

Tigers Stripes

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D
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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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WHAT A START! -- By David Raglin

The first two weeks of the season have been great for the Detroit Tigers. The Tigers started 9-1, and the last two times they started 9-1: 1968 and 1984. That sounds like a good omen. The Tigers are currently 10-2 after a resounding victory in the rubber game of the series with the White Sox. The offense has been great -- 5.67 runs per game, tied with Kansas City for the best in the league -- and the pitching and defense have been phenomenal: 2.92 runs allowed per game, best in the American League by 0.39 runs per game.

On one hand, it's only two weeks, and it's easy to overemphasize two weeks, but on the other hand, it's good for a Tigers team with more question marks than in past years get off to a good start. The injury news as we left Lakeland was not great with Justin Verlander and Bruce Rondon not making the trip up north, but Shane Greene and Alfredo Simon have pitched great and Joakim Soria has pitched like the closer the Tigers have not had in years. It's not just pitching that has prevented runs; the improvements in the defense have borne fruit.

At the plate, Miguel Cabrera has shown us what he can do when he is healthy for the first time in over a year. J.D. Martinez has continued his hot spring, showing us that 2014 and his new swing was not a fluke, and Anthony Gose has also continued to swing a hot bat after impressing the Mayo Spring Training group.

In this issue of *Tigers Stripes*, we will start by looking at the improved defense, and then delve into the changes Shane Greene has made that, like J.D. Martinez a year ago, have paid off big time.

FIELDING IMPROVEMENTS -- By David Raglin

The Tigers' defense the last few years has been a big problem. The team thought they had made some major improvements by acquiring Jose Iglesias in 2013 and trading Prince Fielder for Ian Kinsler during the 2013-14 offseason. Unfortunately, Iglesias missed all of 2014 and Nick Castellanos and Torii Hunter were among the worst defensive players in baseball. Last year, the Tigers' fielding allowed an estimated 69 more runs than the average defense, according to the stat Defensive Runs Saved provided by Baseball Info Systems. (There are other defensive measures out there, but they all agree that the Tigers' defense was bad last year.) Given that, roughly, each 10 runs is a win, Detroit's defense cost the team seven wins compared to an average defense.

The Tigers worked to improve the defense again this offseason. Beyond getting Iglesias back, they traded for Anthony Gose, who had a good defensive reputation. They let Hunter go and effectively replaced him with Yoenis Cespedes in left field. Castellanos' defense had been hurt by his move to the outfield in the minors, and he spent the winter working on his lateral movement.

The defense this year has been a key reason for the Tigers' start. The Tigers are +13 in runs saved. What does that mean? The Tigers have allowed 34 runs in 11 games, an average of 3.09 runs per game. With an average defense, they suggest the Tigers would have allowed about 47 runs, right about the league average. The below chart showing the Tigers' Runs Saved since their breakout 2006 season shows that is a big change.

Detroit Tigers Runs Saved and American League Ranking in Runs Saved, 2006-2015

Season	Runs Saved	AL Rank	Season	Runs Saved	AL Rank
2006	+54	2 nd	2011	+12	5 th
2007	+42	3 rd	2012	-34	13 th
2008	-32	10 th	2013	-62	13 th
2009	+25	5 th	2014	-69	14 th
2010	-5	9 th	2015	+12	2 nd

From 2006 to 2009, they had good defense in three of those four seasons, the disastrous 2008 74-88 season being the exception. After a couple of so-so years in the field, things went south in 2012. Some of that was Prince Fielder -- not just his glove but his presence pushing Miguel Cabrera to third base -- but looking at the Runs Saved estimates from 2012 to 2014 shows that, other than second base last season (Kinsler), there were really no strongly positive defensive positions in any of those seasons. (The “Shifts” column shows the number of runs saved because of shifts, which are not credited to any particular position.)

Detroit Tigers Defensive Runs Saved, By Position, 2012-2015

Season	P	C	1B	2B	SS	3B	LF	CF	RF	Shifts	Total
2012	0	-6	-5	-8	-3	-3	+3	+2	-14	+5	-34
2013	-21	-5	-10	-7	+6	-15	+1	0	-11	+3	-62
2014	-7	-6	-6	+21	-9	-32	-2	-8	-20	+8	-69
2015	-1	+1	0	+1	+3	+2	+1	+5	0	+1	+12

We can disagree with individual numbers, and their methodology is not perfect, but the overall conclusion is that the Tigers’ poor 2012-14 defense was caused by poor defense pretty much all over the field. To contrast, look at the figures for 2015. They are highest at shortstop (Iglesias) and center field (both Gose and Davis), but they are positive everywhere else but pitcher and right field. Castellanos had been much better this season, Cespedes has decent range and a mighty arm, and Kinsler is playing his usual great D.

SHANE GREENE’S START – by David Raglin

We were optimistic last winter that Shane Greene would be a decent starting pitcher for the Tigers in 2015. Well, right now, it looks like we might have stolen another starting pitcher like we did Doug Fister from Seattle and Max Scherzer from Arizona. Ironically, the principal player the Tigers dealt to get Greene was Robbie Ray, who was the main guy the Tigers got from Washington for Fister, and the Tigers got Greene in a three-way deal with the Yankees and Arizona, the same two teams involved in the Scherzer deal.

Greene was a mediocre pitcher in the minors. His biggest problem was his large platoon split. He was good against righties but struggled against lefties. He came to the majors last year for the first time, basically splitting his season between AAA Scranton/Wilkes-Barre and the Yankees, and actually pitched much better in the majors than he did in AAA. As you can see in the table below, a big part of that was doing much better against lefties in the majors than in the minors. Against righties, his numbers were not much different.

Shane Greene’s Platoon Differential, 2013-2015

Season/Level	Versus Left-Handed Hitters			Versus Right-Handed Hitters		
	BA	OBP	SLG	BA	OBP	SLG
2013 Minors (High A/AA)	.313	.370	.446	.267	.299	.369
2014 Minors (AAA)	.320	.383	.488	.273	.327	.329
2014 Majors	.280	.363	.398	.243	.307	.358
2015 Majors	.189	.231	.216	.132	.195	.184

How was he doing in the majors? He was “pitching backwards”; most pitchers use the fastball earlier in the count to set up the off-speed stuff, but Greene did the opposite against lefties, focusing on his sinker, slider and cutter early in the count and the fastball later in the at-bat. While it helped cut down the power lefties had against him, the .360 on-base percentage against them for the Yankees indicated he was not there yet.

The next step was to develop an effective changeup. Late last season, Yankees pitching coach Larry Rothschild showed Greene a changeup grip that seemed to work. In spring training, Greene said, “I haven’t really used my changeup a whole lot because it’s never really been that good, which is why going into the offseason I knew it was something I needed to work on, and I have, and I’m pretty happy with where it’s at

right now.” When Tigers pitching coach Jeff Jones, asked about the changeup at the start of spring training, Greene “kind of gave me a funny look, and he threw seven in a row of the best changeups he says he’s ever thrown. Sometimes with guys it takes a little bit of time to get good feel on a changeup, and hopefully he’s gotten that feel.” It looks like he has. Through three starts, Greene has thrown about 12 percent changeups, almost all to left-handed hitters, compared to about 4 percent last season.

The table also shows that it is not just the changeup. His numbers against right-handers are phenomenal, and that’s not related to the changeup. Part of it is luck, part of it is the improved Tigers defense that has turned ground balls into double plays. He won’t end the season with a 0.39 ERA or about one hit allowed every two innings. However, he looks like a good solid major league starter for a team that really needs one, especially with the injury to Justin Verlander.

For a more detailed look at Greene’s start, Owen Watson has a great piece on him on the Fangraphs site: <http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/shane-greene-committing-to-the-changeup/>.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE TOP MEN IN THE DUGOUT – By Todd Miller

Prior to the Tigers’ April 19 game against the Pirates at PNC Park, Tigers Manager Brad Ausmus gave me his impressions of the retooled roster. “Iggy (shortstop José Iglesias) is an upgrade, and so is (left fielder Yoenis) Cespedes. (Center fielder Anthony) Gose is solid, and J.D. (right fielder Martinez) is underrated.” In his second year at the helm, Brad is “more comfortable” with the players because he knows their tendencies better than he did last year. He gives credit to GM Dave Dombrowski and the front office staff for assembling a group of players that forms “a great clubhouse” and is quick to add that such harmony “is not about me, but it’s a tribute to the people who put this team together.”

As for Tigers’ pitchers tossing consecutive shutouts in two of the young season’s first three series, Brad said, “We’ve got a solid staff that’s better than a lot of people give it credit for. (Alfredo) Simon had quite a night and pitched a gem.”

Francisco Liriano, that evening’s starter for Pirates (and tough-luck loser by serving up a Rajai Davis home run -- the game’s lone tally), prompted Brad to recall a June 2006 contest between the Twins and Astros, the defending NL champions for whom Brad was catching. “It was Roger Clemens’ first game back (after coming out of retirement for the third time). Liriano was absolutely filthy, and he beat us.” The Twins’ closer that evening in Minute Maid Park was none other than Joe Nathan, whose one inning of scoreless work preserved a 4-2 victory before a sellout crowd.

Bench coach Gene Lamont doesn’t get nostalgic when he comes to PNC Park despite having managed the Pirates 1997-2000 and coached under Jim Leyland in Pittsburgh 1986-91 and 1996, sandwiched around a stint as White Sox manager 1992-95 and winning AL Manager of the Year honors in 1993. “The old stadium (Three Rivers) is gone, so this is really just another place we play.” Gene got to know the Tigers’ skipper while serving as an Astros coach 2002-04 under Jimmy Williams, who managed the Blue Jays 1986-89, a period which included Toronto’s epic collapse in ’87 when the Tigers took the AL East crown from their international rivals on the regular season’s final day.

Ex-Tigers pitcher Jack Morris, in his first year as a part-time color analyst on Fox Sports Detroit, fondly recalled the prime of his career, which included a Society contingent in attendance at old Memorial Stadium in Baltimore to see Jack notch his 20th victory of the 1983 season and become the first Tigers hurler in a decade to accomplish the feat. “That Baltimore team really drove us to succeed in ’84. We lost out to them the year before and were determined to beat them the next time around.” When it comes to Hall of Fame induction, Jack is cautiously optimistic, saying, “I just hope the old guys think enough of me to get in.” In 2017, the Veterans Committee will vote on Jack’s candidacy he did not receive at least 75 percent of the writers’ votes during his 15 years of eligibility.

SPRING SPRINGS ETERNAL IN LAKELAND – By Mark Pattison

When the Mayo Smith Society’s annual spring training trip contingent got to Joker Marchant Stadium in Lakeland for the first game of their seven-game package, the Tigers were in last place in the Grapefruit League and had the worst record of all American League teams in spring ball. By the time we left, Detroit had at least

nudged past the White Sox (by percentage points) in the AL spring standings. And all this despite a 4-2-1 record in the seven games.

But the Smithers got to see some quality baseball, including a feature Detroit fans had complained was missing the past couple of seasons: scoring in the late innings. The Tigers did that in every game but the rain-shortened 4-1 loss to Toronto in Dunedin, which didn't even go a full five frames. But here's a handy catalogue that kept us on our feet: two bottom-of-the-eighth wild pitches by the Mets that scored two Detroit runners from third base; a bottom-of-the-ninth home run by A-ball second baseman Joey Pankake that tied a split-squad game with Washington; a Miguel Cabrera bottom-of-the-eighth double that broke a tie against the Cardinals; a majestic home run by King Tiger 2014, Victor Martinez, also in the bottom of the eighth, that spelled the difference in a win over the Orioles; and a Jordan Lennerton two-run double in the bottom of the eighth that gave Detroit some insurance runs in an 8-4 victory over the Marlins. The Tigers even scored a couple of runs in the top of the seventh to bulk up to a six-run lead over the Yankees in Tampa, although the bullpen (since dispatched to the minors) let things crumble after the seventh-inning stretch. As they say in investment prospectuses, past performance is no guarantor of future performance, but this augurs well for the Tigers' season if this keeps up.

Yes, we saw the infamous tricep cramp suffered by Justin Verlander in the loss to Toronto, although we initially thought he had tweaked something covering first base on a grounder to first baseman (!) Alex Avila. We also saw some sterling catches by new left fielder Yoenis Cespedes, plus the first games played (and first home runs clobbered) by Martinez and Miguel Cabrera. The only day it rained hard enough to keep a game from being played was on the only day when no game was scheduled!

Our King Tiger presentation to V-Mart went off without a hitch. We even had an interloper of sorts on the field, as a stadium usher allowed Society member Evelyn Young onto the field without a pass, as she was decked out in the same orange golf shirt worn by the Smithers conferring the award to Victor. (For the record, the last time we had a spring training shirt in orange -- with buttons -- it was 2006, and Detroit, as you may recall, went to the World Series.) Evelyn's husband, Norm, said, "White hair will get you everywhere." Had Martinez and Cabrera not been well enough to play for Detroit, they could've helped out the Mayo Maulers, who collapsed midweek from lack of available bodies.

Mike Smith, the Tigers' director of field operations, gave us insights into the club's thinking on personnel decisions and roster moves during the annual "opening night" dinner at the Tigertown minor league cafeteria. And he was joined by Lance Niekro, son of ex-Tiger pitcher Joe and nephew of Hall of Famer Phil, and himself an ex-big leaguer with the Giants and now the head coach at Florida Southern College in Lakeland; you know them as the sacrificial lambs that get to play the Tigers in Detroit's first exhibition game of the spring. Each guest got a new Mayo Smith baseball cap; we've got three left for \$10 each. First come, first serve. My address is 1221 Floral St. NW, Washington, DC 20012.

If you haven't joined us yet on this spring fling, consider it for 2016. It'll be the last time you'll be able to see Joker Marchant Stadium in its present configuration before a yearlong \$60 million facelift starting right after the final out of spring training.

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