

The Boston Red Sox Monday, November 25, 2019

*** *The Boston Globe***

Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez is the established starter, but who will be his backup?

Julian McWilliams

Christian Vazquez takes pride in catching every game. He wanted to make a point of that in 2019: play as much as possible and be an impact player for the Red Sox.

In 2018, Vazquez split time with veteran Sandy Leon and started 74 games at catcher, a career high at the time. Last season, Vazquez became the first Sox catcher since Jarrod Saltalamacchia in 2013 to catch 100-plus games (Saltalamacchia caught 106 times that year).

“I love to be in the lineup,” Vazquez said toward the end of the season. “I want to be there every day. I hate to be on the bench. I like to play.”

Before last season, Vazquez was considered a defensive catcher, but in 2019 he had a breakout season at the plate. Vazquez hit .276 with 23 homers and a .798 OPS, and finished the season ranked in the top five for catchers in both homers and batting average (minimum of 400 plate appearances).

He didn’t always drive the ball, so during the 2019 offseason, Vazquez revamped a swing that often produced groundballs into one with more launch angle.

“His approach to the ball and the movements of his body have changed,” former Sox assistant hitting coach Andy Barkett said last year. “He used to kind of cut the ball, more of a direct path to the ball. He would be able to hit it all the time but his barrel a lot of times wouldn’t stay in the zone long enough.

“Now he’s really getting behind the ball early and able to stay through the ball and hit it with backspin.”

At times, Vazquez became overzealous, chasing pitches at a 35.2 percent clip and striking out 101 times in 521 plate appearances.

“With Christian, it was amazing that he was hitting the ball harder,” manager Alex Cora said at the end of last season, “but there were certain times with Christian that a man was on third with less than two outs, I don’t know how many times he was able to drive it in.”

While his offense improved, Vazquez’s defense took a step back. Vazquez led the American League with nine passed balls and had the third-most in the majors. In certain games, he was lazy with his feet, electing to backhand certain pitches in the dirt instead of moving his body to get in front of it. It wasn’t until September that Vazquez’s defensive prowess was more evident, and he was a finalist for a Gold Glove.

The tools never left Vazquez, who has one of the better arms at his position. Most importantly, the Sox brass is bullish on his game-calling and his ability to mix the data with in-game feel or adjustments. If he can produce another solid offensive campaign in addition to maintaining his defense throughout the course of the season, he could be among the best two-way catchers.

Vazquez is the likely starter next season. The bigger question is who can be his backup? Blake Swihart failed to take hold of one of the catching spots and was designated for assignment in April. That left Leon as the backup, but his offensive struggles proved to be a huge hole in the Sox lineup. In 191 plate appearances, Leon hit just .192 with a .251 OBP and .297 slugging percentage. In 2019 and 2018 combined, Leon hit .183 in 479 plate appearances.

The Sox are no longer tethered to having certain pitchers work with Leon. Rick Porcello is a free agent and Vazquez worked more with Chris Sale this season than he did in the past. Leon made \$2.475 million last year and might represent too big of an arbitration number to bring him back.

Sox catching prospect Kole Cottam is still some time away from reaching the majors. Jhon Nunez spent time in Double A last year and the Sox re-signed him to a minor-league deal, but he, too, isn't ready.

The Sox could re-sign Juan Centeno, who was recently outrighted and then elected free agency. Centeno has familiarity with the coaching staff, Cora, and some of the Sox pitchers.

It's worth noting that new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom has a knack for finding defense-first catchers with elite pitch-framing ability and sticking with them despite some offensive lulls.

Jose Molina, for instance, had 834 plate appearances over three years with the Rays from 2012-14 despite hitting just .213 in that span. Bloom acquired Mike Zunino, and even though he hit just .165, he had an immediate impact on the Rays pitching staff.

Could the Red Sox nab someone like that?

The Sox have Vazquez under contract on what could become a team-friendly deal — he has two years and \$10.45 million remaining and the Sox have a \$7 million option for 2022 — but his understudy is the one question that looms large.

CATCHER OUTLOOK

Primary 2019 starter: Christian Vazquez

Projected 2020 starter: Christian Vazquez

Major league depth: Sandy Leon.

Prospects to watch: Kole Cottam, Jhon Nunez.

The Red Sox need rotation help. Here's a few ways they could go

Peter Abraham

The Red Sox need a starter with Rick Porcello off to free agency. They also need starters who can fill in for Nate Eovaldi, David Price, Eduardo Rodriguez, and Chris Sale during the course of the season when they go on the injured list, which seems inevitable with that group.

But where will the Sox find these starters? The only other pitchers on the 40-man roster with substantive starting experience are Brian Johnson, Hector Velazquez, and Ryan Weber.

The farm system offers only a few possibilities and free agency is expensive. Employing a Tampa Bay-style opener would make a lot of sense for the Red Sox — and not just because new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom came over from the Rays.

Using an opener is not the same as having a bullpen day. The idea is to use a reliever to start the game and get 3-6 outs before having a second pitcher come in and work 3-5 innings. The Rays used that format to help develop their pitching prospects while at the same time remaining competitive.

“The overriding goal was trying to put them at the appropriate intersection of where they are competitively and the needs of our team,” Rays senior vice president and general manager Erik Neander said. “What allows them the best chance to find their footing as a major league player.”

The Rays used an opener 41 times over the first 137 games but only twice in 25 games in September. By then, pitchers such as Yonny Chirinos and Ryan Yarbrough had built up enough experience, skill, and confidence to work as conventional starters.

Overall, the Rays finished 27-16 with a 3.87 earned run average in games started by openers.

“Every situation is unique. But with respect to our situation the last couple of years, we identified pitchers we thought were ready to have major league opportunities. But it wasn’t something that was going to come with an expectation of six or seven innings,” Neander said.

Ultimately, it was the best way to give young pitchers a chance to find success.

“Confidence is so powerful,” Neander said. “We’ve seen that in how they responded.”

The Red Sox have a number of pitchers who could benefit from coming into games following an opener. In addition to Johnson, Velazquez, and Weber, they recently added 27-year-old lefthander Kyle Hart to the 40-man roster.

Hart was 12-13 with a 3.52 ERA in 27 games last season for Portland and Pawtucket. He’s probably not ready to be a conventional starter but could help the Sox by filling the gap between an opener and the late-inning relievers.

Righthander Tanner Houck is another starter who would benefit from that approach, especially given his solid work in the Arizona Fall League and for Team USA. Another prospect, righthander Bryan Mata, could be ready to try it come June or July.

The Red Sox intend to use Darwinzon Hernandez as a reliever. But isn’t it worth seeing if the big lefty could handle more?

With new pitching coaches Dave Bush and Kevin Walker coming up from the minor league staff, it’s good timing for the Sox to give this a shot.

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Cherington gets second chance

Theo Epstein, breaker of two historic curses, will be in the Hall of Fame. The same is true of Dave Dombrowski, a GM for 30 consecutive years who had a role in putting together two World Series champions.

Ben Cherington was the man in the middle, his tenure as GM of the Red Sox lasting less than four seasons. It produced a delightfully unexpected World Series title in 2013 but otherwise three last-place finishes.

That Cherington, 45, is getting a second chance with the Pittsburgh Pirates is fitting. He deserves it after going through plenty of turmoil in Boston. Yes, he made some mistakes in prominent deals. But some of those deals were forced on him.

Cherington waited patiently until the right chance came along. The Pirates, who need rebuilding from the ground up, fit his skills.

“This was the only one and, really, the perfect one to consider,” he said after being introduced in Pittsburgh.

Cherington still has plenty of friends at Fenway Park and his return was celebrated. But it also could mean some changes for the Sox.

Dana LeVangie, now a scout after being pitching coach for two seasons, is a good candidate for the Pirates' coaching staff.

When Torey Lovullo became interim manager in 2015 following John Farrell's cancer diagnosis, LeVangie became the interim bench coach and was widely praised for his work in preparing the team. LeVangie could fit the Pirates as a bench coach, pitching coach, or bullpen coach.

Every indication is Chaim Bloom has been welcomed into the organization by the baseball ops staff and quickly gained their respect and confidence. But if Pittsburgh offers a chance for professional advancement, a staffer or two could join Cherington.

You also could see Cherington find a spot for Farrell, who is a pitching consultant with the Reds but could be ready for a higher-profile job. Farrell and Cherington have a professional relationship that goes back to 2007. Farrell applied for managerial jobs with the Phillies and Angels the last two offseasons. If he wants to get back in uniform, it could have to be as a coach.

LASTING IMPRESSION

La Russa enjoyed time in Boston

It was strange to see Tony La Russa standing behind a batting cage at Fenway South wearing a Red Sox cap during the early days of spring training in 2018. La Russa, so identified as the Hall of Fame manager of the White Sox, Athletics, and Cardinals, looked out of place. His cap was brand new, not a wrinkle in the brim.

Getting to know La Russa a little better the last two seasons was fascinating. He has a long list of stories and friends from across the spectrum of sports, culture, and politics. Asking him a question about baseball would end up with an anecdote about watching a game with Bill Parcells or Bobby Knight.

La Russa, 75, was invited to stay with the Sox after Dombrowski was fired and he decided to fulfill the final year of his contract. He went on both of the remaining road trips, a sign of the high regard Brian O'Halloran and the other assistant GMs had for him.

But when Angels owner Arte Moreno offered him a position similar to what he had with the Red Sox, La Russa changed his mind. Moreno is a longtime friend and working for the Angels meant La Russa could spend more time at his home in the San Francisco Bay Area and his animal rescue foundation.

It was simply a matter of convenience. "There are so many good people here. They're in great hands," La Russa said. "It was fun for me to be around Fenway Park so often. It's special when that is where you go to work."

A few other observations on the Red Sox:

- You can partially thank La Russa for outfielder Marcus Wilson, who was put on the 40-man roster Wednesday. Wilson was the player to be named later the Sox received from Arizona in the Blake Swihart trade last March. Wilson was a second-round pick of the Diamondbacks in 2014 when La Russa was the team's chief baseball officer. When the Sox discussed the trade, La Russa offered some insights on Arizona's prospects.

Wilson, only 23, had a 1.016 OPS in 45 games for Single A Salem when he joined the Sox. As is typical, Wilson struggled in his first taste of Double A. But he played well in an eight-game stint in the Arizona Fall League. The Sox lack outfield depth in the minors and Wilson could prove helpful as he continues to develop. That's a better return than expected for Swihart.

- With C.J. Chatham and Bobby Dalbec now on the 40-man roster, that could mark the end of their time with USA Baseball. The US team, which fell one game short of qualifying for the Olympics at the Premier12 tournament this month, has another chance in March. Commissioner Rob Manfred said owners

want the United States to have a strong team. But asking players to take time away from major league spring training will be difficult.

■ Count me as skeptical that Manny Ramirez has truly reformed. His new-and-improved attitude, on display at The Tradition event last week, is almost certainly tied to his Hall of Fame candidacy.

Ramirez has seven years remaining on the BBWAA ballot and to this point has not gotten to 24 percent. That he twice failed drug tests after MLB and the Players Association agreed to start a testing program is something most voters can't overlook. Quitting on the Red Sox to force a trade is hard to get past, too.

Ramirez knew the consequences of his actions and went ahead. No amount of time can erase that.

Related: What's Manny Ramirez like these days? Apologetic, contrite, and renewed by his faith

■ The Yankees released Jacoby Ellsbury on Wednesday and intend to not pay the remaining \$26.1 million left in his contract because he received unauthorized medical care. It is sure to spark a contentious grievance.

It brings to mind the issues the Sox had with Ellsbury in 2010 over how badly his ribs were injured. He accused the team of misdiagnosing the injury then fled for Arizona, claiming he didn't want to be a distraction.

The Red Sox made Ellsbury only a token offer when he became a free agent in 2013. What a good decision that was. Ellsbury produced 9.8 WAR from 2014-16 and cost the Yankees \$127 million. During the same period, Jackie Bradley Jr. produced 15.3 WAR for \$19.8 million.

When you add in the money the Yankees spent on replacing Ellsbury, it was an even bigger financial disaster than Pablo Sandoval was for the Red Sox. From 2008-19, the 12 full seasons he had a major league contract, Ellsbury missed 742 games. For somebody as good as he was, it's hard not to wonder if Ellsbury actually liked playing.

ETC.

Jeter only definite on the Hall ballot

There are 32 candidates on the Hall of Fame ballot the Baseball Writers' Association of America will vote on. The only no-doubt choice is Derek Jeter and that should create opportunity for players such as Todd Helton, Scott Rolen, Larry Walker, and Billy Wagner to get a better look.

With 11 players elected by the BBWAA over the last three years, the ballot has opened up. Walker, now in his final season of eligibility, climbed from 34.1 percent to 54.6 percent last year. Another 20.5 percent jump would get Walker past the required 75 percent. Curt Schilling's strong candidacy was set back by his intemperate comments on social media, but has been slowly recovering momentum in recent seasons.

The players tied to PED use — Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens most notably — have made strides, but not enough. Clemens was at 59.5 percent a year ago and Bonds 59.1 percent. They each have three years remaining.

As the voting bloc gets younger — the Hall has been prodding out older writers or others who haven't covered a game in years — Walker, Clemens, and Bonds will benefit.

The younger voters are more likely to look beyond traditional statistics and be more forgiving of PED use considering both the league and union ignored the problem for years.

Ballots must be postmarked by Dec. 31 and any new Hall of Famers will be introduced Jan. 21.

Globe voters will reveal their choices as a group sometime in January before the Hall's announcement.

Extra bases

One recurrent theme of this offseason: Drew Pomeranz is going to get paid. The lefthander had an 0.84 WHIP and averaged 15.7 strikeouts per nine innings in 28 relief appearances and threw two perfect innings in the National League wild-card game. Pomeranz, who turned 31 on Friday, should land a deal in the neighborhood of two or three years at \$8 million or \$9 million a season . . . Japan's version of the Cy Young Award is the Sawamura Award. It's determined by a vote of five retired pitchers. Previous winners include Koji Uehara (1999 and 2002) and Daisuke Matsuzaka (2001). The committee decided not to give out the award this season, saying a sub-standard winner would tarnish the "greatness" of the award. It's the fifth time without a winner since the award was started in 1947. Now that's conviction . . . Toronto added infielder Santiago Espinal to the 40-man roster. He was the player the Sox traded to the Jays in 2018 to get Steve Pearce. Espinal, 25, could be a big-league backup down the road. But that's a trade the Sox will never regret . . . In her biography on the Harvard softball team website in 2012, Crimson catcher Eve Rosenbaum was described as a fan of classic rock and the Red Sox. She still likes the old tunes, but her team is the Orioles now. Rosenbaum was named Baltimore's director of baseball development, a new position that will include aspects of scouting and analytics. Rosenbaum is the highest-ranked woman in baseball operations for the Orioles . . . After reading an item a few weeks ago about Nationals assistant GM Mike DeBartolo, a native of Bedford, loyal reader Joe D'Urso reached out with a reminder that Washington manager of advance scouting Jon Tosches is a graduate of Hopedale High and UMass Amherst . . . Two former Red Sox are doing something important at Sacred Heart University on Dec. 4. John Trautwein, who appeared in nine games for the Sox in 1988, will give two presentations on spreading awareness about teen suicide. Bobby Valentine, now Sacred Heart's athletic director, invited Trautwein to campus. Trautwein and his wife, Susie, lost their son, Will, to suicide in 2010 with no warning. They started the Will to Live Foundation to help parents and friends become better educated about mental health issues. Trautwein will speak to Sacred Heart's athletic department before a 7 p.m. program at the Edgerton Center for the Performing Arts that is free and open to the public. Go to will-to-live.org for more details . . . Happy Birthday to Jeff Plympton, who is 54. The righthander played for King Philip High in Plainville then helped the University of Maine advance to the 1986 College World Series before the Red Sox took him in the 10th round of the draft in 1987. Plympton was with the Sox for seven seasons, getting to the majors in 1991 and throwing 5½ shutout innings in four appearances. Dwight Evans, Edgar Martinez, Dave Parker, and Omar Vizquel were 0 for 4 against Plympton and he struck out Martinez. A shoulder injury derailed his career, but Plympton stayed involved in athletics. He has been recreation director for the town of Wrentham since 2004 and operates the Crush team in the New England Elite Baseball League.

Red Sox continue efforts to bring All-Star Game back to Fenway

Julian McWilliams

It's no secret the Red Sox have a desire to host another All-Star Game, and on Friday, team president Sam Kennedy said they've conveyed that desire to Major League Baseball.

"We would love to have an All-Star Game here," Kennedy said at the groundbreaking ceremony for the MGM Music Hall at Fenway, which is set to open in the fall of 2021. "In fact, I talked to some of the folks at MLB about the possibility.

"We need to work and figure out a time that would work for the convention centers. But we've told MLB that we would like to host."

The last time Boston played host to the All-Star festivities was in 1999, and that event was full of memories for Red Sox fans. Pedro Martinez dazzled as the American League starting pitcher, striking out five batters over two innings to steal a lot of the headlines.

But the signature moment came when Red Sox great Ted Williams was driven onto the field to be honored by the players and the Fenway crowd prior to the game.

"We'd like to make it happen [again] in the near future," Kennedy said with a smile.

Work to do for Bloom

Speaking of All-Stars, Kennedy said there still haven't been any formal discussions with Mookie Betts about a contract extension, though he did note that chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and general manager Brian O'Halloran spoke to Betts's representatives at the GM Meetings in Arizona last week.

Kennedy's hope is that Bloom can find a way to configure the roster in a manner that allows the Sox to keep Betts, who is heading into his free agent year, while still reaching their goal to shed payroll.

"Chaim's reputation is creativity and turning over lots of stones and looking at different opportunities," said Kennedy. "So we'll see where this offseason leads us. It's been interesting to see, over the last couple of days, deals getting done and the market moving more quickly."

On Thursday, catcher Yasmani Grandal signed a four-year, \$73 million deal with the Chicago White Sox, a record for the club. Betts will be worth a lot more than that; he should be creeping up on some record numbers of his own, including a payday approaching \$30 million for 2020.

As for Bloom, Kennedy said he's still getting settled, but he's already seeing what made Bloom so successful in Tampa.

"He is so bright," Kennedy said. "He has a way of describing complex situations and breaking it down in a simple way, which is a real skill and a real talent. He's in that mode right now."

Bloom will spend Thanksgiving week here in Boston, with the Sox having so many question marks on their roster. They have emphasized the importance of keeping the lines of communication open between the coaching staff and the front office, and so far, it's a role Bloom has thrived in.

"I'm incredibly impressed," Kennedy said. "I'm impressed with him mostly as a person, and his ability to connect with people and work with the group of men and women we have in the department."

No further comment

As MLB continues its investigation into accusations that the Houston Astros illegally used technology to steal signs, Kennedy elected not to comment on how that might affect Red Sox manager Alex Cora, Houston's bench coach in 2017. "Alex acknowledged that he did speak to MLB and wants to leave it at that, as he should," Kennedy said. "We'll see where it all goes."

Watch Mookie Betts (or his avatar, at least) dance as part of new MLB Players Association partnership

Michael Silverman

These days, nothing beats the opportunity to interact with an animated avatar.

Now, Mookie Betts has his own -- look below to see Betts perform some indescribable arm motions and eye rolls -- as do the rest of the Red Sox and every MLB player, thanks to a new agreement between the MLB Players, Inc. and the avatar company Genies' Avatar Agency.

The deal allows the players to use the avatar across the social media platform of their choosing, plus players can have their avatars adorned with brand apparel and accessories from companies the players have deals with.

"We are always looking for new and innovative ways for Players to enhance their brand identities," said Evan Kaplan, MLBPI's executive vice president of licensing and sponsorship in a press release. "With a digital representation, they can stay focused on baseball without losing the opportunity to actively engage with brands and fans."

Said Allison Sturges, managing director of the Avatar Agency: “Players can now expand their digital identity and take on new experiences and benefits that weren’t possible before.”

Red Sox earn award for philanthropic work

Peter Abraham

The Red Sox on Thursday were named the recipient of Major League Baseball’s Allan H. Selig Award for Philanthropic Excellence. The announcement was made on the final day of the owners’ meetings in Arlington, Texas.

The Red Sox were recognized for their partnership with Massachusetts General Hospital to develop the Home Base Program, a nonprofit dedicated to providing clinical care, wellness, education, and research initiatives for veterans, active military service members, and their families impacted by PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.

Team chairman Tom Werner was a driving force behind the initiative, which has aided more than 24,000 veterans, service members, and their families.

“We are honored to be the recipients of this prestigious award for the second time, and for a program that has been incredibly special to me personally,” Werner said.

The Sox received a \$10,000 grant from MLB Charities as part of the award. They are the first team to win the Selig Award twice. The first time came in 2010 for the Red Sox Scholars program.

ESPN picked up the April 6 Rays-Red Sox game, which has a 7:05 p.m. start.

*** *The Boston Herald***

5 Red Sox thoughts: White Sox look like a fit for Mookie Betts

Jason Mastrodonato

The White Sox are spending money so quickly this offseason that it’s got us thinking: could Chicago be a landing spot for Mookie Betts?

There aren’t expected to be too many teams willing to take on \$30 million for a one-year rental, but the White Sox are acting aggressively after 11 straight seasons without a playoff appearance.

Given they ranked 29th out of 30 teams in overall production from right field, and 25th in OPS from the leadoff spot, they could desperately use a spark plug like Betts atop their order if they’re serious about competing in 2020.

And with a farm system ranked fourth by MLB.com before the 2019 season, they have the depth that would make this kind of deal palatable.

The only time White Sox general manager Rick Hahn has made a deal involving new Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom was in 2017, when Hahn sent middling reliever Dan Jennings to the Rays for infield prospect Casey Gillaspie, who never made it to the big leagues.

Of course, Hahn was in charge of the White Sox when they sent Chris Sale to Boston for a package involving Yoan Moncada and Michael Kopech.

If the Bloom can't find a suitable partner for Betts, trading J.D. Martinez seems like a conclusion, particularly given the comments from team president Sam Kennedy, who has said multiple times that it'll be difficult to keep both Betts and Martinez in 2020.

With that in mind, here are five Red Sox-related thoughts heading into Thanksgiving week:

1. Trading Betts still makes sense

The quick recap: John Henry and the Red Sox have outspent the field the last three years (and will still have a top-five payroll in 2020), every big market team attempts to cyclically reset the luxury tax threshold and the Red Sox' farm system is desperately thin, making it difficult to imagine them being competitive in the future without making immediate moves to get younger.

But why must Betts or Martinez be traded? Well, which team is going to give up any prospects of value for 34-year-old David Price, who is owed \$96 million over the next three years and has averaged just 21 starts per season with a 3.75 ERA since 2017?

The same could be said about a 31-year-old Sale, who is about to begin his five-year, \$145-million extension and has finished the last two seasons with injury concerns related to his shoulder and elbow. It remains to be seen if he'll be able to pitch in 2020 without needing Tommy John surgery.

Packaging mid-tier salary guys like Nathan Eovaldi (\$17 million) and Jackie Bradley Jr. (\$11 million) could accomplish the goal, but the Sox aren't likely to get much prospect value in return for either of them.

Lastly, cross this one off the list: trading team MVP Xander Bogaerts (\$20 million) would be a gigantic mistake.

2. How much value does Martinez have, anyway?

The White Sox extended Jose Abreu on a three-year deal worth \$50 million (about \$4 million annually less than Martinez will make), and that deal was met with some criticism around the industry.

Over the past three years, Abreu, the same age (32) as Martinez, has hit .286 with an .849 OPS while Martinez has hit .313 with a 1.007 OPS. Neither has offered much defensively.

Martinez may be slightly overpaid, but not by much. And if the Red Sox were to chip in a few bucks to find a team in need of a designated hitter, there's a chance they net a good prospect in return.

3. How far away is Christian Vazquez from Yasmani Grandal?

Four years and \$73 million was the contract signed by Grandal with the White Sox this week. The 31-year-old had 28 homers with an .848 OPS for the Brewers in 2019 and is considered a good defensive catcher on par with Christian Vazquez, who had 23 homers with a .798 OPS.

Vazquez, 29, will make just \$10.45 million over the next two years with a team option for a third year at \$7 million. The contract, signed by Dave Dombrowski, looks to be a good one.

4. So long to Jacoby Ellsbury, who was released by the Yankees

It remains a surprise that Ellsbury didn't win the MVP in 2011.

There have been only 12 players to hit at least .320 with 30 homers and 30 stolen bases in a single season, and only three times did that player win the MVP (Betts in 2018, Ryan Braun in 2011 and Larry Walker in 1997). It appears stolen bases are undervalued by MVP voters.

The Yanks will pay Ellsbury \$26 million to play for anybody but them in 2020 after suffering through two injury-plagued seasons in which Ellsbury didn't make a single appearance. A source close to the 36-year-old told MLB.com he intends to play in 2020.

5. Welcome back, eight-figure deals for minor leaguers

The Mariners made headlines this week by signing minor league prospect Evan White to a six-year, \$24-million deal. He's yet to appear above Double-A.

These minor league extensions are risky but somewhat necessary for low-budget teams to retain potential stars over the long term. Would the Red Sox ever take a chance on a deal like that? They haven't done so in recent memory, unless you count Rusney Castillo's \$72.5-million contract out of Cuba.

Typically they've waited until seeing at least two big league years before signing extensions, as they did with Vazquez, Jon Lester and Clay Buchholz.

*** *MassLive.com***

Mookie Betts rumors: Boston Red Sox still haven't had formal extension talks with star OF

Chris Cotillo

BOSTON -- The Red Sox still have not engaged star outfielder Mookie Betts in formal extension talks this winter, team president and CEO Sam Kennedy said Friday.

Chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom and general manager Brian O'Halloran met with Betts' representatives at last week's GM Meetings in Arizona but those talks took on a more informal tone.

"No discussions yet," Kennedy said at the groundbreaking ceremony for the MGM Music Hall at Fenway Park. "I just saw Chaim on my way out here, and he's still getting his feet under him."

Betts is a year away from free agency and is projected to earn \$27.7 million in arbitration, according to MLBTradeRumors. Betts has previously rebuffed Boston's attempts to extend him, making him a trade candidate now that the Sox are trying to cut payroll to get under the \$208 million competitive balance tax threshold.

Kennedy reiterated that the Sox would prefer to lock Betts up to a long-term deal and continue the relationship between the sides when Boston drafted the outfielder in the fifth round of the 2011 draft.

"You want Mookie Betts as part of your organization," he said. "We've made that clear to him and continue to make that clear."

Teams around the league have begun making significant moves over the last week, with the Braves signing relievers Will Smith and Chris Martin and the White Sox committing \$123 million to catcher Yasmani Grandal and first baseman Jose Abreu over the last two days. With the annual Winter Meetings less than three weeks away, Kennedy believes things could start heating up in regards to Betts.

"Chaim's reputation is creativity and turning over lots of stones, looking at different opportunities. We'll see where this offseason leaves us," Kennedy said. "It has been interesting to see, over the last couple days, some deals are getting done and the market is moving more quickly. We'll see how that affects us as well."

Boston Red Sox in talks to host future All-Star Game, team president Sam Kennedy says

Chris Cotillo

BOSTON — The Red Sox have had recent discussions with Major League Baseball about hosting an All-Star Game in the near future, team president and CEO Sam Kennedy said Friday.

“We would love to have an All-Star Game,” Kennedy said, speaking at the groundbreaking ceremony for the MGM Music Hall at Fenway Park. “In fact, I talked to some of the folks at MLB last week about the possibility.”

Kennedy previously expressed an interest in hosting an All-Star Game at Fenway Park in the next 3-5 years. He plans to soon discuss the possibility with the city’s convention centers, which would host the other events throughout the All-Star week.

“We need more space for it to take over the whole city. We’ve told MLB we would like to host,” Kennedy said. “We don’t have any specific plans or a specific year. Obviously, 1999 was the last time so we’d like to make it happen in the near future.”

Boston won’t host an All-Star Game in either of the next two years, as Los Angeles will host in 2020 and Atlanta is tabbed for 2021. Philadelphia has the 2026 game, so Fenway could theoretically be slated for a year in the 2022-25 range.

Kennedy discusses MiLB proposal

Kennedy declined to get into the specifics of Major League Baseball’s proposal to eliminate 42 minor-league teams, citing the ongoing negotiations between MLB and Minor League Baseball. He said the Red Sox are generally supportive of MLB’s wishes.

The Lowell Spinners, Boston’s short-season Single-A affiliate, are one of the teams in danger of folding if the proposal is agreed upon.

“I don’t know where the negotiations are going to go,” he said. “We’ve been fortunate, because we’ve got great affiliates. Our hope is, there can be a resolution where if we do end up with just four affiliates, that we can preserve the ones we had. That’ll all play out here over the next few months as the two sides negotiate.”

Kennedy has spoken with some key characters involved in the proposal, including U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan and Spinners owner Dave Heller, in recent days.

“Just to keep them in the loop on what I’m hearing and they told me what they’re hearing,” Kennedy said. “We’ll keep communicating with them.”

Sox decline comment on Astros investigation

Both Kennedy and principal owner John Henry declined to comment on the league’s ongoing investigation into a report that the Astros electronically stole opposing teams’ signs in 2017. Red Sox manager Alex Cora and bullpen coach Craig Bjornson, who both worked for Houston in 2017, have both been interviewed by the league about their involvement.

“Alex acknowledged that he has spoken to MLB and he wants to leave it at that, as he should,” Kennedy said. “We’ll see where it all goes.”

*** *RedSox.com***

After career year, E-Rod 'would love to stay'

Nathalie Alonso

MIAMI -- After being hampered by knee injuries for most of his Major League career, Eduardo Rodríguez enjoyed a breakout season with the Red Sox in 2019.

The 26-year-old lefty finished sixth in the voting for the American League Cy Young Award after posting career bests in wins (19), ERA (3.81), strikeouts (213), innings thrown (203.1) and starts (34). Those 34 starts were the most in the AL, and he finished seventh among big league pitchers with a 6.0 bWAR.

“It was a very important step for me, because for the first time I was able to pitch an entire season,” Rodríguez said, in Spanish, at the 12th annual David Ortiz Celebrity Golf Classic in Miami. “That was my goal when the season started, [to make] 30 starts and throw more than 200 innings, and I was able to do it. That’s what I’m most proud of.”

Rodríguez made his Major League debut with the Red Sox in 2015. Prior to this year, the most innings he had thrown in a season was 137 1/3, and he had never made more than 24 starts in a single campaign. Staying healthy, says Rodríguez, was his focus.

“I matured with regards to training and preparing for games,” he said.

The Venezuelan-born Rodríguez was by far the most consistent starter on a Boston team that finished third in the American League East in 2019 with an 84-78 record. While Rodríguez flourished, the rest of the Red Sox rotation, which featured the likes of Chris Sale, David Price, Rick Porcello and Nathan Eovaldi, posted a 5.33 ERA.

A year after winning the World Series, the Red Sox find themselves at a crossroads. They recently hired former Tampa Bay senior vice president Chaim Bloom as their new head of baseball operations as they look to bring their payroll below the first Competitive Balance tax threshold of \$208 million for 2020. As a result, 2018 American League Most Valuable Player Mookie Betts and fellow outfielder Jackie Bradley Jr. have emerged as trade candidates.

But even though Boston’s focus appears to be elsewhere, Rodríguez, who originally signed with the Orioles in 2010 as an international free agent and was traded to the Red Sox in 2014, is ready to discuss his future in New England. His agent, Scott Pucino, told the Boston Globe during the General Managers Meetings that Rodríguez “would love to remain a Red Sox.” The southpaw, who earned \$4.9 million in 2019 and has two years of arbitration left before becoming a free agent, confirmed that sentiment this weekend.

“I would love to stay with Boston,” said Rodríguez. “If they offer me an extension and we come to an agreement, I would love that. That’s where I began my career and I would love to finish it there.”

Most comical moments in Red Sox history

Ian Browne

Not only have the Red Sox had a lot of epic performances and games over the years, but they’ve also had their share of comical moments. In the grind of a 162-game season, you need a flash of light every now and then.

Here are eight that gave Red Sox fans some laughs.

1. Manny cuts off Damon’s throw

July 21, 2004

In the midst of what would turn into the most memorable season in Red Sox history, the night of July 21 -- a 10-5 loss to the Orioles -- would have been erased from memory if not for one of the most perplexing plays ever. It might not surprise you to know that Manny Ramirez was in the middle of it. David Newhan belted one off the wall in center field, and Johnny Damon made a valiant effort on a leaping catch, but it bounced off the wall and took a bad carom. Damon chased it down, and then he fired the relay throw.

But before the throw could get close to the infield, Ramirez, who was playing left field and not standing all that far in front of Damon, made a diving catch of his teammate's throw. Ramirez then threw it to the intended relay man, shortstop Mark Bellhorn. Thanks to the extra step created by Ramirez, Bellhorn's throw to the plate was too late to get Newhan, who slid home for an inside-the-park, two-run homer against Pedro Martinez. Of all the Manny-being-Manny moments throughout the years, this one probably topped the list.

2. Nomar tapes Pedro to dugout pole June 25, 1999

As much as Martinez was known for his dominance on the mound, he was known for being a goof off of it, particularly in the dugout during games. Martinez could be downright hyper on days he wasn't pitching. His teammates noticed. On a Friday night in 1999, Red Sox star shortstop Nomar Garciaparra took the matter into his own hands, using a roll of white tape to tie Martinez to a pole in the dugout. Pitcher Mark Portugal helped out Garciaparra. As Martinez playfully shouted, Garciaparra then taped the pitcher's mouth shut as well.

When the Red Sox recorded the final out in their 6-1 win over the White Sox, they left Martinez tied to the pole as they formed the traditional victory line in the dugout.

"Pedro's going to pitch here tomorrow at 4 o'clock over most of these stations, and hopefully he'll be freed by then," said Red Sox play-by-play announcer Sean McDonough. No worse for the wear, Martinez and Boston beat Chicago, 17-1, the following day en route to his 23-4 season.

3. The pizza throw April 16, 2007

On a gloomy Monday afternoon at Fenway Park -- it was the annual Patriots' Day game -- J.D. Drew hit a short foul popup down the third-base line, and Angels left fielder Garret Anderson tried to make a play. So did a couple of fans sitting in the front row. The ball squirted free and was ruled foul, and beer splattered from the cups of two customers due to the impact of Anderson.

But the fun was just getting started. One of the fans who couldn't catch the ball -- and got beer on the back of his jacket -- had a slice of pizza thrown just under his neck by another spectator. NESN play-by-play man Don Orsillo and analyst Jerry Remy were in hysterics over the incident. Remy noted that the fan who threw the slice of pizza was asked to leave the park, joking that the reason was, "ruining a good piece of pizza." NESN showed another replay with an incredulous Remy asking, "Why did he do that? Was it because he thought [the other fan] was interfering with a play?"

The camera then zoomed in on the slice of pizza face down on the railing in front of the first row. "Someone should put that in a bag and make sure they take that away to secure the evidence," Orsillo said. "CSI Miami will be here soon to collect the evidence," Remy said. "I'll tell you what, I'd eat that thing," Remy said. Of all the hilarious bits Remy and Orsillo did throughout their 15 seasons together, this one probably topped the list. The Red Sox won the game, 7-2, behind Josh Beckett. But the lasting highlight from that day will always be the pizza throw.

4. Psycho runs into Barrett ... but Red Sox somehow win anyway May 18, 1986

There would be many wild wins for the Red Sox in 1986, but none of them ended in as comical or joyous a way as this one. Trailing the Rangers, 4-3, in the bottom of the 10th, Steve Lyons was on first base for the Red Sox and Marty Barrett was at the plate. Lyons should have been picked off, but the throw by Texas pitcher Greg Harris got away for an error. Lyons moved to second with one out, Barrett laced one down the line in right and George Wright dove for it but the ball squirted away. The problem is that Lyons thought Wright caught it, so he went racing back to second base. Just as he slid back to second, Barrett arrived feet-first on the other side of the bag at the same time for his double.

Realizing he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, Lyons again took off for third. Wright ran the ball back toward the diamond and then heaved to third. The problem was that his throw was so off the mark that

it bounced out of play. Not only was Lyons awarded home on the overthrow, but Barrett was too, and the Red Sox had themselves a walk-off win. It isn't hard to figure out why Lyons carried the nickname of Psycho. He was traded to the White Sox five weeks later for Tom Seaver, and one headline writer dubbed it, "Cy Young for Psycho."

5. Papi smashes dugout phone in Baltimore July 27, 2013

Known for his smile that lights up a room, Red Sox legend David Ortiz was not smiling on a Saturday night in the middle of 2013 at Camden Yards in Baltimore when he struck out swinging. The issue was on the 3-1 pitch that Ortiz was so sure was high and out of the strike zone that he started trotting to first base, only to have home-plate umpire Tim Timmons call him back. Once he struck out, Ortiz barked at Timmons with such vigor that he was ejected. Ortiz then took three swings with his bat at the phone in the dugout. Dustin Pedroia had initially tried to restrain Ortiz, to no avail. As pieces of the phone started flying, Pedroia covered his head with a towel.

When Ortiz retired three years later, the Orioles presented Ortiz with the phone he broke as part of a retirement gift to the slugger.

6. Irate Yaz covers home plate with dirt May 25, 1975

Though it would be a great season for the Red Sox that ended with a loss in Game 7 of the World Series to the Big Red Machine, frustrations boiled over for eventual Hall of Famer Carl Yastrzemski on this Sunday afternoon home game in 1975 against the Angels. When Ed Figueroa was credited with a strikeout looking on a pitch that Yaz deemed to be off the plate, the eventual first-ballot Hall of Famer lost his mind in an argument with home-plate umpire Lou DiMuro. Out of words to describe his frustration, Yastrzemski humorously covered home plate with dirt and slammed his helmet down as he got ejected in a 6-1 loss.

7. Manny high-fives fan after great catch May 14, 2008

Ramirez was always more known for his big bat than his unpredictable glove. But every now and then, he would make a great catch. Such was the case during this mid-week matinee in Baltimore when he raced back and made an over-the-shoulder catch to rob his former teammate, Kevin Millar, of extra bases. As Ramirez followed through with the grab, he climbed up on the wall and spontaneously high-fived a fan in Red Sox gear. That was fairly remarkable, since the play wasn't even over yet. Ramirez fired the ball back in for a relay to Pedroia, who threw to first to double off Aubrey Huff.

8. Rally Karaoke Guy Aug. 21, 2003

The Red Sox had lost five in a row in the middle of the pennant race, and even the team's entertainment staff was trying to find ways to help the team rally. Enter the Rally Karaoke Guy, which was inspired by the Rally Monkey in Anaheim, which was hugely popular at the time. The Rally Karaoke Guy was Millar.

The Red Sox had found a film of a college-aged Millar imitating Bruce Springsteen for the hit song, "Born in the USA", and they played it between innings. The youthful Millar, wearing a skin-tight shirt, could be seen pumping his fist repeatedly and bobbing his head as he lip-synced the song. The Fenway fans loved it during that 14-5 win over Oakland, and it was played at every home game for the rest of the season.

*** *WEEI.com***

The Monday Baseball Column: A new pitching coach's plan

Rob Bradford

It is a worthwhile exercise to take note of Dave Bush's existence.

He is, after all, the most noteworthy Red Sox' acquisition this offseason to date.

While the 40-year-old has been in the organization for more than three years, what he represents now is something next-level. Bush is the man responsible for siphoning the most out of the group — the pitchers — which head into 2020 most likely carrying the key to the Red Sox' lot in life. He is a unique kind of pitching coach in a unique sort of situation.

There are the three starting pitchers — Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi — who head into the new seasons with a boatload of questions regarding health and performance while taking up \$80 million of the team's payroll. Determining how the Red Sox are going to fill Rick Porcello's spot in the rotation is a thing. The bullpen showed promise, but not enough to absolutely classify it as a certainty. And then there is the depth, or lack of it.

Welcome to the Red Sox' pitching staff, Mr. Bush.

Speaking with the man who was taken two spots in front of Jon Lester in the 2002 MLB Draft it is clear what the Red Sox saw in him when identifying the nine-year big league veteran as Dana LeVangie's replacement. He had the experience of living life as a major league pitcher (taking no-hitters past the seventh inning three times). The Pennsylvania native traveled the world to experience all sorts of languages and levels with MLB International. He worked hand in hand in the analytics side of pitching with the Red Sox since joining the organization late in 2016. And he has even shown a heavy interest in the mental side of the equation since majoring in psychology at Wake Forest, diving into he merits of big-league performance-coaching before most.

In a new world of pitching, this is your new kind of pitching coach:

HOW HAS THE JOB OF PITCHING COACH CHANGED SINCE YOU PLAYED?

One of the bigger advancements recently is pitching and hitting is inter-departmental. It's not just the pitching coach that knows what's going on. We have trainers and strength coaches that have knowledge in different areas. We have analysts with information we can use. We track and measure so many more things that we used to. Part of my job as pitching coach is being able to work with each one of these different departments, each one of the people who do that work. And then with all that information do something I can make something useable for the pitchers themselves. So a lot of it is just figuring out which information I want, which things we have had in the past, things we utilized too much or not enough last year or the year before and just trying to put together the best situation to help guys be as successful as they can be.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM YOUR FORMER PITCHING COACHES ABOUT THE JOB?

I had a number of pitching coaches throughout the major leagues and minor leagues. There were some that were great and some that weren't great for me. The ones I liked in the past is the information we have now is verifying stuff they taught me back then. We didn't necessarily have a way to prove it. I kind of learned what worked and what didn't for me. I'm finding a lot of the concepts that really made sense for me 10, 12 years or ago or more still hold true today. We just have a much better way of being sure of that. Instead of having trial or error over a long period of time we can get to that point a lot more quickly.

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN TERMS OF HOW WE VIEW PITCHING?

For me when I pitched I was kind of a lower arm slot. My ball moved a lot. Didn't necessarily sink and probably had a little more rise than I realize. The era I pitched almost everybody was trying to throw down and away fastballs or trying to get the ball going down or get weak contact on the ground. I had success in other parts of the zone with different kind of pitches but didn't necessarily know why. If I could evaluate myself now with the information we have I probably would have suggested a different style of pitching than I did at that time. But that's what everybody did and that was the prevailing style in the industry. I like to think now there may be some guys that pitch that way and there are some guys that is a very effective

style, but there are other guys that have different styles. We individualize the approach a lot more these days.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST ADVANCEMENT OVER THE LAST YEAR IN TERMS OF ANALYZING PITCHING?

We're trying to link up the body movements with pitch quality. When I first started working with the Red Sox, it was still early on in the Trackman phase where we were trying to put together the database that we wanted. Now that is prevalent everywhere. There are high school kids that have access to Trackman information. Rapsodo has made that usable on daily basis. But now we're moving more toward biomechanics and different measurements of the body. It's an area we're still exploring. I don't know exactly where it's going to go. There's a lot of curiosity with hitters. Hitters are catching up to pitchers because hitters are paying a lot more attention to their bodies and how they move and hitters are becoming much more efficient with their movements and that is creating more disciplined hitters. Guys are less apt to chase out of the zone because they are keenly aware of how their bodies are moving. It may or may not match up with traditional pitching mechanics. In some cases this may reinforce things we have been teaching for a long time. In other cases, it may teach us something new or different that we overlooked or wasn't sure about.

TALK ABOUT THE CHALLENGE OF HAVING TO DEAL WITH SO MANY DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES ON A PITCHING STAFF

It's one of the things I like most about it, quite honestly. My college degree is in psychology. It's something I enjoy. I like working with people. It's entertainment and it's sports but it's a people business, too. Coaches and players have their own personalities and their own backgrounds. We're all trying to get to the same place. I spent a number of years coaching overseas and had a similar experiencing, working with kids with totally different backgrounds but I was trying to teach them the same thing. On the field, between the lines the game is still the same. But outside of those lines is when we have to connect with one another one way or another. It doesn't matter what kind of background you have or your education level or your language or anything else. It's about having guys be the best pitchers they can be. I enjoy the joy and the challenge of getting to know guys. I think it's pretty cool there are guys all over the years playing baseball and I enjoy that challenge.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE MENTAL SIDE OF PITCHING?

I ended up being a psych major because I liked it. When I first started playing in the big leagues it didn't exist. We didn't have sports psychologist, performance coaches or anything like that. And even when we first started hiring those guys it was off-putting to a lot of the players. They didn't trust the sports psychologist. They didn't think they had the players' best interest in mind. It's something I appreciated back then even though it wasn't popular. As I've seen that department grow throughout sports I've been glad to see how important that is. Training the mind and the mental skills are just as important as physical skills. I think it has taken an appropriate part of the game. It's an important part of helping guys dealing with what is a really difficult job. It's one of the things we have access to that is going to make guys better.

WHEN DID YOU START THINKING ABOUT THIS CAREER PATH?

When I stopped playing I had no interest of getting back into it. I needed a break from the game a little bit, from the stress of competing and performing. I took the year off and found I missed some aspects of the game that had gotten lost for me. The last couple of years I was so focused on trying to keep up that I lost parts of the game I enjoyed as a kid and as a player. So I started getting back into it on a casual level and not really knowing what I wanted to do and found I enjoyed the people aspect of it, enjoyed working with players and I had more satisfaction of seeing guys get better. I had my chance and I was content with my career as a player and that gave me a lot of peace of mind trying to help other players achieve whatever they could.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN THE ANALYTICS SIDE OF PITCHING?

I played just long enough for this kind of stuff to start creeping into the game. But even at that point, I didn't know what it all meant. Where it really made sense for me was when I started having access to the information and it matched up of things that I already knew and figured out as a player. When I first started working with the Red Sox and kind of got exposed to the Trackman information, working with Brian Bannister. He told me what it meant and what it looked like and gave me the freedom to explore on my own. There was just a little bit of information on me from the very end of my career and I saw the things that worked for me as a pitcher, the things that didn't, the reasons I had trouble throwing fastballs down and away all the time, I now had information that made sense for me. I was like, 'Wow, I get it now!' I started to piece together looking at myself things that worked and didn't and then I was able to look at other guys. Here's what you're doing, here's what working and here's what are not.

HOW DO YOU VIEW THIS CURRENT RED SOX PITCHING STAFF?

The time I spent with the big league team last year was important in helping me reassess where the major league game is right now. Just as the talent and information has increased every year. It's a better game and a more talented game than when I finished playing. So it was important for me to catch up and make sure I fully understood what guys can do nowadays and what the expectations are. Guys throw harder now than they used to, the strike zone is a little bit smaller, the ball carries differently, there is a lot more information for hitters and pitchers, defenses shift so much more than when I played. It was important to make sure I was caught up on what is out there and what guys can do now and what the expectations are for today's players.

WHAT IS YOUR APPROACH TO SPRING TRAINING?

I think it's going to settle into a fairly routine and standard spring training. There is going to be plenty of build-up. Barring injuries there is going to be plenty of time to get all the innings they need. Exactly what that is, we'll see. But there won't be any limitations on time. That spring training issue is a challenge for all teams that go through the postseason. It's not just the number of innings you throw in spring training but it's also the organizational depth you have. Some organizations have better depth and more flexibility early in the season, so they don't necessarily need guys to be built up as much. It's been well-documented that we don't have a ton of depth right now. It's something that may get better in the offseason or it may not. Either way, I'll be prepared for it and I'll have our guys prepared to be ready to go when the regular season starts.

WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON KEEPING PITCHERS FRESH FOR THE ENTIRE SEASON?

I don't like the saving bullets terms just because I don't like the connotations that come with it. I think there is a responsible way to prepare guys for 162 or more games. Sometimes it means backing off at certain times of the year, sometimes it means pushing harder. ... You're talking 162 games like it or not and you're going to need guys all the way through. I don't like the saving bullet term but I do think there is a responsible and smart development where we can get guys prepared to pitch a full season.

THE RICH HILL QUESTION

Numerous blogs and news outlets have put two and two together when guessing where free-agent pitcher Rich Hill might end up. He is from Massachusetts, still lives in the area and has a history with the Red Sox. The Sox also have a need for a pitcher possessing the talent and upside Hill can deliver on a short-term contract. So the majority of the projections have the 39-year-old landing with his hometown team.

That may be the case. But the timeline for the scenario is most likely a bit different than most anticipated.

According to a major league source, Hill underwent primary and revision surgery in late October and likely won't be able to compete until June with the possibility of pushing the timetable until after the All-Star break.

While the path represents a setback for the lefty -- who continued to thrive with the Dodgers in 2019 before succumbing to a flexor strain in mid-June (returning for a couple of regular-season appearances and postseason outing) -- it potentially does pave the way for an interesting scenario. For a contending team, the surgically-repaired version of Hill should offer an intriguing option heading into the season's second half.

The worries of the wear and tear of a full season won't be in play, but the potential that Hill displayed throughout his last four years (39-19, 3.00 ERA, 517 strikeouts, 141 walks in 437 1/3 innings) might just present the pitcher as the right guy at the right time for some contending club.

WHY IS EVERYONE CARING ABOUT CATCHERS?

At this writing, two of the three biggest free-agent signings have gone toward catchers. Yasmani Grandal reeled in a four-year, \$73 million deal from the White Sox while the Braves gave Travis d'Arnaud \$16 million over two years. It's not an accident.

In this day and age of distributing information, catchers have become the connective tissue for many teams.

"If you look back at some really, really good teams, and we can go back to Jason Varitek, he was computing this on his own in his own instinctual way. Then you fast forward to the '13 championship, we had Jarrod Saltalamacchia and David Ross. Same thing. They were doing this on their own because of their experience, because of the information and gathering and getting on a daily basis they were computing every single situation in their head," Arizona manager Torey Lovullo recently said on the Bradfo Sho podcast.

"I love catchers. I've developed a strong bond with catchers. I run the game through the catchers. I put a lot on the catchers. And if they can't handle that we need to find the next guy. Here in the Arizona we have had some really, really, really strong candidates that have helped us win some baseball games."

As far as the Red Sox' catching situation goes, the plan to lock up Christian Vazquez seems like an under-the-radar important move for the cost-conscious organization. Vazquez would have been going into his final year of arbitration-eligibility this offseason, but instead is signed through 2021 with a \$7 million team option for 2022. He will make \$4.2 million this coming season and \$6.25 million in his final guaranteed year.

WHERE THE JOSH BECKETT HALL OF FAME CONVERSATION TURNED

So I remember the moment I interviewed Josh Beckett about the possibility of becoming a Hall of Famer. It was Aug. 25, 2011, one day after he allowed one run over six innings to the Rangers in Texas. It seemed like a plausible notion at that time.

At the age of 31, he was 124-79 in the regular season with a 3.81 ERA, having also owned seven postseason wins with a 3.07 ERA in the playoffs. There was also no signs he was slowing down, with that outing in Arlington moving his 2011 ERA to 2.43 over 25 starts.

Considering age and production, it wasn't an absurd notion. Now that he is officially eligible the idea seems a long way away.

But from that interview until his last outing in 2014 Beckett would go just 15-27 with a 4.21 ERA (although there was a no-hitter in that final season). There also wasn't another postseason appearance.

Compare Beckett with some recent Hall of Fame pitchers through their Age 31 seasons and you can see why it should have been a conversation. Roy Halladay was 131-66 with a 3.52 ERA without a single postseason appearance. Randy Johnson had a record of 99-64 with a 3.52 ERA with two postseason wins. Mike Mussina's ERA was 3.53 with a record of 147-81, having also won a pair of playoff games. And Jack Morris finished the season he turned 31 sitting with a 144-94 mark and 3.57 ERA and three postseason victories.

SOME OTHER THOUGHTS ...

- If you're having a hard time getting your head around why Noah Song would prioritize serving with the military as much if not more than continuing his professional baseball career it's worth your while to revisit the story of Stephen Reich. Reich was one of the best pitchers ever to perform for a military academy, starring on the mound for Army. After dominating as a Connecticut high school pitcher he chose West Point over professional baseball, knowing that there would be a likely delay after his collegiate career if pro ball was still an option. After appearing in two minor-league games with Baltimore's Single-A affiliate three years after his graduation from Army, Reich went back into active duty. He would posthumously be awarded the Purple Heart 10 years later after being shot down while trying to rescue the Navy SEAL team in the 2005 mission featured in the movie "Lone Survivor."

- The Winter Meetings kick off in two weeks. They are in San Diego. Memories from the last time this thing was at this location: 1. The Red Sox getting beat out for the services of Jon Lester; 2. The Red Sox getting beat out for the services of Andrew Miller; 3. Sitting along the walkway to Starbucks from the hotel is the easiest way to track down executives/agents in the history of any Winter Meetings. (One executive recently advised a player looking for work to not worry about setting meetings with teams but prioritize finding a good bench on that path.)

- Mookie Betts retweeted a couple of tweets from the Red Sox' account!!!!

*** *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

MLB Notebook: Rotation offers Red Sox alternate payroll cutting option

Sean McAdam

One way or another, the Red Sox face some painful choices in their effort to get under the first luxury tax threshold of \$208 million for the 2020 season.

There are a number of paths the team could take to achieve their cuts. Trading away Mookie Betts would save about \$28 million alone. Moving J.D. Martinez would represent a savings of nearly \$24 million.

But while those are the most obvious and most speculated possibilities, there are other options in play for the Red Sox. These would involve dealing one of their veteran starters. Together, Chris Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi stand to earn \$79 million, or, more than a third of the club's projected payroll for next season.

Moving one of the starters would enable the Sox to maintain a top lineup, one capable of leading the game in runs scored. And it would potentially allow for the Sox to continue to try to work out a contract extension for Betts, who is under control for just one more season.

There are drawbacks, of course, to dealing a starting pitcher. First, there's the obvious hole that would be created in the rotation at a time when the organization lacks any obvious replacements.

Secondly, each of the three veteran starters is coming off a sub-par 2019 season, meaning the Sox would be dealing at a disadvantage. Accordingly, they would need to subsidize the salary of the pitcher involved — either by including an attractive prospect to offset the cost of taking on such an outsized contract, or by assuming some of the salary themselves. Neither option is particularly attractive: under the former, the Sox would be depleting an already thin inventory of prospects; under the latter, the potential lessening of further salary burdens would be compromised by assuming some of the remaining financial obligations.

But as stipulated earlier, there are no perfect solutions. One way or another, cutting salary is going to leave a mark.

Let's look at the three starters and examine their respective pros and cons.

DAVID PRICE

Remaining money: \$32 million in each of the next three seasons.

Pros: Despite missing time with a few stints on the IL, Price's recent injury history is relatively minor. He missed most of the last two months because of a cyst on his left wrist. He underwent a minor surgical procedure in the final week of the season and is expected to have a normal offseason and be ready for spring training. ... Although he's the oldest pitcher of this trio, he's been relatively durable in his career, having pitched 170 or more innings in seven of his last nine seasons. ... Price's repertoire has evolved in recent years and while he no longer possesses an overpowering fastball, he's demonstrated the ability to be effective using his changeup and cutter. Even at 34, he could certainly remain effective over the next three seasons. ... Though dogged for years as someone who couldn't perform in big games, his stellar 2018 season erased that narrative.

Cons: As noted, Price is 34, making him the oldest starter the Sox could market. ... He's also the most expensive in terms of AAV (\$32 million annually), as part of a contract that, at the time, was the largest awarded to a starting pitcher. ... For the last few seasons, Price had periodically dealt with a forearm issue that some fear could eventually result in more serious elbow troubles and potentially, lead to the need for Tommy John surgery which could wipe out at least one full season of the remaining three on his long-term deal.

The skinny: For a number of reasons, Price would appear to make the most sense for the Sox to move, not the least of which is because he sits in the middle of the three in terms of future obligations, while still pitching at a relatively high level — at least when healthy. It's also worth noting that after this season, Price will gain 10-5 rights — signifying 10 years in the big leagues, including the last five with the same team — which will allow him to refuse any deal and make trading him that much more problematic.

Scout's take: "To me, he makes the most sense (to move). If they eat some of the remaining money, I think there would be considerable interest in him."

CHRIS SALE

Remaining money: \$145 million over five years, with a vesting option for a sixth season.

Pros: Sale has been one of the most dominant starters in the game for much of his career, earning Top 5 Cy Young Award finishes in six of the last seven seasons. ... Intensely competitive with a plus-plus fastball and slider. ... Even in an off-year, he still managed to average 13.3 strikeouts per nine innings and his career strikeout-to-walk ratio of 5.37 to 1 is the best of all-time.

Cons: In a word, contract. Sale has yet to begin a five-year, \$145-million contract extension he agreed to last March. ... The 2019 season represented his worst year with a career-worst ERA of 4.40. ... He pitched better than his won-loss record suggests, but still, six wins in 25 starts is sobering. ... Worse, Sale missed the final six weeks of the season with an elbow injury that remains somewhat mysterious, with the pitcher himself limiting the amount of information the team can disclose. ... The team maintains that he'll be cleared to resume throwing soon and should have a normal spring training, but to say that concerns still linger would be a massive understatement.

The skinny: We've learned in recent years that there may be no such thing as an untradeable contract — if Robinson Cano can be moved, so can anyone else. But Sale's five-year deal coupled with the uncertainty that surrounds his elbow (and shoulder from the previous season) help represent the exception to the rule.

Scout's take: "The Red Sox would presumably have to assume so much of the remaining money that, in the end, it wouldn't be worth it to them. They're better off holding onto him and hoping he's healthy."

NATHAN EOVALDI

Remaining money: \$17 million in each of the next three years.

Pros: A wide assortment of quality pitches in his repertoire continues to make Eovaldi tantalizing. ... His fastball can reach triple digits on radar guns and he has another four or five pitches that are of high quality. ... His complete level and toughness will never again be questioned after his near-mythical relief appearance in Game 3 of the 2018 World Series. ... He has already undergone two Tommy John surgeries — one in high school, another a few years ago — which would suggest that, when it comes to injuries, the worst is already behind him. ... Eovaldi turns 30 in February, making him the youngest of the three pitchers being discussed.

Cons: Durability remains the No. 1 problem. ... Eovaldi has pitched parts of nine seasons in the big leagues and has pitched more than 150 innings just twice and more than 160 innings only once. ... His 5.99 ERA last year — a season in which he missed half the year with yet another elbow injury — is hardly comforting. ... And despite his elite velocity readings, Eovaldi doesn't get nearly the amount of swing-and-misses you would expect. ... Moreover, his career WHIP of 1.365 is further evidence that he tends to allow a lot of traffic.

The skinny: Getting a team to take a flier on Eovaldi would mean finding a team willing to take the same leap of faith the Sox did last offseason when they aggressively outbid other clubs to retain him. Everyone loves the repertoire and the velocity, and there may be a team that believes they can help him finally put it all together. But how much he can be trusted physically is one question. Another: how many pitchers get better — and healthier — after turning 30?

Scout's take: "If someone wants to take a gamble on his stuff, the money isn't horrible given the cost of starting pitching on the open market."

The Jacoby Ellsbury Era is coming to an ugly end in New York.

When the Yankees signed him to a seven-year, \$153-million deal after the 2013 season, it seemed like a bold and effective move. The Yankees were taking away a key component from a Red Sox team which had just won its third title in the last 10 years.

But after a decent first season with the Yankees in 2014, it spiraled downhill quickly for both Ellsbury and his team. Only once more would he play more than 112 games and he didn't play a single game each of the last two seasons.

It wasn't terribly surprising the Yankees unceremoniously released him last week with another year (at \$21 million) remaining and a \$2 million buyout for 2022. What was surprising was that the Yankees maintain that they're not going to pay him that remaining money, citing Ellsbury's decision to seek medical care from someone the Yankees hadn't approved of as their loophole.

Most agree that their efforts will be unsuccessful and that Ellsbury will ultimately win his appeal, but the very fact that the Yankees are trying to get out from underneath their contractual obligations will only further stain Ellsbury's reputation.

It's difficult to think of another player in his mid-30s — Ellsbury just turned 37 — who managed to miss the entirety of two seasons.

Red Sox fans, of course, recall the 2010 season when Ellsbury managed to get into just 18 games after suffering broken ribs following a nasty collision with future Hall of Famer/human brick wall Adrian Beltre. Ellsbury and his agent Scott Boras insisted that the outfielder's long convalescence was the result of an improper diagnosis. Ellsbury famously read from index cards one day in Toronto ("front and back") in asserting his point, but he had already earned a reputation — fairly or not — for being soft.

That rap followed him to New York, and the growing list of maladies in his last two seasons in New York (hip, oblique, foot, back) turned into something of a punchline.

The Sox got the last laugh in letting Ellsbury walk, but it shouldn't be forgotten that in 2011, the year after the broken ribs, Ellsbury had what anyone would agree was one of the best seasons in Red Sox history, slashing .321/.376/.552 with 212 hits, 46 doubles, 32 homers, 105 RBI, 119 runs scored, 39 stolen bases, 364 total bases, a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger.

And, it should be noted: 158 games played.

*** *The Athletic***

Red Sox mailbag, part 1: What punishment could be coming from MLB for Alex Cora?

Jen McCaffrey

The Winter Meetings are still a few weeks away and for now all is quiet on the Red Sox offseason front. But with so many holes to plug on the roster, it doesn't appear like the Red Sox will remain quiet for much longer.

So with that in mind, we took some of your questions for a Red Sox mailbag. Here's part 1, with the next installment coming Tuesday.

Does Alex Cora get punished for (any potential connection to the Astros' scandal in) 2017? What about the Yankees complaints of Red Sox Apple Watch in 2018? How do you think that shakes out? — @hardba1 on Twitter

Commissioner Rob Manfred recently told reporters at the GM Meetings that MLB would investigate the Astros' sign stealing "as thoroughly as humanly possible." The Athletic reported that Cora was heavily involved in the implementation of the Astros' sign stealing system while he was bench coach in Houston in 2017. He's said to be cooperating with MLB in its investigation.

We don't have much information beyond that, but if I had to make an educated guess I'd suspect the extent of the punishment is that Cora pays a hefty fine. There were so many individuals who may have had a hand in implementing or approving of the sign stealing, from Astros manager A.J. Hinch to Blue Jays bench coach Dave Hudgens, who was Houston's hitting coach in 2017. Orioles general manager Mike Elias was an assistant GM for the Astros in 2017. Does MLB fine all of them to varying degrees based on the determination of how heavily they were involved? It feels like a slippery slope. Regardless, I don't think this story is going anywhere anytime soon.

What's the pitchers' reaction to the loss of Dana LeVangie? He seemed to be a well-loved resource who won't be a daily presence anymore. — @SteveStrobridge on Twitter

To some extent, it's going to be a significant change for Red Sox pitchers next season with LeVangie moved from pitching coach back to a role he filled previously for the Red Sox as an advance scout. Meanwhile assistant pitching coach Brian Bannister is transitioning to a role working solely with the farm system. In their place, the Red Sox opted to promote Dave Bush to pitching coach and Kevin Walker to assistant pitching coach. Bush has worked with the organization since 2016 in pitching performance and analyst roles focusing on the farm system. Walker has worked as a pitching coach for the Red Sox minor league affiliates over the last 12 seasons. So he's already familiar with several Red Sox pitchers.

Though the pair kept their main focus on the farm system, both Bush and Walker have been heavily involved with the major league pitchers in spring training drills and workouts with the Red Sox. Bush also spent time this past season in Boston when Bannister was traveling to visit Sox affiliates. So in other

words, the change isn't so drastic that the pitchers don't know how these guys operate. That should ease the transition.

What are your thoughts on first base for 2020? Does Dalbec get a shot? — @hardba1 on Twitter

I think it's safe to say Bobby Dalbec is expected to debut in the majors at some point in 2020. Last spring, the team had him spend a significant amount of time around J.D. Martinez in his first big league spring training to learn from the veteran hitter's routines. He started the season in Double-A and moved to Triple-A in July, finishing the year hitting .239 with an .816 OPS, 19 doubles and 27 homers in 135 games. Dalbec moved from his natural third base position to play 24 games at first.

In eight games for Team USA in the Premier12 tournament this fall, he continued to impress on an international stage, hitting .250 with an .864 OPS and two homers while playing four more games at first base.

The Red Sox recently added Dalbec to their 40-man roster to protect him from the Rule 5 draft, but 40-man spots are rarely wasted and it's likely he'll be in Boston sooner than later. As the Red Sox seek to reduce payroll, it's possible Dalbec gets the nod as the club's opening day first baseman with both Mitch Moreland and Steve Pearce on the free agent market. There's also the factor of Dalbec's service time clock (which affects how soon he's eligible for free agency down the line). The Red Sox may opt to send him to Triple-A for the dual purpose of getting more reps at first base while also delaying his service clock a bit, but at this point I think they're still weighing options for cheaper veteran utility infielders to serve as backups for first and second base.

What are Chaim Bloom's core beliefs in building a baseball team? For example, Dave Dombrowski seemed to want to build a team via power starting pitching. — @ IAmJamesStewart on Twitter

It's hard to say definitively because we've never seen him as the lead executive (he was technically second in command to Erik Neander in Tampa, though it does seem like they made most decisions jointly). Based on those days in Tampa, we know Bloom values drafting and developing prospects, which is no surprise given the way the Rays operate. We also know he's been able to pull off some interesting and smart trades, like Erasmo Ramirez to the Mariners for Steve Cishek and cash in July 2017, or the Chris Archer deal in July 2018 where the Rays acquired top-tier prospects Tyler Glasnow and Austin Meadows.

I think a lot of these "beliefs" may have been shaped by the financial constraints in which he had to work in Tampa, however. He had to get creative because they didn't have the money to spend like he will here. I do think a lot of that creativity and small-market perspective can and will carry over in Boston despite a different financial structure and roster composition.