

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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THE VERLANDER ERA, PART 2 – By David Raglin

Last month, we looked at the Tigers during what we called the “Verlander Era,” from the start of the 2006 season through August 31, 2017, when the trade of Justin Verlander to the Houston Astros for three good prospects marked a change in direction for the Tigers. This month, we are looking at the things the Tigers did well to make the Verlander Era what it was, and the things that could have made the era even better.

Trades: When Dave Dombrowski came to the Tigers after the 2001 season there was little talent in the organization. His primary method to restock the organization during his time as general manager was by trade (a whole lot of them!) that brought the Tigers significantly more talent than they traded away. Here are the major trades made by the Tigers from 2002 to 2013 (only major players in the trade are listed):

2002: Carlos Pena and Jeremy Bonderman for Jeff Weaver; 2003: Nate Robertson for Mark Redman; 2004, Carlos Guillen for Ramon Santiago; 2005: Placido Polanco for Ugueth Urbina; 2006: Gary Sheffield for minor leaguers; 2007: (1) Edgar Renteria for Jair Jurrjens; (2) Miguel Cabrera and Dontrelle Willis for six minor leaguers; 2008: Edwin Jackson for Matt Joyce; 2009: Max Scherzer, Austin Jackson, Phil Coke and a minor leaguer for Curtis Granderson and Edwin Jackson; 2010: Jhonny Peralta for a minor leaguer; 2011: Doug Fister for minor leaguers; 2012: Anibal Sanchez and Omar Infante for minor leaguers; 2013: Jose Iglesias for Avisail Garcia.

That’s 13 trades. I’d say the Tigers won 11 of them, lost on one (the Renteria/Jurrjens deal), and arguably broke even on the Iglesias/Garcia swap. They acquired three key players on the 2006 pennant-winning team (Guillen, Robertson, and Polanco) for basically nothing, and the 2011 to 2014 back-to-back-to-back-to-back division titles were in part fueled by getting Peralta, Fister, Sanchez and Infante for no significant major league players. Add to that, Dombrowski obtained one of the two best right-handed hitters of our generation, Miguel Cabrera, for two players who eventually became decent players (Cameron Maybin and Andrew Miller) and four marginal players.

Probably the gutsiest deal, though, was when Dombrowski reset the team in 2009 by trading Granderson and Jackson for two key pieces on the Tiger division winners in Scherzer and Jackson, and a solid role player in Coke. It’s easy to see now what a great move that was, but at the time Scherzer was a decent young pitcher who was not there yet (he was sent to Toledo in 2010 for a bit) with concerns about his motion, and Granderson was an icon in Detroit. Many people accused the Tigers of doing it to just cut payroll and questioned their commitment to win.

Unfortunately, as the pressure increased to squeeze a World Series championship out of the aging team while Mike Ilitch was able to enjoy it, they made several trades that backfired. The first was trading Doug Fister in the fall of 2013 for three young players. This trade was an effort to recreate the Scherzer/Granderson deal and give Drew Smyly a rotation spot. However, at the trading deadline, they essentially went the opposite way by trading Smyly and Jackson for David Price. That hurt later in the season when the Tigers needed a center fielder and Jackson was not there. The big prospect in the Fister deal was Robbie Ray, but they brought him up too soon and he struggled. The Tigers cut bait on him after the 2014 season, trading him to the Diamondbacks for Shane Greene. Given a chance to mature, Ray has fulfilled the promise the Tigers saw in him, but he’s doing it in Arizona.

Payroll: The Tigers were also blessed with a large payroll from owner Mike Ilitch, which allowed them to make many of their moves. Don’t interpret that as “they won only because they had a lot of money.” We’ve seen that while having more money is helpful, there are teams that spend a lot of money and don’t do well. Tigers management was able to turn that money into wins. Some of the trades they made they were able to make because they supported the increased payroll; for example, they were willing to give Cabrera a large

contract right after trading for him, they got Peralta from the Indians when the Tribe was cutting back and the Tigers were trying to win, and got Sanchez and Infante from the chronically underfunded Marlins. But the key is that they spent on the right players. When they got Cabrera, he was considered a great young player, but not the player who turned into a superstar (or there would have been more teams trying to get him).

Stability: Another reason for their success was stability. They had the same leadership from 2006 to 2013/2014, when Jim Leyland retired and Dave Dombrowski was fired. When they had disappointing seasons after they won the 2006 pennant, especially the 2008 season, the Ilitches could have cleaned house, but reportedly they never considered it. They had a good leadership team in place and they rode with it.

Drafting and Player Development: On the bad side, the key thing that held them back was their poor drafting and player development. From 2002 until now, the Tigers developed only 13 players who have made a notable major league contribution. (My definition of a “notable contribution” is either a career WAR of 5.0 or a young major league player with a WAR below that but with the strong probability of hitting that mark.) The players the team developed are: Curtin Granderson; Jair Jurrjens; Justin Verlander; Cameron Maybin; Matthew Joyce; Andrew Miller; Rick Porcello; Alex Avila; Drew Smyly; Nick Castellanos; Brian McCann; Corey Knebel; and Devon Travis. Of those 13 players, only Granderson, Verlander, Maybin, Miller, Porcello, Castellanos, and Avila have been solid major league regulars for multiple seasons. That’s not much production for a decade plus of drafting and development (noting that the players drafted in the last few years have not had a chance to make their mark yet.)

The Tigers have a “type” of player they typically make their top draft pick: a hard-throwing pitcher, especially a college pitcher. Of the players drafted during the period we are looking at, Verlander (the #2 pick in the draft) and Porcello (who fell to the Tigers at #27 because of his contract demands) are the only ones who’ve really panned out as major league starters. The Tigers have spent very few high picks drafting position players, one reason they acquired so many position players in their recent trades. (The good news is that the pitchers they are drafting high now seem to be better, according to the many prospect raters.)

Defensive and Baserunning Problems: Another problem has been the one-dimensional teams the Tigers have had the last few years. Below is a table of where the Tigers ranked in defense (as measured by Baseball Info Systems’ Defensive Runs Saved) and Baserunning Score. These are not perfect methods to measure defense and baserunning, but they show how the Tigers have stacked up to other teams over the years:

Detroit Tigers Defense and Baserunning MLB Rankings During the Verlander Era

Stat	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Defense	T4 th	6 th	25 th	8 th	21 st	15 th	24 th	27 th	29 th	T12 th	29 th	29 th
Baserunning	Not Av	6 th	2 nd	17 th	10 th	26 th	30 th	30 th	25 th	30 th	26 th	30 th

At the beginning of the Verlander Era, the Tigers had good defense and baserunning, but as time went on, they became a team that won despite their poor fielding and baserunning. Part of that was the decision to use their free agency money to sign players like Victor Martinez and (after Martinez got hurt) Prince Fielder. They also seemed to emphasize power hitting at the expense of other skills.

The 2013 season is especially interesting. The Tigers had a very good season, winning 93 games, third most in the league, and making it to the American League Championship Series for the third straight season. However, they did it ranking 27th in defense and 30th in baserunning. How did they do it? They were second in the league in runs scored and second in fewest runs allowed, so the big bats and great pitchers overcame the deficiencies in defense and baserunning.

Thin Bench and Bullpen: The Detroit Tigers in the Verlander Era were a team of stars: a two-time MVP and Triple Crown winner, two Cy Young winners (plus two more pitchers who won a Cy Young with other teams). The Tigers loved the stars and were willing to pay for them.

But what got left behind was the bench and the bullpen. The Tigers have had a very thin bench during the Verlander Era. Two slight-hitting middle infielders (Don Kelly and Andrew Romine) got substantial time at positions like center field and first base because the Tigers did not have another alternative. In the 2014

American League Division Series loss to the Orioles in 2014, the Tigers were down by one run going into the ninth in two games. In Game 2, they had Hernan Perez pinch-hit, then after Romine took his at-bat, they had Eugenio Suarez pinch hit. In Game 3, with the season on the line and the tying run on second base, they had Bryan Holaday take his at-bat. Nick Castellanos then was intentionally walked and Perez pinch-hit again, ending the Tigers' last playoff appearance with a 5-4-3 double play ground ball.

We don't have to tell loyal Tigers fans about the bullpen problems over the last decade. The search for a closer never seemed to end, and we spent many nights cursing another bullpen blowup. To sum them up, here is where the Tigers' bullpen ranked in ERA in the majors during the Verlander Era:

Detroit Tigers MLB Rankings Bullpen ERA During the Verlander Era

Stat	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Bullpen ERA	4 th	23 rd	27 th	22 nd	14 th	25 th	18 th	24 th	27 th	27 th	24 th	30 th

I want to end this piece on a positive note. I look back on the Verlander Era with warm memories. The Tigers may not have won the World Series, but they gave Tigers fans many great moments. They won two American League pennants, went to two World Series, were in baseball's Final Four four times, including three years in a row. They beat the Yankees three times in the playoffs during the Verlander Era, the only team to play the Yankees that many times in the postseason and never lose a series. We got to see two no-hitters, a batting AND a pitching Triple Crown, Kenny Rogers pour champagne over a policeman's head, a pennant-winning walk-off home run, and many of the very best players in the game wearing our team's uniform.

There are, of course, what-could-have-beens. What if Miggy hadn't been hurt for the end of the 2013 season, including the playoffs? What if they better handled the long layoff before the 2006 World Series? But, it goes the other way too. What if Mike Ilitch hadn't encouraged Dave Dombrowski to go after Cabrera? What if they had reacted to the disappointing season in 2008 by cleaning house? What if Pudge Rodriguez or Magglio Ordonez turned down the money from a losing team to go elsewhere?

We close the book on the Verlander Era, like we closed the book on the Bless You Boys Era twenty years ago, the Year of the Tiger Era before that, and so on. Now it's time for another era. It might be the Franklin Perez Era, or the Jeimer Candelario Era, or the era of a player who is now playing in college or even high school. That era might bring us a World Series championship, and I'm guessing it will bring many good memories. Thanks for the Verlander Era, and here's to the future.

THE BLESS YOU BOYS TIGERS MEET THE HALL OF FAME – By David Raglin

We have not had great timing with *Tigers Stripes* this year. In September, we just missed the Justin Verlander trade, and last month, a few days after we sent the December issue, Alan Trammell and Jack Morris were voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Until now, no player on the 1984 team had been selected, just manager Sparky Anderson.

Frankly, I'd forgotten they were going to make the announcement. The Veterans Committee has generally not selected many people to the Hall, and I figured this would be another strikeout for us. Frankly, I'm still in shock: Hall-of-Famer Alan Trammell and Hall-of-Famer Jack Morris. I'm still getting used to that.

I will be upfront by saying that I was a strong supporter of Alan Trammell's election but not a supporter of the campaign for Jack Morris. As great as Morris was, I felt he fell just short. However, once Morris was elected, watching how touched he was by being elected, and the fact he was going in with his longtime teammate, I was very happy for him and look forward to seeing his plaque in the Hall.

Hopefully, this will help Lou Whitaker take his place in the Hall in two years, the next time the Veterans Committee will vote on players from that era. It's hard to say the line for the Hall squeezes in-between Tram and Lou, given the similarities in their stats.

On the other hand, there is another kind of symmetry in Trammell and Morris going into the Hall together; they were both drafted in 1976, Trammell in the second round and Morris in the third round. (Whitaker was drafted in 1975.) Trammell wasn't the only Hall of Fame shortstop the Tigers took in that draft;

they chose Ozzie Smith in the seventh round but he did not sign with the Tigers. That has to be one of the best drafts in history with three Hall-of Famers! Trammell and Morris were also part of one of the greatest rookie classes in history in 1978 along with Whitaker and Lance Parrish. If Lou gets in, that would be three Hall-of-Famers in one rookie class along with a longtime star who was one of the best at his position.

Until last year, no player with the Tigers from 1975 until now had been elected to the Hall of Fame. Last year, Pudge Rodriguez was chosen, and now Trammell and Morris will be there.

HE'S KING TIGER IN THE NICK OF TIME – By Mark Pattison

Despite the Tigers' subpar season in 2017, there were glimmers of hope, and that was reflected in the King Tiger award voting. This year's winner is last season's third baseman, and next season's presumed right fielder, Nicholas Castellanos. Nick, who had a career year on offense in 2017 with 26 home runs and 101 runs batted in, was the favorite of Society voters who took part in email balloting.

Representatives of the Society plan to make the award to Castellanos prior to a home game in Lakeland during the Society's annual spring training trip, set for March 15-21. With four home games from which to choose, finding a good date for everyone involved should be a breeze.

Coming in second place was Detroit reliever-turned-closer Shane Greene. Departed Tigers Justin Verlander and Justin Upton also garnered votes in the balloting.

Here's what the Mayo Smith electorate had to say about their favored candidates in the exit polls.

Castellanos: "A touch torn on the 'how to vote' for our King Tiger of 2017. I love our Tigers, yet the three with maybe the best performances, are gone JV, J-Up, and J.D. However, voting for one of them would be a vote against the Tiger brass, and maybe as much as they (Tiger mgmt.) deserves my sadness vote, I'll shake that off, and give Nick Castellanos a richly deserved King Tiger vote. Thanks Nick for staying on course, and putting together a solid year. Dang, I'll miss JV."--Dean A. Ross

"Although this has been my most disappointing season as a Tigers fan (since 1961), I cannot overlook what Nick Castellanos had done this early in his career offensively. Considering he had to make the transition from third base to right field late in the season, he remained a pretty positive force at the plate without much support or protection around him. He has my vote for King Tiger."--Bob Huisman

"My vote for King Tiger 2017 is Nicholas Castellanos. His 26 home runs, team-leading 101 RBIs, .272 batting average and .811 OPS were bright spots in an otherwise dull season for our favorites. At age 25, his involvement with Big Family of Michigan and other charitable causes demonstrates a willingness to give back to the community while establishing himself as one of the Tigers players who will form the nucleus of a resurgent team."--Todd Miller

Greene: "As Detroit's season started middling and then arced downward, I looked for Tigers who seasons might have started in a middling way but then arced upward. There were a few candidates in this field. I picked Shane Greene because he showed he was capable of increased responsibility with a concurrent uptick in performance. He started 2017 as a middle-innings/seventh-inning reliever. As other relievers fell by the wayside, Greene became the preferred eighth-inning option, and finally the closer, being 100 percent perfect in converting save opportunities. If the front office is looking for a re-building block, here's your man."--Mark Pattison

Verlander: "Even though he wasn't there in September, I have to go with Verlander."--Maxwell Kates

AARON BOONE'S GRANDPA VS. THE YANKS – By Francis Kinlaw

The selection in early December of Aaron Boone as the next manager of the New York Yankees caught baseball fans from a variety of rooting persuasions off guard -- but for some Tigers fans, the element of surprise was accompanied by a tendency to reminisce about the mid-1950s. For in those years of the Yankees' relative dominance of American League pennant races, Aaron Boone's grandfather was one of several productive players wearing a Tigers uniform.

Nearly 60 years after his last appearance as a Tiger, Ray Boone has been partially overshadowed in Tigers lore by a host of his teammates and by players who came along after he hung up his spikes. Nevertheless, he was undeniably a star not only from a Tigers perspective but also within the broader concept of major league

baseball. Perhaps best remembered for leading the American League in RBIs in 1955 with 116, he earned All-Star honors in 1954 and 1956 while consistently posting very impressive offensive statistics.

A sense of curiosity may inspire a glance back in time to those days of yesteryear when “The Lone Ranger” was on television and the elder Boone patrolled the infield for the Bengals. And, in particular, it is interesting to determine how well the latter performed against the franchise that now employs his grandson.

Ray Boone was acquired in an eight-player trade with the Cleveland Indians on June 15, 1953, and he remained with the Tigers until being traded to the Chicago White Sox on June 15, 1958. During his five-year stay in Detroit (primarily as a third baseman from 1953 through 1956 and primarily as a first sacker in 1957 and 1958), the Tigers faced the Yankees with Boone in the lineup 96 times and came away with victories on 41 occasions.

When Boone’s offensive statistics versus the Yankees are compared to his performance against the other six American League teams during that five-year period, his batting average and on-base percentage against the Bronx Bombers are found to be similar to his performance against the rest of the league. However, because his power was not as evident against the Yankees as against other teams (only nine of his 105 home runs as a Tigers came against New York), his slugging average and, consequently, his OPS were lower against the Bronx Bombers.

During the five-year period, the Tigers (with Boone playing) posted a record of 21-25 against the Yankees in Briggs Stadium. Their record in Yankee Stadium in the same timeframe was 20-30. Boone posted a much higher batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage in Detroit than in New York, but he registered more doubles and triples in the road games. The preponderance of two- and three-baggers in Yankee Stadium as compared to Briggs Stadium might reasonably be attributed to the difference in the configurations of the two ballparks.

Due to the scheduling practices of the mid-1950s, only 17 of the 96 Tigers-Yankees games in which Boone participated were played “under the lights.” The Tigers won eight of those 17 games. In 79 games played in the daytime, they won 33 and lost 46. Boone had a much higher batting average and slightly better on-base percentage in the night games, but his slugging percentages before and after dark were comparable.

When Boone’s record against right- and left-handed pitchers during the five-year period is reviewed, it can immediately be noted that he faced southpaws in only 25 percent of his plate appearances. He would have probably liked to see lefties more often because his batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and OPS were each significantly higher against them.

Identifying the individual New York hurlers whom Boone preferred to see on the mound is open to conjecture, but Aaron’s grandfather had three hits in a game against the Yankees seven times. Casey Stengel assigned the starting assignments in those seven games to a quartet of left-handers (Ed Lopat, Bob Wiesler, Whitey Ford and Tommy Byrne) and one righty (Bob Turley).

One closing bit of trivia: Boone singled to left field off the Yankees’ Bobby Shantz on June 13, 1958, in his final plate appearance as a Tiger. He was then replaced in Detroit’s lineup by pinch-runner Reno Bertoia.

BOOKSHELF: “Ty Cobb, Baseball, and American Manhood” – Review by Mark Pattison

Just when you thought everything that could be written about Tigers great Ty Cobb has been written, along comes Grand Valley State University professor Steven Elliott Tripp with a far-from ordinary biography of the Georgia Peach. This is part cultural biography, part psychological biography and part social biography of the greatest baseball player of his time.

Tripp, who teaches social and cultural American history at Grand Valley State, argues that it was Cobb’s upbringing in Georgia as a child of the South, the son of a revered educator whom he idolized, and the big-league scarring of his psyche in his early American League years with Detroit that made Cobb the man he was.

Rather than check boxes literarily marking Cobb’s each and every baseball accomplishment, Tripp pretty much lays it bare on page 2: “He was not homosexual, but he was certainly homosocial. That is, he much preferred the company of men to women.”

Tripp also dives more deeply into certain career and life markers than even recent biographers Charles Leershen (“Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty”) and Tim Hornbaker (“War on the Basepaths: The Definitive

Biography of Ty Cobb”), both of whom he references in constructing this manifesto. One of many cases in point is a somewhat familiar story of ex-Tiger Kid Elberfeld, at this time with the New York Highlanders, sticking a knee into the rookie’s neck as Ty tries unsuccessfully to steal second base -- a move known then as “the professional teach.” The anecdote is told, and Tripp retrieves Cobb’s own reminiscence of the incident. But Tripp gives a full page to Cobb’s payback and his relishing of it. “Watching the man who had humiliated him sprawling on the ground pleased Cobb immensely,” Tripp writes. Even though Cobb told the story often, sometimes embellishing the details, the truth is less important. “Perhaps what matters most is that Cobb believed something very important happened in the first month of his major league career -- that despite his poor showing as a hitter, he had completed a rite of passage, proving himself to be a man capable of going toe-to-toe with one of the game’s toughest competitors.” It also says something that Cobb came in spikes high in the twilight of his career against a young Leo Durocher, simply because to Cobb, Durocher’s body was in the way of a base that was rightfully his.

Readers will also be treated to more detail than is typically provided behind Cobb beating up Tigers teammate Ed Siever, and his attack in the stands at Hilltop Park in New York against heckler Claude Lueker.

In the South, Tripp says, reality is less importance than appearances. (This goes against the dictum “Ecce quam vidam,” shorthand Latin for “It is better to be, than to seem to be.”) Until Cobb could grab brass ring after brass ring, he was more than content to scare, bully and badger opponents real and imagined until he got what he wanted. This way of life, both on and off the field, worked for Cobb for nearly two decades in pro ball until the emergence of Babe Ruth, who could hit for both power and average. Tripp doesn’t tell the tale of Cobb prophesying to nearby sportswriters his three-homer game in St. Louis against the Browns in 1925 to demonstrate that even he could whack the spheroid over the fence, but instead his private concession at the end of the 1924 season that Ruth had indeed eclipsed him as both a player and an idol.

“Ty Cobb, Baseball, and American Manhood” not only speaks volumes about its subject, it says something about our own societal norms and how they get rearranged to meet the challenges of a new era -- that is, if you’re willing to read between the lines of a 393-page book. Published by Rowman and Littlefield, it’s an expensive volume at \$57 retail, but the reader will be richly rewarded.

SHORT STRIPES

* If you get *Tigers Stripes* by mail, you’ve noticed that our latest stamp is that of ... a tiger. It’s part of the U.S. Postal Service’s “Save Endangered Species” series, and a natural for a group like ours. We still have some Dorothy Height stamps for future issues. Not only was she a Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal winner and president of the National Council of Negro Women president, she was a neighbor of Society member Judith Urban; both lived in the same apartment complex in Washington.

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