

Blue Jays drop home opener to Red Sox, but it doesn't sting like before

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – With one vicious swing in the fourth inning Josh Donaldson put four runs on the scoreboard and a sense of familiarity swept over the Rogers Centre: The Blue Jays were back in Toronto and not wasting any time settling back into the form they displayed almost every game over the final two months of last season.

It appeared the Blue Jays, leading 7-2 after Donaldson's grand slam, would cruise to an easy win. But then suddenly the game got away from Marcus Stroman in the sixth and the bullpen's early season struggles continued, as the Boston Red Sox rallied to hand the Jays an [8-7 loss](#) Friday night and spoil the first major-league game in Toronto since Marco Estrada's Game 5 gem in the ALCS.

"Normally we score that many runs we end up winning," said manager John Gibbons. "It was really a typical, in a lot of ways, American League East game. In these ballparks you never feel good if there's some innings left, that's what can happen."

It's Toronto's fifth consecutive loss in a home opener. But unlike past home opening losses – Sergio Santos' blown save in 2012, J.P. Arencibia chasing down R.A. Dickey's knuckleball as it rolled to the backstop in 2013, Masahiro Tanaka mowing down the Blue Jays hitters one after another in 2014 all immediately jump to mind – this particular loss was met with relative calm rather than cries for change.

Maybe it's because the fan base just saw this same ensemble come within two wins of reaching the World Series. Maybe it's because the came back to beat Texas in the ALDS and were nearly unbeatable last year after Aug. 1. Maybe it's because they really believe.

Forgetting the final score, there were plenty of reasons why the home opener was encouraging. None more obvious than seeing Stroman on the mound, who after making his second start this week, is already halfway to matching his

regular-season total from 2015. It certainly wasn't his best start, as he was pulled with one out in the sixth with the bases loaded and was ultimately charged with five earned runs after Jesse Chavez gave up a grand slam to Brock Holt, but the 24-year-old right-hander has proven he can bounce back from tough situations.

Then there's getting a full season – health permitting, of course – of Troy Tulowitzki at shortstop and Michael Saunders in left field. For Saunders, a native of Victoria, B.C., who missed all but nine games last season with a knee injury, it was a relief to return to the lineup for the home opener.

"I've been waiting for this day for a long time now and to finally be here it was everything I expected. Of course, the outcome wasn't what I wanted, but the fans gave us everything and more," said Saunders. "I think there's a snowball effect from the success we had last year. I know this isn't the start we wanted being 2-3 but the beauty of baseball is that you get to play every day and by the end of 162 (games) I'm very confident we're going to be where we want to be."

Sure, the bullpen blowing its third straight save in the season's first week is slightly disconcerting, but the team isn't worried about their relief pitching yet.

"We haven't pitched particularly well that's for sure, but they're good," said Gibbons. "They'll fall in line a little bit. We really anticipate this to be one of our strengths, it just hasn't happened yet."

Home openers in Toronto are always a memorable event and there was appropriate pomp and fanfare to mark the occasion. It helped that two of the big questions going in were answered right away. It was the first game action on the dirt infield installed over the offseason, which looked great esthetically and was well received by players on both teams.

For those worried that new management would not feel the same obligation to maintain a connection with the Blue Jays' past like the previous regime did, those concerns were put to rest with a couple pregame appearances.

George Bell, the 1987 AL MVP, was on hand for a ceremony to present Donaldson with his 2015 AL MVP plaque, and longtime president Paul Beeston threw out the ceremonial first pitch following a lengthy tribute video.

"I think it's a big sign of this organization that they have former players who are willing to come back and be a part of it and honour guys who are playing now. Especially someone like George Bell, the first MVP for the Blue Jays, it means a lot," said Donaldson, who was in the lineup as the DH, where [he'll likely remain](#) until he's fully recovered from the calf strain he suffered Wednesday in Tampa Bay.

A balance was struck between new and old, fitting that the franchise's slogan for this season is "History Is Now." There have been many instances over the past few years where hope filled the stadium on the first night of the regular season, and hope can often be disorienting.

"I don't even remember the opener last year, it's just a blur. This year, I feel like there's just more excitement around the team than there was last year. That's the cool thing," said catcher Russell Martin.

In the past Toronto's home openers have been eventful because it was the first opportunity to highlight the difference on the roster from year to year. The Blue Jays aren't all that different than they were over their final games last season. And for the first time in a long time, 22 years to be precise, it's just the feeling around the team that's different.

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