

The Boston Red Sox Monday, February 24, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

Jerry Narron brings some flair to Red Sox

Julian McWilliams

SARASOTA, Fla. — Manager Ron Roenicke always has been amazed by Jerry Narron’s writing on the wall.

It’s a product of patience and skill and is truly a form of art.

“You see his lineup cards?” Roenicke asked prior to Sunday’s 11-5 Grapefruit League loss to the Baltimore Orioles. “It’s incredible.”

Narron writes each of his lineup cards in calligraphy. It’s his shtick. He did it for the first time Sunday for the Sox, bringing a flair into his new role as bench coach. Roenicke attempted to emulate Narron’s style at one point, but it didn’t go as planned.

“It was embarrassing because they started selling these things to people up in the gift shops,” Roenicke explained, “and I was like ‘You got to be kidding me you can’t take this thing and sell it to somebody.’ So, I bought these sharpie calligraphy pens and I could slant it in a way and then write and it was passable. But then you look at Jerry’s and you go ‘Oh my gosh.’ ”

Together, Roenicke and Narron will try to write a fresh script for the Sox this season. The club officially announced the Narron hire Saturday afternoon. Narron is a baseball lifer. He debuted as a player in 1979 with the New York Yankees and as a coach in 1993. Narron and Roenicke have a history together. Narron served as Roenicke’s bench coach for the Milwaukee Brewers from 2011-2015.

“He’s super intelligent,” Roenicke said. “He’s got a really sharp baseball mind. The National League is different from the American League. I know a lot of [AL] managers say the National League isn’t tougher, it is. The National League is tougher to manage through a ball game. When do you double-switch, when do you not double-switch. Jerry was outstanding at that. Better than I am at it.”

And Narron is thrilled to be in his new role in the American League after spending the last 15-plus years in the NL.

“[I’m just looking to be] another set of eyes,” Narron said. “I bring experience. I just want to try to help Ron out and slow the game down for everybody here in the dugout during the games. I want to stay positive with these guys and keep them motivated.”

There’s a learning period, obviously. Assistant coach Ramon Vazquez is helping Narron get acclimated to the new system. That won’t be a problem, though.

Narron is used to change and survival in a game that has pushed out a lot of old-school coaches and managers.

“I’m not afraid of new things and trying new things,” Narron said. “I think some people that have been in the game a while they want to do it the way it used to be done. You see guys who have been around for a while they’re willing to make adjustments.”

Adjustments and change ruled the Sox' offseason script. On the field, though, Roenicke and Narron are now the lead writers.

Slow start for Mazza

Chris Mazza is vying for a spot on the Sox' roster. The Sox have a hole in the No. 5 spot of the rotation and are uncertain if they are going to use an opener or a standard starter. Mazza could be an option. Yet his first start Sunday against the Baltimore Orioles wasn't a convincing one.

Mazza went two innings and allowed a run. He loaded the bases in the first after back-to-back singles and a walk. Mazza got out of it, however, with a strikeout and a double-play ball to end the frame. He issued another walk and single to start out the second and then a groundout plated the first Orioles run.

It's the first start of the spring and Mazza will have more chances to make an impression. Roenicke confirmed that he's one of the guys the Sox will take a hard look at this spring. In Mazza's case, he can't afford a slow start. Roenicke drew on his experience as a player.

"When a guy is fighting for a job he needs to be ready to show people as soon as he can," Roenicke said. "Not on my end, but on the player's end. I was always going into a camp trying to be one of the 25 guys on the roster. So, I couldn't afford to start out slowly and then finish out strong because by then they may have already made their decision."

This is all still fresh for Mazza. The Sox acquired him off waivers from the New York Mets in late December. At the time, he planned on competing for a spot in the bullpen. But once the Sox traded David Price to the Los Angeles Dodgers, that then placed Mazza in the conversation as a potential option at starter.

"I'm just going to go out and still do my job as best I can," Mazza said after his start. "If I get the spot, I get the spot. If not, we still got a long season. I definitely feel like I'm in the mix. At the end of the day, the best guy is going to get the job and that's how it should be."

Valdez claimed

The Sox claimed righthander Sox claim righthander Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Seattle Mariners Sunday. He pitched 16 innings in the majors last season, compiling a 3.94 ERA and striking out 18. Dustin Pedroia (knee) was moved to the 60-day IL. Roenicke described it as not a surprise. The Globe reported prior to spring training that Pedroia experienced a setback. Not wearing his high-tech sleeve on his left elbow, Chris Sale threw a bullpen session to Christian Vazquez for about 10 minutes under the watchful eye of pitching coach Dave Bush . . . Roenicke said the team will sit down with Sale Monday and map out the next steps. Those plans will include another bullpen for Sale. Eduardo Rodriguez (knee) felt good after his bullpen Saturday. He'll pitch in a simulated game Monday and if all goes well, he'll fall back into the spring training rotation. Xander Bogaerts (left ankle soreness) is still progressing. He hit in the batting cages. If all went well Sunday, he will hit on the field Monday. Players slated for play against the Minnesota Twins Monday: Nate Eovaldi, Vazquez, Mitch Moreland, Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., and Kevin Pillar. Slated to go on the trip for the game against the Rays: Rusney Castillo, Michael Chavis, Kevin Plawecki, Tzu-Wei Lin. The annual union meeting is Tuesday in the clubhouse.

Mistakes help Jeter Downs boost his learning curve

Julian McWilliams

SARASOTA, Fla. — Jeter Downs is close friends with Torii Hunter Jr., son of former All-Star center fielder Torii Hunter Sr. The two were drafted a year apart: Hunter, in 2016 and Downs, 2017. They are both navigating their way through the minor league ranks. Hunter hopes he lands in Southern California with the Los Angeles Angels' big league squad at some point, while Downs now has shifted sight to Boston and is the can't-miss prospect of the two.

His game caught the eye of the eldest Hunter, who is a mentor to many young players across baseball, including New York Yankees outfielder Aaron Hicks.

“I actually ran into Torii Hunter in my hotel last week,” Downs said. “He told me to make all the mistakes you can now in the minor leagues. Try new things. I’ve taken that to heart. So, I feel really good about that.”

Two games into the spring Downs has made his share of mistakes.

He booted a grounder in Friday’s game against Northeastern. He got his feet tangled going back on a pop-up during Sunday’s 11-5 loss to the Baltimore Orioles. Had it not been for outfielder Marcus Wilson’s impressive sliding grab, the ball would have dropped in for possibly a double. Downs capped his day off going 0 for 3. In his final at-bat, he struck out swinging on a fastball located at the top of the zone. His electric bat speed couldn’t get to it. Still, this is something he’s taking in stride. There’s a progression period for a young player of his caliber. One that he’s embracing.

“It’s a kid’s dream to go out, play and have fun and enjoy it,” Downs said. “Being around all these guys and getting to see them play and stuff like that. It’s a new experience. The trial-and-error of baseball is pretty cool, so you try one thing one day and it might not feel good. Then you try it again in two weeks and it feels great.”

Downs has a quiet yet confident demeanor. He’s still just 21 years old. In a clubhouse full of giants, many of whom have a World Series title, you still see Downs. He exists. His presence doesn’t hide in the shadows. His manager at this moment, Ron Roenicke, is relishing the thought of getting to see him play on a more consistent basis while he’s still in big league camp.

“I like it,” Roenicke said. “I think any time you get somebody from somewhere who your organization has really good things to say about, it’s fun for us to see what they see and see how it plays out with the rest of the guys.

Downs was originally drafted by the Cincinnati Reds, then traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers only to be dealt again. He isn’t a newbie when it comes to trades, but he’ll forever be linked to the trade of a franchise pillar in Mookie Betts that drew large criticisms from the Sox fanbase. Realistically, Sox fans still yearn for Betts, not Alex Verdugo, Downs, and Connor Wong.

But this is when the advice and acknowledgment from a veteran like Hunter Sr. can pay dividends for a player like Downs.

“He actually mentioned that he’s been watching me because he’s working with the Twins,” an excited Downs said. “In this game, the more you play the better you get and the more you learn.”

He’s learning.

*** *The Boston Herald***

How will the Red Sox keep Nathan Eovaldi healthy in 2020?

Jason Mastrodonato

FORT MYERS — Nathan Eovaldi isn’t the worrying type.

Not even after Chris Sale got an injection in his elbow and David Price was traded and Eduardo Rodriguez slipped and hurt his knee did Eovaldi suddenly feel the need to tip-toe around spring training to avoid getting hurt.

Getting hurt isn't something he thinks about.

It wasn't on his mind when he threw 97 pitches in relief on just one day's rest in Game 6 of the 2018 World Series, nor was it on his mind when he was rushing back from elbow surgery last May and suffered biceps tendinitis in the process.

He wasn't thinking about getting hurt when he decided he was going to skip the proper starting pitcher build-up last summer and instead told Alex Cora he wanted to return as a reliever, a role he hadn't held regularly since he was an 18-year-old in rookie ball.

Asked this weekend if he had any regrets, Eovaldi shook his head.

"At the time, I felt like I was ready to go," he told the Herald. "You don't know when you're going to get hurt. You could go out there and be sore but be perfectly fine. And you can be sore and get hurt. You can be perfectly healthy and get hurt.

"I don't think about injuries. If it happens, it happens. Then I'll deal with it at the time. But when I'm on the mound competing, I'm not worried about it."

Eovaldi's teflon approach to baseball is what makes him so beloved by his teammates. And there's no hiding the role his mentality (along with a 100-mph fastball) played in the Red Sox signing him to a four-year contract that'll pay him \$17 million a year through 2022.

But how do the Red Sox keep him healthy?

Given there doesn't seem to be an answer for that, and that he's averaged just 126 innings per season over his career, and that five different teams haven't been able to turn him into a reliable 33-start machine out of the rotation, maybe expectations need to change.

Perhaps it's not Eovaldi who is underperforming, but the Red Sox who have over-projected.

They'll enter the season with injury questions around Sale's elbow, Rodriguez's knee and Eovaldi's, well, general propensity to get hurt. Rick Porcello and Price are gone. But the only starter they brought in via free agency was Martin Perez.

And the Sox say they're trying to compete in 2020.

As the rotation struggled without him early last year, and when the bullpen ranked second-worst in the majors with a whopping 17 blown saves entering July, Eovaldi badly wanted to contribute.

"That's what I battled with all last year, the injuries, coming back from it, rushing a little too fast, having a different role, trying to help out the bullpen, coming back to the rotation," he said. "The biggest thing is staying healthy to perform at your best."

Cora said last July that bringing Eovaldi back as a reliever would be "the quickest way for him to contribute."

Eovaldi remembers it somewhat differently, noting that it was his suggestion to Cora that set the reliever plan in motion.

"I reached out, I told AC," he said. "At the time, our bullpen was struggling. We didn't have that depth. We had different guys coming up and down, leaving it all out there for us. I told (Cora), I said, 'hey, I don't have to just come back in the rotation. I can build up out of the 'pen.'"

The decision seemed desperate. Pressure was building for former Sox boss Dave Dombrowski to trade for a reliever or give up on the season entirely. The Sox were 45-40 and 10 games back in the American League East.

But it was Eovaldi who once again wanted to put the team on his back.

“I thought that’d benefit the team the most,” Eovaldi said. “I didn’t do as well as I wanted to, but overall I think I did good enough to help the team out. Towards the end of the season I was able to go back to the rotation. And the bullpen was outstanding toward the end of the year. I feel like I served a purpose.”

Interim manager Ron Roenicke said this weekend that, “it’s hard to say exactly what the better value is, a good starter vs. a closer,” and, “we know he can do either one.”

Asked if he intends to be a starter all year, Eovaldi said firmly, “Yeah.”

Roenicke said the team hopes Eovaldi feels more comfortable to communicate with the training staff this year.

“I think it’s just constant feedback, what he’s thinking and what we’re thinking,” Roenicke said.

The Red Sox know who Eovaldi is. They love him for who he is. They paid him handsomely for who he is.

They should also know who he is not.

“I try not to think about anything like that, try not to add extra pressure to myself,” he said. “It’s one start at a time.”

Chris Mazza: Bricklayer by winter, pitcher by summer

Tom Keegan

SARASOTA — This is what Red Sox fifth-starter candidate Chris Mazza’s smoothest offseason in several years looked like: He became engaged. He pitched winter ball in the Dominican Republic. He was claimed off waivers from the Mets by the Red Sox on Dec. 20.

It’s what he didn’t do that made this past offseason different. He didn’t work for his father’s business, R. Mazza Masonry in Concord, California.

“My father’s a mason and I’ve worked for him every offseason since 2012, except this last one,” Mazza said. “I try. Give me enough time and I can do it, but I can’t do it as quickly or nicely as he can.”

Does he miss the work?

“I don’t miss it at all,” he said. “It was my lifting program. Pick up 80-pound sacks of mortar, all the brick, you’ve got to move the material, make scaffolding. You do not want to go to the gym afterward. That was my strength and conditioning.”

It’s not that Mazza, 30, is immune to hard work. He would have given up his main career by now if that were the case. Instead, he persevered, making his major league debut at the age of 29 on June 29, 2019, with the Mets against the Braves.

“It was a little bit of a blur at first,” Mazza said. “I remember giving up a run in my first three pitches and then settling down and going four scoreless after that. Freddie Freeman was my first strikeout, future Hall of Famer, so that’s one I’ll never forget.”

The Red Sox are Mazza's seventh organization, five affiliated with Major League Baseball, plus two independent leagues.

When organizations released him, putting an end to his small minor league income, he pitched for much smaller paychecks with the unaffiliated San Rafael Paifics and Southern Maryland Blue Crabs.

Now he's trying to earn a spot at the back end of the Sox rotation, a crowded competition. Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke so far has not listed all the names in the competition, saying he's afraid he would forget somebody, but he did say that Mazza is "definitely in the mix."

Eduardo Rodriguez initially was scheduled to make the second start of the Red Sox exhibition season, but was pushed back because he injured his knee and Mazza replaced him. As planned, Mazza pitched two innings Sunday. He allowed three hits, two walks and one run in the Red Sox 11-5 loss to the Orioles at Ed Smith Stadium.

The Orioles loaded the bases against him with nobody out in the first inning on two ground singles and a walk and he escaped without allowing a run. He struck out a swinging Pedro Severino for the first out and then made a nice play on a comebacker off the bat of Dwight Smith Jr. for a 1-2-3 double play assisted by catcher Kevin Plawecki.

The Orioles put two runners in scoring position with nobody out in the second and came out of the inning with just one run.

"With me being a sinkerball guy, I know I'm going to get a lot of groundballs," Mazza said. "Sometimes they're going to find holes and today they were, but the biggest thing is you've got to be able to minimize. Bases loaded once, then runners on second and third, giving up one run, I'll take that all day."

In the event Red Sox rookie chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom either trades for a fifth starter before the season starts or the Sox decide to use an opener every fifth day, nobody will win the competition, but Mazza said he doesn't allow himself to think about those things.

"I was planning on hopefully fighting for a bullpen spot at the time (he was claimed by the Red Sox)," Mazza said. "We had our five guys in the rotation set in stone until they traded (David) Price. I'm going to try to do my job the best I can. If I get the spot, I get the spot. If not, I've still got a long season."

As Roenicke said, Mazza is "in the mix."

"Yeah, I definitely feel like I'm in the mix and we've got a lot of other good pitchers," Mazza said. "We're all teammates. We all want each other to do well and at the end of the day the best guy's going to get the job and that's how it should be."

Mazza sets high goals for himself or he wouldn't have made it all the way to the big leagues, but he knows that becoming the family's best baseball player is not within the realm of possibility. His grandmother was Joe DiMaggio's cousin.

"My grandmother's mother was a DiMaggio," Mazza said. "I never met Dom. I met Joe once when I was 6 and I didn't realize who I was talking to. I was 6 years old. There's not a whole lot I remember from when I was 6 years old."

Jeter Downs makes exhibition debut with Red Sox

Tom Keegan

SARASOTA, Fla. — On the day Mookie Betts made his Dodgers exhibition debut in Glendale, Arizona, the biggest name in the Red Sox lineup was Jeter Downs, one of three players acquired in exchange for Betts, David Price and half of the left-handed pitcher's remaining contract.

Playing shortstop and batting fifth in an 11-5 exhibition loss to the Orioles at sunny Ed Smith Stadium, Downs went 0-for-3 Sunday. He flied out to right leading off the second, grounded back to the pitcher for the final out of the fourth, and struck out for the final out of the sixth to strand Jarren Duran (2-for-3, triple) at second base.

Downs' results were of little consequence to the main purpose of him getting experience with the big-league club as a non-roster invitee to camp. He is not competing for a big-league job. Simply being here, the hope of the organization is, will benefit the middle infielder who was drafted in the first round by the Reds and then dealt to the Dodgers.

"The main thing is to be along with these guys so that when he gets a chance again the intimidation isn't there being with these big-leaguers and he's comfortable," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "When these guys come into the big leagues and they're comfortable, they perform really well. So hopefully we get him to the point where you're confident with his game, but (also) the confidence that he belongs here and the guys accept him and he's comfortable."

It also gives the manager a chance to form his own opinion on the prospect's prospects.

"Any time somebody from somewhere else the organization has really good things to say about (a prospect), it's fun for us to see basically what they see and we get to see how it plays out with the rest of us," Roenicke said.

Downs said veterans already have made it easy on him to fit in.

"Totally easy. They've been really good to me," Downs said. "All these guys have been really cool and they welcomed me with open arms, and I've talked to most of the guys so far already. It's been a really cool experience so far."

Sox claim pitcher, put Pedroia on 60-day IL

The Red Sox claimed right-hander Phillips Valdez off of waivers from the Mariners. Valdez, 28, pitched in the big leagues for the first time last season with the Rangers. In 11 appearances covering 16 innings, Valdez walked nine, struck out 18 and posted a 3.94 ERA. A native of San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic, Valdez has split time between starting and relieving during his time in the minors.

To make room for Valdez on the 40-man roster, the Sox placed second baseman Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day injured list. Signed through 2021, Pedroia has been limited to nine games the past two seasons and his injured knee, which has jeopardized his career, has not responded well to multiple surgeries.

"The knee's still not right, so this move was going to be made," Roenicke said. "We'll touch base with him here shortly and see how he's doing."

Duran, Duran

Sox left-handed-hitting outfield prospect Jarren Duran stood out at the plate, on the bases and in the field during Sunday's exhibition. He showed good speed running the bases on a deep triple to center, made a nice catch against the wall in center and went 2 for 3.

Duran was a seventh-round draft choice in 2018 out of Long Beach State.

"Exciting player that tool-wise is as good as it gets," Roenicke said. "And that type of player, I mean, he's thrilling to watch. We saw him run a little last year because he hit a couple of gappers for us, but today was pretty fun to watch him run to third. It's just the tools, he's one of those special guys you know that if it all comes together you've got a superstar."

Duran split last season between Single-A Salem and Double-A Portland, played 132 games, scored 90 runs and posted a .775 OPS. He struck out 128 times.

Smooth Sale-ing in Fort Myers

Chris Sale had a “really good bullpen” at Sox headquarters Sunday, according to what pitching coach Dave Bush told Roenicke about the lefty who had been set back by pneumonia.

“So I think we can move on,” Roenicke said. “We’ll probably have a conversation with him tomorrow... and then we’ll plan what he’s going to do next. We’ll probably throw him another bullpen, but it will be an up and down so we’ll rest him in between and keep progressing him, see what he’s thinking. He’ll hear what we’re thinking and try to come up with something that makes sense.”

E-Rod, Bogaerts on the mend

Roenicke said Eduardo Rodriguez came out of his Saturday bullpen session “really well” and added that his progress back from a sore knee will be checked again Monday, when he is scheduled to pitch in simulated game conditions on a back field. If all goes well there, he’ll be scheduled to join the rotation, possibly Saturday.

Shortstop Xander Bogaerts’ exhibition debut could fall at about the same time as Rodriguez’s.

“He’s coming along,” Roenicke said. “Obviously, we would like to see him out here already, but the foot’s getting better all the time and he’s hitting in the cages.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox place Dustin Pedroia (left knee) on the 60-day injured list, claim pitcher Phillips Valdez

Bill Koch

Dustin Pedroia will miss Opening Day for the third straight season.

The Red Sox second baseman has been placed on the 60-day injured list due to recurring left knee troubles. Boston cleared a 40-man roster spot to claim right-hander Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Mariners.

Pedroia underwent left knee joint preservation surgery in August 2019, and the Boston Globe reported he suffered a “significant setback” in January while attempting to make his latest return. The Red Sox have identified a host of candidates to take his place, including free agent addition Jose Peraza, Michael Chavis, CJ Chatham, Tzu-Wei Lin and, eventually, former Dodgers prospect Jeter Downs.

Pedroia has two years remaining on the eight-year contract extension he signed prior to the 2014 campaign. He counts for an average of \$13.75 million toward the Competitive Balance Tax through the 2021 season, and Boston is on the hook for every penny regardless of whether or not Pedroia plays again. That’s looked increasingly unlikely over a two-year period where Pedroia has appeared in just nine games.

Pedroia’s physical breakdown began long before Manny Machado buried his spikes below his fellow infielder’s left knee on a 2017 slide in Baltimore. He averaged just 117 games per season from 2015-17 and has managed just one season with an OPS of better than .819 since 2011. Pedroia’s last Gold Glove came in 2014, and the last of his four American League All-Star appearances was in 2013.

Pedroia’s first five full seasons made him a franchise favorite. He was the A.L. Rookie of the Year in 2007, the A.L. Most Valuable Player in 2008 and claimed the first of his three World Series rings. Pedroia’s 1,512 career games with the Red Sox rank him 11th in franchise history – former teammate Jason Varitek sits 10th at 1,546.

Downs came to Boston in a five-player trade that sent Mookie Betts, David Price and \$48 million to Los Angeles. Outfielder Alex Verdugo and catcher Connor Wong were also among the return to the Red Sox, who slipped under the first threshold of the CBT as a result of the deal. Contracts like those given to Pedroia, Price, Chris Sale and Nathan Eovaldi helped put Boston in a bit of a predicament regarding its payroll situation.

Valdez is a 28-year-old right-hander who made his debut with the Rangers last season, logging 11 appearances in relief. He posted a 3.94 earned-run average and collected 18 strikeouts in 16 innings. Valdez also allowed 17 hits and walked nine, posting a 1.63 WHIP.

Valdez was an international signing by the Indians out of the Dominican Republic in 2008. He's largely reliant on two pitches, using his sinking fastball and changeup a combined 94.5% of the time. Per Baseball Savant, Valdez's fastball ranks in the 89th percentile in terms of spin rate.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox's Michael Chavis hates looking at his stats, has always felt more comfortable vs. lefties despite reverse splits

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox right-handed slugger Michael Chavis posted reverse splits as a rookie in 2019.

He hit better against right-handed pitchers (.266/.347/.427/.774 line, 271 plate appearances) than he did vs. left-handed pitchers (.226/.261/.481/.742 line, 111 plate appearances).

"That's interesting because I've always felt more comfortable against lefties," Chavis told MassLive.com. "Just because I like the idea of the breaking ball coming in to me."

Chavis' batting average also was 27 points higher against righties than lefties in Double A and Triple A combined.

"Actually I do know the answer to that. The answer is I feel good against lefties and I try to do too much," Chavis said. "I really like the idea of breaking balls coming in to me and all that. I really think it's just within myself that I get excited and I try to do too much with it just because you don't see lefties as often."

Chavis could face a lot of right-handers and left-handers this year as he rotates between first and second base. He might start at first base against lefties on days when left-handed hitting Mitch Moreland sits. He could start against righties at second base instead of right-handed hitting Jose Peraza whose career OPS vs. lefties is 73 points higher than his career mark vs. righties.

"Y'all worry about that stuff more than we do," Chavis said about the position he'll play in 2020. "As long as I'm in the lineup, I'm gonna be happy. So I don't really worry about where I'm gonna be at, at this point."

Asked if he wants to see his reverse splits, Chavis replied, "No, I don't. I hate stats."

Why doesn't he like to look at his statistics?

"I hate it because when I look at it, I just try and chase numbers," Chavis said. "Then I'll be looking up there after every at-bat seeing if my average changed and stuff like that. I play my best. I'm literally just having fun and I don't really worry about much."

Chavis will look to improve on a solid rookie year. He batted .254 with a .322 on-base percentage, .444 slugging percentage, .766 OPS, 18 homers, 10 doubles, one triple and 58 RBIs in 95 games.

"I was trying to clean up some moves in my swing that were unnecessary and create some length," Chavis said about his offseason work. "The technical term is slack. I had slack in my swing. So when I would go to swing, instead of just staying connected and firing, I would go to fire and my hands would just kind of drag behind me. Just a little bit of slack. So for repeatability and consistency, that's obviously not good. So this offseason, I didn't change my swing or anything but I just tried to clean it up and make it more consistent and repeatable."

Boston Red Sox's Nick Longhi (born in Springfield) returns 3 years after trade, excited for Double-A roommate Rafael Devers

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Nick Longhi's dream of playing his home games at Fenway Park appeared over when the Boston Red Sox traded him to the Reds for international amateur signing bonus pool space July 2, 2017. The lifelong Red Sox, who was born in Springfield, Mass., described it as "a little bit of a hard pill to swallow."

He had made it to Double-A Portland by age 21 and MLB Pipeline.com ranked him Boston's No. 9 prospect during the first half of 2017.

"Being younger, it hurt a little bit because wherever you get drafted you think you're gonna wear that uniform for your whole career," Longhi told MassLive.com.

Three years later, and one Tommy John surgery later, the 24-year-old Longhi is back with the Red Sox organization. The outfielder/first baseman signed a minor league deal with an invite to major league spring training camp.

He posted solid numbers last year at Triple-A Louisville. He batted .283 with a .336 on-base percentage, .463 slugging percentage, .798 OPS, 28 doubles, 12 homers, three triples and 51 RBIs in 111 games (424 plate appearances). But the Reds didn't add him to their 40-man roster and he became a free agent.

"They (the Reds) made a lot of acquisitions," Longhi said. "Again, it's a business. It ended up being a logjam over there at my position and I'm now back over here."

"A lot of my buddies that I played with at Louisville had unbelievable years," he added. "The writing was on the wall that it wasn't going to happen. But I just wanted to put myself in the best position to get a decent minor league deal and have another place to play next year. That's what I did."

Multiple teams called him soon after he became a free agent. Returning to the Red Sox made all the sense in the world.

Longhi and his family moved to Florida when he was an infant. But his dad Tom Longhi raised him as a Boston Red Sox fan. The Red Sox initially drafted him in 2013 and offered him a \$440,000 signing bonus. He decided to forgo an LSU baseball scholarship to turn pro.

"The teams I was talking to in free agency, it was all kind of the same: the offers, the way they saw me, how they planned on using me throughout the year," Longhi said. "At the end of the day, I was very comfortable with the Red Sox. I had a very good rapport with a lot of the people. My first stint here with the Red Sox, they were nothing but a classy organization, very transparent and honest with me. I felt very comfortable coming back here."

Rafael Devers' former roommate

Longhi was living with a host family in Portland along with Rafael Devers and Joseph Monge when the Red Sox traded him.

Boston traded three prospects that day to add to their international pool space so they could sign three elite teenage prospects from Venezuela: Daniel Flores, Antoni Flores and Danny Diaz.

"I had to try to leave everything behind and say, 'Hey, it's a business. The team's going to make decisions based on what they need and what they need in the future,'" Longhi said. "The hardest part, growing up a Sox fan and getting drafted here, was really convincing myself it is a business and everybody in the front office has a job to do. Just understanding that."

Longhi played only seven games for the Reds' Double-A affiliate, Pensacola, after the trade. He got off to a strong start, going 6-for-19 (.316) with a .409 on-base percentage, one homer, one double and seven RBIs in seven games for Pensacola. But he suffered an elbow injury July 13, 2017, requiring season-ending Tommy John surgery.

"Before that happened, it was actually probably the best my arm felt that season," Longhi said. "And it just gave out that night. I went and got it worked on, stretched out. It just happened to give out."

While Longhi was sidelined, Double-A roommate Devers made the jump to the big leagues after 77 games at Portland and nine games at Triple-A Pawtucket.

"It was especially cool because as a teammate and living with him, you get to know him off the field," Longhi said. "He's such a great guy. All the things he does and how he is as a friend, you can't wish anything but success for him. So when he really started to take off and he really started to get big and do his thing, I was nothing but happy for him. He's an excellent ballplayer and he's an excellent friend. Just a great guy."

Longhi played on the loaded 2015 Low-A Greenville team that included Devers, Yoan Moncada, Michael Chavis, Andrew Benintendi, Michael Kopech, Ty Buttrey and Mauricio Dubon.

"They all had super special qualities," Longhi said. "You're like, 'Hey, this is gonna play for a long time at a high level.' Whether it be Moncada being so athletic and what he does or Devers, the way he swings the bat. Benintendi, the way he plays the game. Being around those guys, you just see they have tools that are gonna play up for a long time. It's kind of exciting to see from the background: how they've worked, their preparation."

'I knew something was really wrong'
Longhi's elbow injury happened on a throw from the outfield to home plate.

"It just snapped on the throw," he said. "It gave out on me and the ball just kind of ballooned out of my hand to home plate. It had no zip on it — no nothing. It kind of trickled into home plate and everybody kind of asked, 'Are you OK?' I was like, 'Yeah, I'm fine.' I ended up playing three more innings in the field and took one more at-bat."

He said he caught a few more flyouts after feeling the snap.

"Luckily ... they were all with two outs so I didn't have to throw it," Longhi said. "And I took one more at-bat and as soon as I hit the ball, I knew. I knew something was really wrong."

Renowned surgeon Dr. James Andrews performed the procedure.

"I kind of had a burning, almost like a tingling feel all the way into my last three fingers," Longhi said. "It kind of went away when I was standing still and wasn't doing anything. But as soon as I went to move my arm, I could feel it every single time. I kind of had a pretty good idea after the throw that something was a

little more wrong than normal. It wasn't just normal arm pain. After I took my last at-bat, I knew that something was really wrong."

'I still feel like I'm in a good spot'

Longhi comes from a golf family. His dad Tom, a longtime Springfield resident before moving to Florida, worked as a golf pro at Tekoa Country Club in Westfield for 12 years. Tommy has been a PGA professional for more than 40 years.

His mother Debbie played at FSU and in the LPGA Futures Tour.

Nick Longhi has a 6-8 golf handicap, he said.

Could he pursue a professional golf career after he retires from baseball someday?

"I actually think so," Longhi said. "That would be something that really intrigues me. And I love the game just because of the mental aspect of it. If you get yourself in trouble, you've got to get yourself out. Definitely after my career — whether it be no time in the big leagues or 10 years — I think it's something I would like to pursue after I'm done playing."

Longhi has worked with Warren Bottke, Brooks Koepka's former swing coach, the past couple offseasons.

"I think if I practiced a little bit more and put the effort that I put into baseball into golf, that I could be a decent golfer. I think I might have a chance to play in one of the lower tours. PGA tour is quite a stretch, but you never know."

For now, playing Major League Baseball remains the dream.

"There's obviously a lot of good players in front of me and around me," Longhi said. "It just boils down to going out and playing baseball. Every day I have that opportunity to play good and maybe force their hand into doing something. But it's all up to me, how I work, my preparation and what happens on the field. I'm just gonna go out there and run through a wall if I have to."

He'll likely begin 2020 at Pawtucket.

"I still feel like I'm in a good spot even though I've been in the minors for a while," Longhi said. "Being young, the only thing I can do is just try to play as good as I can and wait for an opportunity. See what happens and be ready when the opportunity presents itself."

Boston Red Sox roster moves: Dustin Pedroia placed on 60-day IL to make room for new RHP Phillips Valdez

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox claimed right-handed pitcher Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Mariners and placed second baseman Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day injured list Sunday.

Valdez, 28, had recently been designated for assignment by Seattle. The Dominican righty made his major league debut for the Rangers in 2019, posting a 3.94 ERA and striking out 18 batters in 16 relief innings.

Valdez worked primarily as a starter in the minors in each of the last two seasons, making 33 starts in the Nationals and Rangers systems. He'll join a handful of other newcomers to the Sox' pitching staff and could compete for the team's open fifth rotation spot or serve as a bulk pitcher if the Sox opt to begin the year with an opener in their rotation.

Originally signed by the Indians as an international free agent in 2008, Valdez has spent time with five different organizations and has pitched in parts of 10 minor league seasons. The Mariners claimed him off waivers from Texas on Nov. 1.

Pedroia, who suffered a serious setback in his rehab from multiple knee injuries over the winter, has not yet reported to camp and appears unlikely to do so. The 36-year-old has appeared in just nine games over the last two seasons due to issues with his left knee and will not factor into Boston's plans early in the year.

The move to the 60-day IL is largely a procedural move but means Pedroia will be unavailable to the Red Sox for the first two months of the regular season. Players on the 60-day injured list don't count against Boston's 40-man roster.

Once Valdez arrives in camp, the Red Sox will have 67 players in camp (40 on the 40-man roster and 27 non-roster invitees). If Pedroia comes to Fort Myers, he will be the 68th player in major league spring training.

*** *RedSox.com***

Jeter Downs heeding wisdom from Torii Hunter

Ian Browne

SARASOTA, Fla. -- At some point in the baseball career of Jeter Downs, an early-morning bus ride of over an hour to play in a Grapefruit League game will feel like monotony.

But that time is off in the distance for the No. 44 overall prospect, per MLB Pipeline.

To start at shortstop and bat fifth against the Orioles on Sunday afternoon represented a joyful opportunity for the 21-year-old, who was a key piece acquired from the Dodgers in that blockbuster trade for Mookie Betts and David Price.

Downs is reveling in everything that comes with being in big league camp for the first time. And it hardly mattered that he went 0-for-3 in Boston's 11-5 loss to the Orioles.

The experiences are what matter right now.

"It's a kid's dream just going out there and playing and being around all the other guys and getting to watch them play and stuff like that. It's a great experience," said Downs.

It turns out that someone unaffiliated with the Red Sox eased the mind of the top prospect in a chance encounter recently.

"I actually ran into Torii Hunter at my hotel last weekend, and he told me to make all the mistakes you can now in the Minor Leagues, so try new things," Downs said. "I've taken that to heart. I feel really good about that. The trial and error of baseball is pretty cool."

One of those mistakes was on display on Sunday, when Downs ranged back for a popup and collided with left fielder Marcus Wilson, who wound up making the catch. But there was no injury on the play, and Downs came off the field smiling.

"You try one thing one day, it might not feel good. You try it again in two weeks, and then it feels great. He told me to try as many things as you can and make all the mistakes you can now and learn from them and keep going," Downs said.

Downs had never met Hunter before, but he has competed against Torii Hunter Jr. for a long time and considers him a good friend. It meant something to Downs that he is on the radar of a player who had such a solid Major League career.

“[Hunter] actually mentioned he’s been watching me,” said Downs. “I know he works for the Twins.”

There will be a lot of eyes on Downs during his stay in big league camp, including those of interim manager Ron Roenicke.

“Well, I like it,” Roenicke said. “I think any time you get somebody from somewhere else who your organization has really good things to say about, it’s fun for us to see basically what they see and see how it plays out with the rest of the guys.”

What the Red Sox want for Downs in this Spring Training is just for him to gain comfort in this environment.

“So when he gets the chance again, the intimidation isn’t there of being with these big leaguers and he’s comfortable,” Roenicke said. “These young guys coming to the big leagues, when they’re comfortable they perform really well, so hopefully we’ll get him to the point where he’ll get confident with his game but confident that he belongs here and the guys accept him and he’s comfortable.”

With a combination of speed and power, Downs is the type of prospect who will create a lot of excitement among Red Sox fans. However, he doesn’t come across as the type who gets caught up in the hype.

This is his current mindset.

“Learn as much as possible,” Downs said. “Just ask as many questions as I can.”

In the meantime, Downs will welcome those bus rides that his veteran teammates will be all too happy to avoid.

“Hey, in this game, the more you play, the better you get and the more you learn,” Downs said. “I’ll do them all.”

Mazza, Duran impress; Pedroia to 60-day IL

Ian Browne

SARASOTA, Fla. – Righty Chris Mazza had pitched in the Minors for parts of eight seasons before at last making his Major League debut at age 29 for the Mets in 2019.

When Mazza was claimed by the Red Sox just before Christmas, it meant he was joining his fifth professional franchise. But this opportunity could be just the one for the 27th-round pick of the Twins in the 2011 Draft.

The Red Sox have wide-open competitions for the final spot in the rotation and multiple spots in the bullpen, and Mazza formally entered the competition by starting in Sunday’s 11-5 loss to the Orioles.

It looked like the righty was doomed for a forgettable afternoon when he loaded the bases with nobody out in the first. But he turned things around quickly, striking out Pedro Severino and then starting a 1-2-3 double play off the bat of Dwight Smith Jr.

“It’s always good to get out of a little jam like that,” said Mazza. “With the way that I throw, if I have one out, and I have runners on, I have a chance to get a double play. I always know that I’m one pitch away, and I was fortunate to make a play and give a good feed to [Kevin] Plawecki and ended up turning the double play and that was big.”

There was more trouble to start the second with two on and none out. But Mazza again was able to minimize the situation, giving up a fielder's choice RBI.

The two innings were effective enough to keep him in contention.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke, who had to battle for every Major League at-bat he got in his career, appreciates Mazza's journey.

"You know, we had [Ryan] Brasier a couple of years ago, and he opened up our eyes in Spring Training coming over from the Minor League side, and Braze ends up being who he [was in 2018]," Roenicke said. "I like it. I just think that guys that hang in there, you hope eventually they get their opportunity somewhere and when they come through, that's pretty cool."

When Mazza was first claimed by the Red Sox, his sole thought was to try to win a bullpen spot. But his options became more wide-ranging on Feb. 10, when David Price was traded to the Dodgers, leaving a vacancy in the back of the rotation.

The Red Sox have no obvious candidates to fill the role, leaving Mazza as one of many deemed to be in the mix.

"Yeah, I definitely feel like I'm in the mix and he's got a lot of other guys to choose from," Mazza said. "We're all teammates, we all want each other to do well. At the end of the day, the best guy is going to get the job, and that's how it should be."

Duran dazzles

With Jackie Bradley Jr. eligible for free agency at the end of the 2020 season, center-field prospect Jarren Duran is a player you should keep an eye on this spring.

The 23-year-old out of Long Beach State (seventh-round Draft pick in 2018) certainly turned heads on Sunday against the Orioles. In the bottom of the third, he made a tremendous over-the-shoulder catch in front of the wall to take a hit away from Trey Mancini. And in the top of the fourth, Duran ripped one off the wall in right-center and turned on the jets for a triple.

"Exciting player. Tool-wise, as good as it gets," said Roenicke. "And that type of player, he's thrilling to watch. Went back a long ways to get that one. Saw him run a little last year because he hit a couple of gappers for us. But today was pretty fun to watch him run to third. He's just, [with] the tools, he's just one of those special guys. You know if it all comes together, you've got a superstar."

While splitting time between Class A Advanced Salem and Double-A Portland, Duran stole 46 bases last season and slashed .303/.367/.408.

Another step for Sale

Ace Chris Sale continues to progress after an illness led to his late arrival in camp. The lefty threw a bullpen session on Sunday in Fort Myers. Pitching coach Dave Bush stayed back to monitor the session before driving to Sarasota for the game against the Orioles.

"Yes, I talked to [Bush] before the game, and really good bullpen [session]. I think we can move on [to the next step]," said Roenicke.

Roenicke and Bush hope to meet with Sale on Monday to outline his program for the rest of Spring Training. That could be the determining factor in whether Sale is ready to pitch Opening Day.

"It sounds like he'll probably throw another bullpen [session], but it will be an up and down so we'll rest in between and keep progressing him, see what he's thinking and he'll hear what we're thinking and we'll try to come up with something that makes sense," said Roenicke.

Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom, who spent the offseason taking fliers on pitchers via the waiver wire or minor trades, continued that process on Sunday when he claimed righty Phillips Valdez from the Mariners.

To make room for Valdez on the 40-man roster, the Red Sox placed second baseman Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day injured list.

That move was not a surprise. Pedroia is still in shutdown mode after having a significant setback with his problematic left knee in late January, and there are currently no plans for him to report to Spring Training.

“The knee is still not right, so this move was going to be made [eventually],” said Roenicke. “We’ll touch base with him shortly and see how he’s doing.”

As for Valdez, the 28-year-old made his MLB debut for the Rangers last season, notching a 3.94 ERA in 11 relief appearances. In November, he was claimed by the Mariners from the Rangers.

Up next

The Red Sox play two split-squad games on the road on Monday, with Nathan Eovaldi leading the charge in Fort Myers, Fla., against Kenta Maeda and the Twins. Mitch Moreland, Christian Vázquez, Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Kevin Pillar will make the trek with him. Against the Rays in Port Charlotte, Boston will go with Tanner Houck on the mound, with Michael Chavis, José Peraza, Jeter Downs, Kevin Plawecki and Austin Brice also available in Port Charlotte. First pitch for both games is set for 1:05 p.m. ET, live on MLB.TV.

*** *WEEI.com***

The Monday Baseball Column: The story behind why Alex Verdugo's debut is being delayed

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The first impressions have been hard to come by. Just snippets.

Alex Verdugo occasionally cruises through the Red Sox' clubhouse these days, distinguishing himself with the constant companion of music. No headphones, but rather a small speaker that allows for somewhat of a soundtrack wherever he wanders. Once in a while, there might be a sighting out on the field talking to some fans or lightly playing catch. That's it.

The centerpiece for the Red Sox' return on the Mookie Betts trade will have to wait and so will those who want to uncover what type of player they are truly dealing with.

"My personal thing is sometime just after the season (starts)," Verdugo told WEEI.com . "But we don't know."

Verdugo is not only recovering from a stress fracture in his back but is also in a race against time when it comes to actually re-discovering a body that can perform at the level expected. This is what people are missing. It's not just the back, it's all the muscles that have been put on the back-burner because of the original injury.

It's not a total surprise. The Red Sox -- while met with some surprises when evaluating Verdugo's medicals -- were warned of this sort of timetable by the Dodgers. Although what Los Angeles might not have surfaced was how this delay might have been avoided.

While it was known Verdugo was dealing with injuries, missing the final two months of the season, the descriptions were vague. Lower back. Oblique. Heading into the offseason, evidently, the Dodgers weren't overly concerned either. Hence the ill-advised approach to Verdugo's workout program.

"It was one of those things I thought when I hurt it and taking month or two off it was going to be better. I thought I was going to go into workouts," he said. "When I went back home for the offseason to workout I was just following a regular workout plan that the Dodgers would give us. It wasn't specific for my injury. When I was at home in November I looked at the app and it was making me do goblet squats and lifting room. It felt really soon at the time. I lifted and did it and after several days of that I just woke up and I couldn't even move. I woke up with a bunch of soreness."

This led to a November visit to noted back specialist Dr. Robert Watkins, who locked in on a diagnosis and plan. It was a road that didn't include Verdugo anything close to the usual preparation for a baseball season for quite some time.

Considering the pain started in late May after a series against Tampa Bay in St. Petersburg, Fla, it was a much longer path than the outfielder ever anticipated.

"I still had this weird stuff in my back, but it wasn't too weird. It was just an ache," he noted. "We went to rehab and I had three at-bats. I walked in the first one and I popped up in the second. It wasn't a full let it eat swing. So I hit it and I was like, 'I'm OK.' The third one there was a 2-0 count I swung at a fastball, missed it and obviously with the miss you can't slow it down. I felt a little something in my back and after that every time I stepped to my right it was like a knife in my back. I had never been hurt, growing up, nothing. It was it was spraining my ankle, stubbing something or pulling muscle. But even then you might have to hobble for a second but after few days I was going to be alright. The fact it is taking this long is frustrating. What keeps me positive is that all the players, the staff, the trainers, they all support me. They all want me to wait until I'm fully healthy and get back."

In his week-plus of rehabbing with the Red Sox Verdugo has made significant strides, managing to rotate in body in a manner that wasn't possible prior arriving at JetBluePark. But there is a long way to go, longer than many realize. While it is assumed that he won't be ready for Opening Day, making his debut in May wasn't perceived as part of the deal. Now it is at least a very real possibility.

"It's going along good," he said. "Obviously coming back from a stress fracture in my back. A certain amount of the rehab process is honestly giving it time. You have to let the bone heal. There is stuff that happens. People don't understand that while you're letting the bone heal for several months, a lot of other muscles you don't use they get weak, they get out of whack. When you're coming back from this you wait for the bone to heal and now that it's healing and it's good and move around and do stuff. You have to start working out, do athletic movements and to do that all the muscles that haven't been used for several months need to be broken down, stretched and worked on and put in the right spots. I think right now the training staff here has done an excellent job of making me feel extremely good quickly. That being said we're still going to take our time on this. We're still going to make sure it's not just a couple days I'm feeling good. We're going to make sure when I get to baseball activities there are no setbacks."

JACKIE BRADLEY JR. TAKING THE MOOKIE BETTS APPROACH TO FREE AGENCY

While so much of the focus had been on the "it's a business" mantra relayed by Betts leading up to his contract year, another member of the Red Sox was digging in. Jackie Bradley Jr.'s mindset heading into free agency seems very familiar.

"One hundred percent," Bradley Jr. told WEEL.com when asked if he was looking forward to the free-agent process. "It's what everyone wants to get to. Back in the day, you get your time, you get to make a decision where you choose. You get to finally make a choice for yourself. I knew it was a business. That's why I don't get emotional about it."

There are, of course, different approaches when it comes the last guaranteed year of a contract, hence players jumping at extensions. (For the record, the Red Sox have never offered Bradley Jr. a contract extension.) But for the center fielder this isn't complicated. It takes six long years to get this opportunity, so it's OK to enjoy the moment.

"Stress? You get an opportunity to continue playing the game. I guess it depends on who you talk to," he said. "Everybody is different. You're bringing up the stressful part but what about the exciting part? When Markus goes to free agency do you think he's going to be stressed? When Gerrit Cole went to free agency was he stressed? Anthony Rendon, was he stressed? Certain guys are different and it depends who you talk to. Everyone is different.

"Why not be excited about it? I don't see anything negative about it. Things have changed. Free agency has changed."

JARREN DURAN LEARNED HIS LESSON

The outfielder has already left quite an impression on the major league staff, standing out in the second Grapefruit League game in Sarasota with a couple of spectacular catches and a pair of hits. Duran has always had a knack when it comes to separating himself.

"When I was a kid and started racing and I was always beating everyone that's when I'm like, 'I guess I'm pretty fast,'" he explained, winning the semi-prestigious Presidential Fitness Award in elementary school. "Now I'm' definitely faster than I was in college. When I go for doubles or triples I feel faster running around the bases."

But for a time last season, he found himself settling into the kind of mediocrity he wasn't used to, struggling out of the gate with Double-A Portland after tearing it up in Single-A.

"I learned to trust myself," Duran reflected. "I kind of got in my own way doubting myself a little bit. I think everyone goes through it. But believing I belong was the biggest thing for me. This was the first time in Double-A and everyone struggles. I just started trusting myself. I felt like I had to do more than I was doing in Salem and that hurt me. I was trying to do too much instead of playing my game. I thought I had to get more hits, maybe hit more home runs, drive in more runs, just do more. I ended up in a spot I was happy with."

MITCH MORELAND DIDN'T THINK HE WAS COMING BACK

Moreland had gone through this before. This past offseason the first baseman was living life as a free agent for a third time, ultimately eyeing a third contract with the Red Sox. But despite the natural fit as the team's lefty-hitting option the position, there was plenty of doubt when it came to envisioning a reunion.

"From the talks we had with the team I didn't think it was a possibility of coming back," he said. "I had a good amount of teams call early so I was like, 'OK, time to move on. And then as the offseason went on it got into January the team started talking to us a little bit more. I told them, 'Listen, I'm not playing 10 more years. This is where I want to be. I want to be on a good team, be in spot I'm familiar with. Obviously, Boston is my first choice.'"

Was it close with other teams?

"Yeah," said Moreland, who ultimately signed a deal for one guaranteed year at \$2.5 million with a club option in a second season for \$3 million. "There were couple of teams. Some that were really close to home that were enticing. There was some other interest for sure but I wanted to be here."

So, what was delay? Predictably it had to do with juggling payroll.

"It's funny going into it every team says they are trying to clear money or they don't have it. It's part of it," he said. "You expect it."

INSIGHT TO HOW ROENICKE/NARRON WORKS

The relationship between a manager and bench coach can be tricky dynamic. An extreme example was in 2012 when Bobby Valentine and his bench coach Tim Bogar barely talked for the last few months of the season.

It is why if a team can prioritize familiarity and friendship when putting the two together they do so. That's exactly what the Red Sox accomplished when reuniting interim manager Ron Roenicke and new bench coach Jerry Narron.

It's a dynamic catcher Jonathan Lucroy had a front row seat for throughout the pair's five-season tenure in the dugout with the Brewers.

"They had great relationship. They were always communicating in the dugout," Lucroy said. "For me, I was actively involved working with both of them constantly throughout the game. But Jerry being the bench coach, him giving me the signs and Ron is making all the decisions. One thing I like about them is that they are standing next to each other and they are really, really good friends so that is enhances the communication they have. The level of trust there is immense. Between the two of them they probably have 60 to 70 years in the big leagues. They are very experienced in what they do. I don't remember questioning any of the decisions they made. They made very informed decisions in-game, ones that make a lot of sense.

"Because they are such good friends they are able to be fully honest with each other and hold each other accountable, not in a bad way but in a good way. They aren't afraid to tell the truth to each other. I think that is important in a manager, bench coach relationship because you want to be able to have discussions and sometimes they are going to disagree. You have to be able to communicate and discuss with one another so they can make the best decision possible for the team. The one thing that I always liked about Ron and Jerry's relationship is they have that. They can be honest with one another and make the best decision for everyone."

SOME OTHER STUFF ...

- Much as been made of the almost-acquisition of Brusdar Graterol by the Red Sox. Well, it turns out the Betts deal wasn't the first time the Sox made a run at the former Twins reliever. Dave Dombrowski tried prying Graterol away from Minnesota last year only to get word that the hard-throwing righty was not available.

- It was only one inning, but there was something that stood out about Brian Johnson's spring training debut Saturday. He threw exactly one more changeup than he had in the entire 2019 season. The lefty -- who his fighting for a spot as a non-roster invitee -- was unable to throw the pitch previously because of how long his delivery was. "I threw it to (Manuel) Margo the second pitch of the game. I'm 100 percent more this year than I was last year," he explained. But after working on a modified version of the Driveline throwing program Johnson has shortened his approach, not only opening the door to a new pitch but also resulting in less soreness between throwing sessions.

- A year ago Colten Brewer lived in a mobile home. The perks of a full-year in the majors have allowed the pitcher to sell his home on wheels actually buy a house. This spring? He is renting a real house at the same mobile home site his vehicle was parked at a year ago.

Red Sox add another pitcher to their 40-man roster

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- In a sea of new faces in the Red Sox JetBlue clubhouse, another one is on the way.

The team announced Sunday that it had claimed pitcher Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Mariners. To make room on the 40-man roster the Red Sox put Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day disabled list.

The 28-year-old Valdez did get in 11 games for the Rangers in 2019, totaling 16 innings. The righty reliever struck out 18 and walked nine while allowing seven earned runs (3.94 ERA). He struck out at least one batter in all but two of his outings.

Valdez was originally signed as an international free agent by Cleveland in 2009. He did make 14 Triple-A starts in 2019 before being moved to the bullpen, ultimately being claimed off waivers by Seattle following the season.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Red Sox claim RHP Phillips Valdez off waivers, place Dustin Pedroia on 60-day IL

Justin Leger

The Boston Red Sox have made yet another move to bolster their pitching depth.

On Sunday, they claimed right-hander Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Seattle Mariners. To make room for Valdez, they placed veteran second baseman Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day injured list.

Valdez, 27, only has 11 games worth of major league experience under his belt. In 2019, he posted a 3.94 ERA and 1.62 WHIP in 16 innings pitched with the Texas Rangers. Valdez was claimed off waivers by the Mariners in November, then designated for assignment on Saturday.

Pedroia suffered a "significant setback" during his knee rehab, so his placement on the 60-day IL doesn't come as a surprise. The 36-year-old did not report to spring training with the Red Sox.

Along with Valdez, Boston has added Chris Mazza, Martin Perez, Trevor Hildenberger, to its pitching staff this offseason.

*** *The Athletic***

Back to normal, finally? Assessing the biggest Red Sox spring storylines so far

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. – The early days of spring training are normally quiet. That's what we've come to expect, but the Red Sox shattered that norm the past two weeks by finalizing a blockbuster trade, hiring an interim manager, signing a veteran outfielder, and announcing their ace was suffering from pneumonia — all before position players even arrived.

For good measure, they chose a new bench coach and signed a two-time All-Star just as Grapefruit League games were getting started.

It's been anything but business as usual at JetBlue Park the past two weeks, and as the third week of camp gets started, here's where things stand with the revamped Red Sox.

Biggest news of camp — Alex Verdugo unlikely for Opening Day

It might seem like one of the many other headlines should take this spot, but think about it: The Mookie Betts trade was well known long before it was announced at the spring training complex, the Ron Roenicke promotion was a reasonable guess the moment Alex Cora was let go, Chris Sale is healthy again after a

pneumonia scare, and neither Kevin Pillar nor Jonathan Lucroy is expected to be an everyday player, barring injuries.

Verdugo, though, is crucial.

Not only was he most prominent young player acquired in the Betts/David Price deal, he's supposed to be the immediate replacement in right field. A lingering stress fracture, though, means he's unlikely to break camp in time for Opening Day.

Verdugo's back injury was no secret, but the acknowledgment that he likely won't be ready for the opener still came as something of a surprise and a disappointment. It added a literal injury to insult following an already unpopular trade, and it changed the calculus of what this team might look like on March 26.

Pillar seems likely to step in to fill the gap, and there could be an open roster spot for one of the veteran outfielders in camp on minor league deals.

Unspoken issue — MLB's ongoing investigation

While players like Trevor Bauer and Cody Belinger have made headlines by ripping the Astros sign-stealing scheme, the issue has been fairly muted in Red Sox camp. Some of that surely is due to the personalities on the team — it's not an especially outspoken group anyway — but it's also hard to overlook the fact the Red Sox, too, are under investigation.

They are not accused of anything as egregious as the Astros' trash can banging, but they are the only other organization thus far singled out and investigated for using technology to steal signs in the wake of the league's modest crackdown in 2017. It's the reason Roenicke has an interim tag. The organization has to wait to make sure he's not implicated before handing him a full vote of confidence.

While the investigation has been mentioned early and often this spring, the Red Sox have generally refrained from any sort of comment on the matter. We hear only that a report could come by the end of this week. Until then, we wait.

Prospect buzz — Jeter Downs

Through most of the winter, the Red Sox had no clear-cut first baseman, and so Bobby Dalbec loomed as an on-the-verge prospect with a real chance of making the team. But now that they've re-signed Mitch Moreland, with Michael Chavis in place as an obvious alternative, Dalbec no longer seems particularly likely to break camp in an everyday role (or even in a bench role, for that matter).

Enter Jeter Downs.

Technically the secondary piece of the Betts trade, Downs arrived in camp early and became an early sensation. He has an engaging personality, tremendous potential, and there's just something about a Red Sox prospect named after Derek Jeter that causes a commotion.

Triston Casas is still perhaps the top prospect in the system, while Dalbec and Tanner Houck are the ones best positioned to make an immediate impact, but Downs arrived in a blockbuster trade and immediately wound up taking batting practice on a back field while more than a half-dozen cameras covered his every move. Welcome to Boston, kid.

Compelling competition — Fifth starter

The late addition of Lucroy has created some competition for the backup catcher job, there's a Rule 5 pick in camp who might or might not make the roster, it's unclear who the initial fourth outfielder will be, and there are of course a couple of bullpen jobs up for grabs.

But the most compelling competition, which the Red Sox have left wide open, is for the fifth starter role that was essentially vacated when Price was traded to Los Angeles.

Roenicke won't name names — though he has singled out Ryan Weber a couple of times — and he won't rule out using an opener, but he's said there are four or five traditional rotation candidates who will get stretched out this spring. The fact that Brian Johnson started the Grapefruit League opener against the Rays on Saturday suggests he's one of them, despite his having been removed from the 40-man roster this winter. Chris Mazza, a waiver pickup from the Mets, started on Sunday and looms as another possibility.

Assuming full health, Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez currently slot as the Red Sox' top four starters. What makes the fifth spot particularly compelling is the number of directions it could go. Maybe a prospect. Maybe a journeyman. Maybe an opener. Maybe someone who isn't even in camp right now. There are other competitions in Red Sox camp, but none as wide open or immediately impactful as the fifth starter.

Big shoes to fill — Andrew Benintendi

It seems Verdugo will ultimately fill Betts' spot in right field, and there's obvious need for Xander Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and J.D. Martinez to pick up the slack as the Red Sox' best returning players. But the guy best poised to make up for the loss of Betts just might be the team's other young corner outfielder, Benintendi.

Just two years ago, Benintendi was a 4.4 WAR player, according to FanGraphs. That's not at Betts' level, but it's good, and although Benintendi took a step back last season, he's still just 25 years old, and there's a sense around the Red Sox that there's more in the tank. He worked on regaining quickness and athleticism this winter, which should help him in the leadoff role he's likely to occupy in Betts' absence. He doesn't have to be an MVP, but if Benintendi can set the table ahead of Bogaerts, Devers and Martinez, it could go a long way toward keeping the Red Sox lineup productive enough to contend.

Nothing he can do about the team's pitching uncertainty, but that's a different issue altogether.

Notable absence — Dustin Pedroia

His locker is right where it's always been. His jersey is hanging on the rod. His bags are waiting to be unpacked. But Pedroia has yet to report to Red Sox camp, there some question of whether he ever will, and on Sunday he was moved back to the 60-day disabled list to make room for yet another fringe reliever, Phillips Valdez, claimed off waivers from the Seattle Mariners.

Just a few months ago, there was a glimmer of hope. Following yet another knee surgery, Pedroia was said to be cautiously optimistic that he could give it another shot. It was anyone's guess whether he could actually get up to playing speed, but he was at least planning to try, and because it's Pedroia, there was some sense that we shouldn't count him out. At least, it would have been worthwhile to watch him try.

But Pedroia's knee has been a wreck for years, and multiple operations have only reinforced the idea that he will never be the same. His name never even comes up as a vague candidate to play second base this season.

It's a shame. Seeing Pedroia try to make it work would have been compelling, perhaps even inspiring. The fact a guy notorious for his grit and determination is not in Fort Myers speaks to the extent of his injury and the challenge ahead of him.

What's next? — Business as usual

After a couple of unusually busy weeks, Red Sox camp seems back to normal as the full slate of exhibition games is underway. There's even a pair of split-squad games on Monday, and nothing says spring training like simultaneous games in two different locations with benches and bullpens overloaded with minor leaguers.

For the time being, the Red Sox face the usual spring training decisions. They have a few roster spots to fill, a few players who need to get fully healthy, and there will be inevitable, unpredictable wrinkles along the way. This is typical. This is the way spring training is supposed to be.

So, it's business as usual, at least until the league's investigation is complete and the ensuing report is released. At that point, an unusual spring training might get even more atypical.

Rafael Devers is a star. So we'd like to get to know him better

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Having already played on a World Series winner at age 21, Red Sox third baseman Rafael Devers returned last year and submitted his breakout season: a .311 average, 32 home runs and 115 RBI, earning him a 12th-place finish in American League MVP balloting.

And here's a Raffle Devers Fun Fact: His 359 total bases made him the fifth different Sox player to lead the American League in this category over the past 14 years seasons, joining David Ortiz (2006), Jacoby Ellsbury ('11), Mookie Betts ('16) and J.D. Martinez ('18).

And yet Red Sox fans barely know the baby-faced third baseman, and for one very obvious reason: Devers, who was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, still isn't sufficiently comfortable with his English to do interviews without an interpreter. The questions thus tend to stick with standard baseball fare, and Devers tends to provide standard baseball answers.

He did deliver some other-than-baseball fare late last week when he arrived at the Sox' spring training compound here and did a general media session at his locker, during which he expressed how happy he is to become a father for the second time. Devers now has two daughters.

"The birth of my daughters is more important (than anything)," he said, and in such a way that he was understood even before the words had been converted from Spanish to English.

"That's something that is 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 there as fast as possible to experience that."

Later, after the general media session had ended, and with Bryan Almonte of the Red Sox media relations department doing the translating, I ran a series of fun, random, off-the-wall questions past Devers. (And speaking of "fun," the word is a go-to in Devers' repertoire.)

I hope to do more of these interviews with Devers during the season. He is, after all, one of the best young players in baseball. Sox fans should know more about him. For now, though, there is this:

So let's get this out of the way: At what point in your life did it occur to you that you had the talent to play in the major leagues?

It wasn't until I signed (with the Red Sox in 2013). My goal was to be able to sign a contract, but when I was 13 or 14 years old I was just playing to have fun. That's what baseball was mostly about for me back then. Play to have fun. It was something that I grew up with. When I did sign my contract, that's when I realized like, I'm actually good at baseball.

What's the biggest fight you had with your parents when you were growing up?

OK, it was always about the same thing, when I would go out at six in the morning and stay out until 6 p.m., just being out in the streets, just having fun and being in the river and having fun with my friends. Those were always the biggest fights that I had with my parents. I was always out. I wouldn't even come home to eat, and they were always worried about that, asking me why I was always out. They would discipline me every time.

Best friend growing up?

My friend Abel. That's easy. We were always together. We were inseparable. He's someone that I would walk to the fields with every day. We'd go to eat food together, we'd eat empanadas on the way to the field. Things like that. We did all the fun things as kids, but he was someone who I could always count on to be with me. His family also cared for me like I was one of their own, so I'm very appreciative of his mother. Abel and I still stay in touch. I still talk to him every day. He's currently a banker in the Dominican.

Favorite player growing up?

It was definitely Robinson Cano. Even though I didn't grow up as a Yankees fan, Robinson Cano was always a player that I idolized. Everything that he did when he would go up to bat is something that I would always try to copy as well. So he was someone that I always admired so much, including how he worked and how he did his thing. But I also admired David Ortiz, obviously. I followed David because my dad's a Boston Red Sox fan, and he was always talking about David Ortiz. He idolized him. Cano and David had a big impact on me.

When you walked into a big-league clubhouse for the first time, what's the first thing you noticed?

It was seeing all those superstars — Bogie (Xander Bogaerts), Mookie (Betts), even Hanley (Ramirez), and realizing I'm going to be playing with them. I realized this is a really big deal and that's when I set my goal, where, OK, I can't make it back to the minors. I can't allow that to happen now that I'm here. I kept saying to myself, 'I can't make it back to the minors. I have to stay up here.' I decided I'm going to do everything that I can in order to stay up here because just being here is something that I never want to get used to.

You're now the father of two children. How has that changed your life?

I just have so much joy, having two princesses. That means so much to me. They're both healthy and that's the most important thing. Of everything that's happened, that's been the best experience of all.

*** *Associated Press***

Red Sox put former AL MVP Pedroia on 60-day injured list

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — The Boston Red Sox placed second baseman Dustin Pedroia on the 60-day injured list Sunday, further putting in doubt whether the former AL MVP will play again.

The Red Sox made the move while claiming right-hander Phillips Valdez off waivers from the Seattle Mariners.

The 36-year-old Pedroia has played just nine games over the last two seasons. The four-time All-Star has spent the time trying to recover from an injury he sustained when Baltimore's Manny Machado slid spikes-high into his left knee in May 2017.

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

Earlier this month, new Boston manager Ron Roenicke said Pedroia wouldn't report to spring training with the rest of the position players.

"When a guy just ages and then he's not as good, that part's easy to see. But not a guy who has an injury and because of it has not been able to perform," Roenicke said at the time. "That part is really difficult."

This was the third straight spring the Red Sox were hoping Pedroia could return to the lineup. They signed infielder José Peraza to a one-year contract in December, and Michael Chavis also plays second base.

Pedroia is the longest-tenured player on the Red Sox roster. He was AL Rookie of the Year when Boston won the 2007 World Series, was AL MVP and the next season and helped the Red Sox win another title in 2013.

Pedroia had surgery after the 2017 season and admitted to rushing back the next year. He played in only three games in late May before going back on the injured list as the Red Sox posted a franchise-record 108 wins and another crown.

Last season, Pedroia played just six games. Over the winter, the Red Sox said Pedroia had incurred a "significant setback" in his comeback bid.

Pedroia is a four-time Gold Glover with a career .299 batting average, 140 home runs and 725 RBIs.

The 28-year-old Valdez made his major league debut last season. He was 0-0 with a 3.94 ERA in 11 relief appearances for Texas. The Mariners claimed off waivers from Texas in November.