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*** *The Boston Globe***

Jeter Downs's arrival at Red Sox camp was anything but normal

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Nothing about the arrival of Jeter Downs in Red Sox camp Wednesday was normal.

He is a 21-year-old non-roster invitee with just 12 games of experience above Single A — the kind of profile that rarely garners notice, no matter how highly regarded a prospect is. Typically, players with his credentials in big-league camp are assigned a number in the 70s or 90s, set up on the fringes of the clubhouse among other minor leaguers, and speak in whispers on the rare occasions that anyone checks in with them.

That was not the experience for Downs on the morning of his first day in Red Sox camp, two days after the blockbuster trade that brought him over from the Dodgers as part of the return for Mookie Betts and David Price. His locker is near the middle of the Red Sox clubhouse, between J.D. Martinez and Mitch Moreland.

(The location between two veterans is something of a coincidence related to the most crowded Red Sox spring clubhouse in memory, with 65 players in camp. Downs was given one of the few open lockers, but could move if the team finalizes a deal with veteran outfielder Kevin Pillar.)

His jersey is No. 20 — a subtle nod to the No. 2 of Derek Jeter, the player after whom he was named. And as soon as Downs appeared in the clubhouse, he was swarmed by a throng of reporters.

For a player who earlier this week was preparing to fly from his South Florida home to Arizona for the start of spring training with the Dodgers, all of this easily could seem overwhelming. But Downs seemed at ease in his new surroundings — and amused by the now-familiar undertaking of explaining that, yes, he was named after the Yankees Hall of Famer.

“You get bombarded with this whole name thing,” he said. “It’s pretty cool. I guess my mom knew what she was doing when she named me Jeter. She just liked how he was, the way he played the game, so she gave me the name.”

“I obviously have the name, so I kind of had to be a fan of his. I idolized him — the way he played, the way he went about the game, the things he did, how he was respected by every single team.”

Downs had a chance encounter with Jeter recently in South Florida. He was driving with his brother — Jerry Downs, a 26-year-old first baseman in the Red Sox system — when a Range Rover pulled up next to them.

“[Jerry] was like, ‘Oh my God, is that Jeter?’ He honks and I wave at him,” said Downs. “I’m doing training with [Dodgers special adviser and former Yankee] Raul Ibanez. I called Raul and said, ‘Tell Jeter that the kid I was waving at was Jeter.’”

Informed by Ibanez of the identity of the person he’d encountered, Derek Jeter was impressed.

According to Jerry Downs, Derek Jeter told Ibanez, “That’s crazy — I just saw a kid but I didn’t know it was him! Tell him I look forward to following his career. I’ll follow up.”

Days later, with the assistance of a friend in the Marlins system, Jeter Downs talked with Jeter via FaceTime. Now, he is excited about a trade that put him in an organization that is defined in no small part by its rivalry with his namesake's former team.

"I was a Yankees fan," said Downs, "but now I'm going to do everything in my power to win if the Yankees are on the other side, or whoever it is."

Last year, at age 20, Downs hit .276/.362/.526 with 24 homers and 24 steals in 119 games, mostly in the High A California League before a late-season promotion to the Texas League. He's been primarily a shortstop through the minors, though some evaluators expect him to move to second base.

Downs, taken with the No. 32 pick in the 2017 draft, already had been traded once, going from the Reds to the Dodgers before the 2019 season in a deal that sent four big leaguers (most notably Yasiel Puig) to Cincinnati. As such, he recognizes that neither reputation nor, in his case, a name will determine the Red Sox' return for dealing Betts and Price.

"It's cool to be traded for arguably a top-five player in the game," said Downs, "but it doesn't mean anything if I don't go out and do my job. I still have to go out and perform, play well. Things could be talked about after."

Ultimately, Downs and the Red Sox hope that it is what he does on the field that will shape the conversation about him moving forward.

Chris Sale kicks off 2020 Red Sox camp with walking pneumonia

Peter Abraham and Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale stayed home on Wednesday when the Red Sox conducted their first workout for pitchers and catchers. The lefthander is dealing with a case of the flu that morphed into walking pneumonia.

Sale has been sick for about 10 days, interim manager Ron Roenicke said. But he's feeling better and was able to play catch in his yard on Tuesday and Wednesday.

"It sounds probably worse than what it is," Roenicke said.

Sale is expected back at JetBlue Park on Friday to be evaluated.

"It's concerning just because he's worked so hard to get himself to this point. His arm feels great," Roenicke said. "Like he said, this is the worst time to come up with the flu."

Last season, the Sox probably would have celebrated the idea of Sale staying home, so determined were they to rest their pitchers coming off the World Series.

But Roenicke said the plan this year is for the starters to make the customary six starts in spring training to be better prepared for the season.

"I think it's important that we try to get them to six starts and make sure that we start off better than we started off last year," Roenicke said.

Eduardo Rodriguez appeared in five major league spring training games last season. Rick Porcello had three and the other starters — Sale, Nate Eovaldi, and David Price — only two.

The Sox were 29-28 the first two months of the season as their rotation struggled.

Sale was 6-11 with a 4.40 earned run average in 25 starts. He missed the final six weeks of the season because of a shoulder injury.

Progress with Pillar

USA Today reported that the Sox had a one-year deal with free agent outfielder Kevin Pillar. The contract is still being finalized, but the expectation is that Pillar will be on the team for the first full-squad workout on Monday.

Pillar, a righthanded hitter, would give the Sox some balance in their otherwise lefthanded-hitting outfield. He's also a strong defender.

Wong checks in

Connor Wong, one of the prospects acquired from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade, was hosting a housewarming party in Houston when he learned he was headed for the Red Sox.

"I checked my phone, a few missed calls from the farm director over there and a text from someone saying he's trying to get a hold of me. I called him back and found out I was traded," Wong said.

Wong, 23, is a 2017 third-round draft pick who is primarily a catcher but also has played 25 games at second base and 13 at third base in his minor league career.

The Sox have him in camp as a catcher.

"I see myself as a guy who can help the team anywhere. That's what I plan on doing," Wong said.

As a catcher, much of his work will be learning new pitchers.

"It's only difficult in the sense that it takes time," he said. "We have a month and a half before the season begins. That's the timeframe I'm working with. I'm going to have to get it done."

Wong finished last season with Double A Tulsa, and it's fair to think he'll open the season at Portland. Wong has 48 home runs and an .852 OPS in three minor league seasons.

Pedroia questionable

Dustin Pedroia, who had a setback with his left knee last month, has a locker in the clubhouse but is unlikely to attend camp according to people familiar with his status . . . Roenicke looks at Brandon Workman being the closer. "I think so," he said. "I think what he did last year, he deserves that shot to be the closer." Workman was 10-1 with a 1.88 ERA and 16 saves. Roenicke said he preferred to start the season with defined roles in the bullpen. But he wants the late-inning relievers to be flexible if matchups dictate the closer would be better used in the eighth inning, or one of the set-up men in the ninth . . . With 65 players on the camp roster, four players have numbers in the 90s. The highest number, 93, belongs to outfielder Cesar Puello . . . Brock Holt remains a free agent, but his old No. 12 went to Alex Verdugo . . . Righthander R.J. Alvarez has wrap on his left ring finger and it stuck out of his glove. He was unable to catch the ball coming back from the catcher; that task fell to minor league coach Chad Epperson . . . The Sox were using new portable Trackman devices to compile data on their pitchers. The team switched over from Rapsodo and Edgertronic equipment.

Red Sox expected to sign outfielder Kevin Pillar to one-year contract

Katie McInerney

USA Today reported that the Red Sox had agreed to a one-year deal with free agent outfielder Kevin Pillar. The contract is still being finalized, but the expectation is that Pillar will be on the team for the first full-squad workout Monday.

Pillar, a righthanded hitter, would give the Sox some balance in their otherwise lefthanded-hitting outfield. He's also a strong defender.

Pillar, 31, spent most of 2019 with the San Francisco Giants after being traded by the Toronto Blue Jays early in the season. He became a free agent at the end of the year.

Pillar will add to the Red Sox outfield depth, joining Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., J.D. Martinez, Marcus Wilson, and new addition Alex Verdugo.

Pillar hit .278 with an .823 OPS and 21 extra-base hits in 162 at-bats against lefthanded pitchers last season. He is a career .307 hitter in 47 games at Fenway Park.

Red Sox' Juan Centeno on Astros' sign-stealing in 2017: 'What they did, what we did, was wrong'

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Juan Centeno had already played for the Mets, Brewers, and Twins when the Astros signed him before the 2017 season.

The catcher, then 27, was grateful for the opportunity. He started the season in the minors but was called up for two games in May before joining the team again in August.

Centeno made a good impression and stayed on the roster for all three rounds of the playoffs.

By then, he knew what was going on. The Astros were using a video feed adjacent to the dugout at Minute Maid Park in Houston to steal signs from the opposing catcher.

"They weren't doing it the first time I was called up," said Centeno, who is now in his second season in the Red Sox organization. "But when I came back up, they were. Everybody knew it."

As a catcher, Centeno didn't like the idea that signs were being stolen. But he went along with it because he didn't want to cause any waves in the clubhouse of a powerhouse first-place team.

Centeno was an itinerant backup new to the organization. Nobody on the team had less status. Voicing even the slightest complaint could have meant his demotion, if not his release, in the cutthroat, win-at-all-costs culture of the Astros.

"I just went along with it," Centeno said. "I don't feel good talking about it now. But I did it."

Major League Baseball's investigation into the Astros revealed that Carlos Beltran, with the backing of bench coach Alex Cora, pushed the team to improve how it stole signs. They devised the infamous system of banging on a plastic trash barrel to signal hitters about what pitch was coming.

Beltran and Cora are baseball icons in Puerto Rico. Centeno, who also is from the island, was in no position to stand up to them.

"It wasn't right, I knew that. But what could I say?" Centeno said, pausing to choose his words carefully. "You can steal signs if you're on second base and you can see the catcher. But what they were doing was different."

Centeno admitted that he benefited from the system, but to what degree he can't recall. He was 5 for 25 at the plate during home games in August and September, but struck out only three times.

According to research by an Astros fan named Tony Adams, Centeno heard 13 bangs on that trash can.

“Maybe I got some hits because I knew the pitch; I probably did,” Centeno said. “I would apologize to any pitchers if I did. It wasn’t right.”

The Rangers claimed Centeno off waivers after the 2017 season. He then bounced to the Red Sox last year and appeared in seven games. The Sox signed him to a minor league contract Tuesday that included an invitation to spring training.

Centeno is a long shot to make the Opening Day roster. But he’s willing to wait for his chance.

The fallout from the Astros scandal is being felt at many spring training camps as former Houston players are asked what role they played.

Cora lost his job managing the Red Sox because of the cheating scandal, which erupted in November. Beltran, who had been hired to manage the Mets, also was let go.

The Red Sox are being investigated, too, for similar actions they allegedly took in 2018.

Related: Red Sox considered sticking with Alex Cora, but even he knew that wouldn’t be possible

Centeno said he was almost relieved when the story broke about the cheating because he wants to see the game get cleaned up.

“I’m a catcher, I know how tough it is with signs,” he said. “We always have to change them and be careful about what the other team is doing. It’s not a good thing for the game.

“I hope baseball can fix it and make sure teams aren’t doing it. It’s not good for the sport.”

Centeno has a World Series ring that was once a symbol of his perseverance. But now he’s not sure what to think of it.

“I loved playing for the Astros,” he said. “But what they did, what we did, was wrong.”

Mookie Betts, David Price soak in the greener pastures, warm welcome of Los Angeles

Julian McWilliams

LOS ANGELES — Mookie Betts and David Price strolled on the Dodger Stadium field early Wednesday afternoon. The Los Angeles sun reflected off both their faces as they made their way to center field to greet their new beginning.

There was a calmness about them. The pigeon-toed Betts no longer walked as if he was trying to elude a sea of reporters in a Red Sox clubhouse insistent on asking him questions about trade possibilities or free agency. Price, on the other hand, appeared overcome with joy and shared more than his share of laughs with Betts.

What was done, was done. The two, in their new home on their new coast, were at peace.

In a trade that took nearly a week to complete, Betts and Price were introduced, and finally donned Dodger blue.

It was here that Betts, 472 days ago, homered off Clayton Kershaw in the top of the sixth inning of World Series Game 5. It was here that Price put together a herculean performance, going seven innings, giving up just a run and three hits. The label of not coming through in the playoffs, finally, came off his broad shoulders.

Now, the City of Angels sees Betts and Price as its chance to capture an ever-elusive seventh title.

“To be able to jump on a team like the Dodgers,” Price explained, “a team that has had the amount of success they have had the past couple of years, to be able to add a player like Mookie Betts and then to be able to add myself to that mix as well, that’s something special to be a part of.”

It was an arduous offseason for Sox fans. They dealt with scandal, the loss of manager Alex Cora, and now Betts and Price are both gone, too. The club, and new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom, are preaching patience while still expecting to remain competitive in the 2020 season. Bloom is playing the long game, leaning on the idea of sustainable success. But trading Betts, an MVP and arguably the second-best player in all of baseball, is unquestionably an audacious strategy.

A team like the Red Sox, a cash cow, letting go of its best position player in nearly half a century because they don’t find it fiscally responsible in the long term is inexplicable to some fans — even as Bloom sat there late Monday evening in Fort Myers and attempted to explain it. There’s no direct path to winning right now in Boston. It’s not linear.

Betts, on the other hand, remained direct and logical as he sorted through his feelings regarding being traded from the only organization he ever knew.

“It’s still a business,” Betts said. “Once you understand that, you can put those emotions aside when it comes to business time.”

Boston has its memories for Betts, who was drafted by the club back in 2011 out of high school. In a way, he grew up with that fan base.

“I love Boston,” Betts said. “It’s been my life for nine years. And so, I thank them for everything. I can’t ask them for anything more than what they did for me.”

Betts was in the batting cage when he first heard the news that the trade had finally gone through. Price was at home with his family. He said he had spoken to Bloom before the news broke, and could see why the Sox organization went in that direction.

“I understand people being surprised by it,” Price said of the trade. “I’ve done this for a while. I’ve seen a lot of different moves. If I try to put myself in that owner’s seat, or that general manager’s seat, you can kind of wrap your head around it and understand what was going on, what they were trying to do.”

Price has been traded three times. As he noted, he’s been at this for a while. He’s offered advice to Betts, telling him that a transaction is out of his control. Betts described it as “definitely something new that he had to get used to.”

Still, Betts is due to be a free agent at the end of the year and seems set on hitting the free-agent market. When asked if he would consider re-signing in Boston, Betts didn’t quite rule that piece out, again, professing his love for it.

“I love Boston, man,” Betts said, “but I do know that it’s a business and I have to worry about 2020 right now and get to that point whenever it’s time.”

Los Angeles will provide both greener pastures than Fenway Park this season. The Dodgers are the prohibitive favorite to come out of the National League and make it to another World Series. President of baseball operations Andrew Friedman has long coveted Betts, and when he mentioned to manager Dave Roberts that they could potentially trade for him, Roberts was all in.

“When Andrew brought that as a possibility, obviously you get excited,” Roberts said. “You get curious. It wasn’t a straight line, but ultimately, it got done. I know, speaking for the coaches, the players, and the fans, it’s an exciting day.”

Price and Betts made their way through the bowels of Dodger Stadium around 2 p.m. Pacific, surrounded by Dodger employees and wives.

Price's wife, Tiffany, couldn't make it, but her voice echoed over FaceTime instead.

"Welcome to the Dodgers," you could hear one of the wives tell Tiffany.

Los Angeles gave both Betts and Price its warm welcome.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Will fans secede from Red Sox Nation? Should they?

Bill Speros

What if they held a baseball season and nobody came?

Or even worse, nobody cared?

The 2020 Red Sox campaign is underway in Fort Myers, Florida, or Lee County to be more specific. Lee County was named in 1887 for the same Robert E. Lee who finished second in his class at West Point and before leading the Army of Northern Virginia against the Union Army of the Potomac.

But neither the ghost of Robert E. Lee nor Robert John Valentine could drag the Red Sox any lower than they are right now in terms of both public perception and passion.

Mookie Betts and David Price were formally introduced by the Dodgers on Wednesday, having been dealt to a major-league team by the would-be WooSox in a Category 5 salary dump.

As the Red Sox return to the Land of Lee, one may ask how many fans will secede from their union with the team financially and emotionally in 2020?

And would it be OK if they did?

My short answers are "a lot" and "yes."

We're not talking treason against the United States. But rather the realization that the Red Sox — at least for the time being — are not in it to win it.

The excuse to bail on the Red Sox would be a simple paraphrase of Ronald Reagan: "I didn't leave the Red Sox, the Red Sox left me." There's nothing inherently wrong with walking away after four World Series titles since 2004. After all, far too many of our parents and grandparents lived and died without ever seeing the Red Sox win a damn thing.

There is no "fair-weather fandom" in my DNA.

There is something deliciously satisfying about quitting with money still on the table given that the last Red Sox Rolling Rally took place a mere 470 days ago.

In the here and now, Boston's American League franchise would be struggling for notice even with Betts and Price. The Fate of Tom Brady will deprive Red Sox of any media oxygen until it is resolved. The only thing worse than fans being furious about their team's relegation to the Championship league status would be for millions of Red Sox fans to keep calm and carry on.

Apathy is far more lethal than anger.

The machinations of the NFL draft and Patriots OTAs — especially if the local professional gridders have a new QB — will consume hearts and minds throughout April. Expected deep playoff runs by the Celtics and Bruins will make it easy to pretty much ignore anything baseball-related until Memorial Day.

By that time, you'll have about 400 hours of binge watching at the ready. The Red Sox are, at their essence, entertainment. The competition they face from the likes of Disney+, Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix is just as fierce as any challenge posed by the New York Yankees or Houston Trash Can Bangers. And they never have “bridge years” on Netflix.

Once Patriots training camp begins in July — with or without Brady — baseball season will be finished north and east of Bridgeport.

It is little wonder why MLB has embraced legal sports betting. Anything to keep fans glued to games is desperately needed.

Fort Myers was first built by the federal government to help settlers purge the locals during the Seminole Wars in the 1850s. It was then used as a Union base and was attacked by the Confederates during the Civil War.

But there seems little fight in the 2020 Red Sox.

The Red Sox had a chance to void the Betts-Trade salary dump and avoid an Old Testament-sized error. But they failed to heed the opportunity of salvation and went through with the deal.

Chaim Bloom offered this Double-Meat Whopper with extra cheese in regard to the Betts-Price trade during his ill-fated press conference Monday: “At the end of the day, we chose to prioritize talent.”

The halfhearted statements issued by Tom Werner and John W. Henry angered fans even more.

Bloom's doom is living proof that one should be careful for what they wish. Every baseball nerd in the universe has dreamed of being general manager — or whatever the title is these days — of the Boston Red Sox. His reality has been dreadful.

The Red Sox won 84 games and missed the playoffs with Betts and Price last season. They can certainly miss the playoffs without their services this season, as well.

“It's reasonable to expect that, you know, we're going to be worse without them,” Bloom added Monday.

They'll be much worse.

If anyone cares.

Ron Roenicke to change Red Sox' broken plan for starting pitchers

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Ron Roenicke isn't going to keep the seat warm for Alex Cora, continue running the Red Sox exactly like Cora did and eventually slide back into the shadows as a career bench coach.

Just listen to his ideas.

On Day 2 of his tenure as Red Sox interim manager, Roenicke gave reporters 25 minutes to pepper him with questions. The 63-year-old has been coaching for almost 30 years and doesn't lack confidence nor conviction. He shared his philosophies and ideas, some finalized, some still developing.

Some are a continuation of Cora's, such as the belief that the closer role should be flexible. Brandon Workman is likely to start the year as the closer, but Matt Barnes or Darwinzon Hernandez could get some saves, depending on the matchups.

And some are being changed.

The most noteworthy from Day 2: no more babying the starting pitchers in spring training.

"Well, we did get off to a slow start last year and we talked about it," the new skipper said. "We're going to make sure, at least we're going to try to make sure, that they get their six starts in in spring. ... I think it's important that we try to get them to six starts and make sure they start off better than we started off last year."

Last year, Eduardo Rodriguez and Hector Velazquez led the team with four starts each in Grapefruit League action. Rick Porcello had three starts. Nathan Eovaldi, Chris Sale and David Price had two each. The slow springs resulted in a slow April and eventually an 84-win season.

Cora defended it all the way through the 2019 season, saying after it ended that "our plan was the right one."

At JetBlue Park on Wednesday, Roenicke wasn't so sure.

"It's hard to say whether we were wrong last year or not," he said. "We did basically the same thing the year before in '18 and it turned out great."

But it didn't take long for the Red Sox to realize it wasn't working in 2019, Roenicke said.

"We talked about it at the beginning of the season, when we didn't get off to a good start, we talked about it," he said. "I don't think we came up with any conclusions then, but we wanted to see what happened during the season and get everybody together and see if it makes sense to try to get back to that sixth start."

Sale got a head start this week. He's been sick with the flu, which turned into pneumonia, yet Sale still threw 60 pitches on Tuesday and was tentatively scheduled to throw 60 more on Wednesday.

Imagine the intensity to pitch through pneumonia. It's quite the contrary to last spring, when Sale didn't make his first start until March 16. He made his second and final spring start on March 23. His next outing was Opening Day in Seattle, when he gave up seven runs on three homers in a blowout loss.

This year, Sale leads a staff that includes the injury-prone Eovaldi, Rodriguez and bounce-back candidate Martin Perez. There is no fifth starter.

Rookie lefty Darwinzon Hernandez should have the stuff and body type to make it through a season as a starter, but Roenicke wants Hernandez to start the season in the bullpen.

It seems odd. Teams often use spring training to stretch out depth starters. Then the ones who won't be needed in the rotation can move to the bullpen in a long relief role.

But Roenicke explained his thinking. It was genuine and personal. And it was tough to argue.

"I think it's getting him used to the big leagues, getting him confident that he can pitch here," the manager said. "Confidence is so huge in what we do. I know we talk about it but it really determines what a guy is going to do, not just now, but in the future.

"I can draw on my own career. When I was in Triple-A and I was hitting well and I got called up to the big leagues, I always did well. When I was in Triple-A and not playing very well and they called me up, I usually didn't play very well. When I started a season with a team and got off to a bad start, I was a mess.

“I think it’s important for a confidence thing, especially for a young guy who has electric stuff like he has, I think it’s important to know for sure that, ‘Hey, I belong here, I’m going to do anything you want. If you want me to close, I’ll close.’ And if you have that mindset, once you have that confidence you can move a guy in different areas.”

Maybe next year Hernandez will start, Roenicke said. Or maybe the year after.

Roenicke isn’t afraid to make the decisions he sees fit, whether or not they differ from the previous regime.

New Red Sox catcher Kevin Plawecki looks to fit in behind Christian Vazquez

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — After five seasons of playing in the majors, all as a backup catcher, Kevin Plawecki didn’t know what to expect when he was non-tendered and became a free agent this winter, but he’s more than happy with how it ended up.

When the Red Sox traded Sandy Leon to the Indians early in the offseason, it created an immediate need for a backup catcher behind Christian Vazquez. They pounced on Plawecki, who didn’t have many options but loved the fit with the Red Sox.

Plawecki said he had just two suitors, but after speaking to general manager Brian O’Halloran and then-manager Alex Cora, it became an easy decision.

“I didn’t come here for a certain person, I came here to play for the organization, and this organization speaks volumes,” Plawecki said here at JetBlue Park, where pitchers and catchers reported on Wednesday. “It’s a great place to be, it’s a great place to play. I love Fenway. I love that this team is competing every year and that’s ultimately what I want, is to win, so I felt like this was the best fit for me. ...

“I think the market was what it was. I didn’t know what it was going to be. It wasn’t up to me, I wasn’t in control of that, so I trusted in the process and I’m happy that we were able to work something out down here with them. ... When it came down to it, it was a no-brainer.”

After breaking out offensively with 23 homers last season, Vazquez slots in as the Red Sox’ potential everyday starter behind the dish, and if not, seeing the bulk of the playing time. That makes Plawecki, who signed a one-year deal with the Sox, the top candidate to be his backup.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke said Wednesday that if Vazquez is healthy and performing well, “we’re going to try to get him out there as much as possible.” He cautioned against putting a number on how many games he would play.

Vazquez played in a career-high 138 games last season, and based on Roenicke’s comments, that number in 2020 could be expected to be similar. But though Plawecki has struggled offensively in his first five big-league seasons, he could provide a decent complement to Vazquez.

A former top prospect with the Mets, Plawecki has prided himself on defense and calling games. In 2019, he ranked 13th in Baseball Prospectus’ Fielding Runs Above Average metric, which was two spots ahead of Vazquez.

“I’d like to say calling a game is a strong point,” Plawecki said. “My receiving’s strong, so other than that, I just try to be the best all-around player I can be.”

The Red Sox now have some options at catcher, a position they’ve recently been weak in developing. They acquired 23-year-old prospect Connor Wong from the Dodgers in the trade that sent Mookie Betts and

David Price to Los Angeles, and though he probably needs some more time to develop, he's easily their best catching prospect.

Wong has the ability to play the infield, too, but he projects best as a catcher. His time may not come soon, but an impressive season last year, when he hit .349 with a .997 OPS in 40 games in Double-A, suggests he's on the right path.

"We haven't really talked about what they want to see out of me," Wong said. "I assume catcher because that's what I am, but I see myself as a guy who can help the team anywhere, and that's what I plan on doing."

For now, Vazquez is the clear-cut top guy, which puts less pressure on those behind him.

Plawecki's focus right now is simply getting comfortable. He admitted he didn't know anyone on the Red Sox before joining them, though he barely knew Andrew Benintendi through a mutual friend, and he said he's using his time to start camp to pick Vazquez's brain and get his body right for the season.

"I'm not here to prove anything," Plawecki said. "I just try to give it 100% every day, work hard, put good at-bats together, try to catch a good game and really just try to get as many wins as possible when I'm in there. There's nothing, I don't think, I need to prove or anything exactly, it's just sticking to my routine and having fun and working hard."

Red Sox notebook: Chris Sale has mild case of pneumonia, but lefty 'feeling really good'

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Chris Sale is certainly not off to the start of spring training that he would have wanted.

As Red Sox pitchers and catchers officially reported to spring training here at JetBlue Park on Wednesday, the left-hander wasn't present. Interim manager Ron Roenicke revealed that Sale's illness is actually a mild case of pneumonia, which will set back the start date of his spring training.

Roenicke said Sale is on the back end of the illness, though, after having it for about a week and a half. The lefty threw catch Tuesday and was supposed to again on Wednesday, and he's expected to get to camp by the end of the week.

"He is actually feeling really good," Roenicke said. "It sounds probably worse than what it is, but he said (Tuesday) night he had a great night's sleep. So he was really happy about it. He's going to come in here Friday and be re-evaluated to see where we're at."

It's not ideal for Sale, who is trying to bounce back from a disastrous 2019 season that ended early with an elbow injury.

"It's concerning just because he's worked so hard to get himself to this point where his arm feels great and then, like he just said, this is the worst time to come up with the flu," Roenicke said. "I know I just got over the flu — I had it for two weeks. I still don't have 100% energy. We're going to go easy when he comes back and just make sure we're going through the right steps."

Workman likely to close again

Brandon Workman was uncertain what his role might be this season when asked if he expected to be the closer again earlier this week, but Roenicke said Wednesday he favors him in that spot.

After the Red Sox' bullpen began last season without clearly defined roles, Workman became the closer by the middle of the season and ran with it. He was one of the most dominant relievers in baseball, leading the majors with a .123 batting average against. He had a 1.88 ERA and allowed just 29 hits in 71⅔ innings.

“I think what he did last year deserves that shot to be the closer,” Roenicke said of Workman. “I think it’s always more ideal if you have roles for those guys.”

Pillar coming?

The Red Sox are nearing a one-year, major-league deal with free-agent outfielder Kevin Pillar, USA Today reported on Wednesday. According to the report, Pillar would join the team for their first full-squad workout next week.

The 31-year-old Pillar was non-tendered by the Giants earlier this offseason, and would provide some depth in the outfield after the departure of Mookie Betts. Now with three left-handed outfielders in Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Alex Verdugo, the right-handed Pillar would serve as a decent complement to that trio.

“Obviously with three left-handers, it would be nice to have a right-hander,” Roenicke said when asked about Pillar. “I really can’t answer too much because I haven’t talked to anybody about it. Remember, I just got the job yesterday, so I’m not on board with everything that’s happening so far.”

Benintendi back to leadoff?

With Betts, one of the premier leadoff hitters in baseball, now gone, the Red Sox need to figure out who’s going to lead off for them. Benintendi seems to be the most likely choice.

Benintendi led off in 48 games last year, but seemed to struggle with it as he produced just a .256 average and .355 on-base percentage in that spot, and the Red Sox ultimately put Betts back in the leadoff position. But after losing Betts, the Sox are expecting a big bounce-back season for Benintendi, and Roenicke thinks he can thrive back at the top of the order.

“I think Benny learned something last year,” Roenicke said. “I think he’s capable of doing whatever we want to do with him. He is an on-base guy and he’s also a hitter. He’s not up there just swinging at everything. He takes pitches, he goes the other way, he’s really just a pure hitter, so I’m fine with him. If he ends up there, I’m fine with him leading off. We’ll have those discussions with him later when we start playing games and try to figure out how everybody fits in.”

Roenicke also mentioned Verdugo as a potential leadoff hitter on Tuesday. ...

Roenicke said he would try to call Dustin Pedroia, who is recovering from a significant setback in his ailing knee, either Wednesday or Thursday to check in with him. The manager was uncertain when asked if he would expect Pedroia in Fort Myers when positional players report next Monday.

Red Sox prospect Jeter Downs reacts to being traded for Mookie Betts

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — The locker between Red Sox veterans J.D. Martinez and Mitch Moreland is no longer empty.

A new nameplate now reads, “JETER DOWNS.” He’ll wear No. 20.

As the Red Sox officially opened camp on Wednesday morning, Downs reacted to being part of the trade that sent Mookie Betts to the Dodgers.

“It’s cool to be traded for arguably a top-five player in the game,” said the 21-year-old infielder. “But it doesn’t mean anything if I don’t go out and do my job. I still have to go out and perform, play well. Things could be talked about after.”

This is one player who is used to lofty expectations.

Born in Colombia but raised in Miami, Downs was given his first name because his mom loved Derek Jeter and the way he played the game. His dad, though, was a Red Sox fan.

Much of his childhood was spent idolizing Jeter, so Downs naturally became a Yankees fan.

“But now I’m going to do everything in my power to win if the Yankees are on the other side, or whoever it is,” he was quick to point out.

Growing up with the name “Jeter” created a world of pressure. But he had never met Jeter. Not until last week.

His brother, Jerry Downs, is a Red Sox farmhand five years his senior. The two were driving on their way to catch a train in Miami when they rolled up to a red light and saw Derek Jeter driving a Range Rover. Jerry Downs honked and his younger brother waved. The Hall of Fame shortstop didn’t seem to notice.

“So I’m doing training with Raul Ibanez and I called Raul and said, ‘Tell Jeter that the kid he was waving at was Jeter,’” the younger Downs said. “So then he told him. ... A couple days later, the Marlins had an event at Top Golf. One of my friends was there. He Facetimed me with Jeter on the phone.

“We talked for like two minutes. He said he’d been watching me and stuff like that. I’ve idolized him my whole life. It was finally good to meet him and talk to him a little bit. It was definitely special.”

A few days later, on his way to Miami International Airport to fly to Arizona to begin spring training with the Dodgers, Downs was told plans had changed. He had been traded with Alex Verdugo and Connor Wong to the Red Sox for Betts and David Price.

“It’s pretty cool to be a part of something this big,” Downs said. “But you’ve still got to go out and play baseball. I try not to think of it as that big of a deal and just try to focus on the things I need to do.”

Downs played most of his games in High-A last year, hitting .269 with 19 homers in 479 at-bats. The Sox like his power potential and think he can keep growing. He’s generously listed at 5 feet, 11 inches and 180 pounds.

He projects as a second baseman, but Downs played mostly shortstop last year.

“Honestly I don’t care where I’m playing as long as I’m helping the team win,” he said. “It’d be the outfield if that’s what we need to win and make things happen.”

He’ll get a chance to learn this spring with a locker between Martinez and Moreland.

Even more special for the newest member of the Red Sox was playing catch with his brother at the Sox’ complex at JetBlue Park. Jerry Downs was a 15th-round draft pick in 2015 and hit .165 between High-A and Double-A last year.

“I was like, ‘Wow, we’re wearing the same uniform,’” the younger Downs said. “It’s pretty surreal that things turned around like this. We always mentioned it, ‘It would be pretty cool to play on the same team with you.’ But we didn’t think of it that far. Now it’s come to fruition.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve just laid in my bed like, ‘Oh my God.’ The amount of questions being asked about this stuff. But it is what it is.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

After a tumultuous offseason, retooled Red Sox open spring training

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Exactly seven weeks from today, which is 24 hours after they held their first workout of 2020, the Boston Red Sox will open their regular season in Canada, facing the Toronto Blue Jays on March 26.

Oh, what a difference a year can make. At this time last spring, the Sox were basking in the limelight of a World Series championship.

This February, the Red Sox arrived at Fenway South with a vastly different collection of players, team officials and a new head of baseball operations — quite a new look from last year. A sign-stealing scandal and a goal to cut the payroll can mess things up.

Gone are last year's manager, the team's best and most popular player, a 2018 World Series hero and the general manager who assembled that terrific team.

Manager Alex Cora and the team parted ways a few weeks ago. He had been one of the spymasters for the 2017 Houston Astros, for which he was the bench coach. The Sox remained manager-less until the eve of Wednesday's first workout of pitchers and catchers.

That's when the worst-kept secret of the New England winter was officially revealed. Ron Roenicke, Cora's bench coach, was given the reins — with conditions. His title currently is interim manager because the probe into possible illegal sign-stealing by the 2018 Red Sox is still being investigated.

Not often are a former Most Valuable Player and Cy Young Award winner both shipped off in the same trade. That's what happened Monday when Mookie Betts and David Price were sent to the Los Angeles Dodgers in a reworked trade that landed the Red Sox a pair of top-notch prospects — outfielder Alex Verdugo and infielder Jeter Downs, who immediately became Boston's No. 1 prospect.

The architect of that deal was Chaim Bloom, the new head of baseball operations, who replaced the fired Dave Dombrowski.

On Wednesday, Roenicke got to address the whole ordeal to a throng of local, national and New England media.

"I don't think it's fair to put it on any one player to make up for Mookie's production offensively," Roenicke said. "And it doesn't have to be Verdugo, either. If [Andrew Benintendi] picks up his production from last year. If [Jackie Bradley Jr.] is better this year. I think the combination of everybody — [Xander Bogaerts] had a fantastic year, [Rafael Devers] had a fantastic year — it's hard to ask them to do any more than what they did but the combination of everyone just doing a little bit more will help us. You cannot replace Mookie Betts. He's one of the best players I've seen, but other guys can pick up their game and we can still put it all together."

With all the changes and uncertainty surrounding the team, veteran Red Sox players expressed excitement over the upcoming season.

"The expectations are always the same," catcher Christian Vazquez said. "The mental part, we need to stay focused, continue to work hard and keep winning."

The choice of Roenicke to replace Cora was a good one, according to Vazquez and relief pitcher Heath Hembree. Cora was extremely well-liked in the clubhouse, and so is Roenicke.

"We love [Roenicke]; he's been here the last few years," Hembree said. "We've gotten to know him really well the last couple of years. He was with us when we are at the top of the game [in 2018] and he was with us when we weren't at our best last year. He has a really good sense about the club. He understands the pulse of the team. We're excited to move forward with him."

“I know we’re missing some key pieces from the last couple of years. But the situation is what it is and we’re excited to have him at the helm.”

Roenicke said the Red Sox could use the “opener” strategy employed by new general manager Chaim Bloom with the Rays the last two years if a fifth starter doesn’t emerge. But he also added he had plenty of faith in the pitchers in camp vying for that fifth starter role. Those options include Ryan Weber and Hector Velazquez, but there are no current plans to move young fireballing lefty Darwinzon Hernandez into the rotation.

“I think the opener is a possibility when you don’t have your five guys that you really like,” Roenicke said. “Obviously, Chaim is very familiar with it, and in talking to him about it, it wasn’t like, ‘This is what we want to do.’ It’s more like, what’s the best personnel we have and what’s the best way we can get these guys to perform at the level where we hope they can be. And we may use the opener, but [Bloom] is also OK if we find that fifth guy. So, we just need to see where we are at the end of camp and go from there.”

Red Sox Journal: Sale battling pneumonia

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, Fla. — And the doctor’s diagnosis ... pneumonia, but at least not a bad case.

Despite battling the flu and pneumonia for the past two weeks, Chris Sale is displaying the toughness for which he’s known.

“It actually sounds a lot worse than it is,” interim manager Ron Roenicke said Wednesday following the first pitchers-and-catchers workout. “He’s actually feeling really good and he told me he got a good night’s sleep last night, so he was really happy with the way things were going.”

Roenicke said Sale threw a bullpen session Tuesday and that his arm “feels great.” Sale is expected to be re-evaluated by the team’s medical staff Friday and could participate in workouts if he’s cleared.

Jeter at short

Jeter Downs, acquired by the Sox Monday in the Mookie Betts deal, is in camp early and he looked smooth and confident Wednesday while taking ground balls.

He said his mother named him after Derek Jeter, the longtime Yankees star and Red Sox nemesis recently elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

“My mom loved Derek Jeter, how he was and how he played the game,” Downs said. “I can’t even count how many people have asked me [about the name] over the years. Obviously, I have the name so I had to be a fan of his. I idolized him and how he played the game, the things he did — how he’s respected by every single team.”

Downs — a Miami native who is now the top-ranked prospect in the Red Sox farm system — said he was on his way to the airport for a flight to Arizona where the Dodgers train when he got the call that he was traded.

“It’s pretty cool to be part of something this big,” Downs said. “But at the end of the day, you’ve still got to go out there and play baseball. I’m trying not to make too big a deal about it and just focus on what I need to do on the field.”

Opening thoughts

Roenicke said there might be a spot for an “opener” in the team’s pitching plans.

The opener strategy uses a relief pitcher to open the game and work one or two innings. Ideally, a long relief pitcher will then work four to five innings, with the regular bullpen closing the game out.

This concept was begun by the Tampa Bay Rays a couple of years ago when Chaim Bloom was in their front office.

“I think the opener is a possibility when you don’t have your five guys that you really like,” Roenicke said. “Obviously, Chaim is very familiar with it and in talking to him about it, it wasn’t like, ‘This is what we want to do.’ It’s more like, what’s the best personnel we have and what’s the best way we can get these guys to perform at the level where we hope they can be. And we may use the opener, but [Bloom] is also OK if we find that fifth guy. So we just need to see where we are at the end of camp and go from there.”

But Roenicke also added he had plenty of faith in the pitchers in camp vying for that fifth starter role. Those options include Ryan Weber and Hector Velazquez, but there are no current plans to move young fireballing lefty Darwinzon Hernandez into the rotation.

* ***MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox spring training predictions: 10 things that will happen before Opening Day | Chris Cotillo

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox pitchers and catchers held their first workout at Fenway South on Wednesday, signaling the unofficial start of the 2020 season. After a busy start to the week that saw Mookie Betts and David Price get traded to the Dodgers and Ron Roenicke named interim manager, the beginning of camp represented normalcy for an organization in transition.

A lot will change between now and March 24, when the Sox break camp and head to Toronto for their opening series. Here are 10 predictions for spring training:

1. Roenicke names Carlos Febles as his bench coach

Febles was also interviewed to replace Alex Cora as manager and has a strong relationship with a lot of the players because he managed them in the minors. The current third base coach would be a strong fit to serve as Roenicke’s top lieutenant if the Sox decide to promote within the staff, and the move would keep Febles off his feet after a year in which he dealt with some ankle and foot issues while coaching third.

2. Jeter Downs turns heads and puts himself in position to make the big leagues later in the season

Downs, who was acquired in the blockbuster that sent Betts and Price to Los Angeles earlier in the week, has only 12 games at Double-A under his belt. He’s not a candidate to make the Opening Day roster but could turn heads in camp, putting himself to take over at second base in the second half of the year.

The Sox will enter the season with Michael Chavis and Jose Peraza as their top two options at second. It’s possible that Downs plays well enough in camp to start the year at Triple-A and then work his way to the majors in short order.

3. Matt Hall makes the Opening Day roster

Hall is an unknown in Sox camp, having been acquired from the Tigers in a minor trade in January. Though he had a 7.71 ERA in 23 ⅓ innings last season, Boston clearly saw enough to give him a chance, bringing him to camp in hopes he can give them bulk innings early in the year.

Hall, 26, has never started in the majors but made 13 starts for the Tigers' Triple-A affiliate last year. He was primarily used as a starter before 2018 and is the kind of pitcher the Sox need to step up with a glaring hole at the back end of their rotation.

4. Marcus Walden emerges as the 5th starter, being used as an opener

Walden, who came out of nowhere to become one of Boston's top relievers last year, is probably the pitcher on the staff most suited for the opener role. The righty can give the Sox multi-inning stints and demonstrated his versatility in 2019, so he seems like the perfect candidate to open if the Sox don't add a traditional fifth starter.

Walden has never started a game in the majors. Look for that to change in 2020.

5. Jonathan Arauz doesn't make the team and is sent back to the Astros before Opening Day

The Red Sox selected Arauz in the Rule 5 draft, viewing him as a potential fit as a backup infielder at a cheap cost. Now that the competitive balance tax threshold is no longer a factor and Peraza, Mitch Moreland and others are in the mix, it looks like Arauz will have an uphill climb to make the roster.

For the Sox to retain the rights to Arauz, they'll have to keep him on the active roster for the entire season. With the number of players added in recent weeks, it seems unlikely they'll be able to do that. Boston can't keep Arauz without offering him back to the Astros.

6. The sign-stealing punishment is light -- likely the loss of a mid-round pick

The Red Sox seem to think they won't be hit hard once Major League Baseball closes its investigation into their alleged sign-stealing practices in 2018, and nothing has emerged that would suggest otherwise. But because the team is viewed as a repeat offender after the famed Apple Watch incident in 2017, the league will still hand out penalties, likely on the lighter side.

The Sox could lose a draft pick or two, likely in the middle rounds (fourth or fifth). The club could be fined, as well. Suspensions for anyone other than Cora are considered unlikely.

7. A key young player (either Rafael Devers or Eduardo Rodriguez) signs an extension before Opening Day

Now that the Sox have money to play with, they'll likely to lock up both Devers or Rodriguez soon. Rodriguez, who's a free agent after 2021, is likely more of a priority than Devers, who is under control for three more years.

Rodriguez's arbitration trial may cool relations between the sides, making a deal less likely. But Devers seems like a strong candidate to sign a long-term deal, locking in future guarantees while not giving up much of his potential slice of the free agent pie.

When Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom was with the Rays, Tampa Bay made a habit of handing out unique extensions to pre-arbitration players. That strategy was looked as a low-risk gamble that sometimes turned into massive bargains as young players progressed through the early parts of their careers.

Chavis, Bobby Dalbec, Darwinson Hernandez and Josh Taylor are among the players Bloom could look to extend using that model.

8. A reliever that looks like a lock to make the team will be cut

The Red Sox look to have six locks in their bullpen entering camp: Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes, Josh Taylor, Walden, Hernandez and Heath Hembree. But with so many newcomers in camp and a new management structure in place, it stands to reason that someone from that group could be left off the roster with a bad camp.

The likeliest of that group to be cut is Hembree, who dealt with injuries throughout last year and might be easily replaceable on the current roster. If Hernandez or Taylor has a disastrous camp, the Sox can simply option either lefty to Pawtucket.

9. Kevin Pillar emerges as a quasi-starter

Pillar, a veteran outfielder who is reportedly close to signing with the Red Sox, will grow into a role in which he starts on most days. The Sox now have three lefties in the outfield in Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Alex Verdugo and appear unlikely to start all three when facing left-handed starters.

The addition of Pillar means the leash is getting shorter for Benintendi and Bradley Jr., who each spent most of 2019 out of sync.

10. Bloom makes a significant trade before Opening Day

In recent years, the Rays have shown a penchant for making significant trades during spring training, which is traditionally a dead period for transactions. With the Sox' roster in so much flux after the Betts/Price trade, expect Bloom to do the same this year.

The Sox could use another starter and could add to the bullpen as well. Boston could look to deal from areas of redundancy in the farm system to add to the big league squad.

Roenicke calm, cool, collected in first day on the job

As bench coach, Ron Roenicke rarely interacted with the media, letting manager Alex Cora do the talking while playing a behind-the-scenes role for the Red Sox. In two years as Cora's right-hand man, he addressed a media scrum only a couple of times, to explain decisions he made after Cora had been ejected from games.

Life's much different for Roenicke now after his promotion to manager. And the early returns suggest the new skipper will be much better with the press than originally thought.

Roenicke has been extremely comfortable with the media in his first two days on the job, giving elaborate answers, speaking candidly and showing a clear passion for some of the topics he has discussed. He has acted confident, calm and comfortable in an awkward position, jumping into his new role with little hesitation.

"I honestly believe that if I didn't have all (my experiences in different roles as a player and coach), I wouldn't be comfortable talking with you guys," Roenicke said Wednesday. I like questions. I really do. I've always liked questions. It's because I feel like I have answers for what I do and what goes on. So all those years, all the stuff that happened to me, all of that set me up to be able to coach and manage."

Roenicke's comfort with the press shouldn't be that much of a surprise, considering he did manage the Brewers for parts of five seasons. But he has been very impressive in his first 48 hours, leaving many who cover the team to realize their perception of him as an introvert may have been wrong all along.

10 observations from the last week in baseball (all from Red Sox camp)

1. With 65 players in major league camp, there are a lot of new (and unknown) faces in the home clubhouse at JetBlue Park. On Tuesday, a reporter asked a veteran pitcher to confirm the identity of one his new teammates. The answer: "It's definitely possible that's him."

2. The Sox seem pretty set positionally with the additions of Alex Verdugo and (if the deal is finalized) Kevin Pillar in the outfield. Safe to say the days of J.D. Martinez roaming the outfield at Fenway Park are over.
3. Pillar is an excellent pickup at this stage of the offseason. A defensive wizard who knows the division well after spending most of his career in Toronto, he could really make an impact this season.
4. There was a noticeable lack of starpower at the facility Wednesday, with almost exclusively pitchers and catchers in the house. Chris Sale was home sick and Eduardo Rodriguez was in Arizona for his arbitration hearing, so the most notable pitchers at the facility were Nathan Eovaldi, Brandon Workman and Matt Barnes.
5. Ron Roenicke was listed at 16/1 odds to become the manager when Alex Cora was let go. In hindsight, that was ridiculous. Even more insane was that Jason Varitek, who was never considered for the position, was the favorite at 3/1.
6. Red Sox legends have started arriving in camp. Dwight Evans, Pedro Martinez, Luis Tiant and Jim Rice are already in Fort Myers.
7. Roenicke was the first member of the organization to ever admit any fault in how the Sox handled their starters in spring training a year ago. Cora, asked about a thousand times throughout the season, stuck by the plan.
8. Michael Chavis looks to be in great shape. Cora was hard on him at times last year, and the second-year infielder's focus is on staying healthy for the entire season.
9. Among the early position player arrivals: Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., C.J. Chatham, Chavis, Bobby Dalbec, Rafael Devers, Tzu-Wei Lin and Marcus Wilson. Non-roster invitees already in town include Jeter Downs, Jarren Duran, Tommy Joseph, Josh Ockimey and Jantzen Witte.
10. I had to do a double-take during Ron Roenicke's introductory press conference Tuesday. Who would have thought, even a year ago, that Chaim Bloom and Ron Roenicke would be leading the Red Sox in 2020?

Yoan Aybar, Boston Red Sox reliever with mid-to-upper 90s fastball, motivated by dad who died from lung issue; 'I know how much he wanted me to make it'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Boston Red Sox reliever Yoan Aybar's father introduced him to baseball.

"Sadly, my father passed away about eight years ago," Aybar told MassLive.com on Wednesday through translator Bryan Almonte. "But when I was younger, he used to always take me to the ball fields. And that's something that I just grew up (doing) around him."

Aybar, a 22-year-old left-hander, became more serious about baseball when Santos Guarione Aybar Sepúlveda died of a lung issue. Aybar described it as lung inflammation/infection.

"Obviously baseball was a great escape for me," he said. "I know how much he wanted me to make it. So it motivated me even more. And that's when I noticed, I'm about to work real hard to live out our dreams."

The Red Sox signed Aybar on Aug. 9, 2013, as an outfielder out of the Dominican Republic. They converted him from a position player to a pitcher in 2018 after he struggled at the plate during his four seasons as a position player.

Boston added him to its 40-man roster this past November, putting his dream of playing in the big leagues within close reach.

He throws his fastball in the mid-to-upper 90s. He averaged 11.1 strikeouts per nine innings and held opponents to a .176 batting average in 2019. He ran into trouble at times because of some control issues. He issued 41 walks in 56 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, leading to a 4.61 ERA and 1.36 WHIP in 44 outings (56 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings) for Low-A Greenville and High-A Salem combined. The Red Sox added him to the 40-man roster to protect him from Rule 5 Draft eligibility.

He certainly has raw talent.

"I'm doing this for him (dad) and my family," Aybar said. "If he would have still been here, we would be living good right now. So that's something that motivates me."

Aybar batted only .241 with a .279 on-base percentage, .345 slugging percentage, .624 OPS, five homers, 33 doubles, 22 triples, 93 RBIs and 107 runs in 302 games (948 plate appearances) over four seasons. He never made it beyond Short Season Lowell.

But he record 30 outfield assists (24 in center field, six in right field) during his 236 games as an outfielder. The Red Sox took notice.

"I think it was because of my arm strength and they said it would give me the best chance in order to make it to the major leagues with me as a pitcher," he said.

The Red Sox told him about his new position "about two days before spring training ended in 2018," he said.

The first person he called? His mom.

"She didn't know really much about what was going on because she doesn't know much about baseball," Aybar said. "She was just asking a lot of questions. When she asked why did they convert me into a pitcher, I just told her the team felt that was the best opportunity for me to make it to the major leagues."

He remained in Fort Myers for extended spring training at the beginning of 2018 — learning how to pitch.

"At first it was tough because your whole life you've been playing one position," Aybar said. "I grew up playing in the outfield. So when they approached me about it, it was tough at first. But the transition wasn't as tough as I thought (it would be)."

The initial readings on the radar gun surprised him.

"I just didn't know my arm had that type of potential to be able to throw that fast," Aybar said. "So it was surprising at first when I did it."

He knew he had a strong arm. He expected to throw his fastball fast.

"I just didn't know how fast," he said.

His professional pitching debut June 18, 2018, for the Gulf Coast Red Sox marked his first time pitching in an actual game in about eight years.

"I remember doing it when I was 12 years old, but after that I never pitched again," Aybar said. "It was tough at first. But I adapted well."

"First (game) I was a bit nervous," he added. "And obviously the first time, there's a lot of nerves when it comes to that. But then afterwards, once you start doing more and more, the nerves just all go away."

His slider is his second best pitch.

"Because it's like a cutter," he said.

He needs to improve his command. He has averaged 5.8 walks and 10.3 strikeouts per nine innings in 61 games (85 innings) in two years.

"This year I just want to work on mostly my mechanics and improving that and also the command of my pitches," Aybar said.

He said pitching in the majors is within reach this year.

"The goals that I have for myself this year is to make it to the big leagues and something I want to do is just continue to work hard and make it tough for the team ... to decide whether or not I'll be able to make it up there this year," Aybar said. "But that's something that I really want to get a chance to do."

He will take advantage of his first big league camp by watching the veteran left-handers.

"Watching those guys, all the pitchers, just trying to get as much as I can from them, but especially Eduardo Rodriguez," he said. "Whenever we're throwing on the sides, he always gives me some good advice and things like that. So I'm really taking all the advice he's been giving me as well."

Connor Wong learned of trade to Boston Red Sox during his own housewarming party in Houston; 'I had a few missed calls from the farm director'

Christopher Smith

Connor Wong worked out for two weeks in Arizona at the Dodgers' spring training facility, then returned home to Houston for a housewarming party Sunday.

"I bought a house this offseason in Houston," said Wong, a Houston, Texas, native who played college baseball at the University of Houston.

The catcher missed a few calls while enjoying his party with friends.

"We were just having a good time and I checked my phone," Wong said. "I had a few missed calls from the farm director over there (with the Dodgers) and a text from someone saying he's trying to get a hold of me and to call him back. And then I found out I was traded."

The Red Sox acquired the 23-year-old Wong along with prospect Jeter Downs and major league outfielder Alex Verdugo for Mookie Betts and David Price.

"I ended up home for a day and then that's when I found out," said Wong, who flew from Houston to Fort Myers.

He worked out Wednesday here at JetBlue Park as the Red Sox held their first official practice for pitchers and catchers.

"For the last three years, I've been with the Dodgers. And you kind of get in a routine," he said. "You kind of know what's expected and what you need to do. The last week has definitely been different but I think it's going to be good for me as a person to be able to grow and adapt and kind of move on the fly."

Wong — who the Dodgers drafted in the third round in 2017 — batted .281 with a .336 on-base percentage, .541 slugging percentage, .878 OPS, 24 homers, 24 doubles, seven triples, 82 RBIs and 11 steals in 111 games (465 plate appearances) at High A and Double A combined during 2019. Swing-and-miss is an issue right now. He struck out 143 times and drew 32 walks in his 111 games.

He threw out 52% (16-of-31) of base stealers at Double A.

“I personally don’t feel any pressure,” Wong said when asked about being traded for one of the game’s top players. “My goal is just to work really hard and do whatever I can to help this team. And help the future of the Red Sox.”

He wondered if he might be headed to Boston as part of the new prospect package once the initial deal fell through.

The original deal had the Red Sox acquiring Verdugo from the Dodgers and Twins right-handed pitching prospect Brusdar Graterol. But Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom wasn’t satisfied after a review of Graterol’s medical records showed the 21-year-old righty’s longterm outlook likely more as a reliever than a starter.

“I guess in the nature of baseball you kind of wonder,” Wong said. “You’re always wondering. So I kind of thought, ‘What if?’ And then when I had a few missed calls I was kind of expecting the news.”

Wong is versatile. He started 80 games at catcher, 13 games at second base and eight games at third base last year.

He hasn’t talked with the Red Sox about how much time he’ll spend at each position.

“We haven’t really talked about what they want to see out of me,” Wong said. “I assume catcher because that’s what I am. But I see myself as a guy who can help the team anywhere. And that’s what I plan on doing.”

Jeter Downs, new Red Sox prospect, is first Jeter on Boston side of Sox-Yankees rivalry: ‘Look how it turned around now, huh?’

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox franchise history was made Wednesday at JetBlue Park when someone named Jeter donned a Sox uniform for the first time ever.

No, it wasn’t Yankees legend (and soon-to-be Hall of Famer) Derek Jeter making a comeback with New York’s archnemesis. Tuesday marked the arrival of new Sox top prospect Jeter Downs, who was acquired over the weekend in the blockbuster trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers.

Downs is, in fact, named after the iconic Yankees shortstop. His brother, who also happens to be in the Red Sox organization, got his father’s name, Jerry. So when it came time for the Downs family to name their second son in 1998, they turned a famous last name into their new son’s first name.

“Obviously I’m going to get bombarded with this whole name thing,” Downs said. “It’s pretty cool. My mom didn’t know what she was doing when she named be Jeter.”

Downs, naturally, grew up a Yankees fan despite his father rooting for the Red Sox. While he has never met Derek Jeter, he has come as close as he ever has in recent weeks.

Just last month, Downs and his brother, Jerry, were on their way to a training session in south Florida when they noticed a familiar face -- Jeter’s -- in the Range Rover next to them. Downs waved, then immediately called his trainer, former big leaguer Raul Ibanez, to ask him to call Jeter and tell him what had happened.

“I told him to tell Jeter that the kid that was waving at him was Jeter,” Downs said. “He told him that and it was pretty cool.”

A couple days later, a friend of Downs’ ran into Jeter at a Marlins event at TopGolf. He FaceTimed Downs, who finally got the chance to speak with his hero.

“He said he’s been watching and stuff like that. Little nuances of baseball,” Downs said. “I’ve idolized him my whole life, so to get to talk to him a little bit, it was definitely special.”

Downs is excited to be the first Jeter on his side of the Red Sox-Yankees rivalry, even if his name will be a popular topic of conversation in the coming years.

“Oh my God. I can’t even count the amount of times it has come up,” Downs said. “Look how it turned around now, huh?”

Mookie Betts, David Price share favorite memories with Boston Red Sox: ‘That was a great chapter in my life’

Chris Cotillo

As former Red Sox stars Mookie Betts and David Price were introduced as the newest members of the Dodgers, they each took a moment to look back at their time in Boston.

Betts and Price were traded to the Dodgers on Monday in exchange for outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong. Betts, who was drafted by the Red Sox in 2011 and spent six seasons with the team, donned a different uniform for the first time as a professional Wednesday.

“I have a lot of memories in Boston,” Betts told reporters. “Obviously, I’d say the most fond is the World Series. From the debuts to just the ins and outs of every day being around Boston, I have so many memories. That was a great chapter in my life, for sure.”

Price was signed to the largest contract in franchise history in Dec. 2015 and spent four tumultuous years with the club. He was vital to the championship run in 2018, winning his final three starts.

“We won a lot of games,” Price said. “We won three A.L. East division titles and we were able to win a World Series in 2018. For myself, 2018 was very special there at the end. Those are very, very good memories there for myself.”

The pinnacle of both players’ careers came at their new home stadium, when the Red Sox clinched the 2018 World Series at Dodger Stadium. Price got the win after allowing just one run in seven innings. Betts hit a home run off Clayton Kershaw as the Sox won, 5-1.

Neither player admitted to letting those memories come flooding back when they entered their new home stadium for the first time Wednesday.

“I’ve been kind of focused on going forward,” Betts said. “I’d like to celebrate again here in this jersey for sure.”

“We probably talked about it last year, some, at the beginning of the year,” Price added. “Ever since then, I think we’ve just moved forward and we’re both pumped up for 2020 and helping the Dodgers get to that pinnacle.”

Chris Sale has pneumonia but Boston Red Sox ace is throwing, will check in Friday; ‘It sounds probably worse than what it is’

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale was absent from the first official workout for Red Sox pitchers and catchers Wednesday because he's sick.

"I just got off the phone with Chris," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said here at JetBlue Park. "So he's got the flu as you guys know. But it's gone into a mild case of pneumonia. He is actually feeling really good. He's had this for about a week and a half. So he threw yesterday. He's gonna throw again today, play catch. So it sounds probably worse than what it is. But he said last night he had a great night sleep. So he was really happy about it. He's going to come in here Friday to be reevaluated and to see where we're at at."

Sale missed the final six weeks of the 2019 season (39 games) because of elbow inflammation.

The lefty received a PRP injection Aug. 19. Dr. James Andrews cleared him to begin throwing the week before Thanksgiving.

His arm is fully healthy entering camp, the team said.

"It's concerning just because he's worked so hard to get himself to this point," Roenicke said. "His arm feels great. And like he just said, 'It's the worse time to come up with the flu.' ... We're going to go easy when he comes back, just make sure we're going through the right steps."

Sale struggled in 2019. He posted a 6-11 record with a 4.40 ERA and 1.09 WHIP in 25 starts (147 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings). But his 3.39 FIP and .221 batting average against show he might have experienced some bad luck.

Boston Red Sox will fill 5th rotation spot with open-minded approach: 'I think it's a few guys,' Ron Roenicke says

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Red Sox are taking an open-minded approach to the fifth spot in their starting rotation after trading David Price to the Dodgers over the weekend.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke said Wednesday that the team will consider using an opener every fifth day but could also envision locking in a fifth starter, either from within the organization or from the outside.

"I think the opener is a possibility when you don't have your five guys that you really like," Roenicke said. "Obviously, Chaim (Bloom) is very familiar with it. In talking to him about it, it wasn't like, 'Well, this is what we want to do.' It was, 'What's the personnel we have and what's the best way to get these guys to perform at a level where we hope they can be.' It ends up happening to be a couple days where we have openers. He's okay if we go there, but if we can fill it with a fifth guy, he's okay if we don't go there. So I think we just see where we end up here at the end of camp. If we have one day of an opener, we have one day. It's okay."

The Red Sox have a handful of internal options who can give them innings throughout the season. On the 40-man roster, there's Kyle Hart, Mike Shawaryn, Hector Velazquez and Ryan Weber. Tanner Houck or Brian Johnson could join the mix with impressive springs. Newcomers Matt Hall, Chris Mazza and Jeffrey Springs could all factor in as well. Darwinzon Hernandez will likely remain as a reliever.

"We brought in some guys from other organizations," Roenicke said. "And Weber is still back from last year. He's a guy I like because he's right at you. he throws strikes. When his command is good, he gets some easy outs and it's fun to watch him."

If the Sox want to look externally, they could acquire a starter via trade before Opening Day. The free agent pool is not deep, with the likes of Collin McHugh, Clay Buchholz, Andrew Cashner, Jason Vargas and Aaron Sanchez among the top unsigned starters.

On his first full day as manager, Roenicke expressed confidence that some options for the spot will emerge.

“We’ll figure it out, but I think it’s a few guys,” he said. “It’s not just one or two guys.”

Boston Red Sox starting pitchers to receive more starts during spring training 2020 after disastrous beginning to 2019 season (5.39 ERA during first month)

Christopher Smith

Red Sox starters struggled mightily at beginning of the 2019 season, posting a 5.39 ERA in 30 games in March/April.

Former manager Alex Cora kept his starting pitchers’ workloads light during spring training 2019. It’s a strategy Cora and the coaching staff began to question after the slow start.

“We talked about it at the beginning of the season,” interim manager Ron Roenicke said. “When we didn’t get off to a good start, we talked about it. I don’t think we came up with any conclusions then. But I think we wanted to see what happened through the season.”

Roenicke said the goal is for each starting pitcher to receive six starts during spring training.

“The six starts is ideal,” Roenicke said. “I know sometimes you can’t be ideal. But that’s what I think you really plan at the beginning and I know that’s what Bushy (new pitching coach Dave Bush) would like. So that’s kind of where our mindset is.”

The Red Sox finished 2019 with a 4.95 starter ERA.

Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi and David Price each made just two starts last spring training. Sale threw 9 innings, Eovaldi only 7 innings and Price just 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings. They combined to spend 153 games on the injured list during the regular season.

Eduardo Rodriguez remained the Red Sox’s most durable and productive starting pitcher throughout 2019. Coincidentally, Rodriguez pitched the most during spring training (15 innings, five outings, four starts).

“It’s hard to say whether we were wrong last year or not because we did basically the same thing the year before in ’18 and it turned out great,” Roenicke said.

Roenicke said the Red Sox decided to reduce the workloads even more last spring after the 2018 pitching staff threw so many extra innings during the postseason.

“Because we went long, because guys had more innings than they were used to (in 2018), we thought in our minds, ‘If we back off a little bit, maybe that’s going to help us,’” Roenicke said. “It didn’t work last year. But it did work the year before when we also tried to back off and go a little easier on the guys in spring so we’d make sure that we’d have that long season and they were still strong into October.”

Dustin Pedroia injury: Boston Red Sox unsure if second baseman will report to spring training before first full squad workout

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke isn’t sure if Dustin Pedroia will report to spring training before the first full squad workout Monday.

Roenicke, who was promoted to his new role Tuesday, plans to get in touch with Pedroia soon.

"I don't really know. Our medical group hasn't talked to him lately to see where he's at," Roenicke said. "I'll probably try to call him today or tomorrow to find out where we are and what he's thinking and try to go from there."

Pedroia, who has been limited to nine games over the past two seasons due to issues with his left knee, was set to attempt another comeback in 2020 before suffering a "significant setback" in his rehab late last month. The 36-year-old's status for the season is in doubt.

Roenicke isn't as close to Pedroia as his predecessor, Alex Cora, but has kept in touch with Pedroia throughout his rehab process. He said he touched base with Pedroia via text in January to see how things were going.

"I wanted to know where he was as far as his knee," Roenicke said. "At that time, he was feeling pretty good."

Position players are due to report to spring training Sunday. According to Pete Abraham of the Boston Globe, Pedroia is unlikely to join the Red Sox for camp.

Boston Red Sox view fireballer Darwinzon Hernandez as potential starter down road, not immediately following David Price trade; 'His stuff is fantastic'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Darwinzon Hernandez, for now, will remain a reliever.

"We had discussions on him yesterday," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "There's a lot of people that think he's still capable (of starting). And down the road maybe he ends up a starter. His stuff is fantastic. He's very strong physically. So he doesn't wear down. He's a guy that it's definitely a possibility in the future."

The Red Sox need a fifth starter after trading David Price to the Dodgers. But Hernandez isn't part of the candidate pool that includes Ryan Weber, Kyle Hart, Mike Shawaryn and Tanner Houck.

"I think it's getting him used to the big leagues," Roenicke said. "Getting him confident that he can pitch here. Confidence is so huge in what we do. I know we talk about it but it really determines what a guy's going to do not just now but in the future."

Hernandez posted a 3.95 ERA and 1.65 WHIP in 28 relief appearances (27 ⅓ innings) last year as a rookie. He averaged 16.5 strikeouts per nine innings but he also averaged 6.9 walks.

He mainly used a four-seam fastball and slider in 2019. His four-seamer averaged 95.5 mph, per Statcast.

"I think it's important for his confidence, especially for a young guy who's got electric stuff like he has," Roenicke said. "I think it's important for him to know for sure, 'Man, I belong here. I can do anything you want. If you want me to close, I'll close.' And if you have that mindset, once you have that confidence, you can move a guy in different areas. And I think it's easier then, if we wanted. Maybe it's next year. Maybe it's the year after."

Boston Red Sox view Brandon Workman as closer: 'He deserves that shot,' Ron Roenicke says

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Unlike last season, the Red Sox appear to be entering spring training with a set closer.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke believes Brandon Workman will be the team's closer entering the season, barring something unforeseen.

"I think with what he did last year, he deserves that shot to be the closer," Roenicke said.

Workman, who earned one of the last spots on the team after an up-and-down spring training a year ago, had a dominant season and assumed the ninth-inning role by the end. In total, the righty posted a 1.88 ERA with 104 strikeouts in 71 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, saving 16 games along the way.

The Red Sox, under former manager Alex Cora, entered 2019 with a bullpen-by-committee approach intended to maximize certain relievers in certain spots. Matt Barnes, Ryan Brasier, Marcus Walden and others rotated through roles in the early part of the season, with seven different pitchers earning saves by the end of the year.

After rookies Darwinzon Hernandez and Josh Taylor emerged as weapons, Cora transitioned to a more structured system in which Workman was the closer. The team's bullpen improved in the second half, posting a season-best 3.46 ERA as a group in August.

Roenicke said certain situations may call for fluidity in the back end of the bullpen, but most cases will call for Workman to lock down the ninth.

"I think it's always more ideal if you have roles for those guys but I also realize that sometimes, and if you explain it right, sometimes those roles should change," he said.

Workman said Monday that naming a closer "wasn't his call" and that he was happy to embrace any role the team put him in. Roenicke, on his first day since being promoted to manager, gave Workman a vote of confidence.

"I don't think it always has to be an automatic, but I know mentally, these guys handle things better if they know what's going on," Roenicke said. "If I have that discussion with them earlier and say, 'Listen, you're our closer but if I need you to stop an inning in the eighth because it's important,' I think they're fine with that."

*** *RedSox.com***

Jeter, meet Jeter: Downs' chance encounter

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- What a week it has been for Red Sox shortstop prospect Jeter Downs.

One day, he had a chance encounter at a stoplight with his idol, whom he had never met. You know, that guy he was named after.

A few days later, as Downs was preparing to report for big league camp with the Dodgers, his world was turned upside down when he was traded to Boston for Mookie Betts and David Price.

Downs, who sounds extremely poised and comfortable for a 21-year-old in the spotlight, recounted both events to a barrage of media members in the Red Sox's clubhouse on Wednesday morning.

So the man named after Derek Jeter by his baseball-crazed mother -- even though his father is a Red Sox fan -- had never actually met Derek Jeter?

It finally happened last week in a random encounter on a road in South Florida -- sort of.

"This last week, I was driving, me and my brother were driving to go to [the] train," said Downs. "We're in traffic. My brother sees this Range Rover pulling up. He was like, 'Oh my God, is that Jeter?' He honks and I wave at him.

"I'm doing training with Raul Ibanez, [Jeter's former teammate]. I called Raul and said, 'Tell [Derek] Jeter that the kid he was waving at was Jeter [Downs].' So then he told him that and it was pretty cool that I met him that way."

The real fun was yet to come.

"A couple days later, the Marlins had an event at Topgolf. One of my friends was there," Downs said. "He FaceTimed me with Jeter on the phone. We talked for like two minutes.

"It was [surreal]. I've idolized him my whole life. It was finally good to meet him and talk to him a little bit. It was definitely special."

Just days later, Downs -- MLB Pipeline's No. 44 overall prospect -- found himself in the middle of a trade for the second time in less than 14 months. So much for Dodger blue.

"Honestly, I was on the way to the airport to Arizona to report for Spring Training," said Downs. "They called me and told me what was happening. At the end of the day, it's pretty cool to be a part of something this big, but you've still got to go out and play baseball. I try not to think of it as that big of a deal and just try to focus on the things I need to do."

The Red Sox obviously believe in Downs, a middle infielder with a power bat. Typically, prospects -- especially non-roster invitees -- are stationed in the back corner of the clubhouse, way out of sight, and given a jersey in the 60s, 70s or even 80s.

But Downs was handed No. 20, and his locker is in a central part of the clubhouse between veterans J.D. Martinez and Mitch Moreland. Obviously, the Sox want him to absorb as much as he can while he is in camp, given that he is sure to start the season in the Minor Leagues.

"It's cool to be rewarded for doing a good job, so now it's time to learn from these guys and get better," said Downs.

While Downs was dealt for a prominent enough player last year in Yasiel Puig, getting traded for Betts takes it up another notch.

"It's cool to be traded for arguably a top-five player in the game," said Downs. "But it doesn't mean anything if I don't go out and do my job. I still have to go out and perform and play well. Things could be talked about after."

A big side benefit of the trade for Downs is that his older brother Jerry is also in the Red Sox's farm system, though not in big league camp.

"I was playing catch with him and I was like, 'Wow, we're wearing the same uniform.' It's pretty surreal that things turned around like this," said Downs. "We always mentioned it, 'It would be pretty cool to play on the same team with you.' But we didn't think of it that far. Now it's come to fruition."

One member of the family is extremely psyched.

“Oh my God, my dad was a Red Sox fan, so he’s so happy that both of us are here now,” said Downs.

It’s no surprise, however, that someone named Jeter did not follow his dad’s team loyalty when he was growing up.

“I’m going to be a completely honest, I was a Yankees fan,” Downs said, “but now I’m going to do everything in my power to win if the Yankees are on the other side -- or whoever it is.”

Notes: Sale falls ill; opener or fifth starter?

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- When the Red Sox officially opened Spring Training on Wednesday, one of their most impactful players was missing.

Ace Chris Sale, who has already been dealing with the flu for the last week and a half, is now dealing with a mild case of pneumonia.

The good news is that Sale’s left elbow is in strong shape. The lanky lefty missed the last six weeks of last season with elbow inflammation that wound up requiring a platelet-rich plasma injection.

“He is actually feeling really good [arm-wise],” said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. “He’s had this for about a week and a half. He threw yesterday. He’s going to throw again today, play catch. It sounds probably worse than what it is, but he said last night he had a great night’s sleep. So he was really happy about it. He’s going to come in here Friday and be re-evaluated to see where we’re at.”

The update on Sale was a good jumping-off point to ask Roenicke how he will handle his starting pitchers in general this spring.

The last two years, Alex Cora took a highly conservative approach with his rotation during camp in terms of innings and starts. It worked in 2018, when Boston won the World Series. But last year, the team got off to an 11-17 start, and a struggling rotation was the main reason why. The Red Sox proceeded to go just 84-78 and miss the playoffs.

“Well, we did get off to a slow start last year, and we talked about it. We’re going to make sure -- at least we’re going to try to make sure -- that they get their six starts in in spring,” Roenicke said. “Last year, a couple of guys had five. I think [Eduardo Rodriguez] got his six. I think it’s important that we try to get them to six starts and make sure they start off better than we started off last year.”

Fifth starter ... or opener?

When David Price was dealt along with Mookie Betts to the Dodgers, it suddenly meant the Red Sox have just four projected starting pitchers instead of five.

So who will be the fifth starter? Boston doesn't appear close to making that decision, and it’s a battle that could be waged throughout camp.

Candidates could include Brian Johnson, Kyle Hart, Mike Shawaryn, Ryan Weber, Tanner Houck and Hector Velázquez.

At this point, it sounds like the Sox will keep highly regarded lefty Darwinzon Hernandez in the bullpen, where he was dominant at times in the second half of last season. But that is subject to change.

“We had discussions on him yesterday,” Roenicke said. “There’s a lot of people who think he’s still capable, and down the road maybe he ends up a starter. His stuff is fantastic, he’s very strong physically, so he doesn’t wear down. So he’s a guy. It’s definitely a possibility in the future.”

Roenicke also didn't rule out using an opener in the fifth spot.

"I think the opener is a possibility when you don't have your five guys that you really like," Roenicke said. "Obviously, [chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom's] very familiar with it, and talking to him about it, it wasn't like, 'Well, this is what we want to do.'

"It was, 'What's the personnel we have? What's the best way to get these guys to perform at a level where we hope they can be?' And if it ends up being a couple days where they have openers, so he's OK if we go there, but he's also, if we can fill it with a fifth guy, he's OK with that. So I think we just kind of see where we end up here at the end of camp, and if we have one day of an opener, we have one day."

Adjusting on the fly

Less than 24 hours after being named interim manager, the transition felt fast for Roenicke on the first day of camp.

"I mean, I just found out yesterday morning, so it's still kind of getting used to everything," Roenicke said. "I walked in this morning and went to my usual locker [in the coach's room], and my clothes weren't there and they're over in the manager's office, so I walk over there. So everything is still a little different for me."

Roenicke felt similarly during the in-between of some of the morning drills.

"It feels different because when I usually walk around, I like to field ground balls and join in where they need me. And today I was like, 'No, I think I better be over here in the bullpen and watching guys throw, I think that's probably more important.' So that part, I forget," said Roenicke, who managed the Brewers from 2011-15. "I'm walking around, doing my thing and then I forget, like, 'Oh, I probably shouldn't be here.' So that part was a little different."

No word on Pedroia

With position players due in by the end of the weekend and the first full-squad workout scheduled for Monday, Roenicke wasn't sure when injured second baseman Dustin Pedroia will arrive. Pedroia had been hopeful of launching another comeback this season, but he is in limbo again after having a significant setback with his problematic left knee.

"Our medical group hasn't talked to him lately to see where he's at," Roenicke said. "I'll probably try to call him today or tomorrow and find out where we are and what he's thinking and try to go from there."

Workman likely to close

The Red Sox started last season without a set closer, and they paid the price, as the bullpen struggled mightily throughout the first half. After the All-Star break, Brandon Workman took care of the ninth inning and emerged as one of the top relievers in the game. Does that mean Workman will start the season as the closer?

"I think so," Roenicke said. "I think what he did last year deserves that shot to be the closer. I think it's always more ideal if you have roles for those guys."

Wong settles in

Catching prospect Connor Wong, one of three players acquired in the Dodgers blockbuster, found out he was traded in the middle of his own party at his new home in Houston.

"I had some friends over for a housewarming party, and we were just having a good time," Wong said. "I checked my phone and had a few missed calls from the farm director over there and a text saying he's trying to get a hold of me. I called him back, and I found out I was traded."

As for any player who gets traded for the first time, it came as a bit of a stunner.

"It has definitely been different, you know? The last three years, I've been with the Dodgers, and you kind of get into a routine," Wong said. "You kind of know what's expected and what you need to do. The last week has definitely been different, but I think it's going to be good for me as a person to be able to grow and adapt and kind of move on from it."

*** *ESPN.com***

Ron Roenicke tabs Brandon Workman as Red Sox closer

Joon Lee

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Boston Red Sox spent the first half of the 2019 season without a reliever in a defined closer role, but interim manager Ron Roenicke does not have a similar plan for the 2020 season.

Roenicke said Wednesday that he envisions reliever Brandon Workman closing out games this season.

"I think with what he did last year, he deserves a shot to be the closer," Roenicke said.

Workman, who entered camp as the favorite to close games out, ended 2019 15th among major league relievers with an average of 13.06 strikeouts per nine innings. He also posted a 1.88 ERA and a 2.1 fWAR, which was tied for fifth among qualified relievers.

Under Alex Cora, Boston entered 2019 with a bullpen-by-committee approach, but the team had transitioned into a more structured approach with their relievers by midseason.

As has become normal with the influx of analytics into the game, Roenicke said he doesn't plan on locking in Workman only for the ninth inning, even with a formal closer title.

"I don't think it has to be automatic, but I know mentally, these guys handle things better if they know what's going on," Roenicke said. "If I have a discussion with him earlier and say, 'Listen you're the closer, but I may need you to stop an inning in the eighth because it's important,' I think they're fine with that."

Asked earlier Tuesday about closing, Workman kept his answer brief.

"That's not my call," Workman said.

Wednesday marked the first day of workouts for pitchers and catchers in Boston's camp, with Chris Sale a notable absence on the backfields of JetBlue Park. Roenicke said Sale is still recovering from a flu that turned into mild pneumonia, and the Boston ace would be re-evaluated Friday.

Sale threw approximately 60 pitches Tuesday, according to Roenicke, and had plans to throw at some point Wednesday as well. He posted the worst season of his career in 2019, going 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA and a 1.09 WHIP in 147 1/3 innings pitched. His season ended in August with elbow inflammation.

"It's concerning because he worked so hard to get himself to this point," Roenicke said. "His arm feels great. It was the worst time to come up with the flu. ... We're going to go easy when he comes back and make sure we're going through the right steps."

Roenicke is still getting used to his new job title. On Wednesday morning, he walked up to his old locker from his time as bench coach and realized his clothes were instead sitting in the manager's office.

Meanwhile, Major League Baseball continues to investigate the Red Sox for sign-stealing allegations stemming from the 2018 season, leaving some uncertainty regarding the outlook of the season. With the process still ongoing, Roenicke said he was going to hold off naming a bench coach.

"It was brought up in the interview what I thought, so I mentioned a couple of things, but we'll talk about that more today and tomorrow, and it would probably help if the investigation is over and we can just make a decision," Roenicke said.

Roenicke also discussed the possibility of using an opener to start the season, something that chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom helped initiate while with the Tampa Bay Rays. With David Price being dealt to the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade, the Red Sox are short a starter, entering camp with Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez in their projected rotation.

Roenicke said he would be open to a fifth starter, specifically mentioning Ryan Weber (5.09 ERA in 40 2/3 innings over 18 games and three starts in 2019).

"The opener is a possibility when you don't have the five guys you really like," Roenicke said. "Obviously, Chaim is very familiar with it. And talking to him about it, it wasn't like, 'This is what we want to do.' It was, 'What's the personnel that we have and what's the best way to get these guys to perform at a level that we hope they can be.'"

"It ends up having to be a couple of days where they have openers. He's OK if we go there, but if we can fill it with a fifth guy, he's also OK if we don't go there. We see where we end up at the end of camp and if we have one day of an opener, it's OK."

Roenicke said he's leaning on his past experience as manager, specifically bringing up the media storm he managed when MLB suspended Brewers outfielder Ryan Braun in 2013 for performance-enhancing drugs.

"I know I'm going to get tough questions all year," Roenicke said. "But I really enjoy challenges and the experience makes it way easier to get through the challenges that happen. Going back to when I was in Milwaukee with the Ryan Braun thing with the suspension there, that was half a year of basically every day answering questions about it. Knowing what the players feel like going through different trials helps me to talk to them and for them to get through it."

*** *WEEI.com***

How a Red Sox win streak delayed Mookie Betts trade

Rob Bradford

Three wins.

That might have been the difference between Mookie Betts not having been dealt out of Boston last July instead of just this past week.

During Wednesday's press conference introducing Betts and David Price as Dodgers, Los Angeles president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman revealed that conversations with the Red Sox regarding Betts weren't limited to this offseason.

The proclamation lines up with talk throughout baseball during this Hot Stove season, with some executives privately wondering if Chaim Bloom was sitting in Dombrowski's chair at the time if a deal

would have gone down. Bloom was, after all, part of a Tampa Bay front office that dealt Price to Detroit heading into the pitcher's contract year at the 2014 non-waiver trade deadline.

Why was it pulled off the table this time around? Three straight wins against the Yankees.

By the time the Red Sox beat New York for a third consecutive victory on July 27 they found themselves ahead of Tampa Bay and 1/2-game out of a Wild Card berth. With just a few days before the trade deadline, it was hard to imagine that Dombrowski wouldn't need Betts for what was shaping up as a meaningful stretch drive.

But starting with the final game of that four-game series against the Yankees, the Red Sox went into a tailspin, losing eight straight with the trade deadline coming and going without any significant change one way or another.

The decision not to trade Betts at that time is notable considering what the Red Sox could have potentially gotten back. With 1 1/2 seasons of control, a team would surely pay a steeper price than the Dodgers ultimately ponied up this week.

When it comes to rebuilding these Red Sox, those three wins sure seemed to matter.

Mookie Betts on his time in Boston: 'That was a great chapter in my life'

Nick Friar

Mookie Betts and David Price were introduced as members of the Dodgers organization for the first time on Wednesday. Price made a number switch, changing to No. 33 out of respect to former Rays teammate James Shields. Betts is still wearing 50, the same number he wore throughout his Red Sox career.

The two spent most of their time talking about their future: the chance to help the Dodgers win, getting to know new teammates. Though, Betts didn't have much to say regarding the possibility of discussing an extension with his new team.

"Right now, I just got here," he told reporters in Los Angeles. "Still trying to find a house and all those types of things. And so, I'm not really thinking about that. I'm just focused on staying with 2020 and going from there."

Betts was only asked directly about his time in Boston once. But the moment when he talked about the importance of chemistry in the clubhouse and how it can help a team win the World Series felt like a commentary about the group he left behind.

"Those relationships are — translate to between the lines," he said. "That's when you see a team really become a team, and that's how you win a World Series."

Price looks back on that World Series-winning season as one of his greatest memories from his time with the Red Sox, on top of all the success the organization had throughout his four years in Boston.

"We won a lot of games. We won three AL East Division titles and we were able to win a World Serie in 2018," Price said. "And, for myself, 2018 was very special there at the end. And those are very, very good memories for myself."

While the World Series also stood out for Betts, he had a tougher time pinning down the best memory from his time with the Red Sox.

"I have a lot of memories in Boston," he said. "Obviously, I'd say the most fun is the World Series. But, you know, from the debuts to ins and outs of everyday being around Boston, I have so many memories. That was a great chapter in my life for sure."

Now Betts has to get acclimated to LA. There are still adjustments he has to make, but one won't be wearing a different name across his chest. Although he's worn the same one since 2014 and was drafted by the Red Sox in 2011, Betts accepted the reality of playing for a different organization when his name started popping up in trade rumors.

"It was definitely something new. I'd been in trade rumors, I think, my first year. And after that, it kind of went away," Betts said. "And so now they came back. It was definitely something new I had to get used to. I think once I kind of accepted that it may happen everything was pretty much fine. I'm essentially going to play the same game, just with a different uniform."

Nathan Eovaldi on Astros' scandal: 'It definitely does bother you'

Rob Bradford

Nathan Eovaldi isn't unlike most pitchers. He's not happy with how things were done in Houston in previous years.

Appearing on the Greg Hill Show, the Red Sox pitcher offered a pointed response to the question of if the Astros' sign-stealing scheme -- which has now been documented to have been executed at least in the 2016 and 2017 seasons -- left a bad taste in his mouth.

"It definitely does bother you. When they are on base you know they are trying to steal your signs. That's why you use multiple signs with runners on second base. But when they are down there in the dugout and they are able to give you the signs from the very first pitch on, it's definitely a little bothering."

And it wasn't just how the Houston scheme might have impacted pitching against the Astros that bothered Eovaldi. He also noted that the whole saga is perceived as the primary reason he no longer has Alex Cora as his manager.

"Everything," said Eovaldi when asked what made Cora such a good fit with the Red Sox. "We almost feel like it was taken away from us because of the things over there with the Astros."

Chris Sale dealing with a 'mild case' of pneumonia

Nick Friar

Chris Sale threw on both Tuesday and Wednesday, despite the fact he's been dealing with an illness — which started as the flu and turned into a 'mild case' of pneumonia.

"He's actually feeling really good," Ron Roenicke said after revealing the diagnosis on Wednesday. "He's had this for about a week in a half. ... It sounds probably worse than what it is, but he said last night he had a great night's sleep. So he's really happy about it."

Sale will report to camp on Friday. The Red Sox will re-evaluate him then and decide what to do from there.

"He's worked so hard to get himself to this point where his arm feels great," Roenicke said. "We're going to go easy when he comes back and just make sure he's going through the right steps."

Jeter Downs answers for his first name

Nick Friar

Believe it or not, Jeter Downs' father is a Red Sox fan. Yet the middle infielder Boston acquired in the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers is named after one of the greatest Yankees of all time, Derek Jeter.

"I guess my mom — she knew what she was doing when she named me Jeter," Downs said before workouts on Wednesday.

Downs' mother got dibs on naming rights after his older brother, who is also a player in the Red Sox organization, was named after his father, Jerry.

"She just loved Jeter and how he was and the way he played the game, so she gave me the name," the 21-year-old said.

Of course, Downs then grew up a fan of the latest shortstop to be voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. With that being the case, his favorite team naturally became the Yankees.

"I idolize him," Downs said of Jeter. "The way he played, the way he went about the game and the things and stuff like that. How he was respected by every single team. It's just pretty cool as a kid. I don't care what team you're from, it's just cool to watch a guy like that play the game."

Downs has been able to FaceTime his idol once, but they have yet to formally meet one another in person. Though they did have one random, brief exchange while they were both on the road.

"Last week, me and my brother were driving to go train and we were in traffic. So, he sees this range rover pulling up and was like, 'Oh my God, is that Jeter?'" Downs said. "Then (my brother) honks and I wave at him. So, I was going to train with Raul Ibanez. So I called Raul and was like, 'Tell Jeter that the kid waving at him was Jeter.'"

Since Downs is such a big Jeter fan, being traded to the Red Sox has him thinking about the uniqueness of the situation, like everyone else who has asked him about it. But he knows there's more to the trade that delivered him to the Red Sox — because of the talent that was included on the other end of the deal.

"It's cool to be traded for, arguably, a top-five player in the game," Downs said. "But, doesn't mean anything if I don't go out and do my job.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to win if the Yankees are on the other side or whoever it is."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Mookie Betts trade first step in remaking Red Sox into not the Rays, but the Dodgers

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- They're really, officially gone.

On Wednesday afternoon, Mookie Betts and David Price were introduced in Dodger Stadium, where old friend Janet Marie Smith is overseeing renovations beyond center field, a fitting metaphor for a club using its vast resources -- financial, prospect, talent -- to build a champion.

Meanwhile, 3,000 miles away in Fort Myers, interim manager Ron Roenicke addressed a fair number of reporters himself on far more mundane topics. Will Darwinzon Hernandez start or relieve? Might the team acquire outfielder Kevin Pillar to balance a left-handed heavy outfield? Could Triple-A reliever Tanner Houck be in the mix for a bullpen spot?

"Remember, I just got the job yesterday, so I'm not on board with everything that's happening so far," Roenicke acknowledged.

Two years ago, the Red Sox and Dodgers met in the World Series. Now, one of them is building, while the other is tearing it down. Boston ultimately expects to position itself like L.A., with the young core to open a multi-season window of contention, the prospects to provide depth and/or trade capital, and the financial resources to target any free agent in the game.

Unfortunately, the Red Sox are just beginning this process, which is how Betts and Price ended up donning Dodger Blue to polite applause, wearing Nos. 50 and 33, respectively, on Wednesday afternoon. Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom has already acknowledged the trade will make the team worse in 2020, an obvious admission that's nonetheless refreshing to hear. What he said next, though, points to his long-term goals.

"The big picture in how this fits into our chances to win as much as we can over the course of the next number of years, that had to take precedence," he said on Monday. "You can't be afraid to do something you think is right in the big picture."

And so the Red Sox cleared about \$75 million in salary while acquiring three highly regarded prospects: outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs, and catcher Connor Wong. They'll provide a much-needed infusion of youth and potential to a system stripped almost clean by Dave Dombrowski, whose aggressiveness netted Boston a title in 2018, but left the organization teetering over a cliff. Bloom's first order of business, we now know, was to provide the final push.

How he picks up the pieces will be the challenge of the next two, three, five years. The Red Sox boast enough talent to remain in contention if circumstances break their way, but the odds probably aren't in their favor, thanks to some questionable investments in the starting rotation. What the Betts deal accomplishes is it frees Bloom to be the wheeler-dealer he was in Tampa, where the Rays cycled through talent like a wood chipper.

Financial restrictions tied his hands for most of this offseason, but now that the Red Sox have regained some flexibility, it will be fascinating to see how he uses it. The Rays made a habit of hitting on players overlooked by other organizations, be it All-Star right-hander Charlie Morton, who signed for two years and \$30 million, or reliever Emilio Pagan, who was acquired in a complicated three-way team last winter, saved 20 games, and then got shipped to the Padres this past weekend.

Bloom will be able to target those kind of players here in the short term as a means to keep the Red Sox competitive while they retool, but make no mistake about the organization's long-term plans. John Henry has consistently spent among the top five payrolls in the game since acquiring the team in 2002, and he'll do so again. What he won't do is chase bad money with worse money, which is how we've ended up here today.

Boston isn't in danger of becoming Tampa North. The Red Sox intend to remake themselves into Dodgers East, a financial and player development behemoth that routinely competes for elite talent when they're not developing it themselves.

And one day, perhaps sooner than we think, they'll host the kind of press conference that had Dodgers fans clinking champagne flutes and dreaming of their first championship since 1988.

They just needed to take this painful step back before making what they expect will be a significant leap forward.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

The more things change....the more some might stay the same

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Wednesday was not just any old day for Ron Roenicke.

Newly installed as the Red Sox' interim manager, Roenicke had to make some adjustments from his previous role as bench coach.

"I'm still kind of getting used to everything," he said a bit sheepishly. "I walked in this morning and I went to my usual locker (in the coach's room) and my clothes weren't there. They were over in the manager's office. So everything's a little different for me."

When Roenicke went out with pitchers and catchers to oversee his first workout, some things felt a little off.

"It feels different because when I usually walk around, I want to go field ground balls and join in where they need me," he said. "today, I was like, 'I think I better be over here in the bullpen and watch the guys throw.' That part, I forget. I'm walking around, doing my thing and then I forget, like, 'Oh, I probably shouldn't be here.' So that part was a little different."

In time, the job will feel more natural to him. But at some point, Roenicke will have to start making some decisions about his roster and how he envisions using his personnel.

Roenicke has made no secret that he admired predecessor Alex Cora and the way he handled the job. Some things will be handled differently under Roenicke; on some issues, there won't be much change at all.

Here are a handful of topics.

He's in favor of getting his starting pitchers more work this spring after the team stumbled badly out of the gate, perhaps as a result of a lighter Grapefruit League workload. "We did get off to a slow start last year and we've talked about it. We're going to make sure that they get their six starts in the spring. Last year, a couple of guys had five. I think it's important that we try to get them the six starts and make sure we try to get off to a better start than last year. That would be the ideal. It's hard to say whether we were wrong last year or not because we did the same thing basically the year before in '18 and it turned out great. But because we went long (in October in 2018) and guys had more innings than they were used to, we thought in our minds, if we back off maybe that's going to help. It didn't work last year, but it did work the year before."

The team needs to replace Mookie Betts in the leadoff spot in the lineup and Roenicke is considering giving Andrew Benintendi another shot at the job. "The leadoff spot is obviously important. I think Benny did learn something last year. I think he's capable of doing whatever we want to do with him. He is an on-base guy. He's also a hitter. He's not up there just swinging at everything. He takes pitches, he goes the other way, he's really just a pure hitter. If ends up there, I'm fine with him leading off. We'll have those discussions with him later when we start playing games and try to figure out how everybody fits in." In his introductory press conference Tuesday, Roenicke also mentioned Alex Verdugo as a possibility for the role.

In need of a fifth starter, he's not ruling out using an opener. Thanks to some injuries last year in the final month of the season, the Sox used some relievers to start, but then didn't have someone to follow for the bulk of the innings — the true definition of the opener concept. This time, Roenicke may be ready to experiment. "I think the opener is a possibility when you don't have your five guys that you really like. Obviously, Chaim (Bloom) is very familiar with it. And talking to him about it, it wasn't like 'Well, this is what we want to do.' It was 'What's the personnel we have and what's the best way to get these guys to perform at a level where we hope they can be?' He's OK if we go there, but if we can fill it with a fifth guy, he's OK if we don't go there. So I think we just kind of see where we end up at the end of camp. And if we have one day of an opener, we have one day. It's OK."

He'd like a more defined bullpen structure. Last year, Cora mixed-and-matched for the first half of the year before appointing Brandon Workman as a more traditional closer. Roenicke believes Brandon Workman will open this season in that same role. "I think with what (Workman) did last year he deserves that shot to be the closer. I think it's always more ideal if you have roles for those guys. But if you explain it right, sometimes those roles should change. Say we've got Darwinzon (Hernandez) and he's at the back end of the bullpen and we have Barnes there, too. If you go into the eighth inning and they've got two of three lefties and you know Darwinzon's a better fit, I like him in there. And it may end up being in the ninth inning. If it shows that you've got three righthanders coming up who don't hit righthanders that well and Workman is rested, he pitches the eighth and then you maybe go with Darwinzon in the ninth knowing that you have (Matt) Barnes backing him up. But so I don't think it always has to be automatic but I know mentally, these guys things handle things mentally if they know what's going on. If I have a discussion with someone earlier and say, 'You're our closer, but if I need someone to stop something in the eighth,' I think they're fine with that, too."

Red Sox Notebook: Sox nearing agreement with FA outfielder Kevin Pillar

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — With an all lefthanded-hitting outfield and depleted depth at the position, the Red Sox are finalizing a deal with free agent Kevin Pillar, according to an industry source.

The deal is believed to be for one-year major league contact.

Pillar, 31, was dealt from the Toronto Blue Jays to the San Francisco Giants at the start of last season. He slashed .259/.287/.432 last year with 21 homers and 88 RBI in 156 games with the Giants before being non-tendered after the season.

He would join an outfield in which all three regulars — left fielder Andrew Benintendi, center fielders Jackie Bradley Jr. and newcomer Alex Verdugo in right — are lefthanded. Pillar can play all three outfield spots, though most of his career has been spent in center.

Pillar could platoon with Bradley in center, provide experienced depth at the two corner spots, or perhaps, clear the way for the Sox to move Bradley in a deal.

Over his career, he's hit .281/.313/.453 against lefties. One issue is that he almost never walks, which is reflected in last year's low on-base percentage. In 611 at-bats, he drew just 18 walks for a 2.8 percent walk rate the lowest of his seven-year career.

Defensive metrics suggest that Pillar has slipped some defensively, profiling as league-average in center field — a dip from previous seasons when he was considered the equal of the likes of Bradley and Kevin Kiermaier in center.

Starter Chris Sale, who lives in nearby Naples, is now dealing with a case of mild pneumonia following a nasty one-week case of the flu.

"He's actually feeling really good," said Roenicke. "He's had this for about a week and a half. He threw (Tuesday) and he's going to throw again today, play catch. It sounds probably worse than what it is. But he said he a great night's sleep (Tuesday night), so he was really happy about that. He's going to come in here Friday and be re-evaluated and see where he's at.

"It's concerning because he's worked so hard to get himself to this point where his arm feels. He said it's the worst time to come up with the flu. We're going to go easy when he comes back and just make sure we're going through the right steps. I know it makes it sound like he's just going into the pneumonia, but really he's on the back end of this thing."

Connor Wong is the third player in the deal that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers. He, like Jeter Downs, was part of the second iteration of the deal.

He's primarily a catcher, though he's also played second and third in his pro career.

"We haven't really talked about what they want to see out of me," said Wong. "I assume catcher because that's what I am. But I see myself as a guy who can help the team anywhere."

Coming to a new organization, Wong will have to become familiar with a lot of different pitchers and do in a short period of time.

"It's only difficult in the aspect that it's going to take time," he said. "We have a month and a half before the season starts. That's the time frame I'm working with, so I'm going to have to get it done."

Jeter Downs on The Trade, a family reunion and the 'other' Jeter

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — To suggest it has been a whirlwind week for infielder Jeter Downs would be a great understatement.

Downs was readying to fly from his winter training base near Miami to report to the Los Angeles Dodgers spring training home in Arizona when he got a call from the Dodgers, notifying him that he had included in the mega-deal with the Red Sox which sent Mookie Betts and David Price to L.A.

That would be upheaval enough for any young player, but when your first name is Jeter and you've been dealt to the Boston Red Sox, well...

"Obviously, I've been getting bombarded with this whole 'name thing,'" said Downs. "It's pretty cool.

Ah, yes. The "name thing."

Downs was indeed named after the Yankee legend, despite the fact that his father was — and remains — a Red Sox fan. He said his mother was chiefly responsible for his name.

"She knew what she was doing when she named me Jeter," said Downs. "I have an older brother (Jerry), who is here (as a Red Sox minor league first baseman) and he was named after my dad. She just loved (Derek) Jeter, how he was and the way he played the game. So, she gave me the name. I can't even count the number of times (the origin of the name) has come up. Look how it's turned around now, huh?"

Downs, naturally, gravitated toward the Hall of Fame shortstop and followed him closely.

"I had the name, so I kind of had to be a fan of his," Downs said. "I idolized him, just the way he played, the way he went about the game and the things he did and how he was respected by every single team. It was pretty cool as a kid — I don't care what team you're from. It's cool to watch a guy like that play the game and grow."

Downs has never met Jeter in person, but last week, while in south Florida, he and Jerry driving in traffic. Jerry noticed a Range Rover and saw that it was Jeter driving. The Downs honked at Jeter and waved. Later, training with Raul Ibanez (a former teammate of Jeter's in New York) and he asked Ibanez to get in touch with the Hall of Famer and let him know that "another" Jeter had been waving to him.

"It was pretty cool," he said.

Not long after, the Marlins had a golfing event in the community and a friend of Jeter Downs attended. He corraled Derek Jeter briefly and the two Jeters spoke via FaceTime.

“We talked for like two minutes,” Downs said, “and he said he had been watching (me) and we talked about some little nuances and stuff like that. I’ve idolized him my whole life and it was cool to meet him and get to talk to him.”

Downs is still trying to wrap his head around all that’s gone on in the last week — from getting introduced to his hero and changing teams.

“It’s pretty cool to be part of something this big,” he said of the trade. “But you still have to go out and play baseball. I try not to think of it as being that big of a deal and just try to focus on the things that I need to do on the field.”

Downs grew up as a shortstop, but has also played second base in the Dodgers’ organization. That’s his likely position here, with Xander Bogaerts laying claim to short for the next six years at a minimum.

“Honestly, I don’t care where I’m playing as long as I’m helping the team win,” he said. “I’ll be in the outfield if that’s what we need to win and make things happen. It’s cool to be (in big league camp) and learn from all of these guys and get better.”

Naturally, he’s also excited to be joining his brother.

“I was playing catch with him and I was just like, ‘Wow, we’re wearing the same uniform,’ ” he said. “It’s pretty surreal that things have turned out this way. We always mentioned, ‘Oh, it would be pretty cool to play on the same team,’ but you didn’t think about it (too much). Now, it’s come to fruition. It’s pretty interesting.

“My dad is actually a Red Sox fan so he’s so happy that both of us are here right now. To be completely honest, I was a Yankee fan but obviously now, I’m going to do everything in my power to win, (even) if the Yankees are on the other side or whoever it is.”

*** *The Athletic***

These guys have been the ‘other’ player in a superstar trade. Now Jeter Downs will seek to surpass their legacy

Steve Buckley

FORT MYERS, Fla. — It was his first close-up as a member of the Boston Red Sox, and Jeter Downs did not melt from the heat pouring out of all those television cameras.

“It’s pretty cool to be a part of something this big,” said the new kid. “But you still got to go out and play baseball, you know?”

The fact of the matter is that, no, we do not know. How could anybody not named Alex Verdugo, Connor Wong or Jeter Downs possibly know what it’s like to be traded for one of the toolsiest of five-tool players ever to wear a Red Sox uniform?

Come to think of it, Jeter Downs is still on training wheels in terms of grasping what it’s like to have his good name attached to a trade for a great player named Mookie Betts. In the present, yes, he understands the new-found notoriety: Pretty much every question directed at him this spring training will be a variation of either of two themes:

How awesome is it that your remarkably prescient mother named one of her two ballplaying sons after future Hall of Fame shortstop Derek Jeter?

Hey, what was it like being traded for Mookie Betts?

Question No. 1 makes for a nice piece of trivia, one that play-by-play announcers will be weaving into their game descriptions for years to come, usually when Downs steps up for his first plate appearance for the first game of every series.

And so here's Jeter Downs coming to bat, and, you know, funny thing about this kid ...

But Question No. 2 is the stuff of history. If Betts continues on his merry way to forging a Hall of Fame career — and my money is on that, the chips pushed to the middle of the table as I sport a wry smile — it means that Downs, Verdugo and Wong will live out their days being known as the guys the Red Sox received when they shipped out Mookie and lefthander David Price.

But while we can't look to the future to see what it'll be like for those guys, what we can do is look to the past in search of some clues.

I'd like to introduce you — or, for you Society of American Baseball Research fans in our audience — reintroduce you to a couple of former big-league ballplayers who have gone through life being asked the same question, over and over and over again.

“Hey, what it was like being traded for . . .”

Our first subject is Jim Dorsey, former big-league pitcher, whose claim to fame is that he was one of the three players received by the Red Sox on January 23, 1981, when former MVP Fred Lynn was traded to the California Angels.

Our second subject is Doug Clemens, former big-league outfielder, whose claim to fame is that he was one of three players sent to the Chicago Cubs from the St. Louis Cardinals on June 15, 1964, in exchange for future Hall of Famer Lou Brock.

I had two extremely pleasant telephone conversations Tuesday afternoon, one with Dorsey, the other with Clemens.

Jim Dorsey

The Betts and Lynn deals are similar on several levels. Betts is a former AL Most Valuable Player who has received MVP votes in each of his five full big-league seasons and has won four Gold Gloves. Lynn, at the time of the trade, was a former MVP who had received MVP votes in four of his first six full seasons in the big leagues. Like Betts, he had won four Gold Gloves. Betts is entering his age 27 season, Lynn was entering his age 29 season. And both players were flight risks: Lynn was poised to be a free agent after the '81 season, Betts will be a free agent after this season. In both cases, the Red Sox were unwilling to pony up the dough.

The difference between the deals was that the Red Sox, in dealing Lynn, received two veteran players: Outfielder Joe Rudi and lefthander Frank Tanana.

Dorsey, who made four big-league appearances with the Angels in 1980, made a total of four appearances with the Red Sox in '84 and '85. Now 64, he worked 31 years for United Parcel Service until retiring a little over two years ago.

“At first, I thought the trade was a good thing for me.” he said. “I'm thinking I'm getting traded for Fred Lynn — Fred Lynn — so maybe I'll have a chance.

“I was the last cut in spring training (in 1981), and the way it worked out they were stacked in the minor leagues. They had Bruce Hurst, Bobby Ojeda, Oil Can Boyd. I think maybe I got lost in the shuffle there.

“But it worked out. I got through an 11-year pro career. It wasn’t too bad, I guess.”

Dorsey’s recollection is that he didn’t get bombarded with a lot of questions when he arrived in Winter Haven, Fla., for his first spring training with the Red Sox. Most of the questions were directed at Rudi and Tanana.

For Dorsey, the questions would come later in life.

“People will bring it up now and then,” he said. “But here’s the thing: I know my friends see Fred Lynn at autograph shows and things like that, these appearances he makes, and they’ll ask him, ‘Hey, do you remember Jim Dorsey?’ and he says, ‘Nope, I don’t know him.’ And they’ll say, ‘You were traded for him.’ My friends love to tell me that.

“I’m the guy who got traded for Fred Lynn, but I’ve never met him. I never pitched to him and I never met him. Even with the alumni events they have in Boston, I’ve never met him. At the alumni events I go to, he’s not there. When he’s there, I’m not there.

“If I ever meet him, I’d say to him, ‘I’m the guy a lot of my friends are asking you about.’”

If you think the trade didn’t work out for Dorsey, that’s only because you’re basing things solely on baseball statistics. And there’s more to life than baseball, right?

It so happens that during his tenure as a member of Triple-A Pawtucket, that Dorsey went out one night to a place called My Brother’s Pub and started gabbing with a woman named Debbie Santos. Sparks flew. Dorsey, from southern California, and Debbie Santos, from Pawtucket, fell in love and got married. They bought a house in Seekonk, Mass., and have been living there ever since.

And his buddies still go to autograph shows and ask Fred Lynn if he’s ever heard of Jim Dorsey.

Doug Clemens

Doug Clemens — no relation to Roger — was a former Syracuse University football player who landed a \$40,000 bonus to sign with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1960 after scouts saw him tearing up a summer college league. He then hit .389 in 39 games with the Billings Mustangs of the Pioneer League, enough to earn Clemens a big-league call-up at the end of the season.

He was 21 years old. He appeared in one game, the regular-season finale, with Cardinals manager Solly Hemus sending him out to right field in the sixth inning. When his turn at bat arrived in the ninth inning, Hemus had Daryl Spencer pinch-hit for him.

Clemens was up and down from the bigs to the minors and back again over the next four seasons. And then came June 15, 1964, when the Cardinals sent him and veteran pitchers Bobby Shantz and Ernie Broglio to the Cubs for pitchers Jack Spring and Paul Toth ... and outfielder Lou Brock.

Nobody thought much of the trade at the time. The big names in the deal, in fact, were Shantz, a former American League MVP with the Philadelphia A’s who was 38 and at the end of the line, and Broglio, who had won 21 games for the Cards in 1960 but would win a total of just seven games in parts of three seasons with the Cubs.

Brock had shown flashes of brilliance in parts of three seasons with the Cubs, but it was not until joining the Cardinals that his skills were put on display for all the world to see. Hitting just .251 with the Cubs when the trade was made, he hit .348 in 103 games for the Cards, who made a late-season surge to overtake the slumping Phillies for the NL pennant and then defeated the Yankees in the World Series.

“I’ve often wondered how the Cardinals could give up me for Lou Brock, but there you go,” said Clemens, now 80 years old and comfortably retired in New Hope, Pa., after serving 36 years as vice president of sales and marketing for General Machine Products.

“The trade was made at the deadline, which was June 15 in those days. I’ve since been told that it was not consummated until 2 a.m. on the 16th. And I’ll be honest with you, at the time I didn’t know who the hell Lou Brock was. I had barely heard of him.”

Brock went on to play 16 seasons with the Cardinals, appearing in three World Series. By the time he retired in 1979, he had amassed 3,023 career hits and led the NL in stolen bases eight times. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1985.

Clemens went on to play nine seasons in the big leagues, three of them with the Phillies. He was a .229 career hitter. But he is better known as the man who was traded for Lou Brock.

“I hear it all the time,” he said. “In fact, it just happened the other day. I drove into Philly for a sports luncheon, it’s called Bats & Balls, they have it several times a year, and I was sitting with Bobby Shantz of all people. He’s 94 years old. And right away a guy came up and said, ‘Hey, you guys were traded for Lou Brock.’”

Clemens is quick to point out that, for now, his situation is different, much different, than what Jeter Downs is going through.

“He’s going to feel some pressure to perform — not only because he’s trying to get to the big leagues, but because of who he was traded for,” he said. “I never had to deal with that.”

A closing thought from Doug Clemens serves as a reminder to suggest it might be a good idea for Jim Dorsey to join his buddies next time they go see Fred Lynn at one of those card shows.

“I was at a trade show a number of years ago and wouldn’t you know, Lou Brock was there as well,” Clemens said. “I went up to him and said, ‘I’m Doug Clemens and I was once traded for you,’ and by God he gave me a big hug and he signed a ball for me and added, ‘The trade that made us famous.’”

As Red Sox camp opens, everything has changed — even if it looks awfully familiar

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — On the first official day of Red Sox spring training, Ron Roenicke walked into the same old building, took the regular path to his familiar locker, and found it empty — one of many little moments when a new reality washed over him.

Out of the coaches’ locker room and through a conference room, Roenicke walked into the manager’s office, and that’s where his stuff was waiting.

The whole day was like that on Wednesday, a familiar melody set to a brand-new beat. Pitchers threw in the bullpen. Hitters took batting practice on a back field. Peter Gammons did a television appearance from the sidewalk.

But Nathan Eovaldi got dressed at David Price’s locker, Roenicke’s clothes were hanging in a completely different room and the star acquisition getting all of the first-day attention was a 21-year-old kid who’s probably heading to Portland, Maine, when the season starts — not an impact free agent who’s itching to carry the Red Sox into October.

The scene was, ultimately, whatever you wanted it to be. The early days of spring training are always like that. They’re either brimming with hope — every bullpen fastball a weapon, every new player a star in the making — or they’re shrouded in uncertainty: Every batting practice line drive a mirage, every empty locker a missed opportunity. The Red Sox first day had all of it; smoke and mirrors, with promise and possibility.

No one generated more outside attention on Day 1 than new infield prospect Jeter Downs, one of three players acquired in the Price and Mookie Betts trade. Outfielder Alex Verdugo was the top young player coming to the Red Sox in the deal, but he wasn't in camp yet and he isn't named after a Yankees Hall of Famer. So it was Downs who addressed media in the middle of the clubhouse, cameras surrounding him so quickly that someone literally bumped into the kid and nearly knocked him to the ground.

When Downs took batting practice on the most remote field in the complex, eight cameras and a reporter with an iPhone captured his every swing. Andrew Benintendi and Michael Chavis hit on a much more accessible field, with hitting coach Tim Hyers and quite a few fans watching, but only a team photographer was there to document it.

"It's cool to be traded for arguably a top-five player in the game," Downs said. "But it doesn't mean anything if I don't go out and do my job."

New chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom stood largely unnoticed in the far corner of Field 3. Then he talked endlessly on his phone as he paced behind the bullpen sessions. Then he made small talk around the cage while Christian Vázquez and the rest of the catchers took batting practice. TrackMan technology monitored every pitch. The coaching staff clapped and shouted and offered quiet suggestions.

Behind the bullpen mounds, Pedro Martínez watched closely, at one point talking to minor-league free agent Robinson Leyer and showing him something to do with a changeup grip. Jason Varitek walked the grounds with authority, pointing directions and giving players instructions. Dwight Evans greeted a security guard by name.

It's still unclear if or when Dustin Pedroia might arrive in camp — many other position players were already there even though their workouts won't begin for a few days — but the injured second baseman's locker was fully stocked anyway. Jerseys hung on the rail, two duffel bags were stacked on a shelf and pieces of mail were waiting on top of his chair. If anyone reading this sent Pedroia a large white envelope or a brown cardboard box, he hasn't opened them yet.

In the middle of the clubhouse, Chris Sale's blue golf bag stood unattended because he, too, was absent. Sale was supposed to be there on Wednesday, but he's home sick with the flu, which Roenicke said progressed to mild pneumonia. It's perhaps not as bad as it sounds, though. Roenicke said the Red Sox actually had thrown 60 pitches the day before and hoped to be in camp for reevaluation by the end of the week. The team says he's otherwise healthy.

Other revelations from Roenicke's first big media session as the man in charge:

He expects Brandon Workman to resume his closer role.

He can't comment on reports that the Red Sox are nearing a deal with free agent Kevin Pillar to be their fourth outfielder.

And he'd like every starting pitcher to pitch in six games this spring, a slightly increased workload when compared to the year before and one that he hopes will help the Red Sox avoid last year's slow start.

Otherwise, there wasn't much to report. The real news had come the previous two days when the blockbuster trade became official and Roenicke was promoted. It was the Dodgers' turn to have a press conference on Wednesday, introducing Betts and Price later in the day. Those two put on new jerseys and hats, held microphones in their hands and answered questions in the middle of Dodger Stadium.

Red Sox camp was far less interesting, which seemed welcome.

When Roenicke addressed the team in the morning, players said, it felt normal. He'd been in charge of spring training as the bench coach, and so there was nothing particularly special about him taking the lead on Wednesday. It was predictable. It was typical. It was a familiar melody, set to a brand new beat.

*** *The New York Times***

Without Betts and Cora, Ron Roenicke Embraces Red Sox's Challenges

Tyler Kepner

FORT MYERS, Fla. — When Ron Roenicke played his final major league game, for the Cincinnati Reds in 1988, his manager was serving a lengthy suspension. Pete Rose had shoved an umpire, forcing the league to take action. History has a way of repeating itself.

Roenicke, 63, is the new interim manager of the Boston Red Sox, taking the job less than 24 hours before the team's first workout for pitchers and catchers on Wednesday. Roenicke, who had been the team's bench coach, found his usual locker empty when he arrived at the Red Sox's spring training facility. His clothes had been moved to the old office of his former boss, Alex Cora.

Cora was fired — and is still facing the prospect of more punishment from M.L.B. — for his role in the Houston Astros' sign-stealing scheme, which helped them win the World Series in 2017, when he was a coach there. Cora won another title the next season, as Red Sox manager, but Boston fired him on Jan. 14 after Commissioner Rob Manfred cited him as instrumental to the Astros' operation.

The scandal cost two other managers their jobs: Houston's A.J. Hinch and the Mets' Carlos Beltran. The Astros hired Dusty Baker and the Mets promoted Luis Rojas to manager, but the Red Sox were the last to fill their vacancy for two reasons: They are also being investigated by M.L.B. over charges of sign-stealing in 2018, and they were busy trading their franchise player. This is the situation Roenicke inherited, on the eve of spring training workouts.

“You cannot replace Mookie Betts,” Roenicke said on Wednesday. “This is one of the best players I've seen. We're not going to do that. But other guys can pick up their game and we can still put it together and do the same kind of thing.”

Betts and starter David Price now play for the Los Angeles Dodgers — the team they helped beat in the 2018 World Series — as part of a protracted trade that was finalized on Monday. In return the Red Sox got salary relief and three players: outfielder Alex Verdugo, the infield prospect Jeter Downs and the catching prospect Connor Wong.

Downs — yes, his mother was a Derek Jeter fan — was about to leave from Miami for Dodgers camp when he was rerouted.

“I was on the way to the airport going to Arizona to report to spring training and they called me and told me what's happening,” Downs said. “It's pretty cool to be a part of something this big, but you've still got to go out and play baseball. I try not to think of it like that big of a deal.”

Roenicke with Alex Cora during Cora's first spring training as Red Sox manager, in 2018. Cora was fired in January over his role in the Houston Astros' sign-stealing scandal. Credit...John Minchillo/Associated Press

It was a big deal, of course, and it will reverberate for years. How will the prospects develop? How will ownership use the financial flexibility they have deemed so essential? The players' impact can at least be quantified, but what will the clubhouse miss about Cora, a young leader who had seemed to fit so well?

“Everything,” catcher Christian Vazquez said. “He brings a lot of good things to this team in his two years. He's a great person; he's my friend forever. I knew him before Boston, we've got a good relationship. But this is baseball.”

And these days, baseball is more complicated than ever, with the explosion of data emerging as a force for innovation but also temptation. Roenicke is less known for analytical savvy and more for a breadth of experience few peers can match. Only three major league managers — Baker, the Los Angeles Angels' Joe Maddon and the Atlanta Braves' Brian Snitker — are older.

Roenicke played for two World Series teams managed by Hall of Famers: Tommy Lasorda's 1981 Dodgers and Dick Williams's 1984 San Diego Padres. He coached for the Angels' championship team in 2002 and nearly won a pennant in 2011 with the Milwaukee Brewers, whose cornerstone, Ryan Braun, was later found to have failed a test for performance-enhancing drugs.

"I really enjoy challenges," Roenicke said. "The experiences make it way easier to get through the challenges. When I was in Milwaukee, going through the Ryan Braun thing with his suspension, that was half a year of basically every day answering questions about it.

"Knowing what the players feel like, going through different trials helps me to talk to them. The good thing about the players is, when you're younger, you're pretty resilient and you get through things way easier," he added. "You all know how I feel about Alex and I've said a lot about that, and these players certainly feel the same way. But they'll bounce out of this pretty quickly. They're so focused on what they need to do to get their game right that the outside stuff doesn't worry them."

Roenicke, likewise, said he was not concerned about potential club sanctions from M.L.B.'s investigation, and the Red Sox clearly do not expect him to face any personal discipline. The bigger question for Roenicke is how to wring more from a team that won only 84 games last season — and then traded away two stars.

The Dodgers deal seemed inevitable, in hindsight. Boston's principal owner, John Henry, said publicly that he hoped to reset the team's luxury tax rate, and hired a top lieutenant from the frugal Tampa Bay Rays, Chaim Bloom, to run baseball operations.

Roenicke brings continuity from the Cora years, and right field will not be barren without Betts: Verdugo has plenty of talent, and the veteran Kevin Pillar, a star defender, is headed to Boston as a free agent. But almost half of the 2018 World Series roster is gone now, and there is no replacing Betts's talent and soul.

Betts now plays at Dodger Stadium, where Vazquez jumped into Chris Sale's arms after the final out in 2018, but his six years in Boston leave a lasting imprint.

"He brought a lot of memories to us, all those years," Vazquez said. "He brought a World Series ring. He was a very special player for us. He's going to be a champion for life."

*** *The New York Post***

Ron Roenicke embraces pressure of fixing Red Sox mess

Greg Joyce

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Ron Roenicke walked into the Red Sox spring training complex Wednesday morning and went to his usual locker in the coaches' room.

His clothes were gone. Then he realized his belongings had been moved to the manager's office, his new home.

"So everything's still a little different for me," Roenicke said.

It's been that kind of offseason for the Red Sox, which was why they cherished Wednesday, when pitchers and catchers had their first workout. The sound of catcher's mitts popping during bullpen sessions, bats cracking during batting practice and even the minutiae of pitcher's fielding practice made things start to feel normal again.

“Just starting today and getting through a normal day, I think, is important,” Roenicke said. “I enjoyed today.”

It was just Monday that the Mookie Betts and David Price trade was finalized after it was dragged out in public for nearly a week. It was Tuesday when Roenicke was named interim manager, which came less than a month after the Red Sox fired Alex Cora for his role in the Astros’ 2017 sign-stealing program.

While MLB’s investigation into the Red Sox’s own alleged illegal sign stealing in 2018 still hangs over their heads, with the results not yet finalized, Wednesday was the first day that baseball — the actual product on the field — began to take over the conversation at Fenway South.

Roenicke handled his first (non-introductory) press conference as interim manager with aplomb. He was still asked about the investigation — he doesn’t want to comment while it’s ongoing — and replacing Betts and Price, but spent more time answering regular manager questions.

There were questions about Chris Sale, whose flu has turned into a mild case of pneumonia. The left-hander, who is trying to put together a bounce-back season and prove he can stay healthy after elbow issues last season, won’t report to camp until at least Friday and will have a slow start to spring training.

There was talk about who would hit leadoff — Andrew Benintendi and Alex Verdugo are candidates, Roenicke said. There was talk about who would be his closer — Brandon Workman deserves a shot to prove he can do it again this year, Roenicke said. There was talk about whether the Red Sox would use an opener, which new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom’s old team (the Rays) mastered. It’s possible, depending on whether somebody steps up to win the open fifth-starter spot, Roenicke said.

A baseball lifer, Roenicke was ready for all of the questions and handled them with ease.

“I honestly believe that if I didn’t have all that [experience], I wouldn’t be comfortable talking with you guys,” Roenicke said before a large horde of reporters. “I like questions, I really do. I’ve always liked questions. But it’s because I feel like I have answers for what I do, what goes on. So all those years and all the stuff that happened to me ... all of that set me up to coach and manage.”

Roenicke thought back to 2013, when he was managing the Brewers and Ryan Braun was suspended for using performance-enhancing drugs. He spent half the season answering daily questions about Braun, he said.

The challenge awaiting him now is different — leading an iconic franchise back from a brutal offseason — but baseball has finally begun again and Roenicke is embracing the pressure.

“I think that was one of the discussions I had when I was interviewing,” he said. “Because all the stuff that I’ve done in the past, I think it really helps me to deal with what’s going to happen through the season. I know I’m going to get tough questions all year, I understand that. But I really enjoy challenges. The experiences make it way easier to get through the challenges that happen.”

*** *The USA Today***

After strange winter, Red Sox gather for camp without Mookie Betts: 'It's going to hurt for a while'

Bob Nightengale

FORT MYERS, Fla. — They were on the other side of the country but their presence Wednesday morning at JetBlue Park was overwhelming.

There wasn’t a single Boston Red Sox player or employee who wasn’t asked about Mookie Betts and David Price at their first spring training workout.

“He’s one of the greatest players to ever wear our uniform,” new Red Sox GM Chaim Bloom softly said when cornered on a back practice field, “and that makes it really difficult to do something like this.

“We feel that. We know our fans feel that. We know it hurts. We know it’s going to hurt for awhile.”

New manager Ron Roenicke discussed Betts as if he were mourning the loss of a loved one.

“You can not replace Mookie Betts,” he said. “This is one of the best players I’ve ever seen.”

The Red Sox say they want to move on, trying to tell themselves they can be America’s underdogs, believing they will be cleared when Major League Baseball releases the findings of its investigation into whether Boston was illegally stealing signs.

“I was shocked, shocked,” Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez said. “Mookie is one of the best players in the league. He bought a lot of memories to us. He brought us a World Series ring. He’s a very special player for us. He’s going to be a champion for life, so he’s going to be missed here. ...

“It’s tough, but the Red Sox pay us to play baseball, not control that other stuff. We have to keep fighting together as a family, and stick together.”

They’ve got no choice.

There’s still a season to be played.

A passionate fanbase to appease.

And skeptics to be proven wrong.

“We can lay in the weeds and have people count us out,” Red Sox reliever Heath Hembree said, “nothing to lose I guess. We know the outside expectations may look a little different based on guys that aren’t here this year, but the expectations here are still to win.”

Still, the pain is too fresh to go away overnight.

You don’t trade one of the greatest outfielders in the game and a former Cy Young pitcher and act like it’s just another spring training opening day.

“Even though I didn’t get a chance to know him,” said Bloom, who was hired in November to replace David Dombrowski, “I know how it feels to be that connected to a player. To feel that connected to a great player, and how difficult it is to see that player leave the organization, I fully get all that. ...

“We just felt at the end of the day our jobs are to do what’s best for the Red Sox, not just for today, but also down the road. We have that duty to our fans to make sure we’re taking care of the long view of the organization as well.

“So, as tough as it was, we felt this move accomplished that.”

The Red Sox got outfielder Alex Verdugo and two mid-range prospects in return, but the reality was that it was a money dump, saving them \$75 million over the next three seasons, including \$43 million in 2020. They could have procured one of the Dodgers’ elite prospects if the Red Sox didn’t include Price in the deal, but they wanted his contract off the books.

Red Sox relief pitcher Darwinzon Hernandez works out in Fort Myers on Tuesday.

Price may not have been the headliner in the deal, but for Bloom, it was just as painful as losing Betts. You see, he knows Price well from their days together in Tampa. Bloom was part of the front-office regime that

traded Price from the Rays to the Detroit Tigers on July 31, 2014, and the anguish was just as painful this time.

“David is as fierce a competitor as I’ve ever been around,” Bloom said. “There is nothing you’d put past him between the lines. He holds himself to such a high standard. Obviously, he put this team on his back in the 2018 postseason.

“I was not here at the time, but knowing how much he cares and to see him do it on the biggest stage, was really cool.”

Now, all that’s left are the memories, and the Red Sox’s hopes of carving out a legacy with their new players.

The most comical scene Wednesday surrounded infield prospect Jeter Downs, acquired from the Dodgers, who became an overnight fan favorite and media darling, named after a certain Yankee icon who’s going to be inducted into the Hall of Fame in July.

“Hey Jeter!” one fan yelled. “You’re better than Derek!”

If nothing else, one day, there really will be a Jeter cheered at Fenway Park.

“You get bombarded with this whole name thing,” said Downs, who grew up a Yankee fan with his father a Red Sox fan. “It’s pretty cool to be traded for arguably a top-five player in the game. I guess my mom knew what she was doing when she named me Jeter. She just liked how he was, the way he played the game, so she gave me the name.

“I obviously have the same name, so I kind of had to be a fan of his.”

Strange times, indeed. It’s going to take time for the adjustments to settle in. A Jeter in the Red Sox clubhouse. Longtime Toronto Blue Jays outfielder Kevin Pillar soon to join him. A Rays executive who is now their boss.

And their bench coach, Roenicke, who now is their manager.

Roenicke, who has run the Red Sox spring training camp the past two years, hardly was overwhelmed on his first day on the job, not with 26 years of experience as a coach and manager.

Still, when he showed up for work at his locker in the coaches’ room, he was stunned to find it empty. Sorry, he was told, but his clothes now are in the manager’s office.

“Obviously, it’s cool,” Roenicke, 63, said. “But the circumstances are so different on how all of this happened. It’s still pretty quick. It’s still getting used to everything.

“Getting through a normal day was important.”

Maybe the Red Sox players will be resilient and can put aside the tumultuous winter.

“We can’t believe it happened, man,” Red Sox pitcher Martin Perez said, “but that’s baseball. That’s business. What are you going to do?”

*** *The Naples Daily News***

New-look Red Sox arrive to camp with lofty expectations intact

Andrew Sodergren

The Boston Red Sox squad that took the practice fields at Fenway South for its first official spring workout of 2020 looks vastly different than the defending World Series championship team that reported a year ago.

There's no Mookie Betts or David Price, traded this week to the Los Angeles Dodgers. Manager Alex Cora is also gone, with he and the team mutually parting ways last month in the wake of the Houston Astros sign-stealing scandal. A separate investigation on the 2018 Red Sox is still ongoing. Bench coach Ron Roenicke was named as the team's interim manager Tuesday.

In the midst of an 84-78 season last year, general manager Dave Dombrowski was dismissed and eventually replaced by 36-year-old Chaim Bloom, a longtime executive with the Tampa Bay Rays.

"I don't think it's fair to put it on any one player to make up for Mookie's production offensively," Roenicke said. "And it doesn't have to be Verdugo either. If (Andrew Benintendi) picks up his production from last year. If (Jackie Bradley Jr.) is better this year. I think the combination of everybody – (Xander Bogaerts) had a fantastic year, (Rafael Devers) had a fantastic year – it's hard to ask them to do any more than what they did but the combination of everyone just doing a little bit more will help us.

"You cannot replace Mookie Betts. He's one of the best players I've seen, but other guys can pick up their game, and we can still put it all together."

With all the changes and uncertainty surrounding the team, veteran Red Sox players expressed excitement over the upcoming season.

"The expectations are always the same," catcher Christian Vazquez said. "The mental part, we need to stay focused, continue to work hard and keep winning."

The choice of Roenicke to replace Cora was a good one, according to Vazquez and relief pitcher Heath Hembree. Cora was extremely well-liked in the clubhouse, and so is Roenicke.

"We love (Roenicke), he's been here the last few years," Hembree said. "We've gotten to know him really well the last couple years. He was with us when we are at the top of the game (in 2018), and he was with us when we weren't at our best last year. He has a really good sense about the club. He understands the pulse of the team.

"We're excited to move forward with him. I know we're missing some key pieces from the last couple years, but the situation is what it is and we're excited to have him at the helm."

Boston still has plenty of talent remaining, including ace pitcher and FGCU product Chris Sale. Coming off an injury-shortened 2019 campaign, Sale was absent Wednesday due to illness.

"If our guys stay healthy, we're going to be fine as a pitching staff," Vazquez said. "We've got Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, (Nathan) Eovaldi, Martin Perez. We'll be fine."

Roenicke said the Red Sox could use the opener strategy employed by Bloom with the Rays the last two years should a fifth starter not emerge. But he also added he had plenty of faith in the pitchers in camp vying for that fifth starter role. Those options include Ryan Weber and Hector Velazquez, but there are no current plans to move young fire-balling lefty Darwinzon Hernandez into the rotation.

"I think the opener is a possibility when you don't have your five guys that you really like," Roenicke said. "Obviously, Chaim is very familiar with it and in talking to him about it, it wasn't like 'this is what we want to do.' It's more like, what's the best personnel we have and what's the best way we can get these guys to perform at the level where we hope they can be. And we may use the opener, but (Bloom) is also OK if we find that fifth guy. So we just need to see where we are at the end of camp and go from there."

Sale sidelined with pneumonia

Sale is getting a late start to spring training, but not due to arm trouble.

Roenicke said Sale has been battling the flu for nearly two weeks and recently was diagnosed with a mild case of pneumonia.

"It actually sounds a lot worse than it is," Roenicke said. "He's actually feeling really good and he told me he got a good night's sleep last night, so he was really happy with the way things were going."

Roenicke said Sale threw a bullpen session Tuesday and planned to play catch Wednesday, and that his arm "feels great." Sale is expected to be re-evaluated by the team's medical staff Friday and could participate in workouts if he's cleared.

Jeter's in camp with Red Sox
There's a Jeter in camp with the Red Sox.

No, not that one.

Infielder Jeter Downs, one of the prospects acquired in the Betts-Price deal, faced the Boston media for the first time prior to Wednesday's workout. He said his mom named him after Derek Jeter, the longtime Yankees star and Red Sox nemesis recently elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Nice name, kid: Red Sox prospect Jeter Downs has tough name to live up to

"My mom loved Derek Jeter, how he was and how he played the game," Downs said. "I can't even count how many people have asked me (about the name) over the years. Obviously, I have the name so I had to be a fan of his. I idolized him and how he played the game, the things he did — how he's respected by every single team."

Downs, a Miami native and graduate of Monsignor Pace High School, is ranked the 44th overall prospect in the game by MLB.com. A natural shortstop, Downs is expected to slide over to second base with the Red Sox. Splitting time between Class A-Advanced Rancho Cucamonga and Double-A Tulsa, Downs batted .276 with 35 doubles, 24 homers, 86 RBI and 24 stolen bases last year.

Downs said he was on his way to the airport for a flight to Arizona where the Dodgers train when he got the call he was traded to the Red Sox.

"It's pretty cool to be part of something this big," Downs said about the trade. "But at the end of the day, you've still got to go out there and play baseball. I'm try not to make too big a deal about it and just focus on what I need to do on the field."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Boston Red Sox spring training workouts

WHEN: 10 a.m. daily until games start

WHERE: JetBlue Park at Fenway South

NOTES: Workouts are free and open to the public. First full-squad workout scheduled for Monday, with pitchers and catchers in camp this week. The team is hosting an open house inside the main ballpark Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Spring training games begin Friday, Feb. 21 with a home contest against Northeastern University.

*** Associated Press**

Red Sox to send Dodgers \$48M in 18 installments over 3 years

NEW YORK (AP) — The Boston Red Sox will make their \$48 million in payments to the Los Angeles Dodgers as part of the David Price and Mookie Betts trade in 18 equal installments over the next three years.

Boston will send Los Angeles \$2,666,667 on the 15th of each month from April through September in 2020, 2021 and 2022 as part of the deal announced Monday, according to details obtained by The Associated Press.

The \$48 million is equal to half of what Price is owed for the remainder of the \$217 million, seven-year contract he agreed to with Boston ahead of the 2016 season. He is due \$32 million in each of the next three seasons.

Betts has a \$27 million salary this year and is eligible for free agency.

Boston's net savings of \$43 million this year — Betts' salary and half of Price's — drops the team's projected luxury tax payroll below the \$208 million threshold. The Red Sox paid \$11.95 million in tax following their World Series title in 2018 and \$13.4 million in tax after missing the playoffs last year.

If the Red Sox exceed the threshold for the third straight season, they would pay at a 50% rate on the first \$20 million over, a 62% rate on the amount over \$228 million and a 95% rate on the amount above \$248 million.

As part of the trade, Boston acquired outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher-infielder Connor Wong.

Roenicke's first day brings news: Sale has pneumonia

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Ron Roenicke went to his usual locker in the Red Sox clubhouse at the team's spring training complex Wednesday morning and found that his clothes were all gone.

They had been moved to the manager's office.

On his first day since being promoted to interim manager, Roenicke said it was taking him a bit to get used to being the boss. While wandering the fields during the workout, he had to remind himself that he couldn't just help out hitting grounders or wherever an extra hand was needed; he needed to be with the pitchers, monitoring their bullpen sessions.

“That part I forgot,” he said. “I’m doing my thing and then I’m like, ‘Oh, I probably shouldn’t be here.’”

Roenicke was given the job Tuesday, the day pitchers and catchers reported, to replace the well-liked Alex Cora, who was shoved out the door after he was identified as the ringleader in a sign-stealing scheme from when he was in Houston. Major League Baseball is still investigating whether Cora implemented a similar program in Boston, and Roenicke will be considered interim until he is cleared in that probe.

Although the former Milwaukee Brewers manager has experience in the job and two years as Cora's bench coach, he acknowledged he wasn't completely up to speed. Asked about a player who wasn't on the team's major league roster, he apologized for not having a report.

“Remember, I just got the job yesterday,” he said. “I’m not on board with everything that’s happening so far. But quickly, I’ll have a good idea of everything.”

The biggest setback was the news that Chris Sale, who had been getting over the flu, has a mild case of pneumonia. Roenicke, who had just overcome a bout with the flu himself, said it didn't stop the 30-year-old left-hander from throwing 60 pitches Tuesday, with plans for another 60 on Wednesday.

“He’s actually feeling really good,” Roenicke said.

With Mookie Betts and David Price traded to Los Angeles, Sale may be the most important player for the Red Sox success this season. The seven-time All-Star, who finished in the top 10 of the Cy Young voting every full season until 2019, is coming off an elbow injury for which Tommy John surgery was discussed -- but avoided.

That limited him to career-worst of a 6-11 record, 4.40 ERA and 25 starts lasting 147 1/3 innings.

“It’s concerning because he worked so hard to get himself to this point,” Roenicke said. “We’re going to go easy when he comes back.”

Also Wednesday, Roenicke said:

--Since taking the top job he hadn’t been in contact with second baseman Dustin Pedroia, who had a setback in his knee injury rehabilitation. The 2008 AL MVP played just nine games over the past two seasons while trying to come back from the injury from May 2017.

“I’ll find out what he’s thinking,” Roenicke said.

--The closer’s job is Brandon Workman’s to lose. The 31-year-old righty was the most reliable arm in the bullpen after Craig Kimbrel was allowed to leave as a free agent following the 2018 World Series championship.

Workman was 10-1 with a 1.88 ERA and 16 of the team’s 33 saves.

“I think what he did last year, he deserves a shot to be the closer,” Roenicke said.

Red Sox prospect Jeter Downs has tough name to live up to

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Carrying one of the most hated sports names in Boston is already enough of a burden, so Jeter Downs won’t also try to be the guy who replaces Mookie Betts.

The former Dodgers prospect, who was named after Hall of Famer Derek Jeter by his Yankees-loving mother, was acquired in the deal that sent Betts to Los Angeles on the eve of spring training.

And he knew the question was coming.

“Obviously, I’m going to get bombarded with this whole name thing,” he said in the Red Sox clubhouse Wednesday before the team’s first formal workout of spring training. “It’s pretty cool. And I guess my mom, she knew what she was doing when she named me Jeter.”

The 21-year-old infielder was the No. 3 prospect in the Dodgers organization and the second son in his family. His older brother was named after their father, so when he was born, it was their mother’s turn.

“She just loved Jeter and how he was and the way he played the game. So she gave me the name,” Jeter Downs said. “I obviously had the name, so I kind of had to be a fan of his. I idolize him -- just the way he played, the way he went about the game and the things he did and stuff like that, how he was respected by every single team.

“I don’t care like what team you’re from,” Downs said. “It’s just cool to watch a guy like that play the game and grow, you know.”

Downs said he has never met his namesake, though he did pull up next to him at a stoplight once while on his way to work out. They connected through a friend and spoke on FaceTime for a few minutes.

“I idolized him my whole life,” Downs said. “So then finally, you get to meet him and talk to him a little bit -- it was definitely special.”

The trade reunited Downs with his older brother, Jerry, a 15th-round pick by the Red Sox in 2015 who made it as far as Double-A last season. Playing on the same team was something Jeter Downs would lie in bed and dream about, he said.

“I was playing catch with him and I was just like, ‘Wow, we’re wearing the same uniform.’ It’s pretty surreal that things have turned around this way,” he said. “We always mentioned, ‘Oh it would be pretty cool to play with you, or be on the same team with you.’ But you didn’t think of it that far. And now it’s come to fruition? It’s pretty interesting.”

A shortstop and second baseman who split time between Single- and Double-A last season, Jeter Downs came to the Red Sox with outfielder Alex Verdugo and minor league catcher Connor Wong for Betts and David Price. The deal was a salary dump for the Red Sox, who were willing to part with MVP and Cy Young winners to get under the collective bargaining tax threshold for 2020.

Downs was on his way to the Miami airport to fly to Dodgers camp in Glendale, Arizona, when he got word that he should instead head across the state to the Red Sox complex in Fort Myers.

“It’s cool to be traded for arguably a top five player in the game,” he said. “But it doesn’t mean anything if I don’t go out and do my job. So I still think I’ve got to go out and perform, and play well and things can be talked about after.”

Downs hit .276 with 24 homers, 86 RBIs and 24 stolen bases last year. With shortstop Xander Bogaerts signed long term in Boston, Downs will try to work his way up to the majors at second base.

If he makes it, Boston crowds could be cheering for a player named Jeter.

“I’m sure he’ll hear a lot about that,” Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke said.

And, if that’s too difficult for the Fenway fans, they could always take a tip from Jerry Downs Sr., who’s been doing it for 21 years.

“My dad was actually a Red Sox fan,” he said. “So he’s so happy that both of us are here now.”