

SABR Oral History Committee

Major League Ballplayer: Richard Fred 'Pete' Varney

Summary of Career: Played with Chicago White Sox and Atlanta Braves in the mid-70's

SABR Interviewer: Paul Motyka

Date of Interview: November 14, 2000

Location Where Interview Took Place: Pete's Office at Brandeis University where he is the Baseball Coach and Physical Education Instructor

SABR: Where did you grow up?

PV: I grew up in Roxbury MA and lived there for 9 years. I didn't play much organized baseball. I didn't have the opportunities. My father was a roofer with 9 kids. My father got a break and moved to Quincy MA. I didn't play Little League baseball until I was 10 years old. That's where it started. I graduated to Jr. Babe Ruth baseball when I was 13 years old. I played in the Boston Park League when I was 16. I also played there while at Harvard. The Boston Park League is a semi-pro league mostly for older guys. I also played at North Quincy High .

SABR: Were you always a catcher?

PV: The reason that I became a catcher was that when I played Little League, I played 3<sup>rd</sup> base and there was a wooden fence around the field. I went after a pop-up and had my eyes on the ball and ran into the wooden fence. The Little League coach said that if I was going to run into fences that I should put the gear on. I have been catching since I was 11 years old. I also pitched, played the outfield, a typical high school kid. I played where they told me to play. I went to Harvard. I was the Number 1 draft pick in the country in the "special phase". I played freshman baseball at Harvard; they wouldn't let freshmen play on the varsity. In my sophomore year I played right field, in my junior year I played first base. I didn't catch until my senior year. I was drafted as a catcher by the White Sox.

SABR: Did your father or brothers play baseball?

PV: My father played a little bit in the service. He told stories that he was a limousine driver for General Patton but I haven't been able to research that.

SABR: How did you get your nickname?

PV: I am Richard Frederick Varney Junior. My father is Senior and his nickname is "Pete". I was "Re-Pete". Hopefully, not to many people listening to this will call me "Re-Pete".

SABR: How did you end up at Harvard?

PV: When I got out of High School they didn't have the draft. I got a call from Ted Williams who was then the manager of the Washington Senators. They called in all of the prospects to work out at Fenway Park. I did that. I walked into the locker room and Frank Howard had a locker in there. He was playing for the Washington Senators at that time. He was a big guy – 6' 7" and 300 pounds. I was 16 years old. They gave me a locker with a uniform and said "Here, you can workout." I put the uniform on and this big guy tapped me on the shoulder. I didn't see him. I turned around and had to look up at him. He called me "Sir." and said "Have good luck today." "We usually have a lot of kids in." He's calling me sir and he's 25 years old – a monster of a man. I went and worked out, had a great time. When the workout was over I was changing my clothes to leave before the game started. Howard noticed that I took infield but didn't have a catcher's glove. I was relatively poor growing up and he noticed that I didn't have a glove. I was taken back and said "Yeah, you're right. I didn't mean to embarrass the team." He said "Come with me." We went to Paul Casanova's locker. Catchers always have 6 or 7 gloves on hand. He said to Casanova – "Give him a glove." "Casanova said "What are you talking about?" Howard literally picked Casanova off of the ground and said "Give him a glove." That's how I got my first glove. The amazing part of the story is that 8 years later, when I was about 24 years old, I got called up to the Big Leagues. The first team I played against was the Detroit Tigers. The first hitter was Dick McAuliffe, the second hitter was Norm Cash, the third hitter was Al Kaline and the fourth hitter was Frank Howard. He stepped up to the plate and remembered that he gave me the glove. He said - "Pete – how is that glove I gave you?" This is eight years to the day. So I asked Frank – "What pitch do you want?" He wanted a fastball and deposited it in the upper deck in Chicago.

SABR: So you ended up at Harvard and you played several sports there?

PV: I played 3, football, basketball and baseball, at Harvard. We were talking about how I got to Harvard after high school. I was drafted by Charlie Finley, who was with the Kansas City Athletics. He offered me some money. I didn't sign. I went to Deerfield which is a prep school. I graduated from high school in May and in April of that year had just turned 17. I was very young. I wasn't ready to play professional baseball nor to go to college. I went to a post-graduate year at Deerfield Academy. I kept getting drafted. There is another interesting story. While at Deerfield, I played football and my backfield coach was Stan Benjamin, who was a long, long, long time scout with the Houston Astros. Whenever I screwed up he would start barking – "Varney, a series of barking sounds." I said back to him – "Mr. Benjamin, I am the property of the Kansas City Athletics and you can't talk to me because you are a scout with the Houston Astros."

I did pretty well at Deerfield academically and sportwise. The Headmaster was a guy named Frank Borden, who was a renowned Headmaster. There is a book about him. He suggested that I go to Harvard.

SABR: Another sidebar – you mentioned that you played football. You played a prominent role in a famous Harvard-Yale tie game that it was reported that Harvard won.

PV: I was fortunate. I had a pretty good football career. That was my sophomore year. The greatest thing about the game and I don't think it's happened again is that both teams were undefeated. Yale was an absolute juggernaut. Brian Dowling was their quarterback. He hadn't lost a game in high school, hadn't lost a game in college and he came into this game undefeated. He had Calvin Hill, who played for the Dallas Cowboys, in the backfield. They were really loaded. We were a fourteen point underdog and yet we went into the game undefeated as well. They were up on us and they were smacking us around. We eventually came back and tied the game. I scored the 2 points that actually tied it with no time left. That was quite a thrill. We were down 16 points with 42 seconds left. It worked out well. (SABR: The headline in the Boston Globe reported that Harvard won the game even though the final score was tied.) Most people believe that, if the game had continued, we would have come out victorious.

SABR: Were you drafted in football?

PV: No. I had a pretty good football career. I talked to Dallas as a free agent but I really knew that I was going to play baseball so I didn't pursue it that much.

SABR: Was your family supportive of your pursuing baseball as a career?

PV: They were hoping that I would eventually. My father was a roofer. He really didn't have much of an education. My older brothers didn't go onto college. I was the first one to go and I think it made him a little bit proud that I went off to a pretty good school and got an education.

SABR: How much was your bonus?

PV: When I got drafted out of high school the money was pretty good. Back then they had the "Six Month Rule" and if you didn't sign you went back into the pool and got redrafted every 6 months. I was actually drafted 7-8 times. Each time I got drafted the money kept going in half, in half, in half. As I got older and older and older, the money got less and less and less. I didn't sign for what back then was a huge bonus. I signed for a little over \$10,000. Again, I was a senior and had finished school. Most kids today sign after their junior year when they have a little bit of leverage to get more money. I went all the way through four years of Harvard.

One of the great thrills that I had when I was at Harvard was that I went to the College World Series; one of the few times that they have gone. That was 1970. We finished fifth. The parameters were a little different back then. We opened up with Brigham Young. We won 4-1. The next game was against Tulsa. We lost 8-7. The next game we lost 2-1 against Pan-American. Pan-American had more shutouts by their pitching staff than games that we had played. They had played over 113 games and had 42 shutouts and our record going into the game was something like 25-8.

SABR: Did any of your teammates at Harvard play professional baseball?

PV: We had three other guys sign off of that team. The best man at my wedding, who actually recovered the on-side kick in the football game, Bill Kelly, from Reading, signed with the St. Louis Cardinals. We had a kid from Cranston Rhode Island, who was also a hockey player at Harvard, Dan DiMichael. He went on with the Chicago Cubs and made it to AAA. Another kid who made it to AAA and signed with the Red Sox was Ross Brighton.

SABR: Who signed you?

PV: A guy who's with the Orioles now, Deacon Jones, was the guy who signed me. He's not Deacon Jones, the football player; same name but not the same guy. He was with the White Sox then but he's with the Orioles now. He's been a long time scout with the Orioles.

SABR: I see where you started your minor league career in Asheville in 1971.

PV: I started out in AA which was kind of a high level to play at. But again, I was older and actually a guy named Bob Woolf represented me; the guy in town (SABR: Bob Woolf handled Larry Bird and others.) I was not quite in that company. He was a friend because I had played for his team; he had sponsored a team in the Boston Park League - Woolf Associates. We won the championship in that league. I became pretty good friends with Bob. He very kindly represented me. It wasn't a big signing bonus but as a friend he took care of me.

I went to Asheville in the Southern League; that was AA. I played that year, just getting my feet wet. I went to the Instructional League in Florida with the White Sox which was in Sarasota. The following spring I reported to the Big League Spring Training Camp because they needed catchers for all of the pitchers. I actually made the AAA team in Tucson. I played for the Tucson Toros in the Pacific Coast League. I had less than half a year in AA right out of college and now I was at the AAA level. Quite honestly, I was over matched. I was struggling and just trying to wade my way through it. I did OK at the end and after that year I went to Des Moines. I played in Des Moines and had a pretty good year. We had a pretty good ballclub. I think we won the championship that year with the Iowa Oaks. Rich Gossage was on that team. We had some pretty good players. Bucky Dent was on that team. Some pretty good players came off of that team.

Following that year, I went to Venezuela and the winter ball league. I went to spring training again with the Big League club and got a bit of a taste of it. I think someone was hurt. I didn't play at all but I was on the Big League roster. I then went back to Des Moines and then at the end of the year I went up to Chicago. (SABR: This was in '73 and '74.)

SABR: Who were your managers along the way?

PV: With the White Sox, Chuck Tanner was a pretty good manager. Paul Richards came after him. I had Tommy Aaron as a manager in AAA in Richmond, VA; Hank Aaron's brother. A guy named Joe Sparks, who didn't quite make it to the Big Leagues, was my AAA manager. A guy named Larry Sherry was who I broke in with in Asheville. Larry Sherry was the MVP of the '58 World Series; the Dodgers pitcher.

SABR: How did you feel when you made it to the Big Leagues in '73?

PV: I really felt proud. It was quite an accomplishment coming from Harvard where you didn't get to play as competitive a schedule as some other kids who had come out of college. I didn't play the number of games as some other kids I had played against. I was really quite proud of what I had accomplished coming from New England and had not played a lot of games. It was a pretty special moment.

SABR: You played in Fenway because you were in the American League

PV: I got to hit once. I hit a double off I can't remember who, but I got to play one game at Fenway.

SABR: Did you have your whole family there?

PV: Yeah. I had the whole family and friends there. It was quite nice.

SABR: How would you describe yourself as a hitter?

PV: Geez - I don't know. I didn't get many chances. I had some power but I was more of a gap hitter, quite honestly. (SABR: I see that you hit about .250.) Right now I would be making about 2.5 million.

SABR: You had five home runs.

PV: I can name all five of them.. Against some pretty good pitchers - Jim Palmer, Luis Tiant (SABR:, a kid named Vern Ruhle (SABR: It was Jim Slaton), Larry Gura and a big left handed pitcher from the Yankees (SABR: Rudy May).

SABR: I see where you managed to steal a couple of bases.

PV: I think they were on the back end of a double steal.

SABR: I see where you struck out quite a bit, too.

PV: If I was any good I would still be playing with the money they are tossing around today.

SABR: Did you have any favorite players growing up? Were you a Red Sox fan?

PV: I was certainly a Red Sox fan. Ted Williams - I idolized him. Willie Mays was the greatest player ever.

SABR: Did you copy your style after any player?

PV: I wish I could. You kind of have to adapt your own personal abilities to what you can do.

SABR: Did you have any favorite parks?

PV: Coming back to Fenway was kind of nice. I got to play once or a couple of times where I could take batting practice when the visiting teams came in. Actually, I got to warm up Ralph Terry before a Yankee game when I was a little kid. Coming back to Fenway was nice and sharing that moment with family and friends.

SABR: What was it like to play against the Red Sox of the mid-70's? They had quite a juggernaut.

PV: They had some great teams; that's when they were involved. I actually, as a player, was able to purchase tickets for the World Series in '75. The sixth game was the one with the home run that Fisk had. I had three empty seats next to me because I couldn't give them away. If you remember it was raining. The game got rained out three consecutive days. I kept calling different friends because they had work and whatever, people couldn't commit to it.

SABR: I see that you played with Richie Allen

PV: I played with Richie Allen, Wilbur Wood, Terry Forester, Goose Gossage, Bill Melton who was or tied for the home run championship, Ron Santo, Jorge Orta, Brian Downing, Tony Muser, Dick Allen, Carlos May, Henderson (I don't remember which one – not Ricky). It was kind of nice, kind of neat to say that you played with or against some great players.

SABR: Richie Allen had a reputation.

PV: Richie Allen was a very aloof person. He was a tremendous player. He showed up one year one day before the season started. He was a chiseled athlete. He was in tremendous shape. Just a great player. He could do it all. He could run, hit, throw. He was the type of guy that when you went to battle you wanted him on your team.

SABR: Did you enjoy Chicago?

PV: Yes. I liked it a lot. Other than it not being on the ocean which I was on all my life living in Quincy. Chicago is very similar with the lake there, downtown, great restaurants, good theater, great culture. We had a nice pleasant time. Obviously, when you are in the Big Leagues things are a little bit nicer than being in the minor leagues. I have some fond memories of being in the Big Leagues in Chicago.

SABR: What was your salary in the minor leagues? In the major leagues?

PV: When I signed with the White Sox it was \$500 per month and \$3 a day meal money. When I got to AAA I probably made \$1800 per month and the meal money was up to \$7 a day. When I signed with the Big League club the most I ever made was \$25,000. The minimum was \$21,000 and it was \$20 a day meal money. I never got the benefit of playing under a \$1,000,000 contract. But honestly, back then \$100,000 was kind of like the watershed mark. Wilbur Wood signed for \$100,000. That was big, huge back then.

SABR: That was right when free agency started?

PV: I actually was a player representative with the White Sox. Even though I only had 110 days they voted me to be a player rep. I was on the committee when the Messersmith thing came about.

SABR: Were there any flakes or characters on your team?

PV: Not really. Baseball was real old time back then. You came to the ballpark ready to play and you played.

SABR: Did you ever get thrown out of any games?

PV: No. I couldn't afford to. The fines were too big. I got thrown out of one and I learned my lesson. It was actually in AAA at Tucson. It cost me \$75 and I learned my lesson. It was a lot of meal money.

SABR: Were you married at the time?

PV: I married my wife in November when I went to Asheville. I signed like in mid-July of '71 after my senior year and we got married in November '71. My wife was gracious enough. She always tells our friends that I got to move 27 times in 7 years. One time I think we moved 8 or 9 times in the same year and she was pregnant with our first son. She was quite a trooper.

SABR: What caused you to end your career in '76?

PV: I just thought it was time to move on. It was the year that Toronto was an expansion team. I hoped that if I had a decent enough year in AAA they might be looking for a kid who was looking to catch on. When I didn't get any sniffs from the expansion club or Atlanta I said "This is enough and let's move on." I had a wife and 2 kids then. We were about to have our second kid then.

SABR: You were in your late 20's and you hit .285 with 10 home runs at Richmond.

PV: .285 - I'd be making \$4,000,000. I had a decent year and the other catcher that year was Dale Murphy. The Braves were probably set at catcher. Like I said - when nobody would give me a chance in spring training, I said let's try to utilize my Harvard education and go onto bigger and better things.

SABR: Were you good friends with Dale?

PV: Dale is living in Belmont MA right now. (SABR: He's with the Mormon Church.) I played one full year in Richmond with Dale. Great guy.

SABR: What did you do after you packed it in?

PV: I first got out in '77. I went back and had to work odd jobs. I worked in a liquor store, did some substitute teaching. I had to go back to school to get my teaching certification. After a year or so, after getting my certification papers, I hooked on as a part time teacher in Wayland MA - a 3/5 teacher in Wayland. I did that for one year. I lived in Acton MA but changed jobs out to Narragansett Regional High School in Gardner MA. I coached 3 sports - football, basketball and baseball. I was

head baseball coach there for 3 years. In '82, February 9<sup>th</sup>, my wife's birthday. I got offered this job at Brandeis and I've been here ever since.

SABR: So you are the baseball coach?

PV: I also teach physical education.

SABR: How does your team do? Are you Division 2?

PV: We are Division 3. We've done pretty well. We've just celebrated our first pitcher pitching in the Big Leagues – Nelson Figueroa. Pitched for Brandeis in 1995. He got signed by the Mets, got traded to Arizona and then pitched 3 games in the Big League for the Arizona Diamondbacks and then just got traded to Philadelphia as part of the Schilling deal.

SABR: Is he related to Ed Figueroa?

PV: No. He's from Brooklyn NY. Real skinny kid. He's going to do well. Two years ago we went to the College World Series. We had a kid drafted in the tenth round by the Cubs; kid by the name of Jim Deschaine from Bristol Connecticut. He finished up this year in AAA. We've had 12 kids sign professional contracts from Brandeis. The most impressive thing, I think, is that 10 of the 12 signed after their junior year. All 10 came back and got their education at Brandeis. It shows their values and their family values.

SABR: You also run a baseball school?

PV: Local – 2 weeks in Acton MA. I did that to help get my sons through school. Both of them started out at Dartmouth. To help pay tuition costs.

SABR: It costs more than you made in the Big Leagues.

PV: It does.

SABR: Did we miss anything? Do you want to add anything?

PV: I've been pretty fortunate. I describe my career as having a cup of coffee – not having time to put the cream and sugar in – to really enjoy it. It was a life long dream. Long work.

SABR: Your biggest thrill was just making it?

PV: It grows. You make it the first time and you're just excited to be there. Then you want to play a little bit. Then you want to get a hit and then you want a home run. Each one of those are special milestones for you. My first home run was against Larry Gura in Shea Stadium against the Yankees. They were renovating Yankee Stadium. So you get to play in Yankee Stadium and you go out to see the memorials out there. The plaques out there are something special and going to all of the parks.

The story I started out with – meeting Frank Howard – that is the type of people you want to meet in baseball. He's just a great, great, great individual. He made me really feel comfortable. I remember going to that locker room when I was 16 years

old and then remembering me in the first game that I played in was kind of special. The first game I played against some special players – like Mickey Lolich was there, the other left- handed pitcher was there, Al Kaline, Norm Cash, Bill Freehan, who was the coach at Michigan. So the people you meet and the people you get to know and become friendly with is something special.

SABR: Do you have any contact with any players?

PV: Very sparingly.

SABR: Wilbur Wood lives here.

PV: I see Wilbur occasionally. I actually see Wilbur playing golf. We get involved in a golf tournament out of Arlington. I see him at different times during the course of the year.