

The Boston Red Sox Thursday, October 3, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Sorting out the mixed signals coming from Fenway Park

Christopher L. Gasper

It's a barren month for Boston baseball. There are no playoffs for the first time since 2015. There are no more games that matter until March. October is empty. But Fenway Park is full of mixed signals being sent about the 2020 vision for the Red Sox.

The Sox are pushing the soft reset button unless they're not. They're in money-saving mode because of the burden of the competitive balance tax unless they're not. They're parting with either Mookie Betts or J.D. Martinez, because of the financial sword of Damocles that ex-baseball boss Dave Dombrowski left dangling above their heads, unless there's a way they're not.

The Sox currently have more hedges than the garden at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The more they elaborate, the harder it is to pin down the team's stance for next season.

Sometimes you just need to rip off the conversational Band-Aid. The Sox need to shoot us straight. We can take it. The Fenway Faithful form the most sophisticated, informed, and loyal fan base in baseball. They might not like the plan, but they'll tolerate it. The only thing they'll have less tolerance for than a step-back year is being told it isn't happening while it's unfolding right in front of them. Send the euphemisms and equivocations to the dustbin along with manager Alex Cora's spring training pitching plan.

It's simple. On the heels of boasting baseball's biggest payroll the last two seasons, the Sox feel compelled to get below the luxury tax threshold of \$208 million next season. They are willing to sacrifice less talent on the roster for less money on the payroll. The Sox are done throwing their wallet around now that Dombrowski is gone. The deposed president of baseball operations left them with little financial flexibility and a trio of basically untradeable contracts belonging to pitchers David Price, Chris Sale, and Nathan Eovaldi.

Those three will account for \$79 million in salary next season and are on the books for \$237 million over the next three seasons. They all come with injury issues and will be 30 or older on Opening Day next season.

When the principal owner of the team, John Henry (who also owns the Globe), states, as he did last Friday in a confab with reporters, "We need to be under the CBT and that was something we've known for more than a year now," then that's what is happening. Period.

The next Red Sox president of baseball operations will be under no illusions about what his or her marching orders are in constructing the team.

The compounding cost of luxury tax tariffs, explained in depth by colleague Alex Speier, makes the Red Sox resetting the tax rate to 20 percent by ducking the tax altogether in 2020 all but a certainty.

Backtracking to say that it's not a mandate, it's just a strong preference (chairman Tom Werner) is parsing words for rhetorical cover. Saying that it's more like a goal, and that there are scenarios where the team could exceed the threshold for a third straight year and swallow an onerous tax bill, as team president and CEO Sam Kennedy said Monday, borders on misdirection. The spin rate here is higher than that of a Brandon Workman curveball.

There is no chimerical path to significant cost savings and a significantly improved roster that still features high-priced core pieces of the 2018 World Series winner such as Betts, Martinez, Sale, Price, and Xander Bogaerts. The Sox are selling another type of Impossible Dream there. You can't keep this team intact and trim the baseball budget below the tax line.

The scenario where the team blows past the luxury tax threshold again is one in which Henry is convinced to abandon the temporary belt-tightening he said that the organization has known was required for some time now.

That's going to be harder to do coming off an 84-win season that saw the Sox finish 12 games behind the Tampa Bay Rays, owners of baseball's lowest Opening Day payroll, and 13 games behind the Oakland A's, who also boasted a bottom-five Opening Day payroll, according to the Associated Press. Tampa Bay was at \$61 million to start the season, Oakland was at \$88 million, not including player benefits.

The two bottom-five spenders squared off Wednesday night in the American League wild-card game while the Sox, who spent about \$227 million, minus benefits, are idle for October.

The days of trying to win with the wallet are over on Jersey Street, rightfully so. It is simply not a sustainable model of winning over the long term. Fellow hardball high rollers the Dodgers and Yankees have already figured that out. The Sox need to restore balance that goes beyond the competitive balance tax.

That's what the Sox should be selling, the idea that they want to build a sustainable model for contention. They need to come to grips with the reality that their fan base is smart enough to see through the conversational countermeasures, the talking points, and the buzz phrases being thrown out to try to convince them that less will be more or that less might be avoidable in '20.

Currying favor with the Fenway Faithful by not acknowledging the obvious isn't going to save the Sox. They have the misfortune of being the most-scrutinized and easily criticized sports team in New England. Throwing derisive darts at the Sox' custodians is a regional pastime. It's a rite of passage.

Fans will fight any claim of potential roster mismanagement by the Patriots to the death or sign off on whatever plan the Celtics serve up. They'll grumble about the Bruins, but ultimately lower the bar for them. The Sox remain a magnet for dyspeptic discourse.

You can't fool this fan base.

So, tell it like it is. The Sox are planning to take a step back to move forward.

Red Sox part ways with assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett

Alex Speier

While change seemed likely for the Red Sox coaching staff in the wake of an 84-78 season, the first known alteration to the group comes as something of a surprise.

According to multiple industry sources, the Red Sox informed Andy Barkett he is being let go after two years as assistant hitting coach. During Barkett's time under hitting coach Tim Hyers, the Red Sox ranked in the top three in the majors in runs per game (5.48, second), batting average (.269, first), on-base percentage (.339, second), slugging (.460, third), and OPS (.799, third).

Barkett came to the Red Sox after a dozen seasons as a minor league coach, coordinator, and manager, most recently as the manager of the Pirates' Triple A affiliate in 2017. Prior to that, he had spent two years as a hitting coordinator in the Pirates and Marlins farm systems, following four years as a manager of Marlins minor league affiliates and four more managing in the Tigers system from 2007-10, at a time when Dave Dombrowski was team president.

The bilingual Barkett worked closely with Rafael Devers in 2018 and 2019 as the young third baseman learned to develop a pregame routine and how to use technology and data to game-plan. Barkett also got frequent morning entreaties from Mookie Betts to do early work in the batting cage.

While Barkett worked well with members of the Red Sox, he was informed by the team that his strengths as a communicator seemed better suited for a different coaching track — perhaps that of a third base or bench coach, or manager. Barkett was told that none of those positions were expected to be available with the Red Sox, so they wanted to let him explore opportunities elsewhere.

The Red Sox will seek someone with a different — presumably more analytically based — skill set for the position of assistant hitting coach.

Hyers is expected to return as hitting coach.

*** *The Boston Herald***

Red Sox part ways with assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett

Steve Hewitt

In one of the first moves of what promises to be a busy offseason ahead, the Red Sox have parted ways with assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett, a team source confirmed to the Herald.

The news was first reported by The Boston Globe.

The 45-year-old Barkett was hired in November 2017 under Alex Cora as hitting coach Tim Hyers' top assistant. The Red Sox went on to win the World Series behind a league-leading offense that ranked first in runs, hits, batting average and OPS. The Sox finished top five in each of those categories in 2019.

Barkett also served as a third-base coach temporarily in 2019 while Carlos Febles was out with an injury.

Barkett was a minor-league coach for 11 years – spending time with the Tigers, Marlins and Pirates organizations — before joining the Red Sox. He was a big presence in the clubhouse and Cora always raved about his communication skills with the players.

“The connection they have with Timmy and with Andy, that’s something we’re very proud of,” Cora said in spring training. “I like that. I like that. The more baseball talk, I said it last year, the louder, the more, the better it is for us.”

Hyers is expected to remain in his role as hitting coach, according to the Globe.

Cora said Monday that he was meeting with his coaching staff this week as he begins preparations for the 2020 season. It’s unclear if more changes are on the way.

*** *The Providence Journal***

Resetting the potential Red Sox roster for 2020

Bill Koch

What exactly is the next top Red Sox baseball executive inheriting?

It's safe to say the same plan of standing pat won't be employed prior to 2020. Boston counts several free agents and a handful of difficult financial decisions to consider ahead of reporting for spring training in February.

The Red Sox finished just 84-78 despite a handful of sterling performances by players like Rafael Devers, Xander Bogaerts, Eduardo Rodriguez and Brandon Workman. That's just to name a few – Boston, as manager Alex Cora said all season, wasn't a team that lacked talent. Its inconsistency and general absence of sharpness was ultimately the club's undoing.

We'll take this by position and mix in a few promising minor leaguers along the way. This also excludes any possible trades or signings the Red Sox might make on the free agent market. Principal owner John Henry's stated goal of slipping under \$208 million in payroll should prove mathematically impossible with all of the following players included on the roster.

-- Outfielders

Under contract: J.D. Martinez (through 2022), Mookie Betts (arbitration), Jackie Bradley Jr. (arbitration), Andrew Benintendi (arbitration), Gorkys Hernandez (arbitration)

Free agents: None

Prospects of note: Jarren Duran (Portland)

Start with an easy decision by non-tendering Hernandez. Setting the Pawtucket club record for strikeouts by a right-handed hitter and following up with a .463 OPS in 20 games with the Red Sox was simply dreadful.

That's obviously not the headliner among this group. Martinez can opt out of the final three years of his deal – Boston will be informed of his decision shortly after the World Series concludes. Betts and Bradley will be due about \$40 million in arbitration awards and enter free agency prior to 2021.

The arguments for and against trading Betts both carry some merit, particularly with him unwilling to publicly commit his future to the team. Settling matters with Martinez and Betts early in the offseason likely helps shape the rest of the roster and could determine whether or not the Red Sox return to the postseason after a one-year absence.

-- Infielders

Under contract: Dustin Pedroia (through 2021), Xander Bogaerts (through 2025), Marco Hernandez (arbitration), Rafael Devers (pre-arbitration), Sam Travis (pre-arbitration), Michael Chavis (pre-arbitration), Tzu-Wei Lin (pre-arbitration)

Free agents: Mitch Moreland, Steve Pearce, Brock Holt, Chris Owings

Prospects of note: Bobby Dalbec (Pawtucket), C.J. Chatham (Pawtucket), Triston Casas (Salem)

It would take some research to find a better left side of the infield in recent Red Sox history. Bogaerts and Devers were both American League MVP candidates this season and are under long-term control. They're the future of this team.

Casas is the organization's top prospect and feels like the long-term answer at first base, but he's unlikely to arrive before 2022. That means possibly keeping Moreland on a one-year deal and platooning him with Travis or Dalbec. Chavis is likely to be the leader at second base into spring while Boston faces a tough decision to enter the market for Holt or move on to a new utility man.

-- Catcher

Under contract: Christian Vazquez (through 2021), Sandy Leon (arbitration), Juan Centeno (arbitration)

Free agents: None

Prospects of note: None

Vazquez was terrific this season. His 23 home runs buried the modest career total of 10 he carried into 2019 and he also set career highs in doubles, RBI, walks, slugging and OPS. But appearing in 138 games – several as the designated hitter and at first base – isn't optimal going forward in terms of preserving his legs and offensive production.

The Red Sox need an improved second option, preferably one comfortable with Chris Sale to build in a day off each trip through the rotation. Leon made almost \$2.5 million this season to post a -0.2 WAR per FanGraphs. Boston should non-tender him and hit the market for a backup who can post better than a .548 OPS.

-- Starting pitching

Under contract: Chris Sale (through 2024), David Price (through 2022), Nathan Eovaldi (through 2022), Eduardo Rodriguez (arbitration), Brian Johnson (arbitration), Hector Velazquez (arbitration), Josh Smith (arbitration), Ryan Weber (arbitration)

Free agents: Rick Porcello, Andrew Cashner

Prospects of note: Tanner Houck (Pawtucket), Bryan Mata (Portland), Thad Ward (Salem), Noah Song (Lowell)

It was a brutal season for this group. Red Sox starters posted a 4.95 earned-run average, which ranked 20th in a 30-team league and represented a significant rise from the 3.77 ERA it cobbled together in 2018. Sale, Price and Eovaldi all spent time on the injured list, and Boston was just 58-70 in games not started by Rodriguez.

Sale, Price and Eovaldi are on the books for an average of \$73.6 million over the next three seasons – hope isn't generally an advisable strategy, but their health will pretty much determine whether or not the Red Sox contend. Boston could attempt to retain Porcello on a one-year deal and might examine non-tendering Johnson, Velazquez, Smith and Weber to shave payroll.

-- Relief pitching

Under contract: Brandon Workman (arbitration), Matt Barnes (arbitration), Steven Wright (arbitration), Heath Hembree (arbitration), Darwinson Hernandez (pre-arbitration), Josh Taylor (pre-arbitration), Marcus Walden (pre-arbitration), Ryan Brasier (pre-arbitration), Colten Brewer (pre-arbitration), Trevor Kelley (pre-arbitration), Travis Lakins (pre-arbitration), Bobby Poyner (pre-arbitration), Mike Shawarzyn (pre-arbitration)

Free agents: None

Prospects of note: None

Costing Rodriguez his 20th win on the season's final day seemed a fitting end for this group. Red Sox relievers combined to blow 28 saves this season – only the Athletics, Nationals and Mariners suffered more. Their collective ERA also spiked to 4.40 this season, up from 3.72 in 2018.

Workman was sensational at the back end while Barnes, Hernandez, Taylor and Walden feel like locks for the 2020 roster. That leaves three or four spots for a host of pitchers who were relatively unimpressive this

season. Brasier, Brewer and Lakins would seem to have the best chances to stick entering spring while Wright and Hembree could both be in jeopardy of being non-tendered.

* **MassLive.com**

MLB awards: MVP, Cy Young, Rookie of the Year picks

Chris Cotillo

The regular season has come to an end, meaning it's time to hand out some awards. Some -- like the NL Rookie of the Year -- are obvious, while others require some deeper thinking. But here are my picks.

(Note: Last year I was 9 of 10 getting these correct, with the only exception being AL Manager of the Year. Coincidentally, that's the one I'm voting for in real life this year.)

Here are my 2019 picks:

American League MVP

OF Mike Trout, Angels (.291/.438/1.083, 45 HR, 104 RBI)

Death, taxes, Mike Trout as MVP. The Angels superstar should take home his third MVP award this fall after what many consider the best season of his stellar career. He probably already had it locked up before being knocked out for most of September with a foot injury and none of the other candidates -- Houston's Alex Bregman, New York's D.J. LeMahieu or Boston's Rafael Devers -- were superhuman enough in September to knock Trout off the top of the list. Bregman will likely finish second, marking his highest-ever finish in the voting (he was fifth in 2018).

National League MVP

OF Cody Bellinger, Dodgers (.305/.406/1.035, 47 HR, 115 RBI)

This is one of the closest races of all of them, as Bellinger and Milwaukee's Christian Yelich both had tremendous seasons for playoff teams. But Bellinger, who was better defensively, stands out a bit above Yelich and played 26 more games. This one could go either way and likely would be a slam-dunk for Yelich if he didn't get injured at the end.

American League Cy Young

RHP Justin Verlander, Astros (21-6, 2.58 ERA, 300 K)

Honestly, they might just split this award between Astros teammates Cole and Justin Verlander. It's going to come right down to the wire, but Verlander seems likely to take home his second award (seems low) and first since 2011. Verlander beats out Cole in innings and WHIP, distancing himself a tiny bit in a race in which Cole leads in ERA, strikeouts and FIP. Verlander's late-season no-hitter might have just won him the Cy Young. It'll be extremely close.

National League Cy Young

RHP Jacob deGrom, Mets (11-8, 2.43 ERA, 255 K)

deGrom's phenomenal second half (1.44 ERA in 14 starts) set him apart from the pack as Los Angeles' Hyun-jin Ryu and Washington's Max Scherzer faltered. deGrom didn't have the year he had in 2018 but was still the National League's best pitcher, even on a team that missed the playoffs.

American League Rookie of the Year

DH/OF Yordan Alvarez, Astros (.313/.412/1.067, 27 HR, 78 RBI)

Entering the season, Toronto's Vladimir Guerrero Jr. seemed like a lock to win Rookie of the Year, but Alvarez is the clear pick now. A potent Astros lineup added Alvarez's big bat in mid-June and was rewarded magnificently, as the 22-year-old became one of baseball's best hitters over the last four months. Baltimore's John Means, Tampa Bay's Brandon Lowe and others will get votes.

National League Rookie of the Year

1B Pete Alonso, Mets (.260/.358/.941, 53 HR, 120 RBI)

Alonso has been one of the best stories in baseball this year and seems like one of the most likable players to come into the league in a few years. His rookie home run record sealed his ROY fate, giving him the win in a wide race in which he beat out Atlanta's Mike Soroka. The Mets will probably have the Cy Young and Rookie of the Year winners and miss the playoffs.

American League Manager of the Year

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This is the one I voted for, and we're not supposed to reveal our votes before the announcement so I won't. But there are a handful of really strong candidates who are all deserving.

National League Manager of the Year

Craig Counsell, Brewers

Milwaukee's late surge without Yelich was as impressive as any team has looked this season and Counsell deserves credit for getting his team into the postseason. Five seasons into his tenure, he's becoming a star in Milwaukee.

American League Hank Aaron Award (Best Hitter)

OF Mike Trout, Angels (.291/.438/1.083, 45 HR, 104 RBI)

Trout seems like a lock here. He has only won once, back in 2014.

National League Hank Aaron Award (Best Hitter)

OF Christian Yelich, Brewers (.329/.429/1.100, 44 HR, 97 RBI)

Even if Yelich doesn't win MVP, he'll likely take home the Aaron award for the second time in as many seasons. He was better offensively than Yelich.

American League All-Stars

David Petkiewicz, cleveland.com

American League All-Stars: Hunter Pence, Texas Rangers, Shortstop. David Petkiewicz, cleveland.com

American League Comeback Player of the Year

OF Hunter Pence, Rangers (.297/.358/.910, 18 HR, 59 RBI)

Pence might not win this one because he played only 83 games, but he's a deserving candidate. In his age-36 season, he went from someone who looked to be on his last legs to an All-Star once again.

National League Comeback Player of the Year

3B Josh Donaldson, Braves (.259/.379/.900, 37 HR, 94 RBI)

Donaldson looked to be in line for a monster deal in free agency before missing 110 games due to injuries in 2018. He signed a one-year, \$23 million prove-it deal with the Braves and has proved his worth, becoming a major threat in Atlanta's lineup. He'll be in high-demand entering his age-34 season as a free agent.

10 thoughts on the last week in baseball:

1. Mookie Betts' dive into home plate seemed like a send-off Sunday afternoon. Turns out his fate might be decided by J.D. Martinez.
2. We were at the manager luncheon at the winter meetings sitting with Alex Cora when the Charlie Morton-to-the-Rays news broke in December. I thought Cora overreacted at the time, as he was really impressed by the news and worried about Morton being in his division. It was not an overreaction.
3. The criticism of the Athletics for not advancing in the postseason is a little tired. Aren't they perennially overperforming by just getting there?
4. Sure looks like Brad Ausmus was Rick Renteria'd in Anaheim. Joe Maddon going home to the Angels is a cool story, though.
5. The Red Sox have exactly zero competitors in the market for a new GM/president of baseball operations. There are six managerial jobs open, though.
6. Boston's firing of Andy Barkett was surprising. A good guy who was great to deal with and should latch on somewhere soon.
7. Have to wonder if more restructuring will happen on the coaching staff. Dana LeVangie is probably safe; someone like bullpen coach Craig Bjornson might be in jeopardy.
8. John Farrell is interested in managing again but I'm not sure that'll happen. In this current era of managers, it's crazy a 57-year-old who won a World Series six years ago seems like a fossil.
9. The Drew Pomeranz thing is hilarious.
10. Division series predictions: Astros, Twins, Braves and Dodgers.

Boston Red Sox's 84-win season guarantees them 17th-overall pick in 2020 MLB Draft

Christopher Smith

The Boston Red Sox will receive the 17th-overall selection in the 2020 MLB Draft after posting an 84-78 record in 2019.

This marks Boston's highest draft pick since 2016 when they selected Jay Groome 12th overall.

Boston has had a draft pick in the top 20 only six times since 2000. They drafted 12th in 2016 (Groome), seventh in 2015 (Andrew Benintendi), seventh in 2013 (Trey Ball), 19th in 2011 (Matt Barnes), 20th in 2010 (Kolbrin Vitek) and 17th in 2003 (David Murphy).

The Red Sox have had the 17th-overall pick four other times: 2003 (Murphy), 1999 (Rick Asadoorian), 1997 (John Curtice) and 1973 (Ted Cox).

Asadoorian and Curtice never made the majors.

Boston Red Sox coaching changes: Andy Barkett, assistant hitting coach, won't return in 2020

Chris Cotillo

The Red Sox have parted ways with assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett, a major-league source confirmed Wednesday. The move was first reported by Alex Speier of the Boston Globe.

Barkett, 46, was hired in Nov. 2017 to serve as the assistant to Tim Hyers. Under Hyers and Barkett, the Sox' offense led the majors in runs, hits, batting average and OPS in 2018 and finished in the top five in all of those categories in 2019.

Barkett spent nine years as a minor-league manager in the Pirates, Tigers and Marlins organization before joining the Red Sox and received interest from the Pirates and the Rangers when their hitting coach jobs were open last year. He declined to interview so that he could return to the Red Sox.

Barkett drew praise from players and fellow coaches and was a vocal presence in the team's clubhouse. Barkett and Hyers formed a unique duo of differing personalities in the team's hitting department.

"The Tim Hyers-Andy Barkett duo in the clubhouse, they're so different but they're great together," manager Alex Cora said during spring training. "It works. One (Barkett) is the DJ and one (Hyers) is the psychologist. It's awesome."

Hyers is expected to remain in his role, according to Speier, but other coaching changes are possible this week. Cora said Monday that the team would meet to make decisions this week at Fenway Park.

*** *RedSox.com***

Source: Barkett out as assistant hitting coach

Ian Browne

The Red Sox will make at least one change to manager Alex Cora's coaching staff for next season, as MLB.com's Mark Feinsand has learned that the team has parted ways with assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett.

Though the Red Sox aren't expected to make any formal announcements until the status of the entire coaching staff is resolved, a club source said that Barkett was let go.

Barkett might not be the only subtraction from the coaching staff, MLB.com has learned. Meetings are ongoing at Fenway Park this week.

The news is somewhat surprising given that Boston boasted one of the best offenses in the game the last two seasons under hitting coach Tim Hyers and assistant Barkett.

Though the club performed below expectations this season, finishing 84-78 and missing the postseason for the first time since 2015, the Sox finished fifth in the Majors in OPS (.806), fourth in runs (901) and first in doubles (345).

Barkett joined the Red Sox following the 2017 season after 12 seasons as a Minor League coach and manager for the Pirates, Marlins and Tigers.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Remember Chavis? From rookie revelation to question mark, he's determined to make 2020 impact

John Tomase

Through all the trials he faced in the minors -- from the possibility of being a first-round bust to the soul-searching that accompanied a lengthy suspension for PEDs -- Michael Chavis clung to one deeply held belief.

He was a big leaguer.

Selected in the first round of the 2014 draft because of his power potential, Chavis looked like he might never escape Single-A after three wayward seasons. But belief in his ultimate destination never abandoned him, and when he broke out in 2017 with 31 homers between two levels, the big leagues suddenly seemed realistic.

But until Chavis got the call this April to join the Red Sox in Tampa, he had to take it on faith that he belonged in the majors. Then came the whirlwind. He debuted with a booming double off a 99 mph fastball, authored a dream first month that seemed to bring a different nightly moonshot, and then struggled with the inevitable adjustments that smack most young hitters when the league reacts.

As Chavis prepared to head south for the winter following Sunday's season finale, he reflected on just how different his mindset is as he prepares for 2020.

"There's a lot, man," he said. "It was a fun season. I think to your point, I proved to myself that I am a big leaguer. I always believed it and kind of knew it, but going out and doing it is different than just saying it. Having had a little bit of success and the experience I've had is just incredible. It's just a building block. This offseason I know what my strengths were. I know what some of my weaknesses were. I have a good idea of what I need to work on. I have to put myself in a position to get better. That's the approach of each offseason, to come back better. That's the goal."

Chavis provided a lot to like as a rookie. He slammed 18 home runs in 347 at-bats while driving in 58 and showing some versatility by playing first, second, and third. He hit 10 home runs in his first 28 games, feasting on an assortment of hanging breaking balls before teams wizened up and began attacking a hole in his looping uppercut swing with letter-high fastballs.

His OPS stood at .903 on May 28, but from that point forward until an oblique injury ended his season in early August, Chavis struggled. He hit .239 with eight homers and a .682 OPS in 61 games. He also struck out 85 times vs. only 14 walks, losing the command of the strike zone that marked his arrival by cheating in order to get to high fastballs.

Chavis bristled at the characterization of his struggles -- "I know I can hit a high fastball," he said on more than one occasion -- but like everything else with his young career, he's intent on earning the trust of manager Alex Cora and his teammates.

"I don't want anything handed to me," he said. "Having earned the opportunities that I got made me appreciate other ones where I didn't get them. It made me want to work harder to be in that position, whether it's to be trusted to pinch hit here or something like that. It's another benchmark for me. I want to be that guy. I want to be that guy."

He certainly caught the attention of his rivals. When Chavis debuted in April with a game-saving double off of Rays flamethrower Jose Alvarado, fellow rookie Brandon Lowe greeted Chavis at second in disbelief.

"The debut knocked us back a little bit," Lowe recalled earlier this year. "My god. First pitch off Alvarado, double off the center field fence. I talked to him right when it happened, I was like, 'You've got to be kidding me? You're going to do that in your first at-bat?' He's very mature as a player, for being as young as he is. He's got the notebook, he writes his stuff down. He knows what he's trying to do up there. He's not going to get away from it. It's going to be fun to play against him and watch him play for hopefully the next 10 or 12 years."

Chavis heads into the offseason with a real opportunity. The Red Sox expect to cut payroll, which should open multiple jobs for younger, cheaper players. Chavis fits that bill and could see reps as the right-handed half of a first base platoon or even at second base, where he acquitted himself unexpectedly well in his pro debut at the position.

All he knows is a year ago he had to rely on faith that he was a big leaguer. Now he has proof.

"The work's not done," he said. "This offseason there's a lot of work to be done, and a lot more to look forward to down the road. Having had this taste and an idea of how things work in the clubhouse, how these guys work, how things work in the big leagues, its going to put me in a better position. I know what I'm working for."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

Red Sox can only sit and watch much smaller payroll teams in Wednesday's wild card game

Sean McAdam

It's bad enough that the Red Sox are sitting home Wednesday night while the American League wild-card gets played 3,000 miles away.

But the fact that the game is between the Tampa Bay Rays and Oakland A's only makes it that much worse.

While the Red Sox spent approximately \$240 million and still finished in third place in their division with the seventh-highest win total in the league, the Rays, with the game's smallest payroll (\$63.4 million, according to Spotrac.com) finished eight games ahead of the AL East.

Meanwhile, the A's, with the 25th-ranked payroll (\$92.8 million), won 13 more games than the Sox.

You could combine the payrolls of the Rays and A's (for a total player cost of \$166.2 million) and still be just bit over two-thirds of the Red Sox payroll for 2019.

None of which is to suggest that no correlation exists between payroll size and on-field performance. Major League Baseball is littered with teams who didn't spend and got predictable results. The teams with the 27th (Pittsburgh), 28th (Baltimore) and 29th (Miami) ranked payrolls each finished last in the division.

Of the 10 bottom teams in payroll — the lower third in the game — only three (Arizona, Oakland and Tampa Bay) even finished with winning records.

So, perhaps the best way to link payroll and performance is to note that while spending big doesn't guarantee success, not spending makes it highly unlikely your season will end well.

Unless, that is, you spend smartly, which both the Rays and A's have done.

Comparing the big-market Red Sox with the small-market Rays and A's is risky business, as it's akin to comparing economic apples and oranges.

The expectations are greatly different between the teams, and so, too, are the achievements. While the Red Sox have four World Series since 2004, the Rays have never won a title (they've appeared in just one World Series in their history) and the A's last one came 1989.

Moreover, this trip to the postseason is the first for the Rays since 2013 (when they were ousted in the ALDS by the Red Sox), though they did win 90 games last season. And while the A's have qualified for the postseason four times in the last eight years, they haven't won a postseason series since 2006.

Still, it's hard not to admire the efficiency with which the A's and Rays operate.

The Red Sox had four players (David Price, J.D. Martinez, Rick Porcello and Mookie Betts) making \$20 million or more on their 2019 payroll; the A's and Rays had none.

The Sox had an additional four players making eight-figure salaries (\$10 million or more); the A's (Khris Davis, \$16.75 million) and Rays (Charlie Morton, \$15 million) had one each. (The A's also had starter Tanner Roark earning \$10 million but he was trade-deadline acquisition and the Cincinnati Reds absorbed some of his remaining salary).

In addition to squaring off in Wednesday's AL wild-card game, the Rays and A's share another bit of ignominy — each plays in a ballpark that barely qualifies as major league-caliber. The A's have been trying without success to find another home in the East Bay for years while the Rays this past summer took the unprecedented step of announcing the possibility of adopting Montreal as a split-season home.

Neither team, not surprisingly, draws well. The Rays were 29th overall and dead last in the American League this past season at 1.1 million fans while the A's were only slightly better at 1.6 million, good for 24th among the 30 franchises. Clearly, in both cases, the poor attendance contributes to the low payroll.

Following Wednesday's game, one team will go home for the winter, having had the privilege of playing exactly one more game than the Red Sox did. And it's highly doubtful that the Wednesday's winner will get far in the ALDS, matched against the powerhouse Houston Astros.

But there's no taking away from the overall achievement: the Rays and A's are playoff participants, and the Red Sox, having spent more than any other team in either league and more than in any other season in their long history except one, are not.

That's got to sting — for the players, the manager and staff.

But here's what makes Wednesday's game tougher to take from ownership's point of view:

Not only did they spend \$240 million and finish out of the postseason only to watch two teams qualify with payrolls anywhere from a quarter to 40 percent of the Sox' payroll taking part, but Oakland and Tampa Bay also were the recipients of million of dollars from the Red Sox themselves, the result of baseball's revenue sharing program.

The Sox will contribute some \$60 million to MLB's central fund in 2019.

*** *The Athletic***

Here's why Red Sox jettisoned hitting coach Andy Barkett and what they're looking for in his replacement

Chad Jennings

There was no list of grievances that led to assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett's dismissal from the Red Sox coaching staff. There was no behind-the-scenes conflict, no issue with the players, no problem with his work. According to two team sources, the Red Sox simply wanted a fresh perspective and a different skillset.

“We're just going in a different direction,” one source said.

In this era of constant evolution, “going in a different direction” is the new “not trying to do too much.” Everyone says it. Every team, it seems, is looking for a new direction that can stay in line with the changing game. That philosophy is part of the Red Sox hitting culture that Barkett himself helped create alongside hitting coach Tim Hyers. From daily hitters' meetings that empowered players to control the game plan, to open lines of communication that left room for outside voices, the Red Sox recognized that offensive philosophy and preparation had to be multi-directional.

“I think the culture that Tim and Andy built was strong,” Romero said. “It encouraged feedback and an openness to ideas.”

To put it another way:

“However we can get the guy to freakin’ rake,” Barkett said last month. “I teach him, or you teach him, or we teach him – I don’t really care, as long as the guy rakes.”

Under Barkett and Hyers, the Red Sox have been one of the better offensive teams the past two years, but their situational struggles this season – they ranked among the league’s worst with a runner at third and less than two outs, for example – suggest room for improvement. Manager Alex Cora has said the team hopes to install at least one more batting cage at Fenway Park, essentially doubling the amount of pregame swings available to players, and Barkett’s replacement will bring a new voice to a clubhouse that’s embraced the value of different perspectives in an era of overwhelming information.

“I’ll be honest with you, it’s not all perfect,” Hyers said last month. “We have confused some players, and we have disrupted some players (with too much data)... We do have players that, there is very limited information they want, and that’s perfect. They’re good. That’s what makes them function, and that’s great. But also, the guy that needs to dig deep and (have) all that about how they move and all that information, we’re here to help also.”

Keeping up with new technology has become one of Hyers’ most important offseason responsibilities. Already, advanced analytics and Trackman data have become commonplace, and now biomechanical analysis is opening new avenues for instruction. A player might have tight hips, for example, which affects his optimal swing. There’s so much video and such detailed scouting reports that dual hitting coaches have become the norm, and even that’s not always enough for a roster of 12 or 13 position players, many of whom are consumed with trying to improve.

When Mookie Betts got off to a slow start this season and wanted extra swings, he hired an outside hitting consultant who worked with him daily for two months. It meant temporarily pushing aside the two hitting coaches who’d helped guide him to an MVP award the year before, but Hyers and Barkett did not try to stand in his way.

“That’s why I love them so much,” Betts said. “It’s our career, and they let us take control of our career.”

During daily hitters’ meetings, the coaches rarely spoke, instead opening the floor to veteran players who had experience against that day’s opposing starter. There are scouting reports, of course, and a lot of individual attention in the cage and in the video room, but those daily meetings are more about dialogue and game planning. What does this pitcher’s curveball look like from inside the box? Who has advice for handling his fastball’s late movement?

“If we have the mentality of, you don’t speak until you’re spoken to, or you can’t say anything, or you can’t share, then it doesn’t help the young guys,” Hyers said.

The arrival of Hyers, Barkett and manager Alex Cora in 2018 coincided with the Red Sox signing of J.D. Martinez, an elite slugger who’s come to epitomize the modern hitting revolution. Teammates, including Betts, quickly latched onto Martinez’s unique drills and get-the-ball-in-the-air devotion. Jackie Bradley Jr. eventually worked with some of Martinez’s outside coaches.

“To me, it’s not about the hitting coach,” Martinez said. “It’s about the performance of the athlete, and whatever the athlete’s doing to perform, that’s what’s important. And I think (the Red Sox coaches) understand that.”

When Miami-based consultant Lorenzo Garmendia worked with Betts this summer, he stayed in regular communication with Hyers. When Garmendia began overhauling Christian Vazquez’s swing last winter, Barkett went to the Miami facility to witness the training first-hand. That openness was not a given,

Garmendia said. He has clients who have to work in secret because their organizations won't allow outsiders.

"If it weren't for the way (the Red Sox) are," Garmendia said, "this wouldn't happen."

Of course, not everyone wants the outside perspective. We rarely, if ever, hear about it when a hitting consultant fails to improve a player's statistics, but it's happened. Xander Bogaerts said he's never even considering using outside hitting help, and he's just completed the two best seasons of his career. Rafael Devers uses a separate hitting coach only during the offseason. He's otherwise stuck with the Red Sox coaches, and it was the bilingual Barkett who typically threw him batting practice.

"This isn't rocket science," Barkett said. "Ted Williams wrote the book 40, 50 years ago and, guess what, we're still teaching the same things. We just package it really pretty and act like we're all real smart now. But at the end of the day, they got a sphere, I got a stick, and I've got to get on plane with it, and I've got barrel it to and through the ball. It's been the same forever."

A new assistant hitting coach isn't likely to teach something Barkett doesn't already know, but it takes a lot of voices to guide a major league roster through a 162-game season, and the Red Sox are looking for a new one.

Alex Cora one-on-one after Red Sox lost season: 'We should do this better and different'

Jen McCaffrey

The season ended just a few days ago, but Alex Cora is already preparing for next year. In a wide-ranging interview with The Athletic, the Red Sox manager reflected on reasons why the season went awry, what he's thinking about the potential for Mookie Betts and J.D. Martinez to stay in Boston, what he's learned about managing in Boston, plans to take advantage of the Red Sox relationship with Liverpool, and more. Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

What kind of qualities are you looking for in a GM candidate if they ask for your input in the search?

I know ownership has been loud and clear that I'm in a good spot right now, but I don't know what's going to happen in the upcoming days, weeks and months. I have to connect with whoever it is. I don't have problems with that. I think I've done a good job throughout my life to connect with people but it's different. It's usually I go into a situation for them to learn about me, and now somebody is coming into this situation. Probably there are going to be a lot of questions from that chair to this one.

Having been here two years, are there things you've learned about this job that you hadn't expected that maybe you can share with this incoming boss?

I knew what I was getting involved in. It's 24/7, seven days a week for the whole year. It's nonstop. The fan base, they really get into it. The noise outside Fenway is loud, it is. And you have to block. That's the most important thing. You have to actually, you come here, you work and when you go home you try to get away from it. Sometimes it's hard. Most of the time it's hard because wherever you go they're reminding you what's going on, or who you are or what you mean for them, which is a cool thing. And it's not that it's too much, but sometimes you really want to kind of disconnect yourself from what you do. It's a challenge, but I do believe if you're involved in this business, it's a good challenge. It's one of those markets, and I played in some big ones — it's very intense. I believe that although we're a big market, it's a small city. It's not big. So wherever you go, somebody is going to let you know what's going on.

Last season you won the World Series in your first year. This second year wasn't as successful. What have you learned about yourself as a manager?

This year, there were certain times where you stay here and think about it, but I never lost sleep. I never said, "I don't want to do this." I think it was very challenging, but last year, honestly, going into the

playoffs, there was pressure. Although I don't actually say it, there was pressure for the group. Because yeah, you won 108 (regular-season games), cool. It's what you guys are going to do the rest of October (that's) going to make your season or break it. And obviously we did a good job, but it was a challenge. This year, it was more about, we went through so many things. You go from Nick (Cafardo's death), to (the death of) Blake (Swihart's) brother, there was a lot of stuff that happened off the field with the group that made it hard. I learned a lot from that.

Was there a point or a moment this year, where you knew, "Maybe this just isn't our year"?

Honestly, well there were a few games we did stuff out of the ordinary. I told you there were certain games I felt like if we win that game, we take off. The game against the Dodgers on (July 14, a 7-4 loss). We got a man on second, no outs, and we trust that Marco (Hernandez), he's going to pull the ball. He hits a ground ball to short and Jackie (Bradley Jr.) at second, he gets thrown out. It's like "Ugh. We don't usually do that." Then we lost two out of three in Baltimore. But then we go to Tampa and win the first two, but the whole freaking mess on the 24th with the changing pitchers. We won two, but that third game kind of took everything out of it. I didn't notice it (then), but I was out there for 25 minutes. So that was like, "That's weird." We beat Tampa two out of three but it didn't feel that way. Then you get to that Sunday game (against the Yankees on July 28). You (have a chance to) sweep them, but we get beat. And it's like, 'Man.' Last year, we (would have) swept them.

The eight-game losing streak the Sox endured against the Rays and Yankees in late July — while the team stood pat at the trade deadline — and early August helped seal their fate. Still, Cora recalls plays he thought could have redirected the Sox. Specifically, he thought Rafael Devers being thrown out by Minnesota's Eddie Rosario to end the game — after a J.D. Martinez double that looked almost certainly like it would score Devers — on Sept. 5 especially stung.

There were a few moments. Oh, wait. The one: Eddie Rosario. When that happened I was like "No way." Then we had New York that weekend and they demolished us (in a four-game sweep). If we're going to pick a play, that's the play. I was still upbeat.

Do you think not getting any help at the deadline affected the players?

I just feel like we put ourselves in a tough spot. It's just one of those that you're, like, in the middle. You put pressure on ownership and the front office to make the big deal. But right around there, that's when we (beat New York) three out of four but lose (the finale) on Sunday. We lose on Tuesday. If we won that Sunday, maybe it was different. But we were fighting for the wild card at that point. We were close, but not that close. It wasn't easy. I think the players understood that. I just think we didn't play well. There were taxing games around there. If Christian (Vazquez) hits a homer the 30th (with two runners on and two outs in the ninth inning of a 6-5 loss to Tampa), then boom, maybe it's different. But I don't think it was making a trade or not. It was about us playing and (it) just didn't happen.

If your brother Joey is let go from the Pirates coaching staff, would you want him on your staff?

No. Regardless of what happened, he's good where he's at. He's still got one more year (on his deal) and they moved to Pittsburgh and the kids love to have their dad around. So I don't think we're ready for that relationship to evolve in the walls of a clubhouse. I just feel like, and I mentioned this, the best thing he ever did was calling me when I got the (Red Sox) job and like, "No, before you ask me, I'm not going." I think with time, when I get more experience ... It's not that he doesn't see me as a manager. I can big-league him and say no, I'm the manager, you're the coach. But he's still my older brother. And sometimes I wonder if I say we're stealing here and I give him the sign and he's coaching at third, he might not put it on because he feels like, "No, it's not a good idea." What am I going to tell him? I'm the manager. And he'll be like, "I'm your older brother." I still feel that way for some reason. But he's good where he's at. He's happy.

What about your coaching staff?

We'll make some adjustments and that's part of it. I was looking at Milwaukee and they went to Game 7 (of the NLCS) last year and they made three changes. It's not the results, it's just where we're going in the division and obviously things you have to get better at. And if we make decisions based on the right reasons, not the results, we'll be OK.

As a person who's always planning ahead, you've probably at least considered a lineup next year without Mookie Betts or J.D. Martinez. What does that look like?

I mean honestly that's the nature of the business and whatever decision we make as an organization — well first of all, J.D. makes (with his opt-out clause). That's on him — but if there's a drastic change, obviously there's going to be other players. I can't get ahead of myself. I've been thinking about what we can do better from Sept. 10. I was managing but at the same time looking around like, "We should do this better and different. We should attack this this way, from players to clubhouse guys, to video guys, to coaches to myself too. I'm my biggest critic. We're in a good position. Obviously there are a lot of question marks, and when those question marks are answered then we'll have more clarity of what's going on. But I have a pretty good idea of what we want to do in the offseason and who's very important. We talk about Mookie and J.D. all the time, but there are certain guys here that we feel they can take a step forward just like Xander (Bogaerts) did and (Devers). (Andrew Benintendi) is the guy. I do believe if Andrew plays up to his potential — I was watching yesterday, I think it was Game 1 in the World Series and how fast he was. Benny was playing at another level in October. So if we get him to play to that speed again, he'll be a force.

Obviously people outside our walls are doubting us and saying this is a tough situation. All that stuff that is not true. I understand where they're coming from, but I do feel we're in a good spot. You get those three guys (David Price, Chris Sale, Nathan Eovaldi) healthy and pitch the way they're capable of. And we've got left-hander (Eduardo Rodriguez) that did pretty good this year. You look at (Brandon Workman) and (Matt) Barnes, (Josh Taylor), Darwinzon (Hernandez), (Marcus Walden), they had great seasons. Brasier should be better and Heath (Hembree) should be OK. We're not that far off.

We've asked you before about the spring training pitchers plan and you said you don't think you'll change it. Are there other things about spring training that you can change to help the starters better prepare?

I think the (Atlanta) Braves are going to help us out.

The Braves are moving their spring training complex to North Port, Fla., near Fort Myers, which will give the Sox another rotational partner for spring games. They will play six times next spring. They played once last season when the Braves were based in Orlando.

People don't realize we play Tampa and Baltimore and this has been going on forever at this level. Sometimes you pitch against your division (in spring training games) but most of the time you don't. Having the Braves around (will) help. At least that's something that our starters can pitch against them.

Honestly, it'll be interesting, there are different numbers. Chris didn't pitch that much, David didn't pitch that much, Nate didn't pitch that much. Eddie pitched a lot. So maybe that's the one we have to take care of, but at the same time the other two (Price and Sale) are coming back from their injuries. So that's (head trainer) Brad (Pearson) and the pitching department. We'll get together in the offseason and map it out but I don't think we'll do that much different. Probably a little more innings because of where we ended up, but that's about it.

You mentioned last weekend speaking with ownership about different things the players need in order to be successful, in the clubhouse or with nutrition or equipment. What specifically do they need?

We need one more batting cage. That's very important. We live in an era that these guys show up early and with one (cage) it's tough because schedule-wise, you hit but you're in a rush because you've got the next guy. I think that's going to help us out. They're planning on adding one more or two more. Probably on the roof, if the Cubs were able to fix their (setup at Wrigley Field), I think we can do it.

We talk about sports science a lot. It's a lot easier if we get that involved because it gives you checkpoints and instant feedback. That's the most important thing nowadays. They've got stuff going on to make sure our camera systems and all that are in place and sharp. We're still developing all that stuff. There are certain organizations that are doing a good job, either instant feedback hitting-wise or pitching-wise and we're trending in the right direction. I do feel that's something that's going to help us out instead of just riding the "0-for-20 you'll be fine." If you go 0-for-4, hey, right away, what's going on? Where's your swing? That's something we want to do. I think it's going to take us to another level. The most important thing, honestly, as far as competition, when I got here I mentioned it. You've got to steal wins. On the field you saw something and won that game. I think sooner rather than later, we'll be where we want to be in that aspect.

We have a great example in what they're doing in Europe (with Liverpool of the English Premier League, the corporate cousin to the Sox). They've done amazing things over there. So I think working together and talking to (Fenway Sports Group president) Mike Gordon a little more is going to help us to get to the next level in that aspect.

So you've tapped Liverpool about process in that regard?

I mean Mike (Gordon) was here last week. We have so many resources in this city. We have the best schools in the world. So we have contacted some people and getting some ideas. Actually the plan for me is to go over there to watch a match, I think when (Liverpool) plays Manchester City. And just to be around ... to see what it's all about.

Is adding to the sports science department becoming more of a priority?

We've got (Red Sox sports science coordinator) Michael (Cianciosi). It's one of those that obviously we want it here, but in the minor leagues is where it starts. I don't know if it's adding more staff here. I think it's more about as an organization, there's a few things we can do from the ground up that are going to help us in five or six years. But at the same time, working together with these guys and teaching them the right way and guiding them to the right path so they understand that this can benefit you. Sleep patterns or routine patterns, I think that's something we can take advantage of.

Will your office stay outside the clubhouse where it was moved last offseason? I know you said you felt removed from the players.

I don't know. I think they spent a lot of money with this. It's comfortable. We made some adjustments with the door. There are certain adjustments that we're not so isolated, instead of having two study rooms just have one. We have to go over there, they have to come over here. So I think that's a way we can connect.

*** *The New York Times***

Rays' Victory Sets Stage for a Pitchers' Duel in Playoffs

Tyler Kepner

Major league hitters shattered the single-season record for home runs this year, so the start of the wild-card games was fitting. In both of them, a ball cleared an outfield fence before the first out.

It was Yandy Diaz, the Tampa Bay Rays' muscular leadoff man, on Wednesday who drove a fastball from the Oakland Athletics' Sean Manaea over the right-field wall at the Coliseum. Diaz did it again in the third inning, between homers by his teammates Avisail Garcia and Tommy Pham.

"They kind of beat us with our game," said Bob Melvin, the Oakland manager, after the Rays' 5-1 victory. "We're normally a home-run-hitting team, and we couldn't do much."

The A's hit the fifth-most homers in the majors this season, but on Wednesday they scored their only run on a three-base throwing error and a sacrifice fly. They managed no extra-base hits off Charlie Morton and three relievers, which should not have been surprising: no pitching staff unplugs offense quite like Tampa Bay's.

The victory earned the Rays a trip to Houston's Minute Maid Park, where the mighty Astros await in an American League division series that starts Friday afternoon. Justin Verlander will start Game 1 for Houston, with Gerrit Cole lined up for Game 2 and Zack Greinke for Game 3. It is the most imposing top three pitching lineup in the majors.

"They're such a good team, they're so dynamic offensively and they probably have the best pitching staff," Pham conceded. "But we match up with them, pitching-wise, really well."

In the year of the homer, the Rays' staff was the best in the majors at keeping the ball in the park. Tampa Bay pitchers allowed only 181 home runs, compared to 230 by Houston pitchers. They also ranked third in strikeouts with 1,621, behind only the Astros and the Boston Red Sox.

"They have a lot of guys that throw really hard, and they're all different in their own right, which makes it difficult with how quick they are to the plate, how quick their arm is," Oakland's Mark Canha said of the Rays, after striking out twice on Wednesday. "Trying to have a different plan for each guy, you're just kind of spinning your wheels."

Only the Los Angeles Dodgers had a better earned run average than the Rays' 3.65. The Astros were just a point higher, and the best way to beat them is with the blueprint the Rays used here: the home run.

The Astros' staff allowed just 7.4 hits per nine innings, the fewest in the majors. But Verlander, Cole and Greinke did serve up 86 homers — 36 by Verlander, including one to the first batter he faced on opening day: the Rays' Austin Meadows. Cole allowed homers this season to Diaz and Ji-Man Choi, and Greinke to Meadows and Travis d'Arnaud.

"If we can provide enough offense to get ahead in the game and hand over the game to our bullpen, we have a shot," said the Rays' infielder Matt Duffy. "We rely on our pitching. That's our strength of our team. They're going to carry us most days."

Besides Morton, who threw nearly 200 innings, the Rays will probably not push anyone beyond 75 pitches. Tyler Glasnow will start Game 1 and Blake Snell Game 2, but both dealt with injuries for much of the second half, and neither reached five innings or 70 pitches in September.

Even so, the Rays will take what they can get: Glasnow had a 1.78 E.R.A. in 12 starts this season, and Snell beat out Verlander for the A.L. Cy Young Award last season.

"We have all the confidence in the world in our bullpen and our starting pitching," said the pitching coach, Kyle Snyder. "They've done a tremendous job all year — whether it's preventing home runs or striking people out. I feel like we can measure up very well against that club."

Though Morton needed 94 pitches to survive five innings on Wednesday, he pumped 98 mile-an-hour fastballs in the first inning and later induced two double plays. The A's managed no earned runs off Morton and looked feeble against the relievers Diego Castillo, Nick Anderson and Emilio Pagan, fanning eight times in the last four innings.

Anderson — a former independent leaguer who arrived from Miami in a trade this July — has struck out 45 of the 83 batters he has faced with the Rays. Pagan has thrived with impeccable control: 38 strikeouts and one walk since July 30.

“Look, the Rays match up as well as anybody in baseball, and they use their entire 25-man roster,” Melvin said. “They have terrific starting pitching. They have a great bullpen. They’re going to give any team a problem.”

In the Astros, though, the Rays will encounter an extreme contact team that also slugs. The Astros’ hitters had the fewest strikeouts and the highest slugging percentage in the majors this season — just as they did in 2017, when they won the World Series.

This Houston offense is even deeper, with the rookie slugger Yordan Alvarez and the All-Star Michael Brantley added to the core of Jose Altuve, Alex Bregman, Carlos Correa, Yuli Gurriel and George Springer. The Rays are used to facing powerful lineups in the A.L. East, but the Astros will be their toughest challenge.

“It’s going to take everything we’ve got to silence them,” said Chaim Bloom, the Rays’ vice president of baseball operations, as he watched his team celebrate in the clubhouse Wednesday night. “We’ve seen throughout the season and tonight, when our pitchers are on top of their game, we’ll put them up against anybody.”

*** *The USA Today***

David Ortiz will return to Fox for studio coverage during MLB playoffs

Chris Bumbaca

The David Ortiz comeback tour is coming to a television screen near you this month.

"Big Papi," who will be less than four months removed from suffering a life-threatening gunshot wound in his native Dominican Republic on June 9, will return to his role as an analyst during Fox's pre- and postgame MLB playoffs coverage on the network's properties, the network announced.

Ortiz faced an arduous recovery from the attack. The Boston Red Sox flew him from the Dominican to Boston so he could receive care at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, and he underwent a trio of operations while under care of the doctors. He made his first public appearance by throwing out the first pitch at a Red Sox home game at Fenway Park on Sept. 9.

On Tuesday, Ortiz hinted at his return by tweeting a picture of him on set with host Kevin Burkhardt and co-commentators Alex Rodriguez and Frank Thomas.