

Greg Pryor

Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in Late May 2006.
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You never know where a good story or interview is going to come from. When you look at the career of former Sox infielder Greg Pryor one has a tendency to say that he probably wouldn't have a lot of interesting things or memorable moments to talk about.

But think a little longer about him.

Greg played with the White Sox from 1978 through 1981. He'd go to Kansas City in a trade where he played another five years winning a World Series ring in 1985. When Greg was on the South Side Bill Veeck was the owner, then the duo of Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn came in. A very young lawyer named Tony LaRussa became manager, free agency was still in its infancy, the tandem of Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall were in the broadcast booth and there was a 'little' event called "Disco Demolition" that made a few headlines.

Greg Pryor was on hand for all of it. Now do you still think he wouldn't have a few memories?

I spoke with Greg one evening in late May from his home in the Kansas City area. Greg is still involved in community work for the Royals and is involved in the Royals Alumni Association. In addition, for the past 11 years he's been a successful businessman operating his own company, Life Priority. He's a complex man, with stories to make you laugh and perhaps more importantly to make you think. The game of baseball and the game of life have a way of doing that, where sometimes there isn't much difference between winning and losing.

ML: Greg I want to focus on your years with the White Sox but from an earlier discussion I've got to ask you to repeat the story of how you tried to get out of the Yankees organization with the facial hair protest and then your conversation with George Steinbrenner.

GP: I finally got to the big leagues at the end of the 1976 season with the Rangers but that off season I was traded as part of a deal involving Sandy Alomar Sr. I wound up going to Syracuse, the Triple-A club of the Yankees and I was angry. I was ready to play Major League baseball but with New York, especially at that time, there was no place for me. This was my third year in Triple-A, I was in my late 20's and I knew I had to get out.

When I was sent back to the minors, I held out for a few days, and then did something I never did before, I screamed at Yankee G.M. Gabe Paul to get me the hell out of there. I was willing to do anything I could to either get traded or released so that maybe I could get a shot somewhere else.

I was broke though so I reported to Syracuse but as soon as I got there I told our manager Pete Ward that I was going to be his worst nightmare. It was nothing personal towards Pete who was a good guy, but I had to get out and get a chance to play.

One of the first things I did was start a protest towards the Yankees policy of facial hair in the minor leagues. New York didn't allow it and I had to shave my mustache when I reported which really bothered me. I got the guys together and told them that we were just as much men as "Catfish" Hunter and Reggie Jackson. They had facial hair...why couldn't we? So I got them to sign a statement saying that all of us were going to start growing mustaches. I and another teammate presented it to Pete. He was stunned for a moment then asked why we were doing this. Now he'd have to report it to Yankee management. I told him again, "Pete, I told you I was going to get out, that I was going to be your worst nightmare."

After a period of time I was the only guy left with a mustache. Everyone else either shaved or was threatened if they didn't, but I stuck it out. Finally one day Pete comes into the locker room and says that the Yankees have agreed to let minor league players have facial hair. Everyone is congratulating me and I'm pissed off! I wanted them to release me....not agree with me!
(laughing)

Later that year I got a phone call that changed my life. Marvin Miller called me and said that I was one of 11 players who were allowed to become free agents after the season. I was in the Major Leagues in 1976 and was sent back to the minors in 1977, so according to the labor agreement we were allowed to test free agency. I couldn't believe it! Shortly afterwards I got a call from the Yankees saying that they wanted me to come to New York for a meeting so I did.

I went to the Yankee offices where I met with Gabe and Mr. Steinbrenner. They offered me a two year contract at 30 thousand dollars a year plus they would bring me up every September to be with the team. I told them that I'd think about it but that I really wanted to try free agency.

Mr. Steinbrenner looked at me and said that for the rest of my life I'd be able to have "New York Yankees" on my resume and that if I didn't take the offer "I'd move to the top of his dumbass list! (laughing)

Sometimes I wonder how things would have turned out if I took the offer. That was a lot of money but I made the right decision and never second guessed myself. I played for nine years and earned a World Series ring, I didn't turn out like George Zeber. He's the guy the Yankees *did* call up in September. He played a month, got a ring, and you never heard of him again.

(Author's Note: Ward is the former White Sox third baseman, who was co-Rookie of the Year in 1963 with teammate Gary Peters)

ML: So, you were granted free agency and signed with the White Sox in November 1977. Tell us about how that went and why you chose the South Side?

GP: I was drafted by five teams, the Yankees, Red Sox, White Sox, Twins and A's. I really wanted to sign with Boston. I got a call one day from Steve Greenberg. I had known Steve for a few years from when we were both in the Washington / Texas organization. His dad was Hall of Fame player Hank Greenberg. Steve tells me that he's become an agent and would like to represent me. I asked him how much this would cost and he said he'd only charge two per cent.

So, we agreed and he immediately started shopping me around. He calls me one day and said the White Sox offered a one year guaranteed deal with a bonus and that they'd pay \$45,000. The kicker was that since it was one year I could be a free agent again after the season. So that's where I signed.

Bob Lemon was the manager and I thought he was one of the best managers I ever had but I didn't get off to a great start because I had a bad wrist. I had some tendinitis in it and it really bothered me. If you look it up you'll see that I didn't get into a game until two, two and a half weeks had already gone by in the season.

I had assumed that I was going to be a free agent again when late in the year, it was a Friday game with the Mariners, and I hit two home runs, Steve called me up and said the White Sox wanted to extend the deal for another two seasons and we tentatively agreed to it. I don't know why I did this, probably because it was the emotion of the moment, but I told him to ask Bill Veeck for another 10 thousand dollars and I sign right away. Steve wound up calling him and waking him up! (laughing) Bill agreed to it and I signed but you know I never did get that 10 thousand! (laughing)

(Author's Note: They were the only home runs that season for Greg and came on September 8 in a 3-2 Sox win)

(Author's Note: Hank was also a close friend of Bill Veeck and was a partner when Bill owned the White Sox in the early 60's and then in the late 70's)

ML: The years from 1978 through 1980 were pretty lean with the Sox. Those clubs lost 90, 87 and 90 games respectively. How did you keep your spirits up? I guess if you have to lose games there are worse places to do so than in the big leagues.

GP: I always enjoyed playing... it didn't matter the circumstances but when you are out of a pennant race the season gets old quickly. The other issue for losing teams is that as the season goes along, it gets harder and harder for players to avoid arguing with each other. You can feel the tension in the air. Guys are always ready to start pointing fingers.

Even I didn't get along at times with my teammates. I remember the time Steve Trout and I almost went at it.

"Rainbow" was off in his own little world. One day we had some kids who were helping out as celebrity bat boys, only in this case, one of them was a little girl about 10 or 12 years old. She's in the dugout and Steve is just going off, saying every four letter word he could think of. I went up to him and said "there's kids here, can't you clean up the language?" He looked at me and said, "f*** her, she shouldn't be in the dugout anyway." That did it... Tony LaRussa and some of the guys had to jump between us because we were going to have at it, right there, right then.

ML: Those clubs didn't win a lot but they sure had some characters... Marv Foley, Eric Soderholm, Steve Stone, Ron Blomberg, Francisco Barrios to name a few. Didn't you say that you actually had more fun with the White Sox than anyplace else you ever played?

GP: I did. It was a different atmosphere with the White Sox. I felt I had more in common with them and those guys than anywhere else I played. We were guys just trying to make it, we weren't big stars. All of us were trying and doing the best that we could.

And we had some fun and some strange times. After I signed that two year extension I told everyone that we'd have a team party at my apartment downtown. I had a real nice place, big, \$800 dollars a month and everything was white. White curtains, white carpet, white walls. I had catered food brought in. Most of the guys were there and Bill Willoughby comes in with a friend of his. I guess enough time has passed that I can tell you his friend wasn't his wife. Anyway they got into an argument and he just tipped over the entire table of food. It went everywhere, on the floor, on the curtains, everywhere. He stormed out. I asked his friend if she was O.K. and what was going on and she said, "I don't know where he's going, I've got the car keys.

The next day I see Bill and I was relieved. I figured at least he got home O.K. Bill apologized for everything and said to send him the cleaning bill. As far as how he got home? Well he didn't drive and apparently he didn't take a cab. He walked home. That's not necessarily a big deal except Bill's home was *fifteen* miles away! (laughing)

ML: July 12, 1979 was a rather 'unusual' evening. It was "Disco Demolition" night at Comiskey Park. I've spoken with fans who were there (including future Sox pitcher Donn Pall and future actor Michael Clarke Duncan) and media members, but I've never spoken with a *player* who was there for that night. Why don't you take me through the evening your perspective.

GP: There were around 47 thousand on hand that night and the great majority was underage kids. They weren't there to see a double header let's say that. I played shortstop the first game and I remember getting an RBI double. It was the only run we got. I'm in the locker room between games, I was supposed to play shortstop again in the second game and I see Ken Kravec. Ken was supposed to start game two and this was only a few minutes before we were supposed to begin and I was surprised that he was in the locker room so I asked him about it.

(Author's Note: The Sox lost to the Tigers 4-1)

He told me, "Have you seen what's out there? There's a riot going on!" So I ran back through the tunnel towards our dugout, I was still in my underwear. What I saw was like a battlefield after a war. They had blown up those records and the smoke was all over the field and it was complete chaos. I remember our equipment manager swinging a baseball bat to keep a bunch of kids from trying to get into the tunnel towards the clubhouse. Anyone who left anything in the dugout itself lost it. Everything was taken.

I ran back to the clubhouse and eventually we bolted the door. We were in our own cave, we couldn't get out. We heard the mounted horses arrive through the clubhouse walls. Outside of those few moments was I was looking on to the field I didn't see anything else. We were locked in the clubhouse for about an hour and a half.

My wife arrived at the park near the end of the first game and she couldn't get in. They locked all the gates because there were another 15 thousand kids trying to get in. She was stuck in her car and the crowd just started rocking it back and forth. Finally for her own safety the guard opened the gate so she could get in. As she was getting through she told me the kids were feeling her up. We were still finding pieces of blown up records on the field and in the grass a month later.

ML: I'm not sure if this is the right way to put this but after that incident as well as the perception that the Sox were foundering with no money, little talent and not much of a future, were you ever ashamed to be a member of the organization. I mean after "Disco Demolition" the team was ripped apart by everyone, they were a laughingstock.

GP: I came up through the minor leagues, the school of hard knocks. In 1969 I hurt my shoulder and a doctor told me to quit baseball because I'd never play again. With all that I went through, when I finally got to the big leagues, I was the happiest kid in the world. I wasn't going to let someone ruin my joy of playing in the Major Leagues.

ML: 1979 also saw the managerial debut of Tony LaRussa who took over on August 3.

(Author's Note: The Sox won the game 8-5 in Toronto) What was it like playing for a guy who was actually younger than some of the players themselves?)

(Author's Note: Tony was 35 when he started his career.)

GP: In a way something Tony did was the best thing that ever happened to me. When Tony took over he said I was going to be his shortstop, and then the next year the Sox traded for Todd Cruz to play shortstop. That forced me to have to learn to play some other positions which ultimately made me more valuable so that the Royals wanted me.

I don't think today that Tony would have been hired as a manager because he didn't have a track record. He wasn't like Bob Lemon and I already said Bob was one of the two best guys I ever played for, Dick Howser being the other.

Tony wasn't very respected by the players at first. I remember one game there was a bang-bang play at second base and before Tony went out to argue he asked me and Jim Morrison if we thought the guy was safe or out. Jim and I kind of looked at each other wondering why the manager, and a lawyer at that, was asking us for our opinion before he argued about it. The other thing about Tony was that he was a retaliation manager. He was going to get revenge if someone was trying to hurt his players, be they throwing at them or doing things like going in overly hard at second base.

I do wish though I could have played for him as he matured. He's consistently won wherever he's been.

ML: You had one of those magic moments on July 6, 1980 when the Sox were at home against the A's. Roland Hemond was telling me a little about this but certainly I wanted to hear your take. In the 9th inning with the Sox trailing 4-3 you faced pitcher Bob Lacey. There were two out when Lacey apparently threw you a slider that you took out for the game winner. According to Roland, who spoke with manager Billy Martin at the airport after the game, Martin was livid because he specifically told Lacey not to throw you that pitch but he did anyway. Take me through the at bat and what happened afterwards.

(Author's Note: Former Sox G.M.)

GP: I hadn't played in four days and late in the game Tony walked down the bench and stopped in front of Bruce Kimm and said, "If this guy goes in, you're going to hit..." When I heard that, basically I stopped paying attention, figuring I wasn't going to play again. So then in the 9th inning Todd Cruz hits a ground ball and the throw pulls Jeff Newman off the bag. So we've got two outs and a guy on first.

Tony comes down the dugout again, only this time he stops and says "Pryor you're hitting." I didn't have any batting gloves, I didn't have my bats. I turned to Jim Morrison and said, "Can I use one of your bats?" Jim said "sure take any one you want."

I go up there and Lacey throws me the sweetest slider you'll ever want to see and I took it. His problem was he came back with the same pitch. After I hit it I started running, watching left field at the same time to see what would happen. Rickey Henderson was out there and he was a great outfielder. I saw Rickey leap and then I noticed that I was past first base into right field! (laughing) I had to do a U-turn and start towards second base. I saw a white object come out of the stands and I thought, 'a double? OK...tie game!' Then I saw the umpire make the signal for a home run. I'm thinking, 'oh my gosh!' It turned out the object that fell was a cup of beer that got knocked over the wall. I was so happy to do it against Billy Martin, a guy who cut me three times and hated me! I got to home plate and the guys are pounding me all over for the hit, then we go back into the locker room. I'm changing clothes when one of the security guards comes in. He says to me, "the crowd refuses to leave and they keep calling your name. Can you go out there for a minute so that they'll go home?" I said sure, threw my uniform back on and went out. The crowd was chanting 'we want Pryor!' I stepped out for a curtain call, the only time in my life that ever happened. I blew kisses to the crowd. It was an amazing experience and is a wonderful memory.

One other note about that hit, the A's second baseman that day was Jeff Cox who was later a coach with the Royals. He told me that in the A's locker room after the game Martin just demolished a clock radio that was in there. Cox had never seen him as angry.

ML: 1980 was the last year Bill Veeck owned the Sox. What did you think of Bill?

GP: I really didn't talk to him that much. He and I only spoke a few times. I remember he wasn't a fast talker, he took his time. He used to say that I fielded ground balls like I was 'pickin' cherries...' I took that as a compliment.

I think all the players respected him. I know I never heard a player say anything bad about him.

My favorite memory of him was in spring training when he'd be sitting on something watching us. He usually had his shirt off and he'd wear shorts. He wasn't shy about showing off his peg leg.

ML: You were telling me that you enjoyed reading an interview I did with Jimmy Piersall but you were surprised that Jimmy was as complimentary as he was towards Chet Lemon. Can you explain what you mean by that?

GP: Well Jimmy was removed from his position as a part time coach helping the outfielders. I had heard that the reason he was removed was because Chet's wife didn't like the things Jimmy was saying about him. Maybe he didn't know that or maybe the job didn't pay him anything so he didn't care.

It turned out that I also was right in the middle of what happened between Jimmy and Rob Gallas. Gallas had asked me if I knew anything about why Jimmy was removed from that position. I didn't know anything definite and wouldn't have said anything even if I did, so I just told him that I didn't know and that he should go ask Jimmy about it himself.

A few days later we were playing the Angels and Rod Carew just hits a bullet with that inside / out swing of his off my foot and the official scorer ruled it an error. He came around to third base and the first thing he said to me was "how could you get an error on that?" After the game in the locker room Jimmy comes over and asks the same question. While we were talking I mentioned to him that Rob Gallas was asking me if I knew anything about why he was removed from the part time coaching position. Jimmy's eyes got real big and he said "wait till I get my hands on him."

(Author's Note: Gallas, who eventually became the White Sox marketing director, at this time was an award winning sportswriter for the Daily Herald newspaper.)

(Author's Note: On July 2, 1980, Piersall found Gallas in the Sox locker room and after saying "if you have something to ask me, ask me," then started choking him. Fortunately several players immediately jumped in to separate the two.)

ML: Everything changed in 1981 for the Sox. They got new owners and suddenly they started to get good talent. Guys like Carlton Fisk signed. Greg Luzinski was acquired along with Bill Almon, Tony Bernazard and Dennis Lamp. Players like Harold Baines, Chet Lemon, Rich

Dotson and Britt Burns were young and getting better. You saw everything over the winter; I'd imagine this was one time when you had high hopes going into spring training.

GP: It was good to see the new blood show up. We got some good people. Carlton was a tremendous catcher and Tony Bernazard was one of the best second basemen I ever saw.

ML: 1981 was also the first time a sizable part of the season was wiped out in a labor impasse. What was your take on the situation and what did you do during the hiatus?

GP: I really wished that the strike had never happened especially because of the start that we had in the first half. We were really playing well. I stayed in Chicago and tried to work out but it was very disheartening to lose a thousand dollars a day. What could we do though? The players just couldn't give everything back to the owners. We just had gotten free agency in 1976 and now we were going to give it away? I went to one of the meetings that the players had at O'Hare Airport. A number of guys flew in from all over the country and we really hung together during this.

(Author's Note: On June 12, 1981 the player's walked out after ownership continued to insist on a modified form of free agent compensation. In essence their original demand was that a team that signed a free agent would have to give up a player off their roster to the club that lost him. When the walkout began the White Sox had won four straight raising their record to 31-22, only 2 ½ games out of first place. The strike lasted until August 10.)

ML: The Sox traded you to the Royals in late March 1982. I'm assuming it was a numbers game that caused it. The Sox had Almon, Bernazard, Vance Law and Jim Morrison to play the infield. Was that the reason for the deal and what was your reaction to it?

GP: I knew something was up because over the winter I got a call from Tony. He said that I wasn't going to make the team. So I said, "well why don't you release me?" and Tony said they couldn't do that. I assume it was because they wanted to get something for me in trade. Before I reported to Sarasota my agent Steve Greenberg called me and said that the Sox wanted to cut me 20 per cent which was the most that they could do. I asked if I could fly to Chicago and sit in on the negotiations. Steve said sure, so I went up and sat in with him and Mr. Reinsdorf. All I said was that the Sox weren't going to find anyone who could play the different infield spots like I could for less than they were paying me.

I guess Mr. Reinsdorf agreed because the Sox did not cut me in salary but they also didn't guarantee the contract.

So I went to spring training and one day I was in the trainer's room when Tony said he needed to see me. We walked into the next room and he said, "We've just traded you to the Kansas City Royals. John Schuerholz is in the next room and he'd like to meet you. Good luck." That's it. He walked out.

(Author's Note: The Sox traded Pryor to the Royals on March 24, 1982 for pitcher Jeff Schattinger. The deal came three days after the White Sox acquired infielder Vance Law from Pittsburgh.)

ML: After baseball Greg what do you do for a living and what do you do now?

GP: The Royals released me in 1986 and oddly enough Tony LaRussa called to see if I'd be interested in signing with the A's. They wanted to send me to Tacoma to get back into shape and as insurance. After all that time in the Major Leagues though I just couldn't see going back to the minors and my wife and I had our third daughter, so I retired. I worked in some different jobs but it was a difficult time. I went through withdrawal. The little boy in me died and I realized I'd never play again.

I finally got a break when I went to work for a health and nutritional company. I worked there for three and a half years. Then I took a chance, after consulting with my wife, and we formed our own company, Life Priority. I started that in 1995 and have been doing that ever since. We have our own warehouse in the area and supply top notch vitamins and nutritional products to a very diverse group of people including Hall of Fame pitcher Steve Carlton and umpire Don Denkinger.

ML: Greg earlier I asked you that question about being 'embarrassed' to wear a Sox uniform after "Disco Demolition," let me flip that around. Last October you saw the Sox march through the post season and win the World Series. As a former player and knowing the loyalty of Sox fans, what went through your mind as the team closed out Houston?

GP: I was so happy for Sox fans and for the people in the organization who have been there for years. I'm talking about folks like Roland (Hemond), Herm Schneider, Art Kusnyer, Ed Farmer and Joe Nossak.

I wanted to be around the fans as the White Sox were doing this, so my wife and I went to Chicago. We got a room at the Drake Hotel and we just enjoyed the atmosphere. I didn't actually go to any of the games, I could have, but the weather wasn't great and to me what I wanted to see were the people and how they were reacting to all this.

To me the most disappointing thing about the entire experience of the White Sox winning the title was the fact that so many Cub fans didn't or wouldn't acknowledge it. I understand it wasn't their team, but the White Sox still had 'Chicago' written on the uniform, they played for the entire city.

ML: You know for a guy that George Steinbrenner called a 'dumbass' you wound up getting a World Series ring and played for over nine seasons. Seems you made the right call by signing that free agent deal with the Sox.

GP: Like I said earlier, sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I took the Yankees offer. I know that I wouldn't have enjoyed the days on the South Side like I did and I wouldn't have met some of the people that I did, folks like Roland Hemond... they don't make them like that anymore. Next time you talk to him ask him if he remembers the times he'd just go into the training room, stretch out on a table and just take a nap. (laughing) We'd be going about our business and there was Roland with his clothes and shoes on just catching some sleep. I put Don Kessinger in that same category. Don is really the first true star that I ever played with. He could

really play shortstop and I still remember how soft and accurate his tosses to me were when he was at short and I played second base.

