

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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THE LEGEND CONTINUES TO GROW – By David Raglin

The Tigers may have lost the Sunday Night Baseball game to the Rangers, 11-8, but after the game all that anybody wanted to talk about was the star of the game, a man who wore the uniform of the losing team. Buster Olney of ESPN, before he started his postgame interview with Texas' David Murphy, let him know he'd be asking about Miguel Cabrera. Murphy said "Good, because I was going to talk about him anyway."

Having a game like that on a national stage helps the legend of Miguel Cabrera continue to grow. Cabrera hit three home runs, but it was the second that really caught everybody's attention. Watching the replay, you can see Rangers pitcher Derek Holland duck, like he might get hit by a liner. According to Fangraphs.com and ESPN's Home Run Tracker, the ball left the bat at an angle of 15.9 degrees. That is the lowest angle for a homer since they started tracking it in 2006. To provide context, home runs typically leave the bat at an angle of about 20 to 37 degrees. The ball got to 47 feet above the field; the general range is 50 to 140 feet.

PORCELLO GETTING IT TOGETHER – By David Raglin

Rick Porcello has been an enigma for the Tigers. He was considered one of, if not the, top talent in the 2007 draft coming out of high school in New Jersey, but he fell to the Tigers with the 27th pick in the first round due to signability concerns. The Tigers signed him to a \$7 million contract with a \$3.5 million bonus, well over slot. Porcello spent his first season as a pro with Lakeland in 2008; most first-year pitchers out of high school go to low-A, not high-A. Porcello had a good year, leading the Florida State League in ERA. When he came to spring training in 2009, Porcello was considered to be minors-bound. However, the 20-year-old made the Tigers rotation. He had a good rookie year, going 14-9 with a 3.96 ERA. He got stronger as the season went on, posting a 6-3 record with a 3.76 ERA in the second half. He was chosen to start the fateful "Game 163" in Minnesota, going into the sixth inning and giving up only one earned run, leaving with the Tigers ahead, although Detroit lost in extra innings.

Unfortunately, Porcello's rookie year was his best season. His ERAs the next three seasons were 4.92, 4.75 and 4.59, and he was bumped from the rotation in the 2012 postseason. After the Tigers unexpectedly resigned Anibal Sanchez this offseason, Porcello was on the trading block, but the Tigers did not get a great offer for him and held on to the righthander. Given that this is Porcello's fifth season in the majors, it is easy to forget how young he is -- younger than Steven Strasburg and only three months older than Mets rookie sensation Matt Harvey. It's hard to trade a 24-year-old hurler with a great arm.

Porcello, in spring training this year, looked like a different pitcher. He traded in his mediocre slider for a plus curveball, didn't walk a batter, and wowed everybody in Florida -- not just the Tigers but the toughest crowd of all, opposing scouts. Porcello beat out Drew Smyly for the fifth spot in the rotation, but struggled to start the season, giving up seven runs in his first two starts. Porcello was then skipped in the rotation and appeared in relief for one game in Oakland.

Then came the disaster. It was a sunny day in Anaheim, and the Tigers called Porcello to break a two-game losing streak. The game was one of Fox's regional broadcasts, but what followed was more like something on one of Fox's horror series. Porcello did not survive the first inning, and when he left after Mike Trout's grand slam, it was 9-0 Los Angeles. It was the second time in the last two seasons Porcello has had an epic first inning meltdown; last year, almost a year earlier to the day (April 21), he gave up nine runs (eight earned) to Texas in one-plus inning. Following the game I thought it was time to give up on Porcello.

That was unfair, as it was as fluky as an inning could be. It started with a mishit infield single. After a steal of second came a ground ball single up the middle. Next was another grounder up the middle, followed by

a walk, and then came the first really strong hit of the inning, a liner to right, and another grounder up the middle. Finally, Porcello got some luck with a ground-ball double play. The next hitter got a pop single to left, followed by two mishit infield singles. Then came the booming grand slam off Porcello by one of the best players in the game on Porcello's 47th, and last, pitch of the inning.

To review, there were three infield hits where the batter was totally fooled, three singles up the middle, a dumper to left, a solid liner to right, a walk, and a grand slam. We can't even blame the Tigers' lack of infield range for the infield hits and grounders up the middle, as they were perfectly placed. Still, nine hits and runs is nine hits and runs, and certainly Tigers fans were concerned, many demanding that manager Jim Leyland do the obvious and put Smyly, who had been effective in the bullpen, in the rotation.

As they say, you can't predict baseball. That was the last bad start Rick Porcello has made as of this writing. Four starts, four quality starts, as you can see below:

Rick Porcello Game by Game, 2013

Gm	Date	Opponent/Loc	IP	H	R	ER	HR	BB	SO	Dec	Final	ERA
1	April 4	Minnesota-A	5.1	6	3	3	2	2	2	L	L 2-8	5.06
2	April 10	Toronto-H	5.0	8	4	4	0	0	1	--	L 6-8	7.20
3	April 14	Oakland-A (Relief)	2.0	0	0	0	0	0	0	--	W 10-1	0.00
4	April 20	LA Angles-A	0.2	9	9	9	1	1	0	L	L 0-10	121.50
5	April 27	Atlanta-H	6.1	5	3	3	0	2	5	W	W 7-4	4.26
6	May 2	Houston-A	7.0	5	3	3	2	0	7	--	W 7-3	3.86
7	May 12	Cleveland-H	6.0	4	2	2	0	2	6	--	L 3-4	3.00
8	May 17	Texas-A	5.2	5	1	1	1	1	6	W	W 2-1	1.59
Total			38.0	42	25	25	6	8	27	2-2	4-4	5.92
Total w/o Angel game			37.1	33	16	16	5	7	27	2-1	4-3	3.86
Total last four starts			25.0	19	9	9	3	5	24	2-0	3-1	3.24

I know this is only four starts, and by the time you read this, there will have been another start, but Porcello is a different pitcher. Yes, one start was against Houston, but the other three were versus Atlanta, Cleveland and Texas. Justin Verlander, Sanchez and Doug Fister were battered by the red-hot Rangers, but Porcello held them to only one run. Take a look at his stats ignoring that Angels start; those are really good numbers.

Even better, look at the strikeouts. One of the biggest concerns about Porcello, even in his strong rookie year, was his very low strikeout rate. Coming into this season, he had thrown 691.7 innings and struck out 384 hitters, almost exactly five strikeouts per nine innings (4.997 to be precise). While the rate had been going up, it was still only 5.5 strikeouts per nine innings last season. In an era of strikeouts, that is quite a low rate. He started the season the same way, with only three strikeouts in his first two starts encompassing 10.1 innings. However, take at his last four outings: 5, 7, 6, and 6 K's, 24 strikeouts (and only five walks) in 25 innings. Previously, his highest strikeout total over four starts was 20 (in 2011), with his next best at 18 (twice in 2012).

Will this continue? We certainly hope so; if Rick Porcello is for real, this is by far the best rotation in baseball from top to bottom. There is also a good explanation for the improvement. Last year, Porcello threw his mediocre slider 451 times (according to Fangraphs) and his plus curveball only 90 times. This year, he has thrown only 14 sliders and 118 curves. Let's hope that the pitch switch is the ticket to the resurgence of Porcello's career.

THE RIVAL INDIANS - By David Raglin

One question coming into the season was who in the American League Central would challenge the Tigers. The Kansas City Royals made moves in the offseason to position themselves, and their long-suffering fans celebrated the start, which saw them with a 13-8 record and a half-game lead in the Central after the first

game of a doubleheader with Cleveland on April 28. They later held a record of 17-10, only a half-game behind the Tigers, on May 5. However, the Royals have faded badly, dropping below .500 to 20-21.

The team that I felt before the season would be the biggest threat to our Tigers was Cleveland. The Indians started very slowly, with a 5-10 mark after being swept by new manager Terry Francona’s old team, Boston, and losing the first game of a series to the dreadful Houston Astros. They split the next six games, and subsequently went on an 18-4 tear prior to the two-game set with the Tigers in Cleveland to stand at 26-17 with a 2½-game lead over Detroit. That stretch included winning streaks of three, four, five, and six games. How have they done it? Let’s look at their stats.

Cleveland is second in the league in runs per game at 5.07, behind only our Tigers at 5.29 runs per game. They have allowed 4.21 runs per game, better than the league average of 4.46 and slightly behind the Tigers who have given up 4.17 runs per game. Below are the stats of their individual players:

Cleveland Indians, 2013 Stats, Through May 20, 2013

Hitter	Pos	AB	H	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	Pitcher	Pos	IP	W	L	SV	ERA
Carlos Santana	C	135	40	7	16	.296	.403	.548	31	8.5	Justin Masterson	SP	7.0	7	2	0	2.83
Nick Swisher	1B	146	40	6	16	.274	.382	.493	29	7.1	Zach McAllister	SP	51.0	3	3	0	2.65
Mark Reynolds	UT	146	37	12	37	.253	.341	.548	28	6.5	Ubaldo Jimenez	SP	4.2	3	2	0	5.31
Jason Kipnis	2B	144	38	7	24	.264	.329	.500	24	5.6	Scott Kazmir	SP	28.1	2	2	0	6.35
Michael Brantley	LF	157	48	2	20	.306	.364	.395	23	5.4	Corey Kluber	SP	28.1	3	2	0	5.40
Asdrubal Cabrera	SS	156	37	4	20	.237	.296	.417	19	4.1	Trevor Bauer	SP	16.1	1	2	0	2.76
Drew Stubbs	CF	141	35	3	12	.248	.301	.376	18	4.4	Chris Perez	CL	16.0	2	0	6	2.25
Ryan Raburn	RF	87	26	5	14	.299	.358	.540	16	6.7	Bryan Shaw	RP	21.1	0	0	0	1.69
Michael Bourn	CF	82	25	2	3	.305	.360	.463	14	6.4	Cody Allen	RP	19.1	1	0	1	2.33
Mike Aviles	UT	72	21	3	14	.292	.316	.472	10	4.7	Joe Smith	RP	16.0	2	0	1	1.13
Lonnie Chisenhall	3B	94	20	3	11	.213	.253	.351	7	2.4	Rich Hill	RP	11.2	0	0	0	3.09

Several key contributors came to the Indians in the offseason: Nick Swisher (free agent), Mark Reynolds (free agent), Drew Stubbs (trade with Cincinnati that cost them Shin-Soo Choo), and Michael Bourn (free agent). Swisher and Reynolds in particular have made a mark. However, what that list shows is how everybody is contributing. Almost everybody is at or above the league average of 4.5 runs created per game; the only two short of that are Asdrubal Cabrera, one of their best players who will turn that around, and Lonnie Chisenhall, who has been sent to the minors. To contrast, two current Tigers regulars, Victor Martinez (2.4 RC/G) and Alex Avila (2.2 RC/G) are well below league average.

On the pitching end, their starters don’t look so good, but that is deceptive; their starters’ ERA of 4.37 is just about at the league average of 4.40. (Detroit was at 3.79 after the rough weekend in Texas.) Ubaldo Jimenez has a bad ERA but in his last four starts he is 3-0 with a 1.90 ERA. Scott Kazmir has had three good starts out of six and has reminded people a bit of the good pitcher he was in Tampa Bay. Corey Kluber had one bad start when the Tigers got eight runs off of him in 4.2 innings; otherwise he has a 3.42 ERA. They have had a nice bullpen as you can see; their pen ERA of 3.07 is third in the league, much better than the league average 3.75. (Detroit’s bullpen has a 3.91 ERA.)

One reason I thought Cleveland would be better was their impressive list of acquisitions this past offseason. Maybe their key move, though, was to fire the very forgettable Manny Acta and hire one of the best managers in the game, Terry Francona. Yes, the Indians might do what they did under Acta—start strong and fall hard. With Francona though, don’t expect that to happen.

DETROIT’S ORGANIC FARM PRODUCE – By Mark Pattison

At this writing (May 22), the Tigers’ AA affiliate in Erie has the best record in the Eastern League. Triple-A Toledo and high-A Lakeland, on the other hand, have the worst records in the International League

and Florida State League, respectively. Low-A West Michigan is treading water at two games under. 500 in the Midwest League. But although each team fielded plays to win, records are less important than development and, ultimately, promotion up another rung or two in the organizational ladder.

Detroit has a fistful of minor leaguers who, if they continue to develop, could step in for current Tigers as their contracts expire. It's not out of the realm of possibility to think of Austin Jackson as the grand old man of the Detroit outfield, flanked by Avisail Garcia and Tyler Collins. And what of Nick Castellanos? He could get put back at third when Victor Martinez' contract ends after 2014, with Prince Fielder DHing and Miguel Cabrera moving back to first base. Australian Warwick Saupold is an intriguing-looking starter at Erie in a rotation that features unbeaten the 5-1 Victor Larez and Rule 5 pick Kyle Lobstein, and we all know well the potential of Toledo's Bruce Rondon in the bullpen. Erie outfielders Jamie Johnson and Daniel Fields (Bruce's son) and supersub Marcus Lemon (Chet's son) could merit late-season look-sees by Detroit in a year or two, and there's a trio of catchers in the system in the lusty-hitting Ramon Cabrera (obtained in the offseason from Pittsburgh for Andy Oliver) and defensive whizzes Bryan Holaday and James McCann who could serve as a backup to Alex Avila -- or a replacement, if Avila can't shake his hitting woes. Some combination of Hernan Perez, Dixon Machado and Eugenio Suarez could figure into the middle-infield picture as well.

On the other hand, the Tigers, in win-now mode since 2008, could deal some of all of these players to strengthen the parent club's lineup. That's been a franchise hallmark since the 2006 World Series run, and it's amazing to think how successful Detroit is at grooming future big-leaguers coveted by other teams considering the Tigers' relatively low draft positions in the Jim Leyland era. Even if none of them make the grade in Detroit, these minor-leaguers are building personal value to their career with their play.

Now, on the OTHER other hand, it's a bit confounding to see the relative lack of success of the traded-away young Tigers once they get to other teams. The biggest exception to this in the Dave Dombrowski era could be Jair Jurrjens, a quality starter for Atlanta who even started for the NL in the All-Star Game. It was especially galling as Jurrjens' career climbed in Atlanta while Edgar Renteria, who we traded Jurrjens to get, was the poster child for Detroit's bust of a 2008 season (but only because Jacque Jones was gone before Memorial Day). However, Jurrjens' body betrayed him and he's trying to get back to the bigs via Baltimore's AAA affiliate in Norfolk. But you can't exactly say, either, that the likes of Cameron Maybin, Andrew Miller, Clete Thomas and Charlie Furbush are setting the world on fire.

SHORT STRIPE

We spotted a fine feature article earlier this year on Mlive.com about Dave Borkowski, the pitcher from suburban Detroit who spent parts of 1999-2001 with the Tigers, then toiled in the Baltimore system to work his way back to the majors, then concluded his big-league service with three seasons for Houston. Three of us from the Society treated Borkowski to lunch once on Capitol Hill when he was pitching for the Bowie Baysox. Borkowski's back in the minors, but this time as pitching coach for Houston's low-A Midwest League affiliate, the Quad Cities River Bandits. Baseball has defined much of Borkowski's life as he was drafted out of Sterling Heights High School by Detroit in 1995, and we wish him the best of luck.

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