

The Boston Red Sox Thursday, September 5, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

A standing O, and another big W, for Eduardo Rodriguez

Julian McWilliams

Eduardo Rodriguez submitted his most impressive inning of his season in the top of the first of the Red Sox' Wednesday night's matchup against the Minnesota Twins at Fenway Park.

Rodriguez faced the Twins' first three batters — Max Kepler, Jorge Polanco, and Nelson Cruz — and started Kepler off with a fastball in for a ball, but came back with the same pitch which Kepler fouled off.

Rodriguez went to his fastball two more times in the Kepler at-bat before breaking off a filthy 88-mile-per-hour changeup with late movement that fooled Kepler and sent him down swinging.

Rodriguez quickly worked the count 0-2 to Polanco on a cutter and fastball that Polanco fouled off. He couldn't get Polanco to chase a high and outside fastball, but on the following pitch, almost in the exact same spot at the exact same speed, Polanco swung right through it.

Cruz was his easiest victim. After a cutter for a called strike, Cruz chased a changeup in the dirt. Rodriguez followed with back-to-back fastballs, the latter he buried in on the hands of Cruz for a called strike three.

“That’s something that I’ve been working on the whole season,” Rodriguez said afterward. “Go out there in the first inning and get three outs. That’s what I think is one of the hardest innings for a starter.”

Rodriguez' fastball came in at an effortless 95 miles per hour. His changeup, despite the high velocity, had hitters out in front. Rodriguez' full arsenal helped set the tone in what was a 6-2 Sox victory to remain 5½ games behind the Rays in the AL wild-card race

The Sox starters haven't gone deep into games. But that hasn't been the case for Rodriguez, who completed seven innings Wednesday. You would have to go back to his April 29 start against the Oakland Athletics to find an outing that Rodriguez didn't complete a fifth inning.

“It’s part of the progress,” manager Alex Cora said. “We knew stuff-wise he was up there with the other guys. I do feel — fair or not — I was really hard on him during spring training, letting him know that this is what we need from him.”

Rodriguez' career-high 17th win of the season was co-authored by Mookie Betts, who went 4 for 5 with a pair of home runs in his first two plate appearances and drove in five of the Red Sox' six runs.

Betts hit a solo shot off Twins starter Jose Berrios in the bottom of the first inning on the first pitch he saw. He then followed up with a three-run blast in the third off another first-pitch offering from Berrios.

It was the first game Betts ever homered twice on the first two pitches he saw in a game.

“I just know he’s a good pitcher,” Betts said. “If you start falling behind him he’ll put you away quick.”

It was the third game of his career where he hit a first-pitch homer in the first inning, the last coming in 2018 against the Los Angeles Angels. It was also the third multi-homer game of the season for Betts and 16th of his career, which ranked as the second-most by a Red Sox player before turning 27.

Christian Vazquez accounted for the only other RBI when he doubled to left, scoring Brock Holt to give the Red Sox a 5-0 lead.

In the seventh, Rodriguez struck out Polanco again, registering his eighth strikeout of the night.

“I just want to go out there and pitch,” said Rodriguez. “And give the team a chance to win the game. That’s all that matters to me. It’s more important to give the team a chance to make it to the postseason.”

He departed the game to a standing ovation from an appreciative Fenway Park crowd. Ryan Brasier took over for Rodriguez in the top of the eighth inning and gave up a two-run homer to Eddie Rosario.

Cora wanted to stay away from Josh Taylor, but with one out in the frame, Cora summoned Taylor from the bullpen. He induced a Jake Cave groundout. C.J. Cron then singled off Taylor, but he struck out Jonathan Schoop to end the top half of the eighth.

Darwinzon Hernandez struck out Willians Astudillo to start the ninth, but ran into trouble, walking Mitch Garver and Luis Arraez. Cora was forced to go to Brandon Workman against Cruz and Workman got a double-play ball to secure the win.

Red Sox summon all available arms in September call-up

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox are utilizing every available arm on their expanded roster in September in an attempt to salvage their season.

Prior to the Red Sox’ 6-2 win against the Minnesota Twins Wednesday, the team recalled lefthanded pitcher Bobby Poyner and righthanded pitchers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley, and Mike Shawaryn from Triple A Pawtucket. That puts the Sox’ roster at 36, with 21 pitchers.

“We’re going winter-ball style,” said manager Alex Cora. “The games, instead of four hours, are going to be five hours.”

The four pitchers weren’t supposed to be a part of the September call-up to the big leagues, but circumstances warranted their inclusion in the Sox’ roster expansion after Rick Porcello lasted just four innings, allowing six runs, in Tuesday night’s 6-5 loss to the Twins.

“Our starters are not giving us enough,” Cora said. “We need matchups. We need arms. We’re going to try to maximize Brewer’s cutter, Shawaryn’s slider and Bobby’s fastball up. We’re trying to look for outs.”

Essentially, the Red Sox will use a myriad of arms to mask the deficit in starting pitching.

Cora indicated Tuesday the team would use more of a bullpen method in September, but adding more depth to the staff — specifically four pitchers who weren’t initially a part of the fold — indicated the lengths to which the team was willing to go in making the aggressive move.

Cora said he received a call from president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski Wednesday morning, asking for his input.

“He was kind of like, ‘What do you think?’ said Cora, recalling his conversation with Dombrowski. “And I was like, ‘You know where I’m at.’ Lucky I work for an organization that we’re not going to tap-out. We’re not going to wave the white flag.”

Injuries have played a role in the Sox’ struggles this season, but so has flat-out underperformance, particularly when it matters most with runners in scoring position.

Entering Wednesday night's game, the Sox starters had a 16.02 ERA with runners in scoring position, second-worst in baseball. Starters allowed a .302 opponents batting average — again, second-worst in the league — with a .533 slugging percentage. That's the worst in baseball.

That has had its trickle-down effect, of course, on the bullpen. Excluding last Saturday's bullpen game against the Los Angeles Angels, the last three Sox starters have accounted for just 10 innings, entering Wednesday.

Dating back to the start of the Angels series through Tuesday evening's contest against the Twins, Sox relievers accumulated 30 innings. Matt Barnes worked three straight days against the Angels and was warming up in Tuesday's game. It would have been his fourth appearance in five games.

A hopeful run at a wild-card spot is one component of the Sox' decision to employ even more arms. Yet, there's another element to it, too.

"It's a lot easier," Cora said. "You don't have to push certain guys all the time. There's a few guys here that have shown they are big leaguers and are a big part of our future. Although we're staying in the present and trying to win today, at the same time you have to take care of them."

When asked if Porcello will remain a part of the rotation, Cora said, "As of now, yeah."

Cashner bullish

Andrew Cashner is part of the reason the Sox' rotation hasn't been good. But he looks as if he's found something in the bullpen since being taken out the rotation in mid-August. As of Wednesday, he held a 0.82 ERA in 11 innings pitched in relief. Opponents were hitting just .114 against him. Most notably, in last Friday's 15-inning game vs. the Angels, Cashner turned in four scoreless innings, helping the bullpen hold a 3.38 ERA since Aug. 1 (second-best in the majors in that span).

"I think one of the biggest things is communication," Cashner said of his bullpen success. "I think a lot of that is just being honest on how you feel. It's one of those things they could stay around you on days you don't feel good. When you do feel good, you're ready for it. It's been fun being down there. I think we've become a really close group."

Despite the success of the bullpen and more teams employing a bullpen method, Cashner said he doesn't see baseball's latest trend as something that's sustainable.

"I think teams are now seeing how important it is to have starters," Cashner said. You look at the Rays and I think what they've done is really outstanding in this game. But I don't think it's sustainable over years. Especially once those guys get more expensive and start to log innings."

Rooting for Rocco

Twins manager Rocco Baldelli, a native of Woonsocket, R.I., had a group of about 40 friends and family at the game, a trip organized by his father, Dan.

"It's really nice. Not coming here very often any more is a little different," said Baldelli, who played for the Rays and Red Sox before joining the Rays as an instructor and coach. "It's always nice to feel the support from the people that have been there, basically, your entire life supporting you."

Boston College senior outfielder Dante Baldelli, Rocco's brother, was among those at the game.

Chavis update

Michael Chavis was back in the Red Sox clubhouse and took some swings, Cora said. The team hopes to get him back in the mix this weekend for their series against the New York Yankees . . . Mitch Moreland

will join Red Sox staffers at the Greater Boston Food Bank on Thursday to sort donated items as part of MLB's "Home Plate Project" for childhood hunger prevention . . . The Yankees flew into Boston after their game on Wednesday night and will have a day off in the city as the Sox play the Twins on Thursday night. The Yankees and Sox start a four-game series on Friday night. Domingo German, J.A. Happ, Masahiro Tanaka and James Paxton are scheduled to pitch for the Yankees. The Red Sox have not yet announced their rotation.

Expanded bullpen could make for endless games down the stretch

Alex Speier

So this is what it's come to.

The Red Sox spent much of the spring and first half of the season proudly defying the creeping bullpennism of the era. They invested \$90 million in their rotation with an expectation of leaning on their starters for 18 outs — or more — on many nights and their relievers for just nine.

Wednesday marked a landmark of just how spectacularly that plan has flopped. Two days after being told to go home after their seasons with Triple A Pawtucket, four pitchers — lefthander Bobby Poyner and righthanders Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley, and Mike Shawarzyn — were told to turn around and head to Fenway Park.

That about-face came on the heels of a four-game stretch in which Red Sox starters had contributed just 10 innings (not including the one-inning outing by reliever-turned-opener Josh Taylor on Saturday) and the bullpen had been pushed for 32. Against that backdrop, Alex Cora found that the 13 relievers on his 17-man pitching staff were inadequate — a conclusion that became apparent in a 6-5 loss on Tuesday, as the Red Sox manager fretted about the extreme workloads being conferred upon his relievers.

And so, the call to arms was made, and the Red Sox packed their bullpen with 17 relievers on a 21-man pitching staff. A bit of context on the current bullpen crowd: As recently as 1993, the Red Sox used just 16 pitchers all season. The 1994 season (the 94th of the team's existence) marked the first time the team used more than 21 pitchers in a single season.

Now, there are pitchers coming out of every pore of the clubhouse, dugout, and bullpen. And perhaps most disquietingly, they are about to start coming out of every inning, with the Red Sox already committed to one bullpen day in every turn of the rotation, Rick Porcello's place in the rotation getting a "for now" disclaimer from Cora that underscores the notion that a quick hook will be used freely, and two pitchers — Nate Eovaldi and David Price — still rebuilding pitch counts.

Against that backdrop, not only does Cora have 17 relievers, but he plans to use them — early and often. In 2020, MLB will alter the rules governing September roster expansion, requiring teams to go from 26 players from the start of the season through the end of August to 28 in September.

But in this last gasp of the 40-man September roster, the Red Sox will join the increasing number of teams committed to slogging through an endless succession of pitching changes in the season's final month.

There will be nights when the result is painful. Already, the average MLB time of game this year is the longest in history (3 hours, 9 minutes entering Wednesday). The Red Sox have had, far and away, the longest average games in baseball this year at 3 hours and 24 minutes. To no one's delight, those numbers are about to go up.

"We're going Winter Ball style. That's how we're going to do it. The games, instead of four hours, they're going to be five hours," Cora said, half-joking, prior to his team's 6-2 win over the Twins. "Keep the fans away from the . . ."

Cora trailed off, recognizing the potential third rail of admitting that viewers might find some nights unwatchable. But people who are in the game and love it also acknowledge the uncomfortable reality that baseball is sometimes putting its worst product forward precisely when the games are at their most critical.

For teams and managers, it would be negligence not to take advantage of the current roster expansion rules both to try to maximize the potential number of wins and minimize the likelihood of injury.

In recent days, even with the first wave of call-ups on Sunday in Anaheim, Cora worried that he was redlining pitchers. Taylor is tied for the major league lead with 37 appearances since his call-up on June 14; Matt Barnes pitched in all three games in Anaheim and warmed up on Tuesday; Brandon Workman pitched in three of the last four games and warmed up in the only one he did not pitch. The Red Sox had all three getting in work on Tuesday in a game they trailed for all nine innings.

From the other dugout, Twins manager Rocco Baldelli — who was a coach with Tampa Bay in 2018, when the Rays became a trailblazer with their usage of “the opener” — gets what the Red Sox are doing and why. He likewise empathizes with those who worry about the pace of the game, but the primary responsibility of teams lies elsewhere.

“On our end, we have to do what we think is best in order to win a game today and prepare for the near future,” said Baldelli. “There’s every reason in the world to take advantage of the rules the way they’re written and to go about business this way. Are there short moments when you’re out there during the game and the flow of the game might not feel like it’s there? Sure. I don’t think we should look away from that. It might be one of the reasons that the rules are changing going forward, because there are people who believe that and believe there needs to be more fluidity in what’s happening.”

“But for now,” he added, “we have to operate like this. If you’re competing and not doing something along these lines, we think we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn’t operate like this.”

Necessity has pushed the Red Sox to the point where they are taking the same approach, with the potential for some painful games to follow. On Wednesday, thanks to a seven-inning outing from starter Eduardo Rodriguez, the Red Sox needed “just” four relievers for the final two innings, employing Ryan Brasier before turning to mainstays Taylor, Darwinzon Hernandez, and Workman. But there are some days coming when the amazingly crowded bullpen will be thinned or even emptied in potentially historic fashion.

The record for most pitchers used in a game is 13 by the Rockies in 2015; the 2017 Red Sox once deployed 12, tied for an AL record. Certainly, there are now enough arms in the Boston bullpen to challenge that benchmark, for better or more likely worse.

“Obviously it’s not perfect,” said Cora, “but our starters are not giving us enough. We need matchups. We need arms . . . We’re trying to look for outs.”

For that hunt, the team has cast a remarkably wide net — an unforeseen and unwanted last gasp for the ridiculousness of the 40-man roster.

Red Sox call up four more pitchers, giving them 21 on the roster

Julian McWilliams

Prior to the second game of a three-game series against the Minnesota Twins Wednesday, the Red Sox recalled lefthanded pitcher Bobby Poyner and righthanded pitchers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley, and Mike Shawaryn from Triple A Pawtucket.

Manager Alex Cora has said the Red Sox would be creative heading into September, taking advantage of the expanded rosters. Adding those four arms adds depth to what has been an overworked bullpen and underperforming rotation.

Brewer has the most experience with the Sox of the four. He made the Opening Day roster and appeared in 48 games this season, posting a 4.31 ERA in 48 innings of work.

The Sox now have 36 players on their roster, and 21 are pitchers.

* ***The Boston Herald***

Eduardo Rodriguez in contention for 20-win season

Tom Keegan

Saying an athlete has “great potential” starts out as a compliment, but it doesn’t age well and at some point morphs into an insult.

Red Sox left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez entered this season at that crossroads, teetering on the brink of the craved and then dreaded “P” word getting delivered with a sneer and a roll of the eyes.

Until this year, his career followed a path similar to that of this year’s Red Sox: Loaded with talent, unable to translate that into consistent performance. Once he put a lousy September behind him, Rodriguez also left the word “potential” in the past.

A crusty baseball lifer in uniform—man, do I miss talking to those guys—once sneered when I asked him if he liked the potential of a young catcher in the system.

“Potential,” he spat. “You know what that is, don’t you? It’s a French word for ‘ain’t (bleeping) got it yet.’”

Actually, it’s derived from the Latin word for power, fittingly enough in E-Rod’s case. He has arrived and loudly so in his own quiet way this season.

“Fair or not, I was very hard on him in spring training, letting him know this is what we need from him,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “Potential is great, but there are a lot of people who just stay with that and they don’t take the next step. He took a challenge. He made some adjustments, and now he’s doing what he’s doing.”

Rodriguez (17-5, 3.81) already has reached career-high totals in wins, starts (29), innings (172- $\frac{2}{3}$), and strikeouts (168). If his ERA stays where it is or drops, that also will count as a career-best.

Don’t say this out loud for fear of jinxing him, but Rodriguez is in contention to become the organization’s first 20-game winner since Rick Porcello won the Cy Young with a 22-4 record in 2016. Rodriguez figures to have four starts left, his next one scheduled for Monday in the finale of a four-game series against the Yankees, and possibly could squeeze in a fifth with some juggling.

Rodriguez gave the Red Sox seven shutout innings Wednesday night, allowed five hits and four walks and struck out eight. He joined Mookie Betts in propelling the Red Sox to a 6-2 victory on a night that turned beautiful once the rain that delayed the start 47 minutes cleared.

Rodriguez, 26, displayed veteran traits yet again, bearing down when the bases grew crowded, shaking off borderline calls that went the way of the hitter, and bringing a little more sharpness, more heat in clutch situations.

He’s not only the Red Sox best pitcher, he’s their most dependable. He’s such a low risk to put a major strain on the bullpen. He has lasted at least five innings in 23 consecutive starts, the longest such streak of his career, and is 15-3 with a 3.30 ERA during that span.

He's going deeper into games than a year ago, when he didn't have a single outing as long as seven innings. Wednesday's seven-inning gem was his eighth start of the year that lasted at least that long. The Sox are 8-0 in those games and he has 0.96 ERA in them.

In Rodriguez's 13 starts at Fenway Park, the Sox are 12-1, which is another way of saying they are 23-32 in games started by anyone else at Fenway.

Even with an offense that ranks third behind the Twins and Yankees in the American League with 800 runs, the Red Sox would be below .500 without Rodriguez stopping losing streaks.

"His preparation has been a lot better, more consistent, more into it," Cora said.

Rodriguez's easy-going vibe didn't make it any easier for those in the organization to watch him stuck in the "potential" holding pattern, but the lazy look to his body language during a delivery that hides the ball well helps him on the mound.

"It's hard to pick up the ball His 92 looks a lot harder, his 95 does too and then the changeup just plays off the fastball," Cora said. "He's been great at keeping it simple too. There is not too much trying to nibble or tick people. It gets to the point in the game that he's just challenging people with the fastball up and that changeup down in the zone."

Rodriguez, who showed plenty of emotion Wednesday after escaping tight spots, let it be known immediately that this would be another strong night when he struck out the side in the first.

"That's something I've been working on this whole season," he said of getting off to a fast start. "That's the hardest inning for a starting pitcher, first inning. To go out there and get three outs, that was really good."

The crowd sent him back to the dugout with a nice ovation, as was the case after the third out of the seventh, when everyone knew his 113-pitch day was done. He gave the team that's now carrying 21 pitchers 21 outs, which is a pretty big deal these days.

"This whole year (Cora's) been telling me the whole time, 'Go out there and attack hitters, try to get deep in the games, don't get in deep counts,'" Rodriguez said. "It's part of the job as a starting pitcher to go deep in the games."

He's doing his job. Bill Belichick would be proud of him.

Mookie Betts blasts two homers, leads Red Sox to 6-2 win over Twins

Steve Hewitt

Amidst an MVP season in 2018, one of the biggest difference makers for Mookie Betts at the plate was his aggressiveness at the plate.

Alex Cora's arrival as Red Sox manager was met with a new approach for his leadoff hitter. The philosophy was rather simple: Swing more, and don't be afraid to swing early at hittable pitches. It's paid huge dividends for the star right-fielder.

Betts' production has dipped this season, even if his numbers from a year ago were impossible to replicate. But Wednesday night, he provided a reminder of the damage he can do when he stays assertive at the dish.

Betts went 4-for-5 with two home runs and five RBI — all on six total pitches — and Eduardo Rodriguez continued his stellar season with seven shutout innings to fuel the Red Sox to a decisive 6-2 victory over the Twins at Fenway Park.

“You look at his numbers and I think on the first pitch, he’s hitting close to .400 and slugging a lot,” Cora said. “It’s the nature of him. He’s patient. It’s nothing, I’m not against it, but I feel that he can do this from the get-go, set the tempo. It was good to see.”

Betts pushed his average to .377 with seven homers when swinging on the first pitch this season. Against Twins starter Jose Berrios, the plan was to get in front of him. It worked.

After a 47-minute rain delay pushed back the start of the game, Betts put his stamp on the game promptly in the first. Rodriguez struck out the side to start the game, the right-fielder led off the bottom half and wasted no time. Twins starter Jose Berrios threw Betts a fastball middle in, and he promptly jacked it to the second row of the Green Monster seats.

The next time Betts came up, he did it again. With two runners on in the third, Berrios’ first pitch to Betts was a curveball right down the middle, and demolished it, this time clearing the Monster seats and out of the park for a three-run homer, an estimated 438-foot shot for his 25th home run of the season.

Two pitches, two swings, approximately 786 feet of home runs.

“I just know he’s a good pitcher,” Betts said of Berrios. “You start falling behind him, he’ll put you away quick. That’s kind of in general. I just need to be a little more aggressive.”

With the homers, Betts became the first leadoff hitter to hit a home run on each of the first two pitches he saw in a game since Jimmy Rollins did it for the Phillies on Aug. 25, 2009, according to STATS, Inc.

“It feels good but I think the most important thing was us getting on top for Eddie there,” Betts said. “He just cruised and did an amazing job.”

It was more than enough for Rodriguez, who picked up his 17th win of the season and pushed the Red Sox to a 22-5 record in his last 27 starts. The lefty gave up five hits and worked through a few jams — including a bases-loaded situation in the fourth.

The Red Sox added more in the sixth when Christian Vazquez got ahead in the count and roped an RBI double before Betts drove in another run with a single to left.

Getting back into more favorable counts has been a focus, and it showed on Wednesday.

“I think lately we’ve been very patient, we’ve been getting into some bad counts, we’ve been striking out a lot as a unit, and we don’t usually do that,” Cora said. “We’re the other way around, we push them out of the zone, and today was good, that was good to see. (Betts) set the tempo.”

The Red Sox (75-64) didn’t gain any ground for the second wild-card spot on the Indians, who won and stayed 5½ games in front. The Athletics, who were tied with the Tribe, were still playing late Wednesday on the west coast.

With starters struggling, Red Sox add more bullpen help

Steve Hewitt

Alex Cora finally has seen enough from his starters, and he’s taking advantage of the rules while he still can in attempt to fix the problem.

In an apparent last-ditch effort to save their slim postseason chances, the Red Sox added even more pitching to their bullpen on Wednesday. In a second wave of September reinforcements, the team brought up left-hander Bobby Poyner and right-handers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley and Mike Shawarzyn to the big league roster.

The moves put the Red Sox at 21 pitchers on the active roster, certainly unorthodox but also within the rules as rosters expand to 40 players in September. It comes at a critical time for the Red Sox, who entered Wednesday 5½ games out of the second wild card spot, and Cora was almost left with no choice given the way his starters have been performing.

Discussions started after Tuesday night's 6-5 loss to the Twins in which Rick Porcello lasted just four innings and gave up six runs, forcing Cora to use six relievers who combined for five shutout innings. On Wednesday morning, president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski gave Cora a call, and they made the decision on how they would attack the last four weeks of the season.

“(Dombrowski was) kind of like, ‘What do you think?’” Cora said. “I was kind of like, ‘You know where I’m at.’ Luckily I work in an organization that we’re not going to tap out, we’re not going to wave the white flag, and we’re going to keep pushing.

“Obviously it’s not perfect, but our starters are not giving us enough. We need matchups, we need arms.”

As it stands, Eduardo Rodriguez is the Red Sox’ only healthy, reliable starter, and that’s been the case for some time. Porcello has been inconsistent, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi are still building up after coming back from their respective injuries, and Cora said Tuesday the Sox will use Chris Sale’s vacated spot in the rotation as a bullpen day.

That means Cora has a lot of innings to eat in the final 23 games of the season. He joked that games will last five hours instead of four, but he might not be far off. The manager will be looking for matchups more regularly, trying to maximize the strengths of his crowded pitching staff. The Red Sox have just two off days remaining – before and after a two-game series in Philadelphia – before finishing the season with 13 games in a row, and they need all the arms they can get.

It’s taking all hands on deck to an extreme level.

“I think it’s going to help us in the sense that obviously you’re going to have a bullpen day and the next day you play, so it’s how we’re going to attack that, who’s available and who’s not,” Cora said. “So, we’re about to find out. I thought about it (Tuesday) night, thought about it this morning, and there’s more homework obviously now, but that’s the challenge of this and I don’t mind that. ...

“These guys, they’ve been here before. We know what they have. We can maximize the pitches and matchups and let’s see where it takes us.”

Cora also doesn’t mind pushing the rules, even if this approach might seem uncommon. Next season, the rules change as teams can only carry 28 players on the active roster in September instead of 40. For now, Cora is very much willing to do absolutely whatever it takes to get to October.

“The rules are the rules,” Cora said. “I talked about it to Dave yesterday, I was like hey, if you don’t mind, it would be a good way ... a bullpen day, and if a starter goes short, we can still try to keep the game in check using matchups. We’ll see. I don’t know. It’s just kind of the way we feel that we can pull this off.”

Time for Red Sox to pitch to their strengths, not hitters’ weaknesses

Tom Keegan

The No. 21 is a great one for a right fielder. Roberto Clemente wore it in such exciting fashion, arms flailing when he sped around the bases, right arm whistling fastballs to home plate, a bat that produced 3,000 hits.

It’s an even better number for a blackjack hand.

But 21 pitchers on an active roster? That's just weird, which means it probably makes sense. It's a statement on the weirdness of pitching in the majors with the return of juiced hitters, a juiced baseball and control freaks from the front office reaching all the way onto the field on a pitch-by-pitch basis.

A better approach: Let the pitchers and catchers work together based on what the pitcher is feeling that day and encourage the pitchers to "let it rip," to borrow a phrase James Paxton used after he allowed one hit in seven shutout innings vs. the Rangers. By that he meant he's going after hitters aggressively instead of trying to pitch to their weaknesses. What a novel concept. This keeps up and the computer analysts are going to give the game back to the ballplayers. Can't let that happen.

The Red Sox have a "let it rip," pitcher too. His name is Darwinzon Hernandez and the lefty's numbers of late are outrageous. In his past six appearances covering seven scoreless innings, Hernandez has allowed four hits and two walks and has struck out 14.

Upon his promotion to the majors, Hernandez was cautioned by manager Alex Cora not to worry about being too fine with his location. His stuff is dynamic enough that he can get hitters out even with fat strikes. It was sound advice and ought to send a signal to the front office that the same approach very well could work with other Red Sox relievers blessed with strong arms.

They are armed with so much information on the weaknesses of hitters that it's as if the strengths of each reliever become secondary issues. John Doe hits .126 vs. fastballs in the high-and-inside quadrant of the strike zone, so pitch him there. OK, what happens if you miss to the outside and are a little lower than intended? Home run. Or if you miss your target to the inside or deliver it high out of the strike zone you start down a path toward a walk or at the very least a home run count.

Just because you have information, that doesn't mean you should use it. Too much of a good thing at some point turns on itself and heads one down a destructive path. Just because brownies coming out of the oven and smell and taste great, it doesn't mean eating the whole pan is a good idea.

The whole idea of obsessing on pitching to hitters' weaknesses might be caused by the control-freak nature of the geniuses in the front office, some of whom might have resented jocks for the attention they received in high school. Whatever the result, the cause is that pitchers' targets become too small, so they get behind on counts and surrender walks and home runs at alarming rates.

Think about the backward nature of that philosophy. The average of all hitters in the majors this year is .253, which means that the pitcher has close to a 75 percent chance of winning a battle that doesn't end in a walk or hit by pitch, so why doesn't the favorite in the matchup set the tone, pitch aggressively, go with his strength instead of letting the hitters' weaknesses dictate the plan?

That's what the Yankees' Paxton has decided to do and that's what the Sox' Hernandez has been instructed to do and look how well it's working for them.

The surest way to make a pitcher squeeze the ball too tightly and start aiming instead of pitching is to give him too small a target.

That seems to be a big part of the problem with the Red Sox, who have allowed more walks at their home ballpark (274 in 69 games) than any club in the majors.

They're pitchers, not puppets. They don't come equipped with strings. Let the pitchers pitch and go pull something else.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox 6, Twins 2: Brilliance from Mookie Betts, Eduardo Rodriguez powers Boston

Bill Koch

Two examples of individual brilliance were enough for the Red Sox on Wednesday night.

Mookie Betts needed just six pitches and four swings to put his on display. Eduardo Rodriguez did so more methodically through seven scoreless innings.

Hitter and pitcher guided Boston to what feels like a rare easy victory. The Red Sox coasted past the Twins, 6-2, and preserved a chance to win this three-game series against the American League Central leaders.

Betts homered twice as part of his second four-hit game this season and Rodriguez added to his career high with his 17th victory. Christian Vazquez chipped in an RBI double to left in the bottom of the sixth as Boston shook off a painful one-run defeat on Tuesday. The downside for the Red Sox is they gained no ground on Cleveland and merely held serve against idle Tampa Bay in the wild card race.

“It was one of those nights where we put it all together,” Betts said.

Betts crushed the first two pitches he saw from Jose Berrios to deep left. His solo home run in the bottom of the first and three-run shot in the bottom of the second were all the Red Sox required on this rain-delayed night in the city. Those among the 35,218 fans on hand who waited the extra 47 minutes through the thunderstorms were treated to an entertaining display.

“He’s patient,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “I’m not against it. But I do feel he can do this from the get-go and set the tempo. It was good to see.”

Betts jumped on a fastball in his first at-bat, popping a drive to the Monster Seats. He lashed a hanging curveball to Lansdowne Street the second time, a 438-foot blast. It was the 19th career multi-homer game for Betts and his 13th as a leadoff man, which ties Bobby Bonds for third all-time in the big leagues.

“You start falling behind (Berrios) and he’ll put you away quick,” Betts said. “I just needed to be a little more aggressive.”

Betts added a single to left in the fourth and an RBI single to left in the sixth. Rodriguez was well in command by that point, enjoying a scoreless outing for the third time in his last four. The left-hander scattered five hits and struck out eight, wriggling out of jams in the second and fourth innings.

“I tried to execute every pitch with Vazquez out there calling it,” Rodriguez said. “I executed everything – everything was working pretty good.”

Rodriguez blew a high fastball past Jonathan Schoop to strand a pair of men in the second and used a 4-6-3 double play to record the first two outs of the fourth. The Twins eventually loaded the bases on a pair of walks before Willians Astudio sent a harmless fly to right, ending the threat.

Rodriguez has lost just one of his last 12 decisions dating back to June 9, and that includes a pair of victories over Minnesota. His earned-run average has dipped to 3.81, the lowest among a preseason rotation that was both more experienced and more handsomely compensated than Rodriguez.

“He’s been solid for a while,” Cora said. “You go back to where he was in April and there were a few things that we cleaned up with him, and he took off.”

Berrios has been in a funk since the end of July, surrendering at least five earned runs in three of his last six starts. The standout right-hander allowed as many runs just once in his first 22 outings this season, including a June 17 gem against Boston where he took a hard-luck 2-0 loss. Berrios now has an ERA of 3.78, just a tick below the less-heralded Rodriguez.

Red Sox pitcher David Price makes his next start Friday

Bill Koch

Friday marks David Price's first scheduled start at Fenway Park since July 30.

The Red Sox left-hander will take the ball to open a four-game series against the Yankees. Price's last outing at home came against the Rays, a 6-5 loss in which he allowed nine hits and four earned runs in just 4 1/3 innings.

"I think it's going to help us in the sense that we're going to have a bullpen day," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "The next day, you play – how are we going to attack that? Who's available and who's not? We're about to find out."

Price made just one more start before being placed on the injured list for the second time this season. He was hit hard for seven runs in just 2 2/3 innings at Yankee Stadium, suffering a 7-4 defeat against New York. Price received a cortisone shot to treat a cyst in his left wrist, adding that injury to the left elbow tendinitis that sidelined him for 18 days in May.

Price threw two innings in a 4-3 victory over the Angels on Sunday. He managed 45 pitches before turning over a 4-0 lead to the bullpen, which recorded the final 21 outs. Price and Nathan Eovaldi (right elbow) both could help ease the load on the bullpen over the season's final three weeks with deeper outings.

Longer games? Red Sox manager Alex Cora ready to do whatever it takes

Bill Koch

Red Sox fans can only hope Alex Cora was joking.

Part of the manager's Wednesday pregame remarks addressed the state of his pitching staff. Boston summoned four more relievers from Triple-A Pawtucket prior to the middle game of its series against the Twins.

The Red Sox received another short start from Rick Porcello in a 6-5 defeat against Minnesota on Tuesday. The right-hander lasted just 12 outs and was charged with all six runs, absorbing his 11th loss of the season. Boston can't afford such struggles while desperately trying to maintain even a sliver of hope in the American League wild card race.

"We're going Winter Ball style," Cora said. "The games, instead of being four hours, they're going to be five hours."

Cora was promising frequent mound visits and changes. But the Red Sox already play the longest games in the big leagues by a healthy margin – three hours, 24 minutes. That's seven minutes longer than the Brewers, who sit in second place.

"We're trying to look for outs, and that's something we talked about last night when I finished here," Cora said. "Dave (Dombrowski, Red Sox president of baseball operations) called me this morning and was kind of like, 'What do you think?' I'm like, 'You know where I'm at.'"

Boston was already planning on going bullpening in place of Chris Sale (left elbow). The four scheduled off days enjoyed by the Red Sox between Aug. 15 and Sept. 2 allowed for a four-man rotation, and roster expansion this month could give Boston a chance to be aggressive when running into a trouble spot.

"We trust our guys, but we haven't been consistent about it," Cora said. "The rules are the rules. I talked about it with Dave yesterday. I was like, 'Hey, if you don't mind, that would be good.'"

Red Sox starters have posted a 5.03 earned-run average this season, including career-worst marks for Sale (4.40) and Porcello (5.63). Eduardo Rodriguez has been the best of the bunch, carrying a 3.97 ERA into his Wednesday start against the Twins.

Red Sox bullpen receives Wednesday reinforcements

Bill Koch

Hurricane Dorian prompted Bobby Poyner to delay his offseason trip home to Florida.

The Red Sox left-hander opted to stick around New England for a couple extra days. Poyner lives in Wellington, which is directly west from the devastated Grand Bahama Island. The Category 5 storm brought sheets of rain, destructive winds and widespread flooding to what is normally a tropical paradise.

Poyner wasn't among the first wave of Boston call-ups when rosters expanded on Sept. 1, but he's here now. Wednesday's game with the Twins at Fenway Park saw Poyner and fellow pitchers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley and Mike Shawaryn summoned for additional bullpen depth.

"For the guys who don't get called up, they say to stay ready," Poyner said. "There's the potential to be more call-ups. Obviously it depends on what the team needs."

Triple-A Pawtucket finished its season on Monday afternoon at McCoy Stadium. Pitchers Travis Lakins, Hector Velazquez and Ryan Weber were all absent, as were position players Gorkys Hernandez and Juan Centeno. They had already received promotions to the Red Sox.

"There's no direct, 'You are going' or 'You're not going,'" Poyner said. "It's kind of a wait-and-see pattern."

Boston's struggling starting rotation created a scenario where additional reinforcements were required. Rick Porcello lasted just 12 outs in Tuesday's 6-5 loss against Minnesota, and the Red Sox are already planning on a bullpen day every fifth game in the absence of Chris Sale (left elbow). Boston has just two scheduled off days among its final 24 games.

"Obviously it's not perfect, but our starters are not giving us enough," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "We need matchups. We need arms."

Poyner had already shipped his car home and was prepared to travel later this week. Instead he's with the Red Sox for a third stint this season. He posted a 3.77 earned-run average in 49 games with the PawSox in 2019.

"I wanted to go up, but I understood," Poyner said. "I get how it works. I was kind of leaving the field and expecting it to be the offseason."

Pawtucket players participated in exit meetings Monday with manager Billy McMillon, his staff and Boston vice president of player development Ben Crockett. The Red Sox were originally set to move forward with five additional players and right-hander Jhoulys Chacin, a right-hander signed as a free agent after being released by the Brewers in August. Boston opted to change course while still clinging to the faintest of hopes in the American League wild card race.

"Luckily, I work for an organization where we're not going to tap out," Cora said. "We're not going to wave the white flag. We're going to keep pushing."

That doesn't mean the Red Sox are about to completely mortgage their future. Matt Barnes pitched in all three weekend games against the Angels and Josh Taylor appeared six times between Aug. 24 and Tuesday. Boston is also thinking long term with Darwinzon Hernandez, who has made 10 of his 23 appearances since Aug. 10.

“When you look at our usage, you’ve got two out of four or three out of five where they’re getting hot,” Cora said. “It’s just not – it’s not October. It’s not possible to do it that way the whole time. For how cool it looks and how everybody wants it to be, you’ve got to be responsible.”

* **MassLive.com**

Boston Red Sox now have 17 relievers; here’s how much they trust each one

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox added four relievers to their roster Wednesday afternoon, capping off their all-hands-on-deck bullpen approach after adding four pitchers to the mix when rosters expanded Sunday. For the last 24 games of the season, manager Alex Cora will have a staggering 17 relievers at his disposal, and 21 pitchers in total.

Members of the current bullpen range from two guys with over 1,100 big-league innings (Andrew Cashner and Jhoulys Chacin) to a pitcher who has just one inning under his belt (Trevor Kelley). There are first-round picks, late-round picks, trade acquisitions, free agents, long guys, traditional setup men, lefties, righties and representatives from just about every category you could name.

But all that matters at this point is how much Cora trusts them. So here’s a ranking-- after hearing the manager speak about each pitcher and watching how he has used them all year-- of how much Cora trusts each reliever.

“OUR GUYS” - High-leverage, trusted relievers

Throughout the season, Cora has referred to his core group of relievers as “our guys.”

1. RHP Brandon Workman

Workman, the closer, has been Boston’s best reliever all season and is the designated ninth-inning reliever now. There’s no one Cora trusts more.

2. LHP Darwinzon Hernandez

Hernandez, a rookie lefty, has the lowest ERA in the bullpen and has become a dominant force in a variety of roles for the Sox. While he rarely serves as the pure setup man to Workman, he’s constantly used in high-leverage situations and has been the most unhittable bullpen arm.

3. LHP Josh Taylor

Taylor, another rookie, pitched a ton in August, posting a 1.76 ERA in 15 ½ innings. That workload shows how much Cora trusts him, in high-leverage situations throughout the late innings of games. Taylor has been deadly against lefties and every effective against righties, as well.

4. RHP Matt Barnes

Barnes, who entered the season at the top of this list, is still viewed in high regard. But his inconsistencies throughout the year have dropped him below the two lefties, who were much better in August. Barnes is a preferred option before Workman in the late innings and is the most traditional setup man in the group.

5. RHP Marcus Walden

Walden, who has surprisingly stuck on the roster for almost the entire season, has bounced back from a brutal June to re-establish himself as trustworthy. The righty has the ability to go multiple innings and is valuable in many different spots throughout games.

“THE OTHER GUYS” - Next tier up

Throughout the season, Cora has referred to his low-leverage relievers as “the other guys.”

6. RHP Andrew Cashner

Cashner, a disaster in the rotation after being acquired in mid-July, has adjusted to his relief role about as well as he possibly could have. He owns a 2.84 ERA in eight bullpen outings and has the potential to dominate in short stints or give the Sox length.

7. Ryan Brasier

Brasier’s regression has been a major storyline in the bullpen all season, so he’s fallen down this list steadily. But he’s still someone Cora will look to use in medium-leverage situations after the Sox recalled him from Pawtucket last month.

THE MULTI-INNING GUYS - Long relievers with experience

A group of guys who can go multiple innings, either during bullpen games or in mop-up duty.

8. LHP Brian Johnson

Johnson, who was excellent in a swingman role last season, has struggled when healthy this year and was removed from his role as a spot starter last week. He’s still viewed as a change-of-pace option as a reliever and is the best of the long relievers.

9. RHP Travis Lakins

Lakins has been on the Boston-to-Pawtucket shuttle all season and hasn’t been particularly impressive, posting a 4.70 ERA in 10 appearances. He was on the roster in August and was among the first callups on Sept. 1, giving the Sox a multi-inning option with some upside.

10. RHP Ryan Weber

Weber has pitched way more than anyone would have expected this season (33 innings), serving as a spot starter and long reliever. While he has definitely had his bad moments, he has strung together some good outings and was tasked with two innings in a close game Sunday in Anaheim.

11. RHP Hector Velazquez

Like Johnson, Velazquez was a key to the Boston’s success in 2018. Velazquez has not been able to repeat that success this year, struggling all season and spending time in Pawtucket. He’s not too high on the pecking order at present.

12. RHP Josh Smith

Smith has been on the roster for much of the last few months and has been tasked with mop-up duty in most of his recent appearances. He’s on the roster to eat innings.

NEW BLOOD - Latest round of call-ups and a new signee

The latest wave of call-ups to the big-league roster and a newcomer to the organization.

13. RHP Colten Brewer

Brewer, who posted a 4.31 ERA in 48 appearances before being sent to Pawtucket in early August, is someone who could rise quickly up the trust list. The fact he wasn't among the original wave of call-ups shows that he has fallen down Boston's list a bit.

14. RHP Mike Shawaryn

Shawaryn, a Triple-A starter, strung together eight straight scoreless innings while up in June before imploding in London (eight earned runs in 1 1/3 innings). He was never heard from again in the majors and built back up as a starter. He's intriguing as someone who can eat innings.

15. LHP Bobby Poyner

Poyner, a candidate for the postseason roster last year, will likely be used in very specific situations against lefties. He has made just three big-league appearances in 2019.

16. RHP Trevor Kelley

Kelley has pitched just one big-league inning in his career, coming up for an appearance against the Blue Jays on July 2. He's a relative unknown with some promise, as he posted a 1.79 ERA in 65 1/3 innings with Pawtucket and could fool some hitters with an unorthodox delivery.

17. RHP Jhoulys Chacin

Chacin, who struggled with the Brewers before being released in late August, was brought in on a minor-league deal last week. He has never appeared for the Red Sox so it's impossible to gauge how much he's trusted. Cora said Tuesday he'd likely use Chacin in one-inning stints at first.

10 observations from the last week in baseball

1. There's no better rule change than the one that limits rosters to 28 players in September, beginning next year. 40 is ridiculous.
2. That said, Aaron Barrett's return to the Nationals is one of the best stories of the season.
3. The addition of Jhoulys Chacin could be a good one for the Red Sox' future. Maybe they see something from him in September and decide to bring him back for next year. They'll need innings.
4. There's no way the Sox will give Rick Porcello a qualifying offer. He could come back on a lesser deal but won't get the money required on the QO.
5. Interesting report from Ken Rosenthal on the Yankees almost acquiring reliever Ken Giles from the Jays on deadline day. It wouldn't be hard to believe the Sox came close to something as well.
6. Highly recommend this amazing story from Zach Buchanan of The Athletic (subscription required) on the suicide of Romell Jordan, the adopted brother of ex-Red Sox catcher Blake Swihart. That tragedy struck the Red Sox family hard in spring training.
7. Nothing close to enough movement in the last 10 games for any major changes in the A.L. wild-card race. The Rays and A's (6-4) and Indians (5-5) have largely kept pace with the Sox (7-3), keeping them at distance.

8. The Yankees have a 10-game lead in the A.L. East with 21 games to go. The Sox were up 9 ½ games at the same spot last year. Boston clinched on Sept. 20; will the Yankees do it earlier this year?

9. The Sox-Yankees series at Fenway is actually a five-game series, as the biannual media game will take place Friday morning at Fenway Park. Time to break a losing streak.

10. Too many unspeakable tragedies in the baseball family this season. Thoughts and prayers with the Swihart/Jordan, Skaggs, Bivens and Numata families, among others.

Mookie Betts' first-pitch aggressiveness keys Boston Red Sox to victory over Twins: 'He set the tempo,' Alex Cora says

Chris Cotillo

It's safe to say Mookie Betts wasn't thinking about working Jose Berrios' pitch count when he stepped to the plate Wednesday night.

Betts approached the Twins' ace as aggressively as possible, ambushing the first pitch of each of his first two at-bats and hitting home runs both times. In all, the reigning A.L. MVP was 4-for-5 with two homers, two singles and five RBIs in Boston's 6-2 win.

If Berrios-- a back-to-back All-Star-- has a fatal flaw, it's how he pitches to start at-bats. Entering his matchup with the Red Sox, the righty had allowed hitters to go 36-for-82 (.439) with eight homers and a 1.258 OPS against him on the first pitch of at-bats.

"If you start falling behind him, he'll put you away quick," Betts said. "In general, just need to be a little more aggressive."

Betts did just that, driving a fastball into the Green Monster seats on the first pitch of the first inning and sending a first-pitch curveball over everything for a three-run shot in the second. Out of his 25 home runs this season, seven have come on the first pitch.

With his performance Wednesday, Betts is now 17-for-45 (.378) with seven homers and 16 RBIs when putting the first pitch in play this season.

"You look at his numbers... first pitch, he's hitting close to .400 and slugging a lot," manager Alex Cora said. "Just the nature of him, he's patient. I'm not against it, but I do feel he can do this from the get-go and set the tempo. It was good to see. That's a good pitcher over there."

Betts has put the ball in play on the first pitch in just 46 of his 649 plate appearances so far this year, but he has done damage in many of those instances. His 15th-inning homer to give the Sox a 7-6 win over the Angels on Friday night was on the first pitch of his at-bat against righty Trevor Cahill.

The Sox were aggressive against Berrios all night, swinging at the first pitch 11 times in 26 plate appearances and getting four of their eight hits against him on the first pitch of at-bats. Cora appreciated the effort.

"There were some good swings early in counts," he said. "I think lately we've been very patient, getting in some bad counts. We've been striking out a lot as a unit. We usually don't do that, we're the other way around."

Betts, who is quietly together a great season after struggling at times in the first half, is finding a lot of success being antsy at the plate. Four of his last seven homers have come on the first pitch.

"He set the tempo," Cora said.

Boston Red Sox's Eduardo Rodriguez has chance to be a 20-game winner; that doesn't mean much anymore, but it should for ERod

Christopher Smith

Red Sox lefty Eduardo Rodriguez has the chance to win 20 games this season. But he said all he cares about right now is helping his team make the postseason.

Rodriguez needs to win three of his final four starts to reach 20 victories. That's doable considering the way he has pitched since late May. The Red Sox, meanwhile, will need nothing short of divine intervention to play in October as their playoff odds are down to 5.6%, according to Fangraphs.com.

Rodriguez earned victory No. 17 on Wednesday. He tied Yankees' Domingo Germán and Astros' Justin Verlander for the MLB lead. Rodriguez tossed 7 shutout innings in the Red Sox's 6-2 win over the AL Central-leading Twins here at Fenway Park.

A pitcher's win total has become an irrelevant statistic in the world of sabermetrics, Mets ace Jacob deGrom showed just how little value should be placed on wins when he received the 2018 National League Cy Young. deGrom won only 10 games, but he led the league in ERA (1.70), ERA+ (218) and 1.98 FIP.

But becoming just the 11th American League pitcher in the past 10 years to win 20 games would be a cool feat for ERod because he's just not winning games. He's finally reaching his potential, a word his two managers, coaches and teammates used so much the past five years whenever they talked about him.

"The potential is great," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "We know that. There's a lot of people that just stay with that. They don't take the next step. He took the challenge. He made some adjustments and now he's doing what he's doing."

Rodriguez posted a disappointing 5.43 ERA in his first 10 starts this year. Since then, he has recorded a 3.05 ERA in 19 starts. The lefty has a 2.58 ERA over his past 13 starts.

"We knew stuff-wise, he was up there with the other guys," Cora said. "I do feel, fair or not, I was very hard on him in spring training letting him know, this is what I need from him. That's not an easy lineup. Pitching in Coors Field (last week) is not easy."

Cora said Rodriguez has kept it simple.

"There's not too much trying to nibble or trick people," Cora said. "Gets to the point in the game when he's just challenging people with the fastball up and that changeup down in the zone."

The best part of this 19-game stretch for Rodriguez? He's pitching deep into games.

Rodriguez pitched seven or more innings in six starts as a rookie in 2015. He recorded at least an out in the seventh inning in eight of his 21 starts and pitched six or more innings in 13 starts.

But he pitched seven or more innings in just five starts from 2016-18. He failed to pitch seven innings in any of his starts during 2018.

It felt like he was actually regressing.

But he has gone seven or more innings eight times this year. He has pitched at least six innings in 16 of his starts.

Potential ERod has turned into Ace ERod.

“He (Cora) told me to go out there and attack hitters and try to go deep into games,” Rodriguez said. “Try not to get in deep counts, all that. So something that I’ve been really working on the whole year, especially with him.”

Mookie Betts hits 2 homers, Eduardo Rodriguez dominates as Boston Red Sox beat Twins, 6-2

Chris Cotillo

All Red Sox starter Eduardo Rodriguez needed from teammate Mookie Betts on Wednesday night was one big swing. Betts, ever generous, gave him two in the blink of an eye.

Betts homered on each of the first two pitches he saw from Twins starter Jose Berrios and Rodriguez threw seven shutout innings as the Sox beat the Twins, 6-2. Rodriguez improved to 17-5 and lowered his ERA to 3.81.

After Rodriguez struck out the side in order in the first, Betts drove a first-pitch fastball into the Monster seats to put the Sox up, 1-0. He followed that up with his second homer an inning later, taking a first-pitch curveball over the Monster for a three-run shot.

Minnesota scattered just five hits against Rodriguez, threatening with the bases loaded in the third. The lefty departed with eight strikeouts and four walks in 113 pitches.

After Christian Vazquez hit an RBI double in the sixth, Betts added another run on an RBI single for his fourth hit of the night. The reigning A.L. MVP went 4-for-5 with two homers, five RBIs and two runs in the win.

Twins left fielder Eddie Rosario hit a two-run homer off reliever Ryan Brasier to cut Boston’s lead to 6-2 in the eighth. Josh Taylor, Darwinson Hernandez (who walked two) and Brandon Workman combined for the last five outs.

After losing Tuesday’s series opener, the Sox evened their set with the Twins and improved to 75-64. The two teams will face off in the rubber game Thursday night, with righty Nathan Eovaldi on the mound against lefty Martin Perez.

Betts makes history

According to STATS Inc., Betts became the first leadoff hitter to homer on each of the first two pitches he saw in a game since Jimmy Rollins did it for the Phillies on Aug. 25, 2009. Betts now has 25 homers on the season and three multi-homer games.

Game delayed 47 minutes

Due to rain in the area of Fenway Park, there was a 47-minute delay before first pitch. The skies for clear for the duration of the game.

Jay Groome, Boston Red Sox 2016 first-rounder, to start for Lowell in postseason Thursday as he continues return from Tommy John surgery

Christopher Smith

Boston Red Sox 2016 first-round pick Jay Groome will start for the Lowell Spinners in Game 2 of the New York-Penn League semifinals Thursday at Lowell’s LeLacheur Park.

The left-hander made his season debut Aug. 21 for the Gulf Coast League Red Sox. It marked the first time he had pitched in a game since undergoing Tommy John surgery in May 2018.

Groome pitched 2 scoreless innings in two outings in the GCL. He allowed two hits and no walks while striking out three.

He then started for Lowell this past Saturday. He hurled two innings, allowing one run, three hits and one walk while striking out three.

Groome turned 21 on Aug. 23. Boston drafted him 12th overall in 2016.

Red Sox 2019 fourth-round pick Noah Song, a righty out of the United States Naval Academy, will start Game 1 today.

Rafael Devers' 'wake-up call': How Boston Red Sox star rose from baseball purgatory to the MVP conversation in 365 days

Chris Cutillo

To fully understand just how far Rafael Devers has come this year, it's worth looking back at where he was 365 days ago.

Exactly a year ago, Devers returned to the Red Sox from a minor-league rehab assignment that was meant to serve as both a way for the third baseman to recover from his hamstring strain and a warning sign that he needed to make significant adjustments. Facing the biggest challenge of his young career, the 22-year-old has responded by going from someone who appeared to be falling out of favor in the organization to being squarely in the conversation for American League MVP a year later.

By the time last August rolled around, Devers had struggled enough that manager Alex Cora decided to platoon him with the right-handed hitting Eduardo Nunez at third base. Devers hit just .214 with a single homer in July, then went on the disabled list with a left hamstring strain on July 29.

Devers recovered quickly and appeared in just one rehab game at Single-A Lowell before returning Aug. 8. He lasted just six games-- going 4-for-22-- before re-aggravating his hamstring injury and going back on the DL on Aug. 17.

That DL stint was different for Devers. After being shut down for nearly two weeks, he joined Triple-A Pawtucket for a rehab assignment that went much longer than expected.

From Aug. 29 to Sept. 3, Devers was pretty much in baseball purgatory. In that week, which included 21 at-bats, two 4 ½-hour bus rides to Scranton, Pa., and watching the Sept. 1 roster expansion go by without a promotion, the second-year player learned a lot.

"It just helped me a lot in terms of my maturity," Devers said (through interpreter Bryan Almonte). "Obviously, when you come up here at first, you think you kind of know things. That served as a wake-up call for me where I had to like grind out."

In the two months before the rehab trip, Devers hit just .205 with two homers while going on the DL three separate times and committing five errors in 21 games. The Red Sox believed Devers needed a reset.

"Besides being healthy, just getting his timing back," Cora said. "You try to grind through stuff and physically you're not able to do things that put you in a good spot in the batter's box or playing defense. That was the reason. He was able to slow down the game, forget about the results and work on his craft. At the same time, he got healthy. When he got back, he was a different player."

With Nunez emerging as a legitimate option, Devers needed to prove his worth in September to reemerge as the starting third baseman in October. With Nunez hurt for much of a significant portion of the season's final month, Devers got hot, raising his OPS from .632 in July and August to .807 in September.

“I came back completely healthy, and that helped me,” Devers said. “When I was down there, working on my rehab assignment, it was good for me because I knew I was going to get healthy and be able to contribute here for the postseason run. That’s what really motivated me.”

By the time October rolled around, it was clear Devers would have a big role in Boston’s postseason lineup. Though Nunez started some games against lefties, Devers made starts in eight of the team’s 14 games and got hot, hitting .294 with a homer and nine RBIs against the league’s elite.

That run, Cora believes, helped springboard Devers into the superstar he has become in his second full big-league season. A commitment to better diet and exercise has kept Devers in shape throughout the season, allowing him to avoid the injured list and play in 134 of Boston’s first 138 games.

“It’s not a drastic change,” Devers said. “I have made some changes, just not big ones like (major diet adjustments). I know what I can do and how to take care of myself now.”

With three weeks to go, Devers leads baseball with 177 hits, 81 extra-base hits, 48 doubles (tied) and 320 total bases. He is a homer away from becoming the first player since 2005 to have 30+ homers, 100+ RBIs and 100+ runs in a season before turning 23. It’s a rise that few could have seen coming a year ago.

“It all comes down to health,” Devers said. “If I’m healthy, I know the potential I have and what I can contribute up at this level. I know what I can do here, but that’s what helped me the most.”

When Devers rejoined the Sox a year ago, the best the team could have hoped for was that his week toiling in the minors would allow him to contribute down the stretch. What he has given them since has exceeded even the loftiest expectations.

“We felt like he needed to go down there, get healthy and work on a few things as far as his body putting himself in a position to be successful,” Cora said. “He was able to, at the same time, slow the game down and you saw the results in September and October.”

Boston Red Sox active roster includes 21 pitchers; ‘I don’t feel bad about it,’ Alex Cora says

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox today promoted four more September call-ups, all pitchers. They now have 21 pitchers on their active active.

“The rules are the rules,” manager Alex Cora said. “Next year, you can’t do that. It’s probably not the first time that’s happened in the game. I don’t feel bad about it.”

The Red Sox added right-handers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley and Mike Shawaryn as well as lefty Bobby Poyner on Wednesday.

“We’re going winter ball style,” Cora said. “That’s how we’re going to do it. The games instead of four hours are going to be five hours.

“Obviously it’s not perfect but our starters are not giving us enough,” Cora added. “We need matchups. We need arms. We’re going try to maximize Brewer’s cutter and Shawaryn’s slider and Bobby’s fastball up and Kelley’s sidearm pitches.”

MLB teams are allowed to expand their rosters to as many as 40 players in September. That number will reduce to 28 next year.

“We’re not going to tap out. We’re not going to wave the white flag and we’re going to keep pushing,” Cora said.

Red Sox starters haven't given this team enough as Cora mentioned. Boston's 2019 starter ERA is 5.03 (392 earned runs, 701 2/3 innings).

"If a starter goes short, we can still try to keep the game in check using matchups," Cora said. "We'll see. I don't know. This is just kind of the way we feel that we can kind of like pull this off."

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

Five Takes: Eduardo Rodriguez is on best run of his career

Chris Mason

Eduardo Rodriguez remains the lone Red Sox starter pitching to his potential this season.

The lefty was brilliant again in last night's 6-2 win over the Twins, tossing seven shutout innings against the most home-run happy offense in baseball. Mookie Betts provided all the offense Rodriguez would need, driving in five of Boston's six runs.

Here are five takes from a rain-delayed evening at Fenway Park:

1. E-Rod excelling

It's not an exaggeration to say Rodriguez is capping a career year with its best run.

Last night marked the third time in the last four starts Rodriguez had given the Sox seven shutout innings — the outlier was a win at altitude in Colorado — and opponents simply aren't hitting him.

In all three gems, Rodriguez held opponents to five hits or fewer. The changeup was his bread-and-butter pitch that kept Minnesota off balance all night. Rodriguez struck out eight Twins, and got 12 whiffs with the change.

2. He's dominated at home, too

When Rodriguez pitches at Fenway Park, the Red Sox are 12-1. When anybody else starts at home they're 23-32.

The jarring statistic is a testament to how good Rodriguez has been, as well as an indictment on the rest of the staff.

Either way, the Sox have long talked about how high Rodriguez's ceiling is. At 27 years old, he's starting to reach it. He improved to 17-5 with last night's victory, and will have a real shot at becoming a 20-game winner.

3. Mookie mashes

Alex Cora often urges Betts to swing at the first pitch more often.

Coming into last night, the reigning AL MVP was the second most passive hitter in all of baseball. Betts had swung at the first pitch just 14.1 percent of the time, 142nd of 143 qualified hitters.

That changed against Twins All-Star Jose Berrios.

Betts swung at the first pitch in each of his first two at-bats, and both went over the Monster for home runs. All told, the right fielder delivered a 4-for-5 showing with five RBIs. Damage done.

4. Historic company

Homer in back-to-back at-bats is uncommon. Doing it on back-to-back pitches is even more uncommon. And accomplishing the feat as a leadoff hitter makes it a once-in-a-decade feat.

The last leadoff man to do it was another former MVP, Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins, on August 25, 2009.

5. Sight for sore eyes

Red Sox relievers might as well have taken a clown car out to the bullpen last night.

With foolish September roster expansions in effect, Cora had 21 active pitchers, and at least 15 went out to the 'pen. There weren't enough seats on the bench beneath the underhang, so satellite chairs were set up out there, too.

Rodriguez's deep outing ensured most of the got the evening off anyway.

Life on the IL isn't for Michael Chavis

Chris Mason

Like most rookies, Michael Chavis has been faced with a myriad of challenges in his first big league season.

When scouting reports on the young power hitter came into focus, opponents began to expose him with elevated fastballs and breaking balls in the dirt. Chavis took a few lumps and battled through slumps, but nothing has been as frustrating as what he's experienced the last three weeks.

"Feeling useless," Chavis said.

Laying out for a blooper last month, he sprained an AC joint in his shoulder and landed on the injured list. It was Chavis' first IL stint as a big leaguer, and he quickly found that life on the shelf isn't for him.

"Obviously I'm here for a reason," Chavis said. "I worked my butt off throughout the season and preparing for the season to be here and then just to have something unfortunate like this happen... I mean, it's nice to stay in the clubhouse and the dugout, to be with the team, but then you're sitting (during) the game and you see something happen where you're like, 'I could help the team in this situation.'

"It kind of sucks just being there and literally being useless."

Fortunately for Chavis, that useless feeling shouldn't last much longer; the infielder may return as soon as this weekend.

Though he's been banged up before, it's a totally different feeling at this level.

"In the minor leagues it's not really about winning, it's about development obviously," Chavis said. "So when you're on the (IL) it's like, 'Just get better so that we can get back to development.' Up here it's about winning the ballgames and helping the team. You can't do any of that when you're on the (IL).

"I'm trying to be a good teammate and help everybody out, being encouraging and stuff like that, but there's only so much you can do. You can only slap so many butts and be like, 'good job.' You know what I mean?"

Before his injury, Chavis was in the midst of a strong rookie season. The 23-year-old was hitting .258 with 18 homers and 58 RBIs, and he'd played three different infield positions in his 95 games.

The baseball gods may have handed Chavis lemons, but he's done his best not to be soured by them.

"It was a nice experience to just watch the game from a different perspective," Chavis said. "Even when you're on the bench you're preparing to go into the game. Just knowing that I'm not going to play because I'm on the DL obviously, getting to watch the game with that perspective, you get to kind of slow things down and see them from a different perspective.

"The game just slows down," he added. "When I'm watching the game trying to play it, I'm watching the pitcher in a way where I'm getting ready to face him. I'm not watching the positioning of the shortstop or things like that. If we're on defense I'm not watching the swing that the opposing player is taking, I'm watching the game and what's playing out there. So getting to watch the mechanical differences, the approaches, the sequences and stuff that you don't really get to pay attention to is nice."

While the glass-half-full approach is a good one to have, Chavis will be happy to have his player's-eye view back as soon as he can.

*** *RedSox.com***

Betts channels aggression into five-RBI night

Ian Browne

Mookie Betts went into his best mode -- or was it beast mode? -- on Wednesday night at Fenway Park. That would be attack mode.

The star leadoff man tore into Twins ace Jose Berrios with an aggressive approach that sparked the Red Sox to a 6-2 victory at Fenway Park.

In a dominant display of hitting, Betts walloped a first-pitch fastball into the Green Monster Seats to lead off the bottom of the first, and he then hit a first-pitch curve for a three-run rocket over everything in left in the second.

On two pitches and two swings, Betts hit two homers that combined for 782 feet of projected distance, per Statcast.

Judging by the data, Betts should go with this approach more often. In the 45 times he has put the ball in play this season on a 0-0 count, he is hitting .378 with four doubles, seven homers and 17 RBIs.

"You look at his numbers, and I think on the first pitch, he's hitting close to .400 and slugging a lot," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "It's the nature of him [not to swing at the first pitch]. He's patient. I'm not against it, but I feel that he can do this from the get-go, set the tempo. It was good to see."

Unprompted, Betts mentioned that some more early count aggression could be beneficial.

"I just know [Berrios is] a good pitcher," Betts said. "You start falling behind him, he'll put you away quick. That's kind of in general. I just need to be a little more aggressive."

The performance was a reminder of how quickly Betts can take over a game. Though the dynamic right fielder did slow down from a power standpoint as the night progressed, he had a monster performance, going 4-for-5 with five RBIs.

It was a different version of Betts than Berrios saw on June 17 at Target Field, when he held Boston's spark plug to one single in four at-bats.

"In reality, the last time I faced him, I dominated him, and today it was his day," Berrios said. "He obviously beat me the first two pitches, and they got the win today. He looked very good at home plate, and obviously he was feeling good at home plate."

When Betts gets caught up in one of those zones, there's not much opponents can do to stop him.

"He's the MVP," Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez said. "When he's good, he's hot and he's going to hit everything. Berrios is a good pitcher, so Mookie is an awesome hitter. The pitcher makes a mistake, he's going to hit it."

Betts came into the night in an 0-for-9 drought, but he quickly heated up. Overall, he has been in a good way of late, reaching base safely in 18 straight games. In a 15-game stretch that started on Aug. 12, Betts has a line of .347/.388/.693 with nine doubles, five homers and 13 RBIs.

"I'm feeling pretty good, but we're trying to find a way to put some wins together," Betts said. "Eduardo [Rodriguez] did a great job today. Can't ask for anything more than what he's been doing. Gave us a chance to win, and we did."

On just about any other night, Rodriguez would have earned top billing with his latest sparkling performance. The lefty fired seven shutout innings (five hits, eight strikeouts) to improve to 17-5 and lower his ERA to 3.81. With as many as four starts left on the season, Rodriguez has a shot at 20 wins.

"It's not important for me right now to win 20 games," Rodriguez said. "For me, it's more important to give the team a chance to make the postseason. That's our goal as a team. Make it to the postseason. If 20 wins come or not, I'm just going to be happy if we make it to the playoffs."

Despite Wednesday's strong performance, Boston (75-64) still faces a tall order to make the postseason.

With 23 games left in their season, the defending World Series champions trail both the Indians and Athletics by 5 1/2 games for the second American League Wild Card spot. The Rays hold the top spot, six games ahead of the Red Sox but five up in the loss column.

It will take a special run to overcome the odds, and a red-hot finish from Betts would certainly help.

Last year's AL Most Valuable Player Award winner is slashing .289/.388/.516 with 39 doubles, five triples, 25 homers and 75 RBIs. That -- along with 91 walks, 14 stolen bases and Gold Glove-caliber defense -- would make for a career year for most. But for Betts, it is a decline from his sparkling 2018.

Perhaps that just means Betts is going to keep raking in the quest to rise closer to his expected level.

"Yeah, Mookie Betts, he's as good as it gets, and he had a good night," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. "He jumped a couple of pitches and put them over the Monster, and that's a big part of what happened tonight. When Mookie comes up and hits a three-run bomb on a first-pitch breaking ball, you kind of do have to tip your cap to him."

Needing arms, Red Sox promote four pitchers

Ian Browne

The Red Sox called an audible on Wednesday with regard to September callups, summoning an unexpected second wave that included four more pitchers to supplant the under-performing starting rotation and overworked bullpen.

Lefty Bobby Poyner, who is ranked the club's No. 30 prospect by MLB Pipeline, was recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket. Also promoted to the Majors from the PawSox were righties Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley and Mike Shawaryn, who is the organization's No. 21 prospect.

The original plan was just for the one wave of callups that happened on Sunday, when six players were added to the roster and David Price was activated from the injured list.

But manager Alex Cora asked president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski to shift course after Rick Porcello lasted just four-plus innings and allowed six runs in Tuesday's 6-5 loss to the Twins.

Boston's rotation entered Wednesday with a 5.03 ERA, which ranks 20th in the Major Leagues.

The Red Sox have a whopping 21 pitchers on their active roster.

"Obviously it's not perfect, but our starters are not giving us enough," said Cora. "We need matchups, we need arms. We're going to try to maximize Brewer's cutter and Shawaryn's slider and Bobby's fastball up and Kelley's side-arm pitches. We're trying to look for outs.

"That's something we talked about last night when I finished here [with the media]. And Dave called me this morning and [was] kind of like, 'What do you think?' I was kind of like, 'You know where I'm at.' Luckily, I work in an organization that, we're not going to tap out, we're not going to wave the white flag and we're going to keep pushing."

Teams won't be able to be nearly this aggressive with callups next year, when a rule change will allow rosters to be at just 28 players in September rather than 40.

"The rules are the rules," Cora said. "Next year, you can't do that. It's probably not the first time that's ever happened in the game, so I don't feel bad about it."

How, specifically, does Cora think the barrage of pitchers can help him manage the final 24 games?

"It would be a good way to kind of like [handle] a bullpen day, and if a starter goes short, we can still try to keep the game in check using matchups," said Cora. "We'll see. I don't know. It's just kind of the way we feel that we can pull this off."

Five burning questions facing AL East clubs

Keegan Matheson

With the stretch run well underway and rosters expanded across baseball, teams are looking to answer some final questions in September.

For contenders, those questions could be the difference between October baseball and an early end to their season. For teams on the outside looking in, it's an opportunity to focus on personal milestones and the 2020 season.

Here is one looming question facing each American League East team the rest of the way:

Blue Jays: Which pitchers can make their case for 2020?

The Blue Jays aren't expected to make significant changes to their positional group, but starting pitching will be a major priority this season. Prospect T.J. Zeuch made his Major League debut on Tuesday against the Braves, throwing four innings of two-run ball with four strikeouts, and lefty Anthony Kay will debut in the upcoming series against the Rays. The Blue Jays have depth, which includes those young arms, with Trent Thornton, Jacob Waguespack and Thomas Pannone currently on the roster, but, much like in their crowded outfield picture, the Blue Jays would love for one or two to step forward and exceed expectations. Who will it be?

Orioles: Can Hanser Alberto win the batting title?

Alberto has flown under the radar this season on an Orioles team that owns the second-worst record in Major League Baseball, but the 26-year-old entered play on Wednesday hitting .323, ranking him third in the AL and fourth in baseball. Alberto is only looking up at Houston's Michael Brantley (.324) and New York's DJ LeMahieu (.331) in the AL, so there's plenty of time for him to go on a run in September. It's been a great story for Alberto, who was briefly lost on waivers to the Giants in February of this year before the Orioles claimed him back on March 1.

Rays: What impact can Snell, Glasnow have?

The Rays have carried on well without their ace in Blake Snell and Tyler Glasnow, who posted a 1.86 ERA over eight starts to open the season before hitting the IL with a forearm strain. Snell was scheduled to throw a bullpen session on Wednesday, and Glasnow recently made two rehab appearances of one and 1 1/3 innings. Charlie Morton and the Rays' pitching staff has done an excellent job to keep the club afloat and atop the AL Wild Card race, but there's no denying that a healthy Snell and Glasnow would put the Rays on another level as they battle to come out of the AL a Wild Card team.

Red Sox: Is there some Red Sox magic left?

If the Red Sox are going to chase down Cleveland, Oakland and Tampa Bay in the AL Wild Card race, they'll need some of those late heroics that have become a staple for Boston-area pro sports teams. Young infielders Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts have both played well enough to potentially finish in the top five of AL MVP Award voting, but they'll need some help down the stretch and Boston's pitching staff will really need to shut down some opponents along the way. The dates circled on Boston's calendar in bright, red ink are Sept. 20-23, when it faces the Rays four times in St. Petersburg. If the Sox can make up some ground by then and take at least three of four, there's a chance, but like manager Alex Cora said earlier this week, the Red Sox can't control what the A's and Indians do.

Yankees: Can they get Severino, Betances or Stanton back?

The Yankees have weathered a long list of injuries in 2019 and, somehow, remained one of baseball's best teams. They could really get a late boost, though, if Luis Severino, Dellin Betances or Giancarlo Stanton could return to the roster for the stretch run and playoffs. Betances threw batting practice to Stanton on Tuesday, and Severino threw one inning in a Triple-A rehab outing on Sunday, so there's certainly some movement in the right direction. If one or more can return, the question then extends to ask what role they'll fill? Severino, particularly, has some variables as he could be used in shorter relief outings or stretched back out to be used as a starter, which would take some additional time.

* **WEEI.com**

The bizarre new existence of the Red Sox bullpen

Rob Bradford

Josh Taylor summed it up after Day 1 of this new world order involving the Red Sox bullpen.

"More people to talk to," he said. "Less places to sit."

True enough.

The Red Sox are living life with 17 relief pitchers, carrying a total of 21 pitchers overall on what is a 36-man active roster. It is not the most players the Fenway Park home clubhouse has hosted, with that honor going to the 2011 club which boasted 39 active players. But it is the most pitchers. And because of it, things are a bit different out in that thing they call a bullpen.

Let's start with the impetus behind the overcrowding.

"We're going Winter Ball style. That's how we're going to do it," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora prior to his team's win over the Twins. "The games, instead of four hours, they're going to be five hours. Keep the fans away from the ... We talked about it last night. Obviously it's not perfect but our starters are not giving us enough. We need matchups, we need arms, we're going to try to maximize (Colten) Brewer's cutter and (Mike) Shawaryn's slider and Bobby (Poyner's) fastball up and (Trevor) Kelley's side-arm pitches. We're trying to look for outs. That's something we talked about last night when I finished here and Dave called me this morning and kind of like, what do you think? I was kind of like, you know where I'm at. Luckily I work in an organization that, we're not going to tap out, we're not going to wave the white flag and we're going to keep pushing."

"Just the way we've been going about it, we're down a starter. Not that we want to pull guys early but we're also playing to try and win every game and if that means an early exit, OK. We can't keep killing our regulars," noted Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie. "As much as we trust them in any game we call on them if we keep doing this where are they going to be next year? It all matters. ... We can't keep doing this the way we're doing it and we understand that. We can't ride them to death, which is what we're sort of asked from them."

So, that leads us to the party down in right field.

For one, the seating assignments have been thrown for a loop. Typically each pitcher is assigned a seat in the bullpen and that is theirs to inhabit over the course of a game. Taylor, for instance, has been planted between bullpen catcher Mike Brenley and bullpen coach Craig Bjornson for the majority of the season. But because both non-players were now relegated to seats on the outskirts of the bench, the Sox lefty reliever had two new neighbors -- Ryan Weber on his left and Bobby Poyner to his right.

Once the group took up shop in the bullpen it was business as usual -- if you're used to doing business in the Mexican Winter League. That was evident in some postgame analysis by a few of the participants.

Marcus Walden: "Winter Ball. Same thing. I'm sure Smitty would agree this was Winter Ball-esque."

Josh Smith: "Oh, yeah."

Walden: "Except Winter Ball only has seats for like six people."

Smith: "If you don't see two pitchers were half-inning it's a good one. Imagine the seventh game of the World Series. Matchup, matchup, matchup, but for 60 games. Down there it's win or get fired."

Walden: "We went through three managers in 26 games."

Smith: "We went through four closers in one week. ... But I've never seen that many people in a big-league bullpen."

Walden: "It's not a bad gig."

Next year there won't be this option, with call-ups limited to 28 active players in September, which will be two more than the 26-man total allowed during the regular season. So, soak it in why you can.

"The rules are the rules," Cora said. "Next year, you can't do that. It's probably not the first time that's ever happened in the game, so I don't feel bad about it."

As long as there are enough seats, why not?

This has suddenly become a familiar-looking Mookie Betts

Rob Bradford

This was the plan that worked so well in 2018 and has finally seemingly kicked in for 2019.

Mookie Betts, leadoff hitter, jumping all over the first good pitch he sees. Two pitches. Two home runs.

This time that's exactly what happened during the Red Sox' 6-2 win over the Twins Wednesday night with Betts executing the blueprint to perfection, taking the first two offerings he witnessed from Minnesota starter Jose Berrios over the left-field wall. (For a complete recap, [click here](#).)

"You look at his numbers and I think on the first pitch, he's hitting close to .400 and slugging a lot," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. "It's the nature of him. He's patient. It's nothing, I'm not against it, but I feel that he can do this from the get-go, set the tempo. It was good to see. That's a good pitcher over there, and he likes to get ahead, and that's what Berrios did the first pitch, hit it out of the ballpark, Christian (Vazquez), first pitch hit it the other way. There were some good swings early in counts. I think lately we've been very patient, we've been getting into some bad counts, we've been striking out a lot as a unit, and we don't usually do that. We're the other way around, we push them out of the zone, and today was good, that was good to see. He set the tempo."

Cora's right, Betts' best game is an aggressive one.

Coming into Wednesday night the leadoff hitter was hitting .349 with a 1.132 OPS when putting the first pitch in play. Of his last seven homers (starting Aug. 1), four have come on the first pitch.

"I just know he's a good pitcher," Betts said of Berrios, who had allowed opposing hitters a .439 batting average on balls put in play on the first pitch of an at-bat. "You start falling behind him, he'll put you away quick. That's kind of in general. I just need to be a little more aggressive."

Betts is back in the mindset that worked so well for him a year ago, with the results to prove it. Since the end of July, he is hitting .330 with 12 homers and a 1.006 OPS over 55 games. That will work.

The unexpected problem in this crowded Red Sox bullpen

Rob Bradford

Brian Johnson and Josh Taylor may have made history Tuesday.

If nothing else, it was certainly the rarest of rare Fenway Park moments: two left-handed pitchers were warming up in the home bullpen at the same time.

Why such an occurrence might seem commonplace, it is anything but. For that, you can thank the dimensions of the Sox' bullpen at Fenway.

Because of the tight quarters in the bullpen, any lefty warming up would typically have to work on the mound closest to the field. Any southpaw pitching on the mound closest to the seats would, to be kind, be put in an uncomfortable situation, as Johnson found out Tuesday.

There simply isn't enough room to extend a left-handers arms and legs without the bathroom wall getting in the way.

"Luckily B.J. pitches on the third-base side of the rubber, which allows him ... If he pitched on the first-base side we would have to get somebody else up," said Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie, who spent years experiencing the dynamic as a bullpen catcher and coach. "Last year we had David Price on that side and his hand was just missing the wall. Somebody else had the other side."

"Last year against Baltimore I had to warm up on that mound. Chris Davis was coming up for the fifth hitter and somebody else had started warming up before. But we ended up getting out the inning so I only threw like two pitches. That was the only time I've warmed up on that mound," explained Johnson, who ended up only having to throw about five pitches Tuesday before switching to the other mound. "This time if I did throw all the way over (on the first-base side of the rubber) my foot would have hit the wall."

While Taylor didn't have to experience the close quarters this time around, he was subjected to the dimensions earlier in the season.

"Warming up before me so I wasn't going to kick them off their mound so I tried to make it work but it was still a tight squeeze," he remembered. "On my follow-through, my leg swing after I threw the pitch I kept kicking the wall. It's tough because you're trying and change your mechanics trying to get ready and not kick the wall but then you're going away from what you're doing for however long. It kind of gets in your head that you're changing your mechanics."

While some might suggest this isn't a rarity, LeVangie points out that the idea of warming up two lefties was even more implausible before Fenway Park's bullpen walls became removable in order to accommodate football. That change -- which took place prior to the 2017 season -- allowed for slightly more room for the relievers.

"It is definitely a tight space," said Taylor, one of four lefty relievers the Red Sox are currently carrying on their active roster.

Let's admit it, Darwinzon Hernandez has found his true calling

Rob Bradford

The Red Sox figure to have at least one opening in their starting rotation for 2020. Let's leave Darwinzon Hernandez out of that conversation.

You watch Hernandez pitch, see the results and immediately thoughts of why might be if he did that over six or seven innings every fifth day come to mind. But let's not make this any more complicated than it needs to be. The 22-year-old has found his calling, whether the powers-that-be will officially recognize it or not.

"I like this guy," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora prior to Tuesday night's loss to the Twins. "I like what he's doing right now. Obviously we'll talk about it in the offseason but right now, he's one of the high-leverage relievers on our team. He's a guy who can get lefties and righties out. He has a good mix and he's actually enjoying it. He likes it. He's up to the challenge. He's durable too. Obviously, you have to be careful because there's more than this year. This guys is a big part of what we're trying to do as an organization and be consistent every year and compete for a World Series and he's part of that."

What Hernandez has been doing has to be one of the top storylines of this season.

In 24 1/3 innings as a relief pitcher, he has struck out 45 big league batters, including all three of the Twins he faced Tuesday night. Since Aug. 12, the lefty has fanned 20 over 11 innings, allowing just one run. Hernandez has become the kind of dominant reliever the Red Sox many believed had to be at the top of their to-do list heading into the offseason.

There's the 97 mph four-seam fastball he throws about 75 percent of the time, and then the slider usually fills out the rest of the repertoire. No need for the curve or changeup, both of which had to be implemented in his days as a starter.

He goes and he throws. It suits him.

"I feel I've got my rhythm down and I feel good about my role," Hernandez told WEEI.com. "I would like to start but at the same time, I just want to help the team out. Whatever the team asks me. That's what they need of me right now, that of a reliever and I've really enjoyed my role."

Most everyone wants to start, that's no shock. But there also comes a time where pitchers are defined and make pretty good careers for themselves doing something other than what was initially intended. The Yankees Dellin Betances? He started in 122 minor league games. In the majors? One. It has worked out pretty well for him.

Aroldis Chapman was primarily a starter in Cuba and in his only minor-league season with the Reds before finding his calling in the majors. And the guy just behind the Yankees' closer in the American League save race Cleveland's Brad Hand was a failed starter in Miami and then emerged into a late-inning reliever with the Padres. The list goes on and on and on. It's all just a reminder that when it comes to Hernandez this shouldn't be a square peg in a round hole type of scenario.

The Red Sox have solved one of their concerns going forward -- with Hernandez and Brandon Workman making up an extremely intriguing game-closing, one-two combination. All parties involved should embrace it.

"I'm just here to do my job," Hernandez said. "Obviously, if they give the opportunity to start again, of course, I'll take that. But if they want me to be just a reliever that's something I'll do as well. In the end, I just want to help the team."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Say hello to a 21-man Red Sox pitching staff and goodbye to what we think of as baseball

John Tomase

The Red Sox bullpen looked like a packed rush-hour Green Line train. Crossing the clubhouse meant navigating a toppled Jenga stack of spare lockers. Forget about a magnifying glass -- the four-point type on the official roster required a scanning electron microscope.

"Are we having fun yet?!" Adam Scott's Henry Pollard asked plaintively on the Starz cult classic "Party Down", but in terms of virality, the final three weeks of the Red Sox season are taking on the feel of "Too Many Cooks," the Adult Swim earworm that parodied 1990s sitcom themes -- first by never ending, and then by leaving everyone in a pool of blood (don't ask).

Baseball plans to address the issue of September roster chum next year, when each team will only be able to carry three extra players. The Red Sox seem to be operating with a self-imposed 28-man limit, but just barely, and that is the embarrassing number of pitchers on the roster.

On Wednesday, they recalled four relievers they had already sent home for the winter, bringing the number of active arms to 21. That number again: TWENTY-ONE. That's every healthy pitcher on the 40-man roster except Double-A right-hander Denyi Reyes, who should probably keep his phone on vibrate, just in case.

While some teams might be ashamed to carry so many arms, the Red Sox have little choice. They refuse to concede, which means they need all the help they can get. Outside of left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez, their starting pitchers are either injured (Chris Sale), ineffective (Rick Porcello), or nonexistent.

So, with a little more than three weeks remaining and the playoffs somewhere just shy of a pipe dream, Cora offers no apologies for the parade of pitching changes that will almost certainly be inflicted upon us for the rest of the month.

Buckle up, and bring your traveling neck pillow.

"We're going winter ball style," Cora said. "That's how we're going to do it. The games, instead of four hours, they're going to be five hours. Keep the fans away from the..."

Cora's voice trailed off in recognition that even in jest, he probably shouldn't verbalize just how ugly the rest of the month could get. He knows this is a ridiculous use of the roster, but it is one afforded him by the rules, and the only alternative is to run his most effective relievers into a reef and watch them sink.

That's life on a team with horrible starting pitching. The Red Sox will try to bullpen their way to October, and that requires bodies. Lots and lots of bodies.

So on Wednesday, they summoned right-handers Colten Brewer, Trevor Kelley, and Mike Shawaryn, as well as left-hander Bobby Poyner, who had been freed to head home when the Triple-A season ended on Monday. They join a bullpen that already includes Jhoulys Chacin, Travis Lakins, Ryan Weber, and Hector Velazquez. Outside of the recently signed Chacin, that's a veritable Who's Who of pitchers you probably only vaguely remember, and not necessarily positively.

"We talked about it last night," Cora said. "Obviously, it's not perfect, but our starters are not giving us enough. We need matchups, we need arms, we're going to try to maximize Brewer's cutter and Shawaryn's slider and Bobby's fastball up and Kelley's side-arm pitches. We're trying to look for outs.

"Luckily I work in an organization that, we're not going to tap out, we're not going to wave the white flag and we're going to keep pushing," Cora added.

While the organization's motivation is entirely understandable -- ugly wins are wins just the same -- that doesn't mean we have to feel great about watching it. At a time when baseball should be selling the drama of pennant races, it instead shovels compost in our faces.

The Red Sox, who now run seven lines deep in the bullpen, will be leading that charge unapologetically, though in the 6-2 victory Wednesday night over the Twins, Cora still leaned on stalwarts Josh Taylor, Darwinson Hernandez, and Brandon Workman.

"The rules are the rules," Cora said. "Next year, you can't do that. It's probably not the first time that's ever happened in the game, so I don't feel bad about it."

The box scores are about to get crowded. Given the limitations of their roster, the Red Sox see no other options.

Book details 2017 argument between Dave Dombrowski, John Farrell that led to changes

John Tomase

Manny Machado's rough slide in 2017 didn't just effectively end Dustin Pedroia's career. According to a new book, it also marked the beginning of the end for John Farrell as Red Sox manager when it led to a shouting match with president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski.

The scene is laid out in "Homegrown: How the Red Sox Built a Champion from the Ground Up," by Boston Globe baseball writer Alex Speier. It details the tense confrontation between Farrell and Dombrowski after the Red Sox failed to exact retribution against Machado for his April slide that had left Pedroia injured.

It happened following a 5-2 loss to the Orioles on May 1, 2017. That's the night Baltimore outfielder Adam Jones heard epithets from the center field bleachers, igniting a national outcry over racial tolerance in Boston.

Matt Barnes had already thrown a pitch behind Machado's head in the series, which led to Dylan Bundy drilling Mookie Betts in what the Red Sox considered retaliation. An irate Dombrowski confronted Farrell in his office after the game.

From the book:

"The two got into a shouting match related to that night's game, particularly the team's handling of retribution, and whether the Red Sox needed to settle the score by hitting Machado with a pitch after their best player, Betts, had been drummed. The confrontation became sufficiently intense that Farrell essentially challenged Dombrowski: if the president of baseball operations took such issue with how the club was being run, then he should fire him."

The exchange was loud enough to be audible in the clubhouse, and some players crept closer to better hear the blowup. By the end of it, Farrell knew he was on borrowed time. He and Dombrowski later conducted a more civil discussion, Farrell told Speier, "and that's when we kind of really recognized that maybe things didn't align."

Writes Speier:

"At the end of the exchange, the manager had a new view of his job. If there was any doubt that he wasn't Dombrowski's guy, by the end of the conversation, it was gone."

Players noticed their strained relationship and the impact it had on Farrell's clubhouse standing. "Trouble, trouble, trouble," Xander Bogaerts said of the dynamic in the book. "It definitely ain't good."

Farrell was fired after the 2017 season, paving the way for the hiring of Alex Cora, who won the World Series in 2018.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

With additional bullpen call-ups, Red Sox hope to find strength in numbers

Sean McAdam

Like most teams, the Red Sox added to their roster Sunday, going from the 13 pitchers they had on hand to 17.

For the Sox, it was not a moment too soon, too — they had gone 15 innings with the Los Angeles Angels two nights earlier. The next night, they had planned a bullpen game, and on Sunday, David Price, making his return to the mound for the first time in almost a month, provided just two innings.

With 13 — give or take — pitchers in the bullpen, it seemed like the Sox had enough.

But that was before Rick Porcello stalled out after recording just 12 outs Tuesday, necessitating five innings from the bullpen again.

In the span of four games, then, the bullpen contributed a staggering 31 innings of relief.

And so, Wednesday morning, the Red Sox kept adding. Four more pitchers, including a couple who had ventured home for the offseason following the completion of Pawtucket's season on Labor Day, scrambled to get back and spent the final three and a half weeks in the big leagues.

The arrival of lefty Bobby Poyner and right-handers Mike Shawarzyn, Colten Brewer and Trevor Kelly gave the Red Sox 21 pitchers — all but four of them relievers.

“We’re going winter-ball style,” said a somewhat sheepish Alex Cora. “That’s what we’re going to do. The games usually go four hours; they’re going to be five hours. Obviously, it’s not perfect (to have that many pitchers on hand), but our starters are not giving us enough. We need matchups, we need arms. We’re going to try to maximize Brewer’s cutter and Shawaryn’s slider and Bobby’s fastball up and Kelly’s sidearm (delivery).

“We’re trying to look for outs. Dave (Dombrowski) called me this morning and asked, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘You know where I’m at.’ Luckily, I work for an organization where we’re not going to tap out. We’re not going to wave the white flag. We’re going to keep pushing.”

On the recent West Coast trip, Cora had the luxury of going full throttle with his bullpen usage because he had three off-days in the schedule in the span of eight days. But for the remainder of the season, with 24 games remaining, the Sox have just two more off-days left — and those come in the span of four days.

The Sox will finish with 13 straight games and no rest. So for the rest of the way, the attitude is: the more, the merrier.

“We trust our guys,” said Cora, “but we haven’t been consistent about it. I don’t know — it’s just kind of the way we can pull this off.”

At this point, Cora has little choice. Before Eduardo Rodriguez — easily, the most consistent starter the Sox have had this season — went out and tossed seven shutout innings against the Twins Wednesday night, the team’s starters ERA was 5.03, ranking them 20th out of 30 teams.

And because the starters haven’t given them length and the team has shifted into desperation mode, doing all it can to win every night, the team’s principal high-leverage relievers (Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes, Josh Taylor, Darwinzon Hernandez) have been dangerously overworked.

“It’s not October,” said Cora. “It’s not possible to do it that way the whole time. You’ve got to be responsible. It’s a lot easier (with the increased volume of arms) because you don’t have to pitch certain guys all the time. Although we’re staying in the present, at the same time, you have to take care of those guys (for the future).”

Speaking of the future, this is an approach that won’t be possible a year from now. Next season, for the first time, MLB will limit roster expansion to 28 players in September. That will ensure that both teams play with the same number of players every night — something that’s frequently not the case now — and the overcrowded dugouts and bullpens will be a thing of the past.

But for now? Cora makes no apologies for taking advantage of the current situation.

“The rules are the rules,” said Cora with a shrug. “Next year, you can’t do that. I mean, it’s probably not the first time that (a team has had these many pitchers in September), so I don’t feel bad about it.”

And so, in an overcrowded bullpen, an additional bench was added to the existing dugout structure, providing seating for just about every pitcher.

From a distance, the bullpen resembled an overcrowded subway car. For an overtaxed pitching staff, it promised additional relief.

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 6, Twins 2 – Betts, ERod carry Sox to win

Sean McAdam

ERod delivers again: Almost from the first few weeks of the season, Eduardo Rodriguez has been the most dependable starter in the Red Sox rotation. Following a stretch of games in which the Sox failed to get any length from their starters, Rodriguez turned in seven dominant shutout innings, allowing just five hits — all

singles — while striking out eight. “He’s been solid for a while,” said Alex Cora. “He’s been great this year. We knew stuff-wise, he was up there with the other guys.” Cora recalled showing Rodriguez some tough love in spring training to push him into becoming a more accomplished pitcher and part of that was trying to develop a mindset where he wasn’t satisfied with giving the team just five innings. Part of that transformation was being more aggressive within the strike zone and trusting his stuff. He leads the Sox with 17 wins and lowered his ERA to 3.81

Betts swings early and connects: It would be difficult to be more efficient with the bat than Mookie Betts was Wednesday night. In the first inning he swung at the first pitch he saw from Twins starter Jose Berrios and homered into the Monster Seats. An inning later, with two runners on, he swung at the first pitch of the at-bat again, and drove the ball over the Monster Seats. Two pitches, two swings, two homers and four RBI, making Betts the first hitter to homer on the first two pitches he saw in a game since Jimmy Rollins did so with the Phillies against the Pirates on Aug. 25, 2009. “He’s a good pitcher,” said Betts of Berrios. “You start falling behind him and he’ll put you away quick so I figured I needed to be a little more aggressive.” And still Betts wasn’t done, later delivering a run-scoring single and finishing with four hits and five RBI. Betts now has 25 homers this season.

Cora reluctantly goes to top relievers: The Sox led 6-0 after seven innings and this looked like a night in which the manager could stay away from his high-leverage arms at the back end of the bullpen and give them a night of rest. No such luck. After Ryan Brasier took over in the top of the eighth and quickly allowed a single and a two-run homer, Cora had to shift gears. He went with Josh Taylor to get the final two outs in the eighth. In the ninth, Darwinson Hernandez was tabbed to close it out, but after recording a strikeout for the first out of the inning, the lefty allowed back-to-back walks, forcing closer Brandon Workman into the game. Thanks to a game-ending double play, Workman only had to throw four pitches, but still, a six-run lead turned unsafe pretty quickly.

TURNING POINT

Rodriguez got himself in trouble just once — in the fourth when an infield single and two walks filled the bases. But the lefty settled down to retire catcher Willians Astudilo on a flyout to right, leaving the bases loaded. The Twins never again got a man in scoring position against Rodriguez.

ONE UP

Brock Holt: The second baseman had two singles in four at-bats and extended his hitting streak to five consecutive games.

ONE DOWN

J.D. Martinez: Arguably the hottest hitter in the game cooled off for a night, going 0-for-4.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“Eddie did a great job today. You can’t ask for anything more than what he’d been doing. With all the injuries that have gone on, he’s kind of stepped in and been that anchor that we need.” Mookie Betts on Eduardo Rodriguez.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

- * The Sox have homered in 34 of their last 36 games, with 68 homers.
- * The Red Sox are 41-20 when they have multiple homers in a game.
- * When their starter goes seven innings, the Sox are 14-4 including 9-0 in the last nine.
- * Christian Vazquez had two hits for his 33rd multi-hit game, the most for a Sox catcher since Jason Varitek in 2005.

UP NEXT

The Red Sox and Twins play the final game of their series Thursday at 7:10 p.m. with RHP Nathan Eovaldi (1-0, 6.23) vs. LHP Martin Perez (9-6, 4.89)

* ***The Athletic***

The Red Sox keep playing hard, but that shouldn't mask that big change is needed

Steve Buckley

History isn't going to look kindly on the 2019 Red Sox, and that's as it should be. They showed up in spring training practically flashing their World Series rings in people's faces, with too much swagger and too much Alex Cora brazenly asking if we really need to turn the page, and that was the first sign that bad things were going to happen to this team. Turns out the Bill Belichick way is the right way: The arrival of a new season makes the last season, championship or no championship, about as relevant as the Warren Harding administration.

But before proceeding to the main purpose of this missive — which is this roster needs a good ripping apart, and I don't think Dave "I'd really rather not get into that" Dombrowski is the guy to do the ripping — let's say this about the 2019 slip-slidin'-away Red Sox: They are a likable team. They are a fun team. And perhaps most importantly, given they still have a kinda, sorta (but not really) chance of climbing back into the wild-card hunt, it's a team that continues to go about its business with purpose and dedication. If it turns out there's a reboot of the Great Chicken and Beer Fiasco of 2011 lurking in the shadows, it'll inevitably spill out once the season is over. But that's for later on. After Wednesday's win, the Red Sox are 5 1/2 games out of the wild card, which is another way of saying it's time for football, but on Aug. 13 they were eight games out of the wild card.

That the Sox have cut 2 1/2 games off the lead in three weeks is hardly breathtaking, so don't wait up for one of those cutesie NESN mini-docs. But it does mean they haven't rolled over. And save for the annual summertime David Price whine-tasting party, there hasn't been any complainin' and kvetching, pregame or postgame.

Mookie Betts still flashes a rookie's excitement every time he hits a home run. Jackie Bradley Jr. still makes the great grabs. Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts: Offensively, one of the best left-side infields in Red Sox history. J.D. Martinez: One of the best pure hitters in the game. Cora: He should be brought before one of those tough-guy Boston Municipal Court judges after failing to get Martinez the hell out of right field in the ninth inning of that game in Anaheim that the Sox eventually won in 15 innings, but he keeps the clubhouse calm and his players respect him.

So, yes, there's a lot to like about these 2019 Red Sox, even though nobody will remember it.

Red Sox fans should especially hope Red Sox owners John Henry and Tom Werner don't remember it. The worst thing that could happen would be for Henry and Werner to believe the Sox would be in playoff contention if only Chris Sale and Price weren't brittle and Rick Porcello weren't having one of the worst seasons of his career. Technically, that's true: If Sale, Price and Porcello were having 2018-like seasons, the Fenway Park cleaning crew would be ironing the festive postseason bunting this very moment and the hammer-and-nail folks would be assembling the auxiliary press box out in right field.

But if Sale is always going to be brittle — and his new deal doesn't even kick in until 2020 — that's a big problem. If Price can't return in 2020 and be an ace, a real ace, not a sometimes ace, that, too, is a problem. As for Porcello, give him one year and hope he turns it around. See where we're headed here? This is a team in transition, which means the offseason is a good time to thank Mr. Betts for the talent and professionalism he's brought to the franchise and trade the post-2020 free agent.

It boggles the mind to think Henry and Werner see Dombrowski as the guy who can be left in charge of a rebuild. He delivered a championship in 2018 in part because he signed the right free agents, traded the right prospects and made the right in-season acquisitions (including Steve Pearce, who wound up as World Series MVP but shouldn't have been, and I'm thinking of you, David Price), but really: Would you put Dombrowski in charge of a rebuild? I'd really rather not get into that ... but I will: The man who signed Sale to a five-year, \$145 million contract extension, and who signed right-hander Nathan Eovaldi to a four-year, \$67.5 million contract, shouldn't be in charge of fixing those mistakes.

If you can follow the twisty phraseology here, it's not a bad thing to be bad before being good again. The 2013 Red Sox won a World Series after being bad. The Red Sox were bad again in 2014 and a little less bad in 2015, and this was followed by two fool's gold playoff runs during the Farrell Malaise. And then the Red Sox won it all in 2018, Boston's fourth championship this century.

The Red Sox played some good baseball Wednesday night at Fenway, with Betts socking two home runs and Eduardo Rodriguez pitching seven shutout innings in a 6-2 victory over the Minnesota Twins.

Again, they won't roll over. Good for them. Now get the season done so ownership can figure out which people they can put in charge of figuring out how to rebuild the roster.

Absurd 17-man Red Sox bullpen is the final straw for a pitching strategy that must change next year

Chad Jennings

As their final desperate act, the Red Sox called up everyone. They moved six portable lockers into the middle of the clubhouse, recalled four players who'd been sent home for the winter and played Wednesday's game with a 21-man pitching staff, 17 of them relievers. If Heath Hembree is activated in the next three weeks, the Red Sox will have an 18-man bullpen, two-and-a-half times the seven-man standard.

"The games, instead of four hours, they're going to be five hours," manager Alex Cora said. "Keep the fans away from the ..."

Cora's voice trailed off. He seemed to know his joke might hit too close to home. Fans don't show up to see a manager mix and match for five or six innings a night, but that's what it had come to for Cora, and when the Red Sox are finished grasping at every straw imaginable this season, they'll have to find a more sustainable fix this winter. They quite literally can't do this next year. The rules won't allow it, as September roster sizes will max out at 28 next season. They'll have to build their pitching staff to handle the hard times, not just hope for another best-case scenario that might never materialize, because their perceived strength became their greatest weakness this year.

The Red Sox rotation was supposed to set them apart, and it certainly did that. Of the 11 teams with a rotation ERA above 5.00 heading into Wednesday, the Red Sox were the only one with a winning record. They'd kept their heads above water thanks to an elite lineup and a better-than-advertised bullpen, but it was telling that Rick Porcello's four-inning dud Tuesday sent them scrambling for last-minute reinforcements. Colten Brewer, Mike Shawarzyn, Trevor Kelley and Bobby Poyner had literally been told there would be no more September call-ups. Their Triple-A season ended Monday, and they were free to go home. Then Tuesday's game happened, and the Red Sox fired up the Bat signal, recalling all four just to survive this final month. The only 40-man pitcher they left behind was in Double A. Everyone else was up.

"Starters are not giving us enough," Cora said. "We need matchups. We need arms."

That story had been told many times this season, but the Red Sox had found a new way to illustrate the point.

More important than what they do to survive these next few weeks will be what they do to improve in the next four months. That means a more concrete plan for the bullpen, another proven starter for the rotation and additional depth to weather the storm of 162 games. It will have to be an offseason of lessons learned.

This year's bullpen strategy was flawed for two reasons: It depended upon the rotation carrying a heavier workload, and it was hypothetical in terms of how well relievers could handle high-leverage situations in hard-to-define roles. Matt Barnes was occasionally brilliant — he has the second-most strikeouts per nine innings in the majors — but he was also burned out by facing teams' best hitters night after night. It seemed a worthwhile strategy on paper — he'd proven capable of getting those hitters out — but it didn't work in practice. The Red Sox acknowledged as much late in the year when they made Brandon Workman a traditional closer while attempting to ease Barnes' stress level. They finally added this absurd number of relievers to ease the workload on unexpected go-to guys like Marcus Walden and Josh Taylor.

"It's not possible to do it that way the whole time," Cora said. "For how cool it looks and everybody kind of like wants it to be, you have to be responsible."

The Red Sox rotation strategy, too, was faulty for a pair of reasons: Lack of performance and a lack of depth. Eduardo Rodriguez became a source of stability, a seemingly significant step for the youngest starter on the staff, but his veteran cohorts took their lumps. Porcello has the highest ERA of any qualified big-league starter. David Price pitched well when healthy but rarely worked deep into games. Nathan Eovaldi is healthy now but spent much of the year on the injured list. Chris Sale pitched to a losing record and a career-worst ERA, but his strikeout rate and WHIP were among the best in baseball (he also went down with an elbow injury but avoided surgery). When Brian Johnson got hurt, Steven Wright got suspended and Hector Velazquez struggled out of the gate, the Red Sox lost the rotation depth meant to fill the gaps beyond their top five. It spiraled from there. Hence the Red Sox having literally too many relievers to fit on the bullpen bench Wednesday night. Thirteen sat side by side with hardly any space between them, and it just wasn't enough.

All year, the Red Sox always needed more pitching. On Wednesday they called up, essentially, every pitcher who was readily available.

Still, they need more.

*** *The Minnesota Star Tribune***

Jose Berrios struggles from the start as Twins fall to Red Sox 6-2

Phil Miller

The Twins have discovered an ingenious solution to their Jose Berrios problem: Judge him by the balls that don't get hit hard.

Mookie Betts ambushed the Twins righthander with a pair of first-pitch home runs to stake the Red Sox to a 4-0 lead. Berrios allowed two more runs over five-plus innings, and Minnesota limped off with a 6-2 loss at Fenway Park. Minnesota shed a game off its AL Central lead, now 5½ games after the Indians held off the White Sox.

It was the latest post-All-Star frustration for Berrios, who owned a 3.00 ERA before the break and a puzzling 5.37 ERA after it. But if there's a pattern, the Twins say they don't see it; if there's any cause for alarm, it hasn't penetrated the Twins' clubhouse.

"He's been throwing the ball really well on the year and as of late, and he did a lot of things well [Wednesday]," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said after Berrios surrendered eight hits, issued three walks and recorded 15 outs. "His stuff was really good. He was crisp. He made a lot of pitches and executed the way he wanted to."

Well, perhaps not to Betts, the reigning American League MVP who is having a pretty solid follow-up season. The outfielder was clearly waiting for a fastball over the plate on Berrios' first pitch, and when he got it, he skied it into the Green Monster seats, a jolt to open Berrios' night.

An inning later, after a Christian Vazquez single and a walk to ninth-place hitter Jackie Bradley Jr., Betts was lying in wait again. Here came a curveball, center-cut, and there it went, more than 400 feet over all three rows atop the wall. Suddenly, 10 Red Sox had batted, four had scored, and the game already felt all but over.

Berrios stuck it out for three more innings before allowing the first three hitters to reach in the sixth, with Vazquez serving a run-scoring double down the left field line to knock the righthander out of the game. But Berrios said he wasn't discouraged by picking up his eighth loss of the year. He agreed with Baldelli: Everything is fine except the results.

"Right now, I'm missing a few pitches here and there," Berrios said after falling to 0-3 in three career Fenway Park starts. "We're not making any big changes or anything like that. It's just going out there and trying to locate my pitches better."

In one way, he's right — there is plenty of time to recover the form that has made Berrios a two-time All-Star. Three-plus weeks remain in the season, and he showed signs of righting himself last weekend in Chicago.

But the playoffs are approaching, the Twins aim to be involved in them, and they need Berrios to pitch like a Game 1 ace.

Baldelli sounded confident that Berrios will be there when the Twins need him.

"Was it his absolute best, most crisp start of the year? No," Baldelli said. "But he threw the ball well for long stretches, and you don't miss bats like that against a good team like the Red Sox by mistake, by accident. He threw the ball fine."

Just not as well as Red Sox lefthander Eduardo Rodriguez, whose own first inning also revealed the sort of night he would have. Rodriguez used a changeup to whiff Max Kepler, blew a fastball by Jorge Polanco for another strikeout, then caught Nelson Cruz looking on another inside fastball.

From there, Rodriguez, who has allowed 22 home runs this season, limited the Twins to nothing but singles. He departed after allowing five singles in seven shutout innings, striking out eight and inducing two double plays. The Twins left the bases loaded in the fourth inning after a pair of Rodriguez walks, but Willians Astudillo flew out to right to end the Twins' biggest threat.

Only after the lefthander departed did the Twins' power-hitting lineup finally show up. After Cruz singled to open the eighth inning, Eddie Rosario, who had not homered since Aug. 18 — 60 at-bats ago — connected off Red Sox reliever Ryan Brasier, his 28th homer of the season.

*** *Associated Press***

Betts (2 HRs, 4 hits) leads Red Sox to 6-2 win over Twins

Mookie Betts knows the Boston Red Sox are running out of time to be patient.

The reigning AL MVP homered on the first two pitches he saw from Jose Berrios on Wednesday night, collecting four hits and five RBI in all to help Boston beat the Minnesota Twins 6-2.

"I just know he's a good pitcher and if you start falling behind, he's going to put you away quick," Betts said after the Red Sox won for the 12th time in 17 games to remain 5 1/2 back in the race for the second AL wild card. "That's kind of the general thought: You've got to be aggressive."

The game was delayed 47 minutes at the start by a rainstorm, then two Twins outfielders took the wrong positions for the first inning.

It got even stranger at the end.

Willians Astudillo was hit on the forearm while swinging in the ninth, and he was initially called out before returning to complete his at-bat. Then plate umpire Ramon DeJesus was hit on the left hand by a pitch, sending his pitch counter flying; while the Boston trainer was tending to him, second base ump CB Bucknor ran off to the umpire's room to get a chest protector and was still missing when the game resumed after DeJesus decided to stay in the game.

Bucknor returned for the next batter.

Meanwhile, Minnesota put two on with one out before Brandon Workman got Nelson Cruz on a game-ending 1-4-3 double play. The AL Central-leading Twins, who had won seven of eight, fell to 5 1/2 games ahead of second-place Cleveland in the division.

"It was obviously not a crisp inning," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. "There was some weird stuff going on."

MOOKIE'S NIGHT

Betts homered into the first row of the Green Monster seats on the first pitch from Berrios (11-8), then sent one over the seats and out of the ballpark with two on in the second to make it 4-0. Betts added a single down the third base line in the fourth and hit an RBI single in the sixth.

He came up again in the eighth and made his only out, on a line drive back at the mound that pitcher Brusdar Graterol caught before it hit him in the gut.

Berrios pitched five-plus innings, allowing six runs on eight hits and three walks while striking out six. It was the second-most runs he's permitted this season, but Baldelli said his outing wasn't that bad.

"I think it came down to Mookie's really good at what he does," the manager said.

E-ROD

Eduardo Rodriguez (17-5) allowed only five singles in seven shutout innings, striking out eight while walking four and hitting a batter. The Red Sox are 12-1 when he starts at Fenway Park.

Ryan Brasier relieved Rodriguez to start the eighth and immediately gave up a single to Cruz and a two-run homer to Eddie Rosario before Workman ended it in four pitches.

PLAYING BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS

Astudillo threw out Mitch Moreland from one knee on a dribbler in front of the plate in the second inning.

Berrios did even better, diving to stop Andrew Benintendi's checked-swing nubber down the third base line in the fifth, and throwing from one knee as he fell away from the play. He wound up flat on his back before third baseman Miguel Sano came over to congratulate him, putting his arm around the pitcher as they walked off the field together.

FOUL PLAY

Max Kepler, who was listed as the center fielder, and Jake Cave, who was supposed to be in right, switched positions for the first inning.

"It was a miscommunication," Baldelli said.

The manager said one piece of paper had them listed that way, but the players never got the message that the plan had changed by game time. They returned to the right positions for the bottom of the second.

PLAYING 21

The Red Sox had 21 pitchers on the roster for the game, with 17 of them in the bullpen in case they were needed. They used five pitchers in all.

"Obviously, it's not perfect, but our starters are not giving us enough," manager Alex Cora said. "We need matchups. We need arms."

Major League Baseball allows teams to expand their rosters as of Sept. 1, and Boston's Triple-A team finished its season on Tuesday night. The rules are changing in 2020 to allow for only more limited call-ups, but for now, Cora said, "The rules are the rules."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Twins: RHP Sam Dyson (biceps soreness) has returned to the Twin Cities. He was on the 10-day injured list in August for the same problem. ... INF Marwin Gonzalez (abdomen) is not yet ready to return, Baldelli said. Gonzalez has not played since Aug. 27. ... Kepler (upper chest soreness) left in the seventh. Baldelli said he thought it was a muscle spasm. ... SS Jorge Polanco had a sore knuckle on his right middle finger and left in the eighth inning.

Red Sox: INF Michael Chavis (left shoulder sprain), on the IL since Aug. 12, was scheduled to swing a bat.

UP NEXT

Twins: LHP Martin Perez (9-6) pitches the series finale Thursday night.

Red Sox: RHP Nathan Eovaldi (1-0) starts for Boston.