

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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A DEEPER TEAM – By David Raglin

The Tigers made their biggest moves early in the offseason, but there have been a few moves since then. The signing of Mike Pelfrey got the most press. He is a #5 starter who is better than the #5 starters the Tigers had in 2015. He missed most of the 2012 and 2014 seasons with injuries, which may have contributed to him running out of steam in 2015 (3.06 ERA through June 23, 5.66 after). His top pitch is a mid-80s slider; he also has a fastball in the 93 range. One weird stat: The right-hander walked a lot more lefties than righties but with a similar number of strikeouts: versus lefties -- 345 plate appearances (PA), 40 BB, 41 K; versus righties -- 369 PA, 5 BB, 45 K. I don't know what to make of that; it had not happened before 2015.

Similarly, the signing of free agent reliever Mark Lowe and the trade of several non-prospects to the Yankees for reliever Justin Wilson greatly add new arms and depth to a bullpen that needed a major turnover. The Tigers could have an Opening Day bullpen that does not contain a single pitcher that was on the Opening Day 2015 roster. It should be better, but at least it will be different.

I think the unheralded signing that could really make a difference was catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia. The veteran, best known for his days with the Red Sox, has stumbled since leaving Boston, as you can see:

Jarrod Saltalamacchia: Batting Statistics, 2011-2015

Year	Team	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
2011	Boston	103	358	52	84	23	3	16	56	24	119	.235	.288	.450	.737	45	4.3
2012	Boston	121	405	55	90	17	1	25	59	38	139	.222	.288	.454	.742	54	4.5
2013	Boston	121	425	68	116	40	0	14	65	43	139	.273	.338	.466	.804	68	5.7
2014	Miami	114	373	43	82	20	0	11	44	55	143	.220	.320	.362	.681	44	3.8
2015	Total	79	200	26	45	15	0	9	24	23	69	.225	.310	.435	.745	29	4.8
2015	Miami	9	29	3	2	1	0	1	1	4	12	.069	.182	.207	.389	1	0.9
2015	Arizona	70	171	23	43	14	0	8	23	19	57	.251	.332	.474	.805	28	5.6

He left Boston to go to Miami as a free agent, but he did not have a good first season. After a slow start in 2015, the Marlins cut him, and he signed with the Diamondbacks, where his batting statistics were similar to his Boston ones, albeit in limited playing time.

The great thing about Salty is not just that he is a switch-hitter, but he is much better from the left side against right-handed pitchers, an important factor on a team with few lefty hitters:

Jarrod Saltalamacchia: Platoon Splits, 2011-2015

Opp. Pitcher	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
As lefty batter	1345	194	327	93	4	62	197	146	477	.243	.318	.457	.775	197	4.9
As righty batter	416	50	90	22	0	13	51	37	132	.216	.279	.363	.642	43	3.3

This move could give the Tigers a lot more depth. Salty compliments the right-handed hitting James McCann well; McCann had a large platoon differential in 2015. He could be used as a pinch-hitter late in the game when the Tigers need some pop. He could play first (where he has played 44 games) if Miguel Cabrera needs a day off or gets hurt. I know we've harped about this in the past, but the Tigers' bench has been awful the last few years, and Saltalamacchia is the kind of player they needed.

MAKING THE SCHEDULE A MAJOR (LEAGUE) UNDERTAKING –By Todd Miller

Scheduling 30 major league baseball teams to play 162 games each in 180 days, and taking into account teams' special requests, requires a computer-based algorithm that optimizes problem-solving capabilities. It's an information technology tool that only a PhD in industrial and systems engineering is capable of developing.

For the past decade, Michael Trick, a professor of operations research in the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, has been creating the MLB schedule through the Sports Scheduling Group, a company he established in the late 1990s with Doug Bureman, a longtime executive with the Pirates and Reds who sat on MLB's scheduling committee for a number of years.

Bureman was intimately familiar with front-office operations and believed he could make a business focused on creating sports schedules, including the one for MLB, but needed the help of an IT expert. A mutual acquaintance introduced him to Trick, and the pair started making schedules for college conferences. It would be almost 10 years before they caught their big break. Today, in addition to making the MLB schedule, the Sports Scheduling Group develops schedules for MLB umpires and many college sports conferences.

At a recent presentation Trick gave to a group of Pittsburgh-area sports enthusiasts, he said, "Making the baseball schedule is like no other because we have to worry about travel time and distances that makes sense to all the teams." He added "flow" is an important consideration because "teams like to be home for a week to ten days and on the road for a week to ten days, and every team wants at least ten home games a month, except April because nobody draws fans then, and getting to that number can be difficult in July because of the All-Star break." Moreover, MLB requires a "double round robin" (home-and-home series) among division opponents from the last week of August through the end of the regular season.

To help maximize attendance, teams also need to be home half of the weekends during the course of the 26-week season, and also half of the summer weekends. The definition of "summer," however, is defined by the school year in various parts of the country instead of strictly by the calendar.

Complicating matters further is the need to satisfy multiple constituencies. Every team wants to minimize travel due to the fatigue it causes (expense is not much of a factor), television networks want marquee matchups on key dates to maximize ratings, and some club executives want their teams home on particular dates to celebrate milestones in the histories of their franchises or retirements of star players.

Before applying their proprietary algorithm to the science of schedule-making, Trick and his colleagues send a form to each club asking for specific dates they'd like to be at home -- and away -- along with other aspects of what they would like to see in a schedule. After each team and the league accept the schedule for the upcoming season, it's up to each team to determine the starting times of its 81 home games.

According to Trick, "Every team wants to be home on Father's Day and away on Mother's Day, and we try to balance that out year to year. The Red Sox always want to be home on the third Monday of April for Patriots' Day, and the Yankees, Mets and Marlins prefer to be on the road during the Jewish high holy days."

The scheduling process, which begins in February, ends by June and results in a schedule which is released in late-August or September, needs to adhere to players' union rules and industry standards related to off-days, and must avoid conflicts with select NFL games. Clubs in the five markets with two teams [New York, Chicago, San Francisco-Oakland, Los Angeles-Anaheim and Washington-Baltimore] don't want to be home at the same time. Teams also want to be out of town when major events, such as national political conventions and papal visits, occur in their cities. The requests by clubs in two-team markets stem more from issues related to game-day employees and public safety rather than from, say, Cubs fans wanting a peek at their South Side rivals. Specifically, many game-day ballpark employees work at both venues and requiring two sets of traffic police working simultaneously can present staffing challenges to local police departments.

Trick also said that, by careful analysis of factors that drive attendance, including things like scheduling a series to run Tuesday-Thursday instead of Monday-Wednesday, he can help teams increase their revenue by \$1.5 million over the season. Late-week games also produce increased television ratings and online viewership, so such a seemingly minor schedule modification can boost revenue industry-wide \$50 million-\$75 million.

Based on standard industry calculations, the average fan's game attendance generates \$50 of gross revenue for the home team. That figure reflects the amount spent on tickets, parking and concessions. Contrary

to the beliefs of many front office executives, day games don't differ significantly in attendance from night games, all else being equal.

With data from more than 12,000 games played over the past five years, Trick and his colleagues can predict attendance at any game based on the date and ballpark. Although the data can't quantify variables such as a team's place in the standings and game-day weather conditions, numbers show the Tigers, for example, are likely to draw 3,500 more fans in May for a Thursday night game in than for a Monday night game.

Trick foresees himself and his colleagues remaining valuable to MLB because of their "special sauce" – the problem-solving optimization algorithm – being able to create acceptable schedules annually. In fact, Trick's schedule is always within 5 percent of "optimality" considered excellent by computing standards.

In 2007, two years after the Sports Scheduling Group replaced the husband-and-wife team of Henry and Holly Stephenson of Staten Island, N.Y., who had been creating the MLB schedule from 1981 to 2004 manually or by using relatively basic computer technology, MLB tried to create the schedule in-house. After several months of futility, MLB executives approached Trick and his group that August and asked if they would create a schedule for 2008. Ten days later, he and his team presented MLB with an acceptable schedule and have been making the schedule without interruption ever since.

As for problem-solving time, the increase in computing speed has resulted in tasks which took 18 days in 1996 and 30 minutes in 2007 taking three seconds today. The Sports Scheduling Group uses that 30,000-fold speed increase to MLB's advantage.

When it comes to spring training and the postseason, teams and the MLB office make those schedules themselves because they involve fewer clubs. In the case of spring training, club-created schedules give team executives the flexibility to put split-squad and B games on the calendar at the relative last minute.

So, next time you're deciding when to attend a game, you'll know what went into scheduling the contest for that particular date.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "BIG SAM THOMPSON" – Review by Mark Pattison

Remember the table in the December issue of *Stripes* showing Tigers who had two separate tenures with the franchise? Well, Hall of Famer Sam Thompson tops them all. He's the only one to have played for both of Detroit's major league franchises. That's right – both the Tigers in 1906 and the National League's Detroit Wolverines from 1885 until the franchise was dissolved following the 1888 season. Thompson is the subject of Roy Kerr's latest biography; he's written one earlier about Dan Brouthers, another Hall of Famer who played for the Wolverines in their glory days and whose major league career extended into the 20th century.

You may recall that Wolverines owner Frederick Stearns purchased the entire NL Buffalo franchise near the end of the 1885 season so he could get his hands on Brouthers and the other members of the so-called "Big Four": fellow Hall of Famer Doc White and infielders Jack Rowe and Hardy Richardson. As it turns out, Kerr tells us, it's not the first time Stearns went on that kind of buying spree. To improve his struggling Wolverines, he bought the Western League's Indianapolis franchise before the start of the 1885 campaign so he could secure the services of Thompson and other quality players (plus Indy manager Bill Watkins). The purchase caused the demise of the Western League, but it presaged the start of a lustrous career for Thompson.

Big Sam didn't start playing baseball seriously until age 20. Does that remind you of Kirk Gibson? His ascent, though, was rather rapid, making it to the majors by 25, and had an immediate impact with his offense not unlike that of Phillies slugger Ryan Howard. Though Howard hammered out far more homers than Thompson, Big Sam was second all-time in four-baggers by the time he retired, having played his whole career in deadball times. His career arc resembles more closely such notables as Kiki Cuyler, Bill Terry, Heinie Manush, Earl Averill, Bob Meusel, Earle Combs and Babe Herman.

Thompson was an RBI machine, leading the NL once with the Wolverines in their World Series-winning 1887 season (166 in just 127 games), and twice with the Phillies, where he went after Detroit folded. His RBI-per-game mark of .923 is still tops among all major leaguers. Despite four injury-shortened years, with many seasons lasting fewer than the 20th century pre-expansion standard of 154 games, Thompson came just 12 hits shy of 2,000 for his career, with 1,305 RBI and 1,261 runs scored, plus titles in hits, doubles, triples, homers, total bases, and yet-to-be discovered stats like slugging average and OPS+.

Although he racked up tremendous numbers, Thompson may have been best known for being part of a Phillies outfield in 1894 in which all three players batted .400 or better. Thompson, an Indiana native, made Detroit his adopted home. And, in 1906, eight years after his so-called retirement, Big Sam returned to the Detroit lineup -- this time as a Tiger -- and played eight games in the outfield as the Bengals' gardening corps was on the mend. He also became enduring friends with Wolverines catcher Charlie Bennett, another "pre-Motor City" favorite for whom the nascent Detroit Tigers of a resurrected Western League named their park. The two went to games together until Thompson died working the polls on Election Day in 1922; on Opening Day, Bennett would throw the ceremonial first pitch while Thompson served as honorary umpire.

Add to this a compelling argument as to whether Thompson, a left-handed hitter, threw lefty or righty, and you've got a solid, solid book. "Big Sam Thompson," published by McFarland, retails for \$29.95 (as does his fine book on Brouters), and is available direct from the publisher online at www.mcfarlandpub.com.

SHORT STRIPES – By David Raglin and Mark Pattison

▶ The Society sends condolences to the family of former Congressman Mike Oxley. The Republican from Ohio was best known for his co-authorship of the Sarbanes-Oxley financial reform law, but was best known by us as a Society member during his years on Capitol Hill. Congressman Oxley even joined the Society on a bus trip to Baltimore for a Tigers-Orioles game.

▶ In the last issue of *Tigers Stripes*, there was a huge omission in the "All-Time Two-Time Tigers Team". Society Member Bill Feyen pointed out we left Kirk Gibson off the team. Gibby was, of course, a Tiger from 1979 to 1987 and from 1993 to 1995. Sorry Pete Incaviglia, but Gibson benches you! Here is the whole (corrected) team: C Brad Ausmus, 1B Roy Cullenbine, 2B Omar Infante, SS Ramon Santiago, 3B Darnell Coles, LF Hoot Evers, CF Cameron Maybin, RF Vic Wertz, DH Kirk Gibson, SP Dan Petry, SP Jeremy Bonderman, SP Jim Slaton, SP Wild Bill Donovan, SP Virgil Trucks, RP Todd Jones, RP Jose Lima, RP Eric King, Mgr. Bucky Harris.

▶ In December, the Society made a \$1,000 contribution to CATCH, Caring Athletes Team for Children's and Henry Ford Hospitals -- the charity founded by Sparky Anderson. In a thank-you letter, CATCH executive director Jim Hughes said, "When the late Sparky Anderson started CATCH in 1987, it was his vision that we should fund the 'little things' that make a big difference in the lives of pediatric patients at Children's Hospital and Henry Ford Hospital." Donations to CATCH have grown by more than a third since 2011 (\$299,000 to \$404,000). Since its founding, CATCH has provided more than \$6 million to help children. If you want to make your own contribution, you can send it to CATCH, 223 Fisher Bldg., 3011 w. Grand Blvd., Detroit, MI 48202. The Mayo Smith Society contributes to charities thanks to your membership dollars. CATCH has been a favorite charity, as has been the Clubhouse Boys Scholarship Fund, maintained by longtime Tigers equipment manager Jim Schmakel and whose revenues were boosted by the shrewd investments of late Tigers first baseman Dave Bergman. Also, after Max Scherzer's brother died unexpectedly, the Society made a contribution to the Boys & Girls Club of St. Louis, the Scherzer family's favorite charity.

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