

The Boston Red Sox Friday, July 12, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

What do the Red Sox need to fix in the second half of the season?

Peter Abraham

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The bullpen: The Sox relievers are getting worn out and the season is only 56 percent over. They need help, and more than just Nate Eovaldi working in relief. The heat is on Dave Dombrowski.

Mookie Betts: Sure, he was an All-Star. But Betts' OPS is down 20 percent from last season. He also has attempted only 11 stolen bases after swiping 30 a year ago.

Andrew Benintendi: A dynamic player last season, Benintendi has been just OK (.274/.351/.433) so far this season and was dropped down the order. Will that get him going?

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All that travel was a prominent player in Red Sox' 'stop and go' start

Alex Speier

In a season that began with about 6,600 miles of flights over 15 days, then entered the midyear break with another 7,600 miles of travel over another dozen days, the Red Sox could be forgiven if they felt their attempted title defense has been spent in the air.

Yet flight is not the appropriate transportation metaphor.

"It's been stop and go, one foot on the gas and one foot on the brakes, it's seemed like the whole time," said hitting coach Tim Hyers.

The 2018 Red Sox were a marvel of preparation and focus, a team that moved with a constant sense of purpose toward the first pitch and whose attention to detail lasted through the ninth. The team arrived to the park exuding readiness to feast on its opposition. More often than not, it did just that.

This year, the dynamic hasn't resembled that of the championship team. There's been weariness, fatigue, a sense that energy must be summoned rather than channeled.

There are any number of reasons for the distinct differences in the clubhouse feel. Certainly, the Red Sox aren't the first team that has struggled to sustain the almost perfect dynamics that existed on a charmed championship path.

Kris Bryant of the Cubs recalled the unavoidable nature of an emotional lull that occurred in 2017, when the defending champions limped into the All-Star break with a 43-45 record.

“Especially when you play that long, from February all the way to November, that’s a long time playing baseball, then you kind of get a couple months off. I don’t know if that’s enough time,” said Bryant. “I think there’s something to be said for that. I think we’ve seen it with previous teams, too. [And] you see the Red Sox this year. I think any one of those guys will tell you that they’re not performing the way they thought they’d perform. I think there’s something to be said for that.”

Yet if there is an element of a championship hangover in play, it seems as if the Red Sox’ travel schedule may have exacerbated it. As a result of the team’s commitment to play in London at the end of June, in a year where the Sox had the N.L. West on their interleague schedule, the team sought to make just two West Coast trips during the year instead of three, and MLB accommodated.

“We have difficult travel because we’re Boston. The geography of teams on the coast is different from that of teams in the middle of the country, but that’s no different than any other year,” said Red Sox CEO/president Sam Kennedy. “With London, we were extremely pleased with the schedule, including, yes, the early, long trip to the West Coast. Because we have the National League West this year, it allowed us to avoid three trips to the West Coast in a year where we’re playing the National League West, No. 1, and No. 2, it provided us with a warm-weather schedule. We love to open on the road. We were pleased and appreciative of what baseball did on those two issues.”

Yet part of the solution was the 11-game, 11-day road trip to open the year, a trip drawn out even further by the exhibition games in Arizona against the Cubs — part of an effort to allow the Sox to adjust time zones — that preceded it. The result was 15 days living out of suitcases, and a 3-8 face plant recalled fondly by approximately zero members of the club.

“We’ve had road trips where we’ve been out there for multiple weeks. It’s a grind. I feel almost like we haven’t been home that much — we’re never at home. That’s what it seems like to me. We’re always on the road, and it’s kind of one of those things that kind of wears on you,” said J.D. Martinez. “It’s been a taxing first half, I would say. One, mentally, because we had the ups-and-downs, and two, because of the travel and all those trips we’ve been taking.”

There was more happening around the periphery of the club that seeped into the conversations of the day-to-day. In spring training, the subject of contract extensions — who was and wasn’t getting them, both with the Red Sox and around the game — was a frequent one. More players endured vexing struggles at the start of this year, and individual and team struggles both created widespread frustrations.

The rescheduling of the White House visit from the very first days of spring training, timing that the Sox pursued in hopes of leaving the matter in the rearview mirror well before the start of the season, to mid-May left another strange topic hovering for days and even weeks.

Most recently, there was the London trip — or, more accurately, the three-city, 7,600-mile journey (not entirely a “road trip,” since the London contests counted as two home games) from Boston to London to Toronto to Detroit the last 11 days before the break.

“Really, really brutal,” said Bogaerts.

“We went to, what, three countries on a road trip? It’s not easy,” said Martinez. “But it’s the hand we’ve been dealt this year. We try to make the best of it and try to figure it out.”

To their credit, after London, they did. The Red Sox closed out with a 5-1 stretch against the Blue Jays and Tigers. For all of the discussions of the difficulty and frequency of their travel, the team is an elite 29-19 (.604) on the road. Their poor home record (20-22, .476 — a mark that includes the two London games) is the reason why a yawning gap has opened between them and the Yankees.

Of course, it’s possible that the relative infrequency of time at Fenway — the team’s 42 home contests are tied for the fewest in the game; accounting for London, no team has spent more time away from its home park than the Sox — has contributed to the unimpressive performance.

Dodgers roll into Fenway looking for payback against Red Sox

But there's nothing definitive. No way of knowing the role travel, or the team's deliberate spring training build-up, or the more frequent conversations about off-field issues has played in the team's good-not-great performance. Moreover, those around the team both in uniform and the front office recognize that every season comes with its unique challenges, and that it falls on the team to figure out how to work through them.

"[The first-half] was weird. It was definitely weird. But it's kind of what we signed up for, too. It's one of those things. We've just got to hang with them," said Mookie Betts. "You can blame it on anything, but at the end of the day, we have to play better, I have to play better. It is what it is. There's no excuses for anything. You've got to be ready to play."

"You're not going to hear us make any excuses about performance based on travel or logistics," said Kennedy. "We play a lot of prime-time games, Sunday nights. That goes with the territory. We've managed to win four World Series having rigorous travel. We aren't worried about it."

There is basis for believing that the team's true talent level will become apparent after the break. The 2017 Cubs, for instance, burst out of the gates after the All-Star Game with six straight wins on the way to an N.L.-best 49-25 (.662) record down the stretch that concluded with a division title and an advance to the NLCS.

"That whole season, we were kind of looking forward to the break, we got those four days off, and we're like, 'OK, now let's get this thing right,'" said Bryant. "We ended up doing that."

The Red Sox hope for something similar. Of their last 72 games, 39 (54 percent) are at home, tied for the most of any team. While they face a daunting stretch in the next few weeks that will include the Dodgers for three games this weekend and 14 straight games against the Rays and Yankees in July and August, September presents the possibility of a downhill run — one that, the Red Sox hope, permits a halting start to the year to give way to a timely sprint to the end.

"We ended the first half on a high note," said Betts. "We have to kind of ride that wave throughout the season."

Alex Cora confident Red Sox 'will play better' in second half

Peter Abraham

We will know soon enough if the Red Sox are serious about making this season something more than a six-month long concession speech about how hard it is to repeat as champions.

The Los Angeles Dodgers arrive at Fenway Park on Friday for a three-game rematch of the World Series. The Dodgers have the best record (60-32) and run differential (plus-129) in the game, and Sox manager Alex Cora predicted last week they would be "hungry to kick our ass."

Two of the Dodgers, Clay Bellinger and Max Muncy, happily confirmed that earlier this week while at the All-Star Game.

The Sox have Eduardo Rodriguez, Chris Sale and David Price lined up for the series. The Dodgers will go with Kenta Maeda, Ross Stripling and Hyun-Jin Ryu. For three days, Fenway Park will be the best spot in baseball.

But that series is really only a pop quiz compared to what comes next for the Red Sox: 21 games against American League East opponents in as many days, eight of them against the first-place Yankees, and six against the second-place Rays.

The Sox are nine games behind the Yankees, but Cora believes a fourth consecutive division title remains in play.

Breaking down a bizarre first half of the season

“They’re playing great. They’re doing what they’re doing,” he said. “We’ve still got a lot of games against them. We’ve still got a lot of games against the division. They still got a lot of games to play. I guarantee you that’s the message [the Yankees] have, that this is not over. It ain’t over. We know they’re playing great; we know it. You can’t hide that fact.

“The fact is we still have the second part of the season and we know we’re going to improve.”

To what degree the Sox can improve hinges on the July 31 trade deadline, their last chance to improve the pitching staff by either adding a relief pitcher or obtaining a reliable starting pitcher for the vacant fifth spot. Ideally, they would accomplish both.

The alternative for the Sox would be wasting the potential of a lineup that is third in the majors in runs per game (5.66) and fourth in OPS (.807) despite Mookie Betts and Andrew Benintendi having had what for them are below-average seasons.

Shifting budding superstar Rafael Devers to the second spot in the order made a good lineup even better.

“I feel like, offensively, we haven’t really got started and we’re still scoring runs,” J.D. Martinez said. “It’s going to get better.”

But will the pitching?

The Red Sox went into the season believing one of their strengths would be the rotation. But when Nate Eovaldi went on the injured list after only four starts, trouble started.

The Sox have needed 16 replacement starts through the first 90 games, approximately 14 of those filling for Eovaldi.

Those starters were 2-7 with a 6.79 earned run average in those games, and averaged only 3½ innings. That the Sox managed to win eight of the games is a testament to their offense, but the bullpen was taxed by picking up the additional innings.

The plan now is to use Eovaldi as a reliever once he returns from the injured list, which should be in the next 7-10 days. Eovaldi has pitched only four times in relief since 2012, so it’s uncertain how he will perform.

Presumably, president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski has more than that in mind to help a bullpen worn down by his preseason decision to replace the 128 innings pitched by free agents Joe Kelly and Craig Kimbrel last season by using assorted Triple A-level pitchers.

That left Matt Barnes, Ryan Brasier, Heath Hembree, and Brandon Workman to carry a heavy workload.

“We’re doing the best we can,” said Barnes, who has already made 40 appearances. “I’ll say that.”

Cora believes the Sox have survived the worst already.

“I think we do a good job of turning the page right away. It just hasn’t happened,” he said. “We’ve been talking about it the whole first half. We get going and we stop. We get going and we stop. There are a few games that we don’t play well, then we show flashes. You’ve just got to stay positive the whole time.

“I think the [players] have handled it well. We understand where we’re at. I think that’s the most important thing. Be honest with yourself; be transparent with yourself. We’ve got a long way to go to win the division. But I think if we stay with our short-term goals, big things are going to happen.”

Along with any roster enhancements, what will change the season — or not — will be Cora’s ability to get the players to buy into the idea that this season can be more than sneaking into the postseason, making a quick exit, and joining the long list of teams who haven’t been able to repeat as champions.

“They want to be great,” Cora said. “We’ve got a chance to be special, to be one of the greatest groups in this franchise. People are going to remember us. Right now it hasn’t happened. We haven’t played to the level we know we can. We know it’s going to change.

“We will play better. There’s a lot of confidence in the clubhouse.”

Improvements needed

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Dodgers will roll into Fenway looking for payback against Red Sox

Alex Speier

There will be no gradual build back from the All-Star break. The Red Sox, manager Alex Cora suggested, need to hit the ground in a dead sprint when play resumes on Friday night against the Dodgers — the same team that the Red Sox summarily dispatched in five World Series games less than nine months ago.

“You saw what happened in October,” Cora said on Sunday. “[The Dodgers] are going to be hungry, hungry to kick our ass so we better be ready for that.”

Apprised of the assessment, Dodgers infielder Max Muncy cracked a smile.

“Absolutely,” Muncy said at the All-Star Game. “That’s a very fair assessment. I would agree with that.”

Of course, for some members of the team, that sentiment is less about revenge for what transpired last October than a broader outlook that has prevailed on the Dodgers this year. Los Angeles owns a 60-32 record, easily the best in the majors. And after the team entered the break with three straight losses to the Padres — its first losing streak of more than two games since mid-April — it is trying to re-establish its edge.

“I would like to think that we would have that burning desire to kick everyone’s ass every time we take the field. I think that’s what’s made this team so good,” said Dodgers first-base coach George Lombard, who

spent several years as a Red Sox minor league coach and manager. “I think that’s why we’ve had some of the success we’ve had. We have really good players who want to win.”

That said, it doesn’t take much for the Dodgers to access recollections of what happened against the Red Sox last October. Pitcher Walker Buehler, who delivered seven shutout innings at the outset of the 18-inning Game 3 marathon, still relished his role in a World Series epic.

“I feel like I watched another game in the clubhouse,” said Buehler. “I don’t know if that will ever be done again. Obviously it was pretty cool to be a part of it.”

Muncy punctuated that contest with the walkoff homer against Nate Eovaldi to lead off the bottom of the 18th inning — for him, something akin to Carlton Fisk’s walkoff homer for the Red Sox in Game 6 of the 1975 World Series.

“I have the whole moment framed around my house. Any time I walk around my house, I can see it. It kind of gives me chills,” said Muncy. “It’s one of those moments I’ve kind of replayed in my head, and it’s a moment where I kind of wish I remembered more of it. When it all happened, it was kind of a blackout. There is about 30 minutes I can’t remember. I remember hitting the ball and the next thing I know, I was in the media room talking to the media. It all happened so quick. It was such a blur that I wish I could remember more of it. Until we win a World Series, it will be the most incredible moment of my career for sure.”

But, of course, the moment is also something of a reminder of what the Dodgers did not accomplish last October — and what the Red Sox did. Undoubtedly, the same will be true of the return to Fenway Park on Friday. That said, while some members of the Dodgers might experience an amplified hunger to win owing to the memories of the end of 2018, others mixed a desire to win with acknowledgement of the immutability of the past.

“We want to win every game, no doubt. But we can’t take back us losing the World Series,” said Clayton Kershaw. “We’d love to get in there, win three games, but it doesn’t really affect what happened last year. It’s over, but it doesn’t mean we’re not going to try to win.”

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox, Dodgers have a lot to prove in World Series rematch

Jason Mastrodonato

Here they go again.

The Red Sox and Dodgers, two of the biggest teams in baseball, will begin the second half in opposite dugouts Friday night at Fenway Park.

After managing against each other in a World Series that ended in just five games but was closer than that might suggest, Alex Cora and Dave Roberts faced off Tuesday in the All-Star Game.

Cora is the more decorated manager, given his 1-for-1 batting average as a big league skipper. But he’s only now facing adversity in this role for the first time.

Roberts has been here before. Over and over again.

The questions about his job security were fluid the last few years, including during the 2018 World Series, when President Trump criticized Roberts’ for making a “big mistake!” in Game 4. The Dodgers have made it to the World Series back-to-back years and lost both times. The best team in baseball at the break with a

60-32 record, Roberts' crew risks becoming the Buffalo Bills of baseball with another World Series loss in 2019.

He was asked about it in a recent interview with the Los Angeles Times, when he said, "We feel it every day, but it's something that's not talked about. It's like the best of all worlds. Because it's forefront of mind, but it's not talked about. But the work reflects it."

Roberts was given a four-year contract in the offseason.

On the other side, Cora, too, had his contract restructured for his benefit after the 2018 season.

But his team isn't off to a blazing-fast start. The Red Sox don't have three aces who made the All-Star team like the Dodgers do in Clayton Kershaw, Walker Buehler and Hyun-Jin Ryu. The Red Sox don't have a 23-year-old MVP front-runner like the Dodgers do in Cody Bellinger.

The Red Sox have a lot to prove in the second half.

They come out of the break winners of five of the last six, but 49-41 on the season. The Dodgers have cooled off, losing three in a row and seven of their last 13.

The oddsmakers still like Los Angeles: the Dodgers are favorites to win the World Series, with +270 betting odds (bet \$100 to win \$270), per Bovada. The Red Sox are long shots at +2500.

"We're a lot better than this," Cora said Sunday. "We are. We need to get better. We need to get better. There's a few things here that, although we finished strong and all that, they know it. They know it as a group. We have to be ready for Friday, and then we play 34 in 34 days after that, and we start with the Dodgers right away. It should be fun over the weekend. But I think we can be a lot better than this."

The Red Sox may have the weapons to neutralize the potent Dodgers offense.

Their biggest bats in Bellinger and Joc Pederson are left-handed hitters who clobber right-handed pitchers. As a team, their OPS against lefties is .787 compared with .818 vs. righties. Neither number is anything but stellar, but there is hope the Sox can limit the Dodgers bats by throwing three lefties in this series.

And that's what the Sox will do, sending Eduardo Rodriguez, David Price and Chris Sale to the mound, in that order, to try to get their team off to a hot start in the second half.

The Sox are just 17-25 against teams .500 or better this year.

"It's crunch time for us right now," Price said before the break. "Enjoy these next four days off and come back and ready to play against whoever we're playing against. The Dodgers. All right."

The Dodgers hit just .180 with a .550 OPS against the Red Sox in the World Series a year ago. A lot has changed since then, with the Red Sox admitting their attack plan as a pitching staff might need some adjustments as the rest of the league has caught on.

It all starts Friday, with a World Series rematch at Fenway that can shape the Red Sox' season.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Out of the break, Dodgers present a test for Red Sox

Bill Koch

Perhaps this is the ideal way for the Red Sox to exit the All-Star break.

Those looking for a measuring stick as to how competitive Boston will be the rest of the way will encounter one early. The Dodgers visit Fenway Park for a three-game series beginning on Friday night, a rematch of last year's World Series.

The Red Sox dismissed Los Angeles in five games, dropping an 18-inning thriller in Game 3 but dominating the rest of the action. The Dodgers are baseball's lone 60-win team thus far and appear headed for a third straight deep October run. The jury is still out on whether or not Boston can join them in pursuit of more glory.

"Those guys are playing great — at a high level," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said on Sunday afternoon. "A lot of intensity. A lot of emotion. So we've got to be ready for Friday. They'll let us know on Friday if [the break] was needed."

The Red Sox are on a four-game winning streak and at their high-water mark for the season at eight games over .500. Boston has been awaiting such momentum for the better part of three months, but the four-day rest for all but J.D. Martinez, Mookie Betts and Xander Bogaerts was welcomed. The Red Sox pitching staff was running on fumes after a three-city trip that included London, Toronto and Detroit.

"Whenever you win five out of six going into the break, a lot of times you want to keep playing and keep that momentum," David Price said on Sunday. "But I think everybody in here is ready for this break. We need this break. We need these four days off."

Boston's offense is back in familiar territory, topping the majors in batting average and on-base percentage and ranking inside the top four in the American League in runs per game, slugging percentage and OPS. Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and Christian Vazquez have emerged as reliable threats in what suddenly appears to be a deep lineup.

"We started struggling a little bit, but that's the fun of this game," Vazquez said. "Make adjustments and play better. We're very close."

On the mound is where the Red Sox simply must be better. Price is the lone regular starter with an earned-run average below 4.00. Eventually slotting Nathan Eovaldi into the bullpen when he returns from the injured list is a significant gamble that could swing the season for better or worse.

"Everybody resets," Cora said. "That's the most important thing. You disconnect yourself a little bit and get ready for Friday."

Boston's front office also will be tasked with some tough decisions prior to the July 31 trade deadline. The Red Sox are about \$6.5 million under the final threshold of the Collective Balance Tax, and exceeding it again this season would cost both draft position and heavy financial penalties. Boston would seem to require at least another bullpen arm to bolster its depth, and that might be just the start.

Whether or not the Red Sox will lose their grip on the American League East title could be determined by the first full week of August. Boston plays 14 straight games against the Yankees and Rays beginning on July 22 and sits 10 games adrift of New York in the loss column. How the Red Sox deal with this upcoming stretch of the schedule will speak volumes about their potential going forward, and that test begins on Friday.

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox's Bogaerts offers Betts advice on approaching free agency, All-Star Game recap & more

Chris Cotillo

Even in the middle of a pennant race, it's hard for the future to not creep into the minds of the Red Sox's best players.

Boston's roster is likely to undergo extensive change in the next two years as many key players hit free agency. Rick Porcello, J.D. Martinez (if he opts out) and Mitch Moreland will hit the open market after this season and Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. are free agents after 2020.

Betts, the reigning A.L. MVP, is obviously the prize of that group. And while he doesn't like going deep into his thought process with free agency just over a year away, one of his teammates offered some advice earlier this week.

Xander Bogaerts, who entered the season as a pending free agent before signing a 6-year extension in early April, had some words of wisdom for his friend and teammate earlier this week.

"Try not to think about it," Bogaerts said. "Try not to think about it as much. It's hard. It's hard, but try not to. Obviously go out there and continue competing and trying to be productive."

Betts will be one of the headliners in a 2020 class that will also include catcher J.T. Realmuto, shortstop Andrelton Simmons, outfielder George Springer and righty Trevor Bauer. An avid NBA fan with friends throughout baseball, Betts downplayed the notion that baseball players could look to team up in free agency like their basketball counterparts have this winter.

"Not that I'm aware of," Betts said. "I don't know about that."

If Martinez does opt out this winter, the Red Sox will have six players-- Martinez, Porcello, Moreland, Brock Holt, Eduardo Nunez and Steve Pearce-- hit the open market. The changes to the team would be much more drastic than they were last winter, when Craig Kimbrel, Joe Kelly and Ian Kinsler were the only contributors to sign elsewhere.

Bogaerts hopes the Sox are able to keep as many of their free agents as possible but acknowledged the likelihood the team looks much different a year from now.

"I haven't thought about it that way but you might have a point," Bogaerts said. "It has been fun. I know we have a lot of guys on our team from the minor leagues, too. Obviously with J.D., he has been one of the big influences on our team. It will be interesting to see at the end of the year what happens. Hopefully, there's a way we can all remain together. That would be ideal."

Cleveland owns All-Star Game festivities

Every city that hosts an All-Star Game tries to make the event its own, to varying degrees of success. Cleveland, which hosted its first Midsummer Classic since 1997 this week, did a fabulous job in that regard.

This All-Star Game truly belonged to Cleveland, as almost all of the memorable moments Tuesday night were related to the city's baseball history. Michael Brantley's warm reception in his return to town, the touching tributes to Carlos Carrasco and CC Sabathia and the fact an Indian (righty Shane Bieber) won All-Star Game MVP were the moments of the night.

Vlad Guerrero Jr.'s power display in the Home Run Derby aside, there weren't a lot of big moments throughout the festivities. Unless you're from Cleveland, of course.

10 observations from the last week in baseball

1. The fact the Red Sox are pushing hard to acquire starting pitching is not surprising. The team's decision to shift Nathan Eovaldi to the bullpen shows Dave Dombrowski and Co. believe the starting market is stronger than the relief market at this point.
2. The Sox had no choice but to release Tyler Thornburg once his rehab was up. Much overdue, but Thornburg is a good guy who will likely get another chance elsewhere.
3. Astros-Rangers being the only game on Thursday's slate was weird. Tough break for those teams, getting one fewer day of rest during the break than every other team.
4. Who would have guessed Matthew Boyd would be one of the top trade candidates this summer? The lefty, who is under control through 2022, is drawing widespread interest.
5. Zack Wheeler is almost definitely going to be traded, and potentially soon. He's the kind of guy teams likely view as being a fix or two away from becoming a top-line starter.
6. Will be interesting to see if Jake Arrieta is fined for his desire to "put a dent" in the skull of Mets infielder Todd Frazier. Seems likely from here.
7. Hard to believe, but the Dodgers are about to get even stronger with Corey Seager, A.J. Pollock and David Freese coming off the IL. Of course, Los Angeles being a regular season juggernaut is old news at this point. Late October is the big test.
8. Fenway Park could soon be due for an All-Star Game after a hiatus that will last at least 22 years. 2022-- for the 110-year anniversary of the park-- could make sense.
9. The trade deadline is three weeks away and nothing has happened since the Edwin Encarnacion-to-the-Yankees deal. That's surprising.
10. Joe Kelly could have some interesting comments about free agency and the state of the Red Sox bullpen this weekend at Fenway Park. The righty owns an 0.73 ERA since June 1.

Worcester Red Sox: Polar Park to feature state of the art development facilities for Boston prospects, rehabbing players

Matt Vautour

For good reason, much of the discussion of Polar Park, the new home of Boston's Triple-A affiliate in Worcester that's scheduled to open in April 2021, has focused on the fans and the city.

Club officials have promoted the unique fan experience the park and the team, which is relocating from Pawtucket, will provide for fans and the potential economic opportunities it will create for the city.

But creating a ballpark from scratch offers the Boston Red Sox franchise to create a state of the art resources to help prepare their prospects for play in the Major Leagues and rehabbing members of the big league club a facility to maximize their recovery to get back to Boston.

Things like medical treatment areas, strength and conditioning apparatuses, video and indoor baseball equipment that aren't as available in Pawtucket or in some cases even Boston, will be included in areas of the park many fans will never see.

"There are several members of the Red Sox organization here," said Larry Lucchino, the president of the Pawtucket/Worcester Red Sox. "They recognize how important this cog can be in the player development in the system. They're an active part in the planning process of this ballpark."

Ben Crockett, the Red Sox vice president for player development, was one member of the Boston brass in Worcester's Canal District Thursday for the Polar Park ground breaking.

"I'm really excited about the opportunities here for development," Crockett said. "To be able to provide state of the art medical facilities and strength and conditioning facilities as well as being able to move ahead with some of the technological advances the fans will see, we're going reap the benefits. There'll be video systems and other types of technology that are present or will be at that time.

"There's been a lot of emphasis in the industry on player welfare - from nutrition to sleep to physical care," Crockett added. "A lot of those things are the talking points we've had with Larry (Lucchino, Worcester/Pawtucket Red Sox president) and his team throughout this process. We want to go above and beyond and serve the needs of the next generation of player, from 2021 and beyond, not just things done by ballparks that have come before us."

The part is slated to be open for the April 2021 baseball season.

Red Sox president Sam Kennedy said the park would be a useful resource for players at all levels of the organization both in and out of season.

"The ballpark will provide benefit for our Triple-A guys, our guys being promoted from Double-A, but also our Major League guys who stay in Boston for the winter. Larry has been talking about building out some facilities that guys might be able to use," Kennedy said. "We're a little bit challenged for space at Fenway. Having a well-oiled machine at the Triple-A level is extremely important. When we got here in 2002, (owners) John (Henry) and Tom (Werner) wanted to build a scouting and player development apparatus second to none. Having a Triple-A franchise playing in a new ballpark is really helpful. Training, the ability to work indoors all winter long with facilities we might not have at Fenway would be one example."

Kennedy said when deciding the parameters they wanted to include, the team studied mostly MLB stadiums not minor league parks, hoping to create a Major League facility in a smaller package. Jet Blue Park, the Red Sox Spring Training home was also utilized.

"You want to have a Major League feel in the park. By the time guys get to Triple A, you could be throwing the seventh inning one night in Worcester and then closing out a game in the big leagues the next night," Kennedy said. "You want to have the feel if you can."

Motioning to the huge crowd of people attending the groundbreaking, Crockett said, the apparent interest from fans in Worcester will help prepare players for what they'll experience if they're promoted.

"The excitement in the community is something we're excited about," he said. "The energy from 10,000 screaming fans, supportive fans, knowledgeable fans, critical fans, as we continue to build our player development system we're always trying to emulate what players are going to face in Boston.

Mitch Moreland injury: Boston Red Sox first baseman starts rehab assignment

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox first baseman Mitch Moreland began a rehab assignment at Triple-A Pawtucket on Thursday night, going 0-for-4 with a strikeout as the designated hitter.

Moreland hadn't seen game action since June 7, when he exited a loss to the Rays with pain in his right quad. He was diagnosed with a right quad strain and has missed a full month of action.

Moreland has played just one game since May 25, spending time on the injured list with a low back strain before hurting his quad in his first game back. With Steve Pearce also out, Michael Chavis has taken over

as Boston's first baseman with Marco Hernandez, Brock Holt and Eduardo Nunez contributing at second base.

It's unclear how long Moreland will need, though his rehab stint could be a bit lengthy considering how long he missed. When he does return, the Red Sox will have to decide whether to option Hernandez to the minors or part ways with Nunez.

Boston will start the unofficial second half of the season Friday night against the Dodgers. First pitch is scheduled for 7:10 p.m.

Red Sox trade deadline: Triston Casas, 2 other top prospects should be considered untouchables

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox are pursuing a starting pitcher and "would prefer to act sooner rather than later," The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal reported earlier this week.

Every team has its own list of untouchable prospects who they refuse to trade unless the perfect deal is presented. Yoan Moncada and Michael Kopech were as close to untouchable as any prospects in recent Red Sox history, but president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski made the right call when he traded them and two others for Chris Sale, who then had three years remaining on his contract.

The Red Sox are in an interesting spot. Their farm system is ranked 30th, but that doesn't mean they lack prospects who other organizations want.

Shop around for Red Sox gear: Fanatics.com, Dick's Sporting Goods, Champs Sports, MLB.com, Lids

The Sox have been extremely inconsistent with a 17-25 record against teams with a .500 winning percentage or better. They are 32-16 against teams with a below .500 record. Why should Dombrowski trade top-five organizational prospects — and gut the farm system even more — just for a chance to compete for the second Wild Card and then remain unable to beat the best teams come the postseason?

The Red Sox should be reluctant to trade multiple players, especially Triston Casas, Bobby Dalbec, Darwinson Hernandez, Tanner Houck and Josh Taylor.

Ty Buttrey wasn't even a top 10 Red Sox prospect when Boston dealt him for Ian Kinsler last year. He has emerged as one of the major's most valuable relievers here in 2019. The Red Sox need to do a better job of evaluating their own talent.

Casas, Dalbec and Mata should be considered untouchable.

The Red Sox have experienced the most difficulty the past decade developing power hitters and starting pitchers. Casas and Dalbec have tremendous power. Mata has the most potential of any Red Sox minor league starting pitcher.

Triston Casas

Casas, the 26th overall pick in the 2018 draft, is slashing .261/.344/.514/.858 with 17 homers, 15 doubles and four triples in 77 games at Low-A Greenville. He's tied with three others for the second most home runs in the South Atlantic League.

Casas, who's listed at 6-foot-4, 238-pounds, already stands taller than J.D. Martinez (6-3, 232 pounds).

He doesn't turn 20 until Jan. 15. He was playing high school baseball a little more than one year ago. The transition isn't easy.

Boston selected Michael Chavis 26th overall in 2014. Chavis showed some legit power during his age 19 season at Greenville, bashing 16 homers, 29 doubles, one triple and driving in 58 runs in 101 games. But he slashed only .223/.277/.405/.682 and had a strikeout percentage of 30.6%.

Casas strikeout percentage of 25.6% is high as well. But it has decreased as the season has progressed. He struck out 31 times in 88 plate appearances (35.2%) during April. He has struck out 51 times in 232 plate appearances since May 1 for a 21.9% strikeout rate.

His potential is off the charts. He didn't start the season on Baseball America's Top 100. He's now listed at 90.

Bobby Dalbec

Dalbec, who turned 24 on June 29, leads the Eastern League with 19 home runs. Martinez and Dalbec were the only two hitters in the Red Sox organization to drive in 100 or more runs last year.

He's batting only .229 but his batting average on balls in plays (.268) shows he has experienced some bad luck. It's 40 points lower than his career batting average on balls in play (.308).

The 2016 fourth round draft pick out of the University of Arizona isn't concerned about batting average — and he shouldn't be. He ranks seventh in the Eastern League in on-base percentage (.370). That's much more important.

"For me, walking is just as good as a hit because I'm getting on base," Dalbec said. "Obviously it would be nice to see it high and it looks cool. But if I'm getting on base more than someone who's hitting .300 or so, I'd take the on-base percentage."

His strikeout percentage remains high (27.7%), but it's down from 37.7% in 29 games at Portland last year.

His walk percentage of 16.3% is above his career mark (9.2%).

Strikeouts are fine in certain situations. He understands the importance of putting the ball in play with runners in scoring position. He also is a new-age hitter who embraces analytics.

He's No. 98 on Baseball America's Top 100.

Bryan Mata

Mata just turned 20 but he already is pitching at Double-A Portland.

He began the year at High-A Salem where he posted a 3-1 record, 1.75 ERA, 1.09 WHIP and .201 batting average against in nine starts. He has allowed six earned runs in 9 2/3 innings in his two starts since his promotion to Portland. He allowed just one run in 6 innings during his first start but he struggled in his second start.

He has a fastball that ranges from 95-98 mph. He also added a slider this year.

"It's just that weapon that creates that four-pitch mix," Red Sox vice president of pitching development Brian Bannister told MassLive.com in June. "It's something he didn't have last year. And he also was kind of wavering between a four-seamer and two-seamer. So now he's got this really strong two-seam slider mix in addition to the curve and change. Just able to attack the zone more confidently."

Mata is averaging 9.1 strikeouts per nine innings, an increase from 7.6 last year. His walk rate is at 3.4, down from 7.3 last year.

He has reestablished himself as Boston's No. 1 pitching prospect after beginning the year behind Hernandez and Jay Groome.

The Red Sox also should be reluctant to trade Hernandez and Houck who both recently were moved to the bullpen. Dombrowski believes they could help the 2019 Red Sox bullpen. Both pitchers could return to starting next year.

David Ortiz shooting: Longtime Boston Red Sox DH undergoes third surgery 'for complications resulting from his gunshot wound'

Christopher Smith

David Ortiz underwent a third surgery earlier this week as he recovers at Mass. General from a gunshot wound suffered in the Dominican Republic on June 9.

Ortiz was shot in the lower back as he sat at an outdoor table at the Dial Bar and Lounge in Santo Domingo.

Ortiz's wife Tiffany Ortiz released a statement Thursday morning:

"Earlier this week, David underwent a third surgery for complications resulting from his gunshot wound. The operation was performed by Dr. David King at Massachusetts General Hospital. David is recovering well and is in good spirits.

"We continue to be incredibly appreciative of the kindness and compassion shown to David and to our entire family during this difficult time."

Ortiz underwent his first surgery in the Dominican Republic on the night of the shooting. His gallbladder and parts of his liver and intestines were removed during the six-hour procedure.

He then underwent an exploratory surgery after being transported to Mass. General in an air ambulance June 10.

*** *The Portland Press Herald***

As second half begins, can the Red Sox be great again?

Kevin Thomas

The Boston Red Sox are 49-41 at the All-Star break, 12 games behind their front-running pace of last year.

But the team's media department chimed in with optimism, with its daily notes:

Fact: Of the past 19 World Series winners, five were 49-41 or worse through their first 90 games.

Translation: There is hope.

Fact: After starting the season, 11-17, the Red Sox are 38-24 (and 15-7 in their last 22 games).

Translation: This is a team on the move.

But Red Sox fans can also put together their own, glass-half-empty set of numbers.

Facts: The Red Sox are tied for first in the American League in blown saves (18), and are the worst in save percentage (50 percent; 18 saves out of 36 chances). Also, the relievers rank eighth in ERA (4.44) and the starters ninth (4.70).

Translation: Boston needs more arms.

As Boston emerges from the All-Star break – playing the Dodgers Friday in suddenly-unfriendly Fenway – the Red Sox are a good team. Can they be great?

Here are some signs to watch.

RELIEF FOR THE RELIEVERS: It is not a secret that the bullpen is worn down. Brandon Workman (43 games), Ryan Brasier (41), Matt Barnes (40) and Marcus Walden (36) all show positive glimpses and then ... not so good.

Workman has a 1.79 ERA, but also four blown saves. Brasier (3.58/three blown saves), Barnes (4.62/six) and Walden (3.75/three) also struggle. Barnes can look lights-out (67 strikeouts) but he tires. His ERA when pitching with no days' rest is 9.00. Walden began strong, but has a 7.20 ERA over June and July.

The pen could use dependable depth to lighten the load. Heath Hembree coming off the injured list should help, but the Red Sox are counting on another rebound from Nathan Eovaldi. The starter who has undergone two Tommy John surgeries, is coming back from a less-invasive elbow surgery in April. Instead of taking more time to stretch him out as a starter, Boston plans to use Eovaldi in relief. He has been throwing off the mound, but has yet to make any rehab appearances.

Steven Wright is back from his suspension. He can be streaky with his knuckleball, but maybe he provides some respite for the pen.

Internally, Boston has possible – read, uncertain – remedies. Mike Shawaryn gave up one earned run in his first six appearances, but 11 in his next two (including eight in a London outing). He needs another chance. Travis Lakins (5.79) has yet to get on a roll.

Darwinzon Hernandez has been moved to the Pawtucket, hoping to balance his impressive stuff with some control. In Portland, Tanner Houck has also been moved to the pen. If he or Durbin Feltman get going, Boston may beckon.

As for the trade market, dependable (and available) relievers will not come cheap. Shane Greene (Tigers) and Will Smith (Giants) are among the names that would intrigue Boston. But how much is able/willing to offer in return.

BOSTON'S ABILITY to trade has been lessened by Dave Dombrowski's previous trades. Boston's best prospects are corner infielder/power hitters Bobby Dalbec and Triston Casas, and starting pitcher Bryan Mata. Dalbec leads the Double-A Eastern League in home runs (19), and Casas (15) is second in the low Class A South Atlantic League, even though this is Casas' first pro season. Mata, 20, just reached Portland and is Boston's next best chance for a homegrown starter out of the farm system.

The Red Sox would have to score a huge return to give up any of those three.

A potential trading chip is Sea Dogs shortstop C.J. Chatham, who is batting .318. With Xander Bogaerts in Boston, the Red Sox could make Chatham available (although they recently are trying him out at second base).

Dalbec and Chatham will be eligible for the Major League Rule V draft this December, if Boston does not put them on the 40-man roster.

One more reminder about trades: MLB did away with waiver-wire trades in August. July 31 is the hard deadline for any deals.

STARTING PITCHING was supposed to be a strength. David Price is the only dependable starter. If Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez and Rick Porcello got in gear, Boston could think about closing that nine-game gap between the first-place Yankees, instead of thinking only of the wild card.

A fifth starter will also help, and that appears to be Dombrowski's focus for a trade. Wouldn't it be nice to land a lefty like Madison Bumgarner (a free agent next year) or Detroit's Matthew Boyd (3.87 ERA; arbitration eligible next year with the rebuilding Tigers)?

Another seller will be the Mets and some media reports have Boston looking into right-hander Zack Wheeler, who should not cost much considering his free-agent status next year, and his 4.69 ERA.

HOME FIELD "advantage" would be nice, if the Red Sox used it. They are 20-20 at Fenway. On Friday, the Dodgers come to town. Last year, when L.A. visited Fenway, the Red Sox showcased a team worthy of a championship.

As for 2019 ...

*** *WEEI.com***

Tony La Russa on D&K: Deadline deal for rental 'probably doesn't make a lot of sense for our club'

Amin Touri

Making an appearance on Dale & Keefe on WEEI on Thursday, Tony La Russa, special assistant to Red Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, discussed the team's pitching needs and the state of the farm system ahead of the MLB trade deadline with guest hosts Marc James and Andy Hart.

La Russa, a three-time World Series champion as a manager with the Athletics and Cardinals, addressed the organization's current lack of prospect depth, suggesting that a big trade for a rental at the deadline might not make sense for the club.

"You're asking my opinion, I'll give it to you: I've been down for two years now in spring training, observing (prospects), we're definitely stocking the minor leagues again with legitimate prospects, and we do have a process if you want to make a deal," La Russa said. "But I know that there's a very strong sentiment that this is a good time to rebuild and refresh our minor leagues so we can keep making deals in the future, and if you want to try and make a one-shot deal for a guy that's a free agent or something and give up some prospects, that probably doesn't make a lot of sense for our club."

There have been plenty of rumors floating around, from Boston making a move for a guy like Zack Wheeler to bolster the rotation or a deal to patch up a struggling bullpen — though, one that should be helped by the addition of Nathan Eovaldi — but La Russa is hesitant.

"I'm not the guy that makes the final call," he said. "But, I think you've got to be very careful, now that you're starting to rebuild the minor leagues, with making a deal that's going to strip us again and the only benefit you get is the rest of the year."

Dombrowski has developed a bit of a reputation for rinsing the farm system for big deals, his most notable move in Boston coming at the 2016 Winter Meetings when he dealt four prospects, most notably Yoan Moncada and Michael Kopech, to the White Sox for Chris Sale. La Russa did point out, however, that that move served an ultimate goal, while the team still has plenty of homegrown talent out on the field.

"I think what's happening was, as you know we've made some prospect deals the last three or four years, and that's what provided three straight playoff appearances plus a World Series," said La Russa. "The other thing too, which I think is kind of unfair when the experts look at it, if you look at our ballclub that's on the field, whether it's at shortstop, third baseman, the outfielders, those are all products of the minor leagues, and they're all young guys in their 20s. We have made some deals, there have been some prospects traded, but the results have been that we've got a very complete roster."

The pitching deficiencies however, both in the bullpen and in the starting rotation, have been well-documented, and according to La Russa, their struggles have only compounded each other.

"I think that the decision, I think it was a smart decision, was that you put a lot of resources behind our starting rotation, not just for this year but for several years forward," La Russa said. "Now, the point of the starting rotation, and this is something that I think will be true in the second half of the season, is for the starter to go into the last third of the game, get through six (innings) and into the seventh. And the point I'm making is that we haven't done that the first half of the year, for whatever reason, we've had a couple of setbacks here and there, and we're mostly getting like five innings, which has really stressed the bullpen.

"If — not if, when we get our starters to get deeper, then you'll see that guys are out there, when they've been fresh and not worn out, they're capable of finishing the game, and a lot of us are very excited that Nathan Eovaldi is going to be a part of that."

Which 2019 draft picks have Red Sox signed?

Amin Touri

A little over a month removed from the 2019 MLB Draft, the Red Sox are wrapping up pick signings with the deadline on Friday, and with the team's bonus pool close to dried up, there likely won't be any more big signings.

The good news for Boston is that the team's top 10 picks have all signed, most notably Cameron Cannon (for a \$1.3 million signing bonus), Matthew Lugo (\$1.1 million), Ryan Zeferjahn (\$500,000) and Noah Song (\$100,000).

Cannon and Lugo, both second-round picks last month, are starting their professional careers in rookie ball in the Gulf Coast League. Cannon made his debut on Wednesday, striking out twice, while Lugo has logged eight games in Fort Myers.

The highest pick not to sign was North Andover product Sebastian Keane, who chose to honor his commitment to Northeastern with the Red Sox lacking enough bonus money to offer Keane enough to entice him to go pro.

After Keane, Boston's 12th round pick, Brendan Cellucci, has yet to sign and told the New Orleans Times-Picayune in June that "what the Red Sox want to do is have me go to the Cape and pitch more in front of them and then get together a contract that would be sufficient," though a contract hasn't materialized in the month since those comments.

A 13th-rounder, Blake Loubier picked up a \$500,000 signing bonus to join the organization rather than attend Wake Forest, but the three college commits that followed him, Jordan Beck, Aaron Roberts and Oraj Anu, are all yet to sign and likely won't considering the team's lack of remaining bonus money.

The Red Sox managed to lock up most of their later round picks, most notably Alex Erro, Jacob Herbert, Reed Harrington and Leon Paulino, each receiving a \$125,000 bonus for their signature.

Dallas Baptist outfielder Luke Bandy, chosen with the 887th overall selection in the 29th round, is currently the latest pick that Boston has signed. The team made 11 more selections, six of whom aren't signing and five of whom remain question marks.

The Red Sox also signed a trio of undrafted free agents in pitchers Zach Schneider, Mason Duke and Casey Sutherland.

The deadline to sign picks is 5 p.m. Eastern time on Friday, July 12.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

American League All-Stars marvel at Rafael Devers' growth at the plate

John Tomase

The batter's box routine may not rival Nomar Garciaparra's for obsessive intricacy, but it's more revealing, because it's effectively an inner monologue come to life.

Throw Rafael Devers a ball just a little off the plate and he might purse his lips and nod. Throw him a strike and he might smile, grimace, laugh, groan or some combination thereof. He berates himself in English. He scolds himself in Spanish. He'll even whack himself on the visor with his bat.

But watch this one-man act a little more closely, and what stands out is the coda, as White Sox All-Star catcher James McCann explains.

"He's a character, and his talent is off the charts," McCann said this week in Cleveland. "It's interesting to see the things he says to himself, the hitting himself in the head, but the one thing I noticed that he does is he always takes a deep breath and calms himself and relaxes himself. And then he's ready to hit."

All-Star closers on being linked to Sox in trade rumors

Is he ever. That final exaggerated breath — Devers' barrel chest heaving like an oil derrick — brings his primary responsibility into focus, which is annihilating the baseball. And since the start of May, few have done it better, establishing Devers as one of the game's brightest young stars and a primary driver of Boston's World Series title defense.

Devers owned a middling .748 OPS on May 3 when he finally launched his first home run of the season. All he has done in 53 starts since is hit .338 with 16 home runs, 52 RBIs, and a 1.003 OPS.

His performance has certainly caught the eyes of the best pitchers in the American League, who raved about his future this week at the All-Star Game, which could be the last one not featuring Devers for a while.

"We caught him when he wasn't quite hot, so I don't have the best — impression's not the right word, but recollection of how he was doing," said A's closer Liam Hendriks. "Now I look back at how he was doing when we were there and then all of a sudden you look up and he's leading the league in damn near everything."

While that's not technically true — Devers doesn't actually lead the AL in anything — he's climbing leaderboards all over the offensive spectrum. The American League's Player of the Month for May, Devers ranks third in batting average (.324), third in runs (69), third in doubles (25), sixth in RBIs (62), and fifth in offensive WAR (3.4). And it feels like he's only getting started.

Complications lead to third surgery for Ortiz

He's hitting .432 with four homers and 14 RBIs since moving to the No. 2 spot in the order on June 25, a span of 10 games. It's no coincidence that that's when the Red Sox started scoring in the first inning again after a three-month deep freeze.

"When we were at Fenway, he was getting real hot," said White Sox ace Lucas Giolito. "He swings super hard, but what impressed me was the discipline, especially how old he is. His approach to hitting is pretty advanced. He's already a star. He's going to continue to be more and more of a star."

Opponents marvel at Devers' combination of power, confidence, and youth.

"How old is he? 22? He's not even baseball-savvy yet," McCann said. "His experience is only going to make him better. To see the talent that he's got and what he's doing right now and the numbers he's putting up, and he's only been in the league for two years? Wait until he's had experience and faced pitchers for five or six years. He's going to draw on those experiences plus his talent. He's going to be a special player."

Stroman details his bromance with David Price

Indians closer Brad Hand is one of the toughest left-on-left pitchers in baseball, with only six hits allowed to left-handed hitters all season. Devers owns one of them, a not-trying-to-do-too-much single to left that brought the go-ahead run to the plate in the ninth inning of Cleveland's 7-5 win on May 28.

"He stayed on everything against me, kind of just used left field against me," Hand said. "I faced him in Boston, just went the other way to left field. He's tough on lefties. He's a good hitter against other left-handed pitchers. He's put in the work. He's a tough AB."

Another left-hander, Rangers starter Mike Minor, held him hitless in three at-bats but still came away impressed. He especially noticed Devers' improvement at the plate and in the field, where he made nine errors in the first five weeks, but has been charged with just three since.

"From last year to this year, he's been even better," Minor said. "From seeing him make plays in the field, last year he made a lot of errors, maybe he wasn't as good. I think he's been working that side of his game, and he obviously has power."

The moment that stands out for Minor came in Devers' 2017 debut, when he turned around a 103-mph fastball from Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman and blasted it out the other way.

"He's not intimidated of anyone on the mound," Minor said. "We saw that a couple of years ago with Chapman when he takes him deep. He obviously doesn't care who you are or what you throw, which is a big factor in this league. Some guys get intimidated by a name or the stature of who they're facing, but not him."

That lack of fear translates to a more disciplined, less defensive approach.

"His biggest issue had always been pitch selection and chasing stuff, but talking to some of their guys they said he cut it down," Hendricks noted. "If you throw something and he chases it, he won't chase it again. I remembered that a little bit, because I threw him a couple good sliders, which he took. He's got that aggressive swing, and if he can continue to get on the ball and not swing at balls, the guy's going to be a good hitter for a long time."

When the White Sox saw Devers for the first time in May, he had yet to homer. That changed in the second game of their series when he took Reynaldo Lopez deep. He ended up going 6 for 15 to end that series and hasn't stopped hitting since.

Rave reviews for Sox trade target Wheeler

"The thing that was impressive to me, when he faced him the first time, his average was up there, but he didn't have a lot of power," McCann said. "I didn't see him overswinging, I didn't see him try to hit for power. I remember thinking, 'Hey this kid has a good approach. He's riding out his base hits and the power's going to come,' and the next thing we know we see him two months later, and he's going on 15 homers or whatever he's got. A lot of guys would've freaked out and said I've got to hit homers and the next thing you know their average is at .210 and they've got three homers. He stayed the course and he's hitting .320 with 15."

"He's one of those guys that hits the ball all over the ballpark. He'll go oppo with authority. He'll pull the ball with authority, and he'll also take his singles the other way. That's something that makes it tough to call a game against, because he does cover the plate extremely well."

The challenge for the rest of baseball will be containing him. That's easier said than done, especially while Devers psyches himself up in the box with a running commentary that is a show unto itself. Even rivals who know he can do damage acknowledge his importance to the future of the game.

"He's a fun-loving player," said Astros right-hander Gerrit Cole. "He hits in big moments. He seems like a fun-loving personality that's engaging, and that's always nice to see."

*** *BostonSportsJournal.com***

First series of second half will remind Red Sox how far they've fallen

Sean McAdam

As the Red Sox prepare to resume their heretofore disappointing 2019 season, their opponents in the first series following the All-Star break will provide them with a sober reminder of what's gone wrong.

The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Sox' opponents in the 2018 World Series just 10 months ago, arrive at Fenway with the best record in either league. While the Red Sox study how to get themselves back into playoff contention — they'll enter the second half two games behind the second wild-card spot in the American League — the Dodgers can start printing playoff tickets.

The Dodgers own a massive 13.5-game lead over second-place Arizona in the National League West, a cushion that is the biggest of any division leader in the game. The start of the postseason is better than two and a half months away, but for now, the Dodgers must be considered strong favorites to win their third straight N.L. pennant.

At the very least, a seventh straight N.L. West title appears to be a certainty.

In sharp contrast, the Red Sox face a far less obvious fate. A fourth straight division title, while not mathematically impossible, is highly improbable, given the nine-game deficit they face in relation to the front-running New York Yankees. And even while a wild-card spot is within their grasp, it's far from assured. Moreover, such a path to the postseason guarantees nothing more than a one-game, win-or-go home opportunity.

So, what happened? How did the team which ran roughshod over its opponent last October (total runs: 28-16) come to struggle so much? And how did the vanquished team come to overcome a second straight World Series defeat to dominate its league?

Let's begin, as is always prudent, with pitching.

While the highly-paid Boston rotation has underachieved and ranks only in the middle of A.L. staffs, the Dodgers have compiled the lowest rotation ERA (3.06) in the N.L. and second-best in baseball, behind only Tampa Bay.

Boston's ace Chris Sale (3-8, 4.04) has been thoroughly inconsistent, while the Dodgers' staff leader, Clayton Kershaw, while not necessarily dominant, is 7-2 with a 3.09 ERA. Meanwhile, while only David Price (3.33) has an ERA under 4.00 in the Boston rotation, the Dodgers don't have a single starter with an ERA higher than 3.79.

Tellingly, while the Dodgers starters have logged 536 innings to date (in two more games played), the Red Sox starters have contributed just 465.1 innings. Per game, that translates into a 5.17 inning average for the Sox and 5.83 for the Dodgers.

(Admittedly, comparing teams in different leagues is a trick proposition. Dodger Stadium is known as one of the best pitchers' ballparks in baseball and the N.L. doesn't feature the DH, making for a far easier experience for opposing pitchers).

Another big difference is the current gap between the team's two best position players, both right fielders as it happens. While Mookie Betts has experienced a significant drop-off from his 2018 A.L. MVP season (1.078 OPS in 2018; .859 this season), Cody Bellinger has enjoyed a breakout season with a 1.124 OPS. Bellinger leads MLB in OPS+ and total bases and leads the NL in runs scored. He's the clear favorite to win his league's MVP.

Neither team made radical changes to its roster in the offseason, and the additions that have been made to each have contributed only minimally.

The Red Sox lost free agent infielder Ian Kinsler and relievers Joe Kelly and Craig Kimbrel, while retaining free agents Steve Pearce and Nathan Eovaldi. Pearce slumped through the first two and a half months before being lost to first, a back injury, and more recently, a knee problem. Eovaldi made four mostly poor starts and has been out since late April with elbow and biceps issues.

The Dodgers, meanwhile, lost free agent catcher Yasmani Grandal while signing Kelly and outfielder A.J. Pollock as free agents. Kelly (5.28 ERA; 1.565 WHIP) has been a massive disappointment and Pollock has missed most of the season after undergoing elbow surgery.

Essentially, then, these are very much the same teams that met on the World Series stage in October. The defections have been slight and the influx of new talent negligible. Rookie Michael Chavis has been a pleasant surprise at second base and first base while the Dodgers welcomed back shortstop Corey Seager, who played only 26 games last year before undergoing Tommy John surgery.

Now that the Red Sox' offense has been revitalized (they rank third in runs scored-per-game at the All-Star break), they can only hope that their pitching staff will enjoy a similar turnaround in the second half — with or without reinforcements from outside the organization.

In the meantime, they'll spend the weekend trying to determine how it is that they've declined so precipitously since the last time they were on the field with their opponents.

*** *The Athletic***

Separating the scruff from the chops: Ranking the beards of the Red Sox pitching staff

Chad Jennings

On the day he was traded, Colten Brewer knew expectations had changed. To fit in with the Red Sox pitching staff, he would have to maintain strength, show consistency, and put in the work to keep himself sharp. Only a select few can get by with true sloppiness around here. Brewer knew that.

If he was going to pitch for the Red Sox, his beard had to be on point.

"I noticed that, yeah," the rookie reliever said. "On TV and stuff, watching the playoffs, they all had the playoff beards going, you know, even though it could have been a season beard, anyway. They all had one going."

That's the reality of this pitching staff. Most strikeouts in the league, best facial hair in the game. From top-of-the-rotation aces to middle-inning relievers, these guys throw and grow.

At any given moment, there have been as many as 17 pitchers in the clubhouse — 13 on the active roster, up to four more on the Injured List — and a total of 18 have thrown at least 10 innings. All but one has worn considerable facial hair. The lone holdout has been one of the relatively new guys, Ryan Weber, who can go a week without shaving and not have much to show for it. You've heard of a 5 o'clock shadow?

"I've got the seven-day shadow," Weber said.

As the second half begins, it's time to separate the scruff from the chops. With input from 21 people — nearly every pitcher on the staff, plus some other beard aficionados in the clubhouse, including the gray-bearded pitching coach — The Athletic presents its official ranking of the Red Sox pitching staff beards. There were no advanced metrics to create this list. We leaned heavily on subjective analysis, expert opinion and whatever consensus we could find within the clubhouse.

And no consensus was stronger than this one:

"Not Eddie's, I know that."

"It's not Eddie."

"It's definitely not Ed."

"Eddie has the worst."

"Not Eddie, that's fair. That's very fair."

Poor Eduardo Rodriguez. His beard grows strictly below the jaw line so that his face is a vast desert on the edge of a dangling forest. He doesn't have a beard so much as a chin curtain. Add in the fact Rodriguez is often the butt of pitching staff jokes anyway, and poking fun became an irresistible temptation. Four of the above quotes were the very first things out of pitchers' mouths.

The consensus worst-in-class beard of Eduardo Rodriguez. (Kim Klement / USA Today)

A similar dynamic played out a different way for Brandon Workman. His beard is objectively impressive — "He's got that Texas hunter (look) down to a tee," Josh Smith said. "His is pretty intimidating," said Mike Shawaryn — but Workman's also the jokester of the staff. He's the one who always has a loud opinion or a smart-ass joke. Workman's funny, but he knows it. He has an impressive beard, and he knows that, too.

"I don't want to give him credit," Ryan Brasier said.

Others felt the same way, routinely dismissing Workman's beard out of hand. One notable exception, of course, was Workman himself. He was the only Red Sox pitcher to pick his own beard as the best on the staff.

"You've got to be careful with him," Rick Porcello said. "It might go right to his head and we'll lose him for three weeks."

Or worse yet, they won't be able to get rid of him.

"No one wants to hear him talk about it because we've heard about a play he made in Pawtucket for the last year and a half," bullpen catcher Mike Brenly explained.

Workman, it seems, is not one to let something go. Begrudgingly, though, Brenly gave Workman his vote. And that vote carried weight because Brenly is one of two non-pitchers routinely cited as true Red Sox beard connoisseurs. Brenly's own beard is a masterpiece, long off the chin with shades of orange to give it a unique hue. It's an impressive display of facial hair mastery.

But even Brenly can't compete with Sandy Leon, whose beard is unchallenged as the best in the clubhouse. Even Workman had to concede that much.

“Thick as carpet,” Workman said.

Not only is it thick, it’s perfectly shaped and always maintained. Not a single hair out of place. There’s surely no one with better beard credentials in the room, and so we approached the maestro’s corner locker with respect and reverence. Who, oh great one, has the best beard on the pitching staff?

“I’ll go Porcello and (David) Price,” Leon said.

Even he couldn’t pick just one.

It’s a common sentiment. Porcello and Price were mentioned by nearly everyone, with multiple pitchers splitting their vote between those two. Porcello wound up winning the player poll by a two votes over Price – really, one full vote and two half votes — with Workman a close third, but it seems Porcello would have won by a lopsided margin had he not shaved in the middle of April when the Red Sox were below .500 and his own ERA was north of 8.00.

“I hate to say this because I try not to be too superstitious about things,” Porcello said, “but I kept the beard last year, things were working great. This year, I kept the beard the first couple of starts, and I wasn’t pitching well, we weren’t playing well, so it just seemed like it was time to change things up.”

He kept the beard to a minimum and pitched to a 2.91 ERA while the Red Sox won six of his next seven starts.

“I’ve noticed that he’s trimmed it every time,” Nathan Eovaldi said. “But I’m just like, come on!”

Of course, as Porcello has struggled again in the past month, some of the facial hair has returned. The power of his beard remains fickle and mysterious. Porcello rarely had more than stubble before 2018 when he showed up to spring training with a face full of dark whiskers. He’d neglected shaving ever since the Red Sox lost to the Astros in the 2017 division series, and when he stepped into the Fort Myers clubhouse, Porcello’s teammates were stunned. In a good way.

“It was like, you’ve been holding out for so long with that beautiful beard, man!” Heath Hembree said.

Alas, the things we sacrifice in the name of baseball and superstition.

Porcello, though, seems to be among those least impressed with his beard. He looked across the clubhouse to find the pitching staff a model of facial hair stability. Porcello said the best beard belongs to Price, and he can’t imagine thinking otherwise.

“I don’t think it’s a contest, honestly,” Porcello said. “His is always well-trimmed. It’s always sharp. Mine got out of control a lot. I didn’t maintain it as well as he maintains his. I mean, his is like a legendary beard. He had that all the way through the playoffs.”

Price wasn’t allowed to grow a beard during his college days at Vanderbilt, but he started to grow one soon after he was drafted in 2007, and had a one by late 2008 when he helped the Rays make the playoffs. Before a division series game in Chicago, though, tragedy struck.

“I was trying to knock it down some and accidentally shaved it off,” Price said. “All of the veteran guys in Tampa, they all got mad. I was like, ‘I didn’t mean to! I hope it grows back.’”

Did it ever. Today, Price’s beard has the gravitas of a relatively new father, just entering his mid-30s, with a second baby on the way.

“I like D.P.’s because he’s got a little bit of salt in his,” Hembree said. “He looks like he’s distinguished. I can’t wait until I get a little bit of that.”

David Price and his salty dad beard. (Kim Klement / USA Today)

Even without the sprinkled gray hairs, Hembree got one vote from a fellow pitcher. So did Matt Barnes (another guy some teammates were hesitant to give credit), and Smith (who was making a strong case for a top-three ranking before being optioned back to the minors) and Brasier. Though, Brasier's was surely the most divisive beard on the staff.

"Does Brasier have a good one?" Weber asked.

It's a fair question without a universal answer. At the moment, Brasier's beard is trimmed to a respectable length, but when he's let it go, it's become a tangled mess – either impressive in its size or disgusting in its chaos.

"Brasier's can get a little wickedly out there," Brenly said, with admiration in his voice.

Hector Velazquez, though, grimaced at the thought of a beard as thick as Workman's or Brasier's.

"It's just a bird's nest," Brasier conceded. "I mean, it's a big beard, but it's not a good beard, for sure."

Not everyone has the freedom to discover their true beard potential. Hembree seems capable of a big one, but he said he can only grow it out for so long before his wife tells him to trim it. The longest Eovaldi's ever got was in 2014 when he was with the Marlins, something he remembers because that's when his wife was pregnant in Texas and not around to tell him to shave it off. Brewer had his outrageously long near the end of spring training – "I could, like, chew on it," he said – but he worried about overstepping his bounds as the new guy, so Brewer trimmed it significantly before Opening Day.

But the saddest and most relatable story of wasted beard potential belongs to Tyler Thornburg, who was working on an epic, Game of Thrones-worthy beard earlier this season before he was hit with a litany of extenuating factors, including the only one stronger than an angry wife – a disappointed mother and father.

"I just got tired of it, and I wasn't pitching well," Thornburg said. "And my parents didn't like it. They both were kind of like just (making) sneaky little jabs about it. It was like, you know what, here! Happy Mother's Day! And my dad's birthday is coming up this month, so, you're welcome! This is what you're getting."

Barnes keeps a beard every mother could appreciate. When it's thick, it's still maintained. When it's trimmed, it's perfectly shaped.

"I take pride in my beard," Barnes said. "Try to keep it somewhat tame."

But is it too tame? There's a growing theory that his grooming preference has less to do with performance or parents and more to do with a Nutmeg State upbringing.

"Barnes is Connecticut with his," Workman said.

Khaki pants. Polo shirts. And Matt Barnes' beard. It doesn't get more Connecticut than that. And it doesn't get much more Red Sox than a pitching staff full of beards. This is, after all, the team that won the World Series with a Fear The Beard mantra in 2013. Coming up in the Reds organization, team rules kept Smith from growing one. Same for Eovaldi when he played for the Yankees, and Marcus Walden when he was with the Blue Jays.

"There were two organizations that allowed facial hair when I was growing up," Walden said. "The Red Sox and the A's. And I got to play for both of them, and I grew my beard out as fast as I could.... I think it's the Boston Red Sox way, right?"

Clearly. Rookie left-hander Josh Taylor is just finding his footing in the Red Sox bullpen, having arrived in late May with a relatively wispy goatee that he knew didn't fit the mold.

“No, no, no, no,” he said. “I can grow a little bit, but not on their level. Not yet. Maybe when I reach puberty.”

No such problem for Mike Shawaryn, another first-time call-up who arrived a day after Taylor sporting one of the most impressive beards in the clubhouse. It was thick like Workman’s, a bit unhinged like Brasier’s. He’d been growing it since New Year’s Day.

“(My girlfriend) probably doesn’t prefer it this long,” Shawaryns said. “But she knows it’s baseball season, so she doesn’t mess with it.”

That’s just the way it goes around here. Some Red Sox position players have impressive beards – Mitch Moreland, sometimes Jackie Bradley Jr., whatever it is Mookie Betts is going with – but it’s the pitching staff that’s made facial hair a defining look. Even the pitching coach has one – Dana LeVangie picked Workman and Price as the best of the bunch, by the way – and one of Boston’s finest seems to have grown one in solidarity.

“One of the police officers in the bullpen has maybe the best beard on the team,” Walden said. “I don’t know his name, but he’s only been there twice, and I’ve had to mention to him both times that his beard looked good. That’s how good it is.”

It sounds impressive, but it’s not eligible for our list. So, here it is, from top to bottom, our ranking of the best beards on a Red Sox pitching staff full of them (10 inning minimum to qualify; no razor necessary):

David Price – Shape, thickness and regular maintenance make Price’s beard a contender for the top spot. Consistency makes it the winner. An impressive beard in every way.

Rick Porcello – If he’d kept it, Porcello would have been at the top of the list, but alas, he surrendered his perch for the greater good. The upside to his most recent rough patch: the beard might make a full comeback.

Brandon Workman – “‘Work’ has more of a neck beard!” Brian Johnson said in utter defiance. We’ll agree to disagree. No beard better suits the player’s persona than Workman’s home-on-the-range look.

Matt Barnes – We kid about his proper Connecticut look, but that’s mostly out of jealousy. Hard to deny Barnes has a Top Five beard, impressive in both its strength and its restraint.

Mike Shawaryn – Have to give the kid credit. On the field, he’s still proving himself. Off the field, he’s taking pictures like this one, leaving no doubt his beard is the real deal.

Marcus Walden – After spending most of his career with teams that didn’t allow facial hair, it wasn’t until he wound up in the Atlantic League four years ago that Walden really started to grow a beard. “In Lancaster, my beard was long,” he said. “We were all in independent ball and nobody really cared.”

Ryan Brasier – Might be too high on this list. Might be far too low. Depends on what you think of a guy who, when he wants to, can grow wild shrubbery on his face.

Josh Smith – This is probably too low. An early attempt at this list had Smith fluctuating between third and fourth place, but he’s been back in the minors for a while, and perhaps his whiskers are fading from memory. “I would like to biasedly say I’m in the top three,” he said. “I think the 1 and 2 are locked up (Price and Porcello), and I think the rest is up for discussion.”

Colten Brewer – He cut it down when the season started, but the beard has come back into pretty impressive territory. “If I grow a full beard before doing bad every time I pitch, I mean, that’s pretty good, I guess,” Brewer said.

Heath Hembree – Please, Mrs. Hembree, let the Heater reach his full facial hair potential. We know there’s more in the tank.

Tyler Thornburg – Now we’re getting into middle-of-the-road territory, which mostly means these are pitchers who have dabbled in big, impressive beards but choose to keep things relatively tame. Thornburg was released this week. May his often impressive beard be his legacy.

Brian Johnson – It’s a good beard. Well maintained and pretty thick. On any other team, it might be one of the best. On this staff, though, Johnson’s beard kind blends into the background.

Chris Sale – The difficult thing about ranking Sale’s beard is that our perceived weakness is what he feels is his greatest strength. “It’s better when I’ve got the neckbeard going,” he said. Is it, though?

Hector Velazquez — We're just not sure what Velazquez is going for here. Among his most common facial hair styles is light on the sides, thick around the chin, with no mustache in the middle. It might be cool, but we're not cool enough to know for sure.

Nathan Eovaldi — It feels intentionally unimpressive, like an accidental beard because that's what happened when Eovaldi ignored his face for weeks at a time.

Josh Taylor — Give him credit for doing the best he can with what he's got. "The clean-cut one," Taylor said. "It makes me a little different, but still in the category."

Ryan Weber — The only guy not even in the running for best beard on the staff. "Best clean-shaven face, though!" he said. "They all throw 100. I throw 90-ish. I've gotta be different, so I'm not going to use the beard."

Eduardo Rodriguez — Yes, we're ranking Rodriguez below the guy who can't grow a beard at all. We're reminded of the line from Jurassic Park: "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." Rodriguez can grow a beard. But should he? "I have the worst," he conceded. "I have the worst!"

Time for a bit of good news about David Ortiz's recovery

Steve Buckley

In the mood for some good news on the David Ortiz front? How about this: He was talking about Rafael Devers last weekend, and in that way that retired Red Sox stars do when they're raving about this or that young player while making the rounds during spring training.

"He went on about Devers for about 15 minutes," said Red Sox president Sam Kennedy, who visited Ortiz at Massachusetts General Hospital last Saturday. "He's very excited about how he's played this year."

As a stand-alone item, this isn't front-page stuff. But considering that Ortiz has remained at Mass General since the Red Sox had him flown to Boston the day after he was shot at a nightclub in his native Dominican Republic on June 9, there's something quite settling to learn that he was talking baseball.

Aside from Kennedy's casual comment about his casual conversation with Ortiz, the only news on the Big Papi front has been delivered by his wife, Tiffany, who sends updates to the Red Sox that are then disseminated to the media. And that's a good arrangement, as it keeps a concerned public somewhat in the loop as to Ortiz' medical status while giving Tiffany Ortiz a platform to offer thanks for the ongoing gestures of support.

On Thursday, via the Red Sox, Tiffany Ortiz issued the following statement: "Earlier this week, David underwent a third surgery for complications resulting from his gunshot wound. The operation was performed by Dr. David King at Massachusetts General Hospital. David is recovering well and is in good spirits."

Tiffany Ortiz closed with this: "We continue to be incredibly appreciative of the kindness and compassion shown to David and to our entire family during this difficult time."

And, really, that's the only news that anybody outside the family needs to hear about David Ortiz's health. Though Ortiz is a public figure and a Boston sports icon on a par with Ted Williams, Bobby Orr, Bill Russell and Larry Bird, there's only so much to which we are entitled. But considering that he had another surgical procedure just this week, yes, that's a concern. It sounds more like weeks, not a day or two, before Ortiz leaves the hospital.

Which is why it's uplifting to hear he was talking about Rafael Devers. We've all made dutiful trips to the hospital to visit beloved family members and friends, right? If the person in the bed is recovering from an appendectomy or a broken ankle, the visits can be laughfests. If it's something serious — and, again, many of us have made these trips — the mission is to keep the conversation chatty, breezy, uplifting.

So you don't talk about the illness. You don't talk about medical charts. You don't talk about prognoses. You don't play doctor.

You talk about what's going on at home. You talk about movies, TV shows, books.

You talk about sports. Lots and lots of sports. It's a universal language, whether it's the people talking on the radio, the gang talking at your favorite beer-and-burger joint, or a small gathering of folks sitting around a hospital bed.

Specifically, Ortiz was talking about Rafael Devers, the 22-year-old third baseman who is emerging as one of baseball's next great stars even if he did fall between the cracks in not being invited to join teammates Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez and Xander Bogaerts, as well as the Red Sox coaching staff, at this week's All-Star Game in Cleveland.

But that's all bookkeeping. Anyone can see that Devers has arrived, that future All-Star Games will be dotting his resume. As a 20-year-old rookie in 2017, he belted a 102.8-mile-per-hour fastball from Aroldis Chapman out of Yankee Stadium for a game-tying home run. It was the first home run Chapman had allowed to a lefty hitter since 2011. Last year, age 21, his first full season in the big leagues, Devers played on a World Series winner. This year, age 22, he's hitting .324 with a .377 on-base percentage and .546 slugging percentage. And showing a stunning improvement with his defensive play at third base.

Kennedy didn't get into exactly what Ortiz was saying about Devers. Most likely the swing, of course, as they're both lefty hitters. Probably the increased power, too: Devers already has hit 16 home runs. And to paraphrase Captain Renault in "Casablanca," I like to think Ortiz smashed the telephone next to his bed after learning Devers didn't get named an All-Star. It's the romantic in me.

Knowing that Ortiz is talking baseball, talking Devers, talking about how the Sox can still catch the Yankees in the American League East (yeah, Kennedy said Big Papi made that observation as well) will do for now.

There's been plenty of talk about who really shot Ortiz, and why. Again: Public figure and all. And, yes, count me among those with raised eyebrows about how this case is being handled. Legit topic.

In the meantime, we have this little piece of news that Ortiz has the strength to talk for 15 minutes about Rafael Devers. Anyone who's ever sat beside a hospital bed can see the value in that.

*** *Associated Press***

Worcester breaks ground on Triple-A stadium

Boston Red Sox executives joined officials from the state and the city of Worcester on Thursday to break ground on a 10,000-seat stadium for the team's Triple-A affiliate.

A crowd of about 1,000 people attended the ceremony to welcome the International League team, which is currently based in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It is scheduled to begin play about an hour west of Fenway Park in the 2021 season.

The team had announced the move last year after failing to reach a deal on a new stadium with Rhode Island officials.

"Worcester is a great baseball city," team chairman Larry Lucchino said.

The \$100 million Polar Park is planned for a lot in Worcester's Canal District. Train tracks running behind the outfield wall will give the ballpark an urban feel.

Janet Marie Smith, who has worked on 11 major league ballparks, including the renovation of Fenway Park, said Polar Park will not have a Green Monster replica in left field but will incorporate other features unique to the site.

A concession tent sold hats, shirts and blankets for the new ballpark as the PawSox mascot mingled with an actor in a 19th Century baseball uniform to recall the period (1880-82) when Worcester hosted a National League team. The city was the site of the first perfect game in major league history and it was also the hometown of Ernest Thayer and where he wrote the baseball poem, "Casey at the Bat."

"This day is not the start of our city's history of baseball," said Worcester Mayor Joe Petty, who was among the dignitaries using baseball bat-shaped shovels in the ceremonial ground-breaking. "This is just one inning."