

Tigers Stripes

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D
Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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THE KEYS TO 2014

This winter, we have devoted a lot of space to the changes the Tigers have made to the team for 2014. In November, we looked back at Jim Leyland and his Detroit legacy. In December, we looked at new manager Brad Ausmus and looked at concerns over team depth. In January, we discussed the two big deals, the popular Prince Fielder-for-Ian Kinsler deal, and why we thought the Tigers made the highly unpopular Doug Fister deal for two reserve players and a prospect. In February, we focused on free agent signings Joe Nathan and Rajai “Dash” Davis, and the improvements in Tigers baserunning. So, this month, we are not going to repeat ourselves on those topics. Instead, we will take a look at a few players who are the keys to the 2014 Detroit Tigers and their quest for a World Series championship.

First, let’s define what we mean by a “key player”. Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander are probably the most important players. However, we expect them to perform at their usually exceptional levels. They both are recovering from injuries but Miggy seems to be recovered from his surgery, and Justin Verlander is ahead of schedule in his recovery and should be ready for Opening Day. What we are talking about when we say “key” are players whom the team needs to have a good year, who could have a good year but that having a good year is in doubt.

Our #1 “key player” is Andy Dirks. Let’s take a quick review of Dirks’ pro baseball career:

Andy Dirks Professional Baseball Hitting Statistics

Year	Team	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
'08-'12	Minors	309	1178	179	341	61	7	30	163	107	187	.289	.350	.430	.779	176	5.4
2011	Detroit	78	219	34	55	13	0	7	28	11	36	.251	.296	.406	.703	26	4.1
2012	Detroit	88	314	56	101	18	5	8	35	23	53	.322	.370	.487	.857	57	6.9
2013	Detroit	131	438	60	112	16	2	9	37	42	84	.256	.323	.363	.686	51	4.3
MLB Total		297	971	150	268	47	7	24	100	76	173	.276	.332	.413	.745	137	5.0

Dirks worked his way up the Tigers minor league chain after being drafted in 2008 out of Wichita State. He reached AAA Toledo late in 2010 and after a strong start to the 2011 season with the Mud Hens, he made his major league debut that May. As you can see from the stats above, Dirks was OK but not great in 2011. Dirks was off to a great start in 2012, with a .328/.379/.515 batting average/on-base percentage/slugging percentage slash line when he injured his Achilles tendon on May 30. It was thought to be a short-term injury, but he did not return to the Tigers’ lineup until August. He hit well the final two months of the season and was the leading candidate for the left field job in 2013. Unfortunately, he injured his right knee slamming into the wall in spring training and while he played through the injury, he had a decidedly mediocre season.

Why is Dirks such a key player for the 2014 Tigers? First of all, he hits left-handed. A downside to the Fielder deal is that the Tigers traded the lefty-hitting Fielder for the righty-hitting Kinsler, leaving Detroit with just three left-handed hitters in the everyday lineup: Dirks, Victor Martinez (a switch-hitter) and Alex Avila. Dirks’ alternative in left field, Rajai Davis, cannot hit right-handers. In addition, Dirks is a very good defensive player, important in Comerica Park’s vast left field. So, the Tigers really need him to have a good year.

What are the odds of that happening? I am cautiously optimistic. Dirks’ minor league numbers and his 2012 season suggest he can be a contributor to the offense. He has, however, had two big injuries in two seasons as a major leaguer, and neither time did he recover quickly from them. The Tigers need some offense from the bottom of the lineup, a problem the last couple of seasons, and it’s hard to see that happening unless

Dirks has a good season. One reason he is a key player is that he could have a dreadful season (especially if he gets hurt again) or he could have a really good season.

Our #2 key player is a pitcher who the Tigers have made a big bet in, Drew Smyly.

Drew Smyly Professional Baseball Pitching Statistics

Year	Year	G	GS	IP	H	R	ER	HR	BB	SO	W	L	WHIP	ERA
'11-'12	Minors	29	28	143.2	125	55	41	5	44	155	11	8	1.18	2.57
2012	Detroit	23	18	99.1	93	49	44	12	33	94	4	3	1.27	3.99
2013	Detroit	63	0	76.0	62	20	20	4	17	81	6	0	1.04	2.37
MLB Total		86	18	175.1	155	69	64	16	50	175	10	3	1.17	3.29

One of the reasons the Tigers were looking to trade a starting pitcher is that they felt Smyly belonged in the rotation and that the rotation ideally should have a lefty. Drew Smyly was drafted by the Tigers in 2010 in the second round out of the University of Arkansas. He started the 2011 season with the high-A Lakeland club and after success there was promoted to AA Erie, where he also pitched well. The Tigers under Dave Dombrowski have been very aggressive in promoting pitchers quickly, but it was still a surprise when Smyly made the team out of spring training in 2012.

Smyly started with a bang, allowing only one run in five of his first six starts, and only two runs in the other start. He then struggled, allowing four or more runs in six of his next seven starts. He then had two good starts but went on the disabled list with an intercostal strain. While he was injured, the Tigers replaced him in the rotation with Anibal Sanchez, so Smyly went to Toledo. Smyly returned to Detroit in late August and pitched pretty well. The next winter, the Tigers shopped Rick Porcello, but there were no takers for what the Tigers wanted, so Smyly went to the bullpen in 2013 and pitched great. Even when Sanchez went down with shoulder problems for a few starts, the Tigers called up Jose Alvarez to start, leaving Smyly in the pen because he was not stretched out at that time to be a starter and he was pitching so well.

Drew Smyly is a key player for the 2014 Tigers because the Tigers have bet the farm on him. They have no real backups for him in Toledo if he pitches poorly. (Alvarez, for example, had a 5.14 ERA for the Tigers in his six starts.) Robbie Ray, the prospect the Tigers got in the Fister deal, might be an option in that the Tigers said that they think he might be ready for the majors in 2014, but that would be a huge risk to take with a guy the Tigers are counting on for the future.

The chances of Smyly fulfilling his role well, though, are pretty good. As we saw last month, Smyly's stats as a starter in 2012 was not that dissimilar to Fister's in 2013, and he had a very good season out of the bullpen in 2013. We don't expect him to be a star, but if he has an ERA around four and stays in the rotation all year, that would be a success, and we see that as a good possibility.

By far we see Dirks and Smyly as the key Tigers for 2014. However, there are a couple of other names we'd like to mention. Our #3 key Tiger is Alex Avila. He has been around long enough that we are not going to go through his biography. He had an incredible season in 2011, voted to start the All-Star Game for the American League. That season has been the holy grail that he has not come close to the last couple of years.

Alex Avila Versus Left-Handed and Right-Handed Pitchers

Year	Versus Left-Handed Pitchers									Versus Right-Handed Pitchers								
	AB	H	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	AB	H	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
2009	10	4	1	3	.400	.455	.800	10	6.9	51	13	4	11	.255	.361	.549	4	15.5
2010	33	6	0	3	.182	.289	.212	2	1.7	261	61	7	28	.234	.320	.356	30	3.8
2011	128	35	3	17	.273	.349	.430	19	5.2	336	102	16	65	.304	.403	.536	73	8.0
2012	85	15	1	9	.176	.304	.235	6	2.2	282	74	8	39	.262	.367	.429	44	5.4
2013	79	11	1	7	.139	.227	.228	4	1.5	251	64	10	40	.255	.345	.422	37	5.0
Total	335	71	6	39	.212	.306	.322	32	3.1	1181	314	45	183	.266	.362	.447	192	5.7

For Avila, the stats we want to discuss are his left-right platoon stats. As you can see on the previous page, Avila has a huge platoon differential. Except for his 2011 outlier season, he has been a terrible hitter versus lefties, but even in the last two seasons, he has hit right-handers well. Part of the problem in general with his offense has been his tendency to take what seems to be more than an above average number of jarring foul tips, which have given him concussion problems.

Last year, his backup was Brayan Pena, a switch-hitter who unfortunately for the team also hit right-handers much better than left-handers and to boot was not Avila's equal behind the plate. This year's leading candidate to be the backup, Bryan Holaday, is a defensive specialist who is not a strong hitter. He bats right-handed but in the minors has had a very small platoon differential (.244/.307/.371 versus left-handers and .249/.309/.347 against right-handers in the minors). Anyway, a straight platoon is not easy to do with catchers; often things like pitcher preferences and day-game-off-after-a-night-game have more bearing on who catches than the hand the opposing pitcher throws with.

The reason we don't see Avila as such a key player is that, three years out, we don't see him coming close to his 2011 season again. We would like to see new manager Brad Ausmus pinch hit for Avila more late in games when a left-hander is on the mound. We've noticed Victor Martinez has reported to camp with the catchers, and part of that is to get him ready for an early trip to Los Angeles and San Diego where the DH will not be in effect, but we also hope that it could give the Tigers the option to catch him occasionally against tough lefties that Avila can't hit. Avila should benefit by the fact that given the number of right-handed hitters in the Tiers lineup, they should not be seeing as many lefties as they otherwise would.

So, the key for Avila is to stay healthy and hit left-handers at least a bit better. We think that he will be a bit better but given his concussion history, we are worried that he could miss significant time with some bad luck on a foul ball. In that case, the Tigers will not get much offense at all from behind the plate.

TRAMMELL VERSUS JETER – By David Raglin

As you probably know, Derek Jeter has announced that the 2014 season will be his last. The graduate of Kalamazoo Central High School has been one of the iconic players of his generation and the consensus is that he will easily be elected to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot in 2020. There is another great shortstop who unfortunately has not had such an easy road to Cooperstown. In fact, with the backup caused by the glut of steroid-era players, there is virtually no chance that Alan Trammell will be elected to the Hall of Fame by the writers.

Sportswriter Joe Posnanski, one of the best in the business, noted the difference in perception between Jeter and Trammell recently. Here is a link to his piece on it, titled "No. ??: Alan Trammell": <http://joeposnanski.com/joeblogs/no-alan-trammell/>. We are not going to repeat much of what he said; first of all, he said it much better than we can, and second of all, he did the work.

Basically, though, what Posnanski said is that while Jeter was much more durable than Trammell (who played 140 or more games only eight times in his 20 seasons) and was a better hitter than Trammell (even adjusting for the eras), Trammell was a much better fielder. By Baseball Reference, Trammell's glove was worth 22 wins to the Tigers compared to an average shortstop, while Jeter cost the Yankees nine runs compared to the average. That differential makes up for the difference in playing time and offense, given them virtually identical WARs (71.5 for Jeter, 70.3 for Trammell, both at the level of Hall of Famers).

Why is Jeter so much more recognized as a star then? We have various theories: Jeter was better on offense which get more notice (and despite his mediocre defense, Jeter has won five Gold Gloves), Jeter played for so many championship teams, and New York players get more notice than Detroit ones. Still, it is frustrating that Trammell has not gotten the call from Cooperstown that he deserves.

Speaking of the Hall, for each of the past four years prior to the Hall of Fame election results being announced, Graham Womack picks the best 50 players not in the Hall of Fame by polling hundreds of writers, asking each to list their own group of 50. In this year's list, with 208 writers contributing, Alan Trammell came in eighth, the highest of any Tiger. Lou Whitaker placed 20th, Jack Morris 31st (tied with Jeff Kent), and Darrell Evans 43rd.

MEMBERSHIP 101 – By Mark Pattison

Every so often we use some space in *Tigers Stripes* to remind people to renew their membership in the Society. The dues year begins on Opening Day. For those receiving the newsletter via the Postal Service, we include remittance envelopes to make it easier. But since the majority of members get *Stripes* by email, a nudge like this is in order.

It's precisely because e-delivery is cheaper that we've been able to hold the line on dues at \$20 a year. But, you still gotta pay or risk being dropped from the mailing list and, thus, the membership list. This means no chance at our box seat tickets during the season, the postseason ticket lottery, and taking part in events like the Annual Gathering or the Spring Training Trip becomes an increasingly distant memory. So, too, the regular social gatherings for members in the Washington-Baltimore region, the Society's birthplace.

So when we say "don't delay, renew today," we mean it. Don't let your membership status slide. Send a check (payable to Mayo Smith Society) for \$20 to Mayo Smith Society, PO Box 119, Northville, MI 48167.

A NEW TIGERS HANGOUT – By Mark Pattison

When newspapers and websites talk about "sports bars," the conversation generally talks about college teams and the NFL. But in Washington, we've come upon a bar where the Tigers are second only to the Chicago Cubs. It's called Ivy and Coney, at 1537 Seventh St. NW in the District. The "Ivy" is for the vine adorning the walls of Wrigley Field, and the "Coney" is for the chili dogs that are a Motor City staple.

Ivy and Coney is a small place. It's an upstairs bar urging patrons to watch their step as they descend the stairs. The atmosphere closely resembles that of a clubhouse with alcohol. The menu is even smaller than the bar. At least the prices are good. A Coney dog will set you back \$4, a can of Stroh's just \$3. Ivy and Coney has Chicago counterparts on the hot dog and beer side.

The place has three TVs, including one in a side room that's outfitted like a living room with borrowed furniture. (I'm running out of ways to say there's no pretense at Ivy and Coney.) *Stripes* sabermetrician David Raglin and I stopped by for a dog and a beer one Sunday afternoon and the joint was bustling for a pre-Super Bowl party three hours before kickoff. Society members should be warned that the demographic is quite a bit younger than our own!

Ivy and Coney isn't practical for our monthly "Tiger Talk" dinners in Washington, but it should be a fun place to visit the next time the Tigers are in the postseason, which should be about seven months or so from now. It is a brisk seven-minute walk from the Shaw-Howard-Convention Center stop on the Green and Yellow lines of the Metrorail system. Limited meter parking is available, as there's construction across the street.

"MAYO DAYS" IN WASHINGTON AND BALTIMORE

If you want to be in the Mayo Smith group for the Saturday, March 29, exhibition game between Detroit and Washington (2 p.m.) or the Wednesday, May 14, tilt between Detroit and Baltimore (7 p.m.), get in touch with Mark Pattison ASAP at pattison_mark@hotmail.com. Ticket prices to be determined!

For **Mayo Smith Society Memberships** send \$20

(US\$23 out of the US) to:

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For **Detroit Tigers Lists and More**, autographed by authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send \$10 to:

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