

# ***The Boston Red Sox Monday, December 2, 2019***

## **\* *The Boston Globe***

### **Giving Bobby Dalbec shot to start at first base makes sense**

Peter Abraham

Bobby Dalbec has yet to make his major league debut, so it could be a little premature to pencil him into the Red Sox lineup next season as their first baseman.

Then there's this: He's not really a first baseman, having started there only 23 times during his four seasons in the minors.

But as the Red Sox seek creative ways to build a more cost-efficient roster under new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom, giving Dalbec a chance begins to make sense.

As a rookie, Dalbec would add only the major league minimum salary of \$563,500 to the payroll while giving the Red Sox righthanded power and what should be above-average defense, given his athletic ability.

There's also a sense that Dalbec is ready for the moment. He hit 59 home runs over his last two seasons in the minors. In 2019, he posted an impressive .816 OPS with Double A Portland and Triple A Pawtucket.

Dalbec was then selected to play for Team USA in the Premier12 Olympic qualifying tournament. Facing lineups of older professionals in what were eight high-stakes games, he was 7 for 28 with a double, two home runs, five walks, and eight RBIs.

Dalbec started four games at first base in the tournament, something the Red Sox had influence on. It was a sign of where they see him best fitting into their major league roster.

Put it all together and Dalbec should go to spring training with a chance to make the roster, unless the Sox find a veteran alternative via trade or free agency.

There is work to be done, certainly. Dalbec is still developing as a hitter and his transition to the majors, whenever that comes, is sure to include a high number of strikeouts.

But his power plays, which is what the Sox projected when they took Dalbec in the fourth round of the 2016 out of the University of Arizona.

The biggest downside to using Dalbec at first base is that he's an excellent defensive third baseman with a strong and accurate arm.

But with Rafael Devers at third base, the Red Sox see Dalbec as a first baseman. If Devers regresses defensively, Dalbec could return to third base. But that's a conversation the Sox hope doesn't become necessary.

There are other in-house options, too.

Michael Chavis, 24, hit .254 with a .766 OPS, 18 home runs and 58 RBIs over 95 major league games last season. But he also struck out 127 times in 382 plate appearances, a lot even when considering the swing-for-the-fences ethos that has taken over the game.

Chavis started 43 games at first base and 40 at second base and was better than expected at both positions.

Chavis is a candidate to be the full-time first baseman. But he also could fit at second base, left field, or as a utility player, depending on how much roster reconstruction Bloom decides to undertake. Health is a concern, too. Chavis missed the final 41 games of last season because of injuries, including an oblique strain. The Sox initially planned to have him pick up at-bats in winter ball in Puerto Rico but scrapped that plan to have him instead focus on conditioning.

When he's not catching, Christian Vazquez could play first base from time to time. He had seven starts at the position last season and handled himself well.

Sam Travis has started 38 games at first base since 2017 and could again be a depth option. But Travis has a .288 on-base percentage over 111 major league games and, after six seasons in the organization, could use a fresh start somewhere else. The Sox missed their window to trade him.

That the Red Sox left Josh Ockimey unprotected for the Rule 5 draft tells you their opinion of the 24-year-old, who has hit .206 over 149 Triple A games.

The Sox appear unlikely to bring back free agent Mitch Moreland, who handled first base well over the last three seasons. At a relatively modest cost of \$18.5 million, Moreland had a .787 OPS over three seasons and 364 games for the Sox with 56 home runs and well above-average defense.

Moreland also had a .945 OPS in 15 postseason games. His three-run homer in Game 4 of the 2018 World Series started a comeback by the Sox that turned a 4-0 deficit into a 9-6 victory. But Moreland, 34, missed 71 games last season because of back and leg injuries.

#### FIRST BASE

Primary 2019 starter: Mitch Moreland.

Projected 2020 starter: Bobby Dalbec.

Major league depth: Michael Chavis, Sam Travis, Christian Vazquez.

Prospect to watch: Josh Ockimey.

#### **This Red Sox prospect is on the 40-man roster thanks to the minor-league system the MLB wants to shrink**

Alex Speier

Kyle Hart missed the call. Though he'd been waiting all day last Wednesday to hear from Ben Crockett, Hart was at dinner with a college teammate when the Red Sox farm director reached out. When he saw the missed call, he hurriedly returned it.

"He told me, 'Hey Kyle, I have some good news for you,' " said Hart.

When Crockett informed the 26-year-old lefthander that he was being added to the major league 40-man roster — and getting an invitation to spring training — it was a gratifying moment. Despite obscure origins and a little-noticed trajectory through the Red Sox system, Hart had earned the same status as highly regarded PawSox teammates Bobby Dalbec and C.J. Chatham, along with fireballing lefty Yoan Aybar.

Hart's ascent to the brink of the big leagues warrants notice, particularly now, with Major League Baseball and Minor League Baseball in negotiations on a new Professional Baseball Agreement. MLB is seeking a 25 percent reduction of affiliates, including the elimination of short-season leagues such as the New York-Penn League. MLB also has asked to shorten the 40-round draft.

Part of the rationale for such a cut is MLB's belief that it is forced to assume costs for a number of players who lack realistic shots of a big league future.

"Major League clubs sign and release nearly 2,000 Minor League players each year," MLB deputy commissioner Dan Halem wrote in a letter to Congress. "Most of the players on the rosters of rookie, short season, and low-A teams are there to fill rosters so the Minor League teams can stage games for their fans, not because the Major League clubs require all of those players to develop Major League talent."

Hart represents precisely the type of player who might not have gotten a shot in pro ball but for the opportunity to gain a toehold in short-season ball. Multiple evaluators acknowledged that Hart might not have been given an opportunity in the Red Sox system had there not been 30 available active roster spots provided by the New York-Penn League.

In 2014, pitching for Indiana University, Hart showed an unusual feel for his craft and an ability to mix pitches in a way that resulted in consistently strong performances, even with pedestrian velocity. He was on the radar of scouts, including Red Sox area scout Blair Henry, as he got off to a dominant start in February and March, forging a 2.29 ERA in 35⅓ innings.

"I was on an ungodly tear," recalled Hart.

But one tear gave way to another. Hart blew out his elbow at the end of March, requiring season-ending Tommy John surgery. He took a medical redshirt and returned the following year, going 5-0 with a 1.21 ERA — good enough to draw renewed attention — but teams didn't want to offer much by way of a bonus, so Hart returned for his senior year to conclude his environmental studies degree.

And so, in 2016, Henry again was scouting Indiana as the Hoosiers traveled through Florida in the spring when he saw a familiar lefty on a back field. It was Hart, looking very much like the same craftsman he'd seen two years ago.

In Henry's eyes, Hart was the sort of pitcher who gets an opportunity because a scout stands up for him. He showed traits that can go overlooked by analytics: competitiveness and makeup, command, intelligence to develop, and simply a feel for pitching. As he was a redshirt senior, the Sox needed to offer him little more than an opportunity, one of those spots in an organization that short-season leagues help create.

"I could've walked past this guy — 'lefty, been hurt, doesn't throw hard,' " Henry said. "But for some reason I wanted this guy. This was me asking for a player.

"We've gotten so caught up in neuroscouting and analytics. I get it. But when you get to a certain point in the draft, go with the people your scouts like. There's a reason they like them."

Hart signed for \$5,000, confident that he could take advantage of whatever chance he was afforded. He didn't pout when, as a 23-year-old, he was assigned to the Rookie Level Gulf Coast League, a level typically featuring teenagers in their first exposure to pro ball. It was a reminder that he lacked even the prospect status of other college players who signed with the Sox that summer.

"I was just happy to have been given the opportunity," Hart said.

True to Henry's report, Hart forced his way through the lower minors, dominating in the GCL in 2016 and at Greenville and Salem in 2017. He continued his solid performances at Double A Portland in 2018 and then finally at Triple A Pawtucket this past season. Between Double A and Triple A in 2019, he went 12-13 with a 3.52 ERA and 8.1 strikeouts per nine innings.

He's not overpowering, yet he has what one evaluator calls a "15-pitch mix" to limit hard contact: a fastball that sneaks into the low 90s, curveball, slider, cutter, and changeup, with the ability to change speeds and locations on virtually all of them. In a year when home run rates exploded in Triple A, Hart allowed 0.7 long balls per nine innings.

Even so, his career seemed to be nearing a crossroads because of the financial challenges faced by a minor leaguer who got a minimal bonus. There weren't offseason jobs in which he could make use of his degree, and the money he could scrape together from pitching lessons still made it hard to afford rent for a full minor league season.

"This was going to be a big offseason for me," Hart said. "I was definitely getting to a point where I had some decisions to make.

"At the same time, it would have been so difficult to say, 'Hey, I need to retire, I need to give this up,' because you are so close. When you're pitching well and you can almost taste it, you just hang in there."

He hung in, and his selection to the 40-man roster represents a game-changer. Hart will make a salary of roughly \$90,000 if he's in the minors and a prorated \$563,500 salary while in the big leagues. As long as he remains on the 40-man roster, he can afford to be a baseball player.

Perhaps more significantly, despite being a player who seemed like little more than "org filler," he represents someone with a chance to contribute at the highest level of the game, a testament to his determination and a reminder that players who fill out short-season rosters can defy expectations and emerge as big leaguers.

"There's somebody there every year past the 10th round, past the 20th round, who's going to play in the big leagues," Henry said. "You have to find him. That's the hard part."

Added Hart, "I'm just extremely humbled that they sat down in a room and said, 'This guy is good. We're going to put him on our roster with the ultimate goal of seeing, hey, is he worthy of taking the final step and contributing to the big league team?'"

"At that point, it's on me. At that point, you've been given every possible opportunity by the Red Sox. Then, just like at all the other levels I've pitched at, it's on me to go out and figure a way to become the version of myself that succeeds at that level. That's my goal."

### **Major league teams looking for coaches in private sector and college baseball**

Peter Abraham

At 32, Peter Fatse will be younger than some of the players he will work with as assistant hitting coach of the Red Sox next season. He also will be in uniform for the first time since 2012 when he was playing for the Florence Freedom in the independent Frontier League.

It might seem like an unconventional path to a major league coaching staff. But the Red Sox are among the growing number of major league teams who are seeking coaches from the private sector or college baseball to fill roles once all but closed off to candidates from outside of pro ball.

It's not who you know anymore. It's about what you know and how well you can teach it.

Fatse spent nine years as a private hitting instructor, starting his own company and eventually earning the trust of players such as Arizona Diamondbacks shortstop Nick Ahmed. The Minnesota Twins hired Fatse as their minor league hitting coordinator last year and he quickly made a big impression on that organization.

That was enough for the Red Sox, who wanted to add a younger, more analytically inclined coach to the staff under hitting coach Tim Hyers.

“I wasn’t trying to get to a major league team. For me it was learning as much as I could,” Fatse said. “I took ownership of the path I was on and took in all the information that I could. The target was to dominate the space I was in.”

A native of Holyoke, Fatse played at Minnechaug Regional and the University of Connecticut before the Milwaukee Brewers drafted him in 2009. He lasted two seasons before going to independent ball.

After his playing career ended, Fatse turned to teaching as a way to stay in the game.

Ahmed, one of the best defensive shortstops in the game, cut down on his strikeout rate and improved his isolated power and adjusted OPS three seasons in a row working with Fatse.

That caught the attention of Twins farm director Jeremy Zoll, although Fatse didn’t know it at the time.

“The opportunity with the Twins came out of the blue,” he said.

But ultimately it was the same job.

“It’s player development. A coach is a teacher, it’s a dual definition,” Fatse said. “You need the communication skills and an emphasis on building relationships with people when you teach. I take pride in that.”

The Yankees took a similar route in hiring Matt Blake as pitching coach.

Blake grew up in New Hampshire and played at Holy Cross before coaching at Lincoln-Sudbury High and with Yarmouth-Dennis in the Cape Cod League.

He worked as a private pitching instructor and with performance guru Eric Cressey, building a good reputation along the way.

The Indians hired Blake as a minor league coordinator four years ago, then he became assistant director of player development.

When the Yankees dropped 65-year-old Larry Rothschild as pitching coach after last season, they turned to a 33-year-old with no prior on-field professional experience.

“When I went into the marketplace I was looking for someone who was well-versed in the new-world order of technology,” general manager Brian Cashman said.

Other teams feel the same way. The Twins hired Wes Johnson from the University of Arkansas as their pitching coach last winter.

Reds pitching coach Derek Johnson was at Vanderbilt before the Cubs hired him as a minor league coordinator.

Michigan pitching coach Chris Fetter is on the radar of a number of major league teams.

Gender is not an issue, either. The Yankees hired 32-year-old Rachel Balkovec as a minor league hitting instructor. She is a former college softball player with a background in strength and conditioning and experience working with Driveline Baseball, the data-driven training center in Seattle.

The Cubs named Rachel Folden as the lead technician for their hitting lab and as a coach for their Arizona Rookie League team. She was hired the same day Balkovec was and also had a background in softball. Her experience is with analytics and biomechanics.

“Honestly, I think it should have happened a while ago,” Folden told the Chicago Tribune.

Folden, 32, was one of eight minor league coaches hired by the Cubs this offseason. Five came from the private sector or college programs.

“There used to be two separate paths, either college ball or pro ball. But that’s changing,” said Boston College coach Mike Gambino, a former Red Sox minor leaguer and coach who became a college coach in 2003.

“Technology is a big factor. Professional coaches used to fight against technology. But now teams are searching for talent on the development side to do whatever you need to do, and that’s increasingly with data.”

Most major conference college teams have high-speed cameras or tracking devices to measure pitch velocity, spin rate, exit velocity, horizontal and vertical break, launch angle, and other data points. That has created a generation of coaches with the skills major league organizations covet.

“College baseball is teaching and player development. We do that every day,” Gambino said. “Analytics are an important part of that and we try to be out in front of that. What we’re doing is comparable to the lower levels of the minor leagues.

“We’re not playing as many games. But when you look at the talent in a conference like the ACC, we’re working with similar levels of players and trying to accomplish the same things.”

UConn coach Jim Penders, who had five of his players in the majors last season, isn’t sure whether it’s a positive trend for the college game.

“I’ve noticed a sea change in the last year or two. But it’s a one-way street,” he said. “We’re losing some fantastic coaches.”

Penders, who has coached the Huskies for 16 seasons, believes the advances in analytics and technology play to the strengths of college coaches.

“We’re teachers at our level,” he said. “I’m not recruiting somebody who can’t hit even if he has a great exit velocity. But we know now to use the data in player development. It’s one thing to understand and another to be able to use it in developing a player.”

That the Red Sox hired Fatse didn’t come as a surprise to Penders.

“It’s a small pond of people who have those skills and that kind of personality,” he said. “They’re in demand.”

Fatse grew up in Hampden with a replica Fenway Park in his backyard for Wiffle ball games.

“My mother even let us put in a warning track,” he said.

Fatse has fond memories of the 2004 Red Sox, and second baseman Mark Bellhorn in particular because they played the same position.

“There’s no denying what it means to me to work for that organization,” he said. “I grew up going to Fenway. I’m extremely eager to get started.”

Fatse has talked to new chief baseball office Chaim Bloom and is getting to know manager Alex Cora.

“A.C. has been extremely welcoming. There’s a great level of communication,” Fatse said. “It reminds me of Minnesota, how close-knit everybody is.”

Fatse is reaching out to players and will soon travel to meet with several of them in person. He and Hyers will split up those duties.

“The players have been great. They’re interested in developing as hitters and taking advantage of what we can give them,” Fatse said. “I want to lay that foundation and build a relationship before spring training starts.

“It’s a learning curve, but I’ll dig in on the players now and when the season starts we’ll be ready to compete.”

That he’s never had a major league hit doesn’t matter.

“It never came up in Minnesota,” Fatse said. “Nobody asked me about that. You build up the relationships and do the work. It’s about being prepared every day with quality information for each player. That’s what is important to those guys.

“I’m here to help them and to listen and work to make them better. It’s a piece of the puzzle.”

## REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

### Still long road for Pedroia

That Dustin Pedroia has not given up on playing again made news during the general managers meetings this past month.

But it’s not that simple. The most optimistic projection for Pedroia would be playing for the Sox in late May or June, several major league sources said. While his left knee is feeling stronger, the second baseman is a long way from major league-level intensity.

If Pedroia joins the Sox in spring training, it would not be with the idea of making the team out of camp.

The Sox lose nothing by letting Pedroia try. The \$25 million remaining on his contract is guaranteed and can’t be converted in any way to keep from counting against the luxury tax.

A few other observations on the Red Sox:

- It seemed odd that Brian Johnson went unclaimed on waivers and the Red Sox outrighted him off the 40-man roster.

Johnson struggled last season but had a 4.20 ERA in 43 games over the 2017-18 seasons and was used in a variety of roles, including as a starter.

A versatile lefthander would seem to have value, and Johnson is healthy and into his offseason throwing program. Former first-round picks almost always get second chances.

One evaluator said Johnson being out of options limited his value as teams are prioritizing roster flexibility.

- Monday is the deadline for teams to tender contracts to their arbitration-eligible players.

The Red Sox have eight players to make a call on and the only potential non-tender is backup catcher Sandy Leon, who is projected for a \$2.8 million deal.

Leon had a .548 OPS last season and started 50 games behind the plate, his fewest since 2015. Leon’s defense is valued, but the Sox can likely find a cheaper alternative.

Leon hopes to get some at-bats this winter in the four-team Colombia Winter League. His in-laws are Colombian and he spends time there in the offseason.

The Venezuelan Winter League would be preferable, but Major League Baseball made the league off-limits to affiliated players because of the civil unrest there.

- Ryan Westmoreland announced on Twitter that he would be a member of the UMass Dartmouth staff next season under coach Bob Prince.

Westmoreland, 29, was a top prospect with the Red Sox when his career ended in 2010 because of brain surgery.

- J.D. Martinez had an interesting vacation. He went on a safari in Tanzania for two weeks with his parents, one of his sisters and her husband, and their three kids. The same group went to Thailand last year.

- Matt Barnes donated \$50,000 to the UConn for its new ballpark, which opens this spring, and the home bullpen will be named in his honor. Barnes played for the Huskies from 2009-11.

ETC.

Pomeranz lands his megadeal

Drew Pomeranz was 2-6 with a 6.08 ERA and 1.77 WHIP for the Red Sox in 2018. It cost him millions of dollars in free agency.

The Giants signed Pomeranz for one year and \$1.5 million. The lefthander was 2-9 with a 6.10 ERA and 1.70 WHIP in 17 starts for San Francisco. He was sent to the bullpen on July 22, his career very much in trouble.

A little more than four months later, Pomeranz signed a four-year, \$34 million deal with the San Diego Padres. It became official on Wednesday.

“A lot to be thankful for this Thanksgiving!!” Pomeranz wrote on Instagram.

Especially considering how it came together. After failing as a starter, Pomeranz made 29 relief appearances, four with the Giants and the rest for the Milwaukee Brewers after being traded at the deadline. He struck out 53 of the 116 batters he faced and allowed only 17 hits.

Pomeranz then pitched two perfect innings in the National League wild-card game against the Nationals.

Those 30 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings of relief were enough to get Pomeranz a better deal than Joe Kelly landed with the Dodgers last season.

As a reliever, Pomeranz used only a fastball and curveball, dropping his sinker and cutter. His fastball velocity, 92-93 miles per hour as a starter, climbed to 95 in September and 96 in the playoff game.

“We’re banking that he’s found a role that really fits for him,” Padres general manager A.J. Preller said.

Pomeranz was an All-Star for the Padres in 2016 before he was traded to the Red Sox for Anderson Espinoza, who has not pitched since 2016 because of injuries.

Extra bases

Success came at a cost for the Minnesota Twins. Along with Peter Fatse going to the Red Sox, bench coach Derek Shelton went to the Pirates as their manager. Hitting coach James Rowson is the bench coach of the Marlins. Assistant pitching coach Jeremy Hefner became pitching coach of the Mets and minor league catching coordinator Tanner Swanson went to the Yankees as the major league quality control coach . . .

Even if he never plays again, Jacoby Ellsbury has a career major league record that may never be broken. Ellsbury has reached first base by catcher’s interference 31 times in his career. Pete Rose is second with 29. Rose had 15,890 plate appearances and Ellsbury 5,375. Josh Reddick is third all time with 18, tied with

Dale Berra and Julian Javier. It seems like a quirk, but not really. Ellsbury has always tended to set up as far back as he could in the batter's box to give himself a chance at a pitch with late movement. That often led to him talking an emergency swing and the catcher's glove getting in the way. He had 10 of his catcher's interferences with the Red Sox. No other player in team history had more than two . . . This is weird: The Dodgers will have two Sundays off this coming season, March 29 and July 12 . . . There were 11 openings for managers and general manager-level positions this offseason. The only minority hired was new Mets manager Carlos Beltran . . . Happy birthday to Red Sox lefthander Bobby Poyner. He's 27. Herm Winningham is 58. The speedy center fielder was with the Sox in 1992 and played in 105 games for Butch Hobson. It was his final season in the majors. The last hit of his career was a single to drive in Tony Pena.

## **\* *The Boston Herald***

### **Inside Fenway Park's luxury suites**

Olivia Vanni

If you've ever wondered what it's like to live the suite life at sports arenas around New England, you're in for a treat. The Track has a ticket to look at our local stadiums' premium seating possibilities, starting with Fenway Park and some of its unconventional spectator experiences.

"Given that we are the smallest park in baseball, we have our own set of challenges as far as the amount of total seats that we can have," said Will Droste, Senior Vice President of Ticket Sales and Premium Package Sales for the Red Sox. "In some ways, it can be a blessing in disguise because it's forced us to be more and more creative."

Aside from the classic concept of a suite, Fenway has crafted a slew of opportunities that will forever stick out in fans' memories. Let's take the park's Jim Beam Dugout, an "open-air suite" made to mirror the neighboring Red Sox digs.

"It is actually dug down into the ground," Droste said of the 25-seat offering, which can cost anywhere from \$13,750 to \$20G. "It's one of the only places where there's a viewpoint similar to that of a player watching from the dugout."

"There are photos and we have a pre-game meal in the Royal Rooters Club," he added of its perks. "You actually get player parking passes because we tried to create a real, player-like gameday experience."

If being dugout-adjacent to the team isn't enough, there's even a premium option that'll have you catching a little on-field action.

"We've created experiences like the centerfield batting practice package, where you're actually in centerfield with custom gloves, catching fly balls during Red Sox batting practices."

The "pretty extreme experience" then has you posting up in Fenway's Left Field Coca Cola Corner Pavilion for the game. You'll get to walk away with your commemorative glove and a killer story. Not bad for \$7G to \$11G.

Higher up from the field, fans can also spend a game schmoozing with a Sox player of yore in the stadium's Legends Suite. For \$11G to \$22G, up to 20 guests can sit with an in-suite Hall of Famer, which could be anyone from Jim Rice to Dwight Evans.

"You have a former Red Sox player actually in there with you for the first five innings of the game, signing autographs, chatting, telling stories," Droste said.

And if you're more in the mood for media, Fenway also boasts a Press Box Suite — a space for eight that is, you guessed it, an old, converted press box.

“It has no perspective like any other suite in baseball because you’re right next to the broadcasters,” Droste said of the space, which rings in at \$3,200.

When it comes to the lucky spectators indulging in these and the other special packages Fenway offers, Droste said that the main demographic is businesses looking to woo prospects and treat clients.

“People gravitate towards the things that are different because they really want to stand out,” he said. “They know that their guests are invited to the whole suite environment by other companies all the time. There are packages that will give them an experience they’ve never done in their life and will never do again.”

## **\* *MassLive.com***

### **Chris Sale injury: Boston Red Sox ace visits Dr. James Andrews for follow-up, cleared to throw**

Christopher Smith

Ace Chris Sale (elbow) finally went for his follow-up visit with Dr. James Andrews who cleared him to begin throwing, per the Red Sox.

Sale visited the renowned surgeon the week before Thanksgiving. WEEI reported the news first.

The lefty’s initial visit took place Aug. 19. He received a PRP injection and Dr. Andrews shut him down. The follow-up visit initially was planned for early October. But the Red Sox decided to take a more conservative approach and give him extra time.

“With the original timetable, the six weeks, part of the reason for that was we were still in it,” GM Brian O’Halloran said Oct. 28. “We still had a chance to make the postseason. So we talked about the early end of the range of when he could be ready. Once it became clear that we weren’t going to be in the postseason, we decided to take all the time that we could because why not? Why not slow it down?”

Sale went 6-11 with a 4.40 ERA, 1.09 WHIP and 3.39 FIP in 25 starts (147 1/3 innings) during 2019.

Shoulder inflammation limited him to 158 innings in 2018, including 29 innings during the second half. But then-president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski signed him to a five-year, \$145-million extension during spring training 2019.

### **Boston Red Sox’s Brian Johnson clears waivers, sent to Triple-A Pawtucket**

Chris Cotillo

Red Sox left-hander Brian Johnson cleared waivers and was sent to Triple-A Pawtucket on Wednesday, the team announced.

Johnson was placed on outright waivers Monday and went unclaimed by the other 29 clubs. He will remain in Boston’s organization but is no longer a member of the 40-man roster.

Johnson, who turns 29 next month, was a key member of manager Alex Cora’s staff in 2018 before struggling with injuries and ineffectiveness last season. After posting a 4.17 ERA in 99 1/3 innings as a swingman in 2018, Johnson dealt with an elbow injury and a non-baseball related medical issue and was held to just 40 1/3 innings in 2019, posting a 6.02 ERA and 1.884 WHIP in that span.

Johnson will still give the Sox some pitching depth in 2020, but he’s behind other options now that he’s on the 40-man roster. Righties Mike Shawaryn and Hector Velazquez and newly added lefty Kyle Hart are now ahead of Johnson in terms of potential rotation fill-ins for next season.

New Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom is expected to add pitching depth this winter behind starters Chris Sale, David Price, Eduardo Rodriguez and Nathan Eovaldi. The Red Sox don't have many ideal internal options who can give them length, so it's likely Bloom will attempt to make a series of external additions before Opening Day.

## **\* *The Portland Press Herald***

### **Major-league potential looms in thin farm system**

Kevin Thomas

A starting pitcher, a couple of sluggers and another starter who might be bullpen help ... that foursome highlights our annual list of the top 30 Boston Red Sox prospects.

As in previous years, the list continues to thin as the Red Sox attempt to rebuild their farm system. There is no guarantee that anyone on this list will establish himself as a consistent major leaguer. There will be call-ups, but who can say if they will stay?

This year's list features less turnover (10 new players) than last year (16). That is because many of Boston's hyped young prospects have not proven themselves. We've included some (like 19-year-old shortstop Antoni Flores), but not others (like Boston's top draft pick last year, Cameron Cannon).

The focus, unlike other praiseworthy prospect lists, is major league readiness. We get to know these players in Double-A Portland and watch them move on to Triple-A. We are not big on boosting several young players until we see more of a sample size, but some cannot be ignored.

Among those players no longer ranked, six have graduated to the major leagues. That does not guarantee a spot on the Red Sox roster. We think most will be there next season, but a player like first baseman Sam Travis is dangling – not yet established, but also out of minor league options. Utility player Tzu-Wei Lin is out of options, too, but his versatility gives him a better chance of sticking in Boston.

Here's our Top 30, listing each player's ranking (his ranking last year), age and position:

1. Bryan Mata, (8), 20, RHP. Most prospect lists put slugger Triston Casas at No. 1 for Boston, but Mata's solid 2019 season makes him potentially the first homegrown starting major league pitcher since Clay Buchholz. Mata had his healthiest season (105 innings) and produced (111 strikeouts). He gets your attention when he starts a game with his 98 mph fastball; then settles in at 96, along with a slider, curve and change-up. He has the stuff and the mix to be special.

2. Triston Casas (10), 19, 3B/1B. The Red Sox challenged Casas in his first professional season, sending him to Class A Greenville. He shined and ended the season in advanced Class A Salem. Casas swatted 20 home runs – the most by a teenager in the Red Sox system since Xander Bogaerts – with an .830 OPS. Mostly a first baseman, he could see Portland before the 2020 season is over.

Corner infielder Bobby Dalbec hit 27 home runs last season between Portland and Triple-A Pawtucket. He was promoted to Boston's 40-man roster after the season. Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer

3. Bobby Dalbec (3), 24, 3B/1B. Playing at high levels last season, in Portland and Pawtucket, Dalbec still hit 27 home runs (compared to 32 the year before) and his strikeouts were down (139, from 176 in 2018). His OPS also dropped 103 points to .816. Now on the 40-man roster, he could be called up if either Rafael Devers or Michael Chavis is injured. He also could be made available in a trade.

4. Tanner Houck (9), 23, RHP. His fastball/slider combination make him a tempting option in the bullpen (where he made 14 appearances in Triple-A after his promotion from Portland). The Red Sox still see him

as a starter, especially if his change-up continues to improve. The 2017 first-round pick will start 2020 in Triple-A.

5. Jarren Duran (21), 23, 2B/OF. He continued to rake in A ball, starting 2019 with a .387 average in 50 games with Salem (.998 OPS). Promoted to Portland, Duran's bat cooled (.250/.634 OPS). The speed is there (five triples, 28 steals in 36 attempts) and his conversion to the outfield is getting smoother. As he makes adjustments at the plate, Triple-A will beckon.

6. C.J. Chatham (13), 24, SS/2B. When Chatham is healthy, he is one of the best pure hitters in the Red Sox system. He missed nearly a month with hamstring issues last season, but still batted .298, which is his career average. Last year, he played 12 games at second base. With Bogaerts in Boston, Chatham's versatility will be key. Now on the 40-man roster, he will be in Pawtucket.

7. Gilberto Jimenez (NR), 19, OF. Jimenez is the first prospect from the short-season levels to be listed, and he's a fine choice. Jimenez, from the Dominican Republic, features dazzling speed. He puts the ball in play – only 38 strikeouts in 234 at-bats – and then runs. He batted .359 at short-season Lowell last year. Considered raw, but with so many skills, Jimenez is one to watch.

8. Travis Lakins (6), 25, RHP. Lakins is not high on most prospect lists, but we figured that after making his major league debut last year, he could be ready to contribute for this season. After the All-Star break, Lakins made nine appearances (2.57 ERA, with 13 strikeouts in 14 innings). His effective fastball/cutter combination make him an option for a call-up.

Left-handed pitcher Jay Groome received media attention after being selected by Boston in the first round of the 2016 draft, but he has pitched just 66 innings in the pros after Tommy John surgery. AP Photo/Michael Dwyer

9. Jay Groome (9), 21, LHP. Since being drafted 12th overall in 2016, Groome has pitched 66 innings in the pros. That included four innings in the rookie leagues last year after he recovered from Tommy John surgery (he missed all of 2018). With a mid-90s fastball and solid curve, he's still considered a potential frontline starter.

10. Thad Ward (NR), 22, RHP. A fifth-round draft pick in 2018, Ward performed well at Greenville (1.99 ERA, 87 strikeouts in 72 1/3 innings). Good college pitchers often stand out in low Class A, but then Ward got to Salem and kept it up – 2.33 ERA, 70 strikeouts in 54 innings. He should be bringing his prime slider to Portland next season.

11. Kyle Hart (27), 27, LHP. This ranking may be a stretch, but Hart has figured out ways to succeed in the past, which is why Boston put him on the 40-man roster. A 19th-round draft pick in 2016, Hart has moved up the prospect rankings with his ability to mix pitches. His fastball is in the low 90 mph range, but plays well off his cutter and change-up.

12. Noah Song (NR), 22, RHP. Will he pitch, or serve? Song, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, has requested a delay in serving his active duty so he can pitch for the Red Sox, who drafted him in the fourth round in June. Song, featuring an upper-90s fastball, had a 1.03 ERA in Lowell, with 17 strikeouts in 15 innings.

13. Mike Shawaryn (5), 25, RHP. Shawaryn was cruising in his first six pro games (four hits, one run in 11 1/3 innings), then gave up a single and back-to-back homers against Toronto, followed by allowing eight earned runs to the Yankees in London. He never seemed to recover. But if Shawaryn can shake off those memories, he can contribute.

14. Bobby Poyner (7), 27, LHP. A five-run outing in June sent Poyner from Boston to Pawtucket until September. When he returned, he allowed one hit (a homer) and one walk in 10 outings (0.26 WHIP). Poyner can still be an addition to the Red Sox bullpen with his deceiving fastball and change-up.

15. Nick Decker (30), 20, OF. Decker was drafted one round after Casas and, while not rushed, he is coming along. He stayed in Lowell last year, recording a .799 OPS in 53 games, with 10 doubles, five triples and six home runs. He does not have the power of Casas, but there is some pop, along with a good approach at the plate.

Left-hander Daniel McGrath worked his way into the Portland Sea Dogs rotation this summer, compiling a 7-1 record with a 1.24 ERA in 15 starts. Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer

16. Daniel McGrath (NR), 25, LHP. Maybe the most underappreciated prospect, McGrath worked his way into the Sea Dogs rotation last year and, in 15 starts, was 7-1 with a 1.24 ERA, and 1.03 WHIP. He got one start in Triple-A (seven innings, three earned runs). He mixes a plus curve and change-up with an 89 mph fastball. Re-signed to a minor league contract, McGrath is eligible for the Rule 5 draft.

17. Eduard Bazarido (NR), 24, RHP. Speaking of the Rule 5 draft, Bazarido is definitely a candidate to be picked by another team. Signed as an 18-year-old, he labored in the rookie levels until last year. He reached Portland by June and, with a low to mid-90s fastball and solid curve, recorded a 2.78 ERA with 35 strikeouts and 13 walks in 32 1/3 innings.

18. Denyi Reyes (15), 23, RHP. Reyes is not a “stuff” pitcher. He doesn’t overwhelm, but he can pitch, using a 91 mph fastball and a diving curveball. He made 26 starts in Portland (4.16 ERA and a 1.18 WHIP). He was consistent and durable and will begin his second season on the 40-man roster, taking his game to Triple-A.

19. Trevor Kelley (NR), 26, RHP. The underdog story of last year, Kelley went from being a 36th-round draft pick in 2015 to making his major league debut in July. A side-arm thrower, Kelley dominated in Pawtucket (1.79 ERA/1.10 WHIP). He needs refinement for the majors (only half of his 10 appearances were scoreless).

20. Josh Ockimey (16), 24, 1B. Ockimey has fallen off most prospect rankings (soxprospects.com has him 45th). He batted only .204 in Pawtucket, but his OPS was .811. He swatted 25 home runs and drew a league-leading 82 walks. Eligible for Rule 5 (but a longshot), Ockimey likely has one more season to prove himself to Boston.

21. Durbin Feltman (14), 22, RHP. A victim of hype and unrealistic expectations, Feltman’s first full pro season, in Portland, was a disappointment (5.26 ERA/1.42 WHIP). Considered major league ready when drafted in 2018, he made four major league appearances in spring training. His stuff (fastball/slider) is apparent, but more work is obviously needed.

22. Alex Scherff (12), 21, RHP. Scherff did not experience the breakout year some expected in his second pro season (4.83 ERA/1.60 WHIP in Greenville). But consider that Scherff, if he had accepted a scholarship to Texas A&M, would not have been draft eligible until 2020. He’s got time. He will remain a starter, but his fastball/cutter may be destined for the bullpen.

The Red Sox placed outfielder Marcus Wilson, right, on their 40-man roster this fall after acquiring him in a trade from Arizona for Blake Swihart early in the season. Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer

23. Marcus Wilson (NR), 23, OF. Wilson looked like a bust when first arriving in the Blake Swihart trade. He was demoted from Portland to Salem. Wilson worked his way back to the Sea Dogs and batted .250/.811 OPS. He was 10 for 30 in the Arizona Fall League, which, along with his potential, prompted his promotion to the 40-man roster.

24. Brayan Bello (NR), 20, RHP. Bello was only 19 when the Red Sox assigned him the Greenville, a sure sign that Boston thinks highly of him. Bello features loads of potential, starting with a mid-90s fastball with life, and a hard slider. He stuck out 119 in 117 2/3 innings last year and may be pushed to Salem this season.

25. Antoni Flores (19), 19, SS. Flores is reportedly a joy to watch in the field, manning his shortstop position with grace and authority. But can he hit in the pros? Flores, only 18 last season, was pushed to short-season Lowell and batted only .193. Another year of development and a return to Lowell may bring out Flores' offensive potential.

26. Yoan Aybar (NR), 22, LHP. Aybar was put on the 40-man roster to protect him from the Rule 5 draft. Now, Boston has to figure out what it has in its newly transitioned pitcher. Once a touted outfield prospect, Aybar moved to the mound in 2018. With a mid-90s fastball, Aybar is both promising and raw, which he showed in Greenville last season (67 strikeouts, but 40 walks).

27. Chase Shugart (NR), 23, RHP. A 12th-round draft pick in 2018, Shugart was a nice surprise in his first full pro season, recording a 2.81 ERA/1.25 WHIP in Greenville. Both his slider and curve work well off a low 90s fastball. He struck out 73 and walked 23. He was both a reliever and starter at the University of Texas.

28. Brandon Howlett (25), 20, 3B. The Red Sox were thrilled to get Howlett in the 21st round of the 2018 draft, because he was a top prospect who figured to be going to Florida State. He was pushed to Greenville and, predictably, struggled (.231/.698 OPS). He will likely head back to Greenville where he should be ready to show his potential.

29. Matthew Gorst (18), 25, RHP. Gorst could have been dropped from our rankings after he took a step backward, with a 4.62 ERA in Portland (after flashing a 0.00 ERA in nine games with the Sea Dogs in 2018). Gorst has a fastball/cutter combination that makes him effective. He will look to bounce back in Portland next season.

30. Austin Maddox (24), 28, RHP. Maddox seemed destined for a promising major league career in 2017 when he recorded a 0.52 ERA in 13 games with the Red Sox. But injuries, including shoulder surgery that wiped out the 2019 season, have derailed him. He hopes to begin his comeback in 2020.

From last year's list, six prospects reached the major leagues – Michael Chavis (1), Darwinson Hernandez (2), Tzu-Wei Lin (11), Sam Travis (20), Josh Taylor (22) and Marco Hernandez (23). One was waived – Chandler Shephard (16). One is a free agent – Dedgar Jimenez (28). Two were dropped from the list – Matthew Kent (26), Roniel Raudes (29).

## **\* *RedSox.com***

### **Sale cleared to begin throwing by Dr. Andrews**

Matt Kelly

Dr. James Andrews gave Red Sox ace Chris Sale some good news for the holidays.

Andrews has cleared Sale to begin throwing with the goal of participating in Spring Training, Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom told WEEI Radio in Boston. Sale visited Andrews last week in Pensacola, Fla., and received the green light in a follow-up evaluation stemming from the PRP injection Sale received in his left pitching elbow back in August. Sale threw his last pitch on Aug. 13 before he was shut down for the remainder of the season with elbow inflammation.

“The rehab has gone very well and Chris is right where we want him to be,” Red Sox general manager Brian O’Halloran said at last month’s General Managers Meetings.

The 2020 season marks the first of the five-year, \$145 million extension that Sale signed in March. He finished 2019 with a 6-11 record and a 4.40 ERA in one of the toughest seasons of his career.

## **\* *WEEI.com***

## **Chris Sale gets green light after visit to Dr. James Andrews**

Rob Bradford

The trip to Pensacola, Fla. was finally made. Chris Sale has seen Dr. James Andrews.

According to Red Sox Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom the pitcher's long-anticipated follow-up with Dr. Andrews, who administered a PRP injection into Sale's elbow in August, took place the week prior to Thanksgiving. The results were positive with the starter getting the go-ahead to immediately start throwing with an eye on participating in spring training.

While the visit with Dr. Andrews was originally scheduled to take place six weeks following the PRP injection Red Sox general manager Brian O'Halloran said at the recent GM meetings that the timetable changed when it became evident Sale would not be needed for postseason duty.

"What changed is we fell out of the playoff race," O'Halloran said. "We decided to slow it down. It was our decision, it was nothing to do with how things were going. The rehab has gone very well and Chris is right where we want him to be, pending that appointment with Dr. Andrews. When we gave a six-week range, that sort of lined up with the end of the season, and we were holding out hope at that point that we still had a chance to be a postseason team. Very quickly after that, that changed, that didn't happen.

"The six weeks was kind of the early range that we were given by our medical department on what was appropriate on a return to play. Once the postseason was no longer a factor, we decided to take the outer end of the range just because it made the most sense to slow it down and give the most time possible to heal and go from there."

Sale last pitched Aug. 13 before shutting down his season with elbow inflammation.

The five-year, \$145 million extension the lefty signed prior to the 2019 season kicks in this coming year, with Sale making \$30 million in 2020.

## **Why latest Chris Sale news was so important to Red Sox**

Rob Bradford

Between another Sunday of football and travel back from Thanksgiving visits it would be understandable if the Chris Sale news escaped your attention. But its importance shouldn't be understated.

Red Sox Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom told WEEI.com Sunday that Sale had made the long-anticipated follow-up visit to Dr. James Andrews the week leading up to Thanksgiving and was told he could immediately start a throwing program that targets hitting the ground running when it comes to spring training.

It was a better late than never scenario for Sale and the Red Sox.

While some were left wondering if the delay in heading to Pensacola, Fla. should be a cause for concern -- (he was originally slated to visit Dr. Andrews six weeks after receiving a PRP injection in August) -- the news should have been music to the Red Sox' ears. It would seem that as of now the elbow inflammation that shut the lefty down after his Aug. 13 start is not going to put 2020 in doubt.

For the Red Sox' fortunes heading into the new season, this was a huge step in the right direction.

As much of the conversation regarding the likes of Mookie Betts, J.D. Martinez, second base, first base and even the bullpen dominate the offseason discussion, whether or not the 2020 Red Sox will be able to keep

pace with the American League heavies most likely hinges on the health and production of its top-paid starting pitchers.

The Red Sox have built the foundation of their team in a similar fashion as both the world champion Nationals and American League title-holding Astros -- committing significant resources to the top of their rotation. The combination of Sale, David Price and Nathan Eovaldi make up \$79 million of the team's payroll (around 38 percent of the whole ball of wax assuming the Sox' land at \$208 million).

The equation clearly didn't work in 2019 with the Red Sox going a combined 27-42 in games the trio started.

So while it's difficult to suggest the results are going to do an about-face in 2020, especially considering neither Price or Sale made a start after Sept. 1 due to their respective ailments, this Sale news was a much-needed step in the right direction. That doesn't mean there won't be breath-holding even if Sale comes back looking like his old self. The same for Price and Eovaldi. But at a time the Red Sox seem in an uncomfortable state of flux, this offers some optimism that wasn't necessarily around as recently as a few weeks ago.

### **The Sunday Baseball Column: Did Red Sox miss the best window to trade Mookie Betts?**

Rob Bradford

Holiday parties can always be a dangerous thing for baseball reporters.

I remember during the Daisuke Matsuzaka saga leading into the 2007 season telling my wife I would not be accompanying her to a Christmas party because there was absolutely no desire to spend hours around the plates of cookies fending off questions about the Red Sox' Mystery Man.

For doctors, it is answering questions about aches and pains. For those who cover the Red Sox, the holiday get-togethers are thick with a diagnosis of the luxury tax threshold.

This year the key question started at the Halloween candy giveaways and is running straight through the opening of the advent calendars: What do you think is going to happen to Mookie Betts?

So, part of the job is to have some sort of answer for this query. The problem is that when trying to nail the outcome of Betts' future we are left to try and make sense of various pieces of this puzzle.

This what we know ...

- Betts is digging in when it comes to what he views his value at. This, as he points out, is all business and zero emotion.

- The Red Sox have made Betts numerous contract extension offers, including what a proposed deal in spring training that would have put the outfielder among baseball's elite when it comes to long-term, big-money contracts.

- Betts is slated to make around \$27 million for 2020, with the 27-year-old heading into his last year of arbitration-eligibility. If traded, the other team would be taking on that money along with the uncertainty of just one more season of control.

- Betts' on-field existence for the 2020 Red Sox is key considering what he continues to bring to the table. His presence on the payroll, however, is a problem considering the organizations' desire to get its bottom line below \$208 million.

- There aren't any logical internal replacements for Betts in the Red Sox' farm system.

When those facts, along with various comments over the past few seasons, have left us all guessing. But there is one aspect of the equation that was recently surfaced in a conversation with a baseball executive that stuck with me: “It’s hard to tell if Chaim would have traded him last season ...”

Not a whole lot of merit was put into the idea of dealing Betts prior to this offseason, particularly leading up to last season’s trade deadline. When Aug. 1 rolled around the Sox’ leadoff hitter was just starting to get hit hot, hitting .373 with a 1.085 OPS in July. And the team was just two games out of a Wild Card berth.

But there were two quotes from team president Sam Kennedy when appearing on the Greg Hill Show immediately after the deadline that stuck with me:

1. “There were some discussions involving major league players and really rattling cages and shifting things around. I’m glad personally those didn’t happen because I believe in the guys we have right now.”

2. “No specific discussions about Mookie Betts or any other player. Just a general discussion, I think which is healthy. About a week before the deadline ownership, Dave and the team we sit down just kind of go through and say, ‘What are things looking like?’ I think it’s responsible for teams in our position that have the resources, we have great assets, we have great scouting and player development, we said to ourselves, ‘Let’s see what is out there on the market and would there be a willingness to listen to any deal?’ The honest answer to that is, ‘Yes.’ I think it would be irresponsible to not at least listen. Were there any substantive discussions, or really any discussions, that got to any type of ownership level on any of our elite players? No, there weren’t.”

They should have talked about a Betts deal, and one has to wonder if it was Bloom sitting in the big chair instead of Dombrowski if the conversations would have become whole lot more interesting.

While the aforementioned optimism of the time pushed aside the idea of actively shopping Betts it would have been the kind of approach Bloom’s former team, the Rays, made a living on. Granted, the stakes in Tampa Bay — along with the financial means — have always been night and day from Boston. But the whole goal is to stay out ahead of the kind of potentially uncomfortable existences the likes of which we find the Red Sox currently trying to manage.

For the Rays, their tough decision came at the 2014 trade deadline when they dealt David Price to Detroit in a three-way deal with a year still left on the pitcher’s contract. Facing having to pay Price what would be \$19.75 million in the final year of control, Tampa Bay deemed it prudent to jump into the trade market a year before many might.

While this might not be an apples-to-apples comparison, the heart of the issue is identical: Figuring out if there is a realistic chance the player can be signed beyond their current commitment.

When last season’s trade deadline rolled around the Red Sox couldn’t have felt good about their chance to sign Betts to an extension considering his rebuffing of the team’s spring training offer. Yet they decided it was worth it to take the chance of getting progressively less in the trade market in exchange for having Betts continue to do his thing in a Red Sox uniform with probably some distant hope that financial common ground could be reached.

It’s not as if the Red Sox couldn’t get anything for Betts if they dealt him this offseason. (One could make the argument that Detroit got more in its Price deal with Toronto in 2015 than the Rays received a year before.) And it certainly doesn’t make sense to jump ship on the star outfielder if there is still hope, both in terms of winning games and agreeing to an extension.

But if Bloom was that chief baseball decision-maker for the Red Sox last July and knew what he knows now I do believe that cage-rattling Kennedy referenced would have been a lot louder.

So, what now?

Let me — and the Red Sox —continue to think about it over some egg nog ...

## **\* *NBC Sports Boston***

### **Greg Bird once looked like future of Yankees, but now he might fit with Red Sox**

John Tomase

He's the original Baby Bomber, and he briefly appeared as indispensable as Gary Sanchez and Aaron Judge. Then injuries intervened, and so now we're left to wonder: could Greg Bird be a buy-low target of the Red Sox?

The former Yankees first baseman cleared waivers and elected to become a free agent on Thanksgiving eve rather than accept a demotion to Triple A.

Four years after taking New York by storm, Bird is now a man without a team, but there are reasons to give him a look.

TOMASE: These Dodgers prospects could be chips in a Betts trade

He arrived with a bang in 2015 at the tender age of 22, slamming 11 homers in just 46 games in relief of Mark Teixeira, beating Sanchez and Judge to the big leagues in the process. Yankees fans daydreamed about his sweet left-handed swing assaulting the short porch in right for a decade.

Then came injuries — lots of injuries. A torn labrum sidelined him for 2016, and foot and ankle maladies have limited him to 142 games since. He has barely produced above a whimper in that time, hitting just .194, including 10 worthless games last season.

And yet . . . when Bird got healthy at the end of 2017, he produced in the postseason. His solo homer off Andrew Miller accounted for the only run in Game 3 of the Division Series, propelling the Yankees from a 2-0 deficit and into the ALCS, where two more Bird homers helped push the eventual champion Astros to seven games.

During that series, the New York Post noted, the Astros considered Bird as dangerous as anyone in the Yankees lineup, and he ended up walking eight times. When healthy, there's a reason Bird drew comparisons to former Yankees first baseman Nick Johnson, because he combined some power with a high on base percentage from the left side. Former Red Sox GM Theo Epstein was enamored with Johnson, who could never stay healthy, either.

There was an exception, however, as the Post also noted. In Johnson's age 27 season, he finally put it all together for the Nationals in 2006, hitting .290 with 23 homers and a .948 OPS in a career-high 147 games. He'd miss the entire 2007 season and spend the rest of his career bouncing on and off the disabled list, but for that one prime year, he delivered the goods.

Bird just turned 27 and has the minor-league track record (.396 OBP) to suggest that if he ever overcomes his injuries, he could pay off as a low-cost, low-risk flier. With the Red Sox looking to slash payroll and openings existing all over the diamond, they're going to have to hit on players like Bird to contend while cutting costs.

As of now, the depth chart at first base isn't particularly deep. Slugging Michael Chavis is one option, but he could also end up playing second base, and he won't be a viable full-timer anywhere until he addresses the hole in his swing above the belt. Youngster Sam Travis is another, but he has done nothing to distinguish himself in parts of three seasons. Then there's prospect Bobby Dalbec, who has appeared in just 30 games at Triple A and still represents an unknown.

A high on-base player with durability issues excelling at age 27 wouldn't be unprecedented. Cleveland's Travis Hafner began a run of four straight 100-RBI seasons at that age before breaking down. Rangers utilityman Frank Catalanotto nearly won a batting title in 2001. Old friend Dave Magadan hit a career-high .328 and earned MVP votes with the Mets in 1990.

The odds may be low, but so is the risk. And those are the kind of players the Red Sox are going to have to target this winter.

## **\* *Bostonsportsjournal.com***

### **MLB Notebook: Reliving the highs and lows in the last decade of Red Sox history**

Sean McAdam

It's that time of the decade again.

Time, that is, to look back on the last 10 years of Red Sox history, a span that saw both great highs and unimaginable lows.

We'll take a look at the top five moments first, followed by the worst. Remember, these are specific moments, not games.

#### **TOP FIVE MOMENTS**

##### **1. David Ortiz's grand slam, Game 2, 2013 ALCS**

There can be little doubt that Ortiz was the Sox' signature player of the decade — even if he retired and missed the final three seasons — and, by extension, this was his most memorable moment. There were more heroics to come later that October in the World Series, when the Cardinals continued to defy logic by pitching to him. But this was vintage Ortiz: rescuing the Red Sox from sure defeat, while completely altering the trajectory of the series. The Detroit Tigers were on the verge of going up two games to none and returning home to finish off the Sox. Ortiz changed that narrative in the eighth as the Red Sox rallied from a 5-1 deficit to tie the game when Ortiz went deep off Joaquin Benoit. Torii Hunter fell into the home bullpen in a futile attempt to catch the ball and a Boston cop became a folk hero for his “touchdown” celebration. The Sox didn't win the game until an inning later, but the series — and entire postseason — pivoted on the blast by Ortiz, a clutch player doing clutch things again.

##### **2. Ortiz's speech**

Days after the Boston Marathon terror attack paralyzed the city, the Red Sox returned home to Boston from a brief road trip in Cleveland. The Friday game which was to begin the homestand was canceled as the city was under “shelter in place” edict as the second bomber was apprehended. On a bright spring day, the city sought a return to normalcy. An emotional pre-game ceremony at Fenway featured scores of public officials saluting the memory of the fallen and honoring the work done by first responders. It was Ortiz, however, who seized the moment and stole the day, noting that Boston was “our (expletive) city,” and that no one was going to “dictate our freedom.” It was at once a rallying cry for a wounded region, a reminder of the healing power of sports and a springboard to a season in which the Red Sox would be powered by a mission to demonstrate the meaning of “Boston Strong.”

##### **3. The final out of Game 5, 2018 World Series**

Despite a dominant regular season that saw the Sox set a franchise record for victories (108), there were doubts about their chances in the postseason. Instead, the Sox lost only three games, outclassing three 100-win teams in the process. After the Sox dropped Game 3 of the World Series, the team rebounded to win Game 4, then cruised in Game 5, behind yet another masterful start from David Price, intent on burying any

and all suggestions that he couldn't perform on the October stage. Steve Pearce, surprise World Series MVP, struck big, Alex Cora's magical first-year ride as rookie manager concluded with a joyous celebration on the Dodger Stadium infield and the Red Sox were champions for the fourth time since 2004. Everything crystallized with the 27th out, as Chris Sale, pressed into closing duty, overmatched Manny Machado.

#### 4. The World Series victory parade, 2013

Three nights earlier, the Red Sox had clinched their first World Series at Fenway in almost a century. That was emotional enough, but the following Saturday, the Sox staged yet another "rolling rally" in celebration. But this was more than the joyous conclusion to an improbable season; it was also a reminder of the bombing which had ripped a hole in the city seven months earlier. Notably, the parade came to a standstill as it neared the marathon finish line on Boylston Street and a handful of players got off their duck boats and took the World Series trophy to commemorate those who had lost their lives in the spring. It was a moving tribute, representing some closure for everyone, and stood as final and conclusive proof of the bond that had developed between the team and the region — one that is unlikely to be matched anytime soon.

#### 5. Ortiz's dugout speech, Game 4, 2013 World Series.

Yup. Ortiz. Again. And again, setting the tone with his words. After winning the opener of the Series against the St. Louis Cardinals, the Sox had lost both Game 2 and Game 3 and were tied 1-1 in the top of the sixth inning of Game 4. Ortiz decided to wake up the troops. He gathered his teammates in the dugout and delivered an emotional talk about what was at stake, how opportunities to win a championship couldn't be squandered and that the Sox were better than they'd shown. Evidently, it worked. The Red Sox scored three runs in that inning, went on to win Game 4, taking control of the series. The Red Sox never lost again in that series. In fact, they never so much as trailed for a half-inning. He was chosen as the World Series MVP, which was a no-brainer after posing a 1.948 OPS. He may well be the greatest clutch hitter in team history and the best DH in baseball history. But he has a pretty good track record as a motivational speaker, too.

### BOTTOM FIVE MOMENTS

#### 1. Game 162, 2011.

The Red Sox had spent most of the month frittering away what was once a sizeable lead in the American League wild-card chase. As bad as things were, it seemed as though they were going to hang on and sneak into the postseason. They held a three-game lead heading into their final three-game series against a putrid Baltimore Orioles team, and after dropping the opener, won the second game of that series — with Ryan Lavanway, of all people, smoking two home runs.

Heading into the final regular-season game of the year, the Red Sox could assure themselves of no worse than a tie with the Rays — a one-game play-in — for what was then the only wild-card spot. But on Wednesday, Sept. 28, the Sox carried a 3-2 lead into the bottom of the ninth, only to see the Orioles rally to tie the game, then win it when Carl Crawford couldn't come up with a shoestring catch in left.

At the time, the Yankees led the Rays, and as I left the press box and headed to the clubhouse, I figured both teams the Sox and Rays would lose and there would be a one-game playoff. But in the stairwell to the clubhouse came word that the Rays had walked off the Yankees on an Evan Longoria homer in the bottom of the 12th. Outside the funereal visiting clubhouse in the bowels of Camden Yards, a shell-shocked Terry Francona stood up against a cement wall and tried to make sense of what had happened. Within weeks, both Francona and GM Theo Epstein were gone and the most successful modern-day stretch in franchise history was over.

#### 2. The hiring of Bobby Valentine.

With Francona fired, the Red Sox were in search of a new manager. In Milwaukee, at the GM Meetings, it seemed the team was on the verge of hiring Dale Sveum, but a lunch meeting with Sveum and the Big Three of John Henry, Tom Werner, and Larry Lucchino led to the search beginning all over. Weeks later, Lucchino chose Valentine over Gene Lamont. Valentine hadn't managed in 10 years, and the feeling was, this could go in one of two directions: really well, or incredibly badly. And yet, "incredibly badly" would have been an upgrade. Valentine alienated half the team in spring training, spoke endlessly about pitchers' "mechanic" (sic) and lost everyone by Patriots Day after taking a not-so-veiled shot at Kevin Youkilis in a TV interview the night before. It was all downhill from there, with the season a long comedy of errors. Valentine spent the season texting with — but not talking to — bench coach Tim Bogar, intent on settling a score from a decade ago. He showed up for a game in Oakland hours before first pitch, insisting that he had to first pick up his adult son at the airport, and in Toronto late in the season, lamented — on the record! — that he had been given the worst roster of talent ever assembled. Mercifully, the franchise was put out of its misery the day after the regular season when Valentine was summarily gassed.

3. Nov. 25, 2014

On the same day, the Red Sox signed free agents Hanley Ramirez and Pablo Sandoval to deals worth a combined \$183 million. It's hard to think of a worse outlay of money by the franchise, compounded by the fact that — and this cannot be overstated — it came on the same day. Ramirez had some decent stretches in his stay, but it's hard to forget (or forgive) his indifference to playing left field. As for Sandoval, he spent parts of three seasons in Boston and was mostly out of shape and ineffective. The Sox paid him \$95 million and got less than one season (161 games) from him. To this day, it remains something of a mystery whose idea these signings were — misguided baseball decisions by Ben Cherington or desperate attempts at star power by chairman Tom Werner. In the end, it didn't matter. The twin disasters haunted the club for years.

4. John Farrell announces he was diagnosed with lymphoma.

The Red Sox were reeling in August of 2015, heading for their second straight last-place finish. It was an ordinary weekday and shortly ahead of his daily pre-game media session, Farrell was in his office, just off the home clubhouse. I stepped in briefly and chatted with him for two or three minutes, seeking some updates on injured players and pitching plans. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary from Farrell, who had a unique ability to compartmentalize his emotions. Minutes later, I joined a dozen or so reporters and headed upstairs to the interview room. Shortly before Farrell entered, the entire baseball operations department filed in ahead of him — a most unusual occurrence. Immediately, I joined everybody in the room in thinking that Farrell was about to be fired and this show of force was one last show of support. Instead, Farrell took his seat at the podium and began to explain what he had found out a few days earlier. As I noted, Farrell was almost always stoic and he held up well in making this disclosure. But I'll never forget the hitch in his voice between the words "diagnosed with..." and "non-Hodgkins lymphoma." The room went eerily silent.

5. Two games in London, June 29-30, 2019.

The first three months of the 2019 season were a train wreck, as the Red Sox attempted, without success, to recover from their disastrous season-opening road trip and to finally overcome their World Series hangover. A two-game international series against the Yankees represented a chance for the Red Sox to begin a turnaround before the All-Star break. Instead, the Sox were thoroughly outclassed in the two-game set, allowing a staggering 29 runs during the weekend. The Yankees appeared to be taking batting practice against the Red Sox pitching staff — starters and relievers alike. At the conclusion of the series, a stunned Alex Cora was at a loss to explain what had happened, or, for that matter, how to correct it. If that trip had represented some longshot hope that the season could be somehow salvaged, the two games against the Yanks put an emphatic end to that delusional thinking.

**As low-cost free agents flood the market, Red Sox have some options**

Sean McAdam

Ordinarily, this would be the time of the year when the Red Sox would be engaged in bidding for one or two of the premier free agents on the market — matching the top offer, proposing another guaranteed year, including an opt-out option.

But this is no ordinary offseason for the Sox.

Instead of looking to spend their way out of doldrums that come with an underachieving season with a big-ticket star or two to goose ticket sales and re-make themselves into contenders, the Sox are instead looking to cut payroll.

As such, their forays into the market have nothing to do with Gerrit Cole or Anthony Rendon or any of the other elite free agents. The Sox have to be content with finding value in the bargain aisle as they attempt to re-set their Competitive Balance Tax (CBT) and get under the initial CBT threshold of \$208 million.

Getting there will require two pivots:

Unloading one or two existing contracts, and filling their current needs with moderately-priced free agents rather than pursuing any of the marquee names.

As luck would have it, three options presented themselves this past week, the result of cost-cutting from other teams. All three could fit into the openings the Sox have on the right side of the infield.

#### 1. Jesus Aguilar, 1B, Rays

Aguilar was designated for assignment earlier in the week by the Tampa Bay Rays, who obtained him from Milwaukee this past July. Aguilar didn't make much of an impact on the Rays' playoff push (.261/.336/.424 with four homers and 16 RBI in 37 games), but he's only a year removed from a season in which he slashed .274/.352/.539 with 35 homers for the Brewers.

You'd have to believe that new chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom — then the No. 2 executive in the Rays' front office — liked Aguilar enough to help pull off the deal.

The Rays have another few days to try to trade Aguilar, and the Sox might not want to cough up a lower-level prospect to get him via a trade. But perhaps if they wait, Aguilar could be released and made a free agent.

After earning just \$637,500 last year, Aguilar could be had inexpensively.

#### 2. Greg Bird, 1B, Yankees

Bird elected for free agency earlier this week rather than accept a Triple-A assignment by the Yankees. He carries some significant health risks, having missed a lot of time over the last four seasons with persistent foot injuries.

But in 2015, he had an .871 OPS with 11 homers in just 46 games and he demonstrated some patience at the plate, with a .343 OBP. As a left-handed bat, perhaps Bird could combine with either Michael Chavis or Bobby Dalbec in a platoon at first.

It would be a longshot for Bird to contribute full-time, but the cost will be minimal. He may even have to accept a Triple-A deal with an invite to big league camp.

#### 3. Jonathan Villar, 3B, Orioles

The Orioles placed Villar on outright waivers and assuming he clears, he'll become a free agent. He was set to be arbitration-eligible for 2020 with an estimated salary of \$10 million, but it seems unlikely he'll get that on the open market.

Even at a reduced rate, Villar may prove too expensive for the Red Sox. He had 24 homers and 40 stolen bases last year and surely that's worth something on the open market — even if Villar is only adequate defensively at second base.

But if he could be nabbed on an affordable deal for a year — allowing additional time for C.J. Chatham to continue his development at Triple-A — he might be worth the investment for the Sox, who, for now, are looking at Chavis and Marco Hernandez as their only internal second base options.

## **\* *The Athletic***

### **15 thoughts on the Red Sox as we wait for the dominoes to fall**

Chad Jennings

Baseball's non-tender deadline is coming up on Monday evening. The Winter Meetings are a week away. In less than two and a half months, Red Sox players will be working out in spring training. Here are 15 thoughts on the team coming out of the Thanksgiving holiday.

1. Most teams are quiet right now – the Braves and Padres are notable exceptions – but the Red Sox' inaction seems almost unavoidable. Given their current payroll, a strong lineup, an uncertain rotation, championship ambitions, luxury tax concerns and a new head of baseball operations, the Red Sox offseason seems especially dependent upon falling dominoes. One decision might be predicated on two other decisions, and a move today might not happen without a future move in the works. Plus, we're still figuring out how chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom operates. It's all added up to an inevitably quiet November.

2. An example of falling dominoes that could affect the Red Sox' direction going forward: If they can get a good amount of David Price's salary off the books, then maybe getting below the luxury tax will become more realistic, in which case they could more aggressively pursue a Jackie Bradley Jr. trade, which might open up more of the free agent market. Every move would happen with another move already in mind or in the works.

3. If bigger contracts can't be moved, and offers for Mookie Betts are underwhelming, then ownership could decide this isn't the time to reset luxury tax penalties, in which case they could fill some gaps with short-term contracts – a fifth starter, an infielder, maybe another late-inning reliever – and make another run with the same core of talent. Trimming salary could then be contingent on whether the team is in the hunt at the trade deadline. If they're not, the salary dump could begin in July.

4. The first month of Bloom's tenure was surely spent getting a feel for these things. First, he had to learn a little more about his own team, then he had to figure out how well his goals lined up with the open market. Aside from the GM Meetings in the middle of last month, we haven't heard much from the revamped front office. We have heard, though, that they're not approaching this winter in terms of filling holes. That's another indication that every first step depends on a second and third step. Trying to trim salary, build a farm system, and keep contending is a bit of a juggling act given the pieces already in place.

5. For example, Andrew Benintendi represents the kind of player the Red Sox need in the short-term. He's been a productive everyday player, he's still pretty cheap, and on the surface there's little reason to trade him. But what if he can bring back the kind of starting pitcher the Red Sox need? And if the Red Sox were to create that kind of hole in left field, could Michael Chavis be traded for a young outfielder with similar youth and upside? And if they need to go after a second baseman or first baseman, could the Red Sox dangle Brandon Workman as trade bait and replace him with an affordable free agent?

6. The key to some of this might be the state of the market at large. We've seen a lot of catchers come off the board, but little else. That's doesn't seem all that unusual, but it also gives us little sense of how quickly the market is going to move. Do the Red Sox need to act quickly to get ahead of things, or do they have to

wait until January for the landscape to become clear? They might be motivated to make outside-the-box moves, but are other teams on the same schedule? If the Red Sox are not in a position to spend right now, then their biggest moves will be dependent on other teams.

7. The catcher market has moved quickly, which has only added to the sense that Sandy Leon will be non-tendered today. Yasmani Grandal, who went to the White Sox, is in a different class than the rest, but Travis d'Arnaud got \$8 million per year, Yan Gomes got \$5 million per year, Tyler Flowers got \$4 million (plus a \$2 million buyout), and Stephen Vogt got \$3 million guaranteed. Those four were roughly 1 to 2 wins above replacement last year, while both FanGraphs and Baseball Reference agree Leon was below replacement level. He's projected to earn \$2.8 million through arbitration. Surely that's too high.

8. It will be interesting to see how much the Red Sox invest in a backup to Christian Vazquez. He was one of the better all-around catchers in the game last year. Does that make his backup significantly less important, since Vazquez is presumably going to get the vast majority of the playing time? It's a tricky spot, because catcher might be the position with the least immediate depth in the Red Sox system. If Vazquez gets hurt, there's really no one ready to fill that void. They can't ignore his backup, but that backup might not play much, either. Wonder if Leon could be non-tendered, but ultimately re-signed for less money.

9. Unless you count Heath Hembree – who's been pretty good the last three years, and whose projected \$1.6 million salary seems perfectly reasonable – then Leon is the only obvious non-tender candidate on the roster. Steven Wright, Chris Owings and Gorkys Hernandez would have been, but they've already been removed from the roster. Non-tendering Hembree could free some salary, and there are other middle inning options, but Hembree's worth the relatively modest cost.

10. Given payroll concerns, there's perhaps a case to be made for non-tendering Bradley, who's expected to get roughly \$11 million in his final year of arbitration, but non-tendering would be a pretty extreme reaction for a guy who should have trade value at that price. When the offseason started, I was told flat-out that it wouldn't happen. The Red Sox absolutely were going to tender Bradley a contract. That was before Bloom came onboard, but I'd be surprised if that's changed.

11. Right now, the Red Sox have 38 players on their 40-man roster. Non-tendering Leon would open one more spot, and they still have some DFA candidates who could be removed to create more room. Trevor Kelley, Josh Osich, Ryan Weber, Tzu-Wei Lin and Sam Travis stand out as guys who could be placed on waivers if necessary. Creating 40-man space isn't much of a problem.

12. Good move to pass Brian Johnson through waivers last week. It was mildly surprising given the Red Sox' need for rotation depth, but they read the market correctly, Johnson cleared without being claimed, and he had to accept the outright assignment to Triple-A. Getting him off the 40-man opened some flexibility without costing any depth. Johnson was a really nice fit for the Red Sox in 2018, but he was hurt last year and became just another guy who failed to fill that fifth starter role. Getting him off the 40-man has opened a roster spot and opened the possibility of stashing Johnson in the minors. Still, don't be surprised if he's very much competing for a job in spring training.

13. Whoever it is, the Red Sox surely need someone to fill the role that Johnson and Hector Velazquez handled in 2018. It's the job no one could do last year: making winnable spot starts and giving multiple innings out of the bullpen. It's not a high-end job, but it's necessary to get through 162 games. In a perfect world, it might be perfect for a guy like Mike Shawaryn (or for Johnson, if he can pitch his way back on the map in spring training). The Red Sox don't just need a fifth starter. They need sixth and seventh starters as well.

14. I've never met Kyle Hart. I've never even seen the guy pitch. But I believe half of my conversations with vice president of player development Ben Crockett have included at least one question about the 19th-round lefty. He's never generated a bit of prospect buzz, but the Red Sox protected him from the Rule 5 draft because he's consistently put up numbers in the minor leagues. Can't rule him out as a candidate for

spot starts and long relief opportunities. I don't know whether his stuff will play at the major league level, but obviously the Red Sox believe it might, or they wouldn't have put him on the roster.

15. If you look ahead to Red Sox players with something to prove heading into spring training, who's the most interesting? Is it Bobby Dalbec because of the power potential and the possibility of winning the first base job? Is it Chris Sale – who was recently cleared to resume throwing – because of his health and potential to be a difference maker? Is it Dustin Pedroia trying to come back from multiple knee surgeries and lost seasons? There are plenty of us waiting for baseball to start up again. These guys are probably looking forward to it more than most.

### **A Black Friday bargain shopping list for the cost-cutting Red Sox**

Chad Jennings

As she does every year on the day after Thanksgiving, my wife woke up early this morning so she could join the crowds for Black Friday sales. She planned to spend several hours in a giant shopping mall (which she genuinely hates) so she can look for Christmas gifts (or so I'm told), all in the name of saving money.

Most days, you would not believe the amount of money my wife is willing to spend on a bottle of shampoo, but that doesn't mean she can't appreciate a good bargain (sometimes).

This day of lowered prices is a good time to go shopping for the Red Sox. They'd like to trim salary, which might mean trading big contracts and replacing them with lower-cost options, or it might mean avoiding big-ticket items and instead looking for value at a discount.

Either way, here are some potentially lower-cost options that might fit the Red Sox under specific circumstances. To be clear, this is not an argument that these are the best players available, only that they might provide value in certain roles without costing considerable money. It's Black Friday on the free-agent market, and we're shopping the sales rack.

If the Red Sox can find a trade partner for David Price or Nathan Eovaldi: Gio Gonzalez  
Why so cheap? He's 34, signed for \$2 million last year and wound up injured.

Why show interest? When healthy, he still performed like a solid-or-better mid-rotation starter.

If you're going bargain shopping for starting pitchers, you're going to come up with some high-risk options. As a former Cy Young contender who now rarely works deep into games, Gonzalez seems fairly similar to Price — Gonzalez has a higher fWAR the past three years — but at a tenth of the cost.

Pitching for Milwaukee last year, Gonzalez had a 3.50 ERA through 19 games, but only 10 of those appearances lasted five innings. He allowed more than three earned runs only three times (one of those came when he had to face the Cardinals twice in a week, and another came when the Twins hit three homers against him). Gonzalez had a hard-hit rate predictably higher than in his peak years, but one still perfectly in line with his 2016 and 2018 seasons, when he was a 4.57 ERA mid-rotation starter for the Nationals.

He could be the kind of guy who can fill a rotation void and might work well behind an opener.

If the Red Sox can free salary and address a different need by trading J.D. Martinez: Jose Martinez  
Why so cheap? He's owed \$2 million in the final year of a two-year contract extension with the Cardinals.

Why show interest? He's proven to be a nice hitter, but one who's best kept out of the field, making him a better fit in the American League.

To be clear, Jose Martinez is no J.D. Martinez. Not even close, really. But the past three years, he has a 121 wRC+, which is the same as Marcell Ozuna, Nick Castellanos and Francisco Lindor. His .819 OPS in that

time frame is better than Mike Moustakas, Gary Sanchez, Eddie Rosario and DJ LeMahieu. Jose Martinez can't hit like J.D. Martinez, but he could make up for quite a bit of lost offense should the Red Sox trade their designated hitter.

Granted, trading J.D. Martinez is easier said than done. The fact he didn't opt out suggests even agent Scott Boras doesn't see a tremendous market for him at \$23.75 million. If the Red Sox could find a trade partner, though, and get something meaningful in return — a starting pitcher, a first baseman, a late-inning reliever — they could probably save some money and make up some of the difference by swinging a trade for Jose Martinez, who's a suboptimal fit in St. Louis.

If the Red Sox go for quantity over quality at second base: Joe Panik

Why so cheap? After an All-Star season in 2015, Panik has become more of a replacement-level second baseman, and he was released by the Mets this month.

Why show interest? Panik just turned 29, he surely needs a fresh opportunity to prove himself, and the Red Sox just happen to have a ton of unpredictability at second base.

This isn't a bad winter to go bargain shopping at second base. The free-agent market offers Jason Kipnis, Brian Dozier, Asdrubal Cabrera, Neil Walker, Eric Sogard, Starlin Castro, Ben Zobrist, Jonathan Schoop and — of course — Brock Holt. That level of redundancy will surely bring down prices, and some of those guys are going to sign for low, low money.

Panik is singled out here because he's still relatively young, and he might be on the lower end of the pay scale after a couple of disappointing seasons. On the plus side, his hard-hit percentage was the best of his career last season, his line-drive percentage was basically in line with his best years in San Francisco, and his numbers did improve after he joined the Mets in August.

One other nice factor: Panik is a left-handed hitter, meaning he could be a nice complement to Michael Chavis or, just maybe, a platoon partner to limit the workload of Dustin Pedroia. Add Panik to the mix, and the Red Sox could arrive in spring training with Chavis, Pedroia, Panik, Marco Hernandez, C.J. Chatham and Tzu-Wei Lin competing for second-base playing time. There might not be an everyday guy in there, but maybe there's some combination that could work.

If the Red Sox trade some bullpen depth to facilitate a bigger deal: David Phelps

Why so cheap? The 33-year-old's \$5 million team option was declined after his first healthy season back from Tommy John surgery.

Why show interest? He's been a consistent and versatile reliever comfortable working the late innings or multiple innings.

If incentives hadn't kicked in, making Phelps' team option more and more expensive, he might not have wound up on the open market. After losing 2018 to Tommy John surgery, he returned for a strong 2019 split between the Blue Jays and Cubs.

His name should be familiar in Boston because of his three seasons as a Yankees swingman, but his career took off after a trade to the Marlins, who moved him into a setup role with particularly strong results in 2016. His experience and versatility could make Phelps a nice fit for Alex Cora's mix-and-match bullpen, especially if the team ends up trading one of its current relievers to fill a different need or gain a little bit of salary relief.

Matt Barnes and Brandon Workman are expected to make about \$3 million each. Should they be trade bait instead? Josh Taylor has pitched his way into the plans. Or is it better to include him as a trade sweetener to get help elsewhere? Do guys like Heath Hembree, Ryan Brasier and Marcus Walden have any trade value? If so, Phelps could fill basically any bullpen hole outside of closer.

If the Red Sox finally move on from Jackie Bradley Jr.: Jarrod Dyson

Why so cheap? His offensive value is extremely limited, and he'll surely make less than the \$3.75 million he was paid last year.

Why show interest? This lineup should generate enough offense, and putting a speed/glove guy in center field lets the Red Sox keep their outfield defense intact.

As soon as ownership announced its desire to trim payroll, Bradley Jr. became an obvious trade candidate. He's been talked about as a trade possibility for years, but now he's expected to make roughly \$11 million in his last year of arbitration.

If the Red Sox do move their center fielder, they could easily shift Mookie Betts or Andrew Benintendi to center and sign a corner outfielder, but guys like Corey Dickerson, Kole Calhoun and Yasiel Puig could easily earn \$6 million or more next season, negating at least half of the financial savings from a Bradley trade.

Maybe it would be better to focus on a good defender like Dyson — FanGraphs pegged him as the 10th-best fielder among players with at least 1,000 innings in center last year — while trusting the rest of the lineup to do the offensive damage. Dyson's not a total zero with the bat (he can get on base a little bit and still runs well), but he would be a No. 9 hitter.

It would work even better if the Red Sox could also acquire a bat-first fourth outfielder, someone who could pinch-hit for Dyson in big spots and then take over right field so that Betts could shift to center. That type of player is hard to find among current free agents, though. Might have to come through a trade.

If the Red Sox go with a placeholder at first base: Matt Adams

Why so cheap? Replacement-level slugger had a \$4 million option declined earlier this winter.

Why show interest? Pure power hitter can help fill the hole at first base with platoon power and gradually yield time to prospect Bobby Dalbec.

Adams doesn't get on base very much, and he no longer hits for average, but three years in a row he's hit at least 20 home runs without getting as many as 350 at-bats. He's a part-time first baseman with big left-handed power, and that just might fit the Red Sox needs. Especially if his market is as limited as it seems.

Eric Thames might be a better option for a similar role, but he also seems more expensive. We're trying to maximize home runs per dollar on this one. Adams stands out because he could be extremely cheap but also could provide some value in a very specific role.

With Chavis and eventually Dalbec, the Red Sox already have some in-house first basemen who hit right-handed. Adding a lefty would provide some balance and the possibility of a platoon. Adams has a career .816 OPS against right-handers, and at 31 years old, he might still have some productive seasons to give. He could be at least as a cheap stopgap to buy development time for Dalbec without standing in the way if Dalbec proves ready.

It's worth noting here that former Yankees first-base prospect Greg Bird could also be worth a flier as a young lefty with upside if he can stay healthy. Also, the Rays have designated Jesus Aguilar for assignment. He's not a lefty, but he did hit 35 home runs only one year ago and has an .805 career OPS.

**Josh Hader faces a unique offseason; Red Sox weigh Jackie Bradley Jr.'s value; Phillies' exits; more notes**

Ken Rosenthal

In their never-ending quest for payroll efficiency, low-revenue teams often entertain ideas that, on the surface, appear to make little sense.

Trading Josh Hader would be precisely that type of counterintuitive move for the Brewers, yet the left-handed reliever is indeed available, according to major-league sources.

“We listen on a wide variety of players throughout the offseason. A lot of players get discussed,” Brewers general manager David Stearns said, while adhering to his policy of refusing to comment on specific players in trade conversations.

Why would the Brewers even consider moving Hader, who has won the Trevor Hoffman Award as the best reliever in the National League in each of the past two seasons and is still only 25?

Follow the money. And Hader’s trade value, too.

Hader, who had enough service time as a two-year player to qualify for an extra round of salary arbitration, is projected by MLB Trade Rumors to earn \$4.6 million in the first of his four years in the process. That number, though, could go higher. The collective bargaining agreement would allow Hader’s agents at CAA, Jeff Berry and Matt Ricatto, to argue he is a player of “special accomplishment,” enabling them to compare him with any reliever, not just those in his service class.

Jonathan Papelbon’s \$6.25 million salary in 2009 stands as the highest single-season number for a first-time eligible reliever in arbitration. The Brewers surely could afford that amount and probably a subsequent jump in 2021 if Hader continued his elite performance.

Such performance, though, is not guaranteed.

Including playoffs, Hader has thrown 168 innings the past two seasons, second only to the 178 2/3 innings thrown by A’s right-hander Yusmeiro Petit among pitchers used exclusively as relievers.

Hader’s strikeout rate of 47.8 percent was even better last season than the year before, ranking second all time among relievers for a single season. His walk rate also improved, dropping to 6.9 percent. But his ERA increased from 2.43 to 2.62 and his opponents’ OPS from .484 to .591 in part due to a phenomenon many other pitchers experienced in the year of the rocket ball — a significant jump in his home-run rate.

Yet, even if the ball is less lively next season, the Brewers need to ask, “How long will Hader be Hader?” The worst thing that could happen to them would be if Hader’s past workload triggered a decline in his performance as his salary started to rise.

Other teams obviously share the same concerns, but those with higher revenues operate with greater margin for error than the Brewers. In “listening” on Hader and others, the Brewers are operating no differently from the Indians, Rays and other low-revenue clubs that constantly gauge the returns their players might bring in trades. Perhaps no team will meet the Brewers’ price for Hader. Yet, it goes without saying that a number will be tempted to jump.

The Mets are one team to watch, though it is not known whether conversations with the Brewers regarding Hader have taken place. Mets GM Brodie Van Wagenen, in his previous job as an agent for CAA, represented Hader along with Ricatto. Berry, who recently landed a combined \$74 million in free-agent contracts for left-handed relievers Will Smith and Drew Pomeranz, entered the picture after Van Wagenen left the agency.

Van Wagenen demonstrated last offseason how much he liked his former players, acquiring second baseman Robinson Canó in a trade, signing free-agent infielder Jed Lowrie and pursuing a trade for catcher J.T. Realmuto. No doubt Van Wagenen likes Hader, too.

Adding Hader would protect the Mets if closer Edwin Díaz failed to rebound and create a dynamic one-two punch in the late innings if he did. The Mets then could move Seth Lugo to the rotation to fill the spot vacated by free-agent right-hander Zack Wheeler, or sign a starter and keep Lugo in the bullpen to make their relief corps that much stronger.

True, the Mets' farm system is thin, but they could offer pieces off their major-league club — think infielder/outfielder J.D. Davis, maybe even super-utilityman Jeff McNeil. Granted, that is all just speculation, and other teams surely would be in the mix. What would the Nationals give for Hader? The Dodgers? The Twins? Pick a contender, any contender. Virtually all would at least inquire.

The appeal with Hader is not necessarily four years of control, considering the volatility of relievers, even top relievers. The appeal is the potential for the same type of dominance Hader gave the Brewers in each of the past two seasons. Dominance unique in the game's history. Dominance that could bring the Brewers a sizable return.

Which way, JBJ?

Red Sox center fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. looms as one of the most fascinating decisions entering the 8 p.m. ET deadline Monday for tendering contracts to arbitration-eligible players.

Bradley's defense remains strong, but he is projected to earn \$11 million in arbitration after producing an OPS-plus 10 percent below league average over the past three seasons.

The Red Sox could offer Bradley a contract and then try to trade him; at that point, teams would know they no longer had a shot at getting him as a free agent. But with Bradley's trade value limited and the Sox trying to get below the \$208 million luxury-tax threshold, a non-tender is possible. New chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom has no ties to Bradley, who was a 2016 All-Star and the 2018 ALCS MVP.

Moving on from Bradley would not necessarily affect the Sox thinking on trading right fielder Mookie Betts; for the right offer, the Sox still might make such a move. But it remains questionable they will get that offer, with Betts projected to get \$27.7 million in arbitration in his final season before free agency.

Perhaps the Red Sox could reallocate Bradley's money to someone like free agent Avisail García, who last season had an OPS-plus 11 percent above league average and showed enough athleticism to play 94 innings in center field with Bloom's previous team, the Rays. The Sox then could see where they were at the deadline and revisit the possibility of moving Betts and others then.

If non-tendered, Bradley would become a free agent entering his age-30 season. The Diamondbacks, a team headed by three former Red Sox executives, would have interest, according to major-league sources. The Diamondbacks, who lean slightly toward Ketel Marte getting the majority of his time at second base, are exploring every center field option.

The Cubs might be another possibility for Bradley, who was part of Theo Epstein's last draft class with the Red Sox in 2011. Epstein had interest in acquiring Bradley to replace Dexter Fowler after the 2015 season, but Bradley was coming off a breakout year. The Cubs ended up re-signing Fowler and winning the World Series.

The Athletic's Sahadev Sharma indicated last month that the Cubs are likely to tender a contract to Albert Almora Jr., who is projected to earn \$1.8 million in arbitration. Bradley and Almora could form a defense-first platoon, though Almora's defensive metrics were down in 2019.

The Mets are another team with a need in center field, though they too might want more of an offensive threat than Bradley.

Phillies' infield set for an overhaul

The non-tender deadline likely will mark the end of the Phillies tenures for second baseman César Hernández and third baseman Maikel Franco, potentially clearing the way for the signing of free-agent shortstop Didi Gregorius.

Hernández, 29, and Franco, 27, have spent their entire careers in the Phillies' organization, Hernández signing out of Venezuela in July 2006, Franco out of the Dominican Republic in January 2010. They have

played nearly 1,500 games combined for the Phils, but the team almost certainly does not value either at his projected salary in arbitration — \$11.8 million for Hernández, \$5.7 million for Franco.

The signing of Gregorius, first mentioned as a possibility by MLB.com's Jon Paul Morosi, certainly would make sense for the Phillies considering the shortstop's history not just with former Yankees manager Joe Girardi, but also former bench coach Rob Thomson. If the Phils complete a deal with Gregorius, they would move Jean Segura from shortstop to second or third base, a possibility they discussed at the end of the season.

The Brewers' trade for infielder Luis Urías on Wednesday seemingly took them out of the Gregorius market. The Reds still loom as a possibility, even if they tender infielder José Peraza a contract after exercising their \$5.5 million option on infielder Freddy Galvis. But they also could attempt to upgrade their offense with an outfielder.

Mariners' Narváez still a wanted man

Alex Avila, Robinson Chirinos and Martín Maldonado are among the remaining free-agent catchers. The Cubs' Willson Contreras is available in a trade. And a number of catchers, including the Red Sox Sandy León, could be non-tendered Monday.

The Mariners, though, still believe they are in good position to trade Omar Narváez, who is under club control for three more seasons and projected to earn \$2.9 million in his first year of arbitration.

Narváez, 27, ranked third among catchers last season, behind Contreras and Yasmani Grandal, in Weighted Runs Created Plus (minimum 400 plate appearances). His defense is not nearly as strong as his offense, but his bat makes him unique.

The Mariners will not ask as much for Narvéz as the Cubs will for Contreras. Chirinos, the only free-agent catcher who had a comparable offensive season, is eight years older. Some team figures to value Narváez for his .361 career on-base percentage, defensive warts and all.

Around the horn

Information from major-league sources.

- Right-handers Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg accepted significant deferrals in their long-term deals with the Nationals, but third baseman Anthony Rendon was less keen on proceeding with such a structure, some with the club say.

The Washington Post reported in September that the Nats offered Rendon a seven-year deal in the \$210 million-\$215 million range with deferrals similar to Scherzer's, to be paid within seven years of the end of the contract.

Players generally look at the totality of a deal, focusing on its present-day value. Deferrals lower the present-day value, and some players want their money sooner rather than later, reasoning they should get the chance to invest it, not the club.

The Nats remain more confident of re-signing Strasburg than Rendon.

- Mariners general manager Jerry Dipoto sounded resistant to trading right fielder Mitch Haniger at the GM meetings, telling reporters, "He embodies almost everything about what we stand for and what we're trying to set up in our systems and our programs."

Dipoto gained an understanding for Haniger's trade value last offseason and does not want to sell low with Haniger recovering from a ruptured testicle and related back issues. Other teams, currently viewing Haniger as a distressed asset, might be more willing to improve their offers once Marcell Ozuna comes off a thin free-agent market for outfielders.

Haniger, 28, is under club control for three more seasons, and a trade seems inevitable, if not right away. Four of the Mariners' top 10 prospects are outfielders, according to MLB Pipeline.com: Jarred Kelenic (No. 1), Julio Rodriguez (No. 2), Jake Fraley (No. 8) and Kyle Lewis (No. 10).

- The Brewers face a number of choices with shortstop Orlando Arcia: trade him, non-tender him or sign him to a deal below his projected arbitration value of \$2.7 million.

Arcia, 25, would offer the Brewers middle-infield protection at a time Urias and second baseman Keston Hiura face questions about whether they can handle their respective positions.

Then again, the Brewers always could find a backup shortstop.

- The second-base market, already deep in veteran free agents, is about to be flooded.

As mentioned, the Phillies likely will non-tender Hernández. The White Sox's Yolmer Sánchez and Orioles' Jonathan Villar (who also plays shortstop) are on outright waivers. Teams then will pick and choose from those players as well as a free-agent group that includes Starlin Castro, Jason Kipnis and Jonathan Schoop, among others.

While none of those players is without flaws, some agents and union officials grow frustrated when teams operate so systematically to drive down prices. It might not be collusion, but the gluts created by the clubs add to the tension between the sides.

## **\* *The New York Post***

### **Red Sox among teams under pressure for hot-stove splash**

Joel Sherman

Prior to Thanksgiving last offseason, just two multi-year deals were reached — both went to catchers, both for two years. Kurt Suzuki received \$10 million from the Nationals and Jeff Mathis got \$6.25 million from the Rangers.

Before the Lions lost on the holiday again this year, seven multi-year free-agent deals were done this season — eight if you include the three-year extension the White Sox constructed with Jose Abreu after tendering him a contract. Representatives generally had reported more aggressive talk and action with clubs this offseason than the slow walk in recent years that has so infuriated the Players Association.

Still, the multi-year markets have mainly been restricted to relief pitching and again catching, with Washington once more handing out a two-year, \$10 million pact to a receiver, this time to Yan Gomes. The Braves have been the most aggressive team, with three multi-year deals — to relievers Chris Martin and Will Smith, and catcher Travis d'Arnaud.

One agency (CAA) represented the top two lefty relievers in Smith (three years, \$40 million) and Drew Pomeranz (four years, \$36 million, Padres) and another (Wasserman) repped the top two catchers in Yasmani Grandal (four years, \$73 million) and d'Arnaud (two years, \$16 million). Thus, they were able to quickly decipher the market peaks and act.

At this point, Scott Boras has held to his more familiar playbook of letting markets slowly develop as he reps seven of the dozen or so elite free agents, including the three best — Gerrit Cole, Stephen Strasburg and Anthony Rendon.

There also has not been a stop-the-presses trade a month into the offseason, despite the belief that Boston's Mookie Betts, the Cubs' Kris Bryant and Cleveland's Francisco Lindor are attainable.

Historically, teams feel out markets through Thanksgiving then grow bolder post-turkey. So here are the five teams under the most pressure to act:

**Angels:** A fourth straight losing record made Brad Ausmus a one-and-done manager with owner Arte Moreno motivating the hiring of Joe Maddon, who inherits a roster with Mike Trout and ... Shohei Ohtani, returning from Tommy John surgery. Andrelton Simmons and Justin Upton are coming off injury-filled down years. Albert Pujols is mainly a payroll albatross. The threat of what can still come out from investigation into Tyler Skaggs' opioid-related death last year looms over the organization.

They should probably act cautiously. Except they already have wasted so much of Trout's prime that they must act. Cole grew up near their stadium, and perhaps the Angels have to give him a blank check. They can't stop there. They need lots of pitching. Remember how the Dodgers gave the Red Sox a financial get-of-jail card assuming the contracts of Josh Beckett, Carl Crawford and Adrian Gonzalez in August 2012? Could the Angels do the same now for a Red Sox team desperate to reduce payroll?

If the Angels were willing to take on David Price (three years, \$96 million) and Nathan Eovaldi (three years, \$51 million), how little would Boston take in prospects for Betts, who the Red Sox have to know at this point will test free agency next offseason?

**Phillies:** No team has spent more on free agency the past two years, plus spent big prospect capital to land J.T. Realmuto and Jean Segura. Yet they still have no winning seasons since 2011. Gabe Kapler was fired and Joe Girardi will bring a greater experience and sense of order as manager. But the Phils still have the fourth-most talent in the NL East and an owner (John Middleton) hungering to get back to the playoffs. Like the Angels, they need multiple starters.

**Red Sox:** They won it all in 2018, missed the playoffs in 2019, fired Dave Dombrowski (head of their baseball operations), have a manager in Alex Cora who might be tied up in the Astros' electronic pitch-stealing scandal from when he was their bench coach in 2017, owners calling for major pay reductions, and a great, popular homegrown player in his prime in Betts, who has given no indications he will re-sign in Boston before free agency.

So Chaim Bloom, who replaced Dombrowski, has a full plate at what feels like a pivotal moment for the organization to try not to get so caught up in maximizing this year's team as to mess up the near future. Can Bloom trade Price or Eovaldi? What can be gotten for Betts, whose value is hurt by having just one year of control and a 2020 salary that will at least approach \$30 million?

**Nationals:** They succeeded the Red Sox as champs, erasing their reputation as postseason chokers. So that stigma no longer lingers. But they have made attempts to retain Rendon and Strasburg, so far unsuccessfully. How long will they dance with Boras — with whom they have a superb relationship — before having to pivot elsewhere to make sure they are not locked out of other strong options at third base and in the rotation?

Keeping a strong rotation is always a Washington priority, so will the Nats risk letting, say, the Zack Wheelers and Madison Bumgarner come off the board and then if Strasburg, say, signs with his hometown Padres, have fewer appetizing options? This is not a team that has any plans to take a step back. The Nats want to try to win again and know the Braves are going to be tough to eclipse in the NL East — not to mention the Mets and Phillies.

**Twins:** They have a window to be more than one-year wonders in the AL Central. The Royals and Tigers are two of the majors' worst teams. The White Sox are trying to improve, but have a lot of road to cover. The Indians are still strong, but facing reality with Lindor. Minnesota has a strong positional nucleus and barely more than \$10 million committed for the 2021 season. So the Twins have lots of payroll flexibility and a strong farm system to pursue a top starter or two, plus some relief help. If the Twins play this right, they can be more than an AL Central power.