

SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 2008



Red Sox 2008 Preview



Perfect fit

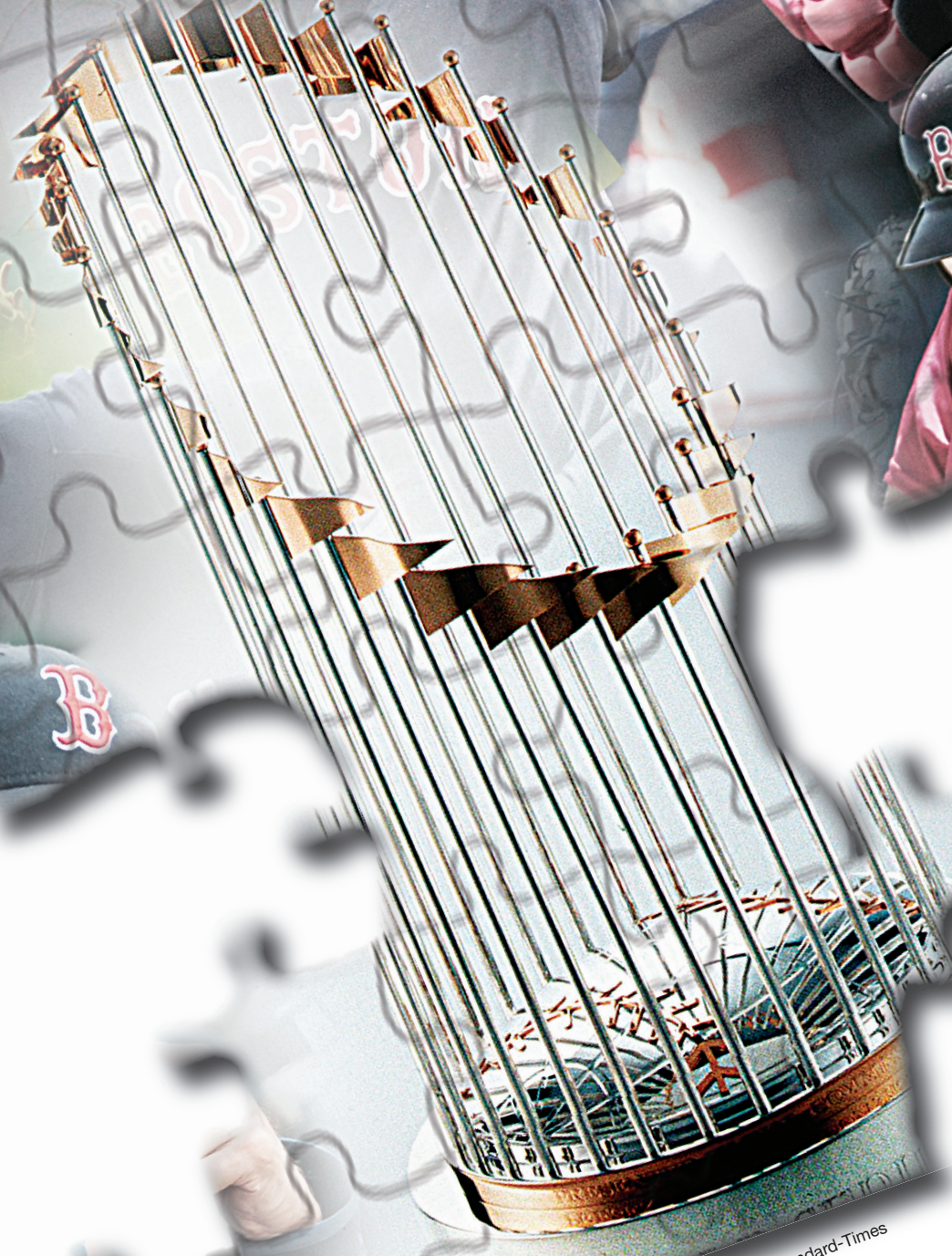


Photo illustration by NATE SILVA/The Standard-Times

The Red Sox will chase their second-straight World Series trophy with much the same mix of talent and personalities from a year ago, which includes (clockwise, from top left) Mike Timlin, the oldest player at 42; David Ortiz, the biggest personality; Jason Varitek, the captain; Jacoby Ellsbury, the teenybopper heartthrob; and Dustin Pedroia, the hard-nosed reigning rookie of the year. It's the job of manager Terry Francona (below, left) to keep the parts together.

Mix of youth and veterans, leaders and followers all comes together under Francona

By JON COUTURE
Standard-Times staff writer

On the morning of July 24, both the Red Sox and the L.A. Dodgers shared the best record in their respective leagues. That, however, was hardly all that intertwined them. Grady Little filled out L.A.'s lineup card, and throughout the season, had a variety of old friends to choose from. Nomar Garciaparra. Derek Lowe. Shea Hillenbrand. Ring bearer Bill Mueller worked in

the Dodgers' front office, for a Boston-bred owner who'd been passed over when the Red Sox were for sale.

On the field, both teams sought youthful contributions for the stretch run. L.A.'s answer to Jacoby Ellsbury, Clay Buchholz and Dustin Pedroia wasn't too shabby. James Loney, 23, baseball's leading RBI producer in September. Matt Kemp, 22, who hit .375 from mid-August on. Jonathan Broxton, 23, a fireballer in his second year as the team's primary setup man.

Yet the roads diverged. Ellsbury's a national heartthrob, fearing the ribbing from a Men's Vogue spread and being declared a potential

"cultural touchstone" akin to Maria Sharapova and LeBron James.

Pedroia's all boast and bombast and backing it up, the sort of player who'd be plastered on every slandering Yawkey Way T-shirt were he playing for anyone else.

L.A.'s youth movement? Veteran Jeff Kent summed it up last September, as the Dodgers crashed out of the playoff race, having lost a combined 33 games in the standings to the Rockies, Diamondbacks and Padres since their last day atop the NL.

"I don't know why they don't get it," he lashed at an L.A. Times reporter, who pressed for what he

meant. "Professionalism. How to manufacture a run. How to keep your emotions in it. There's just a lot of things that go on with playing 162 games.

"I'm running out of time. A lot of kids in here, they don't understand that."

■■■■

By Terry Francona's recollection, it was the latter days of the strike-shortened 1981 season in Montreal. The Expos were on the verge of the only playoff appearance that franchise would ever make, and he'd been called up in mid-August to make his major league debut.

See FIT D4

Parts in place, but repeating no easy task

By JON COUTURE
Standard-Times staff writer

To win, a team must have a plan. The Red Sox had that in the better part of a decade: Build from within, but be willing to gamble. Live within means, yet spare no expense when the time's right.

To win, a team must have good players. The Red Sox had that in 2007: They had baseball's best pitching staff, arguably its best closer, an offense with three .315 hitters and got on base more

than all but one other team.

To win, those good players must play. They did for the Red Sox in 2007: As Bill James points out in his latest book, Boston's opening-day starters accounted for 84 percent of their regular-season starting lineups, easily the best in baseball. (The league average is 70.)

And yet, on four nights in October, the Cleveland Indians were one game away from trumping it all. If Grady Sizemore makes a catch in Game 5,

if Kenny Lofton ties Game 7 late, if a grounder hops differently, there's no World Series.

No reigning dynasty.

No questions about targets on backs or being "the hunted."

Terry Francona knows all this. He's a numbers guy. He mixes old-school communication with new-school thinking. He gets the clichéd concept of "it's a marathon, not a sprint."

He's also succinct.

"People say, 'Oh, you know how hard it is to repeat?' he

said two weeks ago, already well-versed in the question. "Christ, you know how hard it is to win?"

■■■■

This year marks eight seasons since baseball's last repeat champion, when the 2000 Yankees made it three straight with a deceptive five-game roll of the Mets — no game was decided by more than two runs. The 2001 Yankees' fate is renowned: a classic Game 7, capped with an E1 and a Luis Gonzalez floater.

The '02 Diamondbacks won 98 games and led the NL in runs, then hit .184 in the Division Series and lost three straight.

The '03 Angels brought back almost their entire roster, then fulfilled the third-place predictions they'd exceeded the year before. The title-winning Cardinals weren't exactly a juggernaut, so big surprise injuries meant they spent all of five days above .500 in '07.

The '04 Marlins? Lost Pudge See REPEAT D4

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■ Ten key questions — and answers — facing the Sox this season. **D3**

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