

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

September 2013

THE MIDSEASON MASTER – By David Raglin

That's Dave Dombrowski, the Tigers' general manager. Let's review the Tigers' situation at the end of July. They were in first place, but had a big hole opening up with the impending suspension of Jhonny Peralta in the Biogenesis scandal. The Tigers had no other reasonable options.

Their backup middle infielder is Ramon Santiago. Their other backup infielder the last few years, Danny Worth, was hitting .244 with one home run in 38 games in AAA Toledo, and in the majors has hit .241 with two home runs in 122 games over 2010-2012. Their AAA shortstop was Argenis Díaz, a 26-year-old minor league veteran hitting .247 with two home runs for the Mud Hens. Díaz's only major league experience was a cup of coffee for the 2010 Pirates.

Even worse, other teams knew the Tigers were in trouble so they could hold up Dombrowski without a gun. It seemed like the Tigers would have to trade a reasonable prospect for a stand-in who could hopefully plug the hole for the rest of the regular season, when the Tigers could bring Peralta back. However, that would mean that Peralta would have to go from not playing for two months to starting in the playoffs.

So, what did Dombrowski do? He did have to trade a decent prospect, Avisail Garcia, to the White Sox. The White Sox shortstop, Alexei Ramirez, is the kind of player that you would think the Tigers might have to take in such a deal. He has little power -- three home runs -- but he is a .260-.280 hitter with reasonable range a shortstop. However, he has a massively overpriced contract: about \$8 million a year through 2015.

Instead, the Tigers got Jose Iglesias from the Red Sox, in a three-team deal that saw Jake Peavy change his socks from white to red. It was a very fortunate situation for the Tigers in that the Red Sox felt they needed Peavy but they did not have the kind of prospect the White Sox wanted. The Red Sox liked Iglesias, but they have a decent shortstop for this season, Stephen Drew, and one of the best prospects in baseball, Xander Bogaerts, ready to take over shortstop for the long term. The Tigers were able to take advantage of the situation and get a nice broker's fee for helping the two Sox make the deal they wanted.

What is so great about Iglesias? First of all, he is young, only 23 years old. We traded a prospect to get him, but we got another young player in return. He gives the Tigers what they did not have, a good-fielding infielder with great range. Since the trade, we have been treated to what Iglesias can give the team in the field. He has made many really great plays in his short time in Detroit. He has not played enough to evaluate using the modern defensive statistics, so we can't quantify it, but he and Atlanta's Andrelton Simmons are considered the best defensive shortstops in the game.

At the plate, don't get too excited about the .330 he hit with Boston. That was largely fueled by a .376 average on batted balls in play (everything that isn't home runs, walks and strikeouts, basically). That is not a pace he is likely to keep up. However, he could end up being a .270 hitter with a bit of power. He has also already impressing Jim Leyland with his smarts. Like Curtis Granderson, he could be a smart player who does better than the formulas project.

This kind of deal should not be a big surprise to Tigers fans. This is the third straight year Dombrowski has made a great trade at the trading deadline. Last year, he had two holes to plug, and at a time most teams could not fill one of their holes, he filled both in just one deal when he got Anibal Sanchez and Omar Infante from the Marlins for one decent prospect (starting pitcher Justin Turner) and one low- to mid-level prospect (catcher Rob Brantly). Sanchez was an impending free agent, but in his three months with Detroit, both sides decided that this was a good fit, and Sanchez has been one of the best starting pitchers in the league this year.

In 2011, the Tigers traded four prospects to Seattle to get another starting pitcher, Doug Fister. Of those four, none have made significant contributions, while Fister cannot be a free agent until after the 2015 season.

(In fact, the most highly regarded prospect in the deal, third baseman Francisco Martinez, is back in Detroit system after Seattle gave up on him.)

What have we learned from these deals (and other ones, like the Miguel Cabrera deal)? In my mind, it is that prospects can be overrated. Tigers fans are wary because 25 years ago, we traded away John Smoltz, but in all of Dombrowski's prospects deals, none of the prospects have made it big. I think Avisail Garcia could be a decent player who has been rushed, but on the other hand he has poor strike zone judgment that could prevent him from being more than a run-of-the-mill outfielder.

One more thing on the Iglesias deal is that we have to give credit to both Dombrowski and Red Sox general manager Ben Cherington for taking big chances with the deal. There is a decent chance that the two teams will face each other in the postseason (much to the consternation of me and my Red Sox-fan wife), but they were willing to take the chance to improve a potential rival. Dombrowski also had the guts to trade a young player to a division rival where the player could hurt the Tigers for years to come. Both GMs rightly focused on what they needed to do in the here-and-now for their teams.

MORE AMAZING STUFF ABOUT MIGGY – By David Raglin

In almost 30 years of doing *Tigers Stripes*, we have never had a recurring section (except for “Short Stripes”), but I think that will have to change. We could do a newsletter each month of just the amazing things that Miguel Cabrera has done.

Let's start with the location of the pitches of Miggy's home runs. Jeff Sullivan of FanGraphs.com wrote a great article called “Miguel Cabrera's Most Incredible Strength”, which can be found at <http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/miguel-cabrerass-most-incredible-strength/>. (If you are reading the electronic version of *Tigers Stripes*, you can open up the link by clicking on the link.) Sullivan counted all of the home runs in the last four seasons that were more than a foot inside from the center of home plate (and since home plate is 17 inches wide, that means the pitch was at least three and a half inches inside.) Those are pitches that are not just inside; they are way inside. Some of them are in the batter's box. Since 2010, and as of August 14 of this year, there have been 365 such inside home runs in the majors, and Miguel Cabrera by himself has hit 21 of them. To put that into better perspective, Ryan Zimmerman of the Nationals is second with 13 and ex-Tiger Delmon Young is third with seven.

Batters tend to hit well when they swing at the first pitch. While the 2013 American League is hitting .256 overall, on the first pitch -- about 10 percent of plate appearances -- the average is .336. Many hitters only swing at the first pitch if it is exactly what they want. Last year, 14 percent of Miggy's plate appearances were one-pitch appearances, and he hit .436 with a .798 slugging percentage and 10 home runs in 94 at-bats. This year, 15 percent of his plate appearances last one pitch, and he is hitting .448 with an otherworldly 1.013 slugging percentage, with 13 home runs in 80 at-bats.

Miggy has been on a big home run binge lately. He tied a game in the ninth inning and then two days later brought the Tigers to within one run in the ninth with another home run, both off Mariano Rivera. The next day, he hit a home run in the first inning off top starter Chris Sale to put the Tigers up 1-0. Later that week, he led off the bottom of the ninth with a walk-off home run in a tie game against surging Kansas City, and the first pitch he saw the following day went out of the park to give the Tigers a 2-0 lead in the first. That's five big home runs in eight days.

It looks like there will be another Miguel Cabrera-Mike Trout battle for the MVP. They are one-two in Wins Above Replacement (WAR) and despite Chris Davis' home run burst, they are clearly the best two players in the league. Hopefully it will not get ugly again, as debates about any topics (MVP, Hall of Fame, steroids, politics) seem to always be these days. Both players are great, and we are lucky to have the opportunity to watch both play the game we love.

WAR is a very good statistic that tries hard to take into account all facets of the game to come up with its player valuation. However, one flaw is that it treats all events the same; a home run to tie the game in the ninth inning off the greatest closer in the game is the same as a home run in the eighth inning of a 11-0 game off a pitcher who is having a cup of coffee in the bigs. Generally, that is a good assumption, but not always.

How do we measure if players do better in bigger plate appearances? Remember Win Probability Added (WPA), the measure that gives an estimate of a team’s chances of winning a game based on the situation? Baseball-Reference.com has used that measure to divide plate appearances into three groups: High Leverage (the ones with the biggest chance to change the game, about 20 percent of plate appearances), Medium Leverage (about 40 percent of plate appearances, and Low Leverage (the ones with the smallest chance to affect the final result -- again, about 40 percent of plate appearances). Here is how Miggy and Trout have done in high, medium and low leverage situations in 2013:

Miggy and Trout: How They Do Based on the Situation, Though August 18, 2013

Miguel Cabrera	PA	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
High Leverage	104	83	29	6	0	10	43	18	17	.349	.471	.783	1.254
Medium Leverage	176	145	56	9	0	14	41	30	19	.386	.494	.738	1.232
Low Leverage	242	216	75	9	1	16	36	24	39	.347	.413	.620	1.034

Mike Trout	PA	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
High Leverage	106	82	22	3	0	1	24	18	19	.268	.387	.341	.728
Medium Leverage	186	164	55	11	1	12	24	20	29	.335	.409	.634	1.043
Low Leverage	268	223	79	20	7	8	30	39	47	.354	.463	.614	1.077

Miggy has done his best in the biggest, highest-leverage, situations, and his worst (but still great) in the least meaningful situations. Trout, by contrast, has been the opposite, with his performance much worse in the biggest situations in 2013.

What does that mean? It does not mean that Trout does not hit well in the clutch! Trout is a great, great player and last year he (and Miggy) both hit very well in high-leverage situations. It would not be a surprise if Trout hits much better in high-leverage situations the rest of the season than he has so far. A lot of this is randomness. However, if we are evaluating how a player has helped his team win this season (not in some theoretical situations, but in actual games), Miguel Cabrera has hit his best in those situations and Mike Trout has hit much, much worse. A walk-off home run is worth much more than a home run in a blowout.

Again, this is a discussion about two incredibly great players. When you look at Mike Trout and what he has done at such a young age, the only players who compare are the super all-time greats, not even your run-of-the-mill great Hall of Famer. Given how much Miguel Cabrera has accomplished in his 11 seasons, the question is not “Is he a Hall of Famer?” but rather “How does he compare to the all-time greats?”

Jayson Stark of ESPN recently did such a comparison, in an article title “We’re Witnessing Greatness,” which can be found at http://espn.go.com/mlb/story/_/id/9568471/miguel-cabrera-truly-magical-hitter. We’ll let you read the piece yourself, but he favorably compares Cabrera to Hank Aaron, Joe DiMaggio, and Rogers Hornsby. Wow!

CORE OF THE TEAM – By David Raglin

As good as Miguel Cabrera has been, the core of the team isn’t any of the men batting one through nine in the order. It’s the five men on the mound who start the games. We don’t have an easy way to rank it, but this has to be one of the very best five-man rotations in the history of baseball in that all five have been very good pitchers. Yes, even Rick Porcello is continuing his breakout season.

There are many ways to show how good the Tigers’ starting staff is. We can look at ERA, the traditional stat for measuring starting pitching quality. To qualify for the ERA title, a pitcher must have one inning pitched per scheduled game; that would be about 125 innings for a pitcher at this time of the season. There are 40 starters on the 15 American League teams who meet that requirement, about 2.67 per team. Given that starters don’t last as long in games, let’s use 90 innings, about ¾ of the official rule, as our cutoff; then there are 63 starters (4.2 per team) who meet the standard. By that standard the five Tigers starters rank in ERA third

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(Anibal Sanchez), sixth (Max Scherzer), 19th, (Justin Verlander), 22nd (Doug Fister) and 40th (Rick Porcello). OK, but not great.

ERA has its troubles, though, one of which is the defense the pitcher has behind him. There is a stat, Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP), which tries to take that into account. It looks at the things a pitcher gives up that are not affected by defense (like homers, walks and strikeouts), and assumes that their performance on balls in play is the same for all pitchers. The formula is $FIP = ((13*HR)+(3*(BB+HBP))-(2*K))/IP + \text{constant}$. The constant changes a bit each year to make sure the average FIP is the same as the average ERA, and for 2013, the constant is 3.040.

This is a useful stat for Tigers fans to look at given the team's poor defense (at least until the acquisition of Jose Iglesias.) How good would the Tigers' starters be with an average defense?

American League Leaders in Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP), 2013, 90+ Innings Pitched

Rank	Name	Team	G	IP	H	R	ER	HR	HBP	BB	SO	W	L	ERA	FIP
1	Anibal Sanchez	DET	21	133.0	111	41	37	6	2	39	144	11	7	2.50	2.39
2	Felix Hernandez	Sea	26	178.2	159	56	49	12	2	38	182	12	6	2.47	2.55
3	Max Scherzer	DET	25	172.1	117	56	54	14	3	38	185	18	1	2.82	2.66
4	Chris Sale	Chi	23	165.1	141	58	51	14	10	36	175	9	11	2.78	2.86
5	Derek Holland	Tex	25	168.0	158	61	55	12	1	49	157	9	6	2.95	2.99
6	Yu Darvish	Tex	24	161.0	110	50	48	19	6	55	214	12	5	2.68	3.05
7	Corey Kluber	Cle	21	122.0	120	52	48	12	4	26	116	7	5	3.54	3.16
8	Hiroki Kuroda	NY	25	160.1	140	46	43	12	3	29	116	11	8	2.41	3.17
9	C.J. Wilson	LA	25	159.0	158	71	60	10	5	60	146	13	6	3.40	3.25
10	Doug Fister	DET	25	161.1	170	71	65	11	15	31	121	10	6	3.63	3.28
11	David Price	TB	18	126.1	115	54	46	14	3	17	100	6	5	3.28	3.37
12	Justin Masterson	Cle	26	175.2	144	71	70	13	15	65	175	13	9	3.59	3.38
13	Bartolo Colon	Oak	24	154.1	158	52	51	11	0	25	83	14	5	2.97	3.38
14	Rick Porcello	DET	22	129.0	142	64	63	12	2	28	98	9	6	4.40	3.42
15	Justin Verlander	DET	26	166.2	164	73	65	15	4	59	160	12	9	3.51	3.42

Wow, of the 65 starters ranked, all five Detroit starters are in the top 15! Two other teams, Texas and Central Division rival Cleveland have two each, and six other teams have one in the top 15. (Is showing the Top 15, and not the Top 10 or Top 20 rather arbitrary? Yes, but note that numbers 16-20 have FIP marks of 3.58, 3.63, 3.65, 3.70, and 3.73, so there is a considerable drop-off after the top 15.) To contrast, three of the Tigers starters are in the bottom 13th in batting average with balls in play (BABIP); that's probably due more to the defense than them being bad pitchers.

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