

# Tigers Stripes

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## A GROUNDED CENTER FIELDER? – By David Raglin

Center field has been a problem for the Tigers since Austin Jackson was traded to the Tampa Bay Rays in July 2014. Jackson had replaced Curtis Granderson, who in his time in Detroit had become a Tigers legend. Before Granderson, there was a drought in center, but before that, the Tigers had a tradition of good fielding center fielders who could also handle things at the plate, like Chet Lemon, Ron LeFlore and Mickey Stanley.

The last three seasons have seen three different regulars in center: Anthony Gose in 2015; Cameron Maybin in 2016; and Mikie Mahtook in 2017. Mahtook had a very good season last year and will be taking over left field for the traded Justin Upton, so there is an opening in center field this year.

The Tigers have decided to give Leonys Martin first crack at the job. Martin was signed as a low-cost free agent this past off-season, a one-year deal for \$1.75 million. The Tigers had interest in Martin before this year but decided he was not worth the almost \$5 million he was making previously. A subpar 2017 season, though, made the 30-year-old Martin available at a price the Tigers were willing to pay.

The left-handed hitting Martin is your classic defense-first, singles-hitting, speedy center fielder. He was a regular for the Rangers from 2013 to 2015. After the 2015 season, he was traded to AL West rival Seattle at a time that the Mariners were on a pitching-and-defense kick. He actually hit 15 home runs in 2016 but was sent to AAA Tacoma in April of 2017 after a terrible start. The Cubs acquired him at the end of last August for the last month of the season.

### Career Major League Statistics for Leonys Martin

Year	Team	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	CS	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
2011	Tex	8	8	2	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	.375	.375	.500	.875	2	10.7
2012	Tex	24	46	6	8	5	2	0	6	3	0	4	12	.174	.235	.370	.605	4	2.6
2013	Tex	147	457	66	119	21	6	8	49	36	9	28	104	.260	.313	.385	.698	58	4.2
2014	Tex	155	533	68	146	13	7	7	40	31	12	39	114	.274	.325	.364	.689	66	4.3
2015	Tex	95	288	26	63	12	0	5	25	14	5	16	69	.219	.264	.313	.576	24	2.7
2016	Sea	143	518	72	128	17	3	15	47	24	6	44	149	.247	.306	.378	.684	63	4.0
2017	Sea-ChC	49	128	14	22	3	1	3	9	7	4	8	33	.172	.232	.281	.513	7	1.7
7 MLB Seasons		621	1978	254	489	72	19	38	176	115	36	139	482	.247	.300	.360	.661	224	3.8

He has three seasons at the plate, 2013, 2014, and 2016, that produced similar runs created and runs created per game figures, but how he got there in 2016 was very different. At first glance, his 15 home run season in 2016 looks like it should be his best, but he had a bit better on-base percentage in the two earlier seasons. His average in 2016 was lower than in 2013 and 2014. You can see a bit what happened by looking at his stats by whether he hit a fly ball, a grounder, a line drive, or bunted.

### Leonys Martin: Type of Batted Ball and the Result

Year	Team	Ground Balls			Fly Balls			Line Drives			Bunts		
		%	BA	SLG	%	BA	SLG	%	BA	SLG	%	BA	SLG
2013	Tex	48%	.261	.284	24%	.126	.356	20%	.708	1.167	8%	.611	.611
2014	Tex	47%	.297	.332	21%	.044	.122	23%	.663	1.010	8%	.586	.586
2015	Tex	49%	.220	.239	23%	.019	.077	21%	.674	1.130	6%	.545	.545
2016	Sea	41%	.274	.287	30%	.140	.439	24%	.700	1.078	5%	.467	.467
2017	Se/Ch	43%	.146	.146	32%	.200	.567	19%	.500	.667	6%	.167	.167

The first thing you notice is how bad Martin's batting average has been when he hits a fly ball; in the four full seasons from 2013 to 2016, it never got above .140. For example, the major league average on fly balls last year was .210. Then, we see that his fly ball rate has been going up the last two seasons at the expense of ground balls. The fly ball rate has gone up about seven percentage points and his ground ball rate has dropped by almost the same rate. The major league average last year was 44 percent grounders, 29 percent fly balls, 25 percent line drives, and 2 percent bunts, so Martin's fly ball rate in 2016 was about average, which is not good for a singles hitter.

We note in the table the teams that Martin played for, and the change in his batted-ball composition happened when he went from Texas to Seattle. We don't know if it was the Mariners' idea, or Leonys decided he could become a home run hitter, or what. All we know is that however it came about, it did not work. It's telling that despite the 15 home runs, Martin's slugging percentage was actually higher in 2013 when he hit only seven home runs.

The phrase-of-the-moment last spring was "launch angle." The idea is to get the ball in the air and good things will happen. That may work for devotees like J.D. Martinez and Daniel Murphy, who already had power, but for Martin, it seems to lead to a lot of lazy fly balls. Let's hope that Martin and the Tigers have decided that too. Ron Gardenhire was quoted in the Detroit Free Press as saying, "I know this, he can be one of those guys who creates a lot of havoc on the basepaths. You get him in our ballpark, he gets a single up the middle and he can be standing on second base. That's going to be my message and I've already talked about this with (Tigers hitting coach) Lloyd McClendon. 'Just barrel the ball, you can fly.' This guy can really do damage flying around the field."

That seems like they are counting on him to get on base, not to hit the ball a long way. He has stolen on average about 30 bases projected to a full season, which would be a good dimension for the Tigers to add. He is a left-handed hitter who hits righties a bit better than southpaws, but not to an extreme. On a team with a lot of right-handed hitting, a lefty is welcome.

As for his defense, Martin has had some very good seasons. There are several ways to rate defensive players (defensive WAR, Zone Rating, and Defensive Runs Saved, to name a few), and they disagree at times on individual seasons, but overall, they give high marks to Martin's defense. The only caveat on his glove is that his best seasons were in 2013 to 2015 when he was 25 to 27 years old. He will be 30 this season, and we would not expect his glove to be quite as good as it was when he was younger.

Overall, the Tigers clearly had decided not to spend a lot of money on a center fielder, and given that, Martin could be a really good pickup. The young pitchers will benefit from his defense and with Nick Castellanos in right field, getting a good glove in center was important. If he hits the ball on the ground and gets on base, he could help set up the middle of the order. There is even a chance that if he has a really good first four or five months of the season, the Tigers could deal him for a prospect. I can't say I'm crazy about him, but for a cheap player, he at least has some upside.

### **TAKING A STAB AT THE TIGERS ALL-TIME TEAM** – By David Raglin

On the first Wednesday of the month, a few of us Mayo Smithers gather for dinner at Tunncliff's Tavern on Capitol Hill in Washington, for a combination of hearty food and Tiger conversation. In February, Mark Pattison raised the topic of who would be on the Tigers All-Time Team? The Tigers have put together all-time teams twice, and each have had some anomalies (Denny McLain in 1969 and Kirk Gibson in 1999), but a lot of time, and one of the best eras in Tigers history, has passed since the last of those efforts. We threw out some ideas and Mark suggested, "Dave, that would be a great article for *Tigers Stripes*." Actually, it will be several articles, as there will be room to do only one position in this issue.

First, we had to establish some ground rules. The team will consist of a player at each position, including designated hitter (since we've had the DH for over 40 years now), with a left, center, and right fielder specifically instead of three generic outfielders. For pitchers, we will go with one left-handed and one right-handed starter, like the 1969 and 1999 teams did (there were two lefties in 1999 because of a tie), and like the 1999 team, a reliever. A player will only be considered at the position where he played most for the Tigers but his whole body of work will be considered. For example, Miguel Cabrera has played more first than third, but

we will consider his whole Tiger career when comparing him to other candidates. Also, top-level performance will be considered ahead of longevity.

So, let's start at first base, where the rules will come into play in a couple of ways. Norm Cash clearly played the most games of any Tiger first baseman (15 seasons, 2,018 games) but Cabrera (10 seasons and 1,506 games so far) and Hank Greenberg (12 seasons, 1,269 games) have just about the same number of runs created as a Tiger as Cash (Greenberg 1,263, Cash 1,243, and Cabrera 1,225 through 2017). So, it comes down to Greenberg vs Cabrera.

Both were great players in their prime with many distinctions. They are about even in total runs created as Tigers, but the rule was that excellence is more important than just longevity. In that vein, below are the number of times the player led the league in the listed categories as Tigers. That's a lot of black ink on their Baseball Reference page:

**Hank vs Miggy: Seasons of Distinction for Each Player**

Player	G	R	2B	HR	RBI	BB	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	MVP1	MVP10	MVPA
Greenberg	0	1	2	4	4	1	0	0	1	1	3	2	6	7
Cabrera	1	0	1	2	2	0	4	4	2	2	4	2	7	9

MVP1: Won MVP, MVP10: in top 10 for MVP, MVPA: Any votes in MVP race

Looking at these numbers doesn't really help settle the choice. Miggy won several on-base and batting titles that Greenberg didn't but Greenberg had those monstrous home run and RBI figures (58 home runs, 184 and 168 RBIs.) Both players moved positions (Greenberg to left field and Cabrera to third) to help their team. Greenberg did not have a strong reputation for or against his defense while Cabrera has generally been considered a defensive liability. Defensive WAR probably does not have much value for players in Greenberg's era, but for what it's worth, his is much better than Cabrera's (-3.6 total for Greenberg versus -11.6 for Cabrera.) Those numbers reinforce their reputations, so taking them into account, it seems to be the only big difference between the two. Therefore, I'd pick Greenberg by a nose, noting that a really good comeback season by Miggy would be enough to change that verdict.

**TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "THE HALF-GAME PENNANT OF 1908"** – Review by Mark Pattison

Conventional wisdom holds that this year's Tigers won't be anywhere near a pennant, so Detroit fans may have to content themselves with reading about them. Fortunately, 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the Tigers' World Series triumph over St. Louis, but it also celebrates the 110th anniversary of their American League pennant in a four-way race with the Chicago White Sox, the Cleveland Naps and the St. Louis Browns.

Baseball historian Charles C. Alexander, whose past baseball works include books on the "Miracle Braves" of 1914 and what had been the definitive biography of Ty Cobb for a generation, suggests the AL race didn't get as much play as that season's NL chase featuring the New York Giants, Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates, not to mention the "Merkle's Boner" game, due to East Coast bias and the strength of the New York and Chicago press; the AL competitors were all in the "west." He's got a good point. This may have been the tightest and most exciting four-way race in the majors until the 1967 AL season, ably covered in Jeff Miller's "Down to the Wire," which featured the Tigers, White Sox, Minnesota Twins and the eventual champion Boston Red Sox, with the California Angels in a supporting role.

Alexander covers 1908 in game-by-game, series-by-series fashion with none of the four combatants overlooked. At 167 pages, it's a terse, tight read, barely more than one page per game in the 154-game season. Still, Alexander uncovers nuggets long ignored in most other books covering the Deadball Era. Cobb bailing out on his teammates for a week so he can get married and honeymoon has been covered in a fistful of Cobb biographies. Here, though, Alexander extracts his nuggets straight from the source: the daily newspapers that covered the teams and a league like a blanket.

One example: Chicago Tribune baseball writer Charles Dryden, penning his game account of a 10-5 Tigers drubbing of the Chisox in the Windy City, wrote that "(Detroit manager Hughie) Jennings said 'wee-yah' 400 times and pulled up enough of Mr. Comiskey's June grass to stuff a mattress." Or, how the next day,

the Chicago cops arrested a kid who had caught a foul ball but wouldn't give it back to the umpire, as was expected in those days. And, while the Tigers were in spring training in Hot Springs, Arkansas, rookie pitcher "Kickapoo Ed" Summers was asked to describe a pitch that baffled minor league batters the year before while he coasted to a 14-7 record. Summers held the ball on his fingertips, he said, while "steadying it with my thumb alone." Asked if he called it a "finger-nail ball," he replied, It's -- I don't know what. It's just this." The questioner might have had it right in the first place, as what Summers was exhibiting is now known, ironically, as the knuckleball.

Detroit led for a good bit of the 1908 season but lost its grip on first place late – almost too late for it to recover. But recover the Tigers did. Thanks to how the rules of the time were applied, rainouts and games that ended in ties due to rain or darkness were not required to be resumed or replayed. That's what led to Detroit taking the pennant by a half-game over Cleveland, which played all 154 games but had lost one more than Detroit, and a game and a half over Chicago, which played two fewer games than Cleveland, but equaled the Naps in the loss column. Such a travesty would never be allowed to happen again, declared the league's top brass. Except it did, in 1972, when Detroit was again the beneficiary. A strike at the start of the season wiped out games, and Commissioner Bowie Kuhn declared the missed games would not be replayed. So the Tigers finished a half-game ahead of Boston – and that thrilling tale is told expertly in Todd Masters' "The 1972 Detroit Tigers: Billy Martin and the Half-Game Champs."

"The Half-Game Pennant of 1908," published by McFarland, retails at \$29.95. It can be ordered at <https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/the-half-game-pennant-of-1908>.

### **SHORT STRIPES**

\* Comerica Park has never been known as a hitter's park (its original nickname was "Comerica National Park"). Even after the bullpens were moved to left field, it is still a big park—420 to center field and the deep cutout by the out-of-town scoreboard in right center. But, in terms of park factors, Comerica generates more offense than the average park. From 2015 to 2017, there were 3 percent more runs in Tigers games in Detroit than Tiger games in other parks, as well as two percent more homers, a better batting average, and 47 percent more triples. Why is that? Mike Petrello of MLB.com has a theory. He suggests that Comerica's big dark green batting eye is the difference. That makes sense; there are 8 percent fewer strikeouts in Tigers home games than away games. He has several quotes and a bunch of stats, and instead of stealing his thunder, I suggest you go read it yourself at <https://www.mlb.com/news/comerica-park-may-offer-hitters-big-advantage/c-265913828>, or search for the title "Comerica Park May Offer Hitters Big Advantage."

\* I have to admit I irrationally was glad to see the Tigers sign Francisco Liriano. Part of it is for baseball reasons; I can see him being an effective reliever we can flip at the trading deadline (remember how much we got in the Justin Wilson deal), and it gives us another candidate for the fifth starter spot. Part of it is that I like him for some reason. I remember how good he was when he first came up with the Twins. Liriano (2010, 2013) will join Norm Cash (1965, 1971) as two-time winners of the Comeback Player of the Year award to play for Detroit.

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