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*** *The Boston Globe***

Can Chaim Bloom do for the Red Sox what Andrew Friedman did for the Dodgers?

Peter Abraham

When the Red Sox hired Chaim Bloom as their chief baseball officer last month, they were following a road similar to the one traveled by the Dodgers in 2014 when they hired Andrew Friedman as president of baseball operations.

The Dodgers were a successful team but one with unrestrained spending habits. Their payroll as calculated for luxury-tax purposes was \$257.2 million in 2014 and swelled to a record \$297.9 million in 2015.

Friedman, the executive vice president of baseball operations for the Tampa Bay Rays, was hired to change how the Dodgers approached building their roster.

The Dodgers haven't won the World Series under Friedman, but they have averaged 97 victories and won two pennants over the last five seasons while rebuilding the farm system into one of the best in the industry.

They also got under the luxury-tax threshold in 2018 with a payroll of \$195 million. That snapped a streak of five seasons over the limit and a total of \$149.7 million paid to Major League Baseball in tax penalties.

The Dodgers dropped their payroll \$81 million over five years and improved on the field.

"It's finding that right balance between the disciplines of a smaller-market team coupled with having the financial might to make different type of deals," Friedman said.

"When I was with the Rays, and the Red Sox and Yankees were employing some small-market discipline while also having the financial might, I felt like I we had no chance of competing.

"When they were going out and trying to build through free agency, I felt like we would have an opportunity to be able to compete with them and be able to tighten it up and figure it out. When large-revenue teams find that right balance, it makes them dangerous."

That's what the Red Sox are seeking with Bloom, the kind of balance that will shield them from the position they're in now. It shouldn't necessarily take the highest payroll to win.

Better drafting, player development, and roster management should be part of the equation.

"For [the Red Sox] it's kind of similar to what it was for us: Trying to reach a point of sustainability [and] trying to add organizational depth," Friedman said. "I think there's a lot of parallels where we were then and where they are."

"Sustainability" is one of those buzzwords executives are throwing around now. It applies to the Red Sox in this sense: They have finished in first place four times in the last eight seasons and in last place three times.

Given their resources, the Red Sox shouldn't be lurching from one extreme to the other as often as they do.

Rays senior vice president of baseball operations Erik Neander expected the Red Sox would come after Bloom to change that.

“Selfishly speaking, if I had my choice, that wouldn’t have been my No. 1 destination for him,” Neander said. “It’s important to recognize the success the Red Sox have had. He’s going into a job where the previous three who held it all won a World Series.

“The standard of success and excellence that has been demonstrated there is incredibly high.”

Neander believes new leadership is more about creating the proper environment and far less than the transfer of institutional knowledge. The Rays don’t have a secret sauce, but they do have a willingness to explore creative ways to build a roster and develop players.

Their payroll limitations fostered innovation, and the players and coaches bought in.

“We just try to be real and try to be genuine with our intentions,” Neander said. “If you show up and put in the work and you’re thoughtful, the players respond well to that. They recognize that your intentions are aligned with theirs. There are no shortcuts.”

ROAD TO GLORY

Long before he was the general manager of the World Series champion Washington Nationals, Mike Rizzo was an amateur scout for the Red Sox.

He was with the Sox from 1992-98, initially hired by Lou Gorman, then working for Dan Duquette.

“I remember we had a very small but very experienced scouting staff,” Rizzo said. “It was an honor to be part of that group. We were very close and I learned a lot.”

Rizzo replaced Chuck Coney, a longtime scout who had a wooden leg and tirelessly worked the Midwest. Rizzo also became an advance scout for manager Kevin Kennedy and did some work internationally.

Rizzo said his big discovery was Shayne Bennett, a righthander from Australia who was pitching for a junior college in Illinois. The Sox drafted Bennett in 1993 and traded him to Montreal in ’96.

“Mike did a good job for us,” Duquette said. “We had a lot of older, established scouts at the time and were transitioning to some younger scouts.

“Mike worked hard and progressed a lot. We had a good system of player evaluation.”

Rizzo became scouting director of the Arizona Diamondbacks in 1998. He moved to the Nationals in 2006 as their assistant GM, then became GM three years later.

Another former Duquette scout with the Red Sox, Johnny DiPuglia, is Washington’s vice president of international operations.

“I’ve got to hand it to them,” Duquette said. “They had that slow start and came back because of that pitching staff. Good for Mike. He knew the value of top starting pitchers.”

SETTLING IN

Chaim Bloom has been on the job as Red Sox chief baseball officer for three weeks now. Has anything surprised him?

“Just being able to peer under the hood a little bit, I’m not surprised. What I’ve seen is a lot of the same type of internal conversations, the things that get kicked around,” he said. “A lot of that is very similar to what I’m used to when I was in Tampa Bay.

“Not a surprise given that I’m pretty proud of a lot of the things we did over there and I’m really impressed by [the Red Sox] group. Just seeing it and living it on a day-to-day basis, there are some new things and things I’ve thought of I’d like to add. But by in large, it’s very similar in a good way.”

Some staff changes will be inevitable, but that will likely happen over time. Angels GM Billy Eppler said he waited a full season when he got to Anaheim before making changes within baseball operations.

“That allows you to see how people work and you get a good feel for what is needed,” he said. “I wanted to evaluate everybody and see them in their roles.”

Bloom is expected to follow a similar route. In talking to baseball operations staffers, Bloom has made a good first impression at Fenway Park by dropping into meetings and encouraging a free flow of ideas.

A few other observations about the Red Sox:

- Infielder Marco Hernandez has started playing for Licey in the Dominican League. They’re using him as a second baseman.

Counting the minor leagues, Hernandez had 392 plate appearances this past season after returning from shoulder surgery. Playing for Licey will help him catch up.

Hernandez is a candidate for second base next season or could be developed as a utility player.

He hasn’t started playing yet, but Hanley Ramirez plans to join Licey in the coming weeks. Ramirez, who turns 36 in December, is hoping to return to the majors in 2020. He has played only 60 games the last two seasons and hit .230 with a .690 OPS.

- David Kronheim, who analyzes attendance trends, reports that the Sox drew 2,924,627 this past season, a 1 percent hike from 2018. But that included the two games in London against the Yankees.

For the 79 games at Fenway, the Sox averaged 35,518, down from 35,748 in 2018. The Sox filled 94.5 percent of Fenway’s seats. Only the Cardinals, at 96.6, were better.

- The Red Sox appear convinced that Chris Sale and David Price will be healthy and ready for spring training.

Price had a cyst removed from his left wrist, a minor procedure. His long-term status was never really in question. But Sale, who was shut down with elbow inflammation in August, is a different story.

General manager Brian O’Halloran said there are no red flags with Sale, but until the lefthander starts throwing again, it’s impossible to say the Sox can count on him.

Nathan Eovaldi is recovered from the issues that limited him to 12 starts in 2019, agent Seth Levinson said.

The issue for Eovaldi is durability. He has not pitched more than 124⅔ innings since 2015.

- The Orioles announced that all weeknight home games prior to Memorial Day and after Labor Day would begin at 6:35 p.m. next season. The Yankees also do this.

The Red Sox would be wise to follow suit. They averaged 3 hours, 25 minutes for games this past season. An earlier start would give folks a chance to get home before midnight.

It would mean switching 20 games next season.

- Alex Cora had plenty to celebrate for two years. He was bench coach of the champion Astros in 2017, then as a rookie manager led the Red Sox to another title.

He also put together a team for Puerto Rico that finished second in the World Baseball Classic and was instrumental in directing aid to his homeland following Hurricane Maria.

Now he's experiencing the flip side. The Sox fell into third place this past season and Dave Dombrowski, who hired him as manager, was fired. Then this past week Cora was interviewed by MLB regarding his role in the Astros using banned methods to steal signs.

It flipped on John Farrell in a hurry. But Cora does have a fan in Bloom.

"In the times we've talked, I'm completely impressed," Bloom said. "He's got the perfect personality and approach for his job."

ETC.

Scott Boras is the only agent who holds a news conference at the GM meetings and winter meetings. Make what you will of his bombast, but Boras did make some good points this past week.

Among them was the idea that teams are too eager to rebuild, believing that is the best path to competitiveness as opposed to being more aggressive in the free agent market.

"In the big world, when you go to the zoo and half the bears are asleep, you are not able to enjoy the zoo as it should be," he said.

Boras pins baseball's attendance drop on tanking. There were four 100-loss teams this past season, three in the American League. For aggressive teams such as the Astros, Red Sox, and Yankees, their home schedule is loaded with low-quality opponents unattractive to ticket-buying fans.

"In many ways the industry is in a competitive hibernation and the fans are reacting to it," Boras said. "We've got a decline in attendance. We've got owners charging more for [older] generations that want to see the game, yet we're losing a generation of the young people that only are interested in competition.

"They want to see teams play well and do well. And we have this hibernation period where I will be good for two or three years out of 10 and not be good for the other seven years."

Boras is in the business of creating a market for his clients. But he does have a sincere interest in the health of the game. He wants to see teams have an incentive for pursuing success, perhaps with draft picks.

"The system needs to be reevaluated," he said. "Our previous commissioner [Bud Selig] put rails on the system because he was very concerned that owners could not control themselves — luxury taxes and restraints on free agency."

Boras also feels teams rely too heavily on predictive systems that punish players in their late 20s and early 30s.

Boras traditionally is patient with his best clients, content to wait until February for the market to develop. But he predicts that the demand for starting pitchers — he represents Gerrit Cole, Hyun-Jin Ryu, and Stephen Strasburg — could change that approach this winter.

"The competition for all of the pitchers is very aggressive, probably the most aggressive I've seen," Boras said. "The reality of it is that those No. 1 kind of guys, and those special arms that take you through the playoff seas, you've got to have them."

Boras could be right about a run on pitching. A day after he spoke, the Braves signed closer Will Smith for three years and \$40 million with an option for a fourth season that would bring the deal to \$52 million.

Atlanta was willing to lose a draft pick to get a closer. No team was willing to do that for Craig Kimbrel last season, and he didn't sign with the Cubs until June 7.

Extra bases

Ben Cherington waited more than four years to get another shot at being a GM, and it will be for the low-budget Pirates. It could be a perfect match. Cherington excelled at the smaller moves when he ran the Red Sox from 2012-15, the 2013 team being his best work. The expensive decisions — signing players such as Rusney Castillo, Hanley Ramirez, and Pablo Sandoval — were his undoing. Cherington knows scouting and player development and that is what the Pirates need . . . The Cubs hired Mike Napoli as their quality assurance coach under new manager David Ross. Napoli is returning to baseball for the first time since 2017, when he played his final season. He has since delved into owning racehorses and investing in nightclubs. Napoli, now 38, should prove to be a good addition. He was a member of eight playoff teams in his 12 seasons and has an advanced baseball intellect . . . The Portland Sea Dogs will have their annual Hot Stove Dinner and Silent Auction at 5:30 p.m. on Jan. 15 at the Portland Sheraton at Sable Oaks in South Portland. Michael Chavis will be the featured guest. Tickets (\$80) are on sale now. Call (207) 879-9500 or go to seadogs.com. The event benefits the Maine Children's Cancer Program . . . Happy birthday to Gary Bell, who is 83. He was 12-8 with a 3.16 ERA for the 1967 Red Sox after being picked up in a June trade with Cleveland, and had eight complete games. He then appeared in three World Series games, getting the save in Game 6. Bell went to the Seattle Pilots in the expansion draft and started their first home game in 1969. He fired a shutout to beat the White Sox, and drove in two runs. Bell won 121 games over a 12-year career and is now retired in Texas.

Takeaway from the GM Meetings: Red Sox are open to anything

Alex Speier

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Four days in a fancy desert resort came and went without the Red Sox making major league transactions, but there was a clear takeaway: The roster-building efforts of the Red Sox will be very different entering 2020.

Two enormous factors play into that. First, their hope to scale back payroll means that after three offseasons defined largely by targeted additions that left most of the roster unaltered, they are very much open on trading core contributors.

Second, the arrival of chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom has changed completely the needs-based approach of roster-building.

Over the previous four offseasons, the Red Sox' roster-building was mostly dictated by holes. After the 2015 season, former president of baseball ops Dave Dombrowski said the Red Sox needed a front-of-the-rotation starter, a closer, and a fourth outfielder. Within weeks, he had signed David Price and Chris Young while trading for Craig Kimbrel. Aside from one additional move to round out the roster (dealing surplus starter Wade Miley for reliever Carson Smith), the work was done.

That direct formula — identify needs and address them — likewise characterized the following winters under Dombrowski.

In contrast, at this week's GM Meetings, Bloom and GM Brian O'Halloran declined to identify specific needs or a priority list. The entire roster is seen as changeable.

"I don't want to characterize it and compare it to past offseasons," said O'Halloran. "I would just say I'd expect it to be a very creative offseason, one where we'll explore every path available to us and try to create more paths that aren't currently available to us, and be open-minded on any way to achieve our short- and long-term goals, which is competing next year and sustaining that long term."

Many executives around the game remarked on what all of that might mean in an offseason in which the Red Sox have made clear their willingness to discuss trade scenarios involving virtually anyone on their roster.

Yes, the Sox are talking to agents about free agents, but most of those conversations are couched conditionally; it's possible the Sox would have interest down the road in Player X, but only if other precursor moves happen.

The trade possibilities may be more widespread than perceived. Several executives around baseball believe the Red Sox could find a market for their high-priced starters as long as they are willing to subsidize part of the contracts.

The free agent market features two incredible top-of-the-rotation talents in Gerrit Cole and Stephen Strasburg, along with strong second-tier options in Zack Wheeler, Madison Bumgarner, Dallas Keuchel, and Hyun-Jin Ryu. Still, there are plenty of teams looking for front-line starting, leaving multiple clubs convinced that the Red Sox could find trade markets for one or more of David Price, Chris Sale, and Nate Eovaldi.

With all three, the Sox likely would have to eat a sizable amount of salary — perhaps more than the \$24 million Arizona included to move the last two-plus years (and \$77 million) of Zack Greinke's contract to Houston at last year's deadline. Moreover, the Sox would be selling low after the pitchers' injuries and performance struggles in 2019. The availability of free agent alternatives would further suppress their value.

Two executives noted that the Red Sox might be able to get considerably more in a deal involving Price at the trade deadline than now, citing the Justin Verlander and Greinke deals with two-plus years of remaining control as precedents.

Even so, the deals with Greinke and Robinson Cano (dealt from the Mariners to the Mets last winter) underscore the notion that players who are perceived as all but immovable not only get dealt but can even, when their contracts are subsidized, fetch impressive prospect returns.

"If you're willing to be adjustable along the way, if the player has any appeal, or you're willing to be creative, you can move just about anybody," said Mariners GM Jerry Dipoto, noting that Seattle got an elite prospect (Jarred Kelenic) in the Cano deal.

"I would say most go into it trying to figure out how to make it more beneficial from a prospect standpoint or purely beneficial from a financial perspective."

"When someone asks a question like that — 'Is there no chance [of trading a player]?' — my brain doesn't go there; my brain says there's always a way," said Twins president of baseball operations Derek Falvey. "It's our job in the seats we sit in to try to figure out how to make that work."

One rival executive wondered whether the Sox would be willing to attach a young player such as Michael Chavis or Bobby Dalbec to Price to diminish the subsidy needed to deal him. But with the Red Sox focused on sustainability, they appear reluctant to give up such young, controllable players unless they get back similarly controllable players.

Most of the speculation has focused on whether the Sox will deal Mookie Betts. Some officials remain skeptical, feeling that the return for a superstar whose market would be limited by his anticipated \$28 million-\$30 million salary would be too modest to justify moving him. Whereas the Diamondbacks dealt Paul Goldschmidt to St. Louis last year with one year remaining on his contract, he was due "just" \$14.5 million.

Moreover, there was a general understanding that, unlike Betts, Goldschmidt was open-minded about an extension. Would the Cardinals have made a deal if Goldschmidt had made clear an unwillingness to consider an extension before he hit free agency?

“That,” said Cardinals president of baseball operations John Mozeliak, “would have been a problem.”

In other words, there’s a chance that teams will steer clear of Betts as a trade target given both his salary and the unlikelihood of extending him before he explores the open market next winter.

The offseason moves won’t be limited to the Red Sox’ most expensive players. Multiple teams consider Jackie Bradley Jr. an available trade target, and even wonder whether the Red Sox might non-tender him to clear his payroll from the books rather than paying him a salary in the vicinity of \$11 million.

In short, the futures of plenty of Sox players are open for discussion — in a way that raises more questions than answers about what next year’s roster will look like, or even what kind of players the Red Sox will pursue this offseason. Right now, they are a team still trying to identify and create numerous paths to move forward — and nowhere near identifying which one they will follow.

Bloom and O’Halloran met with Dustin Pedroia in Phoenix Thursday before leaving the GM Meetings . . . Sox prospect Noah Song touched 99 miles per hour and struck out two batters on sliders in a perfect eighth inning in the Premier12 tournament for Team USA in its 3-2 win over Chinese Taipei.

How should Chaim Bloom approach changing the Red Sox bullpen?

Alex Speier

It wasn’t hard to connect the dots. The Red Sox let Craig Kimbrel and Joe Kelly leave in free agency and didn’t sign anyone to replace them, their lone addition being a trade for Colten Brewer. The team’s 31 blown saves — second most in the majors — thus struck many as the inevitable byproduct of bullpen neglect.

But was the team’s reluctance to move aggressively in the free-agent relief market truly a mistake? The question hovers as one that can and should impact how the team approaches its relief corps for 2020.

Rewind. What happened to the free-agent relievers who were available last winter?

There were 20 free-agent relievers (excluding either lefty specialists such as Oliver Perez or swingmen such as Jesse Chavez) who signed guaranteed big league deals averaging roughly two years and \$14 million. Those 20 pitchers averaged about 45 innings with a 4.34 ERA, 10.0 strikeouts, and 4.4 walks per nine innings.

Would such a yield have upgraded the Red Sox bullpen? To answer that question, it’s worth noting that Heath Hembree and Ryan Brasier combined to average just under 48 innings with a 4.44 ERA along with 10.1 strikeouts and 3.7 walks per nine innings.

So where does that leave the Red Sox? Probably at least somewhat leery of major free-agent investments in relievers — though it’s worth noting that the Rays (when new Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom was still in Tampa Bay) made a run at signing Kimbrel before he went to Chicago, so no path can be ruled out. Still, the Rays did most of their bullpen assembly finding buy-low opportunities via the trade market.

Most members of the Red Sox front office saw the makings of a strong late-innings group by the end of 2019 – even while acknowledging that early-season reliever struggles (compounded by the unexpectedly low innings totals of the team’s starters) contributed to the team’s first-half struggles.

Brandon Workman (10-1, 1.88 ERA, 16 saves, 13.1 strikeouts per 9 innings, 5.7 walks per 9) – whom the Sox nearly released before the end of spring training over concerns about his velocity – held hitters to a

mind-blowing .123 average, .166 slugging mark, and .433 OPS while pitching in 73 games. He ranked among the best relievers in the game.

Matt Barnes (5-4, 3.78 ERA, 4 saves) had 26 holds (tied for 10th most in MLB) but also eight blown saves (tied for 2nd most), alternating brilliance with struggle, though his numbers were skewed in part by a June faceplant during which he was overused (15 appearances). He allowed 14 earned runs in 13 innings that month (9.69 ERA), and 13 in 51⅓ innings (2.28 ERA) for the rest of the year. He continues to possess elite stuff; his 38.6 percent strikeout rate ranked ninth among big league relievers, explaining why he was a popular subject of trade inquiries at the deadline.

The Red Sox viewed the emergence of Marcus Walden (9-2, 3.81 ERA, 8.8 strikeouts and 3.7 walks per 9 innings) and young lefties Josh Taylor (3.04 ERA, 11.8 strikeouts and 3.0 walks per 9) and Darwinzon Hernandez (4.45 ERA, 16.9 strikeouts and 7.7 walks per 9) as a considerable player development success. Taylor and Hernandez especially showed late-innings wipeout potential.

Hembree (3.86 ERA, 10.4 strikeouts and 4.1 walks per 9) was dominant for a stretch in May and June before elbow issues limited him down the stretch. Still, he continues to look like a solid middle-innings option who sometimes goes on the sort of roll to become a late-innings factor.

Brasier underscored the year-to-year volatility of reliever performances, proving unable to maintain the same magic that made him a late-innings weapon in the 2018 championship run. Brewer never demonstrated the control or command to unlock the full potential of his arsenal.

The Sox believe they have a number of options who offer the makings of a strong bullpen. Still, they'll look to add depth, as was the case with the waiver claim of lefty Josh Osich from the White Sox – a veteran who showed considerable promise while ditching a straight four-seamer in September and increasing his slider/changeup usage.

Other depth options on the 40-man roster underwhelmed in 2019. Travis Lakins didn't miss bats (6.9 strikeouts per nine innings), though his cutter limited hard contact. Among pitchers who shuttled between Boston and Pawtucket in the late-season, he is viewed as having the best shot of emerging as a future middle-innings option.

Mike Shawaryn got strikeouts (12.8 per 9 innings) but gave up five homers in just 20⅓ innings. Both he and sidearm Trevor Kelley allowed more than a run per inning. Lefty Bobby Poyner likewise had a tough season (6.94 ERA) when bumped up to Boston.

Lefty Brian Johnson and righties Hector Velazquez, Ryan Weber, Josh Smith all received spot start opportunities while also spending time as long men. Smith is now a free agent, and while Johnson, Velazquez, and Weber all remain on the 40-man roster, none is assured of a big league role.

Andrew Cashner and Jhoulys Chacin were mid-year acquisitions who are now free agents. Cashner did show interesting bullpen potential once moved out of the rotation, as his homer-prone tendencies as a Red Sox starter did not carry into relief.

The Red Sox will have some bullpen options with late-innings potential in their system. Righthander Tanner Houck likely will open 2020 in the rotation, but his two-seam fastball and slider could be strong bullpen attributes. Houck, a 2017 first-rounder, spent time as both a starter and reliever in 2019. Righthander Bryan Mata is the Red Sox' best upper-levels starting pitching prospect in several years, but his mid- to upper-90s two-seam fastball and slider/cutter likewise create the possibility of breaking into the big leagues as a reliever in 2020.

Righthander Durbin Feltman, a 2018 third-round pick, struggled badly in his first full pro season, spending all of it in Double-A Portland rather than making his anticipated leap through the upper levels of the minors, but if he can recapture his college form, he could emerge as a depth factor. Righty Eduard Bazarzo might command more attention if he was as big as his listed height of six feet. He features a tremendous

curveball, which he complements with a slider and a fastball that has topped out at 95 mph. It will be interesting to see if the Sox add him to the 40-man roster, and if not, if another team tabs him in the Rule 5 draft.

Lefty Yoan Aybar, just two seasons into his conversion from the outfield, remains raw, but his high-90s fastball with flashes of a swing-and-miss slider suggest a future big leaguer, though perhaps not in 2020.

RED SOX BULLPEN OUTLOOK

Primary 2019 relievers: RHP Brandon Workman, RHP Matt Barnes, RHP Marcus Walden, RHP Ryan Brasier, RHP Colten Brewer, LHP Josh Taylor, RHP Heath Hembree, LHP Darwinzon Hernandez

Expected 2020 relievers: See above.

Major league depth: RHP Trevor Kelley, RHP Travis Lakins, LHP Josh Osich, LHP Bobby Poyner, RHP Mike Shawaryn, RHP Hector Velazquez.

Prospects to watch: RHP Tanner Houck, LHP Yoan Aybar, RHP Eduard Bazarro, RHP Durbin Feltman, RHP Bryan Mata

Is this the year Ned Martin is honored with the Ford C. Frick Award?

Chad Finn

The Red Sox' storied tradition includes those who tell us about all of the memorable on-field moments right as they're happening.

Curt Gowdy, Ken Coleman, Ned Martin, Jon Miller, and Jim Woods are some of the legendary voices in Red Sox lore, some of the best ever to call a baseball game in any market and via any medium.

Yet only two broadcasters with Red Sox ties — Gowdy, who called their games from 1951-65 before becoming a national star at NBC Sports, and Miller, who spent the 1980-82 seasons alongside Coleman in the Red Sox booth — have received the Ford C. Frick Award, presented annually by the Baseball Hall of Fame to a broadcaster for "his contributions to baseball."

Mel Allen and Red Barber were the first two recipients in 1978. A single winner has been selected in each year following, meaning that 43 broadcasters have received the honor. It's still a fairly exclusive club.

Even still, Martin (who called Red Sox games from 1961-92, first on radio through 1978 and then TV from '79 on) and Coleman (1966-74 on television, 1979-89 on radio) already rate as oversights. That's how good they were, how smooth, how synonymous with Red Sox summers.

Heck, Coleman deserves to make it on one chill-inducing call alone, during rookie pitcher Billy Rohr's improbable quest for a no-hitter during the magical summer of 1967: "[Yastrzemski] dives . . . and makes a TREMENDOUS catch!"

The Hall of Fame has a chance to right one of those oversights on Dec. 11, when the Frick winner will be announced at the Winter Meetings in San Diego.

Martin is among the eight finalists, who also include current Red Sox radio voice Joe Castiglione, Ken Harrelson (also a former Sox broadcaster in the '70s but best known for his time with the White Sox), Jacques Doucet, Pat Hughes, Tom Hamilton, Mike Shannon, and Dewayne Staats. Martin is the only candidate that is deceased.

Coleman, who has been a finalist in the past, is not this year. The Frick award has three categories that rotate every three years: current major league markets (team-specific announcers, which is this year's

category), national voices, and broadcasting beginnings. Coleman has been a candidate in this year's category.

Castiglione, ever gracious, said he was happy to be nominated but recognizes that some Red Sox broadcasters of the past remain overdue.

"It is quite an honor. They're all worthy candidates, so it's sort of a long shot, but it's nice to be mentioned. It's very gratifying," said Castiglione, who has been in the Red Sox radio booth since 1983.

He worked for seven years with Coleman, his mentor who helped bring Castiglione to Boston from Cleveland. He was also good friends with Martin, with whom he traveled for a decade when Martin was doing TV.

"I would love to see them both honored," said Castiglione. "They both deserve it, and they've both been nominated before."

Jerry Remy, who grew up listening to Martin on the radio and broke in as a broadcaster alongside him in 1988, said he hopes this is the year.

"I have no idea how they go about voting for this," said Remy. "But I'm really surprised he's not in there already when I look at some of the names that are in. I hope that he gets in."

The 14-person committee that decides the honoree is made up of 11 past winners — among them Vin Scully, Bob Costas, and Bob Uecker — one media writer, and three baseball broadcasting historians.

Remy said Martin was a product of a mostly bygone era, one that should be appreciated.

"I used to listen to all the games on the radio as a kid growing up," he said. "They weren't on TV much in those days. We used to hear him a lot. One of the big thrills for me was when I was with the Angels and we came to Boston and he wanted to interview me on the pregame show. That was a thrill for me. Holy [expletive], Ned Martin wants to interview me.

"There were guys in those days where you turned the game on and you knew immediately who the announcer was. The voice was so familiar. You knew that when you turned on the Red Sox game, you'd get Ned Martin, or Jim Woods, or Ken Coleman. We still have that here with Joe [Castiglione], who is so familiar, but now in a lot of places, so many guys are a dime a dozen.

"You turn them on and they all sound the same. There are certain events that you turn on, like with Doc Emrick for example with hockey, you turn him on, right away you know it's going to be a good hockey game. That's how I felt about Ned."

Martin was part of Red Sox broadcasts for 32 years. The 2020 season will be Remy's 33d, but he remembers how kind Martin was to him as a fledgling broadcaster just a few years removed from the playing field.

"It was great for me to work with a guy like him right out of the chute," said Remy. "Because when you're a guy like me with no experience at all, and you're working with someone who had been doing that job so well for so many years and whose personality is so laid-back, it made it much easier. He was really great, even though he was getting older then. I think he should be in there [as a Frick honoree], and I'm kind of surprised he's not."

Tuning in

The post-Kyrie Irving, kumbaya Celtics have won 10 straight after Friday's victory at Golden State, and their early success and restored likability has led to some impressive ratings on NBC Sports Boston. The network's Celtics broadcasts are up 29 percent in household rating over the 2018-19 regular-season average, and up 31 percent in adults 25-54 over last season. Wednesday's 140-133 win over Isaiah Thomas

and the Wizards was the highest-rated game of this season or last, including the playoffs. That game drew a 4.6 rating. Celtics broadcasts have ranked No. 1 in the Boston market in the male and adult demographics three times this season.

It is also seeing increased success with streaming — the past two games prior to Friday cracked the top five Celtics broadcasts all time on NBC Sports Boston in total minutes streamed.

* **MassLive.com**

Alex Cora-Astros sign stealing: Red Sox manager is admittedly proud of his gamesmanship, did it cross the line?

Matt Vautour

Somewhere in an elaborate video room, someone is evaluating key moments of the Boston Red Sox 2018 postseason hunting for evidence of sign stealing.

Maybe it's at MLB headquarters. Maybe it's in Houston where somebody is hoping to find another guilty team to disperse the outrage. Maybe it's at Chavez Ravine or in the Bronx where the Dodgers or Yankees are hoping to find some proof that their postseason losses were the result of something untoward.

Was there a loud bang before Eduardo Nuñez's World Series Game One home run on a slider at his feet? If there was, it wasn't audible on the TV broadcast. Was there somebody signaling in the bullpen?

Alex Cora, who was the bench coach in Houston in 2017, has been implicated in the elaborate sign-stealing allegations against the Astros for that season.

If he was involved in Houston the logical next question will be whether he brought his methods with him to Boston. There's been no evidence of it. But people will be hunting for it now.

If Cora was guilty of anything in Houston, it's hard to believe MLB could do too much to him. He was the bench coach then. Manager A.J. Hinch has more to worry about. There's almost nothing tangible at stake for the Red Sox in the Astros investigation. But if they find something in Boston in 2018, it's hard to tell what they'll do for punishment. This isn't the NCAA where wins get retroactively erased. Nobody is getting banned from the game. So fines and suspensions seem the most likely. Draft pick penalties seem harsher than Major League Baseball is likely to go.

But whatever they choose, that team's legacy will come under scrutiny. Right now that team is statistically one of the best teams in both franchise and MLB history. But introduce proof of cheating or even enough rumors about cheating and it'll be forever tainted.

It doesn't matter that the 2018 Red Sox were terrific on the road in the playoffs and that Cora masterfully put pitchers in positions to be successful. If they cheated even a little, he'll be labeled a cheater.

Cora might not have done anything, but his own words from the 2018 playoffs don't exactly make him look like someone who wouldn't even consider being involved. Cora never mentions using technology but he has admitted he not only tries to decipher signs but is proud of being good at it. There's a thin moral line between gamesmanship and cheating. After the Astros were loosely accused of illegal sign-stealing methods during that postseason, Cora was asked about it.

"I know there's a lot of people here that, they know my reputation about stealing signs or (recognizing) tipping pitches and all that stuff. I learned that when I was playing winter ball, 1997, or hanging out with my brother in winter ball -- Robby Alomar, Sandy Alomar, Joey Cora," Cora said. "That's part of the game -- tippers, stealing signs from second, coaches moving. That's what I said yesterday, we're playing in an

era of paranoia. When a hitter takes a good slider, either he was tipped by a coach or the pitcher was tipping his pitches.”

At the same press conference he added:

“I talked about it in my first press conference with the Red Sox. We’re going to win some games, and we will steal some games because the game will dictate what we do,” he said. “And if we have a chance to steal a game, we’ll do it. We’ll do it.”

He was asked what the Astros did while he was there and his memory got fuzzy fast.

“Honestly, I don’t remember too much about it. One thing for sure, us, as a staff, we prepared. And I’m not talking about cameras or whatever people were thinking,” he said. “We also look at the video and try to take a competitive advantage. And that’s been going on forever.”

Cora is helped too by the fact that other than Nuñez’s home run, most of their big postseason home runs came on the road, where it would be much harder to steal signs. Obviously sign-stealing can lead to more than home runs. The Red Sox also struggled at Fenway compared to the road in 2019. If stealing signs were part of his success in 2018, it seems hard to think they’d have stopped in 2019.

Either way, if it happened, it’s unlikely to stay a secret for long now.

* **WEEI.com**

The Sunday Baseball Column: How committing to a Mookie Betts deal might work

Rob Bradford

The Red Sox have been clearly willing to go down what can be an uncomfortable path, that of giving one player the kind of annual average salary that might make up a small market team’s entire payroll. Offers along those lines have been made to Mookie Betts.

As good of a player as Betts is, such a maneuver is one of the most difficult decisions an organization will have to make.

Last offseason three general managers were faced with similar situations, getting the go-ahead from their respective ownership groups to allocate history-making money to one foundational player. For Philadelphia’s Matt Klentak, San Diego’s A.J. Preller and Billy Eppler of the Angels this was the kind of moment that can make-or-break an organization and a baseball operations chief’s tenure in the big seat.

So when the deals were done for Bryce Harper (13 years, \$330 million), Manny Machado (10 years, \$300 million) and Mike Trout (12 years, \$426 million) a specific thought process -- one which was hatched years before the actual signings -- had offered the base for each contract. Talking to WEEI.com at the GM Meetings, the three executives explained the ins and outs when it came to making this same sort of decision the Red Sox are currently staring at:

KLENTAK

"I would be willing to bet it’s different for every team because it’s obviously very dependent on your own individual organization and the circumstance. For us signing Harper, for example, we viewed it as a couple of things taking into consideration. One was the competitive timeline of our major league team which we still feel is heading in the right direction. Two is the relative youth of the player. Harper was entering his Age 26 season. Thirteen years is a long time but among those years are a lot of prime years. There is a lot that goes into it. You want to make sure your market and your revenues can support fielding a team around that player. I think if you have one marquee superstar controlling too high of your payroll that can be a little

bit of a challenge. Maybe not for everybody. But those are the things you want to think through. Also how that player is going to fit in that market. If you're going to make that kind of commitment to that player, there are enough challenges in baseball already you would like to make sure you're eliminating some of them if you can just by doing your due diligence of the player and his makeup and how he would potentially fit on your club. Even having said that anytime you're signing a player to a guaranteed contract you know there are some risks. You know over the course of a player's career there are likely going to be injuries, and there are likely going to be good years and bad years. You just have to bake that into your decision-making process."

PRELLER

"Each situation is a little bit different. For us, with the last offseason with Manny, the farm system allows us to have some of those conversations. You talk about a percentage of payrolls, it depends on where you're coming from. When you're coming from a lower base it gives you the flexibility to consider somebody like that. We're projecting we're going to have some of those players in those 0-3 years and producing. I think all of that factors in. You understand you have to put a whole team around a player, so it wasn't just about Manny Machado. You look up and you have a (Fernando) Tatis or a (Chris) Paddock and more guys who are coming up through the system who are going to be with us during a six or seven-year period with some type of control and some type of salary certainty.

"Manny asked a lot about (prospects). We sat down with myself, his wife and Manny in Miami and we talked for five or six hours. That was a big part of his conversation. His questions to us were asking about the big picture, the plan, the goal. His agent Dan Lozano also represents Fernando Tatis and he had met him at the futures game so he was aware of a few of those guys. Danny also represented Logan Allen. So he was aware of a few of those guys. We wanted to paint the picture that this wasn't going to be just himself and a bunch of unknown players. We believe in these guys. We believe we're also going to have the ability to add payroll over the next few years which ownership was committed to. That was all part of the conversations and the process of recruiting Manny."

EPPLER

"How does a player contribute to a team. Availability and productivity, right? If he's available, taking innings and taking plate appearances, what have you, that's good. That helps him contribute. And then productivity. How good is he when you're giving him those things. When you're giving him those innings and those plate appearances. Looking at it from that vantage point, somebody who can be available, that's part of the player's contribution and the player's value.

"We weren't going to build by trading Cole (Calhoun), trading (Clayton) Richards, trading (Andrew) Heaney, trading (Tyler) Skaggs. We weren't going to do that. That wasn't going to be the game-plan. That wasn't what the Angels represented. That wasn't what the brand represented. That also would have been fair to our fans. It wouldn't have been fair to Mike. It wouldn't have been fair to Arte. But we knew it was going to take a while to build a farm system. Players at the top of the farm system and emerging in the major leagues, they carry a lot of value with other clubs. You look at prospect value and financial capital. I think it opens ourselves up to a lot more possibilities than we may have had if we would have traded those players a couple of years back when they were in A Ball. Now they're starting to blossom and get some national recognition or if we would have signed multi-year deals, which would have blocked having financial maneuverability. I look at us being more flexible and armed than the last three or four years."

"When we went through this in spring training Mike mentioned some of our prospects by name in his press conference. If I was one of those names mentioned that would be a pretty cool thing. I think he felt there was going to be reinforcement with that group and that gave him confidence where the organization is headed in that moment and time. What we do is look at how this player would expect to perform over the life of the contract, over particular segments of the contract. If you look at payrolls year by year ... We would look at who was coming up in the system, what our flexibility could be, what that player would be producing for us. The baseball operations chair is just one viewpoint. There is a business viewpoint. There is an ownership viewpoint. When a player is drafted, developed and signed by an organization ... We are

his baseball home. Everybody kept bring up East Coast, East Coast, East Coast. That's great. That's where he goes and watches his football games, does his hunting and those things. But we're his baseball home, that's it."

So, how does all of this translate for the Betts situation?

One thing that jumps out is how the farm system impacts this whole equation. If Betts takes the approach of these other players and prioritizes the sustainability of the Red Sox' roster for years to come that might not necessarily be a good thing. It is universally believed that the Sox' best hope at finding impact young talent resides in the lower levels of the minors, leading to more uncertainty.

The ability of the Red Sox to keep their payroll manageable while locking in talent around Betts is also somewhat of a mystery. Xander Bogaerts can opt-out of his current deal and there is a reason the Red Sox want to lock up Rafael Devers to an extension.

Between financial flexibility and prospect capital, Philadelphia, San Diego and Los Angeles could claim more sustainable blueprints than what Betts would be buying into. It's just another piece of what figures to be perhaps the Red Sox' most important offseason puzzle.

A CLUE TO BASEBALL'S CHEATING DRAMA

By now you are familiar with the story written by The Athletic's Evan Drellich and Ken Rosenthal regarding the Astros' alleged use of electronic sign stealing in 2017. The concern in baseball is that this was an example of how technology can be -- and has been -- leveraged in ways that should make everyone in the game uncomfortable.

But while the focus is rightfully on what the Astros might have done in 2017, one strategy employed by the Red Sox the following year offered a clue to how such maneuvering was being viewed throughout baseball.

During a June series in 2018 in Houston it was noticeable that both the Astros and Red Sox were using multiple sets of signs with nobody on base. When asked why after the series' second game catcher Christian Vazquez told WEEI.com, "Because there are cheaters out there."

As it turned out, the Red Sox had suspected teams were using electronic (or other) methods -- beyond just relaying info from runners on second base -- since early in the season, having started the strategy of multiple signs with nobody on during a late-April series in Toronto.

"We talked about it spring training, being smart about things," said then-pitching coach Dana LeVangie. "We didn't (execute the strategy at the start of the season). We probably should have, but we didn't. We're just trying to eliminate that one big hit, which could be a three-run home run. If they're stealing signs or whatever, we're ahead of it."

Something to think about as we wait for the fallout from The Athletic's report.

A WORD ABOUT MY MVP VOTING

So, this is what I submitted for the Top 10 in the American League MVP voting: 1. Alex Bregman, 2. Mike Trout, 3. Xander Bogaerts, 4. Marcus Semien, 5. DJ LeMahieu, 6. Rafael Devers, 7. Mookie Betts, 8. Matt Chapman, 9. George Springer, 10. Nelson Cruz.

While some of the picks weren't in line with the consensus Top 10, the disparity was in line with the majority of other voters. The two biggest debates from my vantage point? I was the only one who voted Bogaerts as high as No. 3 (where Semien finished) and some had a hard time slotting in Devers before Betts.

On further review ... I stand by my order of preference.

Semien was a WAR (Wins Above Replacement) darling, coming in at 7.6 compared to Bogaerts' 6.8. He was considered a better defender at shortstop and played in all 162 regular-season games. But when it comes to impacting games, it is hard for me to pick the Oakland star over Bogaerts. It's close, but ...

Bogaerts: 155 games, .309 batting average, 110 runs, 190 hits, 33 HR, 117 RBI, .939 OPS, 85 XBH, 11 GW RBI, 341 total bases.

Semien: 162 games, .285 batting average, 123 runs, 187 hits, 33 HR, 92 RBI, .892 OPS, 83 XBH, 5 GW RBI, 343 total bases.

As for Devers over Betts, I also look at how one player impacted games more than the other. Sorry, but a hit is more important than a walk before more positive things can happen when you come away with the former instead of the latter. And while Betts' 6.6 WAR is .7 better than Devers, and the right fielder is certainly a more impactful defender, the offensive disparity is hard to get past.

Devers: 156 games, .311 batting average, 129 runs, 201 hits, 32 HR, 115 RBI, .916 OPS, 90 XBH, 16 GW RBI, 359 total bases.

Betts: 150 games, .295 batting average, 135 runs, 176 hits, 29 HR, 80 RBI, .916 OPS, 74 XBH, 11 GW RBI, 313 total bases.

THE BEN CHERINGTON REMINDER

Cherington deserved another chance, and he's getting one. Four-plus years after being let go by the Red Sox he has landed as the chief baseball operations guy for the Pirates.

While Cherington was with the Red Sox there were two primary knocks on how he managed: 1. He was too methodical; 2. There were a couple of bad free agent signings.

Taking the second one first, in fairness to Cherington the power structure when Hanley Ramirez and Pablo Sandoval were brought in -- along with the decision regarding Jon Lester -- was confusing, with few able to identify if the decisions were being pushed by ownership, then-President Larry Lucchino or Cherington and his group.

As for Cherington's methodical nature, it sometimes led to holding on to prospects that probably shouldn't have been prioritized. But there are a few cases -- as pointed out in Alex Speier's excellent book "Homegrown" -- where the former GM saved the day with his decisions to not deal.

The one that jumps out is a reluctance to trade Mookie Betts to Milwaukee during the 2013 season for reliever Francisco Rodriguez. Or include Betts in the three-way trade that ultimately reeled in Jake Peavy. Considering we were talking about a diminutive minor-league second baseman who played a position the Red Sox were seemingly set at for years to come, dealing Betts at the time wouldn't have raised many eyebrows. But this where the ability to fight off the allure of the here and the now can't be understated.

It was an approach put on display again when Cole Hamels was on the market, with Cherington unwilling to discuss either Betts or Bogaerts with the Phillies.

The balance of falling in love with the prospects a team drafts and develops and knowing when to let go was a topic recently broached by Red Sox Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom on the Bradfo Sho podcast:

"Like it or not, these decisions will find you. And you're much better off recognizing that up-front and recognizing if you allude one today it might come back some other form tomorrow or might come back in a form you can't control or you missed an opportunity or you were late with something. ... I think the best way to think of it as you want to have a good process with everything you do as much as you can. It will never be perfect and shouldn't be perfect. We should always want to improve it. But if you believe in your

process I think you have a way of making these decisions a little more calmly and rationally. You're always going to be gritting your teeth a little bit with a lot of them. But you can feel confident that you're accessing everything the right way and doing what's best for the future of the organization.

"To some degree, you're going to (overvalue your prospects). As much as you try and control for it there is a lot of pride for the players you develop yourself and there should be. ... I do think it's a factor with every club and it's basically impossible to fully detach from it."

SOME OTHER THOUGHTS ...

- Word out of the GM Meetings was that the J.D. Martinez decision to opt-in really wasn't that difficult a decision for the Red Sox' slugger, hardly coming down to the wire.

- A small lunch place next to the pool at the Omni Scottsdale offered an interesting sight Monday. With the exception of a few patrons, the list of customers was made up of current and former Red Sox executives. At one table was the team's current group -- Chaim Bloom, Brian O'Halloran, Eddie Romero, Zack Scott and Raquel Ferriera. Then there was the Arizona contingent consisting of Mike Hazen, Jared Porter and Ariel Sawdaye. Also, there was Jared Banner and Allard Baird of the Mets, with the Cubs' Theo Epstein and Jason McLeod trickling in. (Paul Epsten, Theo's brother, was also in attendance for good measure.) There was, however, no sign of Dave Dombrowski.

- Those in the Red Sox' front office would have liked Tony La Russa to stay, and he certainly had the opportunity to do so. But the question that led La Russa to Anaheim involved what exactly the Hall of Famer's role with the Red Sox would be without his longtime friend Dombrowski running the show.

*** *NBC Sports Boston***

Three teams, 7 players, 1 home run: What complicated trade tells us about Red Sox's Chaim Bloom

John Tomase

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Chaim Bloom impressed Red Sox ownership during his interview by dissecting a handful of deals with the Rays that revealed the kind of creativity John Henry wanted to add to Boston's front office.

One was the pursuit of Charlie Morton, Houston's All-Star right-hander, who received one of the biggest pitching contracts in Tampa history at a modest two years and \$30 million. The 35-year-old rewarded Tampa's faith with a third place finish in the Cy Young Award voting.

Another was a complicated three-way trade with the A's and Rangers that sent second baseman Jurickson Profar to Oakland, prospects to Texas, and reliever Emilio Pagan to the Rays. A compensatory pick and international bonus money changed hands, too, for good measure.

It is that second deal and its many moving parts that caught the eye of Red Sox chairman Tom Werner.

"We studied decisions that they made and we were impressed," Werner said. "The total decision-making was impressive. They went out in the free agent market and got Charlie Morton. They made a great three-way trade for Pagan. You can just go up and down that roster and say they found talent in very creative ways."

So how did it happen? The four executives primarily involved — Texas GM Jon Daniels, Oakland counterpart David Forst, and the Tampa duo of Bloom and GM Erik Neander — weighed in from the GM meetings this week. Their observations and recollections shed light on the kind of decision-maker Bloom will be in Boston — nimble, inventive, and connected.

"Very smart and very creative," Forst said. "I've always respected Chaim. He has always dealt honestly with us and been up front."

Merely reading the summary of the trade illustrates its complexity. The A's sent Pagan and a competitive balance pick to Tampa, and infielder/outfielder Eli White and international bonus money to the Rangers. The Rangers sent minor league pitcher Rollie Lacy to the Rays and received three prospects in return: left-handers Brock Burke and Kyle Bird, and right-hander Yoel Espinal, which helped Tampa relieve a roster crunch.

Got all that? Good. The first thing worth noting is that most three-way deals are born of failure, and this was no exception.

"Typically, they don't happen overnight," Neander said. "I don't think anyone's seeking that. There's a sincere interest in finding common ground between two clubs. You run the well dry, and then it's like, 'All right, do we have any other business going on that we could introduce to this negotiation to find a way to get over the finish line?' And that's effectively what happened."

The trade started with Daniels, who played the role of go-between. The A's wanted Profar to be their everyday second baseman, but they lacked the pieces to complete a deal on their own. Because Daniels had maintained regular contact with the Tampa front office — primarily Neander — he knew the Rays wanted Pagan, a hard-throwing reliever who hadn't quite put it together in his first two seasons. And the Rays knew which prospects Daniels valued, primarily Burke.

"Jon Daniels was in the middle," Forst said. "All we knew was there was a team on the other side. Everything went through Jon. We talked to him about Profar and Pagan and the comp pick, and he said, 'Look, to be up front, some of these pieces are going elsewhere.' Anytime you have a three-team deal, sometimes everybody knows, but a lot of times there's kind of a middle manager working both sides. So Jon deserves a lot of credit for working with us and working with Chaim and Erik on that side."

Were 2018 Red Sox the best MLB team of the decade?

The deal would not have happened without steady communication, a skill Bloom will bring to Boston.

"They've always done a good job of constant dialogue over the year," Daniels said of Bloom and Neander. "Not just trade deadline. Not just winter meetings. Constant dialogue, understanding what your goals are, being up front about their goals. It's where I think they have a lot of information. The way they've built their club, they have a heavy-transactional process, if that's what you want to call it, and more information allows them to make better decisions. Sometimes you'll deal with a club and you'll feel like it's one-way, that they're just pulling information out. I've always felt good dealing with them that it's two-way. They want to know what you're looking at, but they're also happy to share what their goals are."

Added Bloom: "I think a lot of that fell out of our organization having good communication with both organizations, but especially with Texas, who was trying to broker it."

Striking a deal is only half the battle, though. The Rays had to identify the right target, and in Pagan, they hit a home run. Tampa represented his third team in three years, and he was coming off a so-so 2018 that saw him go 3-1 with a 4.35 ERA while flashing intermittent command.

But he blossomed in Tampa. His max velocity jumped from 96 to 99 mph and he ended up posting a career-low 2.31 ERA while saving 20 games and striking out a career-best 12.3 batters per nine.

"He stood out as someone who had a chance to have a little more success than he'd had to date," Bloom said. "We knew towards the end of the season that that harder breaking ball was coming into play more. I don't think any of us, if we're being honest, could have expected that he'd turn in the season that he did. That just speaks to getting a great result from hopefully a good and rigorous process."

The Rays preach organizational humility — it's why they might be the worst team in the league at stealing signs, because it's simply not part of their culture — and they'd be the first to note that they got a little lucky with Pagan, who actually opened the season in Triple-A. But they saw an opportunity for growth if he could reshape his breaking ball, a hard slider that he throws with more of a cutter grip, and the results were tremendous.

"I'm not at all surprised that the Rays got themselves involved," Forst said. "We always felt like we and the Rays see things similarly in how we evaluate players. We didn't like giving up Pagan — I didn't know he was going to be throwing 99 and closing games — but we liked Pagan and obviously there's value in the comp pick. So not surprised at all that Chaim and Erik had their fingers in our business."

The comp pick presented its own challenges, because it cannot be traded more than once and thus had to move as part of one big deal. Awarded to the smallest-market and lowest-revenue teams, this particular pick landed at No. 40 overall, the area of the draft where Tampa had previously nabbed stalwarts like All-Star Carl Crawford and Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell. The Rays used the pick on college right-hander Seth Johnson, allowing them to build for the future even as they hoped Pagan would help in the present.

Speaking of which, when Forst discovered Tampa was the third team in the deal, did he pause to question what he and his own evaluators had missed?

"Absolutely," he admitted. "There's a number of teams we feel that way about, where they pick up a player and you go, 'Huh, should we have been involved?' It's not unique to Tampa, but they're a team that we see similar to us in the way they operate."

The Pagan trade is the kind of move the Red Sox will have to make to remain competitive with ownership intent on slashing payroll. Fortunately, they now employ one of its architects.

"Chaim will do really well, because at the end of the day, he's consistent, he communicates well, it's clear," Neander said. "He's trustworthy. There's no agenda. The purpose of the call is whatever's laid out. These relationships are built on trust, and he's someone that can be trusted."

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Onus on Rob Manfred to get game in order; Cherington returns; Bloom readies alternate approach

Sean McAdam

Major League Baseball already had plenty on its plate.

The relationship between labor and management is, by most accounts, the worst it's been in a quarter century. Attendance has dipped across the sport for three straight years. Efforts to quicken the pace of play have largely been unsuccessful. And the industry is at a loss to explain the dramatic increase in home runs this past year, despite the rather obvious explanation that the baseballs — manufactured by a company now owned by MLB — have quite obviously changed.

Add to that a criminal investigation that an employee of the Los Angeles Angels may have helped contribute to the shocking death of Tyler Skaggs this past summer, the revelation that one of its umpires threatened violence over a political matter and an ugly bit of misogynistic clubhouse bullying on the part of a Houston front office executive and it's been rough sledding for Major League Baseball.

And then, this past week, it actually got worse.

Extensive evidence and first-hand accounts seemed to clearly demonstrate that one of the sport's most successful franchises, the Houston Astros, participated in a scheme in which camera and video monitors inside Minute Maid Park helped the home team decode opponents' signs in 2017, and, perhaps, beyond. (The Astros, while a wildly talented team, went 60-21 at home in 2019).

MLB is now conducting an exhaustive investigation of the matter, interviewing current and former players and coaches. Red Sox manager Alex Cora, who served as the Astros' bench coach when they won the World Series in 2017, has already been interviewed, as has current Sox bullpen coach Craig Bjornson, who held the same role in Houston for a number of seasons.

This isn't the first instance of teams using technology to gain illegal advantages. The Sox were caught using Apple Watches in 2017, and the Yankees were found to have been using a camera to sneak a peek at catchers' signs in 2017. The issue was essentially laughed off in 2017 and both teams were fined. In retrospect, that was a significant mistake by the game, which missed an opportunity to make a statement and set precedent by assessing only fines.

But recall that commissioner Rob Manfred warned that future transgressions — by those two teams or any others — would not be dealt with so lightly. And Manfred is reported to be livid about this more recent discovery, with ESPN.com reporting that the severity of penalties “could be unlike anything seen in the sport's recent history.”

It's impossible to know what that could mean. Loss of draft picks? Monstrous fines? Lengthy suspensions? Even long-term (or lifetime) bans?

One MLB source noted ominously: “They're clearly taking it very seriously.”

In other words, the ramifications will go far deeper than a \$50,000 fine, a relative slap on the wrist.

And that's as it should be.

While Manfred's legacy as commissioner may depend more on how he navigates the perilous labor path between now and the expiration of the current collective bargaining agreement and whether he can effect meaningful gains in the sport's turgid pace of play, everyone will be watching closely on this one.

After all, Manfred is being confronted with an issue that impacts the game's integrity. The absolute worst thing that can happen to any sport is having paying customers doubt the authenticity of the outcome. If you leave a ballpark wondering if the victorious team won fairly and squarely, then you've lost the central appeal of the sport: namely, competition.

Fans go to — and watch — games because of the uncertainty surrounding the final result. The games aren't scripted, the winners and losers unknown. That's central to the game's appeal: we don't know what's going to happen.

However, if fans have reason to doubt that what they witnessed wasn't on the up-and-up, the game suffers irreparable harm.

That goes double given that baseball dips its toes into legalized gambling. The last thing such a venture needs are questions about the integrity of the competition.

As for Cora's liability in all of this, we shall see.

It would seem unlikely — to say nothing of unjust — for MLB to punish someone now employed elsewhere for misdeeds from more than two years ago. There would be two exceptions: if Cora is found to have devised the illegal system himself; or, if he chose to take the same system with him to Boston and has been operating a similar scheme in Fenway the last two seasons.

Both possibilities, needless to say, would seem remote.

It's the Astros in the crosshairs here. The organization has a well-earned reputation for arrogance in the way it operates, a point driven home with since-dismissed assistant GM Brandon Taubman reprehensible behavior during the ALCS, and further illustrated by the club's insistence that a Sports Illustrated account was fabricated. The Astros had to be shamed into firing Taubman, then belatedly apologized to the author of the SI story.

Now, this. More than a few teams will be rooting for Manfred to throw the proverbial book at the Astros. Given what's at stake, they might have it coming.

Congratulations to Ben Cherington, who Friday became the new GM of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Ironically, Cherington replaced the fired Neil Huntington, who, like Cherington, is a native of New Hampshire and attended Amherst College. In fact, Cherington worked for Huntington when they both were with the Cleveland Indians.

Cherington's job will not be an easy one. The Pirates are, frankly, a mess. Consider that in the last two months, they fired manager Clint Hurdle mere days after Hurdle said he had been given assurances he would return for the 2020 season. Next out the door was president Frank Coonelly, followed five days later by Huntington. The Pirates remain the only major league team without a manager.

But it's worse than that. The Pirates season featured several physical altercations between players and staff members and the ugly news that closer Felipe Vazquez was arrested for having sex with a 13-year-old Florida girl.

The Pirates had a three-year run from 2012-2015 in which they qualified for the playoffs as a wild-card entrant, but that brief window of contention represents the only three winning seasons for the franchise this century. They last finished in first place in 1992.

Worse, the Pirates rank among the smallest-spenders in the game, having never had a payroll of \$100 million or more. And despite playing in one of the game's crown jewels (PNC Ballpark) have failed to reach two million in attendance in any of the last three seasons.

In Cherington, however, they have landed someone whose strength lies in player development. Cherington helped build a World Series winner for the Red Sox in 2013 and his minor league system helped stock the 2018 championship team. He was crudely shoved aside in August of 2015 when impatient Sox ownership decided to bring in Dave Dombrowski for a quick-fix. Stripped of any power, Cherington resigned and has worked for the Toronto Blue Jays for the last three years.

In Pittsburgh, Cherington won't be asked to deliver a contender immediately. Instead, he'll be tasked with building from within, relying on homegrown players to compete. That process will take a while, but if there's one thing positive about taking on what might be considered a thankless task, Pirates owner Bob Nutting, for all his shortcomings, is a patient man: Huntington kept his job for 12 years despite overseeing just three seasons above .500.

Cherington is as humble a baseball executive as you'll encounter, with no obvious ego or need for credit or attention. He deserved another opportunity. If the Pirates let him do his job properly, they'll likely be rewarded — in time.

Unsurprisingly, the GM Meetings produced little in the way of hard news or transactions, which is to be expected. Typically, the GM Meetings are the mere opening act to the winter, with conversations begun and potential moves are first explored.

Sometimes, those talks later bear fruit; sometimes, they don't.

So the fact that the Red Sox didn't make any trades or sign any free agents shouldn't be the least bit surprising.

But some comments from new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom were revealing.

Given his age, background and philosophy, it was easy to infer that Bloom was going to take a different approach to roster building. His predecessor, Dave Dombrowski, took a fairly linear approach to the job — identifying obvious positional needs, then working to fill them.

In his first winter on the job, in 2015, Dombrowski noted that the Red Sox needed both a front-line starter and a closer. He further added that, given the marketplace at the time, it was likely that the starter would come via free agency and the closer through trade.

Sure enough, Dombrowski soon after dealt for Craig Kimbrel and signed David Price to a landmark seven-year deal. Though Dombrowski wasn't one to telegraph specific moves, he made no bones about his shopping list and then acted accordingly.

Such a course seems highly unlikely for Bloom.

While it might seem obvious that the Sox have openings at second base, first base and the back end of the rotation, Bloom didn't seem to want to acknowledge even that much.

Asked by reporters in Scottsdale about team needs, Bloom answered: "At this early stage, where there isn't an obvious incumbent, I don't think we're really thinking about (how to fill holes) in mid-November. I would say to look at it in terms of Need A, Need B and Need C might be a little limiting for us. To zoom out, we know our objective is to prioritize sustainability, prioritize competitiveness — not just this coming year, but also in the long term. To think of things through that lens rather than try to arrange an order of needs is how we're approaching it and it should open up more options for us."

That holistic approach would seem to make sense. Bloom is clearly taking a big-picture approach rather than adhering to a granular to-do list.

The question is: how does that translate into actual transactions? That's less obvious.

It helps that the Sox have some flexibility. Michael Chavis could help at either first or second, as he did last season, both. And the unstated premise behind Bloom's generalized comments is that, in an effort to pare down payroll, the Sox might first open up additional holes in the makeup of the roster.

Should they end up trading either Mookie Betts or Jackie Bradley Jr., the Sox would then need to address needs in the outfield that don't currently exist. Or, an early run on front-line free agent starters could create an opportunity for the Sox to deal one of their own veteran pitchers to teams frozen out of the market.

The winter figures to be an active one for the Red Sox, but Bloom is already signaling that it won't be a typical one.