

The Boston Red Sox Monday, September 30, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

One last time with gusto, Mookie Betts provides drama for Red Sox in season-ending win

Peter Abraham

Mookie Betts turned to the fans, let out a jubilant yell and pounded his right fist against his chest three times before his teammates mobbed him at home plate on Sunday afternoon.

It was a joyous moment at the end of a disappointing season, Betts dashing fearlessly around the bases in the bottom of the ninth inning to give the Red Sox a 5-4 victory against the Baltimore Orioles.

It was hard not to wonder whether it was the final time Betts will play for the Sox.

Betts has so far turned aside offers to extend his contract and could be traded this offseason, a possibility that gained momentum last week when ownership announced a desire to cut payroll.

But watching Betts ignite the crowd with the kind of daring and skill few other players possess also raised a second point: How can you trade a player like that?

“We’ll see what happens. But, man, he’s special,” teammate Xander Bogaerts said.

Betts drew a leadoff walk from Dillon Tate to start the inning. Rafael Devers followed with a two-hopper to the right side that bounced off the glove of shortstop Richie Martin.

With right fielder Stevie Wilkerson playing deep, Betts hit second and raced for third.

“At that point, it was just instinct,” Betts said.

Wilkerson hesitated then jogged three steps before lobbing the ball back to the infield. Betts turned his head to follow the play as he turned the corner at third and took off for the plate. He scored with a head-first slide, the relay throw far too late.

It was the first walkoff victory to end a Red Sox season since 2008. They finished 84-78.

The play was the latest example of what Betts is capable of.

“He can dominate a game in every aspect,” manager Alex Cora said. “He can hit, he can play defense and he can run the bases . . . it wasn’t a gamble. It was a great baseball play. His reaction was outstanding.”

Said Bogaerts: “He has a different type of vision, seeing plays, reading stuff, anticipating. I don’t think a lot of guys would go on that play or risk it at all, and he was safe by a mile.”

A year after he was named the Most Valuable Player in the American League, Betts hit .295 with a .915 OPS, a major-league leading 135 runs, and 74 extra-base hits.

Now comes the question of what comes next. Betts has one more season before he becomes a free agent. The Sox could trade him or continue trying to put together a contract that Betts feels represents his value.

“That’s out of my hands,” Betts said. “I have my representation to take care of that type of stuff so I don’t worry about it.”

Betts smiled when asked about how he's enjoyed his six seasons with the team.

"I'm still here," he said. "It's not like I'm gone until whenever. I'm not going to focus on that right now."

In what could have been their final games for the Sox, Mitch Moreland was 1 for 3 with a walk and Brock Holt 1 for 4. Both are due to become free agents.

J.D. Martinez, who has the right to opt out of his contract after the World Series, was 1 for 4. He finished with 36 home runs and 105 RBIs.

Eduardo Rodriguez pitched seven solid innings and left the mound with a 4-3 lead. But he was denied his 20th win when the Orioles scored in the eighth inning.

An error by Bogaerts and two singles off Matt Barnes resulted in the 31st blown save for the Sox, tied with Oakland for the most this season.

Rodriguez finished 19-6 with 3.81 ERA over 203⅓ innings.

"I did the best I could," Rodriguez said. "This year was a big step for me."

The Sox nearly took the lead back in the eighth inning when Jackie Bradley Jr. hit a deep drive to right field with a runner on and two outs. But Wilkerson made a leaping catch before nearly tumbling into the seats adjacent to the visitors' bullpen.

"That play has got to be the catch of the year," Betts said.

Dwight Evans, who won eight Gold Gloves for the Red Sox in right field, texted former teammate Dennis Eckersley in the NESN booth to say it was the best catch he had seen in right field at Fenway.

Brandon Workman (10-1 with a 1.88 ERA and 16 saves) struck out the side in the ninth inning. Betts did the rest.

"It was time to go home," he said.

Eduardo Rodriguez answered the bell this season

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox players flung sunflower seeds in Eduardo Rodriguez's direction and he didn't bother to move.

It was the bottom of the seventh inning Sunday, and the Sox had just taken a 4-3 lead on Xander Bogaerts's RBI single. Rodriguez, who was in line for his 20th win of the season, basked in his teammates' celebratory gesture.

In the eighth inning, however, Bogaerts made an error on a grounder by the Orioles' Hanser Alberto that got stuck in his glove. With two on and two outs, Matt Barnes gave up a single to Jonathan Villar that got past a diving Brock Holt at second, scoring Alberto. The groan from the Fenway crowd said it all. In just a blink, the Sox lost hold of a Rodriguez win.

"That was, uh, that was a quick turnaround to be honest," Bogaerts said afterward. "The moment I got a hit and put the team up, especially knowing that was his last inning, it was excitement and joy. Then the next inning, I had it taken away, obviously by a mistake I made letting the first runner get on. Man, that was rough."

Although 20 wins would have been an impressive milestone, it's not just missing the mark is not a blemish on Rodriguez's season. Victories can be misleading. His last two starts of the year indicate as much.

The important part is that Rodriguez — in a lost season for the Red Sox — took a huge leap forward that bodes well for the future.

Rodriguez pitched 200-plus innings for the first time in his career (203½). He finished with a 3.81 ERA to go along with 213 strikeouts. Rodriguez proved to be the Red Sox' most durable starter, pitching five-plus innings in each start since the beginning of May.

"We're very proud of him," manager Alex Cora said. "He gave us a chance to win from the Houston on. It's something that he's going to build on, and he's going to get better. I don't feel that he's going to be satisfied."

In a season that included injuries to David Price, Chris Sale and Nathan Eovaldi, in addition to the underperformance of Rick Porcello, Rodriguez showed up. He entered spring training more in shape this season. He was finally healthy, too, and carried a different mind-set.

"When I went to spring training this year, my goal was to throw 200 innings and make all my starts," Rodriguez said. "Thank God that I did it this year. I battled all season and tried to keep the team in a position to make the playoffs. We didn't make it this year."

His fastball lived up in the zone and caused fits for batters. He threw his changeup at 90-m.p.h., which was just a 5 mile-per-hour separation from his fastball, but it disappeared beneath the bats of righthanded hitters. He made a concerted effort to pitch inside to hitters in order to establish the strike zone, which caught the eye of the Yankees' Aaron Judge.

"He works that cutter well, and that changeup well away to righties, Judge said recently. "So, having that combo, when you start having righties thinking in because he's throwing that heater in for a strike, you kind of have to respect that. But when you respect that, he'll dump in that cutter away or changeup away."

Rodriguez has gained respect across the league. He's gone from the pitcher who was known as the one who threw his glove down in frustration after a Yasiel Puig home run in Game 4 of the World Series against the Dodgers last year, to a legitimate fixture in the Sox rotation. Cora and the organization knew he had it all along.

"That's why we gave him the ball in Game 4," Cora said. "It's because we trusted the stuff. People just remember that one pitch."

The 20-win season was erased Sunday, but Rodriguez's performance wasn't.

"We're going to start over next spring training," Rodriguez said, "and give it all we've got."

Chris Sale, David Price go silent on updates

Peter Abraham

How is Chris Sale's elbow feeling now that the season has ended?

That's a good question. But he has not been around to answer it.

Sale has not spoken to reporters since Aug. 19, two days after he was placed on the injured list with inflammation.

Dr. James Andrews gave Sale an injection of platelet-rich plasma at the time and recommended a follow-up examination in six weeks.

Sale left the team shortly after that, returning to his home in Naples, Fla., and doing rehab work at the team complex up the road in Fort Myers.

Sale rejoined the Sox for the series at Tampa Bay last week and sent word through vice president of media relations Kevin Gregg that he would take questions during the final series at Fenway Park.

But Sale, who was signed to a five-year, \$145 million extension before the season, never made himself available over the weekend, turning down several requests made through the team.

After the Red Sox beat the Baltimore Orioles, 5-4, on Sunday, Sale appeared in the clubhouse for only a few seconds when reporters were there, then rushed out.

According to manager Alex Cora, Sale has not yet had his second exam with Andrews.

“He’ll go home in the next few days and he’ll keep rehabbing down there in Fort Myers,” Cora said. “As far as going to see Andrews, nothing yet. Throwing? Nothing yet.”

Sale is responding well to the rehab work, Cora said. But it remains uncertain whether he will be ready to pitch at the start of next season.

“As of now, so far so good,” Cora said. “Obviously we have to wait. But I think he’s trending in the right direction.”

David Price, who had outpatient surgery to remove a cyst from his left wrist on Thursday, was at Fenway Park. He also has declined to take questions.

No TV time

A day after the Sox were eliminated, ESPN offered Cora a role in their postseason coverage. He turned it down.

“I need [time] for the family. That’s something they deserve,” said Cora, who was with ESPN from 2013-16 as an analyst. “They deserve time.”

Cora doesn’t have a pick to win the World Series.

“I don’t have a horse in the race,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of people that I appreciate and they had successful seasons. You go around the league and the managers, I respect some of them and we have close relationships.

“It’s going to be fun to watch. But I have no idea.”

See you later

It’s customary for teams to conduct exit interviews with the players, largely to set an agenda for the offseason. The Sox started theirs after being eliminated from playoff contention.

For the players who will be free agents, the message is a bit different because of the uncertainty.

“There’s certain guys, people get emotional,” Cora said. “You talk to them and tell them how much you care about them, how much you love them and appreciate everything they’ve done the last two years.

“In other cases, the three or four years they have competed here. There are different tones in different conversations. It’s been something new for me. I’ve learned a lot the last 10 days.”

Along with Cora, a front office staffer is on hand to discuss whatever contractual matters there are to address. The medical staff also is involved.

“We care about the players,” Cora said. “What’s going to make you a better player? What you need to do to physically to be a big leaguer next year.”

Cora said the exit interviews were rushed after the World Series last season with everybody having someplace to go. In retrospect, he felt that was a mistake and the Sox would have benefited from sending the players home with a more concrete message.

Caught in the draft

The Red Sox will have the 17th pick of the amateur draft in June barring any teams ahead of them losing their selections for signing qualified free agents . . . Andrew Benintendi missed the final three games after fouling a ball off his right calf in Texas on Thursday. It was a forgettable season for Benintendi, who played a career-low 138 games because of assorted minor injuries and hit .266 with a .774 OPS. Benintendi dropped off in every offensive category and struck out in 22.7 percent of his plate appearances, a career worst. Cora has said several times that getting Benintendi back on track will be one of the focal points of the offseason . . . The Sox drew 2,805,919 to Fenway this season, not counting the two “home” games against the Yankees in London. The Sox were 38-41 at Fenway . . . Among the selections from Fenway Park disc jockey TJ Connelly before the game was “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by The Rolling Stones. . . . The next game at Fenway Park will be on April 2 against the White Sox. That’s 185 days away, but who’s counting?

What are the implications of a bad Red Sox season?

Michael Silverman

One bad season such as the Red Sox just wrapped up will amount to only a smudge on the team’s long-term financial picture.

But in the wake of the reigning world champions completely whiffing on the playoffs, it’s their pride that has taken a fall.

NESN ratings plunged this season — average household ratings went down approximately 23 percent from last season — and attendance at Fenway Park dipped (0.7 of 1 percent) — with an asterisk because of their home series in London. There is no guarantee ratings or attendance can’t slip farther next season, but neither does a specter of fear emanate from Jersey Street that advertisers and corporate sponsors are about to abandon ship, that the 20,000-plus season ticket-holders’ base will stage a walkout, or that Fenway Park will not still sit close to capacity next season.

All the current froth and chop on the surface — a stormy state that only intensified when Red Sox principal owner (and Globe owner) John Henry and chairman Tom Werner announced Friday they want to slash payroll — belies a franchise that floats on a deep reservoir of sound fiscal health and substantial goodwill that come with serving as a subsidiary of the thriving Fenway Sports Group mothership and winning four world titles in the last 16 years.

Using World Series trophy collections as the standard, the franchise has survived murkier times and emerged just fine.

Yet as the ballclub stares into its barren October schedule, the pain it feels resembles embarrassment more than anything else.

“The impact of postseason play is felt by the team, by the players and by the market — hotels, airlines, restaurants in the neighborhood — I can’t put a specific dollar amount on it but the toll that it takes, for us, is far more important in terms of our psyche than the financial implications,” said Red Sox president Sam

Kennedy Friday. “We want to be playing meaningful games in September and October, that’s the goal here. And when we’re not, it’s brutal.”

The details change each year, but a lag effect usually comes into play when it comes to how a baseball team’s performance affects its economics a year later.

The effect was most clearly seen around the three-year Red Sox whiplash era of worst-to-first-to-worst again from 2012-14.

Few harken back fondly to the 2012 season featuring Bobby Valentine as manager, whose last-place club won only 69 games, but attendance that season at Fenway Park stayed strong at 3.043 million. The hurt showed up the following season, which ended with a championship but also a drop to 2.83 million in attendance.

The reverse lag effect worked in 2014, the year after the World Series victory, when attendance went up to 2.96 million even though the 2014 team collapsed again into last place. Attendance, predictably, dipped in 2015, to 2.88 million.

Since 2013, Fenway Park attendance has flattened to between 2.8 million and 3 million every season.

Attendance across the board in Major League Baseball is down, and this year marks the fourth consecutive season of a drop that has MLB scrambling to figure out how to stop it. This season, the Red Sox did not experience a post-title attendance bounce at Fenway Park, even with the team teasing postseason viability into late July. Losing two likely sold-out games to the Yankees because of the London series obviously hurt the gate total. If the club had averaged the approximately 36,000-plus per-game figure it averaged in its eight 2019 home games against the Yankees, the total might have just crept above, by a couple of thousand, last year’s gate of 2,895,575. Instead, the Red Sox completed their 79-game 2019 homestand at 2,805,919, or an average of 35,518 per game, down 0.7 percent from last season’s 81-game average.

“I don’t know how the market will react to the 2019 season, we haven’t had a year where we finished eight or nine games above .500 or wherever we’ll finish recently — we’ve kind of been either in first place or last place,” said Kennedy with a sardonic laugh. “So this will be unique.”

The Red Sox have yet to settle on 2020 ticket prices. While the 2019 season was not a complete fail like 2012, 2014, and 2015, it would border on hubris for the club to raise prices more than the 2.5 percent average increase it instituted before this season. Ticket prices will be set before the Red Sox follow through on their stated intent to cut payroll, but a strong case could be made that a ticket price freeze, such as the one the club instituted after the 2012 debacle and during the recession in 2008 and 2009, is in order.

“I would anticipate a very, very modest increase, more of an inflationary type of adjustment,” said Kennedy.

Curiously, viewership on NESN tends to trend downward the year after a title, said Kennedy.

“[Ratings] have definitely been down,” said Kennedy. “Interestingly, while tickets and attendance typically has gone up, I believe that in post World Series years there’s been a bit of a decline on TV ratings, which is also counter-intuitive. I don’t have a specific reason for it, it may be that fans are more inclined to tune in as you get closer to postseason play, or there’s an expectation that the team is going to be back in the postseason so people wait to tune in until later in the year.”

Kennedy does not take for granted corporate sponsors and advertisers. But he also believes that the 2019 season will not serve as a loyalty referendum on doing business with the Red Sox.

“We don’t sell advertising on NESN and advertising at the ballpark based on one season — it’s sort of the ‘body of work,’ ” said Kennedy. “There’s no bonus if we win the World Series from an advertiser or a sponsor, and we certainly don’t refund any money if we have a down year.”

A couple of days before the lowly Orioles arrived in town for the final homestand of the season, April Martin, community outreach manager at Boston-based Ace Ticket, described the state of ticket demand as “kind of a slow finish here,” with interest mainly coming from new-to-Boston college kids wanting a glimpse of Fenway Park before it shuts down for baseball.

StubHub ticket data showed between Thursday and Friday last week, the average price of a ticket dropped from \$79 to \$61 for Sunday’s finale.

Bobby D’Angelo, vice president of ’47 Brand and owner of The Official Team Store that sits across Jersey Street from Fenway Park, described the 2019 season for his business as “slightly down, game for game — but not bad.

“January, February and March were great because they hadn’t won a game yet and they’re the world champions,” said D’Angelo. Then came the 6-13 start, which led to a “horrible” April and May, which also featured too much rainy weather. But “June, July and August were good, people still thought for a long time the Red Sox were going to make the playoffs.”

That burst of optimism faded into what D’Angelo described as “kind of like Doomsville” once the Red Sox lost eight in a row in late July/early August — after winning three in a row against the Yankees.

But the “not bad” wrap-up of the season as a whole does not discount what lies ahead.

“October, November and December will be completely different” than a year ago, said D’Angelo, who might as well have been describing the mood of all Red Sox personnel.

Everything about the Red Sox has a different feel right now.

Compared to a year ago, pride’s being offered at a steep discount.

*** *The Boston Herald***

J.D. Martinez leaves options open on future with Red Sox

Steve Hewitt

J.D. Martinez’ future is uncertain, and even the designated hitter doesn’t know what’s next. Or at least he’s not telling.

Martinez’ status with the Red Sox will be one of the biggest storylines to watch as the team enters a critical offseason. The 32-year-old Martinez, who signed a five-year contract before the 2018 season, has an opt-out clause in his contract if he decides he wants to leave Boston for free agency. If not, he can stay and make \$23.75 million next season and \$19.35 million the year after that.

Martinez said he will eventually talk with his agent Scott Boras about what will come.

“I’m just going to be sitting at home just kind of hanging out and talking to Scott, and coming up with a decision,” Martinez said after the Red Sox’ 5-4 victory in Sunday’s season finale. “That’s really how it will go down, I would imagine. ...

“I can’t spill my beans just yet. We’ll see what happens.”

Whatever happens, the Martinez signing has been a home run of a deal for the Red Sox. He hit 43 homers with 130 RBI and a .330 average as he helped key a World Series title in his first season with Boston, and followed it up this year with 36 homers and 105 RBI.

He said he'd be open to coming back.

"I'd love it. I had good memories here and good times here, but that's the business side of it, and something that I always let Scott handle it," Martinez said. "Obviously it would be nice to be back."

Another milestone

Next up for Rafael Devers: count those MVP votes.

Surely, Devers won't finish in the top two, with Alex Bregman and Mike Trout battling it out for the title. But he should get plenty of votes after finishing the season with a .311 average, .916 OPS and 201 hits.

"I think it was a great season for me," he said. "I just want to thank God for being healthy this year, which is huge for me. Like I said before, as long as I can stay healthy, I know I can produce at this level."

Devers collected his 200th hit in a 3-for-5 finale to become the 17th player with 200 hits before turning 23. He's the first American Leaguer under 23 to get 200 hits since Alex Rodriguez in 1996.

"It feels good," he said. "It was a great accomplishment for me. But overall, I wish we'd just had a better season. But that just motivates me more."

He led MLB with 359 total bases and 90 extra-base hits.

"He was one of the best third basemen in the big leagues, not only offensively but defensively," manager Alex Cora said. "He turned the corner... The way he's been talking about what he's going to do this offseason, I'm looking forward to seeing him and when he comes home to visit me and I can see the strides."

What a catch

One of the best catches Fenway has ever seen came in the eighth inning Sunday. Jackie Bradley Jr. nearly hit a go-ahead homer, but his deep drive to right was robbed by Stevie Wilkerson, who made one of the best catches of the year with a leaping grab as he nearly flipped over the wall into the right-field grandstands.

"He hit it and I thought it was gone so I turned around," Cora said. "All of a sudden I didn't hear the fans and I turned around and the ball just hung up there. I have to see it but from my angle it was one of the best plays I've seen."

Staying home

The day after the Red Sox were officially eliminated from playoff contention last weekend, Cora said he was asked by ESPN, where he served as a baseball analyst from 2013 to 2016, about being part of their postseason coverage.

But the manager declined. He's intent on taking advantage of the extra time off as much as he can. Between a World Series with the Astros in 2017, then almost immediately being hired by the Red Sox before winning another World Series, Cora hasn't had much time for himself in the offseason the last few years.

"I need time for the family," Cora said. "That's something they deserve. The WBC, the Astros, the Red Sox and they deserve time. Camilla is in 11th grade, she's taking the SAT and all that stuff and now we have to make decisions about where we're going. Yeah. Go to Miami, come on!" ...

Cora doesn't have a prediction on who will win the World Series this season, and didn't seem to have a rooting interest, either.

“I don’t have a horse in the race,” Cora said. “I’ve got a lot of people that I appreciate and they had successful seasons and you go around the league and the managers, I respect some of them, we have close relationships. It’s going to be fun to watch, but I don’t really have any idea.”

Sweet relief: Red Sox season a disappointment, but not a disaster

Jason Mastrodonato

The Red Sox season ended Sunday with Mookie Betts outsmarting the Orioles, sprinting all the way from first base to score on a single.

The reigning American League MVP slid head-first into home. He popped up and pounded his chest, his fist banging hard on the “Sox” part of his uniform as the crowd let him hear it for perhaps the final time.

All of the frustration and disappointment of the 2019 season was finished. The Red Sox won, 5-4, wrapping up an 84-78 season.

“It was rough, a lot of ups and downs,” Betts said. “We never really got hot. When that happens, this happens. It’s kind of disappointing, but there’s a lot of good things that kind of happened throughout the season to be proud of.”

Betts has been vocal about his decision to test free agency after 2020 and could be traded this winter as John Henry looks to cut payroll and start thinking more diligently about the future.

“It’s been amazing here,” Betts said. “I can’t thank the fans and teammates and front office enough for everything. I’m still here. It’s not like I’m gone until whatever. I’m not going to focus on that now.”

Alex Cora was asked if the season-ending win felt bittersweet given the Sox were headed home to watch the postseason from the couch.

He said it was.

To most of us, it felt more like sweet relief.

The pleasure of watching the 2018 Red Sox break records and perform the equivalent of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 on a baseball diamond had already started to evaporate in spring training.

In February, Cora said to turn the page, then quickly changed his mind. No sense in turning the page, he said. Write the next chapter instead.

“Was I wrong saying continuation? Well, maybe the other guys saying, ‘Turn the page,’ and, ‘It’s a new season,’ for 20 years, maybe they’ve been wrong too,” Cora said Sunday. “So we’ve got to ask those guys if they were wrong.”

Stubborn until the end.

In the first week of the regular season, Rafael Devers kept making errors. Chris Sale was throwing in the 80s. Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. let a fly ball drop between them in right-center. The starting rotation was on fumes, and the bullpen didn’t look up to the task.

The pressure of trying to become the first repeat champion in 20 years was following this group like a plague.

“We weren’t as sharp,” Cora said. “That ball that landed in right-center in Oakland, I mean, we didn’t see that in probably three years here. It’s not lack of being in tune with the game or, ‘OK, we won, it doesn’t matter.’ It’s just, it wasn’t there. It wasn’t there.”

The season was a disappointment, but it wasn’t a disaster.

Cora and his team learned about having the right attitude, always playing with urgency and having something to prove.

The Sox learned that taking the foot of the gas in March and April doesn’t set the tone for a successful year.

They learned Xander Bogaerts and Devers are superstars, that Eduardo Rodriguez might be a reliable pitcher after all, that Christian Vazquez has power and Brandon Workman can close.

They learned Cora isn’t going to change.

He’s growing as a manager and learning from his mistakes, but he remains steadfast about his decision-making process.

He acknowledged that using Matt Barnes as a relief ace was too much to ask, and that Betts should’ve been in the leadoff spot from the beginning. He did not apologize for the way he used his starting pitchers in April, or the generous and perhaps way-too-accommodating approach to player rest, or many other decisions that failed throughout the year.

He was the same confident and stubborn manager he was in 2018, when everything went right, and plans on taking the same attitude into 2020, even if everything goes wrong.

This is who the Red Sox hired and who they entrusted with the most expensive team in history, and who they will trust again, no matter who the next general manager is.

Change is coming, but the Red Sox will be OK. They can lean on a young nucleus that isn’t going anywhere.

Henry always invests in his team, even if that means staying under the \$208 million mark next year. That can’t be said in most big league cities, and for that there is something to be grateful for heading into the winter.

The same fan base that remained hopeful after Bill Buckner’s error and Aaron Boone’s home run shouldn’t run away from this team yet.

The 2019 season was ugly but not heartbreaking. It was flat but not hopeless.

It just was.

And — deep breath — it’s finally done.

Bogaerts was one of the last to pack up his things before leaving the clubhouse.

“I’ll see you guys on the beach,” he said.

Red Sox walk off, but no 20th win for Eduardo Rodriguez

Steve Hewitt

The Red Sox were all in on getting Eduardo Rodriguez his 20th win to cap his breakout season, and everything was in place for the left-hander to reach the milestone as Sunday's season finale headed to the eighth inning.

Though he wasn't able to grab one last feat, it won't take away from what was a special season for Rodriguez.

The Sox couldn't get Rodriguez his 20th win as the bullpen blew a late lead, but they still rallied for the win, as a grounder from Rafael Devers got through to right field in the bottom of the ninth that allowed Mookie Betts to come around to score for a walkoff 5-4 victory over the Orioles at Fenway Park.

Rodriguez was in position to win his 20th game after Xander Bogaerts' go-ahead single in the seventh put the Sox – who finished the season with an 84-78 record – ahead as the pitcher departed. But Matt Barnes allowed the game-tying run in the eighth that ruined the lefty's chance at becoming the second 20-game winner in baseball this season.

“That’s baseball,” manager Alex Cora said. “That’s the thing about wins and losses as a starter. ... Today he gives us seven and does an outstanding job and he didn’t get the W but we’re very proud of him.”

Rodriguez, who settled for a 19-6 record to go with a 3.81 ERA this season, completed seven innings and threw 115 pitches to keep the game tied at 3 going into the bottom of the seventh. Knowing his day was likely over, the Sox had one final chance to give him a chance at his 20th win. Fittingly, it was Rafael Devers and Bogaerts who had his back.

Devers collected his 200th hit of the season with a one-out double to right – his 54th two-bagger of the year – and Bogaerts followed, roping an 0-2 slider to left for the go-ahead RBI single and a 4-3 Sox lead. It seemed like it was meant to be.

“Waking up, I had Eddie on my mind,” Bogaerts said. “Just trying to help the team get him that win. I missed some opportunities early on. I was so happy to get it back in the end and give him a chance.”

“As soon as I saw Bogey get that base hit, the whole dugout was jumping around and everything,” Rodriguez said. “As soon as he got in the dugout he hugged me and everything and said, ‘I did it for you.’”

But in another fitting trait of the 2019 Sox, their bullpen couldn't hold it. Hanser Alberto and Trey Mancini both reached on Matt Barnes, who proceeded to serve up the game-tying single to Jonathan Villar. Boos rained down from the crowd as the Sox blew their 28th save of the year, finishing the season 33-of-64 in save opportunities.

But Rodriguez' teammates were proud of him. Amidst an underwhelming season for the team, it was the lefty's time to shine.

Cora was hard and demanding on Rodriguez in spring training, knowing his potential. And the 26-year-old lefty took ownership, too, with a stated goal of reaching 30-plus starts and 200 innings.

Rodriguez accomplished both of those. Finally healthy for a full season, he reached 30 starts weeks ago and hit 200 innings in the fourth inning on Sunday. He finished with 34 starts to go with 203½ innings, crushing his previous best of 137½ innings in 2017.

The Red Sox finished 26-8 in Rodriguez' starts. To put that in perspective, the Sox were 27-32 in starts made by Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi.

“When most of our starters went down to injuries, he was the one that was always there,” Bogaerts said. “He was kind of the stopper. I would say the stopper. Whenever we needed a game, it seemed like he was always there and always won for us.”

Rodriguez didn't seem upset by not getting 20 wins. As he said, it was out of control. But in 2019, he controlled just about everything he could, and the Red Sox expect even bigger things from him going into 2020.

"That's something he's going to build up and get better," Cora said. "I don't feel that he'll be satisfied."

*** *The Providence Journal***

Trade Mookie Betts? Sunday reminded us why the Red Sox should say no

Bill Koch

Sunday could have been the final day in a Red Sox uniform for Mookie Betts.

Boston could opt to trade its right fielder this offseason, attempting to recoup some value before he enters free agency after the 2020 campaign. Betts has said on multiple occasions he's likely to reject any extension offered prior to Opening Day and hit the open market.

The Red Sox are also looking to shed payroll and come in under the first threshold of the Competitive Balance Tax. The target is \$208 million, and Betts could receive upwards of \$30 million in his final trip through arbitration. Coupled with what's owed the likes of David Price, Chris Sale and Nathan Eovaldi among others, that's a pretty penny indeed.

But this perfect afternoon at Fenway Park served as one final reminder why there simply isn't a worthwhile return available for Betts. His dash toward home plate to score the winning run in a 5-4 victory over the Orioles was that of a natural. Betts possesses breathtaking skills, and no collection of prospects would soothe the on-field or off-field impact of moving on from such a player.

"It's been amazing," Betts said. "I can't thank the fans, teammates and front office enough for everything. I'm still here. It's not like I'm gone. I'm going to focus on that right now."

The answer was typically noncommittal. Betts has been somewhat guarded and measured about his contract situation since spring training, when the likes of Mike Trout and Bryce Harper put pen to paper on monster deals that span dozens of years and are worth hundreds of millions of dollars. It's head-turning stuff for any player, much less a soft-spoken 26-year-old from Nashville.

"He's a great player and obviously he's done great things here," said Mitch Moreland, who's heading into free agency himself. "We'll see from there. It was fun being his teammate for sure."

You'd get a similar answer from any other player in the Boston clubhouse. Betts is a homegrown talent who came through the minor leagues with several current Red Sox stars. Business or not, the experience of riding those buses and winning a championship with them can't be replicated. The trust and comfort level that accompanies such things allows players to reach their ceilings.

"Whenever he goes right and he knows it, it's an MVP-type of season that he puts up," Xander Bogaerts said. "I was so happy last year to see the way he went out and played. He had a swagger about him that was like, 'I am The Man.'"

It seems like Betts is the last person to see himself in that light, this despite public urging from the likes of Bogaerts, Boston manager Alex Cora and Red Sox left-hander David Price. Bogaerts has assumed the role of the locker room's captain, generally accountable and available to the media after every game. Betts does his talking on the field, be it scoring from first base on a single like he did Sunday or taking away a home run in the American League Championship Series against the Astros or roaring his way around the bases after a grand slam to cap a 13-pitch at-bat.

“I don’t read what you guys write or say,” said J.D. Martinez, who could opt out of his contract’s final three years. “There are a lot of guys who come here and start getting caught up on everyone’s opinions. I don’t get caught up in it.”

Betts is unlike any other right fielder in the game. His offensive floor seems to be something around a .300 batting average with a .900 OPS, 30 home runs and 120 runs scored. His defense is Gold Glove-caliber, no small thing when roaming such a significant expanse of green grass from the triangle to the Pesky Pole for 81 home games each year.

Betts also makes the Red Sox a contender to bounce back quickly in 2020 – taking him off the roster in the name of a youth movement would do the opposite. So to say they would simply be allowing him to walk away for nothing is flat wrong. A typically strong year from Betts would maximize what remains in the primes of players like Price and Chris Sale and the additional years of team control over players like Rafael Devers, Eduardo Rodriguez and Andrew Benintendi.

Babe Ruth was sold to the Yankees 100 years ago this December, a colossal mistake that hung like an anvil over Boston’s collective psyche for years to come. It’s unlikely Betts will become a cinch top-5 player in the game’s history or that the Red Sox would go another 86 years without winning a World Series. But former Red Sox owner Harry Frazee tempted fate without knowing it at one point, and current Boston principal owner John Henry surely wouldn’t want to do the same.

Maybe it’s attaching Price’s deal or another high-salary player to a considerable asset to clear payroll. Maybe it’s non-tendering a host of arbitration-eligible candidates – Sandy Leon, Steven Wright, Gorkys Hernandez, Josh Smith and Ryan Weber were on the books for more than \$6 million this season, and that’s just the start. Maybe it’s swallowing hard and handing debuts to the likes of Bobby Dalbec and Jarren Duran and C.J. Chatham, freshening the edges of what is already a strong core with some new energy.

But trading Betts? Sunday can’t be his final day with the Red Sox. Boston could rue such a decision for – gulp – decades to come.

Red Sox 5, Orioles 4: Bittersweet Boston walkoff ends 2019 season

Bill Koch

Sunday afternoon’s experience at Fenway Park captured this wholly unsatisfying Red Sox season in a nutshell.

Some of the talent on display was fantastic. Eduardo Rodriguez pitched himself to the verge of a milestone. Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts wrapped up superb offensive campaigns and Brandon Workman provided one more scoreless inning to pick up his 10th victory.

But as seemed the case through six months and 162 games, disaster lurked around every corner. A leaky bullpen blew its 28th save of the year. Chris Owings made an indefensible mistake on the bases and Jackie Bradley Jr. saw a home run taken away through a fantastic catch by Stevie Wilkerson.

Mookie Betts provided a bit of a salvage job in the bottom of the ninth inning. His leadoff walk and mad dash from first base on a Rafael Devers single gave Boston its seventh walkoff victory of the season, a 5-4 nail-biter against the Orioles.

“Weird,” Bogaerts said. “Especially that play with Jackie in the end. I would just say it seemed like we were so close and yet so far.”

Betts was off from first when Devers sent a three-hopper into the shift on the right side. The ball caromed off the glove of Richie Martin and into shallow right field, with Betts easing into third base. He minded the stop sign put up by third-base coach Carlos Febles but took off moments later when the Orioles lackadaisically sent the relay back to the infield, sliding into the plate head-first.

“At that point it was instincts,” Betts said. “Febles told me to pick up the ball and I think everybody was kind of ready to go. I just decided to go home.”

The Red Sox looked to have the game in hand in the seventh. Devers lined a double down the line in right, his 200th hit of the season and 90th for extra-bases. Only Joe DiMaggio (1937) and Alex Rodriguez (1996) have compiled that many extra-base hits in a season before turning 23, and Devers scored on an RBI single to left by Bogaerts to snap a 3-3 tie.

“It’s a great accomplishment for me,” Devers said through translator Bryan Almonte. “Overall, I just wish we had a better season.”

Rodriguez fell shy in his bid for a 20-win season in the next half-inning. He was six outs away from the first recorded by a Red Sox left-hander since Mel Parnell in 1953 and just the third by a Boston pitcher since 2007. Matt Barnes allowed a Jonathan Villar single up the middle in the top of the eighth and was booed to the dugout by the sellout crowd of 35,427 fans.

“You see what happened last game – I gave up seven runs and still got the win,” Rodriguez said. “I gave up three today and didn’t get it. That’s something I can’t control as a pitcher.”

The Red Sox appeared ready to produce an immediate response when Christian Vazquez and Brock Holt singled to put men at the corners. Marco Hernandez’s soft liner to second caught Owings off the bag at third, and he was tagged out to complete a bad double play. Bradley then launched a drive toward the visiting bullpen in right that was snagged by Wilkerson, a terrific leaping catch on which he crashed hard into the wall.

“That play has got to be the catch of the year,” Betts said. “I’ve seen some great catches, but that one was amazing.”

The Orioles did all of their damage against Rodriguez in the top of the third. Wilkerson’s leadoff walk set an ominous tone and Martin’s one-out bunt single set up a real threat. Hanser Alberto grounded an RBI single up the middle, Austin Hays lashed an RBI double off the Green Monster and Trey Mancini notched an RBI on an infield out. The visitors enjoyed a 3-0 lead after sending seven men to the plate.

Rodriguez settled down from there, retiring 13 of the final 15 men he faced. The left-hander crossed the 200-inning threshold for the first time in his career on Mark Trumbo’s routine fly to center in the fourth and fired a fastball at 94.3 mph past a swinging Martin to end the top of the seventh. It was the 115th pitch of the afternoon thrown by Rodriguez, who closed his breakout season with 213 strikeouts and a 3.81 earned-run average.

Boston began to claw its way back in the bottom of the third. Betts lined an RBI single through the left side and Bradley scored on a Baltimore error to make it 3-2. The Red Sox tied the game at 3-3 in the sixth when Bogaerts drew a leadoff walk and Vazquez lined an RBI single to left.

*** *MassLive.com***

If Boston Red Sox trade Mookie Betts, he ended with play that defines his game

Christopher Smith

If Mookie Betts played his final game in a Red Sox uniform Sunday, he went out in appropriate Mookie Betts-style.

The 2018 AL MVP is one of the major's smartest players. He's excellent at taking an extra base when an opposing team lets down its guard. He's done it many times. And he did it again in the ninth inning after his leadoff walk.

Betts sprinted from first to third base on Rafael Devers' single to right field. He then dashed home when Orioles right fielder Stevie Wilkerson lobbed the ball back into the infield.

Betts scored the winning run. The Red Sox won 5-4 over the Orioles here at Fenway Park in their 2019 finale.

"It was just kind of instincts," Betts explained. "(Third base coach Carlos) Febles right there told me to look at the ball, pick up the ball. I think everybody was kind of ready to go. So I just decided to go home."

Betts has strongly indicated he won't sign a contract extension. He has expressed a strong desire to become a free agent after the 2020 season.

The Red Sox might trade the star this coming offseason if the two sides are unable to strike a deal.

"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."

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.

Betts is set to receive more than \$30 million in salary arbitration next season.

The math is simple. The new GM, whoever is hired, needs to cut salary and Betts might leave after next season anyway. The Red Sox would be wise to trade him if they are offered the right prospect package in return.

Betts, however, didn't step to the plate in the ninth inning thinking it might be his final at-bat as a Red Sox.

"I was just thinking about winning the game at that point," Betts said. "That's out of my hands. That's for my representation to take care of that type of stuff. So I don't worry about it."

Whether Betts stays or leaves, the Red Sox roster could look much different in 2020.

"It is what it is," Betts said. "That's the business side of it. I think you develop relationships with guys and when you see them, you go eat and hang out. ... It's not like they all fell off the face of the earth."

Has he enjoyed his time with the Red Sox and would he want to remain in Boston longterm?

"It's been amazing," Betts said. "I can't thank the fans, my teammates and the front office enough for everything. I'm still here. It's not like I'm gone until whatever. So I'm not going to focus on that right now."

Betts' final play of the 2019 season — and potentially the final play of his Red Sox career — was signature Mookie Betts. Unfortunately for the Red Sox, his answers postgame also were signature Mookie Betts. Business as usual.

J.D. Martinez on Boston Red Sox opt-out clause: 'I can't spill my beans just yet'

Chris Cotillo

Moments after the Red Sox season came to an end Sunday afternoon, slugger J.D. Martinez declined to tip his hand in regards to his impending opt-out decision.

“I can’t spill my beans just yet,” Martinez said. “We’ll see what happens.”

Martinez has until shortly after the World Series to decide whether to return to the Red Sox or hit free agency. If he opts out, he’ll forego the remaining three years and \$62.5 million remaining on the contract he signed last spring.

Martinez’s deal includes opt-out clauses after this season, next season and 2021, so he’d effectively be opting in to a one-year arrangement for \$23.75 million if he stays. He plans to discuss his future with agent Scott Boras in the coming days and inform the Sox of his choice before the deadline.

Martinez said the recent proclamation from ownership that the Sox are aiming to cut payroll this winter will have no impact on his decision.

“I have to make an individual decision for myself when the time comes,” he said. “It’s one of those things where you see what’s in front of you and make the decision. I haven’t sat down to think about it or go through it all with Scott.”

Martinez played in 146 games this season, hitting .304 with 36 homers in 105 RBIs. His first two years in Boston could not have gone much better, as he won a World Series title while making the American League All-Star team in both campaigns.

Martinez said in July he was open to a long-term arrangement with the Sox and reiterated his feelings about playing in Boston on Sunday. If he does opt out, he said, it will not be for personal reasons.

“I’d love (to come back),” Martinez said. “I’ve had good memories and good times here. That’s the business side of it. It’s something I’ll let Scott handle, but obviously it would be nice to be back.”

Martinez, who waited until late February to sign last spring, will make a decision about his future much earlier this offseason. He doesn’t seem to have made up his mind quite yet.

“If I’m not here, it’ll be sad not to be around these guys,” he said. “If I am here, I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Eduardo Rodriguez doesn’t get 20th win, but Boston Red Sox walk off with 5-4 win in season finale

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez didn’t pick up his 20th win of the season Sunday afternoon, but Boston still ended its season with a memorable win.

Rafael Devers hit an RBI single that scored Mookie Betts from first base and gave the Sox a 5-4 win over the Orioles in the season finale. Boston ended its season with an 84-78 record.

Rodriguez, who entered with a 19-6 record, went seven innings, allowing three earned runs on four hits while striking out eight batters. He departed with a 4-3 lead, only to have Matt Barnes blow his eighth save of the season when Baltimore tied the game on a Jonathan Villar RBI single in the eighth.

Baltimore jumped out to a 3-0 lead with a third-inning rally as Hanser Alberto (single), Austin Days (double) and Trey Mancini (fielder’s choice) all drove in runs. Mookie Betts and Rafael Devers made it 3-2 with RBI singles a half-inning later and Christian Vazquez tied the game with an RBI single in the sixth.

After Villar’s game-tying single, the Sox were robbed when Stevie Wilkerson made a spectacular catch to rob Jackie Bradley Jr. of a two-run homer in right field. Betts walked to lead off the ninth before Devers

chopped a single through the right side and Betts hustled all the way around the bases before diving into home for the winning run.

Devers records 200th hit

Devers was 3-for-5, giving him 201 hits on the season. His seventh-inning double off reliever Evan Phillips gave him 200 hits on the year, making him the 28th player in Red Sox history to reach that single-season mark.

Boston Red Sox's Alex Cora declined ESPN offer to do TV work during postseason: 'I need time for the family'

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox manager Alex Cora recently turned down a temporary return to working on TV, he said Sunday.

Cora said ESPN -- his former employer -- offered him a spot on its postseason broadcast crew shortly after the Sox were eliminated from playoff contention last week. He declined, citing a desire to spend more time with his family in the early parts of the offseason.

"I was like, 'No,'" Cora said. "I need time for the family. That's something they deserve. It has been the (2017 World Baseball Classic), the Astros, the Red Sox. They deserve time."

Cora will return to Puerto Rico this week and spend most of October with his family before starting to visit his players later in the winter. He plans to stay involved in the team's search for a new head of baseball operations and expects to return to Boston for a press conference once one is named.

Cora wouldn't offer a prediction for who will win the World Series.

"I don't have a horse in the race," Cora said. "I've got a lot of people who I appreciate and they've had successful seasons. You go around the league and the managers, I respect. Some of them, we have close relationships. It's going to be fun but I really don't know."

With Boston Red Sox roster likely to experience some turnover, some exit interviews got 'emotional'

Christopher Smith

The Boston Red Sox roster will be different in 2020.

Principal owner John Henry wants the payroll to be under the \$208 million Competitive Balance Threshold. The 2020 payroll already is approximately \$218 million before any offseason transactions. Boston will pursue bullpen help. They might also need to add a first baseman and second baseman.

That means cutting payroll — which means roster turnover.

J.D. Martinez has an opt-out clause he might exercise. Brock Holt, Mitch Moreland, Rick Porcello and Steve Pearce are pending free agents.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora was asked if filling out lineup cards and conducting exit interviews felt a bit strange considering the roster could be much different next year.

"Yes, of course. Of course it is," Cora said. "With Rick, we've been talking about it. He's a free agent and all that. The last few starts, he's like, 'This might be it here.' But in the end, you manage the game the way you're supposed to."

Cora treated every exit interview as if every player was returning.

“We care about the players and what’s going to make you a better player,” Cora said. “What you need to do physically to be a big leaguer next year. And then at the end, obviously we’ve got (acting GMs) Eddie (Romero) or BOH (Brian O’Halloran) and they’re like, ‘The business side of it, that’s something we’ll take care of in the upcoming weeks. We appreciate everything you’ve done for us. We’ll see what happens.’”

“There’s certain guys that, people get emotional,” Cora added. “You talk to them and tell them how much you care about them, how much you love them, how much you appreciate everything they’ve done. There’s different tones and different conversations. It’s been something new for me. I’ve learned a lot the last 10 days.”

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

J.D. Martinez just became the most interesting ballplayer in Boston

Chris Mason

As Mookie Betts touched home plate to end the Red Sox season, J.D. Martinez became the more interesting ballplayer in Boston.

With an opt-out clause looming in his contract, Martinez can void his final three years and \$62.5 million remaining to become a free agent.

Will he stay or will he go?

“I can’t spill my beans just yet,” Martinez said. “We’ll see what happens.”

Those beans hitting the ground are the first domino that needs to fall for Boston’s offseason to actually get underway.

Ownership is intent on slashing payroll to get under the lowest luxury tax threshold, and before they get to other decisions, the front office needs to know whether or not they’ll have Martinez’s \$23.75 million on the books in 2020.

To this point, he’s been as tight-lipped with the team as he has with the media.

“I wish I knew,” Alex Cora said. “His situation he can control, obviously. His advisers, too. They control that.”

And of course, Martinez is advised by Scott Boras. He made it clear that he’ll be following the super-agent’s suggestion — don’t hold your breath for a Xander Bogaerts discount.

“I’d love (to be back),” Martinez said. “I had good memories here and good times here, but that’s the business side of it, and something that I always let Scott handle it.

“I’m just going to be sitting at home just kind of hanging out and talking to Scott, and coming up with a decision. That’s really how it will go down.”

While the Red Sox wait to hear, they can look back at Martinez’s first two years in Boston as an unmitigated success. He hit for power and average — the slugger transformed the heart of the lineup — posting back-to-back seasons of at least a .300 average, 35 home runs and 100 RBIs.

He was also a franchise-altering force in the clubhouse, as his passion for hitting was contagious, and he helped to unleash the best of Betts.

Somehow, Martinez's managed to fill David Ortiz's massive spikes.

"There's a lot of guys that come here and start getting caught up in everyone's opinions," Martinez said. "I don't get caught up in it. I just focus on what I can control, and that's my work, and showing up to the ballpark, and being a good teammate with everyone.

"The fans are great," Martinez added. "The fans are tough, but I'm tough on myself. I don't think they could be any tougher on me than I am on myself. I love playing in front of them. It's been great. They're here every night. They cheer. They know what's been going on in the game. It's cool."

But will Martinez be playing in front of them again next season?

Like last time he hit free agency, the big-market suitors don't seem to be there. At 32, he's now essentially a full-time designated hitter, and most American League openings are already filled.

Ultimately, it'll come down to Boras' read on the situation.

"This is a very fun team, very close team," Martinez said. "It's unfortunate how it happened this year, but it is what it is. If I'm not here, then it's sad not to be playing with these guys, and if I am here, then I'll be looking forward to it."

Until then, it's like the great Tom Petty sang, "The waiting is the hardest part."

5 Red Sox Takes: If this was it for Mookie Betts, he went out in style

Chris Mason

If this was Mookie Betts' final moment in a Red Sox uniform, it ended fittingly.

As Orioles outfielder Stevie Wilkerson fumbled around with a ball in right, Betts scored from first base on a single, giving Boston a 5-4 walkoff win. It was a ridiculous run to the plate.

Here are five takes from the season finale:

1. Mookie's mad dash

Betts is a legitimate five-tool outfielder, and his baserunning often goes underappreciated. The speed is obvious, but it's complemented by a natural ability to read situations on the run.

"It's just his instincts, man," Xander Bogaerts said. "Throughout the years, playing with him, he seems like he's one of the best baserunners in the game. He has a different type of vision, seeing plays, reading stuff, anticipating. I don't think a lot of guys would go on that play or risk it at all, and he was safe by a mile. He's special."

2. A final act?

With ownership vowing to cut payroll and Betts seemingly intent to test free agency after 2020, there's a real chance last year's MVP is on the trade block this offseason.

Did it occur to Betts that his ninth inning at-bat could be his last in a Boston uniform?

"No, I was thinking about just winning the game at that point" he replied. "That's out of my hands. I have my representation to take care of that type of stuff so I don't worry about it."

3. E-Rod doesn't get to 20

Falling behind Orioles shortstop Richie Martin 3-0 with a rising pitch count, Eduardo Rodriguez saw his chance at a 20th win slipping away.

The young lefty buckled down.

Rodriguez battled back to work the count full, and then blew a 95 mph fastball by Martin. His final batter of season was emblematic of the year he put together.

“He was amazing,” Alex Cora said. “That last pitch was that fastball we always talk about, and we’re very proud of him.”

He still didn’t wind up with win No. 20, though.

4. Barnes blows the lead

Though Rodriguez got a 4-3 lead that put him in line for the win, it was short-lived.

Matt Barnes allowed the tying run to score in the eighth inning, and Rodriguez would have to be satisfied with a 19-win season. It was a shame, given his strong seven-inning effort.

5. Mr. 200

Rafael Devers notched his 200th hit of the season, fittingly, a double roped down the first base line.

“It feels good,” Devers said via translator. “It was a great accomplishment for me, but overall, I wish we’d just had a better season. But that just motivates me more to the upcoming season to be able to produce the same way that I did this year.”

The 22-year-old third baseman’s 200-hit season is only the 28th in Red Sox history.

*** *RedSox.com***

Five questions for the Red Sox this offseason

Ian Browne

After a title defense attempt fell well short, the Red Sox will spend the coming days and weeks regrouping in an effort to make sure Fenway Park is open for business next October.

There are many questions to answer before manager Alex Cora’s team takes the field again in 2020, and here are five of the most pressing after an 84-78 season.

Who will run baseball ops?

Before many other dominoes fall, the Red Sox will hire a new leader to run their baseball operations department. Who will it be?

One thing that owner John Henry hinted at rather strongly in his recent session with the media is that the team will go outside the organization to find someone who has experience running baseball operations. This person will be someone ownership thinks will be adept at getting the payroll below the first luxury tax threshold penalty of \$208 million while also bolstering the farm system.

It will be interesting to see if Henry will try to free up a big name from another organization like Billy Beane or Mark Shapiro. Theo Epstein seemed to squash rumors of leaving the Cubs for a return

engagement to Boston, saying of a recent speculative article in the Boston Globe, “There’s nothing to the story.”

Will J.D. opt out?

Slugger J.D. Martinez has been the centerpiece of Boston’s lineup for the past two seasons, and the designated hitter has a big decision to make in the next month. Should he exercise the opt-out clause in the five-year contract he signed in February of 2018? If not, Martinez also has an opt-out clause after the ’20 season.

Martinez is due to make \$23.75 million in 2020, before his salary would dip to \$19.375 million in ’21 and ’22. In other words, agent Scott Boras will only advise him to opt out if he believes Martinez can make more than \$62.5 million over the next three seasons.

“I’m just going to be sitting at home just kind of hanging out and talking to Scott, and coming up with a decision,” Martinez said. “That’s really how it will go down, I would imagine.”

Does Martinez know which way he is leaning?

“I can’t spill my beans just yet. We’ll see what happens,” Martinez said. “This is a very fun team, very close team. It’s unfortunate how it happened this year, but it is what it is. If I’m not here, then it’s sad not to be playing with these guys, and if I am here, then I’ll be looking forward to it.”

If J.D. opts in, will Mookie gets traded?

If Martinez stays with the Red Sox for next season and beyond, could that impact the team’s thinking on Mookie Betts?

As has been well chronicled, 2020 is a walk year for Betts, who has indicated he doesn’t plan on signing an extension with the Red Sox before he gets a chance to try free agency. With Henry’s candid admission about needing to trim some payroll, it could be hard to get down to \$208 million with both Betts and Martinez on the roster. Betts is due to receive yet another big bump through the arbitration process.

“That’s out of my hands. I have my representation to take care of that type of stuff, so I don’t worry about it,” Betts said.

Can Sale, Price get healthy?

Of all the reasons the Red Sox didn’t make the playoffs, this is the biggest: Chris Sale and David Price combined for 47 starts, 254 2/3 innings and a 4.35 ERA. The Sox need better health and a higher level of success from two pitchers who will earn a combined \$62 million next season.

Sale’s upcoming follow-up visit with Dr. James Andrews will be pivotal in determining the course of his offseason. Price is also recovering from surgery on his left wrist.

Will Benintendi bounce back?

In a season in which most of Boston’s offensive players performed either above their expected levels (Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts, Christian Vázquez) or right about what you expected (Betts, Martinez), left fielder Andrew Benintendi saw a significant dip in his production.

After hitting .290 last season, Benintendi finished at .266 this year with a whopping 140 strikeouts. When Benintendi is a frequent presence on the basepaths, the Red Sox are a nearly unstoppable force on offense.

What a finale: Red Sox walk off to wrap 2019

Ian Browne

The Red Sox walked off into the offseason Sunday when Rafael Devers chopped a single off the glove of Orioles shortstop Richie Martin, and Mookie Betts roared all the way home from first for a thrilling end to a 5-4 win at Fenway Park.

The day started with all eyes on Eduardo Rodriguez, who was aiming for his 20th win.

But that quest ended when Xander Bogaerts made an error and Matt Barnes allowed an unearned run to tie the game in the top of the eighth.

Even without Rodriguez's milestone win, the final two innings were filled with excitement.

Stevie Wilkerson made what might have been Major League Baseball's best catch of the year in the bottom of the eighth to take a homer away from Jackie Bradley Jr.. Usually, Bradley is the one who does the robbing.

"It was all a matter of time until my debts had to be paid. That was a great catch," said Bradley. "Great catch, Stevie Wilkerson. I definitely hope you win play of the year so I can always be a part of it. It's the first one I've ever been robbed [on]. I'm usual the smooth criminal."

At least the play by Wilkerson set the stage for Betts to literally sprint into the offseason in what wound up the fourth time since 1908 -- and first time since 2008 -- that the Sox have walked off in the final game of the regular season. It was the 135th run of the season for Betts, the most any Red Sox player has scored since Ted Williams crossed the plate 150 times in 1949.

After Betts led off the ninth with a walk, the soft, bouncy grounder by Devers was no sure thing to get through the shifted infield. But as it clanged off the glove of Martin, Betts hustled to third. Not that the play ended there. When Betts saw Wilkerson hesitate to throw the ball back in, Betts galloped home to set off a spontaneous swarm of a celebration at home plate.

"I think there was a mix of [excitement] winning the game and not playing extras," said Betts. "It was just kind of instinct for me. [Third base coach Carlos] Febles right there told me to look at the ball, pick up the ball. And I think everybody was kind of ready to go, so [we're] just excited to go home."

It was a far cry from a year ago at this time when everyone on the Red Sox was excited to see what a 108-win team could do in the playoffs. The answer wound up being a World Series championship.

The bid to repeat never caught much momentum, and Boston finished 84-78.

At least there were some individual performances to remember, and those were on display on Sunday.

E-Rod misses 20, but gets 200

Sure, there was some disappointment for Rodriguez. The Red Sox were all-in on trying to get him 20 wins.

The truth is that the lefty achieved a milestone that was more meaningful to him, pitching 200 innings for the first time in his five-year career.

In fact, Rodriguez finished at 203 1/3 after throwing seven strong frames against the Orioles. The lefty gave up four hits and three runs, walking two and striking out eight.

For the previous three seasons, Rodriguez had been unable to make it through healthy. Then came this year, when the 26-year-old answered the bell for 34 starts and finished with 213 strikeouts.

"I'm just happy I could make it through a whole season, was healthy the whole time, was able to go out there every five days and make 34 starts. That's something that I wanted to accomplish, and I had the opportunity to do it this year and I did it," Rodriguez said.

Devers also gets 200 -- and 90

When Devers rifled a double to right in the seventh, it was his 200th hit of the season. The walk-off gave him 201.

Devers is the 17th player since 1900 with 200-plus hits in a season before turning 23 years old. The most recent? Starlin Castro for the Cubs in 2011 and Alex Rodriguez for the '96 Mariners.

There is much for the gifted third baseman to build on. He led the Majors with 359 total bases and 90 extra-base hits.

Devers joined Joe DiMaggio (1937) and Rodriguez ('96) as the only players in history to have 90 extra-base hits or more before turning 23.

"He was one of the best third basemen in the big leagues, not only offensively but defensively. He turned the corner," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora.

*** *WEEI.com***

Reading the tea leaves when it comes to Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez

Rob Bradford

It was the kind of dynamic performance that has surfaced this conversation in the first place. Mookie Betts dashing home on a simple dribbler into right field, sliding head-first into home and then celebrating the season-ending walk-off win with a group of adoring teammates. A week before it was the unworldly 305-foot throw from the corner of Tropicana Field to third base and now this. How could this guy not be sticking around for years and years?

But just a few moments later the scene had shifted to the clubhouse where cardboard box after cardboard box were being taped up, farewells were exchanged and pages had been turned.

As Betts has reiterated so many times, this is a business. Often times a fun business -- as was the case with the Red Sox' Game 162 win -- but a business, nonetheless.

Want an example? Soak in what J.D. Martinez told John Tomase of NBC Sports Boston before heading out for the season.

"I think everyone knows we don't think they're going to be able to afford Mookie," Martinez said, referencing Betts -- who will be in line to be paid \$30 million in 2020 with or without a contract extension. "It's one of those things. It's kind of hard to have three guys making \$30 million on your team. He deserves it. He's earned it."

The Red Sox might not necessarily agree with Martinez's assessment, still pounding the drum that a Betts extension can get done, but the designated hitter's words offered insight into how that clubhouse views the landscape. There is the Gatorade shower and then there are the contract negotiations. Both had that dressing room buzzing on the final day of the season.

When it comes to Betts there were few words that offered a clue as to how he might shape his own future. When conducting his on-field interview with NESN he told the fans the Red Sox were already looking forward to doing better in 2020. And a few moments later the outfielder stood in the middle of the

clubhouse and stated the obvious - as we sit here, the fate of his existence with next year's Sox club really isn't up to him.

"No, I was thinking about just winning the game at that point," said Betts when asked if he was thinking this might have been his last at-bat as a Red Sox. "That's out of my hands. I have my representation to take care of that type of stuff so I don't worry about it."

From his perspective, it continues to really be not that complicated.

The Red Sox will make him a contract offer, he will determine if it's market value and then either accept it or move on to the arbitration process. From then it is in the hands of the team. The timing or destination when it comes to Betts playing for another team in 2020 isn't his choice this time around. That is a different conversation a year from now, but his mantra of simply eyeing rejoining his teammates in five months is understandable.

"This is a great group of guys," Betts said. "Probably one of the best I've ever been a part of as far as having fun and enjoying the game."

Then there was Martinez.

For him, this is a choice. He can either opt-out of his contract and find another team or choose to stick around. So what is it going to be? If a guess was to be based on Martinez's comments heading into the offseason it certainly seems he is ready to roll the dice in the free-agent market for a second time in the last three years, although it is clear that the path will be pushed off the advice from his agent Scott Boras.

"I don't know. I'm just going to be sitting at home just kind of hanging out and talking to Scott, and coming up with a decision," he said. "That's really how it will go down, I would imagine. ... I can't spill my beans just yet. We'll see what happens."

He later added, "Like I said, I have to make an individual decision for myself. When the time comes, you see what's in front of you and then you make your decision. I haven't sat down to think about it or go through it all with Scott. I've been focused on who's pitching and where I've got to go, what I've got to do, my work. I haven't really gotten caught up in it. Now that the season's over, I'll have time to go home and think about it.

"I felt like I established myself before, at least personally. But playing in a big market and doing it here is obviously different. But it's been fun. It's been great. Just because the team side of it and being able to win, that's the biggest thing."

While Bogaerts guided Boras in the shortstop's contract extension, it certainly seems as though it will be the other way around when it comes to Martinez. And in this case that is understandable.

Reading Martinez's market is complex, with a good chunk of the conversation centering on whether or not National League teams would get in the mix. While so many are quick to dismiss the idea that the 32-year-old isn't viewed as enough of a capable outfielder to regularly play the position, it should be noted that the Red Sox' chief competition for Martinez's services a few years back was a National League team, the Diamondbacks.

And even if the National League doesn't really present a landing spot there is another American League fit besides Boston -- the White Sox.

Whatever Martinez's decision is in those days after the World Series it will undeniably serve as the trampoline for the Red Sox' offseason. He leaves and that will free up upwards of \$60 million while leaving the new baseball operations decision-maker with a sizable hole at the designated hitter spot. That's when we truly will find out how complicated this complicated offseason will be.

Until then, however, we are left with a reminder of how baseball can turn from a kid's game to big business in the bat of an eye. Or in this case, it was the time it took to cross home plate and clear out some lockers.

"It's been amazing," Betts said. "I can't thank the fans and teammates and front office enough for everything. I'm still here. It's not like I'm gone until whatever. I'm not going to focus on that now."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Teammates prepare for life without Betts: 'We don't think they're going to be able to afford Mookie'

John Tomase

Mookie Betts gave the Red Sox every last ounce of his considerable talents right to the bitter end, and Sunday afternoon sure felt like the end.

Let the record show that if this is it, Betts' final act in a Red Sox uniform was quintessentially, electrifyingly Mookie. He scored from first on a single to walk off the Orioles, exploiting a lazy relay and diving in safely before popping to his feet and letting out a scream while pounding his chest.

You can count on one hand the number of players who possess the instincts, athleticism, and explosiveness to make that kind of daring read and then actually engage the afterburners. It's the kind of play you'd expect to see out of a five-tool MVP, and Betts is one of those.

He also happens to be worthy of a monster contract at exactly the moment the Red Sox hope to slash payroll. With just one year of arbitration eligibility remaining, Betts has reached a crossroads. The Red Sox speak gamely of negotiating an extension, but with David Price and Chris Sale already on the books for more than \$30 million apiece next season, let's just say Betts' teammates know which way the wind is blowing.

"I think everyone knows we don't think they're going to be able to afford Mookie," DH and potential free agent J.D. Martinez told NBC Sports Boston. "It's one of those things. It's kind of hard to have three guys making \$30 million on your team. He deserves it. He's earned it."

A Red Sox team without Mookie Betts? After they drafted and developed him and watched him blossom into a superstar? How can that happen?

Martinez shrugged.

"I've been on too many teams where people come and go," he said. "For you guys (it's hard), because you've seen him grow. I came into this situation. To me, everyone is expendable. That's the business of it. I've seen it in Houston. I saw it in Detroit. I saw it in Arizona. It's the business of it. That's why people want to blame the players, that they just want money. You've got to look at the big picture."

When owner John Henry spoke on Friday about his philosophical differences with deposed president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, it's clear he was talking about money. Dombrowski assumed the Red Sox would spend their way to continued contention. Henry would like to see some restraint in order to reset the team's luxury tax penalties by dropping the payroll from \$240 million to \$208 million.

That leaves Betts in no-man's land. He's worth a \$300 million extension and more than \$30 million annually. The Red Sox aren't in a position to offer it without either blowing up their roster or blasting their payroll into the stratosphere and paying luxury tax penalties that could easily top \$20 million, effectively turning Betts into a \$50 million player.

A case can be made that they can afford it, but Henry is entitled to decide his payroll isn't limitless.

"It goes back to the whole CBA and the whole agreement," Martinez said. "The competitive balance tax or whatever the hell they call it. That's something the Players Association is trying to get rid of. Some owners are trying to keep it. The way I look at it now, Tampa's got \$60 mil. There are other ways to win. (Commissioner Rob) Manfred went on record by saying he doesn't think salary affects teams trying to win or not. It's kind of how (Justin) Verlander tweeted -- Perfect, then get rid of the luxury tax. Then everyone is happy. You've got teams that want to pay \$300 million salaries, they'll pay it."

For his part, Betts accepted as many well-wishes from teammates as anyone as he packed his bags for the winter, signing bats with a silver Sharpie and leaving the clubhouse with what felt like his first smile of a trying season.

He saluted the fans and deflected questions about his future.

"It's been amazing," he said. "I can't thank the fans and teammates and front office enough for everything. I'm still here. It's not like I'm gone until whatever. I'm not going to focus on that now."

Unfortunately for those who treasure their No. 50 jerseys, Sunday felt like more than just a season finale. It felt like a sendoff for the defending MVP, and his teammates know it.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Uncertainty hangs over season-ending game for these Red Sox

Sean McAdam

On an otherwise brilliant autumn day Sunday, there was the undeniable sense of finality to the proceedings. Game No. 162 will do that for you, especially when so much more was expected.

Instead of taking care of ticket requests for upcoming playoff games, players milled about before the game, saying their goodbyes to clubhouse staff and packing up belongings for a trip home.

But it was more than the end of the year. There was also the feeling that more than a season coming to a close. More than likely, it represented an end of an era.

When the Red Sox next congregate, they will be led by a new head of baseball operations. It's possible there could be a change or two to the coaching staff.

Mostly, however, there was the impossible-to-ignore sense that the 2020 roster will have a vastly different look to it. That's what happens when you go from 108 wins, a title and a parade, to just 84 wins, front office upheaval and the promise or more changes to come.

Start with the pending free agents: Brock Holt, Mitch Moreland, Rick Porcello, and Steve Pearce.

But beyond the obvious names, there were others:

Was J.D. Martinez playing his final game for the Red Sox? Martinez has an opt-out clause in his contract that would allow him to explore free agency. There's considerable debate as to whether Martinez can do better than the three years and \$63.5 million he has remaining. But if he and agent Scott Boras make the determination to look around, know this: the Red Sox will not try to retain him by sweetening the deal. Could this have been the final game in a Red Sox uniform for Mookie Betts. Betts is still a year away from free agency and is determined to see what the market has to offer. If the Red Sox get the sense that he's unlikely to re-sign here, regardless of what he's offered, they could solicit trade offers for him this winter. The same goes for Jackie Bradley Jr., who, like Betts, is 13 months away from free agency. His final year of salary arbitration eligibility will likely take him up near \$12 million for 2020, and with the Red Sox on record in trying to get under the \$208 million CBT threshold, Bradley, too, could find himself being dealt.

In the dugout, Rick Porcello, having already made his last start of the season, is a free agent, and unlikely to return.

In point of fact, the Red Sox' fiscal prudence could make several players trade candidates, including David Price and Nathan Eovaldi, though in both cases, the Red Sox would need to take back a significant chunk of the remaining salary to make any deal palatable.

Even Alex Cora was left with a feeling that the game marked as sort of transition for the franchise.

The manager has spent the last few days conducting exit interviews with the entire roster, knowing some will definitely be back and others almost certainly won't.

"Sometimes you think about it," acknowledged Cora of the emotions involved. "You do. There's different meetings. (Some are) 'For next year, you need to do this and you need to do that.' The other ones, we treat it like everybody's coming back. That's the way (Baseball Operations) presented it. We care about the players. At the end, you've got the business side of it and we'll take care of it in the upcoming weeks.

"But we tell them, 'We appreciate everything you've done for us; we'll see what happens.' There's certain guys, people get emotional. You talk to them, tell them how much you care about them, how much you love them. It's been something new to me."

So, was this the last time Bradley, Betts and Martinez all wore Red Sox uniforms together? That scenario can't be dismissed.

Asked about the possibility of returning, Martinez said coyly: "I can't spill my beans just yet. We'll see what happens."

And perhaps fittingly, the 2019 season ended with Betts scoring all the way from first base on a ball — a single by Rafael Devers off the glove of an infielder — that barely trickled into right field. He slid into home plate just ahead of the throw to score the last run of the Red Sox season, then stood up triumphantly, pounding his chest.

Did it cross his mind that, as he strode to the plate in the bottom of the ninth, that the at-bat could be his last as a member of the Sox?

"No, I was thinking about winning the game at that point," Betts said. "That's out of my hands."

For now, at least.

But right to the end, to the famous final scene, the 2019 Red Sox season, which began with so much promise and didn't go according to plan at any point, seemed shrouded in uncertainty right until the end.

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 5, Orioles 4 – 3 things we learned in the finale

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox ended their season with a victory, 5-4, over the Baltimore Orioles. Here are three things we learned:

1. Sox get the win, but ERod doesn't.

The game ended in dramatic fashion — with a walk-off victory in the bottom of the ninth — but it wasn't enough to deliver win No. 20 to Eduardo Rodriguez. The Sox had arranged their pitching rotation the last two weeks to get Rodriguez a shot at winning 20, and when Boston took the lead 4-3 in the bottom of the seventh, it appeared as though it would all work out. When the go-ahead run scored, the dugout erupted in celebration and several teammates came over to congratulate him. But in the top of the eighth, an error and

a couple of base hits by the Orioles tied the game 4-4 and robbed Rodriguez of the opportunity. “The only thing I can control is going out there and trying to keep the score like it is,” said Rodriguez. “You saw what happened in the last game — I gave up (seven) runs and still got the win and today I didn’t get it. That’s something I can’t control.”

2. Devers gets to his personal milestone.

Coming into Sunday, Rafael Devers had 198 hits for the season. He singled to right in the third inning, his second plate appearance, then after flying out to left in the fifth, doubled to right in the seventh. Just for good measure, he was credited with a third hit in the ninth when he hit a rocket that deflected off shortstop Rickie Martin’s glove. He became the 15th player in Red Sox history to reach 200 hits. He also ended up leading the majors in total bases with 359 and 90 extra-base hits. “I think it was a great season for me,” said Devers. “Overall, I wish we had a better season, but that just motivates me more for the upcoming season — to be able to produce the same way I did this season. So, building off this is what I’m trying to do.” Devers is the youngest Red Sox player to reach 200 hits and his manager expects him to keep getting better. “Overall, he turns 23 (next month) and he was one of the best third basemen in the big leagues,” said Alex Cora. “Not only offensively, but defensively he turned the corner. He put a whole season together, which isn’t easy to do.”

3. Bradley robbed of a homer on possible Catch of the Year.

Oh, the irony. In mid-May, Jackie Bradley Jr. stole a potential game-winning homer by Baltimore’s Trey Mancini at Camden Yards, as good a catch as you’ll ever see. But turnabout being fair play and all, Bradley himself was robbed of a potential game-winning homer in the eighth inning when Baltimore right fielder Steve Wilkerson raced back to the visitor’s bullpen wall, leaped and snared the ball in his glove before twisting into the seats adjacent to the bullpen, and somehow held on. When the ball was struck, Cora, in the home dugout, turned his back to the play, assuming it was going out. When he didn’t hear the crowd cheer, he knew something had gone wrong. Meanwhile, former Red Sox outfielder Dwight Evans texted former teammate Dennis Eckersley in the NESN broadcast booth and told Eckersley that he thought the play constituted the greatest catch by a right fielder ever in Fenway Park. Which is heady praise indeed, of course, coming from Evans, who played right field for the Sox from 1972-1990.

*** *The Athletic***

‘Frustrated.’ ‘Embarrassing.’ ‘About as bad as it gets’: Why this was such an awful year for the Red Sox

Jen McCaffrey

The Red Sox entered 2019 hoping they would discover the elusive formula for winning consecutive World Series.

They’d employed team executives to study ways to repeat. They brought back almost their entire roster to provide continuity and build upon the camaraderie of their historically successful 2018 season. But they soon found out none of that mattered.

The glory of 2018 had hardly worn off before the losses started piling up. And when they finally started to right their ship, another leak sprung.

A season of false hopes and overflowing frustrations ended with the Red Sox sputtering to an 84-78 record, amid a search for a new face to lead the front office and an offseason full of uncertainty.

From January optimism through Game 162 apathy, here’s how it all went down:

Red Sox brass didn’t shy away from high expectations when they made the rounds in January.

Alex Cora, manager: If you thought last year was special — wait 'til this year.

Dave Dombrowski, president of baseball operations: What's significant is we don't have a proven closer. Sometimes you have to evaluate where you're going to spend your dollars. We decided to keep back the rest of the core of the club. We like our team a great deal, and we think some of the guys internally can do the job.

As spring training opened, the buzz of 2018 was still in the air.

Cora: Should be a fun season. I think we have a great team. ... I've been saying all along, the whole winter, to do this thing we have to turn the page. Your big boys, David (Price) and Chris (Sale) and Nate (Eovaldi) and Rick (Porcello), Mookie (Betts) and J.D. (Martinez), those guys, all they talk about is looking forward to 2019.

Matt Barnes, reliever: It's hard to win once, let alone twice. A lot of stuff's got to go your way, and you've got to play consistent baseball for seven months. We had a great year last year, but everybody's moved on and turned the page, and we're going to do our best to be that first team (to repeat since 2000).

After a shortened offseason, the Red Sox mapped out a plan for a slow rollout of their starting pitchers — bullpen sessions, simulated games and stints against minor leaguers with limited exposure to major leaguers. The idea was it would limit unnecessary stress while still providing ramp-up time for velocity and pitch counts. But while the plan worked well in 2018, the team quickly learned it didn't quite have the same effect.

Cora: They'll be ready for Opening Day. ... We're right on schedule. We're not worried about it.

On March 23, the Red Sox signed Sale to a five-year, \$145 million extension.

Dombrowski: I realize we're not going to be able to sign everybody, but this is a great start. I also look at it for the next three, four years, we have four starting pitchers that are four of the best in Major League Baseball. That's a good way to start building a club. ... That's my job and Eddie Romero's job and Brian O'Halloran's job.

With Joe Kelly and Craig Kimbrel gone, the biggest question throughout spring training surrounded the bullpen and, specifically, who would be the closer. The Sox opted for the no-closer approach, relying on back-end relievers like Brandon Workman and Barnes to share high-leverage situations.

Cora: We've got stuff so it's up to us to find matchups we can exploit and they can maximize their talents. That's how we're going to do it. I'm not going to name a closer. I've been saying all along, tomorrow we'll see what we're going to do. I feel fine. I'm OK with it.

The Red Sox opened the season in Seattle and lost three of four games.

Cora: Whoever is doubting us, what we did last year, I mean, this year, check what happened last year. We did the same thing.

The Sox signed Xander Bogaerts to a six-year, \$120 million extension during that first series. But the good feelings of that deal didn't last long. They lost three of four in Oakland, then two of three in Arizona. They finished the opening road trip 3-8 before they returned for the Fenway Park opener.

Cora: If it was like we were playing good and we were getting beat playing good baseball, probably we'd be shocked, but we haven't played well. Sometimes it's defense, baserunning, pitching; sometimes we don't hit. I don't think they're in shock.

After losing in the home opener against Toronto, the Sox went 3-3 in their first homestand against Toronto and lowly Baltimore. Eduardo Rodriguez became the first starter to pitch into the seventh inning for the Red Sox on April 14, in the 17th game of the season.

Then the first dominoes started to fall. The team designated Blake Swihart for assignment and called up Sandy Leon, purportedly to help Sale as his personal catcher.

Dombrowski: When you have a club that's struggling in a lot of different areas, which we are, you try to fix little things at a time. For us, OK, we've tried to get a little better defensively behind the plate, and a little comfort zone with the starting staff working with him. I think our starting pitching has started to show some improvement, with Rodriguez and Price and the games they threw. We're hoping that continues. And I think our offense will get going. They're a good offense. They just haven't done it so far.

In Leon's first game, Sale surrendered four runs in five innings during an 8-0 loss at Yankee Stadium.

Chris Sale, starter: This is flat-out embarrassing. For my family, for our team, for our fans. This is about as bad as it gets.

The next night Dustin Pedroia, in just his sixth game after a long rehab from knee surgery, exited the game after twisting his knee. It may have been his last appearance in an MLB game.

Cora: We'll see what happens. I really don't know. He was a little bit down. I haven't seen him like that. So, hopefully, it's nothing serious.

By the end of May, World Series MVP Steve Pearce, who'd hit .180 with one homer over 29 games, headed back to the injury list with a back strain. He wouldn't play again. And Pedroia, who'd been rehabbing in Portland and Pawtucket, announced he'd step away to evaluate his next move.

Dustin Pedroia, second baseman: It's to a point now where my knee is not allowing me to play every day. It's taken a while to realize that. I've tried so many things, from braces to orthotics to rehab methods to seeing different doctors to every type of treatment possible. So I'm at a point right now where I need some time.

The Red Sox needed a spark, and Michael Chavis arrived from the minors to provide it.

Dombrowski: We're short on infielders. And he can hit. We're not bringing him up with the anticipation it's long-term, but if he earns it, by all means.

He earned it, hitting seven homers in May and becoming a fixture in the lineup. Around the same time, Rafael Devers went on a tear, hitting .351 with eight homers. The offense was finally ignited. Chavis won Rookie of the Month and Devers won Player of the Month as the team started to find a groove through in May.

The Sox couldn't sustain momentum, however, after they went 11-2 from April 29-May 12. The next night, Sale had maybe his best start of the season, with 17 strikeouts in seven innings against Colorado. Then the Sox blew the lead and lost in extra innings. They continued to squander opportunities, going 4-9 against Houston, New York and Tampa Bay — eventual playoff teams — when they played those clubs during a stretch of four straight weekends.

Cora: You see the scores. I know it's early. I know where we're at. ... There's no secrets as you guys know. It's about execution, and there were certain days we didn't execute it.

On June 1, the Yankees won their second straight game to open a series in New York against the Sox. That gave them a 9.5-game lead over the defending champions in the AL East.

Cora: Disappointed? Obviously we're not happy where we're at. I thought we were going to be more consistent, but we've got plenty of time to get this going.

David Price, starter: We're better than what our record is right now. We all understand that.

On June 11, Brock Holt misplayed a ball that would go for an inside-the-park home run by Texas' Hunter Pence in a 9-5 loss, which marked four defeats in five games for Boston.

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

Rather than bottom out, the Red Sox jumped back into it, reeling off wins in 10 of the next 14 games. But the team's inability to seize home-field advantage at Fenway caused frustration. The Sox went 20-20 at Fenway in the first half.

Failures at the back of the bullpen helped cause some of that frustration. Barnes' blown save on June 26 — when he surrendered a two-run, game-sealing home run in the ninth inning to the White Sox — gave the Sox an MLB-high 16 blown saves.

Cora: We've been talking about dominating at home. We have to do that. We've had chances to start piling up wins at home, and we haven't done it.

Two "home" games against the Yankees in London — when New York outscored Boston 29-21 — left the Sox disappointed again. When the Sox left Europe, they trailed the Yankees in the AL East by 11 games.

Cora: We have the talent to win the World Series, but we have to play better. I've been saying it since Day 1. It better happen sooner rather than later. It's not that we're running out of time, but the lead is huge. It's a huge lead, and there are other teams around us that are playing good baseball. They're trending up, and we're not doing that.

Another change of plans arrived on July 2 when the Sox said they would convert Eovaldi — out since April 16 following surgery to remove bone chips — into a reliever.

Cora: We're not closing down the door of him starting later. This is the quickest way for him to contribute.

Eovaldi's conversion also foreshadowed the decision by the Sox, who already had the highest payroll in baseball, not to add to the beleaguered bullpen.

Dombrowski: I don't have any direction to stay under a specific (payroll) number. But there's a penalty for going above it. You try to avoid penalties. There's not only a financial penalty, but you drop 10 spots in the draft. So that's something you probably wouldn't want to do. We have the highest payroll in baseball now, \$246 (million). Nobody has said, "You can't exceed that," but you also have to be realistic. There's some fiscal responsibility you always have based on where you are. I would like ideally to stay under 246, but we wanted to last year and we went over 246.

The Sox closed the first half at 49-41, nine games back of the Yankees, after five wins in six games. They sent Bogaerts, Betts and Martinez to the All-Star game.

Price: It's crunch time for us right now. Enjoy these next four days off and come back and ready to play.

Cora: We're a lot better than this. We are. We need to get better.

Shaking up the roster was part of the plan to improve. Before the second half began, the Sox cut Eduardo Nunez and acquired starting pitcher Andrew Cashner from the Orioles for two low-level minor leaguers.

Dombrowski: We've dug ourselves a hole as far as trying to win the division is concerned. We're in a battle to try to win a wild-card spot. I think we have the capabilities to make it to the postseason.

The search for consistency never seemed to end. A loss to Baltimore on July 21 in which they were no-hit for six innings by journeyman starter Asher Wojciechowski was yet another low point. The season was quickly approaching a fork in the road, however. The Sox left Baltimore 11 games back and headed for a 14-game stretch against Tampa and New York, the two teams ahead of them in the division.

Holt: We've just gotta play better in all aspects. We've got a good stretch here against teams that we're chasing. So this is a good time to start if we're going to do it.

In the days leading up to the trade deadline, the Sox took two of three from the Rays and three of four from the Yankees. The silence at the trade deadline was deafening, though. The team didn't make a move after acquiring Cashner.

Dombrowski: If we were closer to first place, I would've been more open-minded with some of the other things. Not that we're not trying to get our club better, but when I say that, the club here needs to play better on a consistent basis. We like our club; we've liked our club all year long. We're sitting, what, 10 games over .500. There's a lot of great things about it. We had a great week last week, but we still need to do it on a more consistent basis.

Xander Bogaerts, shortstop: Maybe surprised (by the lack of action at the trade deadline), but I wouldn't say I was disappointed.

Dombrowski: The reality is — if we're going to make it, it's going to be the guys that are in the clubhouse. So we could add pieces to that, but we have a very talented big-league club.

The day after the trade deadline, the Rays completed a sweep of the Red Sox at Fenway.

Bogaerts: I think it might be probably the most disappointing loss of the season so far. It's a crucial time and a time when we need a win. It feels like one win is hard to come by right now.

Next, the Sox went to New York, where they were swept in four games. Their losing streak reached eight, their longest since 2015. They emerged from their fortnight with the Rays and Yankees with a 5-9 mark and fell 14.5 games out of first.

Cora: It wasn't a good week.

The Red Sox remained in the wild-card hunt, albeit trailing Tampa, Oakland and Cleveland. Their odds of making the postseason were dwindling. Then they lost Sale and Price to injury, and the odds got even longer.

Cora: It's always tough. We've got to keep going. That's the way it is. Somebody has to step up.

The fate of the defending World Series champions had been all but sealed when the first weekend of September ended with news breaking in the ninth inning of a Sunday night loss to the Yankees that Dombrowski had been fired.

Cora: I just found out. Surprised. I'm shocked, honestly. This is a guy that gave me a chance to come here and be a big-league manager. It's one of those that they just told me, so I'm not ready to talk about it."

Rick Porcello, starter: You always kind of take an ounce of guilt with you as a player because you're the one that can make or break things.

Dombrowski's departure shined a light on the many issues — like how to fix the rotation and how to tackle contract talks with Betts, who can be a free agent next winter — that will greet his successor.

Mookie Betts, right fielder: It doesn't really matter who's there. It's going to be the same answer. Nothing's gonna change. This is proof that this is a business. Like I said, I love it here, but definitely this is still a business.

The Red Sox temporarily placed Eddie Romero, Brian O'Halloran, Zack Scott and Raquel Ferreira in charge. The remainder of the season focused on speculation for the winter, who would take over the team and which players would return.

World Series champions just 11 months earlier, the Sox were left with meaningless, play-out-the-string games against the likes of the Orioles and Texas Rangers. And everyone, especially free-agents-to-be like Porcello, was faced with questions about how the franchise would change.

Porcello: It's been a tough one this year. I don't want to get too emotional or close the door on anything. Who knows what's going to happen in the offseason. But from the bottom of my heart, it's been an absolute pleasure to wear this uniform and pitch for the Red Sox organization the last five years.

Bogaerts: Those aren't my decisions. I love each and everyone that's on this team. We've had some great memories throughout the years. Seeing some faces that might leave will be tough.

On Sept. 27, team owners John Henry and Tom Werner announced it wasn't just a change in the person running baseball operations, but there would be wholesale disruption to the entire system and a significant paring of payroll.

Tom Werner, chairman: Our real intention is to be competitive every year, and we'll do whatever we have to do to do that. But the solution to that isn't always having the highest payroll in baseball.

Rodriguez had a shot at earning his 20th win in the season finale against Baltimore, but Barnes allowed the Orioles to tie the game in the eighth inning, which left Rodriguez stuck at 19 wins. Betts, who drew a walk in his final at-bat, scored the walk-off run to end the season — and left many wondering if he'll be back to don a Red Sox uniform again.

Betts: It was rough, a lot of ups and downs. We never really got hot. When that happens, this happens. It's kind of disappointing but there's a lot of good things that happened throughout the season to be proud of. This is a great group of guys. Probably one of the best I've ever been a part of as far as having fun and enjoying the game.

Cora: These guys, they want to be great, and they know this year wasn't enough, even though (some of them) they did their part. They'll attack the offseason the right way and be ready, and in Fort Myers we'll start again.

As Red Sox season ends, the jerseys remind us of the change that will churn at Fenway

Chad Jennings

An hour before Sunday's first pitch, on the final day of the Red Sox season, Dustin Pedroia, Mike Lowell and David Ortiz walked into Fenway Park together. They checked their tickets, turned toward the left-field seats and weaved through the crowd before disappearing off in the distance. No one seemed to notice them.

These weren't the players themselves, mind you. It was their jerseys, worn by three women in their 20s who have not forgotten the 2007 World Series.

Out on Jersey Street, a man wearing a Jon Lester jersey bought a steak-and-cheese sub, then stepped into line for a beer. A woman wearing a Carlton Fisk jersey had her arm in a sling, and another wearing a Jason

Varitek jersey had her knee in a brace. A kid no older than 10 had his Kevin Youkilis jersey untucked and unbuttoned.

The jerseys were everywhere, and they came from every era. There were red ones, blue ones and white ones. There were Ted Williams jerseys with no name on the back and at least one Daniel Nava jersey that needed the clarification. Not two minutes after a woman in a blue Nomar Garciaparra jersey stepped quickly and easily through the turnstile, a man wearing a Xander Bogaerts jersey had to lift his hands over his shoulders so the metal detector could make sure he wasn't armed and dangerous.

They came and went like that all day, celebrations of Red Sox past and present, woven and stitched reminders that what's about to happen to this team is not unusual. Baseball rosters change, players come and go, and those who leave are not always forgotten.

And so even as Jackie Bradley Jr., Brock Holt and Rick Porcello wore their actual Red Sox jerseys for perhaps the final time, their jersey replicas stood literally within feet of one another around the concession stand just inside Gate D. A guy in a Shane Victorino jersey had a backpack over one shoulder, a girl wearing a Jonathan Papelbon jersey had one arm across her boyfriend's back, and a Manny Ramirez jersey made its way to the right-field seats.

Inside the team store, Williams, Pedroia and Mookie Betts jerseys were selling for \$150 each. Ortiz was \$175. On the clearance rack, a Carl Crawford T-shirt went for \$5, Eduardo Núñez's cost \$15 and a 2018 World Series champions shirt was \$20. A man in a Koji Uehara jersey walked through the store looking at shirts for his daughters, and one of them reached up for a plain white jersey with no name on the back, only "Red Sox" across the front. Maybe she had the right idea.

But she'll soon learn that the evolving names are a part of the experience. A special few become immortal. In fact, one girl so young her parents likely don't remember the Impossible Dream stood in line at a concession stand wearing a Carl Yastrzemski jersey that hung on her like a blanket. A smaller, even younger boy wore a Yastrzemski jersey that fit him like a tent.

But it's not only the unforgettable we choose to remember. A tiny girl sat in the back row of the grandstands wearing a Jason Bay jersey while the stadium sound system played "You can't always get what you want." A fitting soundtrack.

There was, remarkably, a young woman eating a hot dog while wearing a No. 23 Tommy Fine (from your 1947 Red Sox) jersey. Another woman, even younger, browsed for memorabilia while wearing a No. 55 Brian Butterfield jersey. Getting cash out of the ATM appeared to be a Joe McCarthy jersey, but surely not. That one must have been custom, just like the No. 12 Hatch and No. 16 Wheeler, though perhaps those number choices were subtle nods to Mike Napoli, Ellis Burks, Kevin Romine or Jim Lonborg.

Inevitably, there will be some new numbers on sale in the team store next year, and so a few new names will be standing in line to buy hot dogs and Bud Light. Red Sox ownership has talked about cutting payroll. It's all but announced that some memorable players won't be back next year. But that's nothing new, and it won't be unique.

Among the Orioles jerseys roaming Fenway Park on Sunday were a Brooks Robinson, a Cal Ripken Jr. and a Nick Markakis, none of whom currently play for the team. There were Tom Brady jerseys everywhere, and at least one of them was in the maize and blue of the University of Michigan, where Brady hasn't played in 20 years. Sports come with strong memories, and fans tend not to forget.

And so, of course, there were Betts jerseys at every turn on Sunday. One family of four donned two different Chris Sale jerseys. One Andrew Benintendi jersey walked right past an Andrew Benintendi T-shirt, while not far away another Benintendi ordered a Diet Coke — except this one wore the No. 40 of his partial first season, not the current and more familiar No. 16.

And over in the corner, there was a guy wearing a Steve Pearce jersey. It had a World Series patch on the sleeve. Forever a championship MVP, no matter what happens next.

*** *The Baltimore Sun***

Orioles lose season finale, 5-4, to Red Sox on Rafael Devers' bizarre walk-off single

Jon Meoli

There are plenty of things the Orioles will want to carry over beyond the 2019 season that ended Sunday.

Losses like this, a 5-4 defeat to the Boston Red Sox that denied the Orioles (54-108) their first series sweep of the season, will not be counted among those things.

For the last time but certainly not the first, an Orioles lead disappeared once the bullpen door swung open, and even a late rally to tie the game and a fabulous catch by Stevie Wilkerson to rob a go-ahead home run in the eighth inning couldn't swing things back their way.

Mookie Betts singled and scored from first for the winning run in the bottom of the ninth on a confusing Rafael Devers single to right field off Dillon Tate to end it.

"We play with a ton of heart, bounce back like we normally do, and just fall a little bit short — which we've done so many times this year," Orioles manager Brandon Hyde said. "I'm proud of our guys. Proud of the effort. Love the way we played this series. Even though that team's not going to the playoffs, it's still a really good team and a really good lineup, and we faced a guy going for his 20th win today. They had the varsity club in there trying to get it for him, and we just did a great job of competing."

Even as the Orioles denied former farmhand Eduardo Rodriguez his 20th win, the bizarre end to the game on a single through the shift into shallow center field spoiled what could have been an uplifting end to the season for them.

"I think that second hop took a funny hop on Richie [Martin], it really boomeranged," Hyde said. It was a tough play for him, and Wilkerson was playing no-doubles, playing a little deeper than normal. He had to sprint in, and Mookie with a really instinctual play. He's a great player, great instincts. Hopefully, we'll learn from that and get the ball in a little quicker. Hats off to them, and hats off to Mookie for making a really good play."

Said Wilkerson: "I've got to do a better job of picking it up and just getting the ball in. Obviously, it's something I'll learn from but not the way you want to end it."

The Orioles (54-108) had rallied for a 4-4 tie in the eighth thanks to an RBI single by Jonathan Villar. Evan Phillips, who escaped a bases-loaded, no-outs jam in the sixth, allowed a run in the seventh.

What a catch

Austin Hays spent the past two weeks as the shoo-in winner for catch of the year, but Wilkerson came up with a big one of his own to give him some competition. With the game tied and two outs in the eighth inning, Jackie Bradley Jr. hit a deep drive to right field that Wilkerson tracked to the wall and jumped into it for a game-saving catch.

Hyde said he "couldn't believe it" when Wilkerson lifted his glove up to show he had the ball.

"I thought that ball was 30 rows in off the bat," Hyde said. "I just put my head down, and then I see him like tracking it, and I'm kind of waiting for him to fall over into the bullpen or into the crowd, thinking he

had no chance at it. All of a sudden, he comes out of it with the ball. It was just one of the better catches I've ever seen."

Said Wilkerson: "When I was tracking it down, I had a bead on it, so I knew if I had the space to get to it, I'd have a chance to get it. But going back on them, you never know if you're gonna get beat by the wall or not. But I had a good bead on it and just jumped up and grabbed it."

Wilkerson had a difficult day in right field dealing with the sun earlier in the day, but his catch certainly made up for most of what preceded it.

Shepherd shows off

Orioles starting pitcher Chandler Shepherd, a former Red Sox farmhand who stalled out at Triple-A with Boston, got the chance to pitch at Fenway Park and didn't disappoint. He allowed three runs (two earned) on five hits, with one walk and six strikeouts.

He retired the first seven batters he faced before Wilkerson lost a ball in the sun in right field that went for a triple by Gorkys Hernández that set off a two-run third inning. His only walk was to Xander Bogaerts leading off the sixth inning, ending Shepherd's day. Bogaerts came around as the tying run with Shawn Armstrong on in relief.

Two more for Martin

Shortstop Richie Martin ended his first major league season with back-to-back multi-hit games, solidifying a surprisingly strong second half. Martin was batting .166 with a .507 OPS in the first half, and his two hits Sunday improved his second-half line to .284 with a .713 OPS.

*** *Associated Press***

Bullpen blows E-Rod's 20th win, Red Sox beat O's anyway

Even a walk-off victory on the final day of the season was tinged with disappointment for these Boston Red Sox.

Eduardo Rodriguez missed out on a 20-win season when Boston's bullpen blew a late lead, but the Red Sox overcame a soaring home run robbery by Stevie Wilkerson to beat the Baltimore Orioles 5-4 Sunday in the regular season finale on Mookie Betts' ninth-inning dash home.

Betts scored from first on a single by Rafael Devers with no outs. Devers' hit caromed off shortstop Richie Martin's glove, causing Wilkerson to hesitate in right. Betts beat a late throw by Wilkerson to give his team a celebratory cap to a frustrating season.

"I think everybody was kind of ready to go. So I just decided to go home," Betts said.

Wilkerson made a late entry for catch of the year in the eighth. He chased Jackie Bradley Jr.'s fly ball to the edge of the visitors' bullpen, leaped over the short wall and pulled back Bradley's would-be homer while nearly tumbling into the seats.

"I knew if I had the space to get to it, I'd have a chance to get it," Wilkerson said. "I had a good bead on it and just jumped up and grabbed."

Brandon Workman (10-1) pitched one inning and struck out three to pick up the victory. Dillion Tate (0-2) got the loss for Baltimore (54-108), which was denied its first sweep of the season.

Rodriguez pitched seven innings and was pulled with Boston leading 4-3, putting him in line for a career-high 20th win. But then Baltimore's Hanser Alberto reached on an error by shortstop Xander Bogaerts leading off the eighth and scored the tying run when Jonathan Villar singled off Matt Barnes.

"That's something I can't control as a pitcher," Rodriguez said. "I can just go out there and get three outs every time I go to the mound."

Boston finished 84-78 a year after winning a franchise-record 108 games during the regular season. The Orioles made a six-game improvement from 2018.

The Red Sox are the 10th team since 2000 to win the World Series and not qualify for the postseason the following year.

"It was rough. A lot of ups and downs. We never really got hot," Betts said. "When that happens, this happens."

While this season is something for the Orioles to build on, the Red Sox trudge into an offseason that promises to bring several changes.

There will be a new leader in baseball operations following the firing of Dave Dombrowski. All-Star slugger J.D. Martinez must decide whether to exercise a player option. Starter Rick Porcello is a free agent. The person hired will have to deal with a payroll crunch that includes finding room for raises for Betts from \$20 million and Jackie Bradley Jr. from \$8.55 million. Both are eligible for free agency after the 2020 World Series.

"I had memories here and good times here," Martinez said. "But it's the business side of it and I always let (agent) Scott (Boras) handle that. But obviously it would be nice to be back."

Controlling owner John Henry has also vowed to cut back after having baseball's highest payroll for two straight seasons. Boston is on track to pay a \$13 million luxury tax this year on a payroll of \$243 million.

Manager Alex Cora, who ownership said will return for a third season no matter who replaces Dombrowski, said identifying what went wrong in 2019 isn't hard to put his finger on.

Cora said inconsistent pitching and an eight-day stretch from July 28 through Aug. 4 that saw Boston lose eight straight games -- five to the Yankees and three to the Rays -- will gnaw at him.

Boston was eight games out of first place in the AL East before that stretch and 14 1/2 out by the end of it.

The Red Sox hit more home runs and scored more runs than in 2018, but poor baserunning and injuries on the pitching staff doomed the club in close games.

On the mound, starters Chris Sale and David Price made only 25 and 22 starts, respectively, as Sale battled elbow issues and Price dealt with elbow and wrist problems.

Firming up the starting rotation and bullpen are areas that ownership has also said will be addressed this offseason.

Cora has been criticized for the message he gave to his team during spring training that this season was about continuing the system that propelled them to win the title.

He disagrees.

"I was wrong saying continuation? Well maybe the other guys that said 'turn the page' and 'this is a new season' for 20 years have been wrong too," Cora said.

SOME CATCH

Red Sox analyst Dennis Eckersley told reporters that Boston's eight-time Gold Glove Award-winning right fielder Dwight Evans texted him during the game to say Wilkerson's robbery was the best catch ever by a right fielder at Fenway Park.

TALKING ATTENDANCE

An announced crowd of 35,427 was on hand for Sunday's finale at Fenway Park. The Red Sox averaged 35,748 (2,895,575 total) in 2018. It decreased to an average of 35,518 (2,805,919) in 2019, but that was in 79 games because of two games in London against the Yankees.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: Cora said Sale (left elbow inflammation) will head to their spring training facility in Ft. Myers, Florida, in the next few days to begin his rehabilitation program.

UP NEXT

Orioles: Opening Day for next season is set for March 26 against the Yankees.

Red Sox: Begin 2020 regular season March 26 at Toronto, with home opener set for April 2 against the White Sox.