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## As the Detroit Tigers Head to the World Series, So Does Lakeland

By **RICK ROUSOS**

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### LOCAL CONNECTION

Detroit Tigers who played (or managed) with the Florida State League's Lakeland Tigers:

Manager: Jim Leyland (1976-78)

Pitchers:

Fernando Rodney (1999, 2001)

Jeremy Bonderman (2002)

Joel Zumaya (2004)

Justin Verlander (2005)

Position players

Ramon Santiago, IF (2001)

Omar Infante, IF (2002)

Curtis Granderson, OF (2003)

### LAKELAND

There's a lot of the Motor City in Lakeland, particularly in March for Detroit Tigers' Spring Training baseball games. Tonight and Sunday, for the first and second games of the World Series, there'll be plenty of Lakeland in Detroit.

The Tigers have been playing spring baseball in Lakeland since the 1930s and the team and city have developed a strong bond over the decades.

The city has gone out of its way to be hospitable to the Tigers, and team has said thanks by making Lakeland its southern headquarters, its home away from home. A couple of dozen workers are at the Tigertown complex year round.

All of them and their spouses

are in Detroit as guests of the Tigers for the first two games of the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals.

Maria Walls, 58, a Tigertown telephone receptionist for seven years, is so excited about going to Motown for the World Series that she can hardly stand it.

"When they told us the whole staff was going, we really hooted and hollered, and we're all still pinching ourselves," Walls said. "It was a class act by a class organization. They think about their employees and care about them.

"Everyone feels very grateful. It's like an early Christmas," she said. "I'm a huge fan, and I've waited all my life for this."

A contingent of 20 business and city officials is also making the trip.

Cory Brossart, a 13-year-old student at Lawton Chiles Middle Academy, is walking on air. His dad, Mike Brossart, an assistant finance director for the city and a self-described "diehard Tiger fan," was able to buy tickets for games 1 and 2 through Bill Tinsley, the city's parks and recreation director. The tickets are \$250 each, \$1,000 for two people for two games.



The Detroit Tigers started training in Lakeland in the 1930s -- the longest relationship between a Major League team and its Spring Training city. Here, Tigers line up before a game at Henley Field in the early years. (DAN SANBORN/Lakeland Public Library)

That's why the Brossarts won't be going back for games 6 and 7, Brossart said.

Cory and his father are flying to Detroit this morning. The boy has never flown or been farther north than Tennessee. "I'm a little nervous about flying," he said, but quickly added, "but I'm not scared."

Cory is a pitcher for the Braves of the city league. His dad has coached him since he was 4.

Cory's favorite Tiger is Curtis Granderson, the center fielder and leadoff hitter. "He usually makes contact," Cory said. "He gets on base a lot. Sometimes he hits home runs. And he's fast, very fast."

Cory and his father have loaded up on cold weather gear -- it's expected to be in the 40s for both games -- and the boy has been eagerly awaiting the World Series.

For Cory, there's an added benefit -- he gets to miss school Monday.

Tinsley arranged for 12 people to buy tickets from the Tigers for the Series and knows of at least eight others who made their own arrangements.

Among those expected to make the trip to Detroit for the weekend are Tinsley and his wife, Martha; Tinsley's assistant, Bob Donahay; Larry Glass, who oversees Tigertown; Lakeland Economic Development Council Executive Director Steve Scruggs; car dealer Michael Holley; businessman Bob Becker; and Publix executive Barney Barnett.

## CALLING LAKELAND HOME

The tie between the Tigers and Lakeland is a strong one.

Two former Tiger greats have homes in or near Lakeland.



Lou Whitaker, the superb second baseman on the 1984 World Series championship team, lives here year-round.

Al Kaline, the Hall of Fame Tiger right fielder and leader of the 1968 World Series champs, winters in ImperiaLakes in Mulberry. Kaline is a regular at Spring Training.

Each spring, dark blue Michigan license plates seem to be everywhere in Lakeland, particularly in the parking lot at Tigertown on Lakeland Hills Boulevard. Before each game, the temperature in chilly Detroit and sunny Lakeland is announced to the roar of the crowd.

Maria Walls, a Tigertown receptionist for seven years, is heading to Detroit for the World Series. "I'm a huge fan, and I've waited all my life for this." (ERNST PETERS/The Ledger)

The baseball operation at Tigertown has quietly become big. Think of Lakeland as the second headquarters of the Detroit Tigers, the way Tampa has become to the New York Yankees.

Dorms, dining facilities, playing fields and pitching mounds are available to accommodate scores of players. Trainers are available for injury rehabilitation for players throughout the Tigers' system.

In addition, the Lakeland Tigers of the Florida State League play each summer at Joker Marchant Stadium, Tigertown's stadium.

"We're a smokeless factory in the community and our job is to produce one or two Major League ballplayers each year," said Ron Myers, the director of Florida operations for the Tigers. "If we do that, we're doing our job."

The Lakeland Tigers are doing that.

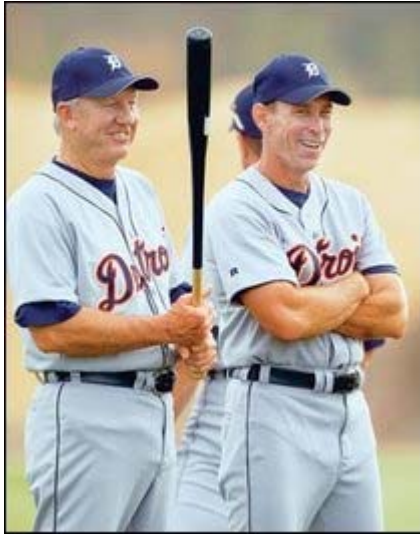
Three key Tigers players are recent alumni of the Lakeland Tigers: pitcher Jason Verlander in 2005, pitcher Joel Zumaya in 2004, and center fielder Granderson, Cory Brossart's favorite, in 2003.

## FRIENDSHIPS & MEMORIES

Frank Decker, 81, a retired construction company owner, owned the Lakeland Tigers from 1972 until 1992. He built Joker Marchant Stadium, which in some quarters is called "the House that Frank built."

The stadium is named after Marcus "Joker" Marchant, the city's late parks and recreation director.

Decker is tight with Detroit Tigers Manager Jim Leyland, who managed the Lakeland Tigers in 1976, 1977 and 1978, winning two Florida State League



Al Kaline, left, the Hall-of-Fame Tiger right fielder and leader of the 1968 World Series champs, passes time during the 2003 Spring Training with Tigers manager Alan Trammell. Kaline winters in Polk County. (SCOTT WHEELER/The Ledger)

were friends and still are. They ended up being great players who grew up to be better people. Friendships like that are far more important than baseball.

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titles.

"He's old school," Decker said. "He communicates with everyone. The fans love him and even the press does, too. He has time for everyone. He makes everyone on the team feel like a part of the team."

Decker said he talked with Leyland a few days ago, and Leyland will be in Lakeland early next month for the team's annual organizational meeting.

"He's upbeat, he thinks his pitchers are rested." Decker said. "But in a short series, you never know."

Carlton Hodges, 69, who owns the LeMans Apartments, has been a Tiger fan since 1976, with spring seats right behind the Tigers' dugout.

"When I think of the money I've spent . . .," Hodges said, laughing and without finishing the sentence. The truth is, he loves what he's gotten for every dime spent at Marchant Stadium.

Hodges said Whitaker, the former Tigers great, grew up in his hometown of Martinsville, Va. "I watched him grow up and watched him hit his first home run, at Tiger Stadium," Hodges said.

Tinsley, the parks director who began working for the city in 1970, said the Tigers have meant as much to him on a personal level than they have on a professional or baseball level.

"Jack Morris and Kirk Gibson were young players in the early 1980s and we had a lot in common, coming up and trying to do a job." Tinsley said. "We