

Jon Matlack

SABR Oral History Collection

Interview by John McMurray
February 6, 2024

Q: Thank you for being with us tonight. This is John McMurray of the Society for American Baseball Research. I am pleased to be speaking today with Jon Matlack. A left-handed starting pitcher, Jon pitched for 13 seasons in the major leagues with the New York Mets and the Texas Rangers. He won the 1972 National League Rookie of the Year award. He was a key player on the 1973 New York Mets team which won the National League pennant. We are recording this interview with Jon's permission on February 6, 2024. Jon, let's start out by talking about what got you interested in baseball.

A: I think when I was 4, my grandfather who lived down the street from where we were in Westchester, Pennsylvania, presented me with a left-handed baseball glove and a ball and said, "Let's go play catch in the backyard" and the rest is history, so to say.

Q: Now when you were growing up, did you initially think you would be a pitcher?

A: Not at all. I was just happy to be part of a team. Matter of fact, in Westchester where I started, a Little League began when I turned 8 in the town. They only had four teams. I think I was one of the last people picked on my team, which was called the Exchange Club. And I got to play right field occasionally. The manager told me to put my tail up against the fence. And if the ball came to me, wait till it stopped rolling, pick it up, throw it to the nearest guy with the same color uniform.

Q: There you are from Westchester, Pennsylvania. You're the oldest of eight children. You were the only one who played sports. How did that happen?

A: Well, not quite the only one to play sports. The only one to play baseball. There were several others involved in track and soccer and other sporting activities, (like) basketball. But I think Mom had something to do with not wanting anybody to have to follow in my footsteps and steer them in other directions.

Q: Now in Little League you were playing the outfield and later on took up pitching. What was it like to play the outfield?

A: It was intriguing, I was still trying to figure out what baseball was all about at 8, 9 years old. I was just barely able to hold onto the ball and throw it in the direction it needed to go. Somewhere between 9 and 10 I had a pretty good growth spurt and when I came back to the team the year when I turned 10, the coach took one look at me and said, "You're not the biggest kid on the team. You're going to pitch." And I immediately went into a state of panic because I didn't know if I could throw a ball over the plate or not.

Q: And you (grew to become) 6-foot-3, and you pitched throughout your high school career. Tell us about your pitching in high school and when you started to think that you might be up to the major league caliber.

A: It probably was in my junior year of high school. We had a very good high school team in

Westchester. The school didn't enter us into any postseason programs, but many scouts told me after the fact that they thought we were one of the the top high school teams in the country during that time frame. But my junior year, I kept seeing people with clipboards and stopwatches show up behind the backstops at our games, and I finally asked the coach, "Who are these people and what are they doing at these games." And he said, "They're scouts." And I literally had no idea what a scout was. What's a scout? And he proceeded to tell me that they're looking for talent for major league teams. And I said, "Oh really? Well, who are they looking at?" He said, "Well, they're looking at you and they're looking at our catcher, Bobby Owens, and they're looking at several of the other players on our team." And that was really the first inkling that I had, other than pipe dreams that kids have amongst themselves and pickup games, that I could ever be anything more than just an amateur player.

Q: Now growing up, what was your favorite team?

A: Did not have one. I was not a watcher, I was a player. So if there was sunshine and even if the sun wasn't shining, if it wasn't too wet, we were playing some kind of sport that involved the ball. And if it wasn't snowing, it was generally baseball.

Q: But I've also heard you say that you enjoyed watching Sandy Koufax pitch in those times when he was on television and that you emulated him a little bit. To what degree is that accurate?

A: That's accurate, but you gotta understand that I think we got television when I was 12 years old. So I didn't get to watch a whole lot of it. I did have the opportunity, well, didn't turn out to be the opportunity, but had the the (World) Series in 1966 gone further than four games, our coach had secured tickets to the game in Baltimore. We were gonna go watch but it didn't make it that far.

Q: And obviously your uniform number, 32, was a Koufax connection, right?

A: Absolutely. And it took a little to get it. They gave me 35 when I first showed up in the (Mets) organization. And when I got to the big leagues, I still had 35 and I had the cajole and connive with the equipment manager, Herbie Norman, to try and eventually end up with 32. And he swore to me I could never have it, and then one day I walked in the clubhouse and it was hanging in my locker. That was just his way. Always playing jokes, but it was nice to see.

Q: Now in the 1967 amateur draft the Mets used their first pick on you, the fourth overall. Ron Blomberg was the first pick. You had mentioned seeing scouts in the stands. Did you have any inkling that you were going to be drafted when the draft came around in 1967?

A: I thought there was a possibility I might be drafted, but had no idea where and was totally surprised to see that I was the fourth pick. Thrilled, absolutely thrilled. And it sort of made my decision whether I would become professional or go to college, because being picked that high I felt like I would get an adequate shot in the minor leagues and be allowed to develop. So we went that route instead of going to school.

Q: How did you feel about the Mets at that time? They were relatively new, hadn't had World Series success at that time. When you were drafted by the Mets, did you think, "Well, maybe this would be a problem because they weren't very good" or did you think, "Oh, there's more opportunity here"?

A: Didn't think either one really. But the only research I could come up with showed me that they loved to be involved with and try and develop pitching and defense, and that's the way they were trying to

win. And that's sort of the way I grew up in amateur ball. It was strong pitching and quality defense. So that made me feel good. And it was a little scary because when I first got involved, I went to instructional league in 1967, I think there were 17, 18, 19 pitchers down there, something like that. Then they lined us up for a picture, from tallest to smallest. I was the eleventh guy. There were 10 guys down there taller than I was. And I think ... I'm through. I was mortified that I wasn't gonna be able to be equal to the task.

Q: And you played for an American Legion team which delayed your entry after joining the Mets, but at the same time, you go from an American Legion team to Double-A, which probably is unheard of today.

A: Well, the easy answer to that is it was the closest place to my home. It was Williamsport, Pennsylvania. I was in Westchester, Pennsylvania. It was only a few hours drive and I think that's why they sent me there. I did get to pitch a couple times. I got my hat handed to me soundly. I think I had a 14 earned run average and two starts or something like that. It was an eye-opening experience, for sure.

Q: Now when you said you had your hat handed to you, did you think at any point that you might not have as much success at this level? Did you doubt yourself at that point?

A: I didn't at that point, but when I got down to the instructional league and saw all the other pitchers, and the quality of the arms that they had in the organization — and these weren't even guys that were in the big leagues. (Jerry) Koosman was there, I think, after setting the International League strikeout record. Nolan (Ryan) was there. A guy named Johnny Glass. There were a bunch of guys that just threw the ball very, very hard. And at one point I called my dad and I said, "I think you might have to send me a bus ticket home because I don't know if I could play with these guys." And he said, "Just give it some time, do what you do best, and keep your nose to the grindstone." And so I went back to work and it took four years, a little more than four years, but I finally did get there.

Q: Raleigh-Durham in 1968 was a real turning point for you. You had a 13-6 record. Was that your best minor league season? What was different that year?

A: I don't know that anything was different. I got to be involved from the very beginning with the team and play the full season, as opposed to being plopped into Double-A in August and try and swim. It was like being thrown into the deep end of the pool without your water rings, you know. But getting to start at the beginning of the season and work through with the team, it had a lot of value. It allowed me to develop fundamentals that helped me carry through through the rest of my career.

Q: You spent three years with the Mets' Triple-A team in Tidewater. The Mets drafted you very high, but you're also spending a lot of time in the minor leagues and developing. How much of a difference did it make to you to spend so much time in the minor leagues?

A: I think it made a big difference, actually. It allowed for a solid foundation so when things didn't go well — and a few times they didn't in the big leagues — you weren't as rocked by it as you might have been without having the opportunity to build that foundation. They teased me in Tidewater, (General Manager) Dave Rosenfield, that if I came back one more year they were gonna run me for mayor. But that never happened, fortunately. It was a very good learning experience. I got to play three full seasons in AAA, high quality baseball, (and) following that winter ball in Puerto Rico, which was a notch above but still not quite major league talent. And that was sort of a stair step that allowed me to get there and perform well in 1972.

Q: And you were able to win the championship in the International League with the Tides one season, as well.

A: That was in 1969 and I was a 19-year-old rookie and I'm happy to do anything I could to help these guys. They were all seasoned veterans, it seemed like, and I believe every team in the Mets organization, from the big leagues all the way down, which I don't know how often that happens.

Q: And you also had personal things going on. You got married at one point, but you also lost your dad.

A: True enough. I got married 10 days after I turned 18. We climbed on a bus and snuck off to Detroit and got married. Fifty-six years later, we're still at it, so. It worked out. And my dad died in February of 1969 and never did get to see me play in the big leagues. He did get to see me play in the minor leagues. But I think I always felt that I had the opportunity and the ability to get there. And hopefully he was able to look down from somewhere and be able to see the career I did have.

Q: In 1971 Jerry Koosman had an injury. You started the year with Tidewater. You're brought up to the major league team. How did you feel?

A: Scared. I had to pitch the second game of a doubleheader in Cincinnati. And the clubhouse guy there tried to send me a bill for the carpet. He said I wore out the carpet pacing so much during the first game that he felt you needed to replace it. But now in all seriousness, it was a good experience. I felt like I pitched a good ballgame. I had Seaver for a caddy and he ended up losing the ballgame. So I thought I was going to come away with a win. And we ended up losing as they pitched him in relief because it was so close to the All-Star break.

Q: I read that you were in the shower after your start and you thought to yourself, "Seaver coming in in relief, (we) got this game under control."

A: That's not quite accurate, but yeah, I was in in the clubhouse and thought, "Boy, I've got Seaver in to close this game out." (Then I heard on the) radio that (Tony) Pérez hit his second home run and the score turned against us and that was that.

Q: We have a question about Gil Hodges. I know we have many people in the audience who are fans of his. You knew him for a relatively short amount of time, but tell us about him.

A: I don't know a whole lot to tell. I respected the man a lot. His baseball acumen was tops. He was easy to talk to when you needed to, but at the same time, if I saw him in the hotel and we were on the road, I'd go the other way if I could, rather than walk by him and say good morning just because of the aura that he had. He would hit fungoes at you, if you weren't paying attention during batting practice, the ball might one-hop and hit you in the chest. And you'd look around and Gil would be standing by the batting cage grinning from ear to ear and you could see him mouth something like, "Can I get you a tea" or something like that? Because I was not paying attention when they might have been hit or hitting balls in the other direction. I was very impressed by his ability the short time I was there when he managed to foresee things in the future of the game. You might tell somebody three innings early, for example, you call down and (Ken) Boswell's not in the game, and (he would say) "Kenny, go get loose. I may need you to hit." And two and a half, three days later, Bozzy got the opportunity. So it was like he was thinking way beyond what most people were. When you get to the major leagues,

obviously the method had a great — you know, a World Series champion in 1969.

Q: You had a lot of veteran players. How did the veteran players, particularly someone like Tom Seaver, treat you when you got to the major leagues?

A: I was treated very well and they put me in a great spot. My locker was in between Tom and Jerry Koosman. I had tremendous support from both of them. Jerry was a fellow left-hander. We used to talk shop all the time about pitch selection and how he sequenced pitches against certain guys. Different grips, that type of thing. And Tom was more theory and philosophy about the game itself, how to prepare for a game. Training and sleep aspects. Good, invaluable information. I was in the perfect sandwich.

Q: I read that your locker was put between them intentionally given their expectations of you as a prospect.

A: I think probably nobody ever said that, but looking back on it that may have been the way it was.

Q: In terms of your own first season, how did you feel it was going in the sense of, you know, you come up, you didn't get a win right away. At the same time, did you remain confident?

A: It's hard to say when you're a rookie. You keep your head down and you keep moving because it's hard to hit a moving target. I just felt like I needed to stay in my world, do the best I could with what I was expected to do, and let the chips fall where they may. My job was to keep us in the ballgame as long as they let me stay out there to pitch. And if I had done that, win, lose, or draw, I felt like I had contributed and that was what I was expected to do.

Q: There were several times during that season when run support was short. Looking back on it people said, "Well, how did you survive that eight-game stretch where you only gave up seven runs and you didn't win a ballgame" and stuff like that.

A: I didn't think about it that way. I thought about it as I had done my job because we had a chance to win that game. Wasn't necessarily my fault that we lost it unless maybe I had made a mistake late in the game that cost us. But if I had kept it close, that was what I was supposed to do.

Q: You started the 1972 season in the majors. You had also played winter ball following the 1971 season. Did that winter ball experience help to get you off to such a good start in 1972?

A: I think it probably did because I had a full AAA season the year before went. After two or three weeks after the season, I went straight to Puerto Rico and played all winter down there, had another 70-some-odd innings. I pitched down there, good learning experience. Bill Virdon was the manager and we had a good club. So it was a building experience. Now it comes spring training and I don't have to get ready for spring training. I'm already ready because I had just pitched all through winter ball. And I think that gave me a little bit of a leg up.

Q: In 1972 you had an ERA under 2 by the end of May. Your ERA for the season was the fourth best in the National League. Tell us about how you pitched so effectively that year. Did you have a particular go-to pitch?

A: Anything that got them out was the one I liked the most, that's for sure. Until I hurt my arm in 1977

(with) bone chips, I was a two-pitch pitcher. I was a fastball, curveball guy. I threw the curve a couple of different speeds and I threw three different fastballs, one cut and ran a little bit, one that sank, and one that was a straight four-seam. So the mix of those pitches, then locating balls, was what I tried to do to keep hitters off stride. As far as game to game stuff, it was just a matter of learning what you could from the previous game, putting the good stuff in your pocket, making corrections mentally for what had to be done for the next one. And then I'd always check the box scores. We would get scouting reports but I'm looking at the box scores: "Who am I facing next? Who's hot? Am I gonna face him? They gonna be in a lineup against me? Who's the base stealers? If the game's on the line, who do I not want to let beat me?" And just preparation in that respect.

Q: How much input did you get from the coaching staff on how to approach certain hitters or was it more something based upon your own study that dictated how you went about pitching to certain hitters?

A: Well, there was information that was always supplied every time we started a new series. The pitching coach, Rube Walker, would usually bring it in and we'd sit with the catchers and the other pitcher. And normally the guy who was pitching that day would run the meeting and discuss how they were gonna approach the lineup. And we would always review the scouting report and invariably they would say this guy's the first ball, fastball hitter, or be careful with the fastball with this guy. And to this day I laugh about it because the first thing that popped into my head is "Well, they haven't seen my fastball yet. And I'm gonna go away from it until he proves to me that I need to." So my approach was to do what I did well, as often as I could, early in the game and later into the game if they would allow me before having to make an adjustment or go to the weak spot. That was shown in the scouting report because if I waited and got him out the first two times up, three times up, now it's a crucial part of the ballgame (and) I can surprise them with the weakness and hopefully it's in my advantage.

Q: On September 30, 1972, you were the pitcher who gave up Roberto Clemente's 3,000th hit. I've read that you didn't know that Clemente was at 2,999. Is that true?

A: Absolutely a fact. I was a wet-behind-the-ears rookie that did not know the famous Clemente needed maybe one more for 3,000. And I'm having a tough day. I've walked too many guys. I'm getting beat. I'm just trying to get another out and when I threw this pitch, I'm trying to backdoor (the) curveball. When it left my hand, I know it's not going to be a strike and I'm mad at myself because of the way it came out of my hand. And somehow he rifles it one-hop off the left-center field wall for a double. And they present him with the ball at second base and I'm going, "Wait a minute, we got a ballgame here to play. Why are they giving him the ball?" And then I see the 3,000 flashing on the scoreboard out there in the outfield and it dawned on me that I was gonna be in the history books for a while.

Q: Now did you have any interaction with Clemente off the field? Did you know him at all?

A: The previous winter, I played for the San Juan Senadores and he had been involved with that club. He did not play, but he had invited the eight American players to his home for dinner and so we had that association, meeting then and talked a little shop. So I knew him a little bit, but that was all.

Q: At that time, you obviously didn't have radar guns and I have a question from Jerry asking about this. What do you think the average major league fastball would have been clocked at and maybe what yours was?

A: I honestly don't know. People have told me they thought I was probably mid-nineties. I couldn't begin to say. People normally ask me and I said they usually clocked my pitch with a sundial. So it's hard to say. The way I gauged whether the ball had life, or at least perception of life to the hitter, was how well they were able to center it. If I got in on a handle or out on the end of the bat, or shattered a bat, I knew darn well that their perception was it was a little different speed than they thought it was.

Q: Going back to Clemente's 3,000 hit, obviously you don't necessarily want to give up a milestone hit like that. But how do you feel about it all these years later?

A: It's nice to be tied to a guy that famous. In history, and when it came to coaching, it was instant recognition with the Latin ballplayers. Because as soon as my name was mentioned they would go, "Oh, Matlack, Clemente, you're the guy who gave up his hit." So they all knew who I was and whether that made them listen any more when I was coaching, I don't know. But I had instant recognition with the Latin ballplayers.

Q: You go into 1973, your record wasn't as impressive as it was the year before but you struck out 205 hitters, good for third in the National League. When you pitched, were you trying to strike players out?

A: No ... with a caveat. There are times in a ballgame when you need an out without the ball being put into play. And if I could accomplish that, yes. But there's not too many times when that happens. And most of the time I was trying to invite friendly contact and have all my other teammates involved. And if I came away with a strikeout, that was good. But I wasn't hunting them.

Q: Now, famously, in May of that year, you get hit with a ball by Marty Perez of Atlanta. That wound up hitting you in the forehead and injuring you and sending you to the hospital. Recount for us what happened.

A: Well, I feel like I got a bad call from an umpire the pitch before. I had a 2-2 curveball that wasn't a strike, it was a little low. And I thought the check swing went too far. Home plate umpire said no. We appealed to first base. He said no, no swing. So now I'm 3-2. I've got the bases loaded. I've got, I think, a 2-1 lead at the time. It's starting to rain. I've got to make a pitch. I overthrew the pitch. I landed too hard on the mound. I lost sight of the ball on its way to the plate. So I see him swing the bat. I can hear the bat hit the ball, but I still don't pick up the ball until it's maybe 15 feet from me and I was able to get my fingertips up and it hit the bill of my cap and hit me right there. And then went one hop in our dugout for a ground-rule double and cost me the ballgame. That was worse than the headache.

Q: And you felt pain in your teeth, right? It hit you in the forehead, but you felt it in your teeth, right?

A: I knew I was hurt and I laid myself down on the mound. And my mouth is what hurt and I was reaching to feel if I still had teeth and (catcher Jerry) Grote grabbed my hand and said wait for the trainer and then they started looking at my forehead and I looked up and I could see the knot had grown enough that I could literally see my forehead when I glanced up. And it was a crazy night. It was a comedy of errors actually, because it was raining, they covered me with a tarp when they took me off the field. Well, my wife's in the stands. She sees me covered up. She thinks I'm dead. She comes flying down to the clubhouse. They claim that she's the second female other than (Mets owner) Joan Payson to go in the clubhouse, to prove that I'm still alive. They cut my uniform off me. They put me in the ambulance. They're going to send me down to Manhattan Roosevelt Hospital to get checked out. And I'm sitting in the back of the ambulance with an ice bag on my head and they can't find their way out of the parking lot. So I'm directing them through the little window out the parking lot. We finally get

down to the hospital and it's raining down there and there's accidents and the ambulances are backed up. They leave me sitting in the rain while they try and find out where they're supposed to take me. When they finally get me inside, somebody is on a high one nearby and he falls off of it on top of me. I mean, it was a comedy of errors all night long. Finally got checked out, they said I had a hairline fracture that ran from where I'd gotten hit down toward the center of my forehead between my eyes. And it would need to be protected for eight weeks. Cause if I got hit there again, I'd probably die.

Q: And then you go home right that evening.

A: No, no, I wasn't. I was in intensive care for two days, maybe three days, and then they let me out. Went back to the house, I don't know, five or six days after that. I got checked out by the team doctor. He said I was fine. I climbed on a plane, but the team was in Montreal.

Q: And you were only out for 11 days, which obviously wouldn't happen today.

A: I don't think so. I think they probably waited for everything to heal, but they did make me wear a headband. There was all kind of speculation about how I was supposed to protect this thing. At first it was a hockey goalie's mask and I said there's no way I'm wearing that. They tried several other things before coming up with the, and I don't know what it's called, even the material that the catchers used to mold around their thumb to keep them from having their thumb knocked back or something like that. And I molded a piece of that to my forehead, sealed it in between two tennis headbands and then I didn't have a hat that would fit. Seaver had the only head big enough. I could wear the hat over the headband and then every time you threw a pitch it would move and bounce. It was a royal pain in the neck.

Q: Obviously you were a star performer, particularly at the end of the season from August onward, you were 5-1 but after an injury like that similar to let's say what Herb Score had, were you able to come back to the mound and feel comfortable and confident?

A: After that first appearance, yes. Prior to it, I was very worried about it. I didn't know who Herb Score was actually until they brought a paper in the next day at the hospital and there's my picture and his picture, and I'm reading about this guy. Nothing, man. I hope that doesn't happen to me. And the more I thought about it, it was an accident more than anything else. So I thought as long as I didn't flinch or blink when balls were hitting my direction, I'd probably be fine. I did pitch, I think, six innings against the Pirates. There were several balls not hit right at me, but several balls hit on the ground in the infield (to) second base (and) shortstop. My reaction was normal. I didn't blink. I didn't flinch. And I pretty much put it behind me after that.

Q: I have a question from Stephen, who wants to know about the catchers that you had when you were in New York. Jerry Grote, Duffy Dyer, is there anything distinctive about the way they played behind the plate and in their approach to the game and the way they interacted with you? Because obviously you're having success and I assume that you're developing strong relationships with your catchers?

A: Well, I ended up, rooming a couple of years with Jerry Grote. We became very close friends. That's sort of a funny story because I think for the first six weeks of my rookie season every time he caught, if I bounced the ball, there was nobody on base where he didn't necessarily have to block it but he did anyway because that's the way he was. He would rifle the ball back at me in a place that I had to catch it and get stung in the palm. Cursed at me, hollered at me. Sort of berated me, just the normal treatment that a rookie might get, only times two. And gradually it would wear on me. I got fired up and he was

headed out to the mound this particular day, I don't know, six, seven weeks into the season. Had his mask propped up on his head like he always did. And I met him at the bottom of the mound. So "Look, Jerry, I'm pitching, you're catching, get your ass behind the plate and let's go back to work. I don't want to hear any more of this." And he stood there and started laughing. I said, "What is so funny?" He said, "I've been waiting 6 weeks for that. Turn around." So all he was trying to do was get me to take charge.

Q: So take us back to the 1973 season and the Mets at one time or other — I believe I'm correct in saying — that every team in that division was in first place. This is a question from Les, why do you think the 1973 Mets caught fire in August and September after struggling so much before then? Did the team just get healthy?

A: I think health had something to do with it. I don't know, the thing that I remember most is the ball that hit the corner of the fence and didn't leave against the Pirates, it bounced back to Cleon (Jones) and he relayed it to home plate. And I think (Richie) Zisk was the guy that got thrown out at home plate. From that night on, we end up winning that ballgame (in 13 innings on September 20), and things seem to go our way. It didn't seem to be one particular person, but whatever needed to happen in the ballgame happened, somebody contributed to make it happen. And we played probably our best baseball for the rest of the season.

Q: Take us back to that ball on the wall play. Dave Augustine hits the ball and then it hits just the right spot and sort of goes straight up and Cleon is able to get it and relay it to (shortstop Wayne) Garrett.

A: Yeah, I don't know, you could try I don't know how many times to try and get that to happen. I have no idea how it could have hit just the way it did on that corner, because the top of that fence was just a 2-by-4 that ran down there and it hit right on the edge and kicked right back to Cleon. Perfect relay, got the play at the plate, and that sort of turned things around.

Q: And just so I'm clear, did the team had a new confidence or was it just something where where you sort of felt the pieces coming together?

A: I don't know. I felt like that was a — it wasn't like that's a sign we're going to win. It was more like that's something that hasn't gone our way all year and tonight it did and the next night somebody else did something that and I couldn't tell you who at this point but that added to our ability to perform well and win ballgames. And it was different contributors the rest of the way through the season. That ultimately led us to the championship without the best record in the world, we just took our turn at the top when it counted.

Q: Now in 1973, Tug McGraw is associated with that season. Tell us about his famous catchphrase ("Ya' Gotta Believe") and how it came to be.

A: I am not really sure how it all came to be except that it got blurted out at the end of the (series) and (Mets team president) M. Donald Grant came in the clubhouse. Some people thought it was mocking M. Donald Grant. I think it was just Tug saying "This is what you got to do if you're going to win." He was an effervescent kind of a personality (and) it just came out and he carried that through the rest of the scene, banging his glove on his leg. "You gotta believe." The fans picked up on it. There were signs everywhere. It was just something that carried through.

Q: What was Yogi Berra like as a manager? I've heard people say that he may have under-managed a bit. Is that true?

A: I don't know if you could call it under-managing or not, but I loved playing for Yogi. Great people. He was one of those guys that sort of said, "Here's the bats and the balls, boys, go win me a ballgame." Didn't put on a whole lot of plays. But now and then hit and run, now and then pinch hit once in a while, but it wasn't like he was marionetting the whole ballgame. Here's an interesting tale about Yogi. I had trouble, when he would come to the mound, understanding sometimes what he was saying and it was a little bit embarrassing to say "Yeah, pardon me Yogi, what was that? I didn't understand that." And I finally went to Seaver and I said, "Look, I'm having trouble when Yogi comes to the mound to know what to do or what he's saying." Tommy said, "It's easy." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, when he's done talking, if he doesn't put out his hand, you say, okay, Yogi, and he'll go back to the dugout. If he puts his hand out, you put the ball in it and you go to the dugout." And it was that simple.

Q: In terms of 1973 and also in 1972, Willie Mays was there. What was your relationship like with Willie?

A: Willie was like my surrogate father. I was the youngster on the club and he was the old man and he watched out for me. Always had something encouraging to say. Great influence on the ball club. It was a wonderful experience having him around. And Willie also, I had sort of an anticipation, he may have lost some of this. He may not have been quite the player that he was some years before, but he was able to, let's say, advance on a passed ball and so forth because he always had a sense of what was going on. I don't know if I could see it the way he saw it. He said he could see from the trajectory of the pitch whether it was going to be tough for the catcher to handle. So before the ball got to the plate, he's already got a step so he didn't have to be as fast and a lot of times, probably more than half of the time, he was successful with it. So the instinct, the ability to read what was happening with the pitch, I'm not sure what it was. But it was definitely positive all right.

Q: But Willie also would, sort of, you mentioned, have sort of a mentoring role, he would look out for players and say, "Hey, get to sleep the night before you're gonna pitch" or something like that to try and make sure that you were staying within the team concept.

A: More than once, we might have been out after a game having something to eat or something like that and Willie came by and grabbed me by the arm and said, "Hey, kid, you gotta pitch tomorrow. Get your tail home and go to sleep."

Q: And, in terms of the 1973 team, when did you feel like, "Hey, maybe you really, really had a shot at this."

A: I don't know. Right at the end, we probably felt that we had a shot at the fact that we were playing so well and we were in it. It meant that we did have a shot. I thought I had a chance to seal it in Chicago and Fergie (Jenkins) beat me in about an hour and 42 minutes, 1-0. And I think we went the next day or maybe the day after that, but I don't know that you ever feel that you've got it until it happens. I think we always felt there was a chance and if we did the best we could, that might come to fruition, but until it actually happened, we didn't know for sure.

Q: In the National League Championship Series in 1973, you're playing the Cincinnati Reds, a formidable lineup. Tell us about Game Two, which is one of the most important games you pitched in 1973.

A: Yeah, it was it was one of my better games, no question. It was one of those days when most everything was working in my favor. I had charted Seaver's game the day before and was shaking my head when the game was over because he had done such a masterful job and still came away a loser. And I'm thinking to myself, "How am I going to possibly beat these guys?" My approach was to take it one pitch at a time, one out at a time, one inning at a time, not get too far ahead of myself. Rusty (Staub) had come to me prior to the game and said, "Look, (Don) Gullett tips his pitches. I can tell what he's gonna throw on a certain pitch and . . . before the day's over you keep him close." And I had a 1-0 lead and sure enough late in the ballgame, he got a pitch that he could hit and that worked. And the rest is history, as they say. It was just one of those days that, things fell into place just right and went in our favor.

Q: What was your strategy to pitching to someone like Pete Rose or Johnny Bench?

A: Well, I was just about to say that they had to put Andy Kosco in the lineup instead of somebody else. And it might have been even better. Because he got the only two singles. But now Bench, I had very good success with throughout my career. I'm not really sure why. I tried to stay as hard as I could in on his hands. Most of the time, that seemed to work. Rose was a different story. He was a guy that could hit just about anything at any time. And I was just trying to keep off the fat part of the bat as much as I could. Sometimes I was successful, sometimes I wasn't.

Q: You get to the 1973 World Series and you're playing the the Oakland A's and just before we get to the games that you pitched, the A's were a powerhouse. Given that you had an 82-79 record, a lot of people were counting you out. How did the team feel?

A: Well, I think you never go into something like that thinking that you don't have a chance. I said earlier on that the Mets built that organization on pitching and defense, and I think that team won based on pitching and defense and timely hitting. The same holds true in a series like that. You can have a powerhouse, but if you can shut down that offense and sit on a one- or two-run lead. You're gonna come away a winner. And that sort of approach, we were trying to take into that game or that series. They definitely had us beat on paper, but they still had to do it on the field.

Q: Now in the first game of the World Series, you pitch six innings and you give up three hits. What was the secret to your success that day?

A: Don't know that I even remember. It was just try and do the best you can at that moment. One out at a time. Who's next? You know, just don't let it get out of hand. Stay away from the walk if you can; you can't defend that. So it was just pitching 101 and hope the defense did the job.

Q: And there was an error in that game (by Mets second baseman Félix Millán) that cost you two runs. Tell us what happened.

A: I have no idea what happened. Félix is usually just as steady as they come and this one didn't work. But to pick up for him, I still threw the ball that (Ken) Holtzman hit down the line for the double. So if I get Holtzman out, the error is not even talked about. So I don't blame Félix for anything. I should have pitched better to Kenny and gotten that out. And maybe we would have won 1-0. Who knows?

Q: You come back on three days' rest and pitch in Game Four and had a really outstanding start. You give up one run in eight innings, the Mets win 6-1. What you recall about that particular game and was that the best game you pitched in 1973?

A: I still think there were better games. The playoff game was a better game. That night was a cold night and I think that worked in my benefit a little bit. I grew up in the eastern part of Pennsylvania and was used to cold weather. So gripping the ball, making the ball rotate to throw the curveball, things like that were not difficult in the cold weather. And I think that helped me.

Q: Now, after Game Four, did you have a sense that Yogi might come back to you for Game Seven at that point, if there was a Game Seven?

A: Yeah, somewhat. It wasn't really discussed, but I felt that if things progressed the way they had been that Game Seven would be mine. There's been a lot of speculation about what could have been, what should have been, what he should have done. I don't know whether it was one right where there wasn't. I know that the Oakland A's powerhouse never showed up from Game One through Six. We should have won all six of those ballgames somehow or another. We only won three. They hit the only two home runs against me in that last game and one of the pitches, you probably could have hit out. A curveball to Reggie (Jackson) and he lost his cap. It was a pretty good pitch for the other home run (by Bert Campaneris). These things happen. I was not equal to the test that day. Whether somebody else would have been, I'm not sure.

Q: The common question that I've been asked is one about George Stone and obviously he was 12-3 that year, he had more rest than you did at that point. There's been a longtime controversy about whether Stone should have pitched either in Game Six or in Game Seven. What was going on in the clubhouse? Did you have any sense that that was under consideration?

A: I did not. It may have been, but I was not aware of it. When you look back at it, it might have been smarter to go that route and have Tommy ready for Game Seven and me in the bullpen, something like that. I know there's been a lot of speculation about it. I never heard, there may have been discussion but I never heard anything about it. And like I say, hindsight's pretty clear. What we did do didn't pan out. What we didn't do might have, but we'll never know.

Q: How did you feel on three days' rest for the second time after going from Game Four to Game Seven? Were you tired at that point?

A: No, I wasn't tired. I didn't make pitches as consistently as I should have. Like I said, I hung a curveball to Reggie. My other pitches may have been not quite as crisp. Might have been something that I should have done different in terms of sequencing. They've seen me now. This is the third time in a week. And I might have been, I should have changed up my approach a little bit. In hindsight, I don't know that I would have done anything different. I think if I had made a better pitch to Reggie and that ball doesn't get hit out, the whole ballgame is a little bit different from that point forward. But like you say, that's history.

Q: I have a question from Dave. How do you look back on the 1973 Series? The Mets outplayed Oakland for the most part over the first five games. Did you feel that you had a real chance to win the World Series? Do you look back and see a missed opportunity at any point?

A: Oh, like I just said earlier, I think there's no question we outplayed them for the first six ballgames and only won three of those. So it could have, should have, would have, but it didn't. And that's just the way it went.

Q: Now over the next several seasons, 1974, 1975, and 1976, you didn't have the same kind of seasons that you had in 1973. What was the difference in the years to follow the 1973 World Series?

A: I don't know that there's a lot of difference. In 1974, if you want to go take a close look at it, was my Jacob deGrom Cy Young year. I led most of baseball in pitching stats that year and had a 13-15 record. So it's hard to fathom, whether you consider that not doing well or you consider just bad luck that you didn't get more runs. I don't know, but in any event you take it on the chin and you go forward. I didn't pitch that badly in 1975, '76, won 17 games (in 1976), and then had the bone chips and later had a shoulder issue in 1977. When we rolled into Atlanta, I sat down with Rube (Walker) at the counter of the hotel to have a sandwich, and (I) went to pick the water up off the counter and couldn't lift the glass of water without setting my elbow on the table and using my bicep. So I looked at Rube (and) I said, "I think we got a problem here." So I had strained my rotator and needed some rest and they gave me, I don't know, six or seven weeks off to try and get that back into shape.

Q: In 1975, you wind up in the All-Star Game and you get the MVP award which is shared with Bill Madlock. You pitched two innings, struck out four batters. Tell us about your All-Star Game experience in Milwaukee.

A: It almost didn't happen because of the home run that (Carl) Yastrzemski hit off Seaver while I was warming up. If the guys in the bullpen don't yell, it might have hit me. It came right into our bullpen so that was a little bit of a wakeup call, but it was just exciting to participate in the game. The All-Star games, I think, are something special and was a lot of fun. I was throwing the ball good that night and fortunate to have positive results. We scored runs that allowed me to win the ballgame. The guy who drove those runs in has a name (Madlock) that sounds an awful lot like mine and we both sort of thought that because they couldn't tell the two names apart, we got the charity award. And in that All-Star Game, you know, you're playing, we don't have the two leagues playing each other the way that they do today.

Q: Stylistically, how do you feel the National League shaped up at that time versus the American League in terms of hitting? And was it an adjustment to face these American League hitters?

A: It wasn't so much an adjustment. You got a little bit of a sense from other players about what they knew about these guys and I still was one that I wanted to pitch the way I was successful pitching, which was using the fastball moving around when it was appropriate, mix in a breaking ball and so on. That information, although valuable if the game was on the line, wasn't something that really came into play until they had proved to me that I needed to change my approach. I was fortunate enough after giving up a base hit to (Claudell) Washington to catch him leaning and pick him off at first. And that might have saved us a little bit there. The strikeout certainly helped because they are not moving guys around the bases when the ball is not put in play. Just in general, you know, as you become a veteran pitcher, you're going out and you're pitching a lot of innings, more innings than pitchers would pitch today.

Q: You mentioned before that you wanted to take the ball and just go as long as you can. But you're pitching close to seven innings on average for every start that you made. And you didn't have a pitch count or anything like that. Did you just go as far as you could each game?

A: Unless somebody brought a team of wild horses out there, I was prepared to stay as long as I could stay. There was a certain sense of authorship, about finishing what you started. And I think guys in my era wanted to do just that as much as humanly possible. Unless I was completely out of gas and felt that

I would be a detriment to the team to be left out there. I wasn't about to say, "Yeah, I need to come out of this ballgame now." The manager has the ultimate decision obviously. But if he's asking me how I'm feeling, he's probably gonna get "I feel fine, Skip."

Q: Now 1976 was likely your best statistical season. Tell us about one game, though, during that year that you pitched against (Houston Astros ace) J.R. Richard. It was a 1-0 game. You pitch nine scoreless innings, he pitches 10 scoreless innings.

A: The only thing I really remember about that is having to get in the batter's box with him on the mound. I was absolutely petrified. He's probably the only guy I've ever faced where the ball was a blur. Usually you discern spin, you can see what the ball is going to do a little bit, whether it's going to sink, sail, curveball, slider, or whatever. That ball was coming at me and it was a blur. So I was tickled to get away from there without getting clipped.

Q: Now around this time, things start to change around the team. Tom Seaver gets traded. He had been vocal about changes that needed to be made with the team. How did you feel about the way the team was being run as you started to get into the late 1970s?

A: Well, it's not my job to run the team, that's for sure. But when asked that, and reporters did ask, I tried to say, sometimes not always accurately reported, that with a little bit of offensive help we had a very solid nucleus of pitching and defense. That a few more runs here and there we could probably do a whole lot better. And that's all I was trying to get across. Somehow or another it came about that I wanted to be traded if we weren't going to do any better. I subsequently was traded. I was very surprised at what had happened with Tom. And even more surprised that I was traded and then that Koosman was traded, all three of us went within the span of a year. So it made me aware that it's a business more than a game and was a little bit of a wake-up call.

Q: So you're traded as part of a four-team trade and go to the Texas Rangers. I know it was a shock to be traded. How did you feel about going to Texas in particular?

A: If you had asked me the night I was traded to name one player on the Texas Ranger team, I couldn't have done it. I had no idea where I was going and who was on that team. I had to do a lot of research. I knew it was going to be a different league. Strike zone was different. The DH was gonna be part of the game. So some preparation and changes needed to be done. But it was a time that, although sad to be leaving New York, was also a fresh start and. I wanted to put my best foot forward so went back to work out in the offseason and got ready to go. I got traded in December, so I had a little bit of time to get myself ready for the Texas heat.

Q: And (in Texas) you're a one-two punch with Ferguson Jenkins. Tell us about Fergie Jenkins as a pitcher and as a teammate.

A: Great teammate, along the lines of Seaver in that respect, anything he could do to help you he would. Very crafty on the mound. Loved to move around on the rubber. Loved to alter the grip on his slider, alter the break on his slider, a master at making the ball look like it was gonna do one thing and having it do just a little bit more or maybe just a little bit less. Interesting teammate for sure.

Q: In 1979 you had some surgery to repair your elbow. How did that go and how were you feeling in general?

A: The surgery was for bone chips. Somehow or another I had accumulated some spurs that ultimately were knocked off. They stayed in there and continued to grow. More spurs grew. The joint just got clogged up. So Dr. (Frank) Jobe took out 17 free floating pieces and four spurs that he clipped off. And they basically had a bloodless operation. They put a nomadic cuff on my arm. It was before the scope, so they had to open up the joint and flush those pieces out and it felt a lot better after that. I had to do a little rehab. Get the musculature back in place because they did lift the muscle to get into the joint. But I don't think I threw quite as hard, due to the chips, trying to pitch with the chips. I couldn't throw my curveball like I wanted to and I had to develop a third pitch. I developed a changeup and from that point on I was more of a three-pitch pitcher probably, a little bit less of a power pitcher because I don't think I quite had as much on the fastball as before the surgery.

Q: But at the same time, you had great control. You were in the top 5 in walks and WHIP. So were you consciously making adjustments to be a different kind of pitcher or just going with what felt good at the time?

A: Good pitching in my mind is disrupting the hitters' comfort zone. You do that a lot of ways. You do it with stuff. You can do it with sequencing of pitches. You can do it with intimidation. You can throw pitches inside, cause them to move their feet. The combination of all this stuff. Reading the responses that they give you based on how they approach a pitch dictates what I'm going to throw in the next pitch. So it wasn't like I had a script to follow or anything like that. They were sort of telling me where to go next by how they were approaching each pitch.

Q: And in 1981, we have the strike and you were involved on the negotiating committee with the baseball players association, and it was a particularly difficult strike. How did you feel that the team treated you after being involved in this role during the strike?

A: Well, I didn't know that there was any ill feelings harbored after that until many years it came to light. (Texas Rangers owner) Eddie Chiles apparently, and this is all hearsay so it may not be true, but I was told that he was not particularly happy with my efforts on the players' behalf during the strike and was part of the reason that I may have been released at the end of the 1983 season. But I was on the negotiating committee, it was part of the executive committee, and it was something that nobody really wanted to do in previous years, which was be the player rep. And I felt seriously enough about, yes, the association and what they represented and what they were going to do for players as a whole. That I didn't want somebody who didn't really care about being there to be involved in and I sort of followed Seaver's footsteps in that respect because he had done it and I was the alternate for a while. And when he wanted to step down I took over and then in Texas I stayed with it. Mostly because nobody else wanted to do it. But I felt the responsibility to do it and whether somebody was upset with me because of what I did, I don't know. They may have been, but I did what I felt I needed to do to help the players in the association during that time.

Q: If you had to summarize your several years in Texas, what do you remember most about it?

A: Well, when I first got there, I felt like I could stand on the mound in Arlington Stadium and see Dallas one direction and turn around the other way and see Fort Worth. Because it was pretty flat compared to what I was used to, and it was hot as the dickens. And I think that was a problem for the team as a whole back then. Especially for the everyday players. Playing in that heat every cotton-picking day can wear you out. Pitching, it was not as bad. I found that I needed to add some pounds. I put on probably 5 to 8 pounds to be able to weather losing the additional water weight when I did pitch. The favorable winds in Arlington Stadium were usually blowing in, so that was nice. I enjoyed my time

in Texas. It was a little different baseball with the DH and the American League umpiring system, the strike zone was somewhat higher. Not a whole lot, but enough. And so there were some adjustments to make, but if I had to choose I prefer a National League style of play with the pitcher hitting and the strategy that's involved when that pitcher is in the lineup.

Q: Once your career was over, you didn't immediately get back into baseball. I know you worked in commercial real estate for a period of time. And then several years later you started to get back into coaching. What was the motivating factor in you deciding to come back to baseball?

A: Well, the real estate world had too much gray in it. Baseball, there's not a lot. If you're out or safe, it's fair. There's not a maybe it's going to be foul this time and the next time it's going to be fair. And that's sort of the way the real estate world was working. That combined with watching some of the games I saw with my son on television and going to Arlington Stadium. Things that were happening, what players were doing that I was taught differently when I was coming up and I thought, "You know what, there's something I can do here to maybe help people as they develop to become better. Give them a chance to be the best that they could be." And I told my wife, I said, "We're not gonna get rich doing this, but I feel like I wanna go back to coach." And she said, "Do what you wanna do."

Q: Give us an example of something that the pitchers were not doing at that time that you were doing when you came up and you thought you might be able to help.

A: I don't know that there is a specific example as much as guys were not trusting their own stuff and developing in a fashion that allowed them to be the best they could be, as much as they were following a script, if you will, or game plan that somebody else had laid out that may not use their best attributes. That coupled with the fact that there was so much being talked about with pitch counts, guys were not allowed to face a lineup — this happened later on — but guys were not allowed to face a lineup more than twice because statistically they weren't able to get them out supposedly. And a lot of that comes from the fact that you've shown the hitter everything you own the first two at-bats, you have nothing to surprise him with the third at-bat. So there were a lot of things that I felt like at least I could keep in somebody's mind. They're gonna use them how they want to use them. But that's sort of what led me back.

Q: You coached with the San Diego Padres on the rookie level. You also coached under Buddy Bell on the major league level with the Detroit Tigers. Where do you think you made the most impact as a coach?

A: I would like to think it was as the minor league pitching coordinator for Detroit. I was there for 14, 15 years in charge of their minor league system and we developed Glenn Ezell was in charge of the minor league department and together we put in place a system that I think developed a lot of quality ballplayers over that time. Some of them got traded. I think at one point I counted 43 pitchers that we traded from the minor league system in Detroit that became major league pitchers. So that was where I felt like I did the most good and had the most impact, over that span of time.

Q: I have a question from Jeff, who wonders from your perspective as a former star pitcher and later pitching coach and minor-league coordinator, what do you think about the current trends in developing pitchers? In particular, what do you think about pitching labs and how much emphasis is there currently on the art of pitching as opposed to just pure mechanics?

A: Well, they're still an art with pure mechanics. But I think there's so much emphasis put on velocity,

an out pitch if you will, or something like that, and the specificity of roles that it takes away from certain individuals' ability to pitch deeper in the ballgame. Not everybody is conditioned to nor can they be expected to pitch the whole ballgame. I think there's certain individuals that come along that have the physical attributes to do that and the mental capability to carry that chess game through the third and fourth time seeing the lineup and be successful doing it, if you allow them to train and build the foundation that they need to. Now you think about that, you put two of those people on any given staff, how much easier it makes running that staff because you don't have to have a 15-man pitching staff.

Q: Dave would like to know why do pitchers only go five innings these days and why are there so many UCL Tommy John procedures? Given the number of innings that you pitched, why do you do you think this is the way to go?

A: You know, you'll get me off into the weeds here. I am not a fan of the max effort, throw 102 if you can, style of pitching. Yeah, it looks good on a radar gun. But it blows up a lot of joints and certainly doesn't benefit the player. It may benefit the team. But unless the player's lucky enough to stay healthy, he may find himself blown out after two years and he might have had a 10-year career, you never know. So the ability to utilize the stuff that you have, and the maximum effect of it, in a more positive way probably for me to try and approach the coaching aspect of it. I'm not a fan of the script of this guy can't hit the slider, so we're gonna throw him all sliders. Maybe in a crucial part of the ballgame, you want to do that, but the rest of the time, he's gonna make out seven out of 10 times even if he's a good hitter. So why not allow the pitchers to do what they do well? And save the special pitches, if you will, or that attack the hitter's weakness when it's necessary only.

Q: Now you were with the Houston Astros as a pitching coordinator in 2012. You retired after that season. Tell us what you're doing now.

A: Absolutely nothing! I am retired. ... I have been working with some 8, 9 and 10-year-olds. Good pitching lessons and trying to help these youngsters get off on the right foot. And that's been a lot of fun. Probably gonna continue to do that a little bit. I don't do a lot of it, but it's very enjoyable. And they have absolutely no clue who I am or what I did or anything like that. They just, they figured out that what I'm showing them works and they're working at it and that's sort of fun.

Q: I've gotten some questions about who the toughest hitter was that you ever faced.

A: Now, as soon as I name one guy, you know I'm gonna piss off about 50 others. But if I had to pick one guy that gave me the most trouble in any particular year, it was a catcher named John Boccabella. That was in Montreal and I don't know if he's faced me 10 or 11 times. It seems like he got hits every time he was up to bat and hit a home run a couple of times. I couldn't get him out. I threw everything but the kitchen sink at him, knocked him down a couple times. I could not get him out. There are several others that probably statistically are far better than he was as a hitter. But in general, I'd like to think that I won some battles and they won some battles and overall maybe we broke even.

Q: Do you have one particular game that is your favorite memory in retrospect?

A: I really don't have one. I think one of the ones that's up there is Game Two of the playoffs in 1973. Being in the World Series, period, was an absolute thrill. Participating in the All-Star Games was phenomenal. There's been several things that I look back on and with a lot of pride and good thoughts.

Q: When people reflect upon your career, what do you want them to remember about you?

A: He never gave up.

Q: You stayed with it and and you were always there for your team.

A: No, my definition of a starting pitcher was to keep the team in the ballgame as long as they allowed you on the bump and to me if I was within a run or two, up or down, I've done my job and if I could go out there and do it 34 times a year, that's what I wanted to do.

Q: I want to thank Jon Matlack, who has been very gracious with his time, for spending this evening with us for our SABR oral history.