

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the

Mayo Smith Society

Vol. 30, No. 5

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

June 2014

GLORY DAYS – By David Raglin

It's good sometimes to take a step back and realize that we are living in the glory days of the Detroit Tigers franchise. Years from now, we will be looking back on the years of Miggy and JV like we now look back at Lou and Tram or Al Kaline and all of those guys who were teammates for so many years. Record-wise, this is not the best nine years in Tiger history, but it is really close. These are the best non-overlapping nine year periods in Tiger history.

Best Nine-Year Non-Overlapping Periods in Detroit Tiger History

9-Year Period	W	L	Pct.	Pace	Highlights
1907-1915	770	606	.560	90.7	Three straight pennants '07-'09, 100 wins in 1915
1932-1940	772	608	.559	90.6	Three pennants ('34, '35, '40) and World Series win in '35
1980-1988	780	624	.556	90.1	World Series win in '84, best record in baseball in '87, no losing seasons
1965-1973 ¹	802	650	.552	89.4	World Series win in '68, division championship in '72
1943-1951 ²	764	621	.552	89.4	World Series win in '45, 2nd place with 95 wins in '50
2006-2014	727	611	.544	88.1	Two pennants in '06 and '12, three division championships in '11, '12, '13

¹ 1964-1972 had the same record. ² 1942-1950 had the same record

The 2006-14 Tigers are sixth on the list, but not far behind the leaders. The “pace” puts the winning percentage in a way that is easier to comprehend—the number of wins per 162 games. The top nine-year periods played at an 88- to 91-win pace for a 162-game season. The best nine-year period in terms of winning percentage was 1907-15. People remember the three pennants but forget the 100-54 team in 1915. Close behind it are four great Tiger eras.

The last one, 1943-51, is not as famous. They won the World Series in 1945, but with a then-record low 88 wins. They actually won more games in 1946, 92, but the Red Sox ran away with the pennant. They also won 95 games in 1950 but lost a thrilling three-team race to the Yankees, with Boston in third.

However, this era is not over yet. We certainly expect the Tigers to be good for the next few years, and if so, it could become the best 10-season, 11-season, etc., era in team history.

I know I really appreciate what we have now. Not just the record, but the chance to watch potential first-ballot Hall of Famers like Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander. These are the glory days for Tigers fans.

HE'S BACK! – By David Raglin

We've missed the old Miggy, the one before the injuries about 10 months ago. He was hampered last August, and really unable to be the real Miggy in September and October.

He had surgery for a sports hernia last fall and was recovered by spring training. However, those of us who saw him in Lakeland know that he was not the same Miggy. There was not that extra zip on the ball coming off the bat.

We mentioned last month research on the Fangraphs.com website that confirmed that. They concluded by saying it looked like the old Miggy was starting to come back, and they were right. At the top of the next page are Miggy's stats for each week of the 2014 season. After a decent first week, the line goes down but has been steadily heading back up, and then some.

Miguel Cabrera: Week-by-Week, 2014 Season Through May 20

Week Dates	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG
1 March 31-April 6	20	1	7	2	0	1	3	1	5	.350	.381	.600
2 April 7-13	20	0	2	1	0	0	1	2	5	.100	.182	.150
3 April 14-20	19	2	4	2	0	0	3	3	5	.211	.318	.316
4 April 21-27	26	3	9	2	0	1	8	0	1	.346	.346	.538
5 April 28-May 4	22	6	8	3	0	0	4	2	5	.364	.417	.500
6 May 5-11	27	6	9	1	0	3	10	0	6	.333	.333	.704
7+ May 12-20	33	4	15	4	0	2	10	2	5	.455	.486	.758
Total	167	22	54	15	0	7	39	10	32	.323	.361	.539

In some ways, though, his stats are still recovering. He has only walked 10 times in 180 plate appearances, a 5.6 percent rate. The league average is 8.6 percent, and the last four seasons, Miggy has been at 13.8, 9.5, 15.7, and 13.7 percent. Our first thought was that pitchers were going more after him early in the season when he was not hitting, but in the last two-plus weeks, he has only walked twice. They might be afraid to be pitching around him because of Victor Martinez’ hot bat, but Miggy’s walk rate was much higher when Prince Fielder was hitting fourth, and he certainly was a hitter that pitchers feared. On the other hand, his strikeouts are a bit up from recent seasons, so his strikeout-to-walk ratio is in line to be the worst since his rookie season. However, we do expect that to return more toward normal at some point.

AVILA AVAILABLE AT THE PLATE – By David Raglin

A disturbing trend the last few years has been the minority of Tigers fans who feel obligated to boo and rip their own players. We’ve seen it with Brandon Inge, Ryan Raburn, Phil Coke, and Alex Avila. It’s great to see it when those players do play well. It has been a bit under the radar, but Alex Avila has had a really good season, as you can see from the stats below:

Alex Avila’s Career Statistics Through May 21, 2014

Year	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
2009	29	61	9	17	4	0	5	14	10	18	.279	.375	.590	15	8.9
2010	104	294	28	67	12	0	7	31	36	71	.228	.316	.340	30	3.3
2011	141	464	63	137	33	4	19	82	73	131	.295	.389	.506	96	7.4
2012	116	367	42	89	21	2	9	48	61	104	.243	.352	.384	52	4.8
2013	102	330	39	75	14	1	11	47	44	112	.227	.317	.376	40	4.0
2014	34	98	16	24	8	0	4	12	18	40	.245	.368	.440	17	5.9
6 Yrs	525	1612	196	408	92	7	54	233	242	475	.253	.351	.419	250	5.3

While most people tend to first spot his mediocre .245 batting average, the first thing I notice is the .368 on-base percentage, which is due in large part to Avila’s high number of walks.

Why the negativity to Avila? In part it is because of his one outlier season, 2011, where he was the best catcher in the league. Since then, people have been disappointed with Avila. If you focus on what he has been doing, and not what he could do based on 2011, he has been a decent player. He’s a catcher with some pop in his bat, generally gets on base at a decent rate for a catcher, and has runs-created marks close to the league average (which has been 4.3 to 4.5 the last three seasons.)

In addition, Avila is considered a good catcher. The pitchers have said they like throwing to him. He is also good at framing pitches, turning balls into strikes. Last year, 10.5 percent of the pitches outside of the strike zone with Avila pitching were called strikes -- third in baseball, barely behind J.P Arencibia and Jose Molina at 10.6 percent.

WHAT V-MART DOES NOT DO – By David Raglin

Victor Martinez has done a lot for the Tigers this year. He leads the American League with a .615 slugging percentage and a .998 OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage). He is tied for fifth in runs created with 34. There is one thing he is not doing very much, though—strike out. Through May 21, he has only struck out 11 times in 180 at-bats. That 6.8 percent strikeout rate leads the league by a good margin. Minnesota catcher Kurt Suzuki is second at 7.6 and fellow Tiger Ian Kinsler is third at 7.8 percent. Thanks in part to those two, the Tigers have the second lowest strikeout rate in the league at 19.4 percent. (The league average is 22.0 percent.

In fact, V-Mart has homered more times than he has struck out—12 home runs and 11 Ks. That is extraordinary. Only two hitters in the league (the Angels’ Albert Pujols and Cleveland’s Michael Brantley) have even half as many homers as strikeouts.

In the old days, having more home runs than strikeouts was pretty common. There were 43 players who did it (with 20+ home runs) by 1955. Joe DiMaggio almost did it for his whole career (361 home runs and 369 strikeouts). Since then, it has been done twice: George Brett for Kansas City in 1980 (24 home runs, 22 strikeouts), and the Giants’ Barry Bonds in 2004 (45 home runs and 41 strikeouts.)

BETTER KNOW THE OPPOSITION – By David Raglin

Right now, the contest for the best two teams in the American League, if not of all of baseball, is between our Tigers and the Oakland Athletics. While the Tigers have lots of big names on the field, the A’s are a no-name bunch who are winning despite one of the smallest payrolls in the game. The A’s are not a fluke; they lead the league both in most runs scored per game (5.2) and fewest runs allowed per game (3.1). While their 30-16 record is the best in the league, their runs scored and allowed suggest their record should be 33-13. They swept the Indians last weekend, the same team that then swept the Tigers. The Tigers will see the A’s for the first time the week after Memorial Day with four games in Oakland. The A’s will return the visit with a trip to Detroit on June 30 and July 1 and 2.

So, in the spirit of Steven Colbert, who has his “Better Know a District” bit featuring congressman and their districts, here is the first in out 29-part series-“Better Know the Opposition.”

The A’s have three of the top eight hitters in offensive Wins Above Replacement (WAR). They are Josh Donaldson (second), Brandon Moss (fifth), and Derek Norris (eighth). Here are their stats:

Top Oakland Athletics Hitters, Through May 21, 2014

Hitter	Pos	Age	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	oWAR
Josh Donaldson	3B	28	45	182	38	49	10	1	10	35	24	43	.269	.356	.500	33	6.4	2.1
Brandon Moss	1B	30	45	153	25	46	11	2	10	40	19	33	.301	.393	.595	37	9.0	1.9
Derek Norris	C	25	36	99	15	34	7	0	4	20	20	13	.343	.454	.535	26	10.4	1.7

Donaldson had a breakout season in 2013, and many of us wondered if he was for real. He is. His runs created per game mark may not be the best, but he plays all of the time and puts up very good stats. He is also a very good defensive third baseman to boot.

Moss was acquired as a low-cost free agent by the A’s after being let go by the Pirates. The Pirates got him from the Red Sox in a veteran for prospect deal that netted the Red Sox outfielder Jason Bay. He failed in Pittsburgh, but A’s General Manager Billy Beane snatched him up, and he hit 51 home runs for Oakland in 2012 and 2013.

Norris was nabbed from the Washington Nationals in a prospect-for-star deal that sent Gio Gonzalez (and current Tiger Ian Krol) to Washington. Norris was known in his Nationals minor league days as a guy who hit for power and walked a lot but had terrible batting averages. For example, in 2011 for AA Harrisburg, Norris hit 20 home runs and walked 77 times but only hit .210.

Once Norris made the majors, he did not walk as much and the power was not that great. However, this year, he is hitting like he did in the minors except the batting average is extraordinary. Do we really believe

Norris is a .343 hitter? No, but I think Norris is a solid player who will continue to be an asset for the underdog A's.

On the pitching side, the A's have a very solid rotation with three starters sporting ERAs under 3.00: Sonny Gray, Jesse Chavez, and Scott Kazmir (who pitched for the Indians last year). All of their current starters have ERAs under 4.00, including Drew Pomerantz, a former Indians prospect who did not make it with the Rockies but whom Oakland took a chance on.

The Tigers and the Athletics have a great playoff history the last few years, facing each other in 2006, 2012, and 2013. The Tigers have won all three series, but the last two came down to the fifth game.

TOUGH SLEDDING—SO FAR – By David Raglin

Baseball is a tough game, especially for a young player. The youngest Tiger is Nick Castellanos, and he is struggling in his rookie year. Below are his stats at the plate.

Nick Castellanos 2014 Offensive Statistics Through May 21, 2014

Year	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
2014	36	135	12	33	7	0	4	20	4	36	.244	.266	.385	14	3.5

The first two columns that stand out are his four walks and 36 strikeouts. No player can have that ratio and be an effective big league hitter long term. It has gotten worse recently; in the last month, he has struck out 26 times and has not walked even once. You can see watching him at the plate that he is looking lost up there.

It's been tough in the field for the rookie, too. Moving back to third base after spending last season in the outfield, he has a -4 defensive runs saved, meaning that he has been four runs worse than an average third baseman. This is not a surprise; he is not considered a really good defensive player.

Put it all together and you get a player who has a -0.4 WAR, which says he has been worse than a replacement player, a player available in AAA to call up to the majors. We have a member of the Mayo Smith Society Facebook page who saw the negative WAR and used that to express skepticism on the stat, stating that the Tigers are certainly happy with Castellanos. However, when you look at these stats, you can see where he is worse than a replacement level player so far.

Are we worried? No way. Are the Tigers fine with him so far? Probably so. Castellanos will be a good big league player. He is only 22 years old. Most 22-year-olds are on the diamonds in places like West Michigan, Lakeland, and Erie. He is playing every day in the big leagues. He will figure it out. In his first 22 games in AA as a 20 year old, he walked only one time and struck out 19 times, and he figured it out there.

This is a caution, though, to fans who were so ready to put Castellanos him in the lineup in left field last year. There is a big difference between a top prospect and a major leaguer. Players have to figure it out in the minors, and they still sometimes struggle once they make the Show. The Tigers are fortunate to be a really good team in a really weak division, so they can afford to give Castellanos some time to get his feet wet. We won't be surprised if in the August or September *Tigers Stripes* we are writing about the surging Castellanos.

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