

The Boston Red Sox Friday, February 28, 2020

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox pitching prospect Bryan Mata impresses in Grapefruit League debut

Julian McWilliams

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Red Sox might have a good one on their hands in top pitching prospect Bryan Mata.

The righthander dominated early last season at Single A Salem despite missing a month because of a sore pitching shoulder, compiling a 1.75 ERA in 51½ innings. The Sox promoted Mata to Double A Portland at the start of July, and he didn't have as much success, posting a 5.03 ERA in 11 starts (53⅔ innings). Mata struggled with control, averaging four walks per nine innings. He did, however, have 59 strikeouts for the Sea Dogs, and racked up 111 overall in 2019.

Mata, 20, made his Grapefruit League debut on Thursday afternoon.

“It’s cool for him to just work and progress,” chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said. “I don’t think you’re too focused on the results. But it was nice to see him do the things that he did. But it’s cool to see a kid like that progress through the system and become a legitimate prospect and gets to have this experience.”

Mata started in the 12-5 loss to the Phillies at JetBlue Park, tossing two scoreless innings. He allowed two hits and struck out two.

“I felt great,” Mata said through translator Bryan Almonte. “Mixing my pitches especially, just taking the lead from [Christian] Vazquez, who’s a great catcher, and that’s someone I leaned on. It felt really great to be able to mix them up.”

In the first inning, Mata gave up mostly hard contact on his fastball, which sat from 93-96 miles per hour. Mata started to mix his pitches effectively in the second inning, adding a cutter, slider, changeup, and curveball. He got at least one swing and miss to a lefthanded batter on his changeup and recorded back-to-back strikeouts on his curveball to end the frame.

Mata doesn't have a chance to crack the Opening Day roster. He hasn't had a full season in Double A and there's no need to rush him. The Sox still don't know if he projects better as a starter or reliever, but with a full-pitch mix, perhaps there's a chance he can be in their long-term rotation plans. Still, it comes down to control of all his pitches, even the curveball, which was working well on Thursday.

“Obviously, I’m just trying to learn how to control it more,” he said. “That’s really my issue with it. I know I have a good curveball, and I know I can throw it, but it’s more so trying to get a feel for how to control it better so I can have more confidence using it.”

Double talk

Jonathan Lucroy didn't take much time to make an impression. In his first at-bat of the spring, the veteran catcher belted a double in the seventh inning off the top of the left-field wall.

“He can really hit,” said interim manager Ron Roenicke, who managed Lucroy during with the Brewers from 2011-15. “He’s had some injuries over the last two, three years. But this guy, when I had him, he was one of the, for sure, best hitting catchers there was.”

Lucroy had offseason surgery for a herniated disk in his neck that he played through the past three seasons. He is in camp as a nonroster invitee, battling Kevin Plawecki for the backup catching position behind Vazquez. Lucroy took over for J.D. Martinez at designated hitter Thursday, and Roenicke said Lucroy will make his first appearance behind the plate Saturday or Sunday. Lucroy believes the injuries are behind him.

“That’s what he feels,” Roenicke said. “We’ll wait and see, but he looks great. He looks strong and his batting practices have been really good, so hopefully we get that hitter I saw before.”

Relief outing

Darwinzon Hernandez pitched an inning of relief Thursday, surrendering a run on two hits. With the overall lack of starting pitching, could the 23-year-old be an option? Not so fast. “I think the upside to do that is certainly there,” Bloom said. “I think we have to remember that he’s at a stage in his development where he moved pretty quickly last year and had a good amount of success. But there’s also the need to make sure we’re not putting too much on him too soon.” . . . Jeter Downs has had a tough go of it in the field to start the spring. He committed an error last week against Northeastern and had another on Thursday while playing second base . . . Rafael Devers is slated to play his first game of the spring Friday against the Twins. The Sox plan on playing him every other day . . . Xander Bogaerts took batting practice and grounders again. Roenicke said he’s coming along after being hobbled by a sore ankle.

Red Sox’ Chris Sale to begin season on injured list after having pneumonia

Julian McWilliams

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Chris Sale called his current situation a gut punch.

The Red Sox lefthander is a competitor. There’s a presence when he’s on the mound. He can rack up strikeouts by the dozen when healthy. When he’s at his dominant best, he’s virtually unhittable.

Unfortunately for Sale and the Sox, all of that’s on hold.

Sale came to spring camp battling pneumonia and is still about two weeks behind schedule. Manager Ron Roenicke announced Thursday that Sale will start the season on the injured list.

Last year, Sale went on the IL in mid-August with elbow inflammation and missed the remainder of the season, but Roenicke emphasized that this IL stint is not related to Sale’s elbow.

“Nothing at all [related] to the arm,” Roenicke said. “He’s doing really good. We’re really happy with where he’s at. This is strictly from missing two weeks.”

The Sox have met with Sale over the course of spring training on his progression and decided that this was the most prudent decision.

“When we were in that meeting, I said, ‘The only thing this hurts is my ego, and that doesn’t matter,’ ” Sale said. “I didn’t have any argument with them trying to take care of me and do what’s best not only for myself but for the organization and the team going forward.”

“They had great points and I didn’t. I respect that. I respect everybody in that room and the decisions that were made, and we move forward.”

If Sale can draw on last year’s spring training, perhaps this might help him move forward. He started just two games last spring, as the Sox decided to minimize the starters’ workload after the championship run in 2018.

But you could make the argument that it threw the rotation out of sorts. Pitchers didn’t go through their natural progression. The Sox are trying to avoid that this spring by having their starters make their six spring starts. At this point, Sale would be slated to make just four before the season starts.

“I think that’s a little bit of what’s going into it,” Sale said. “There were things we had to do. You’re not just going to come out here and start ripping after three months off. I respected it then. I’m not going to say that’s what it was or this person or that person. What happened last season was on me.”

Said Roenicke, “He’s worked hard on getting his arm right. We didn’t think four starts in spring training was fair to him.”

Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom echoed that.

“Unfortunately, getting sick set him back,” Bloom said. “With everything that he’s been through dating back to last summer, shame on us if we don’t do everything we can to allow him to prepare properly for a season.”

Major League Baseball recently implemented a 15-day IL for pitchers instead of 10, so Sale is expected to miss two regular-season starts.

The Sox can backdate his IL stint to March 23, and if they did that, the earliest return would be April 7.

The Red Sox open the season March 26 in Toronto. The home opener is April 2 against the White Sox.

Sale’s absence for any amount of time is a blow to a team short on starting pitching. The Sox already were without a No. 5 starter after David Price was traded to the Dodgers.

“I think he was a big part of our success here before my time and during my time,” Sale said. “He started the last game of the year in 2018, carried us through the postseason, so that’s going to be tough. He’s a guy, you know what you’re going to get out of him.”

The Sox don’t know what they’re getting out of this group of starters, however. They already have considered using an opener in the No. 5 spot in the rotation. Could they now entertain that tactic two times through the rotation?

“I don’t think we’ve taken anything off the table at this point,” Bloom said. “It will all be about what we feel gives us the best chance to win on those days and throughout that opening stretch.”

Bloom added that Sale’s absence won’t alter the club’s thinking on acquiring another arm via the trade market.

“I don’t think so, only in that we would want to accumulate as much as depth as we can,” Bloom said. “I don’t think that changes given that it was already an objective. At the same time, we have a lot of guys that we’re interested in learning more about that we’re excited about.”

Sale is scheduled to throw live batting practice Saturday.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox top pitching prospect Bryan Mata makes Grapefruit League debut

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Bryan Mata, generally regarded as the Red Sox top pitching prospect, made his Grapefruit League debut Thursday in a 12-5 exhibition loss to the Phillies, which ended three hours and 35 minutes after Mata’s first pitch with a small percentage of the 9,618 fans still in the stands.

A 6-foot-3, 160-pound right-hander from Maracay, Venezuela, Mata, 20, pitched two shutout innings, allowed two hits, walked one and struck out two. He's not bashful about how quickly he wants to progress through the system.

"Obviously, my goal would be to play in the major leagues this year, but whatever the team thinks is best for me, that's really what I'll go with," Mata said.

Last season, Mata went 3-1 with a 1.75 ERA in the advanced Class A South Atlantic League, then went 4-6, 5.03 at Double A.

"He's young, hopefully he keeps getting better command, and if he does, he'll be a real nice pitcher," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said.

Mata's fastball and slider are his most developed pitches. He also throws a change-up and curveball. His third-best pitch?

"Change-up," Mata said.

Chaim Bloom, chief of baseball operations, weighed in on Mata.

"It's cool for him just to have worked and progressed to where he gets to do this," Bloom said. "I don't think you're too focused on the results, although it's nice to see him do the things that he did. It's just cool to see a kid like that who progresses through the system becomes a legitimate prospect and gets to have this experience."

Not panicking

Bloom addressed whether Chris Sale going on the injured list makes him more likely to acquire a pitcher from outside the organization.

"I don't think so, only in that we would always want to accumulate as much depth as we can," Bloom said. "I don't think that changes. Obviously, things like this are why you do that. So I don't think it changes given that it was already an objective. At the same time, we have a lot of guys that we're interested in learning more about that we're excited about. We brought them all in for a reason. We have some guys within the organization that we're working with to help them get better. This is a good time to see them put those adjustments in play and learn more about them."

The Red Sox likely will open the season with one "opener" in the rotation and Roenicke said going with two hasn't been ruled out.

Reports: MLB to rule next week

Multiple reports indicated MLB is not expected to rule on the investigation into accusations that the Red Sox were using their replay room to steal signs in 2018 until next week. Bloom said he did not know when MLB would rule.

"Obviously we expect it to be soon, but however long it takes, it takes," Bloom said.

Lucroy debuts

Catcher Jonathan Lucroy, who had offseason neck surgery for a herniated disc, made his exhibition debut as a pinch hitter for designated hitter J.D. Martinez and doubled in his first at bat. Roenicke said it's possible he could make his debut behind the plate as soon as Saturday.

"He can really hit," Roenicke said. "He's had some injuries over the last two years. This guy, when I had him (with the Brewers) he was for sure one of the best-hitting catchers that there was."

Devers to debut Friday

Rafael Devers, who arrived late to spring training after the birth of his and his girlfriend's baby, is set to make his Grapefruit League debut Friday in a road game across town against the Twins.

Devers finished 12th in American League MVP voting last season after hitting .311 with 32 home runs and 115 RBI.

Chris Sale reacts to Red Sox having him start season on IL

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Left-hander Chris Sale's competitive heart hated hearing that he will start the season on the 15-day injured list, but his head couldn't formulate an argument against the Red Sox decision, announced Thursday morning by interim manager Ron Roenicke.

"It was a gut punch," Sale said. "When we were in that meeting, I told them the only thing that hurts is my ego, and that doesn't matter. How can you argue with them just trying to take care of me and do what's best, not for myself, but for the team moving forward? They had great points and I didn't. I respect that. I respect everybody in that room and the decisions that are made."

Roenicke has been adamant about his starting pitchers getting six starts before taking the mound in the regular season and Sale's bout with pneumonia delayed him two weeks. A year ago, in response to playing an extra month in the postseason, the Red Sox gave their pitchers a light workload during the spring, a move that, based on early results of the pitching staff, backfired.

The plan calls for Sale to be placed on the 15-day injured list on Opening Day, retroactive for the maximum allowed three days, which would make him eligible to be activated April 7, when the Red Sox face the Rays in the second leg of a three-game series.

For Sale to join the rotation that soon, he will need to stay on a schedule that will have him making four Grapefruit League starts and two more starts after the Red Sox break camp March 24. The next step for him is throwing against hitters for the first time since last Aug. 13, when he was shut down for the season because of elbow inflammation.

"I can't wait," Sale said. "I'm ready for that."

Roenicke explained the club's thinking: "With the sickness, it cost him two weeks time and that two weeks is what we'd like to give him to make sure he's right. He's worked on getting his arm right and we didn't think four starts in spring training was fair to him. ... Nothing at all with the arm, he's doing really good with that. We're really happy with that. This is strictly missing two weeks and only being able to get four starts in spring training."

The Sale news, preceded by Rick Porcello's departure via free agency and the trade of David Price to the Dodgers, leaves the Red Sox starting the season with a three-man rotation of Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez—provided they all remain healthy—and two starters or openers to be named later.

Sale signed a five-year, \$145 million contract with the Red Sox at the beginning of last season and went 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA. He was limited to 25 starts by elbow troubles and made his last start Aug. 13.

This is Sale's third trip to the injured list with the Red Sox. Shoulder inflammation sent him there Aug. 15, 2018, and elbow inflammation landed him there in mid-August of last summer.

"I trust these guys. I have a lot of faith in them from the top to the bottom, and that's a comforting feeling," Sale said. "I know from the outside looking in, this is not good. Any time you go on the IL, whatever, there is going to be some blowback with this too, I get it, but I have too much respect and faith in these guys who are in my corner to ever second-guess whatever decision we make about the team, about me personally, or anything moving forward."

“I feel great. That’s what I’m taking from this. I’m not going to be bitter. I’m not going to pout. It’s not me. You can do two things: You can sit in the corner and pout or you can get to work. That’s where I’m at. ... I think they just want me to get fully stretched out and get where I need to be. I started two weeks late, so I’ve got to stay two weeks late. Simple math will tell you that makes sense. Do I like it? Absolutely not. Do I respect it? Hundred percent. You move forward and keep working.”

Ron Roenicke: Chris Sale will start season on IL

Tom Keegan

Red Sox left-hander Chris Sale will start the season on the injured list, interim manager Roenicke announced Thursday morning at JetBlue Park.

“With the sickness it cost him two weeks time and that two weeks is what we’d like to give him to make sure that he’s right,” Roenicke said. “He’s worked hard on getting his arm right and we didn’t think four starts in spring training was fair to him. So he’ll open up on the (15-day injured list).”

Sale’s start to spring training was delayed two weeks by a bout with pneumonia. Roenicke said the plan calls for the Sox to take advantage of the rule that allows clubs to place a player on the IL three days retroactively. That makes April 7 vs. the Rays at Fenway Park the first day that the Sox could activate Sale.

“Nothing at all with the arm, he’s doing really good with that,” Roenicke said. “We’re really happy with that. This is strictly for missing two weeks and only being able to get four starts in spring training.”

Sale is on schedule to throw live batting practice Saturday, said Roenicke, who wants his starters to make six starts before pitching in a game in the regular season. If Sale stays on schedule, he would make four starts in exhibition games, a fifth at extended spring training and a sixth either in a camp game or possibly a minor-league game.

Sale signed a five-year, \$145 million contract with the Red Sox at the beginning of last season and went 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA. He was limited to 25 starts by elbow troubles and made his last start Aug. 13.

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*** *The Providence Journal***

Sale likely to start season on IL

Bill Koch

Chris Sale is likely to begin his fourth season with the Red Sox on the injured list.

Boston’s interim manager, Ron Roenicke, confirmed Thursday morning in Fort Myers, Fla., that Sale is behind schedule and probably won’t be able to open the 2020 campaign with the club. Sale was battling an illness when he reported to spring training and won’t be at a place in his throwing program where the Red Sox are prepared to put him on the mound in a regular-season game.

Sale said he agrees with the decision even though he’s not happy about it.

“It was a gut punch,” he said. “When we were in that meeting, I said, ‘The only thing this hurts is my ego, and that doesn’t matter.’”

He said the good news is that his arm is doing well.

“That’s kind of the frustrating part for me is I feel like I’ve hit the checkmarks, I’ve done the things I need to do, and I feel good. I feel really good,” he said. “So, we just need to keep building from there.”

The Red Sox open the season March 26 in Toronto, with the home opener April 2 against the White Sox. Roenicke said Sale will be eligible to be activated on April 7, when the Red Sox host the Rays.

Such a decision would force Sale to start this season as he ended 2019. Boston placed Sale on the injured list in August with left elbow inflammation and he never returned. Subsequent testing and multiple visits with renowned orthopedic surgeon Dr. James Andrews revealed no structural damage in the joint, but Sale was shut down after making a career-low 25 starts.

Sale also endured a pair of stints on the injured list in 2018 because of left shoulder inflammation. He was diminished throughout the second half and activated in September ahead of a run to a World Series championship. Sale recorded the final three outs of Game 5 against the Dodgers, including the clinching strikeout of Manny Machado that delivered the Red Sox their fourth title this century.

Sale staggered to a 4.40 earned-run average last year, and his difficulties brought an end to a pair of noteworthy streaks. The 30-year-old had finished inside the top six of the American League Cy Young Award voting in each of the previous seven seasons. Sale also had been named an A.L. All-Star in each of those years, the first five with the White Sox.

Sale’s Boston debut in 2017 following his trade from Chicago included 32 starts, a 2.90 ERA and a league-leading 308 strikeouts. He made just 27 starts the following year, lowering his ERA to 2.11 but completing only 158 innings. That number dipped further to 147 in 2019.

Sale’s general health is of particular concern to the Red Sox given the start of his five-year, \$145-million extension this season. Former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski announced the deal late in spring training last year and Boston is tied to Sale through 2024. He’ll count for more than 10% of the \$208 million clubs are allowed to spend while remaining under the first threshold of the Competitive Balance Tax.

The Red Sox were already short on starting pitching depth before this latest development. Sale’s absence and the trade that sent Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers are twin blows to a rotation that stumbled its way through last season. Eduardo Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez appear to be the last men standing ahead of Opening Day in Toronto.

Boston has added a host of bullpen arms in the offseason, and chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom carrying the opener philosophy with him from Tampa Bay appears to be an inevitable conclusion. Austin Brice (Marlins), Matt Hall (Tigers), Chris Mazza (Mets), Josh Osich (White Sox), Jeffrey Springs (Rangers) and Phillips Valdez (Mariners) are among the new faces in camp with the Red Sox. Ryan Weber, Kyle Hart and Mike Shawaryn each made at least 14 starts with Triple-A Pawtucket last season and remain on the 40-man roster.

Boston also would have the financial room to add salary in a trade. Cot’s Contracts estimates the current Red Sox payroll at \$191.5 million, which leaves more than \$16 million in space below the CBT. Boston cleared all of the \$27 million owed to Betts in his final arbitration season and half of the \$31 million owed to Price in each of the next three seasons.

*** *MassLive.com***

Kevin Pillar, Boston Red Sox gritty newcomer, was out to prove teams wrong as a 32nd rounder; he has different motivations as a veteran

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — New Boston Red Sox outfielder Kevin Pillar played with a chip on his shoulder in the minors and during his early major league career as a 32nd round draft pick out of Division II California State University, Dominguez Hills.

He even wanted to prove to the Toronto Blue Jays that they were wrong to wait 32 rounds to draft him.

“My motivation certainly has changed over the course of the years,” Pillar told MassLive.com on Thursday. “Early on in my career, that was the chip on my shoulder, the motivating factor to prove all these teams that they were wrong. And to prove to my own organization that they were wrong. I wasn’t gonna allow my draft position to define whether I got to the big leagues or whether I had success in the big leagues. I still think that’s kind of enrooted in me. But it’s not that chip on my shoulder. It’s not that thing that motivates me every single day.”

Pillar, who the Red Sox signed to a one-year, \$4.25 million contract Feb. 14, brings new motivations with him to Boston. He belted a career high 21 homers in 2019 with the Giants, but wants to hit for a better on-base percentage than he has throughout his career.

He wants to achieve certain things in this game he hasn’t yet. Adding a Gold Glove to his resume remains attainable. He has posted an impressive 60 DRS (Defensive Runs Saves) during his career (45 DRS in center). His DRS declined in 2019 but he still thinks he’s an elite defender. He thinks minor adjustments such as positioning, through advanced metrics will help make him an elite outfielder again.

“I’m at a point where I’ve had five-plus major league seasons as an everyday player,” Pillar said. “My motivation is to now reach the heights and standards that I have set for myself. I’m strictly motivated by that. Not motivated by anything else. I’ve proved I can be an everyday major league baseball player. The only thing left for me to prove is to prove to myself that these expectations that I have for myself that I believe I can reach them. Whether it’s being an All-Star. Whether it’s doing certain things on the field that I haven’t yet been able to accomplish.”

Despite new motivations, Pillar still feels a responsibility to tell his original story.

“I was definitely not the most talented guy, even in my own draft class just with the Toronto Blue Jays,” Pillar said.

Still, Pillar became the first player in the Blue Jays’ 2011 draft class to make the majors. He made his big league debut two years, two months and seven days after Toronto drafted him.

“How was that accomplished? I think it had a lot to do with the sixth tool that we don’t talk about it,” said Pillar, who explains the meaning of the sixth tool below. “In no way do I feel like I’m the only one to come from where I started and get to where I got to. But I do take a sense of responsibility of taking the opportunity to share my story.”

Several of Pillar’s new Red Sox teammates, including J.D. Martinez (2009 20th round pick), Mitch Moreland (2007 17th-round pick), Jeffrey Springs (2015 30th round pick) and Chris Mazza (2011 27th round pick), all have their own stories of determination. Springs and Pillar received the same signing bonus: only \$1,000 before taxes.

Pillar wants college players drafted in the lower rounds and high school players who didn’t receive Division 1 college scholarships but instead are playing at Division II and III schools to hear his story.

“Just give them a little bit of hope, give them a little bit of peace in making their decision, especially now with how popular social media has become and how advanced we’ve become as a society,” Pillar said.

Pillar said social media makes it much easier nowadays for scouts to notice under-the-radar prospects.

"If you're good enough, they're gonna find you," Pillar said. "You definitely don't have to go to a Division I California school to be seen by scouts. The word travels very quickly in this game. You could be at some small Division II in the Midwest and if they believe you have what it takes, even if it's a very small chance you can help a major league team one day, they're gonna send people out there to see you."

Red Sox fans should appreciate his gritty style

Pillar plays the game hard. That's always been the case. He had to play hard to prove himself as the 979th overall pick in 2011.

"My style of play is conducive for going out there and doing whatever it takes to get a win that day," Pillar said.

The Blue Jays abruptly traded Pillar to the Giants five days into the 2019 regular season. He called the trade and move across the country "extremely unsettling" after he thought he would remain a Toronto Blue Jays player for life. He never wanted to play anywhere else but Toronto.

Why did he love playing in that city so much? Simple. He embraced the city's blue-collar attitude.

"Definitely a hockey town and they just appreciated guys that went out there, gave their best effort and played the game the right way, played hard and were willing to lay it all on the line," Pillar said.

He's aware Boston fans appreciate the same qualities.

"Not to say this was the determining factor in me signing here. There obviously were a bunch of other reasons. But in some small way I was aware of that," Pillar said. "And it allows me a little bit of comfort knowing that despite the numbers that might be seen on the scoreboard, I'm able to just go out there and play my style of baseball, and play the game the right way and play hard that people are gonna see beyond the numbers. They're gonna see you can impact games in other ways.

"It's not necessarily a goal of mine everywhere I've been to just go out there and try to do something to try to win the fan base over. I just understand, if you go out there and be yourself, and you play your style of game, (fans will appreciate it)."

He was unsure whether his reputation as a gritty player would travel with him from Toronto to San Francisco.

"Shortly after being there, just being myself, not trying to prove anything to anyone, just being myself organically, the reputation just kind of came along with it," he said. "And fans just started to appreciate just my willingness to do whatever it takes to win. Lay it all out there."

He said he knows Red Sox fans are extremely loyal.

"I also understand they have expectations for their team. They have expectations for their players," Pillar said.

'It's a matter of opportunity'

J.D. Martinez told MassLive.com back in 2018, "When I signed, they sent me to the Appalachian League, rookie ball where all the high school kids went, not even the college kids. And I was the sixth outfielder. I didn't even play."

Pillar also began his career in the Appalachian League for the Short Season Bluefield Blue Jays.

"I think the hardest thing initially is when you are drafted late, just getting your opportunity to go out there and show that you can play," Pillar said.

Pillar said he played the first game after being assigned to Bluefield.

“And then I didn’t play for two days,” Pillar said. “I was kind of on a set rotation. Enough for me to say they gave me an opportunity but not enough to really go out there and prove myself. But I understood where I stood kind of early in the process. I didn’t allow that to stop me from getting my work in and just preparing myself for when that opportunity did come. I was able to just kind of go out there and run with it.”

He certainly took advantage of his 56 starts in the outfield that year. He batted .347 with a .377 on-base percentage, .534 slugging percentage, .911 OPS, seven homers, 17 doubles, three triples and 37 RBIs in 256 plate appearances.

“I just tell people it’s a matter of opportunity,” Pillar said. “Just the more you can go out there and play, whether it’s at the DI level, the Division III level or NAIA, junior college. Every time you step on a field you have an opportunity to prove yourself. And the same goes for when you get drafted. Regardless of where you get drafted, despite the amount of opportunities you might get, any time you have a uniform on, a field, that becomes your stage. It becomes your platform to go out and prove to anybody that’s watching that you’re worthy of being on that field. Worthy of being a big league baseball player one day.”

‘It’s your sixth tool. It’s what’s between your ears’

Former Red Sox catcher Ryan Hanigan — who played 11 seasons in the majors (2007-17) after signing as an undrafted free agent out of Division II Rollins College — told MassLive.com in 2015 half the problem for talented young players is receiving an opportunity to play professional ball.

“I played with guys in college and in summer leagues who were damn good players that might have had a career and it’s just hard to get into pro ball,” Hanigan said. “And then you see a lot of guys at the same time that they get into pro ball and you’re like, ‘How did that happen?’”

Why do scouts sometimes fail to identify some very talented players as potential major leaguers?

“There’s a very important component to all this that’s not quantifiable. It isn’t measurable. And it’s your sixth tool. It’s what’s between your ears. It’s your brain. It’s your ability to adapt. Your willingness to learn. Your work ethic. These are things that aren’t measurable. We get caught up in the five tools of baseball. That anyone can go out on a baseball field and go, ‘Wow, that guy’s really fast.’ Because we can time it. Or ‘He’s got raw power because he can hit the ball over the fence.’ And obviously the same for all the other tools. It will never be a perfect science. Because until we can learn to quantify that stuff, it’s gonna be hard.”

Boston Red Sox trade rumors: Wil Myers deal with Padres considered ‘unlikely’ (report)

Chris Cotillo

A trade between the Red Sox and Padres sending Wil Myers and prospects to Boston is considered unlikely, Alex Speier of the Boston Globe reported Wednesday. Speier cites a source who “characterized the idea mostly as ‘tire kicking’ by the Red Sox rather than a deal with real legs.”

San Diego and Boston have discussed multiple scenarios in which the Sox take on Myers (and a substantial portion of the \$61 million remaining on his contract) and acquire a young prospect or two from San Diego in a creative trade. Using that framework, the Sox would essentially buy young talent by providing salary relief for the Padres, who are looking to cut payroll and redistribute it as they look to contend in the coming years.

The Red Sox -- who have financial flexibility after trading Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers earlier this month -- would be open to a creative deal like the one for Myers, who will earn \$20 million in each of the next three years but will, due to the complex nature of his contract, not cost nearly as much against the competitive balance tax threshold. Boston reportedly had interest in pitcher Cal Quantrill, catcher Luis Campusano and shortstop Gabriel Arias in talks with San Diego.

The two sides first discussed Myers as part of their talks involving Betts and later tossed around differing iterations that would be more focused on dumping salary. One potential version reportedly involved looping the Reds into a three-team deal with Nick Senzel potentially heading to the Padres.

Even if a deal involving Myers is unlikely, it's clear the Red Sox are open to using their newfound financial breathing room to make creative moves. New chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom will likely continue to explore similar avenues in the coming months.

Boston Red Sox 2019 top picks Cameron Cannon, Matthew Lugo hit at spring training 2020

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Cameron Cannon and Matthew Lugo, the Red Sox's two top draft picks in 2019, both are here at minor league spring training camp and should be interesting prospects to keep an eye on this year.

The Red Sox selected the 22-year-old Cameron in the second round (43rd overall) out of the University of Arizona. Boston drafted Lugo, an 18-year-old, in the second round (69th overall) out of the Carlos Beltran Baseball Academy.

Lugo already is Boston's top-ranked shortstop. He's Carlos Beltran's nephew. Baseball America, which ranks him Boston's No. 13 prospect overall, wrote, "Lugo's power and middle-infield profile suggest a potential above-average regular."

BA ranks Cannon the No. 22 prospect organizationally.

Chris Sale on missing Opening Day for Boston Red Sox: 'It was a gut punch'

Chris Cutillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Though Chris Sale's bout with pneumonia seemed bound to delay the beginning of his season from the start, the official word that he'd begin the season on the injured list still hit him hard.

Sale, who missed the first few days of spring training while he recovered from the illness, is behind the other pitchers in camp and has not yet faced hitters. Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom, interim manager Ron Roenicke and some of the team's trainers met with Sale earlier this week to let him know he'd miss Opening Day for the first time in three years.

"It was a gut punch," Sale said. "When we were in that meeting, I told them the only thing that hurts is my ego. And that doesn't matter."

Sale, who missed the final six weeks of last season due to elbow inflammation, has no recurring arm pain and expected to enter camp fully healthy. He then came down with the flu, which later turned into pneumonia and delayed his arrival for a few days. Once he returned, he found himself behind the rest of the group and is the only Sox starter to not get into game action yet.

Sale threw an extended bullpen Wednesday and will next throw a live batting practice Saturday. He'll likely need to face hitters twice before pitching in a Grapefruit League game.

"I think they just want me to get fully stretched out and get where I need to be," he said. "I started two weeks late, so I've got to stay two weeks late. Simple math will tell you that makes sense."

With the new rules governing the injured list requiring pitchers to spend 15 days on the shelf, Sale could first join the Red Sox on April 7. The Sox would backdate his IL designation by three days, potentially allowing him to make his season debut at home against the Rays.

The Red Sox won't rush Sale to come back that early. Roenicke wants Sale to get six outings in before pitching in a regular season game.

"They just want me to get back to 100 percent, want me to get stretched out and get all my starts in," Sale said. "I really didn't have any good arguments to come back with for him. Obviously, it's not what you want but sometimes you have to take it on the chin for the better of the team."

The good news for Sale and the Red Sox is that the delayed start to his season is not caused by any arm-related troubles. After missing significant time over the last two years with shoulder and elbow injuries, the lefty feels like he's back at full strength.

"I feel like I've the check marks. I've done the things I need to do and I feel good, I feel really good," he said. "Obviously, I've got some things I've got to tighten up this time of year, but I feel good. I feel like I'm rolling, I'm getting into the groove that I need to get into. So we just keep building from there and once the games start, get after it and then, my philosophy as always, once they hand me the ball I throw it until they take it from me. That's all I can do."

Unfortunately for Sale, his first chance to see how his arm bounces back in a game that counts will be delayed, at least for a week or two. The veteran understands that the Sox are just trying to protect him by pushing him back.

"Do I like it? Absolutely not," Sale said. "Do I respect it? 100%."

Boston Red Sox's Rafael Devers expected to make his spring training debut Friday; Xander Bogaerts 'has come along good'

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Rafael Devers, who missed the beginning of spring training camp because of the birth of his second daughter, is expected to play in his first spring training game Friday when the Red Sox travel across town to face the Twins.

"And then we'll go every other day for a bit," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said.

The 23-year-old Devers emerged as one of the game's top hitters in 2019, batting .311 with a .361 on-base percentage, .555 slugging percentage, .916 OPS, 32 homers, 54 doubles, four triples and 115 RBIs. His 54 doubles led the American League.

Chris Sale update: Red Sox ace won't start Opening Day, will begin season on IL because of delayed start to spring (pneumonia)

Bogaerts continues to hit, take grounders

Bogaerts will take batting practice and field ground balls again Thursday.

"We don't have any lives (live BPs) for him to get into but he has come along good," Roenicke said.

Bogaerts aggravated his left ankle while jumping during offseason drills back home in Aruba a few weeks ago. And so he was limited at the beginning of camp.

Jonathan Lucroy to receive couple at-bats Thursday

Two-time All-Star catcher Jonathan Lucroy, who the Red Sox signed to a minor league deal with an invite to major league camp Feb. 19, likely will take a couple at-bats during Thursday's game here at JetBlue Park against the Phillies. He's not in the starting lineup but will sub in for J.D. Martinez at DH.

“He’s throwing again some today to bases,” Roenicke said. “So we feel like maybe Saturday or Sunday that he can catch a couple innings.”

Boston Red Sox have raised stakes of sign-stealing scandal by proclaiming innocence; David Price trade causes flashbacks for Chaim Bloom & more

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- If Major League Baseball’s pending report on alleged sign-stealing practices by the 2018 Red Sox finds any wrongdoing, the Sox won’t just be labeled as cheaters. They’ll be called liars, too.

In the weeks since The Athletic first published allegations that Boston improperly used a video replay room to decode opponents’ signs in 2018, the Red Sox have dug in their heels and raised the stakes significantly. In the time since owners John Henry and Tom Werner sat on stage at Fenway Park and forcefully shot down any investigation-related questions on Jan. 14, a parade of players -- including Andrew Benintendi, Rafael Devers, J.D. Martinez and Ian Kinsler (who’s retired, works for the Padres and would have nothing to lose by being a whistleblower), have vehemently denied any wrongdoing. Even chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said publicly he thinks the inquiry would come up empty. And Henry and Werner have continued their wink-and-a-nod routine, repeatedly asking fans to “reserve judgment,” implying that the report will exonerate their club.

The Red Sox didn’t have to deny, deny, deny. They could have stiff-armed every question by simply saying they planned on respecting Major League Baseball’s request that they not comment on an ongoing investigation.

But every person who denied the allegations went out on a limb in doing so. And now, with a decision pending, they better have been right.

The only thing worse than being found guilty of cheating would be adding an extra layer of dishonesty to the equation. Even the Astros, who have handled their cheating scandal with bull-in-a-china-shop grace, stayed quiet while the investigation was ongoing. The Red Sox have continually stuck their necks out, starting with Martinez’s declaration late last month that he’s excited to get the investigation over with so that everyone can see “there was nothing going on” in 2018.

Since, the Sox have doubled and tripled down on that stance, with their level of insistence suggesting they’re supremely confident the league will come up empty. But some recent red flags should have the deniers sweating with the report scheduled to be released in the coming days.

Commissioner Rob Manfred has repeatedly delayed the investigation and is now more than three weeks past his original target date for a final decision. Earlier this month, he claimed a “couple of developments” had further stalled the case, adding that some subjects needed to be reinterviewed. Manfred is now a few days past his latest target date (the end of last week) and appears unlikely to render his decision until early next week.

In this case, the extended deliberation by the jury probably doesn’t bode well for the defendant. It’s hard to envision a scenario in which the league only recently uncovered evidence that would exonerate the Sox and more likely that those new developments paint Boston in a negative light. No one outside the league office knows exactly what those developments are, but they’re surely accounting for some sweaty palms in the home clubhouse at JetBlue Park.

There are factors to consider in both the positive and negative columns for the Sox. The vehement denials are, on their face, a good sign, because it would be hard to envision players being so forceful if they didn’t believe what they were saying. No opponents have come out with strong criticism against the Sox, saving all their vitriol for Jose Altuve, Carlos Correa and the rest of the Astros. And it’s important to remember the crime the Sox are accused of -- peeking at catcher’s signs in the replay room and relaying signs during

games -- is nothing close to what Houston did and was common, if not universal, across baseball in recent years.

But the delays should be worrisome, along with the fact the Red Sox are being treated as a repeat offender after being caught using an electronic watch to relay signs in 2017. Add in that the league has gotten a lot of heat for its handling of the Houston scandal and there's at least a possibility that Manfred tries to overcompensate by hitting the Sox hard.

The wild card in all of this is Alex Cora, who was already implicated as a key player in Houston's scheme and is waiting on his punishment from the league. If Cora -- who spoke of transparency and accountability as tenets of his tenure as manager -- established himself as a credible witness in the Houston investigation and says the Sox didn't do anything, the league will be more likely to take him at his word.

It's unlikely Boston's punishments will come close to how the league slammed the Astros, especially considering the Sox have already been punished significantly by losing Cora. Former president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski won't be found culpable and all the players have immunity. Any penalty would likely be in the form of stripped draft picks and/or fines.

But if wrongdoing is found to have occurred, the court of public opinion will act harshly because the Sox chose to scream their innocence from the rooftops over the last six weeks. If the league does find the Sox guilty, a firestorm will ensue.

Bloom says Price trade brought back flashbacks

Two of the most impactful trades in Chaim Bloom's career have involved the same player: David Price.

Bloom was with the Rays when they traded Price to the Tigers in July 2014. Earlier this month, he sent Price packing again, sending him to the Dodgers along with Mookie Betts in exchange for Alex Verdugo, Jeter Downs and Connor Wong.

Back at the Winter Meetings in December, Bloom said trading Price -- a homegrown talent in Tampa Bay - - was "very, very hard" at the time. The second instance wasn't easy for Bloom, either.

"This was unique in the sense that I hadn't been here very long before executing that trade," Bloom said. "There were definitely some flashbacks."

Price's career has come full-circle, in a sense. He was traded by the Rays (led by Bloom and Andrew Friedman) to the Tigers (led by Dave Dombrowski), then signed by the Dombrowski-led Red Sox. Then Bloom replaced Dombrowski and traded him to the Friedman-led Dodgers within a few months of taking the job in Boston.

Bloom had a lengthy conversation with Price after the deal was finalized.

"David handled himself great," Bloom said. "He was appreciative. I thanked him privately, as I did publicly, for -- even though I wasn't here for it -- what he did for this organization. I know he had some ups and downs but as I said, when the chips were down, he delivered (in 2018). I think that's really important to remember."

10 observations from the last week in baseball

1. An interesting piece from Rob Manfred's press conference earlier this month that has gone largely forgotten was this quote: "I'm not going to comment on where we have open investigations, other than Houston and Boston." That suggests he's investigating at least one other team.
2. The Yankees are starting to rival the Mets in terms of frequency of injuries. Luis Severino (Tommy John surgery) and Giancarlo Stanton (calf) are the latest casualties there.

3. Matt Kemp, who is now on his fourth team in three years, says he wants to play four more years in the majors. That... does not seem likely to happen.
4. The Madison Bumgarner rodeo story is one of the best pieces of baseball journalism in recent history. Kudos to Zach Buchanan and Andrew Baggarly of The Athletic.
5. Most likely member of the Red Sox to have a secret rodeo life? I'll go Mitch Moreland, followed by Brandon Workman and Ryan Brasier.
6. Much has been made about Jason Varitek potentially taking on a bigger role with the Sox in 2020, but he was never really considered for manager or bench coach. Would have been a tall task for him in either role considering all that is going on with the team.
7. Alex Verdugo has brought a unique presence to the Red Sox clubhouse so far. He brings around his own mini-speaker, playing whatever music he's feeling in the moment. It's hard to envision there were once days when young players were told to show no personality in front of their teammates.
8. If the Red Sox are going to participate in this reported pre-arbitration extension blitz, they'll likely start by exploring a deal with Rafael Devers. But there are others on the roster (Darwinson Hernandez, Josh Taylor, Michael Chavis and others) who might fit too.
9. Brian Dozier got MVP votes in 2016 and 2017 and just got a minor-league deal from the Padres in free agency. Quick fall for the longtime Twin.
10. All spring training games should be seven innings. That is all.

Chris Sale won't start for Boston Red Sox Opening Day, will begin season on IL because of delayed start to spring (pneumonia)

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Red Sox ace Chris Sale will start the 2020 season on the injured list because of his delayed start to spring training.

Sale missed the beginning of spring training because of pneumonia.

"It was probably a reach anyway," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said here at JetBlue Park on Thursday. "With the sickness, it cost him two weeks time. And that two weeks is what we'd like to give him to make sure that he's right. He's worked hard on getting his arm right. And we didn't think four starts in spring training was fair to him."

Sale threw a bullpen Wednesday. He'll throw a live batting practice Saturday.

This IL stint is not related to Sale's 2019 elbow injury, Roenicke said. It's only because he missed time earlier this month due to pneumonia.

"Nothing at all with the arm," Roenicke said. "He's doing really good. So we're really happy where he's at. This is strictly for missing two weeks."

Sale missed the final six weeks of the 2019 season (39 games) because of elbow inflammation. The lefty received a PRP injection Aug. 19.

IL stints for pitchers will increase from 10 days to 15 days this season. The Red Sox can backdate the IL stint three days prior to the start of the regular season. Sale, therefore, won't be able to make his 2020 debut until April 7 at the very earliest.

He presumably won't make his first start until mid-April.

Roenicke has yet to name an Opening Day starter. Boston will open March 26 in Toronto.

*** *RedSox.com***

Sale won't be ready to pitch Opening Day

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Red Sox ace Chris Sale has been ruled out for Opening Day and is expected to start the season on the 15-day injured list, interim manager Ron Roenicke said on Thursday.

Sale is not injured, but he is building back to a regular Spring Training progression after dealing with the flu and pneumonia for two weeks just before camp opened.

If the Red Sox back-date Sale's IL stint by three days, the earliest he can make his 2020 debut would be on April 7 at Fenway Park against the Rays.

Sale hopes to start the first day he is eligible.

"I mean, [my target date] was March 26," said Sale. "Especially given what happened last year and going through this offseason, that was my goal. I wanted to be there. I've let other people do my job and pick up my slack for long enough."

As much as he hated to give ground with what Roenicke and the training staff recommended, Sale agreed it was the right move.

"It was a gut punch," Sale said. "When we were in that meeting, I said the only thing this hurts is my ego, and that doesn't matter. How can you argue with them just trying to take care of me and do what's best, not only for myself, but for the organization and the team moving forward? They had great points and I didn't. I respect that. Like I said, I respect everybody in that room and the decision was made and you move forward."

Unlike a year ago, when the Red Sox were coming off a World Series title and former manager Alex Cora took it easy on his veteran starters during the spring, Roenicke thinks it's important that every Boston starting pitcher make six starts before pitching in the regular season.

Given the time he missed due to illness, Sale wouldn't have been able to do that.

"There were certain things we were allowed to do and weren't allowed to do because of the 2018 season," said Sale. "I think they just want me to get fully stretched out and get where I need to be. I started two weeks late, so I've got to stay two weeks late. Simple math will tell you that kind of makes sense. You know, do I like it? Absolutely not. Do I respect it? A hundred percent. It is what it is. You move forward and keep working."

Considering Sale missed the final six weeks of last season with a left elbow injury, the last thing the Red Sox want to do is rush him through Spring Training so he can pitch on Opening Day.

The good news is that Sale's left shoulder and elbow are both strong at this point in camp.

"Nothing at all with the arm," said Roenicke. "He's doing really good. We're really happy with where he's at. This is strictly for missing two weeks and then only being able to give him four starts in Spring Training."

After a productive offseason, illness hit Sale at about the most inconvenient time possible.

“With the sickness, it cost him two weeks’ time and that two weeks is what we’d like to give him to make sure he’s right,” said Roenicke. “He’s worked hard on getting his arm right. We didn’t think four starts in Spring Training was fair to him to make him start the season. He’ll open up on the [IL].”

This would have been Sale’s third straight Opening Day start for the Sox. Though Roenicke isn’t ready to announce a replacement for Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez is the most likely choice. The lefty is coming off a breakout 2019 season in which he won 19 games.

Getting Sale back to his vintage self after a down season last year is one of the top priorities for Roenicke and the Sox, who have him under contract for the next five seasons. Sale will throw live BP for the first time this spring on Saturday. He has been sharp in all of his side sessions.

“The good thing with Chris is that he is so competitive, and he wants to start the season right off to be out there. But he’s realizing, he’s thought about this -- he knows we’re looking out after him and what’s best for him, what’s best for the team. And this really is the right way to do it,” said Roenicke. “To treat him fairly and also to take care of the club and where are with him, not just this year, but in the future -- this is the best way to do it.”

Without Sale, the only certainties in Boston’s rotation to open the season are Rodriguez, Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Pérez. The Sox were considering an opener for the No. 5 spot, and perhaps could also use one in the fourth spot until Sale returns.

“We can do it with two spots in the rotation, but we’ll see if someone emerges and covers one of those spots,” said Roenicke.

There are no obvious rotation candidates, but Chris Mazza and Ryan Weber are two that are in the mix, according to Roenicke.

Minor Leaguers, including 2017 first-round Draft pick Tanner Houck, are also getting a chance to show what they can do this spring. Bryan Mata, Boston’s top pitching prospect, is starting Tuesday against the Phillies, but he only has 11 games of experience at Double-A Portland and would be a long shot to make the team.

Don’t rule out chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom adding a starter before the end of camp. He did say he was open-minded about a possible acquisition before learning that Sale would miss the start of the season.

“We would always want to accumulate as much depth as we can. So I don’t think that changes,” Bloom said. “But at the same time, we have a lot of guys here we’re interested in learning more about, that we’re excited about, and we brought them all in for a reason. We have some guys within the organization to help them get better. This is good to see them put those adjustments into play and learn more about them.”

Here are the Red Sox 2020 Top 30 Prospects

Jim Callis

A homegrown core that included Matt Barnes, Andrew Benintendi, Mookie Betts, Xander Bogaerts, Jackie Bradley Jr., Rafael Devers and Christian Vazquez played a large role in the Red Sox winning the 2018 World Series, the franchise's fourth championship in 15 seasons.

But ownership's doubts that president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski could maintain a cost-efficient sustainable team cost him his job last September, three weeks before the season ended with Boston missing the playoffs for the first time since 2015. And with John Henry & Co. looking to avoid crossing MLB's luxury-tax threshold for a third straight year in 2020, new Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim

Bloom made the difficult decision to trade Betts (a year before he is set to become a free agent) along with World Series hero David Price to the Dodgers in February.

That trade netted the Red Sox their best overall prospect in middle infielder Jeter Downs and their top catching prospect in Connor Wong, but it won't help them return to the postseason in 2020. The farm system won't offer much assistance either, as it's rebuilding after years of graduations and the sacrifice of prospects in deals for Craig Kimbrel and Chris Sale, among others. Third baseman Bobby Dalbec and right-handers Bryan Mata and Tanner Houck could find roles in Boston this year, but most of the organization's best prospects are at least a couple of years away.

The Red Sox have landed some intriguing talents at relatively low cost, signing speedster Gilberto Jimenez for \$10,000 out of the Dominican Republic in 2017, finding outfielder Jarren Duran and right-hander Thad Ward in the middle rounds of the 2018 Draft and grabbing righty Noah Song's first-round-quality arm in the fourth round last June amid concerns over his U.S. Navy service commitment. Getting Song earlier than initially hoped and having 2016 first-rounder Jay Groome bounce back from Tommy John surgery would be a shot in the arm for a system deeper in position players than pitchers.

Here's a look at the Red Sox's top prospects:

- 1) Jeter Downs, SS/2B (No. 44 on Top 100)
 - 2) Triston Casas, 1B (No. 77)
 - 3) Bobby Dalbec, 3B/1B
 - 4) Bryan Mata, RHP
 - 5) Gilberto Jimenez, OF
- Complete Top 30 list »

Biggest jump/fall

Here are the players whose ranks changed the most from the 2019 preseason list to the 2020 preseason list.

Jump: Thad Ward, RHP (2019: NR | 2020: 9) -- His stuff improved in his first full pro season while he transitioned from college reliever to starter and ranked eighth in the Minors with a 2.14 ERA.

Fall: Mike Shawaryn, RHP (2019: 13 | 2020: NR) -- He got hammered for a 9.74 ERA and .987 opponent OPS in the big leagues and may not be more than a long reliever.

Best tools

Players are graded on a 20-80 scouting scale for future tools -- 20-30 is well below average, 40 is below average, 50 is average, 60 is above average and 70-80 is well above average. Players in parentheses have the same grade.

Hit: 55 -- C.J. Chatham (Brainer Bonaci, Cameron Cannon, Jeter Downs, Jarren Duran, Gilberto Jimenez)

Power: 60 -- Bobby Dalbec (Triston Casas)

Run: 75 -- Jimenez

Arm: 70 -- Brainer Bonaci

Defense: 60 -- Jimenez

Fastball: 70 -- Yoan Aybar

Curveball: 65 -- Jay Groome

Slider: 60 -- Bryan Mata

Changeup: 55 -- Brayan Bello (Mata, Aldo Ramirez, Noah Song)

Control: 55 -- Ramirez

How they were built

Draft: 17 | International: 9 | Trade: 3 | Rule 5: 1

Breakdown by ETA

2020: 7 | 2021: 6 | 2022: 9 | 2023: 7 | 2024: 1

Breakdown by position

C: 1 | 1B: 1 | 3B: 3 | SS: 7 | OF: 5 | RHP: 10 | LHP: 3

Notes: Mata on the rise; Darwinzon SP or RP?

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The last homegrown starting pitcher the Red Sox had who won as many as 10 games in a season was lefty Felix Doubront, who did it in 2012 and '13.

The current top candidate to break that drought is righty Bryan Mata, the club's No. 4 overall prospect, who fired two scoreless innings (two hits, two strikeouts) against the Phillies in his first Grapefruit League start Thursday.

"I always enjoy when you talk about somebody that you're thinking in the future has a chance to be a guy," said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. "He's got good stuff, his command is I guess what he's worked on, in trying to get that narrowed down to where he can be more consistent in his pitching. But his stuff is good enough to be in the big leagues for sure."

The 20-year-old from Venezuela is the Red Sox's top-ranked pitching prospect according to MLB Pipeline.

"It's cool for him just to have worked and progressed to where he gets to do this," Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said of Mata's Thursday start. "I don't think you're too focused on the results, although it was nice to see him do a lot of the things that he did. It's just cool to see a kid like that who progressed through the system become a legitimate prospect and then get to have this experience."

Playing with a lineup that included established players like Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., J.D. Martinez, Mitch Moreland and batterymate Christian Vázquez was a thrill for Mata.

"I felt great. I had a lot of confidence going into it, just knowing that I was going to be making this start," Mata said. "Mixing my pitches especially, just taking the lead from Vázquez, who's a great catcher, and [is] someone I leaned on. It felt really great to be able to mix them up."

Mata put up dazzling numbers for Class A Advanced Salem last season (1.75 ERA in 10 starts) but displayed some inconsistency after moving to Double-A Portland (5.03 ERA in 11 starts).

Though the Red Sox have some competition for the final spot in the rotation -- in fact, two spots will be open while Chris Sale spends the first couple of weeks of the season on the injured list -- Mata will likely need more seasoning at Portland and perhaps Triple-A Pawtucket before making his big league debut.

But he'd like to accelerate the timetable as much as possible.

"My goal would obviously be to play in the Major Leagues this year, but whatever the team thinks is best for me, that's really what I'll go with," Mata said.

Mata mixes a mid to upper 90s fastball with a slider. The key will be developing a third pitch he can go to. He thinks an improved changeup can round out his repertoire.

Darwinzon dilemma

Given that aforementioned competition, the Red Sox could be tempted to move Darwinzon Hernandez and his electric left arm back into a starting role.

However, the club appears more likely to keep him in the bullpen, at least at this stage of his career. Hernandez made his first appearance this spring on Thursday, allowing two hits and a run.

"I think Rags [Roenicke] has talked about this," Bloom said. "The upside to do that is certainly there. I think we do have to remember that he's at a stage of his development where he moved pretty quickly last year and had a good amount of success. But there's also the need to make sure we're not putting too much on him too soon, whether it's from a workload perspective or just from an ability to handle the role."

While Sale is out, would the Red Sox consider using two openers?

"Yeah, I don't think we've taken anything off the table at this point," said Bloom. "It will all be about what we feel gives us the best chance to win on those days and throughout that opening stretch."

Lucroy doubles in debut

Jonathan Lucroy officially entered the competition to be the backup catcher when he appeared in Thursday's game for the first time this spring.

The right-handed hitter didn't waste any time doing something productive, as he walloped a pinch-hit double off the replica Green Monster in the bottom of the seventh.

Lucroy, who signed a Minor League deal with an invite to camp last week, is competing with Kevin Plawecki to be Vázquez's backup.

Roenicke expects Lucroy to see his first action behind the plate on either Saturday or Sunday.

Arauz makes case

There is also stiff competition in camp for the final two bench spots. Rule 5 Draft pick Jonathan Arauz gave the Sox something to think about when he mashed a three-run homer on Thursday.

Arauz, a switch hitter, can play second, third and short. He is competing with two players who have similar defensive versatility in Marco Hernandez and Tzu-Wei Lin. There's a chance two of those three players could make the team.

Up next

Star third baseman Rafael Devers will see his first Grapefruit League action on Friday on the road against the Twins on Friday at 1:05 p.m. ET. Devers arrived a few days late to camp so he could witness the birth of his daughter. Lefty Kyle Hart, who made 15 starts for Triple-A Pawtucket last season, will be on the mound.

*** *WEEI.com***

Chris Sale will not be ready for Opening Day

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- It isn't a surprise, but for those wondering who will start for the Red Sox March 26 in Toronto it is notable.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke announced Thursday morning at JetBlue Park that Chris Sale would be starting the season on the injured list and not serve as the team's Opening Day starter. Roenicke made it clear that the move isn't due to any physical ailment but strictly because Sale got behind schedule early in camp due to a bout with pneumonia.

"I talked to him again this morning and he was OK with me just telling you guys, he won't make Opening Day. It was probably a reach anyway," Roenicke said. "We'll probably start with him on the DL. Because, with the sickness, it cost him two weeks time and that two weeks is that we'd like to give him to make sure he's right. He's worked hard on getting his arm right. We didn't think four starts in Spring Training was fair to him to make him start the season. He'll open up on the DL. We can backdate it three days. We'll try

to figure out exactly where that puts him, and which start he'll make. But anyway, that's where we are with him.

"The good thing with Chris is that he is so competitive and he wants to start the season right off to be out there but he's realizing, he's thought about this, he knows we're looking out after him and what's best for him, what's best for the team and this really is the right way to it. I didn't even think there was a question, to treat him fairly and also to take care of the club and where are with him not just this year, but in the future, this is the best way to do it."

Sale, who will likely stay in Fort Myers when the team heads to play the Blue Jays, is slated to throw his first live batting practice Saturday.

Sale has made five Opening Day starts, including the last two seasons with the Red Sox. Prior to the lefty's emergence with his current team the Sox went three straight years with different Opening Day starters - Clay Buchholz, David Price and Rick Porcello. Before Buchholz's 2015 start Jon Lester had made four straight appearances in the opener.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

MLB thinks Michael Chavis can't hit high fastballs, but here's how he plans to prove them wrong

John Tomase

Michael Chavis can hit fastballs. His first swing of consequence, after all, launched a 99 mph Jose Alvarado offering to the deepest reaches of Tropicana Field for a pinch double last April.

That pitch was just above the knees, however, just where Chavis likes it, and the result helped mislead the rest of baseball for the first month of his career. "He can hit 99," the thinking went, "so let's see how he handles the soft stuff."

Ten home runs and twice as many pulverized sliders later, it was time for Plan B.

Enter the Astros.

On May 24, the Red Sox opened a three-game series in Houston. Chavis was hitting .270 with 10 homers and a .911 OPS in 29 games, making a serious case for Rookie of the Year. He had struck out 32 times, an acceptable number for someone on pace for 40 tape-measure bombs.

Chavis led off the series against Wade Miley and struck out swinging on an elevated 92 mph fastball. He faced eventual Cy Young winner Justin Verlander three times in the finale and saw 14 pitches, all fastballs, 11 of them above the belt. He didn't put a single one in play, striking out three times and finishing with six K's in 10 at-bats. Gerrit Cole had already blown him away a couple of times earlier.

From that point forward, Chavis hit just .242 with a .681 OPS and 93 strikeouts in 236 at-bats. The book on him was translated into every one of baseball's couple dozen languages, and it consisted of just four words: can't hit high fastballs.

"I would take a shot in the dark and say I'm not the first person to struggle against them," Chavis said recently. "It was the first time I felt exposed. It's a combination, they're phenomenal pitchers, but also I'm still trying to learn how to be a big leaguer. A lot of it was just in my own head, getting in my own way."

Tomase: Conditions ripe for Martinez to opt out after 2020

As Chavis embarks on his second season, he's well aware of this presumed deficiency in his game. And he has learned some important lessons that he believes will make a difference in 2020 as he looks to stick as a utility infielder or maybe even the starting second baseman if he can outplay Jose Peraza.

"You can't hit the ones that aren't a strike," Chavis said. "Essentially what I was trying to do was cover everything. I tried to cover the fastball middle in, the fastball up and in, the fastball up and away, I tried to cover everything and I started expanding up. So then I started getting worried about expanding down, and it snowballed.

"It's not that I can't hit a high fastball. You can find plenty of videos of me hitting high fastballs. My best talent is probably my fast hands, which goes very well with hitting high fastballs. A lot of it was just an approach of trying to do too much and getting in my own way."

Part of what made Chavis so impressive last April and May was his ability to lay off the high hard ones. But once he started swinging, he couldn't stop. Per Brooks Baseball, Chavis hit just .113 (6 for 53) on four-seam fastballs above the belt. In the upper third of the strike zone alone, he swung and missed at a staggering 39 percent of four-seamers. As a means of comparison, teammate Xander Bogaerts -- a tremendous high fastball hitter -- swung and missed there less than 10 percent of the time.

Sale's setback a 'gut punch' to Sox ace

Manager Ron Roenicke believes the key for Chavis in 2020 isn't so much catching up to those pitches, but ignoring them.

"Nobody hits the fastball at the top of the zone, maybe Bogey, but there aren't many, and so if you're not really good at this pitch, which hardly anybody is, you really have to lay off it," Roenicke said. "So it's more the discipline part of it."

Chavis admits the struggles wormed their way into his head and took root.

"When I started expanding the zone, that's just timidity, trying to be too protective, and it was compounded by the results I was having -- striking out more, having tough ABs, falling into two-strike counts really early," he said. "That's something that was frustrating. I told myself I was really tired of falling behind 0-2, 1-2. Even when you're going good, that's a tough AB. One thing I remember telling myself is to be aggressive early, so I started being too aggressive chasing pitches out of the zone, and next thing I know, he hasn't thrown a strike and I'm sitting there 0-2."

While Chavis was no stranger to struggles -- he hit just .223 in his full-season debut after being taken in the first round of the 2014 draft -- he had never struggled with such high stakes, and he admits that it affected him.

In the minors, after all, wins and losses don't matter. Development does. In the big leagues, that equation inverts.

"We're not working on progression, we're working on winning ballgames," he said. "I have to find a way where even though I don't feel good and I don't really know what's going on with my swing, I still have to find a way to compete, and that was something I still had to learn.

"Then when it gets exposed, that's when I don't want to get sent down. I felt like I was fighting for my life. Realistically, that's what it was every single day, that's what I was thinking about. And that more than anything is what got in my way, where I'm so worried about being sent down. I started making up scenarios in my head that aren't even real."

And so as Chavis prepares for 2020, he enters with a clear mind. The fastball above the belt that's so tempting must become a take so pitchers attack him where he can do damage.

"I'd say that's the normal me," he said. "It's not like I need to bring that guy back, but just allow myself to play. When I'm smiling on the field, when I'm relaxed, I'm not getting in my own way. I'm not getting the high fastball and trying to hammer it for a home run and getting all muscly. I just let it flow and make

contact. It's frustrating, because you can say it's just me getting in my own way, but it's not as easy as saying don't think that way. It's like asking someone not to think about a pink elephant."

Call it the pink elephant in the room, then. Chavis knows how pitchers will attack him, and they're not going to change until he makes them.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox Spring Report: Chris Sale won't be ready for first three series of the season

Sean McAdam

Three things you need to know out of Fort Myers:

1. Chris Sale to open the season on IL.

This isn't exactly a new development. In the first week of camp, the Red Sox began planting the seed that Sale's double whammy of the flu and mild pneumonia had put him behind at the worst possible time.

But Thursday, it became official: Sale won't be on the Opening Day roster. Sale knew that news was coming, but acknowledged it was still hard to hear.

"It was a gut punch," said Sale. "When we were in that meeting (with manager Ron Roenicke, chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and members of the training staff), I told them the only thing that hurts is my ego. And that doesn't matter."

Sale had a good bullpen Wednesday and will throw live BP Saturday.

"I think they just want me to get fully stretched out and get where I need to be," Sale told reporters. "I started two weeks late, so I've got to stay two weeks late. Simple math will tell you that makes sense. They just want me to get back to 100 percent, want me to get stretched out and get all my starts in. I really didn't have any good arguments to come back (at them).

"Obviously, it's not what you want. But sometimes, you have to take in on the chin for the better of the team."

Assuming the Sox backdate him the maximum three days at the start of the season (March 26), Sale would need to miss 15 days (the new IL stint for pitchers only in 2020). He would then be eligible to come off the IL on Tuesday, April 7, during the Red Sox' fourth series of the season.

2. Sale's absence won't change Bloom's search.

Bloom was asked Thursday if Sale being unavailable would intensify his search for additional starting pitching. The answer: no.

Some context: Bloom said he was already in the market for more pitching depth, and would continue to seek it out. The fact that Sale will miss his first two starts due to an illness — and not something far more serious, like a recurrence of elbow or shoulder issues that have plagued him the last two seasons — doesn't up the urgency any.

While a deal outside the organization remains a possibility, Bloom said he remains intrigued by some internal candidates. (Chris Mazza, one of the candidates, didn't help himself in this regard, allowing three runs on three hits in a single inning of work Thursday against the Philadelphia Phillies).

Bloom also said that it was possible the Sox could go with openers in two of the five rotation spots until Sale returns.

3. Jonathan Arauz helps his cause.

Arauz is in camp as a Rule 5 draft pick last winter, which means he either has to remain on the 26-man roster (or IL) or be offered back to the Houston Astros, from whom the Sox selected him in December.

Arauz hasn't played much above Single-A and is admittedly a longshot to make the team because of his age (21) and inexperience.

He can play several infield positions and some evaluators have noted that he's already defensively accomplished enough to play at the big league level. His bat, on the other hand, is very much unknown. In the minors, he has a .243 career batting average.

But Arauz smoked a three-run homer against the Phillies Thursday, which can't hurt him in his bid.

*** *The Athletic***

Why starter-needy Red Sox won't consider moving Darwinzon Hernandez to rotation

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — David Price has been traded, Chris Sale is headed for the injured list, the Red Sox rotation depth is so uncertain they're considering at least one opener, maybe two, and in the next month, no fewer than a half-dozen pitchers will audition for starting jobs and long relief roles.

Yet the team's most advanced pitching prospect — the one who's been in the organization the longest and experienced meaningful big-league success — will not be one of them.

Darwinzon Hernandez jogged out of the JetBlue Park bullpen Thursday afternoon, threw his one inning of relief and called it a day. He will not be stretched out this spring, and the Red Sox are not considering him a candidate to fill the rotation void. Hernandez is a reliever until further notice.

"In the future, I don't know," pitching coach Dave Bush said. "I saw him at times really successful as a starter in the minor leagues. I would say anything is on the table. Probably not immediately, but it's an option that's out there and something we have talked about and will continue to talk about, I'm sure."

There was no heightened sense of urgency Thursday, despite the announcement that Sale will not be on the Opening Day roster, leaving a second hole in an already short-handed rotation. Sale developed the flu just before spring training, the illness morphed into mild pneumonia, and he joined Red Sox camp late. He remains roughly two weeks behind schedule.

Sale threw a bullpen Wednesday and is scheduled for live batting practice Saturday — the team says there's no lingering issue with his elbow — but he's unlikely to pitch in a game until the second week of March, leaving time for only four spring training starts when the Red Sox want all starters to get six. It's a point of emphasis after many of their starters had a diminished workload last spring then struggled out of the gate.

"I started two weeks late, so I've got to stay two weeks late," Sale said. "Simple math will tell you that kind of makes sense."

Sale will be eligible to join the Red Sox on April 7 after missing the first road trip and two turns through the rotation. Without him, manager Ron Roenicke has not named an Opening Day starter, but it's worth noting Eduardo Rodriguez is on an every-fifth-day schedule that lines up nicely with the season opener

March 26. Nathan Eovaldi and Martin Perez are the only other Red Sox starters locked into the rotation. Ryan Weber, Brian Johnson and Hector Velazquez are the only other candidates with at least 10 major-league starts on their resumes.

“We can do (an opener) with two spots in the rotation,” Roenicke said. “But we’ll see if someone emerges and covers one of those spots (as a traditional starter).”

Touted prospects Tanner Houck and Bryan Mata have started games this spring — even if they’re not likely to make the Opening Day rotation, the Red Sox want their feet wet for potential spot starts this summer — but Hernandez is being treated differently.

He’s still only 23 years old, Baseball America still ranks him among the top 10 prospects in the organization, and he worked primarily as a starting pitcher throughout the minor leagues. But the Red Sox had a need in their bullpen last season, and they saw relieving as a quicker path to the majors, so they converted Hernandez into a reliever. During his 29 games in the majors — one of them as a starter — he struck out a whopping 16.9 batters per nine innings and had two different streaks of at least eight appearances without an earned run. He had a lot of walks but made up for it with overpowering stuff: A high-90s fastball and powerful slider.

“If he’d gone out and struggled throwing strikes or wasn’t getting high strikeout numbers or wasn’t as effective in relief, we might look at it differently,” Bush said. “But he was pretty damn good as a reliever. So, there’s value in what he does. Back-end relievers are really valuable, also.”

Pitching out of the bullpen let Hernandez scrap his less-potent changeup and curveball. Focusing one or two innings made preparation easier. Hernandez still throws all four pitches in side sessions, and he remains confident he can start at this level, but he acknowledged it would be a different animal.

“When I’m warming up for those (relief) innings,” he said, “that’s much different than when I’m going in there as a starter and have to last longer in the game.”

While his minor-league career was loaded with potential and ability, Hernandez did have a 5.02 ERA between Double A and Triple A last season, numbers that suggest he would be no slam dunk to thrive as a major-league starter right away. He said he’s focused this spring on improving his command, a weakness that hounded him throughout the minors and always made a move to the bullpen a distinct possibility.

“The upside to (being a starter) is certainly there,” chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said. “I think we do have to remember that he’s at a stage of his development where he moved pretty quickly last year — and had a good amount of success, considering — but there’s also the need to make sure we’re not putting too much on him too soon.”

As recently as last spring, Bush said, the Red Sox discussed Hernandez’s future and opinions were split on whether he would be a starter or a reliever. He stressed there’s still no final determination. If, down the road, the Red Sox find themselves loaded with late-inning relievers, or still have holes in their rotation, maybe they’ll see fit to reassess. For now, though, they see the bullpen as a better short-term solution with long-term value.

“I think it’s getting him used to the big leagues, getting him confident that he can pitch here,” Roenicke said. “Confidence is so huge in what we do. ... Once you have that confidence, you can move a guy in different areas. I think it’s easier (to make him a starter) then, if we wanted to. Maybe it’s next year, or maybe it’s the year after.”

This year, the Red Sox believe, is not the time. Not even with Sale hurt, Price gone and two rotation spots up for grabs. Hernandez threw his one inning Thursday, hit the showers and headed for home. He’d done all the Red Sox wanted him to do.

*** *The Fort Myers News-Press***

Red Sox ace Chris Sale will remain in Fort Myers on injured list for start of 2020 season

Bob Rathgeber

Chris Sale, Boston's ace left-hander and former FGCU star, will not be on the mound in Toronto for the Red Sox on Opening Day a month from now. Instead, he'll be in Fort Myers.

That was the word on Thursday from interim manager Ron Roenicke at Fenway South before the Red Sox-Phillies spring training game. Sale will be placed on the 15-day injured list and will remain in Southwest Florida for extended spring training.

Sale, who got a slow start this spring because of the flu and a mild case of pneumonia, is about two weeks behind the rest of the pitching staff. That means he will get just four spring-training starts and Roenicke wants Sale to have at least six before he takes the mound for real.

If all goes perfectly, Sale would make his 2020 debut on April 7 at Fenway Park against the Tampa Bay Rays.

Boston is taking it cautiously with their No. 1 pitcher, who missed the final six weeks last season because of elbow problems. Roenicke said Sale's arm issues appear to be behind him.

"He's doing really good," Roenicke said. "This is strictly for missing two weeks and then only being able to give him four starts in spring training."

Sale called the decision to disable him a "gut punch," but agreed it's for the best.

"How can you argue with them just trying to take care of me and do what's best ...

"I started two weeks late, so I've got to stay two weeks late. ...Do I like it? Absolutely not. Do I respect it? A 100 percent."

He said his arm is feeling good and should not be a problem as he prepares for the season.

"That's kind of the frustrating part for me is I feel like I've hit the checkmarks, I've done the things I need to do, and I feel good. I feel really good," Sale said. "So, we just need to keep building from there."

Sale hopes to bounce back from his poorest big league season in 2019. He went just 6-11. When he's right, the Naples resident is one of baseball's most dominant pitchers. He has a lifetime earned run average of 3.03 and in his first season with the Red Sox in 2017 he led the American League with 308 strikeouts and a league best 2.45 ERA.

Last year was the first season Sale wasn't picked for the AL All-Star team since 2011 as he went 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA in 25 starts, the fewest in his career for a full season since 2012.

*** *Associated Press***

Red Sox left-hander Sale to start season on injured list

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Boston Red Sox left-hander Chris Sale will start the season on the injured list, manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday.

Sale, who reported to camp with pneumonia and is behind schedule, will be placed on the 15-day injured list and will remain in Fort Myers for extended spring training when the team breaks camp.

“With the sickness, it cost him two weeks’ time and that two weeks is what we’d like to give him to make sure that he’s right,” Roenicke said. “He’s worked hard on getting his arm right and we didn’t think four starts in spring training was fair to him.”

Sale ended last season on the injured list with elbow inflammation, making his last appearance Aug. 13 at Cleveland, where he gave up five runs with 12 strikeouts in 6 ⅔ innings. Roenicke emphasized this trip to the injured list is not related to Sale’s elbow.

“Nothing at all with the arm, he’s doing really good with that,” Roenicke said. “We’re really happy with that. This is strictly for missing two weeks and only being able to get four starts in spring training.”

Sale said he agrees with the decision even though he's not happy about it.

“It was a gut punch,” he said. “When we were in that meeting, I said, ‘The only thing this hurts is my ego, and that doesn’t matter.’”

He said the good news is that his arm is doing well.

“That’s kind of the frustrating part for me is I feel like I’ve hit the checkmarks, I’ve done the things I need to do, and I feel good. I feel really good,” he said. “So, we just need to keep building from there.”

The Red Sox open the season March 26 in Toronto, with the home opener April 2 against the White Sox. Roenicke said Sale will be eligible to be activated on April 7, when the Red Sox host the Rays.

Sale is scheduled to throw live batting practice Saturday. Roenicke would like the starting pitchers to make six spring starts before starting a regular season game. If Sale remains on schedule, he could make four spring starts, with the remaining two either in extended spring, a camp game, or a minor league game.

Sale went 6-11 last season with a 4.40 ERA in 25 starts, the fewest in his career for a full season since 2012. This is his third stint on the injured list with Boston. He also missed about a month near the end of the 2018 season before returning to help Boston win the World Series.

Boston has several pitchers in camp trying to win the fifth spot on the rotation that opened when left-hander David Price was traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers along with Mookie Betts. Now, Roenicke has two spots to fill before opening day. Boston had been considering an opener for the fifth spot.

With Sale out, Boston’s likely opening day starter will be left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez, who led the rotation last season, going 19-6 with a 3.81 ERA in a major league-best 34 starts.