

The Boston Red Sox Thursday, October 11, 2018

*** *The Boston Globe***

Chris Sale, David Price to start first two games

Peter Abraham

A day after Chris Sale threw 13 pitches in relief to help eliminate the Yankees, Red Sox manager Alex Cora said his ace was all set for Game 1 of the American League Championship Series on Saturday night against Houston.

Cora told MLB Network on Wednesday that Sale would start the first game with David Price in Game 2. The Astros will start Justin Verlander then Gerrit Cole.

Sale pitched a perfect eighth inning in Tuesday's 4-3 victory against the Yankees and said afterward he was fine to start on Saturday if that is what Cora decided.

"Whatever he wants," Sale said. "I'm ready for it."

He was far more excited about winning a playoff series for the first time in his career.

"This is what I've wanted my entire life," Sale said. "You sign up for this gig when you become a baseball player. When you get to spring training this is what you play for."

Sale pitched twice against the Yankees and allowed two earned runs over 6½ innings with nine strikeouts.

It was a significant improvement from last season when he faced the Astros twice in the Division Series, once in relief, and gave up nine runs on 13 hits over 9⅔ innings.

"It's a lot better to be in the winning side," Sale said. "I've said all along I try to learn from every experience and learn obviously from my mistakes. My first go at it was God-awful, as bad as it could possibly get. Going through that made me better for this situation here and hopefully going forward.

"I look a lot at what happened the first time around and obviously try to flip the script and here we are."

Sale was asked what he specifically learned from the postseason a year ago.

"Don't suck," he said. "Seriously, man. It was a very humbling experience."

For Price, it's another shot at finally winning a postseason game as a starter. He is 0-9 with a 6.03 earned run average in 10 starts.

Price faced the Astros twice in relief in the Division Series between the teams last season and threw 6⅔ scoreless innings. In two starts this season, Price allowed five earned runs over 12⅓ innings against Houston and struck out 17.

Game times set

Major League Baseball set the game times for the best-of-seven ALCS. Saturday's game will start at 8:09 p.m. with Game 2 on Sunday at 7:09 p.m.

When the series shifts to Houston on Tuesday, the game times would be 5:09 p.m. for Game 3, 8:39 p.m. for Game 4, and 8:09 for Game 5.

Game 6 back in Boston on Oct. 20 would be at 5:09 p.m. unless the NLCS is over. Then it would be at 8:09 p.m. Game 7 would be at 7:39 p.m.

All of the games will be on TBS.

Catching up

Tuesday's victory gave the Sox a 11-12 record in playoff games against the Yankees. They have won seven of the last eight . . . The Sox outscored the Yankees, 27-14, in the series . . . Craig Kimbrel has allowed four earned runs on six hits, three walks, and two hit batters over 4½ innings in the postseason the last two seasons . . . The Sox had Wednesday off after a 4 a.m. arrival at Fenway Park. The team is scheduled to work out on Thursday and Friday.

'It's been a pleasure to play for the guy': With Alex Cora and his players, it's a partnership

Peter Abraham

Brock Holt, who drove in five runs for the Red Sox on Monday night, received a call from manager Alex Cora on Tuesday morning to tell him he wouldn't be in the lineup that night for Game 4 against the Yankees.

"What did I tell him? I told him I'd see him at the park," Holt said about 12 hours later, champagne dripping off the ski goggles hanging around his neck after the Sox eliminated their rivals from the playoffs. "I think at this point we've all learned to trust what AC is thinking."

That was why Rick Porcello, finally pitching well in a playoff start after a series of disappointments, shook Cora's hand and took a seat on the bench to watch what happened next after being told he was finished after only five innings and 65 pitches in Tuesday night's clinching win.

That Porcello could have pitched at least another inning wasn't the point.

"I wasn't really thinking like that," Porcello said. "I was thinking about how many more outs we needed to close this thing out."

A team once wrapped tight with tension now lets it ride, confident their rookie manager knows what's best.

"He's got a great feel for the game, he really does," said Matt Barnes, the eighth-inning reliever who pitched in the sixth inning on Tuesday and didn't ask why. "He's done a phenomenal job all year long managing the bullpen, the starters, the defense, the offense. It's been a pleasure to play for the guy."

That freedom has the Red Sox in the American League Championship Series. Game 1 is Saturday night against the Houston Astros at Fenway Park.

The Sox are four wins away from the World Series. Nobody wants to go home, not for another three weeks anyway. They're having too much fun.

"Anybody outside of this clubhouse can say whatever they want. We know who we are and we know what we can do," said Chris Sale, the starting pitcher who pitched the eighth inning Tuesday night. "Keep coming with it. We'll be fine."

The Red Sox already have cleared the significant hurdle of winning a postseason series after being eliminated in the first round in 2016 and '17. Those failures cost manager John Farrell his job a year ago despite having finished in first place during the regular season.

The Sox wanted a new approach with what would largely be the same players. The 42-year-old Cora represented that in almost every way. He opened lines of communication long blocked and protected the players from themselves, mandating days off during the season with an eye on October.

Farrell, justifiably, managed for several seasons worried a three-game losing streak could cost him his job and games took on a grim, rigid sameness.

Cora took the long leash every new manager gets and went for a run.

“He’s been bold since Day 1, since the first day of spring training,” principal owner John Henry said from a dry corner of the celebration on Tuesday. “Even before spring training, he had ideas about what he wanted to do and what he wanted to change. He just did a tremendous job.”

When the playoffs started, Cora shifted. He used Porcello in relief for an inning to help secure Game 1. Then he flipped the lineup after a Game 2 loss, trusting his instincts — along with projections from the analytics staff — that Holt and Rafael Devers would give the team a lift.

They did, Holt in particular. But Cora put them back on the bench on Tuesday. When asked before the game if he was tempted to stay with what had worked, Cora smiled before answering.

“No, not at all,” he said. “We’ve been doing this all season . . . you have to maximize your roster, your position players.”

Ian Kinsler, who replaced Holt at second, doubled, scored a run, and drove one in in the 4-3 victory.

Eduardo Nunez, back at third base, went 2 for 4 with an RBI and saved the game defensively, racing in to field a slowly hit ball and fire to first for the final out.

Cora knew his lineup decisions would be blamed had the Yankees forced a deciding fifth game. But he did it anyway. Some managers can go years before they gain that level of confidence.

“That’s what was sort of missing the last couple of years. I didn’t think we were very aggressive in general,” said Henry, who also owns the Globe.

Now the Sox play the Astros in a matchup of the two best teams in the game.

The Sox led the majors with 108 victories but the Astros, who won 103, outscored their opponents by 34 more runs. The Sox scored the most runs, the Astros allowed the fewest. The Sox had the best record at home; the Astros were best on the road.

Cora was the bench coach last season when Houston won the World Series and a running theme of the series will be his relationship with Astros manager A.J. Hinch.

Cora always tried to bat that talk away, preferring to keep the focus on the players. But with this Red Sox team, it’s a partnership.

“This is what Alex told us we could do from the start,” left fielder Andrew Benintendi said. “How can you not believe him?”

What can be expected of David Price and Craig Kimbrel in the ALCS?

Nick Cafardo

We can agree that David Price and Craig Kimbrel have some sort of Yankee-phobia, a suggestion both players would likely deny. Short of asking them to take a polygraph on the subject, it would be hard for both to prove otherwise.

Whether it's the intimidating lineup, the venue, the rabid Yankee fans, who knows? They would talk about not executing pitches and having poor location. That would be accurate, but we know there's more to it than that. Perhaps a Hall of Fame-bound closer and a Cy Young Award-winning pitcher are spooked by the Yankees.

With the Bronx Bombers gone, we can reasonably hope that Price will be OK against Houston in the ALCS. He had two good starts against the Astros this season: June 2 in Houston, when he went six innings and allowed three runs while striking out seven in a 5-4 win, and Sept. 7 in Boston, when he pitched 6½ innings and allowed two runs while striking out 10 in a 6-3 loss. Price also pitched 6⅔ innings of scoreless relief against the Astros in last year's Division Series.

Kimbrel is one of the most dominant relievers since Mariano Rivera, but the Yankees are his bugaboo. In six regular-season games this season, he had a 4.76 ERA against them, including 6.75 in three games at Yankee Stadium. Kimbrel has faced the Yankees 21 times in his career with a 3.98 ERA, which is certainly not horrible but is pedestrian for such an elite reliever.

In Game 4 Tuesday, Kimbrel allowed two runs in the ninth, though he got the save.

The problem is, he imploded last season in Game 4 against the Astros. John Farrell brought him on in the eighth inning after Chris Sale had allowed the game-tying homer to Alex Bregman to make it 3-3 and a single by Evan Gattis.

With two outs, Kimbrel came on to face George Springer. He threw a wild pitch, walked Springer, then allowed an RBI single by Josh Reddick to give the Astros a 4-3 lead.

He also pitched the ninth, and after a hit batsman and a single, Carlos Beltran's double scored another run.

So there's that to consider with Kimbrel. It's a stretch to think he also has an Astros-phobia, but that outing wasn't pretty, and it cost the Red Sox a chance to advance.

Obviously, Alex Cora isn't going to be afraid to go to Kimbrel, but he may want to avoid the four- or five-out save opportunities. Cora appears to have growing confidence in Matt Barnes and Ryan Brasier, so Kimbrel may not have to get four or five outs.

Cora said Wednesday that Price would start Game 2, following Sale in Game 1, which is the right thing to do considering his success against Houston this season.

Some had suggested that the Sox use Price exclusively as a reliever, an Andrew Miller type who can pitch multiple innings and at high-leverage times. But the Red Sox did that last season against the Astros only because they didn't think Price could stretch out as a starter after his season-long bout with a forearm injury.

This time, there's no such issue. Price is fine, and when pitching his game, he is capable of going deep into a game and neutralizing Astros hitters.

Needless to say, Price and Kimbrel are two very important pitchers. If both do what they're capable of doing, the Red Sox will be in good shape, even against a Houston team that could very easily repeat.

And look at it this way: Could it really get any worse for these two guys?

Better off not answering that. At least not yet.

The story of the 2018 Red Sox gets better with every chapter

Christopher L. Gasper

The Red Sox finally sent their postseason script back for a much-needed rewrite. The new ending, which doesn't have their season ending in the first round of the playoffs, is a hit from Falmouth to Freeport, Maine. That the revised story line featured a playoff victory over the hated Yankees in their haughty home with a deliciously derisive Frank Sinatra soundtrack for the celebration was a satisfying dramatic touch.

We know what the Red Sox' playoff dance was the last two seasons: in, lose, repeat. They got swept by the Cleveland Indians in three games in the Division Series in 2016 and brushed aside by the Houston Astros in four games last season. Those losses were the caveat that clung to a 108-win regular season, the most successful in franchise history, and a third straight American League East crown.

No more. The Sox rewrote their postseason story and changed their playoff perception by downing the 100-win Yankees in the ALDS in commanding fashion.

The Sox no longer bear the burden of consecutive first-round exits. They vanquished the Yankees and their reputation for not delivering on the October stage. They have a new playoff attitude as they prepare for an AL Championship Series showdown with the defending world champion Astros. They are free.

"It's about time. We were stuck in that first round for a while," shortstop Xander Bogaerts told reporters in the sodden and jubilant visiting clubhouse of Yankee Stadium. "But I think this is a group we have that is pretty special compared to the rest."

Think about what the Sox accomplished in banishing the Yankees in four games and finding playoff redemption. They won more games on the home field of their ancient enemies in two days than they had won in the prior two postseasons (1-6 record) combined.

They swept both games in New York and never trailed for a single inning. In Game 3, they administered a Bronx beatdown, handing the Yankees their worst playoff loss ever, a 16-1 shellacking. In Game 4, they jumped out to a 4-0 lead against portly portsideer CC Sabathia and survived Craig Kimbrel's best Heathcliff Slocumb impression to prevail, 4-3.

Start spreading the news . . . these Red Sox are built for the crucible of October baseball from the front office to the manager's office to the dugout to the (gulp) bullpen. That includes the starting pitchers.

No group did more to change the narrative surrounding their performance than the Sox' starters, who also helped finish games.

In the prior two postseasons, the Sox' issues started with their starters. During that span, only one starter completed the fifth inning: Chris Sale in Game 1 of last year's ALDS, a seven-earned-run ambush by the Astros. This time, only one starter didn't complete five innings, star-crossed lefty David Price, who lasted just 1½ in the Sox' only loss of the series, Game 2 at Fenway.

Red Sox starting pitchers went 3-1 with a 3.32 ERA this time. Last year, they were 0-2 with a 12.71 ERA. In 2016, they were 0-3 with a 9.26 ERA.

Rick Porcello was the poster boy for the turnaround. He got huge outs in the eighth inning of Game 1 when employed as a setup man by manager Alex Cora. Then in Game 4, the New Jersey native pitched five innings of one-run baseball to pick up his first playoff win as a starter, in his fifth try. He showed toughness and temerity, challenging Yankees hitters during the game and Sabathia's laments about home plate umpire Angel Hernandez after the game.

Perhaps, the best development of the series was Sale definitively answering questions about his health and effectiveness after a disconcerting September series of convalesce starts. He pitched lights out in 5½ innings in Game 1 last Friday, striking out eight before being charged with two runs as Ryan Brasier sweated out his playoff debut. You might be among the undead if you didn't get goosebumps watching Sale come in from the bullpen Tuesday night to pitch the eighth.

The bullpen was shakier than a shopping cart with a rogue wheel in Game 1, but Matt Barnes and Brasier rebounded with clutch shutdown innings in Game 4 to set up Sale.

The lithe lefty isn't pitching in relief on three days' rest if his shoulder is held together by paper clips, bubble gum, and duct tape. He's not 100 percent, but he's still ace-worthy. This 13-pitch relief appearance for Sale went better than the extended one he made last year in Game 4 of the ALDS, which ended with him serving up a game-tying homer to Alex Bregman.

One of the reasons the Red Sox didn't end up with a horror-movie trilogy of first-round exits is a new leading man as manager. This series was an affirmation of the decision to hire Cora.

Cora managed on-deck circles around his Yankees counterpart and fellow first-year manager Aaron Boone, navigating his first playoff series as a major league manager with aplomb.

The author of the heartbreaking walkoff home run that completed the Red Sox' self-immolation in Game 7 of the 2003 ALCS, Boone whiffed in this series. He left Sabathia in too long in Game 4 and made the dubious decision to follow Luis Severino with Lance Lynn in Game 3, opening the floodgates for a Red Sox rout that turned the tide.

Meanwhile, Cora went full baseball Belichick in the Bronx. The coup de grace was using Sale as a setup man in Game 4 to buttress his bend-but-don't-break bullpen.

But he also inserted Brock Holt and Rafael Devers into the lineup for Game 3 and watched as Holt became the first player to hit for the cycle in a postseason game and Devers went 2 for 6 with a run batted in.

He sat both players for Game 4, going back to Ian Kinsler and Eduardo Nunez. They delivered with back-to-back, two-out, run-scoring hits in a three-run third inning. Nunez ended the game with a difficult defensive play on Gleyber Torres's slow roller to third, allowing the Sox to survive Kimbrel's rickety relief appearance.

"He pulled all the right moves, man," Bogaerts told reporters. "He did."

It's not often in life that you get to rewrite your story. The Sox have done that. They've proven they can prevail in the postseason.

The Astros and firebrand Bregman will be happy to play the villain role in what should be an ALCS epic.

The postseason plot thickens. We don't know how it will end, but we do know the playoffs won't end the same way for the Sox as in 2016 and 2017 — with a first-round flop.

The Red Sox flipped their postseason script, and it's time for a new narrative.

'We finally broke through': Inside (another) Red Sox celebration in New York

Alex Speier

NEW YORK — They'd waited for two years and through two quick exits from the American League Division Series for this moment, and so another 63 seconds wasn't going to dampen the fun.

The Red Sox waited a bit awkwardly through those moments of suspended celebration, players filtering toward the field with a bit of confusion while waiting for replay to confirm whether Steve Pearce had held the first base bag with his toe for the final out. The scene was made stranger by the need for trainers to attend to third baseman Eduardo Nunez, who had injured himself while readying to celebrate after his fine play to sling the ball across the diamond for what may have been the last out.

“I think I would have probably had to go to third base,” said Brock Holt. “[But] when they showed the replay, it was pretty clear he was out. We could kind of breathe a sigh of relief and begin the celebration.”

“That’s 2018 baseball. You have to wait for the replay,” added Game 4 winning pitcher Rick Porcello. “It didn’t take away from our celebration. We felt pretty damn good about it.”

Mercifully, it took barely a minute for confirmation of the out call at first, and so, at 11:35 p.m., it was official: It was time for the Red Sox to celebrate at Yankee Stadium. Again.

The notion that such a thing is now familiar is still a bit remarkable. The Red Sox have showered Yankee Stadium with champagne four times in the past 15 years: First when advancing in the 2004 American League Championship Series, again on the nights when they clinched the American League East title in both 2016 and 2018, and now with a four-game series victory in New York — including back-to-back victories in the Bronx — to advance to the ALCS.

All the same, the heart-attack ninth inning — in which Craig Kimbrel inherited a three-run lead but had given back two of the scores before securing the 4-3 victory — had been enough to inspire memories of a slightly more distant, less elated time.

Red Sox CEO Sam Kennedy said that he spent the ninth having “flashbacks” to the Game 7 loss in the 2003 ALCS, memories amplified by the texts he was receiving from former Red Sox employees who’d been there when Aaron Boone was the agent of Red Sox woe as a player. Similar thoughts of that series had echoed in the mind of team chairman Tom Werner.

“Painful,” he said. “I really thought they were going to catch up.”

“We finally broke through,” said Porcello. “You don’t want to miss out on these opportunities . . . We still have a lot of work in front of us, but this is a good ball club. It’s not easy to come into Yankee Stadium, take two games in a row. The first one, we smeared them [in a 16-1 win in Game 3]. The second one, it was a tight ballgame. We won in two completely different fashions. It felt good. It was emotional.”

Porcello grew up in nearby New Jersey. Surely he’d spent years daydreaming about having such a performance as his clinching start in Game 4 while growing up?

“I never envisioned myself pitching in Yankee Stadium doing this. I was just thinking I’d be lucky to play college ball when I was 15, 16 years old,” he said. “[But] I did have that reflection today before the game, thinking about the opportunity we had tonight. I’m glad we made the most of it.”

The Red Sox continued to make the most of it in the visitors’ clubhouse, which had been transformed with some peril. In 2004, plastic masked just the lockers, and so the carpet at the old Yankee Stadium got flooded with alcohol from the Red Sox’ celebration. When Kevin Millar entered the same room prior to Opening Day in 2005, he sniffed the air, and pronounced proudly that the room still smelled of victory.

The Yankee Stadium staff no longer affords such an outcome. The plastic that once ran only vertically from the ceiling to the carpet and protected the lockers has now been extended across the floor as well, creating pools of champagne and corks across the floor that leave both reveling players and members of the organization wobbling as if on skates for the first time.

Yet the possibility of slipping entered only minimally in the minds of players. The fact that this core group was largely the same as the ones that saw the last two seasons end so quickly created a collective sense that a ceiling had been shattered. The team no longer would have to apologize sheepishly for strong regular seasons that seemed somewhat empty less than a week into the playoffs.

“We were stuck here for a while,” said Xander Bogaerts. “It feels good to get past that.”

The feeling of accomplishment was mixed with the adrenaline and heart palpitations borne of the final innings. The entry into the game of ace Chris Sale for a scoreless inning of relief in the eighth had contributed to a sense of the distinctiveness of the postseason.

“I got jitters from it,” reliever Matt Barnes, who threw a perfect sixth inning, recalled of Sale’s entry into the game for the eighth. “I was like, ‘This is sick!’”

“[The changing roles] might seem like chaos if it’s August or the regular season, but in the postseason, who doesn’t want Chris Sale pitching the eighth inning? Who doesn’t want your best guys out there? It makes a lot of sense when you think about it that way,” said Porcello. “It’s not chaos. It’s just guys playing roles they don’t normally play because the only thing that [expletive] matters is winning.”

That, noted the players, is how manager Alex Cora handled the series, how he’s handled the team all year. Though a rookie in the role, the 42-year-old received raves that flowed almost as freely as the liquids flying across the clubhouse.

“After we interviewed him, I went back to Dave and said, ‘Dave, he’s a little confident — overconfident,’ ” said Red Sox principal owner John Henry. “I think that he was born to be a manager. He’s a natural leader. I think he knew that he was ready for this job.”

Raquel Ferreira, the vice president of major league and minor league operations who is like an adopted family member to most players from the moment they turn professional, sought out the players whom she’d known since they were teenagers — Christian Vazquez, Mookie Betts, Blake Swihart, Bogaerts, and so many others on a largely homegrown team — for hugs.

Almost invariably, Ferreira is a target to be doused in celebrations. This time, she managed to avoid the fate.

“I usually get drenched,” she said. “[Vazquez] caught me, and I lied and said, ‘No, no, no, I don’t have a change of clothes for the plane.’ They believed me.”

Players were divided as to whether to hoist bottles of bubbly or aluminum bottles of beer. Either way, it seemed as if roughly 60 percent of any liquid had made its way to the head of a sopping Andrew Benintendi, who wandered through the clubhouse as if a waterfall remained in place over his head.

The celebration wasn’t confined to those who’d been part of the previous two years of division series stumbles. Ryan Brasier started the year without a job in any professional organization before signing a minor league deal with the Red Sox early in spring training.

“I never thought at the end of February before I signed that I’d be throwing in a clinching game of the ALDS for the best team in baseball,” said Brasier, who pitched a scoreless seventh inning on Tuesday.

Ian Kinsler had been in the center of the fascinating maneuvers of Cora in Games 3 and 4, having sat for Game 3 in favor of Holt — who hit for the cycle — and then reclaiming the start at second base from Holt and delivering what proved a pivotal two-out RBI double in the third inning against CC Sabathia before scoring on a Nunez single.

“It’s the best feeling in the world. We all believe in each other. We all respect each other. And we’re here to win a championship. That’s the bottom line. No one care who gets it done,” said Kinsler. “No one cares who the hero is. We’re here to win a game, regardless of who’s in the lineup.”

At 12:10 a.m., the soundtrack to the celebration took on a tongue-in-cheek edge. Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York” blared in the Sox clubhouse, a nod to Aaron Judge walking through the Fenway Park concourse after Game 2 with the Yankees’ signature victory song playing on a portable speaker. The Sox were delighted to appropriate the song — while sprinkling in a healthy dose of selections from New York icon Jay-Z.

“Coming in here, Yankee Stadium, a lot of guys doubted us. I had the off day and I turned on the TV, everything here is Yankees winning in four, Yankees in four. I’m like, ‘What is going on?’ ” said Bogaerts. “How can we have 108 wins and they’ll be like the Yankees are going to win in four? I don’t understand . . . No one is picking the Red Sox but all of us in here picked ourselves and it was fun. It was fun.”

So, too, were the hard-earned revels that ran past midnight in the Bronx, before finally, at 12:20 a.m., the plastic could be peeled off of the perimeter of the clubhouse. With a 1:30 a.m. bus scheduled, the players retreated to shower and change in advance of the flight back to Boston, and on, finally after three years, to deeper October.

“It doesn’t get much better than this. This is what we’ve all wanted our entire lives, so to get it is special,” said Sale. “We’re not done yet, either. This is the first step.”

*** *The Boston Herald***

ALCS against Astros sure looks to be one fun series

Michael Silverman

We all get it now.

The 2018 Red Sox are a much better version than their last two playoff teams. They’ve got a new improved lineup and manager, and they are king of the hill, top of the heap when it comes to the Yankees.

Still, it has to be said — and the earlier the better — that they are about to face a team far more dangerous than the Yankees.

And just as the Red Sox are a better team over their 2017 version that got spanked by the Astros in the Division Series last year, the 2018 Astros team arrives in Boston not only as defending world champions, but also a better team than they were one year ago.

Did the Red Sox make up enough ground to surpass the Astros? We shall embark down that road Saturday night in order to find out.

But the 103-win Astros are strong enough to make the road another uphill battle for the Sox. They may be good enough to reach the end alive, but they’re going to have to play almost perfectly to do so.

“I don’t know too much about them, just they have a good team,” said Red Sox manager and the Astros’ 2017 bench coach Alex Cora in one of the most blatant understatement of his tenure. “What they did to the Indians (three-game sweep in the Division Series), that was impressive. It seems like they’re playing their best baseball of the season at the right time. They can pitch. They’re playing good defense. They’re swinging the bat well. They’re a complete team.

“I’ve been talking about them the whole season, so now we go. Best of seven. They know me, I know them . . . it should be fun.”

Before the fun starts, take a look at what a destructive force the Astros are.

The freshest evidence is their demolition of a strong Indians team. They outscored the Indians, 21-6, and the rest of the numbers were starkly in favor of Houston. They held the advantage in hits (34-13), batting average (.327-.144), OPS (1.037-.418), and homers (8-2), walks (14-6) and strikeouts (24-30).

Those numbers speak to the dominance of the Astros pitching as well, which held Cleveland to only 13 hits in three games.

Those numbers are not even close, and the Indians were considered to be an excellent team.

What's perhaps telling is that the Astros right now are the most healthy they've been all season. They were hit by just as many injuries as the Red Sox this summer. Second baseman and defending AL MVP Jose Altuve played in only 137 games, right fielder George Springer in 140 and shortstop Carlos Correa in 110.

And yet the Astros won two more games (103) this season than they did a year ago.

Another telling distinction is their run differential. A year ago, the 101-win Astros scored 896 times while allowing 700 runs for a very respectable plus-198 run differential.

This year? They scored a lot less, 797 times, but allowed only 534 runs. Their run differential of plus-263 just happens to be the third best run differential since the 162-season began, according to The Athletic.

In comparison, the Red Sox' run differential this year was plus-229 (876-647).

Wait, there's more.

As the Astros' run differential last year suggests, their pitching was their weak spot. They made their biggest move on Aug. 31 by trading for Justin Verlander, who helped the team overcome a shaky back end of the bullpen.

This year, the rotation got a huge boost with the trade for Gerrit Cole, and midseason the bullpen got its bump with closer Roberto Osuna and Ryan Pressly.

"They have a great group of guys. They have bats, they have arms, they have a bullpen, they have everything," said the Sox' Mookie Betts. "We have a great team too. The rivalry is definitely renewed and something that's going to be fun going forward.

There's that word "fun" again.

And funny, that's how principal owner John Henry sees the series as well, not four but seven games of fun.

"I can't think of anything more fun. That's going to be a great seven-game series," said Henry. "Those are arguably the two strongest teams in baseball. We were all year."

Now it's October and it's the best in baseball-to-date Red Sox against the best-getting-better Astros.

This better be good, because as good as the Red Sox got this year, so too did the Astros.

Fun times.

Alex Cora makes bold bet on David Price as Game 2 starter against Astros

Jason Mastrodonato

Alex Cora is pushing all his chips into the middle of the table.

He's got a bad hand. A horrible hand. One of the worst possible hands.

And he's betting everything on it.

David Price will start Game 2 of the American League Championship Series against the Houston Astros, Cora announced on MLB Network yesterday.

The pitcher with the worst record (0-9 as a starter) and the second-worst ERA (6.03 as a starter) in postseason history is going to face an Astros team that ranked No. 1 in OPS against left-handed pitchers this season.

Cora stored up piles of goodwill and trust in the bank after 108 wins and a convincing performance against the New York Yankees in the Division Series.

And he's spending it all on this move.

"My only criticism after we interviewed him, I went back to Dave (Dombrowski) and I said 'Dave, he's a little confident,' " Red Sox principal owner John Henry said Tuesday night. " 'In fact, he's overconfident.' But he was born to be a manager, he's a natural leader. I've never seen anybody do a better job of handling a clubhouse."

Imagine the confidence it took to make this decision. Cora's go-to line when discussing Price in the postseason is, "We trust him."

The first-year skipper has shown faith in struggling players all year. Sometimes he was rewarded (Jackie Bradley Jr.). Occasionally, he wasn't (Drew Pomeranz).

But the players have said they have faith in Cora no matter the decisions he makes. Would they not still stand by him and play hard for him if he told Price the Red Sox' best chances of winning a World Series were with him in the bullpen?

It can't get much worse than it was last Saturday. Sandy Leon's glove would set the target, and more times than not Price's pitches ended up nowhere near it. It cost him on an Aaron Judge home run, when Leon set up low and away and Price threw one over the middle. It hurt him multiple times when he walked Brett Gardner in the second inning. And then his final pitch of the game was again supposed to be low and away, but it ended up over the plate for Andrew McCutchen to smoke it off the Green Monster.

Maybe the manager saw something that most of us didn't in that ugly performance. Perhaps most confusing is that Cora tends to be creative in his decision-making. There's nothing creative about this. This was standard operating procedure.

Nathan Eovaldi could have been bumped up to start Game 2 after submitting the best performance by a Red Sox starter since John Lackey in the 2013 World Series. Eovaldi's velocity went up, and so did his command and effectiveness as he dissected the Yankees over seven strong innings in winning Game 3 on Monday. His composure in that game didn't surprise anybody in the Red Sox clubhouse. They knew his personality was fit for the postseason.

If the Sox went with Eovaldi over Price for Game 2, they would have other options for Games 3 and 4.

If Eovaldi pitches another gem and the bullpen is well rested going into the off day, how about using an "opener" to start Game 3? Hand the ball to Joe Kelly or Brandon Workman, a pair of former starters, to harness the first inning jitters and handle the most difficult part of the Astros lineup.

George Springer (.222, .620 OPS in 27 at-bats vs. Price), Jose Altuve (.346, .798 OPS in 26 at-bats) and Alex Bregman (.333, 1.232 OPS in nine at-bats) lead off for the world champs.

If one of the relievers can get the Red Sox started before Price comes in out of the bullpen, perhaps it'll give the left-hander a better matchup to gather himself on the mound and find some rhythm.

If not, the bullpen takes over. All the Red Sox relievers can go multiple innings this time of year.

But trying to come back from a big early deficit is the worst-case scenario. Playoff teams are 14-2 when scoring first this October.

Or Rick Porcello could start Game 3 and ace Chris Sale can come back on three days' rest for Game 4.

Or Eduardo Rodriguez could give it a go.

Alas, the debate doesn't matter. The decision has been made.

Now, either Eovaldi or Porcello, who pitched out of their minds in the Division Series, will be able to make just one start in Game 4 in the ALCS. Price can make two.

Cora has been nailing these decisions all year. He might've batted 1.000 in the ALDS. But if he strikes out with this one and Price stinks again and the Red Sox take a predictable loss before flying out to Houston, the manager will get a heaping pile of blame.

After everything that's gone right under Cora's watch this year, it'll be a shame if this is what's remembered most about the 2018 season.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Secret weapon this October is Cora Magic

Kevin McNamara

As the seventh inning unfolded at a tense Yankee Stadium Tuesday night, Alex Cora's gut told him to go for the kill.

Cora's Red Sox owned a comfortable 4-1 lead over a Yankee lineup that somehow forgot to bring its power game home after hitting some moon shots at Fenway Park last weekend. As Ryan Brasier set the Yanks down in order, Cora turned to pitching coach Dana LeVangie and bench coach Ron Roenicke and put a silver-bullet option on the table for the critical eighth inning.

"Everybody was on board," Cora said. "I even shouted to the dugout 'Hey, we're all in. He's coming in.'"

He was Chris Sale, the team's ace hurler and the man slated to start if a Game 5 was needed less than 48 hours later. But Cora saw a path through which this Division Series could end right then and there, in Game 4, in the Bronx, right smack in the belly of the beast.

The move, like seemingly all of Cora's moves in his rookie season as a big league manager, came up aces. Sale set down the Yankees in order on just 13 pitches and turned the ball over to closer Craig Kimbrel for the ninth.

Things nearly went haywire with the loose-bearded righty fumbling through a fight to find the strike zone but a Yankee rally fell one play short. The Red Sox tucked a 4-3 victory to their chests and ran as quickly as possible into a clubhouse where an understandably exuberant champagne-and-beer blast broke out.

The Red Sox first playoff series win since capturing the 2013 World Series flag was filled with twists and turns and, ultimately, dominated by some unconventional moves by Cora. It sets up a star-packed American League Championship Series against the Houston Astros, the defending World Series champs. The Astros are loaded with versatile hitters, some thumping power bats, two frontline starting pitchers and oodles of confidence.

But the Red Sox have Alex Cora. The Astros do not. He's been a weapon the team feels will keep on giving and help pave the way to a spot in the World Series.

“It seemed like every button he’s pushing is the right one,” reliever Matt Barnes said. “I think he’s got a great feel for the game. He understands the game. He does a great job of managing and communicating with everybody on what’s going on. I think it showed in this series and it will be awesome moving forward.”

These are some of the moves Cora pulled out of his hat in the 3-1 series win over the Yankees:

With his bullpen literally choking away Game 1 at Fenway, Cora moved away from his relief corps and tabbed starting pitcher Rick Porcello to protect a 5-3 lead in the eighth inning. Porcello secured two big outs before turning the ball over to Kimbrel, who closed the door on a 5-4 victory.

After watching the bottom of his lineup whiff at the plate for two games, Cora penciled Brock Holt, Rafael Devers and Christian Vazquez into the lineup for Game 3 at Yankee Stadium. Despite a spotty history against New York starter Luis Severino, the bench trio helped spark a 16-1 uprising that shook the confidence of the hated Yanks. The group combined for eight hits, six runs and seven RBI. Holt drove in five runs and hit for the first cycle in major league playoff history.

With lefty C.C. Sabathia on the mound to start Game 4 for New York, Cora chose to reverse course and sit Holt to return to Ian Kinsler at second base. This is like changing your favorite numbers after cashing in a million-dollar Powerball ticket but Holt rarely hits against left-handed pitchers. Kinsler responded with a key RBI double that helped stake the Sox to a 3-0, third-inning lead.

Cora stayed with Vazquez as his catcher for Game 4, even though starting pitcher Porcello had thrown to Sandy Leon in every one of his 2018 outings. Vazquez not only guided Porcello through five innings of one-run ball but also lifted a pitch into the right-field seats to lead off the fourth inning and give Boston a 4-0 lead.

Cora’s final move, his final stroke of hardball genius, was sending Sale out for the eighth. At that point, he wasn’t thinking about a do-or-die Game 5 back at Fenway. He was hearing Sale’s voice in his head. The thin lefty had approached the manager earlier in the day and told him he was ready to come out of the bullpen at a moment’s notice.

As Sale aimed streams of champagne at teammates in the clubhouse, many players and executives targeted Cora with praise. Majority owner John Henry labeled him “a wizard almost from Day One,” while presumptive MVP Mookie Betts chuckled and said, “He’s amazing. We’ve got a guy who hit for the cycle [in Holt] and he wasn’t in the lineup today, and nobody questioned him. We put our full trust in him and I think he trusts us.”

So, what does Cora have up his sleeve for the Astros, a team he helped win the Series last season as a bench coach? Who knows, but he’ll help make these playoffs fun, entertaining and certainly nerve-racking.

Welcome to October baseball.

Win over Yankees validates moves by Boston front office

Bill Koch

NEW YORK -- The offseason message couldn’t have been clearer from Red Sox principal owner John Henry and president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski.

Competing for American League East titles was only the baseline standard for the club and far below the expectation. Considering its payroll and handful of high profile player moves over the previous two seasons, the mandate from the front office was for Boston to annually battle for playoff progress and World Series championships.

Failure to do so cost manager John Farrell his job, and the clock started on Dombrowski's tenure as he looked to make his first hire to the corner office in the Fenway Park home clubhouse. The Red Sox raided the staff of the 2017 champions by bringing back Alex Cora, plucking the former Boston utility man from his role as bench coach under Houston manager A.J. Hinch.

Farrell was fired despite his 2013 World Series ring and the first back-to-back division crowns in franchise history. A combined 1-6 record in A.L. Division Series play against Cleveland and Houston over the last two years was deemed unacceptable, and the Red Sox bowed out of the postseason with a whimper each time. Boston had spent just shy of \$395 million combined on two Opening Day rosters that won a single postseason game.

"I thought our approach last year in the playoffs was lacking a little bit," Henry said. "This year you could see our approach was much more aggressive. The staff on throughout baseball operations, the coaching staff – they did a terrific job all year long."

Fast-forward to Tuesday night at Yankee Stadium, and a champagne-drenched Henry was speaking in the visiting clubhouse. Cora and the Red Sox were more than just three-time A.L. East winners and franchise record setters for victories in a regular season. Boston was back on the sport's version of Broadway, reaching its ninth A.L. Championship series in 32 years and fifth in its last 15 by vanquishing rival New York in four ALDS games.

"These are the type of teams that players want to be on – that I want to be on," said second baseman Ian Kinsler, a midseason acquisition via trade from the Angels. "It's a lot of fun to play with these guys."

Chris Sale, brought in from the White Sox in exchange for a host of prospects ahead of last season, atoned for his previous playoff struggles by winning Game 1 as a starting pitcher and working a 1-2-3 eighth inning out of the bullpen in Game 4. J.D. Martinez, the top free agent hitter signed during this offseason, cracked a three-run homer that put the Red Sox on track to winning Game 1. Nathan Eovaldi, a trade deadline pickup from Tampa Bay in July, had swung the series back in Boston's favor thanks to a masterful performance on the mound in Game 3.

"They're never easy," said Dombrowski, who won a ring as the general manager of the Marlins in 1997 and reached two more World Series with the Tigers in 2006 and 2012. "It's a lot of people in the organization who have contributed in the places I've been."

It was a measure of validation for both Henry and Dombrowski, and in Cora they've found a presence in the dugout who can match their boldness. Sale would have been the likely Game 5 starter on Thursday if necessary, but the Red Sox ultimately decided to go for broke with a three-run lead and six outs remaining. Not even a shaky ninth from Craig Kimbrel – another key piece brought in via trade by Dombrowski – could stop Boston from silencing the Yankees and the nearly 50,000 fans on hand.

"We knew this year would be a good year to shoot for – next year as well," Henry said. "It's tough to manage your payroll these days, and (Dombrowski) did a tremendous job. When you look at the late-season acquisitions he made without spending much money at all, he just did a terrific job."

The Red Sox are over the final luxury tax threshold of \$237 million this season, costing the club 10 spots in the upcoming 2019 entry draft. That would be a small price to pay if the likes of Kinsler, Eovaldi and Steve Pearce make the difference against the Astros and either the Brewers or Dodgers out of the National League. Game 1 of the ALCS against Houston is set for Saturday night at Fenway Park.

"When you sign up for this gig and you become a baseball player and you go to spring training, this is what we play for," Sale said. "We want to play until the very end, we want to hold that trophy and get a really cool ring sometime next year. That's what we all work for. Everything we work for is for these moments right here."

'There's something about Sale' in the eighth

Bill Koch

NEW YORK — Steve Pearce never thought to look.

Rick Porcello had no advanced knowledge.

Even Dave Dombrowski wasn't entirely certain.

The door to the visiting bullpen at Yankee Stadium swung open before the bottom of the eighth inning on Tuesday night, the entrance into a baseball version of the Temple of Doom for many an opposing relief pitcher. Out stepped a tall, lean left-hander more than two hours later than he would typically make his entrance to serve as the setup man for Red Sox closer Craig Kimbrel.

That Chris Sale was the likely starter in the event of a deciding Game 5 in the American League Division Series didn't matter. Boston was going for the kill with a three-run lead and New York seemingly on the ropes, a bold decision that sent ripples through each dugout and prompted a cascade of boos from the boisterous sellout crowd on hand. Pearce did a bit of a double-take from first base, Porcello climbed to the top step of the dugout and Dombrowski leaned forward in his suite above the third-base dugout.

"When I saw him jogging out there, I was pumped," Pearce said. "It's not that I don't have faith in the other guys. There's something about Sale — you know how it is."

Matt Barnes and Ryan Brasier had each worked a 1-2-3 inning in the sixth and seventh, respectively. The bottom two batters in the Yankees order were due, and switch-hitting leadoff man Aaron Hicks would be forced to contend with the more spacious left field by batting from the right side. Red Sox manager Alex Cora said pregame that he would require such circumstances to bring Sale into the game, and he never hesitated to make the decision when the critical moment arrived.

"We had talked that the potential existed," said Dombrowski, Boston's president of baseball operations. "I was sitting up there after the sixth and the seventh and we thought, 'Who's going to pitch the eighth?'"

"We'll sit down after batting practice to see," Cora said during a private afternoon meeting with media members in the visiting clubhouse. "It's something that has to be too perfect."

That could describe Sale's performance itself as well — too perfect. He threw fastballs on just four of his 13 pitches while crafting his way through Gleyber Torres, pinch hitter Andrew McCutchen and Hicks. Sale walked calmly off the mound exactly one year after his last relief appearance, one that occurred while Boston was eliminated by Houston in Game 4 of last year's ALDS.

"I had no idea," said Porcello, who picked up his first career postseason victory in the 4-3 triumph. "I didn't know. The only thing you understand, if you've been in the postseason before, is that if you're in position to clinch a series, all hands on deck."

"Sale stepped up and took the ball on short rest and did a hell of a job in the eighth inning. That's what that guy is made of."

Sale's frank, self-effacing personality generally doesn't lend itself to playing the clubhouse lawyer, and that makes his political gravitas under these circumstances somewhat surprising. He was planting seeds with Cora and pitching coach Dana LeVangie for the previous 48 hours, insisting that he be handed the ball in a tight spot in Game 4. There would be no need to make that next start against the Yankees if the Red Sox could finish them off ahead of Thursday's possible decider back at Fenway Park.

"I said it all along — this is not the time to be shy," Sale said. "We put it all on the line. This is what we live for. We go for the win."

Kimbrel made a mess of the ninth, nearly coughing up what was a 4-1 lead. He figured to be one of the most reliable options out of the Boston bullpen, but his fellow relievers did enough to that point and in the series to leave some insurance. Barnes and Brasier combined for 4 1/3 scoreless innings of relief in five appearances, Joe Kelly turned in 2 1/3 scoreless frames in Game 2 and Sale put the cherry on the sundae behind a third solid start produced by the Red Sox rotation.

"Any time you can have Chris Sale taking the ball in the eighth inning, it's fun," Barnes said. "I got jitters. I was like, 'This is sick.' "

There was a measure of personal redemption in this for Sale as well. He lost two games against the Astros last October, including an 8-2 pounding in his Game 1 start. That same Houston club awaits in the A.L. Championship Series, and it's lesson learned for Sale entering the rematch.

"Don't suck," Sale said. "Seriously. It was a very humbling experience. To be sitting here now with these guys in this room, it's exciting."

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox LHP Chris Sale's advice to himself before facing Astros in ALCS: 'Don't suck'

Chris Cotillo

NEW YORK -- Chris Sale's first career postseason start last October against the Astros was a pure disaster. As he looks forward to facing Houston again in Game 1 of the ALCS on Saturday, his advice to himself is pretty simple.

"Don't suck," Sale said. "Seriously, man. It was a very humbling experience."

Sale gave up seven earned runs on nine hits in Game 1 of last year's ALDS as the Sox fell, 8-2, in Houston. He performed much better in his second playoff start last week, giving up two earned runs on four hits in 5.2 innings against the Yankees.

Sale pitched the eighth inning of Game 4, retiring all three Yankees he faced and helping the Red Sox advance to the ALCS for the first time in five years.

"It's a lot better to be on the winning side," Sale said. "I said all along, I try to learn from every experience and learn from my mistakes. My first go at it was God-awful. It was as bad as it could possibly get. I think going through that made me better for this situation here and hopefully going forward."

Sale said that he didn't have to watch a replay of his start last year to know how bad he was against Houston. It's something that has motivated him this year as he searches for his first World Series ring with the 108-win Red Sox.

"This is what I've wanted my entire life," Sale said. "When you become a baseball player and go to spring training, this is what we play for. We want to play 'til the very end, hold a trophy and get a really cool ring sometime next year. So that's what we all work for. Everything we do is for these moments right here."

Boston Red Sox ALCS rotation: Chris Sale to start Game 1, David Price gets Game 2 vs. Astros

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox aren't making any changes to their starting rotation as they enter the ALCS against the Astros.

Chris Sale will start Game 1 on Saturday and David Price will get the nod in Game 2 at Fenway Park, according to manager Alex Cora (speaking to Christopher Russo on MLB Network). That would seem to set up Nathan Eovaldi and Rick Porcello as the starters for Games 3 and 4 in Houston.

Sale, who pitched a scoreless eighth inning in Tuesday night's ALDS clincher, was a lock to pitch Game 1 after the Sox closed out the Yankees in Game 4. Price, who lasted just 1.2 innings in Game 2 of the ALDS, was less of a certainty but will once again take the mound in search of his first postseason win as a starter.

Sale and Price both made one start against the Astros this season, with Sale taking the loss in a June 1 game in which he allowed four earned runs on six hits in six innings and Price picking up a win a day later with a three-run, five-hit performance over six innings. Sale lost his first career postseason start against Houston last year in Game 1 of the ALDS.

*** *RedSox.com***

Hinch, Cora set for opposing dugouts in ALCS

Brian McTaggart

HOUSTON -- When Jose Altuve fielded a ground ball off the bat of Corey Seager in shallow right field at Dodger Stadium on Nov. 1 and threw to first baseman Yuli Gurriel for the final out of the 2017 World Series, Astros manager AJ Hinch and bench coach Alex Cora turned and shared an embrace in the dugout.

It wasn't too long after the team's World Series parade that Cora was off to Boston to become the manager of the Red Sox, taking with him World Series aspirations of his own. Now, if Hinch and the Astros want a return trip to the Fall Classic, they'll have to go through Cora and the Red Sox.

In an American League Championship Series filled with enough star power on both sides to fill out an All-Star team, Hinch managing against Cora is an interesting storyline in what promises to be a terrific series between the 108-win Red Sox and 103-win Astros.

"He was right next to me," Hinch said. "Obviously, the bench coach and the manager are really tight, and you go through a lot of different things from game strategy to prep. He took over a couple of games I got ejected from. I try to use our staff to the best of their ability, their skill sets. He's really good with players. He was a great liaison for me."

Hinch tried to hire Cora when he took over as manager of the Astros prior to the 2015 season. Cora was working as an analyst for ESPN and was interested in coaching, but not necessarily as Hinch's first-base coach. Rich Dauer ultimately was hired for the position, and Cora finally came aboard as bench coach in '17 to replace Trey Hillman, who went to manage in Korea.

Cora was beloved by Astros players while he was in Houston and still is after managing the Red Sox to their best regular-season record in franchise history.

"He was a great coach and he meant a lot to me," Astros shortstop Carlos Correa said. "Obviously, he's from Puerto Rico, and I've known him for a while. Getting a chance to be with him last year was very special, and I learned a lot of things from him. He's a brilliant mind and he knows a lot about the game."

Astros outfielder George Springer said he can see Cora's fingerprints in how the Red Sox play the game with passion.

"He kind of oozes fun," Springer said. "He wants you to enjoy the game for what it's worth, but he understands you're not out there trying to fail. That makes you, as a player, go have a lot more fun. It's going to be fun to compete against him, and hopefully our team ends up on top."

Cora obviously knows a lot about much of the Astros' roster, especially core players like Correa, Springer, Alex Bregman and Altuve. But Houston's roster in the AL Division Series had a 40-percent turnover from the year before, so there are several faces on the Astros that Cora is not as familiar with. None of that matters much, Hinch said.

"He knows a lot about how we operate, but these are two completely different seasons," Hinch said. "We played each other seven times this year. I don't look at it any further than that. I know him well. He knows me well. Strategically, this is a completely different season. I saw him in Spring Training. That's just sort of getting ready for the season. I saw him early in the season. Saw him late in the season. Now, it's the postseason."

The relationship between Hinch and Cora has been a little more complicated. They argued like brothers at times while they were together in Houston, but that's not unexpected from two men who are both competitive, convicted and pushed each other.

Ultimately, Hinch was a champion for Cora to get the job in Boston because he believed in his baseball instincts and IQ as well as his boldness.

"When I think of one word about Alex Cora, I think of 'conviction,' and it's something he wears front and center every day," Hinch said. "He has his beliefs. He's very convicted. He's passionate, and I fed off of that a little bit. He fed off the things I bring to the table. He was right next to me every step along the way."

Sale, Price to start first two games of ALCS

David Adler

The Red Sox will have the same starting-pitching duo open the American League Championship Series against the Astros at Fenway Park -- Chris Sale will pitch Game 1, and David Price will pitch Game 2 -- that they used in the AL Division Series against the Yankees.

Sale in Game 1 was expected. Price in Game 2 was much more of a question, given his shaky postseason history and struggles in his ALDS start. But manager Alex Cora said Wednesday on MLB Network that Price is in line to pitch Sunday's Game 2 against the defending World Series champions.

Price was knocked out by the Yankees after just 1 2/3 innings in Game 2 of the ALDS, allowing three runs and a pair of home runs in the only game New York won in the series. The left-hander is 0-9 with a 6.03 ERA in 10 career postseason starts.

The Red Sox could have moved Nathan Eovaldi up in their playoff rotation after the flamethrowing right-hander shut down the Yankees in Boston's Game 3 win at Yankee Stadium. Eovaldi, making his postseason debut, went seven innings and allowed just one run. But Cora will stick with Price.

Sale in Game 1 sets up a rematch with Astros ace Justin Verlander -- the two also faced off in the opener of last year's ALDS between the two clubs, with Verlander getting the better of Sale. Verlander held the Red Sox to two runs in six innings in that game, while the Astros knocked around Sale for seven runs in five innings. Price will duel Astros right-hander Gerrit Cole in Game 2.

"I try to learn from every experience and learn from my mistakes," Sale said about his rough start against Houston in last year's ALDS. "My first go at it was godawful. It was as bad as it can possibly get. Going through that made me better for this situation here, and hopefully going forward.

"It's gonna be a little bit bigger stage, too. We're looking forward to it."

*** *WEEI.com***

Alex Cora's insane memory could be Red Sox' secret weapon

Rob Bradford

The topic of Dustin Pedroia's early years comes up. Without hesitation, Alex Cora references the second inning of the Red Sox' Aug. 22 game against the Angels surfaces.

"A missile," Cora exclaims. "Line-drive in the back of the bag."

Pedroia nods because it was his first at-bat as a major leaguer. But why would Cora remember such a moment? It's because that's what he does. It's uncertain if the Red Sox' manager has a photographic memory, but some absolutely believe that might be the case.

"Yeah, when it comes to baseball," said Cora when asked if he realized how good his memory was, pausing before looking around his office. "Now, where's my watch?"

"I've always noticed it," Pedroia said. "He has a great memory."

When it comes to managing these Red Sox Cora has been on a hot streak, seemingly since Day 1 but certainly throughout the past week leading up to his team's showdown with the Astros in the American League Championship Series.

Pats on the back are one thing. Amazement is another.

"No, I haven't," said Red Sox principal owner John Henry when asked if he has seen any manager push the right buttons like Cora did while beating the Yankees in New York. "He has been impossible to second-guess. That's how good he's been."

"I don't know if I've seen anybody who is able to read a game better than him. He's locked in at all times," said Red Sox first baseman Mitch Moreland. "He never panics. He's always two or three steps ahead."

The reason for the success can't be pinned down to one quality, but the manager's memory has certainly served him well. And with the team he spent the entirety of 2017 with - the Astros - coming to town, that reality only figures to be amplified.

It's a topic which many have started realizing is of the utmost importance for managers and head coaches, thanks in part to the success of the Rams' Sean McVay. That's the guy who can evidently remember every play of his coaching career.

It's uncertain how close Cora can come to McVay, but we do have a pretty good idea that the Red Sox' manager has a memory far better than most.

"I've noticed it a few times. He has a really good memory, way better than mine," said Red Sox bench coach Ron Roenicke. "It's an advantage to have a good memory. It is an advantage. The guy who can recall things that happened in a game two months ago against that same team is more prepared for something happening again. You're able to piece together things that happen in-game from stuff that has happened before."

Perhaps the most recognized memory in Red Sox circles has always been that belonging to Jason Varitek.

It is believed that when it came to opposing hitters the former Sox catcher possessed a photographic memory, which obviously served him well when strategizing gameplans for his pitchers. Does Cora compare? "It's pretty close," said Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie.

"He recalls a lot of early 90s stuff, players, situations," LeVangie added regarding Cora. "I've noticed it probably more so this year. It's pretty special. A lot of people talk about catchers having great memories

like Tek was one of those guys. But Alex is pretty special some of the things he remembers. Sitting in the clubhouse before he will be calling out hitters and situations and who got the hits, guys he played with when Ron was managing. It's pretty unique to hear him."

It's not as if Cora has gone through McVay-like tests, or has people broadcasting to the world that he possesses this unique ability. But the more you're around the Sox' manager, listening to him talk situations - or even about items from articles months and years before - it becomes a noteworthy topic.

One to remember heading into this ALCS.

"We've got numbers and stats for everything, but if you can just remember how your pitcher did against someone because outside our division you're only facing them once away and once home. Once you get outside your division the memory really becomes important," Roenicke said. "I've told him a few times, 'Alex, I'm impressed. You have a really good memory.' Because we're talking all the time when he brings up stuff it always catches me because I don't have a great memory. So when people are really good at it, it always impresses me."

Astros better than Red Sox across board, which means ALCS is really the World Series

John Tomase

Let's just get this out of the way: the Astros are better than the Red Sox.

Now that everyone's healthy, their lineup is better. Their starting rotation has been better since Day 1. Not only is their bullpen better, so are the relievers they left at home.

They're the defending champions and they've got a chip on their shoulder, thanks to MLB benching them during prime time. They're clicking like the machine they were to end last season, coming off a sweep of an excellent Indians team after spending the season seemingly content to draft off the Red Sox.

They lie in wait no longer, however, because they're now front and center as Boston's final impediment to a World Series. Nothing against the Dodgers or Brewers, but the World Series effectively starts Saturday. Whoever advances is winning the whole thing.

This is the matchup the Red Sox have wanted all season, particularly since Houston knocked them out of last year's playoffs.

"It's about time," shortstop Xander Bogaerts told reporters in New York. "It's about time. It was tough in this first round for a while, but I think this is a group we have that is pretty special. We know they're a good team, but we have the best record this year and we start at home. We start at home, so our confidence is pretty high."

Vegas has labeled the ALCS a toss-up while giving the Astros a slightly better chance of winning the World Series. The challenge facing the Red Sox over the next seven games is unlike anything they've tackled all season.

"I can't think of anything more fun," owner John Henry told reporters in New York. "That's going to be a great seven-game series. Those are arguably the two strongest teams in baseball. We were all year. It's going to be an exciting series."

If you believe in run differential as the clearest indicator of greatness, the Astros at plus-263 handily beat the Red Sox at plus-229. Houston's differential projects to 109 wins (it won 103), whereas Boston's generally equates to 103 (it won 108). Based on the underlying numbers, then, the Astros were baseball's best team.

But forget about numbers for a minute and just consider the battle-tested talent in the Astros dugout. Second baseman Jose Altuve missed 25 games with knee issues and still hit .316 with an .837 OPS. He's a Gold Glover, three-time batting champ, and the defending MVP.

Brash third baseman Alex Bregman should finish in the top five of the MVP voting after leading the team with 31 homers and 103 RBIs, and he just hit over .500 against the Indians. Leadoff man George Springer overcame injuries of his own to get healthy just in time for October, where the reigning World Series MVP continued his assault on the postseason record books with three more home runs, giving him 10 in just 27 playoff games. Five-tool shortstop Carlos Correa is finally healthy. And on and on it goes.

The 1-2 punch of Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole is terrifying, and 3-4 starters Dallas Keuchel and Charlie Morton aren't too bad, either. Verlander may win his second Cy Young Award after leading the American League in strikeouts, shutouts, and starts. Cole dominated the Indians in Game 2, striking out 12.

And the arrival of Ryan Pressly and closer Roberto Osuna helped further stabilize one of the game's best bullpens. The Astros are so deep, they left most of last year's bullpen at home during the division series, including righty Joe Smith, former closer Hector Rondon, and 2017 stalwarts Chris Devenski and Brad Peacock. A case could be made that any of the four would be Alex Cora's first choice in the eighth inning.

Add it all up, and conventional wisdom says the Astros should be the favorites, which doesn't surprise the Red Sox.

"We had 108 wins and it seems like everybody is against us," outfielder Andrew Benintendi said. "But it is what it is. We knew there was a target on our back. Obviously the regular season was really good for us. At this point, it doesn't really matter. It's about how many wins you have in October. So far, so good."

Added closer Craig Kimbrel after holding off the Yankees: "First off, it felt good to win the division, lead the league in wins and come in and do this. We've got two steps down and two more to go. We're going to enjoy this and come next series hopefully as hot as we are right now. It's going to be a great series. They're a great team, we're a great team and that's all you can ask for."

For the Red Sox and Astros, it's fair to say the World Series starts now. The Red Sox have the talent to win, but let's go into this eyes wide open: the Astros are better.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

David Price to start Game 2 of ALCS vs. Astros

Evan Drellich

BOSTON — He's getting a second chance in the second game.

David Price's early exit in Game 2 of the American League Division Series did not push him further back in the Red Sox rotation for the next round.

MORE RED SOX - DJ BEAN: Sox-Yanks is a whole different vibe now
Sox manager Alex Cora told Chris Russo on MLB Network's "High Heat" on Wednesday that Price is lined up to pitch Game 2 of the Championship Series against the Astros on Sunday night at Fenway Park.

Nate Eovaldi's dominant performance in Game 3 of the ALDS against the Yankees gave Sox manager Alex Cora a prime candidate to pitch Game 2 behind Chris Sale, if Cora wanted to make a change. Price lasted 1 2/3 innings and faced just 10 batters in Game 2 against the Yankees, while Eovaldi's cutter and triple-digit fastball helped him pitch seven innings of one-run ball at Yankee Stadium.

In the ALDS, Cora was asked why people should believe Price can mentally handle the postseason.

"I think there's been guys around the league that they struggle their first 10 starts," Cora said. "Like, [Justin] Verlander, nobody remembers that he wasn't good early in his career in the playoffs, and now he's kind of like the poster child of playoff baseball. I read something about Pedro [Martinez] against Cleveland. I don't know. We saw it last year out of the bullpen, he did a good job. He pitched [Game 163 in 2013] and went nine innings ... against the Rangers. One thing for sure, he's in the same spirits today. He's ready to roll which is very important for us."

Price's 6.04 ERA as a postseason starter is the third-highest in major league history for anyone with at least 10 starts. He's 0-9 as a starter and has two wins as a reliever in the postseason.

* ***Bostonsportsjournal.com***

5 Leftover thoughts from the ALDS – Cora, Martinez KOs Stanton, Kimbrel showing cracks and more

Sean McAdam

1. Round 1 to Alex Cora

When the Red Sox and Yankees fired their managers — technically, Joe Girardi's deal was up and the Yanks used that as an opportunity to move on from him, but let's not get hung up on semantics — it was inevitable that the newbies, Alex Cora and Aaron Boone, would be evaluated against one another. That was especially true since this was the first year since 1991 that the two rivals each hired new dugout bosses.

Using the ALDS as our first real measuring stick, Cora easily outmanaged his friend. While Cora brilliantly played hunches — Brock Holt cycles, then sits; Christian Vazquez catches Rick Porcello for the first time this season and provides the game-winning homer; Nathan Eovaldi's start moved up; Chris Sale in the eighth inning — Boone appeared to be a move behind for much of the series.

He was far too patient with Game 3 starter Luis Severino and got roasted for leaving his starter in too long. Then, he compounded things by making the exact same mistake with CC Sabathia. When he should have shown a sense of urgency in an elimination game, Boone was inexplicably passive.

The series demonstrated that Cora seemed to have an intuitive feel for his roster and clubhouse. Meanwhile, the games seemed to speed up on Boone in the dugout.

2. J.D. Martinez bests Giancarlo Stanton

...And while we're on the subject of obvious comparisons, let's go to the first-year sluggers, shall we?

J.D. Martinez: .357/.421/.571; one homer, six RBI

Giancarlo Stanton: .238/.273/.381; no homers, one RBI

In hindsight, Martinez's first-inning homer in Game 1 was one of the biggest hits of the series. It not only presented the Sox with a quick 3-0 lead, but also took an enormous pressure off a club that lost six of its previous seven postseason games.

Stanton, on the other hand, never had his "moment" — unless you consider his plate appearance in the ninth inning Tuesday night, representing the tying run, when he chased two breaking balls well out of the strike zone.

Like Boone, Stanton will get other chances to redeem himself. But if the first year is any indication, a few things appear obvious. First, Stanton has done nothing so far to disprove those who suggested he might have a hard time adjusting to the expectations that come with playing in New York. Secondly, while he

possesses enormous strength, he's also a somewhat limited hitter who can be pitched to — especially in big spots.

The good news for the Yankees? Stanton is signed for nine more years.

The bad news for the Yankees? Stanton is signed for nine more years.

3. Warning signs for Craig Kimbrel

After the Red Sox got three perfect innings from their bullpen from the sixth inning through the eighth, things got hairy.

Closer Craig Kimbrel consistently fell behind hitters and didn't appear to have much confidence in his fastball (his pitch mix, while clearly dictated by his inability to get ahead of hitters, was about a 50-50 mix of fastballs and breaking balls).

Kimbrel has been inconsistent for much of the year. He had his stretches — in fact, Kimbrel was sharp for much of September — but never appeared capable of extended periods of dominance. There seems to be a very delicate balance between getting him enough work to stay sharp and not overusing him.

That's problematic in the postseason when off-days pop up with more frequency and significant downtime can exist between rounds.

By every statistical measure, Kimbrel experienced slippage this season. He allowed more homers, struck out fewer hitters and walked more.

The irony, of course, is that the Red Sox spent the last couple of months fretting about to get through the treacherous seventh and eighth innings. Now, they have issues in the ninth.

4. Some good, old-fashioned animosity reared its head during the ALDS

It seemed obvious: what this Red Sox-Yankee rivalry needed was a little October passion and the resulting ill-will. Now we have some.

Although the teams were complimentary and classy toward one another in postgame remarks — Cora made sure to salute the Yankees organization in his very first postgame comment in the interview room and Boone did the same in return — some hard feelings seeped through.

While they kept their reaction largely to themselves after Aaron Judge poked them with his boombox antics after Game 2 at Fenway, it's clear that the Sox quietly took offense. They were ready to respond in kind, cranking "New York, New York" during their clubhouse celebration.

Moreover, Rick Porcello took exception to CC Sabathia's complaints about beleaguered umpire Angel Hernandez's strike zone.

"Throw the ball over the plate, CC," said Porcello. "I thought Angel Hernandez called a good game. You've got to put the ball over the white part of the plate and then you the strikes called."

When a member of the Sox is publicly siding with Hernandez over a fellow pitcher, that's telling.

Yup, the hate is back. More, please.

5. It was a good week to be Dave Dombrowski

With the specter of an unreliable bullpen hanging over the Red Sox like the sword of Damocles, this series could have further advanced the perception that Dombrowski can't build a good postseason bullpen.

But Ryan Brasier pitched well in his last two outings, as did Matt Barnes. And despite some close calls in both Game 1 and again in Game 4, the Sox never surrendered any late-inning leads.

In the meantime, Nathan Eovaldi (seven innings, one run allowed), Steve Pearce (four hits, three runs scored, two RBI) and Ian Kinsler (.819 OPS, huge RBI in clinching game) all played significant role in the Red Sox advancing out of the first round for the first time since 2013.

Naturally, there's still time for the bullpen to faceplant and if that leads to the Sox falling short of a pennant or championship, the criticisms of Dombrowski will be freshly and properly re-introduced.

But for now, the Red Sox' president of baseball operations can take a bow.

*** *The USA Today***

Confident Red Sox dismiss the doubters who think they don't have a chance against Astros

Bob Nightengale

BOSTON -- The Boston Red Sox, who returned home in the wee hours Wednesday after their after-hours party at Yankee Stadium, celebrating the AL Division Series championship over their storied rival New York Yankees, woke up and braced themselves for the sobering news.

The preliminaries are over. If they are going to reach the World Series, winning for the fourth time in 15 years, they're going to have to take on the heavyweight champs next.

Yep, the mighty Houston Astros, winners of last year's World Series, who may even be better than a year ago.

The Red Sox insist they're confident, and, yes, may have to change their music selection. It's silly to play Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," mocking the Yankees, once they get to Houston. They may have to go country and change to "Deep in the Heart of Texas," the song played at every Astros game.

No matter what song they choose, the Red Sox are strutting into the series with bravado, their victory total now at 111 games, and a Texas-sized chip on their shoulders. They killed off the Yankees. Now, they're seeking revenge on the Astros, the team that ended their season a year ago when they won the AL Division Series in four games.

Not many outside Boston's clubhouse are giving them a chance to win, almost like the Yankees series when they were tied at one game, and all the Red Sox heard was that they were done.

"A lot of guys doubted us," Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts said. "I turned on the TV, and everything is, 'Yankees in 4.' I'm like, 'What is going on? How can we have 108 wins, and they're like the Yankees are going to win in four?' I don't understand."

This is a team that won more games than any team in baseball, the most in franchise history, and some folks are treating it as if it's no more significant than winning the Grapefruit League title in spring training.

"I think the media, from the first day of spring training, was pretty negative, even though we won the division two years in a row," Red Sox co-owner John Henry said. "[We] just needed to be a little more aggressive in our approach, because these guys are so talented, they just needed somebody to say, 'Go get 'em.'"

"And they went and got them this year, all year long."

The Red Sox, under rookie manager Alex Cora, certainly did just that, and he was a mastermind in their four-game series victory over the Yankees, making bold and daring moves that paid off every time.

Cora even took the ultimate gamble in Tuesday's 4-3 victory when he brought in ace Chris Sale in the eighth inning. If Sale struggled, or the Red Sox lost the game, they were done. Sale was scheduled to pitch in Game 5, and after pitching only 17 innings in the final two months of the season with an inflamed shoulder, just how long could he possibly have lasted in the elimination game?

"I was ready to find out," Sale said.

We'll never have to know.

Sale, who pitched a 1-2-3 eighth inning, is now ready for his own revenge. Last year was his first postseason, and it was ugly. He started one game, pitched in relief in another, and lost them both. He went home yielding an ugly 8.38 ERA, permitting four homers in just 9 2/3 innings.

"My first go at it was God-awful," Sale said. "It was as bad as it can get. It left a bad taste in my mouth. It sucked. I look at what happened the first time around, and obviously I was trying to flip the script. And here we are.

"Anybody outside of this clubhouse can say whatever they want. We know who we are, and we know what we can do. Comes with the business, you know?"

Just in case you think the Red Sox are going to go timid now, Cora not only is doubling down on his gutsy moves, but pushing all of his chips in by announcing Wednesday that David Price is staying in the rotation. Sale is pitching Game 1 Saturday against Verlander. Price is pitching Game 2 against Gerrit Cole.

Price was booed off the mound in Game 2 of the Division Series after facing just 10 batters, and getting a mere five outs in the Red Sox's 6-2 loss. Price has now started 10 games in the postseason with three different teams, and his team has lost all 10 games, with Price going 0-9 with a 6.03 ERA. Only two other pitchers in history have made at least 10 postseason starts and had a higher ERA.

Now, he's back on the mound, looking for his own vengeance.

"I think there's been guys around the league that they struggle their first 10 starts," Cora said. "Like, [Justin] Verlander, nobody remembers that he wasn't good early in his career in the playoffs, and now he's kind of like the poster child of playoff baseball.

"One thing for sure, he's in the same spirits today. He's ready to roll, which is very important for us."

Considering that every move he made in the Division Series turned to gold, how can anyone question Cora now, or doubt the Red Sox's swagger?

"From Day One in spring training, he's been our guy," Red Sox infielder Bock Holt said. "From the beginning, he told us how good we can be. We obviously knew that, but we believed him.

"There's no reason to stop believing now."

*** *Associated Press***

Houston SS Correa struggles with back problem as ALCS looms

HOUSTON — Carlos Correa is in pain.

Every swing and miss hurts, and on the bad days it can even be uncomfortable for the Houston Astros star shortstop to walk.

Correa often puts on a brave face but told The Associated Press how much this is affecting him as the Astros prepare to leave for Boston and the best-of-seven AL Championship Series that begins on Saturday.

"You're a competitor so every time you step on the field you play it off like everything is fine," he said Wednesday. "But obviously you're hurting."

Correa returned from a six-week stint on the disabled list on Aug. 10 and declared that he was better. But he has struggled to regain his top form. He hit just .180 in the second half of the season and managed a single hit — a home run — in an ALDS, looking nothing like the player who made the All-Star team last season and was the 2015 rookie of the year.

He said it bothers him most at the plate, and it's been impossible to get back to how he felt before the injury.

"Not only to find my swing, just to feel comfortable at the plate when I swing," he said. "Because I know every time I swing and miss it's going to hurt. So, I try not to swing and miss and then I try to baby my swing and I don't swing as hard as I usually do or as quick as I usually do. So, it's definitely been tough."

Correa said there's been a domino effect of pain in other areas, most notably in his obliques, as he tries to avoid doing things that make his back hurt.

He's receiving treatment "24/7," but the pain remains. He's using a foam roller at home and been sporadically taking anti-inflammatories.

"It's just a pain down in my lower back that doesn't let me move right," he said. "When I bend over, when I rotate. Sometimes when I wake up and I walk in the morning, I know it's not going to be a good day."

He's accepted that the aching likely will be with him until he gets an extended rest. He's trying not to let it weigh on him, but in private moments at home with his fiancée Daniella Rodriguez, he laments that he simply hasn't been himself this season.

"When I go to sleep at night, I think about especially this year (how) I'm not performing the way I know I can perform, it's just been tough," he said. "Sometimes I talk to Daniella and I'm like: 'There's nothing I can do about it. I'm hurting.' But I'm a competitor so you grind, you try to perform. But it's definitely ... been frustrating at times."

Despite his woes, Correa started all three games of the ALDS and continues to play stellar defense, something he takes pride in as he struggles at the plate. And though he was just 1 for 10 against the Indians, his one hit was a big one — a three-run homer in the clinching game — providing hope that maybe things are getting better.

"I feel like I had really good at-bats in the series vs. Cleveland, just not getting lucky with the balls I hit hard," he said. "But that one fell, and it gives me a lot of confidence going into this series."

Manager AJ Hinch was asked if he's concerned about Correa.

"Not now," he said. "We (have) four days off. We get to press the reset button. You don't just get to press pause either way. We had some guys get six and seven hits in that series, but you have to start over again, new opponent. So, no it doesn't concern me."

Correa is focused on keeping a positive attitude as he fights through this and is determined to do all he can to help the Astros repeat as champions.

"It's been a tough year. But it's not the end of the world," he said. "I keep grinding every single day. I keep trying to find ways to help my team. I thought my defense this year was excellent and I'm looking forward to winning another championship and getting some rest."

The Boston Red Sox celebrate after beating the New York Yankees 4-3 in Game 4 of baseball's American League Division Series, Tuesday, Oct. 9, 2018, in New York. (AP Photo/Julie Jacobson)

LEADING OFF: Red Sox ready for Astros, Yanks begin offseason
"And come back next year strong and be the player that I am," he continued.