

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, September 4, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

The Red Sox starting pitchers keep serving up bad pitches at the worst times, especially at home

Alex Speier

There are plenty of reasons the 2019 Red Sox have represented not just a disappointment but a mystery. Yet perhaps the most vexing aspect of a team that on paper bears very close resemblance to its championship predecessor is a brutally bad performance in the venue that should be most conducive to success: Home.

Most teams suffer a form of homesickness; the Red Sox suffer home sickness.

With a 6-5 loss to the Twins on Tuesday, they are 34-35 at home, and 34-33 at Fenway Park.

(Those two losses to the Yankees in London were technically home affairs, and while on one hand that characterization seems absurd, the contests sort of looked like games at Fenway given the obscene number of runs permitted to the Red Sox' opponent.)

The reason for the team's home woes is fairly straightforward: As a group, the starters have been abysmal in Fenway this year. With the six-run, four-plus-inning yield by Rick Porcello to Minnesota on Tuesday, the team's starters now have a 5.16 ERA in home contests – including a 5.04 mark at Fenway. By comparison, the Dodgers entered Tuesday with a home ERA that was exactly half of that (2.52) posted by the Red Sox in Boston.

“I ran into a number the other day, I think runners in scoring position, the OPS is if not the worst, it's one of the worst in the big leagues against our starters,” noted Red Sox manager Alex Cora. “Keeping the ball in the ballpark, limiting traffic, that's the most important thing to avoiding the big inning that's been going on from the get-go.”

More specifically: It has been going on from the get-go at home. Sox starters have been bad, though just short of awful on the road with runners in scoring position (.292/.358/.523). As ugly as those numbers look, the team would be in a very different position if it hadn't been far worse in such circumstances at Fenway.

With runners in scoring position at home, the Red Sox rotation has produced jarringly awful numbers: A .311 average (second-worst in MLB), .407 OBP (easily the worst in MLB), and .543 slugging percentage (tied for second worst).

Put another way: Imagine a lineup filled with nothing but Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez, and you'd have a decent approximation of the average production against Red Sox starters with runners in scoring position at home this year.

Under those circumstances, it should come as little surprise that rallies have gone from a slow drip (runners on base) to a steady flow (more and more runners on base) before finally becoming a flood (hits that score multiple runs). It's the wash, rinse, repeat of crooked-numbered rallies on the visitor's line on the scoreboard.

At the heart of that struggle, the team has misfired far too many pitches with runners on base. Aside from flashes from Chris Sale, the Red Sox rotation lacks the stuff to be able to mislocate pitches over the heart of the plate and emerge unscathed — particularly this year, when every ball hit in the air threatens to clang off

or clear a fence. Yet that's precisely what's happened on numerous occasions for the Sox at Fenway this year.

"It's pretty obvious that those balls that are getting [hit] are in the middle of the plate or don't have any action on them," rued Porcello.

But it's not just him. In fact, Porcello's 4.92 ERA at Fenway this year is both superior to his 7.01 mark outside of Boston – including London – and better than the performance of his other rotation mates.

The pattern of poorly located pitches at the costliest moments is one that keeps happening for the Red Sox at Fenway this year, particularly against elite competition.

The Red Sox are 10-20 in home games (10-18 at Fenway) against teams with records of .500 or better. Their rotation has a 5.88 ERA (5.62 ERA at Fenway) in those contests.

That is no way to forge a path to a playoff berth, let alone a championship. Yet as much as the Red Sox recognize that they need something better, they have little choice but to hope that their current starters suddenly find something in the remaining 24 games of 2019 (and 12 at Fenway) that they've been missing for almost the entire season.

Tuesday marked the start of a pivotal week for the Red Sox, the onset of seven home games in as many days against the Twins and Yankees. After a survival series against the Angels in Anaheim – one in which the team had gotten just seven of its 32 innings from starting pitchers — the club hoped that Porcello might be able to conjure the same magic he produced earlier this season, when he carved the Twins over seven shutout innings June 17.

Of course, that outing was in Minnesota. On Tuesday at Fenway, it was – again – a different story.

"We trust these guys. These guys have [performed at Fenway] their whole careers. It just happens that this year they haven't been able to be consistent at it. You see flashes, and then," Cora said with sigh, "something like this happens."

Red Sox' pitching plan includes more bullpen games

Julian McWilliams

As Chris Sale prepped for an evening flight back to Boston from Fort Myers, Fla., on Tuesday afternoon, his manager, Alex Cora, broke down the Red Sox' plan going forward, one that doesn't include the lefthander.

The Sox on Sunday transferred Sale (elbow inflammation) to the 60-day injured list, and his season is likely over. The team will likely continue to have bullpen games in his spot in the rotation.

"We added a few guys," Cora said prior to a 6-5 loss in the opener of a three-game series against the Twins. "That game on Friday [15 innings against the Angels] put us in a tough spot, but we should be fine."

In the last 27 games entering Tuesday, (Aug. 1-Sept. 1), the Sox bullpen had tossed 129⅓ innings, the fourth most in the majors. The relievers answered the bell, tied with the Astros for the second-best bullpen ERA (3.48) in that span. But remember, this was a team whose strong suit was supposed to be the rotation. Yet injuries and underperformance forced Cora to adjust on the fly.

"A lot of people hate September baseball, but well, right now we'll take advantage of it," Cora said of the expanded rosters. "That's the way you have to manage it."

“I do feel every team we’re going to face that has a chance to do something special, they’re going to go the same way: [Yankees], Twins, and the Rays. I think that’s the way it’s going to be in September. I think we’re capable enough to do it.”

The relievers know what’s in store, too, this month. What’s it like preparing for a bullpen game? It’s different, according to Josh Taylor, but you try to keep the same mentality.

“You kind of want to try and approach it as every other game,” Taylor said. “You kind of just think, ‘All right, next guy up.’ You do your inning and the whole bullpen is ready for the call. The bullpen game, once the first inning is over, you kind of just think about it as a six- or seven-inning game. You kind of just treat it like a late-game situation.”

Taylor was the first of six relievers Tuesday. After Rick Porcello was touched for six runs in four-plus innings, the Sox bullpen provided five innings of no-hit, no-run relief to give the offense a chance to get back in the game.

Last month during the Sox’ visit to Cleveland, Cora called bullpen games a worthwhile concept but didn’t give much indication that it would be the team’s approach to overcome its deficit in starting pitching. Now, though, he seems to be all-in.

“It’s a good way to manage,” Cora said with a smile. “I like it.”

Chavis setback

Michael Chavis initially was placed on the injured list Aug. 12 with a sprain of the AC joint in his left shoulder. That injury healed, and it appeared Chavis would be back after a rehab assignment with Triple A Pawtucket. But the rookie has had a setback because of tightness in his side.

“It’s a shame because he was swinging the bat well,” Cora said of Chavis, who went 2 for 4 with two homers in a game last Friday against Lehigh Valley.

“He made some adjustments and he was feeling a lot better with his shoulder. But this [side tightness] happened. Hopefully the next few days he can do soft toss and hit off the tee. By the end of the week, the goal is for him to be OK.”

Hembree improving

The Red Sox placed righthander Heath Hembree on the IL Aug. 2 because of inflammation in his pitching elbow. The reliever has been making progress.

“I’ve been throwing for about a week now. I feel good. I feel young again,” said Hembree, who received a platelet-rich plasma injection. “I’m really encouraged with how this last week has been going. I didn’t know much about the shot before I had it done. I kind of just trusted the people around me. Having the time off and giving the shot its time to do its thing in there, I feel like it worked.”

Hembree said he’s been ramping up his throwing, and Tuesday he stretched it out to 120 feet.

Display of power

Triston Casas is the first Red Sox minor leaguer to hit 20 homers in a season as a teenager since Xander Bogaerts did it in Single and Double A in 2012. Casas spent most of the year with Single A Greenville before being promoted to high-A Salem on Sunday.

Alex Cora won’t stop believing, but the Red Sox are running out of time

Julian McWilliams

Manager Alex Cora has remained steadfast that this version of the Red Sox has another gear it can reach. That the talent on the roster is too great to not make a run.

It's not smart to count a team out, Cora said. He's been confident the entire year that his team was one swing or one game away from turning this around.

It's September, and Cora is still clinging to his belief. It's part of what makes him such an effective manager. But ahead of the team's crucial three-game set against the Twins, Cora acknowledged, "It's easy to say. I can map it out and give you a lot of reasons we could do this, but obviously over the course of this season I've been trying to give you guys reasons to believe in us, and it hasn't happened on the field."

The Sox didn't get it done on Tuesday night either, losing to the Twins, 6-5 at Fenway Park.

Rick Porcello got the start and lasted just four innings. He was poor from the outset. With runners on first and second in the first inning, a broken-bat single to left by Miguel Sano put the Twins up, 1-0.

Jorge Polanco led off the third with a single to right and Luis Arraez doubled off the left-field wall to put runners on second and third with one out. Porcello got Sano swinging to record the second out, but Jake Cave — who flew to deep center field in the first — tripled off the wall in right, giving the Twins a 3-0 lead.

Porcello worked a scoreless fourth inning, but it wouldn't be long before he felt the impact of this Minnesota lineup, which leads the majors in homers. In the fifth inning, Nelson Cruz crushed a solo shot to center on a hanging slider. Arraez then singled to right, and Sano laced a two-run shot to center field that went an estimated 452 feet. Porcello's night was done after he failed to record an out in the fifth.

"I sucked," Porcello said after the game. "That's the bottom line. Six runs in four innings is not going to get it done. We need to win every game right now. That's the part that hurts the most is going out there and giving it up like that."

Said Cora: "He struggled with command. It was a struggle. It wasn't his best one."

Josh Taylor took over for Porcello, but after facing just two hitters and plunking C.J. Cron, Cora elected to go to Brian Johnson instead of expending another high-leverage reliever.

The Sox made it a game in the bottom of the frame. Brock Holt's ground out to Polanco at shortstop brought across the Sox' first run. Then with two outs and two on, Rafael Devers homered to right field, shrinking the deficit to 6-4.

That's when Cora was forced to chase the win, which is why Marcus Walden got the ball for the sixth and Darwinzon Hernandez for the seventh. Neither allowed a hit, and Hernandez struck out the side.

Andrew Benintendi made it 6-5 with a solo shot to left in the eighth.

And after Brandon Workman struck out the side in the ninth, the Sox had their chance in the bottom of the inning. Holt singled and pinch hitter Gorkys Hernandez's sacrifice bunt advanced pinch runner Marco Hernandez to second. But Mookie Betts grounded back to pitcher Taylor Rogers, and Devers struck out to end it.

Cora had no choice but to go into win-now mode, but the outcome wasn't ideal, considering the Sox have two more games against the Twins, before a four-game set against the Yankees. The Sox' next offday isn't until after their series against the Blue Jays, on Sept. 13.

"It's very tough, because we know where we're going this week and how many offdays we don't have. We pushed those guys very hard on the road trip," Cora said of his relievers.

The team pushed the bullpen hard again Tuesday, and left with nothing.

“I’m a big reason for putting [the reliever] in tough spots,” said Porcello. “The only guy that has pitched deep into games is [Eduardo Rodriguez]. [We have to] keep pressing and keep going hard. That’s it. That’s all you can do.”

How close is Red Sox prospect Bobby Dalbec to the big leagues?

Alex Speier

Far away, so close.

With the conclusion of the minor league season on Monday, corner infielder Bobby Dalbec — one of the top three Red Sox prospects — made the short trek from Triple A Pawtucket to Boston. The 24-year-old did so on the heels of a season that made him a solid candidate for a September call-up.

For the year, he hit .239/.356/.460 with 27 homers, including a .257/.301/.478 line with seven homers in 30 games following his early-August promotion from Double A Portland to the PawSox.

Dalbec showed a strong overall skill set in 2019. He showed many traits that suggested a big leaguer.

“This is a guy that can control the strike zone, obviously [he has] power, defensively everyone knows that he’s elite,” said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. “This is a guy that’s obviously very important to the organization. We’re very excited with the strides that he made.”

Yet not quite excited enough to convince the Red Sox to add Dalbec to the big league roster.

Instead, the team brought him to Fenway Park for the homestand to work on aspects of his offensive approach while also getting pregame defensive work at first base.

He’ll spend the homestand with the team, then depart for the offseason — a fall and winter that will include a stint playing for the United States in the Premier12 tournament.

But he will not be added to the big league roster.

The Sox have Rafael Devers at third base. They expect Michael Chavis (soreness in his right side) to return by the weekend, allowing the team to platoon the rookie with Mitch Moreland at first base. The team elected to hold off on a call-up given that Dalbec would have an ill-defined and likely limited role.

Even so, the team is virtually certain to add Dalbec to the 40-man roster this winter. He has already made a compelling case that his time to contribute in the big leagues may be at hand early in 2020.

For his part, while Dalbec understood that it is up to the Red Sox to decide when he’ll start contributing in the big leagues, the slugger believes that his progress in the minors has positioned him to help whenever the Red Sox do call for him.

“I feel ready,” Dalbec said in Pawtucket on Monday, prior to the final game of his minor league season. “[But] they’re not just going to bring me up there to bring me up. They want to feel I’m ready.”

Toward that end, Dalbec expressed eagerness to do everything in his power to persuade the Sox that he is just that. Both during his international competition and while working out in Arizona during the winter, he plans to get plenty of exposure to first base — a position he’d played just five times before this year, but where his future may well lie, especially if he reaches the big leagues with the Red Sox, where Devers seems destined to man the hot corner for the next half-decade.

But it wouldn't come as a surprise if sometime in 2020 that the Sox deem Dalbec ready to play opposite Devers, as the pace of his development appears to be quickening.

PawSox manager Bill McMillon — who'd seen Dalbec over his entire minor league career dating to when he was taken in the fourth round of the 2016 draft — saw Dalbec make considerable strides in his pitch recognition and selection even in his one month in Pawtucket. McMillon likewise saw Dalbec improve his first base defense in his one month in Triple A.

“Bobby is perhaps one of the most mature guys for his age that I've been around. He's not overwhelmed by any situation. He has a really good demeanor about himself. He takes that into the field,” said McMillon. “He has power to all fields, just a professional-type hitter. There's still room for development. He swung and missed at some sliders that were down. Once he kind of tightens that up a little bit, I think he has a very high ceiling.

“This is early, but physique-wise, maturity-wise, I saw Scott Rolen when he was young. That would be a [player comparison] that I would put with him,” added McMillon — though noting that Rolen, one of the best defensive third basemen ever, was in a different category with the glove. “Just the way he handled the strike zone, the way he swung, I saw traces of Rolen.”

“Traces of Rolen” — a player who merits significant consideration for Cooperstown — qualifies as an enormous compliment, but it is being applied to Dalbec with increasing frequency.

The righthanded masher shows an exceptional ability to stay back on pitches and pulverize them to right-center field. When he got to Triple A, a level where they use the same ball as in the big leagues rather than the less-explosive ball in lower levels of the minors, Dalbec saw the ease with which his power could translate, in a way that suggests that his 27-homer season in 2019 may fail to capture his true power potential.

“[In batting practice] you can kind of tell. I wasn't swinging very hard and the ball was going into the parking lot. I was like, ‘This is a joke,’ ” said Dalbec. “It's a big difference from hitting the Double A balls all year. It makes me feel like I don't have to swing as hard, which is a good thing. Sometimes in Double A I'd crush a ball and it would get caught in front of the warning track and I'd say, ‘What's going on?’ ”

That curiosity abated by the end of the year in Pawtucket. Now, it gives way to another: With Dalbec knocking on the door to the big leagues, when will his time come? It is Dalbec's maturity, perhaps, that allows him not to venture a guess of an answer to that question, and instead to take actions to put himself in the best position to succeed once he does get his opportunity.

“This year, I've done a good job of trying to find ways to get a little bit better every day,” said Dalbec. “I can see how I've grown up — not that I was immature, but I'm getting better. I like to learn. That 1 percent better every day is one of those things that helps me out.”

And sometime in 2020, the Red Sox hope that the same trait will help their club in the big leagues.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Rick Porcello shelled again as Red Sox lose to Twins

Steve Hewitt

Rick Porcello has searched and searched for answers all season, and he has consistently come up empty.

Now with his team in desperate need of wins to stand a chance in the wild card race, Porcello's struggles are becoming even more magnified.

His trying season has been a big reason why the Sox are on the outside of the playoff picture, and it continued Tuesday night. The righty was shelled, giving up six runs on eight hits, and his offense took too long to get going as the Red Sox opened a seven-game homestand with a 6-5 loss to the Twins.

“I sucked,” Porcello said. “That’s the bottom line.”

With just two fully healthy starters currently in the rotation — Porcello and Eduardo Rodriguez — the Red Sox need not only quality but length. And while Rodriguez has consistently done the job, Porcello has failed to deliver. The veteran, who pitched seven scoreless innings against this Twins team in June, lasted just four innings and saw his MLB-worst ERA climb to 5.63.

“Same old story,” Porcello said. “It’s entirely on me. I don’t know what to say besides I’m frustrated, embarrassed, that’s it. Working hard and putting everything into it, but effort level doesn’t get you wins in the big leagues. It’s executing pitches. ...

“It’s been tough all year. That’s it. No excuses other than I’ve been terrible.”

It also was the same story for the Red Sox (74-64), who again were unable to gain any ground despite the Rays losing one game in their doubleheader with the Orioles, and the Indians falling to beat the White Sox. The Sox are 5½ games behind the Indians for the second wild card spot.

Porcello was off all night but was actually able to avoid damage in the early going. Despite a 30-pitch first inning, he escaped, giving up just one run before pitching a clean second.

Eventually, though, the hard contact that he was giving up to the Twins — who lead the majors in home runs — caught up to him. Jorge Polanco opened the third with a single before Luis Arraez doubled off the Green Monster with one out.

Two batters later, Jake Cave, who came dangerously close from taking Porcello deep on a long fly ball in the first, cranked the righty’s 2-0 offering to deep center. Jackie Bradley Jr. could only watch it bounce off the wall before rolling away for a two-out, two-run triple.

Porcello worked around a leadoff single — which came back and hit him hard in the leg — in the fourth, but he couldn’t record an out in the fifth. And with a tough week coming up that will require Alex Cora to rely heavily on his bullpen, the manager elected to keep Porcello in against the Twins’ power hitters. It cost them.

Porcello’s poorly thrown 0-1 slider that hung to Nelson Cruz to begin the frame was appropriately smashed into the center field bleachers for his 35th dinger of the season. Porcello couldn’t even stomach to watch it fly out of the ballpark, as he reacted to the swing by throwing his head down in disgust.

It didn’t get better. Arraez followed with a liner to right that Mookie Betts couldn’t grab for a diving catch before Miguel Sano ended Porcello’s night with his 27th homer of the season, an estimated 452-foot blast to center that landed high above the wall in the TV camera well. Cora immediately pulled his righty, who was met with boos as he walked off the field.

“We know where we’re going this week and how many off days we don’t have,” Cora said. “We pushed those guys very hard on the road trip. We were actually one hit away from going to (Josh Taylor). You’ve got to trust Rick against Sano and Cruz. We’ve got to get outs. It just didn’t happen.”

Porcello’s short night forced Cora to use six relievers who combined to pitch five shutout innings, which allowed the Red Sox to claw back into the game.

The Sox only produced only one hit through the first four innings but finally broke open in the fifth. Brock Holt scored Mitch Moreland on a groundout to put them on the board, and with two runners on, Rafael

Devers put the Sox back in it with one swing, golfing a 2-2 slider from Trevor May that was low and inside and hitting it over Pesky's Pole for his 29th homer of the season, which made it a 6-4 game.

The Red Sox put two runners on again for Devers in the seventh, but the third baseman flew out to left to end the inning. Andrew Benintendi hit his 13th homer of the season with a solo shot over the Monster in the eighth, but couldn't complete the comeback.

In the ninth, the Red Sox had a runner on second for the top of the order, but Betts grounded out to the pitcher and Devers struck out to end it.

"We'll take our chances with Mookie and Raffy with a man in scoring position," Cora said. "It just didn't happen."

Bobby Dalbec won't be called up to Red Sox

Steve Hewitt

Bobby Dalbec was with the Red Sox on Tuesday at Fenway Park, but he won't be getting a September call-up as the team tries to make a late playoff surge.

Dalbec, the Sox' No. 2-ranked prospect, was taking batting practice and working out with the big league team before it began a seven-game homestand, but it will be a short stay for the right-handed-hitting third baseman. The 24-year-old is on the Team USA roster for the Premier12 international tournament that takes place in November, and the Sox wanted a chance to work with him before then.

Dalbec, who was named an Eastern League All-Star at Double-A Portland this season, was called up to Triple-A Pawtucket at the beginning of August and batted .257 with seven homers and 16 RBI in 30 games there. But the Sox don't have any plans to add him to the active roster right now.

"We're comfortable where we're at," manager Alex Cora said. "We know we're getting Michael (Chavis) here (from the injured list). We've got our platoon situation at first. We've got our third baseman. He's around the next few days, and then he's going to do what he has to do. That's the way it is.

"But this is a guy that's obviously very important to the organization. We're very excited with the strides that he made. Usually he slows down a little bit with his promotions. But I do feel like the higher the level, the better it is for him because he can control the strike zone. So, you saw what happened in Triple A. We were very happy with that."

The Red Sox want to work with Dalbec closely during his Boston visit. Hitting coaches Tim Hyers and Andy Barkett will work with him on his hitting approach, and Cora, who described Dalbec's defense as "elite," wants him to work on that part of his game, too.

"I think it's a good thing for him to be around and get him ready for the tournament," Cora said. "That tournament can be very short, but at the same time, it can be long. So we want him to clean up a few things so he can get better."

PRAYERS FOR BAHAMAS

Cora opened his pregame presser Tuesday by sending love to the Bahamas, where Hurricane Dorian is causing devastation and has left at least five dead.

"First things first, our thoughts and prayers are to the people in the Bahamas," he said. "I thought two years ago was unreal (in Puerto Rico), what I saw, video-wise and then when I went back home, but this is tough to watch. Obviously with time, I know a lot of people are going to help these people out. Should keep praying and hopefully, it's hard to believe, but hopefully it's not as bad as it's looked. It looks real bad.

CHAVIS ON MEND

Cora is hoping that Chavis, who has been out with an injured shoulder since Aug. 12, could return as soon as this weekend. The first baseman returned from his rehab assignment in Triple A on Tuesday but remains on the injured list.

Chavis hit a minor setback in his recovery when he was scratched from a start on Aug. 30. He was otherwise crushing the ball during his rehab assignment, hitting seven homers in 21 games.

“I think he feels better,” Cora said. “It’s a shame because he was swinging the bat well. He made some adjustments and was feeling a lot better with the shoulder, but this happened. Hopefully the next few days he’ll start with soft toss and hitting off the tee and start his progression, and by the end of the week the goal is for him to be OK.” ...

Cora said Jhoulys Chacin, who the Red Sox signed during the weekend, will start in one-inning stints out of the bullpen.

“He hasn’t pitched in a while,” Cora said. “You can’t do simulated games at this time to stretch him out so we’ll use it matchup-wise for now and see how he feels and we’ll go from there.” ...

Chris Sale, who was getting treatment at home in Florida, was planning on flying to Boston on Tuesday night, Cora said. ... In Sale’s absence, the Red Sox will continue to pitch a bullpen game on his spot in the rotation. “It’s a good way to manage,” Cora said. “I like it.”

So Alex Cora’s saying the Red Sox have a chance

Tom Keegan

You might already have heard this one, but just in case: How many optimists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? None. An optimist finds light in the darkness.

Or in the case of Red Sox fans who still believe, they look at the American League standings and see a well-lit path to the playoffs.

They rip their hearts out, place them on a cutting board, hand a mallet to the Red Sox pitching staff and scream, “Hit me with your best stuff one more time.”

The ranks of believers have thinned, as illustrated by pockets of empty seats in the upper deck, but they’re still out there, begging to be teased by their favorite baseball team one more time.

After dropping Tuesday night’s opener of a seven-game homestand to the Twins, 6-5, the Red Sox stood 6½ games behind the Rays for the first wild card, 5½ behind the Indians for the second, and five games behind the A’s (pending completion of their late game vs. the Angels). You don’t have to be a pessimist to consider those really ugly numbers for a team with 24 games left.

But the optimist knows the value of clinging to the law of averages when that fits the agenda, and that sure bodes well for the Red Sox.

The Red Sox dropped to 34-35 at Fenway Park, which makes no sense, so they’re due to get really, really hot at home. Not only that, the entire seven-game homestand is played against division leaders, which is more good news for the Red Sox, based on the law of averages. The Sox have gone 23-38 (.377) against clubs with winning records, so the law of averages says they’re due to go on a tear, right?

After the Twins, leaders of the AL Central, leave town, the Yankees, runaway leaders of the AL East, move into the Fenway Park visiting clubhouse for four games.

The law of averages is like a faucet. You can shut it off whenever you feel like it.

More good news: After the Twins and Yankees leave town, 14 of the 18 remaining games come against teams with losing records, and the Red Sox have dominated losers to the tune of a .662 winning percentage.

After this homestand, the only four games against a winner are in Tampa. The Sox play .580 ball (40-29) on the road. The Sox sweep the Rays and things get pretty interesting, especially for the Indians and A's.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora has grown weary of sounding an optimistic voice, but he gave it one more try in the hours leading up to the opening of the homestand.

"We have an 8 percent chance, so I mean like 'Dumb and Dumber,' you know, the movie, there's still a chance I guess, at least in my eyes," Cora said.

More like 2.4 chances in a hundred, according to baseball-reference.com. Either way, the numbers are telling you there's a chance.

"So you can control two things: The way you play and the Rays because we play four games (against them)," Cora said. "You don't control the Indians. You don't control the A's. That's out of the equation. Although we started controlling the Indians when we beat them two out of three (to finish 3-3 against them). That's all we can do, just keep playing good baseball, win games, make that series (vs. the Rays) count in September, and hopefully by that time we already passed one of the other two teams (Indians/A's). And if that happens, then the last week in September, it's going to be fun. We go to Texas. We play Baltimore and do it."

He stopped himself and started back up.

"But it's easy to say," Cora said. "I can give you a lot of reasons that we can do this, but obviously over the course of this season I've been trying to give you guys reasons to believe in us and it hasn't happened on the field, so we've just got to take care of today."

Making the Rays series (Sept. 20-23) count has to start by winning the remaining six games of the seven-game homestand. Even at that, things will have to fall right with the Rays and either the Indians or A's for even Jim Carrey to believe the Red Sox have a chance.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Twins 6, Red Sox 5: Minnesota rides early thunder against Rick Porcello to victory

Bill Koch

Tuesday was the sort of night the Red Sox simply can't afford.

Boston spurned a chance to gain ground in the American League wildcard race, and there are precious few of them left with September already here. Another poor start from Rick Porcello had the Red Sox chasing from behind all night, an uphill race they couldn't win.

The potential tying run was stranded or came to the plate in each of the final three innings. The result each time was the same for the Red Sox — frustration. Boston suffered a stinging 6-5 setback against the Twins, a team that appears poised to salt away an A.L. Central division title.

The Rays could only split a home doubleheader with the dreadful Orioles, suffering a 4-2 loss in the afternoon. The Indians fell at home to the White Sox at night, 6-5. Both clubs finished Tuesday with 59 losses, but they remained five games ahead of the Red Sox in that decisive column.

“We need to win every game right now,” Porcello said. “That’s the part that hurts the most — going out there and giving it up like that.”

Minnesota used six pitchers to protect what eventually became a 6-0 lead in the top of the fifth inning. Boston did nearly all of its scoring in the bottom of fifth on an RBI groundout by Brock Holt and a three-run homer to deep right by Rafael Devers. Andrew Benintendi’s solo shot to the Monster Seats in the eighth left the Red Sox one run shy.

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“We’ve been doing that for a while now — just giving the offense a chance to come back,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “It’s hard to do it that way the whole time. It is very hard.”

Devers popped to shallow left to end the seventh and Christian Vazquez struck out swinging to close the eighth. Boston left a combined three men on base in those two frames and stranded one more in the ninth. Holt’s soft single to left and a sacrifice by Gorkys Hernandez went for naught when Mookie Betts grounded to the pitcher and Devers struck out swinging.

“We’ll take our chances with Mookie and Raffy with a man in scoring position,” Cora said. “It just didn’t happen.”

Each of Minnesota’s first three runs came with two men out. Miguel Sano’s broken-bat single to left field in the top of the first plated Max Kepler from second base, making it 1-0. Porcello had Kepler in an 0-and-2 hole leading off the game before hitting him with a soft curveball.

Somewhat louder contact accounted for the next two Twins runs. Jake Cave sent a towering fly to center that carried off the top of the wall above the Bleacher Bar. It was a two-run triple by the time Betts could play the carom, and Minnesota had a 3-0 lead.

Porcello met his end in the fifth, failing to retire a batter. Nelson Cruz hammered a leadoff homer to the bleachers in center, upping the lead to 4-0. Luis Arraez singled and Sano followed with another round-tripper, this one a 452-foot bomb to the camera well in deep center to make it 6-0.

“The biggest thing is pretty obvious — those balls that are getting hit are in the middle of the plate,” Porcello said. “They don’t have any action on them.”

It marked the fifth time in his last 11 starts where Porcello had surrendered multiple home runs. The right-hander faced Minnesota on June 17 in the midst of a stretch in which he allowed just two home runs over six starts. Boston’s 2-0 victory included seven innings from Porcello, who allowed just four hits and fanned eight.

Absent Chris Sale, Red Sox pitchers to go bullpening every fifth day

Bill Koch

The Red Sox count just two scheduled off days prior to their Sept. 29 regular season finale with the Orioles.

Boston’s makeshift starting rotation remains absent left-hander Chris Sale (left elbow), who was recently transferred to the 60-day disabled list. He’s effectively done for the season, and the Red Sox will opt to go bullpening every fifth day when his spot comes up.

“Most likely, yes,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “It’s a good way to manage. I like it.”

The expanded rosters this month offered Boston an influx of fresh arms. Ryan Weber, Hector Velazquez and Travis Lakins were all recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket. Jhoulys Chacin was signed as a free agent after being released by the Brewers midway through August.

“We need the starters to help us out and give us six innings,” Cora said. “Quality starts, we’ll take that – when our starters are part of the equation. After that, we’ll see how it goes.”

Rick Porcello, Eduardo Rodriguez and Nathan Eovaldi were scheduled to start over the three-game series against the Twins. David Price managed just two innings and 45 pitches in his Sunday return against the Angels – he could require some backup for at least his next couple outings. Boston has yet to name its pitchers for the four-game series against the Yankees that opens on Friday night and wraps into Monday.

Red Sox prospect Bobby Dalbec working out with Boston ahead of Team USA duty

Bill Koch

Though not officially a September call-up of the Red Sox, Bobby Dalbec was still on the field for pregame drills Tuesday at Fenway Park.

One of the organization’s top prospects is working out with Boston in advance of November’s WBSC Premier12 tournament in Mexico. Dalbec will attempt to help Team USA qualify for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, squaring off against the Netherlands, Mexico and the Dominican Republic in pool play.

“I know that’s far from here, but there are a few things we want to do with him as far as his approach and defensively before he takes off,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “He’ll be around with us and it’s good for him to just be here before he goes to his offseason program.”

Dalbec will stay with the Red Sox and then report to Fort Myers before moving on to join his American teammates. The 24-year-old enjoyed a second consecutive strong season in the minor leagues, earning team Most Valuable Player honors at Double-A Portland and playing 30 games at Triple-A Pawtucket. Dalbec cracked a combined 27 home runs and 19 doubles while totaling an .816 OPS in 135 games.

“It’s a good way for him to be around and get ready for that tournament,” Cora said. “That tournament could be very short, but at the same time it can be long. We want him to clean up a few things so he can get better.”

Dalbec primarily profiles as a corner infielder. Rafael Devers is an American League MVP candidate at third base and has Dalbec blocked there. The platoon of Mitch Moreland and either Sam Travis or Christian Vazquez will take most of the at-bats at first base while J.D. Martinez serves as the designated hitter most nights.

“That’s the way it is,” Cora said. “This is a guy who obviously is very important to the organization, and we’re very excited about the strides that he made.”

Boston added position players Gorkys Hernandez and Juan Centeno when rosters expanded on Sept. 1. The Red Sox also await the return of infielder Michael Chavis, who experienced soreness in his side while rehabbing a left shoulder injury with the PawSox. Boston hopes to have Chavis back to baseball activity by later this week.

Rocco Baldelli returns to Fenway Park with powerful Twins

Bill Koch

Rocco Baldelli played more career games at Tropicana Field than any other ballpark, but there is still only one place he truly calls home.

It’s more of a small detail that the former multi-sport superstar at Bishop Hendricken spent just one season as a player with the Red Sox in 2009. Fenway Park is where Baldelli searches for extra tickets and sets aside additional time to fulfill both personal and media obligations. This storied venue within an hour of

both Baldelli childhood homes – Woonsocket and Cumberland – is hosting him in a different capacity this week.

The potential favorite for the American League Manager of the Year award guided his Twins into town for a three-game series with Boston beginning on Tuesday night. Minnesota sat 5½ games ahead of Cleveland in the A.L. Central race and boasts a historic offense that is rewriting the baseball record books.

“The first 12 years of my life were in Woonsocket,” Baldelli said. “Then when I was in high school we lived in Cumberland – my family still lives in Cumberland.

“But really, it’s the same to me. When I go home, I’m going home.”

The Twins carried 85 wins into their 7:05 p.m. scheduled first pitch with the Red Sox, matching or exceeding the total they posted in every season since 2010. It’s been a strong debut for Baldelli, who steadily climbed the coaching ladder with the Rays beginning in 2011. His eight years of experience in various roles made the 38-year-old a popular candidate to take over his own club following the 2018 season.

“It wasn’t something when I was playing where I was trying to think about the game that way,” Baldelli said. “I tried to think about a lot of different things, but it wasn’t necessarily pointed in the direction of trying to manage.”

Baldelli had the luxury of playing for a certain trio of World Series winners along the way – Lou Piniella, Terry Francona and Joe Maddon. Piniella is certainly the most fiery of that group, while Francona and Maddon are more modern prototypes in terms of temperament and communication. Baldelli’s lone year with Francona in Boston included 62 games and an appearance in the A.L. Division Series.

“They’re good with people,” Baldelli said. “I think that’s probably one of the best things you can say about them. They have the respect of everyone. You definitely pick out certain things and you see certain situations.”

Minnesota smashed 269 home runs through its first 137 games, surpassing the all-time record of 267 set just last year by the Yankees. The Twins are also on a 91-game streak with an extra-base hit, which sat second in club history. Eleven different Minnesota players have totaled double-digit homers, topped by 36 from Max Kepler and 34 from Nelson Cruz.

“There are many moments in the dugout over the course of games where we kind of look at each other and raise our eyebrows and go, ‘Wow, what we’re watching here has been pretty special,’” Baldelli said. “We have no reason to believe it’s going to stop now.”

Baldelli fielded more than 40 ticket requests to fill over the course of three nights, including a pair for parents Dan and Michelle. Much like during his playing career, there are still frequent postgame messages awaiting Baldelli sent by his immediate family. Their evaluation of his performance has changed from what they saw on the field to the decisions he’s making from the dugout.

“It’s not my mom – it’s my dad, mostly,” Baldelli said wryly. “All you guys that know him know that he’s probably got a few words of advice for me sometimes.

“This is a new job for me this year. It’s been a new experience. There have been a lot of great things that have happened and it’s been a lot of fun.”

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox aren’t making the playoffs, but Alex Cora maintaining pennant race atmosphere is valuable anyway

Matt Vautour

The Red Sox aren't going to the playoffs. Too many stars would have to align just right for it to happen and if the first 138 games have proven anything, it's that fate hasn't aligned in Boston's favor much in 2019.

It's not even worth the mathematical explanation of how really good the Red Sox would have to be and how uncharacteristically lousy two of the Rays, A's and Indians would have to be for Boston to miraculously slip into the playoffs.

It's not happening. On Sunday football will resume in Massachusetts and this Boston baseball season will fade to the finish quietly in its shadow.

Alex Cora acknowledged the long odds before Tuesday's 6-5 loss to the Twins, mentioning the 8 percent chance Fan Graph's computers give the Red Sox of playin in October. But he was adamant in the postgame that his team is still in contention. Cora talking about a pennant race and managing like he's in one is neither quixotic nor futile. This can be a valuable month for the future of the Red Sox if he and the players keep approaching the games like they're important.

The journey is beneficial even if the finish line is out of reach.

Most of these players have never really been in a pennant race before. There was no race last year. The Red Sox got out so fast and so successfully, it was obvious in June, maybe even May, that they were playing postseason baseball. Even when the Yankees were in striking distance, the Red Sox were clearly going to be in the playoffs.

There was obviously pressure in the playoffs. More pressure and more intense pressure and they handled it brilliantly. But it's different pressure. Winning a seven-game series and winning effectively through September aren't the same.

Plus some of the guys in key roles now weren't even here a year ago.

Brandon Workman has never been the closer on a playoff team. Josh Taylor and Darwinzon Hernandez have never pitched key innings in night in and night out during a September with little room for error. Both have proven they can now.

Eduardo Rodriguez has never been asked to be a frontline starter with the season on the line. Even Rafael Devers who thrived in the October spotlight last year wasn't being counted on the way he is now. Their continued success sets them up well for a future when reaching the playoffs isn't such a long shot.

If the Red Sox are two games up or two games down on Sept. 3 next year, those moments aren't going to feel foreign to them.

After winning the World Series last year, missing the playoffs is a step back for this franchise, but some of the younger players can someday look back on 2019 as valuable training.

Boston Red Sox starter ERA inflates to 5.03; 'I'm frustrated, embarrassed,' Rick Porcello says after another poor outing

Christopher Smith

Nelson Cruz homered on an 80.6 mph slider from Rick Porcello. Miguel Sano then crushed a 90.3 mph fastball over the center field wall minutes later as the Twins jumped ahead 6-0 in the fifth inning.

Another day, another terrible performance by a Red Sox starting pitcher.

Catcher Christian Vazquez called different pitches.

"I shook off to get to those and I didn't execute them," Porcello said. "Not only does it result in a hit but it resulted in home runs.

"It's entirely on me," Porcello added. "I don't know what else to say besides I'm frustrated, embarrassed. That's it. I'm working hard and putting everything into it. But effort level doesn't get you wins in the big leagues. It's executing pitches."

The Red Sox lost 6-5 to the Twins here at Fenway Park on Tuesday.

"I sucked. That's the bottomline," Porcello said. "Six runs in four innings, not going to get it done. We need to win every game right now. And that's the part that hurts the most: is going out and giving it up like that."

Boston dropped to 23-38 against teams with winning records compared to 51-26 vs. teams under .500. The Sox are 10-18 at Fenway Park against winning teams and 6-14 at home against AL playoff teams.

Poor starting pitching is the reason the Red Sox will fail to make the postseason one year after posting a franchise-record 108 victories and beating the Dodgers in the World Series.

The 2019 Red Sox starter ERA is 5.03 (392 earned runs, 701 2/3 innings).

The 2018 Red Sox starter ERA was 3.77 (365 earned runs, 871 1/3 innings).

That's the difference.

The Red Sox bullpen has received as much blame, maybe even more. But poor starting pitching has caused the bullpen to face a heavy workload. Red Sox relievers have tossed 548 2/3 innings.

That's only 38 2/3 fewer innings than the 2018 bullpen threw but it in 24 fewer games.

"Hats off to our bullpen," Porcello said. "What they've been doing not only the last couple of weeks but the entire year, it's really difficult. And they've been absolutely incredible. I'm a big reason, putting them into tough spots. I just want to say hats off to them because it's been outstanding what they've been doing, picking up innings. The only guy that's pitched deep into games is Eddie (Rodriguez). Other than that, they've been coming in the second, third (innings)."

Boston Red Sox drop to 23-38 vs. winning teams as they lose to Twins, continue to see their playoff odds decrease

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox's brutal play against elite teams continued Tuesday.

The Red Sox lost 6-5 to the AL Central-leading Twins here at Fenway Park.

Boston dropped to 23-38 against teams with winning records compared to 51-26 vs. teams under .500. The Sox are 10-18 at Fenway Park against winning teams and 6-14 at home against AL playoff teams.

The Red Sox's playoff odds (Fangraphs.com calculation) dropped from 8.5% to 6.7% on Monday. It fell to 5.1% after Tuesday's loss.

Rick Porcello pitched 7 scoreless innings at Minnesota on June 17. But his start Tuesday against the Twins was one to forget. He allowed six runs, all earned, on eight hits (two homers) and two walks in 4 innings as his ERA inflated to 5.63.

Nelson Cruz and Miguel Sano both homered against Porcello during the top of the fifth to give the Twins a 6-0 lead.

Devers cut the deficit to 6-4 in the bottom of the fifth. His three-run homer was part of a four-run inning. The third baseman's blast traveled 426 feet to right field and had a 104.3 mph exit velocity, per Statcast.

Brock Holt led off the bottom of the ninth inning with an opposite field single to left field.

Gorkys Hernandez, who pinch hit for Jackie Bradley Jr., bunted Holt to second base.

Mookie Betts grounded back to closer Taylor Rogers and Rafael Devers struck out swinging to end the game.

Red Sox's records vs. opponents over .500:

Arizona 1-2, Cleveland 3-3, Houston 2-4, Dodgers 1-2, Minnesota 2-2, New York 4-11, Oakland 4-3, Philadelphia 0-2, Tampa Bay 6-9

Total 23-38

Red Sox's records vs. opponents under .500

Baltimore 11-5, Chicago 5-2, Colorado 3-1, Detroit 5-2, Royals 5-1, Angels 4-3, San Diego 2-1, Seattle 4-3, Texas 2-2, Toronto 10-6

Total: 51-26

Boston Red Sox will likely use openers for the rest of the season in fifth spot: 'It's a good way to manage,' Alex Cora says

Chris Cotillo

Lefty Josh Taylor became the first opener ever used by the Red Sox when he started Saturday's game in Anaheim, but he surely won't be the last this season.

Boston plans on filling Chris Sale's vacant rotation spot with bullpen games for the rest of the season, manager Alex Cora said Tuesday. Those games will likely be started by a high-leverage reliever for an inning or two instead of swingmen like Brian Johnson, Hector Velazquez and Josh Smith.

"It's a good way to manage," Cora said. "I like it."

Boston next has an open rotation spot Saturday afternoon against the Yankees and will need to fill the hole twice before their next off day on Aug. 13. The Sox could conceivably need an opener at least four times in the season's final 25 games.

Taylor, fellow lefty Darwinson Hernandez and righties Matt Barnes, Andrew Cashner, Marcus Walden, Ryan Brasier and Jhoulys Chacin are candidates to serve as openers for the Sox. Chacin, who was signed over the weekend after being released by the Brewers, is viewed primarily as a reliever.

"We'll use him, mixing and matching," Cora said. "In the beginning, probably one-inning stints and then we'll see where it takes us. This guy, as of now, hasn't pitched in a while (since July 24). We can't do simulated games at this time to stretch him out. We'll use him, matchup-wise, to stretch him out. We'll see how he feels and go from there."

The Sox added four pitchers-- Chacin, Velazquez, Travis Lakins and Ryan Weber-- when rosters expanded Sunday. Lakins, Weber and Velazquez can give the Sox innings in the middle of the games along with long relievers like Smith and Johnson.

“We added a few guys, obviously,” Cora said. “We should be fine. Just we need the starters to help us out and give us six innings. Quality start, we’ll take that when our starters are out of the equation. Then after that, we’ll see how it goes. Obviously, we’re not going to go to the high-leverage guys all the time. We have some capable guys we can maximize. We can maximize breaking balls, or changeups, or sinkers.”

The Sox have just two starters at full strength (Eduardo Rodriguez and Rick Porcello) while Nathan Eovaldi and David Price build back up after stints on the injured list. Sale is out for the season with elbow inflammation after receiving a plasma-rich platelet (PRP) injection in mid-August.

With the rotation running on fumes, the Sox will need a ton of quality innings from their bullpen. Having 17 pitchers on the roster this month will help.

“For how a lot of people hate September baseball, right now, we’ll take advantage of it, obviously,” Cora said. “That’s the way you have to manage it.”

Boston Red Sox’s Andrew Cashner: Relieving ‘was already on my radar for next year’ as MLB free agency approaches

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox demoted Andrew Cashner to the bullpen Aug. 12 and it might end up being the very best thing for his career with MLB free agency approaching.

Cashner, who’s in the final year of a two-year, \$16-million contract, struggled as a starter after Boston acquired him from the Orioles on July 13. He posted an 8.01 ERA and .339 batting average against in six starts.

In six outings as a reliever though, Cashner has allowed just one run in 10 innings (0.90 ERA). He has given up four hits, four walks and he has struck out nine.

Cashner said he will be open to both starter and reliever opportunities this winter as he pursues a new contract.

The righty said he “100 percent” thought about the potential of being a reliever in 2020 even before the trade and move to the bullpen this year.

“Before I came to the bullpen here it was already on my radar for next year,” Cashner told MassLive.com at Fenway Park on Tuesday. “So it’s not like it was anything crazy. It was something that I’ve talked about just because the longevity (as a reliever) is longer if you want to continue to pitch.”

Several teams potentially could be interested in Cashner as a reliever in MLB free agency this coming winter if he continues to pitch well here in September. Maybe even the Red Sox will have interest.

“It’s not something that I found here,” Cashner said. “I’ve been a reliever before. It’s still pitching. It’s not like it’s rocket science.”

Cashner made 92 relief appearances and 32 starts in his first four major league seasons (2010-13). He made only one relief outing while starting 133 games from 2014-18. His first 23 outings this year came as a starter.

“For me, I’m not going to start if the price isn’t right,” Cashner said. “So if the price is best as a reliever, then I’ll be a reliever. Yeah, it’s all the workload. If you’re going to have a high workload and not get paid very much, then I’d rather be a reliever.”

Michael Chavis injury: Boston Red Sox rookie feeling better, could return from IL soon; ‘We’re trying to shoot for the weekend’

Christopher Smith

Red Sox rookie Michael Chavis could return from the injured list as early as this coming weekend.

Boston initially placed the first baseman/second baseman on the 10-day injured list Aug. 12 because of an AC joint sprain in his left shoulder.

Chavis then felt soreness in his right side while rehabbing at Triple-A Pawtucket. He was scratched from the second game of a doubleheader Saturday after homering twice in the first game that day.

“We’re trying to shoot for the weekend,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “I think he feels better. I talked to (head trainer) Brad (Pearson) a little bit. It’s a shame because he was swinging the bat well. He made some adjustments and he was feeling a lot better with his shoulder. But this happened. But hopefully the next few days he’ll start hitting soft toss and hitting off the Tee. Start his progression. By the end of the week, the goal is for him to be OK.”

The 24-year-old is batting .254 with a .322 on-base percentage, .444 slugging percentage, .766 OPS, 18 homers, 10 doubles, one triple and 58 RBIs in 95 games for Boston this year. He has started 43 games at first base, 40 games at second base and two games at third base.

Alex Cora on Boston Red Sox playoff odds: ‘Like Dumb & Dumber, there’s still a chance’

Chris Cotillo

With the Red Sox sitting 5 ½ games out of a wild-card spot with 25 games to play, manager Alex Cora offered a frank assessment of his team’s chances Tuesday afternoon.

The Sox have a 6.8% chance of making the playoffs, according to FanGraphs, down from 8.5% on Sunday night. Cora’s estimate was closer to Sunday’s estimate.

“We have an 8% chance. So, like ‘Dumb & Dumber,’ there’s still a chance, I guess,” Cora said. “At least in my eyes.”

(Cora’s reference, of course, was to the famous “So you’re telling me there’s a chance” quote from Jim Carrey’s character in the 1994 movie).

Boston took two of three from the Angels over the weekend to close their west-coast trip with a 6-2 record. Though the Sox were off Monday, they lost a half-game to both the Rays and the Indians when both of those teams won.

The Sox entered Tuesday 5 ½ games behind Cleveland for the second wild-card spot and six games behind the Rays for the top spot. The Athletics, who are currently out of the picture, are 4 ½ games ahead of Boston.

Boston will face the Rays in a four-game series from Sept. 20-23.

“You control two things: The way you play and the Rays, because we play four games,” Cora said. “You don’t control the Indians and you don’t control the A’s. Although we started controlling the Indians when

we beat them two of three. That's all we can do. Just keep playing baseball, winning games and make that series count in September. Hopefully, by that time we've already passed one of the other two teams."

Boston needs to get hot and get plenty of help from around the league for any chance at playing in October. They'll look to keep rolling during a seven-game homestand against the Twins and Yankees, beginning Tuesday night.

"I can map it out and I can give you a lot of reasons that we can do this," he said. "But obviously over the course of this season, I've tried to give you guys reasons to believe in us and it hasn't happened on the field. We've just got to take care of today."

Hurricane Dorian: Alex Cora praying for Bahamas with memories of Hurricane Maria on his mind

Matt Vautour

Alex Cora has a game to manage and what he hopes is a pennant race to navigate, but as he walked into his pregame press conference, the Red Sox manager's first thoughts weren't on baseball.

"First things first, our thoughts and prayers are with people in the Bahamas," Cora said.

Cora had been vocal in garnering support for Puerto Rico when the U.S. Territory was ravaged by Hurricane Maria in 2017. Watching the news footage of Hurricane Dorian's destruction in the Bahamas looked too familiar.

"I thought two years ago was unreal what I saw when I went back home, but this is (pause), this is tough to watch," Cora said. "Obviously with time, people are going to help these people out, but you keep praying. Hopefully it's not going to be as bad as it looks. It looks real bad."

According to an Associated Press story Tuesday afternoon:

"Red Cross spokesman Matthew Cochrane said more than 13,000 houses, or about 45% of the homes in Grand Bahama and Abaco, were believed to have been severely damaged or destroyed. U.N. officials said more than 60,000 people on the hard-hit islands will need food, and the Red Cross said some 62,000 will need clean drinking water."

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

Five Takes: Red Sox simply haven't been good enough at Fenway Park

Chris Mason

Asked about his team's mediocrity at home this season, Alex Cora tried to boil it down to one thing in particular.

"Keeping the ball in the ballpark has been a problem," Cora said Tuesday afternoon. "I'm not saying 100%, but most likely that's the reason. We haven't been able to keep the ball in the ballpark."

That's exactly what felled the Red Sox again, as the two home runs Rick Porcello allowed proved to be the difference in a 6-5 loss to the Twins.

Here are five takes from the first September evening at Fenway Park:

1. No home cooking

The Red Sox are the only winning team in baseball with a losing record in home games. With last night's defeat, they dropped to 34-35 as hosts.

"This (core) group has played at here for what, three years, four years?" Cora asked. "It's the same group, so I don't know about pressure. I really don't know."

There are plenty of reasons the Sox still sit 5.5 games out of a Wild Card spot — hello, starting pitching — but their anemic record at Fenway Park shouldn't be overlooked.

2. Rick gets rocked

September air tried to give Rick Porcello an early mulligan.

Twins outfielder Jake Cave tattooed a pitch in the first inning that would have been three-run homer in August, but with the ball carrying less, it died on the warning track as a harmless fly out.

That exhalation was short-lived though, as in Cave's his next at-bat he smoked an RBI triple off the center field wall.

Porcello's wheels really came off in the fifth, as he gave up homers to Nelson Cruz and Miguel Sano and left to a smattering of boos after allowing six earned runs in four-plus innings.

3. Devers goes deep

Another day, another home run for Rafael Devers.

The 22-year-old third baseman gave the Red Sox life in the fifth inning, pulling a slider around Pesky's Pole for a three-run homer. The pitch was in off the plate, but somehow Devers was still able to slap the ball fair, a testament to how good his hands are already.

4. Nasty inning for Darwinzon

Tasked with the seventh, Darwinzon Hernandez's stuff was absolutely filthy.

The lefty threw his hardest pitch as a big leaguer — a 99.1 mph fastball that froze C.J. Cron — and struck out the side, leaving more than one Twin shaking his head in the process.

Red Sox fans should be very, very excited about this 22-year-old's ceiling, too.

5. Waldy hits a milestone

Every season there seems to be a bullpen arm that comes out of nowhere to turn in a strong season.

It's certainly been late-blooming Marcus Walden in 2019.

After an odyssey to the majors, Walden finally put a full big league season together at 30 years old. The journeyman made his 60th appearance of the year for the Sox, tossing a scoreless sixth inning, something he's done quite often.

Facing long October odds, Alex Cora is no dummy

Chris Mason

The calendar flipping to September always holds a special significance for Alex Cora.

Though the Red Sox manager is an admitted scoreboard watcher all season long — anyone who says they don't 'is a liar — September 1 is the first day he'll look at the standings with a critical eye.

That's something Robin Ventura taught Cora when the two were Dodgers in 2004 and it's never left him. When September begins, look at the standings and realize you need to make up X games to climb into a playoff spot, or win X to fend opponents off.

This September, Cora's Xs are ugly.

The Red Sox entered last night 5.5 games out of a Wild Card spot, needing to leapfrog two teams to get into the postseason. Trailing the Yankees by 15 in the division, repeating as AL East champions has long been off the table.

So on Tuesday afternoon, Cora was a realist.

"Well, I mean, we have an eight percent chance," Cora said. "Like 'Dumb and Dumber,' the movie, there's still a chance!"

Cora's numbers were actually a bit outdated according to the statisticians at FanGraphs.com. Though they had an 8 percent shot on Sunday night, both the Indians and Rays won on Monday, dipping their chances to 6.8.

The Jim Carrey reference was the telling part of the quote though.

The funniest movie ever filmed (in the opinion of one sportswriter), "Dumb and Dumber" tells the story of two goofballs trying to return a suitcase filled with thousands of dollars to a beautiful woman, Mary Swanson, who they both claim to be in love with. If you haven't seen it and like laughing even a little bit, set your DVR after finishing this column.

And though Cora is always optimistic, the quote isn't as positive as it reads out of context.

Here's how the scene plays out:

Lloyd Christmas: "What are the chances of a guy like you and a girl like me ending up together? (No, that's not a typo). What are my chances?"

Mary Swanson: "Not good."

Lloyd Christmas: "You mean not good like one out of a hundred?"

Mary Swanson: "I'd say more like one out of a million."

Lloyd Christmas: "So... you're telling me there's a chance?"

The computers say the Red Sox playoff chances still aren't quite that long, but October baseball feels about as likely as Lloyd sweeping Mary off her feet.

Though they finished their off-day laden West Coast trip 6-2, it could have easily been 7-1, or even 8-0, and the Sox would be in legitimate striking distance.

Now they're left hoping things break their way.

"You control two things," Cora said. "The way you play and the Rays, because we play them four games. You don't control the Indians, you don't control the A's. That's out of the equation."

"Just keep playing good baseball, win games, and make that series (at Tampa Bay) count in September. Hopefully by that time we're already passed one of the other two teams, and if that happens, the last week in September, it's going to be fun. We go to Texas, we play Baltimore and do it.

"It's easy to say it," Cora concluded. "I can map it out and I can give you a lot of reasons that we can do this, but obviously over a course of this season, I've been trying to give you guys reason to believe in us and it hasn't happened on the field."

Spoiler: Mary and Lloyd don't end up together, (though Lloyd does ask her what all that one in a million talk was about earlier).

The Red Sox may very well miss the playoffs a year after winning a World Series, but honest in finally acknowledging his team's long odds, Cora has proven that he's no dummy.

*** *RedSox.com***

Porcello yields in 5th: 'Hats off to our bullpen'

Ian Browne

For the past three weeks, Red Sox manager Alex Cora has been straddling a fine line, with considerable success. When there are early signs of trouble, Cora has been going aggressively to his bullpen, managing like it is the playoffs.

The reason Cora was able to do this? A favorable schedule that saw his team have six days off in a span of 19 days.

Then came this week, with seven straight home games against the Twins and Yankees.

In a nutshell, that's why Cora tried to squeeze an extra out or two from Rick Porcello on Tuesday night in a 6-5 loss to the Twins. It backfired, but Cora didn't feel he was left with much of a choice.

Nelson Cruz started the fifth by smashing a homer to center field. Luis Arraez followed with a single to right-center. Last week, Porcello would have been out of the game right then and there. This time, he stayed in, and Miguel Sano hit a mammoth two-run homer to center that pinned the Sox in a 6-0 hole.

"It's very tough, because we know where we're going this week and how many off days we don't have," said Cora. "We pushed those guys very hard on the road trip. We were actually one hit away from going to [Josh Taylor]. You've got to trust Rick against Sano and Cruz. We've got to get outs. It just didn't happen."

The fact that the Red Sox nearly came back and won the game -- they had the tying run on second and the winning run at the plate in the ninth -- almost made it more torturous for Porcello, who has a 5.63 ERA this season.

"Yeah, I sucked," said Porcello. "That's the bottom line. Six runs in four innings -- not going to get it done. We need to win every game right now, and that's the part that hurts the most ... going out and giving it up like that."

After Porcello exited, the relievers did what they've generally done of late and turned in a marvelous performance. Taylor, Brian Johnson, Marcus Walden, Darwinzon Hernandez, Andrew Cashner and Brandon Workman combined on five hitless and scoreless innings. Boston's relievers, maligned for the first half of the season, have a 3.33 ERA since July 24, the best in the American League.

As upset as Porcello was by his own performance, he wanted to make sure the work of his relievers isn't going unnoticed.

“I have to say, hats off to our bullpen,” Porcello said. “What they’ve been doing, not only the last couple of weeks, but the entire year, it’s really difficult and they’ve been absolutely incredible. And I’m a big reason, putting them into tough spots.

With 24 games left in the season, the Sox are hanging by a thread in their quest to make the postseason, trailing the Indians by 5 1/2 games for the second American League Wild Card spot. The Rays, who split a doubleheader vs. Baltimore on Tuesday, are in possession of the top Wild Card berth and lead Boston by 6 1/2 games (but five in the loss column).

You can only wonder how different things would be if the Sox could get more innings from their starting rotation, which was supposed to be the team’s strength going into the season but has instead been the biggest weakness.

Ace Chris Sale had an inconsistent season that is now over because of an ailing left elbow. David Price will spend the final weeks of the season building his pitch count back up in the middle of a pennant race as he returns from a left wrist injury that had him out for a month. Nathan Eovaldi is also building back up after surgery – and then a three-week stint as a reliever.

Porcello is healthy and fully stretched out but hasn’t been effective enough to pitch deep into games. Eduardo Rodriguez has been strong and starts Wednesday in the second game of the series vs. Minnesota. But the 16-game winner can’t do it by himself. The fifth spot has turned into a bullpen day.

The Red Sox are walking a tightrope that could collapse if things don’t change soon -- as in immediately -- with the rotation.

“I ran into a number the other day, I think runners in scoring position, the OPS is if not the worst, it’s one of the worst in the big leagues against our starters,” Cora said. “Keeping the ball in the ballpark, limiting traffic, that’s the most important thing to avoiding the big inning that’s been going on from the get-go.”

The offense, thunderous by the overall numbers, has had a hard time coming all the way back to win close games. Rafael Devers provided hope in the bottom of the fifth with a three-run jack down the line in right. Andrew Benintendi provided more hope when he lofted one over the Monster to make it a 6-5 game in the eighth. But the ever-dangerous Devers struck out to end the game.

The Sox slipped to 3-51 in games they trail after six innings. They are 34-33 at Fenway Park and 23-38 in games against teams that are above .500.

How do the defending World Series champs view these final 24 games?

“Yeah, same as we’ve been looking at them,” Porcello said. “Keep pressing and keep going hard. That’s it. That’s all you can do.”

Cora mulls playoff odds as key homestand starts

Ian Browne

Entering action on Tuesday, FanGraphs gave the Red Sox a 6.8 percent chance of making the playoffs. Boston manager Alex Cora didn’t say where he came up with his calculations, but he weighed in at a slightly higher percentage.

No matter what the calculator says or what your formula is, urgency was in the air as the Red Sox started a seven-game homestand in which they will play two of the top teams in MLB -- the Twins and Yankees.

This isn’t the last homestand for the Red Sox. But it could very much be their last stand if they want to punch their ticket to October and have a chance at defending their title.

“Well, I mean, we have an 8 percent chance,” said Cora. “Like ‘Dumb and Dumber,’ the movie, there’s still a chance, I guess, at least in my eyes.”

Cora then expanded to explain how he sees it.

“So you control two things. The way you play and the Rays, because we play them four games,” said Cora. “You don’t control the Indians; you don’t control the A’s. That’s out of the equation. Although we started controlling the Indians when we beat them two out of three [last month].

“That’s all we can do. Just keep playing good baseball, win games and make that series count in September. And, hopefully, by that time, we’re already past one of the other two teams, and if that happens, the last week in September, it’s going to be fun.”

The four-game series against the Rays will be played at Tropicana Field from Sept. 20-23. After Tuesday's games, Tampa Bay has the American League Wild Card lead and is ahead of the Sox by five games in the loss column.

“It’s easy to say it,” Cora said. “I can map it out, and I can give you a lot of reasons that we can do this. But, obviously, over the course of this season, I’ve been trying to give you guys reason to believe in us and it hasn’t happened on the field. We just have to take care of today.”

To overcome the odds, the Red Sox need to immediately start doing two things they’ve struggled with all season: Play dominant baseball at Fenway Park (they are 34-33 this season) and beat teams above .500 (they are 23-38 this season).

Dalbec at Fenway, but not on roster

Corner infielder Bobby Dalbec, ranked as Boston’s No. 2 prospect on MLB Pipeline, will spend the next few weeks with the Red Sox, but he was not added to the roster.

Why is he with the team?

“He’s going to be part of the Team USA that is going to the Premier 12, so we’re going to keep him working out with us and doing anything to be part of the program,” said Cora. “I know that’s far from here, but [there are] a few things we want to do with him as far as his approach and defensively and all that before he takes off. So he’ll be around with us. It’s good for him to just be here before he just goes on his offseason program.”

Dalbec could become part of Boston’s equation at first base next season. Mitch Moreland and Steve Pearce are both eligible for free agency. Third base, Dalbec’s top position, has been taken over by Rafael Devers.

“This is a guy that’s obviously very important to the organization,” said Cora. “We’re very excited with the strides that he made. I do feel like the higher the level, the better it is for him, because he can control the strike zone. So, you saw what happened in Triple-A. We were very happy with that.”

In 105 games for Double-A Portland, Dalbec had a line of .234/.371/.454 with 20 homers and 57 RBIs. In 30 games for Triple-A Pawtucket, Dalbec slashed .257/.301/.478 with seven homers and 16 RBIs.

Chavis could return vs. Yankees

The return of rookie infielder Michael Chavis from a sprained AC joint in his left shoulder was prolonged when the slugger suffered an injury to his right side in a Minor League rehab assignment a few days ago. The latest is that Chavis could be back on Boston’s roster by the four-game series against the Yankees that starts on Friday night.

In particular, the Sox have missed Chavis against left-handed pitching.

“We’re trying to shoot for the weekend. I think he feels better,” said Cora. “Talked to [trainer] Brad [Pearson] a little bit. It’s a shame, because he was swinging the bat well. He made some adjustments and was feeling a lot better with the shoulder, but this happened. Hopefully, the next few days, he’ll start with soft toss and hitting off the tee and start his progression. And by the end of the week, the goal is for him to be OK.”

Would the Red Sox consider adding Dalbec to the roster if Chavis has another setback?

“We haven’t talked about that,” said Cora.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Red Sox miss golden opportunity to make up wild-card ground with season slipping away

John Tomase

Well, that was a killer.

The scoreboard loomed large as the Red Sox fell in a 6-0 hole vs. the Twins and then slowly crawled towards the light on Tuesday night.

The Rays had already dropped the opening game of a doubleheader to the lowly Orioles, drawing the Red Sox within five games of Tampa Bay in the wild-card race, and the nightcap was a one-run game. The Indians, meanwhile, were struggling with the White Sox, locked in a 2-2 tie in the seventh.

By the time Andrew Benintendi blasted a solo homer to bring the Red Sox within a run at 6-5 in the eighth, the Indians had swung from a 5-2 lead to a 6-4 loss, the Rays were closing out a 2-0 win, and the A's trailed the Angels on an early Mike Trout homer.

The stars were aligning for the Red Sox to make up ground on every wild-card contender, if they could just figure out the Twins in the ninth. When Brock Holt led off with a single, the 20,000 or so fans remaining at Fenway Park came alive.

Pinch-runner Marco Hernandez advanced to second on a sacrifice, but neither Mookie Betts (sharp comebacker) or Rafael Devers (strikeout) could advance him.

When the 6-5 loss was over, it felt like it had taken the Red Sox season right along with it. Manager Alex Cora pulled levers and mashed buttons like he was directing a frantic Game 7, but all his machinations ended up doing was burning through his three best relievers with nothing to show for it except a demoralizing defeat. And now two more against the Central-leading Twins and then four vs. the mighty Yankees loom.

"It's very tough, because we know where we're going this week and how many off days we don't have," a deflated Cora acknowledged. "We pushed those guys very hard on the road trip."

Instead of being 4.5 games behind the Indians, the Red Sox still trail by 5.5, and they're running out of season to do anything about it. Only 24 games remain, with three teams blocking their path to October. A team that hasn't been able to beat good clubs all season once again fell to one of the haves after feasting on some have-nots out West. Why should we have expected them to change their stripes now?

"Keep pressing and keep going hard," said starter and loser Rick Porcello. "That's it. That's all you can do."

Porcello played a featured role in the Sox losing ground, allowing a pair of mammoth homers to Nelson Cruz and Miguel Sano in a three-run fifth when the Twins opened that 6-0 lead.

"Yeah, I sucked," Porcello said. "That's the bottom line. Six runs in four innings, not going to get it done. We need to win every game right now and that's the part that hurts the most is going out and giving it up like that.

"Same old story," he added. "Misfiring on pitches, Christian [Vazquez] to Cruz and Sano, he called different pitches and I shook off to get to those and I didn't execute them. Not only does it result in a hit but it resulted in home runs. It's entirely on me. I don't know what to say besides I'm frustrated, embarrassed, that's it...It's been tough all year. That's it. No excuses other than I've been terrible."

Even down 4-0, Cora had left-hander Josh Taylor warming. He summoned Taylor in a 6-0 game after Sano practically knocked down the back wall of the stadium with a homer, and if that seemed like a panic move, it's officially panic time.

Taylor has been a find this season, and he was followed by left-hander Brian Johnson, righty Marcus Walden, lefty Darwinzon Hernandez, righty Andrew Cashner, and finally closer Brandon Workman, who struck out the side in the ninth to keep the score at 6-5. Hernandez also struck out the side in his frame, the seventh, with a series of electrifying fastballs.

Cora would love these guys to carry him to the finish, but the starters must contribute more than three innings a night, and outside of Eduardo Rodriguez, they appear incapable of doing so.

So, what you get are nights like Tuesday, when the scoreboard practically begs you to complete the comeback and tighten the race, but instead, it just ends up taunting you with what might've been.

Red Sox hope Chris Sale is Justin Verlander, but what if he's Tim Lincecum?

John Tomase

In 2014, Tigers ace Justin Verlander underwent abdominal surgery to address a lingering core muscle issue. He returned in time for Opening Day, but posted the second-worst ERA of his career. Shoulder and triceps injuries took a bite out of his production, limiting him to 20 starts in 2015. Many wondered if he could transition from power pitcher to whatever came next without entering a permanent decline.

By that same season, a two-time Cy Young Award winner just four months younger than Verlander already had his answer, and it was a resounding no. Tim Lincecum burned bright, burned fast, and then burned out. After winning consecutive Cy Young Awards with the Giants despite a violent delivery considered a ticking time bomb, Lincecum's fall came swiftly. At age 28 in 2012, he led the NL in losses. By 2016, his career was effectively over after he posted a 9.00 ERA with the Angels.

Just days after Verlander's third career no-hitter put him in elite, Hall of Fame company, why are we comparing him to a contemporary who hasn't thrown a pitch in three years?

Because Verlander and Lincecum, respectively, feel like Chris Sale's best- and worst-case scenarios.

With Verlander favored finally to win his second Cy Young Award at age 36 after three second-place finishes, there's no question that 2014-15 represents a blip in his career and not a major point of inflection.

We can only hope we're saying the same about Sale at this time next season, though there are reasons to worry.

Since returning to full strength in 2016, Verlander is 64-31 with a 2.88 ERA in 130 starts. The 6-foot-5, 225-pounder is your classic right-handed horse. He's on pace to make at least 30 starts for the 13th time in his 14 full seasons, and at 17-5 with a 2.56 ERA and 257 strikeouts, he'll win his second pitching Triple

Crown if he can catch teammate Gerrit Cole in K's (266). He may not be as historically dominant as Sale, but he has proven more durable.

It also turns out that reports of Verlander's power-pitching demise were greatly exaggerated, because he's still throwing gas. Three of his five hardest fastballs came in the final at-bat of Sunday's no-hitter, when he was still throwing 97 mph at pitch No. 120.

From a velocity standpoint, Sale experienced a clear drop in 2019, averaging 93.8 mph on his fastball, down from 95.6 last year. He was all over the place, though, barely breaking 92 in April, and then maxing out at 98 in June, July, and August, per Brooks Baseball.

A case can be made that Sale pitched a lot better than his 6-11, 4.40 numbers suggest. He still averaged over 13 strikeouts per nine innings, and his career-worst home run rate of 1.5 per nine innings could simply be the product of some fluky fly balls that didn't stay in the park. A 3.40 FIP suggests he may have outpitched his defense, too.

But chalking up Sale's 2019 to bad luck also means willfully ignoring some red flags. His average exit velocity jumped more than three mph to 88.1, and his hard-hit percentage soared from an elite 26.8 percent to a more pedestrian 36.3 percent, which is basically the same as teammate Rick Porcello (36.4). Despite all the strikeouts, Sale struggled to find put-away pitches in key at-bats, especially with runners on base. The old Sale could blow away hitters with his fastball or slider. The 2019 Sale didn't consistently command the former or shape the latter. It was never clear on any given day which one he'd have or if it would be both.

That brings us to Lincecum. If Verlander represents the physical ideal of a No. 1 starter, Sale and Lincecum are two extremes. The former stands only an inch taller than Verlander, but it feels more like a foot because he's so wiry. He's lucky to pack even 180 pounds onto that 6-foot-6 frame.

Lincecum hails from the Tom Gordon/Marcus Stroman school of big things in little packages. Generously listed at 5-11, 170, he generated power with a delivery that no one would teach, rocking back like Sidd Finch, tilting his head towards first base, and then firing to the plate with one of the longest strides in the game.

He fell to 10th in the 2006 draft despite overwhelming numbers at the University of Washington because his delivery scared teams that he wouldn't hold up over the long haul. He proved them wrong for five brilliant seasons, winning Cy Young Awards in 2008 and 2009 and a World Series in 2010. He contributed to two more World Series in relief (2012, 2014) before undergoing hip surgery in 2015 that officially robbed him of the fastball that had once hit 99 mph. He did not crack 92 mph in his final two seasons.

It's hard to imagine Sale experiencing a similarly precipitous drop, except scouts have used Lincecum-like language — "unorthodox," "awkward," "high stress" — to describe Sale's delivery for years. He pitches with the dreaded "inverted W," which is often a harbinger of Tommy John surgery, though that finding has been disputed.

What's indisputable is that injuries have curtailed each of Sale's last two seasons, be it the shoulder that basically limited him to one effective start after July 27 last year, or the elbow that shut him down last month and forced a visit to Dr. James Andrews.

While manager Alex Cora noted that Sale has been playing catch, he is still scheduled to be re-evaluated at the end of the month. If he needs elbow surgery, he will not only miss next season, he'll take one giant stride closer to the Lincecum end of the spectrum than the Verlander one.

It turns out only one of those pitchers was built to last. With a five-year, \$145 million extension kicking in next season, the Red Sox can only hope that Sale is, too.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox still can't find home remedies

Sean McAdam

Fresh off a successful road trip, the Red Sox ran back into an ugly reality Tuesday: their season-long inability to win at home.

Alone among the American League playoff contenders (and pretenders), the Red Sox can't seem to take care of business in their own ballpark. The Yankees, Rays, Twins, Indians, Astros and A's are all well-above .500 at home, with the Yankees and Astros already having won better than 50 games with nearly four weeks still to go in the regular season.

The Red Sox? Their 6-5 loss to the Minnesota Twins Tuesday dropped them to 34-35 for the season at Fenway.

Hours before the game, Alex Cora was asked to explain why it was his team had struggled so much at home. Cora paused, as if this was the first time this season that he had given the matter any thought, which is surely not the case.

Eventually, he suggested that perhaps the problem lies with the team's inability to "keep the ball in the ballpark" at home.

That sounded reasonable enough. After all, Fenway is an inviting hitting environment and it sure has felt that teams have taken some liberties as visiting teams.

But, nope, a check of the stats revealed that, before Tuesday's loss, the Red Sox had actually given up considerably more homers on the road (101) than they had at home (79). A breakdown of OPS and slugging percentage and OPS revealed the same patterns: Despite a winning record on the road (40-29), hitters have fared poorer at Fenway than in their own ballparks against the Red Sox pitching staff.

Perhaps, it's simpler than all that. Maybe it's nothing more complicated than this: the Red Sox can't seem to beat good teams at home.

Sure, they beat up losing teams like the Padres, Rockies and Angels on the road. And before that, they even took two-of-three in Cleveland. They've swept the Rays in Tampa once already.

But at home, it's another story. They were a woeful 1-8 against the Rays in Boston. In fact, the only two winning teams against whom the Sox have winning records this season are the A's (3-0) and, improbably, the Yankees (3-1).

With the passage of time, however, that one series against the Yankees over the summer looks more and more like an aberration. The Sox' bats got hot at the precise time when the New York rotation hit a rough patch, and next thing you know, the Sox were rocketing balls all over — and out of — Fenway, scoring 38 runs in the first three games.

But other than that? The Sox have wilted against quality opponents at home, losing series to Houston, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

They're 10-18 against winning teams at home. Against teams currently in the playoff picture, they're 7-16. And against A.L. teams that would be in the playoffs if the season were to end now, they're 6-14.

On their recent road trip, the Sox had the benefit of two factors to aid them: lesser opponents and two days off during the trip. That meant that Cora could go the whip with his bullpen, knowing that a break in the schedule was in sight.

But both advantages are gone now. The Red Sox have only two more off-days the rest of the way, with the next one not coming until Sept. 13. And, tellingly, on this homestand at least, the competition is a lot better.

The Twins are trying to hold off the Indians for the AL Central title and aren't yet eliminated from securing home field in the Division Series, so they've got plenty of motivation. After the Twins come the Yankees, who own the best record in the game, intent on securing home field all the way through the ALCS and into the World Series.

A year ago, en route to a franchise-record 108 wins, the Red Sox were a force on the road and at home. They not only won 57 games at home, but they also won 51 on the road, the most in the game. In October, the Sox lost fewer games on the road than at home and actually clinched all three of their postseason series on the road.

This year, the Sox have a favorable schedule at the end. Their last two home series are against teams out of contention (Giants, Orioles). And they have winnable road series in Texas and Toronto.

But the next six games could do them in. Home field is no advantage at all when you've demonstrated all year long that you can't beat quality teams at home, and six more games against the Twins and Yankees are unlikely to change that pattern.

BSJ Game Report: Twins 6, Red Sox 5 – Sox fall behind early and can't catch up

Sean McAdam

Comeback effort stalls: Give the Red Sox credit: trailing 6-0 by the fifth inning, they didn't pack it in. In fact, they answered with four runs in the bottom of the sixth — three on a homer by Rafael Devers — to get right back into it. In the eighth inning, a solo homer by Andrew Benintendi pulled them to within a run. And there were chances, too. In the ninth, a leadoff single by Brock Holt and a bunt from pinch-hitter Gorkys Hernandez put the potential tying run in scoring position with just one out. But Mookie Betts was retired on a comebacker and Devers fanned to end the game. "We'll take our chances with Mookie and Raffy and a man in scoring position," said Alex Cora. "It just didn't happen." A six-run head start — no matter how strong your lineup — is a few runs too many.

Porcello digs a ditch: Rick Porcello had shown some encouraging signs in his previous three starts, compiling a 3.38 ERA. But he gave up a run in the first, two more in the third and couldn't get an out in the fifth inning, allowing three more. "He struggled with command," said Cora. "It was a struggle. He wasn't at his best." The problem, as it's been often with Porcello this year, was his inability to locate pitches where he wanted them within the strike zone. "Same old story — misfiring pitches," acknowledged Porcello, who admitted he shook off catcher Christian Vazquez, only to have his choice of pitches hit hard and loud for extra-base hits. "I don't know what else to say," Porcello said. "I'm frustrated, embarrassed." At a time when they can't afford to lose any ground at all, the Red Sox have exactly one reliable starting pitcher in their rotation: Eduardo Rodriguez.

Bullpen does its best: Other than a blown lead Saturday night in Anaheim, the bullpen has been remarkable of late and that continued Tuesday night. The Sox had to begin a parade of relievers starting in the fifth inning and six different pitchers combined to give the Sox five shutout innings, buying time for the Sox offense to claw its way back into the game. Over the last four innings, in fact, the Sox bullpen faced 13 hitters and retired 12, including eight by strikeout. The only baserunner came via a walk. Beginning July 24, the Red Sox bullpen has a combined ERA of 3.33. But as effective as it was, the early explosion against Porcello proved too much for the Sox to overcome.

TURNING POINT

Perhaps the warning signs were there early for the Red Sox when, in the second inning, they got a leadoff double from Andrew Benintendi, but couldn't plate him in three subsequent tries. The Sox would be held scoreless until the fifth inning.

ONE UP

Darwinzon Hernandez: The power lefty overwhelmed the Twins, striking out the side on 12 pitches, giving him his sixth straight scoreless appearance.

ONE DOWN

Mookie Betts: Betts was 0-for-4 and stranded three baserunners in his five plate appearances.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“I sucked. That’s the bottom line. Six runs in four innings isn’t going to get it done.” — Porcello.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

With his next homer, Devers can become the second third baseman in franchise history to reach 30 homers in a season. Butch Hobson is the other.

The Sox have homered in 33 of their last 35 games.

Devers now has 107 RBI, the most for any player before turning 23 since Ryan Zimmerman had 109 in 2006.

Over his last 32 home games, Andrew Benintendi has 24 RBI.

UP NEXT

The Red Sox and Twins play the middle game of their series at 7:10 Wednesday with LHP Eduardo Rodriguez (16-5, 3.97) vs. RHP Jose Berrios (11-7, 3.57)

*** *The Athletic***

After ugly season, what should Rick Porcello expect in free agency?

Jen McCaffrey

Rick Porcello entered Tuesday in one of the best stretches of his second half. Over his three previous starts, he’d pitched at least five innings and allowed no more than three earned runs an outing.

But his torturous season re-engaged when he exited with no outs in the fifth inning after allowing six runs on eight hits in a 6-5 loss to the Minnesota Twins.

In 28 starts this season, Porcello has a career-high 5.63 ERA and 1.44 WHIP, second-highest of his career. Opponents are hitting .281 against him.

“It’s entirely on me,” he said. “I don’t know what to say besides I’m frustrated, embarrassed. That’s it.”

The right-hander, who turns 31 in December, hits free agency for the first time this winter. It’s hard to gauge what sort of market he might find since his sagging performance this season may cloud his achievements of past years.

After a December 2014 trade from Detroit to Boston, Porcello signed a four-year, \$82.5 million deal with the Red Sox at the start of the 2015 season.

Earlier this year, Porcello expressed his desire to remain in Boston and that he'd even take less money to re-sign with the club, but the team's inaction spoke volumes. Instead, president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski worked extensions for impending free agents Xander Bogaerts and Chris Sale.

After a rough season on the mound, perhaps due in part to the uncertainty of free agency, the likelihood of Porcello returning seems even more remote. Despite his strong presence in the clubhouse as one of the more veteran players on the roster, Porcello's tough season hasn't helped his case. Meanwhile, the uncertainties surrounding the health and durability of Sale and Nathan Eovaldi mean the Red Sox can't afford another question mark in the rotation.

What does that mean for Porcello? Finding comparisons for the righty as he enters free agency isn't easy. The 2016 Cy Young Award and 2018 World Series title will offer some leverage, but his overall numbers and most recent performances generally create a starting point for negotiations.

Last winter, Drew Pomeranz signed a one-year, \$1.5 million deal with the San Francisco Giants after spending 2018 in Boston, where he had a 6.08 ERA over 26 games with 11 starts. Pomeranz, who's one month younger than Porcello but has three fewer years of service time, had a 5.68 ERA over 21 games with 17 starts for the Giants before a July trade to Milwaukee. In 12 games, including one start, Pomeranz has a 2.63 ERA for the Brewers.

It's certainly not an exact match by any means, but Porcello might have to settle for a one-year deal with little money compared to his current \$21 million salary in an attempt to reset his value.

Gio Gonzalez, 33, signed a minor-league deal with the Yankees in March after a season in which he had a 4.21 ERA over 32 starts for the Nationals and Brewers. Gonzalez was released by the Yankees and signed with the Brewers on a one-year, \$2 million deal. In Milwaukee, he's had a 4.14 ERA over 14 starts.

Then there's Marco Estrada, who had a 5.64 ERA in 28 starts for the Blue Jays last season. Estrada, 36, managed a one-year, \$4 million deal with the Athletics but made only five big-league starts early in the year, managing a 6.85 ERA before hitting the injured list. He pitched a handful of starts in the minors and was released last month.

There's not a perfect comparison, but Porcello's track record and health over his career will likely garner interest from teams in need of depth. However, a slew of top-tier starters such as Gerrit Cole, Cole Hamels, Rich Hill, Dallas Keuchel, Jake Odorizzi, Tanner Roark and Zack Wheeler, among others, are also hitting free agency this winter, meaning it might be a tight market for Porcello.

*** *The Minneapolis Star Tribune***

Twins hang on to beat Boston 6-5 in series opener at Fenway Park

Phil Miller

Taylor Rogers surrendered a home run to a lefthanded hitter Tuesday, which was extraordinary. Then he faced down two of the AL's best hitters with the tying run on second base to save a Twins victory. Which was decidedly ordinary.

Thanks to Rogers and large cross-section of the bullpen, the Twins' first day of a 12-game stretch against teams with winning records couldn't have gone any better. They battered a pesky old foe, crushed a couple more tape-measure homers and fattened their AL Central lead to 6½ games by holding off the Red Sox 6-5 at Fenway Park.

The Twins' magic number for clinching their first division title since 2010 stands at 18. Rogers is hoping he's standing on the mound when it reaches zero.

“I want to be that guy for this team — to face the hitters in crunch time,” Rogers said after converting his 23rd save of the season. “And I feel I can do the job for them.”

Still, his tenacity was jolted when the second pitch he threw, with Boston outfielder Andrew Benintendi at the plate and the Twins nursing a two-run lead, wound up in the Green Monster seats. It was the first home run Rogers had given up to a lefthanded batter since the Dodgers’ Cody Bellinger connected on July 24, 2017.

Rogers did a small hop on the mound as Benintendi blasted the pitch, a sure sign he didn’t see that coming. But don’t worry: His confidence wasn’t damaged.

“I’m not sure anybody is better in baseball than me against lefties,” Rogers said. “That’s a bold statement, but I’m pretty sure it might hold true.”

That’s why manager Rocco Baldelli turned to Rogers as the Twins’ early 6-0 lead, built on a series of blasts of increasing magnitude — Jake Cave’s two-run triple off the center-field wall, Nelson Cruz’s 420-foot homer over it, and Miguel Sano’s missile over the wall beyond it — appeared to be slipping away. The Boston lineup is one of the more lefthanded in baseball, with five lefties in the lineup Tuesday.

“If he makes the pitches he wants to make, he’s very tough,” Baldelli said. “He’s tough no matter what kind of hitter is up there.”

Baldelli claims his faith didn’t waver after another lefthanded hitter, second baseman Brock Holt, led off the ninth with a ground ball that rolled through the infield. Boston sacrificed him to second, bringing up Mookie Betts and Rafael Devers, the reigning AL MVP and this year’s Red Sox MVP, with the tying run in scoring position.

Rogers didn’t blink. He got ahead of Betts with a fastball, then fed him nothing but sliders until Betts hammered a one-hopper that glanced off Rogers’ glove. The pitcher calmly grabbed it and threw him out. “I was a cat out there,” Rogers joked.

Then the lefthanded-hitting Devers, whose three-run homer in the fifth inning off Trevor May pulled the Red Sox within 6-4: Curveball for a called strike. Slider, swing and a miss. And another slider, a foul tip into Jason Castro’s glove, and just like that, it was over.

“That’s the kind of stuff he has. It doesn’t really matter who he’s facing, [even] two of the best hitters in baseball,” Baldelli said. “He’s one of the best relievers in the game for a reason.”

It was a satisfying victory for the Twins, particularly since they beat Rick Porcello, whose eight wins at Target Field, including seven shutout innings there in June, are the most by any visiting pitcher. The 2016 Cy Young winner looked ragged and frazzled, allowing all three of the Twins’ big blasts, his night finishing with Sano’s shot that may have broken the sound barrier.

“I’ve seen a lot of games here,” Baldelli said, “[and] I’ve never seen a ball go up there in my life.”

*** *Associated Press***

Cruz, Sanó homer for Twins in 6-5 win at Boston

The Minnesota Twins are slugging their way toward an AL Central title, adding two more homers and another big victory Tuesday night.

Nelson Cruz and Miguel Sano connected in the fifth inning to pad Minnesota's record home run total and the Twins beat the Boston Red Sox 6-5 Tuesday night.

Jake Cave added a two-run triple for the Twins, who won for the ninth time in 10 games and hold a 6 1/2 game lead in the AL Central with 24 games remaining. Minnesota extended its major league record to 271 homers with nearly four weeks left in the regular season.

"We're a really good group," said Cruz, who hit his 35th homer of the season. "The pitching is there. The offense is definitely there. We score a lot of runs. It seems like every game we score enough to win games."

Cruz's assessment could have described the 2018 World Series champion Red Sox, whose postseason hopes are dwindling. This year it's the Twins who are riding a combination of power, clutch hitting and solid pitching toward the postseason.

"It was a great effort all the way around. There was a lot of good to point to," Minnesota manager Rocco Baldelli said.

Rafael Devers and Andrew Benintendi homered for the Red Sox, who struggled against a parade of relievers and couldn't rally all the way back after falling behind 6-0.

Six Twins pitchers combined on a six-hitter, with only four hits allowed before Benintendi's two-out homer in the eighth off Taylor Rogers.

Rogers returned for the ninth and got his 23rd save, striking out Devers for the final out with the tying run at second.

Lewis Thorpe (2-1) got the win despite allowing three runs and two hits in 3 1/3 innings following opener Randy Dobnak.

"They pitched well and they put us in position to win. We talked about this being a different kind of environment and a challenging place to come in. It's just a different feel," Baldelli said. "They came in and executed, did a great job, and you know both of them, you can't compliment them enough."

Boston's Rick Porcello (12-11) struggled from the start, allowing one run in the first and two more in the third on Cave's triple to center.

"Six runs in four innings is not going to get it done," said Porcello, who was pulled after facing three batters in the fifth without recording an out. "We need to win every game right now and that's the part that hurts."

WAY OUT

Cruz belted homer No. 270 for the Twins with a leadoff shot to center in the fifth, pushing Minnesota's lead to 4-0. Cruz has hit 35 homers in six straight seasons and has 395 in his career.

"He's always got that power," Porcello said. "You can throw a bunch of pitches to him and think he's off-balance, and he's either sitting on something or you make a mistake and he's ready for it. And when he connects it's not a single."

Porcello's night ended two batters later when Sano went deep with a man on to put the Twins up 6-0. Sano's shot was his 27th.

Porcello allowed six runs and eight hits, walked two and hit a batter. He also struck out five over four-plus innings.

The Red Sox struck out 12 times and went 1 for 9 with runners in scoring position.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Twins: C Mitch Garver was out of the lineup a day after a pitch deflected off his glove and struck him in the jaw, causing him to leave a win at Detroit in the fourth inning. ... Minnesota bolstered its bullpen by recalling RHPs Ryne Harper, Trevor Hildenberger and Fernando Romero from Triple-A Rochester.

UP NEXT

Twins: RHP Jose Berrios (11-7, 3.57 ERA) faces the Red Sox for the first time since striking out 10 and holding Boston to five hits over eight innings in a 2-0 loss on June 17.

Red Sox: LHP Eduardo Rodriguez (16-5, 3.97) has won his last three starts and leads Boston in victories.