

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, May 8, 2018

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox' Joe Kelly expects to be booed at Yankee Stadium Tuesday

Peter Abraham

NEW YORK — Joe Kelly has been with the Red Sox since 2014. He knows what's coming the first time he sticks his head out of the visitor's dugout at Yankee Stadium on Tuesday.

If he's lucky, it'll just be boos.

"Maybe I'll need an umbrella," Kelly said. "I hope nothing gets thrown or poured on us."

Kelly and the Sox will be at the Stadium for the first time since the benches-clearing brawl between the teams on April 11 at Fenway Park. It's the start of a three-game series with the best records in baseball.

One of the many sub-plots involves Kelly and Yankees infielder Tyler Austin.

Austin made an over-aggressive slide into Sox shortstop Brock Holt in the third inning on April 11, spiking him in the leg. When Austin came to the plate in the seventh inning, Kelly drilled him in the back with a fastball.

Austin took exception and charged the mound. "Let's go," said Kelly when he saw what was happening. A legitimate fight ensued.

Kelly was suspended for six games, losing an appeal for a reduced sentence. Austin was suspended for five games and on appeal had one game taken away.

Now Yankees fans get their say.

"I just hope people don't throw stuff in the bullpen. Say whatever you want and be loud. That'll be fine," Kelly said. "If I get booed, so what? There are worse things in life."

Kelly was told he might actually like being booed given his personality.

"No comment — but most likely yeah," he said. "I'm the complete opposite. If it gets loud, my psycho ass thinks they're cheering for me. I'm mentally wrong. It'll be fun."

The fight and all the attention that followed it obscured what is actually a more significant story for the Sox: that Kelly has become one of the most reliable relief pitchers in the game.

Kelly allowed four runs on Opening Day against the Tampa Bay Rays and has since thrown 14 scoreless innings over 13 appearances. Opponents are 6 of 47 (.128) with one extra-base hit and 15 strikeouts.

Since Opening Day, the Sox are 11-2 when Kelly appears in a game.

The righthander also has become manager Alex Cora's best option against lefthander hitters. Lefties are 2 of 25 (.080) against Kelly with nine strikeouts.

“It helps having been a starter,” said Kelly, who didn’t move full-time to the bullpen until late in the 2016 season. “I have a fourth pitch available for a lefty. I can use curveball, slider, changeup and fastball to lefties. It helps that I have that fourth pitch.”

On Saturday against Texas, Kelly came into a 5-5 game with a bases loaded and one out. He struck out lefthanded hitting Joey Gallo on five pitches, the last a 98-m.p.h. fastball. Facing Jurickson Profar, a switch hitter batting lefty, Kelly needed 11 pitches before getting a called third strike on another 98-m.p.h. fastball.

Pitchers usually don’t win those long at-bats. Kelly had to throw four consecutive strikes before Profar struck out.

“It’s fun. When you’re a starter, you don’t care if you walk a guy. You might throw some Frisbee curveball and take your chance. But in that situation, you have to throw a strike,” Kelly said.

“It’s a mental challenge. It’s not easy pitching with the bases loaded and a 3-2 count. Luckily the balls I did throw in that at-bat, he fouled them off. I knew some pitches that were ball four and he swung at them. It was one-on-one. It felt like playing basketball or ping-pong against somebody. It was fun.

Kelly was effective in relief last season but appeared in only 54 games. He’s on a pace to pitch in 66 games this season.

“Last year was a different story because of what was going on [physically]. If I feel good, I want to pitch as much as I can,” Kelly said. “Going into games, you should have an idea how much you can go. I have a better feel of that now and the communication is great this season.

“It’s not being conditioned for it. When you’re healthy, you can pitch.”

Big doings

The Red Sox are 25-9 and the Yankees 24-10. The Elias Sports Bureau determined that Tuesday would be the first time they play each other with the best records in the majors since June 2, 2002.

The Sox won that game, 7-1, behind eight strong innings from Frank Castillo. The lineup included Rickey Henderson, Johnny Damon, Nomar Garciaparra and current MLB Players Association president Tony Clark.

The Yankees went on to win the AL East.

Drew are you?

Drew Pomeranz, who starts Tuesday, has a 6.14 ERA through three starts since coming off the disabled list. But the lefty was 2-1 with a 4.10 ERA in five starts against the Yankees last season . . . Yankees starter Luis Severino is 2-5 with a 4.82 ERA in nine career appearances against the Sox. He allowed five runs on eight hits over five innings at Fenway Park on April 10 in a game the Sox won, 14-1 . . . J.D. Martinez has a career .981 OPS in 10 career games at Yankee Stadium with three home runs . . . Brock Holt was 1 for 3 for Triple A Pawtucket at Lehigh Valley in the first game of a planned two-day rehab. He played six innings at shortstop. He is returning from a hamstring strain . . . Tyler Thornburg pitched for the fourth time on his rehabilitation assignment and threw a scoreless inning for Double A Portland at New Hampshire. The righthander has thrown 3⅓ innings as he returns from shoulder surgery.

Sox star Mookie Betts and Duchess-to-be Meghan Markle are distant relatives

Peter Abraham

The Red Sox and Yankees are set to play a two-game series next June at the London Olympic Stadium. The official announcement will be Tuesday in London.

For Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts, it could be a family reunion with the Royal Family.

Betts learned last week that he is a distant relative of Meghan Markle, the American actress who will wed Prince Harry on May 19 at Windsor Castle. Their ancestors are from the same part of Alabama.

“I saw on television that they were getting married. But I had no idea we were related,” Betts said. “That’s not something you expect to hear, but it’s interesting.”

Jim McNiff, an amateur genealogist from Burlington, uncovered the connection between Betts and Markle.

McNiff, a retired hospital financial manager and college professor, undertook genealogy as a pastime. In 2017, the *Globe* published stories based on McNiff’s research into the family trees of Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and coach Bill Belichick.

McNiff became interested in Betts’s background this year. It intersects with Markle’s family nearly 150 years ago.

According to the 1870 Federal Census, the population of a township in Madison County, Ala., included 22 adults and children with the surname Betts. In house No. 105, there was 17-year-old Joseph Betts. In house No. 107, 14-year-old Jacob Betts lived with his family.

Joseph Betts is the great-great grandfather of Mookie Betts and Jacob Betts the great-great-great grandfather of Markle.

Whether Joseph and Jacob were related cannot be determined conclusively. But those residents of Madison were descendants of slaves owned by Elisha Betts, a tobacco plantation owner from Lunenburg County, Va.

Elisha Betts, per a will dated 1783, bequeathed seven slaves to his children.

Two of his sons, Charles and Elisha, moved to Alabama to raise cotton, leaving the overworked Virginia soil for affordable, fertile land being sold by the government around what is now Huntsville, Ala.

By 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, Elisha F. Betts had 46 slaves on a cotton plantation in southwestern Madison County. Edward Betts, the son of Charles, had 34 slaves in the northwestern part of the county.

Records from 1860 show Elisha Betts valued his properties at \$20,000. That included 16 houses that were slave quarters.

Willie Betts, Mookie’s father, was born in 1943. His great grandfather was Joseph Betts.

“I know from family stories that our relatives were from Virginia and settled in Alabama. That’s where I’m from,” he said. “There were Betts all over that area. They worked on farms, things like that.”

Willie Betts served in the military, then moved to Tennessee in the 1970s. Markus Lynn Betts was born in Nashville in 1992 and was drafted by the Red Sox in 2011.

There is a second connection between Betts and Markle by marriage.

On Jan. 5, 1920, Katie Betts married Richard Betts in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

For both, it was their second marriage. Katie, 32, was born in Huntsville, as was 36-year-old Richard. Their ancestors had raised families on the same cotton plantations 80 years prior.

“That’s my uncle Richard,” Willie Betts said. “My father talked about him all the time.”

Katie Betts is Markle’s great-great aunt.

Representatives of Markle did not respond to requests for comment, but she has publicly acknowledged that her mother, Doria Ragland, was descended from slaves.

Markle started dating Prince Harry in 2016. Once married, the couple will live on the grounds of Kensington Palace in Nottingham Cottage. If Harry is named the Duke of Sussex on his wedding day, that would make Markle a Duchess.

Kensington Palace is approximately 9 miles from Olympic Stadium, so it's conceivable the Duchess could meet the All-Star next year. The Red Sox and Yankees will be playing the first regular-season major league games in Europe.

"That would be cool, to meet her," Betts said. "I wonder if she's a baseball fan?"

How long can Alex Cora stick with slumping players?

Peter Abraham

NEW YORK — Through 34 games, Red Sox manager Alex Cora hasn't had to make many difficult decisions when putting together a lineup. He has relied on matchups to guide his choices or made what were generally obvious moves to account for injuries or players getting a day off.

That's about to change.

With Jackie Bradley Jr. and Eduardo Nunez stuck in long slumps, Cora has to decide when to make some fundamental changes. It could happen as soon as Tuesday night against the Yankees.

Bradley is 5 of 47 (.106) in his last 15 games with no extra-base hits and three RBIs. He has struck out 21 times in that stretch and looks increasingly frustrated.

Playing Mitch Moreland at first base with Hanley Ramirez as the designated hitter and J.D. Martinez in left field (or right field at Yankee Stadium) would be an optimal lineup at this point, even if only for a short time.

As good as Bradley is defensively, it's hard to have an outfielder with a .535 OPS. Moreland is hitting .347 with a 1.060 OPS and 17 RBIs. He has earned his way.

"He's putting pressure on the manager to play more," Cora said Sunday. "I like that."

Bradley is notoriously streaky, and sample sizes at this stage of the season are not enough to make firm judgments. But he looks like a player who would benefit from a few days off.

The Sox have a lot of faith in their new coaching staff. Let's see what they can do to get Bradley going.

Nunez is 9 of 54 (.167) since April 21 with three RBIs. But that's not the biggest problem. Defensive metrics show him to be the worst second baseman in the American League.

Can the Sox afford to wait for Dustin Pedroia to get back? Brock Holt is set to play for Triple A Pawtucket Monday and Tuesday, and the tentative plan is to activate him off the disabled list Wednesday. Holt at this point represents a better option at second base considering how well he was hitting before straining his left hamstring.

Bradley and Nunez are established players and probably will be again, Bradley in particular. But Cora has plenty to think about on his day off in New York.

Here are a few other thoughts and observations on the Red Sox ahead of the big series against the Yankees:

- You very rarely see Allard Baird or Frank Wren around the Sox these days. Dave Dombrowski's top two evaluators are already in search mode because the organization believes trades will happen earlier this year because of the divide in baseball.

That Dombrowski skipped the Texas trip to evaluate in-house prospects also was telling.

There is very little middle ground now. Most teams are either contending or tanking. So it would make sense for a bad team to trade a useful veteran in the next few weeks rather than waiting until July when the market will be thick with players.

The White Sox, as an example, have righthanded relievers Nate Jones and Joakim Soria. Texas should see what it could get for Cole Hamels or the Royals for Kelvin Herrera.

Even with Tyler Thornburg making his way back, the Sox should look to add to their bullpen depth.

- That brings us to Blake Swihart. He has become a cause célèbre among some fans because he almost never plays and is stuck on the major league roster. He has no role or minor league options.

It's a bad situation for him but hardly something the Red Sox should be concerned about.

The Sox are a team built to win, and they are winning. Swihart's career path is not a factor. The Sox believe Christian Vazquez and Sandy Leon are their best options to catch and justifiably so given the team's 3.45 ERA.

That Vazquez and Leon are the worst offensive duo in the majors is largely incidental. The league average for a major league catcher is .228 with a .679 OPS.

As teams get more sophisticated with using analytics, a catcher's primary job is to carry out the game plan with the pitchers. Offense is a bonus.

Swihart has caught only 65 innings in the majors over the last three seasons. It would be unfair to a pitching staff accustomed to Vazquez and Leon to change direction in midseason.

Essentially, why mess with what is working?

Swihart is insurance as a catcher, left fielder, and first baseman. He also could be a useful trade chip. A team like San Diego might be interested in developing Swihart, or Miami if it trades J.T. Realmuto.

If not, Swihart can wait. It's only a problem if you choose to make it one.

Blake Swihart (left) has appeared in 14 games this season for the Red Sox.
MICHAEL DWYER/AP

Blake Swihart (left) has appeared in 14 games this season for the Red Sox.

- The Angels went 0-6 against the Red Sox and Yankees at home and were outscored, 44-8. They are 21-7 otherwise with a plus-63 run differential.

- Good luck to Ryan Kalish, who retired from baseball last month when he left his independent league team. Kalish is 30 now, long removed from the 22-year-old who looked like a future Red Sox star in 2010.

Kalish made a tumbling catch at Tropicana Field that season that had Terry Francona predicting big things.

But Kalish was dropped back to the minors in 2011 because the Red Sox signed Carl Crawford. Kalish wrecked his left shoulder making a diving play in April and that started a downward spiral as injuries mounted.

Who can say what would have happened had he stayed in the majors? But if you watched Kalish play, you can't help but wonder.

- As the Sox and Yankees prepare to meet, Jacoby Ellsbury has yet to play this season. He is on the disabled list with an oblique injury and has since had hip and heel issues. The Yankees put him on the 60-day disabled list on May 2, so the earliest he could return is May 25.

With Brett Gardner, Aaron Hicks, Aaron Judge, and Giancarlo Stanton, the Yankees have no role for Ellsbury. He is owed \$59 million through 2020.

- Cora appears to have been a wise choice as manager. His personality is suited to the market and his intelligence to how the game is played now.

But it's hard not to wonder whether the Red Sox would have another World Series trophy had they made Torey Lovullo the manager after the 2015 season and put John Farrell in the front office.

Lovullo is 116-80 with Arizona. He's as much the one who got away as Travis Shaw.

- At 7:10 p.m., last Monday, it was 45 degrees at first pitch when the Red Sox played the Royals. At 1:05 p.m. on Wednesday, it was 86 degrees. That the temperature went up 41 degrees in 42 hours can't be good.

- The All-Star ballot for American League shortstops will have Xander Bogaerts, Carlos Correa, Didi Gregorius, Francisco Lindor, Manny Machado, and Andrelton Simmons. Good luck voting.

- It certainly hasn't been a straight path, but Rick Porcello has a 4.02 ERA in 101 starts for the Red Sox and is pitching like somebody they would want to keep around beyond 2019 when his contract expires.

Porcello has learned how to pitch well without necessarily having a great sinker by embracing the information available to pitchers. He changes speeds, angles, and eye levels seamlessly.

Physical ability is paramount. But the more you watch players like Porcello and Martinez, you realize how important a skill managing data is.

- The Red Sox have only two fewer homers than the Yankees. And that's with Andrew Benintendi having one.

- There has to be a Mookie Betts note, right? Here it is: He is on pace to score 172 runs. That would be the most since Babe Ruth had 177 in 1921.

Betts surely will not catch the Bambino. But it may not be outrageous to think he can break the Sox record of 150 set by Ted Williams in 1949. The last player with more than 140 was Alex Rodriguez, who had 143 for the Yankees in 2007.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Sox vs. Yanks: Baseball's top two teams set to resume their rivalry

Bill Koch

NEW YORK — The season-long quest for supremacy in the American League East resumes Tuesday night.

The banks of the Harlem River will be the setting this time, with the Red Sox and Yankees renewing hostilities in the Bronx. Their crackling opening series three weeks ago at Fenway Park left any casual baseball fan wanting more, let alone the diehards who loyally support two of the sport's most storied franchises.

Boston (25-9) and New York (24-10) carry the two best records in the big leagues, making the 7:05 p.m. first pitch the first of its kind since June 2, 2002. Pedro Martinez, Manny Ramirez and those Red Sox won 93 games while missing the playoffs. Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera and those Yankees won 103 games but were dumped out of the postseason by the eventual World Series champion Anaheim Angels.

Boston took two out of three in April's initial skirmish, a series marked by a pair of bench-clearing incidents in the middle game. New York's Tyler Austin spiked Red Sox infielder Brock Holt on a hard slide into second base and paid the price a few innings later, drilled in the back by a fastball from Boston reliever Joe Kelly. There was no peace to be made the second time both teams left the dugouts, with punches thrown, tempers flaring and suspensions eventually doled out.

It's the kind of matchup that can excite players who are mentally geared for the long haul. Playing 162 games over six months requires a certain mindset, one that was so often set aside when the two teams were both at their peak in the early 2000s. Consider the postgame thoughts of Red Sox ace Chris Sale after Sunday's 6-1 victory over the Rangers, a dominant start that means he won't pitch again until the weekend series at Toronto.

"It'll be fun," Sale said. "They're rolling. We're catching our stride again. This will be our first time going up to New York. I wish I was getting the ball in one of those games."

Each team has enjoyed a blistering stretch of baseball in the early going. Boston logged the best start in franchise history by jumping out to a 17-2 record and leveling off a bit from there. The Yankees staggered a bit early but enter having lost just one of their last 16 games, their first such run since September 1980. Their latest victory was a 7-4 rally past the Indians on Sunday, with Gleyber Torres walking it off in the bottom of the ninth thanks to a three-run homer to center.

It's no coincidence two of the best players in baseball to date are driving the Red Sox and New York. Mookie Betts is rewriting the history books for Boston, leading the A.L. in runs scored, home runs, batting average and slugging percentage. Shortstop Didi Gregorius ranks in the A.L. top five in runs scored, home runs, RBI and slugging percentage for the Yankees.

Drew Pomeranz opposes Luis Severino in Tuesday's series opener. The Red Sox left-hander allowed three runs over six innings last time out in a win over the Royals while the New York right-hander fired a five-hit shutout at the defending champion Astros. Pomeranz was on the disabled list with a flexor strain during the first series with the Yankees while Severino was hammered for five earned runs in a 14-1 loss to Boston on April 10.

David Price matches up against Masahiro Tanaka on Wednesday and Rick Porcello duels C.C. Sabathia in Thursday's finale. Price lasted just one inning in his start against the Yankees this season, exiting early in a 10-7 loss to Tanaka after feeling a sensation in his pitching hand. Porcello was sharp over seven shutout innings in the finale, allowing just two hits while paving the way to a 6-3 victory.

*** *MassLive.com***

Joe Kelly's Boston Red Sox legend grows after Yankees fight; 'I'm just trying to have a good time and smile'

Christopher Smith

NEW YORK -- Joe Kelly yelled "let's go" after his retaliation pitch drilled Yankees' Tyler Austin in the back at Fenway Park on April 11.

Austin, who slammed his bat to the dirt before Kelly summoned him to fight, charged the mound and a brawl ensued. Kelly landed a punch and suddenly achieved legendary status among Red Sox fans.

In the aftermath, he has received multiple standing ovations. He even joined the crowd. During his six-game suspension, he spent time sitting out in the outfield bleachers and in different spots at Fenway Park with fans.

One of his standing ovations came at Game 2 of the Bruins-Maple Leafs playoff series at TD Garden. The Bruins showed the brawl on the Jumbotron. The stadium camera panned to Kelly who stood and waved his rally towel wildly. The crowd erupted.

"Joe Kelly Fight Club" T-shirts made by Sully's Brand have become popular among fans and Kelly's teammates. J.D. Martinez always wears his.

"Coming into the season, I just wanted to have fun playing baseball and compete as hard as I can," Kelly told MassLive.com. "Good outing, bad outing, just trying to go out there and have a good time and smile."

Red Sox fans finally are embracing the witty, wildly-entertaining and goofy Joe Kelly who Cardinals fans enjoyed so much from 2012-14.

He's also pitching out of his mind, too. The Red Sox and Yankees open a three-game series at Yankee Stadium tonight. It marks the first meeting between the rivals since the brawl.

Kelly has a 2.51 ERA and 0.77 WHIP. The righty hasn't allowed a run since Opening Day. He has hurled 14 consecutive scoreless innings, striking out 15 and walking only one.

"It seems like also he's pitching with an edge," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "I don't know if it's the whole thing that happened against New York."

Red Sox fans probably didn't embrace Kelly in the same way Cardinals fans did because of high fan expectations in Boston.

Kelly arrived in Boston at the 2014 deadline in a trade with Allen Craig for John Lackey. Craig's rapid decline and Kelly's struggles early on as a starter irked fans who weren't pleased with the return for Lackey who still had a year and a half remaining on his contract. Kelly posted a 4.85 ERA in 25 starts during 2015 with the Red Sox.

For Kelly, showing his true personality in St. Louis even as a rookie came naturally because he knew everyone so well. St. Louis drafted and developed him.

"I wouldn't say it was difficult (in Boston). I'll just say it was a new environment, a new team," Kelly said. "When I was in St. Louis, it was people I had been with since the minor leagues. So it was guys I was comfortable with from the beginning. So going in and meeting a bunch of new teammates, front office, everything. Probably the timing added up when I was playing with St. Louis."

"I wouldn't say it's harder to connect (with Boston fans)," Kelly added.

Kelly views Twitter as an easy way to connect with fans.

"On Twitter, it's not like you're having full, long conversations with people. So it's a lot easier to say what's on your mind and people respond."

Kelly, a man of many disguises

The fun for Kelly this season began well before the fight aftermath. Kelly teamed with Red Sox productions to produce a humorous video series during spring training.

Disguised as reporter Jim Buchanan from JWK Punta Gorda (JWK are his initials), Kelly wreaked havoc on Red Sox camp March 1. He knocked over bats, ran onto the field to interview "Coach" Dustin Pedroia and called David Ortiz "Big Poopi."

Kelly tried to interview Jim Rice inside the gym as Rice worked out on the stationary bike. He called him "Jerry Rice from the Hall of Fame of the Red Sox."

This wasn't the first time Kelly disguised himself for laughs. He wore an old man mask to interview rapper Nelly during 2013 when pitching for the Cardinals.

"That was just a really, really good mask that we had laying around," Kelly said. "And I was just using it all day and Nelly happened to be there, and I thought it was a good idea to go and interrupt the interview. There was nothing really planned. It was just spur of the moment type thing."

Kelly obviously endeared himself to Cardinals fans quickly. Google his name and you'll find YouTube videos from his days in St. Louis of him dancing in the outfield during batting practice, interrupting a Shelby Miller's interview and cuddling with fellow relievers in the bullpen.

"I think it's good to let the fans kind of know the team on a little bit of a closer level than seeing them on the field," he said. "Ultimately, they are the people who fill the seats and come to all the games. Without them, there's not going to be baseball. ... I think it's good for them to see a little bit -- not too personal -- but have a chance to see what guys are like not just wearing a jersey and being out there on the field. I think it's a win-win for both sides honestly."

Making up family members and his real family

Long before Jim Buchanan and the old man disguise, Kelly was making up family members at the University of California-Riverside. His bio on the official athletic website stated he was a distant relative of gangster George "Machine Gun" Kelly.

Kelly said his whole family acts kind of like him.

"I guess everyone is pretty much laidback and likes to have fun," he said. "Everyone has a lot of energy. It's not something you just get from somebody. I guess it's how you tick. I've always been like that. As a little kid, always until now."

Kelly has a tattoo on his arm "Until Death Do Us Part" with the initials of his three brothers Nolan, Chris and Mikey, and his sister Lennae.

"My brother has the same one," he said. "It's just one of those things that obviously family is the closest."

He talks with his siblings as much as possible.

"I try to stay as close as I can to all my family."

Kelly's son Knox already shares a similar energetic, fun personality.

"DP, DP, DP," Knox will yell to David Price when he sees the Red Sox southpaw.

Kelly grew up in Southern California. He was a talented skateboarder, the only real "California stereotype" thing he did, he said.

"I was always on my skateboard, running around the city," he said.

Mr. Clean

Price roomed with Kelly, Kelly's wife Ashley and Knox during spring training 2017. Price was dealing with his injured elbow at the time and so he said he actually spent more time with Ashley and Knox than Joe did that spring.

"You never know what's going to come out of his mouth," Price said about Kelly. "I think it's funny. In a sense he's kind of like Pedey (Dustin Pedroia). Quick wit. Just say something you've never heard him say before. He's going to hit you right in the stomach and you're going to laugh about it."

Not only is Kelly quick-witted but he's apparently meticulous around the house.

"He's a very clean guy," Price said. "Very clean. His room was always clean. His bathroom was always in order."

Kelly's skateboarding skills came as no surprise to Price when he first learned about it.

"Him being a Cali boy and just being as athletic as he is," Price said.

Kelly's natural athleticism is what allows him to pound the strike zone with 100 mph fastballs and it helped him to the majors quickly despite not as much pitching experience as most.

He didn't start pitching until college. So he has had to learn more in the majors than most pitchers.

"You're always learning as a pitcher," he said. "I had to teach myself a third pitch and learn how hitters adjust to pitches and how hitters adjust in game. That's probably the biggest thing I picked up on as my pitching career came about."

Standing O was 'like playoff-atmosphere vibes'

Andrew Benintendi said nothing Kelly does is fake. Sitting in the bleachers during his suspension is just Joe being Joe.

"What you see is what you get," Benintendi said. "He's the same exact way in here. He keeps it light. He likes to have fun. The stuff he does like that, that's not fake. That's who he is."

Kelly received standing ovations at Fenway Park the first time he pitched after fighting Austin and his first appearance upon returning from his suspension.

"It was definitely really, really exciting," Kelly said. "It's one of those things that gives you a lot of energy. Especially running out and you get that. It's like playoff-atmosphere vibes."

Kelly has had fun since arriving here in 2014 but it also seems fans have grouped him together with Craig because they came to Boston in the same trade, a deal many disliked. So maybe fans haven't paid enough attention to all the humorous things he does.

He took a selfie with Derek Jeter before the shortstop's final game. He contacted the parents of all Sox relievers last year and had their childhood photos sent to him. He hanged each photo in the bullpen.

Kelly remains surprised Craig never recovered after his foot injury.

"He was awesome," Kelly said. "He led the NL when guys were in scoring position.... So it's always a sad thing to see."

"I'd like to see him fully healthy and get to see one more chance," Kelly added. "You never know how something is going to affect someone injury-wise. But you're hoping for the best for him."

Kelly said he sees different players heal differently from the same injury. Craig's situation makes him think about his own career.

"You never know. Every time you get injured it's always in the back of your head," Kelly said. "It's one of those tough situations after going from one of the best players in the league to that."

Kelly is eligible for free agency after this season.

"It's nothing I ever really think about," he said. "I came into the season just trying to play to the best of my ability and see what happens from there and try to leave nothing on the table."

He's leaving nothing on the table personality-wise and as a pitcher.

"I have my offspeed. At times last year I didn't throw it," Kelly said. "Just have a good steady mix of offspeeds to fastballs and attack from there, which is a little bit different from last year."

Cora added: "It's not just throwing fastball after fastball after fastball. ... Last year, not too many swing-and-misses. I saw it first-hand. The feedback was for how hard he threw, it was a comfortable at-bat. It doesn't seem that way anymore."

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

Mason: Five things to watch as Red Sox and Yankees clash in the Bronx

Chris Mason

NEW YORK — For the first time in over a decade, the Red Sox and Yankees have the two best records in baseball.

They received a Hall of Fame end

Talent and bad blood have resuscitated baseball's fiercest rivalry. The AL East will hang in the balance this week, as the Sox open the three-game set with a one-game lead.

Here are five things to watch in the Bronx:

1. How brazen will Yankees pitchers be in retaliating?

After the brawl at Fenway Park, the bean-ball is in New York's court.

"You know that's coming. You know that's coming," Christian Vazquez said of retaliation after last month's melee. "They feel like us. The clubhouse is our second home. It's wanting to protect our home. So it will be something soon. If not this series maybe in New York."

The question is how obvious will that retaliation be?

The league set an interesting standard with the Red Sox last season. After Matt Barnes threw at Manny Machado, the Orioles picked their spot wisely. Dylan Bundy waited until the sixth inning of their next meeting, then drilled Mookie Betts in the hip with a 2-1 fastball.

Because it was a 2-0 game, the pitch couldn't be proven intentional — though the Sox certainly felt it was — and Bundy didn't receive any discipline.

Will the Yankees follow that lead?

2. J.D. primed for a big series

A trip to New York is coming at the perfect time for J.D. Martinez, as the outfielder is swinging a hot bat, and Yankee Stadium may be the best ballpark in the league for his swing.

Where right field at Fenway Park has robbed Martinez of some opposite-field home runs, Yankee Stadium is primed to give them back. He's gone deep four times in the past two weeks and is hitting over .400 in that stretch.

Don't be surprised if Martinez takes this series over.

3. Biggest start of the season for Price

David Price is in a tailspin. The lefty has dropped three starts in a row, allowing at least four runs in four of his last five.

The Red Sox need their \$217 million man to snap out of it, and there's no better time than Wednesday night against Masahiro Tanaka.

In his first appearance against New York, Price left after an inning with numbness in his pitching hand, the shortest outing of his career. This week he'll have a shot at redemption.

4. Moreland or Bradley?

Is this the series that Mitch Moreland squeezes Jackie Bradley Jr. out of the Sox lineup?

Alex Cora has been very diplomatic and regimented in giving players off days early in the season.

Will that change with the stakes raised in New York?

Bradley is batting .178, while Moreland hits .347 with less playing time. Moving Martinez to the outfield and Hanley Ramirez to designated hitter would be an easy way to get Moreland more atbats as a first baseman.

5. Joe Kelly: Public Enemy No. 1

Yankee Stadium is bound to get downright hostile for Joe Kelly.

The Sox reliever was at the epicenter of last month's brawl, plunking Tyler Austin with a four-seam fastball in the ribs. He was lauded as a hero at Fenway, but now it's time to play the villain. Kelly is bound to log some important innings, too. At the moment, he's probably the second most reliable arm in the Sox bullpen.

Who's on the hill?

Here are the probable pitchers for the three-game set in the Bronx:

Tuesday: Drew Pomeranz (1-1, 6.14 ERA) vs Luis Severino (5-1, 2.11)

Wednesday: David Price (2-4, 5.11) vs. Masahiro Tanaka (4-2, 4.39)

Thursday: Rick Porcello (5-0, 2.14) vs. C.C. Sabathia (2-0, 1.39)

*** *The Pawtucket Times***

McGAIR: Looking at the week ahead for Tyler Thornburg and other PawSox thoughts

Brendan McGair

A little of this, a little of that as the PawSox head back on the road after a brief pit stop at McCoy Stadium:

- Tyler Thornburg won't be joining the local Triple-A club on its upcoming seven-game road trip through Lehigh Valley and Syracuse. Instead, the rehabbing Red Sox reliever will join up with Double-A Portland. The Sea Dogs are in New Hampshire for games Monday through Wednesday before returning to Hadlock Field on Thursday.

The decision to have Thornburg continue the next leg of his comeback from right shoulder surgery with Portland has more to do with location than the level of pro ball. Since the Sea Dogs aren't leaving the New England region any time soon, it makes total sense for Thornburg to be stationed closer to Boston in the event something arises.

"We've been taking it slow and smart the whole time ... making sure we're doing everything the right way," said Thornburg after working out at McCoy Stadium on Sunday morning. "We're not going to rush anything."

The good news is that from a health standpoint, Thornburg has aced his first three mound assignments, all with Pawtucket. The soreness that he experienced the day after he's pitched is more of the general variety, the kind that's to be expected.

"There were some outings when I was Florida where the bounce-back was slow, but that's to be expected given how long I've been out," said Thornburg. "Now, I've been able to bounce back and do so a little more quickly than the previous time. It's just one of those good signs that you know you're on the right track."

Thornburg has yet to allow an earned run with the PawSox, spanning 2.2 innings. He topped out at 96 miles per hour during Saturday's outing and once again flashed an impressive curveball. The 29-year-old is scheduled to pitch for Portland on Monday night. If everything checks out fine, he'll be back on the hill on Thursday.

One of the thresholds that Thornburg would like to reach before returning to Boston is to pitch on back-to-back days. Such a scenario doesn't appear to be on the dance card this week, so there's a distinct possibility Thornburg will be back with the PawSox when the team returns to McCoy next Monday.

"The Red Sox are going to want that and I feel like I'm close to being able to pitch on consecutive days, but it's about not needing a couple days off after that," he said. "As far as coming in during the middle of an inning, that's not as big of a deal. Once you're ready and your arm is loose, it's not that big of a difference as far as when you enter."

Thornburg went into last Monday's outing knowing the seventh inning would be his. The next two times, "it's just been play it normal so I can once again get used to the bullpen atmosphere," he said. "We're trying to treat it as a normal thing."

Thornburg does anticipate sprinkling in his changeup relatively soon.

"I'm not too worried about that pitch right now. The curve is there and the fastball is getting there, especially location-wise," said Thornburg. "Probably in the next two or three outings, I'll be throwing my changeup more."

- Travel-wise, it's been an interesting 10-day period for the PawSox. From visiting Buffalo for three games, then home to Rochester for three, then back on the road for two at Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, and back home for two games against Scranton, it's been a stretch that has raised plenty of eyebrows within the clubhouse.

The goal is to ensure that every International League club is home the same number of weekends. It appears this premise is coming at the expense of maintaining a fresh clubhouse. The PawSox returned

home after their two-game stint in Moosic, Penn. on 4 a.m. Saturday. Understandably, they didn't take pregame batting practice before Saturday's game. The home-and-home series where each side hosts a pair becomes even more puzzling when factoring in the decision to have Pawtucket come home when it would have been much better off to head straight to Lehigh Valley, which is roughly an hour away from Scranton.

"I don't think it's productive," said PawSox manager Kevin Boles. "I get it from a business standpoint, but from a player development standpoint I hope it's something they get rid of. No one is going to feel sorry for a professional baseball player, but you have to take into account the health of the club. There has to be a better way to manage this."

The PawSox have two more home-and-home series where each team gets two games – July 2-5 against Rochester and Aug. 31-Sept. 3 against Scranton.

- Thornburg might be off the roster for now, but it's still rehab central as far as the PawSox are concerned. On Monday, Brock Holt (left hamstring strain) is ticketed to play seven innings at shortstop and play another seven innings Tuesday at a position to be determined.

Also Tuesday, Steven Wright will follow scheduled starting pitcher Marcus Walden to the mound. There's a clause that says if you're on the suspended list, which Wright is, you can begin a rehab assignment with six games remaining. Wright has been working out in Fort Myers since the start of his 15-game suspension.

Once the six-game window is up, the Red Sox could elect to re-set Wright's clock for another rehab stretch, this one encompassing 30 days. Knock on wood, Boston seems to be all set on the pitching front that stashing Wright in Pawtucket buys additional time as far as what to do with a knuckleball pitcher who's out of minor-league options and as recent as two years ago was an American League All-Star.

- Sam Travis was in the PawSox clubhouse on Saturday to gather some of his gear and head down to Fort Myers for extended spring training. The first base/outfield prospect was placed on the disabled list last week with a left intercostal strain and has his fingers crossed that he can rejoin his Pawtucket teammates at some point while they're on the road.

- Why mess with a good thing? PawSox hitting coach Rich Gedman was tasked with coaching third base for the third straight day on Sunday. Pawtucket is now 3-0 with the former Red Sox catcher flashing signs from the box. After his team's 2-0 win over Scranton, Boles confirmed that Gedman will be back out there Monday night in Lehigh Valley.

For Boles, the opportunity to remain in the bench for the entire game has its perks. Since the PawSox are predominantly a right-handed hitting team, it's tough for Boles to make an honest evaluation when he's coaching third at McCoy, since he's looking at them from behind.

"You get a pulse of the dugout. When you're out there, you don't get a sense of what the conversations are like. It's been very professional as far as discussing how they're going to attack the opposing pitcher," said Boles. "There's a lot of things that you don't see when you're in the same position the whole time, but it's fun running the game from the dugout."

****Redsox.com***

'As it should be': Red Sox-Yankees unrivaled

Mike Lupica

You want to know how good the Yankees and Red Sox are going this season, one in which the Red Sox won 17 of their first 19 and the Yankees have won 15 of their last 16? Here it is: Their combined winning percentage going into this week's series between them at Yankee Stadium is .721. The Elias Sports Bureau

says that happens to be the highest winning percentage the two have had with at least 60 games played between them since June 1946. So we've got that going for us.

And then, there is this: Per Elias, Tuesday's game will mark the first time the Red Sox (25-9) and Yankees (24-10) play each other with the two best records in MLB since June 2, 2002. Boston entered that game at 36-16, with New York at 37-19.

It is one more reason why the early rounds between the Yankees and Red Sox feel like late rounds. The two teams have played one series at Fenway Park. This time they play three games in New York, starting Tuesday night. If you are a Red Sox fan, you want to know what the Yankees are doing. Same with Yankees fans. This is the way things used to be between the two teams, and the way their fans think things ought to be. And they are just getting started.

The Yankees won again on Sunday, because they scored seven runs in the last two innings and came from 4-0 behind the Indians and won on a three-run walk-off home run from their kid second baseman, Gleyber Torres. Chris Sale struck out 12 in Texas, and the Red Sox ended up taking three of four from the Rangers.

So this is back to being the best rivalry in baseball, better than Cubs and Cardinals, the only thing we have now that resembles what we know about the way things were between the Giants, when they played at the Polo Grounds, and the Brooklyn Dodgers of Ebbets Field, and then when one of those teams would get to play the Yankees in the World Series.

In 2003 and '04, when they played seven-game series in the American League Championship Series, the whole thing felt more like the World Series, the closest possible thing in baseball to what Ali-Frazier was in boxing. Now they are having a new fight, with young stars all over the field. By going 15-1 over their past 16 games, the Yankees have matched anything they have done since 1961. Before Torres won them another game Sunday, 14 out of 15 was the best any Yankees team had done since the '98 Yankees, one of the great baseball teams of all time.

I asked Brian Cashman, the Yankees general manager, one who has brilliantly reshaped his team's present and future since the Trade Deadline of 2016, when he dealt away Aroldis Chapman to the Cubs and Andrew Miller to the Indians and helped both those teams into the World Series, on Saturday about what we have seen from his team and Boston's team in just 34 games.

Cashman described the whole thing with just these seven words:

"Yankees. Red Sox. As it should be."

We always talk about big league baseball as being The Show. These two teams have been some show already. Mookie Betts, if you add it all up, has been the game's most valuable player so far leading off for the Red Sox. He was hitting .355 when he had to leave Sunday's game with a right shoulder contusion after getting hit by a throw while running the bases. Didi Gregorius, not Aaron Judge and not Giancarlo Stanton, has been the Yankees' best and most valuable player and has hit 10 home runs for his team. Betts has hit 13 homers for the Red Sox, already has a pair of three-homer games and has just two fewer home runs than Judge and Stanton combined.

Stanton has been less than the Yankees thought he would be so far. J.D. Martinez has been even more than the Red Sox thought he would be. Martinez, who hit his eighth home run Sunday, has knocked in 27 and has a batting average of .349. Xander Bogaerts, the Red Sox shortstop, is hitting .333.

The Red Sox can hit like crazy. Just not the way the Yankees are hitting these days. Before Gleyber stole his act on Sunday, it was Gary Sanchez who kept winning games with home runs in his last at-bat. Sanchez now has nine home runs for the season, one more than Judge, two more than Stanton. Judge just turned 26. Sanchez is 25. Torres, Sunday's hero at Yankee Stadium, is 21. Third baseman Miguel Andujar is 23. Stanton? He's still just 28.

Betts is 25. Rafael Devers, Boston's kid at third, is 21. Bogaerts is 25. Andrew Benintendi is 23. You can make a pretty good case that there is as much young talent on the field at Fenway and at the Stadium as there has been in any other time in the history of the rivalry. The Astros, defending champs, aren't as good as either the Yankees or the Red Sox right now, because nobody in baseball is.

The Yankees' starting pitching has been better than it was supposed to be; they even got six no-hit innings out of Domingo German on Sunday. The Red Sox starting pitching, mostly because of David Price, has been less than we thought it would be. Red Sox relief pitching has been a lot more solid in front of Craig Kimbrel than many of us expected. Boston just doesn't have the arms the Yankees have ahead of Chapman.

They meet up again in New York on Tuesday night, a May series that will feel like late September. Another early round feeling like a late round. Yankees, Red Sox, as it should be. A money assessment of things from Cashman.

Inbox: Impact of Pedroia, Thornburg returns?

Ian Browne

What's going to happen with the roster as Dustin Pedroia and Tyler Thornburg get ready for their returns?
-- @Grudecks

If everyone is healthy, something is going to have to give when Pedroia returns. At that point, you won't be able to keep Eduardo Nunez, Brock Holt and Blake Swihart as reserves. One player out of those three will have to go. One thing to keep an eye on is whether Boston will try to rest Nunez with a stint on the disabled list. It's obvious his right knee isn't fully healthy yet. On the pitching side of things, the Red Sox have Thornburg and Steven Wright coming back in the near future. At that point, Hector Velazquez and Brian Johnson (out of options) could be in jeopardy.

How do you see the lineup shaking out once Pedroia returns?
-- @tmacbermuda

Look for Pedroia to hit seventh, because that is generally where Nunez has been hitting. Manager Alex Cora is locked into the Mookie Betts-Andrew Benintendi combo at the top of the order. Once Pedroia is back, Nunez will be a super-sub, filling in at various positions each week.

Thornburg is reportedly up to 97 mph, and videos of his hook look unfair. When can we expect to see him back?
-- @SoxFanForsyth

I'd say within the next couple of weeks. Thornburg has a couple of markers left. One is pitching back-to-back games. Another is coming in for the middle of an inning. If Thornburg is right, he could give the bullpen a major boost when he returns.

What's your opinion on using more of J.D. Martinez in left, Benintendi in center, Mitch Moreland at first and Hanley Ramirez at DH?
-- @BrayanR1794

Cora's comment after Sunday's game was telling when he said that Moreland is putting pressure on the manager to play him more. Without a doubt, Jackie Bradley Jr. will see his playing time dip if he doesn't start hitting in the near future. But as we've seen before, Bradley can follow excessive cold streaks with blistering hot streaks. With such a deep roster, Cora will try to find the hot hand as often as possible. Right now, that is Moreland.

Is the Swihart issue (no at-bats or reps in the field) related to the Yankees' fast start?
-- @soxnation25

It has nothing to do with the current streak by the Yanks and everything to do with a roster that has some repetition at the positions Swihart can play. Cora has determined that the defense of Christian Vazquez and Sandy Leon is too valuable for Swihart to be moved into the catching mix. As it is, Cora is trying to finagle the red-hot Moreland into the lineup at first base/DH, so that also takes another option away from Swihart.

Swihart for Matt Harvey makes sense to me. Drew Pomeranz is off to a shaky start, and the back of the rotation could use an extra legit starter. Would the change of environment for both players make sense to you?

-- @KrazyKula

I've heard crazier ideas. I'm all for taking a shot with Harvey. You have nothing to lose if you're fine taking the balance of his \$5.6 million salary for the rest of the season. Maybe pitching guru Brian Bannister can help Harvey figure out what has been ailing him. The main thing with trading Swihart is that you should make sure the return compensation is worthwhile. I'm sure the Red Sox are doing plenty of due diligence on Harvey. The Mets must trade Harvey by Saturday, otherwise he becomes a free agent.

Why haven't the Red Sox traded Swihart if they have no intentions to use him as a catcher?

-- @ribeachguru

The answer to that question is pretty simple: Boston doesn't have any viable options within the organization if Vazquez or Leon sustain an injury.

Is a Betts contract inevitable? It would be such a shame to just let him play out his arbitration years, and leave for free agency.

-- @OneRedSeat2004

I wouldn't say it is inevitable. The Red Sox have been unable to agree on a one-year contract with Betts for the past two offseasons. Two years ago, the team had to automatically renew him. This past year, they went to arbitration. But if I'm the Red Sox, signing Betts to a long-term contract would be my top priority.

Do you agree that the Red Sox should have David Price use breaking pitches more than fastballs since his velocity has dropped?

-- @yrealitycheck

Price isn't a finesse pitcher. He needs to rediscover his fastball command and change speeds a little more to make hitters off-balanced. Velocity is overrated if Price can paint a little more with his pitches. Mixing in some curves to "steal strikes," as Cora put it recently, would be a good idea as well.

What do you predict Price's ERA will be when the season ends?

-- @seanpagne_papi

I'm going to go with 3.65. I think Price will figure out the adjustments he needs to make and pitch well for the rest of the season.

If there were going to be an August callup that could have an impact on the postseason chase, a la Benintendi and Rafael Devers, who might that be for the 2018 Red Sox?

-- @AlexWhizzy

Going into the season, Michael Chavis would have been someone to keep an eye on. But he is serving an 80-game suspension for a positive PED test. Sam Travis is a hitter who could play a role at some point if the Red Sox need him.

****ESPNBoston.com***

From the brawl to the Bronx: Your guide to Yankees-Red Sox

Cole Harvey

NEW YORK -- When Tyler Austin tangled with Joe Kelly last month, we saw once again just how intense this time-tested New York Yankees-Boston Red Sox feud can be.

Still, Austin said he isn't anticipating this week's three-game set between his Yankees and Kelly's Red Sox to be different from any other series he'll play in this season. Boston is just another team on the schedule to him.

Yeah, sure.

"We're just coming out here to try to win ballgames," Austin said when asked about the rivalry returning to Yankee Stadium.

After making that dry statement and several others like it, Austin burst out laughing. He knew exactly what he was doing. He wasn't falling for any traps that might stir up more drama.

"I'm pretty boring over here, guys," he said, still laughing.

Yeah, sure he's boring. And sure these next three games will be boring, too.

At least Hanley Ramirez is realistically looking at what the next few days will hold.

Indeed, it's natural to be excited for this series, and here's why: Both teams are very good and very entertaining this year, coming in with the two best records in baseball. The Red Sox broke out to a 17-2 start, and the Yankees have responded by winning 15 of their past 16. The Sox enter the series with a one-game lead in the American League East. Yes, it's only May, but given the short- and long-term history between these teams, the adrenaline should be pumping on both sides.

Here's a game-by-game look at how it all might shake out in the Bronx.

Game 1: 7:05 p.m. Tuesday

Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez tries to hold back the Yankees' Tyler Austin after Austin gets drilled by Joe Kelly, setting off the teams' April brawl. Billie Weiss/Boston Red Sox/Getty Images
The matchup: Drew Pomeranz (1-1, 6.14) vs. Luis Severino (5-1, 2.11)

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, this game will mark the first time in the series' 115-year history that the teams are meeting this late in a season both holding winning percentages of .700 or higher. The Red Sox enter with a .735 winning percentage, while the Yankees are at .706.

If you weren't already aware of how well the teams have played this season, that should give you an idea.

Boone, Cora scout each other's rosters as Yanks, Sox battle in Boston
Will Giancarlo Stanton wake up? Will Mookie Betts redefine the rivalry? Alex Cora and Aaron Boone spent the spring comparing notes as rookie managers, but now each is in his own corner. Here's how the skippers size up the opposition.

Need more evidence? The Red Sox and Yankees began this week ranking first and second in three key offensive areas: runs (Yankees first, Red Sox second), run-differential per game (Red Sox first, Yankees second) and extra-base hits (Red Sox first, Yankees second).

For Boston, the extra-base hits have come in large part from Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez and Xander Bogaerts. Betts has 12 doubles and a league-high 13 home runs, Martinez has eight of each, and Bogaerts has 10 doubles and three homers.

For the Yankees, Didi Gregorius (10 doubles, 10 home runs), Gary Sanchez (eight doubles, nine HRs), Aaron Judge (nine doubles, eight HRs) and Giancarlo Stanton (seven doubles, seven HRs) have been providing the pop. Miguel Andujar, New York's 23-year-old third baseman, has 12 doubles and went on an eight-game extra-base hit streak earlier this season.

All of this means Pomeranz and Severino will have their hands full Tuesday. Severino will look to build off one of the best outings of his young career. The right-hander posted his first complete-game shutout last week in Houston, holding a dangerous Astros lineup to just five hits in a 4-0 Yankees win. Pomeranz, on the other hand, is still seeking his first really good outing this season. The lefty missed the first few weeks while recovering from a left forearm flexor injury and has been mediocre at best in three starts.

Betts left Sunday's game against Texas early after he was hit in the right shoulder blade by a throw while running the bases, but he is expected to play Tuesday. Severino will have to pitch delicately to the slugging leadoff hitter, who began the week having barreled a major league-high 22 balls, according to Statcast.

Game 2: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Mookie Betts has been arguably baseball's best hitter over the season's first six weeks, with a .355 average and 13 home runs. Brian Fluharty/USA TODAY Sports
The matchup: David Price (2-4, 5.11) vs. Masahiro Tanaka (4-2, 4.39)

If a healthy Betts is the most dangerous man in the Boston lineup, Sanchez is the most dangerous man in the Yankees' lineup -- at least for Red Sox pitchers.

Although the power-hitting catcher enters the series hitting just .198 this season, he is beginning to heat up, and he's owned Price so far in his career. In 12 at-bats against the Boston lefty, Sanchez is batting .500, with five of the six hits being home runs. He also has 11 RBIs.

The latest of those five home runs came in the middle game of last month's three-game set at Fenway Park. With two runs already in on a Stanton triple in the first, Sanchez launched a two-run shot over the Green Monster to give the Yankees a quick 4-0 lead in what would be a short night for Price.

Price left following the first inning with a tingling sensation in his left hand. He hasn't fared well in the four starts he's made since, allowing 17 earned runs in 22 innings. In his latest outing, Price allowed nine runs (seven earned) and six hits in 3 2/3 innings against Texas.

Sanchez isn't the only Yankees hitter to have had success against Price. The 27 homers Price has allowed against the Yankees are the most he's given up to any team in his career. His 4.67 ERA and 1.39 WHIP are both the second worst he's had against any team he's faced at least five times.

Given Price has had so much trouble going deep into games, look for the Yankees to attack him the way they have opposing pitchers all season: by making him work, pushing up his pitch count early.

According to ESPN Stats & Information, the Yankees rank third in the majors in pitches faced this season, having seen 5,422. Only Dodgers and Astros hitters had seen more entering play Monday.

Game 3: 7:05 p.m. Thursday

The matchup: Rick Porcello (5-0, 2.14) vs. CC Sabathia (2-0, 1.39)

Arguably the premier matchup of the week, the series finale features a pair of former Cy Young Award winners. Of late, both have shown Cy Young form.

Porcello has been dominant, using his sinker-slider combination effectively to induce ground balls and rack up strikeouts. He has 46 K's in 46 1/3 innings. Porcello this season has induced his highest percentage of

ground balls and gotten his highest percentage of chased pitches since Statcast started tracking that data in 2015.

Keep the Yankees in the yard

Can you K the Yanks? It's your turn to pitch to Judge, Stanton and Sanchez. Play the game »

The strikeouts are not high for Sabathia -- he has half as many as Porcello -- but in this late stage of his career, the 37-year-old has figured out how to control the strike zone despite his lost velocity.

Sabathia's past four outings have been particularly impressive. Across 23 1/3 innings, the left-hander has allowed just one earned run. Following an early April disabled list stint for a hip injury, he's helped the Yankees beat the Blue Jays, Twins, Angels and Indians, teams that could factor into the postseason race as the season goes on.

Sabathia has been getting outs mostly via the fly ball. Per Statcast, the percentages of ground balls and line drives he has induced this season are at their lowest points of the past four years. His fly ball percentage is at its highest point.

If any of this week's three games figures to be a low-scoring contest, this would be it.

As his team prepared for the series, Yankees manager Aaron Boone had a simple message for his hitters regarding the Red Sox starting pitchers: "Go make them earn it."

"I feel confident our guys will come out and do that. We understand all that goes with [the series] from the outside, that there will be more eyes on this one," said Boone, "and that's what you love about being a part of this."

****WEEI.com***

J.D. Martinez has been really good (and why he might become even better)

Rob Bradford

NEW YORK -- Through all the shock and awe that has come with Mookie Betts' start, lost a bit has been what J.D. Martinez is doing as a member of the Red Sox.

Martinez has come as advertised, and then some.

In case you haven't noticed, the outfielder/designated hitter is heading into the Yankees series with a .349 batting average, 1.015 OPS and eight home runs (with an equal number at home and on the road). With two outs and runners in scoring position Martinez has eight hits in 16 at-bats with two walks. And in his last 12 games, he's hitting .447 (the best in baseball) with a 1.287 OPS

But, believe or not, this might just be scratching the surface.

Martinez has played the exact same number of games in the outfield as he has at designated hitter, a notion that would have as a surprise to most (but not Martinez).

"Yeah. I would say so," said Martinez when asked if this was about what he expected when signing with the Red Sox. "I'm playing both, so I'm cool with it."

What the defensive opportunities have clearly done is give Martinez a level of comfort that is paying off. But there has been a flip-side to the equation that have offered challenges -- living the life as a designated hitter remains somewhat foreign.

"I feel like I'm kind of used to it now," Martinez said. "But once I get used to it the hard part is getting the routine of being a DH then going to the outfield and I lose the routine and I have to get into another outfield routine then I go back to the DH and then I have to jump back to the DH routine. It's just a back-and-forth."

"It's kind of early, but finding that ability to get in the flow of the game isn't easy," said Red Sox hitting coach Tim Hyers. "He's such a process-oriented guy. He works his butt off. I don't see a difference in how he gets ready but maybe playing in the outfield allows him to get in the flow. It's about finding his routine that works. He's on top of it, but as time goes he will find that part that clicks."

This where we get to the part that the Red Sox should be excited about.

Even with all the gaudy numbers Martinez has put up, when you look at what he has done as a DH there is definitely room for improvement. As an outfielder, he is hitting .418 with an 1.070 OPS, while his average dips to .271 as a designated hitter.

Martinez seems to be figuring this DHing thing out, having hit a home run in each of the last three games he has started in the spot, going 5-for-12.

"I'm getting used to it," said Martinez, who had only started 35 games at DH prior to coming to Boston. "Obviously I like the outfield better. You're more in the game, I feel like. I'm figuring it out. Figuring out the routine."

"[The outfield] It keeps you loose. You're running around. You're a DH, you're just sitting there, watching the game and then you have to get hit. Obviously you're going to be more loose when you're running around."

Joe Kelly hoping to hear loud noises at Yankee Stadium

Rob Bradford

NEW YORK -- The question to Joe Kelly was just a bit outside the box: "Have you ever been booed by any other crowd other than your own?"

It seemed like a fair inquiry considering pitchers, particularly relievers, don't stir the emotion of the opposition's fans like some others. And certainly few have put themselves in the position Kelly finds himself as the Red Sox head into Yankee Stadium Tuesday night, having been in at the epicenter his team's April 11 brawl with New York.

"Yes, I have been booed," Kelly said in between chuckles. "Dodger Stadium after I broke Hanley Ramirez's ribs. Every time I would go there they would have some guy saying they were going to stab me. They wanted to legit kill me. On the internet. There. People telling me when they see me in the streets of LA."

The incident Kelly referenced came during the 2013 postseason when the pitcher broke Ramirez's ribs, helping alter the National League Championship Series between the pitcher's Cardinals and the Dodgers, who the hitter was playing for at the time.

So, having been the one who lit the fuse to the latest animosity between the feud between the Red Sox and Yankees thanks to a 97 mph fastball to Tyler Austin's ribs, what is Kelly expecting upon his arrival in the Bronx this time around?

"It will probably be loud and I like loud. Hopefully it gets loud. I like a lot of noises. It gets my blood going," Kelly said. "It makes me laugh. It's so much fun. I love it. We'll see."

The fallout from the brawl is one of the storylines for the upcoming three-game series, which, as Kelly notes, has a different feel than some of the other semi-manufactured showdowns between the teams. It's a notion that is backed up by the fact that this will mark the first time the two clubs play each other with the two best records in Major League Baseball since June 2, 2002 (according to Elias Sports).

"That's good for local fans. I think it's good fans nationwide. As a player you want all eyes on as many games as possible," Kelly said. "If the Red Sox and Yankees rivalry can turn into Monday Night Football — which it never will — if you can get ratings like that it will be awesome. I think it's better for the game. It grows the game. It's good for future players. Future owners. The future of baseball. I think it's awesome. It's good that it's back and it's good that two good teams are going up against each other. Hopefully we'll be fighting throughout the whole season, metaphorically. It's going to be a fun series."

****NBC Sports Boston***

Curran: The sports goodies just keep on coming in Boston

Tom E. Curran

You never have to get up from the table in Boston these days. Sustenance in the form of high-level sporting entertainment just keeps getting slid in front of you.

B's eliminated by Tampa Bay in five games on Sunday?

You don't even get Monday to push your plate aside and straighten up in your seat. You have a ridiculously enjoyable Celtics team within a win of the Eastern Conference Finals this evening.

Who knew this Philly team could become so loathsome so fast? Ben Simmons was as nervous as a cat around a vacuum cleaner for the final five minutes and Joel Embiid bullied his coach to get back into the game in time to throw up an exhausted flamingo shot from the elbow in crunch time.

("Don't you just love him? So refreshing." No. Not really, Dave and Doris.)

And when you're done with tonight's course, do you get to dab the corners of your mouth and utter a light belch?

You don't. The waiter is here with your baseball on Tuesday.

And it's not just USDA Choice and Select baseball. It's Angus Prime. Yankees-Red Sox. Boston at 25-9 — - the only team in baseball not yet at double-digit losses -- and New York at 24-10, having won 15 of 16 and its last six in a row.

Every time these teams get together with a little something at stake we have to have the requisite conversation of whether the rivalry will ever be "the same." Jaysus. No. It won't. We gotta stop.

They aren't bringing back bench-seating in the bleachers. The Fisk-Munson rivalry-Reggie/Billy/George Era is 40 damn years ago this summer. You can't reclaim that, or the feeling in your cells in October of 2003 that the misery would never, ever, ever end.

But it did end. The Shakespearean subplots to the 2004 season -- the aborted trade for A-Rod, followed by his neatly fitting into the villain suit once worn by Reggie/Thurman/George/Billy, the addition of Curt Schilling, the Nomar trade -- built to an ALCS climax that defies explanation. It was cleansing and catharsis and people burbling "Now I can die in peace!" so often, I really started to root for it. It's not going to be the "same" as it was in the late '70s, or 14 years ago.

So? Stuff's not supposed to stay the same. That doesn't mean that this isn't "like" it.

Because it is. David Price patronizingly patted fans on the head after the April 12 multi-scrum dustup at Yankee Stadium: "It's Red Sox-Yankees. That's what everybody wants. That's what they got." Shrug. Yawn. Eyeroll.

He can have it his way. People who immerse themselves -- gorge themselves -- on the game take it differently. It's a Yankees team whose most recognizable trait is that it's inhabited by 527 pounds and more than 13 feet of human in Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton. Their very presence invites Goliath into the esoteric discussion of the two teams regardless of what payroll, pitching staff or overall talent might do to debunk that. "David and Goliath . . . ummmmm, I feel you're being a little . . . ummmmm, reductive?"

Oh ya do, do ya? Whatever. Nobody asked you. We have an early-May showdown of the best teams in baseball right now.

The Yankees rise from 7 1/2 games back on April 20 dovetailed perfectly with the Sox inevitable self-correction from their 17-2 start. While Sean Manaea was no-hitting the Sox on that Saturday night in Oakland, the Yankees were winning their first of nine in a row.

They've slowly reeled the Sox back in but have been stuck one game behind and unable to draw even as they won three straight over the weekend against Cleveland and the Sox did the same in Texas. Stanton is 4-for-23 over the past week and is at .227 with 7 homers and 19 RBI and a .768 OPS. Judge is 5-for 24 over the past week but he's been a beast - .296, 8 bombs, 23 RBI and a .982 OPS.

The Yankees best player, though, has been shortstop Didi Gregorius. He's at .311 with 10 HRs, 30 RBI and an OPS of 1.063. He is right there with Mookie Betts as a very early frontrunner for AL MVP. Betts would get the nod -- he's at .355 with 13 homers and 26 RBI from the leadoff spot with an absurd OPS of 1.252.

The Sox had eight- and nine-game winning streaks already this year and won 16 of 17 between March 30 and April 20. They got no-hit by Manaea on April 21 and are 7-7 since, but have won their three straight, including Sunday when they got Chris Sale's best (7 IP, 103 pitches, 1 ER, 4 hits, 12 Ks, 1 BB, 2 HBP just to keep 'em loose).

No Sale this series for the Yankees. Instead it's Drew Pomeranz vs. Luis Severino on Tuesday, Price vs. Masahiro Tanaka on Wednesday followed by Rick Porcello and C.C. Sabathia to wrap it up. You like that?

Good. Nothing ever stays the same. But it's hard to remember too many times we've had it better.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

McAdam: Five thoughts on upcoming Red Sox-Yankees series

Sean McAdam

1. They are who we thought they were.

The Red Sox and Yankees were projected to be two of the best teams in baseball, and here we are, almost six weeks into the season, and the Sox and Yanks have the two best records in the American League, with a game separating them in the standings.

There's very little difference between them statistically — the Red Sox have scored 192 runs and the Yankees 197. Red Sox pitching has yielded 125 runs with the Yankees allowing 135.

The Sox own a slight edge in team OPS (.792 to .780) and the Yanks have scored a handful more runs (197 to 192). Pitching is equally close, with the Boston staff ERA at 3.45 and the Yankees at 3.43.

Is it any wonder that a single game is all that stands between the clubs?

2. In the first series, the Red Sox had their best pitchers lined up; not so this time.

When the teams met in the third week of the season at Fenway, the Sox had Chris Sale, David Price and Rick Porcello set to go as starters. Sale and Price pitched well; Price, memorably, came out after just one inning, having allowed four runs and complaining of numbness in his left hand.

This time, the Red Sox starters will be (in order): Drew Pomeranz (Tuesday); David Price (Wednesday) and Rick Porcello (Sunday).

That's somewhat problematic for the Red Sox since Pomeranz sports a 6.14 ERA — though he pitched better in his last start. Similarly, at the time of the last series, Price had thrown 14 shutout innings to start the season. More recently, Price has been rocked. In fact, since the last start against New York, Price has compiled an 8.22 ERA and opposing hitters have an OPS of .937.

That leaves Porcello, who has arguably been the Red Sox' best and most consistent pitcher (5-0, 2.14) this season, as the lone starter currently at the top of his game.

Meanwhile, the Yankees have the good fortune to have their top three set for the series: Luis Severino (5-1, 2.11) Tuesday; Masahiro Tanaka (4-2, 4.39) Wednesday and CC Sabathia (2-0, 1.39) Thursday.

Tyler Austin fights with Joe Kelly on April 11, 2018, at Fenway Park. (Billie Weiss/Boston Red Sox/Getty Images)

3. Carryover from the brawl is unlikely ... but you never know.

In the middle game of the first series, the Red Sox took exception to a hard takeout slide at second from Tyler Austin and retaliated when Joe Kelly drilled him in the seventh inning, emptying the benches and resulting in a brief boxing match between Kelly and Austin on the Fenway lawn.

Kelly has morphed into a cult figure of sorts in the aftermath, and not incidentally, become the Red Sox' most valuable set-up man, with a string of 13-straight scoreless appearances, during which he's issued just one walk. Austin, taking advantage of an opportunity at first, has posted an .895 OPS in the 10 games he's played since the incident.

It's likely both teams will be warned before the game and the umpiring crew will be on high alert. But all it takes is a hit batsman — or even a pitch that strays too far inside — for tempers to flare.

4. There's a new addition to the rivalry — and he's pretty good.

Both the Red Sox and Yankees have done a terrific job developing young position players in recent seasons. Think: Rafael Devers and Andrew Benintendi with the Red Sox, and Aaron Judge and Gary Sanchez with the Yankees.

Since the teams last met, the Yanks have added second baseman Gleyber Torres to the mix. A true shortstop, he's been shifted to second base and in 15 games, has posted an .857 OPS while playing his new position well. On Sunday, he became the youngest Yankee ever to connect on a walk-off homer, belting a three-run shot in the bottom of the ninth to complete a ninth-inning comeback for the Yankees over Cleveland.

5. Last time, the Red Sox were surging. Now, it's the Yankees turn.

When the Yankees arrived in Boston on April 10, the Red Sox were riding an eight-game winning streak, going on a run after blowing a 4-0 lead on Opening Day. The Red Sox cooled in the final week of April

when they suffered through a season-high three-game losing streak, but have since reignited, winning eight of their last 12.

The Yankees, however, are the hottest team in the game, having won 15-of-16. What makes that run even more impressive is that a good chunk of it has come against three of better teams in the American League: the Angels, Astros and Indians.

And fair warning to Craig Kimbrel, who's been perfect (9-for-9) in save chances this season: four times in the last 10 games, the Yankees have come back win against the opponents' closer.

****The Athletic***

Jennings: Red Sox and Yankees are again MLB's best teams as they clash in Bronx

Chad Jennings

Red Sox starter Frank Castillo went eight innings, one run. Leadoff hitter Rickey Henderson went deep, designated hitter Carlos Baerga had a double, and notorious Yankees right fielder John Vander Wal took an 0-for-3 with a caught stealing. The Red Sox ran away with the game, 7-1, on June 2, 2002.

At last, it's time for the rematch.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Tuesday's game at Yankee Stadium will be the first since that unforgettable contest 16 years ago that the Red Sox and Yankees face one another with the two best records in Major League Baseball.

Just what the rest of the country loves: another reason for this rivalry to steal the headlines. Maybe the benches will clear just for good measure!

After all, it's been less than a month since these two teams last met. You might remember that series. A 13-run Red Sox blowout in Game 1. Joe Kelly vs. Tyler Austin in Game 2. Craig Kimbrel thwarting a ninth-inning comeback in Game 3.

Since then, the Red Sox have been riding a bit of a roller coaster while the Yankees have found their stride (and apparently found their second baseman in this Gleyber Torres kid). The Yankees have won 15 of 16, and their past 10 games have come against the first-place Angels (a series sweep), the defending champion Astros (won three of four on the road) and the first-place Indians (another sweep with two walk-offs).

The Red Sox just won three in a row in Texas, and their division lead is down to a single game. If the Yankees take two of three, these two teams will be tied nearly a quarter of the way through the season.

So, yeah, big series coming up in the Bronx. A few thoughts before things get started.

FanGraphs' top three players in Wins Above this season: Mike Trout, Mookie Betts and Didi Gregorius. That's the best player of his generation, followed by two guys squaring off this week in New York. And this time, Betts' value isn't inflated by his defense. He's still a plus defender, of course, but he now leads the majors in slugging percentage, and it's not even close. Gregorius finished the weekend with the third-highest OPS, and that's coming from a shortstop (his OPS is even higher than Manny Machado's, and much higher than Carlos Correa's or Francisco Lindor's). The Red Sox and Yankees are the top two teams in baseball, and they're being led by two guys having Trout-like success through the first month and a half. Just one more thing to appreciate these next three days.

What are the Red Sox going to do about their catching situation? They have three catchers, and each one brings some uncertainty. Should Christian Vazquez get less playing time? Should Sandy Leon get more? Should Blake Swihart get any? It's basically impossible to judge Swihart at this point. There's room for him on the roster, but Alex Cora so values the defensive work of Vazquez and Leon that he basically never finds a time to put Swihart in the lineup. Meanwhile, Leon caught Chris Sale on Sunday, and that just happened to be Sale's best start of the year, a reminder of how well they worked together last season. Since Vazquez isn't hitting anyway, it's worth wondering if Cora might eventually pair Leon with both Sale and Porcello. To this point, Leon's been getting almost all of his playing time when Porcello's on the mound (and Porcello just happens to be the team's most consistent starter).

The struggle is very real when it comes to Red Sox hitters vs. left-handed pitchers. Jackie Bradley Jr. is 3-for-34 with no walks and 13 strikeouts against them. Andrew Benintendi is 4-for-30. Rafael Devers is 8-for-35. Even Eduardo Nunez, a right-handed hitter, is just 4-for-34 with no extra-base hits against them. Granted, Nunez hasn't been an extreme splits guy in his career, but still ... a .118 batting average with the platoon advantage? Yikes. Of course, some others have picked up the slack – Betts, J.D. Martinez, Hanley Ramirez, Xander Bogaerts and even Mitch Moreland have an OPS over .800 against lefties – but four lineup regulars really struggling against lefties is a concern. Worth noting: Lefty CC Sabathia starts for the Yankees on Thursday, and lefty Aroldis Chapman looms as the team's closer. Chasen Shreve is the only other lefty in the bullpen.

The bright side against lefties: Martinez has quietly lived up to his billing as a right-handed force in the middle of the order. It's been fairly easy to overlook given Bogaerts' red-hot start and Betts' breakout home run surge, but Martinez has a 167 OPS+ — which is adjusted for the players' ballpark – exactly the same as last season. With three viable hitters ahead of him, he's leading the team in RBI, and he has the second-highest batting average. And while Fenway Park surely takes away some home runs, he's actually hit better at home (1.087 OPS) than on the road (.951 OPS). He's also played enough outfield to give Moreland opportunities at first base and Ramirez half-days off at designated hitter. Seems like we don't talk about Martinez all that much these days, but he's been what the Red Sox expected.

Speaking of Martinez: If Bradley continues to hit below .200, and Moreland continues to slug well over .600, I wonder if we'll start to see Martinez get a little more time in the outfield so that Bradley spends a little more time on the bench. I'm very much of the mind that Bradley's defense is worth his offensive valleys, but in this case, putting him on the bench would let the Red Sox upgrade their first base defense. Plus, a streaky hitter is one thing, but a .178 hitter with the third-most strikeouts on the team? Typically, I think of myself as Team Bradley – I just love watching the guy play center field, and I recognize he can provide offensive impact in bursts – but Moreland is playing well enough to deserve more playing time, and cutting back on Bradley's time is the easiest way to give it to him.

Tuesday's pitching matchup should be lopsided in the Yankees favor. They have Luis Severino coming off a complete-game shutout, and the Red Sox have Drew Pomeranz, who's made three starts, all of them uninspiring. One thing to keep in mind, though, is that Pomeranz looked as good as he has all year in the last four innings of his most recent start. He retired eight of his last nine, with the one exception being wiped out by a double play. "It wasn't clicking the first couple of innings," Pomeranz said. "Then, all of a sudden, I just kind of got it." We could find out Tuesday whether that was a meaningful and sustainable eureka moment.

Don't make too much of a few good rehab performances. That's a rule of thumb that should never be ignored, but let's ignore it for just a second, because Tyler Thornburg's minor league numbers are coupled with impressive scouting reports that suggest his arm strength has returned following thoracic outlet syndrome surgery. That's encouraging, no? Of course it's too early to know anything for certain, but if Thornburg returns at the end of this month, the Red Sox will have two months to evaluate him before the non-waiver trade deadline. Just how desperately the team needs another bullpen arm may very well hinge on how well Thornburg pitches when he finally make his Red Sox debut.

Not that it's an issue right now, but here's something to keep in mind: One week ago, Sam Travis went on the Triple-A disabled list with a left intercostal strain. That means, every healthy position player on the 40-man is current on the active roster. That will change once Brock Holt is ready to return – which should be soon – but still, for the time being, the Red Sox are out of readily available position depth. One non-40-man player to keep in mind is veteran Mike Olt. Once a highly touted prospect and now a 29-year-old organizational third baseman, Olt is putting up great numbers with Pawtucket. If the Red Sox have to dig beyond their 40-man, Olt's making the case for a call-up.

McCaffrey: 'Fortnite' has become a force inside the Red Sox clubhouse

Jen McCaffrey

On Monday, the Red Sox enjoy an off day in New York before a key three-game series against the Yankees.

With spring in the air and temperatures in the 70s, there won't be a shortage of things to do in the bustling city.

Even still, it's likely that a contingent of Red Sox players will be holed up in their hotel rooms with headsets on, glued to computer monitors, playing a game that's gained international attention.

The Fortnite phenomenon has invaded the Red Sox clubhouse.

The multiplayer game is set in a post-apocalyptic world where players are tasked with searching for survivors and resources, while gradually eliminating all your foes. The objective is to be the last survivor at the end of each 100-player round.

And as Sox players tell it, once you pick up Fortnite, it's hard to stop playing — especially on road trips.

“Let's say we get back at 11 p.m. from a game, we'll play until 1 a.m., 1:30 a.m., 2 a.m. depending on what time our game is the next day,” David Price said. “But day games or off days, we can put some time in.

“We have to make sure, ‘All right we've got to eat. Let's take 30 minutes, eat some lunch, and see you back in 30.’ But you can lose track of time whenever you're playing it.”

Since its creation last July, Fortnite has become the world's largest multiplayer video game. Millions are online and playing at any given time, peaking in February, when developer Epic Games claimed it had 3.4 million users playing concurrently.

It's free to download and start playing, though there are cosmetic additions players can buy to augment their characters inside the game. There are how-to guides on best tactics to survive popping up in publications like Forbes and Business Insider.

And the Red Sox Fortnite contingent even dished advice to a fellow player they encountered while making visits to sick kids in a Boston hospital last week.

The Red Sox Fortnite obsession began to spread in spring training. Reliever Carson Smith had picked up the game in the fall, and shortstop Xander Bogaerts began playing Fortnite with a group of friends back home in Aruba in the offseason. When he and Smith arrived in Fort Myers in February and told their teammates about how addictive the game was, several of them started playing together.

The group of Fortnite diehards now includes Price, Smith, Craig Kimbrel, Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Bogaerts, Matt Barnes, Joe Kelly, J.D. Martinez and Heath Hembree.

“I saw everybody playing it and they were addicted to it and I’m like, ‘I’m not going to do it because I get addicted to video games really easily,’” Hembree said. “But I gave in and downloaded it and it’s kind of taken over my nightlife.”

Any free moment in the clubhouse on the road or home at Fenway Park is now spent playing. When they’re traveling away from their families, like in the midst of this 11-day road trip, Fortnite sessions in the team hotel become a nightly occurrence.

The game is structured such that an individual can play alone or in teams of two, three or four. Generally the Red Sox play in multiple groups.

But there’s one favored teammate — Smith.

“We play teams of four so we just try to make sure Carson’s on our team and we just follow his lead and he’ll win us battles,” Hembree said. “Carson kind of takes over every game.”

The fact that it’s so hard to survive in the game makes it even more enticing to play, and it’s little surprise that it’s a perfect fit for a group of hyper-competitive 20-somethings with some free time on their collective hands.

“It’s competitive. It’s tough to win. Just like baseball, we’re all competitors,” Smith said. “This game is a game of failure, especially from the hitting side. [Fortnite is] a game you’re not going to win a majority of the time so the satisfaction you get when you do win — it’s exciting and fun to do with other people.”

Sale, the latest adopter, went out and bought an Xbox system a few weeks ago so he could join in.

“It’s competing, so anybody in this clubhouse, give us a chance to compete ... we’ll take it up,” Sale said. “I got on it because everyone else was playing it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not very good at it. I’m not to the level some of these guys are here. It’s a way to have fun not only here but when we go back to the hotel we link up to the hotel internet and we all get in a chat and there’s usually, if there’s six, seven, eight of us we can play a couple different games..”

As the game’s popularity is surging, moves and actions from the game are trickling into popular culture — and onto the baseball diamond. At the end of each round, for instance, the on-screen character does a specific dance to celebrate the win. In the first few weeks of the season, whenever Bogaerts got an extra-base hit, he’d do one of the game’s dances, called the “Take the L,” which consists of a jig while using your fingers to form the letter ‘L’ on your forehead. It looks ridiculous and it always gets a laugh from his teammates in the dugout.

The Fortnite obsession has meant that players have to get creative to ensure that they can play anytime, anywhere. While there are monitors and headsets set up in the Red Sox clubhouse at Fenway, when the team is on the road they need to bring all their gear with them.

“I’ve got an Xbox. I’ve got my own backpack for it. A little 15 1/2-inch monitor and I can put it up anywhere,” Price said. “Just two cords and just need two outlets in the wall and I’m ready to go.”

When their teammates aren't available, some Sox play on their own hidden behind nondescript screen names. The video game players on the other side don't know they're playing alongside Price or Sale. Price recalled one time in the group chat that accompanies the game, a recent Red Sox-Yankees series came up in conversation and he chimed in anonymously.

But all the Red Sox players agree it's more fun to play together.

"It's insane. It's 100 people. Teams of four or three or two or solo and it's just the adrenaline rush it gives you especially when you get down to those last couple people," Price said. "It's probably the closest you're going to find to being out there on that mound."

McCaffrey: Worries about Chris Sale's velocity can subside now

Jen McCaffrey

ARLINGTON, Texas – It took eight starts, but Chris Sale looks like his old self on the mound again.

Sale spun a gem on Sunday in Texas with seven innings, allowing just one run on a solo homer in his final inning of work as the Red Sox beat the Rangers, 6-1, and improved to 25-9. They sit one game ahead of New York before a key three-game series against the Yankees beginning Tuesday.

"It seems like he wanted to stop all the talk about him not throwing hard anymore," manager Alex Cora said of Sale's dominant outing. "Change of speeds, good changeup, good slider, on top of hitters, elevating the fastball, velocity was up there and that was a great performance."

The lefty allowed four hits, one walk and struck out a season-high 12 batters while registering 23 swings-and-misses. It marked the most swings-and-misses he'd induced since April 27, 2017, against the Yankees.

"I was able to stay a little bit more loose," Sale said. "Just had a good rhythm too. A lot of things combined just being a little more within myself too. My first handful of starts I was kind of getting away from some things and these last two are kind of where I've needed to be in terms of release point and body wise and all that."

Entering Sunday, Sale had posted an otherwise impressive 2.14 ERA, but had only pitched seven innings twice through seven starts. His fastball velocity was sitting around 93.5 mph while last year he'd averaged 95.1 mph, according to BrooksBaseball.net. It wasn't overly concerning, but it was a bit surprising. Part of it was the slow buildup the Red Sox had initiated in spring training. But another concern was that his slider was a tick off.

"It's probably been the main concern," Sale said. "It wasn't where we wanted it to be. With Dana (LeVangie) and Banny (Brian Bannister) looking at some video, we actually looked at a lot of video and kind of got back to where we wanted to be with stiff front side and release point. A couple of other things, couple of other cues that get me where I needed to be, so without them I'd probably still be lost."

On Sunday, he put any worry to rest, consistently hitting 96 mph on the radar gun at Globe Life Park while flashing 98 and 99 mph a handful of times. He got 12 swings-and-misses alone on his slider, the most he'd had since an Aug. 29 start in Toronto.

Of the four hits he allowed, the home run was the only extra base hit as he held the Rangers scoreless for the first six innings.

"When I was out there warming up in the bullpen before the game, I could feel [the ball] coming out a little bit," Sale said. "Different days you show up and you have different things, so you have to play the hand you're dealt and I felt it coming pretty good today. So I just tried to use it and not abuse it."

****Associated Press***

Yankees, Red Sox to play in London in 2019

LONDON -- The New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox will face each other in two regular-season games at the Olympic Stadium in London next year.

Boston will be the home team for both of MLB's first games in Europe on June 29 and 30, 2019. The stadium will have a capacity of 55,000 in a baseball configuration.

MLB says it is also "committed to playing in London in 2020 and our intention is to establish a long-term footprint in the city."

The NFL has played regular-season games in London since 2007, holding 18 games at Wembley and three at Twickenham. Three more NFL games are scheduled for this year, including one at Tottenham's new stadium.