

# Tigers Stripes

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## THE VERLANDER ERA – By David Raglin

The trade of Justin Verlander marked the end of an era in Tiger baseball in a way that the trades of fellow stars J. D. Martinez and Justin Upton could not. When Verlander came to the majors for two spot starts in the second games of doubleheaders in July 2005, Alan Trammell was the manager and the Tigers were finishing up a string of 12 losing seasons in a row. There was some hope for the future -- maybe a .500 season in 2006. Verlander came to camp in 2006 slated to return to the minors; after all, other than for those two starts, he had never pitched above Double-A. But the spring of 2006 was a game-changer for Verlander, who made the team and the rotation, and his Rookie of the Year campaign helped lead the Tigers to their first winning season, postseason appearance, and pennant in years. He even started Game 1 of the World Series that year.

Unfortunately, the Tigers stumbled a bit after that. The Tigers were picked for greatness in 2008 after acquiring Miguel Cabrera but they never got it going, finishing 74-88, in part because of Verlander's only bad season in his first eight years. Both Verlander and the team kicked it into a higher gear in the early years of this decade; the team won four straight division titles and had three appearances in baseball's Final Four from 2011 to 2014, and Verlander with a combo Cy Young/MVP season in 2011 and arguably another Cy Young season the next year (when he finished second to future teammate David Price.)

While the Tigers won the division in 2014, a closer look showed that they were clearly on the way down, barely winning the Central before being manhandled by the Orioles in the Division Series. Verlander had a rough year and injuries led to a shortened 2015 season while the team started to rebuild. Verlander came back to form in 2016, arguably pitching well enough to earn another Cy Young (finishing second again, this time to former teammate Rick Porcello.) By 2017, while Verlander got stronger as the season went on, the Tigers got weaker, and after many rumors, the Justin Verlander Era in Detroit ended on August 31, 2017.

So, we are going to look at the Justin Verlander Era, from 2006 to August 31, 2017, in this issue of *Tigers Stripes*. (Yes, he did make those two spot starts in 2005, but we are going to ignore that. He wore #59 that year, not his later #35, so if you want to be picky, it's the Justin Verlander #35 Era.)

How does this era compare to other great eras in Tiger history? Let's start by comparing the Tigers' record in the Verlander Era with the best 12 season (non-overlapping) stretches in Tigers history:

### **Greatest 12-Season Eras in Detroit Tiger History**

Rank	Years	W	L	Pct	Comments
1	1934-1945	1,023	821	.555	Four pennants, two World Series championships
2	1961-1972	1,067	870	.551	Year of the Tiger era, 101 wins in 1961, 1972 AL East champs
3	1905-1916	1,007	825	.550	Three straight pennants, 101 win 1915 season
4	1977-1988	1,025	864	.543	Bless You Boys era, 1987 AL East champs
<b>5</b>	<b>2006-2017*</b>	<b>1,008</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>.527</b>	<b>Two pennants, five playoffs, four straight AL Central champs</b>

\* Through August 31, 2017

It's easy to forget how good the 1930s-40s Tigers were. Despite being up against some of the best Yankees teams in history, the Tigers were clearly the second-best team of that era. Their .555 winning percentage basically means they averaged, putting into the modern 162-game schedule, 90-win seasons for 12 years.

In a way, though, it is unfair to compare the current Tigers era to those past ones. The league, with things like the draft, free agency, revenue sharing, and improvements in the quality of front offices, is much

more balanced than in the past. A hundred years ago, the best teams in baseball each year usually won almost two-thirds of their games, something that is not true now. Notice in the table that the 1915 and 1961 teams each won 101 games (the 1915 team in a 154-game season), yet did not win the pennant.

How did the Tigers in the Verlander Era compare with the other teams in baseball? The following table compares the records of each team over the Verlander Era:

**Major League Baseball Team Records During the Verlander Era**

Team	W	L	Pct	GB	Pace	Team	W	L	Pct	GB	Pace
NYN	1,080	834	.564	x	91.4	CHC	949	963	.496	130.0	80.4
LAD	1,057	855	.553	22.0	89.6	MIL	950	965	.496	130.5	80.4
STL	1,041	872	.544	38.5	88.2	OAK	947	967	.495	133.0	80.2
LAA	1,039	877	.542	42.0	87.8	ARI	926	989	.484	154.5	78.3
BOS	1,035	880	.540	45.5	87.6	CIN	925	990	.483	155.5	78.3
<b>DET</b>	<b>1,008</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>.527</b>	<b>71.5</b>	<b>85.4</b>	CHW	924	990	.483	156.0	78.2
TEX	1,007	908	.526	73.5	85.2	MIN	920	996	.480	161.0	77.8
TOR	970	945	.507	110.5	82.1	BAL	918	996	.480	162.0	77.7
PHI	968	946	.506	112.0	81.9	COL	907	1,009	.473	174.0	76.7
TBR	969	949	.505	113.0	81.8	SDP	906	1,010	.473	175.0	76.6
CLE	965	947	.505	114.0	81.8	SEA	901	1,015	.470	180.0	76.2
SFG	967	949	.505	114.0	81.8	KCR	897	1,017	.469	183.0	75.9
ATL	964	948	.504	115.0	81.7	MIA	896	1,016	.469	183.0	75.9
NYM	962	952	.503	118.0	81.4	PIT	893	1,024	.466	188.5	75.5
WAS	950	962	.497	129.0	80.5	HOU	872	1,041	.456	207.5	73.8

The Tigers had the sixth best record in baseball during the era, a very solid performance, playing at a 85-win pace. Of the five teams ahead of them, two of them, the two Los Angeles teams, also did not win a World Series during that time (although the Dodgers came close this year). They are about even with the Texas Rangers, who, like the Tigers, won two pennants.

The Tigers made five playoff appearances from 2006 to 2017. Counting the 2017 season, the Dodgers had the most with eight, followed by the Cardinals with seven, the Red Sox and Yankees, with six, and then the Tigers, Rangers, Cubs, and Phillies with five. The Tigers made the League Championship Series, baseball's Final Four, four times; only the Dodgers and Cardinals, with five, were better. That certainly was a significant accomplishment for the Tigers. Eight teams won a World Series in the era, the Giants three times, the Red Sox and Cardinals twice, and five other teams once.

The conclusion from this corner is that the Tigers were a very good but not a great team during the Verlander Era. They produced some very memorable moments for their fans; I have my list and I'm sure you have yours. They could have done better, sure, but there are a lot of teams that did a lot worse than the Tigers over the last dozen years.

The Tigers of that era were full of stars, some of the greatest, highest profile players in the game. Miguel Cabrera is not only a lock for the Hall of Fame, he is in the discussion as one of the greatest right-handed hitters in history. Justin Verlander's 2017 season probably is enough to put him in Cooperstown, and if not, he should have a few more great seasons to make him another easy choice. Max Scherzer is building his own case for the Hall of Fame, too; while he needs a few more years to clinch it, he looks like he could do it. In 2014, the Tigers had four pitchers (Verlander, Scherzer, Price, and Porcello) that between them have six Cy Young Awards.

By way of contrast, the prior two Tigers great eras have been deep teams with a lot of good players, but not that level of stardom. For the Bless You Boys, Alan Trammell and Lou Whitaker should be in the Hall, and others argue for Jack Morris, but none of them are at the level of a Cabrera or a Verlander. The Year of the Tiger era has one key player in Cooperstown, Al Kaline, and as good as Kaline was, Cabrera is that much

better. The only other era that is comparable in Tigers history, I would say, was the 1930s-40s teams with Hank Greenberg, Charlie Gehringer and Hal Newhouser all in the Hall of Fame. In the Tigers of 100 years ago, Ty Cobb is still the greatest Tiger of all time, but there was no pitcher at Verlander's level. Tiger fans have been very lucky to watch some of the best players ever to play the game over the last decade. That might be the lasting legacy of the Verlander Era: a few trips to Cooperstown for Induction Day in our future.

Next month, we will look at the things the Tigers did well to make the Verlander Era what it was, and the things that could have made the era even better.

**THE NEW MANAGER**—By David Raglin

After an extensive search, the Detroit Tigers hired Ron Gardenhire to be the new manager. Tigers fans are familiar with Gardenhire from watching him in the Twins dugout from 2002 to 2014. Gardenhire was the bench coach for the Arizona Diamondbacks last season and when it looked like Brad Ausmus might be let go after the 2015 season, Gardenhire was considered a top candidate.

We don't have any detailed analysis about how good a manager Gardenhire will be. There was criticism that it was the "safe" or "conventional" choice as opposed to one of the hot new names like Alex Cora and Dave Martinez (who ended up getting managerial jobs in Boston and Washington, respectively). There is also concern that he is more "old school" as opposed to being more sabermetrically inclined. The Tigers had a history under Dave Dombrowski of eschewing sabermetrics, and while Al Avila is changing that, Gardenhire's hire raised concerns about how dedicated the Tigers really are to stats. The Twins during Gardenhire's day were not statically advanced, but he said that he learned about the benefits of statistical analysis last summer with the Diamondbacks. As Katie Strang of The Athletic quoted him, "I don't mind being called old-school ... but we also know there are a lot of new ways out there, and if you stop learning, you're probably screwed."

Although I am a very big proponent of sabermetrics and glad the Tigers are trying to catch up, I'm not too concerned about the level of Gardenhire's devotion to it. Frankly, his main job the next couple of years is not to win games with dazzling strategy, it is to develop young players. He has plenty of experience doing that with the Twins, who during their most successful days under him were a low-budget club, and it is considered his biggest strength. Whether he brings in the right relief pitcher in a key situation (not that he will have many good choices) is not as important as how good Jeimer Candelario and Franklin Perez turn out to be.

We can look at Gardenhire as this generation's Ralph Houk. Like Gardenhire, Houk was brought in when it was clear that the Tigers' run of good seasons had run its course and it was time to rebuild. Both had been successful managers elsewhere and were baseball lifers considered to be good with young players. Houk managed the Tigers from 1974 to 1978, when he left of his own volition. The first two seasons under Houk were bad as the Tigers finished last for only the second and third time in their history. By 1976, though, the young players who would make up the Tigers teams of the future were starting to bubble up from the farm system, and thanks to one of the greatest rookie classes in history (Lou Whitaker, Alan Trammell, Jack Morris, Lance Parrish), the 1978 Tigers had the first of 11 winning seasons in a row.

However, even if Gardenhire can make good young players better, they must be good in the first place. Gardenhire noted that both he and Avila have contracts through 2020, which is not a coincidence. They both seem to know that the Tigers must show ample progress by then to have a chance for a contract renewal.

**FREE AGENT POSSIBILITIES** – By David Raglin

The Tigers free agent shopping list will be very different in 2018 than the last few years. Tigers fans have been used to the Tigers shopping at Nordstrom's for the best players as they attempted to win a World Series for owner Mike Ilitch. Now, the Tigers will be heading to the outlet mall for bargains and players who might be able to fill some holes. For example, the Tigers have signed three pitchers, one to a major league contract (starter Ryan Carpenter), and two to minor league deals (relievers Kevin Comer and Mark Montgomery) whom Fangraphs suggested have some potential to blossom. (Let's not get too excited about this; one of the other names on the list was former Tiger Myles Jaye, who did not look like a major league pitcher with the Tigers in September.)

Tigers free agent possibilities fall into two categories: (1) players with some long-term potential, with potential to contribute in 2018; and (2) fillers to allow the Tigers to present a reasonable team in 2018. The three pitchers above fall into the first category. Another avenue is to find pitchers who were good but then had injury problems, like Chris Tillman and Drew Smyly. Tillman was a solid starter for the Orioles from 2012 to 2016 before shoulder problems ruined his 2017 season. Smyly has had shoulder problems, and last year had Tommy John surgery, and will miss much of the 2018 season.

There are several pitchers who would be good possibilities to be fillers, like non-tenders A.J. Griffin and Hector (not Bruce) Rondon, and free agent pitchers like Miguel Gonzalez, Jhoulys Chacin, and even ageless Bartolo Colon. Those free agents might not be good, but they can at least take the ball every five days, which the Tigers sorely need to avoid a disaster like last September (as we wrote about last month).

Our favorite choice for a filler, though, is an outfielder that we are quite familiar with, Curtis Granderson, who played last year for the Mets and Dodgers and surely will not be back in L.A. next year. Why would he be a good fit?

First, he is a left-handed hitter. Right now, the only lefties in the Tigers' everyday lineup are switch hitters Victor Martinez and Jeimer Candelario, and Martinez might not be back in 2018. Second, the Tigers need a left fielder with Mikie Mahtook and Nick Castellanos slotted for center and right field. Granderson is not a good defensive outfielder anymore, but he can certainly hold his own out there. Third, while he hit only .212 last year, his on-base percentage was .323 and he slugged .452. Fourth, Granderson is a great team player who would be a good example for the young players the Tigers will be bringing up. It might even set up a post-playing career for Granderson with the Tigers. Fifth, if he plays *really* well, the Tigers could flip him at the trading deadline for a prospect.

Sixth, his contract may not be the cheapest option but he will bring in money that another player will not. Grandy was a fan favorite, and the Tigers will need to do something to give fans a reason to come to the ballpark this summer. Let's say that between the effect on season tickets and partial plans, and walkup tickets, the Tigers sell 500 extra tickets a game because of Granderson (That is a very reasonable estimate). That adds up to about 40,000 fans for the season, and if you assume that each fan spends \$50 between their ticket, food, souvenirs, etc., that is an extra \$2 million in revenue for the Tigers that will offset the cost of his contract.

Yes, I'm writing this as a fan as much as an analyst, but signing Granderson makes a lot of sense. The Tigers traded a popular #28 last summer, J.D. Martinez, in a deal that upset many fans. It'd be great to have another popular #28 back wearing the Old English "D."

**SHORT STRIPE** – By David Raglin

There was a great article on the University of Michigan's athletics web site recently on Bill Freehan who, along with his great Tigers career, played and coached at U-M. Unfortunately, Freehan now suffers from Alzheimer's disease but while the article talks about that, it talks about his career and his influence over people like Cardinals manager Mike Matheny and Derek Jeter. Even MSU fans will like this piece! Here is the link: <http://mgoblue.com/news/2017/11/28/baseball-bill-freehan-a-legend-and-his-legacy.aspx>.

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