

The Boston Red Sox Sunday, September 8, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Yankees finally get slugging to beat back Red Sox

Julian McWilliams, The Boston Globe

The Red Sox have had to mix and match in their final effort to save their season. Lineup and bullpen creativity has become the team's model. Understandably so. But in Saturday afternoon's game against the New York Yankees at Fenway Park, the Red Sox pulled on the creativity string too much, outsmarting themselves.

With Jackie Bradley Jr. struggling at the plate and lefty J.A. Happ on the mound for the Yankees, the Sox put Sam Travis at designated hitter, which meant J.D. Martinez would shift to right and Mookie Betts to center.

It proved costly in the 5-1 loss.

After the Sox tossed three consecutive 1-2-3 innings to start a bullpen day against the No. 2 offense in baseball, DJ LeMahieu singled against Ryan Weber to lead off the fourth. With one out after an Aaron Judge strikeout, however, Didi Gregorius laced a sinker toward Martinez in right field. He lost it in the sun, and it put Gregorius and LeMahieu in scoring position.

"This place, 4 o'clock game, is the worst," Martinez said. "The worst I've seen. You pray for clouds pretty much."

Point taken, but the very next play had nothing to do with the sun. Colten Brewer took over for Weber, and what should have been a Gary Sanchez pop out to short right field became a double that bounced into the stands, making it 2-0.

It appeared Martinez had a bead on it, but he veered back once he saw Brock Holt running out from second.

"It's a long run for me," Martinez said "I feel like Brock's got the best read on it. It's going to be a tough play for me. It's one of those plays you can't call right away. If I could go back in time, I would have said 'I got it.'"

Said manager Alex Cora: "As an outfielder, you need to take charge on that one."

Edwin Encarnacion then homered, highlighting a four-run inning the Red Sox (76-66) never overcame.

Bradley is hitting just .198 against lefties. Travis is hitting .241, but is 1 for his last 18 after an 0 for 2 on Saturday. Happ hadn't had the most success against lefties this season, hitters slashing .250/.315/.409 against him before Saturday, but Cora noted he's been good against them recently.

Those were all factors the Red Sox considered. They're looking for offense, Cora said. But this was the day — in a bullpen game — that they needed defense. Had Betts been in right and Bradley in center, this might have been a different outcome.

"We're trying to find ways," Cora said. "Sometimes we get caught up in the platoon thing. We do feel like Brock has been putting together good at-bats against lefties. He's been showing it. It's one of those things where we've been looking for ways to score runs."

The Sox offense couldn't find its rhythm. Happ allowed just two hits and a walk, pitching into the seventh.

In the end, it came down to defensive miscues by the Sox in a game they could have grabbed.

"It's tough," Martinez said on the day. "We just have to worry about tomorrow and keep chugging away."

Random thoughts while waiting for Red Sox, MLB to get ratings shellacking

Dan Shaughnessy, *The Boston Globe*

Baseball thoughts while the Yankees are in town for a four-game series that looked "big" when we first saw the schedule last year. That was before Jhoulys Chacin and Travis Lakins were selected to start the first two games for Boston.

- Baseball, and the Red Sox in particular, should prepare for a television ratings beatdown of epic proportions when the Sox and Yankees go up against the Patriots and Steelers on national television Sunday night. This is going to be Secretariat at the Belmont, a Nielsen thrashing like we've never seen. Baseball and the Red Sox thoroughly deserve it. MLB shows contempt for its remaining (mostly older) fans, force-feeding four-hour games on a regular basis. Any league that allows Boston to feature 21 men in the bullpen deserves to be humbled. Alex Cora joked about it when the call-ups were announced Tuesday, saying "The games, instead of four hours, they're going to be five hours," but this is no joking matter. The Sox are certainly obligated to do everything they can while they are still mathematically in contention, and the expanded roster rules are being changed next season, but that doesn't spare us from this soft parade of pitching changes over the next couple of weeks. The analytic-obsessed Sox play the longest games in the majors (3:24, seven minutes longer than the next-worst team). They attempt to strike out every batter, work every count to 3 and 2, nibble and feature all pitches against .180 hitters, step off and look into their hats whenever there's a man on second, and generally suck the life out of the viewing experience. Other than that, everything at the old ballyard is just swell.

- NESN loves cheesy graphics. I have an idea for a new one. Show us a map of American League standings highlighting all the teams bound for the playoffs. Then have the upbeat manager of the Red Sox operate the "Cora-Strator" underlining all probable playoff teams. Cora can use a Sharpie to draw a loop around Boston, indicating that the path to the 2019 World Series is likely to pass over Fenway Park. This would be NESN gold. Better even than the "Heat Zone".

- The Yankees have a lot more at stake in these games than the Red Sox. The Yanks went into Saturday's play in a dead heat with the Astros for best record in the American League (92-50). Everything points to a New York-Houston ALCS and home-field advantage could make a big difference.

- There was a little buzz in the Fenway stands in the later innings of Saturday's loss. Fans were on their phone buzzing about the Patriots' acquisition of Antonio Brown.

- John Smoltz was in town for television duties and relayed this story from 2009 when started the season with the Red Sox: "After they let me know I went to the Cardinals. I was really struggling and couldn't figure it out. Chris Carpenter came up to me and said, 'I know what you are throwing on every pitch.' He explained to me what it was that I was doing and in the next game I went out and struck out seven straight batters. It is the all-time Cardinal record and you could win a lot of bets on that one. I knew I wasn't going to get the eighth guy. It was Tony Gwynn Jr. and Tony Gwynn owned me and junior hit a ball up the middle."

- The champions of the Jimmy Fund were at Fenway en masse for their gold ribbon ceremony as part of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

- J.D. Martinez (two bad plays in right Saturday) should stick with the Red Sox. He is never going to be a good big league outfielder, which means the National League is out of the question if Martinez opts out of his Sox deal.

- Red Sox CEO Sam Kennedy Friday traveled to Beverly, where he presented a 2018 championship ring to ALS warrior Pete Frates.
- Trot Nixon was at Fenway with his wife Kathryn and two sons, Chase and Luke. Chase Nixon, who was born Sept. 11, 2001, is a high school senior who plays football and baseball in Wilmington, N.C.
- In case you missed it, Friday's New York Daily News cover featured a photo of Aaron Judge and a giant headline, "Hunt For Dead October — Yankees out to bury rival Boston's playoff hopes." Over at the New York Post, columnist Ken Davidoff suggested the Yanks would benefit by tanking against Boston in an effort to get the reeling Red Sox into a five-game series. "The Yankees would absolutely maul the Red Sox," Davidoff wrote.
- The owner of one of the local parking lots near Fenway told me that Friday night marked the first time he did not sell out his lot for a Red Sox-Yankees game in 20 years.
- Why does Dave Dombrowski keep spending big money for starting pitchers when he can trot out 13 different pitchers in the first two games against the Yankees?
- Bill Fitch went into the Basketball Hall of Fame this weekend. The honor was overdue. How does a former Celtic coach fit into a baseball column? Easy. The onetime Celtics boss was Larry Bird's first professional coach and won a championship with the 1981 Celtics. Fitch cut his teeth coaching basketball and baseball at Creighton University, where one of his young pitchers was Hall of Famer Bob Gibson.
- Tony La Russa is brokering a meeting between Bob Cousy and Bill Belichick.
- Congratulations to Abby Murphy and her husband, Eamon, who welcomed Emeric Laighean Murphy to Red Sox Nation Friday night.
- Happy 70th birthday to Red Sox/Globe owner John Henry, who hits the magic number this Friday the 13th.

Xander Bogaerts keeps putting up numbers worth celebrating

Julian McWilliams, *The Boston Globe*

Xander Bogaerts's first homer of his career came on Sept. 7, 2013, off former Yankees pitcher Jim Miller. Exactly six years later against the Yankees, Bogaerts tallied the 1,000th hit of his career.

That those two milestones came against the Yankees is certainly a storyline. As Bogaerts said after the Sox' 5-1 loss to New York on Saturday, he's come a long way since his days growing up in Aruba. But what made this day particularly special is that he accomplished both those feats on his mother, Sandra Brown's birthday.

"They [his family] watched the game at their house," Bogaerts said. "They had a lot of friends over. They texted me today and said 'Hey you got to do it today.' My numbers aren't that good against [Yankees] starter J.A. Happ, but at the end of the day I got one and it was nice."

Bogaerts, 26, is just the third Red Sox player to reach the mark before turning 27, joining Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr. Both are in the Hall of Fame.

Additionally, Bogaerts and Rafael Devers led the majors with 49 doubles entering Saturday. There have been eight 50-double seasons in Red Sox history, but never two in a single season.

The only teams since 1947 with multiple players hitting 50-plus doubles in a season are the 2000 Rockies and 1996 Mariners. No team has ever featured two players with 30-plus homers and 50-plus doubles in a season. Bogaerts has 31 homers, Devers 29.

“Once you’re that close to something like that,” Bogaerts said, “just go ahead and grab it. Some people have some different views on that. Those are the views I have.

Welcome addition

Didi Gregorius didn’t have much to work with when he faced Jhoulys Chacin on Friday evening. He had just 11 career at-bats against him, and none since 2016. Chacin was the Opening Day starter for the Milwaukee Brewers, but was released by them on Aug. 26.

Gregorius struck out against Chacin to end the first in Friday night’s Sox win. Saturday, he still didn’t have much to say when asked what made the righthander effective.

“He threw me all fastballs,” Gregorius said. “I don’t know much about him so far.”

Chacin steamrolled through all six Yankee batters in two innings. In addition to Gregorius, Chacin struck out Aaron Judge, Gary Sanchez, and Edwin Encarnacion, setting the tone for the rest of the bullpen.

“He was good yesterday [Friday],” Cora said. “That was a good slider. Good fastball command. He threw strikes. He struggled with command with the Brewers. It’s a tough lineup [he got through].”

Cora said there’s a good chance Chacin can pitch an inning Sunday.

Lin’s lost season

Tzu-Wei Lin was back in the clubhouse to get checked out by the medical staff before going into the offseason.

The 25-year-old utility player suffered a concussion on Aug. 26 when he crashed into the left field wall at Pawtucket trying to make a catch.

Counting the minors, Lin played in only 72 games and had just 272 plate appearances this season because of injuries to his left knee and right shoulder, and then the concussion.

“It was a bad year for me with injuries,” he said. “But sometimes that happens. I feel great now and it’s good to see everybody here.”

Lin had two stints with the major league team and was 4 for 20 in 13 games. He was a helpful player in 2018, playing games at four positions and posting a .744 OPS in 37 games.

The Sox are hopeful to get Lin cleared to play for Taiwan in the Premier12 tournament, an Olympic qualifier, in November. Taiwan is hosting one of the first-round brackets.

“Most likely he’s going to play in that tournament,” Cora said. “We just have to make sure he’s OK.”

Another Sox prospect, infielder Bobby Dalbec, could play for the United States.

Around the minors

In the Class A Carolina League North Division championship, the Salem Red Sox rallied and scored three runs in the ninth inning of Game 4 against the Wilmington Blue Rocks, but the Blue Rocks responded with a walk-off in the bottom part of that frame to win it, 5-4. That knots the series at 2-2, and forces a decisive Game 5 Sunday afternoon.

The Lowell Spinners will also play Sunday afternoon vs. Brooklyn in Game 1 of the championship series in the Class A short-season New York-Penn League.

Worthy salute

Both Yankee and Red Sox players wore yellow wristbands Saturday as the Sox honored Childhood Cancer Awareness month at Fenway. The crowd greeted children to large cheers as they made their way onto the field. Morgan Platt, a 15-year-old cancer fighter from Avon, Conn., threw out the first pitch to Josh Taylor . . . David Price threw off flat ground on Saturday.

Red Sox' Darwinson Hernandez making quick work of learning curve

Peter Abraham, *The Boston Globe*

The Red Sox did a subtly smart thing last week when they gave Jhoulys Chacin a locker in their Fenway Park clubhouse next to rookie Darwin Hernandez.

Both pitchers are from Venezuela and Hernandez, 22, grew up watching the 31-year-old Chacin on television. Now he has a chance to talk to him in person about pitching, life in the majors, and what it takes to succeed.

After Chacin made his debut with the Red Sox on Friday night with two perfect innings against the Yankees, I asked about his initial impressions of Hernandez.

The answer was a surprise.

"He's good, man," Chacin said. "He reminds me of [Josh] Hader. He throws that raised fastball that some guys just can't catch up. I talk to him a lot since I've been here. I want him to stay healthy and keep doing what he's doing."

Outside of perhaps Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman, Hader is the most fearsome lefty reliever in baseball. The two-time All-Star has averaged 15.3 strikeouts per nine innings in his career.

Chacin played with Hader on the Brewers for two seasons and didn't make that comparison lightly. That's how much he thinks of Hernandez.

Sox manager Alex Cora is in that camp, too.

"It's a great compliment. Hader's one of the best, if not the best, lefty reliever in the big leagues," he said. "I know Darwinson is not going to get caught up in that. He's going to keep working. If the fastball plays like that for the rest of his career, we'll take that."

Like Hader, Hernandez is not afraid to challenge hitters upstairs with his fastball and uses a slider as his secondary pitch. He has a curveball, too, but doesn't throw it often as a reliever.

Hernandez has struck out 43 in 23⅓ innings since the Red Sox called him up after the All-Star break and put him in the bullpen.

That's where the Sox plan to keep him, too. Hernandez had a shaky start against the Rangers in June, walking five in three innings but also striking out seven. It wasn't too long after that he began working in relief in the minors.

Hernandez is 94-96 miles per hour with his fastball, but still needs to cut down on his walks and improve the command of his slider.

“There’s a learning curve and he wasn’t as consistent throwing strikes early on. It took us a while,” Cora said. “There’s always stuff that comes into play: fielding your position, slowing down the running game and all that stuff.

“He’s shown he can handle lefties and shown he can handle righties. He can bounce back. There’s a learning period. Not only for him but for us, too.”

Cora recalled a day in spring training when Hernandez threw a fastball and Sandy Leon called for a curveball on the next pitch. Hernandez shook him off, wanting to throw a slider, and the pitch got hammered.

That led to a conversation in the dugout about pitch sequencing.

A few days later, Leon tested Hernandez by calling for a slider after a fastball and Hernandez shook him off to get to a curveball.

“He understands,” Cora said.

Hernandez is a big dude at 6 feet 2 inches and 245 pounds. But he’s not somebody you immediately notice in the clubhouse. Hernandez is usually seated at his locker or is off to the side talking with Chacin or Eduardo Rodriguez about pitching.

“You talk to the veterans and they’re very happy with the way he goes about his business and that’s very important,” Cora said.

The Sox have been gradually giving Hernandez tougher situations in games and seeing how he responds to working on back-to-back days.

He was a starter for 4½ years in the minors, so the nuances that are important to relievers, like holding runners, are new to him. But that’s where talking to veteran players like Chacin will help.

“Just being around here and doing everything right throughout the day as far as preparation, all the things it takes to make you a big leaguer, he’s doing it,” Cora said.

Hernandez has faced the Yankees four times this season and hasn’t allowed an earned run in 4⅓ innings.

“Good arm. Obviously a talented pitcher,” New York manager Aaron Boone said before his team beat the Sox, 5-1, on Saturday. “The stuff is real. When he’s in the strike zone, he’s a challenge.”

Unless you count what Brandon Workman has done this season, the Sox haven’t developed a closer since Jonathan Papelbon. Hernandez could be the next. It’s certainly a better way to fill that spot than overpaying for a free agent or making a trade.

Hernandez laughed when asked about the comparison to Hader. He’s just happy to be the youngest player on the Sox roster and getting a chance.

“I want to pitch and help this team,” he said. “But I am glad [Chacin] said something nice about me.”

Twins expected more power this season — just not this much

Peter Abraham, *The Boston Globe*

The Minnesota Twins were 12th in the American League with 166 home runs last season, 27 below the league average and a whopping 101 fewer than the league-leading Yankees.

They took steps to improve that over the offseason by signing free agent designated hitter Nelson Cruz and power-hitting second baseman Jonathan Schoop. They also snapped up first baseman C.J. Cron on a waiver claim.

The internal projections were that the Twins would hit more home runs; that seemed certain.

“You have high expectations but you don’t put specifics on it,” manager Rocco Baldelli said. “You don’t think about anything like that, or at least I did not and I don’t know that anyone on our staff really did.

“We thought we could have a good offense. They’ve been incredible.”

The Twins went into the weekend with 272 home runs, a major league record for a season with 22 games still to play. They also led the majors with 5.89 runs per game.

“I looked at the lineup offensively before spring started and I was like, this team can and probably will do damage, as long as everyone stays healthy and in the right mind-set,” said outfielder Max Kepler, who leads the Twins with 36 homers. “It was a bunch of guys that hit for power and have good at-bats, and we’ve proved that.”

We pause here to acknowledge that there is something clearly different about the baseball this season that has led to a surge of home runs.

Along with the Twins, the Dodgers and Padres have already set franchise records for home runs, and 10 other teams, including the Red Sox, have a chance to join them. Home runs are up roughly 22 percent this season and that’s not normal.

Triple A teams switched to a major league ball this season and home runs soared by 58 percent.

Whether it was intentional on the part of Major League Baseball or not, the ball is jumping out of parks and it’s more than hitters adjusting the angle of the swings. It’s Arena League baseball and kind of ridiculous at times when routine fly balls land in the seats.

Still, credit the Twins with taking advantage of the environment that now exists.

“I’m not surprised. I knew we’d hit more with the changes they made to bring me in, C.J. Cron and the other guys,” said the 38-year-old Cruz, who has 35 homers this season, his sixth consecutive season with at least that many.

“They put more thunder in the lineup and that increased the confidence in the entire team. For me, the most remarkable part is that we’ve been able to be consistent for a long period of time.”

The Twins hit 50 home runs in March and April (27 games), 56 in May (29 games), 51 in June (27 games), 52 in July (24 games), and 59 in August (28 games).

That is what has enabled Minnesota to be in first place or tied for the lead in the American League Central since April 21.

Related: Pair of New Englanders hope to turn Twins around

The Indians made a run at them last month, but the Twins left Fenway Park on Thursday with a 6½-game lead after taking two of three from the Red Sox.

“Offensively the team’s been pretty incredible, each one of our guys,” Baldelli said. “You can go up and down the roster. We always end up talking about that consistency and our guys have been consistently good all year.”

The Twins have eight players with 20 or more home runs and 11 with at least 10. Every lineup that Baldelli uses is imposing.

Cruz feels that power begets power.

“There’s a lot of confidence in this group and we push each other and talk about what’s going on,” he said. “You look at Max, he’s always had the talent. It was just him having the confidence to do it.”

Kepler, 26, hit 19 homers in 2017 and 20 in ’18. At 6 feet 4 inches and 220 pounds, it’s never been a question of strength. Now he’s having the best season of his career, his OPS soaring to .863.

Through Thursday, 67 of Kepler’s 128 hits were for extra bases.

“I really haven’t changed much in my game,” he said. “I tinkered with really minor things in my swing mechanically in the offseason, but nothing like launch angle. I believe just go out there and hit the ball hard.”

As a rookie in 2016, Kepler was a contact hitter with an opposite-field approach modeled after teammate Joe Mauer. Now hitting coaches James Rowson and Rudy Hernandez have encouraged him to use his size and drive the ball to right field.

“I’ve bought into that. It’s more mental to me than mechanical,” Kepler said. “I’ve been more aggressive and just getting to be around Nelson and Schoop, they hack at first pitches a lot, which wasn’t my game before. I took that from them and learned that, so maybe that helped.”

Baldelli has made a difference with the Twins, too. At 37, he is managing for the first time at any level. After decades of staying in-house with their managers, the Twins took a different approach by hiring Baldelli.

Related: How Rocco Baldelli plans to manage the Twins

It’s more than embracing analytics. Baldelli understood how to create a good environment in the clubhouse. Much like Alex Cora did for the Red Sox last season, Baldelli helped a talented group take the next step.

“We talked about it early as a group, the staff and players, and meant what we said. The way we all treat each other and respect each other here, that gives it the backing,” Baldelli said. “It’s every day. You don’t make a statement like that and back away from it.

“I know that confidence is real and it’s a self-perpetuating type of situation. Guys have had great at-bats and have hit some home runs and believe they’re going to continue to hit home runs.

“The more you believe in yourself and you believe in your teammates, it creates a great energy in the clubhouse and dugout.”

The Twins haven’t won a playoff game since Game 1 of their 2004 Division Series against the Yankees when Johan Santana beat Mike Mussina. Their last playoff series victory was in 2002 when David Ortiz was 26 and their DH.

The Astros or Yankees will be tough to get by in the American League. But the Twins could slug their way to the World Series. There’s something good going in Minnesota.

“It’s a special team,” Kepler said.

GOOD BUSINESS

It makes sense to retain Porcello

Bear with me on this because it won't sound logical at first. But the Red Sox signing Rick Porcello back for next season makes sense.

Porcello is enduring the worst season of his career, posting a 5.63 ERA and 1.44 WHIP through 28 starts. But he has given the Sox 153⅓ innings and will likely finish around 175.

That has value. The Sox should try to sign Porcello to a one-year deal with incentives in the hope that he can regain his form and give them reliability in the bottom part of the rotation.

Porcello turns 31 in December and is in excellent shape. He also was 50-28 with a 3.99 ERA from 2016-18. He's a good bet for a bounce-back season if only to set himself up for a better contract with the Sox or another team in 2021.

Even if Chris Sale is cleared for next season, his left elbow will be a concern. David Price is a concern no matter what given his injury history over the last three seasons. It's impossible to pencil him in for more than 150 innings, if even that.

Porcello would be a good fit and what should be a good value. He also adds leadership in the clubhouse and has proven he can succeed in Boston. It makes sense for both parties to continue the relationship.

A few other observations on the Red Sox:

- Mookie Betts is hitting .370 with a 1.275 OPS when he puts the first pitch of an at-bat in play and .455 with a 1.149 OPS on a 1-0 count. The Sox have encouraged him to be more aggressive early in his plate appearances, something that does not always come naturally.

"You always think you want to see some pitches," Betts said. "But sometimes the best pitch you get is the first one."

Betts has 21 career home runs on the first pitch, seven this season.

- The Sox have seemingly abandoned their ill-considered plan to use Chris Owings at second base against left-handers simply because he hit lefties well in Triple A.

Owings was 1 for 16 and struck out nine times in his first 11 games for the Sox. He was 1 for 9 against lefties and punched out six times.

Now they're trying the same thing with Gorkys Hernandez in center field. That Hernandez hit .291 in 110 at-bats against lefties in Triple A doesn't seem like a compelling reason to change the lineup.

He hit .227 against lefties in 150 at-bats for the San Francisco Giants last season and in his major league career has hit .219 with a .612 OPS against lefties.

Using Owings and Hernandez is unnecessarily embarrassing for Brock Holt and Jackie Bradley Jr.

Bradley has had a poor season at the plate, but he's a better career hitter against lefties than Hernandez. Holt and Bradley both deserved better than to lose playing time to Triple A long shots.

Whether this was Alex Cora's idea or something coming from above him, it didn't help the team or sit well with the players.

Teams should always seek advantages. But pitching is the issue this season, not trying to squeeze an extra run out of the lineup against a lefty.

- Andrew Cashner averaged 2.7 walks per nine innings with the hopeless Orioles and 5.1 since joining the Red Sox.

- As the Red Sox contemplate their outfield in the years to come, Andrew Benintendi is turning more into Mike Greenwell than Fred Lynn.

There's nothing wrong with that. Greenwell was a darn good player for the Sox, hitting .303 with an .831 OPS over 12 seasons. But Benintendi looked like an All-Star-caliber player in 2018 and has regressed this season. He's fine. But shouldn't he be better than fine?

- Through Thursday, the Sox had 11 rain delays this season that lasted a total of 14 hours and 15 minutes.

- The MLB Players Alumni Association selected Johnny Damon as the winner of its Brooks Robinson Community Service Award. Damon, now 45, has eight children but travels often from his home in Florida for charity events. The MLBPA also will present Red Sox adviser Tony La Russa with its lifetime achievement award at a dinner in New York on Nov. 7.

ETC.

One year left for Castillo, Tomas

Even with expanded rosters, there is still no room in the majors for Rusney Castillo and Yasmany Tomas.

Castillo, now 32, hit .278 with a .769 OPS for Triple A Pawtucket. But he never had a chance of getting called up because his salary would have added \$10.35 million to the Sox' payroll as calculated for luxury-tax purposes and put them over the highest threshold.

Thanks to a since-closed loophole, the Sox were able to outright Castillo to the minors in 2016 and take his salary off the major league payroll. But they are still paying him off. Castillo made \$11 million this season and is due for \$13.5 million next season assuming he picks up his option, which of course he will.

"I think he could be a fourth outfielder for somebody," a scout said. "But not at that salary. He seems to make the best of it for Pawtucket."

Castillo, signed out of Cuba in 2014, hasn't played for the Sox since June 16, 2016. He's up to 467 games for Pawtucket. Maybe he can throw out the first pitch in Worcester in 2021.

Tomas, also signed out of Cuba in 2014, played only four games for Arizona this season and was 0 for 6. He's now off their 40-man roster. Tomas made \$15.5 million this season and has a player option for \$17 million in 2020.

But it did work out well for another Cuban player this season, 22-year-old Houston designated hitter Yordan Alvarez.

He was signed by the Dodgers in 2016 and traded only 45 days later to the Astros for righthanded reliever Josh Fields. Alvarez played parts of four seasons in the minors before making his debut on June 9.

He has hit .310 with a 1.065 OPS through 67 games and could win Rookie of the Year.

Extra bases

The Rule 5 draft of veteran minor league players passes each December with little fanfare and none of the selections made much of an impact this season. More interesting is that every team passed on 27-year-old infielder Gio Urshela and he has hit .331 with a .924 OPS on 114 games for the Yankees this season . . . The Yankees set a record with 29 players to land on the injured list this season. The 2016 Dodgers had the old record of 28 . . . Condolences go out to the family of Cohasset's Jim McCarthy, who died last week at

91. McCarthy was one of the hosts of “The Sports Huddle” radio show that ran for many years in Boston on Sunday nights. McCarthy, Eddie Andelman, and Mark Witkin were funny and irreverent, playfully making their points without the contrived anger that is so common today. Don Zimmer got so boiling mad at the trio one season that he demanded they stop using his name on the air. So they referred to the Sox manager as Chiang Kai-shek [the deceased leader of Taiwan] on first reference . . . Three Hall of Fame righthanders — Bert Blyleven, Dennis Eckersley, and John Smoltz — were at Fenway Park on Wednesday night calling games on television . . . Check out “The Boston Red Sox Killer B’s. Baseball’s Best Outfield” by Jim Prime and Bill Nowlin. The new book goes in depth on the Sox outfielders and includes an insightful foreword by Fred Lynn . . . Happy birthday to Don Aase, who is 65. The righthander was 6-2 with a 3.12 earned run average in 13 starts for the 1977 Red Sox. That included a three-hit shutout of the Angels on July 31 and another against the Blue Jays on Sept. 5. The Red Sox then traded Aase to the Angels after the season to get Jerry Remy. It was a good trade for both players as they went to their hometown teams. Aase was from Anaheim and Remy from Somerset. Aase was 66-60 with 82 saves and a 3.80 ERA over 13 seasons.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Yankees, sun blind Red Sox in 5-1 loss

Tom Keegan

The sun makes right field no easy place to work at Fenway Park in the late afternoon hours, but seeking more offense with left-hander J.A. Happ on the mound for the Yankees, Red Sox manager Alex Cora charged designated hitter J.D. Martinez with the tough challenge. It backfired.

The Yankees hit back-to-back doubles on plays Mookie Betts likely would have made in a four-run fourth inning, and that was the difference in the Red Sox’ 5-1 loss Saturday. The sun was a factor in the first, lack of communication on the second.

“Terrible,” Martinez said of the sun. “I would say this place, 4:00 games is the worst, one of the worst I’ve seen, with the shadows and the outfield and hitting and right field, that whole thing. You pray for clouds pretty much.”

Seeking more punch against an offense that has been listless of late vs. left-handers, Cora has been playing center fielder Jackie Bradley, hitting .198 vs. lefties, almost exclusively against right-handers. In those lineups, Betts shifts to center, where he made nice plays in multiple directions Saturday.

Putting Martinez in left when the sun’s a factor in right might be the way to go, even with all the quirks that come with playing the wall, although Martinez didn’t see it that way.

“I don’t care if you’re a DH or an outfielder, unless you’re Superman and you have X-ray vision looking at the sun,” Martinez said. “I don’t know. If someone can see through the sun, I guess they can catch it.”

The Yankees produced back-to-back, one-out doubles on the misplays and started circling the bases faster than Antonio Brown sprinted all the way from Oakland to Foxboro on blistered feet.

After opener Travis Lakins (two innings) and reliever Bobby Poyner combined for three perfect innings to extend the bullpen’s two-day dominance to 12 innings with one run allowed with three hits and three walks allowed and 16 strikeouts, DJ LeMahieu opened the inning with a line single to left off Ryan Weber, who then struck out Aaron Judge.

Didi Gregorius lined a rocket right at Martinez, who tried to use his left hand to block the sun, stuck up his glove and tried to catch what he couldn’t see. It glanced off his glove, he fell down and got back up quickly enough to chase down the ball and return it to the infield before anyone could score.

Had Betts or Benintendi been in right field, chances are good the Sox could have escaped the inning without giving up a run, although it's no guarantee the sun would not have blinded them as well, as it did Yankees right fielder Lou Piniella in the ninth inning of the Bucky Dent game in 1978 to determine the AL East champion. The Yankees survived that one. Forty-one years later, the Red Sox did not.

Weber started the fourth but left the game after Gregorius' sun-aided, one-out double. Enter Colten Brewer, who induced from Gary Sanchez a high popup near foul territory in very shallow right. Second baseman Brock Holt tore after it and Martinez came in from right. Had Betts been in right, he likely would have called off Holt and made the catch. Instead, the ball dropped on the just-fair dirt between the two fielders and bounced into the seats for a ground-rule double that plated two runs.

Encarnacion then took Brewer onto Lansdowne Street for a two-run homer that put the Yankees up, 4-0.

Cora's decision to go with back-to-back bullpen games, fueled by Chris Sale (elbow) being lost for the season and David Price being sidelined by a wrist cyst, worked well. All but three of the 18 innings handled by the bullpen in the two days were scoreless.

The defense and bats let down the pitchers in this one.

The Sox couldn't figure out Happ (12-8, 5.10), who tamed them with 6½ innings of two-hit, shutout ball with one walk and seven strikeouts. Facing five pitchers, the Red Sox managed five hits, including the 1,000th of Xander Bogaerts' career, one-out single in the fourth inning on his mother's birthday.

The Red Sox didn't get on the board until Martinez hammered his 35th home run on an 0-1, 99 mph fastball from Aroldis Chapman in the ninth. It landed in the Red Sox crowded bullpen and didn't injure anyone.

After showering and dressing, Martinez stood up and answered all the questions sent his way about the two fourth-inning plays.

"I'm shifted over on Didi to the left. He hits it and he like hooks it," Martinez said. "I'm seeing it the whole way, the whole way, and as soon as I went up to grab it, it starts to hook and it goes right into the sun, lines up perfectly with the sun, and at that point I was just trying to pull something up. I was trying to get under it, try to do something because there was nothing really I could do there. The ball's hit so hard it's not one of those where you have time to get around the sun. It's tough. It's unfortunate. What are you going to do?"

Martinez explained what happened on the Sanchez popup that dropped between him and Holt with nobody calling for it.

"It was one of those where like we're shifted over on Gary toward that gap and it's a long run for me and I look down I feel like Brock's got the best read on it," Martinez said. "It's going to be a tough play for me. It's one of those plays you can't call right away. It's like a late call. I look down and I feel like Brock had the bead on it. So I like I'm just going to give it to him. I don't want to scare him by stepping loud and causing that stuff where he kind of gets tense. I think he felt like I was going to be there, like it was my ball in between. It sucks. That ball has to be caught. It changed the game."

Martinez said if he had to do it over again he would have kept charging while calling, "I got it, I got it, I got it!"

It's been that kind of year for the Red Sox. A year ago, Gregorius' ball would have hooked away from the sun and the Sanchez popup would have landed in leather, not on dirt in fair territory before it bounced into the stands for a ground-rule double.

Red Sox lefty Darwinson Hernandez doing everything right out of bullpen

Tom Keegan

Careful not to put too much pressure on hard-throwing left-hander Darwinzon Hernandez, Alex Cora steers clear of hyping him, but clearly is enthused about what he has seen.

The Red Sox manager's excitement is rooted deeper than what Hernandez has shown on the mound, which has been plenty good, as in 54 strikeouts in 28- $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Cora traced his belief that Hernandez has what it takes to capitalize on his talent to a moment in Lakeland, Fla., during spring training. Sandy Leon was catching and dropped the sign for a curveball the pitch after a fastball. Hernandez shook him off for a slider and the hitter blasted the pitch, too similar in velocity to the one he had just seen.

"In the dugout there was a conversation about why you go from this pitch to that pitch, this is the way you do it," Cora said. "Three days later, same situation, Sandy gave him the three (sign for slider) on purpose after a fastball and he shook him off and threw a curveball. He understands. He knows."

And that wasn't the last good sign regarding Hernandez's approach to his profession.

"He's doing everything right throughout the day," Cora said. "All the things it takes to make a big-leaguer, he's doing it, he's doing it. We talk to veterans and they're very happy with the way he goes about his business and that's very important."

Loud talents can get away with shortcuts, but Cora doesn't see any of that in Hernandez.

"Showing up early, leaving late, talking to other pitchers, going over scouting reports and understanding, 'This works here.' He gets it," Cora said.

Recent veteran acquisition Jhoulys Chacin has made a new friend in Hernandez, a fellow Venezuelan, and Cora likes seeing that — he is all for Chacin imparting wisdom attained during 11 years in the big leagues.

"He's good, man," Chacin said of Hernandez. "He throws that raised fastball that some guys just can't catch up to. I played with (Josh) Hader and his fastball is great. He has the same one. He just needs to stay healthy, take the same approach to the field every day and he can be a really good pitcher."

Told of the comparison to the Brewers' Hader, Cora fought back a smile.

"That's a good fastball," he said. "There are a lot of swings and misses, a lot of strikeouts with Darwinzon. He's been doing a lot better job with his slider. What Hader's doing in Milwaukee (115 strikeouts in 63- $\frac{1}{3}$ innings), that's pretty amazing."

Had Cora made an instant closer out of Hernandez simply because he has closer stuff he would have been doing a disservice to the young power pitcher. He could have stunted his development in all the other areas of pitching in relief that have nothing to do with the quality of the pitches.

"You have to be careful because there's a learning curve and he wasn't as consistent throwing strikes early on. There is other stuff that comes into play. Covering your position, slowing down the running game. All that stuff comes into play," Cora said. "As soon as you can spin the ball, field your position and hold the running game, you're good to go, ready to be a good reliever. If you don't do that it's tough. He showed us that and he showed us that he can handle lefties and then he's shown that he can handle righties and he can bounce back, but there's a learning period, not only for him but for us too."

A starter in the minors, Hernandez didn't have experience at "getting ready quick enough," Cora said. "In the beginning it took him a while, sometimes too long. You guys see the innings and the pitches during the game, but there's a lot of stuff that goes into the bullpen. He made some adjustments and now he's here. He gets ready quick."

Hernandez, 22, has a stunning strikeout rate of .402. Right-handed hitters are batting .288 against him, lefties .073. A high walk rate is responsible for a 1.52 WHIP.

It doesn't take long for him to draw the attention of opponents.

"Good arm," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said of Hernandez, one of the seven pitchers who combined for a three-hitter in the Sox' 6-1, series opening victory Friday night. "Obviously, a talented pitcher, so the stuff is real, and when he's in the strike one, he's a challenge."

Red Sox' Triple-A attendance drops again, but PawSox optimistic

Jason Mastrodonato

Before Bobby Dalbec was called up to Boston to watch (but not play) as the Red Sox put a bow on their disappointing season over the next few weeks, one of the organization's best remaining prospects finished his year by signing autographs in the concourse at McCoy Stadium.

PawSox fans didn't waste the opportunity to snag a signature from the 6-4, 225-pound slugger. It might've been their last chance.

Such is life in Pawtucket, where the Triple-A home of the Red Sox has been a ghost town when it comes to top-tier talent over the last few years. Either the best prospects are leapfrogging Pawtucket on the way to The Show, or they're making just a brief stop in Triple-A.

"I think these sorts of things are cyclical," said Dan Rea III, the PawSox executive vice president. "And you have your cases of Andrew Benintendi who was on a fast track, or Rafael Devers with us for only a week and proved he was ready for the big leagues."

Despite the club's best efforts to promote the game in a creative and inclusive way – over the final 10 games, all children 16 and under were admitted free – attendance totals for the PawSox saw another steep decline in 2019. They wrapped up their 2019 campaign on Monday in front of just 5,000 people.

Across the International League, attendance totals were almost identical to those in 2018. The PawSox ranked 12th out of 14 teams with around 331,000 tickets sold, down from 395,000 in 2018 and 410,000 in 2017.

Those in the front office expected a difficult year in Rhode Island given the team has already broken ground on a new stadium, Polar Park, and will move to Worcester in 2021.

"We knew there would be a potential drop from some part of our fanbase, that parts of our Rhode Island fanbase would see a drop," Rea said. "We were encouraged by late season trends. June, July, August were strong months for us. Not to make excuses for us, but April and May were tough from a weather perspective. We had seven rainouts as opposed to four last year. We were playing in April and May but those were not months that people would want to sit and watch baseball."

Their average attendance dropped significantly, from 6,000 in 2018 to just 5,200 in 2019. Weather surely wasn't the only factor.

For the second consecutive year, Rusney Castillo led the team in at-bats. The former prospect from Cuba hasn't seen big league time since 2016 and is now 32 years old. Banished off the 40-man roster three years ago, he's unlikely to ever be re-added, given the inclusion would add his eight-figure salary for luxury tax counting purposes. That's a cost the Sox won't pay for an extra outfielder who has hit an acceptable-but-not-great .293 with a .761 OPS over five minor league seasons.

The only exciting prospect who began the year on the PawSox was Michael Chavis, who played just 12 games for them before being summoned to the big league roster, which has been thin on depth all season.

Dalbec spent the majority of the year in Double-A and appeared in just 30 games for the PawSox to finish his campaign.

On the pitching side, the most exciting arm was lefty Darwinzon Hernandez, but similarly he spent just seven games in Pawtucket before the Red Sox needed his services.

There hasn't been a group up prospective big league talent in Pawtucket since 2017, when Blake Swihart, Deven Marrero and Allen Craig spent significant time with the PawSox. That year, they sold 410,000 tickets and averaged 6,400 a night.

The PawSox have had losing seasons the last three years, as their win total has dropped from 67 to 66 to 59.

Of course, there's nothing the PawSox front office can do about that. The big league roster is always the priority and the Red Sox have no obligation to worry about who will be the face on the cover of the programs at Triple-A.

"We try to tell all the stories and realize there's a mix of diehard fans and casual fans," Rea said. "A lot of people are going to the games not knowing any of the players.

"We saw some pretty darn good prospects coming through. Vlad Guerrero Jr. we saw. And Gwinnett, Durham, Columbus all had some talented prospects."

Watching the best prospects from other teams might have been the most compelling reason to get to the park.

Before getting called up to the Blue Jays, Guerrero and Bo Bichette headlined a Buffalo roster that went to Pawtucket in April. The PawSox feel no shame in promoting the other teams' players to attract interest.

"It's a little tricky," Rea said. "But when Vlad Guerrero Jr. came through, we hailed that fact and let people know there was an awesome prospect coming through. Or when Tim Lincecum came through with Syracuse, we definitely promoted that.

"So we got on the radio, we talk to different writers and newspapers and let people know. Tebow was very generous and signed some footballs for us that we auctioned off for the Pawtucket Red Sox foundation. We're not above that, if there are guys from the other side we'll let you know there's a good show coming through."

All season long the ball was flying out of the stadium. And not just at McCoy.

Home runs across the International League were up 57 percent from last year after MLB introduced new baseballs with less drag and began using the same balls in Triple-A.

"It's been noticed, the spike in home runs," Rea said. "I think it'll be a big topic of conversation. We have fall meetings in Memphis in a few weeks. That'll be a topic.

"Within reason, seeing extra home runs is not a bad thing from a baseball fan atmospheric standpoint. People like to see home runs. There's probably a fine line. The question is, have we gone past that fine line? And have the numbers been too disproportionately extended? It's a fair topic. It's been nice to see some good pitching stories even though our team didn't have the record we'd hope for."

Next year will be the last for fans to watch Red Sox prospects in Pawtucket, with Polar Park already attracting major interest in Worcester.

The trick in the front office was not to think too far ahead and ignore the fans coming to McCoy in 2019 or 2020.

“We wouldn’t diminish efforts in Pawtucket at all, we wouldn’t cut back operationally or staffing-wise,” Rea said. “These sorts of two-year situations building a ballpark in one place and operating a team in the other, it’s unique. We couldn’t find many relatable scenarios. So we really as a management team, from Larry Luchino particularly, there were instructions to keep our focus and efforts on Pawtucket as much as possible, to give people a good experience at McCoy stadium, to make it so any kid or family coming to the game would have an experience they’d enjoy there for many years.”

All the while keeping one eye on Worcester, where ticket sales have already begun for 2021.

Rea said the PawSox are already sold hundreds of season tickets and are approaching the 1,000-mark for the debut season in Polar Park, with season tickets starting at \$11 a game for a field box seat on the third-base line.

“It’s good value,” he said. “It’s a little bit of a trial run to see how quickly things have moved. We’ve been pleasantly surprised things have moved as quickly as they have for a 10,000-person ballpark. We wanted to see how the market reacts to prices. There are some tickets in the \$20-30 range for premium tickets. Different tickets have moved consistently.”

Attracting PawSox fans to see a game in Worcester won’t be that difficult, Rea said.

“We like to think people coming to games now will still come to games in Worcester,” he said. “It’s a 45 minute drive. It’s not like we’re moving from St. Louis to Los Angeles. We’re trying to keep that brand consistent.”

“As part of this, if you’re a Pawtucket season ticket holder you get priority in Worcester. So some people are signing up in Pawtucket for Worcester. I think it’s similar in a lot of ways. Pawtucket has been a great baseball town for us. Worcester is in itself a great baseball town. Our hitting coach Rich Gedman is from Worcester.”

If attendance totals are any indication, the move should be a spark for a Triple-A club badly in need of one.

“One of the questions our critics raised when we made a pitch for Pawtucket was, is the league in a strong place?” Rea said. “Because you look at it, I’ve seen the metrics, the average cost of four to go to an NFL or NBA game is crazy. You can go to a Triple-A baseball game and see a good game for \$9 or \$10 a ticket. That’s something that resonates and gives you good entertainment value.”

“We’re starting to get hard at work in Worcester, working on that front. We’re knocking down some buildings on our site. That’s moving forward.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox can’t seem to find the right answers

Bill Koch

You can excuse J.D. Martinez on the ball hit by Didi Gregorius.

Baseball players have been blinded by the sun or the lights for generations. It happens. Saturday wasn’t a particularly good time for it, but it happens.

The ball hit by Gary Sanchez is another story.

Mookie Betts would have put the high pop down the right field line at Fenway Park in his back pocket. The Yankees would have stayed off the scoreboard for at least one more out in the top of the fourth inning. But

that's not the way things have unfolded for the Red Sox throughout this frustrating 2019 season, and this gorgeous afternoon was no different.

Boston's 5-1 loss was the latest example of trying to plug one hole and creating another. Combating left-handed Yankees starter J.A. Happ meant sacrificing defense, as Betts moved to center field to replace Jackie Bradley Jr. and Martinez started in right. Four singles and a lone run – a solo homer Martinez could have provided as the designated hitter anyway – meant the Red Sox bid for the best of both worlds and wound up with nothing.

“We need to score runs, and we've been struggling against lefties a lot,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “You take a chance with J.D. He's been solid. You put him in spots and he makes plays.”

The wicked liner sent to right by Gregorius with a runner at first and one out was always going to be a tough play. Martinez had his right hand up and was attempting to shade his eyes, which were already covered by sunglasses. He made a late stab and ended up chasing a ball that caromed off the webbing of his glove.

“I would say this place, 4 o'clock game – it's the worst,” Martinez said. “It's one of the worst I've seen. The shadows in the outfield and hitting and right field, you pray for clouds pretty much.”

Martinez was favoring right-center field when Sanchez lifted a towering pop down the line toward the tarp. Mitch Moreland was never getting there from first base and Brock Holt was coming on a diagonal from second base. Martinez was angling in to his left and realized as the ball started coming down that he would be straining to make the catch.

“Neither one of us did,” Martinez said, when asked if he or Holt had called for the ball. “The way that we're taught as outfielders, the second baseman is going to go as hard as he can at the ball until he hears the outfielder. It's a tough play and it's a late call.”

Sanchez wound up with a two-run double when the ball dropped on the warning track and bounced into the stands. Edwin Encarnacion crushed the next pitch from Colten Brewer onto Lansdowne Street for a two-run homer. One defensive calamity and one swing later, the Red Sox were pretty much finished.

“Obviously communication has to be better,” Cora said. “We've done it before. It's not a first.”

Boston's offense slipped from a season-high .892 OPS in July to .841 in August. The Red Sox were at just .730 in limited September action entering Saturday, and they were controlled by Twins left-hander Martin Perez in a 2-1 defeat on Thursday. Happ fired 6 1/3 scoreless frames on this occasion, and Boston's four left-handed hitters in the lineup went a combined 0-for-9 against him.

So which is it? Should the Red Sox – who tried to navigate through 27 outs in their second straight bullpen game – opt for pitching and defense? Or should Boston try to slug its way through its final 20 games and attempt to rouse its bats?

The Red Sox arrived at the wrong answer on Saturday. And they're running out of chances to answer the questions.

Yankees 5, Red Sox 1: Boston's bullpen, defense buckle against New York

Bill Koch

Friday night's successful experiment in bullpening seemed poised to stretch into Saturday afternoon for the Red Sox.

Travis Lakins retired all six men he faced, Bobby Poyner worked a perfect top of the third inning and the Yankees offense looked somewhat off balance yet again. Then the top of the fourth took place at Fenway

Park, a quick reminder of how difficult it is to survive a baseball game with a host of pitchers against a quality lineup.

Boston's defense opened the door and New York sprinted through, sending all nine men to the plate. Gary Sanchez's fortunate two-run double was followed by Edwin Encarnacion's booming two-run homer, laying the foundation for an easy 5-1 Yankees win.

DJ LeMahieu snapped a string of nine straight retired New York hitters with a single to left and Didi Gregorius sent a one-out liner to right. J.D. Martinez fought the setting sun and could only get the web of his glove on the ball, playing it into a double. It was shades of Lou Piniella in the ninth inning of the 1978 American League East playoff – Piniella, however, was able to hold Jerry Remy to a single and keep the potential tying run at second base.

Colten Brewer replaced Ryan Weber on the mound and Sanchez followed with a high pop down the line in right. Martinez came in while Brock Holt went back diagonally from second base, and both players appeared to pull up while the ball dropped onto the warning track. The high bounce into the stands kept Sanchez at second base, and it was a 2-0 game.

"I think (Holt) felt like I was going to be there – like it was my ball in between," Martinez said. "It's one of those things where it sucks. That ball has to get caught. It changed the game."

"I think J.D. saw Brock sprint to it and he slowed down," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "As an outfielder you've got to take charge on that one."

Brewer's next pitch was a hanging curveball that Encarnacion didn't miss. His 423-foot blast cleared the Monster Seats and crashed onto Lansdowne Street, making it a 4-0 game. Trevor Kelley, Hector Velazquez, Josh Smith and Mike Shawaryn allowed just one run over the final five frames, but that couldn't save the Red Sox from wasting more precious time in the A.L. wild card race.

"We don't make the play, and the pitch to Encarnacion we didn't keep the ball in the ballpark," Cora said. "That opened the gates for them."

J.A. Happ shut Boston out over his 6 1/3 innings and four relievers handled the rest, as New York continued its march toward an A. L. East title. Happ has allowed three earned runs or less in four of his last five starts, including back-to-back scoreless outings against Oakland and the Red Sox. Martinez lined a two-out solo homer to right-center against Aroldis Chapman in the ninth, helping Boston avoid its fifth shutout defeat of the season.

"I don't think we've been playing bad, but we haven't been hot-hot," Martinez said. "It's tough."

The Red Sox had just two hits to show for their efforts at the plate until the bottom of the eighth. Back-to-back one-out singles by Mitch Moreland and pinch hitter Marco Hernandez put the potential tying run in the on-deck circle. Zack Britton came on for New York and retired both batters he faced, striking out Holt and getting Mookie Betts on a sharp liner to right.

"It's one of those where we're looking for ways to score runs," Cora said. "It hasn't happened against lefties lately."

Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts notches his 1,000th career hit

Bill Koch

Xander Bogaerts made Red Sox history in the bottom of the fourth inning Saturday.

Bogaerts sent a one-out grounder through the vacant right side to beat the shift for his 1,000th career hit. The shortstop is just the third Boston player to reach the mark before turning 27, joining Hall of Famers Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr.

“I came a long way,” Bogaerts said. “I was hoping that it wouldn’t be in a game that we would lose. That’s one of the main things I didn’t want to happen.”

Boston suffered a 5-1 defeat against the Yankees, and Bogaerts managed one of just five hits. He’s the 32nd player to collect as many hits with the Red Sox, and it comes late in a season where he’s already set a host of new career bests. His 31 home runs, 49 doubles, .386 on-base percentage, .572 slugging percentage and .958 OPS entering Saturday all represented new career highs.

“He’s having a career year,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “I do feel there are a few things he’s going to keep improving. If people don’t consider him the best shortstop in the big leagues, he should be in the conversation.”

Sept. 7 was already a significant date on the calendar for Bogaerts. His mother, Sandra Brown, celebrated her birthday at her Aruba home by having a watch party for the game. She sent Bogaerts a pregame text message urging him to record the milestone with family and friends watching.

“From a personal standpoint it was definitely a special day for me,” Bogaerts said. “My mom’s birthday, my first big league home run came against the Yankees on my mom’s birthday (in 2013) – it’s pretty neat.”

Bogaerts has also been a valuable mentor for Rafael Devers. The left side of Boston’s infield appears set for years to come with Bogaerts and Devers both under team control through at least the 2022 season. Bogaerts could opt out of his six-year, \$120-million extension during that offseason.

“One is 26 and the other one is 22,” Cora said. “It’s good that it’s happening. It’s a combination that we’re very excited about – not only about what’s going on this year, but the upcoming years.”

Darwinzon Hernandez and Josh Hader? Red Sox pitcher Jhoulys Chacin sees some similarities

Bill Koch

Friday night’s unexpected contribution from Jhoulys Chacin didn’t stop with his pitching performance.

The right-hander retired all six men he faced in his Red Sox debut to open a 6-1 victory over the Yankees. Chacin made his first appearance since July 24, his final outing with the Brewers before being released in August.

It was what Chacin said afterwards in the home clubhouse at Fenway Park that made more waves. Drawing a direct comparison between a certain former teammate and someone on Boston’s roster will do that. Chacin was bold enough to mention two-time National League All-Star Josh Hader and Red Sox rookie left-hander Darwinzon Hernandez in the same sentence.

“I played with Hader,” Chacin said. “I’ve seen his fastball just rise. I see (Hernandez), and his fastball does pretty much the same. He just needs to stay healthy and take his approach every day to the field. He can be a really good pitcher.”

Hader finished seventh in the N.L. Cy Young Award voting last season. He entered Saturday with a combined 40 saves and 258 strikeouts in his last 144 2/3 innings. The 25-year-old has rocketed to prominence after being drafted by the Orioles and traded twice since 2013.

“Hader is one of the best – if not the best – left-handed relievers in the big leagues,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “It’s something that I know Darwinzon won’t get caught up in. He’s going to keep working. But if the fastball plays like that the rest of his career, we’ll take that.”

Hernandez turned in his 20th scoreless relief appearance on Friday, pitching the eighth inning. He's flourished since being switched to a bullpen role, piling up 47 strikeouts and holding opponents to just 19 hits in 25 2/3 innings. Hernandez entered the season as the organization's No. 3 prospect per Baseball America and has wasted no time establishing himself since being recalled from Triple-A Pawtucket on July 16.

"As soon as you can spin the ball, field your position and hold the running game, you're good," Cora said. "You're ready to go to be a good reliever. If you don't do that it's tough. He showed us that."

Hader averages 95.5 mph on his four-seamer this season, a tick above the 95.4 mph thrown by Hernandez. Batters swing and miss on the pitch 41.7 percent of the time against Hader compared to 38.5 percent of the time against Hernandez. But there's one category that suggests Hernandez has room to potentially equal or surpass Hader's dominance – spin rate.

Hernandez averages 2,356 rpm on his fastball to Hader's 2,128 rpm. The difference that makes in a ball's trajectory to the plate is a significant one. Hernandez's fastball is more likely to stay up in the zone, tricking hitters visually with what they see as a rising effect.

"He throws that rising fastball and some guys just can't catch up," Chacin said. "I've talked to him a lot since I've been here. I want him to stay healthy and keep doing what he's doing."

Chacin and Hernandez are fellow Venezuelans, two of five presently on Boston's 40-man roster. Fellow pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez, catcher Sandy Leon and outfielder Gorkys Hernandez are all potential mentors for Hernandez as he finishes his first taste of September with the Red Sox.

"I do feel just being around here and doing everything right throughout the day as far as preparation and all the things it takes to make it as a big leaguer, he's doing it," Cora said. "You talk to the veterans and they're very happy with the way he goes about his business, and that's very important."

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox's 2019 playoff run ended Aug. 4 when they lost their eighth straight; 'It's 3-8 and eight in a row. That's 3-16'

Christopher Smith

The Boston Red Sox lost eight straight games from July 28 to Aug. 4. In the process, they dropped 6 ½ games in the Wild Card standings.

David Price allowed seven earned runs in 2 ⅓ innings in a 7-4 loss to the Yankees for Boston's eighth straight loss. The day before, Chris Sale allowed eight earned runs in 3 ⅓ innings in a 9-2 loss at Yankee Stadium.

Reflecting back, that's when Boston's playoff run ended.

The Red Sox were tied with Oakland for the second Wild Card spot when play began July 28. He trailed by 6 ½ games for the second Wild Card when their game finished Aug. 4.

Boston has played well since then, going 17-11 (.607 winning percentage). But manager Alex Cora's team has lost a half game in the standings, showing how much easier it is to lose games in the standings than to gain. The Sox trail the Athletics for the second Wild Card by seven games here on Sept. 8.

At the end of the eight-game losing streak, Boston had 48 games remaining, a .518 winning percentage and were on pace for 83.9 wins.

Tampa Bay, who had taken over the second Wild Card spot, had 49 games remaining and were on pace for 93.2 wins. The Athletics (then a half game behind Tampa) had 50 games remaining and were on pace for 92.5 wins.

Boston needed to go 34-14 (.708 winning percentage) over the final two months to finish with 93 wins, the Rays' pace Aug. 4. To put that into context, the 2018 Red Sox played at a .667 clip last year when they posted a franchise-record 108 wins.

The Sox would have needed to go 31-17 (.646 winning percentage) just to reach 90 wins. That was even asking a lot considering how inconsistent they played all season.

Even if the Red Sox played .646 baseball to reach 90 wins, they also would have needed the Rays to go one game under .500 (24-25) and the A's to go 25-25 (.500) to finish ahead of them.

The season was over. Finished.

"It just so happened we haven't put that long stretch of winning (together)," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "I think that's the difference. If you take a look at it, it's 3-8 and eight in a row. That's 3-16. But we can't take away that from our season."

The Red Sox opened the 2019 season with a 3-8 record.

"We've been hungry the whole season," Cora said. "I feel we've been hungry the whole time. There's other teams that are hungry to win one (World Series). We're hungry to win two, back-to-back. We're the only team that can say that. I do feel that we haven't played well. That's it. But to question hungry and toughness and all that, I don't know. You guys see them play every day. That's not for me to judge. I know what I have in the clubhouse. I know how they go about their business.

"But I think hungry, chemistry sometimes gets caught up on an eight-game losing streak or a 10-game winning streak," Cora added. "That's the way I see it. I don't think we're hungrier now because we lost eight in a row. We were hungry in spring training when we talk about being back-to-back champs."

So how does Cora define the 0-8 stretch?

"Here against Tampa, we put pressure against them late in games. We didn't get a big hit," Cora said. "We go to New York and I know it didn't look great. It was four games. But if you are really paying attention to the game and you know what happened, one pitch to (Gleyber) Torres in the first inning of Game One. We didn't make one pitch in two innings; Sale and Price, there were two outs. One line drive, one fly ball, one whatever and we're out of the inning. That sums it up. We had three horrible innings and we paid the price. And it's been like that the whole time with us. We haven't been able to stop the big inning. And that's what happened."

Xander Bogaerts' 1,000th career hit comes on mom's birthday, joins 2 Boston Red Sox legends as fastest to milestone

Christopher Smith

Xander Bogaerts stroked his 1,000th career hit during the fourth inning Saturday when singled to center field off Yankees starter J.A. Happ.

He became the third Red Sox player to reach the milestone before age 27. Hall of Famers Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr also did it.

"I was hoping that it wouldn't be on a game that we would lose," Bogaerts said.

The Yankees beat the Red Sox 5-1 here at Fenway Park.

“It was definitely a special day for me. My mom’s birthday,” Bogaerts said. “My first big league home run came against the Yankees on my mom’s birthday.”

His mother invited a lot of friends to her house to watch the game. She sent her son a text telling him to get it done today.

“My numbers aren’t pretty good against Happ,” Bogaerts said. “But in the end, I got one and it was nice.”

Speaker finished his career with 3,514 hits. Doerr finished with 2,042.

“Obviously those are some big names and some great players,” Bogaerts said.

Boston Red Sox’s J.D. Martinez on losing ball in sun at Fenway Park: ‘This place, 4 o’clock game is the worst ... You pray for clouds’

Christopher Smith

J.D. Martinez belted a solo homer in the ninth inning, one positive for him during a difficult day at the ballpark.

Manager Alex Cora started Martinez, typically a designated hitter, in right field and sat Jackie Bradley Jr. with the Red Sox facing left-handed starter J.A. Happ. Boston’s offense has struggled against southpaw starters (20-26) and Cora wanted as many right-handed hitters as possible in his lineup. Sam Travis served as the DH.

Still, the Red Sox scored only one run and Martinez made two defensive miscues during New York’s four-run fourth inning. The Red Sox lost 5-1 to the Yankees here at Fenway Park.

Martinez lost Didi Gregorius’ line-drive double in the sun. He then failed to catch Gary Sanchez’s blooper that bounced into the right field stands near Pesky Pole for a two-run, ground-rule double.

How bad is the late afternoon sun at Fenway Park?

“It’s terrible,” Martinez. “This place, 4 o’clock game is the worst. One the worst I’ve seen with the shadows in the outfield and hitting and right field. You pray for clouds pretty much.”

Fenway Park’s right field is one of the most difficult right fields to play in the majors because it’s so spacious.

“I don’t care if you’re a DH or an outfielder, unless your Superman and you have X-ray vision against sun— I don’t know,” Martinez said. “If someone could see through the sun, I guess they catch it. It was a tough play.”

Sanchez hit his ground-rule double immediately after Gregorius’ double. It dropped into Martinez and second baseman Brock Holt.

Martinez said he shifted slightly toward right-center field with Sanchez, a right-handed hitter, batting.

“It’s a long run for me,” Martinez said. “Look down, I feel like Brock’s got the best read on it. It’s going to be a tough play for me. It’s not one of those plays you can call right away. It’s like a late call. Look back, look down, I see Brock. I feel Brock had the beat on it. So I’m just like, ‘I’m going to give it to him. I don’t want to scare him by stepping loud.’ ... And I think he felt like that I was going to be there. Like it was my ball in between. But it’s one of those things where it sucks. That ball has to get caught. It changed the game.”

Neither of them called for it. Martinez said he should have called for it and taken control.

Manager Alex Cora said, "As an outfielder, you've got to take charge on that one."

J.D. Martinez loses ball in sun, misplays blooper during Yankees' rally, Boston Red Sox drop to 5-12 vs. New York

Christopher Smith

J.A. Happ has struggled this season, posting a 5.10 ERA in 28 starts.

But the Yankees left-hander improved to 3-0 with a 3.09 ERA (eight runs, 23 ½ innings) vs. the Red Sox on Saturday. He tossed 6 ½ scoreless innings, allowing just two hits and one walk while striking out seven.

Meanwhile, J.D. Martinez, who homered in the ninth, lost a ball in the sun and misplayed a blooper during the Yankees' four-run fourth inning. New York won 5-1 over Boston here at Fenway Park.

The Red Sox dropped to 20-26 vs. left-handed starters and 5-12 against the Yankees.

Manager Alex Cora sat Jackie Bradley Jr. again with a lefty on the mound. Martinez played right and Sam Travis served as the DH.

"We're just trying to create offense somehow, someday," Cora said before the game. "We haven't been good against lefties lately."

The Red Sox went to a bullpen game instead of using a starting pitcher for the second straight day. Travis Lakins, who opened, pitched two perfect innings and struck out three.

New York took a 4-0 lead against Ryan Weber and Colten Brewer during the fourth inning. Weber allowed a single to DJ LeMahieu to begin the frame. Didi Gregorius doubled with one out.

Martinez lost Gregorius' liner in sun.

Brewer replaced Weber. He allowed a two-run ground-rule double to Gary Sanchez that dropped in front of J.D. Martinez. It should have been caught for the second out.

Edwin Encarnacion then took Brewer deep for a two-run homer.

Jhoulys Chacin, new Boston Red Sox pitcher, trying to showcase talents before hitting free agency: 'Finish strong, show I can pitch good'

Chris Cotillo

New Red Sox right-hander Jhoulys Chacin isn't just pitching to help the Sox attempt an improbable September comeback. He's also looking to reestablish value in the final month before he hits free agency.

Chacin, who was Milwaukee's Opening Day starter after a solid 2018 season, struggled to a 3-10 record and 5.79 ERA in 19 starts to begin the year. On July 24, he was placed on the injured list with an oblique issue and remained there until the Brewers released him on Aug. 26.

A few teams, including the Red Sox, called with interest in taking a no-risk flyer on the 31-year-old. Looking for a chance to pitch for a contender in September, Chacin flew from his home in Arizona to Anaheim last weekend to throw a bullpen in front of Red Sox officials, including president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski and manager Alex Cora.

That bullpen went well enough for Boston to offer Chacin a minor-league contract and add him to the big-league roster when rosters expanded Sunday. For Chacin, it represented a chance for him to show the world how he's capable of pitching before hitting the open market.

"Finish strong, trying to show I can pitch good," Chacin said when asked what his goals were for September. "Just trying to take advantage of the opportunity in however many innings I'm going to throw here. Just try to do my best and help the team win."

His first outing was a great one, as he retired all six Yankees he faced and recorded four strikeouts in the first two innings of Friday's win. Making the outing even more remarkable was the fact Chacin had not faced any hitters since his last outing for the Brewers on July 24.

"I felt good, man," he said. "I've been waiting for the opportunity to pitch. It felt like the first day. I was worried about throwing strikes. With all this time, you worry about the location of pitches and I was happy with the results. I was locating my pitches well and throwing with the shapes I needed."

The last week has been a whirlwind for Chacin, who has gotten acclimated to a brand new organization on the fly. His meetings with coaches have been focused on possible adjustments, like throwing his cutter more frequently to lefties and changing his position on the rubber. His interactions with teammates-- including the other 20 pitchers currently on the roster-- have been more about trying to fit in.

"I know a little bit about them because we were over there in the bullpen all these days," he said. "We're always talking and always trying to know each other. Maybe they know a little bit about me because I've been a little bit more around. I'm trying to see what they do, with all the handshakes and all the nicknames."

Chacin doesn't have any handshakes of his own yet and is afraid of creating one that will be a repeat of someone else's. Cora doesn't even have a customized sign for bringing him in from the bullpen like he does with other pitchers.

It's safe to assume Chacin hadn't heard of most of his 16 fellow relievers before joining the organization.

"In the bullpen, I know all those guys now because I've been trying to talk to those guys a lot," he said. "Before, not many. I know (Andrew) Cashner because he's been playing long. All the guys, the young guys, I didn't know before now."

Chacin is getting to know his new teammates and is beginning to make an impact. He has the most big-league experience of any of the team's relievers, having thrown more than 1,300 innings over 11 seasons with six different teams.

"It's good for the team and it's good for the clubhouse," Cora said. "Seeing him around Darwinzon (Hernandez) the last few days, obviously for Eduardo (Rodriguez), it's good, too. He has been around and has been through everything. Having a presence in the clubhouse like that, it benefits those guys."

With the Sox needing to fill plenty of innings in the season's final weeks, Chacin will get a chance to pitch a lot. He feels he can be stretched out as a starter after throwing just 35 pitches Friday. Cora said he's a candidate to pitch out of the bullpen Sunday night.

That need for innings drew Chacin to Boston.

"I knew they needed pitching. I knew I was going to be pretty much in the bullpen," he said. "It was going to be a good opportunity for me to get back in games quicker. If I'm not going to start, I have to go throw more pitches... I feel here that I was going to be in games quicker and get more innings, too. I really wanted to be back in the games really quick."

If anything went wrong for Chacin in his Red Sox debut, it came at the very end of it. As he shook Cora's hand coming out of the game, he slipped down the dugout steps and fell to the ground.

"Maybe wasn't the best first impression," Chacin said.

His hope now is that he can leave a good impression on the Red Sox-- and 29 other teams-- as he attempts to salvage a lost season. The Sox are hoping he can give them some quality innings as they try to stay afloat in the wild-card race.

"Honestly, right now I want him to pitch well," Cora said. "Not to showcase. Everybody feels that we're out of it and we think he can contribute right now."

Boston Red Sox injuries: David Price to throw on flat ground; Tzu-Wei Lin (concussion) checked out; Michael Chavis still sidelined

Christopher Smith

David Price, who felt tightness in his left wrist while throwing a bullpen Wednesday, is scheduled to throw on flat ground Saturday here at Fenway Park. He was scratched from his start Friday.

"Obviously we'll know a little bit more afterward," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said.

Price spent from Aug. 8-Sept. 1 on the injured list because of a cyst on his left wrist.

The lefty is 7-5 with a 4.28 ERA, 3.62 FIP and 1.31 WHIP in 22 starts this season.

Lin gets checked out

Tzu-Wei Lin, who suffered a concussion late in Triple-A Pawtucket's season, was here at Fenway Park on Saturday to get checked out.

Cora said Lin most likely will play for Taiwan in the WBSC Premium12 tournament in November.

"So we've just got to make sure he's OK," Cora said.

Chavis still sidelined

Michael Chavis still hasn't participated in any baseball activities since he suffered an oblique injury Wednesday while working out in Boston.

The Red Sox initially placed the rookie on the 10-day injured list Aug. 12 because of an AC joint sprain in his left shoulder. He then was scratched from a rehab game with Pawtucket on Aug. 31 because of right-side soreness. His season might be finished.

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

Thin Red Sox farm system is not bereft of talent

Kevin Thomas

Michael Chavis joined the major leagues April 20 and his production kept him there.

Darwinzon Hernandez is getting a handle on his control, becoming a needed arm in the Red Sox bullpen.

The Boston farm system, thinned in recent years, still supplies the big-league team with quality talent.

Nearly every spot in the lineup – save for J.D. Martinez’s place as DH – is manned by a graduate of the farm system.

If only the farm could have sprouted the two most needed positions – starter and closer.

Overall, the farm featured more successes – in terms of expectations – than failures. Other players are hovering in a wait-and-see mode.

THE SUCCESSES

* Infielder Michael Chavis, who added second base to his résumé, hit 18 home runs in 95 games but has been shelved recently with injuries. Will he prove to be the real thing or a flash in the pan? Remember Will Middlebrooks’ rookie season in 2012 – .288, 15 homers and 54 RBI in 75 games – and his subsequent, drastic drop-off?

* Pitcher Darwinzon Hernandez, the hard-throwing lefty, became the only member of the 2019 Sea Dogs to reach Fenway Park (debut on April 23). The concern with Hernandez were his walks (five in one game against the Rangers). He was sent down to Triple-A before arriving for good in Boston in mid-July. Since then, he has 43 strikeouts and 17 walks in 23 1/3 innings.

* Bryan Mata is another of the promising pitchers in the system, giving hope that the Red Sox will be able to develop a major league starter for the first since Clay Buchholz. Mata had his healthiest season (105 innings) and featured some dominant games in Double-A – along with some inconsistent ones. Mata does not turn 21 until next May. His potential, with a four-pitch mix that includes a mid-90s fastball, is huge.

* Tanner Houck still may be a starting pitcher after a flirt with the bullpen in Pawtucket the second half of the season. His improving change-up could be the key to add to his impressive fastball/slider combo.

* First baseman Triston Casas was a first-round draft pick out of high school. Casas, the 26th overall pick in 2018, was pushed to low Class A Greenville this year. Casas got off to a slow start but then kept getting better, finishing with .254 with 19 home runs. Casas, who turns 20 in January, could see Portland next summer.

* Bobby Dalbec, a corner infielder, will beat Casas to the majors. In 2018, Dalbec batted .257/.919, with 32 home runs and 176 strikeouts. This year, at a higher levels – Portland, then Pawtucket – Dalbec hit .239 with 27 home runs and 139 strikeouts. Next step: How well will Dalbec do against major league pitching?

* Infielder C.J. Chatham missed a month with a sore hamstring, but was otherwise consistent (.298) at Portland before moving up to Pawtucket. Five of his 20 games in Triple-A were at second base, a spot he should more time at.

* Outfielder Jarren Duran batted .387 at Salem, forcing a promotion to Portland in his first full pro season. He scuffled – his average was .208 on July 20, before raising it to .250. With his speed and mature approach at the plate, Duran could even contend for the majors by later next season.

The above players and pitchers should all reach the big leagues, with Boston or someone else.

WAIT-AND-SEE PROSPECTS

* Pitcher Jay Groome has thrown seven innings in 2019, so far, and there is great rejoicing. The first-round draft pick in 2016 (No. 12 overall), pitched only 14 games in 2017 and none in 2018, recovering from Tommy John surgery. He’s pitching for short-season Lowell, which is in the playoffs, and may get one more outing. If Groome can stay healthy, he may be able to show why Boston had so much faith in drafting him so high.

- * Pitcher Kyle Hart is the crafty lefty who keeps getting results. He was promoted from Portland to Pawtucket (3.86 ERA). Now, will Boston be patient with his development?
- * Pitcher Daniel McGrath was the surprise of the minors with the best Eastern League ERA (1.68) in 34 years. It was strange that he was not promoted to Pawtucket until September.
- * Pitcher Denyi Reyes is on the 40-man roster but stayed in Portland all year (4.16 ERA). He showed improvement, but the clock is ticking.
- * Pitcher Travis Lakins was to start as an “opener” for Boston on Saturday. He made 10 previous big-league appearances (4.70 ERA) with mixed results.
- * Pitcher Mike Shawayrn also made his majors debut this season. He had an 0.90 ERA through six games, but was hit hard his next two and sent back down.
- * Pitcher Trevor Kelly gets the underdog role for reaching the majors as a 36th-round draft pick. Dominant in Triple-A, his one MLB game featured three runs in one inning.
- * Pitcher Eduard Bazardo dominated in the Salem bullpen and eventually did the same in Portland – his last 14 2/3 innings scoreless (six hits, 17 strikeouts).
- * Pitcher Thad Ward recorded a 2.14 ERA in his first full pro season, between Greenville and Salem, striking out 157 in 126 innings. He should be in Portland next year.
- * In Lowell, pitchers Noah Song (1.06 ERA), Chris Murphy (1.08) and Yusniel Padron-Artiles (2.67) all stood out. Song and Murphy were 2019 draft picks. Padron-Artiles, drafted in 2018, pitched six, one-hit innings in Lowell’s second playoff game last week. He also struck out 14 – including the first 12 batters he faced.
- * Lowell center fielder Gilberto Jimenez (.359, .863 OPS) looks like he has all the tools.

DISAPPOINTMENTS IN 2019

- * Lefty reliever Bobby Poyner reached the majors last year with a 3.22 ERA in 20 games. He was ineffective in three early appearances and spent most of the year in Pawtucket. Poyner made his fourth appearance Friday and pitched a perfect inning (two strikeouts) for Boston.
- * Reliever Durbin Feltman was supposed to be on the fast-track to Fenway. He stalled in Portland this season (5.26 ERA/1.42 WHIP).
- * When reliever Matthew Gorst was promoted to Portland last year, he pitched 20 scoreless innings. He could not repeat that this year, with a 4.62 ERA.
- * Starter Alex Sherff spent a second year in Greenville, but struggled with a 4.83 ERA/1.60 WHIP. He is only 21 and 2019 was his second pro season.

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

Alex Cora loses gamble in the outfield

Chris Mason

Facing off with J.A. Happ, a lefty who has dominated the Red Sox at times over the past two years, Alex Cora decided to roll the dice for more offense, and started J.D. Martinez in the outfield over Jackie Bradley Jr.

It didn't pay off.

Martinez made a pair of misplays in right field that felled the Sox, and they lost to the Yankees in uninspiring fashion, 5-1. Here are five takes from an autumnal afternoon at Fenway Park:

1. The first mistake

Didi Gregorius ripped a fourth-inning liner at Martinez, and the outfielder lost it in the late-afternoon sun, falling on his backside as the ball bounced off his glove and rolled to the wall.

"I don't care if you're a DH or outfielder, unless your Superman and you have X-ray vision looking into the sun, I don't know, if someone could look through the sun, I guess they catch it," Martinez said. "But it was a tough play."

2. From bad to worse

The mistake was compounded on the next play, a blooper hit to shallow right field that nobody called bounced into the stands for a two-run ground rule double.

"I think JD saw Brock (Holt) sprinting to it and he slowed down," Alex Cora said. "As an outfielder you've got to take charge on that one."

The next batter, Edwin Encarnacion, blasted a two-run homer to put the Yankees up, 4-0.

The what-if game is always a dangerous one, but there was one out when Martinez misplayed the first ball. It's hard not to imagine the Red Sox would have escaped unscathed with Mookie Betts in right; the Gold Glover makes both those plays.

3. No offense

The argument for Cora's lineup card was that the Red Sox needed more offense against a loaded Yankees lineup. They didn't get any.

No Red Sox runner touched second base until the eighth inning, and the lone run came on a Martinez solo shot in the ninth, when the game had fallen long out of reach.

4. Mr. 1000

Xander Bogaerts recorded his 1000th hit in the loss, making him only the third player in Red Sox history to reach the bench mark before turning 27. The other two, Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr, wound up in the Hall of Fame.

It was especially sweet for Bogaerts because it was his mother's birthday.

"She texted me, like, 'You gotta do it today!'" Bogaerts said. "I'm like, 'My numbers aren't pretty good against Happ.' In the end, I got one and it was nice."

5. AC's bullpen games work

The early reviews on Cora's pitching patchwork in these two bullpen games? Pretty good.

Though the Sox lost yesterday, in back-to-back days of openers instead of starters, the relievers allowed six runs in 18 innings. Against the Yankees, they'll certainly take that result.

Long road proves sweet for underdog Marcus Walden

Chris Mason

For the first time in years, Marcus Walden isn't waiting for a phone call this September.

Perched on the top step of the Red Sox dugout, Walden still looks the underdog he's always been. Listed at a generous 6-0 and 195 pounds, Walden wasn't blessed with the physical frame of Brandon Workman. He wasn't a first-round pick like Matt Barnes, nor does he have a 99 mph fastball like Darwinzon Hernandez.

Walden is at Fenway Park because he's made a career of defying any adversity he's faced. He played independent baseball to keep his dreams alive, made his major league debut at 29 last season, and after almost a decade in the minors he's finally become a full-time contributor for the Boston Red Sox.

The reliever, who turns 31 next week, has been called up to the majors three times.

Once was with the Blue Jays in 2014, though they never used him in a game and designated him for assignment. The second time was last spring, but he was sent back to Pawtucket after five appearances. Then there's this season, where he was called up in early April and simply pitched too well to be optioned back down.

For a decade Walden has been hoping to be added as a September call up. This year, there's no need.

"I was talking to (Brandon) Workman the other day, 'I've got three April call ups and no September call ups,'" Walden said. "So it's kind of weird. It'll be a fun thing. Being a part of September is something that I've always wanted."

Given his 2019 success and Cora's liberal use of call ups — the Sox had 21 pitches active yesterday — it's hard to believe Walden was never recalled from Pawtucket when rosters expanded last season. He's honest about that initial disappointment.

"I wanted to be a big part of the team last year," Walden said. "Not getting that September call up last year kind of hurt."

But you have to be a glass-half-full type to do what Walden's done, and he was quick to find a positive in all of it. With his wife, Nichole, eight months pregnant, he'd be able to lend her a much-needed hand.

"I told my wife this: Either way it's going to be a good thing," Walden said. "Either we're going to be in the big leagues which is a great, great gig, or I'm going to be home with the baby and help out with our oldest. So it ended up working out really good, honestly."

There was another ancillary benefit to being home and taking care of his wife and daughters: Walden got healthy. For the first time in a long time, he didn't go to the Dominican Republic to keep pitching.

"That's my first offseason in four years," Walden explained. "I've been playing winter ball a lot. So being able to have that rest and walking into this season healthy is just something that, that was my biggest thing, making sure I was healthy."

"Last year, every time I was out (pitching) something was nagging," he continued. "It was my wrist or my elbow or my shoulder or my hip, something was always bugging me. This year obviously we've got some sore muscles and things like that, but as (far as) something bothering me, I haven't had that yet, knock on wood. That's the biggest reason why I feel like I've had a lot more success."

That success has been a godsend for Cora, as Walden leads the team with 71 2/3 innings and owns a 3.77 ERA.

But by now you've realized that nothing comes easily for Walden, so even in a breakout year, he had one last hurdle to clear. The right-hander wasn't on the Opening Day roster this March. He started the season back in Pawtucket.

No bother.

Walden kept working and wound up in the big leagues two weeks into the season.

He became Cora's fireman in the middle innings, and Walden's been the winning pitcher in nine of Boston's 76 victories. "It's kind of the situation that AC has put me in, and I personally like that situation more than being on the back end," Walden explained. "It gives me a chance to throw multiple innings, or coming into a tie game or down one. And you're out there just trying to hold the game where it is, give our offense and chance, and obviously our offense is explosive.

"Nine wins, it's more of the situation than how I've been pitching," Walden added. "If we had 100 wins I'd be a lot happier."

But he's been pitching pretty darn well, too. The late-bloomer's 1.088 WHIP is almost identical to Chris Sale's, and it's been over two months since any opponent tagged him for multiple runs.

"I couldn't even tell you (my stats)," he said. "I'll look at them at the end of the year. The only thing I really know is how many innings I have because people keep blowing me up on it. But I try not to look at them."

Walden considered retirement when he was playing independent ball for the Lancaster Barnstormers in 2015, but it was his wife that urged him to keep playing. Four years later, he's a no-bones-about-it big leaguer, and the two have been able to share the fruits of her faith in him.

"It's been kind of a whirlwind of a year," Walden said. "Me and my wife were talking about all the things we've done this year. From being able to go to the White House, to go to London, she's been along this ride the whole time with me. It's been a pretty fun year... We've been married for going on six years, been together for almost 10, and this is her first year really being able to stay with me."

Finally finding some stability, Walden had his family in Boston all summer instead of back home in Fresno, and that gave him additional peace of mind.

"Being able to be home and see my kids every night, that was one of the best things," Walden said. "It made this season go by super fast. I know it's kind of a drag a lot of seasons, when you're FaceTiming your kids and not seeing them grow up."

"Sutton, I saw maybe a total of 45 days until she was a year old," Walden said of his daughter, now two years old. "I was gone a lot. I was in winter ball, the season, and all over the place. So being able to watch my youngest grow up has been one of the better parts of this year."

With that, Walden spotted a ball on the ground, tossed it to a young fan about the age of one of his daughters, and descended down the dugout steps, back to the big league clubhouse.

*** *RedSox.com***

Xander's 1,000th hit a high point in Sox loss

Ian Browne

The biggest reason Xander Bogaerts wanted to get career hit No. 1,000 on Saturday against the Yankees was a gentle nudge from his mother, Sandra Brown, that came electronically in the hours leading up to the game.

You see, it's Sandra's birthday, and she had family and friends at her house on Aruba watching the game.

"She kind of texted me, like, 'You gotta do it today.' I'm like, 'My numbers aren't pretty good against [J.A.] Happ.' In the end, I got one, and it was nice."

A .154 hitter against Happ entering the day, Bogaerts belted a single through the shift and into right-center in the bottom of the fourth to give his mother another baseball birthday present to savor, albeit on a day the Red Sox lost, 5-1, to the Yankees.

"I think it was definitely a special day for me," said Bogaerts. "My mom's birthday. My first big league home run came against the Yankees on my mom's birthday. A thousand hits against the Yankees on my mom's birthday again is pretty neat."

So on the sixth anniversary of his first career homer, Bogaerts got the 1,000th hit. In other words, those were a fairly fast 1,000 hits.

The popular shortstop joins Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr as the only players in Red Sox history to collect that many hits before turning 27.

Bogaerts will celebrate his 27th birthday on Oct. 1. Doerr and Speaker are both in the Hall of Fame. That puts Bogaerts in some lofty company.

"I guess that's something nice for you to say," said Bogaerts. "I didn't know about those two guys. [PR director] Kevin [Gregg] just told me about it. I knew I needed one hit. I just didn't know who it was, or anything like that. Obviously, those are some big names and some great players. Hopefully I can stay healthy and play many more years here."

It is certainly set up for Bogaerts to play many more years in Boston.

Back on March 31, as the Sox were leaving Seattle and heading to Oakland, that word broke that Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 million contract extension.

He has spent the ensuing months rewarding the organization's faith in him by producing the best season of his career.

"I'm glad he got it. He's having a career year, and I do feel that there's a few things he's going to keep improving," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora. "Like I said before, if people don't consider him the best shortstop in the big leagues, he should be in the conversation."

The right-handed-hitting Bogaerts has been an offensive machine since being promoted to the Red Sox late in the 2013 season and has helped the team win two World Series championships.

Thanks to the timely contract extension that ensured 2019 would not be a "walk year," Bogaerts is likely to collect many more milestone hits for the Red Sox.

The new deal doesn't even start until next season, and it also includes an option for '26.

Though performance is never guaranteed, Bogaerts has given the Red Sox a lot of reasons to bet on him going forward.

"This kid, in the offseason, he takes his time off, he goes home, but then he goes to Arizona and he works," said Cora. "He shows up early in Fort Myers. He's looking for ways to get better. Off the field, he's been

great. He takes care of himself, condition-wise. Games are over, and he's in there doing everything possible to be able to bounce back for the next game. We see it."

And it is in the supposed dog days of the season when you really see it with Bogaerts.

"Some guys, towards the end of the season, they're getting tired, they look actually smaller. With him, it's the other way around," Cora said. "I don't know how he does it, but he's so into his routine and he's structured, and that's what happened."

There have been other milestones for Bogaerts this season. On Aug. 14 he smashed his 100th homer, in Cleveland. And on Aug. 28, at Denver, he amassed his 30th homer and 100th RBI with one swing, making him Boston's first 30/100 player at shortstop since Nomar Garciaparra in 1998.

But this one was the most meaningful, because it was basically gift-wrapped for the most influential woman in his life back home.

Hernandez draws comparisons with Hader

Ian Browne

It is becoming clear that the Red Sox have an evolving dominator in their bullpen in the form of 22-year-old lefty Darwinzon Hernandez.

And the comparison that new Red Sox righty and former Brewer Jhoulys Chacin has come up with is eye-opening.

"He's good, man. He reminds me of [Josh] Hader," said Chacin. "He throws that raised fastball that some guys just can't catch up to. I've talked to him a lot since I've been here. I want him to stay healthy and keep doing what he's doing."

Chacin had the chance to observe Hader the last two seasons.

"Hader's fastball just rises," said Chacin. "To see him, his fastball does pretty much the same. Just stay healthy and take his approach every day to the field, and he can be a really good pitcher."

Coming into 2019, Hernandez was considered a starting pitching prospect, but he had trouble with his command in that role in the Minors and was converted to relief at Triple-A Pawtucket on July 5.

Eleven days later, he started performing in that role for Boston. In his first 23 appearances (23 1/3 innings) as a reliever for the Red Sox, he has a 2.31 ERA, 43 strikeouts and an opponents' batting average of .181.

The Red Sox haven't committed to a role for Hernandez beyond this season, but the bullpen seems like a likely destination given the way he can affect a game in that role.

"That's a good fastball. You start looking at the numbers, and there's a lot of strikeouts by Darwinzon," said manager Alex Cora. "He's been doing a lot better job with his slider, but what Hader is doing in Milwaukee is pretty amazing. That's a good start for him. We talk about it."

The stuff is one thing, but Cora is as impressed by what is happening behind the scenes.

"I do believe just being around here and doing everything right throughout the day as far as preparation and all the things it takes to make a big leaguer, he's doing it," said Cora. "You talk to veterans, and they're very happy with the way he goes about his business, and that's very important. It's a great compliment.

“Hader is one of the best, if not the best lefty reliever in the big leagues, and it’s something that I know Darwinzon isn’t going to get caught up in. He’s going to keep working, but if the fastball plays like that the rest of his career, we’ll take it. “

Odds slim, but Cora says Sox are hungry

According to Fangraphs, the odds of the Red Sox securing an AL Wild Card spot were down to 2.6 percent at the start of play on Saturday, but Cora appreciates his team’s effort level.

The Sox are 6-2-1 in their last nine series and have won 13 of their last 19 games.

“We know the odds are very slim,” Cora said. “It just happened that we didn’t play good baseball for a while, and we’ve been inconsistent. That’s baseball, but if you talk to the guys and they see it, whatever window we have, 8 percent or 2 percent or not a chance, they show up every day and they play. It’s been good. It’s been good for a while now.”

Cora doesn’t subscribe to the "World Series hangover" theory.

“We’ve been hungry the whole season,” he said. “I feel we’ve been hungry the whole time. There’s other teams that are hungry to win one. We’re hungry to win two, back to back. We’re the only team that can say that. I do feel that we haven’t played well. That’s it.

“But to question hunger and toughness and all that, I don’t know. You guys see them play every day. That’s not for me to judge. I know what I have in the clubhouse. I don’t think we’re hungrier now because we lost eight in a row [from late July to early August]. We were hungry in Spring Training, and we talked about being back-to-back champs. And we still talk about it, until somebody tells us, 'You guys can’t do it.'”

Red Sox help raise childhood cancer awareness

The Red Sox joined all of Major League Baseball on Saturday in helping to raise awareness of childhood cancer by having all on-field personnel, including players and coaches, wear gold ribbon decals and wristbands during their game against the Yankees.

Many children and families who have been affected by cancer took part in a pregame ceremony on the field at Fenway Park.

The Red Sox presented a check to the Jimmy Fund that represented all of the proceeds from the team’s annual Jimmy Fund radio-telethon on WEEI and NESN, which has raised \$57 million over the last 18 years.

Red Sox chairman Tom Werner and infielder Brock Holt (the team’s Jimmy Fund captain) took part in the ceremony.

The ceremonial first pitch was thrown by Morgan Platt, a 15-year-old from Avon, Conn., who was diagnosed with an aggressive brain cancer in 2011. Platt is now an advocate who helps promote awareness of pediatric cancer and research and fundraising for several charities.

*** *ESPN.com***

Stars with emotional leverage could command bigger paydays

Buster Olney

The conventional wisdom is that Mookie Betts is having a down year. Yet by the end of the season, he's going to post statistics pretty similar to what he had in 2018, when he was the American League MVP. He'll score more runs this year than last, he already has more walks than last year, and he could have more extra-base hits.

In a sense, Betts has the Boston Red Sox franchise backed into a corner. If the Sox try (again) to sign him, his contract would probably be the highest baseball deal doled out in the Northeast corridor. If they can't sign him -- Betts is eligible for free agency next fall -- or won't, they'd have to consider dealing their best and most popular player, and in any trade, they would probably not be able to replicate his actual value and probably would ignite anger and frustration in their fan base.

Teams generally adhere to what the numbers say, but Betts clearly has emotional leverage over the Red Sox in his contract situation. He isn't the only one. Here are some of the other players who do:

- Marcus Stroman, New York Mets. The Mets built their midseason strategy around acquiring the right-hander, sacrificing future assets to go all-in on trying to win in 2019 and 2020 and selling the idea of how perfect the Long Island product Stroman is for New York. Stroman said in conversation last week that he'd be very open to a multiyear deal and believes he'll be an even better pitcher once his future is settled.
- J.T. Realmuto, Philadelphia Phillies. A whole lot has gone wrong for the Phillies this year, from rotation and bullpen injuries to the loss of leadoff hitter Andrew McCutchen. But Realmuto has been everything the Phillies thought they were buying when they dealt for him last winter. He has been playing like the majors' best catcher, posting an .830 OPS and gunning down 43 of 84 would-be base-stealers. The 6-foot-6 Zach Eflin says he has had a couple of moments when he has almost been hit by Realmuto throws to second base. "I've heard the ball go by," he said.

The Phillies gave up major assets to get Realmuto, and given the growing expectations of the franchise, there is pressure on the team to execute a long-term deal with the catcher, who is eligible for free agency after 2020. As Teddy KGB said in the movie "Rounders," "Pay that man his money." Ken Rosenthal recently noted that Realmuto is in position to be the second catcher in history with a deal of \$100 million-plus, following Buster Posey.

- Freddie Freeman, Atlanta Braves. The first baseman has two years left on an eight-year, \$135 million contract signed in the spring of 2014. Freeman is the leader of the franchise, the heir apparent to Chipper Jones and John Smoltz, and he turns 30 later this week. Braves fans have enjoyed many longstanding relationships with homegrown talents such as Freeman, and there will be pressure on Atlanta to re-sign the four-time All-Star.
- George Springer, Houston Astros. The outfielder is about a week younger than Freeman and turns 30 this winter. Coming off this, the best season of his career, it would make sense for the Astros and Springer to work something out this winter.

Masahiro Tanaka starts for the New York Yankees on Sunday Night Baseball, having turned a corner in his performance after adjusting the grip on his split-finger fastball. Like a lot of pitchers, Tanaka struggled with the changed, lower seams that players have talked about since spring training. Although his velocity was about the same as it had been in recent seasons, his splitter lost an average of two inches' drop from what it did last year, with opponents doing big damage.

In his first years as a professional in Japan, Tanaka used a forkball grip, he recalled in conversation Saturday, with his index and middle finger spread wide around the seams. But at age 21, he shifted to a splitter grip, with the index and middle finger spread less.

How the Yankees became 'savages'

You can thank a viral "hot-mic" video from a guy called Jomboy. Coley Harvey »

As Tanaka looked to make the pitch more functional after the All-Star break, he tinkered with his grip -- and initially went back to something closer to the forkball. "But I still wasn't getting the results I wanted," he said through an interpreter, "with the movement or the way hitters reacted to it."

Tanaka changed the grip again, spreading his fingers a little less than he does with a forkball but a little more than he did with the splitter earlier this year. With Tanaka's modified splitter grip, his hand is anchored to the ball a little more than in the first months, and in his past five starts, Tanaka has a 2.43 ERA and has held opponents to a .588 OPS. "It feels better," he said. "I don't want to go too much into detail, but it does feel better."

- The other day, Jhoulys Chacin -- signed by the Red Sox last week -- compared reliever Darwinzon Hernandez, in an interview with WEEI, to his former teammate Josh Hader. In Chacin's eyes, Hernandez's fastball moves similarly to Hader's, beating hitters at the top of the strike zone. Like Hader, Chacin is averaging about two strikeouts per inning: 54 in 28 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Boston catcher Sandy Leon nodded when he heard what Chacin said. He talked about how special Hernandez's four-seam fastball is in how he can throw it up and away or up and in to right-handed hitters and how special Hernandez is.

"He asks a lot of questions of the other pitchers," Leon said. "He wants to be 'The Guy.'"

- Kole Calhoun was drafted by the Los Angeles Angels almost a decade ago, an eighth-round pick out of Arizona State, and he has thrived in the organization, with eight seasons in the major leagues, 135 home runs and a Gold Glove Award. But his time with the team is probably nearing an end. Calhoun turns 32 in October, and the Angels hold a \$14 million option on the right fielder. Mike Trout and Justin Upton, who have manned the other two spots in the outfield, are under contract for years to come, and the organization will look to make room for top prospect Jo Adell, the 20-year-old monster talent who has an .834 OPS across three levels of the minors this year. Calhoun does have value, and the Angels could exercise the option and then trade him, perhaps kicking in some money to offset the salary, or they could decline the option altogether and move on.

- The most difficult managerial decision between now and the start of the postseason might be in the hands of Washington's Dave Martinez. As Max Scherzer has dealt with injury in recent weeks, Stephen Strasburg has been dominant in leading the Nationals' staff, with a 2.96 ERA in his past 12 starts and 98 strikeouts in 76 innings. Left-hander Patrick Corbin has been more than solid in his first year in Washington. Either of those two veterans could be a worthy pick to start the National League wild-card game, which Washington might host.

But Scherzer is one of the best pitchers of his generation, and he bears the sort of personality that engenders confidence. He has pitched OK in a handful of outings since being activated off the injured list -- but certainly not as well as Strasburg.

Whom will Martinez pick: the pitcher who is going the best or the three-time Cy Young Award winner and leader of the staff?

- The Yankees' acquisition cost for Gio Urshela in the summer of 2018: \$25,000 in a straight purchase from the Blue Jays.

- Rafael Devers is closing in on 200 hits for the season, and he has accumulated more than 80 extra-base hits. The most recent Red Sox player to achieve the 200/80 hit/extra-base hit benchmarks in a season: Jim Rice in 1978, when the AL MVP compiled 86 extra-base hits among 213 hits.

- A GM said recently that the worst job in baseball is that of hitting coach because an increasing number of hitters use personal coaches, leaving the hitting coaches in a terrible position. When a player does well, the credit goes to the personal coach, and on the other hand, the personal coach is not in the dugout to deal with

the inevitable struggles, so the blame for those tends to be aimed at the guy in the dugout, the team hitting coach.

One evaluator said he witnessed this scene in 2019: As a group of hitters took batting practice before a game, three were on the phone FaceTiming with their personal coaches between rounds of their swings.

- Back in the days when Realmuto was with the Miami Marlins, a fellow Oklahoman sought him out -- Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench, who asked former teammate Tony Perez to arrange a meeting one year in spring training. Bench grew up about 90 minutes from where Realmuto was raised.
- Club executives have become increasingly wary of players who remain unsigned late in spring training or beyond the start of the regular season because they think those free agents can't ever catch up to their peers -- and sometimes push themselves to the point of injury. Craig Kimbrel signed with the Cubs in June and posted an ERA of 5.68 before landing on the injured list a second time on Friday. He's dealing with inflammation in his elbow. Dallas Keuchel landed with the Braves in June and has pitched successfully, with a 3.72 ERA over 84 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings in 14 starts.

Awards watch

With three weeks to go, this is what the top of the major awards ballots would look like:

AL Cy Young Award

1. Justin Verlander, Astros. He leads the league in innings and ERA, and the no-hitter is a nice chit to have on his Cy Young Award résumé. If he wins, this would be his second Cy Young Award -- and the sixth time he has finished in the top three in the voting.

1a. Gerrit Cole, Astros. This probably will come down to which of these teammates pitches better in the next three-and-a-half weeks.

3. Charlie Morton, Tampa Bay Rays. With apologies to the Rangers' Mike Minor.

AL MVP

1. Mike Trout, Angels. He could take the rest of the season off, and he would still be the MVP. Trout has accumulated 8.7 fWAR, the most in the big leagues and almost two wins better than that of the next player.

Oral history: How Mike Trout fell to Angels

Why did the Mickey Mantle of our time last until No. 25? A decade later, those who know best detail how it happened. Keith Law

2. Alex Bregman, Astros.

3. Xander Bogaerts, Red Sox.

NL Cy Young Award

1. Hyun-Jin Ryu, Los Angeles Dodgers. This standing is in serious jeopardy. Because of Ryu's recent slump and his rate of innings, the Dodgers are skipping his next start and might continue to scale back his work as he prepares for the playoffs.

2. Jacob deGrom, Mets. He's second in the NL in strikeouts, fifth in ERA and fifth in innings.

3. Max Scherzer, Washington Nationals. It's incredible that he is still high on category leaderboards, despite missing a lot of the past two months.

This race is increasingly wide open, with Stephen Strasburg, Mike Soroka and perhaps others still in play.

NL MVP

1. Cody Bellinger, Dodgers. He has been the best player on the best team, posting big numbers offensively and defensively.

*** *WEEI.com***

How Mookie Betts has attempted to help Rafael Devers' MVP push

Rob Bradford

Sometimes we don't know the story behind the story when a player is stumbling a bit.

Maybe there is an injury involved. Perhaps it's simply a mechanical rut. Or there might just be something that only the hitter understands.

Mookie Betts had one of those things.

The Red Sox outfielder has seemingly found his way of late, carrying a .333 batting average and 1.157 OPS for September. The image Betts has portrayed finally feels a whole lot like that of his MVP season a year ago. According to the outfielder, it is no fluke.

Betts explained to WEEI.com one of the challenges he was facing when attempting to find his best baseball-playing self: In basketball terms, he was worrying too much about the assist and not enough about the shot.

Serving as the Red Sox' leadoff hitter Betts was watching in awe of Rafael Devers' onslaught on opposing pitchers, to the point where he started prioritizing the Sox' No. 2 hitter instead of himself.

"There's a flow to the game," he explained. "Devers is behind me swinging early so sometimes you have to sacrifice taking some pitches so he can swing early, especially the way he's swinging the bat. He needs to be able to swing whenever. So I kind of take ownership to work the count or whatever so he can do whatever he wants to do because I'm confident to hit with two strikes. I also kind of sabotage myself, too ... He's banging and he likes to swing early and I know that. He likes to swing early and I don't mind having two strikes so I just take one for the team."

Basically, last year's MVP was trying to mold this year's attempt at unseating Mike Trout. Betts wasn't jumping on his pitch.

For example, in May Betts swung at a pitch on the first or second pitch 50 times, putting 23 in play and coming away with six hits. That was his worst month.

His best two months? July he offered at one of the first two pitches 63 times, putting 31 in play and coming away with 15 hits, with righty hitter already collecting six hits on the nine balls he put in play on 0-0, 1-0 or 0-1 counts in September, swinging 13 times. To repeat, that is six hits on 13 swings.

"Me doing that I hurt myself, obviously. But in a way it kind of hurt the team a little bit too because I'm not doing anything nearly as productive as where I want to be," admitted Betts regarding his approach. "If I can get more productive swinging early I can help myself and the team."

"I'm just like, 'Bro, you're hitting .260 it can't get any worse. Start swinging, bro. They're coming after you. They're definitely coming after you now because they don't want me on base for Devers.' It was just

in my mind. If I'm on another team I've got to make sure, one, Mook's not hitting and if he does you have to live with it because Devers is the one you have to stop in our lineup right now. Him and Bogey and J.D. obviously, too. Devers and Bogey have been the main guys."

"You have to let him keep swinging," he added regarding Devers. "So I don't want him up there taking pitches. He's hitting .330. He needs to swing all the time. Just like if somebody is hitting all these threes, get them the ball. Nobody is going to shoot, nobody. Everybody's job is to get that guy the ball. ..

This isn't about simply jumping on pitches early in the count no matter what. That's certainly not how Betts managed his success in 2018 when he finished as the majors' only hitter with a batting average of better than .300 on two-strike counts.

It is figuring out the best way to make the entire top of the Red Sox' batting order work, and recently that has been with Betts doing what Betts.

"It comes and it goes. For a little bit, I was swinging at the first pitch and then I went away from it. I just need to keep doing it even if I make outs. I can't be scared to make outs," he said. "It definitely feels good. I have something I can maintain. I'm not scared to make outs. There are good outs and bad outs. If I swing at a good pitch that's half the battle."

MOOKIE'S TRUE LOVE

Obviously, Betts is really, really good at baseball. But listening to him talk basketball on the "5-Out Podcast" with WEEI.com's Nick Friar it was interesting to hear the star's mindset when it comes to his true love.

"It's been my favorite sport since I've been able to walk, pretty much," Betts said regarding hoop. (The 5-Out episode will be available Tuesday.)

Betts was actually offered a scholarship to play basketball at Lipscomb University and admitted on the podcast that he would have attempted to walk-on the basketball team at the University of Tennessee if didn't sign with the Red Sox. It was a sport already near and dear to his family, with his father having played against the Harlem Globetrotters and "Mookie" coming from his parents' love of former NBA star Mookie Blaylock.

While Betts doesn't have the opportunity to play in hoop games because of current commitment to baseball (a wise decision ... just ask Aaron Boone), it would have made for a great one-on-one battle if he got the chance to take on current teammate Travis Lakins. Lakins was recruited by a smattering of Div. 1 teams to play basketball, including Brad Stevens' Butler team.

A NEW WORLD FOR WORKMAN

While everyone will understandably be focused on the big-ticket items this offseason, Brandon Workman's contract situation represents an interesting dynamic.

Workman is heading into his final year of arbitration eligibility having signed for \$1.15 million for the 2019 season. But that deal was for a pitcher who had just started his climb back into life as a reliable major league reliever, having pitched just 13 times in what would be classified as high-leverage situations. This year he has had 35 high-leverage outings, pitching in the ninth inning 27 times (which is 23 more than a year ago).

Unless something turns, Workman will head into the offseason as a legitimate major league closer, owning the lowest batting average against (.125) of any reliever in the big leagues.

"It will be different this year," said the 31-year-old. "I'll have a little bit better argument of why I should get paid. I love playing baseball and stuff but it's still my job and I would like to be paid well to do it."

The way the Red Sox' bullpen is set up, the righty will undoubtedly become the highest-paid reliever on the team next season, most likely passing Matt Barnes (who made \$1.6 million this season). There is a very real scenario where very little financial commitment is made toward the group of relievers for 2020, with the team relying on the emergence of Workman and Darwinzon Hernandez to go along with what they feel they already have in Barnes, Marcus Walden and potentially Heath Hembree and Ryan Brasier.

When it comes to the upcoming free-agent market for relievers, the possibilities aren't nearly as intriguing as last time around. Lessons also should have been learned from over-committing to the bullpen following last season, with Jeurys Familia (3 years, \$30 million), David Robertson (2 years, \$23 million), Kelvin Herrera (2 year, \$18 million), and Cody Allen (1 year, \$8.5 million) representing some of the ill-fated relief-pitching deals.

Andrew Miller (2 years, \$25 million) and Joe Kelly (3 years, \$25 million) have been up and down, and Craig Kimbrel is on the injured list with elbow soreness. (By the way, it is interesting to note that Kelly has thrown just four pitches of 100 mph or better this season after totaling 38 such offerings a year ago.)

As for the reliever who started the season as the highest-paid in the Red Sox bullpen Tyler Thornburg he finished off his season with the Dodgers' Triple-A affiliate in Oklahoma City. He continued to struggle in his 12 outings, posting a 6.00 ERA in 12 innings, walking nine. He did strikeout 15. The guess is that Thornburg will continue his attempt at a comeback with the Dodgers, who believe there is a lot to work thanks to the righty's solid measurables (spin rate, velocity, etc.).

THE REAL VALUE OF CHACIN

When Red Sox scout Steve Peck drove an hour across Arizona to see Jhoulys Chacin workout (even though, as he found out later, the pitcher lived 10 minutes from his Scottsdale home) there was an expectation. You were going to get a veteran hurler with a low 90's fastball and a slider that had to play for legitimate success. That's what Peck and the only other scout in attendance (from Kansas City) got.

But there was more.

Talking to Chacin it became evident what kind of presence the 31-year-old carried, with the righty going out of his way to praise the Milwaukee organization that had just cut him loose while saying all the right things when it came to his lot in life. Then Peck started talking to others around baseball and it became clear this guy was cut from the kind of cloth any clubhouse would welcome.

Sure enough, after the first week in a Red Sox uniform, the read on Chacin seems to be the correct one -- both on and off the field.

While so many focused on his two innings of no-hit ball against the Yankees after not facing a batter for seven weeks, the true impact so far has been his mentoring of players like Darwinzon Hernandez. It brings to mind the impact infielder John McDonald had on a young Xander Bogaerts in September 2013, and how memorable/important such a presence figures to be.

LET'S NOT FORGET THE IMPORTANCE OF STARTING PITCHING

While so many are getting wrapped up in this new world of bullpen games, it should be understood that in order to have sustained success you better do what the Red Sox originally intended -- be driven by really good starting pitching.

After Saturday, the Red Sox now have had 26 games in which their starters have gone three innings or less (with their record somewhat remarkably sitting at 13-13.) But consider that last year the number was 13 such starts, with the 2013 team landing at five and you get the idea what kind of challenge has faced them this time around.

Some would look at the relative success of teams allocating a good chunk of starts to relievers and say this is how things are trending. But not really. If you want to win you better have legitimate starters

Take the Rays, for instance. They obviously have rolled out the "opener" a ton, with their starters going three innings or less 35 times. The results have been a 26-19 mark and 4.77 ERA. But you know why Tampa Bay is in this thing? Because of everyone else. There have been 100 starts of four innings or more for the Rays' pitching staff, with those pitchers carrying a 2.97 ERA and the team going 54-36.

Other contenders when their starters have gone for innings or greater? The Yankees are 73-42. The A's are 79-47. And the Astros are 85-38. That's just FOUR innings or more, not six or seven.

Moral of the story: The Red Sox' priority is figuring out this starting pitching conundrum heading into 2020.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT ...

History was made this week when two lefties warmed up at the same time in the Red Sox' home bullpen.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Where it all went wrong for the 2019 Red Sox

Sean McAdam

Technically speaking, the Red Sox haven't been eliminated from playoff contention. And so, they soldier on, hoping against slim hope that the many teams in front of them will collapse, offering them a tiny window to the wild card.

They can fight the good fight, but deep down, even they know it's not happening.

Where did it go wrong? The eight-game losing streak in late July and early August? The 2-8 start on the first road trip? Yes and yes, and a handful of other lost opportunities, too.

But those are specific stretches of play or groups of game.

Ultimately, the Red Sox are going to miss out on qualifying for the playoffs for the same reason every other team falls short: the players didn't perform well enough. Some were injured. Some seemed to get old in a hurry. Others merely had off-years.

If players don't perform, no amount of wizardry on the part of the manager, coaching staff or front office is going to overcome that.

But part of the responsibilities of a manager and GM are to put those same players in a position to succeed, and for the 2019 Red Sox, there were too many instances of operator error at the top.

In that sense, the real downfall came from poor decision-making and philosophical slip-ups.

So, a deeper dive into the choices that sent the season off the tracks is in order, ranked in order of importance. (For the time being, we'll table contractual decisions since, say, extending Chris Sale past this season didn't contribute to his poor season).

1. The "Take it Easy" approach in spring training.

In order to preserve and protect their veteran starters, who had heavy workloads the previous October, the team devised a plan to bring its rotation along slowly during the Grapefruit League season. Starters would

do their throwing in less stressful environments — on the backfields; in a simulated game; against minor league teams — and, in theory, expend less effort and energy in March, the better to be at maximum strength in September and October.

Oops.

Instead, what happened was the team punted on the first month of the season, putting itself such a poor position to start the year that it took until late May before the Red Sox managed to get themselves back to the .500 level. (In the meantime, the Yankees, saddled with injuries, got off to a steaming start and effectively sewed up the division by the All-Star break, leaving the wild card spots as the Sox' only realistic target).

To his credit, Dave Dombrowski acknowledged last month that the organization erred in its approach and said the organization needs to find a better way to prepare its pitchers for the season. Alex Cora, however, has been less willing to concede the error, noting recently that veteran Charlie Morton has had a fantastic season for Tampa Bay despite throwing just 10 innings in Grapefruit League games.

That suggests that Cora isn't quite willing to concede the error of his ways. But there can be little doubt that the team's poor start, the rotation's underperformance and ultimately, the fact that the two most important starters are sidelined in September with physical ailments is evidence enough of what a failure the policy was.

2. Not adding to the bullpen in the offseason.

By now, this is obvious. In fact, it was obvious in spring training that it would be an issue.

No one was suggesting that the Sox should have re-signed both Joe Kelly and Craig Kimbrel. Indeed, Kelly has been every bit as inconsistent with the Dodgers (4.56 ERA) as he was last year with the Red Sox and there were plenty of reasons to be dissuaded from bringing back a closer in his 30s with signs of decline.

Fine.

But to think that the Sox didn't need to somehow replace the 128 innings they provided last season was folly.

There was further naivete in the thinking that the Sox, having uncovered an unheralded gem in Ryan Brasier in 2018, could do it again with someone else this season. (In point of fact, Brasier himself hasn't been anywhere near the pitcher he was last year, a reminder of how fickle reliever performance can be.).

The Sox didn't need to overspend on Andrew Miller or Zack Britton to fill that need. There were other relievers with high-leverage capabilities who could have added to their back-end depth.

Instead, the Sox displayed some institutional arrogance and determined that they would, you know, figure it out. But they didn't.

3. Not naming a closer.

For much of the spring, Cora coyly deflected questions about who the closer would be, repeatedly telling reporters that it would become obvious in the late innings of the first game in Seattle.

Except that wasn't the case.

Yes, Matt Barnes had been identified by Cora and pitching coach Dana LeVangie as the team's primary choice for high-leverage spots. But that was part of a plan to use Barnes in the toughest situations — whether they come in the seventh, eighth or ninth — and not necessarily in save situations.

So, for the first four months or so, the Sox were without a designated closer. A handful of different relievers got the ball in the ninth, depending on usage, availability and matchups.

The result? Relievers were unsure of their roles and unsure when or how they would be used. In the meantime, Barnes lost confidence after, predictably, being beaten up by the toughest parts of the opponents' lineup night after night.

I've long believed that the bullpen-by-committee — for lack of a better term — can be successful and that baseball has for too long put too much emphasis on having the best reliever pitch in save situations, regardless of opponent or where teams are in their order.

But there has to be a buy-in from the bullpen. There has to be some semblance of order to the arrangement, for too long in the season, there was none for the Red Sox.

Eventually, the Sox settled on Brandon Workman as a more traditional closing option. It can't be entirely coincidental that since July 24, the Sox have the lowest bullpen ERA in the game. That roughly coincides with Workman's appointment to the closer's role.

Would choosing Workman as the closer from the beginning made a difference? Maybe, maybe not. But given the struggles the Red Sox had with their rotation, they could have used some stability in the bullpen. If a handful of the blown saves don't happen in the first three months, who knows how that would alter the season?

4. Flip-flopping Mookie Betts and Andrew Benintendi in the lineup.

At the winter meetings last December, Cora announced that he intended to drop Betts to second in the batting order and elevate Benintendi to leadoff.

His reasoning at the time seemed sound: because of the lack of production at the bottom of the lineup in 2018, Betts too often came to the plate with the bases empty, thus depriving one of the team's two best hitters to have more run-producing plate appearances.

Add in Benintendi's ability to consistently reach base, and there was logic to the decision.

But right from the beginning, the new lineup didn't click. Benintendi never seemed to know what was expected of him at the top spot. Should he be aggressive and swing early in the count? Or should be patient, make sure that he didn't chase pitches out of the zone and be content with walks.

Similarly, Betts seemed to be stuck in some netherworld in the second spot. And his placement in the lineup took away a lot of opportunities for him to steal bases.

Finally, Cora recognized the error of his ways at the end of May, putting Betts back in the leadoff position. Within a month, Betts was back to being the force that he was a year ago. But also by then, half the season had gone without the Sox getting full value from their most dynamic player.

5. Mishandling the catching situation.

It happened so long ago it's hard to believe it was this season, but the Red Sox made the judgment at the end of spring training that Blake Swihart was capable of being part of a two-man catching situation while sending Sandy Leon to the minor leagues.

Then, as if to compound things, after the Sox designated Swihart for assignment and dealt him to Arizona, they had Leon and Christian Vazquez share the catching role. That, in retrospect, proved short-sighted, too.

It's true that Vazquez has been inconsistent behind the plate at times, allowing more wild pitches and guilty of more passed balls than he should. But he has the second-best caught-stealing numbers of any catcher in

the league and he's enjoyed a breakout season at the plate, easily surpassing his previous career highs in homers and RBI and other categories.

Leon, on the other hand, continues to be completely overmatched at the plate, with a slash line of .181/.241/.295 which reads like the stats for your typical National League pitcher. A .295 OPS?

Again, this missed call ranks well behind the first three on this list, and is a good measure down from the fourth, too.

But it stands as yet one more example of the poor decision-making that has dogged this team literally from the start of spring training and lasted until the All-Star break.

BSJ Game Report: Yankees 5, Red Sox 1 – Outfield misplays open door for big inning by Yanks

Sean McAdam

Defensive lapses croak Sox: Four of the five runs scored by the Yankees came in the fourth, and all four came as a direct result of some poor defensive play by J.D. Martinez in right field. First, with a runner on first and one out, Martinez failed to catch a liner right at him, struggling with the tough sun field. Then, Martinez went chasing after a ball near the right-field line, only to pull up when he saw second baseman Brock Holt going after the ball. It dropped in for a ground-rule double, scoring two. "As an outfielder, you've got take charge on that one," said Alex Cora. And the next batter, Edwin Encarnacion, hit a two-run homer, ending a highly costly sequence. Cora said he had Martinez in the outfield — and Jackie Bradley Jr. on the bench — because "we need to score runs; we've been struggling against lefties." In the end, however, the choice of Martinez in right proved costly.

Sox continue to struggle against lefties: New York starter J.A. Happ turned in 6.1 innings of shutout ball against the Sox, who dropped to 20-26 in games started by lefthanders this season. Cora had five righties and four lefties in the order, opting to go with lefthanded hitters like Holt and Mitch Moreland because both had been putting up quality at-bats of late. It doesn't help that the manager doesn't have much to choose from on his bench. The only other righthanded options available to him were infielder Chris Owings (hitless in his last 10 at-bats) and outfielder Gorkys Hernandez (also 0-for-10 in his last 10 at-bats). This is where the Sox miss both Steve Pearce and Michael Chavis.

Bogaerts reaches milestone: Xander Bogaerts picked a good time to collect his 1,000th career hit. Back in his native Aruba, his mother was celebrating her birthday and Bogaerts had family members text him before the game that today would be a good day to reach the round number. Sure enough, with one out in the fourth, Bogaerts drilled a single to right field to satisfy his family, provide his mother with a nice gift and realize a nice achievement for himself. "I was hoping that it wouldn't come on a game where we lost," said Bogaerts. "But from a personal standpoint, it was definitely a special day for me. A thousand hits against the Yankees and on my mom's birthday is pretty neat."

SECOND GUESS

Perhaps this is easy to say with the benefit of hindsight, but the idea of playing Martinez in right field during a day game is surely risky. Start with the amount of ground there is to cover — Fenway has one of the game's most spacious right fields — and add in the sun factor, which is considerable in the late afternoon, and it would have been far more sensible to keep Mookie Betts in right, move Andrew Benintendi to center and have either Martinez or Sam Travis handle left.

ONE UP

Travis Lakins: Lakins got his first major league "start" — even if it was for just two innings — as he mowed down the Yankees six straight while recording three strikeouts and showing the best velocity he flashed this season.

ONE DOWN

Rafael Devers: Devers has been streaky of late and Saturday represented a down day, as he went 0-for-4 with a double play and two strikeouts.

QUOTE OF NOTE:

“Got to give credit to (J.A.) Happ. He dominated us today and for some reason, we couldn’t stop chasing those high fastballs.” Xander Bogaerts.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING:

Marco Hernandez delivered a pinch-hit single in the eighth and is now 6-for-13 a pinch-hitter this season.

Bogaerts became just the Red Sox player in history to reach 1,000 hits before turning 27.

J.D. Martinez became the third player to hit 35 or more homers in each of the last three seasons.

The Sox used eight pitchers, tying a franchise record for a nine-inning game.

UP NEXT

The Sox and Yankees play the penultimate game of their season series at 8:05 p.m., with RHP Rick Porcello (12-11, 5.63) vs. RHP Masahiro Tanaka (10-8, 4.42)

*** *The Athletic***

Days like this should make J.D. Martinez think twice before opting out of Red Sox contract

Chad Jennings

J.D. Martinez played almost 500 innings in the outfield last season. He was never charged with an error, but the metric Defensive Runs Saved estimated he cost the Red Sox five runs.

Back in the outfield on Saturday, Martinez spent nine innings in right field and, again, he was never charged with an error. But a ball lost in the sun and another that dropped in front of him cost the Red Sox in a 5-1 loss to the Yankees. Martinez also drove in the only Red Sox run with his 35th home run of the season, but they took the good with the bad, and the result was a loss.

Which that might be worth remembering two months from now.

This offseason has the potential to be one of upheaval for the Red Sox, and no contract on the books is more curious than Martinez’s. He has the right to opt out of the final three years of his deal. Doing so would mean forgoing roughly \$60 million — and forgoing the additional right to opt out after 2020 and 2021 — to hit the open market as a 32-year-old coming off another tremendous offensive season.

It would also mean testing the market value of an elite hitter whose considerable worth is tied almost exclusively to his bat.

For the Red Sox, Martinez has been a near-perfect fit. They have three other strong defensive outfielders, which has freed Martinez to hit 78 home runs in nearly two seasons as the team’s primary DH and cleanup hitter. But occasionally they’ve played him in the outfield corners, as they did Saturday so that Jackie Bradley Jr. wouldn’t have to face a lefty.

That decision cost them in a four-run fourth inning that made all the difference.

First, there was a hard line drive. It was right at Martinez, but he had the sun in his eyes, and though he crouched to make the play, he couldn't catch it and the ball got past him for a double.

"If someone could look through the sun, I guess they catch it," Martinez said.

Next was a shallow fly ball into no man's land halfway down the right-field line. The ball was so weakly hit, Statcast registered an expected batting average of .010, but Martinez didn't get there in time, deferring to Brock Holt who was sprinting from second base to attempt an over-the-shoulder grab on the run. The ball bounced once and landed in the seats for a ground-rule double.

"That ball has to get caught," Martinez said. "If I could go back in time, I would have said, 'I got it.'"

Catch both, and the inning is over without a run. Instead, two extra-base hits created two runs and kept the inning alive for Edwin Encarnación's two-run homer. The four-run inning made all the difference.

Perhaps only Superman could have caught the sun ball, but limited range surely played a role on the popup. Either way, the point is this: Martinez's defense is not what keeps him employed and paid so well. That he can play the outfield is a bonus, but that's not where he generates his value. He's paid to hit.

Although he hasn't quite matched last year's production, Martinez still ranks third in the American League in slugging percentage, fourth in OPS and sixth in wRC+. His back has bothered him at times, but he still ranks top 20 in plate appearances. When it comes to hitting, Martinez is about as reliable as anyone. And the remaining three years, \$60 million suggests he's already in line to be compensated as the game's top designated hitter. Consider some of his contemporaries:

- Twins designated hitter Nelson Cruz had been an All-Star in five of the previous six seasons when he settled for a one-year, \$14-million contract this winter. It came with a team option — not a player option — for 2020. Although he's 39, Cruz currently has the second-highest OPS in the American League.
- Astros left fielder Michael Brantley, who's Martinez's age and has made 23 starts at DH this season, signed a two-year, \$32-million deal in the offseason when he was coming off back-to-back All-Star selections (plus a recent history of injuries). He ranks 10th in the league in fWAR and seventh in wRC+.
- Yankees designated hitter Edwin Encarnación is finishing off a three-year, \$60-million contract (similar to the amount remaining in Martinez's current deal). He signed when he was 34 coming off a tremendous four-year stretch in Toronto and has since been traded twice, with the Mariners paying half of his remaining salary when they dealt him to the Yankees in June.
- Athletics designated hitter Khris Davis signed a two-year, \$33.5 million extension this season. It was seen as a perhaps team-friendly deal considering Davis was 31 and had averaged 44 home runs the previous three seasons, the most of any player. His numbers have fallen off considerably this season.

With Martinez, the Red Sox have taken the good with the bad less often this season. After playing the field for nearly 500 innings a year ago, Martinez is closer to 300 innings in the outfield this season. The Red Sox have that luxury, and it lets them maximize what they're paying for. They can take the good without the bad (or, if you're bullish on Martinez's glove, they can take the good without the not-as-good). National League teams won't have that luxury, which would surely limit Martinez's open-market value (unless, you know, the Mets). Even American League teams have been hesitant to commit \$20 million a year for three years for an all-bat player in his mid-30s.

There's also this factor to consider: Martinez's current contract lets him opt out after 2021 as well. If the new CBA includes a universal DH for 2022, wouldn't Martinez be in a great position to opt out then and capitalize on a suddenly expanded market?

It's a curious predicament. How often does one of the game's best hitters, after another season in which his OPS is at or approaching 1.000, not hit the open market when given the chance?

Martinez surely would be one of the most attractive players on the market this offseason, but could he land a contract larger than three years and \$60 million? Could he find a fit better than the Red Sox? Could he move forward, still hitting all those home runs, without having to explain later that he'd been blinded by the sun?

*** *The New York Daily News***

J.A. Happ stifles the Red Sox with a two-hit outing as Yankees nudge rivals closer towards postseason elimination

Kristie Ackert

J.A. Happ left Fenway Park last October frustrated. The veteran left-hander had been acquired by the Yankees to try and stop the Red Sox in the 2018 playoffs and instead he helped springboard them to their World Series title. It also seemed to send him on a year-long quest to find himself again.

In the last two weeks, however, Happ has found something and is putting together a case for the Yankees to give him another playoff start. He had his most dominant start of the season at the right time, throwing 6.1 scoreless, two-hit innings as the Yankees beat the Red Sox 5-1 at Fenway Park.

The Yankees (93-50) improved to 12-5 against the Red Sox, but just 2-4 at Fenway this season. Edwin Encarnacion had a monster two-run homer and an RBI-double as the Yankees' bats woke up and pushed the defending World Series champion Red Sox (76-66) to the brink of a very quiet October.

Happ is hoping he will be pitching deep into next month.

"I don't know how they're going to feel," Happ said of the Yankees' decision about the playoff rotation. "I'm trying to focus, again, if I can go out and feel like I felt today, I like my chances. They'll decide what they want to decide. Whenever they ask me to pitch, I'm pitching."

And with likely just three more starts in the regular season he is finally pitching well in a crucial time.

After posting the second highest ERA of his career and allowing a career-high 32 home runs this season, Happ's last three starts have been very encouraging.

He has now posted two straight starts of at least six innings without giving up a run, only the second Yankees start to do that this season. He has not allowed a run in 15.1 straight innings, dating back to his Aug. 26 start in Seattle and has allowed three earned runs over his last 17.2 innings pitched.

"I think his stuff is strong right now, I think he's throwing the ball real well. I think he's doing a good job now of mixing his pitches," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "I think there is some conviction with how he wants to attack these lineups and the ability to have some secondary pitches to go along with his four-seamer.

"Today was good, because he was in command of that game from the start," Boone said. "To get into the seventh inning against a team with an offense like that, where I felt all day he was generating some weak contact. Just really excited to see him continue to build momentum."

Saturday, Happ struck out six and walked one. He was efficient, needing just 87 pitches to breeze through those six innings. His most work-intense inning was spent working around a one-out single by Xander Bogaerts, which he needed 21 pitches to get through.

It was just his eighth quality start this season. It has been a rough year for him.

“Part of it, he’s had one of those years, where every mistake has been hit. More than anybody we’ve had and more than anybody I’ve seen in a long time,” Yankees pitching coach Larry Rothschild said.

The 36-year-old has worked on, and regained trust in, his fastball and has seemingly turned a corner on his season. Saturday, the Red Sox were 1-for-10 with a walk and five strikeouts against his four-seam fastball.

“We’re constantly trying to do a little bit mechanically but I don’t think it’s anything drastic,” Happ said. “I think for me, I felt a lot more like myself. I wasn’t thinking as much. Usually when you’re throwing strikes, you tend to ideally settle in a little bit. That’s what I felt like I was able to do tonight.”

That is more like the Happ the Yankees made a trade for last July, trying to catch the Red Sox. It is what they had in mind when they re-signed him last winter to a two-year deal. And it’s what Happ needs to put a season-worth of struggles behind him and get a chance in October.

“I haven’t thought about it,” Happ said when asked where he fits in the Yankees’ postseason plans. “We’ll figure that stuff out. That always has a way of taking care of itself. I think we’re focused on trying to win as many games as we can to close the year out.”

*** *The New York Post***

J.A. Happ tames Red Sox in outing Yankees have waited for

Dan Martin

Maybe the Yankees are finally getting the J.A. Happ they were expecting.

And it could be just in time for October.

The left-hander delivered a second straight dominant performance in Saturday’s 5-1 win over the Red Sox on Saturday, limiting Boston to two hits and a walk in 6¹/₃ shutout innings.

It came after Happ limited the A’s to one hit over six innings in his previous outing in The Bronx and he hasn’t allowed a run in 15 ¹/₃ innings.

The turnaround has been stark for the 36-year-old, who had an ugly 5.57 ERA before his recent gems — and puts him firmly in the conversation for a playoff start.

“I don’t know how they’re gonna feel,” Happ said of the Yankees’ decision-makers. “If I feel like I felt today the next couple [starts], I like my chances. They’ll decide what they want to decide and whenever they ask me to pitch, I’ll pitch.”

Manager Aaron Boone said the final weeks of the season will help determine where players fit in the playoffs.

“I think that’s fair,” the manager said. “I think these three weeks are important to see where guys are at as we get into the decision-making process and how we’re gonna match up.”

Happ said he hadn’t thought about his potential role: “That stuff always has a way of working itself out.”

No doubt the Yankees have.

On Saturday, he gave up a leadoff single to Mookie Betts in the first. Betts was erased on an inning-ending double play from Rafael Devers and Happ retired nine in a row before Xander Bogaerts singled through the right side with one out in the fourth.

And the Yankees' lineup, which was almost entirely shut down by seven Boston pitchers in Friday's loss — when they managed just three hits — saw their first nine batters set down by opener Travis Lakins and Bobby Poyner on Saturday.

The Yankees didn't get their first baserunner until DJ LeMahieu singled off Ryan Weber to open the fourth, which sparked a four-run inning, that was aided by J.D. Martinez losing Didi Gregorius' double in the sun, which helped lead to a two-run double by Gary Sanchez and a two-run homer by Edwin Encarnacion.

"I feel like we came in with an edge and were irritated after [Friday] night," Happ said. "They threw a lot of guys at us today."

Happ pitched into the seventh, when Adam Ottavino entered and got the final two outs.

The Red Sox didn't have a runner in scoring position until Tommy Kahnle gave up consecutive singles with one out in the eighth. Zack Britton got Brock Holt looking before Betts lined to right to end the inning. Aroldis Chapman allowed a two-out homer to Martinez in the ninth for Boston's lone run.

But it was Happ's 92-pitch performance that stood out.

"I've just felt a lot more like myself," Happ said. "I wasn't thinking as much and was able to throw strikes and settle in."

If that continues, their playoff chances figure to improve.

Luis Severino seems to be nearing a return from his season-long absence because of rotator cuff inflammation and a strained lat. James Paxton is pitching well and Masahiro Tanaka is typically reliable in the postseason. Domingo German has already exceeded expectations this season and while the Yankees counted on Happ to be a key part of any playoff run they made this season, the lefty didn't seem like he might be up to the task for much of the year.

That could be changing just in time.

Their next accomplishment could be knocking Boston out of the AL East race. Happ said the Yankees' focus remained on their own team, but admitted: "They won the World Series last year and knocked us out [in the ALDS]. I'm sure it wouldn't feel bad."

*** *The Bergen Record***

J.A. Happ continues to pitch his way back into the Yankees' playoff mix

Pete Caldera

J.A. Happ's yearlong battle to consistently execute pitches had become an almost maddening exercise.

Through his first 26 starts this season, the Yankees veteran lefty had carried a hefty 5.57 ERA, with 32 home runs allowed.

"It's a tricky thing," Happ said. "I think for a long time, I wanted it so bad and I was just trying to sort of feel for it.

"Just trying to find that medium space where I feel like I'm being aggressive but executing."

Lately, he's found that ideal space.

Just when it appeared he'd run out of time to turn around his regular season, Happ has thrown himself back into the mix for a playoff start.

Following up an impressive stint against the Oakland Athletics, Happ handcuffed the Boston Red Sox in leading the Yankees to a 5-1 victory late Saturday afternoon at Fenway Park.

After a solid 6.1 innings against the defending world champs' impressive lineup, that makes two straight scoreless outings for Happ with just three hits allowed over a total of 12.1 innings – with 12 strikeouts.

“I don't know how they're going to feel,” Happ said of the Yankees' rotation decisions come October. “But if I feel like I felt out there today, I like my chances.”

Planning for the playoffs

Yet, as the Yankees barrel toward October, “I haven't thought about it,” Happ said of where he might fit in a postseason rotation. “We'll figure that stuff out that always has a way of taking care of itself.”

Admittedly, “I think it's fair to say this is an important few weeks,” manager Aaron Boone said of deciding how the Yankees might align their rotation for a best-of-five ALDS.

Sunday's starter against the Red Sox, Masahiro Tanaka, would appear to be a lockdown choice to open any playoff series at home.

After that, it's sort of up for grabs.

Do they continue to trust Domingo German, so reliable over a long stretch but stumbling lately as he ventures into uncharted seasonal innings totals?

Is James Paxton, pitching consistently well down the stretch, the logical choice to start an important Game 3 on the road?

And does CC Sabathia have a role in this postseason as he tries to come back from the latest injury to his chronic, arthritic right knee?

'More like myself'

Happ's improved fastball command has led to a sharper mix of his secondary pitches, but it's not due to any drastic mechanical fixes.

“I felt just a lot more like myself,” Happ said of building on strike one. “I don't really want to deep-dive too much into it,” other than to say he's “in a better place mentally.”

With seven strikeouts, no walks and only two singles allowed on Saturday, “he was in command of that game from the start,” Boone said.

Overall, “I feel like we came in with a little bit of an edge, irritated after (Friday) night,” Happ said of a 6-1 loss. “They threw a lot of guys at us (eight Boston pitchers) and our offense did a good job of battling those guys.”

Same formula, new outcome

This time, the Red Sox' attempt to bullpen their way through a second straight win against the Yankees backfired – an outcome influenced by some none support from the Boston defense.

In right field, J.D. Martinez lost a Didi Gregorius liner in the sun for a double, putting runners at second and third.

Gary Sanchez followed with a gift, two-run hit when Martinez and second baseman Brock Holt pulled up in their pursuit of an opposite-field bloop that bounced into the stands for a ground-rule double.

Immediately, Edwin Encarnacion doubled down on that mistake by mashing a massive two-run homer off Colten Brewer that cleared the Green Monster seats in left.

Encarnacion added a long, RBI double to center in the ninth, giving him five RBI in four games since returning from the injured list due to a fractured right wrist.

“When he gets hot, he is one of the best hitters in the game,” said Happ, a past teammate of Encarnacion’s in Toronto. “I haven’t seen many like him when he gets hot.”

*** *The Newark Star Ledger***

J.A. Happ of 2018 shows up again, Yankees roast Red Sox 5-1

Randy Miller

Yankees left-hander J.A. Happ beginning September with consecutive masterpieces won’t atone for five months of on-and-off struggles.

His last two starts also certainly didn’t make up for that bad one last October at Fenway Park when the Yankees dropped Game 1 of a best-of-five Division Series that the Boston Red Sox won in four.

They do bring legitimate optimism that Happ can be a force in this year’s playoffs when he very recently seemed in danger of being demoted to a postseason long-relief role ... or maybe even being left off the Yankees’ postseason roster.

Back in Fenway, Happ made it two gems in a row Saturday afternoon pitching a two-hit shutout over 6 1/3 innings in a 5-1 Yankees win over the Boston Red Sox.

Six days earlier, Happ pitched a one-hitter over six shutout innings in a no-decision against the Oakland Athletics at Yankee Stadium.

Happ’s ERA is still high at 5.10 and his 32 homers allowed over 146 1/3 innings is definitely alarming, but 13 1/3 scoreless innings with 14 strikeouts to start September has rekindled memories of late last season.

Remember that? Happ was traded from the Toronto Blue Jays to the Yankees in late July, then finished the regular season going 7-0 with a 2.69 ERA in 11 starts.

On Saturday, Happ (12-8) allowed a leadoff single to Mookie Betts, then got on a roll retiring 10 in a row.

The Yankees built a 4-0 lead for Happ in the fourth when Gary Sanchez blooped a two-run, grounds-rule double to right one batter after Red Sox right fielder J.D. Martinez lost a liner right at him in the sun. Yanks DH Edwin Encarnacion followed with a two-run homer off Colten Brewer that sailed over the left field Green Monster and all the way out of Fenway, and just like that the Yanks were sailing along up 4-0.

Encarnacion made a three-RBI day in the ninth when he doubled off the center-field wall to drive in the Yankees’ fifth run after Sanchez was hit by a curveball with two down and nobody on.

Happ was pulled in the seventh after striking out leadoff hitter Rafael Devers, then four relievers came within one out of completing the Yankees' eighth shutout of the season. Martinez botched that bid homering with two outs in the ninth off Aroldis Chapman, who was pitching for the first time in six days.

NOTABLE

-- Right fielder Aaron Judge was 0-for-5 with two strikeouts after going 0-for-4 with two Ks in Friday night's 6-1 Yankees loss. He's a career .146 hitter in 20 games at Fenway with three homers, four RBI and 28 strikeouts in 82 at-bats.

-- Center fielder Aaron Hicks suffered a setback rehabbing his right elbow injury and may be done for the season.

-- Third baseman Gio Urshela will be activated from the injured list on Sunday when he becomes eligible to return from his groin injury, but may not start until Monday's series finale.

-- The Red Sox got two perfect innings from opener Travis Lakins, a rookie right-hander, then used seven relievers over the final seven innings.

-- The Yankees reduced their magic number to 11 to clinch the AL East.

LOOKING AHEAD

Sunday: Yankees at Red Sox, 8:05 p.m., ESPN. RHP Masahiro Tanaka (10-8, 4.42) vs. RHP Rick Porcello (12-11, 5.63).

Monday: Yankees at Red Sox, 7:10 p.m., YES & MLB Network. LHP James Paxton (12-6, 4.16) vs. LHP Eduardo Rodriguez (17-5, 3.81).

*** *Associated Press***

Happ, Encarnacion boost Yankees over Red Sox 5-1

With two more wins before they leave Boston, the New York Yankees would be able to end the three-year run by the Red Sox atop the AL East.

That, left-hander J.A. Happ said, would be a nice way to finish up with their longtime rivals for the season.

"They won the World Series last year and knocked us out," Happ said with a smile on Saturday after pitching the Yankees to a 5-1 victory over the Red Sox. "So, I'm sure it wouldn't feel bad."

Happ (12-8) pitched shutout ball into the seventh inning, combining with four relievers on a five-hitter for the Yankees, who lead third-place Boston by 16 1/2 games in the division. He allowed two hits in 6 1/3 innings, striking out seven and walking one.

Happ has not allowed a run in his last 15 1/3 innings.

"He was in command of that game from the start," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "To get into the seventh inning against that team ... really excited to see."

Edwin Encarnacion homered and added a double, driving in three runs for New York, which has won three of its last four games and nine of 12.

J.D. Martinez homered off Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman with two outs in the ninth. The Red Sox began the day six games behind Oakland for the second AL wild-card spot. The Red Sox matched a season high using eight pitchers, a day after employing seven in Friday night's win.

"Got to give some credit to Happ," said Xander Bogaerts, who had one of the hits off him. "He dominated us today and for some reason we couldn't stop chasing those high fastballs and chasing the strike zone."

After losing 6-1 at Fenway Park on Friday night, the Yankees were aided by a bright late-afternoon sun that played tricks with Red Sox fielders on back-to-back doubles in a four-run fourth.

DJ LeMahieu opened the inning with a single off Ryan Weber (2-3), Boston's third pitcher of the game. Aaron Judge struck out, but Martinez then lost Didi Gregorius' flyball to right field in the sun, the ball flicking off his glove and rolling to the wall.

Gary Sanchez greeted reliever Colten Brewer by lofting a flyball down the right field line. As three Boston fielders -- first baseman Mitch Moreland, second baseman Brock Holt and Martinez -- converged on the ball, it dropped just inside the line and bounced into the stands for a ground-rule double, scoring LeMahieu and Gregorius.

Martinez, normally Boston's designated hitter, played the outfield while Jackie Bradley Jr., a left-handed hitter, got a day off against the left-handed Happ.

"I never played there, but I have shagged around that time. It's pretty tough," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said of the right field sun. "The ball never came out. It was hit hard so he didn't have time to adjust. He put his hand up and all that. I think the ball hit his glove, I think."

"As an outfielder you got to take charge on that one," Cora said of the Sanchez play.

Encarnacion hit the next pitch for his 32nd home run of the season, making it 4-0. It's his 11th with the Yankees since coming over from Seattle in June. The Yankees added a run in the ninth when Sanchez was hit by a pitch with two outs and Encarnacion followed with an RBI double to deep center field.

"When he gets hot, I haven't seen many better hitters in the game," Happ said, noting that Encarnacion missed most of August with a wrist injury. "For just coming back, it's been awesome."

LOOKING AHEAD

Boone said he plans to use the remainder of the season to gauge the health of several players returning from injuries and how they can help in the postseason.

"These three weeks will be important in seeing where guys are as we get into the decision-making process, how we're going to match guys up," the manager said.

AIN'T IT GRAND

Bogaerts' fourth-inning single was the 1,000th hit of his career. He is the 32nd player to reach the milestone for the Red Sox, but just the third to do so before turning 27, joining Hall of Famers Tris Speaker and Bobby Doerr.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Yankees: RHP Luis Severino (right shoulder rotator cuff inflammation, lat injury) threw 50 pitches plus five more in the bullpen Friday in a second rehab outing with Double-A Trenton. Boone said the team will map out a plan for what's next for him... 3B Gio Urshela (left groin injury) will likely be active for Sunday's game but Boone isn't sure if he will start...RHP Dellin Betances (right shoulder impingement, lat injury) had his first rehab outing Friday for Trenton and is expected to pitch again on Monday... OF Aaron

Hicks (right flexor strain) had another MRI, which checked out well. But Boone said Hicks' season could be in jeopardy after a setback in his rehab.

Red Sox: Cora said that LHP David Price (cyst left wrist) was scheduled to throw from flat ground.

UP NEXT

RHP Masahiro Tanaka (10-8, 4.42 ERA) is scheduled to start for the Yankees, opposed by RHP Rick Porcello (12-11, 5.63).