

# Time to stick knife in Sox this season, as hopes for playoffs disappear

A month has passed since this space last took up the struggles of the Boston Red Sox.

While having yet to officially stick a knife into them and their 2010 season, the continued spinning of their wheels in trying to gain any serious ground on either the Tampa Bay Rays or New York Yankees has reached the point that it's obvious no postseason games will be played at Fenway Park this October.

On track to win 92 games this year — and with a record slightly ahead of AL West-leader Texas, and on par with AL Central-leader Minnesota — the comfort of knowing that the wild card would be there for the team on the short end of the Yankees-Red Sox AL East pennant battle each and every season, no longer applies.

Helped along by year after year of high draft picks, the Rays have done what many long suffering franchises never seem to figure out how to do — build through youth and have that youth become a reliable backbone for the foreseeable future.

As a result, the Rays stand miles ahead in the wild card "race," and stand only 1-1/2 games out behind the Yanks for the division with 82 wins. Even though they stand in second place in their own division, no other team outside the AL East has a better record. So while the Rays will likely have to resign themselves to entering the playoffs as the league's wild card entry because the best team in baseball record-wise just so happens to be in their division, the Sox will be set-

ting up their tee times after the regular season ends thanks to having the top two squads in their division.

While pressure had been mounting on Sox management in recent months to try to add to a team that has been cursed by one long-term injury after another — shortening the seasons of superstars Dustin Pedroia, Jacoby Ellsbury and Kevin Youkilis — general manager Theo Epstein clearly could see the writing on the wall about this year's team, and after having already dolled out \$162 million-plus in salary this year, the thought of investing even more on this roster, burdened by too many holes, didn't seem to be a viable option.

The problems that are most glaring are an anemic bullpen that has had only two solid arms — Daniel Bard to pitch the eighth-inning and Jonathan Papelbon in the ninth. Emphasizing how poor the bullpen has been this season, even Papelbon has been shaky, to where he has reincarnated the nightmares of the legendary Heathcliff Slocumb in frequently dancing on a tightrope on most nights when trying to earn a save this season. More distressing is that the Sox closer has blown six saves, a career high.

The latest example was Thursday night against the rejuvenated Baltimore Orioles. Since hiring Buck Showalter as the team's manager, the doormat O's have held their own with a 16-11 record. Entering the ninth, the Orioles, who had erased a 5-0 deficit to only be down by two runs, were on the doorstep of another Papelbon blown save in placing the tying run in scor-

ing position with one out, even though Papelbon has amassed a 0.75 ERA in his career against Baltimore. On a 3-2 count, Papelbon struck out Cesar Izturis, on a pitch that could have loaded the bases had it gone instead for a ball, after which another strike out cemented the win.

Pointing to how success is anything but a given year after year for closers, that save ended up being Papelbon's 35th this season, his fifth season with at least that number, becoming the first reliever in major league history to accomplish that feat in his first five seasons.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



ANDRES CAAMANO

Even with that level of consistency, though, it's become a point of frustration for fans who wish for the earlier days of Papelbon mowing down hitters with nary a bat on the ball. Some have begun to even suggest that Bard should become the team's closer, sooner rather than later.

Much of that mindset is because supporters of Bard have been known to drool over the numbers the young fireballer hits on the

radar gun, much in the same way that watchers of Washington Nationals hurler Steve Strasburg were tripping over themselves right after his first major league start, even to where some were calling for Strasburg to be added to the All-Star roster. For as exciting as cracking 100 miles an hour might seem for the fans, Strasburg's arm couldn't withstand the rigors of a full season, only lasting 12 starts before being put on the shelf with a torn ligament and having to be told the career-changing words from the Nationals' medical staff: his needing to have Tommy John surgery.

For as amazing as the surgery might be in allowing a pitcher to continue to pitch just a year to a year and a half after the major injury, anyone under the illusion that the Strasburg of old will return unchanged is simply not paying attention. For as impressive as the list is of pitchers who have returned from the injury to remain a top pitcher in the majors — including Chris Carpenter, Tim Hudson, or Joakim Soria — for Strasburg to succeed as many hope, will require making some adjustments to his game, as it's tough to expect him to torch the radar gun on his return.

While fellow Tommy John surgery hurler Ryan Dempster noted that "(Strasburg) can go back and pitch the way he pitched with the same type of velocity ... My velocity is as good, if not better (after the surgery)," no one would mistake Dempster's velocity for Strasburg's, and therein lies the challenge for Strasburg upon his return.

And like Strasburg, who won't be coming back anytime soon, it's clear that the many Sox players out for the remainder of this season had much to do with the Sox's inability to pass either the Rays or Yanks in the standings this season.

Therefore, if Sox manager Terry Francona wanted to tweak the words once spoken by Rick Pitino a little more than 10 years ago, he could be forgiven if he said, "Dustin Pedroia is not walking through that clubhouse door, fans. Kevin Youkilis is not walking through that door, and Jacoby Ellsbury is not walking through that door."

And from that point, it's best to begin to look toward next season.

Will spending even more be a route to success, though? The second highest payroll wasn't part of the formula to get them to the playoffs this season, and money clearly didn't buy the team much in the form of fan excitement, as troubling numbers continued to spill out about the massive drop in television ratings, and rumblings that the days of the consecutive sellout streak at Fenway might be numbered, with it having hit 600 a little more than a month ago.

And when looking at the rest of the top spenders this year in the majors, the Sox aren't alone in spending big and getting little in return. While the Yanks hold the best record while having spent more than \$200 million this year, the carcasses of other big spenders litter the salary list after the Yanks. The Cubs, having spent \$146 million-plus, are 20 games below .500.

Philadelphia, having made the World Series last year, is nearly at \$142 million, but might need to get in via the wild card because of surprising Atlanta. The Mets? As is often the case, they spend big bucks — \$132 million-plus for payroll this year — but aren't even at .500. Detroit is in a similar spot as the Mets — just under .500 — and floated Johnny Damon through waivers in an attempt at salary relief, only for the Damon's no-trade clause to become a stumbling block in completing a deal.

At the other end of the spectrum are a handful of teams that are holding onto their pennies, but still have found a way to win this season. Most notable is San Diego, with the second lowest payroll at almost \$38 million, but holding a slim lead in the NL West race with a 76-56 record. Then Texas, leaders in the AL West, stand with the fourth lowest payroll, at slightly more than \$55 million.

Therein lies the challenge for Epstein for next year and beyond — trying to infuse some youth that comes at a lower price tag, so the sting of the big contracts handed out for Josh Beckett and Jon Lackey — that unfortunately were paired with limited results this year — can be balanced with the minimal financial investments combined with the high returns the team was blessed with this year from Jon Lester and Clay Buchholz.

(Andres Caamano is the Senior News Editor/NIE Director at The Gardner News.)