

Tigers Outlook Bright Thanks to 2 Livonians

By GEORGE MASKIN
Sports Editor

LAKELAND, Fla. — "If our pitching is as good as we think it is, we'll be okay."

The man talking was Mayo Smith, who next Tuesday leads the Tigers for the first time in a regularly-scheduled American League game.

When Smith talks about pitching, he is quick to mention two gentlemen who make their year-around home in Livonia, Mich.

One is Denny McLain, a 20-game winner for the Tigers in 1966. The other is Joe Sparna, who was pretty much of a flop a year ago as far as he himself and the Tigers were concerned.

McLain and Sparna along with Earl Wilson and Mickey Lolich comprise the Big Four of the 1967 Tiger pitching staff.

There is no reason to believe McLain will not retain the brilliance that made him

one of the American League greats a year ago. As for Sparna, he has emerged as the No. 1 surprise in the Tiger training camp this spring.

The future again has turned bright for the former Ohio State football and baseball star who smiles about what has happened to him in the Grapefruit League this spring and wonders if the good city fathers in Livonia have gotten around to paving the street on which he lives, while he's been in the southland.

Sparna's change in fortunes can be attributed to a lot of his coming up with a good cause and change of pace.

"A year ago, I had to rely too much on my fast ball," he declared. "That would get me into a jam. The batters knew my trouble and would sit back and wait for me to come in there with a hard one."

"When I did . . . bingo,

they really connected." Thanks to new pitching coach Johnny Sain, Sparna has developed a curve and change of pace. His last time

out, he allowed only one hit in six innings of pitching against the Phillies. "He'll be one of my regular starters," Manager Smith declared.

All of which brought more smiles to the face of the handsome Livonian. McLain, meantime, hasn't had a great spring, but McLain isn't worried.

"Remember, I can't so hot down here last year either. But look what happened when the regular season began and the chips were down," the bespectacled fellow who was just 23 years old the other afternoon declared.

Most of the experts are high on the Tigers for the coming season . . . and for more reasons than the pitching, which will feature the Sparnas, McLains, Wilsons and Lolichs.

The Tigers have the No. 1 outfield in the American League with Al Kaline, Willie Horton, and Jim Northrup leading the way.

The infield is very solid, except perhaps for the weak-hitting Ray Oyler at short stop. Norm Cash is one of the best first basemen in the majors today. Dick McAuliffe has made the move from shortstop to second base in handsome fashion.

Find a better third sacker than Don Wert.

Oyler as a fielder is outstanding. It's his hitting that could pose a problem.

If Bill Freehan can regain his hitting prowess, the Tigers will have no problems. Manager Smith told the reporter from the Observer-News:

"We can do it (win the pennant) with the material we have. It's just a matter of our pitching continuing to go the way it has . . . for our bullpen to move in and do the job we think it can do . . ."

The hitting we're certain will take care of itself." The Tigers open their season next Tuesday night in Anaheim, Calif., against the "Angels." They'll be home the following Tuesday (April 18) for their Tiger Stadium debut against the same Angels.

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Observing SPORTS

By George Maskin

LAKELAND, Fla.—Notes scribbled on a cuffless shirt in the Southland:

So, who says its nicer weatherwise in Florida than in the Detroit area? It's 70 when you leave Metro Airport and 64 and raining when you hit Lakeland.

But the grass is green here. Not only are the professionals playing baseball, but so are the high schools and the colleges.

And you're out of style if you wear a suit coat or sports jacket into the dining room for dinner.

The "easy-going" is a far cry from what you see in your journeys throughout the northland with the Pistons. Nobody seems to be in a rush down here.

What strikes you most at exhibition games involving the Tigers is the "old" crowd which makes up 80 per cent of the attendance. Retirees, both men and women, flock to watch the games.

Just as surprising are the numbers of Detroit area fans among the older folks who are enjoying themselves in this country far removed from snow and zero weather during the winter months.

When the Tigers played over in Clearwater, at least two-thirds of the audience had to be comprised of Michiganders. They all stood before the first half of the seventh inning to show their allegiances to the club they were cheering for.

The annual Tiger dinner held at one of the swankiest golf clubs here had to make one feel that he was right back home.

Flanking you at the dinner table were sports columnist Joe Falls and Pete Waldemier from the Free Press and News, respectively. George Cantor from the FP sat close by and a table or so away was Watson Spoelstra from the News.

At an adjacent table were Ernie Harwell and Ray Lane, who'll broadcast all the Tiger games this season starting with next Tuesday night's opener in Los Angeles. Bob Reynolds from WJR was there along with J. P. McCarthy, the ace disc jockey from WJR.

Throw in the official Tiger family and you found yourself in a home away from home situation . . . with some 1,500 miles separating you.

Tiger Publicist Hal Middlesworth declaring: "Who says it's a picnic down here in Florida? You have a million things to do."

But Hal flashes a swell sun tan. The new stadium the folks of Lakeland built for the Tigers has to be one of the finest you'll find anywhere in Florida for training purposes.

The stadium lacks lights, but the city will have those erected within a year or two.

Over in St. Petersburg, you finally see for the first time what you've heard Ernie Harwell declare in the past on the radio—how the baseball field sits alongside the bay from where ol' friend George E. Van used to sail off to Havana in the days when our country carried on peaceful relations with Cuba.



A BIG LEAGUE TIP: Livonia's Joe Sparna system. Woloch attended Redford Union of the Tigers passes along some advice. Helwig Thurston. As raw rookies in the Arnold Helwig (left) and Dave Woloch, Tigers camp. Woloch and Helwig face a both from Redford Township and now long climb before they can win a job in bidding for jobs in the Tigers minor-league the majors.

It's Long 300 Yards For Township Pair

LAKELAND Fla.—You're name is Dave Woloch from Redford Township, Mich.

Or your name is Arnold Helwig from Redford Township.

Or you're one of 125 others in a place called Tigertown, U.S.A., located here in what is described as the "world's citrus center."

Tigertown is where the Wolochs, the Helwigs and all the others start who aspire to some day win a job with the Detroit Tigers.

For the Helwigs, the Wolochs and the others. It's a short distance—spaciously—from Tigertown to where the "big club," meaning the Tigers, operates in the spring.

It's something like 300 yards, maybe not even that much, from the diamonds which make up Tigertown to Marchant Stadium where the Tigers this week wrap up their preparations for the American League season which begins next Tuesday out in Anaheim, Calif.

But those are the toughest 300 yards any young man ever has to cover.

Three, four or five years! Slops in such places as Statesville, Ga.; Montgomery, Ala.; Duluth, Minn.; back here to Lakeland a few times . . . and then to Toledo, O., before that final takeoff to Detroit and place from the Tigers.

However, those who make the hop are far and few between. Of the 125 in Tigertown today, the Tiger front office will leap with joy if four or five mainly make it to the "big club."

If three get to the Tigers some day, general manager Jim Campbell, farm boss Don Lund and his staff, will register a flock of smiles.

It's rough getting across from Tigertown to Marchant Stadium," Lund admitted. "The competition is tough, tougher than it ever has been. That's because there are fewer minor league baseball teams getting today. We no longer can keep the fringe-type players."

"Yes, it's truly the survival of the fittest . . . in every sense of the word."

Helwig and Woloch, the two kids from Redford, stood there dreaming the other afternoon when they walked those 300 yards to

pose for a picture with Joe Sparna, the Livonia home owner who has been the biggest surprise of the Tiger big camp this spring.

Like all others in Tigertown, Woloch and Helwig dress in the gray road uniforms the Tigers have worn in the past. This is one way the Tiger brass has instilled quickly into a candidate at Tiger town that he is a part of the "Detroit" system.

Woloch has been in Tigertown before. He was here last year and didn't make the grade. But the Tigers figured they should take another look at him. So he's back and there's a good chance he'll win a job somewhere in the minor league system this year.

This is Helwig's first crack at playing for dollars. He was belted around the afternoon we saw him work. But the Tigers like what they see in him. They aren't about to give up on him quickly.

"We never rush to send a boy away," says Lund. "Many of these kids are scared. This is the first time they have been away from home. They're nervous. They're nervous . . . they need encouragement."

That's why the Tigers bring a big staff of coaches, of scouts, of instructors to Tigertown.

Every time the players take the field for either a drill or a game, many pairs of expert eyes are looking at them.

"We want the judgments of all the experienced people we can assemble to determine on how good, or how bad a boy is," Lund tells you.

"There are times that one of us may miss something, even a manager. But the sharp eyes of a scout or another coach can catch something which will help to make the boy in question a good prospect to make the trip over to where the Tigers are."

Besides, Lund admits, the toughest job he has is to tell a boy he must go . . . that there's no sense of him staying around any more. The young man's in drama has been crushed. Lund knows it. So the Tigers don't rush that fatal verdict.

The difference between Tigertown and the 300 yards

over to Marchant Stadium is vast in many other categories.

Those who perform at the Stadium reside downtown at a swank motel with a swimming pool, or they can live with their wives and children in a spot of their own choosing.

At Tigertown, the candidates call home to old army barracks. It's more comfortable and roomier than what we remember in World War II days. And you only sleep three or four in a room . . . and on a real bed. But it's not like a first-class, or even a second-class hotel or motel.

The food at Tigertown, however, is hard to beat. And it costs the athlete nothing. The "big club" players each get a \$5 a day in training and the players eat where they wish.

Then, of course, there's the pay check that comes when the season proper begins. Those on the big team will be making upwards of \$7,000 per season. Some as high as maybe \$50,000, like Al Kaline.

For the kids at Tigertown, \$300 a month—and you play only four to five months—sounds like a fantastic deal.

Too, the big clubs always travel first class . . . in jet planes or down here in air-conditioned buses. When the Tigertown contingent moves, most times it's an old bus.

George Maskin



HAPPY STORY: That's what manager Mayo Smith of the Tigers has to tell Observer Sports Editor George Maskin in Lakeland. Smith is confident the Tigers will make a strong run for the American League pennant this season.

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