

The Boston Red Sox Saturday, February 15, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

Alex Verdugo, Kevin Pillar being evaluated by Red Sox doctors

Dan Shaughnessy

FORT MYERS, Fla. — At last, an Alex Verdugo sighting.

The former Dodgers outfielder, the top prospect coming to the Red Sox in the Mookie Betts deal, made his first appearance Friday morning at JetBlue Park and was seen chatting with new teammates Jackie Bradley Jr. and Kevin Pillar while pitchers and catchers were going through their brief workout.

Neither Verdugo nor Pillar participated in any workouts, and Verdugo was not in the clubhouse during media availability periods.

Pillar, a former Blue Jays outfielder, could be playing in place of Verdugo in the outfield at the beginning of the season if Verdugo's balky back puts him on the shelf. Pillar, joining the team as a free agent, moved his stuff into a stall in the locker room early Friday. After reviewing his physical, the Red Sox made the one-year, \$4.25-million deal official later in the day.

The 23-year-old Verdugo also spent Friday undergoing physical evaluation by Red Sox doctors. Verdugo was shut down by the Dodgers in early August last season because of the back issues.

"Right now he's with our medical group, going through things to see where we're at," Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said after the workout.

Roenicke was asked if he could comment on Thursday's Globe report that Verdugo might not be ready on Opening Day.

"Not yet, because I hate to make a comment and it comes back later wrong," said Roenicke. "I think he needs to go through everything with them [doctors], and I know it's been quite a while. They really want to get a good feel for him. They don't know him, which makes a big difference, so they'll talk to him, figure out where we are and at what point we can start going through with whatever — whether it's baseball activities, stretching activity. I'll know a lot more tomorrow."

Regarding the prospect of Pillar joining the roster, Roenicke said, "Nothing's finalized. He's aggressive, knows how to play the game. I thought he gave his team a real nice at-bat when he came to the plate in big situations."

Pillar, 31, played six seasons for the Jays before joining the Giants in 2019. He is a career .264 hitter with a good glove.

"We know he doesn't mind crashing into walls," said Roenicke. "He knows how to play. It would be nice to have that righthanded bat out there if everything checks out."

Doctor's appt.

Chris Sale, battling pneumonia, did not work out with the team but was expected to report to Sox doctors Friday afternoon . . . Red Sox owners are scheduled to be at JetBlue Park Monday for the first full-squad workout . . . The Sox' annual charity golf tournament is Tuesday . . . Crowds at JetBlue have been sparse but are expected to swell next week when school is out in Massachusetts . . . Jeter Downs, the infield prospect the Sox acquired from the Dodgers, was bumped from the locker stall between J.D. Martinez and

Mitch Moreland to make room for Pillar. Downs is now nestled between outfielder Jarren Duran and infielder Jose Peraza . . . Pillar played 156 games for the Giants last year, but he's still using his Blue Jays equipment bag . . . Get well soon to WBZ's intrepid Jonny Miller, who was inducted into the New England Broadcast Hall of Fame last September. Miller, who has been covering the Red Sox in spring training since the early 1970s, fell ill at Thursday's workout and is recovering at a local hospital.

Mitch Moreland asserts of Red Sox: 'We've still got a great team'

Dan Shaughnessy

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Who's less controversial or more boring than nice guy Mitch Moreland?

Nobody.

This Red Sox spring training got off to a rugged start with new baseball boss Chaim Bloom stating, "We're going to be worse," while explaining the unpopular salary dump of Mookie Betts and David Price.

Since the promotion of bench coach Ron Roenicke to interim manager in place of fan favorite Alex Cora, we've had the announcement that Chris Sale has pneumonia and a report that outfield prospect Alex Verdugo (the key piece coming to Boston in the Betts deal) may not be ready for the start of the season because of a back issue.

Meanwhile, the Sox won their arbitration case against 19-game winner Eduardo Rodriguez (more savings!) and are being investigated by MLB for allegations of cheating during their 2018 championship season.

Which is exactly why Nice Guy Mitch was the perfect player for the Sox to put in front of the media Friday morning at JetBlue Park. While we waited for the official announcement that veteran outfielder Kevin Pillar was joining the team (he was in the Red Sox clubhouse Friday morning and the official statement came Friday night), Moreland was hooked up to a microphone and brought us back to baseball for a few minutes.

"This team's going to be good," said Moreland, a 34-year-old veteran of 10 big league seasons. "We're being overlooked right now, so bring it on."

Just what Sox fans need to hear at this hour.

Moreland has been a solid, though oft-injured player, for the Sox the last three seasons. A career .251 hitter with 166 big league homers, he has played a solid first base and came up with one of the biggest (and most underrated) home runs in Red Sox history when he clubbed a 437-foot, three-run, two-out, pinch homer at Dodger Stadium in Game 4 of the 2018 World Series.

The Sox had lost an excruciating 18-inning Game 3 and were looking at a 2-2 World Series tie when they trailed, 4-0, in the seventh inning of Game 4 at Chavez Ravine. Moreland's bomb changed everything.

I asked him about the MLB investigation into those 119-win Red Sox. Unnamed sources told The Athletic that the Sox were illegally using the video replay room to pick up signs and relay them. MLB is well into a lengthy probe.

"Obviously that's still ongoing," Moreland said. "I think it's probably coming to an end maybe next week or something from what I've heard. I don't know, but from what I remember from it, we were just really a good team.

"We went out and prepared well and we won it. It's the best team I've ever played on. It's something I'll never forget. It's a great memory for me and I'm looking forward to making another one this year.

"I talked to them [MLB investigators], but it's still ongoing, so we'll let that finish up."

What's his level of confidence in how the investigation will conclude?

"We'll talk about it when it comes out."

Moreland was a free agent at the end of last season, and many assumed he'd played his final game for the Red Sox, but Boston signed him to a one-year, \$2.5 million deal in late January. The Sox hold a team option for \$3 million in 2021, or they can buy him out for \$500,000 after this season.

"This is my third time to sign here," Moreland said with a chuckle. "I didn't really know how it was going to turn out. I've learned to keep an open mind because you don't know what's going to happen."

"This is my No. 1 choice. And it's nice coming in and not having to relearn the system. I'm excited about coming back."

His reaction to the trading of Betts and Price?

"That's a tough loss," he said. "We've still got a great team. When you look around the room, there's guys that have been doing it good for a long time."

"[Betts and Price] are not replaceable. They are great ballplayers, but at the same time, we're going to be fine."

Back and quad issues limited Moreland to 91 games last season. In that small sample, he hit 19 home runs.

"The health question has always been my thing," he said. "If I can continue to stay on the field, that's going to be good for me and hopefully for the team. I got a lot of work in this offseason, trying to get my body in a good place."

"Obviously I'm not getting any younger. The miles start adding up. You've got to figure out different ways to keep yourself ready."

Minor leaguers to get pay raises, but major issues remain

Michael Silverman

Major League Baseball decided Friday it "would move forward unilaterally" to raise minimum salaries for minor league players beginning next season.

In a memo obtained by the Globe, MLB executive Morgan Sword informed owners, executives, and farm directors of all 30 teams that all minor leaguers will receive pay bumps between 38 and 72 percent beginning in 2021.

MLB has always had the power to implement pay raises to players, but the timing of this one could not escape the shadow hanging over its contentious talks with Minor League Baseball over a new Professional Baseball Agreement.

Those talks dissolved into acrimony since word leaked last October that MLB wanted to strip affiliation from 25 percent of 160 minor league teams across the country.

Talks between MiLB and MLB are scheduled to resume next week in Dallas.

In the memo, Sword, the MLB executive vice president who has played a lead role in the negotiations, referenced the difficulties the sides have had in negotiating on good terms, including the specter of no agreement being reached when the PBA expires at the end of this season.

“We had planned to do this in conjunction with a successor PBA, but in light of the manner in which the National Association has conducted the negotiations to date, we need to move forward with planning for the 2021 minor league season,” wrote Sword.

The raise was discussed at the baseball owners’ meetings this month.

“MLB’s priorities include reducing the travel burden on players and improving player working conditions,” wrote Sword. “These and other objectives only can be reached with agreement of the National Association, or absent an agreement, following the expiration of the current PBA in September. However, we can move forward unilaterally with our goal of improving compensation for minor league players.”

In August, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit issued a favorable ruling for a class-action lawsuit filed by former minor leaguers over insufficient pay.

The memo states that players in Rookie, Short Season A, Single A, and High A make a minimum of \$290 a week currently. Next season, rookies and those playing short-season baseball would receive a 38 percent raises, to \$400, while the weekly pay of the other two levels would rise 72 percent to \$500.

Double A players make \$350 a week, and would see that rise to \$600, a 71 percent raise. Triple A players make a minimum of \$502 a week. Their new minimum would be \$700, a 39 percent increase.

Report: MLB investigation into Red Sox expected by end of February, and allegations are less severe

Katie McInerney

The report on Major League Baseball’s investigation into alleged sign-stealing by the Red Sox in 2018 is expected to be finished by the end of February, MLB Network’s Jon Heyman is reporting.

The allegations against the Red Sox aren’t expected to be as severe as those against the 2017 Astros, which resulted in the suspension and later firing of Houston general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch, as well as a \$5 million fine and the loss of four draft picks.

Alex Cora, who was the Astros bench coach in 2017, has yet to receive punishment from MLB because of the ongoing investigation into allegations that the Red Sox stole signs in 2018, in Cora’s first year as manager in Boston.

The investigation into the Red Sox began in early January, prompted by a report in The Athletic.

But the Red Sox decided not to wait for the results of the investigation, instead deciding to part ways with Cora in mid-January based on MLB’s report on the Astros. MLB found that Cora was heavily involved in creating and running the sign-stealing scheme.

The Red Sox intended to wait until the report was released to name Cora’s replacement, but announced this week that bench coach Ron Roenicke would take over as interim manager after it was made clear that the report would not be finished by the time full-squad spring training workouts began.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Kevin Pillar could be Red Sox’ best signing of the off-season

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Here’s a spring training prediction: Kevin Pillar will be the Red Sox’ best signing of the off-season.

That's not to suggest this is suddenly a team that should be in the playoff hunt, nor does it mean Pillar will match his 61 extra-base hits from 2019, revert back to his old form on defense and quiet the metrics that spit on his performance in center field last year.

All it means is this: the Sox freed up some money by trading Mookie Betts and David Price and it's good to see them spending some of it to fill a hole in the outfield.

Pillar arrived at Red Sox camp on Friday on a one-year deal reported to be worth \$4.25-million, though the Sox were still performing medical exams and hadn't yet made the signing official.

On paper, it looks like a bargain. And 10 years ago, there was no chance a player like Pillar, coming off the monster season he had in San Francisco, would be available so late in the offseason at such an inexpensive price.

Playing his home games in Oracle Park (formerly AT&T Park), which finished the year ranked No. 30 out of 30 in run production via ESPN's park factor, Pillar smacked 37 doubles, three triples and 21 homers. He also stole 14 bases, caught five times.

It was good enough to earn him a vote in the National League MVP race. He finished 22nd.

This is the same guy who earned the nickname "Superman" after chasing down flyballs in Toronto for the better part of six seasons. He's made plays that had Jackie Bradley Jr. tipping his cap.

And with the new baseballs flying out of the park in 2019, when the modern game rewarded aggressive players and was forgiving to those with high strikeout rates, Pillar looked like a hidden gem.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said he appreciates Pillar's aggressive style of play and was never comfortable when he was batting against Roenicke's teams.

"I thought he gave a nice at-bat," Roenicke said.

It's not a perfect signing, by any means. Pillar was in the bottom 10 percent in exit velocity. He rarely takes a walk. And the defensive metrics, which once shined on him as one of the game's elite center fielders, have started to sour.

Formerly a player who routinely saved the Blue Jays 20 runs above average in center field, he cost the Giants three runs last year, according to FanGraphs.

The SABR Defensive Index, which counts for 25 percent of the Gold Glove competition, ranked Pillar 12th out of 14 center fielders in the National League and on par with Bradley, who ranked 13th out of 14 in the A.L.

Bradley turns 30 in April and is a free agent after this year. Pillar is 31.

They each have their flaws. And they don't cover ground like they used to. But together, they make for a potentially dominant center-field combination.

Consider Bradley's weaknesses: he doesn't hit lefties and he's prone to long slumps.

Last year, Bradley hit a paltry .216 with a .640 OPS against lefties, who Pillar crushed to the tune of a .278 average with an .823 OPS.

It's an easy platoon for Roenicke to navigate. And if Bradley hits one of his signature slumps, Pillar can take over against righties, too.

Andrew Benintendi and Alex Verdugo complete the trio of left-handed hitting outfielders for the Sox, making the Pillar addition even more sensible.

Asked to evaluate Benintendi and Bradley against lefties, Roenicke seemed more optimistic about Benintendi, though comfortable with both.

As for Pillar, Roenicke mentioned the poor defensive metrics.

“I’m not sure if the metrics on him are the same as he was five years ago when he was probably faster,” he said. “But he’s always been a good defender.”

Bradley said he welcomes the competition and respects Pillar’s ability.

“He’s going to be able to help the team win,” Bradley said. “If upper management thought he’d be able to make a difference, then bring him on. That’s good.”

Competition is always a good thing. Pillar is coming off a career year. Bradley is a pending free agent.

The Sox are bound to have problems in 2020, but center field shouldn’t be one of them.

Mitch Moreland happy to be back with Red Sox: ‘This is where I wanted to be’

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Mitch Moreland stepped outside JetBlue Park before Friday morning’s workout, and the oldest player at Red Sox camp — save for Dustin Pedroia, who won’t report on time — experienced a first.

The 34-year-old, in front of a sea of reporters and cameras, positioned himself on a bench outside the facility to take in a casual, yet formal press conference.

“This is big time,” Moreland joked as he sat on the bench. “I don’t know if this is for me.”

Not usually accustomed to that kind of spotlight, Moreland didn’t know if he’d be here at all as little as three weeks ago. After three seasons with the Red Sox, it certainly wasn’t set in stone Moreland would be back as the team surveyed how it wanted to handle its first-base situation.

Even Moreland wasn’t really sure what to think. And as the weeks and months went by this offseason without knowing his future, he started getting a little anxious.

“It was a little tougher this year,” Moreland said. “I guess going through that, as a family more than anything, was a little bit tougher, but at the same time, at this point, I’ve kind of been through a little bit of it and I wasn’t completely surprised. I wasn’t caught off guard by it, so I was just waiting on it to happen.

“It seemed like it wasn’t going to happen early. I talked to a few other teams that seemed pretty interested and then it seemed like it kind of shifted back around.”

And when it did, it was an easy decision for Moreland.

“Ultimately, when it came down to it, this was my No. 1 choice,” Moreland said. “Had a blast here, made some great memories, some friends, obviously familiar with everything here and comfortable with it. It’s always nice not having to go into somewhere and kind of relearn the system, and being a new guy again. So I’m excited about coming back. It was just a great fit for me and my family and something we were comfortable with. ...

“This is where I wanted to be, where I wanted to play.”

Moreland, who signed a one-year, \$2.5 million deal for 2020 with a \$3 million player option for 2021, will likely assume a spot in a first-base platoon with Michael Chavis, at least to start the season. But his role, as even he admitted, will be dependent on his health.

Though he's been a major contributor in Boston, durability has been an issue. Moreland was an All-Star in 2018, but injuries slowed him down in the second half before he returned to the playoffs to deliver some key moments in the Red Sox' World Series run. He started 2019 strong, belting 13 homers in April and May, but injuries to his back and quad derailed the rest of his season.

In three seasons with the Red Sox, Moreland's plate appearances have dropped from 576 to 459 to 335, so expectations should naturally be moderate for the first baseman. Interim manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday that Moreland is no longer a player who can play 140 games in a season. But when he's healthy, he's almost always productive.

"That's always been my thing," Moreland said. "If I can continue to stay on the field, it's going to be better for me and hopefully better for the team. ..."

"It's like you're tricking your mind a little bit," Moreland added. "I try to tell myself every day, we play 162 games and I'm going to be ready to play 162 days. That's what I'm telling myself, whether I'm coming off the bench or getting two at-bats or playing the whole game, whatever they need me to do. That's always been my mindset and that's the way I'm going to keep it. I'm going to prepare every day."

As impactful as he can be on the field, he may be just as important off it. Moreland has emerged as a key leader in the Red Sox clubhouse, and he'll be even more so with Mookie Betts and David Price gone.

And he made it loud and clear that anyone writing off the Red Sox in 2020 is doing so prematurely.

"This team is still really good," Moreland said. "We had a little adversity we had to overcome last year with some guys being hurt. If we go out and stay healthy and we do what we're capable of doing, we're going to be fine. We've got a great squad, and a team that has proven we can win. We've got playoff experience. All we've got to do is get there. Once we get there, just play it out."

"This team's going to be good, and we're being overlooked right now. So bring it on."

New OF Alex Verdugo may not be ready for Opening Day

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — The Red Sox may not have their expected outfield lineup when they take the field in Toronto on Opening Day.

Alex Verdugo, the top piece the Red Sox received from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade, has an ongoing issue with his back/oblique that may prevent him from starting the season. The 23-year-old outfielder was at JetBlue Park on Friday, according to Ron Roenicke, but the interim manager wouldn't speculate on the newcomer's status. Verdugo will meet with the team's medical staff.

"Not yet, because I hate to make a comment and then it comes back later that I'm wrong," Roenicke said. "I think he needs to go through everything with them. I know it's been quite a while, so we really want to get a good feel for him. We don't know him, which makes a big difference."

"So, they'll talk to him, figure out where we are and at what point we can start going forward with whatever, whether it's baseball activities, whether it's just strength activities. So, I'll know a lot more tomorrow when I talk to you guys and try to figure out where we are."

Verdugo missed the final two months of last season with an injury that has been described as both lower back soreness and a right oblique strain. The outfielder seemed encouraged last month as he continued rehabbing it.

“I think anybody that’s had something wrong with your back would understand,” Verdugo said on Jan. 3, according to MLB.com. “Any activity you do, your back helps a lot. It’s a lot of frustration, but all I can do is stay positive. I’m going in the right direction. My goal is going to be starting Opening Day. We’ll just see how the days and weeks go and how I recover.”

With uncertainty surrounding Verdugo, the Red Sox are signing veteran outfielder Kevin Pillar, who was present at JetBlue Park on Friday. He was still in the process of passing his physical before a deal was announced, but he would likely start in place of Verdugo if he is unable to go.

Moreland mum on investigation

Mitch Moreland became the first Red Sox player believed to publicly say he’s talked to investigators as Major League Baseball conducts a report on the team’s sign-stealing allegations in 2018, but he didn’t say much on the topic.

“I think it’s probably coming to an end maybe next week or something from what I’ve heard,” Moreland said. “I don’t know. But from what I remember from it, we were a good team, and we went out and prepared well and we won it. That’s the best team I’ve ever played on. It’s something I’ll never forget, big memory for me, and I’m looking forward to making another one. ...

“I talked to them (investigators). But that’s still ongoing, so we’ll let that finish up.”

Moreland was then asked what his level of confidence is that the Red Sox will be cleared.

“We’ll talk about it when it comes out,” Moreland said.

MLB Network’s Jon Heyman reported Friday that the report is expected to come from MLB by the end of February.

Holt continues to wait

A fan favorite in his seven years with the Red Sox, utility man Brock Holt is still a free agent, which is surprising to some. Moreland is close friends with him and said he seems to be in high spirits as he continues to wait for a call.

“Brock’s Brock,” Moreland said. “He puts me in a good mood every time I talk to him. He’s going to be an asset to wherever he goes, for sure. Great teammate, good friend, too. I know he’ll be fine. Whatever works out or happens, it will be good for him.” ...

Chris Sale, who has been dealing with a mild case of pneumonia, was scheduled to arrive at JetBlue Park on Friday for tests.

“He’s going to meet with the doctors, and hopefully we get a good report and he can start doing stuff with us,” Roenicke said.

Jackie Bradley Jr. welcomes competition as Kevin Pillar arrives at Red Sox camp

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — A clubhouse attendant walked in and dropped a Toronto Blue Jays bag in front of an empty locker.

Soon after, Kevin Pillar followed.

The Red Sox have yet to make the move official, but Pillar will soon become the Sox' fourth outfielder as he agreed to a one-year, \$4.25-million contract with the team, according to multiple reports.

The 31-year-old center fielder is coming off a career year in which he hit .264 with 37 doubles, 21 homers and 14 stolen bases for the Giants, earning him one vote for National League MVP.

Pillar is 6-feet tall and 210 pounds with a beard that would make Mike Napoli proud. He's expected to provide back-up duties to Jackie Bradley Jr. in center field, but given his history of playing terrific defense, he could get more playing time than a typical fourth outfielder.

"Obviously with three left-handers, it would be nice to have a right-hander," interim manager Ron Roenicke said on Wednesday.

Bradley, Andrew Benintendi and Alex Verdugo all hit left-handed. Verdugo is expected to miss the start of the season with a back injury, the Globe reported on Thursday.

That should result in more playing time for Pillar, the longtime Blue Jays center fielder who has hit .281 with a .766 OPS against lefties during his career.

"He's going to be able to help the team win," Bradley said. "If upper management thought he'd be able to make a difference, then bring him on. That's good."

Bradley, a free agent after this season, said he's not worried about losing at-bats to Pillar in center field.

"I'm going to focus on what I can control and play my ball," Bradley said. "I respect him as a player. I think anybody at this level who 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."

Pillar was notably suspended for two games by the Blue Jays in 2017 for using a homophobic slur towards former Braves pitcher Jason Motte. He then issued a public apology.

"I really felt embarrassed for myself, for my family for this organization," Pillar told reporters at the time. "I was ashamed."

He's expected to be introduced in Fort Myers on Saturday.

*** *MassLive.com***

Kevin Pillar signing official; Boston Red Sox add veteran outfielder on 1-year, \$4.25M deal

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Red Sox officially announced their one-year contract with outfielder Kevin Pillar on Friday night.

Pillar will earn \$4.25 million in 2020, a major league source confirmed. There are no incentives or bonuses included in the deal.

Pillar was at Fenway South for his physical Friday morning. He greeted his new teammates and coaches and had a locker set up in the clubhouse.

Pillar, 31, is a seven-year veteran who spent the first six years of his career with the Blue Jays before being traded to the Giants last April. In 156 games with San Francisco, he hit .264/.293/.442 with 21 homers and 87 RBIs.

Pillar will give the Sox a right-handed hitting option in an outfield that previously had only lefties (Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Alex Verdugo) in the mix after the trade that sent Mookie Betts to the Dodgers earlier in the week. He's likely to see significant playing time early in the season, especially if Verdugo begins the year on the injured list with a back issue.

"He's aggressive, knows how to play the game," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "I wasn't real comfortable when he came to the plate in big situations. I thought he gave you a real nice at-bat."

Pillar is a plus defender who was the Wilson Defensive Player of the Year in 2015. Though he has played mostly in center throughout his career, he has the ability to play all three spots and will likely get his share of playing time against left-handed starters.

"He has always been known as a good defender," Roenicke said. "We know he doesn't mind laying out. We know he doesn't mind crashing into the walls. Sometimes, you worry when a guy too much of that because of the injury factor."

Pillar has a career .766 OPS against lefties, making him a unique weapon in the newly constructed outfield. Though Roenicke believes both Benintendi and Bradley Jr. have the ability to hit lefties, he knows having a different look on the roster will help.

"To have that right-handed bat out there will be nice," he said.

Pillar will participate in his first official workout with the Sox on Saturday before the rest of the position players come to camp Sunday. Benintendi, Bradley Jr. and Verdugo have all arrived, so Roenicke will soon be able to get a sense of his outfield alignment.

"We haven't talked about it a lot but we did some," Roenicke said. "Because they're flexible... (Bradley Jr.) is a great right fielder, too, and a great center fielder. I think Pillar can play all of them."

Will Jonathan Arauz make Boston Red Sox's 26-man roster? Meet the avid book reader who idolized David Ortiz, Mariano Rivera, Manny Ramirez

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Jonathan Arauz, a 21-year-old infielder from Panama, must remain on the Red Sox's 26-man roster the entire 2020 season (barring an injured list stint) or be offered back to his previous club, the Astros, for \$50,000.

That's life for a Rule 5 Draft pick. Houston left him unprotected. The Red Sox drafted him in December and paid the Astros \$100,000 for him.

"I don't feel that much pressure for the single fact that they selected me for a reason," Arauz told MassLive.com on Friday through translator Bryan Almonte. "They believe I have a chance to make this team. So what I plan on doing is just trying to maximize on the opportunity and try to do everything I can to help this team because I do want to stay here."

Arauz is a slick-fielding shortstop, second baseman and third baseman. But the switch-hitter still has a lot of room to develop offensively. Keeping him on the 26-man roster for an entire 162-game schedule will be difficult for Boston. The Red Sox must determine whether his longterm upside is worth the short-term growing pains. Keith Law listed him in a Jan. 16 article in *The Athletic* as one of the 10 best prospects to change teams this winter.

The roster expanding from 25 to 26 players this year might make it somewhat easier for the Red Sox to keep Arauz for the full season if they choose to do it.

“I think the 26th man is huge to try to do this,” interim manager Ron Roenicke said at JetBlue Park on Friday. “I tried to do it before when I was in Milwaukee with a 25-man roster. It was a left-handed pitcher we had in the bullpen. Very difficult. So the 26th man is big because this guy is very versatile. And what he can do defensively, that helps a lot. But it’s hard. It’s hard for a manager because I know he needs to play to be evaluated. He needs to play to get his confidence. He needs to play to get used to the big leagues. And yet, you’re trying to win every ballgame you can. And sometimes trying to figure that out becomes a challenge.”

‘I like to read a lot’

Arauz initially signed with the Phillies Aug. 7, 2014, four days after celebrating his 16th birthday. Philadelphia traded him to the Astros on Dec. 12, 2015. He’s an interesting young man with a curiosity to learn.

“I like to read a lot,” Arauz said. “I try to read some interesting books. I’m always on the internet just reading articles, trying to keep up to date with all the news, especially with the coronavirus going around.”

He especially enjoys business books authored by professors. He likely would have pursued a career in business if not for baseball.

“Try to own properties, hotels, real estate,” he said.

He always enjoyed attending school.

“Obviously I had to give it up pretty early because I had to focus on baseball,” Arauz said. “But I still try to keep up to date with everything and try to learn as much as I can because I really enjoy it.

“My mom was the one who always told me, ‘You have to study before you can play baseball,’” Arauz added. “She was the one that was always hard on me with school. And even now, I’m obviously playing more baseball but she still tells me to keep up with things and try to learn as much as I can.”

His father played amateur baseball in Panama. He introduced his son to the game.

“My dad, he was in and out of jobs but he’s now focused on coaching kids in Panama. So he does that and trains them,” Arauz said. “My mom works at a meat district.”

David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez were two of his favorite hitters growing up.

“And obviously being from Panama, Mariano Rivera was everything to us, especially to me growing up as a kid,” he said.

“Being in Panama, those (Yankees and Red Sox games) were the games we really wanted to watch,” he added. “The Yankees were always on. The Red Sox were always on. Obviously I followed the Yankees because of Mariano. But my dad, we always sat together and watched Red Sox games because of Manny and David.”

He enjoys spending as much time with his family as possible and watching soccer. Real Madrid and Paris St. Germain are his two favorite soccer clubs.

He still is learning the English language. He has a good understanding of it but prefers using a translator.

“I’ve been here for six years and it’s still tough,” Arauz said. “It’s a tough language for me to learn. I’ve tried as much as I can. But it’s more so I’m nervous to misspeak.”

‘They’ve been watching me’

Law wrote for The Athletic, “I was surprised the Astros left Arauz unprotected in the Rule 5 draft, and was surprised a team like the Red Sox took him, since he’ll just be 21 and hasn’t hit above low-A yet. He’s very

talented, though, and many scouts believe he'll hit once he's at a level appropriate for his age – which doesn't mean the major leagues in 2020. He did trend up last year, with solid contact rates at two levels and a career high in homers.”

“It was a surprise for me, for sure. Especially the fact that the Red Sox selected me,” Arauz said.

Big market teams typically don't have the roster flexibility to carry Rule 5 Draft picks. Rebuilding teams without much chance at making the postseason have more flexibility to carry a young talent like Arauz who never has played above Double A.

“To be selected, that means they've been watching me,” Arauz said. “And to be selected so young, I just want to approach this opportunity and take advantage of it because I didn't know they were looking at me like that.”

He batted .249 with a .319 on-base percentage, .388 slugging percentage, .707 OPS, 11 homers, 22 doubles, two triples and 55 RBIs in 115 games at High A and Double A in the Astros' system during 2019.

“I'm a contact hitter,” said Arauz who had a strikeout percentage of only 14.2% in 2018 and 16% at Double A in 2019. “I like to just get contact on the ball, put it in the gaps. But this offseason, I actually worked on getting stronger so I could have a little bit more power in my bat.

“I just hit the gym,” he added. “Did a lot of workouts. Also improved my diet. But mostly just worked on my mechanics from my swing and my legs because that's where the power's coming from.”

Mitch Moreland back with Boston Red Sox after uncertain foray into free agency: ‘When it came down to it, this was my No. 1 choice’

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- At the end of last season, Mitch Moreland wasn't sure if he was playing his last games with the Red Sox. But after a winter full of uncertainty, he's back in Sox camp after re-signing with the club on a one-year, \$3 million deal last month.

“It doesn't seem like it's getting easier to go through (free agency),” Moreland said. “Ultimately, when it came down to it, this was my No. 1 choice. Had a blast here, made some great memories, some friends. Obviously familiar with everything here and comfortable with it. It's always nice not having to go into somewhere and having to relearn the system, being the new guy again. Excited about coming back.”

Moreland has gone through the free agent process three times in the last four winters, signing a one-year deal with Boston after 2016 and a two-year contract a year later. In a market that in recent years hasn't been kind to aging position players, he waited significantly longer to get a deal done than he had in his previous two go-arounds.

At the outset of the offseason, Moreland seemed like an unlikely fit for a Red Sox team that was looking to slash costs and get younger in 2020. But as the roster shaped up in mid-January, there was a clear need for a left-handed hitting first baseman to share time with Michael Chavis (and potentially top prospect Bobby Dalbec later in the season).

“It seemed like it wasn't going to happen early,” Moreland said. “Talked to a few other teams that seemed pretty interested and then it seemed like it shifted back around. Thankful it did. Like I said, this is where I wanted to be and where I wanted to play.”

Moreland didn't actively worry about securing a deal in time for spring training, figuring he'd get more time to fish at home in Mississippi if he stayed a free agent. Though his family had questions about where they were going to live over the summer, the 34-year-old stayed busy without getting too caught up in thinking about his future.

“My offseasons are crazy in a different way,” Moreland said. “Three kids running around, got a 2-year-old running around we’re chasing, changing diapers. It seems like Disney Channel is on more than ESPN or MLB Network.”

Not counting Dustin Pedroia, Moreland is now the oldest player on the roster and has the most service time of any Sox player. He’s ready to embrace his role as the team’s elder statesman -- a role he doubted he’d get the chance to fill at times over the last few months.

“The first two (signings), it was kind of the same way,” he said. “We’ll be in touch then all the sudden I was back. I didn’t really know. I didn’t know how it would work out. I’ve learned over the years to keep an open mind because you never know what’s going to happen.”

Boston Red Sox’s Mitch Moreland has spoken with MLB investigators about 2018 club; ‘From what I remember from it, we were just a good team’

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Mitch Moreland confirmed Friday he has spoken with MLB investigators who are looking into the 2018 Red Sox for potentially stealing signs electronically.

The Athletic reported the 2018 club used its video replay room to decode opposing teams’ signals.

“Obviously that’s still ongoing,” Moreland said. “I think it’s probably coming to an end maybe next week or something from what I’ve heard. I don’t know. But from what I remember from it, we were just a good team and we went out and we prepared well and we won it. That’s the best team I’ve ever played on. It’s something I’ll never forget. Big memory for me. And I’m looking forward to making another one maybe this year.”

J.D. Martinez and Andrew Benintendi both have said the 2018 Red Sox did nothing wrong.

When asked his level of confidence on how the investigation will turn out, Moreland simply said, “We’ll talk about it when it comes out.”

MLB Network’s Jon Heyman reported via Twitter this morning, “The report on the Red Sox is expected to come from MLB by the end of the month. The allegations against them are far less egregious than the ones that resulted in MLB’s report and punishments in the Astros case.”

The Red Sox dismissed Alex Cora for his involvement in the Astros’ 2017 electronic sign-stealing scheme.

Boston named Ron Roenicke its interim manager. It sounds like the interim tag could be lifted once MLB’s investigation and shows Roenicke wasn’t involved.

Mitch Moreland’s advice to Mookie Betts after Red Sox traded him? ‘Pack those cowboy boots I gave you’

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- At some point during the 2019 season, Mitch Moreland and Mookie Betts made a trade. Moreland, a Mississippi native, gave Betts a pair of cowboy boots. Betts, one of the rare baseball players to be represented by Jordan Brand, gave Moreland a pair of Jordans.

So when Betts was traded from the Red Sox to the Dodgers earlier this week, Moreland made sure to give him some packing advice.

“I made sure I told him, ‘Hey, you need to pack those boots for L.A.’,” Moreland said Friday. “They’ll be in style in L.A. He texted back, ‘You better believe I’ve got them packed.’”

With David Price also gone to Los Angeles, Moreland is now the oldest active player on the Red Sox (not counting Dustin Pedroia) and has the most big league service time of anyone in the group. Though he’s entering just his fourth season in Boston, Moreland is a leader on the club and will have to take on an even larger role in the clubhouse as the a sort of elder statesman.

“With DP and Mookie, that’s a tough loss with those guys, for sure,” Moreland said. “We’ve still got a great team. When you look around the room, there are guys who have been doing it good for a long time, all over the place. Those two guys, they’re not replaceable and they’re great ballplayers. At the same time, we’re going to be fine and we’re looking forward to getting back out there.”

Moreland has spoken to both Betts and Price since they were traded to the Dodgers earlier in the week, wishing both former teammates luck. As someone who has gone through free agency three times since 2016, he understands the business side of baseball better than most.

“You’re not going to keep any team together forever,” Moreland said. “Guys are going to get moved and stuff is going to change. I think with the group we’ve got and the team we’ve got, we can overcome that kind of stuff easily.”

Moreland’s role will change in 2020, as he’ll be the likely starter at first base against righties but will likely get fewer plate appearances than the 457 he has averaged in his first three seasons in town. He’s embracing the underdog mentality that seems to be sweeping through the Red Sox clubhouse in the wake of the Betts trade.

“This team is going to be good,” he said. “We’re being overlooked right now. Bring it on.”

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing investigation expected to be completed by end of February (report)

Chris Cutillo

Major League Baseball’s investigation into alleged sign-stealing practices by the Red Sox in 2018 is expected to conclude by the end of the month, according to Jon Heyman of MLB Network.

Commissioner Rob Manfred previously said he hoped to have the inquiry completed before spring training camps opened in Florida and Arizona, though reporting dates have already come and gone. Instead, it appears the league is taking its time in determining whether the Sox improperly used a video replay room to decode opponents’ signs in 2018, as The Athletic reported in January.

Red Sox players have already been interviewed by the league, with first baseman Mitch Moreland becoming the first to publicly confirm he spoke to investigators Friday morning. It’s unclear if the league has spoken to former Sox manager Alex Cora or his coaching staff about what went on in Boston.

Multiple members of the Red Sox, including Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers and J.D. Martinez, have proclaimed the club’s innocence in recent weeks. In a radio interview Thursday, chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said he had no reason to believe the team had done “anything untoward” that would deserve a punishment from the league.

MLB came down hard on the Astros after investigating them for sign-stealing last month. The league issued one-year suspensions to then-manager A.J. Hinch and then-general manager Jeff Luhnow, fined the club \$5 million and stripped them of each of their top two draft picks in the next two drafts.

Any punishments for the Red Sox are expected to be much less severe. Cora, who was implicated as a key player in the Astros’ scheme, is expected to be punished once the Boston investigation is complete.

Alex Verdugo injury: Will Boston Red Sox outfielder from Mookie Betts trade be ready for Opening Day?

Christopher Smith

New Red Sox right fielder Alex Verdugo is in Fort Myers and stopped by the JetBlue Park complex. The Red Sox medical team will check him out presumably within the next day.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke wouldn't speculate whether Verdugo's ailing back will prevent him from being ready Opening Day.

"Not yet because I hate to make a comment and then it comes back later wrong," Roenicke said Friday. "I think he needs to go through everything with them. I know it's been quite a while. So they really want to get a good feel for him. They don't know him, which makes a big difference. So they'll talk to him, figure out where we are and at point we can start going forward with whatever. Whether it's baseball activities, whether it's just strength activities. So I'll know a lot more tomorrow."

Verdugo's 2019 season ended Aug. 4 last year with what MLB.com has described as a back/oblique/core injury. The Red Sox acquired him with Connor Wong and Jeter Downs for Mookie Betts and David Price.

Meanwhile, Kevin Pillar arrived at Red Sox spring training camp Friday. He still must pass his physical before his one-year, \$4.25-million contract becomes official.

Pillar would be an option to start in right field on Opening Day if Verdugo is unable to play.

Roenicke has named Verdugo as a candidate to bat leadoff.

Verdugo, a 23-year-old left-handed hitter, batted .294 with a .342 on-base percentage, .475 slugging percentage, .817 OPS, 12 homers, 22 doubles, two triples and 44 RBIs in 106 games for the Dodgers during 2019. Both Baseball America and MLB Pipeline ranked him No. 35 on their top 100 lists entering 2019. Baseball Prospectus ranked him 19th.

*** *RedSox.com***

Moreland's return provides comfort for Red Sox

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- In a spring of shifting times for the Red Sox, the comfort of Mitch Moreland returning for another -- albeit somewhat surprising -- tour of duty could not have been better timed.

A free agent at last season's end, even Moreland thought his time in Boston might be finished.

"It seemed like it wasn't going to happen early," said the first baseman, in his endearing Southern drawl. "I talked to a few other teams that seemed pretty interested, and then it seemed like it kind of shifted back around. I'm thankful it did. Like I said, this is where I wanted to be, where I wanted to play."

Moreland waited and waited, and then was finally rewarded for his patience on Jan. 28 when he signed a one-year deal with the Sox that includes a 2021 player option.

Entering his fourth season with the Red Sox, Moreland is an underrated leader who will be relied on in the clubhouse more than ever. Mookie Betts, David Price and Rick Porcello are all gone, and Dustin Pedroia won't be back anytime soon, if at all.

At 34 years and 161 days -- with a service time of nine years and 67 days -- Moreland is now the elder statesman in Boston. For that reason, he got the outdoor "bench treatment" with the media on Friday rather than talking in the clubhouse.

"This is big time! I don't know if this is for me," quipped Moreland. "This is my first bench session, y'all, take it easy on me."

Moreland's leadership has been most evident in the way he has taken Rafael Devers under his wing since the third baseman arrived in the Majors at the age of 20 in July 2017. Just mention Moreland's name, and Devers flashes a big smile.

Early last season, when Devers was struggling defensively, culminating in an error that led to a walk-off loss in Chicago, Moreland sensed his friend was hurting. And as much as he tried to say the right things, he came up with a better idea and put Devers in touch with Adrián Beltré, a likely Hall of Famer once he is eligible in 2024.

"I got to talking to [Devers] one night and I was like, 'Man, you don't understand Mississippi and I'm struggling to understand [Spanish].' We had this little bit of a language barrier obviously," Moreland said. "I was like, 'Man, I happen to know the greatest third baseman who ever came out of the Dominican Republic.'"

Moreland said he then asked Devers if he'd like to talk to Beltré. The young starlet probably said yes before he had even finished the question.

"Raf, he's going to be a special player for a long time, so if he can learn a little something from Adrian to help him, great," said Moreland. "I thought that would be a good one to know, a good one to talk to."

It doesn't take a long time in the Red Sox's clubhouse to realize that everybody loves Moreland.

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

Befitting his personality, Moreland doesn't put up flashy numbers (.252 average, 19 homers, 58 RBIs and .835 OPS last year). But he makes big hits, well-timed defensive stops and hardly ever ends a game with a clean uniform.

"Mitch is certainly important to what we do, important in his leadership role but also important in what he does on the field," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "Last year, we started poorly. I don't know how many games it was, but I would say 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."

Moreland's top goal for this season is to be healthier than he was in 2019, when a variety of ailments limited him to 298 at-bats.

"I don't want to blame it on the short offseason from the year before -- we'd definitely take that every year -- but I got a lot of work in this offseason, trying to get my body in a good place," Moreland said. "And obviously I'm not getting any younger, so as the miles start adding up, you have to figure out different ways to keep yourself ready and stay on top of everything. So I've tried to do a few different things and get myself as prepared as possible and stay healthy."

Veteran outfielder Pillar joins Red Sox at camp

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Rumored to be joining the Red Sox for the past several days, Kevin Pillar appeared in the team's clubhouse shortly before Friday morning's workout and even took some swings in the indoor batting cage.

The veteran outfielder signed a one-year contract with the Red Sox, the team announced Friday night. The deal is for \$4.25 million, a source told MLB.com's Mark Feinsand.

The acquisition of Pillar makes a lot of sense. For starters, newly acquired outfielder Alex Verdugo might miss Opening Day due to a back ailment he suffered last season.

And even once Boston is at full strength, the right-handed-hitting Pillar is a perfect complement to a starting outfield that features all left-handed hitters in Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr.

"Obviously, he's a great player, and has been a great player for a long time," said Red Sox first baseman Mitch Moreland. "He's a great outfielder who has probably robbed everybody in the clubhouse with his years in Toronto. It'll be a great match for us, obviously, a right-handed bat in the outfield with a pretty lefty-heavy lineup.

"He plays the game the right way, plays hard. That's a solid add for our team. He's going to make us that much better. It'll be fun to watch him and Jackie out there, diving and robbing."

While Pillar's primary position is center field, he has experience at all three outfield 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 Pillar has made since starting his career in 2013.

"We know he doesn't mind laying out, crashing into walls," said Boston interim manager Ron Roenicke. "Sometimes you get a little worried when a guy does too much of that because you have the injury factor, but he knows how to play. I'm not sure if the metrics on him are the same as they were five years ago when he was probably faster. But he's always been a good defender."

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 21 homers and had an OPS of .735 over 156 games. Overall, he played 161 games last season.

"Aggressive. Knows how to play the game," said Roenicke. "I wasn't real comfortable when he came to the plate in big situations. I thought he gave a nice at-bat."

A regular the last five seasons, it will be interesting to see how Pillar adapts to more of a complementary role once Verdugo is cleared to play.

*** *WEEI.com***

Red Sox notes: Mitch Moreland confident Brock Holt will be an asset 'wherever he goes'

Nick Friar

When Mitch Moreland was trying to figure out where he'd sign in the offseason, there was an "obvious first choice" for him. The Red Sox.

Of course, it all worked out in the end for Moreland, but it didn't always seem like that'd be the case.

After he played his last game at Fenway in 2019, Moreland didn't know if he'd ever play there on behalf of Boston again. He didn't have much reason to think differently when the free agency process began, either.

“It seemed like it wasn’t going to happen early,” Moreland said. “Talked to a few other teams that seemed pretty interested. Then it seemed like it shifted back around. Thankful it did.”

But, while Moreland has a place to play, former Red Sox utility man Brock Holt is still a free agent. The two have kept in contact, and Moreland thinks his friend will find a home.

“Brock’s Brock. He puts me in a good mood every time I talk to him,” Moreland said. “Like I said, he’s going to be an asset to wherever he goes. Great teammate and a good friend, too. So, I know he’ll be fine and whatever works out or happens, it’ll be good for him.”

—Chris Sale had not arrived in camp by the time Roenicke met with the media on Friday. He was expected to be at the facility later in the day.

“He’s going to meet with the doctors and hopefully we get a good report and he can start doing things with us,” Roenicke said.

Sale, Alex Verdugo (back) and Dustin Pedroia (left knee) are the only Red Sox players who aren't fully healthy.

Red Sox have discussed moving Jackie Bradley Jr. to right with Kevin Pillar in center

Nick Friar

Naturally, the departure of Mookie Betts first raised questions about the Red Sox offense. But, on top of losing an elite hitter, Boston lost a four-time Gold Glove award winner.

Alex Verdugo is a solid corner outfielder with a good arm, but he may not be able to start the season on time. This played a role in Boston’s interest in Kevin Pillar — who was at Red Sox camp on Friday.

When it came to discussing Verdugo’s timeline, Ron Roenicke couldn’t provide any insight on Friday. Though, his inability to add anything on the matter does indicate the Red Sox have doubts about Verdugo’s health.

“I think he needs to go through everything with (our medical staff), and I know it’s been quite a while, so they really want to get a good feel for him,” Roenicke said. “They don’t know him, which makes a big difference. So, they’ll talk to him, figure out where we are and at what point we can start going forward with whatever. Whether it’s baseball activities, whether it’s just strength activities. I’ll know a lot more (Saturday) when I talk to you guys and try to figure out where we are.”

With there being questions surrounding the former Dodgers outfielder’s health, Pillar starting in the outfield to begin the year is realistic. Now, that could be in right field, but the Red Sox have also broached the idea of playing Pillar in center and moving Jackie Bradley Jr. to right.

“We haven’t talked about it a lot, but we did some,” Roenicke said. “Because they’re flexible. Jack is a great right fielder, too. And he’s a great center fielder, and I think Pillar can play all of them.

“(Pillar) always been known as a good defender. We know he doesn’t mind laying out, we know he doesn’t mind crashing into walls. Sometimes you have a worry when a guy does too much of that because you’ve got the injury factor. But he knows how to play. I’m not sure if the metrics on him are the same as five years ago when he was probably faster. I’m not really sure, I haven’t really checked on it. But he’s always been a good defender.”

Pillar also provides the Red Sox a right-handed bat in what has become a lefty-heavy lineup.

Mitch Moreland on 2018: 'We prepared well and we won it'

Nick Friar

Before the Red Sox named Ron Roenicke interim manager, a report surfaced stating the Red Sox would hear about MLB's investigation into Boston's 2018 season next week. Mitch Moreland has also heard that will be the case.

Like his 2018 teammates, he was interviewed as part of the process. When he addressed the situation publicly for the first time on Friday, the first baseman spoke about that season a little differently than Andrew Benintendi and J.D. Martinez.

But, it doesn't sound like Moreland feels the Red Sox did anything wrong.

"From what I remember from it, we were just really — we were a good team and we went out and we prepared well and we won it," he said. "That's the best team I've ever played on. That's something I'll never forget. Big memory for me. I'm looking forward to making another run maybe this year."

Other than confirming his meeting with MLB, Moreland would not speak further on the situation when asked follow-ups. He twice stated, "We'll talk about it when it comes out."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Breaking down MLB investigation, and how even a 'light punishment' could be disastrous for Red Sox

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Ever since the Red Sox fired Alex Cora amidst an MLB investigation into sign-stealing during their 2018 championship season, ownership has asked us to withhold judgment.

Their implication is clear: we're clean.

This overconfidence has subtly shaped coverage, with report after report assuring us that whatever sins are uncovered, they won't be as egregious as the ones that cost the Houston Astros not only their manager, GM, multiple draft picks and \$5 million, but also their standing as a model franchise.

But here's the problem. Somewhere along the way, we've transmuted "lesser punishment" into "zero punishment," and those are two very different things. If the Red Sox illegally used the video room to decode opposing signs, even just a handful of times, and even only with a runner on second, they may not feel the same sledgehammer of justice that has left the star on the Astros logo with three points instead of five, but their stitched B might still require thimble and thread.

So as we await the conclusion of the league's investigation, let's examine where things stand.

1. It doesn't sound like MLB has much . . .

Here's what I've been able to glean through conversations with league and team officials, most of whom are reticent to say much of anything: MLB seems to be making the Apple Watch incident of 2017 central to its case, on the grounds that the Red Sox are repeat offenders with no mulligans.

That approach could both help and hurt the team's case. On one hand, if the league is focusing on an old incident, that suggests it hasn't unearthed much new information. On the other, the prior warning is only relevant if the Red Sox violated it.

MLB has cast a wide net in the hunt for information, reaching out to former employees and even retired scouts, per multiple sources. Maybe it's a desperate fishing expedition, or maybe the league has something. It's important to note that despite their public confidence, the Red Sox don't know everything the league has uncovered.

2. . . . but something is more than nothing

And so that brings us back to the idea of lesser punishment vs. zero punishment. The Red Sox may try to claim the former as vindication, but to use an on-field analogy, we all remember both Gaylord Perry (spitball) and Joe Niekro (emery board) as cheaters, even though it's safe to say the former did a lot more of it than the latter.

If MLB calls any aspect of Boston's 108-win championship season into question, the Red Sox may be able to claim they're better than the Astros, but they'll still be considered worse than everyone else, and that's going to leave a mark.

3. The delay does not help the Red Sox

First we heard the report would be issued the first week of February. Then it became the start of camp. Then it became the end of this week. Now we should receive it by the end of the month, which is two weeks away.

What's the holdup? It's possible that MLB is feeling some heat over continued revelations in *The Athletic* about the role of Carlos Beltran in Houston's sign-stealing scheme and doesn't want to let the Red Sox off the hook only to be embarrassed later for leniency.

It could also be that the investigation has uncovered something that requires further digging. Considering how motivated MLB should be to put a bow on this scandal, if the league believed it could slap the Red Sox with a minor penalty and call it a day, it probably would've done so, because the last thing it wants is more unplanned managerial vacancies.

After all, this was supposed to be about deterrence, not destruction.

4. Alex Cora is taking the fall

Watching Astros stars Alex Bregman and Jose Altuve treat their remorseless and insincere apologies like a nuisance, followed by owner Jim Crane declining to accept any responsibility for actions that happened on his watch, it's clear that Cora is being fitted to play the patsy.

While he's by no means innocent of wrongdoing and deserves the yearlong suspension (minimum) he's probably facing, he is becoming a convenient scapegoat for two organizations.

What happened in Houston was an institutional failure, but it's being presented as an individual one. All parties -- MLB, the Astros, and Red Sox -- have every incentive to lay this at Cora's feet like a live grenade before seeking cover.

Far easier to explain away the chicanery as the actions of one ruthless competitor, rather than acknowledge the much darker truth -- that even in Houston, Cora was just one of many who made it happen, from codebreaking interns to trash-can banging coaches to indifferent executives.

With no union or billionaires to protect him, Cora's on his own.

5. So how does this end?

If I had to guess, I don't believe it's in baseball's best interests to leave the Red Sox at such a competitive disadvantage (ie., lost draft picks) that it hamstringing one of the game's marquee franchises as it tries to rebuild. If that doesn't sound like justice to you, welcome to the real world.

The Red Sox have already paid a steep price by losing their manager, so I'd expect the league to come down extra hard on Cora -- blaming him primarily for whatever is uncovered in Boston -- and then putting this whole thing to bed.

Remember, baseball wants to eliminate electronic sign-stealing, not blow up the sport from within.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Rule 5 infielder Jonathan Arauz hopes to make good on longshot roster bid

Sean McAdam

As a general rule, teams who expect to contend for a championship don't have the luxury of carrying a Rule 5 pick on their roster.

Carrying an inexperienced player — the vast majority of whom have never played above Double-A, if that — is a hindrance when it comes to roster management.

Accordingly, the Red Sox have only had a handful of Rule 5 players on their major league roster. Lenny DiNardo, in 2003, was perhaps the most successful. Josh Rutledge, in 2016, was the most recent.

This year, for a variety of reasons, the Red Sox are trying to see if a Rule 5 pick — infielder Jonathan Arauz, selected from the Houston Astros — can stick. A Rule 5 player must remain either on the major league roster or the DL for the entire season, or else be offered back to the team from which he drafted and/or placed on waivers.

The cost — \$100,000 — is, relatively speaking, a relative pittance. And you never know: the likes of Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente and Blue Jays slugger George Bell first made it to the majors as Rule 5 picks.

It makes sense, then, that the Sox might experiment this season.

For one thing, though the Sox continue to maintain that they expect to contend for a playoff spot, this is, by most accounts, a season in which they're also building toward the future. Secondly, the arrival of new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom has signaled that the Sox are uncovering every conceivable option when it comes to providing depth for their roster.

And finally — and perhaps most significantly — an expansion of major league rosters this season from 25 players to 26 gives one more spot that could be awarded to a Rule 5 player.

“I think the 26th man is huge to try to do this,” said interim manager Ron Roenicke. “I tried to do it in Milwaukee before with a 25-man roster. It was a lefty pitcher we had in the bullpen and it was very difficult. So the 26th man is big. If we're going to do this, we'll try to figure out how to do it. But the 26th man is huge for that.”

Arauz is an infielder with great defensive skills and the ability to play several infield positions. One scout who has seen quite a bit of Arauz, 21, believes his glove work is good enough for the major league level already.

“Honestly, I think, right now, I can (play in the big leagues defensively),” said Arauz through a translator. “I think my glove translates. That's probably my strong suit right now, my defense, so I feel I like I can contribute that way.”

He's played second, short and third in pro ball and considers second base his strongest position. He's done a little work in the outfield, too, and would be eager to add that option to further enhance his usefulness.

But offense is another matter. In parts of five minor league seasons, most of them at A Ball, Arauz, a native of Panama, has hit just .243.

Yet Arauz hardly seems intimidated by the prospect of having to face — and hit — major league pitching for the first time.

"It will be strange at first," said Arauz, "because obviously these guys at the major league level have better control of their pitches and a better arsenal. But overall, it's still the same game and I just have to go out there and have good at-bats. That's probably the thing that will be different — the type of pitchers that I'm facing — but not as much, because I'm just going to attack it the way I always do."

For now, Arauz is trying to get acclimated to his first big league camp.

"It's obviously all really new to me," he admitted. "But it's been good so far. Honestly, it's a bit nerve-racking at times because there's a lot of great players here, a lot of superstars. Sometimes, they need their space. But as the days have gone by, I'm getting more and more comfortable with those guys, picking their brains. It's been good overall, because they've been making me feel like I'm a part of things."

"This guy is very versatile in what he can do defensively and that helps a lot," said Roenicke. "It's hard for a manager because I know he needs to play to be evaluated and needs to play to get his confidence, he needs to play to get used to the big leagues and yet, you're trying to win every ballgame you can. And sometimes, trying to figure that out becomes a challenge."

Most Rule 5 picks don't stick and have to be offered back. It's a longshot bid, with the odds against him.

But the Sox are open to the possibility.

"It's a big jump (from Single-A or Double-A to the big leagues)," said Roenicke. "That's why Rule 5's are hard. Some guys are able to jump from A ball to the big leagues and still be able to help you. That happens on occasion, but probably not very often."

Red Sox Notebook: Sox taking wait-and-see approach to Alex Verdugo's availability

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — It's too soon to predict what might happen in another seven weeks, but Ron Roenicke hinted Friday that it was least possible that newly-acquired outfielder Alex Verdugo might not be healthy enough to start the season with his new team.

"Right now, he's with our medical group and is going through things to see where we're at with him," Roenicke said.

Roenicke wouldn't get into timetables or venture a guess on Verdugo's availability ("I'd hate to make a comment and then it comes back later I'm wrong,"), but said there would be more answers on his status soon. The Boston Globe reported that Verdugo could see the start of his season delayed for injury reasons.

"He needs to go everything with (the training staff)," said Roenicke. "They really want to get a good feel for him. They don't know him. They'll talk to him, figure out where we are and what point we can start going forward with forever — whether it's baseball activities or just strength activities). I'll know a lot more (Saturday) and figure out where we are."

Verdugo was the centerpiece of the team's five-player deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers last week that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the West Coast. Verdugo didn't play after Aug. 4 last year as he dealt with a back/core injury.

The Red Sox knew of the condition when they made the trade and understood the possibility that Verdugo might not be ready for Opening Day.

That, in part is what motivated them to add Kevin Pillar, whom they signed to a \$4.5 million deal earlier this week. As a right-handed bat, Pillar offers some balance to an all-lefty outfield. And should Verdugo be unavailable or limited early in the season, Pillar can step in and play more regularly.

"Aggressive, knows how to play the game, I wasn't real comfortable when he came to the plate in big situations," said Roenicke of Pillar. "I thought he gave you a real nice at-bat. He's always been known as a good defender. We know he doesn't mind laying out. We know he doesn't mind running into walls. He knows how to play. I'm not sure if the metrics on him re the same as they were five years ago when he was probably faster. I'm not really sure. But he's always been a good defender and the nice thing is, with how it looks like our roster's going to be, to have that righthanded bat out there will be nice."

Asked if he had given some thought to how he would align his outfield if Verdugo is out for a time — Pillar in center and Jackie Bradley Jr. in right? Or Bradley in his customary center with Pillar in right? — Roenicke wasn't ready to make a commitment.

"We haven't talked about it a lot, but we did some," he said. "Jackie is a great right fielder, too. He's a great centerfielder. And I Think Pillar can play all of them."

Chris Sale, who has battled the flu for more than the last week and has a case of mild pneumonia, was scheduled to visiting with the training staff Friday afternoon. It's possible that could clear him to rejoin the team and begin his usual spring regimen.

Mitch Moreland makes some concessions to age

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Mitch Moreland won't kid himself. He's older now and battled a series of nagging knee and back injuries the last few years, so the notion that he's still an everyday player at 34 is probably not a realistic one.

Still, Moreland isn't above performing some mental gymnastics as he slips past baseball's middle age bracket.

"It's kind of like you're tricking your mind a little bit," said Moreland. "I try to tell myself every day — we play 162 games and I'm going to be ready to play 162 days. That's what I'm telling myself. Whether I'm coming in off the bench and getting two at-bats or playing the whole game, whatever they need me to do. That's always been my mindset and that's the way I'm going to keep it. I'm going to prepare every day. Maybe I'll mix in a recovery day every now and then, for sure."

But Moreland can do the math and see the numbers. In each of his last two seasons with the Sox, the number of games he's played and the at-bats he's claimed have diminished. After playing in 149 games in 2017, he dipped to 124 in 2018 and then to 91 last year.

It's impossible to ignore that trend, and even if you did, there was the matter-of-fact statement from Ron Roenicke this week, acknowledging that Moreland is no longer someone who's going to play 140 games.

That wasn't meant as a shot at Moreland or a reflection of a lack of confidence in him. It was just the realization that Moreland can best serve the club by being part of a platoon, giving him time to recover from the beating his body takes over the course of a season, while still making himself invaluable as a late-inning defensive replacement or a potent bat off the bench.

So Moreland has quietly come to terms with the reduced playing time. But he's intent on staying ready and making himself available when called upon.

"I know what my job is and I know what I'm supposed to do," Moreland said. "That's the way I prepare every day. But as far as the preparation goes and the mindset goes, I keep the mindset that I'll be coming in to play. Maybe I don't start, but I've got two big at-bats late in the game that I need to be ready for and if you shut off in the beginning, it's hard to crank it back up. I understand (my workload is diminishing), but at the same time, I keep the mindset I've had since I started playing."

Moreland can still be a fearsome offensive performer, especially against righties, against whom he compiled an .887 OPS last season. But he can still make contributions when he's not in the lineup. He can work with Michael Chavis around the first base bag, or he can put Rafael Devers in touch with Moreland's former Texas teammate, Adrian Beltre.

As he took his seat on the bench the Red Sox PR staff reserves for the team's stars in their first-week media sessions, Moreland remarked that this was the first time he had been afforded the honor.

At 34 — he'll turn 35 late this season — Moreland is, with current absence of Dustin Pedroia, the oldest Red Sox player in camp, and the owner of the most major league service time.

In part because of his age and in part because the Red Sox were, until recently, watching every dollar as they attempted to reduce their payroll, Moreland spent much of the winter uncertain of where he would be this year. Finally, in late January, the Sox extended a \$3 million contract for 2020 with an option for 2021.

Like other 30-something free agents in recent years, Moreland had to be patient.

"It doesn't get any easier to go through it," Moreland. "It was a little tougher this year. Going through it as a family, probably more than anything, was a little bit tougher. But at the same time, I've kind of been through a little bit of (the waiting) before, so I wasn't completely surprised. I wasn't caught off-guard by it. It seemed like it wasn't going to happen (with the Sox) early. I talked to a few other teams that seemed pretty interested, then it seemed like it kind of shifted back around.

"It's definitely not something that's easy to go through as far as the family aspect of it. When you have a wife and kids and you're trying to figure out where you're going to live, where you're going to be. I'm thankful it did (work out). Like I said, this is where I wanted to play."

Even if, by now, he knows that he won't be playing as often.

*** *The Athletic***

Baseball has problems. I'm here to fix them

Steve Buckley

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Rob Manfred, Major League Baseball's embattled commissioner, will be holding a pair of official Spring Training Media Days over the next several days, one in Florida and the other in Arizona.

But I'll tell you what: You can wait and listen to Manfred's carefully crafted commissioner-speak ... or you can listen to me. As someone who has covered baseball for more than 40 years and been watching it since

1964 — first game attended: Red Sox-Angels, Fenway Park — I have some thoughts about what MLB should be doing, and what it most assuredly should not be doing.

This is not an if-I-was-commissioner-of-baseball column. It's more of an if-I-was-supreme-ruler-of-baseball column, since some of my ideas would never fly with the owners. Rob Manfred, see, is required to take calls from Houston Astros owner Jim Crane. Not so with the supreme ruler of baseball.

To the telestrator, then, as I outline eight edicts I would put into play if I were supreme ruler of baseball:

1. The Houston Astros' 2017 World Series championship would henceforth be considered null, void, vacated, never happened, etc.

I know what you're thinking: Members of the Chicago White Sox fixed the 1919 World Series, leading to the owners bringing in Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis to become the game's first commissioner and clean up Dodge. And while he banned eight White Sox players for life, he didn't draw a line through the 1919 World Series and say it didn't happen, right?

So what? Why must MLB be held prisoner to a Judge Landis decision from a century ago? The Astros not only cheated, but they followed it up with an arrogant, stagey news conference this week that included a comment from the aforementioned Jim Crane that inspired the biggest collective spit take in the history of mankind.

"Our opinion is that this didn't impact the game," Crane said of his team's illegal sign-stealing operation. He quickly tried to walk that back — "I didn't say it didn't impact the game," he said, his nose taking the shape of Pinocchio's from those Geico commercials — but it was too late.

So no 2017 championship banner for the Astros. And the same goes for the 2018 Red Sox if their crimes match up with what the Astros did.

And, no, neither title would go to the Dodgers. Removing tainted victories from one team doesn't mean bestowing imaginary victories on another team. Let's be grown-ups about this.

2. Once the leases are up and the lawyers have been paid and the bags have been packed, the Tampa Bay Rays are moved to Montreal and recast as the ... Montreal Royals
(I know what you're thinking: MLB already has the Kansas City Royals. I'll get to that in a moment.)

No disrespect to the few, the proud, the fans of the Rays, but the sobering reality is that big-league baseball has simply never become a thing in the Tampa-St. Pete area. They haven't come close to matching their attendance for their inaugural 1998 season (2,506,023) and attendance was only 1,780,791 in 2008, the year they played in the World Series. Last year's Rays, who won 96 games and made it to the Division Series (losing in five games to the Astros), drew 1,178,735 to Tropicana Field, an average of 14,552 per game.

Way back in 1994, the Montreal Expos had the best record in baseball (74-40) when the players' strike halted the season. It never resumed. And the Expos never recovered.

Build a new ballpark in Montreal, bring in the Rays ... and rename them the Royals. The way I see it — and again, I am the supreme ruler of baseball — the old minor-league Royals were a crown jewel of the Montreal sports scene for more than a half-century and they also have historical significance: Jackie Robinson played for the Montreal Royals of the International League before debuting with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

3. Change the name of the Kansas City Royals to the Kansas City Monarchs

I'm totally serious about this. Let's begin here: There are several cases in which big-league teams arrived in a new city, either by expansion or relocation, and adopted the name of an old minor-league team from that town. The Milwaukee Brewers. The Baltimore Orioles. The San Diego Padres. (And as I point out above, I'd like to see Montreal do it with the Royals.) And yet none of the old Negro League teams have been honored by having their names and team colors being resurrected by Major League Baseball.

We can fix that by bringing the Kansas City Monarchs back to life. The Monarchs were one of the best-known and most successful of Negro League teams, and it was in their uniform that the legendary Satchel Paige had some of his greatest success. Buck O'Neil, as fine an ambassador of baseball as the game ever had, played for and managed the Monarchs. Jackie Robinson played a season with the Monarchs before signing with Brooklyn.

MLB is always falling for goofy gimmicks in an attempt to bring in more fans. This is no gimmick. It's recognizing an important and still overlooked era of baseball history, and, perhaps, opening the eyes of kids of all races who've never been taught there was a thing called the Negro Leagues. Or why they existed in the first place.

Passionate fans of the Kansas City Royals won't like this one bit. I don't blame them. I'd ask, though, for Kansas City sports fans to think of the common good and why the old KC Monarchs deserve a seat at MLB's 21st-century table.

4. Eliminate the sounds-great-but-is-actually-really-horrible idea of bringing back so-called 'old-fashioned doubleheaders'

Anyone proposing the return of big-league doubleheaders either has never attended one or is a complete fool. At a time when MLB is desperately trying to speed up the games, it makes no sense to create a "day at the ballpark" that would last seven or eight hours. And, no, I wouldn't be in favor of having doubleheaders featuring two seven-inning games. That works in the minor leagues and that's where it belongs.

As someone who grew up watching baseball, I attended my share of scheduled doubleheaders. Guess what? My friends and I almost always headed home at around the fourth inning of the second game. It was just too much baseball for one day, and, anyway, we were out of money. And this was at a time when people actually had attention spans. You think today's kids are going to sit through two games?

5. Yes, yes, yes, we're going to speed the games up

It's been said that Manfred is obsessed with pace of play. That's a Magnificent Obsession. Of the four major American sports leagues, only in MLB do fans start heading for the exits when the games go to overtime. And I right or am I right? But the solution isn't putting a runner on second base to start the bonus frames — another cheesy gimmick — but to speed up the games to the degree that fans will stick around for the 10th inning and beyond.

The fix isn't complicated: Build a wall and make Texaco pay for it. On this wall, there would be a clock — a pitch clock — and pitchers would throw the damned ball in keeping with the clock or pay the consequences. It's time for MLB and the Players Association to stop dancing around the issue. The clock needs to be real, and it needs to be enforced. And if it takes pitchers out of their rhythm, we'll get new pitchers. I'm calling it the Mark Buehrle Rule, named after the former big-league pitcher who managed to win 214 games during big-league career despite rarely taking much more than 15 seconds between pitches.

By the way, I just threw in the line about Texaco because it rhymes with Mexico. But call us, Texaco, if you're interested in naming rights for those MLB wall clocks I'm putting up.

6. Upon further review, there will be no more further review

This one is going to be especially tricky now that you're being invited to make legalized gambling part of your daily baseball experience, but replay review has always been a clunky thing in baseball. In the other sports, yes, I get it. Especially in the NFL, where a wrong call could reduce the earth to a burned-out cinder.

Without even this obligatory statement of the obvious — which is that it has allowed teams to cheat, which has damaged the very integrity of the sport — replay review in baseball serves as an announcement for anyone watching the game to quickly change the station. I dare you to tell me you have not done so.

If a big-league game can be played by two teams of flawed, imperfect human beings, I don't see the issue in having it umpired by four flawed, imperfect human beings.

The worst thing that could happen is that fans of one team go home angry and hollering. But isn't that what's supposed to happen anyway?

However, and perhaps this is just to hose down the "OK Boomer" crowd, I'm willing to bring in the robotic strike zone — partly because it will keep the game flowing but mostly because of this: in the entire history of baseball no two umpires have had the same strike zone.

7. Take neutral-site games to another level

MLB is already on to something here, staging regular-season games everywhere from London to Williamsport, Pa., and there will even be a Yankees-White Sox tilt this summer on the Iowa cornfield where "Field of Dreams" was filmed. The Red Sox and Orioles will also play a game in Williamsport during the Little League World Series.

My plan is for there to be more of that. And it's a lock, actually. In 20 years it'll be the norm for each big-league team to play bits and pieces of its schedule at exotic locales, and when it does happen it'll be yet another case where the old becomes new. The White Sox played a smattering of home games at Milwaukee's County Stadium in 1968 and '69, and the Brooklyn Dodgers played some home games at Jersey City's Roosevelt Stadium in '56 and '57 before packing up and moving to Los Angeles.

However ...

8. There will be no screwing around, none, ever, with minor-league baseball

And it's not just because the minors are a thing of beauty, what with their hokey contests colliding with a young ballplayer's fierce desire to make the big leagues.

I covered minor-league ball for three years and am here to tell you that every player, every last one of them, even bench players hitting .203, is clinging to the hope that some crazy set of circumstances will collide in such a way as to catapult them to the big leagues.

And yet they cheerfully participate in every zany promotion, visit every hospital, sign every autograph, pose for every photo. There is, I am telling you, an energy to minor-league baseball you won't find anywhere else.

It will not be destroyed, or even diminished, on my watch.

*** *Associated Press***

With Betts gone, Red Sox fill holes in OF and at leadoff

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Win. Dance. Delete.

When the Boston Red Sox traded Mookie Betts to the Los Angeles Dodgers on the eve of spring training, they broke up the "Killer B's" who patrolled the Fenway outfield and led the team to a World Series championship in 2018.

Together, Betts, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Andrew Benintendi formed one of the best outfielders in baseball and became fan favorites by following spectacular catches with their choreographed "Win, Dance, Repeat" postgame celebrations. Now, as the Red Sox learn to live without Betts, his former fellow outfielders are figuring things out with their new partner, Alex Verdugo, who came to Boston in the trade that sent the 2018 AL MVP and pitcher David Price to the Dodgers.

"It's one of those things where you have to get to know the person and see him play, hands-on," Bradley said this week. "Sometimes people just have that natural connection. It could be something that's just seamless.

"As long as you're able to talk," he said. "That's what communication's all about. If you have great communication, then less bad things happen."

Betts, Bradley and Benintendi were one of the best outfielders in franchise history and the best homegrown trio since Jim Rice, Fred Lynn and Dwight Evans. All still in their 20s, fans pictured them robbing hitters of homers for years.

But with Betts earning \$27 million this season and the Red Sox trying to shed salary, they traded him to the Dodgers along with David Price and half of the \$96 million remaining on the 2012 AL Cy Young winner's contract. In return, they got outfielder Alex Verdugo and two prospects.

Verdugo, 23, batted .294 with 12 homers and 44 RBIs last year before a back injury in August ended his season early. The Red Sox acknowledged this week that he might not be ready to open the season.

"He's going through things and we'll see where we're at," manager Ron Roenicke said on Friday.

Also this week, the Red Sox signed outfielder Kevin Pillar to a one-year deal for \$4.25 million. He spent six-plus seasons with Toronto before playing in San Francisco most of last year. He is a career .261 hitter with 76 homers and 318 RBIs who is also known for great defensive range.

Pillar is also a right-handed batter, giving Roenicke some flexibility in the batting lineup; Betts, Benintendi and Verdugo are all lefties.

"He knows how to play the game," Roenicke said. "I wasn't real comfortable when he came to the plate. In big situations, I thought he gave them a nice at-bat."

Pillar arrived in the spring training clubhouse on Friday with a Blue Jays equipment bag. He said a brief hello to some teammates, including Benintendi and Mitch Moreland, then disappeared to complete the physical that was the last hurdle before his deal became official.

"He's going to be able to help the team win," Bradley said. "He can play the game at a high level and can help a ballclub on both sides of the ball. So I have the ultimate respect for him."

The roster shuffling could also mean a promotion in the batting order for Benintendi. Betts spent most of his time in Boston as the leadoff hitter, although Benintendi did bat first in 48 games last season. He hit .256 with a .355 on-base percentage, and batted .119 with just one extra-base hit as the first hitter in the game.

Benintendi said the problem wasn't the No. 1 spot.

"I was going through a little slump when I was the leadoff spot. So, obviously there's a lot of things being said about me hitting leadoff," he said with a chuckle. "It's just like any other spot in the lineup. You just have to hit first in the first inning. But other than that, it's the same. And I don't mind it at all. If I need to do it, I'll do it."

Roenicke said he was open to giving Benintendi another shot.

"Bennie certainly can do it," he said, also adding that Verdugo was a possibility. "I think we'll have to see. You know, we have a couple of new players, so we'll see where they fit in."