

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, October 22, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Three Red Sox players opt for free agency

Julian McWilliams

Three players who spent time in the majors with the Red Sox this past season but had little impact have all chosen to become free agents rather than accept assignments to Triple A Pawtucket, the team announced Monday.

Outfielder Gorkys Hernandez, infielder Chris Owings, and pitcher Josh Smith were all recently outrighted to Triple A and removed from the Sox' 40-man roster. However, they decided Monday to test the open market.

Hernandez, 32, was acquired by the Sox in 2018 after electing free agency with the Giants. He's a solid outfielder but could never get it going with the bat.

In 430 at-bats for Pawtucket this past season, he hit just .219 with a .695 OPS. As a September callup, he hit .143 for Boston in 57 plate appearances.

Like Hernandez, Owings, 28, was solid in the field but struggled at the plate. He got a solid look this season but didn't capitalize on the opportunity, hitting .156 with in 51 plate appearances with the Sox. In 145 plate appearance with Kansas City to start the season, he hit .133.

Owings was a first-round pick by the Diamondbacks in 2009 out of Gilbert (S.C.) High School. He elected free agency in 2018 and was picked up by the Royals. After signing with the Sox as a free agent, he had success in Pawtucket, batting .325 with 11 homers and a .980 OPS.

The Sox hoped to get starts out of Smith, but ultimately that was a failed plan. Smith, 32, inked a minor league contract with the Sox after being released by the Mariners in 2018. He posted a combined 5.64 ERA between Pawtucket and the majors in 98½ innings.

Red Sox hire Western Mass. native Pete Fatse as assistant hitting coach

Alex Speier

The Red Sox are hiring Western Massachusetts native Peter Fatse as their new assistant hitting coach.

Fatse, 32, attended Minnechaug Regional High School in Wilbraham before playing college ball at Connecticut, where he hit .294/.396/.488 in three seasons. He was selected by the Brewers in the 24th round of the 2009 draft, and spent two seasons in Milwaukee's system before spending another two years playing independent ball.

While still playing professionally, Fatse opened Advanced Performance Academy in Western Massachusetts, where his interest in player development allowed him to become well-versed in the hitting philosophies of and technologies employed by many of the consultants who helped reshape hitting approaches in the game in recent years.

Fatse, a former college teammate of Red Sox pitcher Matt Barnes, played a critical role in the offensive development of Diamondbacks shortstop and fellow UConn alum Nick Ahmed, who worked with his former Huskies teammate in recent offseasons.

Fatse's background as both a player and someone who opened a private facility made him attractive to the Minnesota Twins as a minor league hitting coordinator, a role he filled during the 2019 season.

In a conversation with Fangraphs, outfielder Jaylin Davis, a late bloomer who hit 35 homers this year (nearly matching the 42 he'd launched in his first six pro seasons) and became a midyear trade chip in a deal between the Twins and Giants, credited Fatse as a key contributor to his breakout season. From a story by David Laurila:

"He introduced himself and said, 'I'm not trying to jump on you too fast, I just want to show you what I saw on video from the [Arizona] Fall League,' " Davis told me. "He said that while my upper half was fine, he wanted me to use my legs more and try to hit more balls in the air. We worked on that all spring, and it kind of took off from there."

Davis went on to explain that he's now more spread out at the plate, whereas before he was not only "standing too straight up," his head tended to "bounce a bit." He couldn't recall anyone ever having brought those things to his attention, but during his sit-down with Fatse he "could actually see it in the video."

One evaluator described Fatse as checking "a lot of boxes for what you'd look for in a hitting coach in 2019."

He will replace former Red Sox assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett, who was let go after the conclusion of the season, while working with Tim Hyers, who is entering his third year as the Red Sox hitting coach.

Three go free

The Red Sox announced Monday that outfielder Gorkys Hernandez, infielder Chris Owings, and pitcher Josh Smith — players who spent time in the majors this season but had little impact — all elected free agency after recently being removed from the 40-man roster and outrighted to Triple A Pawtucket.

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*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox pitching plan didn't work, but strategy was right

Jason Mastrodonato

On a beach somewhere warm, sipping from an umbrella-covered fruity cocktail, is where we like to picture Dave Dombrowski this October.

He'll open the newspaper and check the playoff box scores. He'll read the postgame comments from the players and managers. And maybe, despite being out of a job and ostracized from the Red Sox front office, he'll smile.

From a pure strategy standpoint, he had it right.

His old school thinking favors a top-heavy roster that spends a majority of its resources on the starting rotation. The back end of the roster suffers (and the good teams have proven to not skimp in that area). The bullpen is almost always too thin.

This year, the Sox entered the season without a single reliever making more than \$1.75 million. That salary belonged to Tyler Thornburg, who was released mid-season.

But as the Nationals and Astros powered their way to this year's World Series behind the two best starting rotations in baseball, there's little doubt that the strategy still works.

Look what happened to the Yankees.

When Aaron Boone made history by removing Masahiro Tanaka with a shutout intact in Game 1 of the American League Championship Series (he was the first starter ever to be removed without allowing a run while throwing fewer than 70 pitches over at least six innings in the postseason), baseball minds exploded everywhere across the country. Tanaka was dealing. His magical split-finger was dropping out of the zone and the Astros looked clueless. Anybody could see that.

But Boone went to his team's strength. The Yankees spent more than \$150 million assembling their bullpen and largely ignored questions in the rotation. Despite the clear need for another starter in July, they stood still when Trevor Bauer (Reds), Zack Greinke (Astros), Marcus Stroman (Mets), Tanner Roark (A's), Aaron Sanchez (Astros) were traded to other teams.

For Boone, going to his bullpen early in Game 1 worked for that game, but it set up the Yankees for failure the rest of the series. By overexposing their dominant bullpen arms early, it allowed the Astros to become familiar. It was fitting that Aroldis Chapman ended the series by allowing a walkoff homer to Jose Altuve.

"The more times you face guys as relievers, you get overexposed," reliever Zack Britton told reporters afterward. "That's what I always say, that's why we're relievers and not starters. You can overexpose guys. It's inevitable."

The Yankees were by far the superior regular season team in the AL East, but it sure looks like being all-in on the bullpen is a strategy best served in the regular season.

Teams like the Red Sox and Nationals have continued to skimp on the bullpen while loading up in the rotation.

The Astros have both, but they bolster a rotation that gets better each season. In the last three years, they've acquired three aces: Justin Verlander, Gerrit Cole and Zack Greinke.

The Nationals spent big to sign Patrick Corbin (six years, \$140 million) last offseason, found a gem in Anibal Sanchez and have continued to rely on Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg.

It's no surprise then that the two teams with the highest quality start percentages during the regular season are the two final teams standing. The Astros led with 55% of their starts resulting in at least six innings and three earned runs or less, while the Nationals were second at 54%.

“You watch the Nationals that are in the World Series, and these guys, obviously, with their rotation — starters is still the way to go,” Britton told reporters, including The New York Times. “If you have a great bullpen, that only helps you. But having four to five guys in the rotation that give you innings is still the formula to win. We came really close with our formula.”

The Red Sox are watching from the couch in October not because of a faulty bullpen, but because their rotation couldn't withstand the long October a year ago and suffered impactful injuries to Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi and David Price. Rick Porcello had his worst career year while Eduardo Rodriguez shined.

The outlook is murky in 2020, with Sale recovering from shoulder and elbow injuries, Price trying to get over carpal tunnel-related issues and Eovaldi continuing his career trend of being physically unreliable.

There's a lot of work to do to get those guys healthy and figure out how to add one more quality starter this winter.

But this October proves it: The Sox were on the right track by going big in the rotation.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox part company with Chris Owings, Gorkys Hernandez and Josh Smith

Bill Koch

The Red Sox continued to sort through the back end of their 40-man roster on Monday.

Chris Owings, Gorkys Hernandez and Josh Smith all elected free agency after refusing assignments to Triple-A Pawtucket. They join Steven Wright on the open market after the knuckleballer was released by Boston late last week.

Per MLB Trade Rumors, Owings and Hernandez were projected to earn a combined \$4 million in arbitration for the 2020 season. The Red Sox were always unlikely to tender contracts to the infielder and outfielder, as the club is seeking a way to dip below the first threshold of the Competitive Balance Tax. Smith was a long shot to crack Boston's rotation despite the potential loss of Rick Porcello in free agency.

Owings also elected free agency after the 2018 season, leaving the Diamondbacks, and was released by the Royals in June. He agreed to a minor league deal with Boston two weeks later and appeared in 26 games, going 7-for-45 with 23 strikeouts.

Hernandez fanned 146 times with the PawSox in 2019 – a new club record for right-handed hitters – before being summoned to the Red Sox in September when rosters expanded. He went 7-for-49 and totaled a .463 OPS in 20 games. Hernandez came to Boston after spending the previous three seasons with the Giants.

Smith made 31 appearances between Pawtucket and the Red Sox in 2019, including 14 starts. He pitched to a 5.81 earned-run average in 18 games with Boston, allowing 36 hits and surrendering 10 home runs. The right-hander made a pair of spot starts while the front of the Red Sox rotation battled a handful of injuries.

Boston is steadily chipping into its projected arbitration awards. Owings, Hernandez and Wright accounted for a fraction of the \$70.1 million the Red Sox were expected to require while tendering contracts to all 12 players. Mookie Betts (\$27.7 million), Jackie Bradley Jr. (\$11 million) and Eduardo Rodriguez (\$9.5 million) make up the majority of that total. Boston has nearly \$134 million allotted in salary for 2020 prior to agreeing with any of its arbitration-eligible players.

The Red Sox are down to 38 men on their roster and still count Chris Sale (left elbow) and Dustin Pedroia (left knee) on the 60-day injured list. Porcello, Brock Holt, Mitch Moreland, Andrew Cashner and Jhoulys Chacin are all free agents and could eventually be removed.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox-MLB free agency: 10 players from Astros-Nationals World Series who Sox could pursue in offseason

Christopher Smith

The World Series begins Tuesday in Houston with the potential for a tremendous pitching duel. Gerrit Cole starts opposite Max Scherzer.

Boston Red Sox fans, meanwhile, should pay attention to a few Nationals and Astros players who the Red Sox might have interested in signing this offseason via free agency. Boston plans to add at least one reliever this offseason.

"We're going to hopefully supplement our relief pitching," Red Sox chairman Tom Werner said at Fenway Park on Sept. 27.

Four Astros relievers are eligible for free agency after the World Series. The Nationals have a pair of relievers who might be on Boston's radar.

Boston also will be in the market for a fifth starter and backup catcher if it non-tenders Sandy Leon.

First base and second base also are question marks.

10 FREE AGENTS FROM NATIONALS, ASTROS:

1. Daniel Hudson, Nationals reliever: The righty posted a 2.47 ERA, 1.14 WHIP, 3.97 FIP and eight saves in 73 innings for Blue Jays and Nationals in 2019. He has closer experience. That would help if Boston decided to stick with Brandon Workman as closer. Hudson would provide a backup if Workman falters. He'll turn 33 in March.
2. Will Harris, Astros reliever: The 35-year-old righty recorded a 1.50 ERA, 3.15 FIP, 0.93 WHIP and four saves in 60 innings.
3. Sean Doolittle, Nationals reliever: The 33-year-old lefty has a \$6.5 million team option and \$500,000 buyout. So he may or may not be a free agent. He experienced a down season with a 4.05 ERA, 4.25 FIP, 1.30 WHIP, 29 saves but six blown saves in 63 appearances (60 innings). But he has had a strong postseason. He dominated in 2018, recording a 1.60 ERA and converting 25-of-26 saves. Like Hudson, he has closer experience if Workman were to falter.
4. Wade Miley: The Red Sox need a fifth starter who can eat innings. Miley, who pitched for the Red Sox in 2015 (4.46 ERA, 32 starts), is an affordable option for Boston. The durable lefty, who will turn 33 in November, posted a 3.98 ERA in 33 starts for the Astros during 2019 on a one-year, \$4.5-million contract. He was on the ALDS roster but not on the ALCS roster.
5. Hector Rondon, Astros reliever: The righty had a 3.71 ERA, 4.96 FIP and 1.25 WHIP in 60 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings. He turns 32 in February.
6. Joe Smith, Astros reliever: The righty had a 1.80 ERA, 3.09 FIP and 0.96 WHIP in 25 innings. He turns 36 in March.
7. Collin McHugh, Astros reliever (injured): McHugh's 4.70 ERA for 2019 wasn't close to his dominant 2018 (1.99 ERA, 72 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings). But the 32-year-old McHugh posted a 2.67 ERA in 27 relief outings this year compared to a 6.37 ERA in eight starts. He's a multi-inning reliever, something the Red Sox could use

with uncertainty surrounding the health of their top three starters. But he has his own health issues right now. McHugh was shut down for the season in September because of some pain when throwing, per Chandler Rome of The Houston Chronicle.

8. Howie Kendrick, Nationals: The Red Sox are unlikely to sign the 36-year-old who has put together a strong postseason after a terrific regular season. He slashed .344/.395/.572/.966 with 17 homers, 23 doubles, one triple and 62 RBIs in 121 games (370 plate appearances). But you never know if the Red Sox want to add a veteran presence if J.D. Martinez leaves via free agency. The Red Sox can't rely on Dustin Pedroia to return healthy. First base and second base are areas of need. Kendrick played first, second and third during 2019.

9. Martin Maldonado, Astros: The 33-year-old, who played on a one-year, \$2.5 million contract in 2019, has backed up Robinson Chirinos since his trade to Houston. He's served as Gerrit Cole's personal catcher. He slashed .220/.298/.391/.689 with 12 homers, 19 doubles and 27 RBIs in 105 games (374 plate appearances).

10. Yan Gomes, Nationals: The 32-year-old catcher has a \$9 million team option and \$1 million buyout. So he may or may not be a free agent. He slashed .223/.316/.389/.704 with 12 homers, 16 doubles and 43 RBIs in 97 games (358 plate appearances).

Boston Red Sox roster moves: Gorkys Hernandez, Chris Owings and Josh Smith elect free agency

Chris Cotillo

Three Red Sox players -- outfielder Gorkys Hernandez, infielder Chris Owings and pitcher Josh Smith -- elected free agency Monday instead of accepting outright assignments to Triple-A Pawtucket.

Hernandez, Owings and Smith all appeared in the majors this season and were on the 40-man roster. Boston had previously outrighted Hernandez and Smith off the roster last week.

Hernandez played in 20 September games, hitting .143 with two RBIs. Owings appeared in 26 games after being promoted in August and hit .156 with a homer. Smith posted a 5.81 ERA in 18 games (two starts).

The Sox have now cut four players from the 40-man roster since the end of the season, including releasing righty Steven Wright last week. There are now 38 players on the team's 40-man roster, which will lose a handful of players when free agency begins after the World Series.

Brock Holt, Mitch Moreland, Rick Porcello, Andrew Cashner and Jhoulys Chacin are among the players who will hit free agency in early November.

Red Sox GM candidates: Who's left with Friedman, other top experienced candidates unavailable?

Christopher Smith

Andrew Friedman isn't walking through that door to become the next Red Sox president of baseball operations. Theo Epstein, Mike Hazen and Derek Falvey aren't either.

Principal owner John Henry prefers to hire an experienced external candidate to lead baseball operations but the candidate pool has dwindled.

Forty-three days have passed since the firing of Dave Dombrowski. The Red Sox have been tight-lipped about the search since ownership met with the media Sept. 27.

There hasn't been a single report about a candidate interviewing for the position. Nobody but the Red Sox themselves know if any progress has been made. The organization is no longer commenting about the search.

At this point, the potential candidate pool remains only speculation. Let's speculate ...

Rays vice president of baseball operations Chaim Bloom arguably is the best experienced candidate remaining. But Tampa Bay must give the Red Sox permission to speak with him.

The Rays initially hired the 36-year-old Bloom as an intern in February 2005. The Yale graduate has done a magnificent job keeping the low-budget Rays competitive since Friedman left for the Dodgers in October 2014.

Henry explained Sept. 27 why he prefers an experienced candidate instead of one of the club's internal options, such as Eddie Romero or Brian O'Halloran.

"It's possible (for an internal candidate), but this is a tough job," Henry said. "This is a tough offseason, too. We talked about the challenges of the CBT, but this is a challenging offseason. To put one of (internal candidates) in charge, that's sort of a tough way to start your career as a general manager. We are starting the search looking outward."

The Red Sox's goal, although not a mandate, is to stay below the \$208 million CBT (Competitive Balance Tax threshold) in 2020. Next year's payroll already is a projected \$218 million.

The Red Sox need to be extremely creative to improve their roster (must add fifth starter, reliever, first baseman or second baseman) and still stay below \$208 million. It likely will require slashing about \$30 million in payroll. If the Red Sox part ways with either J.D. Martinez or Mookie Betts, they will need to add a cheaper replacement as well.

Who better than Bloom to take over as GM if the Red Sox operate on a tight budget (or with small-market principles) this offseason?

The Red Sox want to keep their payroll under the \$208 million Competitive Balance Threshold in 2020 but it's only a goal but not a mandate.

Epstein said in September "that neither he, general manager Jed Hoyer nor executive Jason McLeod was linked to the Red Sox position," according to the Chicago Sun-Times.

Both Hoyer and McLeod seem like obvious candidates considering they worked under Epstein in Boston as well. But if the Red Sox wanted one of them, wouldn't it be a done deal by now?

McLeod also switched roles for the Cubs last month from senior VP of amateur scouting and player development to senior VP of player personnel.

Diamondbacks assistant GMs Jared Porter and Amiel Sawdaye are two names to keep in mind.

Porter, who was raised in Duxbury, Mass., worked under Epstein in both Chicago and Boston before joining Hazen in Arizona. He was part of a Cubs front office that built the 2016 World Series champs.

Hazen brought Sawdaye with him from Boston to Arizona. He headed the amateur and international scouting departments when Boston boasted baseball's top-ranked farm system under Ben Cherington.

Astros assistant GM Brandon Taubman should be a candidate. A graduate of Cornell with a degree in applied economics, he has a vast analytics background. He also been involved in international, amateur and professional scouting and "has been an essential figure in helping the Astros become perennial contenders at the Major League level, while maintaining a top-ranked farm system," according to his Astros biography.

The Red Sox want someone who places great importance on analytics and who will rebuild the farm system. Taubman fits the description but he lacks the experience as a head of baseball operations.

Josh Byrnes, Red Sox assistant GM from 2003-2005, has the experience. He worked as Diamondbacks GM from October 2005 to July 2010 and Padres GM from October 2011 to June 2014. He wasn't successful at either stop, though. He now works under Friedman as Dodgers senior VP of baseball operations.

How about Astros manager A.J. Hinch, Red Sox manager Alex Cora and ex-Boston GM Ben Cherington? These are three outside-the-box candidates who ownership should consider.

“In July 2006 Baseball America named (Hinch) one of baseball's '10 to watch' in the next 10 years for his promise as a Farm Director and future General Manager,” per Baseball-Reference.

Both Hinch and Cora are analytics-driven managers who have been front-and-center for three of the most dominant teams in recent baseball history (2017 Astros, 2018 Red Sox, 2019 Astros). They have the confidence, intelligence and personalities, but their front office experience obviously is lacking.

Cherington, Blue Jays vice president of baseball operations, reportedly is not a candidate. He lost his job because of back-to-back last-place finishes in 2014 and 2015. But the young core of those teams helped the Red Sox win the 2018 World Series. It's unlikely he would want to return considering the ugly end to his tenure here.

As more time passes, Romero and O'Halloran, who both are serving as interim GMs, presumably have a better chance. Romero appears to be the most likely internal candidate.

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

World Series reveals what Red Sox sorely lack

Tom Caron

When the World Series begins Tuesday night, it will feature a matchup of two teams loaded with starting pitching talent. In an era of staggering offense and bullpens created to pitch five or more innings each night, the Houston Astros and Washington Nationals have made it to the Fall Classic on the strength of two old-fashioned rotations.

In many ways this is a throwback series. And it's a reminder for the Boston Red Sox – and every other team in baseball – that pitching wins championships.

The New York Yankees were eliminated from the American League Championship Series on Saturday night when they tried to patch together a Game 6 bullpen outing. It almost worked – the game was tied in the ninth inning – but in the end the Astros were too much for New York. Even if the Yankees had pulled that game out, the Astros would have countered with Gerrit Cole in Game 7. He's been the best pitcher in baseball since May.

The Red Sox staggered to an 84-78 record this year, a disappointing season that began with the expectation that their starting rotation could lead them to a fourth straight AL East title. The pitching struggled out of spring training and never recovered.

The problem began at the top. Boston was seven games under .500 in games started by Chris Sale and David Price in 2019. They were 13 games over .500 when anyone else started. And this was a team that spent the whole season trying to find a fifth starter.

We'll be spending a lot of time in the coming weeks talking about J.D. Martinez's decision to stay or activate his opt-out clause. Fans will focus on the team's decision on what to do with Mookie Betts as he enters the final year of his contract.

Yet Boston's hopes to return to the postseason in 2020 are squarely on the arms who will start games next season. The organization has committed \$241 million to Sale and Price in the coming seasons. The reason we are even discussing a Betts trade is because of the exorbitant salaries committed to those two pitchers.

Sale has been one of the game's best starters over his career, yet hasn't had a healthy season since 2017. In fact, his total innings pitched has come down in each of the past four seasons, since throwing 226 innings for the Chicago White Sox in 2016. He was traded to the Red Sox that offseason and led the majors with 214 1/3 innings in '17.

Shoulder issues limited him to 158 innings in 2018 and 147 1/3 innings this season – the fewest he has thrown as a major league starter.

He was shut down in August and many worried he was headed for Tommy John surgery. Instead he received a platelet-rich plasma injection and was set to be re-evaluated in six weeks.

It's been nine weeks since that injection. And we haven't heard a thing about his progress.

When the Red Sox baseball operations staff met with the media the day after the regular season, the assistant general manager, Brian O'Halloran, said the team was taking things "a little bit slower than we initially anticipated just to be certain." There's certainly no need to rush things with spring training still four months away, but it's hard not to be a little concerned that elbow surgery is still a possibility.

That means the Red Sox may have to look outside for reinforcements to the starting rotation, even as they look to maneuver through a payroll reduction. It should be obvious to everyone that the starting rotation was not good enough in 2019.

If you need a reminder, just watch the World Series this week.

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

5 reasons the Houston Astros will win the World Series

Chris Mason

In ripping off 107 wins and returning to the World Series, the Houston Astros have been remarkably consistent.

I will be, too.

The Astros were my preseason pick to win it all, and I doubled down when the playoff bracket was set. I'm sticking with them to knock off Davey Martinez's Nationals. Gimme Houston in six games.

Here are five reasons why the Astros will win it all:

1. Gerrit Cole

The best pitcher on the planet right now, Cole hasn't taken a loss since May 22. That's 25 starts. And 153 days. The right-hander struck out 326 batters in the regular season, and as the calendar turned to October, he's only gotten more dominant.

Cole has allowed one run in 22 2/3 playoff innings, flat-out toying with his opponents. It's been a Madison-Bumgarner-like performance and he's shown no signs of stopping.

"You've got to try to match the intensity from your opponent, and Cole's had a terrific year," Max Scherzer, his Game 1 opponent, told reporters. "So obviously it's going to be one heck of a challenge."

2. Lineup depth

The Astros have six players in their starting lineup that hit at least .290 with more than 20 homers this season. Six.

They're so deep that Carlos Correa, a 25-year-old All-Star shortstop, has been relegated to hitting sixth or seventh.

"A lot of different ways they can beat you," Scherzer said. "Predominantly right-handed but they've got a couple of left-handed bats in there that are definitely big-time threats. And just what they do up and down the order. It's a complete lineup 1 through 9. You've got to be executing every single pitch you go out there and throw."

3. Big game experience

With a championship in 2017, an ALCS run last year, and another World Series appearance this season, the Astros have very much been here before.

The value of that experience was on display in Game 6 of the ALCS against the Yankees.

After Roberto Osuna coughed up a ninth inning lead, Houston was unfazed. They kept their composure and Jose Altuve walked the series off 15 minutes later, homering in the bottom half of the inning.

4. The better bullpen

If there's an Achilles heel on either roster, it's Washington's bullpen.

Nationals relievers posted a 5.68 ERA this season, highest in the league — the Orioles were the only team in baseball that was worse — and Daniel Hudson is really the only player on the roster that feels trustworthy.

On the other side, the Astros have Osuna, who led the AL with 38 saves, Ryan Pressly, who broke an MLB record with 40 straight scoreless appearances, and Will Harris, who posted a 1.50 ERA this season. In the battle of the bullpens, Houston has a definitive advantage.

5. A.J. Hinch

You won't find a finer manager than Houston's right now.

Hinch is a terrific in-game manager, but just as importantly, he knows how to run a clubhouse. The Astros added Justin Verlander and Zack Greinke on trade deadline days, and both have been thriving in Houston.

"Those guys are elite, so you kind of adapt to them and figure out what's made them be successful," Hinch explained. "The last thing you're going to do is all of a sudden not have them prepare the same way. You might sprinkle in a few ideas, and we've done that."

"Just getting them into our program and into our communication line, it's been huge for us. Because they're so elite, it's a seamless transition when they come to a new team. They take over. They know how to prepare."

Hinch always seems to have a sense of the moment, too.

When the Red Sox were rallying in Game 4 of 2017 ALDS — Rafael Devers' inside-the-park homer had Fenway Park going nuts — Hinch walked to the mound amid the pandemonium and gathered the whole infield. His players exhaled, buckled down, and won the series. It was a little thing, but one that always stuck with me.

*** *RedSox.com***

Will J.D. return to Red Sox in 2020?

Ian Browne

What's the status of Martinez? In my opinion, he should be the top priority this offseason.

Martinez can do nothing and his contract with the Red Sox (\$23.75 million) will be guaranteed for next season. Or he can exercise his opt-out clause within five days of the World Series ending and become a free agent. He would also collect a \$2.5 million buyout from Boston in the process, as per terms of the contract.

If Martinez opts out, I don't believe he will be back with the Red Sox. They've made it clear they need to cut some payroll. If Martinez leaves, they will bank on Mookie Betts, Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts and Andrew Benintendi to carry the offense. They will also look for some other affordable bats on the open market.

I agree that Martinez would be a huge loss. But I think the Red Sox are better positioned in 2020 to have a strong offense without him than they were in '17, when Betts, Bogaerts, Benintendi and Devers were three years younger.

When was the last time the World Series pitching matchups were this good? You have two former Cy Young Award winners, and also this year's probable Cy Young Award winners in both leagues. And they are all pitching well.

Great point. The Astros have Gerrit Cole, Justin Verlander and Zack Greinke. The Nats have Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg and Patrick Corbin. I looked up every World Series in the 21st century. The only Fall Classic that matches this one in terms of the caliber of starting pitchers on both sides is 2001.

The Yankees had Roger Clemens (that year's American League Cy Young Award winner), and also Mike Mussina and Andy Pettitte. The D-backs had Randy Johnson (that year's National League Cy Young Award winner) and Curt Schilling (who was the second-best pitcher in the league after Johnson). That series lived up to the hype and more, going seven games, with Arizona coming out on top. Let's hope this year's matchup lives up to it.

Will the long wait between the NL Championship Series and the World Series affect the Nationals and their chance at a championship?

It is a valid concern. We saw it in dramatic fashion with the Rockies in 2007. They had won 21 of 22 games after sweeping Arizona in the NLCS. But they had a full eight days off before facing the Red Sox in the World Series, and they got swept. By contrast, Boston and Cleveland went to seven games in the ALCS. The Sox had just two days off before the Fall Classic. However, this Washington team has much better pitching than that Colorado team, and that could help to overcome the rust factor.

Do you think the Red Sox are holding off on naming a new GM because they have targeted somebody with the Astros or Nationals? Or are they waiting for the end of the World Series?

I'm not necessarily sure they have targeted someone with the Nats or Astros, but it could be the reason for the delay in naming a GM. MLB discourages teams from making any big announcements during the playoffs, and in particular, the World Series. However, there haven't even been whispers in the media about who the next leader of baseball ops will be, which makes me think they still aren't close to naming one.

Do you think one of the three big starting pitching contracts -- those of Chris Sale, David Price or Nathan Eovaldi -- could be traded this offseason to make room for Betts or Martinez?

This is clearly not the offseason to trade Sale. You'd be getting 50 cents on the dollar, given the uncertainty with his health heading into next season. Ditto for Eovaldi with the season and injury problems he had. If they are to trade a high-priced starter, I believe it will be Price, no pun intended. However, the Sox would have to eat a good chunk of salary for this to become a reality.

How much does community service figure into a team's decision to hang on to a player? Without mentioning names, I'm curious as to whether a player's desire to do good in his community, give back and be nominated for an award goes into the calculus come re-signing time.

I think it goes into how much the club desires to bring that player back. We saw this with Tim Wakefield for many years. However, Wakefield never went for top dollar on the open market, and he always prioritized maintaining his roots in Boston. In a vacuum, the Red Sox do want Brock Holt back both because of what he means on and off the field. But they won't overpay for him because of the latter. As a free agent, Holt has the right to maximize his dollar value. If that winds up being his top priority, he might move on depending on what the market it.

Which starting pitchers will be healthy when pitchers and catchers report?

The hope is that everyone will be healthy. But until we get a more expansive update on Sale, there's no way of knowing how healthy he is right now and how healthy he will be for the start of Spring Training. I don't think there's any concern about the health of Price or Eovaldi at this point.

How likely is it that we see Bobby Dalbec hit 30 homers for a random NL team next year?

Sounds like a thinly-veiled reference to Travis Shaw. Come on, the Brewers aren't that random! Seriously, the Red Sox aren't in the position to be trading prospects right now. Instead, they are trying to add them. I don't think Dalbec is going anywhere.

*** *The Athletic***

Even without a GM, Red Sox make another move that shows push towards analytics

Jen McCaffrey

Six weeks after firing Dave Dombrowski, the Red Sox have still not named a new leader, yet they continue to make changes within the team.

On Monday, reports surfaced that the team had hired former Minnesota Twins minor league hitting coordinator Peter Fatse as the new assistant hitting coach in Boston.

Fatse, 32, is a native of Hampden, Mass., attended Minnechaug Regional High School in Wilbraham and played at the University of Connecticut, alongside Red Sox reliever Matt Barnes.

Fatse was drafted by the Milwaukee Brewers in the 24th round in 2009 and played two minor-league seasons as well as another two in independent ball. While playing, Fatse opened Advance Performance

Academy in Palmer, Mass., serving as a hitting consultant to professional and amateur athletes. In Boston, Fatse will work alongside hitting coach Tim Hyers, who's entering his third year with the Red Sox.

Fatse's analytical approach to the game seems to mesh with the Red Sox's stated goal of better embracing the data available to them. Part of the reason the Red Sox parted ways with Dombrowski and assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett while reassigning pitching coach Dana LeVangie was to make a stronger push toward the analytical side of the game with people better suited to relay that information.

Despite the Red Sox posting the third-best team average (.269) and fifth best slugging percentage (.466) and OPS (.806) in baseball in 2019, there are still areas that can be improved, specifically in the details.

In an interview with The Athletic shortly after the season ended, manager Alex Cora discussed some of the ways in which he hopes to take advantage of the team's resources next year.

"Instant feedback in this game is huge," Cora said. "There are certain organizations that are doing a good job either instant feedback hitting-wise or pitching-wise and we're trending in the right direction. I do feel that's something that's going to help us out instead of just riding the '0-for-20 you'll be fine.' If you go 0-for-4, hey, right away, what's going on? Where's your swing? That's something we want to do. I think it's going to take us to another level."

In an era where players are increasingly seeking outside help to tweak their swings and find even the most minuscule edge to sharpen their game, the addition of Fatse highlights that drive.

"I don't want them to be good at a lot of things, I want them to be great at something," Cora said. "If we do that, it'll be easier and better for us and be easier for them. If you've got too many things on your plate, something is going to be missing, you can't do everything the way you want to."

Cora was speaking about streamlining the club's advance scouting staff, but it's an answer that could be applied to a variety of roles within the team.

Meanwhile, the lack of news regarding the Red Sox front office has been so pronounced, it's seeming more and more likely the team will turn to one of the four internal candidates (Eddie Romero, Brian O'Halloran, Zack Scott, Raquel Ferreira) currently leading the team on an interim basis to take over full time.

As for the pitching coach vacancy, there has been little news on that front as well. However, over the weekend, Yahoo's Tim Brown reported the Red Sox have spoken to former Reds manager Bryan Price, who has 13 years experience as a pitching coach with the Reds, Mariners and Diamondbacks.