

Ed Herrmann

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2003. Originally published at White Sox Interactive in 2003.

His nickname was "Fort" as in "Fort Herrmann."

True, Ed Herrmann wasn't a Johnny Bench, a Carlton Fisk or a Thurman Munson... but then none of those highly regarded catchers was as good at blocking the plate as Herrmann who used a football player's mentality when it came to the art of knocking down and blocking off runners at home plate.

While Ed overall wasn't on par with those three contemporaries of his, he still was better than 75 per cent of the catchers in the major leagues and reversed the White Sox trend of having great fielding, no-hit catchers. Ed averaged in double figures in home runs for the Sox between 1970 and 1974 while providing stellar defense. He was good enough to make the 1974 All-Star team although he couldn't play because of an injury. Herrmann was a small part of the 1967 club that almost won the pennant and then played a major part in the South Side revival that took place in 1971 and 1972.

After being traded by the club in a contract dispute, he spent time with the Yankees, Angels, Astros and Expos. While with Houston he caught the no-hitter thrown by Larry Dierker and retired after the 1978 campaign.

Today Ed is a scout for the Kansas City Royals, coaches at Mesa Junior College and also coaches the top ranked 14 and under youth league team in the country.

I spoke with Ed over the phone from his home in the San Diego area where the subjects ranged from trying to catch Sox knuckle ballers like Wilbur Wood, Eddie Fisher and Hoyt Wilhelm, to how the "Big White Machine" came about, to the stirring 1972 season, to what it was like having Dick Allen as a teammate, and how the Sox could have traded him over a two thousand dollar salary dispute.

ML: Ed you signed with and came up through the Braves organization, how did the White Sox get your contract?

EH: Before the major league draft was started a player had options. He could sign with anybody he wanted. My grandfather had played with the Braves and I thought that would be a good organization for me. The Braves actually offered me 12 thousand dollars less than the Cubs did, but I signed anyway. I signed as a right handed hitting pitcher if you can believe that. I was forced to give up hitting from the right side when I hurt my ankle, I couldn't push off from that side. Hollis Thurston (*Author's Note: White Sox scout*) remembered me when my name came up in discussion among the Sox. He knew that I could do some different things so the Sox took me

and put me on their Triple-A roster in 1964 as a catcher. In 1965 I went to Sarasota, Florida for spring training for the first time.

ML: Do you remember your first day in the major leagues?

EH: I sure do. It was a Sunday in mid-August 1967. Jerry McNertney got hurt and the Sox called down to Evansville for me. We were actually on the road at the time. My manager came to get me and told me the Sox wanted me up. I said that I'd have to go back to Evansville to get my stuff and he said they wanted me there now. So I went right up to Chicago. I remember spending my first day there shopping for two suits because you had to have them on road trips. In the minor leagues we didn't have to wear them because they knew we couldn't afford to get any.

ML: In 1967 you got into two games and went two for three. Do you remember your first at bat?

EH: The Sox were in Boston. My first at bat I drove a ball the other way off the "Green Monster" for an RBI double. It was off Jose' Santiago. I remember thinking "this is easy..." (laughing) (*Author's Note: The hit came on September 1, 1967*)

ML: What was it like for a rookie to be involved in that incredible pennant race?

EH: I thought it was great. Every day you'd get to the ballpark and be ready to play. I quickly learned that Eddie Stanky was a tough manager. He was very harsh on the everyday players. He used to really get on Ken Boyer because he expected Kenny to be the leader and to produce. Kenny used to tell him "it's a team game, there's other guys here." Eddie used to want you in the game at all times, regardless of if you were playing or not. He'd walk up and down the dugout and just stop and get right in your face and ask you "what's the count?" or "how many outs are there?" I'd think 'geez just relax and let us watch the game.' I always wonder if he eventually turned the guys off. Those last few weeks it looked like we weren't playing as hard as we did when I first got to the club in August. We weren't making a hard turn around first base. We weren't looking to go from first to third on a hit as much.

ML: Even though you were a rookie do you remember the feelings in the clubhouse that last week when the Sox lost a chance at the World Series?

EH: I know the team was in shock. I don't remember exactly what was said in the locker room afterwards but we lost that double header to Kansas City because of Stanky. He screwed it up by changing the lineup and the rotation. Remember we had gotten rained out the night before and instead of going with the same lineup he changed things." (*Author's Note: White Sox fans call the double header loss to a bad A's team "Black Wednesday" It happened on September 27, 1967*)

ML: You caught or tried to catch, the knuckle balls of Wilbur Wood, Eddie Fisher and Hoyt Wilhelm. What were their knuckle balls like, was each one unique?

EH: Ray Berres the pitching coach, for some reason took me under his wing. He directed me in how to catch them, I always appreciated it and every time I saw him in the future, I'd thank him.

Hoyt was the dean...his pitch never had a natural movement. His pitch could go in any direction at any time. When I caught him I had to have a very high concentration level. Wilbur's pitch had natural movement. It usually went down and in to a right handed hitter. Eddie's had natural movement as well but his usually broke down and away from a right handed hitter.

With those two guys I could usually react in a certain way. You just couldn't do that with Hoyt. Even with the oversized glove that we were able to use before it got outlawed, it was tough.

ML: The time period from 1968 through 1970 may have been the three worst years in the history of the franchise. I know you were happy to be in the big leagues but the constant losing had to get old didn't it?

EH: It was eating away at us. It was tough to get up every day and go out to the park and know somebody was going to screw up and we were going to lose. We just knew we were going to lose the game, we just didn't know how it was going to happen. And that's not normal for an athlete to go into a game knowing he was going to get beat.

ML: Personally you started to develop taking the job away from Duane Josephson. In 1970 you had 19 home runs in only 96 games. Why the new found power?

EH: Sox hitting coach "Deacon" Jones had me change some things in my stance. He changed the position of my hands and how I shifted my weight. I had ankle surgery a few years earlier and I knew I wasn't going to be beating out any infield hits so I had to go for power.

ML: 1970 was also the year of "The Big White Machine." I know you love working on cars so tell me how that all came about.

EH: Bill Melton and I were living in Oak Lawn and we became friends with a guy named Tom Buffo who was the G.M. of Hawkinson Ford. (*Author's Note: Now known as Hawk Ford*) One day he talked to me and said we need to do something to promote the Sox. At the time Cincinnati's "Big Red Machine," was just starting up and he had the idea for a "Big White Machine." I told him I didn't have the time to get into a rebuilding project but he said he knew where there was a shell of an old Ford roadster and it wouldn't take a lot of work. So he and I and one of his mechanics picked up this car body and started working on it. We completely cut the back off and put wood painted panels around it. We left the front end open. The inside was just a seat and a gear shift and whenever we won a home game they'd fire it up and drive it around the park. Gene Bossard, the head groundskeeper would go nuts because he was worried about it tearing up the field but it was only driven along the edges of the stands and on the warning track. His son Roger would drive it and everybody loved it. It was a big hit. The front office though didn't like it at all... they thought we were making fun of the organization because we were so bad.

ML: The franchise came back from the dead starting in 1971 when Roland Hemond and Chuck Tanner came on the scene. Tell me about those guys.

EH: Coming to the Sox gave Roland a new lease on life. One of the first things he told us was “we’re here to win; we’ve got to bring back the days of the Go-Go Sox.” Chuck told us that the “only thing that matters is what you do between the white lines. When you are on your own, it’s your own time. That’s your responsibility.” I remember thinking that this was great, now if I was in a restaurant eating with my family and someone came up to our table I could tell them that I’m eating but would be happy to sign or speak with them later. The Sox organization wouldn’t let us do that before. Now guys got to do what they wanted on their own time. I and a lot of other guys would still visit fans, sign autographs and try to promote the team but it was because we *wanted* to do it, we weren’t being *forced* to.

ML: What was Chuck like as a manager?

EH: He was the best I ever played for. He was honest; he stood up for his players. He was a motivator, he knew there were 25 different personalities on the club... that’s what made him good. Some guys needed a slap on the back; some guys needed a kick in the rear end. Chuck knew who to do what to whom.

I had long hair during that time and I remember him playfully grabbing the hair and almost pulling me straight off the ground. I mean when he pulls your hair you’ve got to go somewhere!

I was in his office a few times with the door shut and believe me you could hear his yelling through the walls and into the clubhouse. He could really give it to you but when that door opened he never carried a grudge, it was forgotten. He expected you to play hard and he made you do it.

ML: In 1971 you had an emergency appendectomy and never seemed to have as much power as before. Was there a connection?

EH: Not only did I have an appendectomy but gangrene set in. The doctors wanted me to sit out the rest of the season but I couldn’t. I came back with a tube in my side. The reason for the drop in power though was that Chuck wanted me to just make contact. He wanted me to put the ball in play, move runners along and such. I never thought that hitting in the seventh spot was right for a catcher or for me. I wasn’t going to be able to run the bases; I needed to hit sixth to drive in runs.

ML: 1972 completed the Sox amazing turnaround and a big part of that was the M.V.P. season of Dick Allen. What was he like as a teammate?

EH: The Sox traded Tommy John for Dick and that was hard for me because I was good friends with him. It was tough until the first day. Bill (Melton) and I came in early and Dick was already in the batting cage. All he was doing was standing in his stance and *getting hit by pitches!* Bill and I asked what he was doing and Dick said “I’m getting used to getting pitched inside.” Right then I knew this man was serious about winning.

He was one of the best teammates I ever had. He was always there for you. The other 24 guys looked at him as the guy who was going to take us to where we wanted to go. No one on the Sox hated him or didn't get along with him. I sat with him many times on airplanes and he was always great.

Dick took some criticism because he didn't always take batting practice. He took it the first month of the season and the last month. The rest of the time he was saving his strength. He also told me that the reason he didn't usually take BP was because he wanted to come back (to the park) remembering the pitches that he saw when he left it.

Dick might have been one of the top four players I ever saw play the game and I saw Mantle, Frank Robinson and those guys. He could run, hit for average, hit for power. The only thing he really couldn't do well was throwing and that was because he had a bad hand.

ML: When Dick did things that year like get two inside the park home runs in the same game or drive a ball into the center field bleachers did you think you were witnessing something that may never happen again?

EH: "At the time I didn't but then in 1986 or 1987 I saw him at an Old Timers Game in Toronto and realized that he was a very special player. I know Dick came under fire for being different but remember there were 25 different personalities on the club and Chuck knew how to manage them. Chuck did everything he could to shield Dick, especially at times from the media, when things were getting out of hand. A few times he'd have Dick and me off in a different hotel so that he wouldn't have to face them."

There was no reason for Dick to get criticized say for not taking batting practice. Here's something people don't know, Chuck would let Wilbur Wood fly home a few times when he wasn't pitching! Nobody ever said anything about it. Chuck had different rules for different players.

ML: On July 4, 1972, in a 2-1 loss to the Orioles, you set a major league record by throwing out three base runners on the back end of a strike em' out, throw em' out double play. How were you able to do something like that?

EH: This is something that I tell the players that I coach, "every pitch of every game has a meaning." I anticipated a runner going every time. I always tried to get a good jump and be ready to throw. That's the only reason I was able to do something like that. When I played it was expected if you were a starting catcher that you'd throw out 38-42 per cent of all base runners. It's not like that today.

ML: The Sox almost won the division title that year despite losing Bill Melton to an injury after June. Perhaps the greatest example of the guts of that team was the series in Oakland from August 10 through August 13. First place was at stake and to say every pitch had a playoff atmosphere would be an understatement. What do you remember about that series? *(Author's Note: The series began on a Thursday night with a game that wound up being suspended due to curfew tied at three. It was picked up on Friday and would go 19 innings before the Sox lost 5-3 on a two run home run from Joe Rudi. In the regularly scheduled game Cub castoff Dave Lemonds and Cy Acosta would out duel "Catfish" Hunter tossing a two-hit shutout and winning 1-0. The Sunday game saw Wilbur Wood take a one-hit shutout into the last of the 9th inning. With two outs Brant Alyea would hit a home run tying the game at one. The Sox would win the game in extra innings on a dramatic two run home run by Melton's replacement, Ed Spiezio putting them into first place. The Sunday game then saw Vida Blue shut out the Sox 3-0 for a split.)*

EH: After that suspended Thursday game I met an old friend of mine Dave Duncan who was a catcher with the A's. I'd known him since high school. We were talking and I still remember Dunc saying "the winner of this series is going to win the league." He was right; the A's had the lead and hung on to it. What we really needed was a sweep or to take three of four. We expended a lot of emotion just to get a split. That really drained us. We battled them. We didn't have the talent that they did but we played hard and Chuck (Tanner) was right there with us.

ML: I'm going to toss out a few names of some of your teammates. Tell me the first thing that pops into your mind about them...

Stan Bahnsen...**EH:** Hard luck pitcher. He should have had a no-hitter." *(Author's Note: On August 21, 1973 in Cleveland, Bahnsen lost a no-hitter with two out in the 9th inning, when former Sox player Walt "No Neck" Williams ground a single to left just past Bill Melton.)*

Mike Andrews...**EH:** The best fundamentally sound second baseman I ever saw, and an inspiration to the other guys on the team.

Jay Johnstone...**EH:** Moon Man! You know as crazy as he was, his objective was always to win. He was crazy / smart.

Rich "Goose" Gossage...**EH:** Feared. Both he and Terry Forster had a demeanor that scared hitters.

ML: Probably your best ever single game was in 1973 when you drove in seven RBI's against the A's. Tell me about that day. *(Author's Note: On June 24, 1973, Herrmann went three for four with a two run single, two run double and a three run home run.)*

EH: It was one of those days. The baseball was as big as a beach ball and I had guys on base all day. It was a special game. Some days are like that; maybe you had three or four good nights of sleep in a row. Other days no matter what you try you just can't see the ball.

ML: That 1973 season was one which started with high hopes and ended in tremendous disappointment and frustration. After mid-June, injuries hammered the Sox but there also was a ton of dissension towards the front office, specifically then Executive Vice President Stu Holcomb. A number of players were either released or held out. Talk about that situation.

EH: The Sox had always been a team that hadn't spent a lot of money. Dick (Allen) got a nice contract but I guess they wanted to hold the line on everyone else. Everything that everyone worked to build up over the previous two years took Holcomb only four months to destroy.

ML: You were selected to the 1974 All-Star Team but wasn't able to play. How big of a thrill was that for you?

EH: It was fun, something I'll always remember. I was on crutches for the three days because I had a bad ankle. I wound up taking those three days off.

ML: You had a reputation as being fearless behind the plate, what was the secret to your ability to block off runners, take the hit and make the tag?

EH: It was 51 scholarship offers to be a football player. (laughing) I treated every runner trying to score like a running back. I enjoyed catching because in some ways it was like I was back playing football. I was there, I saw everything and I was directing traffic. It was like I was a middle linebacker again. There's a famous picture of the A's Bert Campaneris trying to score on me, actually it's a series of three pictures, but he's coming in with his spikes high. I made the play, he didn't cut me or anything but as I was going back to the dugout I noticed that he ripped apart a brand new pair of long johns I was wearing. That really bothered me; I just paid eight bucks for them! (laughing.)

ML: Before the 1975 season the Sox traded you to the Yankees. I know it's part of the game but did that come as a shock to you?

EH: It really hurt me. It gave me the feeling that I was unwanted. The Sox wanted me to sign a contract for the same money I made the previous season. I said I wasn't going to sign for that, I wanted a two thousand dollar raise just because if I signed for the same amount I'd be losing money because the cost of living went up. They basically wanted me to take a cut and I wasn't going to do that. I told them they better trade me, so they did. I know that wasn't Roland Hemond's doing, it was the people above him.

ML: You also spent time with the Angels, Astros and the Expos. I guess the highlight of your time away from Chicago was catching Larry Dierker's no-hitter. What do you remember about it?

EH: It was a phenomenal day. I know it was hotter than heck at the Dome that day. The Astros deliberately raised the inside temperature because it helped their pitchers balls move more. Larry's ball moved so much that day that he looked like J.R. Richard. He and I were in sync that day; I don't think he ever shook me off. When I was with the Angels I remember Nolan Ryan telling me that he saw more pitchers lose no-hitters late in the game because they would throw the pitch the catcher called for instead of throwing what they wanted... I remembered that. Catchers can only suggest what to throw; the final decision is the pitchers.

ML: After you retired in 1978 what did you do in the "real" world?

EH: When I retired I couldn't throw a ball anymore. I was pretty beat up so I took off about a year and got a lot healthier. Then my dad and I bought some gas stations in the area. Then I got into owning some liquor stores which wasn't the smartest thing in the world to do. One day I ran into Mike Epstein (*Author's Note: Former Major League first baseman*) and he asked me if I'd be interested in taking over his 18 and under baseball team that was in the area. That was about nine years ago and I got back into coaching. Right now I coach out at Mesa College in San Diego and I have the top rated 14 and under team in the country. We play about 172 games year round including at least one or two tournaments per month.

That was a blessing because it got me back into the game. I love going out on the field and being a part of it again. I'm also very fortunate to have a company in the area, Construction Repair Specialists that is the main sponsor for the kids. Ed Laing is the owner out of Long Beach, and he loves baseball. He spends about 180-185 thousand dollars per year on the team. He gets us everything from uniforms to airplane tickets. All the kids have to do is come up with a glove, some spikes and a supporter. Ed wants to make sure that every one of the kids on the team winds up going to college on some type of scholarship. He wants the kids to succeed in life, get an education and make things a little easier on their parents. He's an amazing guy, and I've got to tell you we've got some kids on the team who if they continue to develop both physically and mentally have a great shot at playing in the Major Leagues someday!

ML: Ed you've been gracious with your time and I loved remembering the Sox teams that you played with, can you sum up your time spent in Chicago for me?

EH: I loved Chicago. I still love it. Chicago is *THE* town. I come back and I can still see friends and people I met 30 years ago. The Sox organization always has taken care of me, brought me around to participate in their events and I remain close to the guys who are in the White Sox Alumni Association. They have the best fans going and I can only wish and hope that someday they'll be able to celebrate a World Series championship out on that field.



