

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Vol. 33, No. 3

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

July 2017

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## SELL-BY DATE – By David Raglin

The question for the Tigers (and loyal Mayo members) the last month-and-a-half or so has been: Buy, sell, or hold? Unfortunately, the recent eight-game losing streak has left the Tigers with a 33-42 record, almost the worst mark in the American League, 7 games out of first and 6-1/2 games out of a wild card spot, which seems to have made the decision for General Manager Al Avila. However, many of the people who have been advocating “sell” need to know that this will not necessarily work this year. Every trading deadline is different - just because the Tigers got Michael Fulmer two years ago does not mean there is a Michael Fulmer there whenever the Tigers start making players available.

The Tigers actually *were* in sell mode last winter, but other than dumping Cameron Maybin’s contract, the Tigers could not find teams willing to give them top prospects for their players. It’s a little easier this time of year -- some teams have a need for the one player who can put them over the top and are willing to pay whatever it takes, and some contracts have only months to run, limiting the financial commitment.

The Fulmer for Yoenis Cespedes deal is a good example of this. As the trade deadline approached in 2015, the Mets were contenders for the first time in years, had huge credibility issues with their fans, had a big hole in the outfield, and Cespedes was having the best season of his career. The Mets asked for Cespedes but were told the Tigers needed Fulmer back. The Mets tried every possibility to get Cespedes without dealing Fulmer but minutes before they deadline, they capitulated and gave the Tigers what they wanted.

The other trades made at the 2015 deadline have had mixed results. Daniel Norris is an OK #4 pitcher, Matt Boyd was sent back to Toledo after his poor performance this year, Jairo Labourt might be an adequate middle reliever or lefty one-out guy someday, and JaCoby Jones seems to be a decent bench player at best. Often, the players acquired in these trade deadline deals don’t end up becoming major contributors.

Who do the Tigers have this year that could bring top prospects to Detroit? The criteria generally start with a good player having a good year, reasonable salary, and limited contract commitment. Who on the Tigers meets those criteria? Obviously the first player on the list is rightfielder J.D. Martinez, who since coming off the disabled list in early May has hit 12 home runs and posted a .626 slugging percentage. Ian Kinsler has played well since coming off the disabled list in early June and an acquiring team would only be committed to the remainder of his salary for this year (he also has a team option for \$12 million with a \$5 million buyout for 2018). Alex Avila’s comeback year has made him one of the top catchers in the league, and the Tigers’ trio of relievers—Justin and Alex Wilson and Shane Greene—have pitched well. Another possibility is Jose Iglesias; Al Avila praised backup infielder Dixon Machado (not in context of the trade deadline) during his talk at the Society’s Annual Gathering on June 17. Does that suggest that Iglesias is viewed as expendable? Perhaps, perhaps not.

What about others, such as Justin Verlander and Miguel Cabrera? Verlander would be a good addition for a team looking for a starter, but he has a 4.52 ERA this year, leads the league in walks allowed, and is owed \$28 million each of the next two years. Miggy has been playing through injuries this season that have limited his effectiveness and is still owed \$184 million through 2023.

So, that’s the supply side. What about the demand side? Which teams could be buyers in this market? The list is shorter than usual because of some runaway races. Four of the five playoff teams in the National League -- the Nationals, Dodgers, Diamondbacks, and Rockies -- seem to be set to make the playoffs at this time, although the three Western Division teams are playing for the bye to get out of the coin flip wild-card game. In the American League, the Astros are running away with the Western Division. We see the teams in the market to trade good prospects for the Tigers’ available players as the Red Sox, Yankees, and Rays (possibly) in the American League East, the Indians in the American League Central, the Nationals in the National League

East, the Cubs and possibly the Cardinals in the National League Central, and the Dodgers, Diamondbacks and Rockies in the National League West. We leave the Brewers and Twins off this list because both teams have emphasized that they have a plan for the future, and it would be very surprising to see one of those clubs trade a top prospect to try to sign a veteran this year, especially with the Cubs and Indians, respectively, as division foes.

Unfortunately for the Tigers, none of the potential buyers really needs a corner outfielder, which is the Tigers' best available player. The Cubs could use help there, the Rockies' longtime star Carlos Martinez is having a terrible year, and the Rays have the need but won't trade the kind of player the Tigers are asking for Martinez. The Cardinals could use power but their biggest problems are not in the corner outfield positions, and their record is not much better than the Tigers. None of the other clubs have holes in the corner outfield spots. Does that mean that none of these teams could use a power bat like Martinez's? Of course there are some that could, but are any of them as desperate to get a power bat that they would trade a top prospect like Fulmer as the Mets did in 2015? Probably not at this time, but if a player like Mookie Betts or Yasiel Puig get hurt the last week of July, that changes things.

For the other positions, only the Rays and Cardinals could use a shortstop and only the Rays need a second baseman. None of those teams have a real hole behind the plate. The one need that all clubs have is relief pitching. The Nationals' bullpen, in particular, has been awful and the biggest impediment to the team's drive to win a World Series after three first-round knockouts in the past five years. The Nationals are under a lot of pressure from their fan base to win now; their window is starting to close; they could use several relievers (not just one); the Tigers and the Nats have been trading partners in the recent past; and while Washington has dealt several prospects in the last few years they still have some players worth pursuing. The combination of those things, especially the big need, makes a Tigers-Nationals reliever deal among the most likely to happen.

The other possibility is that the Tigers go full-bore into a rebuilding period, dumping everybody and eating contracts in a dive for the bottom of the standings to get top draft picks. The Cubs and Astros, in particular, succeeded with that strategy, but there are two big problems with it. First, when the Cubs and Astros were diving for the bottom the Basic Agreement rules that governed the draft in essence provided a benefit for losing. Since then, in part to discourage what those teams had done, the rules have changed to limit those benefits. Second, at this point several other teams seem to be giving up for the present, making it harder to get the top draft picks needed to make the strategy work. The Tigers do not want to end up like the Phillies, with a terrible team and no end to the bad years in sight due to their young players and prospects playing poorly. Even if we do have a mediocre team for a few years, at least we will have two first-ballot Hall-of-Famers to watch in Verlander and Cabrera. That's a lot better than we had fifteen years ago in the Randy Smith era.

Should the Tigers be actively shopping their players of value to see what they can get for them? Of course, and they are doing that now. However, don't be too surprised or disappointed if we don't come out of this with the next Michael Fulmer, or even the next Daniel Norris.

### **WHAT'S GOOD FOR GM IS GOOD FOR THE SOCIETY** -- By Mark Pattison

Another terrific crowd of Smithers came to this year's Annual Gathering June 17 at the Hockeytown Cafe across from Comerica Park to hear Tigers General Manager Al Avila and 1980s Tigers hurler Dan Petry, subbing for Willie Horton -- a rare instance of a pitcher pinch-hitting for an outfielder, as Horton had recently had knee replacement surgery. (So, too, has Dave Rozema, disclosed Petry; yes, it was his "kung fu" knee.)

Avila gave a rundown of the Tigers' top draft pick from 2017 and updates on other prospects. "Our minor league system is OK. It's not great, but it's not horrible," he said. Anticipating a question about the Detroit relief corps, he added, "The best way to have a good bullpen is to develop your own."

Speaking the day after a 13-4 Detroit romp over Tampa Bay, he proclaimed, "You saw the defense yesterday. You saw how good it can be. Where has that been all year?" With the Tigers treading water a bit below .500 at the time of the event, he gave credit to outfielder Justin Upton and first baseman Miguel Cabrera. "J-Up was hitting like the star we thought he'd be: .270, 13 (homers), 45 (RBI). He's one of the reasons we're still in it," Avila said. As for the aches and pains of Miggy, he noted, "Miguel Cabrera at 70 percent is better than a lot of guys at 100 percent."

With the transition from the late Mike Ilitch to son Christopher, Avila said Christopher has been "working on it for two years. He's gotten to know a little bit of the industry. He was very involved in the collective bargaining agreement discussions," and has visited the Tigers' academy in the Dominican Republic. Detroit maintains its academy in Venezuela despite the ongoing political turbulence, but without a Venezuelan Summer League, players go to the Dominican Summer League or one of its two Gulf Coast League entries.

Avila was tight-lipped on the Tigers trade-deadline plans, but noted, "You have to be open to anything to make the club better as we move forward."

Petry, who went 18-8 for Detroit in 1984, lobbied for teammates Jack Morris, Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammell to get into the Hall of Fame. Critics point to Morris' 3.90 ERA, but "Morris never pitched in National League, and he pitched exclusively in the designated hitter era," Petry said, noting that Red Ruffing's 3.80 is the highest ERA for any pitcher currently enshrined in Cooperstown. He told Sparky Anderson once, "In some ways it was your fault. You left him in for a lot of games." Anderson replied, "Daniel, my boy, that's not why. I was afraid to go out there and take him out."

As for Sweet Lou and Trammell, Petry said, "For a double-play tandem to play 19 years together at such important positions, it's not just the numbers, it's that they're so deserving to me, and it's not even close." As with pitcher Tommy John, who racked up 284 victories and had named after him a ligament-replacement surgery that's part and parcel of today's baseball, Petry said, "it's what you mean to the game."

He talked about how he got his nickname. Growing up, he was "Peachtree," "Peaches" and "Peachfuzz," but when Petry was in Lakeland, a high school friend sent him a letter addressed to "Peaches Petry." "They'd put your mail on your stool" in front of your locker," Petry recalled, "and that letter was on the top of the pile. And aaaaaalllll of my teammates saw it as they walked past."

Petry is part of the first father-son MLB-NHL family; son Jeff is a defenseman with the Montreal Canadiens. Jeff has also made Petry a grandpa twice over, but Petry is proudest that Jeff, after being drafted out of Michigan State, returned to college to get his degree despite a reading disability. Petry confesses that he had been told his son was a fine skater, but the Orange County-bred baseballer (who idolized Nolan Ryan in his youth and had to square off against him on the mound later) didn't know any of the fine points of hockey.

When it comes to baseball, though, "anytime you're in a ballpark, it pulls at you," Petry said. He gets plenty of chances by acting as a greeter for the Tigers at the Comerica Park party suites, being assistant coach for the baseball team another son coaches at Orchard Lake St. Mary High School in Michigan, and participating in the Tigers' fantasy camps. One of his great thrills was his only All-Star selection. Petry was in awe. "I was the most nervous person you'd ever seen. I was throwing to Rich Gedman, and I didn't know anybody who was playing behind me."

As for the game? Several minutes of fat, widely scattered raindrops didn't dampen the Smithers' enthusiasm, and a Cabrera solo home run certainly perked things up in Section 332. But a two-out Rays rally in the seventh inning gave Tampa Bay a 3-2 lead it did not relinquish, setting the Tigers on an eight-game skid.

More excerpts from Avila and Petry will be dished out weekdays on the Society's Facebook group.

### **HIRED HANDS DOWN ON THE FARM** -- By Mark Pattison

The Tigers have had great luck in bringing up players from Toledo to make immediate contributions to the parent club. The list includes John Hicks, Jim Adduci, Alex Presley and Buck Farmer. J.D. Martinez, too, when you consider his season started in Toledo for rehab games due to his spring training injury. But what of the next step down the minor-league ladder, in Double-A ball? I took in a six-pack of Erie SeaWolves games when they traveled to Bowie, Md. -- a May 1-3 trio and a second set May 30-June 1. Here's some of what I learned.

Mike Gerber, Erie's center fielder, seems to be for real. He had a 5-for-5 game in the early-May series that pushed his batting average over .300, and he kept it there throughout the month. Given Detroit's revolving-door center field sweepstakes of Adduci, Presley, JaCoby Jones, Andrew Romine, Mikie Mahtook and Tyler Collins, it's clear nobody has earned the everyday job due to lack of hitting, lack of fielding or both. Unless someone in that group can catch fire, and fast, I see Detroit making room for Gerber on the 40-man roster before the season is out -- and maybe the even 25-man roster.

Dominic Ficociello, the Society's spring training prospect du jour, pushed his BA over .300 in the early-May series like Gerber, and has kept straddling the .300 line. He's played first and third base for Erie, and even took a turn in left field for one game in the later series, running down a ball that seemed destined for the gap between left and center (although it may have been a case of bad route running). However, Big Bomb Dom's power numbers are fragile. Say Miguel Cabrera takes over as Tigers DH in 2019. Would management, and fans, be OK with their rookie first baseman having just one home run in the first two months of the season, as is the case with Ficociello this year with at Erie? He clouted four homers in spring training, but that power stroke is missing in action in the Eastern League.

Everyone goes gaga over Christin Stewart, who's been playing left field for the SeaWolves. He's among the league leaders in home runs and slugging percentage, and was even first in walks with a 5-to-3 strikeout-to-walk ratio to boot. (Ficociello has more whiffs than Stewart.) But Stewart isn't even in Justin Upton's class as a left fielder, and I can't see either of them moving to right field if J.D. Martinez leaves the organization before either of them. So do you want a 36-year-old Cabrera playing first base in 2019 while a much younger Stewart DH's? The questions are easier to ask than to answer.

Tyler Alexander, Detroit's second-round draft pick in 2015, was the starter in two of the quickest minor league games in recent years: 2:14 on May 1, and a quicker 2:03 on May 30. Erie lost both games, 4-3 and 2-1. It would be great to see quicker major league games. However, Alexander's BAA (batting average against) was over .300 to both lefties and righties. I don't know exactly how to reconcile those two seemingly contradictory points. Maybe we need more hurlers to pitch to contact.

Kody Eaves, who's been nailing down third base for Erie this season but can also play second, has been pasting the ball to all fields. He was over .300 before he went on the disabled list in early May, took some time getting back in a groove, but has worked his way back up into the .280s. He's no worse a defender than Nick Castellanos. Despite Brad Ausmus' protestations that someone's bat will "come around" (or a bullpen, or a lineup for that matter), Detroit's win-now strategy is changing shape. In the Dave Dombrowski era, it was defined as signing top players to big contracts. In the Al Avila era, there's more of a willingness to cut bait. Consider the springtime axing of Mark Lowe and Mike Pelfrey, plus the demotion of Collins and Anibal Sanchez, and the dislodging of Francisco Rodriguez from the closer's role -- all before the season was 40 games old. I'm not saying it's time for the Tigers to give up on Castellanos. But I can see the Tigers trading him for different pieces of the puzzle and promoting from within, and why not Eaves?

One last observation. Tigers great Lance Parrish manages the club. Ex-Tiger Phil Clark is Erie's hitting coach, and the SeaWolves are behind only Bowie in offense in the league. Another ex-Tiger, Willie Blair, is the SeaWolves' pitching coach. He had to manage a bullpen through a 14-inning 4-3 win June 1, and got by using just four relievers. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was the Blair Pitch Project.

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