

## **Jim Landis**

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2003.  
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*It's really a shame. A shame that more television footage doesn't exist of the great White Sox teams of the 50's and 60's. Sure TV was around then, and the Sox had games shown frequently, in fact, they and the Cubs had more games being shown than any other teams in baseball by WGN. But surviving footage of those years is practically nonexistent and that's a shame.*

*It's a shame because if more of it was around, Sox fans could see how good a player Jim Landis was.*

*Landis has always been regarded as a great field, no-hit member of the "Go-Go Sox" and that does him an injustice. In an era when center field was known for defense and very few players provided offense from that spot, Landis averaged 82 runs, 64 RBI's and 20 stolen bases between 1958 through 1962. Sure, that couldn't compare to Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays and "Duke" Snider but it was better than just about anybody else.*

*And defensively, there was an ongoing debate among fans, players and the media, if Landis was as good as Mantle and Mays. No less an authority than Mel Allen, the Yankees Hall of Fame broadcaster said he was. When Jim retired after the 1967 season, his fielding percentage was the second best all-time in baseball. He was a four-time Gold Glove winner and his 1,035 games played in the outfield rank as the Sox all-time leader. He made the All-Star team in 1962 playing in the game in Washington D.C. and was voted to the White Sox All-Century Team at one of the outfield positions.*

*Jim played 11 seasons, mainly with the Sox, but also had stops in Kansas City, Cleveland, Detroit and Houston. Today Jim and his wife are retired and live in the Napa Valley region in California. I recently spoke with Jim from his home. Among the topics discussed were the 1959 championship season, his breakthrough year in 1961, the fierce 1964 pennant chase that saw the Sox come up one game short, what it takes to play center field, and his disagreement with then manager Al Lopez that saw him sent to Kansas City after eight seasons on the South Side.*

**ML:** Jim do you recall how you were scouted and signed by the Sox?

**JL:** I came from California and had started at a junior college when a Sox scout, Bobby Mattox contacted me. He actually saw me in high school. I wanted to play major league baseball, so I said, "let's do it," and signed for 2,500 dollars and was sent to Class-D, Wisconsin Rapids in 1952. That was a pretty good league, comparable to Class-A today. I spent the signing money on getting a Mercury because I needed transportation.

**ML:** You started out that first year as a third baseman. Why the switch to the outfield?

**JL:** I always ran very well and had a good arm. I guess they wanted to use that talent. In 1953, I was sent to Colorado Springs where two guys really worked with me. Don Gutteridge and Johnny Mostil just busted my rear for two to three hours a day. I owe them a lot because they showed me everything from how to position myself, to cutting down angles, the works. Paul Richards (*Author's Note: White Sox manager*) was there and at times he had to tell them, "he's had enough," they were pushing me so hard.

**ML:** After two years in the minor leagues you were called to military service in connection with the Korean Conflict. Then you came back to play. How difficult was that?

**JL:** That was rough. At that time the government was cracking down on athletes who were inducted but just spent time playing baseball. Billy Martin was one of those guys. They decided that if you had more than nine months of service left they could ship you out anywhere. I had nine months and two weeks and got sent to Alaska. That was quite an experience. In addition to my military duties what I did every day was go out to the baseball field and picked up rocks. Alaska has a lot of volcanoes and they would spew out rocks and stuff. That was my job. The other thing that I never got used to was playing baseball late at night. Because it's so far north the sun wouldn't go down until after midnight in the summer.

**ML:** You finally came up to the White Sox in 1957; do you remember anything about your first game?

**JL:** I was nervous... didn't know where I was at! To top it off, I had to face one of the hardest throwing guys in baseball at that time, Herb Score. I think I had two pop outs and a strikeout or two strikeouts and a pop out. Either way I remember saying "what am I doing here?" It took a little while but finally I said to myself, 'you belong' and that's when I started to play better.

*(Author's Note: Landis made his debut on April 16, 1957 in Cleveland. He went 0-3 with a walk and two strikeouts against Score.)*

**ML:** That first year you played mostly right field before being switched to center. Why did they start you in right?

**JL:** I think they were trying to break me in slowly. Larry Doby, I think played mostly in center. They didn't want me to have a lot of pressure. When you are in center you've got a lot of responsibility. They just wanted to relax me and work my way in.

**ML:** By 1959 you were an established starter and the Sox of course, would win the pennant. In spring training did you and the guys feel that 1959 was going to be your year?

**JL:** We felt that we had a good shot. We weren't overconfident, but we knew that we had good pitching and very good defense. We were strong up the middle with (Nellie) Fox and (Luis) Aparicio; those were two Hall of Famers. Those things will keep you in ballgames.

**ML:** People forget that the race that year was very close until the Sox went into Cleveland and swept four straight in three days to put some distance between the two teams. Tell me what you remember from that crucial series?

*(Author's Note: On August 28 the Sox went into Cleveland with a game and a half lead. By the time they left on Sunday night the lead was up to five and a half games after the sweep. The Sox won 7-3, 2-0, 6-3 and 9-4, with Bob Shaw, Dick Donovan, Early Wynn and Barry Latman getting the wins.)*

**JL:** I remember the place was packed.

*(Author's Note: The smallest crowd for that series was the Saturday day game which drew over 50,000.)*

That didn't bother me or the guys because we played before large crowds all year. The way we looked at it was that we had a great chance here and in fact, that made us play even harder. We knew what was at stake, but we were a very close team that was always helping one another. When I came up, guys like "Jungle" Jim Rivera took the time to help me. He wasn't afraid of losing his job. That's the way we were, and it showed in those big, tough games.

**ML:** Then in September you went back to Cleveland and clinched the pennant. Both Billy Pierce and J.C. Martin told me the whole atmosphere was pretty wild especially when you got back to Midway Airport. What do you remember about that night?

**JL:** Everybody was happy in the locker room, there was a lot of hugging, a lot of back slapping. I'll be honest with you; we had a few belts on the plane back to Chicago! Nothing out of hand but we were really happy. We were elated, in high heaven that night. When we got back to Chicago and saw all the crowds we just let it go.

*(Author's Note: The Chicago Sun-Times newspaper the next day estimated the crowd at 125,000 at the airport early in the morning.)*

I remember "Bubba" Phillips, Bob Shaw and I just started singing on the bus ride back to where our cars were parked. Even our wives were surprised at how we acted that night. But that's why you play the game; it's the greatest feeling in the world to know you're going to be in a World Series.

**ML:** In the series itself, you and the Sox destroyed the Dodgers in Game #1, 11-0. But after that it seemed the Sox played tight the rest of the way. Johnny Roseboro shut down the running game and rookie Larry Sherry had the series of a lifetime.

*(Author's Note: Sherry had two wins and two saves in the six games. He threw 12.2 innings, giving up one run with an ERA of 0.71.)*

Looking back over the years, what do you think went wrong?

**JL:** We weren't on base enough. The games were all close, tight ones and when that happens you've got to be careful when you do get on base. You have to give the Dodgers credit; they had a good team with pitchers like Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale. Throw in Sherry and they shoved our bats up our fannies! They also had some breaks...I mean Sherry came out of nowhere and Chuck Essegian, who wasn't a home run hitter, got two *pinch hit* home runs!

**ML:** You also had the best view of one of the most phenomenal catches in World Series play pulled off by Jim Rivera in Game #5. Can you tell me about that?

*(Author's Note: In the last of the 7<sup>th</sup> with the Sox leading 1-0, the Dodgers had men on second and third with two out. Charlie Neal was the hitter. Al Lopez pulled an outfield switch moving Al Smith from right to left field and bringing in Rivera to play right. Jim McAnany was removed from the game. Neal then crushed a Bob Shaw pitch deep into the right center field gap, Rivera after a very long run caught the ball over his shoulder ending the inning and saving the game.)*

**JL:** I never could have caught that ball. What made that catch even more incredible is that it was absolute hell in the Coliseum because you couldn't see the ball! I don't know how Jim saw it. It was a sunny afternoon game and you had nothing but fans wearing white shirts! Later in that same game I lost a ball in the sun. I squinted and thought I knew where it was, but it wound up hitting me in the toes. Man, how that hurt!

*(Author's Note: The ball was hit by Wally Moon leading off the 8<sup>th</sup> inning.)*

**ML:** You also had a scary moment in Game #6 when you got hit in the head by a pitch. Do you remember what happened?

**JL:** Johnny Podres was pitching for the Dodgers and he hit me. The ball caught me square on the helmet which was good because we didn't have ear flaps then. He and I wound up playing together for a time with Detroit. What's funny is that every year or so, I go to Florida and visit Gary Peters. *(Author's Note: White Sox pitcher.)* We usually take in a spring training game. One time we go out to see the Phillies play and Podres is one of their coaches, so I'm talking with him by the dugout and he tells me, "You know I was told to hit you." I looked at him and asked why because the Dodgers had a big lead on us. Johnny said, "it was to keep you guys rattled." I said, "It took you *this* long to finally tell me?" (laughing).

**ML:** During that off season, Bill Veeck felt that if the Sox were going to win in 1960, they had to have more power. A series of offseason trades resulted in the Sox sending out youngsters like Norm Cash, Earl Battey, Johnny Romano, Don Mincher and Johnny Callison. When you and the guys showed up in Florida that spring did everybody kind of look around and ask, 'What's going on here?'

**JL:** We sure asked, "What the hell is going on?" We knew how good those kids were because we saw them in the spring. Every single one of the guys we traded wound up making the All-Star team in the next few years. We figured that we won the pennant without power in 1959 and we had to be better because these kids were going to get better. I don't know why they [management] thought we had to go out and get more power.

**ML:** In 1960 you won your first Gold Glove, the first of four straight. What makes a good outfielder? How much of it is pure ability and how much of it is knowing the hitters, knowing how your pitchers are going to throw to hitters in certain situations and knowing the parks you play in?

**JL:** All of that helps, outside of just working hard. You know one of the best pieces of advice I ever got was from our trainer, Ed Froelich. He told me to stay relaxed by looking up at the sky between pitches and when our guy was into his motion, to bend, take two steps forward and move to the ball. That advice made me get great jumps on balls that were hit. You also had to stay on your toes.

**ML:** Defensively, Jim, a lot of baseball people said you were as good defensively as Mantle or Mays. Pretty high praise isn't it?

**JL:** When I actually played I really didn't hear much of that. Later on, though, I'd read things or hear things along those lines. I know the Yankees and Casey Stengel said some nice things like, "I know that kid in Chicago would turn triples into doubles and doubles into singles."

**ML:** Was there a stadium or two that was harder to play in than others?

**JL:** Yankee Stadium was tough. It was 430 feet into the power alleys and you had those monuments out in center field. I actually had to go around them once or twice trying to get to a ball.

You couldn't dive after a ball unless you were sure you had it because if the ball got past you it would just keep on rolling. They also had a drainage dip in the outfield that slanted downwards. It happened twice where I had to charge a ball and was running down that slope, caught the ball and then fell forward because your momentum was going downwards.

Fenway Park was also tough because of the wall. A few times I'd be going back on a ball and would be very close to it. When the ball hit it, it would bounce back over my head towards the infield. It took a while before I was able to understand when to get close to the wall and when you had to back away from it.

**ML:** In 1961 you had your finest year offensively with the Sox, 22 home runs, 85 RBI's, 87 runs scored, 19 stolen bases. Why the upsurge in production?

**JL:** I got comfortable with the league and the pitchers. I also took to heart a piece of advice that "Minnie" Minoza had about hitting, "See the ball good, swing at the ball good..."

**ML:** During the early 60's the Sox always had winning seasons even though a lot of the guys on the '59 pennant winner were being shipped out. Those Sox were a team in transition, weren't they?

**JL:** We had a good stretch where when guys like Billy (Pierce), Nellie (Fox) and Luis (Aparicio) were traded we had good young players coming in. You had to give the scouts credit for that; we had a very good farm system.

**ML:** In 1962 you made the American League All-Star team and played in the game in Washington D.C. What do you remember about that?

**JL:** I remember two things. When I was growing up I admired Stan Musial. In those days both teams stayed at the same hotel. Well I come out of the hotel getting on the bus to go to the park and who's looking right at me? Stan Musial. I got to sit next to him on the bus and we talked. The other thing I remember is that I got into the game and came up to hit and the pitcher for the National League was Bob Shaw. I got a real funny feeling because I didn't want to hit against him. He was my friend and my teammate for a number of years.

**ML:** By 1964 you were one of the veterans on a team that was involved in a gut-wrenching pennant race with the Yankees. Talk to me about the last few weeks of that. I mean the Sox closed out the year winning nine in a row and still finished one game behind New York.

**JL:** It was a terrific battle. We knew what we had to do and that was keep winning. I know when I was taking off that uniform after the last game, I felt great and sad at the same time. We finished one game behind them! Al (Lopez) really paid us players a great compliment because he never called any team meetings down the stretch those last few weeks. He knew we were grown men.

**ML:** Even though it's been 40 years, older Sox fans still talk about the Sox/Yankee rivalry in reverent tones. What was it like playing against a team that good?

**JL:** It's funny but I never felt that the Yankees were our rival. I always felt Detroit or Cleveland really was because they were closer to Chicago geographically. What the Yankees did do to us was force us to play our best not only against them but when we played the other teams. We had to fight like hell against everybody else just to stay with them. We couldn't afford to lose to a Kansas City or Boston. Al Lopez had a theory and I agreed with it, if you win two of three at home and play .500 on the road, you'll stay in the race.

**ML:** Speaking of Al Lopez, your relationship with him really deteriorated in 1964. You were benched for a stretch and a couple of Chicago reporters, including Bill Gleason, tried to patch things up between you two. What happened?

**JL:** The Sox lost our player rep, I think it was Charlie "Paw Paw" Maxwell and the guys wanted me to take over for him. I said that I'd do it temporarily until we could formally elect a guy. It turned out that the Sox players decided that whenever we would appear on a major radio or TV station, like WGN, we wanted to get 50 bucks for it, most of the time we were getting a transistor

radio for doing it. Well as player rep, I was the club spokesman and Ed Short (*Author's Note: White Sox general manager*) came downstairs and I told him that. Short got mad at me and I got the brunt of it. I don't blame Al, he wasn't going to buck the G.M. Al didn't talk to me for a long time and I was benched for a long spell. I started opening day then sat a long time.

**ML:** Do you think that caused you to get traded to the A's after the season?

**JL:** I think so. Mike Hershberger and I went to Kansas City. The Sox went with some young guys and that's OK. Every so often change is good for you. I figured that as long as I was still in major league baseball that was fine.

**ML:** After you retired in 1967 what did you do for a living? Players weren't making 15 million a season then.

**JL:** I got into the sign business. It really was a lucky break because a good friend of mine had a company and he told me that the U.S. government was cracking down on signs for safety and such. I bought a quarter share of his company and was a sales rep. You had companies like Safeway Supermarkets that had to redo signs at all their stores nationally. My name didn't hurt me either especially in the Midwest. People knew me from playing.

**ML:** Do you still keep in touch with the Sox organization or your former teammates?

**JL:** Sure. Billy Pierce came out to visit last season, he went to San Francisco for a reunion of that 1962 team. I go out to Florida and look up Gary Peters and Jim Rivera and God bless him I had a chance to visit with Hoyt Wilhelm before he passed away last year. I often say this to people that the era that I played in, and the guys that I met, spoiled me for the rest of my life.

**ML:** You were named by Sox fans to the All-Century Team at one of the outfield spots. Were you surprised that Sox fans would remember you like that?

**JL:** Yes and I was very grateful. What I'm most proud of is the number of guys from that team 40 years ago who made it... Nellie (Fox), Billy (Pierce), Luis (Aparicio), myself. We had a real good team then.

**ML:** Jim, I'd like to name some of the other outfielders that you played with on the Sox. I'd like for you to tell me about them, what kind of player they were or any memory that you may have of them. Let's start with the late Al Smith. (1958-1962, All-Star:1960)

**JL:** The first thing I remember is the beer bath he took in the second game of the World Series.

*(Author's Note: Smith was drenched with a cup of beer as a fan reached to try and catch a Dodger home run in left field at Comiskey Park. In doing so the fan knocked over his beer that was sitting on top of the wall. As Smith was looking up at the ball, he got hit full in the face. The photo of the incident became one of the most famous photographs on the 1950's.)*

I was standing over in left center and just started laughing harder than I did in a long time. Just the look on his face! Seriously Al was just so good to me. I remember we played poker a lot on the trains as we traveled in those days.

**ML:** How about "Jungle" Jim Rivera? (1952-1961)

**JL:** Jim was unbelievable. He was always loose, acted like he didn't care but when the game started he played hard. Jim was the practical joker on the club. I remember a sportswriter was sitting next to him in the dugout getting an interview and Jim kept hitting him on his knee with his bat...just tapping him...he must have done it 50 times and the guy didn't want to say anything because he was trying to pay attention to what Jim was saying.

Our pitcher Dick Donovan was very superstitious. He used to keep a towel folded up neatly in a certain spot on the bench when he'd pitch. Every few innings Jim would walk down there and mess it all up so that when Dick came back after pitching, he'd have to put everything back... and then there was the time we had just dropped a double header to the Senators. Everybody was getting on the bus and we felt lousy and suddenly these "poppers" started going off everywhere. Jim had put them everywhere, on the seats, on the floor. I'm sure Al (Lopez) didn't like it but it loosened us up.

**ML:** How about everybody's favorite, "Minnie" Minoso? (1951-1957, 1960-1961, 1964, All-Star: 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1964)

**JL:** Even to this day, when I see "Minnie" I call him "papa." He was like a father to me. He and Nellie (Fox) took care of me. "Minnie" never did anything really funny, but he had a terrific smile.

**ML:** Let's look at some of the guys who flanked you in the 60's, starting with Floyd Robinson (1960-1966).

**JL:** Oh man! You know I still follow baseball and I hear people say, "So and so's a great player, he's a clutch hitter." I just look at them and say "I played with a guy who drove in 100 runs and only hit 10 homers! Now you wanna tell me about a clutch hitter?"

*(Author's Note: In 1962, Robinson drove in an amazing 109 RBI's on only 11 home runs. He also set a club record for doubles with 45. That mark stood for 30 years until Frank Thomas first broke it with 46.)*

Floyd was a *real* clutch hitter and he could run. It's a shame that people don't remember how good a player he was!

**ML:** Here's a guy who had tremendous talent but never realized it, Dave Nicholson (1963-1965).

**JL:** Dave fought it too hard. He was a young kid who had high expectations and he just couldn't handle it. He had tremendous power.

*(Author's Note: On May 6, 1963, Nicholson hit what may have been the longest home run in the history of baseball. He blasted a shot over the roof at Comiskey Park off of the A's Moe Drabowsky that landed an estimated 573 feet away in Armour Square. It was one of three home runs he hit that night.)*

I was in awe when he hit that one over the roof.

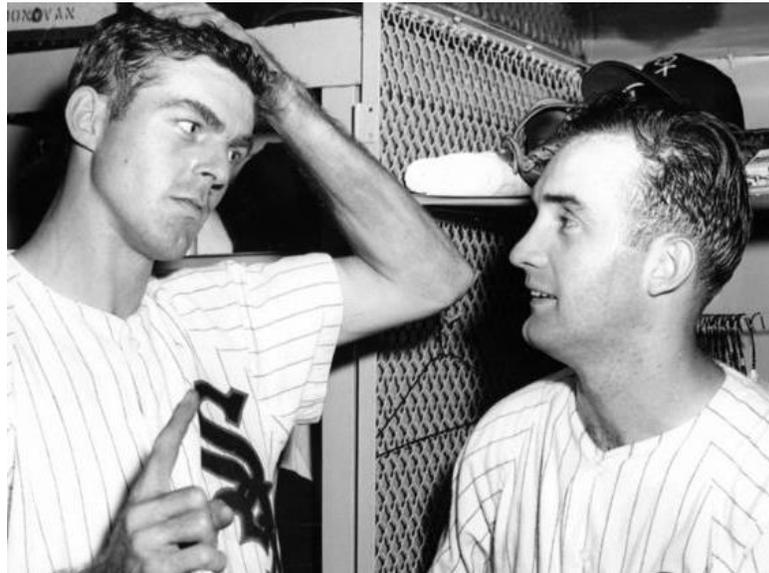
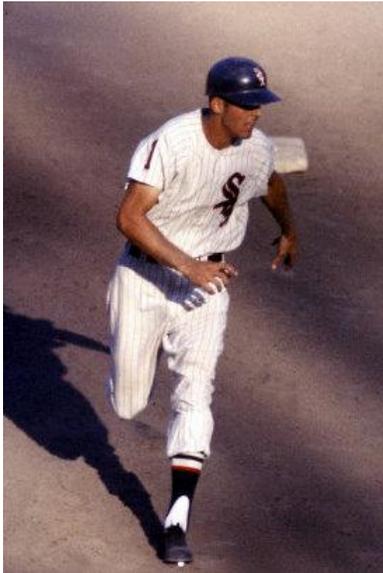
*(Author's Note: Nicholson also was incredibly strong. Landis confirmed a story that I had read about, that after a particular frustrating game Dave went into the Sox clubhouse took a shower and twisted the shower heads so tight no other player could get them loose.)*

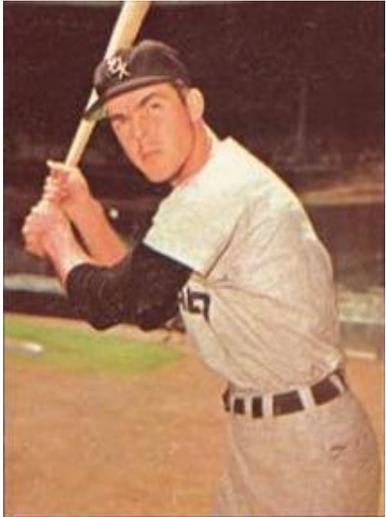
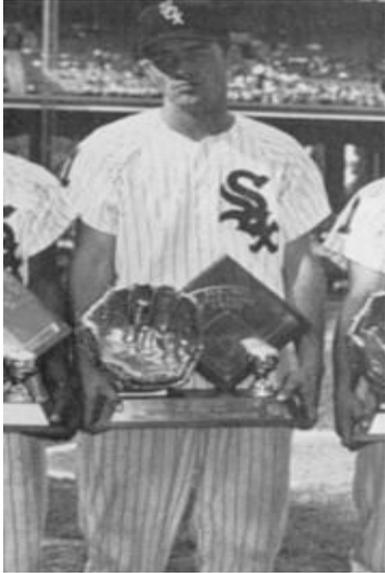
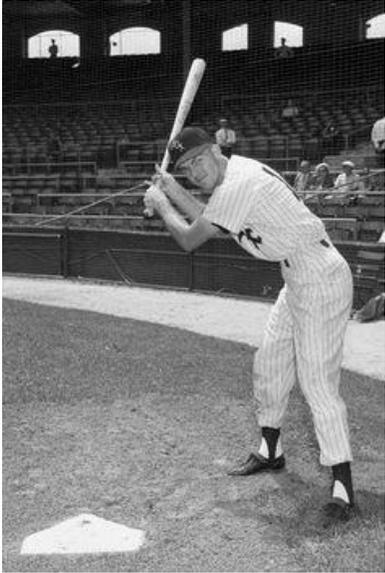
**ML:** And let's finish with a good friend of yours, Mike Hershberger (1961-1964).

**JL:** Mike is a good friend. He had a lot of speed, but he had a bad habit... he tried to hit home runs and he wasn't built for that. I think it was Gary Peters who gave him the nickname one year of "warning track Mike," because his balls would always get caught on the warning track!

**ML:** Looking back over time Jim, did you enjoy Chicago and the years that you played there?

**JL:** Sure. The Sox had great fans. As far as the city, we weren't homebodies. We'd go out and take in the great restaurants, the shows. The guys were very close. Sometimes a half dozen or so of us would go out and eat then come into the locker room at the same time.



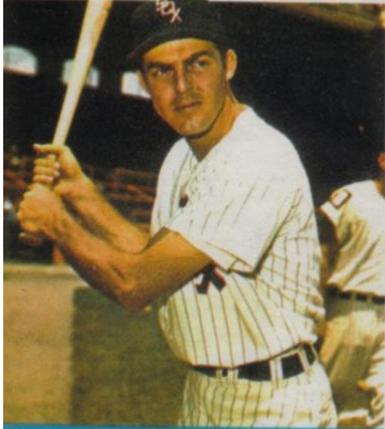


**JIM LANDIS**  
Outfield

Chicago  
White Sox



**WHITE SOX**



**JIM LANDIS**

outfielder