

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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A ROLLER-COASTER SEASON – By David Raglin

That's been the 2014 Detroit Tigers. When we wrote the June issue of *Tigers Stripes*, the Tigers were 27-12, had just swept Baltimore and Boston, and were on top of the world. Just before the July issue, the Tigers had gone 9-20, dropping to 36-32 and in second place behind Kansas City after three straight losses to the Royals. Since that low point, they have reversed that bad streak, going 19-9 and their 55-41 record through Monday July 21 puts them in first place by 6.5 games.

The last few years, they Tigers have been lead by the pitching, especially their starting pitching. They were second in 2012 in starters ERA and led the league in 2013. This year, they are fifth at 3.84, not much better the league average of 4.08. The bullpen, as we know, has been the biggest problem, with a 12th-best ERA of 4.36, much worse than the 3.68 league average. That has led the Tigers to be at just about the league average in runs allowed per game at 4.24 (compared to 4.28 for the whole league).

They have been carried by their offense. Led by Victor Martinez (showing the second half of 2013 was not a fluke), Miguel Cabrera, and the surprise of the season, J.D. Martinez, the Tigers are third in the league with 4.76 runs scored per game, about half a run better than the league average.

As the non-waiver trading deadline approaches on July 31, what will the Tigers do? Other than relief pitching, they don't need much, but given Dave Dombrowski's past trading-deadline success, we won't be surprised if we are surprised. While we have a lot of reason to be worried about the pen, remember a few things. First, the fact is that nobody in the American League Central looks like they can challenge the Tigers. Second of all, when the season ends, the Tigers will gain a superb reliever as Drew Smyly will be available in the pen as only four starters will be needed. Yes, they need to make a deal to get somebody, but it is not time to panic.

THE LATEST FIND – By David Raglin

The Tigers have a history under Dave Dombrowski of finding decent right-handed power hitting outfielders on the scrapheap. Last year, Matt Tuiasosopo was a savior in the first half of the season. Before that, Marcus Thames and Craig Monroe helped the Tigers win the 2006 pennant. (Monroe was signed just before Dave Dombrowski fired Randy Smith and became general manager.) The Tigers have found another gem this season in J.D. Martinez.

Who is J.D. Martinez, and is he for real? Martinez is from southeast Florida, where he caught the eye of the Avila family growing up. Martinez was coached in Little League by the brother of Tigers' Assistant General Manager Al Avila, and was a college teammate at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale of Al's son (and Alex' brother) Alan.

Martinez was drafted by the Astros in the 20th round of the 2009 draft but still managed to hit 12 home runs and post a .348 average for Astros farm clubs in Short Season-A and Low-A ball that summer. He kept it going in 2010 in Low-A and Double-A with 18 home runs and a .341 average. He started to get some recognition, being named Houston's sixth best prospect and the Best Hitting Prospect in the Low-A Sally League following that season. After tearing up AA again in 2011, he earned a late-July promotion to the Astros, where he slugged six home runs and hit .274.

This is where the road started turning for Martinez. After hitting only .235 with a slugging percentage below .400 for the Astros, he was sent to AAA in early August. He spent virtually all of the 2013 season with Houston, but hit only seven home runs and had an on-base percentage well under .300, while also suffering from an injured wrist that kept him out of the lineup for 44 games. His career was stalled out. He was taken off the 40-man roster and passed through the Rule V draft without being taken.

Martinez knew he had to do something. During the 2013 season, he noticed other hitters, including teammate Jason Castro, had a swing that looked different than Martinez' swing. He saw that while his swing was in the strike zone for two or three frames on the video, good hitters were in there for five to eight frames. He found he had too much of a downward slope to his swing.

His change was noticed by at least one person. Ben Farnsworth of Fangraphs had a great piece [last fall](#) in which he described in great detail Martinez' old swing and new swing, along with video, and speculated that he would be a great Rule V pick, and how he was tearing up the Venezuelan Winter League. That article is at <http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/rule-5-dark-horse-j-d-martinez/>. (Hint: People reading this electronically can just click on the link.)

Fortunately for the Tigers, nobody seemed to have read that article. The Tigers expressed interest in Martinez over the winter, probably mindful of the times he had crossed the Avilas' paths, his Winter League performance, and the 464 foot home run he hit off of Max Scherzer in Detroit last summer, the longest home run at Comerica Park in 2013.

The Astros rebuffed the Tigers' inquiries, but after only 18 at-bats in spring training, the team that had averaged a 54-108 record over the last three years somehow decided it did not have a spot for Martinez, saying he was "a victim of our own success." The Tigers did not waste any time, signing Martinez to a minor-league deal two days later.

After slamming 10 home runs in 71 at-bats for Toledo, Martinez was called up to Detroit. The Tigers were not really looking for a right-handed hitting outfielder; they really wanted a lefty after Andy Dirks got hurt and Tyler Collins did not work out, but they could not ignore 10 home runs in 17 games, including four during an Easter Sunday doubleheader.

Martinez' playing time was a bit spotty at first, playing in 25 out of 45 games after being called up. That was not surprising since the Tigers' other right-handed hitting left fielder, Rajai Davis, was playing pretty well. However, Martinez' bat would convince the Tigers to put him in the lineup full time in the crucial #5 spot in the order behind their best hitter this season and a fellow Martinez.

So, the question is: Is J.D. Martinez this good, or is he a flash in a pan? We certainly don't know, but there are good reasons to believe he is for real. The change in the swing was intended him to his fewer ground balls and more balls in the air. That's just what has happened. Martinez hit the ball fair 147 times last year; 61 of them were ground balls, 49 were fly balls, and 35 were line drives. This year, out of 154 balls hit fair, only 55 have been grounders, 54 have been fly balls, and 45 have been line drives. As of July 18, Mark Simon of ESPN noted that 24.5 percent of the balls Martinez hit had been hard hits, the fifth highest rate in the major leagues. (Victor Martinez was first at 26.8 and Miggy was tenth at 23.4.) If he can keep hitting the ball that hard, this will go down as another Tigers steal.

CAN'T WORK OUT BETTER THAN THIS – By David Raglin

The biggest news of the offseason was the trade of Prince Fielder to the Texas Rangers for Ian Kinsler. The reaction of Tigers fans was overwhelmingly positive, but that was mostly because of who we traded than who we got. Tigers fans were glad to have the team out from under the burden of Fielder's contract, especially after the first baseman's poor postseason, and it allowed the Tigers to move Miguel Cabrera back to first base.

It almost seemed like Ian Kinsler was an afterthought. We know he had not been as good the last few years and that he also had a big contract, but he played a position where we had a hole, and he was still a decent player.

After half a season, Miggy is second on the team in WAR at 2.8. Victor Martinez is third with 2.6. The Tigers' leader in WAR among position players is Kinsler, at 3.3 WAR. (Max Scherzer leads the team with 3.4 WAR, and Rick Porcello is third at 3.0 WAR.) That shows how valuable Kinsler has been to the team.

Kinsler is 11th in the American League in WAR among offensive players. Here is a list of the top 15. (Note that the Offensive WAR and the Defensive WAR does not add to the total WAR. That is because both the Offensive WAR and the Defensive WAR have position adjustments that give extra value to players who play the most important defensive positions.)

Top Fifteen American League Position Players in WAR, Through Monday July 21, 2014

Rk	Player	Team	WAR	Off WAR	Def WAR
1	Mike Trout	LA	5.8	6.0	0.0
2	Josh Donaldson	Oak	4.9	2.7	2.3
3	Michael Brantley	Cle	4.5	4.3	0.0
4	Kyle Seager	Sea	4.1	3.4	1.0
5	Alex Gordon	KC	3.9	1.8	1.7
6	Adrian Beltre	Tex	3.6	3.4	0.4
7	Robinson Cano	Sea	3.6	4.0	-0.2
8	Jose Altuve	Hou	3.5	3.9	-0.1

Rk	Player	Team	WAR	Off WAR	Def WAR
9	Adam Jones	Bal	3.4	3.4	0.2
10	Steve Pearce	Bal	3.4	2.3	0.8
11	Ian Kinsler	Det	3.3	2.3	1.3
12	Jose Bautista	Tor	3.3	3.4	-0.5
13	Desmond Jennings	TB	3.3	2.2	1.3
14	Salvador Perez	KC	3.3	2.4	1.5
15	Erick Aybar	LA	3.1	2.8	0.9

FAN CLUB PRESIDENTS, WHERE ARE YOU? – By Mark Pattison

After the Annual Gathering, Society member Kevin McGraw, who is of an age to remember these things, recalled the era when the King Tiger award (now presented annually by the Society), was a congeniality award voted on by the presidents of individual Tigers’ fan clubs. The last King Tiger award was made in 1980 before the Society picked it up 10 years ago. Kevin remembers joining the fan clubs of several Tigers of the 1960s and early 1970s. He adds that if you wanted to be the president of a fan club for a Tigers star, you had to also be the president of a benchwarmer or bullpen Tiger.

Upon returning to his home after the Annual Gathering, Kevin found his fan club membership cards, signed by various officers. It turns out all were women – well, maybe not “women” in the strictest sense, but more likely high school and college-age girls. He wonders whatever became of these loyal fan club presidents from yesteryear, and whether any of them are Society members today. If you know the whereabouts of these onetime (and possibly longtime) Tigers stalwarts, get in touch with me at pattison_mark@hotmail.com.

Their names and the Tigers they cheered hardest for: Rosemarie Lunek, president -- Jim Northrup; Linda Scheich, president and Agatha Rubino, VP -- Gates Brown; Patrice James and Donna Lesnieski, co-presidents -- Tom Timmerman and Mike Kilkenny; Mary Matese, president -- Ken Szotkiewicz; Rosemarie Lunek and Kathy Murphy, co-presidents -- Dick McAuliffe; Benay Finazzo (and we may have the name misspelled), president – Al Kaline. Scheich and Lunek were also president and VP of the Les Cain Fan Club.

OFFENSIVE DROUGHT – By David Raglin

The turn of the century turned into a banner era for hitters in Major League Baseball. However, the party’s over. You probably have heard that offense is down in the baseball the last few years, especially this year, but you probably haven’t noticed how much.

Below is a table with the average runs scored per game for each of the last 50 seasons. Let’s take a look at the table. It begins in the mid 1960s, one of the best pitchers’ eras in the history of baseball. It bottomed out at 3.42 for 1968, the famed Year of the Pitcher, when Denny McLain won 31 games and Bob Gibson had a microscopic 1.12 ERA. Baseball lowered the mound in 1969, and that helped, but by 1972, runs scored were back down to 3.69 per game.

That is when the American League made the biggest change in the rules in the 20th century by adding the designated hitter. While it looks like in the table that made a big difference, actually offense was up in the National League almost as much (expansion could be the reason). Once American League teams figured out how to use the DH, the American League started scoring about a third of a run more per game than the National League. They stayed between four and 4.5 runs per game generally until the steroid era began in the early 1990s. It stayed at about 4.75 runs per game until it jumped over five for three out of four seasons during the Y2K era. It dropped a bit early in the decade until falling off greatly in 2010 and continuing to drop since then. The current average of 4.13 runs per game is the lowest since 1992.

Why has this happened? Part of it is the steroids, but I think part of it is that during the high offensive era of 10-15 years ago, teams focused on pitching-- trading for pitchers, valuing pitchers, highly focusing on drafting pitchers. It is not surprising that teams developed great pitching. Power hitters used to be a dime a dozen but now, teams are starting to focus on getting power hitters.

What does this mean for evaluating players? Many of the modern statistics like Wins Above Replacement adjust for the differences in runs scored. However, stats like runs created, runs created per game, and counting stats like home runs and RBIs, need to be interpreted with the changes in offense in mind. For example, let's look at Rajai Davis. He has six home runs, 32 RBIs, and is hitting .297 with a .340 on-base percentage. He has 40 runs created and 5.4 runs created per game. Back when American League teams were averaging more than five runs scored per game, a left fielder who is slightly above average would not have that much value. However, when Davis has 5.4 runs created when the average team has scored 4.1 runs per game, that is a player who is an asset at the plate.

Runs Per Game, Major Leagues, 1965 to 2014, Through Saturday July 19

Year	R/G	Year	R/G	Year	R/G	Year	R/G	Year	R/G
1965	3.99	1975	4.21	1985	4.33	1995	4.85	2005	4.59
1966	3.99	1976	3.99	1986	4.41	1996	5.04	2006	4.86
1967	3.77	1977	4.47	1987	4.72	1997	4.77	2007	4.80
1968	3.42	1978	4.10	1988	4.14	1998	4.79	2008	4.65
1969	4.07	1979	4.46	1989	4.13	1999	5.08	2009	4.61
1970	4.34	1980	4.29	1990	4.26	2000	5.14	2010	4.38
1971	3.89	1981	4.00	1991	4.31	2001	4.78	2011	4.28
1972	3.69	1982	4.30	1992	4.12	2002	4.62	2012	4.32
1973	4.21	1983	4.31	1993	4.60	2003	4.73	2013	4.17
1974	4.12	1984	4.26	1994	4.92	2004	4.81	2014	4.13

MORE ON AL KALINE

We barely scratched the surface of Al Kaline's comments to the Society. Here, he talks about teammates who helped him out when he joined the Tigers as a bonus baby: "I would go to the ballpark early and Ray Boone would come out and wanted to hit early, so I threw batting practice to him. ... And Ray Boone would ask me out to his house for dinner. They were cooking out. That was great. ... But the person that would really help me out the most was Johnny Pesky. Johnny Pesky was an extra player, a utility player at that time on the team. And in fact, Freddie Hutchinson would say to me, "Son, if you're not in the lineup I want you sit next to Johnny Pesky and watch the game 'cause he'll tell you exactly what you should have done in that situation and what you shouldn't do." And so on. And Johnny Pesky took a really good liking to me, and I had a great relationship with him, and he helped me an awful lot."

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