

## ***The Boston Red Sox Sunday, February 16, 2020***

### **\* *The Boston Globe***

#### **Trading stars helped Mike Hazen rebuild Diamondbacks**

Peter Abraham

Mike Hazen left the Red Sox after the 2016 season to become general manager of the Arizona Diamondbacks, a team that had just lost 93 games.

Now, a little more than three years later, they stand as legitimate contenders in the National League West if the Dodgers stumble.

Hazen knew when he arrived he wanted to improve the farm system and create a wider base of talent on the major league roster. But there wasn't one set way to do that.

"We wanted to get to know the talent on the roster and see how it played out without rushing into any decisions," Hazen said. "As 2018-19 evolved we had players moving through the system and we were able to make some moves."

As first baseman Paul Goldschmidt approached his final year before free agency, the Diamondbacks traded him to the Cardinals last winter for three prospects and a draft pick.

Arizona followed that up by sending Zack Greinke to Houston last July for four prospects.

"Obviously trading those players was really hard," Hazen said. "Particularly, Goldy. He was somebody so identified with the franchise. But we had needs that weren't going to be filled by two players. We felt like those were additions we had to make."

The same was true with Greinke. Hazen addressed the team after that trade to explain his reasoning.

"It's very difficult to make those trades, and they weren't popular at all with the fans," Hazen said. "But that's a short-term reaction. The only thing that matters is moving toward winning."

Arizona is doing that. The seven players acquired in the two trades included three pitchers, an outfielder, a catcher, a first baseman, and a second baseman. Three already have played for the Diamondbacks.

Arizona then used the money saved in the trades to sign free agent lefthander Madison Bumgarner for five years and \$85 million, and traded from their improved prospect portfolio to obtain outfielder Starling Marte from the Pirates.

They also signed underrated outfielder Cole Calhoun, reliable catcher Stephen Vogt, and righthanded relievers Junior Guerra and Hector Rondon.

Outside of Bumgarner and Marte, none of the additions were particularly expensive. But they added a layer of veteran talent to the roster that brings to mind the way the Red Sox supplemented their lineup before the 2013 season.

It's a much different approach than the Padres, who committed big chunks of their payroll to Manny Machado and Eric Hosmer.

The 31-year-old Marte could be Arizona's version of Shane Victorino, a veteran player who sparks the team in different ways. He gets on base, plays above-average defense, can steal a base, and hits for power.

"He's fun to watch. He's a very dynamic player," Hazen said. "We're excited about him."

The Diamondbacks also had eight of the first 100 picks in the 2019 draft thanks to compensation rules. That further added to their stockpile of high-end talent.

Arizona's improving farm system is now ranked among the top 10 in the game by most evaluators.

"They've done some good things," one National League scout said. "Is there one hitter as good as Goldschmidt, one pitcher like Greinke? Probably not, no. But their roster is deep and they'll have some players come up this season and help them."

Even after making those trades, Arizona was 85-77 last season and only 1½ games out of a wild-card spot as late as Sept. 7. Hazen credits manager Torey Lovullo for that.

As its roster shifts, Arizona is 34 games over .500 the last three seasons. Lovullo has skillfully integrated the new players and kept the team focused on winning games as Hazen maneuvers to improve the future.

Hazen and Lovullo have a good partnership, one that started in 2002 when they both worked for the Indians in player development.

"A lot of trust," Hazen said. "Our team has shown a lot of character and Torey is a big part of that. The players respond to him. He's been a great manager, which was something everybody expected."

Hazen's staff includes assistant GMs Jared Porter and Amiel Sawdaye, both former Red Sox executives. Craig Shipley, a special assistant, also spent time with the Sox.

The Dodgers have won the National League West seven years in a row, and that's not likely to change this season. But Arizona can put up a fight.

"The Dodgers have tremendous talent," Hazen said. "The breadth of their talent, from 15-26, is just so impressive. They've been really good at developing players."

"It's a challenge to be in the same division, but I feel like we're moving in the same direction."

Hazen, who is from Weymouth, moved his wife, Nicole, and their four sons across the country after 11 seasons with the Red Sox. He took a risk that could pay off big.

"I love it. It's a privilege to do this job," Hazen said. "You live and die with the highs and lows. It's an extreme challenge, but I love our front office group. That makes it fun."

## BETTING ON BETTS

Dodgers plan to retain Mookie

The Red Sox had Mookie Betts in their organization for 9½ years and never succeeded in signing him to a long-term contract.

The Dodgers now have Betts for 8½ months before he can become a free agent.

It's the nightmare scenario for the Sox, the Dodgers finding a way to retain Betts after they failed in that endeavor then gave up and traded him.

When the Dodgers traded for Betts, a significant part of his value is that they have exclusive rights to negotiate with him until after the World Series. His vow to go to free agency will be tested, you can be sure of that.

Money is no issue. The Dodgers have only \$44.5 million in guaranteed contracts for 2022 and can easily accommodate a large contract. They also have organizational stability in team president Stan Kasten, president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman, and manager Dave Roberts. Compare that with the revolving door of Red Sox GMs and managers.

The Dodgers are set up to compete for years to come with their loaded farm system. They also can offer Betts great weather, far nicer facilities at their stadium, and the Southern California lifestyle for his young family.

Kasten didn't want to go into details other than to say, "I think being with the Dodgers, with this organization, with these fans, in this city, is the greatest thrill of my career. And I think there are many players who would agree."

Ultimately, it's a financial decision. But Betts has interests that range from music (he DJs at parties), to fashion (he wears custom suits from an English tailor) and the NBA.

There are a lot of buttons the Dodgers can press.

It's only a matter of time before you see video of Betts sitting courtside at the Staples Center bumping fists with fellow Nike endorsers LeBron James and Anthony Davis.

#### PHILADELPHIA STORY

Red Sox prospect remembers Kobe

Red Sox first base prospect Josh Ockimey, who was born and raised in Philadelphia, never had a chance to meet Kobe Bryant. But the death of the NBA legend was a blow just the same.

"It's one of those things you weren't prepared for," Ockimey said. "Kobe didn't play for Philadelphia, but he was from Philadelphia. I remember being a little kid when they played the Sixers in the Finals [in 2001] and being proud of the fact that he was from our city."

Ockimey's father, Michael, was a high school referee and worked a game in which Bryant played.

"Everybody knew how good Kobe was even then," Ockimey said. "You knew he'd do special things."

The tragedy had another connection; Red Sox amateur scout J.J. Altobelli lost his father, sister, and stepmother in the helicopter crash that killed Bryant, his daughter Gianna, and four others.

"Everybody says take one day at a time, and it's true," Ockimey said. "Something like that happens and you realize how precious life is. That's been on my mind a lot."

A few other thoughts on the Sox:

- The Mets were in the bidding for Mookie Betts, according to the New York Post. But their offer didn't come close to matching up with the Dodgers.

They were willing to give up outfielder Brandon Nimmo or outfielder/third baseman J.D. Davis along with a solid infield prospect. The Sox preferred All-Star utility player Jeff McNeil, who has five more years of team control.

Nimmo has only three years of team control remaining, and Davis is a poor defender. The Mets also would have needed the Red Sox to take on one of their bad contacts, Yoenis Cespedes (\$6 million this season) or Jed Lowrie (\$10 million).

The Dodgers deal gave the Sox younger players in return and far more financial relief.

- Connor Wong, one of the prospects obtained from Los Angeles, has played only 40 games in Double A, so it's wise not to get carried away. But he's a 23-year-old catcher who has also played games at first base, second base, third base, center field, right field, and left field.

Now that teams can carry 26 players, that kind of résumé has a lot of value. Wong also has an .852 OPS in three minor league seasons with 48 home runs and 18 stolen bases.

- Now that the Red Sox have cleared up their payroll, the notion of improving their 2021 rotation with a free agent is more likely.

For now, Trevor Bauer and Marcus Stroman are the two best starters headed for free agency.

Bauer is on the record as saying he plans to sign a series of one-year contracts once he becomes a free agent. But his talent is undeniable.

Jake Odorizzi, Robbie Ray, Masahiro Tanaka, and Jose Quintana also are entering their walk years.

- One early spring training impression is that infielder Bobby Dalbec works hard. As other players filter into the clubhouse at 8:30 a.m., he's in the cage in full sweat after taking several rounds of swings.

- Baseball America ranked Northeastern righthander Sebastian Keane as the 19th-best freshman in college baseball. The Sox took Keane in the 11th round of the draft last June but couldn't sign him. Keane, who played at North Andover High, has a mid-90s fastball with a slider and curveball that could become real weapons.

ETC.

White Sox are making a move

The White Sox acquired Edwin Encarnacion in the offseason. He hit 34 home runs in 109 games with the Mariners and Yankees last season.

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The White Sox have been the most irrelevant team in baseball for years.

They are the second team in the Second City, lost in the shadow of the beloved Cubs and playing in a stadium devoid of charm. Last season marked their seventh in a row with a losing record, and they haven't made the playoffs since 2008. But now there's hope.

The White Sox added three quality free agents — designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion, catcher Yasmani Grandal, and lefthander Dallas Keuchel — to a core group that includes third baseman Yoan Moncada, shortstop Tim Anderson, first baseman Jose Abreu, and left fielder Eloy Jimenez. They also traded for Rangers outfielder Nomar Mazara.

And this is the season the White Sox will unleash 22-year-old Cuban center fielder Luis Robert, a player every scout raves about.

Robert is so good that he's already been signed to a six-year, \$50 million contract that could balloon to \$88 million.

“You can see the entirety of it coming together,” general manager Rick Hahn said. “We are not certain how quickly it’s all going to click on all cylinders the way we want. When we started this process, it was about putting ourselves in position for annual contention.”

The White Sox do not have a deep rotation and need Michael Kopech to bounce back from Tommy John surgery. They also finished 28½ games behind the Twins last year, and that’s unlikely to be made up in one year.

But the talk in spring training is making a big move.

“The coaches and the players, everyone in uniform is focused on, ‘It’s time this year, let’s go,’ ” Hahn said. “That’s fantastic. That’s great. That’s where you want their mind-set.”

Extra bases

The Mets led the majors in being hit by pitches last season with 95. Think the Astros might hit triple digits this year? There almost certainly isn’t a team innocent of stealing signs in some way, but the Astros were arrogant in how they did it and insincere in how they’ve apologized. Remember when Ryan Dempster drilled Alex Rodriguez in 2013 while the Yankees star was appealing his PED suspension? There will be plenty of pitchers “accidentally” coming inside on Alex Bregman and other dishonest Astros this season . . . Rick Porcello started wearing No. 22 when he joined the Red Sox in 2015. One Cy Young Award and a World Series ring later, he wasn’t giving it up. New Mets teammate Dominic Smith agreed to give Porcello the number and in exchange the righthander made a generous donation to Baseball Generations, an academy in Los Angeles that Smith helped start . . . Felix Hernandez is in Braves camp on a minor league deal trying to earn one of their open rotation spots. What’s good: King Felix is only 33 and he’s slimmed down. What’s bad: He had a 5.82 ERA the last two seasons with Seattle. “That’s the past. This is a new year,” Hernandez said . . . As Rockies camp opened, GM Jeff Bridich was asked if he had anything to say about his fractured relationship with star Nolan Arenado. “Nothing. There is no comment. I haven’t had any comment to this point, so we’ll move past that. Next question,” Bridich said . . . The Padres already have placed righthander Anderson Espinoza on the 60-day injured list. He is still recovering from Tommy John surgery. Espinoza was the prospect the Red Sox traded to land Drew Pomeranz in 2016. Espinoza has not appeared in a game since that season. Meanwhile, Pomeranz has since pitched for the Sox, Giants, and Brewers, and is now back with the Padres . . . Happy birthday to Manny Delcarmen, who is 38. The righthander from Hyde Park and West Roxbury High was a second-round pick by the Red Sox in 2000 and went on to play six seasons in the majors. Delcarmen was a key reliever for the 2007 World Series champs, appearing in 44 games that season.

Action for Boston Community Development will host the 23rd annual Field of Dreams at Fenway Park on June 9. The event gives companies a chance to field client or employee softball teams to play at Fenway in support of ABCD’s anti-poverty efforts. Call Liz Gillis at 617-348-6244 for information.

### **Kevin Pillar wants to take advantage of ‘amazing opportunity’ with Red Sox**

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Kevin Pillar has played 47 games with 179 at-bats at Fenway Park since he broke into the majors in 2013.

But the only home run he has there came that first season off Felix Doubront on Sept. 22.

The Sox are hoping there will be a few more coming after they signed Pillar to a one-year contract. He officially joined the team Saturday.

“I think it’s an amazing opportunity for me,” Pillar said. “I feel I’m best suited for a team that’s trying to win. My style of play is conducive for going out there and doing whatever it takes to get a win that day.”

Pillar should be a useful fourth outfielder, and likely a starter early in the season as Alex Verdugo continues to recover from a stress fracture in his back.

The 31-year-old Pillar was projected to receive \$9.7 million this season in what would have been his final turn through arbitration.

But the rebuilding Giants nontendered him instead, preferring to give more playing time to younger, and far less expensive outfielders such as Mike Yastrzemski, Alex Dickerson, and Steven Duggar.

So even though Pillar led the Giants in runs (82), hits (157), doubles (37), RBIs (87), home runs (21), and stolen bases (14), he was cut loose.

Other teams felt the same way as Pillar had to settle for a one-year, \$4.25 million contract.

Why is that? Pillar drew only 18 walks last season, which led to a .293 on-base percentage and .735 OPS. There were 169 hitters with at least 450 plate appearances last season and only four had a lower OBP.

“In this game, you adapt or die,” Pillar said. “You have to start to value what the game values. Baseball values power. Baseball values on-base percentage.

“I was able to improve on an area of my game in power. Going through the free agent process, I was reminded how important it is to get on base. It’s going to be a major focus of mine going into spring training.”

The righthanded-hitting Pillar is primarily a center fielder and could platoon with Jackie Bradley Jr.

He also started 24 games in right field for the Giants last season, experience that should serve him well filling in for Verdugo.

“I’ll be better prepared this time around to handle all three outfield positions with a full spring training,” he said.

#### Sale on the field

Like a tall, skinny woodchuck emerging from his den, Chris Sale came out of the clubhouse and played catch on the field.

His time on the grass was brief, but at least Sale is starting his comeback from a bout with pneumonia.

“He still doesn’t have full strength back,” manager Ron Roenicke said. “I think he’s progressing fine. We’re still going to go a little easy on him.”

For at least a few more days, Sale will do most of his work inside the clubhouse with the medical staff to improve his conditioning.

#### Out for a stroll

Christian Vazquez left the ballpark pushing his infant son, Diego, in a stroller. Diego was born in November and has been at the park with his mom, Gabriela, for several workouts. Vazquez joked that he wanted his son to become a lefthanded pitcher instead of a catcher because the money was better . . . Position players report on Sunday for their physicals. Most already have arrived. Xander Bogaerts was the latest to check in . . . The Sox have not yet named a bench coach, but it’s worth noting that special assistant Jason Varitek is taking a more active role with the players and that Martin Perez was asked to give up No. 33, the number Varitek wore as a player.

#### **David Price: ‘I could have made a bunch of better decisions [with Red Sox]’**

Julian McWilliams

GLENDALE, Ariz. — David Price wanted to know where he was.

“This isn’t the back of the complex, right?” Price asked.

He looked around once more early Friday afternoon, trying to confirm his location at Camelback Ranch, the Dodgers’ spring training complex.

The tall trees inside the parking lot area even blocked the vision of the 6-foot-5-inch Price, forcing him to contort his wiry frame just so he could get a better view of his surroundings.

“No, it’s the front.” He stopped again for a moment, questioning where he was.

“Yeah, this is the front,” he finally concluded. “Where do you want to do this?”

There was a golf cart on one side, and another cart on the other, which had a longer back. It allowed Price to stretch out his long limbs, so, he plopped down on that one.

Much of the Dodgers complex had cleared out for the day. Price, meanwhile, had an appointment at 2:30 p.m. He didn’t want to leave the stadium since his appointment was close, so the 34-year-old lefthander had a few hours to spare.

The setting is unfamiliar to Price, but he’s a veteran who’s been on the move before. He’s used to the business of baseball. Now, in his new home, he had time to reflect on his previous one.

Price’s career with the Red Sox was a polarizing one. He knows that.

He came over to the Sox before the 2016 season, inking a record-setting seven-year, \$217 million deal. At the time, he tied Miguel Cabrera for the richest average annual value in major league history.

“I went there to win,” Price said. “To me, that is the reason why I went to Boston. I wanted to be able to win right now. I wanted to be able to win the year after and the year after that. That was something I wanted to be a part of. I was comfortable in the American League and even more so in the American League East.”

Yet the general thought among media members and fans was that Price didn’t like Boston and never quite fit in. The belief was that he didn’t want to go to Boston, but couldn’t turn down the money former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski put on the table.

Price said that wasn’t the case.

“I do think it was overblown,” Price said. “I didn’t feel like it mattered what I said. They’re going to make their own assessments and that’s completely fine. If I didn’t enjoy it, I wouldn’t get there at 12:30. I love baseball, I love being around the field, and that didn’t change in Boston.”

Price said a player is under a microscope in Boston. He noted he could feel the difference, even in the tone of his introductory news conference in Boston. His core, in a way, was hardened from the start of his tenure with the Sox. It’s no secret that his relationship with the media, at times, soured.

“In Boston, they’re all competing against each other,” he said. “There’s a bunch of different big papers. They’re all trying to get the big story. I get that.”

Price’s career with the Sox wasn’t linear. After leading the league in games started (35) and innings (230) in 2016, he made just 11 starts in 2017 after dealing with an elbow injury. In 2018, he rebounded, compiling a 3.58 ERA in 176 innings. The Sox won the World Series and Price probably should have been

named World Series MVP. In 13⅓ innings against the Dodgers, he tallied a 1.98 ERA, shining in the closeout Game 5 when he went seven innings and allowed just three hits and a run.

He defeated his biggest foe: the postseason.

Yet at his postgame news conference, Price infamously said, “I hold all the cards now and that feels so good,” which some critics viewed as an odd time to say that.

“That card was played,” Price explained. “That was the first question I was asked in my introductory press conference in Boston. It was, ‘You think you can win in the playoffs?’ That card had been held over my head for a long time — a very long time. It took a while. To go out there and do it once and then do it again. That felt good. It wasn’t anything scripted.”

As Price spoke, a FedEx truck pulled up. Music blared from the speakers, but Price didn’t lose his train of thought. A kid and his father passed by and wished Price good luck on the year. He thanked them and got right back to his conversation.

The fresh air now allows for Price to have a clear perspective. Some of the Boston criticisms, Price knows, came from his missteps.

“I could have made a bunch of better decisions,” Price said. “But that’s life. You make bad decisions, you make poor choices. You live with the consequences. Whether people could forgive you and move past that, that’s one thing. I’m human. I make mistakes.”

Price finished his four-year Boston stop with a 46-24 record and a 3.84 ERA in 98 starts. He wishes they could have won more, but winning one World Series is hard enough. He found peace in knowing that.

“I went there to win multiple World Series,” Price said. “But we won one and that experience was pretty special. I’ll always remember it. Both my kids were born in Boston. I got married while I was in Boston. It was a very significant chapter of my life.”

Price now enters a situation where he might not be looked upon to be the No. 1 guy and he can blend with the other pitchers. He is situated between Clayton Kershaw and Walker Buehler, Price’s mentee who also attended Vanderbilt, in the spring training locker room.

“He’s one of the first guys that put that [Vanderbilt] program on the map,” Buehler said. “He was really accessible to all of us.”

Said Kershaw: “We’re excited to have him. If he’s healthy he’s a really good pitcher.”

There’s some gray in Price’s beard now. He’ll be 35 in August.

Manager Dave Roberts said his spring training workload will largely be dictated by Price. Price said his wrist is healed, and he threw his first bullpen session Saturday morning. He’s entering the twilight of his career and has just one goal in mind.

“For me, I’m going to put team success in front of my personal success,” Price said. “I want us to win a World Series. Whatever it takes to do that, I’m on board for it.”

The move has brought about a fresh perspective. He’s weighing the possibility of selling his home in Florida and moving his family out West. Video calls don’t suffice.

After nearly an hour, Price got up from the cart. He knew where he was going this time. He had an appointment to make, but first had to go back to the clubhouse to change.

“Is that David Price?” one kid yelled out from afar.



Indeed, it was.

“See, I told you,” he told his friend next to him,

By that time, though, Price was long gone. A clean slate and possibly his final act ahead of him.

### **Alex Verdugo explains involvement in 2015 police matter**

Alex Speier and Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo acknowledged his involvement in a 2015 incident in Arizona that led to police investigating the alleged sexual assault of a minor by another player.

No charges were ever filed, and, in response to a question from a Globe reporter on Saturday, Verdugo said he was “cleared of any wrongdoing” in the matter.

“With that being said, it was a terrible thing that happened. It was in my past,” Verdugo said. “It was something that I’ve grown from it; I’ve learned from it.”

In late February 2015, according to a report filed by the Glendale, Ariz., Police Department, two Dodgers minor leaguers (one identified only as “Alex” by police) were partying with three women at the team’s minor league spring training hotel.

According to the report, while “Alex” was in the bathroom with two of the women, the third female — a 17-year-old — lay down feeling sick after excessive alcohol intake.

During that time, according to the recollection of the victim, the second minor leaguer “[took] advantage” of her by placing his hand under her bra and inside her underwear.

After what the victim described in the report as “a couple minutes,” the three people in the bathroom returned to the room, at which point the second minor leaguer stopped touching the victim.

The victim told police that she moved to a pullout bed in the room to lie down while going in and out of consciousness before eventually starting to throw up on the bed. After she became ill, the victim told police in the report, the two other females punched and kicked her in the face and body until she left the room.

“Alex” is characterized in the police report not as a suspect in either the alleged assault or sexual assault, but rather as an investigative lead. He was not charged.

“If I was around for anything that had happened, I would have put a stop to it,” said Verdugo, who was 18 at the time. “I would have helped out. I would have done something.”

But Verdugo’s connection to the incident was concerning enough that, when it came to light in 2019, an executive of a team that had long been interested in acquiring Verdugo said that his club decided — in concert with other concerns about the player’s makeup — it would no longer consider trading for him.

Other teams continued to consider Verdugo as a trade candidate into this offseason. Multiple members of the Red Sox organization said that the team was aware of the alleged incident before trading for Verdugo.

“I don’t think it would be appropriate for us to go into a ton of detail on that specific incident, but the due-diligence process there was extensive,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said. “Obviously, that’s a topic that we take very seriously, as everybody should. We researched it very thoroughly. At the end of the day, we would not have moved forward with the acquisition if we would have found anything disqualifying.”

Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke said Verdugo addressed his new teammates on Friday and discussed the incident.

“It’s just because — it’s obviously the media, just how it is right now,” Verdugo said. “You guys are bringing it up; you guys are asking about it. You have to do it. You guys have to do your homework. You have to cover everything.”

“I wanted to come to a new organization, but I didn’t want to be a distraction. I’m here to play baseball. I’m a baseball player. I’m here to help the Boston Red Sox win a championship.”

“It was something I had to address to let everyone know the truth of it and hear it from my side, to hear the actual what happened.”

Said Roenicke: “I liked a lot of things he had to say.”

Verdugo defended his character several times during his first interview session since the trade.

“Obviously, my name being mentioned in the allegations, it hurts. It really does hurt. It’s hard. I don’t want Boston fans, I don’t want people to judge me for something that they have read or seen posted,” he said.

“I know who I am. I know what I believe in. I know my family values. It’s extremely hard to kind of have to deal with that.”

### **Alex Verdugo’s back injury a stress fracture**

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Opening Day is very much in question for new Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo. He doesn’t simply have a back injury; he has an L-5 stress fracture that could put him on the injured list to start the season.

“This injury, it’s a stress fracture,” manager Ron Roenicke said Saturday. “That’s what this is.”

That was more information than the Dodgers publicly revealed last season when it occurred. But the Red Sox were aware of the injury when they acquired the 23-year-old Verdugo and two prospects for Mookie Betts and David Price last week and believe he will fully recover.

“It’s healing nice and the images that he’s taken through the offseason, [it] continues to heal if not healed completely,” Roenicke said. “It’s an injury that takes time.”

The Red Sox had their own X-rays taken Friday.

“To be honest, if everything goes right he still may not be ready for Opening Day,” Roenicke said.

Verdugo said the injury first became a concern last May when the Dodgers played two games on the artificial turf at Tampa Bay. Verdugo played nine innings in both games, which aggravated what had been minor soreness.

“It blew up my back a little bit. It was my first time being on turf with metal spikes,” Verdugo said. “After that, I felt a lot more discomfort.”

Verdugo then strained an oblique muscle in early August and spent the rest of the season on the injured list. It was at that point that the Dodgers determined he had a stress fracture in his back.

The Red Sox had their own set of images taken when Verdugo arrived at camp. He then met with team personnel to map out a plan for spring training.

“We’re going to take our time on this,” Verdugo said. “We’re going to make sure that we’re right so that way when I am playing and I’m able to be in Boston that it’s the whole year and it’s continuous.”

Once he’s able to play, Verdugo expects to play well. His confidence is not fractured in the slightest.

“I know who I am. I know what I can do on the baseball field,” Verdugo said. “I’m extremely confident in my abilities with everything: defensively, in the batter’s box, base running. I know that I can be a game-changer. I plan on being an All-Star, having Gold Gloves, Silver Sluggers. I plan on that.”

Verdugo claimed he was a Red Sox fan growing up in Arizona and is eager to meet David Ortiz. He joked that he might cry.

“David Ortiz is my main guy,” Verdugo said. “I’m so excited to meet him.”

Verdugo also said he signed his name three times inside the Green Monster when the Dodgers played a three-game series at Fenway last July. He was 4 for 9, with a home run off Eduardo Rodriguez, in that series.

### **Minor League Baseball applauds pay raises while sticking to negotiating stance**

Michael Silverman

Minor League Baseball on Saturday expressed its support for Major League Baseball announcing a 2021 pay raise for minor leaguers.

But, as with most recent dealings between MiLB and MLB, it’s not as simple as that.

“This is an important step as we seek to work together to improve working conditions for players without reducing the number of players and teams,” read the middle portion of the statement. “Minor League Baseball believes MLB can afford these salary increases without reducing the number of players by 25 percent.”

MiLB’s rejoinder was a reminder that the league representing 160 teams across the country stands in opposition to MLB’s proposal from last fall to strip affiliation from 42 of those teams.

When MLB announced the pay bump Friday, its announcement came with its own jab at MiLB, with which it is engaged in contentious negotiations over a new Professional Baseball Agreement, set to expire at the end of this season.

In its statement explaining their its action to increase salaries, MLB said, “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.”

The sides are due to resume negotiations Thursday in Dallas.

MiLB lauded the decision by MLB, saying it “fully supports MLB’s decision to raise the pay rates for players in affiliated Minor League Baseball,” before concluding on a relatively optimistic note. “We have provided MLB with a specific proposal on how we can work together to ensure improvements to older facilities and reduce travel between series through limited realignment. We look forward to continued good faith negotiations with our colleagues at MLB and our principal goal remains to preserve Minor League Baseball in as many communities as possible.”

**\* *The Boston Herald***

## Kevin Pillar's unique journey brings him to Red Sox

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Kevin Pillar suddenly had his life uprooted, traded four days into last season from the only baseball home he'd ever known — one where he thought he would play his entire career — and forced to move himself and his family, including a 1-year-old baby, across a continent.

It was jarring, and in his own words, “extremely unsettling.”

Yet, the veteran outfielder, playing last season with the Giants after six with the Blue Jays, felt he performed well given his unique circumstances. His defense took a dip, but he posted career highs in homers (21), RBI (88) and OPS (.719), even earning a 10th place vote for National League MVP.

But as he's learned, goodwill with an organization only guarantees you so much. After looking forward to joining the Giants for a full camp and second season, he was non-tendered in early December.

“It came as a little bit of a shock, but as I've done this a little bit longer, nothing seems to surprise me in this game anymore,” Pillar said. “The longer you do this, the more you understand that we're essentially just assets, and that we can be moved at any time.”

Pillar's strange journey has now taken him to Fort Myers. With Mookie Betts gone and newcomer Alex Verdugo's health in question, the Red Sox need some help in the outfield. They think they've found some in Pillar, who signed a one-year deal Friday and is hoping he can put it all together in whatever role he's needed.

“I think it's an amazing opportunity for me,” Pillar said. “I think any time you get to put a Boston Red Sox uniform on is something to not take lightly. It's a historic organization, an organization that is always trying to win. I feel like I'm best suited for a team that is trying to win.”

After averaging 152 games played over his last five seasons, and even with Verdugo likely to miss the start of the season, it's fair to say Pillar won't be expected to be an everyday player in Boston. But when he gets his playing time, he'll need to improve his defense to help the team win.

That may seem crazy to say, given Pillar was once considered one of the game's best defensive center fielders, but the 31-year-old took a step back in 2019. He ranked 12th out of 14 center fielders in the NL in the SABR Defensive Index and cost the Giants three runs a game defensively, per FanGraphs.

But Pillar tried to explain why that was the case. Since he was traded to the Giants at the start of the season, he didn't have the benefit of a full spring camp to get comfortable and process the information behind the organization's defensive philosophies and approach.

“Some will say that I've taken a step back defensively,” Pillar said. “I don't believe that's the case. I think it's a matter of making some minor adjustments, whether it's positioning, getting a little bit more information, which is something I'm excited about joining this organization. ...

“I'm excited to be here on time with an organization that's going to give me that information and I feel like I can make those small adjustments and continue to be an elite defender, whether it's in center field, left field or right field.”

For the majority of Pillar's career, he has played in center. In 836 defensive appearances, he's played 732 games in center, 77 in left and 38 in right. The latter is where he projects to play at with the Red Sox, with Jackie Bradley Jr. continuing to man center and Andrew Benintendi in left, but Pillar is up to the challenge.

Last season, Pillar was thrown into right with the Giants without much time to prepare. But with Bradley in center, he knows to expect to play in right, which is uniquely large at Fenway Park.

“I’ll definitely be better prepared this time around to handle all three outfield positions and getting a full spring training to practice all three positions,” Pillar said.

“I’m not just saying this because I’m sitting here now, but it was always my favorite place to go play when I was a member of the Blue Jays. Rain or shine, warm or cold, fans are out there, winning record, losing record, fans are extremely loyal. I also understand they have expectations for their teams. They have expectations for their players. But, yeah, it’s a one-of-a-kind atmosphere and I’m excited to call that my home.”

### **Red Sox notebook: Chris Sale’s illness could cause him to miss Opening Day**

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Chris Sale’s mild case of pneumonia has delayed the start of his spring training, and there’s a chance the Red Sox ace may miss Opening Day as a result.

The left-hander was at camp Saturday, throwing catch and participating in some light workouts, but he’s still not fully recovered from the flu. The Red Sox are being cautious with Sale as he works back to full strength.

“I think he’s progressing along fine,” Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. “We’re going to still go a little easy with him and try to keep him out of fundamentals now and more inside, he can be with (strength and conditioning coach) Kiyoshi (Momose) inside and the trainers. Try to get his cardio where it is so it’s controlled. ...

“They’ll be careful with that,” Roenicke added of Sale’s illness. “You don’t want to set him back any. So they’ll really watch that well. The good thing is that baseball-wise, all that’s good. It’s just a matter of getting him strong.”

And if that sets Sale back to the point that he can’t start on Opening Day, so be it.

“Obviously he’s huge for our starting rotation and is one of the best pitchers in the game,” Roenicke said. “So whenever we can get him to start up, it would be silly for us to try to push him to make him come back sooner than probably he should physically. So it’s not worth taking a risk on having him Opening Day exactly and where we’re pushing him to get him there.

“He’s important to us as we go through this season and hopefully get into the playoffs and keep up the strong there. mayor. To push anybody nowadays, it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense for any of us.”

### **Verdugo unlikely for Opening Day**

Roenicke revealed Saturday that the injury new outfielder Alex Verdugo is recovering from is a stress fracture in his back. It caused him to miss the final two months and the playoffs with the Dodgers last season and could force him to miss the start of the season with the Red Sox.

Roenicke said that the team knew about the injury before acquiring him last week in the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers.

“It’s healing nice and the images that he’s taken through the offseason, it continues to heal,” Roenicke said. “It’s not healed completely, but it’s in a progression where they’re really liking how it’s coming along. It’s an injury that takes time. It takes a lot of time for this to heal. ...

“To be honest with you, if everything goes right, he still may not be ready for Opening Day.”

Verdugo idolized Papi

Though Verdugo is from the West Coast, he said Saturday that he grew up rooting for the Red Sox. A big reason for that is David Ortiz, who he's hoping to meet at some point.

"I'm telling you, if I see David Ortiz here, I'm giving him the biggest hug, I might even tear up," Verdugo said. "That's one guy that growing up, I don't know what it was ... David Ortiz was just the man, dude.

"I grew up and he was just my favorite guy. You see him doing stuff special, you see him tearing up the Yankees and now obviously I'm with Boston. Now I want to do it. Now I want to go do it. ... That was like my main guy. I'm telling you, I'm so excited to meet him. I'm so excited."

Verdugo made his first visit to Fenway Park last season with the Dodgers and it was a memorable trip. He hit a home run in his first game there and he said he wrote his name inside the Green Monster three times.

"I had a lot of childhood emotions come out of me," Verdugo said. "I remember hitting the home run and just running around the bases. I thought I was a little kid in the candy store for the first time. I was just so happy and it's like you're walking on air. It's just your dream come true."

### **Red Sox OF Alex Verdugo regretful for actions during 2015 incident with Dodgers**

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Some of the details from a tragic night in Glendale, Ariz., five years ago remain murky, but we've learned enough about Alex Verdugo to conclude that the Red Sox traded superstar Mookie Betts for a player who comes with a lot of risk.

Verdugo is an injury risk, with a confirmed stress fracture in his lower back and an oblique injury from 2019 that he said he's been rehabbing since last June. His back is healing well, but it seems unlikely he's ready for the start of the 2020 season.

Like any young player, Verdugo is a performance risk. Despite being a former top prospect and hitting .294 with 12 homers in 377 at-bats with the Dodgers last year, he's yet to play a full season in the big leagues.

And he's an off-the-field risk.

Saturday, Verdugo spoke for the first time as a member of the Red Sox. He admitted to regretting the way things transpired that night during spring training with the Dodgers back in 2015, when he was 18 years old. He said he's learned from it. He vowed to be a champion of women.

"I have regrets, obviously, with what had transpired that night with certain events," he said. "There was an investigation and I was cleared of any wrongdoing. And if I was around for anything that happened, I would've put a stop to it. I would've helped out. I would've done something."

There are several parts of the story that have been corroborated by a public police report shared via Sports Illustrated, an independent media report and a statement from Gabe Kapler.

Here are the details that were reported via several outlets: a 17-year-old girl, a runaway, was with two other girls and two Dodgers minor leaguers at a hotel during spring training in 2015. Alcohol was involved. The underage girl was intoxicated and vomiting on a hotel bed while the two other girls began physically assaulting her. One of the players passed out, while the other player video taped the violence and shared it on Snapchat.

These details were confirmed by Kapler, who shared a statement on his blog last February, as well as the SI story that included details from a public police report and a story on a blog called High Heels On The Field, which interviewed Nick Francona.

Kapler, now the Giants manager but working in the Dodgers' front office at the time, wrote that both players "admitted their role in the incident and felt remorseful that their actions helped to create a situation that allowed these events to occur in their presence."

While neither SI nor Kapler used any names of the players in their reports, the High Heels blog noted that Verdugo was in the room, his role uncertain. Verdugo suggested on Saturday that he was indeed present for some of the events, but his comments that he would've "put a stop to it," make it unclear what, exactly, he would've stopped.

The SI story also included a second police report, taking place a week later, in which the alleged victim said she was on the bed and intoxicated when one player began "touching her breast with his hand under her bra. She also described [the player] placing his hand down the front of her pants ... ."

But no sexual assault charges were filed. And Kapler specifically wrote that he was not informed of any sexual assault allegations.

In none of the reporting was Verdugo ever accused of sexual assault.

Upon acquiring Verdugo on Monday, Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said the Sox "researched (the incident) thoroughly" and "we would not have moved forward with the acquisition if we would have found anything disqualifying."

Verdugo, though, was regretful of his actions when discussing the 2015 incident on Saturday.

Asked specifically who cleared him of any wrongdoing, he said, "there was a police investigation and a team thing, too. Obviously there's mixed views on everything. It is what it is. People will spin it however they want to spin it. I know who I am as a person. I'm very confident in that. I have five sisters, two brothers. I have a very big family. I was raised the right way. I was brought up very close to my sisters. I treat women with the utmost respect. That's why having allegations like this hurts, having my name mentioned in it hurts."

Verdugo said he addressed his new teammates in Red Sox camp on Saturday to discuss the incident.

He called it a "terrible thing that happened."

"I've learned from it," he said. "I've grown from it. I've stayed active in my community with the Dodgers, and showing face and being very out there with the fans and interacting with people. I want to give back to my community. I want to show people that I am a good guy and I do care a lot about this game. I have a big heart and I want people to judge me for the way I play."

## **\* *MassLive.com***

**Boston Red Sox's Kevin Pillar: 'Some will say I've taken a step back defensively. I don't believe that's the case'**

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Kevin Pillar regressed defensively in 2019, according to his advanced metrics. But he still feels he's an elite defender.

“Some believe, some will say I’ve taken a step back defensively,” Pillar said here at JetBlue Park on Saturday. “I don’t believe that’s the case. I think it’s a matter of making some minor adjustments out there, whether it’s positioning, getting a little bit more information, which is something I’m excited about (with) joining this organization.”

Pillar signed a one-year, \$4.5-million contract with Boston. He likely will begin the 2020 season as Boston’s right fielder because Alex Verdugo (acquired in the Mookie Betts trade) has a stress fracture in his back.

He has posted an impressive 60 DRS (Defensive Runs Saves) during his career (45 DRS in center), although last year he recorded a negative-3 DRS overall, per Fangraphs.com.

“I wouldn’t say I’ve resisted or refused the information in my career,” Pillar said. “But I was really only exposed to one environment. This is my first spring training with another organization. Toronto last year being in spring training started to lean more towards information and sabermetrics and advanced numbers. And I didn’t have a very long time to have those conversations with them being traded four days into the year. San Francisco was a little bit more progressive in the way they were thinking. But being traded four days into the year, I didn’t feel like I necessarily had time to get all that information, apply it. It was kind of survival mode initially.

“I wanted to make my teammates know what I was about. I tried to go out there and prove myself every single day,” he added. “I wanted to make a new organization, a new fan base understand what type of player Kevin Pillar was. ... I was looking forward going into that organization for a second year, getting exposed to that environment, exposed to that information. But I didn’t get an opportunity. So I’m excited to be here on time with an organization that is going to give me that information. And I feel like I can make those small adjustments and continue to be an elite defender whether it’s in center field or left field or right field.”

Betts won the AL Gold Glove in right field the past four years. He’s difficult to replace out there. But Pillar and Verdugo both are talented defenders. Verdugo had 13 Defensive Runs Saved in 2019 as a rookie, per Fangraphs.com.

**Kevin Pillar joins Boston Red Sox after tumultuous 2019 in which he was traded, non-tendered: ‘Nothing seems to surprise me in this game anymore’**

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- After a year in which the business of baseball turned Kevin Pillar’s life upside down on two separate occasions, the veteran outfielder is looking forward to settling into his new home with the Red Sox.

Pillar, who spent the first eight seasons of his professional career in the Blue Jays organization, has had his life uprooted twice in the last 12 months. First, in April, he was abruptly traded from the Jays to the Giants five days into the regular season. In December, he was surprisingly non-tendered by San Francisco, being let into the free agent market after posting a career-high OPS in 2019.

All of that came as a shock to a player who previously viewed himself as a Blue Jay for life.

“As I’ve done this a little bit longer, nothing seems to surprise me in this game anymore,” Pillar said. “I thought I was going to be a lifer in Toronto. I was drafted, developed and brought to the big leagues by that organization. Never thought it would be me, being the guy that got traded. All of the sudden, four days into the season, I’m asked to move my wife and a one-year-old out of Canada, across the United States to San Francisco for the first time. Nothing in this game will surprise me or shock me.”

Pillar headed west on April 2, being dealt in the middle of a Jays home series against the Orioles. When he got to San Francisco, he found a clubhouse of unfamiliar players who hadn’t even gotten the chance to



know him in spring training. Pillar also dealt with the difficulty of uprooting his wife, Amanda, and his baby daughter, Kobie.

Pillar called that process “extremely unsettling.”

“It made me a better prepared baseball player to handle anything that comes my way,” Pillar said. “I don’t think anything in my career, on a personal level, was as difficult as that.”

After adjusting to his new life on the west coast, Pillar settled in and put together a fine season for the Giants. He played 156 games, hitting .264 with career-highs in home runs (21) and OPS (.735) while getting exposed to both corner outfield spots for the first time in years. He even earned the club’s “Willie Mac Award,” given to annually to the “most inspirational” Giant in honor of the late Hall of Famer Willie McCovey.

Pillar entered the winter as a Giant and was looking forward to building upon his success in 2020 with the club. Then, as the non-tender deadline approached in early December, he started getting indications that he might be cut loose. San Francisco, in an attempt to get younger in the outfield, didn’t seem intent on paying him the projected \$9.7 million he’d earn in arbitration. They non-tendered him on Dec. 2, making him a free agent for the first time in his career.

“It was a little bit of a shock,” Pillar said. “Considering the type of year I had, coming into that organization four days into the year, changing divisions for the first time. Gaining the respect of all the guys in that clubhouse and the city of San Francisco. It came as a little bit of a shock.”

Pillar and his agent, Scott Leventhal, spent the next two months talking to interested teams, including the Pirates and others. In those conversations, Pillar gained a better understanding for specific things teams valued, like power numbers, on-base percentage and OPS.

“You have this evaluation of yourself -- you think you have this value of yourself after putting in close to six years of work, coming off a career high in a lot of different things offensively last year -- then you start to get in conversations a little bit more in depth with teams when you’re a free agent,” he said. “You’re reminded of the things they do value. Things... I wouldn’t say I didn’t value them before but I never really had consequences for my actions.”

Those talks led to a bit of an epiphany for the 31-year-old.

“It’s time for me to start to value those things,” Pillar said. “You either adapt or die in this game.”

After trading Mookie Betts to the Dodgers early in the week, the Red Sox zeroed in on Pillar in what the outfielder dubbed an “11th hour” pursuit. The sides reached a one-year, \$4.25 million deal that became official Friday night and Pillar will provide a right-handed bat in an outfield mix that previously had only lefties (Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Alex Verdugo.)

Pillar is looking for an opportunity to prove himself after a tumultuous year. He thinks having a full spring training with his new organization will be extremely beneficial in getting acclimated.

“It’s an amazing opportunity for me,” he said. “Anytime you get to put a Boston Red Sox uniform on, it’s something to not take lightly. It’s a historic organization, an organization that’s always trying to win.”

Pillar knows there are no guarantees beyond this season, when he’s slated to hit free agency once again. If he performs well and the Red Sox fall out of contention, a trade will become possible, if not likely.

Until then, though, Pillar is a member of the Red Sox. After a crazy 2019, the veteran believes he’s better equipped than ever to tackle the challenges of joining a new organization.

“The longer you do this, the more you realize we’re essentially just assets and we can be moved at any time,” Pillar said. “I experienced that first-hand.”

**Kevin Pillar, newest Boston Red Sox: ‘Obviously with Jackie (Bradley Jr.) here, I wouldn’t see myself as someone that’s probably going to play center’**

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Ninety percent of Kevin Pillar’s major league outfield starts have come in center field. He has made 677 out of his 750 starts in center, 45 in left field and 28 in right field.

But he knows he won’t make 90% of his starts there this year. Pillar, a longtime Toronto Blue Jays center fielder who played for the Giants last year, agreed to a one-year, \$4.25 million contract with Boston. The deal became official Friday evening.

“Obviously with Jackie (Bradley Jr.), here I wouldn’t see myself as someone that’s probably going to play center field,” Pillar said. “I was lucky to have a little experience last year moving to the corners. But really I’m just here to help any way I can. Try to go out and try to be the best version of myself.

He has posted an impressive positive-60 DRS (Defensive Runs Saves) during his career (positive-45 in center) although last year he recorded a negative-3 DRS overall, per Fangraphs.com.

“I think it’s an amazing opportunity for me,” Pillar said about signing with Boston. “I think anytime you get to put a Boston Red Sox uniform on, it’s something to not take lightly.

“It was my first time going through free agency,” Pillar added. “So I didn’t really know what to expect. The type of season I had last year, on the surface I was very confident about it to the point where getting non-tendered came a little bit as a shock to me. Obviously, San Francisco is going in a different direction. They have an abundance of young outfielders that they wanted to give opportunities to.”

A right-handed hitter, Pillar should nicely complement outfielders Alex Verdugo, Andrew Benintendi and Bradley, 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.

He’ll likely start the year in right field if Alex Verdugo (back) isn’t ready for Opening Day.

“Mookie (Betts) getting traded for the second time to the same team, no, I wouldn’t say when that happened I saw myself as an immediate fit,” Pillar said. “I still viewed myself as a center fielder at that juncture and felt like there were teams out there that could use my service in center field. But you find out quickly in this game that there’s a handful of teams out there that are really trying to go out there and compete and are willing to spend some money. And then there’s other teams that are in rebuild and looking to play some of their young players. This kind of came up at the 11th hour. Like I said, it’s an amazing opportunity to play for such a historic franchise.”

He has been an everyday player throughout his career. He knows he’ll likely serve in more of platoon role this year.

“When the Red Sox called, we had our initial conversations, I didn’t want to hear anything about guarantees,” Pillar said. “I just wanted a fair opportunity to go out there and earn playing time. They said that wouldn’t be an issue. That’s how I’m going to go out and conduct my business every single day.”

He said he has a ton of respect for Bradley.

“He’s got the hardware to prove how talented he is,” Pillar said. “You ask anyone in the game, Jackie’s still one of the best, if not the best defensive center fielder in the game.”

Pillar feels he himself still is an elite defender.

“Some believe, some will say I’ve taken a step back defensively,” Pillar said. “I don’t believe that’s the case. I think it’s a matter of making some minor adjustments out there, whether it’s positioning, getting a little bit more information, which is something I’m excited about (with) joining this organization. I wouldn’t say I’ve resisted or refused the information in my career. But I was really only exposed to one environment. This is my first spring training with another organization. Toronto last year being in spring training started to lean more towards information and sabermetrics and advanced numbers. And I didn’t have a very long time to have those conversations with them being traded four days into the year. San Francisco was a little bit more progressive in the way they were thinking. But being traded four days into the year, I didn’t feel like I necessarily had time to get all that information, apply it. It was kind of survival mode initially.

“I wanted to make my teammates know what I was about. I tried to go out there and prove myself every single day,” he added. “I wanted to make a new organization, a new fan base understand what type of player Kevin Pillar was. ... I was looking forward going into that organization for a second year, getting exposed to that environment, exposed to that information. But I didn’t get an opportunity. So I’m excited to be here on time with an organization that is going to give me that information. And I feel like I can make those small adjustments and continue to be an elite defender whether it’s in center field or left field or right field.”

### **Chris Sale pneumonia: Boston Red Sox won’t rush ace just to be ready for Opening Day; ‘It’s not worth taking a risk’**

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale threw about five bullpen sessions this offseason before he recently developed the flu, which turned into a mild case of pneumonia.

“He still doesn’t have full strength back,” Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. “He played catch today. Stretched it out. He also did that yesterday. So I think he’s progressing along fine. We’re going to still go a little bit easy with him.”

This delay to the start of spring training might cause him to miss Opening Day. The Red Sox will reevaluate him every week and see how he progresses.

“He’s huge for our starting rotation and he’s one of the best pitchers in the game,” Roenicke said. “So whenever we can get him to start up, it would be silly for us to try to push him to come back sooner than probably he should physically. It’s not worth taking a risk on having him Opening Day exactly and where we’re pushing him to get him there. He’s important to us as we go through the season, and hopefully get into the playoffs, and keep him strong there. So to push anyone nowadays, it doesn’t really make a whole lot of sense to any of us.”

He won’t work on pitcher fielding practice in the coming days. He’ll stay inside with the trainers and work on cardio.

“Baseball-wise, all that’s good. It’s just a matter of getting him strong again,” Roenicke said.

### **Alex Verdugo injury: New Boston Red Sox outfielder has stress fracture in back, doubtful for Opening Day**

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo has a stress fracture in his lower back and is doubtful to be ready for Opening Day, interim manager Ron Roenicke said Saturday. Boston knew about

Verdugo's injury before acquiring him in the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers earlier this week.

Verdugo missed the last two months of last season with injuries to his oblique and back. The Dodgers never specified that his back injury was an L5 stress fracture, only calling it a back issue.

"It's healing nice and the images he has taken through the offseason show it continues to heal," Roenicke said. "It has not healed completely. But it's in a progression where they're really liking how it's coming along. It's an injury that takes time. It takes a lot of time to heal. It's an injury that's fairly common in baseball because it's a rotation issue. Our trainers are familiar with it. We'll take him as the steps come -- not only what the images show, but his response to things."

Verdugo arrived in Fort Myers on Friday and had imaging done by Boston's medical staff. The team's trainers were pleased by his progress and believe he can begin working his way back soon.

"We're getting to the point where we can start doing some physical activity with him, mainly in the training room to make sure everything's fine," Roenicke said. "Like I said, after a few days or a week, we'll re-evaluate and see when he's ready."

Verdugo will not be ready to play when spring training games start next weekend and may begin the year on the injured list. The Red Sox added to their outfield mix Friday, signing veteran Kevin Pillar to join Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr.

"To be honest, if everything goes right, (Verdugo) still may not be ready for Opening Day," Roenicke said.

Verdugo said he began to feel back stiffness in the early part of the season and believes it got worse after he played two games on the turf at Tropicana Field in May. He hit the injured list with an oblique strain on Aug. 4, rehabbed for a month and attempted a rehab assignment at Rookie-level Ogden on Sept. 2. It was at that point, Verdugo said, that he realized there might be something more serious going on.

"When I was doing my rehab stuff, we were progressing and my oblique was healing but there was still discomfort in the back," Verdugo said. "Went on a rehab start, took a swing, swung and missed and felt a lot of discomfort and pain in my back. Got further imaging and ended up realizing it was an L5 stress fracture."

Verdugo then shut down baseball activities for the rest of the season and missed the postseason. He rehabbed throughout the winter with Opening Day as a potential target date to return.

The Red Sox were fully aware of Verdugo's medicals before acquiring him, knowing it was possible that the 23-year-old would miss the beginning of the season. Verdugo is on board with the plan to take things slowly.

"We have a set plan now," he said. "We have something we can draw out. The exact timeframe of it, whether it's to be ready for the start of the season or slightly after, we're not really sure. We're not trying to rush that. We don't want to give people or give fans a false hope or just even a deadline we miss again. We're going to take our time on this and make sure that I'm right so that way when I am playing and I'm able to be in Boston, it's the whole year and it's continuous that we don't have any setbacks or anything like that."

The Red Sox have Verdugo under their control for five years, so they won't rush him back and risk further injury so he can play in a few early-season games. The rehab process is designed to allow Verdugo's back to fully heal so that he has no further issues in the future.

"We need him to be healthy to see what kind of player we have and the kind of player he knows he is," Roenicke said.

## **Alex Verdugo on being traded to Boston Red Sox for MVP Mookie Betts: ‘That doesn’t add any pressure on me’**

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo said he doesn’t feel any pressure because he was traded for one of the game’s top players, 2018 AL MVP Mookie Betts.

Boston acquired Verdugo from the Dodgers with prospects Jeter Downs and Connor Wong for Betts and David Price.

“Obviously Mookie Betts is one heck of a player,” Verdugo said here at the JetBlue Park complex Saturday. “It’s just an honor to be in that type of trade for a player like Betts and Price. With that being said, it’s part of the business. It’s part of the game. It is what it is. That doesn’t add any pressure on me. It doesn’t add anything like that. At the end of the day, I’m going to go out there, I’m going to play the hardest I play. Play with the passion and love that I have. I know my numbers at the end of the day will be good. I know I can play and I’m confident in my ability.”

He said he likes how Boston fans speak their minds.

“People are sad about seeing Mookie go, which I understand that,” Verdugo said. “But like I said, I’m going to let my play talk. I’m going to get healthy. I’m going to go out there and just play my heart out. Give it everything I’ve got. And I think at the end of the day, Boston will accept that and I think they’ll see what they got is a good player.”

Verdugo likely won’t be ready for Opening Day. He has a stress fracture in his back that’s still healing.

The 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.

“For me, I personally know what I’m capable of,” Verdugo said. “I’m nowhere near where my ceiling is.”

Verdugo’s name was mentioned in trade rumors involving Betts even before the first agreement, a three-team deal between the Dodgers, Red Sox and Twins. The initial deal fell apart but the Dodgers and Red Sox completed their own trade after several extra days of negotiations.

“It was crazy,” Verdugo said. “Because obviously social media was blowing up about the trade. And none of the players had gotten notified by any of the clubs because it wasn’t official. We were waiting on medical stuff, finalizing things. To see kind of all of it, to see it all transpire, to kind of feel you’re in the dark from the Dodgers, it’s a lot. It’s tough. And obviously me being injured right now, I felt like I was already at a low point. It was a lot to take in. It was my first organization I was ever at. It was the only place I knew. So there was a lot of love, a lot of feelings that went into that trade.”

“I don’t know if a lot of people know this but growing up my favorite team was actually the Boston Red Sox,” Verdugo said. “I was a big fan of David Ortiz. Big fan of Boston. To actually be here now, to meet the staff, meet the players and to be with the organization, it’s amazing. They welcomed me with open arms and this is really like a family here.”

**\* *RedSox.com***

**After always robbing Sox, Pillar to return favor**

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- As Kevin Pillar took his first -- and somewhat surprising -- foray into free agency, he never considered the Red Sox to be a fit.

Pillar has been an everyday player for the last five years, and at the time, the Sox had Andrew Benintendi in left field, Jackie Bradley Jr. in center and Mookie Betts in right.

Even after Betts was traded to the Dodgers -- twice, as Pillar quipped -- he still didn't think much of the Sox because of Bradley's hold on center field. But the idea suddenly grew on him when Boston reached out to him a few days ago.

And here Pillar is now, ready to tackle the opportunity of playing for the team he played against so often in Toronto.

"I think it's an amazing opportunity for me. I think any time you get to put a Boston Red Sox uniform on is something to not take lightly," Pillar said. "It's a historic organization, an organization that is always trying to win. I feel like I'm best suited for a team that is trying to win. My style of play is conducive for going out there and doing whatever it takes to try to get a win that day. And I'm excited for an opportunity to do that here."

Pillar, who signed a one-year, \$4.25 million deal with the Sox, didn't expect to be eligible for free agency for the first time until after the 2020 season. But after a solid year for the Giants, Pillar was non-tendered -- and humbled at the same time.

"The type of season I had last year, you know, on the surface, I was very confident about it to the point where getting non-tendered came as a little bit of a shock," Pillar said. "Obviously, San Francisco is going in a different direction. They have an abundance of young outfielders they want to give opportunities to."

After two months of Pillar not being able to find a new home, the opportunity presented itself in Boston earlier this week due to the trade of Betts and some health uncertainty for Alex Verdugo, who might miss Opening Day.

When Boston's roster is at full strength, you can still expect Pillar to start against virtually every left-handed pitcher. But the platoon role will be new for a fierce competitor who played 161 games last year and hasn't played fewer than 142 games the last five seasons.

"The reality is, there's three other really talented outfielders on this team. There will be a role for me at some point, and there'll be an adjustment period," Pillar said. "But my mindset, the way I prepare, won't change. If or when that time comes, I will handle it as professionally as I can and find ways to stay ready."

Due to Pillar's competitive nature, he doesn't expect to be given anything. But he will still go full throttle trying to earn as many at-bats as he can.

"My mindset is just to go out there and be myself, prepare like I'm an everyday player and go out there and perform and earn playing time," Pillar said.

It is evident listening to Pillar speak that he carries a chip on his shoulder that fuels him as a player. He has heard about the metrics that say his defense isn't what it used to be, and he looks forward to proving that he can still be elite in the outfield.

Pillar also believes that the Red Sox can help him improve with their dearth of analytical information.

"Some believe, some will say that I've taken a step back defensively. I don't believe that's the case," he said. "I think it's matter of making some minor adjustments, whether it's positioning, getting a little bit more information, which is something I'm excited about joining this organization."

The passion that Pillar has for his job would seem to make him a perfect fit for Boston, a city that appreciates the grinders who never stop hustling.

“I’m not just saying this because I’m sitting here now, but Fenway was always my favorite place to go play when I was a member of the Blue Jays,” Pillar said. “Rain or shine, warm or cold -- fans are out there. Winning record, losing record, fans are extremely loyal. I also understand they have expectations for their teams. They have expectations for their players. But, yeah, it’s a one-of-a-kind atmosphere and I’m excited to call that my home.”

### **Sale won't be rushed for Opening Day start**

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox ace Chris Sale, who had been dealing with the flu and pneumonia, was cleared to join his teammates at Spring Training on Saturday.

There’s a chance the setback will prevent him from making his third consecutive Opening Day start for Boston.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke made it clear the Sox will be careful with the left-hander, who missed the final six weeks of last season with a left elbow injury.

“Yeah, obviously he's huge for our starting rotation and is one of the best pitchers in the game,” said Roenicke. “So whenever we can get him to start up, it would be silly for us to try to push him to make him come back sooner than probably he should physically.

“So it's just, it’s not worth taking a risk on having him, [by] you know, Opening Day, exactly, where we’re pushing him to get him there. He's important to us as we go through this season and hopefully get into the playoffs and keep him strong. To push anybody nowadays, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to any of us.”

If Sale doesn’t pitch Opening Day on March 26 in Toronto, the most logical candidate to take the ball would be lefty Eduardo Rodriguez, who is coming off a 19-win season.

At this juncture of Spring Training, there’s no reason for Roenicke to definitively say that Sale will miss Opening Day.

Instead, the club will take a step-by-step progression.

“I think we have to reevaluate him every week to see where he is and see how far we can continue to progress him,” Roenicke said.

Though Sale is no longer contagious, which is why he was permitted to report to camp, he is still getting over a pretty significant illness.

“He still doesn’t have full strength back,” said Roenicke. “Played catch today, stretched it out. He also did that yesterday. I think he’s progressing along fine. We’re going to still go a little easy with him and try to keep him out of fundamentals now and more inside, he can be inside with the trainers. Try to get his cardio where it is so it's controlled.”

The Red Sox continue to believe Sale is over the elbow woes from last summer. They are determined to keep it that way, which could include some precautionary steps in Spring Training.

“I think any time there is any injury, you're pretty silly if you don't stay on top of it to try to make sure that doesn’t come back,” said Roenicke. “You guys know -- this guy is huge for us and not just this year, but through his contract. To have him as your No. 1 versus maybe pushing him and maybe having him be a

three or four, we don't want that to happen. We're going to take care of him and whatever it is to keep him strong through the whole season."

### **Verdugo (back) unlikely ready for Opening Day**

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- For many weeks last summer, Alex Verdugo wondered why a back/oblique injury originally sustained on the turf of Tropicana Field on May 22 wouldn't heal all the way. But feeling a searing pain in his back after swinging and missing in a Minor League rehab game with the Dodgers' Class A Ogden affiliate on Sept. 2, he finally got his answer.

Imaging taken shortly thereafter revealed an L5 stress fracture in his back.

Saturday was the first time Verdugo said publicly what the injury was, and the 23-year-old outfielder also acknowledged that the reports that surfaced earlier this week -- that he is likely to miss Opening Day -- could wind up being accurate.

"We're not trying to rush that," Verdugo said. "We don't want to give fans or give people a false hope or just even a deadline that we miss again. So it's just -- we're going to take our time on this and make sure that we're right. So that way, when I am playing, when I'm able to be in Boston, that it's the whole year and it's continuous. And we don't have any setbacks or anything like that."

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke also admitted that thinking Verdugo can play on March 26 for the first game in Toronto is probably a reach.

"We'll look at that," the skipper said. "To be honest with you, if everything goes right, he still may not be ready for Opening Day."

Though the Dodgers never told their press corps the specifics of the injury, the Red Sox knew about the findings while reviewing his medical information just prior to the blockbuster trade that brought Verdugo to Boston and sent Mookie Betts and David Price to Los Angeles.

Red Sox doctors were able to examine Verdugo for the first time on Friday, and the injury appears to be healing well.

"It's in a progression where they're really liking how it's coming along," Roenicke said. "It's an injury that takes time. It takes a lot of time for this to heal. It's an injury that is fairly common in baseball because of the rotation -- it's a rotation issue."

So there's your answer if you were wondering why the Red Sox would trade for a player with such an injury: It's a common one that usually heals all the way. Boston, which controls Verdugo's contractual rights for the next five seasons, was thinking the long view.

Plus, outside of Verdugo, they think they are getting a good return for Betts and Price with prospects Jeter Downs (ranked No. 44 overall by MLB Pipeline) and Connor Wong.

Trade -- and the lead-up -- was 'crazy'  
Verdugo was already stressed out enough trying to get healthy again. Then came the flurry of trade rumors.

But the deal wasn't finalized for another week due to medical concerns the Red Sox had about reliever Brusdar Graterol, who wound up going from the Twins to the Dodgers in a re-configured exchange.

"It was crazy because, obviously, social media was blowing up about the trade," Verdugo said. "And then none of the players got notified by any of the clubs because it wasn't official. So we were waiting on



medical staff, finalizing things. So to see it all transpire and to kind of feel like you're in the dark from the Dodgers, it's a lot. It's tough.

“And obviously me being injured right now, I felt like I was already at a low point. So it was a lot to take in. My first organization I've been at, the only place I knew. There was a lot of love, a lot of feelings that went into that trade.”

Big fan of Papi, Sox

Now, however, Verdugo is clearly used to the idea that he will get to play for the Red Sox. In fact, he welcomes it.

“I don't know if a lot of people know this, but growing up my favorite team was the Boston Red Sox,” said Verdugo, who grew up in Arizona. “I was a big fan of David Ortiz, big fan of Boston. To actually be here now, to meet the staff, meet the players and be with the organization, it's amazing. They welcomed me with open arms. This is really like a family here.”

Just wait and see Verdugo's reaction when Big Papi arrives at Red Sox camp for the first time this spring.

“I'm telling you, if I see David Ortiz here, I'm giving him the biggest hug. I might even tear up,” Verdugo said. “That's one guy that growing up, I don't know what it was ... David Ortiz was just the man, dude. Like everything, with him just in the postseason. It's just a different animal at all times, and it felt like when you needed him the most, he stepped up. He came up and he did it, and obviously you see the way the city loves him.”

Pressure being traded for Mookie?

Though two prospects did come along with Verdugo in the trade, Verdugo will have the most pressure to initially justify the Red Sox trading their best and most popular player in Betts.

“Obviously, Mookie Betts is one heck of a player, and it's just an honor to really be in that type of trade for a player like Betts and Price,” Verdugo said. “And really, it doesn't add any pressure on me. It doesn't add anything like that. I'm going to go out there, I'm going to play the hardest I can play, play with the passion and love that I have. And I know my numbers at the end, they will be good. And I know I can play and I'm confident in my ability.”

One thing that is already clear about Verdugo -- he doesn't lack in the confidence department.

“I know what I can do on the baseball field. I'm extremely confident in my abilities with everything,” Verdugo said. “Defensively, in the batter's box, base running. I know that I can be a game changer and I plan on being an All-Star, having Gold Gloves, Silver Sluggers, I plan on that.”

**\* *ESPN.com***

**Red Sox's Kevin Pillar wanted to talk to Kobe Bryant about writing book**

New Boston Red Sox outfielder Kevin Pillar, who grew up in the Los Angeles area as a Lakers and Kobe Bryant fan, was most impressed by Bryant's post-basketball career and had hoped to emulate it when he was done playing baseball.

Pillar said he hopes to write a children's book about baseball like the one Bryant wrote about basketball, but he had been waiting until his career was over to approach Bryant about it.

“That's something that's going to haunt me,” Pillar said.

Pillar's fandom went as far as to name his daughter “Kobie” after she was born in October 2017. He shared the story with the Toronto Sun in January 2018 of how he and his wife, Amanda, landed on the name.

"My wife wouldn't admit to naming her after Kobe Bryant," Pillar told the newspaper, "but it was a name I grew up around and obviously I was a big Kobe Bryant fan, there's no secret there. We wanted to name our daughter something with a K. We wanted her to be KP; that was the nickname I had growing up. We bounced around a bunch of different K names, and Kobe came out one day on a road trip and the name Kobie Rae came out and it was in our final two.

"We waited until she was born. Maybe 30 minutes after she was born, we decided on her name."

Bryant died in a helicopter crash Jan. 26 with his 12-year-old daughter, Gianna, and seven other people. Pillar said he was at a park with his wife and daughter when he saw a tweet reporting the news, but he couldn't believe it at first.

"I'll have that memory as long as I live," Pillar said.

### **The most disappointing moves of baseball's offseason**

Dan Szymborski

Life isn't a zero-sum game, but baseball certainly is. We mostly focus on teams getting better in the form of big signings and giant trades, but for any team to improve, another team has to get worse. There are 2,430 wins out there on the schedule, and if your team gets better, you have to get those additional wins from someone.

Whether through poor evaluation of players, lack of willingness to invest in the team or simply downright self-sabotage, bad moves have been made. Here are our picks for baseball's most disappointing offseason moves, in terms of winning games in 2020.

#### The Mookie Betts trade

You can make a reasonable case that acquiring Alex Verdugo and Jeter Downs, dumping David Price's contract (or at least half of it) and pushing the reset button on the luxury-tax penalty was a fair valuation for one season of Mookie Betts at \$27 million. You can also make a reasonable case that it was far healthier to eat steamed vegetables at your Super Bowl party than buffalo wings.

If the Red Sox were one of the league doormats, this trade wouldn't really matter. But Boston is a team that, while coming off a disappointing 2019 season, still has enough of a foundation to get 88-92 wins in 2020. Win totals in the 80s are most valuable in that they boost a team's playoff chances the most. Similarly, letting wins in the 80s get away is most damaging, and the Red Sox just dropped themselves into significant underdog status in the American League East and well down the ranks of wild-card contenders.

#### Colorado's "can't-do" attitude

After playoff appearances in 2017 and 2018, the only consecutive playoff appearances in franchise history, the Rockies decided to address their depth issues by doing, well, almost nothing. After dropping to 71-91 in 2019, the Rockies felt an urgent need to change course and do ... totally nothing.

With stars such as Nolan Arenado and Trevor Story already on board, and Jon Gray having a breakout season, the Rockies addressed their need for help in the outfield, rotation and bullpen -- by announcing they were suddenly out of money. Of course, the payroll figure was known a year ago -- Colorado didn't make any significant additions during the season -- and Arenado apparently was assured that the team would remain competitive. Co-owner Charlie Monfort's odd use of sabermetrics aside, Colorado's roster is no better than the one that lost 90 games last year, and now the team's best player is extremely unhappy.

#### Reds fail to fill their biggest hole

There are many teams for whom Nick Castellanos would have been a major upgrade -- we'll get to two of them next -- but by the time the Reds signed him, the outfield wasn't the team's biggest problem. Castellanos is a fine hitter, but a dreadful defensive player, and with Jesse Winker, Nick Senzel, Aristides Aquino, Shogo Akiyama and Phillip Ervin, the outfield was just fine. Now, Betts would have been a significant upgrade, of course, but Castellanos is merely above average, not an MVP candidate.

While Castellanos is an improvement, the Reds didn't fill their largest hole, the shortstop position. Both the ZiPS and Steamer projection systems peg Cincinnati as the league's weakest team at shortstop. Maybe Didi Gregorius didn't want to sign with the Reds, but Gregorius getting only \$14 million for a one-year contract indicates they didn't do much to drive up the bidding. Before Gregorius' injury-shortened 2019, he was the better player than Castellanos each of the previous four seasons, and signing Gregorius would have addressed a team need.

The Reds are a much improved team overall, but they've hurt themselves by not addressing shortstop.

Cubs, Indians short an outfielder

The Cubs are totally out of money, scout's honor, playing in that tiny market of Chicago. Last season, the outfield of Kyle Schwarber, Albert Almora Jr. and Jason Heyward was a drag on the team's offense, necessitating a July trade for Castellanos. Chicago didn't re-sign Castellanos or do much to address the outfield situation, bringing in only Steven Souza Jr. With a lone 2-WAR season in his career, Souza is hardly the savior the outfield needs. Nor is Ian Happ, whose .242/.364/.432 line in Triple-A was rather lackluster in a season when the league was using the MLB crazy ball. It's hard to justify a large-market team that had the benefit of monetizing the franchise's first World Series victory in more than a century letting itself fall back to the pack like this.

While the Indians have a better claim than the Cubs to be short on cash, their need for help in the outfield is even greater. The team blundered by letting Michael Brantley walk without even making a qualifying offer, and after the outfield performed as miserably as projected in 2019, the Indians again pinched pennies in the outfield, settling for signing Domingo Santana. Against that, the Twins added Josh Donaldson this offseason. The White Sox signed Yasmani Grandal, Dallas Keuchel, Gio Gonzalez and Edwin Encarnacion. Cesar Hernandez at second is a nice enough pickup, and Santana will have to do for outfield reinforcements, but the Indians are in danger of watching their AL Central rivals close their contending window for them.

Coffee with Joe

As he embarks on his first spring training as Angels manager, Joe Maddon opens up about his departure from the Cubs and his fresh start in L.A. Alden Gonzalez

Angels miss out on adding pitching

Anthony Rendon was a massive addition to the lineup and a better signing than Albert Pujols was at the time of his deal, by far. The Angels acquired Dylan Bundy from the Orioles and signed Julio Teheran, but fell short in the race for every other available starting pitcher. Shohei Ohtani could be that ace, but he's also a young pitcher coming off Tommy John surgery and won't return to the mound until mid-May. The Angels need more help than even an Ohtani breakout would provide. The ZiPS and Steamer projections agree; both systems have the Angels with the worst rotation of any likely 2020 contender. A team that has more or less wasted much of Mike Trout's prime has to do better than this.

Orioles dump their best player from 2019

The Orioles were destined for the AL East basement no matter what they did, but was there a more cynical move than the team threatening to non-tender a 4-WAR player in an attempt to force a last-minute trade? Jonathan Villar compiled a slash line of .274/.339/.453, hit 24 homers, stole 40 bases and scored 111 runs on the second-worst offense in the American League. Yet Baltimore treated Villar as a pure salary dump.

## \* **WEEI.com**

### **Red Sox notes: Ron Roenicke updates status of Chris Sale, Alex Verdugo**

Nick Friar

Chris Sale arrived at Red Sox spring training late on Friday and was able to get some throwing in. He did so again on Saturday and worked out with his teammates, as well.

But Sale is still dealing with the side effects of his illness – which turned into a “mild case” of pneumonia.

“He still doesn’t have full strength back,” Ron Roenicke said on Saturday. “He played catch today. Stretched it out. He also did that yesterday. So I think he’s progressing along fine. We’re going to still go a little bit easy with him.”

Even though everything “baseball-wise” is good with Sale — it’s just a matter of recovering from his illness — the Red Sox aren’t setting a timeline for his progressions yet.

“Whenever we can get him to start up — it would be silly for us to try to push him to come back sooner than probably he should physically,” Roenicke said. “It’s not worth taking a risk on having him Opening Day exactly and where we’re pushing him to get him there. He’s important to us as we go through the season and, hopefully, get into the playoffs and keep him strong there. To push anyone nowadays, it doesn’t really make a whole lot of sense to any of us.”

Roenicke was told Sale threw around five bullpens in the offseason, some with “pretty good energy.”

The Red Sox will re-evaluate Sale’s strength throughout the course of spring training.

—The Red Sox have diagnosed Alex Verdugo with a stress fracture in his lower back. The team doesn’t know how it happened, though they know Verdugo started feeling pain in his back when he was dealing with his preceding oblique issue.

“It’s healing nice and the images he has taken through the offseason (show) it continues to heal,” Roenicke said. “It’s not healed completely. But it’s in a progression where they’re really liking how it’s coming along. It’s an injury that takes time. It takes a lot of time for this to heal. It’s an injury that’s fairly common in baseball because it’s a rotation issue. Our trainers are familiar with it. ... We’ll just take him as the steps come, how — not only what the images show, but his response to things.”

Roenicke said surgery won’t be required based on the imaging that was done on Friday. Verdugo is taking part in limited physical activity, mainly in the training room.

He will be re-evaluated in “a few days or a week,” but will not be ready to play in Boston’s first spring training game.

“If everything goes right, he still may not be ready for Opening Day,” Roenicke said.

### **Alex Verdugo addresses his controversial past in introductory Red Sox press conference**

Nick Friar

When the Red Sox acquired Alex Verdugo as part of the trade that sent Mookie Betts and Davis Price to the Dodgers, questions about his character were raised. And not simply about how Verdugo approached the game.

During initial reports of the trade, SB Nation's Beyond The Box Score surfaced a report from another site, All Heels on Deck, regarding the assault and sexual assault of an underage girl in Arizona. In All Heels on Deck's report, written by Jessica Quiroli, two then-members of the Dodgers organization were mentioned as being present at the scene of the incident, per the Glendale Police Department: James Baldwin and Verdugo. Baldwin was investigated by the Glendale PD for the sexual assault.

Paul Rubin reported on the incident for Sports Illustrated, stating there were two members of the Dodgers organization alleged to be present during the 2015 incident, though he did not mention the specific names of players "since no charges were filed."

Rubin — who was also familiar with the police report — also reported on the assault, stating Gabe Kapler, then the Dodgers director for player development, receive an email from the girl's grandmother, who wrote the underage girl "said she had consumed half a bottle of vodka, vomited on a bed and then been beaten up by the two women — all while someone in the group recorded video that was later posted on Snapchat." Quiroli's report indicates Verdugo witnessed the assault of the girl by the two women present, and either he or Baldwin, or both, posted the video to social media.

Following the acquisition of Verdugo on Monday, Chaim Bloom was asked about how the organization approaches vetting on an issue of the magnitude of "allegation of proximity to a sexual assault."

"I don't think it would be appropriate for us to go into a ton of detail on that specific incident, but the due diligence process there was extensive," Bloom said. "Obviously, that's a topic that we take very seriously, as everybody should. We researched it very thoroughly. And, at the end of the day, we would not have moved forward with the acquisition if we had found anything disqualifying."

Bloom was asked a follow-up question regarding the process, and replied, "I don't want to get in the details of the process."

On Saturday, before Verdugo spoke to the media for the first time since the trade, Ron Roenicke stated Verdugo talked to the team about the report and allegations.

"He's already addressed that with us," the Red Sox interim manager said. "He did yesterday, talked about it. I don't know how freely he'll want to talk to you guys about it. I'm not sure. But, our people investigated it a lot, and they're comfortable with what has been reported."

Verdugo was then asked five questions about the incident. Here are the questions, along with Verdugo's entire responses:

Alex, since you were traded, there were some media reports about an incident when you were in the minor league in Arizona. Can you say if you were there or what happened during that incident?

Verdugo: Yeah. With that incident, there's a lot of reports and, obviously, my name being mentioned in the allegations, you know, it hurts. It really does hurt. It's hard. And I don't want Boston fans, I don't want people to judge me for something they have read or seen posted. For me, it's just, you know, I know who I am. I know what I believe in. I know my family values and, like I said, it's extremely hard to have to deal with that. You obviously have a lot of mixed views on it, but there was — I was cleared of any wrongdoing, of anything. And with that being said, it was a terrible thing that happened. But, I'm really just — it was in my past. It's something that, I've grown from it. I've learned from it and I've stayed active in my community with the Dodgers. Showing face and being very out there with the fans and interacting with people. I want to give back to my community. I want to show people that I am a good guy. I care a lot about this game, and I have a big heart. I want people to judge me for, obviously, the way I play. The way I go out there and what I bring out to the field: the energy, the hard work, the giving a hundred percent. That's what I want to be known for. Obviously, not something that happened several years back.

You said you were clear from it, but you also said it's a terrible thing, you learned a lot from it. What did you learn?

Verdugo: I learned that you have to be smarter with the positions that you put yourself in. And, really, with that being said, yeah like I said, you got to be smart with the positions your self in. It's just ... it was tough, but I feel — there was due diligence on everybody's end. Boston — before making a trade like this, everybody looks into it. Everybody has to do their homework on everything and make sure everything's right. And with that being said, there was — I was cleared of anything wrongdoing. And, obviously, that still didn't — this is just tough to talk about because it's hard for me and I don't want this to keep going. I want to start my time in Boston. Like I said, I grew up loving this team. I grew up loving this fan base, the organization. You obviously read what people say and you hear it, you hear it come out. So, it hurts, but at the end of the day, it was in the past. I can't do nothing about it not but really show people the real me, who I am. And continue to further myself as not only a baseball player, but as a human being as a person, as a teammate all that.

Do you have any comment on the Nick Francona-Gabe Kapler back-and-forth?

Verdugo: No, honestly I don't have any comments regarding that.

Do you have any regrets about what happened?

Verdugo: I mean, I would say ... I have regrets of, you know, obviously, what had transpired that night with certain events. But ... yeah, I mean, with that, yeah, I don't even want to — I don't think there's much further to comment on it. It's just, there was an investigation. There was a lot of things that was done with it. And, like I said, I was cleared of anything wrongdoing. And if I was around for anything that had happened, I would have put a stop to it. I would have helped out. I would have done something. There's a lot of mixed reports on it. I just felt like this is a good time to get my truth out and how I am. I think it's something that, you know, obviously, it's ... it sucks but we're going to work through it, we're going to keep getting better and we're just going to keep going.

Ron mentioned that you said something to the team about it, why was that important to you to address that right away?

Verdugo: It's just because, obviously, the media. Just how it is right now. You guys are bringing it up, you guys are asking about it and talking — you have to do it. You know, you have to — you guys have to do your homework. You have to cover everything. With that being said, I wanted to come to a new organization, but I didn't want to be a distraction. I'm here to play baseball. I'm a baseball player. I'm here to help the Boston Red Sox win a championship, to go out there every single day and contribute and to, like I said, win a championship and keep going further like that. So, it was something I had to address to let everybody know the truth of it and hear it from my side to hear the actual what happened. It was just — I think at the end of the day, it doesn't catch any of the players by surprise now. It's out there. Everybody knows it. Now you can kind of start that healing, the moving on, like, let's focus on baseball. This is what we're here for. It's spring training, everybody is excited. It's baseball season. This is one of the best times all year round. So that's what I'm looking forward to.

Just to clarify, Alex: you had said you were cleared of wrongdoing, who was that? By the team?

Verdugo: Well, I mean, there was a police investigation. There was a team thing, too. But, obviously, there's mixed views on everything. You know what I mean? It is what it is. People will spin however they want to spin it. But, like I said, I know who I am as a person. I'm very confident with that. I have five sisters, two brothers. I have a very big family. So I was raised the right way. I was — growing up, I was very close to my sisters. And, like I said, I treat women with the utmost respect. And that's why I say having allegations like this hurts. Having my name mentioned in it hurts. It does. It does put — it puts emotional stress on you. It takes a lot out of you. But, with that being said — like I said, that's in the past. I would really like to focus on baseball. Focus on my next opportunity here and the Boston Red Sox. And I'm looking forward to getting started here and really letting my play, letting passion for the game show people who I really am.

## **Michael Chavis recalls getting dunked on by Jaylen Brown**

Rob Bradford

Michael Chavis was introduced to Jaylen Brown well before most.

Appearing on the Greg Hill Show, the Red Sox infielder recounted his run-in with the Celtics star when both were playing high school basketball in Georgia. Chavis was just a part-time player for Sprayberry High, but Brown's reputation while playing for nearby Wheeler (Marietta) High was already well-known throughout the country.

Let's just say the introduction left a mark.

"That is traumatic," said Chavis when asked to explain the meeting.

"Basically, they ran their entire offense around Jaylen, obviously, and we practiced for a week preparing for this game and the big play they had was an alley-oop play around him. And for some reason, I was the sixth man and I saw the alley-oop go up and for some reason I was like, 'That's definitely an air-ball. That is not an alley-oop.' So I decided at 5-foot-11 and not built for the game I was going to jump for it and right as I was four inches from the ball I felt this large presence hitting me in the face and dunking on me and I'm laying face up on the ground looking up at Jaylen Brown standing above me. My home team stadium is cheering for him while I'm on the ground. I get pulled immediately and I didn't play the rest of the season. So shout out to Jaylen."

Chavis said that despite now playing in the same city he hasn't had the chance to meet up with Brown. "I'm mad at him," he joked.

## **Kevin Pillar prepared for new situation after odd 2019**

Nick Friar

Kevin Pillar thought he was going to spend his entire MLB career playing for one team. The Toronto Blue Jays.

He liked the city. He was brought up in the organization. He'd settled down and started to raise a family.

Then, shortly after the 2019 regular season started, Pillar found out he was heading West, and leaving Canada.

"It was extremely unsettling," he said on Saturday. "I wouldn't say every season, but as I was there longer in Toronto, I always had this mindset that 'It won't be me. It can't be me. This organization drafted me, developed me. I've been in the big leagues for five years. Was beloved in the city of Toronto, across Canada.' And then you realize that it can happen to you, and it did happen."

"Extremely unsettling. It would've been unsettling for anyone. If I was a single guy and just had to pack my own stuff and move across the country, find a new place to live. Go into a clubhouse for the first time, five games into the Major League season, not having spring training with these guys. Not having any friends or people that I know. Unfamiliar coaches that aren't super familiar with me. And just expected to go out there and play like nothing happened was extremely difficult. ... I don't think anything in my career on a personal level was as difficult as that, just because I was super open and honest with how much I enjoyed my experience and love for the city of Toronto, felt like that was the only place that I ever wanted to play. And then that was all kind of taken."

Being with a different organization presented challenges. But there was another element to the abrupt transition.

“The human side of having to move a one-year-old and a wife, two cars that were in Toronto and living in a hotel trying and to find a new place,” Pillar said. “Once you experience that, everything else becomes a little bit easier in this game.”

Still, the game continued to throw adversity Pillar’s way.

He had to change his approach at the plate. There have also been concerns about whether or not he has lost a step defensively.

In the course of all this, Pillar became a free agent when the Giants didn’t tender him. After a season in which he’d posted career-highs in home runs (21) and OPS (.735) to go with his defense. He was then presented with a chance to find a solid situation as a free agent.

Again, didn’t go as planned.

“You think you have this value of yourself,” Pillar said. “After putting in close to six years of work, coming off a career-high in a lot of different things offensively last year. Then you start to get into conversations a little bit more in-depth with teams when you’re a free agent. And you’re reminded of the things that they do value.

“You find out quickly in this game that there’s a handful of teams that are really trying to go out there and compete and are willing to spend some money, and there (are) some other teams that are in rebuild looking to play some of the younger players.”

Even when he was in San Francisco, the new situation was part of what forced Pillar to focus more on his power numbers, in addition to placing an emphasis on, on-base percentage.

“I think, in this game, you adapt or die,” he said. “I think you have to start to value the things that game values. Baseball values power. Baseball values on-base percentage. I was able to improve on an area of my game in power. And, once again, going through the free-agent process, I was reminded of how important it is to get on base, how important OPS and it’s something that is going to be a major focus of mine going into spring training and into the year.”

Now Pillar has the ability to invest more time looking into ways to improve upon what’s being valued in the game, thanks to the Red Sox’ emphasis on analytics — whether it’s defensively or offensively.

Still, playing for a different team in the American League East is odd for Pillar. Not because he didn’t know players on the Red Sox prior to signing, which is something he dealt with last year. Again, he just didn’t see himself ever leaving Toronto.

But everything that’s led to his current situation, in addition to his initial interactions with his new teammates and the fact he signed with the Red Sox on time, has Pillar feeling he’s more equipped to play for another new team.

“It’s a little strange,” he said when asked about playing for a team that he’s faced so much. “I’m more prepared for a situation like this, being traded four days into the year, going to a team all the way across the United States in San Francisco. ... That transition went as smooth as possible. I made friends on the team and felt like one of the guys on the team fairly quick.

“Playing against these guys, competing against these guys, we have a lot of familiarity with one another, and I feel like there will be an easy transition. Just in the day and a half, I’ve been here, the guys have been very welcoming. Seems like a very close-knit group of guys. And I am excited to get this thing started and go out and do what I love to do.”

**\* NBC Sports Boston**



## **Red Sox' Alex Verdugo addresses assault allegations: 'I would've put a stop to it, I would've done something'**

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Red Sox acquired Alex Verdugo from the Dodgers despite murky allegations that he may have played a role in failing to prevent a sexual assault, and on Saturday afternoon, Verdugo addressed those claims in both a declaration of innocence and a plea for Red Sox fans to greet him with an open mind.

Discussing the topic for roughly seven minutes, Verdugo repeatedly noted he was cleared of wrongdoing by police in Arizona after the incident in February 2015, which resulted in no charges being filed, but included both allegations of physical and sexual assault.

"With that incident, there were a lot of reports, and obviously my name being mentioned in the allegations, it hurts," Verdugo said. "It really does hurt. It's hard. I don't want Boston fans or people to judge me on something they've read or seen posted. I know who I am. I know what I believe in. I know my family values. It's extremely hard to have to deal with that. You obviously have a lot of mixed-up views on it. I was cleared of any wrongdoing. That being said, it's a terrible thing that happened. It was in the past. I've learned from it. I've grown from it."

The Washington Post reported last year about the incident, though it didn't name any of the players involved because no charges were filed. A 17-year-old girl accused one player of posting a video to social media of two other girls beating her. She later alleged that another player -- not Verdugo -- had sexually assaulted during a night of partying at a hotel.

The suggestion was then made that Verdugo had not stopped the second assault, though there's no evidence to support he was even aware it had happened.

Back injury puts Verdugo's availability for Opening Day in doubt

"I have regrets obviously what had transpired that night with certain events," he said. "There was an investigation and like I said, I was cleared of anything wrongdoing, and if I was around for anything that happened, I would've put a stop to it. I would've helped out. I would've done something. There's a lot of mixed reports about it. I just felt like this was a good time to get my truth out and how I am. It sucks, but we're going to work through and keep getting better and we're just going to keep going on."

Manager Ron Roenicke said that Verdugo addressed the team about the situation when he arrived, and the 23-year-old outfielder explained why.

"You guys [media] are bringing it up, asking about it and talking about it," he said. "You have to do it. You guys have to do your homework and cover everything. That being said, I wanted to come to a new organization, but I didn't want to be a distraction. I'm here to play baseball. I'm a baseball player. I'm here to help the Boston Red Sox win a championship, to go out there every single day and contribute."

"It's something I had to address to let everyone know the truth of it and hear it from my side, to hear the actual what happened. I think at the end of the day, it doesn't catch any of the players by surprise. It's out there. Everybody knows it, and now you can start that healing, the moving on, let's focus on baseball."

Verdugo hopes fans will give him a chance to show that he has matured and grown. He said he intends to give back to the community and says it's the way he was raised "the right way" alongside five sisters and two brothers in Tucson, Arizona.

"I've stayed active in my community with the Dodgers, and showing face and being very out there with the fans and interacting with people," he said. "I want to give back to my community. I want to show people that I am a good guy and I do care a lot about this game, and I have a big heart, and I want people to judge

me obviously for the way I play, what I go out there and bring out to the field, the energy, the hard work, the giving it 100 percent. That's what I want to be known for, not something that happened several years back."

Added Verdugo: "I treat women with the utmost respect, that's why having allegations like this hurts, having my name mentioned in it hurts. It does. It does. It puts emotional stress on you. It takes a lot out of you. With that being said, that's in the past. I'd really like to focus on baseball, focus on my next opportunity here on the Boston Red Sox. I'm looking forward to getting started here and letting my play, letting my passion for the game show people who I really am."

### **Stress fracture in back could delay the start of Alex Verdugo's season with Red Sox**

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo is recovering from a stress fracture in his back and probably won't be ready for Opening Day, though the Red Sox said Saturday they do not anticipate long-term issues.

Verdugo traces the injury to his first exposure to Tampa Bay's turf last May. An oblique strain exacerbated the issue, and he shut things down in August. He made one rehab appearance in September before feeling acute pain on his first swing, and he hasn't played since.

"I was dealing with a little bit of stiffness, something I could get treatment on and work through it and then feel good," Verdugo said. "Then we played in Tampa Bay and obviously playing on the turf out there, I think it kind of just blew out my back a little bit as my first time really being on turf with metal spikes. And just after that, I felt a lot more discomfort."

Tests revealed an L-5 fracture, according to Verdugo. Manager Ron Roenicke said the Red Sox were aware of the injury before acquiring Verdugo from the Dodgers as the centerpiece of the Mookie Betts trade.

Verdugo addresses allegations of his involvement in a 2015 sexual assault

"It's healing nice and the images that he's taken through the offseason, it continues to heal," Roenicke said. "It's not healed completely, but it's in a progression where they're really liking how it's coming along. It's an injury that takes time. It takes a lot of time for this to heal. It's an injury that is fairly common in baseball because of the rotation – it's a rotation issue. So our trainers are familiar with it and we'll take him as the steps come, not only what the images show but his response to things."

Roenicke added that the Red Sox won't rush anything.

"To be honest with you, if everything goes right, he still may not be ready for Opening Day," Roenicke said.

That's OK with Verdugo, who's considering the big picture.

"We have something that we can draw out and kind of know the exact timeframe of it, whether it's to be ready for the start of the season or slightly after," Verdugo said. "We're not really sure. We're not trying to rush that. We don't want to give fans or give people false hope or just even a deadline that we miss again. So we're going to take our time and make sure that we're right. So that way, when I am playing, when I'm able to be in Boston, that it's the whole year and it's continuous."

**\* *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

**MLB Notebook: Baseball's radical playoff proposal may be a necessary overhaul**

Sean McAdam

Major League Baseball floated a trial balloon a week ago, only to see the vast majority of media, fans and players take aim at it in order to (figuratively) shoot it down.

The proposal: expanding the number of playoff teams from the current five teams to seven in each league; awarding a first-round bye to the division champion with the best record; staging a three-game wild card round (rather than the current one-and-done format) with all three games hosted by the team with the superior record; and perhaps most radically, allowing the two highest-seeded teams to choose their first-round opponent.

Let's put aside, for the time being, the fact that a lot will have to happen to get this plan enacted. The Players Association must approve any changes to the postseason format and it's highly unlikely anything will change before 2022, with the current CBA set to expire after the 2021 season.

Almost immediately, the reaction was intensely negative. Some didn't like the notion of the expanded playoff field, charging that baseball would be more closely resembling the NBA and NHL playoffs. Both the NBA (30 teams) and NHL (31 teams) have 16 postseason participants while the NFL allows 12 of its 32 teams to qualify.

Others argued that choosing opponents — which would be done on the final night of the regular season as part of a TV selection show — is too hokey and reeked of the artificial drama associated with reality shows.

Players raged. Columnists fumed. Mostly, people asked some variation of this question: Why does Rob Manfred hate baseball so much?

Whether that part is facetious or not, understand that Manfred doesn't hate baseball at all. But he has every right to hate the direction in which the sport is heading and this proposal aims to reverse that.

Naturally, much of this is designed with TV in mind. Although MLB's deal with FOX (involving a Game of the Week telecast, the All-Star Game, two of the four Division Series, one League Championship Series and the World Series) is in place through 2028, the rest of the sport's broadcast inventory (wild card round, Division Series and one LCS) will up for bidding soon, with the current contract with ESPN and Turner up after 2021.

Networks love drama, and they especially love the possibility that one team's season could end without a win. Fans love the urgency of such games, too, which is why the one-and-done wild-card games sometimes attract bigger numbers than the Division Series which follow.

Under this proposal, networks could get a minimum of four elimination games (Game 2 of each of the wild card rounds) and potentially, four double-elimination games (Game 3). Meanwhile, the Sunday night "Choose your opponent," show could potentially have the appeal of the NCAA Tournament Selection Show and instigate a week's worth of trash talking.

The drama inherent in the Selection Show and the wild-card rounds would presumably help build interest in subsequent rounds, culminating in the World Series.

Along the way, baseball has ceded October to football. Playoff games — including LCS showdowns to determine which teams are going to the Series — routinely get clobbered by run-of-the-mill NFL matchups on Sunday and Monday nights.

The new format could attract more casual fans, curious to see if the Yankees pick the Red Sox...or someone else in the first round. Think of the trash-talking that would ensue, especially if a team picks its own opponent, only to then lose to them and see its season ended prematurely.

Meanwhile, the networks would have staggered start times — as many as six games could be played on the same day — across multiple network platforms, once again drawing comparisons to the NCAA college basketball tournament.

Naturally, MLB could see its TV rights fees skyrocket, making owners happy. And ultimately, Manfred is in his job to do exactly that.

But there would presumably be benefits for the fans. An expanded playoff field would encourage more owners to spend freely with an eye toward a postseason berth. And that, in turn, should appeal to the MLB Players Association, which believes, not without reason, that there are currently too many incentives to tank.

The bigger playoff field could also re-make the trade deadline, with again, the potential for more teams to improve rather than sell-off. And the availability of two more wild card spots plus the race for a first-round bye or home-field advantage for an entire playoff round will help maintain interest deep into September when fans of .500 teams might otherwise be tempted to re-direct their rooting interest to college or pro football.

Are there potential negatives? Surely, starting with the obvious notion that by enlarging the playoff field from 33 percent of the teams to 47 percent, MLB will water down the significance of qualifying for the postseason. In the span of roughly 10 years, baseball will have nearly doubled the number of teams in each league to get to the playoffs, going from four clubs (as recently as 2011) to the proposed seven.

It's a competitive landscape and the pitfalls are many. But baseball has been losing ground for too long to simply try more of the same. As it is, football sucks up all the oxygen in the sports world — from the regular season to the playoffs, and soon after, with the start of free agency and the draft — and the likelihood that the NFL will add a 17th regular-season game and play the Super Bowl later in February will further crowd baseball out of a month that it's already struggling to dominate as spring training gets underway.

Some change and innovation are necessary for baseball to thrive. The status quo, as we've seen, is a losing proposition.

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Even allowing for the fact that last week didn't coincide with school vacation week back in New England, the size of the "crowds" watching the Red Sox go through their first week of workouts should alarm the organization greatly.

As recently as a decade ago, Red Sox' spring training would attract thousands and thousands of people daily, to the point where the team provided shuttle buses from satellite parking lots to transport fans to the field. For many, a trip to Fort Myers was a rite of February, a chance for many snowbirds to get a head start on the baseball season.

This past week, the number of interested onlookers was in the hundreds, many of them senior citizens and many of them local.

On Saturday, the team held its annual Open House event at Fenway South — a chance to fans and families to walk on the field at jetBlue Park and get access they normally wouldn't. In the past, the event would nearly fill the nearby pasture that doubles as a parking lot; this weekend, the lot was barely one-third full.

Of course, it's easy to determine the factors that may have contributed to a drop-off in interest. The Red Sox are coming off a lackluster season in which they finished out of the playoffs and in third place in their own division. They've also been forced to part ways with their manager, are currently under investigation from Major League Baseball for sign-stealing in 2018 and just last week, traded away their best and most popular player.

None of that, obviously, is going to go over well with the fan base.

But a dozen or so years ago, it wouldn't have mattered where the Red Sox finished the previous season. Fans would still swarm the spring training complex here, eager for autographs or just the sight of a favorite player.

The dip in interest here mirrors the diminishing support for the game nationally. Last season marked the seventh straight year in which attendance went backward from the previous season, an alarming trend to say the least.

It's been a while now since the Patriots easily surpassed the Red Sox as the region's most popular team. Six Super Bowls and an iconic, magnetic quarterback will do that for a franchise. For the longest time, the New England area was a rare holdout which sided with baseball in its battle for the hearts, mind and wallets of local sports fans.

That battle is over, and football now rules New England, too.

But there's something more ominous for the Red Sox. The two sports radio stations in Boston virtually ignore the Red Sox for long stretches of the calendar year — unless scandal (manager fired! franchise player traded! cheating allegations) surfaces.

The lack of airtime devoted to the Red Sox may reflect the personal views of the hosts, or align with a station's business interests. But if enough listeners insisted on talking baseball, both stations would acquiesce. That there hasn't been that groundswell is another troubling sign.

Social media is similarly sour on the Red Sox, where fans claim the owners are too cheap and express disinterest toward the team in general.

And "disinterest," should concern the Red Sox greatly. This isn't anger or rage — though there's some of that, to be sure. This is general apathy, which, from the team's standpoint, it worse.

This spring, fans are far more interested in where Tom Brady is going to play next season than they are in determining who will hit leadoff for the Red Sox or who will claim the fifth spot in the rotation.

Those same fans are also voting with their feet — by staying in New England and letting spring training play out without them.

### **Obtained for Mookie Betts, Alex Verdugo knows expectations are high ... and welcomes them**

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Alex Verdugo wasn't the only player the Red Sox got back when they shipped Mookie Betts (and David Price) to the Los Angeles Dodgers. After the trade was re-worked, the Sox also obtained two other prospects in the five-player deal.

But as the only player coming back with major league experience, Verdugo instinctively knows that, for now, he's the face of the trade. He'll be the player Red Sox fans think of when they lament the departure of Betts.

In short, he'll have a target on his back. And he's ready for it.

"I know who I am, I know what I can do on the baseball field," said Verdugo, who met with the media for the first time Saturday. "I'm extremely confident in my abilities — defensively, in the batter's box, baserunning. I know that I can be a game-changer. I plan on being an All-Star, having Gold Gloves, Silver Sluggers. I plan on that.

“That’s what helps me — truly being confident in my abilities. It’s something I’ve always told people, ‘You guys are going to see it.’ At the end of the day, in between the lines, all that matters is you competing against that person. I don’t care if you’re Jacob deGrom, Gerrit Cole, if you’re a Cy Young winner, the best. That’s what feeds people like me. That competitive edge, that wanting to be the best.

“People are sad about seeing Mookie go, which I understand. I’m going to let my play talk. I’m going to get healthy I’m going to go out there and just play my heart out, give it everything I’ve got and I think, at the end of the day, Boston will accept that and I think they’ll see what they got is a good player.”

Verdugo also understands that he’s in for a culture shock, going from southern California to Boston, where fans can be more demanding of their players.

“Boston, they speak their mind a little bit more. That’s what it is,” he said. “I like that man, I really do. There’s no holding back. People get mad about trades or if you’re not performing, they speak their minds and they say it. Hey, that’s the nature of the game. We’re in that business, we’re in the public eye. People are going to have mixed emotions, mixed feelings about you. Some people are going to love you and some people will just look at you and not like you. That’s just how it is.”

Though raised in Tuscon and drafted and developed by the Dodgers, Verdugo revealed that he grew up a Red Sox fan and completely idolized David Ortiz. On his first visit to Fenway last July, Verdugo signed his name inside the Green Monster and was nearly overcome with emotion playing in the ballpark of his childhood dreams.

“It was unbelievable,” he gushed. “And to hit a home run my first time being there. ... I watched Boston play the Yankees a lot of time in that park and just being there, I had a lot of emotions come out. I remember hitting the home run and just running around the bases, I was like a little kid in a candy store for the first time. I was just so happy. You’re walking on air. It’s just your dream come true.

“I’m telling you — if I see David Ortiz here, I’m giving him the biggest hug. I might even tear up, man. Growing up, I don’t know what it was. David Ortiz was just the man. In the postseason, it’s just a different animal at all times and it felt like, when you needed him the most, he stepped up. He came up and did it. You see the way the city loves him — it’s for a reason.”

In addition to the expectations, Verdugo also comes with some personal baggage. He was implicated in a sexual assault that took place in an Arizona hotel room while he was an 18-year-old minor leaguer. No charges were filed, but the fact that Verdugo was present continues to be an issue.

Perhaps as a pre-emptive strike and to ensure that the story wasn’t a lingering distraction, Verdugo addressed the team about his involvement in the incident.

“Obviously my name being mentioned and the allegations, it hurts,” said Verdugo. “I don’t want Boston fans to judge me for something they’ve read or seen posted. I know who I am, I know what I believe in. It’s extremely hard to deal with that. I was cleared of any wrongdoing. That being said, it was a terrible thing that happened. It’s in my past. I’ve grown from it, I’ve learned from it.

“I want to show people that I am a good guy. I want people to judge me for the way I play. That’s what I want to be known for, obviously not something that happened several years back. I learned you have to be smarter with the position you put yourself in. It was tough. But there was due diligence on everybody’s end. I was cleared of any wrongdoing. I don’t want to (be defined by this). I can’t do anything about it now, but just show people the real me and who I am.”

Before Verdugo can win over fans, he’ll first have to get healthy. He’s dealing with an L5 stress fracture in his back, a condition that dates back to the middle of last season and cost him the final two months of last season. It’s virtually a given that he won’t be ready for Opening Day, according to the team.

“It’s healing nice,” said Ron Roenicke. “It continues to heal, but it’s not healed completely. But it’s in a progression where they’re really liking how it’s coming along. It’s an injury that takes time. It’s an injury that is fairly common in baseball. It’s a rotation issue. So our trainers are familiar with it. We’ll take him as the steps come — not only what the images show but his response to things.

“To be honest, if everything goes right, he still may not be ready for Opening Day. It’s silly to push him where he can have a setback and now this thing is bothering him the whole year. We need to get him 100 percent.”

“We’re not trying to rush that,” said Verdugo. “We’re going to take our time on this. We’re going to make sure that we’re right, that when I’m able to be in Boston, it’s the whole year and we don’t have any setbacks.”

“I know what I’m capable of and I know I’m nowhere near what my ceiling is. I’m still working, I’m still grinding. And every day I’m going to continue to get better. That desire, that want to be better, it doesn’t fizzle out, it doesn’t stop. You get success and the more success you get, the more you want. That’s the way I am. I kind of get greedy with it.”

### **Red Sox Notebook: Chris Sale’s illness could put Opening Day start in jeopardy; Kevin Pillar survives a trying year**

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — For the second day in a row, the Red Sox on Saturday publicly conceded that a key player might not be available for Opening Day on March 26.

On Friday, it was outfielder Alex Verdugo, thanks to what was revealed Saturday to be an L-5 stress fracture in his back.

On Saturday, interim manager Ron Roenicke acknowledged he couldn’t guarantee Chris Sale would be ready, either. Fortunately for the Red Sox, that’s less about Sale’s balky elbow, which curtailed the final two months of last season, and more about the flu and mild pneumonia which has been an issue the past 10 days.

Sale was checked out by the team’s medical and training staff Friday afternoon and cleared to begin baseball activity. But having lost some strength in the last little while, he needs more time to ramp back up, which could result in him being a little behind when the regular season gets underway.

“He still doesn’t have full strength back,” said Roenicke. “He played catch today, stretched it out. He also did that (Friday). I think he’s progressing along fine. I think we’re going to go a little easy with him, try to keep him out of the fundamentals now and (keep him) more inside with the training staff to try to get his cardio where it (should be). The good thing is, baseball-wise, all that’s good. It’s just a matter of him getting strong again.

“Obviously he’s huge for our starting rotation and he’s one of the best pitchers in the game. It would be silly to try to push him and make him come back sooner than he should physically. It’s not worth taking a risk on having him on Opening Day exactly, where we’re pushing him (to go). He’s important for us during the season and, hopefully, we get into the playoffs and keep him strong there. But to push anybody nowadays doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to any of us.

“I think we’ll re-evaluate him every week and see where he is and see how far can we continue to progress. ... If we think it’s important for him to get a certain amount of starts (in spring training) to build him up to a certain point, that’s what we’ll do. And if it means that he’s not there for Opening Day, then he’s not there for Opening Day.”

Meanwhile, there's little concern over the strength and condition of his left elbow, though the Sox will continue to monitor that.

"I think anytime there's any injury, you're pretty silly if you don't stay on top of it, and you try to make sure that doesn't come back," said Roenicke. "This guy's huge for us, not just this year but through his contract. To have him as your No. 1 versus pushing him and having him be a No. 3 or No. 4, we don't want that to happen."

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If Kevin Pillar didn't realize baseball was a business, he learned his lesson the hard way in the last 11 months.

First, last April, just five games into the season, Pillar was traded by the Toronto Blue Jays to San Francisco. Then, in November, despite setting career highs in both homers and RBI with the Giants, he was non-tendered and unexpectedly made a free agent.

It was an unsettling year, from start to finish.

"It was extremely unsettling, but I'm a little better prepared for it this time," said Pillar. "(Five) games into the year, going to a team all the way across the U.S., a team I had maybe competed against a handful of times, going into a clubhouse where I didn't really know anyone and you're not sure if they really know you. It came as a little bit of a shock. But as I've done this a little longer, nothing seems to surprise me in the game anymore. I never thought I would leave Toronto.

"Then, (a few) days into the season, I'm asked to move my wife, and at the time a 1-year old. We're not immune to the emotion and the human element in this game. At the same time, you understand that we're essentially just assets and that we can be moved at any time. For me, I experienced first-hand. It's just part of the business and when you experience it for the first time, you realize it and you just go out and do your job and see what happens."

Pillar agreed to a one-year, \$4.25 million deal with the Sox last week and arrived Friday, when he underwent a physical and officially signed his deal.

It's likely that more adjustments are coming for Pillar, too. After averaging 152 games over the last five seasons, it's doubtful Pillar will match that total here.

He'll get playing time in center against lefties (against whom Jackie Bradley Jr. hit .213 last season) and, early in the season, could get plenty of starts in right if fellow newcomer Alex Verdugo isn't ready to start the season.

Either way, however, he almost certainly won't play 150 or so games. But he's willing to make that concession.

"Obviously, with Jackie here, I wouldn't see myself as someone who's probably going to play center field (regularly)," said Pillar. "I was lucky to have a little experience last year moving to the corners. I'm just here to help any way I can. Most of my time has been spent in center field. But I'm excited about getting to spring training on time and getting an opportunity to practice all three (outfield spots). They each have unique challenges.

"But I still have expectations for myself to go out there and be a guy who can play every single day. That's the way I'm going to treat this spring training, no different than any other spring training. I'm going to prepare to go out and play as many games as possible. The reality is, there's three other really talented outfielders on this team. There will be a role for me at some point and there will be an adjustment period. But my mindset and the way I prepare won't change."

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Roenicke spoke with Eduardo Rodriguez after the pitcher lost his arbitration case in Arizona and said that Rodriguez isn't bitter about the hearing.

"I talked to Eddie about it," said Rodriguez. "Some of these arbitration cases, there's a lot of negative that comes out. And Eddie didn't feel that way. There wasn't much negative said. He felt really good coming out of it. He said, 'Man, I was worried about all these bad things they were going to say about me.' And he didn't feel that way at all.

## **\* *The Athletic***

### **Baggage-laden Alex Verdugo arrives in the Fenway spotlight facing questions about more than his play**

Steve Buckley

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Yes, Alex Verdugo grew up a Red Sox fan. His favorite player was David Ortiz. When he played at Fenway Park for the first time — as a Los Angeles Dodger — he stepped inside the Green Monster and signed his name on the dark, dusty cement not once, not twice, but three times.

Now he is a member of the Red Sox. And had it been any other year, had he been acquired for any other player and under pretty much any other circumstances, he would already have Sox fans racing down to Jersey Street to purchase his No. 99 game jersey.

But that's not the way it is, not with the 2020 Red Sox. And for Verdugo in particular, no amount of fast-paced, upbeat talk about how excited he is to be a member of his new team can alter the fact he's going to be known, definitely in the short term, possibly forever — and that's up to him — as the guy the Red Sox obtained from the Dodgers for Mookie Betts.

Yes, other players were involved in that trade. The Red Sox gave up a very talented but often unhappy pitcher, left-hander David Price. The Dodgers gave up two minor leaguers, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong. But Verdugo has already logged parts of three seasons in the big leagues and will step directly into the Fenway spotlight, and he already has baggage.

During his Dodgers minor-league days, Verdugo was investigated for an alleged connection to a 2015 sexual assault incident involving one of his teammates, though no charges were filed. Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and manager Ron Roenicke have addressed the case, saying they were satisfied with the findings from the team's investigations, and Verdugo, meeting with the media Saturday afternoon at JetBlue Park, said, "I was cleared of any wrongdoing of anything and with that being said, you know, it was a terrible, terrible thing that happened. ... There was an investigation, and like I said, I was cleared of any wrongdoing, and if I was around for anything that happened, I would've put a stop to it. I would've helped out."

Verdugo also said that he has regrets about what happened that night and that he has learned from the incident. At the same time, he said, "I don't want Boston fans, I don't want people to judge me for something they have read or seen posted. For me, it's just, you know, I know who I am, I know what I believe in. I know my family values."

Verdugo's arrival in camp is the latest stark reminder of how much has changed with the Red Sox. Two springs ago, there was excitement and optimism over the arrival of Alex Cora, a young manager brimming with optimism and good cheer. Last spring, the Red Sox showed up at Fort Myers as the defending World Series champions, the team looking so good that then-president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski made no significant offseason roster changes. And Cora offered up daily variations of: You ain't seen nothing yet.

This spring, the Red Sox have arrived in Fort Myers still waiting for the other shoe to drop in Major League Baseball's ongoing investigations into illegal sign stealing. The Houston Astros have already been punished for cheating their way to a World Series title in 2017, and the 2018 Red Sox are on deck. Cora has already been shown the door, this because of his involvement with the Astros' 2017 sign-stealing antics when he was the team's bench coach, requiring that the Red Sox hand the job to Roenicke, a veteran baseball man who probably thought his managing days were behind him until all this happened.

As for the Betts-Price trade, that was a salary dump even if the Red Sox say it was not. Whatever you want to call it, Alex Verdugo, born and raised in Tucson but a Red Sox fan from back in the day, is the face of that trade.

And did we mention that he has a stress fracture in his back and that it doesn't sound like he'll be ready for Opening Day?

So there he sat Saturday afternoon on that green bench out behind JetBlue Park's facsimile Green Monster, talking with the media about his Red Sox fandom, about his back ... and about an incident from 2015 that has bubbled back to the surface.

"I learned that you know you have to be smarter with, with the positions that you put yourself in," he said. "It was tough, but I feel, there was due diligence on everybody's end, in Boston, before making a trade like this."

It's not uncommon for professional sports teams to acquire players with questionable pasts. Some fans don't care. Some have grudgingly made their peace with it, agreeing that a man walking the streets has a right to seek employment. Some fans express outrage. And yet some waver back and forth, depending on the situation.

What makes this case different is that there's a chance, if he stays hurt, or if he returns to the lineup and then struggles, that Alex Verdugo may wind up as the symbol for everything that has gone wrong with the Red Sox. Say what you will about Verdugo and his past, but that would be pushing it.

It's usually the big-ticket, hugely compensated free-agent acquisitions who feel a ton of pressure when they join a new team, especially if the team is the Yankees, or Dodgers, or Phillies, or Cubs ... or Red Sox.

Alex Verdugo is 23 years old and has played in 158 major-league games. He may face more pressure this season than any player in baseball.

## **\* *Associated Press***

### **Boston's Sale, Verdugo already behind schedule for opener**

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Three days after telling reporters he wanted to push harder in spring training to improve on last year's slow start, Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke pumped the brakes on two key players.

Left-hander Chris Sale and outfielder Alex Verdugo are both recovering from setbacks that could keep them out of the opening day lineup. Second baseman Dustin Pedroia is also contemplating his career after playing just nine games in the past two seasons, but the pneumonia-induced weakness that has left Sale short of 100% is the biggest surprise for a team that won it all in 2018 and then never got its title defense going last year.

"If we think it's important for him to get a certain amount of starts to build him up at a certain point, that's what we're going to do," Roenicke said. "And if it means he's not there for opening day, then he's not there for opening day."

Verdugo, who was acquired from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade, has a stress fracture in his spine that Roenicke said was known to the team before the deal but had not previously been disclosed. He is not expected to break camp with the rest of the team.

“Whether it's to be ready for the start of the season or slightly after, we're not really sure,” Verdugo said. “We're not trying to rush that. We don't want to give people a false hope or just even a deadline that we miss again. So we're going to take our time on this or make sure that we're right. That way, when I am playing, I'm able to be in Boston that it's the whole year and it's continuous. And we don't we don't have any setbacks.”

The Red Sox won a franchise record 108 regular season games in 2018 on their way to their fourth World Series championship in 15 years.

So much has happened since then.

The team eased off its regulars — especially the starting pitchers — the following spring, and they've since acknowledged that may have contributed to their 6-13 start. Sale, who only made two starts in spring training, went 0-5 with a 6.30 ERA in April; he was shut down with a sore elbow in mid-August with a 6-11 and 4.40 ERA, two of the many statistical low points in his career.

But hopes that he would bounce back quickly were dampened when he wasn't able to make it to spring training because of a case of walking pneumonia. Sale, 30, reported on Friday — three days late — and ran sprints on Saturday but will mostly work out inside with the trainers instead of going through the usual spring training drills.

“The good thing is that baseball-wise, all that's good. It's just a matter of getting him strong again,” Roenicke said. “Obviously, he's huge for our starting rotation and one of the best pitchers in the game.”

“It would be silly for us to try to push him, to make him come back sooner than probably he should, physically,” the manager said. “It's not worth taking a risk on you know, having him opening day, exactly, and where we're pushing him to get him there. He's important to us as we go through this season and hopefully get him to the playoffs and keep him strong there.”

The Red Sox are taking the same approach to Verdugo, who has a stress fracture in his spine, which he picked up on top of an oblique injury last season.

“To be honest with you, if everything goes right, he still may not be there for opening day,” Roenicke said. “It's silly to push him to where to have a setback and now this thing is bothering him the whole year. We need to get him 100%. We need him to be healthy just to see what kind of player we have and the kind of player that he knows he is.”

Also Saturday, Verdugo addressed allegations that he failed to stop the sexual assault of a 17-year-old girl when he was a Dodgers minor leaguer in 2015. Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said they investigated the claims before acquiring him and “would not have moved forward with the acquisition if we had found anything disqualifying.”

Verdugo addressed his teammates on Saturday, and then told reporters “I was cleared of wrongdoing, of anything.”

“It was a terrible thing that happened. But, it was in my past. It's something that, I've grown from,” he said. “I want to show people that I am a good guy. I care a lot about this game, and I have a big heart. I want people to judge me for, obviously, the way I play. The way I go out there and what I bring out to the field: the energy, the hard work, the giving a hundred percent. That's what I want to be known for. Obviously, not something that happened several years back.”

According to The Washington Post, the girl said she was partying with two Dodgers players and two women when she got in a fight with the women. Rather than help her, the players videotaped the fight and posted it on social media. The girl told police one of the players sexually assaulted her.

Other media reports identified the players as Verdugo and James Baldwin. Verdugo denied being present and said he would have intervened if he had been.

“If I was around for anything that had happened, I would have put a stop to it,” he said. “I would have helped out. I would have done something.”