

## Jack McDowell

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2002.  
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*He was rail thin, 6-5, maybe 180 pounds, but "Black" Jack McDowell was pure meanness on a pitcher's mound. From the black White Sox cap pulled down tight, to deep set piercing eyes, to a Van Dyke on his face, McDowell practically dared opposing hitters to try to connect with one of his offerings...most of the time they couldn't.*

*From the period between 1990 through 1994, McDowell won more games than anybody in the American League; he was the legitimate ace on the Sox staff and one of the top pitchers in the game. McDowell was the type of pitcher that when it was his day to start, you knew the Sox were going to win.*

*(Author's Note: Only Greg Maddux won more in baseball)*

*The man could bring it. If it wasn't one of his blazing fastballs, it was a devastating split finger pitch which fell off the table and caused hitters to look silly.*

*Jack was a product of the incredible drafts put together in the mid 80's, by former Sox G.M. Larry Himes. Himes was responsible for getting players like McDowell, Robin Ventura, Frank Thomas and Alex Fernandez. Those players were primarily responsible for turning around a franchise, making it one of the finest in baseball which had actual fans flocking to the new Comiskey Park with the promise of a bright future.*

*For a period of time it looked like nothing was impossible, even a World Series championship. From 1990 through the strike shortened 1994 season, the Sox won 428 games. McDowell thrived in that environment, racking up 83 wins, two 20 or 20+ win seasons, three All-Star appearances (including being the winning pitcher in the 1993 game at Baltimore) and finally a Cy Young Award.*

*After the strike, it all fell apart for the Sox and their fans, but McDowell wasn't around to see it. He was traded to the New York Yankees in a cost cutting move where he continued to win in double figures and pitch in the playoffs. Then came a stop in Cleveland with another double digit win total and still another trip to the post season. While the Sox were blowing the Wild Card lead in September 1996, in part, because their fifth starters were horrific that year, McDowell was pitching for Cleveland, and probably smiling about the irony of it all.*

*His career basically ended because of a surgical accident in 1997. While undergoing a procedure on his pitching arm, an arthroscope placed in his elbow traumatized a nerve, permanently paralyzing a forearm muscle. But he could still play a guitar.*

*And with that Jack began concentrating full time on a new career that he'd been developing for years.*

*In the early 90's McDowell was lead singer and guitarist for V.I.E.W. a rock group that played in the off season and had some moderate success.*

*In fact you can hear some of Jack's tunes if you own the official 1991 White Sox highlight video called "Brand New, Old Fashioned Fun." Now however, he was able to devote his entire energies to playing, singing and songwriting.*

*McDowell is the writer, lead singer and guitarist with Stickfigure which has been playing for 10 years now. They played at the All-Star game party in Milwaukee this past July and have a recently released CD "Ape of the Kings," on the market. It's their third one.*

*McDowell spoke with me driving from his home in San Diego to Los Angeles to record music. We spoke over two consecutive days. Jack talked about his career with the Sox, the contract struggles that engulfed him and the organization, what the Sox did the day after they lost the first game ever played at new Comiskey Park, the stunning revelation that Mark McGwire wanted to join the Pale Hose, the time he sang the Canadian National Anthem on the Dan Patrick ESPN radio show, the reason, according to Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, why the Sox wouldn't sign any big money free agents as long as McDowell played with them, and about life in the tough world of the music business.*

**ML:** Why don't we start with you telling everyone how you got the nickname "Black Jack?"

**JMD:** It came from "Hawk" Harrelson, the Sox TV guy. The first time I even found out about it was when we were in the Metrodome. I was stretching out before the game when Kirby Puckett came over and said "hi, Black Jack!" I said "hi Puck." Then I stopped and thought "what did he call me?" I went back to the dugout and asked the guys and that's when they told me that "Hawk" was calling me that. We never see the TV stuff because we're playing the game at the same time so I didn't know about it. That's how I got the nickname.

**ML:** Jack you came out of Stanford where you helped the Cardinal win the College World Series. How did it happen that you even signed with the Sox? I mean at that time, they weren't very good and you probably wanted to play closer to your home in Southern California.

**JMD:** Remember back in 1987, guys didn't have the same leverage that they do today. Ken Griffey Jr. was the first pick and he signed pretty quick which set the pay scale. I was the fifth pick. Sitting out wouldn't have worked all that great in those days.

**ML:** After an impressive debut in 87', you struggled the next two years. Didn't you have some type of hip injury that really hurt you?

*(Author's Note: Four games, 3-0 record, 1.98 ERA in 28 innings)*

**JMD:** It wasn't really a hip injury, and it may have been my fault for not explaining it better at the time. I was born with an arthritic hip. I've had it all my life and learned to play with it. I adjusted my mechanics for it. After my rookie season, the Sox tinkered with those mechanics and it did certain things to my motion. That caused me to start having some problems with the

hip. I tried to adjust to what they wanted and I realize the coaches were only trying to help, but it wasn't good for me.

I know they didn't want me to hurt my arm but I also realized that I had to pitch the way I wanted. I've seen guys throw all kinds of different ways and that has nothing to do with who gets hurt. It happens. The best coaches are the ones who work with you on the mental aspects of the game not the physical. That's what gets you to the majors and that's why you win. The best coach I ever had was Rick Peterson. When the Sox let him go, it was a real shame.

*(Author's Note: Peterson now is with the Oakland A's and has been a major factor in the rapid development of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito.)*

**ML:** 1990 was your breakout year. You went to spring training as the fifth starter but quickly became the ace of the staff. What was the difference, was it just the fact that you were healthy?

**JMD:** I don't know if it was that exactly. I do know we had a much better team. When I first came up to the Sox, I've got to tell you, I had a better defensive team in college! I had a solid season in 1988. I know my record was only 5-10, but in a lot of those games, I pitched pretty well only I either didn't get a decision, or I left with a lead and we couldn't hold it. In 1989 the Sox held me back, they sent me back down to the minors and when I got there I tried to throw harder. That's didn't work. Finally, I figured out what I had to do to be successful and I used that when I came back up in 1990. I finally got it.

**ML:** That 1990 team is revered by a lot of fans because you guys did all the little things needed to win games. You were a consensus pick for last place yet you won 94 games and shocked baseball.

**JMD:** That was the year a lot of us guys came together. Me, Greg (Hibbard), Melido (Perez), Robin (Ventura), Frank (Thomas) and Alex (Fernandez). We had a core group that came up through the minors together. I thought that we were going to surprise people. We were a lot like the Angels this past season. It doesn't matter if you play in a big market or a small market. That doesn't win or lose you games. You win when you develop good organizations.

**ML:** You had the honor of starting and winning the last game ever at old Comiskey Park. I know that was special for the fans, especially those who lived in Chicago all their life, but how special was it for you and the guys?

**JMD:** That was great...it was an honor. It was a tremendous atmosphere... the park was packed, everybody was excited. In a way I was used to it because I also started the last game ever at Rickwood Field when I was with the Birmingham Barons. Rickwood Field was the oldest park still in use at that time, major or minor leagues.

**ML:** Was it hard to focus that day because of all the hoopla? I mean the park was packed with politicians, musicians and Hollywood celebrities.

*(Author's Note: Among the dignitaries at the park that day were Governor Jim Thompson, Mayor Richard M. Daley, Styx, the Oak Ridge Boys, George Wendt, who played "Norm" from the TV show "Cheers", John Candy, Billy Cunningham, Wayne Gretzky, Maureen O' Hara, Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn.)*

**JMD:** No, it was a fun day. You talked about Goldie Hawn; she watched the game from one of the skyboxes. But before the game, I'm in the training room on the table, getting a rub down before I go out to warm up. The door open and she walks in... not only to the locker room, but in the trainer's room! I'm lying there half naked and she sits right down a few feet from where I'm at.

**ML:** You also started the first game ever in new Comiskey Park when it opened against the Tigers. We won't talk very much about what happened that day though!

*(Author's Note: The Sox lost 16-0!)*

**JMD:** That was a strange game. Sammy Sosa fell down going after a ball in right field, we gave up some bad hop hits, and the Tigers had a 10-run inning. The next day some of the guys were concerned that maybe the baseball 'gods' were angry because we left old Comiskey Park. So before the game, before the fans got in, we had a little ceremony out by second base. We took Scott Radinsky's jersey and burned it. We just wanted to make sure the baseball 'gods' knew it wasn't our fault that we left the old park!

**ML:** 1991 was the year you not only became a good pitcher but you started to dominate other clubs. In July for example, you fired a one-hitter against the Brewers in Milwaukee. It was unusual because Paul Molitor led off the game with a home run, after that, nine no-hit innings. Was that just another step up in maturing as a pitcher?

**JMD:** I really looked around to see how guys who won played at this level. I saw that the successful pitchers threw a lot of innings. That's what I decided I needed to do. I had 15 complete games that year, which today is a couple years worth. When it was my turn to pitch I wanted to take the ball, pitch, and finish what I started. A lot of games, and complete games, are lost because pitchers will get taken out with a 5-0 lead after five innings. I didn't want to have that happen to me. That really helped the team too because the bullpen guys got the day off. A lot of fans don't know how important that is. I'd much rather have a bullpen that was underworked then overworked.

**ML:** How important was Carlton Fisk to your career?

**JMD:** He helped tremendously. I really only had about one and a half pitches when I started. I had a fastball and was developing the split finger pitch; I would have gotten killed without a catcher like him. He taught me how to use my fastball. There were games when I'd throw 20, 25 fastballs in a row. Carlton though was moving them around... in and out, up and down and I was able to succeed. The way he prepared, the class that he had, the way he played the game... you can't get better than him.

**ML:** 1992 saw you take your game to an even higher level; you hit the 20 win mark, over 260 innings pitched and an ERA of just over three. You seemed to develop a reputation as a 'gamer', a 'bulldog,' someone who just refused to lose and the Sox seemed to respond to that.

**JMD:** Those were fun years. I was locked in. You talked about the other guys knowing we were going to win that day. That's true; I had guys tell me that. I wanted to be consistent, to give a consistent performance. The most important thing in baseball is consistency. You have to pitch well every time out, it doesn't do any good to pitch three or four good games in a row then have two bad ones."

**ML:** In 1993 of course, you won the Cy Young Award, The Sporting News named you "Pitcher of the Year" and the Sox won the divisional title with 94 wins. You pitched really well since 1990, but 93 had to be your best season wasn't it?

**JMD:** Those three seasons, 1991 through 1993 were actually pretty close. If you look at the numbers in terms of ERA and innings pitched they were about the same, but here was the difference. In 1991, I won 17 and had four blown games. In 1992 it was 20 wins and three blown games, but in 1993 it was 22 wins and zero blown games.

*(Author's Note: That's where McDowell left with a lead and the bullpen couldn't hold it.)*

**ML:** I recently watched my tape of the 93' post game celebration which I got off the ABC network feed, and it looked like you were a pretty happy camper that night!

**JMD:** That's what it's all about... winning. You play and work as hard as you do, to win championships. I was never fortunate enough to get to a World Series, so for me the highlight was winning divisional titles and getting into the playoffs.

**ML:** Let's talk about the 1993 A.L.C.S. I read an interview a few years ago where then Jays manager Cito Gaston claimed that you and Alex Fernandez were tipping your pitches and that's why the Jays were able to win. Do you think that's true?

**JMD:** The Jays had a real good team that season. They were a veteran bunch of guys. I went 22-10 in the regular season and they beat me three times, and I'm not talking about losing to them 2-1. They just beat me up. Sometimes it happens that a team has your number no matter what you do. Could I have been tipping something? Maybe... but the Jays were a bunch known for being able to steal and relay signs from the bases to their hitters too.

**ML:** 1994 was the strike year. How tough was it for you and the guys knowing as the calendar crept towards August that the clock was ticking on a labor impasse?

**JMD:** I thought that we were going to be out longer than a week or 10 days but I never felt the rest of the year was going to be cancelled. The Sox felt that we had to be in first place when the strike hit because we didn't know what could happen. The last month, the Sox went with a four man rotation. My last three wins were all complete games and all on three days rest. It turned out we did finish the year in first.

**ML:** When the strike hit did the players even think that not only would the season be cancelled but that it marked the end for that group of Sox players as well?

**JMD:** I didn't know what the organization was going to do. I don't think anybody thought they were going to tear the team up. For me, I put up great numbers for four years. I played hard every time I put that uniform on. I wanted to win, but was never offered a multi-year deal. It was one of those things. Maybe someday I'll sit down with Jerry (Reinsdorf) and find out what happened.

**ML:** Do you think some people in upper management had hard feelings towards you?

**JMD:** I don't know why they would. Fans don't know this, but not only was I never offered a multi-year contract, I was never even offered a one year deal! The Sox just automatically took me right to arbitration three years in a row, they just didn't negotiate with me. Did that piss me off? Yes. Should I have said some of the things that I did to the media? Probably not. I didn't play the game as far as the team image was concerned, but I was just telling the truth about what was going on.

*(Author's Note: McDowell won one of those salary hearings)*

**ML:** You were traded to the Yankees in a cost cutting move after the 94' season. Management claimed they had to try to recoup some of their losses from the shortened season. A lot of Sox fans feel it was just a personal vendetta against you. All things considered, were you happy to leave?

**JMD:** I regretted it. I loved Chicago and we had one of the best teams going. 1995 was extremely fun for me though. We made the playoffs, had that great series with Seattle and Don Mattingly got a chance to play in the post season.

*(Author's Note: Jack won 15 games with the Yankees.)*

**ML:** During the period of 1990 through 1994 the Sox were one of the best teams in baseball but you only made the playoffs one time and never got to a World Series. Was that the biggest disappointment for you?

**JMD:** That was tough. They didn't have the three division set up or the Wild Card until 1994. We happened to be in the same division with Oakland and they had a great team. We probably would have made the playoffs three years in a row if they did. We were just scratching and clawing to try to stay with the A's. That would have helped us because very rarely does a team do something like the Angels did this past year, get in for the first time and win everything right off.

**ML:** I'm not trying to place blame here, but the Sox as good as they were, always seemed to be one piece short, whether it was another starter or another big bat to go with Thomas and Ventura. Do you think the organization did everything they could to get to a World Series?

**JMD:** That's tough to say. I know that Mark McGwire wanted to come here. He called me three times in about a 10 day period after the 1991 season. He asked me about the other guys in the clubhouse, about the coaching staff and about the city of Chicago. I honestly felt we were going to get him. I called Robin (Ventura) to let him know what was going on and I remember he was excited. He told me "alright...we're going to kick ass." The Sox then asked Frank (Thomas) if he'd go to DH full time so that Mark could play first and he said no.

One time I was talking with Jerry Reinsdorf and he told me the reason the Sox wouldn't go out and sign any big name, big money free agents is because they were concerned about how I'd react to it. We had those contract issues all those years and they thought I'd get angry over it. I looked at him and said it wouldn't bother me, especially if I was looking at my World Series ring! All I ever wanted to do was win, I didn't care how much somebody else made.

**ML:** You mentioned Frank Thomas. He's had his share of controversy over the past few seasons, what do you think of his situation?

**JMD:** A lot of guys have taken him the wrong way. Players have different personalities. If you have 25 guys on a team, they're not all going to think or act the same way. And you don't want that anyway. Frank has had to answer a lot of charges against him the past few years. Maybe he'll give some thought to what's being said and try to change a little to keep his legacy as a great player intact.

**ML:** Tell me about playing for Jeff Torborg and Gene Lamont.

**JMD:** Both were very different guys. Jeff was real animated, very spirited. Gene was quiet, low key, mellow. I really enjoyed playing for Jeff because of his style and enthusiasm. We were a group that wanted to win, like the A's and Angels of today, he was really good for us.

**ML:** Now that you're out of baseball do you miss it?

**JMD:** I miss the game. I miss playing because you have to remember this is something that I did every single day from the time I was six years old. I played for 30 years.

**ML:** Can you sum up your stay with the White Sox? Was it a good time for you because I know Sox fans sure enjoyed seeing you pitch.

**JMD:** It was an amazing time. Chicago is my second home. I consider Chicago by far, the best city in the country and I tell everybody that. The way it plays out, you get a small town feel, especially in the neighborhoods but it has everything you want in a big city. The people here are great.

**ML:** It unusual when a person has great success in one field then goes on to have as much success in a totally different field. But that's happening to you...from baseball to music. Let's talk about your new career. Was music always a part of your life?

**JMD:** Music was a huge part of my life. When I was a kid, I'd listen to a song on the record player and be writing down the lyrics. My brothers and sisters were all into music, in fact my sister worked for Chrysalis and MCA Records. I was brought up on what's now called 'classic rock.' I'd listen to The Beatles, The Who, Jethro Tull; I got what it was all about. It was very therapeutic for me. I know that I'm extremely fortunate to have the passion for music that I do and the means to be able to pursue that.

**ML:** I imagine there are a lot of similarities between athletics and music. Both take time, talent, dedication and a drive to be the best doesn't it?

**JMD:** Sure, the only real difference is that in baseball you're competing against someone else. In music you're competing against yourself. You're trying to do the best you can do. That's the challenge, to be able to craft something for you, that you're happy with, but also to do something good enough that someone listening to it can relate to it.

**ML:** Your first group V.I.E.W. was around when you were pitching with the Sox in the early 90's. I recently listened to some of your songs again like "Sunday Driving," and "Tell Me Something." Who were you influenced by in those days because I thought I picked up a little R.E.M. in that work.

**JMD:** "It was pretty obvious that I was ripping off R.E.M. (laughing). It was just me on an acoustic 12 string and a Rickenbacker guitar. I told that to Pete Buck last year when I saw him at a show. He said that he liked what Stickfigure was doing."

**ML:** Why did V.I.E.W. split up? It seemed that you guys were on your way to at least some regional success.

**JMD:** It was a logistical problem, the logistics of baseball. At that time I certainly wasn't going to give up my baseball career for music. That meant that we only had a short period of time in the off season to try to do anything musically. I, and everyone else, had to be able to do this full time; I wanted to do this at the highest level. The timing wasn't right then.

**ML:** It's 10 years later, now you're hooked in with Stickfigure. How has your music changed and how is the new band different from the old one?

**JMD:** V.I.E.W. was more of an acoustic sound; I wanted to start to express things more electrically. The first Stickfigure CD was V.I.E.W. with more power; the second emphasized a loud guitar and the latest CD "Ape of the Kings," shows my pop face. The song structures are different. I wanted to keep my music varied. I'm not the type to be pigeonholed. That's why I keep the reigns on production.

**ML:** It's plug time. How can Sox fans check out your music?

**JM:** They can go to our website [www.stickfigure.com](http://www.stickfigure.com) You get buy our CD's there, and check out audio and video cuts. We've got the song lyrics posted, as well as info on the band. There's

also a place on the site where you can send me e-mails. I'm pretty good about getting back to everyone who asks questions.

**ML:** Is the music business hard on your family? I know you have three small children at home yet you have to make time to promote your music and play around the country.

**JMD:** "In baseball it was a situation where I'd be on the road for two weeks at a time, and then when I got home, I'd still be working because we'd still be playing. I didn't have a lot of time for anything. Here I know I have to devote time to be a father, so I'm not going to take off and tour for six months at a time. I make sure that I can get home for at least a few weeks in a row and just be a dad 24/7."

**ML:** What inspires your writing?

**JMD:** Day to day life. I look at what draws emotions in me. I'm not a song crafter; I write what moves me on an interpersonal, human level.

**ML:** I am always amazed at musicians like Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Those guys literally wrote hundreds of songs. As someone who just doesn't have a talent to do that, how does someone actually create a song?

**JMD:** There's no one way to write a song. I've used a few different ways. One way is that I'll be on the guitar just messing around, and I'll hit on a chord change that sounds good. I work from that and try to come up with a melody. Once I have that, then I'll work on lyrics, trying to find words that fit the cadence.

Another way is that I'll come up with a word or a string of words that sound good first. I'll write them down on a slip of paper. Later on more words might come to me and I'll write them down. Soon I'll have a bunch of scraps of paper with different words or phrases on them. I'll then try to put them together into something that makes sense. Then I work on the music for it.

I've also written songs when I've been deeply moved. An example of that is when my daughter Olivia Mae was born. I was just so emotional at the time. I was driving home from the hospital and I had this chord in my head. By the time I got home I was already starting to put things together, words and music.

*(Author's Note: Jack and his wife, have three children, ages seven, six and two)*

**ML:** Do you do all your writing alone? Or do the other guys in the band have input?

**JMD:** You know I've never been with a band that wrote together. In the past, because of baseball, I never had the time. I had to try to get as much done as quickly as possible, so I did it myself. That's one of the things that I'm looking forward to. Now that I do have the time, I want to see what happens when everyone contributes.

**ML:** Musically who do you listen to? Who's style inspires you?

**JMD:** The Replacements, Tom Petty, Wilco, Paul Westerberg.

**Jack McDowell's favorite albums:**

Wilco *"Summerteeth"*

Frank Black And The Catholics *"Frank Black And The Catholics"*

The Beatles *"Abbey Road"*

The Replacements *"All For Nothing"*

Julian Cope *"My Nation Underground"*

Pearl Jam *"No Code"*

The Smiths *"The Queen Is Dead"*

The Beatles *"Revolver"*

Elvis Costello *"The Very Best Of Elvis Costello"*

R.E.M. *"Life's Rich Pageant"*

**ML:** Before I let you go, you've got to tell us about you, the Canadian National Anthem and the Dan Patrick ESPN radio show!

**JMD:** "I've known Dan for a long time, he's a great guy. Last month I was on his radio show and we were both ripping on the Disney Company. Disney owns ESPN and the Angels. I was telling him about how the Angels said that they'd have me sing the National Anthem before one of their games this year and it never happened. Dan said that I'd have probably screwed it up anyway. So I told him "Dan, I've heard that song 200 times a year for 12 years, there's no way I'd have messed it up. In fact I could sing you the Canadian National Anthem right now and get it right." so I did!"



