

# Tigers Stripes

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Mayo Smith Society

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## A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE – By David Raglin

As this is written, the Tigers have just beaten the Angels on Memorial Day and stand with a 24-29 record. The mood about this season among Tiger fans is pretty positive; most of us feel the team has been better than expected. We knew it would be a rebuilding year, and that is what it has been. On the other hand, the Tigers' record projects to a 73-89 season, better than last year but close to what most people picked for them. (For example, I had them being a 74-88 team.) Therefore, why are we so happy?

I think we are happy for three reasons. First, they *are* better than last year, when a dreadful September and October included a 6-24 record and losing streaks of five, six, and nine games and sent them to a majors-worst 64-98. Second, they have been in second place and nominally in the AL Central race because the Indians have been hovering around .500 and everybody else has been terrible.

Third, and most important, there have been some good performances to cheer. Matthew Boyd has pitched pretty well; he has been the best starter on the team this year, no mean feat on a staff featuring Michael Fulmer. Jeimer Candelario (full disclosure: my favorite player on this team) has been outstanding. Despite a sore wrist that sent him to the disabled list for a short time, he has hit well all year, including a two-homer game a day after coming back. He has also shown a decent glove and is reported to have a great attitude and leadership skills in the clubhouse. If we are looking for the first player from this rebuild as part of the next good Tiger team, he could be it. Shane Greene has been a good closer, a commodity that brings the most at the trading deadline, and Joe Jimenez has shown he could be a decent replacement for Greene when that day comes.

This season is also showing us that we don't need a World Series contender to have some fun. Yes, a rebuilding team is nowhere near as much fun as a team at the top of the division, but I appreciate the days when things go well, when a player makes a nice play or gets the clutch hit. Attendance is down at Comerica Park -- and TV ratings, I'm sure, are down -- but the people who've dropped out are missing some excitement, even if it is not as frequent as we would like. Look at the masthead, we are still "Tigers Fans Who Always Care," and when players like Candelario and Jimenez mature and people wonder where they came from, **you'll** know.

## STAT MANAGER – By David Raglin

When the Tigers hired Ron Gardenhire, there was no doubt he would manage the clubhouse well, but there were concerns about whether he was an old-time manager who would eschew modern-day statistics. He managed the Twins for 13 seasons when they were a more traditional organization, and while the Tigers are building their analytics department, they also have been more of a traditional organization. Gardenhire has said that he learned a lot about analytics last year as the bench coach for Arizona. (As an aside, while I love analytics, I was not concerned because I felt the biggest need was for a manager who could develop talent and run the team, qualities where Gardenhire excels.)

It seems like Gardenhire was telling the truth. One of the hot new ideas these days is batting the best hitter second. The idea is that the extra plate appearances will make up for having fewer men on base. When the season started, Jeimer Candelario batted second for 36 of the first 38 games (missing two with an injury) and did very well. When he went on the disabled list, Gardenhire put Candelario's replacement at third, Pete Kozma, into the number two hole. Kozma is a good-glove, no-hit player, but he drove in a run in his first five games as a Tiger, not done since 1929 by Dale Alexander. Unfortunately, Kozma went 2-for-21 in the 2-spot his last five games there, so Gardenhire tried JaCoby Jones and Mikie Mahtook there over the next three games.

According to Anthony Fenech of the Free Press, Jay Sartori, the Tigers' senior director of baseball analytics and operations, had been after Gardenhire to bat Castellanos second since he is the Tigers' best hitter right now. Gardenhire looked at the data and decided to make the move. When Candelario came back, he was

put in the #3 slot, but with his power, he will probably bat fourth or fifth when Miguel Cabrera comes back and Castellanos will stay batting second.

**STEPPING UP** – By David Raglin

One of the problems of a rebuilding team is that reinforcements are few when the inevitable injuries happen. When Miguel Cabrera went down, the backup catcher John Hicks became the starting first baseman. Hicks has done a very good job stepping up to fill the job of a Hall-of-Famer-to-be. Now that Miggy is coming back, manager Ron Gardenhire has made it clear Hicks will go back into the backup role behind the plate, but he has shown he can hold his own in the majors.

Hicks was drafted by Seattle in 2011 out of the University of Virginia. He worked his way up the minor league ladder, sniffing a cup of coffee in 2015 with the Mariners, but otherwise that season was not good and he was claimed off waivers by Minnesota. In late April 2016, the Twins returned him to the waiver wire and the Tigers grabbed him. He did well in Erie and Toledo and got a small sip of coffee in September. He started the 2017 season in Toledo but was called up to replace the injured Cabrera in April and did well. When Miggy came back, Hicks went back to Toledo but after a few more up-and-downs, he was up to stay in August.

**John Hicks Statistics, 2016 to 2018, Through May 27, 2018**

Year	Tm	G	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
2016	Minors	93	323	46	100	10	47	22	73	.310	.358	.480	55	6.3
2016	Detroit	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	.500	.500	1.000	1	26.7
2017	Minors	52	208	21	56	7	35	4	54	.269	.281	.428	25	4.2
2017	Detroit	60	173	25	46	6	22	13	51	.266	.326	.439	24	4.8
2018	Detroit	32	118	17	33	5	17	9	32	.280	.328	.475	17	5.0
Totals for Detroit		93	293	43	80	11	39	22	83	.273	.300	.457	42	5.0

So, is Hicks a future star or even a future regular? Probably not; he’s almost 29 years old, and as the stats on the next page show, he’s a slightly above average hitter in limited time. We don’t want to go crazy about him, but he’s a good example of the kind of move a good front office makes, stealing a serviceable player from a division rival. He’s the kind of guy we enjoy rooting for in a year needing some cheer.

**BASEBALL AT THE MUSEUM** – By David Raglin

Since this is the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Year of the Tiger, it’s not surprising that the Tigers and baseball history are getting attention, and there are two exhibits at Detroit museums that you should take in.

The Detroit Historical Museum’s exhibit is called “The Year of the Tiger: 1968.” It runs until October 7 and according to their website, it “weaves together stories about the players, the manager, the stadium and the events that paved a path toward a World Series victory and ultimately changed the mood and spirit of the city.” For more information on their exhibit, go to <https://detroithistorical.org/detroit-historical-museum/exhibitions/special-exhibitions/year-tiger-1968>.

Right across Woodward Avenue is the Detroit Institute of Arts, which has its own baseball exhibit, “Play Ball! Baseball at the DIA,” which runs through September 16. It “commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Detroit Tigers’ 1968 World Series victory with memorabilia, baseball cards and collectibles,” including the “opportunity to view more than 500 baseball cards known as the ‘T206 White Border Set’” with the famous rare Honus Wagner card. For details, go to <https://www.dia.org/playball>.

Note that on Saturdays, the Detroit Institute of Arts opens at 9 a.m. and the Detroit Historical Society at 10 a.m., so you could see both on the way to the Annual Gathering on June 9.

**THE CLOSEST CALL** – By David Raglin

This month, we look for the best third baseman in Tigers history. Third base has been sort of the stepchild of Tiger positions through history. They have not really had a great third baseman. Several players, as

you will see, were good but not great and played a relatively short time for the Tigers while the one who played the most was not really good. You can see that by looking at the top ten third baseman in a variety of categories, some based more on seniority and others based on production:

**Detroit Tiger Career Leaders for Third Baseman in Four Categories**

Rk	Tiger 3B	Gms	Tiger 3B	RC	Tiger 3B	RC/G	Tiger 3B	WAR
1	Brandon Inge	1408	Travis Fryman	634	Ray Boone	6.4	Travis Fryman	27.5
2	Aurelio Rodriguez	1241	George Kell	568	George Kell	6.3	George Kell	22.8
3	Tom Brookens	1206	Brandon Inge	544	Dean Palmer	5.2	Brandon Inge	18.6
4	Travis Fryman	1096	Mike Higgins	462	Travis Fryman	5.2	Ray Boone	16.4
5	Don Wert	1090	Ray Boone	446	Pinky Higgins	5.1	Marty McManus	13.2
6	Pinky Higgins	857	Don Wert	410	Fred Haney	5.1	George Moriarty	13.2
7	Bob Jones	853	Marv Owen	399	Nick Castellanos	4.7	Ossie Vitt	12.8
8	George Kell	826	Aurelio Rodriguez	399	Marv Owen	4.7	Tom Brookens	12.4
9	Marv Owen	792	Darrell Evans	394	Brandon Inge	3.9	Pinky Higgins	11.3
10	George Moriarty	769	Tom Brookens	379	Fred Hatfield	3.8	Don Wert	10.3

The top three in games played are Brandon Inge, Aurelio Rodriguez and Tom Brookens. Inge had only 999 of those games at third but our policy in this series is to look at players at their primary position but to also consider their entire Detroit career. None of the three players were ever stars, and all were better known for their gloves rather than their bats.

Inge had a checkered career with the Tigers but had some good seasons, like 2006 when the Tigers made the World Series. Looking back, WAR gives him quite a bit of credit for his defense. His best year was in 2006, the year the Tigers broke through from the years in purgatory with the run to the World Series.

Rodriguez actually was considered the gem of the Denny McLain deal when it was made but he never had as good a season at the plate for Detroit as he had had in his only season in Washington working under Ted Williams. Rodriguez never broke 4.0 runs created per game, and even taking into account his stellar glove and the fact that it was a pitcher's era, he was still not good.

Brookens was another well-liked player who was an okay player earlier in his career. The Tigers kept trying to find other third baseman (Darrell Evans and Howard Johnson are two examples) but he held on. By 1986, he had lost his job to Darnell Coles, but when Coles faltered the next year, Brookens regained his job. That was the point the Tigers probably should have found another third baseman, but Brookens was the regular in 1987 and 1988 with marginal results for a team trying to win.

On the other hand, the most effective offensive third basemen did not spend that long wearing the Old English D. The leaders in runs created and runs created per game at third base were players like Travis Fryman, George Kell and Ray Boone.

None of those players were great for the Tigers, though, even for a short time. Among players considered as a third baseman by our rules, the best season in runs created was George Kell, with 124 in 1950. While that sounds impressive, it ranks 47th in Tigers history among all players. Only two other seasons even made the top 100: Travis Fryman (57th) with 117 runs created in 1993 and Eddie Yost (66th) with 115 in 1959. (Miguel Cabrera had the top two seasons for a Tigers third baseman but he was considered as a first baseman.) Looking at WAR, it's even worse; George Kell's WAR of 5.4 in 1950 is the best among players on this list, but only 100th among Tiger position players in history.

All this being said, the race comes down to Travis Fryman and George Kell. Kell was named the third baseman on the all-time Tigers team in 1969 (celebrating professional baseball's centennial), and the 1999 all-time team from the last season at Tiger Stadium. Certainly, he is much more of a Tiger than Fryman, broadcasting for the team from 1959 to 1963 and 1965 to 1996 -- 35 years all told -- but this is about his playing

career, not his Detroit legacy. After the Tigers traded Fryman to Arizona, he was flipped to Cleveland, where he spent the rest of his major league career and for whom he has worked since retirement.

**Travis Fryman and George Kell: Battle for the Hot Corner**

Tiger 3B	Yrs	G	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G	WAR
Fryman	8*	1096	4297	607	1176	149	679	390	931	.274	.334	.444	634	5.2	27.5
Kell	7*	826	3303	502	1075	25	414	337	107	.325	.391	.433	568	6.3	22.8

\* Fryman came up about midway during the 1990 season, so he played about seven and a half years for the Tigers.  
 Kell was acquired in May 1946 from the A's and was traded to the Red Sox in June of 1952, so he played about six full seasons for the Tigers.

Fryman	4 All-Star teams, 1 Silver Slugger, led the league in AB twice and SO once, top 10 in runs created once
Kell	6 All-Star teams, 5 times received MVP votes, led league in H twice, 2B twice, BA once, top 10 in WAR 3 times in RC 4 times

Fryman has the longevity as a Tiger compared to Kell, with higher totals in every counting stat. Kell did not have any power but he had a better batting average and got on base much more than Fryman. Their slugging percentages were similar, with Kell's better batting average balancing out Fryman's power. Kell was more productive on a per-opportunity basis, as his higher RC/G figure indicates, but Fryman had a higher WAR due in part to his longer service.

However, WAR is not everything. The bottom two lines in the table highlight their major accomplishments during their time in Detroit, and this is where Kell pulls away. He made the All-Star team every year and received MVP votes every full season as a Tiger. He had multiple appearances in the leaderboards for WAR and RC and led the league in several categories. Fryman did make four All-Star teams but otherwise cannot match Kell.

So, after all of this, we end up at the same place everybody else did, with George Kell as the greatest third baseman in Detroit Tiger history. However, with all due respect to Kell, when the Tigers name their 150th season all-time team in 2051, we would have to guess that Kell is the most likely person on this list in 2018 to drop off the team. Maybe Jeimer Candelario...

**SHORT STRIPE**

\* You may have seen the report that "science" has determined that last year's baseballs indeed flew farther than previous years' models, although science can't say exactly what it is about the ball that accounted for the increased distance. Before Justin Verlander left Detroit's employ last season, he had said the ball was different, citing the stitching not being as raised as it had been. On the Mayo Smith Society's spring training trip, clubhouse manager Jim Schmakel said Verlander was so convinced of the rightness of his position, he even cut open some balls from the 1980s to see what made them different on the inside from the 2017 ball. Afterward, Schmakel said, "you'll notice he didn't say anything." Let's hope Verlander didn't open up balls from 1987, when even banjo hitter Wade Boggs clouted 24 homers.

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