

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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## TIGERS STARTERS ARE OH-KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK! – By David Raglin and Mark Pattison

Remember how, 60 years ago, Al Kaline and Harvey Kuenn were known as the “K-K Kids”? In our day, we can consider ourselves as having the K-K-K-K Kids with a starting rotation containing Justin Verlander, Max Scherzer, Doug Fister and Anibal Sanchez.

Verlander has already led the American League in strikeouts in 2009, 2011, and 2012. He has rocketed up the team’s all-time strikeout list, currently at fifth place, with the potential to move into fourth place this year.

Scherzer led Major League Baseball last year in strikeouts per nine innings with a 11.0 mark. Tigers fans got a glimpse of his strikeout potential in his first start back from a brief minor-league demotion in 2010. In that game, he fanned 14 Oakland A’s in 5.2 innings – meaning 14 of the 17 he retired were by strikeout. In a game last season against the Pirates, he struck out 15 batters – all of them on swinging third strikes.

Fister is not a huge strikeout king, but throughout his career, he has maintained a solid K/BB ratio. His best so far was in 2011, when he had a ratio of 3.94 K/BB. However, he has an entry in the strikeout leader boards when last year, he set an American League record by fanning nine Kansas City Royals in a row in a victory on September 27. (He also got the win in last year’s Annual Gathering game, but that victory was most notable in that he pitched perfect ball for 5.2 innings.)

The latest entrant to this club is Sanchez, who set a Tigers record for most whiffs in a game with 17 in an eight-inning stint April 26 against Atlanta. He bested the team record of 16, set twice in 1969 by Mickey Lolich; in one of those games, Lolich pitched nine innings, giving up one run but getting a no-decision.

Lolich is the club’s all-time strikeout leader with 2,879. His best year was 1971, when, starting every fourth day and pitching 376 innings under manager Billy Martin, he racked up 308 strikeouts to lead the league. Lolich’s teammate during the Mayo Smith-Charlie Dressen years, Denny McLain, was no slouch in the K department, either, collecting 280 in his 31-win year of 1968. McLain also made a memorable relief effort on June 15, 1965, against Boston, when Dressen replaced an ineffective Dave Wickersham after one-third of an inning with Denny, who promptly struck out the first seven batters he faced, and 14 overall in 6.2 innings of relief (the Tigers came back to win the game 6-5).

But for all their greatness, this year’s strikeout mastery is something else. From 1921 – when other teams decided they could imitate Babe Ruth and started swinging for the fences – until 2012, the Tigers had recorded nine games in which their pitchers had struck out 16 or more opposition batters. But in the first 21 games of 2013, Detroit pitchers had replicated that feat four times. The Tigers are on pace for 1,634 strikeouts, which would shatter the all-time record of 1,404, set by the 2003 Chicago Cubs of Kerry Wood and Mark Prior fame. Verlander, Scherzer and Sanchez all have struck out more than a man an inning, and according to ESPN’s Jayson Stark, no team has ever had three starters who qualified for the ERA title accomplish that feat in one season. Only three teams have had even two, one of them being the 2012 Tigers (Verlander and Scherzer.)

Despite this start, the Tigers do not have the clear-cut top strikeout pitching staff in the league. The Boston Red Sox are right with them. The Bosox have more strikeouts, 248 to 232, but have played two more games, so the Tigers have the slight edge in strikeouts per game, 10.08 to 9.92. However, the Tigers have had some long extra-inning games, so the Sox are slightly ahead in strikeouts per nine innings at 10.00 versus 9.74. However you look at it, the two teams are virtually tied. Part of that is while the Tigers have three starters averaging over ten strikeouts per nine innings (Verlander, Scherzer, and Sanchez), Fister has “only” 25 K’s in 34 innings, and fifth starter Rick Porcello has sent back to the bench only eight hitters in 19.1 innings pitched.

The bullpen has gotten into the act too. Al Alburquerque has an amazing 22 strikeouts in only 11.2 innings; 42 percent of the hitters Alburquerque has faced have headed back to the bench muttering to

themselves. Drew Smyly, who is looking more and more like he should be the guy in the fifth starter slot, has 19 K's in 15.2 innings, and Joaquin Benoit has struck out 13 in 11.1 innings.

It isn't just in Detroit. Strikeouts are way up everywhere. This year in the major leagues, there are about 7.7 strikeouts per team per game. To put that in perspective, the all-time record for a whole season is 7.5, set last year, with the only other years above seven were 2010 and 2011 at 7.1 each. During the "steroid" era of the late '90s and early 2000s, the average was only 6.5 strikeouts per team per game, and in the 1980s, the average was closer to 5.5. Based on this trend, pretty much every strikeout record on the books has a sell-by date that is coming sooner rather than later (the only exception is maybe strikeouts in a season by a pitcher, because starters throw so many fewer innings than they used to.)

**WELCOME HOUSTON TO THE AMERICAN LEAGUE** – By David Raglin

One of the hardest things to get used to is seeing the Houston Astros in the American League. Every time I see Houston playing somebody, I keep thinking "interleague game." That is understandable, given that Houston was taken from the National League after 51 seasons and forced to move to the American League just because they were in the process of being sold at the time that the commissioner was looking for a club to move to the Junior Circuit to even out the leagues at 15 teams apiece. (An Astros-fan friend of mine refers to it as being "relegated" to the American League.)

The Tigers will play a four-game set against the Astros at the former Enron Field the first weekend in May followed by three games at Comerica the second week of the month. In honor of the teams meeting for the first time as American League opponents, we present the All-Time Tigers-Astros Team, made up of players who played for both clubs. We focused on who played the most for each team as much as possible. Those of you who read *Detroit Tigers Lists and More* recall we had teams like this in one chapter of the book. However, it is much easier to come up with this team now since Baseball Reference, on its "Frivolities" page, has a way to find players who played for up to four different franchises.

This team is richer than most Tiger-NL Team teams because of one man: former Tigers general manager Randy Smith. Smith was known for his many trades with his former team, San Diego, and his dad's team, Houston. In his career as a GM, he traded for Brad Ausmus three times and traded him away twice. Despite the movement between the teams, this, unfortunately, is not a particularly good team. There are three players on the current Tigers who played for both teams: Carlos Pena, Jose Valverde and Octavio Dotel.

**All-Time Detroit Tigers-Houston Astros Team**

Pos	Player	With Det	With Hou	Pos	Player	With Det	With Hou
1B	Dave Bergman	1984-1992	1978-1981	DH	Carlos Pena	2002-2005	2013-2013
2B	Gary Sutherland	1974-1976	1972-1973	SP	Joe Niekro	1970-1972	1975-1985
SS	Adam Everett	2009-2010	2001-2007	SP	Brian Moehler	1996-2002	2003-2010
3B	Enos Cabell	1982-1983	1975-1985	SP	Jose Lima	'94-'97,'01-'02	1998-2001
LF	Luis Gonzalez	1998-1998	1990-1997	SP	Vern Ruhle	1974-1977	1978-1984
CF	Brian Hunter	1997-1999	'94-'96,'02-'03	SP	Jack Billingham	1979-1980	1969-1971
RF	Rusty Staub	1976-1979	1963-1968	RP	Todd Jones	'97-'01,'06-'08	1993-1996
C	Brad Ausmus	'96,'99-'00	'97-'98,'01-08	Mgr	Phil Garner	2000-2002	2004-2007

**EARLY SEASON ROCK AND ROLL** – By David Raglin

Often times, the May issue of *Tigers Stripes* is the hardest to write. The season is quite young, and when I do statistical analysis, there is the ever-present danger of making some sort of statement, and in a few days, it looks totally silly. (Yes, even more silly than what I usually write.) Take this season, for instance. We had originally planned on doing this issue a week earlier, but things were not going that well for our favorite team and I wanted some positive stuff to write about. A week ago, only the stalwarts -- Miguel Cabrera, Prince Fielder and Austin Jackson -- were hitting week, plus newcomer Torii Hunter. A week later, Omar Infante is on fire and Jhonny Peralta is doing pretty well at the plate, not to mention Matt Tuiasosopo in his part-time role. In

that week, the Tigers swept the Atlanta Braves, April's hottest team, and Anibal Sanchez struck out 17 batters. What that reminds us is that it is April, and short of a 18-5 (or 5-18) start, you can't get too up or too down. Sparky Anderson used to say you need 40 games to figure out a team, and while that might be a little long, 20 or so is too few. Let's everybody relax and enjoy the season.

**REMEMBERING OUR CHILDHOOD AND THE BIRD** – By David Raglin

I was 13 years old when I got to witness one of the most amazing phenomena I have ever seen. It was the Bicentennial summer and the Bird was in full fight, becoming Detroit's, and America's darling. Therefore, the day that Doug Wilson's book, *The Bird—The Life and Legacy of Mark Fidrych*, was published in April, I immediately bought it on my Nook. I used a sick day to spend going down memory lane.

Wilson's book is not a weighty tome, but it is a fun book about probably the most fun player I have ever gotten to experience. Wilson talks about the changes going through the game and society at the time, like free agency, and opines that The Bird's enthusiasm and innocence provided a much-needed contrast to those changes and helped save baseball. However, the best parts of the book to me are the parts where he vividly brings us back to that magical summer of 1976.

The foundation of the book is Wilson's vast number of interviews. His interviews with people in Fidrych's hometown of Northboro, Massachusetts, provided a more complete picture of his childhood than in most books like this, and I learned a lot about Fidrych's youth I didn't know before. "Fid," as he was known there before and after his career, was -- not surprisingly -- a very active kid who was both well-liked by his teachers while being described as a "handful" by them. Today he probably would have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, and the talking to the ball was one of his ways to combat that and keep his head in the game. His groundskeeping of the mound came from his dad, who emphasized to Mark to "make sure the mound is just right." He had his later-famous mannerisms as a youth, where he was a very good player but not someone who stood out. That changed when he started pitching American Legion ball. He even had a bird-like nickname in those days, The Mad Stork, due to his energy and his lanky build that was described as all arms and legs. He was scouted somewhat but was surprised when the Tigers drafted him. He didn't even know when the draft was taking place, and when he found out he was drafted when a friend told him, he at first thought he had been chosen in a much-less desirable draft.

Wilson also does a good job with details about Fidrych's year and a half in the minors. Fidrych got his more famous nickname in the brief training camp with the Tigers after being signed. Coach Jeff Hogan noticed the curly hair, the flapping arms and legs, the squawking, and said "He looks like Big Bird," from which came "The Bird." The nickname caught on with everybody in camp. He pitched well out of the bullpen for the Bristol Tigers, who went 52-17, and was considered somewhat of a prospect, but no more than several other players. In 1975, though, he went from Lakeland to Montgomery to Evansville. He starred for the AAA Triplets, going 4-1 with a 1.59 ERA, and became a fan favorite; a prelude to what would happen the next summer.

Fidrych was officially a nonroster player in the Tigers' 1976 camp, but the team thought he would make the club, which was looking for new blood after going 57-105 the year before. He may have been an unknown among fans, but not to management. Once it was official, there was still one important thing to take care of. Tigers GM Jim Campbell sent Fidrych to a fine clothing store so that the pitcher, known for his casual dress, could get some clothes more appropriate for team travel. Fidrych did not end up buying anything after seeing the prices. Campbell took him back to the store and the usually frugal GM treated Fidrych to some nice clothes (including three leisure suits!).

The heart of the book is, of course, the 1976 season. Wilson gives a great description of Fidrych's first start, a rainy Saturday afternoon at Tiger Stadium against the Indians, which I can attest to that since I was at that game. Fidrych did not allow a baserunner until the fifth and the first hit did not come until there were two out in the seventh. That runner scored, but it was the Indians' only run in a 2-1 complete-game win for Fidrych. (Imagine a 21-year-old pitcher in his first start being allowed to go nine these days!) Wilson's description of Fidrych's next start in his home state of Massachusetts is one of the highlights of the book. Fidrych pitched great but lost 2-0. After the game, Fidrych made it a point to get an autographed ball from Bosox heroes Luis

Tiant and Carlton Fisk for one of his youth coaches who had been at the game, the kind of thoughtfulness that 21-year-old kids are not necessarily known for.

The biggest game of the season, and the game that catapulted the Bird onto the national stage was the Monday Night Baseball win against the Yankees. These days, with thousands of games on TV, computers and even cell phones, we can forget how important nationally televised games were. I watched that game; Wilson helps bring back the memories. The game sold out with about 10,000 people outside of the park unable to get a seat. The ABC broadcasters. Bob Uecker, Warner Wolf and Bob Prince, marveled over the antics and the quality pitching of The Bird, and the stadium erupted when the Tigers clinched the 5-1 win (in only 1:51!). Rusty Staub tells the story how he had to coax Fidrych to come out for the postgame curtain call. Staub captured the moment years later: “In that one instant, he created something I never saw in baseball and have yet to see again”. Wilson opines, and I agree, that was probably the beginning of the curtain call in today’s game.

That night set off a national craze for all things Fidrych. Ironically, the source of that excitement did not even have a television or a telephone; Jason Thompson, who lived nearby, acted as his secretary, fetching the Bird when calls for him came in.

The stories from the rest of the season are precious. Fidrych was the biggest thing in the country but delighted in spending his time teaching the kids in his apartment complex how to swim. When he said a bad word on TV, he was worried he’d be fined by the commissioner, so of course his teammates sent him a prank telegram fining him \$250 (a lot of money for a guy making \$16,000). He met President Ford, Elton John and, of course, Big Bird.

As we all know, the fairy-tale story fell apart the next year. I still vividly remember where I was when I heard about Fidrych’s knee injury the next spring -- halfway through my paper route -- and how the news crushed me. Wilson describes the many comebacks over the next few years; I had forgotten that between the injuries he actually pitched very well. He recovered nicely from the knee injury, making the All-Star team in 1977, but he hurt his arm on the Fourth of July and things went downhill from there. This part of the book is painful to read but is necessarily complete.

After Fidrych retired, he went back to being “Fid” in Northboro, where he was known for his good nature and his great generosity. Despite the premature end to his storybook career, Wilson notes Fidrych was not bitter; he credited baseball to allowing him to buy his dream farm. I can vouch for that. I met him when he spoke to the Society in 1985 and it struck me that he was so positive and upbeat about his time in baseball, grateful for what did happen rather than bitter for what did not. (As an aside to show that he was still The Bird: Dale and Denny Petroskey picked up Fidrych from the airport before the speech and noticed that Fidrych was uncharacteristically nervous. When they asked him why, he said he had never spoken to a group of doctors. The Petroskeys informed him that he was speaking to the Mayo Smith Society, a group of Detroit Tigers fans, not doctors from the Mayo Clinic, to which The Bird replied, “Oh, I can do that!”)

I know this is longer than our usual book review (*not anymore it’s not!--Ed.*), but this book brought back so many great memories. If you were a fan of The Bird, this is a must-read.

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