



Detroit Tigers Clips

Saturday, September 17, 2011

Detroit Free Press

Division title allows Tigers to reflect on past (Sharp)
Team chemistry on display as Tigers celebrate AL Central title (Windsor)
Detroit 3, Oakland 1: Tigers clinch first division crown since 1987 (Windsor)
Mitch Albom flashback: Tigers roar to 1987 AL East title (Albom)
Tigers 1B Miguel Cabrera's big season lost amid other standouts (Windsor)
Victor Martinez praised as spirit of Tigers (Windsor)
Detroit 3, Oakland 1: Tigers clinch AL Central with win over A's (Crawford)
Scenarios set for a wild Tigers scene tonight (Samuelsen)

The Detroit News

Tigers beat A's, win first division title since 1987 (Gage)
Champagne sprays as Central champ Tigers cut loose (Gage)
Tigers manager Jim Leyland counts his blessings amid celebration (Gage)
Justin Verlander finds release in title, while Miguel Cabrera finds contentment (Gage)
25 reasons Tigers will win again in 2012 (Gage)
Tigers face difficult playoff decisions (Gage)

Booth Newspapers

Tigers' Magglio Ordonez: 'This team's got all the ingredients to win the World Series' (Iott)
Tigers' new focus: Gaining home-field advantage, setting playoff roster, rotation (Iott)
Tigers first baseman Miguel Cabrera enjoys clubhouse celebration from afar (Iott)
Tigers built to be contender in AL Central Division well beyond 2011 (Iott)
Tigers' Jim Leyland: 'This one's special to me for personal reasons' (Iott)
Tigers clinch Central Division title with 3-1 victory over A's (Iott)
Leyland: Trades during season put Detroit Tigers over the top (Iott)
Tigers' Justin Verlander lined up perfectly to start in playoff opener (Iott)

MLB.com

Fister leads the way as Tigers clinch Central (Beck)
Path traveled to title is uncharted for Tigers (Beck)
Tigers' work continues despite crown (Beck)
Porcello aims to impress with playoffs looming (Kruth)
With boppers around him, Miggy's job easier (Beck)

FOXSportsDetroit.com

Tigers earn first division title since 1987 (Wakiji)

ESPN.com

Improved Tigers clinch AL Central (Kahl)

Tigers tame AL Central, clinch title (Staff)

USAToday.com

MLB playoff primer: It's clinching time for Phillies, Tigers (Staff)

The Associated Press

Tigers win Central, first division title since '87 (Staff)

Tigers clinch first AL Central crown and first division title since winning the East in 1987 (Staff)

A's offense sputters as Tigers clinch AL Central crown and first division title since 1987 (Staff)

Lansing State Journal

Local singer to make 50th Comerica appearance (Schneider)

Reuters

Tigers clinch division with win over A's (Staff)

Holland Sentinel

Hamilton store drops gas price for 30 minutes after Tigers win (Hayden)

New York Times

Verlander Could Reach Rarefied Air (Paine)

Forbes

Why Justin Verlander Deserves To Be The American League's MVP (McDonnell)

CBSSports.com

The Tigers found Fister, and now they're champs (Knobler)

These 2011 Tigers making own mark with perfect timing (Miller)

Tigers claim first AL Central title (Rosecrans)

Daily Transactions

Division title allows Tigers to reflect on past

September 17, 2011

By Drew Sharp / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND -- A 24-year thirst was finally quenched.

“Oh yeah!” boomed Justin Verlander, his voice as thunderous as one of his 100-mile an hour fastballs as he sucked the bottom of a bottle of Dom Perignon dry. “Man! This is sweet!”

Vindication usually is.

The Tigers formally buried the nagging ghosts of 2009, clinching the AL Central, their first division title since 1987, applying a definitive exclamation point to a season and recent history noticeably stamped with question marks.

“We knew all along that we were a good team,” said Miguel Cabrera, sitting on an exercise bike off to the side with a cigar in one hand, a bottle of water in the other and an electric smile that could’ve lit up the Bay Area. “It didn’t matter what anybody else thought. It only mattered what guys in this room thought. And we knew we were a very good team.”

This was personal on so many fronts.

Father and son stood with arms embracing each other, realizing what can only be described as the wildest of dreams. Al Avila practically begged the Tigers’ scouting director David Chadd to not draft his son, Alex, if he were available in the 2005 amateur draft. Avila, the Tigers’ assistant general manager, didn’t want any accusations of nepotism.

But Chadd went against his immediate boss’ wishes when the Tigers’ turn came in the fifth round and the young catcher out of Alabama was the top remaining name on the team’s draft board.

“Is it possible for a father to be any prouder?” said the elder Avila, decked in a T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops. “And you know what? I’ve got to thank David Chadd for going ahead and drafting him. It turned out pretty good. Thank you, David Chadd.”

Alex shared a story about when the Tigers drafted him.

“I remember sitting in the Instructional League and talking to him,” he said. “I said to him, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to win the World Series together in the same organization?’ This is a first step. But I’m just so happy to be able to celebrate with him. There are really no words to describe how great this is.”

The words came hard for Jim Leyland.

This is sweet payback for him.

“This is very personal for me,” he said, Leyland, tears welling his eyes as he spoke, “because there were a lot of people who didn’t think I would be the manager of the Detroit Tigers next season.”

The opportunity is there for a little front office gloating. If such a sentence of Internet/talk radio effigy existed, Dave Dombrowski mercilessly swung from those gallows. His credibility as a sound baseball executive not only challenged, but downright refuted, by the impatient and frustrated.

“Everybody, well not everybody, but a lot of people think they have the answers because they’ve either played the game or observed the game,” Dombrowski said before Friday’s game. “And I don’t think they understand how much hard work goes into it. But that’s why it’s a beautiful game. It’s why you take the praise with a grain of salt and you take the negativity with a grain of salt.”

The Tigers’ division title provided him with the last laugh. But Dombrowski won’t stick it to his critics because he appreciates that the Tigers’ running away with the AL Central is as much a product of good luck as it was prudent preparation.

Did anyone really expect THIS out of Doug Fister when Dombrowski acquired him from Seattle, inspiring the general reaction of “Who’s that?” How fitting was it that Fister got the clinching victory, his sixth straight start in which he pitched seven innings while surrendering nothing more than a single earned run.

It’s payback for Fister because he became the next Doyle Alexander rather than the next Jarrod Washburn.

“This is such a tremendous team to be a part of,” Fister said in between dousings from teammates. “We’ve come together. I know it probably sounds like a cliché, but it is very much like a close-knit family.”

There was a noticeable absence within the champagne-soaked, smoke-wafting revelry.

Mike and Marian Ilitch weren't in Oakland Friday night. They were there Thursday in case they clinched then, but couldn't stick around because they're attending former Wings' assistant coach Brad McCrimmon's funeral Saturday. McCrimmon died in that Russian hockey air disaster earlier this month.

But the Ilitches' first divisional baseball championship will taste particularly sweet considering the criticism they drew when they bucked public consensus and extended Dombrowski for five more years and Leyland through 2012 before season's end.

"It's going to be hard for some people to understand how special this is for a lot of us," said Leyland, now free to wear clean underwear and socks not worn down to a thread with the championship secured and the legacy of 2009 expunged. "And maybe it comes across as a little selfish, but I have so much affection for this organization and the good people of this city who so dearly deserve this and I wanted this so badly for them. But I wanted it badly for myself as well."

This championship party was a long time coming and after nearly 240 bottles of sprayed or consumed bubbly, won't soon be forgotten.

Team chemistry on display as Tigers celebrate AL Central title

September 17, 2011

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND -- Jim Leyland stayed back.

And waited.

For his players to embrace one another. For his lungs to stop hyperventilating. For his brain to process the dominating run his team was on and to savor a moment that never gets old.

It had been 24 years since the Tigers had won its division – until Friday night in California, when Detroit won the AL Central by beating the A's, 3-1. When Miguel Cabrera caught the throw from Brandon Inge to record the game's final out, the team sprinted toward the pitcher's mound to celebrate.

Leyland watched from the dugout. He wanted them to have their space. He eventually walked onto the field and took his customary spot along the edge of the infield, waiting for the line of players to come shake his hand.

The players and coaches mingled briefly before heading back to the clubhouse to let loose, where attendants had sheathed the stalls and floor in plastic, laid out cases of champagne and icy tubs of beer.

Smoke plumes from expensive cigars – “beyond my pay range,” joked Justin Verlander – mixed with a constant spray of bubbly and beer. Most of the players wore eye protection to avoid the sting. Inge donned a diving mask and snorkel, just about everyone else sported swim goggles. Cabrera wore nothing but a content smile as he sat on an exercise bike with a bottle of water.

He'd hung out in Leyland's office when the team first spilled into the clubhouse, choosing to avoid the alcohol-tinged revelry. Still, as he sat on the bike he hollered like his teammates, occasionally getting up for photos.

“Playing with these guys is a lot of fun,” he said. “I'm glad to be a part of it. We are in the playoffs! We are in the playoffs!”

Pitchers posed with hitters. Starters posed with the bullpen. Superstars posed with role players.

Jose Valverde, who had collected his 45th save earlier in the night, oversaw the improvised sessions, gathering the disparate groups for pictures. “Latino shot,” he'd holler. Then: “Gringos!”

All the while, he'd stand in the center, cackling, spreading his arms and his 6-foot-5 frame wide and warm, pulling his teammates together.

“We are all the same,” he explained. “Black. Brown. White. Purple. Whether you're from the Dominican or Venezuela or America or Korea. We are baseball players.”

Leyland had long eschewed chemistry as a reason for success in the big leagues. But even he acknowledged that his team exhibited cohesiveness this season. Deep in the bowels of the dilapidated stadium, that verve was on display.

Albuquerque sat in a corner, legs splayed, sloshing them back and forth, like making snow angels, only in puddles of champagne and beer. Phil Coke howled at anyone that would listen, impersonating Tony Montana from Scarface, making sure that everyone was properly doused.

Daniel Schlereth sprinted across half the clubhouse before taking a leap – headfirst – onto the plastic-covered floor and slid, slip-and-slide style, leaving a rooster tale of liquid. Coke followed. Tom Brookens tried to put a stop to it, but not before Verlander took a turn.

“Get out of the way,” he bellowed.

Then he skidded across as if a body surfer, delirious and free.

“Feels great,” he said.

He was talking about the team's accomplishment, its run to the division title, its roster of talent jelling into a formidable team at the right time of the season.

“Everybody that is in this room right now has had an integral part to us being here right now,” he said between tugs on his cigar. “It feels great.”

It did for Leyland, too, who jumped into the celebration and got soaked for his effort. Carlos Guillen and Coke were the culprits, a couple of guys that dealt with uncertainty and changed roles, players who nevertheless found ways to contribute, who helped the Tigers climb from an eight-game deficit early in the season to a 13 1/2-game lead today.

“It was only a matter of time,” explained Magglio Ordoñez, who never questioned where his team would finish.

“We’ve got good chemistry.”

Late Friday night in Oakland, this was never clearer.

Detroit 3, Oakland 1: Tigers clinch first division crown since 1987

September 17, 2011

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND -- It wouldn't have been right if the charismatic closer hadn't allowed a double to the A's leadoff hitter as Detroit was trying to clinch its first division in 24 years. After all, baseball, if nothing else, is about patterns, and on the coast, at the O.co Coliseum, the Tigers were looking to ride out the pattern one last time. Already, Doug Fister had pitched another masterfully efficient eight innings -- giving up one run on three hits. Already, Don Kelly had homered and driven in another run with a single. And Wilson Betemit had tripled. The team had cobbled together three runs from newcomers and unlikely places.

Wasn't that what helped propel them to the precipice in the first place?

So here it was, after midnight in Detroit, the Tigers up, 3-1, in the ninth, Jose Valverde on the mound, three outs from a spot in the playoffs. As he has often done this season, he allowed the leadoff man to reach base. As he also done this season, he shut the door quickly.

Striking out Jemile Weeks. Inducing a pop-up from Hideki Matsui. Coaxing a harmless grounder from Josh Willingham that Brandon Inge scooped up and fired to first to end the game.

When Miguel Cabrera caught it, Alex Avila sprinted to the mound and embraced Valverde. The team joined them, forming a jumping circle to celebrate.

How did it feel?

"Truthfully," admitted Jim Leyland, "you're relieved."

But only for a moment, because the moment starts to settle and you start to realize what you've just accomplished.

"You really can't explain it," said Leyland. "It's a special moment. You can't put a price tag on it."

Leyland got choked up several times Friday night in California, talking about his players and the ride they'd just taken him on. Beating Oakland pushed the Detroit's record to 88-63. The team is now 13 1/2 games up in the division.

As Leyland pointed out, "we were seven games behind the Cleveland Indians at one point and people weren't really talking about us at all."

Yet his team, he said, "worked hard. They stuck together."

They did again against the A's even when it didn't look good early in the game.

After a routine first inning by both clubs, the Tigers opened the second with consecutive walks -- Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez (who else?). But a strikeout by Avila followed by two groundouts from Jhonny Peralta and Betemit left the runners stranded.

Willingham then began the bottom half of the inning with a bomb into the rightfield seats, giving the A's the early lead for the second night in a row. After Fister set down the next two batters, the lights went out. Literally. All but two of the tower lights at the stadium went dark. Play was suspended for 16 minutes. When the lights returned, Detroit quickly tied the game courtesy of a Ramon Santiago triple and a Kelly single.

The Tigers had a chance to take its first lead of the series in the fourth, when Cabrera singled and Martinez doubled to open the inning. Oakland's starter, Trevor Cahill, got a strikeout from Avila, a groundout from Peralta and a strikeout from Betemit to get out of the jam.

Detroit put its first two batters on base again in the fifth. Santiago bunted and Austin Jackson was hit by a pitch. Santiago eventually got to third but was tagged out when Delmon Young hit a grounder to A's third baseman Eric Sogard and Santiago couldn't get back in time.

Yet Detroit -- as it has so many times this season -- kept coming, moving on from its missed opportunities, knowing that someone was going to make a play. Enter Peralta and Betemit. The shortstop singled and the third baseman tripled to bring him home, giving Detroit a 2-1 lead.

An inning later, Kelly, the club's utility specialist and the team's most agreeable player, worked a 2-0 count off Cahill and then hammered a non-sinking sinker into the rightfield seats. The blast gave the Tigers a little more room as it closed in on its division title.

"I was able to contribute as a bench player," Kelly said. "That means a lot."

After Kelly's shot, Fister pitched a 1-2-3 eighth. He gave up only three hits. The team has won his last six starts.

“He has a lot of deception,” said Avila. “He can throw any pitch in any count. He has great command. And he’s a strike-throwing machine.”

He is also “so calm and collected.”

This season, his team is, too. They took out the upstarts from Cleveland and never let preseason favorite Chicago get going.

The run has been memorable. They are eager to keep it going.

Mitch Albom flashback: Tigers roar to 1987 AL East title

September 17, 2011

By Mitch Albom / Detroit Free Press

Editor's note: This story originally was published Oct. 5, 1987.

This said it all: Frank Tanana darting off the mound, scooping up the ball, turning to first baseman Darrell Evans and -- with a lollipop smile already on his face -- flipping it underhand for the final out.

One, two, three, leap!

Happy ending.

"Whenever I think of this game from now on, " Evans said, champagne soaking his face, after the Tigers had beaten Toronto, 1-0, to capture the American League East, "that's the moment I'm going to see. Frank coming towards me, the ball in his hand, his eyes as big as saucers. . . . Oh, man. Oh man. I'll never forget that." Forget it? Are you kidding? For years in this city people will be talking about where they were when the Tigers turned that final out, beat the Blue Jays, leaped into each others' arms having done what everybody dreamed and nobody expected -- on the final day of the season.

American League East champions.

Happy ending.

"I couldn't move, " said Chet Lemon, who watched that last play from center field. "I should have started to run in, but I was, like, frozen in amazement. Then it hit me. We won! We won! . . . And I said, 'I better move before I lose a limb.'"

They won! They won!

In an instant the field was filled with leaping Tigers players, police on horses, fans who made it over the wall. Inside the Detroit clubhouse, the staff wheeled out champagne, and pulled down rolls of protective plastic over everything that could be protected.

And in the stands, the sellout crowd was on its feet, giving thunderous applause, basking in a gloriously winning feeling. As their Tiger heroes galloped en masse toward the dugout, Tanana, in the center, looked up, his hair in bangs on his forehead, a wad of pink chewing gum in his mouth, and gave an expression of joy that was captured in 100 camera clicks and a delightful page of history.

"I felt, " Tanana said, "like I was six years old again."

Happy ending.

What a moment! What a day! What a finish! Here was the final piece of a jigsaw season, that suddenly, finally, made sense.

"If you had told me this would happen back in April, I would have said you're crazy," said pitcher Jack Morris. "We were playing terrible (11-19 in May). That was the truth then. But there's a different truth now. We're playing pretty darn good baseball."

Good? Is that the word for it? Try great, remarkable.

"Awesome," suggested Tanana.

OK. Awesome. Best record in either league. It was downright chilling to watch these final seven games with the Blue Jays -- three this weekend, four last weekend in Toronto -- all of them decided by a single run. History will surely remember this as one of the finest title chases in baseball.

"I've never been involved in seven games like this," said shortstop Alan Trammell, his voice a rasp, lost to screams, shouts, a million interviews. "A week ago, we were really down, trailing Toronto by 3 1/2. But we never gave up. And now . . . this. I'm so emotionally drained right now. But it's the greatest feeling. God, it's great."

God, it was. Seven head-to-head games in the last 11 days. And it all had come down to this -- the last one on the schedule. Tigers win, it's over. Blue Jays win, there's a one- game playoff.

Tanana (who two weeks ago was slumping so badly, he was removed from the rotation) was back and pitching for the Tigers. And Jimmy Key, Toronto's ace, 17-7, was going against him.

A duel in the Sunday afternoon shadows. How would this one go?

A better question: What was left? Already in this crazy series, there had been games as raucous as a 10-9 Toronto win up north, and as tense as Saturday's 3-2 Tiger victory in 12 heart-stopping innings.

What was left? What hadn't we seen? How about a 1-0 game -- the slimmest possible victory in this sport -- on a wobbly home run by Larry Herndon in the second inning?

Perfect. How absurdly perfect. A series full of big hitters and big talkers won on a single swing by the quietest man in a Tigers uniform.

"Pretty fitting, huh?" said Evans, winking. Indeed. Herndon even gave a brief interview afterward.

"How do you feel?" he was asked.

"Great," he said.

What more need be said?

Great. Grreeaaat. Couldn't have been better.

And Tanana wins it? The homegrown Detroit hero? A shutout? A complete game? A six-hitter?

"Did you ever think two weeks ago this might happen?" he was asked.

"No," he said, "I hoped I'd get a chance. But I wasn't even pitching. My job then was to be a cheerleader."

Is that beautiful? A guy is benched, and he becomes a cheerleader.

Outsiders might suspect a tad of corniness here. But that is truly characteristic of this Tiger team. Subs root for starters. Slumpers root for the hot hands.

Remember, this is not 1984, a Tiger season of power and dominance. Uh-uh. This year has been spit and glue, a leak springs, you take the gum out of your mouth and plug it up.

And because of that, this was the year of Sparky Anderson's life -- probably the best managing of his storied career, no matter what happens in the playoffs.

"That guy," said pitcher Dan Petry of Anderson, "is the key. In May, when we stunk, he came to us and said we could win it. And a lot of us said privately: 'The guy's nuts.' But his spirit catches on. It really does."

And finally, it gave birth to a title. In the spritz-a-second Tigers clubhouse, Anderson, 53, talked to microphone after microphone, dressed only in T-shirt and shorts, his white hair soaked with champagne.

"I've had it all now, " he croaked. "If I die and go to heaven -- and I hope I go to heaven -- I can say I've had it all."

"What about that prediction back in May?" he was asked. "How did you know? How did you know?"

He grinned.

"I didn't know, " he whispered. "I was just having fun."

So the Tigers win the division. They go on to play Minnesota for the American League pennant. And the city of Detroit wakes up this morning, happier than it expected to be, with scenes from Sunday that linger like sucking candy:

Here was Toronto's Cecil Fielder, 6 foot 3, 220 pounds, trying for second base in a botched hit-and-run attempt -- and sliding desperately into the waiting tag of Lou Whitaker. Out. End of threat.

Here was Lemon, standing in center field in the eighth inning, waiting for George Bell's fly ball to drop lazily into his glove. All weekend long, Bell, the Jays' MVP candidate and biggest threat, had been handled this easily.

Up, down, out. Did not drive in a run. Maybe the key to the series.

And here, lookie here, was an octopus flying out of the stands in the seventh, going splat in front of the Blue Jays' dugout as nearby fans pointed and chuckled.

An octopus? Isn't that what they throw at Red Wings hockey games? Well. Yes. Maybe someone got confused.

The Blue Jays players sitting on the dugout steps simply looked up into the stands, mystified, shaking their heads, as if this was the final insult.

An octopus?

OK. A moment here for Toronto, a great team, a team that should be playing more baseball this season. The Blue Jays may not realize the ugly pitch fate will toss them now; but they will soon enough.

The despair of one lost afternoon will not compare to the disgust at 100 afternoons of questions next spring, next summer, forever: "How could you guys lose your last seven games? What happened? What happened?"

Who knows?

History will record that the Jays finished just two games behind the Tigers, with the second-best record in baseball.

But who really reads history?

People will remember that they lost the last game of their tilt with Detroit in Toronto -- some say the turning point of the season -- then lost three straight to Milwaukee, and three straight to the Tigers. Their last seven games? Yes. People will cast the Blue Jays as losers, chokers, and that is unfair, they deserve better. "This series had gotten to be so good," said Trammell. "I kind of wanted to keep playing them."

No need for that now. The division is won. The Tigers got it.

"Yeah," said Trammell, grinning at the words. "Yeah . . . yeah . . ."

Yeah.

An hour after it was over, when Tiger Stadium was empty, quiet, the evening sun just about gone, three figures, dressed in underwear, suddenly appeared on the Tiger infield: Jack Morris. Jim Walewander. Scott Lusader. The highest-paid player on the team, and two rookies.

They dropped into a stance at first base, and, smiling, on cue, took off in a foot race to second.

Lusader took the lead, Walewander second, Morris trailing. They reached the bag -- Morris slid -- and they cracked up, laughing, waving, yelling.

All alone.

Is that any way to behave? The American League East champions? Racing in their underwear?

You bet it is.

Tigers 1B Miguel Cabrera's big season lost amid other standouts

September 17, 2011

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- For much of the season, the story line of the Tigers has been Justin Verlander's dominance, the surprising play of shortstop Jhonny Peralta, the emergence of catcher Alex Avila, the late-season acquisitions of Doug Fister, Wilson Betemit and Delmon Young, and the clutch hitting of Victor Martinez.

Perhaps overshadowed in all those threads is the recent play of the team's most gifted offensive player. Miguel Cabrera was hitting .373 over his past 52 games entering Friday.

He had reached base in 40 of his past 41. He is on the verge of becoming the fifth Tiger to score 100 runs, drive in 100 runs and draw 100 walks in the same season -- he sat at 102, 97 and 100 in those categories, respectively. His most meaningful statistic might be what he does with runners on base. He was hitting .397 with runners in scoring position -- best in the American League.

Manager Jim Leyland said Cabrera is moving as freely and easily as he has seen him in a long time.

"He is moving better than he has all year," said Leyland.

Leyland said he sees that at the plate, in the field, everywhere.

He sees a bounce to Cabrera.

Leyland said Martinez batting behind Cabrera has helped. So has Young batting in front of him -- at least part of Cabrera's torrid stretch dates to mid-August when Young joined the team.

Victor Martinez praised as spirit of Tigers

September 17, 2011

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Victor Martinez says little in the clubhouse. He doesn't seek attention through the media. In fact you might say he shies away from reporters in general -- though he will answer questions when approached.

In other words, the Tigers' designated hitter is a low-key sort, except when he's in the dugout and the game is about to start.

There?

"He is loud," said Ramon Santiago.

Hollering at teammates. Encouraging them. Revving them up.

"People don't see the energy," said Santiago. "He leads. We follow."

During Friday afternoon's pregame session with the media, manager Jim Leyland was asked what the difference was between this year's squad and previous versions that didn't quite meet expectations. He said he didn't want to single out one player.

Then he said, "I think Victor Martinez has been huge. He's relentless. ... He's been a godsend for us. He's been a major force for us, obviously on the field as well as the personality that goes with it. He's got the guys pumped up all the time. He's pumped up all the time."

He thought for a second. Then added: "Let me put it this way: I'm not a big chemistry guy, but he has helped that. If there is such a thing, he's helped the chemistry."

It's hard to imagine higher praise, considering Leyland doesn't believe chemistry is anything more "than a subject you took in school."

Santiago, however, didn't want to think about where the team would be without Martinez.

"He's the spirit," he said. "Nobody else in the clubhouse like him."

The first-base coach, Tom Brookens, has experience watching a veteran ballplayer come in and take over a team.

"What Victor has done reminds me of what Darryl Evans did for us back in 1984," Brookens said.

Evans arrived in Detroit and helped guide the team to a World Series. Martinez aspires to the same end.

Brookens said it didn't take long for Martinez to assert himself. He felt his way around for a bit, he said, then grabbed hold.

"To me," said Brookens, Martinez "is the team leader, quite honestly. Every day he is kind of leading the chants. He gets everybody cranked up. He keeps you going during the game, too. The rest of the team has rallied behind him."

Leyland said Martinez's leadership wouldn't be as effective if he weren't backing it up at the plate. The DH entered Friday's game against the A's on an RBI tear in September. He'd driven in 17, leading the American League.

He is fourth in the league in batting at .323. He is hitting .386 with runners in scoring position -- second only to teammate Miguel Cabrera. Perhaps more than anything, he has provided hits at moments that matter, in games that feel important. Ask anyone in the clubhouse about Martinez and that's the first thing they will tell you.

"His bat has been huge," said Santiago.

So has been his presence.

Detroit 3, Oakland 1: Tigers clinch AL Central with win over A's

September 17, 2011

By Kirkland Crawford / Detroit Free Press

Doug Fister continued to dazzle as the Tigers beat the Athletics, 3-1, tonight in Oakland, Calif., to clinch the American League Central division.

The Tigers clinched their first division title since 1987 and are the first AL team to make the postseason. Detroit is now two games up on the Rangers for the second seed in the AL playoffs.

“We were seven games behind the Cleveland Indians at one point and people weren’t really talking about us at all,” Leyland said. “They deserved it. They worked hard. They stuck together. There are special moments you can’t put a price tag on and you just enjoy them. I’m an emotional guy, we all know that.”

“We were seven games behind the Cleveland Indians at one point and people weren’t really talking about us at all,” Leyland said. “They deserved it. They worked hard. They stuck together. There are special moments you can’t put a price tag on and you just enjoy them. I’m an emotional guy, we all know that.”

After giving up a home run and a single in the second inning, Fister retired 17 straight, including six by strikeout. David DeJesus bookended Fister's streak with a pair of singles. But Fister got Cliff Pennington to pop out to short to end the seventh.

Fister (9-13) went eight innings and gave up an earned run on just three hits and no walks on 91 pitches. He struck out five and improved to 6-1 in nine starts with the Tigers.

The Tigers won for the 23rd time in 28 games dating to Aug. 19 and 25th time in the club’s last 36 road games.

“This is very special to me,” he said. “This is some fun stuff.”

“I just want to party!” yelled pitcher Al Alburquerque as he walked into the plumes of smoke coming from all corners.

Same for Leyland.

The 66-year-old could light up a fresh cigar to celebrate a division title that looked like a longshot mere months ago. The sixth-year skipper sported fresh socks and undershorts a day after Detroit’s winning streak was stopped at 12 games in a 6-1 loss in Thursday night’s series opener.

With the game tied at one in the top of the sixth, Jhonny Peralta hit a one-out single to center. Then, Wilson Betemit hit the next pitch off the centerfield wall and out of the reach of Coco Crisp for an RBI triple. Ramon Santiago hit a fly ball to left and Betemit tried to score from third, but Hideki Matsui threw the runner out at the plate. Betemit appeared to suffer an injury on the play but stayed in the game.

Detroit got an insurance run in the seventh when Don Kelly hit a one-out solo home run to the seats in right, his fifth of the season.

“It’s been pretty much magical this whole second half,” reliever Phil Coke said. “We’ve gone out every day and handled our business. We’re all hungry. We’re all ready for this.”

Jose Valverde gave up a leadoff bloop double to Coco Crisp, which was just out of the reach of Austin Jackson in centerfield. The closer then struck out Jemile Weeks, got Matsui to pop out to third and got Josh Willingham to ground out to third. It's Valverde's 45th consecutive save this season.

Leyland stood some 10 feet from the pitcher’s mound and waited for a hug from each of his players.

New faces and old, Detroit made all the right moves. This month alone there have been two sweeps of the White Sox, one of Minnesota and another at Cleveland.

“I have a very special satisfaction. A lot of people probably didn’t think I’d be managing the Tigers next year,” Leyland said. “We were fortunate, because we were the team this year that met the challenge. We were almost spotless.”

The Tigers left six runners on base in the first five innings, including in the second, when Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez drew back-to-back walks to open the inning. But Alex Avila struck out, Peralta grounded into a fielder's choice and Betemit grounded out to first.

In the bottom of the inning, Josh Willingham hammered a pitch deep and over the centerfield wall for a leadoff home run and a 1-0 lead.

Santiago led off the top of the third with a triple down the rightfield line. With one out, Kelly singled through the right side of a drawn-in infield to tie the game.

“We’re just a very talented and resilient team,” Avila said. “At that (early) point in the season, we knew we just had to keep playing our game and we’d get there.”

The game was delayed 16 minutes after the stadium lights went out before the top of the fourth. Once the inning started, Cabrera singled and Martinez doubled to put runners on second and third with no outs. But Avila struck out again, Peralta hit a ground ball to short and Cliff Pennington threw out Cabrera at home and Betemit struck out to end the threat.

The Tigers again got the first two men on base in the fifth inning. Santiago led off with a drag bunt single and Austin Jackson was hit by a pitch while trying to sacrifice bunt. Kelly then bunted the runners into scoring position. Delmon Young then hit a ground ball to third base, where Eric Sogard fielded while stumbling into foul territory and was able to tag Santiago for an out. After a wild pitch moved the runners up, Cabrera was intentionally walked. Martinez then grounded out to first.

Trevor Cahill (11-14) went 6 2/3 innings and gave up three earned runs on nine hits, four walks and a hit batter on 106 pitches. He struck out four.

Scenarios set for a wild Tigers scene tonight

September 17, 2011

By Jamie Samuelsen / Detroit Free Press

The Detroit Tigers lost their first chance to win the division title Thursday night. What happens tonight? Let's be very clear about something: The Tigers will not, under any circumstances, be backing into the postseason. If the Cleveland Indians lose tonight, and the Tigers also lose and can't celebrate on the field, it means nothing. Nobody remembers where the San Francisco Giants celebrated last season, nor the New York Yankees the year before that nor the Philadelphia Phillies the year before that. Those are the last three World Series champions. How you win the division doesn't matter at all. The fact that you won the division does. Only fools would look at a Tigers loss tonight and wonder whether it is a sign of an inability to close things out. Their 12-game winning streak should forever end doubt about Jim Leyland and his second-half swoons. (I'm not saying it will erase 2009 but maybe it will dull the pain a bit.)

Backing into the playoffs is what the Detroit Lions did in 1999, when they lost their final four regular-season games (and then got blown out by the Washington Redskins in the first round). You don't "back into" the baseball playoffs. It's impossible when you play 162 games. (Just don't tell this to Red Sox fans. The Sox are 3-11 in September. Maybe they'll be the first team to do it.)

But there's still something a little disappointing about failing to win the division on your own terms. These guys have played nearly 150 games, and you'd love to be able to celebrate on the field. And after the Indians lost Thursday night, I'm sure there were plenty of Tigers fans who stayed up into the wee hours to witness their first division title since 1987. By losing, 6-1, to the Oakland A's, the Tigers set up a bizarre scenario in which they can win the division WHILE PLAYING the A's. If the Tribe loses at Minnesota, the Tigers win it. That should be right around 10:30 or 11 our time, which means the Tigers will be in the early innings of their game.

Best-case scenario is the Indians win tonight, so the Tigers can win it themselves and celebrate. Second-best scenario: Indians lose but the Tigers still win the game. Sure, they would have been champs for a couple of hours, but at least they'd still be able to run onto the field and celebrate. Third-best scenario: The Indians and Tigers lose, meaning there still would be a raucous party in Detroit's clubhouse.

But because of the oddity of knowing you're the champ before the game is over, we were discussing this morning the absurd scenarios that could take place tonight. Thanks to my radio friends and some excellent ideas on Twitter, here's what we'd love to see happen tonight:

Scenario 1: Indians lose to the Twins; Tigers rush the field.

How great would it be if, in the middle of the fourth inning with the A's, the Tigers rush out of the dugout and mob the pitchers mound? Safe to say it would cause a bench-clearing brawl -- but the Tigers' bench already would be cleared, so they'd have a pretty big advantage.

Scenario 2: Indians lose to the Twins; Tigers don the championship T-shirts and hats.

Rushing the field might be viewed as showing up the opposition. So instead of that, the Tigers simply can put on those T-shirts and hats that instantaneously appear the moment a team wins a title. Major League Baseball inexplicably had an issue with the New York Mets wearing NYPD and FDNY hats on Sept. 11, but I'm sure they'd have no problem with these officially licensed MLB products, right?

Scenario 3: Indians lose to the Twins; Tigers lose to the A's on a walk-off hit.

As the A's rush the field to mob the offensive hero, the Tigers rush the field to celebrate the division title. Either there would be surreal dual celebrations happening on different parts of the diamond, or there would be another brawl.

Scenario 4: Indians lose to the Twins, Leyland benches all of his regulars so that the game will end as quickly as possible.

Or as Tiger fans like to call this: most regular-season Thursdays. After the Indians lose, the Tigers will be intent on starting the party. So send up Brandon Inge as many times as possible. Swing at everything (as Inge tends to do) and let the celebration begin.

But this is stodgy old baseball. None of those scenarios will happen. Hopefully, the Indians will win, so that the Tigers can enjoy the moment. This team deserves it as much as any. When the division was up for grabs, the

Tigers destroyed the competition and pulled away. They are quietly becoming the favorite to win the American League. And that's a title they'll certainly be able to celebrate on the field and in the clubhouse.

Tigers beat A's, win first division title since 1987

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif.— Jim Leyland was right. It was "a nice position" the Tigers had put themselves in. And it just got a whole lot nicer.

With a 3-1 victory over the Oakland A's on Friday night, the Tigers nailed down their first division title since 1987 — and will be heading to the postseason for the first time since 2006.

It's looked likely for days, of course, that they would win the American League Central. Now they have.

With 13 victories in their last 14 games, it's also looked likely they would be headed to the playoffs. Now they are.

Wilson Betemit tripled in the go-ahead run in the sixth and Don Kelly made it a two-run lead with a solo home run in the seventh.

Meanwhile, limiting the A's to one run through eight strong innings was the amazing Mister Fister — Doug Fister, who is 6-1 as a Tiger since they acquired him from the Mariners in July.

The A's took a brief lead in the second on Josh Willingham's home run, but didn't score again.

Two events made clinching a tad more difficult, though.

1) The Cleveland Indians, the only team that still had a mathematical chance of tying the Tigers, won in Minnesota, keeping the magic number at one.

2) Plus a 16-minute light failure delayed the game in Oakland after three innings.

As they've done with all other obstacles, though, the Tigers overcame both.

This was the way, according to Brandon Inge, the Tigers had hoped to clinch the AL Central — doing it themselves instead of relying upon an Indians loss.

The White Sox were no longer a factor. They've been eliminated Thursday night — but the Indians were hanging on by the thinnest of threads.

And with the Tigers still on the field playing the Oakland A's, the Indians' victory over the Twins came first. There's no bad way to win a division, of course. Despite the fact that the Tigers wanted to do it themselves, when asked if that would be his choice, Leyland shook his head.

"If they happen to flash up Minnesota 8, Cleveland 2, that wouldn't bother me," he said before the game.

The final step of simply getting it done was more important than how, in other words.

It's the first time the Tigers have been AL Central champions. The last time they won a division, they were in the AL East.

They went to the postseason, and eventually to the World Series in 2006, but that was as a wild-card team after the Twins won the division.

This time, though, the Tigers weren't upstaged by anyone. Instead, after leading the division by only 1 1/2 games on Aug. 18, they ran away from the others by winning 23 of their next 28 games.

"For the last month or so," said Leyland, "we've had pretty good chemistry. I've never been a big chemistry guy. I thought it was a subject you took in school.

"But winning creates chemistry. That's why the bottom line is always winning. We're a team that got on a pretty roll at the right time."

And, in doing so, the Tigers became the first team in 2011 to clinch a division championship. The Phillies clinched a playoff spot earlier this week.

These last two days have been unusual ones, because of the starting-time difference between the games the Tigers were looking at on the scoreboard and the games they were playing.

For instance, they knew before the fifth inning on Thursday night that the White Sox had been eliminated and that the magic number to oust the Indians was down to one. They knew about the same time on Friday night that Cleveland had won.

"It's right there in front of you on the scoreboard," said Leyland. "You'd have to be an idiot not to know what's going on. But our focus has been not just to win the game we're playing, but as many as we can."

In response to a pre-game question of whether he had allowed himself in spring training to think of the Tigers as a potentially "special" team, Leyland said he thought the Tigers were going to be a good team.

"But, to be honest with you, this is not the same team we left spring training with," Leyland said. "This is a team with the addition of Delmon Young, Doug Fister and Wilson Betemit — so it would be kind of phony for me to say I knew everything was going to work out like this.

"I had no idea we were going to get those guys. But did I think we could be very competitive in the Central Division? Yes, I did. I meant what I said. I thought whoever got hot would win."

And the Tigers were the ones who not only got hot — but now loom as a "legitimate opponent for anybody," Leyland said.

"I'm not saying we're the best team," he said. "I'm not all of a sudden bragging that we're going to win everything. Nobody is saying any silly statements like that. But we have met our challenges pretty good.

"I don't think anyone believes they'll breeze through the Tigers — like we're some piece of cake. We're going to play someone really good, but my only point is I hope is that whoever else gets in looks at us and says they're going to be playing someone pretty darn good, too."

Champagne sprays as Central champ Tigers cut loose

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — The vote was unanimous.

In the wild celebration that followed the Tigers' clinching of the American League Central on Friday night, Jose Valverde was voted as the player most likely to be the last Tiger spraying champagne.

And swigging it as well.

"He's got the biggest compartment to hold it," said a grinning Magglio Ordonez, extending his hands from his stomach.

It can be said, without dispute, that the Tigers know how to party.

There was Valverde dousing everyone in sight. And when he'd gotten all the players, he turned his sights on others. Anybody who was dry was a target.

It was also Valverde who manager Jim Leyland passed out cigars, the best cigars many of the Tigers have ever smoked.

"Beyond my price range," said.

"Maybe mine, too," Justin Verlander passed out cigars, the best cigars many of the Tigers have ever smoked.

"Beyond my price range," said.

The Tigers' clubhouse was lined with plastic, of course, to protect the lockers. Nothing protected the ceiling, though. In many places, something bubbly was dripping down.

Champagne here, beer there — and the whole room was filled with cigar smoke.

This team celebrated as a team. It had just won the A.L. Central for the first time ever. It had just won its first divisional title since winning the East in 1987 and will be headed to the postseason for the first time since 2006.

But the way it let loose was both creative and fun to watch.

There was Al Albuquerque sitting in a corner, either singing, gurgling or just plain yelling while a teammate poured a full bottle over his head.

There was Brandon Inge, wearing the snorkel and mask he bought with the help of a clubhouse attendant on Friday.

"Thought I'd do something different," he said. "Other guys have goggles, I've got the snorkel."

There was Phil Coke having as good a time as you'd probably expect him to have.

There was Joaquin Benoit telling Rick Porcello he better be ready to pitch nine innings on Saturday.

There was Miguel Cabrera participating only with a cigar, a wide smile and hugs for all his teammates.

There was Jacob Turner — 20-year-old Jacob Turner — looking kind of green, as if he'd never smoked a cigar before.

There was Dave Dombrowski, being poured on by several players.

And there, next to each other, were father and son — Al and Alex Avila — sharing the moment they'd dreamed of sharing ever since Alex began to look like a major league talent.

Al, the Tigers' assistant general manager, hadn't been spared by the sprayers. Father and son, for that matter, hadn't spared each other.

But for the two who used to mow the lawn together, Alex with a toy mower next to his dad with the power mower, it was a truly special moment.

"I'm so happy to be able to share this moment with him," Alex said about his dad. "It's unbelievable.

Overwhelming joy."

Alex knew his father wouldn't be right down from where he'd been watching the game at the Oakland Coliseum

"I was upstairs changing," Al said. "We knew what we'd be going into."

The celebration was going to be both crazy and emotional.

When I got drafted, there was one night we were talking on the phone," Alex said, "and we said to each other, wouldn't it be something to win a World Series together someday.

"This is the first step."

And what a loud, boisterous, happy step it was. But the voters who voted for Valverde?

They probably had it right.

"Where are you going?" he roared at a writer leaving the clubhouse, relatively dry.

"Upstairs to work," was the reply.

"Come back here," Valverde bellowed — as he earned the media's vote.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland counts his blessings amid celebration

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — His eyes already were red, of course.

Some of it was the stinging champagne. Most of it wasn't.

Jim Leyland is an emotional intersection. The façade can be gruff. The core, however, is kind.

The voice can be loud and challenging. It can also break with feeling.

And the one guarantee of a celebrating clubhouse, in the partying wake of the Tigers winning their first divisional title since 1987, was that Leyland would well up.

Nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all.

It's a genuine part of what makes him a manager players love to play for — a fact that could be seen as, hug after hug after hug, they filed past him toward the dugout after the celebration ended on the mound.

Consider the case of Don Kelly.

The Tigers had just beaten the A's on Friday with a combination truly symbolic of how they've succeeded as a team. In the clinching game, they got contributions from core players such as Jose Valverde, with his 45th save. From acquired players, such as Doug Fister, who held the A's to one run on three hits in eight innings while winning for the sixth time in seven decisions as a Tiger.

And from depth players such as Don Kelly, whose sacrifice fly drove in the first Tigers' run of the division-clinching game — and his home run drove in the final run.

"That's why you coach a team," Leyland said. "To me, this is so good because this is something that Donnie Kelly will never forget.

"That's what makes it special to me. Here's a guy that not many people know about or talk about much. But to do what he did in this game goes into a heck of memory bank for him.

"That's worth its weight in gold. That's why you play all your players. It takes a whole team."

And Fister's performance?

"He certainly met the challenge," Leyland said. "He's been fantastic for us. When you talk about a clinching game, you can't ask for more than what he gave us. It was almost spotless."

The postgame celebration was a sequence of one rewarding moment after another for Leyland.

"Instead of running out there, it's nice to stand back and watch the players celebrate something they had just accomplished," he said. "You're just so happy for them.

"But then we went out to congratulate them. It's such a special moment you can't put a price tag on it, no matter how long you've managed or played.

"It's something you really can't explain to people. I mean I was hyper-ventilating in the ninth inning."

The next moment was to reflect, back in his office, on how far the Tigers had come.

"There were times we were seven games behind and people weren't really talking about us at all," Leyland said.

"But they worked hard and stuck together.

"I'm an emotional guy. We all know that. But I have a very special satisfaction for obvious reasons. Probably a lot of people didn't think I'd be managing the Tigers next year at the start of the season.

"I've been around a long time, and I don't think any (clinch) is more special than any other. But this one is special to me for personal reasons.

"I'm just glad I'm managing the Tigers next year. It sounds kind of selfish, and maybe it is.

"But that's why it is personal."

Justin Verlander finds release in title, while Miguel Cabrera finds contentment

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — The typical Tiger had a bottle of champagne in one hand, a cigar in the other.

Miguel Cabrera, however, was not a typical Tiger on Friday night. No bottle. Just a cigar.

While others bubbled over with bubbly, Cabrera was first spotted outside the manager's office, looking content as the media filed in to speak with Jim Leyland.

Content?

Yes, content.

For all of the documented reasons of his past, Cabrera couldn't partake in the entire celebration. But at no time did he look left out.

Staying away from the spray, he posed with teammates for photos. In short, he was handling the situation just fine.

It was on the other side of a plastic curtain that divided the Tigers' clubhouse where the real rowdiness was taking place.

Nothing outrageous. Players letting good times roll, that's all.

"I've been blessed since I've been here to be part of some real great teams camaraderie-wise," Justin Verlander said. "This is up there. Everybody gets along."

But c'mon, Justin.

Certainly there was a Tiger who surprised his teammates by letting loose; some calm, quiet Tiger who became a spraying machine after the final out of the division clincher.

"I figured everyone would let loose, man," Verlander said. "It's that kind of team. We're a close-knit group that celebrates together."

Did it make the celebration sweeter that the Tigers had pulled away to win the division by putting together a 12-game winning streak against teams in their own division — mostly their two closest pursuers in the Central Division standings?

"It doesn't make it sweeter, but I think it's better for us a team," Verlander said. "To come in and show under pressure situations that we can play our best baseball, that's a good sign for the playoffs."

Ah, yes, the playoffs.

They don't begin today, fortunately.

The Tigers were up late.

25 reasons Tigers will win again in 2012

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif.— They'll win it next year, too.

Twenty-five reasons the Tigers will also be American League Central champs in 2012.

1. Justin Verlander: Better than any other No. 1 starter in the division. By far.
2. Miguel Cabrera: If you write down 30 home runs, 110 RBIs, you'll be close enough. A production machine.
3. No key defections: Nobody's leaving that would create a big void.
4. Ouch: The White Sox might not be able to spend much on free agents after making some expensive blunders.
5. Not in the same ballpark: The Indians were bold, though possibly not smart, in trading for Ubaldo Jimenez. But they won't be big spenders this offseason, either.
6. A whole year of Doug Fister.
7. The Royals are up-and-comers, but are more than a year away from building a deep rotation.
8. Alex Avila: Won't be a one-year wonder.
9. Victor Martinez: Some players can't adjust to DH'ing as much as he DH'ed this year. Not only a huge addition to the lineup, but to the clubhouse as well. Three more years on his contract.
10. No gaping holes: Second base, you say? The committee, it turns out, did just fine.
11. Getting younger: Jacob Turner has been groomed to take over a spot in the rotation.
12. So you think the Twins will bounce back next year? Think again. No stud starter, and Target Field has taken away whatever power the Twins had. Their comeback will be more than a one-year project.
13. Depth: Nobody in the division can or will be able to match the lineup, the rotation, the bullpen or even the bench.
14. Constructive attrition: Yes, an older player or two will probably be gone. But what if Magglio Ordonez would take \$5 million for next year and what if Carlos Guillen would take \$3 million? They're not full-timers any more, but they've been part of the September surge. Would you bring either of them back?
15. Expendability: Even if Ordonez and Guillen don't return, they've meant more to the Tigers in the past than what they would mean in the future. Valued as individuals, and for what their contributions have been, but expendable.
16. No experiments: The Tigers won't return next year tinkering, such as starting Phil Coke instead of keeping him in the role where he's most effective. That cost the Tigers four months of having Coke help where he helps most.
17. Delmon Young's not going anywhere. And it's still amazing how he just landed in the Tigers' lap.
18. Ramon Santiago: Absolutely essential, but the good thing is that the Tigers know it. Danny Worth might someday be as useful as Santiago, but why bank on it for next year?
19. Trust: Jim Leyland's ever-changing lineups won't bother you as much next year. By now, you're probably seeing much more method to those lineups than madness.
20. Front-office staying put. Those who built the 2011 team will be at the helm for 2012 as well. Whether they can continue to make all the right moves remains to be seen — that's asking a lot — but Dave Dombrowski's crew has had quite a year.
21. Max Scherzer's stuff: He did what he did this season without consistently locating his fastball where he wanted. Good, but capable of being better.
22. Ryan Raburn: Remember how the Tigers thought he would be their regular left fielder this year? They won't force the issue for next season. He is what he is, folks, and everyone knows it by now. It can't be July before it's July.
23. The good ol' "club option": As fast as they possibly can, the Tigers will pick up the \$9 million option on Jose Valverde's contract for next year.
24. Jose Valverde: What's more, it wouldn't be at all surprising if they try to extend Valverde's contract through 2013, guaranteeing them the bullpen duo of Valverde and Benoit for at least two more years.
25. The taste of winning: This is not a team which has gotten to this point by over-achieving. The Tigers have gotten to this point based on their talent.

They know they are good. They now know they can win a division.
It might take a few years to knock that confidence off its new perch.

Tigers at A's

First pitch : 4:11 today, Oakland (Calif.) Coliseum

TV/radio: Fox/97.1, 1270

Scouting report

Rick Porcello (14-8, 4.83), Tigers: Appears to be finishing strongly. He's 3-0 in his last four starts with a 3.08 ERA.

Gio Gonzalez (13-12, 3.41), A's: After an 0-5 stretch, this left-hander is 4-1 in his last five starts with a 3.62 ERA.

Tigers face difficult playoff decisions

September 17, 2011

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif.— Now for the next step — the planning of the rotation and the roster for the postseason.

Do you pitch Max Scherzer second or Doug Fister? Who do you pitch in Game 4 of the division series, if there is a Game 4?

And who do you leave off the roster?

These will be the difficult decisions facing manager Jim Leyland, who admitted on his first day here that such thoughts, while not putting the cart before the clincher, already have been considered.

Meanwhile, division series ticket sales haven't just been considered, they're all but done.

"It's always bugged me," said Leyland, "when people say, 'Oh, they're talking about the playoffs.'"

"You have to put playoff tickets on sale. Everybody had to, not just us. But you don't want to offend other teams and have them say, 'They think they're in.'"

So, long before clinching, the wheels for ticket sales were in place.

Now other wheels are rolling as well.

"You do have to start thinking about your pitching rotation," Leyland said. "I mean that's only natural."

"But you have to be careful because someone in the media will blow that up, saying, 'The Tigers already have their rotation.'"

"That's not what we're talking about. But you do have to start thinking about stuff. Common sense tells you that — and some of it is a pain."

"It would be a bold-faced lie, and I'm not going to lie about it."

There are those who believe that Leyland will go with Justin Verlander, Scherzer and Fister as his 1-2-3 in the division series. There are those who think he'll flip-flop Fister with Scherzer.

As for the No. 4 starter, if needed, the choice would be between Rick Porcello and Brad Penny, or maybe a combination of both. Leyland hasn't yet disclosed his plans.

When discussing Scherzer before Thursday night's game, he was upfront about his talent but also his inconsistency.

"He has great stuff, but he's been in and out of his delivery a little bit more than you'd like. When he's getting it right, he's really good."

"He's a perfectionist. He wants everything just right, and sometimes it doesn't work that way. If he'd had his rhythm two or three more games, he'd have 17 to 18 wins."

Fister, of course, has been everything the Tigers envisioned — and more.

"The strikeouts are a little bit of a surprise, but not the fact he's pitched really well," Leyland said. "He was a guy we thought would help our club and so far, knock on wood, we — meaning all involved with that decision — have been right."

Leyland isn't thinking only of his rotation and roster. More than once, he's alluded to the thorn the media can be in the postseason.

When he said, for instance, that the Tigers were concentrating first on winning the division, he added, "It won't be the only thing they concentrate on because the writers and media, which is only natural because it's what they do for living, will want to jump the gun."

"The media will be asking, 'Who would you rather play?' Stuff we don't need to talk about now."

Some things just come with the territory.

In this case, postseason territory

Tigers' Magglio Ordonez: 'This team's got all the ingredients to win the World Series'

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND – The last time the Detroit Tigers made the playoffs, in 2006, they made it all the way to the World Series before losing four games to one to the St. Louis Cardinals.

This time around?

“I think this team's got all the ingredients to win the World Series,” outfielder Magglio Ordonez. “We have to keep playing like we're playing so far and try to take the whole thing.”

Ordonez has not played as large a role this season as he did the last time the Detroit Tigers advanced to the playoffs. But you wouldn't know it from the smile on his face in the clubhouse after the clincher.

“It's always great to win the division and celebrate with your teammates and everybody on the team,” he said.

“I'm very proud of this team. We worked really hard.”

Ordonez hit .298 with 24 home runs and 104 RBIs in the regular season in 2006, then hit a dramatic walk-off home run to beat Oakland in Game 4 of the American League Championship Series and send the Tigers to the World Series.

This season, he is hitting a modest .245 with five home runs and 28 RBIs. But he has played well down the stretch and is hitting .417 (10-for-24) with two doubles, a home run and three RBIs in eight games in September.

Ordonez was asked what it was about the Tigers that helped them bounce back from being eight games out of first place in May to running away with the division title in September.

“It was just a matter of time because we've got a great team,” he said. “We've got good chemistry. We get along really well. We have a coaching staff that's pushing us, pushing the players every day. ...

“We've got a great team. We've got a complete team. Good hitters, great manager, good coaching staff. The fans supported us all year. We've got to try to get all the way to try to win the World Series.”

Tigers' new focus: Gaining home-field advantage, setting playoff roster, rotation

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND – Even before the Detroit Tigers clinched their first division title in 24 seasons, Tigers manager Jim Leyland said the most important part of the regular season was yet to come.

“There would be a lot of baseball left,” Leyland said prior to the game Friday night. “If it happens, if we do get it done ... it would be the most important stretch of the season.”

After the Tigers clinched the division with a 3-1 victory over Oakland, Leyland expanded on his thoughts a bit.

“We'd like to try to get home-field advantage,” Leyland said. “So we're going to continue to play, and we're going to continue to play hard. Then we have some other things that we have to sit down and make some important decisions on. Rosters. Rotations.

“We're going to enjoy this tonight. Tomorrow, we'll get after it pretty good.”

The Tigers have two more games in Oakland before an off-day Monday and a two-game series at Kansas City after that. Leyland said he will meet with General Manager Dave Dombrowski and a few others in the organization while in Kansas City to make some important decisions.

“It's an important time,” he said while smoking a giant cigar. “But I'm not going to worry about that tonight.”

Tigers first baseman Miguel Cabrera enjoys clubhouse celebration from afar

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND – There was plenty of champagne flying in the visitors clubhouse late Friday night as the Detroit Tigers celebrated their division title.

Justin Verlander shot an entire bottle into the face of winning pitcher Doug Fister, who leaned into the spray with his eyes slammed shut.

Players drank it, sprayed it and poured it over each other's heads.

It puddled deeply enough on the plastic that covered the floor to allow Phil Coke, Daniel Schlereth and Justin Verlander – yes, the AL Cy Young Award favorite and Most Valuable Player candidate – to skid across the clubhouse on their stomachs.

First baseman Miguel Cabrera didn't seem to have a drop on him.

Throughout almost all of the wild celebration that took place in the Tigers clubhouse, Cabrera sat calmly with a smile pasted on his face and a bottle of water in his hand.

“It feels great,” Cabrera said. “Winning this division means a lot to us because we worked for this. We worked to win. We worked to go to the playoffs.”

The Tigers said they provided non-alcoholic champagne for Cabrera – who has had two alcohol-related incidents since the final week of the 2009 season – and anyone else who chose that option along with regular champagne. But Cabrera chose neither.

He sat perched on an exercise bike with his feet on a couch at one end of the clubhouse and took it all in. In a way, he looked like the king of the clubhouse, taking in all he could survey.

In a way, he was. Overshadowed a bit by the accomplishments of his team as well as the MVP talk that has surrounded Verlander, Cabrera has had a seemingly quiet season, at least for a guy who is hitting .335 with 26 home runs and 97 RBIs.

“Do you want me to let you go?” a reporter asked at one point as a group of Cabrera's teammates gathered to celebrate in front of him. “I have more questions, but I don't want to keep you from celebrating with your teammates.”

“No,” Cabrera said. “Go ahead.”

Then he went on to talk more about his team and how everyone has contributed.

“It's not about one guy,” he said. “It's about 25 guys on the roster. Everybody did what they could do to win games.”

Cabrera talked about how satisfying it was to beat the teams they were fighting with for a playoff spot during their current stretch of 23 victories in 28 games.

“They played hard the whole season,” he said of the White Sox and Indians. “We battled with those guys the whole season. The past month we played good baseball and beat those guys.”

Tigers built to be contender in AL Central Division well beyond 2011

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND -- It has been 24 years since the Detroit Tigers last won a division title.

It is very likely that it will be just 12 months until they win another one.

Tigers fans should be thrilled with how their team is playing right now. They should also be excited about the future.

Fans can be fickle. The Tigers got off to a slow start this season and found themselves eight games out of first place in the first week of May. Many fans questioned whether they would get back in the race.

The Tigers were in first place when Dave Dombrowski and Jim Leyland received contract extensions on Aug. 8, but many fans thought those extensions were premature.

The Tigers recently put together a 12-game winning streak as part of a stretch that featured 22 wins in 26 games. Now, some fans believe the Tigers are unstoppable, a team of destiny.

They are the hottest team in baseball. Surely, they will roll through the playoffs and win the World Series. Right?

Well, maybe and maybe not. A short series can be a crapshoot. The Tigers certainly could win the entire thing. They also could lose three straight in the American League Division Series.

But if fans take the long view for a moment, they will realize that this is not a one-shot deal for the Tigers.

Barring drastic roster changes in the offseason for other AL Central Division teams, the Tigers will enter the 2012 season as the favorites to repeat as division champions.

While the other teams in the Central Division have some holes to fill, the Tigers roster is pretty solid. And they don't have any major players heading into free agency.

Ponder this question: Which free agent can the Tigers least afford to lose in the offseason?

The answer is Ramon Santiago.

Now this isn't to say that Santiago is not a good player. It is simply to show that the Tigers will be able to spend their offseason looking at ways to add a couple key players rather than paying through the nose to keep their best players or, worse yet, patching holes left by the departure of their best players.

Their other free agents are Carlos Guillen, Magglio Ordonez, Wilson Betemit, Brad Penny and Joel Zumaya.

Compare the Tigers' situation with, say, the one the Milwaukee Brewers face with Prince Fielder, who has one foot in the pennant race and the other out the door, and you can see where the Tigers stand.

Delmon Young, Rick Porcello, Max Scherzer, Phil Coke, Don Kelly and Brad Thomas are eligible for arbitration. It seems likely that the Tigers will keep everyone but Thomas around.

The Tigers rotation is stocked with young arms who should only get better. They also are under team control for the foreseeable future.

Someone suggested to Leyland earlier this season -- before he was given the contract extension -- that the likely future rotation of Justin Verlander, Scherzer, Doug Fister, Porcello and Jacob Turner could be a formidable one.

"I hope it's my rotation," he said.

He smiled. Tigers fans should, too. After all, that is their rotation -- and the Tigers are their team -- this season and the next one and the next one.

Clinching the division could be the start of something big for the 2011 season. But it also could be the start of something big for the 2012 season ... and beyond.

Tigers' Jim Leyland: 'This one's special to me for personal reasons'

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND – For Jim Leyland, it was personal.

The Detroit Tigers manager became emotional multiple times late Friday night after his team put the finishing touches on its first Central Division title in 24 years.

One of those times was when he discussed why this season has been so special.

“I’ve been around a long time,” Leyland said. “I don’t think any one is more special than any other. But you always find a reason to make this one special. This one’s special to me for personal reasons.”

Leyland knows what people say about him, both positive and negative. He openly admits that he reads what is written in the newspaper and that people tell him when he is criticized on talk radio.

He started this season in the final year of his contract, with no safety net for next season. The Tigers started slowly, fought their way back into the race at midseason and led a half-game at the All-Star break.

But even then, many fans doubted the team, pointing to the second-half struggles the Tigers have gone through during Leyland’s time in Detroit. This time, however, the Tigers put together a late-season surge for the ages, winning 12 in a row at one point.

The Tigers extended Leyland’s contract in early August, and it is clear that he loves the franchise that gave him his start.

“I’m just glad I’m managing the Tigers next year,” he said. “There probably weren’t a whole lot of people who thought I would be. It sounds kind of selfish, and maybe it is, but that’s how I feel about it. That’s why it’s personal.”

Tigers clinch Central Division title with 3-1 victory over A's

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND – The Detroit Tigers are Central Division champions.

Now the battle for home-field advantage begins.

Doug Fister allowed just three hits in eight innings and Don Kelly homered and knocked in two runs Friday night as the Tigers earned a 3-1 victory over the Oakland A's to wrap up the division title.

Jose Valverde put the finishing touches on the game for his 45th save, then pumped his fist and embraced catcher Alex Avila as their teammates rushed the field in celebration.

The Tigers have won 23 of their past 28 games while burying the Cleveland Indians and the Chicago White Sox in the division race. The Tigers led the Indians by just 1 1-2 games prior to going on that hot streak, which started with a three-game sweep of the Indians in mid-August.

It is the first division title for the Tigers since they finished first in the American League East Division in 1987 and the fourth title for the team since divisional play began in 1969.

The Tigers will participate in the playoffs for the 13th time and the first time since 2006, when they advanced to the World Series.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland used the phrase “up to this point” repeatedly during his pregame meeting with media members, refusing to speak about the certainty of the division title until the Tigers had it totally wrapped up.

But Leyland did speak of what comes next.

“There would be a lot of baseball left,” Leyland said. “If it happens, if we do get it done ... it would be the most important stretch of the season.”

The Tigers have several tasks ahead of them in the final 11 games. They need to get their rotation set up the way Leyland wants it for the American League Division Series. They will have to make tough decisions about which players make the playoff roster. Scoreboard-watching players – and fans -- can switch their focus from the Cleveland Indians to the Texas Rangers.

The Tigers led the Rangers by two games in the race to have home-field advantage in the American League Central Division. Nothing is certain at this point, but the two most likely scenarios for the Tigers are as follows:

– If they finish ahead of either the AL East or AL West champion, they will have home-field advantage in the ALDS. Their most likely opponent in that case would be the Boston Red Sox.

– If they finish behind both the AL East and AL West champions, they will not have home-field advantage.

Their most likely opponent in that case would be the New York Yankees.

After the Indians lost Thursday night, the Tigers had a chance to clinch the division with a win over Oakland, but they suffered a 6-1 loss in that game.

The Tigers had a chance to clinch earlier Friday night if Cleveland lost to Minnesota, but the Indians held on for a 7-6 victory. The Twins rallied for two runs in the bottom of the ninth inning but could not complete the comeback.

Fister retired 17 consecutive batters at one point. Fister, who struck out five and did not issue walk, is 9-13 overall this season but 6-1 since joining the Tigers in a trade just prior to the deadline.

“He's been everything and probably a little more than what we thought,” Leyland said prior to the game. “He's done a great job for us.”

The A's took a 1-0 lead when Josh Willingham led off the second inning with a solo home run, his 27th of the season.

The Tigers tied it 1-1 in the top of the third when Ramon Santiago tripled into the corner in right field and scored on a one-out single by Kelly.

The Tigers had an excellent chance to take the lead in the top of the fourth, following a 16-minute delay caused by a power outage that affected the stadium lights. A single by Miguel Cabrera and a double by Victor Martinez put runners at second and third with no outs against Oakland starter Trevor Cahill.

But Cahill got out of the jam by sandwiching strikeouts around a fielder's choice grounder to short that resulted in Cabrera getting thrown out at home.

The Tigers had runners at second and third with one out and then the bases loaded with two outs in the fifth inning. But Cahill got Martinez to ground out to first to end that rally and strand three runners.

The Tigers took the lead for good in the fifth.

Jhonny Peralta singled with one out, then came around to score on a triple off the wall in right-center field by Wilson Betemit to make it 2-1. The A's put an end to that rally when Ramon Santiago hit a fly ball to left field for out No. 2. Betemit tagged up at third and raced home, but Matsui threw a strike to home plate to complete the double play.

Don Kelly homered with one out in the seventh inning to make it 3-1.

The Tigers lost seven of their first 10 games to start the season and found themselves eight games behind the first-place Indians in early May. They fought their way back into a first-place tie for the first time on June 11.

They took over sole possession of first place for good on July 21.

The Tigers still led by just 1 1-2 games on Aug. 19 when they started a three-game series against the Indians.

The Tigers swept the Indians in that series and never looked back.

Now they have nowhere to look but forward to a fight for home-field advantage and a playoff run that will take them into October.

Leyland: Trades during season put Detroit Tigers over the top

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND — The Detroit Tigers were thought to be a solid contender for the American League Central Division title when they left spring training and headed to New York for a season-opening three-game series with the Yankees.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland said Friday, at the time, he felt confident the Tigers were a good team.

He was asked if he knew in spring training that this team was special.

“I thought coming out of spring training we had a good team,” Leyland said. “I believed that. I didn’t know how it would end up or how it would play out. ... I felt like we had a good team. But, to be honest with you, this is not the same team we left spring training with.”

Trades during the season brought the Tigers three players who have played key roles down the stretch.

Doug Fister brought a 3-12 record to the Tigers when they obtained him at the trade deadline. But he had a 3.33 ERA with Seattle and received less run support than any other starting pitcher in baseball. Fister was 5-1 with a 2.28 ERA in eight starts for the Tigers heading into his start Friday night.

“He’s been everything and, probably, a little more than what we thought,” Leyland said. “He’s done a great job for us.”

Delmon Young hit .266 with four home runs and 32 RBIs in 84 games for the Twins this season, but through Thursday he was hitting .306 with five home runs and 21 RBIs in 29 games for the Tigers.

Wilson Betemit brought some much-needed offensive punch to third base. Betemit strikes out a lot (44 times in 111 at-bats) and is not the best fielding third baseman, but he was hitting .279 with four home runs and 17 RBIs in 37 games with the Tigers heading into the game Friday night.

Two of those three players — Young and Betemit — came to the Tigers in trades from division rivals. So did Jhonny Peralta, who came to the Tigers from Cleveland in a trade last season.

“I think it’s a compliment to our organization because it meant we had players somebody wanted so we could get these guys,” Leyland said. “I think sometimes you talk about developing through your farm system, which I think is great. But, sometimes, you develop through your farm system by having a good enough farm system to trade for someone who’s more major-league ready.”

The streak

Leyland downplayed the Tigers’ 12-game winning streak a bit while it was going on, but now that it is over, he is clearly proud of what his team accomplished.

He said multiple times in the past two days what he finds most impressive about the streak is that it came at an important time of the season against teams that were chasing the Tigers in the division.

All 12 games in the streak came against Central Division opponents, including six against the White Sox and three against the Indians. The Tigers also swept the Indians in mid-August, which is really where their current hot streak began.

“If somebody said, ‘Are you amazed at what you just did, up to this point?’ Yeah,” Leyland said. “If somebody had told me (in mid-August) that we’d sweep Cleveland twice, Chicago twice and Minnesota, I would have said, ‘You’re out of your mind.’ And so would anybody else, I think.”

The streak ended Thursday night in a 6-1 loss to Oakland.

Going for 100 again

Miguel Cabrera headed into the game Friday night nearing an impressive accomplishment.

Cabrera had 97 RBIs, 102 runs and 100 walks through Thursday to leave him just three RBIs short of becoming the fifth Tigers player to ever reach 100 in each of those three categories in the same season.

Hank Greenberg accomplished that in both the 1937 and ’38 seasons. The other three are: Charlie Gehringer (1938), Rocky Colavito (1961) and Norm Cash (1961).

Honored

First baseman Juaner Aguasvivas and outfielder Brandon Eckerle were selected to the Gulf Coast League postseason all-star team. Both play for the Gulf Coast League Tigers.

Tigers' Justin Verlander lined up perfectly to start in playoff opener

September 17, 2011

By Chris Iott / Booth Newspapers

OAKLAND -- The starting rotation for the Detroit Tigers is lined up perfectly for ace Justin Verlander to start the first game of the postseason.

The Tigers named their starting pitchers Friday for the two-game series at Kansas City that will immediately follow an off-day Monday. They are Brad Penny and Max Scherzer.

If the division race had remained tight, it seems likely that Tigers manager Jim Leyland would have skipped Penny to allow Verlander to make three more starts, with the final one scheduled on the final day of the regular season against the Cleveland Indians.

But since the Tigers have pulled away in the race, getting Verlander into the season-ending Cleveland series is clearly not important.

Leyland would not commit to what his rotation will be down the stretch. He was asked Friday if he could say whether or not he would stick to the current rotation through the end of the season.

"No," he said. "I can't tell you."

Then he paused.

"I can tell you," he said, "but I'm not going to."

If Leyland sticks with the current rotation, it would line up nicely for the American League Division Series.

Verlander could start both Game 1 and Game 5 on five days' rest. Scherzer could start Game 2 on normal rest, and Doug Fister and Rick Porcello could pitch in Game 3 and Game 4 on an extra day's rest.

Whether or not the team holds the home-field advantage will likely play a role in how Leyland would prefer to set his rotation for the ALDS. If the Tigers host the Boston Red Sox in the first round, having Fister and Porcello, who both induce lots of ground balls, pitching in Fenway Park in Game 3 and Game 4 would seem logical.

If the Tigers open the postseason at Yankee Stadium, Leyland might prefer to have Fister pitch Game 2 and have Scherzer set for Game 3 at Comerica Park.

Scherzer has a 3.66 ERA this season in 17 starts at Comerica Park and a 5.33 ERA in 14 starts on the road. He is also among the league leaders in home runs allowed, and Comerica Park is much more pitcher-friendly than Yankee Stadium.

Even if Leyland isn't saying much about the rest of the rotation, he clearly planned things well to have Verlander available to pitch twice in the ALDS without having to shake up the rotation to make that happen.

Fister leads the way as Tigers clinch Central

September 17, 2011

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Doug Fister was a good pitcher on a last-place team for most of the season before the Tigers targeted him at the Trade Deadline. He was at the heart of Friday's win that clinched the American League Central title, and in the middle of the celebration that followed it.

Wilson Betemit was a utility man who had outlived his role on the Royals before the Tigers traded for him in July. His go-ahead RBI triple stood up in Detroit's 3-1 win over the A's.

Don Kelly was part of the 2009 Tigers team that suffered heartbreak at the hands of the Twins. He scored the go-ahead run in the tiebreaker that year, only to see the lead vanish. He scored a key insurance run Friday night that ended up being the final tally.

Ramon Santiago was part of the 2003 Tigers team that lost 119 games, and his was the run that got the Tigers going against Oakland, continuing the key role he has played for at least a month at second base.

They all played their parts in the run that brought the Tigers to the cusp of their first division title since 1987, and they all had their hands in Friday's clincher. So did many more in a game capped by Jose Valverde's 45th save in as many chances. That made it all the sweeter for manager Jim Leyland, who teared up talking about it in his office while his players celebrated as a group down the hall.

"That's why you coach a team," Leyland said. "I think, to me, this is so good, because Fister was a pickup, but this is something that Donnie Kelly will never forget. That's what makes it special to me. Here's a guy that a lot of people don't really know about. And to come up like he did tonight, this goes in a heckuva memory bank for him.

"That's worth its weight in gold. That's why you play them all."

With their magic number at one, the Tigers needed to either win Friday night or have the Indians lose in Minnesota. They were going to get it at some point, but considering how all they needed was a win to wrap it up two years ago, getting that last victory was going to be special.

After Josh Willingham's homer to straightaway center pulled the A's ahead leading off the bottom of the second inning, it was all Tigers from there.

Once Tiger nemesis David DeJesus followed Willingham's homer with a single, Fister recovered with some help. Jhonny Peralta ranged deep into the hole at shortstop and rifled a throw to first to retire Cliff Pennington for the first of 17 straight outs recorded by Fister (9-13).

Just two Athletics in that stretch got a ball out of the infield against Fister, whose career-best fifth straight win ranked among the sweetest. Less than two months after he was a Mariners starter with the lowest run support among AL starters, he was a division champion. He was conscious of how close he was to the latter when he was on the mound.

"Definitely a world of emotions out there, trying to stay kind of composed and under control, still having a job to do," Fister said. "That's the main focus. Luckily tonight it was able to be done. It was a team effort. Offense came out and put together a lot of good at-bats and battled, and then the defense really picked everybody up. That's what it's all about."

Fister's five wins over his last six starts included two gems against the Indians. His eight innings of three-hit ball Friday eliminated Cleveland from the division chase.

"He certainly met the challenge tonight," Leyland said. "He's been fantastic for us. When you talk about a clinching game, you can't ask for any more of a performance than he gave us tonight. I mean, that's almost spotless. That's pretty impressive."

Fister's offense made sure he didn't trail for long. Santiago's triple leading off the third inning set the table for the top of the order to drive him in. After A's starter Trevor Cahill struck out Austin Jackson, up came Kelly, who's made many of his contributions recently as a defensive replacement, but started Friday.

Kelly's ground ball through the right side tied it. His fifth-inning sacrifice bunt moved two runners into scoring position before Cahill escaped, but once Cahill fell behind on a 2-0 count to him in the seventh, he pounced on a hanging sinker and drove it deep to right field for his fifth home run.

"This is the perfect example of how this team has won," Kelly said. "You had the two big hits. Fister, the new guy, goes eight. ... Everybody steps up and then you you've got Papa Grande at the back end closing it out. It's an amazing feeling. It's a fun night."

Valverde, as he has been for more than half of the Tigers' wins this year, was the exclamation point. He has been more and more animated in recent saves, and this seemed set to be his biggest celebration of all. But when Willingham grounded to third for the final out, he went to his catcher, Alex Avila, and gave him a big hug. Then the dugout emptied.

Nearly a quarter-century of frustration in the standings among Tigers fans poured out with it.

"It's an unbelievable feeling," Fister said. "A great group of guys to be around, a great group of guys to fight tooth and nail with. This is what we're living for, this is what we're playing for. Every drop of sweat, every drop of blood, tear, whatever, is what it's all about right now."

Path traveled to title is uncharted for Tigers

After years of falling short, club claims first division crown since '87

September 17, 2011

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The last time the Tigers won a division, Alan Trammell was their shortstop, Lou Whitaker was his double-play partner, and Jack Morris was their ace. Tom Brookens was a 13-homer third baseman, not a coach on the other side of the infield.

Yes, it's been that long. It just feels like they've been there recently because they've come so close. The way they pulled away the last few weeks, they didn't give anyone a chance to think back to those close calls again. "This one means a little more, because we won the division," Magglio Ordonez said on Friday night, after the Tigers defeated the A's, 3-1, to clinch the American League Central. "Because this team hasn't won the division since 1987. It's been so long."

For all the wins the Tigers have racked up over the last six years, starting with their surprise run to the World Series in 2006, they hadn't punctuated it with a division crown. They had become known more for their September swoons than their celebrations.

The Tigers' trip to the Fall Classic came on a coach-class ticket as the AL Wild Card, their fallback once the Minnesota Twins beat them out for the AL Central title on the last day of the regular season. They had the division lead in 2007 as late as August before the Indians overtook them and pulled away, making an MVP-caliber season from Ordonez a secondary effort. And nobody will soon forget the one-game tiebreaker Detroit lost two years ago after holding a three-game lead with four games to play.

When the Tigers lost the tiebreaker that year, Miguel Cabrera sat in the clubhouse, his back hunched over, and cried openly. He felt like he had cost the team the division, a feeling more rooted in emotion than fact.

As the Tigers celebrated on Friday night, spraying champagne around the front half of the visiting clubhouse at Oakland Coliseum, Cabrera sat away from the crowd on the opposite side, watching it all as he puffed on a cigar and drank from a bottle of water. He had a look of pure contentment.

"I have four years right now in Detroit," he said. "Finally, we win the division. We're here for this, man, to win. You have to give a lot of thanks to our owner, to our general manager. They put a lot of great guys here together. We finally made it man."

The way the Tigers surged to this title made up for some of the lost time.

"I'll say one thing: You can't say we've backed into this one," manager Jim Leyland joked Thursday after his team swept the White Sox for the second time in as many weeks.

The champagne they were able to pop Friday night doesn't erase all those memories. But as anticlimactic as the Tigers' 12-game winning streak made the division race, the drought made it just as sweet as if they had barely pulled it out. Only the Expos/Nationals franchise and the Royals have gone longer without a division crown.

The Marlins have won two World Series in the last 15 years, including in 1997 under Leyland and general manager Dave Dombrowski, but they came won both of them out of the Wild Card spot; Florida hasn't won the NL East since it began play in 1993.

Considering the Tigers went 13 years between winning seasons before their breakout year in 2006, that division drought shouldn't be surprising. But considering the success they've had since, including a division lead in July or later in five of the last six years, it's surprising that they hadn't held the top spot at the end.

The way they pulled away at the end, though, requires reminding that they were in a close race this year until fairly recently.

A month ago, the Tigers held a three-game lead, which was halved two days later. They've gone 23-5 since then.

Detroit swept a three-game series from the Indians at Comerica Park that weekend before taking three out of four from Tampa Bay in an excruciatingly close series of pitching duels. The Tigers haven't looked back since. Once they swept the White Sox and Indians in consecutive series around Labor Day weekend, the rout was on.

"I think when we swept the White Sox and Cleveland, we had all the pieces together," Ordonez said.

Said Cabrera: "I always keep saying if you want to win the division, you have to play teams hard in your division."

As Leyland sat in his office, he was thinking further back than that, all the way to the end of April. Detroit came out of Cleveland in early May having been swept in three games that turned late. A day later, the Tigers were eight games behind the Indians in the division race, and facing questions whether they could make up that kind of deficit.

Leyland, meanwhile, was facing questions about his managerial future.

"We were seven games behind at one point," Leyland said, "and a lot of people weren't really talking about us at all. To me, it's amazing that we were seven games behind, and now we're 13 1/2 games up. I mean, that's pretty impressive.

"But they deserve it. They worked hard. They stuck together. They're special moments that you can't put a price tag on, and you just enjoy them."

Tigers' work continues despite crown

AL Central champs will not coast during season's closing days

September 17, 2011

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Somewhere in the midst of the Tigers' longest winning streak since 1934, manager Jim Leyland's catch phrase took hold. Now that they've clinched their first division title in 24 years, they're still hearing it.

"Pedal to the metal," reliever Daniel Schlereth recalled Friday night in the midst of their celebration. "Skip said that after every game."

Brandon Inge was listening, too. To him, it was a key to clinching so soon.

"Skip's been saying, 'Keep your foot on the pedal, on the gas pedal and keep going at the end,' " Inge said.

"That's honestly what everyone's done."

That's what the Tigers plan to continue doing, because to them, their playoff chase isn't done yet.

"Because you move on, it'll be our most important stretch of the season, to maintain the edge, to figure things out," Leyland said Friday.

Realistically, Detroit had long since run away with the American League Central, having put the White Sox and Indians behind by double digits in the standings, with a 12-game winning streak. But in the midst of that stretch, the Tigers propelled themselves not only into the postseason, but in a position to grab home-field advantage for the Division Series.

Just a couple of weeks ago, that seemed hard to fathom. Not only are the Rangers the reigning AL champions, they're one of the more balanced teams in baseball. They average more runs per game than the Tigers and possess a lower ERA from their pitching staff. Texas has also won three out of every five games since the All-Star break. However, the Rangers plodded along to a degree in early September, and the Tigers swept passed them.

Since then, that race has quietly become a sprint for that second seed. While the Tigers' winning streak ended in Oakland on Thursday night, the Rangers entered the weekend with four straight wins thanks to a three-game sweep of the Indians. That sweep helped put the Tigers in a position to clinch sooner, but Detroit might have actually been better off had the Tribe won a game or two.

The Tigers' ticket to the postseason was very secure; their second seed is not. Detroit's win Friday night, combined with Texas' loss, stretched the gap to two games with 11 games to play. And with the division wrapped up, that seed is clearly in their sights.

"It's not like we won the World Series tonight. We won the Central Division," Leyland said. "But we're going into play into the postseason. ... First of all, we're going to continue to play because we'd like to get home-field advantage. And then we have some other things that we need to sit down and really make some important decisions.

"But we're going to continue to play, and we're going to continue to play hard."

Texas visits Seattle this weekend and Oakland next week before hosting the Mariners and Angels to close out the season. It's a fairly similar schedule to what the Tigers face in terms of caliber of opponent until the very end. While the Tigers aren't scheduled to play against a team with a winning record until the postseason, the Rangers get an Angels team still with a chance to make a race out of the AL West.

Whoever seizes the second seed will open the postseason at home Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, against the AL Wild Card assuming it's the second-place team in the AL East. The Red Sox currently have a four-game lead on that spot, having finally cooled off the Rays Friday night behind Josh Beckett. The Tigers lost five of six games to Boston this season, but three of the losses were one-run decisions. Additionally, all of the games were in May, before Detroit climbed over .500 for good.

If the Tigers finish behind Texas, and the Yankees hold onto the AL's top seed, Detroit would face a familiar first-round foe. They had to beat the Yankees in the Division Series in 2006 on their way to the World Series. They won the regular-season series this year, mainly from three straight wins at Comerica Park to finish off a four-game series in early May.

Whether it's the Red Sox or Yankees, they'll be facing a different Tigers squad than they met early in the season. Doug Fister's arrival from Seattle has given the rotation another front-line starter and given opposing

hitters ample frustration. Delmon Young's trade from Minnesota provided a power-hitting weapon in front of MVP candidate Miguel Cabrera.

If they continue to play like they have recently, they're a tough matchup for either the Yankees or Red Sox. Yet, that's the other challenge -- trying to stretch this caliber of play into the postseason.

The Tigers acknowledged that even during their 12-game winning streak. Now, they're staring at the gap, 11 games between them and the postseason berth they've already earned.

It isn't simply going to be a victory lap.

"We have a long way to go right now," Miguel Cabrera said. "We have to just keep playing hard. We have to keep winning and try to be ready for the playoffs." Leyland will keep his rotation in order next week after Monday's off-day in Kansas City, but it's the next turn that could be interesting. Verlander, who faces the A's on Sunday, would be on turn to make his regular season finale Saturday against the Orioles. He would then be able to start a Division Series opener Sept. 30 on five days rest.

After that, it gets interesting. Max Scherzer, who makes his next start Wednesday at Kansas City, would be on turn to start Game 2 of a Division Series on his regular rest if the Tigers rotation order doesn't change. Fister, on the other hand, would need to be shuffled or skipped to start Game 2, though he could start Game 3.

Those questions should become clearer next week, after the Tigers have organizational meetings in Kansas City. For now, they're going to enjoy this.

Porcello aims to impress with playoffs looming

Right-hander trying to lay claim to No. 4 starter job in October

September 17, 2011

By Cash Kruth / MLB.com

The Tigers have clinched the American League Central title. Now they can begin their postseason planning. Fresh off a 3-1 win Friday against the A's that clinched them their first division title since 1987, the Tigers can begin thinking and talking about the roles each guy will play in their quest for the World Series. Perhaps no area has produced more strategic questions than the starting rotation, and how it will fall into place following AL Cy Young Award favorite Justin Verlander.

The first pitcher to make his case for postseason consideration is Rick Porcello, who has won two straight games and tossed three quality starts in his last four outings. The 22-year-old right-hander -- who will take the hill on Saturday in the third game of four at the Coliseum -- could be pitching for the right to be the No. 4 starter in the playoffs. However, he said he isn't focusing on that possibility.

"I'm just going out there trying to pitch now. That's not my decision," Porcello said. "I just want to help this team get into the playoffs, then whatever happens from there happens."

Porcello defeated the A's back on April 15, tossing six innings of one-run ball. He knows that, despite the A's third-place standing, they are nonetheless a solid team.

"It's a scrappy club that has real solid pitching. That's what they are," Porcello said. "They've got a real good rotation, especially when everybody's healthy. Obviously offensively, they've got some scrappy guys and they've got a couple guys that have some pop that can hurt you. That's definitely not a team you can overlook or take lightly."

Good pitching will be on display Saturday as Oakland's Gio Gonzalez take the mound for the A's. The left-hander is fresh off a win against the Angels, in which he held permitted two runs in 6 2/3 innings. Although Gonzalez is 0-3 with a 6.87 ERA in four career starts against Detroit, he tossed six shutout innings against the Tigers in April.

Tigers: Cabrera nearing record book

With 102 runs scored, 97 RBIs and 103 walks this season, first baseman Miguel Cabrera is looking to become only the fifth player in Tigers history to reach the century mark in all three categories in a single season. The others are Hank Greenberg (1937-38), Charlie Gehringer (1938), Rocky Colavito (1961) and Norm Cash (1961).

- Victor Martinez is hitting .339 with five doubles, three home runs and 17 RBIs in 15 September games.

Athletics: End on a good note

The A's, who are 8-7 in September, are looking to break a streak of seven consecutive months without a winning record. Oakland's last winning month came in July 2010, when it went 14-10.

- With 14 home runs, Kurt Suzuki is one shy of tying his career high.

- Hideki Matsui is hitting .317 since the All-Star break.

Worth noting

- Current A's batters are hitting a combined .363 against Porcello in his career.

- Friday was A's outfielder David DeJesus' 1,000th career game.

With boppers around him, Miggy's job easier

September 17, 2011

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Two years ago, when the Tigers were trying to hold onto their lead in the American League Central, Miguel Cabrera looked like somebody with the weight of the world -- or least Detroit -- on his shoulders. He accounted for so much of the Tigers' offense (26 percent), that every Cabrera at-bat carried the Tigers' fortunes on it.

On Friday, with Detroit on the verge of clinching its first division title since 1987, Cabrera was bouncing around the visiting clubhouse at Oakland Coliseum with the energy of a kid attending his first ballgame. And his manager was praising his All-Star cleanup hitter and MVP candidate for the pep in his step, unprompted. "Personally," Leyland said, "I think Cabrera's moving better than he has all year ... particularly defensively. I mean, he's bouncing around like I've seen him in the past."

When asked why that might be, Leyland said, it was the situation.

"I think he's on a mission," Leyland said. "I just think he's really pumped up. He's really a good player, and I think he's one of those guys that takes pride. There's an old saying I've heard, and I believe: Big time players come up big in big time situations."

He has had big time situations. But now, it's safe to say he can see the ultimate stage up ahead.

Cabrera said later that the energy is about the situation, and he demonstrated the difference. First, he bounced on the balls of his feet.

"When you're winning," he said.

Then he hunched the back of his mighty 6-foot-4 frame and walked around like he was carrying a piano through the visiting clubhouse at the Coliseum.

"When you're losing," he said.

The 12-game winning streak is over, but the situation hasn't changed. Four years after the Tigers traded a bevy of then-prospects to Florida for Cabrera, nearly four years after they signed him to an eight-year contract, they have the team around him to get into the playoffs. And for all the praise given to Victor Martinez for his impact on the offense, Cabrera might actually be getting too little attention for his season.

Cabrera's 1.001 OPS entering Friday is the second highest of his career, below only last season. His .334 average was also second best, trailing his .339 clip in 2006 with Florida. His 100 walks are a career high.

The difference this year is that the Tigers offense has more balance.

But Leyland believes that's a difference in Cabrera's bounce.

"I think he's well aware that he's got Victor Martinez behind him, and at different points Magglio Ordonez and Delmon Young in front of him," Leyland said. "I think there's been times this year, to be honest with you, where he hasn't had to expand the strike zone as much, because he knows Victor's behind him."

Leyland mum on rotation for stretch run

OAKLAND -- Long before the Tigers took the field for batting practice Friday at Oakland Coliseum, top pitching prospect Jacob Turner took the bullpen mound in foul territory in right field. He threw a side session, just as he has every so often since his last start Sept. 1 for the Tigers.

With the Tigers on the verge of clinching the American League Central title, it shouldn't be long before Turner's role down the stretch becomes clear.

Manager Jim Leyland said Friday that his rotation would not stay in its current order through the end of the regular season. He would not say, however, what would change. Considering any changes would most likely involve getting his pitching in order for the postseason rotation, he isn't going to say anything on that quite yet. Leyland will keep his rotation in order next week after Monday's off-day in Kansas City, but it's the next turn that could be interesting. Justin Verlander, who faces the A's on Sunday, would be in line to make his regular season finale Saturday against the Orioles. He would then be able to start a Division Series opener Sept. 30 on five days' rest.

After that, it gets interesting. Max Scherzer, who makes his next start Wednesday at Kansas City, would be lined up to start Game 2 of a Division Series on his regular rest if the Tigers rotation order doesn't change. Doug Fister, on the other hand, would need to be shuffled or skipped to start Game 2, though he could start Game 3. Those questions should become clearer next week.

Benoit back to dominant self since rocky start

OAKLAND -- While Jose Valverde has been perfect in save chances this year, Joaquin Benoit has seemingly had two different seasons in his first year as a Tiger.

The more Benoit pitches in September, the more impressive his second half looks.

Benoit entered Friday's game against the A's with a 3-0 record and 1.47 ERA in 46 appearances dating back to May 20, when he was briefly pulled out of setup duty to work on his offspeed pitch and shore up his mechanics in lower-stress situations.

Those numbers include a .179 batting average against, 26 hits over 43 innings, and 45 strikeouts.

That output bears a far greater resemblance to the Benoit of 2010 in Tampa Bay. But as manager Jim Leyland pointed out, that would've been a tough standard to meet under any circumstances.

Benoit posted a 1.34 ERA with 75 strikeouts in 60 1/3 innings for the Rays last year.

Tigers earn first division title since 1987

September 17, 2011

By Dana Wakiji / FOXSportsDetroit.com

The last time the Detroit Tigers won their division, Don Kelly was seven years old and Doug Fister was just three.

Both will have far greater memories of the 2011 Central Division title as they were instrumental in clinching it in a 3-1 victory over the Oakland A's on Friday night.

Manager Jim Leyland was emotional when he talked about what winning the division might mean to the Detroit fans.

"I think it's tough times for people in Detroit, we know that," Leyland told FOX Sports Detroit during the postgame show. "Believe me, it's not something that we don't think about, because we do.

"I come from a big family. My dad was a factory worker, I know about that. During times like this, a sports team can uplift your spirits, and I hope that we've lifted up the spirits of the fans in Detroit, because they deserve it."

The last time the Tigers (88-63) won their division was when they won the American League East in 1987.

It was somehow appropriate and fitting that the Tigers needed to take matters into their own hands.

The Cleveland Indians held off the Minnesota Twins, 7-6, earlier in the evening, meaning the Tigers had to earn their celebration themselves.

For Fister, that was no problem. He came into the game with five straight starts of seven innings or more and one earned run or less. That trend continued Friday.

In eight innings, Fister allowed one run on three hits while striking out five.

"This is very special for me," Fister said. "I feel very honored to be a part of this at all. These guys are a great group of guys. I love them to death already. I wouldn't trade this for the world right now."

As for Kelly, he provided all the offense Fister would need. His RBI single drove in Ramon Santiago in the third inning, tying the game at 1-1.

After Wilson Betemit's triple scored Jhonny Peralta in the sixth inning, Kelly gave the Tigers a little breathing room with a solo home run in the seventh to make it 3-1.

"Everybody's stepped up," Kelly said. "What Santiago's been doing lately, (Ryan) Raburn, when I get in there, try to do something.

"We've got guys stepping up consistently -- Miggy (Cabrera), Justin (Verlander), Papa Grande (Jose Valverde), Victor (Martinez), (Alex) Avila. You try to step up when you get an opportunity."

Max Scherzer was the picture of celebration in the clubhouse, a champagne bottle in one hand and a cigar in the other.

"This is as good it gets," Scherzer said. "This is one of the best baseball memories of my life.

"To be able to do what we've done this season, what we've been able to accomplish and do the things we've been able to do, it's just an awesome, awesome feeling. To be able to drink champagne and smoke cigars, there's nothing better."

MVP candidate Cabrera, 1 for 1 with three walks Friday, has already won a World Series with the Florida Marlins in 2003. His grin went from ear to ear when he spoke on the postgame show.

"It feels great," Cabrera said. "We're here for that, we're here for the fans, for the owner, for the general manager, for our manager, that push us every day to win games.

"It's awesome, it feels awesome. We do something for Detroit, for our owner, and I'm happy. We got a long way to go right now. We gotta keep winning and try to be ready for the playoffs."

Although the division has been won, the Tigers (88-63) still have something to play for in their final 11 games - - playoff positioning.

They have an outside shot at catching the New York Yankees (90-59) for the top seed in the AL.

More likely, they'll fight it out with the Texas Rangers during the season's final days for the league's second-best record.

If they finish with the same or better record than the Rangers (86-65), the Tigers will earn the No. 2 seed and have home-field advantage against the wild card team, currently the Boston Red Sox, in the ALDS.

If the Tigers were to finish third in the AL, they'd likely open the playoffs in New York. For the five players who were on the 2006 team that fell short in the World Series -- Verlander, Santiago, Magglio Ordonez, Brandon Inge, Carlos Guillen -- there's some unfinished business. "We didn't finish the mission we started in 2006," Ordonez said. "We've got to finish that this year. Our goal is to win the World Series."

Improved Tigers clinch AL Central

September 17, 2011

By Christina Kahrl / ESPN.com

With their 3-1 win over the A's in Oakland on Friday night, the Tigers clinched their first division title since 1987, and their first AL Central title ever. That ended a 24-year run without a division crown, which per ESPN Stats & Info represents the fourth-longest active crown-less run in the major leagues.* Before anyone brings up their pennant in 2006, remember, that came when the Tigers won the wild card -- proof positive that the AL East doesn't hold the mortgage on Bud Selig's extra playoff team -- so that's not the same thing.

With the division won, time for the Tigers to pile up. As events go, the Tigers winning is something that should warm the hearts of Kitties fans old and new. It can reassure those who remember 2009's near-miss and exit via a one-game 163 tiebreaker with the Twins, or those whose memories stretch further back, say to the desperate run of 1991, when Sparky Anderson almost managed to drag a pitching-light team of slow sluggers and aging greats to a surprise playoff berth. It was the Hall of Fame skipper's last shot at making it to October action, reaching a tie with Toronto with five weeks to go, but a 15-21 stretch run will put a dent in anybody's ambitions, but especially those of an old and desperate contender.

Thinking on the late great skipper of Tigers and Reds fame is easy when you consider the Tigers' current skipper -- Jim Leyland. With another entry into October's action, Leyland gets another chance to join Sparky in a fairly small group. Anderson was the first manager to win World Series titles in each league, and it's a feat only Tony La Russa has since matched. Leyland had his first shot at achieving the feat in 2006 -- only to see La Russa get there first when his Cards beat the Tigers. Strangely enough, Anderson also achieved the honor in 1984 by beating a team with a manager making his own bid for this exclusive club, the late Dick Williams of the Padres.

Can Leyland's team put Leyland over the top this time around? It's easy to identify reasons why, because this isn't the same team people were talking about a few months ago. Earlier this season, the Tigers were a team that made you wonder whether its obvious strengths could overcome its equally glaring weaknesses. Whether in the rotation or the lineup or the bullpen, the team seemed as stratified a stars-and-scrubs setup as you could imagine. The rotation was Justin Verlander and four days of praying for rain, fog or midges. The bullpen was Jose Valverde and a relatively anonymous collection of maybes -- or maybe nots. The lineup was split sharply between All-Star hammers like Miguel Cabrera and Alex Avila and next to no offensive production from four different slots.

But that was this team in July, and GM Dave Dombrowski didn't sit still and let it ride, making a series of deals for second-tier talents to shore up a team that already had the A-list on board. Doug Fister gets and deserves the most attention, and will continue to after starting the Tigers' clincher on Friday, but adding Wilson Betemit to platoon at third and Delmon Young to start in left. Not everything has worked -- early-season stathead fave David Pauley has struggled since being added to the pen -- but no GM is going to see everything he touches turn to gold.

The outcome has been dramatic. The Tigers kicked into a higher gear as they've raced out to a 39-20 record since the All-Star break. The Tigers are scoring 5.2 runs per game in the second half, a clip that stands up to the league-leading offenses in Boston, New York and Texas. The lineup's questions have been reduced to sorting out who to use at second base and in right field, but sharing the keystone between Ramon Santiago and Ryan Raburn has the pair both delivering OPS marks above .900 since the break.

The pitching's also now very different. Verlander's bid for multiple awards is still going strong, but with Fister tossing seven quality starts in his nine Tiger turns and Max Scherzer sporting a 4-to-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio in the second half, picking a postseason rotation has become a nice problem to have. And the bullpen has been exceptional since the break, posting a 2.89 ERA and a collective .630 OPS after producing first-half marks of 4.68 and .755. Adding Phil Coke back to the bullpen to join Dan Schlereth has given Leyland a pair of power lefties, which has let the manager pick his spots with Joaquin Benoit, and suddenly Valverde's a closer with plenty of effective help.

So the Tigers can settle in and celebrate their win, but they can also look forward to October as a much stronger team than the one we might have been talking about a very few months ago. It's a credit to Dombrowski for

improving it on the fly, Leyland for adapting, and to the players themselves for making this club something more than a stars-and-scrubs squad. Whether that's a formula that will give Leyland a second shot at dugout history remains to be seen, but it'll be something well worth watching.

Tigers tame AL Central, clinch title

September, 17, 2011

By ESPN.com Staff / ESPN.com

On Friday, the Detroit Tigers rode the right arm of midseason acquisition Doug Fister to defeat the Oakland Athletics, 3-1, and capture their first AL Central crown in team history and first division title since winning the AL East in 1987.

Fister, who was acquired July 30, has been on fire having rattled off a career-high five straight wins since August 20 (his previous high was three). Over that stretch he has rivaled the production of teammate and Cy Young contender Justin Verlander.

How has Fister been so successful?

While he mixed up his offspeed pitches, it was the fastball that did the damage against the Athletics. Fister changed eye level with the pitch, throwing no more than half of his heaters to a particular vertical zone. That movement resulted in the Athletics going 2 for 16 with all five strikeouts in at-bats ending with a fastball. Fister's fortune of throwing 91 pitches in eight innings of work (11.4 pitches/inning) was helped by his ability to avoid three-ball counts. Only three Athletics hitters faced a three-ball counts and all grounded out. And despite throwing his second lowest first pitch strike percentage of the season at 48.1 percent, Fister went to a 2-0 count to just two hitters, throwing nine pitches in the game with a two-ball count.

Justin Verlander vs Doug Fister

Since August 20

Verlander Fister

Starts 5 6

W-L 5-0 5-0

ERA 2.70 0.81

K-BB 34-11 41-4

K per 9 IP 9.2 8.3

>>Tigers won all 6 starts

Thanks to Fister the Tigers become the first AL team to clinch a playoff spot this season as they won for the 13th time in the last 14 games. They will be making their 13th playoff appearance and first since 2006 when they advanced to the World Series.

The Elias Sports Bureau says now that the Tigers clinched their first division title since 1987, only one American League team now has a current drought of at least that length since it last won a division title: the Kansas City Royals, who most recently finished in first place in 1985, when they went on to win the World Series.

MLB playoff primer: It's clinching time for Phillies, Tigers

September 17, 2011

By USAToday.com Staff / USAToday.com

How things stand in baseball's races for playoff spots and positioning:

American League

Right now: Division Series matchups would pit the Rangers against the Yankees and the wild-card Red Sox against the Tigers. The Yankees have a four-game lead on the Tigers for the AL's best record and home field advantage throughout the playoffs; the Tigers lead the Rangers by a game for the No. 2 seed.

Looking ahead: The Tigers can clinch the AL Central title tonight with a win at Oakland or a loss by the Indians. In the West, the Rangers and Angels -- separated by 3 1/2 games -- will be playing cellar-dwellers on opposite coasts, as Texas is at Seattle and Los Angeles at Baltimore. And the wild card race will, of course, be focused tightly on Fenway Park.

National League

Right now: Division Series matchups would pit the Phillies against the Brewers and the Diamondbacks hosting the wild-card Braves. The Phillies have an 11-game lead on the Brewers and D'backs for home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. Arizona and Milwaukee (both 87-63) are tied for the No. 2 seed, but Arizona has the edge based on a 4-3 record against the Brewers this season.

Looking ahead: The Phillies can clinch the NL East with a win tonight against the Cardinals and a Braves loss to the Mets; their magic number is two. The D'backs' magic number in the West is six; they are at San Diego this weekend while the Giants are at the Colorado Rockies. The Brewers -- at Cincinnati this weekend -- have a magic number of eight to clinch the Central. And the Braves have a magic number of nine (over the Cardinals) to clinch the wild card.

Tigers win Central, first division title since '87

September 17, 2011

By The Associated Press Staff / The Associated Press

OAKLAND (AP) – Away from the madness of a cigar party for a moment, Jim Leyland nearly cried. Doug Fister improved to 6-1 since joining the Tigers, helping Detroit to its first AL Central title on Friday night.

For everybody who figured there was no way he would manage the Tigers beyond this season, for all those who couldn't envision a comeback after Detroit fell behind by eight games in early May, Leyland sat in his office puffing on his own celebratory stogie, a black "2011 MLB Playoffs" hat on his head.

Detroit is AL Central champion.

Newcomer Doug Fister pitched the Tigers to the division title on Friday night, beating the Oakland Athletics 3-1 to secure a first-place finish for Detroit for the first time in nearly a quarter-century.

Fister (9-13) retired 17 straight during one stretch to win his third straight start and fifth consecutive decision, and Wilson Betemit hit a go-ahead triple off Trevor Cahill (11-14) in the sixth. Don Kelly had a solo homer in the seventh after an earlier RBI single.

"We were seven games behind the Cleveland Indians at one point and people weren't really talking about us at all," Leyland said. "They deserved it. They worked hard. They stuck together. There are special moments you can't put a price tag on and you just enjoy them. I'm an emotional guy, we all know that."

Detroit is headed to the playoffs for the first time since winning the AL wild card in 2006 and losing to St. Louis in the World Series. The Tigers (88-63) had not finished on top since winning the AL East in 1987, three years after their last World Series championship.

"It's been pretty much magical this whole second half," reliever Phil Coke said. "We've gone out every day and handled our business. We're all hungry. We're all ready for this."

When Josh Willingham grounded out to third to end it, the victorious Tigers sprinted out of their dugout. Closer Jose Valverde pumped both arms, then turned as catcher Alex Avila jumped into his embrace.

Leyland stood some 10 feet from the pitcher's mound and waited for a hug from each of his players.

New faces and old, Detroit made all the right moves. This month alone there have been two sweeps of the White Sox, one of Minnesota and another at Cleveland.

"I have a very special satisfaction. A lot of people probably didn't think I'd be managing the Tigers next year," Leyland said. "We were fortunate, because we were the team this year that met the challenge. We were almost spotless."

In the last year, general manager Dave Dombrowski acquired three players from within the division to put his team in position for a sensational September.

Delmon Young came to Detroit in a three-player deal with the Twins on Aug. 15, veteran infielder Betemit from Kansas City for a pair of prospects in July and Jhonny Peralta at the trade deadline last year from Cleveland.

Then there's the reliable Fister, who improved to 6-1 since he joined the Tigers in a six-player trade with Seattle on July 30. He is 5-0 over his last six starts and has given Leyland another front-line starter behind AL Cy Young Award contender Justin Verlander.

Fister has allowed only four earned runs in his last 44 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings for an 0.81 ERA over that stretch. He was unfazed after giving up Willingham's career-best 27th homer leading off the second. David DeJesus followed with a single, and Fister retired the next 17 hitters in order before another single by DeJesus, who played in his 1,000th game.

Fister allowed three hits, struck out five and didn't walk a batter for the fifth time in nine starts for Detroit. Valverde finished for his 44th save in as many chances this season and his franchise-record 45th in a row overall.

As the party turned the visiting clubhouse floor into a slip-and-slide of water and ice, Fister stood to the side and watched. What a difference being with Detroit.

The Tigers won for the 23rd time in 28 games dating to Aug. 19 and 25th time in the club's last 36 road games. "This is very special to me," he said. "This is some fun stuff."

"I just want to party!" yelled pitcher Al Alburquerque as he walked into the plumes of smoke coming from all corners.

Same for Leyland.

The 66-year-old could light up a fresh cigar to celebrate a division title that looked like a longshot mere months ago. The sixth-year skipper sported fresh socks and undershorts a day after Detroit's winning streak was stopped at 12 games in a 6-1 loss in Thursday night's series opener.

He'll surely be changing clothes again after a bubbly celebration in the visiting clubhouse at the Coliseum.

These Tigers have been on such a roll there has been no need for scoreboard watching — even if Leyland has been doing so since April. It's been quite a late-season surge, considering Detroit trailed the Indians by eight games and was four games under .500 on May 3.

On Friday, the offense eventually did enough to back Fister.

"We're just a very talented and resilient team," Avila said. "At that (early) point in the season, we knew we just had to keep playing our game and we'd get there."

Detroit missed chances in the fourth and fifth innings after the game was delayed for 16 minutes before the top of the fourth because of an outage to the stadium lights in the Coliseum.

This is the second straight year a visiting team has clinched the division in Oakland. Reigning AL champion Texas did it last season and visits next week.

"It's not something you want to do," manager Bob Melvin said. "We would have liked to have won that game in the ninth inning. If you can have them win it in a different fashion, whether it's going in the clubhouse after we beat them and somebody else losing, that's how you'd like to do it."

Tigers clinch first AL Central crown and first division title since winning the East in 1987

September 17, 2011

By The Associated Press Staff / The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Pitcher Phil Coke yelled through the victorious clubhouse looking for Jim Leyland.

His turn had arrived to douse Detroit's manager with beer and champagne.

Detroit Tigers' Jose Valverde, right, lifts catcher Alex Avila as they celebrate on the mound after the Tigers clinched the AL Central Division title at the end of a baseball game against the Oakland Athletics, Friday, Sept. 16, 2011, in Oakland, Calif.

“Where's the skipper?” Coke shouted amid the cigar smoke and showers.

Leyland had already tucked himself away in the quiet confines of his office, reflecting for a few minutes on all the milestones in the Tigers' run to the AL Central title while also preparing for the next step: lining everything up just right for what he hopes is a deep October run.

Newcomer Doug Fister pitched the Tigers to the division title on Friday night, beating the Oakland Athletics 3-1 to secure Detroit's first top finish in nearly a quarter-century.

“A bunch of 'em nailed me, and they should,” Leyland said of being soaked. “I want them to spray me. What the hell?”

Fister (9-13) retired 17 straight during one stretch to win his third straight start and fifth consecutive decision, and Wilson Betemit hit a go-ahead triple off Trevor Cahill (11-14) in the sixth. Don Kelly had a solo homer in the seventh after an earlier RBI single.

“We were seven games behind the Cleveland Indians at one point and people weren't really talking about us at all,” said Leyland, puffing his own celebratory stogie and fighting tears. “They deserved it. They worked hard. They stuck together. There are special moments you can't put a price tag on and you just enjoy them. I'm an emotional guy, we all know that.”

Detroit is headed to the playoffs for the first time since winning the AL wild card in 2006 and losing to St. Louis in the World Series. The Tigers (88-63) had not finished on top since winning the AL East in 1987, three years after their last World Series championship.

“It's been pretty much magical this whole second half,” Coke said. “We've gone out every day and handled our business. We're all hungry. We're all ready for this.”

When Josh Willingham grounded out to third to end it, the victorious Tigers sprinted out of their dugout. Closer Jose Valverde pumped both arms, then turned as catcher Alex Avila jumped into his embrace.

Leyland stood some 10 feet from the pitcher's mound and waited for a hug from each of his players.

New faces and old, Detroit made all the right moves. This month alone there have been two sweeps of the White Sox, one of Minnesota and another at Cleveland.

“I have a very special satisfaction. A lot of people probably didn't think I'd be managing the Tigers next year,” Leyland said. “We were fortunate, because we were the team this year that met the challenge. We were almost spotless.”

In the last year, general manager Dave Dombrowski acquired three players from within the division to put his team in position for a sensational September.

Delmon Young came to Detroit in a three-player deal with the Twins on Aug. 15, veteran infielder Betemit from Kansas City for a pair of prospects in July and Jhonny Peralta at the trade deadline last year from Cleveland.

Then there's the reliable Fister, who improved to 6-1 since he joined the Tigers in a six-player trade with Seattle on July 30. He is 5-0 over his last six starts and has given Leyland another front-line starter behind AL Cy Young Award contender Justin Verlander.

Fister has allowed only four earned runs in his last 44 2-3 innings for an 0.81 ERA over that stretch. He was unfazed after giving up Willingham's career-best 27th homer leading off the second. David DeJesus followed with a single, and Fister retired the next 17 hitters in order before another single by DeJesus, who played in his 1,000th game.

Fister allowed three hits, struck out five and didn't walk a batter for the fifth time in nine starts for Detroit.

.Valverde finished for his 44th save in as many chances this season and his franchise-record 45th in a row overall.

As the party turned the visiting clubhouse floor into a slip-and-slide of water and ice, Fister stood to the side and watched. What a difference being with Detroit.

The Tigers won for the 23rd time in 28 games dating to Aug. 19 and 25th time in the club's last 36 road games. "This is very special to me," he said. "This is some fun stuff."

"I just want to party!" hollered pitcher Al Alburquerque as he walked into the plumes of smoke coming from all corners.

Same for Leyland.

The 66-year-old could light up a fresh cigar to celebrate a division title that looked like a longshot mere months ago. The sixth-year skipper sported fresh socks and undershorts a day after Detroit's winning streak was stopped at 12 games in a 6-1 loss in Thursday night's series opener.

He'll surely be changing clothes again after a bubbly celebration in the visiting clubhouse at the Coliseum.

These Tigers have been on such a roll there has been no need for scoreboard watching — even if Leyland has been doing so since April. It's been quite a late-season surge, considering Detroit trailed the Indians by eight games and was four games under .500 on May 3.

On Friday, the offense eventually did enough to back Fister.

"We're just a very talented and resilient team," Avila said. "At that (early) point in the season, we knew we just had to keep playing our game and we'd get there."

Detroit missed chances in the fourth and fifth innings after the game was delayed for 16 minutes before the top of the fourth because of an outage to the stadium lights in the Coliseum.

This is the second straight year a visiting team has clinched the division in Oakland. AL champion Texas did it last season and visits next week.

"It's not something you want to do," manager Bob Melvin said. "We would have liked to have won that game in the ninth inning. If you can have them win it in a different fashion, whether it's going in the clubhouse after we beat them and somebody else losing, that's how you'd like to do it."

A's offense sputters as Tigers clinch AL Central crown and first division title since 1987

September 17, 2011

By The Associated Press Staff / The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Trevor Cahill's latest start was just like so many others this year for the Athletics' pitcher. The result was, too.

To make it worse, Cahill had to sit through a 16-minute delay when several banks of lights at the Oakland Coliseum went out prior to the start of the fourth inning.

He returned to the mound long enough to suffer his 14th loss of the season and watch the Detroit Tigers celebrate their first division title in nearly a quarter-century.

It could have been worse, too.

"I kind of put myself in a tough situation in a couple innings," Cahill said following the A's 3-1 loss on Friday night. "I was able to get out of it and made pitches when I had to. That's one positive thing I can take out of it."

Cahill pitched out of jams in the second, fourth and fifth innings when the Tigers stranded seven of the nine runners they left on base.

He wasn't as fortunate in the third when Ramon Santiago tripled and scored. Cahill later gave up a go-ahead RBI triple to Wilson Betemit in the sixth and a solo home run to Don Kelly in the seventh.

Had it not been for Oakland's defense — which has been terrible for the most part this year but made two solid plays against Detroit — Cahill's numbers could have been worse.

"If we didn't play well defensively that game would have gotten out of hand in a hurry," manager Bob Melvin said. "At times (Cahill) can be effectively wild and make a pitch when he has to, and that was the case tonight."

The Tigers were just a little better.

Newcomer Doug Fister (9-13) retired 17 straight during one stretch to win his third straight start and fifth consecutive decision, and Wilson Betemit hit a go-ahead triple off Trevor Cahill (11-14) in the sixth. Don Kelly hit a solo home run in the seventh.

"This is special to me because a lot of people didn't think I'd be managing the Tigers next year," Detroit manager Jim Leyland said. "We were fortunate, because we were the team this year that met the challenge. We were almost spotless."

Detroit is headed to the playoffs for the first time since winning the AL wild card in 2006 and losing to St. Louis in the World Series. The Tigers (88-63) had not finished on top since winning the AL East in 1987, three years after their last World Series championship.

When Josh Willingham grounded out to third to end it, the victorious Tigers sprinted out of their dugout. Closer Jose Valverde pumped both arms, then turned as catcher Alex Avila jumped into his embrace.

Leyland stood some 10 feet from the pitcher's mound and waited for a hug from each of his players.

New faces and old, Detroit made all the right moves.

In the last year, team president and general manager Dave Dombrowski acquired three players from within the division to put his team in position for a sensational September.

Delmon Young came to Detroit in a three-player deal with the Twins on Aug. 15, veteran infielder Betemit from Kansas City for a pair of prospects in July and Jhonny Peralta at the trade deadline last year from Cleveland.

Then there's the reliable Fister, who improved to 6-1 since he joined the Tigers in a six-player trade with Seattle on July 30. He is 5-0 over his last six starts and has given Leyland another front-line starter behind AL Cy Young Award contender Justin Verlander.

Fister has allowed only four earned runs in his last 44 2-3 innings for an 0.81 ERA over that stretch. He was unfazed after giving up Willingham's career-best 27th homer leading off the second. After David DeJesus followed with a single, Fister retired the next 17 hitters in order before another single by DeJesus, who played in his 1,000th game.

Fister allowed three hits, struck out five and didn't walk a batter for the fifth time in his nine starts for Detroit. Valverde finished for his 44th save in as many chances this season and his franchise-record 45th in a row overall.

Detroit won for the 23rd time in 28 games dating to Aug. 19 and 25th time in the club's last 36 road games. At last, the 66-year-old Leyland could light up a fresh cigar to celebrate a division title that looked like a longshot mere months ago. The sixth-year skipper sported fresh socks and undershorts a day after Detroit's winning streak was stopped at 12 games in a 6-1 loss in Thursday night's series opener.

He'll surely be changing clothes again after a bubbly celebration in the visiting clubhouse at the Coliseum. These Tigers have been on such a roll lately there has been no need for scoreboard watching — even if Leyland has been doing so since April. It's been quite a late-season surge, too, considering Detroit trailed the Indians by eight games and was four games under .500 on May 3.

On Friday, the offense eventually did enough to back Fister.

Detroit missed chances in the fourth and fifth innings after the game was delayed for 16 minutes before the top of the fourth because of an outage to the stadium lights in the Coliseum.

With one out in the fifth and runners on second and third, third baseman Eric Sogard lunged to his right to stop Delmon Young's sharp grounder and Sogard's momentum allowed him to reach out and tag Ramon Santiago, who was off the base. Cahill later loaded the bases with an intentional walk to Miguel Cabrera before retiring Victor Martinez on a grounder.

Betemit was replaced at third by Brandon Inge in the bottom of the seventh after he came up limping after being thrown out at the plate by left fielder Hideki Matsui on a double play to end the sixth.

This is the second straight year a visiting team has clinched the division in Oakland. Reigning AL champion Texas did it last season and visits next week.

NOTES: Willingham hit 26 homers in 2006 with Florida. ... A's 2B Jemile Weeks returned to the lineup after missing two games with leg cramps. He batted in the No. 2 hole for the first time in his career. "I don't want him to feel he has to push it right away," Melvin said. ... LHP Gio Gonzalez starts Saturday looking to improve to 5-1 over a six-start stretch. ... A wedding took place in front of home plate less than an hour before first pitch. ... It was also "Star Wars" night. ... A man on a treadmill in left field failed to run a marathon before the game ended.

Local singer to make 50th Comerica appearance

September 17, 2011

By John Schneider / Lansing State Journal

When Lansing singer David Songer lifts his voice later this month, he'll be playing to a packed house in a venue with 40,000-plus seats.

That might even be more fans than Paul McCartney drew when the former Beatle played Comerica in July. The difference, of course, is that, aside from his mother and a few other loved ones, the folks in the seats won't be there specifically to see Songer on Sept. 26; they'll be there to see the amazing Detroit Tigers register one more exclamation point on the road to post-season triumph.

Still, Songer is more than happy for the chance to bask in the collateral glory. And, as everybody knows, you can't have a ballgame without a stirring rendition of the anthem that ends with those magic words: "Play ball!" No. 50

Prior to the Tigers- Cleveland Indians match-up, Songer will sing the "Star-Spangled Banner" before a Tigers game for the 50th time - a string that began Sept. 1, 1987 at Tiger Stadium.

Songer, a native of Grand Ledge, said he was "thrilled and humbled" by the prospect of his 50th performance. Trained as an opera singer, Songer majored in voice at Taylor University in Upland, Ind. In 1976 - the year he graduated - he won the Indiana Metropolitan Opera Competition.

Songer went on to earn a living as a psychologist and college professor. But he remained in good voice, regularly performing at the Grand Ledge Opera House, and the Ledges Playhouse.

Songer is strictly a purist in his approach to the national anthem. He has no tolerance for adornments.

"I think it was written in such a way," he said, "that it is to be done straight, powerfully and without embellishment ... embellishments only detract from the lyrics."

By the way, the Tigers don't pay their national anthem performers, however, Songer said he has received some "nice gifts," including tickets, a jersey with his name on it, and, the crowning jewel - a little jar of dirt from Tiger Stadium.

No frills

Coincidentally, as I was writing this column, I got an email from Roger Lewis of East Lansing, who, like Songer, likes his national anthem straight up. Lewis wrote, in part:

"Much too often, the programmers for sporting events trot out a so-called 'performing artist' who treats our national anthem as a pop aria to show off their 'exceptional' technique and improvisational 'chops.'

"The result: absolutely dreadful ... I grant that, in purely musical terms, our national anthem is not great music. Its melody and harmony are plain, pure vanilla; it's not as tuneful as a 'America, the Beautiful,' nor as rousing as 'Oh, Canada.'

"Still, it is our national anthem and, as such, it deserves far more respect than it receives at many public events. I am not usually a 'There oughta be a law' advocate, but in this case, perhaps."

Tigers clinch division with win over A's

September 17, 2011

By Reuters Staff / Reuters

OAKLAND (Reuters) - The Detroit Tigers clinched the American League Central on Friday with a 3-1 win over the Oakland Athletics, capturing their first division title since 1987.

The Tigers (88-63) became the first team to win their division this season and joined the Philadelphia Phillies in the postseason. The Phillies, who have already claimed at least a wild card spot, failed to seal the National League East title after losing 4-2 to St. Louis.

"It's awesome, it feels awesome," said Tigers first baseman Miguel Cabrera. "We've done something for Detroit, for our owner, and I'm happy. We got a long way to go right now. We have to keep winning and try to be ready for the playoffs."

In Boston, Mike Aviles hit a solo home run in the fourth inning to lift the Red Sox to a 4-3 win over the Tampa Bay Rays. Boston extended their lead over the Rays in the AL wild card race to four games, while the LA Angels dropped five behind with an 8-3 loss to Baltimore.

Tigers starting pitcher Doug Fister pitched eight spectacular innings, allowing three hits while striking out five. After giving up back-to-back hits, including a solo home run to Josh Willingham in the first inning, Fister retired 17 consecutive batters.

"It's an unbelievable feeling," said Fister. "A great group of guys to be around, a great group of guys to fight tooth and nail with. This is what we're living for, this is what we're playing for. Every drop of sweat, every drop of blood, tear, whatever, is what it's all about right now."

Jose Valverde pitched the ninth inning to secure the win with his Major League-leading 45th save.

The Tigers will make their first post-season appearance since 2006 when they qualified as the wild card team and lost the World Series.

Philadelphia's 'magic number' to clinch the NL East is one following the Atlanta Braves' 12-2 loss to the New York Mets.

St. Louis moved to within 3 games of the Braves in the NL wild card race, and the San Francisco Giants trail Atlanta by five after their 9-1 win over Colorado.

Hamilton store drops gas price for 30 minutes after Tigers win

September 17, 2011

By Jim Hayden / Holland Sentinel

Hamilton — The \$2.99 question: How'd the Tigers do Friday night?

The Tigers won, beating the Oakland Athletics to clinch their first division title in 24 years.

It also means you can get a steal on gas at the Hamilton Marathon, 3416 Lincoln Road (M-40).

The day after every Tigers win, station owner Dave Kempkers drops the price of regular unleaded to \$2.99 for 30 minutes. Not bad, with prices now above \$3.71 a gallon. The catch — he won't say when the half-hour of fuel heaven will happen.

"It's created quite a bit of interest," Kempkers said, noting passers-by have called in the low price to radio stations, bringing even more people to the station in the small Allegan County community south of Holland.

"It's a fun thing to do."

Kempkers, 57, has been a lifelong Tigers fan, even incorporating the Old English D into the design of his coffee shop, Sweet D's Cafe, at Hamilton Food Center on M-40.

The whole price swing started in May after a suggestion by an employee, and it just kept going.

If the Tigers didn't bring home a victory in last night's game that started at 10:05 p.m. — past The Sentinel's deadline for today's edition — Kempkers will be prepared for the next game.

"We'll do some fun stuff in the playoffs and hopefully through the World Series," he said.

Verlander Could Reach Rarefied Air

September 17, 2011

By Neil Paine / The New York Times

The wins just keep piling up for Justin Verlander, the Detroit Tigers' ace. On Tuesday, his seven scoreless innings propelled Detroit to a 5-0 victory over the Chicago White Sox, the 23rd time this season that Verlander was the pitcher of record in a Tigers win. If Verlander can win his final two starts of the regular season, he will become the first 25-game winner in more than 20 years.

First, how good are his odds of reaching that milestone? Verlander has won 23 times in 32 starts (a rate of about 72 percent), so simple probability would seem to give him slightly better than a 50-50 shot at winning both of his remaining starts. However, that approach actually underrates his chances, as his final two starts are scheduled to be against Oakland and Baltimore, which had a combined winning percentage of .430 through Thursday's games.

Verlander has dominated sub-.500 opponents to the tune of 18 wins in 21 starts this season, a figure that would push his odds of a milestone 25th victory north of 70 percent. This means the opportunity to ring the magical 25-win bell will be right there for Verlander's taking as he puts the finishing touches on a great 2011 season. If he succeeds in that pursuit, Verlander will be the 178th pitcher in major league history to notch 25 victories in a season. That doesn't exactly sound like a very exclusive group, but remember that the game has changed drastically since Al Spalding, Candy Cummings, Dick McBride and Bobby Mathews became charter members of the 25-win club in 1872.

Before the turn of the 20th century, 25-game winners were quite common; 99 of the 177 pitchers who won 25 in a season did so before 1900. That trend peaked in 1884 — 21 pitchers reached the quarter-century mark that year — and has been declining ever since. By the time baseball's modern two-league structure was established in 1901, only a handful of pitchers were winning 25 games each season, and in the live-ball era no more than three pitchers have won 25 games in any season.

Already dwindling in numbers, the 25-game winner became a dying breed in the latter third of the 20th century, as the rise of the reliever, combined with pitcher-unfriendly conditions (a lower mound, smaller ballparks and hitters' use of performance-enhancing drugs), gave ace starters fewer chances to win than ever before.

As it currently stands, Bob Welch is the only 25-game winner in the past 31 seasons, having won 27 in 1990, and only two pitchers (John Smoltz and Randy Johnson) have even reached 24 wins in the intervening years. Given the era in which Verlander pitches, 25 wins would be an impressive statistical achievement.

As the sabermetric movement has gained more mainstream traction in recent years, perhaps no traditional statistic has taken a greater (deserved) beating than a pitchers' victories, which suffer from countless well-documented flaws. Even so, when you watch Verlander dismantle an opposing lineup, it's easy to understand the mystique of 25 victories. Simply put, every fifth day, Verlander gives Detroit a great chance to win.

Putting up a lopsided won-loss record doesn't necessarily make someone a great pitcher, and plenty of great pitchers have had unfairly poor records (look no further than the 2010 Cy Young Award winner Felix Hernandez, who went 13-12 on a terrible Seattle team). But in Verlander's case, the eye-popping win total is telling the truth about his performance. He has just been that good.

Why Justin Verlander Deserves To Be The American League's MVP

September 17, 2011

By Wayne McDonnell / Forbes

With only two weeks to go until the end of the regular season, the race for the American League's Most Valuable Player Award has become a hotly debated topic throughout baseball. The customary conversations regarding the ambiguous definition of the award have been greatly intensified this year due to the dominance of Justin Verlander. Besides the brilliance of throwing his second career no-hitter in May, Verlander is the primary reason why the Detroit Tigers are on the verge of winning their first American League Central title since realignment in 1998.

In what certainly appears to be a sizable discount for an elite starting pitcher, the Tigers' decision to sign Verlander to a five-year, \$80 million contract in February 2010 has proved to be a fortuitous and prudent agreement. Dave Dombrowski, the C.E.O./President/General Manager of the Tigers, provided both Verlander and the ball club with security and stability. Besides avoiding the acrimonious entanglements of arbitration, the structure of the contract's compensation surprisingly coincides with Verlander's meteoric ascent to the pantheon of pitching excellence. After making \$6.75 million in 2010 and \$12.75 million this season, Verlander will see a 57% salary increase for the 2012 season as he will finally eclipse the \$20 million plateau for starting pitchers. However, his salary will remain flat until the contract expires at the conclusion of the 2014 season.

MLB Realignment The Baseball Writers Association of America has held the tremendous honor and responsibility of selecting the Most Valuable Player Award in both leagues for the past eight decades. Even though minor adjustments have been made throughout the years regarding a ball player's eligibility, the number of voters and point allocations, the essence of the award's original intent is still firmly intact. Currently, two writers from each of the 14 American League cities will name up to 10 ball players and allocate a weighted point system to each spot on the ballot where the names of the candidates appear. This year, ball players such as Curtis Granderson, Adrian Gonzalez, Jose Bautista, Jacoby Ellsbury and Robinson Cano will undoubtedly occupy prominent spots on many of the baseball writers' ballots as the season quickly comes to a close. While the premise and voting procedures appear to be fair and equitable on the surface, the results haven't always been met with support and acceptance. Programs such as "Prime 9" on the MLB Network have chronicled some of the biggest upsets and surprises in the history of the Most Valuable Player Award. In 1934, Lou Gehrig became the fourth ball player in American League history to win the Triple Crown (49 HR, 165 RBI, and .363 BA). Besides striking out once every 18.68 at bats and hitting a home run every 11.82 at bats, Gehrig had finished fifth in the voting to a man who had hit only two home runs during the season and whose batting average was 43 points lower than the Yankee first baseman. Mickey Cochrane, the manager and catcher for the Detroit Tigers, had led his ball club to a 101 – 53 record and the American League pennant.

Another Yankee icon that surprisingly finished fifth in the American League's Most Valuable Player voting was Mickey Mantle in 1958. Mantle had achieved the highest Wins Above Replacement in the American League (9.8) as well as an On Base Plus Slugging Percentage of 1.035. Boston Red Sox right fielder Jackie Jensen had achieved career highs in six key offensive categories and had even accumulated better numbers than Mantle in Games Played, At Bats and Runs Batted In. However, in 12 traditional offensive statistics from the 1958 season, Mantle had easily surpassed his opponent from Boston in nine of them including Runs, Hits, Home Runs, Stolen Bases, Batting and On Base Percentage just to name a few. Mantle had led the Yankees to a first place finish and a return to the World Series while the Jensen-led Red Sox finished in third place 13 games behind the Yankees.

Ever since Commissioner Landis had asked the B.B.W.A.A. to handle the voting for the two Most Valuable Player Awards in 1931, a pitcher has won the prestigious honor on 20 different occasions in either league. Hall of Fame pitchers Carl Hubbell (1933, 1936) and Hal Newhouser (1944, 1945) each won the award twice. 10 pitchers had achieved this honor as a member of an American League ball club, while eight had done so for a National League ball club. On four occasions (1950, 1981, 1984, 1992), a relief pitcher had even won the award. Besides Hall of Famers Dennis Eckersley and Rollie Fingers, anomalies such as Jim Konstanty and Willie Hernandez have had their names etched on the Kenesaw Mountain Landis Memorial Baseball Award.

In baseball's vast and illustrious history, 25 pitchers have won the Triple Crown of Pitching (Wins, Strikeouts and Earned Run Average) on 36 different occasions. Six pitchers have won both the Triple Crown of Pitching and some version of a Most Valuable Player Award seven times. Prior to the current incarnation of the award distributed by the B.B.W.A.A., there was the Chalmers Award (1911 – 1914) and the League Award (1922 – 1929). Walter Johnson had won both of these awards while pitching for the Washington Senators (1913, 1924) and Dazzy Vance of the Brooklyn Robins had won the League Award in 1924. Lefty Grove (1931), Bucky Walters (1939), Hal Newhouser (1945), and Sandy Koufax (1963) each achieved this spectacular accomplishment under the watchful eyes of the B.B.W.A.A. Unfortunately, Sandy Koufax was the last man to join this exclusive club in 1963 when he won 25 ball games, struck out 306 batters and accumulated a miniscule 1.88 earned run average. However, Justin Verlander could quite possibly become the seventh man to accomplish this feat if the baseball writers can look beyond the inherent biases that constantly affect a pitcher's candidacy for the Most Valuable Player Award.

Justin Verlander's unworldly performance this year merits serious consideration for the American League's Most Valuable Player Award. The statistics that he has accumulated to date are beyond extraordinary. Verlander has consistently astounded opponents and teammates alike with his explosive fastball, fierce competitive spirit and remarkable endurance. In 23 of Verlander's 32 starts, he has given up three earned runs or less while completing at least seven innings pitched and winning 86.96% of the decisions. At one point in the season (June 9th – July 10th), Verlander had pitched in seven consecutive games where he had given up only one earned run or less per outing. As a ball club, the Tigers are 24 – 8 in games in which Verlander has started. Verlander's mastery far exceeds the ball parks in the American League. At the present moment, the ace of the Detroit Tigers leads all pitchers in Major League Baseball in the commonly accepted and easily understood statistics such as Wins (23), Strikeouts (238), Innings Pitched (226.1), and Walks Plus Hits Per Innings Pitched (.915). To a sabermetrician, Justin Verlander is a fascinating subject to study and intimately analyze through complex calculations and permutations. His 7.9 Wins Above Replacement for all trails only two position players, Matt Kemp (8.7) and Jose Bautista (8.2). Verlander is obviously Major League Baseball's leader in Wins Above Replacement for Pitchers (8.0) as well as other key sabermetric inspired statistics such as Adjusted Pitching Runs (44), Adjusted Pitching Wins (4.8), and Base-Out Runs Saved (47.54) just to name a few. Amazingly, Verlander is in the midst of a consecutive games winning streak. He hasn't lost a game since July 15th and has won his last 11 decisions while accumulating a 2.53 earned run average and a .958 Walks Plus Hits Per Innings Pitched. Verlander's 238 strikeouts are currently the most in baseball and the inning in which he has achieved the most strikeouts is the sixth inning (39). On 41 occasions to date, Verlander has struck out batters on three consecutive pitches. To add to the intrigue, Verlander is expected to make two more starts before the Tigers conclude the regular season on September 28th against the Cleveland Indians. Since the first appearance of an award specifically honoring a pitcher's excellence in 1956, nine ball players have won both the Most Valuable Player Award and the Cy Young Award in the same season. Clearly, the accomplishments of Justin Verlander this season have caught the attention of several baseball writers. Now, it's up to them to judge Verlander on his actual value to the Tigers as well as his character, disposition, loyalty and effort.

The Tigers found Fister, and now they're champs

September 17, 2011

By Danny Knobler / CBSSports.com

Yeah, there were no impact pitchers available on the July trade market.

No one but Ubaldo Jimenez, and no one was sure that he was a real top of the rotation starter anymore.

No one but Ubaldo Jimenez -- and Doug Fister.

How did we miss him? How did everyone except the Tigers miss him?

"If you hit against him, you know him," Johnny Damon said the other day. "You see the ball. You just can't hit it."

What you see now is the Tigers spraying champagne -- the first major-league champagne celebration this year -- because Tigers general manager Dave Dombrowski and his staff identified Fister and went and traded for him. Justin Verlander is the Tigers' MVP, and he may well be the MVP of the entire American League. Miguel Cabrera is the Tigers' best player, and Victor Martinez may be the most important offseason addition any AL team made last winter.

But just as the Kirk Gibson/Alan Trammell Tigers needed to add Doyle Alexander to win a division title in 1987, the Verlander/Cabrera Tigers needed Fister to win it 24 years later.

Between Doyle and Doug, the Tigers made one trip to the World Series (in 2006), but they never won a division.

Friday, Fister retired 17 in a row at one point. He pitched eight innings and allowed just one run. He improved to 6-1 in nine starts as a Tiger, and he lowered his Tiger ERA to 2.12.

You know the only guy in the last 38 years to make that many starts in a Tiger season with a lower ERA than Fister's 2.12?

Yeah, that would be Doyle Alexander, with a 1.53 ERA in his 11 starts in 2007.

Doyle's Tigers needed an incredible final week, to win the division on the final day. They were spent by the time they got to the playoffs, and lost to the Twins.

Fister's Tigers became the first team to clinch a division (the Phillies clinched a playoff spot earlier this week, but they're waiting to clinch their division before celebrating).

The Tigers have two weeks to get ready for the playoffs, two weeks to line up their rotation.

They'd love to win a few games in those two weeks. They want to stay ahead of the Rangers (who they now lead by two games), so that they'll open at home against the wild-card team (likely the Red Sox). They wouldn't mind winning enough games to pass the Yankees for the best record in the league (they're now three games behind), which would give them home field in a possible American League Championship Series matchup.

"Right now, they look like they could be the scariest team," said Damon, who played for the Tigers last year and plays for the Rays now.

A month ago, baseball people saw the Tigers as a dangerous playoff opponent, simply because of Verlander. Now, scouts watching the American League say they might be the league's best team, because of Verlander, Cabrera and Martinez -- and because of Fister.

They say Cabrera is playing harder -- and running harder -- than he ever has. They say Martinez may get more big hits than even Cabrera.

Indians, the Rangers . . . everyone, probably, except for the Phillies.

The Tigers were the ones who found him languishing with the Mariners. The Tigers were the ones who traded for him.

Now the Tigers are the ones celebrating. They're the first ones celebrating.

And now, the question is whether they'll also be the last ones celebrating.

These 2011 Tigers making own mark with perfect timing

September 17, 2011

By Scott Miller / CBSSports.com

CHICAGO -- Hello, Hammerin' Hank Greenberg. And Mickey Cochrane, too.

From here to Paw Paw, Mich., the Tigers are leaving extra-large pawprints. Their roar is being heard loud and clear.

It was wet, it was rainy, it was 55 degrees and it was Detroit 6, White Sox 5 in 10 innings Wednesday.

And do you know what that result means?

The Tigers now have their longest winning streak since 1934.

Think about that for a minute.

Nineteen Thirty Freakin' Four!

Not since Schoolboy Rowe schooled 'em with Greenberg, Charlie Gehringer and Cochrane, with Goose Goslin in the outfield, has a Tigers team shredded opponents like this.

That was 26 years before Hall of Famer Ernie Harwell broadcasted his first Tigers' game. It was 10 years before current manager Jim Leyland was born.

Only similarity between then and now? The ragged, snagged White Sox. In the middle of that 12-game streak in '34, according to expert researcher (and colleague) Danny Knobler, the Tigers swept the White Sox in Detroit, outscoring them 37-4 in the three games.

Sort of like the 32-6 combined shellacking the current Tigers delivered the White Sox in the final game of their series in Detroit, Sept. 4, and the opener of this week's series on Monday.

"We're having a good time," outfielder Ryan Raburn said.

Yeah? And birthday parties are a joy, too.

I mean, talk about having your cake and eating it, too. The Tigers were down 5-2 heading into the ninth when, suddenly, Raburn belted a homer and then Alex Avila walloped a game-tying, pinch-hit, two-run homer.

Then Carlos Guillen cracked the go-ahead single in the 10th and Jose Valverde converted his 44th consecutive save opportunity and, chalk up another.

This is how it's going for the Tigers: Guillen hadn't even started in 10 days, since Sept. 3, and he punched out three hits.

"He must have a dumb manager, not to play him for 10 days," Leyland quipped.

Flip side is, how dumb can the manager really be for sitting Guillen all that time? It's not like the Tigers lost during that span.

"Every day, we know what's going to happen," Guillen said. "We win."

There was another group like that in Detroit between 1934 and now. And the amazing thing is, how in the world did the 1984 Tigers not win 12 consecutive games? Especially given that 35-5 start?

"We did put a couple of nine-game winning streaks up there," says Tom Brookens, an infielder on that team and now Detroit's first-base coach. "I don't get caught up in numbers, how many games in a row you've won, but I do know there are a lot of good clubs that have never won 10 in a row."

Brookens is correct on both counts. The '84 Tigers' 35-5 start both began and ended with nine-game winning streaks.

"It's fun to talk about and, fortunately for us, this came right when we needed it," Brookens says, moving nimbly from past to present.

As it is, this 12-gamer now is the third longest in more than 100 years of Detroit baseball. The '34 team's streak went to 14 games before it was snapped. The 1909 Tigers also won 14 in a row.

These Tigers led the AL Central by 5 ½ games when it started and have extended that to 13 games, pending Cleveland's game Wednesday night. The Tigers' magic number now is one over the White Sox and three over Cleveland.

As anybody watching the ninth inning Wednesday saw, the Tigers can do no wrong. Beyond that, they're good. Justin Verlander, as Roy Halladay was last year, should be a unanimous Cy Young winner. Verlander and Miguel Cabrera are legitimate MVP contenders.

Beginning with his no-hitter on May 7, Verlander is an astounding 23-2 -- and one of those two losses was 1-0. He's also 15-3 after a Tigers' loss.

Cabrera, with 102 runs scored, 97 RBI and 98 walks, is on the verge of becoming only the fifth Tiger ever to reach 100 in each of those categories in one season, following Greenberg, Gehringer, Rocky Colavito and Norm Cash. He's hitting .333, and designated hitter Victor Martinez is hitting .325.

Valverde's 44 saves is a club record.

On and on it goes. Leyland praises the club's "swagger", noting that the 2006 World Series team, while exceptionally gifted, had neither the talent nor the swagger of this group.

"Both teams were really good," outfielder Magglio Ordonez says of '06 and '11. "Right now, we have more experience and, I think, more talent. We've got pitching, defense ... I think we've got everything together."

Or, as Cabrera says, "We've got a bunch of guys here who can play."

Guillen likens it to what he experienced playing with the 2001 Mariners team that went 116-46.

"As soon as you come in the clubhouse, you know you're going to find a way to win a ballgame," Guillen says. Even when, as was the case Wednesday, the game goes into extra innings, even the expanded September rosters aren't enough and the manager actually is looking at playing one of his pitchers in the outfield.

Who?

"I'll never tell," Leyland said, then paused, then grinned. "I will tell you this much: It was not going to be Verlander."

Those 1934 Tigers wound up going all the way to the World Series, where they lost in an ugly Game 7 when Ducky Medwick slid so hard into Detroit third baseman Marv Owen in the sixth inning that livid Detroit patrons responded by bombarding Medwick with all sorts of debris in left field the next inning -- bottles, fruit, vegetables. The Cardinals led 9-0, so Commissioner Judge Landis ordered Medwick out of the game so St. Louis could win before things became even uglier.

No telling yet how far these 2011 Tigers will go, but they're peaking at a perfect time. And that sure beats ducking fruits and vegetables.

"I will say one thing," Leyland said. "Up to this point, we're not backing in. Up to this point, and I emphasize up to this point, we've met the challenge pretty well."

Tigers claim first AL Central title

September 17, 2011

By C. Trent Rosecrans / CBSSports.com

Before Friday, the last time the Detroit Tigers won their division, there was no Central division and the Brewers were in the American League. With a 3-1 victory over the Athletics on Friday, the Tigers clinched the American League Central, their first division title since 1987.

Doug Fister allowed just three hits in eight innings of work, while Don Kelly had two hits and drove in two on a single and a solo homer to lead the Tigers to the win over the A's, clinching the division for Detroit.

Detroit made it to the World Series in 2006, winning the wild card before losing to the Cardinals in five games. Their last division title came back before there was Central Division and the team finished two games ahead of the Blue Jays and seven games ahead of the Brewers in the AL East.

The Tigers were as many as eight games behind the Indians early in the season, but overtook Cleveland for good on July 21 after trading the division lead for most of June and July. Detroit's recent 12-game winning streak extended a 5.5-game lead to 13.5 going into Friday.

Fister, acquired in a trade-deadline deal from the Mariners with David Pauley in exchange for Charlie Furbush and others, was 5-1 with a 2.28 ERA in his first eight starts for Detroit, adding some depth to the Detroit rotation behind Justin Verlander. Fister was 3-12 with a 3.33 ERA in 21 starts for the Mariners.

The Tigers are the second team to clinch a playoff berth, but first to clinch their division. Philadelphia missed a chance to clinch the National League East after the Braves lost to the Mets, but fell 4-2 in 11 innings to the Cardinals at home.

Cleveland held on to beat the Twins earlier on Friday, keeping the Indians' chance alive for a couple of more hours, but any real shot at making it a race were dashed when the Tigers swept the Indians in Cleveland last week.

Last updated: Sat, September 17, 2011, 02:38 EDT

Saturday, September 17, 2011

Team	Player	Transaction
Philadelphia Phillies	Justin De Fratus	Called Up from Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Brandon Moss	Purchased From Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Domonic Brown	Called Up from Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Mike Zagurski	Designated for Assignment
Philadelphia Phillies	Juan Perez	Designated for Assignment
Philadelphia Phillies	Erik Kratz	Purchased From Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Joe Savery	Purchased From Minors

Friday, September 16, 2011

Team	Player	Transaction
Arizona Diamondbacks	Cole Gillespie	Called Up from Minors
Colorado Rockies	Hector Gomez	Called Up from Minors
Minnesota Twins	Francisco Liriano	Removed From 15-Day DL, (Left posterior shoulder strain)
Toronto Blue Jays	Colby Rasmus	Removed From 15-Day DL, (Jammed right wrist)
Toronto Blue Jays	Colby Rasmus	Recalled From Minors, Rehab Assignment