

The 1972 Detroit Tigers



Billy Martin and the Half-Game Champs



TODD MASTERS

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On the cover: Manager Billy Martin restrained by umpires
John Rice (left) and Larry Barnett (UPI)

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Preface

When Brandon Inge struck out against St. Louis Cardinal relief pitcher Adam Wainwright to end the 2006 World Series, a rare chapter was concluded in the history of the Detroit Tigers. That unexpected playoff run resulted in the first pennant for the Tigers in 22 years and represented their first post-season appearance of any kind in 19 years. Unfortunately for Detroit fans, dry streaks have been all too common in the 109-year history of the franchise through 2009. Despite being a charter member of the American League and one of the more tradition-steeped and storied clubs in major league baseball, the Tigers have reached post-season play only twelve times in more than a century of play. Seven of those appearances came during the first half of the twentieth century, with the Ty Cobb–led run of pennants from 1907 to 1909, followed nearly three decades later by back-to-back World Series appearances in 1934–35 by the Gehringer, Greenberg, Goslin gang, and then with a pennant and world championship sandwiched around World War II in 1940 and 1945.

Seven pennants over the first fifty years of American League play would have to be viewed as a moderately successful period, especially when compared with the other seven teams that comprised the league during that time. It was nowhere near the total achieved by the New York Yankees, who had won 17 pennants by 1950; otherwise, Detroit trailed only the Philadelphia Athletics franchise (nine), and had won the same number as the Boston Red Sox.

Over the next 60-plus years, however, post-season baseball became a rare event in the Motor City. Nearly a quarter of a century would pass between 1945 and the Tigers' next appearance, when they reached the Fall Classic in 1968 and won the World Series in dramatic fashion. Sixteen years after that, they reached the summit again with a dominant 1984 regular season and World Series win. Those two treasured seasons marked the only two pennants (and world championships) the team would win between the end of World War II and the close of the twentieth century. Perhaps because the champi-

onship seasons have been so rare, and their spacing was such that entire generations of Tiger fans identified with them as their own, most of Detroit's other seasons, good and bad, have been overshadowed.

Lost between those venerated '68 and '84 squads is the often-overlooked 1972 Detroit Tigers team. Unlike those other two more well-acclaimed seasons from Tiger lore, the 1972 club did not jump out in front of the American League standings in dominant fashion and then coast home in a blaze of glory. Instead, their year was a struggle from start to finish. It was a journey down the uncertain road of a team inflicted with an aging roster, thin pitching staff, injuries, batting slumps, and a league-wide despise of their outspoken and combative manager. Yet despite the obstacles and hardships, the team fought and scrapped its way to a level of success enjoyed by few teams in Detroit Tiger history. Fueled by a team made up of familiar heroes and the excitement of one of the tightest races in baseball history, more than two million fans poured through the turnstiles at Tiger Stadium before the final out was recorded that season.

I was 11 years old in the summer of 1972. Too young to fully appreciate the glory of the near-legendary Tiger team from four years earlier, the '72 season instead became my first encounter as a devoted fan living through the daily passion involved with a tight pennant race. In a time that doesn't seem that long ago, yet already differs so much from today, the trials and tribulations of a long season were experienced in a very different way. There were no cable broadcasts that allowed you to watch every game. ESPN and its nightly highlights didn't exist. The proliferation of sports-talk radio was still a decade away. Online stories, blogging, or chatting with baseball junkies on Internet message boards would have seemed more believable as part of George Jetson's world. Instead, following the Detroit baseball team from a small town in mid-Michigan consisted of listening to Ernie Harwell and Ray Lane on a small transistor radio tucked beside the pillow, or reading game accounts and looking at box scores in the daily newspaper spread out on the kitchen table or family room floor. If you were lucky, there might be a grainy black-and-white photo in the paper that provided a visual image to something you heard via the static-filled airwaves the previous evening. A real treat was provided on those 35 evenings or Saturday afternoons, when George Kell and Larry Osterman beamed a game into your living room on the Tigers' television network. The family trip each summer to see a game in Tiger Stadium was simply the highlight of the year.

I've never forgotten the excitement or the crushing disappointment I felt while following baseball that summer and fall. Those emotions came together on October 12, 1972, when barely a month into the fifth grade, I was bowled over. My classroom teacher pulled me and another boy from class and took

us to the teachers' lounge where we sat and watched the fifth and deciding game of the American League playoffs. That sense of happy wonderment, sitting and watching baseball in a locale foreign to even the most curious of students, was replaced later by a gnawing despair as my beloved Tigers fell behind and struggled to prolong their season. That innocent adulation I felt about the team that day was replaced in later years by a more mature understanding of what had occurred. When an aging team was broken up soon thereafter, and the pains of the rebuilding project that became Detroit's baseball club of the middle 1970s set in, I realized I had experienced the end of a special era in the franchise's history. As the years passed by and that season receded further into the annals of dusty old archives, I often thought that 1972 had been a very special, but overlooked summer among Tiger fans and a tale worth revisiting again. This book is the story of the 1972 Detroit Tigers.

As I began my research and looked back at that season, it also became apparent to me that 1972 had been a watershed year in the game's history. It was caught between the tranquil sport that had remained largely unchanged for decades, thanks to the controlling interest of a group of tight-fisted businessmen, and the sport it would evolve into by the end of the 1970s, with loud personalities, exploding scoreboards, million-dollar contracts, and increased media attention; both good and bad. That season, tensions came to a head that would eventually change the game drastically. Transitions were also taking place on the field, where many of the old standouts from the 1960s were still around, but their impact on the game was diminishing. Players like Aparicio, Killebrew, Powell, Robinson, Howard, and McLain in the American League, as well as Aaron, Mays, Williams, Clemente, Gibson, and Torre in the National League, were being overtaken in stature by names like Jackson, Hunter, Blue, Murcer, Fisk, Ryan, Mayberry, Carew, Carlton, Bench, and others. The way the game was being played was also under attack that summer. Changes would come immediately after the season that would forever alter the pace and tactics that had been in place for nearly three-quarters of a century, but not before that one final season had been played in 1972 under the old format.

One of the most prevalent figures in the story is Tiger manager Billy Martin. His impact on the team that season is undeniable, just as was the case throughout the other eight stops he made in his managerial career. Much has been documented elsewhere about the flaws, mostly off-field and often involving character, which were the cause of many of Martin's short-lived regimes as a manager. While many of those same traits undoubtedly existed during his stay in Detroit, and some close to the team during that period didn't always have a glowing regard for the man, the goal of this work was neither to glorify nor vilify Martin, but instead to show the combative nature and personality he brought to the ball club.

I will attempt to delve into the game as it existed then, both on and off the field, and the forces that were at work that season. The primary focus, however, will be the day-to-day happenings within the 1972 season for the Detroit Tigers as well as their competition in the American League. I've detailed the journey, starting from before spring training and continuing through post-season play, in an effort to capture the feel of a season-long divisional race over the marathon that is otherwise known as a major league baseball season. It is written from the viewpoint of a Tiger follower at the time, intertwined with the local and global events of that summer. But mostly it is the story of a team for which nothing came easy, and each and every run and victory was a battle.

Introduction: A Summer to Remember

It was a summer to remember. The turbulent 1960s, with their social and political strife, were over. The page had been turned to a new decade, one that promised greater tranquility, fewer demonstrations of civil unrest, both collectively and individually, and one free of the political chaos that had dominated the latter half of the previous decade. By 1972 it was time for the “silent majority” to once again reassert itself as the voice of reason for the country. Certainly, the 1970s were by no means turning into an idyllic period. As the year 1972 commenced, the war in Vietnam was still raging, but removal of U.S. ground troops was underway and the government had extended overtures for peace talks to the North Vietnamese, giving many Americans hope that the long, largely unwanted war was drawing to a conclusion. A February trip by President Nixon to Red China was historic in its significance and viewed as a potential small step towards warming relations in the Cold War. Two more trips were planned for an Apollo program that was making trips to the moon seem routine. It was an election year, the first since the explosive campaign in 1968 that had been filled with violent protest and even assassination. However, with an incumbent president enjoying a 60 percent approval rating, few expected a repeat of the hysterics from four years earlier.¹

As the weather warmed heading into the summer of 1972, it appeared that Father Time reached back once more to the decade just passed, clinging to the anarchy that so dominated that period. The peace talks with the North Vietnamese that sounded so promising just weeks earlier broke off in early spring and instead brought about the U.S. increasing its bombing to unprecedented levels, triggering renewed energy to anti-war protests across America.² In May the country was horrified once again when a prominent Southern governor was struck down by a would-be assassin's bullet while campaigning for president on the Democratic primary trail. A month later a strange story

surfaced about a break-in at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters in Washington, D.C., and throughout the summer and early fall, revelations began to emerge that left much of the country feeling uneasy about the role their chief executive had in the act and its subsequent cover-up. The presidential campaign was marred by fractions in the Democratic Party over the ticket's top man and questions over his vice presidential nominee. There was civil unrest over the rights of African Americans and women. And if those events over the summer hadn't dislodged any sense of calm the country might have enjoyed, the news coming from Munich, Germany, that first week of September certainly left the country aghast. Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes who had been competing at the Summer Olympic Games, with much of the drama and horror playing out in living rooms via ABC television.

In the city of Detroit people reacted to these events in the same way as most others across the country. The world was a much bigger place at that time, or at least it seemed like it. Outside of those who had family members in the military serving in Southeast Asia, the happenings halfway around the world were of little consequence to the daily routines of most people. Almost any news outside of the immediate vicinity was regulated to tiny snippets through limited mediums. There were no 24-hour news networks, bombarding each household with the "latest" on that day's story, and continual analysis by the pundits. Most people received their news from newspapers, usually of the local variety, and the content in those was oftentimes much more dated than today's newspapers. Television news came via one of the three major networks, in half-hour segments each evening via one of the revered, stately anchors of that time, with limited reporting from the actual newsworthy location. Radio had similar limitations, and the proliferation of talk radio had not yet settled in. The events of the world, and even the national stage, seemed much further away.

People in Detroit and across the state of Michigan did look forward to a baseball season that at least allowed for cautious optimism. The Detroit Tigers were still the most popular sporting diversion in town, and despite three years having passed since that magical summer in 1968 that saw their heroes run away with an American League pennant before capturing a dramatic come-from-behind, seven-game triumph in the World Series over the St. Louis Cardinals, a love affair still existed between the fans and the team. It was a bond of familiarity, built over nearly a decade of good times and bad. The Tigers were a veteran team in 1972. The core was made up of players in their 30s who had been in a Detroit uniform their entire careers. Al Kaline had signed fresh out of high school in 1953 and was entering his 20th season with the Tigers. Norm Cash had played briefly with the Chicago White Sox,

before coming over to Detroit in 1960, and was entering his 13th season with the team. Mickey Lolich, Bill Freehan, Dick McAuliffe, Jim Northrup, Willie Horton, Mickey Stanley, and Gates Brown had all signed their initial professional contracts with the Tigers, and had been playing in the major leagues together since at least 1964. For those born after World War II, these players *were* the Detroit Tigers, and they defined an era.

In the 109-year history of the Detroit franchise, there have been perhaps four collections of players that crystallized an era of baseball. The first occurred shortly after the formation of the American League with the Ty Cobb–led consecutive pennant winners of 1907–09. Those teams featured the greatest player of his era in Cobb, who was augmented by the underrated and fellow Hall of Fame member Sam Crawford, and pitchers George Mullin and Wild Bill Donovan. In the mid–1930s, Mickey Cochrane, Charlie Gehringer, Hank Greenberg, Billy Rogell, and Marv Owen made up one of baseball’s greatest infields ever. Together with outfielders Goose Goslin, Pete Fox, and JoJo White, as well as pitchers Tommie Bridges and Schoolboy Rowe, Detroit enjoyed consecutive A.L. pennants in 1934–35, and even topped the one million mark in home attendance in 1935, a remarkable accomplishment at the depths of the Great Depression. Nearly 50 years later, another talented collection of players captured the imagination of Tiger fans. Jack Morris, Lance Parrish, Alan Trammell, Lou Whitaker, Kirk Gibson, and Chet Lemon were the foundation for baseball’s winningest team of the 1980s, with the 1984 world championship serving as the culmination for that wildly popular group.

However, as great as each of those teams were and as popular as they might have been with the fans of their particular era, long-time observers of Detroit baseball generally side with the teams made up of the likes of Kaline, Cash, Lolich, Freehan, Horton, etc., as the most popular of all time. Those teams defined Tiger baseball for more than a decade, and within that span some of the most endearing personalities, controversial figures, and memorable moments in the franchise’s history took place. They formulated during the closing stages of the Mickey Mantle–led portion of the New York Yankee dynasty. They survived the tragic death of two managers at a fragile time in their development and learned to win through painful lessons gained during a 1967 campaign that saw them let a pennant slip through their fingers. People in Detroit looked upon them as a saving grace in 1968 when they galvanized a riot-torn city and provided a common cause for citizens of all races to root for the pennant-bound team. The championship season in 1968 saw them draw a home attendance of more than two million fans, an almost unheard of total at that time and one never previously reached. That level of popularity was sustained over the next three years as the Tigers topped atten-

dance figures of 1.5 million each season (totals surpassed only six times in the franchise's previous 68 seasons).³

By the spring of 1972, however, the shine had been removed from the championship trophy they had gained 3½ earlier. The Baltimore Orioles had dominated them since the inception of divisional play, and the feeling among baseball insiders was that Detroit's core was getting long in the tooth and maybe a bit complacent. The Tigers' window of opportunity for another championship run was closing quickly. In 1971 a new manager had been hired in the person of Billy Martin, and his fiery manner proved wildly popular with the fans in Detroit and breathed new life into the ball club. Such new additions as Eddie Brinkman, Aurelio Rodriguez, and Joe Coleman had fit in with the old favorites and proved likeable themselves. Now heading into a new season, the feeling within the organization was the Tigers were ready again to compete with the seemingly invincible Baltimore club.

This is the story of that 1972 season for the Detroit Tigers. It would be perhaps the final chance to restore the glory they had attained four years earlier, yet they would have to overcome age, injury, batting slumps, lack of pitching depth, and a tight four-team divisional race in order to do it. There would be close contests, bitter disputes, on-field fights, and an unexpected players strike along the way. It was an exciting summer to be a baseball fan in Detroit and across the state of Michigan, with the season being played against the backdrop of one of the most violent, eventful, and history-making years of the twentieth century.

I

Ascending to the Mountaintop ... and Tumbling Back Down

It began with a trade. A remarkable decade that would see the Detroit Tigers franchise survive tragedy, civil unrest, heartbreak, and controversy, all while steadily building towards arguably the most memorable and beloved team in its long history, began with a trade. It was a trade of epic proportions; the type of high-profile transaction that is commonly debated among fans, but rarely executed. On April 17, 1960, the Tigers and Cleveland Indians hooked up in a straight-up deal of veteran outfielders. Detroit traded the reigning batting champion of the American League, Harvey Kuenn, coming off of a .353 batting average in 1959, for outfielder Rocky Colavito, the muscular A.L. home run champion from that same season. It was a trade unlike any seen previously or since, and invited the type of scrutiny and opinion that any follower of the game was bound to reveal.

While the trade did not immediately improve the fortunes of either team on the field, it did bring attention back to a Detroit baseball team that was looking to resurrect itself in the American League. The 1950s had been a lost decade for baseball in the Motor City. After capturing a pair of pennants in the mid-1930s, another in 1940, and a world championship in 1945, the Tigers had fallen on hard times. There had been a series of near-misses in the ultra-competitive A.L. immediately after World War II, with the last coming in 1950 when the team won 95 games but finished three games back of the pennant-winning New York Yankees. After that, the bottom fell out for a proud franchise and charter member of the junior circuit. Detroit finished as a second-division club in eight of the next ten seasons, winning more games than it lost only three times during that stretch.

The bright spot during that otherwise dark decade was the play of a young outfielder named Al Kaline. Kaline had been picked up off the sandlots of Baltimore in 1953, signing for the princely sum of \$35,000 with leg-

endary scout Ed Katalinas.¹ Although lacking in strength as a gangly 18-year-old, Kaline possessed tremendous athletic ability and uncommon baseball skills. He bypassed the minor leagues entirely and made his debut in Detroit that summer, just days after his high school graduation. The next summer he played 135 games in the Tiger outfield, trying to hold his own while competing against men much older than he was. In 1955, however, he exploded, becoming the youngest player in history to win a batting championship, hitting .340 at age 20, while bashing 27 home runs. Throughout the rest of the decade he established himself as one of the great young talents in all of baseball. He became the cornerstone of the franchise, never hitting lower than .295, while displaying power, driving in runs, and playing the outfield as well as anybody in the game.

As the 1960s dawned, the Detroit team appeared to be on the upswing. Ownership of the franchise had been garnered by John E. Fetzer, who by 1961 had bought out shares from ten other partners to become the sole proprietor of the Tigers. Fetzer was a radio and television mogul who had been part of the consortium that had purchased the franchise in 1956. While in his twenties, he had built and operated a radio station at a small missionary college in southern Michigan, which he eventually purchased and moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan. After World War II, Fetzer continued to build a radio empire, featuring stations all across the Midwest, before delving also into television just as that medium was taking off. He was a life-long baseball fan and jumped at the opportunity to be involved in the game as an owner when the family of Walter Briggs put the team up for sale as part of the settlement of the late owner's estate. Among Fetzer's first actions as the sole owner of the Detroit team was to rename the ballpark Tiger Stadium, replacing the family surname from the previous ownership, which had been used for the team's home for more than twenty years.

On the playing field, better days were on the way, as well. Trades for Colavito and a promising left-handed-hitting first baseman named Norman Cash provided additional muscle around Kaline in the Tiger lineup. A talented group of young arms led by Jim Bunning, Frank Lary, and Paul Foytack was joined by veteran Cleveland starter Don Mossi to form a quality rotation of starting pitchers. Although they fell back slightly record-wise in 1960, the team was accumulating talent and looked to move up in the standings the next season, as the American League expanded from eight to ten teams.

In 1961 the Tigers assembled arguably the most powerful lineup in its history with Kaline (.324 average, 19 home runs, 82 RBIs), Cash (.361-41-132), and Colavito (.290-45-140) creating a formidable trio in the middle of the batting order. The team led the major leagues in runs scored that season,

plating more runs than even the famous New York Yankees, which were led by Roger Maris' record-setting 61 home runs and Mickey Mantle's 54. The season rejuvenated interest in Detroit, where fans hadn't enjoyed a finish any higher than fourth place in the American League since 1950. Approximately 1.6 million fans passed through the turnstiles at Briggs Stadium, cheering on the Tigers as they battled the Yankees deep into September for the league lead. At season's end, the Tigers had won 101 games, but still finished eight games behind the powerful New York squad. The anomaly of winning 100+ games without winning a pennant (100 wins in a season has only been achieved five times in Detroit's 109-year history) only added to the sting of coming up short to what was generally considered at the time as the second-greatest Yankee team ever.

The on-field renaissance didn't last, however. In 1962 the Tigers finished fourth with 85 wins, eleven games behind the pennant-winning Yankees. In 1963 they dropped even further, to sixth place in the ten-team league, with a 79–83 record. Attendance dropped with the team's record as only a little more than 821,000 made up the home attendance in 1963, barely half the 1961 total. Many of the players who contributed to the great '61 season couldn't sustain the level of production they had enjoyed that summer. Cash, Colavito, Lary, Mossi, Foytack, Jake Wood, Dick Brown, and Steve Boros were among the players whose performance fell off considerably over the next two seasons.

Away from the glare of the major league spotlight, however, the Detroit organization was putting together the pieces for a team that could compete over the long term and be in the thick of the American League race on a yearly basis. Fetzer had turned the running of the organization over to "baseball men," the primary one being Jim Campbell, who had been named the general manager in 1962. Campbell had been with the organization since 1949, working his way up through various jobs in the minor league system before finding a home on the business side of the franchise in Detroit. He was from Ohio, and had played baseball at Ohio State University. Campbell shared many of the same conservative midwestern values as his boss and understood what it took to turn a profit while operating the team.² He believed in building a club through the farm system and player development rather than via flashy trades. By the time he had assumed the general manager's role, the seeds had been planted for an eventual harvest of players who would not only make up the Tiger teams for more than a decade, but also become icons for the franchise for years to come.

A left-handed, 18-year-old pitcher from Portland, Oregon, named Michael Stephen (Mickey) Lolich had signed with the Detroit organization in 1959 and was in the process of working his way up through the Tigers'