

Decision and Findings of the Commissioner in the Red Sox Investigation

Executive Summary

Following an exhaustive investigation into allegations of improper use of the video replay room by the Boston Red Sox, I have come to the following conclusions:

- I find that J.T. Watkins, the Red Sox video replay system operator, on at least some occasions during the 2018 regular season, utilized the game feeds in the replay room, in violation of MLB regulations, to revise sign sequence information that he had permissibly provided to players prior to the game.
- I find that unlike the Houston Astros' 2017 conduct, in which players communicated to the batter from the dugout area in real time the precise type of pitch about to be thrown, Watkins's conduct, by its very nature, was far more limited in scope and impact. The information was only relevant when the Red Sox had a runner on second base (which was 19.7% of plate appearances league-wide in 2018), and Watkins communicated sign sequences in a manner that indicated that he had decoded them from the in-game feed in only a small percentage of those occurrences.
- I do not find that then-Manager Alex Cora, the Red Sox coaching staff, the Red Sox front office, or most of the players on the 2018 Red Sox knew or should have known that Watkins was utilizing in-game video to update the information that he had learned from his pregame analysis. Communication of these violations was episodic and isolated to Watkins and a limited number of Red Sox players only.
- I find that the Red Sox front office consistently communicated MLB's sign-stealing rules to non-player staff and made commendable efforts toward instilling a culture of compliance in their organization.

Given these findings, I am imposing the following discipline for the violation of Major League Baseball Regulation 1-1:

1. Watkins is suspended without pay for the 2020 season and 2020 Postseason and prohibited from serving as a replay room operator for the 2021 season and 2021 Postseason. No other Red Sox personnel will be disciplined. Although the Commissioner's Office agreed not to discipline players who were truthful in their interviews, based on the findings of the investigation, this is not a case in which I would have otherwise considered imposing discipline on players.
2. The Club must be held accountable, particularly since the Club may have benefited from Watkins's conduct. As a result, I have determined that the Red Sox shall forfeit their second round selection in the 2020 First-Year Player Draft.

Overview of the Investigation

On January 7, 2020, *The Athletic* reporters Ken Rosenthal and Evan Drellich published an article alleging that the 2018 Boston Red Sox engaged in a sign-stealing method that violated MLB's rules. Specifically, the article alleged that a Red Sox staff member in the video replay review room ("replay room") provided information about the opposing catcher's current sign sequence to a Red Sox player, who would relay the information in person to the dugout, where someone would use gestures to signal the sign sequence to the runner on second base, who in turn would decipher the catcher's sign and use body movement to signal the coming pitch type to the batter. The article implied, but did not explicitly state, that the replay room staff member was deciphering signs from the video replay system, which was (and is) a violation of MLB rules.

I instructed the Department of Investigations ("DOI") to investigate the matter with the same degree of thoroughness and urgency as the Houston Astros matter. The DOI interviewed 65 witnesses, including 34 current and former Red Sox players. Some witnesses were interviewed multiple times. The Major League Baseball Players Association ("MLBPA") also provided DOI with an attorney proffer on behalf of 10 players who played 20 or fewer games for the Red Sox in 2018, each of whom provided no material information. As a result, every player who was on the Red Sox' Active Roster during the 2018 season was afforded the opportunity to provide information. The DOI also reviewed tens of thousands of emails, text messages, video clips, and photographs. The Red Sox fully cooperated with the investigation, producing all requested electronic communications and making all requested employees available for interviews. Upon request, certain Red Sox employees provided their cellular telephones to be imaged and searched. I afforded the Red Sox and their employees the opportunity to submit evidence relevant to this matter and present any arguments to me and my staff.

At the outset, it is important to put into proper context the nature of the Red Sox' wrongdoing. MLB rules in 2018 did not—and still do not—prohibit all methods used by Clubs to decode signs. It always has been permissible for baserunners—particularly runners on second base—to attempt to decode an opposing team's signs. It also always has been permissible for Clubs to utilize video before a game or after a game is completed to attempt to decode an opponent's sign sequences in order to provide the Club with an advantage in future games with that team. While MLB rules between 2014 and 2017 stated that "no equipment may be used for the purpose of stealing signs or conveying information designed to give a Club an advantage," many Clubs and their players did not view that prohibition as restricting staff and players in the replay room from attempting to decode signs during a game for use when a runner was on second base. In September 2017, the Red Sox were fined for using a smartwatch to receive sign information in the dugout from the replay room, but the focus of that decision was on the use of electronics to improperly communicate signs to the dugout rather than on the use of video to decode signs. In March 2018, however, my office clarified in a memorandum sent to all Clubs by then-Chief Baseball Officer Joe Torre that "electronic equipment, including game feeds in the Club replay room and/or video room, may never be used during a game for the purpose of stealing the opposing team's signs." Red Sox staff members who were interviewed by our investigators consistently stated that they were

aware of the prohibition against using video in the replay room to decode signs in 2018, and that the Club's front office took proactive measures to ensure that the rules were followed.

J.T. Watkins, a member of the Red Sox' advance scouting staff, was responsible for attempting to decode an opposing team's sign sequences prior to and after the completion of the game, which was (and is) permissible under the rules. Watkins conveyed the sign sequence information he learned from his pregame work to players in a meeting prior to the game, or sometimes during the game. The issue in this case stems from the fact that Watkins—the employee responsible for decoding an opponent's signs prior to and following the game—also was the person stationed in the replay room during the game to advise the Manager on whether to challenge a play on the field. (It was not uncommon for those two roles to be combined in this manner by Clubs in 2018). Therefore, Watkins, who was an expert at decoding sign sequences from video, had access to a live feed during the game that he could have—if he so chose—used to supplement or update the work he had performed prior to the game to decode an opponent's signs.

Watkins vehemently denies utilizing the replay system during the game to decode signs. Of the 44 players who provided information, more than 30 stated that they had no knowledge regarding whether Watkins used in-game video feeds to revise his advance sign decoding work. However, a smaller number of players said that on at least some occasions, they suspected or had indications that Watkins may have revised the sign sequence information that he had provided to players prior to the game through his review of the game feed in the replay room. They largely based their belief on the fact that Watkins on occasion provided different sign sequence information during the game than he had offered prior to the game, and, based on the circumstances of the communication, they assumed that the revised information came from his review of in-game video. One player described that he observed Watkins write down sign sequence information during the game while he appeared to be watching the game feed in the replay room, circling the correct sign in the sequence after the pitch was thrown.

Therefore, the narrow issue before me is whether Watkins on at least some occasions during the 2018 season utilized the game feed from the replay room to supplement or revise the sign sequence information that he had provided to players prior to the game. After carefully considering all of the evidence, which is summarized below, I find that Watkins, on at least some occasions, utilized the game feeds in the replay room to supplement and revise sign sequence information that he had provided to players prior to the game. Accordingly, I hereby suspend Watkins without pay for the 2020 season and 2020 Postseason and prohibit him from serving as the replay room operator for the 2021 season and the 2021 Postseason. Although no other Red Sox personnel will be disciplined, the Club must be held accountable, particularly since it potentially benefited

from Watkins's conduct. As a result, I have determined that the Red Sox shall forfeit their second round selection in the 2020 First-Year Player Draft.¹

I considered a number of factors in determining the appropriate discipline to be imposed on Watkins and the Club.

First, it appears that Watkins's communication of sign information evidently decoded from the replay station was episodic and was done without the knowledge of the Manager, the coaching staff, and most of the players. But, it was not the first time that Watkins was found to have violated MLB's rules. Watkins was a key participant in the "Apple Watch Incident" in late 2017, when the Red Sox admitted to using a smartwatch to communicate opposing Clubs' decoded signs from the replay room to the dugout.

Second, unlike the Astros' 2017 conduct, in which players communicated to the batter in real time the precise type of pitch about to be thrown, Watkins's conduct, by its very nature, was far more limited in scope and impact. To the extent Watkins used in-game video to decode sign sequence information, the information he obtained was the cue for the actual pitch's sign among the many signs flashed by the catcher when a runner was on second base. The information was only relevant in circumstances when the Red Sox had a runner on second base (which was in 19.7% of plate appearances league-wide in 2018), and Watkins communicated sign sequences evidently decoded from the in-game feed in only a small percentage of those occurrences. And even when Watkins utilized in-game video to revise his advance work, the information was only useful if the opposing team did not again change its sequence after Watkins passed along the information to players, and, only then, if the Red Sox baserunner was able to recognize the sequence provided by Watkins and also inform the batter through a gesture that was understood correctly by the batter.

Third, I find that Watkins used in-game video to decode signs during the 2018 regular season only. The evidence uncovered during the investigation is insufficient to conclude that the conduct continued in the 2018 Postseason or 2019 regular season. In this regard, it is important to note that, starting with the 2018 Postseason, the Commissioner's Office placed full-time in-person monitors in replay rooms ("Video Room Monitors") to prevent the improper use of video equipment. Prior to the Postseason, replay room monitoring by the Commissioner's Office had taken place only during certain portions of the game because the Video Room Monitor was responsible for both the home and visitors replay rooms and also had other duties.

With respect to my decision that no Red Sox personnel other than Watkins should be disciplined, I considered that the Red Sox front office staff was unaware of Watkins's conduct and took appropriate steps to communicate to Manager Alex Cora and the video staff (including Watkins) that game feeds could not be utilized to decode signs. I do not find that Cora or any member of the Red Sox staff either knew or should have known that

¹ I am mindful that because the 2020 First-Year Player Draft may be as few as five rounds, this penalty may have a more significant impact on the Red Sox than in a normal year.

Watkins was utilizing in-game video to update the information that he had learned from his pregame analysis. Separately, Cora will be suspended through the conclusion of the 2020 Postseason for his conduct as the Astros' bench coach in 2017.

With respect to Red Sox players, at the outset of the investigation, the Commissioner's Office and the MLBPA agreed that, in return for their cooperation and honesty during their interviews, current and former Red Sox players would not be subject to discipline based on the results of the investigation, and that the names of the current and former Red Sox players who cooperated with the investigation would be kept confidential and not publicly disclosed. At the close of the investigation, the MLBPA confirmed that it expected the Commissioner's Office to honor that agreement. Although we agreed not to discipline players who were truthful in their interviews, this is not a case in which I would have otherwise considered imposing discipline on players. Watkins decoded sign sequences using the replay review system, and most of the team was unaware that Watkins obtained any information during the game utilizing that system. The witnesses who believe that Watkins obtained sign sequence information from in-game video feeds largely do not have direct evidence, but most based their belief primarily on inferences that they drew from the way the information was communicated during the game, including the fact that the sign sequence information Watkins provided during the game differed on some occasions from the information he had provided prior to the game. In addition, the prohibition on utilizing the replay room to decode signs was not effectively communicated to Red Sox players, and most Red Sox players said that they were unaware that MLB's rules in 2018 prohibited Watkins from using the replay room during the game to decode signs.

Finally, while the Red Sox' good faith and emphatic efforts to ensure compliance with MLB rules among staff certainly is a strong mitigating factor in determining the level of discipline, I also must consider the fact that the Red Sox were disciplined in 2017 for communicating sign information electronically to the dugout, and I warned the Club that any future violation would result in more severe discipline. Indeed, immediately following the Red Sox' violation of these rules in 2017, I issued a memorandum to all Club Owners, CEOs, Presidents, and General Managers, which notified them that future violations of this type would be subject to serious sanctions, including the potential forfeiture of selections in the First-Year Player Draft. In addition, as stated above, despite the good faith efforts of the Red Sox' front office, the rules in effect for the 2018 season were not effectively communicated to Red Sox players. For all of the foregoing reasons, the Club must be held accountable for Watkins's conduct.

Discussion of Findings

A. Relevant MLB Rules

As stated above, it is important to note that sign stealing is not, nor has it ever been, prohibited. Baserunners are free to decode signs while on base and communicate the coming pitch type to the batter through whatever non-electronic communication method they choose. This has long been considered part of the game. Moreover, there has never been a prohibition on pregame or postgame video research into the sign

sequences preferred by an opposing pitcher. Rather, the rules have prohibited the in-game use of electronic equipment to steal the opposing team's signs, which has been articulated in various rules that have evolved over time.

As of 2017, the operative prohibition was found in Section 1-2.A of the Major League Baseball Regulations ("MLBR"), which provided:

The use of electronic equipment during a game is restricted. No Club shall use electronic equipment, including but not limited to walkie-talkies, cellular telephones, laptop computers or tablets, to communicate to or with any on-field personnel, including those in the dugout, bullpen, field and, during the game, the clubhouse. No equipment may be used for the purpose of stealing signs or conveying information designed to give a Club an advantage.

On September 14, 2017, I disciplined the Red Sox for communicating sign sequence information from the replay room to the dugout using electronic equipment. As described further below, the Red Sox' discipline resulted from Watkins sending text messages to an athletic trainer in the dugout containing opposing Clubs' sign information.

On September 15, 2017, I issued a memorandum to all Club Owners, CEOs, Presidents, and General Managers, which notified them that future violations of this type would be subject to serious sanctions "including, but not limited to, the forfeiture of selections in the draft depending on the severity of the violation." Highlighting the challenges with acquiring information about such violations, my memorandum further noted that "Clubs may be disciplined for violations whenever the Commissioner's Office learns of the conduct. . . . [E]ach Club's General Manager and Field Manager will be held accountable for ensuring that the rules outlined in this memorandum are followed by players and Club personnel."

In 2018, the prohibition against using electronic equipment or devices for the purpose of stealing signs was moved to MLBR 1-1.A, which stated in relevant part: "Under no circumstance may electronic equipment or devices be used for the purpose of stealing signs or conveying other information designed to give a Club a competitive advantage." On March 27, 2018, Torre issued a memorandum to all Club Presidents, General Managers, and Assistant General Managers summarizing MLB's revised policy on the use of electronic equipment prior to and during Major League games. The memorandum explained, in relevant part:

Electronic equipment, including game feeds in the Club replay room and/or video room, may never be used during a game for the purpose of stealing the opposing team's signs. In this respect, MLBR 1-1 expressly provides that "under no circumstance may electronic equipment or devices be used for the purpose of stealing signs or conveying other information designed to give a Club a competitive advantage." **To be clear, the use of**

any equipment in the clubhouse or in a Club’s replay or video rooms to decode an opposing Club’s signs during the game violates this Regulation. (Emphasis in original.) Clubs (and Club employees) who are found to have utilized equipment in the replay or video rooms for such purposes during a game will be subject to discipline by the Commissioner’s Office.

* * *

Any violation of MLBR 1-1 or the guidelines outlined in this memorandum will result in discipline, including, but not limited to, the forfeiture of selections in the draft depending on the severity of the violation. Because we often learn about violations when players or uniformed personnel change Clubs, Clubs may be disciplined for violations whenever the Commissioner’s Office learns of the conduct. Each Club’s General Manager and Field Manager will be held accountable for ensuring that all of the rules outlined herein are followed by players and Club personnel.

During Spring Training 2019, my office published revised Major League Baseball Regulations, including new MLBR 1-1 (“Sign Stealing and Pitch Identification”) and 1-2 (“Electronic Devices”). These regulations broadly prohibited the communication of an opposing Club’s signs “to a batter, baserunner or coach on the field,” with the “only exception” being “a baserunner or coach on the playing field who independently identifies an opposing Club’s signs or the type or location of a pitch may communicate the information to the batter or a coach on the playing field.” MLBR 1-1.B stated that “[n]o Club Personnel may utilize electronic equipment or devices during the game to identify the opposing Club’s signs, or to communicate or relay an opposing Club’s signs to any Club Personnel,” and defined “electronic equipment or devices” to include video monitors, the replay video system, computers, and laptops, among others. MLBR 1-2.B.2 stated that a Club’s video replay personnel “may not communicate the opposing Club’s signs or the type or location of an incoming pitch to any other Club Personnel.”

On March 11, 2019, I issued a memorandum to all Club Presidents, CEOs, General Managers, Assistant General Managers, Field Managers, and Video Coordinators, which attached the new MLBR 1-1 and 1-2 and warned of penalties for violations.

To ensure compliance with these rules, beginning in 2018, the Commissioner’s Office began recording dugout and bullpen phone calls, and implemented in-person monitoring of the replay rooms. The individual Video Room Monitors were required to report to the Commissioner’s Office any information suggesting that Club personnel were attempting to decipher or steal signs or otherwise violate the rules. During the 2018 season, replay room monitoring was not constant because a single Video Room Monitor was responsible for the home and visitors replay room and also had other duties. Starting with the 2018 Postseason, there was a full-time Video Room Monitor in both the home

and visitors replay rooms.

B. The “Apple Watch Incident”

In late 2017, the Red Sox admitted to using a smartwatch to communicate to the dugout from the video room information regarding an opposing Clubs’ signs, which resulted in my September 14, 2017 discipline of the Club that was publicly deemed the “Apple Watch Incident.” The discipline was largely based on Watkins’s conduct. Watkins admitted to my investigators that he had been watching the live game broadcast in the replay room—both at home and on the road—to decipher the opposing Clubs’ sign sequences when a baserunner was on second base. Initially, Watkins communicated the sign sequence information in person in the replay room to a player serving as a “runner,” who was then responsible for relaying the sign information to the players in the dugout, who would communicate it to the baserunner on second base, who would use it to interpret the catcher’s signs and transmit the coming pitch type to the batter.

At some point no later than early July 2017, the Red Sox replaced the runner’s video-room-to-dugout relay function with text messages. Watkins began sending text messages with the sign information to one of several athletic trainers in the dugout, who received the message on his device and conveyed it to players in the dugout. Watkins acknowledged to my investigators that he knew that his text messages violated MLB’s rules at the time, but he sent them anyway. There was no evidence that the Red Sox front office or then-Manager John Farrell were involved in or aware of this practice.

In addition to my September 15, 2017 warning to all Clubs that future violations of MLB’s sign-stealing rules would “be subject to more serious sanctions,” I specifically advised the Red Sox that I “expect your strict adherence to the On-Field Regulations going forward.” Numerous witnesses described that both then-President of Baseball Operations Dave Dombrowski and current General Manager Brian O’Halloran subsequently communicated the importance of adherence to rules to employees, including Watkins.

C. Red Sox’ Efforts to Ensure Compliance with MLB’s Rules

The evidence demonstrates that in both 2018 and 2019, the Red Sox’ front office consistently communicated MLB’s sign-stealing rules to non-player staff and made commendable efforts toward instilling a culture of compliance in their organization. The communication of rules to the players, however, was not as consistent.

There is no question that Red Sox non-player personnel were informed of and understood MLB’s sign-stealing rules in 2018 and 2019. For example, during 2018 Spring Training, Torre previewed updates to MLB’s sign-stealing rules with each Club. On February 27, 2018, Torre met with a broad group of Red Sox staff, including Dombrowski, Cora, and Watkins, at the Red Sox’ Spring Training complex in Fort Myers, Florida. Multiple attendees described this meeting as clear and effective. Most notably, Watkins told my investigators that following this meeting, it was “crystal clear” that he could not use any video, including the replay station, to decode signs during

games. Similarly, Cora described that this meeting made “clear” that the replay station could not be used for anything other than replay.

Witnesses consistently described that, as a general practice, either Dombrowski or O’Halloran would circulate MLB’s rules memoranda among Red Sox personnel. The day after receiving Torre’s March 28, 2018 memorandum, O’Halloran forwarded it to relevant staff, including Cora and Watkins, asking recipients to read this “important memo” and noting that there were “key changes” from the previous year. O’Halloran added, “obviously it is critical that we adhere to the rules outlined in this memo.” Following what he described as his standard practice, O’Halloran told my investigators that he followed his email by circulating the memorandum in hard copy to all coaches and clubhouse staff, including replay room personnel. O’Halloran explained to my investigators that he wanted to ensure that “there were no excuses, that everybody knows the rules, [and] that there are severe consequences especially in light of” the Apple Watch Incident.

This pattern of diligence continued in advance of the 2019 season. When MLB introduced a revised policy on the use of electronic equipment to steal signs during the Winter Meetings, a Red Sox employee promptly summarized and circulated the changes to other relevant personnel. On February 12, 2019, O’Halloran forwarded a draft of the proposed amendments to key Red Sox personnel, including Dombrowski, Cora, and Watkins, and highlighted that MLB sought feedback prior to finalizing the regulations. Watkins reviewed the draft, discussed concerns with others, and responded to O’Halloran’s email with comments. Also on February 12, 2019, O’Halloran and Dombrowski conducted a compliance review session for clubhouse and training staff, which discussed the “critical importance” of following the rules and not putting the organization at risk. On February 28, 2019, the Red Sox’ in-house lawyers conducted another compliance review, which discussed, among other issues, MLBR 1-1 and 1-2, and noted that subsequent violations of these regulations would subject the Club to serious consequences. When O’Halloran received the Commissioner’s March 11, 2019 Memorandum regarding Electronic Equipment and 2019 Sign Stealing Regulations, he forwarded it to relevant personnel and asked them to read it “as soon as possible” and respond with any questions.

On March 21, 2019, my office issued a FAQ on the 2019 Electronic Equipment and Sign Stealing Regulations. As he had done with previous MLB communications, O’Halloran forwarded the document to key personnel, including Cora and Watkins, and emphasized to them that it was important that everyone “understands the new rules about electronic equipment and sign stealing.” He also asked the recipients to make sure their staff received a copy of the rules and were “aware of the importance of adhering to the rules.” Notably, O’Halloran ended his email with “I would also encourage coaches and other staff members make sure the players are aware of these rules as well.” O’Halloran also communicated with MLB to obtain clarification on a few issues, and he passed that clarification on by email to a smaller group that included Watkins and other video staff.

Based on these and other similar communications, as well as the consistent

statements of witnesses, I cannot fault either Dombrowski or O'Halloran for any non-player staff member's lack of adherence to the sign-stealing rules. While I strongly believe in the accountability of leadership, given that Dombrowski and O'Halloran were emphatic that MLB's rules be followed, there must be limits when leaders' resolute and active support for the rules is knowingly defied. It is apparent on this record that any failure by non-player staff to abide by the rules was in spite of the efforts and culture of the Red Sox' front office.

Despite the notification efforts for non-player staff, the specifics of the sign-stealing rules apparently did not consistently and effectively reach the Red Sox players. While some witnesses believed that the Red Sox may have provided physical copies of the relevant memoranda to players, most players could not recall receiving any rules memoranda that specifically addressed the topic of sign stealing. The players generally described that they largely discarded any such memoranda and gave mixed accounts of whether they received other guidance or understood the parameters of the sign-stealing rules. Many players told my investigators that they were unaware that in-game sign decoding from the replay station had been prohibited in 2018 and 2019. Watkins said that prior to the 2018 season, he told multiple players in one-on-one discussions that he could no longer use the replay station to decode sign sequences, but no players confirmed this.

In addition, most players did not believe that MLB rules prohibited them from using video clips provided to them during the game of their prior at bats to decode a pitcher's sign sequences. They also did not believe it violated the rules to attempt to utilize the broadcast feed on monitors in the clubhouse to decode sign sequences. While players may have varied in their success in decoding sign sequences using game video that was available to them under the rules, it is clear that some players attempted to decode signs using those sources.

D. Watkins's Role in 2018 and 2019

In addition to serving as the Red Sox' replay operator during games, Watkins provided advance scouting information about opponents, including information about opposing pitchers' preferred sign sequences.

Specifically, one of Watkins's advanced scouting tasks was to decode sign sequences that each opposing pitcher had used in prior appearances, which enabled Watkins to advise Red Sox players of potential sign sequences that the pitcher might use against them. Watkins stored the information in a master chart and created a one-page PDF of all pitchers for an upcoming series, which he loaded on the MLB-provided iPads. Witnesses said that during the hitters' meetings held before games, players and staff, including Watkins, would describe opposing pitchers' tendencies, including any decoded sign sequences from past games. Witnesses consistently praised Watkins's skill and dedication to pregame sign decoding, noting that he would stay into the early morning hours working on it and, as a former catcher, he was particularly skilled.

Prior to the start of the 2018 season, the Red Sox moved the replay station from a relatively remote upstairs area to a small room just outside of the dugout that also housed several stations for players to review clips of their past at bats, known as BATS stations. Watkins was the sole Red Sox employee staffed in this replay room, but other staff and players trafficked in and out of the room to review the BATS monitors or speak to Watkins about his advanced research on various topics. Witnesses consistently described the room set up as “small,” “cramped,” “crowded,” and “tight.”

While Watkins acknowledged decoding sign sequences from the replay station in 2017—which formed the basis of the Apple Watch Incident—he claimed to my investigators that, even if it had not been prohibited, his capability to decode sign sequences in 2018 and 2019 was limited because of a reduction in access to the center field video feed in the replay station. While Watkins’s ability to see catchers’ signs in the replay system did decrease significantly in 2018 and 2019, he still had sufficient access during many games to, at a minimum, confirm whether the sign sequences he had predicted in his pregame research were actually in use. Indeed, Watkins conceded to my investigators that in 2018 and 2019, he noticed sign sequences while working replay, explaining that “there were instances when I watched and intuitively picked up that signs were wrong or different than [the] advanced work.” In those instances, he “kept a mental log of it” but claimed he would not share the information with any player. In addition to “mental notes,” Watkins regularly electronically bookmarked games whenever a player reached second base so that he could incorporate the ensuing at bat into his postgame research.

E. Watkins’s Alleged Conduct

The crux of this matter involves resolving a factual dispute regarding whether Watkins utilized game feeds from the replay room to revise the sign sequence information that he had provided to players prior to the game (and sometimes during the game) based on his advance work. Watkins claims that all of the sign information that he provided to players during the game was based either on his advance work or information communicated to him by Red Sox players who had stolen signs while on second base. Certain witnesses, to varying degrees, said that based on a combination of factors, they believed that Watkins at least on occasion did use the game feed in the replay room to provide players with updated sign sequence information.

Watkins admitted that he did communicate sign sequence information to players during a game in certain circumstances. Watkins said that if the opposing team changed pitchers, he would sometimes remind players of the sign sequences that the incoming pitcher had used in the past. According to Watkins, these reminders were based on his pregame advance work. Similarly, if a baserunner had decoded signs from second base and reported the information back to him, Watkins would circulate that information to other players. In fact, he asserted that players were aware that they were supposed to routinely provide him with sign information gathered when they were on second base. He claimed that these in-game communications of sign sequence information were never based on his own in-game sign decoding.

While most witnesses stated that they had no reason to believe that Watkins obtained sign sequence information from in-game feeds, 11 witnesses identified features of Watkins's in-game communications that indicated to them that Watkins had at times acquired the sign sequence information from the replay room during the game. Specifically: (i) six witnesses observed Watkins write out signs during the game, which they surmised was obtained from his reviewing the game feed in the replay room; (ii) 11 witnesses said that Watkins communicated the sign information in a manner that indicated that he had obtained it in game, for example by providing them with different sign sequence information during the game than he provided to them before the game, or by using language that led them to believe that he obtained the information from watching a game feed (*e.g.*, describing what sequence the catcher was using "this inning"); and (iii) four witnesses said that Watkins used gestures or notes to communicate to them sign sequence information when a Video Room Monitor was present in the replay room, which led them to believe that he was engaged in prohibited conduct because he was attempting to conceal his communications.

Some of the witnesses who provided the incriminating information were in the group of witnesses that interacted most with Watkins on these issues. One player, who was interviewed twice, said that he had no doubt that Watkins utilized the replay room to decode signs on occasion, and said that he watched Watkins attempt to decode the sign sequence by writing sign information on computer paper while he watched the replay station in the replay room and then circling the correct sign in the sequence after the pitch was thrown. Another player said that he believed that 90% of Watkins's sign sequence information was obtained from his advance work, but that 10% of the time Watkins "obviously" updated that information from in-game video feeds.

Watkins, for his part, vehemently denied that he utilized the replay review system to decode signs, and he offered several explanations for the statements of the witnesses. Watkins said that he sometimes took in-game notes of sign information that baserunners obtained when they were on second base and reported to him. He insisted that any notes that he provided to players were based on his pregame advance work or information provided to him by players during the game. He also contended that any updated sign sequence information that he provided to players during the game was based on information reported to him by baserunners who had decoded signs when they were on second base

Watkins admitted that he attempted to conceal his communications with players from the Video Room Monitor in the replay room but claims that such conduct was entirely innocuous. He said that he passed notes or used gestures when a Video Room Monitor was present because he did not want to "give the impression that we were doing something that we should not be doing." Watkins also claimed that players and staff were careful about what they said when Video Room Monitors were present because they were concerned that the Video Room Monitors would share Red Sox advance scouting information with other Clubs.

Because there is no written record, recording, or other contemporaneous evidence

of the underlying events, resolving these allegations requires an assessment of the relative credibility of the accounts of Watkins, on the one hand, and the witnesses providing incriminating information on the other. I do not do this lightly—I personally met with some of the key witnesses on both sides of the issue to evaluate their responses myself, weighing the consistency, clarity, and logic of the information provided. Based on this process and after careful consideration, I believe that the evidence clearly supports a finding that Watkins, at least on occasion, utilized in-game video to decode sign sequences.

Watkins could not explain why witnesses would fabricate such allegations against him, aside from perhaps: (i) their confusion over the nuance of him providing pregame information during the game; (ii) a competitive incentive from witnesses now with other Clubs; or (iii) a lack of appreciation for his degree of preparation. He described that he had a “pretty decent” relationship with most Red Sox players and coaches, and he did not think that any held a grudge against him. Witnesses consistently praised him to my investigators, commenting on his skill and degree of preparation, and the incriminating information came from witnesses both within and outside of the Red Sox. There is simply not a basis to believe that the witnesses who provided incriminating information provided misleading or false information.

While I acknowledge that most of the Red Sox players and staff members said that they had no reason to believe that Watkins, who admittedly knew the rules, did not follow them, they also did not provide information that exonerates him. Some witnesses said that they received in-game sign sequence information from Watkins but had no idea about whether the source was pregame research, other baserunners, or impermissible in-game video review. The main takeaway from most of the Red Sox witnesses is that they had no knowledge of where Watkins obtained his information other than his advance work, which is not in conflict with the accounts of the witnesses who stated that they witnessed conduct that indicated that Watkins was utilizing the replay system inappropriately.

Perhaps most significantly, Watkins did not provide a persuasive explanation for why the information he provided to players during the game differed from information provided prior to the game. While he may have received updated information from players who decoded signs while on second base, the players themselves who provided the incriminating information did not believe that this was a credible explanation for how he was able to obtain updated sign sequence information during the game on all occasions. For example, one such player described that Watkins knew the sign information before any player told him, telling my investigators that “if we knew it was wrong, without anyone telling [Watkins], he would update us with a new sign.” Indeed, a number of players challenged the notion (espoused by Watkins) that players would routinely provide him with sign information obtained while the players were on second base. Such players said they would provide the updated sign information directly to other players in the dugout rather than providing it to Watkins in the replay room.

Finally, I am significantly troubled by Watkins’s admissions that he knowingly attempted to conceal his communications with players from the Video Room Monitor. In

light of the belief of certain witnesses that Watkins was utilizing in-game video to decode signs on some occasions, his attempt to conceal his communications of sign sequence information to players during the game supports the view that Watkins knew he was engaged in conduct that violated the rules. While I recognize that behaving in a manner that indicates “guilt” does not necessarily mean that Watkins is guilty, his lack of a credible explanation for how he was able to obtain revised sign sequence during the game without reviewing video, particularly when combined with the fact that he attempted to conceal his communications of sign sequence information from the MLB Video Room Monitor, does in my view support a finding that he concealed his communications because he did not want to get caught again for breaking the rules.

I should note that virtually all of the witnesses described Watkins as a hard-working and diligent employee, who on many occasions reminded players of protocols that were in effect in 2018 and 2019, such as the rule that players themselves could not view the replay system in the replay room. In my view, Watkins was placed in a very difficult position by virtue of his dual role as the person responsible for decoding signs pregame and as the person responsible for operating the Red Sox’ replay system (a structure, as I have previously noted, that was not uncommon within MLB Clubs). Watkins admitted that because he watched the game feeds during the entire game, he was able to determine during the game when the sign sequences he provided to players prior to the game were wrong. Thus, he was placed in the difficult position of often knowing what the correct sequences were but being prohibited by rule from assisting the players by providing the correct information. While this does not excuse or justify his conduct, I do believe that it created a situation in which he felt pressure as the Club’s primary expert on decoding sign sequences to relay information that was consistent with what he naturally observed on the in-game video.

F. 2018 Postseason and 2019

I find that Watkins used in game video to decode signs during the 2018 regular season only. The evidence uncovered during the investigation is insufficient to conclude that the conduct continued in the 2018 Postseason or 2019 regular season. Many of the witnesses who believed that Watkins violated the rules in the 2018 regular season said that they do not believe the activity continued into the Postseason because sign sequences were too difficult to decode in the Postseason, and MLB increased its monitoring of the replay room, which made it more difficult. Additionally, no witness described any specific support for in-game sign decoding, such as Watkins circling the correct sign in the sequence or describing sign information in problematic terms, as had occurred in the regular season. Similarly, there also is insufficient evidence to support a finding that Watkins violated the rules in the 2019 season after MLB issued a more stringent policy on the use of electronic equipment to steal signs that provided that the increased monitoring from the 2018 Postseason would continue and MLB’s Video Room Monitor would be stationed in the replay room for the entire game.

Discipline

Based on the findings described above, I hereby issue the following discipline:

1. J.T. Watkins shall be suspended for the 2020 season and 2020 Postseason. When Watkins returns from his suspension, he will be prohibited from serving as the replay room operator during any game for the 2021 season and 2021 Postseason.
2. The Boston Red Sox will forfeit their second round selection in the 2020 First-Year Player Draft.
3. Alex Cora will be suspended through the conclusion of the 2020 Postseason for his conduct as the bench coach of the Houston Astros in 2017. While I will not impose additional discipline on Cora as a result of the conduct engaged in by Watkins (because I do not find that he was aware of it), I do note that Cora did not effectively communicate to Red Sox players the sign-stealing rules that were in place for the 2018 season.

No other member of the 2018 Red Sox staff will be disciplined because I do not find that anyone was aware of or should have been aware of Watkins's conduct. The Club's front office took more than reasonable steps to ensure that its employees, including Watkins, adhered to the rules. Notwithstanding these good faith efforts to comply with the rules, however, the Red Sox organization ultimately is responsible for the conduct of a member of its advance scouting staff.

As noted above, I feel bound by the agreement not to impose discipline on Red Sox players who testified truthfully in this matter. Even if I were not so bound, I do not believe that the Red Sox players who suspected that Watkins used game feeds to decode sign sequences should be held responsible for his conduct. Watkins knew of the rules and was responsible for not utilizing the replay system to decode sign sequences. Some players may have suspected that Watkins was using the replay system improperly, but they did not know that with certainty. Others had no idea how Watkins obtained the sign information. Moreover, those who suspected that Watkins was using the replay system largely did not understand that it was a violation of the rules because the evolving rules landscape had not been adequately explained to players.

Dated: April 22, 2020

Robert D. Manfred, Jr.
Commissioner of Baseball