

J.C. Martin

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2002.
Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2002.

The time period from 1951 through 1967 is regarded by most Sox fans as the "Golden Age" of the franchise. It was a time when the Sox organization, along with their fans, expected and demanded that the team not only win every season but also contend for a championship. This the Sox did, having a winning record for 17 straight seasons, one of the longest streaks in major league baseball history. The Sox were also the only team in the league that contended every year of the Yankees dynasty, playing the New Yorkers tooth and nail.

J.C. Martin was right in the center of that age. Martin came up to the Sox in September of 1959 and was there when the Sox clinched the pennant in Cleveland. Martin also was the Sox primary catcher during the historic pennant races of 1964 and 1967. He caught some of the best pitchers in the decade including Sox aces Joe Horlen, Gary Peters and Tommy John. Martin went on to win a World Series with the 1969 New York Mets and finished his career with the last of the great Cub teams in the early 1970's.

After his baseball career ended he worked with Harry Caray and Bill Mercer in the Sox TV booth in 1975.

Baseball is certainly in the Martin family, son Jay went on to have a fine college career at Wheaton College and is now the head baseball coach at Malone College in Canton, Ohio.

J.C. recently spoke with me from his home in North Carolina, where he's retired and living the good life which includes a lot of golf.

ML: How did you get the nickname J.C.?

JCM: My actual name is Joseph Clifton Martin, but I had two grandfathers who were also named Joseph. So, to avoid any confusion my family took to calling me J.C. When you live in the South you find that using initials is pretty common.

(Author's Note: Martin is from Virginia)

ML: Do you remember who scouted you and how it came about that you signed with the White Sox?

JCM: I was scouted by a guy named Harry Postove. He scouted me for three years when I was in high school. The day after my high school graduation, I went up to Chicago and worked out for three days at old Comiskey Park. I remember seeing guys like Nellie Fox, Early Wynn, Luis Aparicio, Sherm Lollar... they were all there watching us. I signed for four thousand... that was the limit on salary in those days. If you signed for any more, you were considered a "bonus baby" and had to stay with the major league club for two years. I started my minor league career in Holdridge, Nebraska with Gary Peters.

ML: You came up for a few games late in 1959. What was it like to finally be in the big leagues and in a pennant race to boot?

JCM: It was pretty exciting. I think six guys came up from Indianapolis, which was the Sox Triple-A affiliate. I came up along with oh, Johnny Callison, Joe Hicks and Ron Jackson. I'm sure there were a few others.

ML: Speaking of pennant races, were you in Cleveland the night the Sox clinched the title? If so, what was that like?

JCM: I was... talk about exciting. That stadium was completely full. Cleveland had a massive stadium. It was a real thrill. I still remember Gerry Staley coming in to pitch to Vic Power. Staley threw one pitch, Power hit into a double play and that was it. It was pandemonium in the locker room. Then we flew right back to Chicago to Midway Airport. I don't know how many people were there but it was a lot. I know we had to get on a bus and drive out to where our cars were parked. A bunch of us players lived in the Piccadilly Hotel during the season and that's where I eventually got back to.

(Author's Note: The Chicago Sun-Times the next day estimated the crowd at 125,000)

ML: How did you go from being a first baseman to a catcher?

JCM: Ron Jackson was a big 6-8 guy, the Sox expected a lot out of him. He was the first baseman at Indianapolis. I also played first, so my manager told me that I had a choice. I could learn to play third base and stay at Indianapolis, or keep playing first, but they would have to send me down to a lower minor league level. I wanted to stay in Triple-A so I made the switch. The next year the Sox traded Earl Battey and John Romano and didn't have any catchers in the farm system. Manager Al Lopez told me that if I'd go down to the minor leagues and try to learn how to catch, he'd get me a little more money. Lopez also said that if it didn't work out, he still would bring me up to the big club, only as a third baseman. I went to Savannah, Georgia for three months and worked with Les Moss on catching. I was able to pick it up and that's where I wound up playing.

ML: In the early 60's, the Sox never won less than 85 games and in 1963 they won 94, but never came close to the Yankees. How frustrating was that for you and the guys?

JCM: It was really tough. The Yankees just had so much that nobody could compete. I'll give you an example; the three Yankee catchers in the early 60's were Yogi Berra, Elston Howard and Johnny Blanchard. Those three guys could have played on any team in the world! They had guys like Bob Cerv and Hector Lopez coming off the bench. They had pitchers like Luis Arroyo and Ryan Duran to close out games. They were tremendous. We'd battle them and stay with them for a bit but could never catch them.

ML: In 1964 came the first of the great pennant races. The Sox won 98 games including the last nine in a row and still finished one game behind the Yankees. As you headed into the final few games was the club optimistic that they were going to catch them and take the title?

JCM: The end of the year was a strange thing. You see the Yankees had back to back double headers against the Indians, who were a strong club. We all knew the schedule and we all felt that Cleveland was going to split with them. Remember those games were in Cleveland.

We thought we had a great shot. So what happens, the Yanks sweep both doubleheaders! All we could do is our part, win games, and we did that. We did everything that we could.

(Author's Note: J.C.'s memory is faulty here, the Yankees finished at home with Cleveland winning two out of the three games)

ML: During those last few days did Al Lopez ever say anything to the players about who would be on the World Series roster or what the pitching rotation would be?

JCM: No. Al never said one word. No plans were made. Now he probably knew in his own mind what he would be doing. But he didn't say anything about it. Al never said much anyway.

ML: What was it like playing for "The Senor"?

JCM: He was great. Al was the kind of manager who let you play. He wouldn't run you down by playing you day after day after day. He knew the game. He got me into the big leagues and I have nothing but respect for him. We all did.

ML: The Sox won 95 games in 1965 but all everyone seems to remember was the 'frozen ball' controversy. As an honest Southern gentleman, I've got to ask you, did the Sox freeze the balls?

JCM: (laughing) I have no information that actually happened. But I will tell you this; the balls that year were the heaviest and had the highest seams I've ever seen. When a ball is moist the seams pop up and that went on all year. I'll tell you a story, we were playing the Twins and Harmon Killebrew hit a shot to right center and he stood there and watched it. Well the ball hit the wall and Harmon had to suddenly start running. So the next time he comes up, he tells me, "J.C. there's something going on with those balls." He knew when he hit a ball good and when it should have been a home run! Remember that we had other advantages at Comiskey Park. Gene Bossard, our head groundskeeper, drilled two holes in the dirt in front of home plate. He'd stick a hose in those and floor the whole area, turning it into mud. You couldn't have driven a ball past our infield with a cannon. The ball would hit that mud on its way out to the infield and just die.

Here's another story, I swear it's true. Right before a game one time against Minnesota, I saw the whole Twins team come out of the dugout and start stomping the ground in front of home plate. Everybody! They were trying to pack that loose dirt back down.

ML: Eddie Stanky arrived as manager for the 1966 season. He was a lot different from Lopez. What was he like to play for?

JCM: He was tough. He was so different from Al. He intimidated. He'd fine guys for anything. He knew baseball... no question, but he couldn't manage people. After a little while the players would lose interest and loyalty. He actually pumped up the other team more because he was always getting on them.

I'll never forget, it was in 1967 we got into Boston and went to bed. The next morning I pick up a Boston paper and see this big headline... 'Yaz an All Star from the neck down...' Stanky ripped him to the press. Man, "Yaz" wound up hitting everything we threw at him but the rosin bag!

ML: You brought up 1967. Sox fans remember that great pennant race. Four teams within a game of each other going into the last week. How did the Sox stay with Minnesota, Boston and Detroit for so long without big hitters like Al Kaline, Willie Horton, Carl Yastrzemski, and Killebrew in the lineup?

JCM: We had pitching and defense. If you have that, you'll be in every game and we knew how to manufacture runs. Guys knew how to bunt, hit and run, steal bases. We knew what we had to do to win.

ML: It's been 35 years but do you still remember the locker room after dropping that double header to the last place Kansas City A's the last week of the season?

JCM: Absolutely. We were in shock. We were supposed to play a pair of single games but the first one got rained out. We played a double header the next night. They beat Gary Peters and Joe Horlen. That again was Stanky's fault. Al Lopez had a saying 'let sleeping dogs lie.' Stanky didn't believe in that. Those Kansas City guys like "Catfish" Hunter, Reggie Jackson, Sal Bando, they hated us, and they wanted to beat us so bad because Stanky threw at them all year. Rick Monday and Danny Cater, a lot of bad blood between us. I remember that afterwards absolutely nobody spoke in the locker room, nobody said a word. I remember that vividly like it was yesterday. That year still sticks in my craw.

ML: You finally did reach the World Series in 1969 with the Mets. Joining you were fellow Sox players Tommie Agee and Al Weis. You were involved in that controversial bunt play, tell me were you in the baseline or not?

JCM: Remember first base is actually in fair territory. If you are a left-handed hitter and you run inside that double line just to the right of the base, you'll never even touch the bag if you run straight at it. I ran straight towards the bag. The funny thing is that nobody really made a big deal about it until the papers came out the next day. They had a picture that showed Pete Richert's throw hitting my on the left wrist.

(Author's Note: The play occurred in the 10th inning of Game #3 which the Mets won 2-1)

ML: J.C. you were involved in some of the best pitched games of the 60's. I'd like to go back over some of them and tell me what you remember. We'll start with July 29, 1963. The Sox were leading the Senators in Washington 1-0. Joe Horlen had a no-hitter going into the 9th inning...

not only did Horlen lose the no-hitter but he lost the game when Don Lock belted a two run homer. What happened?

JCM: Chuck Hinton got on base with a hit up the middle that Joe just missed getting his glove on. "Bobo" Osborne was coming up; he was a left handed hitter and a straight fastball pull hitter. On a 2-2 pitch I called a curve that just missed. Now the count's 3-2. I call a fastball because I don't want to get beat by having Horlen not throw his best pitch in this situation. Hinton takes off running because it's 3-2 and Osborne grounds a ball to the left of second base. Because Hinton's running we can't turn a double play. Lock comes up. Remember it's still only 1-0 and we're trying to win the game. Joe hung a curve and Lock hit it out for a 2-1 win. Afterwards nobody's saying anything in the clubhouse; nobody's even taking off their uniform.

Al Lopez comes up to me and yells "you idiot! You should have called for a fastball on Osborne with a 2-2 count." I didn't say anything. I've thought about this a lot over the years and don't feel what Lopez said was justified. Osborne was a fastball hitter and he was looking for that pitch from Joe. We almost had him struck out on the curve.

ML: How about May 30, 1966? Sox pitcher Jack Lamabe threw a one-hitter beating Jose Santiago and the Red Sox 11-0. The Sox took a pair that afternoon and shut out the Bosox in both games.

JCM: Jack had real good stuff that day. It was late in the game, I'm sorry I don't remember the exact inning or the hitter but Jack shook me off on what I wanted him to throw. We went with what Jack wanted to throw and the guy hit it into center field for their only hit. I've got an autographed picture of me and Jack and he signed it "To J.C. I should have thrown what you wanted. It was my mistake!

(Author's Note: It was Joe Foy who singled leading off the 8th inning)

ML: And now the big one, September 10, 1967. In the middle of a pennant race Horlen no-hits the Tigers 6-0 at Comiskey Park.

JCM: Joe was great that day. In the 9th inning we got the first two guys out. I called time and went out to the mound. I asked Joe what he wanted to throw to the next hitter, Dick McAuliffe. Joe payed me a great compliment because he said "you've called the first eight plus innings, you finish it up." I knew that McAuliffe was both a good pull hitter and a good inside-out opposite field hitter. I wanted to take something away from him, so I decided we were going to pitch him away. Dick hit one to our shortstop Ron Hansen who threw him out. When we got him everyone was out on the mound. It was exciting. We couldn't dwell on it for too long though because we had to play a second game. Anyway about a week later, we're in the locker room. My locker was right next to Joe's. He looks over and asks me if the club did anything for me for catching the no-hitter. I told him they didn't. Right there Joe goes into his locker and writes me out a check. He gives it to me and says "I wish it could be for more." That's the kind of guy he is.

ML: Former Sox coach Charlie Metro has just come out with a book called "Safe by a Mile." In it he talks about you and the fact that you had to catch knuckleballers like Hoyt Wilhelm, Eddie

Fisher and Wilbur Wood. Metro says you were the only guy who could catch Wilhelm. What was that like?

JCM: It was exciting because you never knew where the ball was going. Seriously, it could do a 90 degree break and then double back! If you didn't wait, you just couldn't see it. You'd have to snatch it when it was right on top of you. It's the best pitch I've ever seen a relief guy throw.

ML: Did those guys throw the knuckleball the same way?

JCM: No. Hoyt had the most consistent pitch. The other guys had good ones but every so often they'd throw one that would spin and then they'd get hit. Hoyt's always worked.

ML: You regularly caught some of the best pitchers of the 60's and many of them were with the Sox. I'd like to give you some names and have you tell me about them. What kind of pitchers were they? What did they throw and what were they like to catch?

Ray Hebert (1961-1964. Winning pitcher in the 1962 All-Star game at Wrigley Field, 20 game winner 1963, Sox record 48-32)

(Author's Note: Keep in mind that the won-lost records of some of these great pitchers is skewed because in 1968 through 1970 the Sox lost a total of 295 games!)

JCM: Ray was a good pitcher. He had a good curve ball, good cutter. He wasn't overpowering. He made you hit the ball, usually on the ground.

ML: Joe Horlen (1961-1971. Had a 1.88 ERA in 1964. Won 19 games in 1967, member of the 1967 All-Star team, led A.L. in ERA that same year at 2.06, threw no-hitter against Detroit on September 10, 1967. Also led league with six shutouts that same season. Sox record 115-104)

JCM: Joe was a competitor. Regardless of the score, regardless if he was ahead or behind, he pitched well and gave you everything he had. He should have won a lot more games with us but we never could score him a lot of runs. He was a hard luck pitcher. He threw about 90-91 miles an hour but he was a control guy. He never threw a straight ball, everything moved. He had a curve and a slider. Very underrated pitcher. When I see Greg Maddux pitch, I think of him and he never walked anybody, he just didn't.

ML: Johnny Buzhardt (1962-1967. Won 13 games in 1965, consistently beat the Yankees. Sox record 49-52)

JCM: "I haven't heard his name in years, he's from South Carolina. Sinkerballer. He was perfectly suited to Comiskey Park with its high grass. A ground ball pitcher."

ML: Gary Peters (1959-1969. Won 19 games in 1963, Co-Rookie of the Year 1963. Led the league in ERA in 1963 at 2.33. Won 20 games in 1964. Member of the 1964 All-Star team. Led the league in ERA in 1966 at 1.97. Won 16 games in 1967 and was a member of the 1967 All-

Star team. Threw a pair of one-hitters in his career versus Baltimore in 1963 and versus California in 1967. Sox record 91-78)

JCM: Gary started out with me in the Rookie League in Nebraska and he should have been in the big leagues two years earlier than he was. For some reason the Sox made him stop throwing his slider. In spring training 1961, Al Lopez called me over and asked if Gary threw a slider. I told him Gary threw a great slider, that it was his out pitch. Lopez went over to talk to Gary and told him to start throwing it. Gary did and you saw the results. He had terrific control and his windup was so smooth that before you knew it the pitch was on you. He broke a lot of bats, I can tell you that. He also had a fine curve.

He was also smart. One year we were in Yankee Stadium. Gary wound up shutting them out and afterwards the Yankees told the newspaper guys that they were sitting on his slider, they were waiting for it, but guess what, Gary never threw it!

ML: Juan Pizarro (1961-1966. Won 16 games in 1963, member of the 1963 All-Star team. Won 19 games in 1964 and was a member of that All-Star team. Threw a one-hitter against Washington on August 11, 1965. Sox record 75-47.)

JCM: Juan was pitching with Milwaukee and wasn't doing very well. He was pretty wild but somehow Al Lopez and pitching coach Ray Berres saw something in him and we got him in a trade. Those guys knew more about pitching than anybody I've ever seen. They straightened him out. He was tough. He threw a wicked curve, a hard fastball and a good change.

ML: Tommy John (1965-1971. Won 14 games both in 1965 and 1966. Member of the 1968 All-Star team. Sox record 82-80 but overall in his career won 288 games.)

JCM: He was a fun guy. He was a pleasure to catch because he only had one pitch, an 82 mile an hour sinker. Guys on the other team would see him and be yelling 'go warm up' because they couldn't believe he was throwing that softly. He'd throw 20 ground ball outs a game. He threw more "worm killers" than anybody I'd ever seen.

(Author's Note: ground balls)

ML: After you retired you worked in the Sox TV booth with Harry Carey and Bill Mercer. Did you enjoy that experience?

JCM: Not really. I didn't really fit in with Harry. He didn't want to work with me. We didn't hit it off at all. I wasn't used to working with a guy that had that kind of authority and Harry used that against me. I was only there for one year. Now Bill Mercer was a great guy, he helped me out a lot. If I had Bill when I started out, I think I'd have been a lot better and things would have worked out. Harry just left me out to dry. I'll give you an example, we were in Milwaukee doing a game and the Brewers had a pre-game activity which saw the Milwaukee wives playing a game before the regularly scheduled one. That game caused the regular game to start late. Harry opened the telecast and then just left the booth. He left me there by myself for it must have been 15-20 minutes.

ML: You and Joe Horlen were invited back by the Sox this year to throw out the first pitch at the home opener against Baltimore. Did you enjoy that?

JCM: Oh my yes! We were treated like royalty by the Sox. We stayed at the Hyatt Regency and they sent a limo to pick us up and take us to the game. It was exciting to go back out on the field and see the crowd. It was a real thrill.

ML: How would you sum up your baseball career?

JCM: I wouldn't trade it for anything. I spent 13-14 years in the big leagues seeing the best players ever, guys like Bob Gibson, Willie Mays, and Carl Yastrzemski. Players like that just aren't around anymore. Baseball was better back then... they didn't have the DH which has killed all the suspense in the American League, and the ballparks were fair. You didn't have this emphasis on hitting home runs all the time. It was great.



