

WORST TO FIRST, AGAIN?

PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo

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Red Sox hoping to have a **2018 season** in them

By MAC CERULLO
CNHI Sports Boston

We've seen this story before.

A moribund, last-place Red Sox team embarks on an offseason rebuild panned by many in the fanbase as insufficient. Rather than make some kind of splash, the club spreads its money around by signing a multitude of proven, mid-tier free agents to plug the its many holes.

Come Opening Day the widespread consensus around baseball was that the Red Sox wouldn't be a factor. Nobody expected the club would win the AL East, and few thought they'd even make the playoffs as a Wild Card. Most experts projected the Red Sox to finish fourth or worse.

The story I'm describing is the story of the 2013 Red Sox, and everyone knows what happened next. The club went from worst to first, cruising to the AL East title before winning the franchise's third World Series title in nine years.

A decade later, the Red Sox find themselves in almost the exact same position.

Could history repeat itself once more?

Like the 2013 club, the Red Sox revamped their roster by adding a litany of quality mid-level free agents. The 2013 club signed seven free agents, and of that group Shane Victorino was the only player to sign for more than two years. The newcomers also included closer Koji Uehara, first baseman Mike Napoli, outfielder Jonny Gomes and shortstop Stephen Drew, all of whom played integral roles in the championship campaign.

This year the Red Sox signed eight, with Masataka Yoshida the only one on a long-term deal. Yoshida, outfielder Adam Duvall and designated hitter Justin Turner are all projected to bat near the top of the order,



BILLIE WEISS/Boston Red Sox

New Red Sox closer Kenley Jansen is introduced by Red Sox CEO Sam Kennedy and chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom during a press conference at Fenway Park. Jansen is one of eight free agent signings the Red Sox made over the offseason, a group the club hopes can help turn its fortunes around after a last-place 2022 season.

and starter Corey Kluber could be among the team's most important pitchers.

Both clubs also locked up the faces of their franchise, ending the uncertainty that loomed over their futures. After 2012 David Ortiz was a pending free agent, but early in the offseason he and the Red Sox agreed to

a two-year deal to keep the future Hall of Famer in Boston. This offseason the Red Sox signed Rafael Devers to the largest contract in team history, eliminating the potential distraction Devers' looming free agency would have created.

The end result, on paper at least, was an improved and better-constructed

roster that addressed the prior year's deficiencies while adding considerably more depth. In 2013 the on-field reality exceeded even the most optimistic projections, and while there's no guarantee this year's club could be that good, there's enough reason to believe a similar turnaround might be possible.

This year's club still has question marks, there's no doubt about it. The Red Sox have injury risks all over the pitching staff and it remains to be seen how Yoshida will adjust to the big league level. The club is also counting on a number of young players to make an impact, first baseman Triston Casas and starting

pitcher Garrett Whitlock chief among them, and on others to bounce back after lost 2022 campaigns.

But that doesn't mean the 2023 Red Sox can't reach championship heights. The 2013 team is proof that anything is possible.

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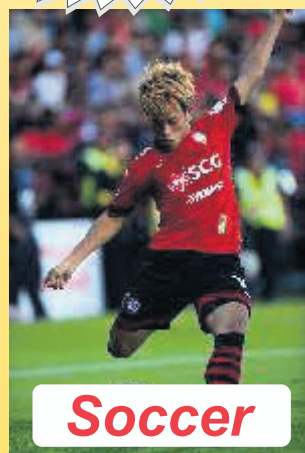
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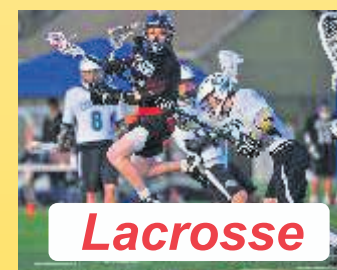
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Can Story return to write new chapter?

Ten Red Sox storylines to watch closely in 2023

BY MAC CERULLO
CNHI Sports Boston

One way or another 2023 is going to be a big year for the Red Sox. Either the club will shake off last season's fifth place finish and get back into playoff contention, or it will continue struggling and prompt a franchise-altering reckoning this coming offseason.

Which way will things go? And what should fans know going in? Here are 10 storylines to watch as the season gets underway.

1. Will Story return during second half?

The Red Sox suffered a huge blow over the offseason when Trevor Story underwent right elbow surgery, which will sideline him for a sizable portion of the season. Initially there was doubt the two-time All-Star would play in 2023 at all, but Story says he's pushing to return at some point during the second half.

There is reason to believe that might be possible.

Internal bracing surgery, the procedure Story underwent, is considered a less significant alternative to Tommy John surgery and usually has roughly half the recovery timeline. Others who have dealt with similar injuries have also returned early as designated hitters, most notably Shohei Ohtani, who spent 2019 as a designated hitter only while recovering from offseason Tommy John surgery.

Even if Story only returns as a DH he could make a significant impact on the Red Sox lineup down the stretch. His progress will be worth monitoring closely.

2. Can Sale (and others) stay healthy?

If the Red Sox are going to accomplish anything in 2023, they'll need the rest of their best players to stay healthy. That starts with Chris Sale.

The big lefty has spent the majority of the past three years on the shelf with various injuries, first undergoing Tommy John surgery and then suffering a string of bizarre setbacks last year. That included a broken rib, a broken pinky suffered after being hit by a line drive, and then a broken wrist suffered in a bicycle accident near his home.

The good news is none of those incidents had anything to do with Sale's surgically repaired elbow, so in theory he should be healthy and back to his old self. The Red Sox are counting

on similar bounce backs from Garrett Whitlock and Tanner Houck, who are both coming off season-ending surgeries last fall, and from James Paxton, who like Sale has also missed most of the past three years due to injury.

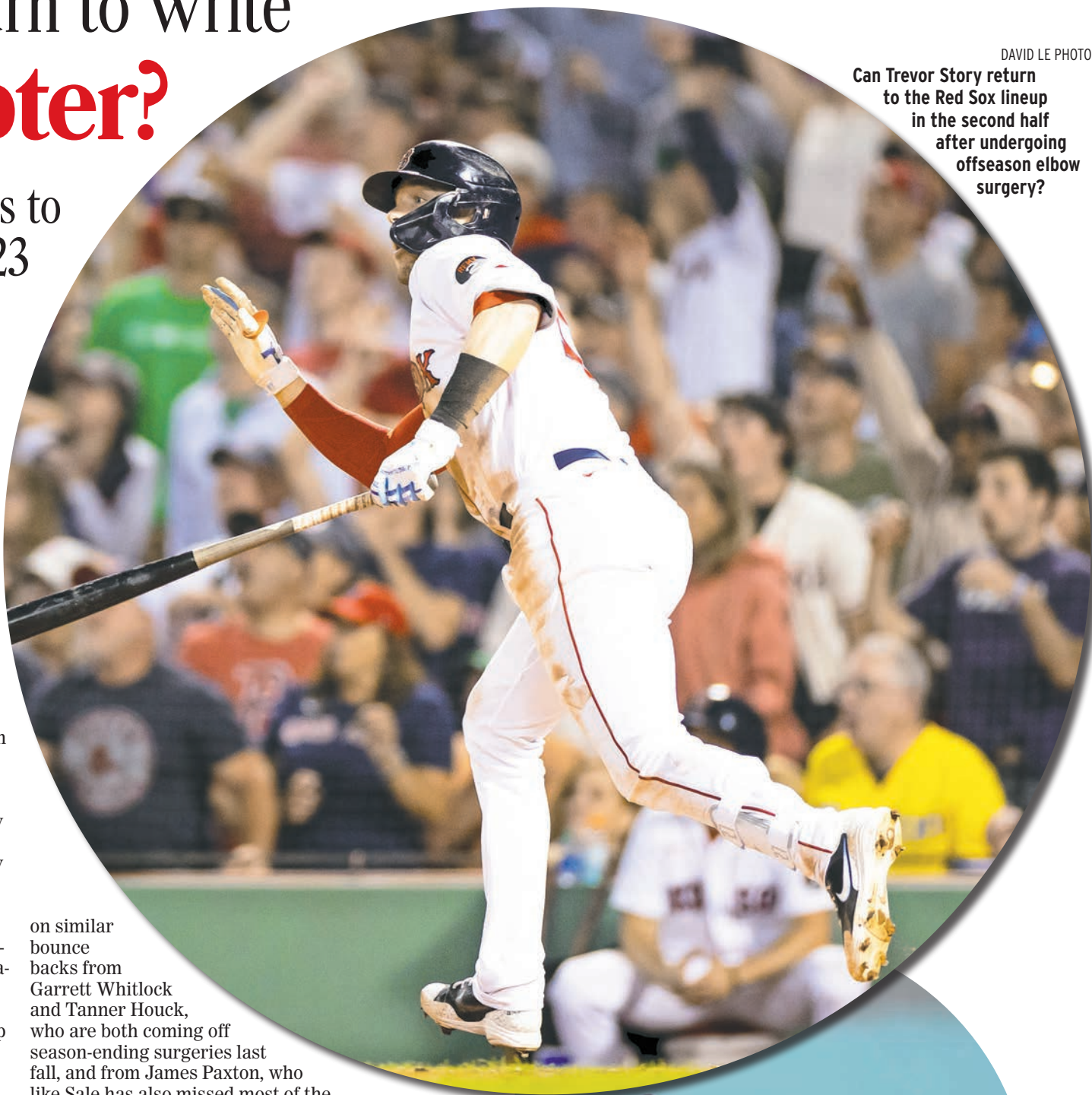
3. How much better could bullpen be?

If there is one area the Red Sox should be most improved in 2023, it's the bullpen. Last year's pen was a mess from the start and by season's end the group had only converted 39 of 68 save opportunities (57.3%). That wasn't good enough, and now the group has been completely revamped.

Leading the way will be Kenley Jansen, MLB's most consistent and accomplished closer of the past decade, and he'll be supported by top set-up men Chris Martin and John Schreiber in the late innings. Two new lefties, Joely Rodriguez and Richard Bleier, will join the fold as well, and the rest of the group should include a mix

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DAVID LE PHOTO
Can Trevor Story return
to the Red Sox lineup
in the second half
after undergoing
offseason elbow
surgery?



AP PHOTO
Can
Chris
Sale stay
healthy in
2023?

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AP PHOTO
Kenley Jansen should give the Red Sox their first established closer since 2018.

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of veterans like Ryan Brasier and numerous promising youngsters knocking on the door.

4. Devers ready to take charge

Rafael Devers is all grown up. No longer just a youthful phenom, the Red Sox slugger is now officially the face of the franchise after signing the largest contract in team history. Devers' new 10-year, \$313.5 million extension will keep the 26-year-old in Boston through the next decade, but with that level of commitment comes an increased level of responsibility.

If the Red Sox are going to contend this season Devers has to be a star. Not just on the field, everyone knows he's fully capable of ranking among the league's best hitters, but in the clubhouse as well. Can Devers make the leap and become "the guy" like David Ortiz, Dustin Pedroia and Mookie Betts before him? Stay tuned.

5. What kind of impact could Yoshida, Casas have?

Two of the most intriguing additions to the Red Sox lineup should be Masataka Yoshida and Triston Casas. Though both are technically rookies, the two standouts have walked vastly different paths and yet bring similar skillsets to the Red Sox offense.

Yoshida has been the best hitter in Japan for the last few years and is known for boasting a formidable combination of contact skills, power and plate discipline. He recently led Team Japan to an Olympic gold

medal (beating Casas and the U.S. in the final) and also his Orix Buffaloes team to the Japan Series title.

Casas, meanwhile, is a former first-round pick who boasts effortless power along with an impressive ability to control the strike zone. Casas turned heads during his brief September call-up last fall and is now expected to play a key role in the Red Sox order.

If their skills can translate over a full big league schedule Yoshida and Casas could both become huge difference makers.

6. Are young pitchers ready to take next step?

If Chris Sale is the biggest 'X factor' on the Red Sox pitching staff, the trio of Garrett Whitlock, Tanner Houck and Brayan Bello aren't far behind.

The three young Red Sox standouts have all proven they can succeed at the big league level, and now the question is whether they're ready to take the next step and become reliable big league starting pitchers.

Their success isn't a guarantee. All three are working



PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo
Rafael Devers is set to take center stage after signing a 10-year, \$313.5 million extension, the largest contract in Red Sox history. Can he live up to the heightened expectations that come along with a deal like that?



AP PHOTO
Tanner Houck is one of a handful of young Red Sox pitchers looking to make an impact. Can they take the next step and become reliable everyday starters?

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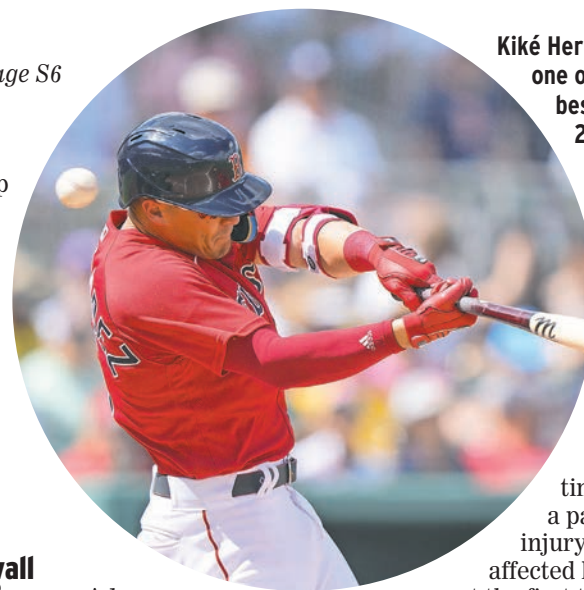
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their way back from injury and not all young players develop along a linear curve. But if they can run with their opportunity and establish themselves as real workhorses, they could transform the club's pitching staff and elevate the Red Sox from playoff hopefuls to serious contenders.

7. Can Kiké, Duvall bounce back?

Two of Boston's most important position players, shortstop Kiké Hernández and new center fielder



Adam Duvall, are coming off lost seasons. Hernández missed a significant amount of

AP PHOTO
Kiké Hernández was one of Boston's best players in 2021 before injuries limited him throughout last season.

time due to a painful core injury which also affected him throughout the first two months of the season. He finished the year batting .222 with a paltry .629 OPS, but that was after an excellent 2021 in which he tied for the team lead in wins above replacement and enjoyed a monster postseason run.

Duvall, similarly, had a rough 2022 in which he batted .213 with 12 home runs before undergoing season-ending wrist surgery in July. But in 2021? Duvall was dominant, hitting 38 home runs with 113 RBI while earning a Gold Glove and helping the Atlanta Braves to the 2021 World Series title.

If the 2021 versions of Hernández and Duvall show up, the Red Sox offense could be a sight to behold. If the pair struggle or deal with injuries again, the club could be in real trouble.

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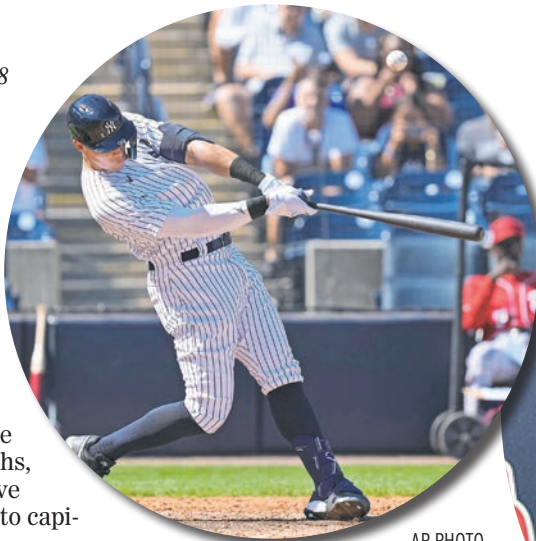
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8. How will Red Sox adapt to new rules?

MLB is introducing radical new rule changes this season, including a pitch clock, a ban on defensive shifts and larger bases. Besides improving pace-of-play the changes are also expected to encourage clubs to be more aggressive on the base paths, something the Red Sox have repeatedly said they hope to capitalize on.

One of baseball's slowest teams in recent years, the Red Sox have made becoming more athletic and dynamic a priority. The club recently brought in shortstop Adalberto Mondesi, who has led the league in both stolen bases and triples over the course of his career, and up-and-coming prospects like Jarren Duran, Ceddanne Rafaela and David Hamilton are also burners who could cause opposing defenses fits if they're given the green light to run wild when they get on base.



AP PHOTO

The Red Sox won't see as much of Aaron Judge, the New York Yankees or any of their AL East rivals this year.

9. How much will Sox benefit from fewer AL East games?

The other major change being introduced this season by MLB is a new balanced schedule, which will see clubs play significantly fewer games against divisional opponents while increasing the number of interleague games so

that every-one plays every other club at least once.

For the Red Sox, this change could be a godsend.

Last season the Red Sox got crushed within the AL East. They had a 26-50 record against divisional rivals and went 52-34



Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom is entering his fourth year in Boston, which could be a make or break season after two last place finishes in three years.

club's ability to compete for a Wild Card spot.

10. Is Bloom's job on the line?

Red Sox chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom is now entering his fourth year running the front office, and for better or worse his fate could hinge upon how this team performs in 2023. Bloom has assembled the vast majority of the roster and built the club according to his vision and values, and now all the talk of "building towards the future" is over. It's time to win and everyone knows is.

If the Red Sox get back into contention, return to the playoffs and compete for a championship, Bloom's position atop the baseball operations department will likely be secure. But if the club struggles and limps to another fourth or fifth place finish, his seat could start getting hot real quick.

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against every-one else.

The AL East is once again expected

to be among the toughest divisions in baseball, so only having to play 52 games within the division instead of 76 could make a meaningful difference in the

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Mookie Betts' return tops list of **must-see** series



AP PHOTO

Mookie Betts and the Los Angeles Dodgers will come to Fenway Park the weekend of Aug. 25.

By MAC CERULLO
CNHI Sports Boston

With MLB shifting to a new balanced schedule, the Boston Red Sox will face every other team in Major League Baseball at least once this season for the first time ever. The new schedule promises to bring more opponents to Fenway Park, including National League clubs who might have previously come to Boston once or twice per decade.

So what can Red Sox fans expect this season? Here are seven series you'll want to circle on the calendar.

Baltimore Orioles, March 30 – April 2: For the second time in three years the Red Sox open their season at home against the Baltimore Orioles, and just like in April 2021 the Red Sox are coming off a last-place finish in which they finished behind an Orioles club

they were expected to finish well in front of. That last series didn't go well, with the Red Sox getting handily swept, but the club quickly bounced back and wound up making it all the way to the ALCS.

For local fans this series will mark the MLB debut of Masataka Yoshida and the first Red Sox appearances of newcomers like Justin Turner, Adam Duvall, Corey Kluber and others. The Red Sox open on Thursday at 2:10 p.m. before picking up with afternoon games on Saturday and Sunday following a quick Friday off-day.

Los Angeles Angels, April 14-17: Patriots Day weekend is always a highlight of the Red Sox season, and this year's edition should be particularly star-studded with Mike Trout, Shohei Ohtani and the Los Angeles Angels in town. This weekend will mark those superstars' only

appearance at Fenway in 2023, and fans who get into the park can also count on seeing the Red Sox wear their popular yellow City Connect alternates and the "Boston Strong" home white uniform on Marathon Monday itself.

At San Diego Padres, May 19-21: This already would have been the marquee road trip on the schedule, but now the highly anticipated meeting between the Red Sox and Padres will take on added significance following San Diego's offseason signing of Xander Bogaerts. Beyond the emotion of reuniting with the longtime Red Sox shortstop, fans will also see former starting pitcher Michael Wacha along with a who's who of baseball's biggest stars, including Juan Soto, Manny Machado and Fernando Tatis Jr.

New York Mets, July 21-23: If money were no object,



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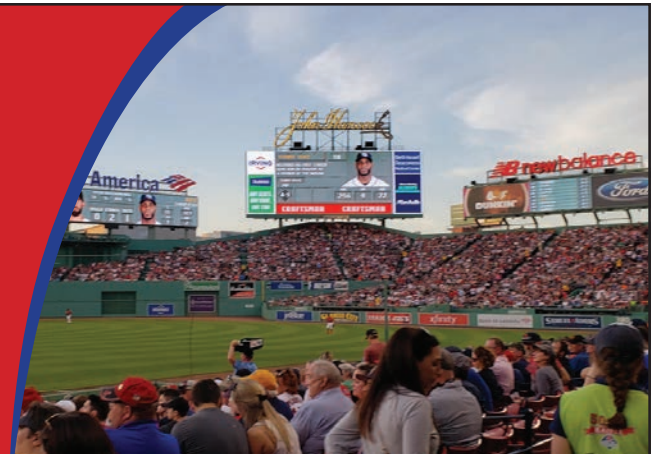
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what kind of baseball team could you field? New York Mets owner Steve Cohen has effectively answered that question by assembling the most expensive roster in MLB history, and this weekend in late July Red Sox fans will get to see it for themselves. Featuring a rotation including Justin Verlander, Max Scherzer and newly signed Japanese standout Kodai Senga, as well as elite closer Edwin Diaz and All-Stars like Francisco Lindor and Pete Alonso, the Mets are expected to once again contend for a World Series title and should be among the best teams to visit Fenway Park all year.

Los Angeles Dodgers, Aug. 25-27: If there's one series worth circling on the calendar all season, it's this one. This weekend marks Mookie Betts' first trip back to Fenway Park since he was traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers in early 2020, and it promises to be an emotional reunion.

Beyond the Betts angle,



DAVID J. PHILLIP - STAFF, AP

New York Yankees' Aaron Judge walks out to the dugout after flying out against the Washington Nationals during the third inning of a spring training game March 1 in Tampa, Fla.

this weekend also sees the return of J.D. Martinez to Fenway Park, and numerous former Dodgers including Justin Turner and Kiké Hernández will face their former club for the first time in a Red Sox uniform. Even putting all those storylines to the side, the Dodgers are

perennially one of the best teams in baseball, so Red Sox fans willing to shell out the big bucks for tickets should get their money's worth.

Houston Astros, Aug. 28-30: How's this for a one-two punch? Right after the Dodgers leave town the

Red Sox will welcome the defending World Series champion Houston Astros to town. Besides providing the Red Sox a chance to prove their mettle against two of baseball's best teams right before the calendar turns to September, the series will also give local fans the

opportunity to see Rhode Island's Jeremy Peña, the reigning World Series MVP and a former UMaine star.

New York Yankees, Sept. 11-14: Under MLB's new balanced schedule divisional rivals will only play two series at each others' home parks rather than three. The good news is that frees up more time to play other clubs who typically don't see each other as much, but for Red Sox fans the chief drawback is there will be fewer chances to see the Yankees at Fenway Park.

This year the Red Sox first host the Yankees at Fenway from June 16-18, but the bigger series by far will be the late-season meeting from Sept. 11-14. By that point we should have a clear understanding of the playoff picture, and if things play out a certain way this series could have major implications for both the AL East and AL Wild Card race.

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MLB SHIFTING TO BALANCED SCHEDULE

This season Major League Baseball is shifting to a balanced schedule in which every club will face each other at least once for the first time in league history. Here is a summary of how each team's schedule will change:

■ **Divisional Games:** Clubs will play 52 total games against divisional opponents, down from 76 in previous years. That includes 13 games against each divisional rival, down from 19.

■ **Intraleague Games:** Clubs will play 64 total games against non-divisional league opponents, down slightly from 66 in past years. That includes two series against each opponent, one home and one away.

■ **Interleague Games:** Clubs will play 46 total interleague games, up from 20 in past years. The Red Sox will play a home and home series against the Atlanta Braves and one series against every other National League opponent.

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MEET THE NEW GUYS!



Red Sox have no shortage of newcomers hoping to make an impact

Say what you will about the Red Sox offseason, but you can't say the club wasn't busy.

Boston has plenty of new faces in town, as chief baseball officer Chaim Bloom turned over nearly the entire pitching staff while overhauling the outfield and adding depth all over the roster. The result? A retooled Red Sox club that, in theory, should be deeper and more balanced than last season's fifth-place outfit.

So who are these guys and what can fans expect? Here's a rundown of all the notable additions. — *Mac Cerullo*

Masataka Yoshida, OF: One of the top hitters in Japan over the past few years, Yoshida was Boston's splashiest addition and possibly its most polarizing. The five-year, \$90 million signing was initially panned by industry experts, but the analytics community has been much higher on the 29-year-old, who boasts a rare combination of power, bat-to-ball skills and plate discipline.



Yoshida has a career on-base percentage of .421 and has walked more than he's struck out in each of his last four seasons. He's also a proven winner, having helped Team Japan to a gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics and then his old Orix Buffaloes club to 2022 Japan Series title. As of this writing FanGraphs has Yoshida projected to bat .299 with 17 home runs, 73 RBI, a .387 OBP and 3.4 wins above replacement, and if he can deliver anywhere near that level of production he'll immediately emerge as a formidable threat in the Red Sox lineup.

Adam Duvall, OF: A key contributor to the Atlanta Braves 2021 World Series championship club, Duvall is coming off an injury-plagued 2022 but is now back to full health and expected to make an impact in Boston. A power-hitting righty, Duvall hit 38 home runs with 113 RBI two seasons ago and also won a Gold Glove in right field.



Duvall is expected to shift over to center field for the Red Sox as Kiké Hernández moves to shortstop. Having only played 75 career games in center it will be interesting to see how Duvall adjusts, and one way or another his performance could play a major role in determining the club's fortunes.

Justin Turner, INF/DH: Coming off a highly successful nine-year run with the Los Angeles Dodgers, the 38-year-old Turner remains highly productive and is expected to slot into J.D. Martinez's old role as Boston's primary designated hitter. Turner batted .278 with a .350 OBP along with 13 home runs and 81 RBI last season for the Dodgers, and he's also widely renowned as one of the best clubhouse guys in the game.



In addition to primarily batting DH, Turner also remains an effective corner infielder and should see a fair amount of time at both first and third base on days where Rafael Devers and Triston Casas need a day off their feet.

Kenley Jansen, RHP: Of all Boston's problems last season, the bullpen's chronic inability to hold late leads was among the most frustrating. To address that the Red Sox have brought in baseball's best and most reliable closer of the past decade, who they hope can finally stop those close games from slipping away.



Jansen has recorded at least 33 saves in each of the past eight 162-game seasons, and last year he led the National League with 41 for the Atlanta Braves. Jansen also has significant playoff experience and won a World Series title with the Dodgers in 2020, and even at 35 he's shown no signs of slowing down. His strikeout rate, expected batting average, expected slugging and fastball spin all rank 93rd percentile in MLB or better, and the certainty his presence provides in the late innings will also help the club's other relievers slot into more appropriate roles themselves.

Corey Kluber, RHP: A two-time Cy Young Award winner, Kluber was once among the most dominant pitchers in baseball. Now approaching his 37th birthday Kluber isn't that guy anymore, but last season he did prove he's still capable of performing at a high level following three years lost to injury.



Kluber is coming off a strong season in which he made 31 starts and posted a 4.34 ERA over 164 innings for the Tampa Bay Rays. He also boasted the best walk rate by any starting pitcher in baseball, and despite owning one of the slowest fastballs in the game he still ranked 96th percentile in chase rate. Kluber is projected to slot in as the Red Sox No. 2 starter, effectively replacing Nathan Eovaldi.

Adalberto Mondesi, INF: An all-world athlete who can never stay on the field, Mondesi represents a high-risk, high-reward gamble by the Red Sox front office. When healthy Mondesi is a game-breaking talent who has led MLB in both stolen bases and triples during his career, but he has also only topped 100 games in a season once in seven years and is currently working his way back from a torn ACL suffered early last season.



How Mondesi ultimately fits into the picture remains to be seen, but given his injury history he'll likely start off as a depth piece primarily playing shortstop once he completes his ACL recovery.

Chris Martin, RHP: Another former Dodgers standout, Martin is coming off an outstanding season in which he struck out 74 batters over 56 innings while only walking five. It probably won't come as a surprise that he boasted the best walk rate of any pitcher in baseball, and he's now expected to slot in as Boston's top setup man behind Jansen in the club's revamped bullpen.



Joely Rodriguez, LHP: Boston's first free agent signing of the offseason, Rodriguez projects as the club's top lefty reliever. The 31-year-old is coming off a solid season with the New York Mets in which he set new career highs in games pitched (55) and innings pitched (50.1) while posting a 4.47 ERA.



Richard Bleier, LHP: Acquired in a trade for longtime Red Sox reliever Matt Barnes, Bleier brings a completely different look to the club's new-look bullpen. The 35-year-old lefty hardly strikes anyone out but has enjoyed a successful career anyway by limiting walks and getting batters to chase for weak contact. Bleier is coming off a season in which he posted a 3.55 ERA over 50.2 innings and 55 games with the Miami Marlins.



A whole new ballgame

What can fans expect from MLB's rule changes?

Baseball is going to look a whole lot different this year.

This season MLB has introduced a series of radical new rule changes designed to help improve the game's pace of play. The idea is to reduce the amount of dead time between pitches, increase action on the field and encourage a faster, more exciting game.

The rules, which include a pitch clock, a ban on defensive shifts and larger bases, were tested extensively in the minor leagues before being put into force at the big league level for the first time this spring. Now as the rules debut in the regular season for the first time, here is what fans can expect. — *Mac Cerullo*

Pitch clock

Much like the shot clock in basketball, the pitch clock's principle goal is to keep the action moving along by requiring pitchers to begin their motion to the plate before time expires. Pitchers will have up to 15 seconds between pitches when the bases are empty and up to 20 seconds when there is at least one runner on base. If they take too long, they'll be charged with an automatic ball.

Pitchers may disengage the rubber — to catch their breath or to attempt a pickoff, for instance — twice per plate appearance without penalty, but subsequent disengagements will result in a balk unless an out is recorded on a runner. That disengagement count will reset if a runner advances, which was not the case in the minors last season.

The clock will also impact hitters, who must now be in the batter's box and alert to the pitcher with at least eight seconds left on the clock. Hitters will have one timeout per plate appearance, and those who take too long to get back into the box will be charged with an automatic strike.

Pitch clock violations can be, and already have been, incredibly consequential. The first Red Sox game ever played with a pitch clock at the start of spring training ended when an automatic strike was called in a bases-loaded, two-on, full count situation with the game tied in the bottom of the ninth. That resulted in an inning-ending strikeout, and with no extra innings in spring training the game was called a draw.

Unusual as that case was, the clock has already had a tremendous impact.

According to MLB, last season the pitch clock reduced the average nine-inning game time in the minor leagues by 26 minutes from 3:04 in 2021 to 2:38 in 2022. Baseball has seen similar reductions in game time throughout spring training without any corresponding decrease in offensive production or game action. The league also hopes the clock will encourage more stolen base attempts, with pitchers now limited in their ability to attempt pickoffs or hold runners on.



1010PH AP

Ban on defensive shifts

In response to the increasing prevalence of defensive shifts, MLB has implemented a set of restrictions designed to return baseball to its traditional aesthetic while encouraging more balls in play and giving infielders more opportunities to showcase their athleticism.

Essentially, two infielders must be positioned on each side of second base when a pitch is released. All four must have both feet in the infield dirt when the pitcher is on the rubber, and infielders won't be allowed to switch sides unless there's a substitution.

The net effect is defensive alignments in which three infielders move to once side of the field will now be illegal, as will alignments that



AP PHOTO

move an infielder into shallow left or right field. The hope is ground balls that might have previously been

vacuumed up by the extra infielder will now squeak through for a base hit.

Bigger bases

Primarily billed as a player safety measure, MLB has increased the size of first, second and third base from a 15-inch square to an 18-inch square.

The new bases are roughly the size of a pizza box and the idea is that with more surface area there will be fewer collisions between runners and fielders on the base paths. According to MLB base-related injuries

decreased by 13.5% in the minor leagues last season, including declines at every level of the minors.

In addition to safety, the larger bases will also reduce the distance between bases by 4.5 inches, which the league hopes will encourage clubs to attempt more stolen bases and generally be more aggressive on the base paths.



BILL BURT

Stars align

Padres' big bet will pay off with first World Series title

By MAC CERULLO
CNHI Sports Boston

Not long ago the San Diego Padres were an afterthought, an irrelevant organization toiling in obscurity. No longer.

The Padres have become one of baseball's marquee franchises, bucking the "small market" narrative by assembling the kind of star-studded lineup you typically only see in places like New York or Boston.

Every time you think they've pushed as far as they can go, they find a way to reach another level.

It started with the blockbuster signing of Manny Machado in 2019. Then they locked up homegrown superstar Fernando Tatis Jr. If that wasn't enough, they traded the farm for potential future Hall of Famer Juan Soto, shocked the baseball world by inking four-time All-Star Xander Bogaerts, and then doubled down by extending Machado for another 11 years.

And those are just the headliners.

The Padres have pushed all their chips to the center of the table, and it's no secret what they're gambling on. The organization has never won a World Series in its 54-year MLB history, and the city of San Diego hasn't celebrated a championship of any kind since the San Diego

Chargers won the 1963 AFL championship, three years before the first Super Bowl.

Now, it's time to see if the Padres big bet will pay off.

San Diego took a big step forward last year, knocking off the New York Mets and Los Angeles Dodgers before running into a Philadelphia Phillies club that felt at times like a team of destiny. This year's club is talented enough to go even further, and with the addition of Bogaerts, the return of Tatis and a full season of Soto the club's lineup will be a force to be reckoned with.

The pitching is rock solid too. The group of Yu Darvish, Blake Snell and Joe Musgrove is among the stronger 1-2-3 punches you'll see in any rotation, and Josh Hader remains among baseball's elite closers. The depth may not be a strength, but let's be honest, if the Padres have any questions by July they'll probably trade for the top pitcher on the market anyway.

The Padres won't have an easy path. The Los Angeles Dodgers remain kings of the NL West, though that club is coming off a quiet offseason and will likely come down to Earth at least somewhat after last summer's 111-win campaign. The rest of the NL is loaded too, with the Mets, Atlanta Braves and Philadelphia Phillies all boasting championship aspirations as well.



AP PHOTO

San Diego Padres' Nelson Cruz, left, celebrates with Manny Machado, right, after hitting a solo home run during a recent spring training game. The Padres are among the favorites to win this year's World Series.

MLB AWARD PREDICTIONS

MVP

AL: Shohei Ohtani, Los Angeles Angels
NL: Mookie Betts, Los Angeles Dodgers

CY YOUNG AWARD

AL: Jacob deGrom, Texas Rangers
NL: Sandy Alcantara, Miami Marlins

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

AL: Triston Casas, Boston Red Sox
NL: Corbin Carroll, Arizona Diamondbacks

MANAGER OF THE YEAR

AL: Alex Cora, Boston Red Sox
NL: Brian Snitker, Atlanta Braves

But after more than five decades and untold millions of dollars spent, this could finally be San Diego's year.

Expect another epic NL East race

Last year the NL East was a monster. The Braves and Mets battled all the way to

the finish, with the Braves ultimately coming out on top on a tiebreaker after both finished with 101 wins.

Then, to everyone's surprise, the third-place Philadelphia Phillies wound up emerging as the true contender and made a run all the way to the World

Series, upsetting the NL Central champion Cardinals, the Braves and the Padres on their way to the World Series.

All three clubs have gotten better and have every reason to expect big things this year. The Braves likely deserve to be considered the preseason favorites given they are the five-time defending NL East champions and won a title two years ago, but the Mets look like a real beast with Justin Verlander, Max Scherzer and Kodai Senga leading the rotation, and the Phillies doubled down by adding Trea Turner to a group that should also have a healthy Bryce Harper

back in the mix.

Astros and Yankees still rule AL

The Houston Astros and New York Yankees were the top two teams in the American League last year, and there's no reason to expect that should change heading into 2023.

Fresh off capturing its second World Series title in six years, the Astros lost Verlander in free agency but still boast one of baseball's most talented rosters top to bottom. New York is in a similar boat having retained Aaron Judge while adding Carlos Rodon to a rotation that still features perennial Cy Young

PROJECTED 2023 MLB STANDINGS

AL EAST

- New York Yankees 92-70**
- Toronto Blue Jays 90-72*
- Boston Red Sox 87-75*
- Tampa Bay Rays 85-77
- Baltimore Orioles 79-83

AL CENTRAL

- Cleveland Guardians 90-72*
- Minnesota Twins 86-76
- Chicago White Sox 80-82
- Detroit Tigers 75-87
- Kansas City Royals 71-91

AL WEST

- Houston Astros 96-66**
- Seattle Mariners 90-72*
- Texas Rangers 84-78
- Los Angeles Angels 82-80
- Oakland Athletics 60-102

NL EAST

- Atlanta Braves 95-67**
- New York Mets 94-68*
- Philadelphia Phillies 92-70*
- Miami Marlins 75-87
- Washington Nationals 65-97

NL CENTRAL

- St. Louis Cardinals 91-71*
- Chicago Cubs 83-79
- Milwaukee Brewers 82-80
- Cincinnati Reds 68-94
- Pittsburgh Pirates 62-100

NL WEST

- San Diego Padres 98-64**
- Los Angeles Dodgers 95-67*
- San Francisco Giants 84-78
- Arizona Diamondbacks 78-84
- Colorado Rockies 70-92

**Earns first-round bye to divisional series

*Qualifies for Wild Card round

contender Gerrit Cole.

The Seattle Mariners remain an intriguing wild card as a club on the rise, but as much talent as there is in the AL West, the pecking order seems clear. It'll be the Astros in first, Mariners in second as a top Wild Card team, and then the Texas Rangers and Los Angeles Angels will be battling for third while the Oakland Athletics trudge though another difficult year.

The AL East should once again be baseball's deepest division, and while the Yankees and Toronto Blue Jays look like the two strongest squads, the Boston Red Sox might have a better chance

to contend than a lot of people think. Tampa Bay's lineup isn't very impressive and Baltimore did nothing to improve over the offseason and will hope that its young talent will collectively take the next step to push the Orioles closer to playoff contention

If the Red Sox can stay healthy and play to their potential, don't sleep on them being able to edge ahead of those clubs and crack the field as the last Wild Card club.

At the end of the day, this year we should see another Astros vs. Yankees matchup in the ALCS, and until the Yankees prove otherwise there's no reason to doubt

MLB PLAYOFFS PREDICTIONS

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Wild Card Series

Red Sox over Guardians 2-1
Mariners over Blue Jays 2-1

Divisional Series

Astros over Mariners 3-2
Yankees over Red Sox 3-1

Championship Series

Astros over Yankees 4-2

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Wild Card Series

Phillies over Cardinals 2-0
Mets over Dodgers 2-1

Divisional Series

Padres over Phillies 3-2
Mets over Braves 3-2

Championship Series

Padres over Mets 4-3

WORLD SERIES

Padres over Astros 4-2

the Astros' postseason pedigree. That should set up a potential all-time classic in the World Series, with the Padres having a chance to deny the Astros the right to call themselves a dynasty while capturing their long-awaited first title.

Our bet? San Diego over Houston in six.

Email: mcerullo@northof-boston.com. Twitter: [@MacCerullo](https://twitter.com/MacCerullo).



Red Sox rookie Triston Casas is expected to open the season as Boston's starting first baseman and could have an immediate impact on the club's lineup.

AP PHOTO



2023 BOSTON RED SOX SCHEDULE

MARCH/APRIL

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
				BAL		BAL
BAL	PIT	PIT	PIT	DET		DET
DET	TB	TB	TB	TB	LAA	LAA
LAA	LAA	MIN	MIN	MIN	MIL	MIL
MIL	BAL	BAL	BAL		CLE	CLE
CLE						

MAY

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
	TOR	TOR	TOR	TOR	PHI	PHI
PHI		ATL	ATL		STL	STL
STL	SEA	SEA	SEA		SD	SD
SD	LAA	LAA	LAA		AZ	AZ
AZ		CIN	CIN			

JUNE

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
				CIN	TB	TB
TB		CLE	CLE	CLE	NYN	NYN
NYN	COL	COL	COL		NYN	NYN
NYN	MIN	MIN	MIN	MIN	CWS	CWS
CWS		MIA	MIA	MIA	TOR	

JULY

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
						TOR
TOR		TEX	TEX	TEX	OAK	OAK
OAK	ALL-STAR BREAK			CHC	CHC	
CHC	OAK	OAK	OAK		NYM	NYM
NYM		ATL	ATL		SF	SF
SF	SEA					

AUGUST

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
		SEA	SEA		TOR	TOR
TOR	KC	KC	KC	KC	DET	DET
DET		WSH	WSH	WSH	NYN	NYN
NYN	HOU	HOU	HOU	HOU	LAD	LAD
LAD	HOU	HOU	HOU			

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
					KC	KC
KC	TB	TB	TB		BAL	BAL
BAL	NYN	NYN	NYN	NYN	TOR	TOR
TOR	TEX	TEX	TEX		CWS	CWS
CWS		TB	TB	BAL	BAL	BAL
BAL						

*ALL GAME TIMES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

HOME AWAY



FAMOUS MARINADES

Sirloin Tips | Boneless Chicken
Boneless Pork | Wings & Thighs

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Custom-Cut Meats



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