

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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PAYROLL AND THE LUXURY TAX – By David Raglin

It's been an unusual offseason for our Tigers. It started with the trade of centerfielder Cameron Maybin to the Angels in a move to cut \$9 million from the payroll. The word was that this would be the first of several moves to trim the payroll. The idea was to trade quality players like Ian Kinsler and J.D. Martinez (maybe even Justin Verlander) for David Price- and Yoenis Cespedes-like hauls and retool the team to still contend in 2017. Those deals never materialized, though, and other than Maybin, the 2017 Tigers look a lot like the 2016 Tigers.

Why were the Tigers, a team that does want to win, in trade-now mode, and why didn't other teams bite? It's the luxury tax system, which was made tougher in the new Basic Agreement signed last fall. The 2016 Tigers had a payroll for luxury tax purposes of about \$212 million. (The actual cash payroll was closer to \$200 million, but other charges are included in that figure.) The luxury tax cutoff in 2016 was \$189 million, so the Tigers were about \$23 million over. Their "tax rate" was 17 percent, so they paid about \$4 million,

The tax cutoff goes up to \$195 million in 2017, but if the Tigers are over that, as an offender for the second year in a row, their tax rate would go up to 30 percent, and anything over \$215 million would have a 42 percent tax rate. Right now, after the Maybin trade, Cot's Baseball Contracts, the best-known source for baseball payroll information, projects the Tigers with their current team to be at about the same place as last year, \$213 million. So, if they signed a player for \$5 million, the actual cost would be closer to \$7 million. Plus, if they stay over the luxury tax cutoff of \$197 million in 2018, anything over that would be taxed at 50 percent as a third-time offender. There are also penalties applied to draft picks lost when signing a premium free agent and received when losing a premium free agent (which J. D. Martinez will be after the 2017 season.)

The Dodgers seemed like a likely destination for Ian Kinsler. They need a second baseman, he has a reasonable \$11 million salary, and they have lots of young talent close to the majors to trade. However, the Dodgers projected luxury tax payroll is \$226 million right now. If they traded for Kinsler, the first \$9 million would be taxed at a 62 percent and the last \$2 million at 92.5 percent. So, instead, they have been lined more often with the Twins' Brian Dozier, who is cheaper.

This is the price the Tigers are paying for not developing their own young talent. That is the best way to get good players at bargain prices. If the Tigers are going to be good, they are going to have to start developing their own talent.

SAME TEAM, DIFFERENT YEAR – By David Raglin

So, as we said before, the 2017 will be basically the 2016 Tigers. That's good in that the team had some of the best players in baseball and they were in the race until the last week of the season. It's bad in that the team went 85-76 and finished eight games behind the Cleveland Indians, who will have a star returning from injury (Michael Brantley), a new star hitter (Edwin Encarnacion), and Andrew Miller for the whole season.

We still say that the Tigers have a team that can contend in 2017. While it's the same players, there is reason to believe the outcome could be different.

Let's start with the rotation. Justin Verlander and Michael Fulmer were the anchors in 2016. The biggest disappointment was Jordan Zimmermann, but he is healthy now, so that would give the team three top starters. Daniel Norris has had some injury and health issues but in his last 10 starts in 2016, he had a 3.04 ERA and a 55-19 strikeout-to-walk mark in 56.1 innings. He will be only 24 in April and he could be a solid starter. According to Catherine Slonksnis of the Bless You Boys website, Norris and Tigers pitching coach Rich Dubee reworked Norris' motion, increasing the leg kick and speeding it up, giving us reason to believe this burst at the end of the season was not a fluke.

That's now four starters. The fifth spot will be between Matthew Boyd, who has a 3.18 ERA from July to September until the last start of the season, Anibal Sanchez, and Mike Pelfrey. Sanchez and Pelfrey had dreadful 2016 seasons, but between them and Boyd, hopefully one of them will be pitching well at any given time.

On the position player side, J.D. Martinez and Nick Castellanos each missed significant time with freak injuries that will not be a factor in 2017, and hopefully James McCann can have a season somewhere between his breakout 2015 season and his disappointing 2016 season.

Yes, this analysis is looking at the bright side. The Tigers have quite a few older players, so injuries would not be a surprise. The Tigers have pretty much no depth, so an injury or subpar performance would be especially serious for them. This is not meant to say the Tigers will contend in 2017; I am saying they can contend if things go right.

PUT ME IN, COACH – By David Raglin

Ever since Cameron Maybin was traded to the Angels, the biggest question in Tigerland has been: who will play center field. Given the luxury tax problems the team has, even such reasonably priced options like Colby Rasmus, Austin Jackson and Peter Bourjos have been out of the Tigers' price range. The Tigers added a candidate recently in the purchase of the contract of Mikey Mahtook from the Tampa Bay Rays. Beggars can't be choosers -- he is not the ideal solution for the team -- but he could be a contributor.

To be fair, the Tigers have not said he is the solution, but that he is a candidate to get playing time in center field. A right-handed hitter, if he makes the team he will likely platoon with lefty Tyler Collins, allowing JaCoby Jones to get more seasoning in AAA Toledo. Neither is a good defensive player but both are acceptable enough (although a good center fielder would be ideal in the vast Comerica outfield.) The 27-year-old Mahtook was the Rays' first-round selection in the 2011 draft and reached AAA for the first time in 2014. He was up and down a few times in 2015, but as a September callup, he shined with a .353 average and six home runs in 68 at bats that month.

Unfortunately, as you can see by the stats below, everything went wrong in 2016. It started with an oblique injury. He came back from that and after regular center fielder Kevin Kiermaier was hurt, Mahtook got the chance to play, but then he was hit in the hand and missed seven weeks. When he came back, he did not play well.

Mikey Mahtook AAA and Major League Statistics

Year	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
AAA (14-16)	979	107	271	65	12	17	120	80	259	.277	.342	.420	.762	139	5.0
TB 2015	105	22	31	5	1	9	19	6	31	.295	.351	.619	.970	23	7.9
TB 2016	185	16	36	9	0	3	11	7	68	.195	.231	.292	.523	12	2.1
MLB Totals	290	38	67	14	1	12	30	13	99	.231	.275	.410	.685	35	4.0

Ideally for the Tigers, Mahtook would be a left-handed hitter to help balance the extremely right-handed Detroit lineup. Unfortunately, he is not, but let's look at the lefty/righty splits to see how he does (particularly against right-handers).

Mikey Mahtook Versus Left-Handers and Right-Handers, AAA and Majors

AAA Split	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
vs LHP	249	83	20	4	5	39	21	64	.333	.388	.506	.894	48	7.4
vs RHP	743	193	45	8	12	81	61	197	.260	.329	.390	.719	91	4.2

TB Split	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
vs LHP	134	37	6	1	9	20	6	35	.276	.322	.537	.859	24	6.2
vs RHP	156	30	8	0	3	10	7	64	.192	.235	.301	.536	11	2.3

Mahtook, unfortunately, has a pretty big platoon differential, which means that he should not be a regular against right-handed starters (115 games in 2016, for comparison). However, he could be the effective half of a cheap center field platoon. The current in-house candidate for that is Tyler Collins. Here are Collins' career major league platoon stats:

Tyler Collins Versus Left-Handers and Right-Handers, Majors

DET Split	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
vs LHP	46	8	1	0	0	5	3	10	.174	.224	.196	.420	2	1.3
vs RHP	306	81	12	6	9	39	24	75	.265	.321	.431	.753	42	4.7

Collins is a serviceable left-handed half of a platoon, but Collins has not proven himself as a major league player despite several chances. Platooning is a viable option given the lack of other choices, but certainly it would be nice if a lefty version of Mahtook could be acquired (know that it is a lot easier said than done.)

CHANGES IN BASEBALL – By David Raglin

The game of baseball is always changing. The changes from season to season are often subtle enough, but even if you look at just a few seasons, you can see a trend. It is important to understand those trends so that you can evaluate situations given current baseball conditions, not ones from a few years ago. Below are some selected averages in the majors from 2007 to 2016. Some have not changed, but some have changed a lot.

Major League Baseball Averages, 2007-2016

Year	R/G	HR/G	BB/G	SO/G	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	SB/G	SH/G	IBB/G	StaIP	FBVel	GmTm	Atten
2007	4.80	1.02	3.31	6.62	.268	.336	.423	.758	0.60	0.32	0.27	5.79	90.3	2:55	32,690
2008	4.65	1.00	3.36	6.77	.264	.333	.416	.749	0.58	0.31	0.27	5.81	90.7	2:55	32,382
2009	4.61	1.04	3.42	6.91	.262	.333	.418	.751	0.61	0.34	0.24	5.81	91.2	2:55	30,218
2010	4.38	0.95	3.25	7.06	.257	.325	.403	.728	0.61	0.32	0.25	5.98	91.2	2:54	30,066
2011	4.28	0.94	3.09	7.10	.255	.321	.399	.720	0.67	0.34	0.25	6.03	91.5	2:56	30,228
2012	4.32	1.02	3.03	7.50	.255	.319	.405	.724	0.66	0.30	0.22	5.89	91.6	3:00	30,806
2013	4.17	0.96	3.01	7.55	.253	.318	.396	.714	0.55	0.28	0.21	5.90	91.7	3:04	30,451
2014	4.07	0.86	2.88	7.70	.251	.314	.386	.700	0.57	0.28	0.20	5.97	91.8	3:07	30,345
2015	4.25	1.01	2.90	7.71	.254	.317	.405	.721	0.52	0.25	0.20	5.81	92.1	3:00	30,349
2016	4.48	1.16	3.11	8.03	.255	.322	.417	.739	0.52	0.21	0.19	5.65	92.3	3:04	30,131

We'll start with runs, the most important statistics in the game. Runs per game hit a peak of 5.39 in 1996, right after the strike and during the steroids era. The last time we had five runs a game was 2004 (5.01). As you can see, it dropped from there through 2014, where it hit a recent low of 4.07. (The last time it was below four runs a game was 1976 at 3.99.) The last two years have seen somewhat of an offensive resurgence, to around the historic season average (since 1901) of 4.43.

The reason for the increased offense is in part a jump in home runs. The 1.16 average home runs per game was the second highest in history after 2000 (1.17). The game has become much more of a hit or miss proposition, with strikeouts per game going up almost a strikeout per game in the last five seasons. Walks per game has dropped, so while the average strikeouts per walk ratio was about 2:1 in 2007, it is now over 2.5:1.

Batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage have change in proportion to runs and home runs. Small ball strategies like stolen bases, sacrifice hits (bunts), and intentional walks was way down over that period.

The number of innings thrown per game by the starter (StaIP) has changed but not in a linear way; it seems to be inversely correlated with runs per game, which makes sense. However, given how much we hear about lower pitch counts and wearing out starters, I'm surprised that it has not fallen more. One thing that has

changed linearly, up and up, is velocity. The average fastball speed has gone up more than two miles an hour in the last nine seasons on a pretty steady path.

Another thing that has been on an upward path is, unfortunately, game length. The changes in 2015 seem to have saved a few minutes but it is still on an upward path -- bad news for those of us with jobs that require us to go to work in the morning after another game ending after 10:00. The attendance data is a bit misleading; the outliers are 2007 and 2008. Attendance has been going steadily up until the recession, and from then on it has held quite steady.

SOCIETY BOOKSHELF: "Curve Ball" -- Reviewed by Mark Pattison

First, the disclaimer: This book isn't about the Tigers -- but it was written by a Mayo Smith Society member, Jim Sargent, better known for his books "Yesterday's Tiger Heroes" and "The Tigers and Yankees in '61," plus his many player profiles in the defunct Old Tyme Baseball News. This is Sargent's first published foray into fiction, as he chronicles the life and career of one Tom Perry, who grew up near cherry country in Traverse City, Michigan.

Perry led a rather idyllic life as a multisport high school and college player -- a cross between Jack Armstrong and some kid in the "Gil Thorp" comic strip -- although baseball was his first love and ultimate calling. He signed with the Milwaukee Braves, and had the good fortune to be called up to provide some punch in the team's 1957 pennant race not long after his Wichita teammate Bob "Hurricane" Hazle gets the summons. Perry's .324 batting average is eclipsed by wunderkind Hazle's .400-plus mark, but he manages to steal some at-bats from injured players like Andy Pafko, Joe Adcock and Billy Bruton, and healthier players like Frank Torre, Wes Covington and probably Hazle himself. He even manages to hit a game-tying home run in the World Series against the Yankees, although Milwaukee loses in extra innings.

So what does this get him? Not only a trade to the mediocre (at best) Chicago Cubs, but the breakup of his already tenuous marriage. It seems that wife Barbara, whom Perry met while on scholarship to Michigan State, liked the idea of being married to a major leaguer more than actually having to be married to one. An injury late in spring training keeps Perry from cracking the lineup, but he does even better than the year before in limited opportunities, which leads to a career crisis when the Cubbies refuse to offer him a major-league contract for 1959.

Our reticent hero opens up, but only a little, to his grown daughter nearly 40 years after his playing career ends. Sargent navigates the changes in eras well in this maiden novelistic voyage, and captures the baseball action adroitly enough, but he rushes the appearance of audiocassette tapes and the northern Michigan stretch of Interstate 75 into the fabric of life.

As baseball novels go, it's not W.P. Kinsella, or even Michael Shaara's "For Love of the Game." But it's nothing if not genial, and the language is acceptable for readers far younger than ourselves. "Curve Ball" retails for \$15.99. It's available from the publisher, Wynwidyn Press in Pinckney, Michigan, or online at amazon.com.

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