

The Boston Red Sox Wednesday, February 26, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox' Jackie Bradley Jr. searches for consistency at the plate

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The ball soared off the bat of Jackie Bradley Jr. in the bottom of the fourth inning, a towering home run that clanged high off the light tower above the batter's eye in center field. But Bradley didn't witness the trajectory or landing spot of his first homer of the spring.

"I was too busy looking at the piece of my bat that it broke," said Bradley, who was memorializing a piece of lumber that had lost a sizable splinter and that had been reattached by tape below and above the barrel. "It died a warrior."

Bradley knows better than to get carried away with early spring results. After all, after overhauling his swing (trying to get it on the plane of the baseball and drive it in the air) following the 2018 season, he hit home runs in each of his first two games of the 2019 Grapefruit League season.

The Red Sox savored the prospect that Bradley's offseason work with Craig Wallenbrock — the California swing guru who'd helped transform the career of J.D. Martinez — might yield considerable gains. But that early outburst wasn't a harbinger.

Bradley endured a six-week struggle to open the 2019 regular season, hitting .144/.245/.176 with a 29.7 percent strikeout rate through 46 games — struggles severe enough to raise questions about his role.

"He probably bit off a little bit more than he can chew," said Red Sox hitting coach Tim Hyers. "I think he understands that."

Indeed, the outfielder seemed to arrive at that realization by mid-May, when he made adjustments to make more frequent contact while driving the ball to all fields. Over roughly the final three-quarters of the year, he posted strong numbers (.252/.342/.504 with 21 homers and a 26.5 percent strikeout rate) that, in concert with his excellent defense, made him a well-above-average player over the final two-thirds of the season.

This spring, Bradley is employing a swing that resembles the one he used down the stretch in 2019 rather than the more pronounced uppercut that got him in trouble early in the season. Instead of returning to Wallenbrock, Bradley took a different approach entering this year in his ongoing pursuit of consistency. This spring, he's featuring a swing that is more level through the strike zone and features fewer moving parts than the one he employed a year ago in hopes of more regular, hard contact and less vulnerability to strikeouts.

"I'm a work in progress," he said. "I have different thoughts, different keys that I've been working on this go-round."

Will it bear fruit? Will it yield, finally, a consistent season, rather than stretches in which he resembles an above-average to All-Star-caliber talent immediately before or after a stretch that ranks among the worst in the majors?

The Red Sox are trying to figure that out.

"What happens to these other months?" wondered interim manager Ron Roenicke. "That's obviously what we're trying to look at and Jack is trying to look at, and when he gets it right, he's an exciting player

offensively. He's great defensively all the time. But offensively, just trying to be more consistent and extend that period. There's not too many guys that have six good months. But extend [the period of success] a little bit, and then the end of the year, the numbers [will] look pretty good."

Bradley, too, acknowledges his desire to achieve greater consistency. He can't say for sure why he's been unable to achieve steady production over a full season. Sometimes it's a matter of pitch selection; sometimes it's his swing; sometimes it's lack of timing.

Regardless, he's long past the idea of taking solace in moral victories — stretches in which he has excellent exit velocities indicative of hard contact, but not results. Roenicke noted that Bradley posted elite exit velocities down the stretch. Bradley suggested little interest in his underlying data.

Now 29 and entering his final season before he's eligible for free agency, Bradley continues to pursue something that he has yet to achieve during his time in Boston: steady results.

"The whole hitting balls hard, I'm over it, I'm out on that. I don't care about that. I want bloop, bleed jobs, jammed knuckles, I want all of that, as long as they fall in," said Bradley. "Take my knuckles, take everything, break all my bats. If they fall in, I'm down for it."

Results of investigation into Red Sox won't be announced this week

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Major League Baseball's investigation into the 2018 Red Sox will not be finished this week after all. An industry source told the Globe on Tuesday that the findings will not be announced until next week at the earliest.

Commissioner Rob Manfred said on Feb. 16 that his goal was to wrap up the inquiry by the end of this week. But unexpected delays related to scheduling have pushed that back.

The probe started six weeks ago after anonymous sources told The Athletic the Red Sox used live video to steal signs, then relayed the information to runners at second base.

Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers, Ian Kinsler, and J.D. Martinez are among the current and former Sox players who have denied that.

Red Sox principal owner John Henry, who also owns the Globe, and team president Sam Kennedy also said the team's 2018 championship was won fairly.

Sox manager Ron Roenicke said earlier Tuesday that the team was eager to have the investigation finished.

Tuesday's spring game report: Connor Wong slams Orioles

Alex Speier

SCORE: Red Sox 12, Orioles 4.

RECORD: 2-2-1.

BREAKDOWN: At JetBlue Park in Fort Myers, the Red Sox broke a 4-4 tie with an eight-run eruption in the fifth. Catcher Connor Wong, acquired from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts deal, crushed a grand slam to right-center. "What a nice swing," said Sox manager Ron Roenicke. "He's got a lot of power."

PLAYER OF THE DAY: Wong's grand slam and Jackie Bradley Jr.'s broken-bat homer to center were noteworthy, but the most improbable event of the day occurred when Mitch Moreland hustled into third on a fly ball to center that was misplayed into a triple. Was he thinking three out of the box? "Absolutely not,"

said Moreland. “Then I got mad because Jackie hit a homer off the top of the lights. As soon as he crossed the plate, I said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me? I’d have stopped at second.’ ”

NEXT GAME: The Sox will travel to Bradenton to play the Pirates, with lefthander Martin Perez making his first Red Sox start against righthander Mitch Keller. The game will be on WEEL-AM 850 radio.

Red Sox’ Alex Verdugo making progress in injury rehab

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo has been able to resume throwing and running, leaving a final checkbox in his rehab from a stress fracture in his lower back.

“The only thing I’m missing now is the swinging, and that’s coming. It’s coming sooner than we think,” said Verdugo. “I didn’t even think I was going to be throwing yet. The fact that we’re throwing, doing a lot of weight-room stuff, exercises, and the fact that I’m passing it is a good sign.”

Verdugo said that the contrast to how he felt when he attempted similar baseball activities last September has been extreme.

“Every time I did something, it felt like someone was stabbing me with a knife in my back — putting my shoes on, putting my socks on,” said Verdugo. “Now, I don’t have any pain, nothing like that. I maybe have some soreness.”

Verdugo and the Sox are trying to measure the pace of his buildup in activity, wanting to take a conservative approach to avoid a setback. Still, he characterized himself as “close, very close” to swinging.

“We don’t have a set date, but it’s soon,” he said.

Alex Verdugo sounded an optimistic note about his health on Tuesday.

Alex Verdugo sounded an optimistic note about his health on Tuesday. **JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF**
While Verdugo is still weeks away from being ready to play in games, interim manager Ron Roenicke hasn’t given up on the idea that the outfielder might be ready to play in spring training games.

“I would say that we start getting into the middle of March and on that he’s got a chance to play some games,” said Roenicke. “I think he does [have a chance] depending on how fast he comes along with his swinging. He’s doing really well. We just haven’t asked him to swing a bat yet.”

Investigation delayed

Major League Baseball’s investigation into the 2018 Red Sox will not be finished this week after all. An industry source told the Globe on Tuesday that the findings will not be announced until next week at the earliest.

Commissioner Rob Manfred said Feb. 16 that his goal was to wrap up the inquiry by the end of this week. But unexpected delays related to scheduling have pushed that back.

The probe started six weeks ago after anonymous sources told The Athletic the Red Sox used live video to steal signs then relayed the information to runners at second base.

Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers, Ian Kinsler, and J.D. Martinez are among the current and former Sox players who have denied that.

Red Sox principal owner John Henry, who also owns the Globe, and team president Sam Kennedy also said the team’s 2018 championship was won fairly.

Sox manager Ron Roenicke said earlier Tuesday that the team was eager to have the investigation finished.

Let's talk

Tony Clark and members of the MLB Players Association met for roughly 1 hour, 45 minutes on Tuesday morning with Red Sox players and coaches. The conversation was split largely between potential sign-stealing regulations and matters related to the collective bargaining agreement.

After the conclusion, however, Clark couldn't help but notice a glaring absence from the meeting. Two weeks removed from the trade that sent Mookie Betts to the Dodgers, the MLBPA remained puzzled by the transaction.

"Boston made whatever decision they made for whatever reason they made it. I think that a face of our game, someone that should be more a face of our game, being put in that position, I don't think it was necessary," said Clark. "I know they've offered some commentary publicly, but you'd have to ask Boston as to why that's the case. We simply believe that Mookie is a generational talent. And the idea that he is no longer here is one that we just didn't believe was necessary."

The Sox have stated that their trade of Betts was driven by baseball reasons. Nonetheless, the team's stated desire to get its payroll below the \$208 million luxury-tax threshold in the coming season — and thus resetting the penalties associated with future overages — is consistent with what Clark sees as teams using the threshold as an "excuse" to cap payroll.

"We think there are a number of aspects in our CBA that need to be addressed. If the competitive balance tax is being used in the fashion that it's being used and the excuse that it's being used for, then it's something we're going to look at," said Clark. "The assumptions that we made [in negotiating the current CBA] were predicated on what it was that teams had been doing in the past."

"What we've seen, though, is a dramatic change and shift in how those teams are functioning against the backdrop of how they may have functioned five or 10 years ago. As a result, we're going to need to modernize the system to reflect the changes that we're seeing."

Important piece

A year ago, Ryan Weber was a nonroster invitee to camp, a virtual unknown simply hoping to position himself for a big league call-up during the season. But after making 18 big league appearances, including three starts, with the Sox last year — going 2-4 with a 5.09 ERA in 40⅓ innings — Weber is now in a very different position.

The 29-year-old is competing for a potential rotation spot. In his first appearance in that quest, he threw a pair of scoreless innings against an Orioles split-squad unit on Tuesday, allowing two hits, walking none, and striking out a batter.

"Just knowing that they have the confidence in me puts a lot of accountability on me, which I really like," said Weber. "I'm not just another depth piece to them, I think. It makes every pitch really, really matter at this point. I'm trying to make the team and prove to them that . . . I am a big league pitcher and I can go out and I can start games, I can pitch deep in the games or I can throw multiple innings out of the bullpen. I can do what they want me to do."

Sale's plans

Lefthander Chris Sale is scheduled to have a bullpen session on Wednesday in which he throws, sits, then throws again, a controlled simulation of a multi-inning workload . . . Eduardo Rodriguez (left knee) was fine after Monday's live batting practice session and will start in a Grapefruit League game on Saturday . . . The Red Sox lineup against the Orioles featured J.D. Martinez in left field, Andrew Benintendi in center, and Jackie Bradley Jr. in right, an alignment Roenicke said the team might use during the season at Fenway . . . Xander Bogaerts (ankle) took ground balls for a second straight day . . . Rafael Devers could make his first appearance in a game as soon as Friday.

Technology's effect on baseball is a huge concern for MLBPA head Tony Clark

Peter Abraham

FORT MYERS, Fla. — It has been seven weeks since Major League Baseball launched an investigation into whether the 2018 Red Sox improperly used video feeds to steal signs.

Major League Baseball Players Association executive director Tony Clark met with the Sox for nearly two hours on Tuesday and the ongoing probe was one of the topics.

Clark said it was his understanding that the investigation was complete and the results will be released soon. But it was later learned that MLB is not prepared to release its findings until next week at the earliest.

A growing number of current and former Sox players who were with the team that season have already said they don't expect much will be found.

A larger question, one that Clark and his staff have been discussing with players as they tour spring training camps, is how much of a role technology should play in the game beyond the outsized influence it already wields.

The Astros cheating scandal that has roiled the sport is a byproduct, however unintentional, of baseball's embrace of high tech.

Under former general manager Jeff Luhnow, the Astros used data to change how they scouted, developed, and utilized players. Scouts were fired in favor of making decisions purely on the numbers. High-speed cameras and remote monitoring replaced boots on the ground.

Emotion was taken out of the equation.

That a large group of Astros players was comfortable using live video to be more efficient at stealing signs shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. They played for an organization that apparently was lacking a moral compass from the top down.

"We've seen technology boom in a way that our industry never has here in the last 10 years," Clark said. "The culture that it's created, and that's been allowed to be created left unchecked, is manifesting itself in ways that a number of us had concerns about, were interested in talking about, and now we found ourselves on the doorstep of what I hope are those exact conversations."

Clark and commissioner Rob Manfred are discussing how best to limit the access players have to live video during games, and those rules are expected to be in place for Opening Day.

My suggestion a few weeks ago was to ban it entirely during games. MLB may not go that far, but there certainly will be much tighter restrictions.

"The changes that we anticipate making and working on with the league, we hope it lends itself to there not being a conversation about sign stealing moving forward," Clark said.

But Clark's concerns, and those of many players, go beyond sign stealing.

Baseball clearly needed a replay system to correct egregiously blown calls, but now games are delayed to determine whether a base runner's leg came ever so slightly off the bag while a glove was on him.

Managers also ask for calls to be reviewed late in games for no good reason other than that they have a challenge left.

That wasn't the spirit of the rule when it was implemented.

From the union's perspective, technology also is changing how players are paid. Pitchers are prized for their spin rate and batters for exit velocity, metrics that couldn't be measured until a few years ago.

Statistical analytics were a better way to parse the results, but they never damaged the product on the field. If anything, they helped make it more interesting because we could better understand the value of players.

But the technology revolution has changed the game, creating a generation of young hitters consumed with getting the ball in the air and pitchers who value velocity far more than creativity.

A series of strikeouts interrupted by an occasional home run isn't particularly enjoyable. Strikeouts have increased by 14.4 percent in the last five years.

Managers certainly aren't powerless in all of this. But their job is increasingly focused on maintaining clubhouse harmony while the analytics staff prepares game plans.

Any manager who resists the data won't be around for long.

"I think our entire industry has been affected by technology and the atmosphere and considerations around efficiency," Clark said. "I think it has been on and off the field affected in a way that's not necessarily beneficial to anybody."

The Red Sox, as an example, use portable devices to monitor every bullpen session and batting-practice swing. That's smart; they should know everything they can about their players.

In theory, that information is used to improve performance. But it's also used as a tool to determine a player's physical ability and, in turn, his value. Should the players and the representatives have access to that information?

These issues will all be part of the discussions for the next collective bargaining agreement.

"I think it spans every aspect of our industry," Clark said.

Sign stealing can be fixed by turning off some monitors. How baseball gets fixed, or at least improved, won't be as easy.

Red Sox bench coach Jerry Narron was on the scene at some very memorable ballgames

Dan Shaughnessy

FORT MYERS, Fla. — He was there the night the Red Sox collapsed in the Bronx when Grady Little didn't take Pedro Martinez out. And he was in Anaheim in 1986, catching Donnie Moore after Moore surrendered a series-changing home run to Dave Henderson in the ALCS.

Red Sox bench coach Jerry Narron also was the man who replaced Thurman Munson behind the plate at Yankee Stadium on the night after Munson was killed in a plane crash.

Narron is a hardball Forrest Gump — a humble, unassuming man who always seems to be on the scene when big things happen. This past week he was named bench coach of Ron Roenicke's 2020 Boston Red Sox.

The role of a big league bench coach has grown in recent years. There was a time when many a bench coach was perceived as a manager's drinking buddy or someone to round out a foursome for poker on road trips. No more.

Terry Francona, the best manager in the majors for the last two decades, would be lost without wingman Brad Mills (a.k.a. "Millsy"), Alex Cora was the inventive bench coach of the cheatin' champion Houston

Astros in 2017, and Roenicke was Cora's bench coach until the Sox parted ways with Cora for his involvement in Houston's sign-stealing scandal.

"I'm just another set of eyes for the manager," says Narron, who served as Roenicke's bench coach when Roenicke managed the Brewers from 2011-15. "As a bench coach, I keep the game slow for the staff and the players. Try not to get emotionally involved where the game runs away from you. I think that happens to a lot of guys. They get so emotionally into the game, they may not see something."

"With Ron in Milwaukee, he would talk a lot during the games and go over situations. Maybe about what might happen a couple of innings down the road. I wish when I managed [the Rangers and Reds] I would have used bench coaches as much as Ron did. Just to see if you're on the right way."

Narron is unlikely to be overwhelmed by anything Roenicke throws at him.

Born and raised in North Carolina, Narron came to the big leagues as a backup catcher for Billy Martin's defending world champion Yankees in the summer of 1979.

He remembers when the Yankees were in Chicago on Wednesday, Aug. 1, and he got to catch the final game of a Yankees-White Sox series while Munson played first base.

"I hit a home run that night," Narron recalls with a smile. "Off Ken Kravec. The second homer of my career."

The next day, Thursday, was an off day, and the baseball world was stunned when it was learned that Munson had crashed his private plane at Akron-Canton Airport.

On Friday, the Yankees came home to play the first-place Orioles. It was one of the most emotional nights in the history of the old Yankee Stadium. Martin tapped Narron to start behind the plate, catching Luis Tiant. Narron was 23.

"It was like losing someone in your family and having to play a game that night," says Narron.

"Mr. Steinbrenner came into the clubhouse before the game and he said, 'We're going to take the field for the national anthem and have a moment of silence. I want you to stay in the dugout and stand next to Yogi [Berra], and he'll tell you when he thinks it's time to go out behind home plate.' "

It was an epic moment. Eight Yankees took their position and all were weeping, while the catcher's box remained empty for the moment of silence and Robert Merrill's national anthem.

"It was a sad day," recalls Tiant. "Nobody wanted to play, but I had to pitch."

Tiant and the Yankees lost, 1-0. Orioles outfielder John Lowenstein's solo homer was the difference.

Narron: "Charlie Lau told me before the game, 'Do not throw Lowenstein a changeup; he will hit Luis's changeup.' And that's what happened."

Seven years later, Narron was part of Red Sox history when he served as Bob Boone's backup catcher for the Gene Mauch Angels in the ALCS. In Game 4, Narron scored the winning run on a walkoff hit by Bobby Grich in the 11th inning to give the Angels a 3-1 series lead, but the next day, he was catching Moore in the 11th inning when Henderson hit a game-winning sac fly to launch Boston's comeback in the series.

Mauch lifted Angels ace Mike Witt too early in that one.

In 2003, this time as Boston bench coach, Narron was sitting in the dugout when Little left Martinez in too long and the Red Sox lost the pennant.

“Between innings, Grady went down to talk to Pedro and he told me, ‘Pedro’s good to go,’ ” recalls Narron. “They got guys on base and Grady went out again. I can’t speak for Grady, but I think he felt that if he was going to get beat, he wanted to get beat with Pedro and nobody else.

“I’ve seen it both ways. I’ve lost with my best guy getting taken out and I’ve lost with my best guy left in.”

*** *The Boston Herald***

BJB wows JBP with bat, not glove, this time

Tom Keegan

The fact that he was playing right field, with J.D. Martinez in left and Andrew Benintendi in center, was the news of the day Tuesday for Jackie Bradley Jr. — until it wasn’t.

The gasp, followed by the ovation from the sellout crowd at JetBlue Park, shifted the conversation to Bradley’s powerful bat.

After Mitch Moreland tripled to the triangle in center field off Orioles left-hander Zac Lowther, Bradley went even higher, deeper, louder. Bradley crushed the first pitch from Lowther two-thirds of the way up the taller dark-green wall stationed beyond the tall center field fence.

Bradley’s baseball rarity, a broken-barrel, tape-measure shot, was the signature moment in the Red Sox 12-4 exhibition victory over the Orioles.

“I didn’t even see where it went. I was too busy looking at the other piece of my bat,” Bradley said.

Bradley knows that once the Sox break camp, it’s not the size of hits that will matter, rather the frequency.

“Hitting balls hard, yeah, I’m over that, I’m out on that,” Bradley said. “I want bleed jobs, jammed knuckles, all that. Take my knuckles, take everything, break off a bat and if they fall in, I’m down for it.”

In case he needs his outfielders to move to different positions for a game here or there in the season, Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke wanted to give Martinez, the team’s designated hitter who has played some right field, experience playing the wall in left and Benintendi some reps in center, which shifted Bradley to right.

Coronavirus caution

A Red Sox spokesman confirmed that Chih-Jung Liu, 20 and a pitching prospect from Taiwan, has been kept away from the Red Sox training complex as a cautionary measure because of the coronavirus. Liu arrived from Taiwan last week.

“We’re just being extra cautious,” the spokesman said. “He has not been to the complex yet. Our medical staff has been monitoring his condition. We expect him to be on time to get his physical on Saturday here at the complex.”

The spokesman added someone from the organization has been delivering three meals a day to Liu at his hotel and that the pitching prospect has not been restricted from going outside his hotel.

The Boston Globe first reported the quarantine.

Verdugo ahead of schedule

Roenicke gave the most optimistic take yet on the health of Alex Verdugo, sidelined with a stress fracture of the back. Is it unlikely that he'll play in an exhibition game?

"Unlikely? I would say that we start getting into the middle of March and on that he's got a chance to play some games ... depending on how fast he comes along with the swinging," Roenicke said. "He's doing really well. We just haven't asked him to swing a bat yet."

He's exceeding expectations in other areas.

"I know the running for sure has," Roenicke said. "The first time they had him running outside was way better than what they thought. I think he's coming along quicker in those areas and we're just cautious on what the rotation can do in a swing."

Verdugo, who projects as the Sox everyday right fielder once healthy, said his back is feeling much better.

"Coming in here, I kind of personally had the feeling that I was even further out than I even thought," he said. "Just working with them a couple of days, they had me moving and doing positions I hadn't been doing for several months. The fact that it opened up so quickly and I've been able to do things and they're testing it and I'm passing the tests so far, it's an encouraging sign."

Ready by Opening Day?

"I don't know about that," he said. "It's just a matter of how fast we go with the hitting. Obviously when we start we're going to start with something slow and see how it comes out. I'm going to do everything I can and the trainers are going to do everything they can to get me feeling right as soon as possible."

A grand slam

Catcher Conner Wong, acquired with Verdugo and infielder Jeter Downs in exchange for Mookie Betts and David Price, hit a grand slam off Orioles left-hander Zach Muckenhirn in the fifth inning.

"What a nice swing," Roenicke said. "Good offensive player. He's got a lot of power. Batting practice I stand out there and balls really jump off his bat. If he can continue to progress as a catcher ... he's real calm back there. He's got really good hands. He's got a strong arm. It's just a matter of keeping him back there, hopefully everything cleans up, and this guy can be a really nice player."

Weber cooks Orioles

Ryan Weber didn't do anything to hurt his unofficial status as the early leader in the clubhouse to land the fifth spot in the rotation. He pitched two shutout innings, allowed two hits, didn't walk anybody and picked up a strikeout.

"He knows how to pitch. He's got a great mix," Roenicke said. "The ball's moving around everywhere. I enjoy it because it's just, 'Here it is, guys,' right at 'em. Sometimes he goes right through them. Sometimes he gets hit."

Clark: CBT needs changing

Players Association boss Tony Clark weighed in on the trade of Betts and Price that allowed the Sox to get under the competitive balance tax (CBT).

"Boston made whatever decision they made for whatever reason they made it," Clark said. "I think that someone who should be more of a face of our game, being put in that position, I don't think it was necessary, but you'd have to ask, again I know they've offered some commentary publicly, but you'd have to ask Boston as to why that's the case. We simply believe that Mookie is a generational talent and the idea that he is no longer here was one that we just didn't think was necessary."

The Collective Bargaining Agreement expires Dec. 1, 2021, and Clark said that changes to the CBT will be discussed.

“The assumptions that we made were predicated on what it was that teams had been doing in the past,” Clark said. “What we’ve seen though is a dramatic shift in how those teams are functioning against the backdrop of how they may have functioned five or 10 years ago. So as a result, we’re going to need to modernize the system to reflect the change.”

MLB investigation of Red Sox hangs a cloud on sunny Florida days

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Even on the sunniest of Florida days the cloud that is Major League Baseball’s prolonged investigation into the Red Sox reported sign-stealing during the 2018 season hovers over the organization.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke didn’t hesitate when asked if he is looking forward to the probe ending.

“Oh, absolutely,” Roenicke said. “I know you kind of push it off because we’ve got all this other stuff to do, but it’s still always there. So it’d be nice to get it done.”

His eagerness for an outcome isn’t focused on Roenicke’s mirror. All signs continue to point to him not having anything to worry about in terms of the investigation implicating him.

Before being promoted, Roenicke made it publicly known he follows the rules of the game. The fact that the Red Sox promoted him before the conclusion of MLB’s investigation made it obvious that management believes he had nothing to do with any wrongdoing from 2018.

He doesn’t look, sound, or act worried.

“I’m not for me,” Roenicke said. “I don’t know what’s going to come out of this, but yeah, I’m not (worried about the investigation as it pertains to him). I know what I do. I know how I go about my job and I take what you’re supposed to do seriously.”

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred traced the delay in reaching a conclusion to the need to re-interview some people based on questions that came up during the investigation. The most common guess as to when baseball will rule on the Red Sox is Friday, but no one has said that publicly.

Asked if he was one of those re-interviewed, or even interviewed in the first place, Roenicke said he’s not allowed to “say what happened in my situations.”

As Roenicke spoke, the players were in the late stages of a two-hour Tuesday morning clubhouse meeting with Major League Players Association chief Tony Clark, who then met with reporters outside the home clubhouse at JetBlue Park.

The Astros fired general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch after MLB suspended each of them for a year. The Red Sox then “agreed to part ways” with manager Alex Cora after The Athletic broke a story that quoted anonymous players from the 2018 Red Sox detailing sign-stealing stemming from the replay room at Fenway Park. The Red Sox made it clear that their position is that Cora’s departure was based on his involvement in the Astros’ scandal, not for anything he did as manager of the Sox. The Mets fired manager Carlos Beltran before he ever had a chance to manage the club, based on his role as a player with the Astros in 2017.

Clark explained why players were not disciplined in the Astros' scandal and added that he hopes that the union and MLB will agree on new rules that would open players to discipline, and hopes that it can be in place by Opening Day.

"There are regulations on the books with respect to who can be disciplined, and who can't," Clark said, and from the union's viewpoint, those regulations did not include language that would result in players being disciplined. "There was also an (immunity) agreement at the beginning of the interviews."

Clark said that the ability to discipline players for future violations "is something the players are willing to talk about," and he added that he hopes any change in rules will be in place by Opening Day.

Part of Clark's mission in touring the clubhouses is to take the players' pulse on reaching a compromise with MLB on restrictions placed on the use of video.

"We are working to find that middle ground to make sure that the tools players have used to position themselves as best they can on the field and off the field are still available to them in one way or another," Clark said. "That's exactly the conversation that we're having with the league right now to make sure that we balance that."

J.D. Martinez has been outspoken in opposition to any proposed change that infringes on his ability to watch videos of his at-bats during games.

"I think to go out there and take all video out, you're not allowed to look through at-bats, I think is a little ridiculous, in my opinion," Martinez said last week.

Speaking generally, Clark said it's time for baseball to reassess the role of technology in baseball.

"We believe that it's a product of the culture, top-down, in a number of ways," Clark said of the abuses of technology. "I've said that and I will continue to say that ... While recognizing that nobody's looking to suggest the players were not a part of it, I'm simply saying that the culture that exists is one that with technology being left unchecked is manifesting itself on and off the field in ways that allowed this to happen."

*** *The Providence Journal***

Benintendi ready to assume lead-off duties

Bob Rathgeber

FORT MYERS, FLA. — Batting leadoff for the Boston Red Sox ... Mookie Betts. At least that's the way it used to be.

But now that Betts has been traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Sox are hoping that Andrew Benintendi will be more than simply an adequate replacement.

So far, so good.

In his first three spring-training games, the left-handed hitting Benintendi had hits in his first two leadoff at-bats and just missed an extra-base hit leading off Tuesday's game against the Orioles.

Benintendi — a career .277 hitter with an on-base percentage of .354 — has hit leadoff for the Red Sox at times during his first two years in Boston. In fact, last year manager Alex Cora flip-flopped Benintendi and Betts in 43 of the club's first 56 games in an attempt to give Betts more chances to knock in runs.

The experiment didn't work, however, as Benintendi failed to deliver and, after June 1, Betts returned to batting leadoff. Benintendi would hit all over the lineup, everywhere except as the No. 3 hitter.

"It really doesn't matter where I bat," Benintendi said. "Really, when you look at it, you are the leadoff hitter only one time in the game. Most of my life I've batted leadoff."

Even though he is just 24 years old, Benintendi is entering his fifth season in the big leagues after being the No. 7 pick in the first round of the 2015 draft. In 2018, Benintendi batted .290 with 16 home runs and 21 stolen bases. Last year, though, he struggled, batting .266.

He doesn't think moving to leadoff was the cause for the off season.

"I swung out of the zone a lot," Benintendi said. "This year I am concentrating on swinging at good pitches."

Interim manager Ron Roenicke has been a big Benintendi fan since seeing him for the first time in 2018. It was the sweetness of the swing.

"That's as good as it gets," Roenicke said.

He said he thinks Benintendi could be an ideal leadoff hitter.

"He's an on-base guy," the interim manager said. "I know he can hit, he's a really good hitter and has a really good eye. He takes pitches, he does everything you need as a leadoff hitter, and he can steal bases, too, so I like him in the leadoff spot. We'll see in camp."

Roenicke similarly agreed with Benintendi's take on 2019.

"Last year, I think he was searching a lot. He kept tinkering with stuff. He just really never found what he wanted."

Another potential leadoff hitter is Alex Verdugo, the outfielder acquired in the Betts trade. But he has a back injury and it's uncertain when he'll be available.

For now, Benintendi will be hitting leadoff.

So far, so good.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox sign-stealing decision not expected this week; MLB likely will issue report in early March (report)

Chris Cutillo

Major League Baseball is not expected to complete its investigation into alleged sign-stealing practices by the Red Sox until next week, according to reports from MLB Network's Jon Heyman and the Boston Globe's Pete Abraham. The league's report will likely be finalized early next week.

According to Heyman, the league might need time to "inform any affected parties" before announcing the results of the investigation to the public. On Tuesday, MLB Players Association chief Tony Clark told reporters in Fort Myers that the league had completed the information-gathering portion of its inquiry and was working on finalizing the report.

Commissioner Rob Manfred is investigating the Red Sox after a report from The Athletic alleged Boston improperly used a video replay room to decode opponents' signs in 2018, when they won the World Series. Manfred originally said he hoped to have his investigation done by the time spring training opened in mid-February but said at a recent press conference that new developments in the case had delayed the process.

Now, it appears the league is moving toward the finish line with the investigation. The league must decide if the Red Sox violated any rules and how to punish them in addition to levying a punishment on former Sox manager Alex Cora, who was implicated as a key player in the Astros' sign-stealing scandal in 2017.

Multiple members of the 2018 Sox -- including Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers, Ian Kinsler and J.D. Martinez -- have denied any wrongdoing by the club.

Connor Wong, Boston Red Sox newcomer from Mookie Betts trade, belts grand slam vs. Orioles; 'Balls really jump off his bat'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Catcher Connor Wong, one of three players the Red Sox acquired in the Mookie Betts trade, bashed a grand slam in the Red Sox's 12-4 win over the Orioles in Grapefruit League action Tuesday.

"What a nice swing," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said here at JetBlue Park. "Good offensive player. He's got a lot of power. In batting practice, I stand out there and balls really jump off his bat. So if he can continue to progress as a catcher— He's real calm back there. He's got real good hands. He's got a strong arm. And I think it's a matter of just keeping him back there. Hopefully everything just kind of cleans up. And this guy can be a really nice player."

The Red Sox acquired the 23-year-old catcher with prospect Jeter Downs and major league outfielder Alex Verdugo.

The initial deal had Boston acquiring Verdugo and Twins right-handed pitching prospect Brusdar Graterol in a three-team trade. But the Red Sox weren't satisfied with Graterol's medicals.

The Dodgers drafted Wong in the third round in 2017. He batted .281 with a .336 on-base percentage, .541 slugging percentage, .878 OPS, 24 homers, 24 doubles, seven triples, 82 RBIs and 11 steals in 111 games (465 plate appearances) at High A and Double A combined during 2019.

Boston Red Sox injuries: Alex Verdugo 'has chance' to play in spring training games starting in mid-March; Eduardo Rodriguez to start vs. Yankees on Saturday

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Alex Verdugo (back stress fracture), who the Red Sox acquired from the Dodgers in the Mookie Betts trade, still hasn't taken any swings.

"But he's done everything else," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "And that's coming along well."

Verdugo is doubtful for Opening Day on March 26 in Toronto. But he might be able to appear in spring training games eventually.

"I would say that (when) we start getting into the middle of March and on that he's got a chance to play some games," Roenicke said. "I think he does, yeah, depending on how fast he comes along with his swinging. But he's doing really well. We just haven't asked him to swing a bat yet."

Other injuries:

~ Eduardo Rodriguez — who slipped and twisted his left knee during a bullpen session last Wednesday — looked sharp and felt strong after throwing a live batting practice Monday. He's lined up to make his first Grapefruit League start Saturday vs. the Yankees at JetBlue Park.

~ Xander Bogaerts (left ankle) was expected to take groundballs again Tuesday.

"His running is coming along really well," Roenicke said. "So he'll get his groundballs. He'll hit again."

~ Rafael Devers, who arrived late at spring training camp because of the birth of his second daughter, might appear in his first Grapefruit League game Friday.

~ Chris Sale, who was slowed at the beginning of spring training camp because of pneumonia, will throw an extended bullpen session Wednesday.

"He'll throw and then rest for a couple minutes so kind of an up-down for him," Roenicke said.

Boston Red Sox sign stealing investigation: MLB done with interviews, gathering information, but decision still to be determined, Tony Clark says

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The results of MLB's investigation into the 2018 Red Sox for illegal sign stealing should come soon. All interviews have been conducted. All information has been gathered.

The Athletic reported the Red Sox used their video replay room to illegally decode signs during the 2018 season.

"The latest we have is simply that no decision has been made yet," Major League Baseball Players Association executive director Tony Clark said. "We will wait to hear from the league as to when that decision may be made. But as of right now, we understand that the interviews that they were going to have and did have, as well as the information that they were gathering from beyond the player interviews, has all happened. And now we're just waiting for the decision itself."

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said Feb. 16 the process was slowed when MLB needed to reinterview certain witnesses after new developments emerged. At that point, Manfred expected to conclude the investigation by the end of this week.

"I think the (Red Sox players) understand the process," Clark said. "Obviously everybody's looking forward to the 2020 season and we'd like to put this behind."

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

Interim manager Ron Roenicke also said the Red Sox want to put the investigation behind them.

"I know you kind of push it off because you've got all this other stuff to do, but it's still always there," Roenicke said. "So it would be nice to get it done."

Roenicke, the bench coach in 2018, is confident MLB won't find him to be involved.

Told he doesn't look worried, Roenicke replied, "I'm not. Not for me. Yeah, I don't know what's gonna come out of this. But I know what I do. I know how I go about my job. And I take what you're supposed to do seriously."

Boston Red Sox, Mookie Betts trade: 'The idea he's no longer here is one that we just didn't believe was necessary,' Tony Clark says

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Major League Baseball Players Association believes the Red Sox trading 2018 AL MVP Mookie Betts was unnecessary, executive director Tony Clark said.

“Boston made whatever decision they made for whatever reason they made it,” Clark said here at JetBlue Park on Tuesday. “I think that a face of our game — someone who should be more a face of our game — being put in that position, I don't think it was necessary. ... I know they (the Red Sox) have offered some commentary publicly. But you'd have to ask Boston as to why that's the case. We simply believe that Mookie is a generational talent and the idea that he's no longer here is one that we just didn't believe was necessary.”

Boston traded Betts, David Price and half of Price's remaining \$96 million to the Dodgers on Feb. 10 for Alex Verdugo as well as prospects Jeter Downs and Connor Wong.

“We think there are a number of aspects in our CBA that need to be addressed,” Clark said. “And if the Competitive Balance Tax is being used in the fashion that it's being used and the excuse that it's being used for, then that is something we're going to look at.”

The current Collective Bargaining Agreement extends through the 2021 season.

Red Sox owner John Henry made it clear last September that the Red Sox wanted their 2020 payroll below the \$208 million Competitive Balance Tax base threshold.

Trading Betts and Price slashed the payroll by \$43 million, allowing Boston to get far below the base threshold. Boston's 2020 payroll after the trade calculated to an estimated \$189.6375 million.

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

MassLive.com explained both the financial and baseball motives involved in this trade. Some of the financial and baseball benefits are intertwined. The Red Sox won't pay a luxury tax in 2020 because the trade will allow them to stay under the \$208 base threshold. The club also will receive its full revenue sharing market disqualification refund in 2020 by staying under the CBT.

Red Sox ownership called it a “baseball trade” and not about dumping salary. Boston explained that it didn't want Betts to leave in free agency next offseason without receiving more than a compensation draft pick. That 2021 compensation pick would have fallen after the fourth round if Boston's 2020 payroll exceeded \$208 million.

“We tried to be clear that this was not exclusively about the CBT and getting under the CBT threshold,” Red Sox president Sam Kennedy said Feb. 17. “There would have been other ways to have done that. You don't trade Mookie Betts to get under the CBT. We traded Mookie Betts and David Price and we got back significant value in return.”

*** *RedSox.com***

JBJ on hitting: 'I'm a work in progress'

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- As Jackie Bradley Jr. enters what could be his final season with the Red Sox -- this is his walk year -- he is taking yet another crack at eliminating the flaw that has haunted him through the years.

Consistency at the plate, that ever-elusive goal, is what drives him.

And maybe a little more luck would help at times, too.

Not long after smashing a rocket of a two-run homer to center field in the bottom of the fourth inning in Tuesday's 12-4 win over the Orioles, Bradley gazed at the crack in the middle of his bat.

Yes, he was a little surprised he could hit a ball so far while breaking his bat.

"It died a warrior," Bradley mused of his deceased piece of lumber. "I'll take all [the luck] I can get."

The truth is that it was a great swing with a piece of wood that was probably just on its way out.

"Wow, he barreled up that ball, too," said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. "He said he saw a hairline in it but didn't really think much of it before. The barrel was cracked in the middle. It wasn't down in the handle. It was right in the barrel. But that ball was hit. I know the wind was blowing out, but that ball was hit."

When Bradley hits the ball in such a destructive way, it makes it hard to fathom why his career numbers (.236/.317/.409) aren't better. Bradley showed on the big stage how dangerous he could be when he was named Most Valuable Player of the 2018 American League Championship Series.

Though Bradley hit just .225 last season, his lowest average since 2014, he consistently hit the ball hard after the All-Star break without much to show for it.

Bradley had an average exit velocity of 90.5 mph in the second half of the 2019 season, tied for 54th of the 252 batters with at least 100 batted balls in that span. His hard-hit rate was 47.9 percent, ranking him 23rd among those same batters.

Looking at those numbers, you probably can't blame Bradley for vowing to view things through a different lens in 2020.

"During the regular season, it's about whether they land or not," said Bradley. "I mean, the whole hitting balls hard, I'm over it, I'm out on that. I don't care about that. I want bloop, bleed jobs, jammed knuckles, I want all of that, as long as they fall in."

Perhaps Bradley got too consumed by the science of hitting heading into the 2019 season. He went on a trip to California last offseason to work with one of the gurus of launch angle in Craig Wallenbrock. Though Wallenbrock has gotten breakout success out of some players, including Sox slugger J.D. Martinez, the new approach had Bradley's swing a pure mess early in the '19 season.

Bradley didn't travel to see any personal coaches this offseason. Never an excuse-maker, Bradley isn't pointing fingers at Wallenbrock for his 2019 woes.

"He was fine. Craig is great. I haven't talked to him this offseason. That doesn't mean I wouldn't," said Bradley.

But Bradley is clearly determined to keep things simpler and let his athleticism take priority over an obsession to technique in his offense.

How does Bradley look at himself as a hitter right now?

"I'm a work in progress," Bradley said. "I have different thoughts, different keys that I've been working on this go-round. I'm going to use it in Spring Training and go from there during the season."

With Wallenbrock out of the picture, Bradley was vague when asked who his hitting confidants are these days. But there will definitely be an inner circle that figures to include Red Sox hitting coaches Tim Hyers and Peter Fatse.

"I'm listening to a few people," said Bradley. "We're all on the same page, discussing and bouncing ideas off of one another. We're trying to make sure something works. There's a lot of people in my corner here. I saw a quote today that was saying how, don't ever be, like, upset when people are trying to help you. It's not that that person trying to help you has it all in place, but who knows? They might have that right piece for you."

Drafted by the Red Sox in 2011, Bradley has been a stud defender in center who has displayed some prolific hot streaks at the plate.

It remains to be seen how his final chapter will be written in Boston -- if this season ends up being that. But after seeing his long-time friend Mookie Betts get dealt earlier this month, Bradley's eyes are wide open.

"Not many baseball players stay with the same team for their whole career," Bradley said. "I don't see it as strange, but I have grown up in this organization. This is all I know. If it does happen, it will be different. But good thing I don't have to worry about it right now at this very moment."

Verdugo progressing; Weber makes starter case

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Though it would be a surprise for Alex Verdugo to return from the stress fracture in his back in time for Opening Day, the Red Sox anticipate being able to see their new acquisition perform in Spring Training games.

"I would say that we start getting into the middle of March, he's got a chance to play some games," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "I think he does, yeah, depending on how fast he comes along with his swinging. He's doing really well. We just haven't asked him to swing a bat yet."

Verdugo has been passing every test the training staff has given him each day, which is all the Red Sox can ask for at this point.

"I would think so. I know the running for sure has," Roenicke said. "The first time they had him out running outside was way better than what they thought [it would be]."

"I think he's coming along quicker in those areas. I think we're just cautious on what the rotation can do in a swing. I really haven't asked. I don't know if that depends on whether he takes an image and the image shows that it's healed completely. I'm not sure."

Simple things excite Verdugo these days -- like when he was allowed to start throwing again.

"Just to feel it coming out of my hand and seeing the ball and getting back to baseball stuff, it's nice, it really is," Verdugo said. "It's a game that I love playing and it makes me happy. When I'm out there doing stuff like that, it brings a little bit of happiness. It brings a little joy."

"You're like, 'We're almost there. It's coming.' Now it's, 'Let's not push too fast.' Let's not act like I'm feeling too good today and overdo it. We're going to keep me going the right way progressing slowly, but at least we're going up, up, up."

Weber starts case

Ryan Weber, one of the many candidates the Sox are looking at as a fifth starter, made a strong opening impression on Tuesday in a 12-4 win over the split-squad Orioles.

The righty allowed two hits (one was a broken-bat job), no runs and no walks while striking out one. Weber is a throwback in today's game in that he doesn't rely on velocity. His fastball tops out in the high 80s.

"Weber, you know what you're going to get right away," said Roenicke. "If he is commanding the ball, he throws a lot of strikes. They make quick outs, he's fun to watch. I know he gets in trouble when his command isn't on. But he knows how to pitch. He's got a great mix. The ball is moving around everywhere and I enjoy it because it's just, here it is, guys, right at him and sometimes he goes right through them and sometimes he gets hit."

The 29-year-old has spent most of his time in the Minor Leagues since the Braves took him in the 22nd round of the 2009 Draft. He made 18 appearances for the Red Sox last season, including three starts, notching a 5.09 ERA. Team evaluators think that he can be a useful Major League swingman with a couple of tweaks.

After coming to camp as a non-roster invitee last year, Weber is pleased to be on the 40-man this time -- particularly after an offseason in which chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom made a big batch of moves on the roster.

"Just knowing that they have the confidence in me puts a lot of accountability on me, which I really like," Weber said. "I'm not just another depth piece to them, I think. It makes every pitch really, really matter at this point."

Motoring Mitch

First baseman Mitch Moreland brings a lot of things to the table to the Red Sox, but turning on the jets around the bases isn't one of them.

His manager and teammates got a kick out of watching him speed into third on a leadoff triple in the fourth on Tuesday.

For perspective, Moreland had just one triple all of last season. Though Moreland somehow had four of them in 2018 -- the only time he ever had more than one in a season -- he had zero from '15-17.

Given the injuries Moreland has sustained in recent years, the Red Sox would just as soon see him hit doubles or homers. But there was no harm from this three-bagger.

"Speedy Mitch is right," quipped Roenicke. "He was pretty good [from] home to about halfway to second, then he had a little slowdown because he was hoping he didn't have to go to third, and then the play wasn't being made and he knew, 'I've just got to go.' So he sped up again."

Catcher Connor Wong is currently known as "the other player" in the blockbuster trade with the Dodgers that also brought over Verdugo and Jeter Downs in exchange for Mookie Betts and David Price.

But on Tuesday, Wong made his presence felt by unloading for a grand slam over the replica Green Monster. Though Wong is likely to spend this season in the Minor Leagues, the Red Sox like what they see in the catcher.

"What a nice swing," Roenicke said. "Good offensive player. He's got a lot of power. Batting practice, I stand out there and balls really jump off his bat. If he can continue to progress as a catcher, he's real calm back there, has really good hands, has a strong arm. I think it's just a matter of keeping him back there. Hopefully everything kind of cleans up. This guy can be a really nice player."

Up next

Lefty Martín Pérez, signed as a free agent in December, makes his first start in a Red Sox uniform on Wednesday in Bradenton against the Pirates. Starting infielders Michael Chavis and José Peraza will be in the starting lineup. Speedy outfield prospect Jarren Duran will also see action. First pitch is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. ET, live on MLB.TV.

*** *WEEI.com***

Ron Roenicke: MLB investigation 'still always there'

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Ron Roenicke is like the rest of us. He waits and waits and waits for Major League Baseball to finally come down with a verdict when it comes to its investigation into the 2018 season.

Tuesday morning, the Sox interim manager admitted that despite the distractions of getting his team ready for the upcoming season the impending verdict looms large.

"Absolutely," he said when asked if it would be a weight off to find out MLB's ruling. "I know you kind of push it off because you have all this other stuff to do, but it's still always there. It would be nice to get it done."

Commissioner Rob Manfred surmised that his report on the matter would be released sometime this week, with the need to re-interview some members of the Red Sox before finalizing the judgment.

"So I guess there are some things ... They're obviously being very thorough on what they're doing and who they are talking to," he said. "It sounds like he had to revisit with a couple of people. It's hard to say why and what the outcome could be."

While Roenicke declined to confirm how many times he might have been interviewed, he was confident in his dealings when it came to matter in question.

"I'm not, not for me," he said when asked if he was nervous. "I don't know what is going to come out of this. But I'm not ... I know what I do. I know how I go about my job and I take what you're supposed to do seriously."

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

This is Xander Bogaerts' Red Sox team; here's why that's a great thing

John Tomase

Xander Bogaerts arrived in Boston nearly seven years ago with a preternatural maturity that screamed future leader.

Just 20 years old when he debuted in San Francisco in 2013, he wore No. 72, hit in front of current Cubs manager David Ross, and shared a field with former Red Sox second baseman Marco Scutaro, who was playing across the diamond for the Giants.

Bogaerts went 0 for 3, but impressed teammates with his diligence and professionalism. Two months later, he'd find himself starting in the World Series, earning a championship ring practically before his career had even started.

It felt like Bogaerts would forever be a promising piece of the next generation as he deferred to superstars like David Ortiz and Dustin Pedroia and big clubhouse personalities like Rick Porcello and David Price en

route to a second championship in 2018, but eventually the future arrives to take charge of the present, and that time is now.

As the Red Sox prepare to enter a transition season without Mookie Betts, Porcello, or Price, it's tempting to say that a leadership void must be filled, and to an extent that's true. But it would also be overlooking one crucial fact: Bogaerts was already well on his way to making this "his" team, and he hasn't gone anywhere.

Some players are born leaders, while others grow into the role naturally. Bogaerts fits the second description to a tee, playing a supporting role as a rookie and gradually assuming more responsibility every year since.

Last season marked the perfect confluence of production and personality, as Bogaerts exploded on the diamond and took charge off of it. He hit .309 while setting career highs in homers (33), RBIs (117), and OPS (.939), finishing fifth in the MVP voting and earning a starting spot at short on the inaugural all-MLB team.

He also stepped forward as a positive, plain-spoken leader for a team coming apart at the seams, consistently facing the cameras during losing streaks and after demoralizing losses, recognizing that he needed to be the face of the franchise after signing a six-year, \$120 million extension.

"Obviously we didn't have the season that we wanted to, but I think it was a little bit of a relief just to get it done and go out there," Bogaerts said. "I think every person that signs a contract still wants to go out there and show that they're worth it."

That's a nice sentiment, but history is littered with players who cashed in and then checked out. That Bogaerts didn't allow himself to become one of them speaks to the pride that he takes in his job and the loyalty he feels to the Red Sox, qualities that management would love to bottle and share with the entire roster.

Those who were there at the very beginning aren't surprised.

"He's the real deal," Ortiz said. "The thing is with Bogaerts, he is so serious about his routine, about how good he wants to be. He is in that group with Mookie, with all the guys that came in from the farm that learned how to play for this team. He has the one year that he figured it out. Now he knows how to get it done."

Ortiz still marvels at Bogaerts' ability to play the sponge early in his career.

"We have conversations and he always tells me, 'Hey, listen, I was blessed enough to come in and learn here from the really good guys that were here when I first stepped in,'" Ortiz said. "He's a guy, Bogaerts, he doesn't talk much but I always say that whoever listens learns more than whoever is always talking. Now that he's been in the clubhouse, he knows when he wants to step in on something and when he doesn't want to get caught in a situation."

The good thing about this ballclub is they have a really good group of guys that know how to run this clubhouse. I have been extremely happy with what I've seen the last couple of years in the clubhouse. I don't go in there much, but once I go, I can feel the really good vibe coming from everybody. I hope that never changes. That's really important.

The Red Sox will need all the good vibrations they can get as they try to overcome low expectations.

For the past couple of years, they've followed the lead of Price, a popular teammate who nonetheless brought a negative vibe to the clubhouse. Price believed in closing ranks, which fostered distrust and even disdain for anyone not on the roster, including the manager, front office, media, and fans.

Bogaerts, by comparison, is far more naturally positive. Interim manager Ron Roenicke noted that just seeing his shortstop's smile every morning for the last two years put a hop in his step as bench coach. He stopped short of declaring this, "Bogaerts' team," but added that he has earned in particular the respect of the Latin players, with whom the multi-lingual Bogaerts can bridge divides.

Tomase: Why Ortiz, Jeter already see greatness in Devers

A minor ankle injury has delayed the start of Bogaerts' spring, but once he gets going, he can't wait to see what the Red Sox can do. Even without Betts, they return a formidable lineup. The fate of their season rests on the health of the starting rotation, but Bogaerts likes being in a position where they can prove people wrong.

"If you ask me, I think no one would pretty much bet on us to win it," Bogaerts said. "We have a lot of veterans still on the team. I think that will help us, especially when we go through stretches, guys that have been there before, guys who have been part of good teams, bad teams and been through the ups and downs of the season. I'm definitely anxious for it to start, try to get right first and see what we can do as a team."

Whatever they do, don't be surprised if Bogaerts is leading the way.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox Spring Report: Rehabbing from stress fracture, Alex Verdugo could return in three weeks

Sean McAdam

Three things you need to know out of Fort Myers:

1. Verdugo return to game action on horizon

Alex Verdugo is still recovering from a stress fracture in his lower back and has yet to so much as swing a bat this spring as the Red Sox closely monitor his workload. But interim manager Ron Roenicke suggested that the outfielder may be ready to appear in some Grapefruit League games in the next few weeks.

"I would say that when we start getting into the middle of March and on, that he's got a chance to play some games," Roenicke told reporters Tuesday. "I think he does, yeah, depending on how fast he comes along with his swinging. But he's doing really well. We just haven't asked him to swing a bat yet."

The Red Sox were aware of Verdugo's condition when they obtained him earlier this month. The club then acknowledged that it was unlikely Verdugo would be in the lineup when the Red Sox open the season March 26 in Toronto.

2. Martinez could see time in left field.

The past few seasons, the Red Sox seemed to make a point of not using J.D. Martinez in left field during home games. Martinez made just three starts in left at Fenway last year after making 17 starts there at home in 2018.

Martinez had played more right field in his career prior to coming to Boston, so that was his comfort zone. But, of course, there's a lot of ground to cover in right at Fenway and that exposed Martinez at times.

On Tuesday, Martinez got the start in left at jetBlue Park, where the dimensions and features are nearly identical to that of Fenway. Getting Martinez some time in left in Fort Myers will likely lead to some opportunities in left at Fenway.

"If we're on the road, maybe he plays right," Roenicke told reporters. "If we're at home, it would be nice for him to get used in left fie.d.

The acquisition of Kevin Pillar gives the Red Sox an established outfielder to come off the bench this season. Presumably, Pillar will become pretty much an everyday player at the start of the season while Verdugo continues to recover. When Verdugo is healthy, Pillar can fill in at all three outfield spots and play center over Jackie Bradley Jr. against lefties.

Pillar's presence will likely cut into playing time in the outfield for Martinez. Martinez's bat is far more valuable to the Sox and he may be limited to DH more, especially with some concerns about Martinez's back and lower body.

3. Benintendi more comfortable at the top

The Red Sox experimented with Andrew Benintendi as their leadoff hitter for the first two months last year. It didn't go well, especially leading off games. In his first at-bat leading off last year, Benintendi had just five hits in 42 at-bats (.119). He had just one extra-base hit in those 42 at-bats.

Eventually, Benintendi was dropped in the order. But with Mookie Betts traded and the injured Verdugo as the only other possibility to hit leadoff, Benintendi is being looked at there again.

So far, it's gone well. On Saturday, Benintendi singled and stole a base. On Monday, he homered before flying out in Tuesday's first at-bat.

Then again, Benintendi never thought hitting leadoff was the issue last year.

"I think that was just during a period I wasn't playing well," he told reporters Monday. "At that point, it didn't matter where I hit. It was not going well."

Roenicke noticed Benintendi experimenting a lot last year, with adjustments to his swing, set-up and stance.

"He kept tinkering with stuff," said Roenicke.

This year, he'd prefer it if Benintendi trusted himself more and thought less at the plate.

"If you think less," reasoned Roenicke, "it means you feel good with what you're doing with your mechanics. You're allowed to really concentrate on the baseball."

* ***The Athletic***

Keith Law's prospect rankings: Boston Red Sox

Keith Law

Years of drafting at the end of the first round, or after the first round entirely, have taken a toll on the Red Sox system, although they just traded for their new No. 1 prospect and have found several legitimate prospects beyond the third round in the last few drafts, helping bulk up a system that would otherwise be thin.

The Top 10

1. Jeter Downs, SS/2B (Top 100 rank: No. 70)

From the Top 100: Downs was part of the big trade that sent Alex Wood and Yasiel Puig to the Reds a year ago, just a year and a half after the Reds took him with the 32nd overall pick in the 2018 draft. He took a big leap forward with the Dodgers last year, leading the California League in doubles (with 33) and homers (with 19) at age 20, even though he was promoted to Double A for the last two weeks of the season — and

hit five more homers there. He's really not a shortstop, but should be above-average at second base or third. And the power he's shown now, especially after the Dodgers helped him better understand how to manipulate the barrel to drive the ball when he gets the right pitch, will play anywhere. Even after an awful April where he hit .213/.276/.371, he showed no panic at the plate and kept improving his approach, making swing adjustments as the season went on. He'd probably be a star if he could handle shortstop as an everyday player, but even at second or third he should be an above-average regular for a long time.

2. Triston Casas, 1B (Top 100 rank: No. 90)

From the Top 100: Casas was Boston's first-rounder in 2018 out of a Florida high school and spent 2019 in Low A, where he hit .256/.350/.480 at age 19, good for fifth in all of Low A in slugging percentage. Casas has a solid swing where he can get to real power when he rotates his hips, but he can get locked up on pitches up the zone. He has a real two-strike approach, similar to Juan Soto's, where he widens his stance substantially and chokes up on the bat to go for contact, which also reduces his power. He has a very good eye for his age, and his approach gets him into a lot of counts where he can hit for power, giving reason to think he'll get to 30-plus homers in time. He started the season by trying to hit from an extreme crouch, resulting in a .208/.284/.364 line in April, but went on a tear after reverting to his usual stance, showing the power and patience required to profile as at least an above-average regular at first base.

3. Noah Song, RHP

Song was Boston's fourth-round pick in 2019 out of the Naval Academy, but broke out in a big way after signing, sitting 95-96 with a better breaking ball and a new changeup that was already flashing plus. He was working in shorter stints, but the way the stuff ticked up, along with his history of strike-throwing, moved him to the front of the pack among Sox pitching prospects, with mid-rotation upside. At this writing, however, he's not going to pitch until 2022 as he completes his two-year obligation to the U.S. Navy.

4. Jason Groome, LHP

Groome, their first-rounder from 2016, returned to action after missing nearly two years due to Tommy John surgery, back up to 95 mph but without the plus-plus curveball he'd shown before the operation. If that returns with more time, he'll be back on track to be an above-average starter.

5. Jarren Duran, OF

Duran was Boston's big breakout prospect for 2019, a seventh-rounder and an 80 runner who should end up an above-average centerfielder given more reps there. He's a slap hitter now, with power he's not going to reach with his current swing and setup; he crushed High A before a mid-year promotion to Double A, where he struggled at first but gradually started making more contact. He has solid fourth outfielder potential right now, but to be a regular he either has to get to more power or cut his strikeouts.

6. Thad Ward, RHP

Ward was their fifth-rounder in the same draft as Duran, 2018, and dominated High A as well before moving to Double A and continuing to miss bats. He's 92-96 with sink and an out pitch in his slider, along with deception in the delivery.

7. Bobby Dalbec, 3B

Dalbec might end up a regular thanks to his absurd power and defense at third, where he'll show a 55 glove and at least a 70 arm. There's always going to be swing and miss here, maybe too much for him to be an everyday guy, but he deserves a lot of credit for cutting his strikeout rate as much as he has, to the point where we can even think of him as a regular.

8. Gilberto Jimenez, OF

Jimenez is an 80 runner with a high-contact approach that doesn't generate any power; there should be some power in there and if he learns to stay back and drive the ball some more. He could end up a regular or better thanks to the speed and his defense in center.

9. Bryan Mata, RHP

Mata has premium stuff, up to 98, with a very tough delivery from a stiff landing to a late, slinging arm swing from a low slot. Left-handed hitters already get to him and I don't think he can repeat that arm action enough for starter-level command.

10. Tanner Houck, RP

Houck is a dominant reliever in the making with two pitches and an arm slot that is tough on right-handers. His changeup hasn't come, and I don't think he can turn a lineup over three times.

The Next 10

11. Matthew Lugo, SS

Boston's second pick last year, taken late in the second round, Lugo is a toolsy shortstop from Puerto Rico who might have gone higher had he not scuffled in the high-profile Excellence Games tournament a month before the draft. He has a good line-drive swing for hard contact across the middle of the field, above-average speed, and good hands to stay at short.

12. Chris Murphy, LHP

Murphy has been up to 95, with an above-average curveball and feel for a changeup, but scouts felt he was mishandled at the University of San Diego, so he slipped to the sixth round in 2019. He took to the change in coaching quite well, cutting his walk rate from 15 percent in college to just over 5 percent in the New York-Penn League. He has fourth starter potential if he can keep this going.

13. CJ Chatham, SS

Chatham is a nice utility player who can handle shortstop and might hit for an empty .300 average in a good season, without power or OBP.

14. Cam Cannon, SS/2B

Their first pick last year, also in the second round, Cannon is a polished bat from the University of Arizona who swung and missed more last summer than expected, partly because the Sox are trying to work with him to stop loading so much over his back leg. He's going to work at second base, which is his best chance for a skill position.

15. Andrew Politi, RHP

The Sox found the perfect way to help Politi, their 15th-round pick from 2018; his stuff took a jump and pitched better in longer outings, so they moved him to the rotation, where he was close to unhittable. He's at 94-96 mph with an above-average breaking ball, good deception in the delivery, and better control when he starts. He'll need a better third pitch to end up in the rotation.

16. Ryan Zeferjahn, RHP

Zeferjahn has an elite fastball but lacks average command or a quality second pitch, so he'll probably move to the bullpen in short order.

17. Nick Decker, OF

Decker played in just two games in his first summer, so 2019 was really his debut, and he was just OK for short-season Lowell at age 19, showing power and a little patience but striking out in 30 percent of his plate appearances. Boston took him out of a New Jersey private school, so he's behind the curve (pun intended) when it comes to picking up spin.

18. Chih-Jung Liu, RHP

Liu signed for \$750,000 this offseason, has hit 100 mph for scouts and topped out at 98 in a tournament this past fall. He took two years off from pitching to recover from heavy use when he was younger, but the time off helped. He gets on top of the ball well and has a promising circle-change and a show-me curveball.

19. Connor Wong, C/UT

A utility man with a different profile, Wong is capable of catching on a semi-regular basis and has experience at second and third. He strikes out too much to be a regular even behind the plate but has value in his flexibility and power.

20. Brayan Bello, RHP

Bello gets guys out with average stuff, working in the low 90s with a fringy breaking ball and change. He struck out a man an inning in Low A but will be hard-pressed to repeat that at higher levels without better stuff.

Others of note

They took infielder Jonathan Arauz in the Rule 5 draft; he's a dynamic player with an idea at the plate and bat speed, but his production has lagged because he's always been young for his levels and he's missed time due to a suspension for a positive test for a banned stimulant. ... Right-hander Alex Scherff had a disappointing year overall despite some dominant outings; he's up to 98, but inconsistent within starts and from game to game, and still lacks an average third pitch to go with his fastball and changeup. ... Their third-round pick from 2018, Durbin Feltman, was supposed to be a quick-to-the-majors college reliever, but we all know how often that works out, right? Feltman walked 31 in 51-1/3 innings in Double-A and regressed as the season went on. He can show two above-average to plus pitches but has trouble getting lefties out.

2020 impact

They might be younger in the majors this year, but the Sox probably won't see much impact from the system unless they push someone like Houck or Mata to the bullpen and bring them up.

Sleeper

I liked their 2019 draft quite a bit; Lugo has the best upside of their lower-tier prospects, while Murphy looks like he might have been a steal in the sixth round. I'd give Lugo the best chance to turn into a top 100 prospect a year from now.

When Red Sox prospect Jarren Duran hit a wall, his teammates helped pick him up

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — For 12 months, the kid out of Long Beach State made a difficult game look easy. He stole bases by the dozen. He hit .348 at his first minor-league stop, got promoted, hit .367 at the next level, moved up again and hit .387. He'd been a seventh-round draft pick in summer 2018, and by summer 2019, he was being touted as a top-100 prospect in all of baseball.

Jarren Duran was an unstoppable force in the Red Sox minor-league system, until he reached Double A and stopped cold in his tracks.

Duran hit just .192 his first three weeks in Portland last summer. He went 15 games without an extra-base hit. By late July — a little more than a year after his exceptional three-hit professional debut — he was hitting just .208 with no power and fewer answers. The kid who couldn't be stopped just couldn't get going.

He was exactly where he needed to be.

In the grind of minor league baseball, failure — or the feeling of failure — is a part of the process. It's a seemingly essential ingredient experienced and recognized by everyone who's been through it. Mookie Betts had two extra-base hits in his first 30 professional games. Michael Chavis hit .223 in his first full season. Xander Bogaerts had six hits and 10 strikeouts in his first 10 Triple-A games.

When Duran went through that grind for the first time, struggling mightily after months of steady success, he looked to the big guy in the locker next to him and to the new guy added to the roster late in the season, and found previously unfamiliar faces who immediately recognized what he was experiencing.

"That's what the minor leagues are for," said Bobby Dalbec, the touted Red Sox prospect who still has a locker next to Duran this spring. "To fail and learn how to deal with it."

Duran learned. Beginning July 21, he had 22 hits during a 12-game hitting streak. That barrage raised his average more than 50 points, where it more or less stayed the rest of the season. He finally homered in August and stole 13 bases that final month. In big-league camp as a 23-year-old this spring, he had two hits and an impressive catch in his Grapefruit League debut.

He has a better sense, he said, of who he is as a player, and like so many of his teammates, he's come to appreciate the hard-earned lessons of a game that's always difficult, no matter how easy it sometimes looks.

"All of us have the tools to play in the big leagues," Duran said. "But it's the guys that are mentally strong and can push through that, that's the guys who make it."

Ask around, and the other Red Sox prospects in camp this spring can immediately rattle off the first time professional baseball punched them in the gut. For Dalbec, it was early 2017, his first full season, when he got off to a slow start, got injured, then struck out 14 times in one five-game stretch.

"I was swinging at everything," he said. "Just trying to make up for lost time."

For C.J. Chatham, it was short-season ball, right after he was drafted in 2016. He'd never seen breaking balls so consistent with so much movement. He's a career .298 hitter today, but he was hitting .207 then.

"You're kind of like, 'Dang, maybe talent can only get you so far sometimes,'" Chatham said. "You get to a point and you kind of sit back and say, 'I've got to work on some things.'"

For Tanner Houck, it was 2018 in Class-A Salem, his first full season after being a first-round draft pick. He had a 5.50 ERA in the first half, then a 3.13 in the second half.

"Having the first failure was awesome," Houck said without a hint of sarcasm. "It's kind of weird to say that first failure was awesome, but it's truly amazing. It shows you that you can come back from deep down in the deepest abyss that happens, and then you can rise to the occasion and get better."

Houck remembers calling his mother from that abyss, telling her he had no idea what was wrong or how to fix it. Sure, he was working on some things — a new arm slot, throwing a four-seam fastball after nothing but two-seamers in college — but he'd never struggled like that.

His mom's advice? Keep going. Work hard. Believe in yourself.

Mothers always know.

Duran got the same message last season from a new set of teammates who knew what he was going through. He compared the experience of arriving in Double A to starting at a new high school. Duran was careful not to step on any toes when he got to Portland. He didn't want to say much, but wanted to prove he belonged.

When Duran got there, his locker was next to that of Dalbec, who was one of the first to reach out, boost his confidence, try to talk him through the familiar frustrations. Young center fielder Tate Matheny did the same, as did veteran third baseman Cody Asche.

And when Dalbec was promoted to Triple A in early August, Tommy Joseph was added to the Portland roster. Joseph was 28 years old, had twice hit 20-plus homers in the big leagues and can today cite the teachings of noted trainer Tim S. Grover in the book "Relentless." The book's subtitle: From good to great to unstoppable.

"You watch kids go through times that are frustrating in this game," Joseph said. "It can be very emotional. ... If we can channel those emotions and get them going in the right way, that's what you want."

And that, Joseph noted, is the challenge for every athlete, not just the kids hitting .200 for the first time. It's the kind of lesson that has to linger, that carries a player through a career.

"The case with (Duran)," Joseph said, "was just trying to be Superman every day on every play — when that's just not possible in this game because of how team-oriented it is. ... He's a good kid, so it was easy to have those conversations with him because things can get really overwhelming really fast when your name is in the paper or in articles or on social media a lot. It's easy to fall into traps."

That's what happened, Duran said. He fell in a trap. Right into a sports cliché. He tried to do too much. He let the pressure get to him. He got away from his strengths. As he got comfortable, he got loose, and he got back to being himself.

"It was really good for him to get challenged like that, particularly so much right when he got there to Double A," Red Sox vice president of player development Ben Crockett said. "Your inclination is to try to change what got you there. Everybody is trying to get incrementally better, but you don't want to change who you are, particularly when you're having that level of success."

The Red Sox were impressed with Duran's adjustments. His numbers never got back to what they were in the first half of the season, but his at-bats were better and his mentality was better. He's appeared focused but confident this spring, talking often with the big-league outfielders, but then laughing easily with his minor-league teammates. Duran doesn't want to be a one-dimensional player, he said, but he does want to focus on what he does best: he's a table setter, a base stealer, a strong defender in the outfield. Just get on base, he said, force the pitcher to throw a fastball because there's a fast runner heading for second, and then have Dalbec or Joseph or J.D. Martinez drive him in.

"I mean, it's baseball," Duran said. "Everything is pretty hard. But I think having a good group of guys, good group of older guys, it's huge. When you're down on yourself, they pick you up. (They say), 'Hey man, we've all been through it. Just keep pushing. Keep doing your work. It's going to come.'"

For 12 months, Duran made a difficult game look easy. When it became hard again, that's when he got better.

*** *The New York Post***

Red Sox keep quarantining players over coronavirus

Mark Fischer

They're trying to strike out coronavirus.

For the second time this spring training, the Boston Red Sox quarantined a player in wake of the virus outbreak.

Taiwanese pitcher Chih-Jung Liu has been bottled up in a Florida hotel room since his arrival from overseas, as the Red Sox are using “an overabundance of caution,” a team spokesperson told the Boston Globe.

Liu, 20, is the second Boston player to be quarantined by the organization after fellow countryman, infielder Tzu-Wei Lin, was quarantined earlier this month due to worries over the virus that is believed to have originated in China.

According to reports as of Tuesday afternoon, the U.S. has had nearly 30 more confirmed cases of coronavirus than Taiwan. Over 79,000 people globally have been infected with the virus, according to health officials.

“I had been here for a week and they said I needed to go back to my apartment,” said the 26-year-old Lin. “I was fine. I stayed away for one day and that was it.”

It is unclear how long Liu has been quarantined, but he reportedly said on Facebook he feels fine and is scheduled to join the team Saturday.

Rated as Boston's No. 17 prospect by MLB pipeline, Liu said he has been lightly working out, scouting the Sox and eating three delivered meals per day while being off the field, according to The Globe.

Liu was signed to a one-year, \$750,000 deal this offseason after starring as a two-way player in Taiwan, though it was his flame-throwing fastball that caught Boston's attention. Liu hit 98 mph with his four-seamer in the fall, and won the Asian Baseball Championship with Chinese Taipei.

The Globe reported it is likely Liu will stay in extended spring training before being assigned to a minor league team.

*** *Associated Press***

Boston lefty Brian Johnson knows about perseverance

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Brian Johnson knows about perseverance.

Selected by Boston with the 31st overall pick in the 2012 amateur draft, the left-hander was hit on the face by a line drive that Aug. 18 at Fenway Park in his fourth professional appearance, a Class A game. He sustained multiple orbital fractures.

Johnson recovered and made his big league debut for the Red Sox at Houston on July 21, 2015. He returned to Triple-A for two more starts but his season was cut short by elbow pain. That offseason, he was a passenger in a vehicle that was carjacked at gunpoint. He missed almost two months of the 2016 season due to anxiety and depression.

Johnson made five starts for the Red Sox in 2017 — all wins — and his first opening day-roster in 2018 when he had 13 starts and 25 relief appearances for a team that went on to win the World Series. He sank to

1-3 with a 6.02 ERA in seven starts and 14 relief appearances last year, was put on waivers, went unclaimed and was sent outright to Pawtucket.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't caught by surprise," he said.

Now he's in big league camp trying to earn a roster spot.

"I do have a different approach, I guess," said Johnson, who turned 29 in December. "For me, I feel like I did coming into '18. I was a long shot to make the team. All I can do is go out there and do what I can every time I take the ball."

There are spots available in the bullpen and at least one in the rotation on a rebuilding team that dealt left-hander David Price and centerfielder Mookie Betts to the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"Losing David stinks because he's such a good teammate and a good friend of mine and I've been playing with Mookie since 2012," Johnson said. "It wasn't easy to take, but you knew it opened up an opportunity for me."

If he is to win a job, his versatility will certainly be a factor. On Tuesday, Johnson pitched his second scoreless inning during spring training, against Baltimore.

"I think he needs to go about it the same as he's always gone about it," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "The nice thing about him is, we know he can also be a long reliever. We need that and think that's important. With the new three-batter minimum, those left-handed specialists aren't as important as the guy who can go through lineups, whether it's lefty or righty. And two innings, the more we can get relievers to go multiple innings is way more valuable."