

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the
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Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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WELCOME TO THE 2016 SEASON! – By David Raglin

As the Mayoites return from Lakeland and the team gets ready to head south to start the season, what kind of spring has this been for the Tigers?

If we had to list five things that have been good this spring, we'd have to say: (1) Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander look strong. We noted that without them and Victor Martinez having strong seasons, the 2016 Tigers looked a lot like the 2015 Tigers, and that was not good. For the first time in several seasons, both players were just getting ready for the season, not recovering from injuries. Verlander is having a little trouble getting pitches down, as the Society members in Florida saw in the two starts we witnessed, but he will be fine and he should have a really good season. Miggy is looking like Miggy. (Several spring training attendees thought he'd lost a bit of weight.) (2) Shane Greene's recovery from surgery to fix a pseudoaneurysm in his shoulder which caused blood clots and numbing in his right fingers and marred his first season with the Tigers. Daniel Norris was the favorite to win the fifth starter job, but his back injury and Greene's strong spring make Greene the favorite to win the job. (3) Tyler Collins has hit well, and could make the team at least until Victor Martinez and Cameron Maybin recover from injuries. (4) Solid bench options have emerged, like outfielder Nate Schierholtz (who I've been a fan of), Collins, and catchers Bryan Holaday and Jarrod Saltalamacchia. For the first time in a few years, decent major league reserves will not make the team; already, Casey McGehee was cut despite hitting over .300. (5) Fernando Rodriguez looks like the shutdown closer the Tigers have needed.

There have been a few bad things, mostly on the injury front: (1) Victor Martinez' hamstring. The good news is that as this is being written, he is recovering and playing in minor league games and getting ready to play in major league games, but it was not supposed to linger this long, and with his leg injuries, we will be taking a deep breath every time he has to run down the line. (2) Anibal Sanchez' mild triceps strain that held him out of action for a while. Like V-Mart, he seems to be recovering and is in line to start the second game of the season against his old Miami team, but also like V-Mart, given his injury history, we will be holding our breath on him, too. (3) Cameron Maybin's broken hand, from a pitch in the exhibition opener. It was good it happened so early in spring training and he should be back early in the season. (4) Alex Wilson and Blane Hardy's shoulder injuries. They are not considered serious, but the 2016 Tigers are counting on a deeper bullpen that is in jeopardy if both are out for any notable time.

Overall, though, we are optimistic about the 2016 Tigers. A big part of that is that we are generally optimistic as fans tend to be, but with the rest of the regulars looking strong, the bullpen holding its own, and the two big stars looking like two big stars, there is reason to believe if the injuries don't kill the Tigers, they could have a great season. The sun is coming up and the weather is warming up, and the Tigers are back!

THE EARLY-SEASON SCHEDULE – By David Raglin

In the first article, I said the Tigers will head south to start the season. That was not a typo; they open up with two games in Miami. They also have two games in Pittsburgh the following week, giving the team some breathing room in case designated hitter Victor Martinez is still battling hamstring injuries since four of the first nine games are in National League parks. Ironically, the Tigers also finish the season in a National League park, helping the Braves close out Turner Field in Atlanta before the team moves to a new park in Cobb County, Ga., northwest of the city. That could cause a problem if the Tigers are fighting for a playoff spot since Martinez (or somebody) will not be able to be in the lineup.

To get to that point, though, the Tigers will have to overcome a very tough early-season schedule. In the first quarter of the season, 41 games, the Tigers play only 15 at home and 32 against teams with winning records. ESPN columnist Buster Olney annually ranks the difficulty of early-season schedule and has the

Tigers' schedule the second-toughest in the American League behind Seattle. After opening in Miami (probably a .500 team in 2016), they face four 2015 playoff teams in a row: the Yankees, Pirates, Astros and Royals, followed by the Indians, who are considered by most prognosticators to be contenders this year.

The Tigers visit the mid-Atlantic region in early May for an unusually compact road trip; three games in Washington and four in Baltimore. If you're thinking of coming out to see some games, the Society will have outings to the Wednesday May 11 game in Washington and Saturday May 14 in Baltimore; contact Mark Pattison (see bottom of back page for contact info) for ticket details.

The Tigers play the National League East and their traditional NL-rival Pittsburgh Pirates in 2016. Three of those teams -- the Mets, Nats and Pirates -- should be good in 2016, one mediocre (Miami), and Atlanta and Philadelphia are sacrificing the 2016 season to help them build for the future. It does not help the Tigers that their traditional NL rival might be the best team in baseball; Kansas City and Chicago have equally tough rivals (St. Louis and the Cubs), but the Indians and Twins get to play two teams (the Reds and the Brewers) who are sacrificing this year like Atlanta and Philadelphia.

The Tigers have three three-series road trips, the tough one to Pittsburgh-Houston-Cleveland in April, New York (Yankees)-Chicago-Kansas City in mid-June and Tampa Bay-Cleveland-Toronto in early July. They have two three-series home stands, Minnesota-Tampa Bay-Philadelphia in mid-May and Seattle-Cleveland-Miami in late June, between the last two three-game road series. All other home stands or road trips two series long except for the two-game road trip in Miami to start the season.

September sees them finish with seven of the final nine series within the division, with a series against Baltimore and the closing series in Atlanta thrown in.

Overall, it is not a remarkable schedule save for the toughness of the early-season games. If they can survive that, they might be in pretty good shape for the rest of the season.

TIGERS IN LAKELAND: SPRING IS IN THE ERR -- By Mark Pattison

The Society's 33rd annual Spring Training Trip took in a lot of things that trip-goers aren't used to seeing. One is a losing record, 2-3 with one rainout. Another is the Tigers needing late-inning comebacks to win both games. A third rare sight: spotty defense. One of the most galling examples was a pair of botched pickoffs, on the same runner yet! There was also the infield popup lost in the sun, a casual approach to a ball hit to the wall at Marchant Stadium, an errant outfield throw on a leadoff triple which resulted in the batter scoring, and a too-late decision to force out a runner at home rather than try for a far more likely inning-ending double play.

But there were many eye-openers on the positive side of things. Those would include Justin Upton's two homers as part of a 4-for-4 day March 26 against the Phillies in Clearwater; Tyler Collins' two triples in the same game, plus a stellar throw from right field to nail a would-be scorer at the plate to end one inning; my first-ever triple play in the March 25 game against Atlanta (which was washed out from the record books); and the good-old manufacture of a run by Ian Kinsler on a leadoff walk, a steal of second, and two ground outs.

The three dozen Society members and spouses and friends also got to see Alan Trammell coach first base March 20 in a split-squad game against Washington in Lakeland. Regular first-base coach Omar Vizquel took over the third-base coaching job; when one batter was being introduced to the opening strains of AC/DC's "Back in Black," Vizquel beat his hands against his thighs in tempo with the guitar riff (I don't think he was passing along signs). In the Braves game, when "Back in Black" was used again, but Vizquel, now back at the first base coaching box, did nothing rhythmically.

There was also Justin Verlander's first bunt attempt in the Phillies game, as ordered by manager Brad Ausmus in preparation for his Opening Day start in Miami. It was a comebacker to the pitcher. Verlander took a few half-hearted steps to first base, bat in hand, waiting for the out to be completed. After some good-natured jeers from the crowd, Verlander doffed his batting helmet with a flourish and bowed to the crowd.

A select few Smithers got to take in a Tigers intrasquad game during the parent club's off-day (a charity golf outing). No different-colored uniforms, no names on the backs of the jerseys, and no numbers either. Everyone had a big white Old English "D" on their chest. The game was played under some fabricated rules. One squad's starter faced just two batters per "inning," regardless of outcome. The other team's first reliever had to record four outs before his team could come off the field. One of the third-base coaches (the one not

named Lance Parrish) barked at a few members of a grounds crew putting tarp over the bases of the Tigertown complex's new Field Turf diamond due to their use of profanity. And Society VP and sabermetrician David Raglin, let it be known, caught a home run ball lofted by a lefty swinger wearing reflective sunglasses.

The Mayo Smith dinner at the Tigertown cafeteria was a revelation, first for the upcoming renovations scheduled for completion by next February (see next story), and new director of baseball operations Sam Menzin's remarks after dinner. Last June, we were told by Menzin's counterpart with the Nationals that ex-Tiger starter Max Scherzer had informed Nats staff that Detroit had prepared a very specific data set for him prior to each start so he could prepare, and he wanted the same thing from the Nats. Menzin confirmed that it was he who would prepare the metric analysis for Scherzer. "On a personal level, I was really sorry to see him go," Menzin said.

Raglin, Deana Carr and I presented the King Tiger award prior to the March 22 16-1 debacle against Toronto to J.D. Martinez, who accepted it with good grace. I told him that what he'd done last season more than earned him the award but that I'd never forget his two weeks in Toledo at the start of the season in 2014, when he hit 10 home runs, including four during an Easter Sunday doubleheader. "I knew then you weren't long for Toledo," I said. "You said it," Martinez replied. "No offense, but..."

Nor was all the Society action in Florida confined to baseball. There were no Jim Leyland sightings at the trip hotel; he's moved to new quarters. But the Crestwood Suites' new extended breakfast hours frequently found a dozen or so Smithers engaged in animated conversation while the staff wondered if someone would be heading back for more biscuits and sausages before closing time. It also turned out there was a celebrity in our ranks. On March 22, seven Smithers turned their attention to American history as they traveled to the McKay Archives building on the Florida Southern College campus to hear a presentation by military historian and longtime Society member Perry Jamieson, making his 27th consecutive spring training trip. Jamieson talked about the last months of the American Civil War, answered questions from the audience, and signed copies of his latest book, "Spring 1865."

The Mayo contingent featured a generous component of spring training trip rookies, and we hope they'll make a Lakeland pilgrimage each year for a good many years to come. Go GET 'em, Tigers. Rowr!

A NEW AND IMPROVED TIGERTOWN – By Mark Pattison

It was 50 years ago, in 1966, that Joker Marchant Stadium made its debut in Lakeland as the crown jewel in the Tigers' new "Tigertown" complex. Ron Myers, now the team's director of Lakeland operations, told the Society during a March 20 "opening night" dinner as part of its annual spring training trip, that since he first started working for the team in 1989, the stadium has undergone three renovations. "The others were Band-Aids," he declared. What's coming up for 2017 is going to be the real deal, he promised.

And, judging from his remarks and the architectural renderings he displayed during his talk, Myers just may be right. The Tigers are getting \$40 million to upgrade their Lakeland facilities. Half of it comes from the state of Florida, which wasn't an easy sell. However, Myers said, Detroit officials could show Florida lawmakers the source of its spring ticket sales: All 50 U.S. states; 10 Canadian provinces; every county in Florida except for a few in the Panhandle ("where there are more swamp creatures than people," Myers cracked), and every county in Michigan save one -- the one in the Upper Peninsula where Myers was born and raised. "One phone call, and now we have all the counties in Michigan," he proclaimed. Another \$14.6 million is coming from a Polk County, Florida, hotel room tax. The city of Lakeland is kicking in the balance, and the Tigers are contributing \$12 million to the project's overall cost.

One sore spot for decades has been the grandstands along the left field foul line at Marchant Stadium. They, er, feature no shade and hard aluminum benches that aren't oriented toward home plate; the provided seat cushions help a bit but can get hot on a hot day. They're rarely sold in advance, and after game-day walk-up buyers sit in those seats, Myers said, "they never come back." Those will be yanked out and replaced with a seating bowl remarkably similar to the bowl between first and third base, complete with shade covering the upper rows.

The clubhouses and administrative office building along the right field foul line? To quote the late, great Ernie Harwell, that, too, will be "long gone." Myers showed us the replacement, a three-story building beyond

the right field fence, set up to accommodate both the home team and the visitors, plus the umpires and Detroit's entire minor league system. The administrative offices will get a new home near the existing souvenir stand in the concourse by home plate.

Rehab facilities will also get seriously upgraded. "Andy Dirks was here a couple of years ago" on injury rehab, Myers reminded the Society. "Someone had to drive him to the YMCA so he could use the pool. The Y is eight miles from here." The new building in right field will have five pools on-site, three for the major leaguers and two for the minor leaguers. The new weight room will clock in at 7,100 square feet; only the Rockies' weight room, at 7,200 square feet, will be larger in a spring training complex.

The new scoreboard, too, will be the second biggest in all of spring training. It will be bracketed by the Spanish-Mediterranean columns familiar to Marchant Stadium fans since the circa-1999 renovations. The concourses will be expanded, and so too will be the souvenir shops and concession areas, since they are the ones largely responsible for the rush-hour-like traffic currently in the concourses during game days in the spring, making it easier to traverse the concourse. And for those of you who have an interest in such things, the Tigers' beer taps in Lakeland will more than triple, from 29 to 90.

Behind the right field wall will be even more fan-friendly improvements. A three-tiered picnic area will replace the clubhouse down the first base line. There will also be a walkway connecting the picnic area to the berm behind the left field wall, enabling fans to walk entirely around the stadium -- certainly not possible in the current alignment -- allowing the fans to look at pitchers warming up in the bullpen below. There will be air-conditioned party rooms added to the ballpark, and a restaurant in the back of Section 201 down the right field line, a help both to spring training day games and the Lakeland Flying (or is that "Frying"?) Tigers' night games in the broiling Florida heat. The Tigers will also install 45 handicap-accessible seats for its less-mobile fans and two more elevators to get fans to the top of the grandstand.

The team is going "all in" on Lakeland, Myers said. And with good reason. The Houston Astros are leaving Kissimmee, the spring training city closest to Lakeland, after this March to join the Washington Nationals in a new joint spring facility in West Palm Beach. The Atlanta Braves are talking to Sarasota County and West Palm Beach. That would leave the Tigers as both the only team in Central Florida, and the northernmost team in the Grapefruit League. And that's going to mean baseball-starved fans will need to head somewhere, and that destination might as well be Lakeland. Myers said that despite the improvements, seating will stay the same, in the 9,000 range (although you can really squeeze folks in on the berm if needed). Construction is already 18 percent complete, according to Myers. This is compared to the Astros-Nationals complex, which he said has barely broken ground.

But anytime you rip off a Band-Aid, there's going to be an owie or two. One of them will be the forced relocation this season of the Flying Tigers due to construction. But even there carries with it a silver lining. They'll be headed to historic Henley Field, which looks much it did when the Tigers played there from 1934 to 1965. Hall of Famer Mickey Cochrane took the team in 1934 en route to its first AL championship in 25 years, and its first World Series title a year later. All tickets will be \$5 all season long, and parking will be free. It's worth a look-see if you've never made the pilgrimage yourself!

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