

The Boston Red Sox Sunday, July 7, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Rick Porcello: 'I need to do my job and I haven't been doing it lately.'

Peter Abraham

Rick Porcello has a place in Vermont that, while easily accessible from Boston, is in another universe from his existence as a member of the Red Sox.

There are fish to be caught, stars to see in the night sky and conversations to be had with family and friends. But Porcello also will have an iPad handy to review, once again, the mistakes he has made on the mound so far this season.

"I'm not in a position where I can just take these days off," Porcello said Saturday night after a rocky outing against the Detroit Tigers. "I need to use the days off to get better. I need to do my job and I haven't been doing it lately."

In a game the Sox won, 10-6, Porcello allowed six runs and wasn't able to finish the sixth inning after being handed a 7-0 lead. On a night when he could have given the team's overworked bullpen a needed break, Porcello allowed four runs in the sixth inning and had to come out.

That led to five relievers pitching, the Red Sox repeating a cycle that will keep them out of the playoffs unless it's reversed.

Porcello has an unsightly 5.33 earned run average. But what bothers him far more are the games when he can't get those extra few outs. Saturday was the latest example.

"Everything was going fine through five innings. Then in the sixth inning I get hit around," Porcello said. "I'm definitely looking to go deeper, at least seven. We had that game in complete control. It's frustrating on my end. I've got to be better from start to finish."

The difference between 17 outs and 21 is more than four batters. On Saturday it was Colten Brewer, Josh Taylor and Matt Barnes having to pitch before the Sox added to their lead.

Barnes has pitched 40 times already, 22 fewer than all of last season with 73 games remaining. It's untenable for him, Ryan Brasier, Brandon Workman and the other relievers.

The best way the Sox can improve their bullpen will be for Porcello and the other starters to go deeper in games. That is particularly the case given the team's plan to shift Nate Eovaldi into the bullpen once he returns from the injured list later this month.

"It's all five starters. That we won't have a fifth guy makes it all the more important," Porcello said. "It's more important now than ever. When you rack up innings on your bullpen arms it affects the team for a few days."

It's not a question of lost ability for Porcello. His fastball velocity is the same as last season. It's executing pitches, particularly with runners in scoring position.

"It's a matter of locating from start to finish. I need to be better the third time through, late in the game," he said. "Whatever it is, I need to be more consistent."

The Sox don't plan to pitch him until the second series after the break, against the Toronto Blue Jays. The hope is an extended break will serve him well.

At 48-41, the Red Sox can reach a season-best eight games over .500 if they can finish off a sweep of the Tigers on Sunday. They'll have David Price on the mound.

"We don't feel like we're out of anything," Porcello said. "We haven't played consistently well as a group but none of us feels like we can't reach our goals as a team. I personally have to do my part because we have high expectations.

"We believe we're a lot better than we are."

Porcello also has his future to consider. The four-year, \$82 million extension he signed after being acquired from the Tigers ends this season. He'll be 31 in December and needs a strong final two and half months to increase his marketability.

Porcello has a World Series ring and a Cy Young Award on his resume. But he'll be judged by these next 16 or 17 starts.

Porcello, who was 17-7 with a 4.28 ERA last season, wanted to discuss an extension in spring training and was rebuffed. He understands what's at stake.

"I'm where my feet are. That's how I'm approaching it," he said. "I'm focused on what I have to do to have a good second half for our ball club. Thinking about my situation is a distraction."

Come Sunday night, Porcello plans to take a deep breath and hopefully relax. He'll watch some video at some point over the coming days because he's wired that way.

But of all the Red Sox, he probably needs to unplug the most.

"He'll find it. He's done it before," manager Alex Cora said. "He's searching for it. We know we can count on him."

The hits, runs keep coming as the Red Sox hang on to top Tigers

Julian McWilliams

The Red Sox never make it easy on themselves.

Manager Alex Cora stood in his office late Friday night and pointed to that as one of his team's flaws this season. It had just won, 9-6, but saw a five-run Detroit Tigers deficit all of a sudden shrink to a one-run game at the end of the sixth.

Saturday's 10-6 Sox victory over the Tigers almost replicated what transpired the previous night.

By the end of this game, the Sox had 17 hits but their pitching staff gave up 14. However, the Sox figured out a way to pull out their fourth win in five games after Steven Wright shut the door in the ninth.

The Sox will go into the All-Star break having taken their last two series after a forgettable one in London. Still, like much of their games this season, it wasn't easy.

"I know it's a grind," Cora said. "It's been a grind since we got on that plane to Europe."

After more than a four-hour rain delay Saturday, the Sox jumped out to an early 2-0 lead in the first, beginning with a Mookie Betts triple off starter Jordan Zimmerman. Three batters later Andrew Benintendi

tripled, too. The last time the Sox tripled twice in the first inning was July 5, 1963 when Gary Geiger and Earl Wilson hit triples off Dave DeBusschere of the Chicago White Sox.

Zimmerman's outing lasted just 3½ innings. By the end of it he had given up seven earned runs on a whopping 13 hits. Rafael Devers's single in the fourth inning off the right field wall extended his hit streak to 10 games. By the end of the fourth the Sox held a comfortable 7-0 advantage.

That advantage soon vanished, because, again, this year's Sox don't make it easy on themselves.

Rick Porcello seemed to have bounced back from his previous start against the Yankees in which he couldn't get out of the first inning and surrendered six runs. He worked three scoreless innings of baseball. Yet in typical Sox fashion it fell apart. Jeimer Candelario belted a two-run homer to make it 7-2, in the fourth. In the sixth inning, Candelario got to Porcello again, this time a solo shot to bring the Tigers within four.

Porcello then gave up two singles, followed by a wild pitch which moved runners to second and third. Bobby Wilson delivered yet another single, scoring an additional two Tigers' runs and shrinking the Sox' margin to two. Cora called on Colten Brewer to relieve Porcello of his duties with two outs in the sixth.

"Everything was going fine through five innings," Porcello said. "The sixth again I got hit around. I was definitely looking to go deeper — at least go seven. The offense did an unbelievable job. It's really frustrating on my end. I have to do a better job from start to finish"

Porcello now carries a 5.33 ERA on the year, which further highlights the inconsistencies of the pitching staff and why the Sox struggle to put their opponents away at times.

The Tigers tacked on another run in the sixth after Brewer gave up a triple to Alex Reyes. Brewer then got Nicholas Castellanos swinging to end the frame with his Red Sox team carrying just a one-run lead into the seventh.

The Sox added an insurance run in the seventh. With the bases loaded, Devers hit a routine chopper back to reliever Buck Farmer, who bobbled the ball and delivered an errant throw. But the Sox made the bottom half of that frame laborious once more by loading the bases with just one out, though they would eventually get out of it.

To expect the Sox to continue producing at this offensive rate isn't realistic. They came into this game scoring 7½ runs in their last four contests and picked up right where they left off Saturday.

"They've [the batters] been carrying us the entire year, really," Porcello said. "They're the heart and soul right now. Myself, I have to pitch better. David Price has been throwing the ball well and our bullpen has been carrying a lot of the load. We just need to piece it all together."

Benintendi tallied four hits on the evening after sitting out the two previous games due to a slight offensive lull. Betts had his second three-hit game in two days and is starting to square the ball up more consistently.

"We did a good job putting together good at-bats," Cora said. "Obviously what Mookie is doing it feels like he's getting there. And everybody knows when he gets going we get going and the fun begins."

The Red Sox clubhouse understands that time is ticking. There's still another half to the season, but Cora sounded his team's alarm after being swept in London by the Yankees. The Red Sox are fighting and pulled out their last two series victories, but they haven't come against a formidable foe that poses a postseason threat to the Sox. Yet at this point, as his club crawls to the break, Cora will take wins however he can get them — even if it means the hard way.

“I think the guys have done an outstanding job the last five games of winning four out of five,” Cora said. “We have one more (before the break). If we win one more, it’s 49 wins. We’re almost there. It’s not easy. It hasn’t been easy.”

With just one trade deadline, baseball GMs are under the gun

Peter Abraham

There is one trade deadline now; it’s at 4 p.m. on July 31. There are 20 teams with at least some chance of making the postseason, which should make the next few weeks interesting ones.

Almost every contending team needs pitching help to some degree. But here’s a deeper look at what teams will be trying to accomplish before the clock runs out:

Angels — Los Angeles is on the periphery of the wild-card race and is dealing with the tragic death of Tyler Skaggs. The Angels need rotation help but could be hesitant to carve into prospect depth.

Astros — Better health is what Houston needed most and that has happened with Jose Altuve and George Springer returning. Now they are waiting for Carlos Correa to come back from a fractured rib. That he has started hitting again is a good sign. If the Astros add, the rotation is where they will look. Once you get past Justin Verlander, Gerrit Cole, and — believe it or not — Wade Miley, it gets thin.

Athletics — Billy Beane once traded Yoenis Cespedes for Jon Lester, so anything is possible. But for now, Oakland needs relief help for certain and a starter to pick up the innings lost when Frankie Montas was suspended for PED use. Top pitching prospect Jesus Luzardo could be their biggest addition over the summer.

Braves — Signing free agent Dallas Keuchel on June 7 may have been their biggest move. But the Braves went into the weekend with a 5½-game lead in the National League East and could create even more distance by further improving a questionable rotation.

Brewers — They won’t go away, fashioning a winning record despite a negative run differential. The Brewers could use relief help and perhaps a first baseman, unless Travis Shaw can get his act together in the minors.

Cardinals — Like many teams, they could use a starter to improve a rotation that is just above league average.

Cubs — Chicago made its big move by signing Craig Kimbrel. But Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer also need a lefthanded reliever to upgrade the bullpen. The best they have now is Kyle Ryan and Mike Montgomery. The Cubs also haven’t found a bench hitter who can give them what Ben Zobrist was supposed to. It’s uncertain when — or if — he will return from personal leave.

Diamondbacks — Arizona is hanging around the playoff picture more than was expected. But GM Mike Hazen isn’t the type to ask in haste for a small chance at success. He’s playing a long game. The rotation needs help and if Hazen makes a move, it could be for a starter who’s more than a two-month patch.

Dodgers — The loss of Rich Hill moved Ross Stripling out of the bullpen and into the rotation. Joe Kelly, meanwhile, remains unreliable. Shocking, right? So look for Los Angeles to make a splash in finding bullpen help. The Dodgers don’t often make trades with the rival Giants, but new San Francisco boss Farhan Zaidi was general manager of the Dodgers last season and could work out an equitable deal for Will Smith.

Indians — Cleveland is not the kind of organization to give up top prospects to chase a wild-card spot. The Indians could stand pat or add to what has been a weak outfield. If the Indians were to collapse, they would

find plenty of takers for reliever Brad Hand. The All-Star lefthander is having one of the best seasons of his career and is signed through 2020. But the schedule suggests the Indians will be in the mix at the deadline.

Nationals — Washington was 18-8 in June and climbed into the wild-card lead in the NL. The Nationals want to avoid going over the luxury-tax limit but need bullpen options to supplement Sean Doolittle. Ownership could be moved to go for it after losing Bryce Harper to free agency.

Phillies — For all its offseason additions, Philadelphia still has trouble scoring. Harper isn't exactly a bust, but he has yet to be a difference-maker. The same is true of catcher J.T. Realmuto. The Phillies need an upgrade in center field and bullpen help given the rough seasons because of injuries for Tommy Hunter, Pat Neshek, and David Robertson.

Pirates — Pittsburgh, which has hovered around .500, is in the mix in an evenly matched NL Central. But don't expect the Pirates to make major additions. And if they do sell, word is they have no intention of parting with closer Felipe Vazquez, who is signed through 2023.

Rangers — Texas was not expecting to contend this season but finds itself in the wild-card race. If the Rangers make moves, they won't be quick fixes. A controllable starter would fit well — which is the case for many teams. They also could use catching help. A tough schedule could mean the Rangers flip to sellers at the deadline.

Rays — Tampa Bay was 29-27 over May and June and the Yankees raced past them. But the Rays are still the American League wild-card leaders and could make additions to their bullpen, which has to pick up a lot of innings with their use of openers. The Rays are always hesitant to add payroll, but their talent-rich farm system should allow them to make cost-controlled upgrades. The real question is whether they will be motivated to do anything given the lack of interest in their market.

Reds — New pitching coach Derek Johnson has turned around the rotation, so Cincinnati could feel a desire to add as the deadline gets closer. The Reds had an aggressive winter and that could carry over. Middle infield is a need.

Rockies — Colorado very badly needs rotation help. The bullpen is an area of need, too. The Rockies will be focused on a starter.

Red Sox — The decision to move Nathan Eovaldi into the bullpen doesn't mean the Sox will stand by idly. They have added relievers at the deadline in previous years and likely will again.

Twins — Minnesota would like to control how many innings Michael Pineda throws in his first season after Tommy John surgery by moving him into the bullpen. So the Twins could be looking for a starter or another reliever if Pineda becomes an opener. The Twins are second in the AL in runs per game, so offense is not an issue.

Yankees — Brian Cashman could go after a starter with Luis Severino now questionable to return. But don't count them out of something else, even after the acquisition of Edwin Encarnacion. Just when you think Cashman will follow a straight line, he will mask a weak point by making a strong point even better.

OVERSEAS OPPORTUNITIES

MLB can thrive internationally

On Tuesday, two days after the Red Sox and Yankees played their second game at London Stadium, Major League Baseball announced it had opened an office in New Delhi, India.

For now, the aim will be to promote interest in baseball and get schoolchildren playing the game.

But in 10, 15, or 20 years, you very well could see the Sox and Yankees or other teams playing a series in India. That's how it started in England, opening an office years before games were even considered.

That the Sox and Yankees drew 118,718 fans for two games means that playing in Europe is no experiment. It's here to stay. Eighty percent of those tickets were sold outside of the United States.

Merchandise sales broke records going back to the 2008 All-Star Game in New York. At one point Saturday, fans stood for an hour waiting to get into the main souvenir shop outside the stadium. MLB showed it could squeeze a ballpark into a soccer stadium and build the required clubhouses, batting cages, and bullpens that teams need from scratch.

Think about how many soccer stadiums there are in Europe. Over time there are sure to be games in the Netherlands, Italy, France, and other countries. MLB also should correct what is an oversight and host a series in the Dominican Republic. Nearly 14 percent of Opening Day rosters were composed of players from the DR. If MLB can play in London, it can play in Santo Domingo. The Cubs and Cardinals will play in London next season and there's more to come.

HELP STILL NEEDED

Eovaldi alone is not the answer

Dave Dombrowski said that moving Nathan Eovaldi into the bullpen was conceived out of urgency, not desperation.

Urgent is a synonym for desperate. However the Sox package it up, the idea is a rash one.

Eovaldi has never had a save and has made only four relief appearances in the last eight seasons. He's also a 29-year-old who has had two Tommy John surgeries and is now on the injured list recovering from elbow surgery and biceps tendinitis.

Having him change roles now may not necessarily be dangerous. But Eovaldi is on the record saying he feels a starter's routine — preparing to pitch once every five days — suits him best physically. Eovaldi showed in Game 4 of the World Series that he was willing to risk his health for the good of the team by throwing 97 pitches in relief over six innings. Now he's being asked to do it again.

The Sox have to have something in mind better than just that.

Related: Nathan Eovaldi eager to help overworked Red Sox pitching staff

A few other thoughts on the Red Sox:

That Chris Sale has a 2.96 ERA in 76 innings with Sandy Leon and 6.68 ERA in 31 innings with Christian Vazquez can't be a coincidence.

Sale is a pitcher who needs the catcher to craft the game plan and tell him what to do. If the Sox want to keep Vazquez's bat in the lineup, play him at first base or DH.

The first game of the London Series lasted 4 hours and 42 minutes, the third-longest nine-inning game in history. The Sox have already played four nine-inning games that lasted four-plus hours this season.

The deadline to sign draft picks is Thursday at 5 p.m. The players to watch for the Sox are righthanders Sebastian Keane of North Andover High (11th round) and Blake Loubier of Oviedo, Fla. (13th round). They are the two highest unsigned high school players.

Keane is committed to Northeastern and Loubier to Wake Forest.

LOCAL TALENT

NU's Civale has auspicious debut

The Red Sox played Northeastern on March 3, 2015, in Fort Myers, Fla. That was when Aaron Civale first caught the attention of scouts.

A sophomore righthander from East Windsor, Conn., Civale started for the Huskies and struck out Xander Bogaerts, Mike Napoli, David Ortiz, and Hanley Ramirez. He threw two scoreless innings.

“It was unbelievable,” Civale said after the game.

It also was the start of something big. Civale, who grew up a Red Sox fan, pitched so well for Northeastern that he was a third-round draft pick of the Indians in 2016 and made his major league debut on June 22 with six scoreless innings against the Tigers.

Civale allowed only two hits, walked three, and struck out six.

“He had a ton of poise and competed like crazy,” Terry Francona said.

Civale was optioned back to Triple A Columbus two days later but should get another chance later in the season. He is the first NU player to make the majors since Adam Ottavino in 2010.

ETC.

Mets apologize for video tribute

When the Mets honored their 1969 World Series championship team last weekend, a video montage of players who had died included outfielder Jim Gosger and lefthander Jesse Hudson. But Gosger, 76, and Hudson, 70, are very much alive, and the team apologized the next day.

There were plenty of laughs at the Mets’ expense. But I sympathized with the person who made the mistake.

As a high school student, I worked part time for my hometown paper in New Bedford, The Standard-Times. I covered a basketball game at Fairhaven High one night and wrote that it was held at the Mel Entin Memorial Gymnasium.

The next day I received a call at the office. It was from Mel Entin, who informed me that while he was retired, he was not yet dead. He found it all very amusing and I met him about a week later.

Extra bases

An incredible streak ended Thursday when Yankees radio announcer John Sterling missed the team’s game against the Rays. Sterling, who also turned 81 on Thursday, had called 5,060 consecutive games going back to 1989. Sterling is taking four games off ahead of the All-Star break. He told the New York Post he was “a little under the weather” and needed some time off. Sterling, who is one of the most unique characters in baseball with his home run calls, broadcast NBA games earlier in his career and was behind the mic for the famed Larry Bird vs. Dominique Wilkins showdown in 1988 . . . Sterling is not the only ailing Yankees announcer. Michael Kay, who has broadcast Yankees games for 29 seasons, is scheduled for surgery in Boston this coming week to repair vocal cord damage. Kay’s surgeon, Steven Zeitels, has helped save the voices of many celebrities, including Steven Tyler, Bono, Roger Daltrey, and James Taylor . . . Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Patrick Corbin, and Nathan Eovaldi received the four most lucrative contracts via free agency last winter. None made the All-Star Game. In fact, none of the first nine did . . . Players who test positive for PEDs can’t play in the postseason that season. How about making them permanently ineligible for the All-Star Game? Minnesota’s Jorge Polanco tested positive for the steroid Stanazolol in 2018. He had a career .739 OPS before the positive test, .827 since . . . The Diamondbacks held a 4-3 lead with two outs and nobody on in the ninth inning on Tuesday night in Los Angeles. The Dodgers at that point had almost zero percent chance of victory based on win expectancy calculations. Greg Holland got ahead of Chris Taylor, 0 and 2, and missed on four consecutive sliders. Holland then walked Russell Martin, Alex Verdugo, and Matt Beaty to force in the tying run. Of his final 18 pitches, four were strikes. T.J. McFarland came in and walked Cody Bellinger, after being ahead, 1 and 2, to give the Dodgers the

win. It was the first game since at least 1920 that ended with five straight walks . . . Happy 61st birthday to Glenn Hoffman, who played for the Red Sox from 1980-87 then managed the Dodgers for part of the 1998 season. He is now the third base coach of the Padres. Newton native Bob Gallagher, who played seven games for the Sox in 1972, turns 72 on Sunday. Matt Mantei, who finished his career with 34 games for the Sox in 2005, is 46.

Is the Red Sox' recent offensive explosion for real?

Julian McWilliams

The London Series was an offensive anomaly. The offensive displays by both the New York Yankees and Red Sox were mind-boggling. Fifty runs in two games between both teams is tough to process without attempting to attach an asterisk to it.

Was the air thin, causing the ball to travel farther? Were pitchers not getting the break on their off-speed stuff, resulting in flat pitches across the heart of the plate? Were the balls, in fact, "juiced" just so Major League Baseball could present an offensive show to a London group that loves its fútbol and cricket?

Those are all anecdotal claims, of course. But it doesn't erase the thought of leaving London not knowing what to make of that Sox offense. In their four games since making the trip across the pond before Saturday night's game, however, the Red Sox averaged 7.5 runs per game. They hit .300 as a club with nine homers and a .346 on-base percentage in that span.

Rafael Devers continues to be what Mookie Betts calls the glue to the lineup. On the other hand, Betts recorded his first three-hit game Friday since June 16 against the Orioles. So, is this offense finally clicking? In short, a larger sample size will answer that, but at the least, their recent offensive explosion certainly catches your attention. Still, the other parts of what has made the Red Sox great hasn't quite caught up yet.

Desperate need of Eovaldi

Whether it's in the bullpen or the rotation, the Red Sox are in desperate need of Nathan Eovaldi. Sox president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski told reporters recently that it will most likely come in the bullpen role and Eovaldi sees that as the most prudent decision based on where the team is.

Coming out of the bullpen would allow Eovaldi to expedite the rehab process. If he tried to rejoin the rotation, that would take about another month of building himself up to that point. While the rotation is thin and inconsistent, the bullpen is worse.

It entered Saturday tied for the second-most blown saves in baseball, behind the dysfunctional New York Mets. They have thrown the fifth-most innings in the months of June and the start of July (127 $\frac{2}{3}$). In that same span, the relievers posted a 5.15 ERA.

Despite the Red Sox win Friday evening, it didn't come without a fight as they saw a 6-1 lead shrink to a one-run game in the bottom half of the sixth. Now, the onus doesn't fall entirely on the bullpen. Jackie Bradley Jr. dropped a liner to center that scored two runs late in the game and the play before that Betts mishandled a ball. But the bullpen did account for three earned runs after Eduardo Rodriguez exited the game in the fifth due to the rain delay.

Eovaldi threw a bullpen Saturday, Cora said. He'll follow that up by playing catch Sunday and throwing an additional bullpen Wednesday.

"We have to get him used to throwing every day," Cora said prior to Saturday's game against the Tigers. "Usually when he throws a bullpen he doesn't throw the next day, so that's why he's throwing tomorrow and then we're going to give him the two days off."

Navy righthander signs

The Red Sox signed their fourth-round pick, Navy righthander Noah Song. He was assigned to Single A Lowell. Song was 11-1 with a 1.44 earned run average as a senior and led Division 1 with 15.4 strikeouts per nine innings. Song will be allowed to play this season with Lowell and will report to flight school on Nov. 1 at Naval Station Newport in Rhode Island. His status beyond that is to be determined.

Per a directive from President Trump, the Department of Defense is working on a policy that would allow service academy graduates to pursue professional sports careers and defer their commitment.

The Sox have signed 22 of their 40 picks, including the first 10, ahead of Thursday's deadline.

Martinez, Bogaerts rest

Xander Bogaerts's 17th homer of the season Friday came on a 2-0 fastball located middle-in. It was a no-doubter once it left the bat, extending the Red Sox' lead to 9-5 in the top of the eighth inning and raised Bogaerts's OPS to .920. Nonetheless, Cora said Saturday Bogaerts needed a day off and the club saw it as the best time to give it to him.

"He's been grinding since London," Cora said. "I was thinking about it last night after the game and he was dragging a little bit. What he's done for the first part of the season, he's been great. I saw Xander, he crushed that ball late in the game, but you can see he's been dragging for a while."

The Sox will use this as an off-day for J.D. Martinez, too. Cora said the All-Star Game didn't factor into the decision to give either a rest. Dating back to London, Bogaerts had played in 85 of the team's 88 games so far this season, while Martinez has played in 78 of them.

Benintendi back

Saturday marked Andrew Benintendi's 25th birthday and he batted fourth. When asked what played into the decision to hit him in the cleanup spot, Cora joked that the birthday boy might have some good fortune in that spot. Cora added that if Martinez were to play, Benintendi would have batted fifth, but with Martinez out of the lineup, he moved him up to fourth. Benintendi, who had sat out the prior two games for the Sox and was in a 0-for-12 skid, had four hits, including a triple during the Red Sox' two-run first inning.

"He felt better yesterday in BP," Cora said. "The one thing about working on mechanics is that when the game starts, it's all about competing. You got to find a way. You can't think about mechanics or actually how you feel. It's just you against the pitcher."

Thornburg hurls scoreless inning

Tyler Thornburg threw a 30-pitch scoreless inning for Triple A Pawtucket against Lehigh Valley, working around a hit and a walk. The righthander has appeared in 11 games for the PawSox on a rehabilitation assignment. He has a 12.66 ERA and 2.44 WHIP over 10 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings. Opponents hit .333. Pawtucket plays Sunday before starting its All-Star break. Thornburg's 30-day assignment ends Tuesday then the Sox will then have to decide Wednesday whether to reinstate him to the major league roster or designate him for assignment. Thornburg has a 7.71 ERA and 1.66 WHIP in 16 major league appearances this season. Opponents had a .970 OPS against him, collecting 15 extra-base hits in 75 at-bats. Thornburg also walked 10. There would seem to be little chance of Thornburg returning to the roster given his extended struggles in Triple A . . . Double A Portland righthander Tanner Houck, a first-round pick in 2014, pitched in relief for the first time in his professional career. He inherited an 8-3 lead against New Hampshire in the seventh inning and allowed six runs while recording one out. The Sox are trying Houck in relief as they search for bullpen options that could help the major league team later in the season. Houck gave up three hits and walked two. He walked in a run then allowed a two-run double. Houck was 8-5 with a 3.65 ERA in 15 starts.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox bats strong again in 10-6 win against Tigers

Michael Silverman

Another Red Sox victory, another set of thank you notes for the pitchers to write to the hitters.

One night after the Sox wasted multiple big leads, they watched a seven-run bulge shrink to just one Saturday thanks to a late implosion by starter Rick Porcello, who allowed four in the sixth inning. But the offense was too much for the Detroit Tigers, and the Red Sox came away with a rain-delayed, 10-6 win that again covered up the visitors' ongoing pitching concerns. The Sox bullpen pitched three scoreless innings to secure the decision.

On his 25th birthday, Andrew Benintendi was 4-for-5, just a homer shy of the cycle in his first game back after two days on the bench spent fixing his swing in the middle of a deep slump. Mookie Betts was 3-for-5, also finishing a home run short of the cycle. The Red Sox collected 17 hits in all, stranding a dozen runners.

The victory meant a series win and a chance to sweep in the last game before the All-Star break on Sunday afternoon.

"I really don't care if we put them away. We're winning. That's what it's all about," manager Alex Cora said. "I know it's a grind. It's been a grind since we got on that plane to Europe. I think the guys have done an outstanding job the last five games winning 4-of-5, and we've got one more. One more. If we win one more, it's 49, and we're almost there. It's not, you know, it's not easy ... but we get a chance to win tomorrow, turn the page, and be ready for Friday (after the break)."

The game began 4:05 later than scheduled, at 8:15, because of rain that hovered over the Motor City. Sox hitters made their first stack of hay early, taking full advantage of the highly hittable stuff of Tigers starter Jordan Zimmermann, who allowed seven runs in just 3 1/3 innings.

RBI machine Rafael Devers and Michael Chavis each knocked in runs in the first inning, Betts doubled in two more in the third, with Christian Vazquez and Benintendi responsible for the other two early runs.

The Red Sox added one unearned run in the seventh, and one earned run apiece in the eighth and ninth.

"They've been unbelievable," Porcello of the Red Sox offense. "They're the heart and soul right now. Myself, I've got to pitch better. (David Price has) been throwing the ball well, and our bullpen, they've been carrying a lot of the load. We need to piece it all together. Thank God we won this one tonight, and we move forward."

The day before Porcello's start, Cora said he thought the right-hander had forgotten about his previous effort (six runs against the Yankees in London while getting only one out) and would be "fine" for this one. Cora also said he was "looking forward to the break" for Porcello.

Cora was right about the All-Star break, wrong about the "fine" part.

Porcello actually pitched more than fine his first five innings, protecting a 7-0 lead into the fourth when Jeimer Candelario hit a two-run shot that that bounced off the right field foul pole. Given the lead and Porcello's stuff, there was nothing particularly alarming about the knock, even though Harold Castro followed it up with a triple. Porcello retired the next three batters in order.

But after striking out Christin Stewart to lead off the sixth, Porcello began to break down as the bottom half of the Tigers lineup got its third and final look at him. He gave up a line-drive solo shot to Candelario, and before he could record another out, two runs scored when he gave up a two-run single to No. 9 hitter Bobby Wilson.

“Everything was going fine through five innings, then sixth inning, got hit around,” said Porcello, whose record improved to 6-7 while his ERA rose to 5.33. “Definitely looking to go deeper, at least seven. We had that game in complete control, the offense did an unbelievable job, the bullpen did a great job. It’s pretty frustrating on my end. I’ve got to be better from start to finish.”

On Porcello, Cora said, “He did a good job until that last inning. Candelario got a breaking ball down in the zone and hit it out of the ballpark, then he tried to go up with Wilson with a two-strike count, and he got to it. Overall, obviously not the one he wanted or we wanted, but this is a guy we trust. We’re going to keep working, and we’re going to keep pushing him, and he’s going to get better. He’ll be ready for the second part of the season.”

Colten Brewer allowed an RBI triple, a run charged to Porcello, before finishing off the sixth. Josh Taylor, Matt Barnes, Brandon Workman and Steven Wright finished the game, combining for three scoreless innings.

Alex Cora believes Red Sox can still win the AL East

Michael Silverman

Despite the roster similarities, we all are familiar with the fact the 2019 Red Sox are nothing like the 2018 Red Sox.

Their performance has been underwhelming, to say the least.

And while manager Alex Cora has yet to find the right spark-to-gunpowder combination that will ignite the team, he has not given up the pursuit.

Or his optimism.

Like, on a day like Saturday when the Red Sox woke up 11 games behind the Yankees, he still believes the team has a shot at winning the AL East.

“I guarantee you that’s the message they have: this is not over, it’s just like the other teams in the division — it ain’t over,” Cora said before the Red Sox’ 10-6 victory over the Tigers. “We know they’re playing great, we know it. You can’t hide that fact. But the fact that we still have the second part of the season, and we know that we’re going to improve, we’ll be OK.

“We’ve got a long way to go to win the division. But, I think if we stay with our goals, our short-term goals, then I think big things are going to happen.”

Cora said motivation after winning a title has not been difficult, adding with a smile, that after winning with the Astros in 2017, he and bullpen coach Craig Bjornson have an active streak to maintain.

“On a personal level, I want to win three in a row — me and C.B., we’re the only human beings in the world that can say we’re shooting for three,” said Cora. “I always joke with them. But they want to be great. I told you guys in spring training, we’ve got a chance — this group especially — to be one of the greatest groups in this franchise, and people are going to remember us. Right now, it hasn’t happened. We haven’t played to the level we know we can, but we know it’s going to change.”

There have been times, Cora said, when his ideas have not exactly clicked.

“I’m trying to find a way to get us going, that’s my job, put these guys in position to be successful,” said Cora. “There’s nights I’m like, ‘Man, what do we need to do?’ I take it personally.

“Sometimes I’m like ‘Why did we try to do that?’ or it didn’t work out but in the end you trust your information, you trust your coaches, you trust your players. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn’t.”

Cora's approach is a calm one, one that bears no resemblance to old-school rants and raves and also one that avoids team meetings.

"I just bring details," said Cora. "It's something that we did last year. Even when we were playing great, you start pointing out things that we could do better. It seems like this year, we have to point out more, but we did it last year all the way to the last day of the season. It's something I learned over the years, and I think it's something that nowadays it works. The constant communication with them, they don't like team meetings. Nobody likes that. The message, sometimes, it gets lost. But if you keep preaching and talking and teaching the game, then the message gets across and they take advantage of it."

Until the turnaround Cora expects actually takes place, he will keep doing everything he can to hasten its arrival.

"Just like last year, I take it personally," he said. "We've got to keep grinding every day and show up every day. It's not that I'm down on myself or down on the team, you've got to just keep finding ways, the same way we did last year. It's going to happen, it's going to happen. We feel that way. I know there are teams that are playing better than us right now but we've got talent. We've got talent. Nobody's feeling sorry for us, it's the other way around actually, so we've got to just keep grinding, keep going and we'll find it."

After the victory, Cora said that starter Rick Porcello would get some extra rest and not pitch until the second series after the All-Star break. The second series begins Monday July 15, meaning Porcello will rest for at least eight days before pitching again.

Red Sox in the first half: 10 thoughts and numbers

Jason Mastrodonato

The Red Sox' dreaded first half comes to an end today.

While it's not totally safe to start booking October vacations, drawing a loose outline and reserving some free-cancellation hotel rooms might be in order.

The Red Sox entered Friday with a .529 winning percentage, leaving them with a prayer's chance and nothing more to win the uber-competitive American League East.

The Yankees are just too good (they're 6-1 against their rivals since the Sox ended their season a year ago), and they're only getting better as big names come off the injured list and the depth of the farm system can be exploited for trade deadline help.

Baseball-reference.com has the Red Sox with a 1.8 percent chance to win the division.

Not happening.

But they do have a 22 percent chance of making the postseason in a Wild Card spot. And once you're in, anything goes.

In the last 10 years, there have been 204 teams to have a winning percentage under .530 at the All-Star break. Only 14 of them (7 percent) have made the playoffs.

Five thoughts on as a strange first half for the local nine comes to an end:

1. As usual, being voted into the All-Star Game is about as meaningful as beating a toddler in a pingpong match.

J.D. Martinez and Mookie Betts were really good — in 2018. Martinez is having another solid season in 2019, though he admitted it's not up to his standard and it's been a grind all year. Betts is always good, but hasn't been great since his last six games of the regular season in 2018.

If this is supposed to be a show of the game's best players *this year,* there's little doubt Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers should've been representing the Red Sox. Bogaerts eventually got in when players started dropping out, but it's a shame Devers won't be in Cleveland.

2. A big bat for the Derby... next year.

The Home Run Derby is on Monday and there's no Red Sox players worthy of being there this year, but keep an eye on Michael Chavis for next year.

Chavis is the perfect player for this event, with an all-or-nothing swing and a personality he's not afraid to let people see. When he goes deep, he goes really deep, with three of the four longest homers of the season for the Red Sox, including this 459-foot moonshot. And since you don't have to be an All-Star to participate in the Derby, maybe we'll see him swatting dingers in Dodger Stadium next July.

3. Are the Red Sox gearing up to acquire a starting pitcher?

Here's why this seems likely: Nathan Eovaldi and Darwinson Hernandez have both been moved to the bullpen. And, unprompted, Dave Dombrowski told reporters in Toronto this week that former first-rounder Tanner Houck (3.65 ERA in Double-A) might also make the move to the 'pen.

There goes the depth to the starting rotation, one that's barely operating every four or five days when the Sox send out an "opener," a strategy that only works when teams have deep bullpens full of big arms. This team doesn't. And it's remarkable the Red Sox have survived these disastrous bullpen games, which, by the way, are extremely unenjoyable to watch, create too many pitching changes and remove any sense of rhythm.

Price and Sale, pray for hail. (Though Eduardo Rodriguez is pitching with more consistency than ever before in his career.)

But with big names like Madison Bumgarner, Zack Wheeler and Marcus Stroman (David Price's baseball brother) likely to be available by trade, the Red Sox could have a chance to not only acquire a game-changer at the deadline, but could do so in a way that blocks the Yankees from strengthening their biggest weakness — but only if they have the prospect capital to make that big of a deal.

Yankees GM Brian Cashman is known for making shrewd moves like this, finding ways to make his team better while simultaneously taking options away from the Red Sox. He did it this winter, acquiring Adam Ottavino and D.J. LeMahieu on bargain deals at two positions the Red Sox could've used some help.

Perhaps Dombrowski will repay the favor with a big-time acquisition that gives the Red Sox some much-needed life.

Otherwise, if the Sox keep sending out "openers," it's going to make it look a bit ridiculous to have sent Eovaldi and Hernandez, two of their most talented options to bolster the rotation, to the bullpen.

4. Is Chris Sale trying to fire up his team with his self-deprecating postgame comments?

All year the Red Sox' ace has been crushing himself harder than even the most critical TV analyst could. This week, he offered another harsh self-assessment. Check out some of the highlights during his postgame interviews this year:

April 9, after allowing five runs in four innings to the Blue Jays: “I’m struggling. I don’t know if I’ve ever pitched like this in my life... This isn’t the hard-work league. This is the do-good league... This wasn’t us not playing good. This was me sucking today.”

April 28, after allowing four runs (two earned) in seven innings to the Rays: “It’s a love-hate relationship; I’ve loved this game for the same reason I hate it.”

May 14, after allowing two runs in seven innings and striking out 17 against the Rockies: “It’s pretty crappy timing to give up a two-run homer and give a team a new life. I’ve got to be better in those situations.”

June 26, after allowing five runs in six innings to the White Sox: “For some reason I suck here (at Fenway Park).”

Wednesday, after allowing five runs in 5-²/₃ innings to the Jays: “What am I, 3-8? That’s absolutely embarrassing. That’s not what I need to be and that’s not who I need to be for this team. On a team like this, they need me to be better and I haven’t been there for them. I’m standing before you as frustrated as I’ve ever been, just to be honest.”

And that’s just a sample. This guy has been hammering himself all year. One has to think Sale is just being accountable and doing his best to fire up his teammates. Are they going to pick him up, after he picked them up so often in the last two years?

5. The \$6.25 million spent on Steve Pearce was the most questionable decision of the off-season.

Looking back, if the Red Sox knew they were willing to get as high as \$68 million over four years for Nathan Eovaldi — which would push them to within \$10 million of the highest level of the luxury tax threshold — why did they spend \$6.25 million Pearce and leave themselves without any additional funding to fill other holes?

Hindsight is always 20/20, but now it seems silly. They were all-in on Dustin Pedroia as the second baseman, counting on an aging and hobbling Eduardo Nunez to fill in if it didn’t work out. Brock Holt was supposed to be the utility man. They had no infield depth, save from Chavis, who they didn’t want to bring up this early but had to.

In the bullpen, it seems like a broken record now but the Sox just failed to address it at all. They were so excited about trading for Colten Brewer they just about stopped adding pieces after that. Brewer has a 4.74 ERA and 1.76 WHIP.

Brian Johnson and Hector Velazquez were the only depth starters they had, and both got hurt. Between injuries and inconsistency, swingmen are difficult to count on given the wacky nature of the role. It’s not easy to do it well all year, much less multiple years in a row.

Pearce, 36, is injured again and has hit .180 with a .503 OPS in 29 games.

Either they shouldn’t have signed him and trusted Chavis or some other options to pick up the slack at first base when Mitch Moreland tired/got hurt, or the Sox simply need to spend more. Bust through the third tier of the threshold and fill the many holes on this team. There’s an argument to be made they should’ve done that in the offseason. And if they’re serious about winning this year, they might have to do it before July 31.

Five interesting numbers from the first half (stats entering Friday):

1. Pablo Sandoval: .287 average, .884 OPS, 17 doubles, 10 home runs in 184 plate appearances for the San Francisco Giants.

Being paid \$18 million by the Red Sox this year, the 32-year-old is back to switch-hitting again, though all his homers have been hit left-handed. He's playing first base and third, where he has just three errors in 23 games.

2. Drew Pomeranz: 6.25 ERA, 1.72 WHIP, 77 strikeouts, 33 walks in 63- $\frac{1}{3}$ innings for the Giants.

Most importantly, he's averaging less than five innings per start, which was often the biggest knock on Pomeranz when he was in Boston. And strangely, his fastball velocity is back to 92 mph after he averaged 90 mph for the Sox last year.

3. Joe Kelly: 5.76 ERA, 1.65 WHIP, 35 strikeouts, 14 walks in 29- $\frac{2}{3}$ innings for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The Sox were never going to pay him the \$25 million over three years he got from the Dodgers, and that's looking like a smart decision thus far. But Kelly is starting to come around. Since May 28, he's held hitters to a .174 average with a 1.46 ERA and 18 strikeouts in 12- $\frac{1}{3}$ innings.

4. Red Sox bullpen: 9.00 ERA, 2.00 WHIP, 12.6 K/9, 6 BB/9, 2.25 HR/9 in 40 innings since June 22.

They're exhausted. They're thin on depth. And they desperately need the All-Star break.

5. Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers combined: .323 AVG, 31 HR, 118 RBI, 131 R

Rest of the Red Sox offense: .256 AVG, 97 HR, 340 RBI, 353 R.

Nathan Eovaldi takes step closer to new role as closer

Michael Silverman

Nathan Eovaldi, the Red Sox' impending closer, threw a bullpen here Saturday. He'll play catch on Sunday, and then throw another bullpen at Fenway Park on Wednesday.

The Sox still have to get him used to throwing off the mound at full throttle every day, so the earliest he could return would be mid-July.

"He threw well, felt fine," manager Alex Cora said Saturday .

Eovaldi has not pitched since April 17, shortly after which he underwent elbow surgery to remove loose bodies. His return was slowed by tendinitis.

Time off for two

Both Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez were scheduled to start Saturday's game on the bench.

Coming in, Bogaerts was tied for second on the team with Rafael Devers for games played (85) this season. Mookie Betts leads the Sox, playing in 86 of their 88.

"(Bogaerts has) been grinding since London, he mentioned something two days ago and he usually doesn't talk about how he feels, he just keeps going," Cora said. "I was thinking about it and last night I saw him after the game and he was dragging a little bit. I mean, everybody's dragging. What he's done the whole first part of the season has been great. With the conditions and everything that's gone on the last 10 days, he needs it."

Cora also said Martinez has "been grinding a little bit."

Birthday boy Benny

In Martinez' absence, hitting cleanup was Andrew Benintendi, who is struggling offensively and had the last two games off in order to get a mental break as he retools his swing.

"It's his birthday, too," Cora said. "Never know."

Benintendi turned 25 on Saturday. . . .

Christian Vazquez, batting .335 over his last 18 games and with multiple hits in four of his last five, was slated to bat third for just the second time in his career. Vazquez was to be the designated hitter. . . .

Mitch Moreland (right quad) is improving and will likely be sent out on a rehab assignment next weekend.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox 10, Tigers 6: Boston rides early thunder past Detroit

Bill Koch

From a rain delay lasting more than four hours to a seven-run lead that nearly vanished, there was nothing easy about Saturday for the Red Sox.

Comerica Park was nearly the scene of the latest rancid Boston defeat of the season, one that would have soured the mood into the final contest before the All-Star break. A late rescue effort headlined by Matt Barnes and Eduardo Nunez was required for the Red Sox to finally escape.

Barnes struck out the only man he faced and Nunez's RBI single allowed Boston to breathe again late. Those were two of the key exchanges in a 10-6 victory over the Tigers, one that moved the Red Sox seven games over .500 for the third time this season.

Barnes was summoned into a 8-6 game with the bases loaded and two outs in the bottom of the seventh. Gordon Beckham fanned on three straight curveballs, the last two of which broke hard into the dirt. Barnes stranded three runners inherited from Josh Taylor, setting up Brandon Workman and Steven Wright to handle the final two frames.

"There's not a lot of room for error there with the bases loaded," Barnes said. "You've got to attack him. You've got to make quality pitches from the start."

Buck Farmer's error on a Rafael Devers comebacker had given the Red Sox that two-run cushion. It still felt rather tenuous into the eighth when Andrew Benintendi finished off his first four-hit game of the season with leadoff single to shallow left. Benintendi stole second and remained there with two outs when Nunez sent an RBI single up the middle, putting the Red Sox further out of reach.

"We kept putting pressure and scoring runs," Mookie Betts said. "The guys in the bullpen helped us."

Christian Vazquez's sacrifice fly in the ninth was the capper on a day where the Red Sox pounded Jordan Zimmermann for the second time in as many meetings this season. Boston tagged the Detroit starter for a career-high 13 hits over just 3 1/3 innings, including 10 by its first 17 men who came to the plate. Zimmermann was charged with seven earned runs, his most allowed in a game since August 2017.

"We did a good job putting good at-bats," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Obviously what Mookie is doing, he's getting there. Everybody knows when he gets going, we get going. And the fun begins."

The slugging started in the top of the first when Betts tripled off the wall in center and scored on an RBI grounder to second by Devers. Benintendi added a two-out triple down the line in right and came home on

a looping single over the second baseman by Michael Chavis. It was 2-0 Red Sox and the first time Boston had tripled twice in a first inning since July 1963.

The Red Sox were at it again in the second when Betts drilled a two-run double to the wall in left and Vazquez lined an RBI single to right. Boston enjoyed a 5-0 lead and was making nothing by solid contact. Vazquez's base hit was one of nine balls put in play at more than 101 mph against Zimmermann.

Benintendi's fortuitous double down the line in left and Brock Holt's sacrifice fly to deep left-center closed the book on Zimmermann in the fourth. Boston didn't manage another hit until Marco Hernandez sent a looper to left with one out in the seventh, and its comfortable lead had been shaved to a sliver.

Jeimer Candelario proved the most difficult hitter for Rick Porcello to solve. Candelario posted the second multi-homer game of his career, accounting for three runs on two swings. His two-run shot hit the foul pole in right in the fourth and he hooked a drive inside the pole with one out in the sixth.

"Today there was a slider to Candelario, then the breaking ball – it just happens," Cora said. "At the end he gave us 5 2/3. We were one out away from going to where we wanted to, but it didn't happen."

Candelario's second homer made it a 7-3 game, and Porcello quickly unraveled. Harold Castro and Beckham each singled and moved into scoring position on a wild pitch, setting the table for Bobby Wilson with two outs. His two-run single through the left side made it 7-5 and forced Cora to bring on Colten Brewer.

Victor Reyes greeted the right-hander with a slicing dive toward the corner in left, one that eluded a diving Benintendi. The RBI triple cut Detroit's deficit to 7-6, and Brewer fanned Nicholas Castellanos to escape further damage. Porcello was charged with six earned runs for the second straight start, his last coming in a 17-13 debacle against the Yankees in London last weekend.

"Everything was going fine through five innings," Porcello said. "Sixth inning again, I got hit around. Definitely looking to go deeper – at least go seven. They had that game in complete control."

Devers' value no mystery in the Red Sox dugout

Bill Koch

As you might expect, the verdict on whether or not Rafael Devers should be an American League All-Star is a unanimous one in the Red Sox clubhouse.

There isn't a hotter hitter in baseball at the moment than the Boston third baseman. There also might not be a defensive player who has improved as much during the season as the 22-year-old. Devers looks like a cornerstone in the making as the Red Sox wrap up their final series of the first half here at Comerica Park.

Devers went without a home run over his first 32 games and proceeded to crack 16 over his next 53. His nine errors through May 2 have been followed by just three over his last 50 games. Per FanGraphs, Devers has broken into the A.L. top five in Wins Above Replacement — only Angels outfielder Mike Trout, Xander Bogaerts, Astros third baseman Alex Bregman and Athletics third baseman Matt Chapman have been more valuable to their respective clubs.

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

It's the first direct allusion Cora has made regarding Devers as an MVP candidate. Trout (6.0 WAR) is currently lapping the competition, holding a sizeable gap over Bogaerts (3.7), Bregman (3.6) and Chapman (3.6). Devers is one of just 11 players in the league at 3.0 or better, and his early deficiencies in the field cost him considerable ground.

“He’s doing everything — hitting homers, doubles, getting RBI, getting runs in,” Eduardo Rodriguez said. “He’s a guy who we’ve got to have in the lineup every day.”

Devers entered Saturday topping the Red Sox in batting average, slugging percentage and OPS. His 111 hits are the most by a Boston third baseman prior to the All-Star break since Wade Boggs reached the same number in 1988. Devers ranks third in the A.L. with 25 doubles and fourth in extra-base hits with 43.

“It’s instant offense,” Cora said. “The way he’s swinging the bat, he’s a threat. You feel like on any pitch he can do damage.”

Devers batted ninth in the order in the opener of a day-night doubleheader with the Tigers on April 23. His OPS was at just .690 the following day — it’s at a robust .946 now. Devers has also spent the last nine games in the lineup’s second spot, and he looks set for an extended run there.

“I think he’s pretty much the centerpiece,” said Mookie Betts, who hits leadoff in front of Devers. “I think everything kind of goes around him. He’s been huge all year.”

Devers carried a nine-game hitting streak into Saturday’s middle game of the series with Detroit. He was 19-for-37 with seven doubles, four home runs and 14 runs scored over that span. His two-run shot to the opposite field in Friday’s 9-5 victory came on a Ryan Carpenter slider that was breaking off the plate away.

It was a later Devers at-bat, however, that caught Cora’s attention. Boston nursed a 6-5 lead into the eighth inning and Betts lined a one-out single to center. Devers worked a walk ahead of Bogaerts, who slugged a three-run homer to deep left. It was the 28th base on balls drawn by Devers this season — he had just 38 all of last year, something that helps explain his 87-point rise in on-base percentage.

“Mookie gets on, Raffy with a great at-bat — 3-2 count, he doesn’t chase — and then Xander put a big swing there,” Cora said. “It gave us a chance.”

Red Sox Journal: Cora expects better play ahead

Bill Koch

With two games remaining prior to the All-Star break, Red Sox manager Alex Cora took stock of his club’s position Saturday afternoon.

Boston entered the middle game of a weekend series with the Tigers at 47-41. The Yankees enjoyed an 11-game lead in the American League East. The Rays, Indians and Athletics all sat ahead of the Red Sox in the race for the two wildcard spots.

Boston has been running uphill since its 11-17 start. The Red Sox have played .600 baseball through their last 60 games — that’s a 97-win pace over the course of 162 games. But several missed opportunities due to a faulty bullpen and a lineup that has failed to fire at times leaves Boston still searching for another gear.

“It didn’t start the way we wanted,” Cora said. “I think we just didn’t play well. That’s it. Right now we’re in a position to win this series and to move on.

“We’ll be fine. We’ll find ways to get going. We still have a good team.”

That’s been the steady message from Cora throughout the first three months. He believes in the talent on the roster. He expects more attention to detail and improved performance.

It’s understandable why Cora has adopted this line of thinking. He’s been essentially the same manager who steered the club to a record 108 wins last season. Those waiting for him to publicly rip his players,

demand help from president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski or unleash a profanity-laced tirade worthy of Billy Martin will be left disappointed.

“I just bring details,” Cora said. “It’s something that we did last year even when we were playing great. You start pointing out things you can do better. Like this year, we have to point out more. But we did it last year all the way to the last day of the season.

“It’s something that I learned over the years and it’s something that, nowadays, it works. The constant communication with them — they don’t like team meetings. Nobody likes that. The message sometimes, it gets lost. If you keep preaching and talking and teaching the game, then the message gets across and they take advantage of it.”

Benny’s back

Andrew Benintendi made his return to the lineup on Saturday while Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez received the day off.

Benintendi was mired in an 0-for-12 slump and was hitless on the road trip to date. He’s been dropped twice in the lineup this season, moved out of the leadoff spot in favor of Mookie Betts and out of the second spot in favor of Rafael Devers.

“He felt better yesterday during (batting practice),” Cora said. “Even during the game they worked on a few things. The one thing about all this working on mechanics — at the end, when the game starts, it’s all about competing. You’ve got to find a way.”

Bogaerts smashed a three-run homer late in Friday’s 9-5 victory over Detroit, but he’s just 2-for-13 over his last three games with six strikeouts. Martinez played left field in place of Benintendi on Friday and the Red Sox are hoping to avoid a recurrence of the back problems that have forced Martinez to the bench in recent weeks.

Injury report

Nathan Eovaldi (right elbow) threw his scheduled bullpen session on Saturday and will be working again soon.

Eovaldi is scheduled to play catch on Sunday and throw another bullpen session on Wednesday. The rest afforded Eovaldi as a starter will be lessened when he makes his return in a bullpen role.

“We’ve got to get him used to throwing every day,” Cora said. “Usually he throws a bullpen and he doesn’t throw the next day. That’s why he’s throwing tomorrow.”

Eovaldi hasn’t pitched in a game since turning in six strong innings against the Yankees on April 17. He’s due to be activated off the injured list by Boston at some point after the All-Star break.

Draft pick signed

The Red Sox announced the signing of right-handed pitcher Noah Song.

The club has now come to terms with each of its top 10 picks in the June draft. Song was selected in the fourth round out of Navy and was one of four finalists for the Golden Spikes Award, which goes to college baseball’s top player. He will report to Class A Lowell.

Massachusetts schoolboy Sebastian Keane, a right-handed pitcher, remains Boston’s top unsigned player. He was selected in the 11th round and could honor a commitment to Northeastern. The Red Sox have inked 22 of their top 29 picks overall, including 19 from the college ranks.

*** *MassLive.com***

Benintendi goes 4-for-6 to lead Red Sox over Tigers; Betts, Hernandez each add 3 hits

Christopher Smith

Birthday boy Andrew Benintendi returned to the Red Sox lineup in a big way Saturday after taking two days off to work on his swing.

Benintendi, who batted cleanup with both J.D. Martinez and Xander Bogaerts sitting, went 4-for-6 with a double, triple stolen base, RBI and two runs. Mookie Betts added three hits, including a triple and double. He drove in two runs and scored twice.

The Red Sox won 10-6 over the Tigers at Comerica Park.

Benintendi was celebrating his 25th birthday.

Marco Hernandez went 3-for-5 with two runs. Holt and Christian Vazquez each stroked two hits.

The Sox picked up a game on the Yankees who lost 4-3 to the Rays. But they still are 10 games behind New York.

Boston's offense exploded against Tigers righty Jordan Zimmermann who allowed a career-high 13 hits in 3 1/3 innings.

The Red Sox scored twice in the first inning with triples from both Betts and Benintendi. Betts scored on Rafael Devers' groundout. Benintendi scored on Michael Chavis' single to the opposite field in right.

Boston plated three more runs in the second inning. Betts ripped a two-run double.

Vazquez added an RBI single to the opposite field to make it 5-0.

The Red Sox increased their lead to 7-0 in the fourth. Devers singled to begin the inning. Vazquez and Benintendi followed with doubles. Brock Holt connected for a sacrifice fly later in the frame.

Porcello struggles

Red Sox starter Rick Porcello allowed six runs, all earned, nine hits and one walk while striking out five in 5 2/3 innings.

Given a 7-0 lead, Porcello allowed a two-run to Jeimer Candelario in the sixth inning, then surrendered four runs in the sixth. Candelario homered in the sixth inning as well.

Boston Red Sox sign Noah Song, fourth round pick and righty out of United States Naval Academy

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox have signed 2019 fourth-round draft pick Noah Song, a right-handed pitcher out of the United States Naval Academy.

Song has been assigned to Short Season Lowell. He went 11-1 with a 1.44 ERA and .171 batting average against in 14 starts as a senior. He led Division I with 15.41 strikeouts per 9 innings. He punched out 161 and walked 31 in 94 innings.

He posted a 2.37 ERA in 58 outings (54 starts) during his Navy career. He tossed 14 complete games, including nine shutouts.

He was a finalist for the Golden Spikes Award, which goes to the top amateur baseball player in the U.S. He also was named 2019 Perfect Game Pitcher of the Year.

The Red Sox have signed their top 10 picks from the 2019 draft.

*** *The New Hampshire Union Leader***

Red Sox don't have Star power

Mike Shalin

Xander Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and Christian Vazquez were all All-Star worthy when the original selections were being made. But as of Saturday afternoon, only Bogaerts, named as an injury replacement, was going.

As we used to say in my old neighborhood, dems da breaks.

Devers has truly been on fire, taking a nine-game hitting streak into Saturday's game — 19-for-37 with four homers and 13 RBIs. In his last 20 games, he was at .444 with seven homers, 21 RBIs. Since the start of May, he was leading the AL with 53 RBIs.

Not an All-Star? Well, you have to remember that while Devers hit for average in the first month, he failed to hit a home run before May 3. Homers get you noticed and Devers has been catching up ever since.

Vazquez lost out to the White Sox' James McCann — a true tossup.

While Sox fans screamed for the three omissions, adding them would have meant five All-Stars from a team that has grossly underachieved. Both Devers and Vazquez will get there in the future.

Bogaerts continues to have a special season — and continues to be one of the more underrated players around. ...

While as many as 1,500 earthquakes were registering in and around Los Angeles late Friday night, the Clippers shook the NBA landscape by adding BOTH Kawhi Leonard and Paul George. Like Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving, these two stars went to the other NY/LA franchises, with the Clippers gambling their future with the huge trade.

The latest moves are great for the Celtics, who no longer have to deal with Leonard in the Eastern Conference. ...

Speaking of earthquakes, I was covering the Yankees in Los Angeles during the 1981 World Series when a couple of rumbles — the second worse than the first — shook our hotel. Heading out to Dodger Stadium for an early story on what Yankees personnel were doing at the time of the quakes I sought out Yogi Berra. Asked what he was doing when the rumbling started, Yogi told me, "I didn't feel nothin' — it must have bypassed me." ...

The Lakers stayed busy Saturday, signing big man DeMarcus Cousins, who is back playing with Anthony Davis, and re-signing Rajon Rondo, who also played with the pair in New Orleans. ...

The Bruins officially lost Marcus Johansson Saturday when he signed a two-year deal with the Sabres for \$4.5 million per year. The B's, who had brought Johansson in at the trade deadline, just didn't have the cap room to keep him. ...

Our thoughts and best wishes go out to Tedy Bruschi, who is recovering from his second stroke. ...

MLB Network's Quick Pitch quiz Friday night asked which position player not selected to the All-Star Game had the highest WAR. Their answer was Marcus Semien, with a 3.6. Devers finished the night with a 3.7. ...

When I talked about the new Jerry Remy/Nick Cafardo book here the other day, I forgot to mention part of the proceeds will go to ALS research in honor of the late Cafardo. ...

OK, Irving didn't turn out to be much of a leader during his time in Boston. Now, it's Kemba Walker's turn. "I'm never going to shout anyone off the court or get overly negative. It's not my style," Walker said in his Players Tribune piece. "But what I do is I take pride in making my teammates better — I'm that lead-by-example type. I like to keep it direct." ...

From @RedSoxStats: "The Sox are 16-23 and being outscored 200-171 against the seven AL contenders, including 1-6 against NY." The Yankees, meanwhile, were 15-3 against the Sox and Rays through Friday night. ...

Freak of nature Tom Brady apparently ran a quicker 40-yard dash recently than the one he ran 19 years ago. ...

The Aron Baynes trade was officially announced Saturday, the club saying, "The Boston Celtics announced today that they have traded center Aron Baynes and the draft rights to Ty Jerome to the Phoenix Suns in exchange for a future protected Milwaukee first-round draft pick, which was acquired by the Suns during a prior trade involving Eric Bledsoe and Greg Monroe." ...

Zion Williamson dominated the early minutes of his first Las Vegas Summer League game then left after banging knees with another player. The injury is not considered serious. To top that, the game was never finished because the earthquakes made the overhead scoreboard sway. ...

Friday night was Seinfeld Night at Citi Field, complete with a Jerry Seinfeld bobblehead. When things again fell apart for Edwin Diaz in the ninth inning, the crowd chanted "We want Seinfeld" and "Sell the team." New York Newsday had a back-page headline proclaiming, "Yada, Yada, Yada," Diaz had blown another one. ...

Staying in New York, with 22 different players on the injured list at some point this season, it figures the Yankees' announcers would feel the bad karma. John Sterling's streak of over 5,000 straight games ended when he took this weekend off to tend to his health — and TV voice Michael Kay will miss a month after undergoing vocal cord surgery. Our thoughts are out to both of them. ...

Sorry, but kind of confused that it took so long for Marcus Morris to find a job. He finally signed a two-year deal with the San Antonio Spurs on Saturday. ...

Along those lines, count Dwyane Wade among those wondering why ex-Celtic Jeff Green has trouble getting a big payday. Wade tweets: "I do NOT understand how and why Jeff Green keeps signing these 1 year deals for the minimum. This is now 3 years in a row. He's never injured, He's never been a problem in the locker room, He's athletic, he can shoot the 3, he can guard multiple positions and he's not old." ...

In the year of the home run, the Twins have broken the MLB record for homers before the All-Star break. ...

SB Nation ran pictures of five teams now scrambling for the Eastern title with Leonard gone. The Celtics were not one of the teams. ...

Enes Kanter is not as good a player as Al Horford, but he is a double-double machine who will be popular here. From @KelleyKidsFdn's Dan Kelley: "In the past 2 seasons Enes Kanter has had 71 double-doubles (with points & rebounds) in 138 games. The entire Celtics roster over that time had 69 in 164 games (led by Al Horford with 24). Kanter also had 30 games of 15+ rebounds in that span; Celtics players combined had 2." Kanter's problem is defense and he doesn't have much (experienced) help around him as things now stand. ...

Everything going wrong for the Mets doesn't just pertain to the big team. The Port St. Lucie farm team had Fireworks Night Friday night and a fire broke out behind the outfield fence. ...

This from Brendan McGair of the Pawtucket Times: "#RedSox will have to make a decision on Tyler Thornburg, whose 30-day rehab assignment expires this Monday. With the @PawSox, Thornburg has posted a 13.97 ERA & allowed a .340 batting average in 10 games. Allowed 2 runs last night after posting 3 straight scoreless outings." ...

The Nationals paid tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Montreal Expos Saturday, but the move didn't impress The Washington Times' Thom Loverro, who wrote, "Saturday is a big day for the Washington Nationals. They get to dance on the grave of the Montreal Expos. In a cheap, lazy, thoughtless promotion, the Nationals supposedly will "recognize" their history as the Expos — a franchise that began play in Montreal 50 years ago — by wearing Expos throwback jerseys and other promotions "recognizing" the Expos, in an attempt to get people to come to the ballpark on a Saturday afternoon during July 4th week when they are playing the Kansas City Royals, who also happened to begin play in that 1969 expansion season." ...

The Dodgers' incredible record streak of five straight walk-offs included what has to be the wildest ending of a game this season. Arizona's Greg Holland had two out and nobody on and an 0-2 count on Chris Taylor — and promptly walked five straight hitters for two runs and a Dodger win. That's unacceptable," Holland said. "I don't know. I don't know what happened. I felt pretty good out there and then just completely lost command of the strike zone altogether. It's just not acceptable." ...

Dave Dombrowski on what looks like a desperation move to have Nathan Eovaldi come off the IL as the Red Sox closer: "I don't think I've ever made a move in my career for desperation. ... I think it's putting into urgency, which is significantly different than desperation." ...

Nasem Kadri, whose current claim to fame is twice getting suspended in the playoffs against the Bruins, was traded to Colorado — and Avs GM Joe Sakic, asked what he has to do to keep his new player under control, said, "Yeah. Don't play Boston." ...

Marcus Stroman, who may or may not be headed for the Yankees, won't back off his celebrations, one of which drew the attention of Dennis Eckersley in a win over the Red Sox. "I'll never change. I won't change for anybody," he said. ...

If you're thinking about Rob Gronkowski coming back, know this — the big fella has dropped 15 pounds from his playing weight of 265 to 250. There are supplements players can take to stay in shape, but not football shape and he could be on them. Ask Ben Watson about that. He thought he had retired and will now spend the first four games suspended because of what he took that is only illegal in the NFL. ...

Cody Bellinger hit one home run in high school and four in his first two years of pro ball. Through Friday, he was at 94 through 2½ MLB seasons. ...

With Paul George gone for a bushel full of draft picks, Russell Westbrook is likely also on his way out of OKC, via trade as early as this summer. ...

Good luck to the US Women's Soccer Team in its Sunday morning World Cup final against the Netherlands. This team has played amid controversy – over not getting paid enough, to the 13-0 victory over Thailand, to Alex Morgan acting like she was sipping tea after her winning goal against England, to the comments about the president and not going to the White House. “I think everybody's just kind of having fun with the celebrations and embracing the moment,” Carli Lloyd said. ...

Christian Yelich practiced for the upcoming Home Run Derby in Pittsburgh the other night – and broke a window on a boat sitting in the Allegheny River beyond the outfield fence at PNC Park. The police were called. No charges were filed. ...

Gleyber Torres wound up going to the All-Star Game. But before he was named as an injury replacement, his manager, Aaron Boone, said, “I think its a joke he's not on that team. Gleyber Torres is not an All-Star? You can kick rocks on that. It's ridiculous. ... It doesn't seem right to me that he's not on that team.” ...

More Yelich: He is the eighth reigning MVP with at least 30 home runs before the following year's All-Star break. Ken Griffey Jr. has the record with 35.

The entire Atlanta infield – Freddie Freeman, Ozzie Albees, Josh Donaldson and Dansby Swanson – homered in a game the other night, Swanson connecting twice. It had been almost 58 years since the Braves pulled off that feat. On Sept. 19, 1961, Joe Adcock, Frank Bolling, Eddie Mathews and Roy McMillan of the then-Milwaukee Braves all homered in the same game. ...

I'm not a big fan of the ESPY's but it is the only thing on Wednesday night – and I am a big fan of Tracy Morgan, who will host. ...

By the way, George signed his contract with OKC with the understanding he could ask for a trade at any time and the team would oblige. Well, he must have asked. ...

Jose Abreu has no desire to abandon the building rebuild with the White Sox, saying, “We are going to be good. We have a lot of talent. We see (pitcher Dylan) Cease today, what he did in his first outing in the majors. Yoan (Moncada) has been doing it through the whole season, and he's going to get better. Eloy (Jimenez) is going to get better, too. We have a lot of talent here, young guys. That's something that made me realize I'm very blessed being here in this organization. I want to be part of this organization going forward because I know we are going to be very, very good, and I think you can see that right now.” ...

Finally, kudos to Boston mayor Marty Walsh for sending a letter of congratulations to 11-year-old unofficial Blues mascot and inspiration Laila Anderson, who continues fighting for her life. He said watching Game 7, “This stinks! I love the Bruins and I want them to win! ... But I really want Laila to win, too!” He also invited her to come visit Boston again in the future. “I certainly can't promise you a cooler experience than standing on the Garden ice kissing the Stanley Cup, but Boston's a great city and we would love to have you back,” Walsh wrote. “Congratulations again!”

*** *The Lawrence Eagle Tribune***

7 relievers Dave Dombrowski could add to bolster Boston's bullpen

Chris Mason

When Brandon Workman lost an eighth inning lead on Thursday, it went in the books as Boston's 18th blown save of the season, most in the American League.

Yes, the Red Sox still need serious relief help. No, Nathan Eovaldi won't be the savior alone. If the Sox want to make a serious run at repeating as World Series champs, it's on Dave Dombrowski to bolster the bullpen before the July 31 trade deadline.

Here are seven relievers that would immediately help the leaky 'pen:

Will Smith, LHP, Giants

Status: Rental (\$4.2 million, FA after 2019)

With San Francisco an obvious seller, Smith is the best arm that'll definitely be available on the trade market. The All-Star closer has a 2.10 ERA, 0.786 WHIP, and has converted 22 of 22 save opportunities. A southpaw, Smith would also give the right-handed-heavy Red Sox an entirely different look on the back end.

Shane Greene, RHP, Tigers

Non-Rental (\$4 million, Arb 3 after 2019)

Detroit's lone All-Star, Dombrowski is very familiar with the name Shane Greene. The Red Sox architect traded Didi Gregorius for him in a three-team deal when he was with the Tigers back in 2014. Reliant on a two-seamer and cutter, the biggest concern with Greene is this season's small sample size. Though he boasts a 1.09 ERA and 0.879 WHIP, those numbers sit at 4.56 and 1.345 for his career.

Greg Holland, RHP, Diamondbacks

Status: Rental (\$3.25 million, FA after 2019)

Once a lights out arm for the Royals, Holland is in the midst of his best season since leaving Kansas City.

The veteran has blown two saves to open July, but would still be an upgrade for the Sox. Will he be available though? Sitting right around .500, the Diamondbacks are flirting with an NL Wild Card spot. The next three weeks are sure to dictate their deadline plans.

Ken Giles, RHP, Blue Jays

Status: Non-rental (\$6.3 million, Arb 3 after 2019)

Alex Cora knows this reliever quite well, as Giles won a World Series with the Astros when he was the bench coach down there. In the midst of a bounce-back 2019, Giles' 1.45 ERA is strikingly better than the 4.65 he posted between Houston and Toronto last season. The Jays will be another obvious seller and don't hesitate to trade with the Sox. See: Pearce, Steve.

Sean Doolittle, LHP, Nationals

Status: Non-rental (\$6 million, team option for 2020)

The only solid arm in Washington's bullpen, Doolittle hasn't been able to replicate his All-Star 2018, but he'd still be the best arm in Boston. A lefty like Smith, Doolittle would also help to give the Sox 'pen a different look. How many righties with mid-90s fastballs and a breaking ball are out there right now?

David Hernandez RHP, Reds

Rental (\$2.5 million, FA after 2019)

The bargain basement arm on the list, Hernandez's traditional numbers don't scream "trade for me" at 2-5 with a 5.35 ERA, but a deeper dive reveals he could be a diamond in the rough. Hernandez's 2.50 FIP (fielding independent pitching) shows the reliever has deserved a better fate than he's gotten, and he's striking out 11.4 batters per nine innings.

Kirby Yates, RHP, Padres

Status: Non-rental (\$3 million, Arb 3 after 2019)

Certainly the costliest player on this list, no reliever in baseball has been better than Yates in 2019. His 2.0 WAR is tops in the majors. Adding a nasty splitter to his arsenal made Yates a whole new pitcher in 2017, and this season he's converted 28 of 29 save opportunities in the Padres bullpen. He'd be a huge lift, but is likely too expensive.

*All stats are as of Saturday afternoon

*** *RedSox.com***

Birthday Benny is back with a bang

Paul Harris

The two days off obviously did wonders for Andrew Benintendi.

After manager Alex Cora sat the left fielder because he had been slumping, Benintendi returned to the lineup on Saturday and went 4-for-6 with two runs scored, a triple, a double, an RBI and stolen base on his 25th birthday, as the Red Sox held off the Detroit Tigers for a 10-6 win.

"He put some good swings on it, had some good at-bats," Cora said. "Ran the bases well. Hope that this will get him going."

Benintendi tripled in the first and scored on Michael Chavis' single. He had a run-scoring double in the fourth that Detroit left fielder Christin Stewart misjudged. Benintendi led off the eighth with a single, stole second and scored on Eduardo Nunez's two-out single.

With two runs scored on Saturday, Mookie Betts surpassed 75 runs for the season before the All-Star break for the third time in his career and joined an elite club.

The only other players to do it are: Todd Helton (2000, '01, '03), Rickey Henderson (1982, '85, '86), Bobby Bonds (1969, '70, '73) and Ted Williams (1946, '49, '50). Betts also accomplished the feat in 2016 and last season.

Boston led 7-0 after the top of the fourth, but starter Rick Porcello, who previously pitched for the Tigers, gave all but one of the runs back and could not make it out of the sixth inning. He allowed six runs on nine hits, including two home runs to Jeimer Candelario, in 5 2/3 innings with a walk and five strikeouts.

Porcello allowed six runs in one-third of an inning in his last start against the Yankees in London last Sunday.

"Everything was going great for five innings, got hit around," Porcello said.

Cora said Porcello did some good things.

"He did a good job until the last inning," Cora said. "Early in the game curveball, change-up and fastball [were good]. Just wasn't able to finish it."

The game was delayed four hours and five minutes because of rain.

Red Sox sign Naval Academy grad Song

Paul Harris

The Red Sox are willing to wait for Noah Song.

They signed the 6-foot-4 right-hander out of the Naval Academy on Saturday, the team announced. Song was their fourth-round pick in the 2019 MLB Draft, despite the fact that he will likely not be able to commit to baseball on a full-time basis until the fall of 2021.

Song, 22, will report to Pensacola, Fla., on Nov. 1, to begin training as a flight officer. He won't be able to petition to serve the rest of his five-year commitment as a reservist until two years from now.

But he will begin his professional career at Short Season Class A Lowell this season.

Song is the highest-drafted senior from the Navy. The Academy's previous highest-drafted graduates, center fielder Alex Azor (2012) and pitcher Stephen Moore ('15), weren't picked until the 10th round. Only two Naval graduates have played in the big leagues: Cardinals pitcher Mitch Harris (2015) and Washington Senators pitcher Nemo Gaines (1921).

Song has a mid-90's fastball and a solid array of secondary pitches. He went 11-1 with a 1.44 ERA and a 161-31 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 94 innings as a senior in 2019, and was one of four finalists for the Golden Spikes Award.

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: As Christian Vazquez grows as a hitter, his defense has regressed

Sean McAdam

To the list of things that have not gone according to plan for the 2019 Red Sox — joining the performance of the starting rotation and the failure of the bullpen — it may be time to add the team's catching situation.

Just prior to the start of the season, the Red Sox identified Christian Vazquez and Blake Swihart at their catching tandem for the season, while designating Sandy Leon for assignment (and, eventually, optioning him to Pawtucket).

That alignment lasted about three weeks before Leon was summoned from Pawtucket and Swihart dealt to Arizona.

Since then, the team's pitching has improved over the horrid stretch it experience over the first three weeks, representing a positive development.

Also, Vazquez has enjoyed a breakout offensively, hitting more homers in the first half of this season than he previously had hit in his career. Vazquez's numbers with two games remaining in the first half (.298/.333/.510) are deserving of All-Star Game inclusion.

But while Vazquez has shown great progress at the plate, his play behind the plate seems to have regressed. Vazquez's arm strength remains elite — he's thrown out 37 percent would-be base-stealers, far above the league average of 28 percent — but he has not done a good job in blocking balls and receiving.

In about the three-quarters of the innings caught compared to last year (484 this year; 604 in 2018), Vazquez has already allowed 32 wild pitches, compared to just 21 all of last season.

Part of that, of course, is a game-wide trend: with so many pitchers throwing breaking balls below the strike zone, wild pitches are up across the game.

In terms of defensive runs saved above average, as determined by Baseball Info Solutions, Vazquez is at three; meanwhile, in approximately the same number of innings in 2014, he had 14. And in 2017, with a full season workload, he was credited with 12.

But it's not just the wild pitches that are up considerably. It's also his inability to hold onto pitches and general sloppiness behind the plate.

And it's worth noting that his catcher's ERA, at 4.83, nearly exactly a full run increase (3.84) over last year. Again, much of that increase has to be the responsibility of the pitching staff, which too often has failed to execute pitches.

Still, it's worth noting that Leon's catcher's ERA is 4.24, more than half a run lower. And unlike past seasons when Leon has had the benefit of being Chris Sale's personal catcher, an edge bound to be reflected in his catcher's ERA, Sale has been so inconsistent this season that that statistical advantage has been negated.

Toward that end, is it merely coincidence that some of Sale's poorest starts — in the first weeks of the season, when Leon wasn't on the roster; and more recently, in Toronto, with Vazquez purposely given the starting assignment — have come with Vazquez as his battery-mate?

That, too, may be flawed data since early in the season, Sale had clearly not built up sufficient arm strength.

But a scout who watched Vazquez paired with Sale earlier this week in Toronto noted that the pitcher's tempo was noticeably slowed by Vazquez, while also questioning the decision to go almost exclusively with fastballs in the early going — much to Sale's detriment.

Is it possible that Sanchez has turned into the Red Sox' version of the Yankees' Gary Sanchez — that is, an offense-first catcher capable of shutting down opponents' running games, but generally regarded as a defensive liability?

Another: has Vazquez's offensive growth come at the expense of his play behind the plate? Has time spent on his swing and hitting approach caused him to move backward as a receiver?

At times recently, Alex Cora has tried to have it both ways, with Leon catching and Vazquez utilized as the DH. But that combination can only be used sporadically because J.D. Martinez is the DH in about 80 percent of the team's games, and because the arrangement can frequently leave the Sox without a DH at all when Leon is lifted for a pinch-hitter late in games and Vazquez must take over behind the plate.

All together, it's one more problem the Red Sox didn't expect to be dealing with as the first half of a disappointing season concludes.

We're just a little past the halfway mark of the 2019 season, and like every other season, there is no shortage of surprises.

Here's one man's take on what we've seen so far and attendant (half-season) hardware:

AL MVP: D.J. LeMahieu, Yankees

The temptation, of course, is to go with Mike Trout, because the case can seemingly always be made that Trout is the best player in the game having the best season. And indeed, that could be argued with a slash line of .299/.454/.633 with 26 homers and 63 RBI and 69 runs scored.

But I place value on "valuable" and Trout's Angels are only on the periphery of the wild card chase, struggling to stay above the .500 mark.

Instead, I'll go with LeMahieu, unquestionably the most valuable free agent signing of last winter, and because of both his performance and the tsunami of injuries that struck the Yankees, the MVP of the first half, too.

AL ROOKIE: Brandon Lowe, Rays

Michael Chavis deserves some attention here. But Lowe very quietly — because it's the Rays, of course — leads all A.L. rookies in a ton of offensive categories including extra-base hits, slugging percentage and OPS.

AL CY YOUNG: Justin Verlander, Astros

In this era of homers and walks and record-setting offense, one number stands out for Verlander: 0.813. That's Verlander's WHIP, easily the lowest of all American League pitchers. Add in an ERA under 3.00 and a league-leading inning totals, and that wraps it up.

AL MANAGER: Aaron Boone, Yankees

Rocco Baldelli has had the kind of impact in his first season in the dugout that Alex Cora did a year ago. And Kevin Cash has done a marvelous job keeping the Rays in the playoff race. But Boone's team has been decimated by injuries — half their infield, their two best sluggers and best starter, to name just a few — and still, he has the Yankees comfortably in first

NL MVP: Cody Bellinger, Dodgers

How good has Bellinger been? Well, somehow better than Milwaukee's Christian Yellich, despite the fact that Yellich is having a better season than he himself had last year, when he was NL MVP — that's how good.

NL CY YOUNG: Max Scherzer, Nationals

Like Verlander, his one-time teammate with the Tigers, Scherzer appears ageless. It doesn't matter that the Nationals have been thoroughly mediocre — Scherzer has been his usual dominant self, leading the N.L. in innings, strikeouts and second in WHIP. Could a fourth Cy Young be in the offing?

NL ROOKIE: Pete Alonso, Mets

Alonso exists so that God can say to Mets fans: "See? Not everything is horrible."

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Dave Roberts, Dodgers

Yeah, I know — he was handed a talented roster and expected to win again. But the Dodgers are playing at a blistering pace and Roberts has kept them motivated and hungry after two straight trips to the World Series ended in disappointment. That's no easy task.

Tragedy struck the Los Angeles Angels earlier in the week when pitcher Tyler Skaggs was found unresponsive in his hotel room and pronounced dead at 27.

The Angels-Texas Rangers game scheduled that night was properly canceled, giving the Angels some time to collect themselves and process the shock and grief that comes with a teammate passing away so unexpectedly.

And yet, the Angels franchise is hardly a stranger to tragedy. Too often, they've been struck in their 57-year history:

Last winter, utility man Luis Valbuena, who had played for the Angels in 2017 and 2018, died in a car crash in his native Dominican Republic.

Only 10 years ago, another young pitcher, Nick Adenhart, was killed by a drunk driver not long after pitching a game at Angel Stadium. At 22, he was even younger than Skaggs.

In 1989, weeks after his playing career ended, former Angels reliever Donnie Moore killed himself with a gun. Moore apparently was never able to get over giving up the game-winning homer to Dave Henderson in Game 5 of the 1986 ALCS that keyed the Red Sox' comeback in that series. He blamed himself for the Angels failing to reach the World Series for what would have been the first time.

In 1978, Angels outfielder Lyman Bostock was shot while driving in a car with some relatives and friends in Gary Indiana. Bostock was just 27.

Sadly, these are just a few of the tragic deaths that have struck the franchise, a sad history that dates back to soon after their inception when Dick Wantz, a rookie reliever, died because of a brain tumor in 1965. In 1977, former No. 1 draft pick Mike Miley died in a car crash, and three years earlier, Bruce Heinbechner, a rookie, died in a car crash in spring training.

That's a lot of misery and loss for one franchise to endure.

Top 3/The List

In honor of Tuesday's All-Star Game, which will feature three Red Sox participants — Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez and Xander Bogaerts — a look at the best All-Star performances by Sox players in history.

1. Pedro Martinez, 1999.

There have plenty of great individual performances over the years, but none can match Pedro, at the top of his game, in 1999 — and doing it at Fenway.

Martinez struck out Barry Larkin, Larry Walker and Sammy Sosa in the first. He then struck out Mark McGwire to open the fourth before Matt Williams reached on an error. (Williams would subsequently be thrown out trying to steal). Finally, Martinez fanned Jeff Bagwell.

So, he fanned five of the six hitters who came to the plate against him. Larkin and Bagwell are Hall Of Famers. Walker could gain election next winter. And McGwire and Sosa, however they, ahem, managed to do it, combined to hit 1,192 homers.

Not bad.

2. Ted Williams, 1941.

Williams made the fourth-most plate appearances in All-Star history, and as you might expect, left his mark on more than few mid-summer classics. In 1946, he went 4-for-4 with two homers and five RBI.

But it's hard to top the 1941 All-Star Game. Earlier in the game, Williams had knocked in a run with a double. But he saved his best for last when he belted a game-winning walk-off homer in the ninth to power the A.L. to a dramatic victory. Williams, who of course never won a championship in his long career, called it "the biggest thrill I ever got in baseball."

3. Carl Yastrzemski, 1970.

Like his predecessor in left field, Yaz making the All-Star team was pretty much an annual event. There were a couple of standout performances from No. 8, but one sticks out: in 1970, he was 4-for-6 with a double, a run scored and RBI, good enough that he was named MVP ... for the losing team.

BSJ Game Report: Red Sox 10, Tigers 6 – Sox wait a while before holding off Tigers

Sean McAdam

Benintendi returns with a bang: It's been a tough last 10 days for the outfielder, who was benched for a few days on the road trip and dropped down in the batting order while also battling what Alex Cora termed "heavy legs." While out of the lineup, Benintendi took some time to make some adjustments with hitting coach Tim Hyers and emerged Saturday like new, going 4-for-6 with two runs scored. In an encouraging sign, three of those hits were to left field and the ability to go the other way has always been part of Benintendi's successful approach. Benintendi said he spent the last few days "getting back to the little things and getting in the cage and taking a lot of swings. Just trying to simplify things and start over. The results today were alright, but it wasn't about results. It was about working on my swing." That looked improved, too.

Betts showing signs: Speaking of positive developments, Mookie Betts continues to hint that he's poised to break out, just as the first half of the season is coming to a close. Betts had six plate appearances and collected three hits with a walk. He also had a vicious line out to third. Betts is driving the ball again, and he's doing it early in games, which is something he did routinely last year, but not this one. He tripled to lead off the game Saturday, one night after doubling to start Friday's game. Both times, the Sox were ahead very quickly thanks to some productive infield groundouts which plated him. It's one thing for Betts to get on base, as he has done fairly well (.388 OBP) for most of the year. But when he provides extra-base pop from the top of the lineup, it gives the Red Sox lineup a whole other dimension and enables them to jump on teams quickly.

Porcello struggles once more: If Betts and Benintendi are trending in the right direction, the same can't be said for Rick Porcello. He was coming off one of the worst starts of his career, having been shelled by the Yankees in London and unable to get out of the first inning. He had six days of rest to recover, but that didn't do him much good Saturday. Porcello was gifted a 5-0 lead by the time he went out for the bottom of the second inning but couldn't make it hold up. He allowed two runs in the fourth inning, then after a quick 1-2-3 fifth, got back into more trouble in the sixth, allowing a solo homer and three more hits and requiring the Sox to go to the bullpen in the sixth in a game in which they once led by seven runs. In Porcello's last three starts, he's allowed 17 runs in just 12 innings of work. Clearly, he needs to make some big adjustments with his location when the second half resumes. It's one thing to allow six runs to the Yankees; it's quite another to give six up to the Tigers, who rank as the AL's worst offensive team.

TURNING POINT

The Tigers were making a lot of noise in the middle of the game, scoring four in the sixth before loading the bases in the seventh against Josh Taylor. But Matt Barnes, entering the game with two outs, needed just three pitches to strike out Gordon Beckham to end the threat and the inning and take away any momentum the Tigers had been building.

TWO UP

Brock Holt: Holt got a rare start at shortstop and while he was lifted for a pinch-hitter mid-game, was 2-for-2 while in the game.

Christian Vazquez: Vazquez has hit well enough for Cora to use him as the DH and Saturday night, he was slotted in as the No. 3 hitter for the first time this season, delivering two hits and knocking in two runs.

ONE DOWN

Jackie Bradley Jr.: Bradley continues to trend the wrong way at the plate, going 0-for-4 while also committing an error in the outfield for the second straight game.

QUOTE OF NOTE:

“It’s not easy to play after waiting four hours, so to get the win was huge.” — Benintendi.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

In the first inning of the last nine games, the Red Sox have scored 19 runs and batted .605.

The Sox managed two triples in the first inning for the first time this season.

Rafael Devers extended his hitting streak 10 games.

UP NEXT

The Red Sox and Tigers finish up the first half with the final game of the series, with LHP David Price (6-2, 3.33) vs. TBA at 1:05 p.m.

* *The Athletic*

The Red Sox have solved their first-inning offensive woes

Chad Jennings

When he thought about it in the offseason, Alex Cora put his considerable baseball acumen to work and decided Mookie Betts should bat second this season. The Red Sox tried it for two months, and it didn’t work.

When he’d seen enough to make a change, Cora had a proven alternative in his back pocket, and he decided Andrew Benintendi should bat second. The Red Sox tried that for three and a half weeks, and it wasn’t much better.

Finally, on June 25, Benintendi had the day off and Cora needed someone — anyone — to hit in the No. 2 hole. He tried Rafael Devers and might have solved the Red Sox most vexing offensive problem of the season.

They’re actually scoring runs in the first inning again.

In their first 80 games of the year, the Red Sox scored 33 first-inning runs, which was nearly the bottom of the barrel in all of Major League Baseball. But in their past nine games — all with Devers batting second — they’ve scored 21 first-inning runs. Per game, that’s more than five times the scoring power out of the gate.

“We’ve been searching the whole season for the right combination,” Cora said. “The first one didn’t work out, and the second one was getting there, but Benny gets banged up a little bit, and Raffy jumps into that spot and that happens. It’s instant offense the way he’s swinging the bat. He’s a threat. We feel like, on any pitch, he can do damage.”

Devers has a 10-game hitting streak and he’s hitting just shy of .500 since moving into the No. 2 spot. Benintendi returned Saturday from a two-day hiatus to work on his swing, and Cora put him in the cleanup spot so Devers could stay put up top. The result was another big day for the offense with two runs in the first inning, seven runs by the end of the fourth and a 10-6 win against the Tigers. Benintendi finished a home run shy of the cycle, but his old spot near the top of the order is no longer up for grabs. For the foreseeable future, the Red Sox lineup starts with Betts and Devers.

That lineup, by the way, has quietly become even more potent than it was last year. The Red Sox scored their 500th run of the season on Saturday, then moved ahead of the Yankees for the second-most runs in baseball. They have scored more runs per game and have a higher team OPS than last year. The offense is no longer a problem.

Jackie Bradley Jr., long the biggest black hole of the bunch, has been on a tear since mid-May. J.D. Martinez's power numbers surged in June, Betts has an on-base percentage over .400 in the past month and Mitch Moreland could be ready for a rehab assignment by the weekend, en route to providing a left-handed power option at first base soon after the All-Star break.

The pitching staff has yet to catch up — as evidenced by Rick Porcello's latest rocky start — but the offense is clicking. All that was missing was that first inning, and the Devers adjustment seems to have solved that.

Before Devers moved into the No. 2 hole, the Red Sox were hitting .192 in the first inning. That was worse than every team except Oakland. Their seven first-inning doubles were fewer than any team except Miami. It made little sense given the people involved.

Sure, Betts and Benintendi haven't been hitting nearly as well as last season, but those two were still getting on base at a good clip, and both Devers and Xander Bogaerts were having career years in the middle of the order. But in the first inning, each of those four had an OPS below .600. Martinez seemed to be the only top-five hitter in the Red Sox order who could actually hit in the first. Even when Cora went back to last year's setup, with Betts leading off and Benintendi batting second, the first inning came and went with a whimper.

On June 17 in Minnesota, the Red Sox scored a first-inning run on three straight singles by Betts, Benintendi and Martinez, but they didn't score another first-inning run for a full week. It wasn't until June 25, when Benintendi got a day off — "His legs felt heavy," Cora said — that the Red Sox scored again in the opening frame. Devers moved into the No. 2 spot in the order, and he doubled home Betts to start the game. It's been that way ever since.

Devers hit second again the next afternoon, and he scored on a first-inning home run by Martinez. The Red Sox went to London, Devers remained in the No. 2 hole, and the Red Sox had a six-run first inning, followed by a four-run first inning. Their next game back in North America, they another four-run first. Two days later, Devers homered in the first inning. The next game was Friday night, which started with another first-inning run. Saturday night, they scored two more.

Cora's been trying to get his offense going like this from the beginning. He tried something new, then he tried something old, and now that he's stumbled upon something that works, he's sticking with it.

*** *The Detroit Free Press***

Detroit Tigers lose to Red Sox again after another long rain delay, 10-6

Anthony Fenech

Eight hours later, another loss.

What was scheduled as a Saturday matinee bled into the next day, as the Red Sox beat the Detroit Tigers, 10-6, at Comerica Park.

The start was delayed by rain for four hours and five minutes.

When the game began, right-hander Jordan Zimmermann was shelled, allowing seven runs on 13 hits in 3 1/3 innings. Most of Zimmermann's hits were rockets, littered around the field, in a career-worst day for him.

As researched by MLB.com's Jason Beck, Zimmermann became the first Tiger to allow 13 hits in less than four innings since Ralph Comstock on Sept. 12, 1913, according to Baseball-Reference.com.

Zimmermann put the Tigers in too deep of an early hole, though like Friday night, they nearly came back. Down 7-0 entering the bottom of the fourth inning, the Tigers closed the gap to 7-6 after six innings, but their bullpen allowed add-on runs in three consecutive innings.

Jeimer Candelario keyed the Tigers' comeback efforts, hitting two home runs. After his first — a towering shot off the right field foul pole in the fourth inning — Harold Castro tripled, standing on third base with no outs, but the Tigers could not drive him in.

Candelario's second home run also sparked a rally: The Tigers scored four runs in the sixth — Bobby Wilson hit a two-run single and Victor Reyes hit an RBI triple, both with two outs.

But Buck Farmer threw away a comebacker in the seventh, allowing one run to score, and Eduardo Nunez tagged him for an RBI single in the eighth, providing the final score.

The Tigers finish the first half on Sunday afternoon against the Red Sox. They are 28-56.

More: Like it or not, Detroit Tigers extending Al Avila is the right move. Here's why:

Zimmermann's night

Just a night to forget for the veteran righty, who was greeted by Mookie Betts smashing a triple off the dead-center field fence to start the game. Things would only get worse. Many of Zimmermann's hits allowed were bullets, in excess of 100 mph off the bat. Given the Tigers' starting pitching situation, Zimmermann figured to take the beating, but could not last long enough to positively impact the game. He allowed seven runs on 13 hits, struck out two batters and walked none.

Candy crushing

Candelario's short trip to Triple-A Toledo apparently has worked. Since being recalled on June 26, Candelario is hitting 10-for-22 in six games. He is showing a noticeable uptick in energy and confidence at the plate. The multi-home run game was the second of his career. He has seven home runs this season.

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

Harold Castro

I don't know what I like Castro as — he doesn't scream everyday player, yet — but I do know that I like Castro. The young Venezuelan infielder recorded three hits in the loss, including a triple. Castro, 25, is hitting .294 in 102 at-bats this season. He has good baseball actions, plays loose and confidently, and shows a strong battle level at the plate. Remember: Castro's major league debut came earlier this season, after arriving to the field in the late innings. In his first at-bat — a pinch-hit opportunity in the ninth inning against the Phillies that day — he singled on the first pitch he saw.

*** Associated Press**

Betts, Benintendi lead Red Sox to 10-6 win over Tigers

It has taken the Boston Red Sox a long time to win the first two games of their weekend series with the Detroit Tigers.

They'd love to finish off a sweep quickly.

"We've got one more game until the All-Star break," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Let's come in here, take care of business and finish on a high note."

The Red Sox beat the Tigers 10-6 on Saturday, in a game similar to the series opener.

In the first game, Boston led 6-1 and allowed the Tigers to get within a run before pulling away late.

On Saturday, the Red Sox led 7-0, the Tigers cut it to 7-6 and Boston scored the game's final three runs.

"We jumped out early again, but they retaliated," Boston's Mookie Betts said. "Give them some credit, but we kept putting on the pressure and scoring runs."

There was one more similarity -- both games ended after midnight because of lengthy rain delays.

"I know it has been a grind -- it has been a grind since we got on the plane to Europe -- but we're winning these games," Cora said. "I really don't care how we do it."

Betts and Andrew Benintendi each finished a homer short of the cycle. Benintendi went 4 for 6 with two singles, a double and a triple. Betts was 3 for 5 with a single, double, triple and walk.

Jeimer Candelario homered twice for the Tigers, who lost for the 24th time in 27 home games. Candelario went to Triple-A with a .179 batting average in early June, but is hitting .378 with four homers in 10 games since his return.

"We know (Candelario) can hit home runs -- he hit 19 last year -- but we're happy to see him putting good swings on the ball," Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire said.

The start of the game was delayed more than four hours by heavy rains that flooded parts of metro Detroit, and both starters had poor outings.

"I got ready to go out to warm up, and they told us there was going to be a delay," Tigers starter Jordan Zimmermann said. "Then after about an hour, they said it was clearing, so I got heated up again, and then more cells popped up. It's tough to get ready three times."

Rick Porcello (6-7) struggled on the way to the win, but remained undefeated against his former team in five starts. He gave up six runs on nine hits in 5 2/3 innings.

"Everything was fine through five innings and then I got hit around in the sixth," he said. "I've got to be better."

Zimmermann (0-6) allowed seven runs on a career-high 13 hits in 3 1/3 innings.

"It would be hard to give up 13 hits in three innings if you were trying to do it," he said.

Betts hit Zimmerman's second pitch of the game for a triple and scored on a groundout by Rafael Devers. Benintendi added a two-out triple and scored on a bloop single by Michael Chavis.

Betts got halfway to the cycle in the second, hitting a two-run double that gave Boston a 4-0 lead. Christian Vazquez followed with a two-out single, giving Betts his fifth run in the first 11 innings of the series.

The Red Sox added two more runs in the fourth, ending Zimmermann's night.

Candelario hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the fourth and Harold Castro followed with a triple, but Porcello retired the next three batters to end the inning with a 7-2 lead.

Candelario's second homer, a solo shot, started a four-run sixth. Bobby Wilson's two-out, two-run single pulled the Tigers within 7-5 and knocked Porcello out of the game.

Victor Reyes made it 7-6 with a triple. But, a throwing error by reliever Buck Farmer in the seventh allowed the Red Sox to move ahead by two runs.

The Tigers loaded the bases with one out against Josh Taylor in the bottom of the seventh, but didn't score.

Eduardo Nunez made it 9-6 with an RBI single in the eighth and Vazquez added a sacrifice fly in the ninth.

"We're trying not to kill the guys in our bullpen, but we're asking them to pitch two out of every three days and this is what happens," Gardenhire said.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Red Sox: RHP Nathan Eovaldi (elbow) threw a bullpen session before the game and came out without pain. Eovaldi is expected to throw another bullpen during the All-Star break, with a possible rehab stint after that.

Tigers: C Greyson Greiner (back) has gone 0-7 in three rehab games with Class A Lakeland.

TICKET DEAL

Because of the four-hour delay, the Tigers announced in the third inning that any fan with a ticket to the game would receive a voucher good for a free ticket to a game later this season.

UNHAPPY DISTINCTION

Zimmermann became the first Tigers starter to allow 13 or more hits in fewer than four innings since Ralph Comstock in an 18-5 loss to the Red Sox on Sept. 12, 1913.

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UP NEXT

The teams finish the three-game series -- their last game before the All-Star break -- on Sunday. Former Tiger David Price (6-2, 3.33) will start for Boston, while the Tigers will throw an old-fashioned bullpen game. Gregory Soto (0-2, 8.06), who pitched in relief on Friday, is expected to be Detroit's opener.