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Red Sox in no rush to focus on velocity

Julian McWilliams

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Fans want to be entertained. The Red Sox know that. But that doesn't mean they're in a rush to get a radar gun up on the big screen at JetBlue Park.

The club is taking this progression thing seriously with their pitchers. It's a buildup process. The Sox don't want their pitchers putting any extra zip on their pitches this early to try to light up a radar gun. Interim manager Ron Roenicke knows about it all too well.

"You guys all see what pitchers do, they throw a pitch then a rub here [across the face with their arm] and then their eyes are right on the radar," Roenicke joked. "Right now, that's not a good thing. It's there. It's real. You see it in every big-league game, a pitcher comes into the game, he throws his first pitch and those eyes are right up on the radar.

"When they don't see what they're used to seeing — maybe if a guy is 95 miles per hour and all of a sudden he's 92 — he's like, 'Whoa.' Whether he's going to throw harder on that next pitch or not, it makes a difference."

Roenicke knows the game has changed. Everything is about velocity now. He even said that the club targets pitchers with high velocity, but pitchers must know when to back off it. Roenicke intimated that it's hard to get that through to pitchers.

"Sometimes you'll see it on a 3-0 count, a guy has to throw a strike, so he'll just back off a little bit," Roenicke said.

He believes it starts at the youth level, where showcase tournaments now rule the amateur baseball scene. He thinks radar guns at an early age should be banned.

"But they're just not trained to do that," Roenicke said of pitchers. "They're trained to get after it on every pitch."

The Sox will put the gun in at some point this spring, but they are being extremely cautious across the board. They have slowed Chris Sale's progress, announcing he will start the season on the injured list. He came into camp with pneumonia and it set him back roughly two weeks. The Sox want to be certain he's ready, particularly with the season-ending elbow issues he had last August.

"We try not to shortcut it," pitching coach Dave Bush said. "We're trying to make smart decisions all the way around."

That includes not having a radar gun at the start of spring.

McCormick moves up

After 24 years as the Red Sox' traveling secretary, Jack McCormick is moving into a new role as the senior director of club relations. A few of the Red Sox players expressed their deep appreciation for McCormick.

"Jack, he does everything for you, man," Jackie Bradley Jr. said Friday morning. "I obviously hate to see him move, but Jack has been doing this thing for a long time. Since the beginning, Jack was all I knew."

Bradley said that, as a rookie, McCormick made the transition to the pros easy for him. That, sometimes, finding ways to get around or make sure your family gets tickets can be a stressful and arduous task.

“If there was anything, you went to Jack,” Michael Chavis said. “I don’t know how he did it, but he damn near managed everything off the field. His people skills are incredible, and he’s as kind and upfront as they come, which is awesome. The day-to-day aspect, he’s top-notch.”

The relationships McCormick forged go beyond just the playing field. He’s in constant communication with family members; in fact, he helped Mitch Moreland’s parents get him a hotel the other day.

“Behind the scenes, people don’t realize how much guys like Jack help out,” Moreland said. “You can lean on Jack and he gets it done for you. Moving to another role, that’s going to be part of it. You’re going to see guys, move around and do different things, but, I mean he’s a special guy. He’s done a lot for us. Done a lot for me.”

Moreland recalled there would be instances where he was no longer the conduit between his family members and McCormick.

“My wife, my parents, everyone has his number,” Moreland said. “And half the time I don’t even know that they talk to him. ‘Yeah, I took care of those things for your wife,’ and I’ll be like, ‘Huh?’ I don’t even know what he’s talking about and they have already done it. He comes in the clutch a lot.”

McCormick has been around Fenway since 1969, when he was with the Boston Police Department.

On the move

Mike Regan was promoted to director of major league operations, Mark Cacciatore was promoted to director of team travel, and Erin Mylett Cox was promoted to executive assistant/manager of staff support.

Edgar Barreto was promoted to major league strength coach. The Sox hired Anthony Cerundolo as an assistant athletic trainer, and Mike Roose has moved over to coordinator of athletic performance. Roose will mainly work with minor leaguers and rehab players. Kiyoshi Mamose remains the head strength coach. Kirby Retzer will serve as rehab strength and conditioning coach, Michael Hernandez has been hired as the strength and conditioning coach for Single A Greenville, while Ricky De Luna transitioned to a strength and conditioning coach for the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League Red Sox. Jharvyn Velazquez was hired as a Dominican summer league athletic trainer. Patrick McLaughlin was promoted to coordinator of minor league operations and Stephen Aluko has been hired as assistant of Florida baseball operations. Greg Rybarczyk has been promoted to director of education and process analysis. The Red Sox also hired Jimmy O’Donnell as assistant of baseball analytics.

The Red Sox hired Jake Bruml as an assistant in amateur and professional scouting; Dante Ricciardi, the son of longtime MLB executive J.P. Ricciardi, as an area scout in North Florida; Kirk Fredriksson as an area scout in the Mid-Atlantic; and Lee Bryant as an area scout in South Texas and South Louisiana.

Marcus Cuellar will take on the role of coordinator of international scouting. Juan Carlos Calderon and Matias Laureano were hired as Dominican Republic area scouts, and Cesar Morillo was hired as a Venezuela area scout.

The Red Sox hired Kyri Washington as a professional scout.

Verdugo back at it

Alex Verdugo threw again on the field Friday and put some good zip on the ball. Xander Bogaerts participated in the team’s batting practice session on the field and in the cages. He’s still progressing and, as of Friday, Roenicke said he was a few days away.

Rafael Devers, who made his in-game debut Friday, is scheduled to play every other day.

Friday's spring game report: J.D. Martinez homers in Sox defeat

Julian McWilliams

SCORE: Twins 4, Red Sox 1

RECORD: 3-4-1

BREAKDOWN: The Red Sox jumped out on top in the fourth, but the Twins scored two runs in both the sixth and seventh innings.

PLAYER OF THE DAY: J.D. Martinez was 2 for 2, with a triple in the first and homer in the fourth. It's his first spring training homer in three springs as a member of the Sox.

NEXT GAME: The Sox will host the New York Yankees Saturday at 1:05 p.m. NESN and WEEI 93.7-FM will carry the broadcast. Eduardo Rodriguez is set to make his first Grapefruit League appearance.

Rafael Devers brings some normalcy back to Red Sox lineup

Julian McWilliams

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Rafael Devers brought a sense of normalcy back to the Red Sox lineup.

Although it's just spring training and numbers don't count, presence does. Chris Sale won't start the season on the Opening Day roster. Xander Bogaerts is still progressing from left ankle soreness. Mookie Betts and David Price are gone.

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

Devers made his debut Friday. Slowly, the familiarity is arriving back at JetBlue.

Devers enters the spring coming off a decorated 2019 campaign. He became the youngest Red Sox player ever to reach 200 hits in a season, as well as the youngest with 32 homers, 54 doubles, 90 extra-base hits, and 359 total bases. And he's still just 23.

"It's hard to say you could see more than I saw for four straight months last year," Roenicke said Friday morning. "Four straight months, he was as good as anybody could be in baseball. When we needed a good at-bat from him, for four straight months, we saw a good at-bat."

Devers's .311 batting average and .916 OPS were a byproduct of hard work, shrewdness, maturation, and talent. In March and April last year, Devers had a 53.5 percent groundball rate and didn't homer. Yet he's so good that he still managed to hit .294 during that span. In May, Devers decreased his groundball rate to 38.5 percent and really took off, hitting .351 with eight homers. Devers can occasionally expand the zone, particularly on soft stuff down and away — he posted a 39.4 chase rate; league average last year was 31.6. It's something he'll want to improve as he gets older.

Yet, it also speaks to his greatness as a hitter. If a pitcher locates a great miss, unless you exaggerate your miss — his one weakness — a hitter like Devers could still make the pitcher pay.

Devers has such excellent bat-to-ball skills that he can get to those pitches just off the edge of the plate and drive them with authority. His ability to hit to all fields is up there with the best in the game. He peppers the left-field wall at Fenway daily. Devers is also flat through the zone, making him a threat at each quadrant of the strike zone.

“Especially with the talk of the, you know, launch angles and the swing kind of going up, that’s none of what Raffy does,” Roenicke explained. “Raffy has what, I think, what [hitting coach] Tim Hyers thinks, is a great swing for today’s pitching. Today’s pitching is better stuff than we’ve ever seen. Velocity’s increased, spin rate increased on the breaking ball. This little kind of lift for sure doesn’t fit the high fastball.”

Devers was 0 for 2 Friday. He struck out in his first at-bat on an offspeed pitch he chased, low and away. In his second at-bat, he flew out to deep right, just missing a homer. It won’t take too long for him to get going again.

“I feel great,” Devers said through interpreter Bryan Almonte afterward. “I feel healthy. Obviously this is what I want to do. I was seeing the ball well as well. I’m just trying to get ready for 2020.”

Andrew Benintendi is getting his chance at the leadoff spot with Betts gone. Roenicke said it’s not ideal to stack the top of the order with two lefties, but he admitted it could change. What won’t change is Devers in the two-hole.

“Wherever the team feels I should be batting, I’ll do whatever they say,” Devers explained. “But, obviously, I had a lot of success batting in the two-hole last year. It’s not going to change my approach. Either way, I’m still going to do what I have to do. But my preference would be to bat second.”

After the game Friday, Roenicke held his press conference inside his office within the visitor’s clubhouse. It was a small group of reporters there. The Dodgers-Milwaukee Brewers game played on the mounted television across from Roenicke. The teams didn’t feature just Betts and Price as Dodgers, but Brock Holt as a Brewer.

Betts led off the contest with a sharp single up the middle, Roenicke, luckily, didn’t see it. His focus remained on the talent that’s still here.

“Devers, nice being back,” Roenicke said. “He just missed that one ball in his second at-bat. It’s just nice looking out there and seeing him out at third base.”

Shortly after, Cody Bellinger laced a double to left-center. Betts, with his signature gold chain bouncing around his neck, came around to score.

It’s authority, not speed for a change, that has Jarren Duran turning heads

Alex Speier

FORT MYERS, Fla. — In 199 career minor league games and just over 800 at-bats, outfielder Jarren Duran has all of eight home runs. Based on that background, one American League scout’s glowing assessment of the 23-year-old came as unexpected.

“It wouldn’t shock me,” said the scout, “if he hit 30 homers in a season in the big leagues.”

Embedded within such a statement is the appeal of spring training. Exhibition games offer exercises in conjecture — treasure maps that often lead surveyors to fool’s gold, but that every once in a while point to something that turns out to be real.

Real or not, Duran is glimmering on the field in the early spring. In four spring games, he’s 5 for 10 with a homer and triple while showing explosiveness on the bases and making some circus catches in the outfield.

A player whose swing was geared for line drives and grounders last year is driving the ball in a different way, one that has allowed onlookers to imagine how his amazing athleticism and physical strength — when

combined with a natural ability to get the bat on the ball — might allow him to evolve. He is a player who embodies possibility.

“I don’t think anyone is expecting him to be a 30-home run guy, but you never know,” said Joe Oliver, Duran’s manager last year in Double A Portland. “I don’t think anyone expected Mookie [Betts] to be a 30-home run guy, either — not trying to compare them, but when guys start to get under control in the batter’s box, good things happen . . . It’s going to be an interesting process seeing how he grows up.”

Duran, however, is not thinking about 30 homers or about redefining his game. The hallmark of the 2018 seventh-round pick, participating in his first big league spring training, is his speed. The fifth-ranked Red Sox prospect grades as one of the foremost pure burners in professional baseball.

For most of his life, Duran has been taught to exploit that skill — to spray groundballs that he can turn into infield singles, to shoot liners into the outfield that he can leg into doubles and triples if they’re not directly at a fielder. He’s not trying to clear the fences.

“It is surprising to me every time I hit a home run,” said Duran. “There’s way stronger guys than me — Bobby Dalbec, J.D. Martinez. [Hitting homers is] their job. My job is to get on for those guys so they get all the RBIs. I’ve never thought about being the power guy. I would gladly take the leadoff role for those guys and get on base for them.”

That approach served him remarkably well in High A Salem at the start of 2019, where Duran hit .387/.456/.543 with four homers and 18 steals in 50 games. He looked like a traditional top-of-the-order prototype, getting on base and wreaking havoc once there.

But after a promotion to Portland, Duran hurtled back to earth, hitting .250/.309/.325 with one homer and 28 steals in 82 games. He had a sky-high 50.6 percent groundball rate, and rarely pulled the ball with any authority, often getting beaten by fastballs on the inner half of the plate.

And so, this offseason, he went to work. He wanted to clean up some of the movements in his swing to get in a better position to handle inside pitches.

Alongside Red Sox hitting coach Tim Hyers, Duran had a few hitting sessions in Southern California with Doug Latta — a swing guru who oversaw Justin Turner’s transformation from a contact hitter to a star, and who also worked at times with Betts in Boston.

Duran worked to improve his balance and timing, particularly on inside pitches.

“I feel like I have more clearance on the inner half,” Duran explained. “I always felt like that was a tough pitch for me. Now, I’m more open and clear. I can get every pitch with one swing.”

Early in camp, he has been getting to some of those pitches with authority, in a way that can create a wide-eyed sense of possibility. From his time with the Dodgers and Red Sox, Hyers has seen great athletes with hand-eye coordination and bat-to-ball skills translate small adjustments to on-field leaps before.

“You don’t hit close to .400 in A-ball without bat-to-ball skills, hand-eye skills, and so many skills it takes,” said Hyers. “He’s not a scrawny guy. He’s got a great engine, we call it, a motor in him. It’s more of a cleaner path to get the barrel there and stay behind it. If he squares up a few more balls, his athleticism puts pressure on the defense.”

Even if Duran doesn’t tap into home run power, his speed makes him a fascinating prospect at a time when the post-Betts Red Sox outfield is in a changing state.

There are few players who can forge jobs as big league regulars without some home run power. Of the 137 players with at least 500 plate appearances last year, only five had fewer than 10 homers.

But the Sox believe Duran's potential to use his speed to hit for average, drive the ball to the gaps, steal bases, and eventually play above-average outfield defense could make him a big league regular.

"With that kind of speed, if he continues, he should be one of the top defenders," said interim manager Ron Roenicke. "He does not have to hit for power [to be an everyday player]. What he needs to do is if he's not hitting for power, he needs to put the ball in play and use that great speed. Any ball that is not right to an outfielder should be a double for him. That creates OPS. It doesn't have to be homers."

But if he does add some power . . . well, that's the sort of possibility to which spring training lends itself.

Regardless, in early games, Duran is the sort of young talent who merits watching.

"The speed is unbelievable. It's exciting," said Oliver. "You might see an inside-the-park home run. You might see a guy last year that is on the basepaths and scores from first base on a throwing error from the middle infield. . . . You don't want to go to the hot dog stand [when he hits] because something special might happen."

Titanium-reinforced Jonathan Lucroy seeks to rebuild his value

Christopher L. Gasper

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Red Sox were slated to hold their annual Casino Night on Friday night; "Bets without Mookie Betts," they should call the event. The team's decision to gamble on catcher Jonathan Lucroy reclaiming his career looks like a shrewd bet.

Lucroy was once among the elite, a tough-as-nails two-time All-Star who finished fourth in the National League MVP voting with the Milwaukee Brewers in 2014. But his career and his numbers declined precipitously the last three seasons due to a herniated disk in his neck. He's in Sox camp as a reclamation project, a non-roster invitee trying to crowbar his way on to Boston's roster. The 33-year-old has a history with Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke, a titanium plate in his neck, and a new lease on baseball life.

You can't help but root for Lucroy. He's a feel-good story in a camp that could use some, and he's a feel-good find for a team that has been defined in terms of who they've lost permanently (Betts and David Price) and temporarily (ace Chris Sale).

"Whenever you're fighting yourself, your bat speed is really low, you're hurt, you're injured, you don't feel good, it's going to be hard," said Lucroy. "No matter who it is, no matter what position you play, it's going to be hard to perform. I'm finally feeling good. I'm ready to get in there. I'm feeling like I'm at full strength and can really contribute, getting rid of some of these bad habits that I've acquired over the past couple of years and get back to who I was."

If Lucroy can become 75 percent of the player he was — he posted a cumulative .800 OPS and 18.7 wins above replacement from 2011–2016 — chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom will be doing backflips down Lansdowne Street. The Sox took a risk in signing Lucroy, because while the titanium device that was inserted during cervical disk replacement surgery this offseason has helped Navy Seals and hockey players return to duty, it's uncharted territory for a baseball player.

Baseball is a grind, and no position endures more of that grind than catcher.

"It's like the cutting edge of the spinal technology that they use," said Lucroy, who sports a scar on the front of his neck. "It's pretty amazing how I feel now. The doctor that I went to [Dr. Jesse Even] is one of the best doctors in the country at what he does. He has been doing this for five or six years, this surgery . . . He has never had an issue with any of those guys coming back saying they had a problem. We're playing the odds here that it's going to be good. It's going to work out, and it's going to help me get even better. I'm very grateful for that."

“I know there was some trepidation on [Boston’s] part because they’ve never seen it before, which is understandable. But I got cleared, and I’m here. I’m ready to go, and I feel good.”

Roenicke had a key role in convincing the Red Sox to roll the dice on Lucroy. Lucroy played for the Brewers from 2010–16, when he was traded to the playoff-bound Texas Rangers in August. Roenicke managed the Brewers from 2011 through the first 25 games of 2015. He vouched for Lucroy the teammate as much as the player competing with Kevin Plawecki for the reserve catcher job behind Christian Vazquez. The studious Lucroy totes a big binder with notes on hitters, and is renowned for his game-planning and game-calling, an ideal skill set for a backup.

Roenicke knows what Lucroy brings mentally, and what he looks like when he’s right physically.

“This guy when I had him, he was one of for sure the best hitting catchers that there was. We’ll wait and see,” said Roenicke. “He looks great. He looks strong. His BPs have been really good. So, hopefully, we get that hitter that we saw before.”

The hitter Lucroy had been the last three seasons was one trying to stay on the field at the expense of his body. From 2017–19, Lucroy compiled a .248/.315/.666 OPS slash line for Texas, Colorado, Oakland, the Los Angeles Angels, and the Chicago Cubs. He hit 18 homers, and compared fighting through the nerve issues and the resulting loss of strength to a water hose that gets kinked. The water is dripping out, instead of flowing freely.

“When I was coming up, we were always taught as catchers to just tough it out and deal with it,” said Lucroy, part of playoff teams in 2017 (Colorado) and 2018 (Oakland). “I mean, catching is a hard position. You’re going to get hurt. It’s going to happen, and you want to go out there and you want to deal with pain. This is an injury that I really thought that I could handle, and I was wrong about that. It affected me a lot more than I thought it did.”

The pain and the lack of job prospects finally led Lucroy to find a solution this offseason. Still, the decision to undergo surgery wasn’t an easy one.

“When you think about spine surgery, it’s kind of scary, but it’s a situation where I was going to have a hard time finding a job because of my performance,” said Lucroy. “So, I wanted to be as healthy as I possibly could to make a team.”

In a good omen, the device in his Lucroy’s neck stabilizing the C5 and C6 vertebrae is made by the same company that manufactured the implant that golfer Tiger Woods had inserted into his back in 2017, providing Tiger a career lifeline.

The real test for Lucroy will be convincing the Sox he can hold up behind the dish. His first catching appearance came in Friday’s 4-1 loss to the Minnesota Twins at Hammond Stadium. He entered in the sixth and caught two innings.

“I thought he looked pretty good for his first time out there,” said Roenicke.

Teams were able to take advantage of Lucroy while he persevered through the neck injury. In 2018, he allowed a Major League-high 72 stolen bases (despite him throwing out 30 percent of base stealers) and led the AL in catcher errors (10). Last season, he threw out 25 percent of base stealers.

Lucroy said working with former Sox catcher Jason Varitek and catching coordinator Chad Epperson to hone his craft and shed some of the deficiencies created by compensating for the injury has been invaluable.

He’s grateful for everything that comes with this opportunity.

“This is my first year not on a guaranteed contract. I’m OK with that. It’s what I’ve earned. I haven’t performed,” said Lucroy. “That’s just the bottom line. I know I haven’t. But I really am glad I came here, even if I don’t make this team . . . I’m very fortunate because even if I don’t make this team, I know I’m going to leave this camp better.”

There are no guarantees for the Sox or Lucroy, but it looks like their decision to gamble on each other could come up aces.

The biggest prospect busts in Red Sox history, position by position

Chad Finn

All of this recent talk about Chaim Bloom’s quest to rebuild the Red Sox farm system — and my generally cynical mood after the Mookie Betts trade — got me thinking about the Red Sox prospects through the years who didn’t make it.

For every Jon Lester or Xander Bogaerts, there are so many flamethrowers that flamed out and shortstops that stopped short. Can’t-miss kids miss all the same, in part because they’re, well, kids, in part because there are so many variables that can interfere along the way, and in part because playing major league baseball is really, really hard.

I actually took this topic to Twitter, asking readers who they thought was the biggest bust in Red Sox history. The responses were so varied and good that I decided to — yes, cynically — put together an All-Busts team of Red Sox prospects. At the moment, an exercise such as this is more interesting than talking about the current team.

A couple of ground rules: I eliminated from consideration players who might have been annoying or didn’t fully live up to their hype, but still ended up having quality major league careers. Clay Buchholz has pitched 13 years in the majors, made two All-Star teams, and finished sixth in the Cy Young voting once. He’s many things, but he’s not a bust. Same goes for Daisuke Matsuzaka, to a different degree.

I also eliminated players that had their promise curtailed by unfortunate real-life circumstances, such as Ryan Westmoreland and Andy Yount.

I eliminated players who never should have been considered prospects in the first place, such as Kung-Fu-fighting Izzy Alcantara, who was 27 when he debuted in 2000, and Pat Dodson, who broke through at age 26 in 1986 in his third full season in Pawtucket and somehow managed to be a Donruss Rated Rookie and a Topps Future Star on his 1987 baseball cards.

And — perhaps wrongly, but hey, it’s the approach I’m taking — I eliminated players who did briefly thrive in the major leagues before the game caught up to them. You’re not busts to me, Sam Horn, Phil Plantier, and Will Middlebrooks. The good moments might have been fleeting, but they sure were fun.

Prepare to wince, position by position . . .

Catcher: Blake Swihart. The 2011 first-round pick’s big-league career got off to a promising start in 2015 when he hit .274 in 84 games as a 23-year-old. Things might have gone differently had the Red Sox not stuck him in left field, where he suffered a career-altering ankle injury in early 2016. But the reality is that he got plenty of chances and never did much with them, putting up a .679 OPS across five partial seasons while drawing something less than raves defensively.

He edges out Peabody High legend Steve Lomasney, the No. 50 overall prospect in 2000 who got just two big-league at-bats.

First base: Otis Foster. I suspect most of you will go with Lars Anderson, who was rated the No. 17 overall prospect by Baseball America in 2009 but hit .167 in 56 at-bats for the Red Sox over three years. But my

vote goes to Foster, the 15th overall pick in 1975 who was pegged as the next Jim Rice (talk about unfair expectations), if only for this amusing but probably apocryphal story.

The legend goes that in spring training in the late '70s, as weight issues were causing Foster's star to dim, the Red Sox devised a plan to help him lose weight: They'd make him run laps around a nearby lake. Great idea, except, as the story goes, Foster had a better plan. He had his girlfriend meet him halfway around the lake with a picnic basket so they could have a nice lunch before he finished his running. That's my kind of thinking right there.

Second base: Donnie Sadler. In Baseball America's ranking of the Red Sox' top 10 prospects of 1996, two shortstops cracked the top four. Nomar Garciaparra at No. 4 . . . and Sadler at No. 1. That's right: Baseball America did not know that Nomar was better.

Sadler, who might be the fastest Red Sox player not named Otis Nixon I've ever seen, did have a terrific season at Single A Michigan in 1995, putting up an .836 OPS with 9 homers and 41 steals. The Red Sox moved him around defensively and rushed him to the majors in 1998, which did him no favors.

But he never really had a good season after that promising start, and in 156 career games with the Red Sox, he hit .242 with 4 homers, maddeningly trying to hit for power when he should have been maximizing his speed.

Shortstop: Juan Bustabad. I mean, the last name should have been a blinking neon clue, right? Never trust a prospect whose last name includes the words "bust" and "bad."

Bustabad drew frequent reference for his defensive wizardry in Peter Gammons's Sunday notes columns in the early '80s. One comment from 1981: "The Red Sox liken Bustabad's speed to that of Kirk Gibson, the Detroit outfielder who reputedly can run with KC's Willie Wilson. Scouts from two other teams say he's not that fast but is a great shortstop prospect."

I remember fully expecting him to become the Red Sox' version of Ozzie Smith. Instead, he peaked as the PawSox' version of Mario Mendoza, putting up a .606 OPS in nine minor league seasons and never playing a day in the majors.

Third base: Wilton Veras. He had a reputation as a future star in 1999 after he hit .288 in 36 games as a 21-year-old. But looking back, it's hard to tell why, beyond the empty batting average. He had just an 80 adjusted OPS in that stretch, hitting two home runs, and he was no whiz at third base.

If we wanted a young third baseman to dream on that season, we should have looked west to watch 20-year-old Adrian Beltre with the Dodgers.

Veras gets the nod here over 2010 first-round pick Kolbrin Vitek, who hit 8 homers in four minor league seasons and never made it past Double A Portland.

Left field: Greg Blosser. The 16th pick in the 1989 draft, Blosser was a strapping power hitter who was supposed to be what Jim Thome became. But he struck out too much even in the low minors and hit .077 in cameos with the 1993 and '94 Red Sox.

I'll also hear you on Jeff Ledbetter, a record-setting slugger at Florida State and a first-round pick in 1982 who lost his pop when he had to trade in the aluminum bat for wood.

Center field: Rusney Castillo. He was touted to be the next Ron Gant when the Red Sox signed the Cuban defector to an absurd six-year, \$72.5 million deal in 2014, and he got off to a nice start, but in 2015, it became apparent that we should have been calling him Rusney Can't.

The circumstances of his contract have left him in baseball purgatory in Pawtucket, where he has a career .761 OPS and is now 32 years old.

Also: Jeff McNeely was supposed to be the next Ellis Burks, but he turned out to be the first Jeff McNeely.

Right field: Rick Asadoorian. He drew comparisons to a young Dwight Evans when the Red Sox took him out of Northbridge High with the 17th pick in 1999. But he spent just two uninspiring seasons in the organization before the Red Sox traded him to the Cardinals for pitcher Dustin Hermanson in December 2001.

Righthanded starter: Mike Brown. He was rated the Red Sox' No. 1 prospect by Baseball America in 1983, and man, did he deserve it. In his first two seasons of pro ball (including a cameo with the big club in '82) Brown went 24-10 with 261 strikeouts in 261 innings and a 1.83 ERA.

He was supposed to be the Red Sox' next ace before we even heard of Roger Clemens. He did not become the Red Sox next ace, going 12-18 with a 5.57 ERA over five partial seasons.

His greatest contribution might have been when he departed: He was part of the deal that brought postseason hero Dave Henderson from the Mariners in 1986.

Lefthanded starter: Trey Ball. I'll presume most of you would go with Henry Owens and his 5.19 career ERA in this spot. But I'll fight you — well, at least bicker passive-aggressively — on that.

The Red Sox spent the No. 7 pick in the 2013 draft on Ball, a high school lefthander from Indiana. I loathe spending high draft picks on high school pitchers; there's just so much that can go wrong, and much of it did for Ball, who at last glance was trying to convert to a position player after putting up a 6.06 ERA in two seasons with the Sea Dogs.

Reliever: Craig Hansen. The hype surrounding Hansen when the Red Sox took the St. John's hurler 26th overall in 2005 is unlike any I can recall for a Boston pitching prospect. The Red Sox fully bought into it, too, rushing him to the big leagues that season and stunting his development.

He was basically supposed to be what Jonathan Papelbon became, but, for a variety of reasons, it never came close to happening, and he finished his career with a 6.34 ERA. If you want to call him the biggest bust in Red Sox history, I'm not going to argue.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Level swing's the thing for Red Sox 3B Rafael Devers

Tom Keegan

FORT MYERS — Talent has a way of making those watching it want even more once a young athlete blossoms into something special.

Take the case of Red Sox third baseman Rafeal Devers, all of 23 years old. It's not enough that he produced last year at the clip of .311 with 54 doubles, 32 home runs, 129 runs and 115 RBIs. The natural question: Can he do more this season?

Someone even asked the fun-loving, always-smiling blossoming star if he sees himself taking on more of a leadership role.

Devers burst out laughing.

"No, no, no," he said. "I don't really think about it too much. We have a lot of great leaders, a lot of good veterans here already. So, I try not to overstep. I know I have a couple of years, but there's a lot of guys that have more. So, they can handle it."

His personality is such that he's not one to hold others accountable. He's one to break tension because he's always in a good mood. Good for a clubhouse, but not for leading it.

Veteran teammate J.D. Martinez captured Devers' personality perfectly: "He's a little kid. He's like a kid, exactly what he looks like is how he is. He's always just like (sticks his chin up and looks around the room) wondering what's going on, talking to himself in the box. He's just funny. He's one of those people, he's just harmless."

Until he takes a bat to the plate. Then, to put it in a child's terms, he's a monster.

Devers caught fire in May last season and it lasted too long to call it a hot streak. Four months to be exact. He was 22 at the time, so the natural question is to ask if he can produce an even better season.

"It's hard to say that you can see more than I saw for four straight months last year," Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said. "Four straight months he was as good as anybody you could be in baseball as far as squaring up a baseball when you needed him. When we needed a good at bat from him, for four straight months we saw a good at bat. ..It's pretty hard to think of anybody doing that for six months. He had a fabulous year offensively when you look at even just the total numbers, but I know what I saw for four straight months was amazing."

From May through August, Devers hit .327, scored 97 runs and drove in 96, and hit 28 home runs.

It's possible Devers could improve as a hitter and few will know it because his numbers won't be as good. Mookie Betts, who spent much of last season as the leadoff hitter, scored 135 runs. Subtracting him from the lineup figures to deflate everyone's numbers to some extent. But that doesn't have to translate to putting more on the plates of Devers, Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez.

"We know he's a superstar, but we don't feel any pressure because we know the type of team we have, and we'll be ready," Devers said of Betts.

The likely top of the order, at least against right-handed pitching, has Andrew Benintendi leading off, Devers hitting second, Bogaerts in the No. 3 hole and Martinez batting cleanup. That would put left-handed hitters back-to-back to start the game.

"I don't think it's ideal, and it may change if a lefty throws that day," Roenicke said. "Maybe we can flip-flop some guys that day, maybe (Kevin) Pillar goes up top, but we can look at that."

Interestingly, Roenicke used Devers' swing as a launching pad to a discussion that debunked one of the theories at the heart of the modern re-invention of baseball, the one that says all swings must finish on an upward path.

"The talk about launch angles and the swing kind of going up, that's none of what Raffy does," Roenicke said. "Raffy has what I think and what (Sox batting coach) Tim Hyers thinks is a great swing for today's pitching. Today's pitching is better stuff than we've ever seen. Velocity's increased. Spin rate has increased on the breaking ball. And this little kind of lift (swing) really doesn't fit the high fastball. For sure it doesn't fit the high fastball."

Roenicke had an attentive audience and kept talking.

"So with Raffy, we saw two years ago the high fastball gave him some problems. And then last year he either laid off it, or with those hands, he's about as straight through the ball as you can get," the interim manager said. "And that allows him to use those great hands to be able to hit a ball up here and also being able to hit a ball at times that's six inches off the ground. It's a great swing for me. Bogey's kind of the same way. There's no lift in Bogey's swing. He's very good on that high fastball."

Roenicke then used his platform to talk to those who instruct young hitters.

“I think it’s misleading, a lot of hitting instructors, whether it’s necessarily what they’re teaching, but it’s how kids are hearing it. This uppercut swing doesn’t allow you to hit high velocity,” Roenicke said. “So somewhere in there we need to change the verbiage on what we say, especially to the youth, on how they’re supposed to swing, and to get to this new velocity that we’re seeing. I don’t see that going back the other way. So they’re going to have to figure out with their swing planes what I have to do to square up more baseballs. Raffy’s got it. What he does now really works with today’s pitching.”

In his first two at-bats of the spring during a 4-1 loss to the Twins at Hammond Stadium, Devers was retired on a called third strike and flied to right.

* **MassLive.com**

Will Boston Red Sox make trade or free agent signing to improve rotation? Chaim Bloom has more than \$13M in payroll flexibility to add to roster

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Red Sox have more than \$13 million in payroll flexibility to upgrade their starting rotation now or during the season. That also applies to upgrading others areas of the roster in-season as needed.

That makes things interesting as chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom constantly is searching outside the organization to upgrade his 40-man roster. He has acquired or signed 12 players from outside the organization to his 40-man roster since accepting his position in late October.

The Red Sox have an open fifth rotation start after trading David Price to the Dodgers. Chris Sale also will begin the season on the IL, creating a temporary rotation spot.

The Red Sox are evaluating several internal candidates for the fifth spot. They also are open to using an opener or even two openers in those two spots. But Bloom also is open to external options via the trade market or free agency.

MassLive.com calculated the 2020 payroll at \$194.0625 million (see below).

That figure would increase if Jonathan Lucroy makes the 25-man roster. The two-time All-Star catcher, who signed a minor league deal with an invite to big league camp, will earn \$1.5 million if he makes the majors.

The Red Sox plan to stay below the \$208 million Competitive Balance Tax base threshold in 2020.

Bloom was asked Thursday if Sale’s IL stint to begin the 2020 regular season will increase the Red Sox’s level of interest in acquiring another starting pitcher. Sale will be eligible to return from the IL on April 7, but most likely won’t make his 2020 regular season debut until mid-April. He was delayed at the beginning of spring training camp because of pneumonia.

“I don’t think so only in that we would always want to accumulate as much depth as we can,” Bloom said Thursday at JetBlue Park. “So I don’t think that changes, obviously. Things like this are why you do that. So I don’t think it changes given it was already an objective.”

Free agent starting pitcher options include Jason Vargas, Collin McHugh, Clay Buchholz, Marcus Estrada, Andrew Cashner and Clayton Richard.

The Red Sox reportedly have had interested in Padres starting pitcher Cal Quantrill but that potential deal, which involved Wil Myers, is unlikely, per Boston Globe's Alex Speier.

Still, the Red Sox certainly have the flexibility to absorb a bad contract, or part of one, from another team if the deal lands a young starting pitcher.

Red Sox 2020 estimated payroll breakdown:

Guaranteed contracts: David Price (Red Sox pay \$16 million of his \$31 million AAV), Chris Sale (\$25.60 million), J.D. Martinez (\$23.75 million), Xander Bogaerts (\$20 million), Nathan Eovaldi (\$16.88 million); Dustin Pedroia (\$13.3 million), Christian Vazquez (\$4.52 million), Kevin Pillar (\$4.25 million), Jose Peraza (\$3 million), Mitch Moreland (\$3 million), Martin Perez (\$6.5 million), Kevin Plawecki (\$900,000). Total: \$137.7 million

Arbitration contracts negotiated: Jackie Bradley Jr. (\$11 million), Eduardo Rodriguez (\$8.3 million), Andrew Benintendi (\$5 million), Brandon Workman (\$3.5 million), Matt Barnes (\$3.1 million), Heath Hembree (\$1.6125 million). Total: \$32.5125 million

Split contracts: Josh Osich (\$850,000 in majors). Total: \$850,000.

Pre-arbitration players: Yoan Aybar, Ryan Brasier, Colten Brewer, Austin Brice, Matt Hall, Kyle Hart, Darwinson Hernandez, Chris Mazza, Mike Shawaryn, Jeffrey Springs, Josh Taylor, Hector Velazquez, Marcus Walden, Ryan Weber, Jonathan Arauz, C.J. Chatham, Michael Chavis, Bobby Dalbec, Rafael Devers, Tzu-Wei Lin, Phillips Valdez, Alex Verdugo, Marcus Wilson. Approximate Total: \$8 million.

Other costs: Add another approximately \$15 million for medical costs, health benefits, spring training allowances, moving and traveling expenses, etc. That's all included in the CBT. Approximate Total: \$15 million.

Total: \$194.0625 million.

Kyle Hart is Boston Red Sox starting rotation candidate; don't be surprised either if Chaim Bloom adds starter via trade, free agency

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Red Sox need to identify a fourth and fifth starter with David Price gone and Chris Sale set to begin the 2020 regular season on the injured list.

Sale will start the season on the IL because of his delayed start to spring training (pneumonia). He will be eligible to return April 7, but he likely won't make his 2020 debut until mid-April.

The Red Sox haven't ruled out using an opener in one or both of the rotation spots.

Does Sale's IL stint increase the Red Sox's level of interest in acquiring another starter?

"I don't think so only in that we would always want to accumulate as much depth as we can," Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom said Thursday at JetBlue Park. "So I don't think that changes, obviously. Things like this are why you do that. So I don't think it changes given it was already an objective."

If you haven't noticed, Bloom is constantly looking outside the organization to upgrade his roster. Since joining the Red Sox in October, he has acquired and signed 12 players from outside the organization to his 40-man roster.

It certainly shouldn't surprise anyone if Bloom added a fifth starter via trade or free agency before Opening Day. His roster is constantly a fluid situation.

“At the same time, again we have a lot of guys here that we’re interested in learning more about; that we’re excited about,” Bloom said. “We brought them all in for a reason. We’ve got some guys within the organization that we’re working with them to help them get better. So this is a good time to see them put those adjustments into play and learn more about them.”

Boston also added five of their own Rule 5 eligible players — including Kyle Hart who started vs. the Twins on Friday — to the 40-man roster in November.

Hart joins Chris Mazza, Ryan Weber, Mike Shawaryn and Brian Johnson (not on 40-man) among the several internal options.

“We’re looking at a number of different options for that fifth spot,” Bloom said without specifically naming anyone.

Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke identified Hart as a candidate Friday. The lefty pitched 2 scoreless and hitless innings, allowing one walk and one hit vs. the Twins.

“We’ve got two spots,” Roenicke said before Hart’s start. “I know he ... has not as much experience as some of the other starters that we’ve brought in from other organizations. But he should be out there and just trying to make a team. Trying to show us enough that he can make a team. His command has gotten better over the years. ... And he’s figuring out how to pitch. How to mix up pitches. How to hit spots. And when he does this, who knows where he’ll end up.”

Hart already is 27 (he had a birthday in November) and he doesn’t throw hard. His fastball sits in the upper-80s and low 90s. But the 6-foot-5 lefty consistently has been one of the most effective starters in Boston’s minor league system the past three years thanks to his array of secondary pitches. The shape to his slider and pitch mix is similar to Patrick Corbin’s.

“He’s going to have to be a command guy. He’s not going to throw 95 and throw by people,” Roenicke said. “So just hit spots. Corner to corner at 90 mph is very hard to hit. Over the middle? OK, now these hitters are really good at this pitch. So he has just has to be better with his command than the guy who throws 95 and above.”

Boston Red Sox’s Jarren Duran ‘drives ball enough’ to hit a lot of doubles, triples; has speed to be ‘tremendous defensive outfielder’

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Jarren Duran showed off some power Wednesday when he homered in a Grapefruit League game against the Pirates.

But his best game is center on speed. Baseball America noted, “There’s still some debate as to whether Duran’s offensive profile is that of an everyday or fourth outfielder. Even with his speed, he must either hit for a high average or show more power to emerge as an everyday player. Still, he has the potential to be a catalyst.”

“Duran does not have to hit for power (to be an everyday player),” Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke said here at JetBlue Park on Friday. “If he’s not hitting for power, he needs to put the ball in play and use that great speed. Any ball that’s not right to an outfielder should be a double for him.”

Roenicke pointed out how important OPS (on-base percentage + slugging percentage) is in today’s game.

“That (speed) creates OPS,” Roenicke said. “It doesn’t have to be homers. It can be doubles. He’s gonna get a lot of triples. He drives the ball enough to where he’s going to get a lot of doubles and triples.”

The 23-year-old batted .387 with a .456 on-base percentage, .543 slugging percentage, .998 OPS, four homers, 13 doubles, three triples, 19 RBIs, 18 steals and 49 runs in 50 games for High-A Salem last year. His stats dropped after a promotion to Double-A Portland. He slashed .250/.309/.325/.634 with one homer, 11 doubles, five triples, 19 RBIs, 28 steals and 41 runs in 82 games.

Baseball America wrote, "While his numbers suffered after a promotion to Double-A, the quality of his at-bats improved."

"He's got those quick twitch fibers, which you can't teach," Roenicke said. "But he's getting strong. With that quick twitch strength, he's driving the ball more and I think that's going to continue."

Duran is a candidate to start in center field in 2021 if Jackie Bradley Jr. leaves via free agency next offseason.

"With his speed he should be a tremendous defensive outfielder," Roenicke said. "He should be. If he continues on, keeps improving, he's gonna be fabulous out there. Does he have the feel that Jackie has? I don't know yet. I haven't seen him enough. Jackie doesn't run as fast as Duran."

Roenicke said Duran must figure out when to turn his back on a flyball — taking his eye off it — to maximize his range.

"When you're looking at the ball and you're trying to run at the same time turning sideways, you're not nearly as fast," Roenicke said. "So that part he needs to get better at. That will come with just time and playing and confidence in knowing that I can turn my back and run with that tremendous speed and I can turn back again and pick up that ball. But it takes time."

Why Boston Red Sox don't show radar gun velocities early in spring training at JetBlue Park

Chris Cotillo

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- At least during the early part of spring training, fans watching the Red Sox at JetBlue Park won't see any radar gun readings flashing on the stadium scoreboard.

It turns out that's by design. The Sox purposefully don't show the readings during games because they don't want their pitchers focusing too much on velocity early in camp, according to interim manager Ron Roenicke.

"They throw a pitch, they rub (their faces) and the eyes go right up to the radar," Roenicke said. "Right now, that's not a good thing. As much as we can stay away... and I realize the fans want that radar up there. We'll get it up there when (pitching coach Dave Bush) feels like they're beyond the point we can start putting it up there."

The left-field scoreboard at the stadium does show pitch types, telling fans whether a fastball, curveball or any other pitch was thrown. The Red Sox want their pitchers to stay focused on their mechanics and command while ramping up to full strength in late February and early March.

"You see it in every big league game," Roenicke said. "A pitcher comes into the game, he throws the first pitch and the eyes are right up there on that radar. When they don't see what they're used to seeing... maybe if a guy is 95 (mph) and all of the sudden he's 92 (mph), he's like, 'Woah.' Whether he's going to throw harder on that next pitch or not, it makes a difference."

Roenicke believes the emphasis on velocity in today's game is bad for young players.

"I think it's leading to some injuries," he said. "When I was young, I didn't even know what a radar gun was. I just pitched to get guys out and pitched to the corners where a guy didn't seem to hit the baseball."

Now, they're pitching to velocity. You're seeing it in Little League, you're seeing radar guns all the way up through.

"If a kid, in his mind, is thinking about playing professionally, it's max effort to throw the baseball," he said. "Max effort doesn't last if you do this all the way up (to the pros). You can't last. It scares me. I'm obviously concerned about the youth and what happens. If we're going to continue the max effort, our arms just aren't made to do this motion at that type of velocity."

Rafael Devers still Boston Red Sox's No. 2 hitter in lineup? Could Kevin Pillar bat leadoff at times?

Christopher Smith

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Rafael Devers will bat second for the Boston Red Sox on Friday in his 2020 Grapefruit League debut. Boston plays across town in Minnesota.

But will he remain in the second spot throughout the regular season?

Then-manager Alex Cora inserted Devers into the No. 2 hole last June 25. Devers hit second in the lineup 69 times over his final 79 games while batting in the third spot 10 times. He batted .334 with a .379 on-base percentage, .653 slugging percentage, 1.032 OPS, 19 homers, 36 doubles, three triples and 63 RBIs in the two hole.

Interim manager Ron Roenicke said Devers probably will remain in the two hole if Andrew Benintendi leads off.

"I don't know exactly," Roenicke said. "You tinker with it. Second certainly is a spot he could be. Then you push three and four with Bogey (Xander Bogaerts) and J.D. (Martinez). But we'll see how it plays out. I think the way he's become consistent with what he does, I think second makes sense. If Benny continues to look like he's gonna lead off, then probably second."

Benintendi and Devers both are left-handed hitters. And so Roenicke might change the lineup order on days the Red Sox face a left-handed starter.

"I don't think it's ideal," Roenicke said about two left-handed hitters at 1-2. "And that might change if a lefty throws that day. We can flip flop some guys. Maybe (Kevin) Pillar goes up top. But we can look at that."

Roenicke also has mentioned left-handed hitting Alex Verdugo, who is expected to begin the regular season on the IL (stress fracture in back), as a potential candidate to bat leadoff.

Statistics have proved the two best hitters in a lineup should hit second and fourth.

"It has changed. Did we just not know numbers back then? I don't know," Roenicke said. "It was kind of strange when I was in Anaheim and you've got Mike Trout and they're talking about putting him second in the lineup. If it was five, 10 years ago you would have never thought about putting Mike Trout second. The numbers prove that the two spot is huge in your lineup in creating runs. I know it gives you extra at-bats (over the course of the season). Whether it's 20, 30 extra at-bats in a season by being second vs. third. You want them up there more often. So I guess that's the new way to do it."

*** *RedSox.com***

'He's a little kid': Joyful Devers aiming higher

Ian Browne

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Who will the face of the Red Sox be in a post-Mookie Betts world?

It might be too soon to definitively say.

But it's not too soon to enter the cherubic face -- and huge bat -- of Rafael Devers as the overwhelming favorite to ascend to that position.

The 23-year-old, who lights up Red Sox Nation with his laser-beam hits, dramatic facial expressions and pure joy for the game, is entering his fourth season (third full) as the starting third baseman in Boston.

"He's fun. He's like my little brother," said Red Sox slugger J.D. Martinez. "He's a little kid. Exactly how he looks like is how he is. He's always wondering what is going on, talking to himself in the box. He's just funny. He's one of those people who is just harmless. He's fun to be around.

After staying home to witness the birth of his second daughter last week, Devers made his Grapefruit League debut Friday against the Twins, going 0-for-2 in a 4-1 loss. With Devers back in the daily mix, things are instantly more joyful in Red Sox land.

"His personality is huge," said Red Sox interim manager Ron Roenicke. "He's another one of those guys like [Xander Bogaerts], he's just in a good mood every day. He's smiling all the time. I think probably people get a kick out of all his facial expressions that happen all through the game. But he really is a pleasure to be around."

And it was Roenicke's pleasure to put Devers into the No. 2 spot in his batting order on Friday.

Coincidence or not, Devers soared as a slugger around the same time former manager Alex Cora installed him into that slot in June of last season.

The days of putting a hit-and-run specialist in the second slot of the order are as long gone as many of the home runs Devers figures to hit this season.

"Did we not just know numbers back then? I don't know," said Roenicke. "It's kind of strange, I was in Anaheim [as a coach] and you've got Mike Trout and they're talking about putting him second in the lineup.

"Whether it's five, 10 years ago, you would have never thought of putting Mike Trout second. The numbers prove I guess, that the two spot is huge in your lineup and creating runs. I know it gives you whatever it is, extra at-bats, whether it's 20, 30 extra at-bats in a season by being second versus third. You want him up there more often so I guess that's the new way to do it."

In this day and age, the No. 2 hitter needs to mash, and that's likely why Roenicke will keep Devers there.

"We'll see how it plays out," said Roenicke. "I think the way he's become consistent with what he does, I think second makes sense. If [Andrew Benintendi] continues to look like he's gonna lead off, then probably second."

That all sounds good to Devers.

"Obviously I had a lot of success batting in the two-hole last year and it's not going to change my approach either way," said Devers. "I'm still going to do what I have to do -- go out there and work hard and obviously my preference would be to bat second."

If the Red Sox had qualified for the postseason last year, Devers' regular season would have gone down in franchise lore. Instead, it was a happy footnote from a disappointing summer of baseball in Boston.

In many ways, it was the summer of Devers, who slashed .311/.361/.555 with 54 doubles, 201 hits, 32 homers and 115 RBIs. His 90 extra-base hits and 359 total bases led the Majors.

It wouldn't be possible to top that, would it? Well, when you are 23 years old, the possibilities seem endless.

"The only thing I focus on, like I said before, is just to stay healthy, and I feel like I can put up even better numbers than I did last year," Devers said. "As long as I'm healthy, I feel like I'll be able to produce."

The Red Sox are counting on it.

"He's just got great talent," Martinez said. "Great hands at the plate. He's got a knack for putting the barrel on the ball. You can't teach that."

Up next

Lefty Eduardo Rodriguez, coming off a breakout season in which he won 19 games, makes his first Grapefruit League start in Saturday's home game against the Yankees at 1:05 p.m. -- the first of two matchups between the rivals this spring. Rodriguez tuned up with a simulated start against teammates Devers and Xander Bogaerts a few days ago. The game can be streamed on MLB.TV and Gameday Audio.

*** *WEEI.com***

Why Rafael Devers is likely to hit second for Red Sox

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- It might be a semi-meaningless Grapefruit League game, but the lineup rolled out by Ron Roenicke Friday did have some meaning.

Making his spring training debut Rafael Devers is slotted into the Red Sox' batting order's No. 2 spot. While this time he is hitting behind Tzu-Wei Lin instead of Andrew Benintendi, it's a position Devers should be getting used to.

"You tinker with it. Second, certainly is a spot that it could be," the Red Sox interim manager said when asked where he saw Devers primarily hitting in the lineup. "Then you push three and four with Bogey and J.D. but we'll see how it plays out. I think the way he's become consistent I guess with what he does, I think second makes sense. If Benny continues to look like he's gonna lead off, then probably second."

It wouldn't be foreign territory for Devers who hit in the spot 74 times in 2019, totaling a .334 batting average and 1.032 OPS while hitting second.

It's a spot that has suddenly become a home for some of the game's best hitters, such as Los Angeles' Mike Trout. Across Major League Baseball in 2019, the No. 2 spot in the batting order managed the highest OPS (.820) ever recorded, easily beating out the second-highest mark, which came in 2017 (.786).

"It has changed. I don't know ... did we not just know numbers back then? I don't know," Roenicke said. "It's kind of strange, I was in Anaheim and you've got Mike Trout and they're talking about putting him second in the lineup. Like you said, whether it's five, 10 years ago, you would have never thought of putting Mike Trout second. The numbers prove I guess, that the two spot is huge in your lineup and creating runs. I know it gives you whatever it is extra at-bats whether it's 20, 30 extra at-bats in a season by being second versus third. You want him up there more often so I guess that's the new way to do it."

Why the Red Sox don't give radar gun readings at JetBlue Park

Rob Bradford

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- It was certainly notable when Nathan Eovaldi led to "99" flashing on the Hammond Stadium scoreboard this week. It was the same early-spring training interest that came with Daniel Bard's fastball dropping to the low 90's in 2012, or a newcomer named Allen Webster popping near triple-digits in early March.

But if you're headed to JetBlue Park for any games in the next week or so don't expect to get a read-out on velocity. The Red Sox are purposely trying to make their pitchers forget such things exist.

"We don't," said Roenicke when asked about the Red Sox not publicizing radar gun readings at home games. "You guys all see what pitchers do later on. They throw a pitch, then it's rub here and the eye is right on the radar. Right now that's not a good thing. So I think as much as we can stay, and I realize the fans want that radar up there, we'll get it up there when Bushy feels like, ok, they're beyond the point, we can start putting it up there. But yeah, it's there. It's real. You see it in every big league game. A pitcher comes into the game, he throws that first pitch, and those eyes are right up on the radar. When they don't see what they are used to seeing, maybe if a guy is 95 and all of a sudden he looks up there and sees 92, he's like, 'Whoa.' Whether he's going to throw harder on that next pitch or what, it makes a difference."

The topic came up during Roenicke's morning session with the media because of a conversation regarding increased velocity in the game.

As the interim manager points out, there is a very real obsession with velocity at all levels these days. In 2013 there were 63 pitchers who hit 99 mph or better at least once. Last season the number came in at 87.

"We're selecting more velocity, more, whether it's high school, college, we're projecting where the velocity is going to end up, which is a hard thing to do sometimes, especially out of high school," he noted. "You're able to get away with more mistakes. Bigger velocity, you don't have to be on the edge. You don't have to be Greg Maddux now, who pitches just black to black. Now you get away sometimes with the thigh-high fastball and it's 98 and has got some life to it, now you get away with it. And then the other thing is, guys are training for it. So, unfortunately, the radar gun at young ages I think is a bad thing, because I think it's leading to some injuries. When I was young, I didn't even know what a radar gun was. I just tried to pitch to get guys out, pitch to the corners where guys didn't seem to hit the baseball. Now they're pitching to velocity. You're seeing it in Little League. You're seeing it in radar guns all the way through. A kid, if in his mind he's thinking about playing professionally, it's max. It's max effort to throw the baseball. Max effort doesn't last if you do this all the way up through. You just can't last. It scares me. I'm obviously concerned about the youth and what happens. If we're going to continue to max effort, our arms just aren't made to do this motion at that type of velocity. We're training with heavy balls now, which for sure increases velocity if you're doing it right. If you're doing it all right with the heavy balls, it increases velocity. All of these things lead to more velocity but also more injuries."

This continues to be a path that could lead to sub-optimal long-term results, as Roenicke points out.

"The biggest thing for me is the injury factor," he noted. "Obviously, we love to see guys coming in out of our bullpen throwing 96 and above, they've got movement, they're spinning the ball. It gives you a lot of comfort when those guys are coming in the game because you know they're getting away with the mistakes. But it's all about the injury with me. As we move forward in years, is this injury thing going to get worse as we learn how to increase velocities, increase the muscle mass that whatever strength your tendons and ligaments can hold up to, is this going to get worse? If it gets worse, it's bad. I know we're smarter than we've ever been medically, but yet we're seeing more injuries than we've ever seen."

"The technology is great, but at the youth level it concerns me a lot. I wish there weren't any radar guns around. Try and take care of them more when they're younger and when they're a little bit older they will see where they are and they can use it. It does help at times. I think when you get older and you're trying to exercise and work different muscles it probably helps to know, 'Hey, am I really increasing my velocity or am I just guessing I'm increasing it.'"

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Ron Roenicke explains why he's hidden radar gun readings at JetBlue Park

John Tomase

Ron Roenicke dislikes baseball's current obsession with velocity, so he has removed the tool that feeds his pitchers' counterproductive cycle of gratification and mortification — the radar gun.

Attend a game at JetBlue Park this spring, and you'll notice the familiar scoreboard velocity readings are missing. That's by design, Roenicke explained to reporters in Fort Myers on Friday morning, because at this point in camp, no good can come of overextending.

"You guys all see what pitchers do," Roenicke said. "They throw a pitch, then it's rub here and the eye is right on the radar. Right now, that's not a good thing. So I think as much as we can stay, and I realize the fans want that radar up there, we'll get it up there when Bushy feels like, OK, they're beyond the point, we can start putting it up there."

Bushy is pitching coach Dave Bush, and he brings an analytical bent to the job, but also experience as a veteran of nine seasons, including a pair of 12-win campaigns with the Brewers in the mid-2000s.

The Red Sox have struggled to keep their pitchers from overthrowing early in the spring over the years, with ace Chris Sale memorably hitting 99 mph in his very first Grapefruit League appearance in 2017.

"It's there. It's real," Roenicke said. "You see it in every big league game. A pitcher comes into the game, he throws that first pitch, and those eyes are right up on the radar. When they don't see what they are used to seeing, maybe if a guy is 95 and all of a sudden he looks up there and sees 92, he's like, 'Whoa.' Whether he's going to throw harder on that next pitch or what, it makes a difference."

Roenicke played during an era when craftiness and guile were as valued as velocity, with pitchers like Hall of Famers Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine living on the black and winning with pinpoint command. It may help explain why Roenicke is so impressed with right-hander Ryan Weber, a longshot fifth starter candidate who rarely breaks 90 mph, but throws a curveball and sinker with considerable movement.

With teams prioritizing big arms above all else in the draft, Roenicke worries about a generation of kids obsessing over throwing rather than pitching.

"When I was young, I didn't even know what a radar gun was," he said. "I just tried to pitch to get guys out, pitch to the corners where guys didn't seem to hit the baseball. Now they're pitching to velocity. You're seeing it in Little League. You're seeing it in radar guns all the way through."

A kid, if in his mind he's thinking about playing professionally, it's max. It's max effort to throw the baseball. Max effort doesn't last if you do this all the way up through. You just can't last. It scares me.

Roenicke hopes teams don't shy away from the Webers of the world, pitchers with unconventional repertoires who nonetheless show some potential. He'd like to see soft, cerebral throwers win games so the pendulum swings back.

"If we see pitchers come up and they are successful and being able to hit spots again, I think if that happens, yeah," he said. "I hope they continue to give those guys chances. So if you're in college and your record is whatever, 15-3 but you only throw 88, I hope we still continue to give those guys a chance."

So don't go look for radar gun readings in Fort Myers this spring, because for now, they're nowhere to be seen.

* ***Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox Spring Report: Rafael Devers likely to return to No. 2 spot in lineup

Sean McAdam

Three things you need to know out of Fort Myers:

1. Rafael Devers likely to hit second in lineup.

On Friday, the Red Sox third baseman made his Grapefruit League debut, which had been delayed when Devers left camp for the birth of his daughter.

He found himself hitting second against the Minnesota Twins, which is where he hit for about half of last season (71 out of 152 starts) and Ron Roenicke suggested that would likely be the case again this season. It doesn't hurt that Devers hit .334 in that spot last year with a 1.032 OPS.

"Second, certainly is a spot that it could be," Roenicke told reporters Friday. "Then you push three and four with Bogey (Xander Bogaerts) and J.D. (Martinez) but we'll see how it plays out. I think the way he's become consistent I guess with what he does, I think second makes sense. If (Andrew Benintendi) continues to look like he's gonna lead off, then probably second."

In recent years, teams have often put some of their best hitters in the second spot. The Los Angeles Angels, for instance, have used Mike Trout as their No. 2 hitter often.

"The numbers prove I guess, that the two spot is huge in your lineup and creating runs," said Roenicke. "I know it gives you whatever it is extra at-bats whether it's 20, 30 extra at-bats in a season by being second versus third. You want him up there more often so I guess that's the new way to do it."

Devers told reporters: "Obviously, I had a lot of success hitting in the two-hole last year and it's not going to change my approach either way. I'm still going to do what I have to do — go out there and work hard and my preference would be to bat second."

2. Busy day for pitchers looking to make the roster.

In a 4-1 loss to the Twins, the Red Sox trotted out a number of arms in competition for the No. 5 starter's spot, or, at the very least, some available bullpen spots.

Lefty Kyle Hart, who was added to the 40-man roster over the winter, got the start and tossed two scoreless innings with a walk and a strikeout.

Austin Brice (obtained from Miami) and holdover Hector Velazquez each contribute a scoreless inning, though Velazquez issued two walks.

Finally, Matt Hall (acquired from the Tigers) had a scoreless eighth while registering two strikeouts.

3. Here come the Yankees.

On Saturday, the Red Sox will get a look at the Yankees for the first time this spring. But it's likely that the squad that makes the two hour-plus ride from Tampa won't look like the lineup the Red Sox will see once the season starts.

Instead, expect a lot of bench players and minor leaguers to dot the lineup for the Yanks.

Being home, the Red Sox will likely field a more representative lineup, with Eduardo Rodriguez, the team's best starter last season, on the mound.

* *The Athletic*

Red Sox mailbag: Why does a January flu keep you from Opening Day in late March?

Jen McCaffrey

The Red Sox have been playing spring training games for a week now, and we're starting to get some more clarity on how the roster will shape up. With that in mind, it's time to open up the Red Sox mailbag.

I'm wondering if something needs to be changed with how players prepare for the start of the season? Only in baseball can someone have the flu 7 weeks prior to the season and miss Opening Day. It seems like every year someone misses a week and, bam, it (affects) the regular season. In no other sport would this be acceptable and I know pitchers are unique but maybe they need to build their arm strength up a little more before camp so a miscue does not alter the season. — Tim Hopkins, @arquimedezpozo

I think it's mainly because baseball is much more of a finesse sport than a ground-and-pound type like hockey or football, in which you can power through things. It may seem bizarre that he's fully healthy now and still missing the start of spring, but he was scheduled to make six starts, one every five days. Because he missed the first two weeks, he's only able to make four of those starts by the end of camp. You can't just throw him out there and force him to throw five innings the second time he's on the mound. It's all about gradual progression. If you skip the steps, that's where players get hurt. It's just the way the sport is, and the stress on the arm is something that needs to be spaced out, especially early in the season and even more so for a guy who hasn't made a major-league start since August coming off elbow inflammation.

Over/under 25 starts for Chris Sale this year? — Kevin Stadnik, @KevinStadnik

I say over. I don't think he's going to make 33 starts every five days throughout the year, but I also think this actually could be his first healthy season (arm-/shoulder-wise) in a while. If he starts 28 games this year, with a few days skipped to give him extra rest here or there, I think that would be near a best-case scenario for the Red Sox. He made 32 starts his first year in Boston, 27 in 2018 and 25 in 2019. I think he falls somewhere between 27 and 32 this year.

Brock Holt filled many roles in the last 7 seasons. He was payroll flexibility. What's the plan now for utility? — Raymond Cruddas, @raycruddas

It's a mix of familiar names and newcomers. Tzu Wei Lin and Marco Hernández will be in the mix, though Hernández isn't on the 40-man roster. He has been working out in a group with the Red Sox starting infielders, though, like Mitch Moreland and Rafael Devers, so that means something. Michael Chavis and José Peraza will switch off at second base. When one isn't in the lineup, the other will serve as a roving utility infielder. Peraza can play shortstop, and Ron Roenicke mentioned he could give Xander Bogaerts a few days off throughout the year. The team has Jonathan Arauz, selected in the Rule 5 draft in December. He's never played Double A, but as a Rule 5 draftee, if he's not on Boston's active roster throughout the entire season, the Red Sox have to offer him back to his original team: Houston. Arauz has seen plenty of playing time so far this spring to try to make the team.

On a scale of 1 to 10 how concerned should Red Sox fans be about Chris Sale's health? — Tim Starr, @_Tim_Starr_

I'd say a 5. There should be some level of concern coming off the elbow inflammation last season and just his general injury history over the past few years. At the same time, he's never had this much downtime in his career (basically from August to early December, he hadn't thrown), and I think that will benefit him. In some ways, the pneumonia that set him back at the start of camp might be a good thing because it forces

him to slow down. Remember when he came into 2017 and was throwing 100 mph in his first spring training game? That's what the Red Sox want to avoid. They're also using this device called a MotusTHROW sleeve to monitor his elbow health.

Other than Alex Verdugo, do the other prospects in the (Mookie) Betts deal have a shot (at) making the big club? — Craig Pedersen, via email

Jeter Downs, 21, and Connor Wong, 23, are the two. Neither of them is expected to make the Opening Day roster. Both were in Double A at the end of last season — Downs for just a handful of games. So they need a bit more development. That said, Downs, who has the potential to be the team's future second baseman, immediately became the highest-ranking prospect in the Red Sox system, according to talent evaluators like The Athletic's Keith Law. Law ranks Downs the 70th-best prospect in baseball, with Triston Casas (No. 90) being the only other top-100 prospect for the Red Sox. Law has Wong as No. 19 in the Sox system, but he's by far the top catching prospect in the organization. Prospect development is never linear, so it's hard to say when they'll reach the majors, but I'd bet on Downs first, perhaps by early next season with a very small chance of a debut in September.

What are the odds of a trade with the Padres? — Philip Scheid, @PHScheid

I think the Padres buzz is more talk than anything. The Red Sox were, of course, wrapped up in talks with the Padres prior to their trade with the Dodgers, but that fizzled out. It seems more like the Padres are looking for someone to take Wil Myers' contract off their hands, and the Red Sox have a bit more financial flexibility right now. But Boston would want some of San Diego's top prospects in return, which is probably where things have stalled. I think it's unlikely at this point that a deal will get done, but stranger things have happened this offseason.

What are the chances that the Red Sox re-sign Mookie next winter? — Dave, @Lamocomotive

I'm inclined to say slim. It's hard to know which direction the Red Sox will go. Did they part with Betts now with his understanding that they're trying to reset and will offer him the moon this winter? It's possible, but there are so many risks involved in that type of approach. Betts might wind up loving Los Angeles and realize he wants to stay there. I'll say this: If Betts does want to go to the highest bidder in free agency and the Red Sox outbid everyone else, then maybe Betts would take it and return.

With new room on the payroll, any chance Rusney Castillo sees Boston this year? — David Regan, @DavidRegan00

I still don't think so. The Red Sox had a chance to give Castillo a spot on the roster before they signed Kevin Pillar. They wanted a right-handed bat for an outfield with three lefties in Verdugo, Andrew Benintendi and Jackie Bradley Jr. But they opted for Pillar. Verdugo will start the year on the injured list, and Pillar will play in his place. I don't think they see a fit for Castillo in Boston.

My dad has a question about the new reliever rules. If a guy comes in, finishes an inning and then goes out to start the next one could the manager pull him after one batter? Because he already completed an inning? Or do the rules reset every inning? — Marion Pritchard, @MarionPritch

The official rule requires a pitcher "to pitch to a minimum of three batters ... until such batters are put out or reach base, or until the offensive team is put out." The key in this instance is: "or until the offensive team is put out." In other words, if a starter is pulled after 5 1/3 innings and the reliever entering gets the next two guys out, that's fine. He doesn't have to return for the next inning. The next reliever, though, has to pitch to at least three batters.

When are the bullpen guys throwing in a regular spring training game? Asking for a friend. — DIBS Sports Info, @DIBFamily3

Matt Barnes and Brandon Workman haven't appeared in games yet but probably will this upcoming week. They endure hefty workloads during the season, so I imagine they're being brought along slowly. Ryan Brasier and Heath Hembree are scheduled to pitch this weekend. Marcus Walden has made only one appearance, but I think he'll be getting more soon. The problem with the early part of spring training is so many pitchers are needed to fill innings, but teams don't want to burn out their regular pitchers' arms too early in camp. It makes more sense for regular relievers to see more innings toward the end of camp, closer to the season starting. That's why you see so many prospects and guys you haven't heard of early in the spring.

Is JBJ going to be traded since he is a free agent next winter and wants to go the Mookie way? With Verdugo, Pillar in the fold and Jarren Duran coming up, can't the Red Sox maximize returns for Bradley in a trade with (the) prospect-rich Padres? How much is JBJ worth in (the) open market? Is (Jonathan) Lucroy going to be #2 catcher? Suddenly too many catchers...CV, (Kevin Plawecki), Wong and so on! Who is the 5th starter as of now? — Sashi Kumar, via email

I don't think the Red Sox would get that much of a return for Bradley. He's an excellent defensive player, of course, but his inconsistency with the bat would likely make teams weary, and they certainly wouldn't be giving up several prospects for him. I think Bradley stays with the team the whole year unless they're out of it by the trade deadline and a playoff contender is looking for a strong defensive outfielder for its playoff push. Even at that, I think he'd likely have to be packaged with someone else in order to get a worthwhile return.

As for Lucroy, I think at this point he has the upper hand over Plawecki. The Sox signed Plawecki first, but Lucroy's track record in handling pitching staffs is well documented, and he's had a strong bat in the past but been derailed by injuries. He had hernia surgery this winter and says he's feeling as good as he's felt in years, so we'll see how that translates. Wong isn't close to being ready for the majors, so the competition really comes down to Lucroy and Plawecki behind Christian Vázquez, who will return as the starting catcher.

Who are the pitchers most likely to make the team? — Peter Thibault, @Peter_Thibault

We did a roster projection earlier this week before we knew Sale would miss the start of the season. So here's who we have pegged right now for pitchers: Eduardo Rodríguez, Nathan Eovaldi, Martín Pérez, Ryan Weber, Brandon Workman, Matt Barnes, Darwinson Hernández, Josh Taylor, Marcus Walden, Heath Hembree, Chris Mazza and Austin Brice. Plus one more to replace Sale.

In addition to those guys, I think others such as Matt Hall or Kyle Hart are in the mix, but really at this point, we haven't seen enough of these guys to know who might take a lead. I think they'll want pitchers with starting experience, and both of those guys have started. There's also the possibility they give Brian Johnson or Hector Velázquez a chance. If Sale is backdated, the earliest he could return is April 7.

Rays wanted Martin Perez too. But Perez's 'dream' was to join Red Sox

Chad Jennings

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Less than two months after he became the Red Sox chief baseball officer, Chaim Bloom locked down a \$6-million deal with free agent starter Martin Perez, and pretty soon, Bloom was hearing all about it from his former co-workers. The Rays had been runner-up in the Perez negotiations. Bloom had been in the Rays' front office for 15 years, and just a few weeks after leaving, he'd already snagged a player they wanted. So, yeah, his old colleagues let him know about it.

“Not exactly in that way,” Bloom said, laughing. “But I got enough to know that they had valued him.”

Truth be told, there wasn't much the Rays could have done to tip the scales. Perez said his agent called him with two offers, and both were fairly similar. The Rays had been a playoff team in 2019 and had a strong

track record of nurturing pitchers. The Red Sox had won a title in 2018 and were the team of Pedro Martinez and Roger Clemens, Perez's favorite players growing up.

Perez said he told his agent, even if the Rays put more money on the table, he still wanted to sign in Boston.

"It's not that the other team didn't do their job, but I want to be a part of this," he said. "I want to be a Red Sox guy. That's one of my dreams. I want to be a part of that team, and we just made a deal, like, two weeks later."

Depending on the perception of the Rays' brand of roster building – whether they're smart and savvy, or cheap and unsustainable – the Red Sox being on the same page about a free agent is either good news or bad; a sign that they've found a clever bargain, or further proof that this winter was all about cutting payroll. Maybe it's a little of both.

The connection to Bloom, at least in this case, might be coincidental. At least a little bit. Much of the preparation and prioritization on Perez, Bloom said, was done before he took the job, and it was executive vice president and assistant general manager Eddie Romero who spearheaded the negotiations. Bloom was on board, and he was involved, but it's not like signing Perez was strictly his idea.

"I think the industry now is such that, our job is to try to find things that nobody else finds," Bloom said. "But, realistically, there's a lot of teams digging into information on players, and you can usually assume if you're onto something, there's at least one other team, and usually more than one, that's on it (as well)."

Perez had an ugly 5.12 ERA last season and was particularly bad in the second half. His 2018 season wasn't any better. But he turns 29 in April, so he's not particularly old. He made at least 29 starts in three of the past four seasons, so there's some durability. He added a cutter last season, and for a while it carried him to career-best numbers (eight shutout innings against the Astros on May 1 and a 2.95 ERA through his first 11 games). FanGraphs valued him between 1.7 and 2.3 WAR in four of the past five seasons. It's not hard to find reasons to be interested, and that's with only a surface-level analysis.

"Basically, we felt two things," Bloom said. "One, the stuff and the underlying way in which he pitched deserved better results than he got. And two, that there were further tweaks we could help him make to his repertoire to make him even more effective."

Perez believes the Rays might have wanted him because their manager, Kevin Cash, played with Perez in the minor leaguers. He would know Perez is good teammate and a strong competitor. Perez said the Red Sox told him something similar, that they liked those elements of his persona. He wants to pitch inside more often this season and throw his changeup like he used to. He believes he can regain last year's early success. And he has nothing against the Rays, but he wants to do those things with the Red Sox.

"There's always going to be ways in which your thinking overlaps with other teams," Bloom said. "I think as you go through this, whether it's in free agency, in the draft, through trades, you find yourself feeling more aligned with the way you see other teams valuing players. But it's never in lockstep. There's always some variation from team to team, no matter how similar you may think."

And although this signing found a connection between his old job and his new job, Bloom does not see himself as a singular force, bringing the Rays' way of thinking into the Red Sox front office. It was a team decision on Perez, and it will be a team decision on the next move, and the move after that.

"I think our jobs are always to make sure everybody is working together well," Bloom said. "That we have good information, make good decisions and put everybody in a position to succeed. Hopefully this turns out to have been an example of that."

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

New Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo reflects on big trade, looks forward to 2020

Andrew Sodergren

Red Sox outfielder Alex Verdugo is still getting accustomed to his new baseball surroundings at JetBlue Park after spending his first six professional seasons in the Los Angeles Dodgers organization.

A native of Tucson, Arizona, the 23-year-old Verdugo was acquired earlier this month by the Red Sox in the blockbuster trade sending Mookie Betts and David Price to the Dodgers. The trade took a week to complete, and Verdugo said he spent that week fielding calls from family and friends – unsure of what his future would be.

“It’s a roller coaster, there’s so many ups and downs throughout the entire process,” he said. “Especially with me, the trade wasn’t even finalized for a week. You have everybody calling up, blowing up your phone. But the only people not calling you are the actual clubs, the organizations. You’re in the dark just as much as everyone else is.”

Verdugo said now that he’s a member of the Red Sox, he can’t wait to show fans what he can do.

“This organization is one of the richest organizations in baseball history, and I don’t mean that money-wise, but the culture, the history and all that,” he said. “It’s amazing, coming out here. But at the end of the day, everyone affiliated with the Boston Red Sox have really made me feel part of the family, welcoming me with open arms.”

He said his welcome has been especially important since he’s still adjusting to life away from the organization that drafted him.

“All I ever knew was the Dodgers,” he said. “Just coming over here, it’s a whole different experience. Spring training’s in Florida, everything is way further than where I’m from. I’m an Arizona boy. To not have my family with me, people that I’ve always counted on for six years to kind of help me get through stuff, it’s strange. It’s nerve-racking, there’s a lot of emotions that go into it. It hurt and it’s a lot to take in. You never want to be traded, I know I didn’t. I wanted to stay with the Dodgers forever and build a legacy there. But what are you going to do? Are you going to pout or cry about it? This is a business, this is what we do. It’s still baseball, just a different team.”

Verdugo seems to be adjusting just fine to his new surroundings, already endearing himself to manager Ron Roenicke.

“Verdugo has tremendous energy and you’re going to see that right off,” Roenicke said. “That’s just who he is. He gets excited, he shows it. I look forward to him getting out there because I think the fans are going to like him right away.”

Verdugo has yet to appear in a spring training game for the Red Sox as he recovers from a stress fracture in his lower back. The team is being cautious with the young outfielder, but he could see Grapefruit League action in three weeks. He’s likely to start the season on the injured list.

“People are making a big deal about it, but I’m not worried,” Verdugo said. “We’re going to take our time on this, make sure that we’re right. That way, when I am playing, that it’s the whole year and that it’s continuous with no setbacks.”

Verdugo, who ranked among baseball’s top 50 prospects from 2016 to 2018 according to MLB.com, finally got extended playing time on an outstanding Dodgers team last year. He certainly made the most of it, hitting .294 with a .817 OPS – slugging 12 homers and driving in 44 runs. He missed the final two months of the season with an oblique injury and the stress fracture in his back.

He says he's excited to finally take the field and reward the Red Sox for having faith in him.

"(The trade) shows you how much the Boston Red Sox really wanted you, and they see that you can be an asset," he said. "The fact that another organization wants you and is willing to give up great players for you, it does speak volumes and shows you how much they believe in you and what you can accomplish."

*** *Associated Press***

Devers likely to be even bigger part of Boston offense

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — His baby face and near constant smile may make him appear younger than his 23 years.

But third baseman Rafael Devers already has parts of three seasons and a World Series championship on his resume. And after finishing 12th in American League MVP voting in his breakout 2019, the Red Sox believe Devers hasn't approached his ceiling yet.

Devers hit .311 with 32 homers, 115 RBIs, an AL-leading 54 doubles, and a major league-leading 90 extra-base hits last season. He led the Red Sox in games played (156), hits (201), and average. With the departure of Mookie Betts in a trade to the Los Angeles Dodgers, Devers will be an even bigger part of Boston's offense this season.

"Especially as much as he's improved his game defensively, he's a huge part," said manager Ron Roenicke. "The bat is good because of especially where it plays in the lineup and how we can push that lineup deeper makes it tough to pitch to us."

Roenicke expects to bat Devers second this season, behind likely lead-off hitter Andrew Benintendi, where Devers had much of his success last season after taking over the spot in late June.

"Wherever the team feels I should be batting in the lineup, I'll do whatever they say," said Devers, who made his 2020 spring debut Friday. "But obviously I had a lot of success batting in the two hole last year. It's not going to change my approach either way. I'm going to still do what I have to do, go out there and work hard."

From May through August, there weren't many hitters hotter than Devers last season. How much more can Boston expect from him offensively?

"It's hard to say that you can see more than I saw for four straight months last year," Roenicke said. "Four straight months was as good as anybody you could be in baseball as far as squaring up a baseball when you needed him. When we needed a good at-bat from him, for four straight months we saw a good at-bat. Maybe it was a lineout, but it was a good at-bat. And it was gaps and it was everything, so it's pretty hard to think of anybody doing that for six months. He had a fabulous year offensively when you look at even just the total numbers, but I know what I saw for four straight months was amazing."

With Betts gone there will be big expectations for Devers. Former Red Sox slugger David Ortiz, though, only needs Devers to do what he did last season.

"I saw more than 250 at-bats coming out of him (last year)," said Ortiz. "And I was saying, 'Bro, I'm telling you this guy is on another level.'"

Devers knows what will be expected of him this season. But, he's not feeling pressure to replace Betts, the 2018 AL MVP.

"I don't feel any pressure at all," he said. "We have a great team. We have a lot of talent on this team. We have (Alex) Verdugo, we have (Benintendi), we have (Xander) Bogaerts, and J.D. (Martinez). There's a

bunch of guys that we have. So, we know we have to step our game up. So, obviously with Mookie because we know he's a superstar but we don't feel any pressure because we know the type of team we have and we'll be ready for this coming season."