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Shortstop Jose Iglesias could hit second for Tigers

December 13, 2016

By Anthony Fenech/ Detroit Free Press

If the Detroit Tigers enter next season with the same offensive core as 2016, manager Brad Ausmus' lineup will look similar.

But without Cameron Maybin, the team has a vacancy in the second spot in the batting order.

Internal competitors for the centerfield spot — JaCoby Jones, Tyler Collins and Anthony Gose — don't profile as top-of-the-order hitters, behind second baseman Ian Kinsler and in front of first baseman Miguel Cabrera.

That leaves shortstop Jose Iglesias — who has been inquired about in trade talks this off-season — as the most likely bet to hit second. Iglesias, 26, hit .255 in 137 games this past season, a steep decline from 2015, when he hit .300 as an American League All-Star.

His on-base percentage dropped 39 points from 2015 to 2016.

Iglesias' offensive production is the reason why the Tigers could consider dealing him. Though he has hit .300 twice in his career — neither season playing more than 120 games — he has been aided by a high batting average on balls in play, indicating luck at the plate. While Dixon Machado doesn't profile as a standout offensive player, either, his contract is much less expensive and he offers a similar defensive performance.

Iglesias batted second 22 times in 2016. If he is traded, Ausmus must look elsewhere for a No. 2 hitter.

One name Ausmus was asked about at last week's winter meetings was third baseman Nick Castellanos, though Castellanos profiles more in the middle of the order.

"Ideally, I want somebody that's going to be on base," Ausmus said. "Just because of the guys that are coming up behind him. I've thought about it in the past and kind of decided against it. Who knows?"

Franchise strikeout record serves as Tigers' call to action

December 13, 2016

By Chris McCosky/ The Detroit News

Detroit – The Detroit Tigers went into the final weekend of the regular season needing to win at least two of three against the lowly Braves to steal a wild-card spot. After winning the first game of the series Friday, the Tigers proceeded to lose the next two – striking out a flabbergasting 27 times in the final two games.

Unheralded Aaron Blair struck out 10 Tigers in six innings on Saturday, and in the 1-0 season-ending loss Sunday, Julio Teheran struck out 12 in seven innings.

This was the last image of the 2016 season: With the tying run on first base in the top of the ninth, former Tigers reliever Jim Johnson struck out J.D. Martinez swinging and Justin Upton looking.

Is it any wonder, then, when manager Brad Ausmus was asked in what areas he felt the team needed to improve – his immediate answer was: “I would like to see us strike out less.”

The Tigers struck out 1,303 times last season – a franchise record. Their strikeout percentage was 21.3, 1.3 over the league average, and Tigers hitters struck out once every 4.2 at-bats, which was right at the league average.

“I think certain guys that produce runs, drive in runs, you live with strikeouts, and that happens,” Ausmus said.

“But I think we've got some other guys that can cut down on their strikeouts, and that will be a topic of discussion early on in camp.”

Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez, two of the run producers Ausmus referred to, were among the best in putting the ball in play. Martinez's strikeout rate was 14.8 percent and Cabrera's was 17.1.

“Miguel has the ability to shorten up and go the other way with two strikes, especially with runners in scoring position,” Ausmus said. “For me, other guys should be looking at that. Here is a guy that hits 35 homers, drives in a hundred and he still has the ability to shorten up with two strikes.”

Shortstop Jose Iglesias' 9.8 percent strikeout rate was best in the American League.

Upton represents the other side of the equation. His 179 strikeouts were a career high. He fanned 28.6 percent of his plate appearances, or every once every 3.2 at-bats.

When the count got to 0-2, Upton put the ball in play just 63 times in 128 at-bats, hitting .198. When the count got to 1-2, Upton put it in play 93 times out of 204 at-bats (.162).

But Upton, a career free swinger who still produced 31 home runs and 87 RBIs, won't be the main target of Ausmus' spring training emphasis on developing a better two-strike approach. Catcher James McCann, third baseman Nick Castellanos, second baseman Ian Kinsler and outfielders J.D. Martinez, JaCoby Jones and Tyler Collins will be among those sitting in the front row of those classes.

McCann posted a career-high 109 strikeouts last season, 29.2 percent. He put the ball in play 34 times in 84 plate appearances when the count got to 0-2 (.084) and 54 times in 115 tries (.132) when the count got to 1-2. Kinsler also posted career-high strikeout numbers – 115, 16.9 percent – though his 28 homers were his most since 2011.

J.D. Martinez fanned 128 times, 24.8 percent – nearly once in every four plate appearances. He put the ball in play 49 times in 105 plate appearances when the count got to 0-2 (.202) and 80 times in 163 tries (.140) when the count got to 1-2.

Castellanos improved his two-strike hitting from the previous season, but still struck out 24.8 percent of the time. He put the ball in play 59 times in 109 plate appearances that the count got to 0-2 (.192) and 77 of 146 trips when the count got to 1-2 (.165).

“He made huge strides this year,” Ausmus said. “He just needs to keep trending in that direction. He made huge strides offensively, especially from a perspective of not chasing pitches out of the zone. He was much better about not chasing breaking balls out of the zone.”

Jones, in his short time in the final month of the season, struck out 42.9 percent of the time. Collins fanned in 25.2 percent of his plate appearances. Before being sent to the minor leagues, center fielder Anthony Gose struck out in 37.6 percent of his plate appearances.

Shifts in analytics, Ausmus said, has made the strikeout more permissible these days. But for players like McCann, Collins, Jones and Gose -- and even Castellanos -- a strikeout rate of over 20 percent is too high.

“Analytics helps the game tremendously,” Ausmus said. “They give you insight and make the team better. But now you're getting that trickle-up effect. Kids that have been reading about power and how important doubles and homers are analytically, well, they swing for the fences, and I think that's why there are more strikeouts. “There is something to be said at times, especially for specific types of players, to putting the ball in play and put pressure on the defense.”

Tigers hitters will be guided by a couple of new old faces – Lloyd McClendon and assistant Leon “Bull” Durham. They replace Wally Joyner and David Newhan. Both have long ties in the organization and both were together at Triple-A Toledo last season.

“In the back of my mind, Mac was the guy, because he has a rapport with some of the veterans,” Ausmus said. “He's been around some of these hitters. He has the respect, and I like that with our veteran core, having someone of that type of stature as the hitting coach.

“And then Bull is the other end of the spectrum. He's seen a lot of our young guys. He's been in Toledo for 15 years or so and has seen a lot of these guys at some point and worked with them. I thought it was a good combination.”

Ausmus said he and McClendon have already talked about developing better two-strike habits and emphasizing putting the ball in play.

“We will talk about it early on, probably the first day or two of spring training,” Ausmus said. “It’s an area we can certainly improve.”

Cubs talked Justin Wilson trade with Tigers, report says

December 13, 2016

By Evan Woodbery/ MLive.com

DETROIT -- The Detroit Tigers didn't make a deal in the Baseball Winter Meetings last week, but some of the conversations that began there could still produce a trade.

Justin Wilson might be the likeliest candidate.

The left-handed reliever was the subject of heavy trade talk last week and is still being targeted, most recently by the Chicago Cubs, according to MLB Network reporter Jon Morosi.

"The highest level of interest has been on Justin Wilson," Tigers general manager Al Avila said last week.

The Tigers acquired Wilson, 29, a year ago this month by trading prospects Luis Cessa and Chad Green to the New York Yankees.

Wilson went 4-5 with a 4.14 ERA in 66 games for the Tigers in 2016, striking out 65 and walked 17 in 58 2/3 innings.

Wilson is eligible for arbitration in 2017 and by one estimate could make about \$2.7 million.

The Tigers recently picked up a left-hander in the Rule 5 Draft and have a couple of other options in a potentially crowded bullpen competition.

Victor Martinez on roster for Venezuela in World Baseball Classic

December 13, 2016

By Evan Woodbery/ MLive.com

DETROIT -- Add Victor Martinez to the potentially long list of Detroit Tigers who will be on the Venezuelan roster for the World Baseball Classic.

Martinez previously said he wouldn't go to the Classic unless Omar Vizquel was managing the Venezuelan team. That issue was resolved last week and Martinez's agent confirmed Sunday that he would join the team. Miguel Cabrera officially confirmed his participation earlier this month, but there could be several other Tigers on the Venezuelan team, including Francisco Rodriguez and perhaps Anibal Sanchez or Bruce Rondon. Given the controversy that led to his temporary ouster, Vizquel was hesitant to talk about any player beyond the five stars that were officially confirmed by the WBC. But tournament rules will ultimately give the manager some flexibility to mix and match. A pitcher, for example, might be on the active roster for one game and not the next.

At least two others Tigers could be in the field: Reliever Joe Jimenez for Puerto Rico and second baseman Ian Kinsler for Team USA.

Players in the WBC field will miss a portion of spring training to work out with their teams and then play games from March 7-March 22.

Major League teams are generally concerned about two issues: players returning to spring training in shape for the regular season and the possibility of injury in WBC games.

Martinez has two bad knees and will turn 38 this month, so injuries could be a concern.

"Major League Baseball doesn't want the organizations interfering with players' decisions to play in the WBC," Tigers manager Brad Ausmus said last week. "If they want to play, I understand that. And if they don't want to play, I understand that side of the argument, as well. I don't broach it."

With Rondon, both the Tigers and Vizquel have stressed the importance of coming to camp in shape.

"He has to keep doing the same thing from day one next year," Ausmus said. "He needs to come in in shape and stay in shape like he did last year."

In some cases, the chance to play in the WBC could actually be a strong motivator to arrive in shape and ready to play.

And Ausmus said it doesn't hurt to be facing elite competition and being around some of the game's best players.

"I think it's probably good for (Rondon) to be around some of those guys," Ausmus said. "Although it seems like half their team is Detroit Tigers."

Tigers could be well represented in WBC

December 13, 2016

By Jason Beck/ MLB.com

DETROIT -- The question came up to Tigers manager Brad Ausmus at last week's Winter Meetings: Would he have a challenge evaluating reliever Bruce Rondon for potential roles if he's away representing Venezuela at the World Baseball Classic?

"I think it's probably good for him to be around some of those guys," Ausmus said, then quipped, "although it seems like half their team is Detroit Tigers."

As the Tigers make plans with Spring Training two months away, they're preparing to be without several players for a stretch as they represent their countries. That's nothing new for Detroit, which has had enough star power over the years to see them called to past Classics. This time, though, it's not just the stars. In at least a couple of cases, including Rondon and top relief prospect Joe Jimenez, the Tigers could see younger players getting the experience of international competition.

Detroit, for its part, stays out of it. Still, with a heavy representation of Venezuelan players, and with Detroit first-base coach Omar Vizquel managing Venezuela and former Tigers great Carlos Guillen as its general manager, Detroit officials at least know their players are in good hands. Likewise, with former Tigers manager and current special assistant Jim Leyland managing Team USA and Jeff Jones as the pitching coach, the familiarity factor is a benefit.

"If they want to play, I understand that," Ausmus said last week regarding the Classic. "And if they don't want to play, I understand that side of the argument, as well. I don't broach it."

The big names are no surprise. Miguel Cabrera, a constant on the Venezuelan team, was among the stars on the initial list released at the Winter Meetings last week. Victor Martinez's agent, Wil Polidor, tweeted on Sunday that the Tigers' designated hitter will play for Venezuela once again.

Closer Francisco Rodriguez has also expressed interest, Vizquel said last week, and Tigers officials are expecting he'll take part. It would be an adjustment for him compared to past springs, when he has pitched to a specific timetable to make sure he throws just enough innings to be ready for the season. But it shouldn't be a serious concern.

Rodriguez's potential presence could make things easier for Rondon, the hard-throwing right-hander whose Major League career has had stops and starts for four years. With 45 strikeouts and 23 hits allowed over 36 1/3 innings in 2016, Rondon has caught the attention of Vizquel and Guillen.

The motivation could reap rewards for Rondon with the Tigers, who have watched him struggle to find his better form in Spring Training.

"We've been talking to him," Vizquel said, "and we want Rondon to get his mind straight up and focused into the game right away. I hope that he can get into Spring Training ready and in shape. And if there's any reason we see that he's not in shape or we need to work longer, maybe we have to take another decision."

If the WBC can be a motivation for Rondon, it could be a springboard for Jimenez, the fifth-ranked prospect in the Tigers' system according to MLB Pipeline.com. He has tweeted his interest in pitching for his native Puerto Rico.

Jimenez, who turns 22 next month, rose from Class A Advanced Lakeland to Triple-A Toledo last year, and he had a strong case for a September callup. General manager Al Avila has said repeatedly the Tigers want him gaining more experience with the Mud Hens before bringing him up, but the competition could provide the next-level test he needs to impress.

One Tiger who appears unlikely for Team Venezuela is Anibal Sanchez, who has pitched for the team in the past but is coming off back-to-back shaky seasons in Detroit.

On the American side, while Ian Kinsler wasn't among the initial list of players announced, the Tigers' second baseman confirmed to MLB.com that he expressed his interest in playing for Team USA when asked by Leyland and the MLB Players Association. He was waiting to hear back as of last week, but Leyland all but confirmed at the Winter Meetings that Kinsler would be a part of the team.

Though Justin Verlander expressed interest in pitching for Team USA, the Tigers' ace is unlikely to take part. Leyland said they had a good conversation about the tournament format and Verlander's meticulous Spring Training buildup, and they decided it might not be an easy match. All Tigers who take part in the World Baseball Classic will report to Spring Training with the Tigers in mid-February. They'll leave for their respective national team camps in late February or early March, then return whenever their national team run is over.

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MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2016

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Atlanta Braves	John Danks	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Baltimore Orioles	Logan Ondrusek	Signed as Free Agent, (2017; Opt 2018)(one-year contract)
Miami Marlins	Dustin McGowan	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Miami Marlins	A.J. Ellis	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Miami Marlins	Jeff Locke	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Milwaukee Brewers	Iván De Jesús Jr.	Signed to a Minor League Contract
New York Yankees	Rubén Tejada	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Philadelphia Phillies	Pedro Florimón	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Philadelphia Phillies	Héctor Gómez	Signed to a Minor League Contract
St. Louis Cardinals	Jordan Schafer	Signed to a Minor League Contract
St. Louis Cardinals	Eric Fryer	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Tampa Bay Rays	Wilson Ramos	Signed as Free Agent, (2017-2018)(two-year contract)
Washington Nationals	Emmanuel Burriss	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Washington Nationals	Michael Broadway	Signed to a Minor League Contract

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2016**TEAM****PLAYER****TRANSACTION**[Houston Astros](#)[Reid Brignac](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2016**TEAM****PLAYER****TRANSACTION**[Arizona Diamondbacks](#)[Rey Fuentes](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Arizona Diamondbacks](#)[Jason Pridie](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Arizona Diamondbacks](#)[Fernando Rodney](#)

Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)

[Arizona Diamondbacks](#)[Asher Wojciechowski](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Atlanta Braves](#)[Emilio Bonifacio](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Boston Red Sox](#)[Mitch Moreland](#)

Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)

[Boston Red Sox](#)[Junior Lake](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Cincinnati Reds](#)[Shawn Zarraga](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Cincinnati Reds](#)[Lucas Luetge](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Cincinnati Reds](#)[Rob Brantly](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Detroit Tigers](#)[A.J. Achter](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Detroit Tigers](#)[Omar Infante](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

Los Angeles Dodgers	Charlie Culberson	Outrighted to Minors
Miami Marlins	Matt den Dekker	Signed to a Minor League Contract
New York Mets	Johnny Monell	Signed to Play in Korea, (KT Wiz)
Philadelphia Phillies	Sean Burnett	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Philadelphia Phillies	Daniel Nava	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Seattle Mariners	Dean Kiekhefer	Outrighted to Minors
St. Louis Cardinals	Dexter Fowler	Signed as Free Agent, (2017-2021)(five-year contract)