

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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OUR 2013 CLOSER – RICK PORCELLO? – By David Raglin

The Tigers need a closer. Rookie Bruce Rondon is the current choice but not a preferred choice, and a good option was eliminated when the Washington Nationals signed former Yankee closer Rafael Soriano.

After re-signing Anibal Sanchez, the Tigers have six starters. The first four are a lock, and the choice for the fifth spot seems to be lefty Drew Smyly. That leaves four-year starter Rick Porcello the odd man out.

Despite four years in the majors, Porcello is only 24 years old, because he made the leap from high school to A-ball to Detroit. We think of Smyly as a “young” pitcher, but he is only seven months younger than Porcello. Porcello had a strong rookie year -- a 3.96 ERA at age 20, albeit with a strikeout rate of barely half a man an inning -- but since then, his ERAs have been 4.92, 4.75, and 4.59. Porcello led the league in hits allowed in 2012, even though had had his turn skipped in the rotation down the stretch in the race for the 2012 Central Division crown. In the 2012 playoffs Porcello was sent to the bullpen.

Part of the problem is considered to be the fact that Porcello is a groundball pitcher, and the Tigers’ infield has poor range. That could be a factor in the large number of hits Porcello gave up, but on the other hand, the batting average against Porcello on ground balls in 2012 was .242, just about the same as the American League average of .238. Porcello’s problem was probably more than he gave more than an average number of line drives, and struck out few batters.

That being said, why the headline suggesting Porcello would be a good choice to be the closer? He certainly has a good arm, and 24-year-old pitchers with good arms are not a dime a dozen. A Porcello trade could come back to haunt the Tigers. Our reasoning was more based on a nugget we found in Porcello’s splits on baseballreference.com: the results against Porcello based on the number of pitches thrown so far. For example, in his first 25 pitches in a game, Porcello allowed a .270 batting average, a .325 slugging percentage, and a .384 on-base percentage:

Rick Porcello’s Performance By Pitch Number, 2012

Pitch Number	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Pitch 1-25	31	185	19	50	9	0	4	14	26	.270	.325	.384	.709
Pitch 26-50	31	201	28	57	15	1	4	7	32	.284	.310	.428	.737
Pitch 51-75	31	197	25	65	19	0	2	9	31	.330	.361	.457	.817
Pitch 76-100	29	139	25	51	8	1	6	13	17	.367	.429	.568	.998
Pitch 101+	5	6	2	3	2	0	0	1	1	.500	.571	.833	1.405

As you can see from the table above, Porcello was much better early in the game in 2012. His best stats came in his first 25 pitches and got worse through the game. The table below shows that is not an aberration; he has been that way every season since 2009.

Rick Porcello’s Performance by Pitch Number, 2009-2011 and Career

Pitch Number	2009			2010			2011			Career		
	BA	OBP	SLG	BA	OBP	SLG	BA	OBP	SLG	BA	OBP	SLG
Pitch 1-25	.287	.333	.425	.253	.293	.361	.240	.294	.328	.263	.312	.374
Pitch 26-50	.218	.269	.293	.308	.344	.467	.278	.337	.422	.271	.314	.401
Pitch 51-75	.292	.343	.481	.310	.353	.421	.383	.424	.601	.330	.371	.492
Pitch 76-100	.266	.347	.495	.280	.336	.424	.260	.297	.366	.295	.355	.464
Pitch 101+	.667	.750	.667	.273	.360	.409	.231	.231	.385	.298	.355	.456

If you think about it, that is a bit surprising for a starting pitcher. Who is at the plate for those first pitches? The best hitters on the other team. There is a good reason that more runs are scored in the first inning than any other inning, because that is the only time the manager can set his batting order the way he wants to. Not that Porcello is the only starter for which this is true, but it is unusual for a starter to have his best stats in the beginning. We don't know why this happens, but it seems like a predictable pattern for Porcello.

He would probably post better stats as the closer than as a starter. He could go out there and let it go for an inning, knowing that is all he had to do. Batters would not be seeing his pitches for a second or third time though the order. Making him the closer would keep him with the Tigers, giving the team the option to move him back to the rotation, after a period to get his arm back into shape. Maybe the Tigers don't have to trade anybody to get a closer.

THE OTHER BIG AWARD BATTLE – By David Raglin

Miguel Cabrera vs. Mike Trout for MVP got all of the attention, but we were very unhappy about the outcome of another award race that was surprisingly overlooked. Justin Verlander was going for his second straight Cy Young Award, but he was beaten out in the voting by David Price of Tampa Bay. Price certainly had a great season, but we'd have voted for Verlander, and not just because he is a Tiger. Look at their stat lines below and you will see the stat that got more attention than deserved and the stats that got less attention than it should have. (WHIP = Walks + Hits / Innings Pitched.):

Justin Verlander Versus David Price: 2012 American League Cy Young Race

Pitcher	Team	G	IP	H	R	ER	HR	BB	SO	WHIP	W	L	ERA
Verlander	Detroit	33	238.1	192	81	70	19	60	239	1.06	17	8	2.64
Price	Tampa Bay	31	211.0	173	63	60	16	59	205	1.10	20	5	2.56

The stat that is overrated is “wins.” I put “wins” in quote marks because pitchers don't win games on their own. The offense has to provide them run support. Last year, Verlander had 4.0 runs of support per start and received zero to two runs of support eight times. David Price received 4.8 runs per game and the Rays scored zero to two runs six times. Some people will say that wins measure a pitcher's ability to win, like it's a character thing, no matter the run support or the defense. First of all, does anybody doubt Verlander's ability to win? That's what we thought. If you take a look at his 2012 and 2011 stats, you will see the 2012 number are marginally worse than the for 2011 Cy Young-MVP season (no disgrace there), except for the win-loss record. Did Verlander “forget” how to win during the winter of 2012? Nah, probably not.

The stat we need to pay more attention to is innings pitched. Verlander is the workhorse of the American League and threw 27.1 more innings -- 13 percent more -- than Price in 2012. The following chart shows the significance of this difference. It shows that Verlander completed the eighth inning 10 times and the ninth inning five times. That total of 15 is triple Price's five times completing eight innings or more. Price was basically a six-inning pitcher, therefore often requiring three pitchers to finish the game for him. Verlander made two more starts and lasted over a third of an inning more on average in his starts. The last column shows the number of times they were pulled mid-inning—Verlander four times and Price nine times. Durability is a key value that is often ignored by voters, and Verlander gave his team more in 2012 than did Price.

Justin Verlander and David Price, Number of Innings Completed, 2012

Pitcher	3 inn	4 inn	5 inn	6 inn	7 inn	8 inn	9 inn	Total	IP	IP/S	Mid-Inn
Verlander	0	0	2	10	6	10	5	33	238.3	7.2	4
Price	1	1	3	3	18	3	2	31	211.1	6.8	9

TIGERS, JAYS SET TO RESUME RIVALRY? – By Kevin O'Neil

Easily one of the biggest stories of the offseason involved the Toronto Blue Jays. Relegated by realignment as a middle-of-the-pack team in the AL East, the Jays through no fault of their own haven't been able to compete with the Yankees and Red Sox since winning back-to-back World Series titles in the 1990s.

The Blue Jays for years have tried to build a contending team through their own farm system along with limited spending with nothing to show for it. All that has changed. In 2013, for the first time in years, both the Jays and the Tigers could both be contenders. What does this mean to Tigers fans? A possible renewal of the intense rivalry that fans of the two teams enjoyed in the '80s.

No doubt the Jays looked at how the Tigers dismantled the Yankees in four straight last October to win the AL pennant and a trip to the World Series, and the trouble the Red Sox had last year, and saw this as their opportunity to climb back into contention in the East with one blockbuster move after another.

The rivalry between Detroit and Toronto started in 1983 when the Tigers finished second to the Orioles and the Jays had their first winning season ever. It set the stage for 1984, when the rivalry started to get intense.

Everyone remembers the Tigers' 35-5 start, the best in baseball history. The Jays' start wasn't quite as spectacular. When the two teams met for the first time in June, Detroit was only six games ahead of Toronto. The first game of the series was one of the most memorable in Tigers history as Dave Bergman, who joined the team at the end of spring training, hit a dramatic three-run homer in the bottom of the 10th to give Detroit a 6-3 victory. The home run came after Bergman fouled off seven two-strike pitches, in a 13-pitch at bat seen by a national television audience. Sparky Anderson later called it the greatest at-bat he ever saw.

The Jays refused to go away. When the teams met in September at Exhibition Stadium in Toronto the Tigers swept all three games, ending any hope Toronto would climb back into contention. A small note: Toronto's pitching staff had a 17-game winner that year named Doyle Alexander. More on that in a minute.

Everyone remembers the Tigers went on to win the World Series that October and things were primed for a repeat in '85. The Jays, however, had something to say about that. When they first met that season the Jays were 36-16 and Tigers were struggling at 27-22. This time Toronto swept the Tigers and Detroit was never really close again that year.

The 1987 season produced some of the most dramatic baseball the two teams ever enjoyed and some of the greatest pennant drama ever witnessed at Tiger Stadium. After an 11-19 start, Detroit started to climb back into contention at the end of May. Two key additions sparked the Tigers' rival. Four-time NL batting champion Bill Madlock was acquired from the Dodgers and Doyle Alexander was picked up from Atlanta for John Smoltz in what is still one of the most talked-about trades in Tigers history. Alexander went 9-0 for Detroit as the Tigers won all 11 of his starts. Everything was set for the final week of the season.

Detroit traveled to Toronto for a four-game series the last weekend of September trailing the Jays. After losing the first three games, Detroit needed a dramatic Kirk Gibson home run in the ninth to tie the score and a Darrell Evans homer in the 11th to salvage one win. Alexander pitched 10.2 innings, allowing two runs. Unbeknownst to the Jays, they would not win another game the rest of the season. The Tigers left Toronto and returned home trailing Toronto by 3.5 games. After splitting four games with the Orioles, they welcomed the Jays, needing a sweep to win the pennant. The Tigers won the first game on Friday night 4-3 behind Alexander again, and won on Saturday thanks to an Alan Trammell ground ball going through the legs of shortstop Manny Lee to give the Tigers' a 3-2 win. Detroit was now one full game ahead of the Jays with one game to play. More than 51,000 fans saw Frank Tanana pitch a complete-game, 1-0 shutout thanks to a Larry Herndon solo homer. It would secure the Tigers' last playoff berth until 2006.

The offseason brought more controversy which still exists this day, as George Bell of the Jays beat out Alan Trammell for the AL MVP award. We know Trammell's name is always mentioned for Hall of Fame consideration, and writers consider his candidacy borderline at best, but an MVP award might be just what he needed on his resume to put him over the top.

Once the Tigers switched to the AL Central the rivalry seemed to dissipate. Chicago and Minnesota have replaced the Yankees, Red Sox and Blue Jays. The rivalry was stirred up for at least one night a couple of seasons ago. Fans still remember opening night in Toronto in 2008 when Blue Jays fans pelted the Tigers with debris, prompting Jim Leyland to pull his team off the field.

Tigers fans won't have to wait long to see the retooled Blue Jays as they play at Comerica Park April 9-11. Everyone will be referring to the series as a possible playoff preview.

Many writers and Las Vegas oddsmakers have already picked the Jays as AL champions, which means a Tigers-Jays matchup this year will have the same amount of excitement, anticipation and drama that we saw in

the '80s. Although both teams play in new stadiums we can bet that Comerica Park will have thousands of Jays fans and Rogers Centre will have thousands of Tigers fans when the two teams play.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF – By Mark Pattison

Fred Hutchinson's career was one that lay largely in eclipse. A boyhood hometown hero in Seattle, the predictions of instant stardom in Detroit didn't quite materialize. Although he put in 10 seasons on the mound for the Tigers, he was outshone by the talents of Hal Newhouser, Dizzy Trout, Tommy Bridges and Virgil Trucks. His two-plus years as Tigers manager was in the shadow of the worst seasons the team had experienced to that point. Being a player's favorite took a back seat to his utter distaste for losing, with clubhouse furniture often the worse for his rages. When he piloted the Cincinnati Reds to the World Series in 1961 and kept them competitive in subsequent seasons, that accomplishment was overlooked with the advent of Sparky Anderson and the Big Red Machine. Then, his entire baseball career was eclipsed by his valiant and losing struggle with cancer, succumbing after the 1964 season.

Two recent books fill out the life and career of the Bear quite nicely. Doug Wilson's "Fred Hutchinson and the 1964 Cincinnati Reds" tells Hutch's story with verve. Of course, Wilson focuses on the 1964 season, when the Reds had the chance to grab the NL pennant on the last weekend of the season with the unexpected collapse of the Philadelphia Phillies. But he lingers on Hutchinson's developmental years as a pitcher and manager with Detroit in the book's early going. Wilson sees Hutchinson as a noble being, undeserving of the fate handed him but all the more ennobled for doing battle with the cancer that claimed him. Even those familiar with Hutchinson's back story might be surprised to learn that his father and brother were both doctors, and it was the brother who delivered the cancer diagnosis in the 1963-64 offseason. Wilson laces the texts with quotes testifying to his subject's attributes as both a player and a man. It's precisely those qualities that caused baseball to name an award for him, the Reds to retire his No. 1 jersey after his death, and why there is a cancer center in Seattle named after their sandlots' favorite son.

Mike Shannon (no, not the St. Louis third baseman-outfielder of the 1960s), a year after Wilson's 2010 book, worked with illustrator Scott Hannig to fashion "Hutch: Baseball's Fred Hutchinson and a Legacy of Courage." The result is a graphic biography -- not a graphic novel in the superhero-dystopian comic book sense because there are no glib caricatures to be seen in this book. And it's a darn fine illustrated bio. It treads much the same ground as Wilson's volume, but it relies on Hannig's art to carry the tale along. True, the captions can get a little long, but there are citations for nearly half of the illustrations on each page; they look like copyright symbols to the untrained eye. And the stories and anecdotes found in the footnotes that would never have fit in the graphic-bio concept make for rewarding reading themselves. This would be an ideal book for a young person getting interested in the history of our favorite game.

Both "Hutch" (\$17.99) and "Fred Hutchinson and the 1964 Cincinnati Reds" (\$29.95) are published by McFarland and Co. in Jefferson, N.C. They're available for order online at www.mcfarlandbooks.com or by phone at 800-253-2187.

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