

Ryan Sweeney enjoys fresh start with Red Sox

Written by Jim Ecker

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DETROIT - The first five batters in the Boston Red Sox lineup have a chance to be all-stars again this season and lead Boston to the playoffs.

The sixth hitter in the lineup is Ryan Sweeney, and he could turn out to be just as important as Jacoby Ellsbury, Dustin Pedroia, Adrian Gonzalez, David Ortiz and Kevin Youkilis.

Sweeney, the pride of Cedar Rapids, is surprised to be hitting sixth for the powerful Red Sox -- surprised and happy.

"In spring training you hit everywhere, but I figured to be somewhere 7,8,9 with the guys that we have in this lineup," he said before Saturday's game against Detroit. "Who knows what will happen later on, but for now I'm hitting sixth again today."

Sweeney justified Manager Bobby Valentine's faith in him by going 2-for-3 with a walk in Boston's 10-0 loss to the Tigers Saturday. He went 2-for-4 with a clutch RBI triple in Thursday's season opener and is hitting .571 for his new club after two games.

"I think he can be a major contributor," Valentine told the Metro Sports Report. "He's one of the best athletes on the team, an outstanding defensive player, loves to play the game. I think he's in the prime of his career, where his offense is ready to take a leap forward."

Sweeney, 27, feels rejuvenated after four frustrating, injury-riddled years with the Oakland A's. He's a career .283 hitter, but fell out of favor in Oakland and was traded to Boston during the winter. He went from a second-division club to a pennant contender when he moved from the west coast to the east coast.

"You have renewed energy to want to play baseball," said Sweeney. "It's like any job, sometimes you don't want to do it, you know what I mean? Last year I had that feeling quite a bit."

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"You know how much I love baseball, and with the Red Sox you're going to be playing in front of a sold-out crowd pretty much every night. It's kind of a cool feeling to see that."

Sweeney made a strong first impression with the Red Sox on Thursday when he laced a two-out RBI triple off the right-field fence to tie the game, 2-2, against Detroit closer Jose Valverde, snapping Valverde's string of 51 straight saves without a blown opportunity.

Sweeney also deprived Detroit ace Justin Verlander a victory on opening day after Verlander, the 2011 American League MVP and Cy Young Award winner, had pitched eight scoreless innings and left the game with a 2-0 lead.

Sweeney normally doesn't show much emotion on the field, but he did Thursday when he reached third base with his stand-up triple to give the Red Sox new life.

"I knew I was going to get a triple because I saw the ball get away from him (the right fielder)," he said. "It happened so quick. You get on third and you're pumped up, because you can't believe you did that."

Boston lost that game, 3-2, in the bottom of the ninth inning. The Red Sox fell to 0-2 for the young season after being shellacked on Saturday when Boston pitcher Josh Beckett was rocked for five home runs in 4 2/3 innings, including two apiece by Detroit sluggers Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder.

Sweeney walked, popped out to shortstop, singled up the middle and lined a single to left Saturday, lifting his on-base percentage to .625. He also made a nice catch on the warning track on a deep line drive to right field.

It's not clear what Sweeney's role will be when regular left fielder Carl Crawford returns from the disabled list once he recovers from a wrist injury. There were signs in spring training that Sweeney, a left-handed hitter, and Cody Ross, a right-handed batter, might platoon in right field.

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For the time being, Ross is playing left field and Sweeney has played both games in right.

"There's no reason to have that determination at this time," said Valentine, a veteran major league manager who's in his first year with the Red Sox.

Sweeney has done everything right so far.

"He knows that the slate is clean here, so the impression that he's making is going to be the lasting first impression," said Valentine. "So I would think a good start would be beneficial. But we're looking for a good season. It's not about getting a couple of hits early.

"I'd just like to see him healthy and enjoying the game. And if he is, I think he'll be a major contributor."

Sweeney has made a strong first impression on Pedroia, Boston's all-star second baseman.

"He does everything on the field well. He's a baseball player," said Pedroia. "He has a great swing, he's a young player. I know he's got time in the big leagues, but he's still learning, still getting better. I think he'll do fine here."

Pedroia thinks it was psychologically important for Sweeney to have a good game in the season opener for his new ballclub and new fans.

"Oh yeah, especially in that situation," said Pedroia. "Opening days are kind of weird. There are a lot of guys that, deep down, are trying to do things they're not capable of doing.

"That helps, especially in that environment. Every game we play is a playoff atmosphere. If he

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can calm his nerves like he did on opening day, he'll be fine."

Sweeney played on losing clubs in Oakland, before skimpy crowds. Now he's playing for a contender in sold-out stadiums. Coming to the park is fun again.

"There's a significance to every single game you play," said Sweeney. "When you're at the All-Star break and you're so many games out (of first place), it's tough to stay focused.

"You're trying to help your team win, but you're playing for yourself, too. Now it's important to win every single game."

Boston finishes its three-game series at Detroit on Sunday, then heads to Toronto for a three-game series on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. The home opener at 100-year-old Fenway Park in Boston is scheduled for Friday, April 13 against Tampa Bay.

Sweeney is looking forward to his first game at Fenway Park as a member of the Red Sox.

"I've gone in there on the visiting side, but now to go in there on the home side will be pretty cool," he said. "I've never been in the home clubhouse there. To be able to experience that and be able to play on that field every day is going to be pretty cool."