

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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TALE OF TWO TRADES – By David Raglin

The trading deadline marked is a fickle mistress. It all depends on who you have to trade and what teams need. Two years ago, a desperate Mets team needed what the Tigers had to offer, and the result was a Rookie of the Year and a piece in another deal. That second deal netted the Tigers Justin Wilson, who brought the most to the Tigers at this trading deadline.

You would think that a star outfielder, J.D. Martinez, would bring more than a reliever and a backup catcher, but not this year. Certainly Tigers fans who were recalling that the Tigers got Michael Fulmer and a piece of the eventual trade for Justin Wilson for Yoenis Cespedes were disappointed with the return for Martinez. They probably should not have been. As we wrote about in the last issue of *Tigers Stripes*, “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 trade a top prospect like Fulmer for one like the Mets were in 2015?” The answer to that was no, and that is why we got what we got.

The market for outfielders was very soft; the only other good outfielder dealt, Melky Cabrera from the White Sox to the Royals, brought a return at the same general level as what the Tigers got from Arizona. (I was quite disappointed at the return for a player of Martinez’s caliber, and would have liked to wait until the deadline to see if there was a better deal out there, but the reality is that there was taking Door #2 was probably not a better option.) What the Tigers got for Martinez is probably the minimum for a top player—less than that and they might have been better taking the fourth-round draft pick they would have gotten for Martinez.

To contrast, the demand for relief pitchers, especially those who could close, was very high, and Wilson and catcher Alex Avila netted the Tigers two young players that move into the Tigers' top-10 prospects list. They happened to find a club that needed two pieces that the Tigers had to offer, and were desperate enough to trade some of their best prospects to get them. That was the Tigers being able to take advantage of the market.

The market is also why all five players are left-side-of-the-infield guys. I doubt Tigers General Manager Al Avila’s goal heading into the trading deadline was to corner that market, but that’s what the clubs that needed our guys felt they had to trade. At this point, the Tigers need to be in talent acquisition mode. I’d rather see them get the most talented player they can even if we have players at that position, then a less talented player who better fits our needs.

Why didn’t they complete the teardown and trade Justin Verlander, Ian Kinsler, Jose Iglesias and the flagpole in center field? From what was reported in the press, they were not offered anything of substance for any of those players. A team can dump for dumping’s sake, but what’s the purpose in that? Yes, the Tigers could have traded Verlander for a marginal prospect if they ate most of the money, but where’s the upside in that? I’d like to see Verlander, all else being equal, finish his career wearing the same Old English “D” he started with. If the Tigers are not going to be contenders for a few years, at least we will be able to see a Hall of Famer and the best pitcher in Tigers history every fifth day.

So, what’s next? The only one of the new players who we will probably see in Detroit this year is the centerpiece of the Cubs deal, third baseman Jeimer Candelario. Dawel Lugo, the main prospect from the Diamondbacks, is in AA, and the others are further away. There will have to sort out who might move to another position and what else to do about the logjam. Then, once the season is over, the Tigers have to decide if they want to trade Verlander, who will have only two more years left on his contract, and whether or not to pick up the option for Ian Kinsler or trade him to a club that would pick it up. Maybe they will even sign Alex Avila and make him the first Tiger to have three stints with the club.

THE HAUL FOR WILSON AND AVILA – By David Raglin

Four months ago, Justin Wilson was just another middle-relief pitcher and Alex Avila was a backup catcher signed as a free agent for a bargain price. Today, they are members of the Chicago Cubs for the price of two of their best prospects. As much as we like Wilson and Avila, that is the definition of selling high.

Let's start with the player who is closest to the majors, Jeimer Candelario, a 23-year old who was born in New York City but moved to the Dominican Republic as a young child. He was signed by the Cubs in 2010 at the age of 16 and reached the AA level for the first time in 2015 at the young age of 21. He has spent the last two years in AA and AAA, with a couple of very brief stints in the majors:

Jeimer Candelario – 2016 and 2017 Minor League Stats

| Year | Level | G | AB | R | H | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO | BA | OBP | SLG | RC | RC/G |
|------|--------|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|------|------|------|----|------|
| 2016 | AA/AAA | 131 | 469 | 74 | 134 | 39 | 4 | 13 | 77 | 70 | 99 | .286 | .380 | .469 | 83 | 6.3 |
| 2017 | AAA | 81 | 286 | 39 | 76 | 27 | 3 | 12 | 52 | 41 | 72 | .266 | .361 | .507 | 52 | 6.3 |

As you can see, he has good strike zone judgment and his power is developing. FanGraphs' Eric Logenhagen said last winter, "He has a combination of good bat control and hand-eye coordination that allows him to spoil tough two-strike pitches, he makes in-flight adjustments to off-speed pitches, and he hits to all fields (though most of his power comes to his pull side)." His arm is good but his glove work is questionable, so different observers rate him in the field anywhere from above average to a liability (but certainly better than Nick Castellanos). He is a switch hitter who hits about the same from each side of the plate. The general feeling is that he has a good chance to be a solid everyday player. He was MLB.com's #1 Cubs prospect and is now #3 on the Tigers' list.

Isaac Paredes is intriguing in that he is an 18-year-old who is hitting above the league average in low-A ball, putting him ahead the curve. In 384 at-bats, he has seven home runs, 49 RBIs, and a slash line of .264/.343/.401. The Mexican-born shortstop will probably have to move to second or third as he moves up the ladder but his bat looks like it could handle the offensive responsibility. He was MLB.com's 10th-best Cubs prospect and is now at #8 for the Tigers. Paredes is a long way away, but so was Willy Adames, the rookie-ball shortstop the Tigers included in the David Price deal with Tampa Bay in 2014 who is now a top-20 prospect.

Keith Law of ESPN, an analyst I respect, said about the trade, "I like the odds here that the Tigers acquired two everyday players for a left-handed reliever and a backup catcher." I agree; prospects are always a gamble but they got the right kind of guys for what they gave up in this trade.

THE HAUL FOR J.D. – By David Raglin

The Tigers started their dealing of players for prospects by trading J.D. Martinez to the Arizona Diamondbacks on July 18. What Detroit got for J.D. evoked a highly negative reaction from fans and analysts.

The top prospect in the trade, Dawel Lugo, was signed at the age of 16 by the Blue Jays from the Dominican Republic. In 2014 and 2015, Lugo played shortstop for the Lansing Lugnuts, the Jays' low-A team in the Midwest League, where he was hitting .336 when he was traded to the Arizona Diamondbacks for shortstop Cliff Pennington and cash. He spent 2016 with Arizona's high-A and AA club, and was in AA when acquired by the Tigers. Lugo is staying at AA for the Tigers, moving to Erie of the Eastern League. On one hand, Lugo is very young for AA at age 22, but on the other hand, this is his sixth season in the minors.

Lugo is not particularly well-regarded by prospect watchers. Jim Callis of MLB.com said, "Second division regular at best, not necessarily a regular on a good team." He felt that Lugo, a former shortstop whose has had to move to third base, may not have the "offensive profile for third base". That general sentiment was echoed by other analysts. Chris Mitchell of FaGraphs.com said, "Lugo makes a lot of contact while also hitting for a fair amount of power. Players who can do both of those things from a semi-premium position aren't all that common." But, he also noted his below-average baserunning and defense and finished by saying that "someone with his offensive skill set who can play a passable third base could be of some use in the future."

Lugo is ranked as the Tigers 14th best prospect according to MLB.com before the Wilson/Avila deal, the highest of the three prospects received in the trade. Sergio Alcantara, the second-closest to the majors prospect, is your classic great glove/questionable bat shortstop. Think Jose Iglesias at the top end, if Alcantara can raise his bat to an adequate major-league level. Otherwise, think Ramon Santiago. Alcantara was playing at high-A for Arizona and has moved over to the same level with the Tigers organization with Lakeland. MLB.com has him as Detroit's 23rd best prospect. Jose King, another infielder, is an 18-year old who is playing at the rookie ball level. In five years, he might be the Rookie of the Year or in his fourth organization. Players at that level are at best a well-educated lottery pick.

J-UP IS UP – By David Raglin

One of the brightest stories in an otherwise dismal season for the Tigers has been the quite success of Justin Upton. Upton leads the Tigers in WAR at 3.8, ahead of Michael Fulmer (2.8) and Alex Avila, Jose Iglesias, and Ian Kinsler (all 2.1). Upton's 3.7 offensive WAR is seventh in the American League this season. Upton is on pace for, along with 2011, his best season in the majors.

This season comes on the heels of his worst season as a regular. Last year, Upton has career lows in batting average and on-base percentage and the lowest full-season WAR, 2.0, of his career. As you can see from the following table, though, it was a tale of two seasons for Upton:

Justin Upton—2016 First and Second Half and 2017

| Year | G | AB | R | H | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO | BA | OBP | SLG | RC | RC/G |
|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|-----|------|------|------|-----|------|
| 2016 Total | 153 | 570 | 81 | 140 | 28 | 2 | 31 | 87 | 50 | 179 | .246 | .310 | .465 | 79 | 4.7 |
| 2016 1st Half | 85 | 328 | 40 | 77 | 19 | 1 | 9 | 38 | 25 | 112 | .235 | .289 | .381 | 35 | 3.6 |
| 2016 2nd Half | 68 | 242 | 41 | 63 | 9 | 1 | 22 | 49 | 25 | 67 | .260 | .337 | .579 | 44 | 6.5 |
| 2017 Thru 7/29 | 96 | 347 | 60 | 95 | 29 | 0 | 16 | 61 | 48 | 104 | .274 | .367 | .496 | 65 | 6.6 |
| Tiger Totals | 249 | 917 | 141 | 235 | 57 | 2 | 47 | 148 | 98 | 283 | .256 | .332 | .477 | 144 | 5.4 |

The table above splits out Upton's numbers for 2016 by first and second half. In the first half of 2016, his first time in the American League, Upton was clearly having trouble adjusting. It was everything -- the lack of power, the poor batting average, even the terrible strike zone judgment (look at his strikeouts by first and second half). His second-half stats were, on the other hand, superb. (Actually, if we wanted to cherry-pick, we could note that he had 18 home runs, 41 RBIs, and hit .303 with a .765 slugging percentage in his 37 games from August 21 to the end of the season, compared to 14/46/.228/.374 in the 116 games before that date.)

Why, then, don't we hear more about Upton? Tiger fans talk about Miggy, V-Mart, Avila, Fulmer, JV, and the now-departed J.D., but you don't hear much about Upton. I have a couple of theories. This reminds me a lot about Ian Kinsler and the reaction to him. Before this year, Kinsler had three excellent seasons as a Tiger but we did not hear as much about him, either. In both cases, they were mid-to-late career stars when they came to Detroit. Second, after the bad start to 2016, people seem to have forgotten about Upton. Third, he does not draw attention to himself. Make no mistake about it, though, Upton has been, along with Fulmer the star of the 2017 Detroit Tigers.

This brings up the dilemma for Tigers fans. Upton can opt out of his contract, which has four years and \$88.5 million left on it, after this season. On one hand, without Upton, the Tigers could be terrible next year, but on the other hand, the Tigers already have three huge contracts -- Justin Verlander, Miguel Cabrera, and Jordan Zimmermann -- and with Upton, they would have over \$104 million in contracts for four players in 2018. Also, while Upton's contract looks fine this year, in 2021, he will be 33 years old.

Do we want Upton to opt out or not? That is a good question (for which I don't have a great answer.) Whatever we think, the odds are that he won't -- the new Basic Agreement is especially punishing on teams with high payrolls, and it may act as a de facto salary cap, so he would very likely not be able to match the money the Tigers are paying him.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "PLAYING WITH TIGERS" -- Reviewed by Mark Pattison

George Gmelch, who put in a few seasons in the mid-1960s as a first baseman-outfielder in Detroit's farm system (but later grew up to be an anthropologist), has written his third baseball book, and it's a gem. "Playing With Tigers," subtitled "A Minor League Chronicle of the Sixties," combines past and present with grace and more than a dash of unsentimentality.

Gmelch was in the second-ever major-league draft in 1965, having been considered a top prospect growing up outside San Francisco. His odyssey takes him to Duluth, Jamestown, Daytona Beach, Rocky Mount and even Quebec in chasing the dream of playing in the big leagues. Along the way, Gmelch's teammates make their way up the ladder a bit more speedily. Among them are Gene Lamont, Les Cain, Jon Warden and a certain catcher by the name of Jim Leyland. He also gets to meet the occasional big-leaguer like Al Kaline, while ex-Tigers tend to be his managers in the minors, like Al Lakeman and Whitey Federoff.

Because there's a lot of down time in the minors, that means players have time to pull pranks and gags. Some, like the hotfoot, are almost traditional in baseball life. Because Gmelch had access to a typewriter at Tigertown, he pulled off a convulsive prank during spring training that was well worth the effort -- although he got a severe rebuke from Tigers officials when they fingered the culprit.

Gmelch is also frank about his looking for love while beating the bushes. In his introduction, he apologizes to his children who had to read drafts of "Playing With Tigers" that contained anecdotes of his sexual and near-sexual exploits with women in these burgs.

Aiding Gmelch in his memoir is the diary he kept while in the minors. He reprints pertinent passages, often bringing them into the context of what was happening then, or has happened in the half-century since.

Regrets? He has a few. The biggest is the article he penned for his small hometown newspaper in California in which he decried the separate-and-unequal treatment of his black teammates in Rocky Mount in which he called the sheriff a member of the Ku Klux Klan. In today's internet age in which no thought doesn't get reposted, Gmelch never thought there could be repercussions from his essay. Surprise: Someone mails it to Rocky Mount. He gets dressed down by the Tigers' minor league brass, the sheriff threatens to sue him, and he eventually gets released by the Tigers. (Times haven't changed; all you need do is remember the story of how the Cubs cut catcher Miguel Monteiro after he criticized how poorly pitcher Jake Arietta was holding baserunners following a game in which the opposition racked up seven stolen bases.) That leads to Gmelch's Canadian sojourn for a couple of seasons, his dream of making it to the majors getting smaller in the rearview mirror, but enjoying the game perhaps the most he ever did as a pro.

In preparation for this book, Gmelch got back in touch with ex-girlfriends (whose names were changed to protect the innocent) and ex-teammates for their own assessments of minor-league and small-town life and of specific incidents. Another surprise: Nobody shares exactly his recollection of events exactly -- but that's part of the joy of anthropology!

"Playing With Tigers," published by the University of Nebraska Press, retails for \$26.95. Look for it online if you don't see it in your favorite bookstore. Look up his other baseball tomes, "Inside Pitch: Life in Professional Baseball" and "In the Ballpark: The Working Lives of Baseball People," while you're at it.

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