

THE ULTIMATE TIGERS HOMESTAND

(by Glenn Guzzo)

Looking for a project to use History Maker Baseball's gorgeous All-Time Franchise cards, I went back to my formative years as a baseball fan.

After seeing my first game at what was then called Briggs Stadium in Detroit in 1959, for years I was in awe each time the family car passed the great cathedral – the majestic light stands towering above the mountainous three-deck stadium; the entry gates seemed like secret passages. Much simpler, yet equally inspiring to this new fan, was the simple marquee, giving the dates of upcoming home games:

BAL 18, 19, 20

CLE 22, 23, 24, 24

NY 26, 27, 28

After seeing Frank Lary shut out the Kansas City A's (whose center fielder that night was Roger Maris) and Charlie "Paw Paw" Maxwell hit a home run that first time, I dreamed of seeing all the games. Alas, the best we could do as a lower-middle-class family, or with neighborhood buddies, was the occasional visit, so we targeted Sunday double-headers (are you old enough to remember those?) to get the most live baseball we could. In the early-mid '60s, our Tigers didn't need to schedule double-headers to sell out games for the legendary Yankees, so we settled mostly for games against the mediocre Indians, Red Sox and Angels, with the occasional dose of Orioles, Twins and White Sox.

But sports simulations let us revive those long-lost dreams. So my HMB project became **The Ultimate Tigers Home Stand**. The All-Time Franchise Tigers would play five-game series against each of the other 11 American League teams in the ATF sets – with every game to be played in the historic cathedral once known as Briggs Stadium and Tiger Stadium (Navin Field was before my time).

The 55 games with Cobb and Kaline, Gehringer and Greenberg, Cabrera and Cash, Trammell and Whitaker, Lolich and McLain, Newhouser and Verlander, Fidrych and Hernandez was a non-stop thrill ride:

Breath-stealing drama: About 40 percent of the games were come-from-behind victories (by the Tigers or their foes) on runs scored in the eighth inning or later.

Unforgettable memories: Denny McLain threw a no-hitter against Texas. Two games later, Justin Verlander did it, too. In 55 years of gaming, two no-hitters in three games were unheard of on my tabletop.

Herculean performances: Miguel Cabrera had 21 HR and 48 RBI. Verlander was 7-1, 1.79 – against all-time greats. His only loss was 1-0 to Bret Saberhagen.

Oddities: McLain's no-hitter was his only win in a 1-6 season. Both of his last two losses were by 1-0 (David Cone and Chris Bosio got the best of the Tigers) ... For Texas (or, should I say, for Detroit?) SS Alex Rodriguez went 0-for-20 with 10 strikeouts and grounded into a double play. The only time he reached base was on an error.

Streaks and Peaks – and Valleys: After being outslugged by Boog Powell, Chris Hoiles and others in three of their first four games, the Tigers humiliated the Orioles in Game Five, 19-2, starting a nine-game win streak that included five straight against Boston. But a five-game losing streak (two to Chicago, three to Cleveland) followed. Much later, the Tigers won eight straight (the finale with the Yankees, five straight with the Angels and the first two with the Rangers). But they were shut out four times while losing six of 10 against the Royals and Brewers, three by 1-0 scores ... The Tigers were 14-1 against the Red Sox, Angels and Senators/Rangers, but lost four of five to the Indians and Royals.

The Tigers finished 32-23, the equivalent of 94 wins in a 162-game season. With no DH in use and facing nothing but Ace and Star pitching – most of them with Flash and Control, too – the Tigers' position players hit only .249, but slammed 65 home runs and averaged four runs per game.

Leaders:

BA: Ty Cobb (.329 -- .349 until he went 1-for-15 in the last series against the Brewers, of all teams) ... Upgraded from Active to DBL Active, the baserunning maniac also had 42 SB.

OBP: Charley Gehringer (.410 on a .280 BA with a team-best 41 walks) ... The Mechanical Man also led the team with 9 doubles.

SLUGGING: Cabrera (.581 and his team-best 21 HR and 48 RBI) ... He provided Clean Up power all season, but shattered expansion-team pitching, with 11 HR (with four two-HR games) in his final 20 games.

On the short-end of a LF platoon with Kirk Gibson, Rocky Colavito slashed .293/.411/.560 in just 75 AB.

The Tigers were forced to play short-handed in three series. Colavito played for Cleveland, not Detroit. Mickey Cochrane played for the A's, not Detroit. His catcher companion, Pudge Rodriguez, played for Texas, not Detroit.

WINS: Verlander led with 7 wins, won-lost percentage (7-1), ERA (1.79) and strikeouts (79 in his team-high 85 1/3 IP).

SAVES: John Hiller (6) to go with a 2.10 ERA for his 30 IP in 27 appearances.

Bullpen Salute: In addition to Hiller's mastery, Willie Hernandez went 6-1, Aurelio Lopez was 3-0, 1.47 and Jose Valverde was 3-1, 2.66. Collectively, the 'pen was 14-3.

Yes, that meant most of the starters had tough times, making Verlander's season all the more remarkable. McLain, the AL MVP in 1968, was 1-6, 3.61. Hal Newhouser, the AL MVP in 1946, was 2-4, 3.54. Mickey Lolich, who won 25 games in 1971, was 4-3, 4.42. Dizzy Trout, who won 27 in 1944, was 3-4, 4.53. Mark Fidrych, who was 19-9 as a rookie in 1976, was 2-2, 4.03, with one of his wins in relief.