

Babe Martin
Interviewed by Dave Heller
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D: I'm curious of your situation. How you ended up with the Browns. Were you 4-F or 1-A?

B: No, I went into the Navy. I was signed by the Browns when I was in high school. Of course, I wish I had waited but I was so anxious to play ball that I just go ahead and signed in high school with my mother's signature. I went into the service in '42, September of 1942, and I got out in April of '44 with a medical discharge.

D: So did you go from the minors?

B: I went to the minors. I went to Toledo. Toledo, Ohio. Was the most valuable player. Hit .350 or something like that.

D: And then you got called up in September.

B: I called up to the Browns in September. Around September 20th or something of this nature. The reason I wasn't called up earlier, we were destined for the playoffs and Little World Series and things of that nature and they were ready to call me up and the ball club started to go on strike. If I had left, the ballplayers would have gone on strike.

D: The ballplayers in Toledo?

B: Yeah, all my teammates. I understand where they were coming from. I myself would have liked to gone. I'd have liked to have been up there before the first of September.

D: Did you guys make extra money in Toledo, was that the way it worked?

B: Oh, sure. If you make it to the playoffs you got extra money. I think my salary was \$450 dollars a month. Our top salary, it was probably two or three ex-major league players there probably making \$550. So that was big money back in those days for us.

D: Do you remember how long the Little World Series went on?

B: Actually we wound up, we got knocked out in seven games.

D: So it couldn't have worked out any worse for you.

B: No it really couldn't have, but that's the way the ball bounces. Instead of looking back now I just look forward.

D: Do you remember your first experience with the Browns [in 1944]? That was your first year, I found out?

B: Oh yeah, do I. First time up I hit a double. A line drive double to left center field against the Boston Red Sox. Next time up I got a single. Next time up I either ground out or flied out. Then I played up in one other game and went one-for-one. I wound up hitting .750, which is a great year you know, 3-for-4 (*laughs*). It was a great experience for me.

D: So you were only up there for a couple weeks probably.

B: I went up there about September 20th really.

D: Overall was it a good experience being on a pennant winning team? Could you enjoy it as much seeing that you weren't there the whole year?

B: Well, I could have enjoyed it by being there the whole year a lot more and also being a World Series

participant and getting a ring. The amounts of money at that time wasn't a great deal but relatively speaking it was a lot of money because the fact back in the '40s, after getting out of the service and making \$450 dollars a month, an extra couple of thousand dollars would have been great.

D: You didn't get any shares at all?

B: No sir, I never got anything. What the Browns did give me, I was supposed to go barnstorming with a bunch of ballplayers, you know, and they were going to take me. The barnstormers were going to take me, it was a trip to California. And they were going to go ahead and have some speaking engagements and things of this nature. Rather than take me, they gave me \$300 dollars not to go. So that was a lot of money too.

D: Did you stay in St. Louis for the Series or did you go back home?

B: No, St. Louis is my home.

D: Was it your home back then?

B: Well, sure. I was born in Seattle, Washington, but I came here as a 4-year-old child.

D: Did you get a big reception then when you first played, being the hometown boy?

B: Sure, sure, I got a big reception. But I can tell you this, Dave, that to play in your hometown is not the greatest thing in the world, not the greatest thrill for a hometowner. Based on the fact that if you did one thing wrong you really got booed by your own people and that really hurts. Being booed out of town, you figure it's a compliment, you know, but not being at home. I had a few of those.

D: That's too bad.

B: That's life.

D: Did you go to any of the Series games [in 1944]?

B: Oh yeah, I was on the bench for all the Series games. The league president, Mr. [William] Harridge, allowed me to be on the bench, and the commissioner's office allowed me to be on the bench.

D: In your uniform?

B: In uniform. The only thing that I could not go ahead and speak out loudly to the opposition, or say anything to the umpire like the other players could. I had to be rather mute. And I remained so because I wanted to remain sitting on that bench, I was so proud.

D: What is your greatest experience in the majors? Would it be that first at-bat or something else that happened later on?

B: I would think so, yeah. The first at-bat. I think the spring training home run I hit against the Cardinals the following year with two on, we beat the Cardinals, I think was another good experience. I think that was the same day that Franklin Roosevelt died, if I'm not mistaken.

D: Do you have any impressions or memories from Luke Sewell or any of the other players?

B: I have fond memories of Luke Sewell, who sent me back to Toledo, I guess, around August the first. We had a outfielder by the name of Pete Gray who was not too well liked by the other ballplayers because of, well, I don't know how to put this because I don't want to go and sound like sour grapes ...

D: I read about that how he only had one arm and maybe he was taking someone else's job after the pennant.

B: His one arm was one thing. But for example, we had a doubleheader in Philadelphia and he made five errors and they gave him two. When you do that, it takes away from the rest of us because we

know if we make some errors we're going to go ahead and be hit with the errors. There's no question about it. But Pete morally was corrupt. Morally, he was a cheater in card games, we caught him cheating. I don't know how you could go and put that down without making it sound too bad, but hell, we hung him out the Cadillac Hotel window. Oh hell yeah, we would have thrown him out. At least we threatened to do that. We didn't do that, of course.

D: To bounce back to '44, can you remember any of the players?

B: Oh sure, I remember very well. I remember they substituted me for George McQuinn at first base. As I say, I didn't get off on a very good start. I had a groin injury, which you never talk to other people about a groin injury based on the fact they say, well, that's a good excuse, he can use that all he wants. But this is a fact — I had a groin injury and I altered my way of swinging so it wouldn't hurt but they put me in at first base substituting for George McQuinn, hoping I could go in and be a first baseman because I did play a few games at first base in the minors and did adequately there. But to replace George McQuinn you had to be a George Sisler at first base and be able to hit like George McQuinn, very steady, you know. We had Don Gutteridge who was our pepper-pot second baseman. I guess he was the real gung ho guy on the whole ball club, he made everything move. We had Vern Stephens at shortstop, who you well know from his background was truly a great shortstop who cut short his own career by not adhering to basic principles by keeping yourself in shape. We had a third baseman by the name of Mark Christman, and Floyd Baker who was our utility infielder. Mark Christman was one of the greatest third basemen, fielding third basemen, I had ever seen, as well as Floyd Baker. We also had Mike Kreevich, who just passed away this year, in center field, who Pete Gray had replaced on numerous occasions and who Mike said was the deterioration of the ball club along with Nelson Potter. He said that in his speech when he was inducted into the St. Louis Browns Hall of Fame in St. Louis a couple years ago, that the worst thing that happened to our ball club in 1945, which we should have won the pennant, was Pete Gray. And that was a quote from Nelson Potter at the Browns affair. We had Gene Moore, who played right field, along with Milt Byrnes who played right field. Myself, who played left field along with Milt Byrnes who'd go ahead and switch occasionally. We had a good pitching staff with Jack Kramer, Nelson Potter, Bob Muncrief, Sig Jakucki, who was a guy who never knew how to stay in shape. God bless his soul, he's gone now.

D: When you came up and in the World Series was there a certain atmosphere in the clubhouse that you sensed or in the dugout?

B: Atmosphere, oh boy. I tell you something, we thought we were going to win it all. We didn't think the Cardinals could go ahead and beat us and I'll tell you something, I don't recall the incident at the time but we were talking about it. Stan Musial was in the armed services at the time, Navy I think, we were just talking about it, rehashing the games. We won the first game, should have won the second and we lost in six games all told. But we had one bad break in the thing and I can't recall exactly what it was, but if it wasn't for that one bad break we'd have won the Series. And I'll tell you what, the Cardinals didn't have a bad ball club.

D: Everyone was expecting a sweep, from what I've read.

B: I'll tell you something, it was really thrilling based on the fact they called it the Streetcar World Series. That was the most interesting thing to me, is that a matter of fact I'll never forget my last ten days coming up. I took my bat home with me every day when I left the ballpark. I had my bat and I took the streetcar home. I couldn't afford an automobile, so I took a streetcar home and a streetcar to the ballpark and I'd have my bat and my glove with me. That's how things have changed from today to 50 years ago. They don't carry anything now, I don't think they carry their wallets now. They got a pretty good deal, I'm very proud of them, I just wish it were me.

D: What was Sportsman's Park like?

B: Sportsman's Park down the left field line was 351. Left-center field was 375, with something like a 10-foot fence all around. Center field was 425 and 426. Right center field was something like 370. From right center, they had a screen that went from the fence to the roof which was probably a 20-foot span, and the screen went all the way over to the right field foul line. Right field foul line was 310 from home plate and then in order to get it up say another 30 feet, you had to hit it pretty good unless you were lucky enough to go ahead and hit a so-called Pat Seerey fly ball. I don't know if you remember Pat or not, but he was one of the guys who hit 4 home runs in one game in Philadelphia, but he used to hit a ball so high that he would clear anything.

D: One thing about your career, you were an outfielder-first baseman, then you became a catcher. Did you have a very strong arm?

B: I had an excellent arm. I was becoming a big fellow, my family is normally big. When I say big I was 208, 210 pounds when I came up to the big leagues in 1945. When I went to Boston I was 225, 228 [pounds], and I was their third catcher in Boston. And I knew what my job was and I worked with Mr. McCarthy, Joe McCarthy was their manager. Joe assigned me to the bullpen as third catcher. I warmed up the pitchers, I caught the batting practice, I came out in the morning and caught Mr. Williams. I caught Ted which I was very happy and proud to do. Any of the ballplayers in a slump, they'd ask me to come out and I'd be thrilled to death to come out. I didn't care what time of the morning it was, I knew I had a job to do. I had Birdie Tebbetts to contend with and Birdie wasn't going to let me take his position, so I did my job as a third-string catcher.

D: If you don't mind me asking, what have you been doing since your playing days have been over?

B: When I left baseball, it was 1954. When the Browns left for St. Louis, I was able to obtain my release from Mr. Artie Ehlers, who was the new general manager of the Baltimore Orioles coming in. He came in from the Philadelphia Athletics. I knew Mr. Ehlers from his being with the Athletics and I knew under the circumstances that Gus Triandos was going to be their catcher in Baltimore. And I knew that Clint Courtney and Les Moss were going to go there as one of the catchers, both of the catchers and Gus Triandos was finally going to be the regular catcher. And I just asked Mr. Ehlers for my release so I could play my last year in 1954 and get a bonus which I did get, of \$5,000 dollars down in Dallas, Texas. I played in 1954 down in Dallas. I knew when my time was up. I can tell you this — I was offered a job as a big league umpire in the spring of 1953 by Mr. Dusty Boggess who asked me with full authority if I would consider becoming an umpire if I would quit the Browns right now and go into umpiring and I'd come back into the majors in 1954. They wanted me because of my size and I was a pretty good athlete, pretty good with my hands, pretty good with the gloves on. And I wasn't just a wrestler when I had a little battle with somebody. I was pretty good as a kid, I'm nothing now.

D: Did you have any desire to be an umpire?

B: You know what, I really did but I had some very personal problems at home. I had a very sick wife and she had my three children and they needed me more than umpiring did. I had to stick close to home.

D: Any other memories from the '44 season?

B: Not really, being a rookie you're just coming up, all you do is sit back and listen. Most of the guys were old hands at the game. I know they put me in left field for two games and they were so concerned that I wouldn't be playing the hitters right they had me moving from left to right to almost against the back wall because Boston had such great hitters back in those days, they hit 'em a ton. Jim Tabor and a few other guys they had on that ball club, they looked like they brought our left field fence in all the time. Outside of being schooled by the coaches and doing whatever Mr. Sewell wanted me to do,

maybe some of the things to his chagrin I didn't do as well as he expected, but I tried my very best.

D: But overall you'd say it was a pretty enjoyable experience even though you were only there for two weeks?

B: Well, it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I wish to God I could have been there for the whole year. I wish I could have come up in June or July. I was leading the American Association in hitting. If I'm not mistaken I ended up hitting .350 for the year and I think I could have helped the Browns. But the way it ended up, Chet Laabs hitting those two home runs in the last game of the season against the Yankees, [it] was just a great, great thrill just to watch him hit that ball.

D: What was the clubhouse like when he hit those home runs?

B: Clubhouse was a complete storm. Everything was thrown everywhere. We had champagne, beer, they had everything up there.

D: What was it like when the Series was over?

B: Sure, they were disappointed. We knew that the Cardinals were a good ball club. We were kind of glad to keep the Series in St. Louis, we thought that was important for the citizenry. We were very, very disappointed. Hell, those are ballgames for ya, you come back tomorrow. We just had to wait till next year. And honestly I think if we hadn't had Pete, we had our ball club we could have won the pennant in 1945.

D: Was the quality of the ballplaying less during the war than after?

B: We had some ballplayers that were strictly war ballplayers. We got some Double-A players right now in the big leagues. And if it weren't for the 28 teams, which is 12 more than what it used to be, I don't think there's any question about the fact that a lot of these people wouldn't be playing in the big leagues today. And they're making things so much easier, Dave. They got the Astoturf. I asked Stan [Musial] how many more base hits would you have had because of Astroturf. And he said, 'Babe, I got to figure a minimum of 40. He played 22 years, that's 880 hits.