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FUN'S OVER FOR SOX; LET THE REAL GAMES BEGIN: View the gallery at Projosports.com/redsox

Next year is here

See what the Red Sox are up to on the eve of the season opener with updates from Japan at Projosports.com/soxblog

Back to the future

This will be the 17th Opening Day meeting between the Red Sox and Athletics, but only the third since the A's moved from Philadelphia in 1955:

	W	L
Sox vs. Philadelphia A's	6	8
Sox vs. Kansas City A's	0	1
Sox vs. Oakland A's	1	0

For up-to-the-second stats and scores: Projosports.com/redsox

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Breakfast *with* Champions

Tomorrow morning, the Red Sox begin their World Series title defense playing the Oakland A's, 13 time zones away.

First pitch is 6:05 a.m.

BY SEAN McADAM
JOURNAL SPORTS WRITER

TOKYO — In the span of only a few days earlier this month, the Red Sox got to see firsthand one of the main reasons no team this century has been able to repeat as World Series champion.

Injuries — however minor — to their starting shortstop, last year's starting center fielder and most critically, their No. 1 starting pitcher served to remind the Sox that good health, like fame, can be fleeting.

As the Red Sox open the defense of their title here tomorrow, farther from home than any champion before them, they do so with the knowledge that one of the most critical components to a successful season — avoidance of injuries — lies beyond their control.

Though the losses of Julio Lugo, Coco Crisp and Josh Beckett were short-term and minor in nature, the point was nonetheless made: No team — even ones with extraordinary talent and sufficient depth — can overcome a succession of manpower losses.

Healthy, the Red Sox stand as good a chance as any recent champion. Though improvements have been made by Detroit (Miguel Cabrera, Dontrelle Willis), and though Cleveland, Los Angeles and, yes, the Yan-

kees, remain as formidable as a year ago, the Sox enter the season as the team to beat.

A look at their various components: ■ **STARTING PITCHING**

Beckett isn't here and won't start a game until the Sox reach the third country of their season-opening, international jaunt. But they're assured that the lower back strain that sidelined him the last few weeks is minor and temporary.

Last fall, Beckett cemented his reputation as the game's best under-30 big-game pitcher, and another 20-win campaign — he was the only pitcher in either league to reach the milestone last season — isn't difficult to imagine.

Daisuke Matsuzaka, back for a second season in the major leagues, should show improvement, though expectations that he's poised to make the same quantum-sized progression that Beckett did in his second season with the Sox may prove excessive. Nonetheless, this season won't be nearly the cultural challenge last year was for Matsuzaka and that alone should translate into a more consistent performance on the mound.

Privately, the starter from whom the Sox expect the biggest leap is Jon

Opening Day

■ Tomorrow's probables: Boston, Daisuke Matsuzaka (15-12, 4.40 ERA in 2007) vs. Oakland, Joe Blanton (14-10, 3.95).

■ Sports writer Sean McAdam and photographer Bob Breidenbach are with the Red Sox in Japan. For up-to-the-minute reports, including tomorrow's pregame lineups, go to: projosports.com/soxblog and projosports.com/redsox

SEE RED SOX, B3



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BOB BREIDENBACH

The fans turned out to see the Red Sox play the Yomiuri Giants in Boston's second and final exhibition yesterday at the Tokyo Dome. One young fan (above) wore a hat with homemade cardboard socks stuck to it and Dice-K written on them. Another Japanese hero, pitcher Hideki Okajima (right), throws a ball up to a fan before the start of the game as others hope for an autograph or souvenir.

MARCH MADNESS

EAST REGIONAL

RESULTS YESTERDAY

North Carolina 108, Arkansas 77
Tennessee 76, Butler 71, o.t.
Louisville 78, Oklahoma 48

GAMES THURSDAY

At Charlotte, N.C.

Washington State vs. North Carolina, 7:27 p.m.
Tennessee vs. Louisville, 9:57 p.m.

SOUTH REGIONAL

RESULTS YESTERDAY

Texas 75, Miami 72
Memphis 77, Mississippi State 74

GAMES FRIDAY

At Houston

Texas vs. Stanford, 7:27 p.m.
Memphis vs. Michigan State, 9:57 p.m.

MIDWEST REGIONAL

RESULTS YESTERDAY

Davidson 74, Georgetown 70
Villanova 84, Siena 72

GAMES FRIDAY

At Detroit

Texas vs. Wisconsin, 7:10 p.m.
Kansas vs. Villanova, 9:40 p.m.

WEST REGIONAL

RESULT YESTERDAY

Western Kentucky 72, San Diego 63

GAMES THURSDAY

At Phoenix

West Virginia vs. Xavier, 7:10 p.m.
UCLA vs. Western Kentucky, 9:40 p.m.