

MOTOR CITY REVIVAL

The 1978-88 Detroit Tigers



By 1978, the Detroit Tigers were a franchise in need of some rejuvenation. The six years since they came within one win of the World Series in 1972 seemed like a lifetime ago. The Tigers were now on four straight losing seasons. They got rejuvenation and got it in a big way.

The 1978 season saw four players come into the major leagues. Alan Trammell, Lou Whitaker, Jack Morris and Lance Parrish gave a shot of life to a great sports city that needed it.

To do that though, these young players needed a manager. One year later, in 1979, they found one of the all-time greats. Sparky Anderson had managed Cincinnati's great Big Red Machine to four National League pennants and two World Series titles from 1970-76. After a couple second-place finishes, the Reds foolishly cut ties with him. Detroit pounced and got their man.

Over the next eleven years, Sparky and these young players--soon to be joined by Kirk Gibson--helped reshape the landscape of major league baseball and created a unique era in the long history of Detroit Tigers baseball.

You'll read all about that 1978-88 era right here. All eleven seasons have their own article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those eleven pieces--along with three

additional game-by-game narratives of postseason series--are compiled here and edited to create a cohesive narrative.

Follow the Tigers through the 1978-79 seasons as they built their foundation. They read on through the ensuing four seasons when they flirted with contention, sometimes took a step backward and continued to crawl closer to their goal in baseball's toughest division.

Then we come into 1984 when Detroit had a run of historic greatness and won the World Series. You'll read about the season, its key moments and go game-by-game through the postseason matchups with Kansas City and San Diego.

On the threshold of dynasty, learn what caused the Tigers to stumble a bit again in 1985-86. But then watch them revive in 1987. An epic battle with Toronto remains one of baseball's great pennant races and you'll see how Detroit pulled off an improbable comeback in the final week. Then wrap it up with 1988, another season marked by contention, even if it came up short.

One note for readers who might not have lived through this era--the alignment of major league baseball prior to 1993 had each league split into just an East and a West division. Only the winner advanced to the playoffs. Making the postseason was difficult and it was made harder for Detroit by the fact they were in the AL East. The Yankees, Orioles, Red Sox and Brewers were all consistent contenders and among the best in baseball.

If the AL Central had existed, the Tigers would have had two additional division titles and stayed in serious contention much deeper into the season on several other occasions.

But even by the standards of the era they did play, the 1980s Detroit Tigers were an unqualified success. *Motor City Revival* seeks to tell that story.

1978

The four young players--Whitaker, Trammell, Morris and Parrish--might have been the future. But there was also some talent on hand for the present. Jason Thompson was a good all-around first baseman and in 1978, Thompson hit 26 homers and drove in 96 runs. Steve Kemp played leftfield and posted an OBP of .379. Veteran DH Rusty Staub played in all 162 games and rang up a slugging percentage of .495. Ron LeFlore provided speed at the top of the order. His OBP of .361 was augmented by 68 stolen bases.

The pitching was a problem, but not a disaster. Milt Wilcox, Jack Billingham and Dave Rozema were reliable, if not spectacular. The Tigers made a trade for another starter who fit that profile with the Ogilvie-for-Slaton deal with the Brewers. As noted earlier, Ogilvie's emergence made it a less than inspired trade from Detroit's perspective, but it's easy to understand where the Tigers were coming from. And Slaton continued to be reliable.

Then we get to the rookies. Lou Whitaker won Rookie of the Year honors with his .361 on-base percentage. It was a freshman class that included two future Hall of Famers—Paul Molitor in

Milwaukee was one. And the other was Whitaker's own double-play partner. Trammell's OBP was a respectable .335 in his first season in the bigs.

Parrish played 85 games at catcher, hit 14 home runs and set the stage for him to eventually take on full-time duty behind the plate. Morris was pulling relief work and spot-start duty. His rookie year of '78 saw him log 106 innings with a 4.33 ERA.



All told, the Tigers had the best on-base percentage in an American League that included fantastic lineups in New York, Boston and Milwaukee (an AL franchise prior to 1998). And Detroit finished fifth in the American League in runs scored.

The pitching needed help. Detroit made an offseason trade, shipping outfielder Ben Ogilvie to Milwaukee in exchange for starter Jim Slaton. Over the long-term, the deal would be less than inspired—Ogilvie became one of the top power hitters in baseball, while Slaton was never more than a respectable starter. But the

logic of the trade at the time was understandable. Slaton was reliable—the 4.12 ERA wasn't great, but he made 34 starts and won 17 games.

Milt Wilcox, Dave Rozema and 35-year-old Jack Billingham all had ERAs in the 3s and rounded out a good rotation. Kip Young made some spot starts and finished with an ERA of 2.81. The rotation wasn't the problem—while the lack of a clear #1 was a drawback, the starting pitching was good enough to win.

The bullpen lacked depth. Even in an era where starters went deep and often finished games, Detroit's pen still needed help behind 35-year-old closer John Hiller. It's the reason the Tigers finished seventh in the American League for staff ERA.

The biggest problem for Detroit though, wasn't anything about themselves. It was the quality of the AL East. The Yankees were the defending champs. The Red Sox and Orioles weren't far behind. The Brewers would have a breakout season in '78. Only the Indians and the Blue Jays were non-contenders.

So it was providential that this young Detroit team was able to open the season with a steady diet of games against the AL West. They took advantage, going 17-7 and leading the East by as many as three games in April. They were tied for first as late as May 19 when the schedule started picking up. The Tigers hosted the Red Sox for a four-game weekend series.

The weekend got off to a good start on Friday night. Staub homered, eight players had hits and Detroit won 7-5. On Saturday afternoon, the Tiger lineup was able to knock around Red Sox ace Dennis Eckersley and the game was tied 5-5 in the ninth. Bullpen woes bit them and the day ended with a 6-5 loss.

Sunday doubleheaders were still reasonably common in 1978—true doubleheaders, with only a twenty-minute break between games. Wilcox was brilliant in the opener and outdueled Boston's Bill Lee 2-1 with the help of a Thompson home run. Even though Rozema and Morris were shelled in the nightcap, a 9-3 loss, Detroit had at least held their ground against one of the division's kingpins.

But the road would not be as kind. Eight games in Baltimore and Boston loomed that would lead into Memorial Day. The Tigers only mustered two hits in losing the opener against the Orioles, 2-0. Slaton pitched well in the opener of Wednesday's doubleheader and handed Hiller a 2-0 lead. The closer promptly allowed the tying runs to score. Fortunately, the Tigers scraped out a run in the ninth and won 3-2. But only one run combined in the next two games—the Wednesday nightcap and on Thursday—resulted in losing three of four.

It got worse in Fenway over the weekend. A Wilcox-Lee rematch on Friday didn't go as well and the Tigers lost 6-3. Morris was brilliant on Saturday, but took a hard luck 1-0 loss. Leading 3-2 in the eighth inning of Sunday's first game, Hiller gave up three straight hits that tied the game and then a walkoff home run in the 10th. Slaton pitched gamely in the nightcap, hanging in the game in spite of giving up eleven hits, but lost 4-3.

By the time the carnage of the East Coast was complete, Detroit was six games out of first. With the Yankees and Red Sox on their way to an epic pennant race, the Tigers would never get back in the mix.

Detroit continued to struggle against the best teams from the AL East through the early part of the summer. By the All-Star break, they were 15 ½ games back and sitting on .500, at 42-42.

But this young team did not mail it in. When the schedule lightened, they took advantage. A strong late summer moved the record to a solid 74-61 by Labor Day. Games with the Red Sox and Yankees marked the September schedule and slowed the Tigers down, but they still clocked in with an 86-76 record.

The string of losing seasons was broken. While a cynic might say that Detroit could only beat the league's softer teams, the fact is that after four years of *being* one of those softer teams, the Tigers had clearly elevated themselves. They weren't among baseball's best. But they were getting there. The foundation was in place.

1979

Veteran manager Ralph Houk retired after '78 and an outreach was made to Sparky Anderson, recently dismissed in Cincinnati. It took until midseason for the deal to get finalized and Anderson to come aboard, but when he did, the great Tiger move into a new decade had taken another big step forward.

Les Moss was handling the managerial duties when the season opened and he had an offense that could steal bases and hit home runs. LeFlore was the man who set the table and the

centerfielder posted a .355 on-base percentage and stole 78 bags. Whitaker's .395 OBP and 20 steals gave the offense some more spark.

Power came from Kemp, who hit 26 home runs and drove in 105 runs, to go along with an excellent .398 OBP. Thompson popped 20 homers. A late May deal for Champ Summers to play right field paid off in a big way—over the final four-plus months, Summers had a .414 OBP, a .614 slugging percentage and hit 20 homers of his own.

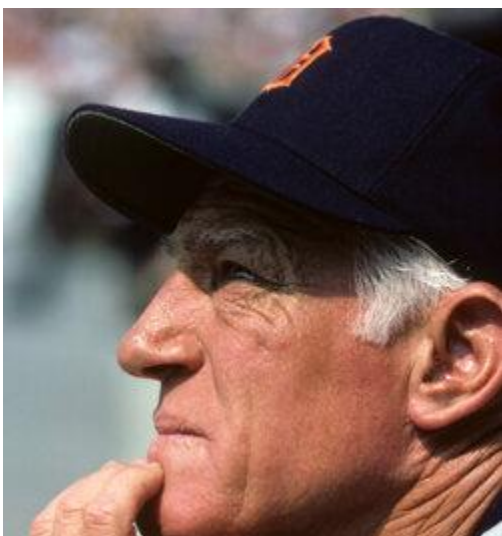
Trammell was still developing as a hitter, but his .335 OBP was respectable. John Wockenfuss was a reliable utility player and hit 15 home runs off the bench. All told, it was good enough for Detroit to rank fifth in the American League in runs scored.

Morris' move into the rotation was an unqualified success, with 17 victories and a 3.28 ERA. But there were problems behind him.

Wilcox was the #2 and his ERA clocked in at 4.35. Wilcox and Morris combined to make 56 starts. Even that's a low number for the top two in a rotation. But Moss, and then Sparky, had to do a lot of experimentation with the other starting pitchers.

Billingham pitched well when he took the ball—a 3.30 ERA and ten wins—but the 36-year-old was only able to make 19 starts. Pat Underwood was too young at age 22 and finished with a 4.59 ERA in his 15 starts. Dan Petry would eventually become a reliable cog in the rotation. This season he was twenty years old and getting his feet wet, 15 starts and a 3.95 ERA. Rozema had similar numbers—16 starts and a 3.51 ERA.

Individually, there was promise. Collectively, that's too much instability. And after Aurelio Lopez, with his 21 saves, 10 wins and 2.41 ERA, the bullpen was weak. So Detroit's staff ERA ended up a mediocre eighth in the American League.



The season started slowly. The Tigers lost five of seven to a mediocre Twins team. They managed to split twelve games against good divisional foes in the Brewers, Orioles and Yankees, but when Memorial Day arrived, Detroit was 18-21. They were in fifth place, eight games back of frontrunning Baltimore.

Detroit came out of the holiday and went 8-5 on a road trip that ended in California. When they returned to old Tiger Stadium, Sparky was signed and in the dugout.

The Tigers continued to chip away with wins against the AL West. But just as had been the case in '78, it was a road trip to Boston and Baltimore that dealt a lethal blow. Detroit lost six of eight. Twice in Baltimore

they lost on a walkoff when they had the lead. The Tigers dropped another game to the Orioles that was tied 5-5 in the eighth inning.

But Detroit came off the mat. They took two of three from Boston back at home, then went up to Milwaukee for a long five-game series and won three times. When Detroit closed the first half by taking four of five from the White Sox, the Tigers had reached .500.

Being .500 in the AL East still left you in fifth place, fourteen games off the pace, so there was no pennant race buzz in the air. But Detroit needed to keep improving. And they did.

The Tigers took home series from the Brewers. After taking another home series from three-time defending AL West champ Kansas City, Detroit headed west to California. The Angels were in the lead in a push to dethrone the Royals. The Tigers had a chance to play spoiler in this mid-August matchup.

Morris picked up his 10th win in the series opener, aided by three hits and three RBIs from Whitaker to lead the 5-3 win. Thompson and Parrish homered on Tuesday and Detroit won 6-3. In Wednesday's finale, Thompson homered again, as did Summers. Petry was brilliant, tossing eight innings of two-hit ball and the Tigers won 6-1. The sweep kickstarted a 7-2 road trip through the West Coast.

California made a return trip to Detroit at the end of August. Billingham opened the series with seven strong innings to pull out Monday night's 3-2 win. The Tiger bats unloaded on Tuesday—three hits from Whitaker and home runs by Summers, Trammell and Thompson—for a 12-2 win. Morris completed *another* sweep of the Angels on Wednesday with a 2-1 win.

The Angels would succeed in their quest to displace the Royals at the top of the AL West. But it was no thanks to the Tigers, who went 6-0 against the eventual division champs in the heat of August.

Detroit reached Labor Day with a record of 73-64. Baltimore was running away with the East and the Tigers were in a 16 ½ game hole. They played 19 games in September against the Orioles, Red Sox and Yankees. It's not the kind of slate where you're going to pile up wins, but Detroit hung in there and went 9-10. They finished the season at 85-76.

In the rigorous AL East that meant fifth place. But it was only three games off of the record the Angels posted in winning the West. Detroit had established that the winning baseball of 1978 was not a fluke. And they had a World Series-winning manager in the dugout to help them build to the next step.

1980

Detroit made a series of moves to try and take that proverbial next step. Unfortunately, the deals didn't pan out and the Tigers suffered some modest regression.

The big trade was shipping Ron LeFlore to Montreal for pitcher Dan Schatzeder. The move had the right priority—pitching depth in both the rotation and the bullpen had been a Tiger problem. But the move didn't pan out—while Schatzeder was respectable, with a 4.02 ERA in his 26 starts, it wasn't worth giving up the lineup's spark plug.

Another big deal came in May when Detroit traded Thompson to California for right fielder Al Cowens. Thompson continued to be productive. Cowens, the runner-up for the American League MVP in 1977, continued a career decline. His .339 on-base percentage was respectable—but not worth the price of Jason Thompson.

A deal with the Mets to get Richie Hebner at first base worked out better. Hebner posted a stat line of .360 OBP/.466 slugging percentage and the price of Phil Mankowski and Jerry Morales was negligible. But the net overall impact of all the trades was negative—and we haven't even factored in the Tigers moving on from Rusty Staub at DH, Aurelio Lopez at third and Jack Billingham in the rotation. Age was a huge factor and the moves justifiable, but they still created a short-term void that was not immediately filled.

On top of all this, there was regression from individual starting pitchers. Morris reliably took his turn, with a workmanlike 36 starts and 16 victories. But his ERA was a mediocre 4.18. Wilcox's ERA was 4.48. Petry was a little better, with a 3.94 ERA in his 25 starts, but when that's the best ERA in your rotation you have problems.

And those problems weren't rectified in the bullpen. Lopez saved 21 games and won 13 more, but the best reliever on staff still had an ERA of 3.77. Rozema and Underwood, who shuttled between the pen and the rotation, had ERAs in the high 3s.

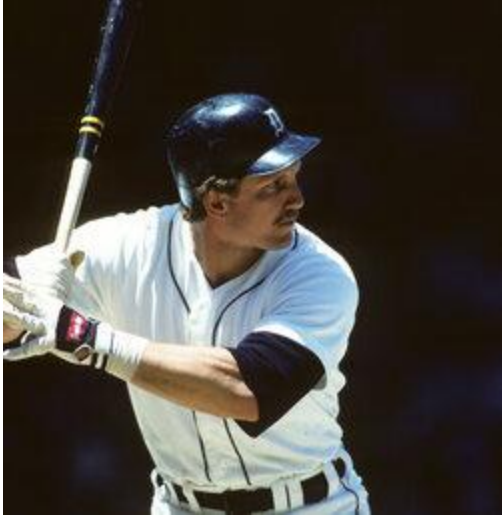
All of which adds up to the Detroit staff finishing 10th in the American League for composite ERA. You aren't going to make any kind of run in an AL East that had baseball's best teams with that kind of pitching.

In fact, you might even be wondering how the Tigers were competitive at all. The answer—this team could hit.

Trammell had his best season to date, batting .300. Even though Whitaker only batted .233, some excellent plate discipline and drawing walks helped Whitaker's OBP clock in at a respectable .331. Detroit was the best in the American League when it came to taking free passes.

Steve Kemp, had a stat line of .376/.474, hit 21 homers and drove in 101 runs. Lance Parrish popped 24 home runs of his own. Rick Peters took over for LeFlore in center and while Peters didn't run like LeFlore did, the new center fielder still finished with an OBP of .369.

Champ Summers handled the DH role and slugged .504 with 17 homers. Sparky used his bench well. John Wockenfuss hit 16 home runs in part-time duty. Jim Lentine's OBP was .377. And Sparky started integrating another talented rookie into the lineup of this young team—23-year-old Kirk Gibson slugged .440 coming off the bench.



In an American League that was stacked with good lineups, no one scored more runs than the Detroit Tigers did in 1980.

Detroit faced an early schedule heavy on the Kansas City Royals, who were bound for the World Series this year. The Tigers lost eight of their first ten, but quickly rebounded to get close to .500.

But when the schedule stiffened again—this time against the top two teams in the AL East, the New York Yankees and Baltimore Orioles, Detroit lost eight of twelve. By the end of that schedule run, shortly after Memorial Day, Detroit's record was 18-24 and they were eight games out of first place.

When Detroit lost two of three in Milwaukee in early June, they were nine games off the pace. Then the Tigers caught fire and ripped off 19 wins in 25 games. The highlight came when the Brewers made the return trip to Tiger Stadium mid-month.

The series opened on Monday with a twilight doubleheader, a common scheduling thing at the time where a twinbill began around 5 PM with twenty minutes in between games. The Tigers fell behind in the opener 5-1, but rallied behind consecutive two-out RBI hits from Summers and Cowens. They pulled out a 6-5 win.

Milwaukee won the nightcap and set up Tuesday night's rubber match between Morris and Milwaukee's good lefthander, Mike Caldwell. Morris was brilliant, with a complete-game five-hitter and Detroit took the series with a 3-0 shutout.

So what did this run of strong play get Detroit? By the All-Star break they were 42-33 and tied for second place...but still 7 ½ games behind the Yankees, who were on pace for 106 wins.

And the late summer would be cruel, as it often is to teams who struggle to find pitching. In late July, still in second place and eight games out, the Tigers lost three straight at home to California. Kansas City came into Tiger Stadium and won three straight. In mid-August, Detroit lost four straight to mediocre Texas.

By Labor Day, the Tigers were still above water, with a 67-61 record, but now in fourth place and 10 ½ games out. They basically held serve in September. There were seven games against the Orioles, who would win 100 games, but have to settle for second place, where Detroit went 1-6. The Tigers made up for it by beating bad teams in the White Sox and the Blue Jays.

The final record came in at 84-78, fourth place and 19 games out. On the positive side, it was a third straight winning season and the quality of the division meant it was fifth-best overall in the American League. On the negative side, it was two fewer wins than the year before and the

11th-best record in the major leagues overall. Whether it was a playoff season by the standards of today depends on how you want to do the math.

The Tigers had opened the season looking for more and came up short. But they wouldn't stop coming and a breakthrough to real contention was just around the corner.

1981

After three years of playing winning baseball, but not seriously contending in a rigorous AL East, Tigers made a real run at the postseason in 1981. They came up just short, but it was another step forward for the emerging core of young players and manager Sparky Anderson.

Detroit's pitching made significant strides. In what would be a strike-shortened 1981 season, Morris made 25 starts, went 14-7 and posted a 3.05 ERA. Wilcox and Petry had similar numbers. Wilcox won twelve games with 3.03 ERA. Petry's 3.00 ERA was actually the best in the rotation, as he picked up ten wins.

Kevin Saucier stepped into the closer's role and was outstanding, with a 1.65 ERA and 13 saves. Lopez and Dave Tobik rounded out a pretty good bullpen. The rotation lacked depth, but Rozema did enough shuttle work between the rotation and the pen to stabilize things and the Tigers finished fifth in the American League for staff ERA.

The offense, by contrast, fell hard in '81. Two veterans, Hebner at first and Cowens in right, had bad seasons that signaled the decline of their careers. Third base was a black hole as far as offensive production. A bench that had been terrific in 1980, did nothing in 1981. Kemp still had a .389 OBP, but his power disappeared.

More disappointing was the drop off from the talented young players that were making Detroit a rising force. Trammell's OBP of .342 was respectable, but there was no power to speak of. The same went for Whitaker. Parrish had a down year.



The only Tiger regular to have a good year was the newest of the young players. Kirk Gibson, now in his second year, got a full-time opportunity in right field and took advantage.

Gibson finished with a .369 on-base percentage and .479 slugging percentage. It was enough to at least keep the Detroit offense afloat, at ninth in the 14-team American League for runs scored.

Detroit took advantage of an early schedule that was heavy on lowly Toronto and won seven of their first nine. But a nine-game losing streak sent the Tigers reeling. Six of those losses came to the New York Yankees, the defending AL East champs, and Detroit scored just eight runs in those six games.

A 10-3 run in late May included series wins over contending teams in Baltimore and Milwaukee. By June 11, Detroit was 31-26, in fourth place and 3 ½ games off the pace. In a normal year, it would be about time for a summer pennant race to get underway.

But 1981 was no ordinary year. On June 12, the players went out on strike. They would not return until mid-August. Baseball had to figure out how to pick up the pieces.

Major League Baseball decided that the way forward in 1981 was to use a split season. The teams in first place on June 12 were declared first-half champions. Everyone would start fresh. The winners of the two halves would then meet in the first-ever installment of the Division Series. The Yankees were in the playoffs. Everyone else was playing to get a shot at New York.

There was one significant caveat to the playoff format. A true split-season would give the first-half champ a chance to win both halves and eliminate the need for a Division Series at all. Not so in this case. Presumably to protect television contracts for October, MLB declared that if one team won both halves, the only reward would be an additional home game.

New York, like the other first-half champs, basically mailed in the second half. But there were still plenty of competitors. Baltimore and Boston were perennial contenders. Milwaukee joined Detroit as the up-and-coming team looking for a breakthrough. And the second-half race in this division would be terrific.

Detroit came blazing out of the gate at the August reset. They beat the Yankees three of four, and then won nine in a row. By Labor Day, the Tigers were 18-9 and in first place. The Brewers and Orioles were two games back in the loss column, with the Red Sox three off the pace. It might be a strange way to get to a pennant race, but stretch drive excitement had finally returned to Detroit.

A temporary hiccup saw the Tigers lose a home series with Boston. In the rubber game Rozema coughed up a 4-1 lead in the eighth. But Detroit bounced back on the weekend by sweeping Cleveland. Their margin in the loss column extended to four games.

But the return trip to Fenway was disastrous. The Tigers mustered only six hits in losing Monday night's opener 5-2. After a day of rain on Tuesday, the teams played a twilight doubleheader on Wednesday. Morris and Eckersley went at it in a great pitcher's duel in the opener. Morris pitched into the 10th inning before losing 2-1.

In the nightcap, the Tigers took a 4-3 lead into the seventh thanks to a pair of RBI from Gibson. Then Tobik, after some steady relief work, gave up two runs and another loss hit the books. In the Thursday finale, Detroit's flagging offense only produced seven singles in a 6-1 loss.

By the time the carnage was over, a race Detroit had firmly in hand, was up for grabs. The Tigers still had the lead, but the Red Sox and Brewers were now just a half-game back and the Orioles only one game off the pace. There were two weeks to go.

A road series in Baltimore was a must-win. Wilcox took the ball on Monday and got a 5-1 win, with help from a home run by Gibson. After spotting the Orioles a 3-0 lead on Tuesday, Wockenfuss hit a big home run and the Tigers won 6-3. Even though Petry was a hard luck 1-0 loser on Wednesday, Detroit had stopped the bleeding.

But the wound reopened on the weekend at home against Milwaukee. Morris and Wilcox were rocked off the mound. The Brewers moved into first place until Petry reclaimed the lead for Detroit, winning 2-1 in the Sunday finale.

The Tiger record was 27-19 going into the final week. The Brewers were 27-20, the Red Sox at 26-20 and the Orioles on 24-21. All four teams would open the final week by going head-to-head.

Detroit was hosting Baltimore. The lack of rotation depth showed on Monday in a 7-3 loss. Milwaukee knocked off Boston and the Brewers took the division lead. The Tigers responded with a vengeance on Tuesday. Gibson, Wockenfuss and Tom Brookens all hit home runs. Morris tossed a three-hitter. Detroit won 14-0. The Red Sox beat the Brewers and the Tigers were back in first.

Rain delayed Wednesday's game and the Tigers watched the Brewers close out a series win over the Red Sox. On Thursday afternoon, Detroit lost their own series finale to Baltimore.

The Tigers were going to Milwaukee to close the season. That meant that even though all four contenders were still packed on top of each other, the Red Sox and Orioles were effectively boxed out. It also meant the half-game that Detroit trailed Milwaukee by was irrelevant. No effort was going to be made to ensure contenders played an equal number of games. It was a simple best two-of-three between the Tigers and Brewers for the second half title in the AL East.

Petry took the ball on Friday night and was hit hard. An 8-2 loss put Detroit on the brink of elimination. They turned to Morris to keep them alive.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon in front of a national audience, Morris was brilliant in shutting down one of baseball's best offensive lineups. He took a 1-0 lead into the eighth.

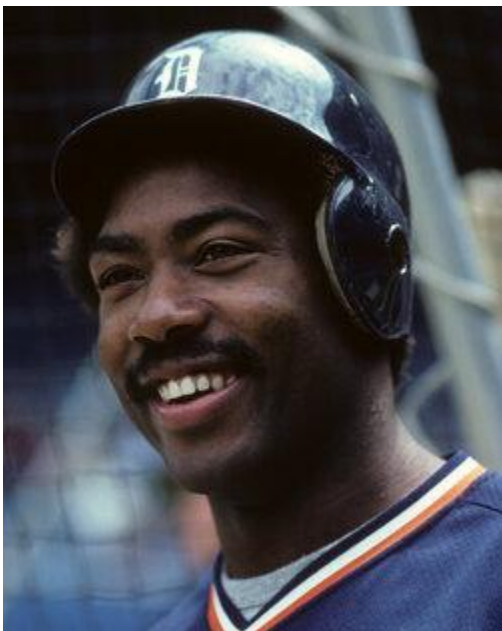
It was a leadoff walk that got Morris in trouble, although the trouble was not of his own making. Detroit flubbed two consecutive sacrifice bunts, allowing Milwaukee to load the bases with no outs. A ground ball out tied the game and sac fly put the Brewers ahead. In an agonizing loss, the Tigers had not given up a hit in letting the lead get away. The playoff push was over.

Even with the heartbreaking ending, 1981 was still a breakthrough year for Detroit. They gave their fan base a taste of the pennant race. And while the quality of the AL East and the rigor of making the playoffs meant the big breakthrough would still take some time, Detroit was clearly coming on strong.

It was time for the Detroit Tigers. They made some big moves in the offseason and those moves proved to be good ones. It was time to return this franchise to the postseason for the first time in ten years. But not only did the 1982 Detroit Tigers fail in that regard, they failed to even come close and took a disappointing step backwards.

No one could blame the pitching. Morris was the ace of the staff and while his 4.06 ERA was high for a #1, Morris made a workmanlike 37 starts and won 17 games. Petry had an even better year, with a 3.22 ERA and 15 victories in his 35 trips to the mound. Wilcox was solid, winning twelve times and posting a 3.62 ERA.

With offense up around the league—the American League average ERA rose from 3.66 to 4.07—the Morris-Petry-Wilcox trio was good enough to key a staff that led the league in ERA.



Detroit made a bold offseason decision to trade Steve Kemp, their best all-around offensive player, to Chicago. The deal paid off. Kemp was never again the same elite player and the return was Chet Lemon, who went to post a stat line of .368 on-base percentage/.447 slugging percentage. Lemon would be a big part of this Tiger outfield for the balance of the decade.

The Tigers dealt Dan Schatzeder and got Larry Herndon from San Francisco in return. Herndon hit 23 home runs in 1982 and, like Lemon, continued to be a key part for Detroit moving forward.

What the Tigers did not get was good production from their great young middle infielders. Trammell had just a .325 OBP in his fifth major league year. Whitaker was a little better at second base, but his stat line of .341/.434 was merely respectable, rather than standout. With first base and third base being black holes of offensive production, and Gibson limited by injuries to 69 games, that wasn't going to be enough.

Detroit did get a big year from Parrish, who slugged 32 home runs. They got valuable bench work from Wockenfuss, whose stat line was .388/.472. But it was only enough to rank ninth in the American League for runs scored.

The Tigers got off to a strong start, ripping through the Yankees and Kansas City Royals (traditionally the best of the AL West in this era) with eight wins in ten games. In May, Detroit took advantage of the weaker Western Division with an eight-game winning streak. By Memorial Day, the Tigers were 28-17, in second place and just a half-game back of Boston.

Detroit continued to raise the hopes of the fan base by rolling into the early summer. They won three straight over the Angels, who would outlast the Royals in this year's Western race. By June 9, the Tigers were 35-18 and into first place by a half-game.

Then it all started coming apart.

Milwaukee, after a sluggish start, made a managerial change and started turning "sluggish" into "slugfest". The Tigers lost two of three at home to the Brewers and gave up 24 runs in the process. A return trip to Milwaukee ended up with four consecutive losses. In between, Detroit dropped a pair at lowly Cleveland. The Tigers went to Fenway Park and lost three straight to the Red Sox. The losing streak hit ten games.

A four-game series with Baltimore now had to be played with some urgency. Jerry Ujdur, the #4 starter, stopped the bleeding with a 7-1 win in the series opener. Detroit was still 37-29, within 4 ½ games of first and plenty of time left in the season. But they promptly lost the next two. In the series finale, a showdown between Morris and Oriole ace Jim Palmer, turned into a rout that the Tigers lost 13-1.

Detroit came home wounded, but with no time to waste. Boston was in town. The Tigers finally won a series, taking two of three and winning the rubber game 5-4 on a two-run double by Gibson in the eighth. Although they turned around and lost a weekend series to Baltimore going into the All-Star break.

The Tigers were now flirting with .500 at 43-41 and in fourth place, looking up at the Brewers, Red Sox and Orioles. But trailing by 5 ½ games was not insurmountable. There was still time for the hope of spring and summer to translate into a pennant race autumn.

That didn't happen. Detroit started to play better and the highlight of the late summer was a 12-inning win over the Yanks where Morris pitched eleven frames. The problem was that the quality and depth of the AL East started to assert itself. Milwaukee and Baltimore took over the race and fought it to the final day. The Tigers reached Labor Day with a record of 70-65, but 10 ½ games off the lead.

Detroit's chance to make an impact on the race would have to come as a spoiler and they played a pair of series against Baltimore down the stretch. The Tigers won two of three at home. In the final week, they went to old Memorial Stadium. Those who lived in Milwaukee—like this then-12-year-old writer, were big Tigers fans, at least for a few days.

And they did not let us down. Even though Morris lost a 3-1 heartbreaker in the series opener, Detroit's bats awoke from a season-long slumber to score 21 runs in winning the next two games. The wins gave the Brewers enough space to hold off a furious final charge from the Orioles over the weekend.

But playing spoiler wasn't what Tiger fans or the organization had in mind. The 83-79 record, only seventh in the American League overall and 15th in the major leagues, was not even a

playoff season by the more generous standards of today. At the end of 1982, the fans of Detroit couldn't be blamed for wondering if the promise of this young team would end up unfulfilled.

1983

In this 1983 season, the Tigers got back on track and took a notable incremental step—they cleared the 90-win threshold.

Detroit's resurgence began with Trammell and Whitaker. In 1983, Trammell hit .319 while Whitaker hit .320. Both had respectable pop, slugging over .450.

Herndon had a good all-around season in left field, batting .302 with 20 home runs and 92 RBI. Lemon, a solid and underrated center fielder, hit 24 homers. Veteran first baseman Enos Cabell hit .311. Parrish popped 27 homers and drove in 114 runs.

Even though the Detroit lineup had its weaknesses, with a bad year from Gibson the most notable disappointment, they could still hit. The Tigers were top four in the American League in batting average, doubles and homers. The one problem was patience at the plate—they were only ninth in walks. But even so, Detroit scored the fourth-most runs in the American League.

The pitching staff was anchored by two horses in Morris and Petry. They combined to make 75 starts. Morris was a 20-game winner and finished with a 3.34 ERA. It was enough to place third in the Cy Young voting. Petry won 19 and his ERA was 3.92. Wilcox was respectable at #3, going 11-10 with a 3.97 ERA.



Even though no one else started as many as twenty games, Anderson was able to piece together reliable work at the back end of the rotation. Juan Berenguer and Rozema were the most prominent in shuttling between the pen and the rotation, finishing with ERAs in the 3s. Anderson's handling of the staff and bullpen, combined with a good year from 34-year-old closer Aurelio Lopez, enabled the Tigers to finish fourth in the AL for staff ERA.

Detroit muddled out of the gates and were at .500 on Memorial Day. The good news is that no one else in the AL East caught fire and all seven teams were within six games of first place.

The Tigers picked up the pace in early June. They went to Fenway and swept the Red Sox four straight. That started a stretch where they went 16-10 against AL East teams. By the All-Star break, Detroit was 41-35 and two games out of first place. The division remained jam-packed with only the Indians having fallen out of contention.

Tiger momentum continued in the late summer. They went 32-20 out of the break and into late August. Between July 19 and August 28 they were never more than two games out of first place and spent six days either tied or in sole possession of the division lead. The possibility of playoff baseball coming back to Motown was real.

Detroit split eight games leading into Labor Day, but Baltimore was heating up. The Orioles widened their lead to 4 ½ games over the Tigers and Yankees. The Brewers, the defending division champs, were five back. Detroit's remaining schedule would be against divisional rivals, including seven with Baltimore. The Tigers controlled their fate.

Over the next two weeks, Detroit went 8-5. Not bad, but Baltimore kept surging and stretched the lead to seven games. The Tigers were still in second place when the head-to-head games against the Orioles began. But any margin for error that might have remained was gone. Detroit needed to take at least three of four when Baltimore came to town on September 20.

Were the Tigers ready? Well, how does scoring 11 runs in the first inning of Tuesday night's opener grab you? Whitaker and Herndon each homered in the barrage. The game was called due to rain after five innings, as close as MLB will ever get to a mercy rule. Detroit won 14-1.

But Wednesday's twilight doubleheader saw fortunes go south. Morris matched up with Baltimore's hot rookie pitcher Mike Boddicker and lost 6-0. In the nightcap, the Tiger bullpen collapsed. A 3-1 lead in the ninth inning turned into a 7-3 loss. Even though Detroit took the finale, this race was all but over and the Tigers were formally eliminated by the time their final week series in Baltimore took place.

Detroit still closed out the season on a good note. They swept the last series from the Orioles, posted a final record of 92-70 and took second in the AL East. Not only was that a playoff season by the more lenient standards of today, it was actually the third-best record in all of baseball, better than anyone in the National League.

After the disappointment of 1982, the 1983 season had re-established that the Tigers were coming.

1984

The 1984 Detroit Tigers were more than a breakthrough. They were one of the great teams of their era. They went wire-to-wire in first place and brought the city its first World Series title since 1968.

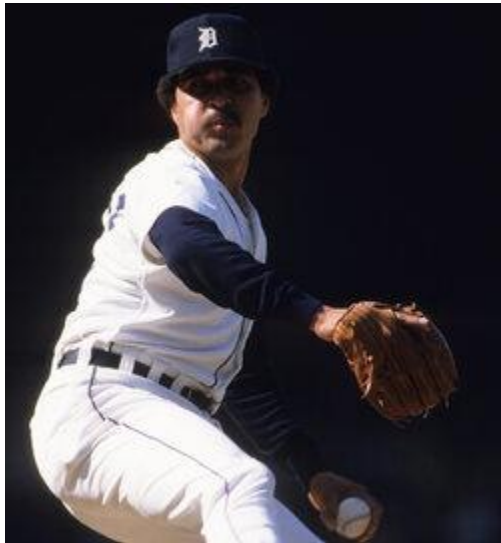
Alan Trammell had an on-base percentage of .382 and a slugging percentage of .468. Lou Whitaker posted numbers of .357/.407, and both were sound defensively. Kirk Gibson hit 27 home runs with a stat line of .363/.516.

They were joined by Lance Parrish, who hit 33 home runs. Chet Lemon quietly put together an excellent season, at .357/.495. Dave Bergmann at first base, and 34-year-old designated hitter

Darrell Evans were patient hitters with solid on-base percentages. The lineup as a whole led the American League in runs scored.

Jack Morris won 19 games with a 3.60 ERA, pitched nine complete games and throughout his career showed a knack for having his best games in either big spots or nights when the offense wasn't hitting. Dan Petry, 25-years-old, won 18 games with a 3.24 ERA and seven complete games.

The rotation was a little top-heavy reliant on Morris and Petry, though Milt Wilcox did win 17 games with a 4.00 ERA. The bullpen had two outstanding arms. Aurelio Lopez pitched 137 innings, won ten games and had a 2.94 ERA.



But no one, either in the lineup, the rotation or the bullpen, made a bigger impact than left-handed closer Willie Hernandez. He worked 140 innings, saved 32 games, won nine more and finished with a 1.92 ERA.

Hernandez won both the Cy Young and MVP award—the second closer in four years to do so, following Rollie Fingers of the Milwaukee Brewers in 1981.

Detroit's schedule in April and May did not have any of the anticipated AL East contenders on the schedule. The Baltimore Orioles were the defending World Series champs, Milwaukee had been a consistent contender over the past several years and no one ever wrote off

the New York Yankees.

Of the Tiger rivals in the old AL East, only the Boston Red Sox and Cleveland Indians were on the schedule in the first two months. Neither would be a contender, nor was such expected of them in April. To the chagrin of the rest of the division, by the time Detroit began playing serious contenders, they had taken firm command of the race.

The Tigers' stunning 35-5 opening to the '84 season remains an MLB record and they were 37-9 when June 1 arrived. The Toronto Blue Jays were shaping up as the prime competition, off to red-hot start themselves. The Jays had the second-best record in all of baseball and were a manageable 5 ½ games off the pace. The Orioles were in third, still hoping to work themselves back into the mix. The next 14 games—all against Toronto and Baltimore were a chance for the challengers to dent Detroit's margin.

The Orioles came into Tiger Stadium for a weekend set. Detroit's bats were ready. Trammell had three-hits, including a two-run homer. The Tigers struck for six runs in the second and cruised home to a 14-2 rout.

But the bats fell silent the rest of the weekend. Morris struggled on Saturday afternoon in a 5-0 loss. And good pitching from Wilcox and Rozema was wasted in Sunday's 2-1 loss.

When Toronto came in on Monday, the offense continued to struggle in silence. Blue Jay ace Dave Stieb was up 3-0 in the seventh and this June test suddenly wasn't going so well.

Then Lemon was hit by a pitch and Bergmann singled. Howard Johnson came to the plate. By the latter part of the 1980s, "HoJo" would become one of the game's best all-around players with the Mets. In 1984 he was still just an unproven utility infield player. HoJo nailed Stieb for a three-run blast that tied the game.

The 3-3 tie stayed until the 10th inning. Bergmann came through again. With two on and two out, he homered. Detroit had a 6-3 walkoff win.

Those late heroics looked even bigger when Tiger pitching faltered on Tuesday and Wednesday, giving up a combined 14 runs in two losses. Thursday afternoon's getaway day finale was shaping up as a big summer game.

And who else would you want on the mound other than Jack Morris? The ace kept the game tied 1-1 into the sixth when the Detroit bats opened up. Parrish singled, Evans drew a walk and backup outfielder Ruppert Jones ripped a home run. The Tigers won 5-3. They had gotten a split of the four-game set almost exclusively on the power of a trio of three-run blasts.

Now it was time to take the show on the road and that started with a return trip to Baltimore on Friday night. Wilcox was pitching well, but trailing 2-1 in the seventh, he looked ready to take his second hard-luck loss in a week to these Orioles.

Then the heroes of the Toronto series went to work. Bergman worked a one-out walk. HoJo doubled to tie up the game and took third on an error. Trammell's sac fly gave the Tigers a 3-2 lead that Hernandez made stand up.

When Detroit lost 4-0 on Saturday, it looked like the pattern of the previous weekend might repeat itself. But as it turned out, this Sunday in Baltimore would be a significant day in the season.

The Tiger bats roared in a doubleheader. The top three in the order—Whitaker, Trammell and Gibson dominated the opener. Whitaker scored five runs, Trammell and Gibson had four RBIs apiece. The final was 10-4. Trammell and Gibson went for three more hits apiece in the nightcap, an easy 8-0 win behind Petry.

Taking three of four put a big crimp in any hope Baltimore had of turning this race around. And in the meantime, Toronto was being swept up in New York. The Tiger lead was back to seven games.

Trammell and Whitaker kept hitting on Monday, leading the way to a 5-4 win in Toronto. Even though Morris and Wilcox struggled over the next two games, allowing 19 combined runs, the

Tigers had survived this big schedule stretch. An AL East lead that was at 5 ½ games when the 14-game sequence began, now stood at seven games.

Detroit went on to win nine of thirteen against Milwaukee and New York and pushed the lead up to ten games. An early July slump against AL West teams allowed Toronto to knock it back down to seven by the All-Star break. But the Tigers responded by winning 11 of 14 out of the break and pushing the margin back to a comfortable 11 ½ games.

Some middling play in August gave Toronto room to at least stay within shouting distance. On Labor Day, Detroit led by 8 ½ games. Baltimore was in third, 14 games out. It would be a stretch to call this a race, but with another long sequence against Toronto and Baltimore—this one twelve games—there was still a ray of hope, at least for the Blue Jays.

The Tigers lost four of six to the Orioles, but it was way too late for Baltimore. Toronto was the team Detroit needed to beat. And they went north of the border, rolled up 24 runs and won three straight. Then the Tigers took two of three from the Jays back home.

Detroit was up twelve games with two weeks to go. It was all but over. Two days later, when Hernandez nailed down a 3-0 win in Milwaukee, the champagne could flow.

1984 ALCS

There are times when a perceived mismatch leads to a magical upset or at least a riveting moment when a favorite has to turn back a determined challenger. The 1984 ALCS between the Tigers and Kansas City Royals was not one of them. The Tigers came in a heavy favorite, and while the Royals were able to make a couple of the individual games very good, the outcome of the series was never in doubt.

1984 was the last year the LCS round was still a best-of-five affair. Homefield advantage was determined by a rotation system, so the series would open with two games in Kansas City on a Tuesday & Wednesday.

Each team had its ace ready, Detroit with Morris and Kansas City sending Bud Black. The Tigers wasted little time getting after Black and sending a clear message about their status as the top-heavy favorite to win the World Series.

Whitaker led off the ALCS with a single and Alan Trammell promptly tripled him home. A sac fly from Parrish had Detroit up 2-0 before anyone was even settled in. Herndon and Trammell each hit leadoff homers in the fourth and fifth inning to extend the lead to 4-0. Another run came in the seventh when Whitaker took second on a misplayed liner to right and quickly scored on a base hit from Trammell.

Morris was rolling and the 5-0 lead was plenty, but the Tigers tacked on three more runs, including another leadoff homer, this one from Parrish. The Royals avoided a shutout with a run in the seventh but that was all they achieved. The final was 8-1.

Detroit went to Petry in Game 2. Kansas City had a 20-year-old kid who had both started and relieved throughout 1984 and pitched pretty well. His name was Bret Saberhagen. The Tigers wasted no time jumping on the kid. After a one-out error, Detroit pounced with back-to-back doubles from Gibson and Parrish. The Royals again faced a 2-0 deficit before coming to bat.

Gibson padded the lead with a one-out solo blast in the third. It looked like the rout was on. But Saberhagen settled in and Detroit stopped scoring. Meanwhile, the K.C. offense started grinding its way back.

Pat Sheridan worked a one-out walk in the fourth and took third on a base hit by George Brett. A productive ground ball from Jorge Orta put the Royals on the board. In the seventh, Steven Balboni singled with one out. A forceout replaced him on the basepaths with Frank White and Dane Iorg's pinch-hit single cut the lead to 3-2.

Hernandez came on in the eighth inning. Kansas City, fighting for its life, found a way to tie the game. Lynn Jones singled to start the frame. Hal McRae, a veteran of K.C.'s four ALCS battles from 1976-80 had lost his power by this stage of his career, but he still came through here with a game-tying double. Kansas City had gotten to Hernandez and still had their own great closer, Dan Quisenberry in the pen.

Tiger manager Sparky Anderson cut his losses on Hernandez and went to Aurelio Rodriguez. The move came through, as Rodriguez tossed two shutout innings, matching zeroes with Quisenberry as the game went to the 11th.

Parrish led off the Detroit half of the eleventh with a single. A sac bunt by Evans was booted by catcher Don Slaught and now there were runners on first and second. Ruppert Jones bunted both over and John Grubb came up with the biggest hit of this ALCS, a two-run double off Quisenberry. Kansas City rallied in the bottom of the inning, putting two on with two outs. Jones came to the plate and lifted a long fly ball to right. But there was no walkoff magic...just a flyout to Gibson. Rodriguez finished the job in the 5-3 win.



Detroit took the field on Friday night knowing they had three cracks at home to clinch their first pennant since 1968. Milt Wilcox got the ball for the Tigers and pitched the game of his life.

Wilcox threw a three-hitter, with no Royal batter ever making it to second base. And it turns out he needed to be just that great, because K.C. lefty Charlie Liebrandt was almost as good.

Detroit mounted a soft rally on the second. An infield hit by Barbaro Garbey started it. After a forceout, an Evans single put runners on the corners and Marty

Castillo's productive ground ball out brought in the run. The Tigers threatened again the next

inning, with Gibson on third and one out. But Leibrandt struck out Parrish and was able to escape.

The rest of the game was the two pitchers putting on a show. The 1-0 lead held and Hernandez came on for the ninth. When he got Darryl Motley to pop up to third, the city of Detroit could celebrate. Gibson was named ALCS MVP, going 5-for-12 with a home run and two RBI.

As series MVP honors go, those numbers are pedestrian. But no pitcher had to go more than twice, no reliever dominated and Trammell was the only other everyday player to have an impact going 4-for-11. Trammell was the difference in Game 1, but Gibson was in the much more competitive Game 2 that all but clinched the series.

1984 WORLD SERIES

Detroit was a steamroller. The San Diego Padres were a nice, overachieving story. They had the best year in franchise history, winning 92 games and then delivering a memorable NLCS victory over the Chicago Cubs.

It was expected that Detroit would win decisively and the fact they did so in five games shows the Tigers met expectations. But if you were a Tiger fan living through it in the moment, there were some nervous moments, as the Padres played competitive baseball throughout this Fall Classic and continually fought back whenever Detroit threatened to blow games open.

The World Series opened on a Tuesday night in San Diego. The Tigers sent Morris to the mound to face consistent Padre lefty Mark Thurmond. San Diego starters had problems in the NLCS. Thurmond was no exception, and his early troubles persisted to start the World Series.

Whitaker opened the Series with a double and was promptly driven in by an RBI single from Trammell. The inning ended 1-0, but only because Trammell was thrown out stealing, negating subsequent singles from Parrish and Herndon.

San Diego got back quickly. With two outs, Steve Garvey, the hero of the NLCS, singled and Graig Nettles followed suit. Terry Kennedy then drilled a two-round double into the right fielder corner and it was a 2-1 game.

The Padres missed a scoring chance in the third, when Morris induced Garvey to hit into a big double play and the Tigers reclaimed the lead in the fifth. Gibson had been caught stealing with one out, and it looked like Detroit might have run themselves out of more runs. But Parrish and Herndon again came through—the former doubled, and the latter homered.

Morris made the 3-2 lead stand up. He gave up consecutive singles to Nettles and Kennedy in the sixth, but struck out three straight to kill the threat. In the bottom of the seventh, San Diego's Kurt Bevacqua, playing only because the DH rule was in effect for 1984 (at this time, use of the DH alternated each year and the rules were in place for the entire Series, not based on which team was at home), hit a double. Bevacqua tried for third and was gunned down by a Gibson-Whitaker relay. Morris went six-up, six-down in the eighth and ninth.

The following evening for Game 2, Detroit again struck right away. Whitaker, Trammell and Gibson hit consecutive singles to open the game. One run was in, and then Gibson stole second. Parrish hit a sac fly and Evans blooped in a single to make it 3-0. After another single put runners on the corners, San Diego manager Dick Williams went for broke, pulled starter Ed Whitson and entrusted 25 outs to his bullpen.

The San Diego bullpen, this team's great asset in the regular season and huge in the NLCS, came through with their Series chances realistically on the line. Andy Hawkins threw 5.1 innings of one-hit ball. Craig Lefferts threw three innings and only gave up one hit. Neither walked a man. Detroit didn't score again and San Diego began coming back.

The Padres picked up a run in the bottom of the first when leadoff man Alan Wiggins bunted, Tony Gwynn walked, Steve Garvey bunted both over and Graig Nettles delivered a sac fly. San Diego consistently threatened each of the next three innings, and finally pushed over another run in the fourth.

With one out in the fifth, Nettles drew a walk and Kennedy singled. Bevacqua, making the most of his chance to play, unloaded a three-run jack. San Diego took Game 2 5-3 and while Detroit had done what they needed to, and split on the road, there was still hope the underdog could make this Series competitive.

The great city of Detroit was watching its first World Series since the championship year of 1968 and were ready on a Friday night for Game 3, as the middle three games came to Motown. It didn't take long for the offense to give the fans something to cheer about.

There were two outs and no one in the bottom of the second, but San Diego starter Tim Lollar couldn't get off the mound. Lemon singled and Marty Castillo hit a home run. Whitaker drew a walk and Trammell doubled him in. Gibson walked, and Parrish singled. The bases were loaded and Lollar was yanked. Herndon drew a walk to make it 4-0 before the third out finally came.

San Diego, as was the case in the first two games, responded immediately to a Detroit attack. Wiggins and Gwynn each singled, and Garvey came up with an RBI groundout. But in the bottom of the third, three consecutive walks and a hit batsman gave the Tigers a gift run and it was 5-1.

Wilcox was pitching well for Detroit and the Padres didn't score again until the seventh, when Gwynn beat out an infield hit and scored on a double by Garvey. Detroit turned to Hernandez, and he got the final six outs.

The 1984 World Series marked the last year with a schedule that included day games on Saturday and Sunday. Though there was a daytime start in 1987 that was an out-of-the-box decision rather than part of a regular schedule. The '87 game was also played indoors at the Metrodome in Minnesota. These weekend games in 1984 marked the last time the World Series was played outdoors in the afternoon.

Detroit scored in the first inning for the third time in this Series, as Whitaker reached on an error by Wiggins at second, and then Trammell launched a home run. The pattern of San Diego answering continued, as Kennedy homered off Morris, who took the ball on three days' rest, making him available for a potential Game 7.



The Tigers again chased a Padre starter early, this time Eric Show, who had been terrible in two NLCS starts. Whitaker singled and Trammell hit his second home run of the day to make it 4-1.

San Diego's bullpen came through—Dave Dravecky tossed 3.1 innings of shutout ball, including a strikeout of Gibson with runners on the corners and one out in the fifth. Detroit was done scoring. But San Diego couldn't crack Morris. They scraped across on a run in the ninth, but never so much as got the tying run to the plate. The final was 4-2 and Morris had

another complete game win.

There was still hope for the Padres—just get one win in Detroit and then get your home park back for the latter part of the World Series. But somewhere along the line a Padre starter would have to do something heroic—like get out of the first three innings. It didn't happen in Game 5.

Whitaker opened the home half of the first with a single and Gibson homered. Parrish, Herndon and Lemon hit consecutive singles and again had Williams putting almost an entire game into his bullpen's hands.

The Padres, to their great credit, continued to keep coming back. Bobby Brown singled in the third, moved up on two ground ball outs and scored on a base hit from Garvey. Bevacqua led off the fourth with a walk, Templeton doubled, Brown hit a sac fly and Wiggins singled. It was 3-3, and Detroit manager Sparky Anderson joined Williams in turning to the bullpen early.

Anderson didn't have the bullpen depth Williams did, but in addition to Hernandez, Detroit had Lopez. What's more, the Tiger relievers weren't taxed by having to pitch virtually entire games. Lopez got seven big outs, four of them by strikeout and slowed San Diego down.

Gibson beat out an infield hit in the fifth, and after two walks, he was at third and alertly tagged up on a short pop fly out to right field. Parrish gave the Tigers narrow breathing room with a home run in the seventh, but Bevacqua answered back by taking Hernandez deep for a solo shot in the eighth. It was 5-4 and San Diego was still clinging to a thread of a chance with three outs to go.

But the Tigers still had to bat in the eighth. Williams went to his closer, Goose Gossage. Castillo drew a leadoff walk. A bunt attempt by Whitaker worked out even better than Anderson imagined—both runners ended up safe. Trammell bunted both into scoring position.

Gibson came to the plate and put the finishing touches on a brilliant game. In one of the memorable moments in Detroit Tiger history he launched a three-run blast into right field, sending Detroit into a frenzy. The World Series title could be tasted and Hernandez closed the ninth without incident.

Trammell won the Series MVP and his numbers were excellent. The shortstop went 9-for-20 and homered twice.



But I still dissent. How was the MVP of this series anyone other than Jack Morris? He pitched two complete games, gave up only two runs apiece in each game, both of which were close and required him to deliver a top performance. He set the tone in Game 1 and had the Padres won Game 4, and at least ensured themselves a trip back west, it changes the whole tenor of the Series.

Trammell, along with Whitaker, made a consistent impact through all five games, but Morris was the true MVP of the 1984 World Series.

No team made a more consistent impact though, than the 1984 Detroit Tigers. They were far and away the best in baseball. Their real competition was not the San Diego Padres, gritty though the '84 Padres were—it's teams like the 1976 Cincinnati Reds or the 1998 New York Yankees, other great teams, who are in the conversation for the best of the modern era. Detroit's 1984 team is right there in that discussion.

1985

The 1985 Detroit Tigers were looking to start a dynasty. But in a tough division, in an era when it was much harder to make the playoffs, a late summer slump did in Detroit's dreams a repeat crown.

Pitching was the key for the Tigers in 1985. A balanced rotation was led by Morris, Petry and Walt Terrell. The trio combined to make 103 starts, win 46 games and all had ERAs in the 3s. Frank Tanana only made twenty starts, but still won ten games and posted a 3.34 ERA. Randy O'Neal did some spot starting and finished with a 3.24 ERA.

Detroit was getting consistent starting pitching and their relief corps was pretty good too. The closer, Willie Hernandez, didn't match his 1984 run to the Cy Young and MVP awards, but he still saved 31 games with a 2.70 ERA.

The depth in the pen wasn't great. Juan Berenguer, who did a mix of starting and relief, had a rough year in '86. So did Lopez. But even allowing for this, the Tigers still finished fourth in the American League in ERA.

It was the offense that sunk Detroit. Although not for a lack of power. Detroit finished second in the American League in home runs. Parrish hit 28 homers and drove in 98 runs, good numbers for anyone and especially so for a catcher. Evans went deep forty times at first base. Gibson hit 29 home runs, drove in 97 runs and scored 96. Whitaker played second base and out of the leadoff spot in the batting order, popped 21 homers and scored 102 runs.

So what was the problem? From a team-wide perspective, the problem was that if the Tigers weren't hitting home runs they weren't doing much of anything. They ranked in the lower part of the American League in every other offensive category.

From an individual standpoint, Trammell had a bad year. So did Herndon in left field and Tom Brookens at third. Lemon wasn't bad, but nor did he stand out. The depth was shaky. And the Tigers finished eighth in runs scored.

There was nothing wrong with the way Detroit started the season. They won their first six games, including a couple over the Royals behind gems from Morris and Petry. Even though the Tigers played up-and-down baseball the rest of the spring, they still rolled into Memorial Day with a record of 24-16, three games back of the Blue Jays.

Detroit had slipped 6 ½ back by June 6 when they headed to Toronto for a big four-game series. On Thursday night, Petry was brilliant...but the bats only mustered four singles and wasted ten shutout innings by their starter. The Tigers eventually lost 2-0 in the 12th. On Friday, Terrell was knocked out by the fifth in a 9-2 beatdown. The gap in the AL East had soared to 8 ½ games. Detroit needed to plant their feet quickly or the race would get away from them.

Gibson and Whitaker stepped up on Saturday afternoon. Whitaker ignited the lineup with four hits. Gibson drove in five runs, including a three-run homer in the first that set the tone and keyed a 10-1 win. On Sunday, Whitaker had three more hits, Gibson drove in three more runs and the Tigers won 8-3. They were still 6 ½ back, but there was a long way to go and given the way the weekend had started, no one in Detroit was likely to complain.

Furthermore, those Saturday and Sunday wins, started a nice run. Facing the Orioles, Yankees and Red Sox, the Tigers went 11-4 and closed to within two games of the lead. But the Blue Jays were a different story. Toronto made their return trip to Detroit and the Tigers lost two of three. By the All-Star break, Detroit was 3 ½ back, with New York nestled in second place, 2 ½ games off the pace.

Everyone was anticipating a hot pennant race. But the late July period after the All-Star game went bad. Facing mostly mediocre AL West teams, the Tigers lost nine of fourteen games. The Blue Jays took advantage and pushed Detroit into a steep 9 ½ game hole as the calendar flipped to August. A nine-game road trip to Kansas City, Milwaukee and Cleveland—with only the eventual World Series champion Royals a difficult opponent—ended with a 4-5 record.

If you were looking for a reason to hope, Detroit had five September games with New York and three against Toronto. But by Labor Day, the Tigers were 10 ½ games out. A homestand with

Oakland, California and Seattle—with only the contending Angels a difficult opponent—resulted in a 4-6 record.

The Tigers were on life support and on a road trip to Toronto, the Blue Jays jammed the dagger in—Detroit lost all three games, scoring just six runs in the process.

They limped home with an 84-77 record, good for third place, but 15 games out of first place. The record was sixth-best in the American League and tied for 11th-best overall, meaning that even by the more lenient standards of today, the '85 Tigers would have still failed to make it back to the postseason. Detroit needed to regroup.

1986

The 1986 Detroit Tigers didn't get back on top of the AL East, but they most definitely regrouped. The everyday lineup enjoyed a nice bounceback year, The collective comeback was keyed by an anticipated individual revival from Trammell. After a rough year in '85, Trammell posted a stat line of .347 on-base percentage/.469 slugging percentage in 1986.

Gibson had a good all-around year in right field, hitting 28 homers and stealing 34 bases. Evans hit 29 home runs. Parrish was limited to 91 games, but still went deep 22 times. A trade to get 24-year-old Darnell Coles to play third paid off, as Coles popped 20 more dingers. The Tigers led the American League in home runs.

But they had hit home runs in 1985 and that wasn't enough to keep the offense as a whole from being mediocre. The reason 1986 was different—in addition to Trammell's return to form—was a more balanced attack that could score in different ways. The Tigers ranked third in the AL in walks and fourth in stolen bases.

Individually, Whitaker's stat line was .338/.437. Dave Collins was acquired to provide outfield depth. Collins got regular playing time, finished with a .340 OBP and swiped 27 bags. John Grubb, the 37-year-old designated hitter, posted a dazzling .412/.590 stat line in part-time duty .

All of which was good enough for Detroit to rank third in the American League in runs scored. But the pitching slipped a bit.

It was no fault of Morris. The ace went to the mound 35 times, finished with a 21-8 record and a 3.27 ERA. But the staff behind him had problems.

Terrell and Tanana each made 30-plus starts and combined to win 27 games, but both had ERAs in the 4s. The normally reliable Dan Petry only went to the post twenty times and struggled to a 4.66 ERA.

Sparky tried to squeeze some starts out of everyone from highly regarded 22-year-old Eric King to Dave LaPoint to Randy O'Neal, all of whom worked in both starting and relief. But only King, with his 3.51 ERA was anywhere close to consistent.

Hernandez saved 24 games in the closer's role, but his ERA was abnormally high at 3.55. Hernandez was in steady decline from his 1984 Cy Young & MVP season. And the Tiger staff as a whole, while credible, still settled for sixth in the American League in ERA.

Detroit came out of the gate playing mediocre baseball. They won a couple series with Boston, who emerged as the early leader in the AL East. But in early May, the Tigers lost six of eight against teams from the AL West. By the Memorial Day turn, Detroit was sitting on .500, in sixth place and seven games back of the Red Sox.



The season teetered on the brink in early June, as the Tigers lost seven of ten games to the Blue Jays and Yanks, slipped to 27-32 and were staring at a twelve-game deficit.

Seven games against the Orioles were the needed antidote. Detroit won six to stabilize the ship. But they were still 43-44 at the All-Star break, 13 games behind the Red Sox and still in sixth place.

Since the high of winning the World Series in 1984, the Tigers had now spent a good year and a half playing mediocre baseball. Late July of 1986 saw a turnaround. Detroit reeled off a 16-6 stretch. Boston stumbled. The Tigers rose through the ranks to third place and closed to within 4 ½ games of the lead. And the Red Sox were coming to Detroit for four games in early August.

All of baseball—to say nothing of Boston fans themselves—were just waiting for this Red Sox team to blow it and it seemed most of the AL East was taking turns in fashioning themselves the challenger. This four-game set was Detroit's chance.

It didn't start well on Thursday night. O'Neal was knocked out early, the bats only managed five hits and Detroit lost 6-1. Tanana took the ball on Friday night and struggled, falling behind 6-1 and then 8-4. The Tigers made a stirring rally in the eighth, scoring three times and putting runners on first and second with two outs. But Gibson flied out. In the ninth, Evans hit a one-out double. But Collins and Coles both flew out. Another loss.

On Sunday afternoon, Detroit had taken a 6-4 lead after seven, thanks to a grand slam from Evans. Bill Campbell came out of the bullpen and was a train wreck. Five runs later, the Tigers were looking at a 9-6 loss.

Morris was brilliant in Monday night's wraparound finale, with a complete-game three-hit shutout. But the opportunity was missed and Detroit was 6 ½ games out.

There was still time to turn it back around, but the return trip to Fenway saw two losses in three games. On August 28, the Tigers were seven games out. There were no games left against the

Red Sox, so the margin for error was thin. On a road trip out west, Detroit lost seven of ten. They came home twelve games off the pace and with a record of 71-67. Any hopes of a pennant push were over.

Detroit didn't mail in the season though. They played some spirited baseball to wrap it up, including going 7-2 on a road trip against AL East rivals to end the season. The final record was 87-75. That was good enough to be tied for fourth-best in the American League and sixth-best in the major leagues as a whole. In other words, by the standards of today, it was a playoff-caliber year.

The improvement off the disappointment of 1985 had put the Tigers back on a positive trajectory. And another big year was ahead.

1987

The 1987 Detroit Tigers were the last postseason team in the Hall of Fame career of Sparky Anderson. They produced the best record in baseball, won the AL East for the second time in four years and did with a dramatic final week push when they appeared all but dead.

Muscle on offense was the key. The Tigers led the league in both slugging percentage and home runs. They were also patient, drawing more walks than any team in the American League.

No one was better than Alan Trammell, who finished with an on-base percentage of .402, a slugging percentage of .551, hit 28 home runs, drove in 105 runs, scored 109 runs and finished second in the MVP voting. Did I miss anything? Only that he deserved to win the MVP rather than settle for runner-up status.

Kirk Gibson posted numbers of .372 OBP/.489 slugging percentage and hit 24 home runs. Chet Lemon finished at .376/.481 with 20 home runs. Lou Whitaker didn't have a vintage year, but was still solid at .341/.427.

Two players at opposite ends of the career spectrum were pleasant surprises. Rookie catcher Matt Nokes was a revelation, hitting 32 home runs with an OBP of .345. And 40-year-old first baseman Darrell Evans turned back the clock with 34 home runs, 99 RBI and an OBP of .379.

All this made Detroit a potent offensive attack, but they did more to augment the attack. The bench was strong, as Larry Herndon finished at .378/.520 in part-time duty and Dave Bergman posted a stat line of .379/.453. And in the early summer, the front office went and got a veteran hitter in Bill Madlock to handle the DH duties. Madlock, a former batting champion, put up a .351/.460 line in his time in a Tiger uniform.

It wasn't all about the offense in Motown. The pitching staff had the third-best ERA in the American League and it all started with Jack Morris. The 32-year-old with a deserved reputation as a big-game pitcher, won 18 games with a 3.38 ERA and worked 266 innings. Walt Terrell and Frank Tanana were both respectable, combining for 32 wins, with ERAs between 3.90 and 4.10.

The bullpen was a problem, with Mike Henneman being the only consistent pitcher and Willie Hernandez a long way removed from 1984. The back end of the rotation was also weak, with Dan Petry and Jeff Robinson struggling to seasons with 5-plus ERAs. But before the year was over, Detroit would pull the trigger on another deal, one of the most consequential trade deadline moves in baseball history.



Nothing about the way the 1987 baseball season started suggested a special year in Detroit. They lost five of six to the New York Yankees in April and by Memorial Day were 20-21, in fifth place and seven back of AL East-leading New York.

A weekend in early June was a key threshold moment in the season. The Tigers made the deal for Madlock. They were also in Boston, where the defending AL East champion Red Sox were also looking to get untracked.

It was Detroit who unleashed. They won three of four, scored 18 runs in the finale, and when the Red Sox made a return trip to Tiger Stadium, Detroit swept

three straight. They took two of three in Toronto, part of a long road trip where the Tigers went 9-5.

By the time the All-Star break arrived, Detroit was 48-37 and back in the mix. They were in third place, five games back of the first-place Yankees, with the Blue Jays in second.

In early August, the Tigers won 10 of 13 against AL West opponents. Against their own division rivals, Detroit won three of four from New York, scoring double-digit runs in two of the games and starting an 11-3 run. But as good as that was, it wasn't the biggest thing that happened in Detroit in the first part of August.

Needing starting pitching, the Tigers dealt a top prospect to the Atlanta Braves in exchange for veteran Doyle Alexander. How did it work out in the short-term? Alexander made 11 starts for the Tigers and went 9-0 with a 1.53 ERA. In an era where a division title meant direct advancement to the League Championship Series, they would not have done it without Alexander.

How did the move work out in the long-term? The prospect was future Hall of Fame pitcher John Smoltz. Who won this trade, or whether Detroit would make it again if they had known just how great Smoltz would be, is a great debate. Or we could just take the political approach and say both teams got what they wanted. Which is probably the view that's accurate.

By Labor Day, the Yankees were fading and had fallen to third place, five off the pace. The Tigers and Blue Jays were running neck and neck. The two teams would finish with the best

regular season records in all of baseball and in the era before the wild-card, that meant a long fight to the finish.

Detroit and Toronto traded blows and tracked each other from afar until they reached the final week and a half of the regular season with the Tigers a half-game back. There would be four games in Toronto on the penultimate weekend of the season. After a series in the middle, they would reunite in Detroit for three games to end it. And it would take all of those games to settle the winner.

Morris got the ball on a Thursday night that started the final push. He went the distance, but one bad inning—a four-run third for the Jays—did him in, as Detroit lost 4-3. Tanana was brilliant on Friday night, pitching seven shutout innings and handing a 2-0 lead to the bullpen. Hernandez coughed it up in a 3-2 loss.

Saturday brought even more heartbreak. Detroit grabbed a quick 3-zip lead, but Terrell was shelled. Even so, the Tigers still led 7-3 and then 9-7 in the ninth. This time it was Henneman that blew the lead and Juan Berenguer finished it off by walking in the winning run. The Tigers were 3 ½ games out and even with the four head-to-head games still remaining, this race was looking over.

Enter Doyle Alexander. He pitched eleven innings in the Sunday afternoon finale. Trailing 1-0 in the ninth, Detroit got a run to tie it. Evans homered in the top of the eleventh.

Anderson, perhaps spooked by his bullpen performance and managing in an era where it wasn't unthinkable to leave a starter in (though admittedly it was still rare), sent Alexander back out and he gave up the tying run. Gibson finally won the game in the 13th with an RBI single. The Tigers were still in trouble, 2 ½ back with a week to go. But they had a pulse.

Detroit split four games at home with mediocre Baltimore and in a lot of circumstances that might have ended the AL East race. Instead, with Toronto getting swept by Milwaukee, it actually tightened it. The final weekend began with the Tigers back to within a game of first.

Alexander pitched on Friday night and it looked like his magic might finally end, when he gave up a three-run blast in the second inning. But he settled in, went seven innings and didn't allow any more. Detroit began coming back. An error and a two-run homer by role player Scott Lusader cut it to 3-2. Trammell homered in the bottom of the third to tie it and Detroit quickly added another run. Hernandez was able to get the last six outs without incident.

The race was tied. It was a de facto best-of-three, allowing for the possibility of a one-game playoff on Monday afternoon.

Saturday afternoon was a taut baseball game that I can still vividly remember being glued to my TV set watching (I was rooting for Toronto and my dad was pulling for Detroit, though neither of us were invested in either team).



Two great veterans battled on the mound, Morris for the Tigers and lefty Mike Flanagan for the Jays. It was 2-2 and went into extra innings. Morris left after nine, Flanagan left after the 11th. And in the 12th, the Tigers broke through. Madlock singled, Gibson walked and Trammell's RBI single to left won it.

How fast the race had changed in a week. Now it was Detroit playing with a little bit of cushion on Sunday afternoon. This was an era where baseball could both rival and exceed the NFL in popularity and this was also the first Sunday that the NFL would use replacement players due to a strike. It made Tigers-Jays the only game in town for sports fans across the nation.

Tanana and fellow lefty Jimmy Key for Toronto made it worth watching. Detroit got on the board in the second when Herndon homered. The game stayed

1-0 with both pitchers locked in. The Blue Jays put two on with two out in both the first and third innings, but couldn't get the big hit. Tanana made them pay for missing, going the distance with a six-hitter and the 1-0 score stood up.

Detroit had completed an amazing final week to win a great race. There was every reason to feel a second World Series trophy in four years would come to the Motor City.

1987 ALCS

The Minnesota Twins were an 85-win team, one of the worst to ever reach the League Championship Series round in 1987. It's natural that the Minnesota-Detroit matchup in the 1987 ALCS was seen as one-sided and destined for a quick ending. That's what happened, but not in a way anyone anticipated.

Alexander would start Game 1. Minnesota, in spite of their flaws, had the advantage of a terrific top-of-the-rotation arm in lefty Frank Viola. As a further aid to the Twins, homefield advantage was set on a rotation basis rather than merit and it was the year for the AL West to host.

Minnesota third baseman Gary Gaetti launched the first blow of the series with a dead-center home run off Alexander in the bottom of the second. Mike Heath did exactly the same thing for Detroit in the third inning and the game went to the bottom of the fifth still tied 1-1.

Gaetti led off the inning and did it again, homering to right center. Randy Bush and Tom Brunansky followed with extra base hits and the Twins were up 3-1. After a sac bunt from second baseman Steve Lombardozzi moved Brunansky to third, Alexander struck out catcher

Tim Lardner. The Tiger pitcher was poised to escape without further damage before left fielder Dan Gladden lined a two-out single to right.

Viola again let the Tigers answer right back, when Gibson hit a two-out solo blast and Detroit kept grinding away in the top of the seventh. Herndon, Lemon and Evans hit consecutive singles to start the inning and the bases were loaded with none out. After a strikeout, Heath lined a single to center. The lead was cut to 4-3 and the bases were still loaded.

Minnesota manager Tom Kelly stuck with Viola, who pulled an escape act. He got Whitaker to hit a grounder to Kent Hrbek at first base, who got the forceout at home. Viola got Madlock to end the inning with the lead intact.

It didn't stay intact for long though. Viola came back out for the eighth and this proved to be a bridge too far. He walked Gibson and allowed a double to Trammell. With runners on second and third, Kelly summoned closer Jeff Reardon. He didn't allow a hit, but consecutive sac flies from Dave Bergman and Lemon put Detroit up 5-4.

There was every reason to think Minnesota was essentially done. They had blown a lead at home with their best pitcher on the mound in a series where they already needed every break. Instead, they came fighting back against Alexander.

Gladden singled to left and center fielder Kirby Puckett quickly doubled him home. It was 5-all and Alexander was pulled for Henneman.

The Twins kept coming. Two walks, one of them intentional, loaded up the bases. Sparky called for Hernandez. Like Kelly, Anderson waited too long. Minnesota had acquired Don Baylor for the stretch drive precisely for at-bats like this. He was a veteran that could handle pressure and he was a right-handed bat that could handle a lefty like Hernandez. Baylor singled and put the Twins up 6-5.

Brunansky immediately followed with a big insurance double that gave Minnesota an 8-5 lead. It proved important when Detroit put two on with one out in the ninth. Reardon struck out Madlock and Gibson and the Twins had taken Game 1.

There weren't many pitchers more reliable in a big game in this era than Jack Morris. Minnesota fans found that out firsthand four years later when Morris pitched them to a World Series title. But in 1987, Morris was a Tiger and entrusted with the ball for Game 2.

If Morris did the job, Detroit would have calmed the waters, gotten a split and have three straight home games ahead of them. Minnesota had a tough veteran of their own to counter with in Bert Blyleven. With an ERA a bit over 4, Blyleven wasn't great, but he was still a future Hall of Famer.

The Tigers got Blyleven in the second. Matt Nokes started the inning with a single and Lemon homered. Pat Sheridan singled, stole second and was bunted to third. There was still only one out and Heath came to the plate. He couldn't duplicate his success of the previous night and failed to pick up the run and the game stayed 2-0.

Gaetti got the Twins started in the second with a one-out double. Brunansky doubled with two outs to cut the lead in half. Shortstop Greg Gagne drew a walk and the third double of the inning—this one from Laudner down the left field line—scored both runs and the Metrodome crowd was rocking again with their team up 3-2.

Minnesota kept coming in the fourth, again doing the most damage with two outs. After Laudner struck out in a bases-loaded/one-out situation, Morris was in position to escape. Instead, Gladden again delivered a clutch hit, a two-run single to left that extended the lead to 5-2. One inning later, Hrbek homered to make it 6-2. Blyleven stayed in command until allowing a solo homer to Whitaker in the eighth, but there was no real late drama in a 6-3 final.

After a travel day, play resumed on Saturday afternoon in Detroit with the Tigers unexpectedly having their back to the wall. The good news for Detroit was that Minnesota's key weakness was a lack of depth in the rotation. And the Tiger bats were able to get after Game 3 starter Lee Straker.

Straker flirted with danger in the first when he walked Whitaker and Evans, but nothing came of it. The Twins' starter wasn't as fortunate in the bottom of the third. Detroit loaded the bases with a Sheridan double, a Whitaker single and a Gibson walk. With nobody out a ground ball force play at second brought in the game's first run. After a stolen base, Straker balked in a run and Trammell singled in another.

It was 3-0 and after another walk, Straker was gone. Dan Schatzeder came in, but Herndon got him for a two-run double and Detroit was rolling with a 5-0 lead.

Minnesota signaled they wouldn't go quietly when the light-hitting Gagne homered to begin the top of the fourth. Hrbek worked a one-out walk and eventually scored on base hits by Gaetti and Bush. With the lead cut to 5-2 and runners on the corners with one out, Terrell got Brunansky on a pop up and escaped without further damage.

Brunansky redeemed himself in the top of the sixth with a two-out, two-run blast that made it 5-4. The Twins kept coming in the top of the seventh. Sal Butera and Dan Gladden opened the inning with singles, putting runners on first and third and ending Terrell's day.

Henneman came on in relief. Gagne hit a ground ball to third and pinch-runner Mark Davidson tried to score the tying run. He was cut down at the plate and Detroit hung on to its lead. Puckett fouled out to first, but it was a deep enough pop-out that the runners were able to tag and get to second and third.

Hrbek was intentionally walked to set up Henneman-vs-Gaetti. From the classic righty-lefty standpoint, this was the textbook move, with Henneman a right-handed pitcher while Hrbek batted lefty and Gaetti from the right side. But given how hot Gaetti was in this series, it was a questionable situational move from a future Hall of Fame manager in Anderson. And it didn't work, with Gaetti singling to right.

The Twins had come all the way back to lead 6-5 and got to within six outs of putting a stranglehold on the series. But in the bottom of the eighth, Herndon led off with a single. Detroit's desperation was underlined by the fact that Morris, a fast runner, came in to run. It turned out not to matter—after a failed sac bunt attempt, Pat Sheridan homered. The Tigers were back up 7-6 and this time Henneman held the lead.

It was a series again, but even in victory nothing was coming easy for Detroit. They sent Tanana to the mound on Sunday night for Game 4, while Minnesota brought back Viola on three days' rest.

The Tigers got a soft run out of the gate. Whitaker led off the bottom of the first with a walk and came around on an infield hit from Trammell and an error by Gagne. The Twins got something going in the top of the second when Baylor led off with a single and Brunansky walked, but nothing came of it.

Minnesota muscled up in the next two innings, with Puckett homering to tie it in the third and Gagne's solo blast in the fourth giving them a 2-1 lead. Puckett then got the top of the fifth started with a single that turned into a three bases after being misplayed by Herndon in the outfield. Gaetti picked up Puckett with a sac fly.

Whitaker got another Detroit rally started with a two-out walk in the bottom of the fifth and then scored on consecutive singles from Jim Morrison and Gibson. Herndon, looking to redeem himself, hit the ball hard...but right at Gaetti and the Twins' 3-2 lead was preserved heading into the sixth.

Gagne and Gene Larkin chased Tanana with doubles to get the run back and make it 4-2. In the bottom of the inning, singles by Lemon and Darrell Evans ended Viola's night. Another single, this one from Dave Bergmann cut the lead to 4-3 and left runners on first and second, still with nobody out. Heath bunted the runners up.

Evans then made a huge baserunning mistake. He drifted too far off third and an alert Laudner picked him off. Minnesota clung to its lead and got some insurance in the eighth when an error and wild pitch set up a two-out RBI single from Lombardozzi. Reardon came in on the ninth and after a leadoff single, got Whitaker, then struck out Nokes and Gibson to seal the game.

Minnesota not only held a 3-1 series lead, but they had grabbed a road win and had two more home games in the bank. They also had Blyleven on the mound for Game 5. Detroit went back to Alexander for their final home game on Monday afternoon.

Alexander's magic from the stretch drive was gone. In the top of the second, Gaetti singled, Bush walked and Brunansky doubled both runs in. He was thrown out trying for third, but the Twins weren't done. Lombardozzi singled, moved to second on a productive out and scored on a base hit from Gladden. Alexander hit a batter, then gave up another RBI single to Puckett. It was 4-0 and Anderson was forced into his bullpen, bringing in young Eric King with the season on the line.

King did an admirable job in stopping the bleeding and the Tigers got back in the game in the fourth. After a Gibson double and Trammell single, Nokes homered to cut the lead to 4-3.

It stayed that way until the top of the seventh. A one-out single, hit batsman and wild pitch set up a sacrifice fly from Hrbek and Minnesota had some modest breathing room at 5-3. They expanded that in the eighth, now facing Hennenman. Gladden doubled with one out and Gagne drew a walk. Puckett hit a bouncer back to Hennenman. He got the force at second, but Gladden went to third where he scored on a fielder's choice.

The Twins could surely taste the champagne when Berenguer got the first two outs in the eighth. Lemon homered to cut it to 6-4, bringing on Reardon, who ended the inning.

Minnesota delivered the final blow in the top of the ninth. Brunansky homered to make it 7-4. Lombardozzi singled and with two outs, Gladden and Gagne hit back-to-back doubles. It was 9-4 and all but over. Detroit got a run in the ninth, but when Nokes bounced back to Reardon for a 1-3 putout, it was over. The Twins had completed an upset stunning not only in that they won, but had done so in a swift five-game series and won twice in Tiger Stadium.

Gaetti was an easy choice for 1987 ALCS MVP. He went 6-for-20, a solid .300 batting average, but that doesn't tell the impact of those hits. He homered twice, drove in five runs, scored five more and always seemed to be in the middle of Minnesota's crucial rallies.

Other notable performances came from Gagne and Brunansky, who each homered twice. On the Detroit side, Lemon was the best in defeat. He went 5-for-18 and hit a pair of home runs. Evans had productive numbers, 5-for-17 and he drew five walks, but getting picked off third in Game 4 was one of the big turning points of the series.

And perhaps nothing was more important to Minnesota's ultimate victory than their pitching, holding Whitaker and Trammell, the 1-2 punch at the top of the order, to a combined 7-for-37.

For Minnesota, the magic was just starting. They went on to face the St. Louis Cardinals in the 1987 World Series and rode dome-field advantage all the way to a title, taking a seven-game Series where each game was won by the home team. It was the first two World Series championships in a five-year span.

For the Tigers, it was a disappointing and surprising ending. But nothing should detract from what this 1987 team accomplished. They just ran out of steam.

1988

The '88 Tigers spent a lot of the summer looking like they might get back to October for a shot at playoff redemption before fading at the end.

Pitching was what keyed the success of Sparky Anderson's team. Jack Morris was the ace of the staff, and while his ERAs were never great—3.94 in 1988—Morris was as good as any at pitching to game situations and he won 15 games.

Alexander won 14 games with a 4.32 ERA. Tanana was a 14-game winner, and while Terrell was a hard-luck loser, at 7-16, his ERA was a respectable 3.97.

Where this staff really separated themselves was in the bullpen. Henneman saved 22 games with a 1.87 ERA. Paul Gibson and Eric King were solid in middle relief, with ERAs of 2.93 and 3.41 respectively. Willie Hernandez saved 10 games and finished with a 3.06 ERA.

And a young arm gave the rotation some added juice—26-year-old Jeff Robinson only got 23 starts, but he finished with a 2.98 ERA. The Detroit pitchers collectively finished with the #4 ERA in the American League—and the old Tiger Stadium, with its short right field porch, was not nearly as friendly to pitchers as the modern Comerica Park is.

The hitters weren't nearly as effective. The middle infield of Whitaker and Trammell at shortstop were solid at the plate and in the field, though neither hit for a lot of power. Evans hit 22 home runs, but did little else. Lemon was respectable in centerfield, but throughout the lineup there were a lot of disappointments.

Detroit had let Gibson walk in free agency. He went to the Los Angeles Dodgers where he won the MVP award, and helped his team win a World Series, including one of the most iconic home runs in MLB history. His replacements in Detroit didn't fare nearly as well.

The Tigers traded for Ray Knight, the 35-year-old hero of the 1986 World Series, but Knight struggled at the plate. So did Gary Pettis, acquired from the California Angels. Pat Sheridan and Tom Brookens were regulars that did not distinguish themselves at the plate, and young catcher Matt Nokes backslid after a strong year in 1987. It added up to the #8 offense in the American League in runs scored.

Detroit got off to a reasonably nice start, with a 28-19 record at Memorial Day. The problems in matching up with the Twins were still apparent—the Tigers lost five of six—but Detroit was right in the mix, four games back of the red-hot New York Yankees.

The Tigers got on a roll in June, winning 11 of 16 and setting up a three-game series with the Yankees in Motown. It proved to be an unbelievable three nights of baseball. In the Monday night opener, after giving up the tying run in the top of the ninth, Brookens capped a three-hit night with a walkoff home run in the 10th.

On Tuesday, Detroit trailed 6-1 in the bottom of the ninth, with New York's fine closer, Dave Righetti on the mound. Detroit scored two runs, loaded the bases and Righetti was pulled. Trammell hit a grand slam and the Tigers won 7-6. On Wednesday, Brookens was a hero again. In the 10th inning of a 2-2 game, he singled, was bunted over and scored on a hit by Luis Salazar.

Three straight walkoff wins gave Detroit a 2 ½ game lead in the AL East, and later in the month, they took two of three in the return series at the Bronx. By the All-Star break, the Tigers were rolling at 52-33, and held a three-game lead on New York with the rest of the division seemingly far in the rearview mirror.

Detroit struggled out of the break, losing seven of ten and the Boston Red Sox got red-hot, joining the Tigers and Yankees in the battle for first place. Detroit still countered with an 11-3 stretch that included a four-game home sweep of the Red Sox and the Tigers held a four-game lead as late as August 21.

Then it all got away. From August 22 to September 14, they lost 19 of 23 games, and in that stretch was a brutal series in New York. In a four-game set, Detroit gave up walkoff home runs three times. Irony can be cruel, and it certainly was in seeing the Tigers lose the walkoffs to the Yankees as a way of ending a strong push that the walkoff wins of summer had begun.

It was Boston who pulled away in the AL East. The final standings tell you that Detroit finished within one game, but that's extremely misleading. After the disaster weekend in the Bronx, the Tigers fell as many as six games back and when the final weekend of play began, they were still four back, and thus eliminated. A three-game sweep to close the year got Detroit to 88-74, while Boston mailed it in and lost three straight to end up 89-73.

Sparky Anderson would never make it back to October. He managed the Tigers through the 1995 season, and had two more winning years, but never got higher than second place and never again matched the 88 wins of this season. The 1988 Detroit Tigers were a good team, but also one that ushered in the end of an era.