

**Obscura Fantasy Focus:** While I am a massive fan of Jackson Jobe, the fantasy bargain on the Tigers is infielder **Colt Keith**, who had a July (7 homers, 1.048 OPS) that hints at what he's capable of. He's being moved to first but will still have second-base eligibility in most leagues, so grab him.

## DETROIT TIGERS

In one of the scattered newsletters I sent out last year, I selected the Tigers as my surprise team for 2024.

They certainly ended up satisfying the criteria, though I don't deserve any credit for the prediction. The Tigers hit the trade deadline with a record of 52-57, trailing the Guardians by 14 games and the Twins and Royals by seven-and-a-half. They sold: they traded Jack Flaherty to the Dodgers, reliever Andrew Chaffin to the Rangers, and Mark Canha to the Giants.

And then they started winning. From August 1<sup>st</sup>, the Tigers were the best team in the American League, running out a 34-19 record that netted them a Wild Card slot in the playoffs. Facing the dynasty Astros, the Tigers didn't flinch, sweeping Houston out and then taking a 2-1 lead in the Division Series against Cleveland before Lane Thomas showed us all that 2024 Tarik Skubal was only *nearly* perfect.

It was a terrific, utterly inexplicable run: it has to count as one of the most surprising stretches of excellent baseball that baseball has ever seen.

It can't happen again.

I do not mean, of course, that the Tigers won't win again. I mean that *how* the Tigers won games in 2024 will be impossible to replicate in 2025.

Here is a table of the Tigers starting pitchers during that stretch:

Player	GS	IP	ERA
Skubal	10	62	2.47
K. Montero	10	54	3.33
C. Mize	4	20.1	4.87
Everyone else	29	60	3.30

Tarik Skubal, Keider Montero, and Casey Mize (when he returned from the IL in September) pitched like normal starting pitchers, averaging 5.2 innings per start. The rest of the starting rotation – understand that

I am using that term in the loosest way imaginable – averaged just a hair over two innings per start.

Many organizations have trialed the use of 'openers' in baseball. The Tigers, with nothing at all to lose and having traded away Jack Flaherty, decided to experiment radically with the idea. Beau Brieske became a 'starter'...he notched fifteen innings in ten starts. Tyler Holton made five 'starts': nine innings. Alex Faedo made four starts, for 5.1 innings. Brennan Hanifée made three starts, 4.2 innings. Reese Olson kind of became the workhorse: three starts, but 9.1 innings. Someone please inform Jacob deGrom.

This was not an elite group of pitchers, but they somehow became elite in the process. The Tigers bullpen-ed their way down the stretch and somehow ran over the rest of the league.

Well, maybe it was a combination of two things. Certainly, the pitching got better, but maybe the hitters improved as well. We can't rule out the possibility that a part of the Tigers surge was the hitters getting better.

Split	R/G	RA/G
Gms 1-109	4.2	4.3
Gms 110-162	4.2	3.2

Okay, it was *all* the pitchers. The Tigers bats did exactly as well after the trade deadline as they did before the deadline. The change was just the pitchers.

And that causes me some anxiety about the Tigers going forward in 2025. I love that A.J. Hinch made the radical decision to just *try* something, and I have long been a proponent of experimenting radically with using your bullpen to win games.

But I think the success of that endeavor came because the Tigers had nothing to lose, and because the players asked to do something different were players who are still trying to get their feet under them in the major leagues. A.J. Hinch was able to get buy-in from everyone involved because why the hell not?