

# Tigers Stripes

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Mayo Smith Society

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## AS THE SHORTSTOP TURNS – By David Raglin

When the story of the 2014 Detroit Tigers Spring Training is written, the #1 word used will be “injuries”. The #2 word will be “shortstop”.

The Tigers have suffered three key injuries this spring. We will start by talking about Jose Iglesias and the shortstop position, because that one has had the most twists and turns. Iglesias played through his shin injuries last season, only missing a few games due to them. After a winter of rest, everybody thought Iglesias would be fine. However, after only one Grapefruit League game, the shin problems sidelined him, and what were thought to be shin splints turned out to be stress fractures in both shins which will cause Iglesias to miss the whole 2014 season.

This was a major blow to the Tigers. The team spent the off-season focused on building a team that would play good defense and have some speed, and Iglesias was a big part of that.

Going into spring training, one of the problems they had was a lack of depth. We’ve seen that lack of depth with the candidates the Tigers had to fill Iglesias’ shoes. They had three players competing for the job for most of spring training, Danny Worth, Hernan Perez, and Eugenio Suarez. None of them were solid candidates. Worth was probably the best of them, but the Tigers clearly were not comfortable trusting him to hold down the job.

Worth missed much of last year with injuries and at the end of the year was a free agent. Despite the apparent lack of opportunity in Detroit with Iglesias there, he resigned with the Tiger organization as a non-roster player with an invitation to spring training. That meant if he won the job, the Tigers would have to make room for him on the 40-man roster (which they could do by moving Iglesias to the 60-day disabled list).

Perez was with the Tigers for a bit in 2013 but spent most of the year at Toledo. He was once considered a candidate for the second base job in 2014 before the team acquired Ian Kinsler. Unfortunately in this situation, his first position is second base, and was considered to be lacking in the field at short.

Suarez is the youngster in the group, and was arguably the most intriguing of the bunch. He is only 22 years old, and as a 21 year old last year, he held his own at High-A Lakeland and AA Erie, hitting 30 doubles and 10 home runs between the two stops. He is a natural shortstop, and while he does not have the range of Iglesias (who does?), he is steady and would not be a defensive liability. Suarez clearly has the most potential of the trio.

Instead of choosing from among those three players, the Tigers traded for two more shortstops. The first was Andrew Romine, son of former major leaguer Kevin Romine, who was acquired from the Angels on Friday March 21 for starting pitcher Jose Alvarez. That deal made sense. Romine, while not much of a hitter, is a lefty bat. He could platoon with Danny Worth, for whom there have been durability concerns.

After the Romine deal, I had an article written for this issue of *Tigers Stripes* that basically said that they could go with this platoon until at least early June. If the platoon did not work out and there were no better options, after the draft the first week in June, signing free agent Stephen Drew would not cost a draft pick. I estimated, based on previous WAR figures, that going with the platoon instead of Drew would cost the Tigers a win or two. (Of course, that assumes Drew would still be out there, but that is a reasonable risk, and if Drew was signed, they could have traded for another shortstop.)

However, everything changed (and my previous article went into the scrap heap) when the Tigers made a very surprising and curious deal on Monday March 24, trading Steve Lombardozzi to the Orioles for veteran shortstop Alex Gonzalez. Who is Gonzalez? He has been in the majors since 1998 and played for Florida, Boston, Cincinnati, Atlanta and Milwaukee. On the next page are his stats for the last three seasons and spring training 2014.

**Alex Gonzalez, Bats Right, 37 Years Old**

Year	Tm	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	WAR
2011	Atlanta	149	564	59	136	27	1	15	56	22	126	.241	.270	.372	52	3.1	1.7
2012	Milwaukee	24	81	8	21	4	0	4	15	6	15	.259	.326	.457	12	5.2	0.2
2013	Milwaukee	41	113	14	20	3	0	1	8	3	26	.177	.203	.230	5	-1.0	-1.0
14 ST	Baltimore	12	28	4	12	1	0	2	6	2	4	.429	.467	.679	9	14.1	----
Total: 15 Years .....		1600	5746	663	1413	332	30	157	688	298	1164	.246	.290	.396	644	3.8	10.0

As you can see, his last full season was 2011 with the Braves. He signed with the Brewers for the 2012 season and was actually the opening day first baseman for Milwaukee that season (replacing Prince Fielder) after the season-ending injury to Mat Gamel. Gonzalez suffered his own season-ending injury in May, but resigned with the Brewers in 2013. He played mostly third base for Milwaukee but was released in June and was out of major league baseball until the Orioles signed him as a non-roster player this February.

Why did the Tigers feel a 37-year-old who was released by a bad team last June and was a non-roster spring training invitee was their solution at shortstop? New Tiger coach Omar Vizquel saw him play in Venezuela this past winter and recommended him to the Tigers. Vizquel, one of the best shortstops of all-time, hopefully is a good judge of shortstop talent too. Gonzalez had looked ok this spring and actually might have been the opening day stand-in for Manny Machado at third base in Baltimore if he had not traded to Detroit.

What can we expect from Gonzalez? At the bat, not much. He has been a poor on-base guy (.290 lifetime on-base percentage), and given his age, we would expect it to be not as good as that. In the field, the generous assessment is that he will catch the balls he can get to, but he will not have much range. However, he has not really played shortstop in the majors for three years, so we will see how this goes. At best, Gonzalez is a replacement-level player and his lack of range at shortstop will greatly hurt the Tigers new emphasis on speed and defense.

The one thing that is clear that, despite the good spring he had, the Tigers have no faith in Danny Worth, so we do not expect to see him have a significant role with the Tigers. This move does not preclude the Tigers from still pursuing Drew in June if he is still out there and Gonzalez has not filled the job adequately.

**LEFT FIELD SHUFFLE** – By David Raglin

The second major injury was to the player we called last month the key player for the 2014 Tigers, Andy Dirks. He had back surgery in March and is expected back in June. However, given that this is the third straight year Dirks has suffered a significant injury and he has taken longer than expected to come back from the previous injuries, we cannot count on his return at that time.

Initial speculation was focused on several players. Rajai Davis was signed to be Dirks' platoon partner, but as we said last month, he is not an adequate offensive player against right-handed pitchers (.228/.273/.321 slash line against them in 2013, for example). Two non-roster players, Ezequiel Carrera and Trevor Crowe, were in the mix, but neither them is close to being a good enough hitter to play a significant role on a team trying to win. One intriguing prospect, Steven Moya, raised some eyebrows, but as a 21 year old last year in High-A Lakeland, he had 18 walks and 106 strikeouts, so he was not ready to make the big leap.

The Tigers also were looking at players to trade for. The best player mentioned was Cubs outfielder Nate Schierholtz had 32 doubles and 21 home runs for the Cubs and is a free agent after the season, making him an ideal stopgap in left field. However, the Cubs would probably require a good prospect in return for him, and the Tigers do not have a deep farm system.

As of this writing, the feeling is that another Tiger prospect, Tyler Collins, will be the winner in the competition. We were very impressed with Collins when we first saw him in spring training in 2013, and he looked pretty good this year too. He has made the big jump to AA and held his own there, and he plays good defense. He is a left-handed hitter who over his career has not had a huge platoon differential (although he actually hit lefties much better than righties in 2013). Ideally, he would start the year in Toledo, but the Tigers need him now.

**Tyler Collins, Bats Left, 24 Years Old**

Year	Team	Level	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
2011	Tigers	Rk	1	3	2	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	.333	.600	.667	1	15.3
2011	Connecticut	SS A	42	163	28	51	10	1	8	31	10	17	.313	.360	.534	31	7.0
2012	Lakeland	High A	126	473	68	137	35	5	7	66	58	64	.290	.371	.429	75	5.7
2013	Erie	AA	129	466	67	112	29	0	21	79	51	122	.240	.323	.438	64	4.6
2014 ST	Detroit	Maj	19	43	8	11	3	2	3	7	4	9	.256	.333	.628	9	6.9
Minor League Totals – 3 Seasons			298	1105	165	301	75	6	36	177	121	203	.272	0.350	.449	171	5.4

**SMITHERS SPRUNG IN TIME FOR SPRING TRAINING** – By Mark Pattison

For the Society’s 31st annual spring training trip to Lakeland, we encountered lots of the new along with much of the familiar. One thing that was new: the number of first-time participants in our group, which maxed out at 40 for the first half of the March 15-22 trip. It also featured the most “late” action probably ever in the annals of the Lakeland sojourn, with members willing to pay a late fee to join our merry band.

Another new thing: the hotel, which by my count is the seventh used by the Society in the three decades-plus of spring outings. This year’s choice: the Crestwood Suites, across from our March home the last several years, and owned by the same franchisee. (One year, the former hotel was overbooked and sent nearly everyone from the trip over to the Crestwood. Some liked it so much they book the Crestwood instead of the old hotel in subsequent years.) The Crestwood has amenities the last lodging didn’t: Each “suite” with a kitchenette; coin laundry, a business center with three (count ‘em, three) computers. And there was one un-advertised amenity: Retired Tigers skipper Jim Leyland, himself a guest at the Crestwood. Leyland appeared to be in great spirits, talking baseball with Smithers and signing autographs, too! The Crestwood is also a haven par excellence for Tigers fans: The 50 extra copies of Tigers Stripes we made for the trip and left at the registration desk were snapped up by the halfway point of the trip.

Our traditional “opening night” dinner featured lots of bon mots from two well-regarded speakers: Mike Smith, the Tigers’ director of field operations, and Bill Scherrer, a late lefty bullpen addition to the last Detroit team to win a World Series, in 1984 -- 30 years ago. (Has it been that long? And, if so, why has it been that long?) Smith took us on a year-by-year journey of the Tigers through the Dave Dombrowski era, which began in 2002, while Scherrer told stories from his tenure with Detroit, including the infamous World Series ring incident.

Oh, and the baseball. Detroit had a winning record of 4-2 for our stay plus one rainout (the first time since 1999 that we can remember a game being canceled even before a pitch got thrown). The only two teams that beat the Tigers had been beaten by Detroit earlier in the week. The Tigers averaged more than seven runs a game, helped in large part by two laughers: 14-3 over Houston on March 15, and 18-4 over Toronto on March 18. We proudly waved our banner high during the seventh-inning stretch, and we sang “M-A-Y-O” at the top of our lungs, including the new-to-2014 verse: Kinsler, he’s our new leadoff man / Rajai DA-vis, he’ll run fast as he can / Joe NA-than, he’ll close out the ninth inning / With Brad, a new beginning.”

The March 16 game against Washington in Viera featured our first opportunity to see the replay challenge at work. Late in the game, Tigers minor league outfielder Ben Guez hit a sharp single to left field. The left fielder started a quick relay to nab Guez as he headed back to first base. Guez was called safe by the umpire, but new Nationals manager Matt Williams issued a challenge – albeit to no avail. Guez remained safe I a 2-1 Detroit win.

The Tigers wouldn’t be likely to keep this up over the course of the exhibition season, much less the regular season, but several Tigers were atop the Grapefruit League leader boards in most every category, including Nick Castellanos, Miguel Cabrera, Austin Jackson, Rajai Davis, and even Don Kelly. At one point, there were 11 Tigers with OPSes (on-base percentage plus slugging average) over .800. with Jackson at a ridiculous 1.264.

The trip organizers – David Raglin, Deana Carr and I – made the presentation of the King Tiger Award to a truly affable Max Scherzer in recognition of his many on-the-field and off-the-field contributions last season. The post-trip news that Scherzer and his agent rejected a multi-year deal that would have made Max a very rich man indeed leaves us a bit disconsolate at the thought that this might be the last year we'll see Scherzer wearing the Old English "D." Maybe the Tigers front office brass should have rejected our advice to deduct the cost of the King Tiger plaque from their offer. The March 18 King Tiger presentation was also "Shirt Day" as Smithers who thought they were getting T-shirts instead were able to pick up a really love powder-blue polo shirt instead.

During our stay, it seemed as if more and more Tigers were filling up the sick bay: Davis, with a tight hamstring, held out of games since March 20; Anibal Sanchez, a sore shoulder that required a cortisone shot, held back a week; Jose Iglesias, shin splints that turned out to be stress fractures in each leg, out four to six months; Bruce Rondon, "Tommy John" surgery, out of the year. But at least the Mayo Maulers didn't suffer any injuries in their morning softball play.

A late addition to the trip itinerary was a tour of the Lakeland clubhouse and training facilities. Longtime Tigers clubhouse manager Jim Schmakel gave a dozen or so Mayoites the red-carpet (actually, a blue-and-orange tiger-paw print job chosen by the city of Lakeland, which footed the bill) treatment. Schmakel's own salary mainly comes from players' tips, which are substantial. "Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. The players are generous," he said. He lamented about his budget (who doesn't?), given that the Tigers often eat all their meals in the clubhouse, plus he's got to buy all the equipment, including 2,700 dozen baseballs at \$108 per dozen. Schmakel and his crew also help the Tigers make money by having "game used" (actually worn) and "team issued" (not worn, like the green St. Patrick's Day uniform for the game that was rained out) authenticated for resale or auctioning. Broken bats, too. After a month in Florida, he'd collected just 17 smashed-up sticks -- a far cry from the 200 he used to collect before more players switched to maple bats.

Mid-trip, we learned the sad news that Garth Taylor, a Society member from Alton, Ill., a World War II veteran -- and a longtime trip participant with his son, Mississippi radio morning show DJ Tom Colt – passed away. Anybody who ever met Garth was struck by his innate kindness. Anyone who ever played morning softball with the Maulers will also remember Garth, a hotel hand towel tucked under his baseball cap, chasing down any errant ball he could get to.

One personal highlight was spotting Richard Verlander, Justin's father, on the concourse of Champion Stadium in Celebration, where Atlanta plays its spring games. Richard was wearing a deep blue faux jersey with "VERLANDER" in white his uniform number, 35, in orange below the last few letters of his name – strikingly similar to the Miguel Cabrera jersey I got for my daughter during the Tigers' off-day (Rick Porcello pitched well on the minor-league diamond in an intrasquad game). Several minutes of conversation – Justin got his folks a New Zealand vacation for Christmas – and a few ill-aimed selfies later, I was ready to watch Justin take on the Braves – which he did, blanking them over five innings in a 3-0 shutout win March 21.

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