

Tigers Stripes

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THE BACK-AND-FORTH SEASON CONTINUES – By David Raglin

The 2014 Detroit Tigers can give you whiplash. They have been a team of streaks, either very good or very bad:

The 2014 Detroit Tigers: Like the Little Girl With the Curl, Either Very Good or Very Bad

Dates	Period			Cumulative			
	W	L	Pct	W	L	Pct	GB
March 31 to May 18	27	12	.692	27	12	.692	+7.0
May 19 to June 18	9	20	.310	36	32	.529	-1.5
June 19 to July 12	17	5	.772	53	37	.589	+7.5
July 13 to August 23 (Gm 1)	15	22	.405	68	59	.535	-3.0
August 23 (Gm 2) to September 22	18	11	.621	86	70	.551	+1.0

Fortunately, they have been in a good streak, and have recaptured the American League Central Division lead. They have been especially strong against their fellow Central contenders, going 10-2 in September against Cleveland and Kansas City. As this is being written, the odds look OK for them to win their fourth Central Division crown in a row and set up a first-round match against the Baltimore Orioles.

I have to admit I was a bit surprised that they had such a good record since late August. I know they'd been playing well, but not that well. How have they done it?

THE LAST MONTH – By David Raglin

It actually has not been quite as long as a month, but the point is that it's been a pretty long stretch. Let's start with the basics: In those 29 games, the Tigers have scored 153 runs, 5.3 runs per game, and allowed 115, 4.0 runs per game. Since the average American League team is scoring 4.2 runs per game, the outlier there is the offense. They have scored 1.1 runs per game more than the season's league average but allowed only 0.2 runs less. Have the Tigers been benefitting from a balanced attack at the plate? Well...

Detroit Tigers Hitters, August 23 (Game 2) to September 20, 2014

Tiger Hitter	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
V. Martinez	27	105	22	40	6	0	7	20	11	4	.381	.444	.638	29	11.6
J.D. Martinez	27	104	16	39	7	1	6	20	9	38	.375	.427	.635	28	11.0
Cabrera	24	96	17	34	9	0	6	15	5	22	.354	.392	.635	24	9.7
Hunter	26	105	15	38	6	1	2	16	2	16	.362	.378	.495	19	7.4
Kinsler	27	120	18	29	6	1	3	17	4	14	.242	.272	.383	12	3.4
Castellanos	26	103	11	29	5	1	0	10	7	30	.282	.327	.350	12	4.1
Davis	25	81	11	22	3	0	2	10	4	8	.272	.314	.383	9	4.1
Avila	16	52	4	13	2	0	1	12	10	23	.250	.365	.346	7	4.4
Suarez	19	54	7	13	0	0	0	8	4	14	.241	.317	.241	4	2.4
Romine	17	36	5	10	1	0	0	4	1	4	.278	.297	.306	3	3.2

Well, unfortunately, it is the same old story. They have been scoring runs, but it has been the same guys, the Martinez “twins” and Miggy have been out of this world, with a solid performance at the plate by Torii Hunter. Other than that, not so much.

The really good news there is the resurgence of J.D. Martinez. There is always the concern that a player who “finds it” in April, May and June will lose it. The league figures him out, pitchers adjust, and suddenly we find out why the player was a journeyman. For example, see Matt Tuiasosopo last year. We were optimistic that J.D. was different, but we were getting worried; Martinez had gone .242/.288/.395 over the 37-game period from July 13 to August 23 (Game 1), when the team went 15-22. He has gotten especially hot since then and is one of the big reasons the Tigers have gone 18-11 in that time.

We also need to appreciate how good Miguel Cabrera is. He has never totally recovered from last year’s sports hernia surgery (as Miggy admitted at the All-Star break), and he has very painful bone spurs in his ankle. Just watching him run, you can see how much pain he is in; there is a chance he will need surgery on his ankle in the offseason. Brad Ausmus has been trying to give Cabrera some games at DH, but with Victor Martinez the regular DH, that means Martinez must play first base. Despite all of that, Miggy has been on fire over the last month.

(An aside on Cabrera It’s been noted that he will hit the fewest number of home runs in a season since his rookie year, when he was called up during the season. However, not as many have noticed that he has hit more doubles than anyone in the American League, by a wide margin: 50 through Sept. 22 versus 44 for second-place Jose Altuve of Houston, a player who gets his doubles in part because of his legs.)

The third hot hitter is Victor Martinez, who has been the foundation of the Tigers’ offense all year and it a contender for the American League Most Valuable Player Award. More on him later.

Let’s talk about the pitching next. As we said earlier, it has been OK but not great.

Detroit Tiger Pitchers, August 23 (Game 2) to September 22, 2014

Tiger Pitcher	G	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	W	L	SV	ERA
Lobstein	5	29.0	24	11	10	8	20	1	1	0	3.10
Scherzer	6	38.1	41	18	16	10	38	3	1	0	3.76
Porcello	6	35.2	52	22	17	6	23	1	4	0	4.29
Verlander	6	39.1	45	20	19	10	35	4	1	0	4.35
Price	5	31.0	45	20	20	7	34	2	3	0	5.81
Coke	13	10.0	12	2	2	2	7	4	0	0	1.80
Albuquerque	13	9.1	6	2	2	4	7	0	0	0	1.93
Nathan	10	9.2	11	4	4	3	4	0	1	7	3.72
Chamberlain	10	10.2	8	5	5	4	8	1	0	0	4.22

The starters are listed first, then the relievers, ranked by ERA within their group. The only starter that has had an ERA much below the American League season average of 3.83 has been the call-up from the minors. Kyle Lobstein may only have a 1-1 record but the Tigers have won four of his five starts, being shut out in the last one against the White Sox. More on him later, too.

Max Scherzer has pitched pretty well, Rick Porcello sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde, Justin Verlander better but not great, and David Price disappointingly bad. The pen has actually been pitching better, starting with everybody’s favorite whipping boy of the spring, Phil Coke. Where would the Tigers be without Coke now? Al Al has been fine, and Joe Nathan has converted seven of eight save opportunities. Joba Chamberlain seems to have hit a wall recently.

So, where are the Tigers right now? As this was written before the Tigers start their three-game series against the White Sox, they are looking pretty good, but like the last few years, they are depending on a few players to perform like superstars (especially at the plate). If that does not continue to happen, the team could be in trouble as we head into the playoffs.

AN AMAZING SEASON FOR V-MART – By David Raglin

Victor Martinez has had one of the most amazing seasons we have ever seen. Even though we watch him every day, I don't know that we really appreciate how good he has been.

Buster Olney has a favorite stat that you may not find on Baseball Reference, but really captures how good a hitter Martinez has been. As of a couple of weeks ago, Martinez has broken three bats all year. There are players who break three bats in one game. That is but one example of his bat control this season.

Martinez's name is all over the leaderboards. Here is where he stands in many major categories: Batting average: 2nd (.336), On-Base Percentage (OBP): 2nd (.407), Slugging Percentage (SLG): 3rd (.506), OPS (OBP + SLG): 1st (.973), Total Bases: 4th (308), HR: 8th (31), RBI: 8th (100), BB: 10th (66), Extra Base Hits: Tied 7th (63), Runs Created (RC): 2nd (122), RC/Game: 8.5 (1st), and Offensive WAR: 8th (5.4). He is fifth in Win Probability Added (WPA), a stat we looked at quite a bit in relation to Miguel Cabrera. WPA is a stat I like to use to measure the value of a player's production; it looks in the change in the probability a team will win the game before the player's plate appearance and after, and calculated the difference. Martinez has a 4.2 WPA, meaning that his at-bats have added about 4.2 wins to the Tigers by this measure. Whew!

Let's look at some of those some more. He is 10th in walks with 66, but he also only has struck out 40 times! He has struck out one time every 13.6 at-bats, the best rate in the league. For quite a while, he had more home runs than strikeouts. The 66 walks has been fortified by 26 intentional walks. That leads the league by quite a bit; only David Ortiz (22), Robbie Cano (19), and Jose Abreu (15) have even half as many intentional passes. The thing to note that all of those hitters have a relatively weak hitter coming up after him in the order, making the intentional walk a viable option. The guy after Victor Martinez is his "brother", J.D. Martinez, who as we noted before has had a great season. (Yes, we checked, his intentional walks did not come proportionally more often early in the season before J.D. has established himself.)

Victor Martinez has been thrown into the mix for the American League Most Valuable Player. That's unusual for a designated hitter, who after all is not providing any defensive value to the team. He won't win it, not should he. (Mike Trout, whether or not you believe he deserved it the last two seasons, is clearly the choice this year. His leaderboard list is even more impressive than Martinez'. Trout leads the league in WAR, Offensive WAR, Runs Scored, RBIs, Runs Created, and WPA. His WPA of 71 is miles ahead of the runner-up, Michael Brantley of Cleveland. His team has the best record in the league.) After Trout, though, Martinez is a contender for the #2 slot behind players such as Brantley, Josh Donaldson of Oakland, Brantley, and Alex Gordon of Kansas City.

Martinez is eligible to be a free agent after the season. His market is limited because he is a DH, but he will have suitors. The Chicago White Sox have been rumored to have interest. If Martinez becomes a free agent, the Tigers will certainly make him a qualifying offer, but given the Tigers' tendency to pay to keep their players, don't be surprised if he inks a deal with Detroit before testing the market.

WHO IS KYLE LOBSTEIN? – By David Raglin

As we said before, Kyle Lobstein has been a key starter down the stretch for the Tigers. Let's give a little bit of background on him.

The right-handed Lobstein (pronounced LOB-steen, with "lob" like a soft throw), who just turned 25, was drafted by Tampa Bay in the second round in 2008 out of high school in Arizona. He progressed through the Rays' system, with a peak at Class AA Montgomery for the last half of the 2011 and the full 2012 seasons. (An aside: Montgomery was the last minor-league stop for Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammell when the Tigers had their AA farm club there.)

The Rays did not put him on the 40-man roster after the season and the Tigers had the Mets draft him in the Rule V draft and sell him to the Tigers. At the end of spring training in 2013, the Tigers liked Lobstein but decided they could not carry him on the major-league roster, as required of Rule V picks. The Tigers worked out a deal with the Rays to allow them to send him out by giving them catcher Curt Casali.

As you can see from the table that follows, Lobstein pitched pretty well for Erie but not as well for Toledo. When the Tigers needed fill-ins for their rotation, they gave four other players a nod before Lobstein:

Robbie Ray (four starts), Drew VerHagen (one start), Buck Farmer (one start), and Kyle Ryan (one start). (To be fair, part of that might have been the timing of the spot start.)

Kyle Lobstein, Detroit Tiger Minor League Career

Year	Tm	Lev	G	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	WHIP	W	L	ERA
2013	Erie	AA	15	95.1	92	35	33	27	83	1.25	7	4	3.12
2013	Toledo	AAA	13	72.1	73	32	28	25	65	1.36	6	3	3.48
2014	Toledo	AAA	26	146.0	174	71	66	42	127	1.48	9	11	4.07

Lobstein’s debut for the Tigers was both insignificant and critical. He came in the game in the third inning with the Tigers down 7-1, the day after the team had been humiliated 20-6. They had used seven pitchers in that game -- two already that day -- and they had a second game that night and a game the next day. Lobstein allowed one inherited runner to score on a sacrifice fly but then held the Twins scoreless again until the seventh and he finished the game. His 5.2 innings allowed the rest of the bullpen to rest, so when Justin Verlander could only go 5.2 innings in the nightcap, there were three relievers who could step in and hold the lead. Lobstein was then given a chance to start, and you can see from the table in the earlier article that he has pitched extremely well in the rotation.

As you might expect from a 25-year-old righty making his major-league debut in his seventh pro season, Lobstein does not have a power arm. Instead, he has been effective with good location and changing speeds, using four pitches including a four-seam fastball that looks faster when he mixes it in with his off-speed arsenal.

Don’t be surprised if Lobstein is a contender for a postseason roster spot. Even if that does not come to fruition, though, he can know that he has played in important role in getting the Tigers to the postseason.

SHORT STRIPES—By Mark Pattison

It’s been our postseason tradition, and it’s one worth continuing. Smithers will be at Tigers home playoff games, not just in the Society’s box seats, but other places in Comerica Park. Our tradition: Ten minutes after the final out of each home playoff game, win or lose, let’s meet in the back of Section 133, where the Society’s box seats are. We’ll take pictures of each other and ourselves, and maybe head somewhere together afterward to hoist a few in celebration – or, if necessary, in defiant defeat.

The Tigers’ defense may not be the best, but they do have one standout. Ian Kinsler actually leads the whole American League, not just the second baseman, but the whole league, in defensive WAR according to Baseball Reference. They estimate his defense has been worth about 2.8 wins this season. That is in line with Defensive Runs Saves from Baseball Info Systems. They say Kinsler has saved about 21 runs this season in the field, fourth best in the American League (behind only Alex Gordon and Lorenzo Cain of Kansas City and Josh Donaldson of Oakland), worth about 2.1 wins.

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