

SABR Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Vernon Law**
Date: **October 15 and 17, 2019**
Location: **Telephone**
Interviewer: **Steve Jeremko**
Duration: **4 hours 3 minutes**

Steve conducted a telephone interview with Vernon Law from his home in Provo Gilbert, Arizona on October 15 and 17, 2019.

As a pitcher, Vern played sixteen years in the major leagues, all with the Pittsburgh Pirates. On his way to winning 20 games and helping take the Pirates to the 1960 World Series, Vern also won the Cy Young Award for 1960. Although injuries somewhat limited his effectiveness, Vern battled back to earn the 1965 Comeback of the Year Award in 1965 when he posted a 17-9 won-loss record with a 2.15 ERA. Vern finished his excellent career record of 162-147 and a 3.77 ERA. After completing his playing days after 1967, Vern continued with baseball as a coach and instructor.

Vern is an ordained deacon and has remained active all his lifetime in the Church of Latter-Day Saints. This interview is divided into four parts.

Part 1 (0:58:15)

- Vernon describes his early life in Meridian, Idaho. He told us how his father, Jesse, a widower with seven children, married his mother Melva – and the couple had three more children, including Vernon.
- Vern described work on the farm and life in rural Idaho, riding horseback and raising livestock. He discusses his family; he is the last remaining sibling among ten.
- Vern played on the American Legion Championship teams of 1948 and recounted meeting Babe Ruth during the last months of his life.
- While in high school, Vern's playing skills earned the patronage of Herman Welker who later became a U.S. senator from Idaho. When the Pirates representative came to sign up Vern, his mother received bouquet of roses and a call from Pirates part-owner Bing Crosby, who knew Welker. He later met Bing and told him how they outfoxed the other agents.
- From the Santa Rosa Pirates ('48) and then, the Davenport Pirates ('49), Vern learned pitching techniques from Bill Burwell.
- Vern recapped the key events of the 1960 World Series. He also talked about how team bus pranking inadvertently resulted in an ankle injury.
- Vern discusses the health challenges faced by his son Varlin in his fight against leukemia.

Part 2 (0:55:42)

- Vern describes how he resolved the conflict of playing baseball on the Sabbath – and of being a positive role model in our society. He went to describe how he tried to encourage fellow teammates to quit smoking.
- Playing his first season with the Bucs under Billy Meyer in 1950, Vern talks about one special bench coach: the legendary Honus Wagner.
- Vern recalls his first two major league ballgames (against the Philadelphia Phillies) and describes playing with teammates Bob Purkey, Clyde McCullough and his early days with the Pirates.
- Vern talks about his arsenal of pitches and his excellent control. Smoky Burgess was Vern's preferred catcher and called good games for him.
- Recounting a story about Branch Rickey, Vern tells of Rickey's faith—and a lesson in tithing. He also tells of helping out Bob Prince's church in Mt. Lebanon (Pittsburgh) with their missionary fund.
- Vern talks about negotiating contracts with management and the Players Union at that time. Marvin Miller helped develop a more robust pension plan for the players.

Part 3 (1:06:13)

- Vern talks about his family dealing with Varlin's illness. He also mentions his other sons including Vance Law, who also played major league baseball. Starting with the Pirates, Vance was sent to the Chicago White Sox and got excellent batting instruction from hitting coach Charlie Lau.
- While playing for the Montreal Expos, Vance's young daughter experienced a brain tumor. Vance experienced an All-Star year for the Chicago Cubs, Vance was shipped to Japan – playing there for a while – before ending his career with the Oakland Athletics.
- Getting back to the '55 Pirates under GM Joe L. Brown, we talked about some of the promising young pitchers coming to the club and young infielders such as Dick Groat, Bill Mazeroski, Curt Roberts, the O'Brien twins (Johnny and Eddie) and Vic Janowicz.
- Roberto Clemente joined the Pirates in '55 and brought so many skills. While not hitting as many homes or stealing bases, he could always get on and take the extra base. His sparkling play and strong arm in the outfield saved lots of runs.
- Vern tells of when Clemente was getting brushed back so often that Vern had to retaliate and knock down a couple of the opposing players.
- Another story involves the Giants' Ruben Gomez throwing at Pirate players. Danny Murtaugh insisted that Gomez be knocked down – and the ensuing bench-clearing episode. You've got to protect your players! Vern talks about brushing back Hank Aaron.
- Pirate pitchers ElRoy Face had a great year in '59 (18-1) – seven of those were Law's games. Face was so effective, and his forkball had a different spin that fooled most hitters.
- We talked about Ron Kline, Nellie King and Hank Foiles. He recalls his only experience of being tossed out of a game for pointing at a scoreboard.
- Vern talks about Pirates coaches Bill Posedel and Bill Burwell – and unwritten rules such as “never walk the first batter” and “always throw a first-pitch strike”.

- Toughest batters for Vern included Stan Musial (he could hit to all fields), Hank Aaron, Frank Robinson, Eddie Mathews, Willie Mays and Duke Snider. Every team had a fearsome slugger. He respected any batter with a major league uniform.

Part 4 (1:03:03)

- Bobby Bragan managed the Pirates from 1956 to mid-'57 but exhibited disrespectful behaviors that resulted in his firing and replaced by Danny Murtaugh, a “players manager”.
- Vern talked about former teammate and fellow pitcher Bob Purkey.
- Vern discussed the therapy and medications to relieve his shoulder and arm trouble. Ultimately, he received a blessing – and with exercise, he was miraculously able to return to pitching. He began his rehab assignment at Kinston.
- On the Voluntarily Retired list after the '63 season, Vern came back with respectable performance in '64. For the 1965 season, Vern posted his best overall season going 17-9 with an incredible 2.15 ERA – and earning the Comeback of the Year Award.
- After a good '66 season, things slipped somewhat in '67 – and during September, Vern retired as an active player and joined the Pirates coaching staff.
- Vern talks about great all-round players like Mickey Vernon, who did not receive due recognition or consideration for the Hall of Fame.
- By comparison, HOFer Ralph Kiner was enshrined due only to his home run prowess. Mazeroski did everything well and earned his place in the Hall. Vern credits Murtaugh with giving Maz his confidence at the plate.
- Steve mentioned that veteran pitcher Jim Kaat also deserves his place in the HOF.
- Vern discusses the multi-cultural aspects of the game.
- Vern talks coaching the Pirates and his recollections of pitchers Bob Veale and Steve Blass. About Blass' trouble finding the strike zone, Vern cites two issues: 1) lowering the pitcher's mound, and 2) changes in his pitching motion.
- After leaving the Pirates, Vern coached baseball at Brigham Young University (BYU). His contacts there led to a two-year coaching assignment for the Seibu Lions, where he taught the pitchers how to throw the curveball.
- The Japanese baseball team spirit was so different – with pitchers being over-worked prior to game-time. Pitchers throw every day there – and pitching outside, etc.
- Vern believes his strongest assets he to the game were integrity, dedication, commitment, clean-living, hard work and care for his teammates.
- The most influential persons in Vern's life were his parents. With regard to sports, he cited his teammates. From his dad, he learned hard work and from his mother, he learned love and caring. Vern regards his wife VaNita as the most influential person in his life – pure love.