

## Lest We Forget: Scenes From the ALDS – by Todd Miller

Thanks to Kate Ready of the Tigers' media relations department, I had the privilege of seeing American League Division Series Games 3 and 4 with a media pass, giving me the opportunity to interview Tigers players, manager Jim Leyland and other notables before and after the games at Comerica Park last week.

**Game Day Reflections:** After the Tigers' disappointing loss in Game 3, I asked the Tigers' skipper if he would do anything different to prepare the team for the next day's elimination game compared to his approach for regular season contests and non-elimination postseason clash.

"No, there is [sic] no tricks. We got to win the game tomorrow to try to extend it to Game 5. It's that simple. There is no different players or no different pitchers, anything of that nature. The bullpen did a great job today. We ran into another situation where we didn't put enough runs on the board and an excellent starting pitcher didn't have a very good day."

Prior to Game 4, I was curious to know how much Jose Iglesias had been watching the Red Sox – his former team – in postseason play. Replied Jose, "They have been doing an amazing job. I try to watch every single game. They have been really good, [and I'm] happy for them."

Following Game 4, I queried Justin Verlander about why he experienced more struggles than usual during the regular season, and if age (30) and workload (an average of more than 200 innings pitched over each of the past seven seasons) were factors. Replied Justin, "No! If I could tell you [why I had difficulties], I wouldn't have had them."

For the second consecutive year, it seems Verlander rediscovered his MVP- and Cy Young Award-winning ways for a Game 5 in Oakland. Let's hope he can keep it going in Game 3 of the ALCS on Tuesday night in Comerica Park and, if necessary, in Game 7 next Sunday at Fenway Park.

At the conclusion of Game 4, I asked Leyland how concerned he was about Joaquin Benoit's uneven performance (1 IP, 2 ER 2H, 1 BB, 2K ) in the ninth inning of the Tigers' season-prolonging 8-6 victory.

"Not at all, he's our guy," said Jim. "Outs are tough to get at any time, particularly when you're playing a playoff team and you've got their leadoff hitter. Leading off, outs are tough to get. But he's our guy. He's our closer. He's been terrific for us and, hopefully, he will be our closer when we get back out to Oakland. Hopefully, we will be in a situation to use him. Obviously Justin is going to start, everybody knows that now. We were fortunate we had Max Scherzer out there tonight and we took our best shot and fortunately we won it."

Jim's trust in his closer was well-placed as Joaquin pitched a scoreless ninth inning to record the save in Game 5 of the ALDS.

**Around the Batting Cage:** On the sun-drenched afternoon leading up to Game 4 when the Oakland A's were taking batting practice, I had the good fortune of meeting Hall of Fame pitcher Dennis Eckersley and Buck Martinez, an ex-major league catcher and manager and current Toronto Blue Jays broadcaster, as the pair was in town to broadcast the game on TBS.

Said Dennis, and Oakland native, about coming to Detroit, "I feel a lot more relaxed now than I did as a player [for the Indians, Red Sox and A's from 1975-98, excluding five seasons with the Cubs and Cardinals]." When I asked Dennis to elaborate, he replied, "That upper deck used to scare me," referring to the overhang in right field at Tiger Stadium. "Anything I threw could turn into a home run, so I wasn't too crazy about the place."

On the subject of pitch counts, Dennis believes "they've proven to be an effective way to manage pitchers and keep them healthy. With all that's on the line these days, you have to make sure guys don't get injured. When I was playing, I often wanted my pitch counts to be higher, but I understand why they [managers] pulled me out of games when they did."

As for whether starting pitchers can enjoy the same degree of success on three days of rest instead of

four, Dennis replied, “It depends on the individual. These days, guys are used to four days of rest, but most of them, I think, could make the adjustment if they had to.”

Dennis’s broadcast partner, Martinez, has fond memories of Tiger Stadium. “When I was a rookie with the Royals in ’69, one of my teammates, Dave Wickersham (a Tigers pitcher 1964-67), told me, ‘Look at that guy in right field. (Al Kaline) Watch what he does and then do everything the same way. He’s what being a professional is all about.’”

Buck’s other memories of baseball in Detroit are from mid- and late-’80s, when the Tigers and Blue Jays were dueling for supremacy in the AL East.

“I’ll never forget Dave Bergman’s at bat,” recalled Buck in reference to the Tigers’ first baseman’s epic battle with reliever Roy Lee Jackson in a nationally televised Monday night game on June 4, 1984. “He fouled off all those pitches [seven] and then beat us with a three-run homer [in the bottom of the 10th inning]. It was a very disappointing loss for us, and they Tigers really pulled away after that.”

In 1987, Buck’s first year as a Blue Jays broadcaster, the Tigers and Jays were locked in a battle for the division crown that came down to the last weekend of the season in Detroit, with the Tigers trailing the fading Jays by one game. “That whole series had so much tension,” said Buck, “especially for us because we had just lost four in a row [to Milwaukee]. I’ll never forget that last game; Frank Tanana and Jimmy Key. Larry Herndon hit a home run early [in the second inning] and that was the only run of the game.”

Coincidentally, Tanana threw out the first pitch prior to Game 4 but, in a departure from common practice, was not available for media interviews prior to the game.

**Friendly Guests:** Turning to the A’s travelling party, I spoke with broadcaster and former catcher Ray Fosse about whether there should be a rule that requires catchers to give the outer third of the plate to oncoming runners to avoid collisions. “Heck no! If the catcher has the ball, he should be able to sit on the plate if he wants to. In more than 100 years of baseball, there hasn’t been a rule against catcher blocking the plate, and there’s no reason to have one now. That play with Buster Posey [the Giants MVP and All-Star catcher who sustained a broken fibula and a severely strained ankle ligaments in a collision with the Marlins’ Scott Cousins in May 2011] was dirty and not typical of the game. One play shouldn’t force a rules change.”

Given the fact that Fosse is most famous for being bowled over by Pete Rose at home plate on the last play of the 1970 All-Star Game and sustaining a fractured and separated shoulder injury which plagued him for much of his 13-year career, it’s surprising that he wouldn’t want more protection for backstops. “Catchers are a tough breed,” said Ray. “We can take it.”

Rose was criticized by many for running home at full speed in an exhibition game. In the irony of ironies, when Rose was sentenced in 1990 to five months in prison for tax evasion, he was sent to the U.S. penitentiary in Marion, Illinois -- Fosse’s hometown.

The A’s managing partner, Lew Wolff, a southern California-based commercial real estate magnate, is working to build the A’s a new ballpark with the same intensity that Rose showed on the basepaths at old Riverfront Stadium more than 40 years ago.

“I’ve owned the team since 2005, and no matter how well the team does on the field, I’ll feel like a failure unless I get a new ballpark built,” said the affable St. Louis native, 78, who has lived in Los Angeles for more than 50 years. “Major league baseball has a process for this kind of thing, and I’d rather follow it than fight it, even if it’s taking longer than I’d like.”

Wolff has had a soft spot for the Tigers since his days as an undergrad at the University of Wisconsin, when alumnus Harvey Kuenn was winning Rookie of the Year, All-Star and batting title honors in the Motor City. “Harvey was really fun to watch, and was an even nicer guy, and I also enjoyed seeing Al Kaline play,” said Lew. “The coach [Arthur “Dynie” Mansfield] had an in with the Tigers, so a lot of Wisconsin guys signed [minor-league] contracts with Detroit.”

Another Wisconsin alumnus Wolff remembers is Bob “Red” Wilson, a Tigers catcher 1954-60, who was the primary backstop for Frank “The Yankee Killer” Lary.

“I don’t remember the Tigers’ lineup from those days, but ask [Bud] Selig [former fraternity brother and current baseball commissioner] and I’m sure he’d be able to tell you.”

When I asked Wolff if he had any memories of the Tigers coming to the old Sportsman’s Park to play the St. Louis Browns, he replied, “Not really. The Browns were so bad, I didn’t pay any attention to them. We used to get free passes to go to the games, and I’d sit in the bleachers and do my homework, and not really look

at the game. Sometimes there would be only 600 people in the stands.”

In contrast, Wolff has vivid memories of watching Cardinals Hall of Famer Stan Musial and catcher Del Rice. “The Cardinals had good teams when I was growing up and were very entertaining. Stan and Del were my favorite players because they were so good at what they did.”

Another ALDS has come and gone, with the Tigers achieving the same result as they have the past couple of years. Let’s hope that the host of next year’s ALDS games in Comerica Park is the defending World Series champion.

### **Short Stripes**

This year marks the Tigers’ 15th appearance in postseason play. The Yankees have 51 such appearances, followed by the Dodgers (27), Cardinals (26), A’s (25) and Giants (24)... Anibal Sanchez’s four strikeouts (a batter reached first base on a dropped third strike) in the first inning of Game 1 of the American League Championship Series (ALCS), ties a postseason record achieved by Cubs pitcher Orval Overall in Game 5 of the 1908 World Series – the last time the Cubs won a clinching game in the Fall Classic. Their opponent: the Tigers, of course... Had the Tigers’ pitchers combined to throw a no-hitter in Game 1 of the ALCS, it would have been the third no-hitter in postseason history. The others are Don Larsen’s perfect game for the Yankees in Game 5 of the 1956 World Series vs. Brooklyn in Yankee Stadium and Roy Halladay’s masterpiece for the Phillies in Game 1 of the 2010 NLDS vs. Cincinnati... Tigers pitchers set a major league strikeout record, finishing the season with 1,428 opposing batters whiffed, breaking the previous record of 1,404 set by the Cubs in 2003... Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander, the starters in Games 2 and 3 of the ALCS, each pitched more than 200 innings and struck out more than 200 batters this past season. They are the first pair of Tigers pitchers to toss 200 or more innings while striking out 200 or more batters since Mickey Lolich and Joe Coleman in 1973... Miguel Cabrera’s third consecutive batting crown makes him the first Tiger to accomplish the feat since Ty Cobb did so in 1917-19. Of course, Cobb is credited with another nine batting titles 1907-15, so you could say he won three batting championships in a row many times over. What makes Cabrera’s accomplishment so impressive is that he’s a right-handed batter facing mostly right-handed pitchers. In fact, he is the first right-handed hitter in the American League since the Indians’ Napoleon Lajoie (1901, 1903-04; the ’02 title was disputed) to win three consecutive batting titles, and the first right-handed hitter in either league to accomplish the feat since the Cardinals’ Rogers Hornsby (1920-25). In contrast, Cobb and the vast majority of other batting champions with at least three such titles to their names (e.g., Ted Williams, Rod Carew, Tony Gwynn, Wade Boggs, Larry Walker) hit left-handed.

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