

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the  
**D**  
Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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## THE FIRST MONTH – By David Raglin

The focus of *Tigers Stripes* this month will be the first month of the season. As this is written, on April 29 awaiting the start of the two-game set against the White Sox, the Tigers sit in first place in the American League Central Division with a 12-9 record, a 93-win pace. However, my observation is that the feeling of the fans (at least based on reaction in the media) has been pretty negative. Maybe Tigers fans are starting to get a bit spoiled. The Tigers have held their own while Miguel Cabrera recovers from his offseason surgery, and as you will see, we see the signs that the old Miggy will be back sooner rather than later.

## RAJAI DAVIS – By David Raglin

The most surprising positive has been the performance of Rajai Davis. Given a chance to play every day when left-handed hitting Andy Dirks got hurt and replacement lefty hitter Tyler Collins was not ready for the majors, the right-handed Davis has shined, even against the righties that have perplexed him in the past:

### **Rajai David Versus Lefties and Righties, 2014, Through April 26**

Split	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
Vs Lefties	14	2	5	1	0	1	3	2	3	.357	.412	.643	4	11.6
Vs Righties	54	11	19	1	0	1	6	2	8	.352	.417	.426	10	7.3
Total	68	13	24	2	0	2	9	4	11	.353	.416	.471	15	8.4

Davis has also stolen eight bases so far. To put that into perspective, Davis has already equaled the total of the Tigers' stolen base leader last season, Austin Jackson. Davis is on a pace for 62 steals, which is almost double the Tigers' total of 35 stolen bases last year, and the most for Detroit since Brian Hunter nabbed 74 bases in 1997. Since Dirks will be out for a while, the Tigers need Davis to keep performing at a high level.

## TIGER PITCHING – By David Raglin

There is good and bad news here. The Tigers are seventh in the league in ERA and runs allowed. Their 3.97 ERA is a bit better than the league average of 4.11. However, there is a big contrast in the starters and relievers. The starters' ERA is third best while the relievers have the second worst ERA.

### **Tiger Starters and Relievers, 2014, Through April 26**

Tiger Pitchers	IP	H	R	ER	HR	BB	SO	W	L	SV	ERA	Rank
Starters	123.0	110	49	42	9	38	120	8	6	0	3.07	3rd
Relievers	65.3	71	42	41	10	22	60	4	3	6	5.65	14th
Total	188.3	181	91	83	19	60	180	12	9	6	3.97	7th

Not surprisingly, the Tigers starters have all pitched well; the four regular starters all have ERAs under four. Max Scherzer is fifth among American League pitchers in Wins Above Replacement (WAR) and Justin Verlander is 10th. Drew Smyly has struggled a bit but his role has been varied because he has been skipped several times because of the large number of off-days (due to the schedule and weather).

Unfortunately, it is not a shock that the bullpen has been another story. The Tigers took a chance on several risky arms in the pen behind Joe Nathan. One of those pitchers, Bruce Rondon, is out for the year, and some of the others have struggled. The Tigers have already used ten relievers (counting Smyly, who has both started and relieved). Probably the most frustrating thing has been the tendency for the bullpen to blow up and

allow big innings. Below is a table showing the number of runs allowed in each appearance by each pitcher. For example, Al Alburquerque has pitched in 12 games. In seven of those games, he has not allowed a run, in five appearances, he has allowed one run, and he has not allowed more than one run in any appearance this season. (Note that these are runs allowed by that pitcher; this is not inherited runners.)

**Runs Allowed in Each Appearance, Tigers 2014 Relievers, Through April 26**

Reliever	0	1	2	3	4	7	T
Alburquerque	7	5	-	-	-	-	12
Krol	7	4	-	-	-	-	11
Chamberlin	7	1	2	-	-	-	10
Nathan	6	3	-	1	-	-	10
Reed	7	-	-	1	-	-	8

Reliever	0	1	2	3	4	7	T
Coke	5	-	-	2	-	-	7
Miller	3	-	-	1	-	-	4
Smyly	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
Putkonen	-	1	-	-	-	1	2
Ortega	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total Bullpen	44	14	2	5	1	1	67

Manager Brad Ausmus has waved in the reliever 67 times so far in the season’s first 21 games, and 23 of those times (34 percent), the reliever has allowed one or more runs. Seven times already this season, the reliever has blown up, allowing three or more runs. Those are the kind of games that stick with fans.

The good news is that relievers tend to be available during the season. Former closer Joel Hanrahan, recovering from injuries, recently threw (well) for teams, and the Tigers are rumored to be one of the contenders to sign him. Let’s put it this way: It’s easier to fix a struggling pen than a struggling rotation. However, something will have to be done.

**ROBBIE RAY** – By David Raglin

Speaking of pitching, the Tigers look like they might have a gem in AA in lefthander Robbie Ray. He was the key player they got in return for Doug Fister from the Nationals. The trade was panned by many people, including in this space, but Fister has yet to pitch for Washington due to elbow and oblique problems (with an expected first start around May 7) and Ray is starring in Toledo. There have been rumors that Ray might even be called up at some point, maybe to take the place of Anibal Sanchez in the rotation while Sanchez recovers from his blister problems. It would be ironic if Ray pitched for Detroit before Fister pitched for Washington.

The trade was panned because the Tigers think much more of Ray than most talent evaluators in the game. The question is: Who’s right? It’s only five starts, but so far Ray looks like the real thing:

**Robbie Ray’s Starts, 2014**

Start	Date	Opp	IP	H	R	ER	HR	BB	SO	Pit	ERA
1	April 6	vs Louisville	5.0	3	1	0	0	1	3	91	0.00
2	April 12	at Indianapolis	4.0	7	3	3	0	2	3	92	6.75
3	April 17	vs Columbus	6.0	6	2	2	1	1	3	100	3.00
4	April 23	vs Indianapolis	8.3	4	0	0	0	1	7	108	0.00
5	April 28	vs Gwinnett	5.0	7	0	0	0	0	5	92	0.00
Total	.....	.....	28.3	27	6	5	1	5	21	483	1.59

**THE DEFENSE** – By David Raglin

This was supposed to be one of the big improvements in the 2014 Tigers. However, losing Jose Iglesias for the season (and inexplicitly trying Alex Gonzalez there) and Andy Dirks’ injury has really messed up that plan. In fact, the Tigers have the worst defense in baseball according to Baseball Info Solutions’ Runs Saved, one of the most respected new defensive metrics. Below is how the Tigers defense ranks by position in Runs Saved compared to the major league average at the position. For example, they say if the Tigers had a league average shortstop, they would have allowed seven fewer runs than they have.

**Runs Saved by Position, American League, 2014, Through April 26**

Team	P	C	1B	2B	3B	SS	LF	CF	RF	Shifts	Total
Los Angeles Angels	3	-1	0	2	-3	-1	7	5	8	-3	20
Kansas City Royals	-2	1	1	4	-1	0	10	2	-7	1	8
Toronto Blue Jays	2	-1	-2	5	0	5	-2	-5	-2	4	0
Chicago White Sox	0	1	-2	1	1	-1	2	4	-8	-1	-2
New York Yankees	1	-2	-2	1	-2	-1	2	2	-1	0	-2
Texas Rangers	-1	-1	-1	1	-2	0	-3	-1	4	4	-4
Tampa Bay Rays	1	2	-1	3	-1	-4	-3	-3	1	-1	-5
Seattle Mariners	-2	-3	-1	0	1	0	-1	2	-3	-1	-7
Boston Red Sox	-1	-1	1	0	-2	-6	-1	-2	3	3	-9
Oakland Athletics	-2	-4	1	3	3	-5	-1	-8	4	3	-9
Baltimore Orioles	-1	1	-4	-4	0	-1	1	-1	-2	5	-11
Houston Astros	0	1	-2	-3	2	-1	-2	-9	-2	6	-16
Minnesota Twins	-4	-3	0	1	-1	3	-6	1	-9	0	-18
Cleveland Indians	0	3	-5	-3	-2	-2	0	-9	-3	0	-21
Detroit Tigers	-5	1	2	1	-1	-7	0	-3	-11	1	-23

Note that the Tigers’ worst position has been right field. Sad to say, while Torii Hunter has helped with his bat, his defense has been a big problem. Watching the games, we have noticed his lack of range out there. We have to admit, though, the -5 for the pitchers surprises us.

One interesting thing to note: Only two of the 15 American League clubs are above average in Runs Saved. Nine of the top ten teams in Runs Saved are in the National League, and seven of the bottom eight teams are in the American League. We see the same trend in the 2013 numbers too, but not before that.

**AROUND THE WEB** – By David Raglin

There have been some really good pieces on the Tigers on the web recently that we’d like to bring to your attention. We suggest you go to the web to read them.

The first was a great article on Dave Dombrowski done on Grantland as part of its recent “Detroit Week” entitled “Trust in Dave Dombrowski”. It was written by Rany Jazayerli, a Royals blogger who has knowledge on the Tigers since they are a division rival of his team and because Jazayerli lived in Michigan for a while. (The definition of a “great article” that I have felt the same was as Jazayerli but he did a much better job than me of writing it up.) Here is the link: <http://grantland.com/features/dave-dombrowski-detroit-tigers/>.

He points out that the Tigers have not done a good job drafting and developing players under Dombrowski. However, they have more than made up for it by their ability to identify players on other teams to trade for and which of their players to deal in return.

We all lamented trading Fister, but we should remember when we got him, he was a relative nobody and that was not considered a great deal by Dombrowski. The Tigers knew; they pursued him relentlessly from Seattle before they finally met the Mariners’ price. Similarly, the Granderson deal was panned by many, but it certainly looks great now. The thing those two deals had in common was acquiring controllable talent, players like Fister, Scherzer, and Ray.

Jazayerli also noted that Dombrowski has acquired several players who were set to be free agents, like Placido Polanco, Jhonny Peralta, and Anibal Sanchez. It has given the Tigers the chance to test-drive the player. In all three of those cases, they liked what they saw, they made the buy, and it worked out.

The second piece was about Miguel Cabrera on Fangraphs. Written by Jeff Sullivan, it notes that pitchers have been pitching Miggy differently since he got hurt last season. Sullivan noted that generally about 21-25 percent of pitches to Cabrera are fastballs in the strike zone. This season, it has been 34 percent, well above the 28 percent league average. However, Sullivan noted that Miggy has started to look more like the real Miggy as he recovers from his sports hernia surgery, and it is getting harder for pitchers to sneak that inside fastball by him. Here is the link: <http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/the-temporary-solution-to-miguel-cabrera/>.

**THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT** – By Mark Pattison

Living in the Society’s birthplace of Washington, D.C., I take the chance whenever I can to catch the Tigers’ Double-A affiliate, the Erie SeaWolves, when they play in nearby Bowie, Md., 35 minutes from my house. In April, Erie salvaged a split of the four-game series, looking woeful in 9-4 and 11-1 losses, then sharpening up in the 6-0 and 9-5 wins that followed. You can ask to join the “Mayo Smith Society” Facebook page and see my same-day game summaries, so I’m using *Stripes* to provide an overview of some of our leading prospects now at Erie.

First among them is shortstop Eugenio Suarez. His habit is to tear up the league at the start of the season, get promoted, then struggle at the plate at his new rung up the minor-league ladder. This year is not much different. Despite a low batting average, he’s already had a pair of two-homer games in Erie’s first 18 contests. In the series finale, he uncorked a fifth-inning grand slam high over the advertising wall in left field. Even though he was clearly overmatched in his spring training at-bats in Florida, Suarez seems more comfortable at the plate here, batting third and wearing the same #27 jersey he did in spring. His fielding: beyond reproach.

A lot of noise is also being made about Steven Moya, a 6-foot-7 outfielder. Moya ripped his first home run of the season in the series-opening 9-4 loss, and he’s hitting in the mid-.100s early in the year. His strikeout-to-walk ratio has been plainly horrible thus far in his pro career, but he’d gotten it down to a less wince-inducing 3-to-1 ratio in April. His defense won’t win awards, but he’s not likely to hurt you.

Kyle Ryan, Lakeland’s pitcher of the year in 2013, has the capacity to amaze. He lowered his ERA from 4.50 (still a rotation best) to 3.13 after pitching seven innings of two-hit ball in the 6-0 shutout win. He’s tied for fourth in the Eastern League with a 1.00 WHIP (walks plus hits per inning pitched), and tops among all EL starters with a .183 BAA (batting average against).

Reliever Corey Knebel (his last name sounds almost like daredevil Evel Knievel) has just one save on the year, despite a 1.27 ERA. But Erie still has a losing record, they’ve won five of their eight games by at least three runs, and they’ve swept two doubleheaders, and nobody’s going to let a top draft pick pitch twice the same day. Knebel can bring the heat, but as he pitched the ninth inning of the shutout, he can also baffle batters with a sweeping breaking ball that drifts along at about 80 mph – about 15 mph less than his fastball. With fan nervousness about the Tigers’ bullpen, you can be sure Knebel’s progress will be watched closely.

Speaking of nervousness, there’s quite a bit of that with Detroit catcher Alex Avila. While there’s always a place for a lefty-hitting catcher who calls a good game, the question is whether such a catcher should get 450-500 plate appearances a season if he hits .227. One catcher whose name isn’t often brought into the conversation is Francisco Cabrera. He’s a switch-hitter without much power, but he does make contact with regularity. He was eighth in the Eastern League with a .352 batting average, but had only one double to show for it. But the number of doubles is more than the number of times he’s struck out in 63 at-bats: zero. His minor-league high was 44 in 90 games in A-ball when he was in the Pittsburgh organization.

Of course, all these numbers are subject to change as the season wears on. In fact, by the time you read this, Erie will be in Bowie for a three-game set, and before the June issue of *Stripes* is published, Erie will have played another four games in Bowie.

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*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). **Membership Services Coordinator:** Pete Wright. The Mayo Smith Society was established in 1983 by Dale Petroskey, Dennis Petroskey, and Bill Mackay.