

Tigers Stripes

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Tigers Fans Who Always Care

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LOOKING BACK AT THE 2017 SEASON – By David Raglin

The season still has a couple of weeks to go, but at this point we can pretty much tell the story of the 2017 Detroit Tigers. It certainly has been a disappointing season, but I am going to make the case that it could have been a *lot* worse.

While Tigers fans were dreaming of one last run with team that had been a playoff contender since 2012, the odds of that were not good. Most prognosticators came in with the Tigers basically being a .500 team, which might have kept them relevant for a wild-card spot. But the Tigers needed everything to go right to be contenders, and beginning in spring training, with the injuries to J.D. Martinez and Miguel Cabrera, it was clear that was not going to be the case. Jordan Zimmermann was a disaster, the young guys in the back of the rotation fell out of the rotation, the bullpen struggled, and the four outfielders manning center and right field were not doing the job. They hung in there at 29-29 in early June but a 3-13 stretch after that sealed their fate. They were 42-49 when the front office traded J.D., and since then they have gone 20-38 through Sept. 19.

So, what if they Tigers had met the predictions and were a .500 or so club? This year, that would have put them on the edge of the wild-card race. They'd still have J.D., the Justins (Verlander, Upton, and Wilson), and Alex Avila, and there would be a small chance they'd get that second wild-card spot. If they got that chance, their chances of winning the World Series would have been very low; as I type this, the various projection systems project the 77-70 Twins to have about a 1 percent chance of winning it all. Then, they would have headed into 2018 without any clear idea of where the team would be in a few years.

Instead, they have acquired some good prospects. There are various prospect ranking lists, but all of them have five of the top 10 prospects overall coming to the Tigers from the Verlander and Wilson-Avila deals, and lower-level prospects coming from the Upton and Martinez trades.

It was a tough season, and trading Justin Verlander, a player who grew up a Tiger and is heading to the Hall of Fame, was especially painful. I watched the first inning of his first start for Houston and I could not watch any more; it just looked so wrong. Opening the Washington Post sports pages to see Verlander celebrating the AL West title after pitching the clincher and striking out 10 was even more painful. It's never fun being on the "prospect" end of trades like this; it was a lot more fun to acquire the veteran stars for names most of us had never heard of. If they had hung in there this year and fallen short, as they most likely would have, and then started 2018 with no present *and* no future, that would have been worse. They still need a lot more good young players, but we can now see where these trades could work out. If they get a good player with the top-five pick they will likely have next year and some of these kids become what they are projected to be, they could form the core of a decent team.

THE VERLANDER TRADE – By David Raglin

It hit me, like I'm sure it hit many of you, like a brick. We had gone to bed thinking we'd dodged another bullet, that Justin Verlander would survive another deadline as a Tiger. We had just put out the September issue of *Tigers Stripes*, rushing it out before I went out of town. We really thought that nothing would happen. When we woke up, we found out a lifelong Tiger and future Hall of Famer, would not be the next Al Kaline, a Tiger for life. Justin Verlander had been traded to the Houston Astros.

As much as we love Detroit, it is not generally considered a glamor destination. Justin Verlander, though, talked about how much he loved being a Tiger, how much he loved representing Detroit. He was one of us, and I think that was one of the reasons we loved him. We weren't the only ones who thought that Verlander would remain a Tiger. The trade talks with the Astros for Justin Verlander had fallen through, maybe to be resurrected after the season. But, at 10:30 p.m. the night of Aug. 31, the Houston Astros called to take one more

shot at Verlander. The Astros reportedly had not been willing to include several top prospects, but at the last minute they gave in, and the trade was finalized just before midnight.

This trade has an interesting parallel in the Yoenis Cespedes-Michael Fulmer trade two years ago. The Tigers held firm on what they wanted, and the other team finally met the Tigers' price. Part of that was that the Tigers were willing to keep Verlander; they did not have to make a deal. They also had made it clear that they had to get top prospects in any trade for the Detroit legend.

The Tigers did get three very good prospects. The top one is 19-year old righthanded pitcher Franklin Perez. It says a lot that Perez has held his own at AA at such a young age. He has a good fastball in the low to mid 90s, but what makes him special are his other pitches: a devastating curveball, a decent change-up, and a developing slider. He is projected as a #2 starter with a chance to be a star. He also has Tiger connections: He came out of Carlos Guillen's academy in Venezuela. After the trade, pretty much everybody has him as the Tigers #1 prospect.

Daz Cameron is a center fielder who is the son of former major leaguer Mike Cameron. His strong 2017 season has seen his stock rise. He reportedly has the chance to be a very good center fielder with 15-20 home run power. Catcher Jake Rogers is considered an excellent defensive catcher who looks like he could hit well enough to be a solid asset. I'm not an expert on prospects, so I suggest you check out the following three websites for the details on Perez, Cameron, and Rogers:

<http://www.baseballamerica.com/majors/last-minute-bombshell-as-justin-verlander-goes-to-astros/>

<http://www.fangraphs.com/blogs/scouting-the-tigers-return-for-justin-verlander/>

<https://www.blessyouboys.com/2017/9/4/16239982/justin-verlander-trade-franklin-perez-daz-cameron-jake-rogers-scouting-report>

After the trade, we put out a rare *E-Mayo Flash* to the members who get their newsletter via email. At the risk of repeating too much from that, I did want to reiterate a point from that piece. Verlander had made it clear he was not up for a rebuild. Even though he really wanted to go to the Cubs, he certainly has a chance to win with the Astros, and given what has happened in Houston, he has a chance to do the most good there than anywhere else. We wish him luck; he deserves to be a winner. The hope is that the guys the Tigers got in the deals this season, along with better drafting, will get the Tigers moving in the right direction. Maybe Justin Verlander will return someday to a young Tiger team on the way up. We can only hope.

WILL THE REAL NICHOLAS CASTELLANOS PLEASE STAND UP? – By David Raglin

One of the questions the Tigers need to answer after the season is: is Nick Castellanos part of the Tigers' future? It looked like 2016 was a breakout year for him after a torrid start; unfortunately, a broken hand from a hit-by-pitch cut that season short. The first two months of his 2017 season were anything but memorable, both at the plate and in the field, but while we (at least me) have been focusing on other things, Castellanos has put up some good numbers at the plate:

Nick Castellanos: Feast or Famine in 2017

Period in 2017	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Apr 4 to May 31	51	201	23	42	11	3	4	25	18	59	.209	.283	.353	.636	19	3.0
Jun 2 to Sep 16	92	357	45	106	20	7	18	63	21	74	.297	.336	.543	.879	62	6.3

You might ask if Castellanos can sustain these stats. Well, his performance in the last 92 games is eerily similar to his first 92 games in 2016:

Nick Castellanos: Strong Start to the 2016 Season

Period in 2016	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
Apr 5 to Jul 21	92	352	47	104	21	4	17	52	21	91	.295	.334	.523	.857	62	6.3

Note: He only played in 18 more games in 2016 due to the injury, and the stats for 18 games are not meaningful enough to show here.

If you do an online search for “Nick Castellanos breakout,” you will get quite a few hits from the last three seasons, all suggesting that Castellanos has broken out or will break out soon. Most of them refer to his hard-hit rate as figured by Baseball Info Systems (although numbers from MLB’s Statcast do not seem to show that). We’ve been waiting, really, since Castellanos came up in 2014 for him to become a star. Maybe he will never be a star, but on a rebuilding Tiger team he could be a solid player who will fill one of the many holes that will need filling. This certainly is not the time to give up on him.

It seems like Jeimer Candelario is the third baseman of the future, which makes sense in part because of Castellanos’s poor range at third base. The Tigers are trying Castellanos in right field this month. (Castellanos played left field in the minors and struggled there, but that was quite a few years ago.) If that doesn’t work, maybe Castellanos could take over at first base/DH if the Tigers do not bring Victor Martinez back.

There is a lesson to remember here. In 2013 Castellanos was having a good season at Toledo. A lot of fans clamored for the Tigers to bring him up and put him in the lineup NOW, assuming he would be a star. It turned out that even when they brought him up in 2014, when he was 22 years old, he struggled. As the Tigers rebuild and young players move up the minor league chain, let’s not be too quick to demand a promotion for the next Nick Castellanos. Sometimes, a little more time in the minors is the best thing for a player.

So what do the Tigers really have with Nick Castellanos? Before I looked into it, I was pretty down on Nick. A slow start can do that, masking improvement as the season goes on. The last three months certainly show that Nick has potential, and the Tigers should keep looking for the right place in the lineup for him.

TRADERS OR TRAITORS? – By Mark Pattison

There’s no denying Tigers fans felt like they’d been hit by a truck after the trades of Justin Upton and Justin Verlander Aug. 31 to go with the deals that sent J.D. Martinez, Alex Avila and Justin Wilson packing in July. Some have compared it to 1995, when the Tigers were 37-33 at the All-Star break, got swept by the Angels in a four-game series right afterward, kept skidding, then dealt David Wells to Cincinnati, Mike Henneman to Houston and Buddy Groom to Florida. Kirk Gibson retired in the midst of those deals, and playoff hopes were bid adieu. But I liken it more to 1974, when at the end of August GM Jim Campbell traded Jim Northrup and released Norm Cash, who had played with Al Kaline for 10 and 15 seasons, respectively, and wouldn’t get to celebrate with Kaline when he got his 3,000th hit in September.

But the trade deadline works both ways. Fifty years ago, in 1967, Detroit picked up Hall of Famer Eddie Mathews from Houston in a bid to break from the pack in the four-way AL pennant race. In 1968, the Tigers acquired Don McMahon and Roy Face to bolster a young bullpen for the stretch drive; Face made two quick relief appearances, then sat as the starters tossed 12 straight complete games in September, including Denny McLain’s 30th win of the season and the pennant-clincher. Woodie Fryman went 10-3 for Detroit after being picked up from Pittsburgh, which helped the Tigers nip the Red Sox by a half-game in the strike-delayed 1972 season. And who can forget Doyle Alexander’s 9-0 run that pushed Detroit past Toronto to win the AL East in 1987 -- even if the price turned out to be eventual Hall of Famer John Smoltz?

Dave Dombrowski, the Tigers’ GM 2002-15, had an enviable trading record. At the time of his firing in August 2015, the cumulative Wins Above Replacement (WAR) of his acquisitions when they played in Detroit was double that of the players’ performance for the teams Dombrowski traded them to. Max Scherzer doesn’t count in this analysis as he was a free agent. And the WAR applies to, say, Jair Jurrjens, only for his tenure with Atlanta -- just as Edgar Renteria’s post-Atlanta WAR takes in only his sole season with the Tigers.

Dombrowski’s 2-to-1 WAR ratio is undoubtedly impressive. But he was trading prospects with little, if any, big-league experience for proven veterans. That ratio is bound to narrow as long as Robbie Ray, Yoenis Cespedes, Avisail Garcia and Rick Porcello continue to perform well. But Detroit will continue to accumulate WAR with players like Ian Kinsler, Jose Iglesias, Matt Boyd, Daniel Norris, Michael Fulmer and some guy named Miguel Cabrera.

Looking at the pre-Dombrowski years 1996-2002, the Tigers didn’t have that much talent to attract other teams’ interest. The biggest name traded away was Cecil Fielder. Todd Jones went to a contending Twins team in 2001. Detroit pulled off a three-team deal with the Yankees and Athletics, letting Jeff Weaver go to get

Carlos Pena and Jeremy Bonderman from the A's. But the other "major" players -- Bryce Florie? Felipe Lira? Omar Olivares? -- didn't net much in return; Mike Maroth, maybe.

Now we're in the post-Dombrowski era. How will it play out? Nobody knows. With the exception of Jeimer Candelario, none of the minor-leaguers picked up by Al Avila had been on a 25-man roster. Teams that acquire prospects know that not all of them are going to pan out, but don't have a crystal ball to see the future. I remember the hue and cry in 2013 when prospect Danry Vasquez was sent to Houston in exchange for Jose Veras in another bullpen-bolstering bid. Anybody hear from Danry lately? Even knowing that offseason free-agent acquisitions are likely to be made, and possibly even more trades, the odds are good that this batch of prospects will be given more than a September look-see to succeed, or fall flat on their face trying.

SHORT STRIPES

► A meaty book worth reading is Gaylon H. White's "The Bilko Athletic Club: The Story of the 1956 Los Angeles Angels" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, \$24.95). The star of the show is first baseman Steve Bilko, who smashed 55 homers that season for the Pacific Coast League pennant winners, winning the PCL Triple Crown (and 56 in 1957) and would down a six-pack of beer after day games to give the afternoon rush hour traffic in the City of Angels a chance to thin out. He's not the only onetime Tiger featured on that team. Third baseman George Freese (Gene's brother) pinch-hit for Detroit in 1953, Casey Wise was a backup infielder in 1960 -- also Bilko's sole season in Detroit; reliever Bob Anderson, PCL rookie of the year in '56, was a hanger-on in 1963 with a wrecked rotator cuff nobody knew how to fix (with an ERA to match); and manager Bob Scheffing piloted the Angels that sublime season before managing the Cubs 1957-59, and the Tigers 1961-63. By that time, though, Bilko was gone. He'd platooned at first base in Detroit with Norm Cash in 1960 and hit only nine homers with a weak .207 average. The Tigers exposed him to the expansion draft and was taken by ... the new American League L.A. Angels for some box-office at "Little Wrigley" Field in Los Angeles.

► Matt Boyd's near no-hitter brought out a lot of emotions, both good and bad, as he came within one out of being the first left-hander to throw a no-hitter for the Tigers. According to www.detroitathletic.com, this is actually the fifth time this decade a Tigers starter has lost a no-hitter in the ninth inning. The first one of those is the most famous: the Armando Galarraga-Jim Joyce game against Cleveland on June 2, 2010. Justin Verlander (who has two no-hitters) twice got into the ninth, 8 1/3 hitless innings on May 18, 2012, versus the Pirates and eight no-hit innings on August 26, 2015, against the Angels. Anibal Sanchez, who had a no-hitter with the Marlins, almost got his second on May 24, 2013, against the Angels, before it was broken up with one out in the ninth. Boyd's was the fourth Tiger no-hitter broken up with one out to go. The other three were near-perfect games, Tommy Bridges on August 5, 1932 versus Washington, Galarraga's and Milt Wilcox's on April 15, 1983 against these same White Sox.

► Have you always wanted to work for the Tigers? The Detroit Tigers are currently seeking a Senior Software Engineer. This role will be responsible for development and maintenance of software projects within Baseball Operations. This position will report to the Sr. Director, Baseball Analytics & Operations. For more information, go to <https://t.co/5AwhdIII Gm>. (If you get the job, don't forget about where you heard about it!)

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