

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Vol. 31, No. 7

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

September 2015

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## **THE END OF THE DAVE DOMBROWSKI ERA** – By David Raglin

The news came in the most blandly titled email possible, “Tigers Announce Front Office Changes”. It was a busy afternoon and I almost put it aside to read later, figuring it was not a big deal. Boy, was I wrong!

The name of Dave Dombrowski, the president, CEO and general manager of the Detroit Tigers, didn’t even make it into the first paragraph, “The Detroit Tigers today announced that Assistant General Manager Al Avila has been promoted to the role of executive vice president of baseball operations and general manager. Avila will assume all responsibilities related to baseball operations of the club and he will report directly to Tigers Owner Mike Ilitch. Executive Vice President of Business Operations, Duane McLean, will continue to oversee all aspects of the team’s business operations and will also report directly to the team owner.” Talk about burying the lead!

The bombshell came in the second paragraph: “I would like to thank Dave Dombrowski for his 14 years of service,” said Ilitch. “Together we’ve enjoyed some success, but we’re still in aggressive pursuit of our ultimate goal: to bring a World Series title to Detroit and Michigan. I’ve decided to release Dave from his contract in order to afford him the time to pursue other career opportunities. I feel this is the right time for the Tigers to move forward under new leadership.”

There has been a lot written about the firing of Dombrowski, the promotion of Al Avila, the hiring of Dombrowski by the Boston Red Sox, and what it means for the Tigers. There is not much we can add to a lot of that discussion, because we certainly don’t know the inside story of what happened and why, but we can look back at the change and speculate on what it will mean for our favorite team going forward.

## **DAVE DOMBROWSKI: PRO AND CON** – By David Raglin

Let’s start with a summary of the Dave Dombrowski era, with the pros and cons of his tenure. Given the success enjoyed by the team, it’s safe to say there will be more pros than cons, but we do want to cover everything.

**Pro:** The first pro is the biggest: Dave Dombrowski took over an organization that was a disaster and under his leadership, the Tigers were very successful. The Randy Smith era, combined with a lack of leadership from upper management, meant the Tigers were the most dysfunctional team in baseball. They had averaged 69 wins a season from 1994 to 2001. There was nothing anybody could do to save the 2002 and 2003 seasons, but three seasons after that, the Tigers were in the World Series, and they have played at an 87 wins-a-season pace since then, with two American League pennants, five playoff appearances, and four straight division titles.

**Con:** A key reason for that success was the fact that Mike Ilitch was willing to spend top dollar for talent. From Pudge Rodriguez and Magglio Ordonez in 2004 and 2005 to players like Miguel Cabrera, Justin Verlander, Anibal Sanchez, Prince Fielder (which turned into Ian Kinsler), and David Price, Dave Dombrowski always had the money he needed for the stars.

**Pro:** There has been nobody who has been a better trader than Dave Dombrowski. Rany Jazayerli of Grantland in the spring of 2014, in an excellent piece on Dombrowski (<http://grantland.com/features/dave-dombrowski-detroit-tigers/>) noted that Dombrowski had acquired 104.4 WAR more in talent than he had traded away, an average of about nine wins per season for the Tigers due to his trades alone. Of the 15 major deals, 11 had been in the Tigers favor (often heavily), including deals that brought the Tigers Miguel Cabrera, Max Scherzer, Doug Fister, Austin Jackson, Jhonny Peralta, Omar Infante, Anibal Sanchez, and Jeremy Bonderman, usually for little talent back. (The only players who have made significant contributions after leaving Detroit in the deals for those players are Jeff Weaver, Cameron Maybin, Edwin Jackson, Andrew Miller (after many years), and Curtis Granderson, with only Granderson being a major player.)

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Con: They had to depend on the trade market because they have developed very little talent themselves. Since Dombrowski joined the organization, the Tigers have drafted or signed as foreign free agents two players with a lifetime WAR of over 40, and only a handful who have even contributed five WAR in the career, whether it is with the Tigers or other teams:

**Tiger Draftees and Foreign Free Agent Signings With Significant Major League Contributions**

Player	Year Signed	WAR	Player	Year Signed	WAR
Justin Verlander	2004	42.2	Rick Porcello	2007	10.0
Curtis Granderson	2002	40.1	Cameron Maybin	2005	9.8
Jair Jurrjens	2003 (FA)	10.8	Matt Joyce	2005	9.7
Alex Avila	2008	10.7	Drew Smyly	2010	8.6

Note: Jurrjens was a free agent; the rest were drafted by the Tigers.

Yes, many of those players are still adding to the WAR and there are young major leaguers like James McCann, Devon Travis, and Eugenio Suarez, and minor leaguers like Jake Thompson who might be able to be added to this list in the future, but over 13 years this is not an impressive list. Defenders of the Tigers farm system note that it is thin because the Tigers use it to acquire veterans, which would be a more valid argument if more than a handful of the players the Tigers traded turned into solid major leaguers. Instead, the Tigers prospects-for-veterans deals have worked because of Dombrowski's trading ability rather than the quality of the talent developed and traded by the Tigers. Ah, but where would Detroit have been then – or be today -- had it hung onto its young talent instead of trading them to serve its “win now” philosophy?

Pro: The Tigers under Dave Dombrowski have had great success with major free agent signings. It may seem obvious now, but players like Rodriguez, Ordonez and Victor Martinez (his initial contract) were not considered good values when made. Pudge and Maggs were overpriced signings by a team that had to overpay to get talent to come to a losing organization, and V-Mart was thought to cost too much. All worked out. That is critical because nothing can sink a team like overpaid free agents. The initial contract extensions for Miguel Cabrera (eight years for \$152.3 million for 2008-15) and Justin Verlander (five years for \$80 million for 2010-2014) turned out to be good deals too.

Con: This is where it gets tricky. The Tigers have given quite a few big contracts to their stalwarts, many which have not worked out or seem to be too expensive (the recent contracts of Cabrera, Verlander and Martinez, and extensions to 2006 mainstays Jeremy Bonderman, Nate Robertson, Carlos Gillen and Brandon Inge), along with the Prince Fielder free agent signing and the Dontrelle Willis extension. However, the feeling in the game that most of those (at least the big ones to Cabrera, Verlander, Martinez, and Fielder) were at the behest of owner Mike Ilitch. Dave Dombrowski took the fall for them because he was a good soldier, but there is good reason to believe those were not his moves and should not be blamed for them. In fact, the way he got out of the Fielder albatross was brilliant.

Pro: The Detroit Tigers under the leadership of Dave Dombrowski have been a very stable organization. Al Avila, the new general manager, came to the Tigers with Dombrowski from the Florida Marlins, as did Director of Baseball Operations Mike Smith and others. A look at the Tigers media guide from this spring and from the guide 10 years ago would have a lot of overlap.

Con: Unfortunately, some of the weakness of the organization have persisted. The Tigers have struggled mightily building not just a bullpen but a bench, too. The emphasis seems to have been more on the stars and less on building depth. The bullpen woes are very familiar to us over the last few years, so there is no need to go over the gory details. It is worth noting, though, that last winter, ESPN's Buster Olney, who is as plugged into the game as anybody, reported that other front offices were very surprised the Tigers did not make major changes in the bullpen. The bench, too, was a big problem as we saw last year when in key moments in the playoffs versus Baltimore, the Tigers sent up Bryan Holliday, Eugenio Suarez and Hernan Perez as pinch hitters. The last few years when the Tigers' best option at first base with Cabrera out was weak-hitting infielders like Don Kelly (we love him but he was not on the team for his bat) and Andrew Romine.

Pro: The last pro, which has no con, is that Dave Dombrowski is one of the most respected people in baseball. He was considered for the job of commissioner to replace Bud Selig when Selig retired. When the Tigers let Dombrowski go, he was described as the biggest free agent in baseball this year. Top organizations like Boston, Toronto, and Washington pursued him. Writers Mark Armour and Dan Levitt, who wrote the definitive book on baseball front offices, *In Pursuit of Pennants*, recently ranked Dombrowski the ninth-best general manager in the history of major league baseball. Dave Dombrowski is a very classy guy who helped make the Detroit Tigers one of the most respected clubs in baseball, no mean feat given the mess he inherited. Tigers fans and the Detroit Tigers organization owe Dave Dombrowski a big thanks for what he has done for us. Thanks, Dave!

### **THE TIGERS UNDER AL AVILA** – By David Raglin

What will be the future of the Tigers under Al Avila? This is not an easy question to answer. Dave Dombrowski may be gone, but many of his lieutenants are still in Detroit, starting with his longtime assistant general manager, Al Avila. Avila has been highly regarded in the game and reportedly had a contract that paid him more than the typical assistant general manager but forbade him from interviewing for general manager jobs with other teams. On one hand, that may suggest that the team will be run basically the same as it was under Dombrowski. But Al Avila is not Dave Dombrowski, and there are reasons to think there will be some differences.

Tony Paul of the Detroit News noted some differences in style between them. Avila tends to dress more casually and is more the guy to “hang out” with other baseball people. Dombrowski is more formally dressed, and formal as well. I’ve noticed that Dombrowski is very good at giving out the information he wants to give out and nothing more, and was very good at keeping trade talks under wraps. (That is not a criticism of Dombrowski.) Dombrowski also has a reputation as being a micro-manager, while Avila does not.

Probably the biggest difference that came out in the last few weeks is that Avila wants to increase the Tigers’ use of statistical analysis. The Tigers have had a reputation as being one of the least statistically oriented organizations in baseball, but that will change. Avila said, “One thing I will bring different is expanded analytics. I will tell you that I feel that we have a ways to go to catch up with the industry. We have been making some strides, but we’ll fast-forward a little bit and add to that department. You’ll see a big difference there.” Avila has promoted Sam Menzin from analytics coordinator under the director of baseball operations to head that office (replacing Friend-of-the-Society Mike Smith, who announced he was leaving the club before Dombrowski was let go) and has given Menzin the go-ahead to bring two analysts onto his staff.

As you can imagine, as a sabermetrician myself, I think this is a great move. Avila, with his scouting background, will certainly not ignore scouting, but he wants to blend the two to provide the best information possible. It’s the model that Mike Rizzo, the general manager of the Washington Nationals and a longtime scout, has used successfully to build that club from basically nothing into an annual contender.

There is one more thing that I might be making too much of, but here goes anyway. The Tigers under Dombrowski rushed top prospect pitchers to the majors from the lower minors or without much pro experience, like Justin Verlander, Rick Porcello, Justin Turner, Jeremy Bonderman, Andrew Miller, and Ryan Perry. With the exception of Verlander and the possible exception of Porcello (who has never fulfilled his early promise), none of these guys ever made it (well, Miller did, as a reliever, after many stops and starts). When the Tigers recently underwent a spate of injuries to starters, I expected them to rush Michael Fullmer (acquired from the Mets for Yoenis Cespedes) into the rotation. Instead, they left him in AA where he was prospering and instead traded for veteran Randy Wolf.

The number one thing that is not changing is Mike Ilitch’s desire to win the World Series. One rumor is that Dombrowski was let go because he wanted to trade for prospects while Avila advocated going for it. Avila has a mandate to win in 2016 and that will color his moves this coming offseason.

### **SOCIETY BOOKSHELF: “Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty”** – Review by Mark Pattison

The early 1960s were quite a time for revisionist history. One case in point: “The Deputy,” a 1963 German play by Rolf Huchhuth. It suggested that Pope Pius XII failed to speak out or take action against the

Holocaust. This despite plaudits during and after World War II by Jewish leaders thanking the pontiff for his deeds. Although a work of fiction, “The Deputy” had, within a generation, reoriented the entire discussion about papal responsibility.

A much less important, but certainly no less contentious, case in point for Tigers fans: Al Stump ghostwriting Ty Cobb’s “My Life in Baseball -- The True Record” followed by his magazine article “Ty Cobb’s Wild 10-Month Fight to Live,” which just as surely reoriented opinion of the Georgia Peach within a generation. It wasn’t helped by the 1994 movie “Cobb,” Ken Burns’ “Baseball” documentary, or the bio Stump wrote during his own dying days, “Cobb: A Biography.”

Charles Leehrsen, who wrote for Newsweek magazine among others, admits he was ready to join the scorn-heapers on Cobb’s legacy until his research -- using sources not available to Stump, Burns or even Charles Alexander, until now the author of the definitive Cobb biography -- found a different Cobb than had been portrayed to the masses.

Cobb had his shortcomings, not the least of them a quick temper, and Leehrsen doesn’t shy away from noting the several incidents where Tyrus flew off the handle. The difference is his treatment of Cobb. Leehrsen does not entwine these incidents around some kind of predestined pathology. One example is Cobb’s throwing minor-league teammate Nap Rucker out of the bathtub after having been sent to “the showers” early in one minor-league game. Another example, in plural: a pair of instances where Cobb tangled with unwitting black victims of his wrath. The tangle part is true. The race part is not -- although it conveniently fits in conventional wisdom for a son of the South who was “always fighting the Civil War.”

Leehersen goes into considerable detail describing the Cobb family and the Georgia that existed before Ty’s birth, showing that Cobb hadn’t just caught the last train from Hicksville when he was summoned by the Tigers in 1905 to report to Detroit. He also touches on Cobb’s relationships with his teammates, his managers and his family. And he doesn’t stint on the details of Cobb’s brilliant career on the diamond, and the controversies that took place both on and off it.

Some readers may be bothered by Leehrsen injecting himself and his research at various points in the 449-page book. True, it can make the narrative seem disjointed, but otherwise we wouldn’t been on the receiving end of anecdotes like Leehrsen happening upon a professional New York actor portraying Ty in a play, who commented, “I’ll never forget the time that one of his grandchildren, who had been in the audience, came backstage afterward and said to me, ‘He was a man who needed a tremendous amount of love -- but who nevertheless pushed everyone away.’” Leehrsen emailed a Cobb granddaughter as to the likelihood of such an incident. Replied the granddaughter, “Yes! It happened!! That was me!”

“Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty” presents a long-overdue recalibration of Cobb’s life and career. It challenges the prevailing worldview that has been drilled into our heads for the better part of a half-century, and it presents a series of plausible alternatives to the dominant paradigm of Cobb-as-monster. You would do well to sit down with this book and read it thoughtfully to learn that few men could be as irredeemable as Cobb has been portrayed, and how easily it can happen, even today, to anyone in the public spotlight. The book should be available in a bookstore near you.

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