

The Boston Red Sox Monday, October 21, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

What's up with the baseballs they're using in baseball?

Alex Speier

In late August, Red Sox manager Alex Cora elected to keep J.D. Martinez in the outfield for the ninth inning with a two-run lead on the road — a departure from a tactic he frequently employed in the previous year, when he often replaced Martinez with Jackie Bradley Jr. when Boston had a late lead. The Red Sox manager offered a succinct explanation as to why he was no longer using his 2018 game plan.

“Different year, bruh,” Cora posited.

Those three words spoke volumes about how, in recent years and including this postseason, an aspect of the game easily taken for granted has created uncertainty, change, and chaos throughout baseball.

In an era where everything is measurable, there is clear evidence that the baseball — the most fundamental piece of equipment in the sport — has changed in critical ways. The home run explosion of recent years, which helped pull the sport from an offense-starved era, commenced in the middle of the 2015 season. Balls that had expired on warning tracks suddenly started finding their way into the seats with increased frequency.

Studies including tremendously illuminating work by Rob Arthur of Baseball Prospectus, as well as a report commissioned by MLB to study the home run surge found the culprit: Drag, or air resistance, on the flight of the baseball had decreased. The MLB committee could not identify an exact reason in the ball's manufacture for the change in drag, but sports data scientist Meredith Wills subsequently found several potential elements in the construction of the ball that might impact its flight through the air.

Early this season, numerous studies acknowledged that drag had again decreased in significant fashion. The results during the 2019 season were jarring, as baseball destroyed its all-time home run record in a season during which every fly ball seemed destined to leave the park.

The way the ball carried altered the game at the field level in fundamental ways. As Cora noted, managerial decisions were framed with an awareness that the threat of a homer was omnipresent. Wisdom from the Red Sox manager's own playing days — that a two-run lead was surmountable with “a bloop and a blast” — had shifted to a fear that a walk and a relatively routine flyball might suffice to erase such an advantage. Different year, bruh, indeed.

For hitters, the reward calculus of an all-fields approach changed. Through most of baseball history — and particularly at the beginning of this decade — hitters needed to crush the ball to the pull side in order to leave the yard.

In 2019, Statcast identified an astonishing 1,093 opposite-field homers — a massive 62 percent increase from 2018, and a 160 percent increase from 2014. The ability to drive the ball out to the opposite field suggested an increase to the number of zones where hitters could attack pitches and drive them out of the park.

“I know that years back, hitting to the opposite field, it was almost like, ‘You want me to punch the ball over there, fillet it?’ ” Red Sox hitting coach Tim Hyers said during the season. “With the ball and some of the strength levels of the players, the ball carrying out of the ballpark, one thing I'm seeing more than usual is the opposite-field home run.”

For pitchers, the notion of a good pitch changed. Certain safety zones disappeared if opposing hitters could manage to get to those pitches and lift them. Pitchers who made their living by commanding the ball in specific areas suddenly found their skill sets to be less valuable.

“One of our pitchers made a really good pitch in a really good location. It actually was above the zone, kind of in, and it ended up being hit out,” noted Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey during the season. “I was like, ‘Wow, you actually executed what you were trying to execute and the guy hit it out of the yard.’”

Such outcomes became commonplace during the season — yet have undergone another massive shift in the postseason. Arthur updated his findings about drag, and discovered that the ball was encountering more air resistance than at any time since at least 2016, meaning that games have been featuring a “dejuiced” ball.

Through Wednesday’s playoff games, Arthur found that the contact properties (exit velocity, launch angle, direction) of balls put in play during the postseason would have been predicted to result in 100 homers with the regular-season ball. Instead, just 64 of those had left the yard.

Cardinals manager Mike Shildt said during the NLCS that his team’s analysts found that fly balls were traveling an average of 4½ feet less during the playoffs than they had been during the regular season. Balls that had been landing in the seats were turning into outs, transforming how games were being played.

In its own right, the changing properties of the ball don’t create unfairness. After all, both teams are employing the same set of baseballs. At the same time, players have found it jarring to see the conditions of the game changing radically — all while MLB says that it doesn’t know what’s happening to the balls, even though the league owns 25 percent of the company (Rawlings) that manufactures them.

Major League Baseball said the baseballs being used in the postseason came from the same batches that were manufactured for the regular season.

“I just think in a game that can be so different based on the ball that’s in play, we should definitely take some steps in normalizing it or having it be at least the same,” Astros pitcher Justin Verlander told reporters on Thursday. “Consistency I think is something that makes this game so special. When you look to compare numbers to greats a hundred years ago, it’s such a unique sport with the history that we have, and it’s been played on the same dimensions for so long. You start changing some of those things and one of the best parts of this game goes away.”

Moreover, the idea of in-season changes to the ball creates a potentially alarming challenge when it comes to evaluating players. A pitcher might find himself out of a job based on how the ball jumps off the bat in one season — only to see the value of his pitch mix skyrocket the next season due to a dejuiced ball. A hitter might receive a massive contract based on a power explosion in 2019 — before seeing his value dwindle for a new team if next year’s ball harbors more similarities to the postseason ball than the regular-season one.

“If pitches move differently, if a certain pitch doesn’t work as well, or a certain pitch to a certain location doesn’t work as well, we’ve got to be ahead of that,” said Falvey. “That’s going to be a challenge. That’s going to be a challenge for all 30 [teams].”

The nature of the challenge appears larger and more bewildering than ever. It is now clear that the game is subject to massive changes based on the fact that the ball — assumed to be one of the game’s foundational constants — is in fact variable, in a way that has enormous implications for how the game is played and seen.

Jacoby Ellsbury quietly became the Yankees’ forgotten man

Peter Abraham

The season was on the line for the Yankees on Saturday in Game 6 of the American League Championship Series. It was win-or-go-home time.

Not for outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury, who went home long ago.

Saturday marked two years and two days since Ellsbury last played for the Yankees. The former Red Sox All-Star pinch ran in the eighth inning of Game 4 of the ALCS against Houston and wasn't used again in that seven-game series.

Ellsbury, now 36, has been a ghost since because of a series of injuries.

He missed the 2018 season with a left hip injury that required surgery, and this year was out with an assortment of injuries that included plantar fasciitis in his right foot and a sore left shoulder.

Ellsbury did not report to spring training until the middle of March, the Yankees deciding he would be better off doing rehabilitation work on his hip closer to his home in Scottsdale, Ariz. Once he did show up, so did the other injuries.

The Yankees returned Ellsbury to the injured list on March 28 and he spent the season doing rehabilitation work at the team's minor league complex in Tampa. He never progressed to the point of getting into a game.

Ellsbury is to the Yankees what Pablo Sandoval was to the Red Sox, only much worse financially because of the size of his contract.

Sandoval was a \$95 million mistake for the Red Sox. Ellsbury will cost the Yankees \$153 million by the time his deal is up. He has \$21 million due next season then a \$21 million option for 2021 that the Yankees can buy out for \$5 million. You can be sure they will do that.

But at least Ellsbury provided some value when he was healthy, giving the Yankees 9.8 WAR over 520 games from 2014-17. He was a somewhat productive player in 2014, hitting .271 with 16 home runs, 39 stolen bases, and 70 RBIs over 149 games.

Ellsbury has missed 439 games since.

The Yankees have essentially moved on from him. They traded for center fielder Aaron Hicks in 2015 and signed him before this season to a cost-effective seven-year, \$70 million deal.

The Yankees now have Hicks and Aaron Judge locking down two of their outfield spots. Optimally, Giancarlo Stanton would be able to play left field.

But even if Stanton becomes a designated hitter, the Yankees have Mike Tauchman and Clint Frazier as candidates for left field. Where Ellsbury fits isn't certain.

Ellsbury has no trade value. The Yankees could release him and simply move on. Ellsbury did not join the team for the postseason and the team long ago gave away his locker at Yankee Stadium.

In their 192-page postseason media guide, the Yankees included biographies of every player who played even one game for the team this season. They did not bother with Ellsbury outside of noting he was not one of the players present for the official team photograph.

That his career has come to this is not what anybody expected. Ellsbury was a dynamic player for the Red Sox after making his debut in 2007 and starting all four games of the World Series that season.

Ellsbury was a combination of power, speed, and good defense, and was a centerpiece player for the 2008 and '09 teams.

Injuries limited him to 18 games in 2010, but he bounced back in 2011 to finish second in the Most Valuable Player voting to Justin Verlander.

Ellsbury determinedly refused to engage the Red Sox in extension talks, saying he wanted to test the market as a free agent. He had a strong season in 2013 when the Sox won the World Series, then swiftly joined the Yankees.

The Sox put up only token resistance at the time, believing Jackie Bradley Jr. was their center fielder of the future.

Bradley has since had a .731 OPS and 15.3 WAR for the Sox at a cost of \$19.7 million. They made the right choice and the Yankees did not.

On Saturday, as the Yankees took batting practice, one of their players observed that Ellsbury would receive a full postseason share because he was on the injured list.

Whether he ever gets a chance to thank them in person remains to be seen.

Why Carlos Beltran believes he'd make a good manager

Peter Abraham

Carlos Beltran is 42 and has never managed so much as a Little League team. But he's a legitimate candidate to manage the Mets next season.

Because why wouldn't he be?

Now that the Angels have hired Joe Maddon, seven teams are still seeking new managers and the range of candidates is vast. There are recently fired managers (Brad Ausmus and Gabe Kapler); managers fired last season (Jeff Banister, Mike Matheny, and Buck Showalter); and managers who were fired in 2017 (Dusty Baker, John Farrell, and Joe Girardi).

At least six bench coaches have interviewed with teams along with an assortment of first base coaches, third base coaches, hitting coaches, and three quality control coaches.

Two player development executives — Rangers field coordinator Jayce Tingler and Diamondbacks director of player development Mike Bell — are candidates with the Padres and Mets, respectively.

You also have television analysts Eduardo Perez and David Ross.

Beltran believes he's just as qualified as anybody else. After retiring in 2017 following a standout career, Beltran is now a special assistant with the Yankees.

"I think I'm ready," he said. "If it happens, I'm ready. If it doesn't happen, I'll continue to work, and when another opportunity comes up I'll analyze it and see if it makes sense."

Beltran, who played seven years for the Mets (2005-11) and three for the Yankees (2014-16), is only interested in the Mets because he wants to stay in New York. He declined overtures from other teams, including the Padres. "New York is the right fit for me," Beltran said.

Beltran has the qualifications many teams are prioritizing in that he relates well to players, will embrace the use of analytics, and would serve as a good spokesman for the organization.

The Mets, who finished 86-76, have a roster that should contend in 2020.

“Every year they want to put a good team on the field. It’s a good position,” Beltran said. “You have to do your job and connect the dots in the clubhouse. You have to be truthful and be a good coach for your players and be a good coach for your coaching staff. You have to motivate your coaches to create a good environment where people feel good to come to work.

“Those are the things that I know are important in the clubhouse. When I was a player I wanted my manager to be honest. I wanted my manager to let me know when I do well and also let me know what I do wrong so I can fix it.”

Whether Beltran makes sense for the Mets isn’t certain. Mickey Callaway, a first-time manager, was fired after two seasons. General manager Brodie Van Wagenen may want an experienced manager to deflect heat from his decisions. That would be the safe route, and somebody such as Girardi would be a popular choice.

Related: Here’s a look at the baseball managerial openings and who may fit

But with the success Aaron Boone, Alex Cora, Dave Martinez, and other rookie managers have had, Beltran has to be considered.

He was a savvy player who paid attention to details. In his final season as a player, Beltran did not hit particularly well for the Astros but was considered instrumental to the team winning the World Series because of his presence in the clubhouse.

“He was important for a lot of us,” shortstop Carlos Correa said. “If he wants to manage, he would be a good one. He picks up on the little things.”

Beltran, who is Puerto Rican, pushed back against the idea that his ethnicity is a selling point in what is an increasingly diverse sport. “Forget about the bilingual stuff,” he said. “It’s about bringing your experience as a player and making sure that you reach the clubhouse with a message that is important to the players.”

But Beltran does feel it’s important to embrace the platform of managing if it’s presented to him.

“I’m not afraid to promote people,” he said. “If you have a good position in life and you have people around you who are professional and bring something positive to the table, it’s a good opportunity for you to promote those people.

“I make my living in baseball. If you can help somebody to a better job or a better opportunity, that’s significant. That’s how I see it. I want to be part of the game.”

Beltran has spoken to Cora about his experiences with the Red Sox, particularly in his first season. He also has sought feedback from Boone and Astros manager AJ Hinch.

“I know what I haven’t done and I want to be prepared,” Beltran said. “I know I’ll need a good group of coaches. I want to create an environment where we talk baseball and everybody wants to contribute.

“I played with Mike Matheny. I played with AJ Hinch. Then they became managers. I feel like I’m ready to be the next one.”

HELP WANTED

All remains quiet with the Red Sox

Sunday marks 42 days since the Red Sox fired Dave Dombrowski, and they have yet to name a new general manager.

But that’s still 10 days short of the franchise record set in 2005. That was the time Theo Epstein quit his post on Oct. 21 and the Sox waited until Dec. 12 to name Ben Cherington and Jed Hoyer as co-GMs.

Epstein eventually returned on Jan. 19, 2006. But Epstein isn't walking back through that door and it's not clear if anybody else wants to.

On Sept. 27, Sox ownership said its hope was to hire a chief baseball executive from outside the organization who had experience running a team. They also said their goal was to trim the payroll by approximately \$34 million to get back under the luxury-tax threshold. To accomplish that, the Sox could have to trade Mookie Betts.

As one National League executive said, nobody wants it on their résumé that they traded Betts. There's also industry-wide caution about the stability of the job considering that Dombrowski was fired less than 11 months after winning the World Series.

"I haven't heard about anybody who wants that job. It's been very quiet," another executive said.

Related: Who are likely candidates to be the Red Sox next general manager?

Principal owner John Henry said last month the Sox were "starting the search looking outward." But they ultimately could turn to one of the four vice presidents now running the team or let them continue indefinitely as a group.

Raquel Ferreira has said she wouldn't pursue the job. But Brian O'Halloran, Eddie Romero or Zack Scott would be worthy choices.

With the GM meetings (Nov. 11-14) and winter meetings (Dec. 9-12) coming up, the Sox will need to clarify their situation at some point.

A few other observations about the Red Sox:

- Former Red Sox head athletic trainer Paul Lessard is going back to the World Series after a 12-year gap. Lessard, a Northeastern graduate, was with the Sox from 2006-09. He joined the Reds in 2010, then the Nationals in 2016.

- The late Ray Boone, who spent more than three decades scouting for the Red Sox, would have thoroughly enjoyed this postseason.

His son, Bob, is vice president of player development for the Nationals and a senior adviser to general manager Mike Rizzo. His grandson, Aaron, manages the Yankees.

The Boones were the first family to have three generations play in the All-Star Game. Aaron Boone joked this past week that he wasn't talking much baseball with his father in case their respective teams faced each other in the World Series. Even a recent birthday party for one of Aaron's sons was a bit stilted. "It was reserved," Aaron Boone said. "We didn't talk much about baseball."

- Did you know that Rawlings presented Gold Gloves to minor league players? Red Sox righthander Matthew Kent got one this season. The 26-year-old appeared in 28 games for Double A Portland and Triple A Pawtucket.

SETTING A TONE

Scherzer showed drive in spring

As Max Scherzer prepares for the World Series, it's instructive to remember Feb. 27. That was the day Scherzer drove 2½ hours across two-lane roads in Florida so he could spend the night in Fort Myers and pitch against the Red Sox in a game at JetBlue Park the next day.

It was his second start of spring training and Scherzer was scheduled for only three innings. Had he asked, the Nationals would have happily set up a minor league game for him at their complex in West Palm Beach.

But Scherzer insisted on making the trip and had catcher Kurt Suzuki join him. Facing a Red Sox lineup that included Andrew Benintendi, Mookie Betts, Xander Bogaerts, and Jackie Bradley Jr., Scherzer pitched three shutout innings. He gave up one hit without a walk and struck out four.

“I want to come over here and face the Red Sox,” he said after the game. “These guys are champs. I know if I come here I’m going to face their [regulars] because they want to play here at home. I’ll drive anywhere to get a chance to face these guys.”

Scherzer went on to post a 2.92 ERA in 27 starts during the regular season and in the playoffs has given up four earned runs over 20 innings.

Scherzer probably would have been just as successful had he not made the drive to Fort Myers. But once you cut one corner, it’s easier to do it again, and at 35 Scherzer is still going about it the right way.

There’s also a lesson there for the Red Sox, who cut back on the workload of their starters during spring training coming off the World Series, then saw them underachieve once the season started.

ETC.

What to do about Greinke?

Here’s the transcript of Zack Greinke’s interview session after Game 1 of the American League Championship Series:

Q: Were both home runs mistake pitches?

A: Yes.

Q: How’d you feel in comparison to your last start?

A: Different, I guess. In some ways it was worse. In some ways it was better.

Q: There are no breaks in the Yankees’ lineup. How difficult is it to work your way through it?

A: They’re a good team. Good pitches are better than bad pitches.

Q: Did you have to pitch perfectly with no offense behind you?

A: I don’t like that question.

Q: You said in some ways it was better. How was it better for you?

A: I threw more innings this time than last time.

That was it, five questions and 41 words of response. Greinke spoke in a low monotone the entire time while looking down and occasionally scratching his head.

Greinke has a social anxiety disorder, so there’s nothing funny about any of this. But he’s capable of providing thoughtful answers. He does it relatively often during the season. Greinke also has a wife, two kids, friends, teammates, and coaches he interacts with all the time. He has pitched in the playoffs going back to 2011 and knows how it works.

As Major League Baseball presents its best teams to a national audience, Greinke's inability or unwillingness to answer questions is uncomfortable for all involved and doesn't serve the sport very well.

MLB briefly considered other avenues — such as having one reporter interview Greinke and share his comments with others — but doesn't want to single him out or invite other players to request the same special treatment. So reporters go through the drill of asking questions and Greinke barely answers them.

Extra bases

The Rays fell a game short of the ALCS. But 24-year-old shortstop Willy Adames took a step forward in his development. His defensive play improved significantly to a point where he's reliable. "From last year to this year it's been a lot," teammate Blake Snell said. "Honestly I thought he was probably going to go to second base because his throws were pretty bad all the time. And fielding-wise he was just OK. Then he came to spring training and he looked pretty good. I still had my doubts. And then to see what he did throughout the season and then every day, I mean, every day this man takes ground balls, and he wants more. His whole game has turned around." . . . St. Louis catcher Yadier Molina has played in 98 postseason games, the most for a National League player. The overall record is 158 by Derek Jeter . . . Daniel Hudson of the Nationals can thank Aaron Loup for being granted paternity leave during the NLCS. In 2015, Loup was with Toronto for the Division Series when his wife, Leighann, had unexpected issues with her pregnancy. Loup was away for the team for much of the postseason and the Blue Jays could not fill his spot on the roster. That led to a postseason paternity policy being approved later that fall at the GM meetings . . . Houston right fielder Josh Reddick said playing right field at Yankee Stadium in the ALCS was borderline dangerous with the objects being thrown on the field. "It would be a very ugly scene for baseball, a very ugly scene for the Yankees, if one of our guys was hit by something from the upper deck," Astros manager AJ Hinch said. "Something tragic could happen and nobody wants that." . . . Marcell Ozuna had an .804 OPS, 29 home runs, and 89 RBIs in 130 games for the Cardinals this season, so he's a solid player. But Ozuna's performance in the NLCS — 3 for 16 with eight strikeouts, no RBIs, and several blunders in the field and on the bases — will hurt him in free agency . . . With the Nationals advancing, the Seattle Mariners are now the only franchise not to make the World Series. And that's with having had Ken Griffey Jr., Randy Johnson, Edgar Martinez, Alex Rodriguez, and Ichiro Suzuki on their roster at various points . . . The Sports Museum will hold its 18th annual gala, The Tradition, at 6 p.m. on Nov. 20 at TD Garden. The event will honor Manny Ramirez, Zdeno Chara, Michelle Kwan, Paul Silas, and Matt Light, among others. For information on tickets, go to sportsmuseum.org/events/the-tradition . . . Happy 26th birthday to Trevor Kelley, who made his debut with the Red Sox this season and pitched in 10 games. He was a 36th-round draft pick in 2015. The Sox have had undrafted free agents reach the majors before, but Kelley is the first player taken that low in the draft to make his debut with the Sox. And best to Juan Marichal, who is 82. The Hall of Famer was with the Red Sox in 1974 and went 5-1 with a 4.87 ERA. Marichal also signed the cover of my game program on Aug. 17 that season after my dad prodded me to ask.

Lowell Spinners would lose Red Sox connection under radical MLB plan

Michael Silverman

The nearly 25-year affiliation between the Lowell Spinners and the Red Sox would end under a radical reorganization proposal from Major League Baseball which leaked Friday, one that would shrink the number of affiliated minor league teams by 25 percent.

Short-season leagues, including the New York-Penn League in which Lowell plays, would be disbanded under the plan, which would eliminate 42 affiliated teams in total. Because MLB views Lowell and the Spinners' home, Edward A. LeLacheur Park, as "good," the franchise would continue to exist in the "Dream League," an MLB concept in line with independent or college leagues.

Also dropping to the Dream League would be the two other New England teams in the NYPL: The Vermont Lake Monsters, affiliated with Oakland since 2011 and playing at 113-year-old Centennial Field in Burlington since the franchise formed in 1994, and the (Norwich) Connecticut Tigers.

The overhaul, first reported by Baseball America and the New York Times, has emerged from ongoing and now contentious negotiations between MLB and Minor League Baseball over their Professional Baseball Agreement, which will expire on Sept. 30, 2020.

MLB says the primary motivations for the changes, which emerged from the MLB owners' meetings in June and were presented to MiLB in August, are to ensure its young players play in quality facilities — rather than some of the current dilapidated stadiums, mostly found in the lower leagues — and to create a saner geographic layout for both leagues and MLB franchises.

The cuts would serve to motivate MLB to increase the currently meager salaries it pays minor leaguers, an increasingly plaguing issue.

Minor League Baseball does not accept the premise and the impetus for the proposals.

“We are engaged in negotiations, and while both sides have differing views over what’s going on, we hope that there’s a resolution available, but we are concerned about saving baseball in as many cities in America as we can, and the proposal that’s on the table at this point doesn’t give us any comfort that that’s even possible,” said Pat O’Conner, president and CEO of Minor League Baseball, which oversees the current 16-league, 160-team system. “It’s the economics. These ownership groups in these communities are just not going to be able to withstand the additional costs the MLB proposal puts on them.”

Through other channels, MiLB castigated MLB for seeking cuts after boasting recently about increased minor-league attendance in the face of decreases in the major leagues. In addition, MiLB intimated that the plan could create a feeling of betrayal among members of the US Congress who, besides holding antitrust authority over MLB, are also invested in maintaining baseball’s prosperity at all levels.

Dave Heller, owner of the Lowell Spinners and three other affiliated teams, was not immediately available for comment. The Red Sox referred the matter to MLB for elaboration; MLB declined to comment.

The “120 plan” wants to reduce the total number of teams from 160 to 120 and eliminate short-season leagues. It also addresses geographical gerrymandering in places like the Triple A Pacific Coast League, whose 16 teams are spread out from Nashville and Memphis in Tennessee to Tacoma, Wash., and Sacramento, Calif.

Each big-league franchise would be limited to four US based full-season franchises, plus one complex-based Rookie-league team.

No other teams in the Red Sox system — Pawtucket/Worcester (Triple A), Portland, Maine (Double A); Salem, Va. (High A); Greenville, S.C. (Single A); and its Gulf Coast squad (Rookie) in Fort Myers, Fla. — would be eliminated or moved out of their league, although there is a high probability that the Single A Carolina and South Atlantic Leagues will be rejiggered and/or drastically reduced.

The “120 plan” calls for a cap on total players under minor-league contract, somewhere between 150–200 per franchise, according to an industry source. (Dominican Summer League teams and roster sizes would not be affected.) Including Lowell, the Red Sox have space for 190 minor-league contracts in their system.

Roster sizes of teams would also be altered. With an emphasis on health and wellness for its players closest to being called up, MLB wants to increase the roster size in Double and Triple A up from 25, which would allow for more player off days, the ability to carry an additional catcher, reduce workloads on pitchers, and effectively create a more serviceable taxi squad.

Also, the “120 plan” seeks to push back the date of the amateur draft from early June to later in the month, after the conclusion of the College World Series.

Red Sox release Steven Wright; knuckleballer needs Tommy John surgery, report says

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox on Friday released knuckleballer Steven Wright, an All-Star in 2016 whose career was interrupted by injuries and two suspensions.

The team also outrighted outfielder Gorkys Hernandez and righthander Josh Smith off the 40-man roster.

Wright, a 35-year-old righthander, was 13-6 with a 3.33 earned run average and a 1.25 WHIP over 156 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings in 2016. Problems started soon after.

Reconstructive knee surgery limited Wright to five games in 2017. He was then arrested in Tennessee on Dec. 8, 2017, on a domestic violence charge.

Wright's case was "retired" by prosecutors in Tennessee on the stipulation he complete an anger management course and incur no criminal charges for a year.

Major League Baseball suspended him for 15 games at the start of the 2018 season.

Wright returned in May and had a 3.38 ERA in 10 games. But he returned to the injured list with knee inflammation after allowing 10 earned runs in 3 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings against Seattle on June 22.

The Sox brought back Wright as a reliever in September and he was exceptional, allowing one earned run over 10 games and 13 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Wright was on the roster for the Division Series, but re-injured his knee shortly before Game 1 and was replaced. He then had a second knee surgery in November.

"I still have some strength to build up," Wright said in February heading into spring training. "I'm not taking it slow to where I'm babying it, but I want to make sure we do it right. We have a good game plan going forward as far as workload."

But on March 6, MLB suspended Wright for 80 games after he tested positive for a synthetic drug that promotes the production of human growth hormone.

Wright claimed he didn't know how the substance got in his system.

He was reactivated from the restricted list June 25, but his return was short-lived. Wright took a line drive off his right big toe July 13 while facing the Dodgers.

He subsequently developed elbow problems and will need Tommy John surgery, according to WEEL.com. Wright hopes to return to baseball.

Eligible for arbitration, he was due to make \$1.5 million.

Wright was a second-round pick by the Cleveland Indians in 2006 as a conventional pitcher, then traded to the Red Sox in 2012, after he became a knuckleballer, for first baseman Lars Anderson.

In his seven seasons with the Sox, Wright went 24-16 with a 3.86 ERA in 347 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Efforts to reach Wright for comment were unsuccessful.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox release knuckleballer Steven Wright

Jason Mastrodonato

The Red Sox released pitcher Steven Wright, a knuckleballer with health problems who had also previously been suspended for violating MLB's policies on domestic violence and performance enhancing substances.

He was expected to make \$1.5 million in arbitration for the 2020 season and the release will clear some expected salary. The Sox are trying to get under the \$208-million threshold for luxury tax purposes.

Teams typically have until the end of November to decide whether or not to tender contracts to their arbitration eligible players, and Wright is not the only arbitration-eligible player the Sox could non-tender to save money.

But according to an industry source, there's new information regarding Wright's health that led to his release at this time. He had dealt with a myriad of health issues over the past four years.

Wright, 35, was also suspended 80 games during spring training for violating the league's PED policy. He tested positive for Growth Hormone Releasing Peptide 2 (GHRP-2).

"It was from an offseason test, I don't know the exact date," Wright said at the time. "Somewhere it got into my system. It's unfortunate. It was such low levels it literally could've been from anything. We couldn't narrow it down from what it was. It falls on me to try to prove that and unfortunately I could not do it."

He was trying to recover from a 2017 surgery on his left knee and said in spring training that it was a daily struggle and he'd never feel the same again.

He returned in late June and made six appearances, all out of relief, before he was placed on the injured list with a bruised toe.

In August, manager Alex Cora announced that Wright had received a plasma-rich platelet injection in his elbow after a visit with orthopedic surgeon Dr. James Andrews.

Wright's career appeared to be blossoming in the 2016 season, when he made the All-Star team and threw 156 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings with a 3.33 ERA. But former manager John Farrell used him as a pinch runner at Dodger Stadium that August and Wright strained his throwing shoulder while sliding back into second base.

Since hurting himself while running the bases in 2016, Wright has thrown just 94 total innings with a 5.17 ERA.

In March, 2018, Wright was suspended 15 games without pay for violating the league's domestic violence policy following an offseason arrest at his Tennessee home.

He agreed not to appeal and committed to treatment and counseling, while also agreeing to educate other players and commit volunteering time and money to local organizations and domestic violence victims.

"I deeply regret my actions that night," Wright said in a statement at the time. "I fully cooperated with MLB's investigators and re-iterated to them that I did not make physical contact with my wife. The legal case that was retired supports that claim. But I accept full responsibility of what happened and have taken steps, including counseling sessions, to help me become a better husband. I apologize to the Red Sox organization, its fans, my teammates and my family. Shannon and I are grateful for your support."

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox release knuckleballer Steven Wright, outright Gorkys Hernandez and Josh Smith

Bill Koch

Steven Wright was suspended for 95 games over the last three seasons. He appeared in just 31.

More than his projected arbitration award per MLB Trade Rumors, the knuckleballer's frequent absences due to disciplinary issues and injury have ended his Red Sox career.

Wright was released by Boston on Friday afternoon. He was due a likely \$1.5 million for 2020 and was thought to be in legitimate jeopardy of being non-tendered by the club. The Red Sox instead opted to make an early decision and set the 35-year-old free.

Wright made 24 starts and was an American League All-Star in 2016. He's been on a downward trajectory since then, posting a 4.71 earned-run average over the past three seasons while battling left knee and right elbow injuries. Wright pitched just six times in 2019, allowing 11 hits and six earned runs in 6 1/3 innings.

Wright told WEEI.com late Friday he will undergo Tommy John surgery next week. That procedure is likely to cost Wright a significant chunk or all of the 2020 season. He was attempting to heal his ailing elbow through rest and a platelet-rich plasma injection.

Wright's off-field problems over the past two years have been considerable. An offseason domestic violence arrest after an argument with his wife, Shannon, at their Tennessee home cost him 15 games in 2018. Wright missed the first 80 games of 2019 and would have been ineligible for the playoffs after testing positive for a growth hormone releasing peptide.

The extensive cartilage-restoration procedure Wright underwent prior to the 2018 season limited him to just 20 games. He pitched out of the bullpen 16 times and posted a 2.68 ERA before a late setback kept him off the 25-man American League Division Series roster. Wright watched from the dugout as Boston defeated the Yankees, Astros and Dodgers on the way to a fourth World Series title this century.

Wright was acquired from Cleveland in a July 2012 trade that sent disappointing infield prospect Lars Anderson the other way. His best season came when he completed 156 2/3 innings and posted a 3.33 ERA in 2016, helping the Red Sox to the first of three straight A.L. East championships. Wright didn't appear in the ensuing three-game ALDS sweep by the Indians, as Rick Porcello, David Price and Clay Buchholz all absorbed losses.

Wright was one of 12 Boston players who entered the offseason arbitration-eligible. Mookie Betts is projected to earn \$27.7 million in his final season before the free agency, the highest award among all eligible players. Jackie Bradley Jr. (\$11 million) and Eduardo Rodriguez (\$9.5 million) are also expected to eat up a significant chunk of the \$70.1 million in salary projected to be paid by the Red Sox.

Boston cleared two more spots on its 40-man roster Friday by outrighting outfielder Gorkys Hernandez and pitcher Josh Smith to Triple-A Pawtucket. Hernandez was projected to earn \$1 million in arbitration. Smith would likely stay on with the Red Sox as a depth starting pitching option.

Wright, Sandy Leon, Chris Owings, Heath Hembree and Hernandez were among the most likely Boston players to be non-tendered. Red Sox principal owner John Henry said the club's goal is to dip below the first threshold of the Collective Balance Tax – \$208 million – prior to the start of the 2020 season. The Red Sox have seven players under contract next year for a combined \$133.87 million.

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox hire Peter Fatse, Hampden native and Minnechaug HS graduate, as assistant hitting coach

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox are hiring Hampden's Peter Fatse to their major league coaching staff as assistant hitting coach, multiple sources confirmed Monday morning.

Fatse, 32, was born in Holyoke and attended Minnechaug Regional High School before playing baseball at UConn. He was selected in the 24th round of the 2009 draft by the Brewers and played two years in Milwaukee's system before moving to independent ball and retiring in 2012.

Fatse founded the Advance Performance Academy in Palmer in 2010 and has served a consultant to professional and amateur hitters for much of the last decade. He was hired by the Twins as their minor league hitting coordinator in January and spent the 2019 season working in Minnesota's system.

Fatse studied political science and government at UConn from 2007 to 2009 and also attended Western New England College from 2010 to 2012. He has served as a coach for the Holyoke Blue Sox and as a prep coach for the New England Royals.

Fatse will replace Andy Barkett, who was let go after the season, and serve as the assistant to hitting coach Tim Hyers. He is the first addition to the major league coaching staff as interviews for a new pitching coach and assistant pitching coach continue.

Zone Coverage's Brandon Warne first reported the hire.

Red Sox pitching coach search: Ex-Reds manager Bryan Price, Sox have spoken about position

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox have spoken with former Cincinnati Reds manager Bryan Price about their open pitching coach position, reported Yahoo Sports national baseball writer Tim Brown.

Price served as Reds manager from 2014-18. He previously worked as Cincinnati's pitching coach from 2009 until his promotion to manager.

He was a pitching coach for the Mariners from 2000-05 and the Diamondbacks from 2006-09. He also served as Mariners minor league pitching coordinator

The 57-year-old went 279-387 (.419 winning percentage) as Reds manager.

Boston Red Sox-MLB free agency: Will Sandy Leon back up Christian Vazquez in 2020? Might Boston bring in another catcher?

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox have yet to hire a new head of baseball operations, but the front office already is busy with roster moves.

Boston released knuckleballer Steven Wright on Friday, then outrighted Josh Smith and Gorkys Hernandez off the 40-man roster to Triple-A Pawtucket.

A new boss should be in place by the Dec. 2 non-tender deadline, when clubs must announce whether they are tendering contracts to arbitration and pre-arbitration players. Players who are not tendered a contract become free agents.

The Red Sox have an interesting call to make with backup catcher Sandy Leon, who is estimated to earn approximately \$2.8 million in his final year of arbitration eligibility.

The Red Sox are trying to cut payroll. Ownership's goal, although not a mandate, is to stay under the \$208 million Competitive Balance Tax threshold in 2020.

Every million matters. The Red Sox's 2020 payroll already sits around approximately \$218 million. But the only likely way for the Red Sox to sign the players they need (fifth starter, reliever, first baseman) this offseason and then stay under \$208 million is choosing between J.D. Martinez and Mookie Betts.

The decision whether or not to tender a contract to Leon shouldn't be based on CBT implications/cutting payroll. After all, his estimated \$2.8 million salary still is relatively inexpensive.

The Red Sox simply need to ask themselves whether Leon is worth \$2.8 million. If he isn't worth that money, they should non-tender him and try to upgrade at backup catcher in free agency-trade market.

An upgrade might cost the Red Sox a little more than \$2.8 million but it still might be worth it. They might need more offense at the position if they do part ways with either Betts or Martinez.

Leon has batted only .199 with a .259 on-base percentage, .312 slugging percentage and .571 OPS in 239 games (780 plate appearances) since the beginning of the 2017 season.

Measuring a catcher's defensive value through metrics is difficult. Leon certainly is a talented and aggressive game-caller. Pitchers enjoy throwing to him.

Many reporters use catcher ERA — a vastly overrated statistic — to make their case for Leon's value to the pitching staff. But Leon's 2019 catcher ERA (4.88) was higher than Christian Vazquez's (4.53). Vazquez had a negative-0.2 WAR for 2019, per Fangraphs.com.

Vazquez took over as No. 1 catcher in 2019. He started 103 games — or made 64% of the starts behind the plate.

Is there another catcher on the market who gives the Red Sox more offensive upside while providing similar defense to Leon for those other 36% of starts?

The Red Sox like Vazquez's versatility. In addition to his 103 starts at catcher, he started 11 games at DH, seven games at first base and one game at second base in 2019. He appeared in four games at third base.

A backup catcher with better offensive upside, therefore, could allow manager Alex Cora to use Vazquez more at other positions when necessary.

Catcher Juan Centeno is on the Red Sox's 40-man roster. The Puerto Rico native, who will turn 30 in November, played for Cora in Houston in 2017, when Cora served as Astros bench coach. He spent September on Boston's active roster after playing the minor league season for Triple-A Pawtucket.

He's a cheaper alternative to Leon. He's not an offensive upgrade through. He has slashed .223/.278/.323/.601 in 118 major league games. But he seems capable of backing up Vazquez.

It wouldn't be too surprising if the Red Sox added Jhon Nunez to the 40-man roster to prevent him from entering minor league free agency. Nunez, who turns 25 in December, slashed .280/.333/.412/.746 in 64 games for Double-A Portland during 2019. His arm has been described as "electric."

FREE AGENT CATCHERS:

Robinson Chirinos: The 35-year-old played on a one-year, \$5.75 million contract with the Astros in '19. The starting catcher for Houston's latest postseason run, Chirinos recorded a 2.3 WAR in the regular season, ranking 10th on Houston. He should receive decent money this offseason after posting a .238/.347/.443/.790 line, 17 homers, 22 doubles, one triple and 58 RBIs in 114 games (437 plate appearances).

Martin Maldonado: The 33-year-old, who played on a one-year, \$2.5 million contract in 2019, was traded twice during the season. He went from the Royals to the Cubs to the Astros. He has backed up Chirinos and started as Gerrit Cole's personal catcher this postseason. He slashed .220/.298/.391/.689 with 12 homers, 19 doubles and 27 RBIs in 105 games (374 plate appearances).

Travis d'Arnaud: The Mets released d'Arnaud on May 3, the Dodgers signed him May 5, and then the Rays purchased his contract May 10. Good decision by the Rays. d'Arnaud enjoyed his best season. He had a .263/.323/.459/.782 line with 16 homers, 16 doubles and 67 RBIs in 92 games (365 plate appearances) with Tampa. He will turn 31 in February.

Russell Martin: The veteran's five-year, \$82-million contract expired at the end of this season and he's likely looking at a one-year deal at this stage of his career. He'll turn 37 in February. He finished with a .220/.337/.330/.667 line, six homers, five doubles and 20 RBIs in 83 games (249 plate appearances) for the Dodgers in 2019. He has AL East experience, playing for the Yankees in 2011-12 and Blue Jays from 2015-18.

Austine Romine: The Yankees backup catcher enjoyed a nice season, slashing .281/.310/.439/.748 with eight homers, 12 doubles and 35 RBIs in 72 games (240 plate appearances). He especially hit well during the second half with a .325/.364/.550/.914 line, six homers, nine doubles and 19 RBIs in 129 plate appearances. He turns 31 in November. He made \$1.8 million in his final year of arbitration in 2019.

Stephen Vogt: The Giants signed the catcher/outfielder/first baseman to a minor league deal in February and it paid off. He slashed .263/.314/.490/.804 with 10 homers, 24 doubles, two triples and 40 RBIs in 99 games (280 plate appearances). He turns 35 on Nov. 1.

Alex Avila: The veteran catcher, who turns 33 in January, earned \$4.25 million in 2019 in the second season of a two-year, \$8.25 million contract. He posted a .207/.353/.421/.774 line with nine homers, eight doubles and 24 RBIs in 63 games (201 plate appearances) this season. He had a 1.3 WAR, 11th on the Dbacks.

Chris Iannetta: The Rockies released the Providence, R.I., native Aug. 15. He earned \$4.15 million this season and slashed .222/.311/.417/.728 with six homers, 10 doubles and 21 RBIs in 52 games (164 plate appearances). He has a .342 OBP and .781 OPS in his past three seasons. He turns 37 in April.

Francisco Cervelli: He'll turn 33 in March. He made \$11.5 million in 2019, the final year of a three-year, \$31-million contract with the Pirates. He slashed .213/.302/.348/.649 with three homers, eight doubles, one triple and 12 RBIs in 48 games (160 plate appearances).

Jonathan Lucroy: The 33-year-old posted an .818 OPS for the Brewers from 2012-16 but he has a .666 OPS his past three seasons. He slashed only .232/.305/.355/.660 with eight homers, 10 doubles, one triple and 36 RBIs in 101 games (328 plate appearances) for the Angels and Cubs in '19. He likely will pursue a starting job and it should be interesting to see how his market develops.

Matt Wieters: The longtime Orioles catcher signed a minor league deal with the Cardinals last February. He earned \$1.5 million in the majors and slashed .214/.268/.435/.702 with 11 homers, four doubles and 27 RBIs in 67 games (183 plate appearances). He turns 34 next May.

* Nationals catcher Yan Gomes has a \$9 million team option and \$1 million buyout that Washington must make a decision on after the World Series.

Red Sox roster moves: Hernandez, Smith outrighted off 40-man roster to Triple-A Pawtucket

Christopher Smith

The Boston Red Sox front office has been busy despite the lack of a general manager.

The Red Sox announced that they released knuckleballer Steven Wright earlier Friday.

Then two more roster moves came across the transaction log. Gorkys Hernandez and Josh Smith have been outrighted off the 40-man roster to Triple-A Pawtucket after clearing waivers.

Hernandez went 7-for-49 (.143) in 20 games for Boston. Smith pitched 31 innings for Boston this year, going 0-3 with a 5.81 ERA, 1.42 WHIP and .281 batting average against.

Red Sox release Steven Wright; knuckleballer dealt with suspensions, injuries in last 2 seasons

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox released knuckleballer Steven Wright on Friday, the team announced.

Wright, 35, had been with the organization since 2012 and appeared in 81 major-league games since making his debut in 2013. He has dealt with a series of significant injuries and suspensions over the past two seasons, being limited to just six games in 2019 due to an 80-game ban for violating Major League Baseball's performance-enhancing drug policy and then missing time with foot and elbow injuries.

Wright's latest ailment was a serious elbow issue that popped up while he was rehabbing his bruised toe in August. He received a plasma-rich platelet (PRP) injection Aug. 7 and was believed to be a candidate for Tommy John surgery.

Wright was due about \$1.5 million in arbitration this winter and was a strong candidate to be non-tendered. The Sox instead decided to move up their decision on him, allowing him to hit free agency immediately.

Wright was 24-16 with a 3.86 ERA in 81 games (44 starts) for the Red Sox. He was an All-Star in 2016 and received two World Series rings (2013, 2018).

*** *RedSox.com***

Red Sox release knuckleballer Wright

Ian Browne

Knuckleballer Steven Wright, who was an All-Star in 2016 but spent most of his time either injured or suspended the last three seasons, was released by the Red Sox on Friday.

Rather than wait until the non-tender deadline of Dec. 2 to make a decision on Wright, who had one more season of arbitration-eligibility, the Red Sox acted on Friday and created a spot on the 40-man roster.

The 35-year-old Wright is now a free agent.

The Red Sox acquired Wright from the Indians for Lars Anderson on July 31, 2012.

Anderson never played in the Major Leagues again after the trade while Wright was a contributor for Boston when he was able to stay healthy, going 24-16 with a 3.86 ERA in 81 games, 44 of them starts.

Injuries weren't the only thing that held Wright back the last couple of years. At the start of the 2018 season, Wright was suspended 15 games for violating Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy.

The righty was also suspended for the first 80 games of the 2019 season for testing positive for a performance-enhancing substance.

After that suspension, Wright was able to pitch in just six games for the Sox before getting hit on the right leg by a line drive and then suffering an elbow injury during his rehab. His season ended by just the third game after the All-Star break.

* **WEEI.com**

Red Sox reportedly interview former Reds manager Bryan Price for pitching coach position

Rob Bradford

The Red Sox' front office has been partaking in a flurry of interviews of late, needing to fill spots for their pitching coach, assistant pitching coach and assistant hitting coach positions.

One notable name has been surfaced as a candidate.

According to Yahoo! Sports' Tim Brown former Reds manager Bryan Price is in the mix to replace Dana LeVangie as pitching coach.

After serving as pitching coach for the Reds from 2010-13, Price took over as Cincinnati's manager in 2014. He lasted in the position until 2018, finishing the managerial stint with a 279-387 record, having been let go after starting the '18 season 3-15. Prior to joining the Cincy organization he was pitching coach for Seattle and Arizona.

Price is preparing to be Team USA's pitching coach for the upcoming WBSC Premier 12 international tournament.

The Sunday Baseball Column: The man who left the Red Sox to help build the 2019 National League champs

Rob Bradford

Ten years ago it was a decision that some might have rolled their eyes at.

When the 2009 season came to a close Johnny DiPuglia was entrenched as a valued member of a Red Sox international scouting department that helped secure a pair of World Series championships, having been in the organization for 10 years. Sure, the position with the Washington Nationals might have seemed like a promotion -- getting the chance to run all of Mike Rizzo's international operations -- but considering the hole the Nationals found themselves in thanks to the Smiley Gonzalez chaos -- (read more about that by clicking here) -- this was far from a no-brainer.

"It was different with the Red Sox," DiPuglia said in a phone interview. "The Red Sox already had a stable base. An academy. They had some core players there. When (former international scouting director Craig Shipley) Ship and I were together I think we had 19 guys get to the big leagues. It was more fun than when I started here with the Nationals. We had to regain the trust of ownership because of what had happened with the Smiley Gonzalez scandal. It was more of a struggle. But while it was more of a struggle it was more rewarding because we were rock bottom. Out of 30 clubs in Latin America, we were probably 30 spending-wise. We had to gain their trust."

A resume that included signing the likes of Anibal Sanchez and Hanley Ramirez was all well and good. But when DiPuglia showed up with the Nationals the kind of success he had left behind in Boston seemed so far from a reality in Washington.

Ten years later, DiPuglia and his Nationals are National League champions.

"This has to be the pinnacle of my 29 years as a scout, watching the fruits of our labor produce in the World Series," he said.

This is a story that is more than just a familiar name on a successful team's masthead. The fruit of DiPuglia's labor will be revealed in some of the most powerful images found in the upcoming World Series. Juan Soto. Victor Robles. Ever heard of them?

The Nationals -- the team buried in such a deep hole when it came to the international baseball-playing landscape -- is rolling out two of the most dynamic young players in the big leagues on baseball's late-October stage.

"Our (Dominican) academy is probably not a JW Marriott but it's a Fairfield Inn," DiPuglia joked when talking about the state of the Nationals' international scouting department. "It's been very gratifying, especially seeing those two young kids playing for us in the everyday lineup. And we have more coming.

"That's been pretty much my diary, rebuilding programs from scratch. A lot of people in baseball call me 'The cleaner' because I go in and clean things up. I like doing that. This was probably the most rewarding one because I was allowed to do it my way. Every other place (which has also included St. Louis and San Francisco) I had people I had to go through to get things done. Mike let me handle it my way and I think that's why we've been successful because he trusts me and I trust him. It's been fun. Hopefully, we can finish this thing off."

THE JUAN SOTO/RAFAEL DEVERS COMPARISON

Soto is a different type of player than Devers, and he is remarkably two years younger -- having made his big league debut as a 19-year-old in 2018. But DiPuglia -- who scouted both extensively -- has always seen a very real similarity between the two.

"Hitting-wise, kind of similar to what Devers was," said DiPuglia when remembering the impression left by Soto on the way to the outfielder's commitment to Washington in 2015. "Devers' bat was special. When he was a kid he always had the ability to barrel the ball. With Soto, he was just such a professional. He understood the strike zone. He took breaking balls like he was a veteran. But Devers did that too. Devers just did that with a little bit more of a flair than Soto did. But they are similar-type of players. ... They both had that knack of being able to barrel a baseball, which is hard to find."

Another interesting Red Sox-related link to one of these young Nationals stars was the nickname Robles gave himself growing up: "David Ortiz pequeño" or "Little David Ortiz."

"I don't know how he figured that out because he had nothing of David Ortiz," the Nationals' chief international scout said of Robles. "He was right-handed. He could run. He is a center fielder. A quick-twitch guy. Could really throw. Maybe the only thing that he had was that he is a high-energy guy and loved to play. All those kids down there idolize David."

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE AN EXTRA MONTH

The Red Sox played 14 additional games last year. Their pitchers threw 134 innings on top of their regular-season total. The General Manager meetings -- the perceived kickoff for Major League Baseball's 2019 roster-building -- kicked off just a week after Chris Sale's final pitch at Dodger Stadium.

This October has obviously been a whole lot different.

The front office had to squeeze a lot in a little amount of time heading into last November, so in that respect, the Red Sox has been afforded a luxury. But each member of the group of four picking up the slack since Dave Dombrowski's dismissal -- Eddie Romero, Zack Scott, Brian O'Halloran and Raquel Ferreira -- have been tasked with added responsibility. Then there are the interviews for a trio of coaching vacancies

(pitching coach/assistant pitching coach/assistant hitting coach) that weren't an issue last year. In other words, this has been a convoluted October in its own way.

Now, how the extra month can help ...

As one big-league executive explained it, "Focus ... It's the only advantage."

The point is that while you can prepare for the next season while going through a postseason run, it's inevitable that attentions are going to be split. Thinking about how rosters and approaches might be altered becomes a much clearer proposition without the distraction of trying to win playoff baseball games.

"Obviously, we don't want too much time in the offseason. I don't want to go home on Oct. 2. But in this situation, we're going home on Oct. 2 and we have time to prepare," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said on the Bradfo Sho podcast during the last week of the regular season. "You reset everything you have to do. You catch up with the family and do everything you have to do and on Nov. 1 everyone starts working." (This is Cora's first free October since 2015, having spent the month three years ago in Bristol, Conn. for ESPN before going through World Series runs the following two seasons.)

The extra focus allowed by the fewer games isn't only limited to the coaches or front offices. The players also avoid the shortened offseason that makes preparation for the next season feel like a whirlwind.

"You don't necessarily carry it around with you when you're walking every day but when you get out there and get in the games there's a little bit there," pitcher Rick Porcello said on his latest Bradfo Sho appearance when discussing the impact of those extra innings in 2018. "But plenty of guys have been able to bounce back from World Series and still be very effective from the first pitch of the season to all the way through. You look at the guys from the Astros, the guys from the Dodgers those guys have been pitching deep in the playoffs for a few years now and they keep rolling. It's not an excuse. ... It's another adjustment you have to learn to deal with. You pitch that deep in the year you have to figure out how to get yourself ready to go from the Day 1 on."

SO, CAN THE ASTROS KEEP THIS UP?

You now have a second World Series in the last three years, with an ALCS thrown in the middle of it. You talk about losing Octobers ...

But just how long is this run by Houston sustainable?

They talk about the analytics, and some key extensions (Jose Altuve, Alex Bregman), but this whole equation will come back to the top of their rotation. (Just ask the Red Sox.) Justin Verlander is signed through 2021, as is Zack Greinke. That's a start considering the perceived state both 30-something starters are still in. But the Astros' best pitcher Gerrit Cole is in line to hit free agency this offseason and that figures to be a decision that will tell us a lot about how Houston plans on building this thing.

Cole will be 30 years old next September. When it comes to total pitches thrown over the past three seasons he only trails Verlander.

But in terms of making a case that he is worthy of the kind of long-term deal given out to some other top tier starters over the last few years, Cole is in a pretty good spot. His total number of pitches (19,781) is below where Jon Lester was (27,638) at when committing to six years with the Cubs, and also shy of Max Scherzer's 21,991 pitches at the time he became a free agent. David Price? His pitch count total when inking that seven-year contract with the Red Sox was 23,687.

Washington's commitment to both Stephen Strasburg (7 years) and Patrick Corbin (6 years) came with each pitcher having thrown just shy of 15,000 pitches at the time of their agreements.

The moral of the story is that even with the wary eyes cast toward free agent pitchers heading into their 30's, Cole will be paid the kind of money that is pushing a team's chips to the middle of the table. And it is this type of player who can go a long way toward defining a team's shelf-life. Just ask the Red Sox.

SOME OTHER THOUGHTS ...

- Despite playing in just one round during the 2017 playoffs and not participating in the postseason this time around, as we sit here the Red Sox pitchers have still thrown more pitches than any other team over the past three seasons.

- At most, we are 15 days away from the day J.D. Martinez will have to define his intentions regarding that opt-out. The Red Sox still don't have a general manager. To think that someone outside the organization is going to be dropped in the middle of these flurry of decisions which need to be made while having to be defined by them in the years to come just seems like a stretch. (The GM meetings start Nov. 11.)

- You know whose collective bargaining agreement is up? The umpires. One thing to look for will be a much greater significant turnover (which usually encompasses just a couple umps each year) this time around. This marks the 20th anniversary of the last huge wave of umpiring additions, and umpires' pensions kick in after 20 years. Stay tuned.

Recently-released Steven Wright to undergo Tommy John surgery

Rob Bradford

Steven Wright is in the process of starting over, in more ways than one.

The Red Sox announced Friday that the knuckleballer was being released, ending a stint with the organization that began in 2013. Wright only pitched in six games for the team in 2019, experiencing a foot and arm injuries that shut down his season after missing 80 games due to a performance-enhancing substance.

Monday's release, however, is just part of the challenge facing the 35-year-old.

Wright revealed to WEEI.com that he will be undergoing Tommy John surgery Tuesday.

"I'm fully committed to rehab and making a comeback," the knuckleballer said in a text. "I feel better than I have ever and want to get back to a position I haven't been in since 2016, which is healthy. My sole focus is to get healthy and stay focused."

Wright had been dealing with elbow stiffness starting in late May, leading to an MRI after he went on the injured list with a July 13 toe injury. The test revealed a tear in the pitcher's UCL. Wright approached the injury with a PRP injury followed by six weeks off, a throwing progression and subsequently a second trip to Dr. James Andrews.

With the injury not responding to the PRP injection in the manner which Wright had hoped it was determined Tommy John surgery was needed.

Wright leaves the Red Sox having pitched in 81 games, getting 44 starts. His best season came in 2016 when the righty went 13-6 with a 3.33 ERA in 24 starts.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Five potential landing spots (and one wild card) for Mookie Betts

John Tomase

Mookie Betts would improve any team in baseball, but only a handful of clubs check the boxes that justify acquiring the defending MVP, should the Red Sox make him available.

The first is money. He's going to earn a little under \$30 million in arbitration and anyone who can't afford that need not apply.

The second is a deep farm system. The Red Sox must replace him with young talent that's close to major league ready, with at least one potential impact player as the centerpiece of any deal.

The third is a legitimate chance to contend in 2020 (or at least that belief, even if it's misguided), because acquiring Betts means you're going for it. Otherwise, what's the point?

Punch all of that data into the ol' Tandy and the list that emerges is manageable. For the purposes of this exercise, we're going to focus on five teams (plus one wild card), with each team's committed contracts in 2020 (per Baseball-Reference), arbitration estimates (per MLB Trade Rumors), farm system rank (per Baseball America), and contention status (per me).

1. Atlanta Braves

2020 commitments: \$83 million
Arbitration estimates: \$28.4 million
Farm system rank: 4th
Contention status: World Series

Of all the short- and long-term landing spots for Betts, the Braves have to be considered high on the list. Blessed with one of baseball's best young nucleuses that features 21-year-old MVP candidate Ronald Acuña Jr. and 22-year-old NL hits leader Ozzie Albies, they're a team on the rise trying to sell out a new ballpark.

Betts fits their mix of veterans (Freddie Freeman, Josh Donaldson) and aforementioned youth to a T, and he could be just the piece to put them over the top. Atlanta has seen its win total increase in each of the last five seasons, from 67 in 2015 to 97 in 2019, but it has lost its last 10 playoff series since 2001 and is desperate to break through.

Making a match even more feasible, Atlanta's farm system remains stacked, even after graduating contributors like right-hander Mike Soroka and outfielder Austin Riley to the big leagues. With six top-100 prospects, including right-handers Ian Anderson, Drew Waters, and Kyle Wright, the Braves have the pieces to deal.

2. Los Angeles Dodgers

2020 commitments: \$125 million
Arbitration estimates: \$53 million
Farm system rank: 5th
Contention status: World Series

Speaking of needing to be put over the top . . .

After two straight World Series losses, the Dodgers were shocked in the NLDS by Howie Kendrick and the Nationals. They've since faced criticism that their patient build through youth and shorter-term contracts has cost them potential superstars, even though they possess some of the most robust resources in the game.

One year of Betts would actually fit their model perfectly, since the bulk of their roster is only signed through 2020 or 2021. They'd need to move center fielder A.J. Pollock to open a spot for Betts, who'd add a dynamic table-setting component to the NL's best offense, which is homer-heavy.

As for what L.A. has to offer, the Dodgers have boasted a top-five farm system in four of the last five years, and they keep churning out star-caliber players, whether it's NL MVP favorite Cody Bellinger, All-Star shortstop Corey Seager, or potential ace Walker Buehler. One name to watch is right-hander Dustin May, who could be next in the pipeline.

3. Chicago Cubs

2020 commitments: \$161 million
Arbitration estimates: \$48.3 million
Farm system rank: 29th
Contention status: Playoffs

Oh, man, are the Cubs at a crossroads. After winning it all in 2016, they have systematically dismantled their farm system while recklessly chasing one more title with the Kris Bryant-Anthony Rizzo-Javier Baez core.

That bill is about to come due in a big way, with the core trio expiring after the 2021 season. The Cubs are locked in to some terrible contracts, whether it's \$184 million for underachieving right fielder Jason Heyward or \$126 million for fragile right-hander Yu Darvish.

They'd have to get creative to fit Betts for even one year since the top 15 players on their roster will count for more than \$200 million next year. Their farm system is also pretty wiped out, but don't discount Theo Epstein, who drafted Betts in 2011 and has watched him blossom into a superstar from afar.

Going all in on one last title run is how the Cubs have gotten themselves into long-term trouble, but their window is slamming shut, and Betts could be a one-year difference maker before the reckoning.

4. San Diego Padres

2020 commitments: \$101 million
Arbitration estimates: \$25.6 million
Farm system rank: 2nd
Contention status: 2-3 years away

The Padres proved their willingness to spend last winter when they landed Manny Machado for 10 years and \$300 million. Machado delivered a disappointing season, but there's reason for optimism, particularly at shortstop, where rookie Fernando Tatis Jr. slugged 22 homers in only 84 games.

The Padres feel they're on the cusp, thanks to an absolutely loaded farm system that delivered both Tatis and 23-year-old right-hander Chris Paddack (9-7, 3.33) last year, and is stacked with big-league ready prospects, including left-hander MacKenzie Gore.

Coming off a 70-win season, it's hard to envision the Padres suddenly making a playoff run. But they weren't afraid to spend last year, and Betts would transform their offense. Most importantly, they have the pieces to entice the Red Sox, whether it's right-hander Luis Patino or outfielder Taylor Trammell.

5. Chicago White Sox

2020 commitments: \$15.3 million
Arbitration estimates: \$32.2 million
Farm system rank: 3rd
Contention status: 2-3 years away

Imagine a White Sox offense that features both J.D. Martinez and Betts? Chicago has the resources to make that admittedly remote scenario happen, with basically no money committed to next season. The other Sox are ready to take the next step behind a sneaky-dangerous core of AL batting champ Tim Anderson, former Red Sox farmhand Yoan Moncada, and slugging youngster Eloy Jimenez.

Their well-regarded farm system has already delivered hard-throwing right-hander Dylan Cease, and there's more where that came from, whether it's outfielder Luis Robert, rehabbing right-hander Michael Kopech, or second baseman and Dustin Pedroia clone Nick Madrigal.

The White Sox were in on Manny Machado last winter and could turbocharge their rebuild with Betts after hanging on the periphery of the AL wild card race for half of 2019.

6. New York Mets

2020 commitments: \$127.5 million

Arbitration estimates: \$48 million

Farm system rank: 28th

Contention status: Pretenders

And here's our wild card. The Mets made a splash under agent-turned-GM Brody Van Wagenen with last winter's Edwin Diaz trade and then the deadline acquisition of Blue Jays ace Marcus Stroman, but they seem unlikely to add enough payroll to accommodate Betts.

And yet ... an offense built around Rookie of the Year lock Pete Alonso alongside a deep pitching staff (Jacob DeGrom, Noah Syndergaard, Stroman, Steven Matz) has the Mets thinking playoffs, especially after their blistering 46-26 second half.

We'll find out in 2020 how real that performance was, but in the meantime, imagine replacing center fielder Juan Lagares with Betts? The temptation should be very real for Van Wagenen, although the issue will be finding the talent to send back, since New York's farm system is thin.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Scouting some Red Sox minor leaguers in the Arizona Fall League

Sean McAdam

The Arizona Fall League, having adjusted its schedule this year to begin earlier, has a week of games remaining. The Red Sox sent a handful of players to play for the Peoria Javelinas.

We caught up with a veteran major league scout who watched AFL action and got his scouting reports on some Red Sox prospects and how they looked.

OF Marcus Wilson: "He's one of those (mistake) hitters. He can hit a fastball; what he's got to do is learn to recognize the other pitches, so he can get the fastball — like most (young players). He's a good athlete and the tools are there. He's someone you want to be more patient with, so when it goes off, it can go off pretty good. It's kind of an all-or-nothing package.

"He read plays pretty well. It's tough out there with the high sky, but I thought he broke well on balls and threw well enough. There's nothing to hold him back defensively; it's basically wait-and-see on the bat, more than anything. He gets fooled pretty good by the finesse guys. When he gets underway, he moves pretty well. I would hope he would be better than a fourth outfielder, but I think he'll hit enough to at least be a backup guy."

OF Jarren Duran: "I like him. I've seen him before. He gets good jumps, reads. He's really got good speed. He's quick, and a legit center fielder from what I saw. Some guys were concerned that maybe his instincts weren't as pure, but I didn't see any reason he can't succeed there. His arm is at least playable. His legs are what's going to make him.

“He’s a guy who needs to focus on scoring runs, getting on base. He’s got this uppercut (with his swing) and puts too many balls in the air. He gets underneath a lot of balls. But he’s such a good athlete and if he’s got any aptitude at all, he’ll hit line drives, use the whole field, bunt, get on base, whatever. Topped ground balls, he can beat out.

“He’s an exciting player. He’s got a good frame and he’s filled out some. He goes first-to-third pretty easily. He’s aggressive early in the count; I would have him be selectively aggressive. He tends to want to do too much early in the count. He chases a bit early and he’s getting himself down in the count and then they spin balls on him. He probably needs a full year at Triple A. Defensively, he can handle (the big leagues) right now.

INF C.J. Chatham: “I like Chatham. I haven’t seen enough of him in the field to say what he is. He the old-school shortstop – you know, high-waisted, like (Don) Kessinger, (Mark) Belanger, like that in terms of actions. But he’s got some hitting instincts and I think he’s got the ability to make adjustments. He’s got deceptive power. He showed that in BP. He’s a kid that stays under control; he’s got great poise. That’s probably a reflection of his makeup. He’s kind of that easy-going, calculated risk-taker.”

RHP Bryan Mata: “Mata’s velocity has inched back up to where we thought it would be. His command was a little streakier than what his delivery suggested it was going to be. They need to let him pitch. He’s got great pitching makeup as far as competitiveness and the ability to stay under control. He can spin the breaking ball. With added velocity and fastball life, he gets that “try to throw the ball by guys” at times, but that’s OK — that’s aggression. He needs to control it a little bit and learn to set-up pitches. He may be a year away, I don’t know. I know his numbers may not say it, but he’s a guy you could fast-track to the rotation. I think mentally he could handle it. He’s a No. 4 as a floor, and either a No. 2 or No. 3 as a ceiling.”

RHP Tanner Houck: “He can give hitters a different look with that sinker. He’s got the good one; it goes down and finished off the knee and on the ankles. He’s gone back to who he is. He was trying to throw four-seamers up in the zone and he never seemed comfortable with that grip. Let him be who he is. He’ll grind out some innings. He’s a competitive kid. The defense has got to play behind him, obviously — he’s basically a ground ball pitcher who’s going to pitch to contact and give you some innings. I see him as a fourth or fifth guy (in a rotation) and maybe better in time, who knows?

Watching the 2019 postseason so far, it’s hard not to think that maybe the Red Sox had it right after all. In theory, at least.

Recall that when the Red Sox went all-in with their starting rotation last offseason — re-signing Nathan Eovaldi to join Chris Sale, David Price, Rick Porcello and Eduardo Rodriguez — it was a commitment to the idea that starting pitching was the way to win.

It felt almost like an outmoded philosophy at the time, with teams putting more emphasis on bullpens and other less-traditional approaches, like openers.

But this month, the two most successful teams — the Washington Nationals and Houston Astros — are succeeding with a similar stance.

The Astros have been spearheaded by the duo of Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole, with some help from trading deadline acquisition Zack Greinke. Meanwhile, the Nationals have ridden the Big Three of Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg and last winter’s prize free-agent addition Patrick Corbin.

Houston defeated the Tampa Bay Rays — who employed a mixture of traditional starters (Charlie Morton, Blake Snell, Tyler Glasnow) and openers — to reach the ALCS, where they are leading the Yankees, whose starting pitching was only league-average for much of the season and who were without Domingo

German, arguably their best starter, suspended for the postseason for violating MLB's domestic violence policy.

The Yankees also didn't have their most talented starter, Luis Severino, at full strength. Severino missed the first five and a half months of the season with an assortment of injuries and made only three regular-season starts before the postseason got underway.

GM Brian Cashman took some heat for not upgrading the rotation at the deadline, but the Yankees convinced themselves that their deep bullpen — featuring closer Aroldis Chapman and a variety of tested set-up men such as Zack Britton, Adam Ottavino and Chad Green.

But as the Yankees discovered, having lock-down relievers isn't of much value when opponents beat up your starters and get off to early leads.

Meanwhile, the Nationals topped Milwaukee in the wild-card game, outlasted the Dodgers in the NLDS, then swept the Cardinals in the NLCS. Neither the Dodgers nor the Cards were a match for Washington's power trio in the rotation.

Washington's starters had pitched to a 2.04 ERA while contributing 61.2 innings, the most of any playoff team. Houston, meanwhile, went into Friday with a 3.10 ERA, lowest of any American League team to play in October. In terms of innings from starters, the Astros were right behind inning pitched from starters at 54 innings.

That doesn't mean that teams are going to necessarily follow their lead. After all, it's an expensive path, since experienced starting pitchers are almost always expensive propositions, and as the Red Sox discovered, not always reliable or healthy

But it's worth noting that, should the Astros hold off the Yankees this weekend, regardless of whether the Astros or Nationals win the World Series, the last three champions in the sport will have thrived in October the old-fashioned way: with dependable, quality starting pitching.

It would seem that the completion of the Red Sox coaching staff for 2020 will require just two more hires — another pitching coach to team with Dave Bush, who, after serving as the team's pitching coordinator/performance last season, will have a still-to-be-defined role on the staff as well as a replacement for assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett, who was told he wouldn't be returning earlier this month.

But could there be more turnover?

Bench coach Ron Roenicke remains under contract through the 2020 season and is expected to return for his third season on Alex Cora's staff. Roenicke's wealth of experience — as a player, minor league manager, major league coach and major league manager — has proved to be a steady influence in the dugout.

But Roenicke also has long ties to the Angels organization, having done two stints on the coaching staff (third base coach 2000-2005; bench coach 2010-2016). In his first stint, Roenicke worked with Joe Maddon, who was recently hired as the Angels new manager, replacing the fired Brad Ausmus. Reportedly, the two enjoyed a strong relationship.

Might Maddon be interested in having Roenicke return as his bench coach? Roenicke still lives in the offseason in San Clemente, CA., not far from Anaheim. Might it appeal to him to be (much) closer to his home?

Roenicke told the Los Angeles Times Friday that, as far as he knew, no one had asked the Red Sox for permission to speak to him about another position.

It could be that the Angels would prefer a younger bench coach to pair with Maddon, who is 65. Roenicke is 63.

Still, this could bear watching.

Steven Wright released by Red Sox

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox can use all the help they can get in improving their pitching staff, but apparently, that need doesn't extend to Steven Wright.

The Red Sox announced that they had released Wright Friday afternoon. Wright had spent parts of the previous seven seasons with the club, going 24-16 with a 3.86 ERA in 81 games, 44 of them starts. His best season was 2016 when he was named to the American League All-Star team and went 13-6 with a 3.33 ERA over 24 starts.

Wright was eligible for salary arbitration, and it was expected that the Sox would non-tender him next month, rather than pay him the estimated \$1.5 million he was projected to earn in arbitration. Instead, the Sox didn't wait and decided to release Wright outright before the tendering process began.

The 28-year-old, believed to be the lone remaining knuckleballer in the game, was involved in two off-field transgressions, both of which resulted in suspensions. Wright was suspended 15 games by MLB in 2018 for violating MLB's domestic violence policy in an altercation with his wife the previous winter.

Then, in spring training last March, Wright was suspended 80 games for violating the game's drug-testing program. Wright tested positive for human growth hormone, though Wright insisted he hadn't knowingly taken a banned substance.

Wright's disciplinary issues, coupled with knee and elbow injuries, limited his availability the last few seasons. After a career-high 156.2 innings in 2016, he was limited to just 84 innings over his last three seasons. He displeased the Red Sox when, after assuring them that he was healthy enough to be part of the ALDS roster in October of 2016, re-injured the knee in a pre-game workout, forcing the Sox into making a move to replace him on the playoff roster.

This past season, after returning to eligibility following the 80-game ban, he appeared in just six games — all in relief — totaling 6.1 innings. He experienced elbow problems and was placed on the IL at the end of August.

Red Sox appear half-set on pitching coach vacancies

Sean McAdam

The announcement earlier this month that Dana LeVangie would be re-assigned to a scouting position and Brian Bannister would focus entirely on pitching development created two openings on the Red Sox coaching staff.

It now appears the Red Sox have decided on how to fill one of those vacancies.

According to a baseball source, Dave Bush, who last year served as the team's pitching coordinator/performance will likely serve one of the staff's two pitching spots. It's unclear whether he will serve as the primary pitching coach (the role held by LeVangie the last two seasons) or the assistant spot (held by Bannister).

Bush's precise role is unclear for now and will largely hinge on who else the Red Sox hire. But either way, the expectation is that Bush will be part of the duo. It's expected that Bush, who pitched in the big leagues for nine seasons with Toronto, Milwaukee and Texas, will approach the position from an analytical standpoint.

Bush joined the organization after the 2016 season as a pitching development analyst before being promoted last January to his role as pitching coordinator/performance. In that role, he was tasked with using "objective information and technology to lead pitch development and optimization, pitch usage and strategy, and mechanics in collaboration with Baseball Research and Development," according to the Red Sox.

As for the other half of the equation, the source indicated the Red Sox are willing to be somewhat unorthodox with their selection, and may be willing to hire someone from the college ranks. The Minnesota Twins took that approach last season when they hired Wes Johnson, a longtime high school and college coach.

Another former college coach, Derek Johnson, spent last season as the Cincinnati Reds pitching coach after spending the previous season in the same role for the Milwaukee Brewers.

The failure of the pitching staff was perhaps the biggest reason for the Red Sox' disappointing season, resulting in a third-place finish and LeVangie's re-assignment.

According to Alex Speier of the Boston Globe, there was tension through the 2018 season between LeVangie and the team's Baseball Operations department, the latter of which wanted to focus more on analytics and other data in gameplanning for opponents while LeVangie favored an approach based on more on video study.

The Sox finished 19th among the 30 MLB teams in staff ERA and four of the five starters experienced disappointing seasons, with three spending time on the Injured List.

*** *The Athletic***

The Red Sox pitching pipeline is broken. Can they find a solution to prevent another decade-long drought?

Chad Jennings

The lefty from Washington State showed up mid-summer 2006, and barely a month later, he was 5-0 with a 2.38 ERA. He would become everything the scouts said he would be and more. A year later, the skinny kid from Texas made his debut. He was another highly touted prospect and threw a no-hitter in his second big league start. A year after that, it was the right-hander born in Jamaica and raised in middle America. He debuted in Boston in April 2008 and eventually became a rotation mainstay halfway across the country. Two years later, the lefty from Venezuela arrived. He would fill in here and there before earning a more permanent rotation spot.

And then the well went dry.

It's now been nearly a decade since the Red Sox developed their own impact starting pitcher. They've brought a few spot starters through the system, and they've traded some to other organizations, but the pipeline that developed All-Stars Jon Lester, Clay Buchholz and Justin Masterson has not further supplemented the rotation in a lasting way since Felix Doubront arrived in 2010.

In that time, the Red Sox have deployed a meaningful homegrown player at every other position except designated hitter (David Ortiz made it almost impossible to check that one off the list). They've also had

quality in-house relief pitchers from Jonathan Papelbon to Brandon Workman, but a homegrown starter has eluded them. This next decade, they need that to change.

“Rotation development is absolutely a point of emphasis,” assistant general manager Brian O’Halloran said. “In order to build championship-caliber rotations year after year, we will need to successfully tap into all avenues of talent acquisition, including the development of homegrown starting pitchers.”

But a total reboot will not be needed; some of the necessary changes have already been made, and the adjustments are starting to bear fruit. A few years ago, the team altered the way it judged amateur pitching, becoming less rigid about specific arm actions and body types. It also added pitching specialists to the amateur scouting department and incorporated advanced analytics into the draft selection process.

“We’re just in a much better place to make decisions,” vice president of scouting Mike Rikard said.

To that end, the system’s top pitching prospects offer hope, while former Red Sox farmhands in other organizations offer evidence that the refined process is working. There were Red Sox draft picks starting games in San Francisco, San Diego and Tampa Bay this season, and there would have been another in Chicago if not for injury. The Red Sox themselves had first-round pick Tanner Houck showing promise in Triple-A, another first-rounder Jay Groome showing good stuff after Tommy John surgery, 20-year-old Bryan Mata holding his own in Double-A, and a handful of recent draft picks positively dominating the lower levels. Ownership’s commitment to player development gives those prospects a viable path toward starting games in Boston.

They will be needed.

Chris Sale, David Price, Nathan Eovaldi and Eduardo Rodriguez stand to make nearly \$90 million next season. That’s almost 40 percent of the Red Sox desired payroll, and that’s before adding a fifth starter. That’s surely unsustainable without homegrown help.

“We need to do better,” O’Halloran said.

The Red Sox minor league system has delivered Mookie Betts, Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts and Andrew Benintendi. To win another championship, it’s going to have to deliver another starting pitcher.

Developing a big league starter is difficult, and not only for the Red Sox. Pitchers get hurt, they fail to adapt, they don’t improve as expected, they end up in the bullpen, and they burn out over time. Even a home-grown, mid-rotation starter represents a massive success. Developing a legitimate ace is a phenomenon.

In the past 10 years of awards voting – 2009 to 2018, basically Lester’s era – only 16 starting pitchers have finished top five in Cy Young voting more than once. The list is a who’s who of this generation’s elite starters: Lester, Price, Sale, Felix Hernandez, CC Sabathia, Jered Weaver, Justin Verlander, Corey Kluber, Roy Halladay, Adam Wainwright, Clayton Kershaw, Johnny Cueto, Max Scherzer, Madison Bumgarner, Zack Greinke and Gerrit Cole.

Cole Hamels nearly made the list, and when this year’s Cy Young results are announced, Jacob deGrom and Stephen Strasburg likely will join the group. Maybe Sonny Gray, too. But it remains a small fraternity of aces, and it’s made up almost entirely of first-round picks.

Counting Hamels, deGrom, Strasburg and Gray, the list expands to 20, and 15 of them were first-rounders, 12 of whom were not available when the Red Sox picked. Those 20 aces were originally drafted or signed by 20 different organizations. No franchise can claim more than one. Among the organizations that did not sign and develop any were the Cardinals, Yankees, Astros and Cubs – four of the more consistently successful franchises of this era.

Having not developed an enduring ace since Lester does not make the Red Sox unusual. Given the importance of picking near the top of the draft, it does not necessarily make the Red Sox failures either. Before Lester, the last homegrown Red Sox ace was Roger Clemens. Pedro Martinez, Josh Beckett, Curt Schilling, Tim Wakefield and Derek Lowe all were outsiders. The inability to develop an ace was not the Red Sox' biggest pitching problem of the past decade.

It was the lack of a next-tier starter that really cost them.

Three years after hitting the jackpot with Lester, the Red Sox selected Buchholz 42nd overall in the talent-laden draft of 2005. He would go on to pitch 10 years in Boston, making 188 starts, earning two World Series rings and being selected to two All-Star teams. Buchholz had injury and consistency problems, but when healthy, he was a good No. 2-3 starter, sometimes a solid No. 1, and he had longevity. He was still pitching in the majors this season at age 35.

But the Red Sox have not produced another starting pitcher like him. Effective mid-rotation starters pop on and off the radar year after year, but the Red Sox have — generously — produced exactly two of them in the 14 years since they drafted Buchholz.

From 2006 to 2015, the Red Sox drafted 32 pitchers in the first five rounds (picks early enough that it was reasonable to expect some big league impact). More than 60 percent of them reached the majors (a strong graduation rate) but only one had sustained success as a major league starter. Masterson, the team's second-round pick in 2006, was a quality starter for about five years including one All-Star season with Cleveland. His Red Sox impact, though, was mostly out of the bullpen before he was traded for Victor Martinez.

Who has the second-most starts — for any team — by a '06-15 Red Sox draft pick? Would you believe it's Brian Johnson with 26? Third on the list is Workman, who's been mostly a reliever, then it's Henry Owens and Stephen Fife, who were largely prospect busts. Casey Kelly easily cracks the top 10 with 12 big league starts, and he was drafted as a shortstop.

“During some of those earlier years, we put pitchers in a box a little bit,” Rikard said. “We kind of had this certain criteria that we were looking for, and it kind of eliminated your pool of players. We were focused and enamored with certain arm actions, certain bodies, and certain deliveries. If you didn't check those certain boxes, maybe we wouldn't consider you in a certain area (of the draft).”

Those assumptions cost the Red Sox considerable talent. They were looking for deliveries that would avoid injury, but pitchers got hurt anyway. They drafted big guys with terrific stuff, but some of them lacked deception. While Lester and Buchholz were becoming big league mainstays, the Red Sox were refilling the minor league system with first-round picks Nick Hagadone, Bryan Price and Anthony Ranaudo, each of whom stood at least 6-foot-4, and none of whom had lasting careers as big league starters. All three were finished by their early 30s.

In that same 2006-15 time period, only three international free agents cracked the Red Sox' top 10 prospects as judged by Baseball America. The first was Stolmy Pimentel, who was traded to the Pirates and never started a major league game. The second was Junichi Tazawa, an atypical prospect out of Japan who became a standout reliever. The third was Doubront, inarguably the best Red Sox homegrown starter since Buchholz. Doubront made a total of 69 Red Sox starts with a 4.82 ERA before being traded to the Cubs for Marco Hernandez. He made only 16 starts after that.

It wasn't only at home that the Red Sox were having trouble. They weren't drafting or developing anyone who could start anywhere else either.

A decade worth of misses

Here's every pitcher the Red Sox drafted in the first five rounds from 2006 through 2015. They largely fit into one of three categories: traded away while still a starter, moved to the bullpen while still with the Red Sox, or flamed out in the minor leagues.

Traded away

Justin Masterson ('06), Nick Hagadone ('07), Bryan Price ('08), Stephen Fife ('08), Kyle Weiland ('08), Anthony Ranaudo ('10), Michael Kopech ('14)

Moved to bullpen

Daniel Bard ('06), Dustin Richardson ('06), Alex Wilson ('09), Brandon Workman ('10), Matt Barnes ('11), Noe Ramirez ('11), Brian Johnson ('12), Pat Light ('12), Jamie Callahan ('12), Ty Buttery ('12)

Drafted as a reliever

Bryce Cox ('06), Austin Maddox ('12), Jake Cosart ('14)

Prospect bust

Kris Johnson ('06),* Caleb Clay ('06), Brock Huntzinger ('07), Chris Province ('07), Henry Owens ('11),* Mike Augliera ('12), Trey Ball ('13), Teddy Stankiewicz ('13), Myles Smith ('13), Corey Littrell ('13), Kevin McAvoy ('14)

*Johnson and Owens did briefly make it to the majors. At 34, Johnson remains the ace of the Hiroshima Carp.

Brian Johnson has been among the most successful homegrown starters this decade in Boston. He's made 26 starts for the Red Sox. (Paul Rutherford-USA Today)

On July 31, 2005, Jonathan Papelbon made his big league debut as one of the most highly touted pitching prospects in baseball – one of the most highly touted starting pitching prospects in baseball.

He'd breezed through the Red Sox minor league system, and the team won each of his first three big league starts. After 5 2/3 scoreless innings on August 21, Papelbon's ERA was 2.25.

Four days later, he pitched out of the bullpen and never started again.

Truth is, we don't know for sure how many capable big league starters the Red Sox have developed in the past decade and a half, but it's safe to say they've developed more than we've seen. Papelbon is an extreme example – a potential top-of-the-rotation stud who became a standout closer – but there are others who were moved into the bullpen either out of need, or because the Red Sox were too good to weather the ups and downs of a true fourth or fifth starter.

Workman, Johnson, Mike Bowen, Daniel Bard, Matt Barnes, Darwinzon Hernandez – all might have been given a chance to stick as big league starters under different circumstances with different teams. Michael Kopech, Jalen Beeks, Shaun Anderson and Logan Allen might be the Red Sox presumptive fifth starters heading into next season had they not been traded to fill immediate needs.

“You're always balancing the win vs. development,” vice president of player development Ben Crockett said. “And for the guys, depending on what their ceiling is as a starter, (that) probably affects that breaking period as well.”

Since Lester and Buchholz, the Red Sox have acquired and played a role in the final development of Rubby De La Rosa, Steven Wright and Eduardo Rodriguez as big league starters. At 26, Rodriguez has a chance for sustained success in that role, but considering those are the highlights of 10-plus years, it's a short and underwhelming list.

How do the Red Sox compare to other organizations? Here's the number of truly homegrown pitchers – originally drafted or signed by the organization – who have made at least X-number of starts for each American League East team during the past decade.

Without Lester and Buchholz, the Red Sox totals would look even worse. Johnson is the only purely homegrown pitcher to start at least 20 games for the Red Sox since 2013. In that same six-year timeframe,

every other AL East team has had at least three such starters, including at least one All-Star for each organization (Blake Snell, Luis Severino, Marcus Stroman, Aaron Sanchez and John Means).

For the Red Sox to keep winning without unprecedented free agent spending, the next wave of in-house starting pitchers will have to be better, something reminiscent of the steady infusion of the previous decade when Lester, then Buchholz, then Masterson, then Doubront broke through to provide impact and depth.

The fact nearly every high-profile trade under Dave Dombrowski involved a minor league starting pitcher is both a good sign and a significant obstacle. That the Red Sox could trade Allen for Craig Kimbrel, Anderson for Eduardo Nunez, Beeks for Eovaldi, Kopech for Sale, Anderson Espinoza for Drew Pomeranz, and Josh Pennington for Tyler Thornburg shows the team has signed young rotation talent that other teams believe in. But it's also thinned their immediate rotation depth. Allen, Kopech, Anderson and Beeks have since started in the major leagues and could be Opening Day starters again next year. That alone is a step in the right direction.

Allen and Mike Schwaryn, who made his Red Sox debut out of the bullpen but mostly started in Triple-A, might not have been amateur draft targets under the team's old way of thinking. The team now casts a wider, more open-minded net, and its amateur scouting department has grown. Former big league pitcher Chris Mears now works as a national crosschecker for pitchers, and special projects crosschecker Justin Horowitz focuses largely on pitcher evaluation with an emphasis on advanced analytics.

The Red Sox have been encouraged by Tanner Houck's performance in the Arizona Fall League, and by Bryan Mata's improvements at just 20 years old. They've been impressed by Jay Groome's early outings after Tommy John surgery, and by Thad Ward's 2.14 ERA in his first full season of pro ball. Their fourth-round pick this summer, Naval Academy standout Noah Song, delivered an eye-opening pro debut with high-90s velocity and 1.06 ERA.

"Hopefully, this next wave kind of turns the storyline on those (previous) years," Rikard said. "And I'm hopeful that it will. There's some reasoning, and there's some excuses kind of mixed in, but yeah, it's surprising we didn't do better."

It will be more surprising if the Red Sox can survive another decade like the last one. They've adjusted the process. Their rotation needs the results.

The best team to ever become a footnote: 15 years later, Cardinals recall runaway train Red Sox who could not be stopped

Steve Buckley

With the Boston Red Sox one out away from winning the World Series, everyone was aware the celebrating soon to take place would be different from so many of the other championship hufests and champagne showers we'd come to expect over the years.

And by everyone, we mean ev-err-ree-one, whether they were sitting inside old Busch Stadium on that cool, comfortable, late October night in 2004, or whether they were watching on television, or listening on the radio ... heck, you didn't even need to be a baseball fan to understand what was at stake.

One more out and Boston would win its first World Series in 86 years, sure, but it also meant that assorted Red Sox managers, players and executives — some of them still living, some of them sitting right there in Busch Stadium that night — would never again be cited, damningly, as one of the reasons it had been so long since the last championship.

And then there were the long-dead managers, players and executives, men whose fine family names were still being associated with this or that late-season tumble. William Shakespeare, who would have made a terrific Red Sox beat writer, put it best: "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." That's why, as a fer-instance, a Greatest Generation of Boston baseball fans long remembered

Joe McCarthy as the past-his-prime, in-his-cups Red Sox manager who inexplicably chose journeyman Denny Galehouse to start the 1948 playoff game against the Indians. And it's why they did not remember McCarthy as owning the highest winning percentage of any skipper in major-league history.

And it's why, on that October night in 2004, with the Red Sox on the cusp of winning it all, the manager in the opposing dugout, Tony La Russa of the St. Louis Cardinals, had already decided what he was going to do when it was over.

He was going to doff his cap in honor of the Boston Red Sox, right there in front of all those brokenhearted Cardinals fans.

"Just after that last out, after (Edgar) Renteria hit the ball back to (Keith) Foulke, I stood at the top steps of our dugout and I tried to get (Red Sox manager) Terry Francona's attention," said La Russa, now a retired, Hall of Fame manager who just so happens to work for the Red Sox as a vice president in baseball ops. "I wanted to tip my cap and congratulate him. It was a historic win."

Historic. That's the word that tugged at La Russa that night, and still does.

"For a franchise as great as Boston's to go that long without a championship just didn't make sense," he said. "They had so many great teams, whether it was '67 or '75 or '86, they came so close. By the time they got to 2004, and that comeback against the Yankees after being down 3-0 in the ALCS, and now that last game, that Game 4, I remember wanting to show my appreciation for that."

The call never got through.

"There was so much emotion out there," La Russa said. "Terry had no chance to look in my direction."

La Russa's attempt to make contact with Francona is symbolic in that it perfectly illustrates the manner in which history would treat the 2004 St. Louis Cardinals. And history has treated them this way: It has had no chance to look in their direction.

As the 15th anniversary of that historic 2004 championship approaches, nearly every Red Sox angle has been covered via newspaper columns, online treatises, magazine articles, documentaries and even as a plot device in a major motion picture ("Fever Pitch"). This, then, is as good a time as any to look in the direction of the vanquished Cardinals, who happen to be one of the best teams in history nobody ever talks about.

To borrow from another Boston-St. Louis angle to amplify the point, consider what happened on May 10, 1970, when Bobby Orr's overtime goal completed the Bruins' four-game sweep of the Blues in the Stanley Cup Final. That nobody ever talks about the 1969-70 Blues is altogether fitting and proper: They were an expansion collection of kids and codgers representing the fledgling "West Division" in the Cup Final, and their role was to be cannon fodder for the Big, Bad Bruins. Beyond the fact that 38-year-old Glenn Hall was in the net that day, or that an otherwise obscure defenseman named Noel Picard used his stick to send Orr flying through the air after No. 4 went five-hole on Hall, or that the Blues had three brothers named Plager, little else about that team is worth remembering.

Not so the 2004 Cardinals, who logged the greatest regular season in the history of the franchise. They could hit, they could pitch, they could play the field — center fielder Jim Edmonds, third baseman Scott Rolen and catcher Mike Matheny all won Gold Gloves. Their 105 wins tied the 1943 and '44 Cardinals for the second-most in the club's history, one behind the 106-win 1942 Cardinals. But sorry, the 1942, '43 and '44 Cardinals were wartime ball clubs, and the game had been watered down to the degree that the perennially awful St. Louis Browns somehow won the AL pennant in 1944, turning the World Series into an all-Sportsman's Park affair.

Those early 1940s editions of the Cardinals did what they could; the 2004 Cardinals, at least in the regular season, did what they wanted.

The offense was led by first baseman Albert Pujols (.331-46-123, .415 OBP), Edmonds (42-111-301, .418) and Rolen (34-124-314, .409). Second baseman Tony Womack hit .307. Outfielder Larry Walker, the power-hitting former MVP obtained from Colorado in early August, hit 11 home runs in 44 games. Outfielder Reggie Sanders, a 36-year-old veteran whose career-high 33 home runs helped lead the Arizona Diamondbacks to their first World Series championship three years earlier, hit 22 homers for the '04 Cards.

“When you think of the 2001 Diamondbacks, we had that 1-2 punch with Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling,” Sanders said. “And obviously, when you look at that Series, there were a lot of situations that we were able to overcome. But if I had to pick, from top to bottom the 2004 Cardinals were the No. 1 team I ever played on, even though we didn’t win the World Series.

“It was a dynamic team at every position. Even our bench was outstanding.”

It surely hurt the Cardinals when, on Sept. 18, right-hander Chris Carpenter suffered a strained right biceps in the fourth inning of his start against Arizona in what turned out to be an NL Central-clinching 7-0 victory. At the time, the decision to remove Carpenter was termed a “precaution.” He would not pitch again for the remainder of the season, finishing with a 15-5 record and 3.46 ERA.

But as former Cards pitcher Jason Marquis points out, “The camaraderie of the starting pitchers that year was something I’ll never forget. We were very competitive and yet we were also pulling for each other to be better than the last person on the mound, and do that every day. It really set a tone for me for the rest of my career that I tried to bring to every team I went to.”

Marquis, in a breakout year after pitching parts of four seasons with the Braves, was 15-7 with a 3.71 ERA in 32 starts. Right-hander Jeff Suppan, who’d begun his big-league career with the Red Sox (and was reacquired by the club for the stretch drive in 2003), also chose 2004 to submit his finest big-league season, going 16-9 with a 4.16 ERA in 31 starts.

The bullpen was superb. Closer Jason Isringhausen finished 66 games and registered 47 saves, both NL highs. Lefty Steve Kline had a 1.79 ERA in 67 relief outings. Veteran workhorse Julian Tavarez, a right-hander who broke into the big leagues playing on those great mid-’90s editions of the Cleveland Indians, was 7-4 with a 2.38 ERA in 77 relief outings.

The staff ERA, 3.75, was the second-lowest in the NL.

“We had a 2004 Cardinals reunion this summer and I was thinking about all the great teams I played on,” Tavarez said. “I played on the Indians with Jim Thome, Albert Belle and Manny (Ramirez), and then I come to St. Louis and look at the team we had: Strength everywhere you looked.”

The Cardinals made it to the World Series after taking out the Dodgers in four games in the Division Series. They then survived the Astros in a grueling NLCS that went seven games. Edmonds won Game 6 with a season-saving two-run, walk-off home run in the 12th inning.

And yet even that Cards-Astros series, exciting though it was, was overshadowed by the Red Sox’ ability to get up off the canvas in the ALCS and win four straight games against the Yankees after losing the first three, including a 19-8 Game 3 humiliation at Fenway Park.

Game 1 of the World Series, also at Fenway, revealed the Red Sox to still be recovering from their comeback against the Yankees. The Sox did jump out to a 4-0 lead in the first inning off St. Louis starter Woody Williams, but Boston’s starter, knuckleballer Tim Lincecum, struggled as well, allowing five runs in 3 2/3 innings. The Red Sox committed four errors.

The key to Game 1 — and in La Russa’s view the entire series — was what happened in the eighth inning. Trailing 9-7, the Cards pushed two runs across off Foulke to tie it, the second run scoring when Ramirez misplayed a fly ball to left by Walker.

Pujols was walked intentionally to load the bases.

The next two hitters were Rolan and Edmonds.

Rolan popped out.

Edmonds was caught looking at a third strike that was (sort of) on the inside corner.

The Cardinals, too, were sloppy. With Tavaréz pitching in the Sox half of the eighth, Rentería misplayed a Jason Varitek grounder to short for an error. Up stepped Mark Bellhorn, who clanged a 1-2 pitch from Tavaréz off Pesky's Pole in right field for a two-run homer. The Sox emerged with an 11-9 victory.

"We had Rolan and Edmonds coming up, and they got a pop-up and a strikeout," La Russa said. "That's it, right there. If we had taken the lead and carried that to a win, I don't know if we would have beat Boston in the World Series — they were playing with a lot of confidence and they really had outstanding pitching, Pedro and Schilling and so forth — but it would have made it a competition."

Even now, 15 years later, the Game 1 loss bothers Tavaréz — and remember, he is a man who in 2007 earned a World Series ring as a member of the Red Sox, though he did not pitch in the postseason.

"It still breaks my heart," Tavaréz said. "I think I made a great pitch, it was down, but Bellhorn had a great postseason, he did great. I remember saying, 'Let's get them tomorrow.' And then we lost that one."

In losing Game 2 to Schilling, and then Game 3 to Pedro Martínez at Busch Stadium, the powerful St. Louis offense scored a total of three runs.

Then the Cards faced elimination. Starting in Game 4 would be Marquis, who, as it happened, was a diehard Yankees fan as a kid growing up on Staten Island. Surely there were still-bitter Yankees fans hoping that Marquis, a son of New York, raised on pinstripes, could stop the Red Sox.

"Yeah, I heard from a few friends after what Boston did to the Yankees after being down 3-0 in the ALCS and then coming back," Marquis said. "I did grow up a Yankees fan, but once I started playing professional baseball in '96 obviously my allegiance to the Yankees went out the window. Whatever team I was playing for at the moment was the team I was rooting for."

The team of the moment was the Cardinals. Marquis allowed three runs in six innings, including a solo home run by Johnny Damon into the St. Louis bullpen on the right-hander's fourth pitch of the game. Derek Lowe worked seven shutout innings against the great Cardinals, and then it was Bronson Arroyo, and then it was Alan Embree, and then it was Rentería's bouncer back to the mound ...

"I sat in the dugout for an extra couple of minutes just to soak up that feeling and that atmosphere, since you never know if you're ever going to be back in the World Series," Marquis said. "You're not sitting in the dugout in that moment feeling sorry for yourself. You're just soaking it up, wondering if that could have been us."

Reggie Sanders, too, lingered in the dugout.

"Probably for a couple of minutes," he said. "It seemed like a half-hour."

That La Russa was on the losing end of a historic World Series must have been viewed by some Red Sox fans as long-overdue payback, given that he had managed the Oakland A's to four-game sweeps of the Sox in the ALCS in 1988 and again in 1990. And yet La Russa said he's always been about relationships, which is why he had a sort of rooting interest in the 1986 Red Sox against the Mets in the World Series and why, beyond the history being made, he had grudging respect for the 2004 Red Sox.

“You go back to 1986, the third-base coach was Rene Lachemann, who was one of my teammates on the A’s,” La Russa said. “The manager was John McNamara, who I played for maybe three or four years in the minor leagues and one year in the big leagues. I was pulling hard for them personally.

“When I was a kid coming up with the A’s, one of the vets who treated me good was Terry’s dad, Tito. And I saw Terry make his managerial debut with the Phillies.

“There was a lot there. And it was historic. We knew it. You see something like that happen, you tip your cap.”

He tried, he really did. But as the 2004 Red Sox were doing their celebrating that night at Busch Stadium, one of the greatest teams in the history of the St. Louis Cardinals was already fading into the background.