



And the edge goes to ...

BY MARC TOPKIN | Times Staff Writer

STARTING PITCHING

The Sox rotation is diverse with RHP **Daisuke Matsuzaka** and his varied repertoire, RHP **Josh Beckett** and his blazing fastball, LHP **Jon Lester** and his remarkable consistency and RHP **Tim Lincecum** and his frustrating knuckleball. There are questions, however, about Matsuzaka, who tends to throw too many pitches, and Beckett, who has battled health problems. Lester, scheduled to start Game 3, has dominated the Rays this season, going 3-0 with a 0.90 ERA (two runs in 20 innings). The Rays have some unknowns too. They can count on solid outings from Game 1 starter **James Shields** and Game 4 starter **Andy Sonnanstine** (who has thrown 13 scoreless innings against the Sox this season). Less certain is what they will get from LHP **Scott Kazmir** in Game 2 and RHP **Matt Garza** in Game 3. Kazmir tends to pitch well against the Sox but had a couple of rough starts this season.

Edge: Red Sox

BULLPEN

Is it more important to dominate in the ninth inning, as Boston does with **Jonathan Papelbon**, or the sixth through eighth innings, as the Rays have with a deep cast? Middle relief has been middling for the Sox, who bulked up to seven relievers by putting **Mike Timlin** back on the roster. Rookie setup man **Justin Masterson** has been better, and their two lefties, **Hideki Okajima** and **Javier Lopez**, didn't allow the Rays a run in 15½ innings. If the game gets to Papelbon, it's usually over. He converted 41 of 46 saves this season (though blew one against the Rays) and hasn't allowed a run in 12 career postseason outings over 19½ innings. Middle relief has been magnificent for the Rays, where LHP **J.P. Howell** and RHP **Grant Balfour** have become what manager **Joe Maddon** calls mid-game closers. RHP **Chad Bradford** could have a key role because of his ability to get ground balls. Maddon insists he'll manage by matchups, but Rhode Islander **Dan Wheeler**, with a career 2.79 ERA against the Sox, is the likely closer having gone 13-for-18 in save situations.

Edge: Rays

OFFENSE

Even without **Manny Ramirez** for the final two months, the Sox finished second in the AL in runs, batting average and doubles and first in walks and on-base percentage. With speed at the top in **Jacoby Ellsbury**, pesky **Dustin Pedroia** second and mashers **David Ortiz**, **Kevin Youkilis**, **J.D. Drew** and **Jason Bay** in the middle, the Sox can break any game open. But they will miss the clutch play of the injured **Mike Lowell**. They will run, and hit-and-run, a little more than they used to. The bottom of the order with **Mark Kotsay** (.226 average since being acquired), **Jed Lowrie** (.258) and **Jason Varitek** (.220) isn't much. The Rays don't swing nearly the big bats with only two players on the ALCS roster with more than 13 homers (**Carlos Pena**'s 31 and **Evan Longoria**'s 27). But all season, they've found a way to score enough runs, winning 11 games on the last pitch and going 52-26 in games decided by one or two runs. Their overall speed, and eagerness to steal and take an extra base, can be disruptive, though they occasionally run into outs.

Edge: Red Sox

DEFENSE

The Sox got better with the addition of **Jed Lowrie** at shortstop and substitution of **Jason Bay** for **Manny Ramirez** in leftfield and finished tied for first in the AL in fielding percentage. But they are considerably weaker with **Kevin Youkilis** moving from first to third to replace the injured **Mike Lowell** and **Mark Kotsay**, a converted outfielder, stepping in at first. **Jason Varitek** threw out only 18.8 percent (13-of-69) of attempted basestealers, which the Rays will try to exploit. Defense has been the Rays' strength all season, and they are at their best now. Few balls will drop between outfielders **Carl Crawford**, **B.J. Upton** and **Gabe Gross**. The infield is as good as any in baseball with team MVP **Jason Bartlett** the anchor at shortstop. **Dioner Navarro** ranked third in the majors, catching 35.7 percent (25-of-70) of attempted basestealers.

Edge: Rays

MANAGER

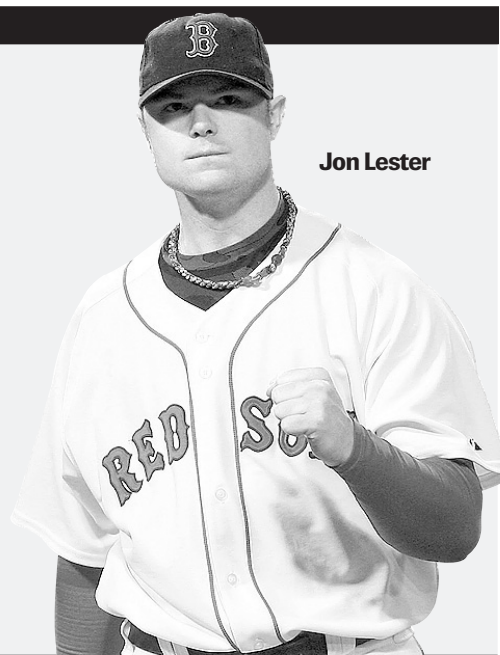
Boston's **Terry Francona** has done a remarkable job in a challenging environment, taking the Sox to the postseason in four of his five seasons and navigating this year's **Manny Ramirez** fiasco. His moves might be somewhat limited due to **Mike Lowell**'s injury on top of **J.D. Drew**'s ongoing health issues and **David Ortiz**'s limitations to DH. And his options for middle relief aren't necessarily appealing. Tampa Bay's **Joe Maddon**, the frontrunner for AL manager of the year, has been brilliant all season from his motivational work and clubhouse managing to his actual in-game maneuvering; specifically the way he and pitching coach **Jim Hickey** have handled the bullpen. And how many times this season has Maddon made a move that you questioned then marveled when it worked out?

Edge: Rays

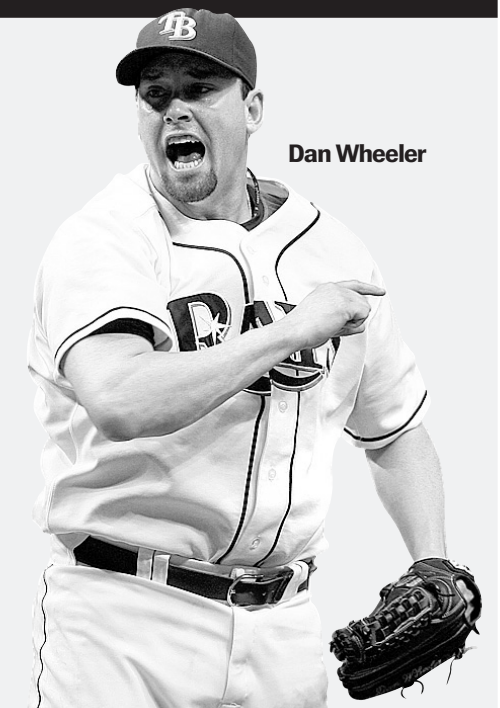
INTANGIBLES

Consider it the Rays' magic vs. the Red Sox's ghosts. The Rays have had an amazing season in which they've pulled out more than a dozen games they had no right to. The Sox have a history of finding ways to win and the players who know how to do it, especially in the postseason. The Sox have the advantage of experience with more players who have been there and done that and know not to panic if they get down early. The Rays got past any initial postseason nervousness in the first round and benefited from losing the one game in Chicago because they now know how to handle that. Their youth and energy should be a plus. Both teams dominated at home this season, but the Rays took a lot out of winning two out of three, dramatically, in the September showdown at Fenway.

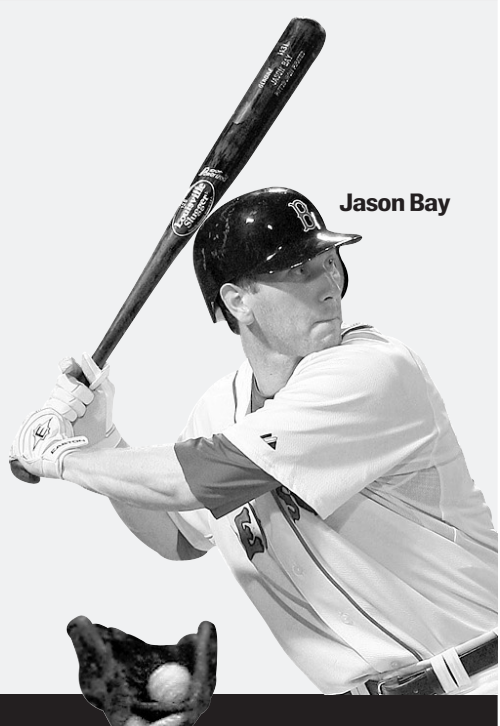
Edge: Rays



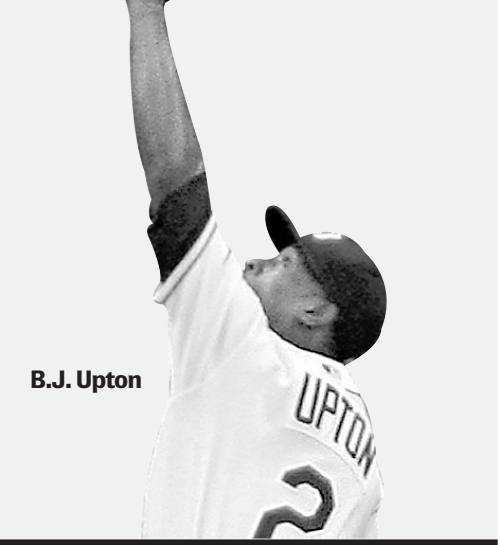
Jon Lester



Dan Wheeler



Jason Bay



B.J. Upton



Joe Maddon



The Rays' **Matt Garza** and **Dioner Navarro** and Red Sox's **David Ortiz** watch **Ortiz's** shot sail toward rightfield on Sept. 17. The ball eventually got stuck in a catwalk and, by rule, was a home run.

BRIAN CASSELLA | Times

Ortiz hopes to get well against favorite team

Boston's DH had a down year but has feasted on Rays pitching throughout his career.

BY BRANT JAMES
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — David Ortiz chatted in Spanish with a Louisville Slugger rep at his locker stall Thursday afternoon, undressing as he placed a bat order. At first oblivious to the mob of media that had massed behind him, he eventually turned and smiled, hands on hips.

"We're watching you get dressed," someone offered as an icebreaker.

"Now I'm watching you," the Red Sox designated hitter responded.

In a locker room of personalities that run from edgy to edgier, Ortiz, 32, is sometimes the comic relief, sometimes the voice of reason.

Lavish with his praise for the Rays despite the thorn they have become to the Red Sox, he seems pleasantly dumbfounded by the throng of reporters he has come so accustomed to entertaining in other cities waiting for him to

change his pants at Tropicana Field.

"How many times do you come to Tampa in October? Not that many; first time," he said. "I was barely here, and I was like, 'Wow.' To walk through the (player entrance), man it's a mission. There's stuff everywhere.

"But it's good. I think it's good for the game having Tampa in the playoffs. I think people get tired of seeing the same team every year over and over and over. People got tired of the Yankees. Hopefully, they don't get tired of seeing us."

Rays pitchers might soon tire of Ortiz. Check that. They already have.

Don't be fooled by his symbolic welcome-to-the-playoffs plate of cookies. Facing the Rays is a welcome prospect, especially after a frustrating season in which he missed 53 games with wrist and knee injuries (producing fewer than 35 homers and 117 RBIs for the first time since 2003) and an

equally discouraging American League Division Series against Anaheim (in which he hit .235).

In the regular season, Ortiz hit .264 with 23 homers and 89 RBIs. But in 117 career games against the Rays, he has hit .304 with 34 home runs and 99 RBIs. And at Tropicana Field, it's .304, 23 and 52, respectively, in 54 games.

His last swing through Tropicana Field was memorable. On Sept. 17, he mashed a Matt Garza pitch that lodged in the D-ring catwalk in right and did not come down. Home run. He finished the three-game set 4-for-8 with three homers and seven RBIs although the Rays won twice to maintain the division lead.

Ortiz is 5-for-10 for his career against Game 1 starter James Shields.

"I've always told people he's one of the most feared hitters in the box," Shields, 26, said. "We've just got to be careful. I'm going to try to hopefully get the guys out beforehand. And if he hits one off me, hopefully it's a solo home run."

Good idea. Because now Big Papi is watching.

Red Sox notebook

Pedroia expects hitting to improve

BY BRANT JAMES
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — **Dustin Pedroia** is confident enough in his postseason prowess to assume he has not lapsed into a slump despite a 1-for-17 performance against the Angels in the division series.

After batting .345 in the championship series against Cleveland as a rookie last year (.283 for the entire postseason), the plucky second baseman and MVP candidate didn't see a problem with his approach or effort.

"They kind of shut me down, so I think it's more a credit to them than me doing that bad," he said before a workout on Thursday at Tropicana Field.

Rays Game 1 starter **James Shields** might have been wise to sequester himself in the video room Thursday night if the Angels revealed the antidote to the player who led the league in hits (213), runs (118) and doubles (54) and finished second in batting average (.326).

"I think he definitely ignites that lineup," said Shields, who has allowed five hits in 10 at-bats against the Sox's No. 2 hitter. "I think if you get him out once every fourth at-bat, you'll be all right."

The Angels did better than that but still dropped the best-of-five series in four games.

Boston got step-up efforts from **Jed Lowrie** (.364) and **Jason Bay** (.412, two homers, team-high five RBIs), who knocked in and scored the series-clincher, respectively, in the ninth Monday



Associated Press

Dustin Pedroia reacts after flying out during Game 2 against the Angels. He went 1-for-17 in the division series.

at Fenway Park.

But Pedroia's struggles hamstrung No. 3 hitter **David Ortiz**. He was pitched around and hit .235, walking three times and striking out four in what he admitted was a frustrating series.

"Sometimes in a close game, you might see one pitch," Ortiz said. "And if you don't hit it, you'll never see another one."

FAST FOOD: 1B **Kevin Youkilis** was a tad peckish as he fasted through Yom Kippur, but Tropicana Field's translucent sky provided him leeway in waiting until sundown to eat.

"All the Jewish people keep telling me there's no sunlight," he said. "So you're allowed to do it."

LIGHTER SIDE: The latest flare-

up of 3B **Mike Lowell**'s torn hip labrum forced him off the playoff roster and Youkilis to third. Though **Mark Kotsay** and **Sean Casey** have proved able fill-ins at first, Boston loses two Gold Glove players at their natural positions. Youkilis likes the change of scenery, however.

"Holding on baserunners can be pretty boring, especially in the playoffs," he said. "You don't want to talk to anyone in the playoffs. You're hoping no one gets on."

ROSTER SET: The Red Sox opted for an 11th pitcher, adding reliever **Mike Timlin** to the roster and dropping INF **Gil Velazquez**.

Times staff writer **Dave Scheiber** contributed to this report.