
A trusty closer emerges

By Peter Abraham

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Alfredo Aceves jogged out of the bullpen at Comerica Park in Detroit on April 8, charged with protecting a three-run lead for the Red Sox in the ninth inning.

The righthander from Mexico spent all of spring training trying to make the team as a starter and was the closer only by default, the Sox having lost Andrew Bailey to a thumb injury just before the start of the season.

Aceves blew his first save chance in seven pitches. Austin Jackson and Brennan Boesch singled before Miguel Cabrera hit a home run to left field. The Red Sox lost the game in extra innings.

“He wasn’t ready for that job,” said teammate Daniel Bard. “He hadn’t pitched in relief all spring and then he had to come in and face that lineup. If it had been me, I wouldn’t have been ready. He was in a tough spot.”

The next day, in Toronto, manager Bobby Valentine sat in on a meeting the pitchers were having to prepare for the Blue Jays. His team was 0-3 and had allowed 26 runs.

Valentine wanted to observe the pitchers, particularly Aceves, to determine whether changes were needed.

“I was trying to read his eyes,” Valentine said. “He looked right back at me. He knew I was searching.”

Later, when Valentine returned to his office, a clubhouse attendant handed him a note from Aceves. Only one word was written on it.

Trust.

“Just one word. That was it,” Aceves said. “Everything comes back to trust. I wanted him to trust me.”

Aceves saved the game that night. Since that disastrous day in Detroit, he has had 12 save chances and converted all but one of them. In his last 15 games, he has allowed two earned runs over 18 2/3 innings and struck out 19.

That trust he so badly wanted has been earned. With Jonathan Papelbon having fled to Philadelphia and Bailey on the disabled list at least through the All-Star break, Aceves is the reliable leader of a bullpen that has contributed heavily to the Red Sox winning 10 of their last 13 games.

“I can guarantee a lesser man would have been shaken by that game in Detroit,” Valentine said. “The next day he was kind of testing me if I was going to stay with him. When I told him yes, I believed he wasn’t shaken. Plenty of guys would run away. He didn’t.”

The lack of an established closer was troubling to the players. Losing games in the ninth inning can be an emotional wrecking ball for a team, and the Red Sox needed stability.

Aceves helped provide that. Vicente Padilla, Rich Hill, Andrew Miller, and the other relievers have fallen into line behind him and thrived in their roles.

“I don’t know where we would be without Aceves,” said David Ortiz. “The season started and we didn’t have a closer. Now when the game is close, you want him to have the ball.”

“He has been through a lot, and I think he’s finally showing people what he can really do.”

Clashing with Yankees

Aceves took a winding path to a prominent role with the Sox.

His father, Alfredo, was a star first baseman in the Mexican League and his brother, Jonathan, was a catcher in the White Sox and Marlins organization from 1998-2006.

The Blue Jays signed Aceves when he was 18, but he never got beyond the Dominican Summer League and quit when they asked him to return for a second season. That led to a six-year career in Mexico before the Yankees purchased his rights in 2008.

Aceves climbed from Single A ball to the majors that year and was 10-1 in 43 games during the 2009 season as the Yankees won the World Series.

But the Yankees soured on Aceves in 2010, believing he grew too comfortable on the disabled list after being sidelined with a back injury. His personality also became grating.

Aceves repeatedly shook off pitches, aggravating veteran catcher Jorge Posada. He was late for meetings and abandoned scouting reports, pitching the way he felt was best.

Aceves was a free agent for two months, recovering from a broken collarbone he suffered in a bicycle accident before the Red Sox signed him.

“I didn’t think my career was over,” Aceves said. “I knew I could still pitch. I just needed a chance.”

When the Red Sox signed Aceves, it came with the urging that he get in better shape to guard against further injuries.

“I think he started taking everything a little more seriously and realized he could be really good if he put some more work into it,” Bard said.

When asked who has helped him the most with the Red Sox, Aceves did not mention a teammate, Valentine, or even one of the coaches. He pointed to Tara Mardigan, the team nutritionist.

“She helped me change a lot,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot from her. She’s amazing.”

Guided by Mardigan, Aceves carefully plans what he eats over the course of a day and adjusts that based on his workouts. Better eating habits and a dedication to yoga and pilates have given him the physique of a championship boxer.

“You see him now, he’s in unbelievable shape,” said Red Sox general manager Ben Cherington. “It was a lot of hard work on his part.”

Mardigan counts Aceves as one of her most successful clients.

“When I first met Alfredo, he asked me who I was and what I did for the team,” said Mardigan. “He wasn’t familiar with the idea of a nutritionist on the staff.

“I told him I would help him to eat better if he wanted to eat better. We started with some basic principles.”

Mardigan advised Aceves on breaking some bad habits and finding a balance in what he took in. Aceves even snapped photographs of food he was considering and sent them to Mardigan to get her opinion.

“It’s a difficult lifestyle with all the traveling, and I try to point him in the right direction and help him make better choices,” Mardigan said. “When you take somebody with drive and a work ethic and give them the resources, it’s a great combination.”

Picking up speed

Aceves still does things his own way. He is often the last player to arrive at the park before a game, and the stretching

and workout routines he adheres to are unique. Pitchers tend to travel in packs, but Aceves is stubbornly individual.

But the Red Sox, who adapted to the quirky personalities of Manny Ramirez, Pedro Martinez, Johnny Damon, and other iconoclasts, are accepting of Aceves.

“The guy can pitch,” said second baseman Dustin Pedroia. “He throws everything, and now he’s throwing harder than he used to.”

The statistics prove that. In his first full season with the Yankees, 2009, Aceves averaged 91 miles per hour with his fastball. It rose to 92 with the Red Sox in 2011, and he hit 96 for the first time in his career.

Through 21 appearances this season, Aceves is averaging 94.2 m.p.h. with his fastball and on occasion has hit 97.

“I don’t think I have to throw that hard,” Aceves said. “But I can when I have to.”

The newfound velocity hasn’t stifled any of Aceves’s creativity on the mound, an issue for his catchers. Aceves once told Jarrod Saltalamacchia to set up outside for a pitch then to move inside if he saw the batter’s front foot move.

“I said to him, ‘Ace, you’re going to be throwing the pitch. Your leg will be in the air,’ ” Saltalamacchia said. “He said, ‘Just catch the ball. I can do it.’ We have our issues over things like that. He can forget where he’s at sometimes.

“Once you think you’ve figured him out, something else comes up.”

Valentine knows the day is coming when Aceves will give it up again in the ninth inning. It’s inevitable in a role that comes with no safety net.

“I’ll send him back out there the next day,” Valentine said. “He’s his own guy, but he has the stuff, he has the heart, and I trust him.”

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