

The Boston Red Sox Saturday, July 6, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox' fireworks give Eduardo Rodriguez something to celebrate

Julian McWilliams

There were boomers felt in Comerica Park in the third and eighth innings, with the thunder coming after the fifth.

Home runs by Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts supported a fine effort by Eduardo Rodriguez as the Red Sox beat the Tigers, 9-6, on Friday night.

Manager Alex Cora mentioned recently that his team hasn't taken advantage of its opponents in the first inning, and the numbers show it. Entering Friday, the Sox had scored just 30 runs with runners in scoring position during the first inning, which tied them for 17th. At the All-Star break last season, the Red Sox scored 45 runs in that exact situation, ranking them in the top five.

In each of the Sox' two recent wins in Toronto, they plated at least a run in the first inning. In the one game they lost to the Blue Jays, however, the Sox failed to score to start the game.

On Friday, they leaned on what made them successful last season. In the first, leadoff man Mookie Betts pounced on Ryan Carpenter for a double down the left field line. Devers then grounded to second, moving Betts to third and Bogaerts grounded to shortstop, putting the Red Sox ahead, 1-0.

"We've been doing that for a week," Cora said afterward. "We've been searching for the whole season for the right combination. [Devers] jumps into that [No. 2] spot and it is instant offense. The way he's swinging the bat, he's a threat. It looks pretty good now."

They would take a 3-1 lead into the start of the sixth inning — but the rest of the game would have to wait 2 hours 4 minutes for the rain to pass through.

In the third inning, the Red Sox got two more runs against Carpenter on a Devers two-run shot to left, giving Rodriguez breathing room.

In Rodriguez's start Sunday in London against the Yankees, the Sox jumped out to a 4-0 lead, but a 38-pitch second inning — and two Yankee runs — swayed some of the momentum back in the foes' favor. Rodriguez recovered but his 118 pitches by the fifth inning forced Cora to go to his bullpen.

On Friday, Rodriguez was effective from the start. He threw just 76 pitches through five innings. He mainly worked off his four-seam fastball, but his complete arsenal of pitches kept the Tiger hitters off balance. Rodriguez did yield one run in the fourth on a Jeimer Candelario double that scored Brandon Dixon from first.

Rodriguez battled back in the fifth, working a scoreless inning.

"I was feeling good," Rodriguez said. "Most of my pitches were right where I wanted them."

Rodriguez's evening was done with the rain, and he handed the ball off to a bullpen that had a 6.75 ERA to start the month of July.

After the rain delay was over, the Red Sox struck for three runs against Jose Cisnero, beginning with a Christian Vazquez double, a Michael Chavis single, and Jackie Bradley Jr.'s two-run double to left. Betts would eventually bring home Bradley with a sacrifice fly.

The Tigers did them one better in the home half against Marcus Walden and Ryan Brasier, the rally compounded by back-to-back errors by Gold Glovers Betts (on a single) and Bradley (on a liner).

"We ran into trouble again," Cora said. "It's tough, man. Really tough. We need to do better. We have a five-run lead, you have to keep it there. We've been playing too many close games. We need to fix that."

Bogaerts gave the bullpen its breathing room back with a deep three-run home run to left. Heath Hembree came on for the ninth and gave up a cloud-scraping home run to left to John Hicks, who started the night with a .305 slugging average.

Despite the hiccup this one didn't come back to bite the Sox. In the midst of their search for consistency and putting away teams, Friday's effort proved to be enough.

"We're in a tough spot here," Betts said. "Kind of playing catch-up. So, every win is important and we have to continue to play our style of ball."

Selected or not, Rafael Devers is a star for Red Sox

Peter Abraham

There are two third basemen on the roster the American League will take into the All-Star game, Houston's Alex Bregman and Oakland's Matt Chapman.

It's hard to take issue with those choices. Bregman is an outstanding all-around player and the heartbeat of a team that leads its division.

Chapman is one of the best defensive players of his generation and a strong hitter for a playoff contender.

Where does that leave Rafael Devers?

Not at Progressive Field in Cleveland on Tuesday, barring an injury in the next two days. But that's OK. His time is coming and everybody around the Red Sox understands that.

Devers hit a two-run homer to help the Sox to a 9-6 victory against the Detroit Tigers on Friday night. He is hitting .331 with 16 home runs, 61 RBIs and a .946 OPS.

He's among the American League leaders in most offensive categories and leads the majors with the most batted balls of at least 95 miles per hour.

"He's one of the best players in the league right now and he's 22," teammate J.D. Martinez said. "He doesn't have to worry about one All-Star Game."

Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts, who has had a terrific season, felt snubbed and legitimately so when he was not selected to the team by either the fans or players. He was later named to the team as an injury replacement.

But if Devers was upset, he hid it behind a smile.

"Me?" he said last week when asked about making the team. "No. Not me. No."

Devers has great respect for Bregman and Chapman. That's part of it. He has talked about his admiration for Chapman's defensive skills, particularly his range.

Devers also is cognizant that this is only his second full year in the majors. He's already appeared in 15 postseason games and has a World Series ring. He doesn't need an All-Star appearance for validation.

Red Sox fans hold some blame on this, too. Kansas City's Hunter Dozier, who was on the disabled list for nearly a month, finished with more votes than Devers. Sox fans sat out this election for the most part.

Devers also is paying for the sins of his teammates. The Sox are one of baseball's biggest underachievers this season, mired in third place and on pace to win 86 games — 22 fewer than last season.

None of that has been his fault. But at some point, a third-place team deserves only so many choices.

Focus instead on the fact that Devers is one of the few players on the team who has improved since last season.

He's a more selective hitter, one who recognizes his strengths and doesn't chase pitches he can't do something with. It's a product of better pre-game preparation and a willingness to use the information that's available.

Devers trusted his hands last season, believing he could get his bat to any pitch because that is what he had always done coming up through the minors. A .298 on-base last season showed him the folly of that strategy. Pitchers make adjustments quickly at the highest level.

Devers may not be as consumed with video as Martinez, but he now pays attention to scouting reports and how to employ them.

His defensive strides are even more striking.

Devers committed a ninth-inning error in Chicago against the White Sox on May 2; it led to a walk-off loss that left him dejected.

It was a routine play that Devers botched. It was his ninth error, the second-most in the majors at the time. He has only three since.

Errors can be an inaccurate way to judge defensive ability. Defensive Runs Saved is better, and Devers is at plus-1. Only seven other third basemen are better. Devers was minus-13 last season.

Devers got more serious about his pre-game defensive work after that flub in Chicago, working with coaches Carlos Febles and Ramon Vazquez on his timing on grounders, when to charge, and when to take a step back.

He also changed how he positioned his glove, attacking the ball on the side so he could have a better angle to throw to first.

"Raffy has worked hard," manager Alex Cora said last week. "You can see the difference. It's not just the routine plays, either."

For young players, confidence plays an outsized role in success. Devers now routinely charges balls hit in the hole instead of letting Bogaerts make a tougher play.

He's proud of his defense, something that wouldn't have seemed possible last season. Devers has answered the question of whether he will stay at third base for the long term. He will.

Devers cracked a two-run, opposite-field homer in the second inning on Friday night, giving the Sox a 3-1 lead before a rain delay of two hours and four minutes.

Should he be an All-Star? Probably so. But Devers is improving at a rate where he's going to become a regular, and Bregman and Chapman will be fighting for a spot.

Slumping Andrew Benintendi out of starting lineup again

Julian McWilliams

Andrew Benintendi got another day off, but will be back in the lineup Saturday afternoon, manager Alex Cora said.

Benintendi, who began Friday in an 0-for-12 skid, has hit .272 with a modest .750 OPS since the 2018 All-Star break. He had 36 doubles but only nine home runs and 66 RBIs in that span. He also has struck out 116 times in 533 at-bats.

Prior to that, Benintendi hit .282 with an .823 OPS and had 36 home runs over 276 games.

"He'll be ready to pinch hit," Cora said before the game. "It was a good day [Thursday]. So far a good day today. He'll be OK. It's just trying to get that feeling.

"Sometimes it's mechanical, sometimes it's mental. But I think we're heading in the right direction. I think overall he hasn't been what he expects, but if you look at the numbers, a few hits here and there he will be right where he needs to be."

This season, the 24-year-old Benintendi is hitting just .266 with a .347 on-base percentage and seven homers in 348 plate appearances. His .768 OPS is the lowest mark of his career.

Benintendi's lack of power isn't a concern, so far. And perhaps it shouldn't be. He's been hampered by a hamstring injury for about the last month, so finding that rhythm might be a bit more difficult.

"I like the all-around player," Cora said. "He's an on-base guy that can steal bases, score runs. I like the whole package. I don't know if that's something that he's been trying to generate. I don't think so, I just think rhythm-wise he's not where he wants to be."

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The Red Sox are fresh off a series victory over the Toronto Blue Jays after their come-from-behind win Thursday. They'll have a three-game set against the Detroit Tigers before heading into All-Star break.

A sweep would be ideal for the Red Sox, who started play Friday 2½ games back of the second wild-card spot held by the Indians.

The Athletics and Rangers, who have been playing consistent baseball, also have better records than the Red Sox and are also on the outside looking in.

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Cora said the past couple of weeks that he believes Mookie Betts is close to breaking out of his lull. Cora still believed that to be the case despite Betts hitting just .262 with 13 homers.

"That was good [Thursday]," Cora said of Betts's at-bats despite going 0 for 4 with a walk. "The last at-bat was great. He hit the ball hard in the first inning. We have to live with the results. It's a good sign. Mookie's a guy that when he hits line drives to that left-center gap the ball takes off."

Has Betts's problems become psychological?

"He wants to be great," Cora said. "If you look, he's leading the league in runs scored [71]."

“I had a conversation with Carlos Beltran two years ago. There were some guys in Houston talking OPS and all that stuff. I said to Beltran, ‘What was your goal every season?’ And Carlos said, ‘To score 100 runs. To score 100 runs you have to get on base. You have to drive the ball. You have to do everything right for that to happen.’”

Cora then brought it back to Betts, saying that although it doesn’t look that way, he’s affecting the game.

Friday, he led off the game with a double to left and scored on a pair of ground outs. In the third, he led off with a single and trotted home on Rafael Devers’s homer to left.

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It used to be that managers had some sort of say in who got elected to the All-Star Game when selected players were injured. Xander Bogaerts was recently selected as an injury replacement, but Cora said that wasn’t his call.

“The only thing that I know for now is starting pitching and the order of the lineup,” said Cora, who will be managing the AL All-Star team Tuesday. “A lot of people think that I have an impact. People think that I picked Xander over [the Yankees’ Gleyber Torres]. Gleyber made it, too, [also as an injury replacement]. People can stop sending messages. It’s just the nature.

“Even back home with [the Twins’] Eddie Rosario. People are mad because Eddie is not in the game and it’s my fault. It’s not. I don’t have anything to do with it, which I love.”

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Although the Sox have not issued an update on David Ortiz’s condition since June 22, a source said Ortiz remains at Mass General since being shot June 9 . . . Brandon Workman pitched the final two innings Thursday and was awarded the win when the Sox scored in the ninth inning. At 8-1, Workman has the most wins in relief for the Sox since Alfredo Aceves had nine in 2011.

Futures Game in his past, Bryan Mata’s future glowing bright

Alex Speier

The All-Star Futures Game, which takes place on Sunday in Cleveland, represents an annual exercise in wishful thinking, a moment to see a player who represents a potentially significant part of an organization’s contention hopes a few years down the road.

But there is a disposable quality to the undertaking. The players who take part briefly step into the spotlight but then just as quickly exit, many into obscurity, their anticipated emergences quickly forgotten. There is a long list of Red Sox Futures Game participants whose futures never really took shape in the anticipated fashion.

Yet sometimes, the return from the most intriguing exhibition of the All-Star festivities to the relative anonymity of the normal player development cycle doesn’t signal a step back. Sometimes, a player recedes from the big stage to the shadows and harnesses his talent, forging a path as an ever more important prospect for an organization’s future.

A year ago, righthander Bryan Mata walked nearly as many batters (58) as he struck out (61). Mata was the lone Red Sox representative in the Futures Game, tossing a scoreless inning while mixing mid-90s two- and four-seam fastballs with a curveball and changeup.

This year, center fielder Jarren Duran is the lone Red Sox minor leaguer in the Futures Game. Mata, meanwhile, looks like a much more polished — and much different — prospect than when he pitched for the World Team last July in Washington, D.C.

Last year, Mata's control issues occurred due to a couple of factors: A changing pitch mix (he started incorporating a two-seamer that he struggled to keep in the strike zone), and a teenager's physical growth and maturation that added strength, but also made it difficult to control his mechanics. A player who signed at 6-foot-3 and 160 pounds had grown to 225 pounds.

"Last year was such a learning year," said Red Sox assistant GM Eddie Romero. "He got so big physically, naturally, that he got behind in his mechanics."

This year, his mechanics are back under control. And with them, so is a significantly altered pitch mix that has re-established Mata as the Red Sox' top starting pitching prospect, particularly with his promotion this week to Double A Portland.

Mata now leans heavily on his two-seam fastball, a pitch that has arm-side run rather than sink while getting on hitters quickly in the mid-90s. (It tops out at 98 mph.) The Red Sox felt that with the movement of his fastball, he was best served to complement the pitch with a hard breaking ball that travels in the same tunnel as his two-seamer, but breaks in a different direction.

As such, Mata developed a nasty slider (referred to by VP of pitching development and assistant pitching coach Brian Bannister as a "deep cutter") that comes at hitters hard, then breaks to the glove side.

Both of those pitches look like plus big-league offerings. Mata complements them with selective usage of his four-seamer, curveball, and changeup, allowing him to attack different areas while keeping hitters guessing.

The results have been dazzling. Though Mata missed a month with a mild shoulder strain, in 11 starts — 10 in High A Salem, the same level where he spent 2018 — he's 4-1 with a 1.73 ERA (the eighth-lowest in the minors among pitchers with at least 10 starts), 8.9 strikeouts, and 3.1 walks per nine innings. He's allowed one homer this year and seven in 267½ career minor league innings. This season, of the balls put in play against him, an amazing 62.8 percent have been grounders.

The progress has been significant: He's getting more chases and swings-and-misses at pitches (particularly the slider/cutter) outside of the strike zone. That has lowered his walk rate and upped his strikeout rate. He's getting more bad contact when batters are getting the bat to the ball.

In a year, he's reshaped his repertoire significantly in a way that has allowed him to dominate.

"Most guys are like puzzles. You're looking to fill out the puzzle where they're complete," said Bannister. "By giving him a hard breaking ball, letting him use a fastball variation that has more movement on it, it allows all of his pitches to really complement each other, and make the mix that much more complete and dynamic. That alone, without improving command at all, can lower walk rates dramatically.

"Now you're introducing swing-and-miss outside the zone. He is throwing two plus pitches now in addition to the changeup, in addition to being able to show the [four-seamer] and the curveball. The mix is significantly upgraded."

That upgrade, in turn, suggests that at some point in the not-too-distant future — perhaps as soon as next season — the 20-year-old could fit the profile glaringly absent for the Red Sox this year: A homegrown starting pitching option.

Though Mata is not in the Futures Game this year, he appears far closer than he was a year ago to being part of the Red Sox future.

“He’s so young. He’s got one Double A start under his belt. There’s no need to rush him,” said Romero. “But if he continues to do what he’s done, it’s natural that if he continues to perform as well as he has, he will work his way into that conversation.”

Three up

Corner infielder Bobby Dalbec has been on a tear in Double A Portland, hitting five massive homers in his last six games to boost his season total to 19. He’s hitting .234/.371/.494 for the year.

Righthander Thad Ward is emerging behind Mata as one of the best Red Sox starting pitching prospects. In 16 starts this year (including three since his promotion from Single A Greenville to High A Salem), he’s 5-2 with a 1.93 ERA, 10.8 strikeouts, and 3.6 walks per nine innings.

The numbers (.190/.261/.429 with a homer and three steals in six games) don’t yet reflect it, but infielder Ceddanne Rafaela, an 18-year-old out of Curacao, is turning heads in the Rookie Level Gulf Coast League. He is another among a growing group of high-ceiling, middle-of-the-field players in short-season leagues in the Red Sox system.

Three down

While Jarren Duran will be in the Futures Game, he’s struggling in Double-A. In his last 10 games entering Thursday, he had 15 strikeouts and no walks while hitting .227/.244/.250.

Though first baseman Joey Curletta has shown some power since the Red Sox claimed him off waivers from the Mariners, the 25-year-old is hitting just .183/.286/.336 with a 30.5 percent strikeout rate with Double A Portland.

Catcher Roldani Baldwin, who after 2017 appeared to have a chance to emerge as one of the better catching prospects in the minors, is amidst a second straight season derailed by injury. He hasn’t played this year due to a broken ankle endured on a slide into second.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox take advantage of rain delay, Tigers bullpen in 9-6 victory

Michael Silverman

Mother Nature threw a pop quiz at both the Red Sox and the Tigers by tossing a 2:04 rain delay after five innings of play Friday night, a dose of weather that knocked out both effective starters with the Red Sox holding a two-run lead.

When play resumed, the test between the two bullpens and lineups began.

In the end, the Red Sox bullpen finished ahead, giving up five runs, while the Tigers’ relievers surrendered six, allowing the visitors to take Game 1 of this series, 9-6.

The Red Sox lineup had another big game, with Rafael Devers clubbing a two-run home run in the third inning off Detroit starter Ryan Carpenter, before Xander Bogaerts (four RBI) swatted a three-run shot in the eighth to allow the Red Sox needed breathing room after the bullpen allowed the Tigers back in the game after the rain delay.

“We ran into trouble again,” said manager Alex Cora, referring to his bullpen.” It’s tough, man. It’s very tough, and we need to do better. Five-run lead, you have to keep it there and let the offense keep doing the work. They got close, and as you guys know, we’ve been playing too many close games. And we’re very limited. We need to fix that.

“We did a good job today, but we have to improve. We have to improve. We’re playing better, don’t get me wrong. That’s, what, 47 wins now. And we have a chance to win this series and go into the break. But there’s still a lot of things that we need to get better at.”

In the sixth inning, each team went to work on relievers. The Red Sox scored three times to take a 6-1 lead but Marcus Walden, the replacement for Red Sox starter Eduardo Rodriguez, allowed four runs. Three of those runs were unearned thanks to rare outfield errors from Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. to make it a one-run lead.

Rodriguez was pitching very well before the downpours. He allowed one run on four hits and walk with four strikeouts. He threw only 76 pitches and left with a 3-1 lead.

He knew the rain was coming.

“I was throwing the ball good and to suddenly see the rain coming in, I was trying to go out there and get three quick outs all the time and it worked pretty good,” Rodriguez said.

The rain came in two patches. After the first one, Rodriguez was ready to go back out but then the grounds crew waited for another storm to roll through and by then it was too late.

“Actually, he had good stuff, man,” Cora said. “Just happened that it rained, but it felt like he was in control. The fastball, changeup, good command. The pitch count was low, so it was one of those, we talk about it in the week. I said, ‘You got 120 for the next one.’ Seems like it was going to be below that. But we finished the game, but he did a good job.”

The Red Sox jumped out to the early 1-0 lead, with Betts (double) scoring on Bogaerts’ forceout in the first inning.

They added on in the third, when Devers flicked a two-run opposite-field home run over the left field fence. The pitch was a good one by Carpenter, on the edge of the bottom outside corner of the strike zone, yet Devers stayed with it and put that deceptively powerful stroke on the ball.

The RBI were Devers’ 10th and 11th in his last four games, his tear beginning with the six-RBI night the first game in Toronto.

Devers’ homer gave the Red Sox the 3-0 lead.

Rodriguez looked comfortable, pitching at a brisk pace through his first five innings. He surrendered a leadoff double to Niko Goodrum in the third but struck out the next two and got a groundout to end that inning.

He did surrender a run in the fourth, the damage coming with two outs. Brandon Dixon singled and then scored when the next batter, Jeimer Candelario doubled to left field to narrow the Red Sox’ lead to 3-1.

Alex Cora believes Mookie Betts will start to pull his weight soon

Michael Silverman

Alex Cora still sees greatness for Mookie Betts this season.

And even though everybody understands Betts is way off his MVP pace from a year ago, there still is an entire second half of the season for Betts to begin to approach the offensive dynamo he was when he led the league in nearly every offensive category.

This year, as of Friday morning, he led in just one: runs scored, 71.

That's a big one, said Cora.

"Although it doesn't look that way, he's impacting the game, he's scoring runs," the manager said Friday before the Red Sox opened a three-game series with the Tigers. "He wants to be better? Of course, yeah, there's a few things he'll do better. We've still got plenty of time for him to get going. Everybody knows when he gets going he starts smiling and it's contagious."

Cora said his friend Carlos Beltran put into perspective the never-ending and perhaps underestimated value of a run.

"I had a conversation with Carlos Beltran two years ago," Cora said. "We sat down and talked about OPS and everything that's going on. I said, 'What was your goal every season?' And Carlos said, 'You know, to score a hundred runs.' 'Why?' 'To score a hundred runs, you've got to get on base, you've got to drive the ball, you've got to do everything right for that to happen.'"

Many have noted that one reason Betts' power is down is that he's been unable to pull the ball much. The Red Sox and Betts have been working to change that.

The double he lined to left field to lead off Friday night's game was the kind of hit the Red Sox like to see.

"There have been a lot of empty fly balls to right," said Cora. "Mookie's a guy, when he hits line drives to the left-center gap, the ball takes off. We expect him to do damage."

In his first 85 games last year, Betts already had 25 homers and was hitting .345 with a .432 on-base percentage, while slugging .664 with a 1.090 OPS.

This year, those numbers stood at 13 homers, .262, .386, .452 with an .837 OPS heading into game No. 86 for Betts.

Porcello back on mound

Rick Porcello on Saturday makes his first start since he got shelled — six runs allowed in one-third of an inning — in Game 1 in London.

"I think he forgot it right away," said Cora. "He threw the ball well the game before that, the one in Minnesota, that one was a good one. The one against the Jays, eh, it was OK, some bad luck but I think he'll be fine for this one and looking forward to the break for him."

Andrew Benintendi was out of the starting lineup for the second night in a row. This time, Cora made him available as a pinch-hitter, while Thursday in Toronto was a totally down day.

"One more day — he's starting tomorrow and Sunday," said Cora. "Just kind of like trying to get that feeling. That's it. Sometimes it's mechanical. Sometimes it's mental. But I think we're heading in the right direction. Overall, he hasn't been what he expects, but if you look at the numbers, I mean, a few hits here and there and he's right where he wants to be.

"I just think now rhythm-wise, he's not where he wants to be."

As for Benintendi's defense and base-running this year, Cora described them as "OK."

"A little bit banged up with the legs and all that," said Cora. "Defensively we know what he can do. We put him in places that he's going to make plays. I think he hasn't impacted the game the way we would like to with his legs, but he's a combination of both. Where he was hitting earlier in the season, it was difficult for us to get him going. Now where he's going to be in the lineup, we've got to pick our spots. But still, I don't know how many bags he's (stolen), seven or eight, but it's a good rate anyway. He's one of our best base runners and he does a good job defensively."

Not Star-gazing

Cora has been asked to do very little for his upcoming role as manager of the American League All-Stars. And he likes it that way.

“The only thing that I know for now is the starting pitcher and the order of the lineup, that’s it,” he said. “A lot of people think I have an impact. My Instagram has let me know the last few days, people think I picked Xander (Bogaerts) over Gleyber (Torres of the Yankees), so on and so on. I’m glad that Gleyber made it too, so people can stop sending messages.

“MLB, they have a process and obviously the players, they vote, and that’s the way it works. I’m trying to stay as far away as possible from it.”

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox 9, Tigers 6: Late blast by Bogaerts secures Boston win

Bill Koch

The last member of the Red Sox named to the American League All-Star team just might be the best.

Xander Bogaerts had a strong argument to start at shortstop in Cleveland next week. His initial omission as a reserve bordered on the ridiculous. His addition to the roster after an injury suffered by Angels infielder Tommy La Stella seemed like overdue justice served.

Moments like those in the top of the eighth inning on Friday more than justify his inclusion. Bogaerts halted another shaky effort by the Boston bullpen with one swing. His three-run homer to deep left cemented a 9-6 Red Sox victory over the Tigers at Comerica Park.

Bogaerts was waiting on a 2-and-0 fastball from Austin Adams and jumped on it, sending a screaming drive deep into the boxes in left. The 441-foot blast broke open what was a 6-5 game, as Boston threatened to cough up leads of 3-0 and 6-1. Ryan Brasier, Matt Barnes and Heath Hembree steadied the ship after Marcus Walden came perilously close to handing Detroit a lifeline.

“Xander put a big swing there,” Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. “It gave us a chance. Like I’ve been saying all along, we did a good job today. But we have to improve.”

Mookie Betts lined a one-out single to left-center and Rafael Devers worked a walk to bring Bogaerts to the plate. He turned around what had been an 0-for-3 night with that lone swing and put the Red Sox in position to win a second straight series into the break. Rick Porcello and David Price will each have a chance to deliver for Boston over the weekend.

“We’re in a tough spot here – kind of playing catch-up,” Betts said. “Every win is important. We have to continue to play our style of ball.”

The Red Sox broke to what looked to be a comfortable lead in the sixth. Jackie Bradley Jr. lashed an RBI double to the corner in left, Michael Chavis scored on an error and Betts lined a sacrifice fly to deep center to make it a five-run cushion. Jose Cisnero allowed three hits and a walk in his lone inning of work.

But nothing has come easily for Boston this season, particularly when it involves the relief corps. Jeimer Candelario touched Walden for an RBI single to right-center, and two men moved into scoring position when Betts booted the rolling ball in the outfield. Harold Castro followed with a knuckling liner to center that was boxed by Bradley, a sacrifice fly and two-base error all wrapped into one that plated two runs to make it 6-4.

That was it for Walden, and Brasier was summoned with an inherited runner at second base. John Hicks sent a two-out single to left and Castro slid home ahead of a strong throw by J.D. Martinez, cutting the margin to 6-5. Two of the four runs in the frame were unearned, but Boston was back in familiar nail-biting territory nonetheless.

“We ran into trouble again,” Cora said. “It’s tough – it’s very tough. We need to do better. You have a five-run lead and you have to keep it there and let the offense keep doing the work.”

The Red Sox made the most of a leadoff double to left by Betts in the first, plating the game’s opening run. Two grounders to shortstop by Devers and Bogaerts did the trick, as the Red Sox took a 1-0 lead. It was the 60th RBI for Bogaerts on the season, as he assumed the team lead.

Bogaerts lasted a total of two innings in the top spot. Boston struck again in the third when Betts sent a one-hop single up the middle and Devers rode a slider breaking away over the left-field wall for a two-run homer. Detroit starter Ryan Carpenter shook his head in disbelief as Devers circled the bases, his 61st RBI in his pocket in a 3-0 game.

Eduardo Rodriguez worked around a leadoff double in the third before running into some two-out trouble in the fourth. Brandon Dixon singled through the left side and Candelario lined an RBI double to the corner in left, with Dixon sliding in just ahead of the relay. It was a 3-1 lead the Red Sox carried into a rain delay that lasted four minutes north of two hours.

“I was throwing the ball good,” Rodriguez said. “As soon as we saw the rain coming in you’re just trying to go out there and get three quick outs all the time. It worked pretty good.”

Rodriguez left in line for the victory, allowing just one earned run for the third time in his last 10 starts. He covered the first five innings on 76 pitches, issuing a lone walk against four strikeouts. Rodriguez was credited with his team-high ninth victory, and Boston improved to 13-3 in his last 16 starts.

Red Sox Journal: Detroit holds special memories for Price

Bill Koch

The way David Price figured it, his first World Series ring could have arrived at least four years sooner.

The left-hander was a trade deadline acquisition by the Tigers in 2014, moving to Detroit from the Rays in a three-team deal. Price joined a pitching staff that also included Justin Verlander, Max Scherzer and Rick Porcello in the starting rotation. All four men have at least one Cy Young Award on their respective resumés. The Tigers also boasted a stacked lineup headlined by Miguel Cabrera, Victor Martinez, J.D. Martinez and Ian Kinsler.

Detroit captured the American League Central title but were swept out of the Division Series by the Orioles, with Price on the wrong end of a 2-1 decision in Game 3 at Comerica Park.

“That was a super-charged team,” Price said. “That was a very good team. Baltimore handled business against us the first two games at their place and then Game 3 here.”

That was the last of four straight years Detroit reached the postseason, as its window under former general manager Dave Dombrowski — now the Red Sox president of baseball operations — abruptly slammed shut. The Tigers slipped to 74-87 in 2015 and Price was on the move again, this time dealt to the surprising Blue Jays. He signed a seven-year deal with Boston in free agency prior to the 2016 season and rewrote his own personal playoff narrative while helping the Red Sox to a championship last October.

“It doesn’t matter what year it is or however many years it’s been since I’ve been back or whatever the case may be,” Price said. “My impressions of Detroit and being a Tiger, they won’t ever change.”

Cabrera is the lone headlining member of those clubs remaining with Detroit. He's tied to the franchise through at least the 2023 season, and the Tigers hold a pair of club options for 2024 and 2025. Cabrera's OPS into Friday night was just .768, well below his career mark of .941.

"He's Miguel Cabrera," Price said. "If he doesn't play another game the rest of his career, he's a Hall of Famer."

Looking for a fix

Andrew Benintendi received another day off on Friday.

The left fielder should return to the Boston lineup over the weekend against right-hander Jordan Zimmermann on Saturday and a Detroit starter to be determined on Sunday. Benintendi was available off the bench in the opener of the three-game series and is using the extra time on the bench to devise a way of breaking an 0-for-12 skid.

"Trying to get that feeling — that's it," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Sometimes it's mechanical. Sometimes it's mental. I think we're heading in the right direction."

Benintendi's strikeout rate has spiked to 23.3% this season, well above the 16.0% he posted in 2018. Per FanGraphs, he's swinging at 33.7% of pitches he sees outside of the strike zone this season. That's up from 28.4% a year ago, a significant jump for a player whose plate discipline has generally been one of his strongest qualities.

"I think early on in the season it was breaking balls down and in," Cora said. "Lately it's been the fastball up. That's something he doesn't do that often. He's never done it throughout his career."

Nothing to show

Mookie Betts hit three balls harder than 100 mph and had nothing to show for his efforts on Thursday at Toronto.

Betts sent a one-hopper to second base in the first inning, lined to deep left in the seventh and hit a bullet to shifted second baseman Cavan Biggio behind the bag in the ninth. The final line for Betts read 0-for-4 with a walk and a run scored in an 8-7 victory over the Blue Jays.

"He wants to be better, of course," Cora said. "There are a few things that he will do better. We've still got plenty of time for him to get going."

Betts is slugging just .452 this season, down from the league-leading .640 he posted during a Most Valuable Player campaign in 2018. He still remains on track to lead the league in runs scored for the second straight year, totaling 71 through 87 games into Friday.

"To score 100 runs you've got to get on base," Cora said. "You've got to drive the ball. You've got to do everything right for that to happen."

Rehab update

Nathan Eovaldi (right elbow) is scheduled to throw a bullpen session here on Saturday.

Eovaldi is expected to come off the injured list after the All-Star break. He'll go into the Red Sox bullpen and could serve as the team's closer down the stretch.

Tyler Thornburg (right hip impingement) will also throw on Saturday at Triple-A Pawtucket. The 30-day rehab clock is running down on Thornburg, who followed up three straight scoreless appearances by allowing a two-run homer against Lehigh Valley on Thursday. He's been ripped to the tune of a 13.97

earned-run average through 10 PawSox appearances, allowing 16 hits and five home runs in just 9 2/3 innings.

“I think the last day for his rehab assignment is Sunday if I’m not mistaken,” Cora said. “We’ll see where we’re at.”

*** *MassLive.com***

Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts power Boston Red Sox to 9-6 win on rainy night in Detroit

Chris Cotillo

Like they have so many times this season, Rafael Devers and Xander Bogaerts powered the Red Sox to victory Friday night.

Devers hit his fourth home run in four games-- a two-run blast in the second-- and Bogaerts hit a three-run shot to put the game away in the eighth as the Red Sox beat the Tigers, 9-6, at Comerica Park. Bogaerts' 17th homer of the year all but ended the hopes of the pesky Tigers on a night when both teams suffered through a two-hour, four-minute rain delay between the fifth and sixth innings.

Bogaerts, who had four RBIs on the night, opened the scoring with an RBI groundout in the first before Devers made it 3-0 an inning later. Jeimer Candelario brought Detroit within two runs with an RBI double in the fourth, an inning before the skies opened up and the grounds crew brought out the tarp around 8:45 p.m.

Heavy rain in the area led to the long stoppage, and both starters (Boston's Eduardo Rodriguez and Detroit's Ryan Carpenter) exited the game when it resumed at 10:50 p.m. Rodriguez pitched well in his abbreviated stint, allowing one run on four hits in five innings while improving to 9-4 on the season.

The sixth inning was a London-esque shootout, as the Sox plated three runs on three hits (including doubles from Christian Vazquez and Jackie Bradley Jr.) to take a 6-1 lead before Detroit rallied back with four runs of their own. The Tigers, aided by errors by Bradley Jr. and Mookie Betts, tagged reliever Marcus Walden with four runs (two earned) on two hits in a walk in just a third of an inning, cutting Boston's lead to 6-5.

Facing Detroit reliever Austin Adams, Betts singled and Devers walked before Bogaerts unleashed a 441-foot bomb to left field. Heath Hembree, in his first appearance since returning from the injured list, allowed a solo homer to John Hicks that made it a 9-6 game.

Boston had 14 hits on the night, including three from Betts and a pair from Vazquez, Bradley Jr. and Michael Chavis. The Red Sox won their second game in a row and improved to 47-41 on the season.

Porcello up next

Former Tiger Rick Porcello will pitch the second game of the series, facing righty Jordan Zimmermann at 4:10 p.m. on Saturday afternoon.

Thornburg has 13.97 ERA with Pawtucket; Red Sox must decide on his future during All-Star break

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox will have at least one roster decision to make over next week's All-Star break regarding the fate of reliever Tyler Thornburg.

Thornburg has been on the injured list since May 24 with a right hip impingement and has been rehabbing with AAA Pawtucket since June 9. His 30-day rehab stint will expire Monday, marking a point when the Red Sox will have to make a decision whether to add him back to the active roster or move on.

As of Thursday, no decision had been made.

“Not yet,” manager Alex Cora told reporters in Toronto. “We’ll wait until the end and then we’ll go from there.”

Thornburg, who missed a year and a half with arm troubles before making his Sox debut almost exactly a year ago, posted a 7.71 ERA in 16 appearances this season before hitting the IL. He has been even worse with Pawtucket, turning in a 13.97 ERA and 2.483 WHIP in 9 2/3 innings in the last month.

Thornburg had two horrible outings in a row (0.2 IP/4 ER/3 H 0.2 IP on June 20 and 1 IP/5 ER/5 H on June 24) before throwing scoreless innings in his next three outings. His last appearance Thursday was a rough one, as he allowed two runs (including a homer) in an inning.

Thornburg is out of options, so he’d have to clear waivers to stay in the organization. The options for the Red Sox are clear: either add him back to the active roster over the break or designate him for assignment.

Cora said before Friday’s game that Thornburg will pitch Saturday at Pawtucket in what could be his final appearance for the PawSox. At that point, the Sox will have to decide whether to give him another chance or finally cut ties on their ill-fated trade acquisition from Dec. 2016.

*** *RedSox.com***

Hits keep coming for streaking Devers

James Schmehl

Mookie Betts doesn’t want to come across as greedy. He’s thrilled three Red Sox players, including himself, have been named to the American League All-Star team.

But Betts and a bevy of his teammates made it abundantly clear following Boston’s 9-6 series-opening win in Detroit that the Red Sox are deserving of a fourth representative.

“Raffy definitely deserves to be there,” Betts said. “There’s no reason for him not to [be there].”

Although he isn’t heading to Cleveland next week to participate in the Midsummer Classic, Rafael Devers belted his fourth home run in as many games and is on pace to set career highs in nearly every offensive category.

Devers, who ranks third in the AL with a .561 slugging percentage, extended his hitting streak to nine games with a two-run homer off Tigers starter Ryan Carpenter in the third inning. Devers added a pair of walks and is now 19-for-37 with 11 extra-base hits, 13 RBIs, 14 runs and five walks in his last nine games.

“It’s just one of those things that kinda sucks,” Betts said. “We need to figure out a way to get him there.”

Following the rain-delayed game, which concluded after midnight, manager Alex Cora spoke highly of Devers, who is batting a team-high .331, and said the 22-year-old third baseman is worthy of joining his teammates in Cleveland next week.

“It’s out of my control, but everyone knows what he’s doing,” Cora said.

But the second-year manager said he's also aware that fans may start pointing fingers his way if another Boston player was to be added as a reserve, particularly given the fact that Cora and his eight-man staff are coaching the AL All-Star squad.

"It is what it is. A lot of people think that I have an impact. My Instagram [account] let me know that the last few days," Cora said. "I'm trying to stay as far away as possible from it."

Regardless of how it could be perceived, Devers' offensive production in the first half simply can't be overlooked, Betts said. Devers entered Friday with a 1.568 OPS in his previous eight games, having recorded hits in 15 of his previous 17 games. And of those 15 games with a hit, 10 have been multihit games, including three of which were multiple-extra-base-hit games.

"I think he's pretty much the centerpiece of our team. Everything goes around him," Betts said. "He's been huge all year. He's been the main one."

If Devers were to be named as a reserve, he would join Xander Bogaerts, J.D. Martinez and Betts -- all of whom were named reserves. Martinez will be the AL's starting DH after Hunter Pence was forced to back out due to injury. Bogaerts, in turn, was named an injury replacement.

But, as of Friday night, Devers had no plans to join his teammates for the Midsummer Classic.

"We were joking today that the way he's going, he may not go to the All-Star Game, but he might have a case at the end of the season to win some other stuff," Cora said. "So, we'll take that one."

Red Sox starter Eduardo Rodriguez worked five innings of one-run ball, allowing four hits and punching out four before the two-hour rain delay forced his exit.

It marked the 12th straight start in which Rodriguez, who has a team-high nine wins, pitched five or more innings. Like Betts, he was equally as shocked that Devers wasn't named an All-Star.

"He's a guy who should've been an All-Star, but unfortunately he's not yet," Rodriguez said.

Devers currently ranks second in the AL in batting average, and his .946 OPS has him ranked third in the AL, two spots ahead of Bogaerts.

"He's hitting homers, doubles, getting RBIs, scoring runs," Rodriguez said. "He's doing everything."

Benintendi out of lineup to help break slump

James Schmehl

Red Sox manager Alex Cora joked with reporters prior to Friday's game in Detroit that he'd been held out of plenty of lineups through his 14-year career to help bust out of slumps.

In his experience, Cora said watching games from the bench would often help. Now, the second-year manager is hoping the same will hold true for slumping left fielder Andrew Benintendi, who was held out of Boston's lineup Friday for a second consecutive game.

"They unplugged me for years," joked Cora, a career .243 hitter, when asked whether sitting players for consecutive games can help them work through slumps. "So, I know how it feels."

Benintendi, who is 0-for-12 over his last three games, was available to pinch-hit Friday. He is expected to be back in the starting lineup on Saturday and Sunday.

"Sometimes, if you watch a game from a different perspective, it helps," Cora said. "You still gotta be ready, but you see the game different. I think these two days are going to benefit him."

Coming off arguably his most productive offensive season, Benintendi has struggled in the first half to consistently produce at the plate. Cora attributed part of Benintendi's struggles to mechanics, but also acknowledged a mental component that may be a contributing factor, too.

"Sometimes, it's mechanical. Sometimes, it's mental. But I think we're heading in the right direction," Cora said. "I think, overall, he hasn't been what he expects. But if you look at the numbers, a few hits here and there, and it's right where he wants to be."

Benintendi took batting practice Friday and has been working with hitting coach Tim Hyers to address a couple mechanical flaws that Hyers recently spotted, according to Cora.

"He keeps working, and he keeps searching," Cora said. "They've found a few things the last few days that I think are going to put him in a good spot."

A career .279 hitter, Benintendi has experienced a drop-off in power numbers since the All-Star break last season. In 128 games and 533 at-bats since the 2018 All-Star break, the 24-year-old Benintendi has batted .272 with only 36 doubles, nine homers, 66 RBIs and 75 runs scored.

He entered Friday's series opener in Detroit hitting .266, and is on pace to record career lows this season in on-base percentage (.347), slugging percentage (.421) and OPS (.768).

"I don't know if [power] is something he's been trying to generate, but I don't think so," Cora said. "I just think, right now, rhythm-wise, he's not where he wants to be."

However, Cora made it abundantly clear he has no concerns that Benintendi's early-season struggles will be a long-term issue.

"He's still young. He's still learning. I think he'll make the adjustment," Cora said. "It wouldn't surprise me if he takes off."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Rare, strong night from Red Sox bullpen offers hope

Sean McAdam

Every once in a while, there's a glimpse of what the Red Sox are hoping to do with their bullpen. Every once in a while, you get the sense that maybe, just maybe, it might work out.

Friday — a mess of a night with a two-hour and four-minute rain delay interrupting things after five innings — was one of those nights.

Starter Eduardo Rodriguez pitched five strong innings, but following the long delay, wasn't about to come back out when play resumed. That forced Alex Cora into yet another night in which he needed more outs from his bullpen than he would have liked.

Sound familiar?

This time, it wasn't anyone's fault. Rodriguez might have been able to get them into the seventh. But then the rain changed everything.

Marcus Walden was the first member of the tag-team to be deployed and despite the fact that the Sox stretched what had been a 3-1 lead pre-delay to a 6-1 edge with three quick runs in the top of the sixth, Walden had a rough go of it, giving up four runs on two hits and a walk. True, Walden's task was made

tougher when both Mookie Betts and then Jackie Bradley Jr. uncharacteristically made errors, leading to two unearned runs.

Still, Walden wasn't sharp.

Ryan Braiser, however, was. He bailed the Sox out of the mess the outfield and Walden created, then came back for more in the seventh and allowed just one single.

Next came Matt Barnes, who needed only 13 pitches to retire the Tigers in order in the eighth, with two strikeouts. It was, quite simply, the most effective and efficient Barnes has been in weeks. Finally, Heath Hembree, making his first appearance in almost a month after spending an extended stint on the IL with some forearm soreness.

Hembree gave up a solo homer to John Hicks, the first batter he faced, but then retired the next three hitters in a row, two by strikeout.

To recap: three of the four high-leverage relievers combined to pitch 3.2 innings and allow only one run.

Sure, the Tigers aren't exactly threatening. To the contrary, they're one of the weakest lineups in the American League, ranking last in runs scored.

But the Sox bullpen has been equal-opportunity offenders, losing leads to good teams and bad, for much of the season. That's evident both in the 18 blown saves as well as the games that have gotten away from them in the late innings. The Chicago White Sox don't exactly strike fears into opponents' hearts, but that didn't stop them from beating the Red Sox in the ninth inning the last time the Sox played a game at Fenway.

It's patently obvious that the bullpen needs help ... and soon. That will come, in the short-term, in the form of Nathan Eovaldi, who's expected to be activated from the IL when the second half of the season begins.

Next, it's widely assumed that the Sox will make at least one other acquisition between now and the July 31 deadline. Perhaps it won't be a marquee pickup, but frankly, it won't take much for someone from outside the organization to provide some upgrade to this group.

Down the road, there's the prospect of Darwinzon Hernandez, who's been shifted to the bullpen at Triple-A Pawtucket in an effort to determine whether he can help out in Boston in the second half.

But let's say that all those things work: that Eovaldi comes back healthy and takes to the relief role; that a deal gets done to provide them with another experienced high-leverage option; and that Hernandez, at least in short doses, proves effective in his new role.

The Red Sox will still need Barnes, Brasier, Hembree and Brandon Workman to be better if they're going to make a legitimate second-half push.

Teams sometimes justify firing the manager by noting that they can't fire 25 players. The same concept applies here: no matter who else arrives to help out, the Sox can't get rid of their entire current relief core — tempting as that prospect might sound on some nights.

At some point, they'll need to contribute. Maybe Brasier has turned the corner after a spotty first-half. Maybe Barnes, given some rest after a brutal June workload, can regain his effectiveness. Maybe Hembree, healthy again, can help shoulder more of the load so that Workman and Barnes aren't pitching twice every three games, as they did — to their detriment — last month.

It's only the Tigers and it's only one game. But maybe Friday was the start of something at the end of the game.

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 9, Tigers 6 – Red Sox outlast rain, Tigers

Sean McAdam

Rodriguez picks up ninth win: His outing was cut short when the game went into a rain delay of more than two hours, but while he was in the game, Eduardo Rodriguez turned in one of his sharpest outings of the season, limiting the Tigers to a single run on just four hits. In his five innings, he never faced more than four hitters in any one inning and issued just one walk. What's more, Rodriguez was more efficient than usual, needing 76 pitches through five innings and showing signs that, had the weather not interrupted play, he was ready to give the Sox seven innings — or at least close to it. Rodriguez has been the beneficiary of great run support for much of the year, but on this night, he got just three runs while still in the game. But thanks to good command and a strong pitch mix, he was able to make sure that was enough to stand up.

Rare miscues in the outfield: It was strange enough when Mookie Betts bobbled a single to right with two out and one on in the bottom of the sixth. Betts went over the field a single off the bat of Jeimer Candelario and simply mishandled it as the ball squirted away, enabling Candelario to take second when he should have been held to a single. It was just the second error of the season for Betts, who has again played a Gold Glove-caliber right field this season. Then, as if that weren't bizarre enough, on the very next play, Harold Castro hit a hard line drive to center, nearly directly as Jackie Bradley Jr. Bradley trotted in, seemed to have a bead on the ball, but at the last instant, the ball clanged off the heel of his glove and bounded away, allowing Castro to reach on a two-base error. As was the case with Betts, that represented just Bradley's second error of the season. The Tigers scored four runs that inning and two of them were unearned, the result of two errors by two Gold Glove outfielders. In case you're wondering, no, it's never happened before that Bradley and Betts made an error in the same game.

Another three-run homer keys win: For whatever reason, the Red Sox have been in the habit of hitting three-run homers of late. On Thursday night, it was Michael Chavis hitting a three-run shot to key a comeback against Toronto. Chavis also hit one Saturday in London in a losing effort against the Yankees. And Friday night, it was Xander Bogaerts' turn. The Sox were clinging to a one-run lead in the eighth when, after a leadoff single by Betts and a walk to Rafael Devers, Bogaerts hammered a fastball deep into the seats in left for a three-run shot. Suddenly, the Sox had some breathing room. And Bogaerts had another huge hit in a season in which he's had a lot of them. That homer — in conjunction with a groundout that scored Betts with the first run of the night in the first inning — gave him four RBI for the night and gave him the team lead in RBI with 63.

TURNING POINT

Following a rain delay of two hours and four minutes, the Red Sox resumed play in the top of the sixth and began swinging, collecting three straight hits while erupting for three runs in that top of the inning. Those proved particularly important when the Tigers took advantage of the two outfield errors to counter with four of their own in the bottom of the inning.

TWO UP

Mookie Betts: Betts continues to get on base at a high clip, reaching three times and scoring all three times. His on-base percentage is up to .388.

Christian Vazquez: The catcher is swinging such a hot bat that Friday marked the second straight night that he was in the starting lineup as the DH. He delivered a single and double in five at-bats.

ONE DOWN

Marcus Walden: Yes, Walden was done in by some sloppy glove work in the outfield, but armed with a big lead, he gave up two hits and a walk and that didn't help matters.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“I’ve hit balls better than that this year, but maybe not as far. I put a good swing on it and I know we needed it.” Bogaerts on his three-run homer in the eighth.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

In his last 49 games, Bogaerts has knocked in 40 runs.
The Sox are 12-2 in their last 14 road games.
Rafael Devers extended his hitting streak to nine games.
UP NEXT

The Red Sox and Tigers play the middle game of their series at 4:04 Saturday with RHP Rick Porcello (5-7, 5.07) vs. RHP Jordan Zimmermann (0-5, 5.36).

* *The Athletic*

Andrew Benintendi hoping time off leads to him being more ‘hitterish’

Chad Jennings

According to the box scores, Andrew Benintendi was finally finding himself at the plate. He was driving the ball for doubles, hitting for a high average and getting on base at a good clip. His OPS was climbing. That’s what the numbers said.

According to Benintendi himself, he was just as lost as ever.

Friday night in Detroit, the young Red Sox left fielder was held out of the lineup for a second consecutive game, a two-day break so he could focus his nightly energy on batting practice while resetting his mind for a fresh second half.

“I feel like (the numbers are) not terrible,” Benintendi said. “But it’s not to what I think I can do. At all.”

In this case, defining success and failure is all about perspective and expectation.

Benintendi is not having a bad year. Not by any usual standard. According to FanGraphs WAR, he’s been one of the 50 best position players in the American League. Weighted Runs Created Plus says he’s been exactly league average at the plate (and league average in the big leagues is pretty good). Benintendi’s season slash line is remarkably similar to 2017, when he finished second in Rookie of the Year voting. Not bad for a guy who turns 25 on Saturday.

But Benintendi expects to be better than that, and the Red Sox believe he can be — and should be — better than that. So after Benintendi’s hottest statistical month of the year, manager Alex Cora benched him for 48 hours.

“He hasn’t been what he expects,” Cora said. “But if you look at the numbers, I mean, a few hits here and there and he’s right where he wants to be.”

Those hits were falling in June. Through the first three and a half weeks, Benintendi hit .322 with a .365 on-base percentage and a .489 slugging percentage. He hit only one home run, but still. He had an .853 OPS across 20 games. That’s almost exactly the level of offense that will have Michael Brantley starting in left field for the American League in the All-Star Game next week.

Benintendi, though, knew it was a mirage. At least some of it was a mirage. When he finally saw the numbers on Friday, Benintendi was surprised they were so good. He had not felt noticeably better at the plate. The stats were inflated by a .406 batting average on balls in play, and he’d struck out 20 times while walking only six.

“I really haven’t felt like I’ve been in a groove or felt good at any point this season,” Benintendi said. “Just trying to simplify things and hopefully that will lead to more consistency.”

All it took were three hitless, walkless games for Cora to decide Benintendi needed to shut down for a couple of days. The numbers said he’d been on a hot streak, but after three bad games, it was time for extra work in the cage with hitting coach Tim Hyers. When Benintendi sat out Thursday in Toronto, Cora invented a word to explain it.

“He hasn’t felt as hitterish,” Cora said. “His hands are not firing the way they usually do.”

There’s no real definition for the word hitterish. It does have an entry on Urban Dictionary — “Used to describe a batter in the game of baseball that displays the characteristics of a quality hitter” — and it’s used as the website domain of a hitting coach in Virginia, but it’s an appropriately inexact term to describe a largely ineffable quality.

For most of this season, Benintendi knew he didn’t have it, and he couldn’t figure out how to get it back. He hit .160 the first week of the season, got something going in early April, lost it again in the middle of May, then went through that deceptive month of June. Barring something remarkable these last two days in Detroit, Benintendi will go into the All-Star break with — let’s invent another term — goodish numbers. Good for someone else, but not for Benintendi.

The past two days have been filled with video and swings. Not an astronomical number of swings, Benintendi said, but more than usual. And he’s had a chance to clear his head. He recalled August 2017, when then-manager John Farrell gave him back-to-back games off to reset. Benintendi returned to produce a .916 OPS the next month and a half. He said he felt fresh with added confidence, and he’s hoping for a similar feeling these last two games before the break.

“Most of the time, it’s not a huge thing,” Benintendi said. “It could be just like the smallest little thing, and that one thing could throw off some other things. It’s just identifying that sooner rather than later.”

Three months to go. Time to feel hitterish.

“I think he found a few things the last few days that I think are going to put him in a good spot,” Cora said. “I think the most frustrating thing for him is chasing pitches. Early in the season, it was breaking balls down and in, and lately it’s been fastballs up. So, that’s something he doesn’t do that often; he’s never done (that) throughout his career.

“It’s part of the process. He’s still young, he’s still learning, and I think he’ll make the adjustment. It wouldn’t surprise me if he takes off.”

On the eve of the All-Star break, taking stock of a season full of troubling trends for pitchers

Peter Gammons

The All-Star break is the timeout before the second half of the season. The game itself is for amusement purposes only.

When the game begins Tuesday night, the 2019 season’s ranking positional stars — Mike Trout, Christian Yelich, Cody Bellinger, Nolan Arenado — will be in the starting lineups. Of the 14 top positional players by fWAR, the only player not at the game (unless he is added because of injuries) will be Rafael Devers, and if New Englanders don’t like it, the fact is their team is coming off its fourth world championship in 14 years and many fans didn’t bother to vote.

Personally, I feel getting every player into the game is the equivalent of an Ed Sullivan “also in the audience tonight” introduction asterisk to the Beatles’ performance. I want to see Yelich, Trout and

Bellinger coming up in the eighth and ninth innings against Aroldis Chapman or Kirby Yates, instead of an at-bat being the equivalent of a certificate of attendance.

It's entertainment. An exhibition. With a Futures Game, Home Run Derby and imaginative events that are a respite before the countdown to the trading deadline, the pennant races and a return to reality.

And in 2019, the reality is that this season baseball has turned into a six-month NBA All-Star Game, 163-155, no mas. Pitchers have little chance. The regular baseballs have become close to those used in the Home Run Derby. The strike zone has shrunk and moved up, from below the knees to above the outfield walls. Hitters launch. Eleventh pitchers on staffs now open games.

A.J. Hinch says, "our bullpen wouldn't be able to do what it's done if we didn't have (Justin) Verlander and (Gerrit) Cole pitching two of every five games." But the Astros were not exempt from the plague that dominated baseball's first half. As of July 1, the effective halfway mark of the season, 252 major-league pitchers had spent time on the injured list. The Astros are an extraordinarily well-run organization, but the fact remains that Lance McCullers is down for the season, and, while losing Dallas Keuchel and Charlie Morton to free agency, the team thought Forrest Whitley and Corbin Martin would be in their rotation by June 1; Whitley has had shoulder weakness, lost his delivery and hasn't won a game in Double A, while Martin now faces serious elbow surgery. Not only does that mean they need to trade for a pitcher — perhaps Marcus Stroman, whom they have followed as closely as Verlander in 2017 — to win this year, they then need to figure out how to replace Cole when and if he hits the free-agent market after the season.

"It's only going to get worse," Mike Reinhold says of the injury trends. Reinhold is the director of Champion Physical Therapy in Boston, protégé and colleague of Dr. James Andrews and Dr. Glenn Fleisig and longtime worker with major-league athletes. "It's all part of an extremely complicated system that starts when pitchers are teenagers. It all comes down to the obsession with velocity and the strain on nerves and tendons, shoulders, elbows." Dr. Andrews and Dr. Fleisig and many of their colleagues across the country have long been preaching the same message. On July 2, there were 134 pitchers on major-league injured lists, on a pace that would result in close to 500 for the season, following 312 in 2015, 319 in 2016, 382 in 2017, 432 last season and 261 in 2011 — before 10-day IL/DL stints, weighted balls and 14-year-olds trying to throw 90-something mph.

"This isn't just the Yankees scoring 29 runs in two games of a London exhibition," one American League manager says. "Heck, the Orioles scored 26 runs in two games against the Indians in the same week. Between the baseballs, the strike zone, the injuries and an astounding generation of young hitters, the Twins are on a pace to hit 300 homers. There are so many starters hurt, so few starters capable of finishing six innings, that relievers are simply worn out. I feel sorry for Bob Melvin in Oakland, who's a great manager with a starting pitching staff that's been cut short by injuries, which has resulted in Blake Treinen and Lou Trivino being worn out. The Red Sox bullpen was worn out by mid-June. Same with the Rockies and a lot of other teams."

On July 3, the MLB pitching ERA was 4.47. Most teams were at 84 games at that point; none had starting staffs on paces to throw 1,000 innings. The bullpen ERA was 4.49, compared to 3.71 in 2015, 3.93 in 2016, 4.15 in 2017. Sense a trend? Bullpenning isn't a sustainable long-term plan.

Talking to doctors, rehab specialists, general managers, managers and pitching coaches, these are the factors that enter into the horrifying trends in pitching.

First, velocity, as opposed to pitching. "Kids are doing these showcases where they are judged and rated by their velocity," one rehab specialist says. When I mentioned a recent Zack Greinke-Clayton Kershaw matchup when Greinke averaged 92.1, Kershaw 91.6 and they matched innings, hits allowed, runs and walks and left with similar earned-run averages (Kershaw 3.07, Greinke 3.08, which would rank them in the top dozen of 78 qualified starters), it prompted one general manager to say, "if they put up those velo numbers in a showcase, they wouldn't get drafted in the first five rounds."

Tyler Kolek was drafted second in the country by the Marlins in 2014 because he threw over 100 mph. He is still in short-season A ball, 5-16 lifetime. He had Tommy John Surgery in 2016, and in the three seasons since has thrown 23 2/3 innings and allowed 28 runs. A victim of the system.

Relievers have long been volatile, and more so now because of the workload. "But we're seeing their reliance on velocity increasingly straining their arms," an NL GM says. "Treinen was great last season, worn this one. Jordan Hicks is now down. It's all velo, very little seeing hitters' swings from the mound and adjusting."

Some in the game feel that analytics have led to too many breaking balls from younger pitchers not yet ready to do a McCullers and throw 25 straight curveballs. Hinch says, "now that starters are not expected to get to the seventh inning, I think we see a lot of them trying for extra velocity on every pitch early in the game." As opposed to Verlander, who'll run from 91 mph to 97 in chosen situations.

There is a great deal of debate about programs such as Driveline. "I don't worry about someone like Trevor Bauer, who gets the individual attention, is extremely intelligent and understands precisely what he has to do and accordingly executes it," one rehab specialist says. "But there are a lot of young pitchers trying to do the Driveline program off word of mouth, or off YouTube. That causes problems in a lot of cases."

"Look, there is a problem with young pitchers working at this year-round, with no rest. Too many kids try to reach 100 mph by throwing 11 months a year, without letting the ligaments, muscles and nerves rest," the specialist says. "When they're 16 and 17 years old they're going to showcases 11 months a year, in which they max out on every pitch they throw."

There is a diverse school of thought about weighted baseballs. Reinhold refers to "fictional increases in velocity," meaning pitchers can spike from 92 to 96 mph, temporarily, and often resulting in some damage. Ron Porterfield, the Dodgers' director of player health and a strong advocate of long-tossing to build durability instead of short-burst velocity, warns against both the long-term effects of the weighted balls as well as the lighter balls, which he says can create faster arm speed that leads to different injuries.

Everyone worries about the effects of three years of serious college pitching. "Those guys can enter the draft in their junior year with 300 to 350 innings in their arms, many in pressure situations," says former GM J.P. Ricciardi, now with the Giants. If you're in the SEC, ACC or Pac-12, baseball is a money business. RPI ratings are important in getting home regionals and advancing to the College World Series, and as one study pointed out, more of the coaches in the top 25 college programs this season were paid more than \$1 million a year than major-league managers. "Too many of the big-program coaches are about what winning does for them, not the kids," one general manager says. Ricciardi thinks the future might be to go to a junior college for one year, enter the draft at 19 years old and enter pro ball with a fresh arm.

Angels manager Brad Ausmus, who caught the seventh-most games of any catcher in MLB history and, because he was so adept at creating relationships with pitchers, thinks "the trend to try to constantly tinker with and change the shapes and nature of offspeed pitches can create stress on elbows, forearms, etc. A lot of young pitchers physically aren't ready for all those different ways of throwing baseballs."

Hinch adds in his experiences with Nolan Ryan when it comes to starting pitchers. "Nolan talks a lot about the legs, how they create power and balance. He would throw a complete game, then ride the bike for 45 minutes before showering." Once Ryan no-hit the Blue Jays on an ESPN Wednesday night game, which was to be followed by Baseball Tonight. The show producer put in the request to the remote producer for Ryan to come on the show after his media scrum.

Ryan, one of the nicest persons on the planet, said he would do so, but needed to put in 45 minutes on the bike first. It was Nolan Ryan. We could extend the show. He rode the bike, then did our show.

Hinch says Greinke has been known to run after starts. "It's important for the starters, but relievers are more geared to the short bursts of power," Porterfield says. James Shields listened to Porterfield, and often ran after starts.

Every person queried talked about deliveries and balance. When Kershaw shut down his throwing for a couple of weeks this spring training, he still went out to mounds and practiced his delivery. I recall two early spring trainings when I interviewed Tom Seaver after he had done a bullpen session without a baseball, just syncing his delivery. No immediate building of velocity, just delivery, and in a couple of weeks, two of the greatest deliveries of their generation — those of Mike Mussina and Mariano Rivera — will go into the Hall of Fame.

In an era when teenagers need Tommy John operations, when 500 pitchers could spend part of a season on the injured list, there are a decreasing number of available, capable pitchers. The Yankees, Astros and Red Sox might be the three best teams in the American League by the end of September, but they had used 25 starting pitchers between them a week before the All-Star break. That increases the load on bullpens, lessens managerial options with shortened benches (how valuable is Ketel Marte right now, while on the subject?) and makes managing starters' innings increasingly complex.

Baseball has a serious problem, one that eventually adds time that no clock is going to fix. Velocity looks good on the scoreboard and is great for orthopedic surgeons, but kids such as Devers walk into the big leagues at 20 and go bridge on 103 mph fastballs from Chapman. Meanwhile, a Kyle Hendricks can miss contact with 88 mph fastballs up in the zone because of everything else he commands.

Maybe that night when Kershaw and Greinke average 90.9 mph and finished with top 12 earned-run averages was one that wouldn't have gotten either into the first five rounds of the draft. But nights like that are getting both into Cooperstown and might allow them to pitch into their 40s if they so choose.

Oh yes, and I'm betting on Verlander's promise to pitch until he's 45; and I feel sorry for Tyler Kolek, a victim of his time.

*** *The Detroit Free Press***

Detroit Tigers' bullpen falls apart vs. Red Sox, after rain delay, 9-6

Anthony Fenech

It took over five hours, but the Detroit Tigers lost to the Red Sox.

Interrupted by a two-hour, four-minute rain delay at the start of the sixth inning, the Tigers dropped their series opener against Boston, 9-6, on Friday night at Comerica Park.

The game was stopped moments before the sixth inning began, with the Tigers trailing by two runs. They allowed three runs immediately after the game resumed, responded with four, but Xander Bogaerts' three-run home run off right-handed reliever Austin Adams was too much to overcome.

Bogaerts' no-doubt home run — which traveled an estimated 441 feet — provided more than enough insurance for the beleaguered Boston bullpen.

Because of the rain delay, lefty Ryan Carpenter's solid day was all but washed away. Carpenter allowed three runs on seven hits in five innings, striking out four batters and walking one.

Carpenter allowed a run in the top of the first and then a two-run home run to Rafael Devers in the top of the third to put the Tigers in a three-run hole. They got on the scoreboard when Jeimer Candelario hit an RBI double in the fourth inning.

One inning later, the rains came.

When play resumed, Boston jumped all over righty Jose Cisnero, scoring three times before the Tigers scored four runs, to pull within one. The big play was a sacrifice fly by Harold Castro, a low, line drive which Red Sox center fielder Jackie Bradley, Jr. botched for a pair of runs. Candelario and John Hicks each had RBI singles in the sixth.

Bogaerts' home run, though, was too much to overcome. The Tigers wouldn't score again.

Bad bullpen

The Tigers returned from the rain delay swinging the bats, but it wouldn't matter. Not with Cisnero allowing three runs in the sixth and then Adams doing the same on Bogaerts' home run. Carpenter was over-matched facing a tough Boston lineup, but succeeded. Neither Cisnero or Adams could do the same, credited with allowing the biggest hits in the game.

Second effort

The Tigers could have packed up their things and mailed it in after sitting in the clubhouse for more than two hours, and then trailing by five runs after the Red Sox continued scoring in the sixth. They didn't, opting to tighten the gap with a strong sixth inning. In that frame, they took good at-bats — three singles and a walk — and put the tying run on second base with two outs. For a game that looked well over, the Tigers showed some late-inning fight.

Carpenter's day

It started ominously, with a double by leadoff hitter Mookie Betts, and it was easy to envision the game getting away from Carpenter early. Instead, the lefty buckled down, limiting the Red Sox to one run in the first inning. He only got better from there, with just one blemish the rest of the way, allowing that two-run home run to Devers. Carpenter was in command and quite all right against a very good lineup.

*** *Associated Press***

Devers, Bogaerts homer as Red Sox beat Tigers 9-6

Boston manager Alex Cora wants the Red Sox to stop making victories so difficult.

Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers homered, and the Red Sox raced to a lead and held on to beat the Detroit Tigers 9-6 on Friday in a game delayed more than two hours due to rain.

"We're playing better -- don't get me wrong -- but we still need to improve," Cora said. "When you have a five-run lead, you have to hold it. We made it too tough again."

Boston's sixth-inning rally came immediately after the rain delay of two hours, four minutes.

"We played cards and watched some of the summer-league basketball game," said Mookie Betts, who had three hits and three runs. "It's not that tough to do."

Eduardo Rodriguez won for the fifth time in his last eight starts.

"I was throwing the ball well, but we could see the rain was coming in," said Rodriguez, who was limited to five innings by the delay. "I was feeling good and I was still ready to go when it stopped raining, but then it started again."

Detroit dropped to 6-23 since June 1 and lost for the 23rd time in 26 home games.

"We had a good crowd tonight, and we really wanted to give them a win," Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Our fans have been through some tough times lately, but there were good times before that and more good ones coming."

Rodriguez (9-4) gave up one run on four hits and a walk while striking out four.

"I was just trying to get quick outs before the rain, and it ended up working pretty well," he said.

Ryan Carpenter (1-6) lost his third straight game. He allowed three runs on seven hits and a walk in five innings. He struck out four and fell to 1-7 in 11 career outings at Comerica Park.

"I thought Carp did a nice job," Gardenhire said. "They got him a couple times, but he had good stuff and we were going to send him out for the sixth before the rain got him."

That wasn't enough to save Carpenter's job, though. He was optioned to Triple-A Toledo after the game to make room for a reliever who will join the team before Saturday's game.

Betts started the game with a double off Carpenter and scored on a pair of groundouts. Boston added two more runs in the third when Betts led off with another hit -- a single -- and scored on Devers' 16th homer.

"The way (Devers) is swinging the bat, you feel like he can do damage on any pitch," Cora said. "He's a threat."

Jeimer Candelario's RBI double made it 3-1 in the fourth as storm clouds moved in. Heavy rain began to fall moments after Rodriguez retired Victor Reyes to end the fifth, and the game was immediately halted.

The teams changed pitchers after the delay; both bullpens struggled.

When play resumed, Boston scored three runs off Jose Cisnero in the sixth. Jackie Bradley Jr. had an RBI double, Betts added a sacrifice fly and a run scored on Candelario's error at third.

The Tigers scored four times in the bottom of the inning to make it 6-5. Candelario and John Hicks had RBI singles as Betts and Bradley committed outfield errors.

Bogaerts hit a three-run homer off Austin Adams in the eighth, making it 9-5.

Hicks homered in the ninth.

"I loved the fact that we kept swinging the bats and we kept scoring runs," Gardenhire said. "We're finally starting to hit the ball, but our bullpen didn't give us a chance."

VETERAN ANTHEM PERFORMER

Harold Lanning, a 91-year-old World War II veteran, performed the national anthem. Lanning performed in USO shows during his Army service.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: RHP Heath Hembree pitched the ninth for Boston, his first appearance since going on the injured list on June 14 with an elbow strain.

Tigers: C Grayson Greiner continued his rehab assignment with Class A Lakeland on Friday, going 0-2 in his third game. He has been on the injured list since June 15 with a lower-back strain.

TIGERS EXTEND AVILA

Before the game, the Tigers announced a multi-year contract extension for general manager Al Avila. Avila, who has held the job since Aug. 4, 2015, was under contract until the end of the 2020 season. The length of the extension was not announced.

Avila, who worked as an assistant to Dave Dombrowski from 2002 until replacing him, has been overseeing the rebuild of a team that lost 98 games in each of the past two seasons and is on pace to lose 107 in 2019.

UP NEXT

Detroit's Jordan Zimmermann (0-5, 5.36) is to face former Tigers pitcher Rick Porcello (5-7, 5.07) on Saturday in the second of a three-game series. Boston is 4-0 in Porcello's four starts against his former team.