

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the  
  
Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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## **STRUGGLING TO STAY ABOVE WATER** – By David Raglin

It's been a rough May for our favorite team. On May Day, things were looking up. On May 2, the Tigers beat the Indians for the fourth time in five games, equaling the total number of wins achieved against Cleveland last year in 18 attempts. Justin Verlander went seven, Justin Wilson's strong eighth inning lowered his ERA to 1.18, and K-Rod pitched a scoreless ninth for the save. Miguel Cabrera, just off the disabled list, homered in the third off Cleveland ace Corey Kluber, bringing in Nicholas Castellanos with him, and the Tigers won 5-2. The Tigers were 14-12, and with J.D. Martinez hopefully coming back soon, they were looking fine.

Yet on Memorial Day the Tigers are 9-15 since the Cleveland series and optimism has been replaced by mild anxiety. There are a lot of concerns with this team. In the April edition of *Tigers Stripes* we asked, "How will the Tigers do in 2017? ... They will do better if Justin Upton hits all year, Jordan Zimmermann recovers from his injuries and is effective, and the young starters come through. They will do worse if the J.D. Martinez injury lingers, if they do not come up with a credible center fielder, and if their aging players (who are susceptible to injury) spend significant stints in the trainer's room without the roster depth to replace them."

Unfortunately, except for Upton, the good things have not happened and the bad things have. Miggy has been a trooper but has battled minor injuries; Ian Kinsler played with a sore left hamstring, limiting his effectiveness, before going on the disabled list; J.D. Martinez did not make his season debut until May 12; Zimmermann has been awful; the young starters have been OK but not an asset; and Tiger center fielders are hitting .195 with a .285 on-base percentage.

It is too early to talk about selling off and giving up on the 2017 season. First, it is still only May, and the Tigers are not out of any race. Most people expect the first-place Twins to fall by the wayside at some point, and the Tigers are only three games behind the consensus best team in the division, Cleveland. Second, the Tigers don't have much to trade. Ian Kinsler and J.D. Martinez are the two players that would bring the most, but the other stars have very large long-term contracts that teams are shying away from these days. A fire sale for a bunch of top prospects is not realistic. We need to hope that the warmer weather and sunnier skies of June bring some more wins to the Tigers.

## **LATE-INNING PROBLEMS** – By David Raglin

The Tigers' relief pitching woes over the last few years have been well-documented, and 2017 has not been any different. The Tigers bullpen has a 5.00 ERA, second worst in the American League and more than a run per nine innings more than the league average of 3.91. Two teams in their division, Cleveland (2.19) and Chicago (2.48), have bullpen ERAs that are less than half of the Tigers. This is despite the fact that Brad Ausmus has used his bullpen the least in the American League; only 33.6 percent of innings pitched have come from the pen.

So, how does that translate into wins and losses? One way to look at that, thanks to the amazing people at [baseballreference.com](http://baseballreference.com), is to look at how often the Tigers are ahead, behind, and tied after each inning:

### **Inning-By-Inning Record for the Tigers, Through May 28, 2017**

After Inning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Final
Ahead	10	21	18	19	22	25	25	26	23	23
Behind	9	14	20	24	23	21	20	22	25	27
Tied	31	15	12	7	5	4	5	2	2	0
+/- .500	1	7	-2	-5	-1	4	5	4	-2	-4

After one inning, the Tigers are ahead ten times, behind nine times, and tied 31 times. The Tigers' high-water mark is after two innings where they are ahead 21 times, behind 14 times, and tied 15 times, putting them seven games over .500. They drop to five under .500 after four innings, jump to five over after seven innings, before settling down to a final mark of four under. You don't want to get caught up too much in the jaggedness of the line; 50 games is not enough data to smooth things out. However, we can see important patterns in the data, especially the drop from the seventh inning on, from 25-20-5 after seven to the final 23-27 record.

So there is our evidence about the ineffective bullpen, right? Well, not so fast. Let's look at the runs scored and allowed in each inning:

**Detroit Tigers Runs Scored and Allowed By Inning, Through May 28, 2017**

Inning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	X	Total
Runs Scored	22	36	29	24	42	25	15	18	15	3	229
Runs Allowed	19	25	39	31	24	32	17	32	27	7	253
Runs Scored/9Inn	4.0	6.5	5.2	4.3	7.6	4.5	2.7	3.2	3.6	5.4	4.7
Runs Allowed/9Inn	3.4	4.5	7.0	5.6	4.3	5.8	3.1	5.8	7.0	12.6	5.2

The first two lines show runs scored and allowed in each inning. The next two lines look at runs scored and allowed per nine innings, which puts the runs scored and allowed in a context that people are familiar with. When we do that, we see that the late-inning problems are two-fold; yes, from the eighth inning on, they give up many more than the league average of 4.4 runs per nine innings, but they also do not score many runs from the seventh inning on (except for the small blip in their two extra-inning games.)

How does that show up in their record? Twenty-two times, the Tigers have been behind at some point from the start of the seventh inning on. In those games, the lead changed only twice, and the Tigers eventually lost both games (April 19, they tied the White Sox in the ninth but lost in the 10<sup>th</sup>; May 16, they went ahead of the Orioles in the seventh but lost the lead in the ninth and the game in the 13<sup>th</sup> after each team scored three in the 12<sup>th</sup>). Some of that is pitching, but a lot of that is bad offense. In late and close situation plate appearances as defined by baseballreference.com (7th inning or later with the batting team tied, ahead by one, or the tying run at least on deck), the Tigers are hitting .207 with a .303 on-base percentage and a .333 slugging percentage.

The good news here is that there is no reason to think the lack of offense late in the game will continue. It's not like they cannot hit in clutch situations. In high-leverage situations, situations defined as having the most potential to change the probability of winning, they are actually hitting better than in low-leverage situations. (Many of those happen earlier in the game, which is why they can be hitting well in high leverage situations but not well in late-and-close situations.) In 2016, with many of the same players, they hit .246/.319/.422 in late-and-close situations, not great but not terrible, especially since players in general do not hit as well in late-and-close situations due to the plethora of late-inning fastballers.

**A HAPPY REUNION** – By David Raglin

The Tigers had a very quiet offseason this past year; their biggest free agent signing was to bring back an old friend, catcher Alex Avila, to back up James McCann. Avila had played seven seasons with the Tigers before joining division rival Chicago for the 2016 season. Unfortunately for Avila, his season in Chicago was marred by injuries, as had his last few years in Detroit. We have always wondered how Avila's career would have been without the injuries, especially the concussions on foul tips that became a too-regular occurrence in his later years in Detroit. In 2014 alone, he left games four times due to concussion-like symptoms, the last time in the division series vs. Baltimore.

Well, we might just have that answer. As you know, Avila has had a resurgence this year, going from backup catcher to playing pretty much every day. Lately, he has been hitting second in the lineup when he plays against a right-handed starter.

Late in his first stint in Detroit, Avila became a prime target of boo-birds. Part of that was due to his father, Al Avila, being the assistant general manager and later general manager, and the unfair nepotism

charges. Part of it was his not being able to duplicate his breakout 2011 season, where he deservedly started the All-Star Game. Part of it was probably the frustration the fans felt about Avila’s injuries. I felt the vitriol aimed at Avila was unfair. Yes, he was not the star he looked like in 2011, but he was a decent player. There were a lot of other problems with the Tigers over those seasons that were much bigger than Avila (the thin bench and bullpens, to start with). Here are Avila’s career stats:

**Alex Avila Career Statistics, Through May 28, 2017**

Year	Tm	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	WAR
2009	DET	29	61	9	17	4	0	5	14	10	18	.279	.375	.590	15	8.9	0.6
2010	DET	104	294	28	67	12	0	7	31	36	71	.228	.316	.340	30	3.3	0.1
2011	DET	141	464	63	137	33	4	19	82	73	131	.295	.389	.506	96	7.4	5.1
2012	DET	116	367	42	89	21	2	9	48	61	104	.243	.352	.384	52	4.8	2.4
2013	DET	102	330	39	75	14	1	11	47	44	112	.227	.317	.376	40	4.0	0.8
2014	DET	124	390	44	85	22	0	11	47	61	151	.218	.327	.359	48	4.1	2.1
2015	DET	67	178	21	34	5	0	4	13	40	66	.191	.339	.287	20	3.6	-0.1
2016	CHW	57	169	19	36	6	0	7	11	38	78	.213	.359	.373	25	4.9	1.0
2017	DET	32	89	13	30	7	0	6	20	20	32	.337	.459	.618	27	12.1	1.5
9 Years .....		772	2342	278	570	124	7	79	313	383	763	.243	.350	.404	353	5.1	13.5

Fans tend to look at stats like batting average, and yes, his batting average had been bad from 2013 to 2015 with the Tigers. However, fans ignore his high walk rate that gave him a decent on-base percentage, especially for a catcher, and which led to a WAR of two or more (meaning having him was worth two or more wins to the Tigers than the basic replacement-level catcher) in three of his last five years with the Tigers.

I was glad the Tigers re-signed him this off-season, for these reasons and for the fact, as a rare left-handed-hitting catcher, he hit righties much better than lefties over his career (.252/.362/.429 vs. righties and .210/.305/.309 vs. lefties), especially important on a heavily right-handed hitting team with a regular catcher who does not hit right-handers well.

Manager Brad Ausmus, a former catcher himself, has vowed to limit Avila’s playing time, feeling that will keep him healthy and productive. We wonder what would have happened in 2011 if Avila had not played 64 of the team’s 69 games after the All-Star break, despite injuries and the fact the Tigers won the division going away. If the Tigers are going to contend, given the problems so far this season, they will need Avila to keep playing well.

**PITCHERS AS HITTERS** – By David Raglin

Sometimes, we like to look at pitchers from the other side—what do the hitter’s stats against them look like? Here are the hitter stats for 12 of the Tigers’ pitchers:

Pitcher	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Michael Fulmer	256	22	60	9	1	4	21	15	54	.234	.285	.324	.609
Justin Verlander	236	35	57	12	1	9	33	29	58	.242	.330	.415	.745
Jordan Zimmermann	227	43	70	9	2	16	41	17	34	.308	.361	.577	.939
Matt Boyd	212	32	67	11	3	7	30	23	36	.316	.380	.495	.875
Daniel Norris	198	27	57	14	1	4	26	23	44	.288	.364	.429	.794
Anibal Sanchez	97	26	34	7	0	9	25	9	22	.351	.406	.701	1.107
Shane Greene	86	3	16	1	0	1	3	10	27	.186	.290	.233	.523
Alex Wilson	76	7	13	1	0	2	7	6	11	.171	.238	.263	.501
Justin Wilson	73	7	12	2	2	3	7	5	33	.164	.218	.370	.588

Pitcher	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Francisco Rodriguez	70	14	21	9	0	5	13	8	17	.300	.372	.643	1.015

Some of what you see is no surprise, but it’s still interesting to get this perspective. The batters facing Michael Fulmer are having a tough year, while those against Jordan Zimmermann and Anibal Sanchez would be heading to the All-Star Game if they got to hit against them every day. There are a few surprises. On the pleasant side, while the bullpen has taken a lot of heat, the Wilson “brothers” and Shane Greene have quietly made a very effective trio. Norris’ high walk total shows up here but otherwise he’s been decent.

**SHORT STRIPES**

► If you live in, or will be visiting, the Mid-Atlantic in early August, spread the word: The Society’s “Mayo Day” game pitting the Tigers against Baltimore at Camden Yards will be Saturday, Aug. 4. First pitch is at 7:05 p.m. We tend to get our tickets in the upper deck close to home plate to get a great view of the action. They usually cost about \$30 each. If you want to be part of the crowd, get in touch with David Raglin at 703-835-1198 or [darags@ymail.com](mailto:darags@ymail.com).

► We’re not sending a remittance envelope with the newsletter if you’re a current member. But if your membership is lapsed or overdue, you’ll see one. Look at your address label. If, at the end of the first line after your name, the number reads “15” or less, you’re WAY overdue -- and at risk for this being your last issue. Spare yourself from this horrible fate. Send \$20 plus name, address, phone and email to Mayo Smith Society, PO Box 119, Northville, MI 48167.

► Reliever Fernando Rodney, who came up with the Tigers, became a U.S. citizen in May. He tweeted: “I’m officially a US citizen God bless America & Thank you for the opportunity. Hijo de Republica Dominicana (Son of the Dominican Republic).” Look at the tweet yourself -- [https://twitter.com/F\\_Rodney56/status/859450714082377735](https://twitter.com/F_Rodney56/status/859450714082377735) -- and you’ll see why he wears his baseball cap the way he does!

► We agree with Brad Ausmus when he recently commented about the problems the MLB schedulers have given the Tigers. After playing the Sunday night game on May 21, they had to fly to Houston for a four-game series. The final game of that series was a night game in Houston on Thursday, May 25, especially tough since the Tigers were scheduled for a makeup doubleheader the next day in Chicago, Unbelievably, the White Sox made it a day-night doubleheader, but rains washed out Game 1 and delayed Game 2. They then had to make up the double-rained-out game the next day (at least as part of a single-admission doubleheader). We don’t want to use that as an excuse, but it’s not surprising that the Tigers turned in some uninspired performances that weekend. (Yes, they are very well-paid and should always be at their best, but tired is tired, no matter how much money a player makes.) The new labor agreement will start affecting the schedule next year and take care of some of the scheduling problems but we don’t know how it will affect rescheduled games.

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For **Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish (\$20)** and **Detroit Tigers Lists and More** (\$10), autographed by authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send to:  
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