

Tigers Stripes

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THE SECOND MOST VALUABLE TIGER – By David Raglin

Certainly Miguel Cabrera, despite his recent injury problems, is the Tigers' MVP this season. However, here is an interesting question: Who is the second-most-valuable Tiger? Is it Max Scherzer, the 20-game winning Cy Young candidate? Is it rotation-mate Anibal Sanchez, who has a much better ERA than Scherzer? Is it slugging first baseman Prince Fielder? One thing that makes this question tough is that we have to compare hitters and pitchers. As you have seen over the years, we are getting much better at hitter-to-hitter comparisons and pitcher-to-pitcher comparisons, but hitter-to-pitcher is a little tougher.

To help us do that, we will turn to a stat that admittedly has been controversial among Tigers fans: Wins Above Replacement (WAR).

The Baseball Reference web site explains the basics well: "The idea behind the WAR framework is that we want to know how much better a player is than what a team would typically have to replace that player. We start by comparing the player to average in a variety of venues and then compare our theoretical replacement player to the average player and add the two results together. There is no one way to determine WAR. There are hundreds of steps to make this calculation, and dozens of places where reasonable people can disagree on the best way to implement a particular part of the framework. We have taken the utmost care and study at each step in the process, and believe all of our choices are well reasoned and defensible. But WAR is necessarily an approximation and will never be as precise or accurate as one would like. We present the WAR values with decimal places because this relates the WAR value back to the runs contributed (as one win is about ten runs), but you should not take any full season difference between two players of less than one to two wins to be definitive (especially when the defensive metrics are included)."

Given that, especially the caution at the end of that about taking the numbers too literally, let's look at the top Tiger hitters and pitchers and their WAR:

Detroit Tigers Players, Ranked by Wins Above Replacement, 2013 (Through September 21)

| Hitter | G | AB | R | H | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | BA | OBP | SLG | RC | RC/G | OWAR | DWAR | WAR | FG |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|------|------|------|-----|------|------|------|-----|-----|
| Cabrera | 143 | 536 | 102 | 187 | 26 | 1 | 44 | 136 | 89 | .349 | .445 | .647 | 154 | 11.3 | 8.6 | -1.3 | 7.3 | 7.6 |
| Peralta | 104 | 397 | 50 | 121 | 29 | 0 | 11 | 54 | 35 | .305 | .361 | .461 | 65 | 6.0 | 2.7 | 0.8 | 3.5 | 3.6 |
| Jackson | 123 | 524 | 97 | 142 | 30 | 5 | 11 | 45 | 52 | .271 | .340 | .410 | 75 | 5.6 | 2.6 | 0.9 | 3.5 | 3.3 |
| Infante | 112 | 432 | 53 | 137 | 24 | 3 | 9 | 50 | 19 | .317 | .344 | .449 | 64 | 5.6 | 2.3 | 0.1 | 2.4 | 3.0 |
| Hunter | 139 | 586 | 89 | 175 | 35 | 5 | 17 | 82 | 26 | .299 | .331 | .462 | 89 | 5.5 | 3.4 | -1.4 | 2.0 | 2.2 |
| Fielder | 155 | 604 | 80 | 171 | 36 | 0 | 24 | 105 | 72 | .283 | .365 | .462 | 101 | 6.0 | 4.0 | -2.2 | 1.8 | 2.2 |

| Pitcher | G | IP | H | R | ER | HR | BB | SO | W | L | SV | ERA | WAR | FG |
|-----------|----|-------|-----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|------|-----|-----|
| Sanchez | 27 | 172.0 | 146 | 52 | 48 | 9 | 52 | 188 | 14 | 7 | 0 | 2.51 | 6.0 | 5.7 |
| Scherzer | 31 | 207.1 | 150 | 73 | 69 | 18 | 50 | 230 | 20 | 3 | 0 | 3.00 | 5.9 | 6.2 |
| Verlander | 32 | 206.1 | 203 | 94 | 84 | 19 | 71 | 195 | 13 | 12 | 0 | 3.66 | 3.7 | 4.5 |
| Fister | 31 | 201.1 | 220 | 89 | 83 | 13 | 43 | 151 | 13 | 9 | 0 | 3.71 | 3.6 | 4.4 |
| Benoit | 62 | 62.1 | 43 | 13 | 13 | 4 | 20 | 67 | 4 | 1 | 22 | 1.88 | 2.6 | 1.5 |
| Porcello | 30 | 174.2 | 183 | 87 | 85 | 18 | 42 | 139 | 13 | 8 | 0 | 4.38 | 2.0 | 3.0 |

Let's look at the WAR columns more closely. There are two main methods for calculating WAR: the method used by Baseball Reference, and the method used by FanGraphs, another baseball statistical web site. We present both estimates of WAR to let you see how they differ. Notice the WARs are very close for hitters but differ quite a bit for the pitchers. Baseball Reference also breaks out their WAR for position players by offense and defense, so we have included that breakout to give you a better idea on how they reach their WAR estimate. We also present their conventional stats, which should not be ignored in this exercise.

We think that it has limitations, but it is a useful way to compare players, taking into account all facets of the game. You will see below that Miguel Cabrera has WARs of 7.3 and 7.6; that means that if we had a guy off the baseball scrapheap instead of Cabrera, we would have won about seven or eight fewer games than we have.

Now that we have the explanations out of the way, what do we see? First of all, as expected, Miggy leads the team in WAR by far, so he is clearly the team MVP. The next two players in WAR are also pretty obvious. Even taking into account comparing WARs that are close, the next two players, Max Scherzer and Anibal Sanchez, are ahead of the pack in WAR. Their WARs are very similar, and the two methods have different estimates of which Tigers starter is better. They are the third- and fourth-ranked pitchers in WAR in the American League, behind Chris Sale of Chicago, whose terrible run support has saddled him with a mediocre won-loss record, and Hisashi Iwakuma of Seattle, who has been unheralded in part because he plays for a terrible team.

If I have to make the choice, then, I would pick Max Scherzer. I would not do that because he is 20-3, but because he has pitched more. Sanchez spent time on the disabled list, so Scherzer has had four more starts and thrown 35.1 more innings. While Sanchez was out, the Tigers had to start Jose Alvarez, who has a 5.66 ERA on the season. Scherzer has also thrown about a third of an inning more per start, 6.68 innings per start compared to 6.37 for Sanchez. Being out there on the mound more means a lot in the modern game where keeping a fresh bullpen is key.

After those two, there is a group of players -- Justin Verlander and Doug Fister among the pitchers, and Jhonny Peralta, Austin Jackson, and Omar Infante among the position players. Probably the most interesting name there is Peralta's. Despite missing 50 games due to his suspension, he is still among the Tigers' best players this season. Given his mediocre 2012 season, it is easy to underestimate the loss to the team when he was suspended, but he clearly was having a very good year. That is why he has been working out in Lakeland and will probably be on the postseason roster as an extra position player (replacing a pitcher since a fifth starter is not needed in the playoffs.)

Two names that rank lower than expected are Torii Hunter and Prince Fielder. Both have good stats at the plate but lose ground due to their fielding. Frankly, as hard as he works at his defense, we can see why Fielder ranks so low in the field; the Tigers need to get him to DH as soon as possible. Hunter had a good reputation in the field when he came to the tigers, but as we noted this winter when the Tigers signed him, that was mostly his great arm; his range was actually about average. The stats would indicate that, a year older, Hunter's defense has deteriorated somewhat this year.

MIGGY'S INJURY – By David Raglin

This has been a season of good news for the Tigers, with one exception, Miguel Cabrera's strained groin. The good news is that playing won't make it worse, but the bad news is that it won't get better until he gets an off-season of rest, a recovery period that we hope won't begin until about Halloween.

Cabrera first left a game early on July 22 with a hip flexor and missed four games. He came back and played through it through the end of August. However, he injured his groin on August 30 and when he came back after missing three games, he has not been the same hitter. Here are his stats since then:

Miguel Cabrera Since the Groin Injury

| Period | G | AB | R | H | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO | BA | OBP | SLG | RC | RC/G |
|-----------------------|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|------|------|------|----|------|
| Sep 3 to Sep 23, 2013 | 17 | 57 | 8 | 16 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 13 | 8 | .281 | .423 | .351 | 8 | 5.2 |

Cabrera is getting on base because pitchers don't want to give him strikes and walk him a lot, but he has only one double and one homer in 57 at-bats in September. Miggy is a tough guy and has done his best since returning to the lineup, and he is better than any other option the Tigers have now. However, this is probably another reason that Jhonny Peralta will probably be returning to the team after his suspension is served. Peralta has played third base, and he could get some time there, particularly late in games in the postseason.

HITTING WITH RUNNERS ON BASE – By David Raglin

Fans often lament that their team leaves too many men on base. “They can’t hit in the clutch,” the cry goes. There have been people out there that have said that about the 2013 Tigers. Is that true?

On one hand, you might say yes. The Tigers lead the league in runners left on base with 1,220 (next is Boston at 1,175). However, runners left on base does not mean an offense is not hitting in the clutch. There is a strong positive correlation between runs scored and runners left on base. The Tigers also lead the league in runners on base with 2,154, just ahead of Boston at 2,137. They have scored 43.4 percent of their runners on base, just about the league average of 43.0 percent.

These days, we don't have to guess how teams hit with runners on base. We can go to Baseball Reference and get the data:

Detroit Tigers Offense: Depending on Baserunner Situation

| Split | PA* | AB | R | H | 2B | 3B | HR | RBI | BB | SO | BA | OBP | SLG |
|-----------------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|
| No One On Base | 3281 | 3018 | 87 | 841 | 163 | 13 | 87 | 87 | 246 | 574 | .279 | .336 | .428 |
| Runners On Base | 2931 | 2553 | 701 | 749 | 128 | 8 | 86 | 672 | 276 | 472 | .293 | .362 | .451 |
| RISP* | 1712 | 1444 | 604 | 409 | 76 | 3 | 52 | 577 | 194 | 292 | .283 | .364 | .448 |
| RISP and 2 Out | 787 | 688 | 255 | 179 | 30 | 1 | 23 | 245 | 89 | 142 | .260 | .353 | .407 |

* PA = Plate Appearances, RISP = Runners in Scoring Position

The Tigers are hitting better with runners on base than when there are no runners on base. We also added runners in scoring position (RISP) and runners in scoring position with two out, because people often mention those stats. They are doing well with runners in scoring position but not quite as well with runners in scoring position and two out.

MAYO BOOKSHELF: “Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes” – Reviewed by Mark Pattison

You'd be right in thinking that Aviva Kempner's film biography of Hammerin' Hank, “The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg,” would be the last word in Greenberg lore. After all, how many Tigers get theatrically released movies made about them? (More on the movie later.)

But lo and behold, John Rosengren, a writer from the Twin Cities, sat down and really painstakingly reconstructed Greenberg's life and career to craft a compelling story of the Tigers Hall of Famer. Rosengren even has the chutzpah to correct Greenberg's own memoir, “The Story of My Life,” which he spoke into a tape recorder after he was diagnosed with the cancer that would claim his life.

The book always hews close to its basic thrust — that it was unbelievably tough enough as it was to break into the major leagues without being Jewish to boot. “Bruggy” (a corruption of “Groggy,” a nickname Hank picked up growing up in the Bronx) got frustrated at having to endure all of the anti-Semitic remarks, got mad at himself for lacking big-league defensive skills to match his big-league bat, grew impatient at not being given a chance to prove himself.

Greenberg ultimately prevailed, although there were moments he wished he could have taken back, in particular his mediocre showing in the 1934 World Series against St. Louis followed by breaking his wrist sliding into home in the second game of the 1935 World Series against the Cubs (he was out), sidelining him for the rest of the Fall Classic — although he stewed at Jake Powell for breaking the same wrist early in 1936 that ended his season prematurely. And let's not forget all of the All-Star Game snubs, first not beating out Lou Gehrig and later not even getting the nod over ex-teammate Rudy York.

But there were the moments of hard-won triumph: his unanimous American League MVP selection in 1935, a second MVP trophy in 1940 after he switched from first base to left field, coming one run batted in shy of Gehrig's all-time AL RBI record one year, and coming up two short of Babe Ruth's 60-homer mark the next. Then there was the iconic grand slam homer against the St. Louis Browns on the last day of the 1945 season that secured the Tigers their fourth AL flag with Greenberg as a vital cog.

At the risk of making this review seem like a recitation of Greenberg career highlights, the importance of him sitting out a game on Yom Kippur in 1934, with the Tigers in the thick of a pennant race and on the cusp of winning their first pennant in 25 years -- while he and his infield mates had not missed a single game all season long -- is what earned Greenberg the lasting pride of fellow Jews, and the admiration of gentiles, in Detroit and elsewhere. Greenberg was not ordinarily one to go to synagogue, but that's not as if it mattered to hecklers and taunters at home and on the road. His religious training of his children was spare at best -- Hank grew to enjoy celebrating Christmas with his family -- but became an ardent and implacable supporter of Israel as he aged.

Rosengren, to this reader's delight, does not give short shrift to Greenberg's post-playing career, including executive stints with the Indians and White Sox, his seemingly contradictory treatment of players at contract time compared to his own salary lobbying, his thwarted hopes of bringing the major leagues to the West Coast, and the lingering discrimination he experienced when it came time to hire a new commissioner (Bowie Kuhn was chosen; need I say more?) Rosengren also shows how Greenberg was a clairvoyant of sorts in advocating changes he thought would improve the game.

"Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes" retails for \$26.95 and should be available at reputable bookstores and online. And Kempner has reissued "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg" as a two-DVD set with new and vintage interview footage. This can be yours for \$30 by sending to the Ciesla Foundation, 5005 Linnean Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20008.

SHORT STRIPES

If you wanted a copy of *Sock It to 'Em Tigers: The Incredible Story of the 1968 Detroit Tigers* and never got around to buying one, you may be out of luck -- at least as far as the list price is concerned. We have sold out our stock. Maple Street Press, which published the book, is pretty much extinct. The publisher Maple Street used to distribute the book was sold, and the new owner promptly discontinued the baseball titles and likely "pulped" its remaining stock. You may be able to find a used copy online, but be prepared to pay in the high three digits for it. In the meantime, buy a copy of *Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish!* which was published just before the end of last year. Ordering information is at the bottom of the back page of *Stripes*.

Congratulations to all the winners in our postseason ticket lottery. But for all lucky Smithers who have playoff tickets, no matter where you sit, we invite you to come to the back of Section 133 -- the section where the Society's box seats are located -- 10 minutes after the end of each home playoff game to meet other Society members, get some pictures taken, and to join in the good times.

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For **Detroit Tigers Lists and More** (\$10) and **Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish!** (\$20), signed by authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send to:

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