

Port: Red Sox built base for championship

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The Boston Red Sox for whom Fallbrook High School graduate Mike Port is now the Vice President of Baseball Operations won the World Series October 27, a feat which had eluded the Red Sox since their 1918 World Championship.

So what, in Port's opinion, did the Red Sox do this year that they didn't do the previous 85 seasons? "I think just the culmination of a lot of hard work," he said, also citing the right attitude at the right point in time.

Port served as the team's interim general manager in 2002. "We had established the core of the club," he noted. "We maintained them and enhanced the cast around them and got good results this year."

Port was named interim general manager on February 28, 2002, one day after the closing of the team's sale to an ownership group led by John Henry. He agreed to serve as interim general manager on the condition that he would be able to return to his previous position after the 2002 season.

Theo Epstein succeeded Port as general manager while Port returned to Vice President of Baseball Operations. Port confers with Epstein and others on personnel matters, and between seven and ten people are involved in each Red Sox transaction. "It takes an awful lot of people in terms of player acquisition and getting them on the right track," Port said. "The players are the essence of our product."

Port joined the Red Sox as an assistant general manager in February 1993 after serving as president of the Arizona Fall League. He became the Red Sox's Vice President of Baseball Operations in October 1996.

By the time Port became interim general manager many of the current Red Sox were already on the team. Outfielder Trot Nixon was the team's first-round pick in the June 1993 draft, made his debut with the team in 1996, and played his first full major league season in 1999. Pitcher Tim Lincecum was signed as a minor league free agent at the beginning of the 1995 season. Pitcher Derek Lowe and catcher Jason Varitek were acquired in a July 1997 trade from Seattle, and after the 1997 season the Red Sox traded for Expos pitcher Pedro Martinez. Outfielder Manny Ramirez, the Most Valuable Player of the 2004 World Series, was signed as a free agent in December 2000,

and in December 2001 the Red Sox signed first baseman Johnny Damon as a free agent.

Dan Duquette was the general manager before being dismissed after the close of the sale and replaced by Port. "They wanted to put a little bit different face on the franchise," Port explained. "This came about in a very quick fashion as spring training was under way."

As interim general manager, Port felt that he added little to this year's team. "I think the one that is left over from that year as far as quality is Alan Embree," he said.

Embree was acquired from the San Diego Padres on June 23, 2002, in exchange for two minor league players. (The Padres also sent minor league pitcher Andy Shibilto to the Red Sox.)

Port also turned down several offers to trade existing Red Sox players. "We knew there was a bigger picture in mind, and it culminated with things this year," he remarked. "You always have trade possibilities for the better players. It's a matter of knowing which ones to pursue."

The trade offers included some prior to the 2004 season. "Over the Winter we had chances to trade Manny," Port noted.

The Red Sox turned down those offers for Ramirez. "Things have worked out well," Port said.

In fall 2000 Port and Duquette traveled to the Newport Beach office of Ramirez's agent during the quest to sign the outfielder. "For only \$160 million finally got the job done," Port noted.

For part of the season, it looked like the World Championship would evade the Red Sox for the 86th consecutive season. The team was hovering around .500 in late July. "I think that we felt that the team was more talented than was being shown in the final results," Port said.

The Red Sox made some additional moves, one of which resulted in the trade of star shortstop Nomar Garciaparra. "It was not popular with me, either," Port noted of a player he helped sign after the June 1994 draft. "We had to put our team element first to do what we thought was best for the club."

A 42-18 record to close out the season vindicated the Garciaparra trade. The Red Sox opened the playoffs against the Anaheim Angels, for whom Port worked prior to his Arizona Fall League activity. (The Anaheim team was then known as the California Angels.)

The Red Sox swept the Angels in the first round, but for a time during the League Championship Series it seemed that those three wins against Anaheim would be the Red Sox's last of 2004. The New York Yankees won the first three games of the best-of-seven series, sending the Red Sox to

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the brink of elimination.

"They collectively decided that this was not the way they wanted to end it, so they regrouped again," Port said.

The Red Sox overcame Yankee leads in both the fourth and fifth games of the League Championship Series and won both games in extra innings. Boston only required nine innings apiece to win the sixth and seventh games of the series, becoming the first team in the history of Major League Baseball to overcome a 3-0 deficit in the postseason.

A comeback from a 3-0 deficit is not unprecedented in professional baseball. In the 1986 Japanese World Series, the Hiroshima Carp were down three games to none before their eventual championship over the Seibu Lions. Port has other memories of comebacks in the 1986 postseason —

that year he was the general manager of the Angels, who led three games to one in the League Championship Series and had a three-run lead in the fifth game with three outs to go before the Red Sox came back to claim the World Series berth. The Red Sox, who that year rallied against Anaheim when down to their final out, would lose the 1986 World Series against the New York Mets after the Mets were down to their final out.

"Certainly the Red Sox have come close to whatever extent before," Port noted.

The Red Sox also took the St. Louis Cardinals to seven games in 1946 and 1967 and the Cincinnati Reds to seven games in 1975. The team had not won a World Series in Port's lifetime and just barely in the lifetime of Port's father, who was born in June 1918

and operated a men's clothing store in Downtown Fallbrook for 37 years.

The Red Sox never trailed in the 2004 World Series and swept the Cardinals in four games. "They didn't fade this time. They had their downturns, but they managed to recover from them, come back, and win the World Series," Port remarked.

Port feels that the World Championship can allow Red Sox fans to be more forward-looking instead of focusing on past glory. "I think it's something that's been very much a positive for the New England area," said Port, who now lives in the Boston suburb of Southboro.

Port said that the Red Sox will follow the same plan for the 2005 season that they have in recent years. "Every year we start out with the status quo," he explained.

The Red Sox will likely pursue some free agents while keeping as much of the team's core as is financially feasible. "Now we just have to try to repeat," Port said.

