

The Boston Red Sox Thursday, August 9, 2018

*** *The Boston Globe***

Yes, the Red Sox are dominating. But this looks awfully easy right now

Nick Cafardo

TORONTO — Don't be surprised if the Red Sox finish with 110 to 115 wins.

Why not? Do you see who the Red Sox are playing on a nightly basis? The Toronto Blue Jays are truly awful. They could get lucky and run into a ball or two now and then. They might get lucky and one of their pitchers might spin a few clean innings.

The Red Sox have one more game at Rogers Centre after Wednesday night's 10-5 victory before heading to play four games in Baltimore against the hapless Orioles. It's possible the Red Sox could complete the sweep here, sweep there, and then head to Philadelphia for two games against an NL playoff contender.

There's no doubt that given the state of baseball, the Red Sox could win more games than they have ever won. The league has never had such a disparity between the good and the bad. It's the Red Sox, Yankees, Astros, Indians, A's, and fading Mariners. That's it, folks.

We saw how bad the Yankees looked without sluggers Gary Sanchez and Aaron Judge. Commissioner Rob Manfred has said that he likes the sudden-death format in the playoffs because it makes for meaningful games in September. But here in August these games are lopsided because Boston is a good team and the opposition isn't. With a nine-game lead in the AL East, the Red Sox have built a gap that might make the September games meaningless in the division race. The Yankees would need a Red Sox collapse similar to 1978 or 2011 to make the final six meetings between the teams truly meaningful. As long as the Red Sox keep beating up the Sisters of the Poor, this could be a runaway.

Remember, they have accumulated this lead with Chris Sale, Christian Vazquez, Blake Swihart, Ian Kinsler, and Dustin Pedroia on the disabled list. They've gained ground with Drew Pomeranz unable to find his form of 2017, and with Craig Kimbrel in a closer slump. They just got Rafael Devers back off the DL. I mean, this looks awfully easy right now.

When you watch the Jays fail to catch foul balls and get blanked for five innings by spot starter Brian Johnson, you know why the Red Sox are steamrolling these teams.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the Red Sox haven't earned this. It's actually fun to watch them dominate teams on a nightly basis and see J.D. Martinez and Mookie Betts roll up MVP-worthy numbers.

The Jays made some noise Wednesday after the Red Sox took a 7-0 lead, touching up Johnson for five runs on two home runs, but the game never was in doubt.

Martinez, meanwhile, continues to gather admirers.

"The numbers he's putting up . . . he's incredibly locked in," said a member of the Jays' front office. "I haven't seen a hitter this year who's as good. As much as we love Mookie, hard to ignore Martinez's numbers. They are fabulous."

The Red Sox' big lead also might allow them to strategically space Sale's remaining regular-season starts.

Sale is scheduled to come off the DL and pitch Sunday against the Orioles. Globe colleague Alex Speier mapped out a schedule in which Sale could make eight more starts in the regular season, with only one against an AL playoff team (Indians). That would set him up for Game 1 of the Division Series.

The Red Sox aren't about to give away their strategy, and their plan is to see how Sale feels after he returns to the rotation. But the opportunity to have him skip playoff teams could be huge. Big leads will enable this team to set its rotation, bullpen, and lineup for the long haul, including the playoffs.

If you're a Red Sox fan, just enjoy what you're watching. Forget about the "show me in October" stuff. Of course it will come down to how they perform in the postseason, but it doesn't mean you can't enjoy the journey.

Worry about October in October.

In the meantime, just be thankful you're not a fan of the Jays, Rays, or Orioles. You're watching the best team in baseball right now, and the Red Sox' dominating play is proof that they are head and shoulders above the rest of the field.

Brian Johnson gave the Red Sox what they needed in this one

Peter Abraham

TORONTO — Red Sox lefthander Brian Johnson has learned not to look at his record. For him, it's a few numbers that don't really mean a lot.

Johnson came out of the bullpen to start four games from July 3-26 and allowed four earned runs over 20 innings. His record was 0-1.

He has since faced the Yankees, and on Wednesday night the Toronto Blue Jays, and given up nine earned runs over 12 innings and won both games.

Johnson pitched seven innings against the Jays and the Red Sox came away with a 10-5 victory before a crowd of 36,798 at Rogers Centre.

Two late home runs marred what was a solid start for Johnson through five innings.

He ultimately allowed five runs on six hits over seven innings. But a day after the Red Sox used six relievers, that he went deep in the game and left with a four-run lead is what mattered.

"People are going to say why did he pitch seven. We needed seven," Sox manager Alex Cora said. "We know where we were in the bullpen and got him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

The Sox are 6-2 when Johnson (3-3) starts and that's a statistic he does like.

"Obviously you don't want to go out there and give up five. But as long as the team gets the W, honestly that's all that matters," Johnson said. "I'll take it."

The Sox have not set their rotation beyond Sunday. But Johnson has shown he should have a spot instead of Drew Pomeranz.

"We're going to talk about it [Thursday]," Cora said.

Johnson has struck out 17 and generated 23 swings and misses over 12 innings in his last two starts. Johnson's ability to locate his high-80s fastball and throw a traditional curveball with some bite has made him a tough matchup for hitters conditioned to face high-end velocity.

“He throws strikes, he works fast, and he makes them put it in play. That’s all you can ask for. Brian gives us a chance to win,” right fielder Mookie Betts said.

Run support helps. The Sox had 12 hits, seven for extra bases, and drew eight walks.

In his first game back from the disabled list, Rafael Devers was 2 for 4 with a home run, a double, and two RBIs. Xander Bogaerts reached base three times and drove in three runs.

J.D. Martinez was 3 for 4 with a double and one RBI. One of his mentors, Miguel Cabrera, won the last Triple Crown in 2012. Could Martinez be next? He is hitting .332 with 34 home runs and 98 RBIs.

The 81-34 Sox have won six straight, 10 of their last 11, and 25 of 30. They are 12-3 against Toronto this season and 6-2 at Rogers Centre.

Rick Porcello will be on the mound Thursday night with the Sox seeking a three-game sweep.

Betts said he had no idea the Sox had won 25 of 30.

“It’s one game at a time, one series at a time. Just keep it like that,” Betts said. “When you start looking at the big picture, that’s when you get content where you are.”

Toronto tried to play a lottery ticket by starting righthander Mike Hauschild. None of the numbers matched.

The Astros released Hauschild on July 30 after he posted a 4.88 earned run average in 19 Triple A starts. The Blue Jays signed him on Aug. 2 and pitched him in relief against Seattle later that day.

Hauschild threw six scoreless innings for his first major league victory and earned the start against the Red Sox.

Hauschild threw two more scoreless innings before the Sox scored four runs in the third.

Devers started the inning with a double. Hauschild then walked Sandy Leon and hit Betts to load the bases.

Andrew Benintendi’s sacrifice fly drove in the first run. Mitch Moreland followed with a two-run double off the wall in center. It was his first double since June 28.

After Martinez singled, Bogaerts’s sacrifice fly scored Moreland.

With runners on second and third and one out in the fifth inning, Toronto intentionally walked Martinez.

It was only the fifth time this season Martinez has been intentionally walked, a testament to the lineup depth behind him.

The move backfired when Luis Santos walked Bogaerts to force in a run.

Eduardo Nunez singled ahead of Devers’s home run to right-center in the sixth inning. It was his 16th of the season. Doubles by Martinez and Bogaerts added another run in the seventh inning.

As the Sox piled up runs against assorted replacement-level pitchers, Johnson was again showing he’s more than that.

He retired 10 of the first 11 batters he faced and had a two-hit shutout through 5²/₃ innings. Justin Smoak then singled and Teoscar Hernandez followed with a home run to left-center.

For the first time this season, Johnson worked into the seventh inning as a starter, and that proved to be too much. With two out and two on, Johnson threw a first-pitch fastball to Randal Grichuk and he hammered it off the facing of the third deck in left field.

“I think the little bit longer innings caught up with me,” Johnson said. “But I felt like I pitched a lot better than my linescore shows.”

Mookie Betts and his girlfriend are expecting their first baby

Kenneth Singletary

Mookie Betts of the Red Sox has big news to go along with the big hits he gets for Boston.

He and his girlfriend, Brianna Hammonds, are expecting.

Their first baby is due in mid-November, Betts said on Twitter and Instagram.

“This year continues to be good for me!!!” he wrote. “Can’t wait to meet you baby Betts. More life, more blessings!!!”

This year is indeed being good to Betts. His Red Sox are firmly atop the American League East division with the playoffs in their sights, and he (along with teammate J.D. Martinez) is a leading candidate for AL Most Valuable Player.

Sandy Leon was on the ball in Tuesday’s Red Sox win

Peter Abraham

TORONTO — It was a footnote in a game where 17 runs were scored over 10 innings. But what Red Sox catcher Sandy Leon did in the sixth inning against the Blue Jays on Tuesday night was the best defensive play of the Red Sox season, in the estimation of manager Alex Cora.

“That was amazing,” Cora said.

Toronto had a 2-1 lead when it loaded the bases with no outs against Brandon Workman. Kevin Pillar popped up to right field for the first out. Kendrys Morales, a slow runner, stayed at third base.

Luke Maile then sent a roller up the third base line. Leon jumped out from behind the plate, shed his mask, chased the ball down, and in one motion slapped the tag on Morales as he ran by.

Workman and third baseman Eduardo Nunez had no play on the ball

“Do or die,” Leon said. “I thought it was going to stay fair so I picked it up. It was a crazy play.”

Workman was worried the ball would come loose.

“Morales is a big guy, I don’t know how Sandy held on to the ball,” he said. “It was one of the best plays I’ve ever seen.”

Score it a 2-unassisted, which is a rarity outside of interference calls on the batter. Special assistant Jason Varitek, who played 17 years professionally after three seasons at Georgia Tech, said he had never witnessed a play like that before.

“Sandy showed great field awareness,” Varitek said. “That was the only play he had. He also has to secure the ball and make the tag.”

Leon also made a smart play to end the inning. When Randal Grichuk grounded a ball in front of the mound, Leon shouted at Workman to toss the ball to the plate for a force rather than make the more risky throw to first base.

“I think that was the only play because it was so slow,” Leon said.

Leon also contributed offensively to the 10-7 victory with a double in the eighth inning that started a four-run rally.

“His baseball IQ is way up there,” Cora said. “The good thing about him is he’s willing to keep learning . . . He’s able to slow down the game. There’s not a big moment. The bigger the moment, he’s able to slow it down and think through the situation.”

Devers returns

Rafael Devers was activated off the disabled list and started at third base. He was 2 for 4 with a double, a two-run home run, and two runs scored in a 10-5 victory after missing 10 days with a left hamstring strain.

Devers went into the game with a .721 OPS, a step back from the .819 he had over 58 games last season. Devers also has 20 errors, the most in the majors.

Inconsistency has been an issue in his first full season in the majors.

“I can’t say that it’s been good,” Devers said via a translator. “I know that there’s more in there, that I can give more. But that’s baseball; you can’t predict the ups and the downs. Sometimes you’re good and sometimes you’re not so good.

“I’m just glad to be back. I know that I can give more than I have.”

Cora believes Devers has played well.

“It’s been a good one. He’s 21,” the manager said. “He’s had his ups and downs. Obviously everybody focused on the errors. He’s a guy [with good range] at third base. He’s made some mistakes, yeah. But at the same he’s been learning.”

Cora said he would not replace Devers for defensive purposes late in a game unless it was a double switch in one of the interleague games in Philadelphia next week.

“As of now, we trust him,” Cora said. “So we’ll let him play.”

To avoid playing consecutive games on turf, Cora said Devers would not start on Thursday.

Swihart progressing

It appears Blake Swihart will return from the 10-day disabled list sooner than Ian Kinsler.

Swihart, who strained his right hamstring on Aug. 2, will meet up with the team in Baltimore on Friday. He will take some swings against Eduardo Rodriguez in live batting practice.

Kinsler, who strained his left hamstring on Aug. 3, will work out with Single A Lowell over the weekend then join the Sox in Philadelphia on Tuesday.

It appears likely the Sox will activate Swihart on Tuesday. Kinsler is eligible to return on Wednesday but the team may wait a few extra days to make sure the 36-year-old is fully recovered.

With Devers back, the Sox have adequate coverage at second base with Brock Holt and Nunez.

Christian Vazquez is working out in Florida during the trip. He has been out since July 8 with a broken right pinkie that required surgery.

Baby Betts

Mookie Betts and his girlfriend, Brianna Hammonds, are expecting their first child in mid-November. Betts broke the news on Twitter and Instagram . . . To make room for Devers on the roster, infielder Tony Renda was optioned to Triple A Pawtucket . . . Cora does not expect to start backup catcher Dan Butler until one of the games of Saturday's doubleheader at Baltimore. Leon has started all five games since Swihart was injured . . . The Sept. 9 game against Houston at Fenway Park has been picked up at ESPN and will start at 8:10 p.m. ESPN also is expected to add the Sept. 23 game at Cleveland, although that has not yet been announced. The Sept. 3 game at Atlanta will start at 1:05 p.m., not 1:30 as was originally the case.

Jerry Remy says latest cancer diagnosis 'hit me hard'

Chad Finn

In the 10 years since he was first diagnosed with lung cancer, Jerry Remy has suffered multiple recurrences of the disease, including last season. But the former Red Sox second baseman and longtime color analyst on NESN's game telecasts acknowledged that the latest one has been especially difficult to accept.

"It's been hard, because we really didn't expect it," he said Wednesday, a day after NESN announced the latest recurrence. "It hit me hard. It's like . . . this is never going to stop. We didn't anticipate this result."

Remy, 65, said he goes in for regular checkups on his lungs every six weeks. His last visit was a week and a half ago, he said. He took a CT scan, which revealed a spot on a lung. He took Monday of last week off to go in for a biopsy.

"I kind of expected a good result, because the last checkup had been good and that was just a little more than six weeks ago," he said. "But the area was starting to reshape as a tumor, and the biopsy came back positive."

The next step for Remy, who was first diagnosed with lung cancer in November 2008, is to undergo a battery of tests starting Thursday to determine a course of treatment.

"I think what we'll do is get these tests done, then get the team of doctors from Mass. General together and put their heads together to see how we're going to attack this," Remy said. "I would think that within a week and a half we know what they're going to do and how."

Remy, who has been diagnosed with cancer at least four times, said that when he first became aware a week ago that the cancer had returned, he initially planned to continue to work.

"I did work the last homestand through the weekend, and we had planned to put the tests off until I got back from this [current] road trip," said Remy. "But the more we thought about it, it didn't seem to make that much sense to wait that long. And the doctors were kind of urging me to get it done earlier."

"I really was going to try to make it to the end of the season and deal with it then, but cancer has a mind of its own, and the best thing to do is deal with it immediately. Plus, mentally, you're not there because your head is all over the place thinking about the possibilities."

"My first thought was to make it through the two months and then do what we've got to do. But that wouldn't have been the wise choice."

There was some assumption on social media after NESN made its announcement that Remy would not return this year. But that cannot be determined right now.

“There’s no way to predict now if there’s a return or if there’s not a return,” said Remy. “I just can’t do that now because we haven’t gathered all the information. We haven’t decided on the course of treatment. There’s no way of knowing what’s down the line for me.”

Remy also has dealt with complications from past cancer treatments, including depression in 2009.

A Somerset native who spent eight seasons (1978-85) as a popular Red Sox player before joining the NESN booth in 1988, Remy said he has been greatly enjoying his job this year. A three-man booth that included Remy, former teammate Dennis Eckersley, and play-by-play voice Dave O’Brien received stellar reviews for its camaraderie and chemistry during the recent series with the Yankees.

“I loved it,” said Remy. “I’d never been a fan of the three-man booth, but this works. You have to have the right combination of people in there for it to work, and we have that perfect combination with Eck, Dave, and myself.

“I really enjoy doing the games that way. I think it’s a blast. We get along great, there’s no ego in the booth, we give each other the space we need. Eck gets a lot of the pitching stuff out there, I get a lot of the other stuff, and I think it comes off really, really well.”

Remy said he informed Sean McGrail, NESN’s president and CEO, of his situation Monday night.

“NESN and the Red Sox have been really, really supportive of everything that I’ve been going through,” said Remy.

“All of the support I’ve been getting over the last 48 hours from everyone has been remarkable. It doesn’t surprise me. It’s happened to me before, and it’s not an unusual situation to be in for me, but I appreciate it.”

Remy acknowledged that it isn’t easy for him to talk about his situation, but he hopes that doing so might help someone going through a similar ordeal.

“People sometimes ask why I go public with this,” he said. “I hate the word ‘celebrity,’ but sometimes when you’re in the public eye, you can make a difference because people know who you are. If I can help one person with a similar problem or going through a problem, I feel it’s my responsibility to do it.

“I’m not a real outgoing person, as people probably know, but in stuff like this, if I can help one person who might be dealing with cancer or might be dealing with depression, I need to do it.

“People have been watching me on TV for 31 years and they feel like they know me, so I feel like it’s my responsibility.”

Ben Cherington’s stamp will be forever imprinted on these Red Sox

Nick Cafardo

TORONTO — Just as the 2004 Red Sox team had Dan Duquette written all over it, the 2018 Sox have Ben Cherington’s fingerprints on them.

Yet Cherington, the former Boston general manager who is now vice president of player development for the Toronto Blue Jays, wants absolutely no credit for the core players who have propelled the Red Sox to the best record in baseball.

“This is about Dave Dombrowski and his baseball operations staff, Alex Cora and his coaches, who have done a fantastic job putting that team and staff together and the performance of the players,” Cherington said.

“It’s very impressive to see what they’ve done. It’s about the performance of the players.”

Cherington, the architect of the Red Sox’ 2013 championship season who left in 2015, regularly spoke of building “the next great Red Sox team.” He was hoping to do it by developing Mookie Betts, Jackie Bradley Jr., Xander Bogaerts, Andrew Benintendi, Christian Vazquez, Blake Swihart, and Matt Barnes.

The 2011 draft really built the core of this team, as Cherington, Theo Epstein, and former VP of amateur and international scouting Amiel Sawdaye picked Barnes, Swihart, Bradley, Betts, and Travis Shaw. Rafael Devers was signed as 16-year-old in 2013, and Benintendi was drafted seventh overall in 2015.

When the Red Sox were in rebuilding mode in 2014, Cherington traded Andrew Miller for Eduardo Rodriguez and picked up Joe Kelly in the John Lackey deal. And it was Cherington who acquired Rick Porcello, the 2016 Cy Young winner who currently leads the AL with 14 wins.

There were big misses — Pablo Sandoval, Hanley Ramirez, Rusney Castillo, and Allen Craig — and Cherington traded Jon Lester for Yoenis Cespedes, a rental who was also a disappointment.

But give Cherington credit; at one time or another, he could have traded all of the prospects but didn’t.

“It’s hard from a competitive point of view because the Red Sox are in our division, but I’m happy for the individual players,” Cherington said. “I know how hard they worked to get to the point they’re at. That part isn’t surprising. We really believed in them and what they were capable of.”

Cherington was frank when asked if he ever thought Betts would reach this level.

“It would be dishonest to say yes, I knew he’d be this good,” he said. “We loved Mookie and his commitment to being the best he could be. He wanted to win so badly. He was a leader. It was obvious he was a special kid who has turned into what we’re seeing now. That part is gratifying. I feel so good for Mookie.”

And there were many attempts by other teams to steal him.

“I give Doug Melvin credit,” Cherington recalled of the former Brewers GM. “He was the first to ask about Mookie. We had something going with the Brewers at the time, and he asked for Mookie. But there were many other inquiries along the way.”

Ruben Amaro Jr., then GM of the Philadelphia Phillies, came at Cherington from every angle in the Cole Hamels talks in 2015, but Cherington held his ground.

Now, Betts is an MVP candidate, Bogaerts is one of the game’s best shortstops, and Bradley is the best defender in center field. To boot, Benintendi is a special young player, Swihart and Vazquez are youthful talents, Barnes has forged himself into one of the best setup men in baseball, and Rodriguez (before his injury) was finally realizing his potential this season. That’s the core of the team.

Cherington’s name is coming up again in discussions about general manager positions, most often linked to the Mets. He turned down interview requests the past couple of years, evidently wanting to step back and not be the guy in charge. But that may be changing.

“Honestly, I’ve been completely focused on my job with the Blue Jays,” he said. “The atmosphere here reminds me of what we had in Boston. It’s a collaborative effort. For the last two years, I think we’ve made very good progress in building our farm system. We have talent that we’re excited about.

“I’m not shutting the door on anything. If something is presented to me, I’ll evaluate it and see if it’s something I want to do. But I love my job here.”

Cherington was very much involved in Toronto's trade-deadline deals, helping president Mark Shapiro and GM Ross Atkins trade J.A. Happ, Roberto Osuna, and Seunghwan Oh, and flip Aaron Loup, John Axford, and Steve Pearce for prospects, further boosting a farm system that boasts the top prospect in baseball in third baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr., who is hitting .400 overall in four minor league classes this season.

Cherington spent 17 years with the Red Sox. He acknowledges that he misses the atmosphere he walked into every night at Fenway Park, the instant feedback he received, and understanding there's nothing like it. Yet he is excited about the fact that the Blue Jays represent an entire country. He doesn't take that lightly and would love to contribute to a baseball resurgence in Toronto.

I get the feeling Cherington will again be in charge of running a team, whether it's the Mets or the Orioles or the Marlins or another team making a change.

You can criticize him for the Sandoval and Ramirez signings, and the left field experiment with Ramirez that didn't work. At the time, there wasn't much criticism of the Sandoval signing after he came off a fabulous World Series performance, but that turned ugly.

But look closely at what Cherington did in 2013. For a guy who always emphasized young players because of his player development background, he brought together Shane Victorino, Mike Napoli, Jonny Gomes, Ryan Dempster, David Ross, Koji Uehara, Stephen Drew, and Mike Carp, and they all performed at a high level. He also acquired Brock Holt from Pittsburgh before the start of that year. It all clicked so perfectly, and the emotion of the Boston Marathon bombing gave them extra inspiration.

So while Cherington wanted no part of a story praising him for believing in the core players who are on the field today for the Red Sox, his stamp will be forever imprinted on what might be the next great Red Sox team.

Inside the numbers of Craig Kimbrel's recent struggles

Alex Speier

What's going on with Craig Kimbrel?

Though the Red Sox claimed a 10-7, extra-innings win Tuesday night in Toronto, Kimbrel continued a troubling trend with a blown save courtesy of a long homer by Justin Smoak in the bottom of the ninth.

In six games since the All-Star break, the closer has been unusually vulnerable. He has allowed five runs in 6⅓ innings (7.71 ERA) with nearly as many walks (5) as strikeouts (7), while opposing hitters have bashed him for a .292/.433/.583 line.

Overall, Kimbrel has been very good in 2018. His 37.1 percent strikeout rate ranks among the highest by a big league reliever, and his .165 opponents' batting average is one of the lowest. But in contrast to 2017, he has been merely elite rather than otherworldly. And of late, he's been downright vulnerable.

So what's happening?

From the standpoint of outcomes, there are clear differences with Kimbrel from his spectacular 2017 season to this one. His strikeout rate has dipped about 25 percent (49.6 percent down to 37.1 percent) and his walk rate has more than doubled (from 5.5 percent to 11.3 percent). So, he is missing fewer bats and issuing more free passes. That spiking walk rate means that any hits against him have a better chance of turning into runs.

On top of that, when opponents make contact, they are doing more damage. Kimbrel is getting fewer ground balls this year (a 22 percent decline), and perhaps as a result, he is allowing homers to 33 percent more of the hitters he is facing.

Craig Kimbrel's 2017 vs. 2018, by the numbers

Category	2017	2018
ERA	1.43	2.49
Saves	35	33
Blown Saves	4	4
K%	49.6	37.1
BB%	5.5	11.3
K/BB	9/1	3.3/1
Ground ball %	37.0	28.7
HR%	2.4	3.2
Batting average	.140	.165
OBP	.202	.265
Slugging	.243	.344
In strike zone %	47.4	37.6
Strikes swung at (%)	61.2	67.8
Balls swung at (%)	37.4	34.5
Avg. Fastball velocity (mph)	98.3	96.8

Craig Kimbrel's 2017 vs. 2018, by the numbers

SOURCE: Fangraphs, Baseball Savant

Those outcomes are the product of a qualitative step back in terms of both the power and command of Kimbrel's fastball/curveball mix. His average fastball velocity has ticked back from 98.3 miles per hour last year to 96.8 m.p.h. — a slight drop that nonetheless translates to precious milliseconds for hitters to attack his pitches.

Some of that drop reflects the fact that he didn't have a chance to experience a normal spring training while he and his wife tended to their newborn daughter Lydia as she underwent surgeries for a heart defect. Yet after Kimbrel showed a steady increase in velocity through the first half, the temperature on his heater had dipped a bit since the break.

Moreover, hitters have been able to take a more selective approach against Kimbrel this year, given that there is a 20 percent decline in the pitches he is throwing in the strike zone. Whereas he did a great job of locating his fastball at and just above the top of the zone last year — particularly in the middle of the plate, a location that leads to far more chases of unhittable pitches than fastballs away or in — he has seen more of his offerings drift down toward the center of the plate, where they can be hammered.

Already, Kimbrel has given up more homers (6) and extra-base hits (15) on his fastball this year than he did in all of 2017. On top of that, his curveball has been dropping farther this year than it did last year. (Per BrooksBaseball.net, his curveball has dipped to about 16 inches below the middle of the strike zone compared with about 9 inches in 2017.)

While hitters haven't been able to do much with the curveball when it's been thrown for strikes, Kimbrel isn't doing as good a job of keeping it in the strike zone or selling it as a strike for opponents to chase, helping to explain the spiking walk rate and the decline in swings-and-misses.

Kimbrel has endured midseason speed bumps before and made the necessary mechanical adjustments. It would be impossible for a pitcher to enjoy his kind of career track record without possessing a superb ability to make the sort of subtle tweaks that serve as a tourniquet to downturns.

For a Red Sox team whose October blueprint relies in no small part on consistent dominance from Kimbrel, there is work to be done.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Brian Johnson solid again, Red Sox batter Blue Jays for sixth straight victory

Michael Silverman

TORONTO – The more Brian Johnson starts, the better he looks.

And while he could not quite close the deal on a scoreless start last night because of a couple of late home runs, the initial five innings of just two hits allowed with five strikeouts and lots of weak contact were confirmation that he has turned into an effective threat for the Red Sox.

With lots of help from up and down the lineup, Johnson led the Red Sox to a 10-5 victory over the Blue Jays for their sixth win in a row and 10th win in their last 11 games.

The Red Sox are 6-2 in Johnson's starts this season.

"He did an outstanding job – I know they scored five runs and people are going to say, 'Why did he pitch the seventh?' but we needed a seventh," said manager Alex Cora. "We were in the bullpen and for him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

The Red Sox bullpen got extended here Tuesday night in a tighter, extra-inning ballgame, but the run support came early and often for Johnson, who was victimized by two bad pitches, one that became a two-run homer in the sixth, and then a three-run homer in the seventh. Pitching seven full innings for the first time counts as a big deal for a still-young, still-learning and still-improving pitcher.

"I think the little bit of longer innings kind of caught up to me, but I feel like I pitched a lot better than my line score shows," said Johnson, who now has an ERA of 3.21 after his eight starts this season dating back to the end of June..

Five different Red Sox drove in runs, and the team had a dozen hits. Xander Bogaerts led with three RBI, while Rafael Devers on his return to the team after a DL stint knocked in a pair with a home run. Mitch Moreland knocked in two runs as well.

Sandy Leon's 'play of the year' puts spotlight on catcher's special season

Michael Silverman

TORONTO — Sometimes all it takes is one play in order to shift and brighten the spotlight on one player and the type of season he is having.

Tuesday night, catcher Sandy Leon made that play, his cue to take a bow for his underrated defense and underappreciated contributions to the Red Sox.

Leon made a play that manager Alex Cora called “the best play of the season — I mean, that’s the play of the year.”

That’s quite high praise, considering the way Jackie Bradley Jr. has roamed center field this season, tracking down balls before making ridiculous leaping catch after ridiculous leaping catch and earning, deservedly, universal praise for his defense.

What Leon did was both special and specialized.

With the bases loaded and one out in the sixth inning, Toronto’s Luke Maile swung at a Brandon Workman pitch and chopped it down, a swinging bunt that rolled down the third base line, barely in fair territory. The runner from third, Yangervis Solarte, was on his way home. Leon gave chase to the ball, running some 30 feet down the line. Before Solarte passed him and before the ball could roll foul, Leon bent down to snag the ball. Realizing he would not have time to grab the ball with his bare hand and also tag out Solarte, Leon went with the mitt in his left hand.

In one motion while on the run, he pinched the ball in his mitt and raised his arm up in time to slap a tag on Solarte’s chest.

Leon saved a run — the hard way and the smart way.

“If you’re in that situation with the bases loaded and he’s running to the plate and you see that ball wavering by the line, would you catch it or let it go foul?” said Cora. “That was amazing. Honestly I know Jackie will probably get the play of the year with us, but that, for me, was the play of the year. For him to go after it and have the presence of mind to catch the ball and tag him. And Jason (Varitek) was talking about it. He never did it. First of all, it never happens. For him to react that way, that was impressive.”

With Christian Vazquez still on a learning curve as well as the disabled list, Leon’s stock has been on the rise.

Heading into last night, the Red Sox have gone 24-1 in his last 25 starts, winning the last 13 straight. His catcher’s ERA of 2.97 is the best of the 29 catchers who have played at least 50 games this season, and his 3.46 catcher ERA since 2016 is the best in the majors for a catcher with at least 150 starts.

The Red Sox are well aware that Leon’s special.

Bradley, like Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez with their bats, and Chris Sale with his starts and strikeouts, generate the most buzz.

Inside the clubhouse, the buzz around Leon is just as intense.

“He’s the best in the league and I’m glad that he’s catching for us,” said Cora. “His baseball IQ is way up there. The good thing about him is he’s willing to keep learning.”

“Obviously, offensively when he’s out of the zone he struggles. When he’s within the zone, like the last few days, he can contribute. Behind the plate I’ve been very impressed, not only with the way he calls the game but the way he blocks the ball. It seems like he blocks it and the ball is right in his hand. Throwing obviously has been really good. There’s something about him where he’s able to slow down the game. The bigger the moment, I’m not saying the easier it is for him, but he’s able to slow it down and think through the situations, call pitches and do certain things behind the plate.”

Even after the Red Sox rewarded Vazquez with a contract extension this spring, Cora said Leon took it the right way.

“Here’s a guy who is always ready, he’s the first one showing up, working out — everyone talks about his offseason program this year, he lost weight, he’s been healthy, he’s been playing a lot more lately,” said

Cora. "I'm not concerned about it. I keep mentioning proud, but that's a situation probably other guys put their head down and say, 'Forget it. Whatever. Let me go about business and whenever they want me to catch, I'll catch.' But he didn't do that. He was helping Christian. He was helping others. Raffy (Devers). Xander (Bogaerts). All those guys. For the Latino players, he's a guy who brings wisdom. He's a quiet leader."

The Red Sox have been winning a lot, nearly always, lately with Leon.

Call it a coincidence if you want to. The Red Sox and Cora would say it's anything but a coincidence. It's a credit to Leon.

Jacoby Ellsbury won two World Series with the Red Sox but hasn't lived up to the big money the Yankees are paying him

Steve Buckley

Your favorite memory of the 2007 World Series is undoubtedly from Game 4, when Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon's strikeout of Seth Smith in the ninth inning at Coors Field completed a sweep of the Colorado Rockies.

You've heard of Mile High Stadium? This was Mile High Leather, as Papelbon propelled his glove into the nighttime sky after his 95-mph fastball proved too much for Smith.

But roll back the tape to the previous play. There was one out in the ninth, the Sox ahead 4-3, when veteran infielder Jamey Carroll drilled an 0-2 pitch to left that had the look, the sound, of a game-tying home run.

Enter Jacoby Ellsbury, who had just turned 24 a month earlier and had just arrived in the big leagues a couple of months before that. He chased the ball to the warning track. He extended his glove. He jumped. He made the catch. Two outs.

It was yet another Preview of Coming Attractions for Sox fans, this after Ellsbury had exploded into regular-season prominence by hitting .353 in 116 at-bats. He then hit .438 in the World Series. He made that catch.

There was a sense Ellsbury was going to be one of the great ones, that he'd take over center field in 2008 and for many seasons to come. He had a good eye. He had wheels. The baseball people said he'd eventually hit for some pop.

Ellsbury did blossom . . . for a while . . . and in spurts. He led the American League in stolen bases in '08 and '09, and in 2011 he socked 32 home runs, had 105 RBI and hit .321. His 364 total bases were tops in all of baseball. He won a Gold Glove. He was an All-Star. He was second in the MVP race to Detroit Tigers ace Justin Verlander.

And yet it was never quite right for Ellsbury here, was it? He suffered legit injuries that were on display for all the world to see — cracking some ribs when he collided with third baseman Adrian Beltre in 2010, injuring his shoulder when Tampa Bay shortstop Reid Brignac rolled over him in 2012 — but there was always grumbling that Ellsbury was brittle, that he spent too much time on the medic's table.

When he departed the Red Sox following the 2013 season to sign a seven-year, \$153 million contract with the Yankees, nobody around here cared much.

Earlier this week, when the Yankees announced that Ellsbury had undergone season-ending surgery to repair a torn labrum in his left hip, nobody around here cared much about that, either.

For all the ritualistic beating-up of general managers that's as much a part of professional sports as the games themselves, the Sox got this one right. Ben Cherington was running baseball ops at the time and,

yes, it was on his watch in November 2014 that free agent busts Pablo Sandoval and Hanley Ramirez were signed, but the non-signing of Ellsbury was smart baseball.

Ellsbury never even got into a game with the Yankees this year, but even if healthy he'd have been a hugely compensated role player. The plan was to go with Brett Gardner in left, Aaron Hicks in center and matinee idol Aaron Judge in right, with newcomer Giancarlo Stanton doing the DHing. Ellsbury was going to be New York's version of Brock Holt — and probably not even that.

In his four seasons with the Yankees prior to 2018, Ellsbury hit .264 with a .330 on-base percentage and .386 slugging percentage. After stealing 39 bases his first season as a Yankee (down from a league-leading 52 his last season with the Red Sox), he followed with seasons of 21, 20 and 22 thefts. After hitting 16 home runs his first season with the Yankees, he hit a total of 23 homers over the next three seasons.

But super agent Scott Boras sure hit a home run to get Ellsbury that seven-year, \$153 million contract. Either the Red Sox made a prudent decision to let Ellsbury walk, or they simply decided to save their money for a rainy day named Pablo Sandoval. With Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Mookie Betts now roaming the Sox outfield, Ellsbury seems like a relic from the long-ago past.

And yet one wonders if things might have turned out differently had Ellsbury remained in Boston. It's the Fred Lynn Syndrome: A player moves on to greener pastures, only to discover, in Lynn's case, that he should have stayed with the Green Monster.

True, it was a trade that sent Lynn to the California Angels, not free agency. But it was a money move all the same, a divorce between the Red Sox and a marquee outfielder who in 1975 claimed Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player honors.

And so began a wandering minstrel's life for Lynn, who over the next 10 seasons would play for the Angels, Orioles, Tigers and Padres.

Lynn had a fine career, but not a Hall of Fame career. Had he remained in Boston, his last stop might have been Cooperstown.

Might Ellsbury be burnishing his Hall of Fame resume if he were still with the Red Sox? Of course not, but he'd have been better off. Had he signed for fewer dollars there would have been fewer expectations, though nobody should ever blame him for taking the cash. This was Brian Cashman's bad move, not Ellsbury's — except for the part where Ellsbury was never going to play at a level that was commensurate with the money he was making.

One last point: Ellsbury got a bad rap that time when he pulled out a set of talking points while addressing the media about his rib injuries. He wasn't comfortable talking with the sportswriters and, anyway, he's not a doctor. He had a right to want to get his facts straight.

Ellsbury isn't worth the money the Yankees are paying him. But he earned his dough while helping the Red Sox to two World Series championships.

Red Sox notebook: Rafael Devers returns from disabled list to give boost to infield

Michael Silverman

TORONTO — Rafael Devers returned to action last night, his strained hamstring keeping him out the minimum 10 days.

His return was an unqualified success in the 10-5 victory against the Blue Jays, when he doubled, hit a two-run homer and scored twice.

“Felt good, gave it 100 percent on every play today and nothing bothered me,” Devers said. “Just happy to be back and contributing and helping the team.”

Manager Alex Cora was very happy but not too surprised about the performance.

“I think he was getting very close to start swinging the bat well, then that happened but we felt the last two games he was actually driving the ball,” Cora said. “It’s cool to see him around, he brings a lot of joy to the game, a lot of smiles in the clubhouse, everybody’s happy, he’s like the little brother. For him to go out there and perform it’s good to see.”

Mookie Betts was pleased to see Devers’ bat and smile back.

“He brings fun,” Betts said. “He’s a young kid who’s laughing and you just enjoy being around him. Any time you have somebody young like that laughing and enjoying it, it kind of helps you sit back and enjoy it, too.”

Devers will not play tonight in the series finale.

The Red Sox infield will be without second baseman Ian Kinsler (hamstring) for at least another week, but Cora is happy to have Devers back. Devers has had highs and lows this season, but Cora reiterated the player’s youth is worth being patient for.

“It’s been a good (season) — he’s 21, he’s had his ups and downs, obviously everybody focuses on the errors,” said Cora, referencing Devers’ major league leading 20 errors. “He’s a guy who is very rangy at third base. He’s made some mistakes, you know, yeah, but at the same time, he’s been learning. Offensively, he’s been up and down. I do feel that before he went on the DL this time, he was getting there as far as getting on top of the ball and driving the ball. It’s not easy to play at this level. Imagine playing at 21 years old for a championship-caliber team? We trust the guy, we let him play and he’s been good for us.”

Devers thinks his performance needs to improve.

“I can’t say that it’s been good. I know that there’s more in there that I can give more but that’s baseball,” he said before last night’s game. “You can’t predict the ups and the downs. Sometimes you’re good. Sometimes you’re not so good. But I’m just glad to be back, and I know that I can give more than I have.”

Cora said he has no plans to start replacing Devers defensively late in games, although the interleague games next week offer an opportunity.

“There’s going to be certain situations like, in Philly next week, we’ll probably take him out, if there’s a double switch, we’re not going to hesitate,” Cora said. “But as of now, we trust him so we’ll let him play.”

Cora said Devers does not object to how the manager and coaching staff view his defense in tight games.

“Nah, I think he’s a smart baseball player, he understands,” Cora said. “He sees that’s happening, he understands, hey, it’s just a baseball decision but he’s been working hard. He’s still trying to do his best. We still trust him at third base.”

With Kinsler out and Devers’ replacement, Eduardo Nunez, without a full-time job, Cora said he will go back to splitting time at second base between Nunez and Brock Holt. Nunez went 1-for-5 and scored a run in the win.

“(Last night), it’s Eduardo, I just feel that he’s been swinging the bat well, he’s been putting good at-bats,” said Cora. “We’ll play him there. Most likely, we’ll play him again and then over the weekend, we’ll mix up Brock and we’ll see how it goes.”

Cora wants to keep a close eye on the playing time for Nunez and Holt.

“(Holt) swung the bat well on Sunday, he hit a few balls hard up the middle, can’t control that — I always have to pay attention to him and Eduardo, I don’t want to run them into the ground,” said Cora. “I’ve got to take care of them, stay healthy, stay fresh, that way both of them can contribute.”

Little Mookie on way

Mookie Betts and his girlfriend, Brianna, announced that they are expecting a child via Twitter and Instagram, with an image of an old-fashioned print “Betts Chronicle” front page, with “Breaking News: Mookie and Bri are brewing a brand new baby & you Betts believe they are excited to share the news!” The pictures above the fold show the two holding signs with the baby’s due date, Nov. 19.

“Very excited, any time you can add something like to your life, you’ve got to be excited,” Betts said.

There are plenty of other dads in the Red Sox clubhouse, but Betts said nobody has given him tips.

“Not yet, I think we need to win some games first and as that time gets closer, I’ll ask some guys,” he said.

Swihart gets closer

Catcher Blake Swihart (hamstring) will rejoin the Red Sox in Baltimore and will hit against Eduardo Rodriguez (ankle) there tomorrow. He is closer to returning than Kinsler. Swihart could be ready for the Phillies series next Tuesday and Wednesday. Kinsler is expected to play for Short-season Lowell this weekend and rejoin the team in Philadelphia. . . .

The Red Sox expect to meet today to discuss if Brian Johnson or Drew Pomeranz will stay in the rotation.

At 81 wins with 47 games to go, the Red Sox need to win just once more to finish with better than a .500 record. If they go one game under .500 the rest of the way, 23-24, they will finish with 104 wins.

Andrew Benintendi doubled twice, walked and had a sac fly last night. Coming into the game, his 40 multi-hit games were fourth most in the league. . . . Mitch Moreland doubled in two runs and has nine RBI in his last five games. . . .

Chris Sale will throw a bullpen session today, then start Sunday’s game in Baltimore.

*** *MassLive.com***

Brian Johnson or Drew Pomeranz? Boston Red Sox's Alex Cora will discuss Thursday who remains in starting rotation

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- Brian Johnson or Drew Pomeranz? Who will remain in the starting rotation with Chris Sale returning from the 10-day disabled list Sunday?

"We're going to talk about it tomorrow," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said Wednesday after Johnson pitched 7 innings to earn a victory.

Boston won 10-5 over the Blue Jays here at Rogers Centre to improve to 81-34.

Johnson allowed a three-run homer in the seventh inning. So his line wasn't exactly pretty. He gave up five runs, six hits and two walks while striking out six in 7 innings.

But he did what a No. 5 starter should do. He has done it every time he has started. Pomeranz hasn't.

"He did an outstanding job," Cora said about Johnson. "I know they scored five runs so people are going to say, 'Why'd he pitch the seventh?' But we needed seven. We knew where we were in the bullpen and for him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

The Red Sox needed 7 innings from Johnson on Wednesday after Pomeranz lasted only 4.2 innings Tuesday.

"I felt like I pitched a lot better than my line score shows," Johnson said.

So who will keep his job in the starting rotation and who will move to the bullpen?

Johnson: 3-1 record, 3.21 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 42 innings, .244 batting average against, 2.6 strikeout-to-walk ratio, eight starts

Pomeranz: 1-5 record, 6.31 ERA, 1.81 WHIP, 51.1 innings, .299 batting average, 1.4 strikeout-to-walk ratio, 11 starts.

The Red Sox are 6-2 in games Johnson has started this season. Boston is 5-6 in games Pomeranz has started.

Rafael Devers, Boston Red Sox 3B: 'I know that there's more in there. That I can give more'

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- Rafael Devers' .736 OPS this season is 84 lower than his OPS (.820) last year as a rookie. He leads all major leaguers with 20 errors.

"I know that there's more in there. That I can give more," Devers said. "But that's baseball. You can't predict the ups and the downs. Sometimes we're good and sometimes you're not so good. But I'm just glad to be back and I know that I can give more than I have."

Devers has seen some regression in his sophomore season, which isn't uncommon. The 21-year-old, who returned from the 10-day disabled list (hamstring) Wednesday, made those comments before the game. He then went out and delivered more during the game.

He doubled and scored in Boston's four-run third inning. He crushed a 109.2-mph, 425-foot home run against Blue Jays reliever Jake Petricka during the sixth inning. The third baseman also walked and the Red Sox won 10-5 here at Rogers Centre.

"It's been a good one," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said about Devers' 2018 season. "He's 21. He's had his ups and downs. Obviously everybody focuses on the errors. He's a guy that's very rangy at third base. He's made some mistakes, yeah. But at the same time he's been learning."

Devers' slugging percentage (.437) is 45 points below his 2017 mark. But he's still hitting for power. Devers is projected for 23 homers, 31 doubles and 76 RBIs on his 137-game pace.

Not bad.

Even better though: The Red Sox haven't seen the best of Devers this season but they still are playing .704 baseball (81-34 record) and on pace for 114 wins. So imagine if 2017 Devers -- the one who bashed an opposite field homer off Aroldis Chapman -- breaks through during the final month and a half and into the postseason.

Don't forget Devers went 4-for-11 (.364 batting average) with two homers, including an inside-the-park home run, and five RBIs in the 2017 ALDS vs. the Astros.

"Offensively, he's been up and down," Cora said. "I do feel that before he went on the DL this time he was getting there as far as getting on top of the ball and driving balls. It's not easy to play at this level. Imagine playing at 21 years old and for a championship-caliber team. We trust the guy, we let him play and he's been good for us."

Boston Red Sox to play Houston Astros on Sunday Night Baseball on Sept. 9

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox will take on the Astros on Sunday Night Baseball on Sept. 9 at Fenway Park, getting the primetime treatment for the fourth time this season.

Boston beat the Astros, 9-3, in Houston on June 3 in their first Sunday night appearance of the year. They've split two matchups with the Yankees in the slot, losing on July 1 and winning in extra innings last Sunday night.

The Sox-Astros matchup will be the second Houston-Boston showdown of the day on Sept. 9. The Texans and Patriots will open the NFL regular season at 1:00 p.m. in Foxborough.

Rafael Devers crushes 425-foot HR, Brian Johnson pitches 7 innings to lead Boston Red Sox to their 81st win

Christopher Smith

TORONTO --Rafael Devers returned from the disabled list Wednesday ready to hit.

He doubled and scored to lead off Boston's four-run third inning. He then crushed a 109.2-mph, 425-foot home run against Blue Jays reliever Jake Petricka during the sixth inning.

Devers went 2-for-4 with a homer, double and walk. The Red Sox won 10-5 over the Blue Jays here at Rogers Centre.

J.D. Martinez stroked three hits and Andrew Benintendi added two hits.

The 2018 Red Sox (81-34) have 47 games remaining and already have more wins than 52 other Red Sox teams in the franchise's 118-year history. Boston is playing .704 baseball.

Johnson earns win

Brian Johnson went 7 innings for Boston for the first time this season but ran into trouble during the seventh. He gave a 110.0-mph, 442-foot three-run homer to Randal Grichuk.

Johnson gave up all his runs on homers. He allowed a two-run homer to Teoscar Hernandez during the sixth.

Johnson threw 98 pitches, 67 strikes (68 percent strikes). He mixed in 43 curveballs (seven swings-and-misses), 40 four-seamers (five swings-and-misses), seven sliders, six changeups and two two-seamers.

He allowed five runs, six hits and two walks while striking out six in 7 innings.

Red Sox's four-run third inning

The Red Sox jumped ahead 4-0 with a four-run third inning.

Devers, who Boston activated from the 10-day disabled list before the game, ripped a double to lead off the frame.

Sandy Leon walked and Mookie Betts got hit by a pitch to load the bases.

Andrew Benintendi's sacrifice fly to center field made it 1-0. Mitch Moreland then belted a 107.2-mph, 407-foot two-run double to center field.

Moreland advanced to third base on J.D. Martinez single to left field and scored on Xander Bogaerts' sacrifice fly to right field.

Did Sandy Leon make Boston Red Sox's defensive play of the year? 'That was sick, huh?' Jackie Bradley Jr. says

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- "That was sick, huh," Jackie Bradley Jr. said here at Rogers Centre on Wednesday, referring to Sandy Leon's web gem Tuesday.

Blue Jays' Luke Maile hit a soft roller down the third base line with one out and bases loaded during the sixth inning.

Leon charged down the line, grabbed the ball with his glove and tagged out Kendrys Morales who sprinted home from third base in the sixth inning.

"I didn't know how it was going to unfold when I first saw it off the bat," Bradley said. "That was pretty cool."

Red Sox manager Alex Cora certainly had high praise.

"That's the best play of the season," Cora said. "I mean, that's the play of the year.

"That was amazing," Cora added. "I know Jackie will probably get the play of the year this year with us. But for me, that was the play of the year. For him to go after it and have the presence of mind of catching the ball and just tag him. I mean, Jason (Varitek) was talking about it and he never did it. First of all, it never happens. And for him to react that way, it was impressive."

Varitek, who is one of the Red Sox's two catching instructors, is here in Toronto with the club.

"His baseball IQ is way up there," said Cora, adding Leon lost weight during the offseason. "The good thing about him is he's willing to keep learning."

The Red Sox are 13-0 in Leon's past 13 starts and 24-1 in his past 25 starts.

"I see it but those guys on the mound, they make a difference, too," Cora said. "They work great. But you see the numbers the last few years as far as the ERA as a catcher. He's the best in the league. I'm glad that he's catching for us."

Boston Red Sox injuries: Ian Kinsler to work out at Lowell this weekend, Blake Swihart to face Eduardo Rodriguez on Friday

Christopher Smith

TORONTO -- Ian Kinsler and Blake Swihart both are back in Boston rehabbing their hamstring injuries. Swihart will fly to Baltimore to join the Red Sox there Friday.

He's expected to take swings against left-handed starter Eduardo Rodriguez (ankle) who will throw his first live batting practice session since being placed on the 10-day disabled list July 15 with a right ankle sprain.

Swihart is eligible to be activated from the DL next Tuesday.

Kinsler, meanwhile, likely will work out over the weekend at Lowell's LeLacheur Park because of the concerts at Fenway Park.

"Ian probably goes to Lowell to work out and get his grounders," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said.

Other injury news:

~ Steven Wright likely will throw a bullpen session at Lowell over the weekend. It would mark his first bullpen session since being placed on the disabled list June 26 with left knee inflammation.

~ Christian Vazquez (broken pinkie finger) is back in Fort Myers with the Red Sox on their nine-game road trip. He'll return to Boston when the Red Sox play their next game at Fenway Park (Friday, Aug. 17).

"He's supposed to start throwing when he gets back to Boston," Cora said.

~ Chris Sale (mild shoulder inflammation) will throw his bullpen session Thursday before he starts in Baltimore on Sunday.

Boston Red Sox star Mookie Betts, girlfriend expecting first child

Chris Cotillo

Star Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts and his girlfriend, Bri, are expecting their first child in November. Betts made the announcement on Twitter on Wednesday afternoon.

Betts channeled his inner Tom Brady to make an announcement via "The Betts Chronicle." The baby is due Nov. 19.

*** *RedSox.com***

Win, rinse, repeat: Red Sox making history

Ian Browne

TORONTO -- Boasting a lineup that is relentless and deep, there is simply no cooling off the Red Sox these days. They have won six in a row, 10 of 11 and 25 of 30.

In Wednesday night's 10-5 victory over the Blue Jays at Rogers Centre, everyone in the lineup but Jackie Bradley Jr. had at least one hit.

After building the early 4-0 lead, Boston chipped away the rest of the night. The Red Sox own an 81-34 record for a .704 winning percentage, and have a nine-game lead over the Yankees in the American League East.

This team isn't just the best in MLB this season, it is joining some rarified air. The Red Sox are just the seventh AL team in history to win 81 of its first 115 games. Four of the first six went on to win the World Series.

But Boston is still too focused on its accomplishments to be impressed by them.

"It's just fun. I don't think anybody is thinking much of it," right fielder Mookie Betts said. "I think we're just going out and playing, and that's all we can do."

J.D. Martinez led the attack with three hits to raise his average to .332. Rafael Devers made a strong return from the disabled list, belting a two-run homer and adding a double that sparked a four-run rally in the third inning. Andrew Benintendi, who is quietly having a strong sophomore season, smacked a pair of doubles and walked twice.

Mitch Moreland continued to demonstrate that he is over his recent slump with a two-run double. Xander Bogaerts added three RBIs.

"It's good, especially when Andrew is getting on base at this pace again, and Mookie's getting on base, J.D. is getting on base," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "We can put Mitch in between Andrew and J.D. and create more traffic for him. He's been putting good swings the last two days. You see Xander doing his thing."

The beneficiary of the run support was winning pitcher Brian Johnson, who again came through during a spot start. Though Johnson's overall line (seven innings, six hits, five runs, two walks, six strikeouts) wasn't glittering, he had a shutout going through five and had only allowed two runs through six innings. In the seventh, the Blue Jays got a three-run homer from Randal Grichuk to make it an 8-5 game.

"He did an outstanding job," Cora said of Johnson. "I know they scored five runs and people are going to say, 'Why did he pitch the seventh?' but we needed a seventh. We were in the bullpen and for him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

But the Red Sox increased the spread back to five runs in the eighth when Martinez got an RBI single and Benintendi scored on a wild pitch.

"Obviously, you don't want to go out there and give up five, but as long as the team gets the 'W,' that's honestly all that matters," Johnson said.

As for those W's, they just keep piling on top of each other.

"It's good to see, obviously," Cora said. "We know what we're doing, but like I said, we win today, we talk about it, we move on, we show up tomorrow and we play hard again."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Sudden impact: Devers didn't take long to reintroduce himself to his teammates. After missing 10 days with a left hamstring injury, the third baseman showed no rust by smashing a double in his first at-bat and then unloading for a two-run homer in the sixth that left his bat at an exit velocity of 109.2 mph and traveled a projected distance of 425 feet according to Statcast™.

"It's cool to see him around," Cora said. "He brings a lot of joy to the game, a lot of smiles in the clubhouse. Everybody's happy; he's like the little brother. For him to go out there and perform, it's good to see."

SOUND SMART

In a lineup that includes Betts and Martinez, it's easy to see why Benintendi can get overlooked. But his contributions continue to add up. The left fielder is hitting .398 in his past 24 games. He has 41 multi-hit games this season.

HE SAID IT

"A little bit, yeah. In some ways, there's laughing and joking more. And in some ways, we're focused on the task more. It's kind of that balance of enjoying it but making sure you get your job done, too." -- Betts, on the difference in the clubhouse between last season and this one

UP NEXT

Coming off the best start of his career, a complete-game one-hitter against the Yankees that required just 86 pitches, Rick Porcello (14-4, 3.84 ERA) is back at it again Thursday night when he closes out this three-game series for the Red Sox at Rogers Centre. Porcello has faced the Jays three times this season, going 1-1 with a 7.47 ERA. That line is skewed by Porcello having his worst outing of the season (two innings, eight runs) against the Blue Jays on July 13. Toronto will counter with lefty Ryan Borucki (1-2, 2.30), who is having a strong rookie season. First pitch is scheduled for 7:07 p.m. ET.

Devers rakes in return from disabled list

Ian Browne

TORONTO -- Talk about returning with a bang. Rafael Devers returned from the disabled list on Wednesday and made a very direct contribution in helping his red-hot Red Sox roll to a 10-5 win over the Blue Jays at Rogers Centre.

Playing in his first game since July 28, Devers quickly made up for lost time.

In his first at-bat, Devers worked the count to seven pitches and belted a 3-2 sinker by Toronto starter Mike Hauschild off the wall in center for a double to spark a four-run rally in the top of the third.

Three innings later, Devers laced a two-run homer to right.

Devers crushed the home run at an exit velocity of 109.2 mph and a projected distance of 425 feet according to Statcast™.

"It felt good," he said. "I gave it 100 percent on every play today and nothing bothered me. Just happy to be back and contributing and helping the team."

His team is 81-34 and leading the American League East by nine games.

Now that he's back, Devers hopes he can crank up his game a notch for the rest of the season.

The 21-year-old entered the night with an MLB-leading 20 errors and has also been inconsistent at the plate.

"I can't say that it's been good," Devers said when asked about his season. "I know that there's more in there, and that I can give more, but that's baseball. You can't predict the ups and the downs. Sometimes you're good. Sometimes you're not so good. But I'm just glad to be back, and I know that I can give more than I have."

Pitchers have adjusted to Devers in his first full season, and he's doing his best to adjust back. Perhaps he's at the point where it's going to start clicking.

"I'm ready to give 100 percent to this team. We have a goal, and that's to win a World Series," Devers said. "I'm just going to keep working hard and putting up numbers, even though it's not really so much about the numbers to at the end of the season look back and say it was a good year."

To make room for Devers on the roster, the Red Sox optioned infielder Tony Renda to Triple-A Pawtucket.

Without question, Devers brings a youthful element to these Red Sox.

"He brings fun," Red Sox right fielder Mookie Betts said. "He's a young kid who's laughing, and you just enjoy being around him. Any time you have somebody young like that, laughing and enjoying it, it kind of helps you sit back and enjoy it, too."

By and large, Boston manager Alex Cora is satisfied with what Devers has provided to the team so far this season.

Devers is slashing .248/.299/.437 with 16 homers and 54 RBIs.

"It's been a good one," Cora said. "He's 21. He's had his ups and downs; obviously everybody focuses on the errors. He's a guy who is very rangy at third base. He's made some mistakes, but at the same time, he's been learning.

"Offensively, he's been up and down. I do feel that before he went on the DL this time, he was getting there, as far as getting on top of the ball and driving the ball. It's not easy to play at this level. Imagine playing at 21 years old for a championship-caliber team. We trust the guy, we let him play and he's been good for us."

And everyone would agree it was good to have him back on Wednesday.

Leon standing out

A day later, Cora was still raving about the play catcher Sandy Leon made in the sixth inning on Tuesday. With the bases loaded and one out, Luke Maile hit a slow hopper down the third-base line. Before the ball could go foul, Leon pounced on it, and chased down Kendrys Morales, who was running from third to home, for the out.

"That's the best play of the season," Cora said. "I mean, that's the play of the year. That was amazing."

In Spring Training, the Red Sox gave Christian Vazquez a contract extension, giving the impression that he would be the team's catcher of the future. Early in the season, Leon rarely played. He eventually earned more time and has been the primary catcher since Vazquez fractured his right pinkie finger on July 7.

"I keep mentioning proud, but that's a situation [earlier in the season] where probably other guys put their head down and say, 'Forget it. Whatever. Let me go about my business and whenever they want me to catch, I'll catch.' But [Leon] didn't do that," Cora said. "He was helping Christian. He was helping others. Raffy. Xander [Bogaerts]. All those guys. ... He's a guy who brings wisdom. He's a quiet leader."

*** *WEEI.com***

Rafael Devers adds to Red Sox' winning ways

Rob Bradford

TORONTO -- What if Rafael Devers is really, really good?

The Red Sox won Wednesday night -- because that's what they do -- beating the Blue Jays, 10-5, at Rogers Centre. Since that Sunday night debacle in the Bronx on July 1, this is a team that has won 25 of its 30 games. The Sox sit 47 games over .500, with 81 wins. (For a complete recap, [click here](#).)

And along the way, the Red Sox got a taste of how life might be even better.

Devers reemerged from his hamstring injury and picked up where he left off in his one-game rehab stint with Single-A Lowell, lining a double in his first at-bat, walking in his second, and launching his 16th homer of the season in Round 3.

To this point, the third baseman's first full big league season has been uneven. Offensively, he hasn't been the threat displayed for much of the final two months of 2017. And with the glove, well, that hasn't been great, leading all major leaguers with 20 errors.

But with the Red Sox winning, and Devers still having been on this planet just 21 years, patience has been easy to come by. Prior to Wednesday night's game, Alex Cora reminded the media two things: 1. Devers is indeed 21 years old; and 2. Adrian Beltre made 29 errors in his rookie season.

Perhaps the patience is about to pay off.

It was promising that Devers hit that home run Monday night at LeLacheur Park and that he could turn in the kind of performance witnessed in the Red Sox' latest win. But the true optimism should have come in what he did in the five games prior to hurting that hamstring. During the stretch -- from July 23-28 -- the lefty hitter batted .368 with 1.008 OPS and one pivotal home run.

"We were joking with him, he only played one game in the minor leagues and he hit a home run in his last at-bat, he hit three ground balls," Cora said. "It's cool to see him around, he brings a lot of joy to the game, a lot of smiles in the clubhouse, everybody's happy, he's like the little brother. For him to go out there and perform it's good to see."

The Red Sox can probably survive without Devers, as was evident in Cora's club going 7-1 without the starting third baseman. But considering the offense managed a modest .254 batting average and .780 OPS in his absence, an influx of youth along the lines of what Devers supplied last August could certainly go a long way.

"He brings fun," said Mookie Betts of Devers. "He's a young kid who's laughing and you just enjoy being around him. Any time you have somebody young like that laughing and enjoying it, it kind of helps you sit back and enjoy it too."

LeVangie uncovers unique reason for Kimbrel's slump

Rob Bradford

TORONTO -- After Tuesday night, the concerns really started growing regarding Craig Kimbrel.

After blowing the save in what eventually would be a Red Sox' win over the Blue Jays -- with the closer giving up a game-tying home run to Justin Smoak -- the numbers had gotten ugly. Since the All-Star break Kimbrel had allowed five runs in 6 1/3 innings, walking five and allowing opponents to accumulate a .292 batting average and .926 OPS.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora cited the lack of command with Kimbrel's curveball. The pitcher simply said it was the struggle he was having with commanding both of his pitches. The strikeout rate was down. The walk rate was up. The velocity had dipped a bit.

There were plenty of reasons to target for the downturn.

But Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie believes he found something that has just as much to do with Kimbrel's opponents as the pitcher himself.

Kimbrel might have become too predictable.

"I brought this up to him last year as well, you just can't get into situations, especially against lefties, where the strike zone map starts to separate. The colors start to stand out. Good hitters hunt certain locations for a type of pitch and if the color code starts to get really separated then they can have better opportunities to have success," LeVangie told WEEL.com prior to his team's game at Rogers Centre Wednesday night.

"I talked to him about using both pitches to both sides of the plate. Curveball backdoor. Using the fastball in a little bit more, not that I love throwing it in but just a little bit more to help get more swings on the breaking ball to them. And some backdoor curveballs for strikes earlier in the count to not help them not just sit on one speed and protect that part of the strike zone. We call it crisscrossing both sides of the plate. Once he starts doing that a little bit more the colors will start to intertwine a little bit."

The importance of mixing things up is more prevalent than ever considering how much information is at the disposal of hitters. And even a pitcher with the kind of stuff Kimbrel possesses can fall victim to routine patterns if there isn't a course correction at times.

After studying the information, and talking to Kimbrel Wednesday afternoon, LeVangie suggests such an alteration might be in the works.

"He's fine. Everybody goes through these little bumps in the road," the pitching coach said. "He's willing to do whatever it takes for this team. He takes the ball every day. He's a big part of our success."

Alex Cora: Sandy Leon made play of the year

Rob Bradford

TORONTO -- Tucked in among a crazy night of plays during the Red Sox' win over the Blue Jays Tuesday night was one of the season's most memorable.

Sandy Leon tagged out Kendrys Morales.

The play was not only important at the time, keeping the bases loaded without the Jays adding to their lead, but was remarkably unique. How unique? One day later Red Sox manager Alex Cora designated it above every other defensive play made by his team this season.

"That's the best play of the season. I mean, that's the play of the year," Cora said prior to the Red Sox' game against the Jays Wednesday night.

"If you're in that situation with the bases loaded and he's running to the plate and you see that ball wavering by the line, would you catch it or let it go foul? That was amazing. Honestly I know Jackie will probably get the play of the year with us, but that, for me, was the play of the year. For him to go after it and have the presence of mind to catch the ball and tag him. And Jason was talking about it. He never did it. First of all, it never happens. For him to react that way, that was impressive."

The conversation about Leon led to a reflection on how good he has been this season.

He carries the best catcher ERA in baseball (2.97), with the Red Sox going 25-1 in games Leon has started since June 21.

"His baseball IQ is way up there," Cora said. "The good thing about him is he's willing to keep learning. You saw it yesterday on that 3-0 count, he swung. We trust him. We trust his swing in certain spots. Obviously, offensively when he's out of the zone he struggles. When he's within the zone, like the last few days, he can contribute. Behind the plate, I've been very impressed, not only with the way he calls the game but the way he blocks the ball. It seems like he blocks it and the ball is right in his hand. Throwing obviously has been really good. There's something about him where he's able to slow down the game. The bigger the moment, I'm not saying the easier it is for him, but he's able to slow it down and think through the situations, call pitches and do certain things behind the plate."

What's somewhat amazing is how Leon's role has evolved, having clearly been designated the backup after Christian Vazquez signed a three-year, \$13.55 million extension during spring training. In the first 11 games of the season, for instance, Leon only managed two starts.

"I just told him he needs to be patient and he understood. He was," Cora said of his communication with Leon after the Vazquez extension. "I think he started off 0-for-whatever and he wasn't playing that much. We were just giving him Porcello. But it's a long season and people go through slumps and injuries and you're opportunity is going to come up. Yo have to be ready. Here's a guy who is always ready. He's the first one showing up, working out. Everyone talks about his offseason program this year. He lost weight. He's been healthy. He's been playing a lot more lately. I'm not concerned about it. I keep mentioning proud, but that's a situation probably other guys put their head down and say, 'Forget it. Whatever. Let me go about business and whenever they want me to catch, I'll catch.' But he didn't do that. He was helping Christian. He was helping others. Raffy (Devers). Xander (Bogaerts). All those guys. For the Latino players he's a guy who brings wisdom. He's a quiet leader."

Mookie Betts announces he will become father following season

Ryan Hannable

Mookie Betts' year continues to get better.

On Wednesday, the Red Sox outfielder announced he will become a father after the season.

"This year continues to be good to me!!! Can't wait to meet you baby Bettsmore life, more blessings!!!," he wrote on Twitter with pictures announcing the baby.

Ready or not, J.D. Martinez has become a superstar

Rob Bradford

TORONTO -- Life has been full of the unexpected when it comes to J.D. Martinez.

Ask a teammate if Martinez is better than they thought and you'll get a shockingly honest answer.

"Definitely," said Red Sox first baseman Mitch Moreland. "I knew he was a great player and a great hitter, but the stuff that he sees and picks up on, that he's able to take to the plate and put it into motion is pretty special."

Ask Martinez about his biggest surprise when it comes to this season and the theme will be constant.

"The media is a lot," he noted. "That's probably the most overwhelming part. There's no ducking or dodging them. You know you're going to have to talk to them every day. ... For me, it's just not getting caught up in all of it. I feel like when you play for a big market team it's easy to get caught up in all the hype and all the publicity that you get. And for me, I don't care about any of that. You see me, I'm just doing my stuff to prepare for the games and just staying focused and having that tunnel vision."

Now comes the next eyebrow-raiser: Martinez has to now officially be viewed as a card-carrying superstar in this town.

For a guy who thrives on his preparation, bracing himself for what his world has evolved into is no easy task. It takes something to be classified in the same conversation of professional athletes such as Rob Gronkowski, Patrice Bergeron, Kyrie Irving and Mookie Betts. This isn't about personality, it's about production, and at this point -- with the Red Sox rolling over the rest of baseball -- Martinez has officially earned his place among New England's best.

And it's not just the numbers or the wins. It's how he's doing it. That's always part of the equation. The latest example? Two outs in the eighth inning and the Red Sox are trailing by a run. Martinez hits a three-run homer. It was almost expected, which is the highest compliment. It was when Larry Bird had the ball in his hands with time running down. It is when Tom Brady needs to drive the length field for a game-

winning score. And it was Sunday night when the Red Sox needed Martinez to keep the rally going against Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman.

There is that hesitancy -- particularly coming from Martinez -- to offer a comparison to the last middle-of-the-order presence possessed by the Red Sox, David Ortiz. But, as we sit here, there is undeniably that same expectation now as there was two seasons ago when the game's biggest moment rolls around.

Martinez has been at-bat 10 times with the bases loaded this season. On eight of those occasions, he has come away with a hit. There's just one example.

He also hits home runs. A lot of them. That never hurts the Q-rating, either.

So with proof that the unassuming 30-year-old has achieved the aforementioned status, next comes the realities that come with it. Martinez loves talking hitting. He doesn't like talking about his own hitting. He seemingly hates doing the prerequisite media scrums after moments like the one at Rogers Centre Tuesday night. And as he pointed out at the All-Star Game, if it was up to him his existence would consist of waking up late in the morning, eating something and then heading over to the ballpark for the great game of baseball.

"I was never a guy who wants the public attention. For me I'm waiting for the next challenge," he said. "Who am I facing next? Who is the next pitcher on the mound? Who do they have warming up? To me, in this game, it's all about what's next. The moment you settle, the moment you stop growing, you start dying. You start going backward and it doesn't matter what you did last game, it's all about what you do in the next game. If I had four home runs the day before and I come back and have five strikeouts they're going to write bad about me. It's all about continuing to go and not get caught up in what's next."

He's right. It is going to be about what happens in the next game, the next month and the next postseason.

But whether or not Martinez is ready for it, or wants it, the slugger has dropped himself in a select group. Meet Boston sports' newest superstar.

*** *BostonSportsJournal.com***

Even in comeback victory, bullpen issues pose threat for Red Sox

Sean McAdam

TORONTO — Ultimately, they won the game, which, in the end, is all that matters.

All that matters for the night, that is, in the present, which is where teams live. The Red Sox' 10-7, 10-inning triumph will not count any less after their bullpen nearly sabotaged them over the final four innings.

"Nearly" is the operative word here, of course, because, again, the win counts fully, regardless of how it was achieved.

But given that the win moved the Red Sox to an almost unfathomable 46 games over .500 and gave them is-that-some-kind-of-misprint winning percentage of .702, this isn't about their lead in the East being threatened or compromised.

With almost eight weeks to go, the Red Sox can't print playoff tickets yet, but they can take a macro view of things and assess how they shape up for October. And from 30,000 feet, or from the dugout, there's a problem that can't be ignored.

On a night when Rogers Centre leaked and allowed rain to seep in, making the roof retractable but not exactly impenetrable, it also seemed to serve as a metaphor for the Red Sox bullpen.

Here's one way to look at it: starter Drew Pomeranz, who walked five, got only three swings-and-misses and missed the strike zone with nearly half (40-of-84) of his pitches, was one of only two pitchers to face more than one batter and still post some scoreless innings Tuesday.

Six different relievers made the visiting bullpen door a turnstile, one after another entering, and more often than not, allowing runs to the Blue Jays. Heath Hembree inherited two baserunners and stranded both when he retired the only hitter he faced. Brandon Workman loaded the bases with no outs and somehow extricated himself, Houdini-like, by emerging unscathed.

After that, it was all downhill:

Joe Kelly pitched an inning and allowed a run, aided and abetted by his own errant pickoff attempt; Matt Barnes allowed two hits and a run immediately after J.D. Martinez had helped to give the Red Sox their first their lead of the night, 5-3;

Craig Kimbrel suffered his fourth blown save of the season when he gave up a game-tying homer to Justin Smoak with one out in the bottom of the ninth;

Tyler Thornburg was rocked for two runs on three hits in the 10th, bringing the potential tying run to the on-deck circle in an inning which began with a five-run lead.

Is any of this providing comfort as the Red Sox look ahead to the postseason, when the Red Sox will face lineups far deeper and talented — and goodness knows, more motivated — than the moribund Blue Jays, currently being kept out of the AL East basement only by the presence of the Baltimore Orioles?

Actually, Kimbrel's struggles — runs allowed in four of his last five appearances — should be considered separately. He's battled command issues for the last few weeks, but there's little doubt that he'll figure out some things mechanically. If the Sox have to worry about Kimbrel, then their pennant hopes are moot.

But if the Red Sox can't protect one- and two-run leads late in games to get themselves to Kimbrel, they're in deep trouble.

Barnes, to be fair, has been mostly excellent, but some missteps of late serve as a reminder that he hasn't locked down the eighth in truly big-game settings.

Kelly? Fantastic first two months, followed by two equally abysmal ones, out from which he's only recently begun to dig himself. He remains the proverbial "work-in-progress."

Workman has bounced back-and-forth between Triple-A and the big leagues and has generally lacked consistency. Thornburg has shown promise in some outings in the last two weeks, but two walks against the Yankees Sunday night and a few hard-hit balls in the 10th on Tuesday night are evidence that he's not yet the Thornburg of 2016.

The good news? First, the lineup is eminently capable of bailing out the bullpen, as it did repeatedly Tuesday night. And a few starters — Chris Sale and Rick Porcello, most obviously — will routinely pitch deeper into games to limit the bullpen's exposure and handle some of their own high-leverage innings themselves.

And, with nearly eight weeks remaining, there's time. Time to fix mechanical issues, build confidence, and maybe snag someone through the waiver process.

Yes, there's time. Which is fortuitous, because on an otherwise very good — maybe even history-making — the Red Sox still have a very significant weakness to address.

Maybe Mookie Betts has competition for AL MVP in his own clubhouse

Sean McAdam

TORONTO — With season better than two-thirds complete, the speculation about individual awards is certain to heat up.

For weeks, the American League Most Valuable Player debate has centered around Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts and Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout, with Cleveland's Jose Ramirez making a recent push to be included.

But what if Betts isn't even the most valuable player on his own team? What if the Red Sox MVP — and league, too — isn't Betts at all, but rather, teammate J.D. Martinez?

Certainly, Betts has the stronger and more obvious case. Entering Wednesday's game, he led the league in batting average and slugging percentage, was second in on-base percentage, runs scored and OPS, third in WAR, and fourth in total bases.

He's also easily the Red Sox' best baserunner and defender, making him the very embodiment of the term "five-tool player."

Martinez, of course, can't make that claim. He runs well for his size, but isn't close to the baserunner or basestealer Betts is. And he's no match for him as an outfielder, either. At best, Martinez could be judged as an average defender.

And that gets to another factor: Of the 108 starts by Martinez this season, fully 67 of them have come at DH. He's not exclusively a DH, and in fact, bristles at the notion. But close to two-thirds of his starts have come at DH, and that may prove an obstacle for voters. After all, David Ortiz, for all his dominance, never won an MVP, and for that matter, no close-to-full-time DH has ever accomplished the feat in the 45 years of the DH's existence in the AL.

(Don Baylor, the AL MVP in 1979, came closest with 65 DH starts. Frank Thomas, who became a more-or-less full-time DH later in his career, played just four and 13 games at DH respectively when he won back-to-back MVP's early in his career in 1993-1994).

But it's impossible to look at the Red Sox lineup — one that is essentially unchanged since last season with the significant exception of Martinez — and not attribute the huge upswing in production to the presence of Martinez.

Every other hitter in the Boston lineup Wednesday night was part of the 2017 team. Yet that lineup finished dead last in the American League in homers and fifth in runs scored. This one, new and improved thanks to Martinez, is first in runs scored, first in slugging percentage, first in on-base percentage, first in OPS, first in extra-base hits, first in doubles ... and fourth in homers.

And while Betts has set the tone at the top, becoming the elite leadoff hitter that Alex Cora envisioned when he installed him in the role over the winter and dreamed of the "instant offense" that Betts could provide, Martinez is the force around which the Red Sox lineup orbits.

Hitting either third or fourth, he's helped make everyone else in the lineup better. Those in front of him — Betts and Andrew Benintendi — see better pitches, and those behind him benefit as he wears down pitchers and provides them with run-producing opportunities.

Martinez has also become the team's unofficial third hitting coach. Betts himself has credited Martinez with providing help and guidance. So have newcomer Steve Pearce, and Xander Bogaerts, who credits Martinez for helping him transition into a more aggressive hitter at the plate. Martinez is an obsessive student of hitting and his habit of talking about adjustments and breaking down opposing pitchers has proved, as Cora predicted, to be contagious.

Not that his value is entirely anecdotal or reflected only in intangibles. To the contrary, the case can be made that Martinez is the team's bell-weather. When he does well, so does the team.

Need proof?

Consider:

When Martinez homers, the Red Sox are nearly unbeatable at 28-4.

When he has multiple RBI, they're 26-3.

When he drives in any runs at all, they're 45-6.

When he has at least one hit, they're 61-19.

And when on the rare occasions when he goes hitless, they're just 15-12.

Then, there are his gaudy personal numbers, especially those in the traditional category. His .332 batting average leaves him just .008 behind Betts (.340), while he leads the majors in both homers (34) and (98).

It would be a longshot because he strikes out a fair number of times and doesn't have the speed to earn infield hits, but if Martinez keeps hitting at this rate, he could be a Triple Crown candidate in September. Only one player in the big leagues (Miguel Cabrera) has won a Triple Crown since 1968.

And Martinez stands a chance of becoming the first Red Sox hitter since Jim Rice in 1978 to reach 400 total bases in a season; he's at 272 with almost eight weeks remaining in the season. He could do something that neither Manny Ramirez nor Ortiz, great as they were, ever came close to accomplishing.

The more bases Betts steals, and hits he takes away in right, the more support he'll get. And again, it will be difficult for a hitter — even one as great and complete as Martinez — to overtake the more well-rounded Betts, who can beat you in ways Martinez can't.

But he can't be counted out, either. And it's a great conversation piece for Red Sox fans, otherwise bored by the team's on-going domination and runaway lead in the division, to debate as they wait for the post-season to arrive.

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 10, Blue Jays 5 – Balanced attack, strong start from Johnson lead the way

Sean McAdam

HEADLINES

Johnson better than his line score: For the second-straight start, spot starter Brian Johnson allowed five runs. But on this night, he gave the Sox what they needed — five shutout innings to begin as the Red Sox kept building their lead, and seven innings of length to help take some of the load over an overtaxed bullpen. "I felt like I pitched a lot better than my line score shows," he said.

"I know people are going to ask, 'Why did he pitch the seventh?'" said Alex Cora. "But we needed seven. And for him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

In his last two innings, Johnson was tagged for a two-run homer and a three-run homer which inflated his ERA, but likely were the result of sitting around during some long innings while his teammates added on. Johnson has struck out 17 hitters in his last 12 innings.

“I think he’s using his fastball in different spots,” offered Cora, “and then he’s able to expand down in the zone. He’s kind of like (Matt Barnes), where he gets that call with the breaking ball up and then you have hitters looking up in the zone, and then he’s throwing the curveball down, and his slider a little more.”

Devers returns with a bang: If Rafael Devers was suffering from any rust at the plate following a 10-day DL stint, he hid it well. Returning to the lineup, Devers had a sharp double, a walk and a two-run homer in his first three plate appearances. “It felt good,” said Devers of his return. “I gave 100 percent on every play and nothing bothered me. I’m just happy to be back and contributing and help the team.” Devers was helped by the fact that he got four at-bats in Lowell on a one-game rehab assignment in Lowell. “The few at-bats that I did have,” said Devers, “it was good for me to see (live) pitching because I hadn’t seen pitching in a little while, just from timing purposes and to get everything back in rhythm. It was good.” If Devers can provide some run production, he can help lengthen the lineup in the bottom of third of the order, where the Red Sox have gotten inconsistent offense from both Jackie Bradley Jr. and Sandy Leon.

Bogaerts showing no ill-effects: When he was hit on the hand a little more than a week ago, Xander Bogaerts was understandably concerned, since the same circumstance last July sent him into a second-half tailspin when he had difficulty driving the ball and essentially was forced to hit one-handed for the second half of the season. But Bogaerts has seemingly overcome that problem this year, as Wednesday night demonstrated. He hit a deep sacrifice fly to right in the third inning, and sandwiched around two walks, drove a hard-hit double the opposite way. That’s a good sign that Bogaerts isn’t limited at the plate, just eight days after being drilled in the same right hand.

TURNING POINT

The Red Sox began turning it on in the third inning, sending eight men to the plate and scoring four times. They would continue to add on, scoring runs in four of the next five innings, but the 4-0 head start proved too much for the Jays, who, it seems, don’t need much incentive to give up these days.

TWO UP

Andrew Benintendi: Somewhat quietly, Benintendi has hit nearly .400 (.398) over his last 24 games, with nights like last night: two walks, a sacrifice fly and two doubles.

J.D. Martinez: Martinez had another one of his typical games, reaching base four times in five plate appearances, including a double, a run scored and an RBI.

ONE DOWN

Jackie Bradley Jr.: Bradley has a rough night at the plate, going 0-for-4 (with a walk) while striking out twice and grounding into a double play.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“I don’t know. I have no idea. Maybe it’s because I’m starting on Chris’s day and he gets a lot of those.” — Johnson, who has 17 strikeouts in his last two starts, both of which came as he filled in for Chris Sale.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

The Red Sox improved to 12-3 against the Blue Jays this season

The Sox have won six straight, 10-of-11, and 25-of-30.

Boston improved to 39-19 on the road.

The Sox have already won this series and haven’t lost one since July 1.

Ten of the 16 homers Devers has hit this year have come on the road.

Andrew Benintendi posted his 40th multi-hit game.

UP NEXT

The Red Sox and Blue Jays wrap up their series Thursday night at 7:07 p.m. with RHP Rick Porcello (14-4, 3.84) vs. LHP Ryan Borucki (1-2, 2.30)

Final: Red Sox 10, Blue Jays 5 – Devers returns with a bang

Sean McAdam

TORONTO – The Red Sox Express continued to roll Wednesday night, with a balanced attack pounding out 12 hits and five different players driving in runs, leading to the team's sixth straight victory, a 10-5 win over the accommodating Toronto Blue Jays.

The Sox got a two-run homer and a double from Rafael Devers in his first game back from the DL and three RBI from Xander Bogaerts. The Sox led 7-0 before the Jays could get on the scoreboard.

Brian Johnson blanked the Jays through the first five innings before allowing a two-run homer in the sixth and a three-run shot in the seventh. He earned his second straight win and posted six strikeouts.

IN-GAME OBSERVATIONS

9:40 If you listen carefully, you can almost hear the Jays barking from the third level of Rogers Centre. This team does. not. care. Rumors of John Gibbons' imminent firing don't seem to be motivating them much. They haven't played hard for much of the year. When the Jays visited Fenway at the end of May, they had players who weren't running out groundballs. Now that it's August and they're buried in the standings, they really don't care. Russell Martin couldn't have looked any more disinterested as a wild pitch got by him and a run scored in the top of the eighth.

9:23 Looks like the Sox might have pushed Johnson a little too far – clearly tiring there and left an 87 mph fastball over the plate which Randal Grichuk hammered into the third deck for a three-run homer. He was at 80 pitches through six, and the Sox probably wanted to give the bullpen some rest after all the innings of late, but it looked like it cost Johnson there in the seventh. At 98 pitches, I would assume that's it. Ryan Brasier warming.

9:03 Encouraging night for Xander Bogaerts, who was hit in the hand last week, sparking fears that he was going to go through the same problems he had in the second half of last year when he essentially had to hit one-handed and couldn't drive the ball after being drilled in the same right hand. But he hit one ball deep to right for a sacrifice fly in the third and just drove a hard double to right to score a run.

8:46 Gorgeous swing by Devers, who loves the ball down-and-in and got a slider right in his wheelhouse from Jake Petricka. Devers serves it out right for a two-run homer, his 16th of the season. Nice return to the lineup for Devers tonight — a double, walk and two-run homer.

8:02 All of a sudden, Brian Johnson is turning into a strikeout machine. He fanned a career-high 11 against the Yankees in just five innings in his last outing and he's got four in the first three here tonight. The curveball has, not surprisingly, been his put-away pitch — three of the four strikeouts have come on the curve.

7:45 Mitch Moreland still isn't fully recovered from the knee issues he dealt with a few weeks ago. When someone asked him post-game Tuesday, following his three-run homer, when he turned the corner with his knee, Moreland cracked: "I'll let you know when that happens." But in the last few days, Moreland has been having better at-bats. He knocked in four Tuesday night and his two-run double to center in the third inning tonight gives his six RBI in the last two nights.

7:35 In his first at-bat since going on the DL a week and a half ago, Rafael Devers drills a double to center. The Sox could use a hot spell from Devers from the bottom third of the order now, with Brock Holt scuffling, Sandy Leon struggling to get over .220 and Jackie Bradley Jr, though improved, still in the low 200s.

WHO: Red Sox vs. Toronto Blue Jays

WHEN: 7:07 p.m.

WHERE: Rogers Centre

WHAT'S UP: The Red Sox have won five straight and own a winning percentage of .702. They've yet to lose in August and are 9-1 in their last 10 games. They're 24-5 in their last 29 games. Toronto is in fourth place in the A.L. East, 28 games behind the Red Sox.

STARTING PITCHERS: LHP Brian Johnson (2-3, 3.74) vs. RHP Mike Hauschild (1-0, 0.00)

TV/RADIO: NESN/WEEI 93.7 FM

LINEUPS

RED SOX

Betts RF

Benintendi LF

Moreland 1B

Martinez DH

Bogaerts SS

Bradley CF

Nunez 2B

Devers 3B

Leon C

BLUE JAYS

Grichuk RF

Travis 2B

Smoak 1B

Hernandez LF

Morales DH

Solarte 3B

Martin C

Diaz SS

Pillar CF

NEWS AND NOTES

As expected, the Red Sox activated third baseman Rafael Devers from the DL and had him back in the lineup Wednesday. The plan is for him to play Wednesday, get a day off Thursday, then return to action Friday in Baltimore. "He's had his ups and down," said Alex Cora. "Obviously, everybody focuses on the error (a team-high 20), but he's a guy who's very rangy at third base. He's made some mistakes, but at the same time, he's been learning. Offensively, he's been up and down. It's not easy to play at this level; imagine playing at 21 years old for a championship-caliber team. But we trust the guy, we let him play and he's been good for us." To make room for Devers on the roster, the Red Sox optioned INF Tony Renda, who scored the game-winning run as a pinch-runner Sunday night.

Cora said the Sox will use both Eduardo Nunez and Brock Holt at second until Ian Kinsler (hamstring) returns from the DL. Nunez got the start Wednesday and will likely be back there Thursday. Nunez was hitless Tuesday night in the series opener, but was 14-for-36 on the just-completed homestand.

Cora lauded Sandy Leon for the catcher's play in the sixth inning when, with the bases loaded and no out, he fielded a roller down the third base line and quickly tagged the runner breaking from third. "That's the best play of this season," said Cora. "Hands down. That's the play of the year. That was amazing. I know that Jackie (Bradley Jr.) will get the Play of the Year this year (for his acrobatic catches in the outfield), but that, for me, that's the play of the year right there. To have the presence of mind to (get) the ball and just tag him? Jason (Varitek, catching instructor) said he never did it. It never happens. And for him to react that way, that was aggressive. His baseball IQ is way up there. The good thing about him is he's willing to keep learning."

*** *The Athletic***

They can do it with dramatic style or brutal efficiency. Red Sox just keep winning

Chad Jennings

TORONTO — There was no comeback necessary on Wednesday. No dramatic at-bat in the ninth. No go-ahead homer in extra innings. No one got a Gatorade bath this time.

But the Red Sox kept their winning streak alive by doing a lot of the things that stirred such drama, and such success, over the past week and a half.

The 10-5 win against the Blue Jays was the Red Sox' sixth win in a row. They've won 25 of their last 30, have yet to lose since the calendar flipped to August, and have already reached a milestone in the win column.

This was their 81st win, meaning they could lose every one of their remaining 47 games and still finish with a .500 record. Thirteen teams were below .500 at the start of play on Wednesday, and it's now literally impossible for the Red Sox to join them.

"Obviously, we know what we're doing," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "But like I said, we win today, we talk about it, we move on. We show up tomorrow, and we play hard again."

This has been a particularly dramatic stretch for the best team in baseball. They walked off three times in the previous homestand, then opened this road trip with an extra-innings thriller. By those standards, win No. 81 seemed ho-hum, but it was actually just a continuation of what's made this team so good to begin with.

Brian Johnson started strong

The final score doesn't do it justice, because this really was a terrific start for Johnson. Filling in for the injured Chris Sale, he went five scoreless, and if he'd stopped right there, it would have been a great outing for a guy who spent most of the season in the bullpen. But he kept going.

A two-run homer in the sixth and a three-run homer in the seventh — both with two outs — basically wrecked Johnson's final numbers, but early success was not to be ignored. Johnson has ultimately fit in with a rotation that's on a roll.

"He did an outstanding job," Cora said. "I know they scored five runs and people are going to say, 'Why did he pitch the seventh?' But we needed a seventh. We were in the bullpen and for him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us."

In the past 19 games, Sox starters have pitched to a 2.11 ERA (they had a 1.75 ERA before Johnson's last two innings). They have allowed one run or fewer in 10 of the team's 17 games since the All-Star break. Johnson is basically the team's sixth or seventh starter, and they're 5-2 in his starts since putting him back in the rotation in late July.

“You don’t want to go out there and give up five,” Johnson said. “But as long as the team gets the W, that’s honestly all that matters. So, 5-2, I’ll take it. I’d rather be 7-0, but 5-2 is good.”

Sandy Leon was behind the plate

The guy’s a .217 hitter, but it seems the Red Sox just can’t lose when Leon’s in the starting lineup.

The team has won 25 of its past 26 games in which Leon started. More to the point, they have a 14-game winning streak with Leon as the starting catcher. Surely there’s an explanation beyond Leon himself, but the success rate is pretty hard to ignore.

“I see it,” Cora said. “But at the same time, those guys on the mound, they make a difference, too. They work together great, but you see the numbers the last few years as far as the ERA as a catcher, he’s the best in the league and I’m glad that he’s catching for us.”

Indeed, Leon’s 3.46 ERA since the start of 2016 is the best in the majors among catchers with at least 150 starts. He also has the best catcher’s ERA of the 29 players who have started at least 50 games at catcher this season.

Christian Vazquez has been on the disabled list since July 8, and Blake Swihart — who was turning a corner offensively — has since landed on the DL himself, but the Red Sox just keep winning with Leon.

Mookie Betts scored twice

There is no shortage of numbers that speak to Betts’ incredible season, but here’s one that he likes: He leads MLB in runs per game.

“You score runs to win games,” he told MLB.com earlier this season. “That’s how you do it.”

Betts gets on base often. He regularly slugs himself into scoring position, he runs the bases well, and he’s driven himself in with a home run 26 times. In the current six-game winning streak, he’s scored nine times, including two runs in each of the past three games.

On Wednesday, Betts was hit by a pitch to load the bases in the third inning. Andrew Benintendi followed with a sacrifice fly for the game’s first run, after which Betts stole second — his 22nd steal — and scored on a Mitch Moreland double. Two innings later, Betts led off with a single, which eventually turned into another run.

“It’s good especially when Andrew is getting on base at this pace again, Mookie’s getting on base, J.D. (Martinez) is getting on base,” Cora said. “We can put Mitch in between Andrew and J.D. and create more traffic for (Martinez).”

Xander Bogaerts walked to make it 5-0

At the time, Bogaerts’ bases-loaded walk in the fifth inning felt unnecessary. The Red Sox already had a four-run lead, and a free pass was as much a Blue Jays embarrassment as it was a Red Sox achievement. But in the grand scheme of things, five runs has been a significant output.

The Red Sox have scored at least five runs in a game an MLB-best 67 times this season. They’ve done it in nearly 60 percent of their games, and they have an .866 winning percentage when reaching that plateau. Since May 16, they’re 38-3 when scoring at least five runs.

For a while the Red Sox were having trouble getting to that number. They scored at least five runs only five times in their first 14 games after the break, but they’ve found some traction recently. They’ve scored at least five runs in their past three games.

“You see Xander doing his thing,” Cora said. “It seems like the last two days, after they took out (starter Marcus) Stroman (on Tuesday), they started swinging the bat well.”

The Red Sox’ 620 runs this season are the most in baseball by a wide margin. No other team has as many as 580.

Joe Kelly finished strong

One way or another, a good finish has been a key part of the Red Sox’s recent winning streak.

While winning 10 of their past 11, the Red Sox have gotten a walk-off homer by Betts, a walk-off double by Swihart, a walk-off single by Benintendi, a 10th-inning game-winner by Moreland, a complete-game one-hitter by Rick Porcello, and an eighth-inning 100-mph pitch by Nathan Eovaldi. They’ve found various ways to finish strong (and the offense kind of kept up the tradition with five runs in the last four innings Wednesday).

But the bullpen — full of guys whose primary job is to finish strong — has been a notable exception during this recent run of success. Craig Kimbrel has allowed a run in four of his past five outings. Heath Hembree let two inherited runners score Sunday. The pen gave up two runs last Thursday. After basically exhausting their bullpen Tuesday, though, the Red Sox got scoreless innings from Ryan Brasier and Kelly to finish off Wednesday’s win. Kelly got into some trouble with a broken-bat single, but he finished the game with a double play.

And just like that, the Red Sox had won again.

“I don’t think anybody is thinking much of it,” Betts said. “I think we’re just going out and playing, and that’s all we can do.”

*** *The Toronto Sun***

Red Sox feast on Jays pitching again

Steve Buffery

The Boston Red Sox have developed a taste for bird, and we’re not talking pheasant under glass.

They’ve been feasting on the Blue Jays all season and did so again on Wednesday night, leaving the Rogers Centre with a 10-5 victory for their sixth straight win and 10th in their past 11. Boston is 12-3 against the Jays this year and has scored 20 runs against Toronto in the first two games of this series. The Jays have dropped three in a row and are 11 games below .500 to match a season low.

“It’s a tough division,” said Jays outfielder Randal Grichuk, who hit his 15th home run, a three-run job, in the seventh inning. “It’s a tough division to pitch in, to hit in. Every time you go out, you’re going to get former Cy Young winners, guys that have chances to win (the Cy Young) this year and lineups like these guys. You definitely have got to come out ready to play every night.”

Teoscar Hernandez also hit a home run for Toronto, his 17th in the sixth inning.

Another one-sided loss, but Jays fans really can’t expect much better at this point of the season against a team like the Red Sox, who lead MLB with 81 wins and 620 runs. Toronto’s rotation is in tatters and is using spot starters and relief pitchers to start some games.

Right-hander Mike Hauschild, who was brilliant in his debut as a reliever with the Jays last weekend in Seattle, got burned quickly by the Red Sox on Wednesday in his first career MLB start. He cruised through the first two innings but ran into trouble in the third when he loaded the bases with none out, including

hitting Mookie Betts with a pitch. He allowed the Red Sox to jump into an 3-0 lead., two via a Mitch Moreland double off the centre field wall. After J.D.

Martinez followed that up with a single, Hauschild was pulled for reliever Luis Santos, who gave up a sacrifice fly to Xander Bogaerts as the Red Sox jumped into a 4-0 lead (another run charged to Hauschild). Boston led 7-0 after the top of the sixth (after a Rafael Devers homer) and while the Jays added two in the sixth and three in the seventh, they couldn't overcome the early deficit.

GAME REFLECTIONS

Hernandez demonstrated yet again in the top of the third that he has a long way to go to become a good left-fielder. Bradley hit a fly to the foul territory in left and Hernandez was slow to get there, allowing the ball to hit the ground. He seems reluctant to go after hits that aren't routine, though he did make a decent catch off Moreland in the fifth to hold a runner at third ... The Jays traded minor league RHP Nick Tepesch to the Detroit Tigers for cash ... Justin Smoak smacked a double to left in the fourth and is on a 12-game hit streak, passing Lourdes Gurriel Jr., for longest streak by a Jay this season. He also had a pair of singles ... Kevin Pillar made a nice running catch at the wall to pull in a Moreland shot in the eighth with two men on ... Martinez picked up a double, two singles and walked ... Also on Wednesday, Jays' uber- prospect Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit his first triple-A home run, a massive blow over the wall in centre off Atlanta Braves prospect Kyle Wright.

JAYS GM LAUDS GURRIEL'S STREAK

The Blue Jays may be out of the playoff picture, but there is at least one reason for fans to get excited. The return of Lourdes Gurriel Jr.

When the rookie infielder went down last week in Chicago with a knee contusion and left ankle sprain, he was in the midst of what manager John Gibbons described as an "historic" run at the plate.

The Cuban native extended his multi-hit game streak to 11 games on July 29 with three hits against the White Sox, tying Tony Perez for the longest streak in the majors over the past 50 seasons. He is one of only seven players in history to string together 11 straight multi-hit games and is only two off the MLB record set by Rogers Hornsby in 1923. Gurriel is batting .521 (25-for-48) over the span of the streak. Jays GM Ross Atkins said one of the most exciting parts of Gurriel's run is the fact that there seems to be no fluke to it.

"You know the most encouraging thing for me was seeing the types of hits he was getting (in terms of) where the pitches were in the zone, his ability to pull his hands in over the inner half and cover the outer half and using the whole field," said Atkins. "When you can do those things, you get those types of results. It wasn't, 'Wow, this guy is really fortunate or just hot right now.' It was really the plate coverage with lots of strength and authority with a great approach. Guys that do that consistently do end up doing historic things."

Gurriel began a running progression program this week and is going through range of motion and strength exercises as well as doing long tossing, hitting in the batting cage and taking ground balls.

*** *The Toronto Star***

Relentless Red Sox too much for Blue Jays

Richard Griffin

The Red Sox were playing the middle of a three-game series against the Blue Jays in the same country, but in a different league.

The Jays are constructed of injuries, warts, a struggling bullpen, depth-chart starters and have no chance of competing on a level field as exhibited Wednesday in a coldly dominant 10-5 shellacking by the Beantowners at Rogers Centre.

"It's tough playing comeback," Jays manager John Gibbons said. "You try to hold the game in check and it sort of turns into that bullpen game again. We hung around, we just couldn't get that shutdown inning. Those kind of games when the starter comes out early you know it's going to be difficult."

The Jays are now 3-12 against the Red Sox this year, including a 2-6 mark at home. The Jays are 9-25 against the Sox over the past two seasons. Boston posted its 81st win of the year and are on pace for 114 victories.

The Red Sox are relentless on offence, especially with the return of third baseman Rafael Devers to the ranks of the active. Devers had been on the 10-day disabled list with a hamstring strain but returned with a double, a homer and two RBIs. Left fielder Andrew Benintendi had a pair of doubles, a sacrifice fly and two walks. The first five Jays pitchers in the game all gave up runs.

The only Jays response began with a two-run homer by Teoscar Hernandez in the sixth and ended with a three-run blast in the seventh by Randal Grichuk.

"It's a tough division to pitch in, to hit in," Grichuk said of his first experience in the AL East. "You know every time you go out you're going to get former Cy Young winners that have a chance to win it this year and lineups like these guys."

Perhaps it was unrealistic to expect another Mike Hauschild performance like the recently released right-hander posted in Seattle in his first relief outing for the Jays. The 28-year-old had signed a contract just hours before Thursday's appearance with the M's unable to watch video or otherwise prepare.

"The biggest difference to me was just pounding the zone with my fastball," Hauschild said. "It seems like they eliminated it in the third inning there. I made a couple of mistakes and they hit it pretty hard."

The Blue Jays had a solid chance to win Game 1 of the Red Sox series on Tuesday but squandered a two-run lead late, with a bullpen meltdown. Gibbons has seen devastating losses turn into longer losing skids over the past couple of seasons.

*** *Associated Press***

Devers hits 2-run HR in return as Red Sox beat Jays 10-5

TORONTO -- The streaking Red Sox have had plenty to be pleased about in recent weeks.

The return of Rafael Devers gave Boston one more reason to smile.

Devers came off the disabled list and hit a two-run home run, Brian Johnson pitched a season-high seven innings to win his second straight start and the Red Sox extended their winning streak to six games with a 10-5 victory over the Toronto Blue Jays on Wednesday night.

J.D. Martinez had three hits and Xander Bogaerts had three RBI for the AL East-leading Red Sox, who have won 10 of 11.

Devers had been out since July 28 because of a strained left hamstring. He went 2 for 4 with a walk and scored twice.

"I felt good, I gave 100 percent on every play today and nothing bothered me," Devers said through a translator. "I'm just happy to be back and contributing."

He isn't the only one who's happy.

"It's cool to see him around," manager Alex Cora said. "He brings a lot of joy to the game, a lot of smiles in the clubhouse. Everybody is happy. He's like their little brother. For him to go out there and perform, that was good to see."

Outfielder Mookie Betts, who scored a pair of runs, said Devers has an infectious enthusiasm.

"He just brings fun," Betts said. "He's a young kid who laughs and enjoys being around. Anytime you have somebody young like that laughing and enjoying things, it kind of helps you sit back and enjoy it too."

There's been no shortage of things for Boston to enjoy. The Red Sox, who own the best record in the major leagues at 81-34, have won 12 of 15 meetings with Toronto this season.

Toronto, meanwhile, matched a season-worst by falling 11 games below .500 at 51-62.

Teoscar Hernandez hit a two-run home run for the Blue Jays, his 17th, and Randal Grichuk added a three-run blast, his 15th. Both homers came off Johnson.

Johnson (3-3) allowed five runs and six hits to earn his first career win over the Blue Jays. He walked two and struck out six.

"I felt like I pitched a lot better than my linescore shows," Johnson said.

Cora praised Johnson for "an outstanding job" after six Boston relievers pitched 5 1/3 innings Tuesday.

"For him to go seven innings, that was excellent for us," Cora said.

Ryan Brasier and Joe Kelly each pitched one inning of relief.

Boston chased Blue Jays starter Mike Hauschild (1-1) with a four-run third inning. Andrew Benitendi opened the scoring with a sacrifice fly, Mitch Moreland hit a two-run double and Bogaerts capped the rally with a sacrifice fly off reliever Luis Santos.

Hauschild, who pitched six shutout innings of relief to beat Seattle in his Blue Jays debut last Thursday, allowed four runs and three hits in 2 1/3 innings.

"The biggest difference tonight was just pounding the zone," Hauschild said. "I made a couple of mistakes and they hit it pretty hard."

Bogaerts drove in a run with a bases-loaded walk off Santos in the fifth and Devers homered off Jake Petricka in the sixth, his 16th. Boston made it 8-2 when Martinez and Bogaerts hit back-to-back doubles off Danny Barnes in the seventh.

Martinez hit an RBI single off Joe Biagini in the eighth and a second run scored on a wild pitch.

SWING AND A MISS

Johnson, who fanned a career-high 11 in his previous start, has now struck out five or more in four straight starts, the past two of which have come in place of injured LHP Chris Sale.

"Maybe it's because I'm starting on Chris' day and he gets a lot of those," Johnson joked.

DEALING

Toronto traded minor league RHP Nick Tepesch to Detroit for cash. Tepesch went 1-6 with a 7.90 ERA in 10 games at Triple-A Buffalo.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: To make room on the roster for Devers, the Red Sox optioned INF Tony Renda to Triple-A Pawtucket. Cora said Devers will get the day off Thursday. ... OF Mookie Betts stayed in the game after being hit on the left hand by a pitch in the third inning.

UP NEXT

Red Sox RHP Rick Porcello (14-4, 3.84) faces Blue Jays LHP Ryan Borucki (1-2, 2.30) in Thursday's series finale. Porcello is 2-1 with a 1.95 ERA over his past four starts at Rogers Centre. Borucki pitched eight shutout innings to beat the Mariners for his first major league win in his previous outing, Aug. 3 at Seattle.