

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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A GOOD START – By David Raglin

As this is written, the Tigers have gotten off to a 10-8 start, good for a tie for first place in the American League Central Division. It has not been a smooth ride so far, but the Tigers have been dodging obstacles in the road.

The Tigers' offense has been strong. They have averaged 4.67 runs per game, third in the American League and well above the league average of 4.10. Only the Yankees (at 5.10 runs per game) and Cleveland (4.83) are outscoring the Tigers. Who are the big bats for the Tigers? Let's look below:

Detroit Tigers Offense, Through April 23, 2017

Name	G	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Justin Upton	15	47	12	13	3	8	9	14	.277	.404	.532	.935	10	7.2
Miguel Cabrera	16	56	7	15	3	9	9	14	.268	.369	.464	.834	10	6.4
Ian Kinsler	17	60	12	13	3	6	14	14	.217	.373	.383	.757	10	5.7
Nicholas Castellanos	18	75	13	18	3	11	5	24	.240	.288	.507	.794	10	4.5
Alex Avila	10	22	3	8	3	7	4	8	.364	.462	.864	1.325	9	17.2
James McCann	13	40	5	6	4	7	8	10	.150	.286	.450	.736	6	4.6
Jose Iglesias	13	45	7	12	1	5	2	5	.267	.298	.444	.742	6	4.6
Andrew Romine	14	42	6	9	1	4	2	12	.214	.267	.381	.648	4	3.1
Victor Martinez	17	63	3	14	0	9	5	12	.222	.286	.238	.524	4	2.0
Jim Adduci	1	4	2	3	0	2	1	1	.750	.800	1.000	1.800	3	80.3
John Hicks	2	10	2	5	1	6	0	0	.500	.500	.900	1.400	3	11.5
Tyler Collins	14	48	6	11	1	2	1	14	.229	.245	.292	.537	3	2.0
Mikie Mahtook	10	23	2	4	0	1	3	7	.174	.296	.217	.514	2	2.7
JaCoby Jones	16	40	4	6	1	4	4	19	.150	.244	.300	.544	2	1.4
Dixon Machado	7	13	0	2	0	0	1	1	.154	.214	.154	.368	1	2.2

The big takeaways are: (1) Except for Alex Avila, there are no big surprises. The guys at the top are the guys we would expect. To contrast, the mishmash of center and right fielders has not gotten it done at the plate; Andrew Romine, Tyler Collins, Mikie Mahtook, and JaCoby Jones are all off to bad starts at the plate. The Tigers have had a lot of injuries, which was a concern given their lack of depth. So far, that concern has been warranted, as the replacements for J.D. Martinez and Jose Iglesias (Dixon Machado) have not hit.

The problem has been the pitching. They have allowed 5.44 runs per game, last in the league by a wide margin (Oakland is next worst at 4.63). Two of the starters do not have good stats: Justin Verlander (who has had a couple of bad starts and we are not worried about him) and Jordan Zimmerman (who we are very worried about), meaning the Tigers are 13th in starters' ERA at 4.42. The bullpen, though, is the place that has been the big problem, with an ERA of 6.63, easily last in the league. Six relievers have ERAs over 6.00 and three are in double digits.

Unlike with the offense, the problem has not been injuries. The good news, though, is that (except for K-Rod), manager Brad Ausmus is not standing pat with his relievers, leaving them in roles they are filing. He has been aggressive in moving them around, and it looks like the Wilsons (Alex and Justin) will be playing a more prominent role.

THE MOST UNDERRATED PLAYER – By David Raglin

I was listening to a radio show recently and the question was thrown out there: Who is the most underrated player in baseball. The first name mentioned was the Detroit Tigers' second baseman, our own Ian Kinsler.

Those kinds of distinctions are so subjective (who really knows how players are “rated”), but after thinking about it, he is as good a candidate as anyone else. He does not get a lot of national ink or discussion on the talk shows, but he has been a great player for the Tigers since they acquired him from the Rangers for the now-retired Prince Fielder. True, the Tigers had to pay a lot of Kinsler’s contract, and he has not been cheap at a high of \$16 million for the Tigers (but only at \$11 million for 2017). But, that certainly ranks among the best ever of former General Manager Dave Dombrowski’s many great trades.

When the trade happened, Kinsler was a very good player but not necessarily a great one. We noted that he was 33rd in WAR in the majors in 2013, and that he was entering the decline period in his contract. In one of the worst paragraphs we have written, we said in the January 2014 issue of *Tigers Stripes*: “The downside of the deal is that Kinsler will turn 32 midway through the 2014 season. ... Since the end of World War II, only 12 second baseman 34 years old have created 80 runs in a season, only three of them outside the steroid era (Eddie Stanky, 1951; Red Schoendienst, 1957; and Davey Lopes, 1979). It is even rarer when you look at 35-year-olds; only four second baseman 35 years old in that period have created 80 runs, only two outside the steroid era (Frank White, 1986; and Lou Whitaker, 1992). By the end of the contract, we very well might be wanting to dump a underperforming contract.” Oops!

Instead, FanGraphs last fall noted that Kinsler was one of only nine second baseman to have a WAR of 5.0 or greater at age 34 or higher.

Seasons With a WAR of Five or Higher by a Second Baseman Age 34 or More Since 1945

Name	Team	Year	WAR	Name	Team	Year	WAR
Bret Boone	Sea	2003	7.4	Joe Morgan	SF	1982	5.2
Jeff Kent	SF	2002	6.7	Tony Phillips	Det	1993	5.2
Randy Velarde	Ana/Oak	1999	6.1	Red Schoendienst	NYG/Mil	1957	5.1
Lou Whitaker	Det	1991	6.1	Eddie Stanky	NYG	1951	5.0
Ian Kinsler	Det	2016	5.8				

Source: <http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/ian-kinslers-historically-great-season-at-second-base/>

We note that three of the names on the list are Tigers: Kinsler, Sweet Lou Whitaker, and Tony Phillips. (I always thought Phillips was also underrated, and since Whitaker is not in the Hall where he belongs, it seems another thing they have in common is that they are all underrated.) The FanGraphs article is pessimistic about Kinsler’s long-term outlook given his age; we just note what we said three years ago and how wrong we were. Kinsler seems to have been rejuvenated wearing a Tigers uniform.

Kinsler has not just been really good compared to other second baseman, he has been one of the best players in baseball since joining the Tigers. The table at the top of the next page shows the top position players in WAR (from Baseball Reference) over Kinsler’s time with the Tigers, from 2014 to present. Kinsler ranks as the sixth-best position player in baseball since 2014 according to this measure. After Mike Trout, Josh Donaldson, and Adrian Beltre, players three to ten are pretty much lumped together.

Kinsler has been a valuable offensive player, but a lot of his value is on defense. Only Andrelton Simmons and Kevin Kiermaier have a higher Defensive WAR than Kinsler over the last three-plus seasons. That is especially important for the Tigers given their poor defense otherwise over the last few seasons. Kinsler has provided the Tigers something important that they have had a special need for.

Top 20 Position Players in WAR From 2014 to April 22, 2017

Rk	Player	Team	WAR	oWAR	dWAR	Rk	Player	Team	WAR	oWAR	dWAR
1	Mike Trout	LA Angels	29.6	29.0	1.8	11	Kevin Kiermaier	Tampa Bay	17.2	7.9	9.8
2	Josh Donaldson	Oak/Tor	24.0	20.3	4.5	12	Kyle Seager	Seattle	17.1	14.4	3.8
3	Adrian Beltre	Texas	19.3	14.6	5.5	13	Lorenzo Cain	Kansas City	16.6	10.2	6.8
4	Jose Altuve	Houston	18.8	19.4	0.7	14	Manny Machado	Baltimore	16.6	12.4	5.3
5	Paul Goldschmidt	Arizona	18.8	16.1	-0.3	15	Buster Posey	San Fran	16.6	14.1	4.2
6	Ian Kinsler	Detroit	18.6	12.5	7.5	16	Adam Eaton	ChW/Was	15.5	13.9	2.0
7	Anthony Rizzo	Chi Cubs	18.1	15.1	-0.2	17	Miguel Cabrera	Detroit	15.2	15.8	-3.1
8	Nolan Arenado	Colorado	17.8	11.5	6.8	18	Starling Marte	Pittsburgh	15.0	9.9	3.4
9	Mookie Betts	Boston	17.8	13.2	4.5	19	Jason Heyward	Atl/STL/ChC	14.9	6.5	6.4
10	Robinson Cano	Seattle	17.6	17.3	1.6	20	Nelson Cruz	Bal/Sea	14.8	15.4	-4.2

Source: www.baseballreference.com

Note: Offensive WAR and Defensive WAR do not add to total WAR because both take into account the fielding position.

Some of the names on this list will surprise you (I know they did me), and most of those surprises are due to players whose defense makes up a large part of their value. Baseball analysts are still working on measures of defense (the Statcast data will go a long way toward that) but we are learning how important defense can be. However, even if you use the old-fashioned method of judging fielding of just watching the player, you can see how good Kinsler is in the field.

We all love Miguel Cabrera, 17th on the list, who will go down as the greatest Tigers since Ty Cobb. But since Kinsler came to the club, WAR suggests that while Cabrera has been the superior offensive player, Kinsler has been more valuable overall. (Keep in mind Cabrera lost 40 games to injury in 2015.) After Kinsler's 18.6 WAR and Cabrera's 15.2 WAR, the only other Tiger position players with five or more wins above replacement are the Martinezes (J.D at 11.0 and Victor at 5.0). Talk about lapping the field!

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: Biographies of Tom Monaghan -- Reviewed by Mark Pattison

It was happenstance that I saw a copy of "Monaghan: A Life" by Joseph Pearce (Charlotte, N.C., TAN Books, 266 pages, \$27.95, 2016), a recent biography of former Tigers owner Tom Monaghan. Pearce is touted a quite the biographer, and he certainly is prolific. But the first sentence struck me as truly odd. It began, "When I was initially commissioned by Tom Monaghan to write his biography..." my muscles tightened. Not only did Monaghan commission the bio, he owns the copyright. Maybe he was looking for a present for his 80th birthday, which was March 25.

Pearce said in "Monaghan: A Life" that he wouldn't shy away from controversy. For the most part, he succeeds. Monaghan's been a part of more public dust-ups than the typical billionaire, even one who's trying to spend down his vast fortune before he dies. What's more disappointing is that Pearce always sees Monaghan on the right side of each and every controversy. Well, that's human nature; don't we always feel right -- or justified when "right" might be too strong a word?

If you're looking for Tigers-related material here, you'll find it mostly in the middle of the book. There's one chapter titled "Pizza Tiger," the title of Monaghan's ghostwritten autobiography published after Detroit won the 1984 World Series -- but which he initially put down after reading only its first 15 pages.

What struck me more was that Pearce, despite disparaging another Monaghan bio -- James Leonard's "Living the Faith: A Life of Tom Monaghan" (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 394 pages, \$29.95, 2012), in his own bio's introduction, cites it more than any other source in writing "Monaghan a Life." This made me decide that I had to read Leonard's tome.

It was a wise choice. Leonard puts a lot more flesh on what are some skimpy bones from Pearce in comparison. The reader gets a more complete picture of Monaghan's childhood, his entrepreneurial drive, and his controversies.

After his father dies unexpectedly when Tom is age 4, the boy leaps into the casket imploring, "Daddy, wake up!" Not long after, Monaghan's mother sends him to an orphanage to be raised. Though he loved the nuns who raised him, Monaghan's relationship with his mother remains awkward at best until her death.

One thing is for sure from reading either bio: Monaghan is terrible both at delegating authority and in choosing high-level managers. He had to rescue Domino's Pizza over and over again, initially from his own overeagerness, but later from executives who took the company down and even further down. Tigers fans need look only at the hiring of Bo Schembechler (not covered in Pearce's book) as team president. Schembechler alienated so many fans with the firing of Ernie Harwell and his famous "rusted girder" speech at the Detroit Economic Club in demanding a new stadium that fans didn't know if they could root for the Tigers if it meant they'd also be rooting for Monaghan. Firing Schembechler (and Jim Campbell) is never presented in "Living the Faith" as a condition of selling the Tigers to Mike Ilitch. Monaghan said it turned out to be a difference of opinion of who should buy the Tigers. Bo thought Monaghan should sell to the Ford family (which still owns the Detroit Lions) because they would be good custodians of the franchise. Monaghan chose Ilitch "because he knew Ilitch would pay double what the Fords would," Leonard writes. And when Bo tried to do an end-run, Monaghan fired him before Bo could reach the line of scrimmage.

Leonard gives more attention than Pearce to Monaghan's ownership of the Tigers -- although how Monaghan calling Kirk Gibson "a disgrace to the Tigers uniform" didn't make it into the final draft of the book is beyond me -- but most of that is wrapped up in the book's first half. Virtually all of the rest of Leonard's volume, and even more of Pearce's, is devoted to Monaghan's quest to revitalize the Catholic Church according to his worldview. The culture wars (pizza boycotts by the National Organization of Women) and internecine fights -- seemingly about whether the Monaghan-subsidized religious orders, schools, colleges, universities and law schools are more Catholic than the pope -- consume Monaghan, winning him as many enemies as friends. Leonard calls him "an eccentric, authoritarian billionaire" intent on getting his own way. Monaghan was full of ideas, but "what Monaghan didn't need was another idea," Leonard writes. "What Monaghan needed, what he always needed, was someone to tell him when his idea was stupid."

If you're on a limited budget, look for Leonard's book. It's more complete, and serves as a cautionary tale of what can happen when you indulge your every wish.

SHORT STRIPE – By David Raglin

Buster Olney, on his daily Baseball Tonight podcast, interviewed James McCann recently. Go to <http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play?id=19200668> or go to the ESPN site and search "buster olney james mccann". The interview starts at about the 21:03 mark. We don't want to spoil it, but McCann talks about his game day preparation, the differences between Miguel Cabrera and other hitters, working with the pitchers, among other things. It's a great interview; in fact, Buster's podcast, with a new one every weekday from spring training until the end of the World Series, is what I listen to on the commute home every night.

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