

# relatively speaking

By Ben Chiswick

## For three West Michigan Whitecaps, professional baseball is a family business

Colin Kaline was in high school the first time he saw film of his grandfather playing baseball. By that time, he had already begun to realize how special of a ballplayer Al Kaline truly was.

"I think the first time that I really understood how much of an impact he made was probably fifth or sixth grade," said the younger Kaline, a third baseman with the West Michigan Whitecaps. "As I started to have conversations with adults, I realized that people really respected him and he must have been really good."

Needless to say, the film only confirmed what Kaline was beginning to suspect about his Hall-of-Fame grandfather, a 15-time American League All-Star and 10-time Gold Glove winner in right field.

"He could do everything," Kaline said. "What really jumped out at me—besides all the tools that he had—was the situations that he did it in. Seeing him play in the playoffs and a World Series. That's awesome. Some people don't ever make it to the World Series, and to see him perform on such a level...[on] the biggest stage in baseball was really cool."

In addition to hitting .297 with 399 home runs and 1,583 runs batted in during his 22 seasons in the Major Leagues—all of which were spent with Detroit, from 1953-1974—Kaline was a member of the Tigers' 1968 club that won the World Series. He hit .379 during the Fall Classic, blasting two home runs and driving in eight runs to lead Detroit to the championship.

Nearly a half-century later, Kaline is in his 60th year working with the Tigers. Two years after he retired as a player, Kaline began a 26-year run as the color commentator for Tigers' television broadcasts. He has been



**The Next Generation:** Catcher Patrick Leyland, relief pitcher Nick Avila, and third baseman Colin Kaline follow in their family members' footsteps as part of the Detroit Tigers organization.

in his current role of Special Assistant to the President since 2002.

In June 2011, he was joined in the Tigers' organization by another Kaline when Detroit selected Colin in the 26th round of the draft.

"I actually got a call from my grandfather that said, 'If you're available in the next round, the draft room just told me they're going to take you,'" Colin said. "We all got to listen to them announce my name, which was really cool. He was just so proud of me. [When we spoke later] it was over the phone, but I could just tell he had a smile from ear to ear."

Kaline is not the only member of the West Michigan Whitecaps who has strong family ties to the Tigers' organization. Detroit's low Class-A affiliate also features catcher Pat Leyland and right-handed reliever Nick Avila.

Pat's father, Jim Leyland, is in his seventh year as the Tigers' manager and his 20th

season managing in the big leagues. He has over 1,500 wins under his belt, not to mention three Manager of the Year awards and one World Series title with the Florida Marlins in 1997.

Unlike the Kalines, Leyland has had an up-close and personal view of his father's baseball career.

He was an eighth-round pick in the 2010 draft, and he is the first to admit that his desire to play professional baseball is in large part due to a childhood spent around the ballparks where his father worked.

"It was definitely a great way to grow up," Leyland said. "I have a great set of parents that both made it work extremely well, so I

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**All in the Family:** From left to right, Al Kaline, Jim Leyland and Alex Avila in their roles for the Detroit Tigers. All three have relatives on the West Michigan Whitecaps.

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couldn't be happier. I got to grow up in a Major League clubhouse. Not that many people get to do that.

"I really got to see what it was like to act like a professional and be a professional every day," he said. "That's something I've tried to take with me as I've turned to pro ball and tried to keep progressing in my career, so I think that was really important for me to see."

When Leyland was born in 1991, his father was in the middle of a ten-year stint managing the Pittsburgh Pirates. He then became the manager of the Florida Marlins in 1997 and guided them to a World Series championship in his first season, just after Pat's sixth birthday.

"I went to all the World Series games," Pat said. "I don't remember too much of the actual game stuff, I just remember being there. What an experience."

In 2006, the elder Leyland's first year with the Tigers, he was named American League Manager of the Year and led the storied franchise to the World Series. That was an experience that Pat, then a teenager, remembers much more vividly.

"I was living and dying with every game," he said. "What they were doing was really incredible to watch develop over the full season. To see how they kept getting better and better, and then slid a little bit and the end, and then got it back together for the playoffs. And that playoff run was incredible to watch."

For Nick Avila, it's an even deeper family affair.

Most Tigers' fans are very familiar with Nick's cousin, Alex Avila, who hit .305 for the Whitecaps in 2008 and made his Major League debut the next season. He has

been Detroit's starting catcher since 2010, establishing himself as one of the better offensive backstops in baseball and earning a spot on the American League All-Star team in 2011. Alex's father and Nick's uncle, Al Avila, has been a scout and executive in professional baseball for a quarter-century and is currently the Tigers' Vice President/Assistant General Manager.

But the baseball patriarch of the Avila family is actually Nick's grandfather, Ralph Avila, a legendary international scout with the Los Angeles Dodgers who is widely regarded by baseball insiders as one of the key figures in turning the Dominican Republic into the hotbed of baseball talent that it is today. He moved down to the small, baseball-rich nation in 1970 and was the driving force in creating the type of training and development academies that are now commonplace across the island. Players like Pedro Martinez, Raul Mondesi and Tony Fernandez were all signed under his watch while other Major League organizations scrambled to catch up.

Today, of course, the Dominican Republic is one of professional baseball's primary sources of foreign talent.

"My grandfather has been involved with the Dodgers for about 50 years now," Nick said. "He's held pretty much every position with the L.A. Dodgers and is a pretty big guy down in the Dominican also. He signs a lot of the players over there."

The whole Avila clan—Grandpa Ralph, Uncle Al, and cousins Alex and Alan—lived near Nick in suburban Miami. Nick often went with his cousins and their father to the ballpark to shag batting practice and hang out in the clubhouse, so the Avilas were also part of the Marlins' run to a championship in 1997. The closeness of their family is something Nick still cherishes, and he keeps close tabs on his All-Star cousin in Detroit.

"We lived down the street from each other," Nick said. "We would be at each other's houses every day. It was just me and my two cousins every day. We got to play two years of high school together and one year with all three of us."

When it comes to advice about baseball, Nick has plenty of good people to turn to. More often than not, however, he dials up the old sage of the family when he needs professional guidance.

"My grandfather is usually the one I call if I need something like that," said Nick. "He plays a real big role. I've worked out with him my whole life. He's taught me everything I know...He taught *us all* everything we know, pretty much."

After all, there is no substitute for experience, something that Kaline, Leyland and Avila all recognize. Now teammates with the West Michigan Whitecaps, they have all benefited from their baseball upbringings and accomplished relatives in building their own careers.

But as Leyland points out, the advantage of growing up with top-notch instruction from baseball experts will not get them to the Major Leagues alone. "I think it helps," he says. "I think it really helps. But, at the same time, you have to be able to go out there and execute it, too. I think it takes knowledge and that obviously helps, but if you can't do it, you can't do it."

Now with the West Michigan Whitecaps, the trio is out to prove they have what it takes to join their loved ones in The Show.

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**Pat Leyland,**  
Whitecaps' catcher