

The Boston Red Sox

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On baseball's agenda: roster size, pitch clocks, and defensive shifts

Nick Cafardo

While Scott Boras offered plenty of ideas to improve major league baseball during his press gathering this past week in Carlsbad, Calif., the general managers offered their ideas and concerns to MLB deputy commissioner Dan Halem, who will brief owners at this coming week's owners' meetings in Atlanta.

Those ideas and concerns will likely be a part of the CBA negotiations, which should take place this offseason.

Here are some issues that have been raised, according to Halem:

■ **Roster size.** This is an ongoing topic. Halem said it was a major discussion during the last CBA but while a proposal was made to change the 25-man roster, the sides couldn't quite agree. As a result, the 25-man roster with the usual September call-ups from the 40-man roster were kept intact. One idea that was floated was to move to a 26-man roster, but during the first month of the season the roster size would be 29. That would allow teams to transition better from spring training to the regular season and gradually turn up the intensity to perhaps avoid injuries. The 26-man roster makes sense in today's game, in which teams are using their bullpens more than ever and going with fewer bench players. It makes sense, but it has to be collectively bargained. It also costs the owners more money to have more players on the active roster, so there might be some resistance on such an idea from the owners' side. The flip side to keeping the roster size status quo is that there's a lot of downtime for players spending significant time on the disabled list.

■ **A 20-second pitch clock.** From this point of view, say it isn't so. And maybe it won't be. The idea has been floated for a while, but commissioner Rob Manfred has not pulled the trigger on it. Certainly, the Players Association is against anything that makes players uncomfortable. David Price was the second-slowest pitcher between pitches to Justin Verlander. Price has publicly said he wouldn't change a thing about how he goes about his pitch-to-pitch routine. It works for him. It works for Verlander. Halem and Manfred are certainly happy that the average time for a nine-inning game had been sliced by 4 minutes, 30 seconds, to 3 hours. MLB managed to accomplish this by reducing time between innings and during pitching changes. Also contributing were limiting mound visits to six per game, a good idea that did not affect the integrity of the game. "It's going in the right direction," Halem said.

■ **Defensive shifts.** This one I'd love to ban altogether as it takes away from offense and takes several points off the batting averages. David Ortiz hated shifts and it took him a while to solve them. What's so great about a lefthanded power hitter grounding out to right field? The argument that hitters should go "the other way" and beat the shift — well, if it were that easy everyone would do it. It's harder to do than people think. Just ask the hitters. Realistically, there could be an alteration on how much shifting can be done. One idea is when a team lines up in a shift, they can't change it depending on the count. Once you declare your shift position prior to the at-bat, you must stay in that position.

■ **Reducing strikeouts.** When MLB has more strikeouts than hits in a season, it's something that needs to be looked at. "We're an entertainment product," Halem said. "Certainly we want to play the game in a way that's compelling for our audience, including our younger audience. So we're constantly looking at the way the game is changing organically. We work very hard on trying to reduce as much dead time in games as possible so games are played as crisply as possible." Halem emphasized the need for "more balls in play." How do you get that done? That's a huge discussion for the Competition Committee, which will also convene in Atlanta.

■ Sign stealing. There's much discussion about safeguards for the use of electronics and video used to steal signs. The issue came up again in Game 1 of the Red Sox-Astros ALCS, when an Astros employee was caught videotaping the Red Sox dugout from the camera well at Fenway. The Astros were absolved when their reason for videotaping was to make sure the Red Sox weren't engaged in hanky-panky. The Red Sox had their incident in 2017 when they were fined for using an Apple Watch to steal signs from the Yankees. Halem said that in discussing this issue with the GMs he got a unanimous response that none of them are engaged in any electronic shenanigans. "I think the real issue here is giving clubs comfort that other clubs are not using electronic technology to steal signs," Halem said. "So we took a variety of measures in the postseason to give clubs comfort that the rules were being enforced. We got some additional suggestions on things we can do at the more granular level. The issues that we talked about — the use of the center-field camera, how much the commissioner's office should monitor video rooms — those sets of issues we're going to talk to the commissioner about and he's going to make a decision about what we should do next year just so we can sort of tamp down this conversation of whether ball clubs are playing by the rules."

■ Halem rejected Boras's idea that lower attendance was linked to teams tanking it or in less-dramatic terms, rebuilding. "I certainly don't agree with that characterization," Halem said. "I don't, and our owners don't believe that there's any connection between the rebuilding process and overall attendance. There are a variety of reasons for our attendance numbers. We had poor weather." There were 54 postponements, which was the most since 1989, and 26 occurred on the weekend when attendance is normally higher. And there were 35 games in which the temperature was 40 degrees or below in April.

■ I asked Halem about whether new Mets president of baseball operations Brodie Van Wagenen, who left his players agency (CAA) to switch sides, had divested his interests. Halem said the issue is addressed in the Basic Agreement, and that Van Wagenen has divested his interests to the satisfaction of MLB. Now the tricky part is that Van Wagenen represented several Mets, including stars Yoenis Cespedes and Jacob deGrom. How do you deal with players you're still drawing commissions from?

Apropos of nothing

1. One of the many players Red Sox manager Alex Cora was proud of was catcher Christian Vazquez. "Maybe he didn't start good," Cora said, "but he's in a good place. I told him, I said, 'Hey man, you went from the doghouse to the fricking penthouse.' He understood the situation and Sandy [Leon] was playing great, but then you know we needed offense and he did provide us with that and plus-defense. He caught better too because at one point . . . I don't know if it was the contract or whatever it was, he wasn't the guy that we were expecting early in the season." Two other interesting things from Cora: He expects Andrew Benintendi to keep getting better, hitting for more power and one day to challenge for a batting title. And he predicts Jackie Bradley Jr. will take off offensively next season after making major adjustments in his swing during the second half of the season.
2. Brian Cashman was the last general manager to repeat a World Series championship and in fact three-peated and almost won four in row. "It's hard, no doubt about it," Cashman said about repeating. "Those [Yankee] teams were different but there were some similarities at the same time we had back then. You just have to be willing to adjust on the run and be willing to plug holes that pop up, and thankfully back then we were able to do that. But this is now and now we're continuing to focus on ways to take a 100-win team that didn't even win the division and improve upon it."
3. Terrific "celebration of life" event in Carlsbad, Calif., this past week for longtime scout Don Welke, who died in September at age 75. Heartfelt speeches by Rangers GM Jon Daniels and Padres GM A.J. Preller, who were mentored by Welke. Welke helped build the Blue Jays with Pat Gillick in the early 1990s and then helped build the Rangers, who played in two World Series. He had spent the last several years with the Padres.
4. Here's a thought: I'm not sure why J.D. Martinez wouldn't be up for spending some time learning how to play first base in spring training. If the Red Sox don't re-sign free agent Steve Pearce, Martinez could spend some time playing first base in a platoon with Mitch Moreland.

5. Yes, Dodgers first baseman David Freese was one of the hitters the Red Sox considered trading for when they wound up making the deal with the Blue Jays for Pearce.

6. Mike Tamburro, the longtime president and part owner of the Pawtucket Red Sox, was named “King of Baseball” by Minor League Baseball and will be recognized at next month’s winter meetings in Las Vegas. In the Larry Lucchino ownership of the PawSox, Tamburro serves as vice chairman.

7. I’ve learned over the years never to believe the Yankees when they downplay interest in a free agent. This offseason we’ve heard that sentiment when it comes to Bryce Harper and Manny Machado. Wallace Matthews of the New York Daily News had an item during the GM meetings that, according to a source, the Yankees might be eyeing a deal to trade Giancarlo Stanton in effort to sign Harper. Anything is possible with the Yankees, who didn’t like getting beaten by the Red Sox.

Updates on nine

1. Miguel Cabrera, 1B/DH, Tigers — Cabrera (biceps tendon surgery) is said to be 100 percent healthy and ready for spring training, according to Tigers GM Al Avila. Cabrera will be playing on a rebuilding team where his hitting talents will go largely unnoticed. The Tigers could strip down even more by dealing starting pitcher Michael Fulmer, right fielder Nicholas Castellanos, and reliever Shane Greene (who wouldn’t be a bad pickup for the Red Sox). The Tigers also have parted ways with former Red Sox shortstop Jose Iglesias, a free agent, and likely will sign a cheaper veteran in his place.

2. Jacoby Ellsbury, CF, Yankees — His agent, Scott Boras, indicated that Ellsbury was healthy again after hip surgery and is ready to go for the 2019 season. “We all know how talented Jacoby is when he’s healthy,” Boras said. It’ll be interesting to see whether Ellsbury will be able to take the starting job back.

3. Alex Cora, manager, Red Sox — Yes, according to a major league source, Cora did have bonus incentives in his contract for postseason success. Cora will reap the financial rewards of winning it all. We’re not privy to the exact amount, but we hear it’s substantial.

4. Billy Owens, assistant GM, Athletics — Owens is said to be a GM candidate in San Francisco after Farhan Zaidi, who spent many years in Oakland before going to the Dodgers, was named president of baseball operations of the Giants. Owens is a longtime Billy Beane employee who has done a lot of the scouting legwork in evaluating players, which Zaidi will need given his more analytical background. Owens is deserving but he is also very loyal to Beane.

5. David Chadd, assistant GM, Tigers — Chadd, a former Red Sox scouting director, has been considered for the Orioles’ general manager position. The process has dragged out as team owners John and Lou Angelos try to settle on a replacement for Dan Duquette. Chadd was responsible for drafting Dustin Pedroia, Jon Lester, Brandon Moss, David Murphy, and Jonathan Papelbon for the Red Sox, and James McCann, Castellanos, Drew Smyly, Rick Porcello, and Andrew Miller for the Tigers. Chadd has certainly paid his dues and has excelled in multiple roles.

6. Yusei Kikuchi, LHP, Seibu Lions — He is going to draw considerable interest once he is posted by the Lions in the near future. There’s no telling which team will emerge as the leader, but the Yankees are certainly interested, especially if they’re unable to land one of the top pitchers in free agency. The Red Sox have scouted the 27-year-old Kikuchi extensively, but because they already have three lefties in the rotation it seems unlikely they would dive into his market.

7. Ruben Amaro Jr., adviser, Mets — Amaro, who spent two years coaching first base for the Red Sox and another year with the Mets, moved to the front office to be an adviser to Brodie Van Wagenen. A longtime Phillies GM, Amaro had applied for the Mets’ GM job but was rebuffed. As a player agent, Van Wagenen had many dealings with the Stanford-educated Amaro (also Van Wagenen’s alma mater) on Phillies players. Suffice it to say, Amaro has had a very interesting baseball career. In the Mets’ coaching shakeup, Gary DiSarcina, a former Red Sox bench coach, will go from bench coach to third base coach.

8. Kenta Maeda, RHP, Dodgers — We don't know whether the Dodgers reworked Maeda's unique incentive-laden contract to reflect that he was moved to the bullpen after making 20 starts. Maeda signed a deal in 2016 for eight years at \$25 million, but the deal was worth up to \$106 million with incentives. He can make \$1 million for making 15-plus starts, and \$1.5 million for 25-plus starts. He also makes \$250,000 for every 10 innings pitched after 90 innings through 190 innings, and \$750,000 for 200 innings. So in 2018, Maeda made \$2 million extra for 20 starts, and for his 125⅓ innings he earned an additional \$800,000 or so. Interesting calculations.

9. Cory Kluber, RHP, Indians — The Indians had conversations with teams about dealing Kluber, according to a major league source. We did spot Brian Cashman with Indians president Chris Antonetti during the GM meetings, so there's likely some Yankee interest. Kluber, who will be 33 in April, is entering the final year of his contract. He won 20 games in 2018 while pitching 200-plus innings for the fifth straight season. No doubt one of the best pitchers in the game, Kluber should draw interest not only from the Yankees, but from the Rangers, Braves, Phillies, Angels, Padres — well, you name it.

Extra innings

From the Bill Chuck files — “In a reflection of the weak state of their division and the weak state of their team, the Kansas City Royals had the lowest percentage of road attendance of any MLB club. The Royals filled just 57.7 percent of visiting ballparks. Of the 10 lowest road team attendances, five came from the AL Central. The Dodgers led the majors with a 77.3 percent road rate.” . . . Also, “Catching takes it toll. Just ask J.T. Realmuto, who hit .318 before the break when behind the plate and .211 after the All-Star break, or Willson Contreras, who hit .283 before the break and .195 after when catching.” . . . Happy birthday, Rey Quinones (55) and Ike Delock (89).

How much will Nathan Eovaldi command in free agency?

Alex Speier

It's been almost exactly one month — 32 days, to be exact — since Nathan Eovaldi stepped onto the mound at Yankee Stadium and transformed from journeyman to October force. Against a Yankees team that was an offensive juggernaut in its home park, Eovaldi delivered a memorable performance, allowing one run on five hits (all singles) over seven innings, the start of a brilliant postseason in which the Red Sox righthander went 2-1 with a 1.61 ERA, 16 strikeouts, and 3 walks in 22⅓ innings.

“He's going into free agency,” Red Sox pitching coach Dana LeVangie noted after that Division Series Game 3 start. “Tonight got him some big money.”

Now that Eovaldi is a free agent, it is fair to ask: How much?

Eovaldi's stock soared during his time with the Red Sox. In late July, as the trade deadline neared, he garnered only modest interest on the market. When the Sox landed him from the Rays for lefthander Jalen Beeks, most viewed him as a solid addition while also suggesting that Beeks — a potential back-of-the-rotation starter — represented about as solid a return as Tampa Bay could have hoped for.

Now the interest in Eovaldi will be very different. The big righthander showed the same sort of power that has been his calling card throughout his career, regularly working at 97-100 miles per hour and topping out at 102, but he also showed a striking ability to mix his offerings.

At times, he dominated with a three-pitch mix (fastball, cutter, slider). At others, he expanded that to five (incorporating a heavier diet of curveballs and splits), a combination that proved remarkably unsettling for hitters who still had to account for his extreme velocity.

From September through October, Eovaldi implemented a number of changes with the input of LeVangie and the Red Sox staff that took him to another competitive level. He had a 1.49 ERA in his final 42⅓ innings of the year, dominating repeatedly against elite lineups.

In the past, it might have been possible to shrug off some of those results as a small sample. Yet in recent years, with teams increasingly focused on future production rather than past performance in free agency, such signs of transformation — even if brief — are treated very differently.

Take, for instance, Rich Hill. In 2015, the Red Sox plucked the lefthander out of independent ball after he'd been released by the Nationals. He reached the big leagues in September, dominated for a handful of starts, landed a one-year, \$6 million deal with the A's, and then, after 110⅓ strong innings (12-5, 2.12 ERA) with the Dodgers and A's in 2016 and three playoff starts, secured a three-year, \$48 million deal to stay in Los Angeles.

Last year, righthander Tyler Chatwood — coming off an age-27 season in which he went 8-15 with a 4.69 ERA for the Rockies — landed a three-year, \$38 million deal from the Cubs based on his relative youth, his solid numbers on the road, and Statcast-driven pitch data that suggested a world of untapped potential.

Eovaldi is coming off an age-28 season in which he logged 111 regular-season innings (nearly identical to Hill's volume in 2016). Whereas Chatwood represented something of a speculative bet, Eovaldi already has shown the ability to make adjustments in a way that took his game to a level of distinction. Down the stretch, once Eovaldi made some adjustments to his delivery (such as his position on the rubber) and game plan, he performed at an elite level.

As ever, the market for starting pitchers should be robust. The precedents of Hill and Chatwood suggest that Eovaldi should be in line for at least a three-year deal, and even as a two-time recipient of Tommy John surgery (Chatwood and Hill each had one), it would come as little surprise if he lands a four-year deal.

It's hard to imagine him getting less than Chatwood, suggesting that his floor is probably at least three years and roughly \$40 million or four years and \$52 million. Eovaldi doesn't represent the same sort of strikeout potential as Hill, and his track record of dominance is over roughly two months. Hill had a season and a month of delivering standout results.

Those factors create questions about whether Eovaldi has the same baseline expectations as Hill when on the mound, but at the least, it's close — and there's a chance that Eovaldi may be capable of providing more durability once on the mound. But it's not unreasonable to view Hill's salary — \$16 million a year — as a potential bar for Eovaldi to near or, depending on demand, clear, suggesting that in a best-case market scenario, he could be in line for four years and \$60 million-\$65 million.

Can the Red Sox afford that?

Sure — though if they did so, their current projected commitments would be around \$225 million-\$228 million, leaving limited flexibility to add up to two bullpen arms (to replace or re-sign Craig Kimbrel and/or Joe Kelly) and to replace or re-sign Steve Pearce.

Still, with Chris Sale and Rick Porcello slated to reach free agency after 2019, and the Red Sox having interesting late-innings options (Darwinzon Hernandez and Durbin Feltman) who look like they may be ready to contribute at some point in 2019, it makes a ton of sense for them to pursue a return of Eovaldi.

But they won't be alone in such a pursuit. A pitcher who was arguably underappreciated leading up to the trade deadline won't be overlooked again.

*** *MassLive.com***

Jerry Remy, Boston Red Sox NESN color analyst: 'Cancer-free for now and hopefully forever'

Christopher Smith

Jerry Remy is cancer-free.

The Red Sox NESN color analyst announced via Twitter on Saturday his first scan since undergoing cancer treatments came back clean.

He participated in the Red Sox's World Series parade earlier this month and said, "I'm kicking cancer's ass."

NESN announced Aug. 7 that Remy had been diagnosed with cancer again, his sixth relapse.

Remy underwent surgery June 26, 2017, for his fifth relapse with lung cancer. He then underwent chemotherapy and radiation last offseason. He finished chemo Nov. 7, 2017. He finished radiation Jan. 16, 2018 before it returned in August.

The 66-year-old was first diagnosed with lung cancer in 2008.

*** *RedSox.com***

Boston's all-time retired numbers

Ian Browne

BOSTON -- At Fenway Park, the right-field façade is reserved for the legends. That's the spot that showcases all the retired numbers for one of the most storied franchises in all of sports.

At one point, the criteria that the Red Sox had for retiring a number was that the player had to be enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame, and have ended his career with Boston.

But there were some exceptions made along the way. The late Johnny Pesky, one of the great ambassadors that the Sox ever had, had his number retired without making it to the Hall of Fame. Carlton Fisk, Pedro Martinez and Wade Boggs all finished their careers for different teams. Boston retire David Ortiz's number the year after he retired, rather than waiting to see how his Hall of Fame candidacy plays out.

The Sox no longer have a formal set of criteria to determine whether a player is eligible to have his number retired. That said, owner John Henry and chairman Tom Werner are committed to reserving that honor for a very select few. All future candidates will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Here is a look at all the numbers that have been retired by the Red Sox.

Wade Boggs, 3B: No. 26
Number retired: May 26, 2016

A left-handed-hitting machine, Boggs won all five of his career batting titles for the Red Sox. He hit .357 or above five times between 1983-88 and set a franchise record by notching 200 or more hits in seven seasons. During the 11 years that Boggs played for the Red Sox (1982-92), he led the Majors in batting average (.338), hits (2,098), doubles (422) and on-base percentage (.428). Boggs was a first-ballot Hall of Famer in 2005.

Joe Cronin, SS: No. 4
Number retired: May 29, 1984

Cronin played on the great Red Sox teams that also included Ted Williams, Bobby Doerr, Pesky and Dominic DiMaggio. In fact, he managed those players as well. Cronin was a player-manager for Boston from 1935-45 and was strictly a manager for the next two seasons, which included the pennant-winning season of '46. At the time of his retirement, Cronin held a franchise record with 1,071 managerial wins. As a player for Boston, Cronin slashed .300/.394/.484 with 119 homers and 737 RBIs.

Bobby Doerr, 2B: No. 1
Number retired: May 21, 1988

The classy second baseman was referred to as the "silent captain" during his tremendous career, all of which was spent with the Red Sox. Doerr hit for a combination of average and power and did all the little things well. He became the first player in Red Sox history to hit for the cycle twice. He died in November 2017, at the age of 99. The one year that Doerr had a chance to play in the World Series was 1946, and he excelled, hitting .409 (9-for-22) to lead the team. Doerr was also known for his superb defense at second base.

Carlton Fisk, C: No. 27
Number retired: Sept. 4, 2000

The man they called "Pudge" will forever be remembered for the home run that he waved fair to end Game 6 of the 1975 World Series. Born in Vermont and raised in New Hampshire, Fisk was a tough New Englander through and through. The only regret -- both for Fisk and the Red Sox -- is that he didn't spend his entire career in Boston. But Fisk did plenty of damage while he was with the Red Sox from 1969-80, when he was an offensive force at the plate and a defensive stalwart behind it. Fisk had 376 career homers and was an 11-time All-Star and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000.

Pedro Martinez, SP: No. 45
Number retired: July 28, 2015

Martinez's popularity in Boston was matched only by his dominance. He carved up the opposition at a historic rate during an era that was known for offense. Martinez pitched for the Red Sox from 1998-2004, winning two of his three career Cy Young Awards over that span, notching a gaudy record of 117-37 with a 2.52 ERA. Martinez had the thrill of starting the 1999 All-Star Game at Fenway Park and struck out five of the six batters he faced. Another of Martinez's most memorable moments also took place in '99, when he came out of the bullpen and pitched through a right shoulder injury to fire six no-hit innings against the Indians to win Game 5 of the American League Division Series. He was part of the history-making '04 team that ended Boston's championship drought at 86 years.

David Ortiz, DH: No. 34
Number retired: June 23, 2017

Big Papi is larger than life to Red Sox Nation for his role in leading the club to championships in 2004, '07 and '13. In '04, Ortiz took clutch to another level, producing a walk-off homer and walk-off single on back-to-back days as the Red Sox overcame a 3-0 series deficit against the Yankees in the ALCS. The left-handed-hitting slugger had another iconic moment in the '13 ALCS against the Tigers, when his grand slam against Joaquin Benoit tied Game 2 of that series. Ortiz was the MVP of the '13 World Series, hitting an eye-popping .688 with two homers and six RBIs as the Sox beat the Cardinals in six games. In 2006, Ortiz set a team record for a single season by belting 54 home runs. Only Williams hit more homers for the Red Sox than the 483 by Ortiz, who played in Boston from 2003-16.

Johnny Pesky, SS/3B: No. 6
Number retired: Sept. 28, 2008

One of the best pure hitters in the AL during his career, Pesky evolved into one of the most beloved figures in Red Sox history. This is due to the fact that he spent 61 years in the Red Sox organization, with roles in just about every capacity. Though Pesky only hit 13 homers in his Sox career, several of them were curled down the line in right, which is why that foul line at Fenway is referred to as "Pesky's Pole." Pesky topped the 200-hit mark in each of his first three seasons with the Red Sox. He was as big a hit off the field as he was on it; nobody enjoyed interacting with fans more than Pesky. Jim Rice and Boggs, who also have their numbers retired at Fenway, both credited Pesky for helping them become Hall of Famers due to his tireless work with them behind the scenes.

Jim Rice, LF: No. 14
Number retired: July 28, 2009

With quick wrists and brute-like strength, Rice was one of the premier hitters of his era. Much to the delight of Red Sox fans, Rice spent his entire career in Boston. Never was Rice better than in 1978, when he won the AL MVP Award by slashing .315/.370/.600 with 46 homers, 15 triples and 139 RBIs while compiling 406 total bases. Though Rice hit some titanic homers, he could also rip line drives to all fields. Red Sox players will always be convinced that Rice could have helped them win the 1975 World Series, for which he was inactive with a broken left hand. Rice did get a chance to play in the 1986 World Series, but the Red Sox lost to the Mets in seven games. Rice remains a fixture around the Red Sox, both as a studio analyst on NESN and at team events.

Ted Williams, LF: No. 9
Number retired: May 29, 1984

The Splendid Splinter. The Kid. The Thumper. Whatever you want to call him, he was a true legend who has a tunnel named after him in Boston. Williams once said that his one goal was to walk down the street and have people say, "There goes the greatest hitter that ever lived." It's safe to say that many people uttered that exact sentence at one time or another. Williams hit .406 in 1941, and nobody has reached the .400 mark since. He also hit 521 home runs, a Red Sox record. Williams had a career average of .344. Williams missed three full seasons fighting for his country, otherwise his career stats would be even more impressive. Williams won the triple crown in 1942 and '47. His book, *The Science of Hitting*, is still used as a resource by aspiring hitters.

Carl Yastrzemski, LF: No. 8
Number retired: Aug. 6, 1989

Perhaps nobody in baseball history had more pressure in his rookie season than Yastrzemski, whose job was to replace Williams in left field. For a while, Yaz felt that burden. By 1967, he was a legend, leading the Red Sox to the "Impossible Dream" pennant and falling just one win shy of beating the Cardinals in the World Series. Yaz won the triple crown that season and went 7-for-8 in the final two games of the regular season, which were both must wins. Yaz was also an elite defender in left field and a master at playing the Green Monster. To make way for Rice in the mid-1970s, Yaz moved to first base and also excelled at that position. He became the first player in AL history to accumulate 400 homers and 3,000 hits.

Was J.D. most important player in 2018?

Mike Lupica

Usually when I find myself agreeing with Scott Boras on just about anything, I simply lie down and wait for the feeling to pass. But when Boras is right, he's right. And he's right to make some noise about the fact that his client J.D. Martinez is not among the finalists for the American League MVP Award.

"There's a complete misunderstanding of the value of the player," Boras said the other day on MLB Network Radio.

Again: He's right. Absolutely.

Martinez just became the first player to be awarded Silver Slugger Awards at two positions, designated hitter and outfielder, in the same season. Now, everybody knows he is more DH than outfielder, especially on a team that has one of the great defensive outfields in history, with Mookie Betts, Jackie Bradley Jr. and Andrew Benintendi. But Martinez still managed to play enough games in the outfield (57) to make some history for himself.

Listen, nobody would suggest that Martinez is the kind of all-around player that the three AL MVP Award finalists -- Betts, Jose Ramirez, Mike Trout -- are. Betts and Trout, in particular, play baseball with a ton of Willie Mays in them, and there is still no higher baseball compliment than that. And there will always be debate in the game about whether you are supposed to be voting for the best player or the most valuable, and how in the world there is a difference between them.

But I will say this again: There was no more important player in baseball this season, in either league, than Martinez. The Red Sox made one significant addition to their batting order last offseason. It was Martinez, who had personal bests across his stat line: Hits (188), doubles (37), batting average (.330), on-base percentage (.402) and total bases (358). He ended up with 43 home runs. He knocked in more runs (130) than anybody in the game for a team that won 108 regular-season games and then went 11-3 in the postseason.

Most importantly, Martinez became the kind of dangerous middle-of-the-order presence that the Red Sox had been missing since David Ortiz retired. And when he got to the postseason with the best chance he'd ever had to win a World Series, Martinez was the same guy in October that he had been since the regular season started for the Red Sox in St. Petersburg at the end of March. Somehow, rather unbelievably, that got lost a little bit, just because there were so many other good stories and so much October drama with the Red Sox.

There was the redemption of David Price. There were the bullpen heroics of Nathan Eovaldi and Chris Sale and even Joe (Fight Club) Kelly. There was the remarkable bases-loaded catch that Benintendi made to save Game 4 of the AL Championship Series. There was a catch-that-wasn't by Betts against Jose Altuve in the first inning of Game 4, a play on which umpire Joe West (correctly) ruled fan interference. There were some theme-park ninth innings from Craig Kimbrel, most notably against the Yankees in Game 4 of the AL Division Series. There were those incredible 18 innings against the Dodgers in Game 4 of the World Series.

And there was the night at Yankee Stadium when the Red Sox rang up the Yankees for 16 runs, as Brock Holt hit for the cycle.

Through it all, there was always Martinez. He may have made the biggest swing of his season in the first inning of Game 1 against the Yankees, with a three-run homer off J.A. Happ. And Martinez was just getting started. He would end up with five hits in each of the Red Sox's three series in October. Martinez ended up hitting a smooth .300 (15-for-50), and he hit three home runs. He played 14 postseason games and knocked in 14 runs, with an OPS of .923.

So Martinez really was the same guy in October that he'd been all year long. For my money, he continued to be Boston's most important player when all the money was on the table. The idea that somehow Martinez isn't viewed as one of the three most valuable players in his league is a notion that requires a laugh track.

"I think it was everyone," Martinez told NESN at the Red Sox's championship parade, talking about a Red Sox team that ultimately won those 119 games. "Everyone just being so humble. There were no egos -- ever. No one ever put themselves first and everybody kind of just pushed for each other."

So much of this culture started with the manager, Alex Cora, who had the best postseason any manager has ever had. But the more you talk to people with the Red Sox, the more you hear about how the clubhouse presence of Martinez, as serious a student of hitting as any current player, was as important to the wonderful culture surrounding the 2018 Red Sox, and he carried them to the parade as much as anyone in the room. Then he just kept delivering on the field, all the way until he hit one more home run in Game 5 of the Series against the Dodgers.

This is nothing against those ahead of him in the voting for an award his electrifying teammate, Betts, will likely win. But nobody was more valuable in baseball this season than J.D. Martinez.

*** *WEEI.com***

Jerry Remy declares himself 'cancer free for now and hopefully forever'

John Tomase

Jerry Remy feels like celebrating.

The NESN broadcaster and fan favorite declared himself cancer free on Twitter on Saturday.

"Friday was a very good day for me," Remy wrote. "Had my first scan since going through treatments. Highly successful. Cancer free for now and hopefully forever. So pleased !!!!"

Remy, 66, was first diagnosed with lung cancer in 2008. He has since experienced recurrences of the disease at least three times, the most recent at the beginning of August.

A native of Somerset, Remy spent eight years with the Red Sox before joining the booth in 1988, where he has been a popular fixture ever since.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

The end of the traditional closer? Not so fast, say GMs

Evan Drellich

CARLSBAD, Calif. — The closer hasn't died, and maybe it shouldn't.

The concept of a starting pitcher seems to be evolving faster than the last man standing in the bullpen, the safety-blanket convention of the endgame. Nonetheless, the winds are changing, if slowly. "Closer by committee" isn't the dirty phrase it used to be, but saves are still sought and valued, and will be paid for this winter.

Starting pitcher Chris Sale closed out the 2018 World Series for the Red Sox, not Craig Kimbrel. Technically, the game was not a save situation. The Sox held a 5-1 lead, one run too many for a save. No one, though, would doubt the pressure that existed in that moment.

MORE RED SOX - Bogaerts, Martinez likely to test free agency when the time comes

Sale pitched out of the bullpen in the late innings for the Sox in the postseason. Same for Rick Porcello, who handled the eighth inning in the Sox' first postseason game of '18. Roles were freely broken, for the Sox and others — a suggestion that training in a particular role is not always necessary to be effective.

Pitchers would be heavily fatigued were they to be used in the regular season as they are in the playoffs. But put frequency of use aside, and the postseason leaves an opening for a logical follow-up: if roles can be broken in the postseason, if pitchers can be effective in situations they're not commonly used to, can that be the case as well in the regular season? The closer is often the only pitcher in a bullpen handed a set inning anyway.

As Kimbrel hits free agency, the Red Sox have to consider the importance and worth of having a pitcher whose designated role is to finish games. Kimbrel has not always pitched in the biggest jams, or faced the most challenging parts of the order. He's not alone. Many teams' closers are still used in a similarly rigid fashion. The role is by definition, rigid, and inefficient. But still, something desirable.

"We'd like to somebody pitch the ninth inning," Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said. "I don't know what your idea of traditional is, but, we do like somebody to close the game...That designated guy."

Dombrowski is certainly not alone, but there are dissenting feelings.

Here's how top executives around the game feel, listed in alphabetical order. (Questions are paraphrased.)

ALEX ANTHOPOULOS, GENERAL MANAGER, BRAVES

Are closers still necessary?

"I think it's easier for the managers obviously to have an established ninth-inning guy. Everybody slots down a bit. You get to the playoffs, when I was in L.A., we brought Kenley Jansen in early. It's just like for years, starters coming: Randy Johnson was coming out of the bullpen. Chris Sale was coming out of the bullpen. So, during the season, certainly it's nice to have that. A lot of people have talked about the most important outs might be in the seventh or the eighth. I think these are just great relievers. Andrew Miller wasn't signed as a closer and he got a huge contract. So I do think it's changing."

What does the postseason show us about roles?

"I think there's a component of getting the save, getting the ball. There's a status to the closer, the leader of the bullpen. All those things. And that's just a hierarchy that's been established for years. I do think come playoff time, there's a selfless attitude of, hey, I'm just trying to get outs, and starters aren't really getting that upset when they're getting pulled. It's just, hey, we're getting outs, we're lining things up, so on and so forth. The playoffs is a totally different animal with off-days. Everyone's available pretty much. We got guys like Charlie Morton coming in out of the bullpen as well. Again, that's not a new phenomenon, right? So for years, starters have come out of the bullpen and tried to get outs. During the season, it's more real, I guess. But I think in the playoffs everyone just says, we're just trying to win."

Are you seeking a closer, interested in Kimbrel?

"I can tell you this. I've been asked, so, I know I can talk about Craig Kimbrel and say he's great, he's a great Brave, I'm allowed to talk about him now. And I know he's really well thought of, really highly thought of in the organization. People that played with him adored him. Now, I'll never get into who we're going to pursue in free agency for obvious reasons."

MORE SOX - Dombrowski doesn't think Kimbrel will accept qualifying offer

"What I basically said about pursuing high level, expensive relievers with term and significant AAVs: I don't know that makes a lot of sense for us to allocate the dollars available to that position. Doesn't mean that there won't be a day that we do it. Or if the value lines up — right now for this current offseason, we haven't, we don't plan to go spend significant dollars and significant years on a reliever. And that doesn't take anything away from the great relievers that are out there. I just think we have other areas we need to address."

Do you view the role as a luxury?

"Yeah, I think so. We have a hole in right field, we need to get someone behind the plate. We'd like to get better in the bullpen. Now, maybe we make a trade and we move some salary and someone's still out there, we may reverse course. But as I sit here today, it's — we'd like to have it. We'd just, in terms of the list, it's not as high on the list. That doesn't mean we couldn't use it and be better with it."

BRIAN CASHMAN, GM, YANKEES

Are closers still necessary?

"I guess you can go both ways with it. You could have your traditional guy. I think I personally believe in that still. Because I don't think everybody's wired to close a game out...Or you can go the other way, by committee. But I prefer to have a standard closer."

"I prefer the standard closer. Because I just don't think maybe everybody in my environment can do it."

Does the market matter, then?

"It could. I believe it does. But I also understand it can be done the other way too."

MIKE HAZEN, GM, DIAMONDBACKS

Are closers still necessary?

"I still think the ninth inning is different than the other innings. I don't know that you need one. But I still think the ninth inning can be a challenge if you're the last guy standing between a win and a loss. I think when those games get lost, it's a tougher mental hurdle to overcome than if it gets lost in the sixth or seventh."

MATT KLENTAK, GM, PHILLIES

Are closers still necessary?

"If you have a lockdown closer, that's incredibly valuable. That's not new. That's been the case for a long time. I think it's hard to find a closer that is that dominant, and there are a few of them. I think the challenge, if you don't have that guy, is, how do you best utilize your bullpen and put players in the best position to succeed? That's kind of what we faced this past year. We tried a few different guys in that role, and we used guys according to leverage, and that was what our personnel dictated we do. There might be a time in the future where we have a more reliable lockdown closer and we pitch him in the ninth regularly. I think there's still a place in the game for it."

Are you seeking a closer, interested in Kimbrel?

"It's not specific to closer. It really has everything to do with trying to find areas to upgrade our team. You know, we're in a position to explore everything. We're going to explore the bullpen, we're going to explore the rotation, we're going to explore position players, and we're seeking opportunities to make our team better. I'm not going to sit here and predict that we will add a closer, but we will explore that market."

What does the postseason show us about roles?

"Postseason baseball is different than regular-season baseball. For one thing, there's more off days in the offseason. So players can be used frequently or in different roles and still know that they're going to have plenty of rest. They usually also know that there's an end date coming, the season's going to end."

If usage is put aside, what about the success in varied roles seen in the postseason?

"It's an easy narrative when a player who's not traditionally pitched the ninth inning, fails in the ninth inning. It's easy to label that guy as not a closer. But every closer at some point was something other than a closer. He was a starting pitcher in the minor leagues, or he was a set up reliever before — Mariano Rivera was a set-up guy before he became a closer. So every closer at some point is a first-time closer. And it's just a matter of how much rope we give them when they start off in that pursuit."

JEFF LUHNOW, PRESIDENT OF BASEBALL OPERATIONS, ASTROS

Why do closers still exist?

"Because there's a statistic called the save that shows up in the newspaper and is used in arbitration and — I don't know. Obviously, the roles in the pitching staff are going to continue to evolve. Tony La Russa was the first one that starts to change that. That was 20 years ago and it seems to be accelerating now. The goal is to get 27 outs with 12 or 13 pitchers in whatever way works best for your talent and your team. And I think we're going to continue to see teams explore new avenues to do that. And power to 'em."

What does the postseason show us about roles?

"I think players are interested in their own economics primarily in their careers. And so anything that affects that in a negative way they're going to initially react negatively too. And so you have to present it to them in a way that is palatable, and eventually the industry will find a way to compensate. I mean, Andrew Miller getting that big deal a few years ago, I think the non-closer relievers have started to become more appreciated and more compensated, and that'll help it."

DAVID STEARNS, GENERAL MANAGER, BREWERS

One of you or manager Craig Counsell were quoted during the postseason talking about the desired elimination of bullpen roles?

"It could have been either one of us. We've both talked about it."

Is that an organizational philosophy for the regular season as well?

"Our guys in our bullpen did a tremendous job not worrying about when they pitched. Corey Knebel knew that on any given day, he could pitch in the fifth inning or he could pitch in the ninth inning. Jeremy Jeffress knew on every single day he could pitch in the fifth, or the ninth. And they didn't care, they just wanted to get outs and hand the ball to the next guy that was pitching."

Weren't closers by committee shunned?

"So, I think the older committee-type of philosophy was: we're not sure we have someone who's good enough to pitch the ninth inning. So, we're going to try to cobble it together with a number of different people. What we did this year, we believe, is we had multiple people who were good enough to be that traditional closer-type pitcher. And we just deployed them at various points during the game."

How difficult was that to implement?

"I think Craig [Counsell] did a really good job of working through this, frankly over the last couple years with our personnel. And making sure that everyone understood that they were available at various points in the game and that their goals should be to get outs and hand the ball to the next person."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Sunday Notebook: Detailed scouting reports on Red Sox prospects from AFL; the difficulty of repeating

Sean McAdam

Bobby Dalbec, third base

"He's a strikeout/power guy, just like everyone else now, I guess. I was concerned about his ability to make consistent contact earlier in the year, but he's made adjustments. Right now, the issue is with secondary pitches and pitch recognition. I thought he recognized secondary pitches better than before. I was told, 'This guy just swings in case he hits it — literally.' And that was far from the truth from what I saw."

"I saw him early in the year at (Single-A) Salem and some scouts were saying 'Hey, this guy needs to go on the mound right now (Dalbec pitched in high school and college). I had never seen him before, but he blistered balls down there. He's got that right-handed, valued power that everyone's looking for. I think he's put himself right on the map. He's kind of a zone-type hitter, (hits pitches) from belt down, geared to low pitches. He's got big power to right-center field. He can turn on fastballs. He's going to have holes. He's going to swing-and-miss up in the zone and to some of the off-speed pitches he's still adjusting to. He's worked hard it, too."

“His defense showed up well out there. His demeanor is really even-keeled. He’s under control, which I like. His backhand was good. He’d go behind the bag. He’s got kind of an odd-throwing action, kind of short-arms the ball, but he has good carry – well above-average. He made all the routine plays and made a couple of web gems — some quick reaction plays. He has athleticism, leaping for balls. He made all the routine plays I could ask for, with good agility and body control. The whole package is there as far as his defense. There may be some range factors that people will focus on, but I didn’t see anything that would prohibit him from playing third base in the big leagues.”

Josh Ockimey, first baseman

“I was disappointed. He’s a kid we all root for. His lack of athleticism around the bag really shows up. He works his ass off just to get by. Maybe he’s a Justin Bour-type, that ilk. Bour worked his tail off just to be (adequate). Ockimey has to hit a ton. His bat’s got to carry him. He’s got big, loud power. He showed a lot of uppercut (in Arizona), with a real pronounced launch angle, trying to do too much. A lot of kids out there do that — they think they have to be better (when measured against other top prospects), so they wind up trying to do too much. He made contact, but there were a lot of big hang-time fly balls to second base and right field. He had one game where he hit a couple of fastballs to left-center field that were very impressive. But he’s got that exaggerated ‘Big Papi’ lift (to his swing); it’s crazy.

“I thought he got to Pawtucket very quick without covering the strike zone better, a little bit ahead of his ETA. It’s all or nothing with him. He struggles terribly against lefties. Unless he can take a different approach, that’s going to be an issue. Raw power alone, he’ll sit enough cripple pitches to hit out. He might be a trade guy, I don’t know, throw him in a deal.”

Darwinzon Hernandez, LHP

“I liked him a lot. He looked in better shape, physically. He’s lost some weight. He’s moving better and his delivery was much, much more under control. He wasn’t trying to throw the ball through the wall, which is what he was doing earlier in the year at Salem. (In Arizona), he worked behind, trying to use his secondary pitches to start hitters off. Ironically, he had much better success with his fastball for his first pitch. The command of his fastball was improved and they were using him in two-inning stints. He’s got three pitches definitely, and four occasionally.

“He was blowing guys away out there. He got up to 98 mph and even when he wasn’t up that high, the weight of his fastball really got in on hitters quickly. He’s got that heavy, late fastball that finishes well. And he hides the ball well. You can’t pick him up. He’s got that nasty slider, that’s swing-and-miss against lefties and righties. He’s got the whole package. I’ve heard everything from closer to No. 3 starter. I wouldn’t tinker with taking him out of the rotation yet until he shows he can’t command three pitches. He’s young, but he’s got great upside. He’d be one of the first kids I’d ask for in any deal with (the Red Sox).”

Mike Shawaryn, RHP

“He’s a polished kid, throws a lot of strikes. They were using him in a closer’s role. He’d come in for an inning two out of three days. That guy’s a strike-thrower. He was basically out there working on his changeup, which he needs to do. It’s not so much that he needs to polish it up; he needs to value it. He likes to go to the slider, which he can really spot. He’s nothing flashy – a low-ceiling, steady, strike-throwing fifth starter who can log innings. He’s a physical kid and maybe pitches a tick above that. He really knows how to pitch. I thought he was fatigued in the early going. The ball wasn’t really jumping out of his hand, but the last time I saw him, he was fine.”

Josh Taylor, LHP

Good arm, but he needs work with his secondary pitches and (improved) command with his fastball. He throws hard, he’s sneaky and he gets swing-and-misses when he’s around the zone. He tends to center-cut his strikes. He needs more command of his fastball and his secondary stuff is good enough and will be better when he throws his fastball for strikes. A lefty with his arm strength, I think you have to take

seriously. He was up to 96 mph at times and was sitting at 92-93 mph with good, late life. He elevates the fastball, but I don't think he trusts himself enough to really make pitches in on guys."

Esteban Quiroz, infielder

"He came out of the chute blazing. He went off right away. He's hitting balls out to left field, driving ball to the gaps. He's got some pure hitting ability. He gives you a good at-bat. Other scouts were like, 'Hey, where'd this kid come from?' He's actually pretty close to playing for a club. I don't know if he's their guy, but he might get a look in spring training because of his bat. Nothing fazes him. He's got plenty of confidence. He's an intelligent hitter. He looks for pitches he can take to left-center and up the middle. He's got a disciplined approach. He's an overachiever. He's got deceptive strength. He showed some of that in Portland. He's a nice, little player."

Two other players assigned to the AFL — infielder Michael Chavis and pitcher Teddy Stankiewicz — withdrew because of injuries. Chavis had irritation in his right wrist and had a procedure performed two weeks ago to remove some calcification, while Stankiewicz left with some mild shoulder inflammation. Both are expected to be 100 percent for the start of spring training.

This century, no team has successfully repeated as champions. The Red Sox will attempt to become the first since the New York Yankees (1998-2000) to do so.

Theo Epstein, the Chicago Cubs' president of baseball operations and formerly the GM of the Red Sox, has had as many kicks at the can as anyone, winning three championships (2004 and 2007 with the Sox and 2016 with the Cubs) but failing to repeat each time.

"Don't ask me," he said with a laugh. "Honestly, I think I'm the wrong person to ask because we've tried everything. We've tried making a bunch of changes; we've tried not making many changes. We've tried redefining the narrative; we've tackled it head-on, 'Let's talk about it out in the open about why it's so hard to repeat and then that'll help us process it.' But nothing seems to work.

"I just think it takes finding a common cause the next season and having the players buy into something new, so they can come together as a team and really rally around. I think motivation can be harder right after you win. Sometimes, once you get past Opening Day, those first few weeks of the year can feel like you just climbed Mt. Everest and now you're back at the very bottom of the mountain, taking your first few steps again. I've had players tell me it can be hard to focus quite as intently early on the following season."

Those intangibles can be factors. But some of the difficulty of repeating has to be linked to the physical toll it takes on teams, and pitchers especially, after playing almost into November.

"That's real," said Epstein. "It doesn't take winning the World Series for that to happen, but teams that go consistently deep into October, that's really hard."

But Epstein believes that, in the end, the issue is more one of motivation than wear-and-tear.

"Teams that get to the World Series and lose tend to actually do better relative to expectations the following year than teams that go to the World Series and win," he said. "So there's some psychological component, some motivational factor."

I yield to no one in my admiration for Bill James. I first began reading his Baseball Abstracts back in the mid-1980s and in the last 40 years, few have had more of an impact on the game. He challenged the way we think about the game and evaluate players and it seems rather obvious he is the father of the analytics revolution which first began sweeping the game 15 years ago.

Some have suggested that James deserved election to the Baseball Hall of Fame, and I would not argue that point. Other than Marvin Miller — who ushered in free agency — it would be difficult to find another non-player who has had such a profound influence on the sport.

But over the last couple of years, James has shown a disturbing habit of getting himself into trouble on Twitter. In the past, the topics have ranged from his defense of Joe Paterno in the Jerry Sandusky-scandal (making the claim it was “quite common 40 years ago” for grown men to shower with teenagers). He later, without evidence, questioned the validity of some sexual assault charges against Kevin Spacey.

Then, earlier this week, James drew the wrath of players, Players Association and others throughout the game by contending that “if the players all retired tomorrow, we would replace them, the game would go on; in three years it would make no difference whatsoever.”

James later tried to walk back his comments, claiming he was “inartful” in presenting his argument. Still, for someone whose claim to fame is finding more efficient ways to evaluate players, it seemed an absurd and wrongheaded comment.

This week — as they’ve done in the past — the Red Sox were quick to distance themselves from James while highlighting that he serves in a consulting role and is not formally associated with the organization.

How many more controversies will the team be forced to respond to before cutting ties altogether?

*** *The Athletic***

He may soon be Mookie Betts the MVP. But to his family, he’s still the same guy

Jen McCaffrey

A few hours before Game 3 of the World Series, Mookie Betts’ parents and his best friend arrived at the Red Sox team hotel in Pasadena, Calif., with shopping bags in each hand. They had flown in from Boston the previous day, gone to the Los Angeles Lakers game that night with Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr., and quickly realized as the morning sun rose that the sweaters and sweatshirts they had packed for the trip in Boston would not suffice in the Southern California weather.

This is the life of the Betts family. His beloved entourage — including his parents, best friend Cameron Lewis, and girlfriend Brianna Hammonds (who was then eight-and-a-half months pregnant) — were with him for every step throughout the playoffs. From Boston to New York back to Boston to Houston back to Boston out to Los Angeles, figuring out the appropriate dress code as they went.

But it’s not as if they’re new to this travel thing, or as if the playoffs were a one-off. Betts’ traveling party throughout the regular season is mighty. They estimated there was at least someone from Betts’ large extended family at about 90 percent of his games.

Family is important to Betts — now more so than ever following the birth of his first child, Kynlee Ivory Betts, on Nov. 6. Brianna gave birth about two weeks early. The Betts family anticipated they might be in the hospital this week as Betts awaits word on whether he wins his first Most Valuable Player award, but Kynlee couldn’t wait. She’d already missed the World Series festivities.

To say it’s been a good year for Betts, 26, would be an understatement. This has been perhaps the most rewarding year of his life: a new baby, a batting title, a World Series championship, another Gold Glove. Now the possibility of his first MVP honors. He’s a finalist and favored to win. The vote will be announced Thursday.

As a franchise cornerstone, Betts’ success has coincided with fame and increased pressure to perform. There’s a delicate balance between enjoying privacy and recognizing his value in the baseball world. Along

with the Angels' Mike Trout, he's part of a group of young players possessed of otherworldly talent but not terribly interested in self-promotion, a frustrating mix for baseball marketing gurus.

For Betts, the one constant through it all has been his family's support.

"Mookie has really been used to somebody being around him for a long time," said his father, Willie Betts.

His mother, Diana Collins, said Betts expected his family to be there from a young age — counted on it, almost.

"Even when Mookie was small, if (Willie) had to do something and I wasn't there, (Mookie) would constantly — every time he came to bat or was out in the field — he'd see if we were in the stands yet," she said. "So he's used to an entourage being there with him, and it means something to him.

"If you support a kid and show that you're interested in what they're doing, they're going to show interest, and that's kind of what we've done all his life."

While it might seem as though Betts has hardly had to deal with adversity in his young, charmed major-league career, the pressure to maintain the gaudy numbers can be just as difficult as making it big in the first place. That's where his family comes in to keep him grounded.

Betts posted a .291 average, .820 OPS and 18 homers in his first full year in the majors in 2015, when he finished 19th in the MVP vote. The following year, those numbers ballooned to a .318 average, .897 OPS and 31 homers, and he finished second to Trout for MVP. But in 2017, he regressed, and it seemed as if the previous season might have been an aberration. Were expectations for Betts set too high? He hit .264 with an .803 OPS and 24 homers over 153 games in 2017 and still finished sixth in the MVP vote. But the hype had simmered down.

So in late January, when Betts and his agent rejected the Red Sox arbitration offer of \$7.5 million, the cynics arrived. Betts later won his arbitration hearing, earning \$10.5 million, a record for a first-year arbitration-eligible player.

And when it came time for him to prove that 2016 wasn't an outlier, he did that and then some.

This year, Betts posted career bests in nearly every offensive category, with a major-league-leading .346 average, a 1.078 OPS, 32 homers and 30 steals despite playing just 136 games after missing time in June because of an abdominal strain.

Most of the credit goes to Betts himself, who cast aside the doubts about how good he could be and delivered a season for the ages. But some of the credit can also be attributed to first-year manager Alex Cora, who helped Betts reach the next level. It was a relationship those closest to Betts noticed, believing that Cora's laid-back approach allowed Betts to thrive.

Lewis, Betts' best friend, likened Cora's impact to a similar situation from their youth.

"We had a head high school basketball coach, but we kind of tuned in a little bit more to the assistant coach because he was younger, he knew our style and he let us play," Lewis recalled, drawing the comparison between the assistant and the young, relaxed Cora.

"So I look back at it now — last year they had a tremendous team, amazing talent but just couldn't get over that hump. This year, Cora is letting them learn from their mistakes and he's letting them play freely and with that, that's kind of all you ask from a coach. At this stage, you know what you're doing so you just want to have that freedom to mess up and say, 'Hey I messed up. I want to correct it, whatever it may be.'"

All the accolades Betts has amassed this season should amount to an even bigger payday when arbitration begins in January. MLB Trade Rumors projects Betts will fetch \$18.7 million in his second arbitration year.

Betts can become a free agent after the 2020 season, so he's under team control for two more years. But his long-term future in Boston remains uncertain.

"Well Boston has been good to him so, you know, you wouldn't say you don't like Boston," Collins said. "The family, the fans, the players, the management. ... When you have something that's good to you, you respond."

Added Lewis: "The sports culture is amazing."

That culture in Boston is also intense. And as Betts has morphed into the face of the Red Sox over the past few years, he, like most athletes in Boston, can rarely go anywhere without being noticed.

It's a bit different back home in Nashville.

"There are places around Nashville that we're used to going," Lewis said.

"In Boston, he can't move. Way worse in Boston. Back home, it's bad back home, but there are certain spots we can go and kind of have a little peace of mind."

Betts can't even do a good deed in the dark of night in Boston without being noticed. During the playoffs, the outfielder and his family got catered food and were hanging out at a friend's house in the Copley Square area. They would all be leaving later that morning for Los Angeles and the next games of the series. They had extra food, so they brought it out to a group of homeless persons outside of the Boston Public Library. Media members found out, and the story spread far and wide — and while the attention was uniformly positive, it wasn't why Betts and his family did it.

That's part of the reason Betts would rather host family and friends at home than go out.

"Mookie likes to do family stuff," Collins said. "We like to play family games and listen to music simply because sometimes when you're out, you don't want to stop for pictures. Sometimes you just want to be normal, and I know that's hard being a celebrity. Every now and then you don't want to have to stop 20 times to go to the mall to take a picture, and people don't understand that. So rather than be rude, and say look I just want to eat my dinner, you just stay home."

In a family of athletes, those nights include a lot of competition, from cooking to cards.

"The cooking competitions are so much fun," Collins said. "We are some of the most competitive people."

Collins hadn't been to as many games as she would have liked this past year. Finally, in August, she decided to retire from the job she held for 23 years with the Tennessee Department of Transportation in the Nashville area.

"I told him I really want to retire because now at this point in time I wanted to enjoy the grandbaby," Collins said, "and travel to see more games and he kept saying 'Ah Ma you're not going to do it.' ... 'Yes, I am, I really am.' So after my birthday, I said this would be great to have a retirement-slash-birthday party because my birthday is in August."

Collins' friends at work threw a party for her on Aug. 31. Betts couldn't be there, of course; the team was on the road in Chicago. But he had a surprise ready for her, and sent his mother's co-workers a video message to be played at the party.

"He said, 'Ma, so you're finally going to do it,' and I'm sitting (watching)," Collins recalled of the video. "He's like, 'So, Ma, I know you're ready to get out there. You've been talking about it for years. But you need another job because you like to spend too much money.' That's what he said. 'But on your way, when you're filling out applications, stop by that Porsche dealership and pick up that vehicle I just bought you.'"

In an Instagram video posted to Betts' account, Collins jumps up and screams in excitement.

"I screamed and danced," Collins said.

The timing of her retirement couldn't have been better, with the Red Sox gearing up for the postseason and, though she didn't know at the time, a World Series championship.

"Ever since Mookie has been playing any kind of sport since he was little, we've always taught him do your best. If it's something you want to do, we're there with you," Collins said. "We're going to struggle with you. We're going to be there for the peaks, the valleys. It's always something we've told Mookie. So excel at it. If it's something you have a passion for, dive in it. And I think that's what Mookie has taken from this all his life."

But it's not just family and close friends who have taken pride in Betts' success. Danny Watkins, the Red Sox area scout who first found Betts at a Tennessee high school tournament in 2010, has watched the 2011 fifth-round pick blossom from afar.

Watkins was among a large group of Red Sox scouts invited to Fenway for the first two games of the World Series, but he'd been watching the entire postseason from home.

A play Betts made in the eighth inning of Game 4 of the American League Championship Series in Houston brought back some memories for Watkins. Betts chased down a line drive to right off the bat of the Astros' Tony Kemp. When he got to the ball, he saw Kemp racing for second, and scooped up the ball, throwing to Xander Bogaerts covering the base all in one motion to throw out Kemp.

"The throw he made, it (went) down the right-field line where he made the 360 (degree) move, that's the type of play I've seen him make," Watkins said.

He owned up, though, to having had some luck.

"I did not see a Gold Glove right fielder with 30 home runs, I did not see that," he said. "But thankfully, luckily for us, he's turned into that."

The MVP award on Thursday would cap a wildly successful year for Betts. All this already, and it was only his fourth full year in the majors. There doesn't seem like much can top 2018. Regardless of what comes next, his growing family will be along for the ride.