

The Boston Red Sox Saturday, February 22, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo on wearing No. 99

Stan Grossfeld

New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo says he's a fun-loving guy, just like another guy who wore 99, Manny Ramirez, who took that number with the Dodgers after wearing 24 with the Red Sox.

Is that why Verdugo chose the number?

"There's several reasons," he says. "No. 1 is that 27, my normal number, is retired here for Carlton Fisk. For me, Manny Ramirez and David Ortiz were great. I watched those guys a lot growing up.

"I felt that 99 would fit my personality the best, and obviously because of Manny Ramirez, it makes it a little sweeter. He was definitely one of the greatest hitters.

"There's no pressure performing with this number. It's a number that I wanted to be able to see on my back, to help my family spot me a little bit easier, so it's something I'm looking forward to rocking with this year and having a good year."

Sebastian Keane has no regrets about turning down Red Sox for Northeastern

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Sebastian Keane was one of the best high school pitchers in Massachusetts last season, going 11-1 with a microscopic 0.50 earned-run average for North Andover.

The righthander was the Globe's Division 1A Player of the Year, and the Red Sox selected him in the 11th round of the draft, 347th overall.

When the Sox invited him to Fenway Park to talk about a six-figure signing bonus, Keane met Pedro Martinez. That was no coincidence.

"If you sign with us, I'm going to be one of your pitching coaches in spring training," Martinez told him.

How many of us would have grabbed a pen at that moment or advised their son to do the same?

But Keane turned down the Sox and honored his commitment to play for Northeastern. He won't be eligible for the draft for another three years.

"It wasn't an easy decision," Keane said Friday before the Sox beat Northeastern, 3-0, in an exhibition game at JetBlue Park. "They tried really hard to sign me, and I worked my butt off to get that opportunity. But it was the right decision for me."

Keane actually grew up a Yankees fan because his father, Tom, lived in the Bronx for a time. But that didn't play into his decision.

"It felt like college was right for me," said Keane, who is scheduled to face South Florida Sunday. "I can get a good education and then play pro ball. I love the campus being in the city and still being close to home for me. The academics are great. This is where I want to be."

Keane committed to the Huskies before his junior year of high school after attending their winter camp. Then the concern for coach Mike Glavine became keeping his prized recruit.

Keane finished his high school career 21-5, with a 0.66 ERA average and a school-record 272 strikeouts. Several major-conference schools tried to recruit him away from Northeastern, offering warmer weather and better facilities. Baseball players get royal treatment at most ACC and SEC schools, so it's not unusual for mid-majors to have recruits ghost them and turn up someplace else.

"We had that happen to us with another kid," Glavine said. "It was an issue. We knew people were contacting him behind the scenes. But his family stayed solid the whole time."

Turning down the Red Sox was a sterner test. They were dangling a big check and the chance to join a minor league team right away. The Sox didn't reveal how much they offered, other than to say they reached the limits of the money available in their draft bonus pool.

The six high school players who did sign out of the 11th round agreed to an average bonus of \$417,000. Two high school players in the 12th round landed more than \$555,000.

Keane, who drives an old Toyota Camry, could have had a new SUV parked behind the Red Sox clubhouse Friday. Instead he arrived on a bus with his college teammates.

"You wonder what you could have done with the money," he said. "But I can wait. The Red Sox treated me and my family great. I hope I get a chance to sign with them again."

Maybe it helped to have a wider view of the world. Because his mother, Marie, was born in Sweden, Keane is member of their national team and played in the Under-15 and Under-18 European Championships.

"I've had a chance to do some cool things," he said. "College has been great so far. I don't have any regrets."

For Glavine, Keane's presence is a form of validation for his program and how it has improved.

Aaron Civale, who was drafted in 2016, started 10 games for the Cleveland Indians last season and had a 2.34 ERA. He was the first major leaguer Northeastern had produced since Adam Ottavino made his debut with the Cardinals in 2010.

Six other Northeastern players are in the minors, and this season's team has several prospects beyond Keane, who was recently listed among the top 20 freshmen in the country by Baseball America.

"It was a big deal when Sebastian came here, especially because he was drafted so high," Glavine said. "He comes from a good family and they had a great process."

Keane's mid-90s fastball should earn him another chance at pro ball down the road. To move up in the draft, he needs to develop his slider, changeup, and curveball, and add more muscle.

The 6-foot-2-inch Keane arrived on campus in the fall weighing 165 pounds. He's up to 180.

"There's a lot we can do with him developmentally," Glavine said. "If he stays healthy, he'll be in a great position for the draft again in three years."

Rafael Devers says Red Sox will 'make the adjustments' without Mookie Betts

Julian McWilliams

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Rafael Devers carried his bat through a traffic-filled clubhouse at JetBlue Park Friday morning. It was his first appearance in camp this spring since the birth of his second daughter. He originally was scheduled to arrive Thursday, but he wanted one more day, one extra moment with her before he immersed himself in the 2020 grind.

“The birth of my daughter was more important,” Devers said through interpreter Bryan Almonte. “That’s something that’s special to me.”

On the field, Devers will have to embrace a new experience. The bat he carries will mean a lot more to the Red Sox this season. He put up personal bests last season primarily in the No. 2 spot of the order, batting .311 with 32 homers and 115 RBIs. But not having Mookie Betts in the leadoff spot leaves a big hole.

Asked how losing Betts will change his approach in the batter’s box, he said, “I’m not sure as of now. Obviously, Mookie is a great player and he was a big piece. But I know we have a really good team as well, and once the season gets going, we’ll be able to see what it’s like. If we need to make adjustments, we’ll make the adjustments.”

The Red Sox still have a potent offense even without Betts. J.D. Martinez and Xander Bogaerts will help Devers lead the way. But Devers is the Sox’ youngest and brightest star, under team control through the 2023 season. If there’s one player you might label untradeable under Chaim Bloom’s new regime, it’s Devers.

Devers didn’t spend much time back home in the Dominican Republic this offseason. He lived in Tampa, working on all facets of his game. He made strides defensively last season, but he still has a ways to go.

“I was just focused on, overall, just be in shape and stay healthy,” Devers said. “I know if I’m healthy, I can do anything I want to do.”

Devers struggled with his weight in the past, but he has entered spring training in great shape the last two years.

So where does he go from here? Defensively, he could improve, but asking offensively might be a bit of a stretch, according to David Ortiz.

“Now I expect him to be consistent,” Ortiz said Thursday. “I don’t need him to do more than what he did last year, to be honest with you. His numbers last year were sick. It seemed like every day, the guy was doing some damage.”

Verdugo progressing

A hairline fracture in his back will keep Alex Verdugo sidelined for the spring and the beginning of the season, but the newly acquired outfielder has progressed to running outside, and on Thursday, he was spotted throwing in the outfield. According to Verdugo, it was the first time he’d thrown since September.

“I felt good,” Verdugo said. “There was no problems, maybe a little soreness through it. It felt good. Just to get out there, to be moving athletically. I wasn’t expecting to go out there that soon in camp. We’re just going to slowly keep working how we are.”

Verdugo said he made about 45–50 throws. He’s not sure what the next steps will be; he leans on the trainers for that.

“So far, everything’s been good,” Verdugo said. “We’ve been testing good. We’ve been recovering good. We’re just going to keep the fingers crossed and keep going the right way.”

Second look

Jose Peraza can play multiple positions. He played second base, shortstop, and third base with the Reds last season. He even sprinkled in some left and center field.

Asked about being a super-utility guy, he said, “It’s better. You have more chances to play.”

But with the Red Sox, Peraza might be able to park at second for a while. There’s a huge gap there, and Peraza is a potential — or even the likely — option.

“Last year, he was kind of split,” said manager Ron Roenicke. “He played second base and shortstop, but before, it was pretty much all shortstop. But I think second base is where we need to see him, and need to see if he’s going to be the guy we can go to for a lot of games there.”

Sore spot

Red Sox prospect C.J. Chatham was scratched from the lineup against Northeastern with general shoulder soreness. He’s day to day. At most, two or three days off, Roenicke said. The Sox beat the Huskies, 3-0 . . . Former Red Sox pitcher Daniel Bard signed a minor league deal with the Rockies that included a spring training invitation. Bard, 34, hasn’t played in the majors since 2013 because of wildness. He has tried multiple comebacks since, the last with the Mets in 2017 . . . There was a moment of silence before the game in memory of former Boston College player and ALS advocate Pete Frates, who died in December, and the three family members Sox scout J.J. Altobelli lost in the helicopter crash that also took the life of Kobe Bryant and five others last month. The team also recognized the one-year anniversary of the death of longtime Globe baseball reporter Nick Cafardo.

Red Sox start play with a win over Northeastern

Julian McWilliams

SCORE: Red Sox 3, Northeastern 0

RECORD: 1-0

BREAKDOWN: Each team had just four hits heading into the bottom half of the sixth, when the Sox scored all three of their runs. Ryan Fitzgerald singled to put the Sox on the board. Then Jantzen Witte drove in a pair with another single.

PLAYER OF THE DAY: Marco Hernandez hit the ball hard, going 1 for 2, and was solid defensively at second base.

NEXT GAME: The Sox host the Tampa Bay Rays at 1:05 p.m. Saturday, a game that will be on NESN. Brian Johnson is set to start and more of the regulars are expected to play.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox beat Northeastern, 3-0, in spring training opener

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — One of the Red Sox’ most interesting offseasons in recent memory came to an end on Friday, when the team took the field for its first of 197 games to be played in 2020.

In the annual spring training opener against Northeastern University, the Red Sox scored late for a 3-0 win in the seven-inning affair.

Sox farmhand Jagger Rusconi singled off Northeastern pitcher Rick Burroni to score Marcus Wilson in the sixth inning and break the scoreless tie.

The Sox have never lost to Northeastern in 19 meetings between the two teams. Their first was at Fenway Park in 1977, when Luis Tiant started for the Sox. The Huskies have come within one run only once, in 2015, when NU lost, 2-1. This was the 10th time they've been shut out.

The Sox used none of their regulars in this one. Marco Hernandez, Rusney Castillo and prospect Jeter Downs headlined the starting lineup, while Downs collected his first hit (an infield single) since coming over from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade.

"He's aggressive at the plate," interim manager Ron Roenicke said of Downs. "I know our hitting coaches really like him. Carlos Febles likes him on defense. He's going to play short and second. He's a great kid."

Roenicke said he expects a few of the team's regulars to debut on Saturday, when the Sox play their first Grapefruit League game against the Rays. A few others will debut on Sunday. Xander Bogaerts (ankle) and Rafael Devers (birth of his daughter) are a bit behind schedule.

"We don't have as much time as we used to have before we started games," Roenicke said. "So these come pretty quick. I guess the negative part when we start these games is the regulars aren't quite ready to go yet. That would be the only thing that I would look forward to, once we can start playing everybody."

Past history important

There should be a few battles for roster spots to watch this spring.

"Certainly the fifth spot in the rotation, maybe a couple spots in the bullpen," Roenicke said. "Second base, first base, how much we can play Mitch Moreland at first. We go to second base, who that's going to be, how much is Michael Chavis going to cover those two spots. We brought Jose Peraza in to play second base, too. So there is still some competition there."

Roenicke said he's not worried too much about spring training performance and will base his decisions more on past history.

"Spring training fools you a lot," he said. "Some guys are really quick starters and some guys are really slow starters. So I think history and what they've done in the past is probably more important than just a straight competition on who does better in spring training."

The 'opener' still in play

Roenicke is still talking with chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and the Sox' front office about the potential use of an opener instead of a regular fifth starter.

The Sox are a starter short since they traded David Price to Los Angeles and have limited starting depth.

"I really haven't figured out with our personnel what would be a better way to do it," Roenicke said. "We've been figuring what the possibilities are and I think we're just going to play this out in spring and see what we have."

"If you just do one opener you have to figure out, OK, whoever that person is who comes in, how does he fit in in those days between when that opener goes his fifth turn again? I think if you have a couple openers it may be easier because you can actually set up something where you have two guys that fill in on these two days."

The skipper said he doesn't want to share who is competing for the fifth starter job, nor does he want to say which pitchers are being stretched out to provide starting depth.

"I would say there's probably four or five guys that we're looking at," Roenicke said. "And we have had those conversations with them. I would rather not say who it is that is in competition."

Chatham injured

Shortstop prospect C.J. Chatham was supposed to play Friday but was scratched with right shoulder soreness.

“Turning double plays today, he came up a little sore,” Roenicke said. “Young guy, we’re trying to protect him. Maybe day to day, or two or three days.”

Former Red Sox reliever Daniel Bard, 34, is attempting another comeback and signed a minor league deal with the Rockies.

Can Red Sox 3B Rafael Devers be even better in 2020?

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Did Rafael Devers peak at 22 years old?

Devers arrived at spring training on Friday a week late due to spending time with his family in the Dominican Republic for the birth of his second daughter, Rachelese.

“It’s really special,” Devers said about seeing his new daughter.

And just like that, questions around Red Sox camp pivoted to how far Devers can carry an offense that no longer has Mookie Betts at the top of the lineup.

“I don’t feel like I’m a finished product yet,” Devers said. “I want to improve on offense, defense, whatever it is that I can work on every single day because I feel like we always need to keep improving.”

It’s a statement that makes sense given his age, but those in Sox’ camp wonder how much better he could possibly get.

He’s coming off a year as good, if not better than anyone could have imagined. At 22 and in just his second full big league season, he exploded with a league-high 54 doubles, 32 homers, 115 RBIs and a .311 average. He finished 12th in MVP voting.

David Ortiz never played with Devers, having retired a year before Devers made his MLB debut in 2017, but he’s a big fan.

“I don’t need him to do more than what he did last year,” Ortiz said. “His numbers last year were sick.”

Ortiz has been paying attention. Retirement allows him to watch almost every Red Sox game on television.

“It seems like that guy was doing some damage every day,” Ortiz said. “I couldn’t wait for him to come to hit. Because even if he gets himself out, he was fighting. He was hitting a rocket at somebody. It was a pitcher making a nasty pitch on him. It was not a giveaway at-bat at all. I saw more than 250 at-bats coming out of him and bro, I’m telling you, this guy is on another level. That’s how I described him last year.”

Since he first came up in 2017, Devers has expressed confidence. On his first day in the big leagues, he sat in the dugout in Seattle and said he wants to be a great third baseman. He said he knows he’s capable as long as he stays healthy.

He had skipped Triple-A almost completely, lasting just nine games with Pawtucket before he was called up. And he hit well his rookie year, batting .284 with an .819 OPS and 10 homers in 54 games.

In the postseason is when he became even more noticable, hitting two homers in the final two games against the Astros in the American League Division Series.

“True story, his first year they went to play the Marlins,” Ortiz said. “I was sitting right next to Derek Jeter. And I asked Derek, ‘Hey, which one is the player in the lineup that scares you the most?’ And he said, ‘Devers.’ His first year. And I totally agreed with him because he was fearless. That’s when you know that a hitter is going to be dangerous. So what he did last year, it was not surprising to be honest with you. I saw that coming.”

A year ago, the Sox wanted to see him control his swing and strike out less. He listened, lowering his strikeout rate from 25% to 17%. And he did so while hitting the ball harder than all but 6% of major league players based on exit velocity.

Devers knows his defense can be more consistent. A strong defensive game in the final few months of 2019 helped erase a slow start in which he made nine errors in his first 31 games.

“Boy, it’s a good question how much he can improve,” said interim manager Ron Roenicke. “That’s about as good as you can get. I guess he had four really good months of defense so continuing that through the whole season would be good. And then the offensive part, he was as good as you could play offensively. So just being consistent.”

Devers will be delayed in spring training due to his late arrival, but Roenicke said it’s important he’s ready to play on Opening Day and has a faster start than a year ago.

The Red Sox don’t know if he can be any better than he was in 2019. But they don’t think he needs to be.

“If he can get locked in early, it would be huge,” Roenicke said. “And it just makes our lineup so tough if he and (Xander Bogaerts) can do what they do. We know that J.D. Martinez is going to have his same year. You become a deep lineup. Christian Vazquez was a big part last year, keep him going. And then you have a lineup that you’re really tough to navigate through.”

Betts was a “big piece” of the lineup, Devers said, “but I know we have a really good team. We’ll get used to it.”

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox’s Jonathan Lucroy has new scar on neck from surgery to repair herniated disc he had for 3 years

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — New Red Sox catcher Jonathan Lucroy played with a herniated disc in his neck for three years. The new scar on the left side of his neck is from surgery he underwent this past offseason to repair the disc (see photo above).

“I’d like to sit here and make excuses and say that’s the reason why I haven’t played good but I’m not going to,” Lucroy said at JetBlue Park. “It did affect me. But I got it taken care of. And I feel a lot better than I have in a long time. I’ll just put it like that.”

The Red Sox signed Lucroy, a two-time All-Star, to a minor league deal this week. WEEI’s Rob Bradford reported Lucroy will earn \$1.5 million if he makes the majors.

He certainly has a chance to make the Opening Day roster. He’ll compete with Kevin Plawecki to be Christian Vazquez’s backup. Plawecki signed a one-year, \$900,000 major league deal this past offseason.

Lucroy said he feels “pretty close” to 100% following surgery.

“It’s been a huge increase in bat speed,” Lucroy said. “We measured it. Before and after, we measured it. And it’s huge. So I feel pretty good.”

Lucroy was one of the top defensive and offensive catchers in the big leagues from 2010-17, slashing .281/.343/.433/.776 in 975 games.

But he posted only a .237/.297/.338/.635 line in 227 games the past two seasons.

“I’ve had some mechanical issues come up,” he said. “I’ve had some injuries that have happened. And I’m working on breaking those things right now, those bad habits. And I’m feeling really good about it.”

Boston Red Sox fifth starter candidates Tanner Houck, Kyle Hart throw live BP (videos); ‘I haven’t really figured out with our personnel what would be a better way to do it’

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — A starting rotation spot opened when the Red Sox traded David Price to the Dodgers last week.

Manager Ron Roenicke won’t yet name the candidates. But Tanner Houck and Kyle Hart should be among the pool. Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom certainly might add a starter via trade or free agency before Opening Day.

Houck is a 2017 first-round draft pick. The Red Sox, meanwhile, added Hart to the 40-man roster in November. Both threw live batting practices here at the JetBlue Park complex Thursday.

Roenicke also could use an opener in the fifth spot.

“I haven’t really figured out with our personnel what would be a better way to do it,” Roenicke said. “We’ve been talking with Chaim and BOH (GM Brian O’Halloran) in figuring what the possibilities are. And I think we’re just going to play this out through spring. See what we have. We know the different options we have to go through. If you just do one opener, you have to figure out, ‘OK, whoever that person is that comes in, how does he fit in, in those days between?’ I think if you have a couple openers, it may be easier because you can actually set up something where you have these two guys who fill in on these two days. So I’ll have to figure that out.”

Houck has overhauled his delivery and pitch mix since the Red Sox drafted him. He’s a candidate both for a rotation and bullpen spot.

Kyle Hart has gone from a 19th-round pick who signed for only \$5,000 in 2016 to one of the Red Sox’s top depth starters entering 2020. He throws a nasty slider.

Hart faced Dalbec, Boston’s No. 2 prospect who has a legit chance of making the Opening Day roster.

Jeffrey Springs, Mike Shawaryn and Ryan Weber also are likely candidates to start or open.

Mike Fiers alerted Boston Red Sox’s J.D. Martinez of Astros’ cheating before 2018 ALCS

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox slugger J.D. Martinez revealed an interesting tidbit Thursday, telling WEEI’s “Ordway, Merloni and Fauria” that whistleblower Mike Fiers first told him about the Astros’ cheating methods before Boston played Houston in the 2018 ALCS.

Martinez said former Sox manager Alex Cora -- who was implicated as a key player in Houston's scheme - - never brought any of those methods to Boston. So when Martinez was alerted by Fiers -- his former teammate at Nova Southeastern University and a close friend -- he was shocked.

"You can put me on any lie detector. You can put me on anything," Martinez told OMF. "Alex Cora never influenced us and never told us about that thing. The only way I ever found out was in the playoffs was when Fiers, who is a really good friend of mine, reached out to me and said, 'Hey, make sure you're doing this because this, because this is what these guys are doing in the playoffs.' I was like, 'What? How is this a thing?' And then I mentioned it to (Cora) and he told kind of me about the whole system and everything like that. That was kind of why it was so crazy. (Cora) was so relaxed going into those playoff games because he knew and we were ready for it."

Houston was found to have used a center field video camera to decode signs, with team employees banging a trashcan in the clubhouse tunnel to alert hitters of incoming pitches. Houston was penalized heavily for the scheme, with the league issuing one-year suspensions to then-manager A.J. Hinch and then-general manager Jeff Luhnow, stripping the Astros of four draft picks and fining the club \$5 million.

Martinez, who split 2017 between the Tigers and Diamondbacks, said he never heard the banging sound while playing at Minute Maid Park.

"When I found out about that, I was like, really?," he said. "I think everybody was. That's definitely crossing the line. I think everybody knows it."

Martinez has previously said he believes Major League Baseball's investigation into alleged sign-stealing practices by the Red Sox in 2018 will come up empty. He has also stated his support for Fiers, who has been criticized by many in baseball, including Sox legend David Ortiz earlier this week.

"I understand his side of it," Martinez said in January. "I understand his side of it, being in that division and going against those guys. It's one of those things where it's an uncomfortable position for him. I understand why he did what he did."

*** *RedSox.com***

Filling rotation hole tops spring storylines

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The all-camp portion of Spring Training is over, and the Red Sox are ready to get down to the business of playing games.

Friday's seven-inning 3-0 exhibition win against Northeastern University started a stretch in which the Sox will play 197 games in 220 days.

With the 34-game Grapefruit League slate set to open on Saturday at JetBlue Park against the Rays, it is time to start focusing on the most relevant storylines that will take shape between now and Opening Day.

Pleading for the fifth

One of the most pressing issues for interim manager Ron Roenicke will be to figure out who his fifth starter will be to open the season. As you may have heard, David Price was traded, leaving a gaping hole in the rotation.

There are no obvious candidates. There's also no clear path. Roenicke is at least open to using an opener.

"I really haven't figured out with our personnel what would be a better way to do it," Roenicke said. "We've been talking with [chief baseball officer] Chaim [Bloom] and [general manager Brian O'Halloran]

and figuring what the possibilities are, and I think we're just going to play this out in spring and see what we have; we know the different options we have to go through.

“So I'll have to figure that out, and it helps I think having Chaim to be really familiar with that type of scenario. So we'll continue to look at it. There's advantages to not having maybe a lot weaker fifth starter, but we'll have to see how that plays out at the end of camp.”

And don't rule out the always-aggressive Bloom signing or trading for another starter before the end of camp. Also, keep an eye on power lefty Darwinzon Hernandez, who came through the ranks as a starter and could be a weapon as an opener.

Ready to set Sale?

All eyes will be on ace Chris Sale this spring. The lefty arrived in camp a few days late due to the flu and pneumonia, and he is also coming off an elbow injury and performance issues last season.

If the Red Sox are to compete for a spot in the postseason, there is no more important player on the roster than Sale. Therefore, he is going to be must-watch from his first live bullpen session to his first Grapefruit League start and the rest of the starts after that.

The illness setback might be just enough to force Sale out of starting on Opening Day, as Boston isn't going to rush the progression of a player so vital to its success.

Roenicke hasn't set a date yet for Sale's Grapefruit League debut.

Bullpen spots up for grabs

This is what we know in the bullpen: Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes, Josh Taylor, Hernandez, Marcus Walden and Heath Hembree are likely to get the first six spots.

After that, there is a crowded derby vying for two to three spots.

Ryan Brasier, Ryan Weber, Austin Brice, Josh Osich, Brian Johnson (also in the mix for No. 5 in the rotation), Colten Brewer, Hector Velázquez, Chris Mazza, Jeff Springs and Matt Hall are all in the mix.

A bounce-back season from Brasier -- a key setup man for the 2018 championship team -- would be key for the Sox.

Keep an eye on hard-throwing starting prospect Tanner Houck (Boston's first-round pick in 2017), who could be used instead as a bullpen weapon if the Red Sox think they need him out there.

Right side of the infield

Roenicke has some decisions to make when it comes to dividing time on the right side of the infield. At this stage of his career, can Mitch Moreland still start four or five times a week? If not, that could open up more playing time for young power hitter Michael Chavis at first.

But if Moreland gets off to a hot start at the plate like he did in his first three seasons with Boston, you could see Chavis more at second base. And that could cut into the playing time of newly acquired free agent José Peraza, who is hoping to be the primary player at second.

Outfield alignment

For the past three years, the Red Sox had the best defensive outfield trio in the game in Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Mookie Betts.

But with Betts gone and key trade acquisition Alex Verdugo out for at least the early portion of the season, there are some questions as to how Roenicke's outfield best fits together.

Will Kevin Pillar fill in for Verdugo in right? Or could he possibly play center with Bradley moving to right until Verdugo returns?

Pillar has spent most of his career as a center fielder, but he did get reps at the corners with the Giants last season.

Bradley has looked comfortable in right whenever he has played there. You can make the case that right field is a more important -- and challenging -- position at Fenway than center. Another possibility would be Bradley playing right at Fenway and center on the road.

It will also be interesting to see how often Roenicke deploys J.D. Martinez in the outfield. The slugger had his share of back woes last season.

Catching competition

There is a clear No. 1 in Christian Vázquez. However, there should be a stiff competition for the backup spot between Kevin Plawecki and Jonathan Lucroy.

Plawecki is the definition of a defensive specialist. Lucroy, on the other hand, was once an All-Star due to his hefty production at the plate.

To go from non-roster invitee to Boston's backup catcher, Lucroy will have to overcome significant offensive and defensive deficiencies from the past couple of seasons. He seems to be looking forward to the challenge, and he has a lot of comfort with Roenicke, his manager in Milwaukee from 2011-15.

Devers a happy pappy, blushes at Papi praise

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Still beaming following the birth of his daughter Rachelese, Rafael Devers reported to camp on Friday with his easy smile and big bat in tow.

Considering the circumstances, it wasn't hard for Devers to come to Spring Training a few days later than his teammates.

"I feel great," Devers said. "Obviously being back here at camp is a great feeling, and I just want to give thanks to God. It's an honor to be here today, and obviously really excited about the birth of my new baby girl. The birth of my daughter is more important. That's something that's very special to me, and as soon as I heard that my girlfriend was about to give birth, I made it a point to get [to the Dominican Republic] as fast as possible to experience that."

Given his late start, it will take the 23-year-old Devers a few days to get into games. But it's hard to imagine it will take him that long to rediscover the stroke that led to a monster (.311/.361/.555, 201 hits, 54 doubles, 32 homers) 2019 season.

"Yeah, I don't think it will take me long to get acclimated again," Devers said. "I feel ready right now. I'm just going to go through the process, but I'm ready to go right now to do whatever it is I need to do."

The Red Sox just need Devers to mash -- and it's hard to believe he won't. For the second straight spring, he came to camp in excellent shape after a stronger winter of workouts.

Devers is still hungry for more even after breaking out last year.

"I want to improve on everything," Devers said. "I don't feel like I'm a finished product yet. I want to improve on offense, defense, whatever it is that I can work on every single day because I feel like we always need to keep improving, and I just want to get better at helping my team win games as well, so just work on everything."

A day after David Ortiz mentioned he was one of the biggest fans of Devers in existence, the young third baseman gushed when hearing that Big Papi praised him.

“It’s great to hear that, especially from a legend like David Ortiz. That’s someone who I watched growing up and someone I hold in high regard,” Devers said. “Knowing that he’s watching me, I try to pick his brain as much as I can, because I know the knowledge he has and can pass onto me is important to my growth.”

‘Big year’ for Rusney

This is the fourth consecutive Spring Training that Rusney Castillo has had no real shot to make the team. At last, however, there is light at the end of the tunnel for the Cuban outfielder who signed a seven-year, \$72.5 million contract with the Sox in 2014.

Due to luxury-tax implications and the fact that they have a full outfield, Boston has kept Castillo off the 40-man roster since early in the 2016 season.

Castillo is a non-roster invitee in camp. He went 0-for-2 while starting in right field in Friday’s 3-0 win over Northeastern.

“He’s going to be a free agent at the end of the year, so I think this is going to be a big year for him,” Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. “Go out and do what you’ve been doing, which has been really good in Triple-A, and hopefully you find yourself in the big leagues. And not to say that it won’t happen this year, but if it doesn’t, shoot, go out and be the same guy and maybe you play a few more years.

“I don’t know him that well, but I know they’ve had really good things to say about him. He’s been in a tough spot, and he keeps doing a nice job for us.”

Verdugo update

The Red Sox still don’t have a specific timetable on Alex Verdugo’s progression this spring as he recovers from a stress fracture in his back. But they seem to be getting closer to identifying one.

“He’s happy where his progression is. Our training staff is happy with what is going on,” Roenicke said. “But I think we’re far enough away where I can’t give you a close timeline. I would say in another week, maybe two weeks, we will have a better idea when we’re going to start with things because I don’t even know when we’re going to start with BP on the field. He is doing some light stuff, but we’re not there yet.

What is Verdugo up to?

“He’s running a little bit outside and actually putting more effort into it than they thought he would,” Roenicke said. “They’re happy he’s a little farther along than what they thought. Anytime you hear that, they feel like they can push him a little bit more. I shouldn’t say ‘push’ because it sounds like when you say pushing, you’re trying to get him there quicker. We’re not trying to do that. We’re just kind of pushing him forward.”

Up next

The Red Sox make their Grapefruit League debut on Saturday afternoon against the Rays at JetBlue Park. Non-roster invitee Brian Johnson, who is battling for the fifth spot in the rotation or a bullpen spot, will get the start. Several Boston regulars, including Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr., are expected to be in the starting lineup. First pitch is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. ET.

*** *ESPN.com***

The most interesting non-roster player for all 30 MLB teams

David Schoenfeld

The rites of spring: pitchers and catchers, Jose Altuve's tattoo and, of course, non-roster invitees. This is one of my favorite articles to write every season, going through all the non-roster players and pulling out an interesting name for each franchise. Sometimes it's a top prospect who we might see later in the season, sometimes it's a veteran who is a good bet to be added to the 40-man roster and make the Opening Day roster, and sometimes it's a simple, "Wow, he's still hanging around!" dude.

Let's go division by division ...

American League East

Baltimore Orioles: Wade LeBlanc. The Orioles have LeBlanc, Ty Blach and Tommy Milone in camp, so if you like soft-tossing lefties, head down to Sarasota. LeBlanc had a solid 2018 with the Mariners but was crushed by the juiced ball of 2019, serving up 28 home runs in 121½ innings. Given some of the other options for the Orioles' rotation, he still has a good chance of making the team.

Boston Red Sox: Jeter Downs. Considering what the Red Sox gave up to get him, all eyes will be on Downs early in camp. He should get some reps in major league games before getting reassigned to minor league camp. The biggest question about his long-term future is whether he'll be able to remain at shortstop, but the Red Sox need a double-play partner for Xander Bogaerts, so second base looks like a perfect fit.

New York Yankees: Clarke Schmidt. The Yankees have several veteran pitchers in camp -- Luis Avilan, Chad Bettis, David Hale, Tyler Lyons, Dan Otero -- and it's possible one of them could crack the Opening Day bullpen, but Schmidt is the guy with upside who could impact the team later in the season. A first-round pick in 2017 out of South Carolina even though the Yankees knew he would need Tommy John surgery, Schmidt returned in 2019 and reached Double-A. He's a polished righty with a plus changeup and curveball. With James Paxton already sidelined, Luis Severino hurting and Domingo German suspended, another injury to the rotation could open up a hole.

Tampa Bay Rays: Joe Ryan. The Rays have so much 40-man roster depth, backed up by even more depth in the minors, that they don't need to fool around with any veterans -- there's no way anyone is bumping one of the younger players off the roster. Ryan is one of my favorite sleeper prospects, as dominant as any pitcher in the minors in 2019, fanning 183 in 127⅔ innings while allowing just 77 hits. A promotion to Double-A at the end of the season didn't faze him as he struck out 24 in 13⅓ innings. The fascinating aspect is he basically did it with one pitch, a 92-96 mph elevated fastball that he reportedly threw about 75% of the time. The secondary stuff may have to improve, but he's somebody to watch, maybe for 2021 more than 2020.

Toronto Blue Jays: Joe Panik. Panik hit .305 as a rookie for the Giants in 2014 and .312 as an All-Star in 2015, but he has hit just .257 the past four seasons and his lack of power stands out in today's game. He's still just 29, but his inability to play shortstop makes him an awkward fit as a utility guy and Cavan Biggio should have second base locked down (although Biggio can move to the outfield or first base if needed). Even if he doesn't make the Blue Jays, a strong spring could lead to a job somewhere.

AL Central

Chicago White Sox: Nick Madrigal. With Luis Robert signed to a long-term deal and promoted to the 40-man roster, Madrigal becomes the player to watch. The White Sox non-tendered Gold Glove second baseman Yolmer Sanchez to clear room for Madrigal, who carries one of the most unique profiles we've seen in a long time. In 532 plate appearances in the minors last season he struck out just 16 times, making him a modern-day Joe Sewell of sorts. He also hit .311, although he lacks power (four home runs) and his contact skills are so good he doesn't walk much (.377 OBP). He has only 29 games played at Triple-A, but it won't be long before he's up and it will be fascinating to see how his approach works in the majors.

Cleveland Indians: Dominic Leone. The Indians have a nondescript list of invitees as even their top prospects are all too far away to earn an invite to big league camp. Mike Clevinger's knee surgery puts a wrench into the Opening Day rotation, but none of the non-roster guys appear to be possible options there.

Leone had good seasons in relief for Seattle in 2014 and Toronto in 2017, but has battled injuries in other years. He had a 5.53 ERA in 40 appearances for St. Louis in 2019.

Detroit Tigers: Tarik Skubal. You know about Casey Mize (the first overall pick in 2018) and Matt Manning (a first-round pick in 2016), but don't be shocked if Skubal ends up better than either one. A ninth-round pick in 2019 out of non-baseball factory Seattle University, where he had Tommy John surgery as a sophomore, he outpitched Mize and Manning during his nine-game stint at Double-A Erie, where he fanned 82 in 42½ innings. The lefty sits in the mid-90s with his fastball and could easily join Mize and Manning in the Detroit rotation by season's end.

Kansas City Royals: Greg Holland. This is your classic non-roster invitee: former elite closer on the back end of his career looking for another moment of glory after a tough season. Holland began last season as the Diamondbacks' closer, but eventually pitched his way out of the role and was released in August with a 4.54 ERA. He should make the team, although Ian Kennedy likely remains the club's first option in the ninth inning. The Royals hope Holland finds some control and becomes trade bait in July.

Minnesota Twins: Royce Lewis. The Twins are not only coming off a 101-win season, but have a farm system Baseball America just ranked as eighth best in the game. Lewis, the first overall pick in 2017, had a rocky 2019, hitting .236/.290/.371 between A-ball and Double-A, but remains the top talent in the system. That showed up in the Arizona Fall League, where he won MVP honors after hitting .353/.411/.565. Watch him in spring training to see if the hit tool can become a consistent weapon.

AL West

Houston Astros: Forrest Whitley. We've been hearing about Whitley for a long time, but this is a good reminder that he's still young enough that he didn't have to go on the 40-man roster. Whitley struggled with his command in 2019, was then shut down with shoulder fatigue, and then pitched exclusively from the stretch when he returned. He fared much better in the Arizona Fall League, providing renewed faith that he's still one of the best pitching prospects in the game. A strong spring will put him on the brink of the majors.

Los Angeles Angels: Luiz Gohara. After reaching the majors with the Braves in 2017, Gohara ranked as high as the No. 23 overall prospect on Baseball America's list. He missed all of 2019 with personal issues and then arthroscopic surgery on his shoulder. The Brazilian has had trouble keeping his weight under control, but he's still just 23 and maybe the Angels can find that upside potential.

Oakland Athletics: Miguel Romero. The A's don't have much on the veteran side of things, so let's go with Romero, a hard-throwing reliever who has a chance to crack the Opening Day roster. Signed out of Cuba in 2017, Romero has big league stuff, including a fastball that tops out at 98 mph, although throwing it over the plate is sometimes an issue. Still, he had a 3.96 ERA at Las Vegas in 2019, no easy feat considering the league-wide ERA in the Pacific Coast League was 5.48.

Seattle Mariners: Jarred Kelenic. Carlos Gonzalez is here and there's at least a temporary opening in the outfield with Mitch Haniger out for the start of the season, but Gonzalez also hit .200/.289/.283 in 166 PAs last year, so he may be done. Kelenic jumped from low to Double-A in 2019 and became one of the top outfield prospects in the game. The Mariners will be tempted to rush him to the bigs and the ultra-confident Kelenic will tell you he's ready now, but it's certainly possible he could play his way into the lineup at some point during the season even though he doesn't turn 21 until July.

Texas Rangers: Greg Bird. Rangers first basemen hit just .228/.302/.402 in 2019, so Bird is here to give Ronald Guzman some competition. Bird broke onto the scene with an impressive 46-game showing with the Yankees in 2015, but has battled injuries ever since. Last year was another lost season as he played just 10 games before a season-ending plantar fascia tear -- after previous foot injuries in 2017 and 2018. Is there anything left here? He has had so many injuries and missed so much time through the years that it's hard to envision a comeback, but a good dice roll for the Rangers.

National League East

Atlanta Braves: Felix Hernandez. Here's a question? Who's the best player ever to accept a non-roster invitation to spring training? Jim Palmer once attempted a comeback after he had already been elected to the Hall of Fame, so it's hard to beat that (it didn't go well). Felix's ERA has risen for five straight seasons, including to 6.40 in 2019. Do the Braves really want to find out what happens in Year 6?

Miami Marlins: Matt Kemp. Hey, he was an All-Star two seasons ago (although he slowed down after a big first half). Kemp went from the Dodgers to the Reds last offseason in an ill-advised prospect giveaway (the Dodgers stole Downs and Josiah Gray) and promptly went 12-for-60 with one walk and 19 strikeouts, drawing his release. His defense has been subpar for years. It's a long shot for Kemp to make the team, especially since the Braves also signed veterans Corey Dickerson and Matt Joyce for outfield help.

New York Mets: Don't say it ... don't say it ... do not ... Tim Tebow. OK, OK, apologies. How about Matt Adams? Pete Alonso and Dom Smith have him blocked at first base, but the addition of the 26th roster spot gives Adams a chance to make the team as a pinch-hitting specialist. He still has pop with 20 home runs in a part-time role with the Nationals in 2019, although his OBP dipped to .276.

Philadelphia Phillies: Francisco Liriano. Now headed for his 15th season in the majors, Liriano was a full-time reliever for the first time in 2019 with the Pirates, appearing in 69 games with a 3.47 ERA. He still walks too many guys, but that slider makes him pretty effective against lefties (.194/.326/.333). After all the injuries in the bullpen last year, the Phillies have several of these guys in camp -- see Bud Norris, Blake Parker, Anthony Swarzak and Drew Storen -- but Liriano is the best bet to make the club.

Washington Nationals: Welington Castillo. The Nationals have a bunch of non-roster vets in camp, but Castillo has the most extensive résumé, with 10 years in the majors. The Nationals brought back both Yan Gomes and Kurt Suzuki at catcher, so Castillo is probably headed for Triple-A or a late-spring trade.

NL Central

Chicago Cubs: Brandon Morrow. He hasn't pitched since July 2018 after missing all of 2019 with elbow problems. His initial two-year, \$21 million contract with the Cubs expired, but he's back as a non-roster invitee. Morrow has had one completely healthy season since 2011, so if the Cubs can get 40 good innings out of him, consider that a victory.

Cincinnati Reds: Jesse Biddle. The most interesting part of the Reds' spring training will be the fight for playing time in the outfield, but Biddle has a chance to crack the bullpen as a lefty reliever. Biddle was once a top-100 prospect as a starter, got injured, made the majors as a reliever and had a solid rookie season with the Braves in 2018. After a slow start in 2019, he went from the Braves to the Mariners to the Rangers, getting just 16 big league innings.

Milwaukee Brewers: Shelby Miller. As a wise person once said, half of pitching is staying healthy. Miller was one of the top young starters in the game from 2013 to 2015, but he has made just 36 starts over the past four seasons and had an 8.59 ERA in 44 innings last year with the Rangers. As you might expect, the odds are against him, and he was never a big strikeout pitcher even when healthy.

Pittsburgh Pirates: Derek Holland. The veteran lefty had a good season in the Giants' rotation in 2018 (2.1 WAR), but his five-year WAR total is just 0.5, meaning he has been below replacement level over the other four seasons. He allowed 31 home runs in 135 innings in 2017 and 20 in 84⅓ innings last year. In other words, he has a shot at making the back end of the Pittsburgh rotation.

St. Louis Cardinals: Angel Rondon. Rondon won the Texas League ERA title in 2019 with a 3.21 mark, and between Class A and Double-A fanned 159 in 160 innings while allowing 125 hits. He should begin the season in Triple-A as a starter, but his fastball/slider combo could lead to a more rapid ascent to the majors as a reliever. He has a chance to impress the big league staff and become one of the first call-ups to the staff when needed.

NL West

Arizona Diamondbacks: Edwin Jackson. He's 36 years old and he's still hanging around, so good for him. Jackson is aiming for his 18th season in the big leagues (although he pitched for the Diamondbacks before, so his tally of teams played for will remain at 14 if he makes the team). It looked like last year would be it for Jackson after he got torched for 105 hits and 23 home runs in 67²/₃ innings, but the man is a survivor. One more year, Edwin!

Colorado Rockies: Ubaldo Jimenez. Back in 2010, Jimenez had a marvelous season for the Rockies, winning 19 games with a 2.88 ERA and finishing third in the Cy Young voting. That was a decade ago. Jimenez last pitched in the majors in 2017 and he last had an ERA under 5.00 in 2015.

Los Angeles Dodgers: Josiah Gray. Similar to the Rays, the Dodgers are so deep that they don't have to fool around with the retread non-roster types. I mentioned Gray in the Reds comment. He had a monster breakout season in the minors after the Reds had drafted him in the second round in 2018, jumping from the Midwest League to Double-A, posting a 2.28 ERA while allowing just three home runs in 130 innings. Considering how little pitching he had done at LeMoyne College (he had been a shortstop until his junior season), it's an impressive rise. The Dodgers may have a future rotation anchor on their hands.

San Diego Padres: MacKenzie Gore. The consensus No. 1 pitching prospect in the game, Gore has just 183 professional innings, but frankly, there isn't much more for him to prove or learn in the minors after holding batters to a .164 average last year. Is he one of the Padres' best 13 pitchers right now? Yes. Will he break camp with the team? Probably not, as he had just five starts at Double-A -- although Chris Paddock had just seven in 2018 and made the Opening Day roster in 2019. The Padres have more options this year with the likes of Dinelson Lamet, Garrett Richards and Zach Davies, but if Gore has a big spring, you never know.

San Francisco Giants: Pablo Sandoval. The Giants have perhaps the deepest list of non-roster names that are familiar with the likes of Sandoval, Billy Hamilton, Gold Glove winner Yolmer Sanchez, Joey Rickard and a slew of pitchers. That's not always a good thing, because it implies there are roster spots to be won. Sandoval hit .268/.313/.507 for the Giants in 2019. He should once again be the backup to Evan Longoria and Brandon Belt.

*** *WEEI.com***

How a home plate collision might have saved Jonathan Lucroy's career

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- For Jonathan Lucroy working out in the Fort Worth, Texas area with his buddy, Rockies star Trevor Story, wasn't anything new. But when the pair met up in October this time around something certainly stood out.

Each player volunteered to try out a new contraption at the workout facility, something that put each participant on their knees in order to whip around what resembled a broomstick. The goal was to accurately measure the miles-per-hour the players' swing came in at.

Story, one of the best National League hitters in 2019, came in at 88 mph.

It was then Lucroy's turn: 46 mph.

That was the last straw for the former All-Star catcher.

"I'm a pretty stubborn guy," the newest Red Sox told WEEI.com Friday. "I have dealt with a lot of pain. Being a catcher you have to deal with it. Stuff like that you just have to deal with it. But that mentality got me in trouble."

Even before the bat-speed test Lucroy knew things weren't right. Not only had his offensive numbers continued to sag, but he was forced to drop his bat-size from 34 ounces to 33 1/2, knowing the explosion that had led him to a fourth-place in the National League MVP voting in 2014 was gone.

Something had to be done. Fortunately, thanks to a July 7 home-plate collision in Houston with Jake Marisnick Lucroy had a pretty good idea what the next step was. A CT scan necessitated by the incident against the Astros showed his neck had a herniation and bone spurs. At the time it explained a lot.

Going back to 2016 Lucroy hadn't felt quite right. But up until the get-together with Story in the offseason, it just seemed like the pain was something that would be part of the deal for the rest of his career.

"We were in Cincinnati and I was with the Rangers," he remembered. "I was laying on a couch in my hotel room, on my phone with my head propped up against a head-rest. The next day I go to the field and I started to hit and I felt an electrical sensation down my arms. That was the beginning. I clearly had done it the night before laying on that couch. It wasn't like I had gotten on a car wreck or anything like. It started the whole process. It lingered, didn't get any better and continued to get worse, and worse, and worse.

"I played through it. I thought I could handle it. I thought I could control it. I was wrong."

The plan was going to be continuing down the road of powering through the discomfort until he had the wake-up call on that day with Story. Enough was enough. He scheduled the cervical disc replacement surgery, a procedure that has left a scar on the left-front side of his neck.

Four days after the operation, he was back working out, ultimately reintroducing himself to the bat-speed machine. Then, a few weeks before working out for a collection of teams (including the Red Sox) he got one final measurement: 99 mph.

"Whenever you feel freer and your body is not hurting, you feel strong, it's like, 'Man, now I just have to get an opportunity. I can show them I still have it.' I think this (injury) has definitely made me weaker and slower," Lucroy noted. "Anything that affects the spinal cord or nerve issues really impacts you. This is a real miracle of medicine. I feel better every day I go out there. It's pretty what medicine can do these days."

Now comes the ultimate test: Trying to make the Red Sox as a non-roster invitee.

"I feel so much better," he said. "Hopefully it pay off."

Ron Roenicke explains how Red Sox are finding a 5th starter

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi, Eduardo Rodriguez and Martin Perez. After that who is going to pitch in the Red Sox' starting rotation is a mystery.

It could be one guy or it could be a bunch of 'Openers' filling the spot. As we sit here, Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke is not locked into any specific approach.

"I really haven't figured out with our personnel what would be a better way to do it," he said. "We've been talking with Chaim (Bloom) and BOH (Brian O'Halloran) and figuring what the possibilities are and I think we're just going to play this out in spring and see what we have, we know the different options we have to go through. If you do an opener, if you just do one opener you have to figure out ok whoever that person who comes in, how does he fit in in those days between when that opener goes his fifth turn again. I think if you have a couple of openers it may be easier because you can actually set up something where you have two guys that fill in on these two days. So I'll have to figure that out and it helps I think having Chaim to be really familiar with that type of scenario. So we'll continue to look at it. There are advantages to not having maybe a lot weaker fifth starter but we'll have to see how that plays out at the end of camp."

Of the candidates on the 40-man roster, Hector Velazquez and Ryan Weber are logical possibilities to start, with non-roster pitchers Brian Johnson and Tanner Houck seemingly in the mix. There are, however, a plethora of youngsters and newcomers with enough experience to contribute as an Opener. (See: Darwinzon Hernandez.)

For Roenicke, it is going to be somewhat of a race against time to figure it out.

"Some of these guys we brought in we really don't know," the interim manager said. "So if you're coming from an organization, at least I don't know - our pro scouts know them well - but we really don't know them so we have to get used to them and what they have. The reason we have them in camp is because our pro scouts have seen something in these guys and maybe what their recs say about how they should be pitching we think this guy could be way more successful if he instead of just going 15 percent cutters, maybe if he goes to 30 percent cutters maybe it changes this guy's whole game. We try and listen to why we get these guys in camp, what we see, what our analytics department can do to help us in terms of what they see works better. And then you go by if we talk to that player and he buys into it and we something different maybe all of a sudden he becomes the piece that we're looking for."

*** NBC Sports Boston**

David Ortiz, Derek Jeter already recognize greatness in Red Sox' Rafael Devers

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Rafael Devers understands most questions in English before they're translated into Spanish by Red Sox communications manager Bryan Almonte.

But on Friday morning at JetBlue Park, he waited to hear a question about David Ortiz in his native tongue before breaking into a broad smile. A day earlier, Ortiz had said he never leaves the room when Devers bats, which means one of the greatest hitters in Red Sox history considers the 23-year-old appointment viewing.

Devers looked positively giddy at the concept.

"It's great to hear that, especially from a legend like David Ortiz," Devers said, via Almonte. "He's someone I watched growing up and obviously he's someone I hold in high regard. Knowing that he's watching me, I just try to pick his brain as much as I can. I know the knowledge that he has and passes down to me is very important to my growth."

As the Red Sox ponder a future without Mookie Betts, they take some solace in the knowledge that Devers has not even approached his ceiling, even after a breakout 2019 that saw him lead the league in doubles (54) and total bases (359).

He has certainly caught the eye of Ortiz, the franchise icon who's in camp as an instructor. It turns out he's not the only baseball legend impressed with the young slugger, who officially checked in to camp on Friday after taking a couple of extra days with his newborn daughter in the Dominican Republic.

Ortiz blasts "snitch" Mike Fiers for ratting out Astro's cheating

"True story, his first year they went to play the Marlins," Ortiz said. "I was sitting right next to Derek Jeter. And I asked Derek, 'Hey, which one is the player in the lineup that scares you the most?' And he said, 'Devers.' His first year. And I totally agreed with him because he was fearless. That's when you know that a hitter is going to be dangerous. So, what he did last year, it was not surprising to be honest with you. I saw that coming."

Told jokingly that Devers was only 14 years old last year, Ortiz laughed.

"That's what makes it even crazier," he marveled, "a guy that young figuring things out that quick."

The story of Devers' 2019 is well known. He didn't drive in a run until Game 13 despite opening the season batting third, he didn't homer until May 3, and he finished April on pace for more than 40 errors.

But once he flipped the switch, he couldn't be stopped. He ended up hitting .311 with 32 homers and 115 RBI, and his move to the 2-hole in the lineup led to a team-wide offensive explosion. For his efforts, he finished 12th in the MVP voting and earned one diehard fan who needs no introduction.

"I don't need him to do more than what he did last year," Ortiz said. "His numbers last year were sick. Last year was my first year really watching a lot of games, to be honest with you. I was sitting at home, so of course, I'm going to be watching games more than ever. It seems like every day that guy was doing some damage. Every day. Now I understand why I have people coming to me and telling me, 'Bro, I couldn't wait for you to come to hit. I was always expecting something out of you. Your at-bats were good enough even if you got yourself out.'

"I have the same feeling about him. I couldn't wait for him to come to hit. Because if he gets himself out, he was fighting. He was hitting a rocket at somebody. It was a pitcher making a nasty pitch on him. It was not a giveaway at-bat at all. I saw more than 250 at-bats coming out of him and bro I'm telling you, this guy is on another level."

Devers practically blushes at Ortiz's praise, but says what he has really learned from the future Hall of Famer is the value of consistency and hard work.

Tomase: Pedro Martinez's tough loves critical to Eduardo Rodriguez continued success

"I want to improve on everything," Devers said. "I don't feel like I'm a finished product yet. I want to improve on offense, defense, whatever it is that I can work on every single day because I feel like we always need to keep improving."

The pressure on Devers to replace Betts will be immense, but he's not sweating it, and that's a good thing, as far as Ortiz is concerned.

"Devers, all he has to do from now on is have the same mentality," Ortiz said. "He had a phenomenal year last year, phenomenal. I can't ask him for more than that."

Remember Rusney Castillo? He'll make \$14 million in Triple-A, then finally become a free agent

John Tomase

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- On an unseasonably cool Florida afternoon, Red Sox regulars scattered like mice before the start of the annual spring training exhibition vs. Northeastern.

None of them were going to play, and therefore, none had to stay, the promise of a rare afternoon off beckoning like an oasis.

So in their place, a parade of prospects, minor leaguers, and fringe performers comprised the starting nine. Some -- such as center fielder Jarren Duran -- may have a future in Boston. Others -- such as third baseman Chad De La Guerra or left fielder John Andreoli -- are household names only in their own households.

But there, batting cleanup and playing right field, was a man with more name recognition than all of them combined, finishing his Red Sox career in a peculiar purgatory, population: one.

When the Red Sox signed Rusney Castillo to a seven-year, \$72.5 million contract in 2014, he represented not only hope for the future, but redemption for the failure to sign Cuban countryman Jose Abreu a year earlier. He was supposed to hit for power, steal bases, and make plays across the outfield. The Red Sox signed him not because he possessed any particular overwhelming skill, but for his across-the-board stability.

Tomase: Pedro Martinez's tough love critical to Eduardo Rodriguez's continued success
Six years later, Castillo is cashing his final Red Sox checks, having fulfilled virtually none of that promise. He'll make \$14 million this season, but he hasn't appeared in a major-league game since 2016, and he hasn't recorded a hit since his first contest of that season, when he went 2-for-4 as an April fill-in.

Despite spending more on payroll over the prior three seasons than anyone, the Red Sox simply couldn't justify Castillo's place in the majors.

Because he's not a member of the 40-man roster, his salary doesn't count for luxury tax purposes. So he has stayed in the minors, hitting better than .300 in two of the past three seasons at Triple-A Pawtucket, sharing a clubhouse with major leaguers only in spring training.

Once the Grapefruit League schedule ends, Castillo packs his cars -- including a vintage McLaren and Lamborghini -- and heads north to Pawtucket, where he plays every day with little hope of reaching Boston, no matter how much he produces.

Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke feels for the 32-year-old, who will actually become a free agent this fall, when he'll hit the market with over \$70 million in earnings and only one-tenth of one season of service time.

"He's going to be a free agent at the end of the year, so I think this is a big year for him," Roenicke said. "Go out and do what you've been doing, which has been really good in Triple-A, and hopefully you find yourself in the big leagues, and not to say it won't happen this year, but if it doesn't, shoot, go out and be the same guy and maybe play a few more years. I don't know him that well, but I know they've had really good things to say about him. He's been in a tough spot, and he keeps doing a nice job for us."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

As Red Sox begin exhibition schedule, these three prospects bear watching

Sean McAdam

As the Red Sox began play Friday afternoon with a game against Northeastern, there are no regulars in the first spring lineup posted by interim manager Ron Roenicke.

Roenicke is saving the likes of Xander Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and J.D. Martinez for Grapefruit League games, which begin in earnest Saturday.

Still, there are things to be learned from evaluating some of the players who won't make the Opening Day roster.

Among them:

1. INF C.J. Chatham

Even with the loss of Brock Holt, the infield picture is mighty crowded in the middle. In addition to Bogaerts, there's newcomer Jose Peraza, Rule 5 guy Jonathan Arauz, holdover Marco Hernandez, and at least occasionally, Michael Chavis — all in the mix and ahead of Chatham.

Moreover, if Chatham looks in his rear-view mirror, he'll probably detect Jeter Downs, obtained in the Betts/Price deal with the Dodgers and someone who very likely will be the team's everyday second baseman next season.

Still, Chatham shouldn't be dismissed.

He's played both shortstop and second, despite his gangly body-type (6-4, 180 pounds) is athletic enough to handle either with an arm that's rated as a plus tool and impressive instincts. And while Chatham doesn't profile as any sort of power hitter at the plate, he's hit at every level (.297 or better from Fort Myers to Greenville to Salem to Portland to Pawtucket) and can drive the ball for extra bases.

If Peraza struggles to hit, Arauz proves he's not yet ready to make the leap to the big leagues and Chavis gets more opportunities at first, Chatham could contribute in Boston in the second half of this season, or certainly by September when rosters expand.

2. OF Jarren Duran

Center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. is eligible for free agency this fall and there's little indication that the Sox have shown any interest in extending him.

The arrival of Alex Verdugo has given the Sox options for 2021 and beyond. Verdugo enjoys playing center and could shift there after this season. Also, Andrew Benintendi has shown the ability to play center and could be moved over from left.

Or, the Sox could see what sort of progress Duran makes. He dominated at High Single-A last season (.998), then, after struggling for a month at Double-A, made some adjustments at Portland and finished strong.

Duran possesses raw plus-plus speed that could be an intriguing element at the big league level and he's athletic enough to handle center, though his arm is ordinary and won't remind anyone of Bradley's.

It remains to be seen what sort of hitter he'll become — for now, he lacks power, but at the very least, he makes a lot of contact and could emerge as a Johnny Damon-type. Given the outfield depth present at the big league level, it's unlikely he'll get much of a look this year, but if he keeps improving, could position himself to be in contention for a spot next year.

3. C Connor Wong

For the time being, Wong is destined to be known as “the other guy” in the Betts/Price blockbuster. He's not the centerpiece (Verdugo), and he's not named after a legend (Downs). And unlike the other two players listed here, there's little chance of Wong getting any major league service time in 2020.

But Wong is intriguing. The Red Sox' catching depth had been embarrassingly thin in their system. (Before the arrival of Wong, the estimable SoxProspects.com had Kole Cottam as the organization's highest-rated catching prospect at No. 57.

Wong needs further development time. He's only played 40 games above Single-A.

But he's intriguing for any number of reasons. For one thing, his power took a big leap last year when he hit 24 homers in the Dodgers' system. For another, he's played around the infield (second, third) and could profile as a No. 2 catcher capable of helping out at several other positions.

Unless the Sox are able to land someone like Luis Campusano in an upcoming deal, there's nobody in the organization standing between Wong and No. 1 catcher Christian Vazquez, whose last guaranteed year is next season. For that reason alone, Wong bears watching.

*** *The Athletic***

Finally (11 days later), the Red Sox are done talking about Mookie Betts

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — It finally happened. A monumental day in Red Sox camp. Eleven days after the blockbuster trade that sent Mookie Betts to the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Sox got through a full day of official press gatherings on Friday without speaking Betts' name.

That might not seem like much, but it was unprecedented. Betts was not He Who Must Not Be Named. He'd become He Who Must Be Named, all the time, even if it seemed to happen subconsciously.

Manager Ron Roenicke had an early habit of mentioning Betts' name even when no one asked about him. Betts became a go-to point of comparison or a means of explanation. And when Roenicke didn't bring him up, someone new would show up in Red Sox camp and give his opinion on the trade and the player.

Betts was gone but not forgotten. Literally.

Despite a lot talk about turning the page, the Red Sox couldn't get away from their former right fielder. And the focus on his absence was not entirely media-driven. So many unprompted references suggested Betts' absence still carried weight more than a week after he'd put on a Dodgers uniform. Outsiders were asking about him, but insiders were still thinking about him.

The deal became official on Feb. 10, and that night's news conference was of course loaded with Betts references. When Roenicke held his opening news conference the next day, the Betts topic remained unavoidable. Not to address it — and for the media not to ask about it — would have been irresponsible. That Roenicke didn't mention Betts in his opening statement showed considerable restraint. He actually mentioned Betts by name only once in the entire half-hour.

"You don't replace Mookie Betts, who is one of the best players in the game," Roenicke said. "But you move forward."

Forward, yes. But always with Betts visible in the rearview mirror.

After the first Red Sox workout on Feb. 12, Roenicke sat for his first daily media scrum, and when he was asked about Andrew Benintendi as a potential leadoff hitter, Roenicke's initial answer had far more to do with Betts as a No. 2 hitter.

"I can't imagine a better leadoff hitter than Mookie," Roenicke said. "I know we switched and tried it differently the first couple of months last year (when Betts hit second). I think analytically, you try to figure out. 'OK, where does Mookie produce the most runs for you?'"

Well, not in Los Angeles, that's for sure.

The second day of camp, Roenicke was miked up for another daily scrum and got a question about the importance of confidence. Again, unprompted, his thoughts turned to his former right fielder.

"As great as Mookie was," Roenicke said — at least he was speaking in the past tense — "Mookie was always (saying), 'Oh, I can't hit anymore.' He goes 0-for-4 (and says), 'I can't hit anymore.' It's always a battle."

And on the third day, when Kevin Pillar showed up — ostensibly to back-up in center field and help out in right — Roenicke was asked about the challenges of center versus right at Fenway Park. Again ...

"Mookie," Roenicke said, "loved to play shallow in right field because he can run after a ball just like a center fielder would because there's all kinds of room. ... If you're a center fielder with good range and you get good jumps, to have room behind you is fun. I think Mookie, that's why he enjoyed it so much."

Saturday nearly brought a respite when Roenicke got through his press duties without mentioning Betts by name, but that was the day Alex Verdugo arrived and spoke to reporters. It was inevitable he would have something to say about the guy for whom he was traded.

“Obviously, Mookie Betts is one heck of a player,” Verdugo said.

Yes. Obviously.

On Sunday, it was again Roenicke’s turn to play the hits. Xander Bogaerts and Chris Sale were specifically asked about Betts that day, but Roenicke again mentioned him unprompted. Asked about the Red Sox outfield arrangement, Roenicke couldn’t help but use his former right fielder as a point of comparison.

“(The team) moved Mookie to center (when Jackie Bradley Jr. had a day off),” he said. “And Mookie played center really well, so it’s nice to be able to have guys you can move around and where they fit.”

Moving guys around is what got the Red Sox into this situation in the first place.

Ownership gave its annual spring training address on Monday, and Betts was an unavoidable topic for everyone.

Tom Werner: “We had repeated conversations with Mookie over a number of periods to try to hold onto him for the length of his baseball career.”

John Henry: “We made it clear to Mookie, I made it personally clear one-on-one, that we wanted to see him in a Red Sox uniform for the rest of his life.”

Sam Kennedy: “We love coming to the ballpark every day and watching Mookie Betts.”

Betts hadn’t been at the Red Sox ballpark in a week. It was only his name that was sticking around.

On Tuesday, more than a week after the trade became official, Roenicke was at it again, making an unprompted Betts reference when asked about Bogaerts’ steady personality.

“Mookie showed up to the ballpark basically in the same mood every day,” Roenicke said. “But it wasn’t as high (energy), smiling. Bogey shows up every day and as soon as you see him, there’s a smile.”

Wednesday was nearly the day Betts faded into the background, but at the end of a group interview in the Red Sox clubhouse, J.D. Martinez got a question about what made Betts so exciting and impressive.

“You never know,” Martinez said. “This could be the day Mookie goes off. That’s the thing we’re going to miss the most.”

At that point, it was still as if he’d never gone. And the next day, on Thursday, David Ortiz walked into camp with plenty to say.

“I know fans are hurting a little bit because we let the franchise player go somewhere else,” he said. “That’s the tricky part about baseball. You fall in love with players and the business side of it doesn’t allow people to keep up with it. That’s the one time you have to say goodbye.”

He said goodbye while saying the name “Mookie” 15 times in 35 minutes.

But on Friday, the name was nowhere to be found. The Red Sox played an exhibition opener against college kids, and Roenicke spent pregame talking mostly about his fifth-starter competition. His postgame scrum was focused on the minor leaguers who’d played well against Northeastern. Betts’ name might have been mentioned on TV, and he might have been on the minds of every fan watching at home and in the stands, but the Red Sox had a game to play, and they seemed ready to move on.

Just in time.

Who wants a spot in the Red Sox rotation? Handicapping a wide-open race

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. – Before the blockbuster trade became official, there remained a locker in the Red Sox spring training clubhouse with David Price's name at the top. He had a place in the room and a spot in the rotation, until one day the players showed up and things had shifted. Price was gone, lockers were reassigned, and the rotation was unmistakably short-handed.

Players talk a lot this time of year about controlling what they can control, about focusing on their own work and ignoring what's out of their hands. But there is no ignoring this: There's an opportunity out there in the Red Sox rotation, and someone has to take it.

"You have to be a realist at the end of the day," 27-year-old prospect Kyle Hart said. "I understand that there's 180, 200 innings that we were probably going to get out of D.P. – assuming strong health – that we need to fill now. I understand that there's a ton of good pitchers in this locker room who are going to be vying for those innings, whether it's a third of them, half of them, all of them, a tenth of them. Whatever it is.

"So, it's time to compete. And it was time to compete before that trade went down, but you've got to be real."

This is about as real as it gets in spring training. Roster competition is usually limited to two or three candidates for any given job. Maybe there's a platoon opportunity in the starting lineup, a two-way battle for a bench job, and a handful of guys fighting for a bullpen role that's going to fluctuate no matter who wins it on Opening Day.

But how often are more than a dozen players – everyone from first-round picks to minor league free agents to veterans willing to change roles – suddenly eyeing one job? And how often do all of them have a chance of winning it sooner or later?

"It's not just one or two guys," manager Ron Roenicke said.

Roenicke specifically mentioned – without naming names – a plan to get four or five fifth-starter candidates stretched out this spring, but there is also the possibility of using an opener in that role, and the inevitability of spot starter filling in from the minor leagues.

By our count, the possibilities reach into double figures, and their viability depends on what the Red Sox want to accomplish in the short term and the long term.

The early favorite (maybe): Ryan Weber

Roenicke was asked about the fifth starter opening each of his first two days on the job, and each time he singled out Weber as a strong candidate. Weber throws strikes, goes after hitters, and when his command is right, Roenicke said, he generates some easy outs.

But the term "favorite" might be too strong. At this time last year, Weber was a 28-year-old journeyman, seemingly just another nondescript minor league free agent in Red Sox camp, and it was a bit surprising when the team used him in a career-high 18 games last season. It was arguably more surprising that they kept him on the 40-man roster all offseason.

Turns out, the Red Sox had prioritized Weber the previous offseason. Pro scout Anthony Turco liked him quite a bit, the team targeted Weber early in minor league free agency, and assistant general manager Eddie Romero said Weber is "definitely in play" this season.

“Every year there’s always opportunities anywhere,” Weber said. “It still comes down to who has the hot hand, who’s pitching the best, but maybe more so this year opportunity-wise because he’s a big name and we need people to fill that spot. But whatever you do on the field is going to be the deciding factor.”

The prospects: Tanner Houck, Kyle Hart, Bryan Mata, Daniel McGrath

The inclusion of Mata is probably premature – he’s only 20 and has pitched in only 11 games above Class A – but a team official included him with Houck and Hart as an internal candidate to start in the majors at some point this season. McGrath, too, is probably a stretch due to limited Triple-A experience, but he did start Friday’s exhibition opener against Northeastern.

Houck is the biggest name of this bunch. The 2017 first-round pick worked mostly as a reliever in Triple-A last season, but he’s otherwise been a starter throughout his career. He started in the Arizona Fall League this offseason, and the Red Sox told him to prepare as a starter this spring.

“It’s easy to creep into that mindset of, it’s right there!” Houck said. “Go out and take it! Be over-the-top special! But I got where I am today because I was just doing what I naturally did. If you start trying to force things and do more than you can physically do, then it’s like, you’re overworking yourself. If you try to swing a golf club harder to hit it farther, you’re not going to hit it farther.”

Hart has never been nearly as touted as Houck, but he might be better positioned in the short term. A 19th-round pick in 2016, Hart pitched his way onto the 40-man roster – and onto the big-league radar – through pure performance and consistency, including a 3.95 ERA in Triple-A last season.

“I mean, they’re not going to keep a 19th-rounder around if you’re not performing,” Hart said. “So, there’s a little bit of fire under the hood just to keep training and keep raising the bar in terms of your own expectations, no matter what their expectations are.”

Hart’s a tall lefty and said he was looking forward to learning from Price this spring. Instead, he can compete for Price’s job.

The new guys: Matt Hall, Chris Mazza, Mike Kickham

A relatively minor trade, a waiver claim, and a minor league contract brought these three into the organization. All three have pitched in the majors, and although they’ve been primarily relievers in the big leagues, they’ve mostly started in the minors.

Hall and Mazza are on the 40-man roster, and Mazza had particularly good Triple-A numbers with the Mets last season – 3.67 ERA with a 1.09 WHIP – but it’s Hall who’s projected by FanGraphs to make the fifth-most starts on the Red Sox staff this season. FanGraphs has pegged Hall for 13 starts with a 4.60 ERA, worth almost 1 win above replacement level. That’s better than any of the Red Sox spot starters did last season.

“I just show up every day and try to get my work done; try to better myself every day,” Hall said. “And if the stars align, I’ll take it.”

The known depth: Mike Shawaryn, Hector Velazquez, Brian Johnson

Asked about his projected Triple-A rotation, Red Sox vice president of player development only smiled this week and said it’s almost impossible to predict. Too many guys who could start or relieve; too many who could be in the majors or the minors.

That includes these three familiar names who have done all of the above. Shawaryn converted to the bullpen last season, but he prepared this winter to become a starter again. Velazquez has an option remaining, and Johnson is no longer on the 40-man roster but could still pitch his way back into the mix.

“Whatever it takes to win, I’m ready for it,” Shawaryn said. “Whether that means a starter role or a reliever role or anything in between, it doesn’t matter. I’m ready to go.”

Interesting that Shawaryn would mention “anything in between” because something in between is a real possibility.

The openers: Marcus Walden, Austin Brice, Colten Brewer, Jeffrey Springs

We’re kind of guessing about who exactly might be a candidate for an opener role, but Roenicke has said openers will be a consideration. Springs served as an opener a couple of times with the Rangers in 2018, and both Brice and Brewer started games when they were minor leaguers (though they’ve been exclusively relievers in recent years).

The one that might make the most sense is Walden, who had a career year out of the Red Sox bullpen last season, but previously spent more than a decade starting games in the minors. He said Alex Cora actually approached him about becoming an opener last season, but it never came to fruition.

“If it happens that Roenicke wants to do that, I’m more than happy to go out and open,” Walden said. “I was actually talking to my wife about it (Wednesday) night. If that means I’m opening two out of five (games), that would be kind of cool, in my opinion. It would still be the same number of games I threw in last year. It would be the same number of innings pitched, especially if I go one (inning) on Day 2 and two on Day 5 or whatever it is. It’s just like if I was in the bullpen.”

If Walden or some other reliever is starting, that would leave room for one of the other rotation candidates to become a bulk reliever out of the bullpen.

The wild card: The open market

Remember that quote at the top of the story, the one with Hart talking about being realistic and recognizing the opportunity? Well, Hart also said this:

“You also have to be a realist about (the fact) we’ve got some money now. We’ve got a little bit of money. We could go out and get a guy. There’s also that possibility. So, you let yourself recognize what’s going on around you. Nobody’s that naïve, but at the same time, you’ve got to kind of locked in, stay in your lane, and let the decision-makers make the decisions.”

Speaking of those decision-makers, chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom doesn’t have much of a free agent pitching market left, and it’s unclear what might be available to him via trade, but he’s said he will keep looking for even more candidates to fill Price’s vacancy.

“Because of the shoes that David leaves behind, we’re going to continue to look outside the organization as well,” he said. “It’s too early to say where that will go.”