

Scott Fletcher

*Interview conducted by Mark Liptak in 2004.
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From Eddie Collins to “Chico” Carrasquel to Luis Aparicio to Nellie Fox to Tony Bernazard to Julio Cruz to Bryan Little to Sandy Alomar Senior to Luis Alvarado to Ozzie Guillen to Wayne Causey to Al Weis to Sammy Esposito to Tim Cullen. The Sox haven’t had many Cal Ripken sized infielders.

And let’s not forget Scott “Scooter” Fletcher.

Fletcher wasn’t a Hall of Famer like Aparicio or Fox and he was never going to wow you physically but to have a successful team you better have a few of his kind on the roster.

Fletcher was the type of guy who could drop down a bunt when needed, hit a fly ball to drive in a run, go hard into second base to break up a double play and most importantly he knew how to win. It’s no coincidence that he was a part of two of the most beloved teams in Sox history, the 1983 “Winnin’ Ugly” Western Division champion White Sox as well as the 1990 “Doin’ the Little Things” team that shocked the baseball world by winning 94 games. During that 1990 season for example, he drove in 56 RBI’s despite hitting seventh in the order.

Fletcher also smoothly made the transition from shortstop on the 83’ club to second base with the 90’ team, no easy task. And I bet here’s something you don’t know about him...Scott holds the highest all time MLB fielding percentage for any second baseman that played over 650 games at that position.

He played 14 seasons in the major leagues spending five and a half years with the Sox. He also played for the Cubs, Texas, Milwaukee, Boston and Detroit. Scott is now a private businessman in addition to keeping his hands in coaching both at the collegiate level as well as with youth sports. I caught up with him at his home in the Atlanta area...

Fletcher was very willing to talk about his days with the Sox and over three hours, touched on subjects as wide ranging as how he overcame a rough start to his 1983 season, observing Tom Seaver get his 300th win in New York, what it was like to field the final out in the original Comiskey Park, and what became of that historic baseball, what he had to do to move from shortstop to second base and what it was like playing with guys like Ozzie Guillen, Julio Cruz, LaMarr Hoyt, Sammy Sosa and Frank Thomas.

ML: Scott I don't know if you know all the details about how the Sox got you the first time in January 1983.

(Author's Note: The Sox got Fletcher, infielder Pat Tabler and pitchers Dick "Dirt" Tidrow and Randy Martz for pitchers Steve Trout and Warren Brusstar on January 25.)

After the 1982 season the Sox lost outfielder Steve Kemp to free agency, he signed with the Yankees. So, the Sox were entitled to pick a player from the free agent compensation pool which was the system in place at the time. The Sox wanted left hander Rudy May but May invoked his rights as a 5/10 man to stop the acquisition. That's when Sox G.M. Roland Hemond noticed that the Cubs had somehow failed to protect Fergie Jenkins. Jenkins was closing in on 300 wins and perhaps because of his age, the Cubs thought no other team would grab him.

But the Sox were interested and immediately Cub G.M. Dallas Green began to talk a trade in exchange for the Sox *not* taking Jenkins.

Let's just say Hemond robbed Green to the point where when the deal was done Green was quoted as saying to the Chicago media "to say I'm relieved probably would be an understatement."

(Author's Note: The Sox would wind up selecting catcher Joel Skinner from the Pirates as the pick.)

Tell me how you found out about the deal and what was your reaction?

SF: Bob Kennedy *(Author's Note: Kennedy played for the White Sox from 1939-1948 and from 1955-1957)* was the Cubs G.M. when I was drafted, and they had me playing second base. When Dallas Green took over he started bringing in guys from his Philadelphia connections, guys like Larry Bowa and Ryne Sandberg. And for me I knew that I was going to be going back to Triple-A. I had some good years there and wanted to play, so when the deal was made, I was happy to get a chance. I wanted the opportunity to play continuously since the past few years the Cubs were only bringing me up in September. I don't remember how I found out about the trade or who called me, but it was nice to know that somebody else wanted you.

ML: You hit .292 in spring training and Tony LaRussa named you the opening day shortstop. I went to cover the season opening series in Arlington that year and was sitting in your dugout when I saw Dave Duncan. He sat down, and we talked about the upcoming season. One of the things I mentioned to him was that I thought it was going to be very hard for the Sox to win having to count on three rookies to make significant contributions. *(Author's Note: The three players were Fletcher, Ron Kittle and Greg Walker.)* Duncan though was very supportive of you guys and felt that all of you had the talent and would produce. For someone who was still basically a rookie, how important was it knowing that the manager and staff had that confidence in you?

SF: It meant a lot to me and to Greg and "Kitty". I had a good spring and part of it was because of the work that I did with Eddie Brinkman *(Author's Note: Brinkman was the Sox infield coach*

and a former great shortstop with Washington and Detroit.) Ed was always talking with me, showing me little things that helped. He and the entire coaching staff made me feel comfortable.

ML: 1983 proved to be an interesting season for you. It got off to a rough start, nine errors in 17 games and by mid-May, Tony decided to give Jerry Dybzinski the starting job. Then you were back as the regular shortstop by July 24 and wound up only making 16 errors for the year...only five after August 1. Talk to me about that season, how you felt with the demotion, how Tony told you about it and most importantly what you did to reclaim the position in time for the stretch run.

SF: When you are in the Major Leagues you are closely scrutinized...by the fans, the media and the manager. That takes some adjusting to. I've always felt that was the biggest adjustment a player had to make when they got to the big leagues. I think Tony saw that it was starting to eat on me. He made the change to give me a chance to get adjusted. That was one of the best things about Tony, he always found a way to keep you going, he'd talk to you, explain why he was doing something or why you weren't playing.

I knew Tony still had confidence in me and I still had confidence in myself. I was positive, kept a good attitude and most importantly I kept working hard. It just takes time in that atmosphere.

ML: The Sox railroaded the rest of the division winning it by 20 games. What do you remember from the night when the Sox beat Seattle to clinch the title? (*Author's Note: September 17, 1983*)

SF: I remember Harold (Baines) with the sacrifice fly and I remember Julio (Cruz) jumping on home plate, giving it that little extra hop at the end. I mean we knew it was coming, it was just a matter of time with the way we were winning but it was still a relief to do it. It had been such a long time since the Sox won, that it was special having a champion on the South Side.

That year we had a great group of guys... a nice combination of rookies and veterans. It's not like that today. Today you have clubs made up of rookies and guys who have been around for 10, 12 years. That's because once players start getting into their fifth, sixth, seventh seasons they cost money so many teams just get rid of them. But that year all of us connected. The guys didn't care about individual stats they just wanted to win games. Tony was great with everybody and we laughed a lot. Sometimes that's what you need to take the edge off.

ML: I've spoken to some of your 1983 teammates like Vance Law, Kittle and Jerry Koosman and to this day I got a sense that they felt the Sox were still the better team than Baltimore. What happened in the playoffs? Was it the pressure from a city that hadn't had a winner in decades?

SF: I don't think it was the pressure, it wasn't "Bull" (Luzinski) speaking at the pep rally. In a short series anything can happen. It was a best of five and if we could have won that fourth game we had LaMarr (Hoyt) going in the last one. I know we would have won. I talked to LaMarr and remember him telling me he was ready. I can still hear him in that drawl saying, "I know exactly what Eddie Murray wants and when he wants it, but I'm not gonna give it to 'em.

ML: In that heartbreaking Game #4 loss to the Orioles 3-0 in 10 innings do you remember your reaction to the Dybzinski base running mistake?

(Author's Note: In the 7th inning of a scoreless tie, Julio Cruz hit a one hop shot to the left fielder. Vance Law was rounding third base when coach Jimmy Leyland stopped him. There was no way he could score on a ball hit that hard. Dybzinski overran second base and got involved in a run down, during that Law tried to score and was thrown out. That inning saw the Sox get three singles plus a balk and zero runs!)

SF: Things happened so fast. I think "Dibber" was trying to read the throw from the left fielder. What happens is that when you're running you take a look at the left fielder to see how he's approaching the ball, or does he have it, or is he throwing it. When you do that you can't see the third base coach and I think that's why he came around second base. It was a big play. The way Britt (Burns) was pitching; one run might have done it. It was just a tough way to lose the game.

When we were in the locker room afterwards Tony tried to speak to us but couldn't... every time he'd try to sum up the year or thank us, he's just start choking up and he couldn't get the words out.

When you look back you just don't realize how fortunate you are just to get into the playoffs. In all my years that was the only time I ever made it. I was a rookie and thought I'd get another chance but I never did. Then we saw Baltimore just beat up on the Phillies *(Author's Note: Baltimore won it four games to one)* and I know we would have won the World Series.

ML: 1984 was a disaster for the Sox although you played in 149 games. In 1985 the Sox rebounded with 85 wins and you were in the game on August 4 in New York when Tom Seaver got his 300th win. Tell me about the type of player Seaver was and what you remember that afternoon?

SF: Just to get a chance to play with someone like Tom Seaver is a privilege. He brings credibility to any team. It was an exciting time, a great feeling to be a part of history. I know it was a relief for him, I know he really wanted it and to do it at Yankee Stadium.

When Tom came to us in 1984 he fit right in, I talked to him that spring training and he was a likeable guy.

I also remember a great stunt pulled by Marc Hill involving Tom's hat. Tom had a big head, just a big hat size and you know how when we got to the dugout we'd take our hat off and put it with our gloves right by the steps so that when we go out we just grab our stuff, hit the steps and take the field. Marc swiped Tom's hat and put it with Vance Law's glove. So we hit the field and Vance is wearing Tom's hat and it's like falling down his ears, covering his eyes, it was really funny.

ML: You were shipped off to Texas in 1986, thanks to new G.M. Ken “Hawk” Harrelson where you spent three and a half years. The Sox got you back near the trade deadline on July 29, 1989.

(Author’s Note: The Sox got Fletcher, Sammy Sosa and Wilson Alvarez for Harold Baines and Fred Manrique.)

Same question, different verse, how did you hear about it and what did you think because unlike in January 1983, the Sox of 1989 weren’t very good.

SF: It’s funny because I was a free agent in 1989 and wound up going back to the Rangers then I wind up getting traded. It was early in the day, I was at home when Tom Grieve *(Author’s Note: then Rangers G.M.)* called me and said I was traded to the White Sox. That was some wakeup call! Jeff Torborg *(Author’s Note: White Sox manager)* called me and said he wanted me in the lineup that night and the Sox were in Anaheim. I had to pack like two months’ worth of clothes in a few minutes! *(Author’s Note: Scott made the game that night and hit second in a 2-1 loss. He went 0-4.)*

The trade was a surprise but at least I knew a number of people in the organization, I knew the city and I was comfortable being with the White Sox.

ML: Something happen in 1990 that I don’t know if anybody can explain to this day. The Sox were picked last by most experts yet somehow found a way to win 94 games. They did it with clutch hits, and brilliant defense but they also won games that year in the most bizarre ways. Strange things happened to play a part at just the right time, like Lance McCullers throwing a wild pitch allowing Lance Johnson to score the game winner, Carlton Fisk getting hit in the back by a curve ball from Greg Harris with the bases loaded, Ron Kittle getting hit on the hip, while running the bases, allowing a run to score on a wild throw from Cal Ripken, Ivan Calderon dropping down a perfect bunt to drive in Ron Karkovice, even while getting no-hit by the Yankees Andy Hawkins. How did you guys do it?

SF: That was an awesome year. We took a lot of pride in the fact that we hung right with Oakland that whole year. That was one of those years where somebody would hit a shot and it would be right at somebody. I remember one game with the A’s, Jack (McDowell) was on the mound. He threw a splitter and Jose Canseco absolutely crushed the ball right out of the park... only it was foul. I looked over at Ozzie (Guillen) and he had his glove in front of his face, he couldn’t believe it. “Thiggy” (Bobby Thigpen) had that incredible year, we had good pitching and we gained momentum... we felt confident.

ML: Things got a little testy with the Oakland A’s that season. In June they took three of four from the Sox in Chicago, but the next weekend you guys went out to the Bay Area and swept them with Dan Pasqua hitting an opposite field, extra inning home run off Dave Stewart to close it out that Sunday. Afterwards Stewart made the comment that the only guys on the Sox, who could hold his jock, were Fisk, Kittle and maybe Calderon. How did you and the guys react to that comment?

SF: I'm sure Dave said that in the heat of the moment, he just lost a tough game. We had a lot of good people on our team. I don't think what he said bothered us one way or another, you don't listen to what other people say, we knew our roles and what we had to do. The only thing that mattered was getting respect from your teammates.

ML: The A's were the better team, but the Sox made them work that year, on August 20 when Stewart pitched in Chicago he got hammered, with fans throwing jocks out on the field. *(Author's Note: The Sox won the game 11-1)* Then you guys went to the Bay Area again in September and beat them two out of three. You had a home run off Mike Moore in the Sox 8-2 nationally televised win on September 18. What was the difference since the Sox were in the race until September?

SF: Oakland had great pitching. They had guys like Stewart, Mike Moore, Bob Welch, Scott Sanderson and they had Dennis Eckersley in the bullpen.

You talked about that one game where we beat Stewart. I remembered that game, the park was packed... it had a buzz to it and we fed off that. That energy carried over to us on the field.

ML: The final weekend at the original Comiskey Park was very emotional for Sox fans. You had the last night game on Saturday September 29, then the final game the next day. The Sox would win both games against the Mariners but tell me about being in the dugout during the last of the 8th inning knowing that the 9th was going to be it, unless Seattle came back to tie it. What was it like on the bench, did anybody say anything?

SF: Again I remember we were playing off the buzz that was in the park those games. I remember thinking about the feeling that went on there, the tradition and all the great players who were on that small patch of grass. I think it was Kurt Russell, the actor, who was there, and he was standing in the tunnel that ran from the dugout into the locker rooms and he said, "Babe Ruth walked here..." You just hated for it to end there.

(Author's Note: Russell played for several minor league teams in the early 1970's before an injury ended his career.)

ML: In the last inning of the last home game, Harold Reynolds hit the final ground ball to you. You threw to Steve Lyons and that was it, 80 years of history was over. What was it like for you and the guys in the locker room afterwards? I read where Carlton (Fisk) was pretty emotional about everything and so was Ozzie (Guillen).

SF: On the bench, whenever a guy would pop out or do something somebody would say, 'there's the last pop out' or whatever. It had finality to it. It was difficult to leave that park when it was all over.

As far as the last play I actually had that baseball and I remember putting it into my bag. When I got home that night I looked for it and it was gone. I don't know where the final ball went to! I remember saying "where's the ball?" Can you imagine losing something like that?

I do have some things from my time at Comiskey Park. Jerry Reinsdorf (*Author's Note: White Sox owner*) gave every player a few seats so I have those, and I've got a pair of my spikes that I wore during the 1983 season. My wife just put up in our basement a bunch of pictures from the time I was playing so I have some nice memories.

ML: You played with some pretty unusual characters around the middle of the diamond. Let me give you a few names and you tell me what kind of players they were, OK?

Ozzie Guillen (1985-1997) - **SF:** He loved playing the game. Ozzie was always talking, I mean *all* the time. I'd be there at second base and think to myself 'come on Ozzie be ready.' He'd be talking, and somebody would hit the ball to him and he'd still be able to get to it and make the play. Everyone else thought Ozzie wasn't paying attention but he knew what he was doing. He was always in the game and he used to love to screw up base runners. After a play he'd turn to our outfielders and yell out "OK, one out" when really there would be two. Maybe the runner doesn't run hard and we get the double play. Or Ozzie would say "two out," instead of one just to see if he could get an edge.

I never saw anybody better at making the bare hand play and throw than him, in fact, Ozzie used to practice that.

Julio Cruz (1983-1986) - **SF:** He was a great guy. He had great timing on the double play, I'd see guys trying to take him out at second and he could always jump over them and get the throw off. He also had a way of making a nice soft toss on the relay so that you could do something with it.

The other thing was that I've never seen a guy order bats like him! He used other guy's bats a lot and if he got two or three hits with one he'd order a dozen bats. Of course, by the time those bats got to him he'd already be using someone else's bat and the bats he ordered would just sit in his locker. I mean this would go on and on! Finally, it got to the point where the Sox wouldn't order any more bats for him! (laughing)

ML: You had to make the change from starting shortstop in the 80's to starting second baseman in the early 90's. What were the biggest differences between the two positions, what did you have to work on, and what was the hardest part of the change for you?

SF: If you can play shortstop you can play any other infield position. Shortstop is the most demanding spot because you don't have the time like at second. You can't bobble the ball or fumble it...you don't have the time. Second base wasn't that hard for me because remember I came up as a second baseman with the Cubs. I was going to play there before they got Ryne Sandberg. At second base the angles are different because you are going away from first base a lot, but you usually have more time to make a play.

ML: You played with two outstanding managers in Tony LaRussa and Jeff Torborg. Can you compare and contrast the two and did you enjoy playing under them?

SF: I enjoyed playing for both. Tony always was working to keep relationships with his players. He'd come up to you in BP (*Author's Note: batting practice*) and talk with you. He'd explain why he was doing something or why you weren't playing that day. Or he'd talk with you about what you might need to be working on. He also played the percentages more than Jeff. I remember one game we scored like four runs in the first and our #8 hitter was coming up. I don't remember who it was, but the other team changed pitchers and I think they brought up a righty. Tony pinch hit for him with a lefty even though it was the first inning. He never even got an at bat.

Jeff was more of a manager who played by his feelings. He was a very, very positive guy who tried to create a family type atmosphere on the team. He was close to the guys on his club. With Jeff in BP he'd come up to talk with you and he'd always ask how your wife and kids were doing. Both guys were very good at what they did.

ML: You also played with two guys who would turn out to be dominant players in Frank Thomas and Sammy Sosa. Both have their critics though and both have had their share of controversy over their careers. Tell me about them and what were they like to play alongside of.

SF: I saw Sammy when he came up briefly with the Rangers and then we were traded to the Sox together. When I saw him, I said, "Wow, what an athlete." This guy could run, throw, hit for power. Then he was totally undisciplined, he'd swing at anything and he was a bit of a hot dog, but he had great talent.

Larry Himes (*Author's Note: The Sox G.M. who made the trade*) brought him over to the White Sox and we sat on the bus together when we got traded. I remember just watching him and noticing the look on his face, the seriousness of everything, it was like he was saying to himself, 'OK, this is my shot, and I'm going to do something with it.' When he finally learned some discipline, that's when everything started coming for him.

Frank was an incredible talent. He was a huge guy with enormous strength. Man, I'd have hated to have to try to tackle him when he was playing football! He had great minor league seasons and carried it through to the Major Leagues because he was a disciplined hitter. This guy was an offensive machine. And he wasn't a bad first baseman either. I know that because in the pre-game we'd do our hand drills together. But the key with Frank was his incredible discipline.

ML: The Sox let you become a free agent after the 1991 season and traded for Steve Sax to take your place. You had some good years in Milwaukee and Boston before retiring. What finally made you say enough?

SF: My kids were growing up. (*Author's Note: Scott and his wife have three children.*) I just had enough, I wanted to be home seeing them grow instead of always traveling. You eventually get to that point in your life.

ML: Your dad was a football coach for many years at the University of Akron; I suppose that's where you saw first-hand growing up, what a coach does and how he can make an impact on people. Talk to me about your work at Emory University.

SF: I've been there for four years. The first two years I was a regular assistant coach. The last two years I've just been coming in once or twice a week to work with our infielders. It's a very good program. Mike Twardoski is the head coach and he does a great job. Mike played in pro baseball for 10 years.

(Author's Note: Emory University is a Division III school in Atlanta. The club went 42-6 in 2004, opening the season by winning their first 26 games in a row. They have had 11 straight winning seasons.)

It really is an outstanding program for baseball.

ML: You're also involved with some other baseball interests, aren't you?

SF: In a few ways. Michael Barrett, the Cubs catcher, is my wife's cousin and he and I have started a new youth baseball association. It's a lot like the NABF or the Little League. We've had teams come to Florida from places like Georgia, South Carolina, Missouri and Alabama for our national tournaments the past few years. We play our championship games in the Devil Rays Stadium. I remember how special it was for me, when I was 17, to play in the old Municipal Stadium in Cleveland and I wanted to try to give as many kids as possible the thrill of playing on a big-league diamond. We're looking for state directors, so we can expand. I know we are close to getting into the Chicago area.

Also, Don Slaught...

(Author's Note: Slaught is a former major league catcher who played from 1982 through 1997 with the Royals, Rangers, Yankees, Pirates, Angels, White Sox and Padres)

...and I have come out with a great hitting software called Right View. It's a system that enables someone, a parent or a coach for example, to insert video of their child or player swinging and to compare it with video in the program of some of the top major league players. You can see side by side how your player compares to say Manny Ramirez. You can use it to check the mechanics and make adjustments as needed. The program is taking off. Major League clubs like the Braves and White Sox have the advanced versions.

ML: Let's close this out by asking you to sum up those five and a half years in Chicago. Were they good ones for you personally and professionally?

SF: All of them were good years in Chicago. The people that I met, folks like Herm Schneider and his family *(Author's Note: Schneider is the long time Sox trainer)* have been friends to this day. You remember the honor it was to play with someone like Carlton Fisk, how he'd lift weights for a few hours after the game was over and goes home at like one in the morning. That's respect for the game. It was a great time.

