

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

March 2017

THE MARK LEFT BY MIKE ILITCH -- By Todd Miller

The recent passing of Mike Ilitch, the Tigers' owner for nearly a quarter-century, marks the departure of visionary and philanthropist who left an indelible mark on the city of Detroit, and whose desire to make the Tigers a winner provided us with so much enjoyment. Even more significant than his ability and willingness to attract Ivan Rodriguez as a free agent in 2004, catalyzing the team's resurgence after a 119-loss season, was the good sense he showed by bringing our beloved Ernie Harwell back to the broadcast booth in 1993, the first full season "Mr. I" owned the team. We should be eternally grateful for that move because it gave us a reason to once again feel good about our Tigers.

The first day of Ilitch's ownership was Friday, August 28, 1992, the same day as the Society's Ninth Annual Gathering. That occasion included a tour of the Tigers' clubhouse, where Dave Bergman, Skeeter Barnes and John Doherty were on hand to greet more than 300 Society members. We then had a romp on the field and proceeded to the grandstands, where we heard from clubhouse manager Jim Schmakel and Hall of Fame pitcher Hal Newhouser. Cecil Fielder then helped accept an \$8,000 check from the Society for the Clubhouse Scholarship Fund to help the clubhouse boys, all high schoolers, further their education.

While walking through the concourse to exit the ballpark following the program, one could see Domino's Pizza signs which had been removed from concession stands and leaned against the walls in preparation for disposal or re-use, and fresh Little Caesars signs replacing the competitor's logo.

Upon entering Tiger Stadium that unseasonably cool evening for a contest against the Kansas City Royals, the Society contingent, among the 24,715 faithful, received Homer Hankies inscribed with the date, the Tigers' logo and the message "Thank you for your support! The Ilitch Family." That evening, the Tigers bested Kansas City, 4-2 with a Dan Gladden two-run homer off ex-Tiger Rusty Meacham in the bottom of the eighth making the difference. Frank Tanana started for the Tigers, and Walt Terrell picked up the win in relief.

Despite Ilitch's pledge of "I'll do what's necessary to win" during a Tiger Stadium news conference announcing his ownership a couple of days before our Annual Gathering, the team floundered for more than a decade until Dave Dombrowski's personnel decisions and Mr. I's largesse took hold. Whether the Tigers' initial futility under Ilitch was due to his preoccupation with the Red Wings, or to other factors, will forever remain a subject of debate. Most importantly, during the last half of his stewardship of the Tigers, he got it right.

Even though the team did not win a World Series during Ilitch's tenure, he was a winner in the strongest sense of the word. That's because he brought stars and superstars to the Tigers to make them one of major league baseball's premier franchises. Famously, when Miguel Cabrera was available, he told his front office to get him, no matter how much Cabrera's contract would cost the team. He also believed in the city of Detroit's potential when nobody else did, and repeatedly demonstrated that faith with his checkbook.

For those deeds and accomplishments, as well as four Stanley Cups, we should be eternally grateful to Mr. I for his unwavering commitment to a city, and to teams, about which we care deeply. RIP, Michael Ilitch.

KEY MOMENTS IN THE MIKE ILITCH ERA – By Mark Pattison and David Raglin

Aug. 26, 1992: Mike Ilitch buys the Tigers from pizza rival Tom Monaghan. The move was lauded by Tiger fans discouraged because Monaghan had let the team deteriorate.

September 18, 1992: In his first big decision as owner, Ilitch announces Ernie Harwell will return to the broadcast booth. Harwell worked radio in 1993 with the two men who replaced him and Paul Carey – Rick Rizs and Bob Rathbun, shifted to PASS to do cable games for Detroit 1994-97, then to over-the-air TV for 1997-98, returning to radio in 1999 until his retirement at the end of the 2002 season.

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October 1, 1995: Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammell play their last game together as baseball's longest-running teammates (and of course, double play combination). Whitaker retires after the season but Trammell comes back for one last year.

September 27, 1999: If you had to say goodbye to Tiger Stadium, then this was fitting. Detroit beat Kansas City 8-2, punctuated by a titanic Robert Fick grand slam in the bottom of the eighth to put the game out of reach. Following the game, a farewell ceremony featured Tigers favorites from decades past flooding the field. As Ernie Harwell said at the end of his remarks, "We will remember."

April 11, 2000: Comerica Park hosts the Tigers' first game on a day when it would have been too cold for any baseball were it not for the stadium's debut. At least Detroit beat Seattle 5-2.

September 28, 2003: It seemed sure the Tigers would break the record for most losses in the season when, with six games left in the season, they were 38-118. They rallied to win five of the last six games, two by walkoffs and one in which there were down 8-0 in the fifth inning, to "only" finish 43-119, thus leaving the 1962 Mets with the most losses at 120.

February 6, 2004: The Tigers start on the road back to respectability by signing future Hall-of-Famer Ivan Rodriguez to a four-year, \$40 million deal.

May 20, 2006: The Tigers' first sellout on a game that's not Opening Day or a chance to see history made (a potential 300th win by Roger Clemens). It comes in an interleague game vs. Cincinnati when, earlier that day, Triple Crown favorite Barbaro broke down running the Preakness Stakes, Detroit topped the Reds 5-4 in 10 innings. The game featured rookie relief sensation Joel Zumaya serving up a home run to Ken Griffey Jr. in what Zumaya called a test of "strength vs. strength." But, center fielder Curtis Granderson knotted the game in the bottom of the ninth with an unlikely opposite-field home run. Detroit won when Reds shortstop Felipe Lopez fumbled a ground ball, throwing late to first base to allow the winning run to score from third.

September 24, 2006: The Tigers clinch the team's first postseason appearance in 19 years with a 11-4 win against the Kansas City Royals. That win put the Tigers up by 1½ games with a week to go. Unfortunately, after winning the next day, they lost the last five games, including three against the last-place Royals, to hand the division to the Minnesota Twins. Forced to face the New York Yankees in the first round as a wild card team, the consensus was that the Tigers had blown their chance for postseason glory. However...

October 5, 2006: The Tigers beat the Yankees in Game 2 of the AL Division Series to tie the Series at a game apiece, one day after the contest had been rained out. Justin Verlander picked up the win. Detroit manager Jim Leyland remarked how he had been "outmanaged" in the rainout as Verlander warmed up unaware of the game being called while the Yanks' bullpen remained empty.

October 14, 2006: This was probably the greatest moment in the Mike Ilitch era. "Swing and a fly ball, left field, it's deep. It's way back! THE TIGERS ARE GOING TO THE WORLD SERIES!!!"

October 22, 2006: Kenny Rogers caps a phenomenal postseason in which he pitched 23 innings and giving up no runs -- earned or unearned. This night, he blanks St. Louis over eight innings despite being told by the umpires after the first frame to remove from his pitching hand what Rogers later called "a clump of dirt." The Tigers win 2-1 -- the only World Series game Detroit won in the Mike Ilitch era.

June 12, 2007: Justin Verlander pitched the first no-hitter for Detroit since Jack Morris in 1984, and the first no-no at home since Jim Bunning in 1958, in a 9-0 blanking of the Milwaukee Brewers. We were having a Mayo Smith newsletter stuffing party at Dave Raglin's house and were so engrossed in the conversation that we did not realize he had a no-no until the eighth inning. He pitched a second no-hitter May 7, 2011, at Toronto.

December 4, 2007: The Tigers trade for the greatest hitter they've had since Ty Cobb, acquiring Miguel Cabrera from the Florida Marlins. The price was considered steep with top prospects Cameron Maybin and Andrew Miller heading south, but it might be the greatest trade in team history.

September 15, 2011: The Tigers win their first division title since 1987 with a 6-1 win against Oakland.

November 21, 2011: Justin Verlander pulls off the rare combination Cy Young-Most Valuable Player combo (not so rare among Tigers: Denny McLain in 1968 and Willie Hernandez in 1984). He also captured the AL pitching Triple Crown with 24 wins, 250 strikeouts and a 2.40 ERA. Verlander also led the league with an .829 winning percentage, 34 starts, 251 innings pitched, a 0.920 WHIP (walks plus hits per inning pitched), and a 177 ERA+.

January 26, 2012: Ilitch shocks the baseball world by signing free agent Prince Fielder to a nine year, \$214 million contract, after Victor Martinez' knee injury put him out for the season. The contract did not work out; after two years, Fielder was traded to the Texas Rangers for Ian Kinsler, with the Tigers picking up a large share of Fielder's remaining contract. Fielder retired during the 2016 season due to neck problems.

October 3, 2012: The end of the regular season cements a Triple Crown year for Miguel Cabrera. He leads the American League with a .330 batting average, 44 home runs and 139 RBIs. It's the first Triple Crown in either major league since Carl Yastrzemski's in 1967. Cabrera also led the AL with a .606 slugging percentage, a .999 OPS and 377 total bases, and won the Most Valuable Player Award.

October 13, 2012: In a postseason rematch of last year, but this time in the AL Championship Series, Joaquin Benoit and Phil Coke emerge as unlikely bullpen heroes after Jose Valverde has another relief implosion and Detroit pulls out an extra-inning 6-4 win over the Yankees. In extras, Derek Jeter blows out his ankle diving for a grounder and is lost for the season, hastening the Yanks' early exit as the Tigers sweep.

October 18, 2012: The Tigers cruise to a second World Series in the Ilitch era with a 8-1 victory over the Yankees. It is their third postseason series win over the Bronx Bombers, the only team that has gone 3-0 or better against them in the postseason. Unfortunately, the Giants swept the Tigers in the World Series.

November 14, 2013: It turns out that it's OK to share, as Miguel Cabrera wins his second straight MVP award, while Max Scherzer wins the Cy Young. Cabrera won his third straight batting title, and also paced the AL in on-base percentage, slugging percentage, OPS and OPS+. For his part, Scherzer led the league with 21 wins, an .875 winning percentage and an 0.970 WHIP, striking out 240 in 214.1 innings.

July 31, 2014: Detroit acquires David Price from Tampa Bay to help push the Tigers to their fourth straight AL Central title. The move gives Detroit three Cy Young winners in its rotation. -- at least until Scherzer signs with Washington and Detroit deals Price to Toronto a year later.

August 4, 2015: There is a changing of the guard in the team management as Ilitch, impatient with the lack of a World Series title, fires Dave Dombrowski and promotes Al Avila to be the team's general manager.

KEY TIGERS FOR 2017 – By David Raglin

The Tigers who have gathered in Lakeland waiting for the Mayo Smith Society contingent to show up on March 18 are basically the same guys who were wearing the Old English D at the end of last season. The biggest loss is center fielder Cameron Maybin, whose hole has not been filled. The biggest additions are prospective center fielder Mikie Mahtook and two longtime Tigers, catcher Alex Avila and infielder Omar Infante. So, if the Tigers are going to improve on their 85-76 record and get into the playoff race, it will have to be with the guys on hand.

Who are the key players -- the players we need to watch to see if the Tigers will vault into contention? These are not necessarily the best players; the two best players on the team are Miggy Cabrera and Justin Verlander, but we are not particularly concerned about them. A key factor to being a key player is the element of doubt -- will the player have a good year. With that in mind, here are our four key Tigers.

1. -- Jordan Zimmermann. Zim is an obvious first choice on this list. His Tiger career began with a bang; he did not give a run until his fourth start and was 5-0 with a 0.55 ERA in his first start. After a stumble, he posted two more good starts through early June, as the table at the top of the next page shows.

However, after four out of five poor starts, Zimmermann went on the disabled list with neck pain, diagnosed as a pinched nerve and disk degeneration. He came back after two rehab starts, had a terrible start (1.2 innings, six runs on August 4), and went back on the disabled list. After three more rehab starts, he came back in September and made three mediocre starts.

Jordan Zimmermann Before and After, 2016

Date	G	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	W	L	ERA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Apr 8 to Jun 3, 2016	10	66.1	63	22	19	13	43	8	2	2.58	0.245	0.281	0.354	0.636
Jun 8 to Oct 1, 2016	9	39.0	55	41	38	13	23	1	5	8.77	0.346	0.391	0.679	1.070
Total - 2016 Season	19	105.1	118	63	57	26	66	9	7	4.87	0.284	0.325	0.478	0.804

If Zimmerman is healthy, the Tigers have three top starters (should-have-been Cy Young winner Justin Verlander, Rookie of the Year Michael Fulmer, and Zimmerman). If that’s true, they have to fill the final two slots and they have a good number of candidates to do that. If not, the rotation has to fill three spots.

The jury is out on Zimmermann. He has been healthy this spring but his language is full of conditional statement such as “so far”, hopefully”, and “seems to be”. He will be one to watch in Lakeland, not for great stats as much as for health and velocity (can he get the fastball speed back from the mid 91s to the 93+ he has with Washington.)

2. -- Justin Upton. The Tigers two big free agent signings are the first two names on this list. That speaks to one of the oddities of the 2016 season; the Tigers went from 74 to 85 wins despite not much from those two players.

Upton’s 2016 is also a tale of two seasons, but with no injury concerns and things getting better not worse. Brad Ausmus’ best move last year might have been benching Upton for a few days in mid-August, for when Upton was reinserted in the lineup, he went crazy. While we don’t expect Upton to replicate the last quarter of the season, if he can do what he did for Arizona, Atlanta, and San Diego, we’ll take that.

Justin Upton Before and After, 2016

Date	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Apr 5 to Aug 18, 2016	115	434	53	98	20	2	13	46	31	140	.226	.281	.371	.652	41	3.1
Aug 20 to Oct 2, 2016	38	136	28	42	8	0	18	41	19	39	.309	.397	.765	1.162	38	10.2
Total - 2016 Season	153	570	81	140	28	2	31	87	50	179	.246	.310	.465	.775	79	4.7

3.—Justin Wilson, Shane Greene, and Mark Lowe. For all we said about the rotation in Zimmermann, the Tigers had the fourth best rotation ERA in the league in 2016. The bigger problem was the bullpen, with the 13th best ERA in the league. Justin Wilson was good for about three-quarters of the season; unfortunately, in 14 games from July 7 to August 14, he gave up runs in eight of the games, including four with multiple runs. He settled down after that, but if Wilson is going to be the key lefty in the bullpen, he cannot become a liability for such a long stretch of time. Greene moved to the bullpen in early June and pitched well much of the time, but when he was bad, he was very bad. In his 42 relief appearances, he gave up multiple runs in eight of them, including four times allowing three or more runs. Lowe was another big free agent signing in the winter of 2015-2016, and he had a terrible year, with a 10.05 ERA at the All-Star break, often credited to a loss of fastball velocity. Used mostly in non-critical situations in the second half, his velocity did not return but he did post a 3.05 ERA, giving hope that he could contribute in 2017.

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