

Alex Anthopoulos: The Canadian who rebuilt the Blue Jays

With news this morning that the Jays GM is leaving, here's our interview from back at the start of playoff ball

by [Michael Friscolanti](#)

Oct 15, 2015



Jays GM Alex Anthopoulos talked trades earlier this summer. (Nathan Denette/CP)

News this morning that Alex Anthopolous is leaving the Jays after rejecting a contract extension. Our colleagues at Sportsnet are following this [breaking news](#). From just a little earlier this month, we spoke to the GM of the Jays.

In his sixth season at the helm of the Toronto Blue Jays, [Alex Anthopoulos](#) is tasting playoff baseball for the first time. After a series-clinching victory Wednesday night—in a game that featured what was surely the most improbable, emotional

inning ever played—the team is in Kansas City, preparing for Friday’s Game 1 of the American League Championship against the Royals. With a spot in the World Series on the line, Anthopoulos talks to *Macleans*’ Michael Friscolanti about late-night trades, champagne celebrations, and why it’s so important for fellow Canadians to take the time to vote before Monday night’s first pitch.

Q: Let me ask this first: Before **Wednesday’s game against the Texas Rangers**—and that unbelievable seventh inning—were you aware of **Rule 6.03(a)(3)**: that if a batter is standing in the box and his bat is struck by the catcher’s throw back to the mound, the ball “is alive and in play”?

A: Absolutely not. No idea. Like everyone else, I was a little confused. But I think once they decided to go to replay, I felt a lot better because I knew that once they went to New York they were going to check the rule. And once they made the decision—as much as it wasn’t going to go our way—I felt comfortable that they got it right. I talked to someone from the league as well while this was going on, and he showed me the rule. It’s not the way you would have wanted to lose a game, but they got the call right and we got due process.

Q: Was there a moment when you thought: “Geez, is this how the season is going to end, on a fluke play like that?”

A: Oh yeah, no doubt about it. Obviously we play a lot of games, but it was an emotional roller coaster and I was trying to prepare myself for the worst. But you try to keep your emotions in check. There’s not a lot of game left, but there were still three innings left in a one-run game.

Q: We witnessed the full emotional pendulum in that seventh inning, from utter agony in the stands to uncontrollable joy. What was that bottom of the seventh like for you? Where were you?

A: I was in our little GM box, which is a small radio booth that fits eight of us. That's as big as it is. It's not a suite. People think we have a GM suite, but it's the equivalent of a radio booth behind the plate. Watching what was going on, we were getting excited, watching guys get on base. When **José Bautista** hit the home run, we lost our minds. We were like fans. Candidly, we were like fans. We were going crazy, and I'm just glad the cameras didn't pan to us. I don't know how that would have looked.



Bautista celebrates his three-run homer. (Nathan Denette/CP)

Q: Has it been a long time since you've been able to enjoy a moment like that—more as a fan than a general manager?

A: There are times. When Ryan Goins hit a walk-off home run earlier in the year, we got pretty excited. And as you get later into the year, the games mean more. You're never truly a fan because it's your job, but in terms of being able to react like a fan would, let your hair down a little bit, there are moments. When games are big like that, you feel the same way as fans: the ups and downs. So we were yelling and screaming and high-fiving. It was pretty crazy there.

Q: So many things, both tangible and intangible, need to come together to make a successful team. You talk a lot about having "good people" and "character guys." What is it about this particular club that is so special—and even more specifically, what sets it apart from last year's roster?

A: We really made a concerted effort last off-season—really, by mid-September—to put less of an emphasis on talent and tools and production. Don't get me wrong: that is still the driver in any player acquisition. But we put more of an emphasis on character, make-up, quality of the human being, what kind of teammate they are. That's not to say we didn't value it before, but we decided to up the percentage quite a bit. We probably didn't value it enough, and that starts with me. That's part of being a young GM: learning from mistakes just like players try to make adjustments and tweaks. I think I said it after we clinched the American League East: I don't think I'll ever go back to the other way. It's like when your parents tell you when you're a kid: "Don't touch the stove." You have to do it yourself in order to realize it's hot.

Q: So how should a fan interpret that comment? Are you saying there are certain players that, if you could go back in time, you would not have pursued?

A: It starts with me, so I take responsibility for it. I maybe didn't focus on the concept of a team. It was more a collection of talent. We've had some exceptionally talented players here, but I don't know that they all fit together. Some people might roll their eyes at that, but I do believe—and it's easy to say because we're winning—that we've taken players that were less talented than others we could have had because they fit the values of what we are trying to do as a team. When you look at the definition of a team—everybody coming together, pulling together, playing for one another, making each other better—this is the first time I can say I've been around a true team.

It took me time to understand the difference between a collection of talented players and a team where the parts fit and complement each other. It's inexact and not easily quantifiable, but it's to the point now that I've become obsessive about it. It's hard at times because you're going to walk away from really talented, productive players that you know can fill a hole or fill a need, but if they don't fit your team and what you're trying to do, we'll walk away from that. I can say in the past I wouldn't have done that. I would have said: "I'm taking the talent, I'm taking the production, and we'll make it fit. We'll take the square peg in the round hole and just jam it into that board and try to make it fit." I'm much more selective now on who we bring in, and that's probably been the biggest change. I won't ever go back to the other way.

Q: You've been the Jays general manager since 2010, and by now your work ethic is legendary. I can't even count how many all-

nighters you pulled just at this year's trade deadline—when you acquired David Price and Troy Tulowitzki, among others. What's your secret? Are you drinking strong coffee? Do you sleep at all?

A: I wish. I wish. When I was really young I used to go to Greece in the summers and sleep until two, three in the afternoon. But ever since I got the GM job—and I'm not complaining—for whatever reason I've lost my ability to sleep. Trust me, I wish I could. When we did the Price deal, I was up all night and then went through the next day. When I finally went to bed that night, I slept eight hours straight, right through. It was an unbelievable feeling. I woke up the next day at nine. It felt so good and I thought: I wish I could do this more often. I don't know why I can't sleep. I figure it's just that with this job you have a lot on your plate and your mind is going. The other thing—and this is not to be corny—is when you love what you do, it's not like you're staying up trying to write a term paper. You're so wrapped up in the job and you're so into it that you enjoy every minute of it. It's not work. You almost get so excited that you don't want to go to sleep.

Q: You've always said that Toronto is a baseball town, that Canada is a baseball country, and that if the Jays field a contender the seats will be filled. Did you ever think the fan support would be this overwhelming?

A: Because I didn't grow up here, I didn't live those '92, '93 years. I was a teenager in Montreal. But Jays of that era drew four million fans a year, so you'd think: OK, I think it could happen. But until you see it with your own eyes, you don't know. Even seeing this now, it's exceeded my expectations—even though it shouldn't. The word “electric” has been used, and it's such a fitting description for what we've experienced in the stadium and in the

community. My daughter just turned 5, and I dropped her off at school Friday morning, the day of Game 5. We were a little late bringing her in and we heard the morning announcements. At the end of it they said: “Go Jays, go!” Even her teacher had a Jays shirt on. It’s amazing to see. To see a community and a country come together, rally together, unite—wow. It is the most unbelievable feeling, and I want to try to remember this because you know it doesn’t happen very often. It’s a really special thing. To me, this is what sports are about: bringing everybody together. It’s an amazing thing to see. I get chills when I talk about it.

Q: Have you been out and about in the city, or do you try to stay out of the spotlight?

A: I still hide, just because I want to try to stay even-keeled with all of it. But everybody has been great—really great. After the game Wednesday, we went out on the field, congratulating everyone and hugging. In the clubhouse, the champagne is flowing, everybody is going nuts, and you’re getting around to see the players and the staff. Finally, about 30 minutes into it, I saw [back-up catcher] Dioner Navarro. We’re drenched in champagne, and he’s got his goggles on. He said: “Hey, I’ve got something for you,” and he reached into the pocket of his game pants and pulled out a ball. He said: “I kept the game ball for you.” For me, that was probably one of the nicest things a player has ever done for me. I was touched, to say the least.



Members of the Toronto Blue Jays celebrate their series win over the Texas Rangers during game five American League Division Series baseball action in Toronto on Wednesday, October 14, 2015. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darren Calabrese

Q: Do you ever stop to contemplate just how far you've come? Do you think about that young Alex Anthopoulos opening fan mail for the Montreal Expos—for free—and try to comprehend how you managed to reach this point?

A: Oh yeah, I'm never going to forget that. At the game, I was walking with one of our employees and a security guard stopped me and asked me for my pass. The employee said: "How the heck does he not know who you are?" I said: "He's doing his job, and he's doing a good job." I've seen other people say: "Don't you know who I am?" That bothers me so much. I don't think I'm ever going to forget where I came from. I am grateful.

Q: Did you ever sense, last season in particular, that your days as the Jays GM could be numbered? There were some in the media

questioning your future, saying this was a do-or-die season for you. Did you ever think about the possibility you could be fired?

A: No. I know it comes with the job, but I think that's why I try to stay even-keeled. Obviously, things are going great now, but I'm not going to change my routine all of a sudden and you're going to see me walking through the concourse—because I wouldn't do that when times are bad. I think what also helps is that I don't follow the mainstream media other than what I need to know. I tell our PR director that I'm not going to read the clips each day, but if there is something I need to be aware of, a big story or a big issue, let me know. If someone wants to write that they're not happy with this or that, I don't need to know that. And I don't take it personally. I'm a sports fan. I've seen it. No matter what team you're on or who you work for, you will be criticized in these jobs. The best of the best get criticized a ton. You know that going in. There are no surprises there, so I never concern myself with it.

Q: As many fans know, you were very close to your father, who passed when you were 20. You've said before that you may not have attempted to pursue your dream career in baseball if you didn't endure his sudden death. How often have you thought about it him over these past few weeks?

A: A lot. I do anyways, but a lot lately. We were three brothers in the family and we grew up making fun of each other. When we clinched the AL East in Baltimore, one of my brothers got a little emotional on me in his text messages, which is totally out of character. Our head trainer lost his father when he was young, too, and when we were out on the field he kind of grabbed me and said it in my ear. I thought about my Dad a lot. It's a good thing. I want to remember him. I want to think about him.

Q: The next home game at Rogers Centre is Monday night—election night. Are you going to have time to vote?

A: Oh yeah. You can vote all day, right? You make time for that. I don't know how I'm going to vote, but I will vote.

Q: Still undecided?

A: Yes. I think it's important to vote, but I'm undecided. I'm probably leaning one way but—in fairness to everybody because they're all Blue Jays fans—I'll probably keep that to myself.

Q: Will this season be a failure if the Toronto Blue Jays don't win the World Series?

A: Oh no. Making the playoffs as a wildcard team would have been a wonderful success. Winning the division was a dogfight, and it feels more rewarding than anything else. In a playoff series, anything can happen. It's a small sample, and teams can slump. I thought winning the division was a great achievement, and no matter what happens from this point forward, I think we've already achieved great things. Do we want to win the World Series? We all do. But I think the organization has come so far and I'm satisfied with what we've done.

Q: However this season ends, your biggest trade deadline acquisition, David Price, is a free agent. Are you confident the Blue Jays can resign him?

A: Of course. He's one of the best starters in the game; that goes without saying. The problem is we're not going to be the only one who wants him.

That being said, I think we've put ourselves in a better position. Roy Halladay said it best when it comes to free agency: Yes, you need to be competitive from a financial standpoint, but top players are going to have more than one team that wants them. So free agency is about choosing where you want to play, and I think with what David has experienced with the fan base and the country and his teammates and the staff, I feel confident we will be a consideration. I think David would definitely consider us, and that is a huge step forward.

Q: Do you have any vacation planned when the playoffs are over?

A: There really isn't any time to get vacation. I'd love to bring our kids somewhere, do something.

Q: Maybe you can take them to a victory parade in downtown Toronto?

A: That would be nice. I'd sign up for that vacation any day of the week.