

The Boston Red Sox Tuesday, July 9, 2018

*** *The Boston Globe***

Alex Cora keeps it consistent in hopes his team will, too

Peter Abraham

Alex Cora was the general manager of his hometown team in the Puerto Rican Winter League, Caguas, when it won the Caribbean Series in 2017.

He then took on the task of putting together Puerto Rico's entry for the World Baseball Classic a month later. That team finished second to the United States, a performance far better than was expected.

As bench coach of the Houston Astros that season, Cora was part of a team that won 101 games and the World Series.

One success piled on top of another, so much that Red Sox principal owner John Henry wondered if Cora was perhaps too self-assured to be a good manager after the Sox interviewed him for job before the 2018 season.

But Henry acquiesced and Cora led the team to 108 victories and a World Series championship. His confidence was earned.

Now the Red Sox are 49-41, nine games behind the Yankees in the American League East. Eight teams have a better record, and the wise guys in Vegas have the Sox 20-to-1 to win the World Series again. They're lumped in with Milwaukee and Tampa Bay.

But this will not be a story about Cora reacting to a painful loss by shouting at his players or flinging a chair across his office.

In the movies, angry managers throw all the bats into the shower or kick over the postgame spread. In 2019, angry managers simmer down and stay positive, lest their millennial charges get upset.

"He's been the same, honestly," J.D. Martinez said of Cora. "He hasn't changed one bit. We've had a couple of more speeches. But he's exactly the same."

This was why the Sox hired Cora. The Sox won division titles in 2016 and '17, but played more with a fear of losing than a thirst to win under John Farrell. Cora's mandate was to change the atmosphere and recapture the attention of the clubhouse. Last season was not a true test of that. The final 72 games this season will be.

"I still feel like I'm fine," Cora said. "I'm trying to find a way to get us going. That's my job. Put these guys in position to be successful.

"There's nights I'm like, 'Man, what do we need to do?' I take it personal. Just like last year, I take it personal. 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. We've just got to find ways the same way we did last year. It's going to happen."

In Boston, where dread is a default position, Cora is working hard to keep the mood upbeat. The players, he believes, want consistency.

“Any time you don’t get that panic from a manager, it goes a long way,” Martinez said. “If they show that pressure, it puts the tension on the team. Alex has done a good job of not showing that.”

Social media has proven to be a good gauge of Cora’s mood and what message he is imparting to his players.

On Saturday, he posted a quote on Instagram from Michelle Obama: “Always stay true yourself and never let what anybody says distract you from your goals.”

A few days before that, Cora posted a meme that said, “Greatness is in the details.”

For all that self-confidence Henry feared would get in the way, Cora has acknowledged mistakes.

He acknowledged it was wrong to flip the lineup and hit Mookie Betts second to start the season. The Sox underestimated how difficult their season-opening 11-game West Coast road trip would be.

Their bullpen construction was a glaring failure, although that was more the fault of president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski than Cora.

“Sometimes we try things and they don’t work out. But in the end you trust your information; you trust your coaches; you trust your players,” Cora said. “Sometimes it happens; sometimes it doesn’t.”

“I do feel that there’s more in this team. We’ll keep pushing them to be excellent and they will be excellent.”

Cora doesn’t pin it on the bullpen, the underachieving rotation, or the dip in production from Martinez, Betts, and others.

“We haven’t played well. That’s it,” he said. “It started in Seattle and carried over. Actually, it started in spring training. We played OK, but we weren’t consistent.”

“We talked about it; we always talked about it. The competition and the urgency and all that. It’s not lack of effort. I think we did the right things in spring training and we just didn’t play well. That’s it.”

Cora has worn his frustration at times, a product of both his team’s record and what has been a wearying season in terms of travel and demands on his time after last season’s championship.

As much as Cora appreciates the reward of managing the All-Star Game on Tuesday night, he would just as soon be relaxing with his family and resting up for what will be a telling stretch of his career.

If he guides this flawed Red Sox team into the postseason, Cora will have another accomplishment to be proud of.

“It’s going to happen. I feel that way,” he said. “I know there are teams that are playing better than us right now. But we’ve got talent. Nobody’s feeling sorry for themselves.”

“It’s the other way around, actually. We’ve just got to keep grinding; keep going. We’ll find it.”

Terry Francona impressed as his coach tree continues to grow

Peter Abraham and Alex Speier

Indians manager Terry Francona is on the American League coaching staff for the All-Star Game but doesn’t have any duties other than to watch the game and enjoy himself.

“That’s just the way I want it, too,” he said on Monday.

With Alex Cora managing the American League and Dave Roberts the National League, Francona has a deep sense of satisfaction. Both played for him during his tenure with the Red Sox, Roberts in 2004 and Cora from 2005-08.

“I’m very proud. Very proud,” Francona said. “Not just for their success, but how they handle themselves. They’re two of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. I’m happy for them.”

The Francona managerial tree is becoming a forest. Along with Cora and Roberts, Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash is a former player and coach under Francona, Phillies skipper Gabe Kapler played for him in Boston, and Mets manager Mickey Calloway was his pitching coach in Cleveland for five seasons.

“I’m glad Alex asked me to be here,” Francona said. “But their staff earned this. I got invited. I want to make sure that never gets lost. They have earned this, all of those guys. There’s a reason they’re running this game. I’m a spectator and that’s all I want to be.”

Francona, 60, has managed for 19 seasons and has 1,624 victories, 19th all-time and second to San Francisco’s Bruce Bochy (1,967) among active managers.

Only 10 managers have reached 2,000 victories and all are in the Hall of Fame.

Motivating Martinez?

J.D. Martinez will bat fifth for the AL in the lineup Cora unveiled. But Cora considered dropping him down.

All the way down.

“We were talking all week about hitting him ninth. That way he would have a chip on his shoulder the rest of the season,” Cora said. “But I couldn’t do that to him.”

Martinez, an All-Star for the third time, had heard the chatter.

“I told Alex to hit me wherever he wants to put me. I don’t care,” Martinez said. “He was joking around with me about it, hitting ninth. I said, ‘It’s going to be fun either way. I don’t care.’ ”

The All-Star Game is meaningful for Martinez, a 20th-round draft pick out of a Division 2 college who spent parts of three seasons in the majors with Houston before he was released in 2013 and took a minor league contract with Detroit.

He has since hit 189 home runs and had a .953 OPS with three teams.

“It’s humbling to be here,” said Martinez, a three-time All-Star. “It’s crazy, the roller-coaster ride I’ve been on in my career. To be here, it’s a blessing and I don’t take it for granted, for sure.”

With Cora opting to hit Martinez fifth, he put the Red Sox slugger in what he viewed as a strong position to make his mark with runners in front of him. Cora installed Astros outfielder George Springer in the first spot (“George has changed the concept of the leadoff hitter,” said Cora), backed in the two-hole by second baseman DJ LeMahieu, who is enjoying a huge first season (.336/.383/.518) with the Yankees after eight years in Colorado.

“He hits outside of Colorado and in Europe, too,” Cora joked after seeing LeMahieu pound his pitching staff in London.

Cora selected Astros ace Justin Verlander, 36, as his starting pitcher.

“He’s getting better, which sucks for us,” said Cora.

Dodgers lefty Hyun-Jin Ryu will start for the National League, becoming the first South Korean-born pitcher tabbed for the honor.

“That’s a big deal, not only for him, but his country,” said Roberts.

Help wanted

The All-Star break always serves as the unofficial starting line for the furious race to the July 31 trade deadline, made more furious this year by the fact that MLB will no longer permit trades involving players who clear waivers in August. Under president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski, the Red Sox have moved aggressively throughout the month of July, including a 2016 deal during the All-Star break that landed starter Drew Pomeranz for pitching prospect Anderson Espinoza.

On Monday, Ken Rosenthal of the Athletic reported that the Red Sox are “pushing to add a starting pitcher” and “would prefer to act sooner rather than later.” The report comes days after Dombrowski said that the performance of the rotation — expected to be “our strong suit” — had not been “what we expected or hoped.”

With the Sox preparing for a critical stretch after the All-Star break that will include two weeks of games in late July and early August against the Rays and Yankees, the desire to act soon has obvious basis. The team is exploring both the starter and bullpen markets — much as was the case in 2018, when the team was seemingly targeting relievers, but then moved to add starter Nate Eovaldi.

There’s plenty of room for upgrades in either area. Sox starters are 27-28 with a 4.70 ERA (18th in the majors), while the bullpen has a 4.44 ERA (15th) and 18 blown saves (2nd).

The absence of a fifth starter with Eovaldi on the injured list for two months has led to a carousel of failure, while rotation mainstays Chris Sale, Rick Porcello, and Eduardo Rodriguez have underperformed their track records.

He’s a Devers booster

In the opening days of the season, Xander Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 million extension that runs from 2020-25. In the middle of a monster season and in the prime of his career, the shortstop might have resulted in bids of more than \$200 million as a free agent after the 2019 season. Any regrets about the deal?

“I would do the same thing, yeah,” said Bogaerts. “Seeing [Rafael] Devers every day, [expletive], that’s something.”

The absence of Devers (.324/.377/.546 with 16 homers and 43 extra-base hits) from the All-Star Game remained a subject of befuddlement to the Red Sox.

“He’s been real big for us. I know he definitely deserved this. It sucks that he’s not here,” said Bogaerts. “Hopefully he has a lot more to go in his career.”

Boston roots

While all three Red Sox at the All-Star Game are position players (starting DH Martinez and reserves Mookie Betts and Bogaerts), the team has an equal number of pitchers who it drafted in Cleveland.

Astros reliever Ryan Pressly is likely to pitch the seventh inning Tuesday after forging a 1.36 ERA with 10.7 strikeouts per nine innings in 39 games. He was taken by the Red Sox in the 11th round of the 2007 draft, but while he showed rare mid- and upper-90s velocity in five minor league seasons with Boston, he struggled while throwing little except fastballs, and didn’t emerge as a dominant late-innings arm — leaning chiefly on two elite breaking balls that he didn’t throw when in the Sox system — until more than a decade later.

“When you look back at it from the very beginning to now, it has taken some twists and some turns,” said Pressly. “That was the most frustrating part for me, I didn’t know how to put it together. . . . Being a fastball-only pitcher with a changeup, to now with the new technology that’s come out to show pitches, how to use them, analytics, it’s definitely opened up a lot of doors for me.”

Padres closer Kirby Yates (1.15 ERA, 30 saves) was taken by the Red Sox out of Kauai High School in Hawaii in the 26th round in 2005. Yates said that he was a draft-and-follow (a now-defunct scouting process in which a team could take a player out of high school or junior college and follow him for up to a year at a junior college before signing him), but blew out his elbow at Yavapai College.

“There was never really a contract offer. . . . I thought if I had a good season, after that year, I would like to sign,” said Yates. “I was in contact with the scout the entire time when I was pitching through the fall, and unfortunately, I blew out my elbow and that was that.”

The third pitcher who was drafted by the Red Sox arrived at the All-Star Game in the most unexpected fashion. In 2005 — the same year that the Red Sox drafted Yates — they took lefthanded pitcher Charlie Blackmon in the 20th round out of Young Harris College. (The Marlins likewise had drafted Blackmon as a pitcher out of high school in 2004.)

Blackmon didn’t sign, transferred to Georgia Tech, moved to the outfield, and is now in his fourth All-Star Game for Colorado. He’s hitting .330/.378/.632 with 20 homers.

“At the time, I didn’t realize it, but it was a blessing in disguise that I was not a very good pitcher. Had I been just a little bit better, I might have put all my eggs in that basket and been a complete failure,” said Blackmon. “I’m sure I might have been successful in some other aspect, but it wouldn’t be on the baseball field, I don’t believe.”

Getting closer

Red Sox pitching prospect Jay Groome, who has not pitched in a game since undergoing Tommy John surgery in May 2018, is once again throwing off a mound in Fort Myers, with positive reports about the pitcher’s physical condition and stuff. Right now, he is on a track that could have him pitching in a game by late August, before the end of the minor league season.

“Everything is on track. He’s ready to go,” said Jeff Randazzo, Groome’s agent. “He’s anxious to get back, but every day he gets closer, he sees the light’s at the end of the tunnel. But his body is great, the bullpens have been great, the throwing program has been great. He’s excited.”

Song to stick?

Though the Red Sox officially signed fourth-round pick Noah Song out of Navy on Saturday and have assigned him to the Lowell Spinners to start his pro career, the team did so without any certainty that he will be able to defer the start of his military service, which is set to begin with flight school on Nov. 1. Though a presidential memo last month opened the possibility of military academy graduates deferring their military commitment in order to pursue pro sports careers, “nothing has really changed” with Song at this point, according to Red Sox VP of amateur scouting Mike Rikard.

“We’re focusing on the now,” said Rikard. “We are certainly well aware of his commitments and obligations. We’re going to watch him pitch this summer and continue to support him as he heads down his path. . . . We drafted a really talented guy who we think can be a really good starting pitcher, has tremendous work ethic and character. We’re taking this process step by step. We decided to select him, we signed him, and now we’re excited to see him pitch in Lowell.”

Next step

The Red Sox recalled righthander Tyler Thornburg from his rehab assignment, but he remains on the injured list. The team has two days to decide whether to activate him or seek his removal from the roster, either by outrighting him off the 40-man roster and sending him to the minors (based on service time, he’d have the right to refuse such an assignment while receiving the remainder of his salary if he does so) or designating him for assignment.

Thornburg had a 12.66 ERA with 13 strikeouts, nine walks, and five homers allowed in 10 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings in his minor league assignment with Triple A Pawtucket, though he finished with scoreless appearances in four of his final five rehab games. In 18 $\frac{2}{3}$ big league innings this year, he has a 7.71 ERA with 22 strikeouts, 10 walks, and four homers allowed.

One who got away

As he considered potential free agent destinations, Connecticut native Charlie Morton couldn’t help but contemplate a homecoming, at a time when the Red Sox had one starting rotation spot. That said, he didn’t expect the Red Sox to pursue him.

“I love New England. I really enjoy going to Fenway. I really respect that organization a lot. The guys who are there are a really good group and seem like really good people,” said Morton. “Surely, with what Nate [Eovaldi] did for that team, I didn’t expect the Red Sox [to be involved] in terms of payroll or rotation space. I fully expected them to go after Nate, for sure.”

That is precisely what happened. While the Red Sox did have internal dialogue about Morton as a possibility, they focused their early offseason efforts on seeing if they could bring back Eovaldi, which they did.

And so, at the same winter meetings where the Red Sox and Eovaldi announced their four-year, \$68 million deal, the Rays announced a two-year, \$30 million deal with Morton — whose residence is now on Florida’s Gulf Coast, about 45 minutes from Tropicana Field. Morton is 10-2 with an AL-leading 2.32 ERA.

“Things really worked out,” said Morton.

In the rumor mill

With trade rumors heating up, there are plenty of pitchers who represent candidates for improving the Red Sox and any number of other teams. For such pitchers who are All-Stars, the game thus serves as the starting point for weeks of questions about their futures.

“I think you hear them, but there’s nothing you can really do about it,” said Yates, whose Padres are teetering near .500. “You really have no control over it. I really just try to ignore it. I don’t really about it at all. I do know I like being a Padre and like being where I’m at.”

Lefthanded Giants closer Will Smith, who is virtually certain to be dealt given that he’s eligible for free agency after this year and on a last-place Giants team, understands that he almost surely will change residence by July 31.

“I’ve already been traded three times. This will be my fourth. I’ve been traded in the middle of the season, I’ve been traded in the offseason,” said Smith (1.98 ERA, 13.1 strikeouts per nine innings). “It doesn’t really affect me. There’s no way I can control it.”

*** *The Boston Herald***

Youth behind him, two-time All-Star Xander Bogaerts in prime

Tom Keegan

It no longer fits to say Xander Bogaerts is one of the best young shortstops in the game. The age qualifier isn’t necessary. At 26, he’s a two-time All-Star, has more than 3,200 career at-bats and is at the beginning of his prime. He’s made the transition from a player being led to one leading.

“It’s weird. It’s weird, but I really appreciate that challenge,” Bogaerts said. “That’s something that I have no problem with. As a young kid, coming up in this system, I know how hard it is, how hard you can be on yourself, to want to do so much to help the team win, and feeling like you’re the one who has to put the team on your back. It’s not always going to be the way it goes.”

Those memories are fresh enough that he easily can spot those feelings in younger teammates and that’s when he takes action.

“Making them understand that everything’s going to be all right,” he said of his new role. “It’s not always going to be the way it’s going to go. I just try to make them understand that everything is going to be all right and that you’re going to have ups and downs. It’s the big leagues.”

Injuries to second baseman Dustin Pedroia and first baseman Mitch Moreland have led the Red Sox to live with defensive inexperience in the infield at times.

“Sometimes I look around the field and I have (Rafael) Devers at third, (Michael) Chavis at first and Marco (Hernandez) at second, and I’m like, ‘Wow, I’m the older guy,’ ” Bogaerts said.

Bogaerts has been up to the challenge and his game is better than ever. If he can maintain his .919 OPS that would be a career high for him, and he’s making all the plays at shortstop, a few of the spectacular variety.

At the beginning of his sixth season as the Red Sox starting shortstop, Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 contract extension that starts next season. He can opt out after 2022, the third season of the extension. The deal shapes up as a sweet one for the Red Sox, given the way he has played this season, but Bogaerts said if he had it to do over again he would not do anything differently. He didn’t hesitate in answering the question, and quickly mentioned how much he likes the idea of playing alongside Devers for a long time.

“I think it probably played a positive part (of his strong first half),” Bogaerts said of signing the extension. “I don’t look at it as, ‘Oh, I wonder what I would have gotten.’ I’ve never thought of it that way. Once I signed I was determined to stay here and be a part of what we have going on. I think signing maybe rewarded me with a good season, being a bit more vocal, being a bit more of a leader type, because of the commitment of the organization toward me.

“I think maybe that has changed and has made me expect a lot more of myself and understand that there are a lot of guys, younger guys, who are looking up to me. I hope that I’m a good influence.”

Red Sox and American League All-Star manager Alex Cora consistently has praised Bogaerts this season for being just that. Bogaerts brings a positive attitude to work every day, so it’s no surprise he hasn’t let being a late addition to the American League roster taint the experience.

“If you make it at the beginning or the end, it’s still the same amount of excitement,” Bogaerts said. “Everyone should appreciate being here, appreciate the opportunity of getting invited to be here. These are all the best players.”

It’s another big moment he can share with his brother Jair, who is in town for the game. The twins signed with the Red Sox out of Aruba in 2009 at the age of 16.

“He always comes to these type of events, big events, small events, he’s always there,” Bogaerts said. “I’m very appreciative of him. We both played in the minor leagues, one made it, one didn’t, but it kind of feels like he still made it. We’re twins and I know he puts himself in my shoes sometimes. He’s very understanding of tough days.”

Bogaerts doesn’t have as many of those as most players. At the age of 22, he hit .320 in 2015 and was an All-Star in 2016. He’s a far more dangerous hitter now than the year he hit .320.

“I don’t think about it the same at all,” he said of his approach to hitting. “At the time I just remember seeing a big hole up the middle I was just wanted to hit a base hit up the middle. Now I don’t think now that even crosses my mind. Just try to drive a ball in the gap, especially when a guy is in scoring position, try to get him in. Runner on first, the only way he’s going to score is hit a ball in the gap or a ball that’s out. I think thinking a bit like that has changed a lot for me. The more at-bats you get the more you understand what they’re trying to do with you.”

And the more experience he gets, the more he can pass on to younger plays. He’s made the transition to leader in seamless fashion.

J.D. Martinez offers juice-free theory for home run explosion

Tom Keegan

Major League Baseball is on pace for 6,668 home runs, a number that would shred the record total of 6,105 from 2017, raising the question as to which factor is more responsible: a juiced baseball or juiced hitters?

Most concede the ball being used this season in the majors and Triple A, but not in lower levels of the minors, is harder and carries farther. As always, fewer are willing to talk about the possibility that an increasing number of

hitters are using banned substances. Testosterone, virtually undetectable because it leaves the body so rapidly, is the latest rage, according to some in the industry who aren't interested in going on the record.

Former major leaguer David Segui (1990-2004) told USA Today's Bob Nightengale: "I would say 60 percent of the guys today, easily, are doing stuff. It reminds me of our era when everybody talked about the balls being juiced. The balls weren't juiced, the players were juiced. Just like now ... the ball is hot, but come on, you think these home runs are just because of the balls?"

At the other end of the spectrum, Red Sox designated hitter J.D. Martinez, hitting fifth on American League manager Alex Cora's lineup card for Tuesday's All-Star Game at Progressive Field and joined on the roster by teammates Mookie Betts and Xander Bogaerts, offered his theory for increased home run totals and it had nothing to do with juiced hitters or baseballs.

"I have my own opinion on it," Martinez said. "I think hitters are more prepared than they've ever been. I think hitters have more of an idea of what they're going to do, with hitting the ball in the air more."

And pitchers enter the equation as well, Martinez said.

"It's a power-arm league," Martinez said. "It's either a walk or a strikeout. It's stuff over command, so I think you see a lot more mistakes over the plate and that, combined with the velocity and trying to hit balls in the air, it's a recipe for home runs."

Martinez has been around long enough to remember when the approach of the hitters and pitchers was different from now.

"In years past, it was more of a command and location and movement type stuff and more of a weak-contact league," he said. "Now it's everybody wants strikeouts. The Dodgers started doing it. Tampa started doing it. Houston started doing it. Everybody has had success and it's a monkey-see, monkey-do league. It's crazy. You look at a bullpen now vs. a bullpen back then and you feel like you face the same pitchers every team you play now. OK, this guy throws a four-seam (fastball) and a breaking ball. OK, great. Go to the next team, same thing, and same thing again."

Martinez said he thinks the home run pendulum will swing back.

"I think it comes in waves," he said. "Pitching evolves, hitting catches up. We're at that point where hitting caught up."

American League starting pitcher Justin Verlander, an outspoken critic of the harder baseball, said he too thinks such things go in cycles and eventually will come back in the direction of pitchers.

*** *MassLive.com***

Red Sox Futures Game: How have Boston's prospects fared after All-Star appearances?

Matt Vautour

Jarren Duran might be the next Jacoby Ellsbury or the next Che-Hsuan Lin. Duran, the Red Sox No. 9-ranked prospect, who currently plays outfield for the Portland Sea Dogs represented the Red Sox franchise in the MLB Futures Game Sunday.

While that's a pretty big honor for the prospect, who'd been largely anonymous before this year, it's no guarantee of success to come. Many players in the Futures Game don't end up having much of a future.

Here's a look at the Red Sox who have appeared in the game since in began back in 1999 at Fenway Park:

1999 and 2000

Tomo Ohka and Sun Woo Kim - The duo each represented the Red Sox on the Team World in both seasons. Ohka, one of the Red Sox first Japanese pitchers had a 10-year Major League career, but almost always in the back end of someone's pitching staff as he bounced around five franchises with a 51-68 career record.

Kim spent six years in Major League bullpens including two in Boston. The South Korea native was 13-13 with a 5.31 career ERA.

2001

Seung Jun Song and Luis Garcia - There are four Luis Garcias who have played in the Majors. This wasn't one of them. Song looked promising early in his minor league career. He was traded with Sun-Woo Kim for Cliff Floyd and never made the Majors.

2002

Jorge De La Rosa and Seung Song - De La Rosa pitched 15 years out of big league bullpens, but none of them in Boston. The Red Sox sent him to Arizona as part of the Curt Schilling deal.

2003

Kevin Youkilis and De La Rosa - Youkilis turned his Futures Game appearance into a solid nine-year career and two World Series rings.

2004

Juan Perez - He played 61 unremarkable MLB Games after being released by the Red Sox.

2005

Hanley Ramirez and Anibal Sanchez - Both Red Sox prospects lived up to their solid billing as professionals, but after they were traded to Florida for Josh Beckett and Mike Lowell.

2006

Edgar Martinez - No not that Edgar Martinez. This one pitched, but not well enough to ever reach the majors.

2007

Clay Buchholz and Jacoby Ellsbury - One of the Red Sox best pairings to be sure. Ellsbury turned out to be a star and while Buchholz never became the ace he was projected to be, he's had a solid career. Future Red Sox World Series MVP Steve Pearce was on the roster too, 11 years before joining Boston.

2008

Che-Hsuan Lin - His MLB future was nine games and three career hits.

2009

Casey Kelly and Junichi Tazawa - Kelly was the centerpiece of the Adrian Gonzalez trade and he never really panned out in the Majors. Tazawa had a solid career as a reliever for Boston and won a ring in 2013.

2010

Stolmy Pimentel - Pitched 33 MLB games, none in Boston

2011

Will Middlebrooks and Chih-Hsien Chiang - Middlebrooks has bounced around in the Majors and has been plagued by injuries. Chiang never reached higher than AAA traded for Erik Bedard shortly after the futures game.

2012

Matt Barnes and Xander Bogaerts - Both were key reasons the Red Sox won the World Series in 2018. Bogaerts is an All-Star this year.

2013

Garin Cecchini, Anthony Ranaudo and Bogaerts - Cecchini played 35 career games in Boston before getting released. He never reached the bigs again. Ranaudo, who was one viewed as a frontline starter, reached the Majors with unremarkable results and was traded for Robbie Ross.

2014

Sean Coyle and Henry Owens - With a name like his, Coyle should have been a star in Irish Boston, but he never reached the bigs. Owens, a Kelly Olynyk-lookalike, was the classic, AAAA player. Too good for Triple A, but a washout in the Majors. Mookie Betts was on the squad but called up to the Majors.

2015

Rafael Devers, Manuel Margot- Devers is flourishing in Boston and could have been an All-Star himself this year. Margot, who was traded for Craig Kimbrel, has been a regular in the Padres lineup, but has yet to hit consistently.

2016

Andrew Benintendi and Yoan Moncada - Benintendi looks entrenched in Boston's outfield for a decade and Moncada, who was traded for Chris Sale, has begun delivering on his prospect promise.

2017

Rafael Devers - Traded former Sox prospects Mauricio Dubon (Tyler Thornburg), Michael Kopech and Moncada (Sale) were also in this game.

2018

Bryan Mata - Mata is 4-2 with a 2.36 ERA for the Portland Sea Dogs.

Boston Red Sox's Xander Bogaerts not letting snub affect All-Star experience

Chris Cotillo

Xander Bogaerts doesn't care how he got to the All-Star Game. He's just glad to be here.

It took an injury to Angels infielder Tommy La Stella for Bogaerts to be named a late addition to the American League squad after the Red Sox shortstop didn't make the original roster. He was considered one of the most egregious snubs in all of baseball before being added to the roster last week.

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

Bogaerts made the All-Star team in 2016 and had a strong case last season despite not making it. He's enjoying the festivities alongside teammates Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez, manager Alex Cora and Boston's entire coaching staff.

"It has been nice," Bogaerts said. "Being around here with my family and teammates. Playing for the coaching staff that has been with me these last couple years, that makes it more special. On a daily basis, we see them and it's easier to interact with them because we know them so well."

Bogaerts, a former top prospect, said he would have predicted he make one or two All-Star Games in his first six seasons if he was asked before his career. At 26, he could easily rack up a handful of All-Star appearances before the end of his career.

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

Terry Francona, ex-Boston Red Sox manager, on Alex Cora's All-Star coaching staff: 'I'm going to enjoy and stay the heck out of the way'

Chris Cotillo

The All-Star Game will be a unique experience for former Red Sox manager Terry Francona, as it will be his first time serving as a coach under one of his former players.

Francona, who has managed the Indians since 2013, is on Sox manager Alex Cora's staff this week alongside Boston's regular group of coaches. The 60-year-old, who managed the American League in 2005 and 2008, is planning on sitting back and enjoying the festivities instead of actively participating.

"I don't want duties," Francona said. "Out of respect to their staff... they earned this. I got invited. I want to make sure that never gets lost because they have earned this."

Cora invited Francona, his former manager in Boston from 2005 to 2008, to join his All-Star staff last month. Francona didn't hesitate in accepting.

"I'm an invited guest," Francona said. "I'm honored but I want to make sure they get the due they deserve. It's not easy to win. I'm going to step back and enjoy and stay the heck out of the way."

Francona has had a front row seat to watch Cora manage before, as the Sox and Indians have played 10 times since Cora took over at the beginning of last season. Francona isn't expecting to glean any competitive advantage from sitting in the same dugout as Cora Tuesday night.

"It's not like I'm going to learn his bunt plays (Tuesday)," Francona said. "I'm more just proud for him-- not just for his accomplishments, but more how he carries himself. Same thing with (N.L. manager) Dave (Roberts). They're two of the nicer guys you're ever going to meet. That's what I take from it."

Both Cora and Roberts (who has won two straight N.L. pennants with the Dodgers) played for Francona and Boston and cite him as a mentor. Cora and Roberts are two of six current managers who played for Francona in Boston.

"You hope as a manager or coach that you help guys," Francona said. "At the time, you're not trying to help somebody become a manager. You're trying to win the game that night. But if (I did help), of course (I'm proud)."

J.D. Martinez, Red Sox slugger weighing opt-out decision: 'If I did opt out, it wouldn't be a personal thing'

Chris Cotillo

In just over three months, J.D. Martinez will make a career-altering decision. The Red Sox slugger, who will start at designated hitter for the American League in Tuesday's All-Star Game, will have the ability to opt out of his contract and enter the free-agent market.

Martinez is not close to making a decision, he said Monday, and hasn't even gotten to the point where he's discussing the opt-out with his agent, Scott Boras. But it's clear the soon-to-be 32-year-old would have no problem with remaining in Boston past this season.

"100%," Martinez said when asked if he wanted to play the rest of his career in Boston. "Boston has been my favorite team since I was a kid. I've always dreamt of being there. I've loved the family side, the way they treat their players and the way they act. It's a first-class organization and obviously I'd like to be a part of it for the rest of my career. But that's not really up to me, in a sense."

Martinez will lean heavily on Boras, who negotiated a 5-year, \$110 million contract with the Red Sox that includes opt-outs after each of the next three seasons. The options are simple this fall: Martinez will either opt into a \$23.75 million salary for 2020 and retain his opt-out after the 2020 season or hit free agency and take a \$2.5 million buyout.

Martinez has repeatedly stated he's open to a long-term extension with the Red Sox that removes the opt outs, but president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski has been hesitant to engage. Speaking at the GM meetings in November, Dombrowski cited Martinez's complicated 2020 and 2021 opt-outs (related to a Lisfranc foot injury he had previously suffered) as the reason the Red Sox were unwilling to make a firmer commitment.

"The reason we put them in there was medically oriented, as we went through at the time," Dombrowski said then. "There was concern, so that's why they were in there."

Martinez's contract, which was revised after he underwent his physical to finalize the deal, provides the Sox with some insurance in case Martinez's foot injury recurs. If Martinez misses a certain amount of time (60 straight days in 2020 or 120 between 2019 and 2020), his 2020 opt-out becomes a mutual option. The same goes for the 2021 opt-out if his foot is injured in 2021.

Martinez said he has not dealt with any foot issues since joining the Red Sox. He was shocked the physical caused the sides to rework the deal last spring.

"I was very confused," Martinez said. "I was going to the top doctors in the league and they were all telling me the same thing, that I was going to be fine and that it was in my past already."

Though Martinez has avoided the injured list over the last two seasons, the concern over his foot was clearly enough for Dombrowski to avoid engaging on an extension last winter. Martinez said he's not disappointed about the lack of discussions.

"I understand it," Martinez said. "It's a business. I'll never hold it against anybody or anything like that. I've been through it too many times. If I did opt out, it wouldn't be a personal thing. It would be a business thing. Same thing on their end so there's an understanding on that."

Both sides benefit from different aspects of the complicated contract. Martinez has the ability to cash in on a new free-agent deal if he chooses and the Red Sox are protected in case Martinez's foot becomes a problem.

Told of Dombrowski's comments in November, Boras said he negotiated the contract in a way that ensures Martinez has all the power regarding his future.

"The club guaranteed J.D. \$110 million," Boras said. "That's all I know. They guaranteed him \$110. If J.D. does not opt out, they have to pay him \$110 million. He can shorten that contract if he so desires. That's how I view the contract and that's what the language says."

The opt-out after this season is totally unrelated to the foot injury and will depend on if Martinez and Boras think they can find a better deal elsewhere. One factor that could come into play is the expansion of the DH rule, as

Martinez could find himself with a more robust market if the DH is implemented in the National League in the coming years.

"I think that's going to make a major impact and have a major role, what's going to happen with that and my decision," Martinez said.

The DH rule will be one of many factors Martinez and Boras will weigh in the coming months as they make a decision that will have major implications on Boston's lineup for years to come.

Red Sox trade rumors 2019: Mets' Zack Wheeler is Boston target (report)

Matt Vautour

The Red Sox are involved in early trade discussions for New York Mets right hander Zack Wheeler according to the New York Post's Joel Sherman.

The plan to move Nathan Eovaldi to the bullpen when he comes off the injured list leaves Boston needing a starter for the stretch run. Wheeler is 6-6 with a 4.69 ERA in 119.0 innings.

At 40-50, the Mets figure to be sellers before the July 31st trade deadline. The Mets will be familiar with the Red Sox available prospects because assistant general manager for scouting and player development Allard Baird and Jared Banner, the vice president of player personnel, both worked for the Red Sox a year ago.

Wheeler, 29, will be a free agent after the season. Sherman said Boston isn't the only team the Mets are discussing Wheeler with.

At 49-41, the Red Sox are in third place, nine games out of first place in the American League East and two games out of the second wild card spot.

Justin Verlander accuses MLB of juicing balls; Red Sox DH Martinez points to hitters' approach (report)

Matt Vautour

Balls are leaving ballparks at a record pace. Justin Verlander says it's not coincidental.

The Houston Astros ace who'll start the All-Star Game for the American League, Tuesday, told ESPN's Jeff Passan that the balls are juiced.

"It's a f---ing joke," Verlander said. "Major League Baseball's turning this game into a joke. They own Rawlings (which makes the balls), and you've got Manfred up here saying it might be the way they center the pill. They own the f---ing company. If any other \$40 billion company bought out a \$400 million company and the product changed dramatically, it's not a guess as to what happened. We all know what happened. (Commissioner Rob) Manfred the first time he came in, what'd he say? He said we want more offense. All of a sudden he comes in, the balls are juiced? It's not coincidence. We're not idiots."

Major League Baseball is on pace for 6,668 home runs, well ahead of 2017's record of 6,105.

Verlander pointed to altered Home Run Derby balls as proof the league knows how to adjust balls. "They've been using juiced balls in the Home Run Derby forever. They know how to do it. It's not coincidence. I find it really hard to believe that Major League Baseball owns Rawlings and just coincidentally the balls become juiced."

Manfred isn't denying the balls are altered but suggested it wasn't intentional

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

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

Red Sox designated hitter J.D. Martinez thinks it's a change in approach:

"It's a power-arm league," Martinez said. "It's either a walk or a strikeout -- stuff over command. I think you see a lot more mistakes over the plate. The velocity, the guys trying to hit the ball in the air -- I think it's a recipe for home runs."

USA Today's Bob Nightengale suggested something a little more sinister.

"But what if there is more to it? What if it's as though we've gone back to the 1990s, and we're being naive? What if doping is back in a big way?"

Tyler Thornburg recalled from rehab assignment; Boston Red Sox have two days to decide on future

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox recalled right-hander Tyler Thornburg from his rehab assignment Monday, the team announced. Thornburg remains on the injured list with a right hip impingement.

The Sox now have two days to either activate Thornburg or part ways with him, either by designating him for assignment or outrighting him off the 40-man roster, according to Alex Speier of the Boston Globe. It appears more likely the team will look to cut ties.

Thornburg has been on the injured list since May 24 with the hip issue and has been rehabbing with AAA Pawtucket since June 9. He posted a 12.66 ERA in 12 appearances during his 30-day stint in the minors, allowing 15 earned runs on 17 hits in 10 2/3 innings.

The Red Sox can't keep Thornburg in the minors without exposing him to waivers at this point, so it appears they'll see if he clears waivers in hopes of keeping him in the organization. Boston could also theoretically work out a trade over the next 48 hours.

Thornburg, who was acquired from the Brewers in Dec. 2016, missed a year and a half due to injury before returning last July. He has made 41 appearances for the Red Sox over the last two seasons, posting a 6.54 ERA in 42 2/3 innings.

*** *RedSox.com***

Bogaerts' All-Star spot more than earned

Ian Browne

Xander Bogaerts could have spent the All-Star break basking in the sun in his native Aruba, and he almost did.

But that wouldn't have been right, considering that Bogaerts has been the most consistent and productive player for the defending World Series champion Red Sox this season.

Bogaerts wound up punching his ticket to Cleveland as an injury replacement to Hunter Pence, and that allowed him to bask in some well-deserved spotlight during Monday's All-Star media day rather than that sun in Aruba.

This is Bogaerts' second All-Star appearance. He was the starting American League shortstop in 2016.

"I'm very thankful for this one, obviously," Bogaerts said. "It's a great reward, each and every one. I don't care if it's your first, fifth or 10th. They all are special in their own ways. I think every player that plays this game would want to be recognized with something like this."

Bogaerts was joined by Red Sox teammates Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez, who were also selected as reserves. However, Martinez will start as the DH and bat fifth, filling Pence's spot in the starting lineup. Red Sox manager Alex Cora is the skipper for the AL, and he was pleased to once again be able to write Martinez's name in the lineup.

"J.D. Martinez, he was one of the best hitters last year. A guy that everybody knows his story. He's been amazing," said Cora on Monday while announcing Martinez as his No. 5 hitter.

While Betts and Martinez were the central figures for the Red Sox last season, Bogaerts was the third driving force that helped the team achieve a franchise record 108 wins.

"He definitely was the other bat in the lineup that helped us go," Betts said. "J.D. and I, we weren't hitting every day. When we didn't, he did. It's one of those things where it's great having him in our lineup for sure."

The 2019 All-Star Game will be played tonight at Progressive Field in Cleveland. It will be televised nationally by FOX Sports; in Canada by Rogers Sportsnet and RDS; and worldwide by partners in more than 180 countries. FOX Deportes will provide Spanish-language coverage in the United States, while ESPN Radio and ESPN Radio Deportes will provide exclusive national radio coverage. MLB Network, MLB.com and SiriusXM also will provide comprehensive All-Star Week coverage.

This season, Bogaerts has been even better. His slash line of .294/.384/.535 (.919 OPS) are the best top-to-bottom numbers of his career. His 3.7 wins above replacement ranks top among shortstops, third in the AL and sixth in the entire league, per FanGraphs.

"Huge. He's been huge," Martinez said of Bogaerts. "I'm really pumped to see him here. He's been a huge part of our lineup all season. He's having a great season, so I'm happy for him that he got in the game."

The name "Bogaerts" is all over the leaderboard. He ranks in top 10 in the AL for doubles (tied for first, 29), runs scored (fourth, 67), hits (ninth, 98), RBIs (third, 65), walks (sixth, 50), on-base percentage (sixth), slugging (seventh) and OPS (fifth). He is the Red Sox's leader in both doubles and RBIs, and his 17 homers are the most first-half long balls for a Boston shortstop since Rico Petrocelli hit 25 in 1969.

As much as Bogaerts had led on the field, he's done every bit as much in the clubhouse.

Put simply, during a year that Bogaerts signed a six-year, \$120 million contract extension, he's showing signs that the prime of his career is starting to take form, and he was well worth it.

"We made a big commitment with him to keep him here for six, seven years. It looks really good," Cora said. "I think offensively, he bought into the concept last year instead of trying to hit .330, hitting line drives the other way, just to look for pitches in the middle of the zone and do some damage. And now all of a sudden, he's hitting almost .300, driving the ball."

Bogaerts plans on savoring these next couple of days just as much as his first go-around in 2016.

"I think each year is individual," he said. "Everyone should appreciate being here, appreciate the opportunity to be invited and get to be here. These are all the best players. It's a fun time, man. We should definitely enjoy it."

For Betts -- last year's All-Star MVP for the AL -- this is his fourth consecutive trip to the All-Star Game. The right fielder got hot before the All-Star break, improving his slash line to .272/.392/.467 (.859 OPS) and extending his league lead in runs scored (77), aided by crossing the plate six times and notching seven base knocks in the Detroit series before the break. Those numbers are still a far cry from his .346/.438/.640 (1.078 OPS) AL MVP Award-winning season in 2018, which Betts has no problem admitting.

When it comes to what the Red Sox -- who are currently in third place in the AL East -- need to do better after the break, Betts started with himself.

"I have to play well. I think it's one of those things I have to take ownership of and play better, and I think set a better example of where we want to go, and that will show the other guys where we need to go," he said.

Though Martinez's power has dipped from where it was in the second half of 2017 and all of last season, he is still having a strong season that includes a line of .304/.376/.541 (.918 OPS) along with a team-leading 18 homers.

While Martinez recently acknowledged the first half has been a grind, he is ready to embrace his third All-Star experience.

"It's awesome. It's a cool experience," he said. "It's a great experience to be around all the guys, all the commotion, there's fans everywhere. There's so many cool things going on. It's a cool atmosphere."

* **WEEI.com**

J.D. Martinez talks approach toward opt-out

Rob Bradford

Within a 45-minute meeting the media one day before this year's MLB All-Star Game the topic made up approximately three minutes. Nonetheless, J.D. Martinez discussing how he is viewing his contract status at the conclusion of the 2019 season was one of the more noteworthy subjects the Red Sox designated hitter/outfielder touched on.

Martinez has the ability to opt-out of his contract following this season or after 2020. If he chooses to decline the option after this year the 32-year-old will make \$23.75 million in '20, with the number dropping to \$19.375 million in the fourth and fifth years of the deal if no opt-outs are exercised.

"For me, I just listen to him. That's what I pay him for," Martinez said, referencing his agent Scott Boras. "He gives me his opinion, he gives me his advice and it's up to me after that to make my decision. We're really not there yet, where he's given me his opinion and his advice. So I think we have to see how it plays out."

Martinez and Boras both confirmed just prior to the start of the regular season that the Red Sox hadn't approached the slugger about any sort of re-working of the current contract. And while Martinez told WEEI.com in March that he might be open to talks during the season, he isn't obsessing over the team's approach thus far.

"I understand it. It's a business," he said. "I don't ever hold it against anybody or anything like that. I've been through it too many times. That's why if it did come out where I did opt-out it wouldn't be a personal thing. It's a business thing. Same thing on their end. There's an understanding in that."

As for the impetus for the contract's unique language, there were multiple motivations.

For the team's perspective, both the 2021 and 2022 seasons can become mutual options if there are complications involving the Lisfranc injury or another ailment to his right foot. It is a clause that baffled Martinez at the time of its implementation and hasn't given him a second thought since signing the deal.

"That's their doctor. The team's doctor that is looking out for the team and stuff like that," he explained. "Obviously, we have a lot of other doctors that are saying it will never be a concern again and knock on wood it hasn't been. ... I was very confused because I was going to the top doctors around the league and they were all telling me the same thing I was going to be fine that it was in my past already."

And the opt-outs?

"I think that was more Scott's way of protecting me, getting me back in the open market to try and get the years we felt like we deserved," Martinez said. "I think that was more the strategic move on that part."

Through it all, Martinez makes it clear that his preference -- if his perceived market value is met -- will be to remain in Boston

"Boston has been my favorite team since I was a kid and I've always dreamt of being there," he noted. "I love the family side of it and the way they treat their parents and the way they act. It's just a first-class organization and obviously, I would like to be part of it for the rest of my career but that's not up to me really, in a sense."

Martinez is serving as the American League's starting designated hitter in Tuesday night's All-Star Game, hitting fifth.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Are different contract approaches the reason for Xander Bogaerts and Mookie Betts' different seasons?

John Tomase

Only about 10 feet separated Mookie Betts and Xander Bogaerts at their respective podiums during Monday's All-Star media day, but they felt worlds apart.

Seated at adjoining daises in the Cleveland Convention Center, the Red Sox teammates answered very different questions.

Bogaerts looked happy, relaxed, and content as he discussed his monster first half, which included a league-leading 29 doubles as well as 65 RBIs, just two behind AL leader Mike Trout. He discussed his burgeoning leadership responsibilities and the pride he takes in the development of potential stars like Rafael Devers.

Betts, meanwhile, maintained the distance that has marked his personality since he arrived at spring training as the defending MVP and began politely declining interview requests by the barrel. Betts will never be confused for an extrovert, but when he's going well, the joy with which he plays the game and carries himself is infectious. This year, that joy rarely reveals itself. He looks weary.

"I've got to be the energizer and I take pride in that, so I have to find a way to get it done," Betts admitted.

Red Sox hoping to acquire a starting pitcher

He fielded queries about his struggles during a half that didn't remotely approach last year's breakout, when he legitimately outplayed the great Trout en route to collecting the MVP hardware.

As Betts and Bogaerts spoke, one issue seemed to bridge the disconnect between their demeanors: their respective contracts.

Bogaerts just signed a six-year, \$120 million extension that already looks like a massive bargain as he produces like an MVP candidate. Betts, meanwhile, reiterated that he won't negotiate during the season while acknowledging that his contract is on his mind. He settled in arbitration for \$20 million and won't become a free agent until the end of next season.

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

The two are case studies in the risk-reward calculation of waiting vs. acting, of maximizing earnings vs. accepting security.

Bogaerts, for instance, believes the stability provided by his deal has contributed to his sterling .294-17-65 season. And if it means he left some money on the table, so be it.

"I think it has probably played a positive part," he said. "I don't look at it like, 'Oh, I wonder what I could've gotten?' Once I signed, I was determined to stay here and be a part of this that we have going on. Signing it maybe rewarded me with a good season, being a bit more vocal, a bit more of a leader type, because of the commitment that team and the organization did towards me. I think that has changed and made me expect a lot more of myself, and understand there are a lot of younger guys looking up to me."

Betts, meanwhile, wasn't about to blame his contract for his relatively down numbers. He's hitting .272 with 13 home runs, 40 RBIs, and an .859 OPS, and he's still playing Gold Glove defense. But he entered last year's break hitting .359 with 23 homers, 51 RBIs, and a 1.139 OPS, well on his way to a batting title and 30-30 season.

"There's no talk," he said of contract negotiations. "Once the season starts, there's no more of that talk. I'm just focused on the rest of the year."

While Bogaerts has stepped into a leadership role, whether it's palling around with Devers or serving as a spokesman following tough losses, Betts has devoted most of his energy to extricating himself from what's a slump by his standards but would be pretty good by anyone else's. He fills the spokesman's role, too, but far more reluctantly.

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

And that brings us to a nine-figure question: would Betts change a thing? He has set records in arbitration while maintaining that he will play out his contract before hitting free agency just a couple of weeks after his 28th birthday. With another MVP performance, he'd have a chance to earn the largest contract in history, surpassing the \$330 million deal Bryce Harper signed with Philadelphia this February.

Betts has earned the right not to leave a single cent on the table, and signing now would almost assuredly preclude that from happening, even if the Red Sox offered him a \$300 million extension. He need only look at Bogaerts to see what can happen when a player chooses security.

Super-agent Scott Boras expressed no regret over fulfilling the wishes of his client.

"Obviously he's very comfortable and playing at a high level. He's an All-Star," Boras said. "A product of that was Xander knowing where he wanted to play and what he wanted to do. My job is, you certainly want optimization economically, but the real job is you want to get the player to play optimally and do well. . . . From a player perspective, I think Xander Bogaerts is one happy guy."

Happy is not a word that applies to Betts at the moment. He's by no means a malcontent or malign influence -- he has always been a pleasant, grounded guy -- but he's certainly not happy.

It's fair to wonder how much his contract has to do with it.

Reviewing Red Sox at All-Star break while taking a glimpse into their future

John Tomase

When viewing the wild card standings, the number that matters isn't games back, but teams back.

Right now the Boston Red Sox only trail by two games, but with three teams ahead of them: the A's (50-41), Indians (50-38), and Rays (52-39). They're a game ahead of the Rangers.

As the second half wears on, it becomes difficult to pass multiple clubs, even if they're only separated by a handful of games. Somebody is winning every night, and the opportunities to gain ground on the crowd are minimal.

The good news is there is ABSOLUTELY NO REASON the Red Sox can't claim the wild card. Tampa is just 11-15 since taking three of four from the Red Sox in early June and is sagging under the weight of Tyler Glasnow's absence and Blake Snell's ineffectiveness (4.70 ERA). All-Star Charlie Morton is on pace for the first 175-inning season of his career at age 35, which doesn't seem sustainable. Tampa is vulnerable.

The Indians are without ace Corey Kluber and just announced that talented right-hander Carlos Carrasco is undergoing treatment for leukemia. They own one of the worst offenses in the game, especially with former MVP candidate Jose Ramirez hitting just .217, but have won six straight and are 24-12 since taking two of three from the Red Sox in May.

The A's lost ace Frankie Montas to an 80-game PED suspension, and are still without left-hander Sean Manaea, who is hoping to return in August from labrum surgery on his left shoulder. They're doing it with duct tape and gum, and at some point that's going to give.

Red Sox set rotation for Dodgers series after All-Star break

The Red Sox, meanwhile, are getting All-Star-caliber performances from shortstop Xander Bogaerts and dynamic third baseman Rafael Devers, as well as slugging catcher Christian Vazquez (!?!), DH J.D. Martinez, and yes, even defending MVP Mookie Betts, who very quietly hit .435 on the final road trip of the half.

Their bullpen remains a mess, and they're not getting much from their starting rotation, but if you're telling me the hopes of the postseason rest on the shoulders of Chris Sale, David Price, and Rick Porcello, I'd actually feel pretty good about that, even though Sale and Porcello have underperformed considerably.

"We're a lot better than this," manager Alex Cora told reporters in Detroit following Sunday's 6-3 victory. "We are. We need to get better. We need to get better. There's a few things here that, although we finished strong and all that, they know it. They know it as a group. We have to be ready for Friday, and then we play 34 in 34 days after that, and we start with the Dodgers right away. It should be fun over the weekend. But I think we can be a lot better than this." . . .

Speaking of Vazquez, holy cow. He smashed his 14th home run on Sunday and hits the break batting .299 with an .852 OPS. This is someone who entered the season with 10 lifetime homers and a lifetime batting average of .266 in the minor leagues.

But the undersized catcher has exhibited power to all fields, with prodigious shots to center and right. For all the talk of Devers' All-Star snub, Vazquez had a compelling case to make, too.

"I want to win," Vazquez told reporters in Detroit. "I'm trying to help the team win. We're playing better, that's the goal, no matter the result, I like wins." . . .

We should have a good idea of where the Red Sox stand by mid-August. They open the second half with a brutal schedule that includes the 34 games in 34 days that Cora mentioned. There's one off day, but it's counterbalanced by a doubleheader in New York.

Those 34 games won't be easy. Ten games come against the Blue Jays, Orioles, and Royals. Three will be against MVP favorite Mike Trout and the Angels, who are hanging around the periphery of the wild card chase. The other 21 will be against the iron -- the Dodgers, Yankees, Rays, and Indians.

Survive that gauntlet, and we can talk.

*** *BostonSportsJournal.com***

Red Sox First-half Report Card – Much improvement needed

Sean McAdam

POSITION PLAYERS

Mitch Moreland: Moreland has been sidelined long enough to almost make it easy to forget how much he contributed over the first two months. He singlehandedly won a few games in the early going and delivered run production if not much in the way of batting average and was leading the team in homers when he was placed on the IL with a calf strain. B

Steve Pearce: The start of his season was delayed by one injury and the last few weeks have been interrupted by back issues. In between, Pearce was a massive disappointment, delivering just five extra-base hits in 99 plate appearances and a .503 OPS. His .300 slugging percent against LHP is mystifying. F

Michael Chavis: One of few pleasant surprises of the first half, Chavis emerged (almost) out of nowhere and proved invaluable at second when injuries struck, then moved to first when both Moreland and Pearce were laid up. He's been streaky and susceptible to good fastballs up in the zone, but he also has emerged as a legitimate ROY candidate and has played better than expected at two positions — neither of which he had played much. A-

Brock Holt: In his absence — first from an eye injury, then a shoulder problem — his value was never more obvious. When he finally rejoined the active roster after missing almost two months, he immediately provided a spark. His production has leveled off some since then and he's not driving the ball much (.406 slugging). But there's no denying his versatility and the energy he brings. B

Eduardo Nunez: Nunez vowed that he was finally healthy this spring and that's evident in his range in the field and speed. But it hasn't translated to better production. Nunez has been pretty much a non-factor in the first half. D

Xander Bogaerts: Maybe it was the security that his extension, finalized in the first week of the season, brought him. Or maybe it's just the natural progression for a player just now coming into his prime. But he's been not only the most consistent player in the first half, but very likely the most valuable. A

Rafael Devers: Watching Devers now, it's hard to imagine how little he contributes in the first month. He had no homers in the first 32 games and a paltry three RBI in the first 24. But as if making up for lost time, he's been the Red Sox best hitter since early May. And his defense, once a liability, has improved markedly since then. A-

Marco Hernandez: If you're looking for a feel-good story on this year's team, here it is. Hernandez has battled back from three shoulder procedures to make good on his promise as a quality offensive infielder. He's had two of the most memorable homers of the season off the bench. A-

Christian Vazquez: Credit should go to Vazquez for the huge leaps in his offensively game. He's hit more homers this year than in his previous four seasons combined and his .299/.332/.520 speaks his offensive growth. And he still throws well, too, nabbing 37 percent of base stealers. But it's impossible to ignore the falloff in his receiving, his lack of focus at times and the whispers about his game-calling. B

Sandy Leon: Designated for assignment on the eve of the opener only to be summoned weeks later when the pitching staff was going off the rails, Leon has delivered his usual stellar play behind the plate, a master of blocking pitches in the dirt and guiding pitchers through rough spots. But the offense, while marginally better than a year ago, is still virtually non-existent. D

J.D. Martinez: Martinez turned in a very good — but not great — first half. Perhaps it's unfair to expect him to repeat — or even approximate — his 2018 season, but there's been a drop-off. His .226 average in late-and-close situations speaks to that. B+

Andrew Benintendi: Benintendi has been enigmatic in the first half. He failed to take to the leadoff spot, forcing Alex Cora to revert to last year's lineup configuration. He wasn't much better in the No 2 spot, and hasn't driven the ball to left the way he did at times in the past. C-

Jackie Bradley Jr. Where have we seen this before — a horrendous start, followed by a hellacious streak at the plate. The hope was that the inconsistency would be a thing of the past, but it didn't work out that way. Throughout, there have been the requisite number of jaw-dropping plays, though some occasional sloppiness has been evident, too. C-

Mookie Betts: No single player has more typified the first-half disappointment of the team than Betts. Yes, he gets on base, scores runs and plays a peerless right field. But where's the thunder? The impact? For answers start with the impossible-to-explain .216/.337/.307 slash line against LHP. B

INC: Blake Swihart, Dustin Pedroia, Sam Travis, Tzu-Wei Lin.

PITCHERS

Chris Sale: If Betts is the poster child for underperformance among position players for the first half, then Sale represents the starting rotation in the same manner. Sure, he got cheated out of some wins and has shown flashes of dominance. But the walks up, and so are the homers and WHIP. He's not hurt; he's just having an off-year (so far). C

David Price: Other than one stinker against Texas, Price has been the model of consistency. Easily the most dependable starter this season, it does seem as though his bust-out postseason has freed him and enabled him to pitch with more assuredness and confidence. B+

Rick Porcello: As ever, competitive and accountable and capable of big outings but with nowhere near the consistency the Sox had hoped for. Is his uncertain future weighing on him? Whatever the reason, his last three starts before the break weren't competitive; maybe the break will do wonders. D+

Eduardo Rodriguez: He's been, to the surprise of many, the second-most consistent starter and on a number of occasions, has answered the bell when the Sox have needed deeper outings following bullpen-heavy games. He's done less nibbling this year than in the past, but the ERA (.465) and WHIP (1.344) are what they are. Please, no more "just-wait-this-is-the-year" talk. C

Hector Velazquez: His season has been interrupted a few times with injury. He's been just OK in relief, and a major failure stepping into the rotation. F

Colten Brewer: The Red Sox treated Brewer's acquisition from San Diego as their stealth pickup of the off-season, but he hasn't shown much. It's hard to be a successful major league reliever with a 5.9 walk-per-nine-inning rate. D+

Brandon Workman: On the one hand, he's limited hitters to a microscopic .107 batting average and given up one homer to the 162 batters faced. On the other hand, he's walked an average of 6.2 batters per nine. The best performing reliever this season, which, admittedly, is the official definition of "damning with faint praise." B+

Heath Hembree: Hembree started slowly, then turned it on in May and early June before going on IL with a forearm injury. You get the sense that the Sox will lean heavily in the second half. Is he up for the responsibility? B

Matt Barnes: He actually pitched pretty well in April and May as the Red Sox were trying to figure out this remade bullpen arrangement, but the workload got to him in June when he face-planted (9.69 ERA; 2.00 WHIP; .816 OPS). He's been better since London and that will need to continue if the Sox are going to do anything in the second half. C-

Marcus Walden: For a time, he was the feel-good story in the bullpen, showing evidence that he was going to be this year's Ryan Brasier. But then came the reckoning and he's been perfectly mediocre for the last month. Which way does he go from here? C+

Ryan Brasier: Brasier's spring training was limited by injuries and he didn't seem ready at the start of the season. He's been streaky as can be and has yet to fully demonstrate that last year's magical half-season wasn't a fluke. C

Tyler Thornburg: Give Thornburg credit for continuing to try to work back from the surgery he underwent in 2017, but he stands as a cautionary tale: unlike, say, Tommy John surgery, this is one more example that there are no guarantees after undergoing thoracic outlet surgery. F

INC: Brian Johnson; Ryan Weber; Josh Smith; Josh Taylor; Mike Shawaryn; Darwinzon Hernandez; Travis Lakins; Steven Wright; Bobby Poyner; Trevor Kelley; Erasmo Ramirez

BRAIN TRUST

Alex Cora: Cora must be held responsible for the poor performance of the rotation in the first month of the season after his spring training plan backfired. Also, he made the wrong call on the catchers at the start of the year and his idea to flip Mookie Betts and Andrew Benintendi in the batting order backfired. On the positive side, he's done his best to provide a steady leadership hand and avoid a sense of panic. He survived the first real challenge in his managerial career; now the question becomes: can he do enough to help the team overcome an underachieving first half? C

Dave Dombrowski: Dombrowski's biggest test will come between now and the end of the month as he attempts to address his club's pitching needs, so assigning him a grade now seems premature. But if he's to be assessed back on his off-season, well, he did next-to-nothing to replace the innings of Craig Kimbrel and Joe Kelly and failed to procure adequate starting pitching depth. And that Eovaldi contract, early as it might be, is not looking good. D-

* *The Athletic*

Red Sox know Rafael Devers is a budding star, even if MLB won't officially tag him as one

Chad Jennings

For the past two weeks, Xander Bogaerts has watched his protege from a new perspective. Two years ago, Bogaerts had a unique ability to relate when Rafael Devers came up from the minors. Bogaerts, too, was brought to the big leagues at 20 years old, asked immediately to contribute to a championship-caliber team. He had to learn and grow and stumble within the lights and shadows of Fenway Park, quietly playing his part until it was his turn to lead.

Devers hasn't reached that final stage just yet, but it's coming.

Still just 22, Devers carries pressure and excitement for all to see. He smiles when he jogs on and off the field. He curses when he swings and misses. He grimaces when he mishandles a ground ball. His joy, frustration and disappointment require no words. They're right there in his face. Bogaerts has found honesty and clarity even in Devers' breathing.

Now that Bogaerts is hitting behind Devers in the Red Sox lineup, he has watched from the on-deck circle as Devers takes deep, steady breaths between pitches. When he chases a slider off the plate or fouls off a fastball down the middle, he reacts, then stops and collects himself. It's not hard to guess what he's thinking.

"That breathing thing he has going on, that's really a place he goes to when he needs to chill and relax and focus back," Bogaerts said. "It's all in a good way. It's always with him. It's not like he's doing it to the pitcher or bat-flipping the pitcher. No. Everything is for himself. It's that focus for him to be prepared for the next pitch."

This season, Devers has been ready. By almost any measure, he's been one of the 10 best players in the American League. He's up there in batting average and RBIs, in OPS and WAR. Even his fielding has taken a remarkable step forward the past two months. The fact he's at home in the Dominican Republic, arguably the greatest snub of this year's All-Star Game, has a lot to do with playing the same position as Alex Bregman and Matt Chapman, and perhaps something to do with not yet being a household name. Devers is a star. We just haven't gotten to know him yet.

In a clubhouse with Bogaerts, Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez, it's not Devers' turn to lead. When the Red Sox have struggled this season, Bogaerts, Betts and the veteran starting pitchers have spoken for the team. Devers has simply put up his numbers, kept the team afloat then moved happily into the background. The improved statistics have defined him as a player. The passion with which he plays has defined him as a person.

"If they want to get to know me, they'll get to know me because of the platform that I have here," Devers said over the weekend, speaking through an interpreter. "Obviously, through the years, they'll get to know me even more as a person, and if I help people outside of the field, that will get noticed as well. But for the most part, I'm just focused on doing my job every single day and just trying to play the game of baseball. The popularity will come, and I understand, that's when (the outside world) will get to know me as a person."

May 2 was the opener of a four-game series in Chicago. The Red Sox had a one-run lead in the ninth inning when Devers committed his ninth error of the season, the second-most in the majors at the time. Two batters later, the White Sox walked off, and Devers trudged off the field, through the dugout, and sat dejected in the clubhouse. He felt it was all his fault.

"He took it very personal," manager Alex Cora said.

Cora now sees the misplay as a turning point. The rest of us can see it as a window in the way Devers works, and the reason he's grown so fully at such a young age.

In 54 games since, Devers has committed only three errors. According to defensive runs saved — a metric which ranked him as a -13 defender a year ago, one of the worst in baseball — Devers has become a league average or better third baseman. He's made bang-bang plays on the run and over-the-shoulder catches near the seats.

"When he makes an error, sometimes (his reaction) comes across the wrong way," infield instructor Carlos Febles said. "You feel like he's not going to be ready for the next play, but he is. He just cares about doing things the right way."

Devers' defense has improved steadily in the past two months. (Raj Mehta / USA Today)
Passion can be mistaken for immaturity. Joy might be misconstrued as naivety. It didn't help that Devers arrived in July 2017 with a grown man's strength and a baby's face. He was impressive but unmistakably young. Last season was his first full year in the big leagues, and he rated as a below-average hitter and a roughly replacement-level player. He split time in September and was on the bench for six games in October.

"He learned a lot last year," Cora said. "He's understanding the winning and losing at the big-league level. When we lose, he takes it very hard, which is great. That's the way it should be. You win, you enjoy it. You lose, and you think about it and learn from it. He's done that."

This season's breakout began with a terrific batting average and on-base percentage in April, but Devers didn't hit his first home run until May 3. Perhaps it's no coincidence it was the day after his error in Chicago. By the end of May, he had eight home runs. At the break, he has 16. He's third in the American League in both batting average and slugging percentage. His move to the No. 2 spot in the order has coincided with a surge in the Red Sox offense.

"He doesn't try to do too much anymore," said Michael Chavis, the Red Sox rookie who's played with Devers since they were rookie-ball teenagers in 2014. "There would be at-bats earlier in his career where you would see he'd get a good pitch to hit, and he would try to do too much with it — a lot of the stuff that I'm doing right now — but it's just a part of growing up and gaining maturity."

Bogaerts, too, was a below-average hitter in his first full season. It was in his second full season that he won his first Silver Slugger, and it wasn't until his third year that Bogaerts went to the All-Star Game. Cora has praised Bogaerts for helping Devers find that balance of patience and desire at the big-league level. Bogaerts has led from experience because he knows the way.

"The thing that is most impressive is (Devers) is not settling," Bogaerts said. "He's not happy with two hits, you know? If he gets two hits, he wants another one. And then another one. He's continuing to be hungry."

This last weekend before the break, Devers was assigned a locker almost perfectly positioned among the Red Sox All-Stars. If the right side of Detroit's visiting clubhouse were an angled clock, Devers was at 6 o'clock, Martinez at 12, Betts at 3 and Bogaerts at 9. They were all right there within Devers' eyesight. He could see them answering questions, preparing for their trip to Cleveland. Would he want the attention that comes with their status in the game?

"Claro!" Devers said, using a Spanish word that required little translation. As he kept speaking, Red Sox translator Bryan Almonte explained, "Of course, everybody wants that."

Everybody wants to be great, and everyone likes to be recognized, but does Devers really want all of the attention, the questions and the public voice that comes with becoming a household name?

"Ah," he said, again with no need for a translator. "No, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no."

Four nos. A pause. Six more nos. Another pause, and a couple more nos.

"I don't really want that much attention," he said. "Mookie and Bogey, those are the guys. Those are the faces of the franchise, so it's more them than me. Obviously, I feel like I can have a voice here. For the most part, I just want to focus on playing my game, more than anything. If anything, I know what comes with the territory of being successful is just having that voice in the clubhouse, and that's something that, if it comes with it, it comes with it."

The translator, Almonte, has been with the Red Sox a little more than a month, and he said most of the questions he's been asked to translate for Devers are basic baseball questions. Adjustments at the plate. Plays in the field. Whether he was looking for a certain pitch, and did he know it was gone the moment he swung the bat? That's typical for a young player. It's a first step, getting to know them as a ballplayer. Getting to know the person, asking him to speak on bigger issues, making him more recognizable within this market and beyond, that comes with time.

"I think he will grow into that," Bogaerts said. "Now's a little bit early for that. We have a lot of veteran guys on the team. But I can see that potential in him, and him wanting to learn English. I remember, when he first came up, he didn't know much, but me and the umpire were joking the other day and made some jokes at him in English, and it's pretty impressive to see how much he's learned and how much he's always wanting to learn. I think that's what's going to make him so great and separate him from others."

To be clear, we're the ones trying to know him, and he's the one making such an effort to make it easier. That might be as telling as the smile on his face, or the four-letter words at the plate. Cora has pointed out that Devers, for whatever reason, cusses at himself in English. The mini-outbursts just come out that way, comical in their innocence.

"He's always been a little kid," Chavis said. "That's just how he is. Even when he's 30, he's still going to act like a little kid. Not in a bad way. Just, he's happy."

Devers nodded at the description. In time, we'll hear more from him. More fans around the game will recognize his name. For now, you just have to see him — an unfiltered glimpse into the heart and soul of a budding superstar.

"Yeah, that's who I am," Devers said. "Because we're playing a game, and I love this game. ... I know I have the God-given talent and my family is depending on me, but for the most part, I want to have fun playing the game, and that's the only way for me to play. That's the only way I know how to play."

Everything else about his game is changing. That part has stayed the same.