

# Tigers Stripes

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## JOE THE CLOSER – By David Raglin

It's been a busy offseason for the Tigers, so much that in the last issue of *Tigers Stripes*, we ran out of room before we could look at all of their moves. This month, we will focus on the Joe Nathan and Rajai Davis signings, as well as looking at baserunning.

The short answer is that I like that the Tigers signed Nathan. Part of that is personal. My wife and I have a fantasy baseball team, and when Nathan was traded from the Giants to the Twins in 2004 to be the Minnesota closer, we drafted him, and his 44 saves helped us win the league. Ever since then, we have liked him (even when we drafted him just before he had Tommy John surgery and was out for the 2010 season).

However, the main reason I like the two-year deal is that Joe Nathan is a very good pitcher. He may be 39 years old and he's had Tommy John surgery and he has lost something on his fastball. But, as you can see from his stats below, he has been quite consistent and he is still an awfully good pitcher.

Nathan was born in Houston but graduated from high school in New York and went to Stony Brook University in New York to play shortstop. The Giants drafted and signed him in 2005 as a shortstop, but he didn't hit. The Giants tried to convince him to become a pitcher, but he instead went back to school and got his degree. After graduation, he decided to return to the Giants and pitch.

### Joe Nathan, Detroit Tigers Closer, Age 39, Throws Right

| Year  | Team          | G   | IP    | H   | R   | ER  | HR | BB  | SO  | W  | L  | SV  | ERA  |
|-------|---------------|-----|-------|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|----|----|-----|------|
| 1999  | San Francisco | 19  | 90.1  | 84  | 45  | 42  | 17 | 46  | 54  | 7  | 4  | 1   | 4.18 |
| 2000  | San Francisco | 20  | 93.1  | 89  | 63  | 54  | 12 | 63  | 61  | 5  | 2  | 0   | 5.21 |
| 2002  | San Francisco | 4   | 3.2   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0  | 0   | 2   | 0  | 0  | 0   | 0.00 |
| 2003  | San Francisco | 78  | 79.0  | 51  | 26  | 26  | 7  | 33  | 83  | 12 | 4  | 0   | 2.96 |
| 2004  | Minnesota     | 73  | 72.1  | 48  | 14  | 13  | 3  | 23  | 89  | 1  | 2  | 44  | 1.62 |
| 2005  | Minnesota     | 69  | 70.0  | 46  | 22  | 21  | 5  | 22  | 94  | 7  | 4  | 43  | 2.70 |
| 2006  | Minnesota     | 64  | 68.1  | 38  | 12  | 12  | 3  | 16  | 95  | 7  | 0  | 36  | 1.58 |
| 2007  | Minnesota     | 68  | 71.2  | 54  | 15  | 15  | 4  | 19  | 77  | 4  | 2  | 37  | 1.88 |
| 2008  | Minnesota     | 68  | 67.2  | 43  | 13  | 10  | 5  | 18  | 74  | 1  | 2  | 39  | 1.33 |
| 2009  | Minnesota     | 70  | 68.2  | 42  | 16  | 16  | 7  | 22  | 89  | 2  | 2  | 47  | 2.10 |
| 2011  | Minnesota     | 48  | 44.2  | 38  | 26  | 24  | 7  | 14  | 43  | 2  | 1  | 14  | 4.84 |
| 2012  | Texas         | 66  | 64.1  | 55  | 23  | 20  | 7  | 13  | 78  | 3  | 5  | 37  | 2.80 |
| 2013  | Texas         | 67  | 64.2  | 36  | 10  | 10  | 2  | 22  | 73  | 6  | 2  | 43  | 1.39 |
| Total | 13 Years      | 714 | 858.2 | 625 | 285 | 263 | 79 | 311 | 912 | 57 | 30 | 341 | 2.76 |

He made the majors in 1999 and mostly started in 1999 and 2000. However, he struggled in the rotation and needed shoulder surgery in 2000. He spent 2001 and most of 2002 in the minors before returning to the majors in 2003 as a middle reliever. He pitched very well that season and was included in an infamous trade (for the Giants), going to Minnesota with pitchers Francisco Liriano and Boof Bonser for catcher A.J. Pierzynski. He became the Twins' closer and was one of the most consistent closers in the game for six seasons. In the spring of 2010, he had Tommy John surgery and missed the 2010 season. He had his worst season as a reliever in 2011 coming back from the surgery and left Minnesota for a two-year deal from Texas.

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As you can see, he had an excellent season in 2013. He allowed a ridiculous low of hits per innings pitched (the best of his career) and had a microscopic 1.39 ERA. In 67 games, he allowed more than one run only one time. That is a pretty amazing, and important, statistic. The most discouraging games are often those where the closer blows up and lets the lead get away. Nathan was very consistent last season.

Of course, that statistic is meaningful only in context. Below is a table that shows the distribution of runs allowed for Nathan in 2013, Nathan in previous seasons, former Tigers closers, and the top 10 pitchers in saves in 2013, as well as the percentage of appearances where the pitchers allowed two or more runs. For example, Nathan allowed no runs in 58 appearances, one run in eight games, and two runs once, and one percent of the time (1 / 67), he allowed two or more runs.

**Runs Allowed Distribution, Various Closers**

| Pitcher-Yr  | 0  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4+ | %2+ | Pitcher-Yr | 0  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4+ | %2+ |
|-------------|----|----|---|---|----|-----|------------|----|----|---|---|----|-----|
| Nathan-13   | 58 | 8  | 1 | 0 | 0  | 1%  | Balfour-13 | 53 | 8  | 1 | 2 | 1  | 6%  |
| Nathan-12   | 53 | 6  | 4 | 3 | 0  | 11% | Chapman-13 | 56 | 7  | 4 | 1 | 0  | 7%  |
| Nathan-11   | 32 | 8  | 6 | 2 | 0  | 17% | Holland-13 | 60 | 6  | 1 | 1 | 0  | 3%  |
| Nathan-09   | 60 | 6  | 2 | 1 | 1  | 6%  | Johnson-13 | 55 | 11 | 6 | 0 | 2  | 11% |
| Benoit-13   | 55 | 9  | 1 | 0 | 1  | 3%  | Kimbrel-13 | 62 | 3  | 2 | 1 | 0  | 4%  |
| Valverde-13 | 16 | 2  | 1 | 0 | 1  | 10% | Reed-13    | 49 | 12 | 5 | 0 | 2  | 10% |
| Valverde-12 | 52 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 1  | 13% | Rivera-13  | 52 | 8  | 4 | 0 | 0  | 6%  |
| Valverde-11 | 63 | 6  | 3 | 3 | 0  | 8%  | Romo-13    | 52 | 7  | 5 | 1 | 0  | 9%  |
| Jones-00    | 54 | 5  | 4 | 2 | 2  | 12% | Soriano-13 | 53 | 9  | 4 | 1 | 1  | 9%  |

That 1 percent figure is the lowest of any of the closers presented. Other closers who did especially well are Greg Holland of Kansas City, and the consensus top closer in the game, Craig Kimbrel of the Braves. Mariano Rivera never allowed more than two runs a game, and as you might remember, two of the four times he gave up two runs were in one weekend against the Tigers.

Nathan himself did not do well in this statistic in 2011 and 2012, the years after the surgery, but in 2009 and prior to that, he did pretty well. Another pitcher who did well was Joaquin Benoit last season, allowing two or more runs only twice, further evidence that he did a very good job helping to stabilize the Tigers' pen last year. That is in contrast to Jose Valverde in 2011 and 2012. Valverde was famously 49-for-49 in save situations in 2011 but pitched poorly in non-save situations.

There is a debate on whether the Tigers paid too much for a closer, and whether closers are paid too much given their low number of innings pitched, especially since Detroit signed Nathan a few days after trading Doug Fister for two reserves and a prospect.

I have no problem with that, for two reasons. First of all, while closer don't face that many batters, they face quite a few batters in critical situations. A couple of months ago, we discussed high-, medium- and low-leverage situations. High-leverage situations are the once that have the biggest potential to change the result of the game, and about 20 percent of all plate appearances are high-leverage. Last year, Nathan was on the mound for 140 plate appearances in high-leverage situations (out of 250 plate appearances). To compare, Justin Verlander had 161 high-leverage plate appearances (out of 925 total), Max Scherzer 129 of 836, Anibal Sanchez 103 of 746, Doug Fister 177 of 881, and Rick Porcello 103 of 746. Second of all, rightly or wrongly, that is the price of closers as determined by the market. There is nothing more demoralizing than a closer who can't hold a lead, so each team needs one. Sometimes a team can fall into a closer, as the Tigers did last year and the Red Sox did with Koji Uehara, but as we recall last year, that can be really risky for a team that is trying to win the World Series.

Also, while Nathan is 39 years old, he still is a very good pitcher. His fastball has lost some bite over the years, but he has compensated by developing a two-seam fastball and his veteran knowledge of the game. Except for the Tommy John recovery time, he has been a top-notch closer. After the roller-coaster situation of the last few years, I think Tigers fans will appreciate the stability at the end of the game.

**NEW TIGER OUTFIELDER “DASH” DAVIS** – By David Raglin

The 2013 Tigers were known for their lack of speed on the basepaths, and they signed veteran outfielder Rajai Davis to help combat that deficiency. The right-handed hitting 33-year old former Pirate, Giant, Athletic, and Blue Jay signed a two-year contract with the Tigers to be the right-handed part of a platoon in left field as well as to provide speed and defense off the bench. Davis also can play all three outfield positions in general better than average. Last year, he played 57 games in left field, 16 games in center field, and 35 games in right field.

Davis does not have a powerful bat, with only six home runs last year and no season with above-average runs created per game since 2008. However, that is a little deceptive. Since he was signed to be a platoon player, let’s look at his statistics separately versus left-handers and right-handers.

**Rajai Davis, Platoon Statistics, 2009-2013**

| Versus Lefthanded Pitching  |      |     |    |    |    |     |    |     |      |      |      |     |      |
|-----------------------------|------|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|-----|------|------|------|-----|------|
| Year                        | AB   | H   | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO  | BA   | OBP  | SLG  | RC  | RC/G |
| 2009                        | 136  | 43  | 7  | 2  | 0  | 12  | 12 | 19  | .316 | .376 | .397 | 21  | 5.7  |
| 2010                        | 138  | 42  | 10 | 1  | 2  | 15  | 10 | 13  | .304 | .349 | .435 | 22  | 5.8  |
| 2011                        | 80   | 23  | 8  | 3  | 0  | 5   | 9  | 17  | .288 | .367 | .463 | 13  | 5.9  |
| 2012                        | 151  | 43  | 9  | 1  | 4  | 14  | 12 | 35  | .285 | .345 | .437 | 23  | 5.5  |
| 2013                        | 116  | 37  | 10 | 1  | 2  | 9   | 11 | 19  | .319 | .383 | .474 | 22  | 7.2  |
| Total                       | 621  | 188 | 44 | 8  | 8  | 55  | 54 | 103 | .303 | .363 | .438 | 102 | 6.0  |
| Versus Righthanded Pitching |      |     |    |    |    |     |    |     |      |      |      |     |      |
| Year                        | AB   | H   | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO  | BA   | OBP  | SLG  | RC  | RC/G |
| 2009                        | 254  | 76  | 20 | 3  | 3  | 36  | 17 | 51  | .299 | .352 | .437 | 39  | 5.6  |
| 2010                        | 387  | 107 | 18 | 2  | 3  | 37  | 16 | 65  | .276 | .309 | .357 | 44  | 4.0  |
| 2011                        | 240  | 53  | 13 | 3  | 1  | 24  | 6  | 46  | .221 | .239 | .313 | 18  | 2.4  |
| 2012                        | 296  | 72  | 15 | 2  | 4  | 29  | 17 | 67  | .243 | .290 | .348 | 31  | 3.5  |
| 2013                        | 215  | 49  | 6  | 1  | 4  | 15  | 10 | 48  | .228 | .273 | .321 | 20  | 3.0  |
| Total                       | 1392 | 357 | 72 | 11 | 15 | 141 | 66 | 277 | .256 | .295 | .356 | 151 | 3.7  |

Davis has consistently hit lefthanded pitchers very well. If you look at the total versus lefties over the last five seasons, it adds up to about one full season of a regular player, and then you can see he might not have much home run power, but he does have a lot of doubles and a good on-base percentage. He will make a good half of a platoon in left field.

The odd thing about the move for the Tigers, though, is that the guy he will be platooning with, Andy Dirks, does not have that much of a platoon differential. Against right-handers in his career, Dirks has a split line (batting average/on-base percentage/slugging percentage) of .286/.342/.416 compared to .267/.323/.410 versus lefthanders. That minimizes the value of a platoon in left. Furthermore, Davis is a righthanded hitter, a commodity the Tigers are already overstocked with and is shared by the other two regular outfielders, Austin Jackson and Torii Hunter. That limits the opportunities for Davis to pinch hit to help get the Tigers the platoon advantage and make use of his outfield versatility.

The chart below shows how Davis’ main asset, his speed and baserunning, compares to other 2013 and 2014 Tigers. When we think about baserunning, we tend to think about stolen bases, and Davis was one of the best in the league there. However, it is much more than that. Many people, including then-manager Jim Leyland, lamented the lack of speed meant the Tigers were often playing station-to-station baseball. This was especially apparent when the balls that were home runs for Prince Fielder in 2012 turned into singles in 2013. The Tigers left 1,250 runners on base in 2013, the most in the league and well above the league average of 1,126. Even given the fact that men left on base and runs scored is positively correlated, that is still a problem.

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The first three columns look at extra bases on hits, such as going from first to third on a single, first to home on a double, and second to home on a single. For example, 81 times, Austin Jackson had an opportunity to take an extra base (for example, he was on first base when a single was hit), and 37 times he took the extra base. His 46 percent rate was very good; the bottom line shows the MLB average was 40 percent. Jackson took 23 other bases (such as advancing on a sacrifice fly, a wild pitch, and a passed ball), and was thrown out on the bases or picked off four times. The GDP and stolen base columns are self-explanatory.

The BR Gain column is the extra bases a player gained on the basepaths compared to an average player in the same situations, with a large penalty for times out on the basepaths. SB Gain is the gain due to stolen bases minus cost of caught stealing, and Net Gain is the number of bases gained (or lost) compared to an average player. Not surprisingly, the Tigers' -32 mark was the worst in baseball in 2013.

Davis, compared to the other Tigers, is in another world. A lot of that is due to his extraordinary stolen base success, but he also had a +15 gain in other baserunning situations, not bad considering he played in only 108 games. The Tigers' other big acquisition, Ian Kinsler, is also an excellent baserunner. Prince Fielder, despite his size, was actually not a bad baserunner. The worst baserunner on the team by far was Victor Martinez. He had a very poor extra base on hit rate and a high ground into double play rate.

### Baserunning, Detroit Tigers 2013 and 2014 Players, From the 2013 Season

| Tiger        | ---- Extra Base on Hit---- |          |         | Bases Taken | Out on Bases | ---Grounded Into DP--- |          |         | Stolen Bases | Caught Stealing | BR Gain | SB Gain | Net Gain |
|--------------|----------------------------|----------|---------|-------------|--------------|------------------------|----------|---------|--------------|-----------------|---------|---------|----------|
|              | Advance                    | Opportun | Percent |             |              | GDP                    | Opportun | Percent |              |                 |         |         |          |
| Davis        | 9                          | 23       | 39%     | 17          | 0            | 8                      | 77       | 10%     | 45           | 6               | 15      | 33      | 48       |
| Jackson      | 37                         | 81       | 46%     | 23          | 4            | 12                     | 100      | 12%     | 8            | 4               | 12      | 0       | 12       |
| Kinsler      | 41                         | 67       | 61%     | 20          | 5            | 5                      | 87       | 6%      | 15           | 11              | 17      | -7      | 10       |
| Dirks        | 13                         | 52       | 25%     | 10          | 2            | 6                      | 110      | 5%      | 7            | 1               | -1      | 5       | 4        |
| Cabrera      | 23                         | 81       | 28%     | 25          | 3            | 19                     | 143      | 13%     | 3            | 0               | 0       | 3       | 3        |
| Fielder      | 22                         | 76       | 29%     | 25          | 3            | 20                     | 147      | 14%     | 1            | 1               | 1       | -1      | 0        |
| Hunter       | 32                         | 62       | 52%     | 18          | 8            | 11                     | 136      | 8%      | 3            | 2               | -1      | -1      | -2       |
| Peralta      | 19                         | 55       | 35%     | 15          | 3            | 9                      | 91       | 10%     | 3            | 3               | 1       | -3      | -2       |
| Iglesias     | 17                         | 37       | 46%     | 12          | 5            | 7                      | 64       | 11%     | 2            | 1               | -4      | 1       | -3       |
| Infante      | 23                         | 48       | 48%     | 12          | 5            | 11                     | 98       | 11%     | 5            | 2               | -4      | 1       | -3       |
| Avila        | 10                         | 42       | 24%     | 12          | 2            | 10                     | 84       | 12%     | 0            | 0               | -3      | 0       | -3       |
| Martinez     | 17                         | 77       | 22%     | 18          | 3            | 23                     | 130      | 18%     | 0            | 2               | -19     | -4      | -23      |
| Tigers 2013  | 241                        | 720      | 33%     | 186         | 41           | 147                    | 1320     | 11%     | 35           | 20              | -27     | -5      | -32      |
| MLB Avg 2013 | 221                        | 551      | 40%     | 160         | 39           | 125                    | 1123     | 11%     | 90           | 33              | 0       | 0       | 0        |

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