

X-FACTOR
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On June 24, 2019, the Boston Red Sox hosted the Chicago White Sox. In the lineup wearing home whites, the wunderkind Rafael Devers was batting cleanup. The 22-year old third baseman led the Red Sox with a .309 average – the only Sox player at the time above .300, the separation between good hitters and the great ones. Not the .406 the immortal Ted Williams hit in 1941 – the last to exceed .400 for a season – but strong enough to be one of 2019's best batting averages a day before the season's midpoint.

The left-handed Devers made his MLB debut July 24, 2017. Just a few weeks later, he famously announced his presence by rocketing a game-tying home run off Aroldis Chapman, the Yankees' closer and the hardest throwing southpaw on the planet. The ball came in at 102.8 mph; it went out like a light - the fastest pitch hit for a home run since pitch-tracking began. A year later, Rafael was a catalyst in Boston's 119-win season and fourth World Series title of the young century, most in the majors.

Four years earlier, a 21-year old shortstop named Xander Bogaerts played a similar role for the 2013 World Series Champs. Since then, Bogaerts had elevated his potential to outright ferocity, establishing himself as one of the best hitting shortstops in the game. But in 2019, his impact was not just with the bat; X made his teammates better.

This night was no different. Like he usually did, Bogaerts batted behind Devers. Rafael had him on average, but Bogey was still hitting a crisp .294. And on a Boston team that brought the wood, Bogaerts had the highest on-base plus slugging (OPS). According to the legendary baseball guru Bill James, the OPS for an average batter sits between .700 and .766; and for the greatest, above .900. On this summer day, Xander's OPS was a scorching .911.

After a scheduled night off the day before, Devers was eager to pick up his hot streak. But in the first at-bat, his excitement got the best of him, and he promptly struck out swinging on three pitches, stranding a runner at second.

In his next AB, Devers grounded into a force out, but he at least reached first base safely on the fielder's choice. A stinging line drive by Bogaerts moved Devers to second, and with a hot Jackie Bradley Jr. coming up, optimism loomed. After Devers narrowly missed being picked off second, Devers and Bogaerts capitalized on a Lucas Giolito wild pitch, each advancing 90 feet to give the Sox two men in scoring position with only one out. But on a 2-1 pitch, JBJ managed only to lift a lazy fly ball to left. Eloy Jimenez caught it in shallow left, a foot from the side wall. Devers tagged up and deked towards home. An outfielder would typically hit the cut-off man standing somewhere between third and home, but in this case, Jimenez threw a dart to the bag. Devers stumbled on his way back to the base. Three outs.

Stunned, Devers sat in the dirt. Bogey walked over from second, lifted up the young man, and rubbed his head. Nothing was said. X was there for his teammate.

On defense, Xander wasted no time picking up his teammate in the top of the fifth. With the lead-off man on first for the White Sox, the batter hit a sharp grounder to the right side of second base. Bogaerts came from his shortstop position to vacuum up the ball, stepped backwards spectacularly to touch the bag for one out, and then as his momentum was still carrying him towards left field, fired a missile to first to record the double play. Xander looked to Devers with solidarity before marching off the field. Only to find out it wasn't the end of the inning - there were only two outs! The Sox went back to work, cleaning up the inning on the next batter.

Devers next came up in the sixth, home team down 3-2. With one out, Devers was patient and walked on a full count. A double by Xander moved his teammate to third, followed by an intentional walk to Jackie to load the bases. After a Christian Vazquez strike-out, the bases were still juiced, with this year's rookie sensation Michael Chavis coming to the plate. Chavis drew a five-pitch walk, pushing Devers across home plate. Tie game.

Devers would go on to double in the 7th, and in the 9th, his nine-pitch ground-out to the right side advanced the eventual winning run to third. The Red Sox went on to win 6-5.

Devers struggled early in the game, with a strike out in the first and a fielders choice out in the 4th. But after Xander picked him up, Devers recorded a double, walk, run scored, and a productive out in the decisive 9th inning. Devers is the wunderkind of the future for the Red Sox, but Bogaerts is the X-Factor.