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*** *The Boston Globe***

AL win in All-Star Game features World Series rematch

Julian McWilliams

You thought it was a World Series matchup that was happening prematurely.

The first meeting was supposed to be Friday. Yet in the bottom of the second inning Tuesday, J.D. Martinez and Dodgers lefthander Clayton Kershaw stood 60 feet 6 inches away from each other. On a 1-and-1 pitch Martinez sent what looked like a homer to left. The sold-out crowd at Progressive Field thought so, too. But the Brewers' Christian Yelich camped under it on the warning track for the first out of the frame.

For all the emotions injected into fans during Monday's Home Run Derby, Tuesday's game didn't have that type of theater. There were moments, though, that tugged on the human element that extended beyond baseball. The game, for what it was worth, was the sideshow.

The Astros' Michael Brantley doubled to bring home teammate Alex Bregman in that second inning. It set the tone for the Alex Cora-led American League to pull out a 4-3 win.

Now to the real show: Cubs shortstop Javier Baéz is the brother-in-law of Twins pitcher José Berríos. Cora wanted to make sure Berríos faced Baéz, so he brought in Berríos in the third inning to face his in-law. Baez flied to center.

"I was trying to get that one. It was fun," Cora said. "I know what it means to the family. Obviously, I know what it means for the people back home [in Puerto Rico] and I know what it means for them, too."

The sideshow: In the fourth, Martinez, in his last at-bat of the night, struck out against the Reds' Luis Castillo.

The real show: The Cleveland Indians recently announced starter Carlos Carrasco was diagnosed with a form of leukemia. MLB has a partnership with Stand Up 2 Cancer, and during the fifth inning fans and players stood up holding signs with the names of loved ones battling cancer. Carrasco's Cleveland teammates stood with him along the third base side, holding a sign that had Carrasco's nickname on it, "Cookie."

"That was a real touching moment," Xander Bogaerts said. "I'm wishing him all the best. I know he has a lot of people rooting for him just because of the type of person he is."

Said Cora: "We get caught up in wins and losses and pennant races and all that stuff and then that happens. And there's more than baseball in life. And we're thinking and praying for him, his family, and hopefully he can be back on the field sooner rather than later."

The sideshow: In the bottom of the seventh, Bogaerts came on to hit with runners at the corners. He grounded into a double play, but brought in a run to stretch the AL lead to 3-1. The next batter was the Rangers' Joey Gallo, and he homered to right field off new pitcher Will Smith of the Giants.

Mookie Betts went into the game in the top half of the eighth inning in right field. He entered Bogaerts's spot in the order with Indians lefthander Brad Hand on the mound. Betts, however, didn't get an at-bat.

“It was kind of up in the air,” Betts said. “We had some guys that were some first-time All-Stars that needed to be in there and play. Cora asked me and I was fine with it.”

The NL lineup finally came to life in the eighth, with two runs coming home on Pete Alonso’s bases-loaded single to left. The threat ended with runners on second and third when White Sox catcher James McCann made a diving catch off Mike Moustakas’s foul pop.

In the top of the ninth, Cora went to Aroldis Chapman to close it out. He struck out the Phillies’ J.T. Realmuto and the Dodgers’ Max Muncy.

To end with the real show: After the second strikeout, the Yankees’ C.C. Sabathia emerged from the AL dugout. He wasn’t on this year’s All-Star team but he threw out the first pitch — a move coordinated by Cora, so the Cleveland fans could celebrate his time in an Indians uniform.

Turns out Cora had one more act for him.

Sabathia walked to the mound, as if he were the pitching coach, to talk to his Yankees teammate. Chapman smiled and then Sabathia slapped hands with each of his AL teammates before heading back to the dugout to a cheering crowd. The proper farewell.

“It was to recognize he was one of the best pitchers in the big leagues for the last, what, 15 years?” Cora said. “Everything started here in Cleveland. We all know he’s going to retire, so we wanted to let everyone know who he is.”

While exhausting, the Sox gained perspective from this All-Star experience that had nothing to do with the game. Now, they switch gears to a new part of the season. They’ll face the Dodgers first. The Sox know what’s at stake.

“They’re all big right now,” Martinez said about the Sox’ upcoming games. “They’re all the same right now. Except when we play the Yankees and the Tampa Bay Rays. Those are the ones we really have to win. We need wins. It’s simple.”

Mookie Betts is example of baseball’s brand-new problem

Julian McWilliams

Tony Clark, the executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, and MLB commissioner Rob Manfred held separate news conferences and a hot topic revolved around how baseball can help promote its stars as well as the NBA or NFL.

Clark spoke on wanting his players to be marketed better, adding that he wants them to be noticed when walking down the street, even if they are not a 6-foot-10-inch superstar.

Yet, the larger question would be: If you can’t promote Mookie Betts, how can you promote anyone?

Betts is coming off an MVP campaign that ended with a World Series title. He plays in a major market and is a four-time All-Star. There’s a strong case that he should be baseball’s most marketable player.

But he isn’t.

“Mookie should be a household name,” Clark said. “Mookie should be a one-name guy. You say [Cristiano] Ronaldo. You say [Lionel] Messi. You say Mookie. You should know who Mookie is. And, outside the baseball world I don’t know how many people do.

“In the grand scheme of things, respected players should be at the forefront of every conversation. He should be in the conversation with non-baseball fans. Mookie [should] be one of them. No doubt about it.”

Clark didn't give any suggestions on how to best promote Betts, adding that Manfred might be better served to answer that question. However, he did add specifics on what he would like to see.

"I will simply suggest to you this," Clark said. "I want to be able to turn on the TV and see players on products with sponsors, licensees up and down the roads. Whether you're in a big city or small city. I would like to see them overlap in other sports, in other industries and on TVs and in commercials promoting movies. I would love to see all of that.

"Promoting guys on baseball channels is not going to get us there. Baseball fans know who Mookie is. Non-baseball fans deserve to know who Mookie is."

Ahead of Tuesday's All-Star Game, Betts was made aware of Clark's comments. Is marketability something he wants?

"I mean I don't know if this is something to necessarily want," Betts said. "It's definitely something cool to have your name mentioned amongst them [Messi and Ronaldo]. There are some guys that definitely deserve it. If I'm one, cool. If I'm not, that's perfectly fine, too."

One source from the league office heard what Clark had to offer on Betts's lack of promotion and told the Globe that MLB tried to push Betts, but the majority of time Betts has declined.

The source alluded to its "Let The Kids Play" commercial as one of the promotions MLB tried to involve Betts in, yet the outfielder chose not to participate.

If true, there's context to it. Some players around the league have expressed their displeasure with how MLB promotes them. From being mic'd up — which Betts did this spring training — to appearing in MLB commercials, the players are only generating revenue for a \$10 billion-plus business.

The sentiments, another source said, largely comes from the younger group of players who have come up under Clark, which speaks to the separation between the MLBPA and the league office.

Heading for home

The Red Sox have traveled to three countries over the last two weeks. For Betts, Xander Bogaerts, J.D. Martinez, manager Alex Cora, and the rest of the Red Sox contingent at the All-Star Game, the traveling hasn't stopped.

The group was scheduled to travel back to Boston right after their 4-3 win before preparing for their next series against the Dodgers starting Friday.

"I'm ready to get some rest," Bogaerts said with a smile. "I'm looking forward to going back to Boston and getting some rest."

Sabathia wary of Sox

The Yankees' CC Sabathia was in Cleveland to throw out the ceremonial first pitch, essentially honoring his eight seasons as a pitcher for the Indians. Standing at his locker Tuesday, he spoke about the Yankees' first half, in which they went an AL-best 57-31 and hold a 6½-game lead in the East.

Despite that, Sabathia is keeping the third-place Sox in his peripherals.

"We always know what that team can do and what they're capable of," Sabathia said. "We watched it last year. So, yeah, we know at any moment they can rattle off 27 out of 30 wins. We're always watching."

Cora said after the London Series that the Yankees were much better than they were. But Sabathia says the Yankees don't want to ease up off the gas pedal.

“It’s good for him to say that,” said Sabathia, who will turn 39 years old this month. “Obviously we want to be good and want to play well. I just think we’re hungry.”

“This same core group of guys have been together since 2016, really, and you’re kind of seeing this talent flourishing.”

Life lessons

The last time Bogaerts stepped on the field as an All-Star was in 2016 as a 23-year-old. He’s here again now and said he’s learned how to take in the moment better.

“I think I know a little bit more on what to do and where I need to be,” Bogaerts said on getting through all the chaos of All-Star. “I know how to hide myself a little bit. I know you have to be certain places at certain times. I just think it’s much easier on me now. But it used to be rush, rush, rush. Now it’s a little bit more relaxed. I understand it.

There are certain aspects of the All-Star scene he appreciates.

“I think it’s cool to talk to other guys on other teams,” he said. “It’s not always that you get to do that.”

Fenway love

Cody Bellinger is having a stellar season. His Dodgers hold the best record in baseball, and they will play the Red Sox in a three-game set starting Friday.

That’s a series that Cora has circled. Not only is it the team his club played in the World Series, but it’s also the team Cora came up with.

Bellinger, though, is just as ready.

“That’s going to be fun,” Bellinger said. “I like Fenway, and I’m excited to go there. The weather is going to be a little nicer than it was in October, so I’m excited to go back there and play.”

Skaggs honored

All of the players and coaches in uniform wore a No. 45 patch on their jerseys in honor of Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs, who died unexpectedly last week. They then honored Skaggs in a moment of silence . . . Sabathia threw out the first pitch to former Indians catcher Sandy Alomar Jr., although they never played together in Cleveland. Alomar played for the Indians from 1990-2000, while Sabathia, who is retiring at the end of this year, wore the uniform from 2001-08 . . . With two outs in the ninth, Sabathia strolled out of the AL dugout and made a mound visit to talk with closer Aroldis Chapman, his Yankees teammate who struck out the first tow batters. After some laughs during the infield conference, Sabathia walked off to a loud ovation and Chapman struck out Yasmani Grandal to end the game.

MLB, players union have lots of hurdles to clear in next collective bargaining agreement

Peter Abraham

The two men who control the immediate future of baseball, commissioner Rob Manfred and MLB Players Association executive director Tony Clark, passed each other while walking through the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Tuesday.

Clark had just taken questions from members of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America for about an hour and Manfred was on his way to the podium to do the same.

“Good morning, Tony,” Manfred said, extending his hand.

“Rob, good to see you,” Clark replied after shaking it.

How long will such civility last? The collective bargaining agreement expires on Dec. 1, 2021 and baseball has what seems like countless issues to settle before the deadline hits, so many that the sides have taken the unusual step of agreeing to midterm bargaining and have already met once.

Before he entertained questions, Clark ticked off a list of concerns shared by the players.

“We are interested in restoring meaningful free agency. We are interested in getting players something closer to their value as they are producing it. We are interested in ensuring that the best players are on the field at all times,” he said.

“We are interested in improving the dynamic for entry-level players. And we are interested at getting to a point where how our game is marketed and how our game is promoted is something that is more beneficial than where we currently sit.”

Those are ambitious goals and it’s unlikely all will be met. But with more than two years remaining to reach an agreement, it’s fair to think baseball can extend what has been nearly 25 years of labor peace with some give and take.

At a time when sports consumers have so many options, the players and owners would be foolish to allow a work stoppage. Especially with revenue generated from legalized sport gambling on the horizon.

J.D. Martinez is not convinced it will happen. The Red Sox designated hitter is “very concerned” the players will go on strike in 2022.

“We’re all together,” Martinez said before hitting fifth for the American League in the All-Star Game. “There’s a thought that the Association is weaker than it’s ever been due to the younger players. But a lot of the younger players are beginning to understand. We’re all united.”

Martinez had a 1.066 OPS, 45 home runs, and 104 RBIs in 2017 before becoming a free agent. But only the Red Sox offered him a contract and he didn’t sign until well into spring training.

“It was painful for me,” Martinez said. “It was enjoyable at first then you start noticing teams don’t want to win. That affected me right away in free agency.”

That too many teams aren’t interested in winning — “Just cashing checks,” Chris Sale said with disdain during spring training — has been a complaint for two years.

Manfred’s answer is that 20 teams are within five games of a playoff berth. Three of those teams have losing records and two others are either .500 or a game over. So is that competitive balance or just a large collection of mediocre teams?

“To me, teams aren’t going after the best players,” Martinez said.

That the current agreement proved favorable to the owners is evident and the pressure will be on Clark to even the field, likely at the risk of his job if he does not.

Manfred and the owners essentially acknowledged the imbalance by offering to make changes well before the deadline.

“It is unprecedented and it started not because Tony came to us, it started because we went to him,” Manfred said.

Non-economic issues, while not as contentious, also will be debated in negotiations.

Many players, pitchers in particular, are convinced the balls have been tampered with to promote home runs and more offense. Teams are on pace to hit a record 6,668 home runs this season, 1,110 more than 2018.

That MLB owns Rawlings, which manufactures the balls, only adds fuel to that theory.

“Baseball has done nothing, given no direction for an alteration in the baseball,” said Manfred, who became exasperated over the number of ball-related questions he was asked.

“The biggest flaw in that logic is that baseball somehow wants more home runs. If you sat in an owner’s meeting and listened to people talk about the way our game is being played, that is not the sentiment.”

Said Clark: “There’s been an acknowledgment that it’s different, and that difference, in part, is yielding different results on the field. So the question becomes, ‘What are you going to do about it?’ ”

The players want more netting to protect fans from foul balls, something teams determine individually.

A universal designated hitter is an issue that will not arise until 2021, Manfred suggested. But the commissioner did indicate he favors a new rule requiring pitchers to face at least three batters. That can be implemented as soon as next season without approval from the union.

CC Sabathia can thank Alex Cora for the star-studded farewell party

Peter Abraham

As he packed up his equipment bag late Tuesday night, CC Sabathia said the All-Star Game was one of the best days of his 19 years in the major leagues.

The Yankees lefthander didn’t throw a pitch. He wasn’t even on the American League roster. But thanks to an old friend, who just happens to manage the Red Sox, it was a special night.

Alex Cora came up with the idea to let Sabathia, a former Indians All-Star, join the AL team unofficially so the crowd at Progressive Field could salute him one final time before he retired.

“Alex was the one who contacted me and asked me if I would do it, if I had any plans,” Sabathia said. “I was honored that he asked. He contacted the league and made it all happen. That he even thought about me like that, I was honored.”

Sabathia played parts of eight seasons with the Indians at the start of his career, winning 106 games and the 2007 Cy Young Award before he was traded in 2008.

Cora signed with the Indians in 2005 and they soon became friends.

“We were close. He was an older guy, one of our teachers. I always looked to him,” Sabathia said. “I asked him for a lot of advice and we had a good relationship.”

Sabathia and his family were invited to Cleveland and received All-Star treatment. They rode in the red carpet parade to the game and Sabathia was in the dugout in his Yankees pinstripes.

The soon-to-be-39-year-old threw out the first pitch to former Indians catcher Sandy Alomar Jr. and with two outs in the ninth inning made a mound visit to talk with Yankees teammate Aroldis Chapman.

That was Cora’s idea, too.

The crowd cheered again before Sabathia went back to the dugout. Chapman then struck out Yasmani Grandal to finish off the 4-3 victory.

“The fans recognize he’s been one of the best pitchers in the big leagues,” Cora said. “The guy has won more than 250 games, 3,000 strikeouts. Everything started here in Cleveland. We all know he’s going to retire. I was like, ‘Hey, let everybody know who he is.’ I think it was a nice tribute.”

Cora also asked Sabathia to address the team before the game.

“I thought I was terrible,” he said with a laugh. “I finally just said, ‘Go kick some ass.’”

Sabathia has been with the Yankees since 2009 and has had his share of hot-tempered moments against the Red Sox. But some things transcend the rivalry.

“Before all that we were teammates and friends,” Sabathia said. “That’s the game, it’s a brotherhood. It’s awesome. That was one of the cooler moments I’ve had in baseball.”

An early riser in Red Sox system, Xander Bogaerts hasn’t stopped shooting for the stars

Alex Speier

As Xander Bogaerts rose through the minors and emerged as one of the top prospects in baseball, he often left onlookers in awe. The young Red Sox shortstop featured a rare mix of athleticism with an easy ability to drive the ball to distant realms.

He hit 16 homers in half a season in Single A Greenville as an 18-year-old in the South Atlantic League, then hit 20 in High A Salem and Double A Portland as a 19-year-old in 2012.

“His batting practice was ridiculous,” recalled Astros reliever Ryan Pressly, Bogaerts’s teammate in Salem in 2012. “When he sits there and tells you he’s 19 years old, you’re like, ‘Wow. You’re 19 and this good already?’”

Tim Hyers became the Red Sox minor league hitting coordinator in 2013, giving him an opportunity to track the young hitter’s progress in Portland and Triple A Pawtucket as a 20-year-old. Hyers witnessed obvious star potential — even though Bogaerts didn’t seem ready to tap into his fullest capabilities at that young age.

“I felt like he had potential to be special. . . . I really believed in the power. I just remember seeing him at a young age taking batting practice, and the ease hitting balls [over the fence] to all fields,” said Hyers. “But he didn’t want to do that [in games]. It was, take a couple strikes, take a two-strike approach, and hit my line drive to the opposite field, which worked for him.”

Indeed it did. Bogaerts became a difference-maker in helping the Red Sox win the 2013 World Series, then after a difficult first big league season in 2014, won a Silver Slugger as the top hitting shortstop in the American League in 2015 while posting a .320 average thanks to his ability to shoot the ball to all fields.

But in 2016 — a year in which Bogaerts was named a starter in the All-Star Game, and in which he’d eventually win another Silver Slugger award — that all-fields approach had gone by the wayside. Bogaerts had gone from someone who was spreading the field with balls in play in equal measure to someone whose pull rate had shot up to roughly 44 percent.

That wasn’t him. Bogaerts expressed concern. He wondered what his numbers looked like when pulling the ball as opposed to hitting it to the opposite field. Especially his batting average. Bogaerts craved hits, suggesting he didn’t sleep well on nights when he’d go 1 for 5.

The answer surprised Bogaerts. He was hitting roughly 200 points higher (.479 to .278) with significantly more power when pulling the ball as opposed to spraying it to the opposite field. Still, at the time, he wasn’t

quite ready to believe those numbers. Hitting the ball to all fields had propelled him to that point of his young career, and he wasn't going to abandon the approach.

"I hit .320 my second year . . . but with no power," Bogaerts said. "It was little bloopers to right field. At that time, I remember I was seeing just a big hole up the middle, and I just wanted to get a base hit up the middle. I don't think now that even crosses my mind."

Bogaerts has changed his offensive outlook drastically in the last two years. He is no longer the hitter whose goal is to take advantage of his ridiculous plate coverage by flicking a two-strike single to right. In the parlance of manager Alex Cora, he's now looking to do damage, hunting pitches he can drive in the air while rattling or clearing fences.

The convergence of Cora, Hyers (who, after two years as the Dodgers assistant hitting coach in 2016 and 2017, returned to the Red Sox as their big league hitting coach prior to 2018), and J.D. Martinez helped Bogaerts to understand his strengths and how he could most dramatically impact the game.

If, instead of meeting the ball, he kept his swing on the plane of the pitch and drove his bat through it, he would start pulverizing pitches, given what Hyers called the "incredible explosiveness he has with his body." He had powers, they told him, that he could harness into something more.

That message, Bogaerts said, "made me change a little bit into trying to launch a little more. I don't like real launch, like pop-ups. I hate pop-ups. I like launching with more of a line drive."

There was no explicit instruction to pull the ball more, and indeed, Bogaerts remains gifted at spoiling two-strike pitches and using right field to salvage hits. But with the concept of driving the ball in the air and using his legs to generate more power ingrained in the 26-year-old's mind with more favorable counts, he naturally started to crush the ball to left and left-center — the parts of the field where he does the greatest damage.

He's been doing just that with great frequency, allowing him to return to the All-Star Game in 2019 as a very different player than the one who broke out in 2015 and got his first All-Star nod in San Diego in 2016. This year, he's hitting .294/.384/.535, his .919 OPS tops among all AL shortstops, his 46 extra-base hits second most in the American League, and his 17 homers bringing him within arm's reach of his career-high of 23 set one year ago.

Driving force

Xander Bogaerts has emerged as a power-hitting force this season

Year	Average OBP		Slugging	
2014	.240	.297	.362	
2015	.320	.355	.421	
2016	.294	.356	.446	
2017	.273	.343	.403	
2018	.288	.360	.522	
2019	.294	.384	.535	
Year	Pull	Center	Oppo	Fly ball %
2014	46.9	33.7	19.3	41.3
2015	33.8	34.2	32	25.8
2016	44.5	31.2	24.2	34.9
2017	40.8	33.3	25.9	30.5
2018	43.4	34.8	21.8	35.6
2019	45.7	32.6	21.7	39.3

SOURCE: Baseball-reference.com

He has emerged as a power-hitting force at a premium position who also makes an impact on the bases. His 3.7 Wins Above Replacement (in the calculations of Fangraphs) rank third in the American League (behind only Mike Trout and Alex Bregman) and sixth in the big leagues at the All-Star break. He is a drastically different player from the very good shortstop he'd been in 2015-16.

"When he hit .320, he only hit seven home runs," said Mookie Betts. "Now he's using his tools. He's a solid shortstop, obviously his bat is amongst the best of all shortstops. I think he just needed to believe it, believe he could do it. He's not just trying to get base hits. He's trying to drive the ball. He knew it would change some. I don't think he was ready initially, but now that he's taken that big step forward, he is who he is."

Yet his emergence has been, perhaps, underappreciated nationally. In 2018, he had an elite year, posting 4.9 Wins Above Replacement (24th in the big leagues), yet was overshadowed dramatically by Betts and Martinez. This year, even as his impact has surpassed that of his teammates, he became an All-Star only as an injury replacement.

No matter. Bogaerts took considerable satisfaction in the fact that he'd made it to Cleveland, regardless of the path.

"For me, if you make it in the beginning or make it in the end, I think it's still something special," said Bogaerts. "It's a matter of if you deserved it or not. I'm thankful that I got invited, thankful to be a part of this."

Yet while a second All-Star selection suggests a career body of work and sustained performance, the Red Sox are thrilled about the emergence of Bogaerts as the star whose future had glimmered so brightly on his ascent to the majors. Hyers and others who have watched the shortstop's career arc have seen a succession of light bulbs flicking on, the combined wattage dazzling with the luminosity of a true star.

"I remember a conversation with Alex Cora before [2018]. He was like, 'This guy can be special. This guy is really good. We've got to help him believe that and make him a little more aggressive in the batter's box, and I think a lot of things will fall into place,'" said Hyers. "It's fun watching him. I'd been around him a long time in the minor leagues, and I knew his potential, and I knew that there was a lot in there that was going to come out. It was just a matter of time."

That time has come.

*** *The Boston Herald***

MLB needs to make changes to stop boring the masses

Tom Keegan

The Yankees and Red Sox played two nine-inning baseball games in London and they lasted a combined nine hours and four minutes. Why waste all that jet fuel? They just as easily could have bored us half to death without crossing the pond.

Yet, ESPN gushed about what a magnificent job baseball did marketing itself with such riveting entertainment. Commissioner Rob Manfred talked about the amazing amount of merchandise sold. Standing in long lines is no fun, but it beats watching baseball games with higher scores than the typical NHL All-Star Game, so that could explain the sales.

Baseball is not in a great place right now and staying in denial about that only steepens the hole out of which it one day must climb when it slips behind basketball and hockey on the minds of American sports fans.

Attendance is down this season for a number of reasons, all of which can via one path or another be traced to the product becoming too boring, despite the advantage of having great athletes playing it.

The causes are many, which means no one solution will fix things.

Let's start with the fact that not enough balls are put into play because so many at bats end in a strikeout, walk or home run.

Why so many walks? First, ball clubs have placed a premium on hard throwers over finesse pitchers who can do a better job of working the borders of the strike zone in all four directions. Second, pitchers fall behind in the count because they are afraid of hitters taking them deep, which leads to longer at bats.

Why so many home runs? Many hitters are juiced in ways that are difficult to detect. Baseball is trying to combat the problem, but you know how those things go. The crooks are always a step ahead of the cops and then the cops figure out a way to catch up and the crooks find a new scheme.

It's easier to fix the juiced baseball problem, which was a popular topic of discussion in Q-and-A sessions that Manfred and Players Association boss Tony Clark had separately with baseball writers Tuesday.

"There's no evidence from the scientists that the baseball is harder," Manfred said. "The basic characteristics of the baseball as measured by the independent scientists who we asked to do the study provides no support for that. What there is support for is the drag is a little less, and when you have less drag, it goes farther."

Manfred said he then told the scientists, "We need to figure out why."

And then?

"Not only do we need to figure out why, but we need to figure out a process that lets us manage in advance how a ball is going to perform," Manfred said. "We're working on that."

Said Clark: "The game has changed. The ball is different. The why, we haven't gotten the why yet. Nobody seems to have represented the why yet."

Since the baseballs are to a great extent handmade there is a little variance in each one, so there is an acceptable range for various specifications. When a thinking cap doesn't work in trying to solve a mystery, it always pays to replace it with a tinfoil hat to shift into conspiracy mode.

That mode led to me asking Manfred if it's possible that people in the Rawlings factory are intentionally skewing the ball to give it less drag and then getting rich by legally placing bets on the over for runs scored. They wouldn't be breaking any rules by doing so and at least early in the season, before those setting the lines caught up, probably could have cashed in big-time betting the over.

Manfred wasn't wearing a tinfoil hat, so he seemed surprised at the question.

"We monitor on an ongoing basis where the baseballs fall within the specifications that are set up," Manfred said. "We would be aware of that sort of manipulation, No. 1. No. 2, the manipulation of the baseball, great conspiracy theory, manipulation of the manufacturing process, I've seen (baseballs being manufactured), OK? How you manipulate a human-dominated, handmade manufacturing process in any consistent way is for a smarter human being than I."

Manfred mocked the notion that baseball intentionally has juiced the ball to increase home runs.

"The flaw in that logic is that baseball wants more home runs," Manfred said. "If you sat in owners meetings and listened to people on how the game is played, that is not the sentiment of owners for whom I work."

That was good to hear. So the best path to take, after checking the Rawlings employee parking lot to make sure everybody's not driving Rolls-Royces purchased with money made betting the over, is to change the specifications significantly so the ball doesn't carry as well.

Also, keep an open mind to shifting to automated balls and strikes called by computer software, which makes its debut Wednesday in the Atlantic League All-Star Game. A bigger strike zone would cut down on walks and put more of a premium on contact hitters.

Next, at parks where it's feasible, move the fences back to make the defense cover more territory, thus putting a premium on hitters who use more of the field and can hit groundballs and flyballs to all parts of the park. Having more of those hitters in the lineup would cut down on the use of the dreaded shift, which has resulted in fewer defensive highlights in the infield. A grounder to the shortstop playing second is not an exciting play.

The shift and how pitching staffs are assembled is based on math, so by changing the strike zone so that the rule is enforced as written — it's supposed to extend from the armpit to the knees — changes the math. So does moving the fences back, at least for every park built from today forward and at parks where it doesn't require a major overhaul.

Implementing a pitch clock and finding some way to limit hitters calling time out also would make for a quicker game.

Clark and Manfred were right about one thing: The influx of young talent is an exciting development for the game. After all, it's not their fault they're playing a game the nerds have manipulated in such a way as to make it boring.

If baseball turns a blind eye and allows the game to keep heading down the slippery slope it's on now, the days of every pitch being called by a computer geek based on data on how the pitcher and the batter have fared on pitches, locations and counts are not too far in the offing. Catcher looks into dugout, gets sign from nerd, flashes a complex series of signs to the pitcher out of fear that some other nerd is stealing signs via technology, pitcher steps off the rubber, plays with the rosin bag, steps back on the rubber, hitter calls time, readjusts his batting gloves, makes the sign of the cross again, steps back in, pitcher delivers Ball 1, TV viewer changes the channel to cable-access coverage of the local town council meeting so as to not nod off.

Rod Serling, paging Rod Serling. Please report to your Olivetti in the sky and bang out the one "Twilight Zone" script you never got around to writing, the one about baseball falling from the national pastime to national nerd play time.

Snubbed Rafael Devers appreciated by All-Star teammates

Tom Keegan

No point in discussing the All-Star worthiness of Red Sox wunderkind Rafael Devers. The only third baseman having a comparable season, Nolan Arenado of the Rockies, plays in the National League.

World Series games are played so late that not enough of those who filled out All-Star ballots outside of New England and Los Angeles were familiar enough to vote for Devers and were too lazy to study the numbers.

Devers slashed .324/.377/.546 with 69 runs, 16 home runs and 62 RBI heading into the break, very similar numbers to Arenado's (.312/.377/.562, 61 runs, 20 homers, 67 RBI).

Devers' most amazing number is his age: 22. It makes the mind race to exciting places when thinking about his future.

“He’s got such great potential. He’s unbelievable,” Red Sox teammate J.D. Martinez said at the All-Star Game media day. “He’s got such a great knack for using his hands and squaring baseballs up. He’s got so much talent.”

How much talent? So much that when asked for names of hitters Devers calls to mind, Martinez didn’t hold back.

“Vladdy Sr., great hands and ability to just put the ball in play,” Martinez said of Valdimir Guerrero Sr. “(Jose) Altuve, another guy who falls into that category.”

How much talent? So much that when Devers does things that the teacher that is experience one day might prevent him from doing it still often turns out right.

“It’s weird, he’s very young and he’s still not in that becoming mature phase, I would say, and it’s almost a weapon for him because it makes him unpredictable,” Martinez said. “Pitchers will think: ‘He’s not going to swing at this pitch,’ or, ‘He can’t hit this pitch,’ and all the sudden the pitcher will feel safe there and he’ll swing at it and hurt them. That unpredictable pattern that he has, I think it makes him really dangerous.”

Bogaerts is sorry Devers wasn’t selected to join him, Martinez and Mookie Betts in representing the Red Sox on the American League All-Star team. Beyond the injustice of his teammate being snubbed for a deserving honor, the baseball fan in Bogaerts is sorry he doesn’t get to watch him hit against the game’s best pitchers for a night.

Bogaerts has enjoyed watching the show Devers has been putting on in the field and at the plate.

“Especially now, when I’m hitting third and he’s hitting second, I can really watch him,” Bogaerts said of his view from the on-deck circle. “Before that, I was hitting fifth and he was hitting behind me most of the time, so I couldn’t really see him. Especially the last two weeks, he’s been on a tear and I’ve been hitting right behind him, see the way he takes pitches, the way he’s swinging the bat, opposite field, pull-side power, it’s pretty ridiculous in a good way, the way he’s going about it. Obviously, he’s one of the guys who has put this team on his back, also Christian Vazquez.”

For Bogaerts to be so blown away by how good Devers has become this early says something because Bogaerts batted .320 in his second full season at the age of 22.

“I was ready at a young age, but he’s ready with power,” Bogaerts said. “I was joking the other day: I hit .320 my second year, pretty much like him, but with no power. It was all bloop to right field, but he’s hitting .330, opposite-field power, all types of power, extra-base hits, driving in runs. He’s been real big for us. I know he definitely deserves this. It sucks that he’s not here. Hopefully, he has a lot more to go to in his career.”

Devers’ in-season improvement in the field in its own way has been even more startling than the progress he has made at the plate.

Blessed with a strong throwing arm and quick hands, Devers started the season poorly in the field, committing nine errors in his first 31 games. He has made three errors in his 52 games since then at third base.

*** *MassLive.com***

Boston Red Sox prospect Gilberto Jimenez has ‘4- or 5-tool potential,’ is rising up organizational rankings at 19

Christopher Smith

Red Sox prospect Gilberto Jimenez received only a \$10,000 bonus when Boston signed him out of the Dominican Republic on Aug. 2, 2017.

“Just because he didn’t get a high bonus doesn’t mean he wasn’t somebody we liked,” Red Sox assistant GM Eddie Romero told MassLive.com. “He’s somebody that wasn’t on the showcase circuit. We loved his athleticism. He was a little raw when we saw him. But he was somebody that was coming along quickly. Now that he’s gotten into pro ball, he’s kind just of taken off. It’s still early.”

Jimenez, who’s only 19 years old, is 25-for-70 (.357 batting average) with a .397 on-base percentage, .429 slugging percentage, .826 OPS, three doubles, one triple, five triples, 11 runs and four steals in 18 games for Short Season Lowell this summer.

He went 82-for-257 (.319) with a .384 on-base percentage, .420 slugging percentage, .804 OPS, 10 doubles, eight triples, 22 RBIs, 42 runs and 16 steals in 67 games for the Dominican Summer League Red Sox last year.

SoxProspects.com has him listed as the system’s No. 8 prospect after it listed him 16th entering 2019. MLB Pipeline has him at No. 15. Baseball America listed him at No. 20 in its preseason rankings.

“Obviously there’s exciting four- or-five tool potential there,” Romero said. “And for him to have success this early on, especially with not having been a switch-hitter for a long time, we’re really excited to see about his potential. The fact that he’s gotten off to this kind of start is really, really good for him.”

Jimenez, who has started 17 games in center field and one game in right field, has been a line drive, gap hitter with speed. He’s lacked power so far. But he might add that tool as he fills out. He’s listed at 5-foot-11, 160 pounds.

He’s a natural right-handed hitter but he has made progress from the left side in his limited time as a switch-hitter. He’s 21-for-55 (.382) with a .426 on-base percentage vs. left-handed pitchers. He’s 4-for-15 (.267) with a .294 on-base percentage vs. righties.

The Red Sox’s minor league system lacked outfield talent entering 2018. But Boston now has three legit outfield prospects with the emergence of Jimenez and Jarred Duran as well as Nick Decker who the Red Sox drafted in the second round in 2018.

Duran played in this year’s All-Star Futures Game. The 2018 seventh-round pick batted .387 with a .456 on-base percentage in 50 games at High-A Salem before a promotion to Portland where he initially struggled with the adjustment. But he’s 9-for-26 (.346) with a .370 on-base percentage and two doubles in nine games during July.

Red Sox’s Cora ‘never envisioned’ himself in All-Star Game, relished first experience in Cleveland

Chris Cotillo

Alex Cora never made an All-Star team in 14 big-league seasons, didn’t cover an All-Star Game in his three years as an ESPN analyst and was already managing the Red Sox when the Astros coaching staff he was apart of in 2017 was honored a year ago. In this 24th year in professional baseball, the .243 lifetime hitter finally got his chance to join the game’s brightest stars Tuesday night as a reward for winning the World Series last fall.

“I never envisioned myself in an All-Star Game,” he said.

Cora spent the last two days enjoying the All-Star festivities with his entire coaching staff and three of his players-- Mookie Betts, Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez. All three players had been All-Stars before, but for Cora, the experience was brand new.

"It was amazing," Cora said. "As a baseball fan you just sit there and listen to them talk in the dugout and sharing thoughts and just talking the game. That's what it's all about."

Cora got the chance to reunite with many friends from around the game in Cleveland. He managed fellow Puerto Ricans Jose Berrios and Francisco Lindor. He went head-to-head with former teammate and good friend Dave Roberts, who was managing the National League. Perhaps most notably, he made sure another former teammate, retiring Yankees lefty CC Sabathia, got an ovation from the crowd at Progressive Field by sending him out for an impromptu mound visit in the ninth inning.

"It was recognized that he's one of the best pitchers in the big leagues for the last, what, 15 years," Cora said. "The guy has won more than 250 games, 3,000 strikeouts. Everything started here in Cleveland. We all know he's going to retire, so we wanted to let everybody know who he is and I think it was a nice tribute."

Cora's fingerprints were all over the A.L.'s 4-3 win, as he avoided hitting one of his own players (Betts) so that each first-time player could bat and even employed a couple of shifts early in the game. In a nod to Puerto Rico, he pitched Berrios in the third inning, at least in part so the Twins pitcher could face his brother-in-law, Javier Baez.

"It was fun," Cora said. "I know what it means to the family. Obviously I know what it means for the people back home."

Though the trip to Cleveland tacked two extra days onto an unprecedented 14-day trip that took Cora and his coaching staff to three countries and four different cities since June 26, the manager wasn't complaining. He felt like he finally had a place among the game's elite.

"Overall it's one of the best baseball experiences I've ever had in my life," Cora said.

Mookie Betts doesn't get All-Star Game at-bat; Boston Red Sox manager Alex Cora explains why

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts was the only position player for either team to not record a plate appearance in Tuesday's All-Star Game.

Betts, the reigning American League MVP, played two innings in right field (the eighth and ninth) but didn't get the chance to hit in a 4-3 American League win. The other 39 eligible position players all recorded at least one plate appearance.

Red Sox (and A.L.) manager Alex Cora said he had planned all along to stay away from using Betts as a hitter. The idea was not injury-related.

"There were other guys that we wanted to play," Cora said. "There were a lot of first-timers. And we kind of like mapped it out."

Betts took over for Tampa Bay's Austin Meadows in right field in the eighth, taking the eighth spot in the lineup that was previously occupied by teammate Xander Bogaerts. Betts would have been due up fourth in the ninth if the National League had tied the game and forced the bottom half of the inning.

"He was going to come up in the ninth," Cora said. "It just happened that we won the game."

Betts, now a four-time All-Star, said he didn't mind missing out on a chance to hit in the All-Star Game.

“It was kind of up in the air,” Betts said. “We had some guys who were first-time All-Stars that needed to come out here and play. (Cora) asked me and I was fine with it.”

Bogaerts was 0-for-1 and grounded into a double play. Designated hitter J.D. Martinez was 0-for-2 with a strikeout.

2019 MLB All-Star Game: How Boston Red Sox players fared in the Midsummer Classic

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox have three representatives in this year’s All-Star Game: designated hitter J.D. Martinez, outfielder Mookie Betts and shortstop Xander Bogaerts. Martinez is the American League’s starting designated hitter and Betts and Bogaerts will both come off the bench.

Here’s how Boston’s representatives did in the American League’s 4-3 win:

J.D. Martinez -- 0-for-2, K

Martinez went 0-for-2 with a flyout and strikeout before being replaced by pinch-hitter Daniel Vogelbach in the sixth.

Facing Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw in the second, Martinez flew out to left-fielder Christian Yelich (at the warning track). He struck out against Reds righty Luis Castillo in the fourth.

Xander Bogaerts -- 0-for-1

Facing Brewers righty Brandon Woodruff with runners on the corners and no outs in the seventh, Bogaerts grounded into a double play that scored Matt Chapman. Bogaerts was not credited with an RBI but gave the A.L. a 3-1 lead.

Bogaerts was removed after his at-bat and did not appear at shortstop.

Mookie Betts -- 0-for-0

Betts played two innings in right field (the eighth and ninth) but did not record a putout. He did not record an at-bat, either.

Juiced balls? Rob Manfred denies Major League Baseball is intentionally creating more home runs

Matt Vautour

A day after Astros pitcher Justin Verlander accused Major League Baseball and Rob Manfred of intentionally juicing baseballs to produce more home runs and offense, the commissioner denied the accusation.

“Baseball has done nothing, given no direction, for an alteration of the baseball,” Manfred told ESPN’s Jeff Passan

Major League Baseball is on pace for 6,668 home runs, well ahead of 2017’s record of 6,105. Manfred said Monday on ESPN radio he does think the composition of the ball is affecting the number of home runs, but it’s not intentional.

“We think what’s been going on this year is attributable to the baseball,” the commissioner said on ESPN Radio Monday morning. “Our scientists that have been now studying the baseball more regularly have told us that this year the baseball has a little less drag. It doesn’t need to change very much in order to produce

meaningful change in terms of the way the game is played on the field. We are trying to understand exactly why that happened and build out a manufacturing process that gives us a little more control over what's going on. But you have to remember that our baseball is a handmade product and there's gonna be variation year to year."

*** *RedSox.com***

Red Sox soak in ASG camaraderie, excitement

Ian Browne

For the Red Sox who represented the American League at Tuesday night's All-Star Game presented by Mastercard in Cleveland, it was a final honor to commemorate the World Series championship season of 2018.

Manager Alex Cora and his entire coaching staff ran the show in a 4-3 victory for the AL.

"It was amazing," said Cora. "As a baseball fan you just sit there and listen to them talk in the dugout and [share] thoughts and just talking the game. That's what it's all about. Overall, it's one of the best baseball experiences I've ever had in my life."

Three key players in Boston's championship efforts last season participated in the game.

J.D. Martinez was the starting DH and launched a fly ball to deep left in his first at-bat in the bottom of the second, but it was flagged down just in front of the wall by Brewers star Christian Yelich. Martinez struck out in his other at-bat on a wicked changeup from Cincinnati's Luis Castillo.

Xander Bogaerts came off the bench in the bottom of the seventh and hit a rocket (104.6 mph exit velocity) toward the middle, but it was scooped up by Cardinals shortstop Paul DeJong, who fed to the Dodgers' Max Muncy for a 6-4-3 double play.

Mookie Betts, last year's AL Most Valuable Player, replaced Bogaerts in the eighth spot in the batting order and played the final two innings in right field. He didn't get an at-bat.

"There were other guys that we wanted to play. There were a lot of first-timers," said Cora. "And we kind of like mapped it out. And he was going to come up in the ninth. It just happened that we won the game."

In a classy move, Cora had Yankees veteran CC Sabathia visit teammate Aroldis Chapman on the mound with two outs in the ninth. That allowed the fans in Cleveland to roar for the former Indian, who is retiring at the end of the season.

"It was recognizing that he's one of the best pitchers in the big leagues for the last, what, 15 years? The guy has won more than 250 games, 3,000 strikeouts," said Cora. "Everything started here in Cleveland. We all know he's going to retire, so we wanted to let everybody know who he is and I think it was a nice tribute."

For Bogaerts, getting to experience the All-Star festivities, including Tuesday's parade through the streets of Cleveland, for the second time in his career was a thrill.

"It was good," Bogaerts said. "A lot of people came out. A lot of fans cheering on."

Though Betts didn't participate in the T-Mobile Home Run Derby, he will never forget watching it.

"It was super cool. Just seeing how young the whole field was," said Betts. "It was a blessing to be a part of and it goes to show you that there's a lot of young talent."

For Martinez, the best part was the camaraderie with people he is used to competing against.

“You spend all year competing against these guys,” Martinez said. “When you’re on the same team, you actually get to talk and know the person and that’s how you build friendships. The next time you play against those guys, it’s like, ‘Hey, what’s up?’ You get to know the person. You only see the action on TV, or what they do on TV or when you play against them, but when you’re in the locker room with them, it’s different.”

With the festivities behind them -- not to mention a lengthy journey that took them to London, Toronto and Detroit before arriving in Cleveland in the rearview mirror as well -- Cora and his All-Star coaches and players will head back to Boston for a three-game showdown with the Dodgers that starts Friday night.

The Red Sox are nine games out in the AL East, but just two behind the Indians for the second Wild Card spot.

“You never know what can happen in this second half,” Martinez said. “We’re two games back and we’ve put ourselves in good position to make a run in the second half. We haven’t gotten hot yet, I don’t think.”

*** *WEEI.com***

Source: Tyler Thornburg refuses assignment to minors, trending towards being released

Rob Bradford

A day after being recalled from his rehab assignment, it appears the Tyler Thornburg era is over.

According to a source, Thornburg has refused an assignment to minors and it's now trending toward him being released by Red Sox.

Thornburg has been in the minors since June 9 rehabbing a right hip impingement and has a 12.66 ERA over 12 appearances.

The reliever was acquired in a trade with the Brewers in Dec. of 2016 in exchange for Travis Shaw, Mauricio Dubon, Josh Pennington, and a player to be named later (which ended up being Yeison Coca).

Xander Bogaerts thankful to be two-time All-Star, despite snub

Gabby Guerard

Even though Xander Bogaerts didn't get voted in as an All-Star, he's still enjoying the activities with his teammates all the same.

“It has been nice,” Bogaerts said to reporters of the 2019 MLB All-Star Week. “Being around here with my family and teammates. Playing for the coaching staff that has been with me these last couple years, that makes it more special. On a daily basis, we see them and it’s easier to interact with them because we know them so well.”

Bogaerts is joined by Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez, Alex Cora, and the entire Red Sox coaching staff. This season, out of all the shortstops in the American League, Bogaerts currently leads the way with 65 RBI, is ranked second overall with 67 runs, and eighth with a batting average of .294.

However, he didn't wind up in Cleveland the traditional way.

After not being placed on the original roster, Bogaerts was invited following Angels infielder Tommy La Stella's injury to his right tibia on July 3. Prior to being named a late addition, the Red Sox shortstop was

widely considered one of the biggest snubs in baseball. But, the 26-year-old doesn't seem to be letting the situation take away from his experience.

"I think if you make it in the beginning or make it in the end, it's still the same amount of special," Bogaerts said. "It's just a matter if you deserve it or not. I'm just thankful I got invited and I'm thankful for being part of this."

If anyone can make that distinction, it's Bogaerts. Despite being a late addition this year, he knows what it's like to be voted in as an All Star too, after being named one back in 2016. Though, no matter how many opportunities the two-time All-Star may earn in the future, Bogaerts believes this is an honor that never gets old – regardless of how he gets there.

"I'm very thankful for this one," he said. "It's a big moment, each and every one. I don't care if it's your first, your fifth or your 10th. I think all are special in their own way. Every player who plays this game would want to be recognized in something like this."

The 2019 MLB All-Star Game will begin at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Mookie Betts acknowledges he thinks about contract, but won't have discussions during season

Ryan Hannable

Two of the Red Sox' best young players -- Mookie Betts and Xander Bogaerts -- are in completely different situations when it comes to their futures.

Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 million extension earlier this season, while Betts settled in arbitration for \$20 million and will not become a free agent until the end of next season.

Speaking to reporters at the MLB All-Star Game in Cleveland on Monday, Betts acknowledged he thinks about his next contract, but knows there's nothing he can do about it now.

"You think about it, but it's just a thought and it goes in the past," he said. "You have to take care of your business. It's going to come. No matter what you do, it's going to come, so don't rush it."

Betts added: "There's no talk. Once the season starts, there's no more of that talk. I'm just focused on the rest of the year."

The right fielder isn't having as good of a season as last when he was the American League MVP. Betts is hitting .272 with 13 home runs, 40 RBIs, and an .859 OPS. As a contrast, last year at this time he was batting .359 with 23 homers, 51 RBIs.

Betts' desire to remain in Boston remains unclear, but if the Red Sox want to keep him around it seems they will need to dish out quite a bit of money.

Time will tell.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Mets All-Star teammates rave about possible Red Sox trade target Zack Wheeler: 'He'd make a great impact'

John Tomase

The Red Sox are in the market for a starter, and the first name rolling off the assembly line is an intriguing one: Zack Wheeler.

The Mets right-hander would certainly represent an upgrade on the back of the Red Sox rotation, which has featured a rotating cast of mediocrity. With Red Sox fifth starters averaging fewer than three innings a start since Nathan Eovaldi hit the injured list in April, someone providing length would help an overtaxed bullpen.

Wheeler could be that man. The flamethrower with a 100-mph fastball has been sneakily consistent. Though he's only 6-6 with a 4.69 ERA, he has pitched into the seventh in 10 of his 19 starts, reaching the sixth 16 times.

Speaking at the All-Star Game, Mets teammates Pete Alonso and Jeff McNeil raved about Wheeler, who sat out the 2015 and 2016 seasons following Tommy John surgery, but hasn't missed a start in two years. He is reportedly a target of the Red Sox, with the Yankees and Braves also among a handful of suitors for the 29-year-old, who will be a free agent this fall and is thus a rental.

"Zack has some of the most electric stuff in the game," Alonso said. "The trade talk, to me, I don't think anything of it because it hasn't happened. It's all speculation. It's not real until it happens. Zack is a real mellow guy, and I love watching him pitch. He's got some electric stuff. When he's on, he's almost unhittable. He's filthy."

Wheeler's stuff certainly plays. His fastball averages 97 mph, the hardest he has thrown since averaging 98 mph in 2012 before arm troubles. He has also topped 100 mph while striking out a career-high 9.8 batters per nine innings.

Secondarily, he features a power 92-mph slider that has been hit pretty hard (.437 slugging percentage against), as well as a curveball that one Mets observer believes the Red Sox would try to feature more under the tutelage of pitch doctor Brian Bannister, since Wheeler has only allowed 11 hits on it in 215 pitches -- 10 singles and one double.

Report: Sox, Yanks set to battle for Wheeler?

"Playing behind him is awesome," McNeil said. "He mixes speed and pounds the strike zone. He's always around the zone. I'm glad I don't have to face him."

Wheeler has a reputation for being injury-prone, but he actually made 29 starts last season and is at 19 this year. Those 29 starts last season came between Games 11 and 150 without missing a turn.

Though he has a propensity to allow big innings because of troubles out of the stretch -- he has surrendered at least three runs in a frame eight times, partly because opponents are hitting .313 with runners in scoring position vs. only .221 with the bases empty -- he still manages to go six or seven in most starts.

"He's very consistent," McNeil said. "You know what you're going to get every single start, and I think that's what you want in a pitcher. It's what makes him so good."

The Red Sox don't boast that kind of consistency anywhere in their rotation. When it comes to reaching the seventh, Chris Sale (5 times), David Price (2), Rick Porcello (6), and Eduardo Rodriguez (6) pale in comparison to Wheeler. None has reached the sixth more than 13 times.

Whether the Red Sox have what it takes to acquire him remains to be seen, but they'd only owe him the prorated remainder of his \$5.98 million salary this year, and he's only one year removed from going 12-7 with a 3.31 ERA.

"He'd make a great impact," McNeil said. "He's a big-time pitcher. He has pitched in some big games for us, and he's healthy, which is a big, big thing. I know he's had some health problems last in the past, but he's healthy now and he can really help a team."

Padres closer Kirby Yates could be the one who got away from Red Sox

John Tomase

The nightly fire drill that is the Red Sox closer's role might've been filled 14 years ago if luck had broken just a little differently for Kirby Yates.

The Padres All-Star closer leads baseball with 30 saves and owns a miniscule 1.15 ERA in a breakout season at age 32. It took him a long time to get here, with his path winding through Tampa, New York, Cleveland, and Anaheim before settling in San Diego, with an unlikely assist from Red Sox right-hander Nathan Eovaldi.

But his first brush with pro ball actually came in 2005, when Theo Epstein and the Red Sox drafted the high school right-hander out of Hawaii in the 26th round and then waited.

Yates was a draft-and-follow, a player headed for junior college whom the Red Sox could spend a year evaluating before deciding whether to offer a contract. And here's where fate intervened.

"I was in contact with the scout the entire time when I was pitching through the fall," Yates said at All-Star media day. "And unfortunately I blew out my elbow and that was that. It didn't work out. I thought if I had a good season after that year, I would likely sign."

The door to Boston has not been closed, however. With the Red Sox desperate for help in both the rotation and bullpen, Yates could be a trade target, especially if the Padres fall out of contention in a jam-packed National League wild card race, which they currently trail by only two games.

Like most players in his position, Yates wouldn't engage trade speculation.

"I'm a Padre," Yates said. "I love where I'm at. I don't have any control. I'll deal with that if it happens. As of now, I don't have any thoughts on that. We haven't played our best baseball yet. It's ahead of us. Every team is trying to get hot down the stretch, and we're no different. If we play some good baseball, we're in this."

His journey is a study in perseverance and the power of pitch mix, how one change to a reliever's arsenal, even at age 30, can unlock the potential he always believed existed.

Sox not the only AL East team in on Wheeler

Three years after that 2006 elbow injury cost him a chance to join the Red Sox, Yates signed with the Rays as an undrafted free agent. Thus began an odyssey that saw him reach the big leagues in 2014 and struggle for parts of three seasons before reaching a crossroads in 2016 after posting a 5.23 ERA in 41 appearances with the Yankees.

"I didn't want to suck anymore," he said.

He realized the problem was his slider, a strikeout pitch when it was on, and a home run one when it wasn't. He needed to scrap it in favor of something else, so he focused on a split-fingered fastball, an offering falling out of vogue in a four seam-curveball-cutter-obsessed league. And that's where Eovaldi entered the picture.

"Going into '17 I put out a plan that I wanted to do something different," Yates said. "I wanted an out pitch. I needed a swing-and-miss breaking ball. The slider wasn't cutting it, so I developed a splitter. Along with that, there was a mindset that went into that year that was different. I didn't want to suck anymore. I wanted to be better, plain and simple. I devoted myself a lot more in the weight room and just kind of came in with a different mindset and everything came together and it just kind of happened."

He conceived of the splitter while pitching for the Yankees in 2016, and he picked the brains of his fellow pinstriped hurlers for pointers. Eovaldi's advice shouldn't surprise anyone.

"What he told me is he always wanted to throw it hard," Yates said. "I took that, because he's a power pitcher and a strikeout guy. He told me, when I throw, throw it hard, and that will help."

Even when he was posting high ERAs, Yates averaged more than 10 strikeouts per nine innings. Since arriving in San Diego, however, that number has leaped to nearly 14 Ks per nine, and he otherwise keeps the ball on the ground, with only one home run allowed in 30 innings. The pairing of a 94 mph fastball and 87 mph splitter that features Koji Uehara-like movement has proven devastating.

"I've always been able to strike guys out," he said. "The days I had a good slider were the days I would get my strikeouts. The problem was the days the slider was bad were the days I'd give up my homers. I had to find a balance.

"The split-fingered has complemented my fastball so well, it's just one of those things where it becomes a chess match and you've got to choose right."

With Eovaldi shifting to the bullpen, where he will presumably close, and the Red Sox in the market for starting pitching, it's a long shot that they'll have the resources to pursue Yates.

If that's the case, it will be the second time they've missed out on the right-hander, who has forged an against-all-odds career for himself nearly 15 years after a bad break kept him from signing in Boston.

Christian Yelich on defending AL MVP Mookie Betts: 'He's going to be right where he needs to be'

John Tomase

Christian Yelich shares more in common with Mookie Betts than an MVP Award.

The defending NL MVP is also a five-tool threat with a Gold Glove and batting title on his resume. Like Betts, he arrived in the big leagues as a skinny doubles hitter (albeit one standing 6-foot-3) who eventually developed legitimate power.

Where the two diverge is how they've followed up their MVP seasons. While both are All-Stars, only Yelich can say he has improved upon last year, when he led the Brewers to Game 7 of the NLCS by hitting .326 with 36 homers and 110 RBIs.

This year, he has been even better, with .329-31-67-1.140 numbers, which stand in marked contrast to Betts' solid-but-not-spectacular .272-13-40-.859 production.

So what does Yelich think of Betts' performance thus far?

"I got to know him over the course of last year," he said at All-Star media day. "He's an amazing player. I love watching him play. He can do everything. He really can, on both sides of the ball. He's unbelievable defensively, his talent on the offensive side is pretty well documented. It's definitely impressive."

Yelich said the hardest part of the post-MVP experience was deciding how to prioritize his time.

"The thing that comes with the MVP, it's a different offseason," he said. "There's a lot of demands on your time. You're definitely busy. It takes you out of your comfort zone and offseason routine. You don't really get to prepare for the upcoming season the way you would have before, and you couple that with (the Red Sox) winning the World Series, and everything that goes along with that, and it's not easy."

With a newborn baby at home, Betts turned down marketing opportunities and interview requests over the offseason and during spring training. Yelich took a different approach.

"It's all what you can handle," he said. "Everyone has different things going on in their lives. The way I looked at it was I wanted to keep baseball first, my preparation for the season first. I felt like I owed that to my teammates, the organization, everybody else that was putting in work for the upcoming year. And anything I could handle after that, I did. I wanted to experience it and I think life is about experiences. When you win an award like that, there's a lot of doors that are open to you. If I had time to do something I did it."

Betts and his Red Sox teammates have noted the bullseye that comes with the MVP award, and Yelich knows that feeling, too. He suspects that Betts will break out in the second half on talent alone.

"He's still having a great season -- he's here," Yelich said. "Maybe it's not up to his standards of an MVP level, but I think when this thing's all said and done, by the time the season's over, he's going to be right where he needs to be."

*** *BostonSportsJournal.com***

Red Sox again prioritize rotation over bullpen

Sean McAdam

Last winter, the Red Sox chose to spend their energy and resources on upgrading their starting rotation rather than their bullpen.

Now, at 2019 All-Star break, they're apparently doing it again.

Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic reported that the Sox are "pushing to add a starting pitcher" and would "prefer to act sooner rather than later."

Joel Sherman of the New York Post, meanwhile, reported that the Sox are one of several teams having discussions with the New York Mets about Zach Wheeler.

There's little doubt that the Sox could stand some improvement with rotation, which is ranked seventh in the A.L. with a 4.70 ERA. Moreover, the Sox have gotten quality starts in just over a third of their games (33-of-90), a total that has them ninth in the league.

But the case could be made that the Sox are more desperate for help in the bullpen rather than the rotation.

The Sox are tied with Seattle for the most number of blown saves in the league with 18. And the Sox have already lost more games (seven) in which they led after seven innings than they did in all of 2018.

For now, however, the focus appears to be squarely on acquiring a starter.

That's likely the result of the decision made last week to utilize Nathan Eovaldi in relief, at least in the short-term. Eovaldi has been sidelined since late April after first undergoing a surgical procedure to remove loose bodies in his right elbow. His rehab was then complicated by a case of biceps tendinitis.

Eovaldi contributed mightily out of the bullpen last October — including a six-inning stint in Game 3 of the World Series — but has had limited experience pitching in relief during the regular season. He does not own a major league save.

Moving Eovaldi to a relief role will enable him to return to the mound sooner, since he need not build up his arm strength to throw 90-100 pitches in a starting role. In the bullpen, he can make an almost immediate contribution. The Sox and Eovaldi have not ruled out his return to the rotation later this season.

In the meantime, the Sox have a gaping hole in the fifth spot in their rotation. Brian Johnson, who gave the Sox one good outing in his two efforts, is out for an unspecified time with a non-baseball medical condition. And in the 17 starts filled since Eovaldi was placed on the IL, the Sox have exactly one quality start.

It hasn't helped that with the exception of David Price, the Red Sox rotation, in which the Sox invested almost \$90 million, hasn't come close to performing up to expectations. Chris Sale has a 4.04 ERA; Eduardo Rodriguez's ERA is 4.65; and Rick Porcello's is 5.33.

When the Sox decided to focus on the rotation last off-season, it seemed to run counter to a larger trend in the game. In recent years, starters have eaten up fewer innings and teams have put more of an emphasis on their relief core.

But despite losing closer Craig Kimbrel and set-up man Joe Kelly to free agency, the Sox stood pat with their bullpen, reasoning that re-signing Eovaldi would give them five established starters, each capable of giving the team a chance to win nearly every turn.

However, with the starters struggling to achieve consistency and regularly falling short of six innings, the burden has fallen on the bullpen with predictable results.

In June, for instance, the Sox turned to Matt Barnes 15 times (in 27) games, resulting in a 9.69 ERA. Marcus Walden was similarly overworked, with 14 appearances and a 6.75 ERA.

The Red Sox have limited resources with which to deal – both in terms of prospects and payroll — which makes the emphasis on starters even more curious since it's likely that market will be more costly than the one for relief help.

And the mere suggestion that the Sox are prioritizing starting pitching over bullpen would seem to suggest that they have doubts about Eovaldi returning to the rotation before the end of the season. What would the Sox do with someone like Wheeler if Eovaldi is ready to return to starting duty?

But that, for now, is the path the Sox have chosen — rotation over bullpen.

Again.

*** *The Athletic***

How things have changed for Red Sox since Opening Day

Chad Jennings

When the Red Sox broke camp this spring, they were a bit dull for a bunch of defending champions. Not that they weren't plenty talented, but they'd generated little buzz in the offseason, and their roster was virtually unchanged from the year before. Their bullpen strategy was a curiosity, but otherwise, there were few storylines beyond the obvious: Could they be just as good the second time around?

That was 15 weeks ago. Today, we're not even sure they're going to make the playoffs.

So, let's compare what we were thinking then and what we're thinking now. To preview the season, I wrote a series of "the most interesting thing about ..." paragraphs — the most interesting thing about the lineup, the most interesting thing about the manager, and so on.

Let's look back at what seemed interesting then, and what's become interesting these past three months.

Rotation

Then: How good it could be.

Now: How bad it's been.

Nothing typifies the Red Sox struggles quite like their 6-12 record in games started by Chris Sale. That's Kansas City Royals level of success, except it's coming from the defending champions in games started by their ace. Sale swears he's healthy. The only thing wounded is his pride.

"Absolutely embarrassing," he said.

Can't overstate this enough: The rotation was supposed to be the Red Sox strength. Coming out of spring training, their best-case scenario was a truly elite starting five. Let everyone else build a super bullpen. The Red Sox would stand firm in their rotation. It was one way to separate themselves from the Yankees, and it's the reason they re-signed Nathan Eovaldi instead of Craig Kimbrel. The foundation of this team was its rotation.

But the Red Sox rotation ERA ranks 18th in the majors. Only David Price has provided anything resembling consistency. Their fifth starter has been a revolving door of defeat since Eovaldi was hurt in mid-April, and now that Eovaldi is healthy again, the Red Sox are so desperate for pitching help that they're going to use him out of the bullpen rather than stretch him out as a starter. Who rounds out the rotation remains a mystery every fifth day, as does Rick Porcello, who has a 5.33 ERA, caused by his trouble both the first and third times through the order. No wonder Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic reported this week they're in the market for another starting pitcher.

The Red Sox built a rotation to lead the way. It's led them only to mediocrity.

Bullpen

Then: How bad it could be.

Now: How close it's come to being really good.

It was obvious the Red Sox were going to sign a reliever in the offseason. It basically went without saying. They'd lost two relievers — including their closer — to free agency, and the market was overloaded with bullpen arms. One way or another, it was a safe bet that the Red Sox would add someone to help in the late innings.

When they did not, the decision was immediately questioned. Then it was questioned again. And again.

Thing is, it's almost worked.

Brandon Workman, Marcus Walden and Heath Hembree are each having career years. Ryan Brasier, while not as dominant as last year, has had staying power in the big leagues. Those four each have a WHIP below 1.20 (last year's bullpen had only two guys who were that good at avoiding baserunners). Add the fact Matt Barnes has the best strikeout rate in the American League, and the Red Sox have the makings of a good and deep bullpen. So why are we still debating the decision to not sign a reliever?

For one thing, the rotation struggles have put too much burden on the bullpen. For another, getting consistency from the last two or three bullpen spots has been a struggle. Barnes had a bad June, Brasier had a rough May, and Hembree missed almost four weeks with an elbow injury. The Red Sox are 35-4 when leading after eight innings, but they're also tied for the league lead in blown saves (many of them before the ninth inning).

It's been almost a very good bullpen, but still not good enough to dispel those roster-building questions that have hounded the Red Sox since the offseason. They're hoping Eovaldi's new role and Steven Wright's return can make the difference in the second half.

Lineup

Then: The 22-year-old kid in the middle.

Now: That very same 22-year-old in the middle.

We got this one exactly right. Sure, Xander Bogaerts is a deserving All-Star, and there's plenty of attention on Mookie Betts' good-not-great season, but what's more fascinating than a 22-year-old taking a giant leap forward to become one of the elite hitters in baseball?

Rafael Devers started the year hitting for average, then he started driving the ball and now he's reached the All-Star break ranked third in the American League in OPS. In a league with Alex Bregman and Matt Chapman, Devers became the year's biggest All-Star snub, but manager Alex Cora hinted at MVP aspirations instead.

"The way he's going," Cora said. "Well, he might not go to the All-Star Game, but he might have a case at the end of the season — if we pull this off and do the things we're planning on doing — to win some other stuff. So, we'll take that one."

With Devers and Bogaerts helping to make up for down years from Betts and J.D. Martinez, the Red Sox offense has an even higher team OPS than last year. It's also averaged more runs per game.

If Devers can keep this pace, and Bogaerts can hold up while playing nearly every single day, the Red Sox could hope to be even better in the second half if Betts and Martinez return to last year's form and Andrew Benintendi finds some traction. As it is, Bogaerts has been a star, and Devers has been a revelation.

Bench

Then: The face of the franchise being a part of it.

Now: The face of the franchise going home.

No one knew what to expect from Dustin Pedroia this season, but everyone expected something. Might be good, might be bad, might be once a week, might be almost every day. One way or another, Pedroia was going to have a role to play at second base.

Instead, his return from a lingering knee issue lasted just 10 days, and after another month-plus of rehabilitation, he went home to Arizona to contemplate his future. His farewell news conference was startling in its honesty. Pedroia is "not sure" he'll ever play again.

Without him, the Red Sox have settled on four options at second base: Brock Holt, Eduardo Nunez, Michael Chavis and Marco Hernandez. Chavis was a revelation when he was called up in April, and Hernandez has been surprisingly adept after he missed two years with a shoulder injury.

With Nunez, Steve Pearce and Sandy Leon each carrying an OPS in the .500s, the Red Sox bench hasn't looked like much of a strength, but it's been unusually good in pinch-hit situations, helping the team get to 26 come-from-behind wins. More than half of their victories have been comebacks.

Whether their iconic second baseman can come back remains a total mystery.

Schedule

Then: The amount of time it would take before serious head-to-head matchups with the Yankees.

Now: How little time they have to make up ground.

In the first three months, the Red Sox and Yankees played one another only six times. The Yankees won't make their season debut at Fenway Park until July 25. There are still 12 head-to-head matchups remaining between these two old rivals.

The Red Sox will need to win most of them.

Despite a slew of first-half injuries, the Yankees have taken full control of the American League East. Giancarlo Stanton's played just nine games, Miguel Andujar is lost for the year, and neither Luis Severino nor Dellin Betances has thrown a single pitch, but the Yankees still have a nine-game lead over the Red Sox at the break. The Rays are in second place, trailing by 6 1/2 games.

While the Red Sox were struggling to win games started by Chris Sale, the Yankees were getting difference-making offense from Gio Urshela. With Aaron Judge, Didi Gregorius and Aaron Hicks healthy again, the Yankees have breathing room, momentum and the best record in the American League. The second half was supposed to be the time for these two behemoths to duke it out for the division title, but so far, it hasn't been much of a fight.

Those 12 remaining head-to-head matchups do provide an opportunity for the Red Sox, but they'll need to take full advantage. When a team is this far back, a little more than two months doesn't seem like a lot of time.

Payroll

Then: That it might not be enough.

Now: The fact it has to be enough.

Not every year would payroll earn a separate section in a season preview story, but it did this year because of the Red Sox many expiring contracts and extension candidates. They have the highest payroll in baseball but clearly have some restrictions as well.

Owner John Henry told WEEI last week that he doesn't expect to add much, if any, payroll this season.

"It's not a luxury tax issue," Henry told Rob Bradford in London. "It's a question of how much money do we want to lose. We're already over budget, and we were substantially over our budget last year and this year. We're not going to be looking to add a lot of payroll. And it's hard to imagine fielding a better team. If we play up to our capabilities we'll be fine."

So, the fascination remains: The Red Sox have spent more money on players than any other team — and that's not counting the roughly \$11 million they're paying Rusney Castillo to play in the minors — yet there's still a strong case to be made that they need to spend enough additional money to add an impact pitcher. Maybe Dave Dombrowski has a trick up his sleeve — he acquired Eovaldi at a minimal cost last season — but a big payroll bump seems out of the question. This roster needs to be enough (but it might not be enough).

Manager

Then: What happened last year.

Now: The way he handled this year.

This was the logic coming out of spring training: As a first-year manager, Alex Cora won a franchise-record number of games and capped it off with a World Series parade. What possibly could happen to overshadow that?

This answer: probably nothing. Last year remains far more memorable, but it has been interesting to see Cora handle adversity. He shows conviction, but with a willingness to adjust his best intentions when they just aren't working. He moved Betts back into the leadoff spot, recalled Leon after cutting him in spring

training and now he's apparently looking to use Eovaldi as a closer after going without a set closer all year. He's been willing to change.

But Cora's optimistic, accountable demeanor has largely stayed the same. He's been occasionally more combative, but he's also faced more difficult questions, some without easy answers.

"I still feel like I'm (handling the stress) fine," Cora said. "I'm trying to find a way to get us going, that's my job, put these guys in position to be successful. There's nights I'm like, 'Man, what do we need to do?' I take it personally. Just like last year, I take it personally. We've got to keep grinding every day and show up every day. It's not that I'm down on myself or down on the team, you've got to just keep finding ways, the same way we did last year. It's going to happen; it's going to happen. We feel that way."

Farm system

Then: The fact it might actually help out this season.

Now: The very help it's provided.

The Red Sox entered this season at or near the bottom of nearly every minor-league system ranking, but the 2018 draft class has performed well, 2017 first-rounder Tanner Houck has found some traction in the Double-A rotation, and 2016 standouts Bobby Dalbec and C.J. Chatham have thrived in the Double-A lineup. All of that bodes well for the future.

But for the time being, it pales in comparison with Michael Chavis.

Called up as something of a desperation move to fill the gaping hole at second base, Chavis has become an indispensable part of the everyday lineup. He's played three different positions, hit 15 home runs and brought a spark of personality to the clubhouse. There's been some inconsistency, but his name is a part of the Rookie of the Year conversation.

Marco Hernandez has also come out of the minor-league system to fill a need as a utility infielder, while Darwinson Hernandez, Josh Taylor, Travis Lakins and Mike Shawaryn have come up from the minors to help out in the bullpen (albeit with hit-and-miss results).

The farm system seemed ready to contribute, and with Chavis in particular, it's provided a much-needed spark.

Spring training

Then: The decision to keep Blake Swihart at catcher.

Now: How quickly and easily Swihart was dismissed.

Happens every year: We tell ourselves not to make any conclusions based on spring training before inevitably thinking there's something to read into the exhibition numbers.

Swihart's terrific spring was important because it earned him a spot on the Opening Day roster, and that felt especially important because Christian Vazquez hit just .132 this spring and looked like an offensive black hole at catcher. It seemed entirely possible Swihart might outplay him and take over the starting job.

Swihart was instead designated for assignment in mid-April. He wound up in Arizona, where he's hitting .167 while currently sitting on the injured list with a strained oblique.

Vazquez, meanwhile, has already shattered his previous season high by hitting 14 home runs in the first half. FanGraphs WAR says he's been the most valuable catcher in the American League and the second-best in all of baseball (his Wins Above Replacement is almost identical to Betts').

Key decisions are made every spring, but the Opening Day roster is always flexible, and it's only the regular-season numbers that really mean anything.

Future

Then: Mookie Betts.

Now: Mookie Betts.

For the next three months or the next 10 years, the future of the Red Sox still rests heavily on Betts' shoulders.

His OPS ranks in the top 25 in the American League, yet it's more than 200 points lower than last season. That means significant room to improve in the second half, giving the Red Sox a top-of-the-order spark that might create more early leads, put less stress on the pitching staff and help the Red Sox push toward a meaningful October.

But even if that doesn't happen, he remains a fascination with only one remaining season of team control. The Red Sox surely would like to sign him long term, and plenty of high-profile superstars have agreed to extensions in the past six months. Could Betts be the next? Can the Red Sox keep chasing championships around a long-term core of Betts, Bogaerts, Devers and Benintendi?

There will be deserved focus on the Red Sox pitching staff when play resumes Friday. The trade deadline offers interesting possibilities to either go for it, stand pat or perhaps sell a piece or two if things get ugly. Martinez has the right to opt out this offseason. Price, Sale and Eovaldi will have to age well for their contracts to avoid becoming albatrosses. Devers looks like a blossoming superstar.

But in the interest of the Red Sox future, Betts remains a singular figure.

Even if they have to wait for him, Red Sox saw too much they liked in Navy's Noah Song

Jen McCaffrey

The first time Reed Gragnani saw Noah Song on the mound, it was a blustery day in March 2018 in Annapolis, Md., with temperatures in the low 40s and 25 mph whipping winds. It wasn't quite ideal baseball conditions, but then again, not much of this situation has been ideal.

Gragnani, a first-year scout at the time, had heard through word of mouth that the Naval Academy had a standout pitcher who was worth a look.

"There were probably 15-20 teams there and he really didn't throw that well," said Gragnani, who spent four seasons in the Red Sox farm system before transitioning to coaching and then scouting. "The velocity was a little down, but I was thinking like, 'Hey, we've got a kid who's been at the Naval Academy, the conditions are terrible, and he still showed something unique with his fastball and off-speed repertoire.' So I kind of let it marinate for a week or so."

Gragnani returned for Song's next start, against Army, and Song struck out 16 batters in six innings with a fastball hovering between 93 and 96 mph.

"That's when I realized this is a guy here that's probably the best player in my area," said Gragnani, who covers Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Eastern Pennsylvania and Washington.

And so began a 15-month long process of scouting Song and developing a relationship with his family, all while trying to figure out if or how the 6-foot-4, 200-pound right-hander would fit in the Red Sox system as a Naval Academy graduate.

The United States has shifted its policy a few times over the last couple of years in regard to active duty service time required by service-academy athletes.

A 2016 policy allowed some athletes to sign with professional teams while on reserve status, but the policy was reversed in 2017. In May, the president announced he was considering another policy change that would allow athletes to play professional sports before fulfilling their military commitments. The policy was ordered to be due within 120 days, which would be by September.

Gragnani barely knew any of this before meeting Song, but became an expert in the matter by the time Song was approaching graduation in May and the MLB Draft last month. By that point, Song had gained national attention and was ranked among the best pitching prospects in the draft. He finished his senior season with a 1.44 ERA and 161 strikeouts in 94 innings, third-most among all Division I pitchers. He was a finalist for several top collegiate baseball awards, including the Golden Spikes award.

Song was ranked the 65th best prospect by Baseball America and 68th by MLB.com entering the draft. MLB.com's scouting report says Song has a "legitimate starting pitcher profile" while touting his fastball and his swing-and-miss slider. But it also mentions the uncertainty around his service commitment and how that may be reason enough for teams to look past him despite the potential. A service commitment might push back the start of his window for minor-league progression for at least two years after being drafted.

Gragnani had researched how other athletes, like New England Patriots long-snapper Joe Cardona, had handled their service commitments. Although it was a different sport, it provided some guidance. Cardona was drafted by the Patriots in 2015 and had his naval assignment delayed under the previous policy.

"When I was drafted, there was a lot of uncertainty as far as what my future would hold," Cardona said. "Obviously, for Noah coming up and being in the Red Sox program, he has an ally here in New England. But ultimately, each road is going to be different and each person is going to have different responsibilities and different things asked of them."

On the flip side, in 2015, right-hander Mitch Harris became the first Navy baseball player to pitch in the majors since 1921 after serving more than four years. He made his major-league debut seven years after being drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals. Harris appeared in 26 games that year but needed elbow surgery the following season and hasn't pitched since. Harris' teammate at Navy, Oliver Drake, left the academy after being drafted his sophomore season and debuted the same year as Harris.

The Red Sox knew the risk, but couldn't pass on Song knowing his potential. When he was still on the board in the fourth round, they selected him with the 137th overall pick.

"We evaluated his talent and deemed his talent to be worthy of taking some of the risk with some of the uncertainties," said Red Sox director of amateur scouting Mike Rikard.

"We did have some intimate discussions. This is the possibility here and it could go that direction. All of the different possibilities and potential outcomes were presented and we decided, listen, we think he's a very talented pitcher and we think he's also a person of extreme high character, which we value. We're going to select the talent and the pitcher and kind of support him through this and see where it carries us."

The Red Sox signed Song on July 6 and he reported to the Class-A Short-Season Lowell Spinners along with a few other Red Sox draftees. Song is expected to report to the Red Sox instructional league in Fort Myers, Fla., after that season wraps. As of now, Song is scheduled to begin flight school for the Navy on Nov. 1. If the president's policy change moves ahead regarding athletes postponing their service time to play professional sports, Song would have the option to remain with the Red Sox. That has yet to be determined.

"It's a unique situation, but we felt the talent outweighed some of the difficult navigation in the player development plan," Rikard said. "We simplified it to the core of that. We feel we got a very talented

individual and if we feel there's going to be a unique or different player development plan, we're willing to support and walk through that with him."

Even if Song must serve the two-year commitment before petitioning to enter the reserves, however that schedule may look, the Red Sox are convinced he'll be able to maintain his strength and athletic ability.

"One of the things we feel very comfortable in in Noah's case is that his work ethic and drive and competitive nature to be good at whatever he sets his mind to is very strong," Rikard said. "His character attributes and all of those things that Reed recognized through the course of time we feel to be very strong, so if he does end up on his own and there's some expectation for training and arm care, we're very comfortable that he's going to be willing and want to maintain those type things at his discretion."

Football has a far different schedule than baseball, but Cardona, who serves in the Navy reserves around his time with the Patriots, sees benefits to doing both.

"When you're performing at a high level and you're in an environment that's high performance, you can't help but pick up on habits," Cardona said. "In my opinion, we have some of the greatest young leaders in this locker room and these guys — character, honor, commitment, everything that the Navy holds dear — is upheld in this locker room. So there's constant examples of leadership in high-pressure situations that I'm constantly learning."

As a scout, Gragnani's job in regard to Song is essentially done. He's already looking toward the 2020 draft, but that doesn't mean he's done keeping tabs on Song's situation.

"We'll continue to support Noah as a baseball player and a naval officer and really, whatever he decides, we're in support of," Gragnani said. "That's all we really know at this point. Right now it's just about him getting acclimated to pro ball and our system and our protocols for throwing and pitching, that's stuff that we can deal with at a later date."

*** *Associated Press***

MLBPA: Baseball doing poor job promoting Betts

Baseball players' union head Tony Clark says a poor job has been done of marketing Boston Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts, the reigning AL MVP.

"Mookie should be a household name," Clark told the Baseball Writers' Association of America on Tuesday. "Mookie should be a one-name guy. You say Ronaldo. You say Messi. You say Mookie. You should know who Mookie is, and outside of the baseball world, I don't know how many do."

Betts earned his fourth straight All-Star selection after helping Boston win the World Series last year.

"In the grand scheme of things with respect to players that should be at the forefront of every conversation and should be in conversations even with non-baseball fans, Mookie is one of them," Clark said. "No doubt about it. And unless or until we fix that, it's going to be difficult for others to be a part of that conversation, too."

Clark said baseball commissioner Rob Manfred probably would be in position to answer what is required to increase Betts' recognition.

"I want to be able to turn on the TV and see players on products with sponsors, licensees, up and down the rows of the streets, whether you're in a big city or a small city, I would like to see them overlap in other sports and other industries and on TV and in commercials promoting movies," Clark said. "I would love to see all of that, so that our guys are mainstream. Promoting our guys on baseball channels is not going to get us there. Baseball fans know who Mookie is. Non-baseball fans deserve to know who Mookie is."

Betts entered the All-Star Game to start the eighth inning but did not have any plate appearances.

"There were other guys that we wanted to play," said AL manager Alex Cora of the Red Sox. "There were a lot of first-timers, and we kind of mapped it out. And he was going to come up in the ninth. It just happened that we won the game."