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Tigers from 1968 World Series honored

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By Scott McNeish / MLB.com

DETROIT -- The front-page headline of the Detroit Free Press the next morning summed it up.

"WE WIN!"

Not "THEY WIN" or "TIGERS WIN." The "we" meant the struggling city of Detroit, which at that point was a year removed from one of the deadliest and most destructive riots in United States history.



However, against the turmoil, the destruction and the hate, this charred, limping city hemmed itself with threads of passion for the World Series champion 1968 Detroit Tigers. People rejoiced as their team defeated Bob Gibson and the daunting St. Louis Cardinals, becoming the third team in World Series history to overcome a 3-1 deficit.

"I had a slogan," Tigers Hall of Fame outfielder Willie Horton said. "It said, 'God put us here to heal this city.'"

The city thanked them. Even the governor of Michigan thanked them. All for turning the city's attention away from its own troubles. The Tigers gave their home reason to smile.

"WE WIN!"

On Tuesday night, with the Cardinals in town, the city thanked them one more time. The Tigers honored the 40th anniversary of the 1968 team with a 15-minute pregame ceremony at Comerica Park. Eighteen members of the team attended Tuesday's game, including a rare public appearance from **Denny McLain**.

Time has distanced the players from their championship, but not from their friendships with each other.

"They're wonderful guys to play with, No. 1, and they're great friends," said Dick McAuliffe, Detroit's second baseman from 1960-73. "They're honest and sincere. What I appreciated most is the dedication they gave to baseball. That lasts a lifetime."

So, apparently, does the city's love for the '68 team. **A sellout crowd of 44,446, the third-largest crowd in park history, came to catch a glimpse of Horton, McLain, McAuliffe, Hall of Famer Al Kaline, Jim Price, Gates Brown, Wayne Comer, Bill Freehan, John Hiller, Mickey Lolich, Tom Matchick, Daryl Patterson, Mickey Stanley, Dick Tracewski, Jon Warden, Don Wert, Hal Naragon and Bill Behm.**

The crowd's impressive ovation indicated they still recall the moments that made the 1968 World Series so unforgettable.

They roared for Kaline, Mr. Tiger, who hit .391 in the Series. They rooted for Lolich, who pitched three complete-game wins in the Series, including Game 7 against Gibson. They applauded Freehan, whose tag of Lou Brock in Game 5 provided a key momentum swing. They cheered for the embattled McLain, who won 31 games in 1968, the game's last 30-game winner.

The city and this particular team share an exceptional bond.

"I've lived in Detroit forever, and wherever I go, they'll remember that World Series," Lolich said.

Kaline had a reason. He said the city grew fond of this team because the players chose to live within it.

"The reason why they like the '68 team is because many of us stayed here and lived here," Kaline said. "In other years, or now, players go back to wherever they're from, probably warm-weather places because they make so much money. On the '68 team, we had a lot of guys that lived in Detroit."

They lived there after vicious riots in 1967 that featured 43 deaths, over 450 injuries, over 7,200 arrests and 2,000 buildings burned down. It lasted five days. President Lyndon B. Johnson sent in the National Guard and U.S. Army troops to quell the uprisings, to disarm the gangs wreaking terror in the streets.

But the Tigers helped turned things around that next summer.

"We had the police department around Tiger Stadium," Lolich said. "They said in 1967, when we had the disturbances here, when you saw four guys standing on the street corner, they were basically looking for trouble. They said in 1968, the same four guys would be standing on the street corner, but they'd be listening to a transistor radio and listening to the Tigers game."

The Tigers' success provided plenty of optimism. As long as their team kept winning, a blanket of positive energy covered the troubled town, helping to extinguish its flames.

"A championship season in sports has people talking positive about things instead of negative about things," Kaline said. "We reminded people [of the positive] a little bit, gave them something to talk about going to the barbershop, going to the market. 'How did the Tigers do?' 'Did they win again?' We had a very positive effect."

The Governor, George Romney, also thought so.

Romney credited the Tigers with calming the city. In a 1968 letter to Tigers owner John Fetzer, Romney wrote:

"The deepest meaning of this victory extends beyond the sports pages, radio broadcasts and the telecasts that have consumed our attention for several months. This championship occurred when all of us in Detroit and Michigan needed a great lift. At a time of unusual tensions, when many good men lost their perspective toward others, the Tigers set an example of what human relations should really be."

Horton saw it at Tiger Stadium, where he witnessed people in the stands embracing, laughing, smiling and cheering in unison, despite having raged out of control through the city streets one year prior.

If not in the stands, Horton remembers fans outside huddling around transistor radios, listening to the legendary voice of Hall of Fame play-by-play announcer Ernie Harwell.

"It was unbelievable to see the people all come together," Horton said. "I think they really did, not only in the city of Detroit, but in the whole state of Michigan."

They came together to witness an unforgettable group of men give Detroit a much-needed victory.

This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

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