

# Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the



Mayo Smith Society

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Vol. 29, No. 11

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

December 2013

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## **BRAD AUSMUS IS THE TIGERS' CHOICE** – By David Raglin

Brad Ausmus, the Tigers' choice to replace Jim Leyland as manager after Leyland retired, may have been somewhat of a surprise, but Tigers fans should be familiar with him from his two stints as a catcher for the team in the late 1990s/early 2000s.

The Tigers interviewed four men for the job. One was Leyland's longtime hitting coach, Lloyd McClendon. He was the only one who was with the 2013 Tigers and the only one with managerial experience, with the 2001-05 Pittsburgh Pirates. Two other candidates had minor league managerial experience, major league coaching experience, and ties to Dave Dombrowski. Tim Wallach had been a player with the Montreal Expos when Dombrowski was general manager, and is the third base coach for the Dodgers. Rich Renteria played for Dombrowski's Florida Marlins and was a Padres coach before recently being named manager of the Chicago Cubs. (They also approached Hall of Fame shortstop Barry Larkin, who played for the Reds and for the University of Michigan, but he turned down the chance to interview. They had an unnamed candidate in mind but never asked permission to talk to him.) Ausmus has no minor league or major league field experience as a coach or manager and Dombrowski said they had previously met only briefly. So, why is Brad Ausmus it?

He won the job because he came with many good references and wowed Dombrowski and the Tigers during his interview. Going into the process, McClendon was the favorite. As Dombrowski noted, "I said all along we'd hire him in a minute, but we needed to follow through with the process and see if someone knocked our socks off and Brad did. For us, it was really that we found someone, in Brad Ausmus, we think has tremendous upside potential. If it wasn't for that, Lloyd would have been a great choice."

Others in the game give Ausmus a positive review. Tony La Russa had dinner with Ausmus and was impressed. He wasn't the only one, as Dombrowski said, "Anyone I talked to or our people talked to, any time Brad's name came up, they were effusive with praise. They talked about his leadership capabilities, his ability as a player on the field as far as providing communication with all players. It always kept coming back that this guy was born to manage many years ago." A.J. Ellis, the Dodgers' catcher and a teammate of Ausmus in his last major league season in 2010, talked about how much Ausmus helped him out and pored over scouting reports to help the pitchers. Austin Hedges, a top catching prospect with the Padres, praised Ausmus, "I have gone down [to San Diego] a few times the last few offseasons to work with [Ausmus] or talked with him when he made the rounds during the season. It's always good to pick his brain. I always seem to learn something from him."

Is it a risk to hire a person with no managerial or coaching experience to take over a team that is going for a World Series title and can't afford much on-the-job learning? Dombrowski agreed it was a risk, but noted there is a risk with anybody he would have hired.

Our opinion, for what it is worth? We agree there is a risk, but people in the game seem to have a widespread respect for Ausmus. He has been a hot candidate for a managerial job the last few years, despite the lack of experience. Ausmus has a chance to be one of those guys, like Mike Scioscia and Jim Leyland, who becomes a legend in the job. He has a very high upside.

OK, so who is Brad Ausmus? Given his longtime association with the Padres, Tigers, and Astros, it's easy to forget that the 44-year old was in two big league organizations before joining those clubs. He was a 48th- round pick of the New York Yankees in 1987, and was progressing through the minors when he was taken in the 1992 expansion draft by the Colorado Rockies.

There is an interesting tie-in to Dombrowski there. Dombrowski's Florida Marlins were the other expansion team. The way the draft worked, in each round each existing major league team could lose only one player. In the third and last round, the Marlins took pitcher Danny Jackson from the Pittsburgh Pirates in a pre-arranged deal to send him to the Philadelphia Phillies. The Marlins knew who they wanted with their next pick,

a young relief pitcher in the Yankees' system named Mariano Rivera. However, the Rockies, picking next, took Ausmus from the Yankees and protecting them from other draft picks, so Rivera remained a Yankee.

Randy Smith, the future Tigers general manager with the Padres at the time, got Ausmus in 1993 from the Rockies in one of the five (!) deals he made involving Ausmus. When Smith became the Tigers' general manager, he traded for Ausmus midway through the 1996 season, and traded him to the Houston Astros (the team his dad worked for) a few months later in a huge deal: Ausmus, Jose Lima, Trever Miller, C.J. Nitkowski and Daryle Ward for Doug Brocail, Brian Hunter, Todd Jones, Orlando Miller and cash. Smith reacquired Ausmus before the 1999 season (along with Nitkowski, who had been in the 1996 trade too), before dealing him away for good after the 2000 season (along with Brocail, who had been on the other side of the 1996 trade) to Houston.

Ausmus managed to stay with Houston through the 2008 season (probably because Randy Smith was not the Tigers' general manager for much longer) before finishing his career with the Dodgers in 2009 and 2010. In 2010, the 40-year-old Ausmus was put on the disabled list with a back problem. What made that notable was that it was the only time the 18-year major league catcher went on the disabled list.

Let's review Ausmus' career with the Tigers. Here are his stats:

**Brad Ausmus Statistics as a Detroit Tiger and Career Totals**

Year	Age	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	CS	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	RC	RC/G
1996	27	75	226	30	56	12	0	4	22	3	4	26	45	.248	.328	.354	27	3.9
1999	30	127	458	62	126	25	6	9	54	12	9	51	71	.275	.365	.415	70	5.2
2000	31	150	523	75	139	25	3	7	51	11	5	69	79	.266	.357	.365	69	4.4
Detroit Tigers		352	1207	167	321	62	9	20	127	26	18	146	195	.266	.354	.382	166	4.6
Career (18 yrs)		1971	6279	718	1579	270	34	80	607	102	53	634	1034	.251	.325	.344	702	3.7

Ausmus had his best season at the plate in 1999 as a Tiger. A good fielding catcher who had 5.2 runs created per game was a really good player. He was the best player on the team according to Wins Above Replacement, although the Tigers beat writers (ignoring defense) gave their Tiger of the Year award to the best offensive player, Dean Palmer. He also had the honor of catching the final pitch thrown at Tiger Stadium, a strikeout of Carlos Beltran thrown by Todd Jones. As the starting catcher, Ausmus wore #11 in the game in honor of Bill Freehan, who had been voted to the Tigers' All-Time Team. He batted second and went 1-for-3. He also caught the first game in Comerica Park (but he did not catch the first pitch, as it was a foul bunt by Seattle's Mark McLemore). Ausmus was the number five batter and went 0-for-3 with a walk.

One more bit of Ausmus trivia: He is the sixth Jewish manager in major league history, joining Lipman Pike (1874 Hartford Dark Blues), Lou Boudreau (16 seasons, including Cleveland's last World Series championship in 1948), Norm Sherry (1976-1977 California Angels), former Tigers catcher Bob Melvin (current A's manager who faced the Tigers in the playoffs the last two years and formerly with Seattle and Arizona), and Jeff Newman (interim manager, A's, 1986).

Good luck to Brad Ausmus. We can't pretend that it is not nice to have somebody with Tiger ties leading the team in the dugout, and we hope he joins future Tiger managers (Bucky Harris of the 1924 Washington Senators and Ralph Houk of the 1961 New York Yankees), and two other men (Eddie Dyer of the 1946 St. Louis Cardinals and Bob Brenly of the 2001 Arizona Diamondbacks) as managers who have won the World Series in their first season on the job.

**PRINCELY FALL** – By David Raglin

One of the biggest reasons for the Tigers' playoff struggles at the plate this season was the lack of production in the middle of the order. Miguel Cabrera's performance was understandable given his serious groin problems that needed surgery, but the biggest disappointment was Prince Fielder. He was a total nonfactor in the playoffs. However, the story that many people missed was how much worse he was at the plate in 2013 than in 2011 or 2012:

**Prince Fielder Offensive Statistics, 2011-2013**

Total	Team	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	*OPS	*RC	*RC/G
2011	Milwaukee	569	170	36	1	38	120	107	106	.299	.415	.566	.981	135	8.6
2012	DETROIT	581	182	33	1	30	108	85	84	.313	.412	.528	.940	128	8.1
2013	DETROIT	624	174	36	0	25	106	75	117	.279	.362	.457	.819	103	5.6

\* OPS = on-base percentage plus slugging percentage, RC = estimate of how many runs his actions created, ignoring context-driven statistics like RBIs and runs scored, RC/G = using RC to estimate how many runs a team made of nine of that player would score per game.

Fielder had over eight runs created per game in 2011 and 2012 (meaning a team of nine Fielders at the plate would have scored over eight runs a game.) In 2013, he had a 5.6 runs created per game mark. That’s not terrible (40th out of 140 hitters who qualified for the batting title), but he was fourth in 2011 and sixth in 2012.

Fielder’s offensive WAR of 2.9 (indicating his bat added about three wins to the Tigers, taking into account he is a first baseman) was comparable to teammates Torii Hunter and Austin Jackson, as well as Chase Headley of San Diego, Elvis Andrus of Texas, and Neil Walker of Pittsburgh. Taking into account Fielder’s bad defense, his WAR of 1.7 is about the same as Erick Aybar of the L.A. Angels, Brandon Barnes of Houston, and Carlos Ruiz of Philadelphia. That’s not what Mike Ilitch is paying \$24 million a year for.

What happened in 2013? Let’s look to see if we can find something in the stats. One stat we found interesting from ESPN is that Fielder is having increasingly more trouble with fastballs. He had a .604 slugging percentage off fastballs in 2011, .542 in 2012, and .439 in 2013. Teams were obviously paying attention to that; in the 2013 postseason through Game Five of the American League Championship Series, about 71 percent of pitches to Fielder were fastballs, and he “slugged” .185 off of them.

We also found Fielder’s left-right platoon stats to be interesting, and not in a good way:

**Prince Fielder Offensive Statistics, Versus Left-Handers and Right-Handers, 2011-2013**

Vs LHP	Team	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
2011	Milwaukee	170	48	7	1	7	31	22	40	.282	.363	.459	.822	29	6.0
2012	DETROIT	218	63	14	1	6	46	22	39	.289	.363	.445	.808	35	5.8
2013	DETROIT	233	68	12	0	9	47	22	45	.292	.360	.459	.819	38	5.9

Vs RHP	Team	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	RC	RC/G
2011	Milwaukee	399	122	29	0	31	89	85	66	.306	.435	.612	1.046	106	9.8
2012	DETROIT	363	119	19	0	24	62	63	45	.328	.439	.579	1.017	93	9.7
2013	DETROIT	391	106	24	0	16	59	53	72	.271	.364	.455	.819	65	5.8

Fielder’s stats versus left-handers are very consistent over the three years. However, against right-handers, whom as a lefty he should crush, his stats took a nosedive in 2013. His home runs were about half of what they were in 2011, his batting average fell by more than 50 points, and his runs created per game dropped like a rock. His stats against right-handers were similar to those against lefties in 2013.

The table at the top of the next page provides more insight. It separates his plate appearances into four categories: the plate appearance (PA in the table below) ending on the First Pitch (a 0-0 count), on Other Even Counts (1-1, 2-2), with the Batter Ahead (1-0, 2-0, 2-1, 3-0, 3-1, and 3-2), and with the Pitcher Ahead (0-1, 0-2, and 1-2). The table shows that Fielder did a bit better on first pitches in 2013 and a bit worse when the count ended even. When Fielder was ahead, his 2012 and 2013 statistics were similar. The most interesting table is when the pitcher is ahead. Fielder’s stats fell through the floor.

So, what do we have here? Fielder had trouble against fastballs, against right-handers, and when the pitcher was ahead in the count (and to an extent when the count was even). What is the common denominator here? We don’t really know. The first two suggest Fielder was not handling pitches that he should (fastballs from righties), but the latter suggests that he had trouble in situations where he did not have the advantage.

**Prince Fielder Offensive Statistics, By Pitch Count, 2011-2013**

Season	Team	First Pitch (0-0 Count)					Other Even Count (1-1, 2-2)				
		PA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	PA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
2011	Milwaukee	78	.333	.346	.693	1.039	118	.254	.254	.483	.737
2012	DETROIT	88	.365	.386	.718	1.104	127	.322	.339	.463	.801
2013	DETROIT	95	.418	.432	.703	1.135	146	.248	.260	.383	.643

  

Season	Team	Batter Ahead (1-0, 2-0, 2-1, 3-0, 3-1, 3-2)					Pitcher Ahead (0-1, 1-2, 0-2)				
		PA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	PA	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
2011	Milwaukee	284	.324	.577	.636	1.213	212	.291	.311	.507	.819
2012	DETROIT	264	.320	.553	.535	1.088	211	.281	.289	.483	.772
2013	DETROIT	274	.318	.507	.551	1.058	200	.196	.205	.299	.504

What does this mean for 2014 and the six (!) following seasons that Fielder is under contract to the Tigers? This could easily be a one-year blip. We only have to look at Tiger postseason killer David Ortiz as evidence. He looked like he was through in 2009, but we now know that was not true. As we discussed last issue, the Tigers' top postseason players this year, Justin Verlander and Victor Martinez, had us pretty worried this summer, but they both turned it around. We know that Fielder had some off-the-field issues he was dealing with this summer that could have affected his play, and once things are not going good, they can get worse in a hurry. In other words, let's hold off judgment. Next year, it might be Fielder who makes the great comeback.

**KING TIGER: ONE AWARD, MANY CHOICES -- By Mark Pattison**

When you cast your vote for this year's King Tiger Award, the tenth under the auspices of the Mayo Smith Society, there is no shortage of choices. Think about all the quality players on the Detroit roster this year.

There were guys who started strong, and guys who finished strong. A Cy Young winner? Which would you prefer -- past or present? MVP winner? Past or present, or maybe regular season vs. playoff hero? Role players without whom the Tigers would surely have been doomed had they not stepped it up a notch. Players whose injuries paralleled a dip in the team performance, only to see both come roaring back when healthy.

Next, take into consideration the players' role outside the lines. What kind of presence did they have in the clubhouse and in the community? Who seems grateful to wear the Old English D? According to our rules, you cannot split your vote between two or more players. Also, you have just one vote per membership. We want voters to wax enthusiastic about their choice for King Tiger, because we like printing the responses of an informed electorate. But we're instituting a much narrower voting window than in years past. You can still choose to vote either via email or postal mail, but all votes MUST be received by Saturday, Dec. 7. Votes by email should be sent to [pattison\\_mark@hotmail.com](mailto:pattison_mark@hotmail.com), with "King Tiger" in the subject field. If you send your vote via the Postal Service, send it to Mark Pattison, 1221 Floral St. NW, Washington, DC 20012.

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*Tigers Stripes*, the official newsletter of the Mayo Smith Society, is published nine times a year. **Publisher/Society Administrator:** Todd Miller (412/848-1082, [toddprmtg@verizon.net](mailto:toddprmtg@verizon.net)). **Editor:** Mark Pattison (202/829-9289, [pattison\\_mark@hotmail.com](mailto:pattison_mark@hotmail.com)). **Writer/ Sabermetrician:** David Raglin (703/556-0332 or 703/835-1198, [darags@ymail.com](mailto:darags@ymail.com)). **Membership Services Coordinator:** Pete Wright. The Mayo Smith Society was established in 1983 by Dale Petroskey, Dennis Petroskey, and Bill Mackay.