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Brad Ausmus won't close door on tweaking Detroit Tigers' cleanup spot

December 15, 2016

By Anthony Fenech/ Detroit Free Press

Brad Ausmus won't close the door.

Though it still seems like – if the middle of the Tigers' batting order returns in its entirety next season – designated hitter Victor Martinez would hit in the cleanup spot, Ausmus said he might consider hitting J.D. Martinez there.

“I certainly wouldn't just throw it out of hand,” Ausmus said, speaking at last week's Major League Baseball winter meetings. “I would consider it. Victor was a pretty good hitter last year, though.”

That was evident in the numbers: Victor Martinez hit .289 with 27 home runs and 86 RBI in 154 games. At full health, he served as ideal, switch-hitting protection behind Miguel Cabrera. Most importantly, he swings left-handed.

“It's tough to protect Miguel,” Ausmus said. “But if Victor is swinging the bat well, I think because of his ability to switch-hit, it makes him the best option.”

But perhaps J.D. Martinez could offer another dimension to hitting cleanup with his legs. Often times, Victor Martinez – one of the slowest runners in baseball – clogged the basepaths, unable to score from first base on an extra-base hit, or second base on a base hit.

Though J.D. Martinez doesn't have optimal speed, he is faster than Victor Martinez, which could move Ausmus' needle towards making a change.

Though Victor Martinez turns 38 years old on Dec. 23, his health last season was good. There were stretches in which his twice-surgically repaired left knee bothered, but by keeping him out of the field, and treating the soreness with cortisone shots, he was a regular in the lineup.

And without sufficient lefty hitting, it appears Victor Martinez will return to his customary cleanup spot in 2017.

Save the date: Tigers pitchers and catchers are scheduled to report to spring training in Lakeland, Fla. on Tuesday, Feb. 14.

Schlereth to Cardinals: Former Tigers left-hander Daniel Schlereth signed a minor league contract with the St. Louis Cardinals.

Tigers reliever VerHagen healthier: 'Baby steps now'

December 15, 2016

By Chris McCosky/ The Detroit News

Trivia question: Which pitcher earned the victory in Detroit's season-opener last year in Miami?

Answer: Drew VerHagen.

You remember the lanky Texan right-hander, right? He not only won a spot on the 25-man roster out of spring training, but for the first few weeks was one of manager Brad Ausmus' go-to guys out of the bullpen.

With a fastball averaging 95 mph, off which he mixed a nasty, 12-to-6 curveball and an improving change-up, he gave up runs in one of his first nine appearances.

Hold on to that memory because nothing that happened after that was much good for VerHagen.

"It was frustrating," VerHagen said during a phone conversation from Arlington, Texas, where he is undergoing rehabilitation therapy four times a week. "I think the May, June and July months were the worst. I was trying to rehab and comeback and it was still bad. Acutally, it was getting worse."

Sometime in May, VerHagen started to feel numbness in his fingers. He kept pitching, trying to work through it, but the results were poor and the numbness continued. It took some time, but he was diagnosed with thoracic outlet syndrome.

Nerves and blood vessels in his shoulder were being pinched, which constricted the blood flow in his right arm.

"They checked the blood flow in my hand when I put my arm in different positions," VerHagen said. "When my arms were even with my shoulders or overhead, there was zero blood flow in my right arm."

Frightening stuff, but certainly not an uncommon malady for pitchers. Tyson Ross and Matt Harvey also dealt with it last season. In the past, former Tigers Kenny Rogers and Jeremy Bonderman were inflicted.

In a blink, VerHagen went from being a main cog in the bullpen to forgotten man. He was sent to Triple A Toledo on May 22, put on the 60-day disabled list a month later and underwent corrective surgery in St. Louis on Aug. 8.

Another season gone.

He missed long stretches of 2014 and 2015 with a back injury, an injury that effectively ended his days as a starting pitcher. Then, just as he was making his mark out of the bullpen (he posted a 2.05 ERA in 261/3 innings out of the bullpen in 2015), he had to be shut down again.

VerHagen, 26, has pitched a total of 80 games — big leagues and minors combined — the last three seasons.

For a man with lesser mental toughness and self-belief, it would be crushing.

"I was obviously not happy about it, just the way it went," he said. "I felt like I was making some really good strides coming out of spring training. But it's not the first setback I've seen in my career.

"It's just about having a good perspective on things and just knowing I will be able to get back to where I was at. I have dealt with it just fine."

That's the bright side of this story. VerHagen, barring another unforeseen medical setback, will be ready to win back his spot when pitchers and catchers report to Lakeland, Fla., on Feb. 14.

"I am just more excited at this point," he said. "I can't really remember how I was feeling back then (before the surgery), but now I am just more excited about next year. All eyes forward. It's the only way you can get through it."

Two weeks ago, VerHagen picked up a baseball and threw lightly for the first time in more than six months.

"It felt really good," he said. "Honestly, I feel better than I did at this point last year. I am just going to keep building it up slowly, not rushing anything. Just trying to be ready for Day 1 of spring training."

He has been rehabbing in Arlington with renown physical therapist Regan Wong since the third week of August. His plan is to move his workouts to Florida in January, where he will ramp up his throwing regimen.

"Still baby steps right now," he said. "But the ball was coming out of my hand real nice right away. I feel good, but I am definitely not trying to push anything too fast. I have a lot of time before I need to be ready.

"But throughout January, I will be letting it eat."

The competition for bullpen spots will be fierce, VerHagen knows that. Another right-hander Shane Greene is part of the mix now — he began last season as the No. 5 starter. Right-handers Bruce Rondon, Alex Wilson, Mark Lowe and Mike Pelfrey are also in the mix.

But that's a worry for a later date.

“Goal No. 1 is, every day in the offseason, just trying to prepare myself to stay healthy so I can play through the year and into October,” VerHagen said. “What I am hoping for is to comeback and compete exactly like I did last year.”

A healthy VerHagen, flashes of whom the Tigers were able to see last April, would be a bonus addition to the Tigers bullpen.

He's still around, but does Anthony Gose have a real shot at winning job?

December 15, 2016

By Evan Woodbery/ MLive.com

DETROIT -- When Anthony Gose and new Detroit Tigers hitting coach Lloyd McClendon bump into each for the first time this spring in Lakeland, Fla., manager Brad Ausmus insists that it won't be awkward.

"Last year -- it's over," Ausmus said last week. "It's water under the bridge."

Last year, of course, is when a dugout confrontation between Gose and McClendon, then the manager at Triple-A Toledo, prompted the Tigers to demote Gose to Double-A Erie for the rest of the season.

It was there that Gose, 26, ended an absolutely miserable 2016 campaign in which he put up sub-par numbers at three different levels.

Gose, however, is still on the roster and, at least ostensibly, still has a chance to compete for the Tigers center field job this spring.

Four years ago, Gose was considered one of the top prospects in baseball. Two years ago, the Tigers acquired him from the Toronto Blue Jays for second baseman Devon Travis, a trade that looks increasingly lopsided. Just last year, in 2015, Gose started 140 games for the Tigers, giving him more experience than internal competitors Tyler Collins and JaCoby Jones.

Even so, it's difficult to imagine a way that Gose can make the roster, especially if the Tigers acquire a cheap veteran center fielder before spring training to compete for the role.

Yes, the Tigers might opt for some more seasoning in the minor leagues for Jones, but where does that leave Collins? Like Gose, he's a left-handed hitter who is out of options, meaning he could be lost on waivers if he doesn't make the team. But Collins can play all three outfield positions -- in fact he might be better suited to a corner spot -- and he spent much of 2016 with the big-league club while Gose was languishing in Erie.

Tigers general manager Al Avila said the Tigers are attacking the position "on every front" and made it sound likely there would be another external competitor added to the mix before spring training.

"Maybe we can get that guy in a trade," Avila said. "Maybe we can wait until January and get a guy to be a temporary fix. Maybe we can plug that hole with a sixth-year minor league free agent."

Ausmus agreed with Avila that, in an ideal situation, Jones would get "more time in the oven" in Toledo.

"We have some candidates in-house, but it wouldn't shock me if they somehow got out of house at some point," he said.

If the Tigers did pick up, say, an Austin Jackson-type center fielder, Collins could still have a chance to make the club as a utility outfielder. (Although the bench spots will be crowded. In addition to Collins and Gose, outfielder Steven Moya and infielder Dixon Machado are also out of options and super-utility player Andrew Romine was tendered a contract for 2017).

So how does Gose make the roster? And why is he still around?

Perhaps the Tigers are keeping him on the 40-man for now in the hopes that he has a good spring and patches up differences with McClendon. Then Tigers could get him through waivers and convince him to accept a spot in Toledo with the expectation that he would continue to build on his progress.

It's also possible that he's simply holding a spot on the 40-man until the Tigers do sign another veteran center fielder later this winter.

But Avila and Ausmus spoke last week as if they expected to see Gose in Lakeland competing against long odds to be the Tigers center fielder.

"I think Mac and Gose will be fine together," said Ausmus, referring to McClendon by his nickname. "I think they will work together fine. I don't think there will be any issues. I know Mac will do everything he can to try to get the most out of him.

"I've always liked Anthony. He works his tail off, almost to a fault at times. I think if he can learn to back off and let the game come to him a little bit with his athleticism, he can be a big-league everyday center fielder."

What explains J.D. Martinez's defensive slump in 2016? Everything and nothing

December 15, 2016

By Evan Woodbery/ MLive.com

DETROIT -- Late in the 2016 season, Detroit Tigers manager Brad Ausmus and right fielder J.D. Martinez sat next to each on a flight and their chat turned to defense.

Martinez was in the midst of yet another stellar offensive season after being plucked from obscurity three years earlier.

But his defense in right field was suffering, and no one was sure why.

"Quite frankly, I just think it was an off year for him defensively," Ausmus said. "I don't want to chalk it up to any more than that."

Defensive metrics that said Martinez was an average or above-average defender in 2015 showed him at the very bottom in 2016.

MLB.com crunched the numbers using Statcast data and largely confirmed what the defensive metrics suggested: Martinez missed an awful lot of balls in right field.

Statcast charted 14 misses by Martinez that were caught 75 to 100 percent of the time by Major League outfielders. Many of the misses were near the wall, suggesting that perhaps he was tentative after returning from elbow injury.

But Ausmus dismissed that explanation, as that would cover only the final two months of the season.

"I don't think it was the injury," Ausmus said. "It certainly wasn't lack of effort. He's always out there taking fly balls in (batting practice) and he cares about his defense. He's a good thrower, accurate thrower."

Martinez's arm strength did dip a bit after the injury, dropping from 91.9 mph to 89.4 mph, according to Statcast.

Martinez kept 52 percent of runners from advancing in 2015, dropping to 38 percent in 2016. MLB.com's analysis posited that his reduced arm strength alone wasn't to blame. Many teams, knowing about his injury, might have simply been more aggressive than they would have otherwise.

Martinez also played deeper in 2016 (289 feet vs. 282 feet), according to Statcast, perhaps in an effort to help improve his range. That would affect his ability to throw out runners.

Martinez is widely considered to be the most tradeable Tiger. He's an elite player, a relative bargain at \$11.75 million and has no trade restrictions.

But the Tigers didn't budge from their high price and couldn't find a taker on the trade market. It's still possible that Martinez could be dealt in the final two months of the offseason, but it appears increasingly likely that he'll be a Tiger in 2017.

Martinez will have a new, still-unknown center fielder patrolling the large outfield of Comerica Park next to him, which makes defensive improvement even more imperative.

"I just think it was down year," Ausmus said. "I expect him to return to 2015 Martinez."

Machado could force way into role with Tigers

December 15, 2016

By Jason Beck/ MLB.com

DETROIT -- Dixon Machado has spent the last couple of years as a shortstop option for the Tigers when Jose Iglesias has been injured. Now he's an option for the Tigers if Iglesias -- or even second baseman Ian Kinsler -- is traded this offseason.

It's a nice spot for Machado, who has been at Triple-A Toledo the past two seasons. But if Detroit's middle infield remains intact going into next spring, the Tigers could have a tough decision to make, since Machado is out of Minor League options.

What was once a burgeoning crop of Tigers middle-infield prospects has been whittled down to Machado. Devon Travis was blocked at second base by Kinsler before he went to Toronto in the Anthony Gose trade two years ago. Two-way shortstop Eugenio Suarez went to the Reds later that offseason in the trade that brought Alfredo Simon to Detroit. Hernan Perez went to Milwaukee on a midseason waiver claim in 2015 and has found a role with the Brewers.

All of those guys have shown promise with their bats. With Machado, currently the 14th-ranked Tigers prospect by MLB Pipeline, the appeal has always been the glove.

Machado has played in 258 games as a Mud Hen over the past two years, having risen through the system as a slick-fielding shortstop with quietly good baserunning. His glove work has produced highlights in Toledo -- where his acrobatic catch in short left field was one of the plays of the year in the Minor Leagues -- as well as Detroit, where his range up the middle rivals that of the Gold Glove Award finalist Iglesias.

"If the right deal for Iglesias were there, then you'd probably plug in Machado as your shortstop," general manager Al Avila said at last week's Winter Meetings. "When we were looking at the possibility of [trading] Kinsler, he would've played second base. If we have the infield intact, then there would be competition."

That competition would be with Andrew Romine for a utility spot. It's possible both Machado and Romine could make the team, considering Romine and Erick Aybar were both utility infielders on Detroit's 25-man roster for the stretch run of a playoff race this past season. But with slugging outfielder Steven Moya also out of options, the Tigers might have to find room for him, too.

The question with Machado has always been his bat, not just because of a .218 (17-for-78) batting average in Detroit, but also a .246 average over eight Minor League seasons. That includes a .266 batting average and a .705 OPS at Toledo this past year, and .261 and .645 in 2015.

"There are guys that think that he should be able to hit enough to be an everyday guy," Avila said. "That's a projection."

If Machado can do that, it would behoove the Tigers to find a way to keep him, with or without a trade. Iglesias is two years away from free agency, and with the Tigers looking to future payrolls with caution, his free agency could force them to decide where he fits. Kinsler could be a free agent next offseason unless his club option is picked up.

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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2016

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Chicago Cubs	Koji Uehara	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Chicago White Sox	Matt Purke	Designated for Assignment
Chicago White Sox	Derek Holland	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Colorado Rockies	Stephen Cardullo	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Colorado Rockies	Matt Carasiti	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Detroit Tigers	Anthony Vásquez	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Milwaukee Brewers	Tommy Milone	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Oakland Athletics	Ryan Brasier	Signed to Play in Japan, (Hiroshima Toyo Carp)
Philadelphia Phillies	Richie Shaffer	Acquired Off Waivers From from Mariners, Seattle
Philadelphia Phillies	Phil Klein	Released
Philadelphia Phillies	Andres Blanco	Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)
Philadelphia Phillies	David Rollins	Designated for Assignment
Tampa Bay Rays	Ryan Brett	Signed to a Minor League Contract
Tampa Bay Rays	Diego Moreno	Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Toronto Blue Jays](#)

TJ House

Signed to a Minor League Contract

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2016

TEAM

PLAYER

TRANSACTION

[Boston Red Sox](#)

[Matt Domínguez](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Chicago White Sox](#)

Caleb Gindl

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Colorado Rockies](#)

[González Germen](#)

Signed to Play in Japan, (Orix Buffaloes)

[Colorado Rockies](#)

[Ian Desmond](#)

Signed as Free Agent, (2017-2021; Opt 2022)(five-year contract)

[Los Angeles Dodgers](#)

Matt West

Signed to Play in Japan, (Orix Buffaloes)

[Los Angeles Dodgers](#)

[Justin Turner](#)

Signed as Free Agent, (2017-2020)(four-year contract)

[Los Angeles Dodgers](#)

[Tyler Holt](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Los Angeles Dodgers](#)

[Kenley Jansen](#)

Signed as Free Agent, (2017-2021)(five-year contract)

[Miami Marlins](#)

[Stephen Fife](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Miami Marlins](#)

[Tyler Moore](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Milwaukee Brewers](#)

[Ryan Webb](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[New York Yankees](#)

[Dónovan Solano](#)

Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Philadelphia Phillies](#)

[Michael Mariot](#)

Outrighted to Minors

[Pittsburgh Pirates](#)

[Phil Coke](#)

Signed to Play in Japan, (Orix Buffaloes)

[San Diego Padres](#) [André Rienzo](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[San Diego Padres](#) [Hector Sanchez](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[San Diego Padres](#) [Zach Lee](#) Acquired Off Waivers From from Mariners, Seattle

[San Diego Padres](#) [Jose Pirela](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[San Diego Padres](#) [Rafael Ortega](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Texas Rangers](#) [Carlos Gomez](#) Signed as Free Agent, (2017)(one-year contract)

[Washington Nationals](#) [Tim Collins](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Washington Nationals](#) [Jacob Turner](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2016

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
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[Atlanta Braves](#) [John Danks](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Atlanta Braves](#) [Williams Pérez](#) Cleared Waivers and Became a Free Agent

[Baltimore Orioles](#) [Logan Ondrusek](#) Signed as Free Agent, (2017; Opt 2018)(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](#) [Hector Gomez](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[Philadelphia Phillies](#) [Pedro Florimon](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[St. Louis Cardinals](#) [Eric Fryer](#) Signed to a Minor League Contract

[St. Louis Cardinals](#) [Jordan Schafer](#) 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