

# Tigers Stripes

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## WHO'S GROWING ON THE FARM? – By David Raglin

As we all know, the 2018 season for the Detroit Tigers is not about the present, it is about the future. So, you might think this would be a good time for us to bring back our rankings of the top Tigers prospects that we used to do several years ago. At the time, it was just Baseball America and a few other groups that covered the minors well. Now there are several websites that provide quality ranking by people who have seen the players play and have talked to people in the game. So, instead of us doing it ourselves, we thought it would be more valuable to look at them all and summarize what we learned.

That being said, the people who put together those sites have done a lot of work and deserve your web hit – plus, it would not be fair for me to copy what they said and put it in *Tiger Stripes*, especially the pay sites, so here they are. (If you get *Tigers Stripes* by email, you can click on the links. If you get it by mail, you can either type the URL or do a search in Google to find them.):

- The Athletic (Emily Waldon): <https://theathletic.com/206119/2018/01/11/tigers-top-20-prospects-comerica-park-candidates-to-ponder-for-18-and-beyond/> (\$)
- MLB Pipeline: [http://detroit.tigers.mlb.com/mlb/news/prospects/index\\_beta.jsp?c\\_id=det](http://detroit.tigers.mlb.com/mlb/news/prospects/index_beta.jsp?c_id=det)
- Detroit News (Lynn Henning): <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/sports/mlb/tigers/2017/09/03/detroit-news-updated-top-tigers-prospects/105262428/>
- Baseball America: <https://www.baseballamerica.com/minors/2018-detroit-tigers-top-10-prospects/#BspcBLqhib8iM42m.97> (\$) for details)
- Baseball Prospectus: <https://www.baseballprospectus.com/prospects/article/37220/detroit-tigers-top-10-prospects-2018-franklin-perez-beau-burrow-alex-faedo/> (\$) for details)
- TigsTown (Mark Anderson): <https://247sports.com/mlb/tigers/Article/Detroit-Tigers-Top-Prospects-2018-TigsTown-Top-50-Top-Ten-111940044> (\$) for players 11-50)

As can be expected, there is a lot of agreement on these lists. Right-handed starter Franklin Perez, the star prospect in the Justin Verlander deal and who will start in either Erie or Toledo, is #1 on all six lists. The only other consensus top five player was Beau Burrows, another right-handed starter, who was drafted by the Tigers in 2015 and will probably begin in 2018 where he finished in 2017, in Erie. Since we are numbers people, we took the Top 10 rankings from each of the six sources and came up with a consensus Top 10 based on their rankings (ten points for first down to one point for tenth. Two lists had Jeimer Candelario in their Top 10 but since others excluded him because of how much time he had in the majors, I excluded him too. Some of the lists had 20 or 30 players but I only used the Top 10 to be consistent.)

### Consensus Detroit Tigers Top 10 Prospects

Prospect	Pos	Age	2018 Team	Athletic	MLB	DetNews	BA	BP	TigsTown	TotPts
Franklin Perez	RHP	20	Erie	1	1	1	1	1	1	60
Alex Faedo	RHP	22	West Michigan	3	3	3	2	3	2	50
Beau Burrows	RHP	22	Erie	4	4	2	4	2	3	47
Matt Manning	RHP	20	West Michigan	2	2		3	6	4	38
Daz Cameron	CF	21	Lakeland	5	5	5	6	4	7	34
Isaac Paredes	SS	19	Lakeland	6	9	4	7	5	5	30
Jake Rogers	CF	23	Erie	9	7	9	5	7		18
Gregory Soto	LHP	23	Lakeland			6	10	8	8	12
Christin Stewart	LF/RF	24	Toledo	10	6		9	9	9	12
Dawel Lugo	2B	23	Erie				8	10	6	9

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Prospect	Pos	Age	2018 Team	Athletic	MLB	DetNews	BA	BP	TigsTown	TotPts
Kyle Funkhowser	RHP	23	Erie	8	8	10				7
Mike Gerber	OF	25	Toledo	7	10					5
Sandy Baez	RHP	24	Erie			7				4
Anthony Castro	RHP	23	Lakeland			8				3
Derek Hill	CF	22	Lakeland						10	1

Note: "Age" is the age they will play as for most of the 2018 season, and the 2018 team is a best guess.

While this list has only 15 names, there are other players who are decent prospects, players like Sergio Alcantara (SS, 21, Erie), Sam McMillan (C, 19, West Michigan), Sandy Baez (RHP, 24, Erie, whom I saw throw a gem for Lakeland last summer), and Bryan Garcia (RH reliever, 22, Toledo).

Matt Manning was the player with the most variation of opinion. Two had him second, while one had him sixth and Lynn Henning of the Detroit News had him 12th. Manning was a 2016 high school pick that was held out until mid-2017, starting at short-season-A Connecticut before being promoted to low-A West Michigan. He was inconsistent at times with his velocity and command, but he did look a lot better as the season went on.

That brings up the conundrum in rating prospects. Christin Stewart is a good example of a player whom we have a pretty good idea what he could be. His ceiling is not high but there is a high probability he will reach it. To contract, Isaac Paredes, one of the prospects from the Cubs, had a great year at age 18 in the Midwest League, showing a strong bat and handling himself in the field. He could end up being a star, but he could wash out even as low as AA. He has a high ceiling but a lower probability of reaching it.

Then why is Alex Faedo, the right-handed College World Series star from Florida, ranked so high? He hasn't even pitched in pro ball yet (the Tigers rested him after he threw a lot of innings in college). While he was not in the pros, he did face many future pros in college and showed great potential.

Faedo is one of four right-handed starting pitchers that top the Tigers' list. The Tigers have been known for focusing on drafting hard-throwing pitchers. As we discussed last month, that has not paid off well, but on the other hand, few of those past drafted rank as high as the current ones. The one player at the top of the list, Perez, was, of course, not drafted by the Tigers. He is one of five names on the above list (along with Daz Cameron, Paredes, Jake Rogers and Dawel Lugo) who were acquired in the sell-off last summer. Given their paucity in position player prospects as of late, it is not surprising that four of them are hitters.

Baseball America and ESPN's Keith Law have also put out MLB Top 100 Prospect lists. (Law as of this time has put out 51-100, and MLB Pipeline is putting out their Top 100 on January 27.) Four Tigers have made the Baseball America and Keith Law lists: Franklin Perez (both), Daz Cameron (Law), Alex Faedo (BA), and Matt Manning (BA). I've heard complaints from Tigers fans that given the sell-off, they should have more. Unfortunately, the farm system was quite barren before the 2017 draft and the trades, and we should remember that there are many good players beyond the Top 100.

While the team in Comerica Park does not look so good this year, you may want to take a trip to your local International League, Eastern League, Florida State League, or Midwest League ballpark and check out some of the young players. As you can see from the list above, each of the Detroit full-season affiliates will have some players who have a decent chance to be contributing in Detroit over the next few years.

### **THE SPRING OF 1968** -- By David Raglin

We all know the story: The Tigers lost a crushing four-team battle for the pennant in 1967 to the Red Sox on the final day of the season, but came back from that in 1968 to cruise to the pennant and win the World Series against the Cardinals. It's easy to look back at that and say, of course they won in 1968, but was it things look like 50 years ago at this time, in the winter and spring of 1968?

The Tigers were not the favorite to win in 1968. The Twins had finished tied for second with the Tigers, and were the preseason consensus to face the Cardinals, the NL chose of most, in the 1968 World Series. The Twins had won the pennant in 1965 and finished second in 1966 and 1967. They had a feared lineup with

sluggers like Harmon Killebrew, Bob Allison and Tony Olivia, along with a strong rotation of Dean Chance, Jim Kaat, Jim Merritt and Dave Boswell. *The Sporting News* took a poll of 240 writers and the Tigers were picked for second, but with 59 first-place votes and 62 second-place votes (and 18 sorry writers who picked them to finish in the second division.) They picked the teams in this order: Minnesota, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, California, Cleveland, New York, Washington, and Oakland. (They turned out to be most wrong about the A's, in their first season in Oakland, they would go 82-80 as the dynasty of the 1970s would emerge.)

Going into spring training, the biggest battle for jobs were at first base, shortstop and the bullpen. The Tigers had acquired 500-home run hitter Edie Mathews during the 1967 season and the Tigers hoped the right-handed Mathews could fight longtime left-handed hitting incumbent Norm Cash for the job, with a platoon like they had in September 1967 a distinct possibility. Mayo Smith said, "I feel we can get 100 games out of Mathews at first base and pinch-hitting." Cash was quoted as saying, "I go along with this competition. ... The people that don't win out will be on the bench. That will give us bench strength." (My guess is that what Cash really thought was much different than that and not printable.) Another possibility at first was Mickey Stanley, of whom Mayo said, "Mickey can play first base with anybody. He handles himself well at shortstop." Hmm... As it turned out, Stanley did start at first base on Opening Day against a lefty but Mathews' back problems precluded him from making an impact.

The bullpen was totally changed from 1967. None of the relievers who were on the Opening Day roster in 1967 returned in 1968. The pen in 1967 had quite a few veterans, some of them former starting pitchers, like Hank Aguirre, Dave Wickersham, Fred Gladding, and Johnny Podres. (They made the changes in spite of the fact that the bullpen ERA in 1967 was third in the league while the ERA of the starters, considered a strength, was seventh-best, a stat that they probably did not have in 1968. It worked, though, with the Tigers posting the top bullpen ERA in the American League in 1968.) The last of the veterans to go was Aguirre, traded to the Dodgers just before the season began. One young reliever the Tigers did miss on was Mike Marshall. He had pitched well in 1967 but lost the last spot in the bullpen to Dennis Ribant. Later, Marshall would go on to be the first reliever to win the Cy Young Award, in 1974 for the Dodgers.

One thing the Tigers felt they could improve on was the number of men they left on base; their 1,210 mark was the highest in the league by 85. They didn't have these stats but they would not be surprised to know that they only hit, for example, .211 with a .317 slugging percentage with two out and runners in scoring position in 1967, so the concern was real. While it was probably random, the problem did go away in 1968; they were below average in runners left on base although generally it is positively correlated with runs scored.

It wouldn't be spring without players telling the writers why they would have a better year, but Denny McLain might have been onto something when he claimed his new contact lenses would help him pitch better. "I can focus on things better and the contacts cut down glare. I'm a spot bowler and the contacts have helped out. I can see who's out there when I'm playing the organ at a club or music store."

There were a few things written about the team that seem quaint now. *The Sporting News* made sure we know that Lakeland chef Mal Murdock got a new stove for the Tigertown cafeteria. Pitcher Bob Reed did not report to spring training because he was in the middle of the semester with his classes at the University of Michigan. He did come down for spring break to pitch and spent the summer in the minors at the A, AA, and AAA levels, pitching for the Tigers in 1969 and 1970. Don Wert had quit smoking but he put on weight and ended up picking up the habit again, while Dick McAuliffe put on weight he wanted to after giving up smoking.

The world at large also intruded on the Tigers. They found out that outfield prospect Ronald Goulet, a 1966 draftee (of the baseball kind) from Detroit, had been killed by a sniper's bullet in Vietnam. Goulet never had the chance to play pro ball. Several players either came back from military duty or left for it. Mickey Lolich received a promotion to sergeant in the Michigan Air National Guard and had to miss 18 days during spring training.

It was a determined Tigers camp, though, with the near-miss in 1967 hitting them hard. Bill Freehan said, "We're going to win it. ... Last September, the town started to believe in us. I'm from Detroit and I realize the town has been semi-believing in other years. I think the people will pick up real enthusiasm this season." This might have been the best prediction of all.

**TIGERS BOOKSHELF: “The Year of the Pitcher”** -- Reviewed by Mark Pattison

As we discussed in the earlier article, 1968 marks the 50th anniversary of “The Year of the Pitcher,” when most hitters were flailing away and dribbling grounders to infielders. It’s also the golden anniversary of the Tigers’ World Series championship over the St. Louis Cardinals. And that’s where Sridhar Pappu’s book gets its energy: from the relentless pitching of Detroit and St. Louis’ respective aces, both of whom get full credit in the book’s subtitle: “Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball’s Golden Age.”

A Tigers fan (who, me?) might get the sense that McLain plays second fiddle to Gibson in the book, especially early on. If so, there are a few reasons: Gibson got into the Hall of Fame, Gibson bested McLain twice in that World Series -- and perhaps most importantly, Gibson turned aside interview requests by Pappu, who overcompensated by relying entirely on teammates and press accounts from the era to paint his portrait. McLain, who’s already written three autobiographies (albeit with others’ help), was far more approachable.

The year 1968 featured historic lows in individual, team and league batting averages, and also in individual, team and league ERAs. McLain and Gibson embodied the hurlers’ mastery of a generous strike zone and a 15-inch-high mound. Gibson’s 1.12 season ERA has long been termed microscopic, and rightly so, but he was never taken out of a game in the middle of an inning that season. And as unlikely as Gibson’s ERA will be bettered, it’s been half as long again since nobody has matched McLain’s 31 wins than it was between McLain and Dizzy Dean’s 30 victories in 1934.

Pappu fleshes out the little-known story that McLain was nearly dealt to Baltimore for shortstop Luis Aparicio in the offseason, which would have dealt a karmic blow to the year that followed: What, no .135-hitting year for Ray Oyler, and no Mickey Stanley at shortstop in the Series? Pappu also goes into greater detail about McLain’s hoping to parlay his big-league exploits to a post-retirement career as a nightclub organist. That didn’t quite work out as planned, as Denny became an itinerant entrepreneur and a two-time jailbird.

All in all, “The Year of the Pitcher” is less a thrill ride in a Plymouth Barracuda fastback than it is a Sunday drive in a Ford Country Squire station wagon. Tigers fans, who know how the story ends (actually, everybody does, but for us it’s a happy ending), will enjoy this book as they pick up on the minutiae they might have forgotten from decades ago about how the team was constructed, its late-innings come-from-behind bravado, and ultimate glory, much of which was available only on the Ernie Harwell-Ray Lane broadcasts since a newspaper strike in Detroit lasted the first two-thirds of the season.

I don’t quite buy the author’s contention that big-league baseball was out of step with a changing America -- a point Pappu amplifies in personal appearances. Baseball has dealt awkwardly with some of the societal issues that have come crashing against it, and 1968 was no exception, especially given the timing of the Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy assassinations. But it was still the U.S. pro sports leader -- especially given desegregation within its ranks two decades before, a point Pappu ignores entirely. And the quest to bring more offense in the game to stifle criticisms that 1-0 games were “boring” and to maintain baseball’s status over football and other pro sports has led to some unintended consequences, among them the talent-thinning role of expansion and recurring claims about juiced balls, not to mention the steroid scandal.

“The Year of the Pitcher” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28) is available in bookstores or online.

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