

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the

Mayo Smith Society

Vol. 34, No. 1

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

April 2018

THE HOPE OF SPRING – By David Raglin

Baseball fans look to the springtime to dream of what could be for the summer ahead. We've had a lot of reason to think big the last few years, but this year is a rebuilding year and there is no reason to think the Tigers will have a good season in the standings in 2018. That said, every year there is a team or teams that surprise, like the Twins and Brewers in 2017. Neither of those teams were considered to be contenders before the season, but the Twins made the playoffs while the Brewers fell just short after leading their division for much of the season. While we have good reason to believe that the Tigers will be a bad team this year (I picked 74 wins), what if everything came together? After all, this is the time of year to dream, isn't it?

So, how do we do this? While WAR, wins above replacement, is not a perfect statistic, it is useful for this exercise. If Player A was 1.0 WAR and Player B has 2.0 WAR, presumably a team would win one more game with Player B than Player A. The Tigers won 64 games last year, so we will add and subtract from that, assuming, with our rose-colored-it-is-spring glasses that everything goes well. Let's start with the three former stars, all of whom had terrible seasons in 2017.

Miguel Cabrera, trying to play through horrendous back pain that would have stopped many players, actually had a WAR of -0.8 last year, meaning he was below a replacement player. What is a reasonable best-case projection for him this year? In recent years, he was not the Miggy of old who would pose WARs above seven; from 2014 to 2016, he has WARs of 5.1, 5.3, and 4.7. So, a WAR of 5.0 from a healthy Cabrera is reasonable. That is +5.8 WAR (+5.0 - (-.8)).

Victor Martinez had a similar season to Miggy in 2017, with a -0.6 WAR last year. His best-case is a bit harder to project; from 2014 to 2016 he had WARs of 5.5, -1.6, and 1.5. Let's say a WAR of 2.0 is possible, so that is 2.6 more WAR than last year.

The third former star that needs a rebound year is Jordan Zimmermann, who clocked in at a 0.3 WAR last year, just about the same as his 0.4 WAR in his first year as a Tiger in 2016. The four years before that, he had WARs of 4.9, 3.8, 4.8, and 3.1. Those came when he was 26 to 29 years old, and now he is 32, even if healthy. So accounting for the aging effect, let's say 3.1, the lowest of those numbers, a gain of 2.8 WAR.

The last couple of years, we've looked for Nick Castellanos to break out. His bat has gotten better (offensive WAR of 2.7 and 2.8), but his bad defense (WARs of 0.9 and 1.9) has hurt him. While his defense in right field in September was not good, that was without any preparation. Let's say his bat jumps to a 4.0 WAR in 2018. (For comparison, Adam Jones of the Baltimore Orioles has a 3.8 offensive WAR in 2017 with 27 home runs, a .322 on-base percentage, and a .466 slugging percentage.) Let's also say his defensive WAR is -0.5, for a total WAR (they are not generally additive, but let's say they are for this example) of 3.5 WAR, 2.8 above his 0.7 WAR of 2017. Jose Iglesias had a WAR of 1.0 in 2017, his lowest as a regular. In 2016 and 2017 he had WARs of 1.8 and 1.8, so let's say he improves to 1.6, a gain of 0.6.

Now let's look at the pitching depth. The Tigers had 15 pitchers with negative WAR in 2017, with a total WAR of -6.8; many of those arms were big contributors to the Tigers' 6-24 record after the Justins were traded. Looking a bit more closely, however, three of the worst pitchers were Anibal Sanchez (-0.9), Francisco Rodriguez (-1.0), and Bruce Rondon (-1.1); they are all, mercifully, gone from the Tigers roster. That is a total of -3.0 WAR, so if the Tigers can replace those innings with replacement-level players, that's 3.0 more WAR for 2018. Joe Jimenez had a -1.1 WAR last year, so if he puts it together and gets half of Shane Greene's 2.4 WAR, (1.2), that is a gain of 2.3 WAR. Let's say we don't have the parade of mediocre pitchers in September this year, adding about 2.0 WAR (which assumes that Daniel Norris put it all together).

Michael Fulmer's injuries caused him to make only 25 starts and hindered his effectiveness in 2017. If instead of his 3.5 WAR last year, let's say he has the 5.3 WAR he had in 2016, that is a gain of 1.8 WAR. If Michael Boyd fulfills his potential and goes from 1.4 WAR to 2.4, that's another 1.0.

Wow, that's a lot of gains, but unfortunately, we are not done. Four of the best Tigers from 2017 are no longer with the team: Justin Verlander (4.7 WAR), Justin Upton (5.2 WAR), Ian Kinsler (2.1 WAR), and J.D. Martinez (1.6 WAR). Mike Fiers basically is replacing Verlander. He was not good in 2016 or 2017 but in 2014 and 2015, he had WARs of 1.1 and 0.9, so let's say his ceiling is 1.0 (although his poor spring and injury is not good news). That is 3.7 less than Verlander. Upton is basically being replaced by Leonys Martin. Martin has been barely above replacement level the last few years, but for Texas, he had seasons of 3.6 and 4.4, so a 2.0 is a reasonable best possible WAR for him, a drop of 2.2 WAR. Dixon Machado is finally getting a chance to play every day, so he could blossom. Let's say he has a WAR of 1.0, 1.1 less than Kinsler. Martinez is basically being replaced by Jeimer Candelario. I love Candelario and I think he can match Martinez' WAR of 1.7 for the Tigers. You may think that's crazy, but remember J.D. only played 57 games for the Tigers and the rest of his slot was filled by below replacement-level players like Alex Presley and Tyler Collins.

I will spare you the math but that is a +17.7 WAR, which, when added to the 64 wins of last year, would give the Tigers an 82-80 record. That does not take into account replacing Brad Ausmus with Ron Gardenhire, which also should be a positive change.

THE REALITY OF SPRING – By David Raglin

The reality, of course, is much different. The predictions vary, from Joe Sheehan's 60-102, to Bleacher Report's 61-101, Baseball Prospectus' 68-94, Sports Illustrated's 70-92, Fangraphs' 71-91, and my 74-88. No matter which of those comes true, or something in between, the team's record will probably not be as rosy as the scenario presented in the previous article.

What are the key factors that will determine if they are closer to the 60-102, 74-88, or even better or worse than that? The #1 factor is the pitching. As we noted in November, the Tigers' 6-24 September/October was fueled by allowing 6.6 runs per game. The only major additions to that staff are Michael Fulmer, who missed the month with an injury but looks great now, and Mike Fiers, who had an ERA over 5.00 last year and whose poor spring was affected by an injury. If there is a #1 guy to focus on, it's the guy who is on the mound on Opening Day, Jordan Zimmermann. (He was our #1 guy to focus on last year, too.) If he looks credible as he did in the spring, it will help greatly. If not, it will be a long summer. There is nothing more frustrating than turning on the game and already being behind in the first inning. They need the starting pitching to come through to make the team watchable. I'm disappointed that they did not get some more reasonable pitchers, either starters or relievers, especially given how many players were going for bargain prices this winter.

From the position players, the #1 guy to look at is Victor Martinez. He had a terrible 2017 but a great 2018 spring training, looking healthy. The other guys who will be bellwethers are Miggy, as well as Jeimer Candelario. The latter looked really good last September and impressed us in Florida. It would be really good if a young player had a good season for the Tigers this year.

FUN IN THE SUN IN FLORIDA – By Mark Pattison and David Raglin

Has it really been 36 years since the Society began its annual Spring Training Trip? Yes, it has! And this year's excursion to Lakeland was a blast. If only the Tigers themselves knew.

With 40-plus on hand at the peak of the trip, it was the Society's first-ever trip that started on a weekday, done so to take advantage of a stretch of four home games in five days, as some of the Spring Training Trippers aren't as fond of traveling as once they were. But those who, er, braved the traffic got to see Atlanta twice in Orlando (a half-hour drive from the airport's rental-car garage to the ballpark) and a first-ever trip to Port Charlotte to see Tampa Bay; the group had never gone even when Texas inhabited Port Charlotte, which is a hop, skip and a jump from (get this) Toledo Blade Road.

We were treated to a mighty tasty dinner at the Tigertown cafeteria -- we were even invited to take leftovers to our hotel, courtesy of the cafeteria crew -- plus insights on this year's club from Sam Menzin,

Detroit's director of baseball operations and pro scouting, as well as some charming commentary by Cindy Cobb, the granddaughter of Ty, who tossed a ceremonial first pitch the next day.

The Society's awarding of King Tiger to Nicholas Castellanos went off without a hitch -- unlike last year, when neither of the winners were available due to the World Baseball Classic. Nick took the award with grace. We told him it wasn't a last-man-standing award, that all Tigers who played in 2017 were eligible for consideration, and he was the voters' choice. During the trip, he didn't have much to do in right field, though, except watch the occasional home run ball go over his head. It's also a recognition of his high esteem that a Tigers podcast is named "Podcastellanos."

The Tigers were 2-4-1 on the trip. Detroit's only victories were against two depleted Yankees squads; the tie was against Philadelphia, thanks in part to a shaky inning from Phillies nonroster invitee (and former Tiger) Francisco Rodriguez, who was released a week later. The losses were to Atlanta (twice), Tampa Bay, and Baltimore's scrubs. We got to see all six pitchers vying for a spot in the starting rotation, and at least we know now that Mike Fiers' back has been bothering him, which accounts for an ungodly bad first inning in the trip opener vs. Atlanta. A couple of trip favorites were a pair of guys trying to eke out the final cuts to make the team: utility players Niko Goodrum and Ronny Rodriguez.

The highlight of the games may have come in the first home game, against the Phillies,, when Jeimer Candelario crushed the ball over the right field fence, leading to an impromptu song in his honor, which we then sang at his first at-bat of every game:

Who can take a fastball, Put it in the stands, Start a double play while waving to the fans?

The Candy Man. (The Candy Man.) The Candy Man can. (The Candy Man can.)

The Candy Man can because he plays in Lake-Land and makes the fans feel good!

The trip would not be the trip without Mark Pattison belting out "M-A-Y-O" to the tune of "YMCA." Every year, he writes a new verse for the season, and this year, he and Dave Raglin combined to create this year's verse:

Fifty -- years since Mayo's big win / We're re-BUILD-ing, and the team is all in.

We have NEW kids, like the third baseman Jeimer / We THINK he'll be a gamer.

Of course, the current active Tigers favorite is Miguel Cabrera, and it's impossible to overstate how well-regarded he is throughout the organization. We were offered an impromptu tour of the Tigers' new clubhouse facilities in Lakeland. We waited to enter because Cabrera was still inside the clubhouse -- the last Tiger to leave -- with a few friends. When he came out, he grinned broadly at the Smithers' shrieks of delight, holding a partially eaten banana aloft and saying in his best Minion-accented Venezuelan English, "Ba-na-na." That sent some Smithers over the moon. When they caught up with Miggy later in the trip, they reminded him of his "Ba-na-na" remark and he signed a Tripper's jersey. (Former manager Jim Leyland also signed someone's jacket; I hope they have a great dry cleaner back home.) And, what with all the uproar over the alteration of the Old English "D" on Detroit's caps and uniforms for 2018, what Cabrera really despised, according to equipment manager Jim Schmakel, were the Tigers' spring training caps, which featured a snarling tiger's face against either an orange or blue background. Schmakel said he had to wait for games in which Cabrera was not playing to distribute to that day's roster.

Our hotel, the Ecco Suites, not only has a kitchenette for refrigerating and reheating Tigertown leftovers, it also played host to a pair of onetime Tigers trying to make it back with the big club: pitcher Luis Marte (2012) and catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia (2016). Neither one made it, but Smithers enjoyed their company nonetheless.

Finally, as long as they make pizza, and paper plates, the Society will conduct the Paper Plate of Prognostication -- a perk for all Trippers at the closing-night pizza party who can guess how many wins Detroit will have for the year ahead, with the tiebreaker being the number of homers hit by the Tigers' leading home-run hitter, regardless of who that may be. Coupled with the Napkin of Integrity filled out at a preseason Society "Tiger Talk" dinners on Capitol Hill in Washington, the prophets, seers and sages will know the numbers for the ages. The next number you should know: 2019, the year of the next Spring Training Trip. You oughta come!

#1 AT 2ND BASE – By David Raglin

Last month, we had a very close battle for the best first baseman in Tigers history. While the Tigers have had two great second basemen, Charlie Gehringer and Lou Whitaker, in the end, the choice was pretty easy.

We all know the name Charlie Gehringer and that he was a great player, but he played 80 years ago and passed away 25 years ago, so it's easy to forget what a great player he was. He was just short of the magic 3,000 hit mark at 2,839. He led the league in runs twice, hits twice, doubles twice, triples once, stolen bases once, and batting average once. As you can see, he is third in runs created among second baseman of the modern era:

Runs Created for Second Baseman Since 1901

Rank	Second Baseman	Runs Created	Rank	Second Baseman	Runs Created
1.	Rogers Hornsby	2108	6.	Nap Lajoie	1577
2.	Eddie Collins	2024	7.	Roberto Alomar	1576
3.	Charlie Gehringer	1828	8.	Frankie Frisch	1486
4.	Craig Biggio	1820	9.	Jeff Kent	1479
5.	Joe Morgan	1804	10.	Lou Whitaker	1379

Of course, that is not entirely fair, since Gehringer played in the greatest hitting era of all time, even more than the steroid era. The league averaged 5.8 runs per game during Gehringer's career, compared to 4.6 for the American League last year. To account for that, Lee Sinins of the Complete Baseball Encyclopedia has created Runs Created Above Average (RCAA), "the difference between a player's RC total and the total for an average player who used the same amount of his team's outs." Gehringer ranks fifth among second basemen in that stat, behind Hornsby, Lajoie, Collins, and Morgan. His WAR of 80.7 is sixth best of all second baseman (just behind Rod Carew), and 37th among all players..

As you can see, Lou Whitaker was no slouch, at tenth on the list (11th in RCAA), and should join Gehringer, Alan Trammell, and Jack Morris in the Hall the next time he is eligible in 2020. The biggest difference between Trammell and Whitaker was that while Trammell had some great years (like 1987) but several off-years due to injury, Whitaker was never an MVP candidate but incredibly consistent. From his rookie year through 1993, 16 years, he only missed substantial time once, in 1988. From 1982 to 1993, the heart of his career, he had 5.0 runs created per game every year but two, and those years he barely dipped below that mark at 4.8. Whitaker ranks seventh in WAR among second baseman and 49th among all players at 75.1.

Dick McAuliffe, who was moved to second base from shortstop in 1967 by Mayo Smith, played more games there and is third in team history in games and runs created among Tiger second baseman (considering his whole career). He may have hit only .247 lifetime, the stat people looked at most during his career, but it was a pitcher's era and he walked a lot, making him a very underrated player.

For **Mayo Smith Society Memberships** send \$20

(US\$23 out of the US) to:
 Mayo Smith Society, PO Box 119,
 Northville, MI 48167

Name _____

Address _____

For **Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish!** (\$20) or **Detroit Tigers Lists and More** (\$10), autographed by

authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send to:

Mark Pattison, 1221 Floral St. NW,
 Washington, DC 20012

City, St/Pr _____

Zip/Postal Code _____ Phone _____

Our shirts are now sold through the Detroit Athletic Company. To purchase a shirt, call 313/961-3550.

E-mail _____

Tigers Stripes, the official newsletter of the Mayo Smith Society, is published nine times a year. **Publisher/Society Administrator:** Todd Miller (412/848-1082, toddprmtg@verizon.net). **Editor:** Mark Pattison (202/829-9289, pattison_mark@hotmail.com). **Writer/ Sabermetrician:** David Raglin (703/556-0332 or 703/835-1198, darags@ymail.com). **Webmaster:** Dan Holmes (dan@danholmes.com). **Membership Services Coordinator:** Pete Wright. The Mayo Smith Society was established in 1983 by Dale Petroskey, Dennis Petroskey, and Bill Mackay.