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*** *The Boston Globe***

Jarren Duran's speed rockets him to big stage, too

Alex Speier

Some players enter pro ball with a series of lofty goals — moving up a level or more, making an All-Star team, and perhaps for the most ambitious, taking part in the All-Star Futures Game, the annual showcase of the top talent in the minor leagues.

Jarren Duran did not consider any of these possibilities.

“I try not to look ahead because I feel like that’s when you get yourself in trouble,” said Duran. “I feel like if I’m where my feet are, I’m at the field today, that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to play today. I’m not trying to think about tomorrow or the next day. I’m just trying to be where I’m supposed to be.”

But for Duran, the idea of being “where [his] feet are” is an unusual one. Duran is one of the fastest players in the game. His speed is not merely elite but at times eye-popping, as when — in a game in Double A Portland — he was on first base on a grounder to second.

at second, rushed because of Duran’s wheels, went wide of the bag and reached left field. Not only did Duran advance the extra base — on a play when most would be trying to slide into third safely — but he whooshed all the way to the plate, scoring from first on what could have been a force out.

Prior to his promotion to Double A, Duran would leave mouths agape when he flew from first to third or turned balls in the gap into triples. And with an aggressive offensive approach from the leadoff spot with which he looked to attack first pitches, it felt as if he opened every game in scoring position.

“Half the time I could barely say [the] time of [the] first pitch because he was already sliding into second,” said Salem play-by-play broadcaster Melanie Newman.

Duran’s feet do not stand still. And on Sunday, they’d transported him to yet another new remarkable destination during a 13-month journey through the minors.

“They’re in Cleveland right now,” said Duran, the Red Sox representative at the Futures Game.

It was, by the outfielder’s own admission, unexpected. Futures Game participants typically enter pro ball with considerable reputations thanks to early-round draft status. To come from relative obscurity, just 13 months after being taken out of Long Beach State University in the seventh round of the 2018 draft, represented an ascent so rapid, many longtime Futures Game chroniclers struggled to recall a precedent.

For Duran, the sudden change of perspective was startling. He tried to comprehend his place in an American League clubhouse filled with elite prospects such as Jo Adell, Luis Robert, Brendan Rodgers, and Royce Lewis.

“I’m a little shocked,” said Duran. “Looking around, these guys have got really good talent. It’s kind of like, ‘Do I belong here?’ I’m grateful I’m here, but you look at yourself and try to stay humble because everyone here is really good.”

Yet Duran, too, has made his own mark this year. After a dazzling pro debut in Lowell and Single A Greenville in 2018 (.357/.394/.516), Duran — who has moved from second base in college to center in the minors — spent nearly

two months flirting with .400 in High A Salem, hitting .387/.456/.543 with 20 extra-base hits and 18 steals in 50 games.

Salem manager Corey Wimberly, who in 2014 spent time in the Twins minor league system as a teammate of Byron Buxton, saw similar attributes to his former teammate in Duran.

“I think that’s fair to say he has some of the same tools as Buxton . . . I think his bat-to-ball skills are a little bit better [than Buxton] which might help him out in the long run,” said Wimberly, who also managed Duran last year in Lowell. “He was one of those guys who just stood out right away. He looked different, the way he carried himself, he focused on his craft. He just kept getting better and better on a day-to-day basis. I think that’s what has allowed him to kind of move through the organization so fast.”

By early June, the Sox deemed Duran ready to move up to a new challenge in Portland — an aggressive timetable that in recent years among Red Sox prospects had only been outpaced by Andrew Benintendi. Since joining the Sea Dogs, his numbers have taken a hit, as he’s posted a .240/.298/.298 line in 30 games, while his strikeout rate has jumped from 19.5 percent in Salem to 22.6 percent in Portland.

“He has a ways to go with [the] bat, still in [the] process of slowing down [the] game at the plate in the Eastern League,” said one AL scout who recently saw Duran in Portland, and expressed uncertainty as to whether he profiles at the top or bottom of a lineup.

Plenty of scouts got a look at him Sunday in the Futures Game when he went 1 for 2 (with a steal, of course) in the game that ended tied, 2-2.

An NL evaluator who’d seen Duran in Salem this year viewed him as a “future plus regular” whose speed and offensive game have echoes of those of Benintendi and Jacoby Ellsbury. Duran noted that he’s heard a number of comparisons with Ellsbury — whom he resembles, in some ways, in speed, athleticism, and position — while moving up the Red Sox ladder, but he refuses to give them much credence.

“I appreciate it, but he made it to the big leagues. I’m still in Double A,” said Duran. “I don’t want to compare myself to a big leaguer.”

Duran insists that he will stay grounded, but his feet keep racing ahead, leading him to places and forcing comparisons that no one would have imagined entering the 2018 draft.

Red Sox will savor break, but know crunch time awaits

Peter Abraham

Their suitcases were lined up in the hallway outside the clubhouse early Sunday morning, ready to be pulled out to the curb and thrown into the trunk of a waiting car as soon as possible once the game was over.

There’s a decent chance a few of the Red Sox players were on their way to the airport after a 6-3 victory against the Detroit Tigers before some of the fans had left Comerica Park.

The All-Star break is welcome every season, but perhaps no more so than this year for this particular team. The Sox have won four straight and 5 of 6, but will happily put that momentum on the shelf in favor of four days off after a road trip that started in London and covered 7,676 miles, three cities, and three countries in 12 days.

“It’s huge,” said David Price, who allowed one run over five innings for the win. “I think everybody in here is ready for this break and needs this break. We need these four days off.”

The Sox are 49-41 and trail the Yankees by nine games in the division. They were 61-29 at the same point of last season and had a two-game lead.

By that measure, it has been a terribly disappointing season. But 2018 was an all-time outlier for the franchise, a season with only scattered bumps, few bruises, and little drama.

This season, as Rick Porcello said a few days ago, has been real baseball.

The Sox also lost Nate Eovaldi to elbow surgery after four starts. Steve Pearce, the World Series Most Valuable Player, has played only 29 games — and hit .180 — because of various injuries.

Mitch Moreland, their rock at first base, has played one game since May 25. Brock Holt missed seven weeks after his son accidentally scratched his eye.

Chris Sale, signed to a \$145 million extension on the eve of the season, is 3-8 with a 4.04 ERA and routinely uses the word “embarrassing” to describe his pitching. His velocity is down and his signature slider erratic.

David Ortiz got shot last month, which left the group stunned. Then came a disastrous two-game series in London when the Sox somehow allowed 29 runs in two games against the Yankees.

The organization’s decision not to adequately replace free agents Joe Kelly and Craig Kimbrel in the bullpen has already resulted in seven blown leads and losses after the sixth inning, one more than all last season.

Manager Alex Cora has been forced to rely too heavily on a small group of reliable relievers, and the workload is wearing them out.

Outside of a handful of players, Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers in particular, few on the roster can be satisfied with what they have individually accomplished.

Even Mookie Betts, on his way to Cleveland for the All-Star Game, is distressed given an .859 OPS that is 219 points lower than last season.

The Sox have the highest payroll in baseball and all too often stumble around. They are 17-25 against teams with a winning record.

Cora, to his credit, wasn’t overly enthused by a three-game sweep of the awful Tigers. The Sox were a pitch away from the tying run coming to the plate in the ninth inning.

“Nah, not yet,” Cora said when asked if the Sox were playing at an acceptable level. “We’re a lot better than this. We need to get better; we need to get better. There’s a few things here — although we finished strong and all that — they know it. They know it as a group. They have to be ready for Friday. We can be a lot better than this.”

Still, for all their issues, the Sox are well positioned to make the playoffs. They’re two games out of the second wild card with 72 games left to play.

The Sox return home on Friday to start a three-game series against the Dodgers in a World Series rematch. Then come 21 games against division foes in 21 days, eight against the Yankees.

Those games will define the season, along with what president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski does to improve the bullpen before the July 31 trade deadline.

“It’s crunch time for us right now,” Price said. “Enjoy the next four days off and come back ready to play.”

Jackie Bradley Jr., who was one of the players zipping out of the clubhouse to get started on his mini vacation, acknowledged the Sox are long shots to catch the Yankees.

“But I don’t think we’re in a bad spot,” he said. “You can’t compare it to the dream season we had last year, but our team is good. You can’t deny that. I think we can put something together.”

It's what we have heard all season. The Sox reconvene Friday, and the Dodgers will test whether this recent upswing has any validity to it.

"They're going to be hungry, hungry to kick our ass," Cora said. "We better be ready for that."

As Sox hit break, bats are booming

Julian McWilliams

Alex Cora was stumped for a second Sunday afternoon when asked what was the most surprising part of the first half of the season.

"Umm, Surprised?" the Red Sox manager asked rhetorically ahead of Sunday's first-half capping win against the Detroit Tigers. "I'm surprised that we're in this spot with the offense that we have. We've been scoring a lot of runs and we're in this spot."

The Sox have plated 46 runs in their 6 games this month with 10 homers, hitting .311 with an .877 OPS.

Yet they've had to grind their way through each of those games because while the bats have picked up, the pitching's still been inconsistent. The Sox (49-41) sit two games out of a wild-card place, however, 49 wins — considering how they have played — proves the talent of this club.

"There's a lot of confidence in the clubhouse," Cora said. "Guys understand where we're at right now."

Tall task after the break

After the All-Star break might be the most pivotal part of the Sox season.

Between July 22 and Aug. 4, they play the New York Yankees and Tampa Bay Rays 14 times. The Sox haven't played well against either this year, going 4-5 against the Rays and 1-6 against the Yankees.

Before those division series, however, the Sox have a World Series rematch against the Los Angeles Dodgers starting Friday at Fenway. The Dodgers head into the All-Star break as baseball's only 60-win team, with an MVP favorite in Cody Bellinger who has taken his game to new heights.

The Sox will pitch Eduardo Rodriguez, David Price, and Chris Sale.

"We go Friday and there's no motivation. We don't need motivation," Cora said. "We know that they're coming and that they're playing great."

Scoring early and often

The Red Sox pounced on the Tigers in the first two games of the series by scoring in the first inning. They did it twice in their two wins over the Toronto Blue Jays, too.

"I think our approach is better now," Christian Vázquez said. "We're hitting with men in scoring position better and we're not chasing a lot. That's better for us to score in the first inning. "It happened in the playoffs last year. We scored in the first inning and we won."

The Sox didn't score in the first inning Sunday, but Vázquez belted a two-run shot to right in the second.

Said Cora: "The fact that we're scoring early in the game, it puts pressure on the opposition. It seems like every starter was going six innings (against us). Now, we're scoring early and often and it changes the way you manage against us."

Betts hitting hard

In his past four games, Betts' has hit a ball at least 100 mph — generally considering the marker of scorching contact — 11 times. His at-bats have been productive all season, as evidenced by his career-best .392 on-base percentage. Now, though, his mixing that in with squaring up the ball more.

"I haven't seen fly balls to right field," Cora said on Betts. "There's a lot of line drives. A lot of line drives to the pull side. We've been saying all along it's just a matter of making an adjustment. Sometimes it takes longer than we want to, but as long as he stays within the zone, he'll be fine. It started in Toronto that last game and he brought it here. He looks like he's in a good spot right now, even in the batter's box. There's a lot of conviction there."

Birthday boy breakout

J.D. Martinez had an off-day Saturday, so Cora moved Andrew Benintendi to the fourth spot in the order. Despite it being logical, Cora noted Saturday was Benintendi's birthday, and that, perhaps, there was some good fortune in him hitting there.

Benintendi didn't disappoint, collecting four hits and driving in a run, then added a hit and RBI on Sunday. Benintendi fell into a min-slump and was held out of the previous two games prior to Saturday.

"I just used those days to work on some stuff and get some feel back," said Benintendi, who was held out of the previous two games after going 1 for 25 the prior six. "I think yesterday going in, I was like 'Whatever happens, happens.' I just wanted to look the way I wanted to look."

On it being his birthday, Benintendi, who's also from nearby Cincinnati, added: "It was cool, I had some family here. It was good seeing all of them."

Devers flashing the leather

A lot of talk has been about Rafael Devers' bat, but his improvement defensively has been impressive, too. Devers piled up minus-13 defensive runs saved last season, according to Fangraphs, and he was on a similar track when an error on a routine play in Chicago on May 2 led to a Nicky Delmonico walk-off homer.

Devers was down on himself afterward, but it's what forced him to buy in on defense.

"The turnaround defensively is what we really enjoy," Cora said. "He's very comfortable at third base. After that day [in Chicago] he became a monster at third base. It's fun because every time they hit a ground ball now, you're like, 'Wow.' We trusted him. We knew about the footwork, we knew about the arm. It was just a matter of repetition. What he's doing defensively right now is great."

Devers was a plus-1 in DRS entering Sunday, and hasn't made an error since June 16.

Off to Cleveland

The Red Sox chartered a plane for their All-Star contingent to make the short flight to Cleveland. In addition to Betts, Xander Bogaerts and Martinez, the group included Cora and coaches Andy Barkett, Craig Bjornson, Carlos Febles, Tom Goodwin, Tim Hyers, Dana LeVangie, Ron Roenicke, and Ramon Vazquez. Video coordinator Billy Broadbent, bullpen catcher Mani Martinez and staff assistant J.T. Watkins also made the trip. Bullpen coach Brian Bannister decided to skip the game . . . In the Live Ball Era (since 1920), only nine pitchers have 150 wins, a .650 win percentage, and an ERA of 3.30 or lower: Sandy Koufax, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez, Whitey Ford, Lefty Grove, Ron Guidry, Clayton Kershaw, Max Scherzer, and David Price, who won his 150th in the regular season on Sunday . . . Potential fifth starter Brian Johnson is just playing catch at Fenway after going to the injured list June 29 (retroactive to June 27) with an intestinal issue previously reported by the Globe. When asked if he'll pitch again this season, Cora said that it's realistic that he'll pitch again this season . . . The Sox are 29-19 on the road after winning 14 of their last 16. They are 26-11 since the 3-8 West Coast trip which opened the season . . . The Tigers have lost 6 of 7 and 19 of 23. They are 12-32 at Comerica Park, with losses in 12 of 13.

David Price nabs 150th victory, Red Sox cap sweep

Julian McWilliams

It depends on the day. Depends on the batter.

David Price has been at this for a while, so he's used to adjusting on the fly. He can manipulate each of his pitches at different speeds better than most. He can rear back and touch 94-95 mph on his fastball if he needs to. Or, he can dock it down a bit to 88. It takes a certain type of ability to control the same pitch at two different speeds within the strike zone. A specific type of veteran gamesmanship.

Price earned his 150th career regular-season victory in Sunday's 6-3 sweep-completing win against the Detroit Tigers, and it had all of what makes him great on display.

The win wasn't a thunderous one. In fact, it was quiet but effective. It came after only five innings and 99 pitches for Price. He struck out six and yielded just one run, on a Nicholas Castellanos double in the first inning. He buried his heater in on the hands of hitters, and went middle-away with his devastating changeup.

Price exited the game with a comfortable 5-1 lead. The Red Sox added another run in the eighth after scoring on a wild pitch, but Tigers' Brandon Dixon belted a two-run homer off reliever Ryan Brasier before Heath Hembree pitched the ninth, striking out Victor Reyes to seal Price's victory.

"It's cool. Winning 15 games for 10 seasons," Price said. "The back of my baseball card speaks for itself and I'm definitely proud of it. I take a lot of pride in it. To have the amount of time I've had in the big leagues and win the amount of games I've won in the big leagues, that's awesome."

In a first half of the Sox season that has been wildly inconsistent, Price has been the model of consistency, and perhaps the one who's kept them afloat.

"Every five days, you know what you're getting," Cora said. "That's why he's great. That's why he's won 150 games in the big leagues and the ERA is what it is. He's been one of the best for the last 11 years and I'm very proud of him."

He's posted a 3.24 ERA in 83⅓ innings this season. He's struck out 95 batters to go along with a 7-2 record. Yet Cora said it's not just this season you should be looking at.

"He's been big since the second half last year," Cora added. "We saw what he did in October, but people don't talk about what he did in the second part of the season last year. He's been consistent throughout the entire process."

Price compiled a 2.25 ERA then, and opponents hit just .200 against him.

Catcher Christian Vázquez said the main difference he sees with Price is that he's fully healthy.

"DP is a great pitcher and teammate. When you're healthy you can do whatever you want," said Vázquez, who hit a two-run homer in the second inning. "His elbow's good. His shoulder is good, so it's better now."

The Red Sox face a daunting schedule once they return from the All-Star break, starting Friday against the 60-32 Los Angeles Dodgers. When Cora was asked if this break would help, he said how the Sox play Friday will be what answers that question.

After the Dodgers, they'll face the New York Yankees and Tampa Bay Rays a combined 14 times between July 22 and Aug. 4. But before the Sox get to those series, the one against the Dodgers is what Cora has circled.

Inked in to pitch that Sunday game is the 150-game winner.

"I've continued to evolve," Price said. "That's something I take a lot of pride in doing, making adjustments on the fly. Just evolving."

But with a 49-41 record at the break, Price knows this game, even with its individual significance, is just a drop in the bucket.

“It’s crunch time for us right now,” he said.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox close out first half the way they wanted to open it

Michael Silverman

Depending who you asked as the Red Sox entered their All-Star break late Sunday afternoon, the Red Sox are either far from playing at their peak or they’re just about there.

Regardless of where the truth lies, they are certainly trending — finally and about three months later than forecast — in the direction they always thought they were headed.

“We’re very close, very close, we have a couple of things to adjust,” said Christian Vazquez, who hit his 14th homer of the season in the club’s 6-3 series-sweeping victory over the Tigers. “If we do that, we’re going to be the top.”

After opening their season by stumbling out of the gate, losing 15 of their first 24 games, the Red Sox dashed any hope that the team would come close to repeating last year’s magical 108-win regular season romp.

But now, finally, they are approaching full stride, winning 15 of their last 24 games, five of their last seven series and possess an active four-game winning streak.

They still remain far from greatness, with too many questions about the depth and quality of their rotation and bullpen.

But their offense is waking up and at a season-high eight games above .500, the 49-41 team is inching closer to being a team to be feared rather than one ripe for the picking.

“It’s getting there, absolutely,” said David Price, the ballclub’s most consistent and best starter this season, after he collected his 150th career victory. “I still don’t feel like we’ve done everything to the best of our abilities the way that we’re capable of doing. To close it out the last six games the way that we have, that’s what we needed.”

Price threw a lot of pitches (99) for only five innings but he only allowed one run on four hits and two walks, with six strikeouts.

The victory improved Price’s record to 7-2 and his ERA dipped to 3.24.

After the Tigers scored first for the first time this series, Vazquez’ two-run shot in the second inning put the Red Sox on top, a perch from which they never left. Xander Bogaerts also drove in two runs in the fifth.

Manager Alex Cora expressed a deep desire before the game to get the win on Sunday and keep the team headed in the right direction by establishing distance from the two-game drubbing by the Yankees in London.

The team won five of six games against two bad teams, the Blue Jays and Tigers.

That’s what they should do, but the Red Sox should be doing their job better, said Cora, because their level of play leaves much to be desired.

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

J.D. Martinez (double) scored on a wild pitch in the seventh inning.

Ryan Brasier allowed a two-run home run to Brandon Dixon in the eighth inning.
The Red Sox return to action on Friday at Fenway Park against the Dodgers.

But before they get a true and timely test of exactly what their level of play is against the best team in the big leagues, they will get a chance to re-set and re-calibrate. The second half of the season poses a big challenge to the Red Sox, but it's still a few days away.

"Whenever you win five out of six going into the break a lot of times you want to keep playing, keep that momentum but I think everybody in here is ready for this break, we need this break," said Price. "We need these four days off, it's good."

Alex Cora: Dodgers team 'hungry to kick our (butt)' awaits Red Sox

Michael Silverman

Alex Cora understands perfectly what the Red Sox will be up against when they open the second half of the season.

Visiting Fenway will be the Dodgers, the team with the best record in baseball and the team that happened to be beaten by the Red Sox in last year's World Series.

Cora would like to keep the momentum his team has been building into the break right into that series.

"We go Friday," Cora said before his club swept the Tigers on Sunday with a 6-3 victory. "There's no motivation — we don't need motivation, we know that they're coming and I know that they're playing great. You saw what happened in October, so we're going to have a team on the other side, they're going to be hungry, hungry to kick our ass so we better be ready for that."

The Red Sox have set their rotation for right after the All-Star break.

In the opening series against the Dodgers, the order will be Eduardo Rodriguez, Chris Sale and David Price, with Rick Porcello pitching the opener of the next series against the Blue Jays.

As for Game 2 against Toronto, that is the No. 5 spot in the Red Sox' rotation.

And that is a subject matter that is very much up in the air, and will be the focus of many a conversation over the break.

"We haven't made a decision, we'll make that decision during the week, see how we're going to attack it," said Cora.

Right-hander Hector Velazquez remains a fall-back solution of sorts.

Left-hander Brian Johnson is also an option, but not in the near-term. He is dealing with a non-baseball medical issue. At the moment, he has been restricted to playing catch. Cora said it is "realistic" to expect Johnson to be able to contribute at some point this season.

150 for Price

Price, 33 years old, collected win No. 150 on Sunday. His career record is now 150-77 with an ERA of 3.25, that ERA just a shade higher than his 3.24 mark this season, when he has been the Red Sox' best and most consistent starter.

“That’s cool, winning 15 games a year for 10 seasons, so, the back of my baseball card speaks for itself and I’m definitely proud of it,” said Price. “I take a lot of pride in it. To have the amount of time I’ve had in the big leagues to be able to win the amount of games I’ve won in the big leagues, that’s awesome.”

According to the Red Sox, in the Live Ball Era (1920-present), only eight other pitchers besides Price have 150 or more wins, a .650-plus winning percentage and an ERA of 3.30 or lower: Sandy Koufax, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez, Whitey Ford, Lefty Grove, Ron Guidry, Clayton Kershaw and Max Scherzer.

Dating back to last July 12, Price is 17-4 with a 2.93 ERA.

“Just continuing to evolve, that’s something I take a lot of pride in doing, just making adjustments on the fly, start to start, inning to inning, pitch to pitch, whatever it may be, just evolving,” Price said about being able to be consistent.

Said Cora: “He’s been big since the second half of last year. We saw what he did in October, but people don’t talk about what he did in the second part of the season last year. He’s been consistent throughout the whole process. Even his first two starts (this season), the one in Oakland, he threw the ball well. And in Arizona he put one bad inning, but after that, he’s been consistent.

“Every five days, we know what we’re getting. He makes adjustments. One day he’s 94, and the next day he’s 89-90 with a changeup and precision, and that’s why he’s great. That’s why he’s won 150 games in the big leagues, and the ERA is what it is, and the strikeouts. He’s been one of the best for the last 11 years, and I’m very proud of him.

Vazquez a hit

Christian Vazquez hit his 14th home run of the season, as he continues to establish distance from his mediocre career offensive stats. He is hitting .299 on the season and his 41 RBI are third best among American League catchers.

Vazquez said his drive to win is why he’s hitting better, although in previous conversations he has mentioned that he worked in the offseason on developing more of an uppercut swing because he was getting tired of grounding out or into double plays.

“I want to win,” said Vazquez. “I’m trying to help the team win. We’re playing better, that’s the goal, no matter the result, I like wins.”

Said Cora: He’s been solid. Done a good job staying on the ball. He works hard. He works hard at it, and he’s staying with it. He had a great first part of the season.”

Cora acknowledged that the second half of the season should offer a more forgiving schedule than the first half. Of the 72 games left, more than half, 39, will be played at home. The road trips are also not particularly grueling. There’s one nonsensical three-city road trip out West in late August-early September that asks the team to fly to San Diego, then east to Denver, then west again to Anaheim before returning home. But outside of that, of the remaining 11 road series, just one, the last in Texas, is outside of Eastern Standard Time zone.

“I mean, it is what it is obviously but especially these last 10 days or whatever it’s been a grind, the long games in Toronto, the long games in London, the rain delays here but we’re not complaining,” said Cora. “Like I’ve always said, there’s charter planes, 5-star hotels and great spreads. And if you have to rest in the clubhouse, now you’ve got sleeping rooms. It’s better conditions than the 80s and 90s.”

Five Red Sox need to be better in second half

Tom Keegan

Mookie Betts, Xander Bogaerts and J.D. Martinez will represent the Red Sox and the American League in Tuesday’s All-Star Game in Progressive Field. Rafael Devers, of course, absurdly was snubbed.

Regardless of what happens in the Midsummer Classic, it will be far from the biggest game in Cleveland for Boston's three All-Stars. At the moment, the Red Sox trail the Indians in the race for the second wild card, so an argument can be made there is no bigger series for the Sox than the one that takes place Aug. 12-14 at Progressive Field.

Even if things go well for the visitors in that series, it will be tough to qualify for the postseason if the following five Red Sox don't do better after the All-Star break than before it.

Chris Sale (3-8,4.04): The harshest self-critic on the ballclub, Sale has a point. He hasn't earned a win at Fenway Park since Aug. 12, 2018.

Sale's season has been a microcosm of the entire team's in one respect: He'll go on a strong stretch, convincing everyone that his problems are behind him and then lapse back into inconsistency. In 11 starts in May and June, Sale compiled a 2.78 ERA, walked 14 batters and struck out 116.

Provided he can stay healthy, it's reasonable to expect a far better second half from him.

Nathan Eovaldi (0-0, 6.00): After signing a four-year, \$68-million contract, Eovaldi made just four starts before heading to the injured list. When he returns, likely this month, he has a chance to save a sinking bullpen as a closer. If he can throw strikes and stay healthy, he has a shot at making a much bigger difference than he could have as a so-so starter.

Rick Porcello (6-7, 5.33): In 10 full seasons as a Major League starting pitcher, Porcello never has finished with an ERA higher than 4.92, and his first-half average innings per start of 5.5 is lower than any of his 10 seasons. Expecting a return to the mean for the durable starter is easy to envision.

Matt Barnes (3-3, 4.62): A well-located 94 mph is far more effective than a poorly placed heater clocked at 96. Barnes throws plenty hard, but there's a reason he throws so many curveballs. They have been more effective than his fastballs, which tend to catch too much of the plate. Barnes has more blown saves (six) than saves (four).

If Eovaldi can pitch effectively as a closer, that will relieve pressure on everyone else in the bullpen, most notably Barnes.

Alex Cora (49-41): Let's dissect a recent quote from the manager: "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.'"

He left out one element of managing, one that if front offices had their way would vanish entirely: the manager's gut. You trust your gut. If Cora ever finds himself wondering why he is doing something, he shouldn't do it. He has a great feel for players, knows how to keep players' heads in the right places, and needs to let his people-reading skills more often take precedence over the data.

Sure, matchup data has played a part in outrageously good pinch-hitting statistics, but Cora's gut on when to use a pinch hitter has played a bigger part. Three words of advice for the manager: Trust your gut.

At the same time, don't ignore obvious data. Sale is a far better pitcher with Sandy Leon behind the plate than with hot-hitting Christian Vazquez. Whatever is gained with Vazquez in the lineup, even against pitchers against whom he matches up well, is not worth the risk of diminishing Sale's performance.

Sale will always maintain his catcher did his job well and take full responsibility for his poor outings and subpar first half, but the numbers need to be trusted on this one. In 12 starts pitching to Leon, Sale is 3-3 with a 2.96 ERA and has 12 walks and 122 strikeouts in 76 innings. In six starts throwing to Vazquez, Sale is 0-5 with a 6.68 ERA and has 14 walks and 31 strikeouts in 31 innings.

Sale lets catchers call his game, which makes the selection of a receiver more important with him than anyone else. It's time for a hard-and-fast rule: Leon catches Sale. Period.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Red Sox 6, Tigers 3: Price's milestone boosts Boston into break

Bill Koch

It was a milestone afternoon for David Price on Sunday, and it coincided with the best record the Red Sox have had at any point this season.

The left-hander collected his 150th career win and Boston moved eight games above the .500 mark heading into the All-Star break.

The dreadful Tigers were the victims for the third straight day at Comerica Park. Detroit seems to find a way to lose, rain or shine, and the Red Sox were only too happy to extend the misery for the locals in a 6-3 victory. It was Boston's fourth straight win overall.

Price was forced to grind through 99 pitches over the first five innings, but that was enough to become the first Boston pitcher to notch his 150th career victory since Tim Wakefield in July 2006. He's also one of just nine pitchers since 1920 to total 150 wins, capture at least 65 percent of his decisions and post a career earned-run average of 3.30 or lower. His peers in that star-studded group include Sandy Koufax, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez, Whitey Ford, Lefty Grove, Ron Guidry, Clayton Kershaw and Max Scherzer.

"That's cool," said Price, who improved to 7-2 this season. "That's winning 15 games a year for 10 seasons. The back of my baseball card speaks for itself, and I'm definitely proud of it."

The Dodgers will be Price's next opponent on Sunday, and he'll carry some strong numbers over the last calendar year into that start. Price improved to 13-3 with a 2.80 earned-run average since last July 20, and Boston is 18-9 in games in which he pitches. That doesn't include the pair of World Series victories Price posted against Los Angeles, including the clinching Game 5.

"He's been big since the second half of last year," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "We saw what he did in October, but people don't talk about what he did in the second part of the season last year. He's been consistent throughout the whole process."

Price trailed, 1-0, after just two batters. He issued a leadoff walk to Victor Reyes and Nicholas Castellanos grounded an RBI double down the line in left. But Price struck out the next two men he faced and induced a Jeimer Candelario fly to center. He allowed just two more runners to reach scoring position the rest of the way.

"Just continuing to evolve," Price said. "It's something I take a lot of pride in doing. Making adjustments on the fly start-to-start or inning-to-inning or pitch-to-pitch — whatever it may be. Just evolving."

"He makes adjustments," Cora said. "One day it's 94 (mph). Another day it's 89-90 with the changeup and precision. That's why he's great."

The Red Sox offense quickly snapped into gear, handing Price the lead in the top of the second. J.D. Martinez singled to lead off and Christian Vazquez deposited a hanging 0-and-2 slider from Gregory Soto into the boxes in right-center field for a 2-1 game.

"I want to win," Vazquez said. "I'm trying to help the team win and we're playing better. That's the goal no matter the result."

Boston found some breathing room in the fifth, sending eight men to the plate and producing a pair of key two-out hits. Xander Bogaerts grounded a two-run double inside the bag at third, his 29th of the season to seize the American League lead. Andrew Benintendi slipped an RBI single through the left side to make it 5-1.

Josh Taylor retired all six men he faced in the sixth and seventh and Martinez doubled and scored on a wild pitch to make it 6-1 in the top of the eighth.

Brandon Dixon's two-run homer off Ryan Brasier in the bottom half gave the Tigers some life. But Heath Hembree worked around a one-out single in the ninth to pick up his second save of the season.

"We've got to be ready for Friday," Cora said. "We play 34 (games) in 34 days after that. We start with the Dodgers right away. It should be fun over the weekend. But I think we can be a lot better than this."

Early leads have been key for Red Sox

Bill Koch

The record-setting Red Sox, who essentially swaggered their way to 108 wins last season, tended to be quick starters.

Boston enjoyed a plus-17 run differential in the first inning in 2018. The Red Sox won all 10 postseason games in which it scored first. Opponents were quickly put on the defensive and forced to fight for their lives from the opening pitch.

That makes some recent developments regarding Boston's offense rather noteworthy. After Sunday's 6-3 victory in which the Tigers held a 1-0 lead after the first inning, this year's run differential was 54-54 in the opening inning.

"That's something we did a great job of last year — getting ahead and putting pressure on the opposition right away," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "It took us a while."

The current top of the order has plenty to do with it. Mookie Betts has settled back into the leadoff spot, Rafael Devers is red-hot just behind him and Xander Bogaerts has enjoyed an All-Star campaign in the third spot. The Red Sox have scored 21 first-inning runs in 10 games with Devers batting second.

"He enjoys playing," Cora said. "He loves it. He shows up every day. I ask him, 'Are you tired?' And he's like, 'No, no.' He just wants to play and contribute."

This is the third primary version of the lineup Cora has employed this season. The first was a flop, with Andrew Benintendi going 3-for-37 and striking out 15 times leading off games. Cora attempted to capture last year's magic by restoring Betts and Benintendi to a 1-2 spots, and there were some signs of improvement.

"It just happened that (Benintendi) got banged up and we put (Devers) there and he took off," Cora said. "I think where we're at right now as far as balance in the lineup is perfect."

Such quick starts can paper over some cracks elsewhere. Boston was forced to work all the way to the end of its 10-6 victory on Saturday, that despite owning a 2-0 lead after one and a 7-0 lead after batting in the fourth. Rick Porcello couldn't escape the sixth, tagged for six earned runs but still credited with the victory thanks to the potent Red Sox bats.

"Any time you jump on top first it gives you a little bit of breathing room and sets the tone and gives you that edge going forward in the game," Porcello said. "We've been swinging the bats well from start to finish, really."

The fourth inning was the lone frame in which Boston was outscored last season. The Red Sox won the first three innings by a combined 43 runs and posted a ridiculous 129-49 advantage in the fifth inning. Boston also enjoyed a 112-73 gap in the seventh, two spots that traditionally coincide with the third and fourth trips through the batting order.

"One thing I learned over the first year is to not guarantee anything to anybody," Cora said. "We've been switching and trying to search for answers. That 1-2-3 right now looks pretty good."

The thin Red Sox rotation will likely force similar production from its hitters throughout the second half. Boston hasn't decided on a fifth starter coming out of the All-Star break, with Porcello scheduled to pitch the opener of the second series with the Blue Jays. Nathan Eovaldi hasn't taken a regular turn since April 17 against the Yankees, and the Red Sox still managed to cobble together a 43-28 record going into the break.

"You've got to make adjustments," Cora said. "You've got to recognize that. Xander is becoming an on-base percentage monster and that's what they're doing. You put them all together and it doesn't matter."

Betts finds himself in elite company

Bill Koch

Mookie Betts appears to have found something.

The Red Sox outfielder declined to be specific when asked about his swing late Saturday night. Betts is content to let the numbers do the talking, and his exit velocities as of late have been rather loud indeed.

Ten balls rocketed off his bat at 100 mph or more over the course of three games, a streak starting with Thursday's 8-7 victory at Toronto. The limp routine flies to right field that dotted parts of the first half have been replaced by sharp liners up the middle and to the pull side. Betts is beginning to resemble the hitter who bashed his way to Most Valuable Player honors last season.

"Just a lot of work," Betts said. "A lot of work behind the scenes that people don't know about. I'm definitely working hard to get to where I want to be."

Betts, who had three hits in each of the first two games of the series against the Tigers, managed only a 1-for-4 performance on Sunday afternoon. But he scored another run, giving him 77, which marked the third time in his career he's reached 76 or better prior to the All-Star break. Only Ted Williams, Bobby Bonds, Rickey Henderson and Todd Helton stand alongside Betts in baseball history.

"We've been saying all along it's just a matter of making adjustments," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Sometimes it takes longer than we want to, but as long as he stays within the zone he'll be fine."

Betts led off Saturday's 10-6 win over Detroit with a triple off the base of the wall in center. It was a sizzling drive struck at 107.3 mph that hit the base of the 420-foot marker. Betts added a double to deep left and a sharp single through the left side to complete his night.

"I'm just consistent with the same swing," Betts said. "That's the main thing I'm doing right now."

Looking ahead

Boston comes out of the All-Star break facing a World Series rematch next weekend.

The Dodgers visit Fenway Park for a three-game series beginning on Friday night. Los Angeles lost both games in the Back Bay last October, falling into a 2-0 hole on its way to a 4-1 series defeat.

"We know that they're coming and I know they're playing great," Cora said. "We saw what happened in October. We're going to have a team on the other side that's going to be hungry. So we'd better be ready for that."

The Dodgers entered Sunday as baseball's lone 60-win team and boasted a 14½-game lead on the Rockies in the National League West. Eduardo Rodriguez, Chris Sale and David Price will serve as the starting pitchers for the Red Sox. It was Price who worked into the eighth inning while closing out Los Angeles in Game 5.

Home vs. away

Sunday marked Boston's 48th road game of the season.

The Red Sox will play the majority of their contests at home during the second half, and that could actually prove problematic. Boston finished the first half 14-2 in its last 16 contests away and 29-19 overall. The Red Sox are just 20-22 at home, a place where they went a sizzling 57-24 last season.

Boston dropped to just 3-10 on the road following a two-game April sweep at Yankee Stadium. The Red Sox went on to author a three-game sweep of the Rays, starting a 26-9 run, including Sunday's 6-3 win at Detroit.

"Like I've always said, there are charter planes, five-star hotels and great spreads," Cora said. "If you have to rest in the clubhouse, now you've got sleeping rooms. It's better conditions than in the '80s and '90s."

In retrospect

Mauricio Dubon earned his first call to the big leagues on Sunday.

The Brewers summoned the 24-year-old infielder from Triple-A San Antonio, the latest reminder of Boston's disastrous trade for Tyler Thornburg. Dubon was one of three minor-leaguers sent to Milwaukee for the right-handed reliever in December 2016, with Travis Shaw serving as the centerpiece of a four-man package.

Thornburg (right hip impingement) is about to finish his 30-day rehab assignment with Triple-A Pawtucket and has pitched to a 12.66 earned-run average. The Red Sox have yet to decide what to do with Thornburg after being generally ineffective over the course of 11 appearances. Shaw — who was recently demoted to Triple A — hit a combined 63 homers for the Brewers in 2017 and 2018.

*** *MassLive.com***

Jarren Duran, Boston Red Sox outfield prospect, has enjoyed quick rise without using social media

Chris Cotillo

Most wildly successful 22-year-olds would want to flaunt their triumphs as much as possible on social media. Turns out Jarren Duran isn't like most 22-year-olds.

Duran, a Red Sox outfield prospect whose torrid start to the season propelled him to the top of prospect ranking lists all over the internet, avoids social media at all costs. Unlike the millions in his age group who have had their lives dominated by Twitter, Facebook and Instagram since middle school, Duran enjoys being blissfully ignorant to the latest happenings in cyberspace.

"I had it a little bit in high school and I decided I'd rather go out and hang with my buddies than get caught up looking at my phone all the time," Duran said. "What does it do for me? If it doesn't do anything good for me, then I don't need it."

Duran's last social posts-- an Instagram featuring him and a friend and a retweet of a "Baseball Problems" account-- came in the fall of 2014, when he was a junior in high school in southern California. In the five years since, he dominated offensively at Long Beach State University, entered the pro ranks as Boston's seventh-round pick last season and reached Double-A in his first professional season after leading the minors with a .387 average in 50 games at High-A to start the year.

Boston Red Sox's younger J.D.: prospect Jarren Duran batting .397, would have signed for 'a bus ticket' just to play pro ball

The Boston Red Sox drafted Jarren Duran out of Long Beach State in the seventh round of the 2018 Draft. He's batting .397 with a .440 on-base percentage, .538 slugging percentage and .979 OPS.

Duran's quick rise led Baseball America to rank him within their top 100 prospects last month, as the 93rd best prospect in all of baseball. He received the honor of being Boston's only representative in Sunday's All-Star Futures Game alongside baseball's best prospects.

Duran's last game with Portland was his best since being promoted in early June, as he had four hits (including a double) Friday against New Hampshire and saw his average rise 24 points. The learning curve at Double-A has been a steep one, as he has hit just .240 (with a .595 OPS) in 30 games after posting a .998 OPS in Salem.

"Pitchers are better," Duran said. "You move up a little, everybody's better. Just pitching me differently and I have to adjust. It's a game of adjustments. Just getting used to it."

Duran will almost certainly spend the rest of the season in Portland as he tries to figure out how to get back on the torrid pace that made him so successful in Salem. He has played center field all season in the minors, so he's a candidate to take over for Jackie Bradley Jr. in 2020 if the veteran departs in free agency.

As Duran continues to develop, he'll try to do it without checking his phone nearly as much as most of his minor-league teammates. He wouldn't have it any other way.

"I don't really look at that stuff because I don't have social media or anything," Duran said. "It's an honor (to be in Cleveland) but I try not to get caught up in all the noise. I'm just trying to play baseball. I don't want to get all into that, like, 'You're this or that, Baseball America.' I'm just a baseball player."

David Price lowers ERA to 3.24, Xander Bogaerts hits 2-run double as Red Sox enter All-Star break at 49-41

Christopher Smith

David Price has been the Red Sox's most consistent starting pitcher in 2019. And he finished the first half with a victory.

Price allowed only one run, four hits and two walks while striking out six in 5 innings Sunday. He helped lead the Red Sox 6-3 over the Tigers at Comerica Park.

The Red Sox lefty improved to 7-2 with a 3.24 ERA in 16 starts during the first half. He has a 2.93 ERA (184 innings, 60 earned runs) in his past 34 outings (33 starts) since July 12, 2018.

Boston heads into the All-Star break with a 49-41 record. This marks the first time the 2019 Red Sox have reached eight games over .500.

Xander Bogaerts, Boston's most consistent first-half hitter along with Rafael Devers, ripped a two-run double with two outs in the fifth inning to turn a 2-1 lead into a 4-1 lead. Andrew Benintendi then followed with an RBI single, putting Boston ahead 5-1.

Vazquez hit his 14th homer in the second inning. His 376-foot opposite field two-run homer put Boston ahead 2-1.

He's on pace for 25 homers. His previous career-high was five homers in 2017.

Ryan Brasier allows another homer

Ryan Brasier gave up a two-run homer to Brandon Dixon in the eighth inning.

He has allowed seven homers in 37 2/3 innings. He allowed two homers in 42 1/3 innings in 2018, including the postseason.

Josh Taylor K's 4

Josh Taylor pitched two perfect innings, striking out four.

Tanner Houck, Red Sox 2017 prospect, moved to bullpen and could help Boston in 2019; C.J. Chatham plays second for first time

Christopher Smith

The Red Sox moved highly-touted prospect Darwinzon Hernandez to the bullpen at Triple-A Pawtucket last week. The hope is he can help Boston's bullpen this year.

Now it's Tanner Houck's turn.

Houck, a 2017 first-round draft pick, pitched out of the bullpen for the first time Saturday.

"We do think he's somebody that could help us in the bullpen, too," president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski said about Houck on Tuesday.

Houck posted a 2.87 ERA (17 earned runs, 53 1/3 innings) in his final eight starts for Double-A Portland. He struggled Saturday, allowing six runs, all earned, three hits and two walks while recording only one out in the seventh inning.

He struck out the first batter. The next hitter for New Hampshire singled. Portland then failed to record an out on a grounder to second. Both runners were safe on the fielder's choice. The inning escalated from there.

Houck certainly has the ability to pitch well in relief and help Boston this year despite a rough first outing.

The righty made an adjustment to his slider during spring training. It's now a sweeping slider.

"A little more distinct sweep on it," said Brian Bannister, Red Sox vice president of pitching development. "He was very good at spring training at making adjustments. And Double A is a tough level for anybody. And he's really gotten better as the year's gone on."

C.J. Chatham, Boston Red Sox 6-4 prospect with .388 OBP, not too tall for second base; 'I'm versatile. I can play anywhere'

Boston Red Sox prospect C.J. Chatham is 13-for-42 (.310 batting average) with a .388 on-base percentage, .476 slugging percentage, .864 OPS, seven doubles, six RBIs, five walks, seven strikeouts and six runs in 11 games for Double-A Portland.

C.J. Chatham plays second

C.J. Chatham, who SoxProspects.com ranks No. 6 in the system, played second base for the first time Saturday.

It marked his first start any position besides shortstop during his professional career.

Chatham is batting .320 with a .360 on-base percentage, .429 slugging percentage, .789 OPS, two homers, 18 doubles and 26 RBIs in 58 games for Portland this year.

With Dustin Pedroia's career potentially finished, Boston will need to find a longterm second baseman. Michael Chavis and Marco Hernandez are candidates. But Chavis likely will start at first base next year with Mitch Moreland and Steve Pearce entering free agency.

Hernandez is considered more of a utility player.

*** *RedSox.com***

Price earns career win No. 150 in sweep

Paul Harris

The Red Sox go into the All-Star break on a four-game winning streak thanks to David Price's 150th career win and the offense of Christian Vázquez and Xander Bogaerts.

Boston defeated the Tigers, 6-3, on Sunday to sweep the three-game weekend series and go into the break with a 49-41 record. The Red Sox are 5-1 in their last six games.

"To close it out the way we have the last six games the way we have, it's just great," Price said.

The lefty gave up a run and four hits in five innings, walking two and striking out six against the team he played for in the second half of the 2014 season and the first part of '15.

"That's cool," he said of the milestone. "Winning 15 games a year for 10 seasons, the back of my baseball card speaks for itself. I'm proud of it."

Price allowed the one run in the first inning by walking leadoff man Victor Reyes and serving up Nicholas Castellanos' run-scoring double.

"In the first inning he was missing a lot," Bogaerts said. "He got better after that. He knows how to make adjustments."

Those adjustments allowed Price to blank Detroit for the remainder of his stint.

"He's been big since the second half of last year," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said of Price. "He's been consistent throughout the process."

Vazquez's two-run homer in the second inning on an 0-2 pitch off Tigers opener Gregory Soto gave the Red Sox a 2-1 lead. It was his 14th of the season and gave him four RBIs in the last two games and a career-high 41 for 2019, third among American League catchers.

"He's worked hard and is doing a real good job of staying on the ball," Cora said of Vazquez. "He's had a great first half."

Bogaerts' two-out, two-run double highlighted a three-run fifth. The shortstop finished the first half with 65 RBIs (second-most in the American League), 29 doubles (tied with Castellanos for first in the AL) and 46 extra-base hits (tied for first in the AL with Matt Chapman of the Athletics).

After being named as an injury replacement last week, Bogaerts will join teammates Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez in Tuesday's All-Star Game presented by Mastercard in Cleveland.

"Obviously, it's an honor," Bogaerts said. "I'm very honored that I can go and be among the best players in the world. Just going to try and enjoy it."

Despite finishing the first half on a high note, the Red Sox will eye improvement when they return from the All-Star break to face the Dodgers in a 2018 World Series rematch.

"We need to get better," Cora said. "We start [the second half] against the Dodgers right off the bat Friday. We need to do better than this."

*** *WEEI.com***

Red Sox nearly put it all together to top Tigers, sweep series

Amin Touri

In serious need of some consistency heading into the All-Star break, the Red Sox put together a nearly complete performance in a 6-3 win to sweep the Tigers on Sunday, with a lineup continuing to click, David Price throwing five strong innings and the bullpen falling one pitch short of closing it down quietly.

Aside from a rough day for Ryan Brasier, who gave up a two-run homer on a full count with two outs in the eighth, things came together nicely as Boston heads into the break having won five of six on this road trip.

Price has quietly been the Red Sox' best and most consistent starter, and while he left the game earlier than he might've liked as his pitch count reached 99 in the fifth, he gave up just one run and four hits while striking out six in one of his better starts of the year.

The big lefty got off to a shaky start, walking Victor Reyes to open the game before Nicholas Castellanos doubled Reyes home to put the Red Sox in an early hole, but Price hung up nothing but zeroes from there.

Price's ERA dropped to 3.24 in his seventh win of the season, as he continues to turn in quality outings for a team in desperate need of them. If you exclude a four-out shelling against Texas on June 13, Price has gone at least five innings and allowed two earned runs or fewer in his last seven other starts. While he hasn't quite put up seven or eight-inning gems, he's consistently put the Red Sox in a position to win every fifth day.

The Boston bats took advantage of that position on Sunday, striking for six runs on nine hits to put the team up 5-1 after Price's exit following the fifth.

Christian Vazquez stayed hot, taking an 0-2 breaking ball from Gregory Soto to right-center for his 14th homer of the season in the second inning, continuing what has been by far his best offensive season to date.

Since April 23, when Vazquez really got rolling, his slash line is an excellent .325/.460/.518, one of the strongest lines of any catcher in that span.

Xander Bogaerts, who will be on the American League roster for the All-Star Game this week, doubled home Marco Hernandez and Mookie Betts in the fifth to give Boston some breathing room, and Andrew Benintendi brought Bogaerts home to round out a big fifth. J.D. Martinez scored on a wild pitch in the eighth, and the bullpen had a five-run lead to protect.

A hot button topic in recent weeks, the bullpen seemed poised for a clean day, with Josh Taylor throwing two scoreless innings, striking out four without allowing a baserunner. Ryan Brasier walked the first batter he saw — command has been an issue for him — but fanned back-to-back Tigers to settle things down. He ran the count full on Brandon Dixon, but threw one bad slider that Dixon belted in the bullpen to cut the lead to 6-3.

Brasier's been up and down for a few weeks, throwing several scoreless innings but making the occasional mistake like he did Sunday for the two-run homer, or having the occasional nightmare like he did walking home two runs as part of a bullpen collapse against Toronto in late June, and one bad pitch was all that separated Brasier and the Red Sox from a complete performance.

Brandon Workman got the last out of the eighth after Cora hooked Brasier, and Heath Hembree shut down the ninth in his second appearance since he was activated from the injured list. He needed 26 pitches to do so, but he managed to pick up his second save of the year.

The win put the Red Sox eight games over .500 for the first time all season, having won four in a row and five out of six, and they were a pitch away from putting it all together, which they'll hope to do on the other side of the break with some momentum on their side.

*** *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 Yelich, despite the fact that Yelich 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 6, Tigers 3 – Sox stay hot into break, Price wins 150th

Greg Bedard

Ready for launch?: The first half of the season has certainly had its shares of highs and lows for the Red Sox, but perhaps they are finally finding some consistency. Sunday's win over the Tigers was their fourth straight as they head into the All-Star Break with a 49-41 record — a season-best eight games over .500 — and having won five of their last six games. Waiting for the Red Sox after the break at Fenway: the NL-best Dodgers, their old friends from the World Series. "We need to get better," Cora said. "We start against the Dodgers right off the bat Friday. We need to do better than this."

Price grinds to 150th career win: It was anything but a Picasso in five innings of work, but David Price was sharp enough to become the first Red Sox pitcher since Tim Wakefield in 2006 to notch his 150th career victory. "That's cool," Price said. "That's winning 15 games a year for 10 seasons. The back of my baseball card speaks for itself, and I'm definitely proud of it." It didn't look good early as Price trailed 1-0 after two batters following a walk and double. But Price retired the next eight batters and held the Tigers in check from there, grinding out four hits, two walks and six strikeouts over 99 pitches to improve to 7-2 (3.24 ERA).

Vazquez, Bogaerts stay hot: Big shocker here — Christian Vazquez and Xander Bogaerts continued to carry the Red Sox' offense. Vazquez took Gregory Soto deep on an 0-2 pitch to give the Sox a 2-1 lead in the second.

Bogaerts' two-out, two-run double ignited a three-run fifth.

TURNING POINT

The Red Sox busted it open in the fifth with three runs in what was a 2-1 game at the time. Boston sent eight men to the plate with huge two-out RBIs from Bogaerts (double) and Andrew Benintendi (single through the left side of the infield) to make it 5-1.

TWO UP

J.D. Martinez: Besides the red-hot twins (Vazquez, Bogaerts), Martinez paced the offense with a 2 for 3 day and a team-leading two runs scored.

Marco Hernandez: Went 2 for 4 to raise his average to .360 with an OPS of .933. Eduardo Nunez better watch his back.

ONE DOWN

Ryan Brasier: Is any lead safe at this point? Apparently not. With a 6-1 lead in the bottom of the eighth, Brasier surrendered a two-run homer to Brandon Dixon. Brandon Workman had to come in and extinguish the flames.

QUOTE OF NOTE

“He makes adjustments. One day it’s 94 (mph). Another day it’s 89-90 with the changeup and precision. That’s why he’s great.” — Cora on Price.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Vazquez has four RBIs in the last two games and a career-high 41 for 2019. That’s third among AL catchers. Bogaerts finished the first half with 65 RBI (second-most in AL), 29 doubles (tied for first in the AL) and 46 extra-base hits (tied for first in the AL).

Price is one of nine pitchers since 1920 to total 150 wins, capture at least 65 percent of his decisions and with a career earned-run average of 3.30 or lower. (Sandy Koufax, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez, Whitey Ford, Lefty Grove, Ron Guidry, Clayton Kershaw and Max Scherzer).

Since July 20 last year, Price is 13-3 with a 2.80 ERA and the team is 18-9 in games he pitches (regular season).

UP NEXT

Red Sox are off for the All-Star Break until Thursday when they host the Dodgers in a World Series rematch to start a seven-game homestand.

*** *The Athletic***

The Red Sox are a jigsaw puzzle. Can it be put together in the second half?

Chad Jennings

The baseball season is long, and every team welcomes the All-Star break in the middle. But maybe the Red Sox, their first half being more of a grind than expected, their schedule having just completed a 10-day, three-country trip, could use the break more than most.

“We’ll see Friday,” manager Alex Cora said. “We have to be ready for Friday. They will let us know on Friday if it was needed.”

As the first-half concluded Sunday afternoon in Detroit, the Red Sox looked and sounded less like a team in need of a breather and more like a team anxious to play meaningful baseball games again, if only to prove they’re better than what they’ve shown so far. The first half was disappointing. They believe the second half will be better.

As it stands, the Red Sox are 49-41, on pace for an 88-win season. Even under the best circumstances, it would have been difficult to match the 108 wins of a year ago, but the Red Sox are 20 wins off that pace. Eighty-eight wins would have been the eighth-best total in the American League last season, nine games out of the second wild card and nowhere near World Series contention. It has been a precipitous drop.

This season, though, has been far more forgiving. The Red Sox are only two games out of the second wild-card spot, and two-and-a-half games out of the first wild card. They are one good week from being the fourth-best team in the American League. They are nine games out in the AL East, trailing a Yankees team with the second-most wins in baseball. Twelve remaining head-to-head games provide an opportunity for the Red Sox to make up ground — and an opportunity for the Yankees to thoroughly bury their rivals — and Cora said he’s still eyeing another division title.

“I guarantee you that’s the message (the Yankees) have: This is not over,” Cora said. “It’s just like the other teams in the division. It ain’t over. We know they’re playing great. We know it. You can’t hide that fact. But the fact (is) that we still have the second part of the season, and we know that we’re going to improve.”

Some of that improvement has already happened. Ever since that brutal season-opening trip, when the Red Sox started 3-8 on the West Coast, they’ve played to a .582 winning percentage — which is a 94-win pace. The offense has already turned around in a big way, scoring more runs per game and hitting for a higher OPS than last year’s team. Some of the early mental mistakes have been cleaned up. Rafael Devers has turned a corner at third base and become a monster at the plate. Mookie Betts is looking more like his old self. The Red Sox went into the break with four consecutive wins, having won five of six after that sometimes ugly, often unusual weekend series in London.

“We know that we’re going to play better,” Cora said. “We will play better. There’s a lot of confidence in the clubhouse. We’ve seen a lot of good things happen.”

Not enough of those good things have happened on the mound. While the Red Sox lineup has found its footing — still with plenty of room for Betts, J.D. Martinez and Andrew Benintendi to become even more productive — the pitching staff remains stuck in the mud with no clear path to solid ground.

David Price pitched well in Sunday’s first-half finale. He allowed one run through five innings and lowered his ERA to 3.24. He’s allowed two earned runs or fewer in 12 of his past 14 starts. His workload has been limited, but he’s pitched well. Not enough of his fellow starters can say the same.

Nathan Eovaldi has been on the injured list for nearly three months. Eduardo Rodriguez has the highest WHIP and nearly the highest ERA of his career. Chris Sale’s been shockingly erratic, and the Red Sox have won only six of his 18 starts. Rick Porcello has had too many starts like Saturday’s, when he pitched well for a while but fell apart in the sixth inning and pushed his ERA all the way to 5.33. That’s the fifth-worst among American League pitchers.

“I’ve got to be better from start to finish,” Porcello said. “(The hitters) have been unbelievable. They’ve been carrying us the entire year really. Raffy, Bogey, those guys have been doing a great job, and Michael (Chavis) has stepped up and done an unbelievable job. Jackie (Bradley Jr.)’s swinging the bat well. They’re the heart and soul right now. Myself, I’ve got to pitch better. (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.”

That’s the trick, isn’t it? The Red Sox bullpen remains a point of contention and derision despite career years from Brandon Workman, Marcus Walden and Heath Hembree. Ryan Brasier and Matt Barnes have hit significant rough patches, but Brasier still has a 1.14 WHIP, while Barnes has the highest strikeout rate in the American League, putting him among the league’s 10 most valuable relievers, according to FanGraphs WAR.

But, again, it’s about putting the pieces all together, and the pitching staff has not worked in harmony. Close games and an underperforming rotation have put a hefty burden on the high-leverage relievers, whose every misstep is amplified by the team’s decision not to sign a free-agent reliever or carry a set closer.

Feeling a sense of urgency to improve the pitching staff, the Red Sox already have announced that Eovaldi will return as a relief pitcher after the break, perhaps in that closer role. Stretching him out as a starter would have taken time, and the Red Sox can hardly afford to wait. Two weeks ago, they also activated knuckleballer Steven Wright from an 80-game PED suspension, giving them another fresh look that they hope will help in the bullpen.

But the fifth starter remains a total mystery. In fact, when Cora announced his second-half rotation — beginning with Rodriguez, Sale and Price against the Dodgers next weekend — he declined to even name a starting pitcher for the fifth game. The five who have filled that role in Eovaldi’s stead, ranging from journeyman long relievers to prospect starters, have a 6.79 ERA through 16 starts.

The biggest Red Sox problem thus far: They expected to have one of the best rotations in baseball and instead rank seventh in the American League in starters’ ERA. The six teams ahead of them are the same six teams they’re chasing for a playoff spot.

They'll make up no ground these next four days. The Red Sox will scatter this week — Betts, Martinez and Bogaerts to Cleveland for the All-Star Game, Devers and Nunez back home to the Dominican Republic, Colten Brewer getting his first glimpse of Nantucket, Josh Taylor to see his dog in Arizona — but they'll regroup Friday for a three-game series against the Dodgers. That's the same team the Red Sox beat in last year's World Series, and the one that now has the best record in the majors.

"They're going to be hungry," Cora said. "Hungry to kick our ass, so we better be ready for that."

Every championship ring becomes that kind of target. The Red Sox have what the Dodgers are chasing. They have what the Yankees and Astros are after. Even the Red Sox themselves are in pursuit of what they accomplished a year ago.

It's been nearly two decades since baseball had a repeat champion, and the Red Sox are trying to do it with basically the same roster that won the title a year ago. There's no indication the front office plans to sell at the trade deadline, and little to suggest a big splash with a high-profile addition. Owner John Henry told WEEI the opposite, saying he's already committed beyond his payroll budget, and "it's hard to imagine fielding a better team." If ownership is committed to this group, it will be up to these players to prove that decision right or wrong.

"They want to be great," Cora said. "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."

On Sunday, the Red Sox reached the All-Star break still waiting but still believing. They could use the break, but they need to play.

*** *Associated Press***

Price, Vazquez, Bogaerts lead Red Sox over Tigers for sweep

David Price sent the Boston Red Sox sailing into the All-Star break with a bit of history Sunday.

Price pitched one-run ball over five innings and the Red Sox finished off a three-game sweep of Detroit with a 6-3 win. The victory was the 150th of Price's career.

"It will be cool to see that on the back of my baseball card, because it speaks for itself," he said. "That's winning 15 games a year for 10 seasons and I'm definitely proud of it."

The win gives Boston four straight victories and 15 wins in 22 games. The first two games of the series finished after midnight because of lengthy rain delays, but the series finale was played under bright sunshine.

"We had a tough finish, going from London to Toronto and then coming here with two long nights because of rain delays," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "To be able to grind out these wins and go into the break like this is great."

Christian Vazquez and Xander Bogaerts each drove in two runs.

"We're getting close," Vazquez said. "We have a couple of things to adjust and if we do that, we're going to be at the top."

For the Tigers, a bad season has gotten even worse. They have lost 14 of 16 and have gone 6-25 since June 1.

"This is a much-needed break for us," said Brandon Dixon, who homered for Detroit. "We can go home, forget about baseball for a few days and come back refreshed."

The Tigers return from the break with a seven-game road trip, which might be the best news of all. Detroit has gone 3-25 in its last 28 home games and hasn't won a series at Comerica since early May.

"I've never been through anything like this, at least not at home," Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Everyone in baseball knows you have to win at home to be any good and we're not coming close to doing that."

Price struck out six, walked two and allowed four hits. He's allowed 15 earned runs over his past 10 starts, going 6-0.

"Every five days, we know what we're getting," Cora said. "He makes adjustments -- one day he's throwing 94 and the next it is 89-90 with a changeup and precision. That's why he has 150 major-league wins."

Detroit played the final eight innings without designated hitter Miguel Cabrera, who was ejected for arguing a called third strike.

"They told me he was waving his arms around in the dugout, so they threw him out," Gardenhire said. "I told them he always does that -- most of the time I have no idea who he is even talking to."

Heath Hembree, the fifth Boston pitcher, pitched the ninth for his second career save.

Tigers opener Gregory Soto (0-3) took the loss. He gave up two runs and three hits in two innings, raising his ERA to 8.14.

After falling behind 6-1 and 7-0 in the first two games of the series, the Tigers jumped out to an early lead. Victor Reyes drew a walk to start the first and scored on Nicholas Castellanos's double.

The lead didn't last long, as Vazquez hit a two-run homer with one out in the second.

Bogaerts added a two-run double off Nick Ramirez in the fourth, and Andrew Benintendi made it 5-1 with an RBI single later in the inning.

J.D. Martinez gave Boston a five-run lead in the eighth, scoring on a wild pitch. Martinez had two hits.

ROSTER MOVE

The Tigers designated reliever Austin Adams for assignment and will announce a corresponding roster move after the break. Adams had a 5.14 ERA in 13 games as a long reliever after being signed off waivers from Minnesota.

SELECT COMPANY FOR PRICE

Price is only the ninth pitcher since 1920 to have 150 wins with a winning percentage of .650 and an ERA under 3.30. The others are Sandy Koufax, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez, Whitey Ford, Lefty Grove, Ron Guidry, Clayton Kershaw and Price's former teammate in Detroit, Max Scherzer.

REVENGE OF THE 2014 TIGERS ROTATION

The Tigers made their last postseason appearance in 2014, finishing a game ahead of the Royals to win their fourth straight AL Central title before being swept by Baltimore in the ALDS. On Sunday, Price became the fifth starter from that team to beat the 2019 Tigers at Comerica Park and the second in 24 hours. Rick Porcello was the winner in Friday's series opener, while Scherzer, Justin Verlander and Anibal Sanchez won in Detroit earlier in the season.

UP NEXT

Both teams are off until Friday for the All-Star break. The Red Sox resume play with a home series against the Los Angeles Dodgers, while the Tigers are on the road to play the Kansas City Royals.