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*** *The Boston Globe***

Andrew Benintendi looking for a bounceback season

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — In the wake of his disappointing 2019 season, one number in particular made Andrew Benintendi wince: 140.

That was how many times Benintendi struck out last season, blowing away his previous career high. He made a U-turn to the dugout following a strikeout at the conclusion of 22.8 percent of his plate appearances in 2019, up from 16 percent in 2018.

The whiff spike was shocking for a player whose tremendous hand-eye coordination and natural ability to barrel the ball had led to projections of a potential batting champion as he was coming through the minors and early in his big league career.

“It felt like a complete 180 of who I thought I was,” Benintendi reflected.

The 25-year-old finished 2019 with a .266 average, .343 OBP, .431 slugging mark, 13 homers, and 10 steals, a painful drop from the 2018 season (.290/.366/.465 with 16 homers and 21 steals) that Benintendi views as more representative of his abilities. That player is the one the Red Sox need the left fielder to be in 2020, as the team moved forward without Mookie Betts.

So, what happened? Some evaluators believe that amid baseball’s offensive explosion, Benintendi was selling out his clean, simple swing in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to generate more power. Benintendi doesn’t agree with such a view.

“I think it was overall just a bad year,” said Benintendi. “In the end, for me, [trying to swing for] more power — I don’t know, I’m 5-foot-9, 180 pounds, and it’s the biggest right field in baseball. I’m not going to be hitting a bunch of homers at Fenway.”

Benintendi suggests he’s happy to live with regular hard contact that yields singles and doubles, and doesn’t use the number of times he clears the fences as a barometer of performance. In 2019, however, Benintendi believes that his struggles related to a loss of discipline and an inability to limit his swings to pitches in the strike zone.

“What really hurt me last year was just swinging at pitches out of the zone, trying to chase,” said Benintendi.

Certainly, Benintendi did see a marked increase in the number of pitches he attacked in 2019. He swung at more pitches inside the zone but, as he suggested, there was also a marked increase in the number of pitches he chased out of the zone, a number that spiked from 27.0 percent in 2018 to 33.6 percent in 2019. That is not a recipe for hard contact.

Nonetheless, Benintendi’s struggles last year may have run deeper than his inability to narrow the strike zone. He swung and missed far more frequently not only at pitches outside the strike zone but those inside of it. That easy ability to put the ball in play and to shoot liners all over the field disappeared.

His offense wasn't the only part of his game that suffered. Benintendi's defense also took a hit. Statcast measures "Outs Above Average," a measure of the number of plays an outfielder makes relative to his average peer based on the time a ball is in the air and the distance an outfielder must travel to catch it.

In 2018, Benintendi ranked as a roughly league average outfielder (one out below average, per the metric) — a strong number for a left fielder. In 2019, Benintendi delivered 10 fewer outs than an average player based on his opportunities — sixth worst among 92 qualifying outfielders.

The Sox are hopeful that Benintendi has positioned himself for a bounceback season. After dealing with a number of injuries that he described as "self-inflicted" at the beginning and end of the year — mostly a remarkable run of foul balls off of his feet and legs — he is rested and healthy. Moreover, interim manager Ron Roenicke believes that Benintendi is in better physical condition than a year ago, and thus is positioned to let his natural athleticism make more of an impact.

"He's in better shape," said Roenicke. "He comes to spring training realizing he needs to be heavy because he always loses weight and doesn't want to get too thin. But this year, he came lighter. Hopefully he can keep the weight on, but I think [the lighter weight] will help his running. It will help everything."

Additionally, Benintendi believes he did the work this offseason to position himself for a more familiar performance at the plate. Hitting coach Tim Hyers and assistant Peter Fatse went twice to St. Louis to work with Benintendi during the offseason. He also spent more time facing live pitching this winter than the previous one in hopes of sharpening his selectivity and timing.

How those efforts translate remains to be seen — and will have a considerable impact on what kind of offense the Red Sox feature in 2020.

"I've just got to learn to bounce back," said Benintendi. "It's a new year. What's in the past is in the past and I'm just looking forward."

Red Sox' Dustin Pedroia won't report for first spring training workout

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Dustin Pedroia, who continues to experience soreness in his left knee following last month's setback in the rehab process, won't report to Fort Myers for Monday's initial full-squad workout.

"The setback is still there," said interim manager Ron Roenicke, who spoke by phone with the veteran second baseman Wednesday.

There is a sense of sadness among members of the team that Pedroia will be absent for at least the start of camp.

"The mind can only take you so far," said Jackie Bradley Jr. "Obviously you want to have a strong mind, but sometimes the body fails. That's OK. It's part of living. I think he's going to move forward and see what's next.

"It's tough. You never want to hear when someone has a setback, especially a player of his caliber and what he means not only to this team but this organization. He's special. Hopefully we get to see him soon."

Eduardo Rodriguez loses his arbitration case

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, FLA. — It's been quite a week for Eduardo Rodriguez.

The Red Sox lefthander left JetBlue Park Tuesday to fly to Arizona for his Wednesday arbitration hearing, took a flight back to Miami Wednesday afternoon, drove across the state, and arrived in Fort Myers at roughly 3 a.m. Thursday. After a few hours of sleep, he returned to the Sox clubhouse Thursday and threw a bullpen session.

His reward for those cross-country adventures? News that the arbitration panel had ruled in favor of the team in the hearing, resulting in an \$8.3 million salary for Rodriguez this season as opposed to the \$8.975 million that he sought.

Rodriguez is the only Red Sox player to go to an arbitration hearing this year.

Waiting for Pedroia

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On his own for now

Chris Sale is continuing to throw on flat ground away from JetBlue Park while recovering from what the team described as a mild case of pneumonia. Sale will be examined Friday to determine whether he is ready to rejoin the team . . . Roenicke said he was comfortable with Michael Chavis at either first or second base, and that he wouldn't be discouraged about using the 24-year-old against lefties simply on the basis of his low average and OBP against southpaws in his rookie season. In 2019, the righthanded hitter hit .266/.347/.427 against righties and .226/.261/.481 against lefties.

Cheating cloud hangs over baseball, Astros — and Red Sox

Dan Shaughnessy

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Baseball's cheating scandal just keeps getting worse. And the Red Sox have it hanging over their heads as they go to work on a season made more difficult by the salary dump of Mookie Betts and David Price.

The cheating Houston Astros — who have shot past the Patriots as the most hated team in America — conducted a hideous press conference in West Palm Beach Thursday that left more questions than answers.

Astros owner Jim Crane spoke, as did new manager Dusty Baker, and we listened to brief prepared statements from Alex Bregman and Jose Altuve, two of the cheating 'Stros who won a World Series in 2017 while employing an electronic sign-stealing system that regularly allowed their hitters to know what pitch was coming.

All of baseball has been shaken since the commissioner's report stained the Astros on Jan. 13. Houston manager A.J. Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow were immediately fired by Crane and one day later the Red Sox parted ways with beloved manager Alex Cora because of his vast contributions to the Astros'

shenanigans. Then the Mets dumped manager Carlos Beltran, who'd been a ringleader player on the '17 Astros.

Meanwhile, the Red Sox wait for the commissioner to rule on an investigation into their 2018 championship season. That probe was launched Jan. 7 after three unnamed sources told The Athletic that the 2018 Sox were violating electronic sign-stealing rules by using the in-house video replay room to learn sign sequences and relay information.

Commissioner Rob Manfred said last week that he hoped to issue his report on the Red Sox before the start of spring training, but he did not meet that deadline. Consequently, Sox players, coaches, and officials are asked daily if any rule-breaking was going on within the walls of Fenway when the Red Sox won 119 games and the World Series in 2018.

Outfielder Andrew Benintendi joined the chorus line of Boston champs who insist they were clean.

"All of us are confident in what's going to come out," Benintendi said Thursday. "We know that we didn't do anything."

This is what we've gotten from J.D. Martinez, Rafael Devers, Jackie Bradley Jr., and interim manager Ron Roenicke, who was bench coach of the '18 Sox under Cora.

Meanwhile, there is chaos across Baseball America. Pete Rose is clamoring to be allowed into the Hall of Fame (Pete's case gets better every day), a couple of class-action suits have been filed by fantasy sports bettors, former Toronto pitcher Mike Bolsinger is suing the Astros for ending his career, and a lot of folks in Los Angeles think the Astros should be stripped of their 2017 World Series championship.

Taking away a title is a slippery slope, but I no longer think it's preposterous. Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis set precedent by not vacating the results of the 1919 World Series, in which Chicago White Sox players took money to lose to the Cincinnati Reds. Manfred similarly did not choose to alter championship history.

But the more we hear, the worse it gets for Houston and for baseball. The notion that Astros players had electronic buzzers under their uniforms seemed silly and Internet-driven until I saw Hinch dodge the question in an interview with MLB Network's Tom Verducci. Given the chance to say that the buzzer theory was nonsense, Hinch cited MLB's finding and said he agreed. On Wednesday, Hinch clarified his non-answer, saying he never saw anything like that anywhere in baseball.

More clarifications and better answers will be sought in the wake of Thursday's nationally televised press conference in West Palm.

This is what we got from Bregman: "I have some brief remarks that I'd like to share with y'all. I am really sorry about the choices that were made by my team, by the organization, and by me. I have learned from this and I hope to regain the trust of baseball fans.

"I would also like to thank the Astros fans for all of their support. We as a team are totally focused on moving forward to the 2020 season. Thank you."

From Altuve: "I also will be brief. We had a great team meeting last night and I want to say that the whole Astros organization and the team feels bad about what happened in 2017. We especially feel remorse for the impact on our fans and the game of baseball.

"And our team is determined to move forward to play with intensity and to bring back a championship to Houston in 2020. Thank you."

Admitting his team broke rules, Crane said, "Our opinion is that this didn't impact the game. And we won the World Series." He later amended that to, "I didn't say it didn't impact the game, but it's hard to tell."

Asked if his team “cheated,” Crane said, “We broke the rules. You can phrase that any way you want . . . The championship stays intact and I agree with it . . . I don’t feel it necessary to reach out to the Dodgers.”

Asked if he deserved punishment, Crane said, “No, I don’t think I should be held accountable.”

What about the players?

“Players are not accountable,” said the owner. “Leaders are accountable.” Presumably, he means Hinch and Luhnow.

“We’re not going to do anything to the players . . . Players should not be punished for the failures of our leadership . . . These are a great group of guys who did not receive proper guidance from their leaders.”

When asked if his team won a championship because of their rule-breaking, Crane allowed, “Fair question.”

According to reports, Astros players were apologetic when the locker room opened. At least five denied the buzzer theory. And all of them held that their championship is not tainted.

Manfred is making himself available to reporters in Florida Sunday and in Arizona Tuesday. His findings on the investigation into the 2018 Red Sox are expected next week.

Red Sox ownership has asked all to “reserve judgment” regarding potential violations in 2018.

I don’t believe the Sox in 2018 were involved in anything close to what the Astros were doing in 2017, but their timing isn’t good. In the wake of nonstop blowback from the Houston scandal, nobody wants to be the next team under investigation.

Given the Apple Watch scam in 2017 (when the Red Sox were caught red-handed and slapped on the wrist), and Cora’s place on the bench in 2018, it’s hard to believe the Sox come out totally clean in Manfred’s report. And the commissioner — already looking inept and weak — can ill afford any perception that he cut a deal with or is going easy on the Boston Red Sox.

New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo may miss the start of the season

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Newly acquired Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo may not be ready for the start of the season.

According to major league sources, Verdugo’s availability for Opening Day is in question because of a back injury that contributed to his inability to play for the Dodgers after early August last season.

The issue was known during negotiations between the Red Sox and Dodgers about the deal that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to Los Angeles in exchange for Verdugo and prospects Jeter Downs and Connor Wong.

The Red Sox did not view the issue as a significant long-term concern when they examined Verdugo’s medical history prior to completing the trade. They will wait to make a more precise evaluation of his timetable once he can be seen by their medical staff.

It remains possible that the 23-year-old outfielder will be ready to start the season. That said, the Red Sox are prepared to take a conservative approach, believing that a small number of games missed early in the year is better than a substantial stretch on the sideline if he is rushed into the lineup.

Verdugo told MLB.com in December that he had a goal of being ready for Opening Day after last year's injuries, but acknowledged that wasn't a certainty.

"I think anybody that's had something wrong with your back would understand," Verdugo told the website. "I'm going in the right direction. My goal is to be starting Opening Day. We'll just see how the days and weeks go and how I recover."

Verdugo hit .294/.342/.475 with 12 homers in 106 games as a rookie for the Dodgers last year. Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said Verdugo may be a consideration for the leadoff spot when healthy.

The possibility of Verdugo missing time has contributed to the Red Sox' interest in free agent outfielder Kevin Pillar, though they already viewed him as a strong fit for their roster. The Sox have three primary outfielders — Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., and Verdugo — who are lefthanded, making a righthanded-hitting complement capable of strong defense at all three positions a natural fit.

Pillar hit .259/.287/.432 with 21 homers and 14 steals in 161 games for the Giants last year, posting more impressive marks of .278/.305/.519 against lefties. Pillar, who became a free agent this winter when the Giants opted not to tender the arbitration-eligible player a contract, has agreed to a one-year deal in the \$4 million range with the Sox for 2020. His deal could become official as soon as this weekend, pending his arrival in camp and a physical.

"He's going to help the team win," said Bradley. "I respect him, period, as a player. He can play the game at a high level, is very talented, and can help a ball club on both sides of the ball."

A first attempt at projecting the Red Sox' Opening Day roster

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Predicting the Red Sox roster was a relatively easy task the last few years. Outside of a few spots in the bullpen, you knew who was going to make the team.

Dave Dombrowski built rosters from the top down, and that worked when the Sox won the 2018 World Series. But Chaim Bloom works from the middle out. He wants a deeper base of talent and roster flexibility.

Bloom has been on the job only since late October. But he already has filled 10 spots on the 40-man roster with players from outside the organization. It will be 11 once the Sox finish off their deal with outfielder Kevin Pillar.

There are surely more to come as Bloom works the margins to add more talent.

That makes it difficult to pick a team at the start of camp. But it's a fun exercise, so why not?

So here is Version 1 of picking the 26-man Opening Day roster:

CATCHER (2): Christian Vazquez, Kevin Plawecki.

Explanation: This is one position that should be pretty straightforward, barring injury.

INFIELD (6): Xander Bogaerts (SS), Rafael Devers (3B), Mitch Moreland (1B), Jose Peraza (2B), Michael Chavis (UT), Tzu-Wei Lin (UT).

Explanation: With Dustin Pedroia again headed to the injured list, Peraza becomes the latest second baseman. Chavis can play first, second, third, and eventually probably some outfield. Lin stayed on the 40-man roster all winter, so they see something in him.

You can expect Bobby Dalbec and C.J. Chatham to get consideration, but they're more likely to be in-season callups for service-time purposes.

OUTFIELD (5): Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., J.D. Martinez, Kevin Pillar, Alex Verdugo.

Explanation: Assuming the Sox finalize a deal with Pillar in the coming days, this is a solid group even without Mookie Betts. It wouldn't be much of a shock if Bradley gets traded before the season. The Sox lack outfield depth in Triple A, so there aren't many options here. But John Andreoli (from St. John's High via UConn) could get a look.

ROTATION (5): LHP Chris Sale, LHP Eduardo Rodriguez, RHP Nate Eovaldi, LHP Martin Perez, RHP Ryan Weber.

Explanation: The guess here is that Bloom will find a No. 5 starter via trade, free agency, or waiver claim. But for now we'll go with Weber. Or the Sox could try an opener. But with 20 games in 21 days to open the season, that would strain the bullpen.

Eduardo Rodriguez prepares to throw a bullpen session Thursday.

Eduardo Rodriguez prepares to throw a bullpen session Thursday. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

BULLPEN (8): RHP Brandon Workman, RHP Matt Barnes, LHP Josh Taylor, RHP Ryan Brasier, LHP Darwinzon Hernandez, RHP Colten Brewer, RHP Austin Brice, LHP Josh Osich,

Explanation: This is where it gets tricky. Heath Hembree is on the fence and Brasier could be, too. Brice and Osich are newcomers the Sox believe can help right away. Outside of Workman, Barnes, and Taylor, nothing can be too certain. Hernandez showed great potential last season but still has to earn a spot.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox 1B/2B Michael Chavis has the attitude and potential to replace Dustin Pedroia

Jason Mastrodonato

A legend is on his way out, but an exciting young player will soon be taking his place.

The Dustin Pedroia era appears to be coming to an end for the Red Sox, a saddening reality that players and coaches are starting to grapple with.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke announced on Thursday that Pedroia will not be in Fort Myers by the official reporting date on Monday. The Sox don't know when and if he'll be coming at all. Nothing is official, and Pedroia isn't known to give up, but the latest setback to his troubled knee could be the final hurdle for the franchise icon.

For the Red Sox, Pedroia's position should be in good hands.

"Literally my biggest fear is not living up to my potential," said motivated 24-year-old Michael Chavis. "That's really deep. But that's my biggest fear, not living up to my potential."

Chavis' rookie season was as exciting as they come. He made his big league debut last April, getting called up unexpectedly due to a sudden need at second, a position he'd barely played. Former Sox boss Dave Dombrowski didn't think it would last, explaining that Chavis was likely to be in the big leagues only temporarily, then return to the minors for more development.

Because of travel issues, he arrived late to his major league debut at Tropicana Field, then came through with a key double off the bench against Jose Alvarado, who had yet to allow a run in his first 10 games. The ball was crushed to the wall in the ninth inning, eventually leading the Sox to a 6-5 win over the Rays.

Through his first 14 games, Chavis hit .354 with six homers and 13 RBIs.

Most importantly, he handled second base better than most would have anticipated.

Asked Thursday how he expects to use Chavis in 2020, Roenicke made it clear that the former top prospect is going to be a regular contributor.

“Certainly with some of the platoon (with Mitch Moreland) at first,” Roenicke said. “But because he’s such a good offensive player, and for putting him in defensively at second base, basically learning how to play second in the big leagues, I thought he did a really good job. So we’re not going to hesitate putting him at second.”

Moreland, 34, is “not going to play 140 games anymore,” Roenicke said.

“When (Chavis) is swinging the bat well, he’s going to get more playing time, whether it’s at first or second,” the skipper said. “He’s going to be out there. When he’s performing the way he can, like when he first came up last year, he was so hot and you wanted him in the lineup.”

After the hot start, Chavis cooled off, hit a slump and then rebounded, finishing his rookie year hitting .254 with 18 homers and 58 RBIs in 95 games.

“I was learning different things, trying different things, pitchers adjusting to me, trying to learn how the scouting reports worked, understand how I’m being viewed by other pitchers,” he said Thursday from his locker at JetBlue Park.

Always introspective, he frequently mentions his journal when evaluating his past performance and future hopes.

What kind of player does he think he’s capable of being in the big leagues?

“That’s a tough question,” he said. “I guess the best way to do that would be a player comparison. I don’t really have a comparison. I’ve been compared to different players coming up. But I kind of approach it more so like, I’m aware of the tools I have and I want to maximize them.

“What I write in my journal all the time is, ‘I want to become the best player I can possibly be.’ Not sure exactly what that is in regard to comparisons, but that’s kind of just what I think about it.”

Roenicke sees Chavis as an impact player, not a platoon player, and doesn’t buy into his reverse splits from ’19. The power potential is sky-high. And Chavis is both quick and athletic in the field.

The Sox haven’t yet told him if he’ll play any outfield this year, so he could make himself at home at first and second base.

Adjusting to scouting reports is the final challenge.

“Nobody hits the fastball at the top of the zone, maybe (Xander Bogaerts), but there aren’t many, and so if you’re not really good at this pitch, which hardly anybody is, you really have to lay off it,” Roenicke said when examining Chavis’ weakness. “So it’s more the discipline part of it, because most of those balls are high.

“He’s got that much ability to drive balls and whether it’s off-speed or fastballs, you hang an off-speed pitch to him, it’s probably going to get hit pretty hard.”

The Pedroia news is sure to be deflating for fans back in New England. It’s also not a surprise.

Watching Chavis in the lineup regularly this season should be worthwhile.

Andrew Benintendi ready to return to Red Sox leadoff spot: 'I don't mind it at all'

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Leading off for the Red Sox, the left fielder, Andrew Benintendi?

Despite poor results last season, he's more than OK with that.

"I don't mind it at all," Benintendi said. "If I need to do it, I'll do it."

With Mookie Betts gone to Los Angeles, the Red Sox are in need of a new leadoff hitter. It will be almost impossible to fill the 2018 American League MVP's shoes and the production Betts created at the top of the order, as Ron Roenicke said this week, but someone needs to do it.

The most logical candidate is Benintendi, who Roenicke was the first to mention this week when asked who the new leadoff hitter would be. He also mentioned newcomer Alex Verdugo, but he's less likely given his relative inexperience and uncertainty he'll be ready to start the season while he still nurses an injury.

It's Benintendi who provides the most potential, even if last season he didn't quite show it. The Red Sox actually changed things up to start the season, putting Benintendi in the leadoff role and placing Betts behind him, but Benintendi never seemed quite comfortable there.

He hit just .256 with a .355 on-base percentage, six homers and 11 doubles in 48 games in the leadoff spot before the Sox pulled the plug on the idea and put Betts back at the top. Now without a choice, Benintendi looks to be the guy to engineer a lineup that still has talented pieces in Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez, despite the loss of Betts.

"It's just like any other spot in the lineup," Benintendi said. "You just have to hit first in the first inning. Other than that, it's the same. ... I think last year, I was going through a little slump when I was in the leadoff spot so obviously there's a lot of things being said about me hitting leadoff but, no, wherever I need to be, I'll be. ..."

"I'll go wherever Rags (Roenicke) puts me. Wherever that is, I'll be fine with that."

In reality, Benintendi was slumping most of last season, whether he was batting leadoff or not.

The frustration was apparent at times as Benintendi consistently swung at bad pitches and never seemed to get in a rhythm beyond a few hot streaks. Two years after finishing second in Rookie of the Year voting, Benintendi posted career lows in most offensive categories, including average (.266), OBP (.343) and OPS (.774).

Whether or not it's in the leadoff role, Benintendi is primed for a big year. After a productive offseason, in which he worked with hitting coaches Tim Hyers and Peter Fatse, Roenicke said Benintendi reported to camp in "better shape." He looks lighter and Roenicke thinks that will help everything about his game.

At the plate, Roenicke wants Benintendi to be even more selective than even he was before, but most importantly, he wants to help the 25-year-old to stay confident through the ups and downs, which is obviously easier said than done.

"It still comes down to this confidence thing," Roenicke said. "When you're good and you're coming up there, you know you're going well, you see, your vision is better, you see the ball better, and you don't chase as much. And then when you're scuffling, you're not sure, 'Do I be more patient? Do I go more aggressive?' Then things start going wider and up and down and wide. It gets difficult."

The Sox are insisting they can contend this season without Betts and pitcher David Price, also dealt to Los Angeles, and if they do, they'll need others to step up. Exhibit A is Benintendi, whose time is here to reach his potential.

"The game is not easy and anything can happen," Benintendi said. "From last year, I think, I've just got to learn to bounce back. It's a new year. What's in the past is in the past and I'm just looking forward."

Dustin Pedroia won't report to Red Sox camp on Monday

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Dustin Pedroia's latest comeback attempt isn't over, but his future continues to not look promising.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday that the team's longtime second baseman will not be here at camp Monday when positional players are required to report as he continues to battle ongoing problems in his left knee.

Roenicke called Pedroia on Wednesday night and Pedroia told him that the knee is still sore after he suffered a significant setback while rehabbing in Arizona last month.

"He's just going to try to evaluate what happens here," Roenicke said. "He's going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and (head trainer) Brad (Pearson) here to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it."

Pedroia's baseball-playing future continues to be in real jeopardy. The 36-year-old hoped at the beginning of the offseason that he would be ready for the 2020 season, but it remains to be seen if he will even be able to get to spring training.

Roenicke, who was the Red Sox' bench coach in 2018 and 2019, has only seen Pedroia play in nine games since being in Boston. Once a coach on the other side, he said there's a sadness to seeing Pedroia's career make this kind of turn.

"He's a special player," Roenicke said. "It's not just the MVP, it's just watching the way he plays. The energy he brings to a team, he's great there too, but just doing things the right way. Playing with great defense and getting on base and slapping the ball to right field when he needs to and driving the ball when he needs to. It was never comfortable on the other side, having to face him, especially when the game is on the line and stuff. It's just not comfortable."

"So whenever you see a great player, age is different. When a guy ages and then he's not as good, that part's easy to see, but not a guy that has an injury and because of it, hasn't been able to perform. That part is really difficult."

Sox players 'confident' they will be cleared in MLB's sign-stealing investigation

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Add Andrew Benintendi among the Red Sox players who think they will be cleared once Major League Baseball's investigation into the 2018 championship team is released.

The league is still working on its report on illegal sign-stealing allegations against the Red Sox during the 2018 season, and discipline and punishment will reportedly be light. When asked if it's important to get the results of the report out of the way Thursday morning at JetBlue Park, Benintendi was moving forward but claimed the team's innocence.

“I think we’re all just looking forward to 2020,” Benintendi said. “I think all of us are confident in what’s going to come out, and all we can do is focus on baseball and there’s a lot of distractions obviously, and I think we’re all just ready to focus on this year.”

Benintendi was asked why he felt so confident.

“I know we know what’s going on and that we didn’t do anything,” Benintendi said. “As far as what the report’s gonna say, whatever it says, it says, and like I said, we’re just focused on this year and that’s all we can focus on.”

Commissioner Rob Manfred said last week that he was hopeful the report would be done before the start of spring training, but it will reportedly stretch into at least next week.

J.D. Martinez was the first to publicly deny wrongdoing or any rules violations in 2018 last month at the Red Sox’ Winter Weekend event, saying, “I’m excited for the investigation to get over with so they could see there was nothing going on here.”

Jackie Bradley Jr. also seemed to express confidence in how the report would come out, telling fans to reserve judgment until it’s released.

“They’ll find out soon enough,” Bradley Jr. said. “I mean, it’s one of those things where you just wait and don’t pass judgment until you know the truth. ...

“So many people are so quick to pass the blame and this and that. Until you know all the truths, I would advise you to wait and then go from there.”

In West Palm Beach, where the Astros hold spring training, the tone was much different. With camp opening this week and in light of their sign-stealing scandal from 2017 that has rocked baseball this offseason, the team held a press conference to apologize for their actions. Owner Jim Crane and new manager Dusty Baker addressed the media, while stars Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman each delivered brief statements.

“I am really sorry about the choices that were made by my team, by the organization and by me,” Altuve said. “(The) whole Astros organization feels bad about what happened in 2017.”

Bloom didn’t expect deal

In an interview on WEEI’s “The Greg Hill Show,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom opened up a bit, and said he didn’t necessarily expect a team to make a good enough offer to trade Mookie Betts.

That meshes with what he said on Jan. 15, when he said he expected Betts to be on the Opening Day roster.

“I didn’t necessarily expect, just knowing he’s such a great player, so important to the franchise, that somebody was going to meet that bar,” Bloom said. “Obviously, everybody can come to their own judgments as to whether what we got did meet that bar. But in our minds, it was something we needed to do.”

Pedroia won’t report

Dustin Pedroia’s latest comeback attempt isn’t over, but his future continues to not look promising.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday that the team’s longtime second baseman will not be here at camp Monday when positional players are required to report as he continues to battle ongoing problems in his left knee.

Roenicke called Pedroia on Wednesday night and Pedroia told him that the knee is still sore after he suffered a significant setback while rehabbing in Arizona last month.

“He’s just going to try to evaluate what happens here,” Roenicke said. “He’s going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and (head trainer) Brad (Pearson) here to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it.”

Welcome back

Mitch Moreland, who signed a one-year, \$3 million deal to remain with the Red Sox two weeks ago, reported to camp on Thursday and was present for workouts at JetBlue Park.

“Obviously Mitch has been around for a long time and he’s got that veteran presence and leadership quality that every clubhouse needs,” Benintendi said. “I was pumped to see him coming back.”

Eduardo Rodriguez, who was gone the past two days to attend his arbitration hearing on Wednesday, returned to camp on Thursday. He lost the case, which means he will be paid \$8.3 million this season instead of his requested \$8.975 million.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox Journal: Team reportedly acquires OF Kevin Pillar

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, Fla. — While several news outlets have reported the Red Sox have agreed to terms on a one-year contract with veteran outfielder Kevin Pillar, mum is the word from team officials.

First reported by The Boston Globe, word is that that Pillar will join the Red Sox in Fort Myers over the weekend, take a physical and then the deal would be announced.

Pillar, 31, one of the finest defensive outfielders in baseball, would be a key acquisition for the Sox. He would add a right-handed bat to the outfield mix and he can play any of the three positions.

He spent most of last season (156 games) with San Francisco. He batted .259 with 88 RBI in 161 games and stole 14 bases with the Giants and Blue Jays. He had previously played six seasons in Toronto. A career .261 hitter, he was non-tendered by the Giants in the offseason.

Pedroia’s not there

Dustin Pedroia will not make it to spring training Monday when all position players are required to report.

That was the word Thursday from interim manager Ron Roenicke at Fenway South.

“I talked to Pedey last night,” Roenicke said. “The [left] knee’s still sore. He won’t be here Monday.”

Pedroia is still in Arizona and trying to figure out what his next steps will be, Roenicke said.

Originally injured in a collision at second base with Baltimore’s Manny Machado in 2017, he has played in just nine games during the past two seasons. Going just 3-for-34 in those nine games, Pedroia’s lifetime batting average dropped to .299.

Roenicke said the Red Sox badly miss their All-Star second baseman. “He’s a special player. Watching the way he plays ... doing it the right way. Having him around is huge.

“I know this,” Roenicke said, “you’re never comfortable on the other side when you’re facing him, especially when the game is on the line.

“Whenever you see a great player age differently and he’s not as good, that part is easy to see. But not when it’s an injury and he’s not been able to perform. That part is really difficult.”

Rodríguez loses arbitration

The Red Sox defeated pitcher Eduardo Rodríguez in salary arbitration on Thursday, improving teams to 5-1 this year.

Rodríguez will earn \$8.3 million rather than his request for \$8.975 million. The case was decided by arbitrators Steven Wolf, Walt De Treux and Melinda Gordon, who heard the arguments Wednesday.

A left-hander who will turn 27 in April, Rodríguez was a career-best 19-6 with a 3.81 ERA in 34 starts last season, when he made \$4.325 million. He would be eligible for free agency after the 2021 season.

Teams also beat Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder Joc Pederson, Minnesota pitcher José Berríos, Atlanta reliever Shane Greene and Colorado catcher Tony Wolters.

Seven players remain scheduled for hearings, which are to run through Feb. 21.

Sale still home

Pitcher Chris Sale, who has had the flu and a mild case of pneumonia for more than two weeks, is scheduled to see doctors Friday and find out when he can join his teammates at spring training.

The lanky left-hander, who lives in nearby Naples, has been playing catch regularly and reports no problems with his pitching arm.

New rules might alter bullpen schemes

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Among the handful of new rules for the 2020 season announced this week by Major League Baseball is one likely to affect the makeup of many teams’ bullpens.

That rule states that a pitcher must face at least three hitters, unless he suffers an injury.

That means teams that had carried a lefty reliever for one purpose — to get one left-handed hitter out late in a game — won’t enjoy that privilege as of this year.

Since the Red Sox don’t have and have not had one of these specialists in recent seasons, the rule change won’t immediately affect them, interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday after Day 2 of spring training at Fenway South had concluded.

“Our lefthanders can get anybody — they are guys with good stuff,” Roenicke said. “The new rule is going to change the way the bullpen is made up.”

Not that Roenicke would have many to pick from. His bullpen is rather barren of lefthanders. There are just two on this year’s 40-man roster — Josh Taylor and Darwinzon Hernandez. Both pitched for the Sox last year.

Two others who are nonroster invitees after losing their spots on the 40-man roster — Brian Johnson and Bobby Poyner — also worked out of the bullpen last year. Both are trying to get back to the big leagues but it would appear they would need a spectacular spring to get back to Boston.

Roenicke said he sees one positive result that could come from the three-batter minimum. Since you know the new pitcher must face at least three batters, he said, it might save a guy in the bullpen from having to warm up, then sit down, then get back up to throw. It could help the legs as the season goes on, he said.

That's how "it could save your bullpen some during the season," he said. "We'll just have to see."

Poyner, one of four nonroster guys trying to make the club, pitched 33 innings for the Red Sox the last two seasons. He said all bullpen pitchers probably will have to make adjustments. "There is no room for that left-handed, one-out guy any more."

Poyner said he has no issues with the rule. In fact, in the minor leagues, at Triple-A Pawtucket, he had more success against right-handed hitters than lefties.

Another new rule this season will reduce the time a manager would have to call for an instant replay from 30 seconds to 20 seconds.

"They're trying to speed things up and that is good," Roenicke said.

But, he said, it remains to be seen what effect losing those 10 seconds will have on making a decision to appeal or not.

*** *MassLive.com***

Chris Mazza's road to Boston Red Sox 40-man roster included brick masonry work with dad, two months of Indy ball, injuries, getting released twice

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Mazza, a 2011 27th-round draft pick, finally made the major leagues in 2019, after pitching for four different organizations and two independent league teams.

"Eight years in the minor leagues. Released twice. Two months of Indy Ball. Yeah, it was crazy," said Mazza, now a member of the Boston Red Sox's 40-man roster.

"It wasn't even a for-sure thing," Mazza added at JetBlue Park on Thursday. "I was playing taxi (squad). Basically, I flew up to Philly (to meet the Mets there) and they were like, 'We're not sure if you're going to be on the roster or not yet.'"

The Mets ultimately added the then-29-year-old rookie — he turned 30 in October — to the 25-man roster June 26. He debuted three days later at Citi Field, allowing one run in four innings against the Braves.

He posted a 5.51 ERA, but a much better 3.52 FIP, in 16 ½ innings over nine relief outings. He had just one bad outing (one inning, four runs Aug. 30 at Philadelphia). He posted a 3.52 ERA in his other eight outings.

He has recorded a 3.21 ERA in 157 outings (64 starts) during his minor league career.

The Red Sox claimed the right-handed hurler off waivers from the Mets on Dec. 20. He has two minor league options remaining and so the Red Sox can use him as a versatile depth pitcher who they move back and forth from Triple-A Pawtucket.

That said, the Red Sox, as of right now, have an open fifth spot in their starting rotation after trading David Price. Boston could name a fifth starter or use an opener. The Red Sox are taking an open-minded approach to the open rotation spot.

The Sox view Mazza as a pitcher who can start and open games in addition to relieving.

"I think it's a really good opportunity to really compete for a fifth starter spot," Mazza said. "And then if not, hopefully compete for a bullpen spot."

Mazza moved to Nashville this offseason after getting engaged in October. He had spent every other offseason in Concord, Calif., working with his dad Bob who owns R Mazza Masonry, Inc. The company's services include brick repair, bricklaying, brickwork, custom stonework installation and decorative wall construction, according to Porch.

"This is the first offseason I didn't work because I made it up to the big leagues," he said. "I was up in the big leagues for 51 days."

The money he made being on a big league roster for 51 days and as a 40-man roster minor leaguer gave him some financial security. He put the brick masonry work aside to prepare for the 2020 season. He pitched 12 innings for Toros del Este of the Dominican Winter League.

Minor leaguers not on a 40-man roster make extremely low salaries. Last year's major league minimum salary of \$2,983.87 per day is more than many minor league players earn in a month. Professional baseball players also don't receive a paycheck during the offseason.

'I didn't know I was getting drafted as a pitcher'
The Twins selected him 838th overall out of Menlo College in Atherton, Calif.

"To be honest, I didn't know I was getting drafted as a pitcher," Mazza said. "I thought I was going to get drafted as a shortstop for the longest time. I only threw 15 innings my junior year. And that's basically all the pitching I had done since I was 12. I know I had teams look at me to play short when I first got on the map or the radar of people (scouts). Minnesota said they were only going to take me as a pitcher."

"You go into this thing, not realizing what it actually is," Mazza added. "You think it's a lot different. It's like, 'Oh, yeah. I'll maybe take one or two years in the minors and then I'll be in the big leagues. I doesn't work like that, which a lot of people don't realize. A lot of people think — and it's nobody's fault or anything — it's just they don't know people that are in the system or they're just the average-joe kind of fan that thinks it's just Double A, Triple A and the big leagues. No, there's like six other steps."

Mazza never lost hope of pitching in the big leagues despite a few major setbacks along the way. He underwent surgery to release his ulnar nerve during his second year of professional ball in 2013. He broke the scaphoid bone in his wrist in 2014.

A 27th-round draft pick standing out in the minors is difficult enough. Mazza was a 27th rounder who pitched only 8 ⅓ innings all season as a 23-year-old in 2013 after beginning the year at Low-A Cedar Rapids.

"After the injury, it does take a little bit more work to get a little bit noticed because you've got the next guys coming in (next draft class) and the next guy's coming in," he said. "So it's tough when there's not a lot invested in you."

'I was shocked. I was not expecting that'
The Twins released him July 22, 2015.

"I kind of knew it was coming," he said. "I had two injuries. I didn't really pitch much."

The Marlins called him about four days after the Twins cut him. He signed a minor league deal with Miami.

"I threw really well with them," Mazza said. "In '17, I thought I was going to make my debut when I had a 3.01 (ERA). It just never happened. I had a Double A coach that was not very happy about it."

Storm Davis, who posted a 4.02 ERA in 442 major league games (239 starts) from 1982-94, believed in Mazza and kept him hungry. Davis served as pitching coach for the 2017 Double-A Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp when Mazza posted a 3.01 ERA in 28 outings (26 starts).

“He basically told me, ‘Just keep on grinding it because it’s going to make it worth it when you’re in the big leagues because you’re going to pitch in the big leagues. You’ve got a big league sinker. Somebody’s going to realize. It might not be the Marlins. It might be somebody else. Somebody’s going to want you.’ That was a big thing that kind of kept me going.”

The Marlins released him May 19, 2018, after he threw just 6 ½ innings for Jacksonville that season.

“I was shocked. I was not expecting that,” Mazza said. “Especially after getting invited to big league camp after the year I had in ’17. And then getting released in May, it just didn’t make sense. And then nobody was calling, which was surprising.”

From there, he pitched in the independent Pacific Association and Atlanta League.

“I went and played about two months of Indy Ball and got picked up by Seattle,” Mazza said. “They left me on the Double-A roster (1.33 ERA, 27 innings) and then the Mets claimed me in the Rule 5. I didn’t even know I could be claimed in the Rule 5 Draft anymore. I thought I was too old.”

‘I felt like I belonged’

“I know I’m old. I’m old,” Mazza admitted.

Sure, 29 is old for a rookie. He’s now 30 trying to break camp with the Red Sox. He never doubted his stuff could play in the major leagues.

“I felt like I belonged when I first got there,” Mazza added. “I feel like that’s kind of the way you’ve got to take it every day. It doesn’t matter if you’re in the big leagues or the minor leagues. You’ve got to take it like you’re a big leaguer. Even though you might not be there, you’ve got to have that kind of mentality because you’re just going to think you’re a minor leaguer and you’re never going to get farther than the minor leagues.”

His pitch mix for the Mets last year consisted of a sinker, cutter slider, changeup and four-seamer, per Statcast.

“Sinker’s gotta be working, first of all,” Mazza said. “If that’s not working it’s going to be tough. I’ve really just have to do a good job of mixing in and out, up and down and changing offspeed. Really pay attention to what guys’ swing paths and tendencies are. And really try to force contact. I’m not a huge strikeout guy. I never have been. I can be at times. But force contact and let my defense do the work because that’s how I’m going to get deeper into games.”

Boston Red Sox notebook: Chris Sale to return to camp Friday, Michael Chavis’ role clarified & more

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- A collection of leftover notes from Fenway South, where the Red Sox held their second workout for pitchers and catchers Thursday morning:

Sale scheduled to return to camp Friday

Left-hander Chris Sale, who has been sidelined with the flu and walking pneumonia this week, played catch Wednesday at his home in Naples and is feeling better. He’s due to be back at the complex Friday.

“We still don’t really want him around people until our doctors evaluate him,” interim manager Ron Roenicke said. “He’s hoping we tell him to stay here but we’ll see what the doctors say.”

Sale’s arm is healthy but his spring training will be a bit delayed due to his illness. Roenicke said he believed Sale had thrown off a mound at the facility during the winter.

Roenicke reacts to rule changes

Roenicke said he has read through the rule changes announced by Major League Baseball on Wednesday. Among them are the three-batter minimum for pitchers, expansion to a 26-man roster, and a shortened time (from 30 to 20 seconds) for managers to challenge plays.

Roenicke doesn’t believe Boston will be affected much by the three-batter minimum because the club’s top two lefty relievers (Darwinzon Hernandez and Josh Taylor) pitch well against both lefties and righties. Roenicke does believe teams will have to build their bullpens differently as a result of the rule.

“I don’t worry about (Hernandez and Taylor) but absolutely you’re going to set your bullpen differently because of that rule change,” he said. “The lefty who comes in to get one lefty out, it’s going to be tough to find a place on the roster where you know it’ll still work.”

Roenicke also discussed the pros and cons of the shortened time for managerial challenges.

“Trying to speed things up is good in all areas,” he said. “The only thing I hope it doesn’t get to is that we have to make the decision, with what we see visually. I pay attention to the game but I’m paying attention to a lot of different things.

“Say I’m walking down and maybe talking to one of our guys and there’s a play that happens out there and I miss it,” he added. “I don’t want to have to be locked in on every single pitch because I think it makes it more difficult what we do to try to get everybody ready.”

Chavis’ role gains some clarity

Roenicke said infielder Michael Chavis will play both first and second base, splitting time with Mitch Moreland and Jose Peraza.

“When he’s swinging the bat well, he’s going to get more playing time whether it’s at first or second,” Roenicke said. “But he’s going to be out there. When he’s performing the way he can, like when he first came up last year and was so hot, you want him in the lineup.”

Chavis struggled against lefties last season, but Roenicke believes that might be the result of a limited sample size. He believes Chavis will be more effective at the plate if he learns to lay off the high fastball.

“If you’re not really good at this pitch, which really nobody is, you really need to lay off it,” Roenicke said. “It’s more the discipline part of it. Most of those balls are high. The guys like to pitch up out of the zone, they’re usually high.

“I think if we can get (Chavis) disciplined to not chase it, pitchers have to come back into the zone,” he said. “If you get back into the zone with him, it gets dangerous. He has that much ability to drive balls whether it’s off-speed or fastballs.”

Benintendi, Moreland already in camp

Two of the early position player arrivals in camp are Moreland and outfielder Andrew Benintendi. Roenicke envisions both players having vital roles on the 2020 club.

Moreland, who re-signed on a one-year, \$3 million deal last month, will get the bulk of starts at first base against righties.

“Mitch is certainly important to what we do,” Roenicke said. “Important in his leadership role but also in what he does on the field. Last year, we started poorly, but in four or five of the first wins we had, Mitch won those games for us. I think he’s huge. When he’s out there, his numbers are really good. He’s dangerous. He gets big hits for you. He’s not going to play 140 games anymore.”

Roenicke said Benintendi, who has been in camp for some time, improved his condition over the winter. Hitting coaches Tim Hyers and Peter Fatse went to visit Benintendi over the winter to start the process of tweaking his swing.

Roenicke believes Benintendi could improve his plate discipline.

“I think he could be a little more selective,” Roenicke said. “I think he’s pretty selective anyway. When he starts chasing out of the zone, I know it bothered him last year because he’s a guy who’s pretty disciplined at the plate. He’ll take his walks. He’ll get deep in counts. I know he chased a lot more pitches than he wanted to last year. So all of that, it still comes down to this confidence thing.”

Roenicke’s nickname emerges

Benintendi referred to Roenicke as “Rags” when answering a question about him Thursday morning. The manager said the nickname dates back to his time with the Dodgers in the 1970s and 1980s and was given to him by trainer Bill Bueller.

“It’s been there for a long time,” Roenicke said. “Sometimes it’s there, sometimes it’s not. I get both (Ron and Rags) and answer to both.”

Mookie Betts trade: Boston Red Sox discussed outfielder with Dodgers at trade deadline but ‘stopped discussions’ after winning streak (report)

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox discussed trading Mookie Betts to the Dodgers at the trade deadline but stopped the discussions after a winning streak, Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman told Jorge Castillo of the Los Angeles Times.

As the July 31 deadline approached, the Red Sox found themselves right on the verge of contention and squarely on the line between buying and selling. After sitting 2 ½ games out of wild card spot on July 24, the Sox reeled off three consecutive wins against the Yankees and outscored them 38-13, giving themselves significant momentum and drawing them within a half-game of a wild-card spot with three days to go before the deadline.

At that point, it appears former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski decided he wasn’t going to sell. Once the Sox lost their next two games and entered deadline day 2 ½ games behind the Indians in the wild card race. Dombrowski then decided to stand pat, declining to add pieces to a potential contender.

Dombrowski was fired in September, and the Red Sox replaced him with new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom a month later. Bloom finally pulled the trigger on a Betts trade with the Dodgers earlier this week, shipping Betts, lefty David Price and cash to Los Angeles for outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong.

Turns out those three wins against the Yankees might have just been Boston’s three most impactful games of the season. Betts even hit three homers in the second game of the series, potentially extending his stay in Boston for a few months in the process.

Boston Red Sox defeat Eduardo Rodriguez in arbitration; lefty will earn \$8.3 million in 2020

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Red Sox defeated left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez in his arbitration hearing Wednesday, a baseball source confirmed Thursday afternoon. Rodriguez will earn \$8.3 million in 2020.

Rodriguez and the team couldn't agree on a salary for next season, so they had to go to an independent arbitrator to settle the case. Rodriguez asked for \$8.675 million but lost his arbitration case.

Rodriguez is the first member of the Red Sox to go to arbitration since 2018, when Mookie Betts beat Boston and earned \$10.5 million. Boston agreed to deals to avoid arbitration with its other nine players before having to go to court, coming to terms on a two-year, \$10 million deal with Andrew Benintendi last weekend.

Rodriguez had to fly to Arizona and attend the hearing Wednesday. He was back in camp at Fenway South on Thursday morning and will resume normal activities Friday.

Kevin Pillar, Boston Red Sox agree to one-year contract in \$4M range; right-handed hitter should complement 3 left-handed hitting outfielders

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Red Sox have agreed to a one-year contract in the \$4 million range with outfielder Kevin Pillar, a source confirmed to MassLive.com's Chris Cotillo.

The Boston Globe's Alex Speier first reported the news, adding that the deal is pending a physical. Boston was reported to be close to a deal with Pillar on Tuesday.

The 31-year-old batted .259 with a .287 on-base percentage, .432 slugging percentage, .719 OPS, 21 homers, 37 doubles, three triples and 88 RBIs in 161 games last year between the Blue Jays and Giants.

He slashed .261/.298/.398/.696 in 690 games for Toronto from 2013-18.

He's known as a strong defensive outfielder. He has posted a 60 DRS (Defensive Runs Saves) during his career, although last year he recorded a negative-3 DRS, per Fangraphs.com. He has started 705 games in center field during his career.

A right-handed hitter, Pillar should nicely complement outfielders Jackie Bradley Jr., Alex Verdugo and Andrew Benintendi, who all hit from the left side. Pillar posted an .823 OPS against lefties last year. He has a career .281/.313/.453/.766 line vs. left-handed pitchers.

Pillar could see significant playing time at the beginning of the season, especially if Verdugo's back injury from last season keeps him out at the beginning of the year.

Alex Verdugo injury: New Red Sox OF uncertain for opening day with back ailment (report)

Matt Vautour

Alex Verdugo might not be healthy enough to start his first season with the Red Sox.

According to Alex Speier of the Boston Globe, Verdugo, who was sent to Boston with Jeter Downs and Connor Wong for Mookie Betts, David Price and money, might postpone his Red Sox debut as he battles a back injury which stopped his 2019 season in early August.

Given the Red Sox attention to Brusdar Graterol's medicals that held up the trade the removed Graterol from it, if they had similar diligence with Verdugo, it's presumable this isn't a surprise.

Verdugo's potential absence increases the importance of newly signed outfielder Kevin Pillar, who'd go from a potential platoon player to a likely starter if Verdugo can't play.

Verdugo didn't play after Aug. 4 last year with what MLB.com called a back/oblique/core injury.

The Red Sox open March 26 at Toronto.

Astros sign-stealing: Boston Red Sox's Ron Roenicke says he never noticed Houston doing anything specific during time as Angels coach in 2017

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- While the Astros were scheming to illegally steal opponents' signs back in 2017, new Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke was working for one of their division rivals. Roenicke, who didn't join the Red Sox until the next year, worked as the Angels third base coach in 2017.

But Roenicke, as he said Thursday, wasn't aware of Houston's elaborate scheme in which team employees used a center field monitor to decode signs and banged a trash can to alert hitters about incoming pitches.

"No, I didn't (ever notice the Astros' scheme specifically)," Roenicke said. "I always notice things because at times, when a pitcher goes out there and he's giving up hits on pitches you think are pretty good pitches, you always wonder where that's coming from."

Roenicke, who has worked in the majors as a player and coach since 1981, said in January that he has always taken a strong stance against sign-stealing. He denied participating in any cheating with Boston in 2018 and said he prided himself on operating within the rules throughout his coaching career.

"I always felt like, yes, there were lots of things we could do on the field," Roenicke said at the team's Winter Weekend event last month. "When I was a third base coach, I could have given the pitches to the hitters. That's legal to do in the third base box, but I didn't think it was right so I didn't do it."

Roenicke, in his years as a coach, has made it a priority to notice if opponents were clearly stealing signs during games.

"Are the coaches picking up signs from the catcher? Is the pitcher tipping pitches? Are they getting pitches from second base where they're picking them, the catchers' signs. Or in the glove, which has become a big thing lately," Roenicke said. "Now, those pitchers make sure they hide that glove hides that hand from the runners on second base. So I'm always watching that stuff but I can't tell you I saw one team versus another that I thought, 'Wow, it's way different than everybody else.'"

Roenicke's former boss, Alex Cora, was let go by the Red Sox after being implicated as a key player in Houston's scheme in 2017. The Astros were punished severely after the league investigated them and spent Thursday apologizing as an organization at their spring training home in West Palm Beach.

Roenicke declined to give his thoughts on the specifics of Houston's misdeeds.

"I know what was reported and what came out but I really don't want to make any comments on that," he said.

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing scandal: Chaim Bloom 'has no reason to think anything went on,' believes Sox will be found innocent

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom defended the organization Thursday, saying that he doesn't "have any reason to think that anything untoward went on" in regard to Boston using electronics to illegally steal signs in 2018.

"I don't have any reason to think anything went on," Bloom said on WEEI's The Greg Hill Show. "I'm careful what I say because I do want to respect the investigation. I think we have to respect it."

Major League Baseball is currently investigating the Red Sox after The Athletic alleged Boston improperly used a video replay room to decode opponents' signals throughout their championship season in 2018. Owners John Henry and Tom Werner both insinuated the Sox would be found innocent at a press conference last month and some of the team's players (like Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers and J.D. Martinez) have directly claimed the league will not be able to find any wrongdoing.

Bloom has been mum on the topic to this point, repeatedly declining comment on anything related to the investigation. His comments Thursday suggest the Red Sox are anticipating the league's report on the matter with a significant deal of confidence.

"As far as the investigation, I think Major League Baseball has the ability to do that on a much larger scale than we do," Bloom said. "That's exactly what they're doing. Our job is really just to fully cooperate with what they're doing. We've been doing that. It obviously is there and is kind of looming over the organization in a sense. On a day-to-day level, I don't think it's interfered that much with a lot of the things we're trying to do."

Dustin Pedroia injury: Boston Red Sox 2B won't be in camp Monday when position players report, knee still sore

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Dustin Pedroia will not be in attendance at Boston Red Sox spring training camp when position players are required to report here Monday.

"He's still sore," interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday at JetBlue Park. "The knee is still sore. So the setback is still there. He won't be here Monday. And he's just going to try to evaluate what happens here. He's going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and (head trainer) Brad (Pearson) to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it."

Pedroia has appeared in only nine games the past two seasons. He underwent a cartilage restoration procedure Oct. 25, 2017. He had scar tissue removed during an arthroscopic surgery in late July 2018, then had a joint preservation procedure on his knee in August 2019.

Pedroia already has expressed uncertainty about whether he'll ever play in the major leagues again.

"He's a special player," Roenicke said. "And it's not just the MVP. It's just watching him the way he plays. The energy he brings to a team. He's a great player, too. But just doing things the right way: playing the great defense and getting on base. And slapping the ball to right field when he needs to. And driving the ball when he needs to. It was never comfortable on the other side having to face him, especially when the game's on the line.

"Whenever you see a great player — age is different. When a guy ages and then he's not as good, that part's easy to see. But not a guy that has an injury and because of it has not been able to perform. That part is really difficult."

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing scandal: Andrew Benintendi says team is innocent, 'no, we didn't do anything'

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Andrew Benintendi became the latest member of the Red Sox to claim the league's investigation into alleged sign-stealing by the team in 2018 won't find anything to incriminate the organization.

"I just think we know what's going on and we know we didn't do anything," Benintendi said. "As far as what the report's going to say, what it says, it says. We need to focus on this year. That's all we can focus on."

Two of Benintendi's teammates, designated hitter J.D. Martinez and third baseman Rafael Devers, previously denied any wrongdoing by the Red Sox. A January report from The Athletic claimed Boston improperly used a video replay room to illegally decode opponents' signs throughout their championship season in 2018.

The Red Sox already lost their manager, Alex Cora, due to his involvement in the Astros' sign-stealing practices in 2018. The league is expected to release its report on the Red Sox in the coming weeks.

Benintendi and his teammates are eager to get the investigation behind them.

"I think we're all just looking forward to 2020," Benintendi said. "I think all of us are confident in what's going to come out. All we can do is focus on baseball. There's a lot of distractions, obviously. We're all just ready to focus on this year."

But during a Thursday appearance on WEEI's "The Greg Hill Show," the Red Sox chief baseball officer said he thinks he got a worthy return for the team's franchise player.

Bloom said that he did not initially expect that any team would make a trade offer that would ultimately make it worth dealing away a player like Betts. In fact, he says he expected Betts to be with the team in spring training.

"I guess for anybody that should be your default expectation," Bloom said. "But we, in our minds, were setting a really high bar."

The final trade to the Dodgers was Betts, Price and cash in exchange for OF Alex Verdugo, IF Jeter Downs and C Connor Wong from the Los Angeles Dodgers organization. It was a move that took a great deal of money off Boston's books and provided a much-needed injection of young talent into a Red Sox farm system that has been barren of elite prospects.

Bloom maintains that the Red Sox were not actively shopping Betts, but were open to any offer involving him, as they would with any player. For Bloom, the focus was to be creative in order "to make this roster more sustainable but still competitive."

Initially, he didn't expect anyone to step up with an offer to make that happen. However, he said the Dodgers offer ultimately did.

"I didn't necessarily expect, just knowing he's such a great player, so important to the franchise, that somebody was going to meet that bar," Bloom said. "Obviously, everybody can come to their own judgments as to whether what we got did meet that bar. But in our minds, it was something we needed to do."

The Red Sox opened up spring training this week in Fort Myers.

*** *RedSox.com***

Benintendi ready to step up in Betts' absence

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- In case you haven't heard, the Red Sox lost the best leadoff man in their history when they traded Mookie Betts to the Dodgers on Monday.

The numbers that Betts posted over the last couple of years are gaudy and irreplaceable.

Yet somebody has to bat at the top of interim manager Ron Roenicke's lineup.

Fortunately, the Red Sox have a willing candidate who has just the right skill set to set the table for a talented group of run producers named J.D. Martinez, Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts.

Andrew Benintendi said on Wednesday that he'd be fine moving back to the top of the lineup -- even though former manager Alex Cora's decision to put him there early last season didn't go so well.

"I'll go wherever Rags [Roenicke] puts me," Benintendi said. "Wherever that is, I'll be fine with that."

You almost get the sense Benintendi craves the chance of redemption at leadoff to disprove the narrative that the role somehow got in his head.

Fact of the matter is, as Benintendi knows full well, he just wasn't a good hitter in general last year. His placement in the lineup had nothing to do with it. And for someone who has hit his entire life, it was a very strange thing for Benintendi to go through.

So what happened?

"I think that was just me struggling and me trying to create hits and stuff like that, and swinging at pitches I shouldn't have been," said Benintendi. "I was just trying to do more than what I should have been doing."

The hitter Benintendi is describing sounds like the anti-Benintendi. That 2019 version isn't him, and probably will never be him again, right?

"God, no," said Benintendi. "I've always known the strike zone."

Benintendi is also human. The Red Sox were coming off a World Series and a franchise record of 108 wins. Everyone on the team wanted to do it again.

It was somewhat surprising that Cora made the switch he did to start the season considering how successful the Betts-Benintendi 1-2 tandem was the year before.

So Benintendi dug himself a hole, started pressing early and was never himself the whole year, other than small spurts. But he is adamant it had nothing to do with batting first. And the fact that his struggles resumed after going back to the No. 2 hole proves that.

Once the disappointing 84-78 season ended, and Benintendi had some time to decompress, it was clear to him what led to his mediocre line of .266/.343/.431 that included just 72 runs (down from 103 the year before), 13 homers and 68 RBIs. In 48 games at leadoff, which covered 235 plate appearances, Benintendi slashed .256/.355/.412.

"Yeah, and I realized it during the season, too -- pitches up and away and up and in that I would swing at and I can't do anything with those. Like during that time, it was stupid, honestly," Benintendi said. "I don't know why I was swinging at all those."

When Benintendi swung at the right pitches, he did damage. How many players have 40 doubles in a down year like he did? That's proof that his fluid and pretty swing from the left side didn't go anywhere. He just got himself out too many times.

The fact Benintendi struck out 140 times -- a jump of 34 strikeouts from the year before in 46 fewer plate appearances -- is a clear sign that the lack of discipline was indeed the main thing that ailed him.

Looking at Boston's roster, Benintendi is easily the best candidate to bat first. Alex Verdugo -- the main player acquired in the Betts trade -- could be a good fit there in time. But it might be too soon to put that on his plate when he will already be acclimating to a new team and a new environment.

"If Benny had what he had the year before and has a .380 on-base percentage, I think that works out really well," said Roenicke.

In actuality, Benintendi's OBP was .366 in 2018, but he was a near-daily force, producing a sturdy .830 OPS.

"I think Benny learned something last year," said Roenicke. "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. 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."

Odds are, Benintendi will be the man that Roenicke deems the best fit batting first -- particularly against right-handers.

"It's just like any other spot in the lineup," Benintendi said. "You just have to hit first in the first inning. Other than that, it's the same. I don't mind it at all. If I need to do it, I'll do it."

Red Sox nearing deal with Pillar (source)

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The ever-busy Red Sox appear to have more news coming.

The club has a \$4.25 million deal in place with stellar outfield defender Kevin Pillar, a source told MLB.com's Mark Feinsand on Friday. The deal is pending a physical, which the club has not confirmed.

The potential signing would make a lot of sense if it happens. Boston's newly configured starting outfield features all left-handed hitters in Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr. Also with Alex Verdugo possibly missing Opening Day, Pillar offers the Red Sox some strong injury protection.

Pillar would give interim manager Ron Roenicke the balance of a right-handed hitter and a plus-plus defender in the late innings.

While Pillar's primary position is center field, he has experience at all three spots. Somewhat stunningly, he has never won a Rawlings Gold Glove Award. But Pillar was selected as Wilson's Defensive Player of the Year for center field in 2015.

Highlight reels are stacked with the great plays he has made since starting his career in 2013.

The 31-year-old Pillar had played his entire career with the Blue Jays before he was dealt to the Giants in the first week of last season. With San Francisco, Pillar belted a career-high of 21 homers and had an OPS of .735 over 156 games. Overall, he played 161 games last season.

A regular the last five seasons, it would be interesting to see how Pillar would adapt to more of a complementary role.

If the Red Sox acquire Pillar, it could also make Bradley the subject of trade rumors yet again. Bradley is set to earn \$11 million in 2019 and is eligible for free agency at the end of the season.

Verdugo (back) might miss opener (sources)

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- There is a chance that newly acquired Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo will debut for his new team after Opening Day, two sources told MLB.com.

Verdugo endured back and oblique soreness that ended his 2019 season with the Dodgers on Aug. 4. The left-handed hitter initially tweaked his back on the turf of Tropicana Field on May 22, and it bothered him on and off for the rest of the season.

The Red Sox, a source confirmed, were fully aware when they made the blockbuster trade with the Dodgers that Verdugo's availability for the start of the season would be in question.

Position players are due into camp for the Red Sox by Sunday and the first full-squad workout is on Monday. The Sox will have a better idea of Verdugo's status for the start of the season once he checks into camp and is evaluated by the team's medical staff.

The way the Red Sox are looking at it, the 23-year-old Verdugo is still in a return-to-play progression and they will evaluate his timetable as Spring Training progresses. If it needs to, Boston is prepared to give Verdugo a slow ramp-up.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke is expected to give more of an update on Verdugo in his briefing with the media following Friday's workout at Fenway South.

The Sox hope to finalize a deal with veteran free-agent outfielder Kevin Pillar within a few days, and that would certainly help the club withstand the temporary loss of Verdugo.

Pillar has been a starting outfielder the last five seasons. With Boston, the right-handed hitter's primary role would be to complement the all lefty-hitting starting trio of Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Verdugo.

And as might come apparent as soon as Opening Day, Pillar also offers the Red Sox some strong injury protection.

The Boston Globe's Alex Speier was first to report that it is possible Verdugo will be out on Opening Day.

Earlier this week, the Sox finalized the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers in exchange for Verdugo and two prospects -- Jeter Downs and Connor Wong.

In what would have been his first full season in the Majors last season if not for the injury, Verdugo slashed .294/.342/.475 with 12 homers and 44 RBIs in 106 games.

Pedroia to miss camp report date after setback

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The magnitude of Dustin Pedroia's most recent setback with his problematic left knee is apparent when you consider the following: For the first time in Pedroia's career, he won't report to Spring Training with his fellow position players by the time the Red Sox hold their first full-squad workout on Monday.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke confirmed as much after speaking with the second baseman by phone.

“He’s still sore,” Roenicke said. “The knee is still sore. So the setback is still there. He won’t be here Monday, and he’s just going to try to evaluate what happens here. He’s going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and [trainer] Brad [Pearson] here to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it.”

Pedroia has played just nine games over the last two seasons.

When Pedroia held a press conference last May, he sounded almost resigned to the fact his career could be over.

But he got some newfound hope following a joint preservation surgery from last summer that left him feeling better after a few months.

By November, Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom relayed to reporters that Pedroia felt he might be able to play in 2020.

However, hopes were diminished in late January when Pedroia reported to the team that he had another significant setback, from which he still hasn’t recovered.

“I talked to Dustin, I would say, a week and a half ago, and it was tough,” said Red Sox center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. “You never want to hear that when someone has a setback, especially a player of his caliber, and what he means to not only this team but this organization. He’s special. Hopefully we get to see him soon.”

Pedroia has two seasons and \$25 million remaining on his contract.

At this point, it would be surprising if Pedroia is able to make a comeback. But nobody has counted him out yet.

“The mind can only take it so far,” said Bradley. “Obviously you want to have a strong mind, and sometimes the body fails and that’s OK. That’s part of living, and I think he’s going to move forward and see what’s next.”

BJJ: They’ll find out soon enough

At the team’s Winter Weekend in January, J.D. Martinez became the first Red Sox player to express confidence that the team will be cleared of any wrongdoing once MLB is finished with its investigation into whether the club illegally stole signs via technology in 2018.

Bradley and Andrew Benintendi weighed in with similar thoughts on Thursday.

“They’ll find out soon enough,” said Bradley. “It’s one of those things -- you just wait and don’t pass judgment until you know the truth. Let them investigate. Like I said, so many people are so quick to pass the blame and this and that. Until you know all the truths, I would advise you to wait and then go from there.”

“I think all of us are confident in what’s going to come out, and all we can do, like I said, is focus on baseball,” said Benintendi. “There’s a lot of distractions obviously and I think we’re all just ready to focus on this year.”

Eovaldi’s bullpen session ‘eye opening’

After trading David Price, the Red Sox definitely need a strong season from Nathan Eovaldi. The righty was a disappointment last season in terms of both health and performance.

Roenicke, who watched Eovaldi's bullpen session on Thursday, is already sensing that the flame-throwing righty is poised to bounce back in 2020

"He's always eye-opening when you watch him throw a bullpen," said Roenicke. "It just doesn't matter, you look at the velocity with that thing and it's incredible. Then he's got his cutter and he's working on this thing, and he's got the curveball and he's got all these weapons. And we see it during the season when those weapons are put in places where they're close enough to where he wants them, they do not get hit.

"When he's bad, it's when he's got 0-2, 1-2 and he leaves that split-finger up or he leaves a breaking ball up and he gets hit hard, so it's really all about command with him. When he's commanding the baseball, you have this fantastic pitcher."

Eovaldi had surgery in April to repair loose bodies in his right elbow, and the club thinks that was the cause of his lack of command.

Sale update

The Red Sox will know more on ace Chris Sale's timetable to report to camp when he visits with the team's medical staff on Friday. The visit will take place after hours in order for the doctors to determine whether he is still contagious after battling with the flu and a mild case of pneumonia the last couple of weeks.

"They'll evaluate him and he's hoping they tell him, 'Why don't you stay here?' But we'll see what the doctors say," Roenicke said.

Sale has kept his arm in shape by throwing off flat ground in his hometown of Naples, which is about 25 miles south on I-75 from where the Red Sox train.

Arbitrator sides with Sox

The Panel ruled in favor of the Red Sox in Wednesday's arbitration hearing with lefty Eduardo Rodriguez, the club announced Thursday.

The sides weren't that far apart to begin with, but the Panel went with the team's offer of \$8.3 million. Coming off a 19-win season in 2019, Rodriguez and his representation were asking for \$8.975 million.

The hearing was on Wednesday in Arizona, but Rodriguez was already back in camp by Thursday throwing a side session.

"I think he was a little bit rushed in what he was doing, but he's all about command," said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. "This guy has as good command as anybody in the game. That's why he's so fast, you see 0-2, 1-2 on hitters. And that's why he's able to have the kind of year that he had. It was pretty good today. He's going to continue to get locked in on command. But he's obviously a huge part of our rotation. And I don't know if it's fair to say we need the same year from him, but he's certainly capable of having that same year."

3 predictions for Red Sox's Spring Training camp

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The sun is shining brightly at Spring Training, but not too bright to take a look into a crystal ball and forecast some developments that will take place in the coming weeks.

Here are three when it comes to the Red Sox.

1. Dalbec will turn heads

Given the construction of the roster, it's hard to say that power-hitting prospect Bobby Dalbec will earn a spot on Boston's Opening Day roster when you consider he's never played in the Major Leagues. But don't be surprised if Dalbec has a monster Spring Training and positions himself as an early-season callup if the Red Sox have any injury issues.

The right-handed masher is a solid defender and can play both corners. Dalbec spent a week under the watch of Red Sox coaches and players last season and is said to be a sponge. Look for him to take it up a notch in the coming weeks.

2. The fifth starter will be ... an opener

The Red Sox have a gaping hole in the rotation following the trade of David Price to the Dodgers, with no obvious candidate to fill the void. So what to do? It's simple. Go with an opener. Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom was one of the masterminds of that concept with the Rays. Look for righty Ryan Weber to be an important part of the plan if that's what Boston goes with for the fifth spot. The Sox love the righty's makeup and think he can get better with a few tweaks this spring. Lefty Josh Taylor, who has a power arm, should also factor in.

3. Vázquez will become a human vacuum

There was one major weakness in a breakout 2019 season for Red Sox catcher Christian Vázquez. He had a hard time blocking pitches. For someone as prideful about defense as Vázquez, you can expect he will spend long and hard hours with catching instructors Jason Varitek and Chad Epperson to fix that hole in his game.

*** *ESPN.com***

Dustin Pedroia's knee still sore, will not report to Red Sox on Monday

Joon Lee

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Boston Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia will not arrive to spring training when position players are required to report to camp Monday, interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday.

"He's still sore," Roenicke said. "The [left] knee is still sore. The setback is still there. He won't be here Monday. He's going to try to evaluate what happens here. He's going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and [head trainer] Brad [Pearson] to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it."

News of Pedroia's latest setback in his comeback attempt from his left knee injury emerged in late January. Over the past two seasons, he has played just nine games, collecting three hits in 34 plate appearances.

The fan favorite initially suffered the knee injury in 2017, when he collided with Baltimore's Manny Machado on a slide at second base. Pedroia last played a game on April 17, 2019.

Over the past several years, he has had multiple surgeries. In October 2017, Pedroia had a cartilage restoration procedure. That was followed by scar tissue removal in July 2018. This past August, Pedroia underwent knee joint preservation surgery, an alternative to knee replacement.

"It was never comfortable on the other side having to face him, especially when the game is on the line," Roenicke said. "It's just not comfortable. Whenever you see a great player age differently and he's not as good, that part is easy to see. But not when it's an injury and he's not been able to perform. That part is really difficult."

Pedroia previously expressed doubts last May about his ability to return to the field.

"I'm at a point right now where I need some time. That's what my status is," Pedroia said at that time. "Some days, I feel fine, and an hour later, walking is tough. If I'm on an hour-to-hour basis of being able to do anything athletically, that's tough. I think the time will give me the right answer of if I can do this."

Outfielder Jackie Bradley Jr. said he recently talked to Pedroia about his injury situation.

"You never want to hear when someone has a setback, especially a player of his caliber and what he means to not only this team, but this organization," Bradley said. "He's special, and hopefully we can see him soon."

Through his 14-year career in the majors, Pedroia has hit .299/.365/.439 with 140 homers, 394 doubles and 725 RBIs. He earned American League MVP honors in 2008, when he hit .326/.376/.493 with 17 homers and 83 RBIs, and has won four Gold Gloves.

*** *WEEL.com***

Report: Red Sox sign Kevin Pillar due to uncertainty regarding Alex Verdugo's health

Nick Friar

Chris Sale's start to spring training has been delayed. Dustin Pedroia won't start on time either. Now it looks like the top player the Red Sox acquired in the deal that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to Los Angeles may not be ready to play at the start of the 2020 regular season.

According to Alex Speier of the Boston Globe, uncertainty around Alex Verdugo's ability to play to start the season due to his back injury is what led to the Red Sox interest in Kevin Pillar. Though, Boston doesn't feel Verdugo's back problem is a "significant" long-term concern.

For help in the short-term, the Red Sox agreed to a one-year deal with Pillar to the tune of \$4 million.

Eduardo Rodriguez reportedly lost arbitration case with Red Sox

Nick Friar

After the Red Sox and Andrew Benintendi agreed to a deal in the offseason, Eduardo Rodriguez was the only Boston player set to go to arbitration. The lefty had his hearing in Arizona on Wednesday.

According to Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic, Rodriguez lost the case.

Rodriguez wanted \$8.975 million. Instead, he will receive the team's offer of \$8.3 million.

Dustin Pedroia will report to Red Sox camp late

Nick Friar

Dustin Pedroia will not be at camp for the Red Sox' first full-team workout on Monday due to the setback he had with his left knee.

Ron Roenicke got an update from Pedroia on Wednesday. Prior to their conversation, the Red Sox interim manager was unsure if the second baseman would be with the Red Sox for the first full-team workout.

Pedroia continues to deal with discomfort.

“The knee is still sore,” Roenicke said. “So, the setback is still there. He won’t be here Monday.

“He’s just going to try to evaluate what happens here. He’s going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and (Red Sox head athletic trainer) Brad (Pearson) here to figure out what the next step is and where he goes from it.”

Pedroia only played in six games for the Red Sox throughout 2019, along with 14 at the minor league level.

Andrew Benintendi on MLB's investigation: 'We know we didn't do anything'

Nick Friar

Major League Baseball has yet to hand down a ruling regarding its investigation into the Red Sox stealing signs illegally in 2018. That dark cloud looming over the organization is why Ron Roenicke has the interim tag in front of his new title as manager.

At the same time, Chaim Bloom says the Red Sox have “no reason to think there’s anything that would cause an adverse result for Ron in this investigation.”

Not much more has been said from the front office outside of Bloom’s comments about Roenicke. They’ve asked fans to reserve judgment from the start.

Which could be the result of how Boston's hitters feel about the situation.

“I think all of us are confident in what’s going to come out,” Andrew Benintendi said on Thursday. “All we can do is focus on baseball. I mean, there’s a lot of distractions, obviously. I think we’re all just ready to focus on this year.”

And why does he feel this way?

“I just think we know what, I know what — we know what was going on, and we know we didn’t do anything,” Benintendi said. “So, I mean as far as what the report is going to say, whatever it says it says. And, like I said, we’re just focused on this year and that’s all we can focus on.”

According to the Associated Press, MLB will not have a ruling on the sign-stealing investigation this week.

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.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Sparse crowds, slow ticket sales, no buzz -- Red Sox facing an enthusiasm deficit

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- What happens if they hold spring training and no one comes? Does it still exist?

When they weren't pondering the existence of God or the nature of love, philosophers have wrestled with that thorny question since the dawn of Dodgertown. But they've never been able to test the hypothesis, because fans have always descended on even the remotest Grapefruit League outposts in droves.

Based on the first couple of days of workouts at JetBlue Park, however, the Red Sox may finally provide the answer.

The scene on Thursday was jaw-dropping. Even accepting that school vacation doesn't start until next week, and even acknowledging that full-squad workouts don't start until Monday, the lack of fans on the back fields while pitchers and catchers began plying their craft in advance of a 2020 season that's still going to be played despite Mookie Betts wearing Dodger Blue was noticeable.

"There's no (expletive) people here," observed one of the many retirees who provide a genial form of security.

Attendance was sparse enough that more than one observer wondered if the workout was closed to the public. The Red Sox estimated that about 500 total fans have attended the first two days of workouts, which is not dramatically lower than years past, per a team official. But it certainly felt different. On one field, new Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke oversaw a hitting drill under the watchful eyes of three fans. On another, new baseball boss Chaim Bloom moved about in near total anonymity, a far cry from the 2003 rock star days of Theo Epstein.

It was the first tangible evidence that the team's demoralizing offseason, which consisted mainly of trading Mookie Betts in order to facilitate a salary dump of David Price, has left a mark. These are the Red Sox, so it's not like fans will abandon them for good, but the organization shouldn't take their devotion for granted.

The fans that did attend ultimately crowded a field where some of the club's more recognizable hitters were taking BP. But the concession stands were dead, the walkways clear, the secondary fields empty. Presumably the crowds return next week when families make the journey south, but whereas once you could guarantee a packed complex before the games even started, now we'll be genuinely curious to see who arrives and in what kind of numbers.

Coupled with CEO Sam Kennedy's recent admission that tickets sales are down (after ticket prices went up) -- not to mention the Betts trade, a cheating scandal, and questions about ownership's willingness to spend - - and the Red Sox could be entering a phase of brand crisis.

They're the organization that seems to suffer the most from Not Being the Patriots, which is strange, given their four titles and all-around Curse smashing since 2004. But they have a habit of alternating incredible highs with embarrassing lows -- gorilla suits, chicken and beer, Bobby V., sign stealing scandals -- and it finally feels like fans are keeping them at arm's length.

Winning them back won't be as easy as rolling the ball out for opening day and relying on a bunch of Fenway sellouts to obscure any enthusiasm gaps. It's possible the Red Sox underestimated the popularity of Betts, a homegrown superstar who simply wanted to be paid his value, but was instead shipped out on the verge of spring training.

(I've argued it was the right long-term move, even if it hurts, and I still feel that way. But I also understand why fans see it differently, since the Red Sox have the resources to afford anyone they want, and they chose not to pay the former MVP.)

Maybe this ends up being a giant bag of nothing, and the fans swarm JetBlue next week and pack Fenway and give NESN record ratings while the Red Sox overachieve and win us over. But just two years removed from a 108-win season and World Series title, the organization has some real work to do to rehabilitate its image with a fanbase that seems more willing than ever to stay home.

No one can replace Mookie Betts, but Red Sox need Andrew Benintendi to be next best thing

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Alex Verdugo may have been traded for Mookie Betts, and he may end up manning right field instead of Mookie Betts, but he's not replacing Mookie Betts.

That job belongs to someone else, because if there's anyone on the roster who needs to pick up the slack for the departed MVP, it's left fielder Andrew Benintendi.

Baseball people like to remind us that player development is not a linear process, and no one embodies this idea more than Benintendi. He arrived to considerable fanfare in 2016, barely a year after being selected seventh overall, and made an immediate impact, posting an .835 OPS and making an out of this world catch in Tampa Bay to preserve a shutout for David Price.

He finished second in the Rookie of the Year voting a year later and smashed a career-high 20 homers, but posted a middling .776 OPS and battled inconsistency. Then came a borderline All-Star first half in 2018, followed by a mysterious loss of power that dragged straight through 2019, when he lost his ability to command the strike zone.

As 2020 dawns, Benintendi owns a new two-year, \$10 million contract, as well as the expectation that, at age 25, he's ready to shoulder more of the load.

"Just being more consistent," he said. "I think after last season, just trying to work on some stuff this offseason with my swing and trying to be more consistent and I think the biggest thing is just staying in the zone, swinging at good pitches."

Benintendi posted career lows in average (.266) and on base percentage (.343) while blowing away his career high in strikeouts with 140. He never looked comfortable at the plate, flinching at pitches down the middle and flailing at ones outside the zone. He hit just .167 on off-speed offerings.

Tomase: Red Sox already adopting an 'us against the world' mantra

"I just think I went outside the zone way too much," Benintendi said. "I was trying to make something happen and I should have just let the game come to me. Hopefully, I'll learn from it coming into this year."

When Benintendi is right, he has line drive power to all fields and an advanced eye. One of Betts' underrated strengths was his ability to attack pitches in the zone with uncanny consistency, and Benintendi possesses a measure of that, too, though the skill largely abandoned him last year.

He raced to the big leagues on the strength of some lofty projections that saw him as a potential batting champ with 25-homer power. If he makes that leap this season, he won't exactly replace Betts, but he'll mitigate his loss.

That might mean batting leadoff, where Benintendi hit just .256 with 55 strikeouts in 48 games last year. Betts ended up returning to that spot out of necessity when Benintendi failed to hit there, but now that Mookie is gone, manager Ron Roenicke noted that Benintendi will be given a chance to stick atop the order.

"If Benny had been what he was the year before and has a .380 on-base percentage, I think that works out really well to have Mookie second," Roenicke said. "I think Benny learned something last year. 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."

Benintendi is open to the challenge.

"No, it's just like any other spot in the lineup," he said. "You just have to hit first in the first inning. Other than that, it's the same. I don't mind it at all. If I need to do it, I'll do it. I think last year, I was going through a little slump when I was in the leadoff spot, so obviously there's a lot of things being said about me hitting leadoff but, no, wherever I need to be, I'll be."

In a perfect world, the Red Sox need him to be the man who covers the most for the loss of Betts.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Former GM Doug Melvin happy to see Ron Roenicke back in manager's seat

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Until Tuesday, Doug Melvin was the only baseball executive to hire Ron Roenicke to manage his major league team. Today, he remains the only one to fire him from that same post.

Still, when the Red Sox and chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom introduced Roenicke as interim manager earlier this week, Melvin couldn't have been happier.

"I'm a big believer in people getting second chances," said Melvin, who worked as a general manager for the Texas Rangers and later the Milwaukee Brewers. "Ron's opportunity with us with the Brewers was his first chance. I got let go as the GM in Texas and in my second opportunity, I did some things differently. You learn from your first chance. I'm a big believer in second chances in the business we're in."

Melvin enthusiastically recommended Roenicke to Bloom when the two spoke last month.

"Ron's a real professional," said Melvin. "Ron will handle your day-to-day job description of a manager really well. He's a good person. He's not afraid to approach players. He wants to make sure that the front office and he work in synch with each other; he feels the relationship with the front office is very

important. We had a good relationship in that regard. He's a stickler for fundamentals. He expects fundamentals to be done properly in preparing for the season.

"He's a very good listener. He uses his coaches very well and values their opinions. He's been a coach — he's been a bench coach, a base coach, so he's done all those jobs. I always feel a manager is better prepared when they've done those jobs first. As for as players go, don't take his mild-mannered demeanor as a non-competitor. He's a strong competitor. He gets upset at tough losses, but he also understands the game. If you have a tough loss, he understands there's 161 games to go. But you don't want to get him upset. He takes losses hard, as everyone should."

Like Roenicke himself, Melvin feared that his former manager might not get another chance. At a time when baseball is turning to younger and inexperienced managers as a rule, Roenicke's age (63) may have taken him out of consideration for some openings.

"It's part of our game today," said Melvin. "Those young guys (Alex Cora, Rocco Baldelli, Aaron Boone) have all done good jobs. I thought Ron might have gotten another job by now. I thought it would have happened. Ron's young at heart. I don't think his age should be (a deterrent). He's got so much more experience. It might have crossed his mind, that the page had turned and they go with younger people."

The game has changed a great deal since 2015, when Roenicke began his fifth and final season in Milwaukee. The influence of analytics has grown, and the dynamic between the front office and the manager has been completely evolved.

"The approach to managing has probably changed," acknowledged Melvin. "But Ron's a smart individual who can recognize all of that. He's not going to fight that. He's going to go along and do what he has to do to be successful. I told Chaim my experience as a GM was much different. I never went down to the clubhouse after games. Today, a lot of them do and go down and discuss the game right then."

Roenicke will have a much different experience dealing with the media in Boston than he did in Milwaukee, where only two reporters cover the Brewers full-time. But Roenicke had his own challenges on the job, having to answer questions about Ryan Braun's PED suspension nearly every day for half a season in 2013.

"That was huge for a market like Milwaukee at the time," recalled Melvin. "But the (media scrutiny) will be much different in Boston than what he had in Milwaukee. There aren't any media markets much bigger than Chicago, LA, New York and Boston. The pressures of this difficult season that the Red Sox are going through, he's obviously going to be looked at under a different lens. But I think he'll handle it."

Above all, Melvin believes Roenicke will succeed because of his ability to build relationships — with both players and those in Baseball Operations.

"That was one thing that he was really good at," said Melvin. "I would question him at times and say, 'Ron, we need to get this guy going, make sure to get on him.' But he loved to build relationships with players and once he built those, he felt he could then bring that player in and reprimand him if he had to."

"But he said he first had to get to know a player, know a player's family. He would say, 'I want to know about his friends.' He was very, very good at that. Some managers don't want to get that close, but Ron was very good at that. He was better at it than I was. As a GM, I knew I might have to make some very difficult decisions at some point and I had a fear of getting too close to a player, because you might have to make a tough call at some point."

"But Ron was very good at relationship-building. And he wasn't afraid that, once he builds that trust, to get on a player when he had to."

To this day, Melvin and Roenicke maintain a friendship outside the game, speaking on occasion and recommending Western novels to one another.

“We stay in touch,” said Melvin, who still works as an adviser with the Brewers. “I think there’s some mutual respect there.”

Red Sox Notebook: Dustin Pedroia will be missing early in camp; Chavis needs patience

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — When the Red Sox have their first full-squad workout Monday under the direction of new manager Ron Roenicke, they’ll do so without the presence of Dustin Pedroia.

Pedroia remains home in Arizona dealing with a knee that has undergone multiple surgical procedures. He told Roenicke Wednesday that he would be reporting to camp anytime soon.

The veteran infielder has played just nine games in the last two seasons and it would seem that he has played his last game. At some point in the next few weeks or months, it appears likely that Pedroia will announce that he can no longer play, resulting in the Red Sox releasing him.

They will remain obligated to pay him \$25 million — \$13 million this season and \$12 million in 2021.

“He’s still sore, so the setback is still there,” said Roenicke. “He won’t be here Monday. He’s just going to evaluate what happens here. He’s going to continue to talk to the people in Arizona and (the training staff here) to figure out what the next step is and where he goes.”

Roenicke isn’t assuming that Pedroia’s comeback has reached a final roadblock, but wishes he had seen him on the field more the last two years.

“He’s a special player,” Roenicke said. “It’s not just (being an) MVP. It’s just watching the way he plays — the energy he brings to a team, just doing things the right play, playing the great defense, getting on base, slapping the ball to right field when he needs to, and driving the ball when he needs to.

“It was never comfortable on the other side, having to face him, especially when the game was on the line. Whenever you see a great player with an injury who has not been able to perform....that part is really difficult.”

Michael Chavis struggled with fastballs up in the zone during his rookie year, but Roenicke isn’t alarmed. The manager believes Chavis would do well to just lay off those offerings.

“Nobody hits that fastball at the top of the zone,” Roenicke said. “Maybe (Xander Bogaerts), he’s a great high fastball hitter. But there aren’t many. So if you’re not really good at this pitch, which hardly anybody is, you really need to lay off of it. It’s more the discipline part of it. The guys who like to pitch up in the zone, (the pitches) are usually high. They look good to a hitter and by the time you start to swing, it’s a ball, it’s high.

“So I think if we can get him to be disciplined and not chase it, pitchers will then have to come back into the zone. And when you’re back into the zone with him, it gets dangerous. He’s got that much ability to drive balls, whether it’s off-speed or fastballs. You hang an off-speed to him and it’s going to get hit pretty hard.”

Despite the return of Mitch Moreland at first and the addition of Jose Peraza at second, Roenicke believes Chavis will get plenty of opportunities.

“When he’s swinging the bat well, he’s going to get more playing time,” said Roenicke, “whether it’s first or second, I don’t know. But he’s going to be out there. When he’s performing the way he can, like when he first came up, he was so hot. Wherever it was, you wanted him out there.”

Though they've yet to announce it or make it official, the Red Sox have a one-year agreement with outfielder Kevin Pillar, who's expected in camp sometime over the weekend.

Pillar brings a strong glove and a righthanded bat to an outfield that currently has three lefty hitters. He could provide depth at the corner spots, but also could see playing time in center against lefties, cutting into Jackie Bradley Jr.'s playing time.

Bradley, however, would welcome Pillar to the team.

"Absolutely," said Bradley. "He's going to be able to help the team, help the team win. Obviously, upper management thought he was going to make a difference so they're going to bring him on. That's good. I'm going to focus on what I can control and play my ball.

"I respect him period, as a player. I think anybody who's at this level and can play the game at a high level, is very talented and can help a ballclub on both sides of the ball. So, ultimate respect for him."

The Red Sox went to salary arbitration with just one player this winter — Eduardo Rodriguez — and won their case. The Sox reached settlements on filing day with more than a handful of players, then avoided a hearing last weekend with Andrew Benintendi, whom they extended for two years and \$10 million.

Rodriguez, who flew to Arizona Tuesday for the hearing and returned late Wednesday night, was asking for \$8.975 million, with the Sox countering at \$8.3.

According to a source, the arbitrator with the team, so Rodriguez will get their figure of \$8.3 million.

Fifth spot in rotation up for grabs

Sean McAdam

The Red Sox' starting rotation will have a different look this year.

Gone are David Price (traded to the Dodgers) and Rick Porcello (free agent, signed with Mets). New is lefty Martin Perez.

Perez joins the returning trio of Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi, and Eduardo Rodriguez.

That leaves one spot vacant. The Sox could experiment with an opener — as Ron Roenicke conceded Wednesday — or they could choose someone from a list of candidates in camp.

"We don't have somebody yet for that fifth spot," said Roenicke. "It's too early to try to figure that out. I think they'll pitch themselves into spots."

Other options could materialize over the course of the season. It's possible, for instance, that by May or June, a young starter in the minors (Tanner Houck or Bryan Mata) could emerge. There are also others in the organization who've shuttled back-and-forth between the bullpen and the rotation (Mike Shawaryn, Kyle Hart).

For now, it's a matter of quantity over quality. Here's a look at those in the running:

RHP Ryan Weber

2019: 2-4, 5.09

The Skinny: Weber made three starts for the Red Sox last year. In one, he completely kept the Blue Jays off-guard, limiting them to a single run on three hits over six innings. In the two others, however, he

combined for 5.1 innings, allowing nine runs on 13 hits. Weber attacks hitters and doesn't walk many, but he has very little margin for error and with a fastball that stays under 90 mph, he needs precise command or else he gets hammered.

LHP Brian Johnson

2019: 1-3, 6.02

The Skinny: Johnson had a miserable season after being a big contributor in 2018. He fell out of favor enough to be placed on waivers early in the offseason. He went unclaimed and returned to the organization, though he's no longer on the 40-man roster. Johnson has battled injuries for much of his career — he missed several months with elbow issues in the first half of the season. Being off the roster, he would really have to wow the Sox this spring to pitch himself back into the picture.

RHP Hector Velazquez

2019: 1-4, 5.43

The Skinny: Like Johnson, he was a key member of the 2018 staff, and also like Johnson, tailed off poorly last year. There's also this: Velazquez has been far more effective in relief (career 2.99 ERA) than he's been as a starter (5.27), suggesting that if he has a role on the 2020 Red Sox, it's far more likely to be in the bullpen.

LHP Matt Hall

2019: 0-1, 7.71 (with Detroit)

The Skinny: The left-handed Hall has 21 appearances in the big leagues over the last two years, but all have been in relief. He's been an effective starter in the minors, however. In 2016 and 2017, between Single-A and Double-A, he made 49 appearances, all but two of them starts and posted a combined 2.58 ERA. He can miss bats, too, averaging 11 strikeouts per nine innings at Triple-A last year. He needs more consistency. The Sox think, at 26, it might be his time.

RHP Chris Mazza

2019: 1-1, 5.11 (with NY Mets)

The Skinny: At 29, Mazza is the oldest candidate in the group and also, the most traveled, having been part of four different organizations (Twins, Marlins, Mariners, Mets) before being claimed off waivers by the Red Sox this winter. He made his major league debut for the Mets at 29 last summer and is actually a distant relative (third cousin) of Yankee legend Joe DiMaggio. Like Weber and Johnson and others in the running, he doesn't get a ton of swing-and-miss, so he needs to keep the ball out of the fat part of the plate and induce soft contact to succeed.

LHP Jeffrey Springs

2019: 4-1, 6.40 (with Texas)

The Skinny: Springs has an impressive rookie season with the Rangers in 2018 (1-1, 3.38 in 18 games, including two starts), but took a big step backward last season, leading him to be sent to the Sox in exchange for Sam Travis last month. Control was a big issue in 2019, when he issued 23 walks in 32.1 innings. Given that wildness had never been an issue with him previously, it would appear that the poor control was the result of a mechanical hitch or a failure to adequately repeat his delivery.

*** *The Athletic***

Red Sox mailbag: Why is Brock Holt unsigned? Could he still return to Boston?

Jen McCaffrey

Spring training is almost in full swing. It's time to open up the Red Sox mailbag. Let's get to your questions:

Q: Who's the closer? and the 8th inning set up pitcher? It feels to me like it's a combination of (Brandon) Workman, (Matt) Barnes and Darwinzon Hernandez. — James Stewart, @IamJamesStewart

A: I think that's a fair assessment. On Wednesday, interim manager Ron Roenicke said he "thinks" Workman will be close and deserves a chance to do so after his work in the role last season. But he also noted that they haven't quite figured out the roles just yet. He made it sound like he'd prefer to have more defined roles than last year, but doesn't want to rule out matchups late in games. If a team they're facing has a lefty-heavy lineup and the score is tight, maybe they use Hernandez (a lefty) in the ninth. At this point, I think you might see Hernandez and Barnes in the seventh and eighth (or vice versa) with Workman in the ninth more often than not.

Q: Does Darwinson Hernandez get a chance to start this year or will he be a reliever? — Kevin Johnson, @kj590

A: At the Winter Meetings, when Alex Cora was still running the team, he said they'd planned to keep Hernandez as a reliever, which seemed to make sense because of the rookie's command issues once he got past a couple innings of work. But this week, Roenicke left the door open for Hernandez to start. He noted that as Hernandez gained innings he built confidence last year and his command stabilized a bit more. It sounds like he'll stay in a relief role for now, but Roenicke noted: "His stuff is fantastic, he's very strong physically, so he doesn't wear down. (Starting) is definitely a possibility in the future." Maybe that means they ease him back into starting via the opener, or maybe he starts the year so solid the bullpen, they choose not to mess with it.

Q: Any talk of still signing Brock Holt again now that they have some extra (money)? — Kevin L Doyle, @newkevindiacity

A: It's possible, but having signed Mitch Moreland and Jose Peraza this offseason and with Michael Chavis, Tzu-Wei Lin and Rule 5 signee Jonathan Arauz in the mix, the infield depth is a bit crowded. The Sox also have CJ Chatham and Bobby Dalbec on the 40-man roster. While Holt would also offer outfield flexibility, he's a left-handed hitter and the Red Sox currently have an all-lefty outfield in Jackie Bradley Jr., Andrew Benintendi and Alex Verdugo. Plus, they're in agreement to sign Kevin Pillar (who hits right-handed) as a fourth outfielder. So yes, it's still possible they opt to sign Holt as the spring progresses, but right now the roster is a bit jammed. Perhaps they trade Chavis as part of a package for a low-level starter, opening a hole for Holt. I don't think the door is closed just yet for him, but I also think there's no obvious roster spot now.

Q: Are the Sox still in the market for a 5th starter or are they going to roll with an opener approach? — Dan Ryaboy @ryaboy88

A: In my mind, they have three options: A pitcher emerges as a solid fifth starter candidate, whether that's a young prospect like Tanner Houck or Bryan Mata or someone with starting experience like Kyle Hart, who pitched well in Double-A and Triple-A last year (3.52 ERA in 27 games, 24 starts). The second option is that they try to pull off a trade for a back-end starter, one in which they wouldn't have to give up much but also would be getting a starter that likely needs some work, a la Martin Perez. The third is the opener, in which they mix and match a variety of the bullpen arms — like Ryan Weber, Mike Shawaryn, Hector Velazquez and Brian Johnson, and even newcomers like Austin Brice, Matt Hall, Chris Mazza, Josh Osich and Jeffrey Springs. There aren't too many starters left on the free agent market and the ones who are there (Clay Buchholz, Andrew Cashner, Matt Harvey, Marco Estrada, Jeremy Hellickson) are injured or haven't pitched well. I feel like they have enough arms in camp that it makes sense to figure something out rather than add one of these questionable arms.

Q: How much worse is this team without Mookie Betts and David Price? Their rotation is in tatters and that assumes that Chris Sale and Nathan (Eovaldi) stay healthy. Do you think the Red Sox will make a play for Betts in the offseason? I expect this trade is a sign that they will permanently reduce payroll. — Max, @jmm060708

A: I don't think this is a sign they are permanently reducing payroll. We've seen the Yankees and the Dodgers do similar things in terms of cutting payroll in the past before ramping up spending again. That the

Red Sox felt their best option was to trade Betts in order to recalibrate their payroll structure is what makes this so frustrating. Chaim Bloom admitted earlier this week that yes this team is worse off without Betts and Price. I think that's obvious. However, I still think they'll be able to compete for a wild card spot. The Yankees already looked like sure-fire locks for the division, but the wild card is such a crapshoot. Teams face injuries, others outperform or underperform. The key for the Red Sox is, of course, staying healthy. If Sale, Eovaldi and Rodriguez remain healthy that rotation could be very good. They just need things to fall the right way for them which yes, is a big ask. As for re-signing Betts, I think it's still a possibility. Maybe having reset this year, they can go all out this upcoming winter. If Betts truly wants to set his market value and the Red Sox are the highest bidders, then he may very well return. It's not something that happens often, but it's possible and it seems like he left on good terms so the door appears to be open for that.

Q: Do you see any chance Brock Holt signs with Red Sox this year? Or does the Jose Peraza and Jeter Downs moves preclude that? — James Phelan

A: Downs will probably start the year in Double-A and it's possible he's ready by the end of the season, but I also don't think they want to rush his development. He's only 21 and while he had a solid year last year, most of it was spent in High-A. I'm sure they'll also want to give him time to get acclimated to the Red Sox system in general. So I don't see him necessarily blocking Holt, but the signing of Peraza and having Chavis, Tzu-Wei Lin, CJ Chatham and even Bobby Dalbec and Mitch Moreland on the 40-man roster crowds the roster. They also have Marco Hernandez, who's not on the 40-man, but still in the system. The impending signing of Kevin Pillar also takes away at-bats/playing time for Holt in the outfield, and they likely were looking for a right-handed outfielder anyway with Bradley, Benintendi and Verdugo all lefties. So right now, it seems like the roster is a little too tight for Holt, but Bloom and the front office know how well he was liked in Boston. So if there are injuries or others aren't panning out this spring, maybe it is something they look into if he's still available.

Q: It seems a next logical step with the newfound money to play with is trying to work out a Devers extension. Is that something you see happening this season, or them at least beginning talks? — Chris Puzia

A: I think it's something they'll at least start talking about. We know there was a report in September that they were planning on making an offer to Devers but obviously a lot has changed since then. Would it be wise to wait another season to ensure Devers sustains the success he had in 2019, especially with some of the ill-advised contracts they've doled out in recent years? Probably. They do have the money and flexibility right now, but they'll also likely have similar flexibility by the end of the season. And by then they'll have more information on how he projects long term. Devers won't reach arbitration until after 2020 at which point he has a little more flexibility. He'll hit free agency after 2024. So signing him now would require a lengthy deal. The longest pre-arbitration extension signed in baseball was Ryan Braun, who agreed to an eight-year deal with Milwaukee in 2008. Waiting too long to sign Devers to extension, however, could make his asking price increase and they don't want to fall into the same situation they did with Betts.

Q: Does anybody actually believe that: A. They really want to sign Mookie and B. Mookie wants to come back? — Maureen, @maureenfox

A: I think having reset their payroll structure, they will give it a go this winter. Whether their offer is high enough, of course, remains to be seen. Betts always said he loved his time in Boston, but viewed his deal strictly as a business decision. I think if he wants to earn the most money in free agency, and the Red Sox offer the highest contract, then I can't see him turning it down just because they traded him. If he understands it's a business, he'd understand their decision to trade him.

Q: Have you heard any news on the investigation? Last weekend credible reporters tweeted that the Red Sox weren't going to get hit hard with penalties and the report was expected this week. It seems fishy, like Manfred got so much backlash from the new Astros report and decided to keep digging for something on the Red Sox. — Maggie Szejner

A: It is a bizarre situation. I would have thought MLB wanted to get the investigation out before spring training, but now that it's dragged into the first week and more Astros revelations have surfaced, it's getting messier and messier. I honestly don't know what will come of this report or what kind of punishment Alex Cora will face. I have to assume, based on his parting of ways with the Red Sox, his suspension is for at least a year. I know some have suggested Ron Roenicke is a place-holder for Cora and that Cora could return next year. I think we honestly have to wait and see what the scope of this is. Bloom said they have no intention of bringing back Cora or that it wasn't a factor in naming Roenicke the manager, but honestly what can you expect him to say at this point? I do think whatever is revealed in this report, it won't offer all the answers and speculation will continue. We may never know exactly what happened, but at least we'll know what kind of punishment, if any, the Red Sox will face and can address it from that standpoint.

The Red Sox have a leadership void now. Who will step in to fill it?

Steve Buckley

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Andrew Benintendi was some five, six minutes into his media session late Thursday morning at JetBlue Park when he dropped the V word.

As in ... veteran.

As in ... veteran leadership.

“I'm sure that a lot of people, they'll kind of step into that spot naturally,” he said. “I feel like a lot of guys in this clubhouse kind of lead by example and go about their business the right way. I mean you don't necessarily have to be a vocal leader. There are a lot of veterans in here, pitchers and position players, and ...”

This is all spring training porridge, of course, as basic on the menu as bunting drills and pasty-legged sportswriters. But it does beg a larger question: When, exactly, does a big-league ballplayer become a veteran? It's particularly relevant for the 2020 Red Sox, now that the trade papers are finally in order and superstar right fielder Mookie Betts and left-hander David Price are sporting their Dodger blues.

Betts, in his fashion, had emerged as a veteran leader on the Red Sox over the past couple of years. And while Price often presented himself as combustible and grouchy, there's no denying he held sway in the clubhouse. Now they're gone, and for all practical purposes so, too, is second baseman Dustin Pedroia. The former MVP's many injuries are bringing his career to a sad, too-quick conclusion.

That's why everybody on the Red Sox with more than a week of big-league service time is going to get asked whether he's that veteran leader the Red Sox need. Benintendi tackled the topic Thursday. On Friday, first baseman Mitch Moreland will get his turn, and designated hitter J.D. Martinez will soon, too. Lefty Chris Sale is on the clock.

And don't forget shortstop Xander Bogaerts, who, though only 27, is entering his eighth season and has played on two World Series-winning editions of the Red Sox. He's going to be asked so many questions about being a veteran that it'll seem like he was a late-season call-up for the Battle of Midway.

“I guess you're a veteran when somebody else refers to you as one,” Benintendi offered. “That's for somebody else to give you that title, instead of you doing it yourself.”

Benintendi's definition of “veteran” — that is, baseball veteran — is more than just clever. It's a bull's-eye. To illustrate the point, we need look no further than newly minted Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke and should-be Hall of Famer Dwight Evans, who played nearly two decades in right field for the Sox.

Roenicke, a former outfielder who played parts of eight seasons in the majors, debuted with the Dodgers in 1981 as a September call-up. He went in as a ninth-inning defensive replacement on Sept. 2 for Dusty Baker. Roenicke had just turned 25 two weeks earlier. Baker was 32 and, incredibly, already in his 14th

season. The '81 Dodgers also had outfielder Reggie Smith, 36, who was in his 16th season. First baseman Steve Garvey and shortstop Bill Russell, both 32, were each in their 13th seasons. Third baseman Ron Cey, 33, was in his 11th season. Second baseman Davey Lopes, 36, was in his 10th season. Even their bench players had been around forever: Jay Johnstone, a 35 year-old journeyman, had already been in the big leagues for 16 seasons. All told, the '81 Dodgers had 13 players with 10 more years in the big leagues.

“Back then, if you were a rookie you shut up and you learned how to play,” Roenicke said. “And then the veteran guys, they would sit down and talk to you, and they would teach you things, they would teach you how to play.”

And yet, to prove Benintendi's point, in just two short seasons Roenicke was with a new team and being asked to assume a new role — veteran leader. Released by the Dodgers on July 18, 1983, he was picked up about a week later by the Seattle Mariners, who had recently changed managers. The new skipper was Del Crandall, and it so happened he had been Roenicke's manager on the Dodgers' Triple-A Albuquerque club.

“Del told me he wanted me to be kind of a veteran influence — and it was only my third year in the big leagues,” Roenicke said. “But we had 11 or 12 rookies on that club, or something like that.”

In other words, Roenicke, in his third big-league season, had become a veteran because Crandall was referring to him as one. And because of personnel: In just a couple of years Roenicke had gone from being a kid on a team of codgers to a codger on a team of kids.

For Dwight Evans, the opposite happened. While Evans strongly believes Benintendi is ready to take his place as a veteran leader as he enters his fifth big-league season, he didn't see himself as a veteran leader until “the early 1980s.”

Evans was only 20 when, on Sept 16, 1972, he made his major-league debut.

And — wait, what? — he's saying he didn't consider himself a veteran until he was in his 10th or 11th season?

How is that possible?

“Yaz,” said Evans, practically whispering the name.

Ahh, yes. Yaz. Carl Yastrzemski.

“There are veterans and there are veterans,” Evans said. “And Carl was just so well respected. There were always a lot of things going on, and he took care of them.

“When he talked,” said Evans, “you listened.”

There is no Captain Carl on the 2020 Red Sox. No Big Papi, no 'Tek, no Pedro.

No Mookie Betts.

For better or worse, no David Price.

“And I think the way it works is, you become a veteran when the younger guys look at you and follow your work habits and see how hard you play,” Evans said. “You're the guy who sets an example.”

Auditions are now underway.

The 300: The fabled, grueling spring training challenge every Red Sox pitcher has come to fear

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Soaked in sweat and still trying to catch their breath, Brandon Workman bent at the waist, Matt Barnes found a place to sit down, and Marcus Walden went straight to the grass, lying flat on his back, staring up into the bright blue sky. When they spoke, the words came in bursts and gasps. They'd known this day was coming, and although they'd been through it before, the immediate aftermath always proves some level of agony.

All Red Sox pitchers dread the 300s.

Around JetBlue Park, the annual sprints are something of a spring training rite of passage. Other teams have their own versions of the conditioning challenge, but for the Red Sox it's simple: six 50-yard dashes, one immediately after the other, all while a strength coach holds a stopwatch and counts down the seconds during the final straightaway.

"It's definitely our hardest running of the year," Workman said. "So, it sucks. It's terrible."

And it's always right at the beginning of camp.

Strength and conditioning staff refer to the drill as a 300-yard shuttle. In the clubhouse, it's simply the 300, or 300s, plural. The dreaded exercise happens in an open field in front of the big-league clubhouse where staff measure and mark a 50-yard chunk of pristine green grass. One at a time or in groups, pitchers have to sprint that distance and back, three times in a row, for a total of 300 yards. It's basically three football fields of sprinting at something close to maximum effort. Red Sox staff declined to say exactly how quickly each pitcher must complete the task, but the players believe it has to be done in less than a minute.

"Everybody says so," Nathan Eovaldi said. "But (the exact number) is always different. It's under 55 or 52 (seconds). Something like that."

And if the players can't do it? The staff wouldn't say whether there are ramifications for a failed 300, but the players believe the standard to be non-negotiable.

"We used to get in trouble on the minor-league side (for being too slow)," Workman said. "But I don't know what the deal is on the major-league side. I haven't failed it, so I don't know."

Pitchers often get a hard time in spring training. They're teased a little bit because they often don't have a lot to do. They show up, work out, field a few comebackers (some days), throw a bullpen (or maybe just play catch), and then they head home. There's a reason pitchers come to spring training with their golf clubs.

But the Red Sox test their pitchers early, and the players view the challenge as a monster scaring away offseason complacency. Don't get out of shape. The 300s are coming!

"I train for it," Mike Shawaryn said. "Seriously."

The Red Sox schedule each pitcher's 300 to coincide with early spring training bullpens. Pitchers who threw Thursday ran Thursday (bullpen first, then sprints). They're given advanced warning so they know what's coming.

"It's like game day in a way," Eovaldi said. "The cones are ready to go. They've got strength coaches out there with their stopwatches. They're like, 'All right! Ready to go? Ready to run?' Like, hyping it up.

"I'm like, 'No! I went to bed nervous last night!'"

When Eovaldi was with the Yankees, pitchers were timed running a mile. Other pitchers talked of annual spring sprints from the right field foul pole, around the field, and up to first base. Other camps had some 100-yard sprints, but not necessarily 300-yard monstrosities.

For returning Red Sox players, the 300s are standard operating procedure. They know the drill. Literally. Workman feels certain he was forced to run 300s far more often when he was a prospect in minor-league camp, but he'll happily take the diminished demand. Minor-league free agents R.J. Alvarez and Mike Kickham signed with the Red Sox this winter, lived together for about a month this offseason and did winter sprints together in preparation.

"It's not like it's an impossible feat," Alvarez said. "But it's one that you really work up in your head before you do it, like, 'I gotta do it! Gotta do it! Gotta do it!' And when you're done it's like, thank God I did it!"

As Workman, Barnes and Walden crouched, sat and lay panting at the end of their runs, fellow reliever Colten Brewer stood 20 feet away, watching them huff, as he toed the line for his turn. Brewer was still running as the others finally got up and made their way to the clubhouse.

"This was our one hard day," Walden said. "I've never felt 31 (years old) in my life (until now). This is my 14th year doing them (in pro ball). I've never struggled really doing them, but today — I mean, I made them, but it was tough. I know I'm not 22 anymore."

*** *Associated Press***

Red Sox beat Eduardo Rodriguez in salary arbitration

PHOENIX -- The Boston Red Sox defeated pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez in salary arbitration on Thursday, improving teams to 5-1 this year.

Rodriguez will earn \$8.3 million rather than his request for \$8,975,000. The case was decided by arbitrators Steven Wolf, Walt De Treux and Melinda Gordon, who heard the argument Wednesday.

A left-hander who turns 27 in April, Rodriguez was a career-best 19-6 with a 3.81 ERA in 34 starts last season, when he made \$4,325,000. He is eligible for free agency after the 2021 season.

Teams also beat Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder Joc Pederson, Minnesota pitcher Jose Berrios, Atlanta reliever Shane Greene and Colorado catcher Tony Wolters.

Dodgers reliever Pedro Baez has been the lone player to win his salary arbitration.

All-Star closer Josh Hader went to a hearing with Milwaukee on Thursday after just making the eligibility cutoff with 2 years, 115 days of major league service. Hader asked for a raise from \$687,600 to \$6.4 million, and the Brewers argued for \$4.1 million. A decision from arbitrators Mark Burstein, Dan Brent and Frederic Horowitz is expected Friday.

A shaggy-haired left-hander who turns 26 in April, Hader had 37 saves in 44 chances and went 3-5 with a 2.62 ERA in his second straight All-Star season. He failed to hold a 3-1 lead in the eighth inning of the NL wild-card game, loading the bases by hitting one batter, walking another and allowing a bloop single, then giving up a two-out, bases-loaded single to Washington's Juan Soto that scored three runs. The Nationals won 4-3 and went on to their first World Series title.

Seven players remain scheduled for hearings, which run through Feb. 21.