



Red Sox 2008 Preview



Photos by CHARLES KRUPA/The Associated Press

With few roster issues this spring, there's been plenty of jocularly in spring training for Manny Ramirez, joking with minor leaguer Joe Thurston, and the Red Sox.

Repeat: Parts in place, but it's never easy

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Rodriguez and couldn't get hot in September. The '06 White Sox? Scored more runs than their curse breakers, but allowed more too and were a 90-win also-ran.

And then there's the 2005 Red Sox.

"Felt like we had a really good team to get there," Tim Wakefield said.

For stretches, they were arguably the AL's best. Permanently pulling away from .500 in June, Boston won 14 of 16 in midsummer and easily scored more runs than any other team.

That was little solace when, as the first defenders to get back to the playoffs since 2002, they scored nine runs, hit 5-for-32 after the sixth inning and didn't win a game.

A disappointing end, yet considering what they'd been through along the way, a shock that they came that close. The '05 Red Sox were, after all, The Team After.

The nation's darlings. The Queer Eye fodder. The team that didn't need to act like it had been there before because, well, everyone had spent the past nine decades reminding fans that they hadn't.

"When I got here, people were still talking about what happened in '04," said Alex Cora, whom the team acquired in July 2005. "I don't blame them, because it was such a long time without winning."

"We'd never been through it. I remember the first order of business was we had to clean up, some of the guys were saying some stuff about the Yankees," Francona said. "I remembered thinking, 'I need to have more trust in our players,' because they're the same players that won the World Series."

And yet, plenty of them weren't. The team's roster turned over by a third during the winter, including its two most used starting pitchers, its shortstop and a sizable chunk of the bullpen.

Was it a mistake? From Matt Clement to Edgar Renteria to David Wells, none of the team's offseason pick-

ups were still around for last season's title run. Yet it's not as though they were wholly ineffective.

"They went out and we won 95 games, and it was a hard 95 to win because we were beat up," Francona said. "They played, though. They played baseball."

"If you're supposed to make changes," GM Theo Epstein said, "you do."

And on the heels of 2007, changes weren't needed. With 20-somethings in the right side of the infield, entrenched veterans all around and a pitching staff largely built for the long haul, bringing back Mike Lowell and passing on Johan Santana was the winter.

To a man, that's just fine with them.

"I think this group, I guess compared to '05, is a more quiet group. Nothing against those guys, obviously, but it's business as usual," Cora said. "You can't be thinking about last year. ... I think that really helps."

"This group's a little bit easier in that you tell 'em what to do in the morning and they go do it," Francona said. "We loved that last group, but this is different. We don't have to push guys to work here. We put it up on the board, we tell them why we're doing it, and they go do it. ... Mikey Lowell signs a three-year contract, and he shows up a step quicker than he was last year. He obviously worked hard."

Obviously, that guarantees nothing. Some, the players among them, say the title puts a team at a disadvantage.

"People," Mike Timlin said, "will play you as hard or harder because you were the winners."

"It was a great year last year, but we know this year we have to kind of play just as good," Dustin Pedroia said. "It's going to be tough. Everyone's out to beat us. Definitely the league got a lot better. We're going to have to play great."

Francona, however, doesn't buy it. Outside of the increased taxing October puts on a pitching staff, to him "repeat-



ing means nothing." "It's no different than trying to win," he said. "When we play Detroit, the Yankees, they're not going to care, come April, May, June that we won last year. That won't mean anything to them."

And if all goes according to plan, it won't mean anything to the Red Sox after the rings are handed out.

"I think we're supposed to be justifiably proud of what we did last year," Francona said, "but realizing it's last year."

Joe Torre looks back on New York's dominant run in the late '90s with a number of emotions, even more so after his onerous departure from the Bronx.

That, however, could never overshadow the bemusement at doing something only a handful of baseball people could ever dream of.

"It certainly was crazy," he said, a smile creeping across his face. "I remember telling Jeter, 'You think this stuff is easy. I went through 20 years before I got there.'"

Asked for the proverbial secret, he said only the apparent: "You need the horses. I had the horses."

He then, however, spun the question toward the unspoken reality. Though Boston is millions smaller than its rival to the south, the pressure isn't diluted a bit.

"The one thing about it when you're in those two

cities, it's not what you did last week, it's what you do next week," he said. "Even though you can feel pretty proud of what you've accomplished, as long as you're wearing that uniform, you've got to be thinking ambitiously. It's a different set of pressures."

"Now that you proved you can do it, you need to do it." If 2005 teaches anything, it's that even in Boston, it's possible for a season without a title to be something other than a failure. That, however, isn't the mindset that makes a champion.

"There's some pressure off, but there's also pressure that you want to try to repeat too," Wakefield said. "It's a different type of feeling I guess this year, knowing that you have the same team back. We have a real good chance to repeat."

Again, they have a plan. They have the players and, while it's not perfect, they have their health.

All they can do now is what they do best.

"Our job is to go play baseball," Francona said. "The status or whatever it is comes from winning."

"Once you've won, then it's over and you have to re-earn it."

If only it were that easy.

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Fit: Winning formula about more than talent

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Not long after, he got a welcome message from an opposing starter: a pitch at his head that sent him sprawling to the dirt.

"I heard this voice behind me on deck, 'Don't play that (stuff),' and it was (Andre) Dawson," he recalled. "I got right back in the box. 'Let's go, because if I can't kick your (butt), he's gonna.'"

The idea that winning baseball can't be produced in a computer, that there's needed components stats can't quantify, is often cited. Sadly, it's almost always misused, a slam against the sabermetric ideas that men like Francona and Theo Epstein have built baseball's reigning dynasty on.

There's a way to mix communication with number crunching, always with a hearty respect for the game. It's ingrained in everything the Red Sox do and are, as evidenced in the first words out of Clay Buchholz's mouth when he's asked about the possibility of starting his year in the minors.

"I'd love to go out there and help this team win, but if it doesn't happen, hopefully I'll be up in the near future."

Understanding the importance of winning, especially to players who've long since gotten over the initial thrill of the stage or that first extra-base hit, is paramount.

"I learned that when I was a young kid, from my dad and my brothers," Alex Cora said. "You respect the game, and people generally respect you. ... Run hard. Do things that you can do. Don't try being somebody else."

When Kent raged last year that young players can't be taught experience, the 40-year-old probably had no idea the Red Sox, among others, have been trying for years.

"We look at this as easing the transition to the major leagues. Get to know the media, get to know the city, get to know how to get to the clubhouse," player development director Mike Hazen said in January at the team's third annual rookie development camp. "Secondarily, we get to lay out the expectations. Tito lays out his expectations. Theo, (pitching coach) John Farrell and (hitting coach) Dave Magadan ... there are no surprises for these guys when they come up to the major league level and we ask them to perform."

"Because ultimately, that's what they're here to do."

And that's what they've done, with an uncommon blend.

"My teammates have been great, especially coming up last year, with them accepting me to the clubhouse and making that transition a lot easier definitely helps," Jacoby Ellsbury said. "Guys like Pedroia, Lester, Buchholz, guys like that made my next step a lot easier. The team wants to win, so they're willing to do anything to help it out."

"There's been guys that have come through our organization that have directly helped us win very important games, and I hope that doesn't stop," Francona said. "The organization makes good decisions."

One of them hasn't been so much a decision as a natural agreement. Given the number of teams he's bounced through, Francona's seen any number of rookie hazing rituals. While he's certainly not averse to the occasional prank — this is the team that dressed

Daisuke Matsuzaka and interpreter Masa Hoshino as Teletubbies — he's never been able to understand the teams that take it beyond.

"These guys are on our team. Making maybe one of the young guys carry the beer on the team bus, something like that, can be in fun, but I think when you're in the clubhouse, you're on the field, they're our guys," he said. "I don't think you start measuring, when you're trying to win games, how many years guys have in the big leagues. They're our guys."

And it didn't take clubhouse access to see the personality of Pedroia — measured, teammates say, until he began performing — the success of Buchholz and the blinding speed of Ellsbury has injected some needed life into the Sox' veteran core.

"Look at how many times last year things could have maybe broken down. Cora's hitting about .400. Petey's (Pedroia) scuffling. Who helped Petey more than anybody? AC," Francona said, beaming. "If somebody was taking a shot at Petey, who was the first one to

be there with his arm around him? Mikey Lowell. That's two of the more veteran guys we have on our team. I think that's the way it's supposed to be."

Especially when those same good people are great players.

"We have a lot of different personalities. We have a lot of different people, from all over the world, that play on our team. But the one thing we have is unity. We stick together. I can't say that's the sole reason why we won a World Series, but it's a huge reason."

KEVIN YOUKILIS

supposed to. "You have to have the right people. We're pretty fortunate."

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The L.A.-to-Boston ties remain, but are a little less tangible today. Garciaparra is hurt again. For the first Opening Day since leaving Boston, Lowe's been usurped as the Dodgers' ace. The onerous end of the season did plenty to send Little out the door.

Yet the teams were tied as the stars of the Grapefruit League. The Dodgers went to China, hastening their painful departure from Dodgertown, while the Sox went to Japan.

Except when they almost didn't, willing to sacrifice a pair of regular season games because their staff's contributions were being glossed over. (Whether a Sox' assumption was to blame doesn't change their belief.)

Would other teams have done it? Most likely. Would they have had the cachet to get their way? Perhaps.

But anyone who was surprised by their actions simply hasn't been watching them operate. The only surprise, really, would have been if they'd done anything else.

"We have a lot of different personalities. We have a lot of different people, from all over the world, that play on our team. But the one thing we have is unity," Kevin Youkilis said. "We stick together."

"I can't say that's the sole reason why we won a World Series, but it's a huge reason."

Jon Couture covers the Red Sox for The Standard-Times. Contact him at jcouture@s-t.com

RED SOX SCHEDULE

MARCH/APRIL

March 25 . . . at Oakland	6:05 a.m.
March 26 . . . at Oakland	6:05 a.m.
1 at Oakland	10:05
2 at Oakland	10:05
4 at Toronto	7:15
5 at Toronto	1:07
6 at Toronto	1:07
8 Detroit	2:05
9 Detroit	7:05
10 Detroit	7:05
11 N.Y. Yankees	7:05
12 N.Y. Yankees	3:55
13 N.Y. Yankees	8:05
14 at Cleveland	7:05
15 at Cleveland	7:05
16 at N.Y. Yankees	7:05
17 at N.Y. Yankees	TBA
18 Texas	7:05
19 Texas	7:05
20 Texas	1:35
21 Texas	TBA
22 L.A. Angels	7:05
23 L.A. Angels	7:05
24 L.A. Angels	1:35
25 at TB	7:10
26 at TB	7:10
27 at TB	1:40
29 Toronto	7:05
30 Toronto	7:05

MAY

1 Toronto	7:05
2 TB	7:05
3 TB	7:05
4 TB	1:35
5 at Detroit	7:05
6 at Detroit	7:05
7 at Detroit	7:05
8 at Detroit	TBA
9 at Minnesota	8:10
10 at Minnesota	7:10
11 at Minnesota	2:10
12 at Minnesota	8:10
13 at Baltimore	7:05
14 at Baltimore	3:05
16 Milwaukee	7:05
17 Milwaukee	3:55
18 Milwaukee	1:35
19 Kansas City	7:05
20 Kansas City	7:05
21 Kansas City	7:05
22 Kansas City	1:35
23 at Oakland	10:05
24 at Oakland	9:05
25 at Oakland	4:05
26 at Seattle	10:10
27 at Seattle	10:10
28 at Seattle	10:10
30 at Baltimore	7:05
31 at Baltimore	7:05

JUNE

1 at Baltimore	1:35
2 at Baltimore	7:05
3 TB	7:05
4 TB	7:05
5 TB	7:05
6 Seattle	7:05
7 Seattle	3:55
8 Seattle	1:35
10 Baltimore	7:05
11 Baltimore	7:05
12 Baltimore	1:35
13 at Cincinnati	7:10
14 at Cincinnati	3:55
15 at Cincinnati	1:15
16 at Philadelphia	7:05
17 at Philadelphia	7:05
18 at Philadelphia	1:05
20 St. Louis	7:05
21 St. Louis	3:55
22 St. Louis	1:35
23 Arizona	7:05
24 Arizona	7:05
25 Arizona	7:05
27 at Houston	8:05
28 at Houston	7:05
29 at Houston	2:05
30 at TB	7:10

JULY

1 at TB	7:10
2 at TB	7:10
3 at N.Y. Yankees	7:05
4 at N.Y. Yankees	1:05
5 at N.Y. Yankees	3:55
6 at N.Y. Yankees	TBA
7 Minnesota	7:05
8 Minnesota	7:05
9 Minnesota	7:05
11 Baltimore	7:05
12 Baltimore	7:05
13 Baltimore	1:35
14-17 All-Star Break	
18 at L.A. Angels	10:05
19 at L.A. Angels	3:55
20 at L.A. Angels	6:00
21 at Seattle	10:10
22 at Seattle	10:10
23 at Seattle	4:40
25 N.Y. Yankees	7:05
26 N.Y. Yankees	3:55
27 N.Y. Yankees	1:35
28 L.A. Angels	7:05
29 L.A. Angels	7:05
30 L.A. Angels	7:05

AUGUST

1 Oakland	7:05
2 Oakland	7:05
3 Oakland	1:35
4 at Kansas City	8:10
5 at Kansas City	8:10
6 at Kansas City	8:10
8 at Chi. White Sox	8:11
9 at Chi. White Sox	7:05
10 at Chi. White Sox	2:05
11 at Chi. White Sox	8:11
12 Texas	7:05
13 Texas	7:05
14 Texas	7:05
15 Toronto	7:05
16 Toronto	7:05
17 Toronto	1:35
18 at Baltimore	7:05
19 at Baltimore	7:05
20 at Baltimore	7:05
22 at Toronto	7:07
23 at Toronto	1:07
24 at Toronto	1:07
26 at N.Y. Yankees	7:05
27 at N.Y. Yankees	7:05
28 at N.Y. Yankees	1:05
29 Chi. White Sox	7:05
30 Chi. White Sox	7:05
31 Chi. White Sox	1:35

SEPTEMBER

1 Baltimore	7:05
2 Baltimore	7:05
3 Baltimore	1:35
5 at Texas	8:05
6 at Texas	8:05
7 at Texas	3:05
8 TB	7:05
9 TB	7:05
10 TB	7:05
12 Toronto	7:05
13 Toronto	7:05
14 Toronto	1:35
15 at TB	7:10
16 at TB	7:10
17 at TB	7:10
19 at Toronto	7:07
20 at Toronto	1:07
21 at Toronto	1:07
22 Cleveland	7:05
23 Cleveland	7:05
24 Cleveland	7:05
25 Cleveland	7:05
26 N.Y. Yankees	7:05
27 N.Y. Yankees	7:05
28 N.Y. Yankees	1:35