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How the Red Sox Made a Championship Team



In 2018, the Boston Red Sox won their fourth World Series under the ownership of John Henry and Tom Werner. They did not prevail solely through pure athletic ability and player trades. The difference between the Red Sox and their competition was chemistry.

During their 2018 championship run, Red Sox manager Alex Cora created an authentic and enduring chemistry among his team. He did so through a hundred

little acts that added up, like the photos on the wall, the personal time he spent with players, and how he supported them on the field and off the field. As you read this article from the Boston Globe, written by Alex Speier, note the event hosted by pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez in St. Petersburg, Florida to thank his teammates for a uniform number. Fifty-six members of the team showed up.

The completed photo gallery on the walls of Alex Cora's office will include 119 images, snapshots that capture the remarkable on-field accomplishments of a Red Sox team that proved insatiable in its thirst for victories until finally it took the last game of the season on Sunday night.

Yet the photos of each win this year will not necessarily capture the full essence of the group or the feeling that existed among the members of the team along the way. There were other moments that team members insist laid the groundwork for a remarkable cohesion. What took place behind the scenes helped lay the foundation for those moments that took place in plain view.

The tone-setter.

Even before the start of spring training, new manager Alex Cora started forging bonds with and among the players, as when he traveled to different parts of the country to meet with them either individually or in small groups. In January, Cora met with David Price, Chris Sale, Sandy Leon, and Jackie Bradley Jr. for lunch in Fort Myers, Fla., a get-together that made an immediate impression.

From that point forward, Price observed, he felt with Cora "a very unique relationship. We're always in contact, even when we're away from the field."

The sense of camaraderie built throughout the spring, particularly over concern for closer Craig Kimbrel's infant daughter, Lydia, who required a heart procedure. When Kimbrel left the team in February, Cora and other members of the Red Sox remained in regular contact with him.

"He's been a friend, he's been a manager, and he's put my feelings and emotions in front of a lot of things," said Kimbrel. "You talk about family, my family at home, we went through a lot, but I was able to cling to the family I had around me here all year long, the guys I spend most of my time with. Those guys were big for me all year."

The Red Sox performed extremely well during spring training as a positive atmosphere took shape. Cora freely talked about the championship expectations for the club, about his belief that the young players had a chance to achieve new heights. The team was buying in and took little time to start feeling close.

Moments of Truth

Two days before the season, the sense of shared purpose was solidified in what many members of the team referenced as a landmark event. Pitcher Eduardo Rodriguez, in exchange for getting the uniform No. 57 (that of countryman and friend Johan Santana) from third base coach Carlos Febles, agreed to host a team dinner in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Fifty-six members of the team showed up.

"There's been some powerful moments throughout the season, and that was the first one," said Cora.

At the dinner, one by one, leaders of the team stood and spoke. The primary theme of the unscripted remarks was championships — what, for instance, Cora had seen in the 2017 Astros that allowed them to win a title, or what a championship would mean for starter Rick Porcello.

Jason Varitek, who played on two Red Sox championship teams and is still with the club as a special assistant, discussed what it meant to him to be in the Red Sox organization and what the experience of being a champion in Boston felt like.

"We just spoke from the heart," said Varitek, a former team captain. "I don't know if I can verbatim remember my words, but it means the world to me. It's the best place to play. It can also be the hardest, but it's the best place — an unbelievable fan base. There's no better place to win a championship."

The desire for a championship permeated a number of players' comments, perhaps most notably Price. The pitcher, of course, was coming off a difficult, controversial 2017 season that had made it common to suggest that he hated Boston.

"The one that stood out was David Price, to be honest," said Febles. "He said, 'You are the reason why I'm still in Boston. I'm here for you guys.' Everybody said something, but that stands out the most. 'I know I had a tough time with the media, but you guys are what makes this place special. That's why I'm comfortable coming in, for you guys.'"

"David just said, 'I just want to go out there, show them who I am, go to the World Series, and try to win an MVP,'" said Rodriguez. "He almost did it. That was special."

Finally, the closer spoke. Kimbrel finished the night by saying that when he took the mound at the end of a game, he did so not for himself but out of a sense of responsibility and obligation for his teammates. His selfless view resonated.

“He was very powerful,” said Cora. “He really takes pride of, ‘You guys work for eight innings and then in the ninth it’s my job to secure wins and pick you guys up,’ and then the way he talked, it was emotional. It was a great moment for us.”

“That was the first sign that there was a very special chemistry with this team,” said assistant pitching coach Brian Bannister. “You can assemble great talent, but chemistry is this thing people argue about. Is it there? Is it a real thing?”

“I’ve been on a lot of teams. There were only a couple that had this kind of chemistry. And you don’t win 108 games without it.”

Radical Candor

Cora is generally not a believer in team meetings. They feel clunky and intrusive on a game day. Typically, if he has a message, he’ll convey it either directly to an individual player or will mention something in a scheduled player gathering, such as the daily hitters’ meetings.

But during the season, there was one exception, as Febles recalled. The Red Sox won an afternoon game on a getaway day to conclude a series win. But Cora didn’t want the team to be overly satisfied with the victory after a stretch of some sloppy play and mental lapses.

Cora didn’t want to wait to address the matter.

“We were winning, but he didn’t like how we were playing,” said Febles. “He said, ‘For us to get where we want to go, we can’t play the way we’re playing. The way we’re playing is not what it takes to win.’”

Creating a Team

Sometimes it was a subset of the team that reinforced the group commitment to a title.

Between the end of the season and the start of the Division Series against the Yankees, Mitch Moreland hosted a few players — among them former Rangers teammate Ian Kinsler and Rick Porcello — at his house.

For seven years, Moreland and Kinsler had carried the dull pain of an excruciating World Series loss from 2011, when the Rangers had been within one strike of a title. In 2012, Porcello had been on a Tigers club that lost the World Series to the Giants. Moreover, Porcello had never even pitched in a playoff game that his team won.

The veterans took a clear-eyed view of those disappointments.

“We kind of talked about what had happened in our prior postseasons, what we needed to do to overcome that,” said Porcello. “By the end of the night — seven, eight, 15 beers later — we all kind of came to the conclusion that we’ve just got to go out there and play our game. We’ve got to hold it inside, go out there, and get it done.”

Elsewhere on the team, coaches sought to offer motivational edges. Pitching coach Dana LeVangie and advance scouting assistant J.T. Watkins put together a video for a meeting with the team’s relievers.

“It was just headline after headline about how this bullpen was going to be the weak point of the Red Sox this postseason,” said Bannister. “It was unbelievable to watch it. I got chills watching it, because I knew how fired up these guys would get, how they’d respond to that meeting.

“It finished with every single pitcher on the staff blowing away all the hitters we were going to face in the postseason in every round. It was an unbelievable video. They did a tremendous job of putting it together.”

Once the playoffs were underway, the team likewise took stock of perceived slights — whether it was people who expressed doubt about the Red Sox’ chances in a specific series or social media incitements (the viral clip of Aaron Judge playing “New York, New York” on his way out of Fenway, Astros star Alex Bregman’s Instagram post tweaking starter Nathan Eovaldi, any trolling from an opponent’s account).

Those were converted into fuel.

“We just kept responding, stayed humble and low-key,” said Bannister. “These guys, they responded on the field. They did it all year long. That was the magic of this team.”

Handling Setbacks

Game 3 of the World Series could have been gutting. The Red Sox had been one Kinsler throw from a 3-0 series lead. Instead, his error prolonged the game, the Red Sox failed to reward Nathan Eovaldi’s historic relief performance with a win, and the 3-2, 18-inning defeat felt devastating.

With a prevailing sense of emptiness after that contest, Cora stepped into the breach with words that proved powerful.

“Everybody went into that meeting with their head down,” said Febles. “After that meeting, everyone was clapping their hands, ready to go. He said, ‘As far as I know, we’re still up, 2-1. It took them 18 innings to beat us.’

“It was kind of a relief to the club, having those guys know, hearing Alex say, nobody feel bad. Then he had Nate stand up and everyone gave him a standing ovation.”

In minutes, the sentiment had been transformed. Exhaustion and agony from the loss gave way to a celebration of a remarkable, selfless, inspirational teammate’s performance.

As Red Sox mental skills coordinator Laz Gutierrez watched the transformation take place, he couldn’t help but have a sense of *deja vu*. In 1996, Gutierrez had been Cora’s teammate on a University of Miami team that was one out from winning the College World Series only to see closer Robbie Morrison give up a walkoff homer to LSU’s Warren Morris. Cora collapsed on the field in tears when the ball flew over the fence.

The defeat felt apocalyptic. Miami coach Jim Morris couldn’t summon words in a silent postgame clubhouse. Instead, it was Cora who did so, telling his teammates how much he loved them, how proud he was of what they’d done, how there was no pitcher besides Morrison he would have preferred on the mound in that moment.

When Gutierrez saw Cora find the words to uplift his team after the marathon Game 3 loss, he instantly recognized something.

“It’s reliving the same moment,” said Gutierrez. “His ability, his innate ability to know when to deliver a message, how to deliver it, and what the context of the message is.

“I’ve never been around anyone who does it better than him. His feel for the needs of our team and our players, I’ve never seen anything like it.

“What’s made this group so special is that they’ve put the group ahead of themselves, and Alex’s ability to cultivate that, to let it be part of the culture, and to promote it by highlighting Nathan’s contributions, his amazing contribution, says volumes to the group and Alex’s ability to deliver the right message at the right time.”

Triumph

When the Red Sox won the World Series, as players spread across the field, the emotions were free-flowing and honest. Porcello repeatedly apologized for his inability to stop crying, and other members of the club likewise let tears flow as they reflected on a shared moment — the culmination of so many others.

Members of the team became emotional when discussing Price, with Varitek comparing the pitcher’s personal postseason history before 2018 to the experience that he’d felt as a member of the Red Sox before 2004.

Players seemed as invested in the joy felt by their teammates as they did in their own sense of accomplishment.

“It’s the relationships that you make while you do this, while you play this game that . . . that’s what makes this game so special,” said Price.

For the 2018 Red Sox, that sense carried across an entire season, helping to mold a wildly talented team into a champion.

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