

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, September 3, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

J.D. Martinez continues to do huge damage at the plate

Alex Speier

As J.D. Martinez cruised into second base following his sixth-inning double on Friday, a lumbering presence sneaked up behind him and delivered a friendly pat on the belly. When it comes to generationally great righthanded sluggers, it takes one to know one, and there are few who can better appreciate what Martinez has become better than Angels first baseman Albert Pujols.

Martinez is now amidst the sort of season and surge that have established him as one of the best hitters in the game over the past six seasons. And perhaps more notably, the stretch has added to a three-year span in which Martinez has been practically Pujolsian.

The Red Sox slugger delivered a barnstorming tour for the ages during the just-completed road trip. Over eight games in San Diego, Colorado, and Anaheim, he went 14 for 31 with a .452/.526/1.097 line while launching six homers and driving in 18 runs. The Angels couldn't be faulted for giving him the Barry Bonds treatment on Sunday, walking him twice in his four plate appearances after he blasted an Andrew Heaney curveball for a solo homer in his second plate appearance.

The Red Sox cleanup hitter now has a .317/.393/.590 line for the year with 34 homers, a pace that would yield 40 at season's end. There is a very real possibility he will join Pujols and Alex Rodriguez as the only righthanded batters this century to have three straight years of hitting at least .300 with 40 or more homers.

"There's a reason he got two Silver Sluggers last year," said Red Sox hitting coach Tim Hyers, alluding to the fact that Martinez became the first player ever to be recognized as the best hitter at two different positions in his league in 2018, receiving recognition as the foremost offensive force in the AL at both designated hitter and left field. "He's a special hitter, and he's got the power to back it up. He prepares, he works, and when that swing hits a groove and they throw him pitches over the plate, it's a lot of fun to watch."

Martinez had "just" 19 homers through the first 100 Red Sox games this year — a solid mark for most, a down period for him — while posting a .285/.360/.506 line. But over his last 36 games (and the last 37 Red Sox games), he's hitting .400/.476/.807 with 15 homers, elevating his season totals to what are now familiar elite plateaus.

"There were a lot of groundballs to shortstop," said Hyers. "He was just trying to work to get his legs back underneath him and to be more aggressive to the ball in his lower half and not sort of sitting back and getting stuck on the backside, causing some spin action where he's twisting. That's when he hits a lot of groundballs. Now he's getting through it. When he finishes out front and sticks it as we call it, that's when he's dangerous."

He is hitting .410/.493/.910 with 17 homers and a 1.403 OPS against lefties. In the last 100 years, there have only been four instances of hitters posting an OPS of 1.400 or better against southpaws, most recently when Ryan Braun had a 1.480 mark against lefties in 2007. Martinez is also threatening to set a Red Sox record for homers in a season against lefties (David Ortiz holds the record with 18 in 2006) and could become just the 10th player ever with at least 20 homers in a season against southpaws.

"That's incredible," said Hyers. "They're just kind of matching the angle of his swing plane right now."

Betts open to change

Mookie Betts continued his career-long excellence in Anaheim, going 7 for 15 with two homers and a double while scoring five times, including runs in each of the three games of the series. That performance stood in contrast to the three games that preceded it, in which the Red Sox leadoff hitter went 1 for 12.

A small change in Betts's stance laid the groundwork for the improved performance. Betts opened his stance slightly, his front foot angled slightly toward first base at the start of the at-bat, before moving into line with the pitcher while striding toward the pitch. The increased movement in his lower half, Betts said, represented an effort "to try to find a way to get into my legs a little better."

"I was just getting a little spinny," Betts said. "I was trying to stay through the ball a little better. I don't know if it's necessarily to pull, but to stay through it. If I pull, I pull; if it goes the other way, it goes the other way, but stay through the ball."

The alteration paid immediate dividends on Friday, when Betts led off the game with a solo homer to left, then delivered the game-winning homer to left in the 15th inning. That immediate payoff was somewhat reminiscent of another in 2018, when Betts spent an off day prior to a series in Anaheim working with hitting consultant Doug Latta and immediately hit three homers in the following game. This time, though Latta attended Friday's game as a guest of Hyers, the outfielder made the swing adjustment on his own. For his career, Betts has a .309/.375/.676 line at Angel Stadium with seven homers in 17 games.

Reining in the rover

In the middle of last month, Red Sox manager Alex Cora outlined a plan to employ his pitching staff aggressively. In an echo of last year's postseason, with the Red Sox embarking upon a stretch of the schedule in which they'd have five off days over a period of 2½ weeks, Cora suggested an openness to employing his rotation members out of the bullpen in a "rover" role similar to the one he used during the 2018 playoffs.

But aside from delaying slightly the move of Nate Eovaldi from the bullpen to the rotation while having the righthander pitch in Cleveland in back-to-back games on Aug. 13 and 14, Cora never used his starters in the rover role. Even during an Anaheim series in which the bullpen ran on fumes due to three starts by Eovaldi, Josh Taylor, and David Price that totaled seven innings, Cora didn't consider Rick Porcello or Eduardo Rodriguez as bullpen options.

"You can take advantage of X amount of off days, but they still have to roll the next 10 days against the Twins and Toronto," Cora said. "It's not as easy as people think it is. What we did in October last year, that was out of the norm . . . You look back at the World Series champs or runner-ups, what we did, it was never done before. David Price was ready to pitch every day. Rick Porcello was ready to pitch every day. Nate Eovaldi was ready to pitch every day. Now, 162 games, there are certain games we can do that, but the schedule will let you know when. It's not that easy."

"There's stuff that we know that we don't have to tell people about, but, hey, we've got to take care of these guys. It's all-in, but you've got to be careful. There's no November coming up. We've got September and October. So we've got to be careful with it."

Cora also noted that his freedom to employ rovers last October followed a September in which he was able to manage pitcher workloads carefully as the Red Sox cruised toward October with the division well in hand.

"[The pitchers] knew that was coming," said Cora. "Last year we had the luxury of tapering down and preparing for that."

With their 6-2 trip through the west, the Red Sox are now 40-29 (.580) on the road, the fifth best record in the majors. But they are just 34-34 at home, including a modest 34-32 (.515) at Fenway Park. The primary disparity in the team's performance has been with their pitchers, who have forged a 4.44 ERA on the road (10th in the majors) but a 4.91 mark at home (24th). Of their remaining 25 contests, 13 are home games . . . Triple-A outfielder Cole Sturgeon matched a PawSox franchise record by blasting three home runs, including a walkoff, two-run shot in the 10th inning, in Pawtucket's season finale, a 4-3 victory over the Lehigh Valley IronPigs . . . The Red Sox do not plan to add anyone to the major league roster at this time, according to a major league source.

Rafael Devers has been a breath of fresh air in a tough Red Sox season

Peter Abraham

A deep cleansing breath is one of the foundations of yoga. It is often referred to as pranayama, a term loosely defined as bringing the mind and body into union.

Rafael Devers was not aware of this when asked why he takes half a step out of the batter's box before every pitch to close his eyes and take a deep breath. But it's the same principle.

It's his way of blocking out the noise of the crowd, the pitcher staring back at him with bad intentions, and the weight of knowing just how much the Red Sox have come to depend on him this season.

Only then, when he exhales from deep inside his chest, is the 22-year-old ready to hit.

Those calm moments unleash a great fury.

Devers leads the majors with 221 batted balls having an exit velocity of at least 95 miles per hour. That force has produced a .321 batting average, a .947 OPS, 28 home runs, and a team-leading 104 RBIs.

Devers leads the majors in hits (176) and extra-base hits (80) and is second only to teammate Mookie Betts in runs with 113.

He is also the first player with at least 100 runs and 100 RBIs before turning 23 since Miguel Cabrera in 2005. Only one Red Sox player — Ted Williams — has done that.

At 74-63, the Red Sox are fighting to stay in the hunt for a playoff spot as they open a series with the Minnesota Twins Tuesday night at Fenway Park.

What Devers has provided hitting second in the lineup has helped the Sox overcome their below-average pitching.

It's a vast difference from a year ago, when Devers was unhappily playing for Triple A Pawtucket.

He was ostensibly on an injury rehabilitation assignment even though his strained left hamstring felt fine. The Red Sox were making a point to Devers that playing time in the majors had to be earned.

His pregame preparation was too casual and his defense at third base inconsistent. The skills were there but not always the commitment.

"He had a lot to learn," manager Alex Cora said.

Devers was activated Sept. 4 and was in and out of the lineup the rest of the season, including the playoffs.

His three-run homer off Houston's Justin Verlander helped clinch Game 5 of the ALCS and send the Sox to the World Series. But he had only three more plate appearances in the World Series than Eduardo Nunez.

An offseason dedicated to improving his condition coupled with following the lead of more experienced players on how best to study opposing pitchers helped create a player the Red Sox can build around.

“A monster,” Orioles manager Brandon Hyde said. “One of best young hitters in the game.”

First baseman Mitch Moreland, who speaks less Spanish than Devers does English, has become a good friend. The two talk often about hitting, defensive positioning, and their families.

“I’m proud of Raffy, I really am,” Moreland said. “I think I should be asking him about hitting because he’s come such a long way this year. But he put in the work.”

It’s what the Red Sox expected going back to when they first saw Devers play.

Devers grew up in the seaside town of Sanchez in the Samana province of the Dominican Republic. His earliest memories of baseball are tagging along to watch his father play in one of the local amateur leagues.

“Baseball was always something I was around,” he said. “I’d play with my father and watch his games. But some of his games were in places where there was trouble, and my mom wouldn’t let me go.”

Devers’s father, also named Rafael, was a catcher, and he initially wanted to play the same position.

But when Devers arrived for a workout at the Red Sox academy in El Toro in 2011, he was made a third baseman. Red Sox scouts, Manny Nanita in particular, were impressed, and reports quickly got back to Boston.

Eddie Romero, newly promoted to vice president of international scouting at the time, flew down to see Devers and was equally taken with his bat speed, ability to make contact, and strong arm. Even at 14, it was clear Devers was a special player.

“He became a priority target,” Romero said.

Former general manager Ben Cherington was among the team executives who saw Devers play in person and approved a \$1.5 million signing bonus.

The Red Sox feared the Rockies would offer even more, but Devers wanted the Sox as much as they wanted him.

“What sealed it for me was after one tryout, I was chatting with Devers and he said, ‘I don’t want to do any more tryouts, this is my team,’ ” said Romero, now an assistant general manager. “In reality he chose us before we chose him.”

Said Devers: “The Sox were the first team to watch me play, and I always liked David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez. I wanted to play with them.”

Devers signed on Aug. 9, 2013, and within 20 months — incredibly fast when compared with his peers — he was playing for Single A Greenville.

He was part of a roster that included Andrew Benintendi, Michael Chavis, Mauricio Dubon, and Yoan Moncada at various points of the season. All are now in the majors, Dubon with the Giants and Moncada with the White Sox.

Devers led the team with 70 RBIs and moved quickly through the system.

“That year, I knew I could do something with baseball,” said Devers, who uses the assistance of team translator Bryan Almonte to conduct most of his interviews but is comfortable speaking English in less formal settings. “I was around a lot of good players, and I thought I was in their class.”

Teammate J.D. Martinez has since encouraged that mentality, telling Devers not to be satisfied with two hits when he's capable of three. Xander Bogaerts also has become a mentor, working with Devers on his play at third.

In what has been a wearying season for the Sox, Devers is part of a clubhouse that largely stayed together.

"He's a good kid," said Bogaerts, who, like Devers, also made his debut at 20 but was a more polished player. "We treat him like a little brother, but he's one of the best players in the league."

That's the standard Devers wants to be measured by.

"I look more at Mike Trout and Jose Altuve," he said. "I want to do what they have done. I respect the younger players in the league. But I have bigger goals."

Devers has a daughter, 3-year-old Rachell, with his longtime girlfriend Brenda. They live in the Dominican and only occasionally visit Boston.

Devers's parents have come to watch him play, but so far none of his eight brothers and sisters. Each of his parents had three children before they were married and then had three more.

"Sleep!" said Devers when asked what he does on days off in Boston. But he is trying to learn more about the city and finds it intriguing. For now, his favorite place to eat is the restaurant on the street level of his apartment building.

"I love Boston, especially when it's the good weather," Devers said. "No matter what team we play, the park is always full. That's something special."

Devers, who is under team control for four more seasons, is open to the idea of a long-term contract.

"If it happens, that would be cool," he said. "We'll see. I don't think about it too much."

"But this was the team I always wanted to play for, and I hope I stay here."

On conflicts of interest in MLB, and other thoughts

Dan Shaughnessy

Picked-up pieces from vacation while waiting for the first shred of credibility regarding the June shooting of David Ortiz . . .

■ It's outrageous that Major League Baseball has Dominican Republic law officials on its payroll. It compromises everything we hear from the island related to MLB, drugs, and crime. Makes me wonder about commissioner Rob Manfred's curious presidential pardon of David Ortiz on the day Ortiz retired in 2016.

The commish came to Boston and reminded us that we should not necessarily trust Ortiz's positive drug test from 2003.

Who else ever got that kind of forgiveness?

Nobody. Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, and Sammy Sosa were the other MLB players whose names were leaked as PED users from the 2003 tests.

None of them got similar help from the commissioner.

Now that we know that high-ranking officers in the Dominican National Police are working for MLB, it makes the Ortiz-shooting “mistaken identity” theory doubly ludicrous.

Meanwhile, we have Ortiz hiring former Boston Police boss Ed Davis (whose clients include the Red Sox and the Globe) to get to the bottom of things.

Yeesh. The conflicts of interest in this case get more staggering by the hour.

Over the weekend, Ortiz’s wife Tiffany posted Instagram photos of the slugger in France with Red Sox/Globe owner John Henry and his wife, Linda Henry.

■ Friday’s Globe included a report on the new TB12 center opening in the Back Bay. In shady Alex Guerrero fashion, the Globe was prohibited from taking photographs inside the facility and TB12 employees would not allow a tour of the 10,000-square-foot workout palace, citing HIPAA privacy rules.

What a joke. It’s a bloody workout facility, not the Mayo Clinic.

Brady’s merchandise mart is not yet open for fitness classes but will take appointments if you want to pony up \$240 for a 90-minute workout. You can also buy Tom’s book, TB12 snacks, pliability rollers, and assorted hats and vitamins.

Brady’s longevity remains the best ad for TB12 (forever-young Tom looks more like a claymation figure every day), but not every NFL star has benefited similarly. TB12 client Julian Edelman was popped with a four-game suspension (substance undisclosed) last year, and Rob Gronkowski, who had to retire at the age of 29, last week recited a frightful litany of pain he endured in his final nonpliable season.

■ The Red Sox not having any rested pitchers for Saturday night’s loss to the Angels was borderline GM malpractice. It was supposed to be a bullpen game, but Alex Cora needed rested arms in the wake of Friday’s 15-inning win in Anaheim. The Sept. 1 callups were still a day away, so that left Cora without ready relievers Saturday. And what happened? On a day when the A’s and Indians lost, Ryan Brasier blew a 4-3 lead in the eighth, surrendering six earned runs in a 10-4 loss.

It’s been almost four weeks since I said I’d be shocked if Dave Dombrowski is still Boston’s baseball boss next season, and there has been no vote of confidence from Sox ownership.

Dombrowski is heading into the final year of his contract in 2020. Early this year, when Nick Cafardo asked Henry if Dombrowski’s contract would be extended, the owner said, “In this day and age, it probably doesn’t make sense for your general manager to go into his final year without a contract. So that would mean something should happen this year.”

Attempts to paint the Sox as wild-card contenders are somewhat laughable. Boston’s pitching staff is mediocre and worn down. The Sox have 27 blown saves. And the math simply doesn’t work when you need two teams ahead of you to collapse.

And let’s not forget that the Red Sox are a pathetic 23-37 (.383) against teams with winning records. After an easy week on the road against the Padres, Rockies, and Angels, the Sox face the first-place Twins and Yankees at Fenway this week. Let’s see how “hot” the Sox are now that they’re not playing the Dolphins, Bills, and Jets.

■ QUIZ: Name the Red Sox career leader in pickoffs by a pitcher (answer below).

■ Weird to see the UMass hockey coach and athletic director going back and forth on Twitter with 98.5 The SportsHub’s Marc Bertrand after alum Beetle tweeted some tough stuff when UMass was smoked by Rutgers in its opener over the weekend.

“Anyone who expected overnight changes just doesn’t understand,” tweeted puck boss Greg Carvel.

“You let 1 bad quarter at Rutgers determine the state of our program,” insisted athletic director Ryan Bamford.

Bertrand shot back with, “Circle the wagons, much, Ryan?”

BC already hates Beetle. Now UMass. “Who do I have left?” asked Bertrand.

- Desperate Buffalo Bills fans are geeked up about a 4-0 preseason.
- Tony La Russa does not know Bob Cousy well, but when the two met a while back, La Russa graciously told Cooz to reach out if he ever needed anything. Last month, when Cousy found himself in need of a second private jet to fly family members from Worcester to D.C. for his Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony, Cooz reached out to La Russa, and the Hall of Fame manager delivered. “Cooz is a legend,” said La Russa. “I was happy to help out.”

■ Roger Clemens’s wife, Debbie, confirms that she was an infant in Dealey Plaza on the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Born Debra Godfrey, the Rocket’s wife was six months old when her parents took her downtown to see the president’s motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963.

“My mom thought there was more than one shooter,” she offered when I spoke with her on the night Clemens pitched two scoreless innings at the Oldtime Baseball Game in Cambridge. Debbie and Roger are grandparents of twin boys.

■ I’m looking for the Chargers and Rams to have down seasons in the wake of their playoff duds against the Patriots last winter. It happens to a lot of teams after they gets pantsed by the Patriots in the postseason. The Seahawks haven’t been the same since Pete Carroll handed the Lombardi Trophy to the Patriots, and the same thing happened to Matt Ryan and the Falcons. Franchises are psychologically damaged after they choke against the Patriots.

■ There were some Week 1 college football scores in the spirit of the US women’s soccer team’s World Cup match vs. Thailand: Penn State 79, Idaho 7; Maryland 79, Howard 0; Alabama 42, Duke 3. Wonder if there were any Rapinoe-esque second-half touchdown celebrations.

■ The Yankees hit 74 home runs in August, shattering the previous major league record of 58. Aaron Judge, who never does much against the Red Sox, hit six in his final eight games of the month.

■ US Open officials fined Spanish player Carla Suarez Navarro \$40,000 for tanking her match against a Hungarian qualifier last week. What would the tennis federation do with the Dolphins?

■ The New York Post wonders if Ray Lewis will wear his white suit on “Dancing With The Stars”?

■ Forget about running for Congress in Arizona, we’d love to see Schill jump into the Ed Markey/Joe Kennedy senatorial scrum from the Republican side.

■ I miss Mike Lynch on Channel 5 already. The station should have kept him on nightly.

■ Dennis Eckersley has dubbed the Globe’s Alex Speier “Stat Masterson.”

■ Quiz answer: Jon Lester, 24.

* **MassLive.com**

Boston Red Sox’s playoff odds at 8.5% after 6-2 road trip; Alex Cora’s team now plays 7 games vs. Twins, Yankees

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox posted a 6-2 record on their road trip through San Diego (2-1), Colorado (2-0) and Anaheim (2-1). But their odds of making the playoffs remain slim.

Boston has just an 8.5% chance of qualifying for the postseason, according to Fangraphs.com. The Sox now return to Fenway Park to play three games against the AL Central-leading Twins and four games vs. the AL East-leading Yankees starting Tuesday.

The Rays, Indians and Athletics are ahead of the Red Sox in the Wild Card standings. The Rays, who took over the first Wild Card by a half game this weekend, have a 73.3% chance of making the postseason. The Indians, who own the second Wild Card spot, have a 66.4% of making the postseason (61.6% to win a Wild Card spot and 4.8% to win the AL Central).

The Athletics, who trail the Indians by a half game, have a 52.2%.

The Red Sox trail Cleveland by 5 games and the Athletics by 4 1/2 games for the second Wild Card.

The Boston Red Sox are averaging the longest games in Major League Baseball for a third straight year (tied with Dodgers in '18). They lead the American League for a fourth straight season.

The Wild Card standings

1. Tampa Bay 80-58 (.580) 1/2 game ahead
2. Cleveland 79-58 (.577)
3. Oakland 78-58 (.574) 1/2 game behind
4. Boston 74-63 (.540) 5 games behind

The Rays have 24 games remaining. They are on a 93.9-win pace.

The Indians have 25 games remaining. They are on pace for 93.4 wins.

The Athletics play 26 more games. They are on pace for 92.9 wins.

The Red Sox play 25 more games and are on pace for 87.5 wins.

If Indians go three games under .500 (11-14) and the Athletics go two games under .500 (12-14) to each finish with 90 wins, the Red Sox would need to go 16-9 (.640 winning percentage) to tie them.

Impossible? No. Highly unlikely? Yes.

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

Red Sox will have to be at their best this week

Tom Caron

Like many of us, the Boston Red Sox have Labor Day off.

It wasn't a holiday for them, just an open day on their schedule. They didn't get a long weekend, just a day to try to recover from an eight-game road trip that wrapped up Sunday in Anaheim.

It was a successful trip, the Red Sox winning six of eight away from home. In most seasons, the team would be praised for winning three straight road series.

But this season isn't like most, and we're left thinking about the one that got away.

Boston's bullpen had been one of the best in baseball during August. So Manager Alex Cora was feeling good about things when he handed the ball to closer Brandon Workman with a two-run lead in the ninth inning of Friday's game.

The closer had converted five of his previous six save opportunities, finally giving the Red Sox the stability they had lacked at the back end of the bullpen. The Sox finally had a traditional closer.

Workman has the lowest batting average against of any reliever in baseball. Trouble is, he has walked 39 batters in 61 1/3 innings, a walk rate of 5.7 per nine innings — the highest in baseball.

He walked the first two batters Friday night. He gave up two runs to blow the save. The Red Sox ultimately won in 15 innings, but the bullpen had to throw 11 innings.

Not an ideal situation heading into Saturday's "bullpen game." Cora had no starting pitcher, so needed nine more innings from his relievers. He got seven before Ryan Brasier allowed six earned runs in the eighth as the Sox suffered their AL-leading 27th blown save of the year.

In a season filled with frustration, Saturday's loss may have been the most discouraging of the year. The Indians and A's had already lost, and the Sox could've moved within 4 1/2 games of the wild card race. Instead, it was a complete meltdown.

"I wish I could have an answer," said Cora, "but you roll with the guys that you have. They're doing their best. It just happened that certain days it's not happening for us."

The Red Sox have lost nine games in which they led after seven innings. By simply going 4-5 in those games – still a losing record – they would've ended the road trip just a game out of a playoff spot.

Instead, they are clinging to flickering hopes of a September miracle.

The embers are still glowing, barely, after the trip. Now comes the hard part. On Tuesday night the Sox open up a seven-game home stand against the AL Central-leading Minnesota Twins. Then it's four games with the Yankees, who have beaten the Sox in 11 of 15 meetings this season.

Boston will have to play its best baseball against some of the best teams in baseball. They'll have to put together a full month of success. They haven't done it yet, faltering every time they approach a level of consistency.

In many ways, they are the exact opposite of the team that won it all in 2018.

"It was a good team that played good baseball," said Cora of the '18 champs. "They had challenges and they showed up every day. We were very consistent at being consistent."

"This year, the topic has been we're consistent at being inconsistent."

Is it too late to change that topic? We're about to find out.

*** *The Athletic***

Blake Swihart, Romell Jordan and the two families sharing the trauma of a young man's suicide

Zach Buchanan

Blake Swihart's voice quavers when he talks about that phone call.

Not the one he received, although that one hurts him plenty. The first call brought just about the worst news he could imagine – his brother, Romell Jordan, was dead of an apparent suicide. Yet the memory of that call is shrouded in the shock he felt in the moment, and he can speak about that without losing his composure. His brother's death didn't feel real until the next call, the one he had to make.

Swihart is not sure why he was the first of his family members to be contacted, why Jordan's boss called him this past February with the news. Maybe it was because he was already awake, in Florida for spring training with the Red Sox while the sun was still hours from rising back home in New Mexico. But the reason didn't matter so much as the knowledge of what he must do next: He had to wake his mother and father with a call and break their hearts.

"I was the one who had to call my parents to tell them," Swihart said, the pain of the memory creeping into his voice. "I don't know how I was able to do it, but I was."

Six months have passed since Jordan took his own life at 23, but the passage of time has brought only a modicum of peace for the Swiharts, his surrogate family. His time with them was short but packed with love. They took him in when he was 16 so that he could finish high school in the community he knew. They watched him star on the Cleveland High football field in suburban Albuquerque and go on to play running back at the University of New Mexico. But mostly they basked in the happiness he brought into their lives and the lives of so many others, even as he ransacked their fridges.

Now, after Jordan's suicide in a hotel room in a remote corner of New Mexico, they are left with questions. In this, the Swihart family – Blake, sister Kacie, brother Jace and parents Arlan and Carla – are not alone. They are joined in their grief by Romell's father and his five siblings – three brothers and two sisters. All of them are simultaneously overcome with love for Romell, distraught to be without him and furious at him for not sharing his pain. And, perhaps most of all, they question why they never saw the hurt beneath his happy-go-lucky exterior.

"We just didn't know he was in such a dark place," Carla said. "That was the hardest part for me – how come we didn't see that? But we didn't. We didn't see it."

Suicide affects a great number of families, many of them left to pick up the pieces that will never fit back together. Despite its terrible prevalence, talking about it carries a stigma that often makes coping with a loved one's suicide a debilitatingly lonely experience.

The Swiharts and the Jordans want to break through that silence and share their trauma. They want to talk about Romell, the joy he brought to their family and the sorrow he left them with. They want others affected by suicide – both those contemplating it and the families fractured in its wake – to know they are not alone.

"All we can really do is just continue to talk about him and the great person that he was and how he impacted all of our lives for the better," Kacie said, "and just hope that somebody's listening."

Romell Jordan had fit into the Swihart family immediately.

It wasn't always so easy for him to find a place to belong. His parents were divorced, and both had moved away from the Albuquerque suburb of Rio Rancho where he had attended middle school. After his freshman year of high school, he was forced to move to Denver with his dad, Robert. There, he began to lose his way. His oldest brother, Robert Jr., did not live in Denver at the time but talked to Romell regularly and sensed that Romell was "losing focus" away from Rio Rancho and was beginning to point himself "down the wrong path." The third oldest, Raymon, did live with Romell and noticed that "he wasn't really

himself when he was out here.” (The 31-year-old Robert Jr. and Romell have different mothers. Raymon, 29, is the oldest of the four children shared by Robert Sr. and Romell’s mother, Tamala Cade-Manning.)

Romell realized he was adrift and pushed to move back to Rio Rancho, where he felt more in his element. He lived briefly there with his godparents the summer before his junior year and developed a deep friendship with Kacie. They were the same age and, along with a friend named Cody, were inseparable those few months. But the idyll didn’t last long.

Kacie remembers sitting with Romell on the balcony of the Swiharts’ home, enjoying a July summer night, when his mother called. Romell’s godparents could no longer afford to take care of him, she said, so he needed to move to Las Vegas to live with her. He had barely begun to feel like he was home, but now he would have to start all over again.

The news unmoored him. Arlan remembers Romell saying he would have to run away. Cleveland High football coach Heath Ridenour remembers Romell visiting him and crying on his front porch, wailing, “How come nobody loves me, nobody wants me? What’s wrong with me?” Romell’s brothers say he was being a bit dramatic – football was still an option in Denver or Las Vegas, they say – but they agreed that Romell was better off staying put.

That was Kacie’s opinion, too. She refused to accept such bad news. She and Romell had spent all their time together that summer, and he already felt like a brother. Romell wasn’t going anywhere if she had something to say about it, and she petitioned her parents to let him stay with them. Arlan said it took him and Carla “about 10 minutes” to say yes. Blake, who’d just begun his minor-league career, gave his endorsement. Romell moved in right away.

There were hoops to jump through. He could have lived with the Swiharts without any legal arrangements, but Arlan and Carla wanted to make sure he had health insurance if he was going to continue playing football. That meant becoming his legal guardians, which required some convincing of Robert Sr. and Cade-Manning. Rayven Jordan, the brother closest to Romell in age, said some members of the family were a bit stung by the idea, although they eventually came around.

“They were probably a little upset more than they wanted to be,” said Rayven, who is 26. “But at the same time, they knew what they were doing. They were doing this for the better of their child.” The paperwork took about four months to complete.

But what makes a family a family doesn’t require the stamp of a notary public, and Romell became a brother and son to the Swiharts overnight. Immediately, Arlan was “Dad” and Carla was “Mom.” Romell got his own room and lived by the same rules as the rest of the Swihart children. He had to get all A’s and B’s in school and, though the Swiharts would feed him and clothe him, he’d need to earn his own money to spend on movies with friends and dates with girls. He would gripe to Robert Jr. about it over the phone – he just wanted to play football – but his brother would remind him that he had things pretty good.

Romell picked up a job at a Wendy’s four miles away from where the Swiharts lived. He rode Kacie’s bike there. “Fortunately, our house is up a hill,” Carla said. “So, his four miles, he probably pedaled twice.” Most of the time, someone was able to pick him up and take him home, although not always. That meant a steep, strenuous ride back home, though Romell didn’t complain about it. “It is four miles up a three-percent grade,” Arlan said. “He’d come in huffing and puffing and be like, ‘Made it in 19 minutes and 14 seconds, Dad!’” When Romell got his paycheck, Carla made him put half of it into a savings account she opened for him.

The Swiharts were not his only safe harbor. Romell was a gregarious sort who became famous for making himself at home. “If you hadn’t seen him in forever, he’d walk right in, walk right by you, walk straight to your pantry to get a snack, and then he’d tell you hi,” Ridenour said. “That was just him.” Once Blake got his own house in the area, it wasn’t uncommon for him to come home to find Romell on his couch. The miracle of Romell’s personality was that it never felt like an intrusion.

“He had the personality that would just suck you in,” Carla said, “and make you want to give him a hug.”

That was the only version of Romell the Swiharts ever saw leading up to his death. When they look back, they find no hints that he was unhappy.

After Romell graduated from the University of New Mexico in 2017, his football career ended and real life began. But that didn't seem to get him down. He took a job with Cintas, the industrial laundry company, and the Swiharts always heard good things about him from his bosses. Last fall, he was able to join the rest of the family in Los Angeles to watch all three of the World Series games at Dodger Stadium, culminating with the Red Sox's title-clinching Game 5. (Blake pinch-hit twice, in Games 3 and 4.) Afterward, Romell excitedly called Ridenour to tell him all about it.

He always seemed upbeat. Ridenour ran into him in December in the small town of Hobbs in the southeast corner of the state, about five hours from Rio Rancho. The football coach was sitting in an almost-empty Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant in the middle of the afternoon when Romell rolled in with a girl on his arm. Romell explained that Cintas had recently lost an employee in the area and he was picking up the slack, delivering fresh uniforms and supplies to oil and gas companies in the area. It meant weeks in a hotel room in a tiny town – and long drives home and back on the weekends – but he told Ridenour he loved it. He seemed his jolly self. The day before he died, he also raved to Kacie about his job. Plus, that day he'd gone to a restaurant and been given a huge steak for free, a fitting turn of events for a guy whose middle name is literally Lucky. “Everything seemed fine,” Kacie said.

The Jordans feel they have a few more pieces to the puzzle. Romell did leave a note, addressed to Robert Jr., Raymon and Rayven. Robert Jr. has a picture of it saved on his phone and figures he'll never delete it. (The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention recommends against publicizing the contents of such notes.)

The Jordans don't know exactly what led Romell to the precipice of despair. That choice to take one's own life is usually the result of myriad factors. Romell was lonely in Hobbs, the Jordan brothers say, and left to his thoughts. That meant stewing over girl troubles, disappointed over his failing to make it to the NFL and still suffering latent grief over his mother's death three years earlier. But they insist they never sensed he was contemplating suicide.

Robert Jr. would speak to Romell on the phone daily from California. They'd trade advice about girlfriends and Romell would express his homesickness, but mostly their conversations were happy. Still, Robert Jr. could sense that Romell longed for connection. The voices and faces of his friends and family were available at the click of a button, but that was hardly a substitute for their presence. “If that physical touch is right next to you,” Robert Jr. said, “you feel all that energy and you feel that love.” But Romell was a master of putting up a brave front. His brothers could probe only so deep. “He knew how to hide it very well. He was very private. Very private,” Raymon said. “Romell was one of those people, it was hard to crack him open.”

Robert Jr. feels like he was as plugged into Romell's head as anyone, but even he was fooled by his brother's disposition leading up to his death. The two spoke the night of Feb. 27 after Romell had returned to the hotel after the workday. The pair swapped girl problems and shared laughs over FaceTime before Romell begged off to take a shower. He promised he'd call back, but first he wanted to show off the muscle definition in his back. Robert Jr. laughed. “Yeah, it looks good,” Robert Jr. told him. “Stop being weird. Call me back.”

The next time the phone rang, though, it was their sister – Teann, the youngest of the siblings. Romell's girlfriend had called her after having spoken to Romell and warned Teann that Romell had mentioned the idea of taking his own life. That didn't quite click for Robert Jr., but he told Teann to call the police – she was in Denver, so it would require some interagency coordination – while he would try Romell to talk him down. Romell didn't answer, but Robert Jr. left a message to remind his brother how much he loved him and to tell him that everything would be OK.

A few hours later, in the small hours of the next morning, Teann called again, screaming. The police had found Romell. He was dead. (Though the details of his death are public record, suicide prevention groups caution against describing the method because it might inspire others who may be harboring suicidal thoughts.) To Robert Jr., it felt surreal. Just hours earlier, they'd been laughing. Just hours earlier, Romell had been flexing his back in the mirror.

"I hang up the phone and was just sitting there like, 'Am I dreaming?'" Robert Jr. said. "I touched myself and was like, 'Fuck, I'm not dreaming.' It was just so unreal, and I couldn't really gather it together."

Disbelief followed wherever the news of Romell's death traveled. The happy front he'd presented made it all the more difficult to comprehend. It hit Robert Jr. when he talked to his father, hearing the man cry for the first time that he could remember. The Swiharts took turns conveying the news to each other. Blake told his parents. It crystallized for Carla when she called Kacie, who remembers repeatedly telling her mother to "shut up," something for which Kacie still feels guilty. Kacie, in turn, had to reach out to a mutual friend of Romell's to wrap her head around it. It was all so unthinkable.

The following days brought a few answers. When Kacie entered Romell's apartment to collect clothes for his funeral, she learned that he'd been putting up a few extended family members. Then there was the whiteboard in his kitchen breaking down his monthly bills. There were the usuals – gas, water, electricity – but also several other expenses he was paying for other people. He was just one man, fresh out of college, trying to provide for others. "For a 23-year-old kid," Arlan said, "that's a lot of stress."

But the biggest factor, the Jordan brothers think, was the trauma of his mother's death. Cade-Manning died in September 2016, early into Romell's junior season. She had moved back to the Albuquerque area but struggled with seizures that may have been the result of a serious car accident she'd been in several years earlier. She was his biggest cheerleader and best friend, always finding a way to come to her son's games. Romell and his mother lived separately, but he checked on her regularly. The day she died, he'd popped by in the morning before class to say hello. Romell had considered skipping class to spend the day with her, according to Robert Jr., but decided against it.

When he returned in the afternoon, he found his mother dead. His brothers say the experience – and the guilt at having left her that day – troubled him persistently. "That messes with you a ton," Robert Jr. said. "That's traumatizing." Raymon said he could see the difference in Romell's emotional state on the football field. He didn't seem to love the game as much and moved just a bit more slowly out there. Raymon also finds significance in the date of Romell's suicide – the 27th day of the month. Cade-Manning died on the 27th of September.

Both families grasped for explanations as Romell was put to rest. Ridenour arranged for the service to be held at the concert hall at Cleveland High, and the place was so packed they had to put monitors out in the hallway so people could watch the service remotely. The lives of many of the hundreds gathered there had been brightened by the young man they'd come to mourn, and many of them would have done anything for Romell had they known he was in distress.

Carla thinks about that, all those shoulders unleaned upon, and finds herself getting mad at Romell. "I'll periodically just be so angry," she said. Both families have battled that emotion. Romell didn't have to bear his burden alone. Any number of people – two families, plus an entire community that watched him grow up – would have helped him carry it if only he'd asked.

"Every one of those people, they weren't just acquaintances, they were family, they were people who Romell legitimately loved," Carla said. "How, with so many people, could you not just reach out to somebody? I get pissed off thinking, 'What the heck, Romell? You did a permanent solve to a temporary situation.'"

The healing process has been slow and incomplete. It moves along in fits and starts.

Some, like Robert Jr. and Blake – now in the Diamondbacks organization after an early-season trade – have forced themselves to accept the situation. “He’s the one who chose that,” Robert Jr. said. There is a big picture of Romell in his house. His 3-year-old son knows his uncle is gone but often looks at the photo and asks if he’ll see Romell again. Although Robert Jr. knows that parts of the Bible say suicide is a fatal sin, he tells his son yes. The moral math doesn’t make sense for him otherwise. “I hope he did make it to heaven,” he said. “That’s the only thing I worry about. They’ve got to let him in.”

Blake, who is currently in Triple A, also tells himself that Romell is happier now, even if there might have been a path to that happiness in life. He finds serenity in the not knowing. He has not read the note and doesn’t want to know whether Romell’s death was quick or agonizing. “He’s in a better place, and he’s happy,” he said, “and that’s how I still have to think about it.”

Others have found a more uneasy peace. Rayven finds otherwise mundane days punctured by the sudden, recurring realization that he can’t just pick up the phone and call Romell. For Raymon, a continuous series of unanswerable questions play in a continuous loop in his mind. “Why? What made you? What was going through your head? Why didn’t you speak? Why didn’t you come to us?” Raymon said. “There’s so much going through my head.”

Kacie was the closest to Romell of all the Swiharts, and her parents think she still hasn’t fully processed losing him. She agrees. She was emotional leading up to his service, but she said everything went numb when she stepped to the lectern to speak. That emotional fog hasn’t lifted since. She works as an investigator at the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, a job that inures her somewhat to traumatic situations. Her coworkers notice she still uses the present tense when talking about Romell. It’s been a while since she cried.

Romell’s legacy lives on with those he left behind. Swihart has adopted Romell’s motto: “Just show up.” He wants to be the guy who’s always cheerful, who always brightens the mood of any room he walks into, who’s always there when someone needs help. Ridenour – who keeps photos of Romell on his desks at work and at home, and sometimes finds himself talking to him through them – said the Cleveland High football helmets will feature suicide prevention ribbons along with Romell’s high school jersey number, 10. Ridenour also delivers a daily message to his team that he wishes Romell had heard six months ago: “You matter, no matter what you think.”

Some members of Romell’s family feel that even if they had known the depths of his torment, they would not have been able to dissuade him from taking his own life. They are in the impossible position of either repeatedly replaying the what-if scenarios in their mind or believing that Romell was immutably unhappy. But professionals stress that no one is beyond help and that suicidal thoughts or tendencies can be reduced with proper mental health treatment and support. Those resources exist, but they are not as widespread as they could be.

Raymon agrees. He views his brother’s death as a call for more resources devoted to direct intervention. It must transcend mere lip service. “In schools, we need to have somebody who can actually talk to kids, to get them to open up,” he said. “A lot of kids can’t open up.” Kacie is in a position to do just that, and he has already experienced the good it can do. She uses Romell’s story when working with kids who have exhibited suicidal thoughts or actions, sharing her pain so that they understand that there are always people who care, always people who forever lose slivers of themselves because of a loved one’s suicide. “I think it kind of clicks for them,” she said.

But broadcasting his story far and wide can’t hurt. So, they talk about Romell – how wonderful a kid he was, how much they miss him and how they wish he’d have let them help him. Perhaps the right person will see it at just the right time. Perhaps it inspires someone to check on a loved one.

“If one person can connect with it and make a change, if they were contemplating something...” Carla said before trailing off. “If we can save one person, that’s all you can ask for.”

The World Series championship hangover is surprisingly common. It shouldn't be a surprise the Red Sox suffer from it

Jen McCaffrey

At the start of the season, the Red Sox repeating as World Series champions seemed like a difficult, if still possible, task. After all, they'd won a franchise-record 108 regular-season games, returned nearly the same roster and appeared to be healthy and relatively young, but with a strong veteran presence.

Yet with one month left in the season, the best chance the Red Sox have of even reaching the playoffs is through teams ahead of them in the wild-card standings falling into disrepair.

And that disappointing outcome puts them in pretty good company because it's not uncommon for World Series champions to struggle.

Since the Yankees completed the rare World Series three-peat from 1998 to 2000, no other team has pulled off back-to-back titles. Back-to-back championships have only been accomplished twice in the past 40 years, with only the 1992-93 Blue Jays joining those Yankees teams.

Over the last 18 seasons, only four teams even played in consecutive World Series. The 2008 Phillies won the title and returned to the World Series the following year, losing to the Yankees. The 2010-11 Texas Rangers lost two consecutive World Series, as did the 2017-18 Dodgers. The 2014 Kansas City Royals lost to the San Francisco Giants then beat the Mets the following year.

Nine World Series winners in this time frame missed the next postseason completely. The Giants remain the greatest enigma of the last decade, winning the World Series in 2010, 2012 and 2014, but missing the postseason in 2011, 2013 and 2015.

None of those teams that failed to repeat, of course, had the payroll well north of \$200 million the Red Sox possess. But for this Red Sox team that seemingly had so many advantages to be such a disappointment highlights the difficulty champions face.

Winning the World Series is hard. Winning it two years in a row, with a target on your back? Good luck.

For many teams, injury is the biggest culprit. While the Red Sox weren't ravaged by injuries this season (like the Rays or Yankees), they did lose a key piece early on in Nathan Eovaldi and another giant one late in Chris Sale.

Eovaldi's absence certainly had a significant impact across the roster, trickling down into what would become a transient fifth starter spot. The rotation struggled from the get-go, but there's no way of knowing whether Eovaldi might have been able to stabilize the group. One thing that is certain, though, is his presence would have helped ease the stress on an already thin bullpen.

By the time the Red Sox evened out, they found themselves in too deep a hole to challenge the Yankees for the division lead, and the wild card was barely in sight. To their credit, despite the frustrating two steps forward, one step back approach that characterized most of the summer, they haven't given up, even with news Sale would miss the remainder of the year.

"We can't worry about trying to sweep a series or win four, five in a row," starter David Price said last week. "We need to come out here and focus on today's game. Win today and hopefully teams in front of us drop a couple of games. If we can win two in a row, they can lose two in a row, then they'll start to feel it a little bit more. We just need whoever the teams in front of us are playing to play good baseball."

None of the Red Sox players on the active roster was on the 2011 Red Sox team that led the division Sept. 1 only to go 7-20 over the course of the month and miss the postseason. When Dustin Pedroia visited from

the injured list last week in Denver, he delivered a reminder of that season, that teams have collapsed before, and if the Red Sox stay the course, they might just be able to sneak in.

“I know, there’s still time,” Pedroia said. “I’ve been on teams, and I told the guys, I’ve been on teams, we were up 11 games with 27 to go and lost. It’s far from over. You’ve got to just find a way to show up every day and win and when you win that game, turn the page.”

There’s not much time left, but the Red Sox are trying to make the most of it.