

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, October 23, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Tone-deaf Astros don't deserve our support

Dan Shaughnessy

Before the World Series even started, the Washington Nationals were America's team.

It's got nothing to do with the fact that the Nats play in our nation's capital. Or that they've never been to a World Series.

No, the Nats are the team to root for because the Houston Astros' organization has framed itself as arrogant, shifty, tone-deaf, stubborn, and completely unaccountable. And that is why on the night of the first World Series opener ever hosted in Houston, the Astros were dodging arrows from across America as they attempted to defend the indefensible.

A little background: On Saturday night, after the dominant 'Stros defeated the Yankees in walkoff fashion to win the American League pennant, assistant GM Brandon Taubman decided to play muscle-flexing, tough guy with three female reporters who were in the clubhouse as the perfunctory champagne celebration was winding down. The 34-year-old Taubman, out of nowhere, turned on the female reporters and started shouting.

"Thank God we got Osuna! I'm so [expletive] glad we got Osuna" Over and over. And over.

It was Taubman's way of reminding the reporters that the Astros were comfortable with their acquisition of the controversial reliever last season, after Roberto Osuna had served a 75-game suspension for assaulting the mother of his child. The 'Stros got Osuna at a bargain rate because of his baggage, and there was some blowback, but not enough to keep him off the team. The issue faded sufficiently for the Astros until Taubman decided to throw down the gauntlet in the post-victory haze.

Sports Illustrated's Stephanie Apstein was one of the three reporters targeted in Taubman's tirade and wrote a piece about the episode Monday. After initially not commenting, the Astros furnished a statement in the wake of Apstein's story late Monday. The statement acknowledged Taubman's clubhouse comments, but said the team was "extremely disappointed in Sports Illustrated's attempt to fabricate a story where one does not exist."

This is right out of the Astros' deny-deny-accuse playbook. They did it when they got caught blatantly cheating at Fenway in the playoffs against the Red Sox last year. They did it when they broke MLB rules and barred a credentialed reporter from their clubhouse (Justin Verlander had a beef with the reporter) last summer. Now this. MLB has sent investigators to get to the bottom of this incident.

In the wake of the ham-handed statement, the topic gathered steam throughout Tuesday. This resulted in more statements. At 1:45 p.m., MLB issued a short one, which included, "The Astros have disputed Sports Illustrated's characterization of the incident."

Taubman and the Astros were next with new statements. Taubman's missive was a classic non-apology, apology. He said he was sorry he used bad language (nobody cares). He said he is a husband and a father (nobody cares). And he finished with the time-tested, passive-aggressive, "I'm sorry if anyone was offended by my actions."

Houston owner Jim Crane chimed in with a brief ditty about how the 'Stros loathe domestic violence and have raised money for the cause. Crane said nothing about the team's Monday statement that questioned the reporter's credibility.

It was left to Houston manager AJ Hinch to do the right thing and he handled the opening question of his afternoon presser in dignified fashion, saying, "I'm very disappointed for a lot of reasons. It's unfortunate, it's uncalled for . . . I take everything that happens in that clubhouse to heart. No one, it doesn't matter if it's a player, a coach, a manager, any members of the media, should ever feel like when you come into our clubhouse that you're going to be uncomfortable or disrespected."

There's not much need for an investigation here. Multiple witnesses have corroborated Apstein's account. It appears likely that Taubman was targeting a local female baseball writer who wears a purple bracelet supporting the cause vs. domestic violence. No one in an Astro uniform has rushed to defend the assistant GM. (Taubman's name was briefly floated at least once as a Red Sox GM candidate, so we can rule him out for that now.)

So now we watch the World Series and wait for the Astros to apologize for an employee who trivialized domestic violence. We wait for them to apologize for attacking the credibility of the reporter.

No sense waiting for them to sanction their assistant GM. They will leave that up to Major League Baseball.

Weak.

Go, Nats.

*** *The Boston Herald***

MLB should suspend Astros' Brandon Taubman to save the World Series

Jason Mastrodonato

Major League Baseball needs to step in and save the World Series.

After those in leadership positions with the Houston Astros refused to use the benefit of time and hindsight to cool their emotions and make room for a simple apology, MLB will have to do their work for them and suspend assistant general manager Brandon Taubman.

Stephanie Apstein of Sports Illustrated, and the two other female reporters she stood alongside during the Astros' clubhouse celebration on Saturday, deserved at least as much after Taubman taunted them for reasons we can only guess, and none of them any good.

"Taubman turned to a group of three female reporters, including one wearing a purple domestic-violence awareness bracelet, and yelled, half a dozen times, 'Thank God we got Osuna! I'm so (expletive) glad we got Osuna!'" Apstein wrote on Monday.

MLB announced on Tuesday that they're investigating the incident, which was corroborated by two other reporters standing nearby, and others in the room.

Let's unpack that quickly.

Roberto Osuna, the Astros closer, had just blown Game 6 of the American League Championship Series and could have cost the Astros their season when he allowed a two-run homer in the ninth inning that let the Yankees tie the game. Osuna was later bailed out by Jose Altuve, who hit a walkoff homer in the bottom of the inning, sending the Astros to the World Series.

Osuna was not the star of the game. He was nearly the goat, in fact. And yet it was that moment during a jovial postgame celebration, that Taubman decided to scream his support for the organization's controversial decision to trade for Osuna last June.

Now remember, there were serious questions at the time if Osuna would ever pitch in the major leagues again. He was arrested in Canada for allegedly assaulting Alejandra Román Cota, the mother of his then-3-year-old child, who later fled to Mexico and never returned to testify, prompting the dismissal of the case. MLB investigated and found enough wrongdoing that Osuna was given a 75-game suspension, the third-longest ever for violating the league's domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault policy.

The Toronto Blue Jays didn't want him to ever throw another pitch in their uniform, so they dangled him in trade talks.

Many teams, including the Dave Dombrowski-led Red Sox, told the Blue Jays that as talented as Osuna is as a closer, they were not interested in having him pitch for their club.

The Astros took advantage. They traded for him anyway, pledged that they'd be at the forefront of support for domestic violence victims and would enact a "zero tolerance" policy going forward.

Instead, they used the most bizarre moment to not flaunt their own success, but instead taunt a few women in the team's clubhouse who were doing their jobs in a professional manner.

Just for a second, try to imagine why somebody in Taubman's position would do such a thing. Was it because the Astros were widely criticized for acquiring Osuna in the first place, and he took the lazy opinion that the criticism was only from women, and that the Astros' success gave him an excuse to use that moment to say, "told ya so!" as if acquiring Osuna was the reason the Astros made it to the World Series?

Late Tuesday, National Public Radio reported that Taubman was purposely targeting the reporter wearing the purple bracelet because she had been vocal on Twitter about domestic violence issues, often sharing a hotline for victims when Osuna appeared in Astros' games.

As if this story couldn't get any worse.

Sadly, the Astros made it worse with an embarrassing public reaction.

Even though Apstein wrote in her column that another Astros official was so taken aback by the event that he immediately apologized, the Astros public relations team took a different approach. They ignored Apstein's request for comment and issued a statement attacking her credibility, calling her story "misleading" and "completely irresponsible."

But they never denied that Taubman made those comments.

After a storm of public backlash on Tuesday, Taubman released his own statement, but never apologized to the women, nor did he express any understanding of why what he did was wrong.

Instead, he said, "I am sorry if anyone was offended."

It's no wonder that the most powerful woman in baseball, Red Sox executive vice president Raquel Ferreira, said that when young women ask her for advice on getting a job in baseball, she always tells them, "don't do it."

She laughs and then offers real pieces of advice, but noted that "every day you feel the challenges" of being a woman in baseball.

Interviewed for a piece on women broadcasters in the minor leagues back in June, the broadcaster for the Astros' High-A affiliate, Maura Sheridan, said she had been screamed at for doing her job, but she was afraid to say anything.

"There's this weird double-edge sword where you don't want to make a huge fuss, but you also don't want it to happen again," she said.

This time was different only because Apstein wrote what happened and the public got a sneak peak into a culture that too often goes unchecked.

The Astros never denied the comments were said. They can bend the context to their liking, but the words don't change. They merely offered a tone-deaf, arrogant and shameless response.

All they had to do was apologize but instead made it clear they feel no remorse and haven't.

It falls to MLB instead.

The league must stand up for the women of the industry and suspend Taubman indefinitely.

*** *MassLive.com***

Astros' Brandon Taubman, potential Red Sox GM candidate, unhireable after clubhouse outburst

Chris Cotillo

Those who are calling on the Astros to fire executive Brandon Taubman can take solace in this: If Taubman somehow keeps his job as Houston's assistant general manager, it will be his last in baseball.

In less than 48 hours, Taubman has gone from a rising front office star to an unhireable national pariah thanks to a bombshell report from Sports Illustrated's Stephanie Apstein. In an account that has since been confirmed by multiple witnesses, Taubman reportedly shouted his support for Astros closer Roberto Osuna (who was suspended 75 games for violating baseball's domestic violence policy last season) toward a group of female reporters in the Astros' clubhouse after Houston clinched the American League pennant Saturday night.

"And in the center of the room, assistant general manager Brandon Taubman turned to a group of three female reporters, including one wearing a purple domestic-violence awareness bracelet, and yelled, half a dozen times, 'Thank God we got Osuna! I'm so f----- glad we got Osuna!'" Apstein wrote.

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Taubman's outburst, which was originally denied by the club before Taubman issued an apology Monday, is being investigated by the league and disciplinary action remains possible. But the 34-year-old remains employed -- at least for now -- as his team competes for its second World Series title in three years.

Even if the league's investigation doesn't result in Taubman's firing, any chance of him furthering his career as a baseball executive is over. A former Ernst & Young and Barclays employee who rose from baseball operations analyst to assistant GM in five years, Taubman appeared to have a bright future in the industry. His two predecessors as the top lieutenant to Astros GM Jeff Luhnow -- Milwaukee's David Stearns and Baltimore's Elias -- both left the organization to take lead jobs elsewhere in the last half-decade.

With a year of serving as Luhnow's right-hand man under his belt, Taubman was likely to start getting looks from teams looking for a bright young GM with an analytical background and experience in a

successful organization. Recent reports even connected him to the Red Sox, who are searching for a new baseball operations head after firing Dave Dombrowski last month.

Before the incident, Taubman likely checked many of the boxes the Sox are looking for in their next GM or president of baseball operations. The club is known to prefer someone from outside the organization, is trying to align its front office more on the analytical side and is likely considering organizational No. 2s after striking out in their attempts for top dogs like Theo Epstein, Andrew Friedman, Derek Falvey and Mike Hazen. Taubman even has familiarity with Sox manager Alex Cora, who was Houston's bench coach in 2017.

But there's absolutely no chance he'll be considered now, by the Red Sox or any other club. Somewhere in the offices of 4 Jersey St., Sox president Sam Kennedy is crossing Taubman's name off a whiteboard, much like ownership groups in 28 other cities.

The incident should also give other organizations pause when it comes to poaching anyone else from the Astros, who have handled themselves as poorly as possible in the aftermath of Apstein's report. Only manager A.J. Hinch, who himself might have front-office aspirations someday, has stood out as a classy, respectful voice in a chorus of denials, non-apologies and P.R. mishaps.

"I'm very disappointed for a lot of reasons," Hinch said before Game 1. "It's unfortunate, it's uncalled for. For me as a leader in this organization down here in the clubhouse, on the field, I take everything that happens in the clubhouse to heart."

So will every other team, especially the ones who had an eye on Taubman before this all happened. Even if his reprehensible outburst doesn't cost Taubman his job, it'll cost him a chance at every other one.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

It's a killer rotation, all right -- Red Sox starters are an albatross, and it's worse than you think

John Tomase

They are the three horsemen of a financial apocalypse that is galloping towards the Red Sox on thundering hooves.

We know the team is determined to shed roughly \$40 million in payroll from 2018 to drop below \$208 million and reset its luxury-tax schedule. To get there will require some unappetizing decisions, like potentially parting ways with both defending MVP Mookie Betts and All-Star slugger J.D. Martinez.

In a perfect world, management would cut from another part of the roster, where price, performance, and reliability are no longer moving in unison. We're talking, of course, about the starting rotation, which is effectively unmovable. We've devoted many GB of cyberspace to the damage the top three pitchers can potentially inflict to both the long- and short-term health of the franchise, but a deeper dive into the numbers suggests the situation is even worse than we thought.

In David Price, Chris Sale, and Nathan Eovaldi, the Red Sox have committed \$252 million to the three biggest question marks on their roster. The trio will count for \$79 million in each of the next three seasons, including \$32 million for Price and \$30 million annually for Sale. That led Martinez, after the season finale, to note that Betts was probably a goner because, "you can't pay three guys \$30 million."

In a perfect world, the Red Sox would move a starter to free up money for one of their sluggers. But good luck finding takers for any of the above, given the health concerns associated with each.

The Red Sox have already announced they're taking it slow with Sale, who visited Dr. James Andrews in Florida after an August elbow scare. His five-year, \$145 million extension begins in 2020, and it wouldn't

be shocking if he ends up needing surgery. There's little incentive for the Red Sox to trade him with his value so low or another club to acquire him with his health such an unknown.

Price, with three years and \$96 million remaining, has already gone under the knife to remove a cyst from his wrist. He's also lugging off-field issues, thanks to his blowup at Hall of Fame broadcaster Dennis Eckersley, which has damaged his reputation. Any team acquiring him would have to be willing to take on not only some portion of his considerable salary, but also his questionable health and negative attitude. He remains talented, but that's a lot of baggage.

Then there's Eovaldi. The right-hander parlayed a magical two weeks last postseason into a four-year, \$68 million contract. He then promptly went under the knife in April to remove loose bodies from his elbow, finishing the season as a glorified opener. October of 2018 sure feels more like the exception than the rule with him.

If all three are healthy and return to form next season, the Red Sox could win the World Series. The more likely path, given their respective ages, workloads, and injury histories, is far less appealing. And those factors are unlikely to improve with the passage of time.

So just how hamstrung are the Red Sox by their rotation? With the luxury tax threshold set to rise to \$210 million in 2021 before the collective bargaining agreement expires, they know they'll be devoting 38 percent of their payroll to those three pitchers in 2020 and 37.5 percent in 2021.

Only one other team will pay its pitchers more both next year and beyond, and they're in the World Series. In Max Scherzer (\$42.1 million), Stephen Strasburg (\$25 million), Patrick Corbin (\$19.41 million), and Anibal Sanchez (\$7 million), the Nats have devoted \$93.5 million to their 2020 rotation, and a staggering \$318 million to their top three pitchers moving forward, a number that will jump to \$336 million if they exercise Sanchez's \$18 million option in 2021.

The difference between the Red Sox starters and Washington starters is that the former broke down after a long World Series run, while the latter remain atop their games, although we'll find out next year if a similar fate awaits them. Washington's Big Four went 54-28 while posting ERAs between 2.92 and 3.85 and combining for nearly 750 innings.

The only other team with a situation even remotely comparable to Boston's is the Cubs, who owe their five starters \$78.5 million next year (including Jose Quintana's \$11.5 million option) and \$182 million moving forward (that number can jump by \$25 million if they exercise Jon Lester's 2021 option).

Giving the oft-injured Yu Darvish \$126 million on a six-year deal that runs through 2023 looks like a mistake, but the rest of Chicago's commitments are manageable, since the only other pitcher signed beyond next year is Kyle Hendricks, who inked a four-year, \$55.5 million extension before last season.

Otherwise, just one other team has more than \$100 million committed to its starters, and that's the Astros, who will likely lose co-ace Gerrit Cole in free agency, but still owe two more seasons and \$136 million to veterans Justin Verlander and Zack Greinke.

Everywhere else, the best big-market teams in the game have minimized their risk when it comes to long-term pitching contracts. The Yankees will pay Masahiro Tanaka, J.A. Happ, and Luis Severino \$50.5 million next year, with only Severino remaining on the books thereafter for the final two seasons of his four-year, \$40 million extension.

The Dodgers have committed only \$34 million to 2020, and the bulk of it belongs to former Cy Young winner Clayton Kershaw, who will make \$31 million in both 2020 and 2021 as part of a three-year, \$93 million extension. Kershaw and Kenta Maeda are the only two Dodgers starters making guaranteed money, and they're only owed \$74.5 million moving forward.

Everywhere you look, baseball's most nimble organizations have left themselves with financial flexibility in the rotation. But not the Red Sox. They're locked in to the Three Horseman, and the apocalypse feels inevitable.