

Tigers Stripes

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EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT IAN KINSLER – By David Raglin

He's been a Tiger for a year now, but it seems like we don't hear much about Ian Kinsler. The trade that brought him to the Tigers was billed much more as "Prince Fielder leaves the Tigers" than "The Tigers get Ian Kinsler." The two things that made the trade work was the fact that the Rangers had a replacement for Kinsler and Kinsler had a large salary (about \$16 million) to help offset Fielder's cost. As we know, it turned into a genius trade as Fielder was hurt for the first time in his career and the Rangers finished last while Kinsler played 160 games at second base for the division-winning Tigers.

What kind of season did Ian Kinsler have and what should we expect for 2015? Let's start at the plate. Here are Kinsler's stats for 2014, with the previous three seasons shown for comparison's sake:

Ian Kinsler, Batting Statistics, 2011-2014

Year	Tm	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
2011	TEX	155	620	121	158	34	4	32	77	89	71	.255	.355	.477	.832	110	6.0
2012	TEX	157	655	105	168	42	5	19	72	60	90	.256	.326	.423	.749	91	4.7
2013	TEX	136	545	85	151	31	2	13	72	51	59	.277	.344	.413	.757	80	5.1
2014	DET	161	684	100	188	40	4	17	92	29	79	.275	.307	.420	.727	84	4.3

First of all, Kinsler was durable. He played in all but one game (160 at second and one as a pinch-hitter) and led the league in plate appearances (736) and at-bats. (Batting leadoff for a good offensive team helped that.) In terms of key statistics like on-base percentage and runs created per game, Kinsler actually had a worse season in 2014 than in 2011, 2012 or 2013. In fact, in terms of runs created per game, it was his worst season of his career.

Kinsler's walks were way down in 2014, too. In 2011, he walked in 12.2 percent of his plate appearances, a career high. In 2012 and 2013 it was 8.2 and 8.3, much closer to the 8.9 percent for his whole career. In 2014, he only walked in 4.0 percent of his plate appearances. It wasn't just walks. In his career, he had seen between 3.77 and 3.91 pitches per plate appearances; in 2014 it was 3.51. The difference in strikes per plate appearance was not much different, but in 2014, he only saw 1.16 balls per plate appearance, compared to between 1.43 and 1.64 balls per plate appearance in his career. After swinging at the first pitch in 17.1, 18.5 and 13.7 percent of plate appearances the last three seasons with Texas, he swung at the first pitch 25.3 percent of the time in 2014 for Detroit.

Kinsler had a great first half of the season and a poor second half, as you can see below. (In fact, the break between good and bad was right at the All-Star Break.)

Ian Kinsler, Before and After the All-Star Game, 2014

Hitting 2014	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Before ASG	90	379	64	115	26	2	11	51	18	41	.303	.337	.470	.806	60	5.9
After ASG	71	305	36	73	14	2	6	41	11	38	.239	.270	.357	.627	29	3.3

He certainly had All-Star hitting stats in the first half of the season, and he did in fact make the All-Star team, but he wasn't the same hitter after returning from Minnesota. We don't have the detailed pitch

information that we presented above by first half/second half, but his strike zone judgment (looking at strikeouts and walks) did deteriorate greatly in the second half of the season.

Kinsler created 4.3 runs per game and the average major league team scored 4.1 runs a game, so Kinsler was a bit above average offensively. However, we have to take into account he was a second baseman. Tiger second basemen (which was Kinsler for all but two games) were fifth in the league in runs created per game, well behind Houston (Jose Altuve), Seattle (Robinson Cano), and Minnesota (Brian Dozier), and right around Los Angeles (Howie Kendrick) and Boston (Dustin Pedroia). So, among second basemen, he was good but not great at the plate.

There was one other thing he was good at in 2014 at the plate. Baseball Reference classifies each plate appearance as a high-, medium-, or low-leverage situation. About 20 percent of plate appearances are high leverage, the plate appearances that have the most potential to change the result of a game. On average, about 40 percent are medium leverage and about 40 percent are low leverage. As you can see, Kinsler was best in 2014 in the key high leverage situations:

Ian Kinsler in High, Medium, and Low Leverage Situations in 2014

Split	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	CS	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
High Leverage	112	32	38	7	2	4	33	6	2	3	10	0.339	0.350	0.545	0.895
Medium Leverage	259	42	60	16	1	6	25	7	1	13	27	0.232	0.276	0.371	0.647
Low Leverage	313	26	90	17	1	7	33	2	1	13	42	0.288	0.318	0.415	0.734

Does that mean Ian Kinsler is a great clutch player and he should be better in key situations again in 2015? No, it does not. For example, Kinsler performed about the same in high-, medium-, and low-leverage situations in 2013, and actually was much worse in high-leverage situations in 2012 than in medium and low ones.

Now let's look at baserunning. When talking baserunning, fans often focus on stolen bases and times caught stealing, but there is much more to baserunning than that. For example, Kinsler took the extra base on a hit (going from first to third on a single, second to home on a single, or first to home on a double 40 times in 63 opportunities, 63 percent of the time, while being thrown out only three times. That is much higher than the major league average of 41 percent. That is similar to Kinsler's rate for previous seasons.

(Rajai Davis, by comparison, took the extra base for a 65% success rate, and was thrown out only one time. At the other end of the spectrum, Victor Martinez took the extra base 18 times in 87 opportunities, 21 percent, and Alex Avila took the extra base six times in 47 chances, 13 percent.)

Baseball Info Systems, the source for this data, scored him a +6 for baserunning (all bases gained minus three times the number of times thrown out on the basepaths), and a +7 for his 15 steals and four times caught stealing (steals minus two times caught stealing), for an overall baserunning score of +13. That is good but not great; 16 players had +30 or greater, with Ben Revere of Philadelphia at +54, and Kinsler's teammate Rajai Davis had a +37. (On the low end, Avila had a -31 and Martinez had a -29.)

Now let's look at fielding. This is where Kinsler really shone in 2014. There are a bunch of modern fielding rating systems. Probably the two most respected are Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) from Baseball Info Systems and Ultimate Zone Rating (UZR) from Fangraphs. DRS had Kinsler leading major league baseball with a +20, meaning he saved 20 runs more than an average second baseman. UZR had him at +13.0, second to Dustin Pedroia. The rule of thumb is that 10 runs is worth a win, so Kinsler with his glove alone was worth about a win and a half to two wins to the Tigers in 2014. Especially given the Tigers' defensive woes last year, that was very big. With Jose Iglesias back and Anthony Gose in center field a lot in 2015, and Alex Avila behind the plate, the Tigers might actually be one of the strongest teams in baseball up the middle.

Finally, how good a teammate is Ian Kinsler? That is something we don't have stats for, or much at all actually. Kinsler is not the kind of player who draws a lot of attention to himself. However, there was an article in the *Detroit News* by Tony Paul recently that talked about Kinsler's influence on the player that exploded on the scene last year, J. D. Martinez. Soon after joining the Tigers, Kinsler and Martinez had a marathon session

where Kinsler helped Martinez with the mental side of baseball. From then on, whenever Martinez needed time, Kinsler made himself available, and we all know what the results were for Martinez and the Tigers.

A large part of the motivation for Kinsler's trade to Detroit may have been the opportunity to part ways with Fielder and his contract, but Kinsler has shown how valuable of a player he is. He had a WAR, wins above replacement, of 5.5, 11th best in the American League among position players. That means that it is estimated that he was worth 5.5 wins to the Tigers overall compared to a replacement-level player off the streets. While a lot of that is defense, where the measurements are not as sure, he clearly was a very valuable player to the Tigers in 2014 and hopefully will be in 2015.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "YESTERDAY'S TIGER HEROES" – Reviewed by Mark Pattison

The word "heroes" gets used a lot these days, but heroes are most precious when they are one's own. And for a young Detroit Tigers fan, the players of your boyhood (and girlhood!) are the ones who stay with you the longest. That's what happened to Jim Sargent, who grew up in Flint, Michigan.

Subtitled "The Detroit Tigers and the 1956 Baseball Season," Sargent was 13 years old when the 1956 Tigers took the stage. It wasn't a great team -- don't we wish they all were? -- but it did have the American League's best record in the second half of the season. Although the second-half push propelled the Bengals (a common alternative nickname until an American Football League expansion bestowed that name on a team from Cincinnati) to a winning record, it wasn't enough to push them into the "first division"; in pre-divisional play, the "first division" was those teams in the upper half of the standings. What's more, Al Kaline was coming off his dream season, besting Ty Cobb as the majors' youngest-ever batting champion, having hit .340 with 200 hits as a 20-year-old in 1955.

There was also change afoot in the front office. Bucky Harris, the onetime "boy skipper" who took the Washington Senators to a World Series title in 1925, was in his second year of his second stint as Detroit's manager, but by this time he was so laconic he would have made Uncle Joe from "Petticoat Junction" seem peripatetic. And the ownership situation would be resolved midseason as the Briggs estate finally found the right buyers -- a syndicate featuring Michigan radio magnates John Fetzer of WKZO in Kalamazoo and Fred Knorr of WKMJ (later "Keener 13," WKNR) in Dearborn -- at the right price: a then-record \$5.5 million for a franchise.

That's the setting for Sargent's book. One oft-overlooked component of books that focus on a single season of a particular team is the games themselves, and Sargent devotes a hefty paragraph to each of Detroit's games in what was then a 154-game season. Or should I have said "Hoefly"? Because 1956 was the season when starting pitcher Billy Hoefly came into his own with his first 20-win season (although his only All-Star nod came the year before in the middle of a 16-7 slate). The Tigers also had a young Harvey Kuenn who was a top batting-average guy at shortstop. All these players -- and even the benchwarmers -- are given profiles in the book.

Sargent, a retired history professor, is no neophyte at writing, as he wrote numerous articles for the late, lamented Old Tyme Baseball News, and a fistful of biographies for the Society for American Baseball Research's Baseball Biography Project, which has just reached 3,000 bios. He recently authored "We Were the All-American Girls," a series of interviews of players from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League." In short, his prose is serviceable and even lively.

You're also sure to like the many baseball cards from Sargent's personal collection used to illustrate Yesterday's Tiger Heroes." A lot of Topps 1956 cards are used, but my favorite are the 1955 Bowmans, which have the player's picture appear as if on a TV screen.

If you are a retiree like Sargent, you may have your own indelible memories about the 1956 Tigers. This book will serve to enhance them. Or, if you're just nuts about the Tigers, this tome is a welcome addition from an era long ignored.

"Yesterday's Tiger Heroes" is published by Wynwidyn Press in Pinckney, Mich., and retails for \$24.99 online. Or, you can purchase it for \$25 postpaid, signed by Jim Sargent himself, if you send a check made out to him to Jim Sargent, 5202 Fordwick Dr., Roanoke, VA 24018. Get in touch with him at Jsargent3@cox.net.

REMEMBERING THE TIGERS' FIRST WORLD SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP -- By Todd Miller

The main characteristics of the Tigers franchise are tradition and a scarcity of World Series championships -- only four to date. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the Tigers' first Fall Classic victory, a six-game triumph over the Chicago Cubs.

Under the leadership of second-year player-manager Mickey Cochrane, the Tigers went 93-58, finishing three games ahead of the Yankees. The team started out 2-9 and was only 20-18 in late May. From late-June to mid-August, the Bengals went on a 35-10 tear and wrested first place from the Bronx Bombers. The team remained hot through Labor Day, posting an 85-44 mark in early September. Over the final weeks of the season, however, the bats went cold. The Tigers clinched the pennant on September 21 by sweeping a doubleheader from the St. Louis Browns at Navin Field. Tommy Bridges prevailed in the opener, 6-2, and Elden Auker hurled a complete-game, 2-0 shutout in the second game.

First baseman Hank Greenberg paced the Tigers' offense with a league-leading 36 home runs and 170 RBI. Charlie Gehringer hit .330 while collecting 201 hits, 19 home runs and 108 RBI while leading AL second basemen in assists and fielding percentage. Shortstop Billy Rogell hit .275 while walking 80 times and leading his position in double plays turned and fielding percentage. Third baseman Marv Owen had a down year.

The Tigers' outfield featured Goose Goslin in left, a platoon of Jo-Jo White and Gee Walker in center and Pete Fox in right. Goslin had led the Washington Senators to a World Series championship in 1924 and AL pennants in 1925 and 1933 before getting traded to Detroit.

In the Series, Hank Greenberg broke his wrist in a Game 2 home plate collision with catcher Gabby Hartnett. Fox picked up the slack, hitting safely in all six games, compiling a .385 average. The pitching hero was Bridges, who won Game 2 and went the distance in the Game 6 clincher at Navin Field.

That same year, the Lions won their first NFL championship, the Red Wings earned their first NHL title and 21 year-old Joe Louis established himself as a heavyweight contender by defeating Primo Carnera and Max Baer, foreshadowing America's victory over the Axis powers in World War II. It's what got Detroit its moniker as "City of Champions."

SHORT STRIPES

▶ Barbara Scrivener, the wife of onetime Tigers infielder Chuck Scrivener, who toiled for Detroit 1975-77, is looking for any video of her husband in a Tigers uniform – DVD, VHS, any format you may have. If you've got something, get in touch with Society sabermetrician David Raglin, who knows how to contact Barbara.

▶ Ty Cobb had a lifetime batting average of .366, but he hit .401 at the Polo Grounds, where the Yankees played through 1922. Not too shabby!

▶ Miguel Cabrera had a "BPA" (bases per plate appearance) average of .527 in 2014 -- a bit below his typical standards. In 2013, his BPA was a scintillating .663, and it was the fifth .600-plus BPA season of his career. The best news is that Cabrera's a few days ahead of schedule in his recovery from offseason surgery!

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