball location," said Cora. "You saw it right away, the first pitch to [Jonathan] Villar was supposed to be down and away, it was right in the middle. The home run to [DJ] Stewart, the same deal. If you live down in the zone, you better have great action and you better hit your spots."

It was the third straight appearance in which the Red Sox hurler had allowed four earned runs.

Despite a third straight loss and the looming air of a baseball-free October, Bogaerts is looking to continue his efforts to the bitter end for his teammates.

“We have one more game to go, we know Eddie’s [Eduardo Rodriguez] going for a big 20 [wins] tomorrow,” Bogaerts said. “I think we need to come out tomorrow with a chip on our shoulder and try to get the job done.”

* **WEET.com**

The Sunday Baseball Column: Eduardo Rodriguez's new world

Rob Bradford

Eduardo Rodriguez has graduated. That much became evident when sitting in the dugout with Rick Porcello in Texas last week.

“I was talking to Porc on the bench. He was one of the guys who would tell me, ‘You have to throw 30-plus starts, 200 innings. Thirty-plus starts, 200 innings.’ He would say the all the time,” Rodriguez said. “We were sitting on the bench and he said, ‘You getting your 30 starts and 200 innings before you leave me, bro.’ He would always say when I got 30-plus starts and 200 innings I would be graduating. He told me, ‘You made it.’ That was a great moment, especially for me. I’ve been his teammate since I got to the big leagues in 2015 and we played together for five years. It’s been a long time. He’s been a teacher, brother and everything.”

The student has learned well. And now he is just starting to reap the rewards of all those lessons.

Heading into Sunday there were the 19 wins, the 196 1/3 innings and the newly-minted title as ace of the Red Sox’ starting staff.

But after Sunday is when the conversation truly gets interesting when it comes to Rodriguez.

The lefty is arbitration-eligible for two more years, having made \$4.3 million this season. And now with the season Rodriguez has turned in his number will slowly be climbing toward another payroll problem for the Red Sox. There is the notion of actually bidding farewell to the starter after the 2022 season.

In the world of the Red Sox right now, Rodriguez’s existence has become more important than ever on multiple levels. It’s why the extension question should be asked.

“They haven’t done that with me,” said Rodriguez when asked if has been approached by the Red Sox about a contract extension. “If it happens, it happens. I still have two more years here. We’ll see how that goes. I love it here and I want to stay here for a long time. If they want me to, I’ll stay here. ... I haven’t had that conversation yet so I don’t know how that feels.”

All of this is new to Rodriguez, but it’s time that all parties involved understand what is at stake when it comes to the 26-year-old. He has suddenly become the most certain commodity on a staff that has committed to nearly \$80 million of uncertainty thanks to the injury history of Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi.

While there is always some uneasiness when it comes to committing long-term to pitchers of any age, this version of Rodriguez is something the Red Sox desperately need. It is the same feeling the organization prioritized when getting out ahead of Jon Lester’s financial future via a five-year, \$30 million extension with a team option that didn’t make him a free agent until after the 2014 season.

It is the kind of maneuvering that can help manage the kind of uncomfortable payroll issues these Red Sox are starting at.

For now, however, the priority is just making sure 2019 is the trampoline for Rodriguez’s career most think it is.

“For me, it’s just being part of the team. That’s all for me. Go out there 35 days. I just want to be accountable and every time I go out there do my job,” Rodriguez said. “I don’t think myself as the best or the No. 1 or whatever. For me, it’s just going out there and doing my part. That’s the way I see it.”

ECK HAS THE BEST 200-WIN STORY

Now that Mike Minor found a way to manage his 200th strikeout — reeling in a bit of controversy along the way — there have been 24 pitchers in big league history to finish their season with 200 strikeouts on the dot. One of the names is a familiar one: Dennis Eckersley.

While Minor’s accomplishment got a lot of play thanks to the dropped pop-up that allowed for the opportunity, the story pales in comparison to Eckersley’s big day back on the final day of the season in 1976.

“I needed eight and I got it in the fifth inning,” said Eckersley, who was pitching for the Indians against the Yankees at the time. “The crazy thing was that in the sixth inning there were guys on first and third and they were going to double steal. Fred Stanley was the hitter and I was going to punch him out at some point. Sandy Alomar Sr. was at first. Alan Ashby was the catcher so he called for a pitch-out. I didn’t know it was going to go straight to Frank Duffy at shortstop. So I threw, pitched out and got off the dirt. He hit me right in back of the head. It went off my (expletive) head. Imagine that? The next inning I got hit in the head. They carried me off. That’s why I’ll never forget it.”

Fortunately for Eckersley, he had managed to secure his 200th strikeout just before being beamed, fanning Gene Locklear in the fifth inning.

“I just flipped it in the dugout,” he said of the big moment. “I was just like it was no big deal because I was going to get 250 the next year. That was my second year and I started off that season bad. They put me in the bullpen. I struck out (138) batters in the second half. That was as hard as I ever threw. It was important that I got 200 but I thought I would do it all the time.”

Eckersley was one of seven pitchers to manage 200 strikeouts that season. Conversely, heading into Sunday there have been 23 to manage the feat in 2019.

THE LAST PIECE OF CHRISTIAN VAZQUEZ’S PUZZLE

With a start Sunday Vazquez will tie Jarrod Saltalamacchia for most games caught by a Red Sox backstop since Jason Varitek’s 2008 season, playing the position in 119 games. And while the catcher won’t identify the departure Blake Swihart (and his playing time) as the springboard for the breakout season, Vazquez does make it clear that the new workload has been an enormous positive.

“I think I worked so hard in the offseason I knew this was going to happen soon. I worked my ass off in the offseason. I didn’t hit so much in spring training but I felt it was going to come,” he said. “I needed the chance to play more than 100 games. I can’t do anything on the bench. I want to pay every day and help the team. If I go 0-for-4 today I know what’s going to happen the next day, do an adjustment quick. If I don’t play the next day I have to wait two days. It’s the first time I’ve caught 100 games. It’s very cool.

“Just pride, man. I want to be the best catcher in the American League.”

The .274 batting average, .796 OPS and 23 homers are certainly notable. But it has been Vazquez’s defensive improvement which has been the true separator. His pop-time, for example, has jumped from 46th-best in the majors last season to 11th overall in 2019, with the pitch-framing finding a new level this time around.

So, what is left?

“Blocking. This year I had a lot of wild pitches,” he explained. “I want to be a wall.”

There seems to be a plan in place in order to accomplish that final goal.

“For him, he gets in trouble when he wavers from one solid active stance. When he becomes consistent in just one that’s when he’s at his best blocking,” explained Red Sox roving catching instructor Chad Epperson. “He has the ability to really stay compact. His feet are quick. His release is quick. The main thing is to block the ball first. I just think that when he gets into his normal solid action stance, he’s on time. When he drifts from that it’s a little too wide, it’s a little too narrow, he gets his leg out there sometimes. But there is no doubt he is one of the better blockers I’ve seen since I’ve been a catching coordinator. It’s just the consistency.”

It appears the three-year extension (with a club option) agreed upon will be a win for the Red Sox, whose commitment to Vazquez in the final year of control (2022) is a palatable \$7 million.

THE NEXT THING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PITCHING

Staying ahead of the curve is Brian Bannister’s job.

So when we asked the Red Sox assistant pitching coach what the pitching world will be talking about heading into 2020 he was quick with an answer. (And it had at least a little to do with Tom Brady.)

“We’ve pushed the limits of velocity so high. Training methods. Lower pitch counts. More relievers. I won’t say velocity has peaked but we are getting closer toward the peak,” Bannister said. “Now mobility is becoming ever more important because it’s about quality of spin, quality of movement, the ability to maintain your body over the course of a long season, throwing at much higher velocities than you used to have to throw. You see Brady with the ‘Pliability’ shirts. Flexibility in the ankles, the knees, the hips, the backs. Guys that are able to commit to those kind of programs are able to maintain and execute better because the athletic demands on the field are so high at the moment relative to where they have been in the history of baseball. ... At some point in their careers all pitchers to compete at what the game is requiring nowadays have to commit to mobility programs.”

In other words, keeping up with the next wave of pitchers is going to require more than just comparable radar gun or spin-rate readings.

“You start losing the ability to shape your pitches,” Bannister added. “You start losing the ability to generate that movement to two specific parts of the zone that get the elite hitters out these days, especially the way the ball is flying out. I think among all the pitchers with elite velocity and elite spin the ability to maintain themselves and move with quality is really the separator at the moment. So it’s biased toward the younger guys because you naturally have more mobility when you’re younger. As your collagen stiffens up over time and and you had innings on your body you have to work harder to maintain it all. It becomes more important as the velocity threshold creeps higher every year and the game gets younger as a result.

“It’s a conversation all over baseball. When the average velocity was 91 you could get away with losing some mobility year over year or at the end of a year. And now where the average velocity is 93.5 you get exposed really quickly if you have to compensate in your movements to generate that velocity and then you start losing pitch quality. The radar gun might stay the same and the spin rate might stay the same but you can’t get into the biomechanical position to get quality.”

(To Bannister’s point about where velocity is going, 77 pitchers averaged a fastball of 96 mph or better compared to 58 just two seasons ago.)

THE CHANGE ALEX CORA SEES COMING NEXT SPRING TRAINING

Appearing on the Bradfo Sho podcast, Cora reflected on the 2019 season but also offered some insight as to some changes he sees coming in 2020. One of the alterations has to do with attacking the non-stop wave of defensive shifts.

In short, when it comes to bunting vs. shifts Cora is tired of the talk and ready for some action.

“I think so,” said Cora when asked if he believed bunting was going to become more of a weapon in 2020. “Not everyone can hit a homer over four outfielders like Mitch Moreland. He didn’t beat the shift, he beat both shifts. If he can do that great. You have to start doing this in the minor leagues because you see teams overdoing it shift-wise in the minor leaguers so the players get used to the positioning. You have to make sure to stay on top of the ball, go the other way, bunt a few times. Have that weapon in your pocket.

“We talk about it in spring training but I think it’s easier said than done. In spring training whenever we get shifts we want guys to bunt to get used to it. You can’t just go out there and do it during the season. It’s not that easy. You bunt it back to the pitcher that’s the last time you’re going to bunt.”

The major league average for percentage of times teams shifted jumped from 17.4 last season to 25.4 in 2019. Four years ago the number was 13.8 percent.

Strangely, there were fewer bunt hits this season than any year since 1984.

SOME OTHER STUFF ...

- Brandon Workman gave up one home run all season. One in 70 1/3 innings. That came on May 14 when Charlie Blackmon hit a curveball into the centerfield stands at Fenway. “I’ve thrown a lot worse pitches than that this year,” Workman lamented. The pitcher who threw the most innings while also allowing no more than one homer? Darwinzon Hernandez who totaled 30 1/3 big league innings.

- An interesting offseason regimen by Red Sox rookie Trevor Kelley. He puts up dummies on either side of the plate to simulate batters and then places three tees across the plate with a net behind the setup. The goal is to throw pitches in the gaps in between the tees. “It works for me,” the sidwinding Kelley said. “I’ve been doing it for the last three years. I did it on my own. It’s just a visual that works.”

- In an effort to find some more velocity Brian Johnson is planning on incorporating the “Driveline” workouts into his offseason. The program — which White Sox’ pitcher Lucas Giolito credits for taking his career to another level — shortens a pitcher’s arm action. Trevor Bauer is also a big proponent of the strategy. (For more on the "Driveline" program, [click here](#).)

- Marco Hernandez has played outfield for just one game in his life, manning left field for the Triple-A PawSox. But now he’s headed to the Dominican Winter League to give it a whirl. His plan: To make the Red Sox very aware of how the position is fitting right out of the gate. “I’ll try and play and learn to play outfield so I can be more valuable. If I feel comfortable I will let them know right away,” he said.

- One of the biggest takeaways from the Red Sox’ owners press conference Friday should have been John Henry’s revelation that he and Dave Dombrowski didn’t see eye to eye when it came to how the 2019 team should be built. Yet despite the disagreement, Henry allowed Dombrowski to execute his strategy. It’s how we ask owners to operate, letting the baseball decision-makers do their jobs. The flip-side is that if such decisions are allowed when they don’t work those making the judgments will be put in the cross-hairs. That’s what happened here. It is a dynamic that should remain in place, with clear credit and blame given to one person when it comes to baseball operations.

- Want a small sample of how Tampa Bay thinks a bit more outside the box than most? They are the only team that tilts up the front of their cage during batting practice in order to eliminate the negative reinforcement that might come with hitters launching balls up into the netting. The strategy is, of course, a product of encouraging launch angle.

Source: Red Sox plan on offering Rafael Devers contract extension

Rob Bradford

Rafael Devers has earned a conversation reserved for a select few in Major League Baseball.

According to a source, the Red Sox are planning on offering Devers a contract extension in the offseason. The team has not extended the 22-year-old such an offer to date.

Devers is completing just his second full big-league season, making \$614,500 in 2019. He will be eligible for arbitration after the 2020 campaign.

Mike Trout holds the record for largest extension for a player signing an extension with two-plus years service time, inking a six-year, \$144.5 million deal. The longest pre-arbitration extension signed is Ryan Braun, who agreed to an eight-year deal with Milwaukee in 2008.

A good comparison for Devers might be Alex Bregman, who inked a five-year, \$100 million contract last March. At the time of the agreement (which doesn't kick in until 2020) the Astros third baseman carried roughly the same level of service time the Sox slugger will possess heading into next season. The pair have very similar numbers -- in terms of batting average, OPS and home runs -- after their first two full major league seasons.

Devers headed into Saturday leading the majors with 89 extra-base hits and is the first player with 89 or more extra-base hits before turning 23 since Alex Rodriguez (91 in 1996). With two games left in the regular season he was hitting .309 with a .916 OPS and 32 homers.

Such an extension will become increasingly important for the Red Sox, whose ownership group has stated its goal heading into 2020 is to cut payroll to under \$208 million.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Red Sox owners want a name with experience for their next GM; disagreement with Dombrowski dates to last fall

John Tomase

The next general manager of the Red Sox will come from outside the organization and have experience in the role, John Henry hopes.

The Red Sox owner laid out what he's looking for to take the organization forward in the wake of Dave Dombrowski's departure. He sounded unlikely, at least for now, to consider any of the four execs currently sharing GM responsibilities -- Eddie Romero, Brian O'Halloran, Zack Scott, and Raquel Ferreira.

That's in no small part because of the myriad challenges facing the franchise, from getting under the \$208 million luxury-tax threshold, to dealing with the possible trade of reigning AL MVP Mookie Betts, to rebuilding the farm system.

"This is a tough job," Henry said. "This is a tough offseason, too. We talked about the challenges for the CBT [competitive balance tax], but I think we would all agree, there are a lot...this is a challenging offseason. So, to put one of the candidates you keep bringing up in charge and responsible for that, that's sort of a tough way to start your career as a general manager. So, we are starting the search looking outward."

Henry noted the difficulty of hiring GMs away from other franchises, but the Red Sox will be sure to inquire on a host of big-name candidates, whether it's Dodgers boss Andrew Friedman, Tampa's Chaim Bloom, or even Theo Epstein of the Cubs, who recently declared his allegiance to Chicago.

"We look at what some of the other teams are doing around the league," Werner said. "We want to be competitive with them in all facets."

As for the perception that the Red Sox lack stability, since they're about to hire their fourth baseball boss since 2011, Henry and Werner bristled.

"You know it's funny, I look at it as we've had three general managers since 2004, right? 2003, right?" Werner said. "I look at it as we've had three general managers in 17 years, right? So I don't look at that as -- not that we count but we have been successful bringing in a general manager from the outside and we've been successful by bringing in someone internally. But I consider, look, we all know Boston is an incredibly great sports town. It's also very demanding. We want to be excellent year in and year out. But I consider this position to be the most coveted or one of the most coveted in all of sports."

WHY DOMBROWSKI WAS FIRED

Henry talked about extending Dave Dombrowski the night the Red Sox won the World Series. He apparently had a change of heart by the time the Duck Boats started to roll.

It turns out the philosophical differences that led to Dombrowski's ouster predated the season.

"What changed quickly was right after the World Series, we had preliminary talks about our way forward and it was clear to me we weren't on the same page at that point," Henry said. "In fact, he and I talked about it that night, that Sunday evening, I think he disagreed with me about that, that we disagreed. We were even disagreeing, you might say, that we disagreed. There was a difference, I think, in how we thought we should move forward."

While Henry and Tom Werner went out of their way to praise Dombrowski's tenure, their issues weren't hard to discern: a bloated payroll that will hamstring the immediate future, and a lack of young talent coming through the minor league pipeline.

"One of the things that we talked about that I think is apparent is that we need to have more depth in our minor league system and more people coming up through the system that can be everyday baseball players," Henry said.

CORA STAYING PUT

One Red Sox employee who needn't worry about his job security is manager Alex Cora. Henry said the manager will return next year, no matter who takes over as GM.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Dombrowski's fate may have been sealed long before the disappointment of 2019

Sean McAdam

In retrospect, Dave Dombrowski's honeymoon period was very brief. Like, perhaps as little as 24 hours.

Last fall, on the morning of the Red Sox' World Series parade, principal owner John Henry stood on the Fenway Park lawn, and unprompted, volunteered that the Red Sox needed to get to work on an extension for their president of baseball operations.

At that moment, Dombrowski's stock had never been higher. Coming off two straight division titles, the team he had helped put together had just finished winning a franchise-record 108 regular-season wins before rolling over three 100-win teams in October to reach championship status.

Understandably, Henry didn't want Dombrowski going into the final year of his deal viewed as a lame-duck. But within hours — perhaps even that same night — it became obvious that an extension for Dombrowski was going to be highly problematic.

The problem? Money.

But not Dombrowski's — though he had told several people in the game that he thought his next deal should lift him into the same financial neighborhood as both Andrew Friedman and Theo Epstein, both of whom were pulling down salaries of \$7 million or greater, or roughly twice what Dombrowski was earning.

One major league source confirmed recently that the talks never got that far.

No, it was more about how much money Dombrowski was going to be given to spend on team payroll.

The Sox were coming off a season in which they had just spent about \$245 million in payroll, taking them over the third and final threshold of MLB's competitive balance tax (CBT), incurring the highest tax rate and a loss of 10 slots in the 2019 amateur draft. At the time, though Henry joked in the immediate aftermath of some unhappiness among his limited partners, it was money well spent.

Moreover, the Sox had given the green light for Dombrowski to spend nearly as much as 2019. There were some long-term commitments on the books (David Price, Dustin Pedroia and the final year of the Chris Sale contract that they assumed from Chicago when they obtained the pitcher, plus big arbitration raises in store for the likes of Mookie Betts and Xander Bogaerts). That flexibility also allowed him to retain both Nathan Eovaldi and Steve Pearce as free agents without regard to payroll level.

But Henry had its limits. The expectation was that the Sox would begin to pare back spending starting in 2020, to reset the team's luxury tax relates while delivering some return on investment for the franchise's numerous minority owners and limited partners.

A talk between Henry and Dombrowski — that may well have taken place that same night, after the parade — revealed a difference of opinion between the two on at least one big issue.

In meeting with reporters Friday afternoon, Henry didn't get too specific about the exact issues, but it seems rather obvious that a big part of the gulf was future spending.

Henry was willing to spend \$200 million or more in 2020 — but not \$240 for the third straight season. And just as obviously, it's logical to conclude, Dombrowski wanted to keep spending at or near the level to which he had become accustomed, pouring resources into the major league roster rather than depending on internal development.

“What changed quickly was right after the World Series, we had preliminary talks about our way forward,” said Henry Friday, “and it was clear to me we weren't on the same page at that point. There was a difference, I think, in how we thought we should move forward.”

What else could Henry have been referring to if not payroll and spending? It wasn't about analytics, or style of play, or the future of Alex Cora.

No, Dombrowski talked himself out of an extension not because he asked for too much in salary — as some had forecast might have eventually been a sticking point — but rather, because he asked for too much to spend on the salaries of others.

Here are (more or less) my picks for the annual regular season individual awards:

AL MVP: Mike Trout

Bubbling under: Alex Bregman, Marcus Semien, D.J. LeMahieu.

There's been the suggestion that Trout doesn't deserve the award because he missed the final three weeks of the season with a foot injury. And history reveals that only once (Dick Allen in 1972) did an AL MVP win the award after missing as much as the final week of the year. And some also point to the fact that the Angels have been out of even the wild card race since early August. But Trout, clearly the best player in the league, is having had arguably the best season of his career.

And the notion that a player has to come from a team reaching — or least competitive for the postseason — is, like or not, outmoded.

NL MVP: Christian Yellich

Bubbling under: Cody Bellinger, Ronald Acuna Jr., Anthony Rendon.

Just like the American League, Yellich spent a good chunk of the final month out of the lineup. And further, the Brewers have made a big push at the end without the service of Yellich. Still, Yellich leads Bellinger — his closest competitor for this honor — in a ton of categories of OBP, slugging percentage and a host of others. And while Bellinger is the better defender, it's not enough to tip the scales in his favor.

AL CY YOUNG: ?

This is the award I'm voting on and we're asked not to reveal our choices publicly, a request I intend to honor. But it shouldn't take much detective work to know my vote will go to someone who has pitched for the Houston Astros this season.

NL CY YOUNG: Jacob deGrom

Bubbling under: Jack Flaherty, Max Scherzer

deGrom stands to be in select company as one of the few pitchers to ever win the NL Cy Young Award in consecutive seasons. Once again, wins get de-emphasized since the starter seldom controls that. But you can't argue with what went into the weekend leading the league in strikeouts and WHIP and a close second in ERA.

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Yordan Alvarez

Bubbling under: John Means, Eloy Jimenez.

It doesn't matter that Alvarez didn't make his debut until midseason and won't end up playing 90 games. Does a 1.092 OPS not say it all? How about a .672 slugging percentage?

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Pete Alonso

Bubbling under: Mike Soroka, Fernando Tatis Jr.

Ordinarily, a 2.60 ERA would be good enough to win this. But that's more than negated by Alonso's 52 homers, an NL Rookie record.

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Rocco Baldelli

Bubbling under: Aaron Boone, Kevin Cash

For much of the season, I was leaning toward Boone, who did a fabulous job withstanding a spate of injuries that were nearly biblical in proportion. But how often does a first-year manager come in and win at least 100 games, hold off a second-half charge by arguably the game's best manager and improve his team's win total by more than 20 games from the previous season?

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Craig Counsel
Bubbling under: Mike Shildt, Brian Snitker

Counsel took his team to within a game of the World Series last year, but the job he did at the helm of the Brewers may have been even better, considering he's been without his best player for much of the final month, yet still steered them to the postseason — with a patchwork rotation (Jhoulys Chacin was his Opening Day starter!) and an under-performing bullpen.

If you don't think there's a competitive balance issue in the game, then perhaps you're not paying close attention.

Like never before, the really good teams are taking full advantage of the several very bad teams to fatten up their record.

Examples?

Houston was 17-1 against Seattle
The Yankees were 17-2 against Baltimore
Cleveland was 18-1 against Detroit
Minnesota was 14-5 against Detroit
Atlanta was 15-4 against Miami.

Sure, there always been bad teams. But never before has there been such a gap between the top and bottom teams, and especially when those teams are housed in the same division, having such a direct impact on races.

The Indians, for example, went into Saturday 26 games above .500. Take away the +17 they were against the lowly Tigers, owners of the worst record in the American League, and the Indians would have been eliminated from postseason contention a lot sooner than Friday, when they were officially knocked out of October.

What's the solution? That's difficult to determine, as there are obviously numerous layers to this.

But one thing's for certain. Soon — waiting until the current CBA expires after 2021 — baseball must find a way to disincentive losing. Maybe the solution is to penalize teams by setting a minimum number of wins — 65 shouldn't be too tough to reach — and if teams fall short, they pay for it by dropping a prescribed number of slots in the next June's draft.

Allowing teams to bottom out for extended periods weakens the game and cheapens the fan experience for all involved.

In the NFL, the first day after the conclusion of the regular season is known as Black Monday when a handful of coaches get their pink slips.

This season could see a similar day take place in baseball.

Already, Andy Green got the gate with two weeks to go, becoming the first manager to lose his job during the season. It's widely expected that a few others will join him on the unemployment line in the next week or so.

Among those thought to be in danger of being turfed: the Cubs' Joe Maddon, Seattle's Scott Servais, the Mets' Mickey Calloway, Philadelphia's Gabe Kapler, and Pittsburgh's Clint Hurdle. Meanwhile, there's a guaranteed opening in San Francisco, where Bruce Bochy won't be returning.

There were also reports that the Los Angeles Angels would be willing to move on from first-year manager Brad Ausmus if Maddon became available to them. That, in turn, could mark the second time in the last five years that Maddon replaces a manager who was hired only one season earlier. That scenario also took place in Chicago when the Cubs moved on from Rick Renteria after just one season.

Beyond Maddon, there will be a number of high profile managers available on the market, including Joe Girardi and Buck Showalter. But increasingly, there's the sense that some of the older managers — beyond Maddon — may not be in play as much.

More than ever, teams want younger managers in the dugout — in part because they find it easier to relate to and communicate with the players, but not incidentally, because they're more amenable to receiving input from upstairs, and finally, because they can common far less in salary.

BSJ Game Report: Orioles 9, Red Sox 4 – Three things we learned

Sean McAdam

The losses continue to pile up for the Red Sox down the stretch, with a 9-4 setback to the lowly Baltimore Orioles. Here are three things we learned:

1. Cora ready for the unknown

Alex Cora is unsure of who his next boss will be, with the team about to embark on a search for a new GM. And he knows that whoever is in charge, he'll have less money to spend than Dave Dombrowski did the last few seasons. But no matter what, Cora is eager for the offseason and whatever it brings as the team takes the first steps toward turning around this year's disappointing record. "We've been talking a lot the last few weeks," Cora said. "I had a pretty good idea what was going on, even before this year. It's nothing that surprises me. Regardless of the plan, the main goal is to win the World Series," Cora said. "I don't see that changing. There are a few things that are going to change in the upcoming days, weeks or a month. We have to adjust to it. At the end, on the field with the players, they understand what we have to do to be competitive next year. That's my job." As for the identity of his new boss, Cora will adapt. "Whatever decision is made in the offseason, I'll understand," Cora said. "In the end, I know we're going to try to win the World Series. That's the most important thing."

2. Chacin reverting back to bad habits

The first few times the Red Sox used Jhoulys Chacin as a starting pitcher, he delivered strong performances, going unscored upon over 3.2 innings. But the last three have seen a reversal of fortune. Chacin was tagged for four runs on five hits in 2.2 innings in the 10-4 loss to Baltimore and over his last three starts, has given up 12 earned runs on 14 hits in just nine innings combined. "It's the same thing that he struggled with while with the Brewers — fastball location," said Cora. "You saw it right away (allowing a first-pitch double to Jonathan Villar to lead off the game), it was supposed to be down-and-away, and it was right down the middle. The home run to D.J. Stewart, same deal. When your stuff is not 98-99 mph, you have to be precise. You can still use (a fastball with lesser velocity), but it has to be in certain areas. When you're pitching down in the zone, you better have good action and you'd better hit your spots." Chacin hasn't done nearly enough of that. And the fact that he kept getting the ball despite a 6.01 ERA speaks volumes about the lack of quality options for the Red Sox down the stretch.

3. Pearce inches closer to retirement.

After re-signing with the Red Sox last winter, Steve Pearce, the World Series MVP has a massively disappointing 2019 season. It began with spring training injuries that set back his preparation. It continued with a stretch in which he couldn't get into any kind of groove at the plate, and finally, concluded with him missing the last four months. While on a rehab assignment for a back strain, he tore a ligament in his knee. His last at-bat came on May 31 and he played in just 29 games, with a slash line of .180/.245/.258 in just 89 at-bats. That may not sound like the kind of season a player wants as his final one, but Pearce is giving that

serious consideration. "I've accomplished a lot," Pearce told MassLive.com's Chris Cotillo. "I'm 36. I'll be 37 next year. I've grinded my whole career and I can lay my head down at night knowing I gave everything I had. We'll see what the future holds." Pearce has had a 13-year career that has seen him play for every team in the American League East (some more than once) along with stints with Pittsburgh and Houston. If he does call it quits, he'll be remembered for smoking three homers in the final two games of the 2019 World Series at Dodger Stadium.

*** *The Athletic***

Amid upheaval, these are the pillars the Red Sox will lean on in trying to execute a turnaround

Chad Jennings

For almost a week now, Red Sox players have been coming and going from manager Alex Cora's office. They've sat for exit interviews about a lost summer and an uncertain winter before scattering inevitably in every direction after Sunday's season finale.

Some will go home to rest. Some will rehab from injuries. Some will become untethered free agents. Some will be back on Opening Day, and some will never again step foot in the home clubhouse of Fenway Park. Brock Holt's contract is up. Rick Porcello's, too. Jackie Bradley Jr. is again a trade chip. Even Mookie Betts can't say for certain what the future holds. In the wake of disappointment, the Red Sox have already fired their president of baseball operations, and there will be more changes in the coming weeks.

But Cora's office remains one of the pillars of stability for a team in transition.

"Obviously, there are a few things that are going to change in the upcoming days, weeks or months, and we have to adjust to it," Cora said. "But at the end, on the field with the players, we have to understand what we have to do to be competitive next year, and that's my job."

As ownership seeks to trim payroll and better build from within, nearly every offseason idea seems up for discussion. There will be someone new in charge of baseball operations, and changes will flow from the top. But as the Red Sox re-imagine their future, they've staked that future to six mainstays that even this disappointing season could not take down.

The manager

In the coming days, we should know whether his entire coaching staff is coming back, but ownership already has made clear Cora will remain the Red Sox manager. There was never any reason to think otherwise.

Cora has proven adaptive this season. He abandoned early-season ideas to bat Betts second, mix and match the bullpen without a closer and get some sort of production from Blake Swihart. He's helped prod Xander Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and Eduardo Rodriguez to career-best seasons. He's acknowledged the shortcomings of the rotation without seeming to alienate the clubhouse.

If last season was a fairy tale, this season has proven Cora's no wizard. But he's been steady through the changes, and the Red Sox want his hand on the wheel.

The shortstop

From the day he arrived, Cora's been singing the praises of Bogaerts, and Bogaerts has fulfilled his manager's vision. Last season was good, this season was better, and now Bogaerts is firmly entrenched among the better shortstops in the game. The metrics don't love his defense, but his offense is undeniable, and he's become a voice of leadership among his teammates.

While the Red Sox speak regularly of a desire to keep Betts long term, it's Bogaerts who agreed to a six-year extension at the beginning of the season. He almost certainly could have made more money on the open market, but he wanted to stay in Boston. With Betts and Bradley Jr. one year from free agency, and Andrew Benintendi finally entering his arbitration years, the Red Sox at least have to consider trading one of their outfielders to save money and address other needs.

Bogaerts, though, seems to be entrenched. He's costly, but he's also young and effective, and replacing him would be difficult bordering on impossible.

The scouting department

Bogaerts, Betts, Bradley and Benintendi are all products of a scouting operation that has thrived in the past decade. Even as the Red Sox search for a new head of baseball operations, the front office has made clear the scouting department will remain largely intact. Already this winter, vice president of amateur scouting Mike Rikard has been promoted to vice president of scouting, giving Rikard a broader reach after his success in the draft.

All of this is important because ownership has said, in no uncertain terms, that it plans to develop more everyday talent from within the minor-league system. The Red Sox farm has improved in the past six months, and the graduations of Michael Chavis, Darwinzon Hernandez, Josh Taylor and perhaps Marco Hernandez should fill important roles next season.

The Red Sox already believe they have the ability to find young talent. Now they're committed to using it.

The third baseman

In Dave Dombrowski's four years as president of baseball operations, his best move was the one he didn't make. He didn't trade Rafael Devers. Yoan Moncada is gone, and Rusney Castillo is a bust, but the Red Sox still have Devers. And a month shy of his 23rd birthday, Devers is emerging as a star. WEEI reported Saturday that the team plans to offer him a contract extension.

Even with Betts' long-term future uncertain, and with J.D. Martinez able to opt out of his contract this winter, Bogaerts' extension and Devers' breakout season give the Red Sox two potent young hitters to build around. There's at least some case to be made for trading almost everyone else, but short of an utterly devastating rebuild, Devers is more long-term solution than down-the-road trade chip. As a bonus, he's scheduled to make barely more than the league minimum in 2020, the year the Red Sox would like to shed as much payroll as possible.

The starting pitchers

Not all pillars remain unblemished, and this one is need of repair. David Price has three years and \$96 million left on his deal. Nathen Eovaldi also has three years left, and he's owed \$51 million. Chris Sale's extension kicks in next season. It's five years, \$145 million.

Combined, those three made just 59 starts this season.

Elbow issues for Sale and Eovaldi and a wrist problem for Price helped turn a perceived strength into an unmistakable weakness. Eduardo Rodriguez was terrific, but the Red Sox rotation as a whole helped bring down the season. Yet it will almost certainly remain largely intact next year.

Sure, the Red Sox could try to trade Price or Eovaldi, but doing so would require eating considerable salary or sweetening the pot with cheap prospects. It could be done, but it would not be optimal, and the chance of moving all three seems next to impossible. So, while the rotation was a weakness this season and its health remains a concern, it remains a wobbly pillar the Red Sox have to use one way or another.

The owners

This is the tie that binds the 2004 curse-breakers to the 2018 record-breakers. Principal owner John Henry and chairman Tom Werner purchased the team in December 2001. Managers have come and gone, general managers have been hired and replaced, but Henry and Werner have remained through four championships.

They bristled Friday at the idea that their methods have created instability. They disagreed that qualified candidates might be hesitant to take a general manager role that's had recent turnover even after winning seasons. But perhaps that perceived criticism is a strength.

Henry and Werner have brought in new voices when necessary. They've adjusted their long-term vision to fit the changing landscape. They saw Dombrowski as the man for the job in 2015, and when his job was complete, they recognized a need for someone else to run the show heading into 2020. Ownership sets the parameters and points the way. Without them, none of the other pillars are put in place.

*** *The Baltimore Sun***

Orioles in position for first sweep of season after 9-4 win over Red Sox

Jon Meoli

No flags will fly for the accomplishments of the 2019 Orioles, but what positives do exist, continue to become evident even on the last weekend of the season.

Saturday's 9-4 win over the Boston Red Sox before an announced sellout matinee crowd was just the latest opportunity for that: Rookie starter John Means capped his All-Star season on a positive note, four Orioles hit home runs, Jonathan Villar reached 40 stolen bases and everyone in the lineup had at least one hit.

"We're playing hard in Game 161, 50 games out or whatever we are," manager Brandon Hyde said. "We just continue to compete."

The two wins to open the series give the Orioles (54-107) a chance for their first sweep of the year Sunday, the last day of the season, though Boston (83-78) will be trying to earn former Orioles farmhand Eduardo Rodríguez his 20th win.

It would have been a fate far more cruel than Means (12-11) deserved had he not grinded out another winning start the way he did, though it looked shaky early. The Orioles took an early 2-0 lead on a home run by DJ Stewart in the first inning. Means gave it right back with interest on back-to-back home runs by Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez in the bottom of the frame to create an early 3-2 deficit.

But he didn't allow another hit until the fifth inning, when he stranded two and left having allowed three runs on five hits with five strikeouts and a pair of walks. While he doesn't qualify for the ERA title because his 155 innings will be seven shy of the threshold, Means' 3.60 ERA is one of the best in the American League.

"I just thought he really gutted it out," Hyde said. "That's a really tough lineup to face with all those good right-handed hitters. They put three on him early and he settled in nicely, but it was just a really gutsy performance. Gave us five innings and left with a lead. Did a great job."

While pitcher wins have been devalued of late, Means admitted having a winning record was something he thought about this week.

"That's what I was trying to get and it was this last game, I was trying to get a winning record," Means said. "That's something that I want to pride myself on, winning ballgames with this team. That's something I'm happy with today. I didn't have my best stuff out there, but getting a win is awesome."

“It’s an over-.500 pitcher on a team that’s not over .500 — well below,” Hyde said. “It just means that he won a lot of games for us, and kind of did what he did today — keep us in the game. I’d love to see him start to go deeper. He threw some good sliders today which is good to see going into next year. But he’s done a great job all year and to finish above .500 on a team that’s where we are is really impressive.”

Means left with a lead thanks to a second-inning home run by Richie Martin and a third-inning home run by Renato Núñez. The Orioles extended their advantage even further before turning it over to the bullpen with a four-run inning against former teammate Andrew Cashner. Trey Mancini’s 35th home run of the season in the ninth produced the final margin.

“I’m just glad we won the series,” Martin said. “That’s really important that we got the first few games, and we’ve got a chance for a sweep, which is pretty cool in Boston. That’s not easy to do. It’s nice to have momentum going into the offseason.”

Cashing in some IOUs

Pitching for the second straight game in relief against his former team, Cashner didn’t close out his 2019 on a high note Saturday.

Chris Davis doubled and scored on a single by Austin Wynns. Wynns scored from first on a double by Martin. Martin scored when Jonathan Villar hit an RBI single, and Villar scored on a single by Mancini.

Cashner, who made six starts after the July 13 trade for a pair of Venezuelan teenage prospects before he was moved to the bullpen, has a 6.20 ERA with a 1.62 WHIP for Boston.

Close call

What grew to be a comfortable lead off Cashner got a little squirmy in the late innings, especially in Branden Kline’s seventh. He took over with one out and loaded the bases in unique fashion over the course of the next three hitters.

The single by Bogaerts and walk by Martinez were understandable, but then Kline fielded a high one-hopper back to the mound and turned toward second to try to start a double play — only to find neither Martin nor Villar covered the base.

Kline threw anyway, and Martin had to body-block it behind the bag. But the two infielders combined on an inning-ending double play the next batter to spare further blushes.

Left-hander Richard Bleier had an inning-ending double play of his own in the eighth before combining for a clean ninth with Dillon Tate.

*** *Associated Press***

Núñez homers again, Orioles hit 4 HR in 9-4 win over Red Sox

The Baltimore Orioles are finding reason to celebrate late in a season that's included little to cheer.

Renato Nunez homered in his second straight game, John Means pitched five solid innings despite a rocky start and the Orioles outslugged Boston in a 9-4 win over the Red Sox on Saturday.

"The whole club, they're playing hard," manager Brandon Hyde said. "Game 161, 50 games out or whatever we are, we just continue to compete. I'm really excited with how we played today. I thought we played with a ton of energy."

Four home runs certainly helped energize the Orioles, who despite a record of 54-107 have a shot at closing the season by sweeping the defending World Series champions at Fenway Park.

It would be the first -- and only -- series sweep by the Orioles this season.

"I'm just glad we won the series," said Richie Martin, one of four Baltimore players to go deep Saturday. "It's really important that we got the first two games and we've got a chance for a sweep, which is pretty cool in Boston. That's not easy to do."

DJ Stewart and Trey Mancini also homered for Baltimore, which has won 5 of 8.

Means (12-11) recovered after Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez hit back-to-back homers for Boston in the first. The Red Sox didn't get another hit until the fifth as Means closed the season with victories in his last two starts and finished with a winning record.

"That's what I was trying to get," said Means, who allowed three runs on five hits. He walked two and struck out five. "Obviously my stuff wasn't there, but to get the win is awesome."

Martin and Stewart drove in two runs apiece and Mancini capped off the day with a solo homer to right in the ninth, his team-high 35th of the season.

Bogaerts hit a two-run homer and Martinez followed with his 36th of the season in the first, when the Red Sox took a 3-2 lead.

Martin's solo homer in the second tied it and Nunez put Baltimore ahead again in the third with a towering shot over the Green Monster, his second homer of the series and 31st of the season.

Boston loaded the bases with one out in the seventh, but Branden Kline got out of the jam when Brock Holt grounded into a double play.

Jhoulys Chacin (3-12) lasted just 2 2/3 innings for Boston. He allowed four runs on five hits, struck out three and walked one.

GOOD COMPANY

Bogaerts' 33 homers match his total of the previous two seasons combined. He hit 10 in 2017 and homered 23 times last year. His 116 RBI this year are the most for a Boston shortstop since Nomar Garciaparra drove in 120 in 2002.

"That's who he is. That's the kid that everybody has grown to love here," manager Alex Cora said of Bogaerts. "He's a force at this level and he's taking pride in a lot of things. To see that kind of effort in Game 161, when everybody knows that we're going home after the game tomorrow, is great."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Orioles: RF Anthony Santander missed his fourth straight game. Manager Brandon Hyde said Santander was banged up heading into the series.

Red Sox: LF Andrew Benintendi was out of the lineup for the second straight game. Benintendi hasn't played since leaving Thursday's game at Texas in the fourth inning after fouling a pitch off his right calf.

UP NEXT

Red Sox LHP Eduardo Rodriguez (19-6, 3.76 ERA) tries to become the club's first lefty to win 20 games since Mel Parnell went 21-8 in 1953. The Orioles had not yet named a starter for the season finale.