

The Boston Red Sox Monday, February 17, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

John Henry, Sam Kennedy explain Red Sox' decision to trade Mookie Betts

Michael Silverman

Two driving forces led the Red Sox to trade Mookie Betts.

The first was realizing that extension talks with Betts, a free agent after the 2020 season, were not headed anywhere. That led to a determination to trade him before the season's start as long as they could receive sufficient value in return.

"I think you go into every offseason where you have a strong potential free agent, you always, during an offseason, weigh what you might get compared with what you might wind up with if you do nothing," Red Sox principal owner John Henry, who also owns the Globe, said last week. "And I think we were all probably surprised that there turned out to be a deal. I don't think it was so much a question of us going out looking for a deal as just a normal course of an offseason where you're looking at everything."

Said president Sam Kennedy: "The value proposition was there. We weren't sure we would get the value back that it would require us to make a move."

Once the Red Sox realized an extension was unlikely, they were open to talks with other teams, some of whom had expressed interest in trading for Betts during the 2019 season. Last year's talks never progressed, since at midseason the Red Sox were still competitive and dealing away Betts was a no-win situation in every way.

Eventually, talks between the Dodgers and Red Sox resulted in a return package of outfielder Alex Verdugo, catcher Connor Wong, and infielder Jeter Downs for Betts and David Price.

Henry stressed that getting under Major League Baseball's competitive balance tax threshold was not a leading factor in trading Betts.

"Yes," said Henry in response to the question of whether the club would have traded Betts even if it had already dipped below the CBT by making other deals. "We had other avenues for getting under the CBT."

One avenue might have been trading Price and Jackie Bradley Jr., and Bradley's name surfaced over the winter in trade rumors.

Henry said the reality of the economic system that rules Major League Baseball forced a team like the Red Sox to consider trading a player of Betts' caliber with a year of team control remaining.

"We also live in an economic system today in baseball that you can't just ignore," Henry said. "When I was growing up, you didn't have great players leaving their teams. We had a different economic system that did not work at all for the players. Over decades now, bargained between players and clubs, there's a system that we now live under that I think makes a lot more sense. But, you end up having to make difficult decisions as a result of the system. It's a continual thing for clubs and players."

Kennedy insisted the Red Sox' calculus in the Betts trade involved working with the economic system and still fielding a team that could be competitive in the near and long term.

“We have to be honest about why we made the decision to do what we did, and that’s clear,” Kennedy said. “We think it’s the best interests of baseball operations. John mentioned the MLB system in which we operate and that requires really, really difficult decision-making, so we made our decision and we have to stand by it and now we have to move forward.

“We are not giving up on the 2020 season. We think we are built to be able to compete. We all of a sudden now have some flexibility and resources that can be deployed as we go forward here in the coming days, weeks, and months ahead. And we just added significant value for the long term, so it’s a balancing act between that inherent conflict between short term and long term. There were baseball reasons for this deal, there were franchise reasons for this deal, which is we have an obligation to do everything in our power to win World Series championships as often as possible. That’s how we see our mission and our responsibility.”

Manfred: Red Sox investigation won’t be done for two weeks

Peter Abraham

NORTH PORT, Fla. — Commissioner Rob Manfred said Sunday that Major League Baseball’s investigation into the 2018 Red Sox would not be finished for at least two weeks.

“There have been a couple of developments in the Boston thing that have slowed us down, people who’ve had to be re-interviewed as a result of things,” Manfred said. “I’m still thinking that by the end of next week, we should be done and have a decision on that.”

The investigation has been going on for nearly six weeks. It started in January after The Athletic published a story citing anonymous sources alleging the Red Sox used their replay room to steal signs from opposing catchers.

A series of players — Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers, and J.D. Martinez among them — have said the Sox are innocent of wrongdoing.

Principal owner John Henry and team president Sam Kennedy are also on record saying the team’s 2018 championship was won fairly.

Manfred had said earlier this month he hoped the investigation would be finished before training camps opened.

“We always want the investigations to go as quickly as possible,” Manfred said. “Never, however, at the expense of making sure that we have pursued every possible lead and done everything that we can possibly do to get the facts right.”

The ongoing investigation isn’t affecting the team as it goes through spring training, according to chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom.

“You’re obviously aware that it’s going on,” he said. “It’s something that is out there. I don’t think on a day-to-day level, it impacts thing too much.”

Manfred, speaking at a pre-planned MLB event designed to promote the coming season, was testy at times as he took questions about the sign-stealing scandal involving the 2017 and ’18 Houston Astros that has enveloped the sport.

He defended his choice to grant immunity to Astros players, saying that was the only way to get to the facts of the case.

“One thing that I do take issue with [is] the notion that anybody in the Houston organization escaped without punishment,” Manfred said. “I think if you look at the faces of the Houston players as they’ve been out there publically addressing this issue, they have been hurt by this.

“They will live with questions about what went on in 2017 and 2018 for the rest of their lives.”

Manfred said MLB would soon announce “serious restrictions” on the use of in-game video this season.

Ron Roenicke expects to have a lot to say to the team

Tara Sullivan

FORT MYERS, Fla. — In his previous stint as a major league manager, Ron Roenicke considered himself well prepared to address his team on the first day of full-squad workouts, the crux of his message written, revised, and ready to go.

“I know when I was in Milwaukee I knew exactly what I was going to say and had plenty of time to prepare for it,” Roenicke said.

But with Boston, where Red Sox position players join pitchers and catchers Monday and Roenicke will bring them together, the newly installed manager has no such luxury. During a wild offseason of change that included manager Alex Cora being fired in the wake of the sign-stealing scandal that followed him from Houston, Roenicke was named his interim replacement.

Last Tuesday.

Not surprisingly, life has been a bit of a whirlwind since, pushing prep time for a speech down the to-do list.

“I’ve been so busy I haven’t had time to think about it the way I usually would,” Roenicke said Sunday, sitting on a bench behind Fenway South after the Sox had concluded their drills. “I was hoping I would be able to do that today, but we’ve got that managers’ thing up north that we’re going to — although there’s a drive up there, so I’ll think about it on that drive.”

Roenicke knows he has to address the unprecedented offseason, which has included everything from the Astros’ mess to the Cora firing to the ongoing investigation of the Red Sox’ improper use of video to the blockbuster trade of Mookie Betts and David Price.

“There’s some things I think I should address about some of the craziness that’s happened, I need to address that,” he said.

Bogaerts goes slow

Shortstop Xander Bogaerts aggravated his left ankle a few weeks ago while doing workouts at home and will be taking it easy for the first few days of training camp.

Roenicke insisted it’s “nothing alarming” and Bogaerts, who said it started bothering him while he was doing some jumps, knows he just has to be patient.

“It’s spring training, no reason for us to force it or get going as soon as possible, but just make sure we get it right so when I start I can finish,” Bogaerts said. “Obviously, you come to spring training, you see guys you haven’t seen in a while and you want to be on the field with the boys and be around the coaching staff and stuff like that. But I’ve got to take it slow, take my time, and be smart about it, and hopefully have a long, healthy season, don’t let this little thing affect my season.”

A great teammate

Bogaerts thought he and Betts would play for many years together in Boston. Both 27 years old, both products of the Red Sox farm system, and both studs at their respective positions, it's easy to understand why. Bogaerts signed a long-term extension at the start of last season and, like many, hoped Betts might be able to do the same.

Of course, Betts is gone now, off to the Dodgers in a trade, but one thing his friend wanted to dispel Sunday was the notion that Betts didn't want to stay in Boston.

"I can't really speak for him, the one thing I know is he loved being here, enjoyed playing with us," Bogaerts said. "He was a great teammate. I can't really say that he didn't want to be here, I think that's a little unfair to say. He enjoyed his time here. He never showed me anything that he didn't like about being here."

Numbers game

Kevin Pillar was assigned No. 5, Alex Verdugo, who initially had No. 12, asked for and received No. 99. Only two Red Sox players in history have ever worn a number in the 90s: pitchers Alfredo Aceves (No. 91 from 2011-13) and Dalier Hinojosa (No. 94 in 2015) . . . Roenicke said two players will be delayed in arriving to spring training – third baseman Rafael Devers is in the Dominican Republic with his girlfriend following the birth of their second daughter and non-roster outfielder Cesar Puello, signed just last week, will be late coming from the Dominican Republic because of visa issues.

Red Sox need Chris Sale to be Chris Sale again

Tara Sullivan

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale lived up to one part of his reputation Sunday, when his frankness, accountability and honesty during a half-hour spring training interview session reminded Red Sox fans why they love him so much. Sale pulled no punches in discussing baseball's latest black eye, exposing the sign-stealing scandal emanating out of Houston for the existential threat to the game that it is.

Bravo.

But the 30-year-old pitcher lived up to another part of his reputation too, evidenced by his absence from the early spring workouts with the rest of the Red Sox pitching staff. This time, it's pneumonia that puts Sale's availability at the forefront of his baseball conversation, reminding us of the only black mark on a resume otherwise filled with dominance on the mound and stand-up greatness off it, that he's still the guy who's been on the shelf with elbow trouble since last August, the one who was also pulled from his final start in 2018 over lingering shoulder soreness, the night the Sox clinched the World Series.

Yucko.

Fiery dugout speeches and 10-strikeout games are great, and Sale is the occasional master of both. But this year, more than ever, the Sox need him to be the consistent pitching ace they are paying him to be. You know it, we know it.

He knows it.

"I'm very confident I can be that," he said. "I feel good. I feel really good. I feel confident that when this thing starts I'll be ready for it and back to doing what's expected of me. Certainly there's an expectation when I step on the mound and I'm ready to get back to that."

He's not exactly off to a rousing start. After a 6-11, 4.40 ERA in 2019 in which he was shut down in August and visited grim reaper, Dr. James Andrews, due to his elbow issues, Sale had the bad luck to fall ill before the start of spring. He's finally back at work after losing two weeks and almost seven pounds to the debilitating condition, but remains on his own program and, as manager Ron Roenicke revealed this weekend, may not be ready for Opening Day.

This is not exactly what Sox fans needed to hear after Mookie Betts and David Price were salary-dumped to the Dodgers in exchange for a couple of A-ball players and a baggage-heavy outfielder who turned out to have a stress fracture in his back.

This is not what a rotation that also said goodbye to former Cy Young Award winner Rick Porcello needs to hold up its end of the 2020 equation that demands winning while rebuilding. This is not what the front office had in mind when it handed Sale a five-year, \$145 million contract extension prior to last season that goes into effect this season. Former general manager Dave Dombrowski paid for that decision (and a few other spend-happy ones) with his job, and while replacement GM Chaim Bloom is here to tighten John Henry's purse strings, he needs a dividend on the Sale investment.

"You can't [overstate his importance]," Roenicke said. "He's one of the best pitchers in the game. When he has a little bit of a setback, yeah, you pay attention to it. We know he's going to get ready when we work it out to what that schedule is, but yeah, he's huge to what we do and our rotation."

Yet here Sale has been, idle for the longest stretch of his professional life, nursing back to health a left elbow that seemed destined for the surgeon's knife, all the while letting the rest of his lanky 6-foot-6-inch frame rest up too. There he was on his living room couch or in his Florida bedroom, watching the Red Sox on television while he and his wife tended to their three sons, the youngest of whom is now three months old, processing the strangeness of being separated from his teammates. Here he was as the calendar flipped over to the new year, finally able to leave the house to throw for what he said was six or seven times off a mound, rounding the corner toward spring training with a new, clearer vision of what was to come.

And then there he was at the doctor's office, being told the symptoms that wouldn't go away were pneumonia, being forced to reduce those throwing efforts to 60 or 70 tosses against a home rebounder, stuck in neutral yet again. As much as he insisted Sunday that all is well physically, that Andrews assured him his elbow is fine and that he was feeling as good as he ever had in those six to seven throwing sessions, this test is far from over. The Sox cannot know what he will deliver until he gets back on the mound.

His recent history is trending the wrong way: In three seasons in Boston, Sale has gone from 17-6 to 12-4 to 6-11. His innings have dwindled from 214 $\frac{1}{3}$ to 158 to 141 $\frac{1}{3}$. He started last season 0-5 with a 6.30 ERA in April after the Sox babied him in spring training. Then came the August shutdown. And then? Pneumonia.

Swell.

"I was like, 'what? That's inconvenient,'" Sale said. "But what are you going to do? Deal with it and move on. I took some medicine, I'm starting to move around a little bit and get my stamina back up. I'm over the hump now, the worst of it's behind me, so back to doing baseball stuff."

Sale, already built like a sheet of paper, said he's been to a favorite barbecue place for four straight days, filling up on ribs in the hopes of putting meat back on his own bones.

"Got down to fightin' weight," he laughed. "It'll come back. I'm not worried about that."

Fans have a right to be concerned though. They love Sale the stand-up guy. They just want to see more of Sale, the on-the-mound force. That's what the Red Sox need.

How will the Red Sox market a Mookie-less team?

Michael Silverman

Red Sox fans are not at all happy, and the team knows it.

Well before the Red Sox traded away one of the best players in Major League Baseball, fans had begun to tune out, either by turning off NESN or not filling the seats at Fenway Park toward the end of last year's 84-win, playoff-whiff of a season.

But when they shipped outfielder Mookie Betts to the Dodgers along with pitcher David Price — a former MVP and a former Cy Young winner who helped lift Boston to the 2018 World Series championship — they compounded the already steep degree of difficulty that faced them in trying to make their fans fall back in love with their team.

So how will the Red Sox market, sell, and woo back an angry and skeptical fan base to a Mookie-less team?

“Sports is in the unique position where if you win, you will be popular, and it really boils down to that — if they made the right call, they'll look great in a couple of years,” said Erik Bernstein, president of Bernstein Crisis Management. “Fans are quick to forgive, but they're not quick to forget and they're going to be keeping an eye on this trade and what the result is.”

Red Sox principal owner John Henry, who also owns the Globe, and team president and CEO Sam Kennedy, along with Adam Grossman, the team's executive vice president and chief marketing officer, gathered around a conference table in the executive offices on 4 Jersey St. the day after the trade to offer their calculus on how and why they made the trade, as well as discuss a win-back-the-fans campaign they acknowledge will not be won any time soon.

“From a human perspective, [the trade] was very, very difficult and we knew there was going to be a strong negative reaction — we anticipated that,” said Kennedy, who said he's heard plenty of strong negative reaction to the trade from his children, family, friends, season-ticket owners, and business partners. “It's great, because you want to hear from your constituents and you want to be able to explain why we couldn't talk about this for a long time, because we weren't sure what was going to happen.”

Outside of Betts and Price's images being scrubbed from the Red Sox website's ticketing ads, the details of a marketing plan are still fuzzy. One was in the works before the trade, given the reality of what happened in 2019 and over the offseason. Kennedy said last fall that attendance over 79 games at Fenway Park last season was down 0.7 percent, while NESN ratings dropped 23 percent.

The day after the Betts trade, Kennedy said overall ticket sales were behind last year's pace by more than 15 percent, and that the renewal rate of season-ticket holders was down from the usual percentage in the high 80s to the low 80s.

Kennedy said nobody has asked for a refund — “I think you underestimate our fans,” said Henry at the suggestion — and that the team will not roll back the ticket price increase, another idea that amused Henry.

“As a result of making trades?” he asked.

There will be plenty of promotional items, theme nights, and activities for fans, but the club will not deviate from focusing its promotional efforts on its players.

“In 19 years here, we've been very consistent in recognizing that the thing that sells tickets and drives interest in the Boston Red Sox is a competitive team — our fans enjoy young players, they enjoy homegrown players, they enjoy a collection of free agents — we're going to market the heck out of this team the way we always do,” Kennedy said.

Prepare for plenty of ads featuring young talents like Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers, with plenty of Jackie Bradley Jr., J.D. Martinez, Chris Sale, and Eduardo Rodriguez as well.

The wait until the beginning of the season on March 26 could be a long one.

“I think the organization has to weather the storm,” said Shawn McBride, executive vice president for sports at Ketchum, a global public relations firm. “They have to get to Opening Day, when this will at last be able to be dialed down. Then see how they’re playing. If the team is likable and they’re playing an exciting brand of baseball, that could be the best elixir.”

The storm blew strong from the start, and it has yet to push out to sea. On Twitter, the Red Sox had their ratio – the buzzword for when a tweet receives considerably more replies than likes or retweets – handed to them.

The official 33-word tweet announcing the trade generated nearly 2,000 largely negative replies and fewer than a thousand retweets. Of the statements the team tweeted from chairman Tom Werner, Kennedy, Bloom, and Henry, the principal owner received the harshest ratio — 1,100 to 241 — with many replies laced with salty language.

Kennedy said that he “absolutely” believes the 2020 team is a playoff-caliber squad and while it got much harder by trading away Betts and Price, he said “in no way are we waving the white flag.”

“We’ve got to get these players to come together and perform at a higher level than they did last year,” Kennedy said. “That will be the path forward – probably less talk from us, except to be accountable to this deal we made, be accountable for other major decisions that we make but we’ll let the team go out and speak for themselves as we go into spring training and as we get beyond what was a tough, tough decision.”

Both Henry and Kennedy wanted to alter, by almost 180 degrees, the prevailing and understandable perception that the Betts trade was made for purely financial reasons. It’s a line of reasoning that was launched last September by Henry himself when he told reporters “This year we need to be under the [competitive balance tax].”

Henry downplayed the notion that financial tailwinds steered the trade.

“You’re hung up on CBT,” Henry said. “You see this and I think the media, too, to some extent, ever since we mentioned that clubs have a tendency to get below CBT once in a while. It’s surprising that anyone would think we would outspend every other team in baseball every single year. To me, that’s a little surprising. Clubs have to make difficult decisions, and one of the biggest decisions they have to make is, ‘Do we potentially let a great player walk away for very little compensation?’ That’s one of the decisions that you have to make irrespective of CBT – it has nothing to do with CBT.”

The Red Sox are a subsidiary of Fenway Sports Group, a global conglomerate that includes the Liverpool FC soccer team and has grown into a \$6.6 billion enterprise, ranked recently by Forbes as the third-largest sports group in the world.

The perception the Red Sox, or FSG, could afford to keep Betts, sign everyone, and pay all penalties with ease is not valid, said Kennedy.

“First of all, Fenway Sports Group is doing great, it’s a collection of companies that John and [chairman] Tom [Werner] and Mike Gordon and their partners own, but each individual entity truly operates independently,” Kennedy said. “The Red Sox have to make the best decisions for the Red Sox. That’s how we operate and how we’ve operated in 19 years.”

Kennedy said “the characterization of this as a financial move or a payroll slash is misleading,” referring to the club’s track record on spending for talent. The Red Sox led all 29 other MLB teams in payroll the last two seasons, and it has never been lower than the fifth in baseball in this ownership group’s 18 full seasons. The club has also been over the CBT 10 times over the last 17 years.

Henry said the CBT was only “an element,” and not the reason for making the Betts trade.

The notion that the top of the Red Sox corporate ladder bears responsibility for making decisions that put it in the payroll jam is one both Henry and Kennedy were willing to accept.

“In management, we’ve made a lot of bad, wrong decisions in our 19 years here,” Kennedy said.

The return for Betts and Price – outfielder Alex Verdugo, catcher Connor Wong, and infielder Jeter Downs – surprised them, said Henry. Time will tell how the trio pan out, but at this point, few would argue the Red Sox are better this year than last.

“Maybe you and others at this point undervalue the baseball side of the deal — we have balance, and not just this year,” said Henry, who said fans would not need as much time as one might think to accept the return as adequate from a baseball perspective.

“I think [fans] rely upon us for both the short term and the long term to make the right decision for competitiveness – that doesn’t always entail putting this year ahead of other years.”

Chris Sale’s vision for baseball: ‘We need to get back to playing a clean game’

Dan Shaughnessy

FORT MYERS, Fla. – Chris Sale was 10 minutes into a half-hour press session when he got the first question regarding the sign-stealing cheating scandal that has poisoned Major League Baseball in this spring of 2020.

“Here it is . . .,” Sale said with a grimace.

And there it was. Indeed.

Sale talked about all of it. He talked about getting lit up by the Houston Astros in Game 1 of the 2017 American League Division Series at Minute Maid Park. He talked about speaking with MLB investigators who are looking into possible rule-breaking by the 2018 world champion Red Sox. He talked about his relationship with former manager Alex Cora, who conspired to beat him in ’17, then called on him to shut down the Dodgers in the final moments of ’18. He talked about what he would tell his children about all of it when everything shakes out.

Sale went 17-8 with 308 strikeouts in 2017. But in Game 1 of the ALDS in Houston, the Astros routed him for seven earned runs on nine hits, including three homers, in five innings of an 8-2 loss. Alex Bregman and Jose Altuve homered off Sale in the first inning.

After the game, Sale said, “No excuses. Bad time to suck.”

Related: So much for Chris Sale’s first postseason start

But it turns out there were excuses. The Astros had a fine-tuned electronic cheating system in place and Houston batters often knew what pitch was coming.

Does that make Sale angry?

“It sucks, but what am I going to do?,” Sale said. “Am I going to go hold ‘em at gunpoint and curse them out through a bunch of cameras? If I had something to say — I know those guys. I can get their numbers and text ‘em and talk to them face to face or whatever. But, it happened. What are you going to do about it? You can sit around and cry about it, or I can get my ass back to work.

“I think there’s some steps to be taken. I think that we just need to get back to playing the game. . . . There’s been stuff going on around the league for years now. It’s been going on for a while and I’d like to

see it cleaned up. I think we need to get back to playing a clean game and really figuring out who the best team is instead of who has a better upper hand.”

Sale suggested some frontier justice is probably coming.

“I think the game polices itself sometimes. It will be interesting to see how this plays out. I think you’re gonna see some stuff happen this year. I don’t know if it’s right, wrong or indifferent. Guys are certainly welcome to handle things however they want. Different people handle things differently and in this scenario I don’t think there’s any right or wrong way. I think some people feel more cheated than others and rightfully so.”

Was he suspicious when Bregman and Altuve were circling the bases in the first inning of that first playoff game — with in-house fireworks erupting and the train whistle blowing beyond the left field wall?

“Yeah,” Sale said with a little chuckle. “I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston. That guy on the train, I must have kept his job for another year. I was like, ‘How the hell are they doing it?’ They were hitting breaking balls over the fence. Hitting fastballs up at their neck. Yeah, it crosses your mind, but what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren’t? I’m not going to sit here and say they actually were because I don’t have 100 percent evidence.

“They’re already an unbelievable team before you even start cheating. I think I was even more mad at the game as a whole. I’m a part of this, too. This is my era of baseball. All of our names are attached to it forever. It’s like the steroid era. Anybody who played in that time is going to be questioned. When you borrow something from somebody, you want to return it in as good a shape as you were handed it. And this game was handed to me. Essentially I’m borrowing it. I want to leave this game in a better way than I started in it. This puts a negative tone into the game of baseball for the future players of this game and it opens up a door that I don’t think was opened before.”

Sale said he spent a half-hour on the phone with MLB investigators regarding the investigation into potential Red Sox cheating in 2018.

“You saw me play last year (6-11, 4.40 ERA), you know I wasn’t cheating,” he joked. “I gave them every bit of information I had. We have no reason to lie. We’ll see what happens.

“They asked me, ‘Do you want to talk to these guys?’ and I was like ‘Yeah, I do.’ Because I want to help make this right. It took 30 minutes out of one of my days in the offseason. To get the truth and to make this a better game, I’m in.

“Until [the result of MLB’s Red Sox investigation] comes out, no one’s going to believe what I say, no one’s going to believe what [anyone] says. We can sit up here as players and an organization and say all the things we want, but until the hammer drops, that’s when the truth comes out.”

Sale got a call from Cora on the night Cora left the Red Sox.

“He had called me several times during the whole thing,” said Sale. “And the last one was like ‘Hey, I’m out.’”

“One thing I’ve always respected about AC, he was always honest. He’ll never lie to you. I think that takes a certain level of character to do that. My opinion of AC has never changed. I love that guy to death and I’ll always be in his corner. People make mistakes, it happens. We’re human. But he was very open and honest about the entire process. That was a tough conversation, but I will always have love and respect for him and I appreciate what he did for me.”

Sale said he never asked Cora about what went on during his playoff start in Houston in 2017, when Cora was the bench coach for the Astros.

“Nothing’s ever going to change it,” said the pitcher.

5 things to know about new Red Sox outfielder Kevin Pillar

Matthew Doherty

With Mookie Betts officially out in Los Angeles as the newest member of the Dodgers, the Red Sox made a corresponding move this week to replenish the post-Betts outfield situation.

The club inked a one-year, \$4.25 million deal with Kevin Pillar on Friday to join Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., and the recently acquired Alex Verdugo in the Red Sox outfield. Pillar is the lone righthanded hitter among the four outfielders and figures to have a prominent role against lefties this season.

Here are five things to know about the 31-year-old Pillar.

He had a career year in 2019.

Pillar played the first five games of the 2019 season with the Toronto Blue Jays before he was traded to the San Francisco Giants on April 2 for Alen Hanson, Derek Law, and Juan De Pala.

Pillar immediately joined the Giants’ lineup and posted the best offensive season of his seven-year career. He hit .259 with a career-high 21 home runs and 88 RBIs across 161 games. His power surge helped him boast the best slugging percentage (.432) and OPS (.719) of his career as well.

Forbes Magazine pointed out a swing adjustment Pillar made on June 7, which contributed to his breakout second half. Pillar even finished 22nd in National League MVP voting.

However, the Giants decided to cut ties with Pillar, non-tendering his contract in early December. Giants President of Baseball Operations Farhan Zaidi comes from the Moneyball executive tree, emphasizing on-base percentage and walks. Pillar’s .287 on-base percentage ranked 132nd out of 135 qualified hitters, while his 2 percent walk rate was the lowest in MLB.

Pillar has an elite defensive reputation

Like Bradley, Pillar is regarded as one of the best defensive outfielders in the game. Pillar finished in the Top 10 of Fan Graph’s defensive runs saved metric from 2015 to 2017, including a third-place finish in 2015. During that three-year run as the Blue Jays center fielder, he saved 50 runs and was named a finalist for the Gold Glove in each of the three seasons.

However, Pillar’s defensive prowess has diminished a bit the past two seasons. In 2018 and 2019, he combined for -7 defensive runs saved.

Still, Pillar’s highlight reel catches are a worth a watch.

He is no stranger to the AL East and Fenway Park

Pillar spent six full seasons (2013-2018) with the Blue Jays and was the starting center fielder when they made their run to the 2016 American League Championship Series. Because of his time in the AL East, he’s played 47 career games at Fenway Park, so he should be accustomed to the cavernous Fenway outfield.

He’s also hitting .307 with a .719 OPS during his career at Fenway Park. According to Fan Graphs, Pillar ranked 14th in the majors in pull percentage (48 percent), and now he’ll have the Green Monster only 310 feet away.

Pillar was a standout Division 2 college player

Pillar grew up in West Hills, Calif., and was lightly recruited out of Chaminade College Prep High School, where he played football and basketball in addition to baseball. His high school coach wound up taking the

pitching coach job at Cal State Dominguez Hills during his senior year and it opened the door for Pillar to join him at the collegiate level.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go,” Pillar said in a 2013 MLB interview.

As a junior in 2010 with Dominguez Hills, Pillar set an NCAA Division 2 record with a 54-game hitting streak and finished his collegiate career with a school-record .367 batting average. He believes the hitting streak helped him get drafted by the Blue Jays in the 32nd round of the 2011 draft.

“I was an unknown at a small school, but the hitting streak helped get me drafted,” Pillar said.

When asked if he thought it was the only reason he got drafted, Pillar said, “I’d like to think not, but in reality, it might have been.”

He and his wife, Amanda Gulyas, named their daughter after Kobe Bryant. Growing up a Lakers and Dodgers fan, Pillar named his daughter was born in Oct. 2017, Kobie, after the late Kobe Bryant. When Bryant tragically died in a helicopter accident on Jan. 26, Pillar tweeted that Bryant was his idol and shared the news that his daughter was named after the former Lakers star.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox giving lefties a chance, despite MLB’s new three-batter minimum

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Maybe the Red Sox found a loophole to bullpen building.

It’s the one position that new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom was aggressive in pursuing during the offseason, though none of the new names were big. And none of them are coming off particularly good years.

Remarkably, three of them are left-handed, despite former Sox manager Alex Cora preferring not to carry lefty specialists, and despite MLB introducing new rules for 2020 that will require pitchers to face at least three batters or finish an inning before exiting a game.

The popular narrative is that the lefty specialist is a dead position in baseball.

The Red Sox don’t seem to share that mindset.

“It might phase a few people out, but let’s be honest, they’re still going to have lefty specialists,” said lefty Josh Osich, who was claimed off waivers by the White Sox last October. “If there are two outs and a lefty coming up, they can just bring the guy in and hope for the best. If he gets out, his day is done. That’s one hitter and they’re done.

“That’s what a lot of people don’t realize: they’re still going to do it, there’s just going to be more strategy involved in it.”

Osich will forever be tied to Bloom as Bloom’s first acquisition while running the Red Sox front office (Bloom was hired on Oct. 28 and Osich was claimed on Oct. 31). The Sox then released him in December, only to sign him two days later. The idea was to sign Osich to a contract that would allow split salaries whether he’s in the big leagues or the minor leagues. Osich has an option remaining and will almost certainly be used by the Sox at some point this year.

There’s reason to believe the 31-year-old could be a sneaky-good pickup.

Osich finished 2019 with a 4.66 ERA. And he looked like a reliever of the past, a lefty who held lefty batters to just a .551 OPS while righties crushed him with a .903 OPS.

But he averaged 95 mph on his fastball, putting him in the top-20% among big league lefties last year. And he added another off-speed pitch in late August, becoming dominant afterward.

In his last 16-½ innings from Aug. 29 through season's end, Osich had a 2.20 ERA, struck out 20 with four walks and allowed hitters to bat just .197 with a .492 OPS.

Perhaps most importantly given the new rules, he faced more than one batter in 11 of the 13 appearances.

Red Sox OF Alex Verdugo regretful for actions during 2015 incident with Dodgers
Osich believes he's more than just a left-handed-one-out guy, also known as a LOOGY, a term that could soon disappear from baseball completely.

"There's still going to be a place for them," Osich said. "That lefty might not be able to only be a lefty specialist, but there will still be a guy that'll run out and face a lefty in those situations."

He could be right. Lefty batters are just as common in baseball as their righty counterparts in the modern game. Last year, the total at-bats by lefties and righties were nearly equal.

Of course, lefty hitters perform substantially worse against lefty pitchers than against righties, with their OPS dropping 50 points when facing southpaws. But righty relievers outnumbered lefty relievers by about 3-to-1.

So while the Sox of old weren't particularly keen on carrying lefties, the new Sox look much more open-minded.

The revamped bullpen should include lefties Darwinson Hernandez and Josh Taylor, both of whom had strong rookie years in 2019.

Hernandez could get chances to close games, interim manager Ron Roenicke said. Taylor was a strong reliever in any role last year, though in seven of his 52 appearances he faced only one batter.

"I don't have a problem with the new rule," Taylor said. "I'd rather get three outs than one out anyways. There's still the occasional time you come in at the end of an inning and get an out or two. I like coming in and getting a full inning for the team and handing it off to the next guy."

In addition to Hernandez and Taylor, Osich deserves strong consideration for a bullpen spot, as do new lefties Matt Hall, acquired from the Tigers for Jhon Nunez, and Jeffrey Springs, acquired from the Rangers for Sam Travis.

Hall had a terrible year based on ERA (7.71) but his cutter had more movement than any lefthander in MLB last year, and his slider had the second-most.

Springs, too, had a bad year (6.40 ERA), but has above-average velocity for a lefty (93 mph) and generates above-average movement on his sinker.

Roenicke said he believes the rule change will force him to set his bullpen differently, but doesn't think any of the Sox' lefties will be affected.

"We're fortunate that our left-handers are guys that get out anybody because of their stuff," he said.

He'll have plenty of options in 2020.

Red Sox notebook: Chris Sale feels healthy, ready to bounce back in 2020

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Chris Sale, for the first time in a while, seems fully healthy. The elbow injury that cost him the final month and a half of last season is long healed, and he's just about over the mild case of pneumonia he just had last week.

"My body is feeling good," Sale said. "I feel better than I have in a long time, actually."

That's certainly welcome news for the Red Sox as their ace begins a five-year contract that kicks in this season, and who they desperately need to be healthy and productive after the departures of David Price and Rick Porcello.

Right now, it all comes down to that elbow.

It was Aug. 17 last season when Sale hit the injured list with inflammation in his left elbow. There was hope he would return if the Red Sox made the playoffs, but they didn't and he didn't. Instead, he watched helplessly from back home in Florida, the first time he can remember doing that.

Sale, in his first interview Sunday since going on the IL last season, said that surgery on his elbow was never on the table.

"I knew I was in good hands," Sale said. "I knew I had gone to see the best doctor in the world for this. No one at any point was ever worried. I guess it was a major injury, but no one was ever stressed. At least in front of me. I went and saw James Andrews and he just looked at it like, 'Yeah, man, you're going to be all right. Throw some PRP in that thing, see you in a few weeks, and we'll be good to go.'"

Sale, by all accounts, had a normal offseason as he recovered from the injury. He threw off a mound six or seven times and felt good until he suddenly got pneumonia recently, which he said caused him to lose about seven pounds. The illness set back the timetable of his spring training and is threatening his availability for Opening Day.

"I hope not," Sale said. "Whatever's best, that's what we're going to do. I trust these guys, I trust the process we have. Over the next couple of weeks we're going to map out a throwing program. I'm getting off the mound (Monday), and then we'll build up to live BPs from that."

Sale said he learned a lot about himself with the extra time he had as he reflected on a forgettable 2019 season that included a career-worst 4.40 ERA before the injury. But he said he feels like he started to figure some things out at the end of the season and hopes to carry that into a critical 2020 season.

"I feel good," Sale said. "I feel confident that when this thing starts, I'm going to be ready for it, and I'll be back to doing what's expected of me. I have a certain expectation level when I step on the mound, and I'm going to get back to that."

Bogaerts starts slow

Xander Bogaerts' physical on Sunday revealed that he has a sore left ankle that will force him to start camp slower than expected. Positional player report to spring training on Monday.

"These next couple, three days, we'll go easy on him," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "It's nothing alarming but it is a little sore so we'll back off on him a little bit."

Bogaerts said he hurt the ankle while working out back home in Aruba.

"We're trying to get it right so I can get back with the guys," Bogaerts said.

Manfred still investigating Sox

The baseball world should know MLB's findings about the 2018 Red Sox by the end of next week, commissioner Rob Manfred told reporters in Florida on Sunday.

"Not this week, but the following, we should have a decision out," Manfred said.

MLB began its investigation into the 2018 Red Sox after a report in *The Athletic* on Jan. 7 that the Sox were illegally using technology in the video replay room to decode and steal signs during 2018, when they won the World Series.

If MLB indeed releases its report on the investigation into the Red Sox at the end of the week of Feb. 28, it'll have taken about two months in total, the same duration it took MLB to investigate the 2017 Astros.

"We always want the investigations to go as quickly as possible," Manfred told reporters on Sunday. "Never, however, at the expense of making sure we have pursued every possible lead and done everything we can possibly do to get the facts right. There have been a couple developments in the Boston thing that slowed us down, people who had to have been re-interviewed."

Manfred confirmed that players were granted immunity "provided they were honest in their answers."

No matter the findings in the investigation, Manfred said he hopes to implement new rules in 2020 that will "have really serious restrictions about players and personnel access to video in-game." The rule still needs to be discussed with the players association.

Bogaerts on Betts

Bogaerts and Mookie Betts both came up through the Red Sox system together, so it was obviously tough on the shortstop when his longtime teammate, who he called a "brother," was traded last week.

"It's going to be hard," Bogaerts said. "Obviously it came at such a late timing, so close to spring training so a lot of us didn't know what was going to happen, if it was going to happen or not. ... I wish him nothing but the best. He's one of the best teammates I've had."

Bogaerts didn't deny that he would try to recruit Betts back to the Red Sox when he hits free agency next winter.

"Probably maybe in a year," Bogaerts said. "We'll see how that goes. We know what he means to us. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"I hope it's real big for him," Bogaerts said of Betts' impending contract. "He deserves it. That's the route he chose to go and I wish him nothing but the best. I wish that he gets all that he wants, and even more." ...

Rafael Devers will arrive late to camp next week because he and his girlfriend just welcomed a baby girl back home in the Dominican Republic. Roenicke said that ideally, the third baseman would be able to fly here on Tuesday. Outfielder Cesar Puello will also be a late arrival due to visa issues. ...

New outfielder Alex Verdugo, who was originally assigned No. 12, has changed his number to No. 99. Kevin Pillar is now No. 5.

Red Sox' Chris Sale had suspicions of Astros' sign-stealing during 2017 ALDS

Steve Hewitt

FORT MYERS — Chris Sale may not have heard the trash-can banging, or knew what he and the rest of the baseball world knows now, but he certainly had his suspicions.

It was Oct. 5, 2017, Game 1 of the ALDS in Houston, when Sale made his first career playoff start, and his only one at Minute Maid Park in 2017. He was promptly lit up by the Astros for seven runs on nine hits, including three homers, two of which came in back-to-back fashion by Alex Bregman and Jose Altuve in the first inning.

The Red Sox were blown out, 8-2, and eventually eliminated in four games by the Astros, who ultimately won the World Series.

More than two years later, though, in one of the biggest scandals in baseball history, it was revealed that the Astros illegally used technology to steal signs throughout the 2017 season — including the playoffs. And while Sale hasn't gone back to review the tape, he certainly remembers how he felt on the mound on that October day in 2017, and like many around baseball, couldn't help but feel like something was off.

"I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston," Sale said. "That guy on the train, it must have kept his job for another year. That was tough. I was standing out there on the mound and saying, 'How the hell are they doing ...' They were hitting breaking balls over the fence, hitting fastballs at their neck. Yeah, it crosses your mind. But what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren't? I'm not going to sit there and say they were because I don't have 100% evidence. I guess there is in the investigation, but in that specific scenario I don't know. ...

The Astros' sign-stealing scandal, the fallout, the apologies and everything associated with it has dominated the sport's discussion as spring training begins. Prominent players are speaking out and letting their frustrations be heard as they arrive at camp, from Cody Bellinger to Trevor Bauer to Kris Bryant and several others.

But Sale, while he had his suspicions, stopped short of ripping the Astros. He wasn't sure how much of his poor playoff outing had to do illegal sign-stealing, and even if it did, it's in the past now.

"Yeah, it sucks. But what am I going to do?" Sale said. "Am I going to hold them at gunpoint? Am I going to sit here and curse them out through a bunch of cameras? If I have something to say to them, I know those guys. I can get one of their numbers and text them and talk to them face-to-face or whatever. It happened. What are you going to do about it? You can sit around and cry about it or I can get my ass to work and try and win a championship."

Sale, though, is certainly concerned about how the scandal has rocked the sport and thinks it's important for it to be cleaned up.

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said in an interview with ESPN on Sunday that there is "no question" the league will have a new policy before the 2020 season that limits access to video during games. That's just one idea as baseball attempts to move forward.

Sale was enlightening as he discussed his feelings about all that has transpired within the sport he cares about so deeply.

"I think there are some steps to be taken," Sale said. "Luckily I'm not running the show and I don't have to figure all that out. I think we just have to get back to playing the game. The X's and O's. If I'm better than you on a certain day I win. If you're better than me on a certain day you win. There's a lot, not only with the Astros, but there has been a lot of chatter of stuff going on around the league for years now. It's been going on for a while. I would like to see it cleaned up. I enjoy competition. You guys know me, if I go out there and I get beat on a day I will tell you I got beat. That's just part of it. ...

"I'm not going to play this game forever. I want to leave this game in a better way than I started. If I can do something to impact that I will. I would like to do that. This puts a negative tone on the game of baseball for the future players of this game and it opens up the door that I don't think was open before. You would hate to think ... I'm no choir boy by any means. I've done some things in the past that I'm not proud of and

some things I wouldn't want my sons to do, but you try and do things the right way and you try and promote this game in a positive light for kids in the future."

The Red Sox, of course, are still under investigation for their own alleged sign stealing in 2018. Sale, who threw the final pitch that season to win the World Series, said he's talked with investigators, said he's hopeful it will be over soon so that people can know the truth.

Sale didn't exactly declare the team's innocence, only saying to wait for the investigation to come to a conclusion.

"They're only trying to do their job and make right by all this," Sale said of MLB. "They asked me, hey, you want to talk to these guys? Yeah I do. Because I want to help make this right. Is it frustrating? Yeah. It took 30 minutes out of one of my days in the offseason? Whatever. But to get the truth and to make this a better game, I'm in. That's what I've talked about basically this whole interview, getting all this right and making this a better game when I leave."

Rob Manfred: Red Sox investigation should be complete next week

Jason Mastrodonato

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"We always want the investigations to go as quickly as possible," Manfred told reporters on Sunday. "Never, however, at the expense of making sure we have pursued every possible lead and done everything we can possibly do to get the facts right. There have been a couple developments in the Boston thing that slowed us down, people who had to have been re-interviewed."

Manfred confirmed that players were granted immunity "provided they were honest in their answers."

No matter the findings in the investigation, Manfred said he hopes to implement new rules in 2020 that will "have really serious restrictions about players and personnel access to video in-game." The rule still needs to be discussed with the players association.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing investigation delayed, leading to frustration within organization

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- MLB commissioner Rob Manfred is taking his time investigating the Red Sox for alleged sign-stealing in 2018, and some in the organization are growing tired of waiting for his findings.

Manfred delayed the proceedings again Sunday, saying that a "couple of developments" have made it so he hopes a resolution will come by the end of next week. Manfred had previously said he hoped the investigation would be complete before spring training camps opened throughout Arizona and Florida.

“We all want the investigations to go as quickly as possible,” Manfred said. “Never, however, at the expense of making sure we have pursued every possible lead and done everything we can possibly do to get the facts right.”

Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and interim manager Ron Roenicke attended Manfred’s address at the Braves’ spring training facility in North Port. Earlier in the day, Roenicke expressed some frustration with the lack of expediency throughout the process.

“I hoped it would be over with, but they want to make sure they’re doing a thorough investigation and I guess it takes a while,” he said.

Roenicke said he doesn’t believe the investigation is weighing on the players, with Bloom later adding that the inquiry had little impact on the club’s day-to-day proceedings. But players, including ace Chris Sale, are looking forward to getting the drama behind them.

“Given the circumstances, with what happened in Houston and (Alex Cora) being our manager, I think they’re just doing their due diligence just to see if he brought it over here,” Sale said. “I don’t know how much longer it’s going to take. I know they spoke to some guys and they asked questions and have done their investigation. Hopefully it will be over soon and we’ll get to see the truth.”

That truth, according to multiple players, is that the Red Sox violated no rules in 2018 and that the club will be cleared of any wrongdoing. But the fact the Sox were penalized once before (for the illegal use of an electronic watch in 2017) means they will be viewed as repeat offenders. The precedent set by the league’s ruling on the Astros and the “developments” Manfred mentioned Sunday do not bode well for Boston.

Still, the entire organization seems to think the league will find nothing. Two players -- Sale and first baseman Mitch Moreland -- confirmed they were interviewed and said they had nothing to hide. Many of their teammates, including Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers and J.D. Martinez, have strongly proclaimed the organization’s innocence. Even the team’s owners (who asked fans repeatedly to “reserve judgment” on the allegations) and Bloom (who said he has no reason to believe “anything untoward” went on) are showing confidence.

“Those guys seem confident. I seem confident,” Sale said. “I gave them every bit of information I had. We have no reason to lie. We’ll see what happens.”

The Red Sox took care of a lot of their business last week, solving the Mookie Betts problem by trading him (and David Price) to the Dodgers and filling their managerial opening (at least on an interim basis) with Roenicke. But the cloud of the league investigation will still hang over Fort Myers as the team holds its first full squad workout Monday morning.

Alex Cora’s involvement in Astros cheating scandal leaves Aaron Boone ‘sad, mad, frustrated, confused’ but Yankees manager didn’t have specific suspicions of 2018 Red Sox

Chris Cutillo

NORTH PORT, Fla. -- The close bond between Aaron Boone and Alex Cora has been tested in recent weeks. Amid a cheating scandal that has rocked baseball to its core, Cora lost his job and Boone lost some faith in someone he had long considered a trusted friend.

Cora, who spent the last two years managing the Red Sox, was implicated as a key figure in the Astros’ sign-stealing scandal and was let go by Boston in mid-January. Boone, who is entering his third year at the helm of the Yankees, is in charge of one of the teams most directly impacted by Houston’s misdeeds.

The Yankees lost the 2017 ALCS to the Astros in seven games. Though Boone wasn't with the Yankees then, he's dealing with a clubhouse full of players who feel like they were cheated out of a chance to win a pennant -- at least in part thanks to Cora.

"I've run the gamut of emotions about it, being sad, mad, frustrated, confused... everything you can think of," Boone said Sunday. "I don't think I'm all the way there reconciling it all. And that's OK. I had a good conversation with (Cora) about a week or a few days ago, which I'm glad happened. I wish him well. But it's made for a tough situation and not a great situation for our game."

New York has lost in the ALCS to the Astros in each of the last three seasons and dropped the 2018 ALCS to a Cora-led Red Sox team that is currently under league investigation for allegedly using a video replay room to illegally obtain opponents' signs. Boone, whose team played the Red Sox 23 times in 2018 between the regular season and postseason, said the Yankees didn't necessarily have suspicions that the Red Sox were doing anything outside the rules.

"I think there's moments throughout the year when you're always worried about that," Boone said. "Not just with the Red Sox. All teams are guarding against that and there's times that maybe they've got a tip or they've gotten something from somewhere. You also understand it's on you to guard that, protect that and be aware of those things."

In 2018, the Yankees hired another close friend of Cora's in Carlos Beltran, who became a special assistant to general manager Brian Cashman. Cora frequently mentioned Beltran -- who was implicated as having worked with Cora to devise Houston's infamous trashcan-banging scheme in 2018 -- when the Sox played the Yankees, taking playful jabs at his longtime pal.

One of those jabs has been heavily scrutinized since details of the Houston scandal surfaced. Speaking after the Yankees swept the Red Sox in the two-game London Series in late June, Cora mentioned Beltran, unprompted, winking as he spoke.

"I was joking with somebody that their biggest free agent acquisition is Carlos Beltran," Cora said. "I know how he works, you know. He's helping a lot, you know. They're paying attention to details ... and I'm not saying devices all that stuff."

What then seemed like an innocuous comment has resurfaced in light of the scandal, with The Athletic recently reporting that Yankees' coaches "found Cora's comments curious" and that "clubhouse chatter in London about Beltrán's relationship with Cora, and — in another example of the widespread paranoia throughout the industry — questions about whether Beltrán could be trusted with the Yankees' secrets."

Boone agreed with that assessment, admitting the comment made him confused.

"I know within our club, I think there was a little bit of, 'What was that about?' and a little bit of frustration about it," he said. "I wasn't even sure what to make sense of. This winter, it certainly made me start to think a little bit. When all of this came down, it made me question and wonder or whatever."

Boone's fears were eased during his recent conversation with Cora and he no longer has any suspicions that the comment involved anything related to sign-stealing. The manager said he never had any reservations that Beltran was all-in with the Yankees.

"I don't think it was where people want to take it," Boone said. "I think it was as simple as that Carlos is someone who pays attention to detail and I think he was complimenting somebody that he knows well."

The scandal has cost three managers -- Beltran, Cora and Houston's A.J. Hinch -- their jobs in the last six weeks, meaning Boone now has three close friends out of work. But Boone believes the consequences, however tough the personal ramifications, are good for baseball.

“I think the culture of baseball over the last couple of years, you’re always on guard no matter who you’re playing,” he said. “That’s everything from teams that do things legally to maybe teams that were crossing a line. You try to be prepared and guarded against that. Hopefully, what’s gone on now from Major League Baseball and the Commissioner’s Office and the penalties handed out, hopefully it goes a long way in cleaning up some of the line-crossing that has clearly gone on.”

Alex Cora called Boston Red Sox’s Chris Sale after Astros sign-stealing scandal surfaced: ‘My opinion of Cora has never changed,’ Sale says

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Though Alex Cora’s involvement in the Astros’ sign-stealing scheme may have played a role in one of the worst starts of Chris Sale’s career, Sale said Saturday that his relationship with the former Red Sox manager remains unchanged.

In Game 1 of the ALDS against the Astros in 2017, Sale uncharacteristically imploded in an 8-2 loss at Minute Maid Park. The Astros -- who were found to have illegally used a center field camera to steal opponents signs throughout the 2017 season -- tagged Sale for seven runs and nine hits in five innings as the lefty took the loss.

Cora, who managed Sale with the Red Sox for the last two seasons, was Houston’s bench coach in 2017. Cora was implicated as a key player in Houston’s sign-stealing scheme and called Sale to discuss the matter after the allegations came to light.

“He was very open the whole time,” Sale said. “I talked to him throughout the entire process. He called me that night when everything went down. That’s one thing I’ve always respected about (Cora). He’s always honest. He’ll never lie to you. That takes a certain level of character to do that.”

Sale and Cora spoke on the phone a handful of times this winter, with the final instance coming when Cora and the Red Sox parted ways on Jan. 14. Sale said he doesn’t have any hard feelings toward Cora, with whom he won a World Series championship in 2018.

“My opinion of (Cora) has never changed,” Cora said. “I love that guy to death and I’ll always be in his corner. Did he make a mistake? Yeah. People make mistakes. It happens. We’re human. But he was very open and honest about the entire process. That was a tough conversation, but it is what it is. I’ll always have love and respect for him. I’ll always hold him to a high standard and appreciate what he did for me.”

Sale suspected that the Astros were doing something related to sign-stealing during Game 1 in Houston but had no proof to confirm his suspicions.

“I was standing out on the mound, I was like, ‘How the hell are they doing (this)?’” he said. “They’re hitting breaking balls over the fence. Hitting fastballs at their neck. And yeah, it crosses your mind. But what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren’t?”

It’s unclear if the Astros employed their sign-stealing scheme against Sale, but there’s reason to believe they might have. More than two years later, the lefty isn’t dwelling on the fact he might have been cheated.

“Unless you put a time portal right here and say, ‘Hey, you can go back to this start and redo it.’ I still wouldn’t do it because I have so many other things I’d want to go back and change,” Sale said. “There’s no reason for it. I can sit here and pound my hands against this thing or beat my head into the ground until I go crazy, but nothing’s ever going to change it.”

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing investigation likely to be concluded by end of next week, Rob Manfred says

Chris Cotillo

NORTH PORT, Fla. -- MLB commissioner Rob Manfred hopes to conclude his investigation into the Red Sox' alleged sign-stealing practices by the end of next week, he said Sunday.

Manfred said the process has been slowed by the emergence of some developments that have caused him to have to reinterview witnesses.

"We all want the investigations to go as quickly as possible," Manfred said. "Never, however, at the expense of making sure we have pursued every possible lead and done everything we can possibly do to get the facts right. There have been a couple of developments in the Boston thing that slowed us down. People that have to be reinterviewed as a result of things. I am still thinking that the end of next week, we should be done and should have a decision."

The league opened an investigation into alleged sign-stealing practices by the Red Sox early last month after a report from The Athletic alleged Boston had improperly used a video replay room to decode opponents' signs during the 2018 season. Multiple members of the Red Sox, including J.D. Martinez, Andrew Benintendi and Rafael Devers, have declared the organization's innocence in recent weeks.

Manfred previously said he hoped the investigation would be wrapped up before spring training camps opened across Florida and Arizona. That date has come and gone, with the delay pushing the investigation well into its second month.

Boston Red Sox's Marcus Wilson (prospect with raw power acquired in Blake Swihart trade) worked hard after tough demotion, was rewarded with 40-man roster spot

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Marcus Wilson batted just .161 (10-for-62) with two extra-base hits, two RBIs, 33 strikeouts and 13 walks in 19 games for Double-A Portland after the Boston Red Sox acquired him from the Diamondbacks for Blake Swihart last April.

The Red Sox demoted Wilson to High-A Salem. It certainly was disappointing but it turned out to be the best thing for him. Hitting coach Lance Zawadzki and manager Corey Wimberly were there waiting, ready to help him break out of his slump.

"When I got sent down, they were the ones to be like, 'Hey, man, we're going to work you. We're going to get you back to where you were,'" Wilson told MassLive.com. "I came in early every day. I worked my ass off. And I got back to where I knew I could play. And just kind of transferred that back into my return to Double A."

The Red Sox added the 23-year-old Wilson to the 40-man roster in November after a strong final two months in Portland and a successful eight games in the Arizona Fall League.

Wilson, a 6-foot-2 right-handed hitter, batted .342 with a .413 on-base percentage, .603 slugging percentage, 1.016 OPS, eight homers, 12 doubles, one triple and 29 RBIs in 45 games (167 plate appearances) for Salem. He returned to Portland where he posted a .250/.325/.486/.811 line, seven homers, 13 doubles and 20 RBIs in 43 games.

He then slashed .333/.412/.467/.878 with one homer, one double and eight RBIs in 34 plate appearances in the Arizona Fall League.

"Sometimes it just clicks and you take off. That's where I feel like I'm at. I'm in a good spot," Wilson said.

He likely will begin 2020 at Triple-A Pawtucket, but he knows he's one call away from the big leagues as a member of the 40-man. He's one of six outfielders on the 40-man roster with Jackie Bradley Jr., Alex Verdugo, Andrew Benintendi, Kevin Pillar and DH/OF J.D. Martinez.

He feels he can help out Boston during 2020.

“One-hundred percent,” he said. “I believe in my ability. I don’t try to cut my ability short. Not in a cocky way or anything like that. I just don’t sell my ability short. I know what I can do. And definitely when I get the chance and get the opportunity, I’m going to do my very best and take advantage of it. The chips are going to fall where they’re going to fall. Can’t kind of worry about it. You’ve just kind of gotta go out there and play.”

The Diamondbacks selected Wilson in the second round of the 2014 June Draft out of Junipero Serra High in Gardena, Calif. Arizona left him unprotected in the December 2018 Rule 5 Draft — something he expected.

“They just weren’t going to protect a High (A) outfielder,” Wilson said. “That just doesn’t happen. So I wasn’t really looking into it. It was just, ‘Keep playing, keep working.’ I’ve worked hard to get to the position I’m at. Just gotta keep working.”

Second time is a charm. The Red Sox added him in November after he turned around his 2019 season.

“Obviously you hope,” he said. “But it’s kind of out of my control. I don’t worry about anything that’s out of my control. I’ve learned that now. This is my seventh year. I’ve been grinding. This is my first big league camp. So I’m just here to learn. Learn and at the same time, compete my ass off and impress the coaches.”

He said he got into his own head too much after the trade to the Red Sox.

“It’s just a lot of things, man,” Wilson said. “New team, new beginnings. It’s not easy but it’s not an excuse either because it’s a part of the game. It happens. You’ve kind of just gotta roll with it. You’ve just gotta keep playing baseball. I just kind of got in my head a little bit. It wasn’t really more complex than that. I just had to get out of my own head and then I got comfortable with everybody and then from there on, it was fine.”

He made a simple mechanical adjustment to his swing.

“I was trying to do too much,” he said. “And I found I myself doing that early. And then I couldn’t keep up. So they brought me down. And I kind of got my feet up under me. It was really just kind of a slight adjustment. It wasn’t even anything drastic.”

Wilson, who has gap-to-gap power, wants to try to cut down his strikeout rate in 2020. He punched out 142 times in 119 games overall last year.

“I think I’m going to focus a little bit more on that this year without losing the power,” Wilson said. “That’s definitely something we said in the meetings. A plan of attack. So I’ve got a good idea of what I’m doing, especially more than ever. So I think this year’s going to be good. And I can’t wait for everything to unfold.”

In his downtime, Wilson enjoys paintball, Fortnite and just hanging out.

“I have some dogs that I love spending time with,” said Wilson who has a Greyhound-Shepherd and Miniature Pinscher Chihuahua.

The 2020 plan is simple.

“Repeat what I did last year — the second half definitely,” he said. “That’s my biggest focus.”

Could Xander Bogaerts recruit Mookie Betts back to Boston Red Sox in free agency? 'He knows what he means to us and we'll cross that bridge when we get there'

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Could Xander Bogaerts recruit Mookie Betts to come back to the Red Sox as a free agent next winter? Don't rule it out.

"Hey, you know... probably, maybe in a year," Bogaerts said. "We'll see how that goes. He knows what he means to us and we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

Betts and Bogaerts, who were born six days apart, have been major league teammates ever since Betts was called up for the first time in June 2014. That run came to an end Monday, when the Sox shipped Betts and lefty David Price to the Dodgers for outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong.

For Bogaerts, this year's spring training will feel different without Betts in the clubhouse.

"That's the only way I knew it," Bogaerts said. "Coming up, I was here a little before him. I saw him make his debut so you obviously think you're going to stick together as a team. We knew tough decisions were going to come at a certain point. It's hard to keep everyone you have on this team."

Bogaerts, who signed as an international free agent in 2009, was ahead of Betts in his development and debuted in Aug. 2013. Betts, a fifth-round pick in the 2011 draft, joined the Sox 10 months later. Save for a couple of short minor league assignments for Betts in the summer of 2014, the two stars played together for five and a half seasons.

"It's crazy to think how time flew that quick," Bogaerts said. "Obviously, I wish him nothing but the best. One of the best teammates I've had. One of the best young players we had to wear the Red Sox uniform. He's someone we're going to miss a lot. It's not easy to replace somebody like that on and off the field."

Though the two players were close, Bogaerts said they never talked at length about how to approach free agency. Bogaerts, who was slated to hit the market after last season, expressed a strong desire to stay with the Sox and took a hometown discount to do so. Betts never seemed too interested in signing an extension, instead focusing on trying to secure the largest deal possible as a free agent.

Bogaerts said the perception that Betts didn't like Boston is an unfair one.

"The one thing I know about him is that he loved being here," Bogaerts said. "He enjoyed playing with us. He was a great teammate. I can't really say that he didn't want to be here. I think that's a little unfair. He enjoyed his time here and never showed me anything he didn't like about being here. It's going to be tough without him."

Betts will play out the season with the Dodgers before becoming the game's top free agent after the season. He's expected to command a deal that exceeds \$350 million, with some speculating that he could shatter records with a contract in the \$400 million range.

It's unclear if the Red Sox, who will be in the market for big name free agents next winter, will pursue a reunion with Betts. Either way, Bogaerts is rooting for his friend to cash in on the open market.

"I hope (the contract) is real big for him," Bogaerts said. "He deserves it. That's the route he chose to go and I wish him nothing but the best. I hope he gets all that he wants and even more."

Xander Bogaerts injury: Boston Red Sox SS limited with sore left ankle next few days but it's 'nothing alarming'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts aggravated his left ankle while jumping during offseason drills back home in Aruba a couple weeks ago.

He'll be limited during the first few days of spring training. The Boston Red Sox's first official full-squad workout is Monday (tomorrow).

"His ankle is a little bit sore," interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "So these couple, three days we're probably going to go a little bit easy on him. It's nothing alarming. But it is a little sore. So we're going to back off on him a little bit."

Bogaerts batted .309 with a .384 on-base percentage, .555 slugging percentage, .939 OPS, 33 homers, 52 doubles and 117 RBIs during 2019.

"Spring training ... there's no reason for us to force it," Bogaerts said. "Just trying to make sure we get it right and when I start, I can finish."

Devers will arrive later

Rafael Devers is expected to arrive to camp late because he and his girlfriend just had their second child.

Chris Sale, Boston Red Sox ace: 'I guess this was a major injury (elbow). But no one was ever stressed, not in front of me'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox ace Chris Sale said never at any point did he really wonder if he would need surgery to repair his elbow.

The left-handed pitcher missed the final six weeks of the 2019 season (39 games) because of elbow inflammation.

Dr. James Andrews gave Sale a PRP injection Aug. 19. Andrews cleared him to begin throwing the week before Thanksgiving.

"Not really. I knew I was in good hands," Sale said. "I knew I had gone to see the best doctor in the world for this. No one at any point was ever worried. I guess this was a major injury. But no one was ever stressed — at least in front of me. I went and saw James Andrews and he just looks at it, he's like, 'Yeah, man. You'll be all right. Throw some PRP in that thing, I'll see you in a few weeks and we'll be good to go.' He's the best of the best. He can do this with his eyes closed I'm pretty sure now. When he gives you that level of confidence, it makes you feel more confident."

Sale threw off a mound six or seven times this offseason. He said he prepared for spring training like he normally does.

"Started flipping some breaking balls and getting after it a little bit," Sale said.

Sale also dealt with a mild case of pneumonia recently. He's feeling better after he lost six or seven pounds. He said he ate ribs for lunch the past four days and so he's attempting to put the weight back on.

His delay to start spring training because of being sick could cause him to miss Opening Day, interim manager Ron Roenicke said. The Red Sox will reevaluate the lefty every week and see how he progresses.

Sale hopes the delay doesn't impact him being ready for the start of the 2020 regular season.

"I think I'll be ready for Opening Day, but I don't make the rules," Sale said. "I'm a competitor. If the season started tomorrow, I'd tell you I could go out there and throw five or six innings. But the guys in my corner might have something different to say."

He said he's confident his elbow is healthy.

"I feel better than I have in a long time, actually," Sale said. "I've never taken that time off before. I don't know if since I started baseball if I've had that time off. It's obviously something you don't want to go through. That was miserable. But there's silver linings with everything. You try to take the positives in every crappy scenario that comes up. I think that time off helped my entire body regenerate. My shoulder, my elbow, my forearm. ... Every muscle in my body got a really long break in trying to heal. I think in the end, it will help me out in the long run."

Chris Sale, Boston Red Sox ace, had suspicions Astros stole signs during 2017 ALDS Game 1: 'I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale allowed seven earned runs and nine hits, including three homers, in 5 innings at Houston in Game 1 of the 2017 ALDS.

It certainly wasn't a normal start for the Red Sox ace who finished second for the AL Cy Young that year.

He had suspicions back then the Astros were stealing signs. MLB severely punished the Astros after a lengthy investigation this offseason for illegally stealing signs during 2017.

"Yeah, I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston," Sale said. "That guy on the train (train in left field takes ride after every homer), I must have kept his job for another year. That was tough. I was standing out on the mound, I was like, 'How the hell are they doing (this)?' They're hitting breaking balls over the fence. Hitting fastballs at their neck. And yeah, it crosses your mind. But what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren't? I'm not going to sit here and say they were because I don't have 100% evidence. I mean I guess there is in the investigation. But that specific scenario, I don't know."

Former Red Sox manager Alex Cora, Houston's bench coach in 2017, said in July 2018 the Astros beat Sale by splitting the plate in half and not swinging at Sale's inside pitches.

Sale said he also thinks he mislocated some pitches during that start.

"You kind of just chalk it up to they were a great team that year," Sale said. "My first playoff start, I didn't know really what I was getting myself into. I happened quick. You're sitting in the locker room afterwards. I'm kind of like, 'What just happened?' Knowing what I know now, could it be? Maybe. But I'm not here to point fingers. I'm not here to blame anybody. Nothing I do or say today is going to change anything from that start or 10 starts ago or eight years ago."

He said it doesn't help to dwell on it.

"It sucks but what am I gonna do?" Sale said. "What am I gonna go hold them at gunpoint? Sit here and curse them out in front of a bunch of cameras? If I had something to say to them, I know those guys. I can get one of their numbers and text them and talk to them face to face or whatever. It happened. What are you going to do about it? I can sit around and cry about it or I can ... work. Win a championship."

Alex Verdugo, new Boston Red Sox outfielder: 'When I see David Ortiz here I'm giving him the biggest hug. I might even tear up'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — One of David Ortiz's biggest fans is here waiting for him to arrive at JetBlue Park.

"I'm telling you, when I see David Ortiz here I'm giving him the biggest hug. I might even tear up, man," said new Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo, who Boston acquired from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade.

Verdugo rooted for the Red Sox despite growing up in Arizona.

"That's one guy that growing up, I don't know what it was, David Ortiz was just the man, dude," Verdugo said. Like everything with him just in the postseason. ... 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. It's for a reason. It's because not only what he did on the field. Off the field, the person he is, the type of clubhouse guy he is. There's a lot of things that go into it. And I really respected David Ortiz for that. I watched him a lot. I grew up and he was my favorite guy. You see him doing stuff special, you see him tearing up the Yankees, and now like obviously I'm with Boston. Now I want to do it. I want to go and do it."

More from Verdugo's press conference: New Red Sox Alex Verdugo addresses incident from 2015: 'If I was around for anything that had happened, I would've put a stop to it'

Verdugo also mentioned Ken Griffey Jr. and Albert Pujols as two of his other favorite players.

"But David Ortiz, that was like my main guy," Verdugo said. "I'm telling you, I'm so excited to meet him. I'm so excited."

New Red Sox Alex Verdugo addresses incident from 2015: 'If I was around for anything that had happened, I would've put a stop to it'

Matt Vautour

New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo met with the media Saturday for the first time since being traded to Boston from the Los Angeles Dodgers with Jeter Downs and Connor Wong for Mookie Betts, David Price and cash.

In addition to discussing his injured back, the pressure of replacing Betts and growing up a fan of David Ortiz and the Red Sox, Verdugo addressed an incident that occurred during spring training in 2015 when he was a Dodgers minor leaguer.

Verdugo, now 23, and a Dodgers teammate had been hanging out and drinking with three women, including one who was 17.

Citing a police report, the Boston Globe reported that while Verdugo, identified only as "Alex," was in the bathroom with the two older women, "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."

According to a Washington Post story, one of the Dodger players (none of whom are named in the Post story) "videotaped the beating on his phone, and then posted the video on Snapchat."

According to the Globe:

“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.”

Nobody was charged in connection with the incident.

Verdugo met with the Boston media Saturday and had the following exchange about the incident:

Q: Since you were traded, there are some media reports about an incident in Arizona. Can you say if you were there or what happened in that incident?

Verdugo: With that incident, there were a lot of reports. Obviously, my name being mentioned in the allegations, it hurts. It really does hurt. It's hard. I don't want Boston fans or people to judge me for something they have read or seen posted. For me, I know who I am. I know what I believe in. I know my family values. It's extremely hard to deal with that. You obviously have a lot of mixed-up views on it. I was cleared of any wrongdoing of anything. With that being said, it was a terrible thing that happened but I'm really just... it was in my past. It was something I've grown from it, I've learned from it and I've stayed active in my community with the Dodgers in 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. 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 it 100%. That's what I want to be known for, obviously not something that happened several years back.

Q: You said you were cleared in it, but you also said it was a terrible thing. You said you learned a lot from it. What did you learn?

Verdugo: I learned that you have to be smarter with the positions you put yourself in. With that being said... you've got to be smart with the positions you put yourself in. It was tough. There was due diligence on everybody's end. Before making a trade like this, everybody looks into it and everybody has to do their homework on everything and make sure everything's right. With that being said, I was cleared of any wrongdoing. This is just tough to talk about. It's hard for me. I don't want this to keep going. I want to start my time in Boston... I grew up loving this team, the fan base, the organization. You obviously read what people say. You hear it. You hear it come out. It hurts. At the end of the day, it was in the past. I can't do nothing about it now. Just to show people the real me, who I am and continue to further myself not only as a baseball player but as a human being, a person and a teammate.

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

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

Q: Do you have any regrets regarding what happened?

Verdugo: I would say I have regrets of what had transpired that night with certain things. I don't think there's much further to comment on it. There was an investigation. There were a lot of things that were done with it. I was cleared of anything wrongdoing. If I was around for anything that had 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 on it. I just felt like this was a good time to get my truth out and how I am. I think it's something, obviously, it sucks, but we're going to work through it, we're going to keep getting better and keep going on.

Q: Ron mentioned you said something to the team about it. Why was it important to address that right away?

Verdugo: Obviously, the media, just how it is right now, you guys are bringing it up and talking about it. You have to do it. You have to do your homework and 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, to go out there and contribute. To win a championship and

keep going forward like this. It's something I wanted to address to let everybody know the truth of it, to hear the actual 'what happened.' 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 start that healing, the moving on. Let's focus on baseball. This is what we're here for. Everybody's excited. It's baseball season. This is like one of the best times all year round. That's what I'm looking forward to.

Q: You said you were cleared of wrongdoing. Was that by the team?

Verdugo: There was a police investigation. There was a team thing, too. 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 so I was raised the right way. I was growing up very close to my sisters. I treat women with the utmost respect. That's why I said, having allegations like this hurts. Having my name mentioned in it hurts. It does put emotional stress on you. It takes a lot out of you. That's in the past. I would really like to focus on baseball, focus on my next opportunity here with the Boston Red Sox. I'm looking forward to getting started here and really letting my play and letting my passion for the game show people who I really am.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke was also asked about Verdugo and the incident Saturday during his press availability.

Q: With Verdugo, there are some concerns with an incident in the past? Is that something you'll talk to him about?

Roenicke: He has already addressed that with us. 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.

Q: Is there anything you took away from your conversations with him?

Roenicke: I know that anytime a guy comes and changes organizations, it's a fresh start for him. I liked a lot of things he had to say yesterday. Like I said, he's very confident in what he does. We'll get to know him. I'm sure there will be a lot of conversations that I'll have with him to make sure we're not only going in the right direction with him but that the process is right. We'll see where we are with it.

Red Sox Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom was aware of questions regarding Verdugo's makeup and maturity including the incident as trade discussions progressed with the Dodgers but said Monday the team was comfortable acquiring the outfielder after "extensive due diligence."

Bloom answered questions on the topic during Monday's press conference announcing the trade. Below are the three questions and Bloom's answers:

Q: There have been questions about Verdugo's character. Was there a vetting process you went through?

Bloom: We know those questions are out there. With him, and just as we would with any player, there's a really extensive due diligence process and really extensive vetting. I think every player in different ways needs the support of the organization and be his best. We try to provide that support to all of our players, whatever that means in each individual case. I think one of the things about this organization -- and I can say this as someone who saw this from the outside and really admired it from the outside from the years I competed against this organization -- the Red Sox take really seriously putting infrastructure in place to help every player succeed. Obviously, the track record of doing that over the last couple decades speaks for itself. We're very confident we have the ability to do that for Alex.

Q: With Verdugo and the off-field questions, there are very specific questions about an incident he was involved with, specifically an allegation of proximity to a sexual assault. When you are dealing with something like that, how do you approach, as you say, due diligence and vetting on an issue of that magnitude?

Bloom: I don't think it would be appropriate for us to go into a ton of detail on that specific incident. The due diligence process there was extensive. Obviously, that's a topic you 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 had found anything disqualifying.

Q: Was any part of that reading the police report?

Bloom: I don't want to get into the details of the process.

David Price on Boston Red Sox tenure: 'I could have made a bunch of better decisions' (report)

Chris Cotillo

Former Red Sox starter David Price spoke about his time in Boston for the first time since being traded to the Dodgers on Saturday, telling Julian McWilliams of the Boston Globe that he "could have made a bunch of better decisions" while pitching for the Sox.

"I could have made a bunch of better decisions. But that's life," Price told McWilliams. "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, who spent four seasons with the Red Sox, had an up-and-down tenure in town, frequently clashing with media members and expressing his displeasure with the coverage of the team. Though he was sometimes dynamic on the mound, Price's stint with the Sox was often overshadowed by the controversy that followed him, especially when he confronted reporter Evan Drellich and broadcaster Dennis Eckersley in two different incidents during the 2017 season.

Price was key for the Red Sox during the 2018 postseason, winning his final three starts, including the clinching Game 5 of the World Series at Dodger Stadium. After the game, Price -- who was winless in his first 11 postseason starts -- famously claimed he "held all the cards now" in reference to the narrative that he was incapable of pitching well in big spots.

He explained that comment to McWilliams.

"That card had been held over my head for a long time -- a very long time," Price said. "To go out there and do it once and then do it again. That felt good. It wasn't anything scripted."

Price signed the largest deal in Red Sox history, inking a seven-year, \$217 million contract in Dec. 2015. The prevailing thought throughout his time in town was that he signed only for the money and never quite enjoyed pitching in Boston.

He denied that notion.

"I do think it was overblown. I didn't feel like it mattered what I said," Price said. "They're going to make their own assessments and that's completely fine."

Price's time in Boston officially came to an end Monday, when he was sent to the Dodgers along with outfielder Mookie Betts and cash in exchange for outfielder Alex Verdugo, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sale dishes on health, Astros, Sox investigation

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Forget about the illness that set Chris Sale back for the first few days of Spring Training and might force him to make his first start of the regular season at some point after Opening Day.

That was just a nuisance -- a temporary annoyance.

The real question on the collective mind of Red Sox Nation is this: How is Sale's left elbow?

In his first comments to the Boston media in nearly six months, Sale provided an encouraging progress report on the injury that forced him to miss the final six weeks of 2019.

"I think I [threw] off the mound probably six or seven times this offseason," said Sale. "My body is feeling good. Started flipping some breaking balls and getting after it a little bit. I'm doing normal stuff that I was before and it felt good. We'll just keep building from that."

In the aftermath of the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers, the best hope the Red Sox have of making the playoffs is for Sale to return to consistent dominance and health -- two things he lacked last season.

Sale welcomes that challenge to bounce back in a big way.

"I feel good. I feel confident that when this thing starts, I'm going to be ready for it, and I'll be back to doing what's expected of me. I have a certain expectation level when I step on the mound, and I'm going to get back to that," said Sale.

Though the injury crushed Sale when it happened, he now thinks that the break in action could make him stronger than he's been in a few years.

"I feel better than I have in a long time, actually," said Sale. "I've never taken that time off before. I don't know if since I started playing baseball if I've had that time off. Obviously it's something you don't want to have to go through, that was miserable, but there are silver linings in everything.

"You try to take the positives in every crappy scenario that comes up. I think that time off helped my entire body regenerate, my shoulder, my elbow, my forearm, every muscle in my body got a long break and a time to heal. I think in the end it will help me out in the long run."

The enthusiasm Sale gained from a productive offseason only made him more frustrated when he contracted the flu -- and then pneumonia -- in the final stretch before Spring Training.

But Sale didn't let that get him down, either. He made the best of a less than ideal situation by being resourceful -- even in the days he was contagious and not allowed to be with his teammates.

"Even when I was sick, I have a little sport court at my house and I have a rebounder, so I was even throwing against that, just to keep my arm in shape," Sale said. "I couldn't run, I couldn't really work out or anything, but I was able to go out there and make 60 or 70 throws a day, even feeling like crap."

At 30 years old, Sale has full confidence that he'll be able to make last season's disappointment a distant memory.

"As bad as I was last year, I learned a lot, and that's going to help me going forward," said Sale. "Last year was tough; you guys saw it. I was out there throwing batting practice half the time. But you learn from that. It makes you better, makes you stronger, mentally, physically, just try to build off of that."

On the Astros

After Sale discussed all the requisite baseball stuff, he shared his thoughts on the sign-stealing scandal involving the 2017 Astros and also the pending investigation of the '18 Red Sox.

"I'm a firm believer in not really dwelling on things in the past," said Sale. "I think that moving forward, this has no effect on us. It's obviously a tough situation and put the sport in a bad light. Obviously it was the wrong thing to do. But nothing I'm going to do or say today is going to help me win a World Series. It's kind of where I'm at with it."

Though Sale was shelled by the Astros in Game 1 of the 2017 American League Division Series -- and the Red Sox lost the series in four games -- he hasn't spent much time obsessing about whether Houston gained an unfair advantage that day from the trash barrel scheme.

"Yeah, it sucks," said Sale. "But what am I going to do? Am I going to hold them at gunpoint? Am I going to sit here and curse them out through a bunch of cameras? If I have something to say to them, I know those guys. I can get one of their numbers and text them and talk to them face-to-face or whatever. It happened. What are you going to do about it? You can sit around and cry about it or I can get my ass to work and try and win a championship."

And the Red Sox?

Sale acknowledged that he did speak to MLB for the investigation on whether the 2018 Red Sox used technology to steal signs and he was more than happy to talk to them.

"They asked me, 'Hey, you want to talk to these guys?' and I said, 'Yeah I do.' Because I want to help make this right," said Sale. "Is it frustrating? Yeah. It took 30 minutes out of one of my days in the offseason. Whatever. But to get the truth and to make this a better game, I'm in. That's what I've talked about basically this whole interview, getting all this right and making this a better game when I leave."

Sale joined J.D. Martinez, Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and a cast of others in expressing his belief that Boston players didn't cheat during their championship season.

"I know, given the circumstances, with what happened in Houston and AC [Alex Cora] being our manager, I think they're just doing their due diligence, just to see if he brought it over here," Sale said. "I don't know how much longer it's going to take. Hopefully it will be over soon and we'll get to see the truth."

"It's under investigation right now. Until that comes out, no one's going to believe what I say. We can sit up here as players and an organization and say all the things we want, but until the hammer drops, that's when the truth comes out. Just kind of wasted breath for me to sit up here and keep talking about it."

Notes: Bogaerts optimistic, Roenicke, Chavis

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Xander Bogaerts didn't just lose a teammate with the recent trade of Mookie Betts. He lost his "little brother."

Bogaerts was born six days earlier than Betts, who lovingly used to call the Red Sox shortstop his big brother.

Together, they became core players for a squad that won the American League East for three straight seasons, culminating in the team's epic 2018 World Series championship.

But now, the duo will be separated by 3,000 miles, with Betts' trade to the Dodgers a week ago. Bogaerts acknowledged that is going to take some getting used to.

“It’s going to be hard,” Bogaerts said. “Obviously, it came ... so close to Spring Training, so a lot of us didn’t know what was going to happen -- if it was going to happen or not.”

It still seems surreal to Bogaerts that Betts didn’t have a locker in the clubhouse.

“I mean, I remember when he came up and made his debut in Yankee Stadium. It’s crazy to think how time flew that quick,” Bogaerts said. “Obviously, I wish him nothing but the best. He’s one of the best teammates I’ve had. [Betts is] one of the best young players we had to wear this Red Sox uniform. He’s someone that we’re going to miss a lot and it’s not easy to replace someone like that, on and off the field.”

Bogaerts is in it with the Red Sox for the long haul, having signed a six-year, \$120 million contract nearly a year ago that will kick in at the start of this season.

As much as it pains Bogaerts to move on without Betts, Bogaerts is determined to be part of a contending team in 2020. And he welcomes the underdog role.

“If you ask me, I think no one would pretty much bet on us to win it, obviously with the two [guys, including David Price] we traded there at the end,” Bogaerts said. “But I think our team is pretty much the same and, like I said, we have so many opportunities now for these young guys to come up and show what they have. We have a lot of veterans still on the team. I’m definitely confident in the team that we have, so it’s just up to us now to go out there and perform.”

Bogaerts slowed by left ankle

Bogaerts will have a slow start to camp due to a left ankle injury he sustained during a workout a couple of weeks ago.

“It’s getting better,” Bogaerts said. “[I] was doing some workouts back at home and it got a little sore so I’m taking it a little slowly now. As I said, [it’s] Spring Training, I don’t think there’s any reason for us to force it. I’ll get going as soon as possible. Just trying to make sure to get it right and [that] when I start, I can finish.”

There seems to be little doubt that Bogaerts will be at shortstop when the Red Sox open their season on March 26.

“I’ve got to take it slow, take my time,” Bogaerts said. “I’ve got to be smart about it and hopefully have a long, healthy season. So don’t let this little thing affect my whole season.”

Roenicke prepares to address team

Prior to Monday’s first full-squad workout, interim Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke will give his first speech to the entire team.

“I think it’s important to talk to the team on the first day to kind of set the tone of what you’d expect and what can get us to the point of where we need to be,” said Roenicke.

Chavis likely to expand horizons

Michael Chavis can already play first, second and third. Don’t be surprised if he soon adds outfield to his portfolio. If Chavis hits like the Red Sox expect him to, they will want him in the lineup as much as possible.

Roenicke said that Boston general manager Brian O’Halloran and assistant general manager Eddie Romero gave him a list of players who will expand their versatility this spring.

“I won’t even address it for the first week or so but after that, yeah, Chavis and some of those guys, we’ll address where we think we need to give them at least a little bit of work,” Roenicke said.

* **WEEI.com**

Chris Sale has it figured out. Why hasn't everyone else?

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Every once in a while we have to be reminded. There is actually a way to navigate this world of chaos.

Sunday Chris Sale offered that reminder.

For those at the ready with their fingers on the "send" button, all of this seems so simple. How can so many public figures be so tone-deaf? This has been the theme throughout Major League Baseball of late. The Commissioner is tripping all over himself. The players are engaged in non-stop verbal slap-fights. Everyone is defensive. Everyone is judgmental. Everyone is pissed off. Everyone is exhausted trying to convince the world this sport isn't in trouble. This is the reality of the sport.

And when you're trying to dig yourself out of the muck and mire while calling Boston your sports home, the landmines are multiplied. Just ask Red Sox ownership. Just ask David Price. Just ask a lot of professional athletes who have collected their paychecks in the '617' over the years.

Sale, however, stood up Sunday and existed in a manner crisis control managers could only dream of. For the pitcher, this thing that seems so complicated for so many was utterly uncomplicated.

The Houston Astros cheated. Sale was seemingly a victim of their chicanery in Game 1 of the 2017 American League Division Series. Sunday he talked about it all.

"Yeah, it sucks," he said. "But what am I going to do? Am I going to hold them at gunpoint? Am I going to sit here and curse them out through a bunch of cameras? If I have something to say to them I know those guys. I can get one of their numbers and text them and talk to them face-to-face or whatever. It happened. What are you going to do about it? You can sit around and cry about it or I can get my ass to work and try and win a championship."

There was more, but that one quote separated Sale.

This realization that Sale has a better grasp on these sort of things than most isn't a new revelation. Everyone knows that honesty and accountability are the staples in passing the sniff-test among Boston sports fans. It also doesn't hurt to not get sucked into the world of outside opinions, a task made much more feasible if one takes social media out of the equation (as has been the case with Sale).

Worry about your job. Worry about yourself. Stumble across wrongdoing or cheaters, deal with it and move on. This very uncomplicated gameplan isn't the norm. That's why Sale stands out.

"When Chris talks, his personality, he'd probably prefer not to be that guy that's the guy who's outspoken but it's incredible the things he says, the feel he has for when he says something it's right on," said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. "And he spoke a little bit to the guys in the meeting today and I was like 'Geez I'd rather him to speak every day. You can speak for me, you can just do it.' So he's really good, really intelligent in the game and really has a good feel for not just stuff and this is how you pitch but the mental part of it. So I tell you, I walked out of that meeting feeling great today."

It all seems so simple, but so many have proven it's not.

At least Sale has offered a blueprint on how to function in this weird world of professional sports these days. Baseball and Boston better hope others take his lead.

Xander Bogaerts digs in for life without Mookie Betts

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Will Xander Bogaerts and Mookie Betts ever play together again? It's a notion that nobody is ruling out.

"Hey, you know, eh, probably maybe in a year," Bogaerts said with a smile when asked if he was planning on recruiting the new Dodgers outfielder back to Boston after the 2020 season. "We'll see how that goes. We know what he means to us. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

For now, however, Bogaerts is forced to adjust to this new existence. No more Mookie.

"I did," said the Red Sox shortstop when asked Sunday if he believed the two would be playing together for years to come. "Obviously, that's the only way I knew it. Coming up a little before him, like I said, I saw him make his debut. You obviously think you're going to stick together as a team. We knew tough decisions were going to come at a certain point. It's hard to keep every guy that you have on the team. That's why, ownership, front office, make those decisions. I can't do those. It's going to be tough without him and we'll have to adjust."

Unlike Bogaerts, who avoided the idea of free agency by signing his six-year, \$120 million extension at the beginning of last season, Betts has zeroed in on becoming a free agent for a while. It is a reality he is now just one season away from. And that's why the idea of a reunion with the Red Sox will remain in play.

"I can't really speak for him. The one thing I know about him is that he loved being here," Bogaerts said. "He enjoyed playing with us. He was a great teammate. I can't really say that he didn't want to be here. I think it's a little unfair to say but he enjoyed his time here, he never showed me anything he didn't like about being here. It's going to be tough without him but we had a lot of great memories with him, with David Price, getting that final out in Dodger Stadium, those are memories we'll remember forever."

Until Betts' big decision, however, Bogaerts understands what Mookie's absence means. Gone is the Red Sox' starting right fielder for the past five-plus seasons and in his place are players named Alex Verdugo and Kevin Pillar.

"It's going to be hard," he said. "Obviously, it came at such a late timing, so close to Spring Training so a lot of us didn't know what was going to happen, if it was going to happen or not. I mean, I remember when he came up and made his debut in Yankee Stadium. It's crazy to think how time flew that quick. Obviously, I wish him nothing but the best. He's one of the best teammates I've had. Obviously one of the best young players we had to wear this Red Sox uniform. He's someone that we're going to miss a lot and it's not easy to replace someone like that, on and off the field. It's a lot of opportunities for other young guys and they should step up."

Chris Sale reveals elbow surgery was never an option

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- When Chris Sale was forced to shut down his season after an Aug. 13 start in Cleveland due to left elbow soreness, the worst was feared.

The fact that this was an elbow issue and he was going to visit with Dr. James Andrews pointed toward three of the dirtiest words a pitcher can hear: Tommy John surgery.

And even though the initial diagnosis didn't lead to such an operation, the fact that such a path wasn't ruled out -- with a second visit scheduled six months out from a PRP injection -- paved the way for continued anxiety. Then there was the delay in that trip to Pensacola and the idea of Sale coming into 2020 without some sort of delay seemed unlikely.

But as the pitcher put it when meeting with the media Sunday morning, he wasn't -- and isn't -- worried.

"I knew I was in good hands," Sale said. "I knew I had gone to see the best doctor in the world for this. No one at any point was ever worried. I guess it was a major injury, but no one was ever stressed. At least in front of me. I went and saw James Andrews and he just looked at like, 'Yeah, man, you're going to be all right. Throw some PRP in that thing, see you in a few weeks, and we'll be good to go.' All right, he's the best of the best. He can do this with his eyes closed I'm pretty sure now. When he gives you that level of confidence, it makes you feel more confident moving forward."

As Sale explained it, the difficulty came with living an existence he had never experienced.

"I feel better than I have in a long time, actually," he noted. "I've never taken that time off before. I don't know if since I started playing baseball if I've had that time off. Obviously, it's something you don't want to have to go through, that was miserable, but there are silver linings in everything. You try to take the positives in every crappy scenario that comes up. I think that time off helped my entire body regenerate, my shoulder, my elbow, my forearm, every muscle in my body got a long break and a time to heal. I think in the end it will help me out in the long run.

"Just not throwing, not playing. Being in Florida in August, I've never done that, I've never not traveled with a team. Watching my team play from my bed or from my couch at my house is just a weird feeling. That's uncharted territory for me. Just the question. Until you start throwing again, you don't know what it feels like. I can do all these exercises, I can lift every weight, I can do strength tests, I can move my arm in all different directions, but until you throw a baseball, you have no idea what you're working with. That was a great day for me, starting to throw again and actually seeing the progress we had made in the training room translate to the field."

The challenge now has not so much to do with his elbow as it does playing catch from a recent bout of pneumonia.

Sale -- who was back working out at JetBlue Park Sunday -- is hopeful his recent time off doesn't lead to missing Opening Day, but he also understands those sort of decisions are out of his hands.

Whenever he does return to the mound, Sale is banking on his time off from 2019 to fix whatever ailed him -- both physically and mechanically -- throughout what was the worst season of his career (6-11, 4.40 ERA in 25 starts).

"You learn a lot about yourself when you're just sitting around and you've got nothing going on," the lefty said. "I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with my family, my wife, who was pregnant at the time. We have a three-month-old at the house now. My middle son is 3, my oldest son is 9, so I got to spend some more time with them, be around my family, and kind of look back and think about some stuff and learn about who I was last year and how I was pitching and things like that. All that together, you just learn to appreciate things more and come in here to spring training ready to start a new year. As bad as I was last year, I learned a lot, and that's going to help me going forward. Last year was tough, you guys saw it. I was out there throwing batting practice half the time. But you learn from that. It makes you better, makes you stronger, mentally, physically, just try to build off of that.

"Towards the end of the year, it seemed like I was starting to figure some things out. I sat down with our pitching guys and Banny and just were going over my pitching lanes and working pitches off each other and my arm action and my delivery. I had to change some things up. It will be fun being able to continue that because it obviously got derailed after Cleveland, so just getting back to that, where I was before, and just try to carry that throughout the season."

Red Sox notes: Xander Bogaerts slowed by injured ankle

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Of the Red Sox issues, this doesn't appear to be a big one. But certainly, the news that Xander Bogaerts is beginning spring training with an ankle ailment doesn't help siphon much-needed optimism into the Sox' corner.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke and Bogaerts both revealed Sunday that the shortstop wouldn't be participating in full capacity when spring training kicks off Monday due to a left ankle injury suffered while training in Aruba a few weeks back.

"It's getting better," Bogaerts said. "Was doing some workouts back at home and it got a little sore so I'm taking it a little slowly now."

The good news for Bogaerts is that the ankle isn't the same one he previously missed time because of in 2018.

"Spring Training I don't think there's any reason for us to force it," he said. "I'll get going as soon as possible. Just trying to make sure to get it right and when I start, I can finish."

He added, "Obviously you come to Spring Training, you see a lot of the guys you haven't seen in a while you want to be on the field with the boys and be around the coaching staff and stuff like that. I've got to take it slow, take my time, I've got to be smart about it and hopefully have a long, healthy season. So don't let this little thing affect my whole season."

- Two position players have been excused from the first day of workouts Monday, Rafael Devers and newly-acquired Cesar Puello.

Devers and his girlfriend just welcomed their second child, with the third baseman possibly making it to JetBlue Park from the Dominican Republic Tuesday.

Puello, an outfielder from the Dominican who signed a minor-league deal with the Red Sox, is sorting through Visa issues.

- Roenicke admitted that as of early Sunday afternoon he hadn't formalized what he was going to say to the entire team Monday, which is when the ownership group is also supposed to be in attendance.

"So I thought about it a little bit, but to be honest I've been so busy I haven't had time to think about it like I usually would," he said. "I know when I was in Milwaukee I knew exactly what I was going to say and had plenty of time to prepare for it. I was hoping to be able to do that today but I've got that managers things up north we're going to. Although there's a drive up there so I'll think about it on that drive but yeah I've thought about it a little bit but not like I would have liked

"There are some things I think I should address about some of the craziness that's happened. ... I think they're important. I think it's important to talk to the team on the first day to kind of set the tone of what you'd expect and what can get us to the point of where we need to be. I don't know if John or Tom will speak tomorrow, I'm not sure, but I think they kind of feel the same way. Things are a little bit different this year so the message may be a bit different or it could be exactly the same thing. Ideally you want it the same way because you want these guys' mindsets to be the same and not worry about all the stuff that's happened outside of what we do on the field."

- While there are scenarios that would introduce the idea of putting Jackie Bradley Jr. in right field at Fenway Park -- especially with the addition of Kevin Pillar and Alex Verdugo -- Roenicke doesn't sound like someone who is quick to take Bradley Jr. out of his usual spot.

"Well the hard part would be, Jackie is a gold glove in center," he said. "Not just won a gold glove but he's gold glove. So to think about him moving off of there it's not really something I'd like to do. The thing is when I saw him last year, because of trying to get away from - getting another right-hander in left field so

slide Benny over and slide Jackie over, he was unbelievable in right field so I know he can do it at a high level and certainly, I don't know if it's a gold glove in right field but probably is. so we have to look at that and look at - I've never really seen Verdugo play other than the one series against us. And I have really haven't paid attention to him defensively I don't know how good he is. if he's a great center fielder maybe you think about it."

Bradley Jr. has. Played 64 big league games in right field, last playing the spot in 2018 when he manned right 18 times. Pillar played in 27 games as a right-fielder for the Giants last season, with Verdugo serving as the Dodgers right-fielder 25 times in 2019.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Chris Sale doesn't sound quite so convinced of Red Sox' sign-stealing innocence as his teammates

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- A parade of Red Sox players and executives has spent a month assuring us of their innocence and inevitable exoneration once MLB completes its investigation into sign-stealing during the championship 2018 season.

Leave it to plainspoken and accountable Red Sox ace Chris Sale to offer a more nuanced opinion on Sunday.

Speaking publicly for the first time since August, Sale spent about a third of his 30-minute press conference detailing his frustrations with the actions of the 2017 Astros, but he didn't let the Red Sox or manager Alex Cora off the hook when it came to the subject of 2018 and how fans might question the team's accomplishments.

"It's tough, but I understand it," he said. "It's part of the gig. Given what happened with the Astros and then AC coming over and possibly bringing something over, I understand it. They're only trying to do their job and make right by all this."

Sale acknowledged speaking to investigators this winter, and he spoke passionately about wanting to leave the game in better shape than he found it.

"I want to help make this right," he said. "Is it frustrating? Yeah. It took 30 minutes out of one of my days in the offseason? Whatever. But to get the truth and to make this a better game, I'm in. That's what I've talked about basically this whole interview, getting all this right and making this a better game when I leave."

With an investigation hanging over them, the Red Sox struck a decidedly more muted tone than other outraged opponents, with players like L.A.'s Cody Bellinger and Cincinnati's Trevor Bauer blasting Houston as unrepentant cheaters.

"Yeah, it sucks. But what am I going to do? Am I going to hold them at gunpoint?" Sale asked. "Am I going to sit here and curse them out through a bunch of cameras? If I have something to say to them I know those guys. I can get one of their numbers and text them and talk to them face-to-face or whatever. It happened. What are you going to do about it? You can sit around and cry about it or I can get my ass to work and try and win a championship."

Sale does wonder about one start. The Astros pounded him for nine hits and seven runs, including three homers, in Game 1 of the 2017 ALDS. That was Sale's first playoff start, and he has always wondered if Houston knew what was coming.

"I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston," he said. "That guy on the train, I must have kept his job for another year. That was tough. I was standing out there on the mound and saying, 'How the hell are they doing ...' They were hitting breaking balls over the fence, hitting fastballs at their neck. Yeah, it crosses your mind. But what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren't doing anything? I'm not going to sit there and say they were because I don't have 100 percent evidence. I guess there is in the investigation, but in that specific scenario I don't know.

"You kind of chalk it up to they were a great team that year. It was my first playoff start and I didn't know what I was getting myself into. It happened quick. I was sitting in the locker room afterward and like, 'Man, what just happened.' Knowing what I know now, could it be? Maybe. I'm not here to point fingers. I'm not here to blame anybody. Nothing I do or say today is going to change anything from that start or 10 starts ago or eight years ago."

Sale admitted that players could take matters into their own hands and police the game on the field. Sale did exactly that in 2014 with the White Sox, when he drilled Detroit's Victor Martinez, reportedly in the belief that Martinez was being relayed signs from center field.

"It will be interesting to see how this plays out," Sale said. "I think you're going to see some stuff happen this year. I don't know if it is right, wrong, or indifferent. Guys are certainly welcome to handle things how they want. Different people handle different things differently. And in this scenario I don't think there is any right or wrong way. Guys are going to do what they feel is necessary. I think some people feel more cheated than others, and rightfully so."

And that brings us back to the Red Sox. At the end of Sale's remarks, a reporter basically tried to put words in his mouth that the Red Sox won without cheating, and Sale didn't take the bait.

"It's under investigation right now," he said. "Until that comes out, no one's going to believe what I say. We can sit up here as players and an organization and say all the things we want, but until the hammer drops, that's when the truth comes out. Just kind of wasted breath for me to sit up here and keep talking about it."

Quite the contrary. He had already said quite a bit.

Chris Sale might not be ready for opening day, but he's ready to make amends for 2019

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- And now for the non-cheating portion of Chris Sale's first press conference in six months, also known as the part that's most relevant to the team's chances in 2020.

While Sale's frank discussion of the Astros cheating scandal and the possibility that the Red Sox won't come out of the league's investigation unscathed will be sure to dominate headlines, Sale also spoke at length about his health and readiness to erase the disappointment of 2019.

The good news is that Sale believes his elbow is healthy. The bad news is that he contracted pneumonia two weeks ago and is still limited by the illness, which could jeopardize his availability on opening day.

"I got sick and tried to get over it for a couple of days, got a little bit worse, went back to the doctor and he was like, 'You've got pneumonia.' Well, that's inconvenient," Sale said. "What are you going to do? You deal with it and move on. Took some medicine, starting to move around a little bit, trying to get my stamina back up. I'm over the hump now. The worst of it's behind me, and now get back to doing baseball stuff."

Sale hasn't pitched since shutting it down last August. What he described as a "major injury" to his elbow required a second opinion from noted orthopedist Dr. James Andrews, who proscribed rest and a platelet rich plasma injection, much to Sale's relief.

After months of therapy and strengthening, Sale returned to the rubber this winter and ended up throwing six or seven times off a mound, by his estimation.

"I feel better than I have in a long time, actually," he said. "I've never taken that time off before. I don't know if since I started playing baseball if I've had that time off. Obviously it's something you don't want to have to go through, that was miserable, but there's silver linings in everything. You try to take the positives in every crappy scenario that comes up. I think that time off helped my entire body regenerate, my shoulder, my elbow, my forearm, every muscle in my body got a long break and a time to heal. I think in the end it will help me out in the long run."

The misery Sale wasn't related to pain or uncertainty, but his absence.

"Just not throwing, not playing," he said. "Being in Florida in August, I've never done that, I've never not traveled with a team. Watching my team play from my bed or from my couch at my house is just a weird feeling. That's uncharted territory for me.

"Until you start throwing again, you don't know what it feels like. I can do all these exercises, I can lift every weight, I can do strength tests, I can move my arm in all different directions, but until you throw a baseball, you have no idea what you're working with. That was a great day for me, starting to throw again and actually seeing the progress we had made in the training room translate to the field."

Manager Ron Roenicke would like his pitchers to make six starts this spring in order to avoid a repeat of last year's stumble out of the gates. Sale might already be too far behind to reach that threshold in time for the opener in Toronto on March 26.

"I hope not," he said. "Whatever's best, that's what we're going to do. I trust these guys, I trust the process we have. Over the next couple of weeks we're going to map out a throwing program. I'm getting off the mound tomorrow, and then we'll build up to live BPs from that, but taking basically two weeks off right before spring training is not ideal."

If there's a silver lining to Sale's down 2019, which saw him go a career-worst 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA, it's that he was able to reflect on what went wrong while he threw what he described as "batting practice" in too many of his starts.

"You learn a lot about yourself when you're just sitting around with nothing going on," Sale said, adding, "As bad as I was last year, I learned a lot, and that's going to help me moving forward."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Chris Sale is intent on forgetting – his injuries, the Astros' sign-stealing — as new season dawns

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale isn't one to dwell.

In the mind of the Red Sox' ace lefty, what's done is done. So he sees little value in rehashing his disastrous playoff debut against the Houston Astros in 2017 and wondering if the Astros' illicitly stole signs to beat him in Game 1 of the Division Series.

Nor is Sale interesting in rehashing and re-examining his 2019 season — the first half of which was marked by inconsistency, while the latter half was derailed by an elbow scare. What's done is done.

And finally, he is philosophical about the combination of the flu and mild pneumonia that has limited him the last two weeks and thrown off his spring training timetable almost before it began.

“What are you gonna do?” shrugged Sale. “You deal with it and you move on. Whatever the next step is, that’s what we go with.”

That response came as Sale was asked about his own health. But really, it could have served as his answer to almost every question posed to him over a wide-ranging 30-minute interview with reporters, his first public statements since last August.

He would like to forget most of 2019, when he posted the highest ERA (4.40) and missed most of the final two months with what was later diagnosed as a strained UCL in his left elbow. So as much he could Sunday, Sale focused on the present and the future, while reluctantly touching upon the past.

“I feel better than I have in a long time, actually,” he said of his body in general and his elbow in particular. “I’ve never taken that time off before. Since I started baseball, I don’t know if I’ve had that time off. Obviously, it’s something you don’t want to have to go through. That was miserable — not throwing, not playing. Being in Florida in August, I’ve never done that. I’ve never not traveled with the team. Watching my team play from my couch from my house is just a weird feeling. It’s uncharted territory for me.

“But every muscle in my body got a really long break and had time to heal. In the end, I think it will help me out in the long run.”

Many Red Sox fans worried that Sale was on a collision course with a surgeon’s scalpel and was bound for Tommy John surgery. But Sale maintained that he was never truly worried.

“I knew I was in good hands, he said. “I had gone to see the best doctor in the world for this. I guess it was a major injury, but no one was ever stressed. I went and saw (Dr.) James Andrews and he just looks at (the elbow) and he was like, ‘Yeah, man, you’ll be alright. Throw some PRP (platelet-rich plasma) in that thing and I’ll see you in a couple of weeks and we’ll be good to go.’ I was like, ‘OK, he’s the best of the best. He can do this with his eyes closed.’ When he gives you that level of confidence, it makes you feel more confident moving forward.”

The 2020 Red Sox already have a vastly different look. Gone as two of Sale’s longtime rotation-mates, David Price and Rick Porcello. Also missing from a year ago: Alex Cora and Mookie Betts.

“It’s part of the business,” said of the turnover. “It’s something that in the back of your mind, you’re always prepared for. There’s nothing you can do about it. You can’t really dwell on the past because you have something in front of you to do. We don’t have time to worry about the what-ifs or this, that and the other. We’ve got a job to do and we’ve got to do it.”

Sale tries to find positives among the negatives and, sure enough, there was a silver lining or two from missing as much time as he did: more time to study and begin making the necessary adjustments.

“As bad as I was last year, I learned a lot,” he said. “I think that’s going to help me going forward. Last year was tough. You guys saw it — I was out there throwing batting practice half the time. But you learn from it. It makes you stronger, mentally, physically. Towards the end of the year, it seemed like I was starting to figure some things out. I sat down with our pitching guy and we were going over my pitching lanes and working pitches off of each other and my arm action and my delivery, I had to change some things up. It will be fun being able to continue that.”

And don’t get Sale started on baseball’s sign-stealing scandal. He won’t be joining the chorus of players this spring who’s launched verbal attacks on the Houston Astros.

“What’s it going to do for me? What am I going to do? I mean, it sucks,” he said. “What am I going to do? Hold ‘em at gunpoint? Sit here and curse him through over a bunch of cameras? It happened. But what are you going to do about it? I can sit around and cry about it or I can get my ass to work and try to win a championship.”

It may soon be a bit corny, but Sale regards himself as a custodian of the game. He doesn't want history to look back at the era in which he played and see rampant cheating and rule-bending as part of the legacy of his era. He worries that the game's reputation has taken a big hit.

"I think we need to get back to playing a fair game," he said, "and really figuring out who is the best team is instead of figuring out who had the better upper hand. I think the game polices itself sometimes. It will be interesting to see how this plays out. I think you're going to see some stuff happen this year. I don't know if it's right, wrong or indifferent. Different people handle things differently. Guys are going to do what they feel necessary. I think some people feel more cheated than others.

"This puts a negative tone to the game of baseball for the future players of this game and it opens a door that I don't think was open before."

Sale could easily be one of those with an ax to grind. After all, Sale's Game 1 start in the 2017 ALDS saw him give up two homers in the first inning and a total of seven runs over just five innings.

He was asked if, at the time, he suspected the Astros of somehow knowing what was coming

"Yeah! I think they ran out of fireworks in Houston," he said. "That guy on the train (which starts up at Minute Maid Park whenever as Astro homers), I must have kept his job for another year. That was tough. I was standing out there on the mound saying, 'How the hell are they doing this?' I mean, they're hitting breaking balls over the fence and hitting fastballs at their neck. Yeah, it crosses your mind. But what kind of idiot do you look like if they actually weren't (cheating)? I'm not going to sit and say they were because I don't have 100 percent evidence. I guess there is in the investigation, but in that specific scenario, I don't know.

"Knowing what I know now, could it be? Yeah. But I'm not here to point fingers. I'm not here to blame anybody. Like I said nothing I say or do today is going to change anything from that start or 10 starts ago or eight years ago."

Mostly, he's looking forward. In each of the last two seasons, the Red Sox have carefully developed a program for the lefty to ease into the season so that he's plenty strong at the end of the season. But both times, those plans were derailed by injuries.

"It is a little bit (discouraging)," he allowed. "But in '18, with my shoulder, that was an actual thing that happened. Last year, with the elbow, was an actual thing that happened. You can't really prepare for that kind of stuff. You try to, but what we're looking for is just the fade. When the injuries happen, they happen. We do the best we can, but when those freak injuries happen, you have to kind of audible and do something different

"I think now that that stuff is in the rear-view mirror, we can actually focus on what we've been trying to get to. The last couple of years, we just have had a little bit of a speed bump in the way."

And Sale is not looking in that rear-view mirror any longer.

Red Sox Notebook: Ron Roenicke readies his message

Sean McAdam

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The first full-squad workout will take place Monday for the Red Sox and, as tradition calls for, the manager will address the entire organization.

Ordinarily, that would be rather mundane. But given the circumstances of the last month and the fact that this will be Ron Roenicke's inaugural address to the Sox, Monday won't be just any old speech.

“I’ve thought about it a little bit,” said Roenicke, who was named interim manager last week. “To be honest, I’ve been so busy. I haven’t had time to think about it like I usually would. I know when I was in Milwaukee, I knew exactly what I was going to say and had plenty of time to prepare for it. Yeah, I’ve thought about it a little bit, but not like I would have liked to.”

“There’s some things that I think I should address, about some of the craziness that has happened. I need to address that.”

Included in the “craziness” — the dismissal of former manager Alex Cora, the week-long, drawn out drama that ended with Mookie Betts and David Price traded to the L.A. Dodgers, and MLB’s ongoing investigation of sign-stealing during the 2018 season.

Roenicke believes such speeches can help define goals for spring training and the rest of the season.

“I think it’s important the first day, to kind of set the tone of what you expect,” he said, “and maybe what can get us to the point where we need to be. I think it’s important. Things are a little bit different this year, so the message may be a little bit different. Or it could be exactly the same thing. Ideally, you kind of want it the same way because you want these guys’ mindsets to be the same and not worried about all the stuff that’s happened outside of what we do on the field.”

Commissioner Rob Manfred addressed the investigation of the 2018 Red Sox sign-stealing at a media event in Jupiter, Fla. Sunday.

“We always want the investigations to go as quickly as possible,” said Manfred. “Never, however, at the expense of making sure that we have pursued every possible lead and done everything we can possibly do to get the facts right. There have been a couple of developments in the Boston thing that have slowed us down — people who had to be re-interviewed as the result of things.”

“I’m still thinking the end of the (following) week, we should be done and should have a decision out. Not this week, but the next one.”

Manfred added that MLB is currently negotiating with the MLB Players Association to make changes for the 2020 season concerning access to the video replay room, which the Sox were alleged to have used in 2018 to help steal signs.

“I do expect that we will, for 2020, have really serious restrictions on player personnel access to video in-game,” he said. “I think it’s really important for us to send a message to our fans that not only did we investigate and punish, but we altered our policies in a way to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Xander Bogaerts is currently slowed by a sore left ankle. He experienced some tenderness in the ankle during recent workouts in his native Aruba, and the Sox will be careful with him for the next few days. It’s not expected to linger.

Bogaerts was sad to see Betts traded. The two were close – born less than a week apart — and played together for a number of seasons in Boston.

“I saw him make his debut, so you obviously think you’re going to stick together as a team,” said Bogaerts. “We knew tough decisions were going to come at a certain point. It’s hard to keep everyone you have on this team... Obviously, I wish him nothing but the best. One of the best teammates I’ve had and one of the best young players we had wear the Red Sox uniform.”

“He’s someone we’re going to miss a lot. It’s not easy to replace somebody like that on and off the field.”

Bogaerts said it’s inaccurate to suggest that Betts didn’t enjoy playing in Boston.

“The one thing I know about him is that he loved being here,” Bogaerts said. “He enjoyed playing with us. I can’t really say that he didn’t want to be here. I think that’s a little unfair. He enjoyed his time here and never showed me anything he didn’t like about being here.”

So, could Bogaerts help convince Betts to come back in free agency next winter?

“We’ll see how that goes,” said a smiling Bogaerts. “He knows what he means to us and we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

Two position players will not be present for the first workout. Rafael Devers is back in the Dominican Republic with his girlfriend, who just gave birth to the couple’s second daughter. And outfielder Cesar Puello will be delayed a few days by a visa issue in the D.R.

*** *The Athletic***

No, Mr. Commissioner. Red Sox owners do not deserve the benefit of the doubt

Steve Buckley

NORTH PORT, Fla. — MLB commissioner Rob Manfred on Sunday addressed the biggest issue facing the Red Sox.

“There have been a couple of developments in the Boston thing that slowed us down,” he said, the “Boston thing” being MLB’s ongoing investigation into a report by *The Athletic* that the Red Sox illegally stole opponents’ signs during their 2018 championship season.

“People had to be re-interviewed as a result of things,” said the commissioner. “I’m still thinking by the end of next week we should be done and should have a decision.”

But what did not come up during his press conference here was the second biggest issue facing the Red Sox this spring: The trade that sent perennial MVP candidate Mookie Betts and lefty David Price to the Los Angeles Dodgers for outfielder Alex Verdugo and a pair of minor-leaguers, infielder Jeter Downs and catcher Connor Wong.

Unable to squeeze the question into the press conference as time was winding down, I sidled up to the commissioner when it was over and asked him: Is there concern about how fans feel when a marquee team turns around and trades its marquee player in what appears to be a salary dump?

Here’s what Manfred said:

“We want our fans to feel like all of our franchises are trying to compete. I think that given the track record of the management in Boston, the World Series that they’ve won, I think that they’re entitled to the benefit of the doubt in terms of what they think they need to do in order to be as competitive as they can.”

Well, no, they most certainly are not entitled to the benefit of the doubt. Most Red Sox fans are upset about the Betts trade. Many of them are livid. Even scarier — and pay attention here, Mr. Manfred — some of them are sounding flat-out apathetic.

To borrow from Patriots coach Bill Belichick, last year is never, ever relevant to what’s happening this year. That’s why, even when the Patriots are coming off a Super Bowl-winning season, the arrival of a new training camp signals the departure of the last remaining specks of confetti. To pose questions to Belichick about the most recently played Super Bowl on the day the practice balls are being emptied out of the equipment bag is to risk being blasted by laser beams from the old coach’s eyes.

It's true that Red Sox owners John Henry and Tom Werner have been a godsend for Boston baseball fans. Their tenure has been highlighted by four World Series championships in 18 seasons, a renovated and clean Fenway Park and a continuation of the team's embrace of the Jimmy Fund. And let's not forget their support of the late Pete Frates and the fight to find a cure for ALS.

But when there appears to be a sudden change in management style — this happening in the immediate aftermath of a change in the person who runs baseball operations — it's not fair for the commissioner to more or less tell everyone to go home and play DVDs of old rolling rallies.

And when newly installed chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom introduces himself to Red Sox Nation by trading one of the best five-tool players the organization has ever produced, people are supposed to, what, shut up and like it?

Not that trading Betts is Bloom's "fault." Even before he was hired to replace deposed president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, it was generally understood, or at least feared, that Betts was going to be traded. Bloom's first order of business was to pull the right sequence of levers in making that trade happen.

But even if you're a Red Sox fan who has studied up on luxury tax thresholds and understands the concept of resetting the payroll, you should be worried, saddened even, by a system that nudges a team toward trading its best player a year ahead of said player's impending free agency.

Bloom, as well as other front office execs and managers of big-league teams that hold spring training in Florida, was at Sunday's media availability, held at the Atlanta Braves' new facility an hour's drive north of the Red Sox' Fort Myers base of operations. When I told him what Manfred said about asking Red Sox fans to give the team the benefit of the doubt, he said, "I think it's a testament to what this ownership group has accomplished the last few decades that the commissioner feels that way and we hope our fans feel that way too."

However, Bloom added this: "But for those fans who are frustrated, I get it. I know this is difficult. It's really difficult emotionally, and I can promise them that we're trying to do the right thing for the Boston Red Sox."

As for the Belichick analogy about leaving past successes in the past, Bloom said, "I think that's fair. And for the folks who feel that way, as I said, I think they have the right to feel that way. And a lot of people feel really passionately about this team. It's not my voice to tell them to feel differently. All I can do is assure them as much as I can and hope that they take me at my word. That my only motive, as the head of this department, is to do what's best for the Boston Red Sox."

Even though his first big move was to make a cold and numbers-driven trade, Bloom still has the ability to talk to Red Sox fans.

Manfred, by reminding Red Sox fans about 2004 and 2007 and 2013 and 2018, is talking at Red Sox fans.

Often brilliant, too often unavailable: What the Red Sox really need from Chris Sale now is reliability

Jen McCaffrey

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The last time Chris Sale spoke with the Red Sox media corps, Dave Dombrowski was president of baseball operations, Alex Cora was manager and Sale had just been placed on the injured list with elbow inflammation amid the worst season of his career.

It was Aug. 20, a few days after he'd been placed on the IL, and Sale laid out the details of a visit with Dr. James Andrews in which he'd been prescribed a platelet-rich plasma injection and told to rest for six weeks.

Six months later, the Red Sox lefty is almost back in action. After a lengthy period of rest to fully ensure his elbow was back in shape, Sale threw off the mound six or seven times this offseason before an ill-timed bout with pneumonia two weeks ago set him back just as he was ramping up his workouts for spring training.

Determined to shed the injury-prone label he's acquired the last few seasons, Sale offered assurances that despite being sick, he's still working to ensure he's ready to go once the season starts.

"Even when I was sick, I have a little sport court at my house and I have a rebounder, so I was even throwing against that, just to keep my arm in shape," he said Sunday after one of his first workouts back at JetBlue Park. "I couldn't run, I couldn't really work out or anything, but I was able to go out there and make 60 or 70 throws a day, even feeling like crap."

That's always been part of what made Sale so brilliant — that burning competitor inside him who must often be held back from himself. It's been a delicate balance the last two years. Coming off his first year with the Red Sox in 2017 where he posted a 2.90 ERA and struck out 308 in 214 innings, the last two years have been injury-shortened disappointments. In 2018, it was his shoulder and last season his elbow. A strong start to this season is imperative.

"I feel like I'll be ready for Opening Day, but I don't make the rules," he said. "I'm a competitor, if the season started tomorrow, I'd tell you I could throw five or six innings, but the guys in my corner might have something different to say. I've been here a while. This will be my fourth year with the Red Sox, the one thing I've learned is I can trust these guys."

On Sunday, Sale did some light workouts and running with the other pitchers. He's scheduled to throw off the mound on Monday for the first time since falling ill and will build up to live batting practices before games. Initially, interim manager Ron Roenicke said he'd like the starters to make six starts this spring, a few more than last year when the slow buildup following the World Series seemed to affect the pitchers' readiness.

Sale's 2019 campaign ended unceremoniously on Aug. 14 after 25 starts, in which he posted a disappointing 4.40 ERA in 147 1/3 innings. He never anticipated needing surgery, but the waiting and being away from the team gnawed at him.

"I feel better than I have in a long time, actually. I've never taken that time off before," he said. "I don't know if, since I started playing baseball, if I've had that time off. Obviously it's something you don't want to have to go through, that was miserable, but there's silver linings in everything. You try to take the positives in every crappy scenario that comes up. I think that time off helped my entire body regenerate, my shoulder, my elbow, my forearm, every muscle in my body got a long break and a time to heal. I think in the end it will help me out in the long run."

As Sale builds back strength from pneumonia (he said he lost six or seven pounds over the two weeks, but has been eating ribs every day to regain weight), the plan will likely have to be adjusted and he may not be able to make six spring starts. He may end up with a slower buildup this spring regardless.

But his role in the rotation and his overall health take on an even greater importance this spring without David Price and Rick Porcello. Sale now finds himself the lone ace on a staff with a trio of established starters who still each have something different to prove in Nathan Eovaldi, Eduardo Rodriguez and Martin Perez, in addition to a fifth yet-to-be-identified starter. If the Red Sox are going to have a chance at competing this season, they'll need Sale to be at his best for an entire year.

"They were leaders in the clubhouse. It is weird," he said of losing Porcello and Price. "It's always weird when a big person in our clubhouse leaves, David Ortiz four years ago, and every year it just seems like somebody else. But like I said before, it's part of the business and in the back of your mind, you're always prepared for it. There's nothing you can do about it."

As Sale enters the first year of a five-year, \$145 million extension, he knows the changes mean he'll be relied upon more in the clubhouse, too.

“When Chris talks, he'd probably prefer not to be that guy who's outspoken but it's incredible the things he says, the feel he has. When he says something it's right on,” Roenicke said. “He spoke a little bit to the guys in the meeting today and I was like ‘Geez, I'd rather have him speak every day.’ So he's really good, really intelligent in the game and really has a good feel for, not just ‘stuff and this is how you pitch,’ but the mental part of it.”

The Red Sox haven't been able to rely on Sale for a while, but they'll need him now more than ever.

*** *The New York Times***

Manfred Says Astros' Shame Is Penalty Enough. Opponents Might Disagree.

Tyler Kepner

NORTH PORT, Fla. — Late Sunday afternoon, just as M.L.B. Commissioner Rob Manfred began his annual spring training news conference in Florida, the Chicago Cubs' Yu Darvish sent a tweet from Arizona.

Earlier in the day, Darvish had wondered aloud why the Houston Astros got to keep their 2017 World Series title despite having cheated that season. A fan responded to that comment by tweeting a photo of the Commissioner's Trophy in front of an Astros backdrop.

“Gorgeous trash can!” replied Darvish, who lost Games 3 and 7 of that World Series for the Los Angeles Dodgers. “I like it!”

Players across the majors have reported to spring training this year with gloves, bats and barbs. When they are not lashing out at the Astros, they are lampooning them. The Astros' sign-stealing scheme was egregious enough to break established norms in professional baseball, where players rarely gang up on fellow members of the brotherhood.

But now there seem to be 29 teams of saints and one dirty band of sinners from Houston, absolved by a benevolent commissioner who granted immunity in exchange for confessions. That decision now undermines Manfred with fans and players, and he knows it. Before he even took a question on Sunday, he asserted that shame was punishment enough for the Astros.

“I think if you look at the faces of the Houston players, as they've been out there publicly addressing this issue, they have been hurt by this,” Manfred said. “They will live with questions about what went on in 2017 and 2018 for the rest of their lives.”

Sad faces? Constant questions? Apparently it is up to the news media to do what Manfred could not: impose some kind of lasting toll on the Astros. Four people from the 2017 Astros have been suspended or fired in the wake of the scandal, but all were general managers or managers. None of the active players who benefited from the scheme — stealing catchers' signals electronically and relaying them in real time by banging on a trash can near the home dugout at Minute Maid Park — have been penalized.

Had Manfred suspended the players, he would have surely faced pushback from their union. His report in January blistered the Astros' leadership but curiously spared the team's owner, Jim Crane, who piled on the departed General Manager Jeff Luhnow and Manager A.J. Hinch last week by blaming them for not giving “proper guidance” to his players.

Manfred said Sunday that, in a perfect world, he would have punished the players, but he needed their cooperation to confirm what really happened.

“They had an obligation to play by the rules and they didn’t do it,” Manfred said. “I understand when people say the players should have been punished. I understand why people feel that way, because they did not do the right thing. If I was in a world where I could have found all the facts without granting immunity, I would have done that.”

The Astros begin their exhibition schedule on Saturday night against the Washington Nationals, who beat them in a seven-game World Series last fall. Houston opens its season at home on March 26 against the Los Angeles Angels, and then plays its first road series in Oakland, home of the Athletics and pitcher Mike Fiers — the former Astro who revealed the sign-stealing operation to The Athletic in November.

Who will be the first pitcher to inflict punishment at 95 miles an hour? At Red Sox camp on Sunday, reporters asked Chris Sale — who was thrashed by the Astros in the 2017 division series opener in Houston — about that. Sale seemed fine with whatever his fellow pitchers decide.

“I think the game polices itself sometimes,” he said. “It will be interesting to see how this plays out. I think you’re going to see some stuff happen this year. I don’t know if it’s right, wrong or indifferent. Guys are certainly welcome to handle things however they want.”

Not if the league can help it. The Astros’ new manager, Dusty Baker, publicly asked M.L.B. over the weekend to step in against “premeditated retaliation,” and Manfred relayed the message to managers before a dinner here on Sunday.

“I hope that I made it extremely clear to them that retaliation in-game by throwing at a batter intentionally will not be tolerated, whether it’s Houston or anybody else,” he said. “It’s dangerous and it is not helpful to the current situation.”

The next situation — an investigation into sign-stealing allegations involving the 2018 Boston Red Sox, who also won the World Series — should be completed by the end of the month. In the meantime, Manfred said, he would engage the players’ union about further anti-cheating measures. Over the last two years, he said, some initiatives have helped — a league official monitoring the video room, for example, and the recording of dugout phone conversations. More are coming.

“I do expect that we will, for 2020, have really serious restrictions on player and playing personnel access to video in-game,” he said. “I think it’s really important for us to send a message to our fans that not only did we investigate and punish, but we altered our policies in a way that will help make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

That is a noble and necessary goal, but the league lost credibility by failing to uncover the scheme earlier, despite accusations by several teams. And the Astros’ credibility is so shredded that, no matter how much they or M.L.B. dismiss it, many fans and players will always believe the Astros used buzzers to transmit the Yankees’ signs to hitters last October.

“In my own mind, it was hard for me to figure out, when they were immune: Why they would be truthful and admit they did the wrong thing in ’17, admit they did the wrong thing in ’18 and then lie about what was going on in ’19?” Manfred said. “Can I tell you I’m 100 percent sure about that? You’re never 100 percent sure in any of these things.”

And that is the problem. We are supposed to be 100 percent sure that the games are played fairly. That is the very underpinning of sports. Manfred wisely let the Astros keep their trophy; the Dodgers do not want it, and it is pointless to pretend those games never happened. They did, the Astros won, and that will never change. But Darvish is right: The trophy might as well be a trash can.

“The 2017 World Series will always be looked at as something different,” Manfred said. “Whether or not you put an asterisk or ask for the trophy back, I don’t think it makes that much difference. I think we did what we should do — that was, we found the facts and we were transparent about them.”

The facts were devastating to the players’ reputations, but that was the best M.L.B. could do to punish them.

The Astros* play on.

*** *The New York Post***

Red Sox cheating probe ‘developments’ delay decision

Ken Davidoff

NORTH PORT, Fla. — “Development” is a fine word for movie scripts and young athletes. Less so if it refers to someone investigating you. And that’s where the Red Sox find themselves.

Rob Manfred said Sunday that his office’s look into allegations the champion 2018 Sox illegally stole signs had lasted longer than he originally anticipated. When the commissioner spoke at the conclusion of the owners’ meetings on Feb. 6, he said he hoped to conclude the investigation by the time camps opened, a deadline he missed.

“There have been a couple of developments in the Boston thing that slowed us down,” Manfred said at CoolToday Park during Grapefruit League Media Day. “... People who had to be reinterviewed as a result of things. ... I am still thinking that by the end of next week, we should be done and have a decision out.”

That would be by Feb. 28, Manfred clarified.

The lack of a public whistleblower or damning video footage, two components that immediately put the 2017 Astros in the hottest of water, have led baseball folks to assume that the penalties for the Red Sox will be nowhere as harsh — beyond a lengthy suspension for former manager Alex Cora, who served as the bench coach for the 2017 Astros and led the way in the trash can-banging scheme. These “developments” at the least delay such assumptions from turning into realities.

In other matters:

Manfred said he met with all of the Grapefruit League managers here — there were 13 on site — and discussed, among other matters, new Astros manager Dusty Baker’s public plea that the league ensure his players aren’t repeatedly drilled by pitchers as an unofficial penalty for their sign-stealing.

“I hope that I made it extremely clear to them that retaliation in a game by throwing at a player intentionally will not be tolerated, whether it’s Houston or anyone else,” Manfred said. “It’s dangerous and not helpful to the current situation.”

Progress continues toward a rule that could go so far as to ban players and coaches from the video-replay room during games.

“I do expect that we will for 2020 have really serious restrictions [against] players and player personnel having access to video in-game,” Manfred said.

Regarding the dramatic revision of the postseason that The Post’s Joel Sherman first reported, Manfred offered: “Have we discussed expanded playoffs as an internal matter? Yes, we have. I think in an entertainment environment, as competitive as the one in which we live, if we were not at least talking about

that, we probably wouldn't be doing our job. No decisions have been made on that particular topic, but it certainly has been a topic of conversation internally."