

Tigers Stripes

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MAHTOOK IS EMERGING – By David Raglin

The Tigers' 2017 season has had a lot of disappointing developments, but the most pleasant surprise has to be center fielder Mikie Mahtook. The 27-year-old Mahtook was the Ray's first round selection in the 2011 draft and reached the Show in 2015; that September, he shined with a .353 average and six home runs in 68 at-bats. Unfortunately, an oblique injury followed by a broken hand from a pitch ruined his 2016 season, and he was traded to Detroit this past winter for a player to be named later.

Mahtook's luck did not change at the start of the 2017 season, which started poorly for him. The oblique injury had given Mahtook some bad habits at the plate, as he was trying to pull the ball too much instead of following through with his swing and hitting the ball to all fields. J.D. Martinez's injury opened some playing time in the outfield, but Mahtook did not take advantage of it during his brief chance. He started six of the first 10 games but hit only .174 and his playing time dwindled, especially when Martinez returned in early May. At the end of May, after an eight-game losing streak dropped the Tigers into last place, manager Brad Ausmus decided to give Mahtook another chance with nine straight starts. Mahtook then was platooned for a week until Martinez was traded to the Diamondbacks. Since the trade, Mahtook has started 34 of 37 games and hit well. In fact, let's compare Mahtook to Martinez since the trade:

Mikie Mahtook Versus J.D. Martinez Since the Martinez Trade, Through August 26

Hitter	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Mikie Mahtook	36	130	25	37	6	3	4	10	15	29	.285	.373	.469	.843	22	6.0
J.D. Martinez	33	117	15	26	4	1	11	27	14	38	.222	.305	.556	.861	18	5.0

J.D. has had a lot more power, but Mahtook has been getting on base much more, resulting in much better runs created and runs created per game numbers. (This may not be the most apt comparison in that Mahtook did not directly take Martinez's spot, but the trade did give Mahtook his regular spot in the lineup.)

Well, you might say, let's not get too excited about 36 games. That is fair, but Mikie actually has been hitting well since the beginning of June, a period of 64 games:

Mikie Mahtook: April/May Compared to June/August, Through August 26

Period	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Apr 4 to May 31	25	59	5	11	3	0	2	7	3	17	.186	.238	.339	.577	5	2.4
Jun 2 to Aug 26	64	216	35	66	9	4	7	22	15	47	.306	.359	.481	.840	36	6.2

Mahtook does not have a lot of range in center field, which is important in the vast Comerica Park outfield, but on the other hand, if he keeps hitting like this, he could move to right field to take Martinez's spot next season if the Tigers can find a better center fielder.

Along with the stats, there is another reason to root for Mahtook. He brings a lot of energy to the Tigers and has a very positive attitude, which is especially important for a team having a disappointing season. Brad Ausmus has noted that "he's always in a good mood." Mahtook has that attitude despite some tough times in his life; his father died of heart problems when Mahtook was 2, and his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when he was in college (his mother has a clean bill of health now, thank goodness.)

Is Mahtook for real? We certainly hope so, we think he has earned it. Maybe the Tigers found another outfielder on the scrap heap just like they did with J.D. Martinez.

TOMORROW'S TIGERS TODAY -- By Mark Pattison and David Raglin

We've long had the good fortune to check in on Tigers prospects when a road series takes them to the mid-Atlantic. This time, one of us made the trek to Florida to take in some grade-A A-ball prospects. While we did not see the high-flying low-A West Michigan Whitecaps, we did see some interesting players. From top to bottom on the minor-league ladder:

AA Erie SeaWolves – Mark Pattison

A few Erie players, like Dominic Ficociello and Jason Krizan, have earned promotion to AAA Toledo. There's still no shortage of intriguing players in Erie.

New is Dawel Lugo, obtained from Arizona in the J.D. Martinez trade. Stationed at third base for Erie, he'd hit five home runs in less than a month (you do the math), albeit without a high batting average. His fielding when we saw him play was capable, but his best instinct was to hold on to a slow roller rather than try for a spectacular play in flinging it to first base. He did so twice during the series against the Bowie Baysox, even though the first roller scored a run in the first inning; it was also Bowie's last hit of the game.

Christin Stewart in left field seems to have tamped down most of his fielding hiccups, and still hits with power (tied for first in the Eastern League in homers, tied for second in RBI). Most impressive, though, was a two-out bunt with a runner on first that he beat out for a single.

Mike Gerber is still steady in center field, hitting near .300 with decent power and production, although the emergence of Mikie Mahtook in Detroit may have usurped a spot from Gerber in Comerica Park.

Another somewhat recent acquisition is reliever Victor Alcantara, obtained in the Cameron Maybin offseason deal with the Angels. Alcantara has by far the lowest Erie bullpen ERA, but what stands out is that his home-road and lefty-righty splits all check in at under 3.00. Starter Beau Burrows, Detroit's first pick in 2015, is also landing feet-first after being promoted to Erie, but he didn't appear in this series.

High-A Lakeland Flying Tigers – David Raglin

While visiting my dad and his wife in Lakeland, my wife Barb Mantegani and I got the chance to take in a Flying Tigers game against the Daytona Tortugas (just because I know you're asking, "tortuga" is Spanish for turtle or tortoise). It took just over two hours for the Flying Tigers to win 2-0, mainly because of starter Sandy Baez. He allowed four singles over 7 2/3 innings, struck out 11, leaving after his only walk of the game put the tying run at the plate. Daytona never came close to figuring him out as he had them swinging at bad pitches and mis-hitting the ball when they did get their bats on it.

Baez is a little old at 23 for high-A, and his biggest issue has been his secondary pitches, but the fastball that can get into the high-90s convinced the Tigers to add him to their 40-man roster last winter. He impressed manager Brad Ausmus in spring training, but the season did not start well for Baez, posting a 7.76 ERA in his first six starts, posting impressive stats in only one of them. However, since then, he has looked great:

Sandy Baez Statistics: Last 11 Starts

Date	G	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	W-L	ERA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Jun 8 to Aug 18	11	62.0	47	17	15	15	70	6-1	2.18	0.205	0.259	0.306	0.565

The word is that he has developed a slider and changeup that are at least average and could become above average. If that happens, he could have a chance to be a starter, and if not, his long-term future would be in the pen. The 2018 season will be a big one for Baez, who needs to start moving up the ladder quickly.

Short-Season A Connecticut Tigers – Mark Pattison

With bloated (35-man) rosters and curtailed mound outings, it's difficult to assess just who will make the grade -- although Brennan Boesch looked mighty good a decade ago in his first year of pro ball. We're both pulling for centerfielder Ronell "Ro" Coleman, a 5-foot-5, 155-pound 22-year-old switch-hitter out of

Vanderbilt. Less than a month into the New York-Penn League season, he wasn't hitting for average or power, but Coleman can field and run -- and how. But at this level, players are focusing

ARM WOES – By David Raglin

To identify the biggest problem with the 2017 Tigers, you only have to look at two statistics: The Tigers have scored 4.80 runs per game, seventh in the American League and a bit above the league average of 4.70. However, they have allowed 5.58 runs per game, last in the league and one of only three teams who have allowed over five runs a game (the others, for you trivia buffs, are Texas and New York.)

What this means is that if the Tigers are going to get better in 2018, they need to focus on the pitching staff. While trading Justin Verlander could theoretically be justified if they got great prospects that could help the team now, he and Michael Fulmer have been the best pitchers on the staff. The other starters have a collective ERA of 6.25 (individually as starters: 6.11, 6.17, 6.19, 6.31, and 8.31). The bullpen may have the worst ERA in the league (5.26), but there is more hope there in that it is feast or famine: four current relievers with ERAs under 4.00, and 12 (only four currently with the team) with ERAs over 6.00. Shane Greene has been an effective closer, which would mean the Tigers would not have to focus on the top, most expensive relievers, during the offseason.

QUESTIONS FOR PUDGE – By David Raglin

My wife Barb Mantegani and I were fortunate to be invited to an event recently at Nationals Park in Washington for new members of the White House Historical Association. New Hall-of-Famers Ivan “Pudge” Rodriguez and Tim Lincecum answered questions from Nationals broadcaster Bob Carpenter and fans in attendance. Both players have ties to the Nationals franchise; Pudge finished his playing career with the Nats in 2010 and 2011, and Lincecum was a longtime Montreal Expo.

I, of course, wore my Tiger hat and asked the first question, “I’d like to thank you for what you did for the Tigers. Could you talk about what happened to turn the team around in 2006?”

His answer covered several different areas. He talked about his signing with the Tigers in 2004, “During that offseason when I decided to go to the Tigers, my family sat me down and said to (me), ‘Tigers, what the heck are you doing? They lost [119] games and you won a world championship?’ I said ‘That’s a team where I really want to play.’” What persuaded him was that Dave Dombrowski, along with Mike Ilitch (“Mr. I”), told him, “I want you to come over, we’re going to give you a five-year contract. I want to build the team around you, I want you to be the big guy. ...You will be back in the World Series in two years.” It turned out to be three, but that was fine!

On the 2006 season, he said, “We swept Oakland in four games. It killed us because the St. Louis (NLCS) series went to seven games, and we had nine days off before the World Series started, especially with the cold weather, it’s going to hurt you.”

Pudge was the anchor of that 2006 championship team, and it was a pleasure to meet him and hear about his fond memories of playing in Detroit.

TIGERS BOOKSHELF: "The Tigers and Their Dens" -- Review by Mark Pattison

If the title sounds a bit familiar, it's because co-author John McCollister published a book, "The Tigers and Their Den" -- singular -- in 1999, the last year major league baseball was played at Tiger Stadium before its closure and later demise. This new volume, written with Mayo Smith Society administrator Todd Miller, adds the 21st century and Comerica Park to the book.

"The Tigers and Their Dens" is one of those coffee-table books that offers a glancing tour of team history with lots and lots of vintage photographs. As involving as the text may be to read, I found myself heading over to the photo captions and giving the pictures a long, hard look.

On a personal note, when the book came in the mail, I was more surprised than the average bear (the average tiger?) that Todd had co-written the book; he'd never mentioned it to me, though he had plenty of occasion to. Then, imagine my surprise when I skipped to the acknowledgments and found not only my name but *Tigers Stripes* sabermetrician and Society stat master David Raglin among those thanked. Aw, shucks!

I didn't pull out the 1999 book to compare it to the 2017 version -- goodness knows where my copy of the 1999 book is in the basement -- but the new volume says it's "revised and expanded" from the original.

I found some factual errors, particularly during the "deadball" era of 1901-19, and the emphasis given on a few other things struck me as odd. But those are relatively minor quibbles given the size and scope of "The Tigers and Their Dens." It happens to the best of us, and the rest of us.

Because success in baseball is defined differently these days, what with two rounds of playoffs before getting to the World Series, not to mention a wild-card game -- and because the Tigers had quite a dry spell even with expanded playoffs -- I wished the authors had devoted more space to the team's last decade of postseason participation, especially there was a lot of success (particularly against the Yankees). It's the franchise's success since 2006 that has shaken off many of the ghosts of old Tiger Stadium.

"The Tigers and Their Dens," published by Lyons Press, retails for \$22.99. Fans should look in the sports section of their nearest bookstore for a copy. If it's not there, look for it online.

SHORT STRIPES

▶ Curtis Granderson was traded from the Mets to the Dodgers just in time to return to Comerica Park for the Dodgers series against the Tigers. In his second game as a Dodger, Granderson broke up the double no-hitter in the top of the sixth inning by hitting a home run off longtime teammate Justin Verlander. Fortunately for the Tigers, they broke through in the bottom of the sixth with two runs and eventually won 6-1, with Verlander allowing two hits over eight innings. Granderson is a free agent after this season, and we are not the first Tigers fans to suggest that it would be great for Grandy to finish his career where it began and where he has played the most games. He would be a great influence in the clubhouse too, as the Tigers bring up some youngsters they hope will be in Detroit for years to come. We certainly don't regret the trade that sent Granderson to New York (the Tigers got Max Scherzer in that trade, after all), but we do miss him.

▶ Some of the background for the Mahtook piece came from an in-depth article on him from an exciting new website, The Athletic (theathletic.com). It is a subscription-based service with no advertising that has two components: local coverage in selected markets (of which Detroit was one of the first), and national coverage of major sports. Their Tiger beat writers are Katie Strang (formerly of ESPN) and Emily Waldon. Their national writers include Ken Rosenthal for baseball and Chris Vannini, who has covered Michigan State for several years, for college football.

▶ There was an interesting article in the Daytona Beach News-Journal about a safe deposit box owned by Ty Cobb that was recently opened. You can find it by searching on "ty cobb daytona beach news-journal" or go to <http://www.news-journalonline.com/sports/20170809/found-heirlooms-bring-fond-memories-of-ty-cobb-for-volusia-grandson>. Among the items in the box were a telegram to Cobb from Mickey Mantle dated soon before Cobb's death, newspaper clippings, and common household items. Cobb's grandson, Charles Cobb, also reminisces about his grandfather. It's worth checking out.

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