

Tigers Stripes

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D
Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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GETTING OUR HOPES UP – By David Raglin

Yes, I know this is a rebuilding year. But going into the Reds series, we were only one game under .500, 36-37, and had a five-game winning streak. The Reds have the worst record in the National League, and that series was to be followed by what could have been a showdown with the Tribe. At least it would have been nice to reach and even surpass .500, even if only for a short time. After seeing Jeimer Candelario win the Mayo game in a walkoff against Cleveland while wearing my new “Candelario 46” T-shirt, maybe this team could...

We all know what happened next. The Reds swept the two-game series in Cincinnati, the Indians swept three in Cleveland (even the most loyal U-M fan does not like dislike Ohio more than I do right now), and we blew a 4-1 lead in the pre-fireworks opener against the A’s as I was typing this.

I guess it’s a good sign that this team has made me mad. They have been good enough to make me care not just about the kids, but about wins and losses.

CATCHING THE BALL – By David Raglin

One of the reasons the Tigers have been better than expected is the improved defense. All of the defensive measures have shown the Tigers’ improvement, but the stat we use most, Baseball Info System’s Defensive Runs Saved (DRS), shows how dramatic it’s been. Last year, the Tigers were -60 runs worse than the average team. That mark was the second worst in baseball behind the woeful Mets at -71, and meant that the Tigers had been estimated to have their defense cost them 60 runs more than the average team. If 10 runs is roughly equal to a win, that says the defense cost the Tigers about six wins all by itself last year.

This year the Tigers’ DRS has been much better. They are at -6 runs, projecting to a -12 for a full season. Where has all this improvement come from? Let’s look position by position. The “2018” line is where they are now, and the “2018 Proj” is where that projects for a 162-game season.

Detroit Tiger Defensive Runs Saved by Position, 2017 and 2018

Season	P	C	1B	2B	3B	SS	LF	CF	RF	Shifts	Total
2017	-13	-12	-8	-3	-22	-1	11	0	-21	8	-60
2018	0	-4	-5	-6	-1	1	10	0	-13	12	-6
2018 Proj	0	-8	-10	-12	-2	2	21	0	-27	25	-12
Change	13	4	-2	-9	20	3	10	0	-6	17	48

The biggest improvement is at third base. Nick Castellanos, as much as we love him at the plate, never has gotten it together in the field. Candelario, who was not good at third base in 2017, has improved quite a bit in 2018. Castellanos has moved to right, and is not adequate there either, but last year we had J.D. Martinez for three months (who is also very defensively challenged) and Castellanos himself for a month, so right field was already a problem. The pitchers, not usually talked about in fielding, were not good last year, with the worst being the now-departed Anibal Sanchez. Second base is worse after the change from Ian Kinsler to Dixon Machado and Niko Goodrum. JaCoby Jones has been the best defensive player on the team, leading to the improvement in left field over the already good glove of Justin Upton.

Another team defensive stat is Defensive Efficiency Rating (DER), which is simply the percentage of batted balls in the field (i.e., not homers) that are turned into outs. Last year, the Tigers were 29th in the majors in defensive efficiency at .668 (or 66.8% if you prefer), well below the major league average of .688. This year, they are 11th in the majors at .696, close to a three-point improvement.

Part of this improvement might be new pitching coach Chris Bosio. I was listening to the Tigers-A's game on June 25, and Dan Dickerson was talking about how Bosio has the pitching staff throwing more sliders to induce weak contact. I checked and he's right; the Tigers are 28th out of 30 in the percentage of fastballs and first in the percentage of sliders. I don't know if the second part is true, i.e., whether the sliders are inducing weak contact. The defensive stats above, however, especially DER, would indicate this could be true.

LEFT FIELD: A BIT LEFT OUT – By David Raglin

Most of the time, when all-time or all-star teams are chosen, people choose three outfielders regardless of position. The 1969 all-time Tigers team chosen as part of baseball's centennial had two right fielders and a center fielder (Harry Heilmann, Ty Cobb, and Al Kaline). The 1999 team chosen as part of the closing of Tiger Stadium had Kirk Gibson (a right fielder) instead of Heilmann. I made a decision at the start of this to choose a true left fielder, center fielder, and right fielder, so this month we will pick a left fielder.

Having said that, the greatest Tiger outfielders have been center fielders (Cobb) or right fielders (Kaline, Heilmann, and Sam Crawford), so that leaves left field a bit open. Who are the top candidates? Below are the top 10 Tiger left fielders in a few categories, thanks to Baseball Reference's Play Index:

Top Detroit Tiger Left Fielders in Games Played, Runs Created, and Wins Above Replacement as a Tiger

Rk	Tiger Left Fielder	G	Rk	Tiger Left Fielder	RC	Rk	Tiger Left Fielder	WAR
1	Bobby Veach	1,604	1	Bobby Veach	962	1	Bobby Veach	45.8
2	Willie Horton	1,515	2	Willie Horton	834	2	Willie Horton	25.9
3	Charlie Maxwell	853	3	Charlie Maxwell	485	3	Charlie Maxwell	19.2
4	Larry Herndon	843	4	Steve Kemp	436	4	Rocky Colavito	17.3
5	Bob Fothergill	802	5	Bob Fothergill	433	5	Matty McIntyre	16.8
6	Matty McIntyre	795	6	Rocky Colavito	431	6	Steve Kemp	16.0
7	Steve Kemp	684	7	John Stone	396	7	Dick Wakefield	13.2
8	Craig Monroe	672	8	Larry Herndon	387	8	Bob Fothergill	12.9
9	Davy Jones	646	9	Dick Wakefield	375	9	Larry Herndon	11.3
10	John Stone	644	10	Matty McIntyre	340	10	John Stone	10.7

This is an interesting list. The race for the top seems to be between Bobby Veach and Willie Horton. You all know about Horton and what he has meant to the Tigers, but you are probably not as familiar with Veach. Thanks to Veach's SABR biography, written by Bob O'Leary, we have details of his career (<https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/7a57b94d>).

Veach played for the Tigers 100 years ago, from 1912 to 1923. The Tigers purchased Veach's contract from the minor-league Indianapolis club late in the 1912 season and in 23 games that year, he hit .342, convincing manager Hughie Jennings that he was the answer to the left field problem. By 1915, Veach had become one of the best players in the league and helped the Tigers win 100 games for the first time. (It's easy to forget how good the 1915 Tigers were because they finished in second place to Boston. Their .649 winning percentage -- 100-54 -- is the second highest in team history (behind the .656 posted by the 1934 club) and ahead of the legendary Tiger teams of 1968 and 1984.)

Veach was an easygoing guy, and that caused problems between him and the volatile Ty Cobb. Once Cobb became manager, he had Harry Heilmann continually insult Veach to get him fired up. That may seem extreme, but Veach did have his best seasons, 1921 and 1922, with Cobb in charge. However, Cobb finally got rid of him during the winter of 1923-24 to the Red Sox. The Sox traded him to the Senators in 1925, giving Veach a chance to finish his career finally getting to the World Series, albeit in a losing effort. Veach continued his career in the minors for four years and lived in Detroit. He later purchased a coal company; he died in 1943.

So, let's look at Veach versus Horton. Veach played 11 full seasons and one partial season for the Tigers, compared with 12 full and three partial seasons for Horton. Despite that, and the fact that Horton played in the 162-game era compared to the 154-game schedule during Veach's career, Veach did play a few more

games for the Tigers than Horton, in part due to Veach’s durability; he missed fewer than five games in a season seven times while Horton played 140 or more games only five times for the Tigers.

Veach also has over 100 more runs created than Horton. (Ironically, both played most of their career in comparable low-offense eras; the American League averaged 3.1 runs per game during Veach’s career and 3.1 runs per game in Horton’s.) Looking at runs created per game, which is a “per opportunity” stat like batting average and comparing it with runs created, which is an “accumulation” stat like hits and home runs, Veach had 5.8 runs created per game as a Tiger and Horton had 5.4, both very good but with Veach in front again.

The biggest difference between them is WAR; Veach was a lot better than Horton, at 45.8 versus 25.9. Not that WAR is the be-all and end-all, but why is his WAR so much higher? Part of that is defense, which rates Veach as a marginal fielder and Horton as a poor one. We don’t want to weight defensive WAR too much for players from a long time ago, but Horton’s WAR does match the perception that he was not a good outfielder (a certain 1968 World Series assist notwithstanding). Nevertheless, the difference in offensive WAR is more than 13 wins. Veach was more often one of the league’s best players, as shown below, for six offensive categories.

Number of Times in the Top Ten in the American League in Various Categories, Veach and Horton

Tiger Left Fielder	BA	OBP	SLG	RBI	RC	WAR
Bobby Veach	5	4	5	9*	8	2
Willie Horton	1	1	4	5	1	1

* Veach led the league in RBIs three times

Horton had one outstanding season, 1968, where he was in the top ten in batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, home runs, runs created, and wins above replacement. Horton finished third in the American League Most Valuable Player balloting that year. Otherwise, he had only three other top-10 seasons, all in slugging percentage. Veach, in contrast, was a regular in the top ten lists in his 11 seasons as a regular. Along with leading the league in RBIs three times, he also led the league in games played twice, plate appearances once, hits once, doubles three times, and triples (at the time a key stat) once. So when this judge makes his decision, Bobby Veach gets the nod as the best Tigers left fielder of all time.

Third in all three lists is Charlie “Paw Paw” Maxwell, who got that name when he moved to the Michigan city as a player. Maxwell played for the Tigers from 1955 to 1962, eight of his 14 seasons as a big leaguer. Paw Paw was most known for hitting home runs on Sundays, and 35 of his 133 Tiger home runs (26 percent) came on the Sabbath. Some names more recognizable to current fans include Tigers television analyst Craig Monroe, 1984 platoon left fielder Larry Herndon, and former #1 pick Steve Kemp. There are also an inordinate number of names that you might not be familiar with because, along with Veach, they played for the Tigers before their first World Series championship in 1935: Marty McIntyre (1904-1910), Davy Jones (1906-1912), Bob Fothergill (1922-1930), and John Stone (1928-1933).

THE ANNUAL GATHERING: SPECIAL GUESTS AND A SPECIAL GOOSE – By Mark Pattison

The Society’s 34th Annual Gathering, at a sold-out Hockeystown Café, was a treat for everyone. We advertised two Tigers, and we got three. Even though Jon Warden, a reliever on the 1968 World Champion Tigers, had to beg off (he’s got a rain check for next year), infielder Tom Matchick took his place and regaled us with all sorts of stories -- many of which I’d never heard before, given how I’m such a nut about that club. Like how Hall of Famer Eddie Mathews, who ended his Hall of Fame career with Detroit, was color-blind, walking into the clubhouse each day with mismatched socks. Or how our society’s namesake, Mayo Smith, had a special “inside pocket” behind the Old English “D” of his uniform shirt. “Sometime near the third or fourth inning, he’d go into the tunnel and take a drink, then he’d return to the end of the bench and take a nap,” Matchick recounted, imitating his skipper snoring midgame.

One of the greats from the 1968 team, Willie Horton -- who himself took a rain check after a surgery shelved him last year -- told the Society faithful of his love for the game and how fortunate he felt to have played for the Tigers, having grown up in Detroit, becoming a schoolboy star, and even sneaking into Briggs Stadium to catch some free game action -- until he got caught.

As a schoolboy, Horton got to meet one of his idols at the stadium, Rocky Colavito. “The Rock” gave Horton all sorts of tips, which served Horton well when he broke into professional baseball. The time came when Willie was promoted to the Tigers, and Colavito told his protégé that young Horton would nudge him out of the lineup. Willie, never one to hide his feelings, was astonished to hear that. Colavito advised him not to take it personally should the fans boo him when he steps into left field instead of Colavito. “It’s not that they hate you,” he said. “It’s just that they’re comfortable with that old shoe they’ve been wearing the last few years.” Horton said he continues to talk with the Rock even to this day.

Horton was also thankful for the lessons given him by teammate Mickey Stanley, even though improving Horton’s game could have jeopardized Stanley’s playing time. It all worked out in 1968, as Stanley played regularly in center field during the season -- and his fielding tips helped Horton uncork the throw that nailed Lou Brock at the plate in Game 5 of the ’68 World Series, which turned the Fall Classic in the Tigers’ favor -- and not a moment too soon.

Accompanying Horton was 1961-67 Tigers second baseman Jake Wood, who was involved in that day’s Negro Leagues pregame ceremonies at Comerica Park. Also firing up the crowd was Tigers PA announcer Bobb Vergiels -- who does double duty by doing the spring training games in Lakeland.

The post-event game got off to a slow start. Not because of offense or failure to find the strike zone, but because of a rain delay of nearly two hours. Starter Mike Fiers was effective, but reliever Louis Coleman uncharacteristically coughed up an eighth-inning solo home to allow Cleveland to tie the game 2-2. And there it stayed through the eighth, the ninth, the tenth and the eleventh innings, despite frequent video-board sightings of the Rally Goose. At the top of the twelfth, I leaned over to my wife and said, “Maybe just one more inning.” I wouldn’t have walked the plank for abandoning ship; by that point, all but a dozen or so of the Society faithful had filtered out of the ballpark. Fortunately, Jeimer Candelario, the Candy Man, swatted a two-run homer with Miguel Cabrera aboard to give Detroit a 4-2 win at about 9:45 p.m. Mission accomplished.

THE RALLY GOOSE TEAM – By Mark Pattison

The Rally Goose caught Tigers fans’ imagination when they rebounded from that May 30 rain delay at Comerica Park against the Angels, who have had their own Rally Monkey for most of this century. As a result, we’ve come up with a highly unscientific list of avian-named and -nicknamed players for an All-Rally Goose team. It’s not inclusive, but we do try to go heavy on players with a Tigers connection.

On the mound, at the top of the rotation is none other than Mark (The Bird) Fidrych. Others on the mound staff include Pol Perritt, Ed Willett (he just has one “t” too many), Charlie Jaeger and Dean Crow. Behind the plate, there’s none finer than Birdie Tebbetts, backed up by Aaron Robin-son.

The infield is populated with the likes of Chick Shorten, Sam Crane from the 19th-century Detroit Wolverines and Billy (Purple) Martin -- a nickname that works on multiple levels -- while “Bill” Freehan migrates from behind the plate to first base. In the outfield, we’ve got Hall of Famer Goose Goslin, Ducky Holmes, Earl Webb (think feet!), Delos Drake, and Anthony Goose (well, Gose, but close enough). Managing this team of birdbrains would be ex-Tigers catcher, coach and interim skipper Bob Swift.

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