

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the

Mayo Smith Society

Vol. 32, No. 1

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

March 2016

STATE OF THE TIGERS – By David Raglin

As our favorites gather in Lakeland for what we hope will be a resurgent season, what is the state of the 2016 Tigers?

A year ago, the Tigers were coming off four consecutive division titles. With the prospects of David Price in the rotation all year to join Justin Verlander and Anibal Sanchez, and Yoenis Cespedes to join Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez in the middle of the Tigers' order, there was hope they would hold off the 2014 American League champion Kansas City Royals to win their fifth division title in a row. Unfortunately, Verlander, V-Mart, and Cabrera battled injuries all year. Martinez was never an effective player and Verlander did not make his season debut until mid-June and was not an effective pitcher for a month after that.

The Tigers did a very un-Tiger-like thing of late by being sellers at the trade deadline, dealing impending free agents Price and Cespedes for impressive young talent. At the time of the deals, Detroit was 49-52, but finished out the season 25-35. They gave up the most runs in the league by a wide margin, 4.99 per game.

Mike Ilitch decided to go for it in 2016 and backed up his decision by authorizing only the second pair of \$100 million-plus signings by one team in one offseason, Jordan Zimmermann and Justin Upton.

However, as exciting as those signings were, they only really got the Tigers back to where they were at the start of the 2015 season. Zimmermann replaces Price (and that's a bit of a downgrade) and Upton replaces Cespedes. (In addition, Cameron Maybin basically replaces Rajai Davis -- somewhat of an improvement -- and Jarrod Saltalamacchia basically replaces Alex Avila.)

So, why would we be optimistic about the 2016 Tigers? There are two keys to the team, and if they bear out, the Tigers will be contenders. First, the Tigers need good productive healthy seasons from Miguel Cabrera, Victor Martinez, and Justin Verlander. There is reason to believe that will happen. A year ago at this time, Cabrera and Martinez were recovering from serious injuries which never healed in 2015, and Verlander was coming off the worst season of his career. I remember watching each of Verlander's spring training starts with a hope that he would show signs of the old Verlander. When we saw him come off the mound with the injury in Dunedin, we knew the Tigers' playoff chances were in trouble. When Verlander came back from the injury, he was hit hard, sporting a 6.62 ERA in his first seven starts. However, here are the totals from his last 14 starts:

Justin Verlander Finishing Strong, 2015

Date	G	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	W	L	ERA
July 24 to October 3, 2015	14	99.1	74	30	25	20	91	5	5	2.27

Last year, Verlander had a 2.2 WAR, meaning it is estimated that he was 2.2 games better than a replacement pitcher (for the definition of a replacement pitcher, look at the back end of the 2015 Tigers rotation at the end of the season. At his peak, he had WARs of 8.4 and 7.8. We cannot expect that, but in 2013 he had a WAR of 4.4, which is certainly attainable in 2016. So, that +2.2 wins for the 2016 Tigers (assuming the pitcher that replaced him was "replacement level", which is a fair assumption).

Now let's look at Victor Martinez. What would a resurgent Martinez do? Last year, he was -1.6 WAR, which says that some guy off the scrap heap would have been 1.6 wins better than Martinez. You may scoff at that, but V-Mart had a slash line of .245/.301/.366. Even worse, he did that playing in 120 games in the middle of the order. We cannot expect that again, but over his previous three seasons with the Tigers, he had WARs of 3.2, 1.4, and 5.4. It's reasonable that a healthy Martinez, one year off a career year, could do the average of that,

3.3 WAR. Compared to -1.6 WAR, that would be a positive swing of 4.9 WAR. (Now you can see how critical V-Mart’s comeback is to this team.)

Miggy is next. Playing in 119 games, Miggy had a 5.2 WAR. (Think about it: For how many players would we consider that an off season?) We certainly cannot project him playing better, but if he plays 150 games, assuming the same production, that would give the Tigers 6.5 WAR, 1.3 more than last season.

Adding together the possible increases for Verlander, V-Mart, and Cabrera gives us $2.2 + 4.9 + 1.3 = 8.3$. So, if those players stay pretty healthy and therefore play at a reasonably-expected level, that right there adds about eight wins to the 2016 Tigers.

(Let’s not forget Anibal Sanchez, who also suffered through an injury-filled season. After he posted a 4.7 WAR in 2013, his first full season in Detroit, he followed it with a 1.4 year in 2014 and a -1.3 WAR last year. However, unlike the others, his shoulder injuries flare up each year, and so we cannot be as optimistic about his return to form. Even if he gets back to his 2014 level, that would give the Tigers another two to three wins.)

The second key is the revamping of the bullpen. The moves look good on paper, and the Tigers had to make changes given the disastrous bullpens of the last few years. We don’t have a good WAR estimate for what an improved bullpen could mean for the 2016 Tigers, but one thing about rebuilding something that is a rock-bottom, there is only one way to go -- up. On paper, the moves they brought in for Francisco Rodriguez, Mark Lowe and Justin Wilson were the right ones, and they received praise from the baseball establishment.

The experts have the Tigers around a .500 club. I think that is low, but I am biased and an optimist. If we can get decent seasons from Miggy, V-Mart, and Verlander, and the new bullpen pitches as promised, the Tigers should be contenders, even in a division where Kansas City and Cleveland look very good, and Chicago and Minnesota are not pushovers. We know if they are sniffing in the race in July, they will get reinforcements. Let’s hope the team is in that position.

LOST IN THE SHUFFLE – By David Raglin

In all of the talk of this offseason, there is one player who has been overlooked a bit. Nick Castellanos was the Tigers’ one big prospect a few years ago. In 2014, after just having turned 22, Castellanos was made the Tigers’ regular third baseman. He struggled, especially in the field. Baseball Info Systems estimated that he cost the Tigers 30 runs compared to an average third baseman. That -30 was the worst of any big league player at any position by a good margin (shortstop Yunel Escobar was second worst at -24.) At the plate, Castellanos was not bad for a rookie; his 4.3 runs created per game was just about the league average for all players.

Castellanos, who played shortstop as an amateur, third base in the low minors for a year and a half, and left field in the high minors after the Tigers acquired Prince Fielder and moved Miguel Cabrera to third base, vowed to work hard in the offseason to improve his fielding. He spent time with coach Matt Martin in Lubbock, Texas, on a variety of drills. It worked; he went from a -30 to a -9, still well below average (after being closer to average early in the season), but a huge improvement. Most of that was the improvement in his range to his right, which went from a -20 compared to an average player to a -2. Watching the games, we could see that improvement with our own eyes.

Unfortunately, his bat did not get off to a good start; through June 21, he was hitting .217/.267/.328 with only four home runs in 67 games. From then on, he got a lot better. The table below splits Castellanos’s season into two halves, his first 77 games and his second 77 games. (As an aside, I could have pulled a statistical trick and shown his stats for his first 67 games versus his last 87 games to make the difference look more dramatic and to help me make my point, but splitting it into 77 game halves was less arbitrary.)

Nick’s 2015 Season—A Tale of Two Castellanos(es)

Date	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
April 6 to July 4, 2015	77	273	15	64	11	4	4	30	18	72	.234	.281	.348	.629	24	2.9
July 5 to October 4, 2015	77	276	27	76	22	2	11	43	21	80	.275	.323	.489	.812	40	5.1
Total	154	549	42	140	33	6	15	73	39	152	.255	.303	.419	.721	64	3.9

In the second half of his season, he showed more power and got more hits. Matt Comley, of the Bless You Boys website, also noted in a piece entitled, "Don't Give Up on Nick Castellanos Just Yet" (<http://www.blessyouboys.com/2015/11/11/9707596/dont-give-up-on-nick-castellanos-just-yet>), noted that the Brooks Baseball web site (www.brooksbaseball.net) showed that Castellanos was hitting more line drives and hitting the ball harder as the season went on. Those are indications that Castellanos' second-half accomplishments are not just noise but could be real improvements.

After all, Castellanos will turn just 24 years old in early March. He is two years younger than Jose Iglesias and James McCann, and four years younger than J.D. Martinez. We heard in the offseason that teams were sniffing around Castellanos, trying to see if the Tigers would bite. (There was never any indication that they were going to.) The Tigers need good young players, and Castellanos can be one of those.

TONY PHILLIPS, RIP – By David Raglin

I was especially saddened by the recent death of Tony Phillips. Phillips played five seasons for the Detroit Tigers, from 1990 to 1994, and he was my favorite Tiger during his time in Detroit.

Phillips personified the early-1990s Tigers. Those Detroit teams were known for scoring a lot of runs despite lower batting averages, which in the pre-sabermetric days was used as a proxy for the quality of the offense. (I recall one sportswriter noting the Tigers were in contention in 1991 despite the worst batting average and one of the worst ERAs in the league, which he said proved what a great manager Sparky Anderson was.) The Tigers did it by hitting home runs and walking -- from 1990 to 1993, they were second, second, first and first in runs scored due to leading the league in home runs each of those years and being third, first, second and first in bases on balls. Phillips was a big part of the getting on base part. He walked 95 times or more in each of his five seasons in Detroit, including an astounding 132 walks in 1993, which led to a .443 on-base percentage.

Phillips was also known for his extraordinary versatility in the field. Upon his death, Phillips was compared to Bon Zobrist for his versatility. However, there really is no comparison. Zobrist plays a lot of positions, but usually with long stretches at either second base and left field. To contrast, Phillips played everywhere all the time. In each of his first two seasons in Detroit, Phillips played second, short, third, left, center, right, and DHed. In one 17-game stretch in May 1991, Phillips played 3B, DH, 3B & LF, 2B & 3B, 2B & LF, SS, RF, LF, DH, LF, RF, 3B, SS, 2B & 3B, DH, 3B, and 2B. Phillips loved to play and reportedly did not care where he was in the field as long as he was on the field.

After retiring from the majors, Phillips kept trying to catch on. Even at the age of 56, Phillips attempted a comeback with an independent team with the hopes of winning a job with a Dominican League team the following winter.

Tony Phillips was a character who was loved for the energy he brought to his teams, his colorful language and his love for the game. He will be missed.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "WAR ON THE BASEPATHS" -- Review by Mark Pattison

'Tis the season for career reassessment; this is the second book on Ty Cobb to emerge in the past year, with Charles Leerhsen's "Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty" recently winning the Casey Award for best baseball book of 2015. This book, subtitled "The Definitive Biography of Ty Cobb" and written by Tim Hornbaker, similarly reappraises the Georgia Peach and his life and times.

Hornbaker does not take the first-person-singular voice in "War on the Basepaths" that Leerhsen had in his Cobb bio. Instead, it's a drier, more thoughtful look back at Cobb. True, there are plenty of episodes where Ty got into scrapes with people; it's also true that Cobb was as much a product of his times as we are of our own times. It's just that there was a lot more race prejudice 100 years ago. But Hornbaker does not try to gloss over Cobb's anger. Nor does he become a Cobb apologist by simply shifting the blame on each of Cobb's adversaries for every peccadillo. He did a fantastic job of researching accounts and harmonizing them to bring a more three-dimensional view of Cobb as both a player and a man.

He gives a generous amount of time at the end of the book to "the Tiger in winter," a look at Cobb's post-baseball career, and how he was regarded after retirement and for the half-century after his death in 1961. This becomes an important part of how lives and legends get manufactured, both for good and for ill.

Perhaps the best part of "War on the Basepaths" is what Hornbaker leaves out: a pseudo-psychological explanation of Cobb and his many furies. That kind of pop psychiatry has long since outlived its welcome. Rather, he lets the tales unfold, leaving the reader to make an independent judgment. Take this episode from Sept. 4, 1919, as an example. Hornbaker sets the scene: Cobb was heckled by a loud-mouthed fan at Navin Field. Ty at first ignored the abuse, then approached the stands twice to warn the man against continuing. Eventually, Cobb challenged the man to a fight after the game. "The rowdy was not backing down for a moment, apparently unafraid of the consequences, and once the final out was made, he rushed onto the field to confront the Georgian. Needless to say, Cobb was in no mood for extra innings with a foolhardy hood, and he didn't waste any time kneeling the man in the groin and walking to the clubhouse, his day's work at an end."

Hornbaker has also written a biography of Charles Comiskey, taking a more sympathetic look of the owner of the Chicago White Sox at the time of the Black Sox scandal. He's also working on a book on Vince McMahon, the World Wrestling Federation/Entertainment mastermind, whose grandfather owned a Negro League team in Philadelphia a century ago; if he can make Vince sound like a poor misunderstood old soul, then he's an even better writer than I thought. "War on the Basepaths" retails for \$24.99 and may be available at bookstores, but is definitely sold online.

SHORT STRIPES – By David Raglin and Mark Pattison

▶ I don't know about you, but I'm really disappointed in the Tigers' new spring training hats and uniforms. The hats are terrible, with the outline of the Tigers' Old English D but nothing in the middle, and the sublimated American League logo on the right side. The orange hat, in particular, screams "TACKY." The uniforms are not bad, but the league seems to be "encouraging" the Tigers to wear them in spring training games. The Tigers always stood out for wearing their regular-season uniforms in spring training, which was classy, but they will do that only for a few games. Hopefully, some of those games will be the week the Mayo group is in Florida. I hope that fans react to this junk by not buying it -- it's the only thing that will stop MLB's overzealous marketers. (DR)

▶ Justin Upton will wear #8 and Cameron Maybin will wear #4. The greatest #8s in Tigers history include Ron Leflore, Ray Boone, Eddie Brinkman and Don Wert. The best #4s are Rudy York, Aurelio Rodriguez (the original A-Rod), the recently deceased Tony Phillips and Bobby Higginson. (DR)

▶ The signing of former Mets reliever Bobby Parnell was the kind of move the Tigers have been making this offseason, as opposed to years past, and we are glad to see it. Parnell had Tommy John surgery in 2014 and struggled last year, with a 6.38 ERA and more walks than strikeouts. Before that, Parnell was a solid reliever for the Mets for several seasons. The Tigers targeted him during the offseason, and Parnell finally agreed to take a nonroster spot in February. He very well might not work out, but that's the kind of gamble the Tigers need to take. (DR)

▶ Keep in mind that the Society has a page on Facebook, now with more than 300 devotees. Look up "Mayo Smith Society." There are some regular posters, and the chatter is almost always amiable. (MP)

▶ Do you get Stripes by mail? Look at your label. If it says "14" or lower at the end of the line with your name on it, your membership is overdue. Rejoin pronto in time for Opening Day! (MP)

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

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

Mayo Smith Society, PO Box 119,
Northville, MI 48167

Name _____

Address _____

For **Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish!** (\$20) and **Detroit Tigers Lists and More** (\$10), autographed by authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send to:

Mark Pattison, 1221 Floral St. NW,
Washington, DC 20012

City, St/Pr _____

Zip/Postal Code _____ Phone _____

Our shirts are now sold through the Detroit Athletic Company. To purchase a shirt, call 313/961-3550.

E-mail _____

Tigers Stripes, the official newsletter of the Mayo Smith Society, is published nine times a year. **Publisher/Society Administrator:** Todd Miller (412/848-1082, toddprmtg@verizon.net). **Editor:** Mark Pattison (202/829-9289, pattison_mark@hotmail.com). **Writer/ Sabermetrician:** David Raglin (703/556-0332 or 703/835-1198, darags@ymail.com). **Membership Services Coordinator:** Pete Wright. The Mayo Smith Society was established in 1983 by Dale Petroskey, Dennis Petroskey, and Bill Mackay.