

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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THE SPRING SO FAR – By David Raglin

Spring is the season of bloom, of promise, where everybody is in “the best shape of their life” and everybody is tied for first place. I don’t want to focus too much on what we’ve seen this spring so far. First of all, by the time you read this, things will have changed, and second of all, for an established team like the 2015 Tigers, there are not a lot of jobs up for grabs or a lot of news.

The best news is the progress shown by Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez in recovering from their injuries. On a star-laden team with several weak spots and pretty much no depth, if those two don’t have a good year, the wheels could fall off the cart. As of now, they might not be ready for Opening Day but both look like they will be in the lineup soon after that at least. Also, Justin Verlander is looking very good. His fastball is not as fast as it was even last year, but it is still early and it will still be a good fastball. More importantly, though, he is locating his fastball much better, along with his off-speed stuff. He also knows that he is not a kid anymore and needs to adjust his game. Also, in his last outing, Shane Greene showed why the Tigers traded for him.

The bad news has been the bullpen and the nagging injuries. As we will discuss later, Jose Iglesias has not played consecutive games at shortstop yet, Ian Kinsler and Yoenis Cespedes have been hurt, and Joakim Soria has been battling a blister. The latter has taken on more significance because of the worst news of the spring so far: Joe Nathan has been dreadful and there is more talk about whether he can even help the team in any capacity this year if he can’t close. The 40-year-old’s fastball is way down and he has had trouble locating his pitches. This is scary given that the Tigers did little to fix a bullpen that had the second-worst ERA in the league last year and did not sign affordable free agents like Casey Janssen and Sergio Romo.

The Mayo Smith group is heading to Lakeland on March 21 for seven games, so we will be able to report on what we see down there. Hopefully we will see Miggy and V-Mart and the Tigers will be ready for a big season.

THE RETURN OF JOSE IGLESIAS – By David Raglin

One of the biggest shocks last spring was the news that young shortstop Jose Iglesias was going to miss the whole season due to shin splints and stress fractures in both legs. The Tigers tried to plug the hole unsuccessfully by picking up Alex Gonzalez (who lasted about a month) and Kevin Romine (who became the regular shortstop). The Tigers also played Eugenio Suarez there a lot in 2014, but he was traded to the Reds in the Alfredo Simon deal over the winter.

Iglesias is back with a bit of an asterisk, given that he has not played back-to-back games at shortstop this spring, and he has suffered two injuries to his shins already in Florida (one on a freak line drive that hit him during batting practice.)

Assuming Iglesias is back this year, how will he do and how does that compare to what the Tigers had at shortstop in 2014? First, given Iglesias’s injuries and tenuous situation, let’s assume that he only plays about 130 games and that for the other 32, the Tigers get about the same production they got at shortstop in 2014.

Let’s start with hitting. Below is a table comparing the Tigers’ 2014 shortstop with a projection for Iglesias in 2015, projected to 130 games. Why did we use a projection for Iglesias for 2015 rather than his 2013 actual statistics? First, we cannot expect him to hit .303 in 2015 even though he hit .303 in 2013. That average was inflated by an amazing start to the season for the Red Sox. In the first half, he hit .367, due in large part to a .414 batting average in balls in play in the field (BABIP), which ignores strikeouts and home runs. While player’ BABIP does vary, nobody consistently has a .414 BABIP. (The American League leader in 2014, Lorenzo Cain, hit .380.) Second, there are quite a few projection systems (Baseball Info Systems, Baseball Prospectus, Steamer, ZiPS, etc.) and they all are pretty close in their projections (BA between .253 and .257,

OBP between .298 and .301, SLG between .311 and .335), which suggests a consensus on how he will do. I used the Baseball Info Systems projection pro-rated to 130 games.

Tigers Shortstop Offense, Prorated to 130 Games, 2014 Shortstops Versus Jose Iglesias

SS Prorated to 130 G	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Tiger SS 2014	130	438	52	98	13	2	5	32	35	107	.224	.286	.297	.583	37	2.8
Iglesias 2015 Proj.	130	451	51	116	15	2	4	34	25	70	.257	.299	.326	.625	44	3.4

Iglesias does not look that great at the plate but he is much better than the options the Tigers used in 2014. (We have to keep remembering that teams are scoring about 4.2 runs per game these days, not the 5.0 runs they were scoring in the steroid era, so 3.4 runs created per game is not that bad.) This suggests that the Tigers will score about seven more runs with Iglesias compared to the shortstops last season. A rule of thumb is that 10 runs is worth about a win, so Iglesias' bat will be worth a little less than one win. Not huge, but one win is one win (remembering that the Tigers won the Central by one game each of the last two seasons.)

Now let's look at the defense, where Iglesias is expected to shine. There are different projections systems for fielders; there are several systems out there. The numbers differ, but the trends are the same. Tigers shortstops were between -2 and -10 runs worse than an average shortstop in 2014. Andrew Romine was a little below average, but Eugenio Suarez and Alex Gonzalez were well below average. (Gonzalez by one system was a -4, meaning that in the month he played for the Tigers, he was already four runs worse than an average shortstop.)

Now let's look at Iglesias. By several of the systems, he did not actually have a good year at shortstop in 2013. I suspect a large part of that was the Red Sox moving him between shortstop and third base, not allowing him to get comfortable at either position. However, looking at his who major league career at shortstop, in 103 games he saved about +4 to +7 runs more than an average shortstop.

So, Tigers shortstops prorated to 130 games were about -2 and -7 runs below average and Iglesias is projected to be about +6 to +9 runs better than an average shortstop. That would indicate that the Tigers will save about 8 (-2 versus 6) to 16 (-7 versus 9) runs this year at shortstop in the 130 games I expect Iglesias to play.

Combining offense and defense suggests that having Iglesias for 130 games would be about 7 runs on offense and 8 to 16 runs on defense, for an overall total of 15 to 23 runs. That is about two more wins for the Tigers (using the rule of thumb of each 10 runs is a win) with Jose Iglesias. Given how close we expect the Central Division to be in 2015, we will probably need those wins.

LOU AND TRAM – By David Raglin

With Alan Trammell back with the Tigers and the 20th anniversary of their last game together coming this year, we thought we'd look back of their great careers and compare them. I certainly believe that both of them belong in the Hall of Fame, as do pretty much every statistical analyst who has looked at it. It's really odd how players like Ryne Sandberg and Barry Larkin got in quickly but Lou and Tram have never got close. Probably the deciding factor is that both Sandberg and Larkin won MVP awards, which cemented their greatness in history. This makes the writers dreadful pick of George Bell over the real MVP in 1987, Alan Trammell, even more of travesty now than it was then. Here are their career stats:

Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammell, Career Statistics

Player	Yrs	G	PA	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G	oWAR	dWAR	WAR	MVPV
Lou Whitaker	19	2390	9967	8570	1386	2369	420	65	244	1084	.276	.363	.426	.789	1395	5.7	67.1	15.4	74.9	1
Alan Trammell	20	2293	9376	8288	1231	2365	412	55	185	1003	.285	.352	.415	.767	1255	5.3	62.4	22.0	70.4	7

oWAR: Offensive WAR (Wins Above Replacement), dWAR: Defensive WAR, WAR: Total WAR, MVPV: # of seasons with any MVP votes

Even though Lou Whitaker played one fewer season, he has higher career totals, due to the injuries that Alan Trammell suffered. However, while Trammell suffered more “off” seasons or shortened seasons, he had more spectacular seasons; he received votes on an MVP ballot in seven seasons compared to Lou Whitaker, who received MVP votes in one season.

I also included the modern WAR statistics, for Wins Above Replacement, which did not exist when they played. Note that Offensive WAR and Defensive WAR do not add to total WAR since the individual WARs are adjusted for the defensive position the player played. The WAR estimates pretty much mirror what we see in the other stats. (FYI, their WARs are both about the same or better than Sandberg’s (67.7) or Larkin’s (70.2).)

One interesting thing I noticed is Whitaker’s offensive stats continued to be strong late in his career. For example, his runs created per game (RC/G) in his last five seasons were: 7.5, 6.6, 7.2, 6.8, and 7.1. Those were his five best marks in that statistic, actually (there was another season at 6.6). A large part of that is that the left-handed hitting Whitaker had a very large platoon differential; for his career, he hit .290/.378/.460 against righties and only .239/.323/.334 against southpaws; and late in his career he was basically a platoon player who rarely hit against lefties.

BASEBALL CARDS COMBINING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT – By David Raglin

Just like many of you, I am sure, I collected baseball cards as a kid. I grew up in the 1970s, and the first year I collected was 1972. That year saw one of Topps’ funkier designs that reflected the era we were in; the team name on the top was in an arched 3-D-like look and the cards were very colorful. I collected through the 1970s but eventually fell out of the hobby as the multiple sets and variations made collecting much more complicated and expensive. (One year I tried to get every Tony Clark card made that year; I stopped at about 20.) The cards these days are more works of art than the cards we had growing up, which were meant to be played with, not put into plastic sleeves.

The last few years, though, Topps has been doing something pretty cool, which I have just gotten into. They have been making cards of current players in the styles of older cards. They started in 2001 with cards based on the 1952 design, and have continued it, so this year, the cards are in the style of the 1966 set, with the team name on a diagonal stripe in the top left corner and the player’s name and position at the bottom of the card. They are also not overly glossy, with the feel of the cards of the past era. Even though I was not collecting in 1966, I still remember getting cards from that era at card shows, so I got the 2015 set of Tigers, which includes new players like Yoenis Cespedes and Shane Greene <http://www.amazon.com/Topps-Heritage-Martinez-Cespedes-Castellanos/dp/B00U59WHEI>.

They also have a series called Topps Archives, where they make a few players in the styles of more recent eras. I like those even more because a few years ago, they made several Tigers -- Prince Fielder, Justin Verlander, Doug Fister, and Miguel Cabrera -- in the style of my beloved 1972 cards http://www.comc.com/Cards/Baseball/2013/Topps_Archives/50/Miguel_Cabrera/6613348. They have also made cards of players like Justin Verlander based on other season, like the 1977 set that I had and the 1971 set that all had bold black borders. http://www.comc.com/Cards/Baseball/2012/Topps_Archives/67/Justin_Verlander/5949509. I got a special delight when I found they made a few baseball cards (including Miguel Cabrera) that look like the 1971-72 Topps hockey cards, the first hockey cards I collected that had an even more funky design than the 1972 baseball cards. It’s actually a lot cooler than I would have thought to see current players on cards that look like the ones I had growing up.

If this interests you, I have bought a lot of single cards of my favorite Tigers and a few other players from a website called COMC (www.comc.com) that serves as a middleman for card shops around the country. Even a better option is to check out a local baseball card shop and card show.

HALF A COBB IS BETTER THAN NONE – By Mark Pattison

Two books published last year feature Ty Cobb, the greatest Tiger of them all, in a shared billing. One, Rick Huhn’s “The Chalmers Race: Ty Cobb, Napoleon Lajoie, and the Controversial 1910 Batting Title That Became a National Obsession,” gives co-star treatment to Nap Lajoie, the star second baseman of the Cleveland Naps – a man so beloved the team was nicknamed after him before it assumed its current moniker of Indians.

The other book gives it all away in the title: Amber Roessner’s “Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, And the Sporting Press in America.”

Let’s take Roessner’s book first. Matty and the Georgia Peach were portrayed by sportswriters as pretty much diametric opposites. Mathewson was “The Christian Gentleman,” a college boy who did not even so much as swear in the heat of battle. Cobb was something else entirely: brazen, desperate, always fighting, on and off the field. But the writers paved a path to greatness for Cobb even though he was portrayed as nothing like Christy.

The fabrication of Cobb’s poverty upbringing in Georgia (only in comparison to Mathewson’s childhood) only served, they said, to fuel his desire to win at any cost. Cobb didn’t have much choice but to go along with it. Cobb, though, did manage to get some postseason plums even if a world championship win was never in the cards – in the form of stage appearances, a movie, and World Series commentary in a syndicated column – not all of which were ghost-written. (Cobb was as likely to string together 140 sentences as much as today’s stars are to string together 140 characters on Twitter.)

Since they never faced off against each other in a World Series, the most time Cobb and Mathewson spent together was in the Gas and Flame Division of the Army during World War I. It was there that Matty inhaled too much gas in a training accident. He was never the same again and died of pneumonia before Cobb’s career ended.

I wish Roessner could have extended the theme of image management to today’s players. It’s the principal shortcoming in what is otherwise a fine book.

“The Chalmers Race” gives more detail than one might have thought possible to the 1910 competition for the American League batting title. Most people know the story: Cobb and Lajoie went hammer and tong for the crown. Cobb had a nearly insurmountable lead, and after a good day at the plate on the penultimate day of the season, he rested. But Lajoie went 8-for-8 in a final-day doubleheader against the St. Louis Browns to win the championship. Or did he? Stat-keeping of a century ago was far less exact a science as today’s statheads will tell you. The outcome was in doubt until AL president Ban Johnson declared Cobb had won, which earned him a brand-new Chalmers automobile. The automaker, grateful for all the publicity, gave a car to Lajoie, too.

While Cobb and Lajoie are the star players, this book features a fine supporting cast, including Johnson, who may (or may not) have tampered with the stats to give Cobb the win; Red Corriden, a future Tiger, but then a rookie third baseman for the Browns who was ordered to play back of the bag, allowing Lajoie to rack up a perfect day at the plate; and Jack “Peach Pie” O’Connor, the St. Louis skipper who ordered Corriden to play back and was banished from the big leagues. O’Connor petitioned and sued for reentry for the better part of a decade but to no avail. Not long after he gave up trying, there were new scandals to quash and a new sheriff in town to kick out the malefactors.

Huhn’s book has, undeniably, far more lively prose, but Roessner’s book makes for a fascinating case study. You can’t go wrong with either – or both. “The Chalmers Race” (University of Nebraska Press) retails for \$29.99, and “Inventing Baseball Heroes” (LSU Press) retails for \$40.99. If you can’t find them (not surprising) at a local bookstore (sadly, also not surprising), you can easily snag them from online booksellers.

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