

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, February 25, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

Worcester's John Andreoli getting a chance to play for the home team

Peter Abraham and Alex Speier

PORT CHARLOTTE, Fla. — John Andreoli was born in Worcester, played at St. John's High in Shrewsbury, and grew up rooting for the Red Sox. But none of that played into his decision to sign with them.

"It was more of the opportunity," said Andreoli, who started in left field Monday in a split-squad game against the Tampa Bay Rays. "When you're a free agent, you're looking for the best chance."

The Red Sox have Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., Kevin Pillar, and Alex Verdugo in their outfield mix. But there's not much depth in Triple A.

Rusney Castillo is a nonfactor because his addition to the roster would trigger a \$10.04 million hit to the payroll as calculated for the competitive balance tax.

Jarren Duran and Marcus Wilson are solid prospects, but could return to Double A Portland to start the season.

So Andreoli, 29, could prove helpful if a need arises, especially given his 26 games of major league experience with the Mariners and Orioles in 2018. That led to the Sox signing him to a minor league contract in December.

"Once you get in professional baseball, being a fan goes away," Andreoli said. "It's a job and you look for a place with the right fit. It made sense for me when they called.

"When you've been in Triple A and been up and down, your goal is to be in the conversation when they need somebody."

The Red Sox are Andreoli's fifth organization since the Cubs drafted him out of the University of Connecticut in 2011. His teammates at UConn included now-established big leaguers Matt Barnes, Nick Ahmed, George Springer, and Scott Oberg.

"It's been a treat seeing what those guys have done," said Andreoli, who roomed with Ahmed in college. "We had some special teams. They did a good job of recruiting two-sport athletes who were really competitive."

In Andreoli's case, he was an option quarterback and safety in high school who led his team to two state titles while playing for his father.

John Andreoli Sr., a former Patriots player, has been St. John's football coach since 2004. Andreoli helped coach the offense under his father for a few years as he pursued his baseball career.

True to his football roots, Andreoli has good speed and can play all three spots in the outfield. He also has 259 stolen bases over nine seasons in the minors.

Rodriguez is sharp

In Fort Myers, Eduardo Rodriguez looked fully healthy during two innings of live batting practice against teammates Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts.

Rodriguez's scheduled Grapefruit League start Sunday was pushed back after he twisted his left knee last week.

His knee wasn't an issue as Rodriguez showed his full mix — four-seam fastballs, sinkers, cutters, and changeups — during a reassuring session.

"I just know I was feeling really good," Rodriguez said. "Everything was there; everything was great. All pitches, everything was right there.

"I surprised myself with the command. Body-wise, I was feeling good and was ready to go out there today. Body-wise, command, pitches, everything was there and I was feeling good."

Bogaerts, who has been slowed by a sore left ankle, mostly just tracked pitches from his teammate. But Devers took several healthy hacks — and repeatedly swung and missed, leaving the third baseman alternately shaking his head, cursing, and laughing.

"It was fun for me," Rodriguez said. "I don't know if it was fun for him. He was mad at me a little bit."

Rodriguez is lined up to start Saturday against the Yankees.

Manager Ron Roenicke said Devers would make his spring debut before Bogaerts.

"It's nice to get [Bogaerts] out on the field, see him running around," Roenicke said. "It's weird when you get familiar with a team then all of a sudden you have a couple faces missing. It just doesn't seem right. It will be nice to see those guys all together again."

Leading man

Andrew Benintendi was 5 for 42 (.119) with one extra-base hit leading off the first inning last season. He's 2 for 2 in spring training, including a homer against the Twins Monday.

"That was just during a period where I wasn't playing well," said Benintendi, who led off for two months before Mookie Betts was switched back. "At that point, I don't think it mattered where I hit. I just wasn't going well.

"I can see why it's being talked about if I hit leadoff, but I think that was more of a fluke than anything."

Roenicke has said he wants to get a good look at Benintendi leading off.

Sale's plan

The Sox met with Chris Sale and decided his next step would be another bullpen session rather than facing hitters . . . Minnesota lefthander Rich Hill, who is recovering from elbow surgery, spent some time on the radio with Joe Castiglione during the Sox-Twins game in Fort Myers . . . Austin Meadows was in the Tampa Bay lineup to play left field. But he and teammate Brandon Lowe left the park in a hurry before the game when a brush fire threatened the neighborhood where they are renting a home. The players and their wives had to evacuate the area before the fire was put out . . . The Red Sox will have their annual meeting with Players Association executive director Tony Clark and other union representatives Tuesday before playing the Orioles at home.

Nate Eovaldi comes out firing to begin a critical season

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox need Nate Eovaldi.

He battled injuries for a large chunk of 2019, but when he did pitch, he wasn't very good either. He struggled with command. He struggled to locate his 100-mile-per-hour fastball at the top of the zone. His splitter wasn't working.

This season offers Eovaldi a new slate, but also more pressure in the absence of starters. Monday marked the unofficial beginning of that for Eovaldi.

Eovaldi took the hill against the Minnesota Twins in his first start of the spring. The Sox lost, 3-2, but that wasn't the story, of course. Eovaldi went two innings without yielding a run. He struck out four and allowed two hits. His velocity was there — 99 m.p.h. on his first pitch, then later on that inning, he pumped 100 to Nelson Cruz on a ball that just missed the outer edge of the plate.

The Twins hitters weren't missing the fastball, though. Eddie Rosario squared up Eovaldi to the warning track in center; Jackie Bradley Jr. camped under it to make the play. Cruz stung a single up the middle which kicked off the bottom of Eovaldi's foot.

Manager Ron Roenicke intimated before the game that hitters are too advanced now. You can't just blow a fastball by them.

"I know he's got great stuff," Roenicke said. "These big-league hitters, they're getting better and better. They're getting more used to seeing that type of velocity. The more velocity we see in this game, the more they get used to it, and you're going to really have to start making pitches like everybody."

It was like Eovaldi heard Roenicke's voice through the press room walls. Shortly after the hard contact, he started using his full arsenal: Fastball, cutter, slider, curveball, and splitter. The splitter was the most effective. Eovaldi struck out three in the second, all swinging.

"Last year [my splitter] was real inconsistent," Eovaldi said. "And that was one of the pitches I focused on this offseason to make sure I got back on track. Today they were real consistent, so that's what I'm looking for."

Eovaldi said the feel and flow of the game dictated what he would throw. He didn't like the command of his slider, but by him just throwing his offspeed and breaking pitches, it played up his fastball more.

"There were a lot of lefties in there today," Eovaldi said. "The lefties, I feel like I was throwing a lot of good cutters in to speed them up and then the splitter away, so I felt like me and [Christian] Vazquez had a good mix of pitches going today. That was the key takeaway from it."

Said Roenicke: "When he's got that kind of command and he's down in the zone on his offspeed, he's so tough to hit, with the velocity that you always have to be aware of as a hitter. To be able to stay back and see the other stuff is just difficult."

The spring for a veteran like Eovaldi shouldn't matter, but the fragility of this rotation can certainly amplify the critique, even though it's just February. Chris Sale had a barking elbow late last season — there's no telling how it might hold up — and battled pneumonia just before this spring; he's currently just throwing bullpens. David Price is out west. There's a hole in the No. 5 spot, which will probably require the Sox trading for another starter.

And for Eovaldi, durability and health are always a question. The last time he pitched more than 150 innings was with the New York Yankees in 2015. During his playoff run with the Sox in 2018, Eovaldi practically emptied the tank for a championship.

It wouldn't have been unfathomable for the club to move on from him. Eovaldi was 28, but he'd had two Tommy John surgeries. It didn't, however, and he is now tasked with keeping the thin rotation in order.

"If he's healthy, he's a big arm," J.D. Martinez said. "Never hurts to have a guy like that in your rotation."

Toward the end of the game Monday, one Twins player couldn't help but comment on Eovaldi's velocity as he made his way through the concourse and out of the stadium.

"Eovaldi's gotta slow it down!" the player screamed out. "Ninety-nine in his first start?! He could get hurt!"

The Sox hope that's not the case. They need him for the long haul.

For a change, Red Sox bullpen is the pitching building block

Christopher L. Gasper

FORT MYERS, Fla. — For starters . . . the Red Sox have questions about their starting rotation.

On paper, the Chris Sale-led group is more fragile than a Waterford crystal decanter. All the spring training hand-wringing about Boston's pitching starts with the starters. The Sox got some good news on Monday. Eduardo Rodriguez (knee) threw a simulated game and pronounced he was "feeling great," and Jake Gyllenhaal look-alike Nate Eovaldi, owner of a rigged-to-blow right elbow, struck out four and touched triple digits with his fastball in two innings of dominant work across town against the Minnesota Twins.

Still, betting on this team's bullpen seems like a safer Vegas wager than gambling on the sustainability (buzzword alert) of the rotation. The tables have turned on the mound. Last year, the Sox had to find a way to replace closer Craig Kimbrel and Joe Kelly. It was a bumpy road out of the bullpen early in 2019, leading to a lot of blown saves at the beginning that left the Sox tied with Oakland for the most in the majors (31). But the Sox turned a perceived weakness into a strength, uncovering a quality closer in Brandon Workman.

The pendulum of pitching doubt has shifted. Now, the relief corps is viewed as the reassuring and deep portion of the pitching staff, and it's the starting staff that's in the spotlight and on the spot.

After the All-Star break last season, the Sox ranked top 10 in Major League Baseball in opponent OPS (10th, .720), hits allowed per nine innings (ninth, 7.88), and inherited runners scoring percentage (10th, 31 percent) by relievers.

"Yeah, obviously last year, we were a big question mark and we came out and threw the ball pretty well overall as a bullpen," said Workman. "I think we actually had one of the better bullpens in the league. That was nice for guys to step up, guys that maybe weren't as proven as other names, and step up and throw the ball well.

"It's definitely something we are going to try to build on. We got a lot of the same guys back out there, and I think everybody is expecting to take a step forward."

The faith in the bullpen starts with the 31-year-old Workman. He emerged as a dominant force last season. His ability to plug the closer's role created a domino effect that put all the 'pen pieces in the proper place. The Sox previously suffered through Ryan Brasier (seven saves in 11 chances) and Matt Barnes, twice as many blown saves (eight) as saves (four). That duo evoked the cardiac-testing stylings of Heathcliff Slocumb.

Workman went 10-1 last season with a 1.88 ERA in a career-high 73 appearances. The taciturn Texan led MLB relievers in opponent average against, opponent OPS against, and fewest home runs surrendered per nine (0.13, allowing one across 286 batters). He settled into the closer's role after the All-Star break, recording 13 of his 16 total saves in 15 opportunities. Pitching positively Jonathan Papelbon-esque, Workman earned AL Reliever of the Month honors in September, not allowing an earned run in 12 appearances while recording seven saves.

Workman, who had zero career saves entering 2019, could be poised to cash in as a closer. He's eligible for free agency following this season. His ascension to bullpen linchpin is remarkable when you consider his promising career ended up in the breakdown lane in 2015 and 2016 following Tommy John surgery. He scratched out a bullpen role in 2017 and 2018, but still made 35 combined appearances in Triple A Pawtucket those seasons.

With Workman allowing Barnes to slot in as one of baseball's best set-up guys, the Sox can lean on the bullpen until the rotation finds its bearings and its constitution.

Fueled by cold, calculating analytics, baseball has evolved into bullpen warfare. Starting pitching has been deemphasized to a degree. This bullpen features swing-and-miss stuff with Workman, Barnes, lefty Josh Taylor, Health Hembree, and Brasier. Boston relievers led MLB last season in strikeouts per nine (10.5).

But there is always the fear of bullpen burnout, especially since the relief crew might have to compensate for one spot in the rotation every fifth day. The Sox's fifth starter is as barren as their reservoir of goodwill.

One solution could be to borrow from the bullpen, tapping young flamethrower Darwinzon Hernandez as an opener — a concept popularized by Bloom with the Tampa Bay Rays. Hernandez has the stuff to be a weapon in shorter bursts — he led the majors in strikeouts per nine (16.56) post All-Star break — but lacks the experience and command to feature as a full-fledged starter.

This rotation won't be confused with the 1971 Baltimore Orioles. Still, the starters aren't ready to concede anything, even if they appear dicey due to durability doubts.

"I feel like we got the guys that we need to compete," said Eovaldi. "[Chris] Sale is looking healthy. Eddie is looking good. We got a whole lot of other guys competing for spots as well."

The health histories of the top three starters require pause, and a bullpen that can pick up the slack for load management and missing innings.

The slight Sale is an electrifying ace when healthy. That's the caveat. He seems to hit a roadblock every late August/September. A disappointing 2019 campaign was truncated by elbow trouble, and Sale has been stuck in the starting blocks in Fort Myers after pneumonia.

Rodriguez enjoyed a breakthrough 2019, winning 19 games and posting a career-high 203⅓ innings. Eddie Money could be an ace in waiting, but he's always a breakdown candidate given his knee troubles. That's why a wave of panic spread across Sox Nation when it was revealed Rodriguez tweaked his good (left) knee last week falling from the mound, resulting in his first spring start being postponed.

Related: Eduardo Rodriguez bumped from Sunday's start with sore knee

Rodriguez put some of those concerns to rest Monday, looking dialed in against Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers in a sim game. Still, the check engine light for Rodriguez always bears watching.

Eovaldi has electric stuff, and a standing reservation on the injured list. He missed about three months after undergoing arthroscopic surgery last April to remove loose bodies from his pitching elbow, the same procedure he underwent in 2018 with the Rays.

Eovaldi was the perfect rental for the Sox in '18. The Sox should have left it as a beneficial baseball fling. Instead, in the afterglow of a title, they unwisely committed four years and \$68 million to Eovaldi, who has twice undergone Tommy John surgery. That deal looks even worse when the Sox are sloughing off payroll in the form of Mookie Betts and David Price to limbo under the luxury tax.

Fourth starter Martin Perez is an innings eater, but has suffered from a chronic case of swollen ERA the last two seasons.

The pressure is on the starters, with Price and Rick Porcello exiled and Betts's departure casting a pall of old-fashioned defeatist skepticism over the season.

The burden of pitching proof lies with the Red Sox rotation. But the burden of carrying the load rests with a bullpen that has gone from liability to starting place for pitching optimism.

Monday's spring game report: Red Sox take a loss and a tie

Peter Abraham and Alex Speier

SCORES: Twins 3, Red Sox (SS) 2; Rays 2, Red Sox (SS) 2.

RECORD: 1-2-1.

BREAKDOWN: At Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, the Twins hit two home runs off Kyle Hart in the third inning. Gilberto Celestino led off with a shot to left field. Nelson Cruz had a two-run blast later in the inning. Andrew Benintendi homered for the Sox leading off the game. Jackie Bradley Jr. had two hits.

In Port Charlotte, the Sox could not hold leads of 1-0 and 2-1, and settled for a nine-inning tie with the Rays. Jarren Duran manufactured a run with his speed in the sixth inning. He singled, went to second on a single by Tzu-Wei Lin, tagged up and went to third on a fly ball to left field, and scored on a throwing error by the pitcher.

PLAYER OF THE DAY: Nate Eovaldi retired six of the eight Twins, four by strikeout, and hit 100 miles per hour with his fastball.

NEXT GAME: The Sox host an Orioles split squad Tuesday at 1:05 p.m. Righthander Ryan Weber is the scheduled starter against Baltimore righthander Tom Eshelman. The game will be on WEEI-AM 850 radio.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Benintendi leads off with a bang for a fresh start

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Red Sox left fielder Andrew Benintendi hit the second pitch of the game over the fence in right field off of right-hander Kenta Maeda in a 3-2 loss Monday to the Twins at Hammond Stadium.

It was just an exhibition game and an early one at that, so no big deal, right? Well, maybe it wasn't a big deal, but given the strangely ineffective way Benintendi started off games last season, it was at least a little bit of a deal.

Benintendi went 5 for 42 when he took the first at-bat of the game for the Red Sox in 2019.

"Honestly, I didn't even know it until I was reading about it," Benintendi said. "I had no idea. Hopefully, I'll be better."

The good omen suggests he will be, but so does common sense. It was a limited sample.

"I think that was just during a period I wasn't playing well," said Benintendi, slated to start the season as the Red Sox leadoff hitter. "At that point, it didn't matter where I hit. It was not going well. I can see why it's being talked about, if I hit leadoff. I think it was more of a fluke than anything. I feel like all of last year I was battling stuff and thinking about my swing, which will lead you to not hit well."

Which has led him to taking the approach of not thinking as much.

“That’s the plan,” Benintendi said. “We’ll see if it works.”

That intended approach was relayed to interim manager Ron Roenicke.

“I like it a lot,” Roenicke said. “If you think less it means you’re feeling good with your mechanics and you’re allowed to really concentrate on the baseball. If you’re thinking a lot, you’re up there thinking about your stride, thinking about where your hands are going to be, you cannot hit consistently when you’re doing that. Whenever you talk to a guy, and if he’s really going through a good streak, it’s always the same: ‘I’m not thinking about a thing, except just trying to see the baseball in a good part of the zone.’ And that’s really what you do. And so any time a guy’s there, that’s when he’s locked in.”

Red Sox 2, Rays 2

The Red Sox and Rays played to a 2-2 tie in Port Charlotte in the Red Sox other split-squad game Monday. Tanner Houk started for the Sox, pitched two shutout innings, walked two, struck out one and allowed one hit.

The Red Sox have a 1-2-1 record heading into Tuesday’s 1:05 p.m. game at JetBlue Park vs. the Orioles. Competing for the fifth spot in the rotation behind Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez, right-hander Ryan Weber is scheduled to make the start for the Sox.

Players Association chief Tony Clark will meet with the Red Sox players in the clubhouse in the morning.

Full spring swing

J.D. Martinez struck out and walked at Hammond Stadium and gave his swing the identical grade he gives it every year at this stage of the exhibition season.

“Same thing, like I’ve never played baseball the first two, three weeks of spring training,” Martinez said.

He handled another question about the loss of Mookie Betts well.

“He’s obviously a big bat, he’s a big player, but it’s one of those things where you’ve got to turn the page almost,” Martinez said. “We’ve got a lot of good guys on this team, a lot of really good players on this team. It wasn’t just a one-man team. We’ve got a lot of really good hitters, and a lot of guys who can play. I’m excited for players to continue to grow and continue to develop in their careers.”

E-Rod, Eovaldi pump sunshine into rotation outlook Monday

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Fresh off a 19-win season, left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez slipped during a bullpen session last Wednesday, fell to the ground and twisted his knee. Red Sox Nation grew so quiet you could hear a season drop.

Throwing two simulated innings with Rafael Devers at the plate Monday morning on Field 1 of the Red Sox spring training complex, Rodriguez crushed whatever fears that fall created. He did so with a blistering, well-located fastball and a sharp breaking ball that left Devers shaking his head and mumbling.

Afterward, Rodriguez said he didn’t know how many times he struck out Devers, but the left-handed hitter who delayed his arrival to training camp because of the recent birth of his child didn’t have any trouble counting.

“Five times,” Devers said. “Nasty!”

The good vibrations surrounding the Sox depth-challenged rotation continued a couple of hours later when Nathan Eovaldi took the mound down the road from JetBlue Park to face the Twins at Hammond Stadium.

Lighting up the radar gun at 100 mph, Eovaldi pitched two shutout innings, allowed two hits (one on a ball that glanced off of his foot), didn't walk anybody and struck out four batters in a 3-2 loss to the Twins in which Kyle Hart allowed two long home runs to the Twins.

"I feel like I'm coming in with a better idea and a better approach, picking up where I left off last year, what I was working on," Eovaldi said, comparing this spring to last. "Had a lot of time to work on it in the offseason and I knew exactly what I wanted to work on."

His split-fingered fastball ranked first on that list and the fruits of that work were on display against the Twins.

"I felt really good out there," Eovaldi said. "I felt like I had really good command of my fastball, really everything, other than my slider. Split felt probably the best out there."

If all goes well, Rodriguez and Eovaldi each will start five exhibition games in preparation for the regular season. Only so much can be read into a two-inning stint, but it couldn't have gone much better for either pitcher.

Rodriguez was in great spirits after, and even well before, his simulated two innings in which he rested between innings. Xander Bogaerts, on the mend from an ankle injury, stood in the cage against Rodriguez, but just tracked his pitches, not swinging at any so as not to risk aggravating the ankle.

"When we got here this morning, I told (Devers), 'Bro, you want to face me today?' He told me, 'I want to hit the ball out of the ballpark.' 'I'm gonna strike you out.' Thank God I win that bet," Rodriguez said.

He is on course to make his first official exhibition start Saturday.

Eovaldi's strong start was a step toward putting a frustrating season in which he spent time in the rotation, the injured list and the bullpen behind him.

"He's huge because we need to keep our starting pitchers healthy, out on the field," Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "When you're always trying to go grab guys from your minor leagues to come up or fill in from your bullpen to try to fill starting spots, you can only do that for so long. If you have one injury you're usually OK, but you have two or three of your starters go down and you better be really deep to be able to fill that."

Roenicke was encouraged by the command of his pitches that Eovaldi had for two innings.

"I think a lot of the inconsistency comes from the injury," he said of Eovaldi's 2018 season. "I think with Nate, you get him on a roll health-wise, he looks great so far. And then it starts with that great stuff. He starts getting command with it and then all of the sudden you have this great pitcher. I know he has this great stuff and these big-league hitters, they're getting better and better and they're getting more used to seeing that type of velocity, even up to 100. And when you miss, even with 100, it still gets hit at times. So the more velocity we see in this game, the more they get used to it. And you're going to have to really start making pitches like everybody."

Rodriguez and Eovaldi both made pitches that for the most part were too hot to handle. They're one-sixth of the way through their spring training schedules. For both of them, it was a start, a very strong start.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Encouraging Start

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, Fla. — OK, he pitched only two innings. But he threw his fastball 100 mph. Four of the six outs he got were strikeouts. His control was superb, he didn't walk anyone.

In short, Nathan Eovaldi's spring training debut on Monday against the Minnesota Twins erased, temporarily at least, any hangover worries from his injury-riddled 2019 season.

"Encouraging," is how Eovaldi described his brief appearance. "I had good command. I've been getting a lot of dry work in. ... I feel like I have a better approach this spring."

Along with his fastball that consistently hit between 98 and 100 mph, he pinpointed a cutter and splitter.

"Cutters in and splitters away," Eovaldi.

If the Red Sox hope to contend for a playoff spot this season, Eovaldi will have to pitch like the guy who was a World Series hero in 2018 and then signed a four-year, \$68-million contract and not like the guy who was limited to 12 starts last season, worked just 67 innings and gave up 45 earned runs.

His season took a bad turn in April when he pitched six innings against the New York Yankees. The next day he couldn't straighten his right arm and was placed on the Injured List. Doctors discovered "loose bodies" in the elbow and for the second straight year Eovaldi needed surgery to remove them.

Eovaldi's arm problems have been a big part of his life, starting when he was a junior in high school in his hometown of Houston. He had his first Tommy John surgery that year. In 2016, when he was one of Yankee manager Joe Girardi's most reliable pitchers, he tore the flexor tendon from the bone.

But for a brief moment under a hot Florida sun on Monday afternoon, there was no fretting over a valuable right arm.

Eovaldi isn't the worrying type. He toes the rubber, winds up and fires the heat. He refuses to dwell on the bad breaks of his past.

"I don't think about injuries. If it happens, it happens," he said. "When I'm on the mound competing, I'm not worried about it."

And for a brief moment on Monday, no one was no one was fretting, especially Nathan Eovaldi.

Martinez off to typical slow start

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, FLA — J.D. Martinez, the Red Sox designated hitter, is off to the kind of start he's accustomed to in spring training. He's hitless in his first two spring training games.

"I'm trying to find the barrel," Martinez said after batting twice in Monday's spring training 3-2 loss to the Minnesota Twins. He walked and struck out.

"In the first two or three weeks of spring training it feels like I've never played the game before."

He said that he has changed his diet — "My joints don't hurt as much as they did."

The change means less meat and more greens.

"I'm not saying I am a vegan," he said. "I feel better. I'm kind of excited about it."

Praising his teammate

Andrew Benintendi hit his first home run of the spring. He lined the second pitch of the game off Twins starter Kenta Maeda into the right-field seats.

Martinez is high on Benintendi. "He's got good talent. He just needs to grow. The potential is there for a breakout year.

Maeda threw 37 pitches in two innings, allowing two hits with one walk and one strikeout.

"First time facing hitters so I just wanted to get that feel back," Maeda said through an interpreter. "And I wasn't scheduled to give up a home run on the first hitter, just so you know."

Maeda, 32 in April, is entering his fifth MLB season after four with the Dodgers and eight years in Japan. He went 10-8 with a 4.04 ERA last season for Los Angeles.

Home opener

The Sox will play their first game of the spring at Fenway South on Tuesday against the Baltimore Orioles. It's the first of 16 home games for Boston.

New face

The newest member of the Red Sox is Jerry Narron, named by interim-manager Ron Roenicke as his bench coach last week. The two are longtime colleagues. Narron was Roenicke's bench coach in Milwaukee from 2011-2015. Narron was also Boston's bench coach in 2003.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox slugger Bobby Dalbec traded Tanner Houck \$200 for window seat on flight to Japan, Houck then bought samurai sword

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox power-hitting prospect Bobby Dalbec got stuck with a dreaded middle seat on the flight to Japan for the Premier 12 Tournament. So he acted like chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and made a trade.

"Tanner Houck was in the window (seat)," Dalbec said. "And I paid him like 200 bucks to take the window so I could sleep."

"That was his first offer and I jumped on it," Houck added.

"I think I high-balled a little bit," Dalbec said. "I think I could have got him for a little bit lower. But it was worth it."

Keep an eye on these two talented Red Sox prospects. Dalbec, a 2016 fourth-round draft pick out of Arizona, has bashed 59 homers the past two minor league seasons combined (264 games). The Red Sox added the 24-year-old first baseman/third baseman to the 40-man roster in November. Baseball America has him ranked No. 75 on its top 100 and it listed him as having the best infield arm and most power in the Red Sox minor league system.

He certainly is a candidate to win a spot on Boston's Opening Day 26-man roster.

Houck, a 2017 first-round pick out of Mizzou, is one of several candidates for Boston's open fifth starter spot. The right-handed pitcher started against Tampa Bay on Monday, tossing 2 scoreless innings in a 2-2 Grapefruit League tie.

The 23-year-old Houck — who also played in Japan with U.S. collegiate team in 2015 — viewed the \$200 as much more valuable than a window seat.

“Either way we’re gonna be uncomfortable on a 14-, 15-hour flight. Might as well,” Houck said.

It was a regular commercial plane, nothing fancy like the luxury “flying hotel” (as Alex Cora described it) that the Red Sox traveled on to London last summer.

Team Mexico was on the same flight with Team USA to Tokyo. The plane had middle row seating as well.

This particular side row included three very tall baseball players. Houck is listed at 6-foot-4, 210 pounds. Dalbec is about 6-foot-4, 230 pounds. Pirates pitching prospect Cody Ponce, who is listed at 6-foot-5, 255 pounds, had the aisle seat.

“We were all sitting right next to each other and we’re all big guys. So it already was just a cluster having us three in the same row together,” Houck said. “So it was like, no matter what ...”

Did Houck spend the money in Japan?

“I bought some stuff for the family. Bought some stuff for me. I actually bought a samurai sword,” Houck said. “And I actually had the whole team sign it.

“I wanted something kind of unique. Everybody was getting a jersey or baseball signed. I was like, ‘You know what? I’ll get it on the samurai sword.’ Might as well. Just a fun little, like silly memory that I’ll look back on in 10, 15 years and kind of be like, ‘Good times but what was I thinking?’”

Houck noticed the sword when he and his teammates visited a monastery.

“They have a bunch of shops out front,” Houck said. “I saw it in the window and was like, come to Japan and get a samurai sword. I guess that would be kind of cool. How many people can say that?”

C.J. Chatham, who the Red Sox added to the 40-man roster along with Dalbec in November, also played for Team USA. The 6-foot-3 middle infielder got stuck with a middle seat as well.

Team USA — which finished fourth in the tournament — played both in Mexico and Japan. While in Mexico, Dalbec and teammates toured the Jose Cuervo distillery.

“Tokyo, on the off days we’d kind of just go around to different cities,” Dalbec said. “It’s only like 15, 20 minutes on trains to anywhere you want to go.”

Dalbec especially enjoyed Shibuya Crossing, which is Tokyo’s Time Square.

“There’s so many people,” Dalbec said. “It’s crazy.”

Dalbec posted a .364 on-base percentage, .500 slugging percentage, two homers, one double and eight RBIs in 28 at-bats during the tourney. He bashed a grand slam on a 3-2 sinker in the first game vs. Netherlands.

“The team we had was really cool to be around,” Dalbec said. “We jelled really well together. We were only together for what five days (practicing)? And then going out, wearing the uniform, playing against Netherlands, it felt like we had been playing together for a long time. So it was cool.”

Houck said about Dalbec: “He’s got some unbelievable power to all fields. I’ve gotten to play with him now for two years. So seeing that and seeing what he’s done is unbelievable.”

Boston Red Sox notebook: Chris Sale’s plan comes into focus, J.D. Martinez on plant-based diet

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Some leftover notes from Fort Myers on a day when the Red Sox lost to the Twins and tied the Rays in split-squad action to drop to 1-2-1 in Grapefruit League action:

Sale’s plan formalized

Left-hander Chris Sale met with coaches, trainers and members of the front office Monday to plan the rest of his progression in spring training. Sale came out of his Sunday side session feeling good and will next throw an extended bullpen later in the week.

“It’ll be a bullpen, but it’ll be an extended bullpen,” said interim manager Ron Roenicke. “He’ll throw, probably take a couple minute breather and then get up and throw again. It’s kind of an up-and-down for him.”

Sale, who was shut down for the first week of camp due to a battle with pneumonia, seems unlikely to get the six starts the Sox hoped for him at the beginning of spring. It’s still unclear when he’ll begin to get into Grapefruit League games.

Lefty Eduardo Rodriguez will likely make his Grapefruit League debut by the end of the week, with Saturday looking like a target date. Rodriguez, who dealt with knee soreness over the weekend, felt good after facing Rafael Devers in a live batting practice session Monday morning.

Martinez on plant-based diet

Designated hitter J.D. Martinez didn’t quite go vegan over the winter, but he did focus on eating a plant-based diet in an effort to get leaner for the season.

Martinez cut down on his meat consumption in order to cut down on inflammation throughout his body. He said he can already feel the results.

“I feel better,” Martinez said. “I don’t feel like my joints are as achy as they were in the past. I’m kind of excited about it.”

Martinez was 0-for-1 with a walk in the loss to the Twins.

Hart rocked by Twins

Lefty Kyle Hart, who is on the 40-man roster, was hit hard against Minnesota. In one inning, he allowed three runs on three hits, including two long home runs to Gilberto Celestino and Nelson Cruz.

Hart might be considered for the open fifth starter spot. His first impression in game action was not a good one.

“A little inconsistency in his command,” Roenicke said. “It’s so early in spring, that’s kind of typical. You miss spots and these guys swing the bat. These guys swing the bat pretty good. You miss with it and that’s the stuff that happens.”

Righty Hector Velazquez impressed Roenicke in back-to-back 1-2-3 innings against the Twins. In Port Charlotte, righty Tanner Houck worked around trouble to toss two scoreless innings while striking out one.

Bullpen candidates Jeffrey Springs (2 IP, 3 H, 1 ER, 3 K, 1 HR) and Austin Brice (1.2 IP, 1 H, 1 BB, 4 K) made their Sox debuts.

Bogaerts, Devers progressing

Both Devers (birth of daughter) and shortstop Xander Bogaerts (sore ankle) are expected to get into games soon, Roenicke said.

Bogaerts took batting practice and took some grounders on back fields. Devers told Roenicke he'd be able to get into games by the end of the week.

"It's weird, when you get familiar with a team and then all of a sudden you have a couple faces missing and you go out there, it just doesn't seem right," Roenicke said.

Other notes

Michael Chavis was 0-for-3 with two strikeouts against the Rays, making him 0-for-5 with four strikeouts in two spring games... Outfielder Cesar Puello (visa issues) and righty Phillips Valdez (claimed from Mariners) arrived in camp Monday... Ryan Weber will start against the Orioles on Tuesday at JetBlue Park and will be followed by lefties Mike Kickham and Brian Johnson and righties Domingo Tapia and RHP Denyi Reyes... The Red Sox will have their annual meeting with MLBPA chief Tony Clark on Tuesday morning... First pitch is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. Tuesday.

Boston Red Sox's Andrew Benintendi hits deep leadoff home run, believes leadoff struggles in 2019 were 'more of a fluke than anything'

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The early returns on Andrew Benintendi's return to the top of the Red Sox lineup have been very positive in the first couple games of Grapefruit League play.

Benintendi, who is the leading candidate to take over for the departed Mookie Betts at the top of Boston's lineup, has hits in both of his at-bats leading off games for the Red Sox so far this spring. First, he hit a single against the Rays and stole a base on Saturday. On Monday, Benintendi took the second pitch he saw from Kenta Maeda and crushed it into the right-field seats, giving the Red Sox an early 1-0 lead over the Twins.

Considering Benintendi was 5-for-42 (.119) with just one extra-base hit leading off games last year, his early success is a positive omen. Benintendi, who saw his OPS drop 56 points amid downturn in every offensive category last season, believes the narrative about his struggles in the leadoff spot were overblown.

"I think that was just during a period I wasn't playing well," Benintendi said. "At that point, it didn't matter where I hit. It was not going well. I can see why it's being talked about, if I hit leadoff. I think it was more of a fluke than anything."

Before last season, former Sox manager Alex Cora decided to flip-flop Betts and Benintendi at the top of the order in an effort to give Betts more opportunities to drive in runs. Benintendi's lack of production caused Cora to abandon the experiment, with Betts being reinstated as the leadoff hitter on May 31.

Benintendi led off in 43 of Boston's 56 games before May 31, posting a .357 on-base percentage and .773 OPS in that span while the team's offense sputtered. Questions were asked -- fairly -- about whether or not the new spot in the lineup contributed to Benintendi's struggles. But the former first-round pick never believed the switch changed his approach, instead chalking up his lack of production to mechanical issues that permeated for the entire year.

“He was different,” said interim manager Ron Roenicke. “The first year we came over (2018), I remember the swing. I was like, ‘Man, that’s as good as it gets.’ Last year, I think he was searching a lot. He kept tinkering with stuff. He just really never found what he wanted.”

Benintendi showed promise in the leadoff spot in 2018, hitting .328 with five homers, six doubles and a triple in a 14-game stretch while Betts was sidelined from May 27 to June 11. Leading off games in 2018, Benintendi was 6-for-18 with a homer and two doubles, proving that he’s capable of getting the Sox’ offense going early.

A step forward from Benintendi this season would be a huge plus for the Red Sox, who will try to replace Betts’ production without having added a difference-maker to the offense. Benintendi has drawn praise for his conditioning and swing adjustments so far in camp, leading to optimism that he could rebound from his disappointing 2019 season and help fill the void left by Betts’ departure.

A huge part of Benintendi’s success will be a result of his mental approach. After a season spent constantly overthinking and overadjusting, the Sox want the 25-year-old to simplify his approach at the plate.

“If you think less, it means you feel good with what you’re doing with your mechanics,” Roenicke said. “You’re allowed to really concentrate on the baseball.”

It’s just one good swing in spring training, but Benintendi’s home run bodes well for his future success in the leadoff spot. Boston’s hope is that his numbers will improve drastically after an enigmatic season in which every adjustments failed to do the trick.

“I know he’s pretty happy with where he is right now and hopefully that continues into the season so we can have that player we know he is,” Roenicke said.

Boston Red Sox’s Mitch Moreland closing in on 10 major league seasons: ‘The fact that I have that opportunity is pretty special’

Chris Cutillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- When Mitch Moreland made his big league debut in 2010, the Rangers’ clubhouse was filled with players who had been in the majors for at least 10 years. Grizzled veterans like Darren Oliver, Vladimir Guerrero, Bengie Molina and Michael Young set the tone for a young Moreland, who first reached the majors at age 24.

A decade later, Moreland finds himself on the other side of the spectrum. Now 34, he’s the oldest player on the Red Sox’ 40-man roster (not counting the injured Dustin Pedroia) and has the most big league service time of anyone who will break camp with Boston.

For Moreland, being Boston’s elder statesman is an honor. But it also means facing the reality that he’s getting toward the end of his career.

“Mixed feelings on it,” Moreland said. “Fortunate and happy I’m still getting the opportunity to go out and play. Definitely... I feel the difference, too, when I’m out there. My body doesn’t recover like it used to.”

Moreland, who was limited to just 91 games last season due to back and quad injuries, will reach 10 years in the majors this season, assuming he remains on the roster for the entire year. For a former 17th-round pick who almost converted to pitching after one minor league season, the accomplishment is an unlikely one.

“I think it’s one of those benchmark spots,” Moreland said. “When I started playing, my goal wasn’t to get 10 years. I think there’s stuff that overshadows that. It’s definitely something that’s a cool accomplishment when you look at it, probably when you’re done. Not a whole lot of guys have had that opportunity. I’ve been fortunate.”

Two former Sox pitchers -- Rick Porcello and David Price -- hit the 10-year mark last year and were honored with clubhouse celebrations. Those types of festivities are commonplace throughout baseball, where players recognize the tangible impact of the milestone while also showing an appreciation for the on-field accomplishments it represents.

Any player with 10 years has his pension plan fully vest, locking in a yearly salary in retirement that's usually worth six figures once the player turns 62. With free agency being unkind to aging veterans in recent years, fewer and fewer players are reaching the plateau.

"It seems like in this game, it's getting harder and harder," Moreland said.

Moreland has taken three spins on the free agent carousel in the last four years, ending up in Boston all three times. His latest turn was slow-developing until the Red Sox called with a \$3 million offer in late January and tacked on a club option for 2021.

Though Moreland seems to be in the twilight of his career, he's not setting a timeline for when he plans to retire. In 2020, he'll shift into more of a complementary role, splitting time with Michael Chavis at first.

"I love playing this game," Moreland said. "It's all I know. I'm going to keep doing it as long as I can, and Lord-willing, keep getting opportunities. See what happens and let it play out."

Moreland's teammates believe he'd be a good coach or manager someday, but he's not yet sure what his retired life will look like. The Mississippi native enjoys hunting and fishing and has three kids -- two sons and a daughter -- whose ages range from 2 to 7.

"Maybe one day down the road," Moreland said. "But I've got three kids at home and I want to see them play a little bit too along the way, eventually."

Until the calls from interested teams stop coming, Moreland will enjoy playing the game he loves. And at some point late this season, his teammates will get the chance to celebrate an important moment in an impressive career.

"I've been fortunate to be on some good teams and play for a while," he said. "As you do that, you realize 10 years is tough to get. The fact that I have that opportunity is pretty special."

Boston Red Sox slugger Rafael Devers told Eduardo Rodriguez he wanted to homer off him, but lefty struck him out 5 times

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox teammates Eduardo Rodriguez and Rafael Devers faced each other during a live batting practice here at the JetBlue Park complex Monday.

"Early today, when we got here, I tell him, 'Bro, you want to face me today?'" Rodriguez said. "He tell (me), 'I want to hit the ball out of the ballpark.'"

"I'm gonna strike you out," Rodriguez said he told Devers.

Rodriguez won the duel. The lefty, who finished sixth for the 2019 AL Cy Young, looked extremely sharp during his two innings. He ended up striking out Devers five times.

"Thank God I win that bet," Rodriguez said, smiling.

"Nasty," Devers said about Rodriguez's stuff.

Rodriguez said he went full effort and his knee felt fine. He slipped and twisted his left knee during a bullpen session Wednesday.

“It was fun for me,” Rodriguez said. “I don’t know if it was fun for him (Devers). He was mad at me a little bit because of that.”

He said he needs to discuss the next step with the coaching staff but he’ll likely pitch again in five days. It could either be another simulated game or a Grapefruit League start.

“I surprised myself with the command and everything,” Rodriguez said. “Body-wise, I know I was feeling good and ready to go out there today. Body-wise, command, pitches, velocity, everything was there. And I was feeling great.”

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

Questions linger about health of Red Sox rotation

Tom Caron

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Interviewing Red Sox players over the past two weeks, I would preface my inevitable question about the loss of Mookie Betts with a statement.

“There will come a time where you get to do an interview without being asked a question about Mookie Betts. That time has not yet come.”

It always got a chuckle from the players, who knew the question was coming. Now, with the routine of Grapefruit League games here and Betts over there, we are finally getting to the point where we can talk about this team without talking about the loss of one of the game’s best players.

These are your 2020 Boston Red Sox. For better or worse. And, judging from fans’ reaction to the team’s moves, most of you think things will be worse.

Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom, still just months into the job, added fuel to that fire when he said, “I certainly think it’s reasonable to think we’ll be worse without” Betts and David Price.

Many critics took that to mean the Red Sox were throwing in the towel on 2020, that good times at Fenway were years away.

Last week, in a conference call with season ticket holders, Bloom didn’t back away from the statement but he did clarify that while they might be worse without Betts and Price, he strongly believed the Red Sox should be better than the team that won a disappointing 84 games in 2019.

That’s an important distinction to remember. The bar for this team – even without Betts and Price – shouldn’t be what it did last year. It should be what it is capable of doing. And that will rest largely on the health of the team’s starting pitchers.

Fully healthy, this is a rotation that is perilously thin. There are four identified big league-ready starters here in camp and not a plethora of options to round things out. There’s a very real chance the team will regularly use an “opener” in 2020.

We’ve had mixed news on the health of those pitchers. Most importantly, Chris Sale seems to be throwing without any elbow issues and has declared himself on track for Opening Day. Nathan Eovaldi has quietly gone about his business, meaning he’s ready to handle a full workload.

Meantime Eduardo Rodriguez, coming off a fully healthy season that saw him win 19 games, hurt his knee in a fall while throwing a bullpen session last week. No one here in camp seems concerned about it. Yet.

Back in Boston, everything about this rotation concerns fans. Last season's team had enough offense to return to the playoffs, but with Sale, Price and Eovaldi spending months on the disabled list, the pitching staff couldn't shoulder the load. Now Price is gone and the others will have to prove they can remain durable in 2020.

The only pitcher not answering questions about his health is Martin Perez, but he spent time on the injured list with elbow issues in 2018.

Before Bloom made a deal with the Dodgers that stunned Red Sox Nation, fans were asking questions about the 2020 starting rotation. Now, with questions about the trade dying down, the questions about that rotation's health linger.

And those questions will linger until this group can prove it's healthy enough to stay on the mound in 2020.

*** *RedSox.com***

Eovaldi's splitter returns in first spring start

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Nathan Eovaldi possesses a lightning bolt of a right arm, and that was apparent by the back-to-back fastballs at 100 mph that he fired to Nelson Cruz in the bottom of the second inning of Monday's 3-2 loss against the Twins.

But the heat that Eovaldi unleashed in his first start of Spring Training was not the most significant development.

What was much bigger to Eovaldi was the return of an old friend that abandoned him too many times last season -- the splitter.

For Eovaldi to be what he was two years ago when he helped the Red Sox win the World Series, he needs his secondary pitches to prevent hitters from sitting on his elite heat.

And no pitch does that better than his splitter. Right?

"Yeah, I'd say my splitter for sure," Eovaldi said. "Last year it was real inconsistent. That was one of the pitches I really focused on this offseason. Make sure I got that back on track. Today they were really consistent."

In two strong innings, Eovaldi gave up two hits (only one left the infield), walked none and struck out four. He cited the splitter as the catalyst to his strong Grapefruit League debut

Eovaldi especially likes to unleash the splitter on lefties, and he got several swings and misses on it Monday.

"The lefties, throw good cutters in, and speed them up, and then the splitter away," he said.

"Oh, gosh, that's what we talk about when Nate's got his command. He's really tough to hit," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "He had everything working."

Whether the outs come by fastballs, splitters, sliders or curves, Eovaldi is a hugely important member of the 2020 Red Sox.

“He’s huge because we need to keep our starting pitchers healthy, out on the field,” said Roenicke. “When you’re always trying to go grab guys from your Minor Leagues to come up or fill in from your bullpen to try to fill starting spots, you can only do that for so long.”

With David Price off to the Dodgers -- not to mention the star-studded, five-tool skillset that Mookie Betts possesses -- Boston needs its returning starting pitchers to come through.

It starts with ace Chris Sale and ultra-talented lefty Eduardo Rodriguez. But third in line is Eovaldi, who took turns being injured and inconsistent last season.

As it turns out, those two things were inter-related.

“I think a lot of the inconsistency comes from the injury,” Roenicke said. “I think with Nate, you get him on a roll. Health-wise, he looks great so far. It starts with that great stuff. He starts to get command with it, then all of a sudden you have this great pitcher. I know he’s got great stuff.”

The key will be for Eovaldi to locate his great stuff.

“These big league hitters are getting better and better and getting more used to seeing that type of velocity, even up to 100,” Roenicke said. “When you miss even with 100, it still gets hit at times. The more velocity we see in this game, the more they get used to it, you’re going to have to really start making pitches like anybody.”

Though Eovaldi will never admit it, the workload he endured during that memorable October of 2018 must have taken its toll last year.

Who could forget Eovaldi pitching late into the night and early into the morning for six innings of heroic relief in Game 3 of the World Series, which ended in the 18th inning when Max Muncy walked off with a homer for the only win of the series for the Dodgers.

Even in defeat, Eovaldi was widely credited with making Boston’s eventual World Series victory possible because he saved the rest of the bullpen. In fact, he roved from the rotation to the bullpen throughout the playoffs. But for someone who has endured arm injuries over the years, the after-effects couldn’t help but be felt in 2019.

“Physically I feel really good,” Eovaldi said. “This offseason I worked a lot on my kinetic chain and posture. Coming into Spring Training, I feel like it’s helped out a lot. I know this was the first outing but so far I’ve been really good.”

And if Eovaldi can stay there throughout the season, the Red Sox will have a big weapon.

“If he’s healthy, he’s a big arm,” said Red Sox slugger J.D. Martinez. “You saw him out there today, he’s throwing 100 miles an hour. It never hurts when you have a guy like that in your rotation. If he’s healthy and he goes out there and stays healthy, he’s going to be a big piece.”

Notes: E-Rod's sim positive, Sale plan emerging

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- As a substitute for what would have been his first Grapefruit League start, Eduardo Rodriguez did something much more enjoyable on Monday.

He got to claim bragging rights over one of his favorite teammates.

Rodriguez got his two innings in on Field 1 of the Fenway South complex facing Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts. While Bogaerts was just there to track, Devers was there to rip. But he didn't get very far.

"With Devers, I mean early today, I said, 'Do you want to face me today?' He said, 'Yeah, I'm going to do it.' He said, 'I'm going to hit the ball out of the ballpark.' I said, 'I'm going to strike you out.' Thank God I won that bet."

In fact, Rodriguez struck out Devers several times during the battle. The best the lefty slugger could muster was a grounder to second base and a hard foul down the right-field line. Other than that, it was all E-Rod.

"Nasty," Devers said when he returned to the clubhouse a bit later.

The pitchers are generally ahead of the hitters at this point of spring anyway. But for Devers, who didn't report to camp until four days ago due to the birth of his daughter, that effect is even bigger.

The most important thing is that E-Rod took a positive first step, firing off two impressive innings of simulation that will count toward the six starts interim manager Ron Roenicke wants him to make this spring.

The reason Rodriguez didn't pitch in a game was simply due to precaution. He fell in the bullpen last week and tweaked his right knee. Though the Red Sox were sure nothing was seriously wrong with him, they wanted Rodriguez to make his first start in a controlled environment.

He will likely slot into the Grapefruit League rotation in five days and ramp up to three innings.

"I threw everything with full effort," Rodriguez said. "Threw all my pitches. Everything feels great. It was full effort. I told Bogey and Devers, 'treat this like a regular game, counts, everything.' And it was really good."

It remains to be seen if Rodriguez will have as much fun facing an opponent next time out than he did overpowering the dangerous Devers.

"I mean, it was fun for me," Rodriguez said. "I don't know if it was fun for him. He was mad at me a little bit because of that. I would have been mad at him if he was hitting the ball pretty hard. That's how baseball is."

Sale plan coming together

A day after ace Chris Sale threw another side session, he met with Roenicke and others to discuss what his plan will be for the rest of Spring Training.

Roenicke wasn't ready to divulge that plan just yet, so it's still unknown if Sale -- who was slowed by the flu and pneumonia at the start of camp -- is in play to pitch on Opening Day. Reading between the lines, it sounds as if Roenicke might want to take a more conservative approach and make sure he gets six starts before pitching in a regular-season game.

"We did talk to him. I'll probably let you know in a couple days what we're thinking, have another discussion with him," Roenicke said. "It was good. We just needed to talk about some things, think about some things, and figure out how we want to proceed with him. He's doing great."

Bogaerts making progress

Bogaerts, who came to camp with a sore left ankle, is progressing in his baseball activities. However, there is still no word on when he will play in games.

"Yeah, so he's going to take some B.P. He just actually took some groundballs about 10 minutes ago," said Roenicke. "He's doing good. Nice to get him out on the field, see him running around."

When you factor in the trade of Mookie Betts and the delayed starts to camp for Devers and Bogaerts, there has been a different feel for the Red Sox on the position-player side so far.

“Have a couple faces missing. You go out there and it just doesn’t feel right,” said Roenicke. “Get Bogey back, get Devers back out there ... Devers has been hitting B.P. It will be nice to see those guys all together again.”

Benintendi looking comfortable at top

Andrew Benintendi, who is likely to replace Betts in the leadoff spot, didn’t fare well there last year -- especially in the first inning.

The left fielder was 5-for-42 leading off a game last year. So far in Spring Training, he is 2-for-2.

After belting a single on the first pitch he saw on Saturday, Benintendi led off Monday’s 3-2 loss to the Twins by roping the second pitch he saw from Kenta Maeda over the fence in right for a homer.

"I know he's pretty happy where he is right now and hopefully that continues into the season and we have that player we know he is," Roenicke said of Benintendi.

In the other game of the day's split-squad action, the team visiting the Rays tied, 2-2.

Up next

Ryan Weber, one of the candidates for the No. 5 starter or opener slot, will make the start for the Red Sox in Tuesday's home game against the Orioles. Another bubble roster candidate, lefty Brian Johnson, will see action out of the bullpen. First pitch at JetBlue Park is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. ET.

*** *WEEL.com***

Inside the mind of Chris Sale

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Chris and Allen Sale recently sat down for a talk. Son. Father. Not out of the ordinary even if one of them was making \$30 million a year, living life as one of Major League Baseball's most noteworthy pitchers. There were hard questions and uncomfortable answers.

In many ways, everything about this moment is what has molded Chris Sale, pitcher for the Boston Red Sox. That unique image of accountability that is defining Sale these days was born from this sort of exchange.

"I was telling him I want to give my sons the same opportunities," Sale said in a lengthy sit-down with WEEL.com. "I want to do the same things he did. It's hard. That's why when the offseason comes, it's sacred for me because that's the time I do those things. I take my son to baseball practice. I got my oldest son golf lessons so he can come play golf with me or he can come hang out with me and my friends. My dad had some stuff to say about the differences, the pros and the cons. He's always someone I rely on for information. He's still my dad. I can ask him questions and talk to him about stuff."

We can talk about what Sale will do this season, or how his health will hold up. There will be time to analyze the merits of his \$30 million-a-year contract and how important he is to the success of these Red Sox. That's surface-level stuff. Easy. What's hard is to take a deeper dive into the foundation of this athlete who admittedly wrestles with his life as a professional baseball player and what he thought his existence as a parent and son should look like.

As unique a baseball player as Sale is, his priorities are extremely relatable. That reality was surfaced in the aforementioned father-son get-together, but born from lessons learned from an upstate New York farm girl and Lakeland insurance man.

"It's different avenues, but the dedication, the pride, the work ethic, it's all there," he said.

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

Chris' mother, Marla, grew up on a farm town called Peasleevelee, New York. "There is one blinking stoplight," the Red Sox pitcher said. "Good luck finding it on a map. ... The one thing I remember is they had a horn for the fire department. They said, 'Well when the horn goes off everybody in the town can hear it.'"

His dad was part of Lakeland insurance royalty, part of "Sale Insurance" in the Florida city Chris' great-grandfather had moved to from Georgia a long, long time ago. Marla moved down to the area for her senior year of high school, paving the way for a meeting with her future husband. On March 30, 1989 their son was born. A few years later young Chris was offering the first hint regarding his future.

"My grandmother told me we would have Thanksgiving and they would have those velcro paddles and tennis balls. I would just go all the way down the line and then back again. I threw that thing until the velcro wore off," Sale said.

Soon, the passion was surfaced at a whole different level. Allen Sale saw it and acted accordingly.

"With sports, because that's all I ever did," Chris said. "I didn't want to fish. I didn't want to hunt. I didn't want to work on cars. When I had time I wanted to play. I was calling him at work saying, 'When are you coming home?' My dad would go to work at 7 in the morning so he could come back at 3 and hang out with me and it still wasn't enough. I would call him at lunchtime saying, 'When are you coming home? We have to shoot some hoops! We have to play baseball!' I try and do the same thing with my boys. My dad would come home after a good day, bad day, whatever and he would take off his suit and tie, throw on his basketball shorts and t-shirt and play until it got dark.

"My dad was that every day. And on the weekends we went to Peterson Park. My dad was so disappointed I didn't become a hitter because he threw millions of baseballs to me. You can't even count how many baseballs he threw at me to hit. So when I got my first big league hit that was a big deal."

THEN CAME THE LESSONS

It was all well and good that Chris had a father who was happy to encourage his son's passion. But there was always a caveat. If you were going to be all-in, there were going to be no easy exits.

"You go through ups and downs in baseball," he said, "and I remember my dad saying, 'You can quit at the end of the season but you're going to finish this out. You can play any sport you want. You can never play another sport ever again. But you started this season, you're going to finish this season.'"

There were the usual bumps in the road. Bad games, sometimes against friends and longtime adversaries. It happens. As Sale explained, "There were times I hated baseballs because I sucked. When you do bad you don't want to play anymore." But when could that possibly be the case for this pitcher has long been perceived as better than the best? "Shoot, I sucked last year," he immediately responded in the quick-witted manner that has endeared himself to Boston fans.

There are two instances, however, that truly put Allen's rule to the test.

The first came just months after Sale was drafted out of high school by the Colorado Rockies. He reached a point of actually wanting to quit the sport his whole life had revolved around.

"If you go talk to (Florida Gulf Coast University baseball coach) Dave Tollett right now and you ask him who had the worst Fall Baseball stats to this day it has been me. My freshman fall at FGCU was by far the worst thing anyone has ever seen on a baseball field," Sale remembered. "It's cool we can laugh about it now but I went home at Christmas break and that was probably the first time I really, really contemplated, 'I don't know if this is for me.' I got drafted out of high school but I wasn't prepared for it. It was the first time I had been on a workout regimen. We're running three miles, having to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning to do running, weights and stuff like that. I just wasn't prepared. It happened too fast. I wasn't getting through innings. It was tough. It was not good. I went there and I was supposed to be a starter, got drafted out of high school. I was feeling myself a little bit and I got knocked off my high horse quick."

The uncertainty and doubt were immediately met with one of those talks with Allen. It wouldn't be the last one.

As a sophomore Sale was charged with closing out what was supposed to be a defining win for FGCU -- a second-year Division I program at the time -- overpower Florida State. He gave it up and history had to be put on hold. It was time for another reminder from Dad.

"He always told me I was going to finish what I started. Do what you want after, but finish this off," Sale said. "The love of the game always brought me back. As much as I hated it on the last day of the year. That first game of the year came around I was like, 'Alright, I want to do this.'"

THE NEXT CHALLENGE

Chris has three sons, ages 9, 3, and three months. He knows one way to parent. If it was only that simple.

The challenges Allen faced while raising his baseball-loving son are similar but hardly the same as the ones facing Chris, as the pair were reminded in their recent confab.

"My dad was always the guy who cleaned the garage on Saturday and then re-clean it on Sunday. He always had to do something. He took pride in everything he did. I like to think I'm trying to do the same things," he said. "When I was with my dad a couple of weeks ago and I was just telling him it's hard for me living the childhood I lived with a dad that was home every day. I mean my dad never went on business trips. We didn't travel a whole lot. I didn't get on my first plane until high school. My first taxi ride? In the big leagues, in Chicago. You don't have taxis in Lakeland.

"You can ask my mom, ask my dad, ask my sister, ask anybody in my family, my dad missed less than a handful of my games until I got to college. He would have a seminar or something like that to keep your license and would come watch three innings and leave in the middle of the game just so he didn't miss everything. Going from that to me missing my kids' first day of school, missing my son's first Little League game, missing practices, missing games, not being there just for stuff, just stuff ... it's hard."

There is simply no way around the unique lifestyle a major leaguer is forced to live. But that doesn't mean Sale is going way out of his way to make sure the lessons of his father, mother and their parents prioritized. There was perhaps no better example of that than during the time Chris calls his lowest professional existence, the 2019 season.

"My oldest son, he's 9 and he gets it," he said. "I go out there and get my ass kicked and he doesn't want to say anything. He kind of stays quiet. I'm like, 'Listen, bud, it's going to happen.' My actions, my personality, my attitude, he's going to see that. If I come home cussing up a storm, throwing stuff around the house, getting all mad -- which when I was young sometimes happened but he was a baby ... you have to learn that separation.

"I learned a lot last year. Even telling my son, 'Hey, see that. See how bad that was.' I'm honest with him. I'm not going to shelter him from the truth. I think that's going to be a big part of how I raise him. The accountability. The honesty. 'Listen buddy, you see how that went. You see what I way after the game.

This is part of it. This is part of being accountable and holding yourself to a standard you have to hold yourself to.'

"Part of it is manning your post no matter how you're feeling. If you're sick and you don't feel good you have to get it done. He obviously knew I wasn't at my best. And last year was a big learning moment for me. It was the worst year of my life professionally. Being able to tell him I couldn't wait to pitch even though I just stunk. Those are the little things as a parent."

Sound familiar.

Admit it, you were wondering how Chris Sale -- one of pro sports' most accountable athletes -- got this way. Now you know.

Jackie Bradley Jr. taking Mookie Betts approach to free agency

Rob Bradford

While so much of the focus had been on the "it's a business" mantra relayed by Mookie 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 WEEI.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 to 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 on 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."

Bradley Jr. is hitting second and playing center field for the Red Sox Monday against the Twins at Hammond Stadium.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Projecting Red Sox 26-man Opening Day roster includes many questions

John Tomase

Usually, the exercise of predicting the Red Sox opening day roster isn't particularly taxing. We could normally name about 24 spots in December.

Welcome to 2020, however, a most abnormal year. With the opener in Toronto barely a month away, we still have to answer some basic questions, like whether the team will employ a fifth starter, who'll be starting at second base, and how the outfield will align.

With Mookie Betts and David Price gone, and San Diego's Wil Myers possibly joining the fold this spring, the Red Sox remain in flux. It may just be their state of being all year.

In any event, here's our best guess at the expanded 26-man roster.

Catchers (2): Christian Vazquez, Jonathan Lucroy

Vazquez emerged as a legit power threat, blasting a career-high 23 homers while compiling a .798 OPS. His defense was spotty, with too much emphasis on throwing out base stealers, and not enough on actually receiving the ball. He's in the middle of an affordable three-year, \$13.5 million extension, but there's no guarantee new baseball boss Chaim Bloom will be as loyal to him as predecessor Dave Dombrowski was.

The backup spot looked like Kevin Plawecki's when camp opened, but the arrival of Lucroy, a two-time All-Star recovering from neck surgery, could change things. Lucroy played for interim manager Ron Roenicke in Milwaukee, and it's worth noting that on his first day in camp, he was catching ace Chris Sale.

What impressed Dodgers from Mookie's first speech

Infielders (7): Mitch Moreland, Jose Peraza, Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts, Michael Chavis, Jonathan Arauz, Bobby Dalbec

The infield includes two rocks and then varying pebbles. The left side isn't going anywhere, with Bogaerts and Devers anchoring what should be a strength of the team. The former is coming off an all-MLB season, while the latter was only a slow April away from making his first All-Star team. The Red Sox are counting on both to be at least as good as they were last year.

First baseman Mitch Moreland remained unsigned for most of the offseason before returning to Boston, and if the team is judicious with his usage, the oft-injured left-handed slugger could have some value. He may end up in a platoon with Chavis, who's unlikely to win a second base job that the team has pretty clearly earmarked for Peraza, a Reds non-tender with a decent pedigree as a former prospect.

In a perfect world, Peraza would probably play a little bit of everywhere, but with Dustin Pedroia effectively finished and Chavis more suited to a corner, he'll get a chance to win the job at second. That leaves the utility job for Arauz, a 21-year-old Rule 5 pick from the Astros with the ability to play second, third, and short.

We'll give the final spot to Dalbec, a slugging first baseman with an outstanding glove who could earn the call while outfielder Alex Verdugo rehabs a back injury.

Outfielders (3): Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., Kevin Pillar

Eventually, this group will number four, once Verdugo joins the mix. The only question is who starts where. Roenicke has suggested that he's intrigued by the idea of Bradley in right field, where his arm plays and the unique configuration of Fenway Park calls for a defensive whiz like Betts. Normally, the club wouldn't consider moving the Gold Glover out of center field, but Roenicke has options, because Pillar is human highlight reel of his own. The newcomer has already vowed to play right, but Roenicke may have other ideas.

This will be a big season for Benintendi in left. He came to camp both leaner and stronger than last year, and he's the player most capable of picking up some of the slack left by Betts' departure. He needs to break through at age 25, because a repeat of last year's meh production (.266-13-68-.774) won't cut it, especially if he's batting leadoff.

Verdugo is the wild card. The stress fracture in his back is expected to heal, eventually, and the 23-year-old should become the starting right fielder with the potential to hit over .300 once he returns.

DH (1): J.D. Martinez

The best DH in baseball surprised a lot of us by opting in to his contract, but it turns out he had nowhere to go.

This will almost certainly be his last season in a Red Sox uniform, especially if the NL adds the DH in 2021. The slugger might be the most important player in the lineup, because he welcomes the pressure of being the focus of rival pitchers, and he allows everyone else to slot into their roles.

Starting pitchers (4): Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi, Martin Perez
It's quite the statement on the state of the staff that there's not a (5) in that heading. The Red Sox are almost certainly headed towards an opener for their fifth spot, a result not just of the trade of David Price to the Dodgers, but also a lack of organizational depth that Bloom will need more time to address.

Even the settled spots contain question marks. Sale is coming off the worst season of his career, but arrived at spring training in a positive frame of mind following an elbow injury that cost him the final two months. Rodriguez is already battling a knee injury after slipping during a bullpen session -- though at least it's to his good knee and not the surgically repaired one -- and we still don't know if Eovaldi can last an entire season.

That leaves Perez and maybe an opener, though Roenicke has singled out junk-balling right-hander Ryan Weber as a potential fifth starter.

Relievers (9): Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes, Heath Hembree, Darwinzon Hernandez, Josh Taylor, Marcus Walden, Josh Osich, Ryan Weber, Chris Mazza
The Red Sox ended 2019 with a pretty good bullpen, particularly once rookie left-handers Hernandez and Taylor emerged as legit late-inning power arms. Given the year-over-year variance in reliever performance, it's hard to say if either will duplicate their success, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt for now.

Workman projects to close, based on an otherworldly 2019, even if some of the underlying numbers suggest a regression is in order. He'll be followed by Barnes, who pitches best when he's not being asked to go every other day, as he was last June. Hembree is healthy and has been surprisingly effective when relying on his 95 mph fastball, and Walden was a workhorse last year.

The rest of the pen is wide open. Weber could get a nod as the multi-inning guy who piggybacks off the opener, while Osich was the first signing of the Bloom era following an up-and-down season with the White Sox. Mazza could be a dark horse candidate for the fifth spot in the rotation after eight years in the minors.

That leaves Ryan Brasier, Austin Brice, Brian Johnson, Colten Brewer, Jeff Springs, and Matt Hall among the group fighting it out for a spot at the back of the pen.

*** *The Athletic***

Astros sort through the wreckage; Red Sox wait for MLB's report

Peter Gammons

This much we know: Dusty Baker was the perfect man to hire to manage the wreckage of the Trash Can Sinatras. So fans showed up with signs at Saturday's opener in West Palm Beach, Fla. Some drove through Yeehaw Junction to scream obscenities at Houston players, some of whom say they have been dealing with death threats.

Dusty? "Put your big boy pants on and just play baseball."

When the full squad reported Thursday, he told stories of a couple of 10-day trips he took last summer to see his son Darren — a legitimate prospect from the University of California — play in the Cape Cod League for Wareham. "I'm driving in and I see I'm on the Cranberry Highway, then there's a road to

Ocean Spray, and I thought, ‘This is cool.’” He went to see cranberry bogs, saw they’re flooded in June like small lakes, met the owners and was out fishing on the bogs every morning.

Only Dusty. Probably fished with Buddy Guy playing on his phone.

He has no role in the Astros’ 2017 case, was nowhere near the cameras and monitors. So, every day, the first voice you hear from the Astros is that of Dusty Baker, whose original plan for the 2020 season was to watch as many Cal games as possible.

Rob Arthur has calculated that the pitch-calling had only minimal impact on the Astros’ offense, and if indeed they did not continue the practice in 2019, they led the major leagues in wRC+ in winning 107 games last season. Meanwhile, The Athletic found significant changes in some offensive numbers in 2017. We don’t know, not now.

When Carlos Correa defended José Altuve and said he did not participate, the outrage about the Astros drowned out his voice.

But teammates and ex-teammates this spring have sworn Altuve did not. He’s not talking, but one ex-teammate said privately that if Altuve did publicly plead innocence, he would be indicting other players, which he won’t do. One former Astros pitcher called him. That’s the answer he got.

Was the scheme wrong? Yes. They cheated. But clubhouses, for better or for worse, are a place of bonding. For those who call Mike Fiers a “snitch,” he was pitching for the Athletics trying to beat the Astros last summer, which they did six out of eight meetings, and owed it to his Oakland teammates to share what he knew. I was told that when Justin Verlander got to Houston on the first of September, 2017, he voiced disapproval; but he was new, and was thrown into a clubhouse that believed the Houston Astros were going to win.

Carlos Beltrán came over from the Yankees and reportedly told Astros players they were far behind in sign-stealing. The Astros were so convinced that the Dodgers had some elaborate system in 2017 they kept changing signs in Dodger Stadium during the World Series.

We don’t know what Rob Manfred’s office might know.

If the Astros pitching holds up in 2020, they might be hardened to the sounds of seats banging in stadiums, and Dusty might take their minds off the noise and develop an us-against-the-world mentality. Alex Bregman isn’t going to suddenly hit .230. Neither is Correa or Altuve.

I’ll say this: Being in that clubhouse with these players must be tense. Morose. Edgy.

They know what they did, that it might have cost opposing players their jobs, but when the season enters May, they’ll have had seven or eight weeks’ practice in shutting out the noise with Dusty Baker on lead.

Next, the Red Sox. Manfred has submissions; he is expected to make a preliminary finding early in the week, meet with all parties and render a decision, likely on Friday. It has already been a rocky spring training for the Red Sox, with ownership grilled about the Mookie Betts deal and everything from Chris Sale’s illness to Eduardo Rodríguez’s knee issue. New England fans are now used to good days, and if the club is hit with charges of cheating during the regular season in 2018, lose draft choices and international signing pool money ...

If Manfred comes down hard on the Red Sox, it will make their first April without Mookie even colder.

Baseball fell short in not understanding the possible ramifications of the replay challenge system, boasting that challenges would provide strategic entertainment. Didn’t happen. Why didn’t they go to the NHL system and have a replay official upstairs for every game? Why not have an electronic system, so that

officials could communicate with the home plate umpire, maybe letting him know that his strike zone was a tad out of line?

Ken Rosenthal, as usual, is right — in the end, this will be for the best. The fact that MLB was blind to the ramifications of replay while trying to get billions from Las Vegas and other betting programs is a black eye, but one that, without any further issues, will eventually allow fans to regain confidence that what they see is real.

But we don't know how long it will take —or whether there are more teams to be revealed, or more players who will speak out.

The best thing for the game is that it has been made clear that the majority of major-league players want the spy-vs.-spy stuff to end immediately. That means that a new system should be the product of MLB and the MLBPA working together for the good of the game, not for some chip in a negotiating game.

To most he's a journeyman. To Red Sox, Ryan Weber looks like someone to count on

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — For four years, Ryan Weber bounced from job to job, always seeking opportunity but never finding stability. He pitched for eight teams in four organizations. He was called up, sent down, claimed off waivers, placed on the injured list, released into free agency, then granted free agency again. Weber was, and is, a journeyman in every sense of the word, and if you expected the Red Sox to release or non-tender him this winter, you weren't alone.

But you were wrong.

“There's been a lot of moves made,” Weber said. “And my name hasn't been in any of them.”

When Weber makes his first start of the spring on Tuesday, it won't be some token appearance by a guy inevitably heading to Pawtucket. He's still on the Red Sox 40-man roster and has a real chance to break camp as the fifth starter. The Red Sox have kept Weber longer than expected, because they've always liked him more than it seemed.

“He's definitely in play going into 2020,” assistant general manager Eddie Romero said. “He was identified early as a priority target (last winter). ... So, we pursued aggressively.”

Minor-league free agents rarely feel like offseason priorities, but it's all a matter of perspective. The Red Sox can prioritize J.D. Martinez as a \$110 million clean-up hitter, they can prioritize Jose Peraza as a \$3 million utility man, and they can prioritize Weber as a Triple-A starter good enough to pitch in the majors. When Weber threw six innings of one-run ball in Toronto in May, manager Alex Cora texted vice president of pro scouting Gus Quattlebaum, essentially to say thank you.

“(Weber) executes better than most,” Quattlebaum said. “Obviously, he's not going to wow you — or scouts — with stuff, but he can really pitch and execute.”

Red Sox scout Anthony Turco filed a strong report on Weber in 2018. He liked Weber's command and execution and the fearless way he attacked hitters. The Red Sox analytics department supported that assessment, noting some opportunities to optimize Weber's pitch mix. Legitimate rotation options are hard to find on the minor-league free-agent market, Quattlebaum said, but the Red Sox thought they'd found one in Weber, so they went after him.

That kind of unheralded pursuit happens every offseason. There's an obvious focus on the multimillion-dollar superstars, but teams pay upward of \$20,000 to \$30,000 per month to top minor-league free agents. But money, Quattlebaum said, is no longer the biggest difference-maker in that market. Players might have a coach they like in a certain system, or they might prefer a spring training facility close to home. Mostly,

Quattlebaum's found, they just want an honest opportunity, and the Red Sox have built credibility in recent years by calling up and keeping guys like Hector Velázquez, Ryan Brasier, Marcus Walden and, now, Weber.

"It shows me that they do believe in me," Weber said. "They're sticking to their guns. Obviously, what I did last year, they saw something they really liked. It puts a lot of accountability on me now, knowing that they do believe in me, that I'm not just another depth guy."

Josh Smith, another minor-league free agent signed last winter, pitched in just as many Red Sox games as Weber last season, but he was outrighted off the roster at the very beginning of the offseason. Steven Wright was then released, Brian Johnson cleared waivers, Trevor Kelley was claimed off waivers, Bobby Poyner was designated for assignment and Travis Lakins was designated and then traded. That's six pitchers the Red Sox risked losing before they took a chance on losing Weber. Now that they've traded David Price, it's obvious someone is going to have to fill an innings gap on the pitching staff, and it's notable interim manager Ron Roenicke has repeatedly mentioned Weber as a strong candidate for that open rotation spot.

If the Red Sox go with an opener instead, Weber has experience as a long man out of the bullpen. It's also worth noting Weber has options remaining, which means he can be sent back to the minor leagues without exposing him to waivers, and the Red Sox believe he has the emotional makeup to handle shuttling up and down if necessary.

"It takes a certain mentality to handle that," Quattlebaum said. "And he's shown he can."

What Weber hasn't shown is big-league staying power. He's 29, and his 18 appearances last season were a career high. His 5.09 ERA left quite a bit to be desired, though nearly half of his earned runs came in two particularly bad outings. In the other 16, he had a 3.00 ERA, never walked more than one batter and never allowed more than two earned runs. He topped out at 91 mph but impressed the Red Sox with his willingness to attack hitters.

"Obviously, they have a plan for me," Weber said. "They like me, they want me to succeed, and I think they believe in me."

He wouldn't still be here if they didn't.

*** *The New York Post***

Mark Teixeira torches Red Sox legends in Astros cheating feud

Mark Fischer

Former Yankees star Mark Teixeira on Monday called out Red Sox legends David Ortiz and Pedro Martinez after the two ripped Athletics pitcher Mike Fiers for exposing the Astros' cheating ways.

In two separate interviews the last few weeks, Ortiz labeled Fiers a "snitch," while his former teammate Martinez said the former Houston righty was a "bad teammate" for waiting two years after he left the organization to come forward with what has become the biggest baseball story of the offseason.

"I just think there are very few people out there that really even use the word snitch or rat anymore anyway," Teixeira said on ESPN. "This isn't 'Goodfellas.' This is the real world. In the real world, you want bad things brought to light. You don't want people cheating."

For the most part, Fiers has been praised for blowing the whistle on the Astros, who baseball circles long-suspected of cheating.

Teixeira retired a season before Houston began illegally stealing opponents' signs in 2017, when the Astros beat the Yankees in the ALCS on their way to winning the World Series.

"Players that are clean, whether they are in the steroid era or anybody that wasn't on the Astros, they want these guys outed, they want the Astros punished," Teixeira said. "So for David Ortiz and Pedro Martinez or anybody, it's interesting its two (ex) Boston players and Boston is part of this investigation as well, so I think there's some meaning behind what the two Red Sox players are saying."

There also is the 2009 New York Times report, which said Ortiz was one of 104 players who tested positive for PEDs in 2003. The slugger never was punished as the test was administered one year before MLB implemented a new drug-testing program, and Ortiz repeatedly has denied cheating.

Nowadays, Ortiz and the Hall of Famer Martinez are both special assistants for the Red Sox, who currently are awaiting commissioner Rob Manfred's report into allegations the 2018 champions also illegally stole signs.

But the lack of a whistleblower in the Red Sox case could make it difficult for MLB to levy similar punishments to what Houston faced.

In addition to losing draft picks and being fined \$5 million, the league suspended Astros manager A.J. Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow one-year each, and Houston subsequently fired both.