

Snowballs to Baseballs

Only a few weeks left before we turn our attention to our beloved Tigers. Opening Day is Monday, March 31st. Transitioning to thinking about the Tigers is a challenge this year because we are facing piles of snow and freezing temperatures that just don't seem to want to go away. That being said, we Midwesterners know that baseball is around the corner and despite the cold weather; we are ready to cheer on our Tigers through all challenges.

My colleagues have asked me to share my thoughts on the upcoming season and I have shared with the media that this is the most excited I have been, for at least 10 years, for a season to start because I feel the Tigers are very close to having a team that can compete in any type of baseball game. I love the fact that they have DRAMATICALLY improved their team speed and defense.

Let me start out by doing a quick analysis of their starting pitching:

Scherzer, Sanchez, Verlander, Porcello and Smyly. This starting staff is as good as any staff in all of baseball. I have also gone on record and shared that this is the year where Porcello really steps up his game. If he does, which I know he can do, they will have four starting pitchers expected to pitch at least 6 innings (hopefully more) and turning the game over to the bullpen with a lead. Smyly showed his worth last year out of the bullpen, but this year is going to be a little different for him. My expectations are that this transition will be very smooth because this young man has a great feel for the art of pitching

and he has 4 quality pitches that he is able to throw at any time in the count. He has 2 fastballs (a 2 seam fastball and a 4 seam fastball) a very electric slider and a solid changeup. Going into the season, we know that Verlander is going to be healthy, which is really good news because starting pitching is key.

Now let's take a look at the bullpen:

Nathan, Albuquerque, Rondon and Chamberlain. I think these are the only 4 that have a guaranteed spot on the opening day roster. Personally I think the Tiger bullpen is by far the biggest question going into the season. I know the fans are thrilled about getting Nathan during the offseason, but he is pushing 40 years old. He may do a stellar job as the Tigers closer, but recognize that he has thrown a lot of pitches over his great career and I am concerned about his durability and his arm strength for an entire season. Albuquerque is a wild card again this season. When he is "ON" he is absolutely unhittable, but when he is off, he is by far one of the most frustrating pitchers to watch. I will start the season with my fingers crossed every time he takes the mound and hopefully that finger crossing will dissipate over time. Rondon is ready to be a staple in the bullpen. He came into camp last year with the world on his shoulders as our closer (that is the pitcher who typically pitches the last inning of a game when his team is winning). He has the arm to be that closer, but he was not ready mentally to take on that challenge. I was very impressed with the way the Tigers handled his situation last year. Sending him down to the minor leagues, in hopes

summaries

of him getting his confidence back and then bringing him back to the Major Leagues as a bullpen pitcher who would pitch the middle innings (typically the 5th, 6th or 7th) was a solid move. We were able to watch this young man mature in front of us and we all watched him have late season success. Now he is ready and he may be the set up man for Nathan (set up man is the pitcher who typically comes in to pitch in the 8th inning, hopefully with his team winning, and then giving the ball to the closer to pitch the last inning). Chamberlain is basically in the same position as Rondon except he has a lot of major league experience. He was with the New York Yankees and was publicized as one of their young phenoms. He did start out strong, but because of some arm injuries he hasn't performed. He is now healthy and my observation of him is that he isn't scared. He is a bulldog and I love players like that. The setup role should be an interesting competition between Rondon and Chamberlain. Currently I am leaning more towards Chamberlain, but by season end it wouldn't surprise me if Rondon has control of that title. I have shared my thoughts on 4 bullpen slots knowing that the Tigers typically have 7 pitchers in the bullpen. The other 3 slots are wide open and there will be a surprise in this group! The 3 names that stick out right now are: Coke, Krol and Putkonen. However, if the Tigers feel they need a long man out of the bullpen (a pitcher that comes in early in a game because his team's pitcher either got hurt or had a rough day) who can go 5 or 6 innings and hold the other team from scoring runs, then Alvarez could be a candidate. He showed last year that he can pitch in the major leagues if he has his good control. The bullpen is the wild card this year for the Tigers winning it all or disappointing us in the post season. How do you like that for sticking my neck out!

Now let's talk about our position players: WOW!

Cabrera, Kinsler, Iglesias, Castellanos, Avila, Davis, Jackson, Hunter and Martinez as our DH! This is a lineup that can beat you in so many ways versus waiting for the three run homerun that never seemed to happen in the postseason. Kinsler could be the spark that Tigers have been looking for; however, I was not a happy camper when he said negative things about his time with the Texas Rangers. Could this guy be disruptive to the chemistry of a ball club? I hope not! Just call me old school; I believe a player should keep his thoughts to himself about past teams and players unless they are positive. Davis has absolutely no fear on the base path and I love that in someone who can steal bases. I had an opportunity to talk to Maury Wills (one of the most prolific base stealers in the history of baseball along with Lou Brock and Ricky Henderson) and he said the best base stealers are the ones who have no fear. I saw Davis run the bases last year and he absolutely has no fear. The question will be will he hit enough to be in the line up on a regular basis. I believe he will. Castellanos is the million dollar question heading towards opening day. He is now back at his normal position (3rd base) and is having a solid spring training. I will caution you, having a solid or great spring training doesn't necessarily translate into a solid or great season. I am still pleased to see that he is swinging the bat well which will allow him to start the season (possibly in the snow) with a positive attitude. Iglesias is going to be a weekly highlight reel. What a talent and from my little time spent with him he truly wants to get better each and every day. If he can hit around .240 or better, that will just be a bonus. Avilla is another wild card. He has been beaten up so bad as a catcher, the question will be will his body be able to bounce back to be the player he was when he made the All Star team?

I don't know, but I will tell you this, I pull for him as hard as any player I know because he is such a quality young man and the pitchers really enjoy having him behind the plate. I believe it imperative that Holaday catch more than one day a week. In fact, he has proven that he can do a very respectable job behind the plate and maybe catching him 3 times a week might be a wise decision. I could elaborate on the rest of the position players, but we all know they are solid and in one case maybe the best hitter that has ever played the game (Miquel Cabrera). I know that is a very strong statement, so I will back off a bit by saying that he is most certainly in the top 5 of the greatest hitters that has ever played the game. He is absolutely amazing! There shouldn't be any worries about who is going to hit behind him, in order to protect him from being walked all the time, because Martinez is the next best hitter on the team and may be in the top 5 best hitters in the league! Brad Ausmus will have to determine a batting order, but I can tell you that Cabrera will hit 3rd and Martinez will hit 4th.

Defense:

It is going to improve because of the team speed. Cabrera moving back to 1st base is a solid move. Castellanos moving back to 3rd base could be a positive, but only time will tell. Iglesias could be the most impressive player we have had in a long time with his ability to do things at short stop that most can't even dream about. He will be under the tutelage of Omar Visquel (Tiger infield coach who will be in the Hall of Fame and is possibly one of the best short stops who has ever played) and that will help this young man to understand that making great plays is important, but not nearly as important as making the routine plays. The double play combination of Iglesias and Kinsler should be

solid. Catching has always been pretty solid and will continue to be with Avila and Holaday. The outfield has improved with Davis and his speed in left field. The Tigers defense has improved since last year and I believe the pitching staff will share in that comment.

Bench Players:

Up until a few days ago this list was pretty much complete with Kelly, Lombardozzi, Holaday and Dirks. Then the news came out that Dirks has to have surgery on his back and he may be out 12 weeks. I would argue that he may be out for the entire season. Now the Tigers have to determine if they are going to try to go out of the organization to find his replacement or might they consider using Kelly as that platoon like player in left field with Davis. The Tigers did sign some fairly unknown free agents during the off season and this may be the opportunity for one of those signings to show their stuff. In my humble opinion, I think they need to find a left handed hitting outfielder with some decent speed. Lombardozzi is a solid infielder and I have been told he is fiery type guy. Again, I love these types of players. He does a lot of things well, but nothing great. As a utility type player, he fits the mold perfectly because he can play multiple positions and he may surprise us with his ability to hit. I have been told that he can swing the bat better than most would expect.

Manager and Coaches:

Our new manager is Brad Ausmus. His resume purely consists of him as a player and working in the front office. This will be his first time as a manager, at any level, and it will be very interesting to see how he does. He is a bright young man, who has a

local independent personal accessible
interactive creative local independent personal
knowledgeable thoughtful ethical experienced

track record as a thinking catcher and this will most certainly carry over to his duties as a manager. It will be interesting to watch his journey as he learns on the job, and he has a great mentor in Gene Lamont, who will be his bench coach (typically the manager's right hand). The rest of the coaching staff is hard for me to comment on because I just don't know. They are Dave Clark, Mick Billmeyer along with Matt Martin. That being said, I do know Jeff Jones and there isn't a finer pitching coach in all of baseball. Wally Joyner and Darnell Coles are new hitting instructors and the jury is out on how they will do. I knew Wally as a terrific hitter when he played for the Anaheim Angels and I knew Darnell as a teammate here in Detroit. Omar Vizquel is the infield coach and he will be a fabulous addition to Brad's coaching staff.

My line-up

1. Ian Kislner 2B
2. Tori Hunter RF
3. Miguel Cabrera 1B
4. Victor Martinez DH (Designated Hitter)
5. Austin Jackson CF
6. Nick Castellanos 3B
7. Alex Avila C
8. Rajai Davis LF
9. Jose Iglesias SS

The Tigers will win their division again this year, as is to be expected, and they will win it by winning differently. What I mean is that they can now win a game by getting a walk, stealing second base, having the hitter move the runner over to third base by bunting or hitting behind the runner and then a sacrifice fly to the outfield for a run. They were unable to do this before because they were strictly a power team. They can also win games by stellar defense and taking away base hits that were hits last year. And occasionally they can put on a power display and beat you that way. The Tigers are a more than reputable candidate to win the World Series this year: they have very strong starting pitching, very strong defense and solid hitting. That is a formula for success. So my final analysis is that you should consider getting your order in for World Series Tickets earlier rather than later!!! Have a great summer (it will get here) and enjoy watching this potentially very exciting team do their thing.

David B. Bergman