

# Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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## FEAST OR FAMINE – By David Raglin

That's been the Tigers since the All-Star break. Just since late July, they had an eight-game winning streak and nine-out-of-ten that pulled the Tigers into the second wild-card spot and only two games behind the Cleveland Indians before a five-game losing streak set them back. The Tigers got Jordan Zimmermann and J.D. Martinez back from the disabled list, but Zimmermann went back on after a disastrous start and Nick Castellanos was hit by a pitch that will keep him out a month.

The last game of the eight-game winning streak may be the high point of the season. It was a classic pitching duel between two of the best pitchers in the league, Chris Sale and Michael Fulmer (just think a bit about that sentence). A double, walk and another double put the Tigers up 1-0 in the fourth but a White Sox home run tied it in the seventh. Brad Ausmus pinch-hit J.D. Martinez for catcher James McCann to lead off the eighth, and the Comerica Park crowd gave him a stirring standing ovation. J.D. later said, "I had my plan off of [Sale] and then I got caught up in the moment, and I was like, 'You know what, forget this. See ball. Hit ball. Look for the ball up. Just be ready to hit.' I saw it nice and slow and I just said, 'This is it.'"

If he thought the ovation was big when he came up, it was nothing compared to the one after he clubbed the first pitch back into the shrubbery in deep left-center field. I had goosebumps as I watched it, as I'm sure those of you watching did, too. (If you have not seen the video of it, stop reading this newsletter right now and go to the MLB website and watch the replay and Mario Impemba's call, "(After the ovation) If he hits one out right here... Sale goes to work, A SWING AND A DRIVE, DEEP LEFT-CENTER FIELD...AND...GONE!... IT'S GONE... WELCOME BACK J.D!")

The Tiger players have been feast or famine, too. The Tigers have four of the 23 players in the American League so far with a Wins Above Replacement (WAR) mark of 4.0 or greater (Ian Kinsler, Miguel Cabrera, Justin Verlander and Fulmer). That means that, for example, the Tigers would have won four less games with a replacement-level second baseman (think of a guy just up from AAA) than Ian Kinsler. No other club has that many players on the list.

To contrast, the Tigers have some of the worst players in the league. Mike Aviles has been a solid middle infielder through his career, but he has been one of the worst players in the game this year. He has 11 runs created for the season, and 2.1 runs created per game, meaning a team of Avileses would score 2.1 runs a game. That is the seventh-worst mark among all American League players with 100 or more plate appearances (five of the six worse players are catchers and one is a middle infielder). The Tigers have been playing Aviles, a career middle infielder, in the outfield, and not surprisingly, the defensive metrics have indicated that he has been bad out there. Five other Tigers hitters -- James McCann (2.8), Anthony Gose (3.2), Andrew Romine (3.2), Jose Iglesias (3.2), and Justin Upton (3.4) -- are among the worst 50 players in the American League in runs created per game, the most of any team in the league. On the mound, Anibal Sanchez had a couple of good starts against Chicago and the Mets which gave us hope before blowing up against the Rangers; he has a 6.31 ERA and the Tigers are 4-15 in his 19 starts.

One advantage of having such poor players is that it is not hard to replace them with better ones. It would be extremely disappointing if the Tigers don't find a better backup player than Aviles before the postseason trade deadline of August 31. It's hard to win when the bench is made up of Aviles, Romine, and the backup catcher; you can't blame Ausmus for not making clever moves if he doesn't have good choices. The Tigers have been plagued with a bad bench for years, but they can improve it for the stretch run if they choose to (and maybe replace Sanchez with a starting pitcher who is more likely to lead the team to a win).

**SO LONG, PRINCE** – By David Raglin

We know that Prince Fielder was battling a neck problem that had caused him great problems during his career as a Texas Ranger, but it was still stunning and sad to see the former Tiger, the son of another Tigers star, have to retire early at the age of 32.

We know he is not a Tiger anymore, but Prince will always have a big spot in Detroit history. We all remember how he was hitting balls in the upper deck at Tigers Stadium as a 12-year-old; he grew up at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull. I just went back and looked at the piece I did for the February 2012 issue of *Tigers Stripes* on the signing. It's actually a little embarrassing; the warning signs were there, but the article was quite laudatory. A lot of that was the thought of another Fielder playing for the Tigers and Prince coming home.

One tidbit that made its way around Twitter was that Prince retired with the same number of home runs as his dad; that's especially interesting since both were known mostly for their power. We decided to compare all of their career stats, both for their whole career and their time as Tigers.

**Fielder, Father and Son, Major League and Detroit Tiger Careers**

Majors	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G	WAR
Cecil (13 yrs)	1470	5157	744	1313	200	7	319	1008	693	1316	.255	.345	.482	.827	852	5.6	17.1
Prince (12 yrs)	1611	5821	862	1645	321	10	319	1028	847	1155	.283	.382	.506	.887	1150	7.0	23.8

  

Detroit	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G	WAR
Cecil (7 yrs)	982	3674	558	947	141	4	245	758	519	926	.258	.351	.498	.849	641	6.0	16.8
Prince (2 yrs)	324	1205	165	356	69	1	55	214	160	201	.295	.387	.491	.878	231	6.9	6.6

They may have hit the same number of home runs, and almost the same number of RBIs, but other than that, Prince was a much better player in his career. Despite playing one less season, he had many more games and at-bats, he walked more, struck out less, and had a better batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage. It's no surprise, therefore, that he had a lot more runs created, a higher number of runs created per game, and a much better WAR than his Dad. (Looking at their offensive and defensive WAR, the Dad was the less-poor fielder, -12.5 versus -21.0, but the son was by far a better hitter, 33.7 versus 19.9.)

Cecil played for the Tigers for six and two-thirds seasons, so it's not surprising that he had much better totals for the Tigers than his son, but Prince had a higher runs created per game as a Tiger, which says that per opportunity, Prince was better than Cecil.

**THE FIELDER-KINSLER TRADE** – By David Raglin

We can't talk about Prince Fielder without talking about the player the Tigers got for him in one of the greatest trades in team history. After Fielder's performance down the stretch and in the playoffs in 2013, and his seeming indifference to it in postseries interviews, it was clear that it would be best for Fielder and the Tigers to part ways. That seemed impossible given Fielder's humongous contract.

Dave Dombrowski, though, was always the master of finding the right team to make the right deal, and the Rangers had a glut of good young middle infielders and an expensive second baseman, Ian Kinsler. The Tigers needed a second baseman with Omar Infante leaving for the Royals with an inflated free agent contract. The Tigers were willing to include \$30 million to help bridge the differences in the two contracts, so the deal was made.

If we compare the stats of the two players since the trade, we will see what a steal it has been for the Tigers:

**Ian Kinsler and Prince Fielder Since the Big Trade (2014-2016 Through August 13)**

Player	Tm	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	CS	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G	WAR
Kinsler	DET	428	1775	285	509	98	14	49	227	38	13	104	250	.287	.330	.441	.771	256	5.2	16.4
Fielder	TEX	289	1089	126	293	52	0	34	158	0	0	121	175	.269	.350	.410	.760	156	4.9	0.4

Wow! This shows how their careers have diverged since the trade. Fielder may not have had the best WAR even in his prime, but he was always a solid contributor, but since the trade, he has been basically as good as a player that can be found for nothing. You can see how the neck injury that plagued him since his first season in Texas and has now ended his career really sapped his strength. Even in 2015, when he played the whole season for the Rangers, he only hit 23 home runs.

To contrast, it's easy to not notice how great Kinsler has been for the Tigers. He's not the kind of player who seeks attention. A lot of his value is defensive, at a key position, which can be overlooked, and he is not the kind of player who seeks attention. However, he has been the best Tiger since coming to Detroit, as measured by Wins Above Replacement (WAR), and the sixth-best position player in all of baseball in that time. (The top 10 from 2014 until August 13, 2016, is: Mike Trout, Josh Donaldson, Jose Altuve, Adrian Beltre, Paul Goldschmidt, Ian Kinsler, Anthony Rizzo, Manny Machado, Robinson Cano, and Kyle Seager.) The second-best Tigers, Miguel Cabrera, is 15th in baseball over that time with 14.2 WAR.

Kinsler has arguably been the most balanced of the top WAR performers, too. His defensive WAR of 6.6 over this period is fourth-best in baseball, ahead of such defensive stars and so-so hitters Andrelton Simmons, Kevin Kiermeier, and Brandon Crawford. Kinsler's defense has been especially important given that the Tigers otherwise have been a bad defensive team during his time. Offensively, he has a 11.2 WAR as a Tiger, 23rd in the majors overall but fourth among second basemen, trailing only Cano, Altuve and Minnesota's Brian Dozier.

Kinsler is now at the point of his career that we can legitimately talk about his Hall-of-Fame chances. If we want to continue to look at WAR, he has 51.5 WAR in his career. There are 37 players in the Hall who were primarily middle infielders, using Baseball Reference's Play Index. Kinsler has a better WAR than 11 of them, but honestly, many of those are shaky Hall-of-Famers, like Bill Mazeroski, George Davis, Phil Rizzuto, Red Schoendienst, and Rabbit Maranville. But, if he got 15 more WAR in his career (which seems likely when he is on pace for 7.0 WAR this season and has 5.7 and 6.0 in his first two seasons in Detroit), he'd be in the neighborhood of such recent inductees as Ryne Sandberg (67.5), Roberto Almoar (66.8), and Craig Biggio (65.1). (Because I knew you'd ask, Lou Whitaker had a WAR of 74.9 and Alan Trammell 70.4 -- more evidence what a travesty the sportswriters' voting has been for them.)

### **SOCIETY BOOKSHELF: "THE 50 GREATEST PLAYERS IN DETROIT TIGERS HISTORY" --**

Review by Mark Pattison

This is the book that will settle all arguments – or renew a fresh batch of them. Author Robert W. Cohen, who seems to be making a living writing books whose titles start "The 50 Greatest Players" -- he's done others on the Red Sox, Yankees, Cardinals and, for gosh sakes, even the New England Patriots and New York football Giants – takes on the Tigers in his latest tome. Perhaps Tigers fans should feel honored that Cohen is taking on our humble little franchise from the Midwest.

Not having read any of Cohen's other books, I've got to figure that Cohen has a formula pretty much down pat. But that's to be expected when you've got to profile 50 players (plus another 25 honorable mentions) in the space of 350 or so pages. There's a biographical sketch, usually words of praise for the player and his deeds from teammates and/or opponents, typically some bon mots from the player himself describing his approach to the game, a litany of statistics that helped define his place in the pantheon of Tigers stars, plus three helpful features at the end of each player's chapter that select his greatest season(s), his best games in a Detroit uniform, and a Tiger-centric list of accomplishments.

It didn't take long for me to recognize the formula, yet, oddly, I wanted to savor each individual entry more than I thought I would. Seeing the stats, it was like reading a book-length baseball card (without the color photos). And many of the quotes, from the players or the confreres, I had not recognized before.

Cohen takes some shortcuts, though, which makes it apparent he's written this book on the quick. One such example of many dotted throughout "The 50 Greatest Players" is when he said Kirk Gibson retired at the conclusion of the 1995 season. Not so; he retired midseason, after the All-Star break, when the Tigers went into

a tailspin that took them out of any hope of wild-card contention, saying he had been released and claimed on waivers by his family. Now that's a quote that would have enlivened his chapter!

Without giving away too much about who gets ranked where, suffice it to say that Cohen avoids saying why player A is better (or just not as good as) player B (it's probably the speed with which he has to write these books that keeps him from doing so). I will note for the record, though, there's a cluster of first basemen at 14, 16 and 17, and starting pitchers hold down six slots between 21 and 30. Relievers don't get any love until John Hiller at 43. I'm more than a bit surprised Darrell Evans only got as high as 72nd on Cohen's list and, despite his abbreviated career, there's no room anywhere for Mark Fidrych -- although Pete Fox lifts eyebrows at #34.

One telltale clue as to how accurate the book is: I compared Cohen's list with the imaginary "first team" and "second team" Tigers that David Raglin and I had prepared for our book "Detroit Tigers Lists and More: Runs, Hits and Eras" (still available for \$10; check the end of the newsletter). Considering that we did not have a designated hitter on our teams, and we didn't have the added benefit of a dozen or so seasons of Detroit baseball since our book was published, Cohen's rankings match perfectly with our own teams, with the sole exception of the second-team shortstop -- and here Billy Rogell (Cohen's choice) is just one slot ahead of Donie Bush (our choice).

"The 50 Greatest Players in Detroit Tigers History," published by Taylor Trade in the Washington suburb of Lanham, Md., retails for \$19.95 and should be available through most online booksellers. But if you're in a real bookstore, look for a book with Ty Cobb and Miguel Cabrera on the cover.

**SWEET 15** – by Mark Pattison and David Raglin

Victor Martinez' home run in the 6-5 loss at Seattle Aug. 7 was the eighth time a Tiger has homered in the 15th inning (or later) of a game. And, incredibly enough, it's the third time Detroit lost despite that! The losses (sniff!):

Billy Rogell smacked a circuit clout off Lefty Gomez in the 15th inning of a game the Tigers lost 7-5 in 16 innings August 15, 1931 (exactly 85 years ago as we finished this issue of *Stripes*).

Mickey Stanley clubbed a round-tripper off Diego Segui of the Kansas City A's in the 15th inning of a game Detroit ultimately lost 6-5 in 19 innings on June 17, 1967. Both the Stanley and Rogell homers were solo shots, like Martinez'.

Now, to address those 15th-inning-and-later home runs in games the Tigers won:

August 14, 1956: Wayne Belardi AND Ray Boone homered, both off future Tiger Don Mossi, both in the 15th inning of a 6-4 victory at Cleveland. Belardi's four-bagger came with a man on base.

May 8, 1965: Al Kaline hit a solo homer off Dick Hall in the 15th inning of a 4-3 win at Baltimore.

August 1, 1971: Jim Northrup walloped a solo blast off California's Lloyd Allen in the 16th inning of a 4-3 win on the road.

May 16, 1978: Lance Parrish connected with a man on base against Shane Rawley in the 16th inning of a 4-2 win in Seattle.

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