

# Tigers Stripes

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## SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? -- By David Raglin

The 2018 season was the first full year of the rebuild, and it was a rough year for Tigers fans. There were some great moments, but also a lot of losing. During 2017 they started the rebuild and went 64-98. This past season they also went 64-98. On one hand, the win-loss record and the coincidence that it matched the record of the year before are trivial. The most meaningful games for the Tigers arguably were played in places like Toledo, Erie, Lakeland, West Michigan and Connecticut, and we will have more on the prospects in future issues. However, there was a 2018 season in Detroit and there will be a 2019 season in Detroit that will start on March 28, and this month we will take a look back at 2018 and a look forward to 2019.

## A LOOK BACK -- By David Raglin

The 2018 Detroit Tiger season can be divided into two very different periods. After beading the White Sox on Sunday June 17, the Tigers were a surprising 36-37 and only 2½ games behind the first place Cleveland Indians with two games against a poor team, the Cincinnati Reds, and then three games against the Indians. Not that we really felt the Tigers would be contenders to the end, but I know I was thinking that if we could sweep the Reds, we'd be over .500 and if we had a good series in Cleveland, maybe we could sneak into first at least for a few days. Unfortunately, they lost all five games in Ohio, won only 28 games the rest of the year, and finished 64-98, keeping third place only because rebuilders in Chicago and Kansas City were even worse.

If you do the math, if they were 36-37 and finished 64-98, that means the Tigers went 28-61 the rest of the way. That is a .314 winning percentage, or about a 51-111 record for a full season (worse than any other Tigers team but the forgettable 2003 squad). Over the same period, the Oriole team that ended 47-115 went 27-65, Kansas City went 36-55, and the White Sox were 38-54.

So, what was the difference between the 36-37 team and the 28-61 one? As we have discussed, the Tigers' biggest problem was the offense. However, the difference between the "before" and "after" was more attributable to the pitching:

### **Detroit Tigers 2018: Before and After**

Dates	Record	Runs Scored / Game	Runs Allowed / Game
March 30 - June 17, 2018 (73 games)	36-37 (.493 pct, 80-win pace)	4.07	4.37
June 19 - September 30, 2018 (89 games)	28-61 (.314 pct, 51-win pace)	3.65	5.26
Total 2018 season (162 games)	64-98 (.395 pct, 64-win pace)	3.89	4.91

The 36-37 record was a bit luck (given that they allowed about 0.30 runs per game more than they scored but were almost .500). The league average was 4.53 runs scored per game in 2018, so the offense was well below average but the pitching and defense were a bit better than average. However, after that, both the offense and the pitching/defense were among the worst in the league. The Tigers allowed almost a run a game more after June 17 than before.

What happened? Basically, the starting pitching fell apart. Michael Fulmer had a 4.13 ERA before and a 5.57 after and Francisco Liriano was 3.90 vs 5.09. Even Matt Boyd, who was probably the Tigers' best starter, went from 3.23 before to 5.31 after. Jordan Zimmerman was a bit better later in the year, with 4.75 before and 4.36 after. Mike Fiers did a lot better after than before as well (4.09 before, 3.17 after), but he was traded in August and Daniel Norris took his spot in the rotation and posted a 5.59 ERA, so Fiers and Norris after combined for a 3.94 ERA, about the same as the 4.09 before. Unfortunately, other than Fulmer, who had not

shaken the injury bug and cannot be really counted on in 2019, the after is probably more realistic than the before.

On the offensive side, Nick Castellanos, the Tigers' best hitter this year, was almost the same before and after (.310/.353/.502 batting average/on-base percentage/slugging percentage before vs. .288/.355/.498 after). The two biggest drops were Jeimer Candelario (.250/.352/.474 before and .206/.290/.334 after) and the loss of Miguel Cabrera, who played 38 games and was hitting pretty well (.299/.395/.448). When he got hurt, John Hicks and then Jim Aducci (after Hicks got hurt in August) played first and did not do that well, plus the injury took Hicks out of the backup catcher role.

The key takeaway here is that the Tigers start their planning for 2019 not with a 64-win club but with a 51-win club, and their planning for the 2019 season needs to take that into account.

### **A LOOK AHEAD** -- By David Raglin

Well, that was not a cheery way to end the last article or to start the offseason, but at least Al Avila seemed to realize that when he said in a late-season press conference in Milwaukee that "you can't have a lineup full of .200 hitters." Yes, the Tigers are in a rebuilding mode but should be able to put a credible team on the field. People ask why attendance is dropping in baseball, and the Tigers had one of the biggest drops last year. Part of that is the rebuilding but I think part of it was the failure to field a reasonable team. They could have signed some of the free agents that were available fairly cheaply in the buyer's market last winter and not hurt the rebuilding effort. Instead, their only signing was Mike Fiers (who worked out great). They left big holes in left field, center field, second base, and the bullpen with no good options, which came back to bite them. It's hard for the casual fan to be excited when the team is not even making an effort in the current season. The team's attendance dropped almost 500,000, and estimating a revenue hit of \$50 a fan, that's \$25 million less. A few signings might not have eliminated the drop but it would have helped, and I would guess that ticket sales for next year are projecting even lower.

The biggest question for 2019 is where to play Nick Castellanos. Nick has moved all over the field in his pro career. He was a shortstop in high school but the consensus was that his future was not there. The Tigers put him at third base as he started his minor league career in 2011 but after the Tigers acquired Prince Fielder and moved Cabrera to third, they moved Castellano to left field. When Fielder was traded after the 2013 season and Cabrera moved back to first base, Castellanos was promoted to Detroit playing third base until late in 2017 when the emergence of Candelario pushed Castellanos back to the outfield, this time to right field.

That being said, Castellanos has been a big defensive liability both at third and the outfield. He had a minus-2.4 defensive WAR in 2018, meaning that he was 2.4 losses worse than a player available off the scrap heap. Yes, he got a lot better in right field as the season went on, but his defensive WAR was -1.4 in the first half and -1.0 in the second half, still a liability. But, the Tigers needed his bat.

The problem is the Tigers have one prospect ready to break into the lineup next year, Christin Stewart. He hit 23 home runs, drove in 77, and hit .264/.364/.480 in Toledo, basically the same as he did in 2016 and 2017 as he moved up in the system. Given the Tigers' offensive problems, Stewart's promotion is a no-brainer (in fact, many of us wonder why he was not promoted earlier last year.) The problem is that Stewart is also very defensively challenged. So, what are the options?

Option 1: Put Stewart in left field and Castellanos in right. The problem with that is that even if JaCoby Jones and his Gold Glove-level defense is in center field, that is an outfield that will allow a lot of hits. That will further stress an already-mediocre pitching staff. Plus, during the season, we expect to see the fruits of the pitchers in the farm system to start reaching Detroit: Spencer Turnbull, Beau Burrows, Matt Manning, Kyle Funkhouser, and maybe even Alex Faedo and Casey Mize. It's not fair to them, nor good for the Tigers' development program, to handicap the young pitchers with both Stewart and Castellanos in the outfield.

Option 2: Put Stewart at DH. There are several problems with that. It probably is not a good idea to relegate him to that position as a rookie. Plus, it would probably be best to leave the DH slot open for Miggy. Yes, last year he hurt himself at the plate not in the field, but everything the Tigers can do to avoid unnecessarily taxing his body would be good.

Option 3: Put Stewart in left field and move Castellanos to first base. That is my preferred option. That would allow Cabrera to be the DH. They would have to get a right fielder, but outfield help these days is a relatively cheap commodity. Castellanos probably would not like it but it benefits him too. The Tigers looked into what they could get for him last year but found that an outfielder who is a defensive liability did not have much value, and that will be true when Castellanos tests free agency after the 2019 season. He would increase his value if he can show he is a credible first baseman and he certainly hits well enough to hold that position.

**DESIGNATING OUR HITTER** – By David Raglin

For those of us of a certain age, the designated hitter is still a “new” concept, in that we remember a time without the DH. When the DH position was created in 1973, teams did not really know what to do with it. Many teams went out and found an older defensively-challenged power hitter to fill the spot (like Orlando Cepeda in Boston and Tommy Davis in Baltimore). The Tigers went along with that, but they did not have to go get somebody, they had longtime pinch hitter extraordinaire Gates Brown available. Brown started at DH 102 times in 1973, with Frank Howard DHing 54 more times. In 1974, Al Kaline moved from right field to be the DH, followed by Willie Horton in 1975 and 1976. Rusty Staub, another player fitting the DH stereotype, DHed some in 1976 and took over as the regular DH from 1977 until he was traded in mid-July of 1979.

A month earlier, Sparky Anderson was named manager of the Tigers, which caused a change in the way the Tigers used the DH position. Certainly trading their DH a month later played a part in it, but in the 16 full seasons Sparky managed Detroit, no one player DHed in over half of the games in a season; in fact, only four times did a Tiger start as a DH in 60 or more games. Kirk Gibson was the starting DH in 75 games in 1993; Mike Ivie, 64 games in 1982; Bill Madlock, 64 games in 1987; and Kirk Gibson, 64 games in 1995. Madlock was the closest thing Sparky ever had as a DH because he was acquired during the 1987 season and he was only on the team for 113 games and was the starting DH in 64 of them. The team leaders in games started in DH had, by year 53, 32 (shortened season), 64, 56, 53, 33, 46, 64, 54, 45, 38, 42, 43, 75, 54 (shortened season), and 63 (slightly shortened season). Anderson preferred to use the position to give a semi-day off to a regular player. As time went on, most teams followed the Sparky approach; notice there are very few regular DHers these days.

Once Anderson retired, the number of games by the leading DH on the team dropped at first but later crept up a bit to the 70s from 2003-2005 (Dmitri Young), with an anomaly of 87 games by Bob Hamelin in 1997 under Buddy Bell. Jim Leyland had no regular DH for his first year, but the acquisition of Gary Sheffield gave the Tigers their first regular DH since Staub (119 and 106 games in 2007 and 2008). Johnny Damon started 97 games at DH in 2010, and then the Tigers signed Victor Martinez. VMart only DHed 112 games in 2011 (with other games behind the plate and at first). He missed the 2012 season due to injury but Dmitri Young’s brother, Delmon, became the regular DH that year with 116 games started. From 2013 through this past season, Victor was back and was the regular DH.

This all being said, there are not a lot of candidates for the greatest DH in Tigers history. Our rule is that players are eligible at the position where they played their most games, so early DHers like Brown, Kaline, and Horton do not qualify. Victor Martinez is the most tenured DH by far and has posted the highest career stats.

The table below shows the top 5 in a variety of categories for Tiger designated hitters. Note that instead of WAR, I am using only offensive WAR since our focus is on offense for designated hitters.

**Detroit Tiger DHes Ranked in Games, Runs Created, Runs Created Per Game, and Offensive WAR**

Rk	Tiger DH	G	Rk	Tiger DH	RC	Rk	Tiger DH	RC/G	Rk	Tiger DH	oWAR
1	Victor Martinez	969	1	Victor Martinez	532	1	Luis Polonia	5.9	1	Victor Martinez	8.4
2	Rusty Staub	549	2	Rusty Staub	317	2	Dmitri Young	5.6	2	Dmitri Young	7.6
3	Dmitri Young	487	3	Dmitri Young	285	3	Johnny Damon	5.5	3	Rusty Staub	7.2
4	Gary Sheffield	247	4	Gary Sheffield	147	4	Gary Sheffield	5.4	4	Gary Sheffield	2.8
5	Delmon Young	191	5	Luis Polonia	99	5	Victor Martinez	5.3	5	Johnny Damon	2.6

As you can see, VMart is at the top of three of the four lists, but a lot of that is seniority more than anything else. He has by far the most games as a Tiger DH and the most runs created. However, his runs created

per game as a Tiger was only 5.3, meaning a team of nine Martinezes would score only 5.3 runs per game. That is above the league average in his era (which is about 4.5), but for a player whose only job was to hit, that is a bit disappointing.

In his seven Tigers seasons he has two that were outstanding, two that were good, and three that were, frankly, bad. Certainly without his great 2014 season the Tigers would not have won their fourth division title in a row, but in 2015 through 2018 under the 4-year, \$68 million contract he signed after the 2014 season, he had 3.5, 5.7, 3.9, and 3.3 runs created per game. Given that the Tigers had a bad offense this year and scored 3.9 runs per game, that puts his three seasons with less than four runs created per game in perspective. (Not surprisingly, in those three seasons, he had a negative WAR, meaning that a player available in the pool would have been better than Martinez.)

I know that Martinez was loved by Tigers fans and had some good seasons for the Tigers. The sendoff he got in his last game was touching. But unfortunately, the reality is that he has not been a good player for a while and won't be missed for his production on the field.

After Martinez, the #2 and #3 candidates are Rusty Staub and Dmitri Young. Staub had more runs created and played more games, but Young had a better offensive WAR. My favorite player all time was Mickey Lolich, whom the Tigers traded for Staub. As much as I love Lolich, I could not believe the Tigers got such a good hitter for a player who was on the downside of his career. Staub was one of the three Tigers that started in the 1976 All-Star Game (along with Ron LeFlore and Mark "The Bird" Fidrych). His Tigers career ended as the result of a contract dispute. He held out in 1979 until May 3, and that along with Staub's role in the Players Association riled Tigers General Manager Jim Campbell enough that he traded Staub to Texas in July.

Dmitri Young was the best player on the infamous 2003 Tiger team that went 43-119. (Trivia: The second-best WAR that year was forgettable second baseman Warren Morris). Young played for the Tigers from 2002 to 2006 but was released in September 2006 and was not on the postseason roster that year.

**SHORT STRIPES** – By David Raglin

► We've seen a lot of speculation on who will replace Mario Impemba and Rod Allen in the Tigers TV booth. One name I'd like to throw out there is Curtis Granderson. He played for Toronto and Milwaukee in 2018 but it is clear his career is ending. Granderson has spent several falls with TBS as a postseason studio analyst and has gotten good reviews. He is a very sharp guy who might have to learn on the job, but a young up-and-coming broadcaster for a rebuilding team makes sense; the Tigers and Grandy can grow together. The biggest impediment might be that when he retires, Granderson will have options and he might not want to commit to a full season in the booth, but maybe he could share the spot with Kirk Gibson.

► In 1971, Mickey Lolich went 25-14 in 376 innings. In 2018, Justin Verlander and Clayton Kershaw combined were 25-14 in 375 2/3 innings. There are some caveats: Thanks to manager Billy Martin, Lolich threw an extraordinary number of innings, even for his era (#2 was knuckleballer Wilbur Wood at 332, and only one other pitcher was over 300), and Kershaw missed about a month this season.

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