

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, October 2, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

At Polar Park, there'll be no line to pay for snacks — Left Field Market will be cashier-less

Janelle Nanos

Imagine going to a ballgame and being able to walk into a store at the stadium, grab a box of Cracker Jack, and head back to your seat without waiting in line to pay.

Thanks to technology that replaces cash registers with cameras and a phone app, fans of the Worcester Red Sox will be able to do just that when the team's new ballfield opens in April 2021.

Polar Park's retail experiment, at the stadium's Left Field Market convenience store, is anticipated to be the first of its kind in any pro sports arena in the country. And it's a sign of how shopping is likely to change in the near future, for consumers and employees alike.

For years, retailers have been trying to bring about the end of the check-out line. Self-scanning technology has been in place for over two decades, and its use has been rapidly spreading, according to RBR, a London research firm.

And more retailers are adopting Apple's store model, with tablet-wielding employees handling check-outs on the sales floor.

Amazon piloted cashier-less technology in the United States in 2016 with its Amazon Go stores, 15 of which are operating around the country.

Similar technology has been introduced in Asia, and a slew of copycat startups are racing to serve the global retail industry. Israel-based Trigo, which provides cashier-less checkouts to grocers, says its technology will serve 280 supermarkets in the next five years. Caper, a shopping cart company that uses artificial intelligence, raised \$10 million this month. And the checkout-free tech startup Zippin has a partnership with Brazil's largest grocer.

San Francisco-based Standard Cognition, which will operate the Polar Park space, has raised more than \$40 million from investors, said cofounder and chief operating officer Michael Suswal. Unlike Amazon Go stores, which are built by Amazon and use a combination of cameras and shelf sensors, Standard Cognition uses only cameras to track items, and its system can be installed in existing stores.

Shoppers at Polar Park will be able to walk into the 1,750-square-foot Left Field Market and grab a bag of popcorn or a baseball cap, and the camera will recognize each item. When they're done shopping, they can either pay with cash or a card at a kiosk, or simply leave: Their smartphones' Polar Park apps will automatically process their saved payment information.

The technology, designed to get shoppers in and out quickly, will be able to simultaneously track the purchases of at least 40 people. It will be introduced in just one storefront in the park; traditional beer lines and old-fashioned concession stands will still exist elsewhere.

Suswal said his company's technology frees up employees to engage with shoppers, rather than "doing robot stuff, like taking money and punching in numbers, or hurrying people through a line."

All of this means that the role of cashier — it's the third-most-common occupation in the United States, with 3.6 million workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics — may be at risk, said Erikka Knuti, spokeswoman for the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

Brick-and-mortar stores have been mechanizing the clerk's role for more than a century, first by handing computation, pricing, and inventory tracking over to machines, and then by asking customers to do the scanning themselves, Knuti said, deemphasizing customer service.

Meanwhile, she said, cashiers have seen their hours, wages, and benefits slashed.

"The question [retailers] keep asking is, 'How do we eliminate needing people?' " she said.

Retail companies' only objective seems to be higher profit margins, Knuti said, but customers have not been asking for the technology, and sometimes resent it. "There's something really cynical and, quite frankly, sinister about this," she said.

Ariane Hegewisch, program director for employment and earnings at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, said cashier-less technology is likely to affect women disproportionately.

Women hold the majority of cashier's jobs, while men who work in retail are more likely to stock shelves or unload deliveries in a store's warehouse. That — as well as the fact men are more likely to sell high-ticket items like cars and computers, while women sell clothing and cosmetics — has led to a wage gap. Male retail workers earn an average of \$38,000 a year, compared to \$26,000 for women.

Removing cashier jobs from stores may exacerbate that gap, she said. But it could also offer women an alternative to the more difficult aspects of retail work — some retailers, for example, could put a renewed emphasis on customer service to distinguish themselves from competitors.

"Cashier jobs are not good jobs," she said. "The shift of the last 10 to 20 years has been to put more of the cost of the labor onto the workers, with shorter hours and less predictability."

Francoise Carré, research director at the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, agreed.

"The shift will likely mean that stores will deploy workers differently," she said, and while saving on labor costs is "certainly on the agenda, a lot of what the automation is about is actually freeing the workforce in the stores to be doing other things."

But that can be its own challenge. In her research, Carré has found that when stores move from cashiers to self-checkouts, workers wind up having fewer pleasant interactions with customers and are instead asked to adopt a watchful, cautious role in the store — an effort to combat shoplifting. And that can be more stressful for workers, she said.

Suswal, however, said Standard Cognition's technology can capture shoplifting that employees might miss. And it can de-escalate those incidents by alerting workers if a customer hasn't paid, allowing them to offer a customer help downloading the app or using the kiosk.

"It doesn't have to be accusatory," he said.

Still, the technology's challenges have retailers proceeding with caution. Amazon has spent hundreds of millions on developing Go stores and had planned to have 3,000 open by 2021, Bloomberg reported. But the company hasn't kept pace with that plan; only 15 total have opened: in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Seattle. Three more are in the works.

"Our sense is that this stuff is . . . very much in the test phase," Carre said.

That's fine with Larry Lucchino, owner of the Worcester Red Sox, who says Polar Park is happy to be the "petri dish" for arenas across the country.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Four front office veterans currently steering Red Sox ship

Bill Koch

Eddie, BOH, Zack and Raquel.

The mention of these four people in casual conversation is generally followed by a reach for the Red Sox media guide. The position they currently share is one Boston chairman Tom Werner described Friday as one of the most coveted in all of sports.

Eddie Romero, Brian O'Halloran, Zack Scott and Raquel Ferreira are three assistant general managers and a senior vice president. This was the team assembled to serve in place of former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, who was fired in early September. These are the folks currently presiding over the day-to-day operations of the Red Sox.

"They're not waiting for a general manager or a president of baseball ops," Boston president and CEO Sam Kennedy said Monday. "They've done some restructuring. They've had some promotions. They've begun work on the strategic plan for 2020 and beyond. I'm grateful to them for their leadership during a transition period, which is always hard in any organization or business."

Flash back about 15 years and it was Theo and The Trio who helped Boston break The Curse. Theo Epstein was the prodigy general manager serving at the behest of Werner, principal owner John Henry and former president Larry Lucchino. All four men exerted varying levels of influence at times, leading to Epstein walking away from the job twice and Lucchino eventually stepping aside in favor of Kennedy.

"I was here when Theo was here, and then he left," Ferreira said. "And then he came back again. Then it was Ben (Cherington) and Jed (Hoyer), and then it was Ben. And then it was Dave. I've been through it before."

"I'm hoping that whoever comes in – whether it's external or they decide to go internal – will realize this group is very special that we have here. There's a reason why everybody has stayed here for so long."

Ferreira has spent 21 years working for the Red Sox in various roles, most recently overseeing major and minor league operations. She participated in the hiring process for O'Halloran in 2002, Scott in 2004 and Romero in 2006. The diverse group includes one of few women (Ferreira) and one of few people of color (Romero, a Puerto Rico native) with prominent roles across baseball's front offices.

"It could be an awkward situation, but not with this group of people," O'Halloran said. "We've worked together for so long and the relationships are so strong. We can disagree and still come to a decision."

"I could see it being awkward if you pick a random four people – that would be awkward. But it's not awkward with us."

Romero has perhaps the most traditional player personnel background and would be the most likely internal candidate for promotion. He left a career as a Florida prosecutor to become an international scout for Boston, acting as one of the leaders when the club signed Rafael Devers from the Dominican Republic in 2013.

“There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle,” Romero said. “But again, we’re fully confident in this group of four here. We can make some of those creative deals and put the pieces together in the best way for us to be competitive in 2020.”

O’Halloran earned an MBA from UCLA and spent five years overseas – two in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, three in Russia – working in international business. He was Dombrowski’s top financial lieutenant, functioning as an analyst and minding the nuts and bolts of various player contracts and transactions.

“It is different to have four people, and none of us have been in this position before,” O’Halloran said. “So it’s different. But yes, I would say largely it’s business as usual.”

Scott was a mathematics major at Vermont who went to work out of college for baseball simulation software developer Diamond Mind, Inc. He came to the Red Sox as an intern in baseball operations and quickly progressed to heading the club’s baseball analytics and baseball systems departments.

“Analytics are a hugely important part of the Red Sox baseball operation and our business operation, frankly,” Kennedy said. “We use data analytics in every decision we make that affects the Red Sox and Fenway Sports Group as a whole. That’s a huge part of the way we operate the different businesses that we’re in.”

Henry said Friday that Boston would begin its search externally and preferred candidates with previous general manager experience. Dombrowski was such a candidate when he was hired in August 2015, but he largely kept the structure of the front office in place. The quartet currently in charge holds out similar hope for the coming days and weeks.

“Any one of us could go find a different job in baseball, but this organization is very special to work for,” Ferreira said. “We’re all hoping that the person who comes in will realize what they have here just like Dave did.”

“Dave didn’t make any changes when he came in, and he said that from the beginning – he didn’t know what he was going to do, and he could have. And he didn’t. We’re hoping for the same thing.”

*** *MassLive.com***

J.D. Martinez’s opt-out decision may cause Boston Red Sox to get creative: ‘All options have to be put on the table,’ says assistant GM Eddie Romero

Chris Cotillo

The regime change in the Red Sox’ front office may have significant implications on J.D. Martinez’s future.

Martinez is one of the more fascinating pieces of Boston’s offseason puzzle, as the slugger must decide within five days of the World Series whether he wants to return to the Sox next season or opt out and test free agency. But before that deadline in late October or early November, it’s possible the Red Sox work out a new deal with Martinez or renegotiate his existing one in an effort to make his decision easier.

Assistant general manager Eddie Romero -- one of four executives running the baseball operations department on an interim basis along with Raquel Ferreira, Brian O’Halloran and Zack Scott -- said the team is not ruling out anything when it comes to Martinez.

“I think all options have to be put on the table,” Romero said. “We want to see where J.D. is at. We’ll sit down with him at some point and I’m sure we’ll have discussions with him before then. But J.D. is an

offensive force and incredible consistent and it rubs off on the other players on the team, what he can do. We would love to have J.D. back. Among the other things on the agenda, that's a big one also."

Romero's tone represents a shift from how former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski viewed Martinez's situation. Last November, Dombrowski said the Sox were unlikely to consider a renegotiated deal with Martinez due to concerns with a Lisfranc foot injury that derailed the original five-year, \$110 million agreement in Feb. 2018. Despite interest on Martinez's end, there were not any discussions about ripping up the opt-out clauses after 2019, 2020 and 2021 and signing a firmer agreement, largely because Dombrowski viewed the opt-outs as protection on the team's end of the deal.

Martinez's contract, which paid him \$47.5 million over two All-Star seasons to start, is a complicated one. It includes opt-outs after the final three seasons, giving Martinez a chance to potentially make more as a free agent and the Sox with some insurance in case Martinez's foot injury recurred. If Martinez misses a certain amount of time (60 straight days in 2020), his 2020 opt-out becomes a mutual option. The same goes for the 2021 opt-out if his foot is injured in 2021.

Martinez's foot has not been an issue over the last two years, making his decision a relatively straightforward one this fall. If he returns, he'll earn \$23.75 million next year and be under contract for \$19.35 million in each of the last two seasons, guaranteeing about \$62.5 million with two additional opt-out opportunities.

Manager Alex Cora and team president/CEO Sam Kennedy both said earlier this week they had no inclination of which way Martinez was leaning. Asked if he was still 50/50 on opting out, Martinez said he couldn't "spill his beans" quite yet and that he planned to discuss the situation with agent Scott Boras in the coming days and weeks.

Kennedy, in his year-end meeting with the media, said the team had not yet started specific discussions with Martinez or Boras.

"We hope J.D. is here," Kennedy said. "We'll have certain discussions. He has certain rights that he bargained for under his contract. We're all well aware of those. We'll see where that takes us. You want J.D. Martinez in the middle of your lineup. He's a World Champion and a key part of last year's success."

Martinez's decision -- or, potentially, new contract -- will have a major impact on how the Red Sox shape the rest of their offseason. His salary will make up a significant chunk of the team's \$208 million payroll goal next year and Kennedy already acknowledged that it will be "challenging" to keep both Martinez and reigning American League MVP Mookie Betts on the roster considering the considerable commitments already made to David Price, Chris Sale, Xander Bogaerts and Nathan Eovaldi.

Because Martinez's departure would drastically decrease the chances Betts is traded, it's currently unclear whether the Red Sox truly want Martinez to return to their lineup or if they believe it would be better for them if he opts out. The team's decision-makers will first try to see if there's a way to keep both stars on the roster and will likely exhaust all potential scenarios in an effort to do so.

"There are always challenges with building a championship team, which we aspire to do every year, and doing that efficiently," O'Halloran said. "We'll be as creative as we possibly can in finding ways to do that."

Boston Red Sox free agents: Rick Porcello, Brock Holt among 'foundation pieces' on expiring deals this winter

Chris Cotillo

An offseason filled with turnover has begun for the Red Sox, and one of the front office's first orders of business will be to determine the level of interest in bringing back the team's own free agents.

Three key Red Sox -- utility player Brock Holt, first baseman Mitch Moreland and starter Rick Porcello -- are among the team's free agents this winter. Auxiliary pieces like pitchers Andrew Cashner and Jhoulys Chacin are also on expiring deals and slugger J.D. Martinez can opt out of his contract and join the free-agent pool shortly after the World Series.

Assistant general manager Eddie Romero, who is one of four members of the interim group running baseball operations, said Monday that the team is planning on assessing its level of interest in those players in the coming days.

"Those decisions are ones we'll have to consider and those are the ones we'll be meeting on in the next few days," Romero said. "We haven't discussed those yet but we'll get to that in short order."

Holt, who has expressed interest in returning to the Sox on a team-friendly deal, appears to be the most likely of the free agents to return. Porcello could come back on a cheap deal after a disastrous season and Moreland may fit as a left-handed hitting complement to Sam Travis at first base.

It's unlikely all three of Holt, Moreland and Porcello -- who have spent a combined 15 years with the Sox - will return in 2020. All three veterans will likely draw strong interest from other clubs.

"All of those guys were obviously huge keys for us in their careers with us," Romero said. "Guys like Rick and Mitch, those are foundation pieces in the locker room. We're so thankful for what they've done for us."

Red Sox free agents:

RHP Jhoulys Chacin

INF/OF Brock Holt

DH/OF J.D. Martinez (if he opts out)

1B Mitch Moreland

INF Chris Owings

1B Steve Pearce

RHP Rick Porcello

*** *RedSox.com***

Boston exec. Ferreira a force behind the scenes

Ian Browne

A loyal and tireless member of the Red Sox' front office for 21 years, Raquel Ferreira has received a steady stream of promotions over her two decades with the club.

But the trust that team ownership put in her last month was her most gratifying moment yet.

On Sept. 8, when owner John Henry, chairman Tom Werner and president/CEO Sam Kennedy informed Dave Dombrowski that he was no longer the president of baseball operations, a temporary structure was put into place -- one that is still going strong.

Assistant general managers Eddie Romero, Brian O'Halloran and Zack Scott formed three-fourths of the group that will run the front office until Dombrowski's successor is named. The fourth member of the group is Ferreira, the team's senior vice president of Major and Minor League operations.

By being elevated during the transition, Ferreira became the highest-ranking woman in a baseball operations department during a regular season.

"It meant a lot," Ferreira said. "I'm not going to lie. Especially with the landscape, the way baseball is, there aren't many females in prominent leadership roles. There's Jean Afterman with the Yankees. For John [Henry], Tom [Werner], Mike Gordon and Sam [Kennedy] to actually give me a seat at the table has meant a great deal and it says a lot to me about this organization."

It was a clear sign that ownership realizes what former Red Sox baseball ops leaders Dan Duquette, Theo Epstein, Ben Cherington and Dombrowski knew full well -- that Ferreira is an indispensable part of the organization.

While Henry indicated last week that Dombrowski's successor should probably be someone who has had experience running a baseball operations department given the sheer volume of challenges the club faces this offseason, Ferreira should not be discounted if the Sox decide to go internal.

Such a move would make her the first female in baseball history to run a baseball operations department.

But in typical Ferreira fashion, she won't be submitting her resume. Ferreira -- a communications major and 1992 graduate of the University of Rhode Island -- has never lobbied for a position in all her years with the Red Sox, and she isn't going to start now.

The Ferreira way is to let her work speak for itself.

"No, I don't do that," said Ferreira, when asked if she would tell ownership she'd like to be considered for the GM job. "I am honored that I have a seat at the table which speaks volumes about this organization. I am never going to lobby or give you like, 'Hey, this person should be me.' I will leave it up to them. I've been here for 21 years. They know what I can and can't do. I know my own strengths and weaknesses. It's up to them."

While Ferreira has great pride in the fact she could help pave the way for more women in MLB front offices, she doesn't like the label of breaking barriers.

"No, I hate that," Ferreira said. "I hate barrier breaking. I hate when you have to count on your hand, 'Like she's only the first or the second or the third'. I hope there comes a day in baseball where you don't have to do that, where you don't have to say, she's only the third or the second or whatever."

It stands to reason that women who want to work in baseball will start using Ferreira as inspiration. And Ferreira isn't shy about the exec she has gained her inspiration from. That would be assistant general manager Jean Afterman of the rival Yankees.

"I always say I want to be like Jean Afterman 2.0. She's the original badass," said Ferreira, who then chuckled as she wondered if that last word should be in print. "She's the original badass in baseball, so you know when they always do a reboot, it's not as good as the original? But I would like be Jean Afterman. I'd like to be the reboot because I think she's a badass and she's an awesome person to look up to."

Kim Ng has had a similar impact in front offices. She was an assistant GM with both the Yankees and Dodgers, and is currently the senior VP of for baseball operations with MLB.

Ferreira is perhaps too humble to realize how many people in the Red Sox organization look up to her. And they happen to be some of the most important people.

There isn't a Red Sox player who has been called up in recent years -- from Mookie Betts to Xander Bogaerts to Andrew Benintendi to Jackie Bradley to Rafael Devers -- who hasn't looked at Ferreira as a key guiding force.

Ferreira has long treated every player in the Minor League organization with the warmth of a family member. She makes sure their environment is comfortable and that she has the proper support system in place to thrive on the field.

When the Red Sox extended Bogaerts with a six-year, \$120-million extension back in April, Ferreira played a pivotal role in the negotiations. Bogaerts put his trust in her, and it led to him giving up a chance in free agency this winter, when he likely would have made more than the deal he got to stay with Boston.

In the coming months or years, there could be similar negotiations with Betts and Devers, and Ferreira could get another chance to demonstrate just how vital she is to the organization.

No matter what happens with Boston's search for their next leader of baseball operations, it is obvious that Ferreira's biggest priority is to keep helping the Red Sox -- perhaps even for another couple of decades. The latest transition doesn't phase her because she's been through many before.

"I've been here when Theo was here and then he left and then he came back and then it was Ben and Jed [Hoyer], and then it was Ben, and then it was Dave," said Ferreira. "So I've been through it before and I'm hoping that whoever comes in whether it is external or if they decide to go internal, we'll realize this group is very special that we have here and there's a reason why everybody has stayed here for so long.

"Any one of us could go find a different job in baseball. But this organization is very special to work for and we're all hoping that the person who comes in will realize what they have here. Just like Dave did. Dave didn't make any changes when he came in and he said that from the beginning, he didn't know what he was going to do and he could have and he didn't. We're hoping for the same thing."

For Ferreira, "the same thing" will mean that she continues to make an impact on the Red Sox each day she comes to work.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Grading out the 2019 Red Sox roster

Sean McAdam

It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it. And apparently, I'm that someone.

Warning: it won't be pretty.

CATCHERS

Christian Vazquez: A breakout offensive year — career highs in virtually every offensive category — and a terrific job in shutting down the running game was somewhat tempered by some sloppiness behind the plate. And let's face it: some of the pitching failures have to fall on him. Grade: B

Sandy Leon: A slight — and I mean slight — improvement at the plate over last year's nightmare. But, really, a .548 OPS is embarrassing. Funny thing is, Leon was a better receiver/pitch blocker than Vazquez. Grade D-

Incomplete: Blake Swihart; Juan Centeno

INFIELDERS

Mitch Moreland: Once more, injuries seemed to interrupt his season just when it was going well. He was especially valuable in the first six weeks when no one else was hitting in the clutch and more than solid at first. Would it surprise you to learn that his .835 OPS represented a career-high? Grade: B+

Michael Chavis: Doesn't it feel as though he last played in, oh, May? Shoulder and oblique issues wiped out almost the final two months, which cost Chavis the chance to leave a bigger imprint in his rookie season. He was notoriously streaky, some of which is to be expected. But the flashes of power were promising: Grade: B-

Brock Holt: For the second straight year, Holt bailed the Red Sox out at second when Dustin Pedroia failed to return to good health. He was adequate at second, but his splits (.832 OPS vs. RHP; .557 OPS vs. LHP) and .402 slugging percentage were reminders that Holt is most valuable in a bench role. Grade: B-

Xander Bogaerts: At 26, with six full seasons in the big leagues, Bogaerts keeps getting better and 2019 was unquestionably his best to date. The -21 defensive runs saved seems inaccurate, even if, on his best day, Bogaerts is merely league-average at short. But oh, that bat. Grade: A

Rafael Devers: Who saw this coming on May 1, when the errors were piling up and he had yet to homer? And yet, it's no exaggeration to say that Devers was among the handful of best players in the league over the final five months of the season. Like Bogaerts, there's almost definitely more to come. Grade: A

Eduardo Nunez: Good teammate, strong clubhouse presence, but his production was almost non-existent. Healthy, but strangely, unproductive: Grade: D-

Sam Travis: There was a (brief) period in August when he looked to be a useful bat against lefty pitching. But that didn't last. In parts of three seasons in the big leagues, Travis's OPS has fluctuated between a low of .652-.667. Grade: D+

Marco Hernandez: Finally healthy after missing two full years with three surgeries to his shoulder, Hernandez started well, but faded badly, slashing just .169/.183/.203 in the final month. It could be that he just tired after missing so much time, but he missed a golden chance to claim second base for himself in 2020. Grade: C-

Incomplete: Steve Pearce; Chris Owings; Dustin Pedroia; Tzu-Wei Lin

OUTFIELDERS

Andrew Benintendi: It's not a stretch to suggest that Benintendi was the most disappointing position player on the roster. His strikeout totals spiked and his home runs dipped for a second straight year. His OPS+ of 100 says it all: average. GRADE: C-

Jackie Bradley Jr.: After Bradley supposedly had his eureka moment with his swing late last summer and into the postseason, this year was supposed to be different. Alas, it was more of the same: occasional pop, long stretches of at-bats in which he looked over-matched, and of course, stellar, eye-popping defense: Grade: C+

Mookie Betts: A strange season. On the one hand, it's hard to complain about a .913 OPS and 135 runs. On the other hand, Betts spoiled everyone with his 2018 season. And too often in the first half, he looked lost: Grade: A-

J.D Martinez: Like Betts, Martinez went backward in nearly every offensive category, from RBI to homers and saw his OPS slip by almost 100 points. And while he has super-human against lefties (.404/.494/.887), he was pretty average against RHP (.793). Grade: B+

Incomplete: Gorkys Hernandez

STARTING PITCHERS

Chris Sale: His season can be a Rorschach test. You can be impressed by the 1.086 WHIP or the 13.3 strikeouts per nine innings. And there were occasional gems like the Colorado start (17 strikeouts, two runs allowed) But it's hard to ignore the 24 homers or the 4.41 ERA, more than a run higher than any other season in his career. Grade: C-

David Price: Another tough-to-evaluate season. Really good in the first half, then a slow, steady decline halted only by injuries. And his insistence on re-starting the Eck feud was pointless and counterproductive. Grade: D+

Rick Porcello: He took the ball each time and never made excuses. There were occasional flashes of brilliance, but mostly, he got rocked. That 5.52 ERA and homer-per-game are tough to overlook. Grade: D

Eduardo Rodriguez: Finally, Rodriguez made good on his considerable potential and eventually figured out how to pitch deep into games. Grade: A-

Nathan Eovaldi: Ugh. He missed half the season, which isn't his fault. But when he did pitch, he compiled a 5.99 ERA and was ineffective in both relief and as a starter. Grade: F

RELIEVERS

Brandon Workman: What a story — from being left off the World Series roster to emerging as the Red Sox' closer. How would things have gone differently if he had begun the year in that role. Too many walks, yes, but opposing hitters "slugged" .166 against him. Grade: A

Matt Barnes: Initially, he was going to be the key go-to guy in the broken bullpen-by-committee, but proved too much for him. Rebounded in the second half, though the walks (5.3 per 9 IP) are still alarming. Grade: B-

Marcus Walden: Would it surprise you to learn that he led all Red Sox relievers in innings? Proved himself worthy of a spot in next year's bullpen, even if it probably won't be a high-leverage role. Grade: B-

Ryan Brasier: In a sense, he typified the struggles of the bullpen. All last winter, the Red Sox were going to find the "next Ryan Brasier," when, in reality, not even Ryan Brasier proved to be Ryan Brasier. Grade: D+

Colten Brewer: Obtained in a minor deal with the Padres, he was the one new addition to the pen and, it turns out, not a hugely significant one. Grade: D+

Hector Velazquez: Velazquez was a huge contributor in 2018; this year, he was a major disappointment, failing as both a spot starter and a long man out of the bullpen. Grade: D

Brian Johnson: See above. Grade: D-

Andrew Cashner: Obtained to serve as the No. 5 starter, he was a huge flop. He was far better out of the bullpen (3.96). By then, of course, it was essentially over for the Sox. Grade: D

Josh Taylor: Maybe he doesn't quite qualify as a revelation, but certainly, he was a most pleasant surprise. He had the second-best ERA+ on the team among qualified relievers. Grade: B+

Heath Hembree: His season was twice interrupted by elbow/forearm issues, and the second time came just as he was getting into a good groove. Grade: C+

Darwinzon Hernandez: He possesses electric stuff as his 16.9 strikeouts per nine innings attests. But pardon me if I don't get overly excited about a reliever with a 1.747 WHIP. There's work to be done, still. Grade: C+

Incomplete: Josh Smith; Mike Shawaryn; Travis Lakins; Ryan Weber; Tyler Thornburg; Jhoulys Chacin; Bobby Poyner; Trevor Kelley; Ryan Weber; Steven Wright; Erasmo Ramirez.

MANAGEMENT

Alex Cora: The magic touch, evident in his rookie year in the dugout, wasn't nearly as evident. He erred in his handling of the starters in spring training, his plan for the bullpen and taking Betts out of the leadoff spot. On the plus side, he finally got the most of Rodriguez, showed faith in Devers after early struggles and, importantly, the team continued to play hard for him, long after they were out of the race: Grade: C

Dave Dombrowski: He had plenty of good moves in previous seasons, but this year, his refusal to improve the bullpen last winter — to say nothing of the re-signing of Eovaldi and the disastrous deal for Cashner — ultimately led to his demise. Grade: D

* *The Athletic*

Dana LeVangie is a Red Sox institution. So team faces tough call on his future as pitching coach

Chad Jennings

On Dana LeVangie's 50th birthday, the Red Sox lost. It was Andrew Cashner's final disappointing start. The offense rallied, but Matt Barnes allowed a game-tying home run. Ryan Weber finally lost it in the 10th inning. The date was Aug. 11, and the scenario was all too familiar. The Red Sox had lost 11 of 15 and would lose on a walk-off the next day. Their 4.81 team ERA was 10th-worst in the majors. Even the Blue Jays were doing a better job limiting damage.

Nearly two months later, it's fair to wonder what days like that, and a season like this, might mean for a man who's spent most of his half-century on earth trying to make the Red Sox better.

LeVangie is a true Red Sox lifer. He was born in Brockton, went to high school at Whitman-Hanson, played college ball in Cape Cod and Springfield, Mass, and became the Red Sox' 14th-round draft pick in 1991. He's been in the organization longer than Mookie Betts has been alive.

Six seasons as a minor league catcher. Eight years as a big league bullpen catcher. LeVangie became a pro scout, then an advance scout, then the bullpen coach and, for the past two years, he's been the Red Sox pitching coach. All of his 29 professional seasons have been with the Red Sox, and all of them were spent doing grunt work.

There is no glamour in catching 77 games for Class-A Lynchburg, or helping John Wasdin get loose in the bullpen, or filing advance scouting reports for a World Series winner, or coaxing a breakout season from Eduardo Rodriguez. LeVangie is friendly and approachable, but whatever hair is left on his head long ago turned gray. His work ethic is notorious, and one imagines him studying video while chewing dumbbells and chugging gasoline. He's infinitely human, but surely part machine. It is not hyperbole to suggest he's among the most-liked and respected members of the entire Red Sox operation.

Yet after a disappointing third-place finish, when the bulk of the blame fell on a five-man rotation that was neither healthy nor effective, LeVangie's future must be up for discussion. Manager Alex Cora has not announced whether anyone from his coaching staff is returning for next season. Will Dave Dombrowski be the only decision-maker to take the fall? If not, could he be joined by the beloved head of a pitching staff that clearly underperformed?

“We’ll talk to them individually and go from there,” Cora said this weekend. “As of now, we haven’t made decisions on the coaching staff.”

The LeVangie question is complicated. For one thing, it’s hard to say how much of this was his fault. The rotation’s spring training workload was questioned from the very beginning, but that wasn’t LeVangie’s decision alone, and the issue seemed to disappear when Chris Sale, David Price and Rick Porcello each pitched to a 3.34 ERA or better in the month of May. The problem went deeper than spring training. Nathan Eovaldi wound up hurt despite the precautions. It wasn’t LeVangie’s decision not to supplement the bullpen or add more depth to the rotation.

Rodriguez and Brandon Workman had career years. Josh Taylor and Darwinzon Hernandez thrived as rookies. At 33 years old, Price seemed to reinvent himself and find a groove for three months before a wrist injury. Barnes had the second-most strikeouts-per-nine of any reliever in baseball. But that’s cherry picking. Cora has acknowledged the Red Sox’ disappointing finish began with the pitchers.

Making a fall guy out of LeVangie, though, is complicated because of his history and his status among the players. His roots run deep, and so do his relationships.

“Dana definitely goes about it the right way,” Price said last season. “He puts in the work and the time. Whenever he says something, I might not know it at the time, but as soon as he says it, I’m like, ‘That is what’s going on, and that’s something I can fix.’”

Barnes told a story about arriving in the big leagues, still unsure how to pitch out of the bullpen, trying to find his way against the best hitters on the planet. He didn’t know what to do. He felt out of his element. But Workman, Drake Britton and veteran reliever Craig Breslow told him to talk to LeVangie.

“Everybody spoke incredibly high of Dana,” Barnes said. “So, after a couple of years down there with him, I just got to know him really well and got to gain his trust and saw that everything that he was talking about was true. And he had this passion for the game, and for knowing each guy on their own level.”

He has, of course, seen the game from almost every angle.

“He has unbelievable game vision,” Jason Varitek said during last year’s playoffs. “An ability to see the game through different lenses, and there isn’t any detail that really goes by that he doesn’t pick up on.”

This spring, Porcello called LeVangie “the heart and soul” of the pitching staff, though knowing what became of that pitching staff, there seems to be some good and bad that comes with such a distinction. The Red Sox season is finished, and it’s largely because their pitching let them down. Does that mean, after 29 years of service, LeVangie let them down as well?

“I don’t think there’s ever a day where I’m truly comfortable,” LeVangie said last summer, when the wins came more easily. “But that makes me go forward, and that’s what drives me. I don’t try to think I know everything, and I don’t think I ever will feel that way. That’s what kind of pushes me to keep going.”

Next season would be his 30th in the organization. The Red Sox lost on his 50th birthday. Will he be there to win on his 51st?

How to choose between Verlander and Cole, and the rest of the best

Peter Gammons

I have a friend who pitched, scouted and coached in the big leagues. And he has this vision about some of today’s players. Look, we all know this is the season of the home run and the strikeout, with the inequality of four 100-win and four 100-loss teams. Yet the American League wild-card game features teams with the second-lowest and sixth-lowest season attendances who also won nearly 200 games between them. We suffered through September with games that featured 24 and 25 pitchers. Yet a 24-year-old kid named Peter

Alonso — signed by a scout named Jon Updike and sporting a David Wright persona — captured New York with 53 home runs and allowed Mets fans to joyously bid 2019 adieu even without October games.

And now we turn to the postseason with equally joyous anticipation. We have eight starting pitchers who, together, have won 11 Cy Young awards, and, while we put aside the Justin Verlander-Gerrit Cole 2019 debate, we note that if Cole wins the award for this season, the Astros could have nearly a dozen postseason games started by Cy Young winners. With others in waiting, like Jack Flaherty and Tyler Glasnow, 10 postseason teams feature eight of the 10 MLB leaders in adjusted ERA+ and 13 of the top 25 position players in FanGraphs WAR. And if Mike Trout and Christian Yelich win the MVP awards, we'll have the likely runners-up playing in October, Alex Bregman and Marcus Semien in the AL and Cody Bellinger and Anthony Rendon in the NL.

So here is my friend's fantasy, which, granted, requires an Astros-Dodgers repeat of the 2017 World Series: Game 5, 5 p.m. PT, because it requires the 5 p.m. PT start and the sun, the shadows, the dimming of the day. "Gerrit Cole is becoming this generation's Nolan Ryan," says my friend. "Remember when Nolan started those 5 o'clock games in Anaheim?"

I do. Before one of them, Red Sox manager Eddie Kasko said, "This should be against the law. Someone could get killed." Ryan punched out 17 that night. Years later, Ryan perfected his circle change, the one that made him so devastating in the "twilight" of his career.

Cole has the second-highest average fastball velocity (97.2 mph) of any pitcher that started 20 or more games this season. He has the best slider, curveball and now the changeup, with which he has his highest whiff rate. He has the highest strikeout per nine innings average (13.8) and highest strikeout rate in the game. And there were some September concerns about the Dodger offense against high-velocity pitchers.

My friend's fantasy is that in the Dodger Stadium twilight, Cole is going to pull a Don Larsen or a Roy Halladay and throw a no-no. He's also going to pull a Bob Gibson and strike out 17. "He's that great right now," he says. "And, let's face it — Justin Verlander, Jack Flaherty or Zack Greinke can go out and throw a no-hitter any time, especially any outdoors venue with shadows and twilight."

As the game has gravitated to a bullpen world, 11 of the 12 starters with the best earned-run averages are pitching in October; the wild-card Nationals have three starters (Stephen Strasburg, Max Scherzer, Patrick Corbin) who had 251, 243 and 238 strikeouts, respectively. Clayton Kershaw has three Cy Youngs and an MVP and a brilliant September, while Hyun-Jin Ryu led the NL with a 2.32 ERA and Walker Buehler had 215 strikeouts in 182 innings. Mike Soroka, Atlanta's 22-year-old rookie, was among the MLB leaders in adjusted ERA+ and pitchers' WAR.

Offense? All 10 playoff teams hit 210 or more home runs, right up to the Twins' 307 and Yankees' 306. In case no one traveling west on the Courtney Campbell Causeway or north on the Sunshine Skyway Bridge noticed, the Rays reached 217. All of the 10 postseason teams won at least 89 games, a far cry from the 1987 Twins, who were 85-77 and were outscored during the season, 806-786. One of Yelich's friends says that if the World Series were to get delayed until Nov. 1, he might be able to pull a Kirk Gibson and come limping up to home plate for a dramatic pinch-hitting appearance. If Yelich ever were activated in the World Series, we need Jack Buck and Vin Scully doing the game together.

I'm not waking up at 2:37 a.m. every night worrying about the television ratings. This postseason has elements. We all need someone we can dream on, and this October, there seem to be a lot of players who appear to think that if we want it, we can dream on them.

In so many ways, this has been an extraordinary season. It would have been better had my MVPs, Trout and Yelich, not been injured. Trout remains the sport's best player, from leading in OBP to WAR and hitting 45 homers. If not for Trout, Bregman would be the AL MVP. He's a great hitter and player who saved the Astros by playing shortstop, was second to Trout in WAR and has that George Brett thing going. In 1980, Brett was hurt and played only 117 games but hit .390, had 24 homers and 22 strikeouts, a 1.118

OPS, 66 extra-base hits and 58 walks, and he hit the home run into the third deck of Yankee Stadium off Hall of Famer Goose Gossage to eliminate the Yankees and put the Royals into their first World Series.

I was asked who, in my 51 years covering baseball, was the one player I'd want to see at the plate with Game 7 of the World Series on the line: George Brett. There's a whole lot of Brett in Bregman.

Semien belongs in the top half of MVP ballots; the only players with higher WAR numbers than his 8.1, according to Baseball Reference, are Bellinger, Bregman and Trout. Semien led all position players in innings (1,435), and his September slash was .347/.441/.693/18 XBH/8 HR). DJ LeMahieu belongs there too, and votes are surely in line for George Springer, Rafael Devers, Matt Chapman, Nelson Cruz and Mookie Betts. If you want someone to dream on in October and you're an Astros fan, put 2017 World Series MVP Springer at the front of your mind along with Bregman.

As for Yelich vs. Bellinger, I don't want to hear that after Yelich went down and the Brewers kept winning, it showed he isn't as valuable as we think. Without him, they might have been halfway to the Dan Ryan Expressway. Bellinger slid — slightly — as the season wore down, but he is an elite defender at first, center and right, and while I don't completely understand the different ways WAR is calculated, Baseball Reference prefers him. Yelich has simply been historic; in many years, Rendon might have won. And no slighting Alonso, Ronald Acuña Jr., Juan Soto, Ketel Marte and Freddie Freeman.

The most interesting vote will be for the American League Cy Young between Cole and Verlander. All along, I thought Verlander's mentorship of Cole gave him the edge, and it is valid. But in the end, run down the numbers:

Cole	Verlander
20-5	W-L 21-6
212.1	IP 223
48-326	BB-K42-300
0.895	WHIP 0.803
2.50	ERA 2.58
6.8	WAR 7.8

There is no wrong choice. This is Randy Johnson/Curt Schilling in their Arizona primes. In the end, it probably leans Cole, which means that Verlander, who lost to Rick Porcello in 2016 despite a 14-8 lead in first-place votes, will have finished second in years he could make rational arguments for winning. Mark it on his Cooperstown plaque.

Charlie Morton is seemingly a shoo-in for third place. Then how Shane Bieber, Mike Minor and the other Cy Young possibles rank are a matter of which values matter to each voter.

Jacob deGrom most likely will take the National League Cy Young, although the runners-up like Ryu, Scherzer, Flaherty, Soroka, Strasburg, et al have resumes that might be top three in the American League.

Which sends us to an aside: the Most Valuable Signings, Morton and Cruz. Morton has already had a postseason in which he started Game 7 of the ALCS against the Yankees and finished Game 7 of the World Series against the Dodgers, and went 9-3 against the other four AL playoff teams, as well as Boston and Cleveland.

Cruz hit 41 homers, but his value to the younger Twins players was invaluable. "He's unbelievable the way he goes out of his way to help young players," says one former Baltimore employee. "They rode him, in a good way. That club knows what it takes to win."

The AL Rookie of the Year seems to be a unanimous Yordan Álvarez call and Alonso will likely be unanimous as well in the NL. But the National League's rookies were different, and that's before we see Gavin Lux, Will Smith, Tony Gonsolin and Dustin May in October leading to Kenley Jansen.

Fernando Tatis Jr. may have been the best pure rookie player on the planet, but when his season ended because of back problems, not only were the Padres cooked, but so was a fascinating potential race. Soroka has been one of the best pitchers in the game, proving some former Braves executives who live by the radar gun silly. Bryan Reynolds had a monster season on a Pirates team that created a stage version of “Friday the 13th.”

In many ways, it is unfortunate that the 2018 MVPs aren’t playing again this autumn, unless there is an unforeseen Yelich comeback. Betts had a very good — likely top-six MVP — season, but since he is a free agent at the end of the 2020 season and Boston ownership wants to pare payroll, he will be sentenced to a winter of speculation. To trade a great player in the year he turns 28 is difficult, because to get another team to trade three building-block young players, the Red Sox must have a feel about whether or not he’s signable, and at this juncture Betts wants to test the market. So chances are the Red Sox will run it out as well, try to sign him, and try to rebuild the health and depth of the pitching staff even if, as expected, J.D. Martinez opts out and signs elsewhere.

It is going to be a fascinating winter, with Cole, Rendon, Josh Donaldson and possibly Strasburg and J.D. Martinez out there.

But right now, all that matters to Gerrit Cole is the ring. If he, Verlander and Greinke get to make 10-12 starts in October, he may well get it, and everything that comes with it.

The way this postseason appears to be emerging, anyone who holds up the trophy will have earned it all.

*** *The New York Times***

A’s vs. Rays: A Wild Card Playoff Between Mirror Images

Tyler Kepner

The Oakland A’s and the Tampa Bay Rays are linked in baseball’s consciousness, cousins from opposite coasts with rhyming nicknames, tarps draped over empty seats in the upper deck and a knack for doing more with less.

The two organizations can present an inconvenient sticking point for Commissioner Rob Manfred, who speaks often of Major League Baseball as a “growth industry” while acknowledging that the league cannot expand until the A’s and the Rays find new stadiums. Both have been searching in vain for years.

But both have reached October this season, with the A’s set to host the Rays in the American League wild card game on Wednesday at the Coliseum, their home since 1968, off Interstate 880 near the airport. The complex includes Oracle Arena, which the Golden State Warriors just abandoned for San Francisco. The N.F.L.’s Oakland Raiders, who share the Coliseum, are leaving next year for Las Vegas.

Last year the Athletics moved their front office to Oakland’s Jack London Square, closer to the Howard Terminal site where they want to build a new ballpark. The team — which once pined for San Jose but was blocked from moving there by the San Francisco Giants — is working through a lengthy political process in hopes of breaking ground in 2021.

The Rays play at baseball’s only permanently closed dome, Tropicana Field, which was built in St. Petersburg in the 1980s to lure an existing team and finally landed the Rays as an expansion team in 1998. Last winter, the Rays announced the collapse of a three-year effort to build a ballpark in Ybor City, and their latest plan — to share their home schedule with Montreal, with both cities building new stadiums — is laughably implausible.

The teams do what they can with their aging facilities. The A’s have a popular Treehouse area in left field with bars and a D.J., and they sell membership passes (some for as little as \$33 per month) instead of

season tickets. The Rays provide numerous attractions beyond the center field wall, including interactive games, a touch tank with live stingrays and the Ted Williams Museum and Hitters' Hall of Fame.

Yet attendance for both teams remains near the bottom. The A's ranked 24th in the majors this season in tickets sold per game, with 20,521. The Rays were 29th with 14,552, ahead of only the Miami Marlins.

"We have an organization full of people who try to make it our mission to energize this area with what we do, and I think for a ton of people, they do that," Chaim Bloom, the Rays' vice president of baseball operations, said earlier this season. "The challenges we face and some of the potential solutions that we're seeking — from a business standpoint, those aren't any secret. From a baseball standpoint, I don't think they prevent us from trying to excel."

Several major league teams are mired in painstaking rebuilds, a trend reflected in the standings: For the first time since 2002 — and just the second season ever — four teams lost at least 100 games. Yet the A's and the Rays never really concede, despite payrolls that, according to Sportrac, ranked 25th in the majors this season (\$92.8 million for Oakland) and last (\$63.1 million for Tampa Bay).

Under Billy Beane, Oakland's president of baseball operations, and General Manager David Forst, the A's have reached the postseason 10 times since 2000. The Rays have made five playoff visits in the last 12 seasons, and have lost more than 85 games just once since reaching the 2008 World Series.

In other words, while some teams are built to lose prodigiously to collect high draft choices and build for the future, Oakland and Tampa Bay consistently try to cobble together rosters that give them a chance in the moment.

"If you're pulling back into the 50-, the 60-, the 70-win territory, young players hit your big league team and they may take you to the low 80s, and then free-agency gets you to low 90s and beyond," Erik Neander, the Rays' general manager, said last year. "That free agency step, we don't have. So we have to stay in a territory where we are competitive. And if we hit with some of our more talented young players who will be with us for a long time, hopefully that can elevate us to the 90-win territory."

Last year the Rays won 90 games but missed the playoffs. This year they surged to 96 victories and acquired eight of their 12 best players — as measured by wins above replacement by Baseball Reference — in trades or free agency over the last 16 months.

Outfielder Tommy Pham arrived in a trade-deadline deal last year in a deal with St. Louis for three prospects. That same day, the Rays traded the veteran starter Chris Archer — perhaps their best-known player — to Pittsburgh for outfielder Austin Meadows and starter Tyler Glasnow.

"When I spoke to Neander, he told me they're not selling, they're adding," said Pham, who hit 21 homers with a .369 on-base percentage this season. "He viewed all the additions as upgrades from what he told me, and right now, he looks like a genius. At the time, I kind of didn't know what the team was doing. But you've got to be happy with where we are."

Meadows and Glasnow starred this season, and so did the Rays' one luxury item. They splurged in free agency last winter for starter Charlie Morton, who signed a two-year, \$30 million contract. Morton, who won Game 7 of the World Series for Houston in 2017, went 16-6 this season and was scheduled to start the wild card game on Wednesday.

Oakland's starter on Wednesday, Sean Manaea, also reflects a cunning front office move. After the A's lost the 2014 wild card game in Kansas City, they traded the veterans Josh Donaldson and Jeff Samardzija. Yet they also traded that winter for the versatile Ben Zobrist, a two-time All-Star with the Rays who had one year remaining before free agency.

In Zobrist, the A's knew they had a valuable player who could either help them win or appeal to other teams in a trade. When they fell out of the 2015 playoff race, they shipped Zobrist to the Royals for

Manaea, a former first-round draft pick who had not yet appeared in the majors. Manaea threw a no-hitter last season and went 4-0 with a 1.21 E.R.A. in five September starts this year after returning from an injury.

The A's may also have a bullpen force in Jesus Luzardo, a 22-year-old left-hander who promises to be a fresh and largely unknown weapon after thriving in a September cameo. Like Manaea, Luzardo arrived as an indirect result of the A's building up, not tearing down.

After losing 94 games in 2015, Oakland signed reliever Ryan Madson to a three-year, \$22 million deal in free agency — something of a curious investment, since Madson was 35 at the time.

But Madson pitched well, and in July 2017 the A's sent him and another reliever, Sean Doolittle, to the Washington Nationals. In return, they got a package that included reliever Blake Treinen, who was an All-Star last season, and Luzardo, a future centerpiece for a creative franchise that never gives in — just like the one it will welcome to town on Wednesday night.

Juan Soto Was the Right Man in the Right Spot

Tyler Kepner

The Washington Nationals were four outs from elimination with the bases loaded on Tuesday when a feeling of serenity came over Mike Rizzo, their general manager. Rizzo was watching the National League wild-card game with his senior adviser, Jack McKeon, who is 88 years old. The hitter at the plate, Juan Soto, was 20.

“Right man in the right spot,” Rizzo told McKeon, and a moment later, everything had changed — the game, for sure, but also the sense of dread that stalks this tortured franchise. Soto cleared the bases with a single that skidded past Trent Grisham in right field, lifting the Nationals past the Milwaukee Brewers, 4-3, and into a division series with the Los Angeles Dodgers.

“That’s the man I wanted up,” Rizzo said later, as his players romped around the soggy, boozy home clubhouse at Nationals Park. “Left on left against a great left-handed pitcher was fine with me — with him. He’s a terrific young man and a really good player, too.”

The Brewers’ left-hander, Josh Hader, had been summoned in the bottom of the eighth for a six-out save. This is precisely what Milwaukee wanted: a two-run lead for an overpowering All-Star who had just posted the best strikeout rate ever by a pitcher with at least 70 innings.

“That was perfect, really,” said Craig Counsell, the Brewers’ manager. “We couldn’t have drawn it up any better.”

Hader fanned 16.4 batters per nine innings this season and had whiffed two in the eighth. But he had also hit a batter and allowed a single and a walk, bringing Soto to the plate. Soto had struck out in his first at-bat, then popped out and fanned again. A veteran teammate, Gerardo Parra, reassured him.

“Hey, the good moment is going to come, so be ready,” Soto said Parra told him. “No matter what happened in the past, just forget about it and keep going.”

The Nationals’ past does not apply to Soto. He was 13 years old in 2012, when the Nationals won their first N.L. East title but blew a two-run lead to St. Louis with one strike to go in the ninth inning of Game 5 in the division series.

By the time Soto signed with Washington — from the Dominican Republic for \$1.5 million in July 2015 — the Nationals had lost another division series, to San Francisco in 2014. They fell again in that round in 2016 (to the Dodgers) and 2017 (to the Chicago Cubs).

“I know they always go to the playoffs, they always lose, something like that,” Soto said. “But now we’re here, we try to fight, and we’re going to see how far we’re going to get.”

Soto, now in his second season, helped the Nationals storm back from a 19-31 start by hitting 34 homers with 110 runs batted in, a .401 on-base percentage and a .548 slugging percentage. Only two other players have reached all those numbers at age 20 — Mel Ott for the Giants in 1929 and Alex Rodriguez for Seattle in 1996 — and they did not end those years in the postseason.

“He’s 20 years old, man,” said Nationals catcher Kurt Suzuki, who turns 36 this week. “I was in college at 20 years old. This guy’s hitting 30 and 100 in the big leagues at 20 years old, playing in the postseason. He’s a joke.”

The Nationals have thrived by developing high-impact stars like Soto, Stephen Strasburg, Anthony Rendon and Ryan Zimmerman, and all played pivotal roles in the eighth.

Strasburg kept the deficit at 3-1 with his third shutout inning, capping his first relief appearance since 2007, when he was a freshman at San Diego State. With two outs and one on, Zimmerman — the first player the Nationals drafted after moving from Montreal in 2005 — punched a broken-bat pinch-hit single to center. Rendon, who only led the majors in R.B.I. this season, then walked to load the bases.

Soto cleared them with help from Grisham, who said he charged too quickly on the hit, which “took a funny hop” on him and rolled away, taking Milwaukee’s season with it.

“It’s not how you want your first playoff game to go,” Grisham said. “We expected to win. There’s all kinds of thoughts and emotions that run through your head. It just kind of stings right now.”

If Soto stung at all from his first playoff game, it was only from Champagne in his eyes. He could be embarking on a postseason with few precedents for his age: Think of Jim Palmer throwing a shutout for Baltimore in the 1966 World Series or Miguel Cabrera leading the Marlins, managed by McKeon, to the title in 2003.

For now, of course, the Nationals’ path is just beginning. They will start Patrick Corbin in Game 1 at Dodger Stadium on Thursday, but are likely to be without Max Scherzer and Strasburg until the series returns here for Game 3 on Sunday.

As the Nationals partied late Tuesday night, those seemed like trivial factors. In their 15th year in town, they had finally earned a postseason celebration. It was long overdue.

“The last five, six years have been a fun time to be a Nats fan here,” Zimmerman said. “We haven’t really been able to get over the hump. Maybe this is it, maybe it isn’t, who knows? All I can say is, we’re a pretty darn fun team to watch.”