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Detroit Free Press

TIGERS

How Billy Martin made the Detroit Tigers, and their management, roar 50 years ago

Bill Dow Special to Detroit Free Press

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In what turned out to be one of the most celebrated debuts in Detroit Tigers history, 50 years ago, on April 6, 1971, 54,089 fans flocked to Tiger Stadium for Opening Day.

They wanted to see whether new manager Billy Martin could get the aging team to roar as they did three years earlier when the Bengals won the 1968 World Series.

The previous season the Tigers finished in fourth place with a record of 79-83, their first year under .500 since 1963. Martin — a three-time three world champion in the '50s as a scrappy second baseman with the Yankees (and who had played for Detroit in 1958) — previously won a division title with Minnesota in 1969 in his only season as a big-league manager.

[Detroit Tigers' 2021 schedule: Predicting all 162 games this season]

As reported by Detroit Free Press writer Jim Hawkins: “By actual turnstile count, Billy’s debut was bigger than the ’68 Series... bigger than Denny McLain’s return... bigger than Al Kaline Day... bigger than any game played in the Michigan Avenue ballyard since a two-night doubleheader with the Chicago White Sox in 1961 attracted 57,271.”

On that chilly day, Mickey Lolich tossed a complete-game six-hitter to defeat Cleveland, 8-2. It was the first of 25 victories for Lolich in a year he'd lead the league in victories, strikeouts (308) and innings pitched (376) as runner up to Vida Blue of Oakland for the Cy Young award.

The 42-year-old Martin had been hired with a two-year contract on October 2, 1971, a day after the final game of 1970; when it was announced that Tiger manager Mayo Smith would not be returning.

“Years later I found out that the Twins front office had warned the Tigers not to hire Martin,” said Hawkins, the former Tiger beat writer who now resides in St. Petersburg, Florida. “The players were tired of Mayo Smith and quit on him, so the front office was desperate. Billy had a reputation as a good manager with veterans so they thought they could squeeze one more championship out of the aging veterans like Al Kaline, Norm Cash, Willie Horton, Bill Freehan, Mickey Lolich and Dick McAuliffe”.

Martin was given a gift a week into his job when the Tigers picked the Senators' pocket by dealing sore-armed Denny McLain in a multiplayer deal for starting pitcher Joe Coleman, third baseman Aurelio Rodriguez and shortstop Ed Brinkman.

Although Martin brilliantly turned the Twins into a playoff team with his aggressive baseball strategy, the manager's drinking and temper became his undoing. As a coach, he punched out Minnesota's traveling secretary and in August of 1969 Martin KO'd his pitcher Dave Boswell outside of the Lindell AC bar in Detroit. The Twins fired Martin — despite leading the team to the postseason and being popular with fans — principally because of his off the field behavior.

In Detroit 1971-73 Martin displayed what became a pattern while managing five teams over 16 years, which included five stints with the Yankees where he won a world championship in 1977. The fiery skipper would turn around his team as one of the best managers in the game but then self-destruct by battling umpires, his own players, management, fans, and the bottle before being fired.

'Two innings ahead'

One of the first things Martin did upon arriving in Detroit was meet with his players to get to know them and to share his expectations.

“Over lunch at the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, he said that I was going to be his workhorse, that I would pitch at least six innings, and not to look over to him when things weren't going good,” Lolich said from his winter home in Florida.

Lolich early in the season had been roughed up by the Orioles in the first two innings and gazed to the bullpen to see if anyone was warming up.

2021 TIGERS: Detroit reveals alternate training site, minor-league camp rosters

2021 PREDICTIONS: Here are your division winners, World Series champ

“I then glanced at him standing on the dugout steps with his arms folded staring at me,” Lolich said. “I got out of the inning and when I walked into the dugout he said, ‘Who the F were you looking at?’ I said ‘I was kind of getting shelled and thought you might make a move.’ He said, ‘don’t you remember, I said that you are in the game until at least the sixth no matter what the score is?’ I then shut out the Orioles the rest of the way.

“Billy lived by those rules and he gave me a load of confidence. I liked the guy and he made all the difference for me in my career. He was the best manager I ever played for. He knew what was going on and was always two innings ahead of the other manager.”

Willie Horton, one of a few Tigers such as Jim Northrup and Bill Freehan who would later have difficulties with Martin, remembers the manager first meeting him at his home on Steele Street in Detroit.

“He laid down the law, said that I had been cheating myself out of my God-given abilities and that unless I picked it up, I would have splinters in my butt,” Horton said. “He then said, ‘OK, let’s get Gates Brown and shoot some pool.’ Hiring Billy was a good move, and if he had been hired earlier, we would have been in three World Series. Mayo Smith didn’t get on us enough, and we needed it. Although I had some trouble with him at times, (Martin) made me an even better player.”

Martin displayed his temper while establishing his high expectations early in 1971.

[How AJ Hinch learned an epic lesson: 'Pour the foundation before you build the house']

After the Tigers lost their first game by one run to the defending world champions in Baltimore, Martin saw the players eating their post-game spread in the locker room, and reportedly screamed, "Go ahead and stuff your faces, you are a (expletive) bunch of losers" before flipping over the serving table.

Within the first 10 days of the season, he was thrown out twice defending his players, who were upset with the umpires’ strike zones, and for diehard baseball fans in a blue-collar town, that was the kind of passionate manager they grew to admire. Martin later pulled Horton out of a game for not hustling, something he famously did to Yankee legend Reggie Jackson a few

years later that resulted in a much-publicized dugout shouting incident. In his 2004 autobiography, "The People's Champion," Horton wrote:

“Billy was a tyrannical manager, and he didn’t send candy and flowers to the players. He was direct and confrontational. Some managers leave veterans alone, feeling they have proven themselves to be professional. That was not Billy’s approach. He didn’t care who you were; he would be in your face if didn’t believe you were pushing yourself to achieve the standards he established for his players.”

Martin had led the Tigers to a second-place 91-71 record thanks in part to the best season of Lolich’s career and fellow All-Star Norm Cash who belted 32 homers and 91 RBIs before being selected as the American League’s Comeback Player of the Year. Tiger management was more than pleased with Martin since Tiger Stadium attendance had increased by 90,000 fans.

Martin gets emotional

For the 1972 season, Martin added ’68 champion Dick Tracewski as a coach — that began Tracewski's 24 consecutive seasons primarily as the team’s first base coach.

“I’m grateful that Billy gave me that opportunity,” Tracewski said. “He was a very good manager during the game but he was an interesting and volatile man. He liked to be with the players, especially the veterans, and would drink with them which was unique for a manager. Some players liked him while others didn’t. He did come to the ballpark late a lot.”

Adds Jim Hawkins: “Billy was out imbibing virtually every night. Showing up late for a ballgame the next day was as common as me showing up to the ballpark with a typewriter.”

For the 1972 strike-shortened season, Martin had the Tigers in the thick of the AL East race for the entire year, however by Aug. 13 they faded, having lost 10 of 13 games leaving them one game behind Baltimore.

MORE FROM DOW: Dick Tracewski's indelible impact helped Tigers win two World Series titles

DOW ON MR. TIGER: The day Al Kaline broke his collarbone, I became a fan for life

Desperate to shake things up before the first game of a Cleveland doubleheader, Martin had Kaline pick names out of his hat to set the batting order. Slugger Norm Cash became the

leadoff batter and .206 hitter Eddie Brinkman batted clean up. Billy's magic worked as Brinkman's sixth-inning double tied the score and the Tigers went on to win 3-2.

The Tigers won the division with a 86-70 record finishing a half-game up on Boston who they beat on the second to the last game of the year. Due to a scheduling quirk caused by the strike, Detroit played one more game than the Red Sox.

"Billy molded that veteran team and he deserves credit for winning the division title," Hawkins said.

However, the Tigers just missed returning to the World Series when they lost to Oakland 2-1 in game five of the playoffs at Tiger Stadium.

In his 2015 biography, "Billy Martin: Baseball's Flawed Genius," author Bill Pennington quotes coach Charlie Rivera on what happened when he and Martin left the locker room after losing the pennant.

"We were walking in silence, neither of us talking and then about half way there, when there was nobody else around, Billy just stopped. He said, 'Charlie, I really wanted this one.' And he started to cry. He put his head on my shoulders, kind of fell into my arms, and said, 'I wanted to win today so much.'"

Finding talent everywhere, even in a prison

During the following offseason Martin vociferously argued with former general manager Jim Campbell about veteran players he wanted traded and younger ones he did not want. Martin continued to present problems for management into spring training.

On March 27 Martin was arrested along with recently demoted outfielder Ike Blessitt for using profanity in public during a skirmish outside of a local nightspot. Days later Martin clashed with Willie Horton and Campbell in the GM's office after Horton left a spring training game early.

"Billy had told me earlier that if after six innings I wasn't playing, I could take off and do my running, which I did," said Horton, who was fined. "When we met in Mr. Campbell's office, he told us to work things out, but Billy threw a pipe at him and yelled, 'I quit, you can't tell me how to run my team.'"

Quitting the Tigers made big headlines, but after one day, Martin returned.

“Billy later came to my place and said ‘I apologize for my mistake but outside this door, I’ll never admit it.’ From then on, we had a good relationship,” said Horton, who Martin later hired as a Yankees coach in 1985.

In ’73 the Tigers were in contention until August thanks in part to reliever John Hiller who would win the AL Comeback Player of the Year award and the Fireman of the Year award for setting an AL record with 38 saves. It was Martin in 1972 who convinced Campbell to give Hiller another chance when no one thought the pitcher could return after suffering a heart attack and having open-heart surgery in 1970.

“Billy jump-started my career and he treated me well because he treated guys well who won for him,” Hiller said. When the reliever was not chosen for the ’73 All-Star game, he was offered the opportunity to pitch batting practice for the game in Atlanta.

“I told Billy I didn’t have the money to fly there because I hadn’t drawn a paycheck for a year and a half so Billy suggested that I ask Jim Campbell, but there is no way I would ask anyone for money. The next day there were three \$100 bills on my stool. I went into Billy’s office and told him he didn’t have to do that. He said, ‘I didn’t do that and don’t you tell anyone that I did,’ but I knew exactly where it came from.”

Martin also engineered another Tiger reclamation project.

TIGERS FUTURE: How each Opening Day player fits in plans moving forward

OPENING DAY COLUMN: Tigers bring back some normalcy with chilly fans and Miguel Cabrera shining

Martin’s buddy, Lindell AC bar owner Jimmy Butsicaris, convinced him to meet Ron LeFlore, then a prison inmate and after a special tryout in June, he helped convince Campbell to sign the Detroiter even though he had never played organized baseball except in prison. Within a year LeFlore became the Tigers’ starting centerfielder and eventually an All-Star.

“Billy was my man,” LeFlore said. “If he hadn’t supported me, I don’t think Jim Campbell would have signed me. Billy had a good eye for talent.”

Still, Martin’s problems continued to mount.

'That place was good to me'

Hawkins said between games of a doubleheader on a very hot Chicago day, Martin went into his office, closed the door, turned up the air conditioning, and fell asleep.

“Jim Campbell was sitting behind me in the press box and in the first inning he said, ‘Do you see our manager in the dugout?’” When I said I didn’t he called the Tiger dugout and told Dick Tracewski, ‘If I don’t see Billy in the dugout in five minutes you can tell him he’s been fired!’”

[Tigers' Lance Parrish never wanted to leave in '86, but wanted fair treatment]

The final straw occurred when the AL president suspended Martin for three games at the end of August after he bragged that he had ordered two of his pitchers to throw spitballs to the Indians because Gaylord Perry had not been ejected for throwing greased balls.

On the third day of his suspension with the Tigers in third place at 71-65, 8½ games behind Baltimore, Campbell fired Martin and replaced him with third base coach Joe Schultz.

Campbell told the Free Press:

“From foul line to foul line, Billy has done a good job. I have never once been critical of Billy’s managing and I’m not sorry I hired him. Billy made a contribution to our club and I appreciate that. But there were a lot of other extenuating circumstances.”

Hawkins began his article the next day writing:

“The Tigers hired Billy Martin two years ago because they liked the way he handled men. Sunday, they fired him for the way he managed himself.”

Hawkins said years later when Jim Campbell was asked about Billy Martin his standard reply was, “If I told you the truth you would never believe it.”

Within a week of being let go Martin was hired to manage the Texas Rangers where continued his colorful career with more controversies as he managed the Athletics and Yankees.

Elias Sports Bureau completed an analytical study near the end of the 20th century on the effectiveness of managers and concluded that “Billy Martin happens to be the best manager in the history of Major League Baseball.”

But on Christmas Day 1989 while accompanied by Detroit bar owner Bill Reedy, Martin was killed when he drunkenly drove his truck into a drainage culvert near the entrance of the driveway to his home in Port Crane, New York.

Six years earlier, Martin fondly recalled his days managing the Tigers to Free Press sports columnist Mike Downey:

“What I remember most is the day we clinched the division (1972) when the fans broke down the right field screen and came storming onto the field. That’s my big memory of Detroit. Those great fans, busting down that fence. Hell yes, I remember Detroit. That place was good to me. If anything bad happened to me there, well, I’d just as soon pretend it didn’t.”

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